Radical Chic? Centre 42, the Roundhouse and How Culture Countered Wesker in the 1960s

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Centre 42 (C42) was Arnold Wesker's 1960s'BIB-068 odyssey – preoccupying his emotional and creative energies, and in the end ultimately draining them. The fame Wesker found in *The Trilogy* (1958–60) gave a platform to launch a bold cultural-political initiative. *The Trilogy* depicted working-class life and segued Jewishness, political belonging and socialism. Arguing that art and culture were central to the Labour movement's progress in a 1960 Trades Union Congress (TUC) motion (no.42), Wesker's initiative ran local festivals in 1961 and 1962. In 1964, it inherited the Roundhouse in North London, which became its spatial and symbolic home. By 1970, C42 came to the end of the line – struggling to synthesize and enhance working-class cultural life, failing to secure funding from the unions and Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) and superseded by other popular and counter-cultural activities at the Roundhouse.

Exploring C42's diverse activities and volatile narrative is itself a social history of the 1960s. In the opening piece of *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers* (1970), Tom Wolfe's account of a Black Panther gathering with the liberal elite of Manhattan society at composer Leonard Bernstein's apartment in 1970 is suggestive of the same contradictions inherent in C42 (Wolfe 1970BIB-108). There was

a similar air of 'radical chic' to C42: a socialist playwright wanting to take art to the workers but marooned in a London post-industrial building which it envisaged as its national base, together with a glamorous cast of (sometimes) supporters and (supposed) political and artistic allies. The argument here is that whilst C42 nurtured varied cultural activity, it was thwarted by countervailing tastes, practices and policy agendas. The wider culture – artistic, but also political, financial, personal and popular – also countered Wesker's vision.

Wesker's 1960s: Cultural and Political Context

Wesker's sixties celebrity was notable. He was close to Arts Minister Jennie Lee and Prime Minister Harold Wilson as well as a member of the government's Youth Service Development Council from 1960 to 1966. *Tatler* profiled him in 1965 and by 1967 *Roots* was an A-level text. During the tumultuous summer of 1967, Wesker was offered and declined a CBE. *Roots*' off-Broadway run in 1961 had critics comparing Wesker to Clifford Odets (Anon. 1961bBIB-002). His play *Chips with Everything* was a Broadway hit in 1963 – 'as rollicking as Sgt. Bilko' and casting Wesker as part of 'the British invasion' (Anon. 1963cBIB-006). The buzz was such that Wesker sold the film rights for £10,000 in 1964 to kick-start the Roundhouse appeal by sponsoring a pillar and some bricks (AW 1963bBIB-080).

Wesker was the personification, a *cliché* even, of the 1960s radicalism. Active in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and a founder of the Committee of

100 in 1960 along with Doris Lessing, Lindsay Anderson, Shelagh Delaney and John Osborne, Wesker marched to Aldermaston, was arrested on a sit-down protest and served a month in Brixton Prison in 1961 (AW 1960aBIB-068; Wesker 1995BIB-064: 610, 619). While critical of the Soviet Union, Wesker visited Cuba in 1964 and 1968, and although he condemned Castro's persecution of homosexuality, the British-Cuba Association headquarters was situated at the Roundhouse (Wesker 1969BIB-060: 15, 21).[1]

C42 and the Roundhouse were part of the 1960s' DIY ethos of social innovation and underground entrepreneurialism (Curtis & Sanderson 2004BIB-028: 1) and the stages for the dramas and debates about popular, elite and counter-cultural content: London and the regions, the role of the state and the post-industrial use of buildings. Longer-term, it can be argued that they became the model for arts centres and for forging 'culture' as a political terrain.

In another register, C42 cast itself as a cultural wing of the New Left – an intellectual-activist political formation that from 1956 proposed an alternative vision of socialism to both social democracy and Soviet communism. Culture was the New Left's keyword, and C42 assumed that culture, in both content and practice, should be political. Yet, most accounts of the New Left point to a waning of this ideal in its 'second' generation, where it turned from 1962 to theory rather than such practice as the Soho Partisan café, Left Clubs, new wave cinema or Wesker plays at the Royal Court (Rustin 1989BIB-053: 117–28).

