

St Augustine's Centre, Halifax, UK

English for Life in the UK

Season 2 - Episode 29 - Theatre in the UK - Northern Broadsides

July 2021

Mark Hello, and welcome to the podcast **English for Life in the UK**. This podcast is for those people who want to improve their English by listening to native English speakers, talking in a natural way, about a range of subjects.

Today, I'm delighted to say I've got with me: Laurie, and Laurie is the Artistic Director of "Northern Broadsides" which is a national touring theatre company, based in Halifax, which, regular listeners will know, is where our charity at St Augustine's Centre is also based.

So, Laurie, thank you very much for joining us - how are you, today?

Laurie I'm very well, Mark - thank you very much for asking me.

Mark That's great. So - tell us a little bit about Northern Broadsides - what is it? How does it work - what kind of projects you've been involved in, recently?

Laurie Yes - so the Company has been going for 30 years, next year. So next year's our 30th birthday. And it was set up to perform classic **plays** and new plays, so things like Shakespeare, as well as newly-written plays, in the "Northern Voice". So it had, for a long time, been the case that theatre in this country - particularly of Shakespeare and other classical writers - was usually performed in what we call "RP" which stands for "Received Pronunciation", which is the kind of accent that is associated with the "Queen's English"- so it's Southern, it's got very clipped¹, short vowels and it's how a lot of people might speak down south, but actually, it's a very particular kind of way of delivering² theatre.

¹ clipped - to clip something means to cut off, so that may be something physical such as a newspaper clipping, or an animal's fur, for example, but here is applied to a manner of speaking.

² delivering theatre - this particular use of the word 'delivery' means a manner of style of speaking

And, there was an actor called Barry Rutter - and Barry is a Halifax man and still lives in Halifax - and Barry was very frustrated at the kinds of parts³ that he was getting with companies such as the RSC (Royal Shakespeare Company) and the National Theatre, so he set up his own theatre company called Northern Broadsides - and it was, particularly, to perform Shakespeare and other plays with ... in the Northern Voice, in the Northern accent - and more specifically, in Yorkshire, which, of course, is where Halifax is.

Mark This is a perfect follow on from last week's episode and if any listeners who are listening to this one, who didn't listen to last week's, and you want to know more about regional accents, then I refer you back to that.

Laurie Great.

Mark So, anyway, Laurie - tell us a bit more about what happened next.

Laurie So, I took over the company two years ago and still at the heart of our mission is to make work in the Northern Voice, but we've also started to think about what does the "northern voice" mean now, and started to really develop the definition. So we're starting to think of the northern voice being about the identities and multiple communities that exist in the north. And obviously, this country and Yorkshire - and the north, in general - has changed a lot in 30 years and we want to reflect that in the work that the Company makes.

So the first piece that we made when I arrived was a Christmas piece called *Christmas Broadsides* and "broadsides" are traditional songs that for hundreds of years have been shared on pieces of paper, or broadsides, that tell familiar stories, funny stories, folk stories - often rooted in old folk tales - and we took some of those and we worked with two Iranian musicians, whom we met through St Augustine's, and who were asylum seekers who had recently arrived from Iran and we told their stories of arrival and how they left and what happened when they arrived here and interweaved them with the traditional Yorkshire stories.

(4 minutes: 47 seconds).

So that was our first show and it was an extraordinary thing to make - to include those stories of people recently arrived in Halifax, with the talents of a wonderful folk singer

³ parts - here refers to roles in dramatic productions; to have a part in a play is to act as one of the characters.

called Alice Jones, who shared with us some of her hundreds-of-years-old stories and songs.

Mark You didn't know this, but last week's episode of our podcast was specifically about regional accents in the UK.

Laurie Aah - fascinating!

Mark And I spoke to a number of people, with different accents, and then we talked a bit about this and we talked about "Received Pronunciation" and the Queen's English so ...

Laurie So, we've been busy but we've had to change a lot more what we do - and we've just come back from Sheffield, where The Crucible Theatre is one of the country's foremost theatres - and we made four short plays by an American writer, called Tennessee Williams. He wrote *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Street Car named Desire* - both of those are quite famous films made in America in the 'fifties [1950s] and these were four short plays which we performed in northern accents and we also turned them into short films. So that's what we've been doing recently.

