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A study of political theater and social movements

Portz, Charles Robert, Ph.D.

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U·M·I
300 N. Zeeb Rd.
Ann Arbor, MI 48106

A STUDY OF POLITICAL THEATER AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

by

CHARLES R. PORTZ

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Executive Officer

Bogdan Denitch

William Kornblum

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

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by

C.R. Portz

Advisor: Stanley Aronowitz

It is the contention of this study that political theater, which has always been an important avenue to express social discontent and rail against social injustice, can only have a powerful implementing force on politics and other aspects of social life by working in conjunction with the resources available from a strong social movement. This study is an examination of this contention primarily through a close analysis of the Labor Theater, a workers' theater in the U.S. that operated with the support of the more progressive sections of the American labor movement during the 1970's and early 1980's. In order to place the Labor Theater historically, a brief survey is given of the important political theater in the United States that occurred within the social turmoil of the 1930's and the rapidly expanding labor union movement that helped sustain it.

To give this study a framework, an examination has been made of the ideological and financial underpinnings of several other political theaters producing plays in the United States during the 1970's. To locate the Labor Theater internationally, a comparison was made with political theater groups with similar goals and tactics that operated in Great Britain during the same time period.

The conclusion that was arrived at was that although operations such as political theaters are of significant importance in legitimating the ideologies behind social movements, they can rarely survive without the support and resources of the organizations they are championing.

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Political Theater and Social Movements

Introduction

POLITICAL THEATER & SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

This is a study of the rise and fall of the political theater movement in the United States in the extended decade of the 1970's and the social movements that helped it along its way, both up and down. Although political theaters seem to spring forth whenever there are dramatic social disturbances, it is more likely that these emergences are caused less by some spurring of a deep social consciousness than by the need of growing social movements for moral and aesthetic support. "The tastes and propensities natural to democratic nations in respect to literature will first be disernible in drama, and it may be foreseen that they will break out there with a vehemence. In written productions the literary canons of aristocracy will be gently, gradually, and, so to speak, legally modified; at the theater they will be riotously overthrown."[1] It is thereby the thesis of this study that political theaters operate as important appendages to social movements and are vitally necessary in the fight for support both from their natural constituencies and from the surrounding groups that should, by reason of their political similarities, be strong supporters. It also appears to be true that social movements cannot survive and prosper unless they have an ideological agenda to allow them to take away the "moral high-ground" from the controlling institutions of the

state. It follows that a social movement worthy of the name cannot survive without the support of a cultural movement that allows it to overcome the attacks on its legitimacy from the intellectual apologists for the status quo. That this connection of cultural and social formations is intrinsic to the success of protest movements is the sociological core of this study.

Most of the literature on political theater in the United States was written about the 1930's when there was a tremendous upsurge in dramatic presentations that dealt with the social problems caused by the worldwide collapse of capitalism and the rise of fascism. These books tended to tell the story of the growth of the "most important" of these theaters and the productions that they were responsible for before they faded from the scene. Some were written from a political perspective, such as "Drama and Commitment, Politics in the America of the Thirties", by Gerald Rabkin and others from a viewpoint of the theater artist, such as Harold Clurman's tale of the Group Theater, "The Fervent Years". This period was a time of immense social upheaval, but most notably in the effect that it had on the lower middle classes, who along with the working class had dropped into the abyss of the unemployed. Many of the men and women who would become the writers, directors and actors in the newly formed theaters of social protest were members of or adherents to the ideas of

the communist party. This not only provided a loose ideology that could be espoused or discussed but also gave credence to these theaters through the reviews and critiques that were written by journalists for the newspapers sympathetic with the problems of the unemployed or working with and through the labor unions that were publishing their own widely read papers. Later, these same writers would turn their experiences with these theaters into books about the times, using the productions as springboards for their own theories on the impending collapse of the capitalist system. A case in point is "Drama Was A Weapon", by Morgan Himelstein. This book takes the position that the influence of the political theater of the 1930's was much less than has been reported. The author points out that there were really very few playwrights, with the exception of Clifford Odets, who actually were at all successful in reaching a wide audience with plays that contained a Marxist perspective or adhered, however clumsily, to the ever changing Communist Party line. However, Harold Clurman, writing a new introduction for each subsequent re-printing of "The Fervent Years", seems to grow more and more assured each time that the Group Theater had a profound effect on the nature of theater in the United States. Additionally, much new research, currently appearing in articles and journals about the cultural politics of the Popular Front, makes a very strong case for the tremendous

influence that the Party had in all fields of culture, including the novel, music and theater.

It is my contention that the literature available on the theater of 1930's, most of which was written later, was usually from an academic rather from a theatrical perspective, and therefore took a much harsher look at the texts of the plays produced during that time than was warranted. This literary tendency attached far too much importance to the written word and much less to the spirit and sub-text of the productions. The reason for this distortion has to do both with the inability of these social historians to understand how difficult it is to create works of art that are both political and dramatic and not didactic and dull, and with the further difficulty for political essayists to appreciate the use of language and ideas presented in a medium that is meant to be spoken. Because of this difference of orientation, actors and other artists who are more comfortable with visual images and written dialogue often find plays much more alive and pertinent than academics who have trouble lifting the underlying content from the page. Thereby, I feel that writers who have strong backgrounds in the arts, such as Harold Clurman and G.B. Shaw, have a much better grasp of the power that certain productions had on the audiences and other artists of the period than the academics who came later to analyze primarily the written content of the productions.

Further, it was this aspect of the struggle, the combination of art and politics that was undertaken by the political theater groups in their attempts to furthur social change that continues to be the separating factor between the artistic and political communities. This attempt at forging a new dramatic style that could satisfy both needs, to inform and entertain, was the at the center of the conflict that beset these groups in the 1930's and was a major contributing force that eventually caused them to disband. This study will look very closely at the avowedly political plays that were produced during this time both as dramatic and literary creations to show how they were created and what they were attempting to accomplish, both in relation to their audiences and in relation to the artistic community.

Some social theorists have concluded that, given the monopoly of overwhelming physical force possessed by the modern industrial state, radical social change in the future is more likely to come from raised consciousness than from physical revolution and exposure to the arts can be a potent force for consciousness raising. The civil rights movement demonstrated that when people develop inner resources and positive self-images, they are better able to perceive where there best self interests lie and act accordingly. Aristotle seems to have had it right when he stated, a couple of thousand years ago,

> The artist's function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e. what is possible as being probable or necessary...Hence Art is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of a nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singular. By a universal statement I mean one as to what such or such a kind of man will probably say or do - which is the aim of art, though it affixes proper names to the characters.[2]

The major investigation of this work, the relationship between the Labor Theater and the Labor Movement, will occur in Chapter Six. This recollection will attempt to analyze the complex and confused ideologies that were being thrust upon this Theater and, through inference, by all cultural organizations that were attempting to provide moral support to the struggling unions throughout the 1970's. Often, this resulted in tremendous ideological clashes. For example, while strong support was given to the Civil Rights Movement by the more progressive unions, (perhaps as a way to gain support from these disenfranchised workers that were living in states whose white establishment was violently opposed to unions), the more conservative unions were in support of the war in Vietnam and therefore aligned against the same student

desenters who were working foe Civil Rights. This, of course, divided the unions and their working class membership in a variety of ways; left-wing unions against right-wing unions, working class fathers against college attending sons, black workers against white workers and eventually even men against women (blue collar unions against white collar unions). It was within this climate of anger and confusion that the political theater movement of the era began to develop. The actions and issues that came to the front and became the basis of the material used for the plays, songs and skits were the result of the convergence and violent clash of these powerful social movements with the equally powerful social institutions of the time. All this was, in fact, was just a part of what Raymond Williams refers to as the "long revolution". The long revolution is in fact composed of three revolutions, the democratic, industrial and cultural. Democracy, industry and communications are all means rather than ends.[3]

It is a small segment of this "long revolution", reappearing yet again in the 1960s and 1970s, as always directed against an obviously unjust socio-economic system, that will be examined here.

ENDNOTES

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America (New York: New American Library, 1956) p. 80.

2. Raymond Williams, The Long Revolution, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961) p. 5.

3. Ibid., p. x-xi.

Chapter 1.

Definition of Political Theater

It has been said that all theater is political in that it has something to say about the society that we live in, that it has a point of view. However, if theater lends its support to the prevailing doctrines of the times, it will probably not be called political except by those who are in strong opposition to the status quo. Most others will merely look at the productions as apolitical, at most only harmless affirmations that present society as it is, as it should be. However, if a play attacks the prevailing social structure, especially socioeconomic issues such as property rights or the corporate state, then theater becomes political and is seen and reported as a threat to some sort of national interests. This, of course, is not out of the ordinary as elites have always used the arts not only for aesthetic fulfillment but also to maintain their cultural threatened dominance of the class hierarchy. This, then, is the job assigned to the critics, who normally attack the offending playwright because he has not separated himself sufficiently from the real world. In a well known passage in "A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man", James Joyce suggests some of the principles of this aesthetic approach: "The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his

fingernails."[1] However, as much as this is encouraged by the institutional structure that controlled such matters and "gushed over by literary ladies with three names", a reaction set in. "I have always maintained", George Orwell asserts, "that every artist is a propagandist in the sense that he is trying, directly or indirectly, to impose a vision of life that seems to him desirable."[2] It is at this point that the point is usually restated in a way that seems to want to drive a wedge forever between art and journalism. Newspapers deal with politics. That's their job. Art should avoid political questions and deal only with such things as love, truth and beauty. Since the everyday political life of the world is usually held to be an area that is suitable only for the "news", art is easily shunted off to areas of life that have loftier ideals. The reason most often given for this separation by the keepers of the flame is that politics will ruin art. In fact, the opposite is probably true. The real fear is that art will ruin politics. As Politics deals with deception, lies and confusion and Art, on the other hand, deals with simplicity, truth and clarity, the dangers of ruination are reversed. When art is used to analyze political events, from cartoons to books to motion pictures, the results are often explosive. Truth has a tendency to surface and cause enormous social confrontations. It is because of this that most state institutions tend to be very antagonistic toward any individuals or groups that uses the arts for

political purposes. "Theater is far too threatening a public art for a society that cannot face itself, its past, or its domestic and international uses of power. Theater's vocation has always been and always will be to present images of ruling power, to persuase either elite or mass, either through flattering portraits of ideal worlds or through profound critiques of what must never be, that our world is in part the product of someone's imagination."[3] Marcuse noted in The Aesthetic Dimension that, "In an era when reality is subject to technological manipulation, it is only in art that the world really is as it appears...Although art cannot change the world, it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world".[4]

The question that presents itself at this point seems to be, "Why theater?" Of all the means available, why has it historically been theater's job to deliver the message, to speak out of turn, to support the other side? The answer to that seems to be that was precisely why theater was developed in the first place. In the division of social labor, it was ideally suited to do the work. "The political vocation of drama is to remind society of its obligation to act in terms of its constructive well-being, not in its personal self-interest. Theater's vocation has always been and always will be to present images of ruling power, to persuade both elite and mass, either through flattering portraits of ideal worlds

or through profound critiques of what must never be, that our world is in part the product of someone's dramatic imagination".[5] This social construction of reality can be especially unnerving to an otherwise complacent middle-class theater-goer. Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out that "The spectator of a dramatic piece is, to a certain extent, taken by surprise by the impression it conveys. He has no time to refer to his memory or to consult those more able to judge than himself."[6] And that ability to catch the audience off guard is invaluable, as some social theorists have concluded that, given the monopoly of overwhelming physical force possessed by the modern industrial state, radical social change in the future is more likely to come from raised consciousness than from physical revolution and exposure to the arts can be a potent force for consciousness raising. In this day and age, due to the tremendous conglomeration of the Mass Media, theater seems to be the sole institution that still retains the freedom necessary to present a society to itself, to surprise it, to detach it from its selected self-image. The newspapers, television and movies are so much a part of the corporate structure that they cannot readily report the real news, they can only report the news as viewed through the prism of the ruling classes. It is only in independent theater productions that both the government and society can be viewed critically, freed somewhat from the control that advertising and financing dollars put upon the

other media. It is only in theaters of this sort that people are made capable of believing in themselves as a society which can assume the responsibility for the actions of the state. "Awakening the consciousness of the masses is a real challenge to oppressive ideologies, particularly when allied with intellectuals and progressive elites who communicate with the people through the various arts. Unfortunately, this type of theater cannot exist without the support of social movements that are willing to use their power for cultural as well as political purposes. Horkheimer and Adorno stated in the Dialectic of the Enlightenment, "Movies and radio no longer pretend to be art. The truth that they are just a business is made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce."[7] Benjamin Ginsberg spoke of the 'marketplace of ideas' put together during the 19th and 20th centuries that effectively disseminates the beliefs and ideas of the upper classes while subverting the ideological and cultural independence of the lower classes. In the United States, in particular, the ability of the upper classes to dominate this marketplace has generally allowed these strata to shape the entire society's perception of political reality and the range of realistic political and social possibilities.[8]

THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL THEATER

"The very idea of theater is political, first because of what the theater has always meant and must always be: a place of collective memory, the vision of a collective life, a workable picture of the world...The specific uniqueness of the theater is its restoration of two Aeschylean principles of drama: that theater originates in the foundation of political and social life, for which it becomes a crossroads; and that theater's most pressing objective is the political education of the spectator."[9] Aristotle stated that, "The artist's function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e. what is possible as being probable or necessary. Hence Art is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of a nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singular. By a universal statement I mean one as to what such or such a kind of man will probably say or do - which is the aim of art, though it affixes proper names to the characters."[10] Prior to Aristotle's time, some form of theater was always considered a vital avenue for the expression of ideas. Durkheim wrote of the religious rituals that were conducted and performed by the tribal priests to ward off evil spirits and call on help from the "other" world. But the birth of political theater, dramatic presentations that attempted to tell the stories of the nation, its victories and defeats, the deeds of its great men, probably

began in ancient Greece, with the "tragedies". It was the purpose of these carefully written and staged presentations to relive the events of the past so that they could be reconsidered in the present and important lessons learned. It was felt that these stories had to be told over and over again, lest their values be forgotten.[11] Contrary to modern times, often the stories were of defeats, for it was then thought that it was more important not to repeat mistakes then to glory in the victories of bygone times. But even more, it was thought necessary to "show", that is, act out, the better attributes of men, such as virtue, then to merely talk about them. This was based on the belief that virtues, like colors, were intangibles that had to be seen and experienced to be truly understood and appreciated. The theaters of Greece, like the theaters of most nations, have always been filled with spectators that belonged not only to the aristocracy. De Tocqueville observed that "At the theater alone, the higher ranks mix with the middle and the lower classes; there alone do the former consent to listen to the opinion of the latter, or at least allow them to give an opinion at all. At the theater men of cultivation and of literary attainments have always had more difficulty than elsewhere in making their taste prevail over that of the people and in preventing themselves from being carried away by the latter. The pit has frequently made laws for the boxes."[12] An example of this intermingling occurred in England during the late 1500s, when

there was a period of extraordinary upheaval in the social structure. As the country wrenched itself free of feudalism and lurched agonizingly toward capitalism, Shakespeare's great histories appear. These powerful, thinly disguised criticisms of the state of the nation eventually got Shakespeare into trouble with the Crown. State officials, becoming unnerved by threats of sedition, quietly changed the hugely popular public theaters into private spaces by reducing their size and charging sufficiently high prices to exclude all but the aristocracy.[13] Once this was accomplished, the theaters promoted plays devoted only to private romance, royal power, or the combination of the two, thus indicating that there might be a deeper causal factor behind de Tocqueville's adage that "On the stage, as well as elsewhere, an aristocratic audience wishes to meet only persons of quality and to be moved only by the misfortunes of kings."[14] However, it was in this simple and time honored way, that the Shakespearian theater was summarily censored and the dissent temporarily stilled. Thus ended England's period of great theater, destroyed, at least in part, by the fear of the truths it might tell. But Political Theater reappeared in the 19th Century when the rapidly developing forces of capitalism began tearing to pieces the social concepts that were tenuously holding the newly formed nation-states together. The violently struggling workers' organizations were looking for any way possible to reach out to potential members. Up until

this time, although they had created their own newspapers and brought pamphleteering to an art form, they had totally disregarded using the theater as a political tool. This could have been because the intensity of the trade unions' political struggles absorbed most of their energy, leaving little money or time left over for cultural tasks. But there was probably a more important reason for this omission. The proletariat of the 1870s and 1880s was, in artistic matters, still under the spell of the bourgeoisie. "The plain man saw the theater as a 'Temple of the Muses', to be entered in white tie and tails and in a mood of appropriate elation. It would have seemed scandalous to him to hear anything about the ugly daily struggle, about wages, working hours, profits and dividends amid the red plush and gold stucco of these magnificent halls. The news papers were for that kind of thing."[15] To many, however, this view of the theater had to be overcome if the workingman was to be educated in the ways of the new industrial world. As de Tocqueville wrote earlier, "The literature of the stage constitutes the most democratic part of a nation's literature. No kind of literary gratification is so much within the reach of the multitude as that which is derived from theatrical productions. Neither preparation nor study is required to enjoy them; they lay hold on you in the midst of your prejudices and your ignorance."[16]

POLITICAL THEATER, 1880-1920

"One of the main results of the concept of art as political and its function and responsibility in the twentieth century has been the writer's conscious (or unconscious) sense of commitment: an awareness of one's contribution is in itself an involvement in the problems and disasters of the age."[17] In the last decades of the 19th and the early years of the twentieth century, American writers first became deeply involved with the powerful social movements that were sweeping the country. Inspired by the revolutionary politics of organizations such as the Socialist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World and the reformist aspirations of organizations as disparate as the American Federation of Labor, the Populist Party and the Suffrage Movement, many writers launched their careers as serious social critics with politically inspired magazine articles, novels and plays. Journalists such as Ida Tarbell and Frank Norris wrote "muckraking" newspaper articles that exposed the corruption of American corporations and later turned them into best selling books and novels, such as "The History of Standard Oil" and "The Octopus". Upton Sinclair wrote of the corruption and miserable working conditions suffered by the Polish workingmen in Chicago meat packing plants in his book, "The Jungle". Initially rejected by the prestigious publishing houses, the book found a publisher mainly through the efforts of Jack London, the ardent Socialist writer famous for his allegorical

book on the Klondike, "The Call of the Wild". "The Jungle" also went on to be a best seller, thus opening the path for more literature that would attack the abominable conditions faced by most of the working class in America. London himself had gone to London and lived with among what he called the 'submerged tenth' to research his book, "People of the Abyss".

UNIVERSITIES

Although plays were produced by students in American universities since the 17th century, no courses in theater were offered until about 1900. The first important change came in 1903, when George Pierce Baker began to teach playwriting at Radcliffe College. Later opened to Harvard University students, the course was enlarged in 1913 to include a workshop for the production of plays. Baker attracted many of America's most talented young men, including Eugene O'Neill and S.N. Behrman.[18] This intellectual and academic legitimacy helped launch "Theater Arts Magazine", which, from 1916 until 1948 was to be the principal disseminator of new ideas in American drama. The ideals championed by the magazine broke the ground that led to the formation of the Provincetown Players (O'Neill) and the Theater Guild. The Provincetown Players moved to New York in 1916 and by 1925 had presented 93 plays, mostly by new American playwrights that would have otherwise been viewed as uncommercial. In 1919, the Theater Guild was formed, presenting a number of plays each year to a subscription audience that soon spread to six other cities. The Guild drew upon the several European movements, producing plays by Tolstoy, Ibsen, Gorky, Strindberg and many others and soon became America's most respected theater.

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

Although the main thrust of this paper is about political theater and social movements in the United States, it's is probably important to at least take a short step over and back in time and space to take a brief look at George Bernard Shaw, the Irish critic and playwright who had a profound influence on American writers, especially playwrights. One of Shaw's first novels, "An Unsocial Socialist", was written after he discovered, first in socialist meetings yet another avenue toward his self-education. In 1946, Shaw wrote:

> The title of this novel finished me with the publishers. One of them even refused to read it. I had read the first volume of Karl Marx's 'Capital', and made my hero a Marxian Socialist. This was beyond endurance... A Socialist! A Red, an enemy of civilization, a universal thief, adulterer, anarchist and apostle of Satan... And all the time I did not know that I was being ostracized on social and political grounds instead of, as I thought, declined on my literary demerits, which, as is now clear, were never in question.[19]

Shaw had spent much of his first nine years in London in the Reading Room of the British Museum, where he read the first volume of Marx's 'Capital'. He later said, on many occasions:

> "From that hour I became a man with some business in the world... I was a coward until Marx made a

> Communist of me and gave me a faith; Marx made a man of me".[20]

According to the critic, Dixon Scott, this was an important hour in history to remember. "It was the eve of the eighties, when the arts joined the 'isms'. When the arts went over with a rush to their traditional enemy, the masses. They joined the majority. They made friends with the mob. Sculptors, painters and poets, for the first time in English history, deserted the aristocrats and lined up with the proletariat."[21] Shaw was one of the leaders of this desertion. His belief in the power of the arts as an agent for social change was as strong as his hatred of the Church.

> "The theater is as important now as the Church was in the Middle Ages, and much more important than the Church in London now. It can be a factory of thought, a prompter of conscience, the elucidator of conduct, an armory against despair and dullness, and the temple of the Ascent of Man."[22]

Shaw often stated that although he wrote plays only for the expressed purpose of making change in the ruinous social structure of England, he still wanted to entertain.

> Now when a play is only a story of how a villain tries to separate an honest young pair of betrothed lovers; to gain the hand of the woman by calumny; and to ruin the man by forgery, murder, false witness, etc, the introduction of a discussion

> would clearly be ridiculous. There is nothing for sane people to discuss, and any attempt to do so would be, in Milton's phrase, "moral babble". But this sort of drama is soon exhausted by people who go often to the theater. In twenty visits one can see every possible change rung on all the available plots and incidents out of which plays of this kind can be manufactured. The illusion of reality is soon lost.... In the long run, nothing can retain the interest of the playgoer after the theater has lost its illusion for his childhood, and his glamour for his adolescence but a constant supply of interesting plays... Now an interesting play cannot in the nature of things mean anything but a play in which problems of conduct and character of personal importance to the audience are raised and suggestively discussed. People then have a thrifty sense of taking something away from such plays; they not only have had something for their money, but they retain that something as a permanent possession.[23]

Shaw was a Socialist and a founder of the Fabians, a Socialist Society of civil servants who felt that by "boring from within" they could change the hearts and minds of those in power.

> I fully admit and vehemently urge that the State at present is simply a huge machine for robbing and slave-driving the poor by brute force ... That the primary function of the policeman is to see that you do not lie down to sleep in this country without paying an idler for the privilege... And that the soldier's primary function is to come to the rescue of the policeman when the latter is overpowered... Every institution is corrupted by the fact that the men in it either belong to the propertied class themselves or must sell themselves to it in order to live.[24]

But more than just Socialist, Shaw was an activist, spending most of his free time making speeches at labor meetings, rallies or on street corners. He believed in the strength of the working class movement and the inevitability of coming of the socialist revolution. As he has one of his characters say in Major Barbara, his play about the Salvation Army,

> Now, I am a pure natural-history student, and feel no more indignation against a Rockefeller or a Rhodes than I do against a dog following a fox. I know the capitalist - a poor devil who follows the slot of money without the faintest consciousness of himself as a beast of prey or as a captain of industry... He preys on the proletariat as a cat

> preys on mice, through his instinct for gain... But, you will say, Rockefeller is robbing the poor all the time. So are you. So am I. Society leaves us no personal alternative at all.[25]

Shaw worked tirelessly for the Fabian Society, carrying on the strenuous, thankless task of day-to-day propaganda for about 12 years. Many of the lectures and talks he gave later became part of his extensive outpouring of plays, produced both in England and the United States. In fact, every play that Shaw wrote was political and in support of some facet of the Socialist Movement that he would champion for his entire life. He wrote a colleague in 1895:

> The best established truth in the world is that no man produces a work of art of the very first order except under the pressure of a strong conviction and definite meaning as to the constitution of the world.[26]

Of even greater significance is Shaw's statement about propaganda, the use of which, as a pamphleteer, he had become a master. He claimed it to be the highest form of literature, "for all the highest literature is journalism.... The writer who aims at producing the platitudes which are 'not for an age, but for all time' has his reward in being unreadable in all ages".[27] Although he himself felt that despite his great

accomplishments he had 'failed completely to effect any part of social change which was his sole real objective', he had a profound effect on the courage of the writers that would soon follow him down a political path.

BERTOLT BRECHT

In Europe, the political plays of the German Marxist Bertolt Brecht illustrated brilliantly the connection between the "didactic play" and social purposes. Brecht called his approach "epic" in order to indicate its broad sweep and its mixture of narrative and dramatic techniques. He wished to assign the spectator an active role in the theater by making him watch critically rather than passively. Consequently, he arrived at the concept of "alienation", or making stage events sufficiently strange that the spectator will ask questions about them. To create this thoughtful contemplation and to prevent the spectator from confusing stage events with real-life events, Brecht wanted the theatrical means (such as lights, musicians, etc.) to be visible.[28] Brecht sought to represent human conditions in a world of economic rapaciousness, war, prejudice, brutality and political evil. He too showed how political consciousness inspires art - how social background can and the dialectic can inhere in the artist's imagination and give rise to art.[29] Brecht stated his dislike for a theater which lulls the spectator into a belief that social conditions are fixed and he proposed to replace it with one that distances the audience from the stage events in a way that will make him judge them critically. For instance, "The actor has to discard whatever he has learned of getting the audience to identify itself with the character which he plays...At no moment must he go so far as to be

wholly transformed into the character he plays...He has just to show the character."[30] Others, likr Antoin Artuad, were opposed to Brecht's ideas, and wanted to transform the theater from a forum that separated the actors from their audience to a direct communication between the spectator and the spectacle. "We abolish the stage and the auditorium and replace them by a single site, without partition or barrier of any kind...The spectator, placed in the middle of the action, is engulfed and physically affected by it...There will not be any set...We shall not act a written play, but we shall make attempts at direct staging around themes, facts or known works."[31] Brecht later sought to clarify his position on alienation in acting with this note:

> The contradiction between acting (demonstration) and experience (empathy) often leads the uninstructed to suppose that only one or the other can be manifest in the work of the actor. In reality... his particular effectiveness comes from the tussle and tension of the two opposites.[32]

Like almost all of the political theater that proceeded or followed, the important factor was not how it was done, but how it effected the audience, what it made the spectator do when he or she left the theater. The spectator was to become the actor.

