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# Gay Sweatshop, Alternative Theatre, and Strategies for New Writing

Gay Sweatshop spent twenty-two years producing plays as Britain's first openly gay professional theatre company. Their alternative and political work primarily took the form of author-driven new writing, though experiments with performer-driven work intrigued the company from its earliest cabarets to its late phase of queer solo work under Lois Weaver. In this article, Sara Freeman pinpoints Sweatshop's tenth anniversary new play festival in 1985 as the moment when the company committed to new writing as a strategy for gaining greater legitimacy as a theatre group and as a central mode to encourage gay and lesbian voices and representation. She argues that while this had been the default mode of much 1970s political theatre including Sweatshop's, as it played out in the 1980s, a new writing strategy represented a move toward institutional stability as the locus of theatrical radicalism shifted aesthetics. In this analysis, the celebration of company anniversaries and the creation of festival events provided occasions for the company to experience the success or failure of its policies. Freeman is Assistant Professor of Theatre Arts at the University of Puget Sound. She is the co-editor of *Public Theatres and Theatre Publics* (2012) and *International Dramaturgy: Translation and Transformations in the Theatre of Timberlake Wertenbaker* (2008). Her recent publications appear in *Modern British Playwriting: the 1980s. Readings in Performance and Ecology*, and the forthcoming volume *The British Theatre Company from Fringe to Mainstream: Volume II 1980–1994*.

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GAY SWEATSHOP, Britain's first professional gay and lesbian theatre company, rounded off its first ten years at the midpoint of the 'Thatcher decade', at a moment when the energies of the 1970s intersected with the changes during the 1980s in both national politics and alternative theatre. The resonance of anniversary markers lies in how they call attention both to what is past and what is to come. As a result, the historiographical significance of anniversaries emerges from understanding both what a group does by calling attention to them, and what historians do when faced with the arbitrary bisection of time that a unit such as a decade represents.

In 1985, rather than struggle with funding or close in light of the widespread changes to public funding affecting the arts in Britain, what Sweatshop did marked a high point. By 1985, they'd already been felled once from without, and survived several reinventions from within. For its tenth anniversary, the

company vibrantly and vociferously celebrated with a festival season housed at the Drill Hall called 'Gay Sweatshop × 10'. With this festival, Sweatshop called attention to its longevity and to its sense that there was still a lot to come; in both cases the company emphasized their role as producers of new writing.

British theatre and the academic writing about it continues to struggle conceptually with the poetics and the politics of text-based and non text-based work. One of the key factors about text in theatre comes from the relationship of text to processes of legitimation. This article argues that in the 1980s pushing for new writing accomplished specific goals that allowed an alternative group like Sweatshop to make a bid to for greater legitimation. In this way, new plays are both a path of innovation (new as opposed to old; able to carry radical content) and a way of consolidating influence (potentially producing texts

of importance that will continue to be discussed and produced).

In 1985, Gay Sweatshop celebrated its history as a force for gay writers, actors, and audiences while looking firmly ahead with a plan to keep producing more new writing that would in turn enhance the company's status as an institution. Its success at this anniversary juncture coincided with the way new writing approaches initially central to alternative practice became mainstream across the 1980s while non text-based work became the cutting edge. The new writing strategy, in one form or another, secured Sweatshop's activity almost to its twentieth anniversary.

### New Writing and the Alternative

The initial call for script submissions for the × 10 festival circulated in September 1984. Key company playwright, director, and administrator Noel Greig wrote for it a page-long commentary vindicating Sweatshop's history and the necessity of a *politically* gay theatre. 'Who would have imagined that all those meetings twelve or so years ago, in grubby church halls and cold flats, could have paved the way for the giant pleasure-domes which the business world trips over its feet to offer us?' he asks, but then warns against a 'Gay glossies' worldview that makes 'all the matters of wider politics seem out-of-date, fuddy-duddy and irrelevant'.<sup>1</sup>

In the face of such a shallow view, and against the urge to 'dismiss' the work of the sixties and seventies, Greig announces Sweatshop's anniversary festival of new writing as a 'platform for work which looks at the present and the future, in light of recent past'. A year later, during the actual festival, the newspaper-sized programme supplement for the first week of shows carried a feature commentary called 'Why a Festival' by Kate Owen, who served as Sweatshop's lynchpin designer during the 1980s and was another central member of the management team. This piece even more firmly asserted 'that the tenth anniversary celebration had to look to the future', detailing the historical exclusion of gay and straight women, gay men, artists of colour, and artists with disabilities

from theatrical recognition.<sup>2</sup> 'This festival is an opportunity to change that,' she writes, with the clear imperative that the work must continue.

Owen correctly emphasized the future and, propelled by the festival, the company continued to propagate new work and reinvent its aesthetic for another twelve years before closing in 1997. In this article I want to reconstruct and analyze in detail the × 10 festival and note pivotal festival moments across Sweatshop's history before and after this event. My argument evaluates the forces conditioning new writing missions undertaken by alternative British theatre companies across what might best be called the 'long 1980s'.<sup>3</sup> Situating this specific company in this detail opens up notions about the relationship between fringe and mainstream theatre and about the success and failure of alternative theatre in the 1980s in contradictory and nuanced ways.

New writing helped to (re)establish Gay Sweatshop during this period, and moving away from new writing troubled its path. The festivals that serve as landmarks on the terrain are the × 10 event in 1985, which recalls the 1978 Gay Times Festival where the company staked its claim in the new writing scene. The × 12 festival in 1987 reflected a careful new relationship with the mainstream; while the 1989 production of Greig's *Paradise Now and Then* stands as a type of a broken festival, showing the unravelling of the × 10 and × 12 model as the idea of a 'politically gay' new writing theatre came most under duress. The festivals of queer solo performances hosted by Sweatshop between 1992 and 1997 decisively marked a new phase for the company and reflected the changed strategies of radicalism in British theatre in that quiet moment before 1995.<sup>4</sup>

### Festivals and the Fringe

From the beginning, festival thinking propelled and permeated Gay Sweatshop's operations: a big event gave the artists a reason to bond together, a frame through which to seek new work, and a way to convince venues to host them over a period of time, not just

for one production. Gay Sweatshop created itself via a festival in 1975 at Ed Berman's Almost Free Theatre in Rupert Street, and earned its first annual programme grant from the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) in 1977, which allowed it to develop the work that served as the foundation for the Gay Times Festival in 1978.<sup>5</sup> So in many ways it may have been a reflex action in 1984 to begin planning a festival to celebrate Sweatshop's tenth anniversary. That the company had only just re-launched itself in 1983 after a two-year closure-cum-hiatus made the ten years being celebrated also ten years partially under erasure. That founding member Drew Griffith had just been murdered before the planning began made the act of celebrating also an act of commemoration in mourning.<sup>6</sup>

Within those tensions of erasure and mourning, the festival Sweatshop planned resulted in an event perfectly suited to celebrate the company's role in alternative theatre in Britain, even as the alternative landscape shifted. In 1984, fresh from the success of the production and tour of Greig's *Poppies* that re-started the company, and still in the midst of a remount and second tour of the show, the company planned an event that housed all the facets of post-1968 alternative theatre – consciousness-raising talk sessions, writing workshops for different communities of interest and identity, performances by visiting companies from America and British-based cross-arts experimenters, lunchtime readings, late-night cabarets, and main-stage performances of new plays.

At the same time, as if intuiting that alternative theatre companies would need to explain their reason for existence and their relationship to the larger field of theatrical production and funding in different terms from the 1970s, Sweatshop's understanding of its alterity and its simultaneous bid for mainstream influence coalesced around the concept of new writing. The × 10 festival declared that the company was decisively focused on a new-play development model of alternative theatre.

In 1985, Gay Sweatshop faced a 'fringe' scene divided between the alternative 'tradition' of political theatre that championed new

playwrights and the re-avant-gardization of British theatre through the visual and physical experimentation of newly founded but rising companies such as Complicite, DV8, and Bloodlips. Though a fringe company, Sweatshop primarily focused on plays and scripts, despite the few pieces in its pre-1983 repertoire that were cabaret shows, punky group-assembled rock musicals, or flights of formal pastiche (*Jingleball*, *Warm*, *I Like Me Like This*, *Blood Green*).

