Scenes from the Revolution

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Making Political Theatre 1968–2018

Edited by
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Introduction

A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF POLITICAL THEATRE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY UP TO 1968

Kim Wiltshire and Billy Cowan

There has always been theatre that is political. An argument often put forward by theatre-makers is that all theatre is political because in some form it holds a mirror up to the society in which it is created. That may to a certain extent be true, but there is of course theatre that is specifically political; theatre that looks at issues and asks the audience to think further about those issues. Theatre that uses forms and ways of working that build on what has gone before, whilst subverting ways of working that actors, directors and writers have got used to over the 2,500 years since the dithyramb first produced a theatrical scene. Political theatre companies have in the past experimented by using collaboration and cooperation, by taking socialist or communist ideals and applying these to the way they created theatre, and this concentration on form and ways of working can also be classed as political theatre, regardless of the subject matter (although very often the subject matter is also political). Then there is theatre that is made by, about and for certain groups of people – those who are not male, not white, not straight. By focusing on the issues that affect these groups, the theatre-makers create political theatre through a critique of the status quo.

These are the types of theatre and the theatre-makers we are exploring in this book. These are political theatre-makers.

Over the past 50 years there have been many, many theatre-makers and theatre companies who might fit this description. Of course, not every one of these can be included in a book like this. Catherine Itzin, in 1981, attempted a survey of all the political theatre companies from 1968–80, whilst John Bull and George Saunders have edited a three-volume collection that surveys a range of 'alternative' theatre companies from between 1965 to 2014, considering their work from Arts Council England documentation. These books make the brave attempt to include as many theatre companies as possible. However,

when creating a book about political theatre, editors and writers have to make decisions about which companies to include and which to leave out. Questions have to be asked about a company's remit and objectives, about the body of work produced. Sometimes the size and longevity of the company, the reach and the influence of a company's work, has to be considered. To document and survey the political theatre landscape over 50 years would be a near impossible task without making some of these decisions. And as there are texts attempting this, there is no point attempting to do a similar job.

Also, it was never our intention as editors for this book simply to list a range of theatre companies who did something political once. Instead, we wanted to create 'scenes' from political theatre past and consider what they might mean in the present. Our aim is to highlight a few companies who have made, continue to make or are beginning to make political theatre, and hear their stories, their ideas and their considerations about whether political theatre still matters, still exists or is even still relevant in the modern world.

To do this, we looked at six areas of theatre-making (agitprop theatre; working-class theatre; theatre in education; women's theatre; queer theatre; and theatre and race) and considered which theatre companies we would concentrate on for those sections. We chose companies we believe have had a major impact on the political theatre world, often by being the first of their kind. We also considered whether the theatre companies and/or founding members were still making theatre in some way today. We researched extracts of their early plays, in some cases interviewed those early theatre-makers, alongside those who are still working in the theatre companies now, and we commissioned academics who research political theatre and current theatre practitioners to write about how and why political theatre is still relevant. These 'scenes' work to create a scrapbook that builds a picture of political theatre then and now, giving students of theatre, those interested in political activism through the arts, and those who are simply interested in the social history of political theatre an introduction, a sense, a taste of what it was all about – and why it is still relevant.

Why Start in 1968?

1968 was a year of great political change across the Western world. It was the year of protest, people power and pleas for peace. The war raged

in Vietnam, while many Americans had no idea why their country was involved. In Paris the students marched against capitalism and what they saw as American imperialism, marches that were swiftly followed by a series of general strikes. The Biafran War reached a stalemate and those in the West were confronted with harrowing images of starving Nigerian children, and urged to send what they could to help. The Prague Spring saw the Soviet Union invade Czechoslovakia. Robert Kennedy was assassinated in the US, and US athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos gave Black Power salutes as they stood on the podium to receive the gold and silver medals for the 200m sprint at the Olympics in Mexico. In the UK, whilst Enoch Powell made his infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech,* abortion was legalised, and – only the year before – the Sexual Offences Act 1967 legalised homosexuality.

