

The story of Upperthorpe and Netherthorpe THE LITTLE THEATRE

Big ideas in a tiny space

For four decades, an extraordinary theatre flourished at the Sheffield Educational Settlement on Shipton Street, Upperthorpe. Between 1918 and 1955, warden Arnold Freeman helped produce more than 100 plays. His successor, Christopher Boulton, continued the tradition before going on to establish the Merlin Theatre.

The appropriately named Little Theatre was tiny: a stage only a couple of feet above the floor, minimal backstage space and just 150 seats. Yet its small scale created something special – an intense connection between performers and audience.



The Little Theatre (above) and two of the ensemble performances



The play was only part of the story

At the Settlement, drama was about learning together. Arnold Freeman did not begin with rehearsals. Instead, participants studied the play collectively, exploring its ideas, characters and historical setting – both the period in which the story took place and the time when it was written.

For Freeman, the process mattered more than the performance. The company worked as an ensemble and the process gave people the confidence to change their lives and play their part in society.

Make it together

Costumes, scenery, lighting and music were produced in-house whenever possible.

No star system

Performers were rarely named in programmes, putting the company before the individual.

Serious – and fun!

Freeman favoured challenging plays, but lighter and comic productions appeared too, especially at Christmas.

From a tiny room in Shipton Street to the heart of Sheffield's 'Theatre World' – The Little Theatre had a very big impact.

Merlin Theatre



Sheffield Playhouse, Townhead Street



Small stage – big legacy

The Little Theatre helped build confidence, creativity and a sense of participation that extended beyond the stage and its influence reached far beyond Upperthorpe and Netherthorpe.

The Merlin Theatre grew from the Little Theatre tradition and continues in Nether Edge. The Sheffield Repertory Company also began here as an amateur group. It later became professional, moved to the Sheffield Playhouse, and eventually found a new home in the purpose-built Crucible Theatre.

From a tiny room on Shipton Street to the heart of Sheffield's 'Theatre World' – The Little Theatre proved that a small stage could have a very big impact.