



Robert John Atkins

1939 - 1994

A SERVICE OF THANKSGIVING FOR THE LIFE OF ROBERT ATKINS AND THE BURIAL OF HIS ASHES AND THOSE OF HIS SON TOM

ST. ANNE'S CHURCH, KEW GREEN, KEW SURREY 6 September 1994

ROBERT JOHN ATKINS
TOM ATKINS

Born 25 November 1939 Died 19 June 1994
Born 4 November 1970 Died 14 November 1991

Welcome from The Revd. Canon Peter McCrory, Vicar of St Anne's

Introduction from The Revd. Canon Roger Royle, Hon. Canon of Southwark Cathedral

"All mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated; God employs several translators, some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God's hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie open to one another."

"Devotions" by John Donne

Congregation stand and say together Psalm 46:

God is our refuge and strength:

a very present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear though the earth be moved:

and though the mountains are shaken in the midst of the sea;

Though the waters rage and foam:

and though the mountains quake at the rising of the sea.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God:

the holy dwelling place of the Most High.

God is in the midst of her

therefore she shall not be moved:

God will help her and at break of day.

The nations make uproar and the kingdoms are shaken:

but God has lifted his voice and the earth shall tremble.

The Lord of hosts is with us:

the God of Jacob is our stronghold.

Come then and see what the Lord has done:
what destruction he has brought upon the earth.
He makes wars to cease in all the world:
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear
and burns the chariots in the fire.
Be still and know that I am God:
I will be exalted among the nations
I will be exalted upon the earth.
The Lord of hosts is with us:
the God of Jacob is our stronghold.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.
As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be,
World without end. Amen.

Congregation sit

Address - John Pick - Emeritus Professor of Arts Management, City University, London

Bach suite for solo 'cello in D minor to be played by Mathew Barley

Poem "Parting" in Urdu by Ahmad Faraz read by Firdous Ali

Indian classical music Thumri composed by Nawab Wajit Ali Shah in 1856 played on Santoor by Kiranpal Singh

Poem "The Wild Swans at Coole" by W.B. Yeats read by Katie Machin

Address - Frans de Ruiter - Director, Royal Conservatory, The Hague

Congregation stand and sing:

Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy
Whose trust ever child-like, no cares could destroy:
Be there at our waking, and give us, we pray,
Your bliss in our hearts, Lord,
at the break of the day.

Lord of all eagerness, Lord of all faith,
Whose strong hands were skilled
at the plane and the lathe:
Be there at our labours, and give us, we pray,
Your strength in our hearts, Lord,
at the noon of the day.

Lord of all kindliness, Lord of all grace,
Your hands swift to welcome,
your arms to embrace:
Be there at our resting and give us, we pray,
Your love in our hearts, Lord,
at the eve of the day.

Lord of all gentleness, Lord of all calm,
Whose voice is contentment,
whose presence is balm:
Be there at our sleeping, and give us, we pray,
Your peace in our hearts, Lord,
at the end of the day.

Congregation sit

**Address - Prakash Daswani - Joint Artistic Director, Cultural
Co-operation**

The Northumbrian pipes played by Alistair Anderson

Congregation kneel or sit

The Prayers led by Revd. Roger Royle

Congregation stand

**The organ "Elegy" by George Thalben-Ball played by David Barker,
organist of St. Anne's. During this close friends only will leave for the
committal of the ashes.**

**There will be a retiring collection. This will be used to provide a
permanent memorial for Robert and Tom in the form of assistance with
the conservation of St Anne's churchyard, which they both loved.**

*Members of the congregation are invited to join together at a reception
in the church hall at the side of the church.*

THE WILD SWANS AT COOLE



The Wild Swans at Coole



The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky;
Upon the brimming water among the stones 5
Are nine-and-fifty swans.

The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
Since I first made my count;
I saw, before I had well finished,
All suddenly mount 10
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
Upon their clamorous wings.

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,
And now my heart is sore.
All's changed since I, hearing at twilight, 15
The first time on this shore,
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
Trode with a lighter tread.

Unwearied still, lover by lover,
They paddle in the cold 20
Companionable streams or climb the air;
Their hearts have not grown old;
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,
Attend upon them still.

