The examination of the plays performed by Red Ladder has been an integral part of the analysis of Red Ladder’s career and achievements as a Theatre Company so far. That there can be no doubt about Red Ladder’s perception in recognising that a strong script is essential for the propagation of an idea/ideological stance has been established in the preceding two chapters. This chapter too will continue to look at the plays but with a shift in attention towards the other dimensions that contribute significantly to the making of a successful agit prop production. This involves the psychological conditioning of the spectators as much through pre and post performance activities as through the play during performance time. Thus the handouts/leaflets/fanzines/ragazines, meetings with youth workers and/or members of the target audience prior to the production, follow up sessions (involving: discussion, inviting suggestions, solutions, criticism and comments; show reports, making the audience perform role plays and helping them to draw up a agenda for themselves), recording Red Ladder’s achievements in forthcoming production advertisements, are all strategies used by the company. These are responsible for: (a) underlining the issues/themes of the play, (b) emphasising the status of Red Ladder as a Theatre Company actively involved with such issues/themes, (c) locating the target audience that is affected by these ideas, and (d) the collective realisation of the play in terms of its success, both, as a performance and as an agency for suggesting viable solutions to the issues taken up within the play or to put forward plans of action that the audience can explore. It is only appropriate therefore that this chapter focuses on such features over and above the plays themselves for a more complete knowledge of Red Ladder’s mode of functioning.

The nineties began with the Bus Shelter Project by Lin Coghlan in the spring of 1990, a tour for young people meeting on the street, concentrating on homelessness and poverty. Kate O Reilly’s Breaking the Silence written specially for disabled Asian and Girls groups using British Sign Language (BSL) was produced in Autumn 1990. In spring of the following year Judith Johnson’s The Scappie, about loss and separation, for mixed senior youth clubs, and in autumn, Consequences by Mary Cooper, a play touring to Asian girls groups were produced. Another play using BSL by Philip Osment, Listen, about a deaf young person and family relationships was produced in the winter of 1992; in spring came Though the Heavens Fall by Lin Coghlan about justice and law for senior
youth club audiences while in autumn, *Caught* by Julie Wilkinson, a play for girls groups focusing on teenage pregnancy and integrating BSL were produced. A joint project between Kuffdem Theatre Company and Red Ladder, *No Mean Street* by Paul Boakye, was performed in spring 1993 exploring HIV/AIDS and targeting Black young people while in autumn, Philip Osment’s *Sleeping Dogs*, a play for mixed senior youth clubs, focusing on inter-communal strife in Eastern Europe, was staged.

1994 saw the appointment of Kully Thiarai, Red Ladder’s first Artistic Director of Asian (Indian) origin and the chalking out of a new mission statement which read thus:

Red Ladder, is a national touring company, recognizing that investment in young people is an investment in the future and is dedicated to:

- Creating and providing artistically exciting high quality theatre for young people who have little or no access to, or experience of the theatre;
- Touring new work nationally which, through exploring issues specifically designed for young people, is pure theatre;
- Developing strategies which offer young people the opportunity to become involved in the artistic life of this country
- Striving for artistic excellence in its performance and presentation in a way which is accessible and challenging to its audience
- Developing new writing and other theatre skills.

With the stress now upon youth needs, new writing and pure theatre, one finds that in the next four years Red Ladder’s plays dealt with issues that were of particular interest to the younger generation. In spring 1994, Mary Cooper’s *Mixed Blessings*, a play for girls examining mixed race relationships between African Caribbean and white young people, was produced. Gilly Fraser’s *The Wound*, which emphasised domestic violence and toured senior mixed youth clubs followed in autumn 1994. Philip Osment’s *Sleeping Dogs* was also retoured to Arts Centres and small-scale theatre venues. Set in Ireland and exploring issues of cultural identity, family and loss, Lin Coghlan’s *Waking* was produced in spring 1995 and toured mixed senior youth clubs. The next year, 1996, saw the first International Co-production with Red Ladder and Theatre Direct, Canada and the play produced was Noel Greig’s *End of Season* which toured to youth club audiences and theatre goers and looked at tribalism, youth violence and cultural identity. This happened in the spring, and autumn brought in Roy William’s *Josie’s Boys*, a play about single parenting, leaving home and ambition that toured to youth club audiences. Maya Chowdhry’s *Kaahani* which toured to youth club and theatre audiences for young people
14+ and was about gender, duty and kismet was produced in spring 1997. In autumn 1997 the company staged Crush by Rosie Fordham, a comedy about infatuation, fantasy and reality, men and women and Boybands—this was retoured in autumn the following year to Arts Centre and Youth Service. Spring 1998 saw a co-production with Theatre Centre in a play by Philip Osment, Wise Guys, which studied male identity and violence.

In 1998, Wendy Harris was appointed as the new Artistic Director; the Mission Statement and Artistic Policy however underwent only a little alteration:

Current Mission Statement
To commission and produce accomplished, innovative and relevant new plays that are artistically excellent in performance and tour them nationally to a youth audience who have little or no access to theatre.

Current Artistic Policy
- To create artistically exciting, challenging and pioneering theatre of the highest quality.
- To tour this work nationally targeting young people who have little or no access to theatre.
- To take artistic risks and explore new ways of working.
- To develop new writing that is high quality, imaginative, reflects cultural diversity and is challenging for our audience.
- To raise the profile of Red Ladder's work nationally and internationally as well as locally.
- To continue to pursue new ways to reach and develop our youth audience and to develop strategic new partnerships with art venues and other agencies that want to develop a youth audience.
- To offer excellent participatory and residential programmes alongside the main programme of work and ensure the continued excellence of resource materials and follow up (in conjunction with productions).
- To undertake the above aims through strategies that enable us to implement our Equal Opportunities Policy within all aspects of Red Ladder's work.

With the significant inclusion of taking 'artistic risks' within the Artistic Policy of Red Ladder, one perceives not just a theatre catering to youth demands but a stylistically different and challenging theatre. Set on New Year's Eve of 1999, Last Night, by John Binnie, was produced in autumn 1999 and was the story of a pregnant teenager, an old man and a refugee. Red Ladder's millennium play, After the End of the World by Mike Kenny, was produced in spring 2000, a comedy that studied respect and morality whose major characters were Stick, a teenage boy living with Chintz, his single parent mum, and
Wrinkle, his disabled grandma. In autumn 2000, Noel Greig’s Picture Me, an international story set in England and Mumbai exploring the emotional impact of HIV/AIDS on a British Asian teenager was produced.

It is evident even from this outline that the centre of attention in the nineties was the youth, their individual/societal identity and the factors responsible for the problems of recognition/misrecognition that accompany the making of these identities. As one of the fliers aptly put it, “Red Ladder believes investment in young people is an investment in the future.” Another area of special interest initiated in the eighties that Red Ladder focused on in the nineties was disabled/handicapped/special needs people. If traditional agit prop methods could not be sustained in the eighties due to changing target groups and altered needs of the times, in the nineties it underwent almost a complete makeover. Red Ladder’s work could now be seen as hand in glove with the work of youth clubs and social welfare organisations. The political agenda of Red Ladder now seemed limited to a concentrated effort to negotiate with the Arts Council for continued funding; quite a veering from the early sixties when Red Ladder’s political programme was to protest against the malfunctioning of the government. Thus, from the purely agit prop directly political theatre practiced during its inception to the strong theatre for social action or community theatre into which Red Ladder developed in the nineties, the shift was clearly visible and was an outcome of the demands of changing times.

In keeping with the nature of this target audience in the nineties, the leaflets/fanzines began to incorporate those features that would prove to be most instructive. Obviously the designing of these brochures, etc., had to be handled with skill so that they, both, caught the eye as well as provoked thought. The usual information about the Company i.e., its mission and goals; its staging requirements; quotes from reviews of plays previously performed; the acknowledgements section (mainly to funding agencies) and the credits, remained as before. But the information about the actors and the Company members involved with a particular production was now made more personal, almost as if on a one to one basis with the audience. Using humour, the actor’s or Company members’ revelations from his/her life and his/her perspectives about the theme of the play, was a deliberate attempt to erase performer-spectator distance and generate a spirit of collective understanding about a problem. Often, as with Philip
Osment's *Sleeping Dogs* and Paul Boakye's *No Mean Street*, the programmes included the writer's intent and viewpoint, thus demystifying and making accessible the absent writer such as to connect authorial subjectivity with that of the audience. Both strategies of personalising the performing/production unit were tactical moves to lower any resistance offered by the largely youth audiences that the plays catered to: they desacralised the performance space. The question and answer stratagem employed earlier was further supplemented by the use of scores that placed the respondents in categories; such categorization aimed to generate within the respondent the desire to change (especially if the category was one with negative overtones).