This relationship can be found in the *May Day Manifesto* movement (1967–68), a revival of the 'first' generation New Left – Wesker was a signatory of the original 1967 *New Left May Day Manifesto* (Ponnuswami 1998BIB-049: 138). Yet, despite being edited by Raymond Williams, it said little about 'culture'. This extended to its critique of 'Labourism', in which it argued that it wasn't just a hostile culture that marginalized the left in national life, but that the British Labour Party and trade unions by comparison with European social democracy were too narrowly focused on parliament and wages, lacking a broader presence in civil society or ideological strategy for cultivating this. Yet, Jennie Lee as Minister for the Arts (1964–70), 1962's Festival of Labour (Black 2016BIB-024) and modernizing Labour MPs like Tony Crosland and Roy Jenkins in culture indicate that it was not lack of interest, resources or will but rather popular cultural preference and the wider political culture that constrained Labour's cultural progress (Black 2007BIB-022: 149–62).

The Labour Party, like Wesker, were firm believers in a cultural hierarchy that it trusted Britons might be enticed to ascend. As with much of the permissive legislation enacted in the 1960s, arts policy was at odds with popular opinion; distinctively, it endeavoured to not only modernize traditional arts but also promote access to it, particularly in the regions. Jazz, much in evidence at the Festival of Labour and made eligible for Arts Council funding in 1967, was about as modern as its tastes ran to. Lee's 1965 Arts White Paper extolled how 'in the world of jazz the process has already happened; highbrow and lowbrow have met' (Cmnd. 2601

1965BIB-025: para. 71). This agenda was challenged by self-made commercial pop culture, not to mention the counter-culture that emerged in late 1960s Britain.

By contrast, C42 was less permissive and more prescriptive, defending folksy-proletarian culture as well as elite forms such as classical music. Contemporary critics such as John McGrath and later critics like Mulgan and Worpole felt that for C42 'the problem was of taking existing art to the workers, not trying to create new forms of art' (Mulgan & Worpole 1986BIB-047: 28–29).

Roots and Knots

Wesker's animus and the impetus behind C42 was that theatregoing was a minority pursuit compared to mass audiences for cinema and television. 'Is anybody listening?' (Wesker 1970BIB-061:13) he wondered in *The Modern Playwright or O, Mother, Is It Worth It?*, the 1960 pamphlet he sent to every Trade Union leader. In this, Wesker railed against the industrial relations satire film *I'm Alright Jack* (1959) and condemned the Labour movement for offering little alternative to cultural habits – 'a neglect […] almost immoral' (Wesker 1970BIB-061: 17) – and instead focusing its efforts almost entirely on material improvement for its members.[2] For Wesker this was an impoverishing outlook, since 'if we are not to be materially exploited neither should we be culturally exploited'. Wesker saw exemplars of cultural well-being in 'the Gorkis, Chekhovs, Millers, the Balzacs and Steinbecks, the Beethovens and the de Sicas, the Van Goghs and the Louis Armstrongs' (Wesker 1970BIB-061: 18).

Socialism, for Wesker and the writers of his generation (Rebellato 1999BIB-052: 11), meant 'not merely an economic organization of society but a way of living' (Wesker 1970BIB-061: 17), and Labour and the unions were perpetuating the fragmenting of work and leisure.

The birth of Centre 42 is well documented (Black 2010BIB-023). At the 1960 TUC, a motion drafted by Wesker and Bill Holdsworth, active in the Hemel Hempstead Left Club, called for the involvement of trade unions in cultural activities (Wesker 1960cBIB-058: 67). The motion was moved by Ralph Bond, who told of attending an International Confederation of Trade Unions Film Festival, featuring Scandinavian, West German, Austrian and American films, but not a single British contribution, he was 'sad to say' (TUC 1960BIB-054: 435). When a speaker backing the motion was interrupted by the Congress President – 'I hope delegates will be brief as I want to take the economic section after this' – this served to demonstrate the motion's critique of dominant materialist outlooks and coalesced support for it (TUC 1960BIB-054: 438).

C42 posters proclaimed, 'All Art should be Free – it is an experience not a commodity' and reasoned that 'the principle of free art, like free education and medicine, would be accepted within a couple of decades' (AW n.d.a). Novelist Doris Lessing told the first C42 council of management how '[u]nder the glossy mask of false prosperity which is the face of Britain now, people are being starved […] 95% of the people are educated away from art' (AW 1961cBIB-073). Wesker proved relentless

in urging Harold Wilson to consider the arts as a way of improving Labour's image during the 1964 election campaign (AW 1964cBIB-083). Wilson responded that his famous 1963 'white heat' speech had really been about technology generating the potential for leisure (AW 1964dBIB-084). Jennie Lee, the Minister for Arts and Culture, initially endorsed Wesker's 'brave idea' that if politicians and economists had 'failed to rescue us from the torpor of a subtly totalitarian culture, the only thing left is to give the poet his chance' (Lee 1962BIB-041: 95–96).