But now they drift on the still water, 25
Mysterious, beautiful;

Among what rushes will they build,
By what lake's edge or pool
Delight men's eyes when I awake some day
To find they have flown away?

June 1991
10th October

I want to read you a passage by Jean Jacques Rousseau written nearly 250 years ago which Robert often used when describing what he strived to achieve in his work at the Commonwealth Institute and later with Cultural Co-operation.

" To what people is it more fitting to assemble often and form sweet bonds of pleasure and joy than to those who have had so many reasons to like one another and remain forever united? We already have many of these public festivals; let us have even more...

But let us not adopt those exclusive entertainments which close up a small number of people in a gloomy cavern, which keep them immobile in silence and inaction, which give them only.. afflicting images of servitude and inequality to see. No, happy peoples, these are not your festivals. It is in the open air, under the sky that you ought to gather and give yourselves to the sweet sentiment of your happiness....

Plant a stake in the middle of a square, gather the people together there and you will have a festival. Do better yet; let the spectators become an entertainment to themselves; do it so that each sees and loves himself in the others so that all will be better united."

Robert's relentless passion for the positive was what drove me and everyone else who worked with him over the years forward. His wicked sense of humour, coupled with his acute understanding of what really was important and what wasn't, made even those bleak times we regularly encountered feel sweet.

His powerful insights into the human condition made him a brilliant person-manager and a much-loved leader, inspiring us with a vision given moral force by the absolute sincerity of his beliefs. By the example of his own impeccable manners and generosity to others, he quietly encouraged us always to do things the right way.

He possessed a very finely tuned 6th sense which regularly enabled him to touch the core of our spiritual longing and also helped him distill many complex cultural themes into activities with broad and popular appeal.

Robert's seminal ideas about culture found fruition in a range of projects:

the *World Music Series* he initiated in the early 80's, later to develop into the annual *Music Villages*; the exhibition "*My Family and Me*" which he conceptualised and presented to huge crowds in Sydney; "*The Friendship Quilt*", each section of which was created in one Commonwealth country before travelling to the next; a worldwide journey of fifty countries before the finished article finally arrived in Edinburgh for the Commonwealth Arts Festival which Robert directed in 1986; and the "*International Cultural Relations Conference in Oxford*" in 1989. These were just a few of his many imaginative creations that enjoyed outstanding popular success and were later copied by others.

What a full and purposeful life he had and how little point there now seems in carrying on without him. Yet as we say in India, a saint never dies, but lives on through the faith of his followers.

Though Robert was too human to qualify as a saint in the strict sense of that term, he came pretty close; he was certainly the finest guru one could ever have hoped to work with. And I gladly give thanks I was fortunate enough to share so much of his life for so long.

Although he rightly took pleasure from the mass popularity his work enjoyed, Robert was never afraid to have unconventional or unpopular ideas. At the heart of his philosophy was, it seems to me, a fundamental belief in the right to fail. For Robert, the right to fail was much more than a slogan from the 60's. He continued to champion it much later, even when it was no longer fashionable, during times increasingly characterised by the fear of failure instead.

During his distinguished, though often under-recognised career in the arts, Robert's insistence on the right to fail gave a generation of younger arts administrators who learned under him the courage to take risks and the determination to succeed. And what wonderful, wonderful fun we always seemed to have whenever he was around.

No less did Robert's belief in the right to fail shape his work with artists from the economically underdeveloped world. Never patronising or trivialising yet never afraid to be innovative, Robert's pioneering approach to "other cultures" gave these artists the space and the confidence to present their work and allowed it to be celebrated on its own terms rather than conforming to some apparently higher, european-framed aesthetic. Consider, for a moment something Robert wrote, with our friend and colleague Emma Wallace, when introducing an exhibition of Peruvian textiles:

" Some forms of artistic expression have been restricted to particular societies at particular times, whereas others can be found in every society and at all times. These universal and oldest forms are invariably associated with simple, often domestic needs and aspirations; decoration of the home, clothing and decorating the body, storytelling, preparing food and making music - activities which are inseparable from the experience of being alive and part of human society. At their best - as for example with the Indian costumes from Guatemala we exhibited in 1983 or the songs of the Inuit women we heard in the 1985 Ancestral Voices Festival - there is a special quality to these forms of expression that transcends time place and taste and speaks directly to the soul.

