The early 1980s became another watershed for Red Ladder Theatre Company as it made the Company consider the role and practice of political theatre in the 80s, a very different environment to that of the sixties and seventies. It led to a year of experimentation with new ideas, building on the experience of the past, which was perhaps easier due to the financial assistance provided by such bodies as Arts Council of Great Britain, Greater London Arts, North West Arts, West Midland Arts, East Midland Arts, Yorkshire Arts and South Yorkshire Metropolitan County Council (such assistance was acknowledged by Red Ladder in the policy information that appeared in programmes produced for the 80s plays, for example, Circus).

This period saw many ‘firsts’. In 1981, the Company produced its first extant script, The Blind Goddess by Ernst Troller which was translated from German by Micheline Wandor and was about socialism in a fascist state, the position of women and the hypocrisy of justice; the Company’s first writing commission from the Northern playwright Paul Goetz with the 1983 production of Preparations by Paul Goetz and Pat Winslow—this piece looked at the response of both, the individuals and the authorities, to the threat of the holocaust; and with the 1984 production of This Story of Yours by John Hopkins, the Company took a new path as the play was aimed exclusively at Theatre venues. This play explored male violence and sexuality from a highly charged position: the main narrative was about a policeman being accused of murdering a suspected child abuser during an interrogation.

Apart from these ventures, in 1980, Red Ladder produced Ladders to the Moon, an account of a strike in 1893 at Featherstone Pit in Yorkshire which resulted in the army shooting and killing several miners. Circus by Rony Robinson produced in 1981, was an allegory in which the state of Britain in 1981 was likened to an ailing circus of the 1930s where the owner deceives the workers who have no real control over their work. 1982 saw two productions, Playing Apart and The Best of British ‘whose country is it anyway? The first was a club show about life in post-war Britain from the ‘never had it so good’ fifties, through the ‘swinging sixties’ and the ‘cynical’ seventies. A show that did not achieve much success was the 1983 production of Bring Out Your Dead by Peter Cox. This looked at Britain in 1988 after another term of Tory government and had Big Mac from America running the privatised health service. Put together at very short notice
following cancellations of *Bring Out Your Dead* in 1983/84 was *Dumb Blonde* by Peter Masters and Geraldine Griffins, a Busby Berkley style musical with music by Mc Govan/Dougall which took a light hearted look at women at work. Besides *This Story of Yours* mentioned earlier, 1984 saw three other productions: *Happy Jack* by John Godber (an extant script) charted the history of a coal miner and his wife through six decades of living on a pauper's wage; a commissioned work from South Yorkshire writer, Rony Robinson, *The Beano*, was a sensitive but hilarious account of a brewery workers' day trip to Scarborough in 1914: the revelers frolicked on their one day out while clouds of war were gathering in Europe; and *The Danderhall Red Beano*. This was not a show at all, but a week long festival mounted by Red Ladder in conjunction with Mid Lothian District Council in the mining village of Danderhall, near Edinburgh—it marked a return to the true spirit and ethos of the Edinburgh fringe. A double bill, *Stitchin' the Blues* and *Mixing it* by Maggie Lane, was produced in 1985: the former was a one woman show based on the industrial dispute at Lee Jeans of 1981 while the latter took a look at what happened when an unemployed CND activist got a job building a nuclear power station.

The year also saw the production of *Safe With Us* by Frances McNeill, a play commissioned by the Confederation of Health Service Employees Union for their 75th Anniversary celebrations. This fast moving play used comedy and music to look at current issues within the Health Service.

1985/86 radically changed the shape of the Company from a collective to a Hierarchy with the appointment of a Board of Directors who in turn appointed an Artistic Director—Rachel Feldburg. A new policy was developed with a commitment to Equal Opportunities informing all areas of the Company's work. At this point, it is relevant to not paraphrase and instead to quote in Red Ladder's language its aims as well as Artistic and Audience Developments:

The Company's aims were as follows:

- To create an artistically exciting socialist feminist theatre
- To take this work to audiences who would not normally see theatre, young people 14-25 and the adults who work with them. To perform on their own grounds, in Youth Clubs and places where they normally meet, rather than in theatre venues.
- To make our work accessible to all young people and in particular to reach young people for whom there is little or inadequate provision; young disabled people, Black young people (within which we include Asian and
African Caribbean teenagers), young people in inner cities and isolated rural areas.

- To offer theatre of the highest possible standard which is exciting and challenging both for the audience and performers and which uses a wide variety of forms and which seeks to develop the vocabulary of this form of theatre by offering young people 'the best'.
- To base this work on issues of concern to our audience and to develop the ways in which theatre can be used with parallel groups and professions (for instance Youth Workers). To encourage these workers to use theatre as part of their work with associated training, preparation and follow up.
- To continue to implement and develop the Company's Equal Opportunities Policy (including our Anti-racist Strategy and Action Plan on Disability) placing it at the core of our work and seeking to achieve a fully integrated Company at all levels.
- To raise the profile of this area of work amongst other Companies, funding bodies and professional workers and to encourage Regional Arts Boards and Local Authorities/Youth Services to work in partnership.

Artistic and Audience Developments

- An innovative tri-part programme for Asian girls to include parallel projects in India and the North of England, coupled with development of a new, long term, Asian women's theatre project based in the North.
- A consistent development of the Company's work for disabled teenagers through a series of experimental projects—using sign theatre, dance and an environmental installation.
- A continued development of the Company's work with disabled performers, pursuing adequate funding for their support.
- A continued exploration of work with teenagers in unusual and artistically challenging environments through a promenade piece and a mobile performance space for isolated rural areas.
- An emphasis on work which draws on different artistic and cultural forms. 'Bilingual' work will be a focus of the three small-scale 'work in progress' projects.
- An extension of the Company's role encouraging new writing from under represented groups through the creation of an annual 'work in progress' slot backed by dramaturg attachment.

Keeping these aims in mind, the next decade or so with Rachel Feldburg at the helm of affairs in Red Ladder saw the production of plays that targeted specific groups and had more clear cut storylines. State Agent by Rachel Feldburg and Ruth Mackenzie in 1985 was a new play for youth clubs about young people and homelessness, exploring what happened to young people who lost their benefit in the now forgotten (but then notorious) 'bed and breakfast laws'. 1986 saw two productions: Back to the Walls by Jane
Thornton, a new play based on young peoples’ experience of Youth Training Schemes which targeted young people 15+, unemployed people and school leavers and On the Line devised by the Company is Beat Box Britain² which countered the myth that Britain was a country where “there is no such thing as a racist attack” and looked at the origins of racism—where did it come from, who profited and most important—what was to be done about it? Written for youth clubs, the play tackled a difficult issue in a lively and accessible manner.

An interesting change that appears in the production list following the last two plays mentioned is that the productions are now seasonally dated which seems to imply a more structured and planned calendar year of activities for the Company. Thus, the spring of 1987 saw the production of Winners by Rona Munro which was specially written for young women exploring gender issues while the Autumn of the same year saw the production of Empire Made by Paul Swift, a play for senior youth groups which dealt with racism and police attitudes. In winter 1988 Red Ladder produced One of Us by Jacqui Shapiro and Meera Syal which targeted Asian girls groups and was a comedy about Nishi’s life as she grapples with her expectations and the realities of the world around her. Off the Road by Rona Munro followed in spring 1988, a show that compared rural and city life and toured to girls groups while autumn 1988 saw Mike Kenny’s The Best, a play that explored issues of young deaf people. Bhangra Girls by Nandita Ghose, the first commissioned work touring to young Asian girls groups was produced in spring 1989; in the autumn came Philip Osment’s Who’s Breaking, a play for mixed senior youth clubs focusing on HIV/AIDS issues, integrating British Sign Language (BSL).

A letter to Peter Mair, the Drama Officer in the Arts Council of Great Britain dated 5 March 1980 by Stephanie Munro of Red Ladder, retrieved from the Red Ladder archives, spells out that all was not well with the Company when the eighties started. Munro’s letter is a response to Mair’s letter of 21 February 1980 (unfortunately, this letter is unavailable) and it is evident from Munro’s words that Mair had expressed his misgivings regarding (1) a fall in the number of people attending Red ladder shows that year as against previous years and (2) inability of the Company to meet the estimated number of performances. In spite of Munro’s persuasive defence of Red Ladder and optimism about the Company’s future, what remains visible is that the artistic climate
was not favourable towards the kind of agenda that Theatre Companies like Red Ladder had. This disfavour was expressed vocally and in writing, neither conducive to raising the Company’s morale; but it was also expressed in the more damaging form of funding cuts or at least threats to do so. In fact, available correspondence reveals that a large part of the early eighties was literally a fight for survival and attempts at protecting the subsidy on which the Company’s existence depended. Of course, apart from these additional hurdles, the perennial hazards continued, i.e., primarily the heavy workload due to constant touring of one night stands leading to strain and exhaustion and performers taking ill.