Yet, Wesker and C42 were often seen as patronizing to working-class cultural tastes. Wesker once told the Finsbury Theatre Society in 1963 'that the British public was philistine' (Anon. 1963aBIB-004); in 1970, John McGrath, founder of the radical 7:84 theatre company, and briefly a member of C42's council, condemned Wesker's crusade, claiming that 'the idea […] that culture is a product to be sold by culturally-conscious (therefore superior) artists and intellectuals to a culturally starved (therefore inferior) workers, is based on the bourgeois concept of culture' (McGrath 1970BIB-044).

Such attitudes were implicit in C42's cultural repertoire and preferences. Wesker's pet hates included the furore around the Beatles and intellectuals who 'pretend to like Elvis' (Wesker 1971BIB-062: 5). In *Youth Service Magazine*, he explained: 'that the music of Bach is superior to the music of Elvis Presley […] an indisputable fact that Presley himself would admit' (Wesker 1964BIB-059). In *Chips with Everything* (1962), we see the Wing Commander's chagrin when the men chose

folk music in preference to Elvis – an echo of Beattie in *Roots* trying to educate her mother to appreciate Bizet.

Commentators like Richard Hoggart were similarly wary of American mass culture. Yet, C42 also exhibited what, in *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), Hoggart warned was a 'middle-class Marxist' tendency found in the early New Left type: 'a nostalgia for those "best of all" kinds of art, rural folk-art or genuinely popular urban art, and a special enthusiasm for such scraps of them as he thinks he can detect today […] part-pitying and part-patronizing working-class people' (Hoggart 1958BIB-035: 5). In this sense, Wesker's C42 could be seen as practicing radical chic, *nostalgie de la boue* as Wolfe also terms it, romanticizing exotic primitive culture. C42's politically progressive, culturally traditional amalgam exalted indigenous national cultures in highly selective ways. It aimed to recover 'authentic', traditional working-class experience just as this was reckoned to have evaporated or mutated. Significantly, the multiculturalism of 1960s Britain only faintly registered on C42's radar. C42 was an exercise in cultural defence against new forms of popular culture as much as against elitism – anti-establishment, but at the same time defending traditional 'authentic' forms and struggling to rival mainstream commercial culture. Its only non-classical musical tastes, folk and jazz, were of the 'trad' (acceptable American) type, countering electric pop – although at the start of the 1960s, there was a revival in both, with popular and radical resonance (McKay 2007; Horn 2009BIB-037; Mitchell 2014BIB-046).

The activities for which the Roundhouse would become controversial and (in)famous later in the 1960s were very different from the early offerings at C42's festivals between September and November 1962 in Nottingham, Birmingham, Leicester, Bristol, Hayes and Southall and (in 1961) Wellingborough. Standard C42 fare included: pub and workplace poetry readings from Dannie Abse, Laurie Lee and Christopher Logue (AW 1962CBIB-076); folk music from Ewan MacColl, Peggy Seeger and A. L. Lloyd and art and sculpture displays (including Barbara Hepworth and L. S. Lowry) in shops and community centres. The National Youth Theatre performed *Hamlet* ('Shakespeare's Jimmy Porter' as festival pamphlets dubbed it), and a theatre folk ballad *The Maker and the Tool* (1962) was constructed by Charles Parker from workplace recordings (Watt 2003BIB-055: 43–46). Wesker's short play *The Nottingham Captain* (1962) was written for the festivals with ACGB funding and dealt with the defeat of the 1817 Pentrich Luddite rising. It was scripted to a part-jazz (by David Lee, later musical director on BBC TV's *That Was the Week That Was*) and part-classical score (ACGB 1962BIB-018). Jazz came from the Fortytwo Big band, led by Tommy Watt. The sixteen-piece's repertoire included the 'TUC twist' and 'Wesker Jumps In' and was well enough regarded to record with Columbia Records in 1964 (Green 1962BIB-033: 1).

Yet, this folksy, nostalgic cleaving to some authentic workers' culture did not impress all. Playwright Shelagh Delaney, admired by the New Left and initially a supporter of C42, increasingly wondered why it 'seem[s] to think that 100 years ago,

everybody was speaking poetry in pubs' (Anon. 1962BIB-003). Working-class artists, such as Ron Dellar in *New Left Review*, felt 'resentment' when portrayed as 'romantic misfits whose works could only be […] appreciated by an […] upper middle class minority' as much as when they had to debase their art by contributing to 'glossy magazines' (Dellar 1961BIB-029: 60).

