

64. Sylvia Read as Bessie Bighead in *Under Milk Wood* 1983 (TR/PH/149).

Sylvia Read and William Fry, with director Denis Carey, *Under Milk Wood*, 1983 (TR/PH/146).

Sylvia Read and William Fry as Myfanwy Price and Mog Edwards in *Under Milk Wood* (TR/PH/147).

William Fry as Mr Waldo in *Under Milk Wood*, 1983 (TR/PH/148).

Cover Photograph: Sylvia Read and William Fry in *Vanity Fair* (1967) Photographer: John Vickers.

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Theatre Collection



Theatre Roundabout: Travelling by Stages

17 November 2014 - 27 March 2015

Theatre Roundabout: Travelling by Stages

1 Company, 2 People, 30 Shows & 4,000+ Performances

History

Theatre Roundabout was a unique company which originally specialised in religious theatre. It started life as a London company called Theatre Group Productions and changed its name to Theatre Roundabout in 1961. The company was managed by the playwright Peter Albery, who remained chairman until his death in 1979, and it soon developed into a genre-breaking touring company. Theatre Roundabout played in all sorts of venues: from small churches to cathedrals, from arts venues to village halls and by 1967 was touring internationally.

The vast majority of Theatre Roundabout's work comprised two person shows featuring William Fry and his late wife, Sylvia Read. From their very first production together, *A Strange Coming*, it was their impressive onstage partnership that lay at the heart of Theatre Roundabout. The extraordinary statistics show what a prolific company they created. By the time they stopped performing, almost half a century later, they had played together over 4,200 times. The very fact that the company survived as a going concern for over forty years, while most other similar companies fell by the wayside, gives an indication of the couple's skill and dedication.

Sylvia and William developed a unique technique. By playing numerous characters and combining dialogue with narrative they found a way they could dramatise great novels such as *Jane Eyre*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Howards End* and turn them into two-handers. Their adaptation of *Vanity Fair* required William to play thirteen parts and Sylvia eight, whilst

(TR/DE/2/1, 2, 4, 5).

61. Programme for an evening service and performance of *Canterbury's Burning* at St Paul's Cathedral, 15 February 2004 (TR/PB/50).

Production photograph showing Sylvia as Margarete and William as Cranmer (TR/PH/215/2).

Programmes for *Canterbury's Burning*, 2003 (TR/PB/49).

Production photograph showing Sylvia as Anne Boleyn and William Fry as Cranmer (TR/PH/214/1).

62. Prospective American tour booking leaflets for a production of *Under Milk Wood*, 1985 (TR/PB/99).

Programme for *Under Milk Wood*, 1983 (TR/PB/35).

Handbill for *Under Milk Wood*, 1983 (TR/PB/94).

Music and Lighting prompt script for *Under Milk Wood*, c1983 (TR/PR/3).

63. Poster cut-outs of Sylvia Read and William Fry, used in various publicity material, 1983 (TR/DE/5/2).

Booking correspondence from William Fry, for a northern preview tour of *Under Milk Wood*, 20 Sep - 15 Oct 1983. (TR/DE/5/1).

Tour itinerary showing *Under Milk Wood* at various venues in North Wales, including Newtown, Ruthin, Denbigh and Llangollen. Autumn 1983 (TR/PB/149).

written by William Fry and the play remained in the repertoire until its final performance in June 2007 in St. Lawrence's Church, Hungerford.

55. Props, including pewter inkstand and quill, two pewter flagons, pomander, prop proclamation, prop letters, prop book, sampler and two cameo rings (TR/PR/11).

56. Photograph of Sylvia and William as Margarete and Cranmer. (TR/PH/215/1)

Under Milk Wood was a new show for 1983, when Sylvia and William took to the road in *Mercy* for the first time. The adaptation of Dylan Thomas' classic radio drama remained in the repertoire until 1995 and often attracted large audiences.

57. Props, including prop case with typed list on outside and handwritten label as used during touring of this production, turquoise beret, flat cap, brown tablecloth, bell, prop book (TR/PR/3).

