

ALTERNATIVE TRADITIONS:
POPULAR POLITICAL THEATRE IN BRITAIN

By

MARIA R. DICENZO, B.A., M.A.

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

McMaster University

October 1992

ALTERNATIVE TRADITIONS:
POPULAR POLITICAL THEATRE IN BRITAIN

10 Pasqualina and Vittorio

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the different tendencies found in alternative theatre movements in British theatre in the twentieth century, with a particular emphasis on the achievements of popular political theatre companies in the period after 1968. "Alternative" and "political" are terms most commonly associated with developments in the late sixties and early seventies, but the thesis will demonstrate that there are stronger connections between the prewar and postwar periods of experimentation than are generally recognized. The broad historical framework is designed specifically to reveal the patterns and cycles which characterize the emergence and evolution of alternative theatre movements. It begins with an historical survey of the prewar period, followed by a discussion of the main issues related to the postwar movement, leading ultimately to a detailed case study of a specific theatre company.

The thesis relies on historical and sociological approaches to cultural production in order to demonstrate that social, political, and economic factors account to a large extent for the kind of theatre which is produced in any given period. This is intended to redress the inability of more conventionally elitist and text-based dramatic criticism to include rich popular traditions. The study is concerned with the reasons why alternative theatre companies

defined themselves in opposition to mainstream theatre and the form this opposition took in terms of their socialist/democratic politics, non-hierarchical modes of production, performance styles, the redefinition of theatrical venues, and the attempts to reach more broadly-based and culturally dispossessed audiences. The thesis also argues that in these oppositional tendencies can be found some the most important developments in stage language in this century, and that alternative theatre has provided a constant source of renewal for the mainstream tradition.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is difficult to express thanks adequately at the end of such a long project. so I will begin at the beginning. I will be forever grateful to Susan Bennett for prodding me (not exactly gently) into what was a completely new area of research for me, and for remaining a supportive friend and colleague. But it is to Tony Brennan that I owe immeasurable thanks for his patience and guidance in actually seeing this project through to completion. I could not have asked for a more knowledgeable and committed advisor.

There are many others who have played important roles in the development of the text. I would like to thank Dr. James King for his support and feedback and Dr. John Ferns for his involvement. I am also grateful to friends and colleagues like Alison Lee and Corinne Davies who have offered invaluable advice and support along the way. Further afield, I owe thanks to John McGrath and the many others I interviewed during my research trip to Scotland.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their support and for having so much confidence in me. But most of all, I am indebted to my partner Graham Knight for his insightful contributions to the work, for his constant encouragement that helped me through the tangles, and for sharing the joy of completion.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE	16
CHAPTER TWO	101
CHAPTER THREE	
1. Anatomy of an Alternative Theatre Company 7:84 Scotland	257
2. Making Socialist Theatre: The Theory	331
3. From Theory to Practice: The Plays	357
AFTERWORD	453
BIBLIOGRAPHY	461

INTRODUCTION

In a recent article in which he reassesses the relationship between the terms "alternative" theatre and "political" theatre and how it has changed, Clive Barker notes:

In the early 1970s in Britain a good argument could be made that the Alternative Theatre, which was at that time in its early years, had political significance across the spectrum of its performance styles. Simply by existing it posed critical alternatives to the dominant culture of the time, that of the Establishment to which it defined itself as alternative. At the start of the 1990s it would be difficult to make that argument and, disillusioned by what has happened in the intervening years, some writers who would have promulgated the earlier argument would probably now support an opposing view. The Alternative Theatre has lost direction and political significance. ("Alternative" 18)

One of the writers to which Barker refers is Andrew Davies, who concludes his study on the rather ominous note: "If *Other Theatres* is the first history of alternative and experimental drama in Britain, then sadly it may also be something of an obituary notice too" (209). My own study is informed by a fundamentally different interpretation of both the history and the future of alternative theatre, one which is more hopeful. Like the members of Welfare State--a popular political theatre company with a long and colourful history--I consider myself a "pathological optimist" (Coulter

and Kershaw 13). The large scale social and political change that seemed possible for those who were part of the revolutionary fervour of the late sixties and early seventies was never realized, but small battles were fought and won at local levels. Alternative theatre companies played a role in some of those struggles involving unions, organizations, and communities, and brought information, pleasure, and hope to many of those involved. But the phenomenon of alternative theatre dates much earlier than the seventies and is still active, in increasingly diversified ways.

It seems appropriate to begin with the conclusions I have drawn from my research, since the structure of the study reverses the order in which I came to the subject matter. It was, in fact, my first exposure to 7:84 Scotland which motivated my examination of alternative theatre, taking me back to the earlier part of this century. What became apparent to me at every stage was the rich theatre history to which I had never been exposed, in spite of having taken a wide range of drama courses at a university level. This led me to consider the ideological and methodological biases of traditional forms of dramatic and theatre criticism which account for why alternative and popular traditions in the theatre in this century have been neglected by critics.

In relation to the privileging of certain histories over others, Ann Wilson has argued that criticism is a political act and plays an important role in what we acknowledge as significant or worthy of study:

. . . the worth of art is recognized not only by what is said about it in critical commentary but by the fact that something is said at all. This process of validation results in the creation of literary canons, the grouping of the 'monuments' of literature which inevitably are the 'great' works of poetry, prose and, less significantly, drama (13).

In this way, according to Wilson, the function of much criticism in this century has been "to reinforce and perpetuate notions of high culture" (14). This helps to explain to a certain extent why students in English and drama programmes learn about Shaw, T. S. Eliot, and Beckett, and not about the Workers' Theatre Movement and Joan Littlewood. But the problem is more complex than this. The alternative tradition I will be outlining has also been informed by an overtly political (specifically socialist) agenda, and given that "high" art has traditionally divorced itself from the social and political realm in favour of the celebration of "texts", usually in the context of conservative, establishment institutions, it is not surprising that these movements have been ignored by academics.

While the blatant privileging of some traditions over

others in academic criticism must be acknowledged, I would argue that the reasons are not only ideological, but also methodological. Because dramatic criticism has been almost exclusively text-based, it has limited its attention to the published plays of dramatic authors deemed important enough to warrant inclusion in the canon. The need for a written "text" as a basis for dramatic criticism not only privileges "product" over "process", but more importantly, it necessarily excludes theatrical activity which cannot be accessed by means of texts. In spite of attempts in recent years to recover and document some of the work of alternative theatre movements, the plays or productions are rarely available in published form, and when they are, they cannot be treated as definitive texts because this kind of theatre is performance, not script, oriented. The strength of popular political theatre, as I will illustrate in detail in the case of 7:84 Scotland, is in the bonds which are forged between the performers and the audience through direct address, comedy, music, and song, and a written text can never provide an accurate record of this fundamentally dynamic relationship. But the evanescent nature of such theatre and the practical difficulties of trying to document it are not sufficient reasons to justify the lack of attention it has received.

These problems and gaps forced me to seek a more

suitable analytical framework which could include alternative movements, but also allow for an examination of the relationship between both mainstream and alternative traditions. The models which inform my approach are more sociological than literary, and encompass social, political, and economic considerations, in addition to more conventionally artistic ones. The work of Raymond Williams is a good example, and his own experience of breaking disciplinary boundaries came as a source of reassurance to me. He writes:

People have often asked me why, trained in literature and expressly in drama, making an ordinary career in writing and teaching dramatic history and analysis, I turned--*turned*--to what they would call sociology if they were quite sure I wouldn't be offended (some were sure the other way and I'm obliquely grateful to them). I could have said, debating the point, that Ruskin didn't turn from architecture to society; he saw society in architecture--in its styles, its shaping intentions, its structures of power and feeling, its façades and its interiors and the relations between them; he could then learn to read both architecture and society in new ways. But I would prefer to speak for myself. I learned something from analysing drama which seemed to me effective not only as a way of seeing certain aspects of society but as a way of getting through to some of the fundamental conventions which we group as society itself ("Drama" 11).

Williams' writings have been an invaluable contribution to the development of broader cultural studies approaches.

More specifically, the work of Janet Wolff, namely *The Social Production of Art* (1981), offers a clear and

systematic treatment of many of the concerns which inform the following study. Wolff's central argument is that art and literature must be seen as historical, situated, and produced, not as "the creation of 'genius', transcending existence, society and time" (1). In demonstrating how art is a social product, Wolff considers aspects which influence both the production and reception of cultural products such as technology, social institutions, and economic factors. By seeking non-literary approaches and not including detailed analyses of plays in the following study, I am not suggesting that process is more important than product. What I hope to demonstrate is that the lack of attention paid to the conditions and relations of production and consumption in drama/theatre studies has resulted in a narrow, and sometimes distorted, understanding of what constitutes "theatre".

My emphasis on the broader social, political, and economic context to which theatre, as the most social of art forms, is inextricably linked is born out by other existing studies of alternative theatre. In journal form, *New Theatre Quarterly* (formerly *Theatre Quarterly*) has made the single most important contribution to this area of research, offering profiles of individual writers and companies, as well as providing a forum for more theoretical debates. Among the full-length studies are Catherine Itzin's *Stages*

in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968 (1980), Sandy Craig's *Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain* (1980) and Andrew Davies' *Other Theatres: The Development of Alternative and Experimental Theatre in Britain* (1987). These books read more like social histories than conventional dramatic criticism or theatre history, and each examines the contributions of specific practitioners and companies in relation to determining factors such as political events, professional organization, and economic structures.

I am indebted to these commentators, but my own study represents a departure from those above in a number of ways. Itzin's book remains one of the most comprehensive catalogues of political theatre companies between 1968-78. Its chronological and descriptive accounts of writers, groups and productions have proved to be an important resource for illustrating the range of practices, but I have been more concerned with identifying tendencies and larger patterns of development in alternative theatre. In other words, Itzin helps to provide the specifics from which it is possible to begin to generalize. Craig's book is a collection of essays by commentators and practitioners which covers a wide spectrum of issues related to alternative theatre such as politics, venues, and funding. The essays also help to define "alternative" in a variety of ways since

they include discussions of feminist theatre, community and ethnic theatre, Theatre-in-education and children's theatre. The book is useful as an introduction to these different areas, but the essays are limited in scope and are self-contained. I have attempted to draw some of these issues together in a more comprehensive discussion. Another important difference is the historical scope of the following study. While my main focus, like Itzin and Craig, is the wave of alternative theatre in Britain after 1968, I have chosen to contextualize that movement within a larger historical framework, looking both further back and ahead to the developments in the eighties. In this way, my project seems to resemble Davies's more closely than the others. Davies also traces alternative theatre back to the non-commercial ventures in the early part of this century and like Itzin, he provides nutshell histories of a variety of different theatres and movements. But because he attempts to compile a comprehensive and chronological survey, Davies presents a wide array of groups and practices, spending a limited amount of time on each. For instance political and community theatre in Britain since the sixties encompass only two short chapters near the end of the book. So while our starting point is similar, I have been more selective in focusing on particular traditions. My reasons for including a survey of the prewar years are to demonstrate the origins

of the post 1968 movement, a context previous historians have failed to emphasize. Not only is my focus different than Davies', but as I indicated at the opening, we arrive at fundamentally different conclusions about the future and direction of alternative theatre.

Another study worth noting is John Bull's *New British Political Dramatists* (1983), because it represents what I might have done, but chose deliberately to avoid. Bull includes introductory and bridging chapters which deal with many concerns which inform my own examination of political theatre, but the focus of his book is on the plays of Howard Brenton, David Hare, Trevor Griffiths, and David Edgar--most of which have been published by either Eyre Methuen or Faber & Faber. It is interesting that he acknowledges the importance of John McGrath's work, but chooses not to devote a chapter to him. Bull's book is a good overview of what I term the avant-garde tradition in political theatre after 1968, but my own focus will be on the more neglected popular or grass roots tendencies.

Where I believe the value of the following study lies is in its synthetic quality. In addition to the full-length studies noted above, I have relied on a wide array of articles and essays from a variety of sources and perspectives in order to arrive at some general principles and developments which are relevant to an understanding of

why alternative theatre movements emerge and how they evolve. The need to draw together these piecemeal accounts and disparate sources, explains both the broad historical framework and the length of this discussion. But only by looking at the larger picture is it possible to locate and explain the patterns and cycles that occur. Although I have had to rely heavily on existing studies of the prewar and postwar periods, I have striven to bring together bodies of work which generally remain separate, in order to offer a structural explanation of the recurrent and increasingly complex pattern of alternative theatre.

In the first chapter I deal with the prewar period and use the term "alternative" to refer specifically to non-commercial ventures. Making use of different kinds of studies of the period, I examine the specific conventions against which experimental theatres defined themselves. The segment which deals with the development and entrenchment of the conventions of West End theatre warrants the detailed attention it receives because the same considerations are relevant to the postwar period, even though the later subsidized theatres differ in certain ways from the strictly commercial West End. I refer here to the recuperation of theatregoing as a respectable and fashionable pursuit of the middle classes and the predominance of realist plays about polite society produced in proscenium arch theatres with

lavish sets and star casts. It is crucial to establish this as the point of reference for another tradition which is essentially audience-oriented, non-realist, more varied and economical formalistically, non-hierarchical, and not confined to theatre buildings. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to a consideration of a range of alternative, oppositional theatres and the different ways in which they responded to these conventions. Since the focus of the study is to reassess the historical importance of neglected popular/political traditions of theatre, the discussion is organized with the specific purpose of demonstrating the contribution of political groups in redefining the purpose, shape, and performance context of theatre, and the relevance of their experiments for postwar political theatre.

In the second chapter, I trace the strand of work which derives from the Workers' Theatre Movement and Unity Theatre in the prewar period, through to the more immediate precursors of the alternative theatre movement in the late sixties and early seventies. But the central aim of the chapter is to outline the basis, the shape, and the evolution of the alternative theatre in the seventies and eighties, looking at the practitioners, their aims, the forms they adopted, company structures, the effects of public subsidies, the expansion of venues, and the different audiences they tried to reach. As in the first chapter, my

interest is in popular tendencies and the ultimate impact of this work on mainstream theatre.

In the final chapter I shift from a general, theoretical discussion to an empirical one, using 7:84 Scotland as a detailed case study. This company combines many of the most interesting and successful aspects of popular political theatre, but also demonstrates the process of evolution (leading usually to demise) that such groups undergo due to internal and external forces. Based on interviews conducted with members of the company during a research trip to Scotland, and the analysis of plays which cover a period of over fifteen years (many of which were made available to me in manuscript form), the case study is a contribution of original research to the documentation of theatre history in this fertile period. It is the most detailed example of the emerging pattern I have delineated over an extensive period of the cyclic rise of the theatre groups whose vigour, innovation and political orientation exposes them to challenges and stresses which often lead to their decline, fragmentation and dissolution. Through a systematic unfolding of the history and experiments of this particular company, I hope to illustrate the importance of this kind of theatre work and to expand the vocabulary of more conventional modes of analysis to include popular political traditions.

Before turning to these chapters, a brief clarification of terms, as they are used in this study, is required. The term "alternative" has become increasingly problematic, being used to describe a wide variety of groups and practices. As I noted above, I have used it in the first chapter to denote non-commercial ventures, but it was not in current use in the prewar period and carries none of the political associations it does later. In the period after 1968, as I outline in the second chapter, "alternative" grows out of "underground" and "fringe" and displaces both, suggesting theatre which represents an alternative to the mainstream, not simply something peripheral to it. In this period the term has political--specifically left-wing--associations, but it is used to refer to both avant-garde and popular tendencies.

The term "political" is used in a similar way. In the context of the first chapter, I refer to specific groups as politically-based or oriented and the boundaries of the term are clear. But in the case of postwar theatre, it comes to be used by many commentators interchangeably with "alternative" and always implies a socialist or left-wing perspective. My own usage is consistent with this, except when I distinguish between avant - garde and popular tendencies within political theatre. Related to popular political theatre is the term "community" theatre which

implies a constituency audience which may be defined in terms of location (geographically/regionally), social class, race/ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.

Another term which requires some preliminary clarification is "naturalism". It presents problems because it is used frequently in the debates about dramatic form, but commentators use it in different ways. It is often used in an almost dismissive way to denote a realist treatment of character, action and setting, and for both the prewar and postwar political theatre movements, such conventions are associated with bourgeois theatre. The problem here is that there is nothing inherent in naturalism as a form which makes it "conservative" or "bourgeois"--in fact it was originally a political and unorthodox form in its own right in the late nineteenth century--but because of the predominance of plays about complex, middle-class characters set in stuffy drawing rooms, the term has acquired these associations over time. Although the more specialized meaning of naturalism as the application of the principles of scientific determinism to art (i.e. human behaviour as a product of heredity and environment) is sometimes implied in the use of the term by commentators, this is rarely specified. The overlap between the specialized and generalized definitions makes it a difficult term to use in a precise way. In my own usage, when

referring to the use of realist staging techniques. I have tried to restrict myself to the terms "realist" or "illusionist". But when I refer to the "naturalistic" treatment of characters, both senses are implied, namely, realistically drawn characters, situated in a particular social milieu. Where necessary, the above terms are treated in greater detail in the body of the study.

CHAPTER ONE

One of the chief aims of this study is to demonstrate that the alternative theatre movement in the postwar period, particularly the work of political theatre groups in the sixties and seventies, is part of a cyclical pattern in twentieth century theatre history rather than an isolated phenomenon. While the term "alternative" encompasses a wide range of approaches, the driving force behind them, throughout the century, is a fundamental dissatisfaction with the theatrical status quo which had been established by the late 1800s. Therefore, in order to understand and provide a context for the variety of alternative theatrical ventures launched in the early part of the century, it is first necessary to establish the shape of the theatre industry in that period and why it prompted oppositional tendencies. I will then outline and distinguish between the different areas of experimentation. The frame of reference may seem unusually large in scope at the beginning, but it is important to draw a kind of theatrical map before it is possible to trace specific routes; my intention is to define "alternative" theatre in broad terms in order to locate and situate "political" theatre within its parameters.

Pre-1900: Some Minor Ventures

I am concentrating on theatre work beginning after the turn of the century, because it is not necessary to look much before 1900 for the specific precursors of the political and alternative groups of the late sixties and early seventies. As Allardyce Nicoll, with specific reference to English drama between 1900 and 1930, has argued: "In many respects, the most advanced trends in the theatre of the present era [1973] are, strangely, closer in spirit to those inspiring the first decades of the century than they are to those of the thirties, the forties or the early fifties" (*Beginnings* 15). This is not to suggest that the tendencies I am interested in tracing were not evident before this point. There were, of course, innovators of some significance in the last decades of the nineteenth century who reacted directly to the prevailing conditions in commercial theatre. Nicoll outlines some of the important ventures in this period (*Beginnings* 51-52). He includes John Hollingshead who, as manager of the Gaiety Theatre in 1871, instituted the "Experimental and Miscellaneous Morning Performance" for the benefit of theatre people "without much regard for the old restrictive principles of management." Among those who dedicated themselves to reviving the works of specific authors were Edward Compton and his Comedy Company (1881), Frank Benson's Shakespeare Company (1883),

Ben Greet's series of outdoor performances (1886), and William Poel's Elizabethan Stage Society (1899). There were also early attempts to provide forums for performances of plays which were believed to appeal to "literary" audiences. Nicoll cites Janet Achurch's matinée offerings at the Novelty in 1889, and J.T. Grein's establishment of the Independent Theatre in 1891 which also specialized in Sunday and Monday matinée shows. While these examples may be seen as precursors of the repertory groups and play-producing societies in the early twentieth century, they differ from them in terms of their scope and impact. Nicoll argues that "for the most part, they were what may be called 'remedial', in the sense that they aimed principally to correct defects in the current theatrical régime rather than to inaugurate something new" (*Beginnings* 54). Nicoll also points to their inability to gain firm support, even from the more intellectual groups of playgoers (*Beginnings* 54).

Stourac and McCreery, in their work on the Workers' Theatre Movement, identify some early examples of political plays, springing from labour movement activities. Their overview suggests a wide variety of theatre-related activities. Reference is made to specific "topical plays with a radical slant" such as *The Barn Burners*, performed in 1833, Southey's *Wat Tyler*, used in 1836 to raise funds, and John Walker's Luddite melodrama, *The Factory Lad*, performed in 1832. They also point out that the Owenites and Chartists

(some of whom wrote plays and were involved in campaigns for the licensing of illegal working-class saloon theatres) used the Rotunda theatre as headquarters and included theatrical news and criticism in their illegal papers (192). While these somewhat scattered details represent the early tendencies of politically motivated theatre, it is only around the turn of the century with the National Association of Clarion Dramatic Clubs (Stourac and McCreery 193), and later with the Workers' Theatre Movement, that we see more organized and widespread work underway. These later groups are of greater interest in the context of this study, not only because of the scope of their work, but more importantly, because of their adoption of agit-prop techniques and for liberating theatrical performance from theatre buildings. Their approaches to political theatre and the problems they encountered are relevant to the agit-prop groups of the late sixties and the early seventies.

The Late Nineteenth Century: Refashioning Theatre

In accounting for the theatrical experiments after the turn of the century, it is useful to be aware of the changes and developments which took place in almost every area of theatre in the late eighteenth hundreds. The considerations here are manifold, including social, political, economic, and even geographic factors. Comprehensive studies of the

transitions in theatre in this period exist¹ and it is not my purpose to contribute to this area of research, or to elaborate the complexity of the developments which occurred. My interest lies specifically in the outcome of this transition and in pointing to the range of developments which led to the changed face of theatre around the turn of the century. The factors included, such as changing repertoire, theatre spaces/architecture, production styles, the star system of acting, and the growth of the long run, all have a direct bearing on the discussion of the alternative ventures which will follow. It is also important to stress the degree to which the refashioning of the theatre to appeal to middle-class audiences was the result of a conscious effort to make theatregoing a respectable activity, and it was between the years 1860 and 1900, as Raymond Williams argues that "What we think of as the modern theatre and its audience . . . had been more centrally and more solidly established than at any other time, before or since" ("Social" 210).

Williams offers a synopsis of the developments that occurred after 1860:

¹Three general studies are Michael Baker's *The Rise of the Victorian Actor*, A. Nicoll's *English Drama 1900- 1930: The Beginnings of the Modern Period*, and *The Revels History of Dramas in English: Volume VII 1880 to the Present Day*, by Hugh Hunt et al.

In the theatres what was happening was the process usually described as making theatre 'respectable' again: a process which included putting carpets and seats into the old pit; serving more discreet refreshments; altering times to fit with other social engagements. . . . From the 1860s the time was moved to eight o'clock, and performance ended at about eleven: largely to allow for dinner and supper engagements on either side. Matinées came in, for a new kind of leisured audience. What we now think of as West End theatre was established ("Social" 210).

He is careful to note that the divisions between "respectable" and "popular" which emerged at this time did not imply homogeneous audiences in either case: "The whole point of the newly respectable integration was that it offered to be self-recruiting; it was socially inclusive, at a given level of price, taste and behaviour, rather than categorically exclusive, as in an older kind of society" ("Social" 210). He describes the "popular" audience as "largely working-class and lower middle-class" and suggests that except on special occasions, they were in the music-halls, rather than the theatres ("Social" 210).

Most critics seem to agree that theatre, as we know it today, was shaped in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Hugh Hunt outlines the impact of those years:

The period 1880-1900 marks the birth of the theatre of the twentieth century as a social and literary force. Between those years most of the seeds were sown that were later to blossom into the ideological ferment of Edwardian drama, and radical changes came about in the organization of the theatre as well as in the constitution and behaviour of audiences. The theatre became fashionable, its artists respectable; the breach

between stage and literature was healed; production and design took on an organized shape; and new acting styles were adopted (3).

Hunt isolates the two developments which continue to influence our understanding of and scholarly approaches to theatre and drama. First, he points to the shift in the social basis of theatre and, secondly, to the change in the status of the stage play from performance script to literary text.

Michael Baker, in *The Rise of the Victorian Actor*, offers a useful starting point for an examination of the shift in the social basis of theatre in the late nineteenth century. He traces the gradual changes in the social character of the profession and attitudes towards it which eventually led to the acceptance of acting as a professional occupation in England. One of the ways in which he illustrates this shift is to compare the influx of civilian recruits (those not born into the profession) in the early and latter decades of the nineteenth century. He claims that between 1800 and 1860 the civilian recruits came from solidly lower-class rather than middle or working-class backgrounds and usually in defiance of their families' wishes (85-6)², while the recruits in the years 1860-90 were

²Baker defines his use of "lower-class", which seems to imply lower-middle class, as "dealing with families engaged in occupations wholly characteristic of the urban *petite*

"almost all of solidly middle-class origin, and a few were conspicuously upper-class" (86) and "for the first time there were signs that even clergymen's sons were turning to a theatrical career" (88). Noteworthy exceptions, from Garrick on, complicate the history of the status of the acting profession, but Baker's figures indicate the conditions and patterns of change which affected the majority of actors.

This same tendency is evident in the changing social make up of the audience. Baker explains:

It should be remembered that, before the 1870s, the Victorian theatre was essentially popular. The bulk of its audiences were drawn from the lower and working classes, the uneducated and the poor. It was this section of the community which was traditionally the furthest removed from all those influences and restraints that were held to constitute the acceptable limits of conventional behaviour (45-46).

The obvious questions are, first, what kept the higher classes away from many forms of theatre (the opera being an exception), and secondly, what factors encouraged the new

bourgeoisie (85). Baker continues: "Unless particular circumstances dictated otherwise, they would have been strongly opposed, both on social and religious grounds, to the prospect of their children entering upon a stage career--hence the conspicuous proportion of actors in this group who alienated their families and had recourse to stage names" (85). These objections would have been due to both the existing moral taboo associated with the acting profession and to social ambitions on the part of these families.

class of actor and audience to the theatre. ³

In accounting for the low social status of actors and

³There is, as with virtually all of these issues, some scholarly controversy over how the popular audience in the early nineteenth century should be accounted for. The general view is that expressed by James Woodfield in his outline of the period which argues that the theatre had been the domain of the middle-classes and that the early decades of the nineteenth century represent an aberration, rather than a norm: "In the first half of the nineteenth century, the theatres had been deserted by the middle and upper classes and were forced to play to predominantly uneducated, lower-class audience" (1). He then accounts for the changes in the remainder of the century in terms of "rectifying" and "repairing": "Many within the theatre at the beginning of the century regretted the passing of a more genteel era, the age of Garrick when the audience was predominantly middle-class and relatively well-mannered, and sought to rectify matters" (2). Raymond Williams argues along different lines in accounting for the changing social relations in theatre:

We can distinguish three periods: that before 1830; from 1830 to 1860; and from 1860 to 1914. In the first period there was a completion of the long process, traceable from around 1700, in which the theatre moved back towards a more popular audience. This is not, in spite of some accounts, the entry of the 'mob' into the theatres. On the contrary it was the narrowing of the theatre audience which preceded this movement, from the 1620s to the 1690s and reaching a point of extreme class selectivity in the Restoration theatre, which was the novel phenomenon ("Social" 208).

The idea of the reclamation of the theatre by the middle-class in the latter part of the nineteenth century is relevant to both writers, but they view it from different perspectives. As I outlined earlier, my immediate concern is the outcome of the "reclamation", namely the establishment of a set of theatrical norms in terms of repertoire, venues, production styles, audience, etc.

the disreputable image of the stage, particularly before the 1860s, Baker points to such factors as the financial precariousness of the arts in general, the lack of recognized schools for theatrical training, and the proletarian connotations of theatrical life due to the dependency on managers and the payment of wages as opposed to salaries. Perhaps even more influential was the moral panic surrounding the theatre and the tradition of religious opposition to the stage, as Baker notes: "Ironically, the charge of moral corruption laid against the stage was so universal and indiscriminate that it is not always easy to identify the grounds upon which it was made" (44). The poor condition and location of many theatres, in addition to the frequent presence of prostitutes, also contributed to the equation of theatre-going with moral/sexual corruption.

The eventual transition described earlier was a result of both a weakening of the moral (particularly religious) opposition and the growing respectability (in social terms) of theatre. In the midst of an expanding leisure industry, with religious power and authority in general decline, Baker concludes:

Against this background a relaxation of the traditional religious ban on theatres could not be prevented indefinitely. Many clerical strictures against the stage began to seem inflexible and unreasonable (57).

He also points to the willingness on the part of the

profession to change its image. Evidence of this can be found in the theatre papers of the time (56), in actors' infiltration of the literary and professional world through membership in prominent London clubs, and in the changing residential habits of wealthier members of the profession (82).

While these markers of affluence and respectability helped to raise the status of the profession as a whole, few enjoyed them and, more importantly, they pointed to social divisions developing within the theatre world. Baker claims:

This influx of well-to-do, well-educated newcomers into the theatre [the civilian recruits after the 1860s] had a significance out of all proportion to their numbers--which, even by 1890, probably represented a tiny percentage of the total profession. Their social credentials insured that they acquired a prominent position among their colleagues with the minimum of training and experience (89).

In time, with the trend towards specialization in types of theatre, these divisions were as much professional as social.

While Baker claims that "it is impossible to know exactly why civilians at this social level chose to take up a stage career," (85) there were many changes taking place which made the prospect of a stage career more appealing than before. Andrew Davies, in tracing the rise of London's West End, draws attention to the wave of theatre construction from the late 1860s to the end of the

century--twenty five new theatres in London's West End alone (25). According to Davies, despite the breakdown of the patent system in the Theatres Act of 1843, permitting other playhouses to present spoken drama, very little interest was shown in expansion immediately, "mainly because the working-class audiences attending the melodramas did not represent a financially attractive proposition for theatrical entrepreneurs" (25). He attributes the changes in the latter part of the century to a deliberate "wooing back of the middle-class audience which had earlier in the century transferred its patronage to the opera" and claims that "the key to this change lay in the creation of a respectable and prestigious West End theatre very different from the noisy melodramas of the old playhouses" (25).

The turning point for theatre, as for the leisure industry as a whole, begins around mid-century. One factor frequently noted by critics is the renewed royal patronage of the stage in Queen Victoria's reign (Baker 14, Cunningham 135, Nicoll, *History* 5) and Baker claims that "Its contribution to the growing respectability of actors and play-going cannot be underestimated" (14). Nicoll suggests, with regard to the impact of the Queen's interest in theatre, that "The encouragement of these theatricals [performances at court] and the royal visits to privileged London playhouses soon convinced the aristocracy that what for years had been regarded as an almost entirely popular

amusement might be tolerated by society" (*History* 6) While royal patronage played an influential role in the changing image of the theatre, it was not in itself enough to change theatre going habits overnight.

Hugh Cunningham, in his examination of the "reclamation" of the theatre by the upper and middle-class in this period, isolates Charles Kean's nine-year management of the Princess's Theatre (beginning 1850) as,

mark[ing] the beginning of the end of a drama based upon the support of popular audiences, without significant participation from the fashionable, the socially respectable and the intellectually cultured segments of the population. This participation, when it occurred, led ultimately to the problem play, the middle and upper-class settings and themes of Jones, Pinero, Wilde and Shaw (135).

While Cunningham does not elaborate, he is likely pointing to the impact that theatre managers were beginning to have, in terms of setting the moral tone of their establishments. Davies notes: "New patterns of theatre management were fostered by the actor-managers, men who controlled individual playhouses and ran them in an autocratic fashion ensuring that no breath of impropriety or scandal should ever touch their establishments, unlike the excesses associated earlier in the century with Edmund Kean" (26).

The issue of management is an important one in this period and it is interesting to look at the ways in which theatres were transformed, particularly by commercial or lay

management.⁴ Major developments took place in the areas of architecture and interior design. In tracing the changes, Davies begins with the elimination of the apron stage at the Adelphi in 1858, in favour of a picture-frame stage, as a means of discouraging performers from "playing to" the audience (26). He attributes the introduction of the lit stage and the darkened auditorium to Henry Irving at the Lyceum in the 1870s and briefly outlines other significant changes:

Programmes, reservations, an 8 o'clock start, evening dress, stalls, carpets, and fixed, upholstered and numbered seats were other innovations introduced through- out London's more 'up market' theatres in the last decades of the Victorian period (26).

In relation to these same developments, Kenneth Richards stresses the "opulence and comfort"⁵ of the newly built or renovated theatres and pays particular attention to the changes in seating:

⁴Kenneth Richards in "Actors and theatres 1880-1918" in *The Revels History of Drama in English, Volume VII*, distinguishes between actor-management and lay management. The latter, according to Clement Scott, based its decisions on commercial rather than personal and artistic considerations (67).

⁵With regard to the idea of "comfort" it is also worth noting the improvements and technical advances in the areas of lighting, heating, ventilation, as well as the increasing concern for safety evident in the installation of fire curtains, water containers (for extinguishing fires), and adequate fire routes (Richards 67-68).

Important changes were initiated in 1880 when the Bancrofts took over the Haymarket, adjusted the proscenium to complete the full 'picture frame' stage, and (undeterred by a first-night demonstration) abolished the pit and introduced higher-priced stall seating. Although the pit remained a feature of theatres throughout the period, the new trend was towards orchestra and pit stalls (67).

These changes reveal the attempts to alter the performer/audience relationship and the composition of the audience itself. Davies links the "fourth wall" convention to the increasingly staid behaviour of audiences described in contemporary accounts (26-27). By minimizing the inexpensive seating and raising the prices of the new seats, managers were doing their best to attract a more affluent (and presumably more respectable) audience, while driving out the "pittites". Regarding the implications of these changes, Michael Booth claims: "By 1880, the middle-class conquest of the theatre auditorium, and consequently of the drama itself, was complete" (21).

As the physical structures and arrangements of theatres were changing to accommodate the new audiences, so were their nightly programmes. There was a definite shift away from the lengthy varied programmes typical of the earlier theatres:

The theatre had become fashionable. A novel significance now was attached to the dinner hour, which had not worried the high-tea and supper partakers on whom Sadler's Wells and the Adelphi had previously subsisted. During these years the formal hour of dinner was being advanced, and when eventually it reached seven o'clock it had

the effect of completely revolutionising playhouse programmes. In earlier days . . . [a] performance which started at 6.30 might close about midnight and was expected to include a farce, a tragedy or comedy, a pantomime and a few other diversions. The new patrons had chaster predilections; coming to the theatre decorously at eight o'clock, they were content to depart homeward about eleven, and soon showed themselves completely satisfied with the presentation of one long play (Nicoll, *History* 18-9).

These single plays came to reflect the fashionable surroundings and audience, hence the preponderance of society dramas or drawing-room plays, set in lavishly decorated rooms and performed by "gentleman" actors.

The decline of the varied programme was important for a number of different reasons. One of the results, according to Baker, was the standardization and the specialization of theatrical fare (93). By the 1880s playgoers knew where to go for various dramatic styles or types of entertainment:

classical and 'superior' drama at the Lyceum, 'drawing-room' drama at the Prince of Wales and then the Haymarket, society melodrama at the Princess's, musical comedy at the Savoy and burlesque at the Gaiety (Baker 93).

One of the supposed benefits of this tendency towards specialization was that it attracted serious writers back to the theatre. A. E. Wilson makes this connection when he suggests that,

the stage, socially speaking, was held in very little esteem and the literary man with any kind of reputation had nothing to gain in the way of prestige by association with the theatre. Those mid-Victorian programmes into which were crowded an opening farce, perhaps a Shakespearean

performance and a comedietta to wind up with, did not look very impressive, except, perhaps, as a typefounder's specimen sheet (29).

While the varied programme as described above saw a general decline, "variety" in the sense of combining different entertainment forms in one show remained a central feature of music-hall and later popular forms.

While the growing status and respectability of the stage, along with the opportunities offered by the new programmes, helped to attract writers who had previously stayed away from theatre, there were other factors at work. Playwriting offered meagre financial rewards; it was more lucrative to write novels.⁶ As Hugh Hunt points out, until the latter years of the century (specifically the international copyright agreement of 1887), publication of plays was dangerous practice since there was little protection against unauthorized performance. He indicates: "In mid-century a dramatist either sold his play outright to a management or received a performance fee, but by the eighties the practice of paying royalties for original plays was becoming common practice" (10). That this practice could

⁶It should be noted here that the strict censorship of the "straight" theatre also discouraged writers. Richard Findlater's *Banned! A Review of Theatrical Censorship in Britain* documents some of the objections posed by writers in the anti-censorship campaigns around the turn of the century.

be very profitable can be seen in the case cited by Hunt: "After his success with *The Silver King* in 1882, H. A. Jones was able to demand 10-15 per cent of the house receipts and, whereas his earnings for the year 1881 amounted to £527.15s., his receipts from royalties in the year 1882-3 were £3398" (10). It should be added that, along with the financial rewards, copyright protection gave way to a general increase in the publication of plays addressed to a reading public (11). The implications of these changes for the establishment of the literary drama and the status of the dramatic author were great.⁷

Another phenomenon resulting from the specialization of theatres and related to the fortunes to be had by both

⁷There was a strong belief in the period that the establishment of an English dramatic tradition lay in the publication of plays in a form geared towards a reading public--with lengthy stage directions--as opposed to the publication of acting editions. Hunt refers to the efforts of H. A. Jones in encouraging this practice and Nicoll cites an 1891 issue of *The Era*:

If English authors, indeed, would take the trouble [to publish reading rather than acting editions]...we believe that the best works of such authors as Mr. H. A. Jones and Mr. Pinero would be perused by no small section of the British public....We are never likely to have a native drama of much literary merit without the practice of publication to emphasise conscientious finish and rebuke slovenly writing (*History* 71).

That this period is still associated almost exclusively with printed plays is no coincidence.

playwrights and theatre managers was the "long run". While the long run proved to be a sound financial venture for managers and liberating in some respects for actors,⁸ it had detrimental effects as well. Among the victims were the provincial stock companies (and with them many recruits to acting), new or unknown playwrights, and the idea of repertory.

In order to understand the impact of the long run on the organization of theatre we must first consider the factors which gave way to it in the first place. The two most frequently noted developments concern the accessibility of train travel and the proliferation of newspapers. Nicoll describes how small the potential playgoing public in London was until the introduction of the omnibus and the railway (*History* 8). While newspapers served the function of

⁸ Given the increased costs for managers due to renovations, safety regulations, demand for more sophisticated stage machinery and sets, and salaries for "stars", it was too expensive to keep a number of plays in repertory. A long run of one production could keep the theatre going for an extended period of time after only one initial outlay, and could continue to make money later through provincial touring. With regard to actors, Baker notes that "actors were relieved of the traditional burden of daily rehearsal and study which had characterised the old system. With plays now in performance for weeks on end and revivals a standard practice, actors in established theatre companies had unprecedented spare time on their hands" (91). Along with freeing up time to pursue other work or leisure activities, this schedule provided a higher degree of financial security through the "seasonal contract".

disseminating reports and information about London entertainment, these forms of transportation provided convenient access to London theatres for people living in the suburbs as well as the rest of the country. These factors are related to the growing dominance of London as a "centre". As Hunt outlines: "Despite the growth of the provincial cities and the multiplication of theatres throughout the country, London became, to a greater extent than in earlier years, the focus of social and theatrical life" (9). Although he does not explore the economic considerations, Hunt attributes this increasing centralization to the extension of communications (9).

But mobility could work in both directions. Not only did the long run make star-studded productions available for extended periods in London, but also touring, now facilitated by rail travel, became a way of keeping plays in production and reaching audiences who did not or could not go to London. As Nicoll notes, this provided managers with an additional source of income⁹:

⁹It also became a way of securing income or success, because the tours soon offered a vehicle for grooming new productions. Nicoll explains: "Since these provincial theatres could now be hired or contracted for on a sharing basis, still another development occurred, for London managers came to find it convenient to produce a play first in the provinces and then bring it, polished after the 'try-out', to the metropolis" (*History* 56).

Instead of a constant change of bill, necessitating the maintenance of a salaried group of performers chosen for their recognised skill in portraying type parts, the theatres subsisted on plays which ran for hundreds of nights The provincial cities were, like the metropolis, rapidly increasing and there too a vast audience was arising. . . . As a result, metropolitan managers gathered a first, a second and even a third touring company and sent these out over the country (*History* 55-56).

Cunningham, in his examination of the impact of the railway on the expanding leisure industry in the nineteenth century, indicates the extent of this kind of theatrical touring: "by the end of the century there were no less than 142 special trains every Sunday in England and Wales to transport these companies" (159).

Because of the changing requirements for actors and companies, suggested by Nicoll above, and the establishment of the touring circuit, the long run had a destructive effect on the provincial stock companies. These groups had much in common with the repertories which sprang up after the turn of the century; they were permanent companies based in their own theatres (in London and throughout the provinces) offering a number of different plays in any one period. They are perhaps best distinguished from their later counterparts by their standardized approach to staging since, "in the production of these plays [stock dramas] the audiences were entirely willing to accept the employment of stock scenery--the easily managed wings, borders and backdrops of almost infinite application" (Nicoll, *History*

49). They were gradually rendered obsolete by the groups touring London shows. This was due less to the frequency of the tours, than to the high production standards they set. A great deal of money poured into the lavish, naturalistic sets (feasible for a long running play) and the smaller companies could not compete:

audiences in general were being trained to expect a different kind of theatrical setting--not a purely conventional background such as was provided by the old flat wings-and-backdrop, but stage-pictures heavy and often three-dimensional, above all specially designed and built for the particular plays to which they belonged (Nicoll, *History* 50).

As the stock companies disappeared, the old Theatres Royal which once housed them became stops on touring circuits and passed into the hands of managers interested in "profitable bookings" (Nicoll, *History* 56).

The most serious loss resulting from the dissolution of the stock companies was in the area of acting. Not only did they employ a large number of actors, but also, more importantly, they served as the chief means of training for aspiring artists. According to Baker, the provincial stock companies provided the craft basis of the theatre and fostered versatility, "the hallmark of Victorian acting" (28). Their disappearance only accelerated a process which was already underway:

These developments [the long run of the one-piece nightly programme and the decline of the provincial stock companies due to national tours

by city-based companies] effectively transformed the traditional social basis of the profession. The new touring companies rendered the popular craft foundation of the theatre obsolete, leaving the stage without its traditional training grounds (90).

Baker goes on to add that, without this body of talent from which to draw, the profession had to recruit from areas such as amateur dramatic clubs which were "increasingly the preserve of the middle-class professional man" (90). This tendency, combined with the growing dominance of "polite" drama (plays for which managers gave priority to educated actors) made it "increasingly difficult for the working-class or lower-class aspirant to enter the theatre" (Baker 91).

The implications of the loss of the stock companies for the acting profession were realized by the 1880s and connected with the debates surrounding the establishment of drama academies. Nicoll cites an account from *The Theatre* dated 1882:

It is rather singular that, of all the arts, the one which is perhaps the most popular, judging by the crowds that flock nightly to an increasing number of theatres, is the only one for which, up to the present time, no school or organised system of education upon any considerable scale has been provided. There was a time when the want of such definite routine of instruction was supplied by the means no longer at our command--the constant variety of practice in country theatres, and the stream of tradition unbroken for several generations, simultaneously training and exercising the capacities of actors, and maintaining a standard whereby their efforts might be gauged. But the stream of tradition is dry, and country theatres have no longer stock

companies. The system of long runs in London, and of importing the pieces which have enjoyed them into the provinces, is disastrous to the true interests of the Drama. . . . It is with the view of raising the standard of education on the stage, and, by offering some obstacles to indolent incompetency . . . that an association has lately been formed in the hope of creating a School of Dramatic Art (*History* 58).

While attempts at organizing formal theatrical training were made in the final decades of the nineteenth century, it was not until 1904 that the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art was finally established. Baker argues that the presence of schools eventually strengthened the social bias of the acting profession.

The situation created by the long run was disadvantageous for actors, particularly for new recruits who were looking for experience (playing the same role limited one's opportunities), but also for new writers. Managers relied on the reputations of types of plays or particular playwrights in order to eliminate as many risks as possible in mounting new productions. Nicoll cites the concern expressed by a dramatic author as early as 1870: "[a play] from an unknown writer, although as brilliant as Sheridan or profound as Shakespeare [would stand little chance of being] accepted by a Manager for representation" (*History* 59).

This tendency, along with the disappearing repertory approach, served to restrict the variety of plays audiences might have access to. One writer, lamenting this fact in a

piece in *The Pall Mall Gazette* (1898) claimed:

What is wanted in London is a theatre where it would be possible from time to time to play single performances of some of the plays that were once applauded as masterpieces and that now lie untroubled on the shelves . . . Such a work could, of course, only be done by private enterprise, by private enthusiasm. The revival of an old comedy at a regular theatre would not do, because it could not appeal to a public who would support it for a run (Nicoll, *History* 57).

It is in these years that the attempts, through "private enterprise", to respond to the commercial stranglehold on theatre begin to appear. Included here are the endeavors of figures such as Poel, Grein, Compton, Benson, and Achurch referred to earlier.¹⁰

This survey of developments has, so far, focused on West End theatre. Along with being the most carefully documented tradition, it is still the most familiar; as Davies suggests, "the equation West End=theatre lives on today" (7). Perhaps Baker's remarks concerning the influx of well-bred recruits into acting are equally applicable to the West End tradition as a whole--it had a significance out of all proportion to its numbers. While, as Baker notes, the "middle-class and middlebrow" influences had an obvious impact on the expensiveness and exclusivity of theatregoing

¹⁰The matinée, according to Nicoll, was one of the first attempts to provide a forum for readings or productions of untried plays (*History* 59).

(172)¹¹ Booth reminds us that "The fashionable and middle-class West End audience did not, of course, embody the entire theatregoing public of London" (26). He then offers figures from an appendix to the Report of the 1866 Select Committee to show "that of the total number of places available in metropolitan London theatres--excluding opera--28,933, or nearly 60 per cent, were in twelve theatres outside of the West End" (27). Even more significant, based on the same report, is that by 1866, music-halls (frequented mainly by lower and working-class audiences in this period) outnumbered theatres by as much as five or six to one (Baker 127). But these different spheres of the entertainment industry had become segregated.

Despite the numerical imbalance, in social and economic terms the West End represented the theatrical "mainstream" and dictated the shape that commercial theatre

¹¹This influence extended beyond the West End and "straight" theatres to the music-halls. Writing in 1895, C. D. Stuart and A. J. Park outline the changes in design marked by the opening of the new Pavilion in 1884:

the gaudy and tawdry music hall of the past gave place to the resplendent 'theatres of varieties' of the present day...Hitherto the halls had been almost exclusively patronised by a class composed mainly, if not exclusively, of the lower and middle grade of society, that huge section of the public comprehensively summed up in the term 'the people'. Now, however, wealth, fashions and *tone* became attracted to these handsome 'Palaces' of amusement (190-191).

was to take for a long time. By the turn of the century its characteristics or conventions were established: buildings centrally located in a major urban centre, decorated with plush interiors, socially divisive fixed seating, employing a proscenium arch stage design, in which were performed long runs of plays ranging from "polite" drama and musical comedy to the classics, performed by star casts working in increasingly realistic sets and modes of acting, and geared to a predominantly middle-class audience. Richards concludes: "The hard-won social acceptance had proved a snare: established theatre had become merely Establishment theatre, and was too narrowly circumscribed by commercial imperatives" (69).¹² He argues that the dissatisfaction with

¹²In the first decades of the twentieth century, the problems presented by the "commercial imperatives" governing theatre do not change in kind, but in degree. The expansion of the industry, in terms of the building and remodelling of theatres, was not without its problems. The increasing costliness of owning and operating theatres, along with the profits to be made, led to the take overs by strictly commercial managers and combined investors and, in turn, drove the actor-managers out of business (Hunt 31, 68). Davies notes that by the end of the First World War, with London rents having quadrupled during the war years, productions more expensive to mount, the strain of the Entertainments Tax, and the ever vigilant Censorship, West End managements were not interested in taking any risks--the practice of the long run and the growing reliance on "stars" to attract audiences were secured (79). It is interesting to note that the active organization of music hall and variety artists and actors into trade union bodies takes place in this period, as a response to the powerful managements and their exploitative practices.

the theatrical status quo, due to the limited opportunities it presented, the influx of plays by outside writers, and the visits of foreign acting companies, encouraged a "significant revolt against the mainstream . . . not from new forces at the centre but from practitioners, amateur and professional, working on, and making their impact from, the periphery" (70).

Rejecting the West End Model: Alternative Approaches

It is here that I would like to turn my attention to these theatrical groups and organizations--to the different ways in which they responded to the "status quo" and the implications of their work for contemporary theatre. I will be looking primarily at forms of "straight" theatre; the counter attractions offered by music or variety halls, films, and eventually radio will not be considered in detail here, even though they provide a rich source of material for popular political theatre groups later. Also, instead of providing an exhaustive history or chronology of groups, the focus will be on what I see as major tendencies or types of work, with a particular emphasis on politically-based theatre. My purpose here is to assess the achievements of political theatre within the larger spectrum of non-commercial ventures before the second World War and to provide a context for the different forms of alternative

theatre in the post 1968 period.

The early years of the century saw an unprecedented growth of both amateur and professional theatre companies. While these groups are often referred to in terms of "alternative", "other", "experimental", it is very important to distinguish between the different types of productions and their aims. The distinctions identified here signal those which must be made between groups working in more recent years.¹³ The purpose of this is to avoid the tendency to designate very different types of work to overly inclusive categories such as "alternative" or "fringe".

I will begin by identifying two general tendencies, before looking at specific groups. The first is characterized by a deliberate or self-conscious response to West End/commercial theatre in aesthetic terms. This includes the attempts to stage foreign or progressive plays which often presented censorship problems in addition to being financial risks. The experiments in innovative production styles, particularly of older plays, are also relevant here. The second major tendency stems more from

¹³For example, one must separate the work of Terence Gray at the Cambridge Theatre Festival from that of the Rebel Players or even Unity Theatre, just as we must recognize the differences between the work of more current groups like 7:84 (Scotland), Joint Stock or more esoteric figures like Howard Barker, even though there is a tendency to group all of them together as "alternative" or "fringe".

political considerations, than aesthetic ones. Along with theatrical activity which sprang from specific movements or causes, propagandist in nature, I would also include ventures which were motivated by an increasing concern with civic or regional identities. While some groups belong very clearly to one or the other of these tendencies, there are some which belong to both. The three main areas of activity which I will examine within this framework are play-producing societies and clubs, repertories, and politically based groups.¹⁴

Play Producing Societies and Clubs

The first group, made up of both amateur and professional play-producing societies and little theatres, includes the efforts of leading figures such as Nugent Monck, Nigel Playfair, Terence Gray, Phyllis Whitworth.¹⁵ These undertakings, on the part of individuals and small

¹⁴While some of the groups included in two of these areas could be seen as organized on a repertory basis, I am using the term here to indicate the major regional repertory companies which were formed in cities such as Liverpool, Birmingham, and Glasgow.

¹⁵For more detailed accounts of the work undertaken by these figures and others, Norman Marshall's *The Other Theatre* (1947) is particularly useful since he writes as a contemporary. Marshall's book also provides the starting point for Andrew Davies' more recent survey of alternative and experimental theatre in Britain, *Other Theatres* (1987).

companies, are significant insofar as they raise issues concerning repertoire, production styles, theatrical space, and working methods or relationships--all directly in response to the conditions prevailing in the commercial theatre. While these groups share general tendencies, it is impossible to discuss them as a homogeneous movement because they varied greatly in terms of their financial and talent resources, and the scope of their work.