C42's answer to such concerns was to organize itself as a vanguard, 'a cultural hub in London which by its approach and work will destroy the mystique and snobbery associated with the arts':

> If we do not succeed an army of highly powered commercial enterprises are going to sweep into the leisure hours of future generations and create a cultural mediocrity […] a nation emotionally and intellectually immature, capable of enjoying nothing, creating nothing and effecting nothing. This is not an idle prophecy; it is a fact in the making.
>
> (AW 1962a)

In addition to creating a space to nurture 'the best professional artists' (AW 1962aBIB-074) and a new popular audience for the arts (not vice versa), C42 rethought spectators as more active participants. Wesker believed that 'given the right opportunities, art will return as the natural function of any community; without it a community is

soulless and in the end easily exploitable'; 'a vote in a democracy may be the individual's weapon against political abuse, but […] art can strengthen a man's personality against spiritual abuse' (AW 1962bBIB-075). There was a clear theory to the nomenclature of a *Centre* 42 prior to the Roundhouse.

Roundhouse: The Rise and Fall

Built in 1847 by Robert Stephenson as a turning house for locomotives, developments in rail design eventually rendered the Roundhouse obsolete. From 1869 until fashion tycoon Louis Mintz acquired the leasehold and gifted it to C42 in 1964, it was a liquor warehouse (Foster 1971BIB-032: 43). In 1954, it was categorized as a Grade II listed building. Plans for the Roundhouse, once it was acquired in 1964, were outlined by Wesker in the *Allio Brief*. This provided French theatre designer René Allio and architect Paul Chemetov with guidelines for redesigning this former railway shed as a multipurpose, state of the arts centre. Allio had worked on Roger Planchon's Théâtre de la Cité in Lyon and Malraux's Centres Dramatiques. Chemetov led the *Atelier d'urbanisme et d'architecture* in Paris and had worked on the new French Communist party HQ (Joly 1973BIB-039: 58–63).

The *Allio Brief* 'evoke[d] the atmosphere' (Wesker 1970BIB-061: 52) and aesthetics of C42's vision. Architectural excellence was imperative; C42 artists ought to be 'warlike, audacious, gay, courteous, brilliant – and no doubt drunk' and the Roundhouse 'a place of pleasure and marvelous revelation' and 'efficient, effective,

functional' (Wesker 1970BIB-061: 55), including meeting rooms for local Co-ops, trade unions, church and youth groups. The building should relate the artist and the audience more intimately than in traditional theatres and 'result in developing a new and informed audience' (Wesker 1970BIB-061: 58). Unlike Allio, Wesker liked 'the idea of sceptical youngsters lounging around in a building where there is music, theatre and debate in full swing' and felt there ought to be 'a jellied eel stall, the FortyTwo fish and chip shop, the bookstall… And the drinking bar […] must be available […] as a pub throughout the day' (Wesker 1970BIB-061: 59). More militantly, the Roundhouse was to be the place where if artists were to

> forge a new language that will make society recognize its responsibilities to the arts – it should be here. If they are to acquire that confidence that will eliminate the artist's nervous twitch of apology for his so-called 'inessential' profession – it should be here. And if all this adds up to a cultural revolution and if this revolution has a seat – it should be here.
>
> (Wesker 1970BIB-061: 60)

Yet, it can be argued that '[t]he notoriety and achievements of the Roundhouse came *despite* C42 more than *because* of it' (Etienne 2016BIB-030: 141). Indeed, the 'sorts of popular culture the Roundhouse housed for financial expediency' superseded

C42's vision. The Roundhouse would not have happened so easily in a non-1960s context, yet the same context also undermined C42. Whereas it foundered, other politically engaged theatre companies developed away from London, for instance 7:84, Red Ladder and The People Show (Itzin 1980BIB-038: 4–5). However, C42 was a precursory model for numerous local arts centres and 'carrot-cake' cinemas – such as, variously, the Dagenham Roundhouse or Bristol's Arnolfini, which found its present site in a former tea warehouse in the city centre docks in 1975 – often located in regenerated industrial buildings.

Harold Wilson had gifted the Roundhouse George Hoskins (a coffee shop entrepreneur and former civil servant) and Robert Maxwell, MP, already reputed for his unscrupulous business practice (Anon. 1966BIB-009), allegedly to lend gravitas to fund-raising initiatives (AW 1965aBIB-087). A DIY ethos remained from C42's regional festivals, which not even the business nous of Hoskins and Maxwell could dispel. In January 1967, the Greater London Council declared that 'the present condition of the premises falls short of the required standard' (AW 1967aBIB-094). Efforts to put things on a more commercial footing institutionally uncoupled C42 from the Roundhouse Trust. This saw the Roundhouse used variously for TV, adverts, ice shows, Campaign for Real Ale festivals and a British Film Institute-*Sunday Times* 'cinema city' exhibition, visited by Harold Lloyd and Gene Kelly.

