

John Caine

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Matchstick men on song

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John Caine, a playwright born in Salford, canvasses the views of its councillors and citizens on the city's proposed opera house.

'This is a millennium project,' enthuses Royston Futter, arts and leisure manager of the city, his eyes gleaming with missionary fervour.

'It's a load of bollocks,' says Tony Levy, Salford poet and playwright. 'What will it do for the people of Salford? It, just rubs their noses in the shit.'

'This will be a building that people will come 200 miles to see, and won't be disappointed if it's closed,' is the perhaps not wholly objective view of architect Michael Wilford, who worked for 30 years with the late Sir James Stirling.

All three men are talking about the same thing. An opera house, the latest development planned for the once bustling, and until recently derelict docklands of Salford.

Fifteen years ago, the Salford Docks – which included most of the principal wharves on the Manchester Ship Canal – offered a stark analogy for the decline of industrial Britain. Once the country's third biggest port and entrepot for the vast Trafford Park complex, by the late 1970s Europe's first and still largest industrial estate, Salford Docks, lay quiet and decaying, under a sky forever cleansed of the city's trademark chemical smog.

Then, thanks to the Salford City Council, helped by the money from central government's Derelict Land and Urban Programmes, and supported by private developers, the rusting cranes and crumbling warehouses were transformed.

Four hundred and fifty new waterside homes have been built on Salford Quays over the past five years. There is an eight-screen cinema and a four-star hotel, cafes and bars, a marina and a moored barge converted into a restaurant. There's also provision for one and a half million square feet of office space over a million square feet of it already built, and 800,000 square feet of that still empty.

It is only two miles from the centre of Manchester – 10 minutes by car, and about half an

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hour's drive from the city's international airport. A transport link, to the new Manchester Metro service, would cost an estimated £17 million.

But less than a five-minute walk from the Legoland brick houses serenely reflected in the ecologically cleaned waters of the Quays, is another residential area, the Ordsall housing estate. Last summer, Ordsall was the scene of well-publicised disturbances, when buildings were set on fire and the fire fighters pelted with bricks and bottles.

Here, too, massive redevelopment is under way. Thirty million pounds is being spent to turn the under-lighted, damp and dangerous council dwellings into bungalows, and the graffiti-scrawled concrete walls hidden by new brick cladding. 'Cocaine Tower', one of the 1960s-style high-rise blocks has been closed and stands ugly and empty. The remodelled maisonettes have proper gardens, protected by tall fences.

But for many people who live on the estate these improvements, however welcome, are cosmetic. What they say they really need, and the young people in particular, is work. The redevelopment of Salford Docks has not brought the hundreds of promised jobs, at least not for the residents of Ordsall. Instead, it has sharply defined the contrast between the haves and the have-nots.

The people who live in the waterside splendour of Salford Quays have been made acutely aware that their double-glazed windows are only an angry stone's throw from the people who live on the wrong side of the track.

Can this really be an appropriate location for the proposed Salford Opera House? In his

sunlit, spacious room on the first floor of the Fitzroy Square offices of James Stirling Michael Wilford and Associates in London, Michael Wilford smiles.

'I must say that we weresurprised, he says, 'when we were first asked if we would like to be considered, as architects for the scheme.' A brief silence is filled by the music of a Mozart opera playing in the background. On the cream-painted wall by his table are photographs of one of the practice's noted successes, the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart.

'Any initial scepticism we may have had disappeared after we had visited Salford, listened to the city council's plans, and visited the superb site on Salford Quays. The councillors and officers were so obviously determined that the scheme would succeed, and they'd already proved their point with the development of the Quays.

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'We came back to London, impressed by the enthusiasm of everyone we'd spoken to in Salford, and I thought, why not? Why shouldn't an opera house be built in Salford?'

Michael Wilford doesn't pretend that he's spoken to everyone of Salford's 273,000 inhabitants. Nor does Councillor Bill Hinds, the leader of its overwhelmingly Labour council.

'I'm sure there's plenty of people in Salford who couldn't care less about opera,' admits Councillor Hinds. 'Anyway, it's not just an opera house we're talking about. It's a cultural quarter we're planning.'