Encouraging authors to write stood central to its mission as a gay company and promoted the opportunity for gay theatre artists to stage plays that told stories by, about, and for a gay community. When the planning for × 10 began, Sweatshop had a tighter core group of leaders than it had had at any time since 1975, and the process of rehearsing and touring *Poppies* had forged their connections. *Poppies* itself stemmed directly from the writing of Noel Greig, who in 1982 earned an Arts Council writer's bursary even after Gay Sweatshop as a company had its funding entirely cut.<sup>7</sup> New writing grounded Gay Sweatshop.

New writing likewise determined the processes of the festival. Greig, Owen, Philip Osment, Diane Biondo, Philip Timmins, Martin Humphries, and Bernardine Evaristo publicized the × 10 festival by calling for scripts. They read the ninety-six scripts submitted, organized presenters and communities of artists, remounted an existing production, and figured out which of the new shows to stage and tour following the festival. At each step along the way the company's discourse focused on generating new writing, hearing the script, and finding ways to see new plays into full production. In this case, the politics of the festival were about the role of alternative theatre as an engine of new writing, while its poetics had to do with telling gay stories, as opposed to the opposite way round, which is how it had been in 1975.

### **New Writing about Identity for × 10**

If Sweatshop's calls for submissions to the × 10 festival emphasized the legacy of its

work in new-play development in its first ten years as part of confirming its politics, the actual programme of events at the Drill Hall in October 1985 highlighted new writing as innovation in the name of diverse identities. The only funding the company received prior to the festival came from funding bodies that encouraged disability work and women's work. Later, the festival received funding retroactively in a grant from the Greater London Council (GLC), disbursed after the programming finished.

Over three weeks, the company staged seventeen new play readings accompanied by writing workshops, poetry readings, and concerts in the Drill Hall, plus performances by companies visiting from the US and elsewhere in Britain. A 'grand finale cabaret' closed the festival on 2 November. The strategy of throwing a party and then paying for it bore some fruit: in addition to the one-time grant for the festival itself, the GLC awarded the company an annual grant to pay for a full-time administrator and for renting an office after the festival.<sup>8</sup>

With its festival programming, Sweatshop addressed their self-identified need to highlight the work of lesbian artists, given the dominance of gay male projects in the past.<sup>9</sup> Sweatshop commissioned *Raising the Wreck* in 1984, seeking an all-woman show. Sue Frumin wrote a play about female pirates; the 1985 production was directed by Paddy Taylor and designed by Owen. It opened on tour on 11 October at the Pegasus Theatre in Oxford and then came to London to launch the festival. Sweatshop moved into the Drill Hall space on 14 October 1985, swift on the heels of the departure of Bristol Express.<sup>10</sup> With no rehearsal in the space in the week before, this 'get in' night set up *Raising the Wreck* for performances on Tuesday 15 and Wednesday 16 at 8 p.m.

After the fully staged *Raising the Wreck* launched the proceedings, all the rest of the Sweatshop plays were presented under the banner 'works in progress' (visiting companies brought more realized productions, albeit in bare-bones touring mode). Directors received guidelines about preparing these 'rehearsed, staged readings' that emphas-

ized simplicity, casting, and dramaturgy. 'Please don't be scared of allowing the actors to just sit and read the play,' commanded the document, which lists Philip Osment as the contact for directors. 'The emphasis for the play reading is on the words,' it begins, while the final section on the second page notes 'With some scripts it may be necessary to help the writer realize what they trying to achieve – this is a vital aspect of the festival as we were particularly keen to encourage people who might never have written before to submit work.'<sup>11</sup>

These directives converge around notions of language and authorship that marked Sweatshop's new writing strategy as being grounded in a text-based approach to theatre making. Nonetheless, each week's events had both author-driven work and performer-devised work as well as events that crossed over between the worlds of music, dance, and theatre, which points up how new writing from other modes of experiment cohabited in the alternative scene during the mid-1980s.

#### THE FIRST WEEK

The first week featured a Thursday-evening airing of Nigel Pugh's *Skin Deep* followed by music from the Irish group Pinque Rince, the 'world's first lesbian and gay ceilidh band'. The concert joined with a performance of *Friends of Rio Rita's* by Colm Clubhán, staged by the Irish Gay Theatre Group.<sup>12</sup> Friday brought 'an evening of black lesbian writing' that premiered Jackie Kay's first foray into playwriting, *Chiaroscuro: Light and Dark*. After the reading, a 'women only' sharing of Black Lesbian/Zami poetry started at 9.30 p.m. Lesbian poetry also headlined the Saturday, 19 October lunchtime presentation, followed by a 3 p.m. reading of Carl Miller's *England Arise* and an eight o'clock reading of *Ties* by Tash Fairbanks of Siren Theatre Company. A late-night slot featured a visiting show from The Resisters called *About Face*, which welcomed Cordelia Ditton and Maggie Ford to Gay Sweatshop.

Week one came to a finale on 20 October with readings of Andy Kirby's *Compromised Immunity*, Greynum Pyper's *Boy*, and Cath-

arine Kilcoyne's *Julie* – all shows Sweatshop staged and toured in 1986. The third visiting company of the week, Canada's Nightwood Theatre Collective, a landmark woman's performance group, presented a late Sunday-night performance of their show *Switching Channels*.

The significance of this line-up deserves some excavation to trace the connections and resonances of these artists and projects. The first week highlighted *Compromised Immunity*, one of the first British AIDS plays, which became one of Sweatshop's key productions and is often analyzed in histories of gay theatre. Osment writes at length about the long debate and developmental process the company carried out with Kirby while choosing the show for the festival and then bringing it to full production. The show's successful tour also created significant controversy when cleaners at the Taliesin Theatre worried about contracting AIDS while cleaning up after the show performed there and a national media storm ensued.<sup>13</sup>

The other play readings of week one also indicated which shows Sweatshop felt spoke most to its social and political achievements. Kilcoyne's *Julie* was the only show that took up the proposition in the festival's initial call for scripts that writers submit pieces in response to *Mr X* and *Any Woman Can*, the company's original coming-out plays from the 1970s. Her play imagined a next-generation Ginny from *Any Woman Can*. According to Lyn Gardner, *Julie* is a 'red-blooded, all het good time girl', who comes to recognize that's she's gay.<sup>14</sup>

Pugh's *Skin Deep* dramatized a complex relationship between a skinhead teenager and a gay schoolteacher, thematizing in an extreme situation Sweatshop's engagement with issues about homosexual identity in schools that came out of youth-oriented work and school performances on tours across its ten year existence.<sup>15</sup> Pyper's autobiographical one-man show highlighted an important part of Gay Sweatshop's legacy on that front: Sweatshop's presence (in body or just in reputation) in small towns all over Britain as the only 'out' gays and lesbians that many homosexual men and women in

those communities had ever seen – or heard about. Pyper's bio in the festival 'Programme Supplement' explicates:

I remember sitting in my school hall in Goole waiting to watch a play by the Great Eastern Stage Company. I was around seventeen then. In the programme were biographies of the actors, one of whom, it was stated, had previously worked with GAY SWEATSHOP! I remember staring at those two words. Two words in a programme, that's all I had. But they were enough; enough to cling to, enough to hold on to and hope.<sup>16</sup>

Pyper wasn't the only youthful gay artist debuting at the × 10 festival. Carl Miller was a student at Cambridge at the time. David Benedict, a journalist, actor, and director who served as Sweatshop Artistic Director in 1990 and 1991, directed Miller's play, *England Arise*. The programme describes this as a 'political melodrama' set 'simultaneously in the thirties and the eighties'.<sup>17</sup> Greig often used a time-contrasting structure in his plays for Sweatshop and it is especially prominent in *As Time Goes By* and *Poppies*.

Miller's sensibilities connected with and vindicated Sweatshop's project to undo the historical self-loathing visited on young gay men and to recover gay history. His programme bio begins 'Carl Miller is twenty years old and, after coming out at school, began dividing his time there between studying for his A-levels and discovering politics, theatre, and sex; roughly – he says – in that order.' Subsequently Sweatshop produced Miller's play *The Last Enemy* at the Drill Hall in 1991.

