

# Get on your Trike

It was born into an era of Thatcherite hostility, but as the **Tricycle Theatre** mounts August Wilson's latest play, it is getting proper funding at last.

Interview **Jane Edwardes**  
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The coverage of theatre in *Time Out* between 1979 and 1980 paints a gloomy picture. Maggie Thatcher, the new PM, had no interest in the arts and didn't understand why they needed Government money. In a night of the long knives just before Christmas '79, despatch riders delivered letters to a number of London's companies announcing without warning that their grants had been chopped. It's a surprise, then, to read that in the midst of this misery, in September 1980, a new theatre opened on the Kilburn High Road, called the Tricycle Theatre, under the artistic directorship of Ken and Shirley Barrie Chubb.

It must have felt a bit like opening a restaurant in a food shortage, but Ken Chubb had taken advantage of the fact that Brent was one of the few London boroughs not to have its own theatre, and somehow managed to coax financial support out of the council for both the conversion and the running of the building. The theatre was carved out of an old 1920s community hall where the Citizens Advice Bureau used to hold its meetings. The auditorium was instantly admired and has been little altered since, in spite of a fire in '87. The architect Tim Foster drew on the layout of

the 1788 Richmond Theatre in Yorkshire, and designed a courtyard theatre for 230 in which most of the audience sits in the well on padded benches, surrounded by those seated in the scaffolding at the side and above. It's cheerful, informal and intimate: the current artistic director, Nicolas Kent, can testify to at least four marriages that have followed an evening of sitting thigh to thigh on a bench.

As a community theatre, interested in serving the large ethnic groups – Asian, Irish, Afro-Caribbean and, to a lesser extent, Jewish – that lived nearby, the Tricycle could hardly have been more worthily unfashionable in the '80s. Desperate to know how to spread its increasingly limited funds, the Arts Council misguidedly sought to concentrate on centres of excellence, prestigious theatres designed to serve audiences from miles around.

But wheels are intended to turn, policies have changed, and this year has seen the Tricycle celebrating a 117 per cent increase in its Arts Council grant of to £633,000, one of the largest increases in the recent upturn. It's a just reward for the theatre's lively artistic policy and a commitment to education and cultural diversity that has always

been heartfelt rather than expedient. More money means dreams can be realised after some hard times in which the theatre was reduced to producing only one home-grown show a year. Already the effect has been felt as the theatre enters a new era: Carlo Gébler's sexy and provocative 'Ten Rounds', a fascinating reworking of Schnitzler's 'La Ronde' set in Northern Ireland, was immediately followed by a powerful revival of Arthur Miller's 'The Price' with Warren Mitchell. Plans for the future include the first dramatisation of Harold Pinter's novel 'The Dwarves', directed by Christopher Morahan. No wonder Kent is happy, but equally all too aware that he has to deliver: 'To some degree, we are now masters of our own destiny. Next year there will be no more excuses.'

Kent arrived in 1984 from the Oxford Playhouse during one of the Tricycle's periodic downturns. Chubb had failed artistically and the theatre was threatened with losing its grant. As Kent had just resigned very noisily from the Arts Council's Drama Panel, he may not have appeared the best person to make sure that the grant was maintained. But his first production was one of the Tricycle's two biggest



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Clockwise from main pic: artistic director Nicolas Kent; 'King Hedley II'; 'The Playboy of the West Indies'; 'The Colour of Justice'.

ever successes – 'The Playboy of the West Indies' adapted by Mustapha Matura from Synge's 'Playboy of the Western World' – which had the double whammy of appealing to both Irish and Afro-Caribbean audiences. The latter, in fact, was easier to attract than it is today. Kent believes that there was a different atmosphere: 'Theatre was then quite sexy for black audiences and there were a lot of black companies. At that time, for a lot of those black people, the only way to see themselves reflected was through the Caribbean culture on stage. Now theatre is not as indispensable a part of the black culture as it used to be.' Nevertheless the black plays keep coming to the Trike; August Wilson's 'King Hedley II' is just about to open, another play in Wilson's celebrated cycle covering the black American experience of the last century, one play for each decade. 'Hedley', covering the '80s, is the fourth of the cycle to be produced by the Trike.

The theatre's location partly defines its policy, but is not always an advantage. Unlike the Almeida in Islington, the theatre is not surrounded by a profusion of attractive restaurants. Even local people have to be lured into the build-

ing. But steadily, the building has become more attractive to visit, greatly helped by a fire in 1987 – and yes, the play running at the time was called 'Burning Point' – which resulted in the expansion of the foyer, and the addition of the James Baldwin room, after the writer who has had a profound influence on Kent. As a result of a lottery grant, an award-winning cinema was added in 1998, surely the most luxurious in London.

Since 1984, the theatre has been driven by Kent's combination of a profound sense of justice, an acute understanding of the political landscape, artistic skill, and a determination and perfectionism that can drive nuts those not on the same wavelength. The theatre is wonderfully all of a piece, including the plays that are put onstage, the educational work, the links during apartheid with the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, the cheap seat prices, and even the large amounts that are collected for charity every year.

Kent's passion for justice has been most clearly realised in his dramatic reconstructions of a series of trials and enquiries. For 'Half the Picture' (1994), he persuaded *Guardian* journalist Richard Norton-Taylor to reduce the tran-

script of the Scott Enquiry into the arms-to-Iraq scandal to two hours of engrossing and often bewilderingly absurd material. 'The Colour of Justice' (1999), based on the Stephen Lawrence enquiry, followed the same format. Currently Kent and Norton-Taylor are working on the Bloody Sunday enquiry, not due to end until December 2003, when the pair will be faced with the task of compressing four years of material. Theatre like this provides a forum in which audiences become aware of their responsibilities as citizens. 'The rules a society makes,' says Kent 'are vitally important, and everyone should take an interest in them. It's very important to keep up the debate on whether the laws are just or unjust. I suppose why I care so much about running this theatre is that I hope it contributes towards social justice, especially through celebrating cultural diversity and really showing people that it is possible for different races to enjoy each other's company and work in harmony. London must be one of the most culturally diverse cities in the world and theatre can contribute towards that.' ●  
'King Hedley II' previews at the Tricycle from December 10. Box office 020 7328 1000.