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# (Re)constructing Political Theatre: Discursive and Practical Frameworks for Theatre as an Agent for Change

In 2015 the concept of live performance as having efficacy to instigate political change is contested, yet some politically motivated performance has demonstrably facilitated change, and critical frameworks have been developed that account for performances that hold clear political stances. However, even where arguments exist for the enduring relevance of political performance, certain models of practice tend to be represented as more efficacious and sophisticated than others. In this article, inspired by her recent experiences of making political theatre, Rebecca Hillman asks to what extent prevalent discourses may nurture or repress histories and futures of political theatre. She reevaluates the contemporary relevance of agitprop theatre made in British contexts in the 1960s and 1970s by comparing academic analyses of the work with less well-documented critiques by the practitioners and audiences of agitprop. She documents also the fluctuation and transformation rather than the dissipation, of political activism in the final decades of the twentieth century. Rebecca Hillman is a director and playwright, and works as a Lecturer in Drama at the University of Exeter.

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IN 2009, in his book *Theatre and Politics*, Joe Kelleher asserted that ‘theatre’s instrumentalism [and] use as a means of guiding our actions and changing the world, does not work – never did [and] never will’ (Kelleher, 2009, p. 57). Political theatre of the 1960s and 1970s has frequently been discredited as idealistic and outdated, whether the analysis is based on its status in changing socio-historical and philosophical contexts or on its formal qualities. The organized Left are typically perceived as having failed after the end of the Cold War, while postmodernist detachment from the political is said to have undermined rational materialist argument.

Additionally, contemporary British theatre practitioners have often betrayed an anxiety about their work being categorized as ‘political’. In 2015, the concept of live performance as having efficacy to instigate political change remains contested. Yet some politically motivated performance has demonstrably facilitated change, particularly in terms of improving people’s living and working conditions, and today theatre practice

is being generated by companies and activists in the UK and elsewhere whose form and subject matter has been custom-designed to fulfil that old-fashioned mantra, 'educate, agitate, and organize' (Gramsci, 1919). Capitalism is being critiqued and resisted with renewed urgency, and contemporary scholars have readdressed the viability of what many identify as an inherent resignation within postmodern theoretical perspectives.

Despite the fact that political theatre tends to be couched in terms of decline and failure, as a practitioner in these contexts I have found that it is possible to make work that is not only popular but that is explicitly political, and which acts as an effective tool for community organizing. In 2011 as part of my doctoral research I devised and directed a performance in Reading, Berkshire, based on interviews with local residents on impacts of policy-making on their lives, and in which every theatrical decision was made with the intention of instigating grass-roots political activity. In an attempt to provoke local interest in the project and to maximize accessibility, the rehearsals and performances were held in a disused pub in Reading town centre. Many of the rehearsals were open to the public, and I worked with an accumulating group of onlookers and volunteers, some of whom shaped the performance quite radically.

I drew eclectically for the performance style on the work of such diverse companies as Punchdrunk, Actors for Human Rights, and Red Ladder Theatre. Promenade and 'immersive' aspects of the performance, designed to explore political potentials of engaging audiences physically and viscerally, were combined with scenes deploying direct address, satire, spoken-word poetry and verbatim material. Three hundred people saw the performance over four evenings, and ticket sales for the performances had to be capped on the second day to avoid overcrowding the venue. Many audience members stayed on after the performances for the after-show events, and their responses were overwhelmingly enthusiastic. Some also filled in questionnaires, indicating their interest in being involved with future theatrical and/or political projects, and I have heard from a number of people since who have claimed the project's impact on their involvement with Occupy London and various campaign groups and trade union initiatives. People already active in trade unions or grassroots organizations and who saw the performance invited the company to perform at clubs, AGMs, and demonstrations.

In view of these experiences and the contexts outlined at the beginning of the article, I was compelled to research further into the history of political theatre in Britain to compile a robust case for its enduring efficacy. My concern is that the dismissal of the efficacy of political theatre, and the marginalization of agitprop theatre in particular, constrain the potential of new politically motivated practice. I want therefore to suggest that certain intentions and achievements of political dramatists have been misrepresented or overlooked, and that it is an appropriate critical framework that is missing rather than effective practice. However, it is first necessary to interrogate rigorously some of the historical and theoretical grounds on which political theatrical

forms have been undermined. I will then systematically examine histories of agitprop theatre that are infrequently analyzed, but which tell an important story.

### **Political Theatre and the Grand-Narrative History Book**

Failures of the Soviet Union to redistribute to workers control of the means of production, its emblematic collapse with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and China's embrace of neo-liberalism and marketization are factors seen to have fundamentally undermined Marxist and anti-capitalist movements, and to have irrevocably changed attitudes concerning political drama. Lib Taylor observes that 'the confidence of having a robust analytical and political metalanguage waned as the Left was perceived to have failed in its utopian or progressive aims and was regarded as out of date' (Taylor, 2011, p. 225). Furthermore, the harrowing consequences of fascist and so-called communist dictatorships compelled a search for philosophical frameworks and representational forms that would resist homogenization and monopolized power.

In Britain specifically, a decade of Thatcherism in the 1980s contributed to an increasingly hostile environment for political theatre practitioners, as subsidy cuts created greater dependence on box-office revenue and corporate sponsorship (Botham, 2009, p. 6). Meanwhile, the Conservative government's 'self-improvement ethos' undermined collective practices that were already struggling due to the decline of Left-progressive ideologies (Kershaw, 2004, p. 16). Underpinning these changes was the social fragmentation caused by geographical and administrative decentralization of industry, which loosened the correspondences between working life, community, and class position (Filewood and Watt, 2001, p. 244). In 2002 Peter Lichtenfels and Lynette Hunter declared that common ground and ideological purpose had 'long been replaced by a fractured and isolated context'. They charged the centrist politics of New Labour, as well as a new global consciousness with stifling ideological debate and leaving England on the cusp of the twenty-first century 'at a loss' (Lichtenfels and Hunter, 2002, p. 40-1). Although Amelia Howe Kritzer has maintained that 'political theatre of the 1970s continues to exert power as a model of political drama', she concludes that by 2008 'the energy and optimism that fueled it [had] dissipated' (Howe Kritzer, 2008, p. 7). For her, 'a pragmatic humanism' had replaced idealism, and the 'utopian yearnings', which she associates with political theatre of that period (p. 219, 63).