Miller published a historical study of gay theatre, *Stages of Desire: Gay Theatre's Hidden History*, in 1996.<sup>18</sup> Between 1997 and 1999, like early Sweatshop member Gerald Chapman before him, Miller ran the Royal Court Young People's programme, before becoming literary manager for the Unicorn Theatre, which has been his home base since 2002 across numerous productions and commissions at theatres from Watford to the National. In Miller, Sweatshop fostered a theatre artist able to build a career, inside and outside gay companies, in a way the company's founding generation dreamed about.<sup>19</sup>

Nightwood's visit to the UK for the × 10 festival affirmed the feminist aspect of Sweatshop's work and addressed some of the tensions within the company about women's visibility and voice. In 1985 as Nightwood visited the festival the group had just closed its own new works festival, and were touring parts of the collectively created *This is For You, Anna*. In Canada, Nightwood stands analogous to both Women's Theatre Group and Monstrous Regiment in the UK, and the Toronto-based company exists to this day.<sup>20</sup>

With Nightwood, Jackie Kay, and the poetry readings, the first week events foregrounded the presence of women and issues of race. Sweatshop planned events that strove to achieve visibility for women, while also creating safe spaces for women and artists of colour as communities unto themselves. Management team member and festival organizer Bernardine Evaristo, who had co-founded the Theatre of Black Women when she graduated from university, wrote an article for the festival programme detailing her personal struggle around these issues:

For myself, and many other black lesbians, there is very little security in our lives. As a black woman writer my support is limited. As a black lesbian writer, my support network could be diminished even further. . . .

I do have reservations about working in majority white and/or majority male organizations. However, I chose to participate in this festival because if there is to be a platform for lesbians and gay men then it must include everyone. For these reasons, I believe it is important that black lesbians participate, and I look forward to seeing you there.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout the × 10 festival, Sweatshop embraced the legitimating power of new writing for artists with intersecting identities around sexuality, race, and disability: this was behind the push for the writers' workshops. The testimonials from Evaristo quoted here and disabled artist Tina Shirley quoted below served the purpose of assuring the artists of the most marginalized identities that the authorial force of the established playwrights leading the writing workshops would not overwrite their authentic voices. Tension existed between two outcomes that Gay

Sweatshop expected from new writing. The festival pursued new writing as an alternative project to affirm a community; but new writing was also a mainstreaming project to create greater visibility and consolidate authority.

Indeed, this tension showed in the negotiations about 'women's only' spaces during the festival. Company meeting minutes attest that a tension existed for the lesbian artists of Sweatshop and the women they hoped to recruit to work more frequently with the company, like Ditton and Tierl Thompson, who became more involved with Sweatshop after the × 10 festival. While Sweatshop's women wanted more visibility and not to be sidelined by the past structure of a men's company and a women's company, many women activists and artists of the late 1980s felt strongly about the necessity and efficacy of spaces for women to connect and create without the presence of men.<sup>22</sup>

So, for instance, in the first week's programme, Sweatshop advertised a separate event to be held at the London Lesbian and Gay Centre on 17 October called 'Ten Lesbian Playwrights'. The blurb delineates the event as for lesbians, by lesbians, and only for lesbians. 'This event has been arranged by the Lesbian Co-Ordinating group in association with Gay Sweatshop × 10 festival. All lesbians welcome. Coffee and cakes – tea and buns.' Sweatshop bridged the desires for women-only events as best as it could, but achieved the most leverage with the writing workshops for different communities of identity.

#### THE SECOND WEEK

Accordingly, the second week honed its mid-day focus to writing workshops, while continuing the evening programmes of readings and visiting artists. *Raising the Wreck* had two more Tuesday and Wednesday performances. On Thursday 24 October Evaristo led a writing workshop for black lesbian writers. That evening Miriam Margoyles performed Michelene Wandor's *Meet My Mother* for the first time and then there was a reading of *Lifelines* by Nicolle Freni. Friday 25 October brought the reading of Rho Pegg's *Aliens and*

*Alienists* and began the visit of US director and author Terry Baum, author of *Dos Lesbos* and founding artistic director of Lilith, the leading women's theatre company in San Francisco during the 1970s.<sup>23</sup> Baum gave her one-woman show *Immediate Family* on both Friday and Saturday night.

Familiar names and key crossovers defined this second week of programming: this was a week about success, recognition, and how to wield influence. As such, it was the week for reading the plays written by current members of company management Martin Humphries and Diane Biondo. It was the week for having company leaders direct shows and give workshops: Greig led a writing workshop for gay men with disabilities, and Maro Green one for lesbians with disabilities. And it was the week for featuring a significant number of artists who worked with allied alternative companies and the return of highly recognizable artists who had worked with Sweatshop in the 1970s.

Miriam Margoyles, for instance, played Ginny in *Any Woman Can* at its first one-night performance in November 1975 at the Leicester Haymarket. She also appeared in Joint Stock's original production of *Cloud Nine*. She is now known for her film career, including her recurring role as Madame Pomfroy in the *Harry Potter* films. Wandor wrote the script for Sweatshop's 1977 signal women's show about lesbian custody, *Care and Control*.

Wandor's continuing writing career encompasses plays, poetry, short stories, and scholarship. In the 1980s, as part of the alternative and feminist theatre scene, she collaborated on *Floorshow* for Monstrous Regiment, adapted *Aurora Leigh* for Mrs Worthington's Daughters, was instrumental in editing and advocating for Methuen's 'Plays by Women' series, and authored some of the first studies of British feminist theatre, *Look Back in Gender* and *Carry On, Understudies*.<sup>24</sup> Margoyles's reading of Wandor's monologue was billed as a 'special appearance' in part to denote the importance of their presence at the festival.

Meanwhile, the issue of lesbian custody still propelled work at the festival: Alison Lyssa's *Pinball*, read on Saturday night, took

on the topic of custody, focusing on a woman's fight for the care of her son. After the impact of *Care and Control* and the success of artists like Wandor and Margoyles, Sweatshop could draw attention to artists such as Lyssa and continue the conversation about the human and legal dimension of custody law. The company made sure to maximize the opportunities around the topic with a speaker from Rights of Women immediately following and a strong crossover with the artistic personnel of the Women's Theatre Group. Advertising noted the 'free crèche' on hand for both events.<sup>25</sup>

Nona Shepherd of WTG directed the reading of *Pinball*, and WTG's Libby Mason directed Thursday's reading of *Lifelines*. Likewise, WTG's Hazel Maycock was part of the cast for *Raising the Wreck*, and during week three she played Coquino in *More*. Reaching out to another alternative institution like Women's Theatre Group to feed the artistic staff of the × 10 festival confirmed Sweatshop's connections in the field.

Sweatshop channelled talent not only from women's groups and black groups for the festival; they also sought to develop the work of gay and lesbian artists with disabilities. This emphasis in week two programming reflected both the company's awareness of developments in the alternative scene – Graeae had been founded in 1980, and in 1984 won a special *Evening Standard* award – and also its sensitivity to the emerging focus on such categories by funding bodies.

In company meeting minutes across 1985, Greig reminds the festival organizers to have conversations with Ruth Marks at the Arts Council and with GLC contacts about plans for the festival's attention to black and disabled artists because that would help funding prospects.<sup>26</sup> In printed credits, the list of the Festival Management Team members acknowledge 'help from the Disabilities Unit of the GLC'. Indeed, publicizing the artists-with-disability workshops required personal witness and careful positioning about what precisely Sweatshop was doing and how Greig and Green would lead the proceedings. Tina Shirley, bylined as a 'lesbian with

disabilities' in her Programme Supplement article, vindicated the need for the writing workshops while clarifying that Greig and Green's 'roles will be purposely facilitative, and they will be briefed in advance to ensure that adequate space is provided for disabled lesbians and gay men to speak'. She nonetheless concluded by admitting, 'I'm not very happy about able-bodied people leading the workshops, but there were no lesbians or gay men with disabilities who felt confident enough to do it.'<sup>27</sup> Here, the new writing strategy identified an absence, and set about trying to fill it by cultivating talent.

Sweatshop used some of its influence to focus conversation on the identity intersections of homosexuality with race and disability week by week of the festival. Sweatshop also conceptualized the second weekend events as the festival's 'American Weekend', a move that highlighted the international political conversations happening as gay theatre gained more recognition. Hosting Terry Baum, described in programme copy as a 'cross between Gloria Steinem and a lesbian Lily Tomlin' (this was before Lily Tomlin was publicly out as a lesbian), made a bridge between San Francisco's gay community and the London gay community, like the one created by Jill Posener, who was a US transplant to London before she wrote *Any Woman Can*.

