

The background of the cover is a photograph of three individuals in formal attire (suits and ties) wearing sunglasses. They are holding a large, vibrant red flag that billows behind them. The setting appears to be an urban street with brick buildings in the background. The overall tone is one of political activism or protest.

PAUL FARMER

AFTER THE MINERS' STRIKE

A39 AND CORNISH POLITICAL THEATRE
VERSUS THATCHER'S BRITAIN

VOLUME 1



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Cover image: A39 in street theatre mode at Camborne Trevithick Day, 1985

Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

8. A39 Into 1986: The State of Things

The A39 that set itself to create a new show at the turn of 1985/86 was differently situated to the company that had made *One & All!* a year before. From the peripheries of the arts in Cornwall, we had come in to form an obstreperous part of the core. The comparative ease with which this happened was characteristic of Cornwall, which lent itself to personal and institutional self-definition, perhaps because economically there were so few opportunities that professional definition of any kind would often remain entirely abstract anyway. Anyone can be a writer, if no one is ever going to be published even if they write *Ulysses*, *The Caretaker* and *The Waste Land* in a single Thursday. As far as the arts establishment was concerned nothing had happened in Cornwall, save perhaps Fooksbarn, since the St Ives School of Artists; and even here it was now all but forgotten that this phenomenon was instigated by Alfred Wallis, the working-class Back Road West version of Albert Steptoe, amateur-painting in second-hand yacht paint on pieces of cardboard begged from his local grocer.¹ That is how truly important things happen: unless prevented, anyone can be anything and Cornish people would encourage all such self-transformations warmly, while rolling another cigarette and offering a third cup of tea as one more unemployed afternoon segued into evening.

At this point it seems relevant to assess the nature of the company that had come to be through the experiences of a tumultuous few months.

Many of A39's characteristics derived from its beginnings, from those very first discussions in Falmouth and Playing Place; from its

1 Sven Berlin, *Alfred Wallis: Primitive*, new edn (Redcliffe 1992).

formation specifically to contribute to the support of the Miners' Strike. We were never tempted to engage with any 'angels on the head of a pin'-type discussions of political intricacies: we would always identify a common task then set about fulfilling it. A key difference from much of the Left was that even after the strike was over, A39 conducted its affairs and expressed an ideology in terms of what its members had in common; and never perceived any need to search for what divided us, like someone picking round with their tongue to find the sharply broken tooth.

Perhaps because of this, A39 was never abstract. I would call it 'point of action' socialism: you don't go in for speculative discussion when you're constantly approaching a barricade. The conditions of Thatcher's Britain meant that every day was a crisis for a socialist.

A39 made decisions by consensus. In this book, when I have failed to specify whose idea was this, whose decision was that, it is because predominantly I just do not know. We all took responsibility for all of it. We were a true collective, something I would later discover (and I'm ashamed to say it took several sad experiences to learn and affirm) is not possible without that definitively shared commitment that functions as an external daymark, and against which activities can be assessed. That reference point was the tenets of socialism within parameters encompassing any radical egalitarian critique of capitalism and its elements, societies, institutions, and nation states.

The members of A39 shared experiences of the British Left that rendered us highly aware of its shortcomings and its pitfalls to stymie effectiveness. With only four members, there were no factions. If we didn't agree, we didn't do. There was mutual respect. It was a quiet company, wry. Its constitution was tacit except when a piece of paper was necessary as currency in dealing with arts and funding institutions, when one would be copied from the most basic model offered by the Independent Theatre Council. At meetings with the institutional we would sit and wait for them to tell us we would not be funded, then we would leave to frustrate them by getting on with the job. We did not expect their support. We were there only to parenthesise their preference to give public money to those most like themselves. We assumed any pauses in such conversations were for us to tell them who

we knew, who we might call on who was of influence and might cause a refusal of funding to lead to embarrassment, and the answer in their terms was: 'No one'. We found our friends and our audiences within our organisational hinterland: the unemployed; those with problems in their heads or homes; the political; the urgently active young; in ordinary members of Cornish communities.