Without secure funding or cultural roots, C42 and its property were also overrun by popular and counter-cultural activities, far from the blend of high-end

culture or authentic-folk-proletarian culture Wesker envisaged. Dubbed 'the cathedral of the permissive society' (Anon. 1971BIB-015), the Roundhouse was a trip through the 1960s. It hosted two key London counter-culture events: the 1967 Dialectics of Liberation conference and the launch of *International Times* (*IT*) in 1966. Neither was designed by C42, but its rates made the Roundhouse cheap to hire. Jim Haynes, an *IT* editor and founder of London's ArtsLab and Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre, argued that Wesker's financial ambitions for converting the Roundhouse overrode C42's cultural output. At the same time as the Dialectics conference took place Wesker was at a fund-raising tea party at Downing Street with political leaders and entertainment impresarios like Sir Billy Butlin and Lew Grade. This coincidence of the Dialectics happening and the No.10 tea party encapsulated the cultural chasm between the vision of C42 and the day-to-day life of the Roundhouse (Green 1988BIB-034: 119; Cooper 1971BIB-026).

The 1960s Roundhouse was evidence of class, status and culture in flux as new money and lifestyles, and new artistic forms, flourished. By 1971, performances included a rock version of *Othello* and Peter Brook's trapeze interpretation of *The Tempest* (1968), bands such as The Doors and The Who and Andy Warhol's first play, *Pork* (1971).

The Roundhouse, more soberly, was also a political venue favoured by 1960s radicals. In 1967, it hosted the anti-Vietnam War 'Angry Arts' week, sponsored by Jonathan Miller and Vanessa Redgrave, featuring Ewen MacColl, Peggy Seeger and

Harold Pinter, and recorded as a TV documentary (Anon. 1967bBIB-011). It was also used by anti-Apartheid groups, *Black Dwarf*, and the Revolutionary Socialist Student Federation conference in November 1968, addressed by Daniel Cohn-Bendit. The schizophrenic nature of the venue was such that it also hosted 'high' cultural events like the British School at Rome Painting Group and recordings of Beethoven by the New Philharmonia Orchestra. There was a frisson to the Roundhouse – its radical chic was encapsulated in the fact that it was a scene to be seen at and not where the common herd frequented (AW 1971BIB-101: 27–31).

By 1969, the Roundhouse had become louche, a rowdy place. That year, the GLC Public Services Entertainment sub-committee refused an extension of an all-night music licence (Anon. 1969aBIB-013). When the Roundhouse lost its Camden Council subsidy in 1970, this was the final rupture between C42 and the Roundhouse (AW 1971BIB-101: 18). Relating his decision to resign to the architect Paul Chemetov, Wesker wrote that the 'building has a certain cachet in London […] every slick enterprise wants to hire it', but he now had 'nightmares about it' (AW 1970BIB-100).

Friends (and Foes and Funds)

Away from such dramatic gestures, much of the story of C42, the Roundhouse and Wesker was concerned with a running battle to win the argument for a particular vision of culture and to win material support to practically enact it. Neither proved easy. The six 1962 Festivals had left C42 £40,000 in debt, which made Mintz's offer

of the Roundhouse particularly appealing in lending C42 not only an artistic space, but also a permanent base. Yet, it also left C42 with the task of fund-raising to convert the Roundhouse into a cultural hub. Lord Harewood (the Queen's cousin and director of the Edinburgh Festival) launched the appeal at the Roundhouse in July 1964 in the presence of Mintz, Wilson and James Callaghan, the Chancellor of the Exchequer (AW 1964eBIB-085). Harold Pinter, John Osborne and the TUC's George Woodcock and Vic Feather turned down invites (AW 1964fBIB-086). The target was £590,000 (approximately £11.3m in 2018) to be funded from national and local government, the public, trade unions, charities and business.