Postmodernism, which found resistance in relativist logic and deconstructive aesthetics, further isolated the kind of robust materialist analysis associated with 1970s political theatre. Its diverse theories, united in their distrust of universal explanations and certainties of knowledge, provided a framework that defied hegemony and homogeneity at a time when those concepts were increasingly unpopular (Heddon and Milling, 2006, p. 191). In his influential book *Postdramatic Theatre*, translated into English in 2006, Hans-Thies Lehmann suggested that 'political conflicts increasingly elude intuitive

perception and cognition and consequently scenic representation' (Lehmann, 2006, p. 175). He stipulated therefore, that the place of political statement or debate is outside theatre's represented politics, and in the domain of 'real politics' (p. 177–86). In 2009 Elizabeth Sakellaridou urged the academy to consider a 360-degree revolution in their approach to political theatre, arguing that it should 'revise the definitions and prescriptions of politically oriented theatre . . . and modify . . . expectations, according to the new cultural ethics of postmodernity regarding the production and reception of the arts' (Sakellaridou, 1999, p. 46).

Paola Botham observed that for Sakellaridou, the label 'political theatre' would only be suitable for 'dramatic pieces *not* obviously or deliberately "political"' (Botham, 2009, p. 7, my emphasis). Although Botham considered in the 2000s that new political plays were in fact multiplying, recourse to the politics of representation itself and a resistance to political content caused her to claim that postmodernist discourses 'threatened to confine the notion of political theatre to the grand-narrative history book' (p. 6–8). In this context, playwright Naomi Wallace observed that 'there is the fairly mainstream notion that ideas and political theory are limiting for writers, if not downright hostile to talent and the "real", and that truth springs from the individual, unencumbered by the blinkers of politicking' (Wallace, 2003).

### **The Limits of Postmodernism**

However, Botham and others have formulated arguments that challenge the enduring relevance of postmodernist theoretical perspectives, suggesting that its deconstructive routines and inherent resignation have 'revealed their limits' (Botham, 2008, p. 308) and have been 'losing their radical potential to have any real impact on progressive thinking or action in the dawn of a new century' (Tomlin, 2008, p. 356). Meanwhile, political activism has fluctuated and transformed rather than having simply dissipated since 1989.

The People's Global Action Network was set up by the Zapatista Army in Mexico in 1994, and led to organized anti-capitalist protests on a global scale. Although anthologized records of coordinated action during the 1980s and 1990s are conspicuous by their absence, sources that do exist show that in the 1990s there was an explosion in Britain of a consciously performative politics, starting with the Poll Tax riots in the 1990s (see for example McKay, 1996; Notes from Nowhere, 2000; and SCHnews, from 2004). For George McKay these actions kick-started 'an extraordinary surge of direct action' and foreshadowed protests concerned with reconfiguring city space, and resisting changes to greenbelt land.

Indeed, McKay offers an interesting alternate perspective to those that purport that political disillusionment and stasis characterized the 1990s: 'The sheer popularity and

widespread nature of street protest and direct action emanating from single-issue campaigns is in part in response to a lack of confidence in – or even a rejection of – parliamentary democracy, a result of approaching two decades of what's effectively been one-party rule in Britain' (McKay, 1996, p. 128). Moreover, organized industrial movements that had shown political might in the 1970s did not come to a grinding halt or separate themselves from these vibrant movements. Referencing how in the 1990s the Liverpool dockers went out to support the Reclaim the Streets protesters, Dave Rogers, founding member of Banner Theatre, explains how at that time 'horny handed sons of toil [were] going out to support black asylum seekers in detention centres in Oxford, or helping out hippie types who [were] out blocking off roads and motorways' (Filewood and Watt, 2001, p. 112).

Since the financial crisis of 2007, there has been a resurgence of political activism that has been accompanied by a recuperation and exposure of radical political positions and frameworks, including those of Marxism and communism specifically. Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek have claimed that 'the twenty-first century Left can finally leave behind the introspection, contrition and penance that followed the fall of the Soviet Union' (Douzinas and Žižek, 2010, p. viii). Coalition government policy and in particular the 2010 'austerity programme' in the UK has sparked or rekindled a political consciousness that has manifest in, among other things, mass student protests and numerous occupations of universities, the Occupy movement, and huge protests galvanized across the country by trade unions.

2011 saw the number of days lost by strike action in Britain at their highest in more than two decades, and by November that year the largest national coordinated industrial action since 1926 had taken place, as workers across public sector industries joined forces to protest against 'working longer and getting less'. Meanwhile, for Siân Adiseshiah, class has re-emerged as an important way of engaging with situations in neo-liberalism, and Owen Jones and others have reinvigorated mainstream debate on the social implications of an enduring class system in Britain (Adiseshiah, 2013; Jones, 2011). In 2015 democratic socialist Jeremy Corbyn has won an overwhelming victory to lead the Labour Party with an agenda that is staunchly anti-austerity and pro-union.

But what implications do these factors have for the reputation and practice of political theatre? Does ongoing political activism, and the socio-economic and political circumstances of the past century still resonating today mean that there is still a place for a theatre that seeks to instigate change? And if so, what forms of theatre would be most effective at doing so? Sadly, where a case for the importance of theatre that holds definitive political positions has been made, certain models of practice, notably agitprop theatre, have been regarded as inappropriate.

### **The Problems with Agitprop**

In 2008, Liz Tomlin argued that a much needed 'progressive thinking or action' struggles to emerge between the 'rock of pre-modernist fundamentalism and the hard

place of postmodernist neo-liberalism', and asks what kind of fresh and accountable thinking the new era and contemporary and future theatre practice demands (Tomlin, 2008, p. 356). Using Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere, Botham has provided such fresh thought, developing a theoretical framework for political theatre which allows practitioners simultaneously to promote un-ambiguous political positions, *as well as* to represent multiple voices or perspectives (Botham, 2008, p. 309).

Yet Botham's framework does not account for all forms of political theatre, claiming 'old agitprop' to be 'suspect' and 'unrealistic' (p. 308). She stipulates that the critical space she has established for contemporary political theatre is for theatre neither subject to 'the defeatist limitations of postmodernist positions', *or* 'unrealistic expectations of the traditional Left' (p. 2). 'Old agitprop', also known as 'agit-realist', 'presentational', 'proletarian', 'Marxist', 'socialist', 'alternative', 'community', or 'popular' theatre, has often been perceived in recent discourse as naive, unrealistic, simplistic or hectoring; falling short of artistic merit and therefore political potential (for example Howe Kritzer, 2008, p. 63; Pearson, 2001, p. 201).