As if such impediments were not enough, 1983 saw the staging of a disastrous production by Red Ladder, Bring Out Your Dead by Peter Cox. This play and its production can surely be cited as an example of unsuccessful agit prop theatre and the three show reports available in the archives certainly do not mince words in completely denouncing not just the production but also, unfortunately, Red Ladder as a Company.3 What were the charges levelled against this play? Some of course concentrated on technical details with comments like ‘lighting was abysmal’, ‘sound was excruciatingly bad’,4 ‘the direction (Richard Stone) non existent, the performances...amateur and the technical side weak’.5 In one instance, the venue picked by Red Ladder, i.e., the Skipton Town Hall, was inappropriate as the production could not function as the club show that it was intended to be. To sum it up in the words of another critic, ‘one of the worst productions I ever had the misfortune to witness.’6 As far as such comments go, this thesis must trust the show reports. But there were other shortcomings mentioned in these reports that could be examined, such as a ‘thin, weak and politically naïve’ script7 and, similarly a comment that ‘the material was poor, the script...was shapeless and badly constructed’.8 In fact the structuring of the script has been acidly commented on:

Only the bravest or most naïve, inexpert or foolish of companies would include a musical number entitled ‘I’m Bored’ just before the interval. In doing just that and conforming to the latter attributes Red Ladder consistently held to the same dismal level throughout the long and depressing evening.9

To any theatre-going person conversant with agit prop plays, such complaints may seem all too familiar. It is indeed an inherent weakness of all ritual forms including
performance that no matter how responsive a ritual/performance is to the needs of a community, it will cease to be an effective agency if it lacks the requisite emotional quotient and the dramatic quality that will bond with the audience. It must be remembered that the process of a Dramatic Text moving to a Theatre Text is a series of encodings and decodings where the final decoding is done by the spectator who works upon and is worked upon by the visual dimension as an integral aspect of the reception procedure. Hence no matter how loaded a play may be in terms of its ideological content it will cease to matter if the spectator is unmoved by it. In the concluding section of the previous chapter, one had begun to see a recognition on Red Ladder's part of the unfortunate fallacy engrained as an agit prop theatre dictum, i.e., the subordination of artistic form to ideology, and thus a slight moving away from such a principle by Red Ladder. With Bring Out Your Dead this step forward seems to have been retracted and the play is unable to sustain the message that it seeks to communicate.

What is the play all about, i.e., what are the issues that the play engages with? Virtually everything it would seem from the NHS (National Health Service), employment problems, corruption of political leaders, gender issues, to America’s Big Daddy strategies, the manipulativeness of the media and the foul play of Life Insurance Companies in their Get Rich Quickly tactics. As for the plot, the five characters in the play recreate their individual experiences (within their entangled lives). Helen, a freelance journalist, narrates the abject failure of her marriage and a non-happening career, both due to her inability to fight against aggression. Saa Saa who is made of sterner stuff than Helen and is part of Saa Saa and Tchi Tchi, the media managers of Big Mac, has an unpleasant personal life, being a single mother of two children: her dislike for her husband almost equals her indifference towards her children—she isn’t even able to recall the name of one of her children. Obviously ambition is the overriding factor in Saa Saa’s life. Sandy Washbottoms as his surname suggests is the stereotypical subordinate beleaguered by his superiors (Big Mac and Saa Saa) and nurtures dreams of making it big. Nog, an ex-convict, is the ‘lucky winner’ of the ‘Sponsor an Old Lag’ scheme initiated by Big Mac which entitles him to a job with an annual monthly holiday, a weekly salary of 27.00 pounds and alternate Sundays off. Over and above these personae is ‘The Ex Reverend Delabere Mac Rigour’ or ‘Mac’, representative of the self-
made man with the rags to riches story, but whose methods in reaching thus far are dubious to say the least. The lives of the five characters intertwine as Helen showcases the ‘generosity’ of Mac in sponsoring Nog, following the interview with Saa Saa and Sandy.

The ritual use of symbolical names as in Morality plays may have done the trick in Taking Our Time (which was discussed in Chapter Three), but in Bring Out Your Dead it fails to inspire anything beyond a recognition of its usage and an awareness of the implications. So when Saa Saa speaks of Nog as “a tax reclaimable item” and says, “Just put him under miscellaneous” (p 36), she only confirms the fact that his name ‘Nog’ is an apt one. For if a nog is “a wooden block built into a masonry wall to hold nails that support joinery structures”,12 then understandably Nog becomes the peg upon whom Mac hangs his image of a kindly soul. The irony is that Nog is an ex-convict and yet, an apparently good citizen like Mac needs to be parasitic and depend on him—the world of crime and the ‘good’ world thus have dubious boundaries. ‘The Ex Reverend Delabere Mac Rigour’ is the name given to the man who is, according to the Nebentext, ‘a cross between McEnroe, Elvis. A Preacher and MacGregor. He sings Elvis style in his American accent’ (p 12). The name is as redolent of facetiousness as the persona himself who comes across as a performer so steeped in the many roles he ‘plays’ that he ceases to be believable and is reduced to the ridiculous. Washbottoms, of course, is just that, an unhappy office subordinate literally (in slang) washing the bottoms of his superiors with the hope that something will come of it some day. When it comes to Helen and Saa Saa, their characterization too is typical: Helen may have the beauty but Saa Saa is sassy and has the brains. The contrast between the two women: one a weak vulnerable failure, and the other, a hardened successful businesswoman is drawn with thick strokes.

Why these symbolically named characters fail to rise above their symbolism is because the script allows them only a watered down subversion of their circumstances. They remain from beginning to end the cardboard characters that they are created as. Nog’s brief encounter with Mac in the lift, when his narration of activities while in prison scares Mac silly, does expose him as a possible threat to contend with and it also reveals the cowardice behind Mac’s apparent bravado, but the fact is that the situation remains much the same. Even if the play had ended with Nog killing Mac, such a resolution might
have been theatrically dramatic, but to an audience looking for that something more, some kind of a realistic answer, it is no wonder then that the script appeared to be 'politically naive'. The flatness of the characters, then, is offset by the flatness of the plot; there is no sense of denouement, no climax, no alternative offered: in other words, nothing really happens. Before analyzing this aspect further, it must be mentioned that the repetitiveness of the language, again a familiar agitprop device to drive home a point, while doing so creates an atmosphere of bleak and vicious circularity, one that would be difficult to break. This may be thematically well matched but, as a catalysing agent, its effects are dismal. One example right at the beginning is when Helen says: "1983 Heads you win tails I lose" (p 3) a sentence she repeats with only the year changing till she arrives at 1988 where she stops to be overtaken by Sandy who is more expository. But his exposition continues the unchangeability of time that Helen emphasizes for he reveals that 1988 had not changed his luck. The chorus of the song preceding these lines contain the same words. Two things are clear then. One, that conditions of life even with the passage of time have remained the same and, two, that they have remained the same across genders (though within the same class). Sandy, Helen, the chorus, all voice like feelings. As reader audience (and most certainly therefore as viewer audience) the message could not have been linguistically more self-evident. But as a special (reader/viewer) audience, i.e., as one groping for more than merely this cognisance from an Agit Prop Theatre Company purporting to different agendas, is this enough? The audience that watched this play obviously thought not.

That some material (issues) may be more relevant for drama and others less so is an old debate that, for example, Una Ellis Fermor in *Frontiers of Drama* has elucidated (Fermor, 1964: Chapter One). To extend this point further, in terms of agit prop drama, is it possible to question the legitimacy of the 'material', i.e., whether some situations make for better agit prop drama and some less so? It is tempting to leave the onus, Pirandello like, upon a good author, i.e., where the power of a play would rest upon the merits of the author's skills, but it would be more meaningful to actually see whether *Bring Out Your Dead* does have a case in point in terms of strong dramatic content. The source would obviously have to be the contemporary political situation in England.
The primary concern of the play, to restate an earlier point, is the NHS and the anomalies in its practices under the Conservative Government. In the UK, the NHS is part of the social welfare policy. This policy refers to the use of the state as an income transfer mechanism to provide services and monetary supplements to sectors of the population deemed by the government to deserve such assistance through their social circumstances and to provide basic social services for all citizens. Some of these services, such as those offered by the NHS are provided to all of the public, and others, such as the public (or state run) educational system and government provided pensions, are provided to almost all of the population in a particular age group. A third category of social welfare, exemplified by programmes such as those for unemployment insurance, public (council) housing, child benefit, and the Supplementary Benefit (formerly called National Assistance), is more selectively implemented, usually requiring what the British call a means test to qualify for benefits. Nevertheless, all these programmes involve the state use of material resources gathered principally through taxes to relieve social needs by distributing funds and services to some groups of people. While there are obviously economic implications for all social welfare programmes, i.e., they cost money, it is not the economic aspects but the desirability of their social goals, their target population and their likelihood of success that dominate discussion. (Studlar, 1996: 165-166) The arrival of Thatcherism meant the abandoning of the welfare state as swiftly as electoral considerations allowed and the campaigning of such ideas as “hard work versus welfare scroungers” in keeping with Thatcher’s subscription to the individualistic, anti-state, anti-union, anti-egalitarian views of her party’s right wing. (Leys, 1986: 91-92) Consequently, while private medical care was encouraged, charges for services under NHS were increased. Hence, Helen says in the opening song:

Thought I’d put myself to sleep with something fats and painless
Looked around for something cheap ’cos I couldn’t afford the NHS
(p 1)

While the basic health care provision of the NHS remained strong, was popularly supported, and UK ranked well on most comparative indicators of health care provision such as infant mortality rates and life expectancy, the government’s reluctance to invest in the NHS made it subject to criticism. Furthermore, despite the central financing and
regulation of the NHS, health outcomes were still class related in line with the 'class-war politics' as Thatcher's opponents described the Conservative government's redistribution of class power in a wide variety of spheres, from industrial relations to education and health services. The Conservatives advocated selectivity to concentrate resources on the poorest sections of society and efficiency in service delivery while Labour and to some degree the Liberal Democrats complained of cutbacks in the basic social rights citizenship for all. In turn the Conservatives reiterated phrases such as "the National Health Service is safe in our hand" (a slogan that became the inspiration for Frances MacNeill's play Safe With Us produced by the Company in 1985) to fend off Labour accusations that the government was shortchanging social welfare services with a long term view to privatising them.

Obviously the sequence that best underscores the Thatcherite duplicity in handling the NHS is when Helen interviews Saa Saa and Sandy and her accusations at their mishandling of the 'institution' are completely wiped out by their glib talk sprinkled liberally with such jargon as 'reeconomising', 'redefining', and 'phasing out operation' and the justification on 'macro economic' grounds for keeping patients productive rather than occupied (the latter when Helen asks why the term 'Occupational Therapy' had been changed to 'Productive Therapy'). This is followed by the scene in which Helen showcases Nog as the recipient of the 'Sponsor a Lag' scheme initiated by Mac—the scene is almost farcical in the way it spoofs the whole notion of sponsorship stretched to bizarre limits.

The question that naggingly crops up after such ironic representations is that unlike in the Cake Play where similar depictions were followed by voices that demanded/asserted a certain intervention, that of workers' rights, this play stops at the spoofing. There is no attempt to resolve any of the existing problems; no direct interaction/involvement with the audience to agitate them or motivate them to think of possible resolutions. If the plot appears dismal and bleak, it is because it is an unresolved plot. It is one that fails to rise to the occasion and offer a way out of the hurdles of Conservative governance.

Yet another example of the 'awareness building' that the play seems to be aiming at can be seen in the depiction of the manipulativeness as well as the manipulatedness of
the media as spoken about earlier. The search for demonstrable media effects has proven
to be a difficult and controversial one due primarily to the fact that many people choose
their source of media, especially their newspaper, because they already agree with its
political positions, which limits the number of people who could potentially have their
political choices affected by the media. Nonetheless the media serve as both, a major
agent of political socialization and an intermediary institution in the political process. The
media serve the double function of presenting information for mass and elite
consumption and attempting to instruct both mass and elite audiences about how to
interpret that information. In spite of the growth of alternative sources of information
through international networks which may have reduced the power of the domestic
British media to influence even the agendas of either the political elite or the masses, the
potential power of the media remains important. (Studlar, 1996: 78-79)

When Helen interviews SaaSaa and Sandy, she is so browbeaten by the jargon
they subject her to that she unwittingly adopts the same language while presenting a
report of the interview on television (a classic case of conversion to the dominant
discourse). Ironically, at the conclusion of her interview, SaaSaa’s tongue in cheek
comment “Surely you’re experienced enough to know you shouldn’t believe everything
you read in the newspapers” (p 31) directly implicates Helen within the system and
pointedly tells of the vulnerability of an institution like the media. Far from guiding
people towards making the right choices, the media misguides; and what makes it more
tragic is that it believes in what it propagates and is unable to perceive that it has itself
been misled.

Traditionally the media in UK has been concerned with ‘issues’ but following
trends in the US since the eighties, there is a growing tendency to emphasise the
personalities of bigwigs and cull out those traits that are bound to win over people. This
is the reason why in this play Big Mac is given such footage in television news
worldwide and his campaigns blown out of proportion. When the ‘Sponsor an Old Lag’
scheme is highlighted, it is not Nog the recipient but Big Mac who hogs the limelight
(Nog is in fact quite literally shut out from the spot lights). Political mileage is thus the
name of the game and the power players miss no opportunity to gain it with the media’s
help. Helen’s speech prior to Nog and Big Mac’s appearance, is certainly, and
discernibly, a dig at the numerous attempts of the ruling party to cut down expenditure on social welfare in the guise of so called ‘noble’ causes like ‘Adopt a Granny’ etc. But here again, the entire effort in exposing how the media is trapped by governmental machinations and cannot break free from the political stranglehold, while commendably dealt with, makes even the reader audience ask, ‘So what is the way out? If the media falls prey to the cunning of those in power, what is the fate of the common man?’ The plot offers no answers.

One returns then to the initial conclusion that while Bring Out Your Dead considers issues that are thematically appropriate for an agit prop play; while the linguistic and other methods such as spoofing/lampooning are suitable agit prop ritual devices that the play deploys, where it falls short is in the silence about answers. There is no effort made to stir up the characters (and in turn us, the audience) by the text to rebel against an overpowering and unjust system of governance.

The subtitle of the play reads ‘a black comedy with songs.’ The songs in Bring Out Your Dead received some appreciation attested by comments such as “The redeeming feature was the music: good numbers, well played and well put over especially by Robbie McGovan and Kathie Whitely.” While there can be no denying that the songs are apt, some with artistic and emotional lyrics, it cannot be ignored either that they lack punch. They lack the rousing ability, the dynamism that songs in agit prop plays are habitually used for. In the last chapter Taking Our Time served as a good example to assert that songs are not just a powerful instrument to disseminate information but a means to incite spectators. No such attempt is made by the songs in Bring Out Your Dead.

The distance between audience and actors, then, remains intact—a distance that Red Ladder has constitutionally always sought to erase. The play is reduced almost to a comedy of manners: one where we recognise the representativeness of the characters and happenings, the ‘informativeness’ of the play, but which does not provoke us to react as an engaged, actively involved audience. The move over from audience to activist, an aim that Red Ladder is firm on is certainly not achieved in this play through any of its dimensions.
That *Bring Out Your Dead* had finally to be taken off the road following a van crash on the M1 seems to be a predictable end to a production doomed from the outset. But Red Ladder’s troubles did not end with *Bring Out Your Dead* on the shelf and the comparative success of the next, hastily prepared play, *Dumb Blonde*. For the next two years Red Ladder struggled to remain standing on its feet and continue to receive the financial backing of the Arts Council; every production was geared to meet the mark and available correspondence shows their defensive stance in the face of fairly severe criticism.

Of these exchanges, one document that keeps cropping up at regular intervals is the weighty ‘A Statement for the Eighties’.\(^{16}\) This lengthy assessment and policy record clearly indicates the way that Red Ladder was circumscribed by the conflicting trends within and without the company. It is also recognition on Red Ladder’s part of the need to change the nature of the Company. Some of the key aspects that the document highlights ought to be outlined. First, the political and artistic climate was severely affected by the election of the Tory government. In spite of Red Ladder’s successes, the statement records “it has become sucked into the downturn that has affected the entire labour movement, and become shackled to outmoded concepts of political theatre.” (p.1) Second, Red Ladder retained its political motivation: the desire to look for answers with an audience; the firm, long standing beliefs that (a) though theatre cannot change the world per se, it can affect the quality of perception, thinking and living of people, (b) that a live participatory theatre could be created even in non theatre venues, and (c) agit prop writing and performances were not inappropriate fare for a theatrically sophisticated company and audience nor was it a limiting factor. However, in spite of persevering with its ideological aims, Red Ladder was willing to acknowledge the contribution of mainstream theatre and the fact that a mass audience sought such theatre over participatory theatre—this audience needed to be tapped. Then, in terms of touring, the document reasserts its commitment to touring on a national scale and voices its concern “that funding bodies are moving towards a position where Labour and Trade Union clubs are not recognized as public performances.” (p.3) As socialist and feminist entertainers, Red Ladder aimed to open up a wide range of venues (including theatre venues) “to bring people together to discuss political ideas and to discuss theatre; effectively to combat the
isolation of so much of contemporary mass culture." (p.3) Next, reacting to the charge that Red Ladder was a Labour Movement Resource, the document declares its pride at this achievement but also states its realization that though more needed to be done than merely providing entertainment, its direct intervention could only be achieved informally: ‘it is first and foremost a theatre company, comprised of skilled practitioners (albeit politically motivated in their work). This work is subsequently informed by the Company’s collective politics, and this point is seen as central to the development and expansion of our audiences.’ (p.1) While remaining committed to the principles of collectivism, the statement acknowledges that a number of structural changes would have to be introduced for the Company to function effectively in the eighties. The remaining sections of the document contain detailed descriptions of the artistic and ideological aims of the plays then under production such as Happy Jack, The Beano, This Story of Yours as well as other projects on the pipeline; the intention to pursue two long term objectives of (1) the pooling of the Company’s political and creative ideas for the generation of writing and (2) funding for resident writers; a critical appraisal of the funding situation where the document expresses alarm at (a) “precedents such as the demands…to read scripts in advance and out of the context of the performance, and the trend to take control away from the Company’s” (p.7) and records that, (b) “with the pending abolition of the Metropolitan County Councils…the funding issue is one of the most important political issues facing the arts today” (p.7) which has caused (c) “the divisive and competitive reality of campaigning for a slice of the cake, where one company is set against another.” (p.7) The statement concludes on the note that confronting past failures and implementing crucial measures would surely help Red Ladder to remain one of the oldest surviving political theatres in the country.