Another, much more minor – but for our purposes, no less important – event also happened in the UK during this year. The Theatres Act 1968 abolished censorship in theatre. Since 1737 the Lord Chamberlain had wielded power over which plays could and could not be legally performed on the British stage. Each new play had to be scrutinised by the censor before it could be produced. The removal of this power allowed a range of theatre-makers to create new types of theatre, devising and writing plays that could attack the status quo politically, plays that would no longer have to be approved by government to be produced. This change to the way theatre could be made had a profound impact on young writers, directors, producers and actors at the time, and over the next few years a wide range of new theatre companies sprang up across the country. And, as Catherine Itzin puts it, 'this was the period when the war babies came of age – including "products" of the 1944 Education Act which had opened the doors of higher education to the working class.'[1] All of this created a crucible for new and exciting theatre to be made, theatre that went to the people, that asked questions of the state and the political world and was created by theatre-makers who were not 'just socially committed, but committed to a socialist society. They were the writers of agitational propaganda and social realism, who had not and who probably would not "sell out" or be sucked in by the establishment.'[2] It was a time of political upheaval, a sense of change hung in the air, and those who advocated for active political protest could use art and theatre as a way to get their message out to more people.

* The full speech can be found here: https://tinyurl.com/yaqzg2cf

Pre-1968 Political Theatre

Of course, political theatre did not just happen in 1968. As the range of historic events listed above highlights, the rise of political theatre usually coincides with major social, cultural and political upheavals in the 'real' world, and one of the most significant events to have an impact on political theatre, and indeed on every aspect of the industrialised world in the twentieth century, was the Russian Revolution of 1917, and the rise of Marxism and communism across Europe that followed. This had a great effect on many theatre practitioners, including two of political theatre's most influential innovators: Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht.

In the context of post-World War One Germany, and the rise of fascism, it is not surprising that artists such as Brecht and Piscator were looking to alternative ideologies such as Marxism, which offered 'solutions' to the cycle of war and tyranny that seemed to grip Europe. Influenced by his reading of Marx, Brecht also believed that German theatre was too bourgeois and no longer capable of exploring the complexities of modern life. His solution was to create a new type of theatre, based on Piscator's film montage theory, that 'rejected linear narrative in favor of seemingly disassociated scenes, of which spectators had to make sense in much the same way as they make sense of cuts, dissolves, and flashbacks in film'.[3] For theatre to be relevant and powerful as an instrument for social change, Brecht believed audiences needed to be able to respond to the ideas put in front of them intellectually and not emotionally. The aim of theatre was therefore not to create emotional catharsis for the audience, as in the theatre of Ancient Greece, which since the Renaissance had been the benchmark for all dramatic form, but to allow them to respond rationally. To this end, he developed what became known as 'epic theatre' borrowed from Piscator's idea of 'the text of the play disclosing its socio-political circumstances'.[4] This epic theatre also borrowed some technical innovations from Piscator, such as the use of film-clips and still images, and agitprop devices such as the use of placards to disrupt narratives. Brecht was also interested in popular culture and incorporated song and dance, cabaret-style performance, circus and vaudeville into his 'epic' narratives. All of these techniques were later adopted by many of the political theatre companies that came after him, including many of the post-1968 companies discussed in this book.

In the UK during the 1930s, Brecht's and Piscator's influence as well as Marxist ideology extended to the political theatre of the Workers'

Theatre Movement (WTM), a national network of various agitprop troupes and companies, which was initially set up in 1926. Allied more with communism than socialism and the Labour Party, the WTM's task was spelt out in the February 1932 edition of their official magazine, *Red Stage*:

> Our task is to bring the message of the class struggle to as many workers as possible. When we want to reach the masses it is not enough to wait until they come to us or call for us. We have to go there where the masses are: in meetings, in workers' affairs, on the streets, at factory gates, to parades, at picnics, in working-class neighbourhoods. That means we must be mobile.
>
> Our organizational structure, our plays, the form of our production must be such that we are able to travel with our production from one place to another, that we are able to give the same effective performance on a stage, on a bare platform, on the streets.
>
> We cannot wait or look for a ready-made style for our new theatre; we have to develop the style of the workers' theatre by bringing it in conformity with its tasks and its means of expression.
>
> The organizers, players, writers, and directors of workers' theatres are workers, the audiences are workers. Both are not prepared by a long literary and cultural education, which is only available to the members of the bourgeois class who have the leisure and the money for it.
>
> Worker players are not able to express, and worker audiences are not able to understand, complicated structures of ideas and refined intellectual language.
>
> The workers' theatre plays must be simple, so that workers can produce them and workers can understand them. Simplicity, however, does not mean crudity, does not mean absence of art.
>
> On the contrary: the more artistic our productions are, the more effective they are, and the more efficient is the political education and propaganda we carry.[5]

Although the WTM was short lived, ending in about 1935, many important political theatre practitioners and companies grew out of the movement, the most significant of these being Joan Littlewood, Ewan MacColl and London's Unity Theatre.

MacColl, a writer and poet, was creating street-based agitprop theatre in the streets of Salford and Manchester with a company called the Red Megaphones. Littlewood, who had come up to Manchester from London as an actor for BBC radio, met MacColl in 1936, and together they created the Theatre Union. In these pre-war years they worked on a range of agitprop theatre work, often creating what they called 'Living Newspapers'. These shows were often performed in the street; indeed, in 1940 the police halted a performance and the pair were bound over for two years for breach of the peace. This work set the foundation for their future collaboration.

Following World War Two, Theatre Union changed its name again to Theatre Workshop, and began touring extensively across the country. In 1953 the company moved to what would become its permanent home, the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, an almost derelict building that the Theatre Workshop members had to rebuild themselves. Littlewood and MacColl, who had written many of the early plays, went their separate ways (with MacColl becoming more famous as a folk singer and father to 1980s pop star, Kirsty MacColl, while the Theatre Workshop continued to work in Littlewood's distinctive style). The company's most famous plays – Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey*, *Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'be* (a musical written by Lionel Bart) and, of course, *Oh! What A Lovely War* – all had political messages, all had working-class heroes and asked the audience questions about their community, their society, and what that community valued. So the question might be asked, how did the work post-1968 differ from the type of work Littlewood was already doing? As Itzin comments, '[a]ll theatre is political. But the significant British theatre of 1968–1978 was primarily theatre of political change.'[6]

Littlewood always had to look to the establishment to get her messages across, because she and her theatre company had to make money. *Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'be* had a very successful West End run, and both *A Taste of Honey* and *Oh! What A Lovely War* were made into films. Her work of course carried political messages, but as she perfected her theatre-making style she began to focus less on 'political change' and more on 'theatrical change'. Of course, it can be argued that this widening of the audience spread the political message further, that it inspired young theatre- and film-makers to create work that was more socially grounded and politically active. And it can also be argued that without Littlewood, theatre-makers like Shelagh Delaney, Brendan Behan and a range of actors famous in the 1960s and 1970s would never have had the

success they went on to achieve. Littlewood set up a political ethos to theatre and a new way of working, collaboratively, experimentally and thinking always of audience experience, that changed the usual writer/director duality of power. It was political theatre, but not necessarily theatre of political change – it served to highlight, not change policy.