Long may these cultural activities and the values they represent survive, both for their own sake and for the influence they may bring to an increasingly fragmented and competitive world."

But it was even more important to Robert that his beliefs - which gave inspiration, courage and reassurance for all of us priveleged enough to work with him or just be his friends - could also provide a positive foundation for his most cherished creations, his son Tom and his daughter Hannah, which they did. What fine human beings he and Sandy produced. Tom's sudden death in 1991 was a blow from which Robert said he could never recover.

Today their ashes will be buried together, in sight of the cricket pitch on Kew Green and not too far from at least two excellent pubs. That's something they both would have appreciated.

When Tom died, Robert often turned for reassurance and comfort to the poetry of Mother Julian of Norwich, a 14th century saint who cared for many during times of great physical and spiritual turmoil. There were some lines from Mother Julian's "Revelations of Divine Love" which Robert read time and again, and which he also found in TS Eliot's poem The Wasteland. I remember him saying then how it was poets and other artists, and not organised religion, who had direct access to the secrets of creation. His own insightfulness and his prodigious creative talent made Robert a great artist too.

In memory of Robert and Tom, as a prayer for them and as a source of reassurance and hope for all of us, here are those words of Mother Julian:

: " *Sin is behovely, (that is to say, inevitable)
But all shall be well
And all shall be well
And all manner of things shall be well*".

Prakash Daswani

PARTING

If we part this time, perhaps we'll
meet in dreams,

Like one finds rose-petals between
the leaves of a book

Seek the pearls of fidelity among the
wasted beings,

Such treasures, perhaps you'll come
by in the ruins

Make the sorrows of the world and your
beloved's sorrow one,
That union shall strengthen your
resolve

Neither you are God, nor is my love like
those of angels,

We are both human, then why meet in
secret

The deeds for which we are crucified
today

It would not be a surprise if they are
celebrated tomorrow

Now he is not around, nor I am or the
past same

But it is like two beings meeting in
the mirages of longing

FLY



Fly has been spending his afternoons on the balcony of Fly Towers, with a bottle of impeccable vintage protruding from a silver ice bucket, and with faithful retainers protecting him from the sun by discreet adjustments of his pure white parasol. He has been catching up on his reading.

His first chosen text was you might not call it singing ... *People talk about the Arts of Life* the humorous new Arts Council publication, to which Simon Tait (AMW No 261) has wisely drawn our attention. The 'researcher', whose writing is a delightful parody of many of the arts bureaucrats' 'reports' of recent years, selects at random a group of ordinary people, amusingly pretends that they are more 'disenfranchised' than the rest of us, then gives a droll account of their various pastimes (feeding the birds, scratching their bottoms, cutting the grass and so on), and insists that because they are 'disenfranchised' these activities must henceforth be regarded as 'art', and heavily subsidised. Art you see lies in the way the disenfranchised find their personal therapy....

For more serious reading Fly had chosen *The Kenneth Williams Letters*. Erudite, literate, rather Shavian in tone, they by contrast demand the full attention of the reader. They are full of wise advice to aspiring young artists, critical insights into the nature of art and deeply-felt observations on the human condition. Fly only hopes that our arts planners do not in some way confuse the two publications. It would be sad if they were to follow the skittish and shal-

low suggestions in the 'Arts Council report', and neglect the much more profound insights of the late lamented comedian.

Fly turned also to *The Kenneth Williams Diaries* (edited, like the letters, by the wise and scholarly Russell Davies). The KW emerging from them could hardly be more different. In confiding to his diary Williams revealed a mean and shrivelled personality, archly jealous of colleagues, unwilling and unable to form any kind of intimate relationship even with those he professed to love. His contacts with 'trade' were nervous and unsatisfactory, and his pleasures seem to have lain in drinking too much, in trading vicious gossip and lonely sadistic fantasies to accompany his personal therapy, what he charmlessly refers to, in rhyming slang, as 'the Barclay's'.

