

The Discovery

Over the weekend of Friday 21st to Sunday 23rd February 1975, a party from the Youth Club of Harpenden's St. Nicholas Church visited Coventry. The group stayed at Kennedy House, a U.S.A.-run mission, located near Coventry Cathedral.

The programme for the weekend included a visit on Saturday 22nd February to The Belgrade, the civic theatre of Coventry. Here the attention of the group was drawn to a remarkable item on a poster. The poster, printed in bright red, set out forthcoming attractions at The Belgrade's two theatres, Units 1 and 2.

At the bottom of the Unit 1 list was a play entitled *Speak Up, Harold Beck!* It was billed as a World Premiere and was scheduled for production from 28th May to 7th June 1975. Its author was named as Rony Robinson.

The group brought a copy of the poster back to Harpenden and presented it to me. On its back was further information:-

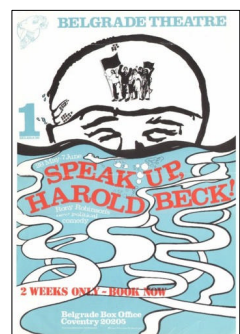
**SPEAK UP HAROLD BECK!** The hero of Rony Robinson's new comedy is an exile from his beloved north, has married above his station and has a dead end job in local government: no wonder he is waiting for the revolution. Set in Coventry, today.



Soon after learning of the play I wrote to The Belgrade at Coventry to book seats for Sheila, Bridget and myself for Friday 30th May. I enclosed a cheque on our usual joint account in the names of H.V. & S.J. Beck and signed the booking request "Harold Beck", without further comment.

It was around the end of April that I took steps to obtain publicity for the *Speak Up, Harold Beck!* play. I spoke to the Editor of the local Evening Echo, who decided to feature the event.

As the time for the production drew near, one of the Evening Echo journalists telephoned The Belgrade and was put in touch with the author who provided some information about the fictitious Harold Beck. The Evening Echo was also sent a large poster on current display at the theatre.



The next development was an interview on the morning of Saturday 17th May by the Evening Echo's Susan Dale. Then on Friday 30th, just before Sheila, Bridget and I set out for Coventry to see the play, a photographer called on behalf of the Evening Echo. I was photographed in my home holding the large poster, which I had seen for the first time only minutes before. The poster described the play as a new political comedy and depicted a group of demonstrators on someone's forehead with the words "Speak Up, Harold Beck!" writ large on a watery background.

When we arrived at The Belgrade Theatre there was a second type of poster on display, entirely different and more disquieting than the first. It was of handbill size (A4) and was printed in lurid red.

At the top was the question "Who is the most dangerous man in Britain?" This was followed by a descending hierarchy of Harold Wilson, Tony Benn and Harold Beck. What gave an uneasy feeling was that the picture beneath the question "Harold Beck?" was of a person who, like me, was dark-haired with a parting on the left, wore glasses and had a moustache. Then, came the exhortation SPEAK UP, HAROLD BECK!

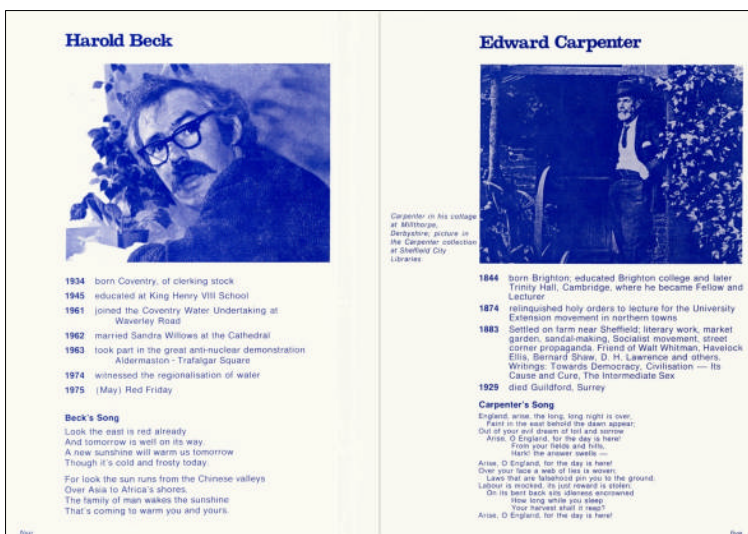


In small print at the bottom was :-

A new political comedy by Rony Robinson, set here and now; see Harold wrestle with his revolution, his marriage, his piles; can he make himself heard before it is too late - for him as well as everyone else?