A new characteristic of many nineties ragazines and fliers was the inscribing of the BSL on the handouts emphasising the need for more people to learn the language to enable greater and better communication with the hearing and speech impaired. Augmenting this proposition was the listing of helplines complete with addresses and phone numbers, providing handy options to be tapped during crises. The cartoons and other illustrations too seemed to be directed to making suggestions that would aid youth club workers and also every other individual to resolve difficulties. Given the increasing sophistication of the tools used by Red Ladder, the focus will shift from an analysis of the plays to an examination of the specific methodological rituals (especially resource kits) innovatively employed by Red Ladder in the nineties to ensure its continued effectiveness, as explained in the introductory paragraph of this chapter.

Performed throughout the UK in rural settings, large cities, to young offenders, in schools, community colleges, to young people with disabilities—in fact, anywhere a bus could be parked, Lin Coghlan’s *The Bus Shelter Show* (1990) takes place inside a bus. The bus, on loan to the Company from Yorkshire Ryder Bus Company was converted so that the action happens around it, underneath it and inside it. The action focuses around the relationships between three young people, Se, Jan and Mikey with Rosie who left home and has lived on the streets since the mid-1950s. To escape from her court hearing and her mum’s new boyfriend, Jan thinks of the bus she has “nicked” and which only needs a starter motor to get it going. Se lives with and looks after his father and hates it when people call his Dad ‘Paddy’. Mikey is Se’s best friend and has the chance to join the army—he knows how to fit a new starter motor and they all know where to get one—
the local bus depot. Rosie left home in the 1950s when she was 18 and lived in a hostel for 20 years; she sees the bus as her shelter, somewhere for her to live. Writer Lin Coghlan, chatted with young people hanging around the streets (as the programme informs one) and, based on the things they said, wrote this play to explore issues important to them.

The performance deals with many issues so that different aspects of the play affect young people in different ways, dependent on their own experiences, cultures and where they ‘hang out’. For instance at one stage in the play the focus is on Mikey who has decided to join the Army, ostensibly to escape from the environment he lives in where he has little or no chance of securing employment. The issues involved in this are explored via his relationship with other characters. Neville Robinson who played the character of Mikey said that in reality this happened a lot, especially in rural areas or areas of high unemployment where they took the performance.1 Young men did sign up for nine years just to escape their environment rather than from any real desire for a life in the armed forces. The performance tackles many other issues, including racism, homelessness, alcohol, and personal relationships which are all thrown up throughout the play (for follow up later in the discussions). The aim is to encourage young people to look again at what they are saying, thinking and doing and above all to ask why. Various one off lines from the play serve as starters for discussion which provides ideas and guidance for youth workers. When Mikey asks Rosie, ‘Why do you live the way you do?’ we are forced to question—is it Rosie’s fault that she lives ‘like that’? Do people make themselves homeless? Why isn’t there anywhere for her to go? What is there for young people to go to if they leave home? Similarly, when Se asks his Dad not to let people call him Paddy anymore, we are faced with the issue of racism and stereotyping people. When and why do people use abusive names for each other? Why does Se’s Dad allow his friends to call him Paddy? Why do people put down Irish people, or black people?

The Bus Shelter Show reflects what young people deal with everyday and the questions youth workers always ask. Before the tour started Red Ladder held previews with workers and young people in each area to discuss the content and format of the play. As follow-up, the idea of a ‘Fanzine’ as a starter for discussion was used encouraging young people to write comments and ideas on it. The Company suggested that the
contents were ideas for things to be done or things that young people had done locally and could include contacts for local information and events, help lines and support groups, comments about the local area—good things, bad things and those requiring change. Another method used in follow up work was drama or role play. The young people identified something that had happened to them or someone they knew who made them feel powerless—perhaps they kept being moved on from the town centre or were harassed about hanging around the bus shelter. They then decided who they wanted to meet to try to get the situation changed—it could be a policeman or a local councillor whose character they would then take on and create a role play for what would happen if they meet up with these young people. The idea was then to talk about how it felt and who had the power.

The potential of the bus was exploited to its full extent. Because one was ‘inside the set’ (at one stage the engine is actually started up) the dramatic distance between actors and audience was reduced. The tiny space, though posing considerable physical problems to the actors, added to the intensity. The play would go on all around the audience which created both a deep sense of involvement and a healthy lack of reverence for the performing space—the audience would start to comment and interact with the performers. A remarkably simple idea for solving the problems of accessibility, the play proved especially useful in rural areas where young people had no building of their own. Not surprisingly, the play worked best and attracted most young people when the right preparation had been done, and when the performance took place at the right time and in the right place for its young audience. In Leicestershire for example, where the play was done mainly in school car parks, audience numbers were down because of the hot weather and the local industrial holiday fortnight.

The Red Ladder Bus Shelter Tour proved that one didn’t need a theatre or stage to produce good drama. The performance worked because it met young people where they generally while away free time and focussed on and asked them to discuss the issues that concerned them. Intended specifically for young girls Kate O’Reilly’s Breaking the Silence (1990) is about three teenage girls, Allannah (Ali), Jo and Damyanti (Damy) each with a different problem. Ali is partially deaf and this is the cause of quarrels between her parents: her father blames her mother, Bette, as Bette’s mother too had been deaf. Bette is
unable to handle a traumatised daughter and a bitter, frustrated husband and leaves home. But her love and concern for Ali keep bringing her back. Dami is Jo’s friend at the beginning of the play, an unequal friendship since Jo never fails to remind her how she had stood by Dami when Dami had been made the butt of racist comments and acts. For this favour, Jo emotionally blackmails Dami into doing a lot of work for her. Dami, being Indian, is plagued by all kinds of demeaning racist attacks such as excreta put into her mailbox or nasty graffiti on the walls outside her house—Dami is outraged by such acts and would like to protect her simple mother from it all (a case of role reversal). Her brother Prakash, would rather she ignored it all. Jo’s problem is that with her mother having walked out when she was much younger, she is completely dominated by the men in her house, her feminine identity kept well in check. She consistently quotes her brother, Paul, an aggressive and confused man himself. Matters come to a head when Paul along with his friend Neil (who has recently started dating Jo and getting sexually intimate with her) throw bricks at Dami’s house with messages like ‘Pakis go home’, shattering the window panes. Jo follows them even if she does not participate in their actions. When Dami rounds up Jo for not stopping her brother, Jo’s excuse is that she wanted to be accepted, especially by Neil. Meantime, Ali and Dami have become close, appreciate each other in spite of their so-called ‘handicaps’; in fact learning the sign language proves to be a source of fun and bonding between them. Ali, however, hides her deafness from Jo because she sees Jo’s hatred and mockery of what she calls the “loonies unit” (referring to the Partially Hearing Unit) and cannot bear to be subjected to such a treatment by Jo, herself.

The play brings to the fore the fact that the three girls are unhappy primarily because none of them know whom to turn to and share their pain. It also highlights the typically prejudiced attitudes that arise out of ignorance—thus Jo attributes the cause of all the problems with students in the PHU to their dimwittedness; to their being ‘loony’; Jo’s brother Paul and others of his ilk call Dami ‘Paki’ (Jo too accuses Dami of speaking ‘Paki language’ whenever Dami lapses into Punjabi) unaware of/ignoring the actual origins of Dami. Such attitudes only serve to repress ethnic/other identities and thus result in trauma.
The fanzine accompanying *Breaking The Silence* is loaded with leading questions. The very first page that starts off with drawings of the basic alphabet for BSL asks a vital question “But what happens if you don’t speak English...or don’t share the same culture?” This same page carries a quick quiz based on gender stereotypes with multiple options for answers, such as, “If a girl won’t give a boy a birthday kiss, do you think (a) she’s a spoilsport (b) she’s just shy (c) she shouldn’t kiss him if she doesn’t want to.” The next page continues the interrogation, the leading question being “How come it’s girls that are kept in, when it's boys that cause the trouble?” Again, notions popularly held in society are quoted and spectators asked to agree/disagree with such notions.

The third page features the desires of young women, disabled or otherwise and the obstacles that prevent the fulfillment of their desires. Among the desires listed are “abseiling”, “mending cars”, “playing pool” and the obstructions extend from “The magazines aren’t in Braille” to “People don’t understand what I’m saying” to “Other people don’t give us a chance to try.” It ends with the insistence “But we can” yet the confession “But sometimes we need help to get started...” and this is where the focus turns to the youth worker.