If ever a man were, in spite of appearances, culturally disenfranchised, it was the Kenneth Williams revealed in the diaries. And if the comic madness of *People talk about the Arts of Life* needed pointing up any further, we need only observe that in its wacky terms Williams was not an artist because of his high camp comedy, nor because of his truly elegant writing, but by virtue of his formidable self-abuse.

The sex lives of great artists always fascinates us, even when it is sordid, as with Kenneth Williams, or when, as with Graham Greene, it is tempestuous. But even affairs as solemn as Greene's can sometimes cause us to smile.

As when *The Times* solemnly reports (28.6.94) that when Greene told the Labour peer Lord Walston that he was having an affair with his wife, who had complained of her husband's lack of sexual interest: 'There was a traumatic response from Walston who retired to a bedroom with his wife "to have it out".' Well, that's all right then.

Having masterminded yet another

splendid sell-out season at the ever-popular Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough, punctilious and reliable Jeannie Swales, the hard-working press officer, took a well-deserved holiday. Imagine her consternation, when she arrived back at her brimming desk, to find herself at the centre of a national grammatical controversy which was not of her making.

Fly had drawn the attention of his readers to a document puffing an exhibition at that theatre which was full of schoolboy howlers. Was that, Fly asked, the end of the press release as we know it?

Well, it transpires that it was not even an official press release. It was written and circulated by the artist, who did not tell the theatre what he was doing. Although its layout looked vaguely official, it was not in fact printed on the theatre's official notepaper, and naturally they would not wish to be associated with its barbarity. It was certainly nothing to do with Jeannie, who is noted throughout Yorkshire for her impeccable spelling and tasteful prose.

Every so often, nemesis strikes with satanic vengeance. It happened recently, with the sudden shocking death of Robert Atkins, whose quiet twinkling personality had enlivened arts management in Britain for a quarter of a century. Robert was killed, together with the Moroccan musician Ahmed El-Azouan, by a runaway car as they were standing on the pavement outside a Bradford Hotel.

Like many others in the business, Fly had known and loved Robert for a long time. He had seemed to be one of the permanent fixtures of the arts world - always working quietly and seriously with artists, never letting himself be sucked into the sterile world of arts bureaucracy, or (though he could easily have done so, for his qualifications were much better than those who set themselves up as experts) letting himself fall back into the comfort of a wholly

academic job. After his years as arts director at the Commonwealth Institute he had the courage to turn to running his own commercial agency, Cultural Co-operation. It was, needless to say, a great success.

In him were perfectly mixed the orderly and the disruptive sides of good arts management. When he ran Cannon Hill, then Birmingham's young people's arts centre, he insisted that the youngsters behave well, but, in defiance of his own pronouncements, also sometimes ran a small bootleg bar for those old enough to drink. And as many of us remember, his joyful world arts promotions were as likely to end in street parties as in ringing political declarations. Yet serious he undoubtedly was; after starring in *Cambridge Circus* in the West End, he eschewed the indolent life of the university satirist.

It is intolerable that a man of all the humours should have been so meaninglessly struck down. But in the days following his death Fly has found himself mulling over a conversation that he had with Robert some years ago, in the buffet bar of a train returning them to London after a Harrogate conference. The conversation had turned, as it always did, to the management and higher purposes of the arts. Robert, who was apt to disguise his commitment by a disarming nonchalance, suddenly said: 'The arts? Isn't all that really just a middle class game?'

For some, perhaps, But with you, Robert, it never really was.

Fly

NEWSLINES

The Los Angeles Philharmonic, the first American orchestra ever to play at the Proms, will celebrate the 20th anniversary of that event at the end of August when it appears in London for the first time under its new music director Esa-Pekka Salonen as part of the 1994 Proms season



Hard worker in the fun palaces

Obituary

Robert Atkins

ART IS fun. Learning is best achieved through enjoyment, celebration and participation. These were the themes in the career of Robert Atkins, who has died aged 54. In the last 14 years, with his colleague Prakash Daswani, he pioneered a new approach to the promotion of culture from the developing world. Disgusted by the patronising presentation of black art as an exotic curiosity, he demonstrated that popular traditions in the third world were vital and aesthetically satisfying on their own terms.