Mark Absolutely fascinating, Laurie - I knew some of that but not all of it.

Laurie Made by artists from throughout the North, about the experience of lockdown and then we made a piece outdoors about the Piece Hall in Halifax, with twenty young people called *The Aftermath*, and that was a dance theatre piece, **choreographed** by two wonderful artists, based in Hebden Bridge - as part of what we call the "Digital Squad". And they were short ten minute films.

Mark That's really interesting. So what other projects have you done recently, or are you in the process of planning at the moment, Laurie?

Laurie We then made this show called *Quality Street* and this was a play by J M Barrie. J M Barrie wrote *Peter Pan*⁴ but *Quality Street* is a play that has been forgotten, largely. Because Quality Street⁵ are the chocolates that are made here in Halifax, in the factory

⁴ *Peter Pan* has been a very famous long lasting children's story about an adventurous group of children and pirates.

⁵ Quality Street - brand name made by Nestlé

and are one of the UK's - I think, actually, *the* UK's favourite chocolates, I think - we decided that a play called *Quality Street* should probably be explored. So when I started to do research, I actually discovered that the chocolates had been named after this forgotten play. The play had been such a huge success in the West End and on Broadway, back in the 1920's, that they'd named these chocolates after them. And if you find some Quality Street, they still come in these tins or plastic containers - purple - and they've got two figures on them - a soldier and a woman - and those are actually the two lead characters from this J M Barrie play called *Quality Street*.

So, we made that production to go on tour and we worked with 6 women who had all retired from the Quality Street factory in Halifax, and we showed them bits of the play, and told their stories as well, through the drama. And we were on tour with that, when Covid hit - so we did four weeks here in Halifax, Manchester, Bury, and Lancaster - and then Covid hit and we were just about to open in Liverpool and we had 4 more months of the tour to go, when all the theatres were shut down. It's been a difficult time for everyone, hasn't it? But for theatre companies: we really had to reimagine what we did. So we then started making short films.

(9:02)

Mark Just help our listeners a little bit. What's the ... what does it mean to be a national touring company - how does that relate to a regional theatre like, for example, you mentioned The Crucible, in Sheffield, and how does that relate to the West End? - and what does that mean, the West End?

Laurie Good question, Mark. So, as a national touring company, we get funded by the **Arts Council** and the Arts Council fund a lot of the theatre companies and theatres across the country, to some degree or another, and we tend to do at least one long tour every year. So, we'll open at the beginning of the year - usually February or March - and then we'll maybe tour to maybe 15 different theatres, around the country - places like Leeds Playhouse, which is a regional theatre, Sheffield Crucible we mentioned before, which is a regional theatre. We go all the way down south to Salisbury Playhouse, .. which is in the south west and London theatres, too. So we will go - we will play there for a week - so, we'll arrive, set up the show - Broadsides are unique in that we play spaces of all shapes and sizes - so we will go from a theatre that's "in the round", meaning the stage is right in the centre and the audience are seated around all four sides, and then we'll go to a theatre that is "end on", which just means that you're playing to an audience that is straight in front of you. And we will arrive, change the way we perform

it, and open, all on the same day. And then we'll move to the next theatre. So we've been doing ... that's been the pattern for the last 30 years and we're continuing that. But we're also making more work that's made by and for our communities, here in Calderdale - which is the borough where Halifax is - and particularly, we're developing deeper ties with the communities in Park which is the ward⁶ in Halifax where St Augustine's Centre is.

Mark Yes - that's great. Tell us about the West End.

Laurie You asked about the West End, didn't you?

Mark I did - tell us about what's that phrase mean and what's it mean in terms of the theatre?

Laurie Sure. So the West End is commercial theatres in London and commercial meaning that they're run by private theatre owners and private theatre producers are staging shows and it's specifically as to make money. So that's the difference. You're seeing lots of big musicals because that's what people want to see - those shows can run⁷ for years and years - and really, to make money in the West End, your show needs to run for a good long time. So some plays will come into the West End for short runs, if the producer thinks they can make some money on it. But normally, it gets **clogged up** with commercial musicals because that's where the money is.