'There'll be an opera theatre with 1,200 seats, that can be used for concerts and by dance companies. It was an approach from the Halle Orchestra that started us on this project in the first place.....though they're now going to have a new concert hall built for them in Manchester. There'll be a 400-seat theatre, and gallery space to take international exhibitions and for our Lowry collection.' Not surprisingly, the city of Salford owns the finest and most comprehensive Lowry collection in the world – about 350 of his paintings and drawings, and biographical material of all kinds.

Bill Hinds isn't a big man but he projects a large vision. 'They've tried to make us believe that the arts and entertainment are market driven.....demand led. Too many of our people think that the arts aren't for the likes of us. That you have to achieve a certain position in order to enjoy opera and ballet. I remember going to the first night production of Otello at the Palace Theatre in Manchester. A lot of the audience were in evening dress – bow ties and dinner suits. But I could tell from their conversation in the bar at the interval, that most of them knew sod all about opera. They were there because it was the thing to do. To see and be seen.'

In his office in Joule House, next to the Viewpoint photographic gallery, and across the road from the museum which presently houses the Lowry collection, Royston Futter talks about money.

'It's difficult to put a figure to it. The central buildings, with the opera house, may be £30 million say £60 million for the whole development. That's the opera house with 1,800 seats. Yes I know we've talked about 1,200 seats but it won't cost a lot more for the additional 600 seats, and the increased capacity will make a big difference to the revenue potential. Obviously, we can't hope to find that kind of money ourselves, not with all the other pressing needs of the city. But we're putting up the land, the best site in the North of England. That must be worth at least £20 million.'

Less than a mile from the office of the Arts and Leisure manager, in the cluttered front room

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of his small council house, Kenneth Keating is expounding his own, somewhat different view of the project.

'It's bullshit.... another con trick! Bill Hinds should be ashamed of himself. He's a sold out socialist.'

Fifty-six-year-old Ken Keating, suffering from an obviously painful disc problem, is half-lying on the sofa. On the wall behind him is a framed, coloured photograph of a blazing car, clearly a prized memento of the recent violence in Ordsall. Ken Keating isn't a socialist though he says he once was. Now he's an anarchist.

'Salford Quays isn't for Salford people. It was never intended to be. Where are all the jobs promised?

'Oh aye, we were useful enough dredging out the canal. But firms that have come to the Quays have brought their own people.'

It's Ken Keating's opinion that the building of a new opera house on Salford Quays is irrelevant to the people he describes, not unkindly, as the underclass. If it's built, he believes that the people of Ordsall will be excluded, either by high prices or high walls.

'In the old days, when the Quays were a working port, they were surrounded by a high brick wall. Workers walked in proud, through big iron gates. They pulled the wall down when the docks were closed. Soon, you'll see, they'll build another wall around the Quays, bigger than the last one, to keep Salford people out.'

Jane Roberts, project co-ordinator for the Salford Centre, quietly disagrees with Keating's opinions. 'I don't see any confrontational element. The initial initiative to develop Salford Quays was a local one, and there's a lot of support from the people who live in Ordsall.'

This was evident last July, when a Salford Centre Seminar was staged at Salford Quays to present the masterplan for the Salford Centre to an invited audience of arts companies and representatives from the residents of the Ordsall estate.

Michael Wilford's designs were considered as 'a discussion document' rather than a finished working plan, but there was enough practical detail to show that the proposed development would form an exciting and powerful centerpiece for the Quays.

As for its relevance for the people of Salford, the new development is seen by its many

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supporters as a building of regional, even national importance. Royston Futter estimates that some nine million people live within one hour's drive of Salford Quays, and its motorway and rail links, together with the planned adjacent car-parking facilities, will make it one of the most accessible arts centres in the country. And there is no doubt that it will provide jobs, though not as many, nor as arduous as were offered by the labour-intensive dockyards.

As Mr Futter is quick to point out: 'A performance centre of this scale will provide more jobs than a warehouse or supermarket.'