Not only do the questions make visible the general pattern of thinking in society, they are also intended to generate a certain sense of discomfort within each spectator in recognizing his/her own prejudices. In making the spectator answer these questions, the effort is to draw the spectator as a participant into the central debates of the play.

While the first three pages asked questions, the next three, while not exactly answering them, provide clues to attain answers. Page Four actually gives evidence of concrete measures being taken to surmount gender and physical restrictions. Some of the examples given are worth quoting. “Deaf Teenagers have got together to make a minicom network”; “In Leeds youth workers and disabled girls got together to form the Get Away Girls. They organise trips and do all sorts of outdoor activities like wheelchair abseiling. Envious? How about starting one near you?” Again, “in Leeds Youth Workers met and talked to some young women on the streets. They’ve organised a weekend away together...and decided where to go and what to do...and fundraised the money...hired the equipment bought the food sorted out who was going and had a really good time.”
The box at the bottom shifts the focus from ‘them’ to ‘you’ to ask ‘what about you?’ thus directly implicating the audience in the process of shouldering responsibilities and changing situations.

But the entire burden is not placed upon the spectator alone who in the next page entitled ‘Where to go to for advice’ is drawn back to the play, where it is pointed out that by the end of the play Jo needed someone to talk to. Some of the suggestions made for Jo (and by extension the audience) include a trustworthy person like a teacher, youth worker or friend; useful numbers available especially in Thompsons directories, Directory enquiries and Libraries; local Samaritans who could be located in the phone book under S; organisations suggested by the local youth worker. In other words, the thrust is towards trying out ‘local numbers first’. While the fifth page speaks generally of people and places where one can seek help, the next page is more specific in information and actually lists out national organisations with their addresses and numbers; such organisations can put a person in touch with local places if one is unable to find them any other way. From ‘Alcoholics Anonymous’ to ‘Eating Disorders Association’ to ‘Lesbian and Gay Youth Movement’ to ‘Rape Crisis’ and ‘Keep Deaf Children Safe’, the list is obviously well researched and comprehensive.

This page also includes quotes from people with physical disabilities—the quotes all highlight the fact that disabled people need to be treated like normal citizens with rights. They show a realisation of the fact that the cruel treatment handicapped people receive arises out of ignorance at the independence (and thus the ‘normality’) of the disabled. The last quote is almost an assertion of a disabled person’s abilities: “Just because people see a person in a wheelchair or using a white stick, it doesn’t necessarily mean that the person cannot walk and see. Just that to be able to walk and see they need wheels and sticks to make it a bit easier.”

The last page is a copy of a photograph of all the Red Ladder people involved in the performance and a personal note about each; the note targets the past of each member to divulge the fact that the performing unit shared the same youth problems as the spectators. In taking up this personal angle, the obvious intention is to break down the barriers between performers and audience, thus underlining the mission and objectives of Red Ladder as a theatre company devoted to the task of community welfare through the
medium of theatre. The photograph even has a dog belonging to Mandy Redvers-Higgins and good humouredly requests the audience not to feed Urma and spoil her concentration when she worked. The closeness of a family structure or of a well-bonded community comes through clearly from the photograph.

Incidentally, the fanzine has a number of cartoons/illustrations and a dog (representing Urma?) features as a character (a wise one too) in them. Hence the first page has a girl fending off a man who has taken her out for drinks and now presumes she should feel obliged to reciprocate his physical advances. The girl wards him off physically and the dog, an onlooker, comments sagely “Go halves next time—then he can’t make you feel guilty?” An oblique way perhaps on Red Ladder’s part to point out that even the underdog’s voice ought not to go unheeded? Another thought-provoking illustration shows a girl on a wheelchair going across a tightrope while another girl hangs from the ropeway; the words being “Sorry, its wheelchair access only—but...we’re not doing anything about it”, thus a dig at the dismal state of the facilities available for disabled people.

No doubt Red Ladder’s plays may have acquired greater artistic merit but the very fact that the fanzine (a sophisticated development of the early propagandist leaflets accompanying a performance) contains every possible dimension for tackling social problems, and attempts to evolve measures that counter problems, is proof that Red Ladder, in an integrative rather than the earlier resistance mode, retains its distinctly agit prop footing. In fact, the fanzine by itself often serves as valuable resource material even when the play is unavailable as with the summer 92 Fanzine supplementing the production of Lin Coghlan’s Though the Heavens Fall. This fanzine is self-sufficient in that one doesn’t necessarily have to watch the play to understand its thrust if one goes through the fanzine. It takes on issues of moral conscience in the form of a ‘Scruples Quiz’; gives an opportunity for discussion through an agree/disagree section; informs about one’s legal rights when dealing with the police or being put under arrest; initiates the idea of fighting for necessary prison reforms undertaken by such organizations as the Howard League for Penal Reforms and lists out addresses and phone numbers of those centers that provide legal aid to the young be they disabled, single parents, drug addicts, etc. Evidently the fanzines appear to follow a certain pattern—that of nudging the
spectator into examining the issue in question in all its dimensions and then making constructive suggestions to tackle the issue. The tone of the fanzine is always a gentle though firm one seeking co-operation rather than inciting angst.

The Autumn 92 fanzine, part of the resource kit of the production Caught, a play by Julie Wilkinson, also follows the trend set by the earlier fanzines. The play revolves around thirteen year old Paulette, her baby daughter Cristal and her elder sister, Karon. The subtitle of the play is ‘The Incredible Expanding Baby’ and that is precisely what happens within the play where the baby Cristal’s proportions increase to such dimensions (physically and metaphorically) that she makes living in the house impossible. Paulette refuses to reveal the name of Cristal’s father; only much later are the facts uncovered and one comes to know that Cristal’s father is none other than Karon’s no good boyfriend Carl, who has just served a term in prison. Having had his way with Paulette, Carl has no compunctions in carrying on with Karon who of course leaves him on learning the truth. Meanwhile the baby is so huge that all kinds of forces—police, fire fighters—try to take her away from Paulette on the grounds that she is a menace (an example of the way state machinery ignores the humane element and operates coldly and autocratically). However, Karon who has been upset with Paulette does return to help her out. The story is narrated and performed in turns (except Paulette’s role) by three characters suitably called Furies as they represent the gossip mongers who only spread venom through scandalous revelations.

In following the format of making spectators play the agree/disagree game, answer the quick quiz or the problem given, air their opinion; and in providing not just helpful information but also some clues as to how to handle problems of young, unwed mothers; of societal/governmental pressures; the fanzine works almost like an FIR. It is an immediate response to the issues of the play and it makes the spectators ideas/perspectives the centre of action. Thus the fanzine acts as a mediating agent between the performance and the follow up—it helps break the ice for the post-production interactive sessions. It allows for the immediate, direct and concrete involvement of the spectator.

Targeted for a mixed senior youth club audience, i.e., an audience comprising of male and female adults belonging to different races, of not more than sixty per
performance, in the age group of thirteen to twenty-five, and of special interest to African Caribbean young people, the one hour performance of No Mean Street was written by the acclaimed Black writer Paul Boakye, after a period of research with young African Caribbean people. The production was a joint venture between Red Ladder and Kuffdem, a Leeds based African Caribbean theatre company, who work with Black communities and groups throughout the country. The main protagonist, Arlington, does not make a decision to be tested for AIDS—he just goes to the hospital for a minor complaint. Diagnosed HIV positive, he discovers that he has no friends and is forced to change his street wise lifestyle. The play explores the impact of HIV/AIDS on young African Caribbean people—the fear, isolation, prejudice and the dangers of living in a society which often refuses to acknowledge the realities of HIV; such feelings sharpened in a multicultural situation where racial prejudices, though cloaked, are certainly present.

The very act of collaborating with another theatre company, a first on Red Ladder’s part, was tactically a sound move. Pitching resources under one banner helped in sharing not just artistic talent and expertise but also pooling knowledge as to how to tackle a tough subject. It also helped to establish the common interests of the two companies and by this connectedness, provided a live example of how different arts, different communities can work towards a particular goal. The magazine (as explained earlier, a magazine that literally puts together ‘rags’ or scraps of information like a collage) complementing the play is, however, different in that it does not contain any of the usual games/quizzes, etc that are staple fare of the fanzines. Rather, it is packed with all kinds of information related to safe sex and AIDS, and how to handle such problems as AIDS and racism. There are sections devoted to African history, African presence in Britain and the Fight for Freedom; what AIDS and HIV are and how the virus is transmitted; what safe sex and condoms are, and notes differing attitudes to sex. There is also a poem addressing the concept of ‘mules’ entitled ‘Excess luggage’ by Remi, a performer in the play. There are also sections that inform about the efforts of people in the Arts to warn against AIDS, as for example the video with pop stars speaking of the disease featuring a Salt and Pepa’ sound track ‘Let’s talk about sex’; and the ‘Red Hot and Rap’ album featuring Arrested Development, LL Cool J, Gang Starr and the
Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy where all the artists have contributed original tracks dealing with safe sex or intravenous drugs use theme.