Intriguingly, although the reduced status of political theatre is frequently attributed to changing historical contexts, British agitprop in the 1960s and 1970s received a bad press from very early on, and from some of its own proponents. Political playwright David Edgar spoke about his decision to move away from agitprop forms because of their formal limitations. By 1979 he was 'increasingly thinking that the politics you could get across [with agitprop] were very crude' in a world that was getting more complicated (Edgar, 1979a, p. 13). What he regarded as the crucial subjects of the mid-seventies ('women, race, and fascism') needed, according to him, a form of expression 'in which the subtle combination of the personal and the political, the emotional and the intellectual' could take place (Itzin, 1980, p. 146). Agitprop would not do because as far as he was concerned it effectively attempted to manage without psychologically conceived characters (Bull, 1984, p. 255). Edgar wanted to develop a 'theatre of public life', which would be as 'complex, rich, and as ambiguous as the bourgeois theatre had traditionally been', worrying that a simplification of ideas or appealing to people on a 'tribal basis' could be futile and dangerous, and would not 'actually lead to the building of socialism' (Itzin, 1980, p. 145).

Another political playwright, David Hare, also criticized agitprop for lacking subtlety, and considered it liable to insult an audience's intelligence. His vociferous words regarding 'the Marxist playwright' at a lecture at King's College, Cambridge, in 1978, are cited in various analyses of political theatre. He called theatre deployed by 'the slaves of Marxist fashion', 'demeaning', 'insulting' and 'rubbish', for its caricature; 'repetitious sloganeering'; its insistence on 'gimcrack mottoes', and its tendency towards 'the godlike feeling that . . . questions have been answered before the play has begun'.

He went on to explain that political plays should operate as 'the interaction of what you

are saying and what the audience is thinking', and as a 'transitional [aid] to understanding', rather than 'the ultimate solution to men's problems' (Hare, 1978, p. 63). Hare's disapproval is also therefore based on an understanding of the political potential of theatre residing in a dialogic process between audience and performance, rather than the kind of passive spectatorship he believes to be imposed by didactic art.

Yet definitions of agitprop theatre by Hare and others are actually at odds with descriptions of many agitprop performances themselves. Time and again, historical accounts of the period reveal agitprop theatre makers navigating didacticism carefully, as well as producing work that can be defined precisely by the dialogic and active relationship established with audiences.

### **Agitprop as a Didactic or Dialogic Form?**

*The godlike feeling that questions have been answered before the play has begun* (David Hare, 1978).

Hare was not alone in the critical stance he took towards what he perceived to be didactic theatre. In fact, practitioners who remained making agitational work in the community, rather than venturing into the mainstream interrogated their own objectives and, by all accounts, seem to share Hare's concerns. Ed Berman of Inter-Action, an experimental activist troupe formed in 1968, saw theatre 'that stands up and spews doctrine' as being 'of minimal use to most people' (Itzin, 1980, p. 59). Director of The Combination, a Marxist/socialist collective formed in Brighton in 1967, told Itzin in 1978, 'I still distrust so much of the pamphleteering and theorizing of the left. I think they are terribly patronizing and puritan and don't know the working class and don't know where it's at' (p. 20). Agitprop group North West Spanner explained their avoidance of didacticism as off-putting to the kind of audiences they played to, who represented 'all layers of political consciousness from conservatism to whatever, but rarely ultra-leftism'. Didacticism, they were sure, would 'go down like a lead balloon' (p. 304).

Meanwhile, agitprop performances often involved music, songs, sketches, direct address, and audience participation. Practitioners of agitprop theatre at this time appear not only to have been aware of the weaknesses or problematic qualities associated with didactic art, but also to have actively sought to avoid them, with work that can be defined precisely by the active and dialogic relationship it established with audiences.

For example, the work of Banner Theatre, a community and agitprop theatre group formed in 1974 and still producing work today, was traditionally staged in 'popular' venues (often pubs), and produced 'the face-to-face intercommunicative nature of

musical performance'. 'The focus of attention was not an entity, "the song",' company member Niell MacKinnon explained, 'but a process to "get people singing"' (MacKinnon, 1994, p. 81, 30). Founding member Roma Bowdler's account in the National Union of Miners' journal about Banner's *The Saltley Gate Show* (1975), reveals the way in which the company conceived of and approached audiences as not only an intrinsic part of the process in the sense that the show was devised to address their concerns, but that it also addressed them as collaborators:

When we go into a miners' welfare, of course we're putting on a show with music and lights and all that. But what we're also doing is showing people to themselves, and saying: look, this is your experience, these are your words, and they're beautiful and dramatic. What we do, in fact, is something you could do yourselves, much better than we can. (Bowdler, 1975, p. 5)

For Filewood and Watt, it was 'Banner's commitment to *listening*' that led to an explicitly 'dialogic relationship with its audiences', which in turn left the company 'strategically placed to carry its political project beyond the 1990s' (Filewood and Watt, 2001, p. 83, original emphasis).

Meanwhile, Howard Brenton, who wrote for The Combination for some time, called their work, which was often at the forefront of local anti-racist, anti-fascist activities, a 'very aggressive theatrical experiment', but explained that their 'communicative [and] socially and politically active' approach was also manifestly rooted in creating a dialogue with their audiences (Itzin, 1980, p. 325). In order to reach diverse audiences, including welfare rights groups, counselling groups, single-parent families, and tenants' associations, the group felt the need to 'reinterpret what art was about'.

Jennie Harris and Noel Grieg explain: 'At first local people didn't understand what we were doing because they had had no first-hand experience of live performance or accessible art. If we started talking about theatre they just clammed up.' So their tactic for making their work accessible was to integrate artistic activity at the heart of the organization:

We needed to make people confident that it was relevant, accessible, and part of the mainstream of life. We were trying to stimulate. We started pottery workshops, video and film projects, mural painting . . . everything that is now called community arts (Itzin, 1980, p. 327).

Also exemplary is the work of Red Ladder, who formed in 1968 and, like Banner, still make work today. In the 1960s and 1970s Red Ladder saw themselves 'as doing political propaganda in a particular form', reading Lenin, Marx, and other political theorists every week, whose work they would then attempt to translate into an accessible theatrical form, as well as into their working methods (Itzin, 1980, p. 43). In addition to encouraging what they referred to as 'active' audience engagement throughout their



performances, they implemented opportunities for audience/ performer dialogue in the form of post-show discussions (Seyd, 1975, p. 37).