At Cambridge, Robert was president of Footlights, a contemporary of John Cleese, and starred in one of the Footlights shows that made the Edinburgh Festival and the West End. But, post university social commitment drove him from commercial entertainment into arts administration. And it was a spell with Joan Littlewood at Stratford East that widened his view of culture. It wasn't just a vehicle for laughter and tears, he realised, but a means of community engagement.

In 1965, he founded an experimental theatre group, Independent

Theatre, which presented plays inspired by German expressionism. But those were the days before significant subsidy and the company closed after a year. Then in 1967, he auditioned as an actor at the Theatre Royal Stratford East. In the event, he worked there as a stage manager. He was fascinated by Joan Littlewood's concept of the fun palace. That dream was never realised but the principles behind it were at the core of her thinking at the time and the concept was to colour his work during the rest of his life.

He was administrator of the Fun Palace Trust and worked at London's Round House, which in the late sixties and early seventies was a focus of radical arts. A spell as a teacher of liberal studies at the Birmingham College of Art was followed by his appointment as the founder director of the Brewery Arts Centre in Kendal in the Lake District from 1972 to 1976. An old brewery was transformed into a multi-purpose space. Robert's aims were to ensure that the centre was not imposed from above but "owned" by the community at large, and to encourage the involvement of all classes and age-groups.

Working in a rural setting is a very different matter from the challenge of promoting the arts in a great city. He moved back to Birmingham to run the Midlands Arts Centre in Cannon Hill Park, one of the largest organisations of its kind in the country. MAC had a reputa-



Robert Atkins — a new approach to the whole world's culture

tion for attracting mainly middle-class children and teenagers. This was not good enough for Robert. He encouraged the development of the Cannon Hill Music Theatre which grew in later years into the highly successful City of Birmingham Touring Opera. Reflecting the multicultural composition of Birmingham's population, he initiated classes in Indian dance, encouraged Caribbean music-making and ap-

pointed an ethnic arts officer, the first such post in any arts centre.

His new interest in Afro-Caribbean and Asian arts marked a turning point. In 1980, Robert left the Midlands and became the arts director of the Commonwealth Institute in London and joined up with Prakash Daswani. Seven years later, the two of them established an independent agency, Cultural Co-operation, which rapidly became the leading promoters in the field. Last weekend, Music Village, an annual festival of non-European music,

which they created at the Commonwealth Institute, opened an international tour in Bradford. It was there that Robert, and a Moroccan performer, were killed in a road accident. The tour will continue, in Britain and Germany, but without Robert Atkins, a fighter in the long struggle for cultural equality and for an idea of art — as sheer delight.

Anthony Everitt

Robert Atkins, born November 25, 1939; died June 19, 1994



Robert Atkins

THERE are times when the style of a death seems peculiarly suited to the life that preceded it. Robert Atkins's sudden death, at the age of 54, was one of those.

The same evening had seen the triumphal start of a tour of Moroccan folk performers brought over by Atkins's organisation, Cultural Co-Operation. The post-show meal for the 50-strong ensemble had been a convivial occasion, turning into an impromptu concert in the Bradford restaurant. Afterwards they had all spilled out singing on to the pavement, and Atkins had gone into the road to shepherd them back to safety. It was then that a speeding car ploughed into the cheerful crowd. Atkins and Ahmed El Azouan, a musician, were killed outright.

Robert Atkins's many friends have taken some comfort from the fact that his last evening was generous and expansive and buoyed up by the direct and natural creativity he had worked all his life to foster. All were trademarks of Cultural Co-operation, the organisation he and Prakash Daswani founded in 1987.

This could — too glibly — be seen as one of the clutch of world music groupings set up in the wake of the questing, optimistic 1970s. In fact it had a very precise philosophy. Growing out of the Music Villages which Atkins and Daswani had pioneered as employees of the Commonwealth Institute, it sought for a format in which artists from other cultures — particularly the developing world — could present their work in Britain without the patina of exoticism. Cultural Co-Operation dancers, musicians and craftspeople found themselves involved with workshops, skills-sharing exercises, demonstrations and exchanges as much as with performance. People who visited these latter-day Music Villages — always based in the open air in parks and spaces from Gunnersbury to Glasgow — had an experience that was sometimes confusing and unfocused but sometimes electrifying and wonderful.