Naturally the helplines section of this magazine looks at organisations that are related to assisting Black people with AIDS, drugs and legal problems. In short, the magazine encapsulates a tremendous amount of information in a crisp and easy manner. While not providing scope within the magazine itself for spectators to express their viewpoints, the message of the play is conveyed clearly in the words, “When you’re dealin’ with the birds and the bees, Don’t shy away from Dealin’ with disease”. Thus the information loaded magazine underlines the theme of the play to spark off debate and discussions post-performance.

Not just through magazines, even direct statements made by Red Ladder declare their intent. The cover of the programme of Philip Osment’s Sleeping Dogs states the purpose succinctly, “This programme has been designed to offer you more information about the Company and the work we do. Also, included are suggestions and ideas that can be used by you, once our touring team have moved on. We hope you will enjoy the play and take part in the discussion afterwards.” Moving on from the purpose of the play to the intent behind the play’s theme and facts about the people involved with the production, the next two pages contain briefs on the actors and the manager and a write up by Osment and a note on Red Ladder’s work/the nature of the Company. The inclusion of Osment’s authorial statement within the programme, regarding his reasons for writing Sleeping Dogs asserts the deliberateness of the theme chosen (both, by the author, and in staging the play, by the Company). That Osment’s words are followed by the note on Red Ladder which spells out that Red Ladder is a multiracial Company, with both disabled and non-disabled performers, catering to the needs of young people of all kinds; foregrounds the collective nature of the project undertaken. Red Ladder may not, as in the days of The Cake Play or Strike While the Iron is Hot, be functioning in the conservative sense of the word ‘collective’ when the plays were scripted jointly, but in making space for the author’s voice and showing the similarity of interests, it is evident that in spirit, the Company remains a collective.5

The middle section of the programme features photographs and cartoons that amplify the question “Do we need conflict?” This question is followed by another on the
next page asking “Do you see yourself as European or not?” Preceding this question is a quote by Mahatma Gandhi that speaks of individuality and assimilation; of tolerance: “I do not want my home to be walled in on all sides and its windows to be stuffed. I want cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.” Above this quotation is a drawing of the globe with the heading ‘Conflict’ and the following subheadings ‘Global’, ‘Community’, ‘Personal’ and ‘Cultural’—underscoring that conflict pervades all domains of life.

These early questions are only teasers to lead the spectators to a more concentrated and intense discussion of the key ideas/themes and issues in the play. The parameters for these are actually marked out on the penultimate page where a number of key terms are given to be used as stimulus for audience response—this list of terms is fairly exhaustive and in a sense, allows no room for deviation from the subject under consideration. While in the initial days Red Ladder’s plays were so subject specific tangling as they did with a certain political moment, the nineties plays while continuing this particularity were artistically sophisticated as well. Again, this did not mean a toning down of the main objective of Red Ladder, that of agitating the audience about the issue/s enacted in the play and of propagating change. (Of course, the meaning of ‘change’ had altered by now from militant protest and resistance to community effort for welfare).

The analyses so far may have given the impression that all was well at the Red Ladder front in the nineties. Undoubtedly Red Ladder’s continued presence in the theatre/arts world proved its success but the struggle continued. A document entitled ‘Extending the Boundaries: 1995-1998’, a Three Year Plan of the Company, actually contains an annual review of the years 1992-1995. What were the achievements and the failures that Red Ladder recorded in these years according to this document?

The main factor affecting the work in this period had been completely unforeseen. From the period of September 1992-January 1994, the Company did not have an Artistic Director in post. This was due to a number of factors including long-term sick leave, sabbatical leave, maternity leave and finally the decision of Rachel Feldburg to leave the Company. During this time, visiting freelance directors and artistes covered the duties of the post, whilst the Financial Administrator covered the overview in addition to her own duties. This put a tremendous strain on the programme of work as well as on any long
term planning, resulting in a ‘holding operation’ by the remaining staff members. In spite of this situation, the Company’s touring work in 1993 thrived and two extremely exciting, risk-taking pieces toured to universal acclaim.

To get down to facts, in 1992-93 Red Ladder commissioned and toured two pieces as planned to target groups: Though the Heavens Fall by Lin Coghlan and Caught by Julie Wilkinson which achieved the target number (one hundred and twenty seven) of performances. The use of Sign Language was developed by engaging an ‘Actor Signer’ for Caught. The first stage of joint production with Kuffidem Theatre Company which included the commissioning process/researching African Caribbean Writers resulted in the first commission for a new Black writer: a six month traineeship was offered to an African Caribbean Administrator followed by an initial session for the same. The marketing strategy for the production commenced.

The Appraisal Recommendations of the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) that were put into action included the three month sabbatical taken by the Artistic Director; an increase in all full time staff salaries in line with other Companies and engaging the services of a European Fundraising Consultant. The administrative and other achievements during this time were: the development of a Special Three Year Relationship with the Eastern Arts Board, the initiation of regionally based ‘Training the Trainers’ weekend as the first stage of new training strategy, completion of ten days of youth worker/young people training, and receiving 35 per cent upliftment in ACGB core funding.

However, this period also saw Red Ladder confronting numerous obstacles. The staffing levels, in particular the absence of an Artistic Director, affected the level of activity throughout the year. This had a direct effect on the following projects: the Asian Women tripartite programme was deferred as also the January/February 1993 ‘Work in Progress’ project; without an Artistic Director, the Company was unable to conduct the ‘Director’s Workshops’ as planned. Following the Appraisal recommendation that the ‘Summer School’ needed to be budgeted to make a profit, the Company undertook a feasibility study which found that Youth Services then were unable to meet realistic prices; with this in mind the project was abandoned and the issue of developing a ‘Training Network’ recommended. The original target audiences for Caught were
disabled young men and women. Whilst researching the project, it became apparent that the Youth Services wanted a piece that would look at teenage girls and pregnancy. The show then toured to girls groups nationally but only reached 9.44 per cent deaf young women: this highlighted the importance of strategic targeting.

1993 toured two major productions that were hugely successful, the first being Paul Boakye’s No Mean Street. To reiterate, this venture was Red Ladder’s first successful co-production with a Black Theatre Company; it was also the first ever National tour of a piece designed specifically for young African Caribbean people in youth clubs and similar venues. The production involved the engagement of a Black freelance Director, a Black choreographer and a Black MD and the traineeship for the new Black Director. The original target to reach 40 per cent African Caribbean youth was exceeded and in fact Red Ladder achieved 50.9 per cent. The Administrative Traineeship for the African Caribbean administrator continued while a Youth Work training weekend focusing on No Mean Street was undertaken at Dudley.

The other 1993 play, Sleeping Dogs, written and directed by Philip Osment, achieved all its aims: the target number of sixty performances; the original brief to look at a small rural community which led to piece focusing on intercommunal strife; the target group, i.e., mixed senior youth club audiences in rural areas. This was a piece that was not issue led and should be seen as a major artistic development in the Company’s work. The excellent feedback/response led to Company decision to retour Sleeping Dogs to Arts Centres in Autumn 1994. Also, two one day ‘Introduction to Theatre in Youth Work’ training days for Youth and Arts workers based in the Eastern Arts region were delivered.

In spite of the remarkable success of the two plays toured in 1993, the level of activity continued to remain affected by the staffing levels, particularly those projects which needed an Artistic Director at the helm: the summer project for Young People; the second New Writer’s workshop; the ‘work in progress project’; the summer school that was found to be financially unviable. Besides, No Mean Street achieved 56 performances instead of the anticipated 60. This was due to the pioneering nature of the project—targeting and finding groups of young African/Caribbean people.
January 1994 saw the appointment of a new Artistic Director, Kully Thiarai who ushered in a period of significant change. Building on Red Ladder’s history and expertise in the field of Theatre in Youth Work, the Company, with Kully Thiarai at the helm, was keen to develop new work that took artistic risks (especially following the immense success of *Sleeping Dogs*, a play reminiscent of and inspired by Lorca) through form, content and style. In the ‘Three Year Plan (1995-1998)’ drawn up once Kully Thiarai took over, it was intended to actively debate and implement appropriate recommendations made by the Arts Council of Great Britain in its 1992 appraisal of the Company. While the artistic policy under Kully Thiarai has already been outlined earlier, some of the other characteristic features of the post '93 productions in accordance with the artistic policy need to be highlighted. The policy now prioritized new writing which was imaginative, challenging and accessible to youth audiences; a moving away from traditional issue based plays and a pursuit of a strong narrative form through which the issues and concerns of young people could be naturally addressed; a maintenance of commitment to new writing and pushing the quality of production scripts by engaging a dramaturg as part of the script development process; pioneering new projects through residency based work which actively sought/involved young people in the performing arts; taking along youth audience to theatre venues to empower them to become active participants and consumers of mainstream arts provision; and through the artistic process an exploration of the themes of internationalism and cultural diversity within Red Ladder’s work. Training priorities included marketing Red Ladder’s knowledge and expertise as a Training Agency in a way which generated additional income for the Company and undertaking and implementing the Asian Women’s traineeship programme for Stage Managers and Administrators.

