

NEWS

Comrades celebrate a local hero

A Celebration for Peter Cheeseman

2.30 pm, Sunday 18 July

A theatre pioneer who devoted his life to putting Staffordshire on stage has been celebrated at the New Vic this month.

A special one-night-only event on **Sunday 18 July** will celebrate the life and achievements of founder, Peter Cheeseman CBE. One of the most influential theatre directors of the last 50 years, Peter and his work earned the Victoria Theatre, a small theatre in a converted street corner cinema in Hartshill, Newcastle-under-Lyme, an international reputation.

Peter became famous for his 'documentaries', which often drew attention to local causes. Starting with *Jolly Potters* (1964), these were made by sending out his actors to research original material, using only the words spoken or written by the people involved in the actual events. Other productions included *The Fight for Shelton Bar*, about attempts to keep open the steel works at Shelton Bar, which was also made into a BBC film.

As well as putting the region on the cultural map, Peter also nurtured the careers of some of the industry's biggest names, including Ben Kingsley, Mike Leigh and Robert Powell.

In April, news of Peter's death saw a flood of tributes from local people, national newspapers and household names, including Powell.

He said: *"There are some people who are absolutely, totally responsible for me sitting here now, and Peter's at the top of page one."*

Refusing work for the Royal Shakespeare Company and in London, Peter was Director of Staffordshire's Victoria Theatre and the New Vic, Europe's first purpose-built, theatre-in-the-round, for an unprecedented 36 years.

Peter produced 393 plays, directing 147 of them himself. He remained a passionate advocate of theatre-in-the-round and of a 'people's theatre' and he encouraged writers and actors such as Alan Ayckbourn, Ben Kingsley, Bob Hoskins and Alan Plater, making North Staffordshire an unlikely creative hothouse.

Film director Mike Leigh, was an actor with Peter's company in the 1960s. *"Working with Peter"*, he says, *"was a special and creative time. The spirit in which we worked – to be political and truthful – was down to him. He was a genius, a vagabond, a facilitator. What he achieved is colossal"*.

A Celebration for Peter Cheeseman is at 2.30 pm, on Sunday 18 July. The event marks the start of a new fund to be used to continue work on the Victoria Theatre Cheeseman Archive, housed at Staffordshire University.

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Tickets are available for a £10.00 (minimum) donation to the Cheeseman Archive Fund. Book through the New Vic's Box Office on 01782 717962 or go online www.newvictheatre.org.uk.

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