EMMA GOLDMAN

Still others, such as Emma Goldman, the anarchist and labor organizer, were unconcerned about the technique of drama. What mattered to her were the vital social themes that made the plays come alive. Her favorite targets were capitalism, the state, institutional religion, and private property, and her favorite solution for the social problems that she blamed on these vested interests was revolutionary anarchism. Although Goldman certainly considered drama a weapon for raising political awareness, she recognized that art has truths to tell that cannot be reduced to slogans or calls to political action. Goldman was a tireless humanist. Instead of social relevance in art, she preached what would be best described as a process of consciousness raising and believed that theater had an important role to play in this process.[33] Emma Goldman wrote that "The great mission of the revolution, the social revolution, is a fundamental transvaluation of not only social, but also of human values...The best playwrights mirror in their work as much of the spiritual and social revolt as is expressed by the most fiery speech of the propagandist. And more important still, they compel far greater attention. Their creative genius, imbued with the spirit of sincerity and truth, strikes root where the ordinary word often falls on barren soil....In countries where political oppression affects all classes, the best intellectual element have made common cause with the people,

have become their teacher, comrades and spokesmen. But another medium is needed to arouse the intellectuals of this country, to make them realize their relation to the people, to the social unrest permeating the atmosphere. The medium which has the power to do this is the theater, for the great dramatists are the social iconoclasts of our time."[34]

WORKERS' THEATER

The story of the beginnings of modern workers' theatre rightfully begins not in the USSR but in Germany. The late nineteenth century movement for a People's Theatre was built upon the many court theatres that had existed in each of Germany's past kingdoms or principalities. The most successful and effective being the Freie Volksbuene, set up in 1890 in Berlin. The organization's function was to recruit subscribers for performances which would bring "Art to the People". It is often popularly assumed that the Russian Constructivist theatre of Meyerhold and Popava was primarily responsible for the technical developments that in fact had long been part of the German theatrical tradition. German technicians were the first to develop electric stage-lighting, revolving stages and mechanized sets that had evolved through the demands of many operatic productions including those of Wagner.[35] In 1920 Piscator's Proletarian Theatre had 5,000 subscribers. This Revue Roter Rummel (Red Riot Revue) became an important model for the agit-prop movement that escalated in the late 1920s until it peaked in 1930 with an estimated two hundred groups in Germany. Piscator had discovered the value of the revue form as a kind of elastic montage which covered a wide range of theatrical devices and could continually be changed and brought up to date. The climax over the struggle for control over the Volksbuene came in 1927 when it had grown to 140,000 members. The first

Piscatorbuehne, like it's later North American counterparts, was to have a school to train actors in collaboration with writers, musicians and technical staff. The company had "dramaturical collectives", teams of writers to supervise the literary prorammme and play texts. Bertolt Brecht was as early member of such a collective. From 1918-33 (when Hitler took control) Germany and Russia shared both a political and cultural alliance. So it became natural for German artists not only to visit Russia but also later on to take jobs there, particularly in architecture and film. When for example Eisenstein's Potemkin was shown in Berlin (only a month after it's first screening in Moscow in 1926), it was the film's success in the more industrialized city that convinced Moscow's Party skeptics that Potemkin had achieved it's propagandistic objectives.[36] The Proletkult intended to become a third force in the Revolutionary state, balancing the political element (the Party) and the industrial element (the trade unions) and ultimately serving to create a new working-class culture to replace that of the bourgeoisie." After 1935 a broad range of progressive writers and artists would be available under the "United Front" policy and that up until 1935 it seems evident that Canadian workers' theatre was not affected by Stalin's conservative Socialist Realism policy.[37]

It is often stated that the earliest example of American workers' theater was the 1913 production of the Pageant of the

Paterson Silk Strike, "STRIKE!", a play written by John Reed, the socialist journalist who went on to write "Ten Days That Shook the World", a first hand account of the beginnings of the Russian Revolution. This pageant, performed by a cast of 1200 striker-actors of the Paterson, NJ silk factories, played to a standing-room only audience at Madison Square Garden. "Although the play was a financial failure as a money raising venture to help the needy strikers, unusually favorable responses were drawn from the press, even from those papers opposing the strike itself".[38] It can well be argued that the first major emancipator impulse of American drama after the Pageant came from left-wing playwrights in the second and third decade of this country. Inspired by the revolutionary politics of organizations such as the Socialist Party and the radical Industrial Workers of the World, these writers launched their careers as serious playwrights with politically inspired, often expressionistic plays that were produced by various workers' theater collectives. One of the first and most active of these groups was the Workers' Laboratory Theater, lead by Erwin Piscator, which followed the example of the Russian and German theaters in using laborers as actors. "If theater has any meaning at all in our time, its purpose should be to teach us of human relations, human behavior, human capacities. It is to this task, consciously, suggestively and descriptively, that Epic Theater is best suited. It sacrifices atmosphere, emotion, characterization,

poetry and, above all, magic for the sake of mutual exchange of problems and experiences with the audience. In other words: the purpose of Epic Theater is to learn how to think rather than feel -- moving above the stream rather than losing oneself in it.[39] Their goal was to eventually establish a network of small proletarian theaters throughout the United States. These would include traveling troupes as well, "ready one day to go to strike meetings to cheer up the strikers, just as ready the next day to accompany a demonstration; a theater of class struggle".[40] The WLT was one of a number of groups that aimed to use theater as a weapon in the class struggle by promoting class consciousness among working people. Most often the WLT performed its impromptu sketches and revues at political rallies, union gatherings and in factory halls. The productions of the WLT reflected the strategies of the Communist Party International that emphasized the irreconcilable nature of the class conflict. Within the theater group there was considerable debate about whether or not to develop a relationship with the legitimate theater. Those whose primary orientation was political argued that in order to participate effectively with in the overthrow of the capitalist society, it was necessary for workers' theater to develop a revolutionary theatrical style in no way connected with conventional theater. Others, with a primarily artistic orientation, argued that a knowledge of theatrical and dramatic techniques gained from the establishment theater

could be put to revolutionary use. As the International took a posture of collaboration with all anti-fascists, the latter arguments prevailed, and the productions of the Theater Union, which were class conscious and revolutionary in content but bourgeois in production values, became the norm.

Later, during the 1930s, the WLT would share artistic resources and talent with the Group Theater, the Labor Stage and the Theater Union and even participated in the work of the Federal Theater Project.

This concludes the brief section on the history of political theater and allows us to continue chronologically ahead. In has been stated that at no other time in the history of theater have artists responded so intensely to the problems of man in society as they have in the twentieth century. "How man is ruled and what his place is in society; how life and culture will survive; how man's freedom will be saved; how the economic problems will be solved. Indeed, the traditional role of the artist as storyteller has merged with what can be termed the prophetic role, whereby the artist combines craft with moral and ultimately apocalyptic meaning -- becoming a spokesman of tragic times of whom much is expected."[41]

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Chapter 2.

Part I - Theories of Social Movements

For this study a Social Movement may be defined as a collective attempt to further a common interest, or secure a common goal, through collective action outside the sphere of established institutions. Social movements are social constructions. Rather than a consequence of crisis or dysfunctions, rather than an expression of beliefs, collective action is "built". Several theories of social movements will be used in this study in order to show how protest movements are interrelated with cultural movements and how organizations such as political theaters encourage, influence and support these collective actions. Of especial importance to this study are the social movement theories of Francis Fox Piven and Alain Touraine, both of whom believe strongly, as I do, in the role of the individual as an agent of social change. In her book, "Poor People's Movements, Piven writes of the "dangers of organizational building", in that it takes people off of the streets and away from the point of action and Alain Touraine's statement, in "Return of the Actor", that any analysis of social movements must "inquire into the production of historical situations by actors rather than put actors into history". Francis Fox Piven gives an appropriate summation on other theories of social movements when she writes:

It seems useful to divide perspectives on insurgency according to whether the emphasis is on pressures that force eruptions, or whether the emphasis is on the breakdown of the regulatory capacity of the society, a breakdown that permits eruptions to occur and to take form in political protest. Thus among "pressure" theorists one might include those who emphasize economic change as a precondition for civil disorder, whether economic improvement or immiseration. If people have been led to expect more than they receive, they are likely to feel frustration and anger. Some analysists, following de Tocqueville, emphasize the frustration produced by periods of economic improvement which may generate expectations that outpace the rate of actual economic gain. Others, following more closely in the tradition of Marx emphasize that it is new and unexpected hardships that generate frustration and anger and the potential for civil strife... The major flaw in the work of all pressure theorists is their reliance on an unstated and incorrect assumption that economic change is extraordinary, that stability and the willing consensus it fosters are the usual state of affairs. The other major set of theoretical perspectives on popular uprising emphasizes the breakdown of the regulatory capacity of social institutions as the principle factor leading to civil strife. These explanations also range broadly from

> social disorganization theorists such as Hobsbawm, who emphasizes the breakdown of the regulatory controls implicit in the structures and routines of daily life; to those such as Kornhauser, who argues that major societal changes -- depression, industrialization, urbanization -- break the ties that bind people to the multiple secondary associations that ordinarily control political behavior.[1]

In the field of social movements, sociology inherits a legacy of dualism from philosophies of history. Collective action has always been treated either as an effect of structual crisis and contradictions or as an expression of shared beliefs and orientations. The dualism between structure and actors seems to be the common feature of traditional analysis of collective action, in both Marxist and functionalist approaches. However, the classical Marxist problem (how to pass from class condition to class consciousness) still exists and can't be solved without taking into consideration how a collective actor is formed and how his idenity is maintained.[2]

In From Mobilization to Revolution, Charles Tilly, a resource mobilization theorist, attempts to show what he thinks are the four major components of collective action, the actions that are taken when a social movement tries to contest or overthrow an existing order.

1. Organization - The ways in which protest movements are organized, varying from spontaneous assemblies of crowds to tightly disiplined revolutionary groups.

2. Mobilization - The process by which a group acquires control over the resources that make collective action possible.

3. Common Interests - The gains and loses resulting from policies or tactics adopted. Some sort of common interests always underlie mobilization to collective action.

4. Opportunity - The forms of collective action, including revolution, are greatly influenced by incidental happenings that provide opportunities for action which might otherwise not exist.[3]

In Tilly's view, social movements develop as a means of mobilizing resourses in order to make their voices heard when their needs are ignored or repressed by the state. However, he doesn't take into account the individual as actor and he therefore doesn't analize the ways that people begin to express their discontent through their culture and their art. He doesn't mention the emotional support that is generated through the use of cultural events, such as sing-ins, dances and theater. He ignores the fact that cultural workers rebelled from the bourgesois theaters because they responded only to the entertainment needs of the ruling classes and many resolved to dedicate their creative talents to the

presentation of the political problems of the day and to the liberation of the working class. Barrington Moore stresses a similar theme as Tilly when he writes, "The main factors that create a revolutionary mass are a sudden increase in hardship coming on top of quite serious deprivations, together with the breakdown of the routines of daily life - getting food, going to work, etc - that tie people to the prevailing order."[4] As mentioned in the introduction, in "The Long Revolution", Raymond Williams takes the time to furthur define the social struggle under capitalism, stating that the long revolution is in fact composed of three revolutions, the democratic, industrial and cultural.[5] However, it is Touraine's analysis that helps us see that there is a continuing dialectic between social movements and the organizations and institutions they confront. He feels that social movements don't just come about as irrational responses to social divisions or injustices but that they develop from specific views and rational strategies as to how injustices can be overcome. He also stated that movements do not develop in isolation but in deliberate antagonism with established organizations. This conflict establishes the "fields of action", the intersection where a social movement and the forces or influences against it ultimately come into contention.

Touraine's theory is based upon four basic ideas.

1. Historicity - There are many more movements in the modern world because groups know that social

action can be used to achieve social goals and reshape society.

2. Rational objectives - Social movements do not just come about as irrational responses to social divisions or injustices, rather they develop from specific views and rational strategies as to how injustices can be overcome.

3. Interaction - Movements do not develop in isolation; instead, they develop in deliberate antagonism with established organizations.

4. Fields of action - This refers to the connections between a social movement and the forces or influences against it. In the process of negotiation, a movement may change, disappear or be come institutionalized, such as what happened with various labor movements.[6]

Touraine's theory does succeed in pointing out reasons why revolts increase in intensity, but he never takes into consideration the importance of powerful beliefs that are ingrained in the people through their myths and rituals that are continually being acted upon by cultural players such as priests, singers, musicians and poets that provide the internal strength that is often necessary to sustain the struggle against the overwhelming physical power of the state apparatus. It is here that the "theater" of the people

becomes all important. Touraine goes on to point out that social movements "are always defined by social conflict, that is by clearly defined opponents. Actors often live their own actions first af all as a rupture with predominant cultural values or institutional rules". He felt that there was always an oppostion between institution and movement, which met on a "field of action" where it played itself out. Probably the most controversial idea which will be dealt with in this work will also be one of Touraine's, that in a given type of society, there is only one central conflict, one "couple of conflicting social movements". Touraine believes that social movements are not positive or negative agents of history, of modernization, or of the liberation of mankind. He feels they act differently in any given type of social organization. This idea seems very close to the Marxist concept of class struggle, often challenged by those who do not believe that the constant eruptions in a capitalist society are all different "fronts" on the battlefield of an all out war. However, Touraine argues,

> Many observers are aware of the fact that central conflicts deal less with labor and economic problems than with cultural and especially ethical problems, because the domination which is challenged controlls not only "means of production" but the production of symbolic goods, that is, of information and images, of culture itself.[7]

As Stanley Aronowitz has noted, Touraine is indebted to Marx in that he preserves the category of class as a historical agency. He very clearly illuminates in his forward to "Return of the Actor" how Touraine opposes the idea often put forward of the "end of history" that seems to obcess movement theorists.

> Classes, for Marx, struggle over the accumulation of the products of labor. Touraine amends this common understanding to include two other elements: struggles over symbolic products and beyond the prevailing socioeconomic model, struggles over historicity, that is, who will represent society to itself, not only with respect to images, but also with respect to its ethical projections for the future.[8]

Touraine offers furthur clarification of his thesis when he states:

> In point of fact, what classical society calls society is nothing but the confusion of a social activity - which can be defined in broad terms as industrial production or the marketplace -- with a national State. The unity of a society procceds from the legitimate power with which it endows itself. Its boundries are not theoretical but real; they are marked by its border customs offices. Society is a pseudonym for fatherland.[9]

Piven & Clowards's book, "Poor People's Movements", seems to agree with the ideas proposed by Touraine in "Return of the Actor" and takes it one more step toward the individual when it states that "it is an obvious fact that whatever the people won (by their protests) was a response to their turbulence and not to their organized numbers".[10] This "turbulence" was often provided or enhanced by the supporting cultural movements' use of such mechanisms as music and drama that gave protestors a sense of the overriding purpose of their struggle, perhaps even a feeling of their often hidden history. The civil rights movement demonstrated that when people develop positive self-images, they are better able to perceive where there self interests lie and act accordingly. Piven enlarges on this thought when she wrote:

> Perhaps the singular contribution of the intellectual tradition of the left, as it has developed since the nineteenth century, has been to bring working class people fully into history, not simply as victims but as actors. The left has understood that working-class people are a historical force and could become a greater historical force. And the left has understood that the distinctive form in which that force expresses itself is the mass movement.[11]

Proletarian movements, Marx said, are formed by a dialectical process reflecting the institutional logic of capitalist arrangements. He declared in the Communist Manifesto:

> In proportion as the bourgeoisie, i.e., capital, is developed, in the same proportion is the proletariat, the modern working class, developed...Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class.[12]

Piven goes on to indicate how important it is that the working-class begin to get back some of their history, recreate their own myths that reinforce what they understand subconsciously, that they are not inferior, but merely oppressed. She understands the power of art to help regenerate this lost feeling of self when she writes:

> What some call superstructure, and what others call culture, includes an elaborate system of beliefs which defines for people what is right and what is wrong and why: what is possible and what is impossible; and the behavorial imperatives that follow from these beliefs. Because this superstructure of beliefs and rituals is evolved in the context of unequal power, it is inevitable that beliefs and rituals reinforce inequality, by rendering the powerful divine and the challengers evil...However, in capitalist societies this reality is not legitimated by rendering the powerful divine, but by obscuring their existence. Thus electorial-representative arrangements proclaim the franchise, not

> force and wealth, as the basis for the accumulation and use of power....By excercising the franchise, men and women presumably determine who their rulers will be and therefore what their rulers must do if they are to remain rulers.[13]

Piven goes on to point out that Aristotle believed that the chief cause of internal warfare was inequality, that the lesser rebel in order to be equal. But human experience has proven him wrong, most of the time. Sharp inequality has been constant, but rebellion infrequent. Aristotle underestimated the controlling force of the social structure on social life. Those for whom the rewards are most meager, who are the oppressed by inequality, are also acquiescent. Sometimes they are the most acqueiscent, for they have little defense against the penalties that can be imposed for defiance. Moreover, at most times and in most places, and especially in the United States, the poor are led to believe that their destitution is deserved, and that the riches and power that others command are also deserved. Piven clearly understands how the ruling ideologies, if unchallenged by the cultural establishment whose power is based upon its ability to legitimize beliefs, will never bend to the winds of injustice, no matter how hard they blow.

> Clearly, the vested interest of the ruling class is usually in preserving the status quo, and in preserving the docility of the lower orders within the status quo.

> But rapid institutional change and upheaval may affect elite groups differently. If, in the ensuing competition for dominance, some among the elite seek to enlist ths support of the impoverished by naming their grievances as just, then the hopes of the lower classes for change will be nourished and the legitimacy of the institutions which oppress them further weakened.[14]

Finally, to bring us back to our study of political theater and social movements, Robert Ash was certainly correct when she noted in "Social Movements in America", that to some degree, we can apply a market place model to social movements and conceptualize each one as competing for time and funds with other organizations and pursuits. I was in this sense that theater was very hard to "sell" to the working class.

In the course of this study, these theories of social movements will be used to examine the symbiotic relationship developed between The Labor Theater and the Labor Movement, examining the process through which each helped the other toward the fullfillment of their goals.

Part II - Early Social Movements

> The two most important movements of the '30s are bound together -- Communism and the rise of the CIO, the industrial unions...[15]

THE CONGRESS OF INDUSTRIAL ORGANIZATIONS

"There was this tremendous upsurge of workers in the 1930s. If your talking social movement, you have to start with the upsurge."[16] The radicalism associated with the CIO was not that of merely a new labor federation but "a mass movement with a message, revivalistic in fervor, militant in mood, joined together by class solidarity", according to Len De Caux of the CIO. He went on to state:

> As it gained momentum, this movement brought with it new political attitudes - toward the corporations, toward police and troops, toward local, state and national government. Now we're a movement, many workers asked, why can't we move on to more and more? Why can't we go on to create a new society with the workers on top, to end age-old injustices, to banish poverty and war?[17]

The year 1934 saw general strikes in three cities: Toledo, San Francisco, and Minneapolis. The stunning union victories in these three cities generated the mass organizing drives of industrial workers and launched the CIO. In James R. Green's

valuable history, "The World of the Worker", an unpublished paper, we are provided with an image of a powerful working class insurgency during the Great Depression:

> ...the gains the U.S. workers made in the 1930s were enormous. During the decade, when powerful workers' organizations fell before the facist threat in Germany and Spain and foundered in democratic countries like Britain, workers in the United States made historic advances despite the effects of the Depression and the cumulative effects of corporate oppression...The number of unionized emloyees tripled from 2,800,000 in 1933 to 8,400,000 in 1941...A new kind of workers' power had been mobilized in countless factories and communities. For the first time millions of industrial workers asserted rights that had to be respected and created oranizations that finally gave them some control over the world.[18]

As political scientist Micheal Goldfield stated, "labor influence was central to the structure of the political situation in 1934 and 1935, both because of its insurent and disruptive activities and because of the growing strength of highly oranized radicalism". Pushing FDR's New Deal policies in a leftward direction, the ensuing battles brought about what Irving Bernstein called in his book "Turbulent Years" a "transformation of the distribution of power in American

society... In all probability, no national election in American history was so class-based as that of 1936. The Republicans received solid backing from the bankers, the industrialists, and the newspaper publishers; the Democrats received the votes of the urban working class".[19]

Probably the most important victory of the CIO was won by the Reuther Brothers - Socialists rather than Communists - against General Motors; court injunctions, vigilantes, police, and the National Guard all were ineffective against the sit-downers in the key Flint, Michigan plant. By 1937 both General Motors and Chrysler workers were organized as were millions of workers in other industries. The Communists at their peak probably led unions representing about one fourth of the CIO's four million members and included supporters in a number of other unions.[20]

THE COMMUNIST PARTY

One of the central facts of movement history in the 1930s is the dominant role of the Communist Party. Few who have lived through the period can write about the Communist Party as anything other than participants and partisans, one way or the other. One should make an effort to understand the events of the past as they were understood by the participants, regardless of "facts", for ultimately the events of ideological phenomena exist only in the minds of

contemporaries.[21] The strength of Communism in America lay not in its professional esoteric inner core but in its large penumbra of rank-and-file organizers, sympathetic intellectuals, and millions of blue and white collar workers who were quite willing to accept Communist aid for an improvement of their fate under capitalism. That no worker came to believe in his right to control his labor suggests that the CP had been neither able nor willing to present to Americans the central principle of Marxism.[22] Robert Warshaw, an editor of Commentary stated that during the 1930's "if you were not somewhere within the Communist party's orbit, then you were likely to be in the opposition, which meant that much of your thought and energy had to be devoted to maintaining yourself in opposition. In either case, it was the Communist party that ultimately determined what you were to think about and in what terms."[23] However, according to Aronowitz, Warshow "shared the ultimate disdain of most anti-Stalinist intellectuals for the popular front" as he went on to describe the result as a "disasterous vulgarization of intellectual life" of the time. Aronowitz believes that "the American example is perhaps one of the representative instances where a small, although militant and respected Communist party grew to have substancial influence owing, primarily, to its ability to adapt, tacitly, the theory of cultural politics to its strategy."[24]

THE NEW DEAL

In many respects it is correct to approach the New Deal as a social movement; although it did not use illegitamate channels for changing structure and ideology, it did use the existing channels innovatively and above all, created many new channels. Viewing the New Deal as an "elite revolution" is by no means an exageration. In a conference in 1992, Paul LeBlanc stated,

> That it was a mild, benign, democratically instituted and only partially realized corporate state should not allow us to skim over such similarities.... It resembled Progressivism in many respects. Like the earlier movement it was an effort to save capitalism form its worst enemies - the capitalists. Although we will not examine the New Deal as a social movement, we will accept it as the context of social movements and as a powerful competitor of social movements.[25]

Melvyn Dubofsky has pointed out that the one experience during the 1930s that united workers across ethnic, racial and organizational lines -- New Deal politics -- served to vitiate radicalism. By the end of the 1930s, Roosevelt's Democratic party had become, in effect, the political expression of America's working class. Old-line Socialists, farmer-labor party types, and even Communists enlisted in a Roosevelt-led Popular Front. "By frightening the ruling class into

conceding reforms and appealing workers to vote as a solid block, Roosevelt simultaneously intensified class consciousness and stripped it of its radical potential."[26] However, labor historians have a more complex view of the happenings within Roosevelt administration. "The purpose of FDR and his New Deal was the saving of the menaced capitalist system and yet in a very real sense it was a people's movement too. A high point in American democracy, the New Deal was the necessary answer to the people's insistant demands. FDR became a world figure because he moved to meet the people's needs."[27]

ANARCHISM

Anarchism, although never a social movement of the size and strength of communism, exerted a powerful attraction for radicals interested in individual freedom. Between 1910 and 1917 American anarchists came as close as they ever would to an organized movement, with as active network of free schools, colonies, and publications throughout the country. In New York the Modern School and the Francisco Ferrer Center, founded in 1911 by a group including Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, rivaled the Rand School as a locus of intellectual activity. Clarence Darrow, Lincoln Steffens, Alfred Stieglitz, Margaret Sanger, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Jack London, and Eugene O'Neill all were affiliated with it.

The vision of a society without rules, one that placed a high value on creative expression, appealed especially to artists. Alfred Stieglitz and Robert Henri both read Kropotkin and communicated their enthusiasm to their followers. At Emma Goldman's invitation Henri began teaching a night class at the Ferrer Center in 1911 and counted among his pupils Man Ray, Kenneth Chamberlain, Abraham Walkowitz, and-for two months in 1917-Leon Trotsky. Of the Masses group, Bellows and Minor took an active part in anarchist activities, and Hugo Gellert taught are classes for children at the Modern School's colony in Stelton, New Jersey.