But we believed we had assets that anyway could not be bought: we knew what we were for; we knew what must be broken; we were friends; we were comfortable together, though officially we were nothing more than a bank account and a claim—a good claim, a claim for the future. We insisted on the right to communicate and the right to create, not just for us but for everyone. What are human beings for? Not just to eat, drink, fuck, decorate themselves and their boxes and donate their lives to the market of alienated labour that enables the produce of the earth to be rationed in favour of those who already have most of it. Humans, all humans, are that aspect of the universe obsessed with significance. We must comb reality for meaning like a lice nurse searching for nits. Without us to perceive it, there is no significance and the universe is meaningless. This interpretation, this nomination, is the function of art; is why humans insist on making it and always have. It is an investigation of whatever the hell this all is, every bit as rigorous as science but without its particular inhibitions. Art is where we can postulate our predictions and our prayers for the achievement of all that humans might be; but only once we finally shake off all that is forced on us by artificial systems that benefit the tiny few. That minority also manifests its power in telling us what art is and is for: boring rituals that fail to accuse them or name their crimes; baroque pseudo paradoxes, low-dynamic tragedies of errors, charms to restrain the world, edicts to restrict us from pointing out their deceitful capture of the world's resources.

A39 was driven by the steady state of indignation generated by lived experience of capitalism's institutions and its distortion of the very concept of education; and by the knowledge that the capitalist hegemony had inadvertent or unadvertised allies within the Left. We were mobilised by the Miners' Strike to manifest all this in performance because that was the only skill we shared that might make a difference, or at least let us name our stand.

There was now another strand to our work that also shaped it. One of our founding principles was that theatre was for everyone, a fundamental aspect of human communication. Its withdrawal or withholding from the widest population was an elitist affront. One thing we learned through this stance was that if you really are available to work with anyone, you will inevitably come to work with those who have least of all, for whom things are hardest of all; to work with whom demands the most care and caring, because others who take an easier path cannot do it. Though all arts institutions pay lip service to universality, nearly all of them are effectively lying. Unless you are explicitly and primarily egalitarian, you are intrinsically elitist because it will be beyond your scope to bridge divisions, something that cannot be achieved casually. So we were increasingly in demand to undertake theatre with and for those people who had the bummiest deal of all, the people then known as the Mentally Handicapped and now termed People With Learning Difficulties And Those With Special Needs.

This was no hardship. Their institutions, the Adult Training Centres they could attend in the day and the Gateway Clubs that furnished important factors in their social lives, provided some of the most joyous experiences you could find, in which you were always in imminent danger of getting a great big hug. Those with the greatest issues of all might find themselves at Budock Hospital, run by George Greene (1953–2022)—one of those who had been most supportive of Roll Up Theatre and became a lifelong friend not only of A39 Theatre Group but also of all its members, a bastion and ally through many adventures over the years and decades. He also took many of the photos in this book.

A39 was well equipped to undertake this work. Sue Farmer had worked with children and adults with learning difficulties for years, specialising in drama: leading workshops and making plays. The money this work generated made A39 ever more viable and, importantly, the verbal and physical vocabulary of street-corner demonstration stipulated by Brecht as encapsulating epic theatre (see Chapter 9) was the *lingua franca* of the work we did in the Adult Training Centres. It was both how we communicated and the kind of performance we encouraged, though the students also enjoyed improvising a close-up naturalism that we would much later turn together into films.

We began to work with the agency Artshare Cornwall, who shared many of our least political precepts and commissioned us to create and tour a pantomime that could be instantly adaptable for a huge range of audiences: for the Adult Training Centres and Gateway Clubs, for old people's residential homes, for primary schools and kids in hospitals, and even for matinee performances in pubs. We devised a kind of show that could be improvised around a skeletal map, with lots of opportunities for participation and mayhem; and in the winter of 1985/86 we toured the first, our *Alice in Wonderland*. Things were moving fast for A39, work generating itself organically from what we did and who we were.

We had also now formed links with the other Cornish theatre companies in accordance with socialist principles of solidarity and industrial organisation, though it seemed wise to have only moderate expectations of what could be achieved by this Cornwall Theatre Alliance. A39 worked, despite the hardnut nature of its calling and its personnel, because it served a bigger cause to which we all subscribed, and this, in turn, served A39 not only as a founding principle but as code of conduct, rule book, constitution, and operating manual. None of this needed even to be written down—its formulation was tacitly agreed: to adopt the most austere and hardest edged version of the code, because there must be no compromise with anything beyond the bounds of the shortest path to a better world. We could even play this for laughs. In those druggy days if we were ever offered anything by anyone, we would shake our heads and say that drugs dissipated the revolutionary impulse. Then we would laugh. So they would laugh. But we meant every word of it.

The Cornwall Theatre Alliance (CTA) initially constituted A39 (Truro–Falmouth), Kinetik Community Theatre (St Austell), Kneehigh Theatre Company (St Austell), Miracle Theatre Company (Truro, then Falmouth), and Theatre Rotto (Penzance). Shiva Theatre (Penzance) attended the foundational meeting but chose not to participate further. At first the CTA felt like a somewhat uneasy truce. In various offices and around assorted pub tables, this sometimes-tense atmosphere was perhaps most comfortable for A39 members experienced in industrial, trade union, and political contexts. But the unease here was due mostly to struggles enacted in the corridors of the repurposed school that

housed South West Arts across the border and a hundred miles away in Exeter. Footsbarn Theatre's departure for Europe had left a creative space to be filled. Which company would be supported to fill it?

