

Author's Note from Milton Keynes Theatre 'Celebration' programme (October 1999)

The banner headline on one of the posters designed by Milton Keynes Development Corporation to attract newcomers announced: Milton Keynes: the city's past. Underneath, a colour photograph of the sundial on a house in Stony Stratford bore a Latin inscription and a date: 1739. This new city had a past.

It also had a future, which, at that stage, was a vision in the minds of architects, planners and those pioneers who'd come, not because they liked mud and building sites, but because they wanted the challenge of building a city and developing a community here. From the start, we needed a theatre, of course; and for 25 years, Stantonbury Campus Theatre, built at the heart of an education complex a couple of miles north of the designated city centre, has been a focus of artistic endeavour for generations of students, community groups and professional dance, drama and music practitioners.

From the day I first moved into this area, in 1967, I was struck by the unique character of Wolverton and New Bradwell. What lay behind the formidable wall along the Front? What was the story behind the grid pattern of the streets? Who were the people who built the foundations of this town? What were their motives?

When the new city came along, the questions had a sharper edge. What was it like to be a newcomer moving into the railway town of Wolverton from 19th century Glasgow or Liverpool? What did it feel like to be a resident of Bradwell Village and see unfamiliar buildings sprouting in the nearby fields and strangers, with unfamiliar ways, walking the new streets?

We went to the roots of Wolverton; found out from primary sources what actually happened in the first thirty years of its existence. Local historians pointed the way. Old residents, delving to the back of long memories, including what their parents and grandparents had told them, gave us the flavour and provided us with glimpses of the past. The result was All Change! The language of this play was never written or spoken with a view to being reproduced by actors on a stage but the words have the power and immediacy of utterances from life. Our creative function was to organise the material we had collected into a coherent story-line; finding the juxtapositions that reveal the conflicts, the humour and the pathos of people's lives. The original project attracted people from all walks of life to come and share their skills and resources. Now the vision of the early pioneers is becoming a reality. The new theatre and gallery in the centre of Milton Keynes have given the city its proper heart. Drama, music, dance and the visual arts on the large scale will thrive here in beautiful buildings.

Stantonbury Campus Theatre will continue to thrive too. Now part of a Specialist Arts College, it will sustain its role as a seedbed for new talents, new projects. It therefore seems appropriate that the first play to be performed in Milton Keynes Theatre should be Stantonbury's All Change! a play that uses drama, music, dance to tell the story of the endeavours of ordinary and extraordinary people to create a town worth living in.

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