Growing out of the Workers' Theatre Movement, London's Unity Theatre, formed in 1936 by the Rebel Players, was one of the most influential political theatre companies to produce work throughout the post-war years up until circa 1975, when a fire seriously damaged their premises on Goldington Street near St Pancras. For over 40 years they were the premier venue for hosting and producing some of the most important political, working-class plays of the era, and giving a platform to some of the most political new work from both British and international writers. In 1938 they produced *Waiting for Lefty*, 'a landmark in the history of left-wing theatre'[7] by the American writer Clifford Odets, which was about a group of New York cabbies who go on strike 'to get a living wage' when their leader, Lefty Costello, is shot. They also presented the first Brecht play in the UK with *Señora Carrar's Rifles* (1938) and British premieres of Sean O'Casey's anti-fascist play, *The Star Turns Red* (1940), Jean Paul Sartre's *Nekrassov* (1956) and Brecht's *Mother Courage and her Children (1958)*. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Unity Theatre became an important venue for the alternative theatre movement, and this is where Roland Muldoon, Claire Burnley (later Muldoon), Ray Levine and David Hatton set up CAST (Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre).

CAST is often acknowledged as the first agitprop theatre company, although Muldoon described it more as 'agitpop'.[8] CAST used a range of theatrical techniques, such as comedy and satire, to explore the culture and counterculture of the times they were living in. Using the archetypal character of 'Muggins' in many of their plays, 'the early CAST aesthetic was developed through collective improvisation: a style developed for the public meetings and working-class social clubs that were the group's venues.'[9] They became part of the rock and roll lifestyle of the 1960s, looking into the audiences' faces and bridging the gap between theatre-maker and theatre-viewer, with a standard Everyman central character that offered immediate recognition and allowed the political message to come across in an uncomplicated, direct manner. In his exploration of CAST, Bill McDonnell defines four periods of the company:

> The first, 1965–1971, was the highpoint of the company as a feted guerrilla troupe, mixing experimental and agit-prop forms to produce a distinctive, hybrid aesthetic. The second, 1971 to 1974, was a period of splits and reformations in which, for a while, CAST lost their way, distracted by their counterculture celebrity. Rebirth came in 1975–1976 in the form of Arts Council subsidy, and lasted until 1979. This year would mark another watershed presaging the slow phasing out of touring shows and […] took the company in a new direction […] in their stewardship of Hackney Empire, 1986–2005.[10]

CAST effectively stopped touring in 1979, although the Muldoons continued to make work and, as McDonnell highlights in the quote above, moved towards thinking about what they termed 'new variety' as being political entertainment – a venture they still work on today, organising comedy tours and gigs that run alongside Labour Party activism.

Building on the work of these earlier companies, often with a socialist message and heavily influenced by Brechtian methods and ideals, the change in censorship law allowed new companies to form, companies that would use theatre and art as a form of direct political activism, finding new ways to work and new messages to take to new audiences.

The Companies and Theatre-makers Explored in this Book

As mentioned above, this book is divided into six sections looking at key areas of the alternative theatre movement since 1968: agitprop theatre; working-class theatre; theatre in education; women's theatre; queer theatre; and theatre and race. In each section we have endeavoured to focus on one key company that existed in those early post-1968 days and invited current companies, theatre academics or practitioners working in those key areas today to talk about their work and experience. We've chosen companies who are recognised as key players in their particular field by scholars and theatre practitioners. No value judgement has been made on the quality of their work compared to other companies that we have not had the space to explore fully here. We simply looked to companies we believe complement each other in the range and breadth of their work.

Within each section we have also chosen to publish an extract of an unpublished or out-of-print play to give a flavour of the type of work these early companies were creating. For the agitprop section, we have

chosen an extract from *Apartheid: The British Connection* by Kathleen McCreery, a founding member of Red Ladder, who later went on to found Broadside Mobile Workers' Theatre, who produced this play. The piece explores the British response to apartheid in South Africa during the 1970s, followed by an exploration of South Africa's form of political theatre, known as protest theatre, by South African playwright and academic David Peimer and completed with a piece by Rebecca Hillman on why agitprop theatre can still be relevant to today's political theatre-makers.