The entire document testifies to the oppositions in every sphere within which Red Ladder was doing its balancing act. It can also be seen as striking a prophetic note in hinting at a possible outcome of this either/or situation; at the way the future course of action inside and outside the Company would shape its fate. In the light of the above account, it is hardly surprising that 1984 was not an easy smooth track for Red Ladder to tread upon and a review of this year serves to expose the twists and turns of Red Ladder’s luck.
The year started with a production of a new play about a brewery worker outing to Scarborough in 1914, called The Beano, by a well-known Sheffield writer and broadcaster, Rony Robinson, who previously wrote the successful Circus for Red Ladder. The Beano toured until April and was extremely well received by audiences and organizers (particularly by older members of the audience, many of whom had not seen Red Ladder before). The success of The Beano led to the decision to tour the show again in autumn after a week in Scotland. Following The Beano, for the first time in many years, Red Ladder decided to tour an established piece of theatre. John Hopkins' This Story of Yours was a powerful drama that had been little performed and was perhaps better known for the film version The Offence. Unfortunately midway through the tour, the leading man, who played a mammoth part in which he never left the stage, seriously injured his back. As a small touring Company unable to afford understudies, Red Ladder was forced to cancel the later part of their tour. Meanwhile plans for a fringe festival in Danderhall, Edinburgh were being drawn up with the help and encouragement of the Midlothian District Council. The week, which became fondly known as the Danderhall Red Beano, was a critical and artistic success, the audiences building up throughout the week. However, in financial terms, Red Ladder, which had funded the project made a loss due to the cost of travel, accommodation, and fees to guest artistes, etc. The Beano continued to tour until early November, to the Midlands, London and Wales. The latter was an area of Britain that Red Ladder had long been trying to make inroads into and the reception was particularly pleasing. At the end of November rehearsals began for a double bill of Stitchin' the Blues, a one woman show written and directed by Maggie Lane, and Mixing It which was devised by the Company and scripted by William Tanner and Maggie Lane. As described earlier, the first play was based on the occupation at Lee Jeans in Greenock and the second play concerned the dilemma of two men forced by the lack of job opportunities into building a nuclear power station which neither men felt was right.17

These two plays broke the cycle of ill luck dogging Red Ladder's heels and the year ended on a high note. Audience reaction and critical acclaim increased local and national support for Red Ladder. Songs were used in a new way in the shows with backing tapes of music written and recorded by Red Ladder's musical director, Gordon
Dougall. These were included in the shows without the use of microphones or elaborate technical equipment giving performers freedom of movement and never allowing the pace to drop; the whole effect being rather like watching a 'live film musical'. Yet in spite of the fair share of success in 1984, 1985 did not auger well for Red Ladder and it faced tremendous hostility from many directions, not the least from the media, evidenced by the press cutting entitled 'Exit Stage Left' in the Yorkshire Evening Post. This acerbic snippet questioned the Arts Council's funding of Red Ladder and suggested that the Council "depending on the size of the audiences, just might find it cheaper to buy a permanent venue for the Red Ladder lads and lasses as a one-off payment? Something about the size of a double garage perhaps?"

Newspaper criticism only made public the ominous noises already being made by the Arts Council; letters recovered from the Red Ladder archives between Councillor BP Atha of the Leeds Playhouse and Dickon Reed, the Drama Director of the Arts Council and responsible therefore for the subsidies to the theatre companies, are proof enough of this. In February 1985, Councillor Atha appealed on behalf of a host of people to the Arts Council to rescue Red Ladder from the financial and artistic poverty into which it appeared to have fallen. The suggestion was to run the current show till July, cease operations till late September, early October, in order to save incomes and to appoint an Artistic Director to maintain appropriate artistic standards. However no steps could be taken without the Arts Council's assurance of sanctioning the grant allocated for Red Ladder for the subsequent financial year. That the 'rescuers' of Red Ladder saw potential in the Company was clearly stated by Atha for he underlined that these members were willing to enter into the procedure for the creation of a Board of Directors, in spite of their considerable responsibilities only because they saw it as something very worthwhile achieving. Responding to Councillor Atha's plea, Dickon Reeds' sombre answer emphasized the Council's growing concern regarding (a) the deteriorating financial condition of Red Ladder, (b) changes in key personnel within the Company with no real clarity about the administrator, and (c) the lack of a discernible artistic director and policy on Red Ladder's part. Thus Reed made it clear that a financial grant to Red Ladder depended on its ability to explain how it would fill the lacunae pointed out by him and
the evidence actual, sustained proof of such measures. He also asked for a plan of action and estimates. 20

Councillor Atha’s rather prompt reply contained the artistic policy of Red Ladder which is relevant to quote here:

... The Red Ladder would continue to provide theatrical performances of a nature and quality that it had always provided, in particular:
1. To present theatrical performances on radical themes to live audiences;
2. To provide performances of high artistic quality which by means of their content would be aimed at provoking discussion, argument and new ideas.
3. To achieve these objects by performances which will entertain.
4. To use new and established writers.
5. To develop differing musical styles in the context of different shows.
6. To take performances to the public who rarely, if ever, attend theatres.
7. To perform in non-theatre venues.
8. To develop a wider list of venues in the Yorkshire region.
9. To maintain a national touring commitment. 21

The first change then that affected Red ladder and challenged the premise of the functioning of Red Ladder as a collective and completed its conversion into a hierarchical structure, at least in administrative terms (initial stages of this conversion were seen in Chapter Three), was the constitution of a formal Board of Directors. The Chairman of this Board was Councillor Atha and Ms Zibby Campbell was appointed Administrator. Soon after came the appointment of the Artistic Director, Rachel Feldburg (as has already been stated in the initial outline of this chapter). Other changes forecasted by the ‘Statement of the Eighties’ and supported by the Artistic policy drawn up in 1985 included the commissioning of plays (such as Nandita Ghosh’s Bhangra Girls for example). But what is of utmost interest is the artistic trend of the plays, the target groups and the themes/issues of the plays, post Feldburg’s appointment, that the Company foregrounded. In keeping with the current political scenario and the artistic needs of the times, Red Ladder displayed its maturity in understanding that the class and labour issues that its productions had been dealing with had largely become a hegemonic artistic discourse and appeared increasingly stereotypical. Red Ladder now began to explore in right earnest other avenues like the cultural differences between ‘races’, ‘communities’ alongside the ‘gender’ and ‘class issues’ within the lived ‘multicultural’ situation of
Britain. These were rightly seen as appropriate contemporary resource material for the Red Ladder plays.

The four available plays that deal overwhelmingly with the whole question of ethnic identity and subjectivity are On The Line (1986), Empire Made (1987), One of Us (1988), and Bhangra Girls (1989) [brief outlines of these plays feature in the first section of this chapter]. These plays also recognise:

that the central issues of race always appear historically in articulation, in a formation, with other categories and divisions and are constantly crossed and recrossed by the categories of class, of gender and ethnicity.

Thus the common meeting ground in the development of the power versus powerlessness nexus can be seen broadly in terms of race, ethnicity, class and gender (not necessarily all or in that order). It must be mentioned at this point that Bhangra Girls, while sharing these concerns, is specially tailored to meet the problems of young Asian women and so deserves separate reading though it will be referred to from time to time.