The determination to expand the repertoire of plays available for consumption at the time accounts for one of the greatest achievements of this area of theatre. These groups saw to the production of plays, both British and foreign, which would have been considered too risky by commercial managers and, in some cases, deemed unacceptable by the Lord Chamberlain. But while this desire to stage plays not staged elsewhere was the founding principle for many of these groups, there was no consensus about the plays themselves. Norman Marshall accounts for some of the divergent approaches. In his discussion of Sunday theatre, he points out that at the same time that "the Stage Society was devoting two-thirds of its programme to foreign plays, and the rest of the Sunday societies were busy either reviving classics or trying out plays for the commercial theatre, Mrs. Whitworth [who founded the Three Hundred Club in 1923] saw there was a need for a society which would produce the work of young English authors who were writing

interesting plays of a sort which had little chance of production in the commercial theatre" (78).

While some were concentrating on mounting particular plays--be they classics, foreign, or by new playwrights--others were more concerned with the way in which plays were produced. A good example of this was Terence Gray's work at the Cambridge Festival Theatre, which opened in 1926. According to Marshall, Gray's mission was "to attack the realistic tradition of acting and production which in England at this time had been brought to a pitch of almost photographic perfection" (53). He was able to achieve this by altering the actual playing space. Marshall recounts:

The Festival stage was so designed that conventional realistic production was almost impossible. The first essential to a photographically realistic production is a picture-frame proscenium isolating actors from the audience. At the Festival it was difficult to find any definite point at which the stage ended and the auditorium began. There was no proscenium. . . . The broad forestage merging into a great fan-shaped flight of steps extending to the feet of the audience sitting in the front row abolished any boundary line between actor and audience (54).

Along with establishing a closer relationship between performer and audience, Gray transformed the stage space itself. The stage was built on different levels and offered numerous entrance points. This, in addition to a sophisticated lighting system, provided the producer, in

Marshall's terms, with "an extraordinary sense of elbow room" and "opportunities for innumerable new combinations of movement and grouping impossible in an ordinary theatre" (54).

Just as people like Gray and Playfair¹⁶ saw the need to reestablish a closer performer/audience relationship, others were interested in redefining the relationships between performers as well. The growing emphasis on ensemble was, for the most part, a deliberate reaction to the star system. Commercial managers, interested in insuring box office success, were willing to pay out large sums to "star" performers and, at the same time, to save money, they would surround them with "cheap labour"--inexperienced or even untrained actors (Richards 127). The star system led to serious inequities with regard to the opportunities open to actors.¹⁷ In response to this, some groups avoided star

¹⁶I refer here to Nigel Playfair's work at the Lyric, Hammersmith. He was responsible for reviving mainly eighteenth-century plays and providing opportunities to innovative stage designers. With regard to the audience, Marshall claims that Playfair's approach was "to accept the presence of the audience, to make them a partner in the play, and to establish a feeling of intimacy between the stage and auditorium" (41).

¹⁷It is not unusual to find this topic dealt with in polemical terms, particularly in contemporary accounts. Cecil Chisholm, writing in 1934, blames stars and financiers for "kill[ing] the artistic spirit of the theatre" (11). In tracing the origins of this trend, he claims:

No uprising of genius, but merely the steam-

billings and, as in the case of the Norwich Players at the Maddermarket, they even adopted the practice of not printing the names of the cast on the programmes. According to Marshall, this was a way of "ensuring that the name of the Norwich Players [would] be very much more important than that of any individual player" (97).

Another area where attempts at reorganization were made was in that of financing. While many of these ventures

train and the popular press made the new stars and unmade the English theatre. Our eulogistic essayists forget how much Irving and Bernhardt owed to advertising!...In the 'eighties and 'nineties, the innocent provincial and the suburbanite had been 'sold' on Irving and Bernhardt by the new arts of the publicity agent, the press paragrapher and the poster, before they ever saw them in the flesh (11).

In an equally vitriolic tone, J. B. Priestley, writing in 1947, describes how the popularity of film contributed to the emphasis on stars in theatre. In a section entitled "Playgoers as Enemies [of the theatre]" he outlines the unfair practices:

I have already mentioned the half-witted mobs in provincial cities who visit theatres only to see film stars in the flesh. The presence of one or two film names in a cast can add a thousand pounds a week to the returns in some of the larger theatres. And this nonsense is having a very bad influence on casting. If a play is to be toured before opening in London, then an indifferent young actress with a film reputation will probably be given a leading part in preference to a really excellent actress who does not happen to have worked in films. But then the public must be blamed for the whole star system (20).

were financed by private means, there were attempts to gain more broadly-based support in the hope of securing a group's existence. When the Norwich Players formed under Nugent Monck in 1911, they pooled their own resources and managed to come up with £12 to mount their first production. But in 1919, when Monck gathered a new group of players to resume work after the war, he was able to mount as many as nine productions that year due to a new system of financing:

Monck attributes the financial success of these seasons to the fact that the productions were guaranteed, not by one or two wealthy patrons, but by a long list of guarantors, promising a guinea each. 'It is better', according to Monck, 'to have a hundred poor patrons at a guinea each than one rich man who is willing to throw away a hundred guineas. For the rich man does not mind if he loses his money. He almost expects to do so, for it makes him a patron of the arts, but the guinea guarantor has not the slightest intention of losing his, and will see that his friends, enemies, and relations are buying tickets first' (Marshall 93).

While Monck was not without a shrewd business sense, his system signals an approach to a more collective form of support at a time when subsidy was not a consideration.

One enterprise which combined most of the different tendencies I have outlined was the Gate Theatre, founded in 1925 by Peter Godfrey and eventually taken over by Norman Marshall in 1934. Writing after the war, Marshall describes in almost nostalgic terms the features which characterized the Gate. With regard to repertoire, he writes: "The Gate's policy was simply to present plays which would not normally

be seen in any other theatre, either because they were too sophisticated to appeal to a large public, or because they dealt with subjects frowned upon by the Censor [to which the Gate was not subject because of its club status], or because they needed a smaller and more intimate auditorium than any West End theatre possessed" (122). Both Godfrey and Marshall achieved successes with plays by Toller, as well as plays considered unfit by the Censor such as *Victoria Regina*, *Parnell*, *Oscar Wilde*, and *The Children's Hour* (Marshall 123).

Also important was the Gate's attitude towards its actors and its audiences. Marshall describes it as "the most democratic of theatres" and this applied to everything from salaries (which were nominal) to dressing room space. According to Marshall, billing was never a problem since the Gate's only form of advertising was a post-card sent out to members (122). He also points out that one could be sure that the actors who opted to work at the Gate did so out of a commitment to their work since there was little commercial future for the productions. This differed from many small societies which were in the business of producing plays in the hope of eventually selling the whole package to a commercial management--"shop windows" for the West End (Marshall 80).

Another attraction for actors at the Gate was the audience. Marshall recalls how membership (members paid

annual subscriptions) contributed to a friendly atmosphere and how the audience became an "entity" as the curtain went up:

It had the reputation of being the best audience to play to in London. It differed from the ordinary West End audience in being on the whole a younger audience. Partly this is explained by the nature of the plays and partly because of the very low cost of theatre going at the Gate (123).

Not only were the prices low, but also the obvious divisions implied by seating arrangements in West End theatres were not present. In these ways the Gate is a useful example in summing up the various attempts made by these types of groups to address issues such as repertoire, production styles, company structures or relationships, theatre space, and audience--all of which had become too closely circumscribed by commercial theatre.

But these clubs, societies, and little theatres were not without their own problems and limitations. In summing up the need for a theatre like the Gate, Marshall's emphasis is on "a theatre where plays will be chosen not because they are likely to appeal to nearly half a million people . . . but because they are plays of originality and distinction which the minority playgoer is entitled to have an opportunity of seeing" (123). While they did offer theatregoers alternatives to the West End, these theatres had a very limited appeal. Nicoll's use of the terms

"minority" and "coterie" to describe this type of work¹⁸ points to its unavoidable elitist connotations--artistic, sophisticated, intellectual, progressive, fashionable. With reference to early ventures, Kenneth Richards notes that the reaction against the professional status quo was as much a rejection of the "popular" tradition as it was of the commercial theatre and concludes that "the consequent divorce of 'mass' and 'minority' theatre was not all to the good" (Richards 110). Some of these groups could afford to be exclusive as long as there were patrons with private means to fund them, but, according to Davies, by lacking a substantial enough audience they were unable to establish firm foundations between the wars (94).

There were other traps into which these types of groups fell. For instance, while an emphasis was placed on ensemble and more democratic approaches to company structures, many were producers' theatres.¹⁹ Not only is this obvious in the way in which they have been documented--star billings attached to producers--but it also had serious

¹⁸Nicoll writes primarily from the point of view of the dramatic authors writing these plays, but the terms are as relevant to the playhouses and audiences (217).

¹⁹The "producer" or "director" was, at this point, a fairly recent phenomenon. The importance of the director was being explored in theoretical writings about the "art" of theatre. Of particular influence was Edward Gordon Craig's *The Art of the Theatre* (1905) (Hunt 23).

implications for the lives of these companies. Marshall outlines the dangers of the producer's theatre in his discussion of Nigel Playfair at the Lyric:

the policy of the theatre was based less on the plays themselves than on the manner in which they were produced. Because it was a very personal and individual manner, it was impossible for Playfair, when he grew old and tired, to employ other producers and confine his own energies simply to the direction of the theatre. It is all to the good of the theatre as a whole that there should occasionally be producers' theatres, but such theatres can have no permanence. They can exist only so long as their directors can maintain their freshness and powers of invention. No theatre can have real stamina and staying power if it neglects the importance of the living author as the only person who can continually supply it with fresh ideas and renewed energy (41).

This pattern of decline could be seen in other theatres where priority was given to innovative productions of old plays instead of recognizing or encouraging new writing.²⁰

While the play-producing societies, clubs and little theatres represented a break from the practices of the West End, they were not able to escape completely. They too were forced at times to turn a successful production into a long run for financial reasons or to lose members in the event of

²⁰ Marshall also accounts for the decline of the Cambridge Festival Theatre in this way. He describes Gray's work as "degenerating into mere freakishness and eccentricity" and, after having produced most of the classics which appealed to him, he grew "weary" of the Festival (68).

West End transfers (Davies 94). More importantly, they never broke out of the confines of "theatres" as venues for performance, even though attempts were made to transform these spaces and eliminate the proscenium arch stage. In relation to this, Davies notes that "Gray might have declared in a rhetorical flourish that he would rather produce Shakespeare in a boxing ring or a public square than in a traditional theatre, but nobody followed up such a suggestion" (95). This is, to a great extent, related to the "artistic" preoccupations of some of these theatres; the attention paid to production, particularly the areas of set design and lighting, necessitated interior, equipped spaces. The ties to specific locations and the individualistic styles of producers were factors which helped to isolate many of these groups from one another. While some recognized the need for organization and collaboration within the non-commercial theatre, it was never realized (Davies 94, Marshall 69).

The Regional Reps

The second area I would like to discuss is the repertory movement. Chronologically, an examination of the first major repertory companies (dating before the First World War) should precede that of the societies and little theatres above. But since my emphasis in this section is on

identifying the tendencies ranging from "art" theatres to "political" theatres, the repertory movement fits more appropriately between the groups already discussed and those to follow. Another problem arises in trying to separate these first two areas. In part this problem is related to the confusion and controversy surrounding the term "repertory", particularly in its English manifestations. Many of the play-producing societies were organized along repertory lines--a permanent group of actors, usually connected with a particular theatre, producing plays for limited runs.²¹ Even Nicoll notes that "while it seems convenient and proper--perhaps even essential--to separate the repertory playhouses and the play-producing societies, it is impossible to hold them rigorously apart" (57).

The reasons for the overlap between these two areas can be accounted for by their aims or founding principles. Both were reacting to commercial theatre. The domination of the long run was countered by frequent changes of bill and the star system was rejected in favour of an ensemble approach to casting and performance (Richards 110). Perhaps

²¹There is a distinction drawn between "pure" repertory (based on the continental model) and repertory in the English sense. In the former, there are changes of bill within one week--while some plays are in production, others are being prepared. English repertory, for the most part, involved one play in production for short runs, usually of one or two weeks, while the next was being prepared.

the most important distinction to be made between these areas of activity is more a geographic than an organizational or artistic one. One of the problems affecting the regional repertories (I refer here to the major repertory theatres outside London such as Dublin's Abbey, the Manchester Gaiety, Glasgow Rep, Liverpool Rep and Birmingham Rep) which was not a concern for those based in and around London was what Richards describes as "the rotational occupancy of provincial theatres by London-based touring companies" (Richards 110). He goes on to add: "Most repertory theatres in major provincial towns had specific local purposes--to provide regular quality drama alternatives for towns mainly provisioned by touring companies, and to give provincial communities a sense of cultural identity" (111).

The regional/national issue was, and continues to be, an important one. These groups were not only responding to London theatre, but also to what London had come to represent in a broader cultural sense. Referring to West End theatre Davies points out: "Appealing to a largely middle-class and metropolitan clientele, the plays tended to reflect their background and share its assumptions . . . the drawing-room comedy or genteel well-made play meant little in Dublin or Glasgow" (47). But, given that there were no alternatives, this type of theatre became normalized. In the case of Scotland, James Bridie, founder of the Citizen's

Theatre, claimed:

The theatre is a very traditional organism and we have always associated showmanship with London. Our ear has become attuned to the London accent on the stage and to the London idiom in playwriting. It is that association I am trying to break down (Marshall 196).

Given the relationship between language and cultural/regional identity, it is no coincidence that the first significant regional reps grew up in places with strong identities of their own.

Two of the first important ones, funded initially by Annie Horniman, were the Abbey Theatre in Dublin (1904) and the Gaiety in Manchester (1908). Both of these theatres were responsible for encouraging and providing a forum for new and local playwriting. In the case of the Abbey, its strong nationalist politics eventually resulted in Horniman's withdrawal. Nicoll attributes this to Horniman's concern with "dramatic excellence" first and foremost, and uses it to warn "those who are inclined to subordinate theatrical endeavours to political aims" (60). Not unlike the Abbey's nationalist character, the Gaiety was founded as a regional theatre with, as Nicoll describes, "particular emphasis upon what may be called the 'social' content of new plays" (61). Dealing with issues such as the position of women and the problem of housing, Davies notes that "The best of the Gaiety plays were rooted in the specific detail and occurrences of everyday life, often located in a topical

Lancashire setting" (54). The viability of these first major ventures provided models and the incentive for people in other provincial centres interested in cultivating a more locally rooted theatre.²²

The concern with localism or community went beyond the actual repertoire. While some of the repertory theatres were funded by wealthy patrons like Ann Horniman and Barry Jackson, others depended on and encouraged more broadly-based support. The Liverpool Playhouse was one of the best examples of this at the time: "a Limited Liability Company was formed on a broader basis than had been attempted elsewhere, drawing its finances, not from single generous donors or from a limited circle of supporters, but from the investments made by no fewer than 1,300 shareholders" (Nicoll, *Beginnings* 64). For this reason, Marshall saw the Playhouse as "genuinely 'belong[ing]' to Liverpool" (196). While many of the early reps suffered financially, the concern with community support and making the theatre an integral part of the artistic life of a city distinguishes them from the play-producing societies and links them with later developments in the establishment

²² Alfred Wareing founded the Scottish Repertory Theatre in Glasgow (1909), Basil Dean the Liverpool Repertory Theatre (1911), and Barry Jackson the Birmingham Repertory Theatre (1913).

civic theatres.

Although in theory, or perhaps in sentiment, the regional reps adopted more inclusive policies regarding their repertoires and audiences, in practice many of them did not differ greatly from the play-producing societies. Kenneth Richards sums up this problem:

provincial repertories were, in the main, although not 'experimental' or 'art' houses, no less 'minority' theatres than those of London. If they provided quality theatre at popular prices, quality was invariably conceived in literary and intellectual terms, and they were initiated and largely supported by the educated middle classes. Intellectual élitism allied with the theatre's new-won respectability to strengthen the middle-class hold on straight theatre (111).

More contemporary commentators were fully aware of the limited appeal of the theatres. Cecil Chisholm, writing in 1934 about the repertory movement, claims: "The serious legitimate theatre finds its audience increasingly limited to the small fraction of the middle-class which represents our intelligentsia, and to a percentage of those working-class folk who have attended secondary schools" (20). He goes on to attribute this to the failure on the part of schools to cultivate a taste for the drama and urges that the "future of the repertory theatre depends on getting that public [the intelligent playgoers] to make its visit to the theatre a weekly habit" (20). Chisholm's attitude betrays the all too common assumptions underlying the uncritical or unselfconscious use of terms such as "serious"

or "intelligent" drama. Ultimately the repertories did not escape this patronizing approach to audiences--with enough exposure or education, the West End and cinema audiences could come to appreciate "serious" theatre.

The repertories also faced problems on a more practical level. Any account of rep theatre is not without a description of the agonies of mounting plays on a weekly or fortnightly basis.²³ For actors, they provided the training grounds lost with the demise of the stock companies, but it was a difficult pace for anyone to sustain. In addition, financial precariousness affected the extent to which repertories could actually produce the plays of new writers (Davies 57); it necessitated the occasional "bow to popular likings" (Chisholm 16); and it forced them to accept West End transfers, with all the destructive effects which accompanied this practice. As Nicoll notes, not only did the outbreak of war in 1914 put a temporary end to the repertories, but inflated costs of theatre after the war

²³The reason for the development of short runs as opposed to "true" repertory is frequently attributed to the theatre-going habits of English audiences. Richards claims: "There had to be compromise with an apparently ineradicable audience taste for the long run, and with the sense of occasion that had come to be associated with theatregoing" (Richards 110). Chisholm in more adamant terms blames this system on the "incorrigible laziness of the British playgoer" who cannot deal with the task of selecting one of three plays offered in a week (16).

exacerbated their financial difficulties. Practitioners and commentators were well aware that without the kind of national organization and patronage of the theatre found in other countries such as the Soviet Union, Germany, and France, a healthy non-commercial or experimental theatre could not survive for long.

Financing, which was crucial to the artistic life of the play-producing societies and the repertories, was not as primary an issue for the third major area I would like to discuss--politically based theatre. In fact, the groups included here, particularly those involved in the Workers' Theatre Movement (WTM), managed to make a virtue of necessity, taking advantage of the lack of resources to create new forms of theatre. These groups not only represent a significant break from the commercial theatre, but also from the "alternative" ventures already discussed. Perhaps the first and one of the most important distinctions to be made is that politically-based theatre did not consider the production of plays as an end in itself, but as part of a larger process of agitation and education. This stemmed from the fact that these groups grew out of, or were affiliated with, organized movements such as the labour movement or the suffrage movement. The repertories and play-producing societies were "political" insofar as they drew attention to regional/national and social questions and opposed censorship of the stage, but this was not a consistent

feature of their work. Ultimately the primary aim of the play-producing societies and reps was to offer artistic products for consumption for those interested and willing audiences.

Politically-Based Theatre: The Suffragettes

Before turning to the Workers' Theatre Movement, I would like to take a brief look at suffrage theatre because it serves as an interesting transitional case.²⁴ Both the Actresses' Franchise League (AFL) and the Pioneer Players were firmly committed to using theatre as a means of furthering feminist causes, but unlike the WTM, they were not responsible for any radical departures in terms of theatrical forms. In part this is due to the members' backgrounds. For instance, the AFL, a suffrage society formed in 1908, was made up of leading actresses of the time who had resolved to do their part in support of the suffrage societies and their struggle for the enfranchisement of women. But, as Julie Holledge notes, "almost all the actresses [550 members by 1911] worked in the straight theatre" and, as a result, "little attempt was made by the

²⁴For a useful discussion of these societies, see Julie Holledge's *Innocent Flowers: Women in the Edwardian Theatre*, Virago (1981).

League to introduce propaganda sketches to the music hall stage" (81). While some interest was periodically shown in experimenting with new forms, according to Holledge, "the theatrical style of these plays [the basis of the AFL repertoire] was derived from the social dramas of Granville Barker and Shaw, which attempted to expose social ills in an ultra-naturalistic form" (65).

But the work of the AFL represented important departures in other ways. Rather than ends in themselves, the plays were part of larger, organized events. Initially the actresses' participation in the movement's activities was based on putting their performance skills to use--delivering political speeches and training other women in public speaking (Holledge 59). The idea of putting on plays grew out of the tendency to break up political meetings with entertainments such as poem recitals and songs in the tradition of labour-based groups (Holledge 60). Plays were quickly seized upon as more effective vehicles than conventional speeches for conveying political messages; according to the Pioneer Players, "one play is worth a hundred speeches where propaganda is concerned" (Holledge 123).

Political priorities influenced other areas of play production as well and, as a result, the AFL's practices differed from those of the play-producing societies and repertories in significant ways. Because meetings were held

in a variety of different locations, AFL productions were not confined to theatres. In its search for material, the League demanded flexibility--"plays which could be performed anywhere from a drawing room to a civic hall"--and suitability in terms of subject matter and message. Since no body of suffrage literature existed, the League had to actively encourage and rely on new writing. As a repertoire was gradually formed, the AFL made scripts available to other suffrage societies interested in putting on plays for themselves.

Rather than isolating its activity or monopolizing suffrage theatre, the AFL promoted and organized play production. As Holledge describes:

The tradition of drawing-room amateur theatre, which dated from the late Victorian era, made it comparatively easy for the AFL to persuade women to produce their own suffrage plays. . . . It became the policy of the AFL to provide theatre groups, whenever possible, with scripts and expert assistance in the form of a director. By 1911, amateur performances had multiplied so much that the entertainments at suffrage fairs and exhibitions were provided partly by the AFL and partly by local suffragists (72).

The scope of the League's organizational work was possible by means of its five regional offices--London, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Liverpool and Eastbourne--and, as Holledge notes, this allowed for contact with a broad audience, including working-class audiences (80-81).

Many of these practices were shared by groups based in

the labour movement and will be examined in greater detail in the context of the Workers' Theatre Movement. One of the suffrage theatre's most important innovations was to foreground gender in its rejection of the dominant modes of theatrical production. Holledge explains that after devoting itself to general issues affecting women, such as getting the vote, the League began to break new ground in its own male dominated profession:

A degree of equality had always existed on the stage; the discrimination which did exist related more to the size, number and nature of women's roles than to the conditions in rehearsal and performance. However, off-stage the theatre was controlled almost exclusively by men. The play department [of the AFL] had given women opportunity to stage-manage, administrate and design, but this was only part-time, unpaid work. Instead of convincing the actor-managers and major theatre companies to employ these women, the League decided to set up an independent Women's Theatre Company (92).

The women's movement itself, by means of individual shares and advanced bookings, served as the source for financing the first season.

In the same spirit, Edy Craig, affiliated with the AFL, founded the Pioneer Players in 1911 in order to "produce plays dealing with all kinds of movements of contemporary interest" (123). Although this group allowed itself a broader mandate, like the Women's Theatre Company, all the areas of administration and production were controlled by women. According to a critic at the time, even

the audience at the first performance was almost entirely made up of women; George Bernard Shaw was one of two men present (Hollidge 124). Despite its administrative policies and political roots, the Pioneer Players under Edy Craig belongs, to some extent, to the tradition of the play-producing or Sunday societies. The company survived the war, but eventually fell victim to inflated theatre rents and production costs after the war when "a Sunday night theatre society relying on subscriptions was not economically viable" (Hollidge 145).

Breaking New Ground: The Workers' Theatre Movement

Some of the tendencies evident in suffrage theatre--such as the need for new, suitable material, the flexibility in terms of venue, and the contact with broader audiences--were developed even further by the Workers' Theatre Movement. The WTM is of particular importance to this study and will be looked at in greater detail for a number of reasons. In the context of the prewar period, it represents the most radical departure from commercial theatre and provides a model which is relevant to an examination of postwar forms of political theatre. The links between these early groups and those of the post 1968 period are more important than most critics suggest or are willing to explore. Like suffrage theatre, workers' theatre has been

"underprivileged" historically, making it generally less accessible. Not until the eighties has a significant body of material been written and original documents recovered and published. But the debates over approaches to form and audience in the early 30s, and the eventual demise of the movement have parallels in the late sixties and early seventies, and raise important questions for theatre workers and academics today.

It is generally agreed that the WTM dates from 1928 to 1936, beginning with the Hackney People's Players successful production of the *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* and ending with the establishment of Unity Theatre. While the WTM is considered the "first organized political theatre in [Britain]" (Goorney, "Epilogue" 199), it by no means represented the beginning of theatrical activity stemming from the socialist and labour movements. "Dramatic entertainments", while marginal in terms of importance, had become a regular feature of meetings and social events, even before the 20s, for organizations such as the Independent Labour Party, the Social Democratic Federation, the Socialist Sunday Schools, and the Clarion League (Samuel 104). What distinguishes the WTM is the extent to which it was able to revolutionize, in Britain, both the purposes of theatre, the forms it could take, and the audiences it could reach.

The WTM rejected not only the commercial theatre, but

also the areas described thus far in this study as "alternative". A statement produced for the First National Conference of the WTM in June 1932 offers a useful account of how the movement saw itself in the larger context of theatrical production at the time.²⁵ The critique of the "capitalist" [commercial] theatre was directed at its deliberate avoidance of the existence of class struggle: "Nine-tenths of life, as the mass of people know it, is taboo at the theatres and cinemas today, and they attempt to cover up their bankruptcy of ideas by means of extravagant and meaningless display" (129). The response to this triviality on the part of "left-wing" theatres (referring here to the little and repertory theatres already discussed) was seen as no better:

The revolt of the intellectuals against the triviality of the large-scale capitalist theatre finds its expression in the rise of the 'little' and repertory theatres, and, also in the advanced section of the amateur dramatic movement. However, such theatres do not realise that the capitalist basis of the bourgeois theatre is the cause of this triviality, and, proclaiming themselves to be 'above the battle', lose themselves in ingenious but sterile technicalities and experiments (129).

²⁵The statement, titled "The Basis and Development of the Workers' Theatre Movement" is included in "Documents and Texts from the Workers' Theatre Movement (1928-1936)" in *History Workshop Journal* November 1977, #4. Subsequent references to the statement will refer to this source.

Even the work of the Labour Party, I.L.P. and Co-op groups was not beyond attack. The criticisms here were based on the tendencies of these groups to try to elevate the working-class by bringing it "into contact with 'great' art (i.e. capitalist art)" and to produce plays which may indeed have dealt with the struggle of workers, but conveyed a defeatist message and "show[ed] no way out" (130).

Instead, as an alternative, the Workers' theatre was determined to achieve something different and more effective as the conference statement outlines:

the Workers' Theatre does not pretend to be above the struggle. It is an expression of the workers' struggle in dramatic form. It is consciously a weapon of the workers' revolution, which is the only solution of the present crisis. It not only unmasks the capitalist system but organizes the workers to fight their way out. Because it deals with realities it escapes from the emptiness of bourgeois drama and becomes the first step in the development of proletarian drama (130).

The emphasis here on class struggle and revolution highlight the movement's partisan politics which are crucial to an understanding of how it chose to operate. As Raphael Samuel points out:

The rise and extension of the WTM was closely associated with the 'Left' turn in the Communist International (1928- 34), and its translation into terms of 'class against class' in Britain. Though developing, in many cases, out of a pre-existing tradition of Labour drama, it mirrored the sharp break which took place between Labour and Communist in these years. The WTM stepped zestfully into this breach (106).

While the sectarian basis of the WTM proved, ultimately, to be the main factor in its downfall, initially, it was a source of strength. By foregrounding theatre's propagandist potential and, at the same time, exploiting its entertainment value, these groups assumed an important role, in Samuel's terms, as a "cultural shock-brigade" in Communist Party life. This was only made possible through a complete break from conventional methods of theatrical production.

The Hackney People's Players' first shows, as Tom Thomas recounts, were set pieces which required all of the trappings such as a stage and lengthy rehearsals.²⁶ These productions included one full length piece (Thomas's stage adaptation of Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*), a few one-act plays, and a single performance of Upton Sinclair's *The Singing Jailbirds*. These productions provided an important start for this particular group, but they also raised a number of problems which the movement, as a whole, was to confront again and again.

A major problem was that of repertoire. As in the case

²⁶Tom Thomas' account of the WTM is based on recordings made before his death in 1977, especially for the *History Workshop* feature. References to Thomas are from "A Propertyless Theatre for a Propertyless Class" in "Documents and Texts from the Workers' Theatre Movement (1928-1936)," *History Workshop Journal*, Nov. 1977.

of suffrage theatre, there was no existing body of suitable plays to draw from. Thomas recalls what, at the time, was a dilemma for most socialist theatre workers:

I spent many hours in the library of the British Drama League, searching for plays which dealt with the realities of the lives of the working class in Britain, and which analysed or dissected the social system which had failed to prevent the war, had completely failed to deliver the 'homes for heroes' promised during the war, and maintained a class system in which the wealthy flourished, and the great majority of people were their wage slaves. But I could find no such plays. So it was clear that if the People's Players was to fulfill its aim of exposing the evils of the capitalist system, and the oppression of the people, then the plays had to be written (116).

The shortage of suitable material was a problem which plagued the movement throughout its active years. Even the First National Conference Statement deals specifically with the issue, recommending collective writing as a way to improve both the production of material and the political training of group members. The method which the report outlines--collective research and discussion, followed by the writing which is undertaken by one or more of the members--is the same process used by many of the alternative groups in the post 1968 period, but never had the aid of arts subsidies available later.

The lack of existing material and the need for new plays of social significance led to two more problems. The first involved what kind of message was to be conveyed

through the plays--a problem which is central to politically-based groups. The issue arose in suffrage theatre in relation to the Women's Theatre Company's production of Brioux's *La Femme Seule*, a play about an upper-class woman who tries to support herself by working but is unsuccessful and must return to her role as a mistress. Holledge describes the reaction to the play's conclusion:

The response of the suffrage critics to Brioux's play raised fundamental questions in the play department about the nature of political theatre. In effect, the suffrage movement was demanding plays in which the last act portrayed women as happy, independent and victorious, rather than lonely and defeated. The implication of this demand was that theatre should serve the political aims of the movement by posing an ideal to which its audience could aspire, instead of realistically depicting the oppression of women (96).

But these concerns were not peculiar to the suffrage theatre.

For the Hackney group, the crisis arose with the production of *The Singing Jailbirds*. Although they played the opening night to a "packed house", there were no subsequent performances because, as Thomas recalls:

we realised that in spite of its powerful appeal, the effect of the play was profoundly pessimistic. In the play, the Wobblies [Industrial Workers of the World] are not released from their cells. They suffer as martyrs in their cause. The play was in effect a glorification of martyrdom. Was this the message we wanted to give our audiences? (119)

It is worth stressing how important the need for positive images was, given the political climate at the time. Leonard Jones suggests: "It would seem that the WTM's growing desire to present material that postulated 'success' was a reflex against the growing disillusionment and frustration brought on by failure of the second Labour Government to apply socialist solutions to the growing economic crisis, a failure and betrayal which led to the catastrophic electoral defeat of the Labour Movement in the autumn of 1931" (280). The issue of "message" was closely connected to, and eventually remedied by, the solution to the second problem--dramatic form.

The suffrage groups, although they never broke away from naturalistic theatre, were aware of its limitations in terms of "message". With regard to Brioux's play and the need for ideal images, Holledge explains:

But the actresses had not developed a theatrical style which could portray this ideal in a satisfactory way. They had been trained to create three-dimensional characters for a naturalistic theatre and in the short propaganda plays--when a character was given a political as opposed to an emotional justification--they had been dissatisfied with the two-dimensional result. The dilemma they faced was whether to pursue the tradition of social drama which, by depicting victims, shamed the audience into political action, or develop a new form of theatre which could successfully represent an alternative (96).

The Women's Theatre Company did not have the opportunity to experiment since its activities were brought to an end with

the First World War. But the WTM was successful in finding a form to suit its needs. Perhaps the most important achievement or contribution on the part of the WTM was its development of agit-prop and revue in Britain. The break from naturalistic forms happened for a number of reasons. In ideological terms, naturalism was equated with the commercial/capitalist theatre. On a more practical level, it required an indoor space, even if not a theatre proper, which in turn imposed limitations on the number and types of audiences the plays could reach (First National Conference Statement 131). These groups sought a more flexible and portable form, as well as one which was less time consuming in terms of developing and rehearsing scripts.

The statement from the First National Conference also outlines some of the formal restrictions related to the naturalistic method. First, it points to the difficulty of delving beneath the surface in a form which lends itself to presenting "the polite surface of capitalist society". Secondly, the report notes "That the unities of space and time, which are one of its main features, greatly hinder the portrayal of the class struggle in dramatic form (consider for instance the difficulty in bringing together in a reasonable, naturalistic way, an ordinary worker and an important capitalist)". Also connected to the shift in form was the desire to present brighter and more encouraging material which was possible through the use of music and

song and to allow for participation on the part of the audience (120). All of these factors eventually resulted in the WTM's commitment to a pared down, agit-prop style representing the antithesis of the commercial theatre--in Thomas's words:

Instead of a theatre of illusion ours was to be a theatre of ideas, with people dressed up in ordinary working clothes. No costumes, no props, no special stage. 'A propertyless theatre for the propertyless class' (121).

As a dramatic form, agit-prop proved to be extremely liberating, making it possible for these groups to use theatre in practical ways. Its portability was particularly important and is best summed up by the First National Conference report:

No longer does the Workers' Theatre play--as do the amateur dramatic societies--to a circle of friends and relatives. It goes out to the workers wherever they may be, at meetings, on the street corners, in the parks; and now has the immediate task facing it of taking their performances to where the workers are actually waging the class struggle, at the factories, the Labour Exchanges, etc. (131).

The material itself was infinitely flexible. Sketches could be put together quickly and kept up to date, and the revue format, which combined songs, satirical sketches, and scenes, could also be easily altered.²⁷ As Samuel notes, the

²⁷ Although the WTM was influenced, through direct contact,

WTM tried, whenever possible, to work around specific agitations (i.e. performing for striking workers, at house evictions, or mining disasters). The performances were often used as an occasion for raising funds and gathering food and clothing for the victims of these situations. These factors no doubt contributed to the growth of the movement--more people were getting involved and writing their own material, all over Britain. Thomas notes the intense activity and growth of the WTM in 1931 and 1932. The journal *Red Stage*, founded by Charlie Mann, served as a link between groups and provided a forum for publishing sketches.

While agit-prop was the answer many theatre workers had been waiting for, others were less enthusiastic. It not only created the crucial debate about dramatic form, but it also caused rifts based on related issues. There was conflict concerning what some saw as aesthetic versus political priorities. Ewan MacColl describes the split that occurred in one of the first groups with which he was involved in Manchester. The crisis arose over an experimental piece called *Still Talking* which had been

with agit-prop forms in Germany, Raphael Samuel notes that "nevertheless the evolution in the direction of sketches and cabaret was an indigenous British development, which preceded the movement's contact with Germany" (107). It is also important to note that these forms derive from popular entertainment such as music hall and variety.

conceived as "an open-ended happening at a political meeting" and involved the audience in a completely new way. He recalls:

Still Talking was only performed on four or five occasions but as far as we were concerned it was a completely successful show. In that success, however, lay the seeds of the Clarion Players' destruction, for the group was now almost evenly divided between those who believed that *Still Talking* was a signpost pointing to the group's future and those who felt that such an approach would result in a theatre where there would be no room for writers other than those who could draft political speeches and pamphlets. The actors would become political orators and all those with a genuine love of theatre would be alienated. . . . In the end, the inevitable happened; the theatre-first people abandoned the group leaving the political faction to run things as best they could ("Introduction" xxi).

Such divisions became even more frequent in the thirties when members of different areas of the theatrical profession began to show an interest in political theatre.

Closely connected to this debate were the conflicts between professionals and non-professionals. On the whole, the WTM groups were drawn from amateur dramatic clubs, political activists, and community members. Techniques and maintaining a high standard of performance were important considerations for many, and some believed that the involvement of professionals could be useful in these areas. At the same time there was a great deal of fear and suspicion about the increasing numbers of professionals who were getting involved in WTM and "Left" theatre groups. The

reasons for this influx were political (particularly the rise of Fascism in Germany and the Spanish Civil War), as well as artistic (a dissatisfaction with the commercial theatre) (Stourac and McCreery 252-53).

The WTM's objections to professional input were based primarily on motives and possible long terms effects. Many had worked very hard to create a form of theatre which grew out of strong political convictions and contributed to a larger plan for change. There was a fear of what Charles Mann described as, "the attempt to legitimize the WTM, make it more as Unity Theatre developed, skillful actors presenting pictures to an audience for entertainment" (Stourac and McCreery 252). The risk was that "serving the theatre" would become more important than "serving the class". These fears were not unjustified. There were already, by the time of the International Workers' Theatre Olympiad in Moscow in 1933, signs of a shift back to social realism and the curtained stage, particularly on the part of groups like the Rebel Players (one of the first groups to take on a professional director).

The changes in the political climate in the mid thirties which attracted professionals were the same ones which led to the dissolution of the WTM by 1936. Samuel sums up the realignment of class forces which came to be fundamentally at odds with the WTM's sectarian tendencies:

Very summarily and crudely one may suggest that

the WTM was a casualty of the Popular Front, and the change in the Communist Party line from 'class against class' to that of the broad 'progressive' alliance--the eventual response of British Communists, like those elsewhere, to the rise of Hitler Germany (108).

Thomas points to the more formal problem of dealing with the new issues, for a movement that had criticized the Labour Party and the I.L.P. as severely as it had the National Government:

The new popular front line didn't lend itself as easily to popular theatre. In theatre terms, it's much more difficult to present an argument for a constructive line, like building a united front against fascism, than to write satires and attacks on the class enemy . . . Agit-Prop theatre is difficult to maintain without a political movement to carry it forward (125).

In the end, the WTM was subsumed by Unity Theatre and the "Left" theatre groups, and their move back to indoor theatre and social realist full-length plays--a tendency already underway in the Soviet Union by the early thirties.

Given the variety of attempts by repertory companies and play-producing societies to break away from the commercial theatre in the early part of the century, the achievements of the WTM are significant. The movement helped to redefine the function and content of theatre--treating theatre not as an end in itself, but as part of a larger process of agitation and education; by exploiting portable and flexible performance styles it liberated theatre from the confines of theatre buildings and brought it directly to

the working-class audiences it wanted to reach; by employing collective approaches to writing and production it offered an alternative to the more conventional, hierarchical methods; by means of touring and the establishment of groups in different parts of the country, it contributed to the decentralization of theatrical activity away from London; finally, it exerted an important influence on the whole generation of theatre workers who went on to work during and after the war.

Along with its achievements, the demise of the WTM is important and instructive. It demonstrates how the progress or fate of a politically based group is inextricable from its cause or movement. To some extent this was true of the AFL. Its origins lay in the struggle to get the vote for women, but this issue was rendered less urgent at the outbreak of war. Holledge notes that the Government granted the franchise (to women over thirty) in 1917 and the AFL did not resume its activities after the war (100).

In the case of the WTM, it was affected by changes in the political and economic climate. In addition to the formation of the Popular Front, there were other factors which had an impact on the work of the WTM and the people involved in it. Stourac and McCreery draw attention to the improving British economy in the mid-thirties and the implications it had for housing and employment. With regard to improving employment opportunities, they note:

The fact that jobs were more readily available had two ramifications. There were fewer unemployed WTM members with time to spare for the Movement. And one of the most important sections of their audience, the unemployed, for whom they wrote numerous sketches, were no longer so numerous. Nor were they so receptive to agitation which tended to simplify issues rather than revealing their full complexity (246).

There was also another factor affecting the availability of members, "one so obvious that it could be easily overlooked":

the pioneering youngsters who had been at the core of the Movement since the beginning were now adults with families and responsibilities. They had lived through severe unemployment and when a job or a house was offered elsewhere they felt they had to take it (246).

Such factors cannot be underestimated, particularly when people are involved on a voluntary basis. Considerations such as age, physical stress, and family obligations come to the fore again later with the theatre collectives in the seventies.

In looking at how the WTM eventually gave way to Unity Theatre, Jon Clark links the political and economic factors with form:

Historically, agitprop (in Germany from 1924 to 1932 or in Britain between 1927 and 1935 and 1968 and 1974, for example) has played a major role as a form of socialist theatre at times of heightened and overt industrial and political conflict, and has often represented an attempt consciously to break with the individual and psychological orientation of traditional 'naturalist' or even 'social realist' theatre. While the agitprop of the WTM had addressed

almost exclusively an audience of the militant industrial working class and the unemployed. the 'Left' theatre groups of the middle and late thirties were operating at a time of declining unemployment and industrial militancy and yet increasing danger of fascism and war which demanded the creation of a broadly based movement (224-25).

Douglas Allen arrives at a similar analysis in his discussion of the "evolution to socialist realism" in relation to the Glasgow Workers Theatre Group and its incorporation into Glasgow Unity.²⁸ He claims: "The GWTG's subsequent adoption (as Unity Theatre) of the realist proscenium stage is not just a formal aesthetic development--it mirrors the decline of radical politics and the absorption of the labour movement and parties like the CP into the system during the postwar era of Labour governments and the Welfare State" (50). Clark's and Allen's analyses are of particular relevance to the post 1968 period. There is an important analogy here with the shift from the agit-prop groups of the late sixties and early seventies, which were responding to specific political events, to the less radical or overtly revolutionary groups in the late seventies and eighties. The political and economic contexts of the later groups will be considered in

²⁸Allen notes that the Glasgow Workers Theatre Group was not a branch of the WTM (54). But the GWTG produced the same type of theatre in terms of aims, techniques, and audiences.

greater detail later.

Also contributing to the shift to more naturalistic forms was the frustration with the limitations of agit-prop, on an artistic level, felt by theatre workers--by both those the movement itself had nurtured and by the professionals from outside who were beginning to join political groups. Ewan MacColl recalls his experience with the Red Megaphones: "Our criticism of our way of working and of our repertoire became increasingly vocal throughout 1933 . . . our agit-prop sketches had been largely static, too obviously didactic and over-dependent on caricature" ("Introduction" xxix). A similar conclusion was reached by the judges, in the same year, at the International Olympiad in Moscow: "Compared with the more advanced groups from Scandinavia, Germany and the USSR, the ill-prepared British delegation did not score well, as Philip Firestein vividly remembers: 'the judges . . . made marks, came to the last day, the results were announced . . . Britain came last, they said we were amateurs, our plays were too raw, we kept shouting slogans all the time'" (Stourac and McCreery 241). But the WTM's arrested development was not simply due to the limitations of agit-prop as a form.

Stourac and McCreery offer some of the reasons for the WTM's "artistic stagnation" and why the movement never went beyond agitational revue sketches. Accounting for the shortcomings of the repertoire, they note:

The movement in Britain was much smaller than in Germany and the USSR, with the result that there were too few dedicated people trying to do too much with too little. The lack of writers bedevilled the groups from beginning to end. Short revue sketches were easier to churn out than complex montage sequences, and certainly more suited to collective writing (266).

In addition, despite the WTM's affiliation with the British Communist Party, the movement did not receive any material support, so practical difficulties impeded political and artistic development.²⁹ Stourac and McCreery argue:

Had the Party thrown its weight behind the WTM there could have been more and better organized performances as part of campaigns and struggles. . . . And if the CP had not been so blind to the dangers of sectarianism, it would have been easier for both WTM and Party to get to the less militant workers they seldom reached except through street work. Objective conditions would have then *forced* the groups to develop new and better forms capable of educating, persuading and mobilizing the majority of working people, not just confirming and reinforcing what their more conscious audiences already largely knew (266).

The lack of support for cultural activities from left-wing

²⁹They also relate the movement's lack of artistic development to the Communist Party's shortsighted policies. They suggest that "The mistaken assessment of the economic situation led to a belief that this capitalist crisis was the final one and would precipitate a revolutionary upsurge. Such an analysis favoured agitation--for one last quick effort to overturn the tottering system--instead of the huge job of propaganda which was necessary in the long-term struggle with a recovering capitalist class" (266).

parties has been characteristic in England, compared to the left-wing in Europe, and the problem recurs in the seventies. Stourac and McCreery also suggest that the WTM went too far in cutting itself off from conventional forms: "Charles Mann considers today that the movement's unwillingness to learn from and adapt 'legitimate' stage techniques, the tendency to dismiss all bourgeois culture instead of critically absorbing those aspects which would have been useful, was one of the WTM's greatest drawbacks" (267).

It might similarly be argued that the WTM did not take full advantage of the techniques available in popular forms of entertainment such as music-hall and variety, even though the politically based groups, because of their working-class audiences, were the only alternative ventures to draw from that popular tradition of entertainment. It is easy to lose sight of that tradition since the conflicts over the threat of professional theatre influences always took for granted the straight theatre. While the WTM revues made use of satire and songs, the pieces most frequently discussed in accounts of the movement are sketches which treated issues in a serious way. There is little evidence that satire, humour, and music, when they did appear, were employed in as deliberate a way as in the case of the Blue Blouse groups in the Soviet Union, who regarded the combination of political material and variety entertainment as necessary in order to appeal to audiences in pubs, recognizing that after a day of

physical labour, people needed entertainment, not lecturing (Stourac and McCreery 42-3). Criticism of a sketch at the 1932 All-London Show suggests that the more dogmatic tendencies in the WTM even rejected these popular forms as sources for their work. The assessment of one particular sketch read: "The laughs got by presenting the police in a humorous way destroys the value of our propaganda. The comic policeman tradition of the music halls must have no place in the Workers' Theatre" (Stourac and McCreery 236). But the appeal of music hall to working-class audiences cannot be underestimated and Bram Bootman of Unity Theatre learned this later when, in 1956 at a conference of trade unionists, the workers told him:

We do not want plays that deal with working class lives [the socialist realist plays Unity produced after its return to the curtain stage] . . . Our wives won't come. They say, 'We know that already.' Put on old-time music hall, and we will bring you block bookings galore (Stourac and McCreery 262).

Bootman concluded that "The best work we ever did at Unity looking back, was the satirical revues, which were on the ball, had poison darts in them, the songs, the wit . . . used to have all types of audience with us then" and his inclination, which was not realized, was to return to a presentational style of performance without the trappings of theatre (Stourac and McCreery 202). The tension between agit-prop and bourgeois forms seems to have been a greater

source for debate than the relationship between political forms and music hall in the prewar context, but the issue of popular forms is important to later groups such as Theatre Workshop and 7:84 (Scotland).

While agit-prop clearly had limitations, the form did not disappear. The people who went on to form Left and Unity groups either came directly from or were familiar with the WTM, and agit-prop had exerted an influence on their performance styles. As groups moved back indoors, street theatre techniques went with them. Rather than making a clean break from the WTM, the socialist groups of the mid to late thirties adopted a more synthetic approach to form. Douglas Allen outlines the emergence of "agit-realism" in plays like *Waiting for Lefty* which he claims "combine the best of all these features, with its psychological realism and identification of the characters, its minimal stage settings and audience dynamism" (50). Classifying "agit-realism" as an important stage in the development of political theatre, he accounts for it as "a complex form located somewhere between the comparative simplicities of 1920s agitprop and 1940s socialist realism, a hybrid form which suited perfectly the mood and complexities of the Popular Front era" (50).³⁰

³⁰With regard to assessing the significance of the transition

This transition is demonstrated most clearly by Unity Theatre which was formed in 1936, initially as an amateur company, consisting of former WTM members and professional theatre workers. About Unity's repertoire, Clark claims that, although the one-act play was the predominant form (*Odet's Waiting For Lefty* being the most successful), the company made use of the living newspaper, the revue, the sketch, political pantomime, pageant, and the speech-choir or mass chant. The range of forms, along with a permanent theatre,³¹ joint projects with the Left Book Club, summer schools and night classes designed to teach theatre skills and aid in the development of new companies, and provincial tours were all part of Unity's attempts to create a more broadly based organization and to reach a more broadly based audience. Clark suggests: "the desire of the Rebel Players

to "agit-realism", Allen raises a very interesting question. He writes "Whether this development--or its subsequent evolution to socialist realism--was the attaining of maturity after a period of adolescent experimentation, or the degeneration of revolutionary potential impotence, is a live matter of debate today" (50).

³¹Unity's first space was St Jude's Church Hall, Britannia Street, King's Cross. But the company moved to new premises in 1937, an old Methodist Church previously used as a doss-house on Goldington Street in North London. Extensive renovations were made possible by voluntary labour on the part of members and the finished product, according to Clark was "a new theatre contain[ing] a large, well-equipped stage with an auditorium seating 323 people, rehearsal, dressing and club rooms, an office, a workshop, a bar and storage space" (226).

and other such groups to establish permanent amateur theatres with proper rehearsal facilities and technical equipment arose out of their recognition that winning a wider audience for the fight against fascism and for socialism demanded a more 'aesthetically convincing' basis of theatrical performance" (225).³²

Unity's interest in conveying the socialist message to other audiences, as well as to working-class audiences, marks its departure from the work of the WTM and it represents a prominent tendency in political theatre which was to continue. Unity's role in the anti-fascist struggle before the war was looked upon with optimism by John Allen, first national organizer for the Left Book Club Theatre Guild:

The audiences who come to the Unity Theatre Club are even more varied [than the cast], for they are not solely confined to members of the working class. A theatre such as this is continually presenting left-wing opinions and problems to people who would never dream of attending a political meeting; and if those ideas are presented in a way that is theatrically effective, they will have a considerable influence on those members of the audience.

³²It is interesting to note the relationship between Unity's insistence on high production standards and the achievements of cinema (without doubt the most popular form of entertainment at the time). In summarizing the substance of Unity's manifesto, Marshall connects the emphasis on standards with the belief that "if the people are still artistically naive yet they have been nurtured on the cinema and demand technical competence" (102).

(Clark 226)

While the degree of influence exerted on these audiences is unclear, Unity was successful in attracting them. Davies notes that "Certainly it had become fashionable among the Bloomsbury set to visit Unity from time to time for a welcome change from the West End experience" (118). Another indication of its acceptance on the part of a wider theatregoing public are the references made to Unity in studies which make no mention of other politically-oriented groups.³³

But Unity's popularity with both "West Enders" and coach loads of trade unionists had a tendency to pull its work in different directions--the responses from these audiences were not the same. In order to illustrate this it is worth considering a review of a Unity double-bill (Brecht's *Señora Carrar's Rifles* and Odets' *Waiting for Lefty*) which Malcolm Page quotes at length from *Cavalcade*:

Theatregoers who venture North London-wards to the Unity Theatre are fairly equally divided between upper-class 'intellectual' would-be revolutionary sympathizers, who, however, are rather chary of mingling with the masses, and genuine, fully-paid-up Party members. . . .

³³For instance, Norman Marshall praises Unity in his section on amateur theatre without ever referring to its roots. Even the *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre* (Third Edition) offers a paragraph on Unity Theatre under the heading of "Amateur Theatre", while it makes no mention of other groups discussed in this section. These are only two examples.

