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## Joint Stock: From Colorless Company to Company of Color

Joyce Devlin

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### In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Joint Stock: From Colorless Company to Company of Color Joyce Devlin The Joint Stock Theatre Company did not begin from an ideological viewpoint, but acquired a point of view through the development of their work. Aesthetics took precedence over politics. In this way, Joint Stock differed from many of the socialist theatre companies of the period. In 1977, Max Stafford Clark, co-founder of the company, described Joint Stock as "a rather colorless company, in the sense that we take on the color of the material and of the writer we're working with" (Bradby 305). Colorless in a different sense, the company was all Caucasian. Gradually, over a period of years, Joint Stock transformed from a Caucasian company into a committed, multi-racial collective. This diversification made a significant impact on the content of their scripts, the actors' ethnicity, the audience composition, and the organizational and artistic policies. For many years Joint Stock had a poor record of representing people of color on stage. It was not until their nineteenth production in 1981,

Borderline by British Pakistani Hanif Kureishi, that black actors joined the company.<sup>1</sup> In 1984 Joint Stock employed black actors again in Sue Townsend's *The Great Celestial Cow*, and again in 1985 in Egyptian-born Karim Alrawi's *Fire In the Lake*. Yet ultimately Joint Stock became a totally integrated multi-cultural company. We can gain an understanding of this radical transformation through a brief examination of the company history. Joint Stock was founded in the summer of 1973 by Max Stafford-Clark, David Aukin and David Hare. The three men had considerable theatrical experience—Stafford-Clark had been the artistic director of Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre, David Aukin had co-founded the touring company Foco Novo, and David Hare had co-founded Portable Theatre which dated from the late 60s and became one of the earliest political theatre companies. For their first production Bill Gaskill joined Stafford-Clark as adaptor and co-director of the Heathcote Williams book *The Speakers*, a documentary about four Hyde Park speakers in the early 1960s. In an unpaid workshop, the two Gaskill directors and the actors explored the text through a variety of acting exercises—both borrowed and discovered. At the end of the workshop, they applied for an Arts Council project grant, compiled a script, rehearsed and toured. The production was innovative in its use of space—the audience was free to move around the actors, becoming part of the performance. According to Gaskill, "The success of *The Speakers* and the pleasure we all had in working together made another show inevitable" (Ritchie 105). However, this production, and the following four, contributed little to the creation of Joint Stock's distinctive working method or to the company's cultural diversification. During the course of the next ten years Gaskill and Stafford-Clark directed or co-directed nineteen productions for the company. While Gaskill's interest was in creating a common method of work and Stafford-Clark's was in altering methods to suit the particular material, between them they developed what became known as the Joint Stock method: a workshop in which directors, actors and writers research and improvise around a particular subject, a break where the writer writes the play, followed by an extended rehearsal period. Some of Britain's best known political playwrights have used this method when writing for Joint Stock: David Hare, Caryl Churchill, Howard Brenton, Snoo Wilson, Howard Barker, and Hanif Kureishi. Joint Stock's reputation as one of Britain's leading touring theatre companies developed while they actively produced an average of two new plays a year. They are noted for their consistent originality, their method and the range and style of their work—sparsity of sets, directorial clarity, and committed ensemble acting. Although the rehearsal methods in their early productions were unique, in 1974 Joint Stock's sixth show, co-directed by Stafford-Clark and Gaskill, effectively politicized the company and profoundly changed its organizational structure, disrupting the traditional hierarchy and the conventional patterns of production. The company became a collective in an attempt to understand the content of the script, David Hare's *Fanshen*, based on William...

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