Although their philosophies seemed to contradict each other, anarchists and left-wing socialist found many points of contact in this period, especially in their support for the IWW and their interest in free speech.[28]

THE INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD

Emma Goldman, an anarchist, unionist and social revolutionary once stated that, "It was through the study of the IWW, which began in 1902 and was destroyed for all practical purposes by the Palmer Raids in 1918, that I first began to understand that their were different ways to fight against social injustice and one of the ways was through song and dance."[29] As social movements go, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was probably one of the most inspirational if not the

best organized of all the working-class movements that have happened in the last 200 years. The IWW was a singing movement. Entire books have been written just about the songs that came out of the struggles. Most of the songs were written on the spot, for a particular problem that was being confronted by the men and women fighting for a living wage, somewhere just this side of the frontier. The Wobblies, as they were known then, were mostly unskilled workers that toiled as lumber jacks, migrant farmers, apple pickers, etc. in the great Northwest. They were also called anarcho-syndicalists, which seemed to mean that they believed in unions, but didn't believe in organizations. As a matter of fact, no one could hold office in the union for more than a year but had to hold office, if elected, for a year. This practice seems to be in agreement with Francis Fox Piven's theory in "Poor Peoples' Movements" that the building of organizations can be a detriment to a social or political movement. Piven believes that the very process of building and maintaining a large, powerful organization drains the strength from a protest movement by pulling the most active, committed and aggressive protestors off the street and into buildings and meetings. She also holds that in order to keep these organizations functioning, money must be raised from elites, who then have the power to subvert or manipulate the cause by cutting or withholding funds when the power of the protests have diminished.[30] The Wobblies seemed to understand

this implicitly and acted accordingly. However, they were constantly being called to task for this deeper understanding of the mechanics of protest. Their policy of confrontations with employers that took place only at the point of production was considered a failure by the craft unions of the AF of L, caused by a lack of oranization. Thus the Wobblies, the singing union that understood its strengths and weaknesses, that understood that it was a union of the soul, of the fighting spirit of man. A union that fought constantly and courageously against oppression by the ruling classes was condemned for struggling not to be a part of the capitalist system, but to rid itself of an economic system that was seen to be vicious and uncompromising when its profits were threatened. The IWW didn't want an organization that matched and fitted into the prevailing corporate structure, complete with presidents, vice-presidents and secretaries. It wanted a union with an ideology, a sense of justice that could carry it forward, not to acceptance by a higher power, but to overcome an elite power structure based solidly on the control and suppression of the masses. That's why they sang. Music is made for lifting the soul, not cutting the pie. Of course, the IWW propaganda reflected the union's confrontational tactics, its foreign-born constituency, and its efforts to awaken class consciousness. Rather than rely on printed texts, soapbox orators fluent in several languages spread the word at public rallies. In contrast to the pious art

presented in socialist propaganda, Wobbly cartoons and posters used folk humor to stir a sometimes illiterate audience. Even more effective were the songs, which set irreverent verses to well-known tunes:

> O, why don't you work
> Like other men do?
> How in the hell can I work
> When there's no work to do?
> O, why don't you save
> All the money you earn?
> If I did not eat
> I'd have money to burn.[31]

Emma Goldman, as previously noted, was a strong supporter of the Wobblies and their way of doing business. Following the lead of the "singing movement", Goldman is said to have remarked that, "if you couldn't dance at the revolution, she wasn't going". The IWW did more than sing the old fight songs, they even went as far as to request new songs from their members, to keep the memories of past battles alive. It's said that Joe Hill, the famous labor song writer who was hung for his activities, was often sent an outline of a struggle going on somewhere in the country and he would write a song about it and send it back. Here was a clear cut case of a social movement asking for artistic support for their cause, something to help keep up the spirits of the workers,

the strikers, the social outcasts that were fighting for what they saw as their rights in a land that was controlled by people that didn't see it that way. This movement, the Industrial Workers of the World, was eventually wiped-out by the power of the state, but the spirit lived on. Many of the members later found themselves in the Southern Sharecroppers' Union, then moving into the Farm Workers' Union and eventually on into the Civil Rights Movement, all unions of men and women with a tradition of song that could not be destroyed by the will and power of the few. Despite their occasional violent class struggle rhetoric, almost all the violence associated with the IWW organizing campaigns was committed by the police, by troops and by vigilantes against the IWW and the workers they tried to organize. The Wobblies were violent only in the sense that they generated demands and situations that could be met only by violent suppression. When faced with violence, IWW organizers responded with the techniques of non-violent resistance.[32] The IWW had long before concluded that, "Violence is obsolete. Education is powerful and terrible."[33]

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Chapter 3.

Political Theater in the 1930s

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS & THE ARTS, 1930s

Unemployment in the 1930s reached previously unheard of levels, over 13 million in the U.S. In the face of such a figure it was impossible to keep social deprivation off the political and cultural agenda. The appearance on the screen, in novels and in newsreels of a class largely ignored or stereotyed in previous representations could not but be noticed. Social problems were reported and recorded in an unprecedented degree. Many young intellectuals (politicized by Depression economics and influenced by left-wing philosophy) attempted to assert the importance of a social democratic politics which would speak for and to all classes.[1] Like the licensed Fool of medieval times, the modern artist exists through levels of permission which close off some activities and sanction others. In the 1930s, the arts were just one expression of the claim for wider social inclusion brought about by economic collapse. (The labor movement was another.) The hegemony had to acknowledge this claim or face the consequence. Cultural production of the period can be read as shifting the boundries of social inclusion, even as it defused a potential revolution. It has always been known, certainly as far back as the Greek theater, that the arts are particularly convenient arena for politics to be discussed at

a distance. A particularly challenging artwork can be a preliminary to actual political recognition and it has been claimed that "the political theater movement in the 1930s was at least partially instrumental in forming a climate of opinion which ultimately led to the New Deal welfare policies. But cultural production is a necessary but never a sufficient condition for change - a hegemony's hand has to be forced in other sphere's as well. Without a movement to wrap itself around, the theater can only shake the foundations.[2]

POLITICAL THEATER, 1930s

In the 1930's, with the collapse of the world economy and the onset of the Depression, theater became increasingly associated with movements demanding social justice and playwrights were caught up in the ideas of political change and the possibility of constructing new political orders. It was during this time that Brecht, writing from war-torn Germany, stated that "society can not share a common communication system so long as it is split into warring classes. Thus for art to be unpolitical means only to ally itself with the ruling group."[3] In the United States, several theaters were started that echoed this belief and vowed to use their talents on the side of the working class. These included the Group Theater, The Labor Stage, and the Theater Union. Even the government created Federal Theater Project became embroiled in "politics", almost against its own will.

"In April of 1931 a call went out from prominent socially conscious theater people for plays to dramatize the social issues and for a theater to play for the vast "oppressed" masses. Armed with the slogan, "Drama is a weapon", the Communist Party attempted to infiltrate and control the American stage during the Great Depression of the 1930s.[4] The Communists believed that the theater could help foment their revolution aainst American capitalism and all of its Depression evils. Unlike the 1920s when New York had but two minor companies devoted to the social drama -- The Workers' Drama League and the New Playwrights' Theater -- the thirties saw the creation of many more social theaters.[5] These new theaters were designed to indoctrinate a new audience, that is the poor workers who could not afford to see Broadway shows and the wealthier theater patrons who sympathized with the plight of their oppressed brothers.

Subsequently, left-est theater developed. Small troupes who performed agit-prop plays to "awaken the workers" began appearing at labor meetings, rallies, and strike demonstrations. There was a certain cachet in being a left-wing artist in the 1930s (as there was again in the 1960s) and those who got the economic backing were often those who least rocked the political boat... It has always been easier to gain acceptance into the mainstream by urging reforms than by

suggesting more radical changes in the economic structure controlled by the cultural elite.[6]

The radical influence of post-war Europe had been felt in the 1920's when the Moscow Art Theater toured America and two of Stanislavsky's actors, Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya were induced to head the American Laboratory Theater from 1923 to 1930. Among the more than 500 students who studied at the American Laboratory Theater were Stella Adler, Lee Strasberg and Harold Clurman, who later founded the Group Theater. But the socially revelant theater of the 30s also had a strong literary background, coming out of a journalistic tradition of "muck-raking", popular at the turn of the Century. This research often developed into powerful novels portraying the evils of the exploding industrialism in the United States. Many of these critiques of rampant capitalism, such as those by Ida Tarbell, Frank Norris, Upton Sinclair, Jack London, and John Dos Passos, just to name a few, were influential in turning the minds of the country toward the necessity for major social reforms. This was not all that difficult, as "the history of the country was always viewed as a sustained struggle between materialism and idealism, specifically between vested property interests defended by Hamiltonian conservatives and the democratic spirit championed by Jeffersonian liberals, Jacksonian frontier egalitarians, and Emersonian moralists or mystics.

The native roots of this liberalism and radicalism were everywhere apparent...The one thing the artist and intellectual feared most as the depression deepened and facism in Europe grew stronger, was to be accused of having evaded one's social responsibility. The intellectuals of the 30s were determined to avoid the opprobrium of having it said of them as Eliot said of the previous slothful generation,

> Here were decent godless people,
> Their only monument the asphalt road
> And a thousand lost golf-balls.[7]

The decade proved far more fruitful than one could have expected from the deepening of the economic depression, the spread of facism, and the imminence of a second world war. "The profusion of poor dramatic criticism - flabbily impressionistic on the "right" and dogmatic, almost formulaic on the "left". The theater of the 30s, with its social fervor and compassion, gave an indisputable vitality found nowhere else in the world during the decade - a vitality plainly never since recovered in the American theater".[8]

THE THEATER UNION

The Theater Union was the first overtly politically engaged professional theater in New York City. It's credo was the Marxist slogan. "Theater as a weapon". Its purpose was to produce plays of the working class written from the point of

view of the working class. There were not many such plays on the market but the advisory board of the Theatre Union included such first rate writers as Sherwood Anderson, Countee Cullen, John Dos Passos, John Howard Lawson, Lewis Mumford, Sidney Howard and Elmer Rice. The group first presented an anti-war play, Peace on Earth in 1933, followed by Stevedore and Sailors of Cattaro, based on a revolt of sailors, in 1934. They received favorable attention from the leftest press. In 1935, the Theater Union offered a production of Brecht's play, "The Mother", based on a novel by Maxim Gorki.[9] It consisted of a series of episodes from the life of a Russian peasant, just before the Russian Revolution, who becomes a revolutionary when she sees her son shot by the police, organizing strikes, handing out pamphlets and leading demonstrations against the ruling class. The "Mother" is an example of "epic theater", in which the direct presentation of the playwright's intellectual message is more important than " the vicarious emotional experience" offered by conventional plays. The spectator is not supposed to become too emotionally involved with the characters because they are presented chiefly to illustrate the idea that literacy is essential to revolution. This method was similar to those of the "agit-prop", with its similar episodic form and didactic aim, which minimized the emotional power between the characters in order not to confuse the lesson.[10] This new theater was ostensibly a united front organization, supported

not only by communists but also by socialists, liberals, and trade-unionists. Theatre Union attracted authors and theater artists of the left. Some were interested in revolutionary politics; others were interested in "revolutionary" theater, for a professional company devoted to prpletarian drama was indeed a dramatic novelty in America. The first principle of Theatre Union's program was broad enough, in a political sense, to attract such a popular front:

> We produce plays that deal boldly with the deep-going social conflicts, the economic, emotional and cultural problems that confront the majority of the people. Our plays speak directly to this majority, whose lives usually are caricatured or ignored on the stage. We do not expect that these plays will fall into the accepted social patterns. This is a new kind of professional theater, based on the interests and hopes of the great mass of working people.[11]

The company started life with a great monetary problem: how to provide productions comparable with those of broadway and still keep the price scale low enough to attract poor workers. Also, it had to limit the number of actors - a serious shortcoming in a supposedly "mass" theater; in general, the productions were skimpy because there was not enough money. The audience, especially the benefit parties of various left-

wing organizations, was the chief source of income, but the policy of reduced prices for these groups limited this source. In order to keeps its productions on the professional level, Theater Union announced that the sole criterion for choosing an actor was his acting ability. There was an admitted preference for a "politically aware" cast, but the few non-partison actors could be converted later.[12] "Socialist realism" was the name given to these realistic depictions of the Party's fantasies. This kind of drama originated in Moscow in the early thirties as a reaction by the Soviet government to experimental productions of Meyerhold. Besides the pretense that the future was already a part of history, plays of Socialist realism were supposed to present a definite program to depict the characters "cheerful readiness to struggle", and to convey a "courageous tone". The Theater Union aimed "to produce plays that all honest militant workers and middle class sympathizers can support: plays that, without compromise on questions of principle, will appeal particularly to unorganized workers who are not yet class conscious".[13] In order to create this appeal, the theater vowed to "deal boldily with the deep-going social conflicts, the economic, emotional and cultural problems that confront the majority of the people".[14]

WORKERS LABORATORY THEATER

Organized in 1928 by individuals who had worked on Michael Gold's pageant, Strike!, in Paterson, New Jersey, two years earlier, it did not assume the collective style of organization nor the style of production for which it was noted until 1930-31. The WLT was one of a number of groups that aimed to use theatre as a weapon in the class struggle by promoting class consciousness among working people. Their preferred style of performance was called "agitprop" (agitation-propaganda), a form originating in Russia during its civil war and popularized by Communist trade unions in Germany after 1925. During the thirties the Proletbuehne and the WLT shared artistic resources, and members of the Group Theatre. The history of the WLT can be divided into two periods that reflect the strategy of the Communist Party International. Between 1928 and 1933 the International advocated a radical "turn to the Left" that emphasized the irreconcilable nature of class conflict. This was translated into a theatrical style that decisively rejected the values and techniques of bourgeois theatre. Its original repertory was make up of conventional one-act plays on social themes. WLT was organized into two sections. The Evening Section was composed of some fifty working people, who devoted several nights a week to rehearsal and performance. But free performances were given for rent parties and strike benefits. The second period of WLT's history coincided with the

International's switch to a popular-front strategy that deemphasized class conflict in favor of an alliance among all progressive segments of society in a war against fascism. This was translated into a rejection of the agitprop style in favor of Socialist realism. The political rapprochement with the middle class coincided with rising artistic ambitions among some people in the workers' theatre movement. Between 1930 and 1935 members of various groups debated the permissibility of a relationship with bourgeois theatre. Those who primary orientation was political argued that in order to participate effectively in the overthrow of capitalist society, it was necessary for workers' theatres to develop a revolutionary theatrical style in no way connected with conventional theatre. Others, with a primarily artistic orientation, argued that a knowledge of theatrical and dramatic techniques gained from the establishment theatre could be put to revolutionary use. As the International took a posture of collaboration with all antifascists, the latter arguments prevailed, and the productions of the Theatre Union, which were class conscious and revolutionary in content but bourgeois in production values, became the norm. Financial difficulties only stimulated an existing trend. The FTP was competing with the workers' theater groups for both performers and audience. Because the FTP could offer a steady wage, members of workers' groups began to defect during 1935-36. By the spring of 1936 neither the Theatre of Action nor the

Theatre Collective existed. The former had entered the New York FTP as the Experimental One-Act Play Group, while the latter had dissolved, most of its members finding FTP employment. In the Theatre of Action the only directors were Sacks and Kazan. The former provided the ideological or thematic interpretation of the script, while the latter elicited the desired results from the performers. A combination of ideology, inexperience, and poverty determined the WLT's performance style. Scenery was minimal, not only because there was little money, but also because it was not practical to transport it from one union or fraternal hall to another. An agitprop play was always short and direct to a specific point. It dramatized the class consciousness and conflict in a current situation of concern to a specific group. Each character was identified by a typology of attitude, speech, gesture, and costume derived from its economic class. Once the nature of the conflict between classes was established, the piece could conclude in one of two ways: the audience was offered a specific solution to the problem, usually in the form of an exhortation to organize or join a union, or a direction to voter for a specific candidate or group of candidates. On the other hand, the audience could by wrought to an emotional pitch and told that the responsibility for finding a solution was theirs. Although Newsboy was the best known of these pieces, the overall framework, as well as the individual episodes of Waiting for

Lefty, by Clifford Odets, accurately represents the agitational script, though in a sophisticated form.[15]

THE GROUP THEATER

The Group Theater began in 1930, founded by members of the Theater Guild who wanted a "more meaningful approach" to theater then they felt existed in America at that time. "The politicians assume that entertainment should entertain, not teach, just as it should make money, not request subsidies".[16] Having been introduced to the Stanislavski system of acting on a trip to the Moscow Art Theater, the Group wanted to present timely, new American plays and to develop new playwrights to express the social concerns of the country. This dream became a reality with the production of "Waiting For Lefty", Clifford Odet's one act play about a taxi drivers' strike. The play was a huge success, and with the subsequent production of "Awake and Sing", both Odets and the Group Theater became widely accepted as the vanguard of the New American Theater.[17] Because the Group Theatre was the theater of "Waiting For Lefty" and "Awake and Sing" it has generally been viewed as a product of the radical ferment of the thirties; inasmuch as the plays and policies of the Group were directed by this ferment the desination is not inaccurate. Indeed, in its time, the Group was invariably classed with the theaters of social protest. But, in another sense, this classification is incorrect. The typical dramatic treatment of the major public

issues of the Group Theater was "reformist", not revolutionary. Their selected social dramatists seemed to derive inspiration from the New Deal not from the Bolsheviks' 1917 coup d'etat.[18] The Group was indeed the reflection of radical ferment but it was not - as in the case of the Theater Union - a product of this ferment. The Group's rallying cry was not "Theater is a Weapon in the Class Struggle", but rather "Theater is an Art which Reflects Life". The Group's forebears were not the revolutionary proponents of the agit-prop, but rather the radical art theaters of Europe. Harold Clurman seems to feel this way when he writes in the "Fervent Years",

> "The Group Theatre, in my view, was a symptom and an expression of a profound impulse in American life, an impulse that certainly did not begin with the Group Theatre, and did not end with it...The purpose, as very simply stated in the early pages of this book, was "to combine a study and practice of theatre craft with a creative content," or, to put it another way, to make the production of stage plays actually mean something in the lives of the participants. What is lacking now is a sense of purpose, of an ideal-something to be achieved over and above a smash hit, a fat salary, rave notices, more fulsome billing and more frequent mention in the columns. "He who desires nothing, hopes for

nothing and is afraid of nothing, cannot be an artist," Chekhov once wrote. And to hope for and desire nothing but the luxurious comfort of success is to desire and hope for little...No art by it's very constitution typifies the social nature of that creative act more than theatre. The theatre, to be fully understood and appreciated, must be seen as a manifestation of this process of interchange between society and the individual...For the theatre is not a business; it never has been basically that. It is an art of direct communication grounded on shared social and moral values. It is not, first of all, a condiment, a genteel pastime, an escape from reality, but like all art it is a resource in civilization's human treasury. It is, moreover, perhaps one of the most telling expressions of a people's innermost character, because it is an art composed of many elements, of which the matrix is the public itself.[19]

THE FEDERAL THEATER PROJECT

The depression in the 1930's motivated the creation of a unique experiment, the Federal Theater Project, established in 1935 to combat unemployment. Headed by Hallie Flanagan, at its peak it employed 10,000 persons in forty states. About

1,000 productions were mounted, 65% of them free.[20] In spite of its diversity, it is now remembered for developing the "Living Newspaper", a cinematic form that integrated factual detail with dramatic vignettes. Originally developed in Russia as a way of reaching illiterate peasants with the "news" (called the Blue Blouses), the Living Newspaper was a series of skits, usually performed by out of work vaudevillians, that outlined in bold relief the major social problems of the day. "A Third of the Nation" dealt with poor housing, "Power" was a comment on the problems caused by the private control of electrical utilities companies, and "Triple-A Plowed Under" was a scathing denunciation of the Federal Agricultural program that was causing the collapse of the small farmer. Each script centered around a problem: "Triple-A Plowed Under" (1936) dealt with agriculture, "Power" (1937) with rural electrification, and "One Third of a Nation (1938) with slum housing.[21] Most of the plays had as the central character the "little man" who, upon raising questions about a current problem, was led through its background, human consequences, and possible solutions. Much of the dialogue was taken from speeches, newspaper stories, or other documents. Many of the techniques were borrowed from the Epic Theater. The political tone of many works eventually alienated Congress, which in 1939 refused to appropriate funds for its continuance. However, the Federal Theater motivated the formation of Orson Welles' Mercury Theater and more

importantly, promoted black theater, laying the foundation for black repertory groups and the opportunity for black playwrights to show their work.[22] Because the Federal Theater Project was funded by the U.S. Government as a way to reduce the massive unemployment in the entertainment industry, wages were paid to any of the actors, directors, writers, set designers, etc. that had the opportunity to work there. Since most of the political theater groups were unable to pay even the small amount that the FTP could offer (about $25 a week) most of the performers quickly jumped to the government ship. This ultimately caused the collapse of these political theaters but also helped tilt the projects of FTP to the left. When productions that attacked the social and economic policies of the country were given light through the Living Newspaper, the Theater was investigated by right-wing Senators and accused of "unamerican activities". This investigation was lead by a Texas senator, John Dies, and his Dies Committee caused the subsides for the Federal Theater Project to be permanently cut. This Committee was the forerunner of Senator McCarthy's House Unamerican Activities Committee which, after the end of World War II, began the witch hunt that effectively prevented any continuation of radical theater in the United States for almost two decades.

In the Government publication, "Inventory", published in 1937, the success of the FTP was heralded:

The WPA Federal Theatre Project, designed to give work to the theatre's unemployed, has brought living drama to millions of people through a total of 1,501 productions of all types, in 40 cities of 22 States. The Federal Theatre gives an average of 2,833 performances each month-nearly 100 per day-to a total average monthly attendance of more than 1,000,000 people. Sixty-five percent of these shows are free, and they are staged not only in city theatres but in community halls, tents, schools, prisons, armories, churches, parks, hospitals, and CCC camps. Even when admission is charged it is nominal. Nearly two-thirds of those who have seen these plays, it has been found by the use of questionnaires, never before had seen a play with living actors. At its peak, the Federal Theatre employed 12,700 actors, designers, technicians, playwrights, theatre musicians, stage hands, ushers, maintenance workers, and box-office, accounting and secretarial people. The number is now about 8,700. More than nine out of ten of these workers come from the relief rolls, and $9 out of every $10 of the appropriation goes for wages. The Federal Theatre undertook this awesome objective in the face of many handicaps. With little money to spend on elaborate staging, it

worked out simple and striking techniques through the use of light and shadow. It delved deeply into rich historical aspects of national development, faced controversial current problems with arresting courage. Burns Mantle declared the project "has turned the theatre back to the people, to whom it rightfully belongs". Gilbert Seldes said in 1936, "The Federal Theatre was, at the end of last season, by far the most interesting, and probably the most successful of theatre impresarios in New York." Federal Theatre productions are of many types. In the "purely entertainment" category would fall circuses, marionette shows, musical comedies Gilbert and Sullivan and other light operas, and a series of satirical musical revenues designed to use a wide variety of vaudeville talent. The classical aspect of the theatre is represented by such plays as the Negro Macbeth, Marlowe's Dr. Faustus, Coriolanus and Trojan Incident. George Bernanrd Shaw and Eugene O'Neill, bothe of whom have approved Nationwide WPA cycles of their plays, also merit this classification. The largest field of the Theatre Project, however, is that of new plays based on American life, whither involving legendary or historic figures such as John Bunyan, Davy Crockett, John Brown, and

> Abraham Lincoln, or dealing with current problems, as in the Living Newspaper treatments of such moot topics as agriculture, housing, power, and labor.[23]

The Federal Theater, America's short-lived but magnificant experiment with a truly national theater based on the people themselves, at first found it difficult to get permission for the production of plays by leading dramatists. Many of these evidently feared that it would compromise their reputations to have their plays produced by a relief project. Others wre willing to release their plays only upon specific guarantees of well known professional casts. Finally, they wrote directly to the most famous living dramatist, George Bernard Shaw, and asked his permission to use all his plays and to present them, where possible, with interracial casts. Shaw promptly replied by letter:

> I know quite well what you are up against in this undertaking. It is useless to hope that you can find groups with a high degree of skill and acting and direction everywhere. You may not be able to find them anywhere. The plays will be murdered more or less barbarically all the time. That happens on Broadway, too...So far from avoiding Negro casts, you will be very lucky if you can get them; for Negros act with a delicacy and sweetness that make white actors look like a gang of rough-

> necks in comparison...Any author of serious plays who does not follow my example does not know what is good for him. I am not making a public-spirited sacrifice, I am jumping at an unprecendently good offer.[24]

It is difficult to judge the Federal Arts Project objectively. For, whatever else may be said of the government's flyer in art, one statement is incontrovertible. It has produced, one way or another, a greater human response than anything the government has done in generations. In the first year of WPA Theater approximately sixteen millions in thirty states saw performances, and the weekly attendance by the end of the period had reached a half a million. What the government's experiments in music, theater and painting actually did was to work a sort of a cultural revolution. They brought the American audience and the American artist face to face for the first time in their respective lives. And the result was an astonishment needled with excitement such as neither the American artist nor the American audience had ever felt before. Down to the beginning of these experiments neither the American audience not the American artist had ever guessed that the American audience existed. (Audiences are given cards to fill out asking them what they think of the show and what other shows they have seen. A surprising number love the theater but have never seen a stage show before. Usual

reason: the high price of Broadway productions.) The American audience as the American artist saw it was a small group of american millionaires who bought pictures not because they liked pictures but because the possession of certain pictures was the surest and most cheaply acquired sign of culture. The same thing was true of the American audience as the American composer saw it. It was something called the concertgoer: a creature, generally female, and ordinarily about sixty years of age who believed everything the Times crtitc said and prided herself from never hearing anything composed more recently than 1900 or nearer than Paris. From one end of the range to the other, American artists wrote and painted and composed in a kind of vacuum, despising the audience they had and ignoring the existence of any other. It was this vacuum which the Federal Arts Project exploded. Holger Cahill, one of the directors of the Project, stated, "The organization of the Project has proceeded on the principle that it is not the solitary genius but a sound general movement which maintains art as a vital functioning part of any cultural scheme. Art is not a matter of rare occasional masterpieces. The emphasis upon masterpieces is a nineteenth-century phenomenon. It is primarily a collector's idea and has little relation to an art movement. In a genuine art movement a great reservoir of art is created in many forms, both major and minor."[25]

THE EFFECTS OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY ON POLITICAL THEATER

The Party's revoultionary beliefs and programs were thus rarely set forth by the social dramatists of the thirties. The Communists can be credited with influence on the left-wing drama to the extent that they publicized the issues of the decade, but such success was not great...We can be sure that sensitive playwrights were able to see the Depression without the Party's aid. As Clifford Odets told the House Un-American Activities he learned his hatred of poverty from experience, not from Communists.[26] The American experience of radicalism would have made itself heard in the theater even if the Communist Party had never existed. Even though the most popular theme of the New Theater movement was the class war between the workers and their bosses, most dramas on this subject failed to offer the Communist solution - revolution. The Party had its greatest successes with labor plays, such as "Strike" and "Waiting for Lefty", because, again, they dealt with the primary Marxist conflict. The Party line was reflected most successfully in plays dealing with the stark economic problems within American society, than with political themes. During the "united front" period, the Communists played down the Party line in favor of a more limited goal of social welfare in order to attract groups that would have otherwise opposed their hope for a Communist revolution leading to a Soviet America.[27] An example of this is the Federal Theater Projects production of "Triple-A Plowed

Under", the graphic account of the agricultural Depression. The writers, either members or sympathizers with the Party, suggested that the farmers join with the workers to apply political - not revolutionary - pressure on the government...On the question of shelter for the American poor, the FTP offered an equally graphic expose' in "One Third of a Nation", advocating a government slum-clearance project, not nationalization. Although there is no question that the Communist Party sought to direct the new theater movement and failed, there is also no question that they had a very strong effect on the the one aspect of the theater that makes it function, the writers.[28] The playwrights responded as perhaps never before or since with an outpouring of plays that changed forever the nature of theater in America. Productions such as "Waiting For Lefty", by Clifford Odets and Irwin Shaw's "Bury the Dead", Robert E. Sherwood's "idiot's Delight", Kurt Weill's "The Cradle Will Rock".[29] Perhaps the Party's real failure was their inability, as Brecht had stated, was his theater's purpose, to train the spectators to demand the kind of drama that they inevitably ought to demand.[30]

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Chapter 4.