[During the Brecht], the 'upper' half of the audience sit back happily, fully sympathetic to the woman's struggle. . . . There is nothing violent said to alarm them. . . . The Left-wingers, however, view the play with impatience. They grant that it is a true-to-life portrayal of the dilemma which faces a person opposed to bloodshed, but to them it merely typifies the 'petty-bourgeois' inaction. . . . During the strongly proletarian *Waiting for Lefty*, the positions were exactly the reverse. While the 'would-be sympathizers' squirmed in their chairs, nervously fingered their neckties, the working-class members of the audience sat back grimly, 'enjoyed' the depiction of the workers's struggles (64).

By appealing to a more broadly based audience, Unity signals a shift from politically-based to politically-oriented theatre. Stourac and McCreery conclude:

Unity Theatre was not a weapon of the class struggle, as the WTM had been, it was increasingly becoming a showcase for progressive drama on the one hand, and a place to go for a provocative, entertaining night out on the other. True, many of its active members were still working class, true, it still numbered many working class people among its audiences, true, some of its plays still dealt with important political and social questions. But the intention had changed fundamentally (259).

Rather than working in the interests of a particular movement to achieve specific ends, as in the cases of the AFL and the WTM, Unity was concerned with producing plays with a social conscience for as wide a public as it could reach.

While it grew out of workers' theatre and defined itself initially in the interests of Popular Front activities, Unity's political goals and affiliations became increasingly

generalized. Unity's reluctance to identify itself too closely with specific groups or parties was evident from the populist thrust of its original policies. This "people's theatre" was founded:

- a) to foster and further the art of drama in accordance with the principle that true art, by effectively presenting and truthfully interpreting life as experienced by the majority of the people, can move the people to work for the betterment of society.
- b) to train and encourage actors, producers and playwrights in accordance with the above ideals.
- c) to devise, import and experiment with new forms of dramatic art (Page 61).

Unity's artistic or theatrical goals were more clearly defined than its political aims and it is here that its greatest achievements lie.³⁴ Unity became a nation wide theatrical movement which managed to continue its work during and after the war, by which time it had fifty branches (two of them professional) and two million members (Chambers and Prior 29).

The movement was perhaps unrivalled in terms of the scale of its activities. Norman Marshall explains:

³⁴While this was the case with London Unity, it was not necessarily true of other Unity theatres which formed later. For instance, Glasgow Unity, which opened in 1941, had specific regional/national concerns: "Unity aims at a theatre indigenous to the people of Glasgow in particular, and Scotland in general...What we try to create is a native theatre, something which is essentially reflecting the lives of the ordinary people of Scotland" (Hill 63).

All over the country amateur companies with aims similar to those of Unity have become affiliated to it and are helped with advice on choice of plays, loan of scripts, and correspondence courses on production. In the summer there are schools for actors and producers, and in London classes are held in conjunction with the L.C.C. There is a National Organiser to encourage and assist the formation of new companies (102).

As Marshall points out, through its apprentice system of training, Unity not only broke down the barriers between amateurs and professionals (members of the professional companies were required to continue their training), but it also opened up the acting profession to those who could otherwise not afford to take it up.³⁵ The organization also instituted progressive employment policies in the case of the professional companies which were recruited from the amateur groups: "They were given two-year contracts, with guaranteed employment, children's allowances and holidays with pay" (Marshall 102). In these ways the Unity movement represented an important and viable model for organizing a network of groups and helping them overcome problems such as inadequate training, sparse repertoires, and administrative

³⁵The full implications of the professionalization of acting are felt by this time. Marshall claims: "Under the present conditions, it is difficult for anyone without private means to obtain a sound stage training unless he wins a scholarship such as one of those to the R.A.D.A. provided by the L.C.C. which not only defray the cost of tuition but also add a maintenance allowance. Consequently the stage draws its recruits from too narrow a class" (103).

difficulties which plagued companies working in isolation from one another.

Unity Theatre and the Workers' Theatre Movement raise important questions about the different shapes political theatre was able to take before the war and in more recent years. In distinguishing between labels such as "workers' theatre", "socialist theatre" and "people's theatre", Douglas Allen identifies three main positions within the spectrum of political theatre:

From the more consciously analytical vantage-point of today, we can see the divisions between the various stances--the revolutionary opposition to the ethos and the forms of traditional bourgeois culture; the reformist strategy of working with the means of that culture and society to change it; the populist assertion of the virtues of 'the people' with little clear analysis of position or strategy. But the demarcation lines between these positions, often obscured and blurred even today, were even more indefinite in the inter-war years (49).

The WTM was the only movement that could be considered revolutionary in terms of its aims, forms, and audiences, while the reformist and populist tendencies could be seen in groups such as Left Theatre and Unity.³⁶ What emerges is a

³⁶Left Theatre (1934-37) was a company consisting of professional actors which operated on the basis of a Sunday society. According to André van Gysegghem, one of the founding members, they wanted to bring plays with a social conscience to non-theatre-going audiences and tried to establish links with working-class organizations. For a

range of "political" theatres, each responding and subject to social, economic, and political factors.

Conclusion

As I noted at the beginning of the chapter, the scope of this opening survey is deliberately broad for a number of reasons. While my chief interest lies in the area of politically-based theatre as background for the socialist theatre groups post 1968, the contribution of this sector is best understood when viewed in the context of other "oppositional" or "alternative" tendencies. For instance, the WTM is rarely examined as part of general theatrical trends because it is excluded from the standard histories of the period and the studies in which it is included focus almost exclusively on left-wing theatre and political movements. But it is necessary to consider it in this larger context because the WTM, as the statement from the First National Conference indicated, consciously defined itself in opposition to the "little" and repertory theatres, as well as the "large-scale capitalist theatre" or West End. I have treated the different areas in a schematic way mainly to

brief account see van Gysegem's "British Theatre in the Thirties" in *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties*.

underscore the distinctions between their aims and practices, but the categories are never clear cut and occasionally these strands overlap, as the regional reps demonstrated. While I would maintain that two general tendencies emerge in experimental theatre in this century--theatre whose intentions are primarily aesthetic and formalist in avant-garde terms, and theatre which regards itself as playing an active role in social, political change at a popular or grass-roots level--the distinctions are often blurred. The similarities and differences between these different areas in the pre-war years are relevant to more contemporary work where the distinctions become more urgent because of overly inclusive labels such as "alternative".

In these ways this opening survey prepares the ground for the discussion which follows, namely the re-emergence of popular political theatre in the post 1968 period and its patterns of development in a larger context of experimental theatre. But the fates of the prewar groups are also important for understanding the symbiotic relationship between dominant and oppositional, or establishment and alternative in British theatre. In the prewar period, before state subsidies, this split is easily defined in terms of commercial and non-commercial sectors. The non-commercial ventures outlined above are characterized by a rejection of the West End as a norm or model, but they were short-lived,

while the dominant form endured, renewing itself over time by absorbing the successes thrown up by the more experimental theatres. The clubs, repertories, and politically-based groups were all vulnerable financially, and fell into similar traps--they tried to appeal to new or specialized audiences of various kinds, but without sufficient backing from private patrons or their audiences, these theatres either dissolved or were forced to compromise their original aims (engaging in the very practices they rejected) in order to appeal to larger audiences to survive. Hence, clubs suffered the consequences of West End transfers for financial survival, repertories included recent West End hits, at the expense of new writing, to insure box office returns, and Unity Theatre groups moved back into theatres and toned down their politics in order to appeal to broader audiences. Even in the case of the WTM groups whose production costs were minimal, lack of funding severely limited the possibilities of script development and the potential growth of companies. It is not surprising that workers' theatre movements in other countries, such as the Blue Blouse in the USSR, who were state supported and part of larger and dominant political movements, made some of the greatest advances in this type of theatre.

Cycles or waves of experimentation in twentieth century British theatre are due in part to social and political factors, but the economics of theatre are chiefly

responsible for its retarded growth, as compared with developments in the visual arts. Financing has always been the most serious obstacle to change in the theatre. As the survey above indicates, the exorbitant costs of productions and the potential risks for producers militated against experimentation, and the pressures of censorship along with the need to cater to conservative audience tastes resulted in a narrowly circumscribed commercial sector. A West End hit, because of the possibilities of a long-run in London followed by a tour, could reach a wide audience. While the non-commercial theatres were largely responsible for the innovations in the theatre in the prewar years--if not directly, then through staging the work of outside writers--they could not sustain themselves for long.

Theatre has always been a more vulnerable art form because of how expensive it is to produce. First, as a collaborative enterprise, professional theatre is labour intensive; it requires a script, a group of performers, a space, designers, a set, and publicity, all before any tickets are sold. Even in the case of the "propertyless" theatre of the WTM, the writers/performers needed time to develop and rehearse material, and, it must be remembered, they did not earn their livelihoods from their theatre work. Secondly, theatre is a perishable commodity; except for programmes and ticket stubs, it offers an ephemeral experience. In these ways, theatre differs strikingly from

the visual arts where artists can experiment on a more radical scale because they rely on a small, elite market for selling their work. Theatre relies on numbers to recoup costs and subsidize the experiments that do not work--the price paid for failures can be great. But occasionally even growth and success can undermine the work of small experimental companies. The economic problems inherent in the production of theatre become more complicated with the advent of state subsidies in the postwar years, when money comes available, but not without strings attached. Yet despite this change in theatre funding, the fragile and volatile nature of the prewar experiments continues to resurface in the postwar period--the wheel continues to be reinvented.

CHAPTER TWO

What is both encouraging and disconcerting is that alternative "theatres" continue to emerge and disappear, in the postwar period, for many of the same reasons they did earlier. The debates concerning the aims and forms of experimental work, particularly in relation to politically-oriented theatre, resurface in the late sixties and early seventies. But it is a case of similarity with a difference. Economics continue to play a crucial role in the work of theatre companies, and the politics of state subsidy to the arts in the postwar period are largely responsible for the changed scenario. Interest in tracing patterns of development in the two periods and attempts at theorizing the work of experimental theatre is a late development. In his examination of political theatre, Clive Barker attributes this to the structure of the British theatre and academic institutions:

But it should be remembered that the British theatre is a largely pragmatic institution which tends to develop through direct experiment. Within the area of theatre there is no established Academy tradition in Britain. University departments of Drama and Theatre

Studies did not exist before the mid-fifties and grew only slowly. . . . The result has been, in recent years, a rich flowering of talent working usually in almost total ignorance of its own past heritage and of what is happening (and has happened) in other countries. . . . Even as late as the end of the sixties when a group of professional actors presented a documentary montage on Trades Union history for the Trotskyite Socialist Labour League, the secretary of that organisation could assert that this was the first time in history that the theatre had placed itself at the service of the working-class movement and one could see from the faces of the assembled company that they believed it ("Politicisation" 269).

In the following chapter, I will explore some of the similarities between the two periods, but the main focus will be on the factors which account for the proliferation of alternative theatre companies and practices after 1968.

A significant difference between the prewar and postwar periods must be noted from the outset to clarify the framework and terminology used in this chapter. In the case of prewar theatre, by considering play-producing societies, regional reps, and politically-based groups all in terms of alternative, non-commercial ventures, I have linked together areas of theatre which were and are regarded as separate, geographically and socially. Conversely, in the case of post 1968 alternative theatre we encounter the opposite problem--a range of theatrical experiments which are treated as a homogeneous movement, mainly because the practitioners shared similar social, educational backgrounds and critical attitudes towards existing political structures. Even more

importantly, the label "alternative" often assumes or is interchangeable with "political" (socialist, left-wing) in theatre in the postwar period. Once again my interest lies in identifying the different strands of work included in broad categories such as "alternative" and "political", in order to situate and outline the achievements of popular and community oriented theatre companies within this larger context.

The Postwar Scene

While the groups discussed in the first chapter were crucial to the diversification of theatrical activity in the early part of this century, the second world war crippled the theatre industry as a whole. Given the impact of the war, it is not surprising that the history of British theatre is generally conceived of in terms of prewar and postwar work. In discussions of postwar theatre, the years 1956 and 1968 are considered to be the turning points, signalling "revolutions" in the theatre. With regard to the latter, many claim, as John Bull does, that "In the late 1960s a number of quite startling changes occurred in British theatre, *changes which for the first time challenged the very basis of theatrical organisation*, and heralded the beginning of the most consistently exciting decade of drama of the entire century (my italics)"(1). While the scope and

range of theatre in the seventies may have been unprecedented, I would argue that the alternative theatre movement was not a revolution in the theatre, but another wave of experimental work that encountered and built on the same problems already confronted earlier. I have outlined the contexts and achievements of the politically-based groups in the prewar years in order to show how they force a new perspective on the changes which are generally attributed to post 1968 companies.

Before turning to the developments of the late sixties and early seventies, it is useful to consider the conditions facing the theatre industry in the years immediately following the war. Commercial theatres did not emerge unscathed. Studies of the period outline the inflated costs of postwar commercial theatre due to lost and damaged buildings, management monopolies, and entertainment tax--not to mention the threats posed by cinema and eventually television (Elsom, Davies, Chambers and Prior). But, as Chambers and Prior indicate, "the status quo was quickly re-established . . . The regional reps were replaying West End hits while the West End waited for the next star vehicle to come along in between the staples of musicals, thrillers, revues and drawing-room comedies" (13).

Repertory companies in London and the provinces were the first to benefit from the small amounts of assistance

available through the newly formed Arts Council, continuing the work begun by CEMA during the war. While the creation of public subsidy was one of the most important changes in postwar theatre, it was not until the mid-fifties to early sixties that its impact on the structure of theatre was fully felt. In the first years subsidy was available only to "properly constituted non-profit-making organizations and bodies functioning under charitable trusts" (Marshall 230). The reps that managed to gain association with the Arts Council were aided through the provision of grants and guarantees, as well as local touring schemes (Harris 195). Hugh Hunt points to the establishment of the Bristol Old Vic (the first state-aided theatre) as "the beginning of a network of regional companies which, together with the established repertories in Birmingham, Liverpool, Glasgow and Sheffield, were able--with the Council's financial support--to provide the power-houses for the renaissance of the provincial theatre (149).

Private theatre clubs and Little Theatres came and went, their precarious existence depending on self-financing (Elsom 9) and occasional transfers. Through their "club" status they were still able to perform new and banned plays, but Jonathan Hammond, in summarizing the output of the "fringe" groups of this period, claims that "the social upheavals and reconstruction of the immediate postwar period

found little artistic outlet, on the whole. in the plays presented at these clubs, which tended toward self-consciously poetic dramas of the Christopher Fry variety" (37).

In the area of political theatre, the Unity movement survived the war, but its moment had passed. In tracing the decline of London Unity and Glasgow Unity, Davies points to their decisions to go professional without adequate resources. But even more important was the problem of building an audience without Labour movement support and in a climate that was hostile to the political views the movement stood for:

The wartime mood had largely evaporated, especially with the introduction of Marshall Aid from the summer of 1947 and the increasing freeze of the Cold War. Any organisation associated with the Communist Party, as Unity was, was bound to suffer from the deteriorating international situation and the growing anti-Soviet sentiments (Davies 141).

One of the examples Davies refers to is that of Merseyside Unity which, because of its former Communist Party ties, was banned by the Liverpool City Council from performing in its halls. In the same context, Theodore Shank includes the economic boom in this period along with the Cold War as factors accounting for the lack of political theatre until the 1960s (48). These analyses underscore the crucial role that political and economic factors play in determining the

fate of certain types of theatre in any given period.

Theatre historians and critics generally agree that British theatre (London's West End) in the early to mid fifties was characterized by blandness and conservatism. Writing in 1954, Kenneth Tynan laments, "The bare fact is that, apart from revivals and imports, there is nothing in the London theatre that one dares discuss with an intelligent man for more than five minutes" and describes a typical play:

If you seek a tombstone, look about you; survey the peculiar nullity of our drama's prevalent *genre*, the Loamshire play. Its setting is a country house in what used to be called Loamshire but is now, as a heroic tribute to realism, sometimes called Berkshire. Except when someone must sneeze, or be murdered, the sun invariably shines. The inhabitants belong to a social class derived partly from romantic novels and partly from the playwright's vision of the leisured life he will lead after the play is a success--this being the only effort of imagination he is called on to make. Joys and sorrows are giggles and whimpers: the crash of denunciation dwindles into 'Oh, stuff, Mummy!' and 'Oh, really, Daddy!' And so grim is the continuity of these things that the foregoing paragraph might have been written at any time during the last thirty years (148).

Terry Browne accounts for this staple fare by outlining the same commercial priorities which I described as providing the impetus for alternative ventures after the turn of the century:

The London theatre remained a middle-class theatre. The fare was dictated by the public and the public liked what was given to them. Coach tours deposited large numbers in from the suburbs

and the provinces for an evening of pleasure in the West End and that pleasure was going to be safe: something they *knew* they would like; something proven in a long-run or abroad; something with had a star player in it (4).

Once again, the commercial stranglehold on theatre had crippling effects on actors and writers because of the limited range of opportunities it offered. It is against this background (and for these reasons) that the two most prominent writers' theatres of the fifties were formed.

Developments in the 50s and early 60s

Although the conditions for the next major wave of political theatre were not ripe until the late sixties, there were some significant attempts in the interim which link the two periods. I will be taking only a cursory look at companies and projects which have been documented in greater detail elsewhere, but they are considered here for the purposes of distinguishing between avant-garde and popular tendencies in what are regarded generally as experimental or alternative theatres in this period. The English Stage Company at the Royal Court and Theatre Workshop at Stratford East offer useful illustrations of this split.

The Royal Court, as a writers' theatre, was certainly influential, but it was so as a harbinger of what was to

become a new subsidized "establishment" theatre. Because of the working-class subject matter of some of its early productions, the Royal Court is often regarded as having been a consciously left-wing, political theatre, but its contribution in this area has been reassessed by many commentators--particularly socialist/feminist ones. In spite of his flippant tone, John McGrath does sum up many of the accolades that the Royal Court has received: "In 1956 John Osborne is said to have inaugurated a New Era; Revitalised various things; Heralded a new Dawn; Opened the Doors of the Theatre to this, that and the other--(mostly the northern working class) and 'Given a New Direction' to British theatre" (*Good* 8). If the Royal Court represented a "breakthrough", it was in presenting plays which focused on working-class characters and problems for the first time--not in British theatre--but in British literary drama. In relation to images of the working-classes in the British dramatic tradition, Chambers and Prior clarify this distinction, pointing to the credit wrongly attributed to the Royal Court:

If one were to add to the Theatre Workshop participants the names of the indigenous writers presented by Unity theatres and the many unnamed creators of their group-devised pieces, then a picture would begin to emerge of a tradition of theatre rooted in the working class, however local or specific, that has yet to be given its due weight in the history of Britain's cultural development. The lack of any production or organizational network that could sustain this

alternative drama around the country, and the fact that many of its innovations were absorbed into the general theatrical world, helps to explain why 1956 is heralded as the start of a new revolution rather than being the fruit of previous pioneering (30).

It is also often noted that, while the plays dealing with working-class life represented a thematic shift, they were not necessarily innovative in formal terms. The style of these plays was still naturalistic (the "kitchen-sink" school) and, according to Michelene Wandor, simply moved from "the upper-middle-class drawing room to the working-class settings of urban England" (140).

In his overview of these developments, Bull concludes:

With the exception of Arden, the new writers of the 1956-60 generation, and in particular Wesker and Osborne, offered no real threat to the traditional format of the well-made play. Their political protest was contained within existing theatrical models. Their characters may have proclaimed a refreshingly abrasive form of radicalism at the audience . . . but they did so in plays which were remarkably unthreatening in format (3).¹

¹That Arden was an "exception" (given his Brechtian style and use of popular forms) helps to underscore the political and formal limitations of the work at the Royal Court. Many have noted the unfavourable responses to his "anarchist" views and his departure from naturalist forms:

Arden's play [*Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*] has a cool, detached style; Hobson complained that it is not entertaining. It deters us from reducing political issues to personal problems by withholding in-depth motivation; *The Times* complained that it entrusts its message to

But given the theatrical landscape of the fifties, it is not surprising that a play like *Look Back in Anger* could seem so radical. In his review, Tynan stresses the iconoclasm of the play: "All the qualities are there, qualities one had despaired of ever seeing on the stage--the drift towards anarchy, the instinctive leftishness, the automatic rejection of 'official' attitudes, the surrealist sense of humour . . . the casual promiscuity, the sense of lacking a crusade worth fighting for, and underlying all these, the determination that no one who dies shall go unmourned" (178). But if one accepts that the "context" of the theatrical event (relations of production, forms, venue, audience) is as, if not more, important in determining the political nature of a given production than the subject matter, then the reasons for classifying the Royal Court as an avant-garde theatre become clearer.

The Royal Court may have been committed to new

characters who do nothing to win our sympathy'. It denies us what Arden called the 'cosy point of reference' of an authoritative central character; Alan Pryce-Jones in the *Observer* thought it 'totally nihilist' (Sinfield, "Audiences" 185).

Arden, with Margaretta D'Arcy, eventually left the professional theatre altogether to work in the area of amateur, community theatre projects. Albert Hunt has traced the development of Arden's work in his very interesting study *Arden: A Study of His Plays* (1974).

writing, but not to specific kinds of writing: they did, after all produce absurdist as well as social realist plays. As a result, the emphasis placed on the working-class content of many of the plays can give a misleading impression of the motives or impetus behind the work at the Court. It is worth considering who founded and ran the Royal Court in order to understand its aims and its success. The venture grew out of response to the desperate lack of new and interesting writing in the theatre, with the hope of producing the plays of contemporary European playwrights and encouraging new English writers, not unlike the Vedrenne seasons years earlier, in the same theatre. The goal itself was not new, but what made it viable were the influential backers and strategies employed in setting up the company. Browne outlines the figures (and their backgrounds) who were responsible for forming the original Council and providing some of the funds, "the sort of stable, respected men in whom the Arts Council tends to place confidence" (7).² The

²Because George Devine was the first artistic director of the company, it is often assumed he founded it. He was in fact approached by the already formed Council which included the likes of Lord Harewood (son of the Princess Royal and cousin of the Queen), James Edward Blacksell (master of a large boy's school), Ronald Duncan, an established writer, and they were eventually joined by Alfred Esdaile (lessee of the Royal Court Theatre), Sir Reginald Kennedy-Cox (Chairman of the Salisbury Arts Theatre), Eric Duncannon (later Lord Bessborough), and Greville Poke (former publisher of

kind of influence that the reputations of these men had with the Arts Council is clear in case of Neville Blond, who as Browne notes, had no connection with theatre, but was "a man with extraordinary executive ability" (8-9). After being impressed by the "thoroughness of the organization and the by the fact that the Company was using the same solicitors as he did", he accepted the Chairmanship and, as a result, "the pre-production grant from the Arts Council was raised to £2,500 [from £500] and a subsidy of £7,000, including guarantee against loss, was granted for the first year of productions" (Browne 13). The company was, from the beginning, at least structured in business terms (even if it did not intend to make huge profits), with artistic and management committees. It was also a building-based company from the outset, on the insistence of some of the Council members.

The class bias of the management figures extended to the artistic personnel of the company. McGrath's claim that "The curious fantasy that the values of that place were anything other than bourgeois, elitist and utterly whimsical is a refinement which must have come later" (*Good* 10) is reinforced by an excerpt from William Gaskell's personal

Everybody's magazine) (Browne 1-6).

account of his years at the Court:

John [Dexter] was soon back after the success of his Wesker productions at Coventry. He was working class and had none of the educational background of the rest of us, which isolated him. George, Tony and Lindsay had all been at Wadham College, Oxford; Tony Page and I were both Oxford men too. I was closer to John because my background was provincial petit-bourgeois whereas Lindsay and Tony Page had both been born in Bangalore, the sons of army officers, and had been brought up by ayahs. Having a nanny is as big a class divide as any. The ethics of the forces and public school were always in evidence (24-25).

This is not to suggest that middle and upper-class backgrounds preclude political commitment--indeed many of the prominent figures in Britain's New Left have come and continue to emerge from the ranks of the privileged. But Gaskell's book offers a view of the internal politics and the artistic concerns which shaped what was basically an "art" theatre, not unlike some of the club theatres outlined in the previous chapter.

Because the Royal Court was an avant-garde and not a popular theatre does not negate its achievements. It did much to challenge the limited range of plays being done at the time, stepping up the fight against censorship in the process. Even more importantly, it was responsible for attracting a large, untapped audience into the theatre. Tynan predicted this in his review of *Look Back in Anger* in 1956:

I agree that *Look Back in Anger* is likely to remain a minority taste. What matters, however, is the size of the minority. I estimate it at roughly 6,733,000, which is the number of people in this country between the ages of twenty and thirty (178).

By the sixties, the Royal Court had devised special schemes and reduced rates for students, and outreach programmes to schools aimed at generating interest in the theatre from an early age. The composition of this young audience, in class terms, is a subject of debate. The Education Act of 1944 is frequently used as a factor explaining the supposed shift in the social basis of theatre. C.W.E. Bigsby does much to dispel the myth concerning the shift in the educational and class backgrounds of both the writers and the audiences in this period. He suggests that "the idea that there had been a radical change in the social background of English writers, at least as judged by their education, is . . . false (in fact C.H. Halsey's research, published in 1980, suggests that the 1944 Education Act had itself surprisingly little effect on the structure of English society)" (13).³

³ After providing a startling catalogue of the leading playwrights and directors of the last twenty-five years who had public school or Oxbridge backgrounds, he concludes:

On the whole they [44 universities in Britain] have not provided that stimulus for eroding the class system which many had hoped. The percentage of working-class students attending those universities, indeed, was the same in 1976 as it

But Clive Barker describes the impact of the Butler Act in different terms:

It was also largely the first generation [the one born between 1925 and 1933] of working-class children to take advantage of education reforms and to enter the previously bourgeois areas of higher education, en masse. . . . A section of this generation chose to enter the theatre as actors, directors and writers, and significant changes took place in the theatre as a result ("Politicisation" 270).

had been, on average, during the period 1928-47. Those attending Oxford and Cambridge constitute some eight per cent of all those attending university in Britain. In other words, approximately half of one per cent of British people attend those two universities, with half of that number coming from fee-paying schools. And it is from this group, by and large, that the English theatre draws its strength (14).

Biggsby also provides evidence concerning the composition of audiences which is relevant to a discussion of the Royal Court:

It is also, perhaps, worth reminding ourselves that a mid-1960s analysis of British theatre audiences discovered the perhaps unsurprising fact that, at a time when 68.9 per cent of the male population were engaged in such jobs, only 4.6 per cent of male theatregoers did blue-collar jobs, and that 40 per cent of the non-graduates in the audience at the Royal Court Theatre were students. Indeed 86 per cent of the men and 90.3 per cent of women in a survey of audiences for the performing arts in Britain had left school after the minimum school-leaving age, while nearly a half were graduates or held professional qualifications (as judged by the fact that their full-time education ended at the age of twenty or over) (15).

With regard to the audiences for the Royal Court, Alan Sinfield also points to the presence of these new recruits:

By 1955 the numbers of sixth-formers and of university students had doubled since 1939, and three-quarters of the students received grants. These people did not share the Loamshire fantasy. Their relatively lower-class origins left them with quite different ways of thinking, feeling and speaking, which they could not shed if they wished to. Tynan identified this 'non-U intelligentsia' as the audience for *Look Back*. They derived their confidence--and their opportunities for relatively well-paid employment--not from social background but from educational attainment. They had every reason to welcome an attack on the ethos and credentials of the established middle class, which seemed to be sustaining extremes of wealth and poverty, stifling creativity by despising those without the right accent, and endangering the world by obscuring the reality of the international situation ("Audiences" 178).

But the working-class roots and resentment of the "angry young men" was no guarantee of revolutionary ideas or actions--quite the opposite, institutions like the Royal Court contributed to a diffusion of such tendencies. McGrath argues that "What these unprepossessing youths, of which I was one, were in fact doing was absorbing as many of the values of the middle class as possible, and contributing one or two new ones of their own to the re-formation of middle-class behaviour that was necessary if the middle class was to survive " (*Good* 12). Sinfield notes:

The most insidious trap for radical theatre in the sixties was a tendency to attract likeminded audiences, who instead of being challenged were

able to congratulate themselves on their commitment. This is probably the general case with attempts to promote change in Britain, and the new drama should perhaps be perceived as a means of reinforcement, not conversion ("Audiences" 181).

It is important to consider the Royal Court in terms of a producer and marketer of mild and acceptable forms of radicalism in this period. It survived and prospered ultimately because it was not dangerous politically.

The avant-garde character of the Royal Court becomes clearer when one considers what was regarded as the other major writers' theatre in London in the fifties and how it serves as an important contrast, namely Theatre Workshop. If a line could be drawn to connect the prewar politically-based groups and the post 1968 movement, it would pass through Theatre Workshop, not the Royal Court.⁴ In terms of its politics, personnel, internal organization, production styles and geographic location, this company, under the direction of Joan Littlewood, was the most significant "alternative" in theatre in the fifties. The company can be seen as a model in both a positive and negative sense; Theatre Workshop's aims and working methods

⁴Except for its early touring roots, Theatre Workshop was not strictly like WTM. There was continuity in terms of personnel and techniques, but I would argue that Theatre Workshop, once based in Stratford East, was more like Unity Theatre than the WTM.

inspired and provided a framework for the many political/community groups in the sixties, but its inability to overcome certain obstacles and the eventual absorption of its work by the commercial sphere are also indicative of the fates of later groups.

Perhaps the briefest and most effective way of putting the work of Theatre Workshop into perspective (and to underscore the differences between it and the Royal Court) is to consider its origins.⁵ As I noted, the English Stage Company, under the artistic direction of George Devine and Tony Richardson, set out to "revitalize [the] decaying landscape" of London theatre in the mid-1950s by "staging the work of neglected writers, with a small permanent company and a permanent setting" (Findlater, *Royal* 10). If these aims can be termed "reformist", then those of Joan Littlewood and Ewan MacColl were "revolutionary". They formed the company in 1945, but only after having worked extensively in agit-prop theatre in Manchester before the war. As a result, they provided a direct link, through their own experience, between the prewar groups and the generation

⁵For a more detailed history of Theatre Workshop, see Goorney's *The Theatre Workshop Story* as well as MacColl's "Grass Roots of Theatre Workshop" and "Introduction" to *Agit-Prop to Theatre Workshop*. These are the main sources for the information that follows.

of theatre workers who began to form groups in the sixties. It is useful to remember that, at a time when documenting such work was not a priority or even possible, the movement of "personnel" was crucial to the continuation and development of techniques and approaches.

Theatre Workshop chose initially to work as a touring group, developing its own brand of performance style (with non-trained actors) based on theories of acting, dance, and an examination of the popular theatrical traditions (Sophocles, Shakespeare, Jonson, Commedia dell'Arte and Moliere), taking plays dealing with social and political concerns to more broadly-based audiences than those attending theatres at the time. As in the case of Unity Theatre, Theatre Workshop was not a party-based group, but aimed instead at a popular theatre, with a specific interest in drawing working-class audiences. Joan Littlewood believed that working in this way was crucial to changing the function of theatre and the kind of experience it could offer. Ewan MacColl recounts: "four years at R.A.D.A. and the opportunity to see the London theatre at work, followed by her current experience in one of Britain's leading repertory theatres, had convinced her that the theatre was sick in all its parts" ("Introduction" xxxii).

The decision to make the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, a permanent base resulted from several factors. Given

the strain of touring at the time, it is not surprising that some of the members desired a greater degree of stability.

Goorney recounts:

There were no recognised venues or touring circuits in the forties and fifties as there are now, and every hall had to be sought out and booked. We were the only political theatre touring at this time. We had no subsidy, and playing six one-night stands a week for months at a time was very hard work" ("Epilogue" 202).

Although the move to a permanent base in the London area was opposed by some of the members (namely Ewan MacColl) and it did lead to the critical success which slowly eroded the company, the choice of Stratford as a location was significant. It was not only more viable financially, but it was also consistent with the basic aims of the company since "it was in the East End of London and therefore provided the possibility of building up a working-class audience rather than attracting existing theatre-goers" (Goorney, *Story* 87). In contrast, with regard to the Court's "indeterminate political impetus", Alan Sinfield notes the lack of interest on the part of its directors in drawing new (non-middle class) audiences to the theatre, quoting George Devine on the potential audience for this theatre, given its location outside the West End: "it could draw on a large residential area of Chelsea (rapidly becoming the new Mayfair) and Kensington" ("Audiences" 179).

Building new audiences had always been an important

consideration, and in its touring days, Theatre Workshop tried hard to reach the audience it wanted for its shows, even if it meant selling door to door or distributing leaflets. The recurring problem they faced, according to Goorney, was stimulating interest in seeing plays, "for theatre had played no part in the lives of these communities for *generations*" (*Story* 76). Playing one-night stands was an obvious obstacle in the process of building an audience, but the task was no less difficult when the company moved to its permanent base because they were still faced with a local population who were not in the habit of going to see plays. How successful Theatre Workshop was in drawing a local following was always, as Goorney points out, "a matter for conjecture".⁶ But the whole notion of the "habit" of theatregoing helps to underscore the relationship between production and consumption. Reaching a specific audience is not simply a case of offering a specific "product"; rather, it involves altering the attitudes or the associations surrounding the "activity" of theatre-going. MacColl

⁶Goorney outlines the problem of defining the audience in terms of "local" as opposed to "working-class". In relation to members of "The Supporters Club" (at one time numbering two thousand), he notes: "They cast their net and no doubt many of them couldn't be described as working-class; but if we accept 'local' as being a radius covered by five miles, then we can undoubtedly claim a following in that area" (99).

describes how the struggle to establish a working-class theatre was completely undermined once the company received critical acclaim:

The wrong kind of good write-up from the critics produced a situation where you couldn't get near the Theatre Royal for Bentleys and Mercedes, with the result that working-class people in the area felt 'This is not for us'. They felt uncomfortable in that sort of society and just didn't come (Gorney, *Story* 128).

As in the case of Theatre Workshop, the experiences of later groups suggest that the risks of achieving a higher critical profile and alienating local community audiences are greater when companies have permanent bases.⁷

For Theatre Workshop, the search for the right "product" involved experimenting, not just with content, but with form and presentation. Littlewood and MacColl drew on everything from living newspaper to constructivist staging

⁷ It is interesting to consider Jim Lagden's observations of audiences in relation to his work in and around the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent. Describing a project which involved taking a panto into small working-men's clubs in the area, he discovered:

It went down well. Apparently the children rarely went to the remaining big variety panto in Hanley, and never went to the Vic theatre because it was 'posh' and involved 'dressing up.' This is interesting because the Vic is certainly not like this. So not only have we to go to them with the message, but the performance has to be where they are, not where we are (84).

techniques (making this tradition available to a new generation of theatre workers and audiences) and they were particularly influential in making effective use of popular forms of entertainment. Referring to *Oh, What a Lovely War* (1963), Clive Barker describes:

The script was researched by the actors and the core of the production script was the soldiers' songs and parodies from the war period. The framework for the production was a late-music hall popular entertainment form--the concert party--a form which relies on a mixture of song, comic sketches and stand-up comedians. . . . The lesson learned was one that Littlewood had been teaching since the end of the war, serious theatre can be created in popular form ("Politicisation" 272).

John McGrath is a specific writer who acknowledges his debt to Littlewood and draws from a similar tradition in his plays for working-class audiences in the seventies.

The company also underwent constant training based on theories of acting and dance/movement. But the experimentation was not without specific aims, as Goorney recalls:

There was an overall political and social awareness governing the choice of plays and how they were produced, which gave to all plays, new and classical, a sense of immediacy. The aim was to relate them to the lives of the audience bringing them into contact with the characters and the play, bridging, as far as possible, the gap between stage and auditorium (*Story* 179).

In its search for ways of making this "contact", the company's eclecticism helped to expand stage vocabulary, as

Clive Barker notes:

Another important concept was that of style in production, which was how the actor communicated with the audience. That meant you didn't create pretty pictures on the stage, but you created a live dialogue, and you could use Music Hall styles, you could use Marx Brothers clowning, you could use pastiche, parody and satire, and you could use moments of intense realism within the one production. Or you could use direct contact with the audience, not uncommon in Joan's work (Gorney, *Story* 166).

While the shows provided new, refreshing possibilities for making theatre a medium of communication, transfers such as *Oh What a Lovely War* demonstrated how the techniques could be reduced to novel devices in the context of commercial theatre.

While any account of Theatre Workshop reveals the kind of authority that Littlewood possessed in shaping the work artistically, the company's internal organization reflected its aims for a more popular or democratized theatre. It operated as an ensemble with an inclusive policy concerning new members. New recruits were by no means restricted to people with conventional drama training. In fact, it proved a hindrance because it was at odds with the company's working methods which involved improvisation, singing and dancing, and a collective approach to the technical aspects of production. According to Gorney, the recruits ranged from young actors who had just left drama school, to local amateurs, to people who had no experience at all. Because of

the meagre resources of the company, it attracted only interested or devoted members:

Certainly in the earlier years, no-one joined because they needed a job, the work was too hard and there was no real living to be made. They were either attracted by what they had seen or heard of the work, or were recommended by those who felt that their particular talent and outlook were best suited to the requirements of Theatre Workshop (Gorney, *Story* 190).

Gorney acknowledges that they were only able to take advantage of such diverse talents because they were not subject to the same "regulated entry into the profession and the existence of the Equity shop" at work today (*Story* 39). It is interesting to note how the motives for working for the company changed once it achieved "critical" success. John Bury describes the impact that the transfers had on the idea of the company and its personnel:

We'd burned ourselves out. We'd lost about three companies in the West End, and Joan was having to come back to Stratford after every West End show and put together an ad hoc company and do it again. Now everyone who was coming to work for her was working on the theory that the easiest way to get into the West End was to work at Stratford East! (Gorney, *Story* 124)

This tendency for alternative theatre to act as a training ground and pool of talent from which the commercial theatre can draw for both artistic and financial gain was evident before the war and becomes even more prevalent in the sixties and seventies in the relationship between the major

subsidized theatres and alternative groups.

The company offered, particularly in the earlier years, a framework for making theatre that differed greatly from the commercial set-up--these were not just actors coming in to learn assigned parts for a play which had been selected and planned by those in artistic and financial control of the theatre. As Goorney points out, Theatre Workshop was a co-operative, with no outside management (which is why Equity contracts did not apply) and received, when there was any money at all, the same wages. As well as working and making policy decisions collectively, for a long time the company lived together in the Theatre Royal. Littlewood placed a great deal of emphasis on the internal relations of the group: "I believe very much in a theatre of actor-artists, and I think the trust that comes out of team work on what is often a new script, cleaning up points of production, or contact between actors, is essential to the development of the craft of acting and playwriting" (Goorney, *Story* 114). The sense of "community" within a group inevitably affects the nature of both the work and the contact with the surrounding community. Kristin Lind, based on her own experience with the company recalls:

Our work and life together articulated the values I had always believed in, and suddenly belonging to a group, fighting together towards the same aim, gave meaning to both theatre and life. This group solidarity is a necessity. Theatre is never one man's work (Goorney, *Story* 194).

The group's contact with the local area was not confined to a performer/audience relationship within the theatre itself, but extended to workshops and neighbourhood projects.

The working methods which were so central to the company's approach to theatre were eventually undermined by the commercial theatre they had rejected. Goorney outlines the gradual erosion of the group structure which took place once "under the scrutiny of the national critics"; good reviews led to offers of West End transfers which, given the lack of subsidy, they could not turn down (*Story* 101). But the exposure also made it possible for Theatre Workshop to exert an influence on yet another generation of theatre workers--those who would form the core of the alternative theatre movement in the late sixties and seventies. In describing the extent of this influence, Harold Hobson claims:

Joan broke up the fabric of the British theatre. She, to a certain extent, disorganised it out of its old forms and began an internal revolution in the theatre in the way that plays were produced, and the sort of plays that were produced. Also in the way they were written and the way directors and players co-operated with the author. I doubt if there would have been any fringe without Joan . . . We now look for our dramatic sustenance elsewhere than in Shaftesbury Avenue, to the fringe, the Repertory Companies and, of course, the National and the R.S.C. I'm convinced this change would never have taken place without the erosion of the bourgeois theatre and its commercial organisation, by Joan (Goorney, *Story* 183-84).

The emphasis on "organization" is important to a consideration of both the company's contribution and its fate. The speculation about why this group--which was celebrated abroad and achieved so much for British theatre--was never supported by the Arts Council all tends to focus on the issue of structure. The designer, John Bury, suggests:

There was a lot of fuss about the books and keeping it together, programming and playing. Joan would always be rude to them. We didn't play their game and they weren't going to play ours (Gorney, *Story* 138).

Clive Barker also attributes the lack of subsidy to attitudes towards Littlewood and the working methods: "Joan is, for my money, the finest theatre scholar in this country, but because she worked in a seemingly unstructured way, she created in some people's eyes, the picture of an irresponsible dilettante, playing at theatre, a brilliant amateur, which she is not" (Gorney, *Story* 138). It is interesting to note in this context that the money Theatre Workshop did receive from the Arts Council between 1957/58 and 1963/64 was roughly one-fifth of the amount received by the Royal Court.⁸ The whole issue of the compatibility of

⁸Gorney lists the grants received by both companies in the appendix on finances. A breakdown for funding received by the Royal Court is also available in Richard Findlater's *At*

working methods and the requirements of public subsidy is relevant to the post 1968 groups and will be discussed in greater detail.

It has been worth considering Theatre Workshop in detail for a number of reasons. Relating it to the work at the Royal Court offers an opportunity to illustrate the difference between changing the "content" of plays and changing the content along with the conditions of "production", thus exploring new ways of working.⁹ These two theatres/companies also represent the divergence in trends that characterizes the burst of activities in the late sixties--an "avant-garde" fringe based in, or touring to, arts clubs and theatres versus a "political" or "community" fringe mainly touring to non-theatre venues. Theatre Workshop is also important as a prototype for later groups, in terms of its origins and its evolution as an organization. McGrath points to the doors that Theatre Workshop opened for the next generation of theatre workers and summarizes "Joan's legacies":

1. The feeling in some young directors that *they*

the Royal Court: 25 Years of the English Stage Company (1981).

⁹The issue of "consumption" is a relevant, but more complex consideration. The Royal Court was ultimately successful in attracting the audience it wanted, whereas Theatre Workshop was not.

were capable of conjuring up theatre out of thin air with a strong theme and a few actors who could entertain.

2. The feeling in some actors that they could contribute to the making of the play.

3. The feeling in some theatre organizations that given the right director, actors and theme, they could create a house-style that would pull in a working-class audience (*Good* 49).

The main differences between Theatre Workshop and the post 1968 groups lie in the changes in conditions of production, namely the abolishment of censorship and the expansion of subsidy. Littlewood's emphasis on improvisation and revision of play scripts in rehearsal was at odds with the practice of having plays approved, a major constraint which was eliminated in 1968.¹⁰ And, while later groups could not be unravelled by commercial transfers in the same way, they were (and are) subject to the threats posed by grant cuts and the parasitical tendencies of the major subsidized theatres. This process of co-option or absorption is often

¹⁰The prevalence of improvisational work in performance (the "happenings" of American theatre companies) and the practice of workshopping plays which undergo changes during the run were late developments in British theatre because of the restrictions imposed by pre-censorship of plays. Script based theatre remained in place for a long time because of the legal measures which hung over managements and which even "club" status could not always circumvent. This also helped to perpetuate the hierarchy of manager, director, and writer, all of whom could be made legally responsible. It is not until the seventies, with the work of theatre collectives, that the strict divisions between writers, directors, and actors, began to break down, and the evolution of a script in production was possible.

related to the achievement of critical success and raises a whole set of problems concerning the conditions which give rise to innovative and committed work. In the case of Theatre Workshop, the irony was that "success" led to the disintegration of the company. Goorney recalls Littlewood's reaction to the company's huge success at the International Theatre Festival in Paris in 1955:

And I remember her saying 'Ah well, now that we're a success, the whole thing will fall apart.' One felt that success was the last thing she wanted and that we could only really survive with struggle, there had to be something to fight against (*Story* 150).

In these ways, Theatre Workshop serves as a useful means of understanding why and how later groups were able to proliferate and overcome some obstacles, while at the same time, falling into some of the same traps. There were other landmark efforts in the early sixties which cannot be dealt with in detail, but help to clarify the lines of development. They also point to the advantages and problems related to building-based and community-based approaches. For instance, Arnold Wesker's plan for Centre 42¹¹, the

¹¹The name of the project was based on the resolution passed unanimously by the Trades Union Congress in 1960 concerning cultural provision:

Congress recognizes the importance of the arts in the life of the community, especially now when many unions are securing a shorter working week

beginning of a network of arts centres to serve working-class communities, never secured the financing necessary to begin operating, despite the years of planning throughout the sixties and some initially successful local festivals. There was controversy surrounding Wesker's personal "vision" of what such a centre should involve, but the attempt itself set a precedent and encouraged others to try to put the ideas into practice elsewhere. In terms of financing such a project, Itzin points out how "The idea of going to the trade union movement in 1960 was original, audacious and indicative of the project's connections with the genuine grass roots Labour movement" (109). Clive Barker also links Centre 42 with the building boom in theatre in the sixties:

It clearly influenced official policy in cultural provision but in form rather than spirit. From 1959 onwards, national and local government began to invest large sums of money in rebuilding the provincial theatre. In the 1960s, many theatres

and greater leisure for their members. It notes that the trade union movement has participated to only a small extent in the direct promotion of plays, films, music, literature and other forms of expression, including those of value to its beliefs and principles. Congress considers that much more could be done, and accordingly requests the General Council to conduct a special examination and to make proposals to a future Congress to ensure a greater participation by the trade union movement in all cultural activities (Coppieters 39).

were built with national government investment under a policy called "Housing the Arts". Many of the ideas of *Centre 42*, in calling for buildings which were more accessible and less forbidding to the working class, were incorporated in the new buildings ("Politicisation" 274).

Along with contributing to the struggle to secure stable sources of funding in order to free artists from the values of the market place, through *Centre 42*, Wesker tried to point up the need for more widespread organization of artists. This idea of having organizations and networks to act as resource centres is based on a need to bring together individuals and groups working in increasing isolation from one another. It was not only a strategy employed by *Unity Theatre* to connect its many branches, but it is an issue which comes up again in the eighties.

An important venture in the sixties which brought together working methods similar to those of *Theatre Workshop* and the class/community emphasis of *Centre 42* was the work of Peter Cheeseman and company at the *Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent*.¹² Working in a permanent theatre-in-the-round, this group was influential in the development of group-created documentaries; the process of collective research to create episodic plays dealing with

¹²The *Stoke-on-Trent* project is documented in *Theatre Quarterly* I.1 (January-March 1971) in the first installment of the "Place and Performance" series.

local history became a widespread practice in other regional repertory companies and amongst alternative theatre groups in the late sixties and early seventies.

This approach to script development arose out of a desire to meet one of the company's aims--"to give expression to the life of their home community"--in the absence of a resident dramatist or available local plays (Cheeseman 86). Clive Barker comments on the tone and subject matter of Vic's first documentaries:

Only rarely have these documentaries had an overt political purpose and only one of them, *The Fight for Shelton Bar*, which was mounted as part of a campaign to prevent the closure of a local steelworks, has been totally politically conceived. The documentaries have been mainly concerned with recreating the working-class history of the region and celebrating the values of community life. *The Staffordshire Rebels* dealt with the Civil War in the region. *The Jolly Potters* charted the development of the Pottery industry. *The Knotty*, the most successful of the series, dealt with the building of the local railway and its ultimate absorption into the national network ("Politicisation" 275).

Through the research process for such shows and through work with local schools and children's theatres, the company achieved a greater degree of integration in the local community than did earlier ventures. For instance, Theatre Workshop was interested in drawing a regular audience from the immediate area, but did not explore the potential of local subject matter in attracting that community. In the case of Centre 42, its mandate was too broad to allow for

such involvement. But it is generally true that regions with histories, economies, and even languages of their own, are richer in source material and have a greater shared identity than do cosmopolitan centres such as London. Although the Vic audiences on the whole were mixed¹³, as Barker notes, the documentaries were important in terms of their "success . . . in drawing a local, working-class audience into the theatre inspir[ing] many other theatres to follow suit" ("Politicisation" 276).

If Centre 42 and the Victoria Theatre in Stoke-on-Trent represent one line of development--building/community based companies--they developed from and maintained an interest in what was becoming a separate area of work--one-off community projects

¹³Cheeseman, writing in 1971, stresses the age of the audience: "It is young--60 per cent of our audience is under 25" (80). With regard to class, he explains:

Socially our audiences are very hard to place, particularly in the Potteries where social distinction is less practised in rituals of dress than many other areas. There is a singular absence of near-formally dressed, middle-class, culture-seekers. . . . Socially, the young people--many of them in that transitional class, the students--spread much more widely than the older members of the audience, and at Christmas children come from a wider social spectrum still. Apart from the young people, the rest of the audience are disguised as an informal, mixed crowd (80).

or festivals and touring. Included here, beginning in the early sixties, were John Arden's and Margaretta D'Arcy's community projects, the educational work of Albert Hunt and the Bradford College of Art Theatre Group and the expanding T.I.E. programmes. These groups were more successful in reaching non-theatre going audiences because of their mobility and contributed to an expansion of the ideas concerning the function of theatre in an educational sense.

Point of Departure: 1968

It often seems in the attention focussed on the emergence of a whole range of alternative theatre groups that 1968 was the starting point for alternative/fringe theatre. I have taken pains to indicate that this is a misleading assumption. It was a pivotal year in that it witnessed a proliferation of groups and led to the establishment of a more widespread movement. But, this was possible because of a number of factors (political, social, economic, and artistic) which converged in the mid to late sixties which paved the way for these groups and shaped the different tendencies in their work. I will not deal with the specific factors in great detail; instead, as in the first chapter, I would like to point to the range of issues which must be taken into account in order to understand how the alternative theatre movement assumed its particular shape in the late sixties and early seventies and how it differed

from the prewar movements.

A major impetus for left-wing theatre in the sixties was the profound disillusionment with the Labour Party as a vehicle for change, particularly the Wilson administration of 1964. Bull explains:

Fired with recent memories of the Kennedy Administration, and the 'white heat of technology' issuing from his very nostrils, Wilson had seemed to offer to the majority of left activists the last chance, within a broadly Parliamentary framework, of instituting a full programme of socialist change as initiated by the 1945 administration. However 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 (5-6).