In the second sequence of On The Line when Fay and Mitch talk to each other about suntans and Fay wishes she could sport gorgeous brown skin to attract attention, Mitch is quick to undercut the desire with the words “Yeah and you’ll get one fat greasy bloke who’d rush up to you and say ‘Piss off wog back to where you come from.’” (p 6)

What seems like an attractive proposition to Fay is completely the reverse experientially for Mitch who doesn’t need the suntan, for, being Black is ‘tanned’ the year through and subjected to the most unwanted sort of attention. In a later sequence, Mitch describes how awkward it is to be the focus of indirect, shifty eyed glances—the curiosity of the White gaze that commodifies Black identity. A similar experience is narrated by Nishi in One of Us when she recalls how people coming towards her father’s shop would change direction on observing who it was behind the counter. The ‘otherness’ of their origin as easily reflected by the colour of their skin and appearance prevents people like Mitch and Nishi from ‘belonging’; making them out as distinct in the white gaze, pejoratively of course. Not just in their visual approach, linguistically too, whites have a definite (and demeaning) terminology for non-whites. In Empire Made Amarjeet and Paul react sharply to being called ‘Paki’ and ‘Samba’ respectively by Derek; the racist connotations surrounding such words being an established fact. Inversely, when Nishi in One of Us
wears the prawn in her hat in the restaurant where she is waitressing, the obnoxious white male customer she has to serve thinks that he is complimenting her by commenting that with the right clothes on she could almost pass as "one of us". This kind of homogenising effect of appearance equally succeeds in undermining and negating the individual identity of the 'other'.

But markers such as skin colour, appearance et al, fade in comparison with the cultural myths regarding a community that are perpetuated with such ferocity that they completely appropriate societal psyche. Nishi's encounter with the old male customer just mentioned, on her very first day at the prawn restaurant, is a harrowing tale of the cheap advances she has to face because the white customer is under the impression that coming as she does from the land of the Kamasutra and of temples with gods and goddesses up to all kinds sexual tricks, it was inconceivable that Indian girls were innocent: their virginal reactions according to him cloaked their sexual precocity. Empire Made is more interesting because it shows different layers of response—Amarjeet versus Paul, Derek and Vicky versus Paul and Amarjeet (and vice versa), Amarjeet and Vicky versus Paul and Derek, Amarjeet versus Derek, etc. The umbrella term of 'Black' that whites apply to all non-white people overlooks the differences between ethnic communities and the fact that the 'Black' experience is not a singular, unified one. So, Amarjeet conscious of her 'Asianess' slips into the hegemonic white discourse, a discourse explicated by Jenny's words in On The Line

You call one black person a criminal, and all blacks become criminals. It's how you give the blame out, anything wrong, blame the blacks. (p.41)

Thus Amarjeet accuses Paul:

...But you black kids aren't interested in hard work—....All you care about is trouble. No wonder people are racist. You carry on like a load of animals and the rest of us have to suffer for it. (p.13)

The extent of the mythification is subversively represented in On The Line when the police deny the existence of a racial attack in which whites beat up blacks but are quick to accept crimes in which the opposite happens (i.e., blacks beating up or mugging whites). The play ironically portrays the tragic fact that the very pillars upon whom the meting out of justice, law and order depend, are weak, contained by and encouraging
myths that allow discrimination and inequality. It is not insignificant that earlier in the same play, it is the police inspector (Fox) who suggests the idea of the race riot (as an ace he has up his sleeve) and then puts his plan into action at the incentive of a promotion; thus the police become a major force in propagating and perpetuating myths about non whites to suit their own vested interests.

In fact the police and its dubious modes of operating is depicted in a highly critical light in all three plays but most so in Empire Made. Derek, the policeman in Empire Made, is representative of everything ugly that one associates with the police force. He is violent, a violence stemming from an in-built sadism, a sexist, a racist and an egotist; in short, an archetypal representation of a corrupt and degenerate police force. All these qualities are evidenced by his cruelty towards Paul whom, as has been observed already, not only does he demeaningly call ‘Samba’ but whom he itches to hurt physically (and kills in the end) after handcuffing him and his chauvinistic attitude in delegating such tasks as the making of tea or cleaning up Paul to the women, Amarjeet and Vicky, at whom he passes many sexual remarks. That he cannot stomach the sight of blood and that he finds it necessary to keep Paul handcuffed even when Paul needs to relieve himself clearly unveil the essential cowardice that he disguises with his policeman stance and weapons.

Again, in On The Line, it is not just Inspector Fox’s foxiness but the entire state of apathy pervading the police station that is mockingly recreated as one clearly perceives from the following telephonic conversation or rather, the callous responses, of Officer Jules:

Sir...Hello...what...your being burgled...no, this is a police station, sorry, we can’t help you...beg you pardon...no...we’re very busy at the moment...they’ve broken what?...well you should sneak downstairs, do you have a gun in the house...no...well never mind...uhm...try the citizens advice bureau... (p. 24)

Soon after when Neran comes to report the attack on his friend, a Black like himself, by White youths, the policemen refuse to co-operate and are instead hellbent on terrorizing him. They deny that such a racial attack can occur while, in their crowding in on Neran, they are unwittingly committing the same crime whose possibility they reject. They are only willing to consider a happening where Blacks mug Whites thus forcing Neran to
change the truth in order to get them activated. This deliberate repudiation of actual events by a body of people supposedly engaged in maintaining law and order in the everyday functioning of the city reveals the process of the institutionalisation of racism.

The police force is not the only institution or class of people that is targeted; the so-called aristocracy (in the form of Sir James) and rich industrialists such as CJ are also revealed as the scheming and completely heartless people that they are. When CJ discloses his company, CJ Multinationals plans, for launching a new product called Sniffo Soap Powder and pretends that this is his contribution in converting a miserable town for the better (a common practice of masking intentions reminiscent of the discourse of manipulative politicians), the falsehood of his words is made manifest by his actions thus:

CJ: Yes I’m going to give them something to live for. Pull
(They shoot Michelle)
SJ: Lazy Blighter anyway (p. 4)

The callousness with which they dismiss their killing of the gardener (Michelle) proves exactly how little they value human life, especially of the lower classes. Apart from the elites, On the Line, akin to Bring Out Your Dead, lays bare the manipulatedness of the media. The media is shown to be completely moulded by political forces which enslave its integrity to do disservice to the general public (for whom it is supposed to be existing in the first place). So the race riot is cleverly crafted by the industrial scions in collaboration with the police force. Jenny’s Black identity is deviously used by them and she is placed almost like a chess pawn on the scene of turmoil as a tactical move. Her reporter identity is created by these same schemers and though she reports the truth, what is printed in the papers is completely the reverse, for, as CJ states boldly later: “The truth belongs to those who can afford it.” (p 40) The media is consequently up for grabs and plays the tune of the highest bidders. The question is, hemmed in by institutions that knowingly and purposely perpetuate racial myths, where does a Black/Asian, in other words, a non-white person seek equality in justice?

In Empire Made, Vicky is sympathetic towards Paul and one would imagine her standing by him in the end; her complete volte face and aiding Derek after he ruthlessly kills Paul comes as a surprise at first. Especially after one has had time to see that not
much love is lost between Derek and Vicky. But on second thoughts, one can reason out how Vicky feels doubly duty bound to support Derek; doubly because (a) she is Derek’s colleague after all and would like to be on an even keel with him if she is to survive in the male dominated profession she has chosen; she perhaps sees the favour she is doing to Derek as a means to making him feel obliged to her; and (b) analysed from the White versus Black equation, she must stand by Derek. This play painstakingly drives home the message, that Empires may have territorially been dismantled but stay on in the mind. For complete decolonisation to take place, the white mind would have to rid itself off its assumptions of colonial superiority. The truth is that these psychological Empires, once created, are harder to erase than geographical ones.

While the operation of institutionalised instigation of racism is transparent, what works more insidiously and less visibly are those forces that colour the imagination of people. This arises either from a complete lack of information or from a twisted, invented and much circulated version of the cultural ‘other’. When Mrs Bagnell tells Nishi in One of Us

...Have you got any of them cook-in sauces? no? I didn’t think you had you don’t eat casseroles do you its something in your religion isn’t it? And I’ll have two slices of ham. Thin. I hope it’s fresh.
(p. 5)

Nishi is stung into retorting (even if partly in her mind)

Came in yesterday. Of course I’m sure. Yes its pork. Actually Mrs Bagnell, it’s human meat. We’re cannibals. We keep dead bodies in the cellar... (p. 5)

That such false notions also lead whites to anticipate certain patterns of behaviour by non-whites can be seen from the entire dialogue between Nishi and Babs which is predicated upon such a happening. Babs’ (familiar) notions of Indians as “spiritual non-materialistic” people, of Indian families “getting together for Sunday curries” (p.16) and of “yoga being an Indian way of life” (p.17), are all concepts that Nishi defies (thus reducing her ‘exotic’ value in Babs’ eyes). That Babs is prey to an orientalist discourse that has created certain pictures of India which sell in the western world is only too clear. But what Nishi’s repudiation of such impressions and her plaintive “You’ve got to fit in, haven’t you?” (p.17) makes plain is the trauma of non-native English people located at
the crossroads between cultures and pressurised by both, the native and the non-native, i.e., the home and the world.