The dance theatre company Galveston, featuring the choreography and performance of artistic and romantic partners Tom Keegan and Davidson Lloyd, formed the second leg of the American invasion. The play *Angle of Vision*, about a gay Vietnam veteran who witnesses the murder of a gay teenager outside his apartment building, completed the American contributions to the festival. For this play, Osment directed, as he did for the reading of Martin Humphries's *Dreams Recaptured*.

Osment's presence as director for these scripts confirmed the festival's emphasis on staging plays and the centrality of the text-based and authorial ethos the company worked by, even though the festival wove in dance performance pieces like those from Galveston. Osment is the only Sweatshop

member to have worked with the company across all three decades of its existence. Though Drew Griffiths and Noel Greig, both loved and revered by Osment, were the most visible banner carriers for the company, Osment formed the consistent linking presence for the group between 1978 and 1996 as a performer, playwright, producer, publicist, director, and historian. So his placement on the festival bill is as important as Owen's and Greig's in charting where Sweatshop put its weight in this festival.

Owen's indelible mark on the × 10 festival lies in the extraordinary reach of women's work included on the programme. Greig's generative presence lies in the focus on new writing workshops. Osment's work in the festival drove home the company's continued insistence on linking author-driven new gay plays with political activism, and kept these at the forefront.

During the second week of the festival, Gay Sweatshop made use of the success and recognition it had gained in a decade to invite more artists in to voice and to continue a political platform. The company wanted to be noticed for these actions and knew those actions made an important statement in 1985. It is no accident that the collage of participating artists on the cover of the week two Programme Supplement features in the lower right-hand corner a photo of Margaret Thatcher, hand to her forehead in exasperation, with a comic-book dialogue bubble declaring 'I am not responsible for any of this' emanating from her mouth.

### THE THIRD WEEK

If week one of the festival showcased the new finds and week two the big names and the old guard, week three was a mixed bag, a short week of surprises and challenges culminating in a splashy cabaret finale. All the events of this week took place in the evening except on Saturday; gone were the midday events on Thursday and Friday. *Raising the Wreck* performed its final two nights on 29 and 30 October. Halloween brought not the costume party – that was to come – but the festival's second AIDS-focused play, a reading of Robin Swados's *A Quiet End*. Maro

Green (Penny Casdagli) and Caroline Griffin's *More* premiered on Friday 1 November. In the following year, this play developed legs both in performance and theatrical criticism that made it something of a surprise hit buried at the tail end of the festival. After *More*, Galveston performed again, this time showing *Passing on the Right and Other Accidents of Life (A Gay History)*. Saturday brought back poetry and confirmed dance and physical theatre as part of the aesthetic brief for gay theatre.

Saturday's programme began with gay male poets reading their work in the theatre bar and moved into a presentation of a dance-theatre piece by Gary Rowe called *Outside*. Between *More*, the Galveston company, and Rowe, body-based crossover work had a stronger presence in the third week. Saturday culminated with the reading of *Education: Part One* by an emerging black writer named Ibo and directed by Paulette Randall, who was Evaristo's cohort in creating the Theatre of Black Women.

This strong return to the dynamics of race and identity closed the works-in-progress readings. The festival ended with a late-night Grand Cabaret Finale, which featured guest appearances by Tracey Anderson, The Communards, The Virgin Mary Society, Janice Perry, The Insinuendos, Simon Fanshawe, and Hard Corps, to list only those publicized. Surprise guests were also promised, but are not documented.

The cabaret performers for the finale anticipate the modes of solo performance and queer aesthetics that Gay Sweatshop began to emphasize with the 1992 *Queer School* and *One Night Stands* shows. There was the performance artist Janice Perry, whose vivid costumes and 'Gal' persona allowed for daring identity play, and stand-up comedian Simon Fanshawe quipped commentary about gender and representation. The Insinuendos were a gay cabaret troupe whose presence suggests a mode of camp and vamp in the evening's performances. Hard Corps, co-founded by former WTG member Adele Salem, provided an experimental lesbian-feminist edge to the night.<sup>28</sup> Only the Communards, Jimmy Somerville,

and Richard Coles's new band, recalled Sweatshop's past. Somerville had been the lead singer of Bronski Beat, a new wave band that came to fame in 1984 with the song 'Smalltown Boy'.

'Smalltown Boy' tells the story of a boy, persecuted for being homosexual, who escapes to the big city and finds a new community to embrace him. The video for the song, starring Somerville, rapidly distils the content of Gay Sweatshop's work in the 1970s about being rejected by family, dealing with homophobia, coming out, and wrestling with internalized oppression. In fact, the title of the album featuring this song was 'Age of Consent', the name of Drew Griffiths's 1977 Sweatshop play for the Royal Court youth theatre scheme.<sup>29</sup>

Bronski Beat dedicated the song to Drew Griffiths, so recently murdered. The festival of new writing memorialized Griffiths, remembered the coming-out plays that called the company into being, and yet was on the cusp of a cultural moment when gay stories were soon able to be everywhere in popular culture, like the Bronski Beat hit. Indeed, during the × 10 festival, Antony Sher and Simon Callow, both of whom had performed for Gay Sweatshop in the 1970s, were appearing in major gay plays running in London: Callow in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* at the Bush and Sher in *Torch Song Trilogy* at the Albery.

### 'Give Us a Play!'

Sweatshop connected its new writing strategy backwards to its founding by publishing reprints of the scripts for *Mr X* and *Any Woman Can* in 1985 and making them available for sale at the festival in a small, lithographed format. The cover of this edition indexes the meanings heralded in Sweatshop's focus on new writing, featuring a torn-edged photocopy of a photograph of Sarah Bernhardt playing Hamlet, contemplating Yorick's skull. Bernhardt faces left in the frame, her hand outstretched and her gaze cast down; she's wearing an elaborate doublet and hose, her hair styled in a Pre-Raphaelite pageboy style. She is a cross-

dressed woman, playing perhaps the most famous of all English-language roles. Out of her mouth rises a cartoon speech bubble calling 'Give Us a Play!' and below that is a banner emblazoned '1975–1985', Sweatshop's decade.

In many ways 'Give Us a Play' served as the rallying call for Gay Sweatshop during that time: give us a play about our lives! 'Give us a *new* play', suggests this reappropriation of the image of Bernhardt, since playing the old roles in drag no longer offers enough theatrical freedom. 'Give us a play' was the tag line used in Sweatshop's pre-publicity and calls for submissions for the × 10 festival. The phrase best encapsulated the company's take on what it was doing, both as a new writing company and as a gay company. This one image and slogan yoked together new writing and Shakespeare, new plays, national history, and queer history. 'Give us a play' served both to set forth Sweatshop's specifically gay political agenda – give *us* a play – and to connect Sweatshop to the larger project under way in the field of British theatre to cement the new writing sector as central to a shared conception of the nation's key achievements in theatre arts – give us a *play*. Across the 1980s, new plays were becoming the business of everyone.

Thus as Gay Sweatshop opened the × 10 festival in October, the Royal Shakespeare Company was simultaneously in the midst of a three-play mini-season at the Barbican devoted to the work of Howard Barker, whose status as an alternative writer productively complicates notions about fringe and mainstream, text and performance, the political and aesthetically experimental.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile the Royal Court was finally returning to a fuller producing schedule of new work, after some dire funding blockages across 1984.<sup>31</sup>

Most telling, the National staged its own festival of ten new plays. These reopened the Cottosloe (closed by a funding cut) under the auspices of the newly founded National Studio, led by Peter Gill, himself a homosexual artist, though the festival's offerings were not on gay themes.<sup>32</sup> New writing mattered to the producing schedules of the subsidized national theatres and, symbolic-

ally, Sweatshop's × 10 festival staked its involvement in that dialogue.