This redefinition entailed, as Barker notes, "a significant break with the reformist political direction of earlier work" ("Politicisation" 277) and was outlined in detail in the *May Day Manifesto* (1967).¹⁴

In the political sphere, the dissatisfaction within Britain on the part of the left was further fueled by the

¹⁴The WTM had grown out of a similar split between revolutionary and reformist tendencies on the left. As Raphael Samuel notes, "The rise and extension of the WTM was closely associated with the 'Left' turn in the Communist International (1928-1934) . . . it mirrored the sharp break which took place between Labour and Communist in these years" (106).

events taking place on an international level. Most commentators agree that 1968 was the year in which these events culminated and helped to politicize an already active and growing youth movement. Sandy Craig describes the immediacy of this international turmoil, made possible by means of the media:

The 'most publicized' political events of '68 include the May revolt of students and workers in France; the police riot at the Democratic Convention in Chicago; the Prague Spring and the brutal Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia that followed. There were continuing race riots and student sit-ins in America . . . here was the escalating war in Vietnam and, following the banning of a Civil Rights March in Derry, the beginning of the war in the North of Ireland. Across the world, large-scale, revolutionary demands by students, workers and peasants were answered by massive and brutal repression ordered by governments of every political leaning--capitalist, communist, or social-democratic. And every tear-gas grenade exploding, every policeman's boot kicking, every Buddhist priest burning was voyeuristically filmed, as it was happening, for television (15).

The scope of the events of 1968 and the impact which they had on both new and experienced theatre workers are evident not only from personal accounts, but also from what Gunther Klotz calls the "internationalism" which is characteristic of many British plays in the early seventies. Among the "gains" that David Triesman sees the progressive movement as having made in 1968 were the "recognition that bourgeois culture and ideology was a specific 'enemy'" and that "there was a tangible connection between the way life is lived and

the ideas that underlie the system, and that this connection was a location for political intervention" (168). The responses or interventions on a cultural level, to the political upheaval of this period, took different directions. But among the things that the participants in the "counter-culture" had in common was age and, in the majority of cases, education. These are important points to consider in accounting for the fact that the emerging fringe theatre movement was made up primarily of young, male activists and university grads. There was a shift in the institutional base of the socialist struggle from the labour movement to the student movement.¹⁵

In his examination of the factors which helped to radicalize the student movement in Britain in the years preceding and specifically in 1968, David Triesman notes first the size of the postwar generation--"numerically and as a proportion of the total population far larger than comparable groups before the war"--but more specifically the percentage attending educational institutions:

Student numbers in higher education increased dramatically in the 1950s and 60s. In 1962-63, the number of full-time students stood at

¹⁵The harbinger of this was the development in the early sixties of the New Left movement, and *The New Left Review* which was dominated by academics and developed clubs throughout England connected to universities.

217,000, and by 1967-68 it had risen to 376,000. The growth in five years outstripped the previous 25, because of growth in population in the relevant age-group (bulge) and the demands made for more trained personnel ('trend'). Indeed, compared with 1900, nearly eight times as many of the people between 19 and 22 were in full-time study (164).

Triesman also draws attention to the mixed social backgrounds of the student population, explaining that "students ceased to be such an exclusive social group as the proportion of them from working-class backgrounds increased to about 25 per cent" (164).¹⁶

When looking at the composition of the fringe theatre groups, the question of the age of the members has practical implications; the work required great energy and few obligations. This was (and still is) particularly true for touring groups carving out new touring circuits on meagre means. But even more important are the factors of social/educational backgrounds and non-aligned politics;

¹⁶Triesman's figures do not necessarily contradict those in Bigsby's study, referred to above. Bigsby was referring specifically to universities and the percentage of Oxbridge graduates working in the major subsidized theatres. While he does not specify the term "higher education", Triesman's statistics seem to include a broader range of institutions, particularly given his emphasis on "specialized technicians". It is useful to consider Clive Barker's specific references, with regard to the personnel for the early fringe groups, to "recent graduates of universities, teacher training colleges, polytechnics and art colleges" ("Fringe" 63).

here we begin to see some of the significant differences between the prewar and post 1968 movements. The case of the WTM demonstrates how politically-based theatre, in the 20s and early 30s, was confined to the periphery of even the non-commercial theatre in important ways. Not only did these groups perform in non-theatre venues at a time when even the "experimental" groups remained in theatre spaces, but the participants were, for the most part, amateurs from working-class backgrounds (doing theatre after day jobs), many of whom were Communist Party members. The professional/amateur division is worth noting because it plays an important role in how political theatre has been perceived and in its ability to survive. It is not a coincidence that Unity, which represents the influx of professional theatre people and non-sectarian attitudes into political theatre, managed to make its way onto the official maps of theatre history.

One cannot ignore the issue of social/professional status when we turn to the postwar movements because they were, with few exceptions, generated by activists and theatre professionals, most of which were university educated. Chris Rawlence, a ten-year member of Red Ladder, offers a useful breakdown of the social composition of political theatre companies by identifying two groups:

Firstly there are a number of teachers, writers, artists and intellectuals; radicalised by 1968

and after, and many with a university background, they share a desire to fuse their politics with their work, choosing theatre as a means. Secondly, there are a large number of actors, actresses and other theatre workers who have 'defected' from established theatre; these are people who have been radicalised by high unemployment and oppressive working structures, but above all by the alienating futility of performing second-rate theatre to middle-class audiences. They sought an involvement in a kind of theatre that was more appropriate to their emergent socialist ideas (70).¹⁷

But he goes on to note the conspicuous absence of members "directly" from working-class backgrounds, and clarifies:

While many may have originated from working-class backgrounds, these origins have often been filtered out by the middle-class milieu of higher education or the bourgeois cultural climate of established theatre. Probably the majority are from middle-class backgrounds and upbringings (70).

When one combines the issue of status (with its capacity for influence) with the increased freedom due to the abolishment of censorship and the benefits of public subsidy, it is not surprising that the post 1968 movement was a more viable and

¹⁷While Rawlence deals specifically with the case of theatre, the prevalence of activists from middle-class backgrounds was part of a larger tendency. David Triesman points out: "The flow of, mainly, young people into protest movements also signalled a change. CND, and its more dynamic wings, the YCND and the Committee of 100, brought many young, middle-class people into contact with forms of direct action" (163).

far reaching one. This shift in the class basis of political theatre companies can also be seen as a factor in the eventual assimilation of many fringe theatre workers into the subsidized establishment, particularly the participants that Jonathan Hammond refers to as "the intelligent young disaffected 'bourgeoisie'" (46).

Along with political and social factors, there were specific changes and influences within the theatre world which made a political fringe possible and contributed to its growth. One of the most crucial factors was the abolition of stage censorship in 1968. Until this point, as Richard Findlater notes, without the Lord Chamberlain's license, "no new work [could] be publicly staged in Britain by paid actors before a paying audience--whether it [was] a translation of Aristophanes, a new *Mother Goose*, a Britten libretto, an Osborne play, or a Bart musical" (*Banned* 10). Findlater (writing in the 1967) goes on to outline some of the powers of the Lord Chamberlain under the Theatres Act of 1843:

the Lord Chamberlain and his men . . . serve as loyal arbiters of what is too indecent, profane, blasphemous, seditious, treasonable, in poor taste, or just excessively un-English to be presented in theatre. He can ban any play or part of a play, 'either absolutely'--says the law--'or for such time as he shall think fit': as long as he believes it is necessary for 'the preservation of good manners, decorum or the public peace so to do'. Every word and every bit of 'business' must have the sanction of the Chamberlain before it is seen by an audience. . . . Against his

verdict there is no appeal. As censor of the stage he is above Parliament and outside the law (*Banned* 10).

Given the extent of this control over the religious, political, and sexual content of plays--control not exercised over any other medium--it is not surprising that the scope of so much of British commercial/mainstream theatre was limited. The only way around the process for a theatre or company was to assume a club status and perform for members only. But even this proved to be difficult in some cases as Theatre Workshop and the Royal Court found out.

While the end of censorship opened up the possibilities for explicitness (at first mainly sexual), the visits of foreign theatre companies offered innovative forms and approaches. The influence of Brecht's work, which I will raise here and elaborate on later in the discussion of forms, provided an important model for a politicized stage language. At the time of the Berliner Ensemble's first visit to London in 1956, Brecht was primarily an object of aesthetic curiosity, but the influence of his work in a formal, political sense, was showing up in the work of Arden and Hunt--both peripheral figures.

Perhaps even more influential in the years immediately surrounding 1968 were the visits of American theatre companies and the American counter-culture more generally.

The visits of companies such as Café La Mama, the Open Theatre, and the Living Theatre helped to expand existing ideas of what theatre as a form entailed, bringing with them aggressive, physical performance styles and "happenings". But these formal experiments, often divorced from any overt political analysis, had a greater influence on the avant-garde in Britain than on the socialist companies. Jonathan Hammond singles out Jim Haynes and Charles Marowitz, both Americans, and their work in establishing experimental groups and spaces. He describes the Arts Laboratory (Drury Lane) and the Open Space Theatre (a converted basement in Tottenham Court Road) as "two significant birthplaces of the fringe" (38). Not only did they offer forums (in terms of venues and audiences) for new work, but, as Craig and Barker note, they provided models for and were among a growing network of new arts venues all over the country. Craig describes the "infrastructure" for this emergent theatre:

Within three years the combination of an existing network of venues complete with partisan audiences, the groups' own anti-metropolitan bias and sometimes romantic attachment to the nomadic life, the almost complete lack of coverage in the traditional media . . . and a cheap, ubiquitous form of transport in the Ford Transit and similar vans helped establish touring as the organizational model for alternative theatre (16).

This network of arts venues served a useful purpose

initially, but groups and individuals began to move in different directions--some moved towards the subsidized stages and others moved further away from the traditional structures altogether. The directions in which theatre workers drifted were related ultimately to their motives for creating theatre in the first place.

Dividing up the "Fringe"

Until this point, I have discussed the fringe movement in general terms, but it was far from being a homogeneous entity. As one socialist theatre worker insists: "lumping together all left-sounding theatre groups, into one broad continuum, submerges crucial political differences in the name of 'unity'" (Anonymous 5). Hammond's "Potted History of the Fringe" is interesting as an early overview of the first years of the movement for a number of reasons. In attempting a "factual" rather than an "evaluative" account, he provides a catalogue of groups, venues, events and publications between 1963 and 1973, concluding that "it is difficult to discern any kind of common denominator underlying the various manifestations of fringe" (46). But Hammond begins to differentiate between the various groups:

Some people are interested in theatre as an instrument of political and social change, as, in their different ways, are the 7:84 Company, the Combination and Red Ladder; others, like The Welfare State, in a spiritual and imaginative liberation based on such change; while others, like The People Show, are interested broadly in radical explorations of our aesthetic perceptions and ideas about culture (46).

Without the benefit of distance and without analyzing the determining factors, he identifies the major strands which

emerged.¹⁸ But what he mistakes is the fate of the fringe, speculating that it might "really have to go underground [due to Tory government measures], and become the one surviving democratic means of communication" (46). Instead, much of it was institutionalized.

Hammond points to competing tendencies which go all the way back to the different types of "alternative" theatre before the war and are relevant even now. This split is based on the prioritizing of artistic/theatrical issues over political functionalism--avant-garde versus grass roots movements. It is in these divisions that the social/educational backgrounds of the practitioners, outside influences, and the different motives for doing theatre manifest themselves most clearly.

John Bull and David Edgar both deal with this split in the movement and trace some of the influences and factors which account for it. Bull's analysis is useful because he highlights the role and the characteristics of the political avant-garde in the years surrounding 1968. He locates the

¹⁸ Clive Barker acknowledges the advantage of writing, in this case only three years later, about the history of fringe or alternative theatre. He claims: "The three years that have elapsed [since "A Potted History of the Fringe" and the fringe theatre issue of *Gambit* also in 1973] have been ruthless in sorting the wheat from the chaff, revealing the relevance or self-indulgence of certain lines of work, separating talent from dilettantism" ("Fringe" 60).

roots of the New Left in "the young radical intelligentsia rather than the organised Labour movement" and attributes the political consciousness of the new playwrights "primarily [to] the experience of the immediate past and its lessons of failure and compromise" (8-9). He disagrees with critics, specifically Catherine Itzin, who see 1968 as a clear turning point, due to the convergence of events on a "global scale", and as giving way to "a period of . . . unprecedented consciousness and activism" (9). Bull rejects the positive thrust of Itzin's account and argues that the new drama was a product of despair. While his argument is relevant to the careers of the political playwrights he chooses to discuss in his book (David Hare, Howard Brenton, Trevor Griffiths, and David Edgar), these figures do not represent the spectrum of political "theatre"--as opposed to "drama"--in these years.

In order to arrive at this view, Bull rejects the theory of "global" influences and focuses more directly on France and the student protests in Paris in the spring of 1968. Again, he emphasizes the distance between the radical intelligentsia and working-class organizations: "Although tentative moves were made towards the formation of an alliance between the students and the workers, the 'revolution' remained to the end what it had always been, the property of a political *avant-garde* as suspicious of the

organisations of labour as they were of those of government" (11). The distinction is important because the two camps differed in both their analyses of the problems and the solutions to them. David Edgar summarizes the fundamental difference between the more traditional Marxist position based on class struggle and the revolutionary avant-garde position (epitomized here by the French Situationists) which was concerned with shattering the lies and illusions underlying the "spectacle" of modern, consumer society:

Revolutionary politics was seen as being much 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. The centre of the revolution had shifted from the factory-floor to the supermarket ("Ten Years" 26).

The differences between these two positions, and their implications, were reflected in the approaches which various theatre groups adopted.

While in practice there was a certain amount of overlap, especially in the movement of theatre workers between groups, the positions outlined above produced two main lines of development. The terms which are repeatedly used to describe the avant-garde or "underground" groups emphasize the violence and the shock value of their work:

Significant responses [to the political events of 1968] have been the growth of neo-Marxist political groups which reject the politics of the Communist parties in favour of more spontaneous forms of left-wing action and commitment, and the

propagation of anarchistic philosophies which manifest themselves as negative and destructive opposition to prevailing political and cultural values, but which fail to find any positive programmes for action (Barker, "Fringe" 62).

Both Edgar and Bull use the work of Howard Brenton and the Portable Theatre playwrights to illustrate the impact of these counter-cultural ideologies on the early British fringe. Edgar characterizes their work as "violent, anarchic, and destructive" and Bull quotes Hare on the subject of audience appeal:

We have a very bad record with working class audiences-- we've hardly played to any. Our weapon has always been a middle-class, middle-brow weapon really. But we used to have a percentage of what we called Agro dates. The Carnegie Hall, Warrington springs to mind as an example. You knew from the start you were doomed. All you could hope to do was spread the maximum bad vibrations amongst the audience (18).

In the same interview, Hare recalls the source of his own aggression and its intended purpose in the context of his work with Portable Theatre:

Our aggressiveness is immensely conscious. I suppose it stems from a basic contempt for people who go to the theatre. . . . I loathe most people as individuals and, en masse, I find people particularly objectionable. But the aggression isn't entirely spurious. We wanted to pick up the medium of theatre and shake it by the scruff of its neck (Ansorge, "Portable Playwrights" 20).

This use of the theatre medium to challenge the audience in graphic, hostile, and provocative ways could also be seen in

productions by the Pip Simmons Theatre Group, such as *Do It!* and *An Die Musik*. Although these groups did not direct their work at working-class audiences, they helped to establish and toured the growing circuit of venues, playing to audiences which Steve Gooch describes as "people from the same generation as the practitioners--the late sixties' generation of students and 'drop-outs' from both universities and 'straight' jobs. They read *Time Out* and frequented the arts labs, studio theatres, clubs, centres and students' unions which became the focus for anti-establishment culture" (43).

While I am arguing that this was one of two major tendencies in fringe and alternative theatre to emerge from the events surrounding 1968, accounts of these groups and the terms used to refer to them differ amongst commentators. The main discrepancy concerns the use of "political" and its relationship to the content of plays. For instance, describing the anti-establishment impetus behind Howard Brenton's work with Portable Theatre, Itzin claims: "Ironically Portable was not political when it started: in retrospect it was regarded as one of the first political theatre companies. . . . The fact that Portable was touring--playing non-theatre places to non-theatre-goers--pushed it in a 'political' direction, 'to thinking about political theatre'" (189). She quotes an

unpublished interview with Brenton to clarify this process:

If you set up an antagonistic theatre touring to people who have never seen the theatre before, it transforms itself into political theatre. It has a political effect. And the anarchic, antagonistic theatre becomes increasingly one of political content. . . . It reached its peak [in the case of Portable Theatre] with *England's Ireland* (189).

The distinction seems to lie in the difference between experimental theatre (in terms of forms and the context in which it is performed) and the overt treatment of political issues, with a view to social action.

Sandy Craig seems to suggest a process of development similar to the one outlined by Itzin in relation to Portable. He states that "Though 1968 was the watershed year for alternative theatre, the emergence of a specifically political theatre didn't occur until some two or three years later" (32). But Craig actually separates "underground" from "political" and sees them as two different movements:

whereas the earlier 'underground' companies had been influenced stylistically by the visits of American and Continental theatre companies and had taken their themes from the May '68 *événements* in Paris, from student demos and the youth revolt, political theatre companies rapidly evolved their own theatrical models. These owed little to underground experimentation apart from pace, the use of music and a general concentration on image as well words (32-33).

But ultimately he arrives at the same split between the traditional Marxist and Situationist approaches discussed

above. Although he does not restrict the use of the term "political" entirely, Craig tends to apply it specifically to the "more authentic Marxist theatre" of groups such as CAST and Red Ladder. The discrepancies in the historical accounts are often related to a confusion of terms.

The terms are difficult to pin down and carry different associations and points of reference for the critics and theatre workers who use them, but the shift in the use of "fringe" and "underground" to "political" and "alternative" suggests a process of development beginning with a radical, random experimental stage and leading to a more mature form of politically oriented theatre. This comes through in an interview with Brenton who, as early as 1975, could discuss and shelve the fringe movement as a theatrical phenomenon:

I think in that sense the fringe was a historical thing. Where it went wrong was when the audience became sophisticated. . . . David Hare identified it quite rightly and that was when it was time to get out--it was becoming 'arty' ("Petrol" 12).

But many of those active in the avant-garde wing of the fringe movement, like Brenton and Hare, left to work for the bigger subsidized theatres. It is perhaps in this shift that the notion (however mistaken) of a maturation process is based--moving from the poverty of the fringe to the resources of the mainstream theatres.

The decision to write for the majors, and the

attraction to the opportunities they offered, were ultimately connected with the aesthetic/theatrical priorities which were more typical of the members of the avant-garde groups than those who opted for community oriented theatre work. Brenton's remarks about his early work with the Brighton Combination reveal the rifts between political activists and artists which plagued the post 1968 groups as much as they did the prewar ones:

There was the idea that theatre should be communicative work, socially and politically active. There was the idea of very aggressive theatrical experiment. And there was always the tension in the Combination . . . between theatre and community work. They really are a socially active group now, not a theatre. I went the theatre way ("Petrol" 7).

It is striking that a writer emerging from a radical fringe movement could define "theatre" as narrowly as he seemed to at that point. But writers like Brenton, Hare, and Edgar did not abandon political plays, they just came to argue for the importance of producing those plays within mainstream institutions. Before examining the debate surrounding the contexts for this work, I would like to turn to a consideration of the community-based groups and their place in the alternative theatre movement.

If one tendency is represented by the anarchic and iconoclastic work of early groups like the People Show, the Pip Simmons Group, and Portable Theatre, the other main

approach could be seen in the agit-prop street theatre of CAST and Red Ladder. What is significant about both these companies and distinguishes them from those who remained within the circuit of arts labs is their commitment to the labour movement and finding a role to play within it. Itzin describes CAST (Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre) as "the first and for a long time the only avowedly socialist theatre company of the sixties" (12). The group was founded by former members of Unity; their politics had become too revolutionary to fit into the type of work Unity was doing. Roland Muldoon recalls:

We were the first of the contemporary batch of theatre groups to orientate itself towards the Labour movement. With twelve million people voting Labour, twenty-two million people going to work, with x million belonging to trade unions, it is, to put it simply, a big target . . . It is clear to us that there are potential audiences throughout the country hungry for the service of the theatre, theatre that is prepared to gear itself to the functions of, for want of a better word, the community (Itzin 13).

Red Ladder's origins were more accidental. According to Richard Seyd, the first show resulted when the Tenants' Action Committee involved in the Greater London Council tenants' rent fight asked members of the Poster Workshop "whether anyone could get together a short sketch to put on at the beginning of their meetings to get them off to a lively start" (36). They began as the Agitprop Street Players and were later renamed Red Ladder. Seyd recounts:

The fact that from its very inception the group has been involved in performing its plays to labour movement audiences--the result of accident and luck in the beginning, and the result of consciously developing an understanding of the history, traditions and organisation of the labour movement as our involvement became deeper--was the most important reason why Red Ladder has survived as a revolutionary socialist theatre group for seven years (36).

In terms of their initial aims and functions, these groups have more in common with the earlier Workers' Theatre Movement than they do with their contemporaries in the fringe.

Sandy Craig recognizes the danger of overlooking or confusing this other tendency with the Situationist-influenced work, on the basis of the analyses used and the backgrounds of the members: "Such a concentration [on 1968] emphasizes the anarchistic anti-politics stance at the expense of the tradition of Marxist socialism; it focuses attention on May '68 in Paris at the expense of the imperialist war in Vietnam; and, by implying that the class composition of the early underground theatre was exclusively student and middle-class drop-outs, it ignores the crucial minority of working-class theatre workers" (18). The backgrounds of the members of these groups were more varied than predominantly university educated and theatre trained people in groups like Portable. In his account of the radicalization of CAST, Muldoon deals

with this issue directly:

By this time [1968/69] we'd somehow got a reputation of being so red no one would touch us. We were self-educated working class: left school at fifteen, now twenty-one, twenty-two. We'd been bohemian for a couple of years, escaping our class origins. When we went to Unity we were beginning consciously to look for an expression of dissension. We had trouble with the counter-culture hippies (Itzin 16).

In the case of Red Ladder, there was an even greater mix:

All had jobs in the daytime or were students, keeping their evenings free for theatre work. Some had had formal 'drama training' and had worked in the established theatre, but shared a rejection of it as something socially and culturally alien to most of the population. Others came to the group through their desire to get involved in socially meaningful theatre work: it didn't matter that they had no theatrical experience (Seyd 36).

The group's composition and its process of selection is reminiscent of the early Manchester groups described by Ewan MacColl and Goorney's account of Theatre Workshop.

As a result of their interest in and reasons for doing theatre, these groups developed different relationships with their audiences. The counter culture groups, at times, assaulted their audiences as much as establishment values and they gained a reputation for what Craig refers to as "a cruelty in performance". The Marxist based groups were concerned with encouraging collective action to bring about change, so the effort lay in building a positive,

communicative relationship with their audiences. This became the basis for including the target audience in the creation and adaptation of shows (through interviews and post performance discussions), and for playing in non-theatre venues. In relation to the work of Red Ladder, Seyd explains:

We aim to put our shows on in a context and venue where those present are the ones the play is designed for, and where the context does not exert alienating cultural pressures. This is why we play where our potential audience lives or works (or near by). That is why the venue is the club, the pub, the canteen, the community centre, the factory floor (37).

For the people these groups were interested in reaching, arts labs and studios were just as "alienating" as established theatres.

Community theatre and regionally based groups continued and developed these kinds of relationships with their constituency audiences. Ed Berman's Inter-Action, in North London, was an important early example of community theatre as Craig describes:

Inter-Action is, in fact, an umbrella organization involved in a wide range of community and self-help projects as well as the presentation of professional theatre of a number of different types. These latter have included Dogg's Troupe, a children's theatre company which toured the housing estates of the local community presenting participatory drama in the form of Game Plays; an environmental theatre project, the Fun Art Bus, a double-decker bus with theatre and video-screening and actors performing from the boarding deck to bus-queues (23).

Paul Bream writes: "To Berman these diverse activities can hardly be accounted for under one 'experimental' cliché, since their objectives are not solely concerned with the theatre--'I like to use theatre,' he said, 'as a socio-dramatic instrument to further community ends'" (26). North West Spanner, based in Manchester, grew out of a children's theatre group, but eventually created plays based on local labour disputes and became "an active shop floor theatre company--performing at building sites, dry docks, work canteens and factory gates and doing evening plays in clubs and pubs based on insights and experiences gained during visits to the workplace" (Itzin 297). Craig notes that "Their shows, which are promoted by shop stewards, trade union local organizers, and community activists, concentrate on single issues which directly affect their audiences" (39). But the company members were part of the community they worked in and played to, as Ernie Dalton describes: "The *Safety* play comes from our own work experience; at every level it's taking the piss out of our old work situations . . . We're the actors in the canteen having a laugh. We are working-class theatre. That is our tradition, where our roots are, our class background" (Craig 39). North West Spanner's effectiveness in generating support for specific issues, and its growing popularity with local working-class audiences is perhaps best illustrated by

the fact that the North West Arts Association cut their grant because--and they openly admitted--of the group's Marxist politics (Itzin 293). Inter-Action and North West Spanner are good examples of the kind of work that was going on outside of the arts circuits. These two major tendencies--avant-garde versus popular--are useful for understanding and situating the variety of groups which emerged in the seventies into a spectrum of left-wing theatre.¹⁹ The difference is much like that between the priorities of the play-producing societies and the politically based groups in the prewar period, except that the societies and clubs did not define themselves in political terms. In that context, they represented opposite ends of a range of theatrical activity existing outside of the commercial theatre. In the case of the post 1968 period, the various components of the "alternative" movement share a commitment to left-wing politics, but they too differ according to aims, forms, audiences, and venues. It is

¹⁹I have chosen to use these terms to summarize at this point because they help to stress the major differences, particularly in relation to the exclusivity or accessibility of these forms of theatre to types of audiences on the basis of social class, educational background, and location. Since both are political in that they are based on leftist ideologies, terms such as "socialist" and "political" will be reserved for reference to the range of work, as will be "alternative".

important in this period, as it was in the case of prewar movements, to distinguish between different types of theatre work to avoid the recurring problem of overloading terms such as "fringe" and "alternative". The attempt to draw lines between different areas of work is more difficult in the post 1968 period because of the overlap of techniques and personnel, but even more importantly, because the commercial theatre no longer provides an easily defined "enemy". The phenomenon of subsidized theatre, particularly as it developed in the sixties, and its relationship to alternative theatre, demands a more complex analysis than the earlier commercial/non-commercial dichotomy.

In this part of the study, the commercial West End becomes relevant only insofar as it still (occasionally) transfers plays which have been tried out in more experimental contexts, and it continues to represent a mode of production based on a hierarchical chain of authority and box-office success. In his analysis of the three sectors of British theatre (the commercial or West End, the subsidized establishment, and the fringe), McGrath relates each area to Raymond Williams's categories of literary production (residual, dominant, and emergent), designating the West End as *residual*--it "draws its sources from a previous period but is still effectively alive in the present" ("Theory" 44). He also argues that it has been replaced as the

dominant sector, both "financially and ideologically", by the subsidized establishment: "the National Theatre--the British Leyland of showbusiness--the RSC, the major reps, like Nottingham and Sheffield" ("Bootle" 45).

The Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre (often referred to as the "majors" along with the Royal Court) have long turbulent histories which cannot be dealt with here. They are important to this study insofar as their formation, in the early sixties, represents one of the most significant developments to shape the theatrical landscape in Britain. Their important contributions lie in the areas of ensemble work, providing a forum for exploring classical repertoire as well as some new writing and experimental work. But these companies, because of their buildings, classical repertoire, and predominantly middle-class audiences, constitute the new, prestigious theatre "establishment" or "mainstream", against which much alternative theatre defines itself. The terms may be contentious ones, but these companies have, since their formation, been the recipients of the two largest portions of funding for theatres in Britain. Indeed, as Genista McIntosh has suggested recently, "mainstreamness" is probably best defined by the funding patterns themselves (Lavender, "Report" 214). McGrath argues that they are dominant "in the sense that their product is recognized

generally as what we must all aspire to appreciate, or create, or imitate" ("Theory" 45).

It would be misleading to posit a strictly oppositional relationship between the two areas of theatre, given the new plays the majors have produced in their studio theatres, the co-productions with smaller touring companies, and the movement of writers, directors, designers, and actors back and forth. But it must be noted that this relationship has been a limited one; there are many groups whose aims and working methods are fundamentally at odds with those of the major subsidized companies. Gillian Hanna notes that co-productions with theatres such as the Birmingham Rep marked a new phase in the work of *Monstrous Regiment*, but not without a price:

As we continued to struggle for our financial existence during the 1980s, co-productions with larger institutions became a lifeline in the maintenance of our artistic standards. They gave us access to resources and facilities (workshops, wardrobe departments) beyond our means. However, small entities taken under the wing of large institutions are in danger of being swallowed whole, and we felt we were constantly juggling our economic needs against our desire to work on our own terms ("Introduction" lxii).

Steve Gooch outlines how the original aims behind the establishment of the national and regional theatres involved "broadening the social class composition of audiences, making the general fare at [British] theatres more serious, and following the example of France, Germany and other

European countries with a longer tradition of subsidy for cultural and intellectual life" (28). But the outcome was quite different:

The people and the live art they now paid for through their taxes were still as far apart as in the heyday of the drawing-room comedy. In fact the working class was now subsidising middle-class audiences.

Just as the nationalisation of coal and steel effected only a slight change in the lives of miners and steelworkers, so subsidy in the theatre of the fifties and sixties did little to change the basic relations of production inherited from prewar commercial theatre (28).

For companies who were trying to reach new audiences, change the relations of production (and eliminate the hierarchies), and to escape the impact of market pressures on repertoire, the national and regional theatres held little appeal.

Choosing Where to Work

A variety of options became available to left-wing theatre workers by the early seventies which would never have been possible in the prewar years. While the work of the WTM constituted one type of non-commercial theatre, in the post 1968 period, three main areas of theatre became open to socialist writers and/or groups. These include the major subsidized theatres, the circuit of arts venues (including university theatre spaces), and the expanding

area of community-based, non-theatre venues.²⁰ The emphasis, for the purposes of this study, will be on the last area, but it is necessary to outline how all three, in addition to television, provide opportunities for left-wing theatre workers.

The options did not open up by accident or because of magnanimous gestures on the part of established institutions. The opportunities were due to a number of factors. First the determination on the part of the new practitioners to continue and develop their work cannot be underestimated. The alternative theatre movement as a whole underwent a process of proliferation and diversification, giving way to new groups and types of organizations, raising a larger range of issues related to class, gender, sexual orientation, race, and regional identities. There were also influential people (mainly directors) working within the major subsidized companies who were interested in producing the work of new playwrights and adopting some of the new production techniques--recognizing at an early stage that the fringe would prove an important means of artistic

²⁰Malcolm Hay outlines the new range of arts venues in "Showcasing the Fringe: The Venues" in *Craig's Dreams and Deconstructions*. He describes venues such as The Traverse, The Arts Lab, Oval House, and The Bush, in addition to the studio spaces linked with major subsidized companies such as The Theatre Upstairs, The Other Place, and The Cottesloe.

sustenance.

Also crucial was the gradual recognition of these new groups on another level--through public subsidy. They began to pressure the Arts Council into honouring its mandate, as outlined by the 1967 Royal Charter. The grants began to trickle out, but the trepidation with which these new matters were being handled is obvious from the annual reports. In the introduction to the twenty-fifth annual report (1969/70), the Chairman discusses the most "fettlesome" of their committees, the "New Activities" Committee, and the criticisms made of him, "a gentleman of intellectual and social distinction", from "sober and concerned voices", for subsidizing "a collection of weirdly attired, hirsute bohemians", for "stirring up anarchy in St. Ives and communism in Cullompton". His response reveals both the urgency generated from the artists and the patronizing way with which they were dealt:

we had, rightly or wrongly, heard that a group of youngsters around the country had some new ideas and the rumour grew with disturbing persistence. Reverberations came from arts laboratories in London and nearby seaside resorts, from towns rarely associated with artistic explosions. From all over the place reports of quaint, new phenomena were raced to us by carrier-pigeon, mule and camel. We sat feverishly unwrapping the messages and reporting them back to our colleagues. And they all pointed to one thing, that there was something astir. . . . enthusiastic groups of young people are working under totally unorthodox conditions in a fashion which they find deeply satisfying. . . . They are desperately seeking to break away from

conventional restrictions. Whether they are attaching too much importance to the print and too little to the text remains to be seen. . . . But misgivings and doubts will always be felt by my age group. It would be hypocrisy to pretend that the young have our total trust.

The decision was taken to give new activities a "sporting chance", but the funding statistics confirm how little importance was attached to this work. Even though the grants to alternative companies were small, the availability of public subsidy did make it possible to create, rehearse and tour/perform shows with a degree of stability which had not been possible before.

With different options open, choices had to be made. Individuals and groups had to decide what they were doing and why, whom they were doing it for, as well as how and where they would do it--for some this process was a natural step in defining the identity of the company, for others it was part of the process of filling out grant applications. Each of these considerations is inextricably tied to the other. The degree of self-consciousness with which groups have formed and worked makes it possible to examine them in these specific terms. Clive Barker notes, writing in 1980, "There is less idealism and a growing concern to understand theatre in its social context, and to arrive at revised concepts of the *function* both of theatre practice and theory" ("Politicisation" 277). The extent to which these issues have been explored and made more visible through

books and theatre periodicals is a recent phenomenon, but Barker distorts the picture when he claims that the "concern with theory is new" ("Politicisation" 277). I would like to use the main tendencies outlined above, representing two distinct lines of development, as a framework for what I see as the central debates concerning context and form. What is both interesting and disconcerting about these debates is how little they have changed. They divided political theatre workers in the twenties and thirties, and they are far from being resolved even today.

Why Theatre?

Before turning to the debate about theatrical context ("where" to perform), it is important to consider why so many artists have chosen and continue to work in this medium instead of television or film. For instance, the main argument in favour of television concerns its potential to reach a mass audience. Trevor Griffiths, after having done work for both the fringe and majors, is one of the writers who has concentrated much of his creative energy on plays and serial drama for T.V. He describes the appeal of the medium:

'Strategic penetration' is a phrase I use a lot about the work of socialists and Marxists in bourgeois cultures . . . I simply cannot understand socialist playwrights who do not

devote most of their time to television. That they can write for the Royal Court and the National Theatre, and only that, seems to me a wilful self-delusion about the nature of theatre in a bourgeois culture now. It's just thunderingly exciting to be able to talk to large numbers of people in the working class, and I can't understand why everybody doesn't want to do it (Edgar, "Ten Years" 29).

The audience figures for television are staggering; as Graham Murdock points out, "Even with an average audience of four million, a single *Play for Today* still attracts more working class viewers than most theatre productions could hope to reach in a decade or more of continuous performances" (162). But some have been discouraged from writing or continuing to write for television because of the lack of creative freedom and systems of control over the work produced. John McGrath recalls the unusual opportunities available to him and other writers in the BBC in the early sixties and claims:

That era has died out. Historically, the economic collapse of Britain has undermined the confidence of the ruling class. Politically they *do* feel threatened. So the BBC, sensitive as ever, has altered its structure. Anarchy is over. Centralise control, elaborate systems of command supervision, check and review have been introduced ("TV Drama" 104).

Those (particularly playwrights) who remain in theatre are willing to give up numbers for the sake of creative freedom and the advantages of the live performance which offers the opportunity to confront an audience en masse unlike the

television audience which is, as Edgar notes, "confronted in the atomized, a-collective arena of the family living room, the place where people are at their least critical, their most conservative and reactionary (the dwelling-addressed postal vote will always get a more reactionary response than any other form of balloted decision)" ("Ten Years" 30).

Related to this idea of collectivity is the dynamic nature of the relationship between performer and audience. Chris Rawlence points to a three-way relationship between the spectator, other spectators and the performers, and how this can shape or alter a given performance (63). It is precisely this potential of theatre which led Brecht to redefine the relationship between the stage and the audience and continues to be developed by an increasingly wider variety of theatre groups. John McGrath argues that "the theatre is by its nature a political forum, or a politicizing medium, rather than a place to experience a rarefied artistic sensibility in an aesthetic void. Theatre launches even the most private thought into a public world, and gives it a social, historical meaning and context as it passes through the eyes and minds of the audience" (*Good* 83).

Albert Hunt links these ideas of "liveness" and the public nature of theatre to the neutralizing effects of the mass media:

by offering a direct, physical experience, by making the imagination concrete, it has a particular role to play in a society in which experience constantly becomes less immediate and more second-hand. Our society knows more about political events . . . When the rockets fall on Phnom Penh, we see the effects almost as soon as they happen, stuck between the margarine ads and Affairs of the Heart. But the more we know, the less we seem able to grasp, imaginatively, the processes that shape the events, and so control them. The theatre can make those processes concrete ("Political" 6).

This emphasis on concrete visual images has been an important factor behind the work of many political groups, particularly those exploring cartoon styles of acting. The live, collective situation also allows for immediate feedback on the part of audience. This can take the form of general responses such as laughter, hostility, and applause. As a result, the performers can gauge the impact or success of their work in a way which is impossible to determine about a television audience, despite the availability of ratings. Even more important is the potential for post-performance discussions with the audience. This is a practice developed and used most frequently by community and small scale touring groups who perform in spaces such as pubs, clubs, and halls. As Richard Ceyd describes in relation to Red Ladder, such discussions are central to their work:

It is here that the group and the audience can exchange experiences. The ideas and questions raised in the play are taken up, rejected, challenged, broadened out, tempered, narrowed

down and so on. The group learns, the audience learns. The play changes as a result, and so does the audience and the group (37).

Theatre allows for this kind of dialogue in a way that other media do not. This flexibility also extends to economics and control over content; theatre can be labour intensive, but it requires little or no technology, so it can be done anywhere by anybody, unlike television or film.

On another level, Rawlence considers the political implications that the collective nature of live performance can have for socialists in particular. He examines the idea of collectivism as an aspect of working-class culture and one of its weapons against capitalist individualism:

Capitalism collectivised the working class at the point of production during the Industrial Revolution. Collectivity, imposed upon it, became its prime mode of defence--in the form of trade unions, Chartist lodges, co-operatives and so on--against the unemployment and wage-cutting of the capitalist system. The collectivism that it created became capitalism's worst enemy. Collectivism, mutuality and class solidarity have never been the only ideologies active within the working class . . . But they are still very much present . . . today . . . in being aware of both the collectivist aspirations of working-class culture on the one hand, and the potential that live performance has to create in an audience the feeling that it can collectively determine the outcome of the performance on the other, it is possible that we can act as a catalyst in reminding this audience of its own cultural and political potential (64).

While Rawlence deals specifically with class struggle, the process he describes is relevant to oppressed groups in

general.

The erosion of working-class organizations is often linked to social and economic developments in the postwar years, particularly domestication and the impact of mass media. Clive Barker, describing the areas of discontent shaping the work of theatre workers in the sixties, notes: "It was generally felt that the social reconstruction after the war had materially improved the living conditions of the working-class but in the building of housing estates and tower blocks of flats no provision had been made to continue the social institutions of the working-class communities. What both major political parties wanted was a quiescent electorate, each man with his family in his house, with his television set" ("Politicisation" 274). It is the significant role that television has come to play in the leisure time of the population in general that drives writers like Griffiths to want to take advantage of it. Others remain committed to luring people out of their living rooms towards public forms of entertainment.

Not only can theatre help to promote greater collectivism on the part of audiences, but as Albert Hunt argues, the working relationships between theatre companies can provide positive models for methods of organization: "the fringe theatre groups, whatever their differences of political line, have demonstrated new ways of working

together, outside hierarchic social structures" ("Political" 6). In these ways, theatre possesses powerful functional/political as well as artistic capacities--for those who choose to explore and make use of them. The opportunities to do so depend on the context in which practitioners choose to work.

Strategic Penetration or Repressive Tolerance? Socialist Plays in Mainstream Theatres

One of the controversial issues to emerge in the seventies concerned the production of the work of socialist writers in the major subsidized theatres. The National Theatre and the RSC have always held particular appeal for a whole range of theatre workers--for some they represent prestige and success, and for others they offer resources. For instance, David Hare, who along with Howard Brenton²¹ made the move from fringe to establishment theatre, recalls:

I came here [to the National Theatre] to experiment on a really large scale . . . I write social plays and you have to have a sweep of actors, a company of Shakespearean size, so that

²¹Itzin notes that Brenton's *Weapons of Happiness* was the first new play to be produced in the National Theatre (1976). When the NT commissioned the play, Brenton insisted on doing it for the Lyttleton--he wanted to get his plays on as big a stage as possible (Itzin 187).

not only is every class represented, but groups can argue within each class. You are talking about 15 to 20 players. And there are only three or four theatres in the country where you can use that number (Wilkes 16).

But the attractions extend beyond the artistic advantages these theatres offer; for some, the hand-to-mouth existence of working the fringe circuits took its toll.

While artistic/economic benefits may be obvious, what is the position of socialist theatre workers within these institutions? One of the arguments in support of working for the majors involves the idea of challenging or subverting them, as power structures, from within. Raymond Williams points to the importance of taking advantage of opportunities in the dominant institutions when they present themselves:

We have to establish the fringe culture--there's no alternative to that--but if we don't also contest the central institutions then we are giving away too much. You run radical theatre groups wherever you can but at the same time you really do think seriously about establishment theatre and about establishment broadcasting.

You really get in there with proposals for more democratic structures, which a lot of those institutions want, and in any case are the necessary dimension of any serious challenge to the orthodox position ("Building" 26).

Even more significant for some is the opportunity to direct a particular type of play or message at middle-class audiences and appealing to the left contingent. With regard to this function of political theatre, Brenton has argued:

Writers on the left have to be a

vanguard. They have to provide survival kits for people who are active politically. . . . Also their work has to be at the service of the working class. But in ways that are difficult to describe because you are not performing to the working class. Therefore you are addressing them to people who are a potentially political vanguard (Itzin 196).

David Edgar goes even further, suggesting that the attempt to appeal to working-class audiences has failed, and praises the "seemingly modest aims of a group like Monstrous Regiment, to perform aesthetically and politically mature plays to an existing audience" ("Ten Years" 33).

In his assessment of political theatre in the ten year period between 1968-78, Edgar sees its intervention in the working-class struggle, at best, as "patchy and peripheral". Despite some noteworthy forays on the part of agit-prop groups and television writers, he maintains that the major breakthroughs have been made in mainstream theatre: "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-built buildings patronized almost exclusively by the middle-class" ("Ten Years 31). Among the examples of such statements, he includes the final scenes of Bond's *Lear*, Brenton and Hare's *Brassneck*, Keefe's *Gotcha*, and Barker's *Claw*. What these pieces share is a shock value which relies on the audience's ignorance of what is going to happen.

But an important problem exists regarding the

accessibility of these plays. First, because they rely on an upending of received forms, both literary and theatrical, Edgar points out their inaccessibility to "those without the dubious advantage of a university education" and admits that the writers he cites are much further from political activism than most touring socialist theatre workers. Interestingly enough, he seems quite unselfconscious about his own bias as a viewer. It may be true that the power of the plays he cites, and many others like them, depends on an informed reading. But what he seems to overlook is the potential impact of theatrical statements which have been made for other types of viewers, namely working-class audiences; he never seems to entertain the possibility that the images offered by popular forms of theatre might not be accessible to him--for different reasons.

The second problem is that the venues in which they premiered--the Royal Court, the National Theatre, the Aldwych--are hardly frequented by the working-class. Edgar argues that socialist theatre has not built up a mass working-class audience; instead, it has generated support within the socialist movement and what he refers to as a *Time Out* audience. He concludes that once theatre groups face up to this, then they can "concentrate on the presentation of content that can speak appropriately, authoritatively, and also controversially to that audience"

("Ten Years" 32).

It is no coincidence that Edgar's assessment provides a defence for some of his own work. His career, like Brenton's and Hare's, is marked by a shift away from agit-prop to the mainstream. He accounts for his break from General Will as the result of an obsession with "slickness" and frustrations with the limitations of agit-prop ("Ambiguities" 13). He too was attracted by the resources of the larger stages, but he maintains that the infiltration of the mainstream by socialist playwrights is an important achievement in itself. In the case of his own work, he claims: "*Destiny* had more effect, by virtue of being done at the Aldwych, than anything else I've written. Partly because it's better than a lot of what I've written, but partly because it became an event" ("Ambiguities" 15).

It is difficult not to consider the arguments of those who have gone to the majors as justifications for moving on, to what they and many others regard as, bigger and better things. While few would deny that it is better to have political plays produced within the subsidized establishment theatres than not at all, a number of important criticisms have been raised. The main objection or concern is based on the danger of incorporation or absorption of interventionist works by the dominant institutions. This works on two levels: the context in which a play is performed can

influence and even distort its effect or meaning for an audience and, in turn, this control can be used to present, but at the same time contain, oppositional voices.

McGrath has been one of the more vocal critics. His own career reverses the direction of those of Brenton, Hare, and Edgar; he turned down the opportunity of writing for the subsidized establishment and, after experimenting with television and film, concentrated his energies on working with 7:84 (both the English and Scottish companies) to create theatre for working-class audiences. He acknowledges that socialist plays in establishment theatres contribute to "the struggle . . . against the hegemony of the 'bourgeois' ideology within those institutions". But his rejection of the mainstream is based on the fact that, as power-structures, these theatres reflect nationalized industries-- "they are capitalist structures, but without the need to make profits." McGrath argues:

They [the plays] become 'product' and the process remains the same: they are in constant danger of being appropriated in production by the very ideology they set out to oppose. . . . The process, the building, the wages structure, the publicity machine, the free interval drinks budget, all these can turn opposition into novelty ("Theory" 46).

The attempt to change the conditions of theatrical production--to create a political theatre, not just plays dealing with political issues--has been central to the work

of many groups.²²

When the politics and the context of the play are at odds with one another, there is also a risk of distortion, especially when writers are denied control over their material. This can happen in a direct way, as in the frequently cited case of the 1972 RSC production of *The Island of the Mighty*, by John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy, at the Aldwych. After a dispute over what they saw as a distortion of their play and a violation of their rights as playwrights (as stipulated by their contract), Arden and D'Arcy went on strike and picketed the theatre. Albert Hunt, who agreed that there was an important discrepancy--"The

²²This is true of political theatre in other countries as well. Franca Rame accounts for the decision she and Dario Fo made to leave the mainstream theatre in Italy:

Yet it was just at the end of the 1968 season (a true record in terms of takings) that we arrived at the decision to leave the traditional structures of the official theatre. We had realised that, despite the hostility of a few, obtuse reactionaries, the high bourgeoisie reacted to our 'spankings' almost with pleasure. Masochists? No, without realising it, we were helping their digestion. Our 'whipping' boosted their blood circulation, like some good birching after a refreshing sauna. In other words we had become the minstrels of a fat and intelligent bourgeoisie. This bourgeoisie did not mind our criticism, no matter how pitiless it had become through our use of satire and grotesque technique, but only so long as the exposure of their 'vices' occurred exclusively within the structures they controlled ("Introduction" vi).

extrovert, circus-like quality of the Ardens' script was turned into an introvert meditation about the decline of a kingdom"--attributes the problem not only to political perspectives, but to a fundamental difference between working methods. He claims: "The Ardens, in their search for new, collective working methods, are closer to Brecht than they are to the British theatre establishment: not because they are 'Marxist' or 'left-wing', but because they have consistently produced work which cannot be squeezed into the conventions of 'legitimate' theatre, and because the nature of this work has driven them unceasingly to find alternative solutions" (*Arden* 162).

The distortion of plays can also occur in more subtle and unexpected ways. For instance, David Edgar's *Destiny* (1977), also produced by the RSC, explores the basis for extreme right-wing positions: "I am out to show the awesome ease with which people can move from . . . mild racism, say, or a mildly reactionary line on crime . . . to open fascism" ("Exit"). Because of his choice to present the characters naturalistically, not as caricatures, Edgar became aware of the risk of being misunderstood and notes how a few critics "took great delight in alleging that this leftie writer had written a Nazi play by some kind of accident" ("Exit"). A slightly more ironic and amusing case is the overwhelming success of Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money* (1987) at the

Royal Court. A notice in the *Times* (June 30, 1987) opens: "The hit satire about City greed is causing considerable embarrassment to its left-wing creators". Churchill, and many others, were surprised by the enthusiastic response to the play on the part of City firms who flocked to see it.

Even when obvious forms of distortion are not at work, there is a larger risk involved in the presentation of work in mainstream theatres. Alan Sinfield points to the problem of co-optation when he poses the question: "Is Brenton gaining wider influence at the National, or is he helping the state to present a liberal front? Who is using whom?" ("Audiences" 194). Many practitioners are all too aware of the capacity of bourgeois culture to absorb oppositional elements. The anonymous author of the *Wedge* article on grant aid suggests that airing such views in established institutions poses far less of a threat to state control than grass roots organizations:

Even the throwing of Molotov cocktails could be permitted, provided it occurred within the context of a play's performance, in a building specially set aside for that purpose. Messages of discontent, despair, and revolutionary aspirations were freely available in the dress circle of the Royal Court, Sloane Square, SW1, to the select clientele who frequented that establishment. What was not encouraged so readily, and was more difficult to contain, was the wave of theatre that sprang up from the socialist movement . . . which began to attempt to reach working class audiences (6).

This concern with audience has been the basis for most of

the work pursued outside of the mainstream structures.

Seeking New Contexts

The issue of audience raises, once again, the questions of "why" and "for whom". For practitioners interested in exploring the functional possibilities of theatre, there has been little choice but to perform outside of theatre buildings, just as the WTM found it necessary to do so. It is a case of taking the shows to the places where one is most likely to find the people one is trying to reach. This is true for groups which fall into political, popular, and community categories--whether they are trying to create a counter-culture rooted in the working-class or to play to other types of culturally dispossessed audiences. For the earlier agit-prop groups, the performances were often part of a larger event (demonstrations, rallies, fund raisers), but even the full length shows which emerged in the seventies served certain functions. Sandy Craig deals specifically with socialist theatre, but the points he makes can easily be applied to groups who define their work around other issues such as gender and race:

Socialist theatre . . . does have many different functions which are integral to the continuation of the fight for socialism: it can provide information and analysis, it can boost confidence and strengthen solidarity, it can 'raise consciousness' or, most basically, it can provide

socialist entertainment. It can help re-establish the belief in socialism, it can help persuade the doubtful, it can sow seeds of doubt in the critical. It may even, on occasion, be influential in 'converting' someone to socialism. It doesn't man the barricades or the picket lines: it raises the analysis, it puts meat on the bones of socialism (37).

It is the fact that these goals have been realized, to varying degrees by various groups, that has encouraged many of them to continue and others to form. For companies like Red Ladder, the Belts and Braces Roadshow, North West Spanner, The Combination, 7:84, The Broadside Mobile Workers Theatre, The Women's Theatre Group, Charabanc, and many others, the achievements have been made in places quite remote from the mainstream theatres.

Whereas in the case of establishment theatre the audience is drawn to the institution as a result of the mediating process which takes place between the product and the audience, in the case of alternative theatre, groups seek out and try to win over their audiences. It is a difficult and not always successful process. But as Chris Rawlence explains, "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" (69).

Rawlence links the importance of venues to the attempt

to break down the middle-class associations which surround the idea of theatre (something Theatre Workshop tried to do earlier):

Theatre is felt by the working class not just to be not about them, but also to be not for them . . . Theatre is felt as the terrain of another class. The ambiance of many theatre buildings compounds this feeling: compared to the working-men's club or local, they are special places whose decor and plush percolated hush is sometimes intimidating. A visit is sometimes felt as a pilgrimage to someone else's shrine. And there is often the problem of catching the last bus (68).