In keeping with the emphasis on new and challenging writing, one observes that a number of the projects lined up in the three year plan centred around ‘Writing Policy’, ‘Resident Dramatist’ and the ‘Seeding/Workshop Programme’ (whereby the Company would develop the skills and craft of young writers whom it was keen to work with but unable to offer a commission to at that stage). A document entitled “‘Creative Dialogue’ Working With Writers”, possibly penned around 1995-1996, invites writers attuned with
Red Ladder's work and interested in being involved creatively with the Company. The
second paragraph of this document reads:

... How do we create work which combines observable 'learning
areas' with narrative that does not reduce to simple 'instructional
theatre'? Red Ladder is committed to offering its audiences full,
resonating dramas: ones which seek to make connections as
opposed to coming to conclusions. This dual responsibility to the
writer's craft and to the learning needs of the constituent audience
is a fine balance. It has led the Company to look at developing
ways in which it can offer strong dramaturgical support to the
writer without being prescriptive or limiting...

The keen interest taken by Red Ladder in the kind of scripts that the company
could work on is more than enough recognition of the fact that the Company could no
longer rely on actual happenings of history to provide themes for plays but rather on
enterprisingly crafted dramas to suit their different target audiences. This fact is amply
illustrated by Red Ladder's fifth national tour, for young women and girls groups, of
Mixed Blessings by Mary Cooper in 1994. What is the colour of love? How is the
meaning of a relationship changed by the colour of the skin for those who are involved
and those who look on? What does a black man imagine a sexual relationship with a
white woman is like? And what do their friends and family say about mixed race
relationships when the lovers' backs are turned? These questions and more are explored
by the play. Aimed at young women aged 14-25, the play uses comedy and music to
explore the nature of mixed race friendships and sexual relationships between young
Afro-Caribbean and white people.

Mixed Blessings is about friendships, loyalty and relationships with boyfriends.
Lisette (White, Irish) and Sian (Black, Afro-American) are best friends. They catch the
same bus to school, are in the same set for maths, buy the same kind of clothes and both
like basketball. But when boyfriends Mark and Jem appear on the scene, their friendship
is put to the test. Sparks fly, arguments brew and secrets unfold as Lisette and Sian
struggle to stay friends and hang on to their boyfriends. The play forces its audience to
recognise and challenge the existence of racial and sexual stereotypes. All these issues
are seen through the eyes of Lisette or Sian, from a black woman's point of view and a
white woman's point of view. How they perceive boys, how they think boys view them and what they think about their lives. There is a realisation amongst the characters that they are not alone in the way they feel and that problems can be overcome through talking and sharing in each other's experiences.

The play raises issues that affect young women's lives—their dress and identity, relationships with parents and with friends, sex, and different cultures and music. Reporting from a performance in a Nottingham youth centre, the reporter, Mandy Jarvis, said that it was clear from the audience's laughter and nods of recognition, that these issues were realistic to them and they could relate to what was going on. The performance contains a lot of movement, with music and dance playing a large part in each scene, giving the performers a lot of different things to do, but making for a visually interesting piece of theatre.

Before examining the other paraphernalia that Red Ladder used in this production (as it ritually did in other production) it would be worthwhile to analyse briefly how the primary text, i.e., the play itself, sought to reach out to its target audience. Within the play racial stereotypes are constantly challenged and differences of cultures celebrated. Sian is white and Irish while Lisette is Afro-Caribbean, and these different cultures are studied. In one scene, Lisette and Sian talk about different music they listen to, and perform the different sorts of dancing they do. They acknowledge that they eat different foods and their cultural backgrounds are very different in some respects, but similar in others. They both have problems with their boyfriends and parents and, as it turns out, they both have similar expectations of their friendship with each other. The real problems are created when they both get boyfriends and the conflict of seeing each other or seeing their boyfriends develop. Sian's boyfriend Jem is black and Lisette's boyfriend Mark is white.

Lisette tells Sian that she shouldn't go out with Jem because he'll treat her badly, he won't ring her, when they go out he'll ignore her all night and talk to his friends and that anyway, he's only interested in having sex with her. The problems of being in a mixed-race relationship are explored from both the young women’s cultural perspectives and sometimes turn out to be the same, although it also becomes clear that there are differences in the acceptability of a white woman seeing a black man and of a black
woman seeing a white man. Both young women are afraid that people will stare at them, that their boyfriends will boast to their friends, and that they’ll get into trouble with parents for bringing shame on the family. It becomes clear that young women in a mixed-race relationship have a whole range of considerations to think about, due to the existence of racial and sexual stereotypes and some of the lines in the play bring these to the forefront:

"Being friends is all right but you shouldn’t mix blood." (Friends of Lisette and Sian)
'I know you black girls want it.' (Sian’s brother, Michael to Lisette)
'I've been thinking it might be easier to go out with black eyes.' (Lisette)
'I don’t think of you as black. You’re just Lisette, my mate, and you just happen to be black." (Sian)

The play uses a lot of stereotypes of black and white people, which raises questions about where they all come from and whether there is any truth in them. Getting back to Mandy Jarvis, again, she says that these questions, along with the whole subject of mixed-race relationships and whether they could work, dominated discussions in the follow-up workshops.

As with all of Red Ladder’s productions, the performance of Mixed Blessings was followed by workshops where workers and young women were split up and given the opportunity to share their impressions of the play. The young women were in workshops, facilitated by the actresses and the youth workers, worked alongside Vashti Maclachlan, one of the Company’s musicians. The majority of young women and workers who were at the performance and participated in the workshops were black. After the Nottingham performance, the areas (as per Mandy Jarvis’ report) discussed by the young women included mixed-race relationships and how parents reacted to them; issues surrounding identity—being mixed-race in all white community, being mixed-race in all black community; people talking about you behind your back; sex and safe sex; sexual harassment—should you tell anybody or keep it to yourself; what other people might say if they found out. Lisa, who played Sian in the play said:

We’ve found that in the workshops young women talk to us as if we’re the characters that we’ve played in the performance, although we don’t consciously stay in role. It’s clear that they feel
safe talking to us and they were coming out with a lot of really good stuff. They wanted to tell us about what they got up to and what their relationships and friendships were like. We talked about boys and about how people perceive them as young women, what their parents say to them and how they feel about that.

I think it’s really important that all of these issues are brought into youth clubs. In the workshops there are no youth workers present and the young women do open up. It gives them the space to talk about what they’ve seen and how they feel about it personally with someone who they see as experiencing the same things that they do.

Amanda who played Lisette, explained that:

What we talk depends on the make-up of the group. Whether it’s a black group, white group or mixed group. Different young women talk about different things. I’ve found that when I’ve facilitated a workshop of white young women they want to ask me a lot of questions about what it’s like being a black woman. As a black performer, it’s good for me to think of why they’re asking me those questions, as well as making it clear that I can’t speak on behalf of all black women!

The play does throw up a lot of issues. The whole question of loyalty in friendship—having thought about it all and as a result of the conversations I’ve had with young women, I’ve found that there are no real right answers. It’s a lot about the discussions that young women have to face which are often really difficult. How to handle a relationship with a boyfriend and keep in with your girlfriends. Young women have told me that it’s about respect and that you have to give space to both people, as well as space for yourself, which seems like a good attitude to me.

Sitting in on the workshop for youth workers with Vashti Maclachlan, Mandy Jarvis who reported on this play observed that the general feeling was that the play raised some very important issues really well. The workers said that the whole issue of having mixed-race relationships was something that did come up a lot with the young women they worked with and that they did a lot of work around the whole issue of identity—how they saw themselves, how they related to their culture. They explained how black young women were constantly bombarded with negative images of their colour. One worker explained, “the lighter your skin is, the less flat the nose is, etc, the more attractive you are seen as being. Black is not perceived as being attractive.”
One of the workers talked about how she worked with young people who are of mixed race descent, “It’s very difficult for young people who are of mixed race themselves, as they find it even more difficult to formulate an identity of themselves.” It seemed that the workers found the production useful, as it related to the ongoing work they do with young women. Expressing it through theatre was another way of encouraging young women to feel more positive about themselves.