### New Plays at the National Studio

With Sweatshop and the NT's overlapping festivals echoing each other, the distance between the artistic focus and working methods at the Drill Hall and on the South Bank was not as wide as it might have seemed. The NT's Festival of New Plays began on 23 September with Daniel Mornin's *The Murders*, directed by Gill. Two weeks later Debbie Horsfield's *True Dare Kiss* opened, directed by NT Studio co-founder John Burgess. Two weeks after that Gill's adaptation of *As I Lay Dying* premiered, just as Sweatshop opened *Raising the Wreck* in the Drill Hall. A few days after Sweatshop's Grand Finale Cabaret, the NT Studio presented a five-play bill of short plays.<sup>33</sup>

The NT's nine-week long exploration of new plays closed with a performance devised from interviews with miners during the 1984–85 strikes called *Garden of England*. Edited by Peter Cox, this piece travelled a developmental process between October 1984 and October 1985 that demonstrated an interesting crossover between the NT Studio and alternative theatre companies like 7:84 which performed an initial adaptation of the similarly sourced interviews with miners. The difference between Sweatshop and the NT's new writing festivals lay in length and production support: the NT's festival lasted three times as long as Sweatshop's event and provided each of the plays with designers (particularly Alison Chitty who designed all the sets); dialect coaches; fight choreographers; and composers. At the NT studio, new writing wasn't a strategy to increase the status of the company, instead the company legitimized the new writing by where it was being presented.

The National Theatre complex dwarfs the Drill Hall, even though the spaces shared a basic philosophy of place.<sup>34</sup> There are multiple performance spaces intertwined with public space for meeting, talking, and eating; multifarious types of performance are programmed on a rotating schedule so audi-

ences find a wide range of reasons to attend events at the venue; and the complexes create a compelling but flexible sense of shared identity for people who frequent events there.

Still, Sweatshop relied on staged readings and the NT opened true workshop productions. In this difference of geography and economics lay the difference between the festivals of new writing in Chenies Street and the complex across Waterloo Bridge. For Gay Sweatshop to stage its tenth anniversary festival at the National Studio itself would have bookended a pioneering decade of gay theatre differently from the location at the Drill Hall, marking the inclusion and support of the company in a premiere national mainstream space. Instead, Sweatshop used festivals to give their plays a platform that could make dialogue among a smaller community in the way the NT expects to do so for the nation.

### The Forerunners

In working on the project of giving 'us a play,' Sweatshop had staged previous festivals before  $\times 10$ : the Homosexual Acts season at the Almost Free in 1975, when the company was founded; a season of lunchtime plays at the ICA in 1976, which might be named the 'Gay's the Word' festival since it led to the launch of the bookshop of that name a few years later; and the Gay Times Festival at the Drill Hall in 1978.<sup>35</sup> These festivals ran over extended periods of time. Homosexual Acts ran from February until June 1975. The lunchtime shows at the ICA extended from February through July. And by the time the company staged the Gay Times Festival in 1978, it had developed parallel production tracks for gay men and gay women and needed an incubator that would welcome its multipronged process, like the newly transformed Drill Hall.

In many ways, Gay Sweatshop and the Drill Hall co-constituted each other: Julie Parker finished working with Sweatshop on *Any Woman Can* and *Jingleball* and became the programmer at the Drill Hall as she helped plan the 1977 Women's Festival with the Action Space collective that occupied the

space in Chenies Street.<sup>36</sup> The next year, under the banner of the Drill Hall, Parker welcomed Gay Sweatshop to the space to stage a different type of festival from the six-month seasons of short plays it had mounted before.

Compared to 1975, the 1978 festival timeline shortened, but the variety of offerings increased: across three weeks in January and February the company performed three shows and two cabarets, and in addition programmed 'workshops, discussions, performances by guest companies, and screenings,' including a performance by Bloodlips.<sup>37</sup> This became the model for the  $\times 10$  festival. The Gay Times Festival maximized its focus on *As Time Goes By*. This play held the seeds of *Dear Love of Comrades* (premiered in March 1979 at Oval House), which was Sweatshop's fullest investigation of the 'interrelationship between personal lives and wider politics'.<sup>38</sup> The festival mattered both as an event itself and as a way to launch what the company deemed to be important plays – those with themes closest to the group's heart and a political perspective. The content of the plays mattered most – the fact that they were new plays simply reinforced new writing as the basic focus of the alternative scene.

The  $\times 10$  festival recapitulated the structure of the Gay Times Festival with reversed commitments. There was more focus on how to make a lasting imprint on theatrical practice through new writing while still raising consciousness and having political impact on ideas about homosexuality. For the rest of the 1980s this focus on new writing enabled a consolidation of the company's status and allowed them a new phase of influence if not complete financial security.

*Raising the Wreck* and *More* consolidated Sweatshop's influence in the realm of women's theatre and laid the groundwork for the 1988 production of *Twice Over* by Jackie Kay, *More* and *Twice Over* both being anthologized in collections and discussed by feminist theatre scholars.<sup>39</sup> *Compromised Immunity* became Britain's first widely seen home-grown AIDS play, and in its consciousness-raising force bears comparison to the role of Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* in

the United States, though John Clum characterizes it as more sentimental than the 'angrier' early American AIDS plays.<sup>40</sup> Following in its wake, Osment composed *This Island's Mine* (1988), which married the AIDS theme to the state-of-the-nation play as Tony Kushner was to do in *Angels in America* (1991).

The × 10 festival, like so much of 1980s alternative theatre, sought the maximization of the 'event' or 'occasion', for the theatre faced a struggle to express political analysis but not make agitprop, and moved in dialogue between speaking to specific marginalized communities and addressing a universal audience. It initiated a dialogue between gay theatre, black and Asian theatre, and disability theatre in Britain. At the pivot point of the 1980s, Gay Sweatshop's synthesis of all these trends and developments powerfully testified to its hope for a type of institutionalization of such practices: the × 10 festival can be understood as an inquiry into building a structure to encourage the development of new work and consciousness raising about homosexual identities and politics while perpetuating a workable theatrical and administrative unit.

### Mainstreaming Gay Plays

Sweatshop's programming focus on new, gay plays continued for four years after the festival and brought them wider attention than before. Sweatshop successfully translated the × 10 festival into a production model. So, while a twelfth anniversary does not always carry as much significance as a decade marker, the company still marked the anniversary, returning to what it started in 1985 on a smaller scale and in a different venue for a × 12 festival.

It's fair to say the company's energy was stretched thin by the ambition of its operational goals. That partially accounts for the reduced scope of the 1987 festival. Immediately after the × 10 festival closed, Sweatshop went right back into rehearsal and a month later opened three stand-alone productions at the Oval House over four days in December 1985 (*Skin Deep*, *Boy*, and *Julie*). Two of those shows (*Julie* and *Skin Deep*)

continued to be performed in various venues around London in January 1986 and two other shows read at × 10 (*More* and *Compromised Immunity*) received full productions and tours starting in March and July 1986 respectively. That means that for more than a full year from summer 1985 until October 1986 Sweatshop fired on all cylinders continuously, with preparation, execution, and follow-up from the first festival. Then preparation for the × 12 event absorbed the winter of 1986 and the early spring of 1987.

While this hectic schedule precluded planning an event on the scale of × 10, the company kept to the festival model because of how it developed new writing, which now stood firmly at the centre of the group's mission. Although the events on tap at × 12 comprised rehearsed readings, poetry readings, performances by guest companies, and a final cabaret, the reduced scale of the festival de-emphasized these events and showed that the company was focusing more intensely as it selected scripts. The resulting slate of eight plays reflects selectivity and homing in on the tactics of new play development. In 1987 even more than in 1985 Sweatshop kept the company's development cycle running by fostering continuing artists in the company toward full production – the pinnacle logic of the new writing strategy.

Familiar names from the personnel of the × 10 festival populated the × 12 proceedings, as with the reading of Osment's *This Island's Mine*. The subsequent production and impact of that play receives the most sustained scholarly attention of any of Sweatshop's work except its very earliest, so does not need reiterating here.<sup>41</sup>

Sweatshop's previous work elevating the presence of the women artists allied with the company also showed in the × 12 festival: Maggie Ford directed the reading of Maria Aristarco's play *The Gleaners*; Cordelia Ditton directed *Where to Now?* by Martin Patrick; Kate Owen got to reprise her move into directing by staging *The Legend of Bim and Bam* with Richard Sandells; Salem staged her own play *Seven Seas*; and Emlyn Claid presented a fully realized performance piece, *Raw Hide*, presaging her work on Sweatshop's

'lesbian horror ballet', *The Hand*, in 1995. Most important, Jackie Kay's *Twice Over*, directed by Sally Aprahamian, made its debut.