Despite arguing in 1963 that trade unionism needed to address spiritual as well as material poverty, Vic Feather (1963BIB-031:124), the TUC's Assistant General Secretary, proved a thorn in C42's side. According to the British Film Institute's Stanley Reed, when C42 was mentioned to him in 1962, Feather bemoaned 'eccentrics knocking on the doors of the TUC' (AW 1962dBIB-077).[3] Wesker had urged the new TUC General Secretary George Woodcock in 1960 to show 'vision' (Wesker 1960bBIB-057), but by 1963, Woodcock bemoaned C42 for being 'long-haired and starry-eyed' (Anon. 1963bBIB-005). Two years later, Wesker retaliated by branding the TUC 'old men […] paralyzed by the narrowness of your preoccupations' (Wesker cited in Coppieters 1975BIB-027: 47). The hostilities meant that the TUC ceased to support C42.

C42 called on local authorities to contribute, as permitted by the 1948 Local Government Act. However, with the London County Council (LCC) expanding into the GLC between 1963 and 1965, many local authorities deferred such decisions. In 1966, Bromley Councillor Raymond Pope denounced C42 as a 'proletarian piffle' and any donation as 'throwing […] public money down the kitchen sink' (Anon. 1966BIB-009). The GLC and LCC were minded to hear how the ACGB felt about C42 before committing (AW 1963aBIB-079). Likewise, the ACGB's Chairman Lord Goodman was keen to see match-funding for any ACGB support (AW 1966aBIB-091).

The Gulbenkian Foundation donated £10,000 early in 1962 and £3,000 in 1964 (ACGB 1964). Business patronage was also forthcoming from the ITV Companies Association Committee of Review of Grants to the Arts and Sciences. After 1964, business interest diminished as central ACGB funding and support increased (ACGB 1968BIB-021). The Arts Council's Secretary General, Sir William Emrys Williams, had suggested that 'Weskerism' was a 'false doctrine', premised on mass interest in the arts and told Wesker that business would want to see that C42 was 'a sound and sane organization' (AW 1964bBIB-082). C42 submitted four unsuccessful bids to the ACGB by 1967. Ultimately, Goodman confessed his personal dislike of the C42 project to the ACGB and LCC (ACGB 1965BIB-020).

Wesker's celebrity and charisma gave the movement early impetus, enabling him to assemble union leaders Ted Hill, Frank Cousins and Bill Carron plus Doris Lessing, Tom Maschler and Jennie Lee on C42's first Council of Management (AW

1961bBIB-072). C42 was based on personalities as much as ideas long before its aspirations, directed to a primarily trade union audience, faded. Much energy was expended on schemes like the 1965 Stars Committee fronted by John Lennon, Vanessa Redgrave, Spike Milligan and Fenella Fielding (AW 1965bBIB-088; Anon. 1965BIB-008). If Wesker's abrasive personality attracted controversy, his core concept of a cultural hub was no less contentious since it implicitly questioned current government policy and the dominant structures of artistic production. This explained why C42 was received so coolly by many otherwise politically or creatively sympathetic. Doris Lessing spoke as early as 1961 about 'a great deal of malice being spread [...] about C42' (AW 1961aBIB-071). Lessing reported that George Devine, the Royal Court's Artistic Director who had facilitated Wesker's breakthrough works, 'seems to see this as an attack on himself'.

Wesker's talent for ingratiating himself with the famous and the influential meant the 'Friends of Centre 42' was bedecked with Lords, Ladys and Sirs as well as the Countess of Albemarle and luminaries John Berger, Sidney Bernstein, Gerald Gardiner, Peter Hall, Cleo Laine, J. B. Priestley, Alan Sillitoe, CP Snow, Kenneth Tynan and Raymond Williams (AW 1971BIB-101: 40–41). Most audacious was an approach to Prince Philip. Wesker explained he would 'sooner have built 42 on the pennies and pounds of many hundreds and thousands', but this was not forthcoming (AW 1965cBIB-089). He visited Buckingham Palace in May 1965, where Philip blamed government funding of sports and arts for reducing the interest of private or business

patrons. Wesker's request was rejected (AW 1965dBIB-090). In another instance Wesker simply pleaded for a millionaire to back him (AW 1966bBIB-092).

C42 always generated as well as hosted cultural debate – and amidst the evidence of putative or fleeting friends and the uncertainties induced by its aura of radical chic, it is worth noting there were plenty who not only ignored but were downright hostile to either Wesker's vision or the workings of the Roundhouse. Noel Coward, a critic of the 'dustbin school of drama' (Anon. 1961aBIB-071), disparaged Wesker's efforts in 'all those dreary English towns organizing dreary festivals for those dreary people' (Anon. 1964BIB-007). Other cultural warriors saw C42 as more sinister. In 1968, Mary Whitehouse drew attention to 'the headquarters of the left wing organization "Centre 42"', adding that 'the Roundhouse is used for activities of the "anti-university"' and had hosted a conference on the "'dialectics of liberation"' […] whose neo-Marxist ideas have kindled much of the present unrest in Europe' (NVALA 1968BIB-048).