However, the whole issue of getting into mixed-race relationships remained a dilemma for some of the workers.

Young women (and men) will go into a relationship because they like the person, but when those involved are of different races there are so many other problems that go with it, like the reactions of family and friends. We try to make the young women we work with more aware of the problems they may encounter if they do go out with a white guy. That’s not to say they shouldn’t do it, just that they should be aware that it won’t be easy.

In the production, both characters have a stereotypical image of the other culture, of what a black man is like and what a white man is like, and some of the workers said that although the play uses a lot of these stereotypical images, they worked effectively because they showed them up for what they were—stereotypes based on prejudice and ignorance.

The opportunities for developing the issues raised in the play did not stop with the workshop. As with the other productions, workers took away information and resource listings to do follow-up work with the young women they worked with. Quotes and scenes from the play were extracted in the fanzine to stimulate follow-up discussion and create role-plays while an agree/disagree exercise was provided for further work which included statements like: “It’s okay to go out with someone of a different race”, “It’s okay to put your boyfriend before your girlfriend”, “If girls wear short skirts they are asking for it”, and “Friends always talk about you behind your back”.

The play for which one found extremely elaborate, detailed, resource material (apparently meant for youth workers to use for follow up) was Lin Coghlan’s Waking, which toured between April and July 1995. Perhaps the multidimensional themes of the play, its setting, the research that obviously went into its making demanded such well documented, exhaustive resource material to ensure that the play hit home.

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**Waking** is an Irish story which looks at family relationships and the often difficult journey back to one’s cultural roots. It explores the emotions, expectations and aspirations that span three generations. Sean is the grandfather who has lived all his life in Ireland. Michael has lost his job and with no place else to go, he returns to Ireland after an absence of twenty years taking his son, Brian with him. Brian is an English boy having lived all his life in England, yet at thirteen years old, makes an instant bond with Sean, his Irish grandfather whom he has never known. The arrival of Sarah (Sean’s close friend) on the scene and her strength and determination to bring the family together makes the three men gradually ‘wake’ to their emotions.

The contents of the ‘Resource Material’ for **Waking** are divided into Seven Sections: (i) Useful notes for facilitation/role play, (ii) General themes/issues in ‘Waking’ to use as stimulus in Youth Work, (iii) How do we fit into the world we live in?—‘Identity’, (iv) Family Relationships and the ‘work’ ethic, (v) Loss, (vi) Irish Cultural Traditions in the play, and (vii) About the Red Ladder Touring Team.

Within this broad rubric, however, are carefully worked out details of how to conduct post-production follow up workshops. In the ‘notes for discussion’ section emphasis is placed on the body language and listening skills of the youth worker/workshop coordinator, as also the kind of questions to be asked to facilitate discussion. Questions that invite yes and no answers are discouraged as they inhibit talk and other open questions are suggested such as “How do you feel about that? Why is it important to you? Could you give some examples? Has anyone else felt this way? Who could they talk about this? Are there any other possibilities?” That the kind of venue chosen was an important factor in creating the right atmosphere for interaction is perceived by the fact that the nature of the venue is spelt out, both on this page as also reiterated in the next section to read: “Space to hold the discussion should be ‘safe’ (not a thoroughfare),” “... should be ‘safe’ in order to set up a supportive environment for working (there is nothing worse than having an uninvited audience).”

Apart from bringing certain issues to the front, the fact that for Red Ladder, theatre is only a means to a greater end, that of learning about or recognizing individual/societal/other weaknesses and attempting to amend these is reflected in the resource material as well. The resource material reinforces to its user:

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e) After the role-play has taken place, review what has happened with the participants—discuss particular areas of interest: Why did they work? If they didn’t, why not? How could this be developed?  
f) The analysis is as important as the role play itself—this is where the real learning takes place.

Empowering the spectators, by making them not just participants in the post-production interactive sessions but in turn becoming actors, is also underlined in this resource material by the suggestion that following the role play, scenes could be taped and then scripted if the group agreed on it. The work could then be developed into theatre, using music, scenery, costume, etc. The ongoing and processual nature of the theatrical project as undertaken by Red Ladder is underlined by such a suggestion. Again, the fact that Red Ladder uses Theatre to help generate greater welfare for people is brought home by the manual’s directive that knowledge of other support agencies and availability of their leaflets providing relevant information was essential during the workshops.

The remarkable feature about Waking’s resource material is the minuteness and exactitude with which every dimension is worked out so that the section on general themes/issues is a compilation of every possible aspect of the play through key terms; the numerous quotes cited to be used as referral points are aptly chosen from all parts of the play and maintain the connectivity of the workshop with the play. A case in point is the section on ‘Loss’. The resource kit actually chalks out the various stages that a person experiencing loss may go through from, both, the psychological as also the physiological angles—the sentiments/emotional confusion of the person as manifest in his/her thoughts and physical symptoms.

The two sections “How do we fit into the world we live in?” and “Irish Cultural Traditions” focus on the whole idea of difference—between individual identities in terms of the impact of their environment, family, social group, cultural group, childhood, adulthood and heritage. The profiles of the actors at the end and in the fanzine accentuates not just these differences but also signals that such differences rather than creating divides in communities, should engender mutual harmony. Only taking interest in and learning about each other can achieve this harmony. Such an educative process can help one see the plus side of another’s traditions—a learning that can even affect ones own life positively if one were to adopt beneficial aspects of traditions. Thus the title of
the play, Waking, is actually a reference to the ritual where Irish people ‘wake’ their dead, encouraging the living to celebrate the dead person’s life. Metaphorically, ‘waking’ implies that knowledge alone can prevent the formation of adverse judgement as well as foster mutual respect among different communities.

This detailed resource kit is documentary evidence of the fact that though the nature of the ritual devices used by the Company and the artistic level of the plays produced may have reformed, the primary mission of Red Ladder, inciting social change, remains very much in place.

Following Red Ladder’s successful collaboration with Kuffdem Theatre Company in the production of No Mean Street, 1996 saw yet another such successful venture by Red Ladder. Recognising that in spite of the world becoming smaller due to interconnectivity, there was also increasing separatism and fragmentation and that the need to cut across divides more imperative; Red Ladder felt that artistes have a special function in creating processes of work that prove that one can create, dream and work collaboratively. In doing so one can begin to imagine and produce a healthier future; creative work for and with young people would thus have to naturally be high on the agenda. The collaboration between Red Ladder and Theatre Direct Canada in the production of Noel Greig’s End of Season was one such attempt to engage artistes and young people across divides of geography, race and culture; the project involved artistes whose histories span three continents, Asia, Europe and North America.

In 1994 a young white woman, Kelly Turner, revealed to the police that her ex-boyfriend was the perpetrator of a vicious, racist attack on a young Bengali boy. The reaction she received from her peer group and her community was both horrifying and yet not surprising. Around the same time, Red Ladder was talking to playwright Noel Greig with a view to him writing a new play for the Company. Red Ladder was concerned by the rise of tribalism particularly amongst young people, and were interested in the stories of individuals who, in different ways, broke ranks with the cultures they were framed in. Kelly Turner’s story inspired the Company and, two years on, End of Season was the product fuelled by the stories of individuals like Kelly.

As part of the development of End of Season, a twelve member team of theatre artistes from both sides of the Atlantic came together in Toronto in November 1995. A
wide range of voices brought their histories to the project: English, British Asian, Canadian Asian, Czech, Scottish, Ukranian, Indo-Caribbean and Irish. This process reflected the artistic and philosophical concerns of both, Red Ladder and Theatre Direct, Canada: to create a new piece of work for young people on both sides of the Atlantic which was not simply ‘about’ the world we live in but which, in the manner it had been conceived and executed, challenged the fragmentation we see all around us. It was only by finding ways for artistes to connect, that Red Ladder felt one could produce the art that is now needed.

As anxious and insecure communities begin to close in on themselves, to withdraw from the notion of shared citizenry in a pluralistic culture, Red Ladder through its theatre sought (and continues to seek) to invite young people to see beyond their own constituent group and to make connections—not by abandoning their own cultures, ways and traditions, but by engaging in a dialogue, which enables them to question and challenge the view that ‘difference’ means ‘the other’ means ‘the enemy’.