This turmoil is felt at all levels, from modes of dressing to social interaction especially with the opposite sex, to choice of profession, way of living and social attitude. Jenny in *On the Line* may want a well paid job and fame but she cannot possibly live in isolation from her black family who feel that she has betrayed their community. Amarjeet in *Empire Made* has to run away from home because her parents refuse to let her marry her boyfriend on religious grounds—he is a Muslim. But her boldness belies her submissiveness to her boyfriend’s wishes. When Vicky asks her what she intends doing after marriage, she replies: “Have kids. He says he wants a houseful.” (p.18) Amarjeet is conditioned by both, the modern forces of the outside world and her conservative domestic upbringing.

Again, Nishi in *One of Us* may rebel against the mythification of India and the Indianisms flung at her by her white counterparts but she equally rebels against the stranglehold of her rigidly patriarchal home where her mobility is restricted to the extent that her father literally locks her in if there’s a man about, even if that man be only an electrician come to repair faulty wiring. In all cases, the only way out of such unease for these three young non-white women seems to be, leaving home, by choice and circumstances.

In Ritual discourse the space occupied by these personae would be called a liminal one with the individuals torn between different senses of belonging (i.e., to their native as well as their non-native environments). This liminal space is also one where rituals of oppression/terrorization/violence encounter rites of resistance. Thus ritual verbal/physical interrogation and attack by the police in *On the Line* and *One of Us* is countered by mob violence on the streets and factory strikes by the protestors; denial of freedom (whether it be in terms of profession or appearance or choice of friends) in the domestic set up in *Empire Made*, *One of Us* and *Bhangra Girls* is answered by a running away from home and then disobeying domestic dictums completely; sexual innuendos/passes ritually made by males in *Empire Made* and *One of Us* are answered in like manner by the women.
Cutting across the problems of race, whether of discrimination on its grounds or adjustment difficulties following clashes in cultures, is the whole issue of gender and the injustices arising out of gender biases. Take for example Derek’s male chauvinism whereby he subjects Vicky to all kinds of sexual comments and jokes and also reduces her work as an able police officer to the making of tea or cleaning up Paul as if such acts are the only ones that Vicky, being female is fit for. Derek is not an exception in his psyche and behaviour but as Vicky’s narrative reveals, it is the entire male majority of the police force who treat their lady officers in like manner. Vicky has to contain her femininity and her feelings of resistance towards the callous way her male counterparts treat women. In her own words:

…If I want to stay in this job, I have to be “one of the lads”. I have to listen and smile while the “real men” talk about fighting and boozing and screwing women. I have to be a good sport, a good laugh, ‘cos no matter how tough I am, or how good I am at the job, I’m not a real copper. I’m just a “plonk”. That’s what they call women police officers in the Met. “Plonks”, which, according to my duty sergeant, “has an obscene origin and refers to the bit of you what sits down.” And that’s how they treat you. I spent my first week on station alone in a Panda car with PC Rawlinson, the “fastest truncheon in the Met”, ho, ho. I’ve never met a bloke with so many hands. I had more finger marks on me than the A to Z. In the end I had to fight him off. I actually had to hit him to get him off me. “What’s up with you?” he said, “Are you a lesbian?” “No”, I said, “But I’m thinking about it!” They made my life hell after that. (p.24)

Vicky doesn’t leave the police force on the grounds that she doesn’t want to give her male colleagues the satisfaction of knowing that they could force her to leave—but it is a fact that all along, she has to constantly prove that she “might be a woman but…can be just as hard, just as tough as any of them.” (p 24) If for the police force, the us and them differentiates between enforcers of law and order and criminals, it also demarcates the ‘us’ of the lady police from the ‘them’ of the male police.

In One of Us, one sees Nishi’s mother joining hands with other Asian women in picketing the factory where they work to protest against the disparity in wages—they are paid less than their white counterparts for the same work. In A Woman’s Work is Never Done, it was observed in Chapter Three, the protest was for pay parity between sexes—
One of Us complicates this further by exposing same gender pay disparities on the basis of race. Not just professionally, but even in personal relations, racial differences play a significant part. When Derek tells Amarjeet in Empire Made that he is more than good enough for her while attempting to molest her, he is in effect implying that he is superior to her not because he’s a man but because he’s white (thus of a higher order). He is not alone in his racist sexism: in One of Us when Nishi starts going out with her white friend, Erik, she narrates:

...he was nice. A bit slow but nice. Well, I say nice, but sometimes, well...he wasn’t. It was alright when we were by ourselves, kissing and cuddling and all that, but when I went out with him it was like he had the Elephant Man on his arm. And when his friends came round, I felt like he would have liked to stick a paper bag over my head. It is not much fun I can tell you, walking down the road with your boyfriend, turning to whisper sweet nothings into his ear only to discover that he’s seen one of his friends coming and dived under a bloody bush. Well, I got pissed off with that so I left him didn’t I?... (p.8)

Nishi’s plight does not end with dumping Erik for she meets with the same responses to her Asianness when she works as a waitress in the restaurant. Her friend Carol may be casual about her misgivings at sexual advances made towards her by saying that all the waitresses had to put up with these but in Nishi’s case, being an Indian adds insult to injury. The men might treat all the waitresses in a free and easy manner but with Nishi, her old white male client actually thinks that she is available as she comes from a barbaric land where there are no rules about sex. The most outrageous part of his speech is his concluding words:

...And what right do you have to be so choosy. Think anyone’d have you, do you? Lucky for you, I’m liberal-minded. Some wouldn’t be as willing I can tell you. (p.12)

It is obvious that the client’s mental make up is similar to that of Derek.

Amarjeet in Empire Made and Nishi in One of Us have it real bad not just because of the unfairness of attitudes towards them in the larger public world but also due to gender biases inherent within their own race and culture. Consequently, Amarjeet cannot marry her boyfriend because he is a Muslim and her strict father (the stern patriarch is a figure common to both plays) will not hear of such a religious deviation. Nishi cannot
...a recognition that we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture, without being contained by that position... We are all in that sense ethnically located and our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are. But there is also a recognition that this is not an ethnicity which is doomed to survive, as Englishness was, only by marginalizing, dispossessing, displacing and forgetting other ethnicities. This precisely is the politics of ethnicity predicated on difference and diversity.23

Red Ladder took a cue from the special place of Asian women in British society as emerged from these plays, and wrote and produced Bhangra Girls for Asian and other girls groups all over the country. Research for the play was carried out by Nandita Ghose (to whom the script is credited) and Kully Thiarai by visiting girls and in particular Asian girls groups, identifying their needs and the issues that should be raised. Like with other Red Ladder plays that were taken to young people where they were, in this instance, it was taken to young Asian women in their own territory. Written, directed, designed and performed by Asian women, Bhangra Girls shows the development of respect and understanding between four Asian girls, Suki, Jaz, Marie and Parveen, who form a Bhangra band as they share and face up to different challenges and problems, resolve conflicts and attempt to define their position as young Asian women in society. All four characters in the play have different ‘problems’ or situations which cross and overlap causing disagreements, arguments and emotional upsets but result in eventual acceptance and understanding. This develops through a realisation that they are not alone with the way they feel and that these things can be overcome through talking and sharing experiences.

Like other Red Ladder plays, Bhangra Girls did not provide any answers or come down on any one side, rather it attempted to show various ideas and attitudes and trigger off thoughts for follow up work. This took shape as usual in the workshops and discussions that followed every performance and gave the women the opportunity to talk...
with the performers and express their own opinions on the issues raised in the play. But the follow up did not stop at discussions alone for youth workers took away a comprehensive resource and information pack to develop the issues further within the club setting. For example **Bhangra Girls** was brought to Leicester as part of a six show package for the Leicestershire Youth Service on the invitation of Girls Work Youth Workers in the area who identified a need for a specific direct work with young Asian women. After the show, youth workers applied for funding for follow up work to take on and develop some of the issues raised in the play with young Asian women and workers in drama workshops in youth clubs and projects.

Using the subject of Bhangra as the focus of the play was bound to produce an instant identification for the audience with the performers, the Bhangra having its own cult status among young Asian people. The combination of traditional Punjabi music with a western style rock beat produced an interesting parallel alongside the problems faced by the characters in the play of being women and being Asian in a sexist and racist society. Parveen wears western style clothes and in the early stages dismisses the idea of the band playing Bhangra which raises the whole issue of image and pride in what we are and how we are categorised by race, culture and fashion. At one point in the play, Suki turns to Parveen and says “You should be proud of being Asian” to which the reply comes, “I’m not, I’m not anything, I’m just me.” (p.22) But at the end of the play, Parveen identifies with her culture and her pride in being Asian.

If **Bhangra Girls** is analysed along the same lines as **A Woman Work is Never Done**, i.e., according to Victor Turner’s structuring of social drama, then one observes that the first scene of the play contains all the right ingredients for ‘breach’ to take place.24 Suki and Marie are off to a Bhangra with Marie wearing an Indian dress lent to her by Suki—it belongs to Suki’s elder sister, Jaz. Just as they are about to leave, Jaz arrives striving to look cool as she smokes her cigarette in a pronouncedly sophisticated manner. She insists on accompanying the duo on the grounds of keeping an eye on them. Once they reach the disco they encounter Parveen who has come from London and seems bold especially in her attitude towards boys. Parveen’s brother drops in unexpectedly into the disco forcing Parveen to leave after concealing herself with the Chunni (scarf) worn by Marie; as she departs, she fixes a time and venue (“Tomorrow, music room, after
school') presumably to return the scarf. As things turn out this meeting would usher in new and exciting possibilities and effect a change in the course of their lives.