I have forgotten what price we booked but it turned out to be irrelevant for when as requested by The Belgrade's Manager through the Evening Echo we made ourselves known to the Box Office, we were made guests of the theatre, our cheque was returned and we were given free meal vouchers and drinks.

## The Programme



Page four was devoted to information about the Harold Beck of the play. It was printed in blue and included a photograph which was different from the one which appeared on the small poster but was another look-similar to me. It gave biographical notes in the form of dated entries and concluded with the words of a song attributed to Beck. The page four text was:-

Harold Beck	
<b>1934</b>	born Coventry, of clerking stock
<b>1945</b>	educated at King Henry VIII School
<b>1961</b>	joined the Coventry Water Undertaking at Waverley Road
<b>1962</b>	married Sandra Willows at the Cathedral
<b>1963</b>	took part in the great anti nuclear demonstration Aldermaston Trafalgar Square
<b>1974</b>	witnessed the regionalisation of water
<b>1975</b>	(May) Red Friday

Beck's Song	
Look the east is red already And tomorrow is well on its way. A new sunshine will warm us tomorrow Though it's cold and frosty today.	
For look the sun runs from the Chinese valleys Over Asia to Africa's shores. The family of man wakes the sunshine That's coming to warm you and yours.	

Page five, directly opposite the Harold Beck page, was devoted to information, in an identical format of biography and song, about someone called Edward Carpenter. The text was:-

Edward Carpenter	
<b>1844</b>	born Brighton; educated Brighton college and later Trinity Hall, Cambridge, where he became Fellow and Lecturer
<b>1874</b>	relinquished holy orders to lecture for the University Extension movement in northern towns
<b>1883</b>	Settled on farm near Sheffield; literary work, market garden, sandal making, Socialist movement, street corner propaganda. Friend of Walt Whitman, Havelock Ellis, Bernard Shaw, D. H. Lawrence and others. Writings: Towards Democracy, Civilisation - Its Cause and Cure, The Intermediate Sex
<b>1929</b>	died Guildford, Surrey

Carpenter's Song	
England, arise, the long, long night is over, Faint in the east behold the dawn appear; Out of your evil dream of toil and sorrow Arise, O England, for the day is here! From your fields and hills, Hark! the answer swells Arise, O England, for the day is here! Over your face a web of lies is woven; Laws that are falsehood pin you to the ground; Labour is mocked, its just reward is stolen; On its bent back sits idleness encrowned How long while you sleep Your harvest shall it reap? Arise, O England, for the day is here!	

The photo was captioned "Carpenter in his cottage at Millthorpe, Derbyshire; picture in the Carpenter collection at Sheffield City Libraries".

Two pages in the programme (six and seven) were headed "Company File" and described the cast, the author and the director. It was stated that Rony Robinson was an Oxford graduate who had hoped to become a journalist but instead took up teaching English in a large London comprehensive before turning to the theatre. Apparently at The Belgrade he had a type of appointment which was rare in Britain, namely that of resident playwright. It was also said that he was:-

Definitely not Harold Beck - although he is a mildly eccentric socialist who wears sandals and gets enraged if he cannot buy a New Statesman on a Friday morning.

The cast list on page eight showed that there were only four members of cast, three of whom took on five parts each. The fourth played just one character, the adult Harold Beck, and I saw later that the actor looked almost the reverse of me - throughout the play he wore a mask embodying my features of left-parted dark hair, spectacles and moustache.

Page three was taken up with The Ballad of Amos Valera, described as a "Poem in the style of a Stanley Holloway recitation" by Trevor Watson, of the Water undertaking's offices in Waverley Road, Coventry".

### The Play

The play was described in the programme (page nine) as a psychodrama, which is a therapeutic technique used in psychiatric hospitals where patients take on roles assigned to them but perform without a script. The setting of the play was itself a psychiatric hospital in which Harold Beck was a patient, looking back at various critical incidents and phases in his life and especially when he was a clerk in a Water undertaking.