58. Production photograph for *Under Milk Wood*, 1983 (TR/PH/145).

Case Drawers

Please note: only one drawer at a time can be opened. Please ensure that each drawer is fully closed before the next one is opened.

59. Sound and lighting prompt scripts for *Canterbury's Burning* (TR/PR/11).

60. A sketch costume design by Henrietta Webb for Sylvia Read and William Fry, for a production of *Canterbury's Burning*, including fabric samples and prices for Sylvia Read's dress and associated correspondence, 28 July 2003

Hamlet required the pair to play fourteen different parts while also operating the music and sound effect tapes themselves!

Much of their work was of a religious nature, including shows specially written for the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (USPG) and the Religious Drama Society, Radius. Some productions, such as *Pilgrims Progress* and *Shadowlands* were very successful in spanning both markets.

Their phenomenal touring schedule often required long drives across the country, with every day bringing a new stage to set up and perform on and every night a new bed to sleep in. The situation was eased in the 1960s by buying a motor caravan, the *Wanderer*. Later, in 1972, they purchased the *Roadranger*. It became their touring home, their office, an emergency dressing room, a place to eat and entertain friends and above all a refuge from the stresses of life on tour. In 1983, after driving nearly a quarter of a million miles together, they needed another motor caravan and along came *Mercy*. She cost £16,000 - more than two years of their joint total salaries - but she was a bespoke design perfectly fitted out just for them and she more than lived up to her name.

By the time of their final performance, *Shadowlands* (2008), their pioneering method of adapting and writing new plays, performing at a wide variety of venues and moving between religious and secular plays - which at one time completely broke with all convention - had become firmly established within wider theatrical practice in the UK and abroad.

The history of this remarkable company is recorded within its archive which comprises business papers, programmes, photographs, scripts, costumes, props and other accessories. The directors of Theatre Roundabout and William Fry donated the archive to the Theatre Collection in 2013/14 as a tribute to

Sylvia Read and we are very grateful to them for generously supporting the cataloguing project and associated exhibition. This exhibition gives a brief insight into Theatre Roundabout; please ask if you would like any further information.

Main Foyer

Case 1: History of Theatre Roundabout

Theatre Roundabout had its origins in Theatre Group Productions managed by Peter Albery. Peter, a playwright, came from a distinguished family with a long history of theatrical management. In 1959 William Fry was invited to audition for *A Strange Coming*, written by Sylvia Read to mark the Epiphany. It had a cast of three playing thirteen characters and, with this play, the beginnings of Theatre Roundabout were established.

1. Black and white photographs of Sylvia Read and William Fry in the roles of Mary and Joseph, *A Strange Coming*, January 1960 (TR/PH/1/2).

2. Programme for *A Strange Coming*, by Sylvia Read, at the Moreland Hall, Hampstead, 15-17 December 1960 and at the Hartley Hall, Mill Hill, 19-21 December 1960, with William Fry, Sylvia Read and John Quarmby, produced by William Fry and stage managed by Margaret Watts (TR/PB/3).

3. Handbill for *A Strange Coming*, Moreland Hall, 1961 (TR/PB/55).

In 1962, the production *For Crying Out Loud* was the first to be 'branded' as Theatre Roundabout, and was the first of their many 'two-handers'. It was sponsored by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) and directed by E. Martin Browne. Sylvia had worked with Browne during the Second World War when she performed with his travelling company,

1960s-1990s (TR/PR/12).

49. Original sketch design by Dorothea Braby for *Vanity Fair* c1975 (TR/DE/3/1).

Screen above Case 3

50. Production photographs of *Vanity Fair*, 1967 and 1994 (TR/PH/66-72/C, TR/PH/192-196).

Lift Lobby

Screen

51. A selection of production photographs from the many performances given by Theatre Roundabout in their long career.

Case 4: *Canterbury's Burning* dress and hat

52. Modern Tudor style black velvet dress worn by Sylvia Read, with a red brocade front skirt panel, wide outer cuffs, trimmed on gold piping and lined with red brocade, inner cuffs in black velvet with cream lace trim, cream lace inner collar and a white quilted and padded underskirt (TR/CO/1). Matching hat with veil (TR/PR/11).

