

Derek Smith

Debbie Collins: This is an interview for Discovering Stratford Village Working Communities Working Lives, the interviewer is Debbie Collins and my interviewee is Derek Smith. So Derek, please can you tell us your date of birth and where were you born?

Derek Smith: 30th of the 7th, 1943, and I was born...right...in Castle Donington, in... I think it is Leicestershire but it might be in Derbyshire. I am not too sure

DC: So, how did you come to Newham or your first association with Newham?

DS: I came to Newham to join Soapbox Theatre¹, which was part of a group called East, as a playwright. Along with community activities, they also had a theatre group, and I came along to be writer in residence.

DC: About what date was that?

DS: That was 1976. And I was with them for three years and Gill Hay was working there at the same time and ...she was on the community activities side. She wanted to set up a book shop, she, ok persuaded me to go into that with her.

The idea initially was to do bookstalls at various markets, and then we discovered, 53 West Ham Lane, which had been the Sufi Cultural Centre, but was not [any] longer because they'd moved on, but they had sub-let it to a group who was running this ... clandestine vegetarian café which hardly nobody (sic) knew about. I think they had two small tables right at the very back of quite a long shop. Anyway, we suggested that we'd take the front of the shop and we'd pay them, and they agreed, so we spent about six weeks making book shelves, getting the place straight.

DC: And may I say that the reason that we are talking about 53 West Ham Lane is now the Saw Mill Café which is on the edge of the Discovering Stratford Village project area and could well form a focal point for some of our walks...so yeah if you'd like to continue about the history of the centre you developed there...

DS: Yeah. So putting up as many book shelves as we could, you know...we'd borrow a saw or something and we were sawing away ... I had 500 quid and we put that into books but it was really not a lot even in 1979, so we had them all facing the front, in order to fill the shelves. And then we had a big opening day, and we had a couple hundred people there because we knew a lot of people around about the community and obviously our association with Soapbox. We knew musicians and artists, all sorts of people. Anyway, so we had around a couple hundred people coming to the shop that day. And, right following the opening day, the shop started to

¹ <http://www.unfinishedhistories.com/history/companies/eastend-abbreviated-soapbox-theatre/>

do quite well, you know, and we put all the money we made way back into books, and we obviously not longer had to have them face on. We put them properly on the shelves, but we found after a month or so...we realized that the café at the back, which was a vegetarian café, actually was not very good, the food was actually quite poor. And so one day me and Gill had a chat about it and we decided that, well we'd offer to amalgamate with them in order to improve the café. But we would not tell them that bit, but anyway, that was the reason. So we put it to them, and they agreed at once, and the next day I was working in a vegetarian café. I was not a vegetarian in those days.

DC: Are you now?

DS: I am now. Well it happened very quickly. Basically there was not much money around but you could have free food in the café, anyone who worked there could have free food in the café, and also take home any wholefoods if you wanted. So at the end of about six months, that's what I was doing, and I was not buying any meat or anything like that so I became a vegetarian, you know, through ... And I learnt to cook, somewhat.

DS: On the job

DC: Well, I was never great, I had a few dishes that I could do fairly well, and at the same time working at the bookshop. We also ... well I was involved with Newham Community Housing, and in fact I think I was the Chair at that time, and they were looking for an office and they took an office there. There a large room upstairs, and we encouraged all sorts of people to use it for activities, and we had sort of plays, and poetry readings, and a film club, and yes whatever we could get in there.

DC: So then young poet Benjamin Zephaniah, who then became rather famous ... then needed your help

DS: Well, we started to get money, from ... well we got some money from the Gulbenkian Foundation which was great because they loved what we were doing and they also increased our stock in books. But also we got money from the Greater London Arts ... and one of the things that we said that we would do is we'd publish books. And, so, anyway one day, this guy Benjamin Zephaniah came along. He was totally unknown at that time, he hadn't published any books. In fact, I do not even know whether he had done any gigs at the time. I think he hadn't. Anyway, he said he'd been to Centerprise to try to get his poems published, and they turned him down, because they said that there was too much about drugs, in the books...

DC: Centerprise being an organisation in Hackney? Which was rather bigger than your own?

DS: Oh yes, yes yes yes. Centerprise was a well established bookshop in Hackney. They had a café, they ran lots and lots of courses, publishing, all sorts of writing groups, and they were very well funded and a much bigger book shop that we were. I suppose we wanted to do something like that but when we went to see them they weren't very helpful. The group that were really helpful, but we did have friends

there, was a group that used to be called THAP, Tower Hamlets Art Project², and is now the Brick Lane Book Shop.