This kind of alienation works along cultural, as well as class, lines, and in smaller scale "artsy" venues as well as in the up-market theatres. Rawlence goes on to suggest that it is "in these venues [community centres, pubs, labour clubs] that the new audiences expect to enjoy themselves; it is here that their experience of live entertainment is rooted" (69). It is a process that involves returning to theatre, in a working-class context, the social dimension which was, for instance, a part of early forms of music hall.²³ A number of plays produced in regional repertory

²³I refer here to the changes made to the general shape of music hall entertainment by the end of the nineteenth century, much like those made to straight theatre. These include the upgrading of buildings and their interiors, the shift from tables to fixed seating, and the elimination of alcohol in the auditoria.

theatres have provided some important exceptions. Because of the administrative structure of these theatres, artistic directors (required by the Arts Council and answerable to boards of directors), no matter how adventurous, are limited in the selections of plays for a given season. Steve Gooch refers to them as "identikit seasons", designed to guarantee the sixty-per-cent box-office capacity approved by the Arts Council:

one Shakespeare, one Restoration comedy, one Chekhov or Ibsen (or possibly Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams-- foreign at any rate), one slightly more obscure classical play (usually one that's recently been revived by the National or RSC), one 'modern' play (yet another production of *Godot*, or *The Caretaker*, or perhaps a Stoppard or an Ayckbourn), one 'old favourite' like *Charley's Aunt*, a Ben Travers farce, an Agatha Christie or a Priestley, the Christmas panto and one other (29).

Despite the limited scope for experimentation, some of the reps have produced socialist plays, usually based on local material, which have attracted non-theatregoing audiences. Among those which have made attempts at rooting the theatre into the communities where they are based, McGrath includes the Liverpool Everyman, the Victoria in Stoke, the Playhouse in Nottingham, the Northcott in Exeter, and the Belgrade in Coventry ("Theory" 46)²⁴. Using a more specific example,

²⁴Although it is not possible within the scope of this study,

Rawlence notes the Sheffield Crucible's production of *The Stirrings in Sheffield on Saturday Night*, explaining that "it [the play was about the knife-grinders' strike in the city during the 1860s] was very popular with the working-class of the city. The theatre organized to get that audience and succeeded" (68). A similar case is *Close the Coalhouse Door*, which deals with the history of the mining industry in the region, produced for the Newcastle Playhouse. Alan Plater writes:

When 'Close the Coalhouse Door' was running in Newcastle it is recorded history that strong men, only able to obtain tickets for the Saturday matinee, voluntarily missed football matches to see the show: in the North East greater love hath no man. This response, *among folk for whom it was created*, [our stress] was hardly anticipated (Chambers and Prior 46).

Along with acknowledging the exceptions, it should also be noted that while it is necessary to generalize for the sake of the argument, the labelling of audiences can be much more difficult in some cases than in others.²⁵

it is interesting to consider these repertory theatres from an architectural perspective. Many of them were products of the civic building and "housing the arts" efforts. In their designs (thrust stages, theatre-in-the-round, studio and flexible acting spaces, etc) and in their attempts to integrate the theatre into the community (through exhibit spaces, bookstalls, coffee shops, T.I.E. programmes) they represent an important departure from approaches to theatre building before the war.

²⁵In the context of regional repertory companies, John Elsom

The Debate About Form

The other major area of controversy in the post 1968 period involves the problem of theatrical/dramatic form. Much of it is a reworking of the debate about agit-prop and naturalism in the prewar period. This issue is a difficult one to discuss because it includes a number of different considerations. It is impossible to examine the range of work produced by the alternative theatre movement without taking into account some of the social, political, and economic factors which forced the various areas of theatre work to change, and in some cases, to disappear. Included

discusses the complexity of the term "middle-class" and how it can become "an adjective to describe a state of mind, possibly but not necessarily linked with incomes and education" (34). With regard to situating theatres and selecting a repertoire, he explains:

A 'middle-class' theatre, therefore, may not just appeal to the 'middle-classes'--but to the middle-class strain in us all. Overt attempts to fit a theatre into a locality, to choose 'appropriate' plays, are often disastrous, because they sometimes conceal a loftiness towards the area which the potential public may well resent. It is no good putting on 'working-class' plays in a 'working-class' area where most of the inhabitants are trying to be 'middle-class' (34).

here are the shifts in class politics, the growth of new issues and movements, the effects of inflation on wages and production costs, the organization of companies, collective approaches to creation, the struggles within Equity, and most importantly, the positive and negative effects of subsidy. What complicates any analysis even further is the fact that many of these factors are closely connected to one another and therefore difficult to isolate for the purposes of discussion. In the late sixties, the formative years of the fringe, groups explored a whole range of performance techniques such as mime, dance, environmental theatre, happenings, and cartoon styles of acting. But the central debate, based on the pros and cons of agit-prop and naturalism, surfaced in the early to mid seventies, after the initial frenzy of radical experimentation had begun to subside. It was triggered by what seemed to be a gradual retreat from the revolutionary principles underlying the form and function of socialist theatre. The controversy has involved practitioners (mainly writers) of left-wing theatre and drama generally--those working in mainstream theatres, television, and the touring fringe. I should clarify that the terms of the debate are misleading if one considers that very few of those involved in it actually produce either pure agit-prop or naturalism. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that practitioners and commentators use the terms

in different ways. The terms, are used in a very general way to indicate general tendencies which can be simplified into non-realist versus realist approaches to characters, language and setting. But the associations are also more complex than this dichotomy would imply. The debate is also about doing scripted plays in theatre spaces as opposed to breaking away from the conventional apparatus altogether.²⁶

Outlining some of the new directions, Edgar includes "a return to forms of social-realism . . . and . . . a much greater concentration on the entertainment value of performances, sometimes at the expense of overt political content" ("Ten Years" 27). Sandy Craig describes the mid to

²⁶This is difficult to summarize in any comprehensive way, but it is much like the conflict between WTM and Unity members/groups. Even though Unity occasionally staged satirical cabarets, they had gone back "inside" to perform full-length plays. The reason I raise this is because, in spite of all that has been written about this formal debate, I can think of few "naturalistic" plays by political playwrights, except for works such as Griffith's *The Party* and *Comedians* and some of Hare's history plays. There are equally few which rely solely on the kind of agit-prop techniques found in Red Ladder's *The National Cake*. Many of Brenton's and Hare's plays, even for the main subsidized theatres, employ epic structures and non-realist staging techniques. For these reasons I believe the term naturalism is mainly associated with full-length plays which include relatively rounded or recognizable characters. More importantly, the term seems to refer to plays which employ primarily dialogue--as opposed to shows which are made up music/songs, sketches, stand up routines, direct address, and audience participation. This is, of course, a very loose definition of the term.

late seventies as "a period of consolidation for the 'straight left' companies" during which there has been "a sophistication of the existing forms and a trend towards less directly interventionist forms" (36). Craig is correct in suggesting that this transition cannot be explained as a complete switch from agit-prop to naturalism, but the fact remains that these terms, however inadequate, are used by practitioners and critics and have shaped our understanding of this issue. In the context of this debate, "agit-prop" and "naturalism" tend to be used in a more representative than literal way, suggesting ideological tendencies even more than technical ones.²⁷

What the variety of experiments in the early years of the fringe demonstrated was the need to break away from conventional (verbal and representational) stage language as it manifested itself in plays which involved individuals talking to one another (whether middle or working-class) in rooms. The counter-cultural groups went the furthest in this

²⁷This is particularly important in the case of the term "naturalism" about which there is much disagreement. For the purposes of this study, I am using the term chiefly in a technical sense, as Raymond Williams notes: "In popular and semi-professional usage naturalism means no more than accurate or lifelike reproduction of character, an action or a scene" ("Social" 205). But this technical usage is, to a great extent, loaded ideologically; it carries with it associations with bourgeois individualism and the tendency to focus on the private versus the public.

respect. Using the example of "The People Show", Clive Barker notes the visual emphasis of this kind of work: "[they] developed a style based upon elements of Dadaism and the Happening, working through the improvisatory creation of visual images . . . [and] dispensed with any concept of the word being paramount, or often necessary" ("Fringe" 65). The work of the Marxist agit-prop groups was less anarchic and aggressive, but it was similarly based on the power of visual rather than verbal images.

Even in the area of scripted plays involving characters and narratives, there was a shift away from a realist treatment of these elements. Comparing post 1968 drama with that of the "breakthrough" (1956), Gunther Klotz points to the increased tendency to treat subjects in an objective rather than a personal or subjective way:

After 1968 there is a distinct advance of more objective kinds of presentation which are linked up with a more mature understanding of the way in which present-day struggles against the bourgeois establishment are linked to the struggles of the past, and of how private problems relate to social developments on a national or international level. With some authors the greater objectivity of presentation is also connected with a straight interest in the question of how the imperative and profound social change is to be prepared, organised, and led (47).

Among the examples of this objective treatment of material he includes documentaries, historical revues, epic chronicles, and plays drawing on the Living Newspapers,

agit-prop, and the English Music Hall. Some of the specific plays he refers to are the Stoke documentaries (*The Knotty, Fight for Shelton Bar*), Alan Plater's *Close the Coalhouse Door*, Community Theatre's *The Motor Show*, Brenton's and Hare's *Brassneck*, 7:84's *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil*, the Ardens' *The Ballygombeen Bequest*, and Joint Stock's *Fanshen*.²⁸ He links objectification, in a dramaturgical sense, to the work of Piscator and Brecht, stressing the position of the audience as outside (observers of) the action, but active participants in the production of meaning.

The emphasis on the role of the audience, while it has varied in degree, is one of the common denominators in the diversified practices of alternative theatre. Sandy Craig claims:

Despite all the differences of content, form and context, despite the different ideologies

²⁸All of these plays cover long spans of time, and almost invariably for the purposes of illuminating contemporary problems (usually related to trades and industries) through an examination of how they evolved. For instance, *The Knotty* is a documentary play about the history of The North Staffordshire Railway Company, *The Motor Show* is "a 24-scene epic spanning sixty years of struggle between Ford and the trades unions and its working-class members...[using] songs and a fast succession of music hall, documentary and realistic scenes to show the history of the Ford empire from the Model T and introduction of the production line, through the slump of the 1930s, to the industrial relations struggles of the early seventies" (Itzin 163).

(whether socialist, anarchist, feminist or social-democratic), despite the different theories about the function of their art (theatre as individual expression, theatre as weapon, theatre as community expression, theatre as dialectical mirror)-- despite these many, fundamental differences there appears to be one quality shared. That quality is to be found in the new relation between the stage and the audience, a relation of engagement (28).

This shared relation of engagement between the stage and the audience generally involves breaking down the barriers between the performers and audience that naturalism necessarily keeps in place.

The basis for the break from naturalistic forms for the post 1968 practitioners was much the same as it was for the Workers' Theatre Movement. Ideologically, the form is associated with middle-class, establishment theatre, just as it represented commercial or capitalist values for the prewar groups. On a practical level, such plays still required indoor, equipped spaces, and fringe groups needed more portable, flexible, and inexpensive shows. But, even more importantly, on a formal level, naturalism imposed too many restrictions; political groups wanted to get beyond individuals to the social, political forces shaping their lives. It is this question regarding the formal potential and the limitations of naturalism which was debated more extensively in the seventies.

It is in relation to this controversy that Brecht's work becomes most important. His writings on epic theatre

and the increasing availability of his plays offered a systematic analysis of the limits of naturalistic theatre for a socialist theatre, as well as strategies for undermining its conventions. There are three issues of particular relevance to the rejection of naturalism in the post 1968 period. The first, already noted in relation to Klotz, is the objective treatment of subjects on stage. In outlining the characteristics of epic theatre, Brecht posits the human being not as a given, but as "the object of inquiry", placing the spectator outside the action as an "observer" (Willet 37). In more general terms, Benjamin describes the stage as a "public platform" or "public exhibition area" for "revealing" or "uncovering" conditions, not for creating illusions (4). The limits which naturalism imposes on the treatment of character, time and place makes it an inadequate means for presenting and questioning the broader political problems. Concerning Brecht's rejection of realism as a form of oppositional art, Peter Wollen suggests: "On a purely descriptive level it tended to be local rather than global, and to show what was present simultaneously rather than past and future. It favoured the actual rather than the possible and the observable rather than the unobservable. It was descriptive rather than explanatory. It effaced contradiction" (23).

The second issue, closely connected with the first, is

the redefining of the relationship between the action on stage and the audience--the "filling-in of the orchestra pit". Through detaching the spectator from the action, s/he is thrust into an active role. In Brecht's terms, epic theatre "arouses his [the spectator's] capacity for action", and "forces him to take decisions" (Willet 37). This positioning of the audience is central to epic theatre's political agenda:

Once the content becomes, technically speaking, an independent component, to which text, music and setting 'adopt attitudes'; once illusion is sacrificed to free discussion, and once the spectator, instead of being enabled to have an experience, is forced as it were to cast his vote; then a change has been launched which goes far beyond formal matters and begins for the first time to affect the theatre's social function (Willet 39).

Left-wing theatre groups in particular have sought to maximize these confrontational aspects of theatre and Klotz argues that the dramaturgy of the post 1968 period goes further than Brecht's in involving the audience. As I will demonstrate in the context of the work of 7:84 later, some groups sought not only more involvement, but different (more positive) forms of interaction with their audiences than did Brecht.

The third important issue Brecht and Benjamin explore is the idea of continual change or innovation in form, as well as in the relations of production in the theatre; both

must change according to the intention or purpose of theatre. These points are relevant to the debate about formal innovation, but also to that concerning the contexts in which political plays are performed. Brecht seems to have recognized his own techniques, not as fixed, but as appropriate to challenging the conventions of the theatre in a specific period; he writes:

Methods become exhausted; stimuli no longer work. New problems appear and demand new methods. Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must change. Nothing comes from nothing; the new comes from the old, but that is why it is new. The oppressors do not work in the same way in every epoch. They cannot be defined in the same fixed fashion at all times ("Against" 51).

With regard to Brecht's attitude towards experimentation, Sylvia Harvey states:

His defence of innovation was linked to his search for those forms which, as far as possible, offered an adequate representation of reality from the point of view of, and on behalf of, those social forces struggling to change that reality. So art had to change, not because the consumers buy that which is 'new and different', but because reality itself was changing (51).

In this way, formal innovation is always linked to changes in the social and political spheres. This was demonstrated in the case of the WTM, and once again in the late seventies and early eighties with the decline of radical class politics.

If the theatre is to contribute to changing existing

conditions, then the apparatus itself (the relations of production) must reflect this intention--formal innovation is not enough. Benjamin writes:

Brecht has coined the phrase 'functional transformation' to describe the transformation of forms and instruments of production by a progressive intelligentsia--an intelligentsia interested in liberating the means of production and hence active in the class struggle. He was the first to address to the intellectuals the far-reaching demand that they should not supply the production apparatus without, at the same time, within the limits of the possible, changing that apparatus in the direction of Socialism (93).

In describing the role of the apparatus and its power to absorb subversive elements, Brecht writes:

We are free to discuss any innovation which doesn't threaten its [the apparatus's] social function--that of providing an evening's entertainment. We are not free to discuss those which threaten to change its function, possibly by fusing it with the educational system or with the organs of mass communication. Society absorbs via the apparatus whatever it needs in order to reproduce itself (Willet 34).

Brecht's work had important implications for political theatre workers because, as Benjamin notes, "Epic theatre takes as its starting point the attempt to introduce fundamental change into . . . the functional relationship between stage and public, text and performance, producer and actors" (2). I will turn now to some of the ways in which these relationships were explored in alternative theatre in Britain in the seventies and eighties.

The Case Against Naturalism

The formal arguments against naturalism have focused mainly on the limitations it imposes on the treatment of subject matter. This was the basis of the initial rejection of it as form in favour of agit-prop in the late sixties and early seventies. As Edgar notes, "socialist theatre-workers in Britain responded to the increased militancy of the early 1970s by rejecting the social-realism of writers like Arnold Wesker that had dominated radical theatre for 15 years" ("Ten Years"27). Regarding the inadequacies of naturalism as a form for a radical era, he argues that it "shows people's behaviour as conditioned, primarily or exclusively, by individual and psychological factors. The socialist, on the other hand, requires a form which demonstrates the social and political character of human behaviour" ("Ten Years" 27).

Graham Murdock considers not only the limits of naturalism, but also its power and persuasiveness. First he notes the need for an objective stance: "by encouraging the audience to identify with the central characters and their struggles, naturalism prevents people from reflecting critically on the structural forces that have generated their problems. It therefore disconnects the personal from

political" (163). Edgar is aware of this tendency and has consciously tried to prevent it by withholding information that makes characters individuals:

I'm not going to give you the opportunity to say Turner [in *Destiny*] is a fascist because his wife is a gorgon, or his child is a mongol, or his son was run over, or whatever. I'm not going to do it. You are not going to know. He could be single. He could be gay. I'm going to treat everything else about him in a very complicated way, but you're not going to know anything personal or intimate, because, if you do, you'll run up that blind alley for psychological explanations (Bull 157).

It is a difficult trap to avoid. McGrath encountered these limitations which is why he stopped writing for *Z Cars* and has been critical of other television productions such as *Bill Brand*: "The naturalism of the form did not allow the author to distinguish between Brand's politics and his personal life, or to make his attitude to either at all clear" ("TV Drama" 105).

The second aspect of naturalism which Murdock deals with is the specificity of the locale and setting: "the audience tends not to make connections between the situation dramatised, and other similar situations" (163). This is relevant to the element of time as well. McGrath has noted that "naturalism is incapable of making long historical connections" ("Popular" 392) and such "connections" are often central to Marxist modes of analysis which underscore historical patterns. Bigsby notes: "the reconstruction of an

alternative history was accepted by the left-wing theatre in Britain as a primary responsibility, and is embodied in works like John Arden's *The Non-Stop Connolly Show*, Caryl Churchill's *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, David Hare's *Fanshen*, Steve Gooch's *The Women Pirates Ann Burney and Mary Read*, Trevor Griffith's *Taking Our Time*, and John McGrath's *The Cheviot, The Stag and the Black Black Oil*" (38).

The third problem Murdock raises is the conservatism associated with naturalistic forms: "by borrowing the techniques of journalism and documentary to present a convincing slice of life, naturalism is seen as surreptitiously taking over the canons of objectivity that underpin these forms" (163). He refers to McGrath's discussion of naturalism in the context of television to elaborate this point:

Naturalism, of course, can and does achieve a great deal. But as a *form*, it imposes a certain neutrality about life on the writer, the actor and the audience. It says: here's the way things are for these people, isn't it sad--if a tragedy; isn't it funny--if a comedy; isn't it interesting--if by a good writer; God, it's boring-- if by a bad one. It encapsulates the status quo, ossifies the dynamics of society into a moment of perception, crystallises the realities of existence into a paradigm ("TV Drama" 102-103).

For many groups the initial solution to these formal and ideological problems lay in embracing a form which is

diametrically opposed to naturalism--agit-prop.²⁹

Before turning to the characteristics of agit-prop as a form of expression, its practicability must be stressed. While the post 1968 groups were not as adamant about "propertyless" theatre (the complete elimination of stage paraphernalia), agit-prop presented many of the same advantages it did for the Workers' Theatre Movement. It was inexpensive to produce, could be performed anywhere, and the material could be altered to suit changing situations. In one respect, practitioners were making a virtue of necessity, especially before grants were forthcoming. But on the other hand, as was the case with the Workers' Theatre Movement, agit-prop represented a deliberate rejection of

²⁹Trevor Griffiths is one of the only socialist playwrights who has actively defended the use of traditional naturalistic modes in his work for television. For Griffiths, form is secondary to political content:

It interfaces with the whole problem of form, which is to do with realistic modes as against non-realistic alienating modes. I chose to work in those modes because I have to work now. I have to work with the popular imagination which has been shaped by naturalism....One of the things about realistic modes is still that you can offer through them demystifying, undistorted, more accurate, counter descriptions of political processes and social reality than people get through other uses of naturalism. So that if for every *Sweeney* that went out, a *Bill Brand* went out, there would be a real struggle for the popular imagination (Wolff, "Bill Brand" 57).

the materialist values of the commercial and mainstream theatres, contributing once again to a redefinition of the shape and function of theatre.

Sandy Craig offers a broad, but useful, account of what agit-prop includes: "[it] often covers all varieties of 'tendency' theatre: street theatre, agitprop proper, issue plays, theme plays (e.g. the position of women), parable plays, working-class history plays, panoramic documentary plays, personal development plays, cabaret, and revue" (37). He also outlines the variety of techniques that these forms make use of: "mime, movement, stylized costume and gesture, character stylization, different levels of address to the audience, monologue, aside, various types of song, intercutting of scenes, use of slogans and captions, quotes and statistics, ensemble playing and the interruption of the action by 'acts'--magical, comic, escapological or whatever" (37). What these forms have in common, according to Craig, is first, "that the content of the shows tends to present people behaving in public in relation to public events" and second, "that the relation between the stage and the audience is much closer and more direct" (37-38).

Craig's account helps to clarify more general uses of the term, particularly when it applies to anti-illusionist or non-realist techniques. In relation to the early agit-prop plays of Red Ladder, Richard Seyd points to the

origins of the term for a working definition:

Lenin defined 'agitation' as the putting across of one idea to many people, and 'propaganda' as putting over many, complex, ideas to fewer people. Agit-prop, as it developed historically, concentrated predominantly on the agitational aspect only. . . . The reason that Lenin initially made the differentiation was because the media that the Bolshevik Party had to work with were mainly speeches, newspapers, and pamphlets--all literary or verbal means of communication (39).

Red Ladder worked on combining these elements through what Seyd describes as "a method of presentation that was non-verbal and non-literary, and thereby transcended any wider theoretical training that might be needed to understand the overall political implications of any one issue" (39). The result was "a series of dynamic political cartoons" which transformed political and economic ideas into concrete visual images, with the intention of foregrounding the "economic and social forces that so deeply affect our lives--which are usually invisible, hidden from our understanding" (Seyd 39). To illustrate the technique of visual metaphor he uses the example of "the National Cake" in *The Industrial Relations Act*, a play designed to explain the concept of wage labour, inflation and the basis of class struggle: "the workers are bakers who bake the national cake, the strike is seen as a knife which cuts into the cake; the myth of the 'national interest' is exploded visually because it is the capitalist who sits on top of the

cake, the workers purchase cake to eat, the cake itself is a visualisation of the class structure in society, etc." (39).

Seyd's account of Red Ladder's agit-prop plays is important because it points to both the strengths and weaknesses of the form. On the one hand agit-prop can be used to present larger political issues without the constraints of naturalism (in terms of characterization, plot, setting, and time). For instance, Seyd notes that "Without the necessity of a sequential development or through-line, several images that are in opposition to each other can be unfolded at once, and the result is a montage effect" (39). As well as a visually powerful form, agit-prop can be produced cheaply and performed anywhere. On the other hand, this schematic or stylized form of presentation--what Seyd refers to as "its tendency towards 'St George and the Dragonism'--is more suitable to some subjects than to others. Seyd acknowledges both its efficacy and shortcomings as a form:

The major problem is that it provides answers rather than asking questions. For a short sketch on a particular issue (a rent strike, for example) we find that agit-prop is an effective, perhaps the best, theatrical method of mobilising support. If we want to put over an understanding of, say, the roots of racism or the oppression of women, in a way that actually moves an audience to re-examine their own beliefs and attitudes and feel the necessity of acting to transform their own and others' attitudes, then we find that agit-prop is a perfect tool. But we also find it is unable to fulfill the artistic task of portraying and interpreting the way people

operate, and why they operate in that particular way, revealing the contradictions as they grow out of the social, economic, and political conditions of society itself (40).

These criticisms of agit-prop's ability to cope with complex issues were shared by many practitioners and led to gradually increased use of naturalistic elements in political plays.

Naturalism: For Better or for Worse?

The shift, by the mid seventies, away from agit-prop towards hybrid forms, was based on factors much like those which accounted for the same kind of transition in the prewar period with the growth of the Unity Theatre movement. As in the earlier case, practitioners turned away from agit-prop for both aesthetic and political reasons. The artistic frustration was felt mainly by fringe writers, particularly those who were interested in writing for larger stages. Edgar recalls: " I was fed up with seeing agitprop plays that were messy, and also I was increasingly thinking that the politics you could get across were very crude, whereas the world about us was getting more complicated" ("Ambiguities" 13). In the case of Edgar, as well as writers like Brenton and Hare, the move away from small-scale agit-prop shows was connected with a desire to explore

artistic/theatrical opportunities. As was noted earlier, Brenton made it clear that he was interested in theatre, not community work. In Bull's view, this shift is part of a general maturing process on the part of theatre workers and audiences:

In the second half of the decade, then, a greater degree of sophistication is to be found in both the *avant-garde* and agit-prop traditions, not the least reason being that it begins to be possible to talk about an established tradition. A generation of older and wiser theatre writers and workers were discovering in the only way possible, through their own experiences, that there were no short cuts, theatrically or politically. But it was a generation that had found an audience, or rather a variety of audiences, and its success gave it access to venues and to financial support that allowed for the public opening up of a more complicated discourse; a discourse that was anyway being enforced by the changing political climate (116).

As Bull suggests, there were also political and economic factors which accounted for the shift away from agit-prop, even for groups who were committed to working in community settings. Edgar situates agit-prop as the dominant form of socialist theatre in the years 1970-1974--the period of the Heath Government and heightened class struggle ("Ten Years" 27). Chris Rawlence refers to specific events in these years, such as "the miners' strikes, the fight against the Industrial Relations Act, the Pentonville 5, and the struggle against Heath's Phases One, Two and Three", stressing the point that "millions of workers became

involved in industrial and political struggle who had never been involved before" (67). But Edgar argues that as the struggles receded, agit-prop was no longer appropriate:

The objective state of class relations also has formal implications for socialist theatre. . . . The move away from pure agit-prop towards more complex theatrical forms seems to me satisfactorily explained in terms of a considered response by the the groups to this failure of economism [the collapse of wage-militancy in the post- 1974 period]. Red Ladder . . . have found that agit-prop, although a good weapon for confirming workers in their struggles . . . (in other words, a form ideal to the subject- matter of economic militancy), is not suited to the tasks of a period of class retreat ("Ten Years" 28).

As in the late thirties, declining unemployment and wage militancy led many groups to more broadly based audiences and issues. In the period after 1974, Rawlence recounts: "We were faced with a choice: to make a political theatre for the politically conscious sector of the working-class--those who continued to be actively involved; or to seek a broad working-class audience which would be attracted to our shows first and foremost because they offered the prospect of a good night out. We opted for the latter--the building of a popular socialist theatre" (67). The growing size and militancy of the feminist and gay rights movements in the mid seventies also contributed to the shift in emphasis away from strictly class-based issues. Many theatre workers began to regroup around issues concerning sexual politics out of a

dissatisfaction with the structures and attitudes of existing socialist companies.

While most commentators explain the shift away from agit-prop to an increased use of naturalistic elements in terms of a decline in radical class politics and the limitations of agit-prop as a form, there are other relevant factors to consider. The anonymous *Wedge* article, written by a socialist theatre worker (identified by Sandy Craig as Bruce Birchall), offers a more cynical, but nevertheless important analysis of this transition. He considers the issue of form in the context of a number of disputes resulting from the split between revolutionary and reformist positions within the socialist theatre movement generally. He links changes in theatrical style to the effects of subsidy, particularly to the professionalization of fringe theatre.

The effects of subsidy and Equity requirements on the work and structure of alternative theatre companies will be considered in greater detail below, but a few points must be established to provide a context for Birchall's analysis of stylistic changes. He argues that "the post-1968 breakaway movement became absorbed into the theatrical mainstream by state funding, and that what had begun as a piece of political practice ended up as a job, with the result that cultural workers began to see themselves as 'left-wing

artists', rather than as socialists who used artforms for political ends" (Anonymous 39). A significant factor was Equity's decision, in 1974, to match fringe wages with those of other areas of subsidized theatre, making the fringe just another source of employment for actors: "With 90% unemployment in Equity, many actors were desperate for work. It was fashionable to be left-wing and oozing enthusiasm for the professed aims of socialist companies at auditions, so as to secure work" (Anonymous 8). According to Birchall, the influx of professionals motivated primarily by artistic rather than political aims resulted in a greater emphasis on professional organization and securing grants (an "administrative class" within the groups), a greater tendency to perform in indoor, equipped spaces, and an interest in more demanding acting roles. It is in relation to acting that he discusses the increased use of naturalistic elements:

The professional actors, who basically wanted 'meaty parts' criticised the use of 'cardboard two-dimensional working-class caricatures' and argued for putting 'real people' on the stage--people the audience could 'identify with'. This tended to mean lots of family scenes, emotionally fraught arguments, and behaviour explained in terms of inner psychological motivations (with no reference to a social and political milieu). All the claptrap of an archaic British Drama School Training was to be imported, uncritically, into a popular theatre tradition, that had grown up in opposition to it (Anonymous 41).

Birchall is not willing to rule out the usefulness of naturalism for a revolutionary theatre practice, but what he objects to is that "the defection to the naturalist camp was not motivated by a spirit of enquiry as to whether naturalism *was* useful to our purpose, but by a desire to slide out of a discussion on purpose, and substitute instead an abstract discussion of style" (Anonymous 41). In his analysis, the move towards more broadly based issues and the use of more conventional forms of expression reflect reactionary tendencies on the part of groups feeling the pressure to secure their grants. As Sandy Craig suggests, Birchall's theory, like Edgar's, oversimplifies the relationship between theatre and society: "For Birchall, revolutionary theatre, which uses theatre as a weapon, is autonomous of society; for Edgar it is a direct reflection of the movement of forces within society. . . . one [theory] tending to collapse into 'vanguardism', the other into reformism" (36). But considered together, these approaches indicate the range of factors which influence theatre movements. They also provide interesting points of comparison between the prewar and post 1968 periods. Both movements proved to be susceptible to external changes in the political and economic climate and to internal conflicts between the aims and priorities of professional artists and political activists. The changes affected the form and

content of the work, and in both cases it is possible to explain the shift away from agit-prop to greater degrees of naturalism in either regressive or progressive terms. But Birchall's emphasis on the role of subsidy in this process cannot be underestimated and is borne out by the more drastic measures taken by groups to secure grants in the period of severe subsidy cuts in the late seventies and early eighties. Alternative theatre came to represent a source of employment and, for some, a route to mainstream work, in a way that the pre and immediately postwar groups could never have imagined. In other words, subsidy inevitably forced some to reassess their political convictions in the interests of pursuing a career in the theatre.

Birchall's view that the stylistic changes reflected reactionary tendencies--keeping within acceptable bounds to secure funding--overlooks the effectiveness of the hybrid forms which emerged. Rather than a complete departure from agit-prop or a wholesale adoption of naturalistic techniques, many groups attempted to combine the most effective aspects of the various forms available to them. Seyd describes the combination of agit-prop, naturalism, and epic theatre and the advantages of these various elements in Red Ladder's *A Woman's Work is Never Done*:

The main element of our agit-prop work that we carried over into the play was the use of visual

metaphor. . . . One of the central episodes in the play is 'The Disputed Pint' [a visual analogy for the conflict over wage parity for male workers and wage equity for female workers using pints and half pints of beer]. . . . The bourgeois dramatic form gave us . . . the concept of a strong plot or storyline and fully rounded, three-dimensional characters. . . . In order to be able to show a person developing through different social and personal experiences . . . the 'Epic' concept [the use of music, placards, direct address, and episodic structure] . . . makes sure that the audience doesn't become completely enmeshed in the trials and tribulations of the individual characters (40-41).

This eclectic approach to form, sometimes termed "agit-realist" or "presentational", reflects the interest, shared by most alternative theatre groups, in creating powerful plays which provide both political analysis and entertainment. It also reflects the economy of means which has continued to be one of the important features of alternative theatre, even in light of increases in subsidies. The theatrical "shorthand" developed and used by these groups has had a significant impact on stage language generally, particularly on productions in the major subsidized theatres. Discussing the need to fund small touring companies in the interests of keeping theatre alive, Gerry Mulgrew argues:

The work which is seen in the large houses is not the breeding ground of new ideas--it is the end of a process rather than the beginning. To take an English example: the RSC's *Nicholas Nickleby* was the big hit. It was a wonderfully acted, ingeniously staged piece of theatre, using an open set, stylised chorus work, physicality,

music et al. It was also something fairly unusual, being a dramatised novel for the stage. The RSC got the credit for pioneering a new style of vibrant theatre-making. The fact is, however, that these ideas were being tried out, invented, altered and refined by small alternative groups touring the country ten years before the ideas filtered through to the establishment theatre (65).

The production of *Nicholas Nickleby* offers a good illustration of how the theatrical establishment absorbs and adapts, in a sophisticated way, (mainly through directors who straddle both sectors) the techniques and performance styles which alternative groups exploit because they have no choice. This helps to revitalize and often to scale down excessive tendencies in mainstream theatres, but the formal devices are divorced from the political purposes for which they were developed.

Popular Forms of Entertainment

But it is not enough to consider the issue of form outside of a performance context. The specific elements (anti-illusion and naturalist techniques) have implications for how the play will work in relation to its audience--maximizing or minimizing communication and participation. This, in turn, depends on the aims and interests of particular writers or groups; here the split between the avant-garde and popular tendencies in alternative theatre reasserts itself. Of these two main areas, the community based and socialist touring companies have been most instrumental in finding ways of maximizing audience input. In their attempts to attract and build relationships with new audiences, they have experimented with popular forms of entertainment, a tendency found in the work of Unity Theatre and later, Theatre Workshop. These include techniques from music hall and stand up comedy, and the use of rock music and folk songs. In the case of companies like Welfare State, these forms include open-air carnivals and parades. What is significant about popular entertainment forms is that they are participatory; they encourage and sometimes depend on the direct involvement and feedback of the audience. This is an important factor in the work of groups who try to maximize the socially interactive potential of theatre (often in the hope of organizing or

mobilizing people), rather than simply presenting politically conscious plays to audiences. The post-production discussions with audiences, described by Seyd above, are conducted for the same reasons. There is an important difference between playing "at" people, as opposed to "with" and "for" them.

Popular forms are not only participatory, but perhaps more importantly, they are rooted in familiar traditions of entertainment and their purpose is to provide pleasure, usually through music/songs and comedy. It is not surprising that the companies who make extensive use of such techniques are those who are interested in building positive relationships and a sense of solidarity with their audiences. CAST was one of the first companies of the post 1968 wave to draw directly from popular entertainment traditions. Craig describes Roland Muldoon of CAST as "the original socialist comedian . . . in daring leaps of an imagination which is both fantastical and politically rigorously logical, he is in the mainstream of the Music-hall and Northern Variety tradition of anarchic comedians . . . Like those comedians he appeals to a sense of localism" (Itzin 47). Muldoon describes playing during the intervals in folk clubs:

The most important thing CAST did in the history of political theatre was turn to the audience. At the time, we actually invented looking straight

in the audience's face and telling them what we were talking about. We called it "presentationism"--sort of here we are, entertainers, but theatre as well. It's like a three-card trick. Once you get them watching, the magic starts. You start telling them a story, cut fast, distract them from what they thought was going on, catch them with a glass of beer in their hand, so they stay and watch. Now we're not so fast because people are prepared to sit and wait for a theatre group to come on. We have a style and a philosophy of the style--invented in that pub in Camden Town. Peter Brook used to come and say, 'Where did you get that style from?' As if I owed him something? And I told him our influences were working-class entertainers--and they are (Itzin 14).

Muldoon's account reveals both the performance context and the influences which gave way to the fast-paced, variety style of these groups. But the reference to Brook points to huge gap which exists between these popular traditions and the "great art" or avant-garde traditions.³⁰

Like Muldoon, Gavin Richards (who worked with John McGrath at the Liverpool Everyman, Ken Campbell, and the English 7:84) claims that the Belts and Braces Roadshow grew out of a similar tradition:

Everyone was going around talking about playing to the people, but no one except Ken

³⁰This has serious implications when it comes to funding this kind of theatre. Often those trained (in class terms as well as professionally) in "great art" have no sympathy, knowledge or experience of the long history of popular entertainment and, as a result, are unqualified to assess these forms on their own terms.

Campbell--and Ken Dodd--was actually doing it. Ken Campbell was totally apolitical and totally popular. . . . You just went into pubs and made them laugh. I learned an enormous amount about the duplicity of being a performer, the intellectual game you play with audience. The real point for me was to perform in a different way to working-class people in their own environments, to find a way to interest them, attract them, get them to enjoy it and learn something (Itzin 199).

Like 7:84, Belts and Braces used techniques from panto, folk and rock music, extensive doubling of parts, in an overall presentational style; their policy was to "strive to present entertainment which is articulate and socialist" (Itzin 200). The stress which Muldoon and Richards place on "entertainment" is also relevant to the practices of companies such as 7:84 and Wildcat, and is part of the optimism that informs the work of popular political theatre. Keith Peacock points to the "optimism" of a play like *The Cheviot* and distinguishes it from the mood of "personal despair" which characterizes *Plenty* and so many of Hare's plays. He relates these moods to the fundamental difference between the roles McGrath and Hare assume as writers--referring to the former as an "interventionist" and the latter as a "chronicler" ("Fact" 30). The distinction is an important one and the focus on optimism underscores the celebratory aspects of so much community/regionally based theatre--using comedy and satire to provoke laughter, as

well as political analysis.³¹

The use of popular forms also indicates a recognition of the fact that appealing to new audiences (in a community or class-based sense) involves an understanding of their particular values and traditions. Sylvia Harvey, making the point that institutions of reading are culturally and socially determined, suggests that "a reader approaches a

³¹This is particularly evident in the work of companies which have and continue to involve themselves with labour organizations. Plays produced in such contexts necessarily focus on problems, but they often take entertaining approaches--rather than dwell on defeat, they look for positive solutions. One example is *Now You See It, Now You Don't* (1976) by the Broadside Mobile Workers Theatre. Itzin explains:

The play was intended to counter the 'tighten your belts' and 'get the country back on its feet' line, and the economic viewpoint being put over by the media--that high wages cause inflation, that investment can be stimulated by transference of funds from the public to the private sector. It was an attempt to put over an alternative economic analysis in simple and entertaining terms, to demystify such bogeys as the International Monetary Fund, inflation and the National Debt and to reallocate the blame for the crisis to those responsible for control of the country's wealth. It was done in a traditional agit prop style with the ladder and its hierarchies, money bags, etc. but also incorporated puppets, circus, clowning and conjuring (239).

This blend of agit prop and popular, celebratory forms helps to illustrate the importance placed on entertainment as well as a critique of social and political issues.

text from within a particular 'apparatus of reading'. Any cultural producer who fails to investigate the relationship between social class and reading competence produces in a vacuum" (55). Using the specific case of the social class of audiences, McGrath claims that "if a socialist theatre company or socialist playwright wants to speak to the working-class, then they would do well to learn something of its language, and not assume that the language of bourgeois theatre of the twentieth century is all that is worthy of pouring from their lips" ("Theory" 54). While McGrath has been a vocal exponent for the use of working-class traditions of entertainment, Edgar, by 1979 had concluded that these were no longer viable:

The General Will was not the only group to realize that it was employing forms that had expired more than half a century ago. . . . Some groups and companies have indeed drawn successfully on other popular-cultural forms, but it is interesting that they have achieved most when they have employed forms actually peripheral to the urban British working class ("Ten Years" 29).

McGrath's own attempts to draw on popular traditions and to formulate a theory of working-class entertainment will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.³²

³²It is interesting to note that included in the theatre listings in *Time Out* for July 1992 are the following events:

As the variety of positions taken by practitioners and commentators suggests, there has been little consensus over the issue of form. Even more striking is the limited scope of the debate, revolving ultimately around the dichotomy between agit-prop and naturalism--changing in degree rather than kind from the prewar period. The lack of consensus is due mainly to the differing aims and interests of playwrights and theatre companies, but, as I noted at the end of Chapter One, the larger issue of innovation is related to the constraints of theatrical production generally. Steve Gooch makes the point that, of the social art forms, theatre "has remained one of the least innovatory in *form*--certainly compared to twentieth-century

Brick Lane Music Hall: *Music Hall* compered by Vincent Hayes. Situated in the former Brewery canteen, boasting cheap booze, homely fare, and a maitre d' who looks like an extra from "The Krays", Brick Lane's cheery little music hall is a nostalgic delight. Don't go unless you're prepared to sway from left to right, bang on the table and sing along . . . Do yourself a bleedin' favour and try it . . . prices include dinner, booking essential.

Underneath the Arches: *Aba Daba Music Hall* production . . . A traditional variety show with a different line-up every two weeks.

Hackney Show: Sat: A day of family entertainment including circus acts, cabaret and music

developments in music, painting and the novel--which must be due in large part to its production being more socially complex to organise" (16). Even in the case of alternative theatre, because theatre is labour intensive and subject to the "box-office" (as a source of income), experimentation and developmental work are difficult to sustain. This is complicated by the fact that so many companies, according to Craig, "have developed in comparative isolation . . . [due to] the splintering of the Left and lack of a coherent mass movement" (48). But some commentators regard the lack of consensus about form in positive terms. Craig attributes the endurance of socialist theatre to the variety of responses it contains (48) and Colin Chambers suggests: "The issue is therefore not to find one form, but to develop the many based on strategies that take account of the commercial as well as the subsidised theatre, TV and radio, as well as rock concerts and dance, and finding ways of linking up with the political forces that can be brought into action on a range of subjects" ("Socialist" 250).

Relations of Production: The Collective Approach

The debates about the appropriate forms and contexts for political theatre must take into account the different ways in which theatre companies have chosen to produce their

work. In keeping with the rejection of the establishment theatre's forms and buildings, many alternative theatre groups have challenged the production apparatus of these institutions--undermining the traditional hierarchies by working collectively. The importance of altering the relations of production in order to affect long term change in cultural practices takes us back to Walter Benjamin's proposition: "that to supply a production apparatus without trying, within the limits of the possible, to change it, is a highly disputable activity even when the material supplied appears to be of a revolutionary nature" (94).

The emphasis on ensemble work, in reaction to the star system, stems back to the prewar play-producing societies and is developed even further in the fifties by Theatre Workshop. While these efforts represented attempts to redefine the relationships between performers, many were conducted under and subject to the power of directors. The collectives of the seventies were interested in going even further to democratize the production process and this proved to be particularly significant for actors. Michelene Wandor notes that "alternative theatre companies have been largely performer-managed; a feature which highlights the fact that in traditional theatre work the performer is the least powerful in the creative process" (94). Simon Callow offers a personal account of the experiences of actors in

the major subsidized companies:

The company, as such, barely exists. The growth of the individual artist is not attended to in the least. Normally casting is a rather squalid affair, each director trying to get the biggest names for every part, and then working his way down after each refusal. . . . The involvement of the company in decisions is non-existent. Not a single actor, stage manager, scenic artist, designer or musician sits on any National Theatre committee. It is in these subsidised theatres that the directocracy is at its most unqualified (108).

But even more important than making the work satisfying for all the company members was the ideological basis for collective work--the idea that the relations of production within the group should reflect its politics and provide a model for the organization of society as a whole. Many companies such as 7:84, Belts and Braces, and Monstrous Regiment, consciously organized themselves as collectives for "political" reasons, but Joint Stock is an interesting example of a group which grew into a collective through the experience of doing *Fanshen*. Rob Ritchie explains: "having enacted the turning over to communism of the Chinese peasants, the company promptly applied the process to itself, eventually establishing a collective, abolishing the post of artistic-director and subjecting all aspects of the work from get-ins and get-outs to the choice of future productions, to democratic discussion and control" (12).

Not all alternative companies chose to structure

themselves along collective lines. Some maintained a more conventional division of labour, keeping the functions of directors, writers, designers, actors, and stage management in place. The barriers were of course broken down in the spirit of experimentation and the necessity of operating on limited resources. This tendency to focus on changing the product (the subject matter and styles of plays) and not the process was more characteristic of the writer/director based companies. In the case of Portable Theatre, while there was a degree of collaboration between writers, they nevertheless wrote scripts which would then be performed by actors for audiences. Peter Ansorge recounts how Malcolm Griffiths saw this as a problem when he took over as artistic director:

Portable has always survived as a writer's theatre, which has made it unique in the underground and easier to milk subsidy from the Arts Council (who like to see finished scripts before making the annual handouts), but Griffiths feels that the actors are being overlooked. Portable had been accustomed to hiring its actors for thirteen week seasons--then letting them go at the end of their time. That, says Griffiths, is like any West End production. . . . I recognised that changing the content of plays wasn't enough. We have to change the basis structure of the group-- the how as well as the why' ("Portable Playwrights" 20).

The conflicts in this case (which eventually divided the company into separate groups) reflect the differing aims of the practitioners--the relations of production are less of a priority for those involved in avant-garde experimentation

than they are for those concerned with making theatre part of a larger struggle for social change.³³

Socialist and feminist theatre companies were the first to attempt to eliminate the hierarchies altogether by giving all members equal voice and participation in all aspects of the creation and production of shows. Feminist companies like the Women's Theatre Group and Monstrous Regiment were particularly adamant about collective principles because they were reacting to the male domination of even the socialist companies in which the members had been involved--challenging the division of labour from the point of view of sexual politics.³⁴ Theatre collectives of different types contributed to standardizing a method of creating plays on the basis of research, improvisations, and collective discussion, as well as the practice of involving the audience in the development of material by way of

³³But there are exceptions to this pattern. For instance, Hull Truck (in its first years with Mike Bradford) and Joint Stock are two companies whose collaborative structures were based on finding interesting and satisfying ways of developing scripts, rather than on any overt socialist agenda.

³⁴Michelene Wandor examines the work of feminist theatre companies in detail in *Carry on, Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics*, tracing feminist responses to the male domination of theatre (particularly in areas of direction, designing, etc.) back to the earlier ventures I outlined in Chapter One.

interviews and post-production discussions--techniques developed as early as the Stoke documentary plays. Some have even foregrounded their production processes as a way of removing theatre from an artistic realm and rooting it in more familiar practices. Rawlence describes Red Ladder's practice of setting up, making costume changes, etc, in full view of the audience and claims:

so they are seen and experienced by their audiences in the process of production. A working-class audience is an audience of producers. The revelation of means involved in this process of production presents theatre as work; performers are seen as workers; entertainers are seen as part of the world of production; cultural barriers are broken down--because the reality is that there often is a class barrier between the community theatre companies and the audiences they seek (69).

While these groups developed new and active relationships with audiences, there remained a certain degree of separation. Very few went as far as to actually include the target audience in the production itself.³⁵ The only

³⁵ Birchall sees this as a serious failure resulting from an acceptance of the Equity closed shop policy and assumptions about the skills of "artists", even if they are "socialist artists". He explains: "It meant that whilst middle-class actors debated how to put 'real people' on stage, those same real people *couldn't get on stage* to portray themselves--a craft elite had got a monopoly on the right to portray the workingclass!" (Anonymous 42) Despite his scathing tone, he does help to highlight some of the discrepancies between the intentions and practices of various groups.

significant challenge to this separation of "professionals" and audiences has been made by groups such as Welfare State and Colway Theatre Trust which mount large scale community shows involving a huge numbers of local residents.

Before turning to the problems related to collective structures, it is important to establish that most companies lie somewhere between the writer/director and collective structures. It has been more common for groups to maintain some division of labour---making use of the skills and talents of individual members--but with a strong emphasis on preserving a democratic work environment. This tendency is often seen in groups who have a resident writer or bring outside writers in to work on a particular production; the material may still be researched, discussed, and even improvised collectively, but the actual process of writing the script is handed over to a writer. Gillian Hanna recalls how Monstrous Regiment arrived at such an arrangement:

One of the questions that came up again and again in the 1970s was the breaking down of the division of labour and the consequent hierarchy of skills. Why should an actor be considered more important than a stage manager? Why should the writer be God? Wouldn't it be more democratic to write scripts collectively? If you were working in a collective, how could one voice represent

the ideas of the whole? We acknowledged some truth in this, but there were some areas where we recognised it as bunk. Enough of us (and I was one of them) had been through the painful experience of writing shows collectively in other groups to know that the skill of playwrighting was one skill we wanted to acknowledge. We also knew that women writers had to be found and nourished. . . . We were looking for a collective relationship with the writer (xxxiii).

Joint Stock is another company which has worked collectively with a variety of playwrights, including Caryl Churchill, Barrie Keeffe, and David Hare. While this process has helped to expand the role of performers, it has also had positive and negative implications for writers.

Some playwrights have welcomed the opportunity to work collectively with theatre companies in creating scripts. Pam Gems sees this as an important option: "Writing used to be something you conceived in your own head and then did, and when it was a finished product, you had to try and sell it somewhere. You can still do it that way, but it is also possible to go and work with a group" (*Theatre Quarterly* 46). Caryl Churchill recalls the first round of improvisations with Joint Stock for *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*: "I'd never seen an exercise or improvisation before and I was as thrilled as a child at a pantomime". This process was followed by a nine-week writing period: "Looking at the forgotten notebooks I can catch for a moment the excitement of being so crammed with ideas and

seizing on structure, characters, incidents that might contain them" (Ritchie 199). Gooch stresses the advantages of breaking down the isolation of writers:

Ironically, theatre has *always* been a social art. Only now is the idea of the isolated writer seen to be a romantic nineteenth century myth. The point is, however, that we have been isolated not only from our audiences, but from each other, and from directors, from actors, and so on. If you can find a way of working collectively and having artistic control as a group, then you also share a collective experience with your audience. . . . It is very important for writers to force themselves out of their private world, and to confront new situations, to confront people who think differently (*Theatre Quarterly* 47).

But through his own experiences, Gooch also recognizes how threatening and even counter-productive the process can be at times:

Passing the buck of the blank page to the writer or director, actors would sometimes chip in with their requirements as if giving a shopping-list to an errand-boy. Everyone had The Big One, the Play to End All Plays in mind, but every- one's perfect play was different. . . . The more 'democratically' the outsider tried to satisfy all demands, the more likely the result would please no one (52).

There is also the problem of a writer's script being changed once the play is in rehearsal. This was the case in Monstrous Regiment's production of *Scum: Death, Destruction and Dirty Washing*, a play about the role of women in the French Revolution. Claire Luckham and Chris Bond state:

Our recollection of the events surrounding the

writing and rehearsal period of *Scum* is substantially different from Gillie's. We were commissioned to write a play, not a 'working script', and that was what we delivered. That play was fundamentally altered in two ways: firstly, because there were fewer performers available than we had agreed to write for, which was understandable; and secondly because the company wanted, in our view, to romanticise the story we had written, which was not. They did so without any consultation whatsoever, hence our surprise and anger on going to see the show (Hanna xxxv).

The tension between the needs and views of performers and writers has been a continual source of conflict in such arrangements.