The intentions of the Artistic Director (Kully Thiarai), Playwright (Noel Greig) and Canadian Director (John Van Burek) are succinctly spelt out in the programme. While Noel Greig wanted “to tell the story of individuals who are confronted by the choice of self-interest or standing up and speaking out against what they know is wrong”; Kully Thiarai “was interested in making links that were real connections: connections that broke boundaries and safe heavens, crossed divisions of geography, race and culture...”, and John Van Burek asks, “... as the world grows smaller, do we, as humans, have to follow suit? The injustices of the world are huge; are their solutions any bigger than our individual responses to them on a daily basis? None of us pretend to have the answers but our play is an invitation to you to join in the search.”

What then is End of the Season all about? The play follows the story of five characters: Frances Murphy (mother), Linda Murphy (daughter), Trevor Hipkin (boyfriend/husband to be), Harjit Singh Gill (father: Asian/English) and Rajinder Singh Gill (nicknamed Royce—son: Asian/Canadian). It is set in a seaside town in England: “A world of arcades, ice cream vans, funfairs, chip shops, discos, bed and breakfast. A world away from the world on the TV screen: the faraway world where whole communities, nations, are torn apart.”
Here, at the end of the summer, people are preoccupied with more personal matters. Frances worries about the takings of her small guest house. Her daughter Linda, obsessed with the 'soaps', is planning to marry Trevor and longs to leave the house, opened annually to strangers. It was supposed to be a beautiful summer for Trevor and Linda, A summer rich with dreams and desires. A summer full of fun.

Then two strangers arrive: Harjit and his son Royce from their home in Canada. Having visited far flung relatives in India and England, Harjit has now to visit the English seaside town that holds memories dear to him. During their stay, cultures collide with tragic consequences. As events unfold, the sectarian, tribal fractures that appear as distant events on the TV screen cast their shadows over the lives of the people in the town. In a place where the only things that seem to happen are the opening and closing of the season and the ebb and flow of the tides the harsh realities of an increasingly divided world do not seem as remote and incomprehensible as they do each night on the news.

The tensions and pressures people face in that bastion of English tolerance, the seaside town, are exposed—identity and cultural heritage are brought to the fore. When loyalties of blood, family, habit and friendship are tested, where will people stand at the season’s end? A symbolic and taunting piece of contemporary theatre *End of Season* exposes our failure to see what’s happening at our own door steps.

Immediately after the messages by the Artistic Director, etc, of the production, is the touring team’s profile created through questions answered by the team members. Some of the questions included are: “Where do you come from?”, “Where do you live now?” and “What is your ambition?” Seemingly innocuous questions, it is the answers given that drive home the differences in origin, culture and desire between the individuals who hail from Bangladesh, Canada, Ireland and England; who live in different parts of England or Canada; and whose desires (though the seriousness with which these last revelations are made is dubious) range from “making plays with people I like and live in a commune” to “learn the English language”. In turn, these differences lead to the idea that there can still be a commonality of interests; the very fact that such dissimilar people can get together and ‘act’ can be read metaphorically in the sense that agit prop theatre means to.
Directly connecting different aspects of the play to the issues these raise, the next section of the resource programme contains quotes from the play and suitable questions to generate discussion. The themes that crop up through the questions are vast: racism and intolerance, youth violence, gang culture and tribalism, family identity, cultural identity, teenage relationships/teenage pregnancy, peer group pressure and the power and influence of television. The last section focuses on culture and moves from discussion to action, i.e., the idea of cultural difference is explored through project work such as “make a list describing as many aspects of your culture within your group”, “Research the culture of a different community”, and “Create a ‘Cultural Wall’ using images from magazines.”

To reiterate a point made earlier, this process of moving from discussion to action post-production continues the agit prop traditions maintained by Red Ladder of the ‘play’ serving only as ‘starter’.

The growing ingenuity then, of the fanzines was a natural outcome. For if this was not the time for protest marches or demonstrations and instead was time for persuasive emotional education, what better way for Red Ladder to communicate than through the resource material/fanzines.

Produced in 1996 Autumn, Roy Williams’ Josie’s Boys looked at single parenting and the choices young people have to make in terms of their friends, family and career. The fanzine accompanying Josie’s Boys is significant in the way it persuades young people to look at things from their parents’ perspectives—it reveals the flip side of parenting. The significance of this fanzine lies in the humorous tone adopted in conveying its message; obviously a deliberate strategy employed to connect with young people resisting any discourse that appears pontificating. Even the tour profile of the stage manager Fran Maskell is funny as for example the last line that says, “She’s a pleasant enough girl as long as she has plenty of chocolate to eat and doesn’t have to wear a dress.” The suggestion under the tongue-in-cheek heading “How to bring up your parents” continues on this light yet effective plane:

1... Don’t be afraid to speak their language. Try to use strange sounding phrases like ‘I’ll help you with the dishes’ and ‘Yes’.
2... Try to understand their music. Play Gary Glitters’ ‘D’ yer wanna be in my gang on the stereo until you’re accustomed to the
sound. 3... Encourage your parents to talk about their problems. Try to keep in mind that, to them, things like earning a living and paying the rent/mortgage seems important. 4... Be tolerant of their appearance. When your mum or dad get a new haircut, don’t feel personally humiliated. Remember, it’s important for them to look like their peers. 5... Most important of all, if they do something you consider wrong, let them know that it’s their behaviour you dislike, not them.

Apart from the difference in tone (suiting the target group of the play) that one observes in this fanzine, the other feature to be noted is that this is a ‘thinking’ fanzine rather than a physically proactive one. In other words, the fanzine appeals to the reasoning powers of the audience; it attempts to arouse self awareness as such awareness alone provides scope for change. The questions asked in the fanzine followed by the grouping of the spectators according to their scores is a device used specifically for this purpose. Such categorisation though apparently playful is not intended to become thus. It is meant to lead to introspection. Thus follow up ‘action’ in Red Ladder’s dictionary in the nineties changed in definition, it now read more along the lines of self education and change.

That such self education can only occur alongside discovering/exploring one’s identity (ies) is therefore a given fact. Red Ladder’s Spring 1997 production, Kaahini, a play by award winning playwright Maya Chowdhry, meant for young people (14+) and adults, explores questions of gender, duty and kismet. Set in 1990s Britain, this intriguing tale of denial, deception and family pride uses rich, poetic language to reveal the dreams, aspirations and frustrations of being young and Asian.

Neelendra believes his prayers for a son have been answered as he celebrates the birth of his child Esha; but will he ever fully understand the real meaning behind the words of the Mystic? For the Mystic says cryptically, “You want a son for your life to be fulfilled, you believe you must have a son in order to live. Be careful—where needs and desires cross the path of destiny only chaos will follow.” As Esha reaches adolescence, the secrets held so long with the family erupt with devastating consequences: Esha is not a boy after all.

Esha is training hard for the school football final and dreams of winning the cup; ‘his’ parents Neelendra and Anishaa want the best for him but worry. Meanwhile ‘his’
best friend Farooq is dreaming of girls and wants to hang out as ‘Juicy’s’. Then there’s
Kaahini; is she Esha’s ‘real self’, ‘alter ego’, ‘other’? Farooq is attracted to Kaahini. As if
being a teenager was not enough, being an Asian teenager is even more difficult—
especially when the past merges with the present, cultures collide and you’re a girl.

In researching this play Maya Chowdhry uncovered shamanic rituals in which
men and women exchange genders, Hindu philosophy recounts how the ‘self’ splits into
male and female at the beginning of the world. Reflecting on the genderless nature of ‘the
soul’ Maya reread the tale of Sikhandin in The Mahabharata, where King Drupada brings
up his daughter as a son after a dream in which Lord Shiva tells him his Queen is bearing
a son. Thinking about the implications of the legacy of the Ramayana: boys are told to be
like Rama and girls to be like Sita, and the taboos this puts in place, Maya wanted to use
this as a background to a play about young Asian people based upon ideas and
information gained while working with them.

The Programme/Resource of Kaahini takes the definition of Gender from the
Oxfam handbook emphasising that “whilst sexual identity is biologically determined,
gender identity is not. It is constructed by society and therefore can change and be
changed. Gender roles and relations are constantly changing, at variable rates and in
diverse ways in different cultures.” The follow-up work involving the spectators after this
definition includes making a list describing different aspects of one’s gender; researching
how different genders are portrayed in material culture (books, newspapers, television,
etc) and questioning whether this shapes our view about how men and women should
behave; and creating a gender wall using gender images from different Asian cultures.