Political theatre makers at this time frequently conveyed their preoccupation with maximizing the applicability and accessibility of their work for their target audiences, which directly inflected the nature and trajectory of the work and in some cases led to the creation of bespoke performances for community-led initiatives. For example, Penny Morris, founder member of North West Spanner, explained how the tenants' association in Salford had asked them to put on a performance in 1972 in response to the Conservative Finance Housing Bill, to help attract people to the meetings and to convince them not to pay the rent increases. They came up with *The Rents Play* (1972), and were subsequently invited by a nurse who saw the show to make a play specifically for the nurses' strike in 1973 (Itzin, 1980, p. 297–8). Morris describes how:

The nurses said they'd been going round with a collection slip but only ever speaking to the stewards, and they thought they'd get more money and support if we did our play and went into the canteens and had a whip round after, so we went in and said you've got to support the nurses: we used a simple format – the old one of 'sinking the HMS NHS' – for which we used an old zinc bath tub. We had an amazing response (p. 299).

The 'amazing response' to *Nurses' Play* (1973) led to the Manchester Nurses' Action Group encouraging North West Spanner to move on to other political audiences. Morris explains: 'The nurses themselves said it was ridiculous just going around the hospitals – what about the dockers, the miners, the big battalions?' According to Itzin, *Nurses' Play* led the company to the shop floor, where they were to remain, and is one example of how political theatre was shaped by people organizing in their workplaces and communities (p. 298–9).

Accounts of 1970s British political theatre consistently reveal cases of groups making innovative theatrical gestures, relying on the input of the communities for whom they made the work, and staging work in logistically difficult places such as shop floors, tenants' association meetings, building sites, or at factory gates in an attempt to instigate active audience engagement. The examples I have given here are not by any means exhaustive, but each demonstrates what Itzin described as the ideology of agitprop: that 'anyone could and should learn to do it', and that theatre should provide a forum for exploring issues audiences wanted to see dealt with (p. 39-41).

Also foreshadowed are approaches of contemporary politically and non-politically motivated practice, including my own, that exploit the potential of the locale and setting of the performance for the engagement of audiences. Hare's insinuation that 'Marxist' political theatre of the period was not characterized by the interaction of what the playwright is saying and what the audience is thinking is also challenged, and a picture emerges in which an audience's investment and collaboration is positively

encouraged, rather than one in which a top-down structure is imposed. Because agitprop theatre has traditionally provided an analytic perspective on the causes of oppression, the related-ness of different people's oppression, and strategies for ending those oppressions, it is in a sense unsurprising that its practitioners would be sensitive to the emancipatory *and* oppressive potential in forms of representation and propaganda.

As we have seen, however, it is not only agitprop's supposed didacticism that has come under fire, but its perceived idealism, relating to a Marxist view of inevitable revolution that was encouraged in the 1970s by periods of intense rank-and-file organization, class-consciousness, and militancy. But although plenty of sources confirm that a feeling of buoyancy and optimism about changing the world helped motivate political theatre makers at this time, these perspectives alone are not representative of the complex, critical, and diverse thinking of the practitioners. Indeed, utopianism, idealism, and Marxism were often concepts that they were keen to interrogate but were often wary of, or inclined to avoid.

### **Pipedreams or 'Real Concrete Issues'?**

While agitprop practitioners were frequently united over shared *desires* for the realization of a socialist society, their perspectives and their work were frequently inflected with skepticism about the possibility of such change and theatre's role in relation to it. They investigated the complexities and problematic nature of their own desires as well as the (im)possibilities of their implementation. Also, the plays they produced often confronted social and political problems uncompromisingly.

Roland Muldoon, founding member of agitprop group CAST, explained how exciting, relevant theatre dealt with 'real concrete issues', and that the plays they produced could be described as *dystopian* more easily than utopian (Muldoon, 1977, p. 40-1). Their play *Cuts* (1977), for example, showed that by 1984 the working classes would have failed to resist cutbacks to services which would therefore be eradicated, leaving 'mass unemployment and rampant racialism'. Muldoon described the CAST play *Goodbye Union Jack* (1977), as 'a calendar of political malaise', charting the rise of the National Front in the vacuum of Labour politics, and their 1978 play *Overdose* as 'an investigation into failed (left-wing) ideology'. 'We were talking about the nightmare world', he explained (p. 18-19). For Muldoon, being a middle-aged group at that point meant CAST were 'in a position to talk about the last twenty years of alienation and what it means for the future' (p. 20).

Meanwhile, Banner Theatre also analyzed the difficulties of being politically active, depicting the world of political struggle as fickle and challenging. According to Rogers, *Steel* (1980), a 'play about failure', was relevant in lots of communities, where the les-

sons to be learned were not encouraging: 'Don't expect that profitability will save an individual enterprise, don't expect the backing of your union, and don't expect to win' (Filewood and Watt, 2001, p. 109). Although thoughts of a 'utopian' or more equal society drove some of these performances, it did not constitute the work. The 'utopian yearnings' Howe Kritzer ascribes to political theatre of the 1970s are one element of a movement that was often acutely pessimistic, disillusioned, and whose work was defined by the critique of political systems.

As well as questioning the notion that agitprop theatre of that era was naively optimistic, it is also possible to challenge the idea that it was crude or simplistic, by foregrounding its historically complex and hybrid lineage, and by reconsidering its formal qualities. On close inspection, even those who have ultimately rejected its approaches have actually described its form as rich, sophisticated, and revelatory, and it is possible to argue that essential elements of the form are inherently complex, albeit in a different way to the dominant forms of psychological drama.

### **Agitprop Forms: Crude or Complex?**

Scholars have directly challenged the notion that political theatre of the 1960s and 1970s was simplistic by foregrounding its complicated and heterogeneous history. For example, Raphael Samuel observes the connection between the workerist turn in socialist politics in the 1920s and an openness to experimentalism, whereby communists and socialists became involved with modernist movements (Samuel, 1985, p. xx). John Bull describes a symbiosis between avant-garde and agitprop groups in the 1970s, the former becoming 'increasingly infused with a didactic seriousness as the seventies advanced' and the latter 'readily borrowing techniques from fringe', so that by the end of the period under review the two traditions were once again enmeshed (Bull, 1984, p. 25-7).

Maria DiCenzo explains how many 1970s groups attempted to combine the most effective aspects of the various forms available to them, concluding that agitprop and naturalism 'were used in a more representative way, suggesting ideological tendencies, even more than formal ones' (DiCenzo, 1996, p. 50). Writing about the work of the 1970s socialist roadshow company, Belt and Braces, Catherine Itzin challenged the notion that theatre that is 'blatantly didactic' and 'arrogantly entertaining' cannot also produce complex theories 'without reservation' and 'through a synthesis of styles' (Itzin, 1980, p. 199-202).

