

Edinburgh Fringe: Social and political dynamics of shutting down British coal mines

by [Larry Bridwell](#)

Theater at its best tells history. That is always the case at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, the world's largest arts festival. The next Fringe, August 4 to 28, 2017, features 30,000 performances of over 3,000 productions of drama, musical, and dance productions. To offer a sense of it, here is what I saw at the last event, which dealt powerfully with what happened when Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher downsized the British coal industry.



"The Red Shed"

Written and performed by Mark Thomas; directed by Joe Douglas. At the [Traverse Theatre](#).

In the 1970's, when the socialist Labor Party was in power, negotiations between a coal-friendly government and the miners usually led to taxpayer subsidies and the protection of jobs. This changed when the Conservative Thatcher government insisted on a financially independent coal industry, setting the stage for a long, contentious conflict. This led to a series of miners strikes with the marching slogan of "Coal not Dole" based on the premise that the loss of jobs would lead to welfare.

The Red Shed is a pub in a mining community founded by a socialist activist and for fifty years, it has been a meeting place for political organizing. The color red has been historically linked to socialist movements.

The Red Shed's history serves as the theatrical framework for describing the social solidarity of the community in supporting its miners. The play revolves around Thomas's recollection of the singing by elementary school children of the socialist solidarity anthem during a parade of striking miners. As a journalist, he wants to accurately report the facts, so thirty years later he conducts an elaborate investigation.

A fascinating part of his remarks during the play is his description of how the Labor Party abandoned coal miner communities. He



said working class voters viewed the Brexit Referendum as a rare opportunity to rebel against the establishment and voted overwhelmingly for Brexit.

The play was supported by nine labor unions, and shows how the Fringe provides a venue for social activism.



“Undermined”

Written and performed by Danny Mellor; directed by Ben Butcher.

“Undermined,” in contrast to “The Red Shed’s” focus on political history, was very personal. Danny Mellor brilliantly describes how closely knit communities in Yorkshire were upended by the anti-Thatcher mine strikes. When the mines were open, everyone could get a job, but the mine closings turned these once prosperous communities upside down and created conflicts among men and their socially inter-connected families.

At the beginning of the strikes, workers and their friends, in their twenties and thirties, would travel to towns and cities to support union activists. Afterwards, they would go to pubs and enjoyed close social solidarity.

But scabs, economically desperate, crossed picket lines and created highly personal bitterness as once close working class communities became tragically destabilized.

“Playing Maggie”

Written and performed by Pip Utton; directed by Marguerite Chaigne.

The politics of the miners’ strike is also a topic in “Playing Maggie,” which features a brilliant impersonation of Margaret Thatcher. The play won the Winner Stage Award for Acting Excellence and the Outstanding Theatre Award 2015. It begins with a male actor Pip Utton putting on make-up, a wig and then a dress while he conducts a dialogue with Margaret Thatcher. When he finishes dressing, his voice changes from male to female and he addresses the audience as Thatcher, realistically conveying her conservative political personality.



A highlight of the performance is unscripted questions from the audience addressed to “Thatcher.” Utton brilliantly improvises answers in her spirit.



Towards the end of the play, Utton switches from portraying Thatcher and talks about his father losing his job as a miner. He describes how his father continued for the rest of his life to go nightly to the local pub to socialize with fellow former miners.

Earlier in the play, Margaret Thatcher says that hard-working taxpayers should not subsidize money-losing operations, a view which was the basis of her shutdown of the government-owned mines. But when the mines were in operation, many miners died prematurely during their forties and fifties from accidents, heart attacks and lung diseases. Utton points out the irony that his father lived into his eighties instead of dying at a much younger age, which might have happened if the British Government had continued to fund the money-losing mines.

The world of British coal mines encompassed labor unions, left-wing politics, social solidarity, and close knit communities surrounding local pubs. When Margaret Thatcher confronted the reality of money-losing government-owned mines, dramatic social upheaval ensued. Thirty years later, these reverberations are still expressed at the Festival Fringe.

If you go

Edinburgh Festival Fringe occurs for three weeks every August. A wide range of tasty, reasonably priced food is available, frequently right next to the theaters. Also, Edinburgh has an excellent bus system. The only drawback is the high cost of lodging during the Fringe month. There are bed & breakfasts and apartments to share as well as hotels. It is best to book accommodations several months ahead.

[Edinburgh Festival Fringe](#)