One of the interesting facets of this particular fanzine are the questions asked of
the touring team in the profile creations. These are searching questions that attempt to
project the inner thoughts/beliefs/attitudes of the team members. They read:

1. What did you want to be when you were young?
2. Do you believe in love?
3. If you could be someone else who would you be?
4. What is your image of freedom?
5. What is your favourite food?
6. What is your life’s desire?
7. What’s great about being a man/women?
8. What does friendship mean to you?
9. Who are you?
10. What did you inherit from your parents?

Undoubtedly, some of the answers given are flippant but the nature of the questions asserts the theme of this play and the larger aims of Red Ladder in choosing it for performance. As observed earlier, such a method of personalising the actors establishes their 'one of us' quality and signals that anyone (among the audience) could well become a 'performer'.

But perhaps the most significant aspect of *Kaahini* is the language of the play. Classically, agitprop drama would refrain from poetic language, assuming it to undercut the message of the play. However if one keeps in mind that, equally conventionally, agitprop theatre recognises that the play is only secondary—what is of more importance is the follow-up action, then one realises that by staging plays like *Kaahini*, Red Ladder was in fact following both conventions. For not only were the audience being treated to an artistically sound play but were also being motivated to think along the lines of the ideas propagated by the play. Rather than being a diluted genre, agitprop theatres strength had actually been enhanced.

Completing thirty years in 1998, Red Ladder's horizons had considerably expanded and it had even began to make international connections towards the millennium. In January 1998 the company visited Delhi for two weeks. Kully Thiarai, Noel Greig and Ann Cross worked with arts practitioners, students and young people sharing the company's work and history through a series of workshops in Playwrighting and Performance. The Asian Theatre School, which was collaboration between Theatre in the Mill, Bradford and Red Ladder had held two summer schools in 1997 and 1998 offering young Asian performers an inspiring introduction to the performing arts led by actors, writers, directors and musicians from across the UK. The outcome, *Masala Nights*, a play performed in Autumn 1998, in which reality and fantasy created a spicy mix when Bradford and Bollywood collided, was the first opportunity for the participants to put their skills to the test in the creation of an original and unique piece of theatre.

Spring 1998 saw the production of *Wise Guys* by Philip Osment, a hard hitting, stark and engaging play about the lives of four young men, Mike, Skid, Stephen and Darren. Osment says:
There is a widely held belief that there is more and more violence in our society and that more and more people—young men in particular—are turning to drugs and crime. There are those who blame this on the breakdown of the family and the collapse of traditional moral values; others say that we have become greedy and selfish because we live in a world where only money matters.

What is certainly true is that there are many young people in present day Britain who do not feel valued and who are not being given the opportunity to realize their full potential. The role of men in our society is changing—they are no longer necessarily the breadwinners and many young men do not feel that they have a role to play.

I decided that I wanted to write a play about a group of young men whose lives reflect this state of affairs and then look at whether they are able to turn their lives around and change direction, find a sense of purpose.

... I wanted to show that whatever choice [he] made it wasn't going to be easy. I think young people know this and so any play that suggested otherwise they would find untruthful.8

Obviously Osment was successful in his efforts and as one review reported "Red Ladder and Theatre Centre pour vital new theatrical blood into the old bottle of socially-conscious drama."9

The artistic merit of this play and its performance is matched by the gravity with which the follow up work has been undertaken. For there is not just a booklet with notes for youth workers to use as resource material put together with information from Red Ladder's Touring Team and the Oxfam Gender Training manual, but also a booklet of information for young people in the audience.

The information booklet for the young audience contains a large section on and by the actors who answer a number of questions (a) about their selves regarding their origins and what influenced them to join theatre; (b) the main male influence in their lives and (c) a difficult moment with their dad/adult male figure. It is necessary to reemphasise the reason why Red Ladder makes an in depth study of the actors responses to such questions: the boundaries between actor and audience are done away with; the 'sacredness' of the performance space (as maintained by proscenium arch theatre) is erased and the involvement of the performers with the issues propagated by the play is underlined. In other words, the insight provided into the actors' thoughts/lives serves as
an entry point to members of the audience to join in the 'play'. This is characteristic of good agit prop theatre.

The actor responses are preceded by the author's words and thoughts from the Director; the latter felt “Directing ‘Wise Guys’ was an opportunity for me to learn more about why we are violent to each other. In helping to tell the story I wanted to allow others the opportunity to think more about our own/their own use of violence.” Yet another instance of the collective approach retained by Red Ladder; each production person was involved with the play as much on ideological as on artistic grounds.

Following the actor responses, are two sections on ‘Bullying’ and ‘Abuse’, each defining the parameters within which the two terms operate; as well as suggesting carelines that one can tap if one is a victim of either. The penultimate section is an agreement/disagreement poll allowing scope for interpersonal discussion. The last page contains a little questionnaire for the audience regarding their thoughts about all aspects of the production—the play, the discussions and the booklet; and inviting further comments and discussion—Red Ladder’s efforts to facilitate evaluation of the Company’s work.

This young people’s booklet, as said earlier, complements the Youth Workers Resource Pack. Drawing heavily from examples in the play, the pack first highlights the key themes/issues in the play with questions specific to the play as well as general ones. Yet again, as in other resource packs, this one also encourages the movement from discussions to creative activities such as role play, drama scenes, making a video, writing song lyrics and creating a visual art display: i.e., the impetus is towards action than towards speech. The pack then moves on to gender issues, the two major aims being to introduce the term ‘gender’ to a group and to help male youth to see the pressures on them to adopt certain attitudes. This is done by making the participants respond to statements and then a discussion on the answers by the whole group. Finally, the last pages contain brief biographies of the actors, the latest update on Red Ladder and information on how to become involved in theatre.

One aspect of these resource kits that must be mentioned is their increasing sophistication, their material enhancement. Reflecting the consumerist culture of the times, one notices that the packaging of these resource kits (as regards the quality of
paper, illustrations and the obvious labour put into their making) is greatly improved. While no direct inference can be drawn from this development, it can certainly be perceived as a sign that (a) Red Ladder is materially doing better in its functioning as a Theatre Company, and (b) that there is a recognition on Red Ladder's part that just as the plays needed artistic skill to survive, so did the resource kits need touching up to sustain the attention and commitment of an impatient generation.

For example, the resource kit accompanying the production of Rosy Fordham's Crush, retoured in Autumn 1998, is positively a riot of colours in that single pages of different sizes, each containing notes/information/questions, etc are of different hues. Such an eyecatcher makes for immediate visual impact, and is indicative of a growing awareness on Red Ladder's part of the tactical devices one needs to employ to survive in a world increasingly susceptible to the seduction of good advertising.

Concluding a research project such as this is both simple as well as tough. It is simple for one could easily sum up Red Ladder's status by stating that the Company, having weathered all kinds of difficult circumstances is here to stay. But it is tough for one cannot predict how much the Company will change with time; how much it will modify its aims/target groups/methodologies and how much further it will distance itself from pure agit prop theatre.

However it is also visible that the very definition of the term 'agit prop' has undergone change—from inciting the masses to protest and demonstrate against political and social ills of the time; to generating awareness about the same and motivating people to work with social welfare organizations towards a better environment. Earlier agit prop encouraged militant resistance while contemporary agit prop veers towards a more pacifist, mediating stance. This has been traced through both, an analysis of the plays as well as of the follow-up activities.

Thus this thesis can be said to be as complete as it can possibly be and said to reach a positive conclusion. For with the view that agit prop theatre will continue to survive, one presumes that Red Ladder too will not cease to exist. In what form and structure however, is for this millennium and the courses that history takes, to decide.
Notes and References

1 Information from copy of article in ‘Youth Clubs with the Edge’, September 1990, p.22 given by Red Ladder, entitled ‘Red Ladder—The Bus Shelter Tour.’


3 Ibid.

4 The fanzine informs that ‘mules are women used by drug smugglers to swallow condoms filled with cocaine, and then to travel to other parts of the world where the drug (which passes through the bowels in the toilet) is then sold for profit on the streets. These women sometimes die of drug overdoses when the condom bursts inside of them. They are called mules and are only ever paid a small amount of the money.’

5 Set in a mythical Eastern Europe country, Sleeping Dogs using rich classical text and heightened poetic language tells the story of Assan and Marina, two young lovers from different cultures with different religions and different customs. For forty years the leader had ruled with an iron fist, stray dogs slept peacefully in the park and their families lived as neighbours. When the old government was swept away and peace was threatened, Assan and Marina found themselves caught in the crossfire of a community at war. Would their love survive?


7 From the programme accompanying the play.

8 Quoted in the information booklet.