DC: I know the Brick Lane Book Shop, yes

DS: Anyway, and they were really helpful. Told us how to get hold of books and all that sort of things and that gave us a reference so we could get our first books and then we were off ... Right, back to Benjamin,

DC: Yes, yes, how was your first meeting

DS: He came in and he said Centerprise had turned him down, and would we be interested. And I said well, I will have to have a look at them, and I took them home that evening, and I read all the poems, probably about 60 or 70. And I divided them in three piles - Yes, No and Maybe - and I thought, the next day I thought ... we might have a bit of an argument over this, you know we'll have to go through all the poems, take them one at a time, have a row ... anyway. But I told him what I had done, and he said, "No, Just publish the Yes", which did quite impress me, because obviously, right, he had a high standards. I suppose he trusted me, I do not know why.

DC: He mentions you in his recent autobiography ... a thoughtful, humble, bearded man

DS: There you go...but at the time, ok, it was the first time we had met. So, anyway, we did publish his book and it was a book called Pen Rhythm and it was the first of his books. Benjamin came to work at the collective, the collective was a co-op called Page One which was the name of the bookshop, and he was involved in the book shop and he was also involved in the café, and obviously everything else we did. His first gig I think, we had a fundraiser because what was happening is ... we were having some problems with the lease, and we wanted to buy out the Sufi Cultural Centre. So we had quite a number of fundraising activities, we had some musical activities here and there. And one of the things that we did was that we had a fundraising dinner within the shop and it was part of the dinner that Benjamin had his first gig. I was so impressed because he had this amazing, amazing blue African outfit,

DC: Like a dashiki³?

DS: I do not know what it was but anyway I did recognize it as an African outfit, but the thing was I thought ok, here's a performer. I realized that he was so good, and that he was going to go places.

DC: So he could say that you were one of the first that spotted him

² <http://bricklanebookshop.org/history/Our%20History%20-%20In%20The%20Beginning.html>

³ a loose brightly coloured shirt or tunic, originally from West Africa.

DS: Well, no ... I did not help him get any gigs, I mean in a sense, he started doing that himself. But I suppose we were a friendly place encouraging things like poetry and fairly progressive and gave him a bit of a home I suppose. And he did go to live in the short-life housing which was Newham Community Housing which was associated with The Whole Thing.

DC: So he lived in Stratford for a while...

DS: I am not sure whether that was Stratford, because our short-life housing was all over the Borough, so exactly where I do not know but initially ... the headquarters of Newham Community Housing or NCH in short, started off at The Whole Thing and then it moved to Essex House which is up the road, in Stratford, near The Rex anyway.

DC: So there's the name Page One which is the books and publishing side, and then there's the name The Whole Thing.

DS: There is.

DC: So ... did that cover the whole organisation covering the café and the book shop and where did it come from?

DS: Page One when we were at Soap Box Theatre there was a place called Stage One, and Stage One, right, was a theatre space owned by the Council, which ... if you know Sarah Bonnell [School], where the sports hall is, a bit of it (it probably held around 100 people maximum). Anyway when Gill and I left we had to come up with a name for ourselves, and ok we had been at Stage One so we thought we'd call it Page One. And Page One is the name of the Co-op and the Co-op was all of the people who worked at the café and worked at the food shop, and the book shop.

DC: And there's an interesting explanation for The Whole Thing?

DS: Right, the building if you'd like is called The Whole Thing. And the original guys who ran the café, they were trying to come up with a name and they had a very exasperating evening where everybody was rejecting every name that they came up with. And one of them said, at the end of that tedious evening, I am fed up with the Whole Thing! And someone else said 'Yeah, Yeah that's it, The Whole Thing!' And that was it. So the building was called the Whole Thing, and the collective, the co-op, was called Page One and that was the name of the bookshop too.

DC: I guess you have some photographs of the frontage of the café that is now the Saw Mill where it says the name The Whole Thing very clearly and I think in Benjamin's book there is also a photo, of the front of the Whole Thing and one of a poster from one of the early gigs which was held at the space upstairs?

DS: Ok, I don't remember because there was quite a lot of activities upstairs, like I said like the film club and there was poetry....I think Ben Elton⁴ came along one day,

⁴ English comedian, author, playwright, actor and director. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben_Elton

John Hegley⁵ he was involved in a play of mine upstairs, so yeah we were quite a busy little place. And also we had pictures around the inside of the workshop encouraging local artists to put their stuff up.