It strikes me that it is possible to comprehend agitprop as inherently complex, not only for its stylistic hybridity, but also in terms of its ability to transform political and economic structures and ideas into concrete visual images. Agitprop theatre often pursues through characterization or imagery the representation of those systems in an

attempt to develop in audiences an understanding of how their different, lived experiences relate to and are affected by social, political, and economic forces; forces which, as Richard Seyd of Red Ladder points out, 'are usually invisible, hidden from our understanding' (Seyd, 1975, p. 39).

Edgar articulated a similar perspective when he wrote what he called 'pure unadulterated agitprop' for The General Will. He distinguished the group by 'the sophistication with which it treated economic history', arguing that it created 'a rich and total and three-dimensional political vision that ultimately can change people's minds'. He also credited the group with presenting 'a political analysis and the real problems of living people . . . in an entertaining way', and explained that the group not only revealed historical changes, but also uncovered 'what the real history had been' (Itzin, 1980, p. 140–9). Rather than agitprop equating to an *absence* of analysis or complexity, then, perhaps it is more accurate to say that in this theatrical form one sort of analysis or complexity tends to replace another. This is in so far as analyses of character psychology are replaced by analyses of political and economic systems, and the cause and effect of material reality is focused on, through an examination of the characteristics of systems of business and governance rather than the characteristics of people who run them.

Furthermore, making theatre to engage diverse audiences politically led to bold experimentation in terms of theatrical and dramatic form, as well as to methodologies relating to how and where the work was created and disseminated. Agitprop theatre makers have traditionally taken on the critically and logistically demanding task of working with communities to codify and decode representations of reality and to identify possible points of change. Filewood and Watt point out that theatre practitioners operating in the workplace and community are under particular strain to invent sensitively forms for diverse groups in specific/changing circumstances. They describe how, in most cases, work of this kind is formulated by 'loose, temporary, and contingent alliances of like-minded arts workers and political activists', engaging in 'a constant process of negotiation and adaptation to changing contexts' (Filewood and Watt, 2001, p. 3). For Swati Pal, on a fundamental level, 'agitprop theatre is conjunctural and it intervenes in a historical context'. She points out that since "'historical context" or in other words, "politics", is by nature dynamic, agit-prop theatre too, then, cannot be enslaved to a particular political stance/view/message' (Pal, 2005, p. 3).

All this is not to overlook the indigenous complexities of particular forms or sub-genres, and although I have argued that agitprop theatre is intrinsically complex, rather than 'simplistic', simplicity (which is surely a complex thing to achieve in performance) was considered an essential quality for much political theatre (see, for example, Itzin (1980), on North West Spanner, p. 297, or Belt and Braces, p. 200). However, the departure of Edgar and others from agitprop towards 'more complex theatrical forms' can also be explained by an understanding of the relationship of those forms with changing

historical contexts (Edgar, 1979b, p. 28). Such decisions need to be explored in more depth.

### **Historical Continuities since the 1970s**

*If only you knew that Tory MPs liaise with crooked architects, and bent offshore bankers* (Hare/Brenton, *Brassneck*, 1973).

At the beginning of this article I observed that techniques associated with agitprop theatre have been deemed unviable in recent and current socio-political contexts, which are, undeniably, radically different from those of the of the 1960s and 1970s. I now want to challenge the notion that this difference is absolute, and suggest that to interpret history as a series of finished stages, which are consistently new and strange, unhelpfully works to conceal continuities across time, as well as striking similarities of past and present landscapes. This is important because my observations and personal experience have led me to conclude that practice developed nearly half a century ago is not redundant today, but in fact holds value for contemporary practitioners who make work that is socially and politically engaged.

Like others, Edgar saw agitprop as having agency within a much more specific time frame than the traditional 1968–1980s catch-all. Rather, he saw it as a response to working-class militancy between 1970 and 1974, which increased during the Heath government and after the Industrial Relations Act of 1971. He explains how the surprise and joy specific to that period formed ‘the soil in which agitprop grew’. However, in 1978 Edgar did not see agitprop as categorically outmoded, conceding: ‘There may again be a period when agitprop will have more relevance than I believe it does now.’ In his opinion a resurgence was likely, because he felt that militancy, and the crisis of capitalism, had not only been put back on the agenda but would remain there (Itzin, 1980, p. 146).

As well as depicting stark differences between then and now, anecdotes from practitioners working in the 1970s also vivify political and economic dynamics noteworthy for their contemporary resonance. For example, Itzin’s description of the Conservative government altering the tax system to ‘favour the wealthy rather than the worker, whilst [dismantling] the NHS’ echo critical responses to ‘austerity measures’ that the Cameron ministry is wheeling out today (Itzin, 1980, p. 337). Meanwhile, Broadside Mobile Workers’ Theatre created their performance *Now You See It, Now You Don’t* (1976) to ‘counter the “tighten your belts [and] get the country back on its feet” line’, and the viewpoint that was being put across by the media ‘that high wages cause inflation, [and] that investment can be stimulated by the transference of funds from the public to the private sector’.

What Broadside aimed instead to encourage through their performance was a re-allocation of 'the blame for the crisis to those responsible for control of the country's wealth' (Itzin, 1980, p. 239). And Muldoon explains that audiences and commissioners dealt with at that time were not necessarily less skeptical than they are today, explaining, 'You could still be 'so red no one would touch [you]' (Itzin, 1980, p. 16–17).

There were also more general concerns of practitioners at that time relating to political and economic systems which remain on the agenda today. It is worth remembering, for example, that while scholarship of the 1990s often understood a collapse of political certainties in Britain as a result of the disorientating political centrism that came with New Labour's restructuring of the traditional Left, political theatre practitioners of the 1970s were often already disillusioned with the Labour Party that came to power in 1964. As Bull explains, 'The failure of the Wilson government to pay even lip-service to radical reform, let alone socialist change, slowly brought about a redefinition of political struggle on the left' (Bull, 1984, p. 6). Often political theatre makers shared a lack of faith in party politics more generally, as we have seen in the dystopian elements of some agitprop work.

Meanwhile, founding member Gavin Richards conveys how Belt and Braces strove to explicate complex economic and historical theories including economic relations of globalization – relations that would, of course, gain great significance over the next twenty years, and which continue to be tackled by contemporary playwrights. He claimed that the company's fundamental aim was to demonstrate how 'the so-called and apparently political problems in the world were at root economic problems', and that 'governments were mere pawns in the multi-nationals' global game of Monopoly' (p. 204–5).