But even C42's relationships with its friends were fraught. Wesker's hostility to pop music, including the Beatles, has been noted, but Lennon's association was keenly sought. Peter Sellars was listed amongst the Friends of C42, but *I'm Alright Jack* was regularly cited as unworthy of the Labour movement because it suggested trade unionists were self-interested, cynical and lazy. Impresario Jack Hylton was also a 'Friend', but Wesker dubbed him a 'cretinizing' cultural influence (Green 1962BIB-033: 7) and told Goodman he would 'prefer to have Hylton's assurances in the bank'

(AW 1962eBIB-078). On the eve of the No.10 tea party, Wesker enjoined the Gulbenkian's Jim Thornton: 'let us hope that the industrial thugs who gather at Downing Street will be touched with your enlightenment' (AW 1967dBIB-097).

The New Left was as unforthcoming with ideological sustenance as the TUC or ACGB. Relations had been close – Wesker wrote in the first *New Left Review* (Wesker 1960aBIB-056) and touted his project as 'another focal point of activity' (Wesker 1960cBIB-058: 47) to match CND. Yet, actress and later Labour MEP Janey Buchan wrote to Wesker in 1960 explaining she had 'prodded Stuart Hall and *NLR* until I'm sick' to participate in the burgeoning fringe at the Edinburgh Festival (AW 1960bBIB-069). She despaired of the New Left's Londo-centrism and felt that '*NLR* need their heads looking at because they could have the most tremendous stage ready-made for them'.

Relations with Lee also faltered (Hollis 1997BIB-036: 246–96). Although Lee noted that Wesker 'agreed with me that an urgent priority is to try to set up counter-attractions to the influences of commercial television, betting, drugs' (AW 1967cBIB-096), Wesker's outburst at June 1967's Labour Arts and Amenities group meeting sealed the fallout (JL 1967BIB-042). The group chair told Lee: 'C42 is suffering from 'Jenniecide' […] Arnold is under the delusion that you are conspiring with Ted [Willis] to kill the C42 project' (HW 1967aBIB-106).

Goodman then undermined C42 with the Prime Minister. He had 'never felt much enthusiasm for the project', since it was

> in direct contradiction to a policy […] cultivated by Jennie and myself […] that we do not impose our views or any central views on the local regions and […] that pre-packaged London culture dispatched all over the place is the exact reverse of what we are trying to establish.
>
> (HW 1967b[BIB-107])

The July 1967 tea party at 10 Downing Street came a month after Wesker's accusations against Lee. Donations totalled almost £80,000 (AW 1971[BIB-101]: 41–42). This amounted to a survival rather than a development package, confining C42 to a virtual entity, existing in name and imagination alone.

Wesker's suspicions that C42 had ended up as 'tenants of the Roundhouse, rather than having a prior claim on it, […] hood-winked by tycoons, railroaded by commercial imperatives and deserted by […] Lee and the TUC' (Black 2010[BIB-023]: 167) were not unfounded (AW 1966c[BIB-093]). Ted Willis, TV playwright and Labour Lord, was a longstanding foe of C42. He had suggested that it merge with Unity Theatre in 1963, and in a 1966 interview with Susan Barnes (partner of Labour MP Tony Crosland) in *The Sun*, Willis berated Wesker for suggesting that 'to write for television would be dipping his pen in mud'. Willis felt Wesker suffered from a 'messiah complex', seeing 'himself in shining white robes coming down […] the Old

Kent Road and converting everybody there to Bach and Beethoven'. Such 'hysterical sincerity' was 'patronizing' (Willis 1966BIB-103).

Other critics argued C42 was too profligate and that cultural output should always precede the needs of funding and a permanent base. Again, Willis was among their number, writing in *Tribune*: 'Wesker seems to think that he alone has the tablets of stone [...] on art and the rest of us are either philistines or cheats'. He insisted C42 needed to 'show us in deeds not words' (Willis 1967BIB-104). For Mike Kustow, the ICA (where he was Director from 1967 to 1971) was artistically superior and ArtsLab more 'successful as a meeting place' (Anon. 1969bBIB-014). In fact, the uncoupling of the Roundhouse and C42 was apparent to most commentators from 1967 onwards. *London Look* (Anon. 1967aBIB-010) were wowed by the spectacle and presence of the building but put-off by its ambitious funding demands and felt C42 was essentially a landlord to other cultural providers. *Jackie*, the teenage magazine for girls (itself evidence of how the Roundhouse was a fixture in popular youth culture), observed that with its late-night bars and psychedelic lighting, the Roundhouse was 'a really jumping scene' but during daytime reverted to 'the rather solid sign of a social and cultural arts centre' (Anon. 1967cBIB-012).