DC: Did local artists manage to sell their stuff through the book shop?

DS: Probably not [they laugh] but they displayed their stuff.

DC: What about yourself? Were you able to earn a salary out of it or it was purely voluntary, and you were supporting yourselves elsewhere?

DS: I think one or two people managed to get a wage, but it was pretty hand to mouth. And in fact, I would say probably two thirds of us were signing on, and I always thought, this is what it used to be, the greatest encourager of the arts actually was the benefit system. Probably not these days though, because they have become much more savage. But anyway loads of musicians and artists and writers, or whatever, started off signing on. Maybe they got a part job or whatever but, you had to do that initially to get a leg up.

DC: And Benjamin got involved with the café, or the book shop, or both?

DS: He was involved in both. He was involved in the café, he was also cooking in the cafe, and he became involved in one of the housing co-ops. There were a number of housing co-ops. At peak, there were probably 14 or 15, when I left the Whole Thing we had like 100 short-life houses, mostly from the Council, a few years later, they had over 300.

DC: What's the rest of your story that is connected with The Whole Thing. How did that develop?

DS: I stayed there three years. The reason I left was ... ok there was all this talking in corners, that I was doing everything, that people were phoning up asking for me all the time. Which was true, and the reason was I was getting the grants, I was writing most of the letters, so obviously in a sense I was the front person but some of the women were talking about... they were oh would not it be great if this was a female collective and etc etc. So I thought, Ok, ok, I am going to go, so ... So I left after three years anyway.

DC: And then after you left was chaos with the accounts and so on?

DS: Well what happened, right, it continued until 76, sorry, 86. I was invited to talk upstairs about getting grants, and I spoke to this woman, Louise I remember, and we went up to the top room which is where we used to do the accounts and it was so untidy. The table where I used to work, which I used to keep very clear, was utterly and totally covered in papers. And I was telling to myself that I could not possible work here. And then six months later, when it collapsed, it was pretty obvious that nobody else did either. Because the reason the place collapsed, very sadly, was because the accountant would not sign off the accounts. Because nobody had done

⁵ English performance poet, comedian, musician and songwriter. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Hegley

any bookkeeping for nine months. And there was no receipts and all that sort of stuff. And then what happened, of course, Greater London Arts would not give a grant, and the whole thing collapsed like a house of cards.

DC: Do you have any other interesting memories of the times when you were working there? Any other people that you remember who were notable characters?

DS: Quite a lot of notable characters - right, there was Chris Bain, he was an Australian who was there for maybe 18 months, and he helped us set up the dark room upstairs and he actually taught me a lot about photography. Anne Edyvean who still lives in Stratford, she's now a BBC producer working on things like Holby City, and she also worked on EastEnders. There are a number of people who are still around, Paul Romaine was with us for some time, a guy called Micky Kannemeyer (I had a big list of people) I suppose this is all that I can think off the top of my head, Marion George...

DC: You were more or less opposite the police station, did you ever attract any suspicion from the police?

DS: We didn't actually. I don't think they were customers, but we never had trouble from them, there was a pub up the road - the Pigeons, on 53 West Ham Road, if it is the Pigeons, it was one up the road from, is it Victoria Street?

DC: Oh the Princess of Wales, it is now a gaming ... the secret weapon ...

DS: That was the police pub, if you went in there of an evening there'd be lots of cops there, but no, we never had any trouble with the police. Which a bit surprises me because we did have pretty far Left stuff.

DC: Yes that is why I thought you might have attracted some suspicion. Did you have any problem with the National Front? Because that was their heyday.

DS: There was a time, yes I do remember this guy coming in and we just realized, we felt he'd come to case us out. He was a fairly dubious character and that he was going to report back to his colleagues but nothing came of it. So maybe they thought we were fairly small beer, or not left enough or not troublesome enough, so...

DC: What become of the premises immediately after The Whole Thing collapsed?

DS: I think it became an estate agent and also a second hand bookshop.

DC: Well there was an estate agent Andy Stemmler who ran a second hand book shop in there. I think that was more in the early 2000's. And they also had a martial art club in there.

DS: I don't know what happened to it in the interim. Once we lost it I suppose I lost interest in it. That was our tragedy and then it went.