Broadside Mobile Workers' Theatre were also concerned with the representation of transnational economic relations in performance. In 1976 they produced *We Have the Power of the Winds* in co-operation with the Portuguese Workers Co-ordinating Committee, to identify a 'need for workers in Britain and abroad to combine against multi-national companies [and their] strategy of maximizing profits by closing factories and shifting production around the world when workers in any particular country became too militant or too expensive' (p. 240). Broadside wanted to draw a parallel between the poor working conditions in Portugal and Britain, and identification among their audiences was strong. Audience members told Broadside afterwards that what they described going on under the fascist government in Portugal was taking place in Liverpool and Kirkby; and accounts of agitprop theatre that include audience feedback document many instances of audience identification. Within these responses also lie clues to the efficacy of agitprop for provoking change, despite the disillusionment of some of its advocates.

## Making Micro-Change with Agitprop

*I've been nothing but a cabbage. You've shown it to me* (Audience member, Red Ladder's *The Big Con*, 1970).

For Catherine Itzin, the political theatre movement of the seventies, which took theatre to the people on an unprecedented scale, was a response to the 'dream of popular socialist theatre' that had been around in Britain since the war (Itzin, 1980, p. 338–9). She lists for example performances by Red Ladder, 7:84, and North West Spanner, which were estimated to have reached audiences of 10,000, 6,000, and 3,000 each through touring to large centres or performing at mass demonstrations (p. 46–50, 297, 304).

As well as large audiences, agitprop theatre also reached a diverse demographic. Chris Rawlence from Red Ladder explained that, 'By making theatre about questions at the centre of the lives of working people – often in collaboration with them – and by performing this theatre in venues situated near the workplace or home, the community theatre companies have shown, through their popularity, that it is possible to develop a much broader audience' (Rawlence, 1979, p. 69).

Meanwhile, positive responses to theatre that was made for specific audiences and as part of ongoing campaigns are readily available in accounts of the work. Delegates at the Amalgamated Union for Engineering Workers annual conference unanimously concluded that Red Ladder's *Technology Play* (1972–3) 'teaches more than a dozen lectures', while an audience member commenting on the stimulating effect of seeing Red Ladder's *The Big Con* (1970), said, 'You've shown me my life. I've been nothing but a cabbage – you've shown it to me' (Itzin, 1980, p. 45–7). A woman at Pilkington's Factory claimed Red Ladder had revealed for her 'the reality behind our "Democracy", the reality of the employing classes' [and] constant exploitation of us, the working people'. For this woman, Red Ladder had put things so clearly that she stated it was 'vital that all workers see their plays' (p. 48).

There were other successes. North West Spanner claimed the performance of *The Rents Play* (1972) was also 'the first time you could feel the estate really coming together', while, according to Itzin, The Combination's role in the 'All Together Now' festival helped significantly to bring about the National Front's electoral defeat in Lewisham. Harris also recalls that *The NAB Show* (1971), suddenly had claimants unions, community workers, and 'political people' from up and down the country asking them to do the show (p. 321–5).

Reactions *against* political theatre groups also suggest that the work they were doing was effective. The Combination suffered arson attempts at the Albany Empire, and received threatening letters from Column 88,<sup>1</sup> and in 1976 cast members of Roger Howard's play about Chairman Mao and staff at the Institute of Contemporary Arts,

where it was staged, received death threats, when the play coincided with Mao's death. For Itzin this indicated that political theatre was being taken as seriously as it was at the time in South Africa or Chile, where it was censored and silenced (p. 260-1). Similarly, for DiCenzo, North West Spanner's funding being cut by the North West Arts Association because of their Marxist politics was one of the best indicators of the group's effectiveness in generating support for specific issues and their popularity with local working-class audiences (DiCenzo, 1996, p. 24).

Yet despite its achievements, political performance that penetrated the 'bourgeois theatre' or which raised the consciousness of individuals in pubs, clubs, and workplaces is presented as a minor conciliation in relation to the fundamental failure of theatre to 'reach or convert or mobilize the *mass* of the population' (Itzin, 1980, p. 338, my emphasis). The conclusions in the postscript to Itzin's *Stages of the Revolution* betray a strong sense of disillusionment. At the end of the decade, Itzin asks, 'what was changed?' and she concludes, 'Certainly not the world'. She then asserts that 'assessed on its own terms – on its desire to achieve a socialist society the political theatre movement could only have been judged a failure' (p. 337).

Even John McGrath stated in 1996, in relation to political and agitprop theatre groups, that 'everybody knows of course, that we lost nearly all our struggles' (DiCenzo, 1996, p. xii). In the hopes of offering 'a balanced perspective', Itzin settled for Edgar's somewhat compromised position to close her book – that 'the realization that socialist playwrights cannot themselves change the world might yet help them to discover ways of contributing, and in no small measure, to the work of those who can' (Itzin, 1980, p. 339). But what happens if political theatre is relieved of the expectation of provoking dissent independently or on a *mass* scale? Or, if conclusions as to the efficacy of political theatre focus on the existence and no less concrete *achievements* of ambitious projects that instigated small-scale and specific instances of change?

Filewood and Watt observe that political theatre in the 1970s that was concerned with the labour movement 'was predominantly impelled by a pragmatic concern with immediate ends (wages and conditions in particular industries) rather than a commitment to broad social change' (Filewood and Watt, 2001, p. 40). Many theatre-makers were committed to representing and addressing details of everyday realities for certain communities, and working towards small-scale change in those communities. They were sensitive to the fact that the communities they played to might be conservative, and to the importance of showing economics and politics in terms of the 'pragmatic experiences of those audiences' (David Mayer in Heesan, 1977).

Despite a reputation to the contrary, there are plenty of accounts of political theatre at that time that depict it as 'pragmatic' – made above all to be at the service of working people. In examining examples of agitprop theatre's pragmatism, it is not that idealism is absent, or that it was crushed by overwhelmingly critical attitudes of those who produced it. Rather, it constitutes work that can be simultaneously idealistic and



pragmatic – invested in socialist objectives yet rooted to the experiences of those involved with the production and/or consumption of that work.

Some practitioners reflect that their work was driven by a desire to make changes to the world around them. North West Spanner, for example, describe how ‘the main thing was that we held out the belief that the play could change audiences’ lives’ (Itzin, 1980, p. 302). Yet this desire to ‘change the world’ was propelled by fears and dissatisfaction rooted in their everyday realities: ‘We’re frightened because we want a different world for our lives and our kids. Now is not what we always want it to be.’ And ‘When you drive through places like Skelmersdale, when you know that kids of sixteen will never get a job and are likely to turn to the National Front, then you know what you’ve got to tap into.’