The popular reception C42 elicited proved equally constraining. C42's local festivals met the uneven reception that the project as a whole encountered. J. B. Priestley was supportive of Wesker's 'noble simplicity' and efforts to counter 'admass' but imagined Halifax workers faced with C42's cultural fare remarking, 'ah

couldn't make head nor tail of it' (Priestley 1965BIB-051). For his part, Wesker saw in Priestley 'a popular touch which seems to have eluded me' (Wesker 1995BIB-064: 144).

Conclusions

Interviewed by Catherine Itzin and Glenda Leeming for *Theatre Quarterly* in 1977, Wesker conceded (indeed almost felt 'fulfilled' by) the suggestion that 'your earlier career seems to be slightly overshadowing your later career' (Wesker 1985BIB-063: 100). C42 and the Roundhouse were the buffers against this earlier success. Wesker at least thought that C42 had 'created a spirit and focused attention on the arts in a way that has inspired' (AW 1968BIB-098). Itzin reckoned that as fringe theatres and arts centres flourished in the 1970s, C42 had 'come true, independent of its originators' and foreshadowed the heyday of radical theatre (agit-prop, avant-garde, feminist, black, gay) in the 1970s (Itzin 1980BIB-038: 103–15). Wesker tended to look back in anger. In 1967, he reflected: 'I have been too charming or innocent in my dealings with "the powers that be"' (AW 1967bBIB-107).

Like many contemporaries, historical comment on C42 has tended to judge it harshly. For Coppieters, the idea of a Centre controlled by artists was radical enough to generate political unease, threaten commercial dictates and question artistic hierarchies – its potential was 'betrayed' by elite opposition and union antipathy (Coppieters 1975BIB-027: 51). By contrast, Marwick notes that efforts to transform the Roundhouse into a political theatre 'inevitably flopped' (Marwick 1998BIB-045: 343).

The terms of such perceived 'failure' disclose much about the pattern, and limits, of the 1960s' cultural revolution. Nonetheless, this chapter's argument moves beyond such a simple dichotomy to see Wesker as thwarted by wider cultural tastes and emerging practices, the broader political culture and by the project's own contradictions: in short, culture(s) countered it. In addition, whilst C42 fell short in its own terms, it served to inspire as a model for others after 1970.

What C42 lacked in cultural provision (once in the Roundhouse it is hard to envision precisely *what* C42's output was to be), it made up for with a vision. Its legacy was here rather than in its own cultural turns in the 1960s – in modelling rather than realizing the cultural turn. Wesker would return to Buckingham Palace to collect a knighthood in 2006. By then the Roundhouse had undergone many changes: it had remained culturally iconic but dishevelled in the 1970s (Preston 2005BIB-050), failed in efforts to become a black arts centre with GLC support in the 1980s, became subject to preservation by English Heritage in the 1990s and reopened in 2006 as a renovated, bespoke arts centre, with private financial backing, as well as English Heritage and Arts Council support. Echoes of C42 and Wesker resounded: Pink Floyd offered financial support, there was a sponsored brick scheme and a 'studio 42', whose first play was the suggestively titled *The Foolish Young Man* by Jeremy Weller. Politics was apparent in that it hosted US radical filmmaker Michael Moore's first UK stand-up performance, albeit one that ended in claims of Moore being short-changed by the venue and organizers (*Guardian* 2003). This all tied in with the 1990s' and 2000s'

New Labour rhetoric of the creative industries. If this was a cultural revolution, it was not as Wesker planned or envisaged, and while he nourished and hosted it, he ended up being consumed by it. Radical, mostly; chic, definitely!

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Notes

1 For critics like Bernard Levin, all this meant that 'on political matters' Wesker 'has a brain made of apfelstrudel' (Levin 1970BIB-043), a culinary reference borrowed from Wesker's *The Four Seasons* (1965BIB-087).

2 In the original address to the 1960 Oxford Drama Festival on which the pamphlet was based, Wesker's rhetoric extends to calling the film 'a sick cultural manifestation' (see AW 1960c).

3 This animosity did not prevent Wesker from using Feather as one of the inspirations for the character of Victor in *Love Letters on Blue Paper* (1977).