DC: But during the time you were there did it expand into 55 West Ham Lane?

DS: Ok. One of the things that some of us were involved in setting up was Newham Co-op Development Agency. And because obviously we were a workers co-op and there were a few others in the borough, not many. But anyway, I was on the committee of Newham CDA as we called it. And we got money from the GLC (Greater London Council). Margaret Thatcher got rid of it, but anyway with this money we set up Newham Co-op Development Agency. They were looking for a premises and they took the place next door, which was great.

DC: So what sort of work did they do?

DS: Their job was to encourage workers co-ops, encourage people to set up workers co-ops. Then obviously to help keep them going.

DC: How did housing cooperatives work? You said they were short-term housing?

DS: Short life housing. How did short-life housing work? Well, what happened was they were mostly from the Council but we did get some from London & Quadrant, but at the peak about 99% was from the council. What happens is the Council has these development plans, and they could be for things like road schemes, they could be for school enlargements. And they'd buy these houses up and then they are empty. Sometimes these plans can take ages to actually come to fruition. And in fact we were quite lucky, in one way, because Margaret Thatcher had come to power and obviously the borough had less money. And because the borough had less money they could not continue these schemes. Initially they were very suspicious of us and they gave us six houses.

DC: Newham Council were suspicious?

DS: Yeah. They gave us six house to try out the scheme. And after the first year they were quite happy and then they started throwing houses at us so fast. All the first houses went to Newham Short-Life Housing Co-op which had been set up previously. But then we began getting so many houses that we set up a lot more coops. We were setting up coops about one every two months. And at the end of a couple of years there were a dozen housing co-ops and they ran themselves. So the way it worked, Newham Community Housing was the umbrella group and each co-op was a member, so they would send a delegate. The housing went to Newham Community Housing and they doled them out to the member co-ops.

DC: Were they semi derelict properties that you needed to do up?

DS: They weren't in a bad state. We only got a few that were in a pretty bad state. But there were also something available from the Housing Corporation called a "mini HAG" which was a small housing association grant which was worth a couple of thousand quid. So basically, you could get a property and put in basic plumbing, electricity, any roof repairs so it was an acceptable standard. There was a workers co-op called B&N who did the building work for us.

DC: Do you know what that stood for?

DS: Yes. Being and Nothingness, which is basically a book by John Paul Sartre. Quite a few of B&N's worker were graduates of North East London Polytechnic (NELP).

DC: The tenancy agreement, was it with the housing co-operative or the Council and who gets the rent?

DS: What each co-op had to do was charge enough to cover the rates because the rates had to be paid to the Council. Another couple of quid was charged on top because Newham Community Housing had some workers, and also we had our own major work schemes which took another quid on top, and any of the housing co-ops could apply for that if they wanted to do any further works on the housing.

DC: Do cooperatives like that exist now?

DS: I don't know of any short-life housing co-ops now. I think what's happened ... well , I suppose housing at that end of [the] line has just become disastrous. Obviously this is government policy. Housing has become just a valuable asset that I doubt they would leave empty for that long, and also the Council does not have any money so I doubt they would be able to buy houses up. So no, I don't know of any. There are permanent housing co-ops ... I mean, I am in one myself which is Longlife Housing Co-op.

DC: And you live in Forest Gate?

DS: I live in Forest Gate but I know it (Longlife HC) has one house in Stratford ... possibly two actually, but we are not very big. And I think we are the only housing co-op in the borough.

DC: So what's your own working life story since you left The Whole Thing? You are a professional writer aren't you?

DS: I am. What happened was I left The Whole Thing. That was in '82. Within six months, I got a job with Tower Hamlets Co-op Development Agency and I was there for about four years and while I was there I started writing a book. No, I think I had been writing a book whilst I was working at The Whole Thing but it was pretty disastrous. It didn't work. And I went along to City Lit, anyway, to do some writing courses because I had been writing plays if you recall. And I learnt how to write prose, how to write stories. I got a book published in '91.... Thatt was a book called Hard Cash, and I got a few more books published in the '90's and these were children's books. And once I got a few children's books published I started to get some work in schools. I did a fair bit of work sending leaflets around and I actually got a load of work up until about 2010 and then that all collapsed because the Tories got into power and they cut school budgets.

DC: You ran what was then Forest Gate Writers Workshop or was it already Newham Writers Workshop?

DS: I joined Forest Gate Writers Workshop which was run by Donna Francischild. When she left I became the coordinator for a few years.