

CHAPTER 13

Growing Pains

Centre 42 and On the Edge



There were two or three moments where one literally feels a fire of a new vision, where one is touched and sobered in a profound way, where Haydn and flower-petals and gasworks perceptibly belong to the same world.

MICHAEL KUSTOW, ON ONE OF CHARLES PARKER'S
CENTRE 42 PRODUCTIONS, 1962

Ewan is at last swinging into the mood of *On the Edge*. He closets himself for 14 hours a day, comes out at night looking like a toad coming out of a dark and slimy pool ... but this one is going to be the best one yet.

PEGGY SEEGER, IN AN UNDATED 1962 LETTER TO NORAH MASH,
CHARLES PARKER'S SECRETARY

Centre 42

The sixth Radio Ballad, about Teenagers, had originally been conceived for broadcast in November 1962, the 40th anniversary of the founding of the BBC. Charles commissioned Ewan and Peggy in late November 1961, but he was so busy in the following months that he left the collection of actuality almost entirely to them. Not only had he produced *The Body Blow* and the two Vaughton/Campbell programmes, he was working flat out on an extraordinarily ambitious project for the unions. Not for the BBC, and not paid. A short-lived but fascinating experiment in radical, actuality-based theatre, midway between the end of the travelling Theatre Workshop of Joan Littlewood and Ewan MacColl, and the explosion of radical theatre of the 1970s: it's worth a detour.

Resolution 42 at the annual congress of the TUC (Trades Union Congress) in September 1960 asked for 'greater participation by the trade union movement in all cultural activities.' But the TUC did little to bring about that lofty intent. It had involved itself with the theatre very rarely, notably in 1934 when it commissioned a play on the Tolpuddle Martyrs. This time, they set the ball rolling, but it had stopped by the time it was picked up by Arnold Wesker, the radical playwright, recent author of *Chicken Soup with Barley*, *Roots* and *The Kitchen*. *Roots* is a play in which a self-educated working-class girl tries to interest her parents in the culture she has come to love – and is met with blank bewilderment. So Wesker knew just what he was up against ... He campaigned for the construction of the first of a series of 'culture palaces' for working people, to be known as Centre 42. He formed an organisation, without any money at first but his own, to create a series of Arts Festivals in conjunction with the annual recruitment weeks of six different trades councils, designed to speak directly to working people. Wesker had a grandiose, if noble vision:

You start off with a picture: orchestra tucked away in valleys, people stopping Auden in the street to thank him for their favourite poem, teenagers around the jukebox arguing about my latest play, miners flocking to their own opera house; a picture of a nation thirsting for all the riches their artists can excite them with, hungry for the greatest, the best, unable to wait for Benjamin Britten's latest opera, arguing about Joan Littlewood's latest.

Now, that seems to teeter on the preposterous, but back then it did fire a genuine crusading energy among many radicals. It was 'Pure New Left subculture', as Alan Filewod and David Watt say in *Workers' Playtime*, an analysis of community theatre. The New Left 'offered a Marxist intellectual context for the essentially middle-class dissidence of the activist theatre workers ... [which] gave them a grounding in left-wing politics.' (An early brochure