On walls above case

53. Poster for *Canterbury's Burning* directed by Roger Redfarn c.2003 (TR/PB/260).

54. Copy illustration used to publicise *Under Milk Wood*, 1983 (TR/DE/5/5).

Case 5: *Canterbury's Burning* and *Under Milk Wood*

Canterbury's Burning - The Turbulent Life of Thomas Cranmer was the last new production to be undertaken by the company and was first performed in 2003. Exploring the life and secret marriage of Thomas Cranmer, the script was

44. Sketch of a dressing room used for sheets of performance requirements (as per Shelf 1) (TR/DE/15).

To side of case 2

45. Poster for the London premiere of *Kingdom Come* at The American Church in London, 26 - 31 May, directed by Denis Carey c1981 (TR/PB/244).

Wall above table

46. Poster design for Collegiate Theatre, Bloomsbury, 8-10 June 1973 for *The Pilgrim's Progress* (TR/DE/7/7).

Wall on stairs:

47. Production photographs of *Pride and Prejudice* showing Sylvia Read and William Fry playing Mr & Mrs Bennet, Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy, Caroline Bingley and Mr Bingley, and Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Wickham. These photographs demonstrate how the smallest changes of costume, along with changes of expression, indicated a change of character, for example the use of the handkerchief for Mrs Bennet, 1976 (TR/PB/107/3, 109, 110, 111).

Case 3: *Vanity Fair*

Their adaptation of *Vanity Fair* in 1967 was the first real commercial success for Theatre Roundabout. It had been suggested that they produce something well known in order to appeal to a wider audience including theatres and arts societies, so they fixed on a two-hander of *Vanity Fair*. Sylvia played eight parts and William thirteen over two and a half hours - almost unheard of at the time. The original production ran until 1980 and was then revived again in 1994.

48. Props relating to *Vanity Fair*: an antique wooden travelling writing desk containing fan, pince-nez, costume jewellery and tiara; prop book; watch fob; prop letters and money from the *Bank of Vanity*; framed 'miniature' and decorated eye mask.

the Pilgrim Players, which predominantly performed work by T. S. Eliot and James Bridie. Although highly praised by the press and audiences at the Edinburgh Fringe, the play's strong criticisms of the Church made it very controversial when first performed to the Area Secretaries of the SPG.

4. Black and white photograph of Sylvia Read and William Fry in *For Crying Out Loud*. Photographer: Tony [Anthony] Howarth (TR/PH/59/B/6).

5. Programme for *For Crying Out Loud*, 1962, produced by E. Martin Browne (TR/PB/11).

6. Promotional leaflets for *For Crying Out Loud* (TR/PB/61).

Throughout the 60s, 70s and 80s Theatre Roundabout continued to develop as a pioneering touring company. In 1967 they began touring internationally, eventually visiting venues across Western Europe, the United States and Africa. They performed religious and secular plays, including many adaptations.

7. Working design by Iain Lanyon, for a production of *Transformation Scene* and used as the programme cover, handbills and posters c.1984 (TR/DE/6/1).

8. Photograph of Sylvia Read and William Fry as Elizabeth Bennett and Mr Darcy, from an American performance of *Pride and Prejudice* at the Elliott Museum, Stuart, Florida, America. Photographer: Louise Jaulbee 1979 (TR/PH/216).

9. Leaflet insert for the American tour, March - April 1981, with performances of *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte and *Living and Giving* by Sylvia Read (TR/PB/91).

10. Programme for *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen with Sylvia Read and William Fry, originally directed by Hugh Morrison at the Elliott Museum, 16 March 1979 (TR/PB/457).

After almost five decades of being on the road new productions were still being added to the repertoire including *Canterbury's Burning* and *Shadowlands*, which, in March 2008, became the company's final performance.

11. Magazine article by Pat Ashworth relating to the first farewell tour by Theatre Roundabout, with reference to forthcoming performances of *Shadowlands*. Published in the *Church Times* 20 Oct 2006, p.26 (TR/PB/329).