Political Theater in the U.S. during the 1970s.

This brief analysis of political theater in the 1970s, through the use of interviews, attempts to show the structural and contextual basis behind a highly specific cultural movement. These theaters and the playwrights, directors and actors that worked through them were the driving force behind a conscious attempt to alter the way that theater and, as a result, film and television production were constituted. These politically motivated theaters "eschewed both the naturalist tradition of social drama which had dominated left-wing theater in America since the 30's and the dialectical Brechtian model popular in Europe". This "new theater" wanted to move away from the personal, micro-examinations found in family sagas such as Odets' "The Golden Boy", to the dramatization of larger, societal crises. This was felt necessary in order to illuminate the truths behind actions taken by a vast and impersonal government that were directly affecting the lives of the common working man and woman. Due, at least in part, to the secret mechanations of a government involved in the "cold war", an almost "Orwellian" version of truth was being sent out through a state controlled mass media. As Benjamin Ginsberg noted in "The Captive Public",

> "The 'marketplace of ideas' built during the 19th and 20th centuries effectively disseminates the beliefs and ideas of the upper classes while subverting the ideological and cultural independence of the lower classes. In the United States, in particular, the ability of the upper classes to dominate this marketplace has generally allowed these strata to shape the entire society's perception of political reality and the range of realistic political and social possibilities.[1]

Bette Craig, one of the founders of the Labor Theater in New York City, made her entry into political theater more personal.

> I think that one of the reasons that I and some other people started The Labor Thater was that we were all embarrassed to call ourselves actors in the state of the art, in the state of the theater, as it was. At that time, if you wanted to work for money you had to find a job in commercial theater and you didn't have much of a say about what kind of play it was. You often thought of it as a waste of time. Our theater was started really with the idea of connecting it with an audience, of doing theater for people who we'll call "working-class" for the lack of a better

> term. We started out with the thought that a good way to reach an audience of working-class people might be through connections with labor unions, but as it turned out, the labor unions weren't just sitting there waiting for the Labor Theater.[2]

Marianne van Krekhoven, a part of the Political Theater Project at the University of Brussels, stated at a conference in New York on political theater that theater in the beginning of the seventies, reflected "the enthusiastic atmosphere of May, 1968. At this time theater expressed, in a relatively direct way, its belief in societies ability to change, and in its belief in a socialist society of the future. This theater placed more emphasis on the message than on the quality of artistic expression...It was only later that artists committed themselves to struggling against their own reintegration into a society whose values they questioned."[3] It's important to understand that in the 1970s actors and writers still considered New York City as the place to come from all over the country to study, learn and practice their craft. Playwrights came because not only of the tradition of the theater, but because of the large numbers of small theater spaces that were available for inexpensive productions that could still attract some kind of an audience. It was because of this gathering of talent, more interested in ideas and expression than in making

money, that New York was the center of political theater in America. In addition, New York City had always been known as a "union city", where a substantial number of workers were organized into labor unions. Thus, when the Labor Theater was formed, it was with the purpose of utilizing the labor movement to open the way to audiences that would appreciate plays written about the dreams and frustrations of their own lives. Arnold Hauser wrote in the Sociology of Art that,

> Democracy does not mean that art is reduced to the cultural nadir of the majority. It means, on the contrary, that genuine artristic creations are made accessible to a broader strata of society...Popular art which is produced for the urban masses belongs ideologically to the petit and middle bourgeois, no matter from where the groups come that flock to be its audience and adapt themselves to it culturally...The books which they read correspond to the escapist fantasies, compensatory satisfactions and inhibitions, the passive acceptance of fate by the underprivileged and the identification of their heros as those of the middle-class.[4]

What follows are interviews with two individuals, an actress and a musician, who worked for the entire decade of the

1970s to forge a cultural movement, political theater, with a social movement, the labor movement, in order to enact change.

INTERVIEW WITH BETTY CRAIG, PRODUCER/ACTRESS, LABOR THEATER

When we formed the Labor Theater, we formed with the idea of doing plays for working class people like ourselves. As it turned out the Labor Movement was not necessarily like ourselves. Some and most of the progressive unions especially in New York City were black labor unions...And therefor when we were putting the plays together, putting a season together, and trying to figure who we should go to, and what type of plays we should put on, we usually tried to take into consideration the make-up of our audience. Since we put on at least four plays a year, the plays could be pointed at particular groups, for instance black women or primarily white construction workers. Many of the plays were selected or written to appeal to different sensibilities, but with the same general theme of a working-class consciousness. An example of this was our first play for a black audience was about black history, what might be called a Populist rendition, in that it took license with the truth but kept the basic facts intact. It was called Railroad Bill.

WHAT WAS THE HISTORY OF RAILROAD BILL?

> We had heard the song by Taj Mahal, a blues number about a black man robbing the trains down South, so we started looking through books to find out more about him. We ran across these pictures in

Southern Exposure, a left-wing magazine published in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, pictures of black convicts living in animal cages left over from circus. This keyed us into the idea that there was something there to think about, because the pictures were from the Alabama turpentine fields and "Railroad Bill" was from Alabama. The only somewhat factual material I came across was a short blurb in a blues magazine in England that said the song was based on the story of black train robber named Morris Slater who was robbing trains somewhere around 1893. Since the turpentine forests were where a lot of black convicts were put to work, on farms owned or leased by the railroads, in made some kind of interior sense. I don't know if Morris Slater ever actually worked there but if was ever sent to prison, and most blacks were, due to the vagrancy laws, then the chances are he spent some time working the 'pine fields. We used a character named Henry Coldwell as the Narrator to tell the story. He was based on another possibly true character, a white detective that probably worked for the Pinkerton's who was sent down to Alabama by the L & N Railroad to find Morris and kill him. Anyway, the whole thing moved along in a kind of

story-theater sort of way, like a ballad rather than a drama, more music, less dialogue. When we announced it to our typical labor union sponsors they said, "yeah, but what does this have to do with labor unions? It's about a black train robber". But once they saw it, they found plenty of reasons to encourage their members to see it, even though it had nothing to do with unions, per se. The point is they immediately recognized that it had a lot to do with working people's struggles, blacks and whites working together. Although it was especially popular with black audiences, a part of the union membership that we hadn't been able to reach before, it also worked for white audiences, so we had our first successful "cross-over". This was very important to our cause, as a lot of our unions, the progressive ones that supported us, had a primarily black membership...The hospital worker's union, 1199, DC 37, AFSME, the ILGWU, and a lot of the locals of other, mostly white unions, such as the United Auto Workers in New York. Because of this ability to attract black and white audiences, it was one of our biggest successes. It started off slow, as most of our productions did because we couldn't afford to advertise, but we had a very

> good word-of-mouth and eventually we were sold out with people sitting on the floor. There was a tremendous resonse from the audience. They loved the blues music and the music hall style. When we did it on tour, we drew together an audience of blacks and whites that usually didn't go to the same place on their nights off.

This "getting together after work" was often of great importance to to union organizers and leadership as they were constantly looking for ways to pull an often disparate membership together. When Morris and Henry throw in together to rob the railroad, their common oppressor, at the end of the first act, we always got a standing ovation. It was a simple confirmation of everything the workers knew, deep down inside. As Benjamin Franklin once said when asked about his feelings on the coming American Revolution, "If we do not all hang together, we most certainly will all hang seperately". This reaffirmation that the people had to stand together against a relentless enemy was important to a labor movement that was constantly being pitted against itself, either through wage arbitrations or wild-cat strikes that often forced stand-offs between union locals and the international. These constant disruptions on the inside make it more and more difficult for labor to stand together against a constantly attacking corporate structure that more and more controlls the media. An outside source, any

outside source, that offers opinions that correspond with those coming from the biased perspective of the union press, was of immense help in sustaining morale in an anti-labor period.

WHAT WAS THE LABOR THEATER TRYING TO DO?

> Our priority, of course, was to attract members of the Labor Movement into our theater. It was not like the Labor Movement was just dying for us to start a theater for them to come to. Once we created the theater, then we had to coax and convince them to come. We had to sell them on the idea of getting their membership to come to the show, maybe talk them into the idea of buying group tickets, giving us free advertising in their newspapers to help us get the word out. You see, the only way we could afford to advertise was through union papers. We didn't have the money to advertise through papers like the Times or the Daily News. Even if we had, it wouldn't have helped. The average worker doesn't read reviews or ads to find out what show their going to. They don't go to the theater. They go to movies. So we went to union meetings, put posters in the union halls, pictures in the union papers, anything to get out the word. The union leadership usually loved our plays because, even

if we didn't strictly follow the union line, we at least espoused the cause.

The message we were bringing was important to the members themselves because everything coming out of the Reagan administration and thereby out of the mouths of most of the "talking heads" of the news programs blamed the unions for the recession that was destroying the economy at the time. We were at least one other voice that was telling the "truth" in another form. That was very important. Our information, the message we were espousing, usually agreed with what the average worker knew was true but never heard "over the air". Hearing this, coming from a source such as the theater which had the respect of the upper-classes, can gave workers confidence in themselves and their union.

WHAT HAPPENED WHEN YOU WENT TO THE AFL/CIO FOR ASSISTANCE?

We were very naive, at that point, not knowing the background of the politics that made up the AFL/CIO. We were constantly turned down when we told them of our ideas. In a way, they were too political. They always offended somebody. However, I had been working on this play about the 1930's depression for quite awhile. I hadn't gotten too far with it, but I had been at least thinking about it for a couple of years and taking

a lot of notes. So, there on the spot, in the meeting at the AFL/CIO headquarters in Washington, D.C., I said, "you know we have this other play on the Depression that follows these two workers, a man and his wife, all the way across the country, from the dust-bowl to California, as they look for work. It mixes these fictional characters, Marie and Ed, named after my aunt and uncle, with the real characters of the time. F.D.R. is in it, and Will Rodgers and Babe Ruth. And there's a lot of labor union organizing is in it". They said now that sounds more like it, so we stayed in Washington that night and I typed up a four page outline of what would become "Working Our Way Down". They ended up giving us a small grant to help in the writing and the production of it. That helped to get things off the ground, helped get us started. But they were very wary. They didn't trust words. We were told, "If you were dealing with music, or a dance company, if you didn't deal with words, it would be much easier for us to support you and try to get support for what you are doing, but words are dangerous. Everybody knows that".

The AFL/CIO was really afraid of sponsoring anything new and original, as it might go against what was politically correct at the time. One of the reasons that the Labor Theater got away with doing shows of our own choice was because all of our productions supported the labor movement, per se. That is, it took the idea of organizations of workingmen and women as intrinsically good, not only for the individual but for the country. All of our plays started with that assumption. Of course, the corporate system felt otherwise. We were always saying that big business was wrong and we usually tried to show why. It may not have been a pure Marxist analysis, but it was reassuring to the union leadership when we were dealing with other problems such as alcoholism, women's rights, etc.

A LOT OF THE THEATER IN THE 1930s WAS CONSIDERED DANGEROUS. DID THE LABOR THEATER THINK OF ITSELF IN THAT WAY?

A weapon in the class struggle? I think not specifically. I think we felt committed to do things on the morally right side, as we considered it. Which had to do with empowerment of people, which had to do with down with bureaucracy, which had to do with people taking control of their lives, organizing for change. We were genuinely anti-capitalistic but we were not very specific in terms of dealing with our struggles. We were not

like the San Francisco Mine Troop which always had these very thought-out, political points that needed to be addressed. "Let's tell people what they should do about their problems". We were more impressionistic in what we were trying to do. In terms of giving a picture of real people's lives, what they had to fight against, what their problems were, showing some triumphs when we could and giving a kind of emotional feeling of what people were going through, what was happening to them and why. A lot of the things that we did were historical. Some of them were specifically issue oriented and more overtly political than others, like "Power", a play we did on energy policy. It started out loosely based on the Living Newspaper production of the same name which was done by the Federal Theaters Project, but our show was about nuclear energy. It was very contraversial because different union were taking opposing positions on the issue. We did a play called "Dying to Make It", by Jim Campbell, one of our regulars, that Marty Burman did the music for. When a official of the AFL/CIO saw it, we thought he was having a heart attack. He was turning purple by the time it was over. He told us to cancel it. He said, "We just can't let this go

> on, we're going to have to cancel the whole thing". When we asked him why, he said, "It'll just caused too much trouble with the factory owners". They even refused to honor the contracts they had signed with Actors Equity, an affiliated union. It caused huge internal problems. We never got anything from them again.

As it turned out, the AFL/CIO finally agreed, through pressure from Equity, to honor the contract and pay the actors, but they refused to sponsor a tour. This left us high and dry. The strange part is we were willing to make certain changes, even though the writer was very unhappy about our willingness to make these changes, claiming censorship and artistic freedom. We would have compromised because we thought that the play would still have guts and also we felt that a show that even gave out a part of our message was better than no show at all. The problem with the labor movement at that time was that they were so afraid of offending any of their affiliates that they couldn't say anything. As Francis Fox Piven has pointed out they had become so burocratized, so busy being an organization that represented all of its members that it had become incapable of movement. It had lost the capability of expressing its ideology and thereby moving its membership emotionally. Piven states,

> The spirit generated by the mass strikes (of the thirties) had helped build the industrial unions. The disruptive political force exerted by mass strikes had compelled the federal government to establish a framework that would protect the unions over time. But once established, the unions in turn did not promote disruption, either in economic or political spheres.[5]

It was this disruption that the Labor Theater was attempting to prod back into existence, this driving force that we felt was all the unions really had going for them if they really wanted to enact social change. We felt that if we painted pictures of corporate irresponsibility, showed how the health and safety laws were being broken, how the respect for the workers safety was being diminished by the gutting of OHSA, that the unions would get pressure from their membership to fight back. In fact, this turned out to be true. Everytime we gave the show, usually sponsored by individual locals that had severe health or safety problems, there would be a discussion afterward to talk about what was happening in the workplace and how the union should get involved to stop the deterioration of workers' rights. Too often issues are buried under grievence proceedures on an organizational level and are never discussed where the power for change really exists, on the

shop floor, with the individual actor. Through this type of institutionalized management, the workers lose all sense of their involvement in the conflict, and thereby all sense of class consciousness. As Touraine has stated in the "Return of the Actor",

> A distinction must be made between a social class consciousness -- that is, a social movement that is always present, even in diffuse ways, as soon as there is conflict over the social appropriation of the key cultural resources -- and a political class consciousness, which ensures the translation of a social movement into political action.[6]

WHAT WAS THE LABOR THEATER'S AUDIENCE?

> Well, in New York it depended on where we were performing. Most of our performances in the early days were in union halls. Eventually, people who had been in left wing movements of various sorts sought us out. Old commies, younger radicals of various stripes, and certainly older people in labor unions who had a tradition of going to cultural events, mostly left over from the 30s. They were usually very loyal in terms of showing up. Union members would only give us a try if their local was really pushing it and they were doing a good job of organizing. Some unions were

better at this than others, the ILGWU regularly turned out quite a few people. So did the clothing workers and the department store workers. We actually did several performances for retiree's meetings, where we would do a performance at one of their regular meetings.

WERE THE PERFORMANCES GENERALLY REVIEWED?

Not by the mainstream press. We probably got about three reviews by the New York Times in the Labor Theater's entire history. The Village Voice occasionally reviewed us, the Guardian, occasionally. It was very difficult to get reviewed by any press. We were largely ignored. Marilyn Stazio from the New York Post came to see two or three things that she liked. But when we tried to get her to see things after that, she said, "Well, I really can't come to everything". It was the feeling that the Labor Theater was marginal, unimportant. That we were playing to some "special interest group", like Mothers Against Drunk Driving that didn't really deserve constant attention. The Nation did review us a couple of times, but that was because Harold Clurman was still alive at that point. He came to review our first original production, Singly None.

He gave it really a good review. If he would have lived we would have probably continued to have more coverage in The Nation.

The Labor Theater tried especially hard to get the left-movement press coverage, but even that was very, very difficult. Part of that was because the Theater was not seen as a national organization, even though it did tour nationally. In reality, the productions were usually short lived, gone by the time a review came out in a monthly paper. However, reviews were very important for the Theater, as they made the productions "legitimate", so that the sponsoring organizations that were putting out dues money for a production could believe that they were getting a "professional" show.

DID THE LABOR THEATER USE POLITICAL PEOPLE AS ACTORS OR ACTORS IN POLITICAL ROLES?

From the beginning it was a dilemma, from our very beginning days, and it continued to be on through to the end. When political people would come up to us and want to work with the Theater, it was always a problem. Do you hire what you think is the best actor for the role, or do you hire someone you think is committed to what you want to do as a theater? Over a period of time there

developed a core group of actors, who worked in several shows, who were committed to the theater and what the theater was about. That was always a true pleasure because then roles could be developed for them to play. When you were writing a show you wrote parts for them, because you wanted to include them. It felt like a family. If that would have been able to continue over a period of time our life would have been much happier. There was always a terrible feeling of betrayal when you realized that people who you had cared about and worked with for a period of time, just did not care to the extent you did. I suppose they did not have the same investment, they were not getting as much out of it as we were, so they could not always have the same commitment. But it was often a great disappointment. Sometimes people would leave to take another show that was better for their career, right in the middle of a run. So I guess, to answer your question, what we tried to do, at least in our early days, was to find somebody that we felt was the best actor for the part and hope they would become politicized.

WHEN YOU THINK BACK ON THE LABOR THEATER, WHAT COMES TO MIND?

The thing that came to my mind just now, really surprised me. It was "Last call for medications". It's something connected with a performance, actually the only time we ever did a performance in a prison. It was the women's correctional facility at Rikers Island, in New York. We did a performance of "I Just Wanted Someone to Know" there, as a part of our tour. It was a captive audience in more ways than one. They did choose to come to the show. I guess they could have chosen to stay in their rooms. But, it was treated as just some other activity, like doing crafts or watching television. There was no cognizance somehow that this was a live performance and there were actors here doing things in front of them. I happened to be acting in that performance, so I guess I felt it in a particular way. I remember thinking that this was not the kind of audience we were seeking. They had to be there. We did that once and we never did it again after that. Because we were looking for an audience that had given something or made a choice to go there. In other words, we were not doing street theater. We wanted to deal with

people who had either bought a ticket or come to a place, where they had made an investment of their time, to see what we had to say.

WHAT ARE YOUR BEST MEMORIES?

When I think of our experiences in the Labor Theater and what I think were the most effective moments a lot of them have to do with touring performances. We reached some of our largest audiences on tours. That was partly because of the theaters and halls we performed in in New York tended to be small, usually under 100 seats. Some of those performances on tour probably reached over 500 people. A lot of them were sponsored by Labor Union groups, community groups, various kind of women's groups. A lot of the frustrating parts of touring had to do with bad sponsors, people who were not good at turning out an audience, did not know how to organize an event. We did one performance, at some place in Tennessee, in a gym which would have held about a 1000 people and I think we only had about fourteen people there. On tour you are always at the mercy of the sponsoring organization. When it worked it worked well. When it did not work, it really didn't work.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ACTUALLY CAME OUT OF THE LABOR THEATER'S EXISTENCE?

Well in terms of the world at large, I am not sure. I think that it effected individual people. I know it affected me, it played an important part in my development, as a political person, as a practicing artist. I think it certainly did the same for other people like Jim Cambell, who wrote plays, Kieth Walters, who acted in several plays, Marty Burman, who wrote music for several things that we did. Certainly it played a big role in my life. For the audience, I think it made certain groups proud for a while, that the Labor Theater existed, and that they played a role in helping to support it, like some labor union people. It gave the people a feeling like, "What's the Labor Theater doing this year? Maybe we'll plan some activities around one of their shows, bring them to a meeting, or if we're having a summer school, maybe they could do something there, if they're touring around". I like to think that we are all influenced by the books that we read, people we talk to, play's that we see. So maybe in that cumulative effect, the Labor Theater might have had an effect on quite a large number of people, over the course of twelve years. The Hospital

Worker's Union, 1199, developed their whole "Bread and Roses" program and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers developed their "Threads" Program on the concept the Labor Theater came up with to get money from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the New York State Council on the Humanities. I had written the first grant for a arts program for members of labor unions that was funded by the NEH. I think it was partly because the Labor Theater existed, as a cultural resource, as something that the unions could point to, could say we will do this, we'll help sponsor performances of the Labor Theater for our members, that the grants were funded. I think that if we hadn't existed, those programs would never have existed. There just wouldn't have been any example to follow.

INTERVIEW WITH MARTY BURMAN, MUSICIAN WITH THE LABOR THEATER

When we started the Labor Theater, we knew that one way or the other we were going to be supported by and involved in the labor movement. As it turned out we were also involved in a lot of other social movements, such as the Women's movement, the Farm Workers' movement, just because we had overlapping interests or we were trying to promote similar causes, such as equal pay for equal work. Marty Burman, who later became our musical director, helped us do that, both with his music and his commitment to other social movements.

WERE YOU ALWAYS STRONGLY INVOLVED IN THE LABOR MOVEMENT?

No, although I come from a union family, I really became much more involved as a result of working with the Labor Theater. I'd been involved to some extent with the Civil Rights Movement, with the new left and the anti-war movement. But the civil rights movement was first.[7]

HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED IN THAT?

My involvement with all this stuff, happened through music. I learned some of the civil rights songs early on. I went to a camp for a three week period, which was a very civil rights oriented camp. Called camp Hurley. It still exists. What the camp always tried to do was give scholarships

to people, like people from the ghetto, trying to bring together people from a whole different cross section. I got a union scholarship to go there from 1199 (hospital workers union) because my father was a member. That was the only way we could afford it. I learned some civil rights songs there, songs that I had never heard before and picked some up from some old song books. There was a leftist background in my family, so I was sort of inclined in that direction. I learned a lot of songs from the 30's before I knew the civil rights songs. Songs like those by Joe Hill, "Union Maids", early Woody Guthrie, a Kurt Weil song that I first heard my Uncle sing at a family gathering.

WHAT WERE YOU DOING BEFORE YOU JOINED THE LABOR THEATER?

I was involved in an organization called the Cultural Workers' Front. They were sort of trying to revive the left, that was their broad goal. To create a place for artist with a social conscience. I was involved in the singing group. One of the other members of the singing group, heard about an audition at the Labor Theater. She got me to go with her. That's how it began. I got the job of guitar accompanyist, probably because I knew a lot of songs. I'd done some

research on the history of some political songs and how the related to political movements. I remember reading an interview by an old radical that had a profound effect on me, I guess it still does. He said that Bob Dylan's first album, which was a very political album, did more to influence people in a radical direction, than a thousand speeches, or a hundred books. When I heard that, it echoed very deeply inside of me. So what ever activity I did from then on, I came into with the sense that music can't change the world, music can't do everything, the arts can't do everything but they certainly have a role. They have a role within the movement in terms of bolstering morale and making people feel better about what they are doing and they have a role in terms of trying to recruit people from the outside, trying to express ideas as creatively as possible. Expressing things like, "change is important and possible, poverty is terrible, the environment is falling apart". There are a host of things that people don't normally get exposed to or they get exposed to so many ideas at once, coming through the mass media, that they can't sort through them. The arts can be a very effective method of clarifying these issues, communicating new ideas, if they are

creative enough. That's one of the things I thought the Labor Theater was very good at doing. We used some of the ideas that I had, like the importance of style and form. For instance, that folk music was something that the left had done a lot with but rock-n-roll was something that the young working class could relate to a lot more easily. I always had it in the back of my mind that this had to be part of something that I would do. Young people got really excited because we would put rock-n-roll into our protest songs. It gave the old music a new twist. I tried to be as poetic as possible, like Bob Dylan, and as humorous as possible, I guess like the Beetles. These were the ways that I thought music could communicate effectively. The Labor Theater kind of jived with what I was trying to do. Instead of trying to hammer in a message we tried to do it in way people could relate to on a lot of levels. Get to them, somehow. Break down the barriers between politics and art. So many kids don't believe that anything can change. I think they're less ready for change than ever, because they can't see where it's going to come from. They've heard the corporate message for so long, which is that government can't do anything, its part of the

problem. That blocks off the whole idea that problems are solvable and that the government should have any role in trying to help anything except to keep the rich people wealthy and keep the military strong. And that the unions are part of the problem to a greater extent than ever. That's the perspective of most young working-class people, I think. Unfortunately, people listen to those that have the power. Those with the power create the ideology. It sinks in. I always felt that was our job, trying to change the message, create our own ideology.

DO YOU THINK IT DID ANY GOOD, THE LABOR THEATER?

Its hard to judge. It seems to me it had to have done some good. But you could never quantify it. How would you document something like that? But, I think it did. If you're reaching a thousand people and ten people get moved by it, how do you know who those ten people are? How were they moved and what did it do for them? I mean if it only made them feel better about their own work and lives, that would be something. That was part of what we did. There is an internal role of bolstering peoples morale and an external role of trying to get people to change their minds about

something, or entertain new ideas. Anyway, I just don't think music, political music, has any real value without a social movement to support. It is of value but not any lasting value. Without something happening on the movement side, or the organizational side, a place for people to go once they say, "hey, these people are right". The music was greatly inspired by what people were doing, in terms of the social movements at that time, in the 60s and 70s. Then the music feeds in and plays a role. In those situations, the movements were really first. Their motion, activity and energy was what led to the best music happening. It was inspiring. Then the music brought more and more people into the movements. In the 60's it was real clear that's what was happening. That music was really cutting through so much and was really pulling people in. I think it started with the movement, then the music, then it went back. It fed on itself, then others came in. Dylan came straight out of Guthrie, for instance, although he was sort of a reaction to him. He was a rebellion to what Woody and them were doing, stylistically. But clearly, movement wise, he knew what they had done. He knew it very well. Woody was his idol. And he inspired

> thousands of others, including Bruce Springsteeen and even the Beetles. Things never stop happening in music. You can't stop music from filtering down. When the next upheaval happens, it'll be there. That's why it's so important to have the tradition continue, to keep the fight going on. To keep the movements from disparing.

