

# Up the Feeder Down the Mouth

**ACH Smith on his moving homage to the lost world of Bristol dockers**

In 1996 Andy Hay, then director of the Bristol Old Vic, commissioned me to write a play about Bristol docks, in the researched documentary vein of a play about the GWR I had written for the BOV some years earlier. It would take account of the thousand-year history of the docks, but would focus on the industrial experience of dockers still living. Like a Bristolian Studs Terkel, I listened to about 50 old dockers and their wives and a few seamen, and wound up with a hundred close-typed pages of material, about five times as much as an evening on stage would need. The job, then, was selection, and shaping. People might think it an easy way to write a play, to base it on documentary material. It is not. Often I longed for the licence just to write a scene out of my head. Some linking parts were like that, but most of the scenes had to respect the human experience of the source. Even some of the songs arose from the research. An old seaman said to me, Prince Street, look at it now, what have you got?, and those words open the closing number. Hay drove me through nine drafts on the first production of 'Up the Feeder, Down the Mouth', in the Theatre Royal, and four more on the 2001 revival, not to mention on-the-wing tweaks in the course of rehearsals.

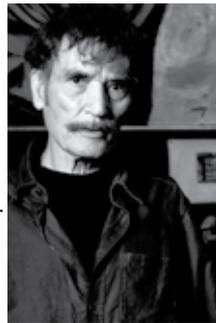
In the Theatre Royal in 1997 we had a professional cast of 11, plus five musicians, and 34 extras as dockers and chorus. The extras had their own director, Mike Shepherd of Kneehigh. Over the three-week run we filled about 70 percent capacity, with full houses in the last week. There were up to six curtain calls, and enthusiastic reviews. Many in the audience had seldom or

never been to a theatre. They shouted out, ignoring the shushing. It was, of course, in recognition of the way of life they had known when there were still working ships in the heart of Bristol. Every night elderly men were in tears. Liverpool dockers on strike came down,

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 “some of the audience shouted out, ignoring the shushing”

and told us that they recognised every docking dodge and slang phrase.

Four years later, Hay decided to revive the play, 'but this time we'll do it on the



ACH Smith  
 PHOTO: Stephen Morris

Howard, Mark and Ross  
 PHOTO: Graham Burke

docks itself. The revival was to be staged on Prince's Wharf, with the keen collaboration of the Industrial Museum. It would be a much larger show, with a very big real ship docking, and cranes and a shunting engine and a van performing. We needed to introduce new material. John O'Hara, the musical director, called me in to hear a canon he had written. 'I've always wanted to write a canon.' I liked it, and told him I'd often complained that it was the writer who had to do the stone-breaking work, finding a song's form and rhythms, making things easy for the composer. I would enjoy doing it this way round. I began to feel less easy, however, when we agreed it had to fit into a sequence where our cast of extras were unloading bananas from the ship. I was not brimming over with witty lines about unloading bananas. At home, I had more trouble writing those words, to fit O'Hara's canon, than any other song I've done. I never got them quite right, and would have a fresh go if there were another revival.

Throughout rehearsals and the run I was on crutches, having broken my ankle when delivering, on a wet pitch, the most literal leg-break in the history of cricket. The BRI did a brilliant job, on what they told me were four snapped bones, one of which had 'migrated'. Since I had recently suffered a broken arm, playing cricket of course, they wanted to be sure that I was not developing osteoporosis. They did a bone scan, and as a result I now have it written down, on NHS-headed paper,



that I am *essentially normal*. I carry it in my wallet to rebuke doubters.

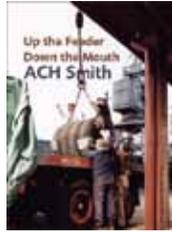
The revival booked out its entire run before the opening night. The Theatre Royal production had primed demand, and local television news got interested. Sarah Smith, the BOV general manager, told me it was just as well we sold every one of 8000 seats, because staging the show had cost so much that 70 percent, good going normally, would have left the company on its uppers. To this day people tell me how much they enjoyed it, or how cheesed-off they were at not getting in.