That Parveen for all her verbal bravado needs to hide from her brother or that Suki lies to Jaz initially about her and Marie's destination are signs that familial rules trespass upon sibling relationships no matter that the siblings may belong to the same age group. Parveen knows as does Suki that going to the (Bhangra) disco was against the rules and that by going for one on the sly they had breached the rules laid down by their families.

Breach aside, this first scene sets the plot rolling and introduces us immediately to aspects of the protagonist's personalities: Jaz is a typical 'elder' sister, domineering, interfering and slightly patronizing; Suki has all the resentment of a younger sibling and the desire to conceal things from her prying elder sister; Suki is also a music enthusiast and loves both listening to and playing the drums. Marie appears to have a more tentative nature and is carried along by Suki's drive while Parveen seems self-assured and aggressive, her bitterness about men hints at some unsavoury personal experience. More than the others, it is Parveen who comes across forcefully as fiercely desirous of freedom of action. Scene One also establishes through the slight skirmish between Jaz and Suki about the dress that Suki had borrowed off Jaz (without Jaz knowing) that, of the various cultural markers contributing to a person's identity, attire/dress codes play a definite role.

The departing words of Parveen in Scene One may not have indicated the nature of events to follow; Scene Two however is full of new developments at least for Suki, Marie and Parveen. When Suki and Marie meet Parveen in the music room after school as per Parveen's instructions, they find Parveen playing the guitar enthusiastically if not proficiently and with all the élan of a guitarist in a rock band. In the ensuing conversation the idea of the three of them getting together to form a band crops up. The fact that Suki and Parveen at least would have to keep this idea under cover confirms that joining such a band was in some way a breaching of a certain set of norms or codes whether of the family or of the community. However, the band does not form without coming to terms with individual problems and sorting them out. Suki is reluctant to lie to her parents about the band because though she may rebel against her parents strictures, she believes that they do know what they're about—thus she is torn between her personal urges and talents
on the one hand and parental pressure on the other. Marie is keen initially though unsure about her own contribution to the band as a tambourine player but is certainly doubtful later at the idea of a ‘Bhangra’ band due to her experiences as a half Indian which has earned for her such terms as ‘half caste’ and ‘chocolate drop’ (p.23)—she doubts whether an ethnic band can attain success. As for Parveen, the notion of a ‘Bhangra’ band is totally unappealing as Parveen feels that no one listens to anything that is Asian/Indian. All three, then, face a crisis in terms of their ethnicity: Suki’s ethnic community of which she is proud (therefore it is she who culls out a Bhangra tune and insists on the band being a Bhangra one in the first place) and which her parents are strong members of, cannot allow such happenings as an All Girls Band staying on after school to rehearse; Marie being half Indian from her father’s side has been subjected to such racist treatment that she fears the band, if Bhangra will fail; Parveen rejects anything ethnic because her own hybrid subjectivity is dismissive of all that is purely Indian. Interestingly however, Parveen displays her knowledge of the fact that ethnicity was at a premium at least in an institutional set up—so while personally rejecting ethnic markers she is not averse to using it as currency as when:

...we can meet here. After school, fix it up with the teachers. They’ll be alright—tell ‘em it’s ethnic or something. We’ll have to practise everyday. (p.18)

Ultimately this first crisis is methodically resolved with Suki giving way to her own love for music on the fairly flimsy grounds that it would not be too much of a falsehood to say that she was taking music lessons after school; Marie is carried along by Suki and Parveen’s fervour and Parveen submits to the Bhangra concept when she realizes that she might be missing out on a good chance of receiving some critical acclaim and is cajoled into believing that it would not be really too ethnic. The Bhangra Girls Band is formed at the end of Scene Two; that it must need be under crises is significant in foregrounding the nature of the so-called ‘multicultural’ situation of the UK. Within this theoretically multicultural setup, it is obvious that both, ethnic as well as non-ethnic cultures exercise different modes of authority and are differently as well as oppositionally hegemonic over individual identities.
Crisis however does not end with Scene Two. Scene Three continues the problems of intra-ethnicity. Suki's mother comes down heavily upon Suki and forbids her from staying on for her 'music lessons'. It is only when Jaz mediates and plays up the ethnic aspect of the band i.e., it being Bhangra and something intended for the school (not for the big lights as Parveen, Suki and Marie have dreams of), that the mother relents, thus proving the emotional and persuasive power of ethnic identity. Marie finds a photograph of her Indian father and as she talks to the photograph, it is clear that in her need to reach out to him, she is willing to play all the cards that she feels may win him over: so she speaks of Bhangra band and of her two friends in the band and emphasizes the Indianness of both. Her words, "I wish I was Indian. May be you wouldn't have left me then", (p 29), her keenness to embrace her ethnic origins in the hope of fostering kinship between herself and her father is a direct contrast to Parveen's shunning of her ethnicity. Parveen feels stifled both physiologically (as with the Chunni, a part of her traditional attire) as well as psychologically, by her Indian origins. She cannot relate to her parents with whom she's on a word strike because of their clashing attitudes and ethical approaches. Among their many strictures, what Parveen dislikes the most is their interference in her social life—she envies Marie for not having parents who forbid her having boyfriends. Parveen blames what she sees as conservatism and narrow mindedness in her parents upon their ethnic roots. The problems of a sense of belonging generated by the ethnicity of young women with ethnic origin's brought up in the UK takes on different forms then, as Scene Three asserts: (i) a conflict between a liberal western outlook outside the home and the less liberal, traditional outlook of parochial parents within the bounds of the home, as exemplified by Suki and Parveen; the difference between them being that Suki deep down respects her parents and their ethnic ideals while Parveen is downright rebellious and anti-family; (ii) in Marie's case, the added complication of being discarded both by the father as well as by society—her ethnic identity being the big question in every instance and causing her thus to be at odds with it; she feels the pain of her partially ethnic subjectivity; she feels her father would not have left her had she been a pure Indian and as for society, she is relegated, to recall an earlier observation, to the category of half castes. Thus, the crises precipitated by ethnic complexities do not have easy solutions as Scene Three projects.
Scene Four carries these crises further. When Suki tells Parveen and Marie that she has not been allowed to stay back, Jaz intervenes with the information that Suki can participate on the condition that Jaz too be allowed to join in. Suki abhors the idea but finally gives in when Parveen assures her that she wouldn’t allow Jaz to boss around and that the microphone used by Jaz could be doctored by them. However the practise session that follows is dismal as everyone appears to be distracted. Tempers are frayed and Marie is urged to bring out her poem to change the atmosphere; unfortunately matters become worse as Parveen completely misunderstands the poem. She reads it as a sentimental piece about boys (while Marie had actually intended it for her father) and spews venom about it. Marie runs out in distress and Suki rounds up Parveen. The rest of the scene contains a series of about turns by Parveen, Marie and Suki. Parveen reveals the secret of her relationship with a boy and how her suspicious parents insisted upon her leaving London for a place where she would be comparatively free from temptation and there would be many relatives to keep an eye on her. This story, after Parveen’s haranguing about boys so far, is such an abrupt changeover, that it seems almost unbelievable. Marie too does an about turn in that she determines to ask her mother yet again about the true story behind her fathers’ abandoning them, regardless of the consequences of her mother’s response. And Suki, by the end of this scene, seems so totally besotted by Jaz that she is unable to see anything amiss in Jaz’s behaviour. It is important to note that all these turnabouts involve the exposure of truth/half truths in some way. Parveen reveals her past, and though she does not come out with the full story, it is an admission of real happenings in her life. Marie’s persistence in attempting to discover what went wrong between her parents shows how keen she is to know the truth and thus come to terms with it. Suki’s blind support of Jaz and her refusal to accept that Jaz could possibly be breaking family rules by going out with a boy prove her inability to see the truth for what it is. It is impossible for Suki to believe that given their kind of upbringing, Jaz could possibly break family norms. It is an irony that Suki leaves the band at this stage, dragging Jaz with her simply because she is unable to understand that like her own self, Jaz too may have felt the need to deviate from the codes of the family, of the ethnic community. In fact Suki and Parveen almost come to blows because Suki’s ethnic pride
that surfaces at this point makes her champion the cause of Asian values and be indirectly critical of Parveen and Marie’s dormant ethnicity, a criticism they resent.

Scene Four thus propels the crises in the formation of a Bhangra Girls Band to the peak. With Suki’s departure, the tenuous nature of the affinity and friendship between Parveen, Marie and Suki comes to the fore. It is obvious that Suki has to return for the band to actually form. For this Suki’s blinkered vision about Jaz will have to be corrected.