In the case of North West Spanner and other companies, ‘idealism’ could also be interpreted as simply an understanding of the instrumental value of theatre accompanied by a sense of duty to harness it as a tool for a particular kind of political change. For North West Spanner member Maureen Ramsey, ‘If you believe in a fight for social-ism, then, of course, political theatre is relevant. And it is your job to make it so’ (304–5). Ideas about how agitprop might serve this end often revolved around its ability to focus on and raise awareness of specific issues and their details, and to facilitate change on a micro scale.

I am particularly thinking here of pieces like the Agitprop Street Players’ fifteen-minute performances in 1968 for the tenants’ campaigns. The group collected fourteen bookings after their first show and were soon playing at up to three meetings a night. Kathleen McCreery (Agitprop; Broadside Mobile Theatre Workers) explained that the shows had to be ‘topical and flexible since the situation of the tenants was changing constantly’ (p. 41). The content consisted of predicting what the Housing Minister might do next, warning the tenants not to fall for it, so it was strictly ‘agitational’ leading to unification and morale boosting but also tactical debate.

It is curious that agitational, socially and politically-engaged work has been associated with words such as ‘naive’, ‘idealistic’, or ‘utopian’ when in fact the perspectives of the practitioners who made that work were often skeptical as to the possibilities of mass consciousness-raising by any means, and while the work itself was frequently constructed with specific and modest – if difficult – objectives, and often in coordination with other movements for change.

Practitioners and scholars acknowledged this in different ways. Political playwright Barry Keeffe considered ‘small battles’ such as the rent strikes, to be ‘more important than the big battles’, such as Vietnam; the inference being that the small battles were something theatre audiences might have more chance of winning (Itzin, 1980, p. 243). Meanwhile Harris remarked: ‘I suddenly realized it’s a huge arrogance to think that you can change the last hundred years of history – of exploitation and alienation – in

two or three or four years. It's an amazingly slow process – through the revolution or to the revolution or to the ten years before the revolution or whatever' (Itzin, 1980, p. 328). Bull claimed in 1984 that 'there was, in reality, never the remotest possibility that anything like a genuinely revolutionary movement would be created on a mass scale' (Bull, 1984, p. 11). In fact, the notion that political theatre can operate as an independent revolutionary force might itself be seen as naive or idealistic, rather than the theatre it addresses.

### **Playwrights Moving into the 'Mainstream'**

*I like the agit; the prop I'm very bad at* (Howard Brenton, 1975).

Despite the significant impacts of agitprop theatre, it has failed to attract critical regard, and accounts of the work tend to appear in survey studies where there is no room for fully investigating its complexities. One likely reason for this is the evanescent nature of the work, in that it was often produced quickly to address issues as they emerged, and was often devised and unscripted. John McGrath explained that 7:84 never kept records, and stated that in alternative theatre the publishing or archiving of plays was rare as companies moved quickly from one work to the next (DiCenzo, 1996, p. xii). DiCenzo corroborates, pointing out that the strength of popular political theatre lies in the bonds forged between performers and audiences, whether this is through direct address, music, song or comedy, for example. Yet she also maintains that this, and the practical difficulties of trying to document such work, cannot alone account for the lack of attention it has received, causing her to consider ideological biases of traditional forms of theatrical and dramatic criticism (p. 4–5).

DiCenzo notes a tendency in the canon to associate the move away from agitprop with a move towards maturity on the part of theatre workers and audiences (p. 47). Despite Edgar's thoughts on the likely resurgence of agitprop forms, his perception of a move away from agitprop towards 'sophistication' was indicated by his analysis of a post-1975 'loss of innocence' (Edgar, 1988, p. 230). Meanwhile, for Bull, the 'optimistic postures of much agitprop theatre', that had begun to look 'foolish' under worsening conditions and industrial uncertainty, were replaced throughout the 1970s by the work of practitioners who were now 'older and wiser', with increased 'sensitive awareness' (Bull, 1984, p. 26–7, 116).

For Bull, 'the new drama was coming of age', and agitprop had 'little to offer' after failures of the organization of working-class opposition in the face of significant adversity (p. 117, 200). But, despite this, in Bull's view all was not lost. British political theatre practitioners, including the four political playwrights he considered the 'most important' of their generation – David Hare, David Edgar, Howard Brenton and Trevor Griffiths – having cut their teeth on agitprop, now moved on to bigger, better things (p.

4). These were defined in terms of venue as well as theatrical form. Discussing Edgar's *Maydays* (1983) Bull concludes: 'That this play, concerned exclusively with the meticulous examination of the state of socialism, should find a home in the new Barbican Theatre in London – and that it should furthermore do so only to the surprise of the right-wing critical mafia – is a measure of how far political theatre has developed in Britain since 1968' (p. 225).

Brenton felt that in order for theatre to perform at 'the centre of public life' and be 'as loud as parliament', it should take place in big theatres in order for large numbers of people to see it (Itzin, 1980, p. 192). However, he also described the paradoxical position this put his company in, in terms of performing to their target audiences. He maintained that Portable's work should remain 'at the service of the working-class', yet acknowledged that the company were in fact no longer performing to such an audience. He rationalized this position to some extent by claiming that 'writers on the left have to be a vanguard', providing 'survival kits for people who are active politically' – although implicit in this idea is that effective political activity does not, or did not any longer, occur in working class communities (p. 196).

Edgar built on this idea, although in the early seventies he had turned away from both traditional and alternative theatrical venues to seek 'audiences within the working class whose history and struggles [would] form the substance of [his] plays' (Bull, p. 19). Despite trade union membership still, just about, being on the incline before reaching its peak in 1980, Edgar felt in 1979 that the attempt to appeal to the working-class audience had failed, and described how revolutionary politics became less about 'the organization of the working class at the point of production, and much more about the disruption of bourgeois ideology at the point of consumption' (1979a, p. 26–33). Later he controversially claimed: 'It seems to me demonstrably if paradoxically true that the most potent, rich, and in many ways politically acute theatrical statements of the past ten years have been made in custom-based buildings patronized almost exclusively by the middle class' (Edgar, 1988, p. 41).