Alain Touraine feels strongly that cultural movements are of immense value. He feels that any new social movements will more than ever have to call into question the values of culture and society. He writes, "Strangely enough, it is in private life, in the least directly political expressions, such as songs, and in small intellectual groups, that one must seek the latent life of protests of a new sort. Social movements are best delimited in these situations of conflictual pull between the past and the future; they serve as reminders to individual subjects that the latter are more defined by their creativity than by their creations, and more by their convictions than by the results they achieve."[8]

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Chapter 5.

Political Theater in England, 1930s & 1970s

You are wrestling with the enemies of the human race, not for yourself merely, for you may not see the full day of liberty, but for the child hanging at the breast. (Instructions of the London Corresponding Society to its traveling delegates, 1796)[1]

In England, by the late 1960s, there was a coming to consciousness -- political consciousness -- of middle and working-class youth, to an awareness of the terrible reality of the world around them. Eric Hobsbawm, the Marxist historian, wrote that in the capitalist world there had never been a period of expansion and prosperity to compare with the 1950s and 1960s. If ever capitalism looked as though it worked, it was in these decades.[2]

But this explosion of wealth in the developed countries, including England, merely showed more clearly that this wealth was unevenly distributed and often at the direct expense of the Third World. "The response was disillusionment, despair, pessimism - and anger. The significant thing was that this response - the rebellion - did not remain random, but became a movement of the political left, appealing to Marx as a symbol of the revolutionary transformation of society. All of this came to be reflected in the theater."[3] For those that reject the system - and for most that meant the capitalist system - the establishment is the enemy of the people and therefore their enemy. Not to strive for but to struggle

against. And it was this attitude which characterized many of the writers and theater workers who made an impact in the British theater in the late 60s and 1970s. The significant theater of this time was primarily theater of political change. In the words of John McGrath it was a theater "that has as its base a recognition of capitalism as an economic system which produces classes; that sees the betterment of human life for all people in the abolition of classes and capitalism".[4] These theaters were created primarily by people who thought that capitalism was "an absurd and damaging way of organizing society",[5] and their work could contribute to changing that system. In England, as in the United States, there were precedents for the development and proliferation of political theater companies. There had been the Unity Theater, growing out of the Workers Theater Movement of the 30s, where Toby Ryan began, Ewan MacColl's Theater Workshop, and many, many others that only survived for a short period of time. Thus the work of Roland Muldoon's CAST and John McGrath's 7:84 Company, in the 1970s, had ideological and stylistic roots. The following are interviews with Ryan, MacColl, Muldoon and McGrath that give an overview of political theater in these two decades.

INTERVIEW WITH TOBY RYAN, THEATER OF ACTION

The traditional organized left in England and Canada in the 1930s still thought and acted in accordance with a vitiated version of Marxist analysis, based on the primacy of the class struggle - a struggle which had become institutionalized into little more than am annual squabble over pay raises. The revolutionary left had moved beyond that point. They sought nothing less than a redefinition of political struggle as it effected the individual in his everyday life. Toby Ryan did political theater in the 1930s in Canada with a group called Theater of Action. They did various kinds of entertainments, like readings of plays, poetry, Living Newspapers. They also produced cabarets on Sunday nights. Because Toronto had "blue" Sundays, there was standing room only. Ryan spoke of what it was like.

> "I had seen the Prolet-Buhne in New York and I was really enamoured with their work. The material dealt with very timely themes: deportation, evictions, unemployment, war, arrests of political prisoners in various parts of the world. So I set to work to find a group of people for what we called agit-prop theatre, which simply meant plays that we could take out anywhere--the street, on a truck, on a picket line, in a hall. New members came after seeing our productions of "Bury the Dead" and "Waiting for Lefty". Being on stage with

the audience booing or cheering or making comments, suddenly I thought, my God what a vehicle! How it gets to people, how it affects them. It was so potent. Remember that at that specific time in North America there was a considerable growth in new writing. People like Clifford Odets, Irwin Show, George Sklar, John Wexley and others were writing very relevant scripts for the times. So we turned to the United Stated for scripts. Our defence was that "Waiting for Lefty" could be anywhere, and "Bury the Dead" is universal. It's interesting to me that while we were doing those plays we were also accused of being further to the left than we were. There was no separation then between actors and audience so we felt very much like a people's theatre...We did a play called "Steel". That was the period when the CIO started it's drive to organize the steelworkers in America. When we discovered this play, since we really tried very hard to interest the trade unions in our theatre, we felt that what we had to say would make a lot of sense to them. It was very tough work. Quite a few of us went out to address union locals before every production to stimulate interest. With "Steel" we had a vehicle that was especially direct, since the play dealt with the organization

of a steel plant. We decided to go to the Steelworkers organization, becuase we didn't know much about a steel mill. So we asked some of them to read the script. They liked the play but had strong opposition to the language. I should add that in those days to use "hell" of "damn" or "goddamn" was terrible. The objection was that yes, steelworkers in a plant use pretty strong language but when we bring our wives to the theatre, we don't want them to hear this language. So both sides compromised. They were excited because the play was so timely. They then explained to the cast what it was like in a steel mill, how hot it was, what ailments steelworkers experienced and so on. When the play opened the Steelworkers' union local took a benefit night. They packed the small theatre. Such audiences, when they see themselves on stage and relate to the subject matter, they're so animated. It's marvellous for actors. I felt with "Steel" that not only was Theatre of Action fulfilling it's job by doing a working-class play but also by bringing it to a working-class audience."[6]

When Theatre of Action decided to enter the theater festivals that were going on all over Canada, they knew that their work

would have to be especially good because their plays would not easily be accepted.

> "Our strongest play about what society can do to an individual was Life and Death of an American, it could have been a Canadian. It didn't matter. It starts with the birth of this young man, goes through all the things that happened in his lifetime. From the war to unemployment, to strikes, and in the end to his deth on the picket line. Everything was in that play-it was powerful. It used music, dance, theatre scenes all done on an open platform; not sets, just lights. We really knocked them out. It was a strong indictment. We presented Life and Death of An American in 1939."[7]

Ryan stated that their was a huge contrast between the popular and political success of workers' theatre in Canada, caused by the failure of the larger political struggle and the subsequent red-baiting which made it difficult for Theatre of Action to continue. A blanket was placed over all theater, even to the point of censoring the issues that could be discussed on stage.

> "Once the war started, it was hard to figure out what our role should be. There were people in the group who felt that since it was a war against Hitler, they really should be in it. And then

there were jobs available for the first time. If you hadn't been working for the bulk of your life...it made an impact. There was a malaise that set in...So those that didn't join the armed forces tried to get jobs. The war finally was the reason for the Theatr's demise. There was one more attempt in 1953 during the McCarthy period to try and re-form our theatre, though differently. I and two of my friends decided to do something about McCarthy. Whay was happeningg particularly to the arts in the States was so outrageous. We decided to take a crack at it. We formed the Play Actors. Little did we know what we were undertaking. It was for more difficult, the climate was different."[8]

INTERVIEW WITH EWAN MacCOLL, THEATER WORKSHOP

In the 1930s, Ewan MacColl was part of a political theater group in Manchester, England called the Theater Union, a decade in which enormous changes in the economic structure of England were effecting the lives of millions of working people. Theater Union's aims were summed up in this manifesto:

> We live in times of great social upheaval; faced with an ever increasing danger of war and facism, the democratic people of the world have been forced into action. Their struggle for peace and progress manifests itself in many forms and not the least of these is the drama. Theater Union is Manchester's contribution to the forces of democracy...All that is most vital to the repertoire of the world's theater will find expression on the stage of the Theater Union...It has been said that every society has the theater it deserves; if that is so, then Manchester, one of the greatest industrial and commercial centers in the world deserves only the best. It is for the people of Manchester to see that Theater Union's goal is attained.[9]

Ewan MacColl later wrote in his book, "Journeyman",

> I can still remember, as a child, the tremendous thrill of sitting in a legitimate theater for the

> first time in my life and waiting for the play to begin. I can remember, too, the boredom which enveloped me like a thick stultifing fog as the play progressed. The antipathy I feel for a great deal of formal theater was, I think, born at that moment.[10]

However, and fortunately for the English Theater, he was later taken by his parents to the Salford Hippodrome where he saw some of the most notable comics of the English stage.

> It was the variety theater which really made the most profound impression on me; the live music, the wandering limelights, the incredibly beautiful chorus girls, the grotesquely made up comics and the dashing acrobats -- these were indeed the stuff that dreams are made of.[11]

But it was an agit-prop script which contained a passage of writing by Maxim Gorky that first made him aware of the fact that he might get involved in something which could be described as art. "There is no art in the world today worthy of its name besides the art created by the working-class in the course of its struggle. We are the ones who build this art. By means of it we are working for the great causes of labor, destroying the chains of slavery."[12] Ewan MacColl was on to something.

> On the few occasions that I visited the commercial theater during those years I don't remember seeing anything that wasn't a completely unconvincing sham - badly acted, badly written and badly produced. Obviously one's view of society is determined by one's angle of vision; if one lives under the foot of society one tends to see the entire body as a pair of dwarf-like legs and two enormous, flabby buttocks. I was conscious of all these things, but at the same time I remained absolutely convinced that the theater, in the right hands, could be a symbol of truth, passion and beauty.[13]

Early in 1935, they embarked on a production of "Waiting for Lefty" which had recently opened in New York and was playing there to enthusiatic audiences.

> Odett's play was ideal for us: it was not too long but long enough to fill a substantial part of an evening, it dealt with a significant area of class struggle and it did so in a way that was direct and uncompromising. Its theme was one which would appeal to almost any working-class audience and its dialogue would be easily comprehended by people whose main theatrical fare was Hollywood films.[14]

Ewan MacColl later helped form the Theater Workshop (1945), which, up until the early 50s, can be seen to have been fairly consistent in its efforts to create a revolutionary working-class theater. The Theater Workshop continued into the early 1970s and served as a bridge for the newly politicized writers and actors who would take up the cause and again produce plays of political significance.

INTERVIEW WITH ROLAND MULDOON, CAST

Roland and Claire Muldoon started CAST, the Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre, in 1965. It was the first of the political theaters that would eventually come to dominate the theatrical movement throughout the 1970's. CAST came out of the Unity Theatre, which Muldoon said was "run by the CP, but doing silly little plays" that were too respectful of the Labour Government. "We weren't in the CP, but we were coming round to Marxism. We were young and we were part of an enormous resistance to establishment politics -- Ban The Bomb, Anti-Apartheid, that sort of thing. We wanted to bring this into Unity. We were expelled for our efforts."[15] So they started CAST, with the dream of being a workers' theater, much along the lines of Piscator's Epic or Brecht's Volks Theater during the 1930's. Muldoon stated:

> We were the first of the contemporary batch of theater groups to orientate itself towards the Labour movement. With twelve million people voting Labour, twenty-million people going to work, with x million belonging to trade unions, it is, to put it simply, a big target.[16]

Since Muldoon wanted to go after a working class audience, he decided to go where the workers hung out, their pubs and clubs. But, in order to work these kind of venues, they had to develop a style that was suited to the space. That meant

basically a fast, loose format that wasn't bothered by beer drinking and dart playing. In other words, the old music hall tradition of stand up comedy, songs and skits was adapted to fit the pop culture of the time. Instead of agit-prop, Muldoon called it "agit-pop".

> Our influences were working class entertainers like Chuck Berry and Little Richard, not Stanislavski. Theater then was all about sitting down and standing up and walking out of French windows. We were the first rock'n'roll theater group...And about that time Bob Dylan came along and sang "Hard Rain is Going to Fall". Well, I went into the Unity Theater and played Dylan and they said "put on Pete Seegar"!, because he was a Party member. We said listen to this song that this bloke Bob Dylan wrote but they didn't want to hear it. They yelled, "put on Pete Seegar, he was a Party member". It was quite symbolic to us. You see, the culture of the Party had split. We were young and effected by Dylan and Chuck Berry and R & B. This had effected the whole white working class. As a matter of fact, it was said that the the big thing that brought in the Labor Government in 1945, was that the people wanted to be like Roosevelt's America. They didn't want to be like Russia. They didn't vote Socialist to be like Russia, they voted

> Socialist to have the New Deal, like America. A decent society. This was believable, it was possible. And this led to the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and the flowering of the alternative British theater. All this coming from a working-class culture in America. Who wanted to live in a monolithic production belt like Russia, with the shooting of the people and the Berlin Wall and all the rest of it. So here we were at the Unity Theater, where everything was compromised by the British Communist Party. That led them to put on some pretty fucking boring theater. Where everyone just kinda looked at each other and talked. It was dreadfull. What we wanted was a modern, revolutionary theater. So, when we were thrown out for having these new ideas and being a threat, we invented CAST. Since the people we recruited like Clair, my wife, were into Rock and Roll, we did rock and roll shows.[17]

Muldoon developed and played a character called Muggins that appeared in most of the CAST productions. Muggins was the 'Everyman', similar to the Charlie Chaplin clown, but with a definate English workingman's soul.

> It wasn't until later, in the late 60s, that people got offered the big Arts Council grants. At first

> we didn't want it, the money. We took the position that if we took the State's money, we'd be the State's propagandists. But we finally gave in and took it. Everybody else was and we figured we might as well use their money against them. But then they cut us. We were cut because it was their idea never to let the flower develop. Give it to 'em for a couple of years, then cut 'em off. Move the money on to whatever was in fashion, but make damn sure it was to an area where it won't cause any harm. This was part of the government's strategy to get rid of all political theater.[18]

Muldoon had a meeting in 1979 with John McGrath, the founder of 7:84, just before he came over to the United States to do a show called "Confessions of a Socialist".

> That's when Thatcher was cutting everyone. I had the idea of doing a cabaret circuit. Pool everything, since we had no way of paying the actors otherwise. But John said no way and fled to Scotland. He's still up there, I think. So CAST began doing comedy shows. That saved us for the time, because British comedy had always been to the left. But American comedy is to the ludicrous right, so that doesn't help you.[19]

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN McGRATH, THE 7:84 COMPANY

In June, 1970, John McGrath declared that it was time for revolutionary socialism to make itself known, to oppose the bourgeois theater by creating a revolutionary theater that could bring about a change in society and in art.

> I decided it was stupid trying to write for a Royal Court audience, or for a West End audience. It seemed perfectly obvious that all the people I knew and cared about at that time were watching television.[20]

McGrath had worked for a time in British television and even had a stint in Hollywood but it hadn't worked out because of totally opposite ways that he and his producers had looked at the final product.

> I finally came to the conclusion that the mass media were so penetrated by the ruling-class ideology that to try to dedicate your whole life to fighting within their structures was bound to drive you mad.[21]

So he started his own theater, the 7/84 Theater Company. The first production was called "Trees in the Wind", which opened at the Edinburgh Theater Festival. The title of the play came from a quotation by Chairman Mao - 'Wind will not cease even if Trees want to rest' - about three women whose life is invaded by a wild-eyed radical socialist, JOE, passing himself off as a cat-burglar.

JOE (To audience)

> Actually, I gave up cat-burgling for personal gain four years ago. I used to make my living at it, you see. Then I became a member of the Party and joined the working-class -- not only in their ideological struggle, but in their daily toil. To my delight, I found you get paid for it. I no longer needed my hard-won expertise with drain-pipe and window-latch. I kept my hand in, of course - whenever the Party needed some money, I'd nip off and do a few jobs of an evening, send in the proceeds, anonymous, of course, just to keep the struggle going forwards. I've enjoyed the last four years.[22]

The play is both funny and cut by songs that comment upon the inner feelings of the confused characters. The humor, the catchy tunes and the direct contact with the audience combine to create an informal atmosphere in which the more serious business, the message of the play, can be more easily accepted. In fact, whenever possible, the actors stick around after the show and talk with the audience about the the ideas they presented in the performance. This is often the most important part of the evening for McGrath, as many of the points that he was attempting to get across can be clarified.

The 7:84 Company defines itself as being in opposition to the dominant culture; yet, over the years it has managed to gain high respect for its productions. Like CAST, many of John McGrath's plays are strongly influenced by the music hall, that is, comedy routines and music held together by a Master of Cermonies that comments upon what's going on and moves the show along. This, in itself, isn't new. The Unity Theater and the Worker's Theater Movement, formed in 1928, often used agit-prop and music-hall techniques, as had the Theater Workshop, but 7:84 found a way to include the more complex art of the theater, with its specialized use of lighting and sound to create the atmosphere for drama.

The fact that John McGrath rejected his promising career in the establishment theater and committed his full resourses to starting 7:84 was a significant sign of the times. When asked what he would do if the National Theater wanted to commission a play from him, he responded,

> I would run about 25 miles. I'd rather have a bad night at a pub. You'd get a lot more out of it in the end. The National Theater itself is a political statement. In its structure and its productions it embodies a set of values and assumptions that are demonstratably those of the ruling class; even when it attempts a left-wing play, it gobbles them up in its high-cultural

> maw...The theater has always been a public statement of how individuals relate to each other and to their own destinies -- and this is profoundly political.[23]

The politics of 7:84 were markedly different from those of the National, the Royal Shakespeare Company, or the West End.

> As power structures, these theaters reflect the capitalist industries. We look at people from a socialist perspective. We are Marxists... The 7:84 has as its base a recognition of capitalism as an economic system which produces classes, but sees the betterment of life for all people in the abolition of classes and capitalism; that sees that this can happen only through the rise to state power of the current under-class, the working class.[24]

When asked what can socialist drama do to help in the overthrow of the state, McGrath answered:

> By challenging the ruling-class hegemony. By presenting work with a socialist content of high artistic standards that could support a strike or a struggle against such things as racism, sexism, facism or the presence of the British Army in Northern Ireland. A counter-culture of the left, based on the working-class, which would grow in

> richness and confidence until it eventually displaced the bourgeois theater in England.[25]

As in the work of most of the other political theater companies in England, there is more than just a touch of Brecht at work in the 7:84 productions. Brecht had learned his techniques in the political cabarets of Europe that were popular during the early part of the 20th century. But, unlike Brecht, McGrath objects to the "distancing" of the audience from the actors. He, like Roland Muldoon of CAST, wanted to narrow the gap between the audience, not widen it. That's why much of the humor of both companies wraps itself around the manners and behavior of a typical working class bloke, such as "Muggins", in "Last Confessions of a Socialist" or "Joe" in "Trees in the Wind". The same character appears again in McGrath's "Fish in the Sea" as "Andy", the "anarchistic, anti-organizational, violent and frustrated working-class man in search of self-fullment". Andy, Joe and Muggins are the 70s version of the angry young man that John Osbourn portrayed in the 50s in "Look Back in Anger", all screaming out their rage against society. Like Joe, the cat burglar, Andy'll do anything for excitement, especially if it somehow seems to help the cause.

ANDY

> So you take a few risks - shoot a few soldiers, blow up a few pubs - but you get used to taking

> those risks. Your whole life's a bloody risk. But at least you're not dying alive through sheer bloody slavery.[26]

Andy's speech seems very similar to Joe's, in that both are willing to take the law into their own hands when the somewhat vague interests of the oppressed are in need of help, but are otherwise quite helpless. Like CAST, 7:84's consistant use of characters that can't seem to do anything in their own self-interest, such as "vote the bastards out of office", indicates the high degree of frustration that was felt about the Labor Government, then in power, but seemingly ineffectual. Muldoon especially used any method possible to try to stir up the wrath of the workers against their labor bosses while, at the same time, maintaining that the unions themselves were the most important tool that the workers had to overthrow the capitalist state. It was this fine line that had to be walked whenever the shows were on tour, castigating the unions for not doing more and encouraging the workers to demand more from their leaders, yet not totally antagonizing the leadership that was often providing the halls for performances.

In the "The Making of the English Working Class", E.P. Thompson shows a strong disdain for a history that picks and choices only the successful social protest movements and discards the rest into Marx's dust bin of history. He states:

Only the successful (in the sense of those whose aspirations anticipated subsequent evolution) are remembered. The blind alleys, the lost causes, and the losers themselves are forgotten. I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the obsolete hand-loom weaver, the utopian artisan, from the enormous condescension of posterity. Their crafts and traditions may have been dying. Their hostility to the new industrialism may have been backward-looking. Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies. Their insurrectionary conspiracies may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these times of social disturbance and we did not. Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience; and, if they were casualties of history, they remain, condemned in their own lives, as casualties. Our only criterion of judgement should not be whether or not a man's actions are justified in the light of the subsequent evolution. After all, we are not at the end of social evolution ourselves. Causes lost in England might, in Asia or Africa, yet be won.[27]

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Chapter 6.

The Labor Theater

METHODOLIGICAL JUSTIFICATION

What follows is, in part, an autobiographical account of the Labor Theater, a political theater that began its operation in the early 1970s and continued to present plays until 1985. As Barbara Epstein stated in her introduction to "Political Protest and Cultural Revolution", "In combining the roles of participant and observer, I have abandoned any effort at neutrality (though not at accuracy or at some degree of critical distance, both of which I have tried to achieve).... I believe that in general one can learn more about a movement from the inside than from the outside, and that a position of engagement and critical identification tends to be more fruitful than objectivity achieved by maintaining a distance".[1] I agree whole-heartedly.

As co-founder of the Labor Theater, I was with it from start to finish. As a dedicated member of the labor movement and a professional actor who was producing, directing and acting in plays, I was in a unique position to observe the attempt that was made by a great many people to create a theater that could be made available and responsible to a working class audience. As I was a part of that history, actively running a political theater full time from 1972 through

1985, it would be an artificial choice to try to separate this study into objective and subjective stances. I am therefore going to include a less usual method of analysis in this research, but one that is often now being used to look at cultural and social movements, that is, an autobiographical approach. Therefore, for part of this study I will insert myself as the informant, for I feel that not to do this would be a serious omission and a lost opportunity to re-examine the issues of the times. However, at the same time, I don't intend to merely provide a memoir, but rather a critical, reflective account of how political theater, in general, and the Labor Theater, specifically, developed. This will necessitate looking rigorously at my personal experiences and the plays I myself wrote, and also at the experiences and plays that were written by other members of the group, along with their personal remembrances and reflections on the times. This information will be used to re-evaluate the causes and effects of the actions taken by the group as members tried to develop a new "workers' theater" appropriate for their audiences. Because of the time that has elapsed, I feel that I have achieved enough distance to be as dispassionate and as disinterested as need be to accomplish a work of this sort. It is by using this autobiographical method to analyze and study a particular political theater that was part of my personal experience that I feel I can best make an assessment of political

theater in general, thereby offering some insights on how this type of theater relates to, grows from and ultimately supports social protest movements. Hopefully, through the reconstruction of these times, it will be possible to develop the necessary evidence to support my thesis that political theaters did not and cannot succeed without the committed backing of a powerful social movement and, conversely, that a social movement cannot hope to continue to grow without a sustained commitment to the cultural as well as the economic needs of its people.

LABOR THEATER BACKGROUND

The Labor Theater was founded with the idea of producing great plays, including the classics, that could be taken directly to a working-class audience through an association with their unions. Although not political at the time of its inception, within three years the Labor Theater had become fully politicized. At this time, it no longer had as its goal only to present "good" plays. Instead, the productions that would be selected for mounting had to have at their core well thought out political ideas that could be presented to the progressive and working-class audiences that were beginning to come to the shows. We came to this conclusion because we felt that there was a need to portray the problems that were currently haunting the working-class people throughout the country but were for the most part not

understandable. This was due, in a large part, to the medias inability or reluctance to explain the underlying causes of social problems such as inequality of resources or the collapse of the American dream because the answers struck at the very core of the socio-economic system that was always staunchly defended by the reigning administration and the corporate "free-enterprise" system. Since there were only so many shows that could be put on in a season due to a lack of funding, the choice of either doing the classics or new, more overtly political, productions was decided in favor of the latter. This seemingly simple decision not only permanently altered the direction of the Theater, but came to change the course of our lives as well.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

Probably the most important single aspect of the Labor Theater for me, was the education that it provided. I've always had a certain amount of feeling for the labor movement, primarily because I was born and raised in Akron, Ohio, a factory town that was known then as the rubber capital of the world. What that meant in our family was tires. When I was growing up in the 1950's, Akron made almost all the tires for the automobile industry, and our family built them. My grandfathers on both sides worked in the tire factories, one in Goodyear, the other in Goodrich. My dad worked at Goodyear, my uncle Frank at Firestone and

various other uncles and cousins were scattered throughout the smaller companies, such as Seiberling, UniRoyal, U.S. Rubber, etc. Everybody worked for one of the rubber companies, even a couple of aunts, and they all belonged to the Rubberworkers' Union. However belonging to the union and being an active part of its operation were not the same thing. None of our family ever became involved in union politics. The union was there, you followed its rules, voted during the elections and went to the annual summer picnic. Other than that, life for my family was about the same, except for the money. There was more of it. Because of that union, my family had moved up into what was referred to as the middle-class. What this meant, nobody quite knew, except it meant a new car every three years and the new idea that some of the kids could go to college. The ones who wanted to. Nobody was really encouraged, but nobody was told that they couldn't, that it was unrealistic. You could go. You'd probably need some kind of a scholarship, probably have to sell the car you got when you turned sixteen, and have to work in the cafeteria for your meals, but you could go. In reality, only a small percentage ended up going and only about half of them graduated. However, as a matter of fact, none of my cousins went into the factories when they left high school, even though the jobs they took paid less than they could have made building tires. That was because the word of mouth was bad. Everybody in our

family who worked there hated it. One of my grandfathers, the one that was a tire builder at Goodrich, was killed in the factory. He was caught in one of the machines and crushed to death. He'd been partly deaf and wore a cheap hearing aid, but he turned it off in the plant because the noise was so bad. Someone said that's what killed him. He couldn't hear what was going on and a machine got him. Like a big animal was waiting for him to make a mistake and when he did it reached out and took him. At least that's the way I'd always thought about it when I heard the whispered story. He was 56 when he was killed, I was about 10. Because of the higher wages that the union had been able to force out of the company, he'd been able to buy a small farm, which was where I'd gotten to spend a lot of week-ends. When he died, the farm went over to my uncle, but it was never the same. Joe, that was my grandfather's name, was a farmer first and a rubber worker second. His son, Andy, who took over the farm, never liked it. He went on to be a supervisor in the plant, the only one in the whole family who ever became part of management. And nobody liked him for it. He was never quite accepted after that. Not that anyone really blamed him for doing it -- he made a lot more money, bought a new car, fixed up the old farm house -- it just seemed like he'd gone over to the other side. This became clearer to me later when I first heard the old miner's song called "Which Side Are You On?". I'd been

working for the United Mine Workers on what was called the Harlan County Strike, a strike that the coal miners had staged in answer to the terrible and rapidly deteriorating safety conditions in the underground mines of Eastern Kentucky. Harlan County was renowned for the fierce strikes that had taken place in the 1930's that had killed and maimed hundreds of strikers and union organizers. The coal and iron police that were hired by the mine owners had terrorized the little hollows where the mine workers lived, isolated from any form of police protection that might have come their way. The woman who wrote "Which Side Are You On?" was named Florence Reece and her husband was a mine worker and an organizer for the UMW. She said that she "sat down at the kitchen table with the baby on her lap" and wrote the song after her husband crawled out the back window and ran into the woods to keep the Pinkerton men from killing him. The song became an anthem for the miners in the struggles of the 1930's and was sung again when we were there, 40 long, hard years later. It went:

They say in Harlan County,
There are no neutrals there,
You either are a union man,
Or a thug for E.H. Blair.
Which side are you on,
Which side are you on?