So the West End is the most high profile bit of our industry but it's ... in some ways, makes the least interesting work, because it's not necessarily artist-led, although **some things fall through the cracks** and you get the odd, really exciting piece of work in the West End, just because people get excited. So, there's a play ... a musical called "Everyone's [Everybody's] Talking about Jamie" for example, that's now in the West End, but that started at Sheffield theatres. And it's about a young lad in Sheffield, who wanted to go to his prom - his end-of-year ball⁸ - dressed in drag - basically, dressed as a woman. And that caused a huge furore at the school and a documentary was made about him and this was then turned into a really life-affirming, feel-good, musical, that's still running in the West End. So there is a certain connection between some shows

⁶ ward - a local area identified by a set of streets drawn up by the local Council for administrative purposes in local government; normally, ward will refer to a hospital area tending patients with similar medical needs.

⁷ run - be presented

⁸ ball - a formal dance evening; in more modern usage, a celebratory party arranged by school or colleges for pupils leaving to go on to the next stage of education or work

that have come from regional theatres and end up in the West End, but that is quite rare.

Mark OK. And so the regional theatres that you're talking about, which is where you often do your performances, they are ... they will put on some plays of their own but they will also bring in Companies like you, to perform things. Have I understood that right?

Laurie Yes - exactly right. There's lots of theatres round the country who just bring touring work in as well, who don't make their own plays. Usually, when you're talking about regional theatres it means ... it refers to a theatre that's funded by the **Arts Council** to both make their own work and have visiting Companies.

Mark That's great. And where does the ...you mentioned the Royal Shakespeare Company - where does that fit into all this?

Laurie So there are a handful - maybe not even a handful - there's two national companies and that's the RSC - the Royal Shakespeare Company - they're based in Stratford, which is in the Midlands.

Mark And the birth place of Shakespeare.

Laurie Exactly right - so you can go on a great day out. You can go to Shakespeare's birthplace, you can go to Anne Hathaway's cottage which is where his wife grew up and you can go and see a play. So it's a really nice day out. The one thing about the West End and the RSC is they both also cater for tourists, because tourists love to come to London and Stratford and spend their money on going to the theatre, because it's such an English institution⁹.

And then there's the National Theatre and the national theatre is in London on the South Bank and they have three theatres within one building and they do maybe up to twenty or twenty two shows a year and in all the different spaces and they get the most money from the Arts Council - both the RSC and the National Theatre, as our two national companies.

Mark That's great - that's really helpful. And - just to explain to listeners - the West End is called the West End because it's the West side of London, of this central part of

⁹ English institution - well-established part of society and culture

London and certainly I've been to a number of plays there, over the years and to a number of theatres. And - I don't know how many there are - are there, Laurie? You may know - but within quite a small area - within a couple of square miles, there are a significant number of these commercial theatres aren't there?

Laurie Probably thirty to fifty - and there's one road called Shaftesbury Avenue and you can look down Shaftesbury Avenue and you can see theatre, theatre, theatre, theatre. There's like about eight all down that road, all one after the other. So that's really the heart of what we refer to as "Theatre-land".

Mark Yes - and you also mentioned "Broadway" and Broadway of course is the American equivalent of that and that's in New York and is literally the road where a large number of the American theatres are.

Laurie Although, it's interesting, you know - when you first go to New York and go to Broadway, you realise that most of the Broadway theatres are not on Broadway - they're .. much more spread out really than in London but Broadway is a street that cuts across them all really, so yes - that's the equivalent.

Mark Very interesting, Laurie. So - just to wind things up, what are the future plans for Northern Broadsides? What are your next projects and how do you see the immediate period after what you ... as you rightly say - has been a very difficult period for you, as for many people, including in the arts?