Footsbarn had formed in 1971, core countercultural days.² They were part of a commune near Liskeard and theirs was theatre as lifestyle and/or lifestyle as theatre, with everything centred on the art and anything extraneous sacrificed to it. Using techniques that drew on mime and circus, they developed their plays through intensive investigation, something they had in common with practitioners such as Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski. Music was also fundamental to what they did, with their arrival in a place often announced by a bizarre brass band. These other companies had formed in their shadow and now the question was, which of them would emerge to seize the light?

The starting line-up strongly favoured Kneehigh Theatre and Kinetik, also supported by South West Arts. Theatre Rotto was receiving some commissioning funding (which would not go to them, but to an 'approved' writer), but Miracle Theatre, and Shiva Theatre were currently outside this hallowed loop, and A39 was just the new kid in town.

We differed from the others, but they all differed from each other too. Although both Kneehigh and Miracle were influenced by the legacy of Footsbarn, up to now Kneehigh had specialised in young people's theatre—hence the name. Now they were changing in ways that might fill the Footsbarn-shaped void. I had seen Kneehigh twice, once at the Royal Cornwall Show when we were there performing Miracle's street theatre act. Kneehigh's core members—Mike, Tim, Dave, and Jim—were dressed as cowboys and duelling by throwing baked beans at each other. Later, I saw them perform their *Three Musketeers* in a hall in Mevagissey. It was loud, elaborate, and fun.

Kinetik were, in their way, as austere as A39 were in ours, but based on an Alternative Theatre model of the kind I might have found myself watching during my years in London. Their (what would now be termed) engaged practice had provided the route into theatre for Mark and Lucy,

2 For a history of the Cornish phase of Footsbarn's practice see Rupert White, *The Giraffe That Swims: Footsbarn Theatre's Early Years*, 1st edn (Cornwall: Antenna Publications 2018).

as Kinetik's Keith Johnstone-influenced workshops, supported by the WEA, had caused the unemployed workers theatre company Roll Up to coalesce. I had seen Kinetik perform Stephen Berkoff's adaptation of *Metamorphosis* at the Truro City Hall Annexe, a less angry reading than Berkoff's practice.

Miracle Theatre, as we have seen, was and is very much the personal creation of Bill Scott. It had begun by drawing on Bill's circle of friends, and then on Roll Up personnel too, to mount outdoor performances of the first play of the Cornish Ordinalia miracle play cycle *Creazen An Bys*, or *The Beginning of the World*, before moving very much into Fooksbarn territory with *McBeth*.

Shiva had a track record dating back to 1978. Based at the far end of Cornwall from Fooksbarn, it seemed completely uninfluenced by them. Shiva, also known as Cornwall Theatre Company, operated as an extraordinarily prolific touring Repertory company and had provided opportunities for members of other companies to first find themselves engaged in Cornish theatre, mounting a wide variety of plays—including Orton and Shakespeare—around the halls and little theatres of Cornwall and beyond.

The company with whom A39 found most in common was Theatre Rotto. What each company shared was a ragged edge where we frayed into a wider context. For A39, this was the world of political engagement: left-wing Labour, anarchists, Trotskyists, trade unionists, and also Travellers and poets; for Rotto, it was the cultural milieu of West-Cornwall musical and festival culture that gave them practical links with Fooksbarn in the form of The Barneys—the music-based performers who had remained in Cornwall. There was enough in common in our raggedy-edginess for A39 and Rotto to collaborate on performances and projects, especially as they too had a specialist practice in cabaret based on the accomplished singing of Julia Maclean and Lucy Fontayne and Julia's musical skills, alongside a group of accompanists led by the brilliant jazz guitarist Ufi (see Fig. 23).

Economically, Kneehigh and Kinetik were the companies supported by South West Arts, enough to indicate the official approval that could bring more support in its wake. But as the Cornwall Theatre Alliance formed itself, it was apparent that it would be Kneehigh who would

be major beneficiaries of future SWA funding in Cornwall, along with special support from SWA's 'Theatre Worker in Cornwall'³ Jon Oram, who wrote the script of Kneehigh's breakthrough show, the ambitious and expensive *Tregeagle*. The figures from the South West Arts Report 1985–86 would be Kneehigh receiving £8700 ('Production of *Tregeagle* and work in schools'), Kinetik £2000 ('Touring production of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*'). Theatre Rotto were included with £500 'To commission *The Nutcase Suite* by Dave Humphries'.⁴ The Theatre Officer's Report included, as one of the 'highlights of the year' 'Kneehigh Theatre's production of *Tregeagle* which will take the Company outside of the South West for the first time'. Below this was a photo of a scene from *Tregeagle* occupying more than half the page.⁵ Kneehigh's inexorable rise had begun.