The song had several more verses and Florence sang them all for me, accompanying herself on an old guitar. Her husband, Sam, just sat there quietly and listened. He couldn't join in, because he could no longer breathe. The Pinkerton's hadn't got him, but black lung did. This was, if not the beginning, at least another glorious step in my education of the singing side of the labor movement. However, by the time I'd gotten involved, the labor movement no longer sang. Fortunately, the Civil Rights Movement took over that area of the struggle and took it to new heights, reviving old protest songs such as "We shall Not Be Moved" and "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder". It was about this time that I decided to write a play about John L. Lewis, the notorious leader of the United Mine Workers' Union. For some reason, although I was inspired by the mine worker, the little guy fighting for his rights against the corrupt coal barons, I instead wrote about their leader. I'm now fairly certain that this was because of my education. Since all of my history courses in high school and college were about the great men in history, the Generals, Businessmen, and Politicians that made history, I guess it was only natural that when I decided to write about the labor movement, I wrote about one of their great men. A real example of cultural indoctrination. Anyway, I read everything that I could find about Lewis, although there really wasn't all that much. For a man who was as well known as his nemesis,

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, when they were battling it out for the hearts and minds of the working class, he is now little remembered in the history books that come across the desks of working-class children. But I did find some old recordings of his speeches in the UMWA archives. They were often broadcast over the radio, immediately following Roosevelt's "Fireside Chats". These orations were truly extraordinary, laced with biblical references that were soul stirring. But even I knew that a play was not made up of an hour or so's preaching, even if it was for our cause, and that's when I turned to song. With the help and guidance of Marty Burman, a fine guitar player and a repository of labor songs taught to him around the camp fires of socialist summer camps since he was old enough to walk, we broke Lewis' speeches with the voices of the people, the great songs of struggle. The Labor Theater had its first original play and many of the old songs were back on the air. I think the show, called "Singly None" helped keep some of these songs alive and reintroduced them to the mine workers who had since stopped singing. The reason they had stopped singing the old songs is that their way of hearing music had been taken over by the radio. Gone were the times when people sat around and sang songs to each other. Now everything came in over the air. This tends to make the songs quite different, rather than being songs of injustice and protest, we now have songs of personal failure, mostly

in love. There are several reasons for this. Adorno and Horkheimer stated that, "Talented performers belong to the industry long before it displays them, otherwise they would not be so eager to fit in. And there is a determination of all authorities not to produce or sanction anything that in any way differs from their own rules, their own ideas or above all, themselves."[2] Certain performers are selected to be put on the "air", as long as their message fits the corporate ideology. If they don't, they often have difficulty finding a sponsor. Since, as Noam Chomsky said, the media is basically "corporations selling audiences to other businesses, it would hardly come as a surprise if the picture of the world they present were to reflect the perspectives of the sellers".[3] Because of this, most of the old songs of clan unity or the songs of social protest that have been handed down over the centuries, like "Which Side Are You On" or "We Shall Not Be Moved" wouldn't be coming in over the air-waves. So if they were to be heard then they must be presented to social movements by independent, committed cultural artists. To accomplish this, movement singers have traveled from demonstration to demonstration, from rebellion to rebellion, singing the old songs and making up new ones. It is said that Victor Jarra had his hands cut off by General Pinochet in a soccer stadium in Chile when he wouldn't stop playing his guitar and singing the peasant songs of protest. Joe Hill, the Wobbly song

writer, was hung in Utah. Under certain circumstances, even the songs must be stopped.

THE LABOR THEATER, INC.

In order to understand the Labor Theater and its beginnings it is first necessary to understand that the working-class had been eliminated from the realm of theater going audience in much the same way as "groundlings" had earlier been escorted out of the Shakespearean theaters in Elizabethan times -- by making it too expensive to attend. When I arrived in New York and decided to study acting, it was a common practice for actors to "second act" a play they really wanted to see. This meant showing up at intermission and taking any seats that might have become available. Even then, around 1970, the prices were too high to be paid by mostly out-of-work actors, and out of the question for any member of the working-class who was merely looking for some kind of entertainment besides the movies. It was because of this anger at not even being able to see plays that were considered the classics of the American theater that we decided to do plays for the working-class that the working man or woman could afford to attend. Of course, the easiest way to do this was to find a free hall and just not pay the actors. As it turned out, this is exactly what we ended up doing. Since most actors are dying to practice their craft in front of an audience instead of constantly performing in

classes in front of other actors who already know how the play is going to turn out, we soon rounded up the necessary talent. The plays were going to be the old time favorites that most probably hadn't seen, like Arthur Miller's "View From the Bridge" or Tennessee Williams' "Glass Menagerie". Great plays with great parts that would attract good actors. The next problem was the performing space and it was here that the labor unions could really help us out. Many of the older unions, such as the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union, still owned several buildings around New York with auditoriums that were used for union meetings. Also, many of the membership were used to going to their halls for meetings, rallies, etc. and were in regular contact with each other through the union papers. It was this combination that was going to be the backbone of the Labor Theater as we began to set up our organization. Our promise to them was that we would offer the performances to their members at a price they could afford, the same price as a movie ticket. What we didn't know was that the membership no longer looked to the unions for cultural guidance, as they had in the 1930's. Most of the unions had evolved into what is known as "bread and butter" unionism. They were no longer involved in the workers' lives, only in their paychecks. Aside from the annual Labor Day Parade, which hadn't been held in New York City for 5 or 6 years, the unions had relinquished their hold on their members'

social lives that had been so much a part of their success in the 1930's. As Barbara Epstein had stated, they had given up on the "cultural revolution, the transformation not just of economic or political structures but of the ideas that govern social life as a whole, which had been a continuing theme in the protest movements of the past".[4] What we soon found out was that it was going to be almost impossible to get this cultural trust back, as the corporate structure had stepped in and filled the void with the "consumer culture", using the power of advertising to tell their members what they should think, what they should buy, what they should see. Adorno goes into this usurpation in depth in the "Dialectic of Enlightenment" when he states:

> The basic tenet of the cultural industry has become that pleasure means not to think about anything, to forget suffering even when it is shown. Basically it is helplessness. It is flight; not, as asserted, flight from a wretched reality, but from the last remaining thought of resistance. The liberation which amusement promises is freedom from thought and from negation.[5]

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

THE CENTRAL LABOR COUNCIL

The function of a Central Labor Council (CLC) in most good sized cities is to co-ordinate the activities of the various independent labor unions that operate autonomously but want some semblance of cooperative interaction, especially on non work-related issues, such as the annual Labor Day parade. Since the CLC is always composed of officials of these same unions, elected by a vote of the membership, it stands to reason that the most powerful unions decide how the labor movement will interact, as a group, with the rest of the city. In New York City, the Central Labor Council is controlled by what is known as the "Building Trades", a loosely affiliated group of construction unions headed by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW). The IBEW is notoriously anti-communist, probably stemming from the fact that the union was once accused (in the 1950's purges) of being heavily infiltrated by communist organizers. It is now, or at least was in the 1970s, the avowed purpose of the IBEW to destroy any suspected nest of commie sympathizers before they could grow strong enough to destroy the American labor movement. At the time Bette Craig and myself were attempting to form the Labor Theater, we did not know this. As a matter of fact, we were totally unfamiliar with any labor history, except perhaps the massive labor wars of the 1930s, as my father and both

grandfathers had worked in the rubber companies during that period in Akron, Ohio. But, as far as the intricate and complex union ideologies existing in New York City at the time, we were totally ignorant. In retrospect, this was probably much to our advantage, for if we had known how different the unions were in their basic beliefs of how the workingman and woman could be best served, we would not have known where to begin. Since we didn't, we began with an ex-commie organizer who had been drummed out of the labor movement in the 1950s and was writing plays about his experiences. It was this disgraced union man, Emmanuel Fried, a friend of Bette's (she'd been introduced to him by the director of her hometown community theater group) and the author of "The Dodo Bird", a play about factory workers that the Labor Theater later produced, who introduced us to Sally Genn at the Central Labor Council. Sally, it turned out to her credit, was actually an anarchist who was working there in order to "bore from within", a policy earlier encouraged by G.B.Shaw's Fabians. We didn't know this at the time, either, and, of course, had never heard of the Fabians. Never-the-less, Sally set us up with a meeting with the leaders of several of the more progressive labor unions, held in the conference room of the Council itself. Most of the people there were older, in their 60's or 70's, and spent a lot of time telling old war stories about the theater that they loved back in the '30's. The Group

Theater, The Theater Union, The Labor Stage, etc. They went on and on about how great it had been and how much organized labor needed another theater just like it. "Just like it" turned out to mean "do the same plays for us again". When we asked them what plays they would like to see, Jules Kolodny, an officer of the United Federation of Teachers, immediately suggested "Waiting For Lefty", Clifford Odets' rabble rouser about a taxi strike that put the Group Theater on the map. Everyone agreed, "that was a great play, the kind of theater nobody does anymore". We said we'd do it, along with "The Dodo Bird", as they were both one act plays and could be done in one evening. The meeting broke up with everyone excited about the prospects of a new theater for the working-class.

Well, things didn't exactly turn out the way we expected. We did mount the two plays, at a huge theater (probably 1,000 seats) in the Fashion Institute of Technology. This theater was selected, over our cautiously voiced concerns, because it could hold all the thousands of people that would be turned out by the unions for what was to be called a Labor Festival of the Arts. When we first saw the theater, we were stunned. It was the biggest stage any of us had ever been on in our lives and it was obvious that the set for the Dodo Bird would be dwarfed by the space. Besides, the audience was so far away from the stage, separated by a

full sized orchestra pit, that the intimate scenes of "Waiting For Lefty" would have to either be played on the apron or yelled from center stage. When we again mentioned our concerns to the labor committee that had been set up to handle such problems, they felt we were being faint-hearted. It turned out that they were used to going to the occasional Broadway musical, in a heavily miked, acoustically sound space, not an old auditorium. So, things started out bad but got much worse.

The head of the Central Labor Council, Harry Van Arsdale, an especially small-minded, but powerful old time labor leader out of, of course, the IBEW, hated both plays. He hated "The Dodo Bird" because it dealt with worker alcoholism that wasn't handled with great humanity and understanding by the union, and he hated and despised "Waiting For Lefty" because, as he later told Sally Genn, it was a "commy play, written by a commy about a commy take over of a taxi union". We were totally ignorant of his sensitivity on the subject of taxi drivers. We didn't know that only a short time before Harry Van Arsdale had had chairs thrown at him at a union meeting by furious striking cab drivers who accused him of selling them out. Well, that was the end of us with the Central Labor Council. From then on, we were red-baited by them and any of the unions that they had control over, including Jules Kolodny who had originally suggested that we

do "Waiting for Lefty". So not only didn't we get the help we needed, we had to fight constantly to overcome the vileness issuing from Van Arsdale whenever our theater was mentioned in his presence. Ironically, the name that we had selected for our company, The Labor Theater, because of our strong sympathies with the labor movement, was to cause us extraordinary problems in the future. We were accused of being Communists and red-baited both by the Labor movement and the corporate community, even though neither Bette or myself had ever even met a Communist until we met Manny Fried.

THE DODO BIRD

As actors, we were always looking around for plays to do, parts to play. Almost all of the plays we were familiar with were classics, such as Tennessee Williams' "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" or Miller's "Death of a Salesman". These were both basically "family" plays, with the father and sons battling out some sort of personal problem that was tearing the family apart. Brick, the son in "Cat", and Biff, the son in "Death", were both alcoholics, caused by something or other that had happened to them, something that was out of their control and that they couldn't deal with. Life was not to be faced, but run away from. The father's job was to help them back to life, in any way he could. There was nothing really political about this, in the narrower sense. The personal is political, but in these plays, not political in that it was being caused by an outside force "on purpose". It was just the facts of life, running on in their own tragic ways. Just grin and drink on it. So, I did those plays, those parts, at least did the scenes that involved the sons, either for class or as a part of a "scene studies" group that occasionaly would come together to put on a five or ten minute portion of a play for each other to critique. Anything to keep busy, to help learn the craft. But I was always on the lookout for something more, something "newer" that spoke more directly to the problems I was facing, like the music I was listening to. Rock and

roll. Folk music. Not Elvis and his Heartbreak Hotel, but Bob Dylan, the Beatles, Joni Mitchell and Where have All the Flowers Gone? But the plays were nowhere to be found. When I stumbled over John Osborne's "Look Back in Anger", there it was, at least part of it. The anger was there, the disappointment, the disgust with it all. The rich and the poor. There was a little of this in "Cat" and "Death", but something was missing. As I look back, I think it was the analysis, the confused class analysis that spewed out of Jimmy Porter's mouth in "Look Back in Anger", something that I'd never heard before. An answer, some answer, to what was wrong with the world. Even if it was a somewhat befuddled Marxism, it still made sense. It was simple. We weren't getting our fair shot. Not me, but us, all of us, all my friends I grew up with, everybody I knew. We were just the drones, the dumb slobs that were doing all the stupid jobs that had to be done and everyone else was getting all the breaks, all the breaks we were working for and somehow never quite saw. After I read "Look Back in Anger", I didn't want to do Brick or Biff anymore, I wanted to do Jimmy Porter. I wanted to talk about something that mattered, not my personal problems, my hang-ups. Here was something more. A play that attempted to make some sense out of everything we were going through, that said that the Politicians and the Generals and the Businessmen were all part of the same line of bullshiters who told us to just go back to work, then go

out and get drunk and forget the whole thing. Everything was alright. I later read much more about it in C. Wright Mill's "The Power Elite", but at the time I had never heard of Mills and anyway they weren't doing him on Broadway. They were doing plays that denied what was going on outside the theater, denied anything but some sort of an obtuse reality of deep personal problems. Life was an illusion, a mystery to be sorted out through private analysis. Anyway, it was much too short to worry about. But in fact life is too long, way too long not to worry about it. There are too many days and too many dulled nights that creep endlessly by not to make you try to do something about it. Something stupid, like blowing up a building. The funny thing is that none of this would have become obvious to me unless I had been sitting in New York reading through one play after another about the same sad families when some kind soul handed me "Look Back in Anger" and the bells went off.

Anyway, there weren't any theaters in Akron, Ohio that I ever remember hearing about. Theater wasn't something that you did. You went to movies. I remember going to one play in college, in Florida, but only because I was trying to go out with one of the actresses. I don't remember what it was and I think that I left at intermission. I never even spoke to the actress again. It was all too irrelevant, somehow. When I returned to Florida after putting two years in the

Army, everything was the same. Everyone was out of college and had grabbed some kind of boring job with some huge corporation like Proctor & Gamble or Continental Can or, like I soon did, with the American Casualty Insurance Company. Boring jobs in middle management that were dead-end, except for the fact that you'd eventually move up the old corporate ladder, have a big expense account and make enough money to send the kid to some state university to keep the process working. All you had to do was give them the next forty years of your life and you could do whatever you wanted with the last ten.

So after I raged through the part of Jimmy Porter in a scene class and then somehow got cast in another play with similar ideas about life, "The Gingerman", by J.P.Donleavy, I was constantly on the lookout for more of the same. Someone must have suggested Clifford Odets, so I read "Waiting for Lefty" and I was hooked. So when Manny Fried somehow showed up at Bette's apartment with "The Dodo Bird", I was aching to do it. The only problem was that I wanted to do one of the parts, Bull, the anti-hero, and I couldn't find anybody who would direct it. So I decided to direct it myself. It worked beautifully, if I do say so myself. I loved it. I loved directing it. I loved the audience's response to it. I actually sat back in the last row with tears in my eyes. I had found what I wanted to do. Theater about my people,

people like me. And more than that, I wanted them to see it. All the people like me who had never seen a play about themselves, about their lives, I wanted them to see it. Manny Fried said no problem, he knew people in the labor movement who would love to help us put on plays like this for their members. He was wrong. The leaders of the so-called labor movement weren't interested in putting on plays like the "Dodo Bird", plays that might disturb their members, put the union in a bad light. They wanted "puff jobs", plays that glorified the unions, not looked at their flaws. But more than that, they wanted entertainment, plain and simple. Something to entertain the troops, not make them think. They wanted Broadway, big and splashy and sexy. Horkheimer & Adorno again had it right when they wrote that:

> The universal criterion of merit is the amount of "conspicuous production", of blatant cash investment. The varying budgets in the culture industry do not bear the slightest relation to factual values, to the meaning of the products themselves. This is the triumph of invested capital, whose title as absolute master is etched deep into the hearts of the dispossessed in the unemployment line; it is the meaningful content of every production, whatever plot the production team may have selected.[6]

Most of the major productions that appear on Broadway, such as "Cats", "Miss Saigon" or "Phantom of the Opera" are celebrated not for the content of the play, what it is actually about, but on the amount of money that was spent on the costumes, the set, the technical apparatus. This is even more obvious in theater than in movies, which do the same thing but have the massive salaries of the "stars" to promote along with everything else. The time of "poor theater" is now a thing of the past. It is no longer possible to point with pride at a production that was produced for almost no outlay of hard cash. This is now looked upon as a mark of worthlessness, as the value of the production is in outlay not content. This sense of worth has been driven into the mind of all Americans so that the poor cannot compete. So that nothing will be judged on merit but only on cost. If it's expensive, it's good. If it's not, it's junk.

REVIEWS

One of the hardest things for any alternative theater group to do was to get the major papers to review its work. This was especially true if you were political and didn't exactly represent the same political ideology as the newspaper that you were asking to send a reviewer. Of course, you could hold the same basic views on captialism as Karl Marx, if you were a major advertiser -- a good example of this might be Dario Fo's, "The Accidental Death of an Anarchist" -- you'd still be well covered. You'd get the review, as bad as it would probably be. However, since the New York Times was charging around $35,000 for a full page ad at the time, more then the cost of your entire season, there was little chance of that. So, why, you might ask, would you even want to be reviewed in a newspaper that was more than likely to tear you to pieces? The answer is simple. If you were reviewed, you were legitimate. You existed. Then the labor unions, colleges, and women's groups that you were trying to get to book the show, would not think that you were just some "amateur" political group that threw something together in protest, but were, in fact, a professional theater company that was doing something that was of interest to them. It was imperative to have reviews if you were trying to package a tour across country. It was only if you included reviews in your promotional material that the organizers would go out on a limb to gather their people together for an

evening. Time and money were too precious to be spent on something bad. And as John McGrath of 7/84 said, "if you were bad, not only will you never be invited back, but you ruined it for any other theater groups for the next ten years." That was quite a responsibility. Horkheimer and Adorno go into this in depth in "The Dialectic of the Enlightenment", when they analyze the changed status of the "amateur" in our society. They explain in detail how the most efficient way to eliminate a section of culture in our society is to confine it to the realm of the "unprofessional".[7] Professional meaning good and amateur meaning bad. This simplified redefinition of how to determine what's good and what's bad -- if you're good, you're on Broadway; if you're not on Broadway, you're not any good -- allows those who control the media to designate which individuals have talent merely by putting them on display. It has now become axiomatic in the American consciousness that if you are talented, you will be put on view. It therefore holds that if you haven't been touted in the papers or over the airways, if you aren't highly paid, then you aren't any good and are considered valueless by those who have been taught to find value only in what can be bought.

SINGLY NONE

The play about John L. Lewis and the United Mine Workers, called Singly None (from a poem inserted in the United Mine Workers Constitution), has a strange background. I was down in Florida working for a detective agency and repossessing cars, trying desperately to pay off some bills I'd run up trying to be an actor, when a friend in the labor movement contacted me and asked if I wanted to come up to Harlan County, Kentucky and work with the United Mine Workers on a strike they were having against the Duke Power Company. Duke Power is a huge electrical monopoly that owns coal mines all over the South. I was looking for a chance to get out of the repo business, so I said sure and caught a bus for Harlan. While I was there, I got very involved with the Mine Workers' Union and read several books about their history and about their famous leader during the 20's and 30's, John L. Lewis. I found the speeches he made absolutely extraordinary, with their political clarity and biblical references. He thought of the labor unions as an extension of the teachings of Christ, so he used the old testament as an underpinning in most of his appeals, either to the miners or to the nation as a whole. His talks over the radio were the answer to Roosevelt's fireside speeches, as he continually tried to reframe the political issues into those of the battle of the owners against the workers. At the same time, I was listening to the songs that the miners

sang to keep up their spirits on the picket line or, in the motel every night, the songs that were written about working in the mines by labor troubadours such as Joe Hill. Most of these I'd never heard, as I wasn't yet a part of the left-wing movement that had kept them alive after the huge organizing battles that took place in the 1930's. But when I heard them, I decided then and there to write a play that encompassed both the grandiose speeches of Lewis and the simple songs of struggle that were sung by and about the miners. When I finished writing it a few months later, we put it together with actors and singers and decided to take it on the road. So I jumped in my Volkswagen, drove to Pittsburgh, and spoke to the President of one of the UMWA Districts, Lou Antel. The reasons Lou was the man to see were many. He had been a part of the labor movement since he was child. His father and grandfather had both worked in the mines. But more important, Lou had been part of the effort to oust Tony Boyle, the corrupt successor to John L. Lewis, from the union presidency. Lou was working with Jock Yablonsky when Boyle had him and his family murdered. Lou was one of those responsible for bringing Boyle to justice, at great personal risk. This personal courage, so respected by the miners, and the fact that Lou Antel thought of the UMWA as more than a union for raising wages but as a organization that should cater to the social consciousness as well, made him, indeed, the right man to talk to about a

play. He promised me $1,000 on the spot for a show he'd never seen and then sat there and outlined who I should see next. So as I drove back toward New York, I stopped off at Mine Workers' locals throughout Pennsylvania. Lou had already called them. By the time I got home, I'd lined up 7 shows at $1,000 each, enough to cover the expenses of paying the actors, singers and renting a van. What made all this possible, aside from Lou's powers of persuasion, is that the UMWA was one of the few remaining unions that still considered themselves a part of a social protest movement, who felt that they needed to retain the connections with their past in order to truly understand who they were, what they were fighting for, what tradition they were continuing. As Francis Fox Piven stated, perhaps the singular contribution of the intellectual tradition of the left, and Lou was an unlettered part of that, has been to bring working class people fully into history, not simply as victims but as actors. The left has always understood that working-class people are a historical force and could become a greater historical force. And the left has understood that the distinctive form in which that force expresses itself is the mass movement. Men like Lou also understood that working-class movements are not forged merely by willing or thinking or arguing them into existence. Neither the frustrations generated by economic change, nor the breakdown of daily life, may be sufficient to lead people to

protest. Ordinarily, when people suffer such hardships, they blame God, or they blame themselves. "For a protest movement to arise out of these traumas of daily life, people have to perceive the deprivation and disorganization they experience as wrong and subject to redress."[8] The Mine Workers had always tried to keep these perceptions alive through songs and stories. The ones we brought to Pennsylvania were more than matched by the ones we took back with us. The Miners even included a poem in their first Constitution:

Step by step the longest march
Can be won, Can be won.
Single stones can form an arch,
One by one, One by one.

And by Union, what we will
Can be all accomplished still.
Drop's of water, Turn a mill,
Singly none, Singly none.

The Labor Theater had done its first tour. We didn't stop for ten long but quite wonderful years.

DUKE POWER

When I went down to Kentucky to work with the United Mine Workers on their strike against the coal company, I learned that the mines that were being struck didn't belong to a coal company, but were actually part of a conglomerate controlled by Duke Power Company, the vast energy cartel that began with tobacco money. This organization owned and operated the electrical utilities companies that provided the power and light for a large part of N. Carolina, S. Carolina and Kentucky. In fact, Duke Power had acquired mines all over the South and used the coal to power their electric plants. Thus it was to their advantage to keep the miner's wages down, as they could then make higher profits when they sold their electricity. A simple form of horizontal integration that was paying off handsomely. At the same time that Duke was cutting wages in the mines and fighting the union over safety conditions, they were petitioning the State governments for higher electrical rates. As a matter of fact, they were asking for a 33% across the board rate increase that would raise the cost of electricity -- to the mostly poor homeowners -- well above the cost of their monthly mortgages. The story behind this unusual set of economic circumstances was that Duke Power had set its rates unrealistically low in these areas in order to encourage contractors to build all electric houses. That is, little uninsulated cement block boxes that came

complete with central air-conditioning and electric heat that would keep that house at an ideal temperature, all year around. However, once these huge tracts of cheap houses were built, most of them sitting on bull-dozed land in the middle of scrub pine, the price of electricity began its seemingly inevitable rise. Within a few years, these happy homeowners found themselves paying 5 or 10 times the rates that they had started with. The costs to keep those houses livable were becoming more than most of them could afford, in those low-wage, right-to-work states. So, Duke, rather than reduce rates and lower profits, decided instead to reduce the wages of the coal miners.