12. Promotional folder sleeve, designed to contain publicity samples and practical details to send to venues. The cover is printed with a montage of production photographs, 2004 (TR/PB/237).

13. Handbill for the last performance by Theatre Roundabout of *Shadowlands* by William Nicholson at St Thomas Church Centre, Watford, 14 March 2008 with Sylvia Read and William Fry, directed by Roger Redfarn (TR/PB/120).

Above Case 1:

14. Poster for *Jane Eyre* at All Saints Cathedral, Nairobi, Kenya, 10 June and *Kingdom Come*, at Murang'a Cathedral, Murang'a, Kenya, 15 June (1980s) (TR/PB/245).

15. Poster for four charity performances of *My Brother's Keeper* in aid of Christian Aid Week, with Sylvia Read and William Fry, produced by E. Martin Browne 1960/70s (TR/PB/241).

37. Photograph of Sylvia Read and William Fry in a scene 'Evangelist points Christian on his way to the Celestial City', part of a third production of *The Pilgrim's Progress* in 1996. Photographer and copyright: Robert Workman (TR/PH/200/1).

Brother Francis

38. Typed sheet of practical details and requirements for performances of *Brother Francis* in 1973, including advanced preparations and staging, sequence of events and accommodation requirements (TR/PB/230).

39. Programme for *Brother Francis*, 1977 (TR/PB/30).

40. Programme for *Brother Francis*, 1976 (TR/PB/27).

41. Photographs of Sylvia Read, William Fry, John Kelland, Charles Wegner and James Saxon, as Pica, Bernardone, The Bishop, St Francis and a Priest, 1976. Photographer: Felix Fonteyn (TR/PH/102, TR/PH/104).

42. Press cuttings from the *Windsor Express*, 11 March 1975 entitled 'The Wild Holy Man' and 4 June 1976, Chester (TR/PB/300).

Shelf 4: Make-up Cases, 1950s-2000s

Efficiency was paramount for Sylvia and William as they travelled far and wide and had no traditional dressing room. This case contained all they needed for any production and was used along with specific production 'props cases' (see Case 5 for an example).

43. Make-up Cases containing: make-up in old 'Bendicks Bittermints' box, two mirrors, sewing case and thread, postcards, correspondence and stamps, tea towel and dressing gowns, hair grips, throat sweets, and hairspray (TR/PR/6).

29. *Christian Theatre: a handbook for church groups* by Sylvia Read and William Fry, 1986 (Eyre and Spottiswoode Ltd) (YXM/R282).

30. An unpublished book entitled *Faith at Play*, by Sylvia Read and William Fry. With accompanying explanatory note: "This is a book of scenes, poems and workshops, broadly based on our past work. We wrote it in 2008-9 and sent it to various publishers. Everybody seemed to like it but no one would risk publishing it, I've got the kindest rejection letters you ever read." (TR/SC/38).

31. Programme of events, including an advertisement for a performance of *Eye of Innocence* as part of the Christian Arts Festival, 8 May 1980 (TR/PB/376).

Shelf 3:

The Pilgrim's Progress

32. Handbill for *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan, directed by Robin Crawford, 1997 (TR/PB/114).

33. Lighting and sound prompt script including a handwritten note indicating the number of minutes on each stage of the journey, c1983 (TR/PR/2).

34. Handwritten sheet music with words and epigrams for *The Pilgrim's Progress* by Tristram Cary, 1970s (TR/SC/16).

35. Flier for a production of *The Pilgrim's Progress* at The Roundhouse, London, 3 June 1973 (TR/PB/74).

36. Flier for a performance of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, opening at St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, 1 March 1974, with Sylvia Read, William Fry, John Kelland, Edward Lyon and Paul Lally (TR/PB/75).