Both the emphasis on collective creation (as a working method as well as its implications for copyright and royalties), and the lack of provision on the part of the Arts Council for writers contributed to the precariousness of the writer's position in this period as the *Theatre Quarterly* Symposium "Playwriting for the Seventies" (1976-7) indicates. This led to the formation of the Theatre Writers Group in 1975 and, as Itzin describes:

Within twelve months it had become the Theatre Writers Union representing over 150 playwrights who were successfully blacking [sic] the new National Theatre in an attempt to force major subsidised theatres to negotiate a minimum standard contract for theatre writers. . . . For the first time, playwrights--notoriously individualist and traditionally isolated--combined and used their considerable collective strength to improve the working conditions of the worst paid of British theatre workers (306).

The status and economics of playwrighting has been a continuing source of concern.

The prevalence of collective theatre companies had a significant impact on the hierarchical conceptions of theatrical production. They redefined the role of writers, offered new creative opportunities to actors, and tempered the power of directors. The achievements were not confined to the area of alternative theatre; these developments had an inevitable effect on the working relations within the major subsidized companies. While some performers found the collective experience too demanding, for others it set up a new set of expectations about how they regarded themselves and how they were willing to work. The approaches filtered into the mainstream companies through the movement of directors and performers. For instance, directors like Max Stafford-Clark and William Gaskill moved between Joint Stock and the Royal Court, often taking performers and writers with them. But to a certain extent, the majors were also forced to make working conditions more attractive to the accomplished performers they wanted to woo, by developing flexible contracts, adopting "workshop" approaches, and allowing occasional opportunities to direct. But by virtue of the very structures of these companies, these have only ever been attempts at pseudo-democracies. If *Nicholas*

Nickleby represents alternative theatre staging techniques dressed up and de-politicized, then the *Playing Shakespeare* workshops with John Barton and RSC actors indicate how the mainstream absorbed the new working relationships without relinquishing power.

In spite of the positive impact on the relations of production in the theatre more generally, there were a number of factors which made it difficult, in some cases impossible, to sustain collective structures. Contrary to the assumptions made by some that theatre collectives were simply a fad of the seventies, there were internal and external factors responsible for the shift from collective to management companies.

The internal factors include personality conflicts and power struggles between members holding different points of view. This was always a larger problem for companies which lacked a specific governing principle for their work such as Joint Stock, as Simon Callow recalls: "We were all of a leftward inclination, but the range embraced by that was source of division rather than unity: libertarian, anarchist, Marxist, Maoist, parliamentary democratic, IRA" (64). In almost any personal account of working in a collective one invariably finds descriptions of endless meetings, frustration and exhaustion. Theodore Shank refers to the "tyranny of structurelessness" (61) and in some cases

it turned out to be counter-productive. As Gooch notes, working collectively is not always the best way: "Many people feel more comfortable and function better within recognised structures. Where such structures are frankly acknowledged and willingly accepted, they can even work in the better interest of all concerned" (63).

Collective structures make greater personal demands on members as Gooch explains:

While this had the advantage of bringing everybody to the project on an equal basis, it had the disadvantage of falling prey to economic hierarchies outside the immediate work process. Men who were married with children, women who bore the responsibility for child-care, and anyone who had an aged parent, sick lover or a mortgage could not commit their time as whole-heartedly as others. . . . Consequently it became a field of work in which there were more single, childless, middle-class, young men than any other sort of person (39).

The demands were only exacerbated by touring. Lyn Ashley recalls the choice she was forced to make while working with the Women's Theatre Group when it went full time with a grant in 1976:

Touring is impossible with children. It wasn't just being terribly tired, it was a strain, tearing me in different ways. People think it's like having a dog, you can dump it, or you can go home and feed it. But it's not, it's the time you want to spend with them, and that they want to spend with you (Wandor 100).

Only very few companies have ever built in provisions for

child-care that make it easier for members with such commitments to continue to work.

Along with personal priorities, members--particularly the "theatre first" ones--leave to take up opportunities in other areas such as television, film, or other theatrical work. The loss of experienced members and influx of new ones can have a damaging effect on any group which tries to practice collective or democratic approaches to the creative and decision making process. While some companies unravel in these ways, others have evolved from collective into management structures. Occasionally this is deliberate, but most often the shift is necessary for financial reasons. The single most important factor for the changing structures of the collective companies of the seventies was external--economics.

The Role of Funding in the Structure and Work of Alternative Companies

The funding of the arts by the state is an enormous and complex issue, and there are many considerations which lie beyond the scope of this discussion. I would like to focus specifically on the degree of control which state funding bodies have exerted over the work, structure, and survival of alternative theatre groups.

It was not until the early seventies that alternative theatre companies began to be subsidized by the Arts Council of Great Britain. The ACGB had played an important role in the late fifties and sixties in the widespread construction of new theatres and the creation of relative stability for the major London-based and regional repertory companies. But the emphasis on these "centres of excellence" and the process of "housing the arts" clouded the Council's original mandate as outlined by the Royal Charter granted to it in 1967:

- (a) to develop and improve the knowledge, understanding and practice of the arts.
- (b) to increase the accessibility of the arts to the public throughout Great Britain.
- (c) to advise and co-operate with departments of Government, local authorities and other bodies.

The ambiguity of these objectives may have worked to the Council's advantage thereby justifying the distribution of funds, but it was also seized upon by the theatre groups who were trying to exist outside of the major subsidized institutions in the late sixties and early seventies.

The first major breakthrough was the inclusion of the Experimental Drama Committee on the Drama Panel of the Council, but the inequities were obvious. Itzin notes:

In 1973, the fringe was receiving only 4 per cent of the total allocation for drama, which was then £3.2 million. . . . In 1973/74 the fringe received £250,000: sixty companies had to share an amount equal to only half the grant to the

National Theatre (158).

The first grants were given in small lump sums and in 1974 Equity voted to extend the minimum wage policy to fringe theatre workers. This had serious implications for subsidy, forcing the Arts Council to increase the size of its grants to experimental companies. By 1978, the number of touring companies and community arts groups receiving money had grown significantly, but there was little left for them after the national companies and theatre "buildings" were given their portions. Itzin claims that even this small percentage had only come about because of the relentless efforts on the part of organizations such as The Association of Community Theatres (TACT), the Independent Theatre Council (ITC), and the Theatre Writers Union (TWU) (158).

Because the Arts Council was for many groups the main or sole source of funding, state subsidy created a problematic level of dependency. On the one hand, as I suggested earlier in the chapter, the size and range of the alternative theatre movement in the seventies was made possible by subsidy; grants created the opportunities for many to work full-time developing plays and touring in ways they could never have done earlier. Financial resources were crucial to achieving continuity in the work and, because of the size of the venues and the effort to keep prices low, these groups could not finance themselves through box office

revenue alone. But, just as the Arts Council could give life, it could also take it away; non-renewal of a revenue grant could mean the end of a company's work. The seventies saw a rapid growth both in the funds to the Arts Council and the increasing number of groups competing for that money. The situation had become critical by the late seventies, but the real trouble began in the eighties under Thatcher, with widespread cuts and a general shift towards the privatization of the arts.

I would like to turn to a consideration of the main issues which have arisen in relation to the funding of alternative theatre since the early seventies until the late eighties. The first is the question of how the Arts Council's cake was being cut and what percentage of its drama funds went to experimental theatre groups. The Council paid lip service to the encouragement of new work and the efforts to reach new audiences, but the allocation of money made it quite clear where these areas were placed on the list of priorities. John Elsom claims:

Immediately after the war, the motto of the Arts Council . . . had been 'State support for the Arts, without State control'. It had always been a doubtful maxim, but now it had lost all credibility. By establishing its list of priorities, the Arts Council was inevitably controlling the pattern of arts activity in the country. . . . by responding to some pressures and not to others . . . [it] was inevitably furthering one species of theatre at the expense of another (130).

One explanation for this was that the Council, having paid to build so many theatres, had an obligation to keep them going, making further commitments unmanageable. The importance placed on "bricks and mortar" in funding patterns points to the disadvantageous position in which small-scale touring and community groups find themselves when they try to secure grants. In a budgetary pinch, it is much easier to cut a touring group than to justify letting an already existing theatre building fall into disuse or disrepair.

While "bricks and mortar" have always taken priority over touring companies, so too have classical repertoires been favoured over new work. The ideological biases of the ACGB's funding patterns received much attention in this period. The single most controversial term used by the Arts Council has been "excellence". In his scathing analysis of the internal workings of the Arts Council, published in *Theatre Quarterly* in 1977, Malcolm Griffiths interrogates the term and offers his view of its implications for funding:

What is excellence? Is the most excellent that which the Arts Council gives the most money to? . . . The Arts Council is there to perpetuate the monopoly of an élite, essentially the ruling classes, over the national resources, the people's money. The élite identifies those people with some sort of talent that provide it with its entertainment as the finest people, therefore they must be the finest. Is 'excellence' a final culmination, the rose which blossoms out? But

then it must start to die. There's no concept of growth provided for beyond an instant of glory which somehow continues to exist without any nurturing, without any rebirth (16).

The cruel irony Griffiths points to is that the fertile ground of experimentation has always been systematically starved in the interests of the comparatively extravagant spending on the part of mainstream companies. He illustrates this contradiction using the case of David Edgar's *Destiny*, which received a John Whiting Award, in its production at the RSC:

David Edgar's work would not have reached that 'eminence' without the work done by the General Will in Bradford which was started by people themselves deciding to do something. The initiative for creating new excellent work has not arisen from the Arts Council, which is incapable of identifying it. It has arisen through the work of people themselves throughout theatre. The Arts Council is, in fact, in confrontation with those companies (18).

The preoccupation with 'centres of excellence' on the part of the Arts Council continues to be a point of contention for the alternative sector in the funding debate.

Related to the allocation of funds is another major issue which arose in the seventies, namely the idea of funding as a form of censorship in the theatre. As Craig notes, the Arts Council "cannot--and it must be seen not to--judge on political grounds" (181). But, because of its status as a "quango" (a quasi-autonomous national government

organization), and the nature of its review process, the Council could practice forms of censorship without ever being held responsible. Malcolm Griffiths, who served as a member of the Drama Panel and several of its sub-committees between 1971 and 1977, accused the Council of indirect political censorship in the *Theatre Quarterly* article, provoking a response by Roy Shaw, Secretary-General, in a later issue. Griffiths had outlined how, at the time, by means of the very structure of this body, through its system of appointments, control over membership, and closed-door decision making, "policy is concealed in the interstices of administrative decisions" (3). The Finance Department, responsible for dividing the "cake", was the only department without a public committee or panel (16) and the panels which did belong to the various arts departments could only act as advisory bodies. The potential for abuse of power stemmed not only from the Arts Council's anti-democratic structure, but also from its lack of accountability (to anyone but itself) for everything from the acknowledgment of receipt of applications to the distribution of public funds (9). In this way, according to Griffiths, "The Arts Council does have the means by which it can directly affect companies and the livelihoods of the theatre workers involved by making decisions which never go through a committee" (11). Both Griffiths and Craig cite the cases in

the seventies of 7:84 England's production of *The Ballygombeen Bequest* by John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy and Foco Novo's *The Nine Days and Saltley Gates*, as examples of how companies could be informally punished for controversial work. Both productions had received attention in the media; the first was the target of a libel suit, and the latter was criticized for advocating trade union militancy. The theatre companies involved found that the status and size of their grants were reduced in the year following each incident. Because there was no justification for how these companies were treated, many believed that the decisions had been politically motivated. "Messages" could be sent in a variety of ways--direct cuts, demotion to project funding, or stand-still grants which effectively translate into cuts because of inflation.

Perhaps even more insidious was the growing self-censorship on the part of companies seeking or trying to maintain funding. This is a phenomenon described by many commentators and practitioners. Companies begin to define their policies and select their work on the basis of what they think the Arts Council is likely or not likely to fund. Even more evident is the pressure which is exerted on companies to conform to certain structural patterns.

Funding policies have, in many cases, forced the shift from collective to management structures. As more

substantial grants became available for groups in the seventies, they were accompanied by conditions and requirements which were fundamentally at odds with their working methods. Among these are the policies stipulating the appointment of artistic directors and managerial boards, excessive long term planning, and specialized touring schemes. Such policies demonstrated an unwillingness to recognize how many of these companies, namely the collectives, differed from hierarchically structured ones. If they wanted money, they would simply have to adapt. Howard Purdie, writing in 1986, offers an illustration of such stipulations in his summary of the conditions which had to be met by smallscale touring companies, as set out by the Scottish Arts Council:

Two previous productions by the company will have had assessment by the SAC drama committee before an application or subsidy can be considered; companies must show evidence of a board of directors, and be a member of a recognised management association; companies must be prepared to tour for at least three weeks, five performances per week; they should achieve at least 40% of their costs in guaranteed income; they must ensure effective publicity; priority is given to those whose tours include areas outside of the Glasgow-Edinburgh central belt (56).

Such requirements had the effect of making new groups structure themselves according to the necessary specifications. But companies which formed in the early and mid seventies as collectives, were forced to shift to

management structures.

As Purdie's summary suggests, there was also increasing pressure on companies to find other sources of funding. Regional arts associations and local/district councils were the main funding bodies outside of the Arts Council itself. Local authorities continue to be crucial to the survival of community arts in particular. But the degree to which certain types of projects are subsidized vary from council to council since party politics play a role at that level. For example, in Scotland, where local authorities have traditionally been Labour, more support has been available for politically oppositional work.

The Redcliffe-Maude Report of 1976 was an important document which supported the devolution of the responsibility for arts patronage onto local authorities, but the associated risks became evident in a series of cases in the late seventies. The most frequently cited case was the blatant act of censorship on the part of the North West Arts Association in 1977 when they cut their grant to North West Spanner on the basis that they were "a 'Marxist revolutionary' company, that public funds should not be used for that purpose" (Itzin 293). In a statement at the time, Roy Shaw, Secretary General of the Arts Council, admitted: "If devolution puts clients at the mercy of political pressures, we shall have to reconsider the whole question"

(Itzin 157). The move to devolution was made recently when "on March 13 [1990], Arts Minister Richard Luce announced a radical restructuring of the Arts Council itself, which [would] devolve responsibility for funding the arts to the regions, leaving the Arts Council to fund only the 'National' companies and other 'centres of excellence' (Goodman and Giannachi 16).

In the eighties, theatre companies were also being pressured to seek business sponsorship. What united practitioners in both mainstream and alternative sectors was that the attempt to privatize the arts would have serious implications for all involved. In his account of the "British Theatre in Crisis" conference in 1988, Andy Lavender describes the centrality of the sponsorship issue and summarizes:

Whilst many theatre companies were now successfully attracting private sponsorship, others were unattractive to commercial organizations because they are smaller and/ or propound left-wing politics. [Caryl] Churchill called for a concerted rejection of private sponsorship, because of the intrinsic inequalities which the system promotes, and because of the level of control which it gives to business organizations whose values are ultimately those of Thatcherism (211).

The pressure to secure corporate sponsorship was most evident in the Arts Council's "Three Year Plan" in 1989. At a meeting of theatre workers in May 1988 at Goldsmiths'

College, London, McGrath expressed his views on the plan:

It's the most dangerous thing that's going on. The central part of the Arts Council's three-year plan for theatre funding is the three-part ratio: public money, your own income from box office, and sponsorship. You have to predict these ratios for three years, and if your forecast doesn't show a significant increase in sponsorship your chance of getting funding is considerably decreased. This is a monstrous form of interference, and nobody had actually blown that (Lavender, "Symposium" 116-17).

The Arts Council brochure which outlines the plan makes it quite clear that the "underlying theme" of the plan is "financial self-sufficiency of arts organisations" and promises that "By placing a new emphasis on business planning and marketing, arts managers will be able to increase sales and attract more private finance". The other point that becomes clear is the Arts Council's interest in relinquishing its role as a funding body: "If the Arts Council is to help arts organisations in this task, it must become less of a traditional funding body, mainly concerned with delivering government monies to a portfolio of clients, and more of an advocate, an adviser and policy-maker".

I have been able to offer what is, at best, an outline of some of the main issues and developments in the funding debate. The case study of 7:84 Scotland will provide a more detailed account of these considerations in relation to the work of that company, but I would like to offer a few brief

examples of how other groups were affected by grant related problems. What emerges from the profiles of alternative theatre companies in the seventies and eighties is the need for stable sources of funding and how the actual search for funding became an increasing drain on their resources.

Rob Ritchie's brief history of Joint Stock suggests that the company had better luck than others with the Arts Council who funded them from the beginning. The fact that Max Stafford-Clark and Bill Gaskill of the Royal Court were two of its founding members and that it was originally planned as a management with no overt political agenda no doubt helped to stand the company in good stead with the Arts Council. As I noted earlier, the decision to work collectively was taken after the production of *Fanshen* in 1975, but the company still had a board of directors. Joint Stock is an interesting case of how the administrative burden of being an Arts Council client could become overwhelming even for a theatre company with experience of management structures. By 1976/77 they had to hire a full-time general manager to look after administrative work and Ritchie recounts:

In the eighties, this [the power concentrated in the hands of administrators] has become a very common thread. The Arts Council now demands a degree of administrative stamina and ingenuity from its clients that leaves little reserves for art. It is to Joint Stock's credit that they have resisted this pressure, though the group's recent

history reflects the bureaucratic character of the times. Company minutes for 1977 weighed in at 14oz, excluding agendas; by 1984, with less work in production, they had broken the 3lb. barrier, despite a flirtation with cheaper paper (24).

This tendency for administration to displace creative work became increasingly common.

Another important problem which emerges from Ritchie's account is the pressure to be productive coupled with the consequences of failure for experimental groups. It is clear that the Arts Council monitored its clients and was pleased to see productions running on schedule, but bad reviews could have serious implications. According to Ritchie:

The first two seasons of the eighties were more variable in quality and less certain in direction than at any time in the past. The growth in subsidy that allowed the output and the scale of the work to expand in the seventies came to an end. The Arts Council continued to hand out money . . . but there was increasing talk of empty pockets, difficult days, honest work to be done in the regions. . . . From 1979, the output settled at two shows a year, offering between 18 and 22 weeks of performances, sufficient to make an impact but not enough to conceal failure (26).

Grant structures do not adapt themselves to the creative cycles that theatre companies, particularly those committed to scripting new work, undergo. The energy which is required in this kind of theatre can often lead to periods of creative exhaustion and the turn over of personnel can affect the working dynamics of a group. Ironically experimental groups are expected to continually explore new

directions in their work, but this inevitably involves occasional failures. When this happens, companies tend to compensate by relying on already scripted work or a production that will guarantee box office returns; they play it safe in order to keep their grants.

Similar tendencies can be seen in the evolution of Monstrous Regiment. In her personal history of Monstrous Regiment, Gillian Hanna relates the work of the company directly to the relations of production:

The change in approach reflects the material changes in the structure of the company and the world in which it works. So in 1975 we were a collective of eleven people, all of whom had the right and the burning desire to contribute to the making of the play. But by 1989, as a management of five, we were playing a more traditional, 'managerial' role (xiv).

Like Joint Stock, by 1976 the company found the need to pay a full-time administrator, and by the early eighties, the only full-time member of the company was the administrator:

Reluctantly we were forced to admit that the full time collective was a dead duck. We also had to face the fact that financially it had become impossible to maintain. With inflation eroding the value of our Arts Council Revenue grant almost month by month, we simply couldn't afford to pay eight or nine people for fifty-two weeks a year any more. Actually, we could only afford to pay one person for fifty-two weeks a year. Administrator excepted, we had all come off the payroll after *The Execution*. We would never go back on it on a permanent basis. (lix)

The company worked hard to maintain its founding principles

by making decisions as a "collective management" (involving unpaid work for some of its members), but as Hanna recalls, by the late eighties even this was not sufficient: "We gradually realised that we were 'ipso facto' forcing the role of artistic director on our administrators, who didn't want it. So when in 1990, the Arts Council made continued funding dependent upon our appointing an Executive or Artistic Director, we were not greatly surprised" (lxxvi).

Hanna's overview of the company's work also reveals the ways in which economic factors limited the time they could devote to new writing and she admits: "Of course we have continued to commission and champion women's work of all kinds, but economic conditions force us into a conservative position" (lxxii). The problem is especially acute for companies like Monstrous Regiment without a permanent base who often must rely on co-productions with mainstream theatres. Hanna believes that "new writing itself has become harder and harder to put on as cuts in arts funding and a recession push bookers and producers into a more conservative position of producing safe plays" and she expresses frustration with "critics like Michael Billington [who] wail at the 'crisis in new writing' [and] they never seem to grasp the obvious correlation between the 'crisis' and the economic situation in which theatre operates" (lxxiii).

Arts Council interference and the mounting pressure to seek business sponsorship have helped to undermine the idea of the collective for both new and established companies. Vera Gottlieb notes that "Younger groups immediately start off thinking about individual sponsorship, using the machinery and language of today, rather than actually addressing themselves to what they're trying to say or, for that matter, to whom they might be saying it" (Lavender, "Symposium" 119). This emphasis on "packaging" has made the role of administrators ever more central to the survival of theatre companies, as Sue Beardon, administrator for Monstrous Regiment from 1976-78, claims:

In the 1980s the priorities of an arts administrator are shaped by considerations of funding, marketing and managerial efficiency. Arts funding bodies, guided by the prevailing monetarist philosophy of the present government, set stringent criteria for companies, based on their organisational effectiveness and ability to obtain a range of sponsorship. This is the age of the business plan, the consultant, the strategy, incentive-funding and expensive fund-raising training courses. The only growth area in the arts it seems and the only place anyone can make a decent living. Why fund an arts festival when you can fund a feasibility study on an arts festival. Why pay an artist when you can pay a consultant (Hanna xxvi).

McGrath relates these tendencies to the actual work being produced by theatre companies and specifically the decline in the last ten years of the number of new plays being done: "The new groups that are coming together and establishing

some kind of prominence on the scene are now doing the classics" (Lavender, "Symposium" 121).

A great deal of energy on the part of theatre workers has been expended in the search for acceptable solutions to these problems. For example, the London conference (cited above) devoted an entire session to the subject of alternative funding. A relatively untapped--and logical--source for popular political companies is the trades union movement. McGrath, who made some progress with the Scottish TUC over the years, has been a spokesman for pursuing this direction:

One of the most appalling things about the trades union movement in England is that the TUC does not have an Arts Officer of any description, and never has had. One role that the Arts Officer plays in the Scottish TUC is that of knowing all the people who are likely to be interested in the arts in the trades union movement, and putting them together with likely companies. Creating such a role would be a possible way not for the TUC to give us money, because they don't have any, but of making contacts with unions who may have a campaign going . . . Some trade union branches could help spawn community theatre a hell of a lot more than they do . . . Who else is more likely to want an oppositional form of theatre? (Lavender, "Symposium" 123).

There are models for this kind of involvement elsewhere. For instance the Community Arts Board for the Australian Arts Council established an "Art and Working Life" programme in 1982 which was designed to promote ties between arts organizations and trade unions (Watt 162). These sources

will become increasingly important to British companies as state sources of funding continue to dry up.

Even when public subsidies are forthcoming, companies will have to look elsewhere in order to meet the conditions of "balanced patronage" schemes. Business sponsorship has been minimal, even for mainstream companies like the RSC. But the majors are in a better position than most and a long overdue attempt is being made to tap their resources. Ted Braun suggested "that collaboration across the spectrum [through the encouragement of new writing and co-operation with new groups] might be a way of ensuring that Arts Council funding was still supportive of smaller groups, even though they were no longer directly in receipt of it" (Lavender, "Report" 214). The national and regional companies have an obligation to support the areas of activity from which they have reaped so many benefits--from actors and directors to scripts and performance styles. If solutions to the funding problem are not found, what theatre in Britain risks losing is the "theatre underworld" (Purdie 62) which has provided some of the most important developments in stage language and continues to be a source of renewal for the ever celebrated "centres of excellence" of the establishment theatre.

It is appropriate to end the chapter with the issue of funding because it is, in my view, central to an

understanding of what made the proliferation of the alternative theatre movement possible in the seventies, and how it evolved. It illustrates all too clearly how misleading it is to attempt to discuss "plays" outside of the context in which they are produced. I have examined the phenomenon of alternative theatre in general terms, highlighting the most important political, social, and economic factors which shaped it as a whole. But I will turn now to a detailed account of a specific popular political theatre company, using the main issues explored in this chapter as a framework.

CHAPTER THREE

1. ANATOMY OF AN ALTERNATIVE THEATRE COMPANY: 7:84 SCOTLAND

The purpose of this chapter is to present a case study of an alternative theatre company in order to explore in practice the issues raised in a theoretical way in the previous chapter. I would like to explore, in a more empirical way, why a particular group, 7:84 Scotland, decided to produce theatre outside of the conventional structures, how it organized itself, what kinds of plays it put on, whom it tried to reach and where. Inevitably the history of a particular group is just that. It is representative in some respects, but as I hope the previous chapter indicated, no two companies are ever completely alike, even if they purport to be doing the same thing. Compounding this is the problem of change; some companies which started out as radical left-wing collectives in the early seventies became "established", even "mainstream" in their own right by the early eighties. Despite these problems and limitations, the case study is intended to provide a point of reference for specific alternative practices and for larger issues related to the cyclic growth and decline of political theatre.

The reasons for selecting 7:84 Scotland are many and varied. On a practical level, 7:84 Scotland has been

documented more extensively than most groups. In part this is due to the tremendous success of their first production, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*. It proved to be a ground-breaking show and received an unusual amount of exposure through touring, a televised version, and a text published by Methuen. The company has also attracted attention because of the high profile artistic director John McGrath has had in the debates surrounding political theatre in Britain in the media, theatre journals, international conferences and festivals, and through his published plays and theoretical writings. McGrath inevitably uses 7:84 as the basis for explaining and theorizing his approaches to theatre. With the exception of documentary articles in major theatre journals and publications such as *The Joint Stock Book* it is difficult to find detailed accounts of the aims and working methods of alternative theatre groups, over an extended period of time. McGrath's writings in conjunction with critical responses to the productions offer a valuable opportunity to consider the work of the company both in "theory" and "practice".

There are, of course, more important reasons, beyond the availability of material, that make 7:84 a useful case study. In historical terms, because the company was formed in the early seventies and is one of the longest surviving groups, it is suitable to the time frame of the study and

offers a rare opportunity to trace changes and developments over a period of at least fifteen years. The company was indirectly connected to a network of alternative theatre groups in the seventies which were formed from personnel who were original members of 7:84 England.¹ It also provides a direct link to the prewar political theatre groups through its revival and subsequent publication of plays from that period, as well as through its conscious commitment to create theatre about and for working-class audiences. In this way 7:84 Scotland is a significant example of a group which belongs to the popular political as opposed to the avant-garde areas of alternative theatre. Through the plays, performance styles, choice of venues and touring circuits, 7:84's work foregrounds the relationship between theatre and

¹McGrath's list of the founding members of the 7:84 Theatre Company gives an indication of the directions some of them pursued after leaving the group. David MacLennan, who went to found the Scottish company with McGrath and Elizabeth MacLennan, later formed Wildcat (a popular political Scottish theatre group which made extensive use of rock music and the rock concert format). He also lists Sandy Craig, who has written about alternative theatre in various contexts and is the editor of *Dreams and Deconstructions* (1980). Another was Gavin Richards who founded Belt and Braces in 1973, a group which also used music as an important part of providing socialist entertainment. Gillian Hanna also worked with Belt and Braces, but then co-founded Monstrous Regiment in 1975, a feminist collective with a long and successful history. Among the directors for the first 7:84 shows were Alan Dosser and Richard Eyre (who in 1989 became artistic director of the National Theatre).

issues such as form, culture, class, and regional identity.

In terms of internal organization, the company's shift in the late seventies from a collective/democratic to a more bureaucratic structure of administration provides a useful context for considering the advantages and disadvantages of the collective as an alternative approach to production. The case of 7:84 also questions to what extent it is possible to sustain non-hierarchical structures of organization, in face of the pressures of funding stipulations and the labour intensive nature of the work and thus highlights several of the factors which affect the survival of such groups more generally. Indeed, if the history of 7:84 (both the English and Scottish companies) is illustrative of anything, it is the precariousness of trying to operate as a political theatre company while depending on government subsidy to survive.

While 7:84 is an instructive case for these reasons, it presents difficulties as well. For instance, although McGrath's theoretical writings serve as a crucial source of information, it becomes difficult to distinguish between him and the company, and to avoid the pitfall of focusing on a writer/director instead of a group. The problem is not only one of methodology (i.e. avoiding the traditional categories) but also one of accuracy. One need not delve very deep to find, indeed even McGrath himself will admit,

that there are discrepancies in the accounts of the company's history. Since anonymous "hearsay" does not constitute an appropriate source for a study of this kind, I will try to provide as wide a range of perspectives on the work of McGrath and 7:84 Scotland as is available.

The Origins of 7:84 Scotland

The Scottish company was a spin off of what was originally called the 7:84 Theatre Company, a name derived from a statistic published in *The Economist* (1966) which showed that 7% of the population of Great Britain owned 84% of the capital wealth. A note in the company's publicity material explains that even though this proportion may have changed marginally over the years, they continued to use it because it pointed to what they saw as the basic economic structure of their society, from which all political, social and cultural structures grow.

The original group emerged in 1971 with a production of McGrath's *Trees in the Wind* at the Edinburgh Festival. In the first two years, the company produced plays by McGrath, Trevor Griffiths, John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy and toured them (by means of a Ford Transit van) to venues which varied from universities to school gymnasiums in England, Scotland, and Wales. The company, "composed predominantly of

disenchanted professional theatre workers" (Craig 34) evolved, according to McGrath, "From enthusiastic autocracy at the beginning (Trevor Griffiths once referred to me as 'il Duce') to a *form* of collective control, within a year" (*Good* 119).

The crisis which led to a fracturing of the original company arose in relation to their production of Arden's and D'Arcy's *The Ballygombeen Bequest*. The play was touring at the time (1972) with McGrath's adaptation of an earlier Arden play, *Sergeant Musgrave Dances On* (both dealing with Northern Ireland) and was taken off, according to McGrath, because of a threatened libel action. Until this point the 7:84 Theatre Company had received grants from the Arts Council but they were only renewed on a project by project basis.² Due to the financial uncertainty, decisions were

²MacLennan describes "project" funding as "a kind of artistic parole system whereby you have to submit and defend scripts and projected tours on a show-to-show basis, which makes it very difficult to retain a group or plan ahead" (43). In the list of drama grants and guarantees for the year ended 31 March 1973, the 7:84 Theatre Company received, for the productions noted above, a total of £1,296 (£400 for Capital Expenditure and £896 for New drama and neglected plays). In the following year, they received a total of £650 for their adaptation of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* and Adrian Mitchell's *Man Friday*. In 1974-75 they received a capital expenditure grant of £1000 and in 1975-76 they received a total of £29,950. The grants increased annually until the amount reached £92,500 in 1984-85 after which they were cut.

taken which led to a fragmenting of the company:

During the first two months of 73 discussion raged, and ended with a meeting at which it was decided that Gavin Richards should seize the opportunity that arose and start what became Belts and Braces, that the English lot should stay in London to do a tour of Adrian Mitchell's *Man Friday*, and that David MacLennan, Feri Lean, Elizabeth MacLennan and I should go to Scotland to start a Scottish company. These things we all did (*Good* 121).

While the financial crisis forced a rethinking and restructuring of the company, there were also internal factors affecting the decisions to pursue different directions. These will be discussed in connection with the organization of the company.

The English company resumed its annual grant in 1975 and went on to produce work by playwrights such as Steve Gooch, David Edgar, Barrie Keeffe, John Burrows, Claire Luckman, and Peter Cox. Its activities came to an end in 1985 when it lost all of its Arts Council funds. McGrath continued to write for and work with the company, but he devoted most of his energy to his work with what became the Scottish 7:84 Theatre Company and eventually to his own film company, Freeway Films. I will deal with the English 7:84 only insofar as it provides illuminating parallels and contrasts to the practices and fate of the Scottish company.

The Shift to Scotland

The original 7:84, as the name implied, defined itself as a socialist theatre. The work in the first years helped to clarify that definition and McGrath claims that "What started out as an attempt to make socialist theatre became during this time an attempt to make theatre of and for the working class in a socialist way" (*Good* 118). But as a mandate even this remained quite broad, and the range of work the company did (as indicated by the list of playwrights above) indicates its flexibility in terms of styles and subjects in the attempt to bring theatre to working-class audiences all over England. One of the strengths or advantages of the Scottish company, was that it could merge class politics with specific regional/national problems for an audience that was more than ready to listen and to support them. Scottish issues provided a focus for the subject matter of the plays and popular Scottish entertainment (both rural and urban) provided the language through which to reach audiences. Some familiarity with the context in which the Scottish company chose to work is important in understanding the shows they produced and the support they received.

Scotland has a long socialist tradition which provided fertile ground for the company. In accounting for the success of 7:84's first production, *The Cheviot*, David

Campbell and Douglas Gifford refer to Scottish socialist sentiment as an important ingredient: "Certainly the people of a country which produced John MacLean and the international socialist idealism of the red Clydeside could be expected to welcome the sentiments and attitudes of this company" (1). The decision to work in Scotland and to tap into existing traditions was by no means accidental. Elizabeth MacLennan recalls what led to the formation of the Scottish 7:84:

We had become increasingly aware of the cultural and political differences between the situation in the south-east and the north of England and Wales, and between their preoccupations and those of people in Scotland. Scotland is distinguished by its socialist, egalitarian tradition, its Labour history, its cultural cohesion and energetic participation in argument and contemporary issues. Within its separate educational, legal and religious systems is a strong but not chauvinist sense of cultural identity. Culture and politics are not dirty words. We felt our plays there should reflect and celebrate these differences in language, music, political identification and carry on the arguments. This would need a different but related company (43).

Their tremendous initial success proved their predictions correct, and they could not have arrived at a better time.

As elsewhere, the seventies were particularly fervent years in Scotland and in his survey of theatre in Scotland in this period, Randall Stevenson points to the connections between popular political plays and the general political

climate:

the 1970s were buoyant years not only for nationalist sentiments but for socialism in Scotland. Scottish participation in the miner's strike, and, particularly, the prolonged occupation of the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders' Yard in 1971 demonstrated the power of labour action in Scotland, and its successful results were widely celebrated on the stage (361).

While 7:84 was able to ride the socialist wave, Scottish nationalism proved to be a more difficult concept to reconcile to their work.

As Stevenson's remarks indicate, the seventies were also a period of growing nationalist sentiment in Scottish political life. But the forces of socialism and nationalism were not necessarily happily aligned. Joseph Farrell claims: "In all Third World countries, and in small European nations, notably Catalonia, socialism and nationalism went naturally together. In Scotland, where socialism involved dreams of the brotherhood of all, and nationalism supposedly tarred an individual as a provincial egoist, they were felt to be in contradiction" (51). The relationship between nationalism and socialism raises specific problems which 7:84 never directly or fully addressed in their work. McGrath and company dissociated themselves from what they saw as the essentially conservative tendencies of the nationalism of the Scottish National Party (most evident in their direct attack on the SNP in *Little Red Hen*), but their

work was undeniably rooted in and made use of Scottish history and traditions of entertainment, and appealed to the growing sense of a Scottish cultural identity--different from "English" culture which had always been dominant, particularly in theatre and television.

Scottish nationalism defined in negative terms translated into being "un-English". In a more positive sense, it took the form of a reconstruction of a Scottish past and tradition. In theatrical terms, what Scotland could claim to be its own was a tradition of popular forms such as music hall and panto--live forms of entertainment in which music and comedy figure prominently. What 7:84 did was to take advantage of the familiarity with and entertainment value of these forms (and others such as the "ceilidh") and to use them as vehicles for political analysis and commentary. They were also able to revive what Linda Mackenny has termed "the Scottish popular dramatic tradition" which was active in the 1920s, '30s and '40s. In their "Clydebuilt" season in 1982 and in subsequent Mayfest productions, 7:84 made an attempt, according to MacLennan, "to pay tribute to our popular theatre antecedents such as the Unity Theatre, the Bowhill Players, the Theatre Workshop and the Workers' Theatre Movement" (109). Among the Scottish plays the company has revived are Joe Corrie's *In Time of Strife* (1926), Ena Lamont Stewart's *Men Should Weep* (1947),

and Robert McLeish's *The Gorbals Story* (1946), plays that deal with the life and struggles of the Scottish working-class. Through these revivals, and through publishing their own editions of these and other plays, they created a direct connection between their own work and an earlier political theatre movement as well as making them available to other theatre groups and readers.

Connected with these forms of Scottish entertainment and early plays is the issue of language. In the case of the shows 7:84 produced for tours in the Highlands, beginning with *The Cheviot*, they included dialogue and songs in Gaelic. The impact of using the Gaelic language, particularly in the context of celebrating the history and resilience of the Highland people, cannot be underestimated. In his introduction to *Modern Scottish Literature*, Alan Bold emphasizes the importance of language in the larger context of Scottish writing:

In Scotland language is treated as a weapon in a national, and nationalistic war. The Scottish writer makes a matter of decision--over the use of English, Scots, Gaelic--a matter of division. . . . Gaelic was thus once a national language which is why it has such emotive associations for Scots who know not a word of it. It is still regarded as the speech of a lost Celtic paradise. Scots are generally united in lamenting the way Gaelic was systematically destroyed as the national language of Scotland (4).

The Highland shows demonstrated a particularly strong commitment to the preservation of Gaelic culture and

included performers who themselves were Gaels.

Language, specifically the use of Scottish dialects, was an important component of the shows which targeted working-class audiences in the urban, industrial belt of Scotland as well. Stevenson stresses the role of language in Scottish plays of the seventies depicting working-class life:

This excitement [generated by the rapport between urban life on stage and the experience of the audience] is much enhanced by the development of a language which lets the stage speak to spectators in the tones and terms they might use to speak to themselves or to each other. In this way, recent dramatic exploitation not so much of Braid Scots but of the language of 'Argyle Street, Glasgow, or the Kirkgate, Leith' has greatly added to the theatre's ability to communicate Scottish issues to the Scottish people with direct, compelling clarity (365).

In this way language plays a crucial role in establishing points of contact with audiences who have never regarded theatre as having anything to do with their lives.

The issue of language in Scottish theatre has had enormous implications for Scottish performers. Director Sandy Neilson argues that it is central to building a Scottish theatre, as opposed to theatre in Scotland:

It is essential that Scottish theatre should offer its own indigenous talent something positive to keep them here and that can only be the establishment of a new voice to speak through, not a hollow imitation of an English accent, but a strong and viable new voice with a distinctive Scottish accent which can enrich the overall aspects of British theatre and, indeed, world

drama; a new voice that can benefit from the best of English theatre but which does not feel that it is necessary to pay constant lip service to it (19).

The expansion of Scottish theatre/playwrighting in the seventies provided opportunities, previously unavailable, to Scottish born actors/performers not only to stay in Scotland if they chose, but also to speak a new stage language, no longer simply subjects of a cultural colony.

The political and cultural factors outlined above converged to make Scotland a particularly receptive place for popular political theatre. This is in no way meant to undermine 7:84's achievements. It simply underscores the importance of knowing the traditions, the language, and the concerns of the audiences one is trying to reach. It also helps to explain, in part, why 7:84 lasted much longer than other groups which formed in the early seventies and why they were supported by both funding bodies and audiences for many years.³

The Process: the "Who" and "How" of 7:84 Scotland:

³The issue of funding will be discussed in greater detail in a later section. The presence of Labour based district councils and the more progressive components of the Scottish Arts Council had much to do with the continued financial support the company received. The demise of the English company provides a useful contrast.

There are organizational problems involved with trying to discuss specific aspects of a theatre company's work in detail, since the issues inevitably overlap. As in Chapter Two, exploring the "who" and "how" without, at the same time, describing the "what", "where" and "for whom" is difficult. The added problem in this case study is accounting for the changes the company went through; the 7:84 Scotland of the 80s was not the same company that set out in 1973 to tour the Highlands in a Ford transit van. Before turning to 7:84's productions, the theory behind them, and the responses to them, I would like to examine the structural basis of the company and how and why it changed. The relations and conditions of production are central to establishing a context for the theatre they produced. I will limit the discussion in the following section to organizational issues and treat the impact of funding separately. This will provide the framework for looking at the development, the features, the target audiences, and touring histories of specific 7:84 productions.

The relationship between the context (the mode of production as well as venue) and the plays themselves is one of the key features which distinguishes left-wing, alternative theatre companies. As McGrath has pointed out in the past: "It is important here to see theatre not just as 'plays', but as a means of production, with bosses, workers,

and unemployed, with structural relationships . . . It is through its structures as much as through its product that theatre expresses the dominant bourgeois ideology" (*Good* 44). Like many other groups in the early seventies, 7:84 adopted working methods and structural relationships that would, more or less, reflect their socialist politics.

When John McGrath, Elizabeth MacLennan and David MacLennan left to form the Scottish company, they were faced with trying to find others with talent and skills and who would be committed enough to work very hard for little money. They considered running an ad:

Needed: people who can act, sing, entertain, and play at least one musical instrument (all superbly well), who are committed socialists, know the Highlands, can drive, and are prepared to join in all the work of the company on a communal basis, and play in a dance band. Apply 7:84 (Scotland) (McGrath, "Year" viii).

They never ran the ad, but in his introduction to *The Cheviot*, McGrath offers an account of the people who eventually came together for their first production. Their backgrounds are worth noting because they indicate the range of talents needed to perform the kinds of shows 7:84 produced, and some of their social/cultural roots. Three of the actors, Alex Norton, Bill Paterson and John Bett had worked together on *The Great Northern Welly Boot Show* (1972). McGrath describes how they combined "an enormous number of skills, acting, singing, guitar, pipes, whisky,

commitment and others" ("Year" viii). This Glasgow show, starring Billy Connolly, had been very popular. Stevenson describes the show as the "story of the occupation of Upper Clyde Shipbuilders (thinly disguised as a boot factory)" and claims that "Though its mixture of songs and sketches seemed only light satiric entertainment, the production was significant at least as a focus for a range of talents later to develop in several directions on the Scottish stage. The show had been designed by Glasgow artist and playwright John Byrne, who also designed the pop-up book set for *The Cheviot*.

The group also included Dolina MacLennan, a Gaelic singer from the Outer Hebrides, who had spoken only Gaelic until she was eight years old. Another member who was crucial to the work of the company in the 70s was Allan Ross, described as "fiddler extraordinary, musician, entertainer, whose great-grandfather had been cleared from Easter Ross". The versatility of the performing members of the company was crucial to developing a popular style, but it is also significant that such performers were available. MacLennan claims:

This is partly due to the fact that performers traditionally in Scotland don't have such strong internal class divisions between variety theatre, straight theatre, and club entertainment--in the way that in England these things are very much separated. You find actors who can play instruments and sing and singers who can act (63).

Two further members, Chris Martin and Feri Lean, took care of stage management and administration (bookings, publicity, box office, etc.). The people who came together to work on *The Cheviot* took working relations into account; McGrath maintained "When we met to discuss the way the collective should work, it felt very good" ("Year" viii).

As I outlined in the previous chapter, the notion of the "collective" has been interpreted in diverse ways, making for as many variations as there are groups that claim to use this form of organization. Terms like "collective" and "co-operative" immediately suggest democratic structures in which decision making and duties are shared amongst its members. In this way a company becomes a microcosm, or a reflection of, the socialist society it tries to promote. In the context of theatre, the collective approach to work breaks down the boundaries between the different areas of production and, consequently, the status or importance traditionally attached to certain roles. Ideally, everyone has a say; everyone shares both the challenging/exciting and the tedious aspects of the work; everyone is happy and fulfilled. In practice, particularly in theatre companies (no matter how "political"), equality can be difficult to achieve.

Conflicts concerning the working methods to be employed by the company accounted, to some extent, for the

fragmentation of the original 7:84 Theatre Company. McGrath refers to this in an early interview: "And it was clear that Gavin [Richards] and I had different perspectives--he needed what he called the liberation of the performer, and I distrusted that, not as a concept, but as an actuality. To me that meant a kind of anarchism, and I was interested in a Socialist theatre, not an anarchist theatre. So it was better that he worked in one way and I carried on working another way" ("Bootle" 50). He goes on to describe the form this "anarchy" took when 7:84 England did a joint production with Belt & Braces the following year:

At that time, very much under the influence of Gavin there was a total decentralization, a total exchange of roles. Everybody was a writer, everybody was a bureaucrat, everybody could do anything on the show. It was total chaos. The gigs got all fucked up because somebody didn't tell somebody that they'd made an arrangement to ring somebody back, because one day they were organising the gigs and the next day they were rushing around to find props ("Bootle" 50).

There also seems to have been tension between McGrath and Richards over the role of the band and the "writer". In discussing band-related problems, MacLennan notes "It doesn't mean that you get what Gavin used to call 'hegemony of the band'--having played Gramsci he was really into hegemony and could spot it when only a gleam in the eye. (He also worried about 'hegemony of the writer'--the Power of the Pen--until he started writing himself)" (43-44). The

source of such conflicts becomes clearer when one considers McGrath's own approach to collective work which is based on maintaining a division of labour, but opening up the different areas to input from other members--what Doug Paterson formerly of the Dakota Theatre Caravan calls "access to power". What emerges from McGrath's accounts of the working methods of the company is the centrality of writing:

Obviously I, as a writer, had a very clear idea of exactly how I wanted the show [*The Cheviot*] to be. I knew who it was for, and I knew what I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it. But I also wanted everybody in the company to be intimately involved in the actual process of creating it. I had always fought shy of group-writing before, and still do. This wasn't to be a free-for-all, utopian fantasy: I wouldn't expect to play Allan Ross's fiddle, or to sing in Gaelic or act. The company didn't expect to write the play. My contribution was my experience as a writer and director, and it was to be used ("Year" viii-ix).

While McGrath was interested in opening up the area of writing to the company--"de-mystifying" the role--his concept of the writer emphasized individualism:

Writing a play can never be a totally democratic process. They are skills which need aptitude, long experience, self-discipline and a certain mental disposition in one individual. They demand leaps in the dark, liberated instincts, arrogance of the imagination and autocracy of the intuition ("Boom" 9).

This underscores the complexity of reconciling the writing process (traditionally an individual act) to a collective

approach. In this case McGrath's own experience as a professional writer, before working in a collective structure, undoubtedly complicated the situation.

Even though McGrath was responsible for the final scripting of plays, in the early productions, members were involved in the research process and contributed to the development of features such as scenes, characters, and songs. But, in his introduction to *Boom*, McGrath outlines the boundaries of creative freedom. He firmly states that the scripts were not improvised ("Virtually everything, down to the smallest throwaway, is written or discussed before the performance") and that the actors did not write their own material ("The shows are conceived and controlled down to the smallest detail by the writer/director, with the fullest consultation, discussion and contribution from the collective company" ("Boom" 9). He uses an example from the preparations for *The Cheviot* to illustrate this process:

Everyone was given one or two areas to be personally responsible for, check what we said, and answer to in public discussion. For example, Bill [Paterson] was given the section on the Highland's military tradition--the numbers killed in the wars, the way recruiting worked, etc, and he looked through the books, went to libraries, and military museums to get the facts. When we came to write that section, I knew what I wanted to write, we all discussed it, Bill knew the details, or where he could find them, and either there, with everybody present, or in the evening at home, the section was written ("Year" x).

There are obvious practical advantages to such a method of

gathering information, but the main reason for opening up the processes of writing and directing to the whole company, according to McGrath, was "so that every member of the company knows what is being said--how and why--and feels part of the creation of the show, not alienated from it or the mere instruments of it" ("Boom" 9).

On a more ideological level, this process was one of the ways in which they could "break down the insane hierarchies of the theatre":

Firstly, we could all respect each other's skills and at the same time lay them open for collective discussion and advice. Secondly, we could work as equal human beings, no skill being elevated over another, no personal power or superiority being assumed because of the nature of the individual contribution: no stars, of any kind. And no recourse to the 'I'm an artist' pose to camouflage either power-seeking or avoidance of responsibility to the collective ("Year" ix).

Equal status of members was reinforced through company meetings, at which all could contribute ideas and vent frustrations, and by the company's wage policy. The equal pay policy was a feature of the original company and 7:84 Scotland maintained it until their funding crisis in 1988.⁴

⁴In one of her journal entries at the time of the impending cut, MacLennan speculates about their need to hire a new administrator at a higher wage (120). She notes that they had resisted compromising the equal pay policy until then. It is not clear from either of their accounts that this affected the pay structure for the rest of the company.

Despite the measures taken, in both working methods and the wage policy, to work in a less hierarchical way, the collective participation that characterized the early 7:84 productions could be seen as hierarchical from another perspective. As much as McGrath was willing to "open up" the creative process, clearly he was in control of the final product. Research was embarked upon "collectively"--they all went out to gather information--but McGrath played the central role in interpreting and shaping the presentation of the data. It must be noted that ultimately his name appeared on the published versions of the plays; title pages indicate that they were "presented by" 7:84, but the plays themselves are "by John McGrath".

This is not to suggest that collective principles did not inform the creative process or that the possibility for such a process is a myth. It is important to recognize in the case of 7:84, McGrath was a dominant figure and was the

MacLennan's book offers some of the amounts paid over the years. For instance, in 1975, for the tour of *The Little Red Hen*, the company wage was £50 per week (accommodation £3 per night). By 1980 it was voted to rise to £100 and to £120 the following year. Finlay Welsh who worked with the company on and off from the late seventies, recalls how 7:84 paid well and allowed the members to vote on wages: "The budget has always been open to the company to look at and if the company felt that there was space in the budget for a rise in wages they would vote for it and it always paid well" ("Interview").

final authority in certain matters, particularly artistic ones. This is not unusual; many significant experimental ventures in the past have depended on strong or charismatic personalities like Joan Littlewood. This has positive and negative sides; often it takes the vision and determination of an individual to get the project off the ground and sustain the enthusiasm, but there is the risk that that person becomes too central, overshadowing the efforts of all those involved.⁵ In organizational terms, the point is that the presence and authority of a strong figure contradicts the socialist philosophy that informs the structure and can lead to internal clashes.

Responsibilities for the remaining aspects of production were also shared by the company, including design and construction of sets, costumes and the "get-ins" and "get-outs". The sheer amount of work involved in touring, usually one-night stands five times a week, made great demands on the company. McGrath recounts typical set ups during *The Cheviot* tour:

⁵It is interesting, after reading McGrath's introduction to *The Cheviot*, to note MacLennan's assessment of it. She describes it as "a very faithful, vivid, highly accurate and typically modest account of what took place; for of course, none of it could have happened without John's own strength of purpose, determination, sense of humour, talent, writing skill, and huge faith in people" (44-45). The notion of "the collective" becomes increasingly blurred.

Everybody worked on get-ins, which became faster and easier the more we did. Then a quick tech, for lighting and sound levels, then a short company talk about any changes. checked props and costumes, and if we were lucky found digs or some fish and chips. . . . At the end of the show everybody struck their own costumes and props, I did my roadie bit with the band while the stage was dismantled and chairs shoved away and the floor swept. . . . During the dances, those not playing in the band packed and wrapped lights, costumes, props, stage, etc, quietly, and at the end, we wrapped the band gear, and everything was ready for loading the next morning. By ten everybody was back at the hall to load ("Year" xxii).