Laurie Well - two things worth mentioning: we're planning, at the moment, our next touring show which will start touring at the next spring and that will be a Shakespeare play. We're looking to work with LGBTQ artists - so Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer artists - to explore the play, because the play is a lot to do with desire, love, gender, gender roles, people changing gender. So that's our next project. It's also the most musical of Shakespeare's plays - it's got lots of songs written in to it which Broadsides love - we love that, because we like to our productions are very bold and very accessible¹⁰ and always full of life and music. And then we're also starting a project in the autumn for service centre users, based in St Augustine's - so if anyone's interested who are at the centre, we're looking for anyone who's interested in developing their English, doing creative writing, whether that's poetry, plays, stories, and potentially

¹⁰ accessible - when used to refer to a work of art (painting, writing, film, stage work) - this means it is more easily understood.

telling their story, and we're looking to start back in the autumn, so do get in touch with St Augustine's if you want more information. Because we'll be contacting people soon about that ongoing project and it will be a weekly session but we also hope to gradually build up to a performance.

Mark Thanks very much, Laurie - and just to say a big thank you from the St Augustine's Centre because you are an important partner to us and, as you've just described, doing some really important and interesting work with our centre members, so we're very grateful for that partnership, Laurie.

(Music) (19:36)

Mark **Language Support**

This is the part of the podcast where I choose a few words and phrases from the episode and talk about them.

Today, I'm starting by saying a little bit about the word **Play**. Because we use the idea of " a play" as being a work of drama, that is put on in a theatre or an area for performance. There will be a written version of the play and then it will be performed. Of course, the word **play** can also mean to play a sport, children can play games, so it is a form of entertainment of some sort, so that links to the idea of a play in the theatre.

You can talk about actors **playing** a part, so they take on a role, in the theatre. You would normally say that people would put on a play or perform a play in a theatre. Laurie talked about the **choreography** of a particular play - choreography is usually used in relation to dance, or performances like ballet, and the choreography there is about the organising of how the performers are going to do that particular dance or that piece of movement, within the play.

Laurie talked about the **Arts Council**. The Arts Council is a government-funded agency that distributes money and promotes the whole range of artistic activities - it gives it to artistic organisations, like Northern Broadsides, and to theatres and to artists themselves.

I'm going to choose two phrases from this episode:

Laurie talked about the West End **getting clogged up by musicals**. If something is clogged up it means there's so much of something that actually it's not necessarily working very well or it's difficult for anything else to happen, in that space. So you can talk about a machine getting **clogged up**, if there's too many things in the machine, or something that's not supposed to be there. In this case, Laurie is saying there are so many - probably, too many musicals - in the West End, and that that clogs up the West End, and there isn't room perhaps, for other types of plays.

And then he talked about some things **that fall through the cracks**. So, something that falls through the cracks, is something that's not noticed or dealt with - so, in this case, Laurie was saying there was some very high quality dramas that do find themselves into the West End, but that they kind of don't get noticed, because of all the musicals and more commercial activities that go on there.

You can also talk about **people that fall through the cracks**. For example, if someone is wanting support or some financial help, but they don't quite meet the criteria - for example, they haven't been in the country long enough or to do with where they live or how old they are, then you could say they have fallen through the cracks of the support and the welfare available to them.

That's it for this week. I hope you've found that an interesting episode. If you want to find out more about this podcast, about the activities of our centre and how you can support us, and how to get the transcript - that is the written version of this podcast and all the others in the series - then stay listening for information about our website and email addresses.

Otherwise, we will be back with you, again, very soon - meanwhile, stay safe and keep practising your English.

(Music) (24:36)

You can get the transcript for this episode and all others - through our website:

www.staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk

That's also where you can find out how to support our work, including making a donation.

You can contact us by email; we have a specific email address for this podcast, which is:

englishforlifeintheUK@gmail.com

and there is also a general email address for the Centre:

info@staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk

I'll spell out all of those:

So, the website: -s-t-a-u-g-u-s-t-i-n-e-s-c-e-n-t-r-e-h-a-l-i-f-a-x.org.uk

Org - that O-R-G.-U-K.

The email is: englishforlifeintheUK@gmail.com

And that's "English for" spelt: f-o-r - life in the uk.

And the general email - Info at:

info@ - is i-n-f-o (at), and then the same as the website address
staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk

Thank you and be back with you again soon.

Ends (27:10)