It was after the short visit to the Kentucky mines that I previously mentioned, that I was sent to Greenville, South Carolina. I was there to do the publicity necessary to set up a social protest that could fight against the rate increase and at the same time tie the plight of the coal miners in Kentucky with the homeowners in the Carolinas. Working out of a black lawyer's office along with several organizers from the Textile Workers' Union, we began to organize a mass meeting between blacks and whites, an interracial front to fight against the rate increase. This was an extremely good tactic on the part of the unions involved, because for the first time the issues clearly did cut across race lines. The poor whites were getting hurt as

badly as the blacks. Also, the UMW was bringing bus loads of mine workers from Kentucky to talk to the workers in the mills about the conditions they were facing trying to supply coal for the generators. As the word spread from organization to organization and a time and place was set for a mass demonstration -- a previously segregated park in downtown Greenville -- enormous pressure was put upon Duke Power by the white power structure to rescind their request for a rate increase. They had no desire to present an opportunity for poor whites and blacks to come together around a common issue. They told this to Duke, but Duke wouldn't budge. They didn't want to set a precedent. They didn't want it to get out that they didn't really need the increase, that they just wanted it. And it was common knowledge that what Duke wanted, Duke got. It was their God-given right for being good enough to provide light where there was once only darkness. However, this was a time when the Civil Rights Movement was having a powerful effect on young people, especially on the college campuses. There were committed students who were willing to lend their time and talent to help fight the injustices that the protest movements were making more and more obvious. By the labor movement connecting into the universities, into the art, music and drama departments, young artists were soon found who did posters, wrote articles in newspapers; poets and singers announced what was going on at coffee shops and folk

clubs. Popular bands that were performing in the area quickly agreed to show up at the demonstration and show their support. The numbers of people expected at the rally changed from the few dedicated activists from the unions to the huge numbers of disenfranchised and their supporters. This united front split the power structure into factions that had Duke Power on one side and the local merchants, who knew that they could only be hurt by a meeting of this sort, on the other. On the night before the demonstration was to be held, Duke caved in. The rate increase was cancelled, costing Duke Power Company millions of dollars in profits over the next few years. As Francis Fox Piven points out, it was not the fear of powerful organizations that made this happen. There were already several rich and powerful organizations operating in the area -- the UMW, the TWUA, the NAACP, among others. However, these were organizations that the power structure of South Carolina, led even then by Strom Thurman, knew how to deal with, how to placate, how to control. It was only the thought of what could happen if the poor blacks and whites in the area ever could find a place to come together on issues that couldn't be obfuscated by race, that caused the disruption. Where issues of class, the concept of owners and workers, the glaring truth of monoply and collusion were exposed through such devices as posters and songs, new coalitions could be made. It became clear that when a social movement, made up of mostly poor

workers, was joined and legitimized by the community of artists, intellectuals and students, the power structure would never again have the same degree of control. The next day, the demonstration was held anyway, but instead of a protest it was a party, celebrating the first time a request for a rate increase by Duke Power had not been approved by the city fathers.

REPO

After we gave a Labor Festival in the Spring of 1973 with the backing of the New York labor movement and nobody came, it was time to re-group and, more importantly, make a little money to live on. The Festival didn't pay for itself and nothing was left over for us to survive on while we tried to find money to continue the idea of a Labor Theater. Bette went to work for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union and I headed down to Florida. I'd spoken to an old friend who was running a detective agency in Orlando and he told me to come on down and go to work for him. I grabbed a train and returned to Florida, a place I'd left about 7 years before to seek work in New York. It seems all my life I was always going someplace to look for work. As it turned out, I couldn't work in the detective agency, as I didn't have a detective's license. That would take a while to get. However I could go to work immediately in another business that my friend ran as a sideline, a repossession agency. When I got there, phones were ringing off the hooks as the banks were making desperate calls to get some of their expensive rolling stock brought back home. It seems that I had arrived at the time of the "oil crisis", and the big pick-ups, campers and motor homes were too expensive to drive. I ended up spending almost a year in Florida, repossessing cars and bringing them back to the banks. This work experience, as I like to think of it, was the basis of

an unfinished novel that was turned into a play for the Labor Theater. The story follows a "stranger" coming into town who goes to work for the banks, sees the error of his ways, and ends up joining the people in their struggle against the exploitation caused by the economic fluctuations of the capitalist system. The detective agency becomes the agency of change and the employees become the workers who gain class consciousness. The play was structured around a working-class man who wins fame and fortune through race car driving, only to lose it when his friend is killed and he can't drive any longer. Deprived of his high paying "craft", he quickly falls back down into the ranks of the unemployed, taking work wherever he can find it. He ends up repossessing cars because it's the only work he really knows how to do, driving cars away. It's his American Dream, dashed by misfortune. In the end, by dealing first-hand with people even more desperate than himself, those that are losing their cars and thereby access to any kind of employment, he comes to an understanding of the economic system itself. This character, Henry Matusic, tells the story directly to the audience, almost as a remembrance, stepping in and out of the action on the stage whenever necessary. The idea was to involve the audience directly, like an old friend who had come back home to tell a story of where he'd been and what happened to him while he was there. At the time, the country was going through the first of many

great economic shocks caused by the so-called oil crisis, and workers were being laid off in great numbers. This was the beginning of the massive restructuring of the economic system in the United States that would eventually reduce the union work force in the factories to less than 12 percent, a figure lower than before the massive organizing drives in the 1930's. The use of the plot device of repossessing cars was particularly appropriate, as members of the United Autoworkers Union in Detroit, devastated by the gas price increases that kept them from being able to afford to drive their campers, had caused the collapse of the economy in up-state Michigan where they had traditionally spent their summer vacations. (Also, the United Autoworkers' Union had always been a strong supporter of the Labor Theater, coming out of a powerful socialist tradition that harkened back to the forming of the CIO.) Although the play offered no particular insights into what to do about the problem other than the obvious point that everyone had to stick together -- if they take your car today, they can take mine tomorrow -- it took as its central theme the recognition that changes in national economic policy can often destroy individual lives; to help make people realize that it was not the workers fault that his car payments couldn't be met, the circumstances surrounding him had changed, quite without his permission. It was, therefore, by showing the workers in the audience how things come about, the arbitrariness of the

way that the banks decided which cars to pick up, the way the owners of the banks put pressure on the loan officers to maintain profits, regardless of the lives they destroyed, the impossibility of people adjusting to changing economic conditions quickly enough to save their lives, that the Theater was able to help develop a class consciousness. By depicting characters that were in the same circumstances as the audience members themselves, either presently or possibly, the Theater was able to help the Unions in their efforts to keep their members from placing the blame either on themselves or on some short-coming of their union. We saw this as extraordinarily important, as the self-esteem of working-class people is often tied directly to their jobs, their earning power, with the result that serious personal depressions usually follow any major economic set-back. Of course, this can be very dangerous to the health of the individual member, but it is also a major threat to the union itself. As Stanley Aronowitz has often stated, a depressed individual is of no help to the union when his or her presence is needed to assist in the fight against this attack. Additionally, if the union is viewed to be part of the problem, this causes splits in the membership, setting fathers against sons, friends against neighbors, blacks against whites. These internal rifts can make a concerted union struggle impossible. It was by bringing a play of this nature into the union halls and having discussions

afterward that many of the issues that were being harbored but not discussed could be brought out into the open and dealt with not as a union problem, but as a universal problem that was affecting workers everywhere. The first problem is to recognize the enemy and to realize it is not us.

RAILROAD BILL

The only "black" play, or perhaps more correctly, the only play done by the Labor Theater about the African-American experience was called "Railroad Bill". RRB was the story of a black turpentine worker by the name of Morris Slater who began robbing trains as they passed through his native state of Alabama. The idea for this play came from many directions at the same time, as most ideas usually do. First, I had heard a song about a black train-robber, probably played for me by our musical director at the time, Marty Burman. Marty was always singing songs to me from his endless supply of protest music, some of it folk, some new, and some that he had written himself. Railroad Bill is one of the great ones, a blues song telling the story of the proud but tragic life of an ex-slave who killed a sheriff in the 1890's and had a posse chasing him until they finally caught him 3 years later. To keep alive, he robbed the trains chugging through the swamps, loaded with timber, turpentine and the odd payroll. I wrote the play with a "narrator" so that a lot of history and other interesting information could be gotten out in a hurry and so that there was no problem with the audience keeping up. If they got confused, the Narrator came out and cleared up the mess. Also, the whole piece was infused with music, mostly the blues, but with a little rag-time thrown in to pick up the tempo now and then. The songs were either old ones that

Marty found or knew about or new ones that he wrote especially for the play. The fact that we had a phenomenal black female singer in the company made the idea hard to resist. The story was a tough one to tell, as the action was spread all over time and space. However, after continuous rewrites, we finally got it to work and it was one of our most popular shows. The "bandit" theme crossed all the lines -- race, gender, class -- and the shop developed into a huge success. Hobsbawm's book, called "Bandits", goes into great detail and tells many stories of how the bandit, as a mythic cultural hero, figures in the tall tales of almost all ethnic groups, from East to West, North to South. Railroad Bill became "the story of the Black Robin Hood", for advertising purposes, but was in reality the story of the coming together of the black and white share-croppers in the late 1800's, and the growing power of the populist movement in the western and southern parts of the United States. As Touraine emphatically points out in "Return of the Actor",

> Order never prevails absolutely; we may speak of ideological control, manipulation and alienation but what we actually have is physical repression, violence and rebellion, reduced to degraded forms. Just as there is never total silence in the world of slavery or in the concentration camps because there always subsists some resistance and

> therefore some direct represion, so behind the facade of order there always survive social relations of domination and protest.[9]

In addition, since the Haymarket Strike in Chicago was in 1886, and the play dealt with railroads, one of the characters, the Villain, was modeled after a somewhat minor "robber baron" by the name of L.T. Lodge, who ran the L & N Railroad. At the time that the play takes place, 1893-1897, the country was going through a massive depression and the fledging labor movement was fighting for its life. The rapidly forming monopolies such as those controlling railroads, grain and steel, were an important aspect of the play. This play was intended to bring even more diverse groups and movements together. It was hoped that it would be a bridge that could be crossed over from both directions. From plays that dealt with strictly labor themes, which our labor union backers wanted, to themes that would connect the labor movement more closely in the minds of the left-wing audiences that weren't historically familiar with the labor movement. Also, since many of the progressive labor unions in New York were mostly black and hispanic in their membership (for instance, the hospital workers from 1199), we felt it was important to try to bridge the gap between black and white workers, our natural constituency, by overlapping the themes in our plays whenever possible.

Finally, we wanted to introduce our white audiences to the little understood fact that black and white workers had been together before but had been driven apart by interests that wanted them separated and hostile. We felt that the labor movement had, in recent years, been terribly amiss in not educating its members, especially in the history of the struggles that went on at the turn of the century. Because of this lack of historical knowledge, the members haven't the deep, cultural understanding of what the unions had to go through to get where they are. That unions are not permanent fixtures somehow given to the workers by management to help keep them under control. By introducing the old songs of protest, often sung to the tunes of Christian hymns, that came from both the black and white fights for social justice, we felt the audience would come to understand that the poor have a common social base. That any difference in the races is much less than the differences between the classes. As Piven stated, "In theory, the left has also understood that working-class movements are not forged merely by willing or thinking or arguing them into existence".[10] Proletarian movements, Marx said, are formed by a dialectical process reflecting the institutional logic of capitalist arrangements:

> In proportion as the bourgeoisie, i.e., capital, is developed, in the same proportion is the proletariat, the modern working class,

> developed.... Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class.[11]

The story of RRB was basically done to set the record straight, to make it known that the racial divisions were not "natural occurences" in a racist universe but were in fact concocted for economic purposes. That every time blacks and whites of the lower classes tried to come together, they were driven apart by the economic interests that wanted them divided. It was this truth that was recognized by our audiences and helped to make the play a success.

TREES IN THE WIND

To retreat a bit, in 1971 Bette and I went to Ireland to do two one-act plays that a friend had written. They were performed in a small theater, the Lantern, in Dublin and ended up getting fine reviews in the local papers. One was about a down and out boxer and the other was love story between a man and woman on skid-row. The first was a little stronger and easier to put on than the other, so we decided to take it to the theater festival that was going on in Edinburgh, Scotland. John Kendrick, the playwright, found a space for it -- there were probably close to a hundred plays being performed somewhere in Edinburgh during that month -- so we did it, outdoors, on a makeshift stage in front of the Traverse Theatre, with a couple of lockers and two stools as the set. As it turned out, the show was well received, probably owing more to its American theme than to its quality. But more important, by being there, we got a chance to see dozens of plays that were being done by theaters from all over the British Isles. It was there that I saw a play called "Trees In The Wind", written by John McGrath, and the first production of his newly formed political theater group, the 7/84 Company. McGrath named it that in deference to the fact that in England, 7% of the people owned 84% of the wealth. This fact came as quite a shock to me, as I had always thought that the wealth was somehow much more evenly distributed than that, although I

was well aware that my particular family didn't have any of it. The story is about JOE, a working-class member of the Socialist Party who moonlights as a cat-burglar to make ends meet. He comes to the flat of a female comrade, Carlyle, to tender his resignation to the Party. The reason that JOE gives is that he has a chance to go straight, meaning to start his own business and join the capitalist system. His whole point is one of integrity. If he can make it in the system, as much as he hates and despises "for what it stands, then I'm really just complaining, ain't I, just bitchin' about not makin' it". Let him in, give him a piece of the pie and he'll stop complaining and get busy making England richer and a better place to live.[12] This was the first time I'd ever seen a play that was funny, shrewd and written from a Marxist perspective. It didn't preach, it laughed. It wasn't didactic, it screamed with pain and confusion. I had felt the same way when I'd seen John Osborne's "Look Back In Anger", but this was funnier and was offering a much more intelligent critique of what was going on between the rich and the poor. This was a class analysis that I could understand without really knowing what Marx was talking about. I loved it. It was "them and us", articulated as only the English seemed able to do. After the show, I went backstage and met all the actors and went out later and had a few beers with McGrath. He told me about his company and how he was going to tour plays like

this one all over England, going to trade union halls, schools, churches, etc. Take it directly to the working class. I thought it was the greatest idea I'd ever heard. I'd have signed up on the spot, but he didn't need any American actors and he hadn't started to raise the several million pounds that he'd finally put together over the next 20 years. So, I did the next best thing. I asked him if I could take the play back to the U.S. and put it on. He said, sure, that'd be great, and when I left, I left with a copy of the play under my arm and an idea of what I wanted to do when I got home. The play was eventually put on, as a staged reading at St. Clements Church, in New York, a space that was used for poetry readings and other counter-cultural events. Nobody came. Why? Because there was no Socialist movement that we were associated with that could have been tapped into for support. In our ignorance, we didn't realize that it was because of the Labor Government that was in power in England at that time that John McGrath felt he had an audience that he would be connecting with, a powerful social movement going all the way back to G.B. Shaw and his Fabians that was willing to support his political theater. It was when we became aware of this possibility, of reaching the working-class through their cultural connections with their unions, that we began to align ourselves with the then rapidly declining labor movement.

BANDITS

In 1978, Bette and I were awarded a fellowship by the National Endowment for the Arts to go to England for six months to study political theater. This turned out to be one of the most extraordinary experiences of our lives as we were able to meet most of the people in the U.K. who were trying to do the same type of theater that we were. It was at this time that we met Roland and Claire Muldoon, who were running CAST, and renewed our acquaintance with John McGrath, the founder of the 7:84 Company, among many, many others. But it was a playwright, not the leader of a political theater, who we became closest to, probably because his plays expressed more nearly what our theater was trying to say. His name was Cecil Taylor, and within a few years two of his plays would travel to Broadway, "A Nightingale Sang" and "Good". By this time, Cecil had written 30 or 40 plays, most of which had been staged in a small theater near his home in Northern England. He said the Labor Theater could do any one we wanted and I chose "Bandits".[13] "Bandits" was the story of gambling coming to a small, seaside town on the North Sea. With the decline of tax revenues, the town had decided that gambling would fill the empty coffers at Town Hall and bring the town back to its pre-war prosperity. Of course, the real story is one of creeping corruption and the side effects of moral desolation brought about by the insidious invasion of organized crime.

I felt that "Bandits" was the perfect play for a working-class audience, as the story was built around the murder of a local fisherman and the detective who tried to find out who did it. A political who-done-it. What could be better. As it turned out, the audience loved the show, once we toned down the accents so they could understand what the hell the actors were saying. One of the reasons they seemed to like it so much was that much of the story took place in a nightclub. This allowed us to use a sound track that was made up of mostly Beetles' music, which played more or less constantly throughout the show. One of the actors we hired was a drummer, who played a flunkey for the mob, but doubled as a drummer in the band at night. It was only because we were doing the show in a small theater off the beaten track, primarily for our own audiences, that we could get away with using this music without paying the huge royalties that would have made the show impossible. So, being poor and disregarded had its advantages. The play was especially right for our audiences because it allowed us to use a familiar and very popular format, the detective show, but fill it with a political message that would not normally be found on television: that the corruption of organized crime only exists because it is permitted to exist by the officials in the very highest ranks of government. And that the accusations of corruption and complicity that were at the time being leveled against our government and

discredited as conspiracy theories, were in fact true. It was obvious, at least to us, that corruption was now not only an acceptable way of doing business in corporate America but that it was condoned in the highest offices of government. What was worse, this new social norm was rapidly spreading downward as the word got out. At the time, many of the protest movements, especially the anti-war movement, were trying to convince the American people that there was a collusion between the government, the military and the defense industry to keep the war in Vietnam going; that this corruption had pervaded the entire power structure of the nation and was, by example, corrupting the entire nation. However, most people, even in the labor movement, had not yet come to what is now a foregone conclusion -- that big business was not working in the interests of the country, but in its own self-interests. It was still difficult, in the 70s for most people to accept this. It went against their grain. So it was generally held by most of us working in political movements that anything that could be done, books, music, plays, whatever, that carried this theme of corruption to the American people, would help make them aware of what was going on. That what was good for General Motors just might no longer be good for the country. It is interesting, in this context, that when Kennedy was assassinated, the American public did not believe that there was a conspiracy involved. They accepted

the Warren Committee's report. However, in 1993, 30 years later, after enormous amounts of information has been forced to light about the covert actions of the FBI, the CIA and the National Security Council, the American people no longer felt that way. They no longer believed that conspiracy theories were just crazed ramblings of fevered left-wing brains. In a poll conducted in 1993, over 70% of the people polled believed Kennedy's death was not the result of the efforts of one mad man. The times had changed. Everyone by that time had been through Watergate, Iran-contra, and a dozen other scandals. But when we selected "Bandits" out of all of Cecil Taylor's offerings, it was because we felt that the theme of corruption in business and how it penetrated into even the the smallest towns when condoned by the authorities was not yet part of the collective conscious of the nation. We were simply trying to add a type of moral legitimacy to what the anti-war movement was saying, as it accused the American government of mass murder for profit. Any help it could get was badly needed at the time. It is quite remarkable how much the public consciousness had changed by the time the Gulf War came around. Recognizing that U.S. government and industrial self-interest were no longer something to be hidden under a cloak of patriotism, the Bush administration readily admitted that we were in it for the oil. The previously hidden collusion had come out into the open.

LEFT OUT LADY

We decided to do John McGrath's play, "Yobbo Nowt", because it was about a woman worker.[14] Period. Almost all our other plays had male leads and we wanted to break out of that pattern. Also, many of the labor unions we were trying to reach had a large female work force. One of our major sponsors, the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union had a membership of mostly black and hispanic women, and we wanted to do a play that they could identify with. McGrath's play had several of the ingredients that we had come to see as important. It was funny, had a lot of music, and addressed issues head on. The play followed the course that we had often trod before, that of a person, this time a woman, who is totally apolitical and totally exploited coming to see the light of day. Whether this light was the blinding glare of marxism or the wider beam of class consciousness -- which side are you on -- it was enough to awaken our poor wage slave to the idea that she was being taken advantage of by those who had all the advantages. This was a tougher play to do in some ways, because it was a family show, complete with a teen-age daughter. This meant that we had to find a teen-ager who could play the part. We did and she did a terrific job. But it was another character, the stock boy, that made this play different from any of our others. His name was "Potshot" and he was a confirmed young marxist revolutionary. Out of his mouth, in

a crazy, comic fashion, came all the rhetoric of the far left that was firmly entrenched in the unrelenting logic of the Marxian interpretation of the capitalist system. We had finally arrived at the point as a theater group where we felt comfortable presenting to our audience a theory about why they kept coming up empty. Why they could never get ahead. Why their lives always seemed to be one step forward and two steps back. Up until this time, we had usually been content to point out that things were not great, but if we all worked together, formed unions, fought racism, we would prevail. But this play was done in 1981, at a time when the future wasn't looking rosy. With the tremendous leap in gas prices and the recession that left millions unemployed, the country was in a state of depression. Everybody was looking for some answer for why this was happening. Nobody in the working class yet recognized, as Stanley Aronowitz did in his book, "False Promises", that this was indeed the beginning of the end of the American Dream, that glorious promise that had become the popular belief following the industrial expansion after the Second World War. The labor unions still thought that they could deliver the "goods" to their members, even if there wasn't much they could do for the remaining 75% of the working class. However, since this play had been written in England about what was happening over there, it was much farther ahead in its analysis of the true problem. The U.K. was at least ten years ahead of the

U.S. in its industrial collapse. Unemployment was already in double digits in England and a large portion of their working class had already begun to realize that they might never work again. This is just now beginning to sink into the minds of the American working class, buffered as they were by a much more powerful manufacturing base. Many of the plays that we saw in England during our six month stay there on our U.S./U.K. Fellowship were dealing with this frightening reality. We traveled all around the country, into the industrial North where many of the touring political theaters were doing their shows, and were shocked by the levels of unemployment and the tremendous feeling of despair among the younger men and women who had yet to get their first job. We brought "Left Out Lady" back to the U.S. so that our audiences could get a feeling of what was going on in the economy in what most people consider the Mother country. What was happening over there was what could happen over here, if nothing was done to stop it. The Labor Party in England was being crushed by the power of the corporate structure that was investing overseas and allowing many of their major industries to collapse. Mining, steel, ship building, and automobiles were things of the past. England was being changed from a relatively high paid manufacturing nation to a land of the unemployed. "Yobbo Nowt" was John McGrath's way of explaining to a politically unsophisticated working class why this was happening to

them. By bringing the play over, we hoped to use his examination as a warning rather than an explanation, to yell "look out", rather than mumble later, "what a shame".

THE RAGGED TROUSERED PHILANTHROPISTS

When Bette and I were in England, in 1978, we went to the Edinburgh Theater Festival. One of the great plays that we saw there was a political piece about prisons called "The Hard Man", written by Jimmy Boyle and Tom McGrath (not to be confused with John McGrath). Tom McGrath was a Scottish playwright, Jimmy Boyle, an inmate in a maximum security Scottish prison. According to the story, Jimmy Boyle had been a notorious teen-age gang leader who had killed several men before he was caught, tried, convicted and sent away for life. While in prison, he learned to read and write and for some reason or other decided to write a play about his life. He did, it was produced by a small political theater company and it became a hit, playing throughout the British Isles. I met with Tom McGrath and told him I'd like to meet Boyle. He said that was no problem, as he was imprisoned in Glasgow, only 50 miles away, and was receiving guests. He arranged it for me and a few days later I was ushered inside the prison walls. I was taken to his cell, which was filled with books, plays and poetry. He was obviously very well read. He certainly had the time for it. We sat and talked for a couple of hours about theater, what was going on in the U.S. and the new play he was working on. I told him about the Labor Theater and that we were looking for plays about the working-class. Just then the guard came, and told me it was time to go. However, Jimmy was given permission

to walk me out to the recreation room. As we walked, Jimmy asked me if I'd ever read a book called "The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists". I said no, I'd never even heard of it. He said it was the best book he'd ever read about the English working class and that I should read it and if I liked it, I could adapt it to the stage. I thanked him, shook hands and followed the guard out to the main gate. On the way, the guard leaned over to me and said, "Jimmy's right, you know, Ragged Trousers is the best bleedin' book I ever read about the workin' class". Could this have ever happened in the United States? It doesn't seem possible. As it turned out, I bought it, read it, had it adapted, and put it on the next season.

As mentioned before, in the United States, in particular, the ability of the upper classes to dominate this marketplace has generally allowed these strata to shape the entire society's perception of political reality and the range of realistic political and social possibilities. Arnold Hauser goes even further when he states that,

> Popular art which is produced for the urban masses belongs ideologically to the petit and middle bourgeois, no matter from where the groups come that flock to be its audience and adapt themselves to it culturally.... The books which they read correspond to the escapist fantasies, compensatory satisfactions and inhibitions, the passive

> acceptance of fate by the underprivileged and the identification of their heros as those of the middle-class.[15]

Our trip to England, made possible by the U.S.\U.K. Fellowship, was one of the most important experiences of our lives. Out of it came an exchange program with CAST, a visit by Cecil Taylor and the production of one of his plays, access to the plays of John McGrath, and continuing discussions about the practice and purpose of political theater for years to come. We were able to analyze what we were doing in relation to other theaters that were trying to accomplish the same thing, but through quite different avenues and approaches. We found that although the British political theaters were trying to reach the same audiences as we were, because of the presence of a Labor Party, they had much less contact with the labor unions themselves. Because Bette had actually worked for a union, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union (ACTWU), we had a much closer understanding how unions actually operated and could use these inside connections to further the cause of the Theater.

As in every other endeavor, the most important part of being successful is gaining access to those individuals that can make things happen. Like Lou Antal, with the United Mine Workers' Union, Sally Genn with the Central Labor Council, or the numerous others that Bette met through here work in the huge Farah strike, it was always the work of the few concerned individuals that made it possible for us to put on our productions.

Without these people who held our same beliefs, that theater and cultural events were an important part of the union's responsibility toward their membership, the Labor Theater would have had to fold up its tent long before it had made any impact what-so-ever. We could provide the plays, but it was the union leaders themselves that had to provide the credibility that opened the doors to our shows. We always knew we were the support, but we also had a strong sense of our importance to the cause.