Every night, watching the show, I felt like Saint Sebastian, pierced by the little things that were not quite right. Stephen Sondheim once watched a show of his in rehearsal and at the end said, 'Perfect. Now make it better.' It's always like that for the writer. You miss the bigger picture. But the reviews were warm. *The Observer*, in its 2001 annual review of British theatre, called it the single most magical moment of the year. The most withering comment on the show was just outside L Shed, where the audience entered. The pavement had been dug up, so there was a big sign to redirect people, with an arrow pointing towards the theatre entrance, and what the sign said was: *Pedestrian Diversion*. Surely it's a bit better than that, I thought.

The production manager, Derek Simpson, got the credit he deserved. Sadly, Hay did not. Having conceived the show and set it up, he had resigned from the BOV before rehearsals began, and the production was directed by Heather Williams and Gareth Machin. After ten years as Artistic Director, Hay felt crushed by the bureaucracy of dealing with the Arts Council, and tepid support from the city council. He wanted an easier life, in television.

People from the National Theatre came to see the show but it was too site-specific (and, I suspect, too Bristol-specific) for them to consider a transfer, even though, I pointed out, they have got a river outside their place. So many people had been turned away at the box-office that the BOV were debating whether they should put it on again in 2002, but decided that that might turn it into an annual rite, and it would be better to wait a year or two. But then the BOV entered a sombre period, leading to the brink of permanent closure, and a fresh revival was out of the question. ■

**'A sign outside M Shed said pedestrian diversion. Surely it's a bit better than that, I thought'**



**Up the Feeder, Down the Mouth: the long life and sudden death of Bristol City Docks dramatised by ACH Smith**  
to be published February 2012 by Redcliffe Press  
£12.95

**Wordsmith**  
a memoir by ACH Smith will be published by Redcliffe Press in 2012



## The Pierhead Jump

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### The Pierhead Jump

When you have had it up to here,  
You can't afford a pint of beer,  
Your head's gone down, your shoulders  
slump,  
What do you do? The pierhead jump.

When you've just got to get away,  
Can't stand it here another day,  
You're out of luck, you've got the hump,  
What do you do? The pierhead jump.

Far away places,  
With magnetic names,  
Caracas, Odessa,  
Macao, Conakry,  
There's a place for you and me ...  
Worse things happen at sea ...

No place like home. You come ashore,  
But it's no place to be once more.  
It's worse than before, you're down with a  
bump,  
So what do you do? The pierhead jump.



# Exploring? It's boring

The true story of the Port of Bristol in three and a half minutes

SONG  
In twelve-forty AD  
To everyone's surprise  
The Bristol city fathers  
Show some enterprise.

The Frome was just a rivulet,  
To Bristol Bridge it led.  
So they dig a half-mile trench  
Down past W Shed.

CABOT  
My name is Giovanni Caboto.  
A new day, a new dollar's my motto.  
They think I'm exploring.  
Exploring? It's boring.  
I'm out to make money, a lotto.

MRS Q  
We know he won't find no Japan or  
China.

CABBAGE  
We've been over there regular. It's the  
codfish, see. Teeming, they are. You can  
pull 'em out in baskets. No one else  
knows about it. Apart from the cod,  
forget it.

MRS Q  
So we try to put him off it. But oh no, he  
doth have to go and see for himself, he  
doth. And now they're all on to it.

CABBAGE  
We should've knifed him, and had done  
with it.

SONG  
By seventeen hundred and nought  
We've got a prosperous port.  
From America vessels come  
With sugar, tobacco and kegs of rum.

DOLLY  
But the ships are always getting bigger,  
look.

MRS Q  
At low water, they sit on mud.

SCOUSER  
In Liverpool, we've got two *wet* docks,  
like.

SONG  
In 1735  
A committee speaks as one:  
If you want this port to thrive  
Something has to be done.

MAYOR  
Too expensive.



SONG  
Trinkets, guns and gin  
Were sent out on the waves,  
And when they got to Africa  
They traded them for slaves.

PINNEY  
Surely God ordained them for the use and benefit  
of us, otherwise his divine will would have been  
made manifest by some sign.

GOD  
B:@@7K  
Hands off those Africans, Bristol!  
4gf [fy Vgf kZwz VeahWaa] WfzSfz