The action of the play seemed to me to be much ado about nothing. It was weird to hear one's own name mentioned so much, especially as the views expressed by the Harold Beck on the stage were poles apart from my own; his politics were of the far left whereas mine, to the extent that they can be placed at a single point, average out at a little to the right of centre. On the other hand there were some uncanny similarities, such as the information given from the stage that Harold Beck had not done military service because he suffered from asthma, which was exactly the position I had been in. Even more striking was a personal quirk - like me, the Harold Beck in the play fastened his pyjama trousers with a bulldog clip!

### The Belgrade Theatre People

After the performance we were introduced to the cast, the author and to one other person who was probably the director of The Belgrade. Over drinks we discussed features of the play and how it had come into being.

Two members of the cast seemed to me to be very left-wing. This may have been a simple reaction to the information, no doubt conveyed through the Evening Echo, that I was a Conservative Councillor. Overall, however, I could not help but form an impression of an overwhelming bias to the left.

I asked Rony Robinson how he had come to choose the name "Harold Beck" and he replied without hesitation that since the workplace of his hero was the Water Department of a local authority, he had used, as names, words which had some association with water. Hence was derived Beck, as well as presumably Grimsdyke and perhaps also Marsh, Otter and Drake. He said he had chosen "Harold" because it was a well-known name and sounded right.

When I mentioned to the author that there had been some extraordinary events in my life, including an approach by a Russian inviting myself and family to spend some time in Moscow, his reaction can perhaps best be described as one of exasperation that I had not taken advantage of such a rare opportunity. In response to my question about how he had thought up the point about his Harold Beck not doing military service because of asthma, he said his brother had been in that position.

Another point that emerged was that the management of The Belgrade or their municipal sponsors were very apprehensive that I would sue them for damages. I reassured them that I was not of a litigious nature but I did say I would be concerned if the play were to be put on in a place where I

was known. Rony Robinson responded by assuring me that there was no question of presenting the play outside Coventry.

We made our way home that evening having had a fascinating experience which left me with much food for thought.

### Publication

Susan Dale's article on *Speak Up, Harold Beck!*, together with the photograph, was published in the Evening Echo on Saturday 31st May under the headline

## **Harold goes 80 miles to see his namesake**

The text of the Evening Echo item reads:-



HAROLD BECK took a long look at himself last night . . . and travelled 80 miles to do it.

Could he really be the man with a dead end job in local government, who had married above his station and was an exile from his home in the north?

This was a character in a play Harold Beck saw - Harold Beck of Coventry.

The real Mr Beck, pictured left, is a 50 year old councillor on St Albans council, who is happily married with three daughters and was born in London.

He was intrigued about the fictitious Harold Beck, who stars in a new comedy in Coventry, called *Speak Up Harold Beck*, by Rony Robinson.

"I went to see the play with my wife Sheila and youngest daughter Bridget," said Mr Beck, of Manland Way, Harpenden, a lecturer in management studies at the management centre of Hatfield Polytechnic in St Albans.

He heard about the play when Bridget, 15, and Mrs Beck went on a youth weekend to Coventry.

"Part of this weekend was a visit to the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry, and they were amazed to see this name staring at them from a poster," said Mr Beck, who is also chairman of the Community Health council for North West Hertfordshire.

The play's author chose the name Harold Beck because the character works in the Water Department of the local council and Beck is a Yorkshire word meaning river.

"As to the name Harold, I honestly don't know where I got that from - except that perhaps I think the name has an old fashioned feel about it," said Mr Robinson.

Both Mr Becks have moustaches and wear glasses - but according to Mr Robinson, the resident playwright at the Belgrade theatre, that's where the similarities end.

"My Mr Beck is a failure and the real one sounds as if he has made a success of his life," he said.

### Basic Question

What had occurred at Coventry made a good dining-out story but at the same time I regarded it as a miraculous answer to prayers for guidance - indeed I called the whole episode *The Coventry Miracle*. However, considering earlier experiences and in the light of information that came my way, I increasingly wondered if much of what happened in 1975 was contrived.

The basic question remains: "Was *The Coventry Miracle* coincidental or contrived?" Either way, the real Harold Beck feels he has a responsibility to *Speak Up*.