JACK LONDON

Once the Labor Theater had been established well enough that a lot of labor unions and left-wing groups had heard of us, either through seeing our shows, reading reviews or getting our mailings, we began to get a lot of calls to perform or provide some type of "entertainment" for meetings or fund raising events. I put entertainment in parenthesis because the one thing that the Theater didn't and wouldn't do was to provide entertainment for the masses. That was the reason we started the Theater, to get as far away as possible from the mindless entertainment that we were constantly seeing in the commercial theater. It must be remembered that both Bette and myself were trained in the theater, having met and studied together in Lee Strasberg's personal classes at Carnegie Hall. Strasberg, as previously discussed, was a part of the Group Theater and still onto their beliefs in a theater of "social consciousness". This was probably subliminally instilled in us, because when we started auditioning for plays, or just going to the plays that were being presented both on and off Broadway, we hated them. Not disliked or felt frustated by or disappointed in, we hated them. It was like we had trained all this time to do something of value and we were given nonsense to memorize and spit back to the audience. At the time, I was working on commercials as a grip and I told Bette I'd rather hang lights and push a dolly around a film set than act in one of

those productions. When I tried to get an agent -- a feeble attempt that lasted about a month -- I was rejected immediately as a possible client when I said I wouldn't do commercials. I'd work on them, but I wouldn't act in them. It was too demeaning. Even when I was given the opportunity to act in a low-budget film by a friend of a friend, after I read the script, I turned down the part and took a job on the lighting crew. So, when someone contacted the Labor Theater to provide entertainment, we offered them the political satires that we were always developing. However, even these shows weren't always available, as often either the actors weren't available or the shows weren't rehearsed enough to give a presentable performance. So we often had to turn down the chance. And this is something we never wanted to do, because we desperately needed any money that was available and, more than that, we wanted to get out our message. To spread the word, get out the propaganda. Counteract the misinformation spread nightly over the tube. The only answer was to develop a show that could be done on a moment's notice, without actors. What that meant was me, doing a one-man show, with little or no set and props. After thinking about it for a long time, I decided to write a play about Jack London. Here was a play about a man that was right for our audiences. London was born in the slums of San Francisco, became an avowed socialist while still in his teens, went on adventures around the world that he wrote

about in his books such as "Call of the Wild", became the most highly paid writer of his time, and died just after reaching his fortieth birthday. This eventful life would have been more than enough to stage, but there was even the interest of an ideological confusion running through it, as London was always torn between his desire to succeed in the capitalist world and his avowed belief in socialism. Throughout his life, while remaining a socialist and professing his disgust for everything that captialism stood for, he continued to amass a fortune from his vastly successful books. It was this contradiction in London's life that I felt was beneath the consciousness of us all. We didn't want to join the system, we wanted to beat it, destroy it, maybe only change it, but not to be considered a part of it. At the same time, we wanted to succeed in it so that we would have access to the machinery that would allow us to have the fame and prestige that we thought we deserved. This confusion is only to be expected, as both of these desires are parts of what Touraine considers interlocking agents of change. He stated, in "Return of the Actor", that:

> The labor movement is a central actor of industrial society since it affirms that machines and the organization of labor are good but only insofar as they serve all the workers and the population at large. Entrepreneurs are also

> central actors because they hold an analagous discourse: our activities and our profits are good because they develop industry and raise everyone's standard of living. Thus the conflict between industrialists and workers lies at the center of industrial society: both camps believe in industry and have the same cultural orientations, but they struggle to give industrial culture widely divergent social forms.[16]

The play, finally called "Yours for the Revolution, Jack London", because of the way London always signed his letters, was staged in two acts, each about an hour in length. The first act was about London before he became famous, the second was after he had become world-renowned. The show was structured this way so that the first act could be done alone, if the time wasn't available for a full-length show. Of course, the first act was exhilirating and the second act depressing. This was due in no small part to London's growing belief and thus, despair, that the socialist revolution that he championed would never happen in his lifetime. He was right. When he died, in 1916, the Russian Revolution was a year away and men and boys were dying by the millions in the European trenches of the First World War. The show was a success, getting mostly favorable reviews, and after a New York run, we toured it across the

Eastern part of the U.S. and later throughout England as well. The show was a hit with the labor unions, not because London was presented as a socialist, which the unions had problems with, but because he was a fervent trade unionist, who believed, somewhat confusedly, that the world had to unite along class lines, that the bosses were the oppressors, that the distribution of wealth was the major economic problem of his time, and that all this was compatible with the idea of making something of yourself as an individual. In other words, you could get rich and be a socialist, too, as long as you didn't exploit your fellow workers. Something for everybody.

With this play, we had the opportunity to reach out to several diverse sources within the conflicting social movements and bring them together into a common audience. In this way, the discussions that we always held after every performance could be used not just as self-congratulations for a job well done, but a forum where differences could be discussed and argued out. Groups such as the Democratic Socialists, the Libertarians, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, etc. could come to the theater or we would bring it to them. Of course, another one of the strong points of the show was that it was a history play. It took place long enough ago that it could be looked at by everyone as not being contemporary and thus subject to political correctness

-- for example, London was often accused of being a racist for his statements about the Japanese -- but still be relevant because the issues that London was writing about and the government policies he was fighting against were still current. The play also helped bring "history" to the various fueding social protest movements and that allowed them, in the discussions, to follow their own personal histories back to the source. Francis Fox Piven stated that:

> Perhaps the singular contribution of the intellectual tradition of the left, as it has developed since the nineteenth century, has been to bring working class people fully into history, not simply as victims but as actors. The left has understood that working-class people are a historical force and could become a greater historical force. And the left has understood that the distinctive form in which that force expresses itself is the mass movement.[17]

But, as Piven has further asserted, popular insurgency does not proceed by someone else's rules or hopes; it has its own logic and direction. It flows from historically specific circumstances: it is a reaction against those circumstances, and it is also limited by those circumstances. This is one of the reasons that the Labor Theater was always looking for

the opportunity to produce plays that had a strong historical background. We felt, that by locating our plays historically and then telling the story of specific events, even if the characters were fictitious, the audience would begin to reevaluate the history they had learned and question its veracity. You can't trust the media to bring you the truth, especially about events that go against the treasured national heros or myths. Noam Chomsky stated that,

> Those who occupy managerial positions in the media or gain status within them as commentators, belong to the same priveleged elites.... Journalists entering the system are unlikely to make their way unless they conform to these ideological pressures, generally by internalizing the values; it is not easy to say one thing and believe another and those who fail to conform will tend to be weeded out.[18]

NIGHT SHIFT

In 1977, the Labor Theater was sent a play that the Public Theater had turned down, called "Night Shift".[19] The script was written by Martin Goldsmith, an old time screen-writer who had gravitated to Hollywood form New York in the 1930's and was trying his hand at his first legitimate "play". It was a wonderful piece of work, superbly structured, with great characters and a story about the plight of a factory worker caught in the never ending circle of his life. I was in heaven. For whatever reason, the fact that most writers were middle-class, that theaters weren't interested in producing plays about blue collar workers for their white collar audiences, that television was handling the subject, whatever, it was almost impossible to find plays of this type that were this well written. I immediately called the writer's agent in New York and told her we were very intereested. She, of course, wasn't. She had never even heard of us and could tell from talking to me that we didn't have the kind of money she wanted for her client. However, since there weren't any other offers, she agreed to talk to Mr. Goldsmith and let him decide. To make a long story short, we finally got the rights to do the play in New York when we got Rip Torn, a well known actor, to agree to do the part. It was the first play that the Labor Theater did under an "Off-Broadway" contract and it put us in debt for years, but it also made us a legitimate company in the eyes

of the theater world, eyes that looked at us and saw us as a bunch of Commie hold-overs from another era. Rip did a great job in the show and got great reviews, but the uptown newspapers hated the play and couldn't understand why Rip had so lowered himself to take the part. They didn't know or conveniently forgot that the reason Rip was not out in Hollywood making tons of money doing the TV shows and movies that he once did was because he was blacklisted for doing and saying things that had branded him a Commie sympathizer back in the 60's, when he supported the Civil Rights Movement and failed to support the war in Vietnam. And here he was again, doing a play that attacked the "system" that turned the workingman into a meanlingless cog. But by now, it was alright. The black movement for social justice had been mollified, the war in Asia was over, the labor movement was beaten to its knees. The play was but a lonely cry in the dark. There was no movement for it to support, no organized left to rally around it and say what an important play it really was. No writers like Jack London or Upton Sinclair to blast back at the watchdogs of the capitalist press, causing a stir. Even though the left-wing and union papers loved the show, nobody heard their voices because nobody read their newspapers. The show closed after four weeks without ever reaching its audience. Rip took his great reviews and went back to Hollywood where he was immediately put back to work. As

Adorno wrote, "what completely fetters the artist is the pressure (and the accompanying drastic threats), always to fit into the business... Not to conform means to be rendered powerless, economically and therefore spiritually -- to be 'self-employed'. When the outsider is excluded from the concern, he can only too easily be accused of incompetence."[20] The sadness in all this comes from the "readiness of the artist to make compromises unhesitatingly and to sink below his own level in order to achieve success".[21]

THE BOTTOM LINE

Without a doubt, the greatest success that the Labor Theater scored with the labor movement was a satirical review called "Welcome to the Bottom Line", about a band that toured around the country on a military grant. This concept came from the fact that military bands received more money from the Pentagon than was made available to all the arts organizations in the country through the National Endowment for the Arts. The ideas for skits came from a close friend and member of the Labor Theater board of directors, Ed Felder, a brilliant person with a sharp wit and ironic intelligence. One of the skits that Ed came up with was "Of Meese and Men", a take-off on the way Reagan was controlled by his advisors, such as Ed Meese, in much the same way that Lennie was controlled by George in Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men". It was this simple idea that became the basis for the entire show. Structurally, we placed the skit in the Rose Garden, about an hour before an important press conference. Reagan was being programmed by his staff for the question and answer session that was about to begin. Throughout the piece, the cast would break into songs (written by Marty Burman) that would comment upon the social problems that were plaguing the nation. Reagan was shown as an "actor" whose only "job" was to memorize the lines given to him by his corporate backers. The heart of the piece was the perception that the country was no longer being run by even

the semblance of an individual with intelligence and integrity but by a front man for the military-industrial complex whose only allegiance was to money and power. More than a puppet, Reagan was portrayed as a mouthpiece for an anti-labor industrial system that was determined to destroy the American Labor Movement. Marty's songs were the real ideological backbone of the play. The skits were the comedy relief. Because of this combination of stand-up comedy and music, the show was easy to stage in places that were usually not conducive to theater, such as union halls, school auditoriums and convention sites. Our real triumph was doing the show in Miami at the AFL/CIO annual convention to a standing ovation. The cast included an extraordinary black, female singer, Gussie Harris, who truly blew the House of Labor away. Because of her great voice, the production was given a legitimacy that great acting could never match. Acting was acting, but this woman could sing!

We were able to get a small grant from the North Star Foundation, a group that backed grass roots organizing, to make records and tapes of the show which were distributed by Folkways Records. We sold these to the union delegates for cost, so that they could take them back and play them to their members at the local union meetings. We felt that this was a great achievement. Not only had we reached the leadership of hundreds of local unions throughout the

country, but we had found a way, through those records and tapes, to reach out to thousands more. Evidently, the opposition felt the same way, for when the Labor Theater came up for a renewal of its grant through the National Endowment for the Arts, newly reorganized and politicized under the Reagan administration, we were cut off. The grant was not renewed, supposedly because of "deterioration of artistic standards", even though the critical reviews that we received in newspapers and from the various State Arts Councils that sponsored our work gave us our highest marks ever. It was not how well you said it, but what you said that now mattered. The de-funding of the left had begun.

Benjamin Ginsberg stated that, "Westerners often equate freedom of opinion and expression with the absence of state interference. The freedom of opinion found in the western democracies, however, is not the unbridled freedom of some state of nature. It is rather the structured freedom of a public forum constructed and maintained by the state. The maintenance of this forum has required nearly two centuries of extensive governmental effort in the areas of education, communication and jurisprudence. The species of freedom that westerners enjoy is a product of the state's intervention, not of the absence of such involvement."[22] Politics is the study of who gets what, when and how: the societal competition for the allocation of values. He

understood very well that "In the realm of opinion, upper and upper-middle-class groups and the organizations and institutions they control are, first, the most powerful producers of ideas. These groups generally have far better access than their potential rivals to the social, financial, and organizational resources needed to effectively create and promote ideas."[23] Which is the reason why the winners of public art funding constitute a small, elite segment of the population whose culture milieu -- that is white European non-contemporary art in traditional settings -- receives the bulk of the public art subsidy.

BAYSIDE BOYS

The Bayside Boys may have been the most successful play the Labor Theater ever did. Not so much in box office, as most plays are measured, or even in number of performances, it only ran for the prescribed month that every production was given. Another play was always lined up to go in as soon as the one running closed. This usually meant tearing down the set as soon as the curtain went down on the last performance, while the wrap party was going on. This may seem a rather unsentimental manner of handling something that had probably taken up the better part of a year to put together, but it wasn't. Since everything in the theater was looked upon as process, rather than accomplishment, the finishing of one production and the beginning of another was really the time for cheering, not remorse. Either one of the other theater groups had something ready to open or something else was coming in that had been selected because of its political importance. No one ever thought that any of the shows that we put on were going to go into some theatrical cannon of plays that would be done throughout the country. The productions were too personal, usually developed out of the actors' and directors' own visions or adapted from productions that were being done in other countries but seemed to have a political significance in the United States.

The play the Bayside Boys was written by me after I taught a course in Queens in an Empire State College, SUNY, outreach program called School Without Walls. In this case, the Labor College was offering courses that could be taken in the local neighborhoods if a sponsoring organization would provide the space. The program that I taught through was for IBEW Local 3, better known as the electrical workers' union. The class was held in a small store-front, with a different instructor coming three nights a week. About 10 guys showed up every night, after working eight hours running cable and electrical wiring through some new high-rise in Manhattan. They usually walked in the door carrying sandwiches and cokes that they ate while I checked attendance and got things in motion. It was like trying to teach manners to a football team during half-time. The course I was teaching was called "An Introduction to Theater", and it was structured in a way that allowed me to take the class to a play in Manhattan every other week and discuss what we saw between times. The results were very rewarding and often hilarious, as nothing was held sacred. Since none of the class had ever really heard of any of the plays before, with the possible exception of "Macbeth" from high school English, they were taken at face value, in much the same way as a movie. But the effect was greater. They either loved the plays or hated them. The proximity of the actors changed the experience from just another "show" into

something much more personal. They tended to believe what was going on onstage, whereas in the movies they knew it was just "make-believe". Therefore the discussions took on a very personal tone, as if they were told something that they didn't quite know how to take. Because they -- the class was all men -- were encouraged to bring their wives or girlfriends, often heated discussions were held in coffee shops and bars after the shows. These discussions were then turned into papers that were written and read to the class in the form of reviews or "critisisms". Over the course of the semester, the reviews changed from simple recapitulations of what happened to more reflective evaluations of what the play was about, what it was supposed to mean to the audience. It was here that the discussions changed in their depth and began to allow the class to talk about their lives and the society they lived in, without danger of revealing too much of themselves to their fellow workers. The experience proved to be a jumping-off point for ideas and feelings that were often suppressed, an opportunity to relate to a verbal culture that provided the well thought out ideas that are usually only found in "serious" books that are seldom read and never discussed by the working class. This return to receiving important ideas from a verbal culture that is almost gone was the real importance of seeing theater that was presenting themes that were of social importance and not just mindless

entertainment. Most interesting, when I finally broke down and took the class to see one of the hugely advertised Broadway musicals that they were clamouring to see, they came in the next session with nothing say. They'd been highly entertained and extremely disappointed. I was truly pleased.

I wrote "The Bayside Boys" based on my experiences teaching the class and on the many hours I spent drinking beer with some of the guys after the classes. The hardest part of writing the play was finding a structure that would work. I knew that it was going to be funny because most of the time that I spent with these guys I was laughing. But the more I was there, the more the stories would come out about what was going on in their lives underneath the jokes. Mostly it was disappointment. I ended up basing the main character, BOBBY, on one of the guys that showed up a couple of times and than didn't come back. He quit for the same reason that we all quit, nothing seemed to be going anywhere. He was beginning to get into the one step forward, two steps back routine. Nothing big, just all the little things. No way out, but then out to where? Where was out? What was out? Anyway that was what I was thinking about at the time and so I guess I made myself the central character. In other words, BOBBY was me if I'd have been in his shoes. And I once was. I was a kid coming from a working class

background in Akron, Ohio. My father was a factory worker. He and my grandfathers, both of them, my uncles, all of them, and everybody else in the neighborhood worked for the rubber companies, either Goodyear, Goodrich, or Firestone. I was lucky, I got out. I went off to college right after high school and didn't look back for years. When I finally did, I was sitting in New York, having quit a good job to become an actor. And now I was teaching classes to a bunch of young guys who hadn't gotten out of the factories but were still trying. It was a natural. That's why I decided to have each one of the characters, at some time during the play, walk right up to the audience and tell his story. After all, that's what I was doing. And that's all Roland Muldoon did with MUGGINS in "Confessions of a Socialist" and John McGrath did through JOE in "Trees in the Wind", just stand there and tell their story. Because the story is always the same, the little guy, the average man finally begins to understand what's being done to him in this unjust world. He finally realizes, like that other JOE in Clifford Odets' "Waiting for Lefty" that the deck is stacked against the working man and that unless he begins to gain a class consciousness, he'll never get out from under. The times change, but the social movements go on and the cultural movements keep trying to lend a hand. But without the social movements to rally around, the soldiers of culture are just so much cannon fodder. Raymond Williams wrote "The

Long Revolution" about this very concept. As touched upon before in this paper, Williams understood better than most that there really aren't a lot of little, distinctive revolutions going on at different times and places all over the world, but there is really only one, the continuing, long revolution that we are all living through. Williams wrote,

> The long revolution is in fact composed of three revolutions, the democratic, industrial and cultural. The democratic revolution commands our political attention. Here the conflicts are most explicit, and the questions of power involved make it very uneven and confused. Yet in any general view it is impossible to mistake the rising determination, almost everywhere, that people should govern themselves and make their own decisions without concession of this right to any particular group, nationality or class. The industrial revolution, backed by immense scientific development, commands our economic attention. From the process of accumulating capital to the status of the worker, the complex interaction between the democratic and industrial revolutions is at the center of our most difficult social thinking. When we speak of a cultural revolution it is with the knowledge that our whole

way of life, from the shape of our communities to the organization and content of education, and from the structure of the family to the status of art and entertainment, is profoundly affected by the progress and interaction of democracy and industry and by the extension of communications. Democracy, industry and extended communications are all means rather than ends.[24]

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24. Raymond Williams, The Long Revolution, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961) pp. ix-xi.

Conclusion

After looking closely in the course of this study at several political theaters in the United States during the 1930s and at the Labor Theater in the 1970s and comparing their experiences with those of several other political theaters in Great Britain, it is my contention that the roles of political theaters and social mcvements are tightly intertwined. Moreover, it is this coming together of these sympathetic ideological forces with different forms of action that generate the power necessary to cause social change. This synergy is of tremendous importance to any protest movement, as it causes an outreach to sympathetic support groups that can make the movement many times more powerful than the sum of its parts. The Bantu saying that "A lake dries up at its edges" is of utmost importance here. A social movement, by definition, is locked in a struggle against a prevailing power that through some historical happenstance has gained control of society. Without the assistance of at least a segment of the cultural apparatus within that society, a protest movement will not be able to claim any legitimacy. However, without the purely political power provided by a social protest such as the Labor Movement in the 1930s or the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, most cultural protests are ineffective.

It is true that in some countries, such as South Africa, Poland, and many Latin American nations literary fame has given enormous influence and political clout to some novelists and playrights, such as Vaclav Havel and Athol Fugard. These writers can then provide respectability to governments in power and legitimacy to revolts and revolutionary movements, and articulate the ideas and contribute the images through which their countrymen relate to power. However, as Richard Nelson has stated in his essay on theater in America,

> The notion of an American artist giving legitimacy to an American political movement or debate is so ridiculous as to be incomprehensible.... Whatever social impact our work may aspire toward is easily deflected by American society, because the source itself is considered questionable, of no immediate importance, separate from the world and society. So what American society gives its artists is a role to play which at its essence is defined as unthreatening.... Influence and power are elements of success reserved for others, such as businessmen, lawyers and politicians.... Just as any dictatorship demands political conformity from its artists, so our society demands its artists to conform to the basic principle of the American Dream.[1]

For Marx, the class struggle was over the accumulation of the products of labor. Alain Touraine amends this common understanding to include two other elements: struggles over symbolic products and struggles over historicity, that is, who and what will represent society to itself. In the late 1960s, Touraine announced the coming of this postindustrial society. He argued that the great social actors of industrial society no longer dominated the struggle over the historicity because a "new field of action" had been created. "If property was the criterion of membership in the former dominant classes, the new dominant class is defined by knowledge".[2] Knowledge has become the condition of economic and social development, and the government controlled it through the power of the media. New battle lines had to be drawn. According to Touraine, "Historical change is no longer defined as progress or modernization but as a network of strategies seeking to make optimal use of limited resources and to control zones of uncertainty."[3]

Moreover, if a cultural movement no longer has access to the disrupting power that comes through the numerical strength of a true social movement, then any of its cultural products, be they songs, plays or images, will have almost no effect on the entrenched powers that control the State. As Stanley Aronowitz has repeatedly stated, the first and foremost event that must be looked at in a social movement is the struggle,

the uprising. Francis Fox Piven always speaks of the disruption that causes the ruling classes to react, to take note. It is after this upsurge and disruption that the ideologies are formed and the messages can be disseminated. Unfortunately, times are rapidly changing and almost all mass culture in the United States and England is now tightly controlled by a communications industry that carefully disseminates the prevailing ideologies throughout the world. Those who have power over the media, by closely scrutinizing whatever information is being sent forth, carefully select the cultural myths that guide the society and the underlying contradictions will be safely confined to the radical cultural fringes and thus excluded from the mainstream of social thought. This applies to theater as well as to the more obvious forms of propaganda such as movies and television. As theater is often considered to be on the cutting edge of progressive thought, an arena where ideas have historically been presented and debated, it is of great importance in a hegemonic culture that theater appears to agree with what is otherwise being produced by cultural industry that is no longer respected for its truth or wisdom. It is here that the almost total demise of the alternative newspapers, the once highly respected and widely read labor papers, the critical literature once written by popular novelists such as Upton Sinclair, the reviews of respected theater critics, such as G.B. Shaw, written with a sharp eye on the social conditions

of the nation, are most powerfully felt. With these avenues for dissent gone or severely limited, there is no longer any way to counter the ideology issued by the commercial media whose purpose is to limit or destroy any contradictory ideas. Thus, newly developing social protest movements have much less access to the hearts and minds of the general public in the 1990s through cultural outlets, than was true in the 1930s.

Richard Nelson goes on to ask, "In today's American society, when many of the basic political conflicts are again being debated, when socio-political lines appear more definitely drawn than at any time since the thirties, why hasn't our theater responded, and at the very least attempted to articulate these debates and conflicts, to say nothing about taking sides or assuming a leadership role? Nelson's answer to this rhetorical question is that in our culture, aesthetics and ethics have become separated. "It is no longer the function of the artist in our society to present the world as it should be, but only to reflect what it is. In other words, what artists believe is insignificant. They should keep it to themselves."[4] However, despite this deception fostered by the cultural elite, that art and politics shouldn't mix, it should be noted that the social movements that are still worthy of the name in our society, especially the Women's and the Gay Movements, are in fact supporting and being supported by both theater and literature to a very high degree. In *theater,

specifically, the two most highly praised shows on Broadway, in 1993-1994, "Angels in America" and "The Kiss of the Spider Woman" both had gay themes and "Philadelphia", a Hollywood movie about AIDS, was highly successful and widely praised. In addition, more women playrights and directors were represented on the stage and screen during this same period than ever before, a tribute, in least in part, to the power of the Feminist Movement. It is of further interest to this study that most of the powerful social movements that were so important in causing social change during the post-war period, such as labor, civil rights and anti-war protests, have now been rendered almost powerless, either due to changing socioeconomic conditions or by the constant attack from the conservative forces of both government and industry. Even the labor movement, highlighted in this study, at one time the ideological and financial backbone of social protest in the United States has been reduced to a point of almost total ineffectiveness as an agency and actor for social change. It follows that the theaters, such as the Labor Theater, that championed their issues and depended on them in turn for their audiences, have all but disappeared. As Stanley Aronowitz stated in "False Promises", that "Unions have made little or no room for intellectuals and scholars (and artists) unless they are willing to function as professional servants of the leadership. In consequence they have...retreated to the uiversities.[5] What is most important here is that it is going

to be almost impossible to get this cultural trust back, as the corporate structure has stepped in and filled the void, replacing the "popular" culture with the "consumer" culture, using the power of advertising to tell people what they should think, what they should buy, what they should see. It is this hegemonic control of the cultural apparatus by the ruling classes that undermined and obfuscated the ideological messages of the contending classes and caused the deterioration of the once forceful social movements earlier in this century. As previously stated, Theador Adorno understood the terrifying consequences of this usurpation of cultural codes and beliefs when he warned that the basic tenet of the cultural industry was now as follows:

> Pleasure means not to think about anything, to forget suffering even when it is shown. Basically it is helplessness. It is flight; not, as asserted, flight from a wretched reality, but from the last remaining thought of resistance. The liberation which amusement promises is freedom from thought and from negation.[6]

Therefore, the underlying thesis of this study, that it is this amalgamation of artistic agencies such as theaters with "special interest groups" such as labor unions, that helps make political change possible, seems to be true. It also seems to be true that although social movements can survive,

however inadequately, without the aid of cultural movements, it is almost impossible for a cultural movement, such as a political theater, to operate for long without the support of a social movement. The final irony, however, is that since social structures such as corporations have an innate tendency to fight against change, it is also quite possible that social movements actually keep these antagonistic institutions healthy by forcing them to adapt their socioeconomic policies to the needs of an ever changing world.

ENDNOTES

1. Richard Nelson, "The Future of Non-Profit Theater in America", Performing Arts Journal, Issue #21, 1983, p. 33.

2. Alain Touraine, Return of the Actor, from forward by Stanley Aronowitz, p. ix.

3. Touraine, p. 6.

4. Nelson, p. 34.

5. Stanley Aronowitz, False Promises, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973) p.

6. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightment, trans. by John Cumming, (New York: The Continuum Publishing Co., 1990) p. 144.

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