Scene Five initiates the redressive or remedial measures to achieve the goal, i.e., the creation of the Bhangra Band. In this scene, Suki’s sexual innocence and curiosity is focused on through the leading questions she asks Jaz. Not only is she repulsed by her new found sexual knowledge, she is further aghast when she learns that Jaz does have a boyfriend as Parveen and Marie had suspected. But initial horror gives way to better understanding; Suki comes closer to Jaz after the disclosures Jaz makes and the positive outcome of their bonding is that they decide to go back to the band. Marie in this scene has asked her mother and finally has got to know that the only reason why her father dumped her mother was because he had a wife and kids in India and they had found out about his relationship—he did not think it worth the effort to return (especially, according to Marie, since she was a girl child). In burning her father’s photograph and resolving to send him the ashes, Marie, through such a ritual act, literally cleanses her mind of all the thoughts bedevilling her. She begins to accept the reality of her racial origins with more practicality, even if it’s tinged with bitterness. Parveen’s is the happiest story in this scene. For Parveen receives a letter that makes her ecstatic. It is from her boyfriend and he wants her back. Thus the ritual journey or rites of passage of the trio, Parveen, Suki and Marie in getting together to form their band, though dotted with many obstructions seems to have a happy ending after all.

Or does it? Does the band really become rich and famous? Do the now comparatively happier Bhangra girls go on to accomplish great things? Scene Six is the final scene that shows not an integration of the band into society but rather legitimises the yawning irreparable schism between the Bhangra girls and society (conforming to Turner’s pattern). And it takes only a single act to do this. In this instance, it is the man who snips off Parveen’s long hair and in doing so is instrumental in closing down the
band (which is hugely successful in its performance). Due to Parveen’s lack of communication with her family and their conservatism, Parveen decides to run away from home for she is convinced that her parents will strictly confine her to the house after such an incident. Parveen rebels against such a notion:

So we have to stay inside all our lives? Never leave our families’ because of him. Because of people like him… (p.62)

Luckily for Parveen, her boyfriend’s support seems to have arrived at an opportune moment and she can thus escape to him. But what then of the Bhangra Girls? Suki’s and the play’s concluding words “what’s going to happen to all of us?” (p.66) labour the point that Parveen makes a little earlier “Maybe hell’s better than here, better than this country where no one wants us but our parents.” (p.62)

In the Artistic Policy of Red Ladder after Rachel Feldburg’s appointment as Art Director, one of the key aims mentioned was to make the Company’s work accessible to all young people for whom there were insufficient provisions including Black young people within which ‘Asian and African Caribbean teenagers’ were counted. The language of the policy is misleading for clubbing these different communities under the single label of ‘Black people’ may deny their specificities. It is to Red Ladder’s credit that the Company was sensitive to such a fallacy. Thus Bhangra Girls may be about an Asian experience but it is not a singular homogenous one; the three completely different perspectives, recognise the complexity of the Asian experience in the UK. In Woman Skin Deep Feminism and the Post Colonial Condition, Sara Suleri says:

In seeking to dismantle the iconic status of post-colonial feminism, I will attempt here to address the following questions: within the tautological margins of such a discourse, which comes first, gender or race? (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1995: 273)

The four plays analysed here may not have answered this question directly but the common thread between these plays point toward the towering significance of race or ethnic origins over and above ongoing gender based conflicts where the idea of ‘multicultural’ society actually masks racial assumptions, prejudices and oppression.

Engaging with the travails of ethnicity did not mean that Red ladder had stopped being concerned about other marginalised communities and their problems. Race may have become a new avenue for Red Ladder to explore and explode but its commitment
towards other peripheral sections such as the jobless, the homeless, the elderly, the disabled and the sexually different remained unchanging. Nor were efforts spared to be innovative in terms of form and modes of performance so that multimedia and other techniques were adopted in many of the plays. Though performed in English, synopses of Bhangra Girls for example are available in more than one language, including Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati and Bengali to ensure that larger numbers of people would connect with the play. Osment’s Who’s Breaking and Kenny’s The Best integrated British Sign Language (BSL) while Munro’s Winners mixed screen images with stage presences to emphasis gender issues.

Red Ladder thus rose phoenix like from the doldrums of the mid-eighties by the changes it ushered into the content and form of the plays, the modes of performance and the administrative set up of the Company (transformed from a loose collectivity into a structured Hierarchy—but without losing the collective spirit and ideals). That it was successful in these measures is attested to not just by its survival but by the critical acclaim it received. In the May 1989 issue of ‘Young People Now’, Tim Burke’s article on Red Ladder entitled ‘Red Ladder Day’ underlined that Red Ladder was the Youth Services only full time touring theatre company and one which tried to maximize benefits from each performance by developing a strong working relationship with each service. This meant that unlike other theatre companies, Red Ladder did not just descend on a club, perform and disappear but rather worked strategically as part of a planned process of social education. Burke asserted Red Ladder’s success with the evidence of Bolsover, a mining area in Derbyshire which had taken all seven shows from Red Ladder in the past two years.

This means that they can now work together in a structured cohesive fashion, which starts with workers attending a preview of each production. This not only gives feedback to the writers and performers at Red Ladder, but also provides an early indication of the issues that youth workers should start to raise in the club before the performance. The preview can also have benefits even before the Company arrives at the youth club. For example Red Ladder’s decision to use sign language in their latest production, The Best, brought home to Bolsover youth workers the realisation that they were doing no work with deaf young people. As a result they have been
in contact with social services and a strategy for building relationships with deaf young people is being developed.\textsuperscript{25}

Of course the article did not deny that Red Ladder had many obstacles on its track and that things could go wrong. For instance, when two performances of The Best were scheduled for consecutive nights in nearby clubs with a large crossover of membership, the result was a rapt audience of fifty on the first night and a considerably smaller and more fidgety number on the second. However these upsets faded when compared to the other spin offs of the Red Ladder productions; Burke quotes Steve Waterhouse, district resource worker in Bolsover,

It's a great resource for issue-based work, and its' consumer-oriented: we know that our comments on each production will be listened to and acted upon.\textsuperscript{26}

He says again that ideally every youth service ought to have its own theatre group as such a flexible resource could target local problems and the needs of specific groups.

From 1968 to 1988 Red Ladder had traversed a long way and altered a lot keeping pace with the demands of the time. But it had retained its status of a radical fringe theatre company, the most noteworthy asset being that it gave access to theatre to people traditionally denied it and ensured that theatre was not "something that only goes on in that great big building down the road that none of them would ever go in."\textsuperscript{27}

Summarising the Red Ladder approach actress Kay Hepplewhite said:

We want to entertain and be a catalyst to help youth workers raise issues. And we do that by doing the play in young people's own space, doing it in their language and within their frame of reference.\textsuperscript{28}
Notes and References

1 Bed and Breakfast was a method of tax avoidance whereby shares were sold one day and bought back the next day to avoid capital gains tax. [Referring to the temporary nature of the transactions as if it were bed and breakfast accommodation].

2 Beat Box is a way of speaking by using your voice/breath as a drum. It was popular in the 80s with the African Caribbean communities.

3 The three show reports are dated 8 September 1983 (from the Town Hall, Skipton production) 16 September 1983 and 19 September 1983 (from the Jackson’s Lane Community Centre production).

4 19 September show report.

5 8 September show report.

6 16 September show report.

7 Ibid.

8 8 September show report.

9 Ibid.

10 See Aston and Savona, 1991:142 where the spectator’s reception of the visual dimension is seen as the final stage of a project involving four distinct phases.

11 Saa Saa and Tchi Tchi is based on Saatchi and Saatchi, the ad agency that calls itself ‘an ideas company’. It has centers worldwide and is known for its award winning print and TV ads.


13 8 September Show report.

14 Moloyashree Hashmi put it clearly in her conversation with Anjum Katyal published in Seagull Theatre Quarterly, Dec 97, issue 16 where she said ‘Drama has to be created and crafted even on the streets; it involves a lot of hard work, trying new things’.

15 Susan Bennet elaborates in Theatre Audiences, Routledge, London, 1990, p 179 ‘Spectators are thus trained to be passive in their demonstrated behaviour during a
theatrical performance, but to be active in their decoding of the sign systems made available.'

16 The copy of the document used in this thesis is the one attached by Robbie McGovan with his letter dated December 30, 1983 to Dickon Reed, Drama Director of the Arts Council of Great Britain.

17 From Red Ladder archives; article entitled 'Review of 1984.'

18 From Red Ladder archives; this press clipping was attached with an Arts Council: Internal Memo dated 29 October 1985.

19 From Red Ladder archives: letter from Councillor Atha to Dickon Reed dated 18 Feb 1985.

20 From Red Ladder archives: Dickon Reed’s response to Councillor Atha dated 1 March 1985.


23 Ibid: 227.

24 For details about the various stages, Chapter 3 may be referred to.


26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.