After Kay's first foray into writing a play for the × 10 festival, the Theatre Centre, a 'leading school touring' company, commissioned her to write for them.<sup>42</sup> *Twice Over* emerged from that commission, though in the end the group didn't produce the play because of concerns about being in schools with the mixed-race lesbian content. Greig, who left the management team of Sweatshop after the × 10 festival to focus on his own writing, had become writer-in-residence at the Centre, and midwived the idea of reading the script for × 12. Sweatshop's post-festival production of *Twice Over* and its tour (including into schools) marked the first full staging by the group of a play by a black writer with a mixed race cast.

### Riding the Trajectory

This landmark and the success of *This Island* meant, in Osment's words, that the policies 'which inspired the Gay Sweatshop Times Ten Festival had paid off'.<sup>43</sup> Like *This Island's Mine*, *Twice Over* also provided a response by the company to the passage of Section 28 of the Local Government Bill outlawing financial support of positive images of homosexuality or 'alternative living'. Both plays vindicate the central, human dignity of the lesbian and homosexual relationships formed by the nuanced, relatable central characters. These valued characteristics in new writing mattered to the reception of the plays, and facilitated Sweatshop being taken seriously as producers of important work.

The impact created by *Twice Over* and *This Island's Mine* capped Gay Sweatshop's legitimizing trajectory with its new writing strategy. While still advocating a politically gay perspective – both plays were clearly received and written up as part of an ongoing cultural dialogue around Section 28 and other aspects of liberation politics – these plays in every way made a claim to being dramatic literature of note. Sweatshop's institutional structure at this point matched the move to becoming more established: meet-

ing minutes begin to record company process around hiring a full-time administrator and discussion of hopes for a paid artistic director.<sup>44</sup> After outright denial of their application for charitable status to the Charities Commission in 1978, in 1986 the company obtained charitable status, which to them communicated a true belonging in the national scene.<sup>45</sup>

The company set up a donor scheme called POSH (Pals of Sweatshop).<sup>46</sup> The company discussed the desirability of home-basing at a venue and chose the Oval House, where it already had deep connections, for the × 12 festival. Kate Crutchley, a vital Sweatshop member from 1975 to 1978, programmed the spaces at the Oval in the 1980s. This institutional ballast allowed the company to imagine what it might be like to be at home in a complex like the National Theatre.

So at their twelfth anniversary, Sweatshop closed in on being the institution they aimed to be: one that got grants, commissioned work, and engaged in national political dialogues, based in a complex that reflected its values and produced new plays. The company won a London Fringe award in 1988 for continuing excellence.<sup>47</sup> When the company history and collection of plays, edited by Osment, reached publication in early 1989, the critic and Sweatshop supporter Jim Hiley made plans for the launch party to be a National Theatre Platform event, with Ian McKellen presenting the company onstage.<sup>48</sup>

### The Rise of Solo Performance

Sweatshop's trajectory between 1984 and 1989 moved towards goals for politically informed new writing staged to polished standards of production. The direction changed, however, with an anniversary celebration in 1989 that became more about nostalgia than the future as the company looked to both its fifteenth anniversary and the twentieth anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. At the same time, a leadership transition in 1991 threw into question new writing as an alternative or political strategy for gay artists who wished to be more provocative than they felt more institutional production prac-

tices and the mainstreaming of gay plays allowed.

Meeting minutes in 1988 begin to refer to a 'Stonewall '89' project and also to mention to the possibility of a Gay Sweatshop × 15 festival for 1990.<sup>49</sup> At first these were separate things: a play about the twentieth anniversary of Stonewall, and a festival of new play readings to advance new women writers and generate new projects for the company. In the end, the idea of a × 15 festival submerged into the production of *Paradise Now and Then*, which opened on 5 October 1989 at the Drill Hall.

Though a single show, *Paradise Now and Then* aimed to be a type of festival in itself, celebrating both new writing and gay history. It recapitulated many of Sweatshop's concerns, and in fact took its premise from the third section of *As Time Goes By*. But it did not particularly succeed in making the case for a new gay writing company to continue into the 1990s.<sup>50</sup> 'Didactic and well meaning Noel Greig's play may be,' wrote James Christopher in *Time Out*, 'but when the cast of *Hair* meets an emasculated version of the Village People for 'Songs on Sunday' you know all is not quite right in the Garden of Eden.'

The play's musical ambitions confused the matter. 'If Richard Coles considers musical theatre his *métier*,' commented Hiley in *The Listener*, 'then repeated listening to Sondheim is just what he needs.'<sup>51</sup> Hiley usually championed Sweatshop's projects, as he did *Poppies*, but his response to this show struggled with a desire to laud the content while feeling unsatisfied with the form.<sup>52</sup> Andy Lavender summed up the imbalance of the show: 'The atmosphere of polite agitprop is the most unsatisfactory kind of compromise between the epic and the twee,' and reflected tensions in British theatre over the forms of political theatre as the new decade arrived.<sup>53</sup> As an anniversary celebration, *Paradise Now* floundered, and it failed again as a celebration of new writing and political insight.

However, the 1990 production of Bryony Lavery's *Kitchen Matters* did seem to make the case for Sweatshop's vitality as a new writing company, and to celebrate Sweat-

shop's history and continuing influence. In fact, the play made that project its meta-theatrical point: the action begins with a playwright sitting down to write a play that will help save Gay Sweatshop in the face of funding cuts.<sup>54</sup> But a decisive aesthetic shift was under way, as seen in Lavery's technique of using a pastiche-absurd adaptation of *The Bacchae* at the heart of *Kitchen Matters*.

*Paradise Now and Then* exemplifies a hybrid between queer postmodern aesthetics as political intervention and an earnest activist mode of political theatre. Again, Greig used a time-contrasting model, presenting the two main characters in 1989 and as their younger selves in the 1960s – the now and then. This formed the centre of the earnest meditation on what's changed and what lost in the struggle for homosexual liberation, conjuring nostalgia for youth and critiquing a late-1980s lack of utopian impulses.

Around this dramaturgical core were woven intertextual and visual references to the Living Theatre, to *Hair*, to Milton, to the biblical Garden of Eden, to Judy Garland, and *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Another Greigian signature, a pair of bickering Beckettian figures who provide commentary on the show's proceedings, also framed the plot. In *Poppies*, these figures are the Mouldy Heads; in *Paradise* they are Dragdress and Dresssuit, and are inverted mirrors of the main characters. Olwen May played Dresssuit with crop hair and in the eponymous suit; Peter Shorey sported pink as Dragdress.<sup>55</sup>

These two archetypal characters reinforce the anniversary arc of the play, since they meet annually to remember Stonewall. While providing pointed comic barbs, Dragdress and Dresssuit also, Hiley observes, deploy 'stereotypes of subversive ends: part of this couple's function is to parody heterosexual marriage, though with the "sex" taken out and the gender roles upturned'.<sup>56</sup> Directed by Paul Heritage, designed by Kate Owen, *Paradise* was a large-scale work employing a full sixteen-person 'Paradise Choir' for its London performances (but not on its tour).

Greig presented the size of the work as another type of political intervention, one

that challenged governmental attempts to 'suffocate radical work through lack of cash'.<sup>57</sup> The impact of that strategy drained Sweatshop but didn't guarantee adequate funding (hence, *Kitchen Matters*).<sup>58</sup> The critical sense of the show as sentimental rather than radical indicates that this particular mode of new writing wasn't landing in the same way as the works of 1985.

Hence, even as Sweatshop staged × 10 alumnus Miller's AIDS play in 1991 and earned its first official three-year cycle of funding from the Arts Council, the company reinvented itself under the sign of solo performance, driven by its 'Queer School' project and the new artistic leadership of Lois Weaver and James Neale-Kennerly. 'New work' supplanted new writing, though the company staged plays in alternation with its solo performance series across its last five years.

Weaver and Neale-Kennerly staged plays during their tenure, and had success in 1993 in particular with *Stupid Cupid* by Phil Wilmot and *Threesome*, a bill featuring short plays by Phyllis Nagy, David Greenspan, and Claire Dowie. In 1996, Neale-Kennerly directed a production of Osment's throwback AIDS play *The Undertaking*. But between 1992 and 1997 the company experienced the failure of text as the motivating force of innovation. The solo work reflected what was felt to be 'alternative' at that moment in theatre.