Even with the presence of people employed strictly as stage management (in part through pressure from Equity) the rest of the company shared in the work of set ups and strikes. According to Finlay Welsh, this was still true (although less so) when they toured *The Albannach* (1985). MacLennan believes that the sharing of production responsibilities serves an important function: "Notwithstanding the back-ache, elbow ache and belly-aches, I think it makes a great difference to the way companies relate to each other, to the management and to the audience" (76).

Inevitably such a process brings with it great rewards as well as great problems. The willingness to share the work and tour for subsistence wages (or less) made it possible to get the company off the ground, since the success and popularity of *The Cheviot* served as grounds for more and better funding. And, despite the exhaustion and frustration,

the performers and crew members who were involved with these tours, particularly in the Highlands, had some of the most exciting and enjoyable experiences of their careers, due mainly to enthusiastic and welcoming audiences. The collective process also offers performers the opportunity to get involved in areas of theatre production which they are traditionally excluded from--rather than just learning parts, they could contribute to creating them. This can be especially liberating for actors who have worked in more traditional structures.

At the same time problems arose which could be attributed to collective structures in general and to the specific circumstances related to 7:84's work. First, there were internal conflicts caused by a variety of factors. A perennial source of conflict for political theatre groups, which has changed little from the prewar groups, is the theatre/politics split. McGrath recounts:

If any polarisation took place it was the inevitable one, between those with strong political responsibility which was taken as earnestness and commissaring, and those with strong responsibilities to entertaining and pleasing the audience, which were taken as ego-boosting and copping out. . . . It was only in discussion away from work that these seemed like divisions of any importance ("Year" xxv).

While it was not difficult to find actors with socialist tendencies in Scotland, they were "committed" to varying degrees. Finlay Welsh recalls a time when "passing the

political test" was a kind of prerequisite:

It was in those early days when they were very very keen that the members of the company should be committed and should do things like attend rallies, hand out leaflets . . . and they must represent the left wing in Scotland. Those members of the company who put more emphasis on acting than on doing any of that were kind of thought of as being not committed enough ("Interview").

In the eighties, due to a change in structure and improved wages, this was no longer an issue--for many actors, a 7:84 production was like any other job.

There were also internal conflicts related to the division of labour within the company. Clearly tempers flared when some members felt they were doing more than others. MacLennan raises this indirectly when she describes why she chose to work on lights in the set ups and strikes: "I found if I stayed too long talking to people one or two folk would get cross about being left to pack costumes. So doing the lights and cabling meant I could do both." (76) As the company hired crews to handle these aspects of the work, tensions developed between stage management and actors. Finlay Welsh recalls stormy company meetings over such issues:

an example that springs to mind is the stage management saying 'we have to hump the gear and we have to be there ahead and we're not getting any extra money and we're doing twice the work as bloody actors' and then you've got the actors saying 'I can't go on and do this performance after having set up a stage and taken it all down

the night before. There was a lot of that went on. It just had to be worked through ("Interview").

Inevitably the conflicts were fueled by the fact that people were stretched to their limits because of the demanding pace of touring as well as personality clashes which are difficult to avoid altogether.

The hiring of stage management people, even though work was still shared, undermined the notion of a collective structure. But the need arose in part from pressure from Equity (they were required to crew the shows properly), but also because the demands of the work were destroying the company. The set ups, performances followed by ceilidhs until the early hours, strikes, loading, and travelling to the next gig, all contributed to sheer exhaustion and made it increasingly difficult to keep people for any length of time. McGrath describes the crisis reached in the late seventies:

What happened round about six years after we began was that it was almost like built in obsolescence. Many of the cast went all at the same time. The guy who built all the sets, played the fiddle, drove the truck, loaded the truck, suddenly his back went and he couldn't work. He, at the same time, got involved with somebody (his marriage had broken up during the touring years) who wanted him to come off the road to live a life. And, at the same time, other people were having problems either worn out with life on the road or wanting to go and, being wooed for large amounts of dough, for other productions, wanted to start a career. Others were just exhausted. Some of them, their voices just went. It all happened over a period of six to nine months

("Interview").

This level of strain on members presumably could have been alleviated through less touring or a more relaxed pace (two or three night stops instead of one-night stands), but taking the work to the audiences they wanted to reach (and as many of them as possible in a 3-4 week tour) was the *raison d'être* of the company. As McGrath notes, in the end, the situation becomes counter-productive: "You begin to lose people because they say, look, I love the work, I love going on the stage, I love the audiences, I love the way you work, but I can't do it anymore" ("Interview").

The working conditions affected not only the people involved, but also the quality of the work. Commentators almost unanimously agree that the productions which followed *The Cheviot* achieved nowhere near its success. The overall validity of this assessment will be considered in greater detail in the discussion of the productions themselves, but the problem is worth noting here. McGrath himself admits the difficulties which arose due to rushed scripting and inadequate rehearsal time. He accounts for the weaknesses of *Boom*, their second Highland show:

It lacked rhythm, flow, variety, pace, surprise. . . . There can be no excuses, but rehearsal time had been far too short, constantly interrupted by most of the company going off to perform *The Game's a Bogey* in the evenings and eaten into further by negative discussions and the need for us to do almost everything else as well as rehearse a difficult piece. We were much too

small in numbers, the work-load, even just in performance terms, was enormous on every single one of us, and we became increasingly tired and slow. So the first week or so, while not a disaster, was below what we wanted ("Boom" 31).

The attempts to rewrite and improve the show as it toured eventually worked, but only after putting additional pressure on all involved--"An opening night every night for three weeks".

By 1978, some major decisions had to be made about the future of the company on the basis of artistic/political and economic grounds. It was at this time that the group fractured and Wildcat was formed, and the remaining members formed a management structure.

From Collectivity to Bureaucracy

In July 1977, the company paused to take inventory of its work. MacLennan recounts:

7:84 Scotland met as a group to have three weeks of informal political discussions on Nationalism, the role of music, sexism and male chauvinism, collective organisation and training. We felt we needed to restate and develop our basic principles both for the benefit of new company members, and in the light of the experience we had gained. Some people found this very useful (others dozed off) but it tended to clarify our *different* perspectives and objectives rather than unite us as a group (84).

The lack of consensus and morale made it impossible to continue as a group.

Some of the internal conflicts were resolved through the formation of a spin off company, Wildcat. 7:84's work had always involved musical theatre and a band had eventually grown out of the work. The last show before the break up was a piece of band theatre, *His Master's Voice*, written by the piano player, David Anderson. MacLennan notes the significance of this production for the company:

The new musicians wanted a different relationship with music. . . . They were evolving something different and exciting. The show was popular and during the run it became clear that the main people involved should be free to develop their ideas for this 'band theatre'. If they were to stay in 7:84, it would mean that we would have to stop our own development as a company. . . . We had to be free to use whatever kind of music was needed. The musicians on the other hand wanted music to lead the story, to shape the narrative, and to have a consistent rock-based style (85).

Finlay Welsh maintains that there were political as well as artistic reasons for this split: "I think maybe part of the reason why Wildcat was set up as a splinter group was because Dave Anderson and Dave MacLennan felt they had more to say than 7:84 weren't going to say for them, so they formed their own company" ("Interview").

The solution was, according to McGrath, "amicable"; "we made an arrangement with the Arts Council that we would come off the road, and they, as our band, would be forming themselves into a new company, would take over part of our grant and they would then have money to operate for six

months" ("Interview"). MacLennan aptly notes that such an arrangement with the Arts Council would be impossible today. The group was successful and received its own grant the following year, while 7:84 resumed theirs.

But conflict over the artistic direction of the company was not the only issue which led to the precarious state it found itself in by 1978-79. They were also faced with serious financial difficulties because of the increasing costs of production and wages. According to McGrath, the late seventies was a period of considerable inflation, wages were being pushed up and prices were going through the roof, but the income from the Arts Council and the box office (because they did not put their ticket prices up) did not match what they needed to cover wages. He believes the Arts Council was trying to keep them as a small company:

after seven years of producing some of the most interesting work in Scotland which everyone still agreed on . . . we thought it was time . . . we got a little bit of a promotion, that we were able to have two trucks instead of one van, that maybe we could have more stage management so that it would not be so heavy on the performers getting stuff in and out of the hall ("Interview").

The move to hire stage management was helped along by Equity, who felt the company had gone long enough without employing the required number of stage managers, a sound operator and a lighting operator. This was desirable on one

hand, because of the work load, but unaffordable on the other.

When all of these factors converged--artistic, political, personal, financial--the members made a collective decision to cease to be a permanent company. They could not afford to have a regular company paid all year round. McGrath recalls the "fateful vote" when the members of the company decided they would rather be paid more and only work for rehearsal and tour, then go away (to work for radio or television) and come back for the next show. McGrath claims the decision was reached against his better judgment and explains the implications it had for the structure of the company:

What it did was to immediately create a level of people who had to be permanently employed like the administrator and obviously an artistic director . . . and these people were permanently employed because they had to be, in between shows, setting up the tours, getting people back, etc. That meant that those people, because they were employed, had more power. It became a Taylorist operation which I was fighting against ("Interview").

They continued the practice of company meetings and included members as much as possible in the plans for the next show, usually a day long meeting to go through all the items (tours, production costs, etc.) for the next year's productions. But it became difficult to maintain and people could not always come back after finding work elsewhere.

This process was also complicated by the demands of the Arts Council for advanced artistic planning making it necessary to slot the actors and others in at a later stage (McGrath, *Bone* 95).

The power hierarchy that McGrath had been so anxious to eliminate was in place by the eighties; a small management group would take decisions guided by a board of directors (which the Arts Council had insisted on). The board at this time was made up of representatives of the working company, representatives of the audience (people who booked them from all over Scotland) and "some worthy citizens [appointed under pressure from the Arts Council] to safeguard the taxpayers' money, who were, on the whole, supporters of our company and our plans" (McGrath, "Interview"). Under further pressure, the composition of the board was to change drastically by the late eighties.

McGrath and MacLennan tried as much as possible to keep regular people. This was particularly important for the Highland shows and MacLennan formed a nucleus of performers (including Simon Mackenzie and Catherine Anne McPhee, both Gaelic speaker/singers). They also tried to keep some of their working methods alive, but MacLennan says of their tenth anniversary show, *The Catch* (1981):

It was also the *last* show to date, apart from *Baby and the Bathwater* in which the preparation, research, discussion, writing, re-writing, rehearsal, performance and development of the

performance throughout the tour bore the particular imprint of John McGrath's style, his way of working, and our joint experience as part of a group (98).

But the Clydebuilt season of 1982 was a better indication of how the company would operate in the eighties. MacLennan describes the implications of the structural changes by that point:

Men Should Weep marked a transition . . . We had now become a management and people were cast to play. Get-ins were done largely by the crew. Company meetings became more formal, more for airing grievances, exchanging information and instructions. This change was several times noted in the company minutes but as no one was prepared to commit beyond the run of the tour, there was no alternative. The board were quite clear that for people who came into the company for one show only to decide the company's future plans (which they were not prepared to commit to themselves) would be power without responsibility (114).

The organizational changes proved to be far from simple or efficient; the Clydebuilt season marked the beginning of serious administrative and financial problems for 7:84.

The Clydebuilt shows, which were done in a bigger theatre with large casts of 12-15, also gave way to a new strand in the work--large scale productions, mounted for Mayfest and directed by David Hayman. By 1985, 7:84's work had divided into three separate areas: the Highland tours which were run by McGrath and MacLennan; the small scale tours in Scotland's industrial belt and community projects run by John Haswell, associate artistic director; and the

large scale shows run by David Hayman.

Alternative or Mainstream?

Although McGrath continued to define his work with 7:84 as oppositional and alternative, the structural realities were quite different--it had become a small "institution" in its own right. The idea of a permanent company of committed actors had eroded completely. One of the actors I interviewed in 1988 described 7:84 as being little more than "an office" and most agreed that it had become more of an establishment than an alternative theatre company. Members of cast and crew did not see working with 7:84 as any different from working with other major Scottish theatre companies or reps.

The realities did not escape McGrath and there was little chance of reversing the process:

Looking back on the whole history of 'the office', it is clear that once the running of the company affairs was removed from company discussion, a Board set up to employ and administrator responsible to it for 'professional' management, then the whole enterprise of 7:84 was doomed. 7:84 was an attempt to create new structures, new ways of relating within a company, new and flexible ways of deploying our resources most effectively in a theatrical and political struggle. Once we had accepted specialisation in *management*, then we were subject to normative pressures, we became more and more like everybody else (*Bone* 110).

Although he entertained hopes of forming a permanent company again, after a disastrous attempt at mounting an adaptation of Aristophanes (as part of a recovery of popular plays from the past and other cultures), and due to the general attitudes and lack of commitment of the actors involved, not to mention the sudden discovery of a huge deficit and administrative chaos, McGrath decided to resign instead.⁶

The resignation did not take place (this time) but McGrath was determined to change the company's direction. From all accounts, it had become a bureaucratic nightmare. What he found most difficult to accept, was that the company

⁶The reference here to actors and their lack of commitment deserves a note of explanation. Both McGrath and MacLennan make claims about the attitudes of a younger generation of actors, particularly Scottish trained ones. After the failure of *Women in Power* (adaptation of Aristophanes) McGrath vowed never again to direct actors in the theatre in Scotland. His anger and frustration stemmed from what he saw as a lack of commitment, co-operation and imaginative response. He claims: "Something had happened to that generation of actors under the new regime at the Glasgow drama school--founded by James Bridie--and it was something that broke my whole way of working. The spirit of Thatcher's 80s was getting through to me where it really did damage" (*Bone* 104). MacLennan similarly records the frustration and disappointment of working with actors who are not trained or interested in exploring and developing new styles. Looking back on her work with Mackenzie and McPhee since *The Catch*, she told me in an interview: "It is difficult to work that way [closely/collectively] nowadays; it is against the current mode of employment...drama schools don't encourage it; drama schools find it an abhorrent idea that people shouldn't be told where to stand or anything. Some of the English drama schools are now teaching, with the realisation that a lot of this kind of theatre is happening."

could not put on plays because most of the grant was being spent on administrative expenses. In a series of recommendations to the board, at the time of his attempt to resign in 1985, he wrote:

The £70,000 plus earmarked for overheads is now firmly committed and there is no chance of making any of it available for production in the current year. It will go towards wages of administrators with nothing to administer, and a production manager with no productions, and offices, accounting, insurance, vehicles etc. with no great purpose. . . . I propose that it should be our urgent task to reduce overheads from 60% of our grant to more like 20%, and to liberate the rest of the money for what we should be doing--putting on shows and touring them (*Bone* 106).

The days of the Ford transit van and everybody "mucking in" were long gone and not necessarily for the better.

The structure had grown to the point that it was strangling the work. McGrath felt he could not write or direct because of the overwhelming administrative workload. Even though the grants grew, the company was not actually able to spend more money (and possibly spent even less) on productions because of administrative expenses. They were also forced to plan further and further ahead (three-year plans) for their money. The lack of flexibility in structure and planning inevitably affected the purpose and nature of the work. MacLennan considers the shift from a revolutionary to a reformist mentality as inherent in the process of incorporation which the company underwent. She sees this as

a move in the wrong direction: "We have become the old war horse, not the guerilla" (152).

In 1988, when the company was finally threatened with a complete grant cut, drastic measures were taken to address the Scottish Arts Council's criticisms and to meet its demands. McGrath did resign as artistic director of the company in July of that year.

The evolution of the company from a collective work structure to a highly bureaucratized organization is an instructive case and by no means unique in Britain or elsewhere. The pattern of the success story is a long established one, and although the circumstances are different, 7:84 changed in ways that were similar to Theatre Workshop. In the case of 7:84, there was a need to expand and experiment artistically after the initial success of *The Cheviot*. As this happened, and different areas of work developed (Highland touring, industrial touring, community projects, etc.) there was a need to expand physically and to become a bigger company with more resources. But growth in size usually necessitates the delegation of responsibilities and a stricter division of labour. The increase in grants made some of the expansion possible, but also contributed to the need for a bureaucratized structure. Success and growth had serious implications for the company; they went from being a small group working together to develop and tour

political plays to an administration which employed directors, casts, and crews for its productions. In the case of Theatre Workshop, they were forced to transfer successful productions to the West End in order to survive financially, but the impact on the working methods of the company were similar--the philosophy governing the work was undermined by its success.

Until now I have focused primarily on the internal factors which led to the reorganization of 7:84. Implicit in the discussion has been the role of funding in this process and I have dealt only indirectly with this issue because it warrants a detailed examination.

The Role of the Scottish Arts Council

The hostility towards cultural activity which characterized the eighties under Thatcher affected a whole range of theatre companies--from the subsidized majors to small scale touring and community groups--but left-wing oriented groups were especially hard hit. While many political theatre companies fell under the axe, some did not. By examining the circumstances of particular cases, it is possible to speculate about why some companies were more vulnerable than others. The seventies saw a steady increase in revenue grants for 7:84 Scotland, but the early eighties marked the beginning of a turbulent period in its

relationship with the Scottish Arts Council. The company was threatened with a complete cut in 1988; the problems leading up to this crisis and the nature of the eventual resolution of this particular case point to some of the key factors that determine the financial survival of groups who depend on government subsidies.

The relationship between 7:84 Scotland and the SAC requires close examination for a number of reasons. First, it illustrates the ways in which a funding body can intervene in both the organization and the artistic output of a theatre company. Secondly, the assessments of and attitudes towards 7:84's work reveal the discrepancies which exist between traditional expectations and experimental work. Thirdly, we see, even in the case of an overtly political group like 7:84, the tendency towards self-censorship in a period of conservative retrenchment. Fourthly, the threatened cut in 1988 demonstrates the precariousness of touring companies and raises the larger problem of alternative sources of funding.

The SAC plays a central role in the history of the company because it has been the chief, and often the only, source of funding. Box office revenue was never high for 7:84 because of the size of venues and the economic status of the audiences; village halls and community centres have small seating capacities and the company tried to keep

ticket prices as low and affordable as possible for their audiences. The only other sources of funding have been labour organizations and local authorities. But the amounts were only large enough to supplement budgets or to finance specific projects. For instance, the company received money from Glasgow District Council and Strathclyde RC towards the Clydebuilt season. Occasional touring grants came from the Highland RC, the Highlands and Islands Development Board, Western Isles IC, and organizations such as the Roundhouse Trust. While these contributions were important to making productions and other kinds of projects possible, each grant amounted, almost invariably, to less than 10% of the SAC grant for the given year.⁷

⁷To offer an example, the following is the entry in the Scottish Arts Council Annual Report for 1981/82:

7:84 Theatre Company (Scotland) (touring)
86 performances of three productions, *The Catch*;
Gold in His Boots; and *In Time of Strife*. Total
attendance, 21,501.

Contributions

Scottish Arts Council	
Revenue	£95,000
Equipment	2,300
Transport Subsidy	1,000
Research	<u>600</u>
	98,900

Local Authority

Glasgow DC	<i>towards Clydebuilt season</i>	7,500
Strathclyde RC	<i>towards Clydebuilt season</i>	7,500
Highland RC	<i>touring grant</i>	1,500
Western Isles IC	<i>touring grant</i>	1,000

Income

Fees and Box Office	29,983
---------------------	--------

The company received some support, but not significant in financial terms, from various labour organizations. When 7:84 formed, they approached the head of the STUC (Scottish Trades Union Congress) for support. This body was not funding cultural intervention at that time, but they were helpful in setting up contacts with specific unions who might be willing to promote the company. In an interview, MacLennan informed me that while the STUC never gave them much money (never more than about £50 a year) they showed support by putting on shows for particular occasions and getting a union to buy out a whole night. A major breakthrough in this area came in 1983 when NALGO (National Association of Local Government Officers), a local government union, sponsored 7:84 to do a show as part of their campaign about the Cuts. The result, *On the Pig's Back*, a street show done in collaboration with Wildcat, was a success with its audiences and, according to MacLennan, became a model for subsequent union financing of single issue shows. The SAC Annual Report (1983/84) indicates that NALGO contributed £21,729 to the show and its tour.

The range and amounts of funding sources are important to consider because the figures underscore the extent to which theatre companies depend on subsidies from the Arts Council. 7:84 and Wildcat managed to become more involved with labour organizations than most touring companies, but

the grass roots support--crucial to their political agendas--never translated into significant amounts of money. This was not a new phenomenon; after all the prewar groups had also suffered from the low priority status of cultural matters in labour movement activities. In the case of local authorities, the figures demonstrate a willingness to support and encourage a company like 7:84, but the contributions to building-based reps are considerably higher.⁸ The company's "touring" status undoubtedly worked against its chances of securing larger amounts of local authority funding, since it could not be regarded as rooted in or belonging to a specific city or community.

The dependence on the SAC raises difficult questions related to the tension between accountability on the part of the group receiving grants and the arm's length policy of the funding body--tension which increases with a growth in the size of the grants. There is no doubt that the Arts Council placed growing emphasis on the need for theatre companies to plan and budget efficiently and to look to other sources, mainly business sponsorship, for funding. While the expectations of and conditions set by the Arts

⁸ For the same year listed in the previous note (1981/82), Glasgow DC gave the Citizens' Theatre (seating 793/831) £57,475, and Glasgow Theatre Club (seating 60 in cafe theatre) £15,228.

Council have had serious implications for the work of alternative theatre companies, the SAC will not be presented simply as a villain in the case of 7:84. I will outline the turbulent history of their relationship for the purpose of demonstrating how funding, as a factor external to the company, contributes to the development and structure of a theatre company.

For the company's first production, *The Cheviot*, the SAC was a reluctant sponsor. The initial request for money was turned down on the basis that the show would not work:

They thought Highlanders didn't want to know about the Clearances, the politics of oil and such, and anyway wouldn't pay to see a theatre-show because they didn't go to the theatre. They threw our estimated budget back in our face, and turned down our request for a small guarantee against loss ("Year" xiv).

McGrath appealed the decision armed with a more detailed itinerary, budget and a lengthy explanation of why the audiences would find the show interesting and enjoyable. They reconsidered and a guarantee against loss of £2,000 came through.

There are a few points worth making regarding the actions of the Scottish Arts Council Drama Committee at the time, and the company's attitudes towards them. Despite the frustration of having to justify the work and schedule in detail, McGrath acknowledges that, after coming through with some money, they "have proved more generous ever since"

("Year" xiv). In her account MacLennan elaborates by suggesting that "however hesitant Faulkner [Drama Director of SAC] may have appeared then, his questions were reasonable and legitimate and we were certainly cutting it extremely fine" (47). But even more significant is how the incident demonstrates the difference between the early and later policies of the Arts Council. The money may have come through with only days to spare, but that it was reconsidered and came at all was important in itself: "Under the strictures that TODAY define the Arts Council's operation, that of course would have been the *end* of the story. They would have to have received such a letter about eighteen months before, complete with full estimated income, details of commercial sponsorship, budgets and alternative sources of funding, the full CV of the administrator, the approval of the approved chairman of the board, the approved directors of the board, and its approved finance committee" (47). Likewise the flexibility shown on the part of the SAC when the company shared its grant in order to launch Wildcat on their first tour would not be possible now.

The size of grants grew steadily, but relations between the company and the SAC did not get hostile until

the eighties.⁹ The company met funding conditions by having a board of directors, but had remained relatively free in choosing its members. And the shift to a management structure, while necessitated by a lack of funds to pay a company year round, was due also to the internal factors outlined above. For theatre companies in general, the signs came gradually, but forcefully, indicating that the conservative victory of 1979 would have serious implications for the arts in the eighties.

7:84 took some measures to insure its own survival. McGrath claims that among the strategies taken to cope with the Thatcherite 80s, the company planned to "soft-pedal on the agitational politics and to expose more gently the realities of the way class works in our society" (*Bone* 66). He uses the example of *Swings and Roundabouts*, written and produced in 1980 which he describes as "conceived as a

⁹To give an indication of the money received by 7:84 after the guarantee against loss for *The Cheviot* tour and the threat of a complete cut in 1988, the following figures are the SAC contribution in each year, as stated in the Annual Reports:

1973/74	£ 8,800	1981/82	£ 98,900
1974/75	£16,188	1982/83	£120,145
1975/76	£15,980	1983/84	£137,290
1976/77	£44,785	1984/85	£125,880
1977/78	£48,366	1985/86	£121,000
1979/80	£11,000	1986/87	£125,000
1980/81	£50,000	1987/88	£134,591

variant on Noel Coward's *Private Lives*" and absent from it was the "7:84 explicit political line" (Scene 67). This tendency towards narrative and away from polemic can be traced in the Highland shows of the 80s as well. What this amounts to, and is perhaps surprising in the history of this particular group, is self-censorship. In addition, it is possible that the increasing presence of plays by authors other than McGrath and the revival of popular classics may have been part of an overall attempt to expand the company's work and demonstrate its versatility.

Another of the strategies McGrath outlines is the establishment of a popular theatre base, to be used as a teaching centre, a workshop and rehearsal space. There would be obvious practical advantages to having such a base and McGrath considered all of the strategies as ways of "laying some foundations for the future". He is never explicit about the issue of the base as an insurance policy for the future, but MacLennan admitted to me, in 1988 when there was a prospect for a base in Glasgow: "I think we all feel now a physical presence of that kind will make us less vulnerable, given the strong emphasis at the moment on centralizing everything . . . it is much more difficult to cut a building than something that moves from place to place". They were by no means willing to give up the touring, but financing a base would necessarily interfere with the amount of touring

they could do.

Both of these strategies--to soft pedal the politics and find a base--indicate that they felt vulnerable enough to compromise some of their fundamental policies in the interests of remaining in operation. They also point to what Eugene van Erven terms as an "expand-or-perish" strategy which he regards, writing in 1985, as a general trend in popular political theatre in Great Britain and elsewhere (114).

Although they showed these signs of "playing it safe", 7:84 jeopardized its survival in a more serious way by creating a deficit in the early eighties. The risks involved in running deficits are clearly outlined by Giles Havergal of the Citizens Theatre who believes:

It is all too easy to be shut down because of bad management--oh, you know, they're artistic and they can't add up. We would never be so pathetic. If you balance your books, you buy freedom and you silence all criticism. I absolutely refuse to present the board with the only problem that really matters, which is a deficit (Coveney 116).

The relentless balancing of books at the Citizens has been crucial to its survival and continued support, even though the productions have been adventurous and controversial.

The serious financial and administrative problems began for 7:84 after the Clydebuilt season. The season was a critical success (particularly *Men Should Weep* guest directed by Havergal) but a financial disaster in that they

overspent considerably. In the following year, 1983, the company's administrative reputation was further damaged by the failure of *Women in Power*. The play was an adaptation by McGrath of Aristophanes for what was to be a new branch of the company called General Gathering, as part of an attempt to recapture popular theatre of the past. 7:84 requested additional funds from SAC in order to get the venture off the ground and, according to McGrath, a small contribution came from the Official Edinburgh Festival under John Drummond, where the play was scheduled to open (*Bone* 96). The production was not only a disappointing work experience for McGrath who adapted and directed the play and MacLennan who performed in it, but the final product was such a disaster (the reviews being "mostly vitriolic"), that it was taken off almost immediately (everyone being paid their fees) because they risked losing too much money if they went through with the tour (McGrath, *Bone* 103). The decision to cancel the tour may have been a sound decision in artistic and financial terms, but it amounted to an admission of failure, and, coming on the heel of the deficit created by Clydebuilt, this did not stand them in good stead with the SAC.

MacLennan believes that the cancelling of *Women in Power* was "decisive for the future funding and confidence of the company" (140). Without offering specific details, she

suggests:

The Scottish Arts Council made it clear that we had had our *one* chance to expand, and were pleased to let us know we had failed. They made it quite clear that we would get no more money for such developments. Within a year John had offered to resign--he felt unable to work in the atmosphere that had been created (144).

The slight decrease in the size of total contributions from SAC in the two years following bears this out. The situation experienced at this stage of the company's history raises difficult questions about experimentation and the consequences of failure. From a strictly financial point of view, it is possible to argue against giving additional or even continued funding to a company which shows signs of bad management and artistic failure when there are many up and coming (and cheaper!) new groups who are screaming for money--assuming the money would be redirected. On the other hand, it is virtually impossible for any company to sustain "success", particularly when it attempts to explore new territory. MacLennan, writing about this period, laments "For every two or three mediocre productions that the average rep slips on and off unnoticed or poorly attended, our every show must be a winner" (148).

If their own shrinking funds and stand still grants were not evidence enough of impending doom, the cut to 7:84 England in 1985 was. It came as a sudden, but decisive blow to the English company which was receiving £92,500 at the

time of the cut. This was not an isolated move on the part of the Arts Council, as MacLennan explains: "In what they described as 'a planning exercise for the decade' and with considerable opposition both within and without the Arts Council, they halved the money for books and withdrew money from thirty-three clients, including five music festivals, two orchestras, fifteen companies and four touring companies, out of which two were clearly politically oppositional--Roland Muldoon's CAST, and 7:84 England" (146).

With little time available, the English company, with the help of the Scottish 7:84 (McGrath and MacLennan being active members of the board) and a wide range of supporters, launched an appeal. McGrath describes the response to the appeal: "Our record was clearly one of very high standards in all areas, the response of the public was overwhelming, and the support from the trades unions, the Labour Party, theatre and community centres, was unequivocal" (*Bone* 38). Some of the more notable supporters included Neil Kinnock, Norman Willis (TUC), and Ken Livingstone (GLC). In an interview at the time of the crisis, McGrath noted the significance of this support in terms of the inroads political theatre had made: "The attack on the English 7:84 . . . is being met by a fantastic audience support, from the whole Labour party, and trade unions, and thousands of

people from the working-class . . . in 1968, '70, when we began, those people would never have supported theatre in such a way. And that is not only because of us but of the whole movement trying to engage with people on their own turf" (Van Erven 119). In spite of all the support, the appeal was turned down.

The axing of 7:84 England's grant demonstrated how swiftly the end could come and the Arts Council even thwarted attempts they made at setting up shop elsewhere. When the company tried to take advantage of funds which had been diverted to encourage arts provision in the regions, McGrath claims that "the offer made by Merseyside Arts, Knowlesly Council and St Helen's Council to provide us with a theatre and half of our subsidy, had to be turned down when the Arts Council refused them permission to use the funds now made available to them to help 7:84" (*Bone* 38). The cut was seen, by those involved as well as by commentators, as politically motivated. The Scottish Arts Council had a reputation for being more progressive in its policies and MacLennan recalls the general reactions in Scotland: "Most people in Scotland seemed to feel, 'Oh, it won't happen here--things are different here. Scotland is a socialist country. People won't take it'" (148).

The complacency did not last long and in the following year 7:84 Scotland ran a deficit which they were asked to

clear and failed to do so. McGrath claims this was one of the main reasons for the threatened cut in 1988. He recounts: "the finances in 86/87 began to go desperately wrong, and left a deficit that gave the SAC their chance: clear it, in one year, or we'll cut you. Although in 87/88 we reduced it by nearly £16,000 it was not cleared" (*Bone* 124). News came in March 1988 that the company was assured of only one year's funding after which there would be a complete withdrawal of revenue. This time the cut was not part of a sweeping series of cuts and the SAC must have anticipated the shock, or at least surprise, it would create because, according to MacLennan, who thought it suspicious at the time, the company was asked "*not to divulge the contents* [of the letter] *until after their press conference two days later*" (119)

The company began to prepare an appeal and, in the mean time, began to address the main areas of criticism as presented by SAC. At a press conference in Glasgow, May 16, 1988, McGrath made it clear, that given that the total withdrawal of funding would mean the demise of 7:84, they would do what they could to satisfy the requirements of the Drama Committee of SAC because they wanted to survive. There were three main areas of criticism: the constitution of the board of directors, the administration, and the artistic quality of their work.

The criticisms made of the board of directors were concerned specifically with the constitution of this body. This was not a new problem for 7:84 which had been required to have a board by 1975 and had been under pressure from SAC on previous occasions to alter its composition. The history of the board deserves a brief examination because it is one of the crucial means through which the policies and running of theatre companies can be controlled or at least modified. Boards of directors are standard features of most theatre companies subsidized by the Arts Council and it is a form of management adopted from the profit-distributing/corporate sector (Brydon 42). The purpose of these bodies--usually made up of representatives from local authorities and local business, as well as professionals and supporters--is to oversee, advise and be accountable for the general management and operations of the company (i.e. budgets, general policy, seat pricing, and negotiations with all funding bodies, including the Arts Council) as well as approving the artistic director's proposals for play selection, personnel decisions and production planning (Brydon 43). The power of boards and the potential tension between their financial priorities and a theatre company's artistic aims are sources of conflict for many companies, in Britain and elsewhere.

The relationship between 7:84 and its board was a

smooth one throughout the seventies. This is not surprising given that McGrath chaired the board (making conflict with the artistic director of the company unlikely), and several other company members (including Elizabeth MacLennan, David MacLennan, Feri Lean, and Dolina MacLennan) were also representatives on the board. There were also members from a variety of sectors: "Bill Speirs of the STUC was a member, as were Lord McCluskey, elevated by Labour when they needed a Lord Advocate; Mabel Skinner, indomitable fighter and councillor from Inverness; Bob Tait, writer and education college lecturer from Aberdeen; Tom Laurie, our old friend and promoter from Cumbernauld" (MacLennan 90). The list goes on. But there was a deliberate strategy underlying the composition of the board. According to McGrath, it became a way of "bringing together representatives from the company to oversee the company's activities and to plan, and we added to them representatives for the audience (people who booked us from all over Scotland). So the idea of the board was not, what they're trying to turn it into now which is a capitalist, entrepreneurial board of profit makers maximizing the profits, but was in fact a way for the two groups most intimately involved with the work of the company (the performing and technical people and the audience) to meet, talk, plan, criticize, to have input into what the bureaucratic hierarchy was actually up to" ("Interview").

The pressure from the SAC to make changes to the board began in 1985 when administrative problems were becoming overwhelming. McGrath states that the SAC forced him to make an appointment to the board; someone he describes as "a whizz-kid, a businessman, who ran a successful medium-sized concern, mostly selling motor-bikes to teenagers" (*Bone* 109). He chaired the Finance Committee and under further pressure, was made Chairman of the Board. The source of conflict between him and McGrath becomes clear in McGrath's assessment: "He applied the rules for making profit from motor-bikes to the making of socialist theatre. Within a year he had allowed the SAC to take our annual grant away, after a series of meetings with them at which I was not allowed to be present" (*Bone* 109). McGrath admits that he finds it difficult to be objective about these events, but the account reveals some of the ways in which boards can be used by funding bodies as ways of intervening in the planning and output of theatre companies.

The funding crisis in 1988 prompted further changes. By this point the "whizz-kid" had resigned and was replaced by Bill Speirs, Assistant General Secretary of the STUC. In a press conference at the time McGrath stated:

the Arts Council decided . . . that the people participating in the company were not objective enough and we have increased the number of people from outside the company to about sixty percent of the board. Clearly this is still not enough. The Arts Council thinks of it as not objective

enough and does not have business-oriented people . . . and requires us to do something drastic about that.

The company had little choice but to comply and, at the same press conference, McGrath announced that they were "in the process of removing all the creative personnel from the board . . . and bringing in people with accountancy, business management, and other associated skills, including PR". Writing about the same events after his resignation, McGrath's tone is vitriolic:

The final straw was that I was supposed to write to people . . . and ask them [long standing supporters and members of the board] to leave the Board now, to make way for businessman, lawyers, accountants, PR men, fund-raisers and people who were not so supportive politically--people who were, in the immortal words of the SAC--'objective'. This stuck in my throat. . . . I pointed out that this condition was blatant political interference in the policy-making body of the company. They had nothing to say, shrugged their shoulders. . . . They of course had absolute power over our resources (*Bone 111*).

The company's financial problems left it open and vulnerable to this kind of external interference.

Closely related to this issue is the second area of criticism presented by the SAC in the threatened cut. In this case, the SAC attacked the company's administration. This criticism was more difficult to explain away and at the press conference McGrath admitted "we have to agree that 86/87 were very dodgy years for the company and we take those criticisms very seriously." He also introduced the

solution to this problem and response to the criticism in the form of a new administrator/general manager, Jo Beddoe, who had rescued the Liverpool Playhouse and Royal Court from similar disastrous situations. Writing later, he recalls with some resentment having to break the company's 17-year-old equal pay policy to hire this "tough, ruthless, administrator . . . to come in and rescue the company, at a salary more than twice that of everyone else" (*Bone* 110).

Management and administrative problems are easily identified and difficult to deny. Clearly deficits, cancelled tours, and bad book keeping will not be rewarded, particularly by an Arts Council which increasingly advocates efficiency and self-sufficiency. But the third area of criticism involved a more contentious issue, that of the artistic quality of the 7:84's work. They were criticized specifically for "the variable quality" of their work. McGrath's responded to this at the press conference: "While we would agree with them that our quality has varied, I think that possibly the National Theatre of Great Britain would also agree its quality has varied without suffering the total withdrawal of its grant". He also admitted in an interview that the smaller scale industrial tours had not been as good as they could be over the last four to five years. One of these was a play that Ena Lamont Stewart (aged 74) finished for them; the show was called *High Places* and

dealt with moving people out of their old communities and into tower blocks. McGrath claims "It was a nice idea that didn't come off and that was a problem" ("Interview").

While it is possible to point to particular productions which were less successful than others, the issue of artistic quality and how it is assessed is complex in the case of popular political theatre groups like 7:84. The single biggest problem is the question of the criteria used to assess the brand of "excellence" required by the Arts Council. These shows/productions cannot, or at least should not, be judged on the same basis as more conventional forms of literary drama. I will examine the principles on which the plays are based and how McGrath arrived at them in the next section, but it is important to point out that there was a deliberate strategy behind the experiments with popular forms in 7:84's work and these were not always understood or accepted by critics and assessors. McGrath claims: "They think I am trying to write Ibsen and failing!" ("Interview").

McGrath points to the class orientation and cultural values/biases of some of the key people on the SAC Drama Committee as an explanation for the views taken of his work. He cites specific examples such as one member who assumed that writing for working-class audiences involved writing "down" and the chairman of the committee who, in defending

the importance of an international repertoire, wrote: "To declare my prejudices at the outset, I believe that what I term, facetiously, the haggis hunt for the great new Scottish play has been the bugbear of the development of the theatre in Scotland" (*Bone* 125-26). For all that McGrath's attacks may seem self-interested, it is possible to see how difficult it might be to impress upon traditional critics and academics the value of plays which use popular forms of entertainment to deal with the events and issues that effect the lives of particular groups of people in Scotland. The focus on community and the "local" conflicts with the universal and international; one is associated with social work and the other with great art. This split leads to an endless struggle on the part of figures like McGrath to explain and justify their work in order to receive funding, at times expending more energy and time on paper wars than creating theatre.

The area of work that seemed to prompt the most negative reactions was the Highland touring. One reason may be how expensive it is to tour shows in the Highlands and islands and McGrath has always insisted on bringing quality productions to those areas. MacLennan recalls the SAC's response to the tours of *The Albannach* (1985): "At the end of the year the Scottish Arts Council drama officer of the time said: 'You took a cast of eleven on a Highland tour. You

must be out of your mind'" (148). This was the area of the company's work that McGrath and MacLennan were most devoted to and felt was the most misunderstood by critics and commentators. They had spent roughly fifteen years creating theatre for these communities and had learned through trial and error what worked and what did not. The SAC seemed to be more in favour of the large scale Mayfest productions which David Hayman had been directing. The shows were big, flashy, highly stylized and very popular.¹⁰ Perhaps even more distressing for McGrath was that Hayman did not grasp the cultural distinctiveness of rural Scotland: "As my successor as Artistic Director of 7:84 said, if they enjoy a show in Glasgow, why should they 'be denied' that show in the Hebrides? There is a very long answer to that question" (*Bone* 128).

The irony in this case is that the company's fame rests on the innovative style of the Highland shows, as MacLennan pointed out, in the question period at the press conference: "in other parts of the world the work which is

¹⁰At the time of the funding crisis, Hayman's production of *No Mean City* sold out for its run at the King's Theatre in Glasgow and the demand was great enough that they brought it back to Citizens for a three week run. The popularity of these productions (*No Mean City*, *The Gorbals Story*) was to a large extent due to the fact that they were based on well known accounts of Glasgow life.

always asked for is the work which, normally here, goes to what you call outlying parts because that is what they see as outstandingly different from other kinds of theatre". Two examples they offered were the productions of *The Albannach* in Toronto, and *There is a Happy Land* in the Berliner Ensemble; both received tremendous responses from audiences and critics. It is interesting to note that the funding crisis prompted responses not only from communities, schools, and labour organizations in Scotland, but also internationally: "we have had strong letters of support from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, a particularly pungent one from Santiago, Chile from a lady who writes to the Scottish Arts Council asking them not to follow in the steps of General Pinochet".

But one of the most poignant letters of support, given the history of attempts at popular political theatre in Britain, came from Joan Littlewood. It is of particular relevance in the context of this study and highlights the consequences of clashing artistic values. It is worth quoting in full:

16 May 1988

Dear Sirs,

So what is wrong with 7:84 now? Too good? Too bad? Or just not orthodox? I passed my working life in the UK to the accompaniment of noises from a long line of Arts Council directors telling me my work wouldn't do for them. The truth being that they would have liked to see Theatre Workshop in hell since it challenged all the standards they held high.

I know enough of John McGrath's work to suspect that 7:84 is in the same boat. One expects mediocrity from your London Branch. I would have been happy to know that Scotland had produced something better by now.
Yours faithfully,
Joan Littlewood (MacLennan 161-62).

The support received at the time indicated how well regarded the company's work was within Scotland and elsewhere. The appeal was eventually successful, but how much it depended on the changes made to address the criticisms of the SAC, the outside support, or McGrath's resignation, is difficult to determine.

At the time of the threatened cut there were many (sympathetic and otherwise) who believed the cut was a gesture directed more at McGrath than at the company. That McGrath was considered a thorn in the side of the Arts Council, political parties, and different levels of government was generally accepted, given how openly critical his stance within and outside the theatre has always been. He even notes the inclusion of his name on the blacklist of people who are "dangerous to employ" issued by the Economic League and distributed to employers in England (*Bone* 77). In June 1988, MacLennan writes: "John is now thinking perhaps 7:84 would stand a better chance of survival without him as artistic director, given all the hostility in the arts establishment and the caution within the company itself" (163).

There was growing opposition to McGrath within the company and board that became evident in the lack of commitment to his plans for *Border Warfare* (a large scale show which had been planned for the following year) and in the lack of consultation concerning major decisions such as the company's move to Glasgow. The decisive moment came at a board meeting when John Haswell, associate artistic director, announced his own resignation and called for McGrath's. According to MacLennan, David MacLennan proposed a vote of confidence to confirm support for McGrath's continuation as artistic director (seconded by Linda MacKenney), but the chair recommended dropping it (164). The ensuing "silence" was indication enough of the lack of support. McGrath officially resigned in July 1988, stepping down in favour of David Hayman as artistic director. By August, Hayman had turned down *Border Warfare* and redirected the money earmarked for McGrath's Highland project--McGrath had been eased out of management and artistic policy decisions.¹¹

¹¹It was clear in an interview I did with David Hayman in May 1988 that he and McGrath had already discussed the possibility of McGrath stepping down and Hayman taking over as artistic director. But the plans included a continuation of the working relationship, specifically between Hayman and 7:84, and McGrath and his company Freeway Films. MacLennan argues that Hayman became less receptive to McGrath's work as he assumed a permanent position in the company.

In his resignation letter, presented to the board and published in the *Scotsman*, McGrath made it clear that he believed the threat to cut 7:84 had been "political". Sir Alan Peacock, Chairman of the SAC, described the suggestion as "evil nonsense". Michael Coveney claims: From the outside, this [political disapproval] looked unlikely, given the high esteem in which McGrath as an artist continued to be held, and the continuing uncompromised left-wing stance of the other groups" (206). Though it is difficult--from the outside--to determine whether or not there were ulterior motives on the part of the SAC in threatening to cut 7:84, the circumstances surrounding the appeal and the actual renewal of funding seem to lend some credence to McGrath's views.

While it is only possible to speculate about the SAC's motives, the lack of internal support on the part of the company and the board for McGrath made itself clear. There were no mass resignations or protests; in the end, there seemed to be very little support or interest in keeping him and this facilitated the transition which was initiated by the threatened cut. In my own conversations with people involved with the company at the time, many felt personal animosity towards McGrath and his reputation was one of being a very difficult person to work with, unlike Hayman who was already attracting a coterie of actors who were keen

to work with him. Had there been stronger internal rallying around McGrath, the funding crisis may perhaps have had a different outcome.

According to MacLennan, in August 1988 the company was informed by the SAC Drama Officer that they were prepared to hear the appeal, but insisted on seeing two more shows before making a final decision about renewal of funds (178). She describes the actual appeal document, penned by the "New Brooms":

It has already gone in to the SAC [writing November 28, 1988]. It seemed flimsy, mostly packaging. The actual shows on offer, pretty conventional. Safe. No plans for Mayfest. None for 1990. Strange for a Glasgow-based company. . . . The tone of the document is placatory, anxious to appease. The proposed Highland tour feels like tokenism. A revival of the *The Sash*--a hit of the 70s about religious bigotry in Glasgow--seems not to be tackling the late 80s with too much rigour (191).

One might not expect a generous response from MacLennan under the circumstances, but her assessment of the appeal document indicates how differently the new management was handling their relationship with the SAC. Significantly, by January 1989, 7:84's grant was reinstated for a probationary two-year period with an increase and an allowance for new writing. MacLennan notes that the decision was made before any of the performances or shows which had been required by the SAC. She also quotes McGrath as saying, "It begins to look rather personal" (193).

The SAC described 7:84 as a "new" company and indeed it was just that:

Letters are being sent to all our supporters by the SAC proclaiming their support for the New 7:84, with New Artistic Director, New Policy, New Board and New Everything, and Peacock's letter concluded: 'I hope that you will find the outcome a satisfactory one and will give 7:84 theatre company your continued support in the coming years' (MacLennan 193).

While the new management and board had had a short time to demonstrate that they could turn the running of the company around, it is surprising that the SAC would accept a new artistic policy without waiting to assess the "artistic quality" of the new company's work. What was quite clear was that the artistic policy would be different from that of the "old" 7:84.

David Hayman was perhaps the key to understanding the SAC's new enthusiasm. He was keen on bringing the Highland and small-scale industrial tours up to higher standards--he had agreed with the SAC's criticisms of the artistic quality of the company's work. Hayman, a proclaimed socialist, also planned a different approach to the actual content of future work, distinguishing his productions from political theatre in the McGrath mode:

As artistic director of 7:84 he claims to produce subtler plays than did John McGrath and intends to tackle the subject of the Scots working-class hero who sells out. . . . That is a paradigm of the Scots condition. We always fall at the last hurdle, and I want to do something about that.

McGrath wouldn't touch the subject. He was always putting political dogma and statements on the stage, rather than investigating the personal political angle' (Coveney 276).

This revisionist tendency is not uncommon in left wing movements. While McGrath did investigate the personal political angle in many of his plays, it is true that he was more concerned--quite deliberately--to depict and recount victories rather than failures.

Not all of 7:84's supporters were in agreement with the new direction the company was taking. Before the appeal was submitted, Linda MacKenney resigned from the board and outlined her reasons in a letter:

I have been very unhappy with the way in which the board and the office have abandoned 7:84's artistic policy. . . . It seems to me that the relationship between 7:84 and the SAC is about to undergo a massive change with the introduction of new administrative structures which will bring 7:84 into line with bourgeois theatres and facilitate greater Arts Council control of the company. It further seems to me that even before those structures have been introduced, there have been a number of compromises *vis à vis* our artistic and political stance . . . I see the adjustments which 7:84 is making as an unacceptable compromise with the authorities, a compromise against the long-term interests of popular theatre in Scotland (MacLennan 185).

There was also skepticism following the renewal of the grant. Writer Adrian Mitchell responded to the SAC's announcement concerning the new company and in a letter explained:

I don't understand how you can say that the

company has responded in a most positive way [a statement by Peacock in the SAC press release] when its artistic director, John McGrath, who with his own energy and talent and funds was the initiator and creator of 7:84, has resigned in disgust. . . . Now the new 7:84 you speak of may well become an important part of theatre in Scotland as you suggest and I hope it does. But I don't think you can expect those who have supported 7:84 in the past to be interested until we know what they're going to do, where they're going to do it, how they're going to do it and who they're going to do it for (MacLennan 193).

If the appeal document was as "flimsy" as MacLennan suggests and the justification for renewal as vague as Mitchell suggests, one must wonder what accounted for the SAC's enthusiasm. Their demands, stated and perhaps unstated, had obviously been met.

After the restructuring and restaffing of the company and the board, 7:84 had little more than its name in common with the original group.¹² It is for this reason that I will take the case study of the company only as far as 1988-89. With regard to the role of the SAC in the history of the company, its power to restructure and redefine the theatre group had been fully demonstrated. It could take advantage of the company's dependence on subsidy by presenting an

¹²The posters for the "new" 7:84's first production omitted for the first time the logo "7 per cent of of the population of this country own 84 per cent of the wealth" and MacLennan queries whether this was "ominous or mindless?" (192)

ultimatum which called for drastic changes--what choice was there but to comply? This helps to explain the increasing attempts in recent years to seek alternative sources of funding. It also begs the question about the security offered by the presence of a physical base; would 7:84 have been threatened with a total withdrawal of revenue if it had been a building-based company?¹³

The organizational and funding history of 7:84 provides an important illustration of the more insidious ways in which the Arts Council can interfere in the policy making of a theatre company. It is able to reward, show disapproval, or inhibit growth of groups through increased, decreased, and stand still grants as well as the complete withdrawal of revenue. It has the power to influence the artistic policy and the practices of a company through the mechanisms of boards of directors, administrative requirements, and increasing long term planning in both financial and artistic terms. As long as a theatre company depends almost exclusively on government subsidy for its

¹³ While it was never stated as such, the new company's move to a Glasgow base, with an accompanying district council grant, may have made the prospect of renewed funding a more attractive prospect for the SAC. As in the case of the Citizens and other regional theatres, the Arts Council can, over time, devolve financial responsibility to regional and district councils for the maintenance and support of such companies.

survival, the Arts Council is in a position to call the shots. The notion of an arm's length policy exists more in theory than in practice.

It remains to be said that 7:84 made itself particularly vulnerable to this kind of interference through inadequate management. The timing of their mistakes was also crucial. Some of the more ambitious projects which resulted in deficits and cancelled tours came in the eighties, a period in which all the arts in Britain could be said to be under siege. Ironically the Clydebuilt season and the production of *Women in Power* with General Gathering could be seen as part of an "expand-or-perish" policy for the eighties. This raises the problem of whether or not it is possible to experiment and take risks in theatre work under the present circumstances. MacLennan poses this question:

I could see the shape of things to come in August '85-- were we to continue to make theatre or to satisfy the changing demands of our paymaster? Was it possible to remain oppositional and do that? Probably not (160).

