

David Pownall obituary

British playwright best known for *Master Class*, as well as for comic novels inspired by his time in Zambia

By Michael Coveney



Master Class, written by David Pownall, with, from left, David Bamber as Shostakovich, Peter Kelly as Prokofiev, Jonathan Adams as Zhdanov and Timothy West as Stalin, at the Old Vic in 1984. Photograph: Courtesy of the Old Vic

David Pownall, who has died aged 84, was a playwright and novelist who, while never fashionable, nor lionised by critics or the major British companies – although a few of his plays were presented by both the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company – was a highly intelligent, imaginative and idiosyncratic writer, and a great encourager of others.

His best-known play is *Master Class* (1983) – not to be confused with the 1995 play of the same title by Terrence McNally – in which Timothy West as Stalin issued his infamous 1948 decree demanding music “deemed fit” for the Soviet people.

The original production, which travelled from the Leicester Haymarket to the Old Vic and Wyndham’s in the West End, starred not only West in what he has always said is his favourite role, but also Peter Kelly and David Bamber as Prokofiev and Shostakovich, both fine, piano-playing actors. The play was translated into more than 20 languages and is continuously performed throughout the world.

The themes of much of Pownall’s earlier work were defined by working in the 1960s for the Anglo-American copper mine in Zambia. Writing at night, he had many plays produced by the country’s thriving theatre scene. His novels inspired by this time, such as *The Raining Tree War* (1974), were comic satires in the manner of Evelyn Waugh; their stories, said the playwright Torben Betts, arose where “modern technology rubbed shoulders uneasily with tribal magic”.



As well as being an imaginative writer, David Pownall was a great encourager of others. Photograph: Kathy deWitt/Alamy

On his return to the UK, he remained busy in theatre, and in 1975 – over a pint of Paines bitter in the Plough pub in Bedford – he co-founded, with the director John Adams, Paines Plough new writing theatre company, a touring set-up later supported by the Arts Council.

Paines Plough remains a powerful force in our theatre ecology, Pownall and Adams having forged influential relationships with outstanding actors including Stephen Boxer, Harriet Walter, Fiona Victory and Andrew Scott, and such talented writers as Sarah Kane, Stephen Jeffreys, Mike Bartlett and Simon Stephens.

Pownall himself – a large, bear-like, always affable and big-hearted man – went on to write 60 stage plays, 15 novels, and many short stories. He also wrote more than 100 radio plays for the BBC.

Born in Liverpool, David was the first of two sons of Elsie (nee Russell) and Jack Pownall, both keen amateur ballroom dancers. Jack was a professional soldier, killed in the Tunisia campaign of the second world war in 1943. As a result, David, at the age of 11, was given a scholarship to Lord Wandsworth college in Long Sutton, Hampshire, a public school that favoured boys who had lost a parent. Boarding there from 1949 to 1956, he disliked the place intensely.

After graduating in history at Keele University, Staffordshire, in 1960, Pownall took a job as a personnel officer at the Ford Motor Company in Dagenham, Essex. He married Glenys Jones, a teacher, the following year. The couple moved to Zambia for Pownall to take up a similar job in the copper mine, returning in 1969 laden with material and bulging notebooks. He was appointed resident dramatist (1970-72) first at the Century theatre in Coalville, Leicestershire, and then, in the same post, at the Duke's Playhouse, Lancaster (1972-75), where he wrote street theatre, community theatre, children's theatre, musicals and plays.

His novels *The Raining Tree War* and *African Horse* (1975) prompted critical comparisons with Tom Sharpe's South African satires, while *God Perkins* (1977), about a touring company in the north-west of England, was described by Auberon Waugh as "a tour de farce". My own first intriguing encounters with Pownall's plays – *Crates on Barrels* (1974), a furious philosophical monologue claiming intellectual precedence in Diogenes, Socrates and God; and *Motocar* (1977), a magical summation of Rhodesian history triggered by a political prisoner awaiting interrogation – put me on red alert.

This critical interest never came into convincing focus because of the sporadic, eclectic nature of Pownall's talent and progress. This despite the fact that both *Motocar* and *Richard III, Part 2* – a theatrical meditation on the relation of history to the truth framed by George Orwell posting his typescript of 1984 and featuring a party political broadcast on behalf of the Plantagenets – were welcomed into the National's Cottesloe (now Dorfman) auditorium in 1978. Pownall never worked out the marketing strategy. This was a signal of his integrity, but a negative career tactic. "He wrote," said Betts, "simply because the ideas, words and characters poured joyously out of him. If the work was of any value to others, so much the better." His stage and subsequent radio play *Beef* (1981), set in an abattoir and dealing with Irish history, was the subject of the first review ever published by the Meat Marketing Board. They gave it a rave.

After *Master Class*, his major stage plays included a notably well-crafted adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1986) that started at the Arts, Cambridge, and ended up at the Old Vic, starring Peter Sallis and Pauline Yates, both unsurpassed as the parental Bennets; the oddly compelling *Elgar's Rondo* (1983) for the RSC in Stratford-upon-Avon, featuring the great Alec McCowen in a walrus moustache, red satin pyjamas and a state of psychological crisis after the poor reception of his *Second Symphony*; and *Getting the Picture* (1998) at the Lyric theatre, Belfast, pitching an 1845 historical photoshoot for the former US president Andrew Jackson in Nashville against an intervention of a present-day Ulster activist seeking a repeal of the Act of Union in Ireland.

None of this was the work of a man who aimed low. His first historical novel, *The White Cutter* (1988), created a father/son narrative around the craft of the great medieval stone masons and was compared, not unfavourably, to Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. One of his most ingenious plays, *Music to Murder By* (1976), imagines a dark and satanic collaboration between the murderous Renaissance composer Carlo Gesualdo and the suicidal dissolute Peter Warlock. As Peter Ackroyd said, "Pownall treats fiction itself as a kind of brilliant lie, sacred and yet at the same time malevolent."

Pownall's marriage to Glenys ended in divorce in 1971. Their son, Gareth, predeceased him. From 1972 until the mid 80s he was in a relationship with the American actor Mary Ellen Ray, who was a long-time Paines Plough collaborator and muse, and they had a son, Tom. Pownall married Alex Sutton, a photographer, in 1993, and she survives him along with their son, Max, Tom, two stepdaughters, Dom and Georgie, a grandson, Zayden, and his younger brother, Barry. A grandson, Raffi, also predeceased him.