The plays, by contrast, were now mainstream but still performing in fringe venues, and struggled for attention in a landscape where Jonathon Harvey's *Beautiful Thing* became a sensation at the Bush, transferred to the West End, and was made into a movie. *Paradise Now and Then* broke the model established only four years before and made the company doubt that fostering new writing with a gay focus was 'enough' of a mission: was it radical enough, was it productive enough, was it good enough?

### Legitimation and its Discontents

After *Twice Over* and *This Island's Mine*, Greig believed that the company had 'gone beyond

the stage of accusing each other of constantly failing to live up to our ideals' and wanted to continue to stage plays that addressed lesbian and gay communities and non-gay audiences too.<sup>59</sup> In a *City Limits* feature about *Paradise*, Miller, writing as an observer-participant, asserts: 'That's what the company now does – not plays about being gay, but plays which examine the world through lesbian and gay experience.'<sup>60</sup>

But, when Weaver named radicalism as a value, the pull of new work that was less traditional and the push against well-made gay plays ended the anniversary festival model created by × 10.<sup>61</sup> Sweatshop experienced a type of institutional status in the early 1990s that it had been pursuing over a decade, and in some ways this was the fruit of its new writing strategy. In a 2000 interview with me, Lois Weaver acknowledged that the company received its first three-year cycle of franchise funding in part as a marker of its trajectory as a new writing company, and that she struggled against it.<sup>62</sup> For her, this was in part a struggle about text-based work versus performer-driven creation, and in part a struggle about the need for polished work versus the aesthetics of unfinished or rough forms, in part a struggle about maintaining legitimacy versus being subversive.<sup>63</sup>

So under Weaver and Neale-Kennerly the focus became less intent on new plays, but the franchise funding Sweatshop received was linked to its status as a new writing company.<sup>64</sup> They started running 'Queer School' training sessions about performance technique, solo work, and writing.<sup>65</sup> Some were 'summer school' sessions, some were weekend intensives at the Oval House or ICA, some were week-long courses, one-day events, or public lectures. Sample topics include: 'Queer Playwriting', led by Bryony Lavery; a 'Femme Lecture/Dem' with Lois Weaver and Peggy Phelan; 'In-Queeries', a course for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth led by Pete Lawson and Pamela Sneed; a Live Art workshop with Robert Pacitti and Michael Atavar; a 'Cocktail Seminar' on 'Identity and Performance'; and classes in contact improvisation, drumming, cabaret, and directing.<sup>66</sup>

These sessions were the descendants of the writing workshops, poetry readings, and networking sessions of the × 10 festival. The result, however, was not necessarily readings and productions of new scripts. Most often, there were evenings of performance pieces, like the 1996 show at Jackson's Lane featuring Chloe Poems and sharing the work of the Queer School class of '96. Similarly, Club Deviance events produced at the Almeida in 1996 and 1997 featured Azaria Universe, Su Zuki, Alison Cocks, Lila Lively, and others presenting 'daring dance, circus, new form drag, and comedy'.<sup>67</sup>

These festivals of solo performance recall Sweatshop's early cabarets, the offshoot work some members did during the group's closure between 1981 and 1983 under the name New Heart, and the more experimental elements included in the × 10 festival.<sup>68</sup> The continuity of this work in the genealogy of Sweatshop stands clear, yet in the 1990s it redirected the company's trajectory regarding new writing – and so Sweatshop lost its Arts Council funding.<sup>69</sup> Nothing special was done to celebrate the twentieth anniversary. Gay and lesbian theatre and new writing schemes were all more extensive categories of British theatre in 1995 than they had been in 1985, and certainly in 1975. Gay Sweatshop's × 10 festival and the company's embrace of the new writing strategy are part of what enabled that expansion.

## Notes and References

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1. From the Royal Holloway University Library Special Collections Gay Sweatshop archive, Document GS/3/17/2/2/5. Subsequent citations from the Gay Sweatshop archive at Royal Holloway will give the folder and document numbers.

2. *Gay Sweatshop × 10 Programme Supplement*, Week One, Tues. 15 Oct.–Sat. 19 Oct. 1985, p. 3. Royal Holloway GS/3/17/2/1/3.

3. Following the way Joseph Roach has imported the periodizing notion of the 'long eighteenth century' to theatre history in books like *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993) and *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), the history of British alternative theatre could benefit from an expanded notion of the 1980s as a period. It often makes the most sense to consider the span of time encompassing events from 1978 or 1979 until 1992 or 1993 (or all the way to 1994) – politically the Thatcherite years – as a more coherent unit bounded by significant ruptures or fissures at either end. For Sweatshop this holds true because the company activities took marked turns in 1978 and 1992, while between these years a steady trajectory builds on related themes with interlaced strategies.

4. See Brian Roberts, 'Whatever Happened to Gay Theatre?', *New Theatre Quarterly*, XVI, No. 2 (May 2000), p. 175–85, for a discussion of the issues between queer and gay at the turning point of the 1990s.

5. Philip Osment, ed., *Gay Sweatshop: Four Plays and a Company* (London: Methuen, 1989), p. xxx.

6. *Programme Supplement*, Week 3, has memorials to both Griffiths and Ruth Marks on page 2. In 'The Drew Griffiths Fund' the company asks for donations in Drew's name and records 'tragically, Drew Griffiths was killed on the 16 June 1984'. Royal Holloway GS/3/17/2/1/3.

7. Noel Greig and Gean Wilton, 'What is Happening to Gay Sweatshop', letter to the company. 31 March 1981. Royal Holloway GS/1/3/1.

8. Osment, p. lvi.

9. Likewise, as part of deciding to have the anniversary festival, the company explicitly made a policy commitment to 'a management structure with equal male/female representation' and that the next major project would be woman-focused. 'Minutes of Meeting of Management Committee, 7 June 1984'. Royal Holloway GS/3/17/1.

10. 'Minutes of a Meeting Between Gay Sweatshop and the Drill Hall, 20 May 1985'. Royal Holloway GS/3/17/1.

11. 'Gay Sweatshop × 10: Guidelines for Directors'. Royal Holloway GS/3/17/2/1/15.

12. This and all the information about the schedule of events comes from the three *Programme Supplements* for the × 10 festival printed by Gay Sweatshop in collaboration with *Capital Gay* weekly newspaper. Royal Holloway GS/3/17/2/1/3.

13. Osment, p. lvii–lxi.

14. Lyn Gardner, review of *Julie* by Catherine Kilcoyne, *City Limits*, 3–9 January 1986, clipping. Royal Holloway GS/3/17/4/1–19.

15. *Poppies* in particular had bookings in schools, and produced controversy both because of its content about homosexuality and its pacifist, anti-nuclear stance. See Osment, p. liii.

16. *Programme Supplement*, Week 2, p. 3. Royal Holloway GS/3/17/2/1/3.

17. *Programme Supplement*, Week 1, p. 3. Royal Holloway GS/3/17/2/1/3.

18. Carl Miller, *Stages of Desire: Gay Theatre's Hidden History* (New York: Cassell, 1996).

19. Osment quotes Drew Griffiths as saying, 'If the aims and objectives of Gay Sweatshop are ever achieved, we will have done ourselves out of a job' (p. lxxvi).