Case 2: The Work of Theatre Roundabout

One of the most distinctive aspects of Theatre Roundabout was the heavy touring schedule. Sylvia and William were undertaking a large number of shows on a regular basis all over the country. In the early days they benefitted from generous offers of overnight accommodation from friends and supporters. Later, a motor caravan served as their home whilst on tour. It was also their costume, prop and lighting store as well as their occasional dressing room and organisational base where they wrote scripts, answered correspondence and managed bookings.

In the early 1980s the life of the company was threatened by the demise of their current motor caravan, which would not survive another year on the road. A fundraising campaign was launched with the aim of purchasing a new vehicle. In 1983 *Mercy* was bought and so another twenty five years of touring began.

Shelf 1: Working Practices

16. Plans for the custom built motor caravan *Mercy*, showing elevations and sections, 24 Jan 1983 and 24 March 1983. Designer: Jennings Coachwork Limited, Crewe (TR/DE/10).

17. Sheet of general performance requirements for venues, and furniture requirements for *Nightwalk with Charley* (TR/DE/15).

18. Two venue booking leaflets informing prospective venues, how to organise and book Theatre Roundabout for performances and workshops, c1984 (TR/PB/98).

19. *Travelling By Stages*, a booklet on the history of Theatre Roundabout, produced in support of their motor caravan appeal, 1982 (TR/PB/93).

20. Magazine article entitled *An Actors Life For Me* by Steve Rowe, on the history of Theatre Roundabout and their motor caravan. Published in *Motor Caravan Magazine*, April 1998 (TR/PB/318).

21. Two illustration designs for an appeal leaflet, one with a church in the background, including an original drawing and the other a secular image, with an Arts Centre in the background, c1982 (TR/DE/9/1, TR/DE/9/4/1).

Shelf 2: Religious Drama

The work of Theatre Roundabout was deeply immersed in religious drama. Many of their performances were held in church halls and their plays were frequently of a religious nature. Sylvia and William were heavily involved in the Religious Drama Society of Great Britain, Radius, and early sponsors included the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (USPG).

As well as performing their own plays and adaptations, Sylvia and William also conducted workshops, usually for church groups, which took people through the process of devising and putting together a play, frequently culminating with a performance during Sunday worship. Their pioneering work developing this process for religious groups led to a publication, *Christian Theatre* (on display). They worked closely with director and producer E. Martin Browne. He directed a number of Theatre Roundabout's productions and they became directors of Radius, of which Browne was President. Their work for Radius involved benefit performances, summer schools, and competitions in an attempt to revive interest in religious drama. E. Martin Browne wrote to Sylvia and William on his retirement stating that they had "*set a resurrection in train*".

My Brother's Keeper

22. Invitation leaflet for a production of *My Brother's Keeper*, at The Rubery Owen Canteen, Booth Street, as part of an Industrial Life Evening, 23 November 1961, produced by E. Martin Browne (TR/PB/56).

23. Handbill for a production of *My Brother's Keeper*, at St Martin-in-the-Fields, 27 October 1961, produced by Peter Albery, directed by E. Martin Browne. Showing both company names, Theatre Group Productions and the first use of Theatre Roundabout as a name for the company (TR/PB/52).

24. Photographs of Sylvia Read and William Fry as Agnes and Brandt, from *Brandt* [Brand] by Henrik Ibsen, part of a production of *My Brother's Keeper*. Photographer: Felix Fonteyn (TR/PH/31/1, TR/PH/31/2).

25. Typed handbill for a production of *My Brother's Keeper* at The Royal Festival Hall, 12 May 1961, directed by E. Martin Browne (TR/PB/57).

26. Press cutting from the *Catholic Herald* for *My Brother's Keeper*, 19 May 1961, entitled 'An Evening of Discovery', commenting that it was "*a most delightful and inspiring evening...Such subtle niceties of rhyme and rhythm I had never before experienced.*" (TR/PB/289).

Other Religious Drama

27. Leaflet advertising a day of workshops for *The Arts in Worship*, including a session on drama led by Sylvia Read and William Fry, 10 February 1980 (TR/PB/377).

28. *Radius Magazine*, which includes an article by Sylvia Read relating to *Shadowlands*, April 1998 (TR/PB/315).