It was these changing circumstances that were the stimulus for the first Cornwall Theatre Alliance meeting. Though there was a general suspicion of done deals, being together regularly in one room inspired a distant relative of collectivity which grew significantly as time went on, though Kinetik would quite soon call it a day as a company. But the Cornwall Theatre Alliance sustained and would mount two substantial showcase festivals in Falmouth (see Fig. 24). The CTA was a context in which lots of misunderstandings were re-understood and collaborations initiated. In a few years it would transmute into the Cornwall Theatre Umbrella—but that's another story.

3 South West Arts, *29th Annual Report 1984–85* (Exeter: South West Arts, 1985)

4 South West Arts, *30th Annual Report 1985–86* (Exeter: South West Arts, 1986), p. 11.

5 South West Arts, *Ibid.*, p. 10.



Fig. 23. The raggedy edges: A39 and Theatre Rotto would often collaborate after coming together in the Cornwall Theatre Alliance.

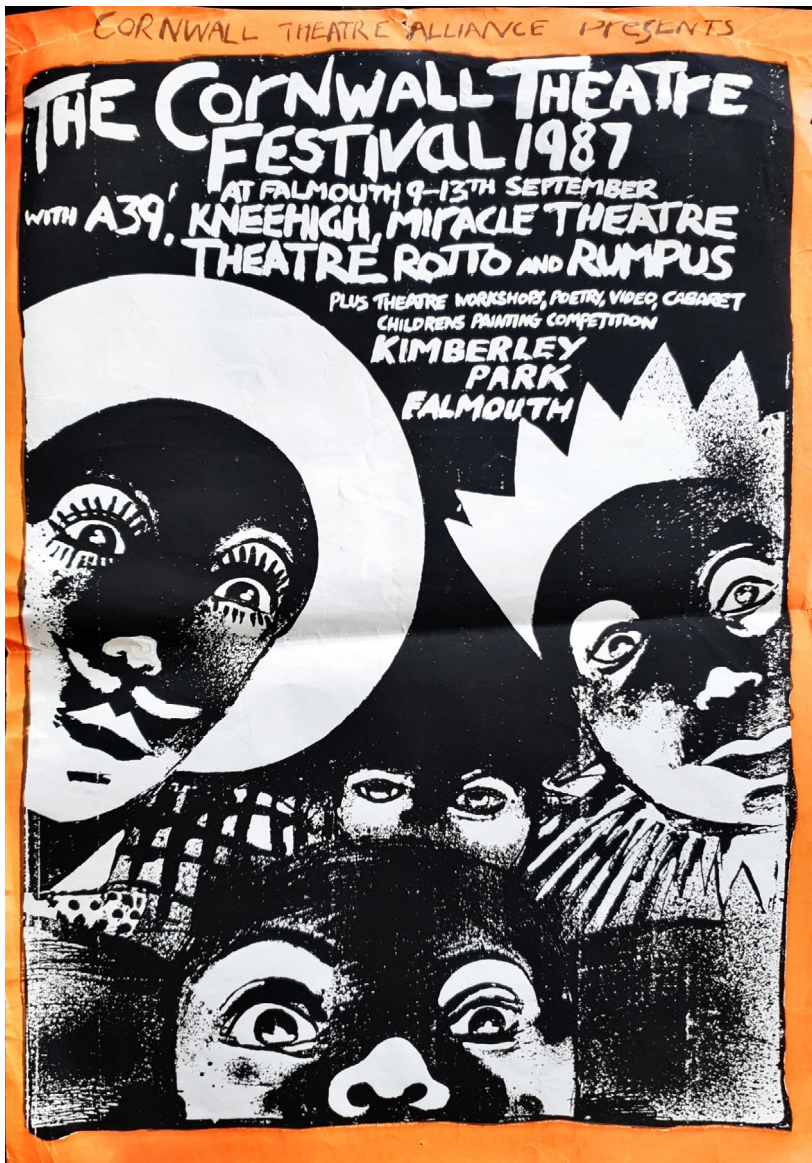


Fig. 24. Poster for the first theatre festival put together by the Cornwall Theatre Alliance. Poster design by Antony Duckels (CC BY-NC 4.0).