20. See Shelley Scott, *Nightwood Theatre: a Woman's Work is Always Done* (Athabasca University Press, 2010).

21. Bernardine Evaristo, 'Black Lesbian Writing', *Programme Supplement*, Week 2, p. 2. Royal Holloway GS/3/17/2/1/3.
22. By 1977 the company had developed parallel women's and men's companies to develop separate strands of work, feeling that was the only adequate way to address the different concerns of gay men and lesbian women. That structure did not return when the company reconstituted itself in 1983, but the visibility of women's work remained an issue for the group. Paula Crimmens in 'Looking at Gay Sweatshop and its × 10 Festival: As Ten Years Go By, Gay Sweatshop 1975–1986', quotes Owen saying, 'Generally, the men's work has been better, for lots of reasons; gay men have worked in the theatre for centuries . . . and there's greater acceptance of gay men. There's still far less women's work.' Publication noted as *The Plot*, Vol I, n.d. Royal Holloway GS/3/17/7.
23. See Charlotte Canning, *Feminist Theatres in the USA: Staging Women's Experience* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 99–105.
24. Michelene Wandor, *Look Back in Gender: Sexuality and the Family in Post-war British Drama* (London: Methuen, 1987); *Carry on, Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1981). See also, Wandor, *The Art of Writing Drama: Theory and Practice* (London: Methuen, 2008).
25. Published Drill Hall policy noted that a crèche was always available 'by arrangement' and there was a 'free crèche' for under-fives to be booked on Friday and Saturday evenings. The crèche for *Pinball* extended the free crèche option to a Sunday afternoon event and it was the only time the crèche was advertised outside the small print around the 'booking information' in the *Programme Supplements*, Week 2, p. 4.
26. 'Minutes of the Gay Sweatshop × 10 Festival Steering Committee Meeting 23.4.1985', 'GS × 10 27/5/85', 'GS × 10 10/6/85 Martin/Oscar/PO/PT/Noel/Tierl/Diane', and 'G.S. Festival Management Meeting Minutes 6.8.85'. Royal Holloway GS/3/17/1.
27. *Programme Supplement*, Week 3, p. 2.
28. See Sandra Freeman, *Putting Your Daughters on the Stage: Lesbian Theatres from the 1970s to the 1990s* (London: Cassell, 1997), about Hard Corps.
29. See Osment, p. xxx–xxxi.
30. See reviews of the Barker season in *London Theatre Record*, V, No. 21 (9–22 October 1985), p. 1013–22.
31. Philip Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 180–5.
32. The NT festival is documented on Peter Gill's website: <[http://dSPACE.dial.pipex.com/town/parade/abj76/PG/works/new\\_plays/new\\_plays.shtml](http://dSPACE.dial.pipex.com/town/parade/abj76/PG/works/new_plays/new_plays.shtml)>. By the end of the 1990s, Gill's homosexuality was openly factored in to reviews of plays he'd written – see Sheridan Morley's review of *Certain Young Men*, 'Four Couples in Search of a Plot', *The Spectator*, 13 February 1999, or Charles Spencer's review of *Original Sin*, *Daily Telegraph*, 7 June 2002.
33. Featuring *A Twist of Lemon* (Alex Renton, dir. Gill); *Sunday Morning* (Rod Smith, dir. Burgess); *Bouncing* (Rosemary Wilton, dir. Gill); *In the Blue* (Gill; dir. Gill); and *Up for None* (Mick Mahoney, dir. Gill).
34. As of 2012, RADA acquired the Drill Hall space and changed its name to RADA Studios.
35. Osment, p. xxvi.
36. Kate Crutchley and other Sweatshop women also helped plan the 1977 festival. See Lizbeth Goodman, *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 80.
37. Osment, p. 147.
38. Osment, p. xlvii. In a 1999 interview with me, Greig commented that *The Dear Love of Comrades, Poppies*, and the period around the × 10 festival were when 'Sweatshop was functioning at its best. It had narratives about big issues like the Cold War or the founding of the Labour Party that happened to have gay people at the heart of the narrative.' Conversation notes, interview with Sara Freeman, Brighton, 24 October 1999.
39. See Goodman on Griffin and Green, p. 109–13, and on *Twice Over*, 133–7.
40. John M. Clum, *Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 65. *The Normal Heart* premiered in New York six months before the × 10 festival and was staged at the Royal Court (starring Martin Sheen, who won an Olivier award) while Gay Sweatshop was touring *Compromised Immunity* in 1986. Sweatshop's membership had conflicted feelings about Kramer's work (Osment, p. lviii). See Osment at p. lx for information about the impact of *Compromised Immunity*. In *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1999), Alan Sinfield discusses British AIDS plays and *Compromised Immunity* as well: p. 314, 318, 326–9.
41. See, for instance, Kate Chedgzoy, *Shakespeare's Queer Children: Sexual Politics and Contemporary Culture*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 1–6. See also Susan Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia: Shifting Shakespeare and the Contemporary Past* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 147–59.
42. Osment, p. lxxv.
43. *Ibid*, p. lxxvi.
44. This discussion runs through the meeting minutes of 1987. Osment began to agitate for a paid artistic director position in the minutes for 22 September 1988. Royal Holloway GS/1/2/4 and GS/1/2/5.
45. Charitable status was achieved in November 1986: 'Meeting Minutes 3 December 1986'. Royal Holloway GS/1/2/4. The company filed articles of incorporation in 1978, but could not obtain a charity number then. In our interview in 1999 Greig still spoke of that charity number with reverence and it was a matter of pride to him that even though the company was closed, the charity number still existed.
46. Carole Woddis, 'Why Gay Sweatshop's Gone POSH', *The Stage*, 14 May 1987, p. 10.
47. Carl Miller 'No Sweat', *City Limits*, 5–12 October 1988, p. 16.
48. *Ibid*.
49. Minutes from Management Committee meetings on 24 May, 11 July, 28 July, and 31 October 1988. Royal Holloway GS/1/2/4.
50. Sinfield, p. 305–6.
51. Collected reviews for *Paradise Now and Then*, *London Theatre Record*, IX, No. 20 (24 September–7 October 1989), p. 1356. Late reviews, *London Theatre Record*, IX, No. 22 (22 October–4 November 1989), p. 1506.
52. Hiley on *Poppies* in *City Limits* asserted: 'This is very much the product of a gay consciousness, but contradicts a common criticism of gay theatre by looking out from the ghetto and addressing itself with wit and sometimes brilliance to the biggest questions of the day.' *London Theatre Record*, IV, No. 3 (13–26 February 1984), p. 103.
53. *London Theatre Record*, IX, No. 20, p. 1356.

54. See Goodman, p. 143–5.
55. See Sara Freeman, 'British Alternative Companies and Antinuclear Plays: Eco-conscious Theatre in Thatcher's Britain', in *Readings in Performance and Ecology*, ed. Wendy Arons and Theresa J. May (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 127–36, for a discussion of the mouldy heads.
56. *London Theatre Record*, IX, No. 20, p. 1356.
57. Miller, 'As Time Goes By: No Sweat', *City Limits* 12 October 1989, p. 16.
58. However, *Kitchen Matters* also ran a deficit in the end and the money from the Drew Griffiths Trust started at × 10 was used to pay the deficit. Meeting minutes in 1991 and 1992 also discuss using some of the trust funds for the first iteration of Queer School. Royal Holloway GS/1/2/7 and GS/1/2/8.
59. Miller, *City Limits*, p. 16.
60. *Ibid.*
61. Roberts frames this as a contrast between assimilationist/ghetto and confrontational/oppositional gay theatre work' (p. 181). In our 2000 interview, Weaver commented about how the ACGB encouraged Sweatshop to focus on plays in order to keep receiving funds, and on how much 'even the gay audience' expected more traditional approaches to theatre; but she felt it was central to the radical vision she and Kennerly shared to push against that. Transcript of tape recording, interview with Sara Freeman, Rose Bruford College, 21 September 2000.
62. Weaver, *ibid.* Meeting minutes from 1993 to 1995 record debates about relationships with writers and how the company should be framed in grant proposals as a new writing company, since Arts Council England

wanted that concept to survive, but that's not what was actually happening in production. Royal Holloway GS/1/2/9. In our interview Greig posed this question: 'Once Gay Sweatshop relocated itself in a frame of queer politics/queer culture, did it pull itself away from its traditional audiences and did it look for its constituent audience in a more limited metropolitan area of London and Manchester? Did that mean that the scope of its dialogue in terms of other practitioners was limited too?'

63. Weaver, interview with Sara Freeman, 2000. For further discussion see Sue-Ellen Case, 'Lesbian Performance in the Transnational Arena', *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights*, ed. Elaine Aston and Janelle Reinelt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 253–65.

64. Ian Brown, Robert Brannen, and Douglas Brown, 'The Arts Council Touring Franchise and English Political Theatre after 1986', *New Theatre Quarterly*, XVI, No. 4 (November 2000), p. 379–87.

65. Queer School ad., *The Pink Paper*, 23 August 1992. Clipping, part of the author's personal collection of ephemera, gifted by Lois Weaver during 2000 interview.

66. 'To Be This Queer You Need Lessons', trifold Queer School letter-size flyer on Goldenrod paper, 1994. Part of the author's personal collection of ephemera, gifted by Lois Weaver.

67. 'Performances at Jacksons Lane', vertical half-sheet Gay Sweatshop flyer, 1996; Club Deviance flyer, third-sheet pale blue card, 1997. Part of the author's personal collection of ephemera, gifted by Lois Weaver. See also Case, p. 253–67.

68. Osment, p. 1.

69. Brown *et al.*, p. 385.