The political nature of *Apartheid: The British Connection* contrasts nicely with the work of John McGrath, who we've chosen to explore in the working-class section. Many of McGrath's plays are well known. However, we have chosen to concentrate on a play called *Blood Red Roses*, originally written for 7:84 Scotland and adapted for an English audience in 1982. Bob Eaton, who directed this production of the play at the Liverpool Everyman, gives a sense of that moment in time in Liverpool and how this was a personal 'micro' story that highlighted the larger social issues of the period. This is followed by an essay by playwright Lizzie Nunnery, who contrasts the themes of her own work on *The Sum* and her growing exploration of political theatre with a capital 'P', linked to McGrath's plays, especially *Blood Red Roses*. The section ends with an essay by Lindsay Rodden who considers what the future of theatre might have looked like if all theatre-makers adhered to McGrath's theatrical ethos.

In the Theatre in Education (TIE) section, we publish an extract from *Farewell to Erin,* a piece devised by Belgrade Theatre in Education Company in September 1979 for junior school pupils. The play is set in nineteenth-century Ireland and deals with land-ownership and Irish emigration. It exemplifies the kind of TIE participatory event that actively engaged children in learning by allowing them to enter into genuine dialogue, negotiation and debate at key moments in the play. This extract is supported by an interview with Justine Themen, who runs Coventry Belgrade's TIE department, and Tony Hughes, one of the original members of M6 Theatre Company – a company that has been at the forefront of TIE and theatre for young audiences for over 40 years. Julia Samuels from Liverpool's 20 Stories High also gives us an insight into how the company creates exciting and political work with young people today.

The extract from the Women's Theatre Group is called *Work To Role,* and is an early example of the type of consciousness-raising theatre

(similar to TIE plays) that was taken into schools during the 1970s. This play aimed to explore with schoolgirls the realities of the world of work that was waiting for them when they finished school. The work of two women-centred theatre companies, Clean Break, who were formed in the 1970s, and Open Clasp, a slightly newer company, is also explored and the question of whether women-centred theatre is still relevant today is considered by theatre-makers Anna Hermann, Catrina McHugh and Jill Heslop.

Although we focus on Gay Sweatshop in the queer section, we decided to publish an extract of a General Will play, *Men,* by Don Milligan and Noël Greig, which was produced in 1976. This play is typical of many 'gay' plays from that time that looked at life in the closet. What makes this special is that the protagonist, Richard, a closeted homosexual, is also a trade unionist and the play, according to Milligan, explores 'the tension between the emancipation of homosexuals and the more traditional concerns of the labour movement'.[11] This is complemented with an essay from Chris Goode about queer theatre and interviews with Ruth McCarthy, artistic director of Outburst, and Julie Parker, formally of the Drill Hall, London, who discuss LGBTQ theatre, then and now, and what it means to them.

Finally, in the theatre and race section we have an extract from *Tainted Dawn* by Sudha Bhuchar, who founded Tamasha Theatre Company, and who speaks about her experiences as a theatre-maker from the 1980s onwards. This section is introduced by May Sumbwanyambe, who explores his (and an audience's) relationship to mainstream 'white' theatre and stories. Finally, Jingan Young considers, through an exploration of her theatre company, Pokfulam Road, the political stance theatre-makers of British East Asian origin have to take against the mainstream theatre world.

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NOTES

1. Catherine Itzin, Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968 (London: Methuen Publishing Ltd., 1980) p. 2.
2. Ibid., p. x.
3. Carol Martin and Henry Bial, eds, Brecht Sourcebook (London: Routledge, 2000) p. 2.
4. Ibid., p. 2.
5. 'Workers Theatre Movement', Working Class Movement Library, viewed 4 March 2018, from https://tinyurl.com/ybgg2fgn
6. Itzin, Stages in the Revolution p. x.
7. 'Political Theatre in the Early 20th Century', Victoria and Albert Museum, viewed 4 March 2018, from https://tinyurl.com/lk3rlh9
8. Itzin, Stages in the Revolution, p. 14.
9. Bill McDonnell, 'CAST', British Theatre Companies: 1965–1979, edited by John Bull (London: Bloomsbury, 2017) p. 124.
10. Ibid., p. 122.
11. Don Milligan, 2017, email, 20 December.