For DiCenzo there is a fundamental problem with this assessment in terms of the inaccessibility of the plays Edgar selects (which include Bond's *Lear*, Hare's *Brassneck*, Keefe's *Gotcha*, and Barker's *Claw*), in that by Edgar's own admission their shock value relies 'on an upending of received forms, both literary and theatrical'. DiCenzo accuses Edgar of being 'quite unselfconscious about his own bias as a viewer' although she notes his admission that the writers producing the most 'acute statements' were at the same time 'much further from political activism than most touring socialist theatre workers' (DiCenzo, 1996, p. 33).

In this, and in Edgar's qualification of the university education of the playwrights he esteems as a 'dubious' advantage, I do not find Edgar to be exactly unselfconscious (Edgar, 1979a, p. 32). However, the disjuncture between his assessment of political acuteness and potency and political activism is somewhat perplexing, particularly as a playwright who presented his shift away from agitprop to 'mainstream' theatres not as

a process of de-politicization, but, on the contrary, as an 'infiltration' of the larger stages where socialist plays could reach bigger audiences to greater effect – the implication being that this 'effect' was at least partly a political one (Edgar, 1979b). Also, while he acknowledges that the plays he prefers may not be accessible to audiences who do not have a background in decoding literature and theatre, he does not, as DiCenzo's claims, 'entertain the possibility that the images offered by popular forms of theatre might not be accessible to him – for different reasons' (DiCenzo, 1996, p. 33). For DiCenzo, 'Often those trained (in class terms as well as professionally) in "great art" have little knowledge or experience of the long history of popular entertainment and, as a result, are unqualified to assess these forms on their own terms.' She concludes that Edgar articulates an awareness of the limitations of the forms of theatre that he celebrated and went on to produce, without contemplating the inaccessibility of forms across cultural differences as a two-way process, or indeed a process with multiple potentials/barriers for different social groups.

Thus, Edgar and others not only overlook 'the potential impact of theatrical statements which have been made for other types of viewers, namely working-class audiences', but they ignore the possibility that those from 'dubiously advantaged' backgrounds may themselves be incapable of reading particular forms of artistic expression that may be just as rich, potent. and acute, according to different criteria (p. 52).

There are accounts from other theatre practitioners at that time which address this issue specifically, but from the opposite perspective to Edgar's. Richards for example, said of Belt and Braces' show about capitalism as an international force, *A Day in the Life of the World* (1977), that it was middle-class audiences who had trouble with its style. For Richards, working-class audiences 'took it in their stride, having no problem in seeing the capitalist ethic presented as anything other than antagonistic to their own'. The fact that, in Itzin' view, 'the show was a great success touring to working-class venues' and according to Richards 'used bourgeois styles . . . one after another and sent them up', also demonstrates how working-class audiences were not necessarily excluded from theatre that relied on 'bourgeois' conventions, as Edgar and others anticipated (Itzin, 1980, p. 205).

Brenton, meanwhile, related the move into 'mainstream' theatres to a lack of confidence in his capacity to write plays for other audiences, despite his initial desires and attempts to do so. He declared that Portable had 'a very bad record with working-class audiences', explaining, 'We've hardly played to any. Our weapon has always been a middle-class, middle-brow weapon really' (Hare, 1972, p. 18). Unwittingly undermining the association of maturation with the move away from agitprop forms, he commented in 1975: 'When it comes to agitprop I like the agit; the prop I'm very bad at. I'm not wise enough. Yet.' (Brenton, 1975).

Perhaps it is not only difficult, as Hare suggests, for theatre makers to make politically acute and effective theatre for audiences whose experiences of work, education, and

culture are different from their own. Perhaps, as DiCenzo suggests, it is also difficult to astutely criticize work *produced* by and / or for people from different cultural backgrounds to the critic's own.

## Conclusions

Whatever the reasons that the history of political theatre has been documented and evaluated as it has, I want to suggest that the qualities, complex objectives, and efficacies of 1970s practice offer rich and relevant stimuli for the analysis and development of political theatre today. Politically motivated performances developed at that time deployed subtle, sensitive, and coercive theatrical forms to successfully propel modest objectives, and win modest victories. My proposal is not driven by a superficial attachment to past forms, but by my interest in opening up and legitimating new areas of enquiry around the contemporary relevance of past practice, as new politically motivated companies emerge.<sup>2</sup>

I have questioned the linear conception of history that is reflected in some contemporary scholarship by demonstrating that some historical accounts reveal political and economic synchronicities across time, as well as differences. This holds implications for emergent political theatre, because it suggests that past contexts, conditions, and therefore practices could productively inform contemporary work. It is therefore my suggestion that an approach to history that acknowledges an interactive relationship of past, present, and future, and which perceives history as relative and unfixed in that it is cumulative, would form a fundamental part of an emancipatory framework for understanding and creating new politically motivated theatre.

My incentive for undertaking this research was my experience of producing effective contemporary political performance that drew on techniques developed in previous decades to address contexts that, although new, were also reminiscent of the past. While oppressive political and economic systems are contested, and while retaliation against gross inequality asks to be boosted and strengthened, it is worthwhile negotiating and reconstructing discursive and practical frameworks for theatre as an agent for change, to evolve its efficacy for the future.

## Notes

1. The paramilitary or terrorist wing of the fascist movement in Britain from the early 70s – early 80s.

2. Over the last few years politically motivated theatre companies and networks have emerged such as Theatre Uncut, Not Too Tame Theatre, Dirty Protest Theatre, Public Domain Productions, Populace Theatre, Blondon, Dumbwise, The Occupied Times (organized by members of the London 'Occupy' movement), Daedalus Theatre Company and the Theatrical Dissidents, to name a few. Since 2009 groups like Red Ladder have returned to their 'agitprop

'roots', to focus explicitly on capitalist structures, workers' rights, and historical and contemporary power structures with satirical and grotesque musical comedies like *Riot, Rebellion and Bloody Insurrection* (2009); *Sex Docks and Rock and Roll* (2010), and *The Big Society* (Leeds Music Hall, 2012). Banner toured *Fighting the Cuts* in 2010; commemorated The Battle of Saltley Gates at a rally in 2012 by performing a song from their show of the same title, and recently toured *The Future Makers*, which specifically looks at how public spending policies, bedroom-tax, benefits and tuition fees are affecting young people in Britain. Mikron Theatre have also dealt with topical issues, increased their audience to 10,000 people in 2012, and have, along with some of these other groups, invoked through their performances small-scale political change. For example, Mikron's *Losing The Plot* inspired a successful 'Save Our Allotment' campaign in Ikenham, winning them legal protection. Meanwhile as a result of Theatre Uncut's campaign of performances in 2010, an audience member noted that 'Groups that were previously non-politicized were galvanized to action'.

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