Atkins and Daswani regularly dealt with the art of the impossible, persuading governments more attuned to conventional promotion to send large troupes of folk-based performers of their popular cultures — Brazilian marching bands, Rajasthani folk musicians and storytellers, Trinidadian steel-drum masters.

Precisely because they ploughed their own furrow, life was not easy. The absence of salary and career structure enjoyed by Atkins previously — as director of the Brewery Arts Centre in Kendal, the Midlands Arts Centre and Arts Director of the Commonwealth Institute — was alarming as well as exhilarating. His insistence on open-air performance ran counter at times to the realities of British weather, and the organisation's principled stand on free events raised eyebrows with funding bodies looking for financial returns rather than — as Atkins hoped — evidence of eyes being opened and lives changed. The sudden death of his student son Tom, from unsuspected viral pneumonia, two years ago, was a deep trauma.

There were times when Robert Atkins was weary of the annual struggle to find new funding for the extraordinary events he wanted to lay before the public. But his innate optimism and the stubbornness often possessed by good men held him on course. At the time of his death he was due to retire from Cultural Co-Operation and turn his attention to European traditions. As things turned out, Cultural Co-Operation will be his memorial, but it is a worthy one.

Naseem Khan

Robert Atkins, arts promoter: born Leeds 25 November 1939; married 1966 Sandy Swan (one daughter, and one son deceased); died Bradford 19 June 1994.

In the framework of Robert's international activities I represent at this sad occasion the Extra European Arts Committee:

Habib Touma, from the International Institute for Traditional Music in Berlin
Chérif Khaznadar and Françoise Gründ, from the Maison des Cultures du Monde, Paris

Laurent Aubert, from the Ateliers d'Etnomusicologie, Geneva

Sylvano Piovesan and Franco Laera, from ATER, Moderna resp. CRT, Milano

Ad 's-Gravesande, from the Holland Festival

and

Hetty Lemmens, Huib Haringhuizen and Otto Romijn, from the Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam. Both Ad and Otto are present in this church today.

The Extra European Arts Committee was created at the end of the seventies. On behalf of the Commonwealth Institute Fred Lightfoot attended the meetings, soon accompanied by Robert as his second man and later his successor as Arts Director. Robert on his turn was soon joined by Prakash Dashwani and later on they created Cultural Co-Operation.

Robert was secretary in the time I chaired the Extra European Arts Committee, and later on Robert took over the chair for a number of years.

Robert was a citizen from the UK with an open mind, amazed as he was about the somewhat closed shop the British society seemed to be, always in favour of international cooperation and exchange.

It was his desperate wish to confront our increasingly multicultural society with the arts of countries outside Europe.

He was fascinated by the wonderful black or coloured artists, presenting their arts deeply rooted in ages-long traditions.

He wanted to convey their messages, their arts to as massive audiences in the UK as possible. Famous were his "(musical) villages" in Holland Park at the Commonwealth Institute and his Edinburgh- and Southbankfestivals besides the hundreds of events he produced in halls and theatres.

Robert was convinced that his artists shouldn't go just on the stage: he enhanced direct contacts between the individual artists and the audience, through lectures, demonstrations and workshops. His philosophy was through respect and mutual understanding to achieve more tolerance, more hope, a better society in peace and respect for the quality of diversity.

Our Committee met two to four times per year. We had many discussions before, amidst and after the meetings. Robert was always full of interest for other societies, the mechanisms behind the screens, the functioning of politics, trying to find the right arguments to further his ideals. He was curious, he loved our heritage, he was fond of innovation.

In the course of the years we all acquired admiration and respect for Robert: he was and is a real friend, a true European a true world citizen.

His death is a great loss for the UK, for Europe, for the many fine artists he worked with and was planning to work with.

But in particular for his family and to us.

People die, but stay in our heads where they remain, as if we met them yesterday. A thought which might give us consolation. Robert's spirit, thoughts, ideals have worked out and shall remain to dwell in our minds.

Frans de Ruiter

Principal of the Royal Conservatory