Fortunately some companies have managed to remain adventurous and to survive. Within Scotland, the Citizens under Havergal and Prowse has continued to mount artistically controversial productions and Coveney attributes this to "its unqualified commitment to a community [district council funding is contingent on this], its belief in its own work, and its exceptional standards of

managerial competence" (283). Wildcat, an overtly political group in the tradition of 7:84, is also thriving. In pointing to the differences underpinning the two companies, David MacLennan claims that "Wildcat . . . offered entertainment and something to think about, and was less concerned about being a solely working-class theatre" (Cameron xiv). It was Wildcat who eventually co-produced McGrath's *Border Warfare*.

Perhaps the political groups which have survived have been more procedurally conformist, in organizational and financial terms. But another factor which influences continued support from the Arts Council is the way in which a company defines itself and its audience. McGrath points to groups still working in Britain (and which continue to be funded) such as Wildcat, Monstrous Regiment, Welfare State, and the variety of local and young people's theatre companies (*Bone* 136). It is interesting to note that while 7:84 was still defining its audience in terms of social class (i.e. targeting working-class audiences), these other groups were targeting a broader, more populist base, even those committed to providing theatre for specific regions.¹⁴

¹⁴A few examples from the promotional materials distributed by these companies will help to illustrate this point. Wildcat's aim is "to bring professional music theatre of a high standard, to as wide an audience as possible".

The fact that their policies are so inclusive or that some of them fulfill needs in specific geographical areas may influence their chances of being subsidized. That McGrath has continued to define his work in terms of social class may have worked to his and the company's disadvantage--"working-class" is not, after all, a term or category that is easily agreed upon. But the issue of class is central to McGrath's theatre practice and I will turn to a more detailed account of this in the following section.

Borderline, while founded in order to tour theatre in Ayrshire, claims to "present vital and exuberant theatre which is accessible to any member of the public" and has "a policy of choosing plays with a genuinely popular appeal". Hull Truck, which presents theatre mainly in Hull and the region, is also "committed to building new audiences and aims to present new, popular, entertaining and accessible theatre of the very highest standards of performance and production." Even Monstrous Regiment does not target an exclusively female/feminist audience; they aim "to present challenging, entertainment of the highest standard, placing women's experience--past, present, and future--at the centre of the stage."

2. MAKING SOCIALIST THEATRE: THE THEORY

In the following section I will shift from a discussion of process to one of product. After having considered the history of 7:84's structure and organization as a theatre company, it is important to examine some of the work it produced and how it was received. This necessarily entails an account of McGrath's own theories underlying the production of socialist theatre because most of the shows performed by the company in the 70s, and to a lesser extent in the 80s, were written by McGrath. Even when the plays were not actually written by McGrath, the factors which influenced the choice of plays, production styles, and touring circuits were part and parcel of the company approach which he was largely responsible for shaping.

There has always been a certain degree of controversy surrounding McGrath as a practitioner and a writer. Given how vocal and opinionated a figure he is, this is perhaps not surprising. He has not only openly criticized practices of the state, and bodies such as the Arts Council, but also other sectors of the British theatre, particularly the major subsidized companies. While his denunciation of individuals and institutions in the British mainstream has made some skeptical and others antagonistic, his work in the field of popular political theatre is recognized and admired inside and outside of the U.K. Whether one agrees with McGrath or

not, or finds his polemical style offensive, the importance of his contribution to the debates about theatre in the last twenty years must be acknowledged. The impact of his plays and writings can be gauged by the wide variety of contexts in which they are discussed, both favourably and critically.

One of the features which distinguishes McGrath's career is the shift from mainstream work to alternative theatre, reversing the direction taken by other political dramatists, such as David Hare and Howard Brenton, who left the fringe to accept opportunities to work in the "majors". McGrath wrote and directed scripts for productions at Oxford University, the Royal Court, the Liverpool Everyman, BBC Television, and the American film industry before forming 7:84. In an interview in 1975, when asked what he would do if the National Theatre were to commission a play from him, he claimed, "I would run twenty-five miles. . . . I'd rather have a bad night in Bootle" ("Bootle" 54). Although he has continued to write and direct films for television and cinema, as of yet he has not done a play for a major rep.

McGrath's involvement with 7:84 represented a significant departure from his earlier work in terms of context, but his experiments with forms and styles in the different media for different audiences informed his approach to political theatre. While McGrath's film writing helped to finance his early years with 7:84, it also taught

him a great deal about the techniques of mass entertainment. He claims to have learned about getting pace and movement into a piece of theatre, through having his film scripts butchered ("Bootle" 45, *Good* 31) Even closer to the 7:84 plays were his attempts at "radical regional theater" at the Liverpool Everyman in the early seventies.¹⁵ Here McGrath turned his attention to community-based theatre and writing for working-class audiences. In two of the Liverpool plays, *Soft or a Girl?* and *Fish in the Sea*, McGrath began to explore the use of songs, comedy, local material, and plots centred around families and romantic love. The plays drew large audiences from whom McGrath claims to have learned a great deal about pushing certain forms to their limits ("Bootle" 51). The Liverpool plays coincided with the first years of 7:84 England and the formal experiments were important in shaping the more strongly political plays McGrath went on to write for both 7:84 companies.

Although McGrath began by working in different media and experimenting with a variety of forms, his plays have always been concerned with the issue of social class. The

¹⁵Van Erven uses "radical regional theater" to describe work which "speaks to the concerns of a regional working-class audience in its own idiom" and sees McGrath's work with 7:84 as a strengthening of his "radical regional commitment" ("14 Years" 108).

emphasis on class, and by implication the class struggle, is central to understanding McGrath's politics and writing. By 1979, in his Cambridge lectures, he had begun to articulate and systematically theorize both his own political position as well as the relationship between class and art in more general terms. After noting the necessity of declaring, or at least recognizing, one's political position in any discussion of how reality is mediated, McGrath claims:

A minimal statement of my own position might be summarised as follows: ours is a class society, and, notwithstanding the welfare state, nationalisation, the TUC and the Labour Party, the class which owns, controls or manages private capital and state capital is a coherent social entity with immense power; the British state and its institutions are organized in the interests of that ruling class, which is supported in its position of power by intermediate classes dependent upon the social order it creates for their well-being and their superiority over the working class, i.e. the middle and professional classes, and the petty bourgeoisie; and all these classes combine to reproduce this system because it works in their interest, and the most effective way to reproduce the system is to create an overpowering ideology which penetrates all areas of the individual consciousness, in order to legitimate class rule and maintain it. I see the bourgeois theatre in all its forms as part of that legitimating ideology. In opposition there are sections of, or individuals within, all the above groups and classes: they are, however, powerless without the main opposition group, those who are in fact exploited,--economically, physically, medically, culturally, socially--the much maligned working class (*Good* 20).

The remedy or the hope for a classless society lies in the

rise to power of the working-class and this depends on the "social, political and cultural development of the working-class towards maturity and hegemony" (*Good* 21). It is in this development or empowerment of the working-class that McGrath sees an important role for socialist theatre.

McGrath is very specific in his use of the term "socialist" theatre and distinguishes it from "anarchist" and "social democratic" brands of political theatre. Unlike the nihilism of anarchist theatre and the reformist tendencies of social democratic theatre, socialist theatre, according to McGrath, is "A theatre that sees the establishment of socialism, not as the creation of a utopia or the end of the dialectic of history, but as another step towards the realization of the full potential of every individual human life during the short time that every individual has to live" ("Theory" 43). The company had a specific role to play in this process and in stating the aims of 7:84 Scotland in the programme notes for *The Cheviot*, he explains that it "tries to present in its work a socialist perspective on our society, and to indicate socialist alternatives to the capitalist system that dominates all our lives today".

McGrath was not interested in developing plays which were evasive, obscure, or socialist merely in sentiment, but ones which offered straight forward political analysis of

social/economic problems and posited socialist solutions. In the programme notes to *The Cheviot* he explains:

The play tries to show why the tragedies of the past happened: because the forces of capitalism were stronger than the organisation of the people. It tries to show that the future is not pre-determined, that there are alternatives, and it is the responsibility of everyone to fight and agitate for the alternative which is going to benefit the people of the Highlands . . . Socialism, and the planned exploitation of natural resources for the benefit of all humanity, is the alternative the play calls for. Not the "socialism" that merely begs concessions from capitalism, but the kind that involves every individual in the creation of the future he or she wants.

The dialectical, agitational nature of the work distinguishes it from plays which are considered political simply because they are informed by left-wing ideas or attitudes. This is a theatre of praxis.

In accounting for the difference between approaches to political theatre, Keith Peacock makes a useful distinction between Marxism as a theory and Socialism as a morality:

Socialism, which inspired the writings of Arnold Wesker and the majority of left-wing British dramatists who succeeded him, was a *morality* based upon the concept of egalitarianism. Marxism (often described as 'revolutionary socialism' in order not to alienate the audience by its potential association with Soviet Russia) in the work of John McGrath and many of the political theatre groups of the 1970s, was, however, a politico-economic *theory* by which, it was believed, egalitarianism might be achieved in practice ("Fact" 16).

The political distinction translates into formal and stylistic differences and Peacock links the Marxist approach to agit-prop and the other to social realism. To illustrate what he refers to as the aesthetic results of this dichotomy, he uses McGrath's *The Cheviot* and Hare's *Plenty*. What is most important about Peacock's analysis is his recognition of the differences between the contexts and audiences for which these plays were written. He explains: "It is my intention to examine . . . in what manner and how successfully the form of each play reflects its author's political attitude and aims, how the dramatist's aesthetic acknowledgement of his audience's theatrical expectations affects that form, as well as the contribution and limitations offered by the environment for which they were intended" ("Fact" 17).

The issue of form, as it relates to his Marxist politics, is at the centre of McGrath's theory and practice. The relationship between his political views and his approach to theatre are inextricable; given the class struggle and the importance of the working-class in bringing it to an end, if theatre is to play a role in strengthening the working-class, it must be created and presented in a way that is meaningful for that audience. McGrath believes the mistake that is too often made is to assume that the theatrical values and expectations of one class (i.e. the

middle-class) are the same as those of another class (i.e. the working-class). The other problem is to assume "that in order to change the meaning or class-orientation of theatre, all you need to do is to change the content of *some* of what happens on the stage" (*Good* 7).¹⁶ McGrath objects to the idea that content determines form and that form, in itself has no meaning; instead, he claims that "elements of form are taken quite clearly as signifiers of class content, either of exclusion of certain people or inclusion in the overall ritual of the event" (*Good* 19). He warns: "if a socialist theatre company or a socialist playwright wants to speak to the working-class, then they would do well to learn something of its language, and not assume that the language of bourgeois theatre of the twentieth century is all that is worthy of pouring from their lips" ("Theory" 54). McGrath's attempts to explain and put into practice what he identifies

¹⁶ McGrath refers to Brecht and the "kitchen-sink" drama at the Royal Court as examples of such mistakes. He recognizes Brecht's work as oppositional, but within the bourgeois theatre of Berlin, thus explaining the basic hostility of epic theatre towards its audience. He distinguishes this "vigorous inflection of bourgeois theatre" (i.e. Brecht and Piscator) from "the creation of a working-class-based theatre" (*Good* 43-44). He also sees the work done at the Royal Court between 1956 and 1970 as "an expression not of a new working class, but of an old middle class trying to renew itself" (*Good* 18). This criticism springs from McGrath's approach to stage language and how it is culturally and class specific.

as the differences between middle-class and working-class forms of entertainment constitute the most revolutionary as well as the most critically controversial aspects of his work.

In the process of identifying the class specific features of different forms of theatre or entertainment, McGrath challenges the traditional concept of "universality" as it relates to meaning. He argues that the political and social values of plays and the meaning of theatre are not the same for all audiences and that they vary on the basis of many factors, an important one of which is class. McGrath rejects a series of assumptions which he believes inform current attitudes towards theatre:

1. that art is universal, capable of meaning the same to all people;
2. that the more 'universal' it is, the better it is;
3. that the 'audience' for theatre is an idealized white, middle-class, etc., person and that all theatres should be dominated by the tastes and values of such a person;
4. that, therefore, an audience without such an idealized person's values is an inferior audience; and
5. the so-called 'traditional values' of English literature are now anything other than an indirect cultural expression of the dominance over the whole of Britain of the ruling class of the south-east of England (*Good* 4).

As the list suggests, McGrath rejects both the possibility of and the value traditionally ascribed to universality as a feature of middle-class culture.

The issue of value is an important one. McGrath not only suggests that different audiences have different values and expectations, but also that they be treated equally in terms of importance. He explains:

I *do* believe that there is a working-class audience for theatre in Britain which makes demands, and which has values, which are different from those enshrined in our idealized middle-class audience. That these values are no less 'valid'--whatever that means--no less rich in potential for a thriving theatre-culture, no thinner in 'traditions' and subtleties than the current dominant theatre-culture, and that these values and demands contain within them the seeds of a new basis for making theatre (*Good* 4).

McGrath has expended a great deal of energy in his writing and in his theatre work in trying to demonstrate that working-class forms of entertainment and popular forms are not inferior and that such audiences are not "philistine".

Also central to McGrath's approach and a challenge to traditional tendencies in criticism of privileging texts, is the emphasis on theatre as a complex social event: "For not only must the text, *mise-en-scene*, lighting, performances, casting, music, effects, placing on the stage all be taken into account in order to arrive at a description of the stage event, but also the nature of the audience, the nature, social, geographical and physical, of the venue, the price of tickets, the availability of tickets, the nature and placing of pre-publicity, where the nearest pub is, and the relationships between all these considerations

themselves and of each with what is happening on stage" (*Good* 5). He claims that while the text of a play is convenient for the purposes of academics, he argues that "The act of *creating theatre* has nothing to do with the making of dramatic literature: dramatic literature is what is sometimes left behind when theatre has been and gone" (*Good* 6).

The emphasis on theatre as a social event foregrounds the centrality of the audience in McGrath's approach to popular theatre, as well as the complex role of the writer who must create with all of the different factors in mind: "The simple acceptance of, say, the location of the event, the kind of publicity available, the price of admission and the behaviour of the box office staff as all being someone else's problem, and not areas of personal concern for creative artists means that in effect a great deal of the meaning of the event socially and politically is taken away from the writer" (*Good* 6). McGrath illustrates some of the important differences between contexts in which theatre/entertainment takes place by describing a typical Sunday night production at the Royal Court in 1960 and an evening in a working-men's club in Chorlton-cum-Hardy in 1963. In accounting for both as social events, he points to how the venues are run, the class backgrounds of the actors/performers as well as the audience, how people are

dressed, and general features of the play/entertainment. What McGrath tries to capture are some of the characteristics of the experience of each of these events and ultimately to show how different they are. But even more importantly, in terms of creating and/or critically assessing popular theatre, McGrath outlines the features of the content and style of working-class types of entertainment and how they differ from middle-class forms.¹⁷

McGrath offers a list of what he believes are generalized differences between the demands and tastes of bourgeois and working-class audiences. The characteristics he outlines are based on his own practical experience, gained throughout the seventies, trying to attract and entertain working-class audiences. He is also careful to qualify the distinctions he makes ("Theory" 51). For

¹⁷If the terms of comparison seem vague, it is because McGrath does not specify them himself. From his references and examples, my understanding is that what he terms middle-class or bourgeois theatre is an essentially classical repertoire with a particular emphasis on realist drama. But what he calls working-class entertainment is perhaps even more varied. Even though he refers most often to working men's clubs and stand up comedy, he really seems to be pointing to a whole range of live entertainment forms. For the sake of argument he is treating two different and very complex entities as homogeneous (in terms of both the plays/entertainment themselves and the audiences) and this can lead to some confusion. It is also important to remember that his focus is on the demands and tastes of these different class specific audiences, based on their respective forms of entertainment.

instance, he claims not to be putting forth a proletcult thesis which would necessarily reject other forms of theatre. McGrath has on many occasions clarified his position in relation to what he refers to as middle-class or mainstream forms of culture. He is by no means interested in doing away with these forms; instead, he has tried to show how they represent one tradition of mediating reality and that there are others which are equally valid. He is also not willing to suggest that "the values of the working class are, *ipso facto*, above criticism, to be endorsed and applauded in some mindless ouvierist manner." He is aware of what he refers to as the many appalling features of working-class culture and at a later point stresses the need to treat some of the more reactionary elements in these forms of entertainment in a critical way.

In outlining the generalized differences between the demands and tastes of these audiences, McGrath isolates nine separate features (*Good* 54-58). The first is "directness". He argues that a working-class audience "likes to know exactly what you are trying to do or say to it" whereas a middle-class audience "prefers obliqueness and innuendo". Based on reactions to the shows from different audiences, McGrath suggests that middle-class audiences feel they are being told what to think and he is often accused of being patronizing in his plays. But he maintains that

working-class audiences do not react in that way because they "have minds of their own and they like to hear what your mind is."

The next two features he discusses, "comedy" and "music", can be found in both sectors, but they carry different connotations. McGrath claims that middle-class audiences regard the presence of laughter and music (with the exception of opera) as threats to the seriousness of a play. He believes that comedy, in the case of working-class audiences, is more "anarchic" and has to be "sharper, more perceptive, and more deeply related to their lives" while bourgeois comedy is "largely of manners, or of intellect, [and] tends to assume there is a correct way of doing things and that that is the way of the average broadminded commuter or well-fed white, etc." Not only does McGrath oversimplify, but the actual distinctions here are not entirely clear. He claims on the one hand that, on comedy, working-class audiences are more sophisticated, yet he admits that "the nature of much working-class comedy is sexist, racist, even anti-working class."

In the case of music, and the fourth feature, "emotion", McGrath suggests that working-class audiences are more open to and accepting of the presence of these elements. He refers here to popular music performed live as part of a show. In relation to middle-class audiences he

argues that "Big musicals, lush sounds and cute tunes are O.K. in their place, but to convey the emotional heart of a genuine situation in a pop song is alien to most National Theatre goers." A consideration of the success and popularity of the Andrew Lloyd Webber style musical or a production like *Les Misérables*, based on box office and record sales, might suggest otherwise, although ticket sales for such shows are connected to their cachet as status events. Yet, songs and sentimentality play an important role in popular forms of entertainment. Another element of working-class entertainment which McGrath isolates is "variety". He explains that these audiences "seem to be able to switch from a singer to a comedian, to a juggler, to a band, to a chorus number, to a conjurer, to a sing-along, to bingo, to wrestling, to strip-tease, and then back again to a singer, and a comedian and grand 'Altogether' finale, with great ease." As a way of illustrating this kind of variety he points to forms such as the music-hall, variety theatre, club entertainment, the *ceilidh* in Scotland, the *noson llawen* in Wales, panto, and the Morecambe and Wise television show. He contrasts variety forms with what he refers to as "[t]he now-dominant strain in British middle-class theatre [which] can be traced back to Ibsen by way of Shaw and Rattigan, and so on." Theatre from this tradition is characterized by spoken drama, organized into

two or three long acts, in which actors immerse themselves in the characters they are portraying and perform on realistic sets. He notes that "[t]he variety within this kind of theatre is more a question of variation of pace and intensity while doing essentially the same thing throughout." McGrath does not intend to make value judgements concerning these differences; he "merely note[s] that the bourgeois is no less bizarre in its essence than the popular, and one might be forgiven for seeing more creative possibilities in the latter." It is also possible to link the prevalence of variety in a great deal of popular art with the volatile quality of life in the working-class--life as a kind of roller coaster.

The sixth element McGrath outlines is the moment-by-moment "effect" (a kind of instant gratification) that working-class audiences seem to demand from their entertainers. He does not actually define what he means by effect, but he is aware of the results of achieving it or failing to:

If an act is not good enough they let it be known, and if it's boring they chat amongst themselves until it gets less boring, or they leave, or they throw things. They like clear, worked-for results: laughs, respectful silence, rapt attention to a song, tears, thunderous applause (*Good* 57).

He believes audiences expect hard work and skill, the standards for which are set by television, radio, and

records. McGrath attributes a different kind of response to middle-class audiences who "have been trained to sit still in the theatre for long periods, without talking, and bear with a slow build-up to great dramatic moments, or slow build-ups to nothing at all, as the case may be." He does not treat the two groups in the same terms here; he gives working-class audiences the credit for knowing what they want and expressing disapproval when they do not get it, but what he seems to be commenting on in relation to bourgeois forms is more an endurance test of pace rather than their expectations. Audiences at the National Theatre may not be as vocal or overt in their disapproval or boredom, but generally actors on stage know when the play is working and when it is not. In the case of club entertainment, audience members have the option of watching or engaging in other social activities. There is a fundamental difference between these two kinds of contexts/venues in terms of finance and the organization of response. Audiences at the National Theatre are there for the play, while people do not necessarily go to clubs for the entertainment. This difference is relevant to shows such as *The Game's a Bogey* developed for working men's clubs.

The last three elements, "immediacy", and "localism" in two different senses, are closely connected and I believe are less contentious than some of the others McGrath

outlines. Based on his own experience of working-class entertainment, he suggests that "it is in subject matter much closer to the audience's lives and experiences than, say, plays at the Royal Shakespeare company are to their middle-class audiences." He acknowledges the amount of escapist art available, but maintains that comedy in the live, stand-up tradition of figures such as Billy Connolly and Ken Dodd, is based on the audience's life and experience. Related to this is the positive response among working-class audiences to material (characters and events) with a "local feel".¹⁸ He contrasts this with what he sees as a tendency or interest in cosmopolitanism in middle-class audiences. The idea of localism is not restricted to material, but extends also to a sense of identity with the performer. Again he uses Billy Connolly's success in Glasgow to illustrate this and argues that "[w]orking-men's clubs in the north of England depend on this sense of locality, of identity, of cultural identity with the audience." In contrast, he suggests that middle-class audiences would not be generally concerned with where John Gielgud came from:

¹⁸ McGrath does not actually distinguish between "immediacy" and "localism", but I am assuming the difference lies in the relevance of material in general social terms (eg. occupations, lifestyles, etc.) as opposed to a specific geographic/community relevance (eg. regional identities based on locations, language, etc.).

"They don't mind if he is a bit disdainful when he's in Bradford, because he's a great man, an artist, and he exists on another planet."

McGrath is aware that in this schematic list of main characteristics of working-class forms of entertainment, there is a danger of "tailism" which he explains as "trailing along behind the tastes of the working-class, debased as they are by capitalism, and merely translating an otherwise bourgeois message into this inferior language" (*Good* 59). He believes he does not fall into this trap for two main reasons. The first is that he insists on handling these features critically, being fully aware of the risks involved with each one:

directness can lead to simplification; comedy can be racist, sexist, even anti-working class; music can become mindlessness; emotion can become manipulative and can obscure judgement; variety can lead to disintegration of meaning and pettiness; effect for effect's sake can lead to trivialization; immediacy and localism can close the mind to the rest of the world, lead to chauvinism, and 'Here's tae-us-wha's-like-us'-ism; and a sense of identity with the performer can lead to nauseating, ingratiating performances with neither dignity nor perspective (*Good* 59-60).

Secondly, he sees in the above features, given that they are handled critically, the makings of "a revitalized, new kind of theatre, capable of expressing the richness and complexity of working-class life today, and not only working-class life."

In his attempt to theorize the production of socialist theatre, McGrath considers the problem of content, as well as that of form. He asks: "what are the parameters of intellectual complexity and refinement of sensibility that an author will encounter when writing for an audience in a working-men's club in Chorlton-cum-Hardy?" (*Good* 81). He considers both the kind and the scope of the issues or subject matter that theatre for working-class audiences can be about.

Concerning the choice of subject matter, McGrath argues that it can be just about anything, but what matters is how it is treated, "as long as the situations are related outwards to discernible patterns, structures of society, historical realities that can connect with the audience's perception of reality and cause them to engage with it; as long as the perspective is thought through, not merely received, and the story is based on rigorous examination of experience, rather than the convenient fictions of the ruling class and its media" (*Good* 90). Among the general kinds of subjects that McGrath believes go down well with popular audiences are the history of the working-class (its struggles, victories, etc.) and areas of contemporary life, particularly issues which affect them socially and economically.

McGrath discounts the notion that by virtue of the

language of the audience and the form of theatre he describes (i.e. creating effects in short bursts and in a variety of styles) that a company is limited in terms of the scope of the issues it can deal with. He argues that as long as an idea is not completely abstract and has some point of contact with reality, it will work. He illustrates this point:

For example, the rather complicated history of rationalization of industry with government support in the late 60s may not sound too promising for a joke-routine. But by the time, in 7:84 England's show, *Lay Off*, a large Irish actor had finished explaining, as Arnold Weinstock, just how beneficial to the country, or at least to GEC, this process was, and we had brought the news to the audience of how many people had been laid off, and where, to allow GEC to amalgamate, take over, rationalize and prosper, not only were the audience highly entertained by the manic and comic manoeuvres of Weinstock, but they had also grasped how this process affected their lives--in terms of jobs, and the products they can buy-- and something of how structural unemployment is created by capitalist solutions to working-class problems. So when the show zoomed in on one individual who had been laid off, feeling upset in the launderette, and mucking about in the garden, that individual was seen as part of a major social process of change with technological, industrial and political determinations, rather than just a poor unfortunate layabout as he might be presented in a sentimental bourgeois drama. And the audience had grasped the essentials of the theoretical and historical ideas relevant to his--and possibly their--position (*Good* 96).

In addition to relating the lives of the audience to larger political and historical frameworks, McGrath believes that "a great deal of popular theatre has got to be 'about' a

socialist criticism of the audience" (*Good* 97) in order to address the reactionary aspects of working-class life, such as sexism, racism, alcoholism, and child abuse. But in order to tackle these kinds of subjects, McGrath maintains the importance of "a questioning, critical relationship with [the] audience, based on trust, cultural identification and political solidarity" (*Good* 99).

Always implied or foregrounded in McGrath's work--the theory as well as the plays--is the audience. The audience is the determining factor in the selection of the form and subject matter of individual plays, the venues, and what McGrath calls the "unifying principles" of the company itself. For this reason, he believes "that a writer (or director, actor or technician) coming into the theatre has to make a choice between working in bourgeois theatre with bourgeois values for largely middle-class audiences--and I include the trendy, experimental bits of the National and RSC as well as Bournemouth Rep.--and working in popular theatre with socialist values for largely working-class audiences" (*Good* 95). He outlines the centrality of the audience in 7:84 Scotland's work:

The unifying principles of the company were, amongst others, to keep faith with the audience by going back time after time, by working hard to maintain the highest possible standards of entertainment and imagination, in writing and performance, by developing our personal contacts with the audience, listening to their comments and learning from them, by expanding our

political and historical work into areas that were important and showing clearly their relationship with the lives of the audience. We tried to 'keep faith' also by changing, by not simply repeating, either in content or form, the first show simply because it was successful, but to keep thinking, moving ahead of the audience's expectations in all areas. . . . They, in fact, had appropriated us: we belonged to them, and when we did not appear for longer than six months, there were complaints (*Good 77*).

This tendency for a touring company to target or seek out its audience, to create with that audience in mind, and to develop an on-going dialogue with that audience is a significant departure from the way in which mainstream theatres select and market their seasons. The kind of relationship between a theatre company and its audience which McGrath outlines is crucial to theatre's political function.

Writing about his work with 7:84 in the eighties, McGrath's position in relation to many of these issues has changed very little. In his final proposal as artistic director of 7:84, a three-year plan for funding, the aims for 7:84's work had not changed: "The long-term policy of 7:84 remains what it has always been: to take theatrical entertainment of the highest quality to the traditionally non-theatre-going public--the working-classes, the unemployed, the disenfranchised--wherever it is accessible to them, usually where they would naturally go for an evening's entertainment, and to draw them into a dynamic

relationship with theatre by creating it about their lives, their concerns and history and aspirations, and by telling the story in ways that are culturally familiar to those audiences (*Bone* 112). While he no longer sees the "revolution" as close at hand, he continues to express a great deal of faith in the need for and the roles of alternative theatre. He outlines five areas in which he sees alternative theatre as an important force:

Firstly it can contribute to a definition, a re-valuation of the cultural identity of a people or a section of society . . . Secondly, it can assert, draw attention to, give voice to threatened communities . . . Thirdly, it can mount an attack on the standardisation of culture and consciousness which is a function of late industrial/early technological 'consumerist' societies everywhere. Fourthly, it can be and often is linked to a wider political struggle for the right of a people . . . to 'self-determination'. Fifthly, it can make a challenge to the values imposed on it from a dominant group--it can help to stop ruling class, or ruling race, or male, or multi-national capitalist values being 'universalised' as common sense, or self-evident truth: as such it presents a challenge also to the state's cultural engineers, in Ministries of Culture, Arts Councils, universities, schools and the media (*Bone* 142).

After almost twenty years of involvement in creating popular political theatre, McGrath's optimism does not seem to have waned. And, as he too points out, there are still many groups working in the U.K. and around the world creating theatre with similar aims.

There are, inevitably, problems with McGrath's

formulations. The most serious one concerns the terms by which he defines audiences. He uses "working-class" and "middle-class" or "bourgeois" as labels for homogeneous groups/audiences. McGrath is no doubt aware of the complexity of the terms themselves and the danger of trying to describe the composition of an audience. While it is clear that he juxtaposes the two class groups for the sake of the argument and even if he can safely assume the general backgrounds of an audience in a working-men's club, the problem remains that he never defines or clarifies his concept of "working-class". This is of particular importance in the case of 7:84 Scotland's work because they always distinguished, in the plays they toured, between audiences in the Highlands and Islands, and those in the industrial areas of Scotland. McGrath selected specific forms and subject matter for his Highland shows, and learned through experience that these were not interchangeable with more urban oriented ones, but he does nevertheless apply the same class designation when referring to both kinds of audiences. The differences between the forms and subject matter of the Highland and urban shows will become clearer in the following section where I will look at specific examples.

In focusing on the politics which inform the aims and the shape of McGrath's work, I have not done justice to his interest in and ability to entertain and, in doing so, have

perhaps distorted the emphasis on politics as opposed to entertainment in the shows themselves. McGrath promises, above all, a "good night out". It is on this basis that some commentators defend McGrath's plays against attacks that claim they are too political or unsubtle. Angus Macleod, writing about *The Game's a Bogey* argues:

If McGrath's plays were meant simply as exercises in political tub-thumping, then it would have been easier to write a play about MacLean's life and times. . . . The first time I saw 'The Cheviot', I heard several elderly Edinburgh ladies talking about the entertainment-- comments like 'Wasn't that amusing, Mrs McDonald' abounded. . . . McGrath is an entertainer, first and foremost and if that seems a banal comment to make, then watch how many people base their criticism of McGrath on the fact that his plays attract tooth-picking capitalists as well as nail-biting Marxists (14).

This is an important point that even McGrath overlooks in his overly schematic arguments. The very elements which he believes make the plays appealing to working-class audiences, also make them entertaining for other kinds of audiences. But in attempting to understand or assess how these plays work, it is crucial to distinguish between "reading" and "seeing" them, as well as to consider the specific context in which they are performed.

3. FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: THE PLAYS

I would like to turn to an examination of a selection of plays written by McGrath with and for 7:84 Scotland. The analysis of the plays will focus on the form, subject matter, and performance styles which characterized the productions to see how his theories work in practice. Where it is possible, I will consider accounts of audience response as well as reviews of specific shows. It is not uncommon to find a discrepancy between the two. I am also interested in using the plays to indicate the shifts or developments in style and subject matter discussed in relation to the evolution of the company and its funding history, particularly the differences between the overtly political work scripted for the company in the seventies and the less polemical plays produced in the eighties.

Before turning to the company's first production, it is important to stress that while McGrath has formulated and articulated his approaches to political theatre in ways that other practitioners have not, he makes use of techniques which are far from new. It can certainly be said that he has made more systematic and extensive use of forms of popular entertainment than most writers, but the tradition from which he draws is a long standing one in British culture. Along with his practical experience in film and musical

forms of theatre (Liverpool plays), it is clear that the British tradition of variety and comic entertainment (in its live, radio, and television forms) exerted an important influence on McGrath and shaped his understanding of popular forms and how they work. He was also part of a generation of theatregoers/makers whose conception of theatre's form and function was being changed by the documentary plays of Joan Littlewood and later Peter Cheeseman. What distinguishes McGrath's work as a writer and 7:84's productions in the context of popular political theatre is their ability to make creative and effective use of this much larger tradition.

Overnight Success: The Cheviot

I will begin with *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* for several reasons. It constitutes an obvious starting point because it was the company's first production, but it also represents a landmark in popular political theatre in this period. The play was clearly 7:84 Scotland's most successful production and is still the best known because of the impact of the original tours, the documentary film version produced for Channel Four and the script (still in print) published by Methuen. If there has ever been a positive consensus between audiences,

practitioners, critics, and academics about the work of McGrath and 7:84 Scotland, it has been about this play. *The Cheviot* established 7:84 as a theatre company worthy of attention in Scotland and the original tours of the show set a precedent for taking theatre to remote parts of the country. It was a bold attempt at finding a new theatrical language to speak to new audiences--and it worked.

Many factors accounted for the success of *The Cheviot* and the show serves as an important example of the need to consider a piece of theatre in its historical, social, political, cultural context. First, although the actual scripting of the play took place in a short period of time, the initial idea or interest in doing a play about the Clearances had a long gestation period. McGrath had spent much time in the Highlands, and as he recounts in the introduction to *The Cheviot*, it was not until 1961 that he began to be aware of the Clearances. The information, from local stories and published accounts, gradually accumulated, but McGrath claims: "To me, at that time, it was a source of amazement that so little was known of it outside, even inside, Scotland. To the people there, it was, and is, a burning memory, never to be forgotten, and never forgiven" ("Year" vi). This interest in the history of the region served as the basis for the Scottish spin-off of 7:84 England--John McGrath, Elizabeth MacLennan and David

MacLennan went off to work on a play about the Highlands "from the time of the Clearances up to the present day" that they could tour "around village halls, dance halls, community centres and schools in the North" ("Year" vii). The scope of and commitment to the subject of the play are, I believe, important to an understanding of the impact of the final product.

As I described above, in relation to the working methods of the company, McGrath had a general outline for the play, but the research and development of specific scenes were undertaken on a collaborative basis, each member being responsible for a particular area of research and section of the play. As McGrath notes, it was possible to work on specific sections because of the form of the play, a popular form of entertainment in the Highlands known as the "ceilidh". MacLennan describes how they adapted an existing form:

Nowadays critics and academics refer confidently to 'the ceilidh-play', as though people had been writing them for years. But it was a new form. On the poster we called it 'a ceilidh play with scenes, songs and music of Highland history from the Clearances to the oil strike' . . . In the newspaper ads we called it 'a ceilidh entertainment with dance to follow'. But people in the villages described it as a concert which is the usual term for any entertainment (54).

The terms used by both the company and the audiences indicate a departure from the idea of a "play" in the

conventional sense.

The ceilidh is a social event which combines storytelling, singing and dancing, but it is also relevant in political and cultural terms: "In the past, these gatherings had also had their political side, particularly at the time of the Land Leagues, and stories of Highland history and oppression had been passed on. . . . they were also one way of keeping intact the Gaelic Culture--language, literature, songs and manners" ("Year" x). The form was ideal for their purposes and provided a means of tapping into a long tradition of lays and storytelling. While some may regard popular forms such as the ceilidh as little more than quaint, it is important to underscore their role in asserting a regional identity and engaging audiences. As McGrath notes, "Form is part of the content. If you choose to write in the form of a ceilidh, that is your meaning, it relates directly to your meaning" ("Bootle" 54). Peacock, in accounting for the success of *The Cheviot*, stresses the "communal" nature of the ceilidh, "a genuinely ethnic and living form of entertainment which could even cross class barriers and which still played an important part in the lives of often geographically isolated Scottish communities" ("Fact" 19).

The familiarity and popularity of the ceilidh as a form worked in combination with the general interest in and

immediacy of the subject matter of *The Cheviot*. In tracing the "savage process of capitalism" on the Highlands from the time of the Clearances in 1745, when people were driven off the land to make room for sheep, through to the recent take-over of North Sea oil by multi-nationals. The Clearances continue to be a part of the living memory of the Highland people. David Campbell and Douglas Gifford suggest that the tremendous response to *The Cheviot* was not surprising given that "[w]e do not need to bury deep in the West Highlands and Islands to uncover the bitter memories of a people cheated of land, made homeless and inheriting knowledge of family deprivation and sufferings" (2). By linking the exploitation of the past with that of the present, the play had an immediate impact on those affected by inflated housing prices and diminishing employment opportunities due to land speculation and outside control of the oil industry. *The Cheviot* had, in many ways, a ready made and receptive audience and, in Peacock's view, this offered the company a real advantage: "The major obstacle facing other political theatre groups in Britain, namely the absence of any significant communal, cultural or political identity amongst their audiences, was therefore largely overcome from the outset" ("Fact" 20). But this is not to diminish 7:84's achievements; they were, at the time, clearly an exception in pursuing such material in a Scottish

context. Randall Stevenson, in his overview of Scottish theatre between 1950-1980, argues that "[t]his commitment to contemporary issues, along with a broad popularity of appeal in examining them, allowed 7:84 to reach the heart of Scottish life and interests in a way which had not been seen on the stage since the demise of Glasgow Unity at the start of the 1950s" (362).

The occasion of *The Cheviot's* first "performance" was indicative of the receptive climate for the material and the kind of response the company could expect on tour. As McGrath recounts in the introduction to the play, their first scheduled performance was at a conference (entitled "What Kind of Scotland") which included "politicians, union men, writers, social and community workers, academics, and ordinary people" and was organized around issues concerning the direction of Scotland's future. Because of time constraints, the play was presented as a "work in progress" in the form of a reading. As McGrath recalls:

It was the best thing we could have done. The audience at the end rose to its feet and cheered, then poured out advice, corrections, support, suggestions of great practical value, facts, figures, books, sources, and above all enthusiasm. Not because we'd been 'good' or 'clever'--but because what we were struggling to say was what they, and masses of people in Scotland, wanted said. Now ("Year" v).

The exposure was helpful in publicizing the show, and the approval and input of the conference participants was

encouraging. But *The Cheviot* had yet to prove itself with audiences in village halls.

In his account of the original tour, McGrath notes that while the first performances in Aberdeen, Stirling, Inverness and Rosemarkie had received enthusiastic responses, he regarded Kinlochbervie as the beginning of the real Highland tour. The reaction of the audience there reassured them of the value and quality of the project:

There were no puzzled looks--everybody knew what was happening. That night in Kinlochbervie, 250 miles north of Glasgow, in that so-called backward area, the people taught us what theatre has to be about. And that was the lesson we learnt over and over again, in fifty or sixty halls all over the North, from Stornoway and Lochmaddy in the Outer Hebrides, to Aberdeen in the east, to Orphir in the Orkneys ("Year" xviii).

The timeliness of the subject matter and the use of the traditional ceildh form may account for the appeal and success of the production in general terms, but a close examination of the play (as it exists in a published script) reveals the specific ways in which it combines entertainment and politics in a powerful and effective way.

The Cheviot and the company's second production *The Game's a Bogey* warrant detailed analysis because between them they embody a repertoire of techniques which are used in different combinations and proportions in the subsequent plays. This is not to suggest that all the plays are the

same--far from it. Each play juggles the variables in different ways in its attempt to entertain and communicate with the audience and some plays succeed more than others. The variables themselves are those outlined by McGrath in *A Good Night Out*, his checklist of elements of working-class forms of entertainment: directness, comedy, music, emotion, variety, effect, immediacy, and localism.

The Cheviot and Epic Theatre

Before looking at these elements in relation to the dynamic of *The Cheviot*, I will outline the overall framework of the play. *The Cheviot* employs what McGrath has referred to as a direct, as opposed to a fictional, plot: "The plot is history, the plot is the events . . . using a different kind of theatrical technique--variety, music, acting, singing--to relate more or less directly a series of events without the intervention of a fictional device" ("Bootle" 51). The structure of the play is episodic, tracing three main periods of the history of the Highlands which are connected within the play through the use of similar characters and situations all related to the theme of clearing the people off the land.

In its historical scope and in the overtly Marxist analysis of its subject matter, the play is clearly linked

with epic theatre. Here, as elsewhere, McGrath is concerned with the structural factors at the root of the problems faced by people in the Highlands and relates their lives to larger political and historical frameworks. *The Cheviot* demonstrates not only how the people of one region have been systematically exploited for generations, but also how people in other parts of the world have suffered as a result of political and economic imperialism.

The Cheviot shares some of the general characteristics of Brecht's epic theatre in structural and technical ways, but its internal dynamic is quite different. In spite of his non-illusionistic approach to staging, use of songs, and interest in stage pictures/visual statements, Brecht's plays adopt a serious attitude towards their subject matter and rely primarily on scenes made up of dialogue--the main ingredient of the more conventional forms of drama he was reacting to. In the case of *The Cheviot*, the theme is a serious and urgent one, but it is explored in an entertaining way, making use of a variety of techniques, only one of which is dialogue. The play is "episodic" in the Brechtian sense in that it presents a series of linked but separate episodes designed to encourage the audience to judge or draw certain conclusions¹⁹, but *The Cheviot* cannot

¹⁹I refer specifically to Brecht's remarks in "A Short Organum for the Theatre" concerning the construction of the

be divided into individual, titled scenes in the way that it is possible to do with many of Brecht's plays. In fact there are no scene or act divisions at all in *The Cheviot*; the transitions between segments are achieved through music, narration, costume changes, etc. and the point or purpose of each is implied, not stated. But what seems like a spontaneous flow is actually carefully constructed to achieve particular effects.

McGrath's plays differ from Brecht's in even more important ways. I have already referred to the entertaining versus the serious approach to subject matter, but this requires elaboration. I would argue that one important key to McGrath's success, particularly in early plays like *The Cheviot* and *The Game's a Bogey*, is the use of comedy, or more specifically, comic techniques.²⁰ In spite of Brecht's stress on the importance of "fun" in the theatre (Willet 180), his claim that "a theatre that can't be laughed in is

story:

the individual episodes have to be knotted together in such a way that the knots are easily noticed. The episodes must not succeed one another indistinguishably but must give us a chance to interpose our judgement (Willet 201).

²⁰The distinction between "comedy" and the "comic" is made by Neale and Krutnik and is useful in the context of this discussion. Given the conventional notion of comedy as a genre, McGrath's plays are more accurately described as plays which employ self-contained or non-narrative comic techniques to generate laughter.

a theatre to laugh at" (173), and his celebration of the "popular" (108), in his own plays he rarely practiced what he preached. In his consistent and extensive use of comedy and popular forms, McGrath's work is more like that of Dario Fo in Italy. Comedy is central as Fo, whose political plays are also created for working-class and non-theatre-going audiences, has noted:

As far as a preoccupation with ridicule, laughter, sarcasm, irony and the grotesque is concerned, I have to say--I'd be a liar if I said otherwise--it's my job. I've been teaching this lesson for years--the origins of grotesque and Marxist and pre-Marxist culture and irony Nothing gets down as deeply into the mind and intelligence as satire The end of satire is the first alarm bell signalling the end of real democracy (Mitchell 9).

For writers like McGrath and Fo, comedy is an essential vehicle for drawing the audience into a show and involving them in the performance. I will illustrate this tendency with examples from *The Cheviot* below.

With regard to the relationship between the performers and the audience, McGrath draws his own distinction between his work and Brecht's. With reference to Brecht's list of the differences between epic theatre and dramatic theatre, he notes:

What is perhaps most striking about that list--to me, anyway, as a theatre-maker--is its hostility to the audience. . . . Distance, in place of solidarity; pseudo-scientific 'objectivity' in place of frank admission of a human, partisan and emotional perspective-- coldness, in place of

shared experience (*Good* 40).

As McGrath's remarks indicate, his own work is concerned with drawing the audience in and creating a sense of solidarity both between the performers and the audience, and between audience members themselves. The critical, objective distance on the part of the audience that is so central to Brecht's dramaturgy may be relevant at specific dramatic moments, but the basic thrust of Brecht's approach is at odds with that of McGrath. For these reasons it is misleading to assume an unproblematic affinity between their work on the basis that their plays share many of the characteristics of epic theatre.

The Cheviot: Components and Dynamics

These general formal and tonal distinctions between McGrath's and Brecht's work have been drawn in order to indicate that a play like *The Cheviot* not only represents a break from the conventions of literary or dialogue-oriented drama, but also from Brechtian epic theatre, a form commonly associated with left-wing theatre. As I suggested above, the tradition of variety entertainment is a more useful model to use in understanding the components and the dynamics of 7:84's early productions.

In the outline of McGrath's theoretical writings, I

stressed the audience-oriented nature of this work. What he recovers from popular forms--ranging from panto and variety in this century back to the mystery cycles of the middle ages--is a particular kind of rapport with the audience which is informal, inclusive, and interactive. It is far from new; it is just "foreign" to establishment theatre, in both its commercial and avant garde forms. Some have argued that there is no viable popular tradition to draw from in Britain, like that of Fo in Italy:

McGrath, though undoubtedly sincere in his concern to bring popular theatre to the workers in Scotland, simply does not have vital traditions of drama or which to draw. He himself admits that Fo goes back to the Middle Ages in the forms he employs, whilst the British artist is obliged to draw on the more recent traditions of pantomime and music hall (which have long since lost much of their popular appeal). There is a tendency on the part of British political dramatists to overestimate the significance and force of outmoded theatrical genres which they feel it is their duty to employ in addressing themselves directly to a working-class audience (Hirst 17).

Hirst does not indicate the source for McGrath's remarks about Fo, but I would argue that McGrath is fully aware of the links between the twentieth century forms he draws from directly and much earlier ones.²¹ After all, he formed

²¹In fact I find it surprising that commentators (often British ones) are so willing to accept the relevance of medieval texts originally performed by the *guillari* for modern Italian audiences, without considering the similarities between these comic/didactic pieces and English

General Gathering as a separate wing of 7:84 in order to revive classics of popular theatre, reaching as far back as Aristophanes--a project undertaken years earlier by Littlewood who was interested in what earlier works could illuminate or contribute to popular theatre now.

Hirst's attitude is in keeping with David Edgar's dismissal of popular cultural traditions in Britain noted in the previous chapter and there are many problems with such "assessments", the most important of which is that they oversimplify the existence or relevance of these forms. For instance it is true that variety theatre, as it evolved out of music hall, saw its demise as a widespread form of live entertainment by the late fifties and early sixties, even though it still exists in pockets such as seaside resorts. But it is equally important to recognize that music hall and variety provided much of the material for early films, television and radio, and influenced those media, in addition to live club entertainment and stand-up comedy. Pantomime is of particular importance in Scotland, because of its unusual popularity there.²² It continues to draw large

medieval mystery plays. For instance, one of the pieces in Fo's *Mistero Buffo* involves the telling of Christ's "Miracle at Canaan" by a drunken guest who has chased away the angel who was to give a serious account of the event (Mitchell 32). I believe the same kind of tendency is evident in a work such as *The Second Shepherds' Play*.

²²Johnny Beattie, a leading comedian and pantomime Dame, has claimed:

family audiences at Christmas-time, and many of its conventions remain unchanged. It is not simply the formal features of these kinds of entertainment that have continued appeal--comedians chatting up audiences, gags, satirical songs--but also the substance of them. Scottish and north of England brands of variety comedy have always been marked by character-based, local humour. For this reason McGrath stresses the role of *localism* in working-class entertainment, both in terms of the characters and events depicted, as well as the *sense of identity* of the performer (*Good* 58). McGrath is not only familiar with this tradition, but he is able to make effective use of it in the context of political theatre.

The main components with which McGrath builds his plays include the song, the monologue, the sketch or scene, and the direct reading or recital. Of these, the sketch/scene is the only one which, strictly speaking, involves dialogue and interaction between two or more "characters"--the main ingredient of all literary drama. In

Sir Lewis Casson said the pantomime is the national theatre of Scotland and I'll second the motion. I'd say of all the theatre forms in Scotland, that is the strongest, consistently the strongest. I honestly can't see that it will ever die. There will always be pantomime. I'm sure there will so I won't throw my bra away yet (Devlin 127).

The Cheviot and other productions of the seventies, in proportional terms, sketches or scenes make up roughly a third (and often less) of the plays.²³ The play includes both satirical sketches (derived from the variety tradition) and serious scenes (performed in an epic style). These scenes take on an illustrative function in the play, in order to show, for example, the ruling class at play in the Scottish countryside or to demonstrate the brutal methods of eviction used on the Highland people.

Another element which is integral to the structure and tone of *The Cheviot* is the song. In fact, songs often outnumber the other components in terms of frequency in a given play. But just as the plays employ comic techniques without being "comedies" in a generic sense, they also make extensive use of music without being "musicals" in the conventional sense. The fiddle is the main instrument used during the play (before the company turns into a dance band) and it provides accompaniment for the songs as well

²³I am not referring here to playing time or written length. When I refer to components of the plays in proportional terms, I mean the frequency of occurrence in the play of particular components, for example *The Cheviot* includes roughly 20 songs, 13 sketches/scenes, 10 monologues, and 17 instances of readings or recitals of documentary material. For reasons which will become clearer, it is often difficult to measure the exact number of segments because of the degree to which they overlap. The purpose of this kind of breakdown is simply to indicate in general terms the complex make up of the plays.

providing musical transitions between scenes. The fiddle is a central part of the folk traditions of Scottish music and forms of entertainment such as the ceilidh, so it contributes to the "local" feel of the play.

The songs serve a series of more specific functions within the play. Structurally, they help to punctuate a play that is not divided into scenes, by bringing segments to a close. Songs such as "The Battle of the Braes" play a narrative role by telling stories of specific events in ballad form, a common feature of the ceilidh. Others contribute to the comedy, more specifically the satire; these are often songs linked to caricatures within the play, but adapted to well known tunes. These sorts of witty songs are standard fare in variety comedy. A good example is "High Industry", sung to the tune of "Bonnie Dundee" by Sellar and Loch. The duet reveals in a comic way the real intentions and motives of the deals they are trying to strike with the people:

There's many a fine shoal of fish in the sea
 All waiting for catching and frying for tea--
 And I'll buy the surplus, then sell them you see
 At double the price that you sold them to me.

But other songs such as the opening "These are My Mountains" and the Gaelic songs in the play serve a more atmospheric and often celebratory function because they reinforce the value of traditions and language, and they encourage

participation on the part of the audience. Raymond Williams claims: "[i]t was a very considerable part of the rapport between the company and the audience that the songs were shared: they did not have to be produced to be learnt, they already in a sense existed as a bond" (225). This "bond" through music and song allows for a special level of involvement on the part of the audience and the company maximizes this through the use of well known songs or "song sheet numbers" during which the performers hold up a large sheet with the lyrics so the audience can join in. The impact of the music and songs in performance is easy to underestimate, because reading songs in a play text is nothing like hearing and watching them performed--this is as true of the opera libretto or the lyrics of a rock song. The company often provides a record of at least one or two of the songs from their plays by reproducing the lyrics in the programmes for the productions.

The monologue is another feature of *The Cheviot*, although it is developed and used more extensively in subsequent plays. By "monologue" I refer to points in the play when a single performer addresses the audience, in character. The Harriet Beecher Stowe speech about her friend the Duchess of Sutherland and Lord Selkirk describing his "plan" to populate Canadian colonies with Highlanders are good examples. But the monologue is only one form of direct

address in the play, which is why I have used it for extended speeches delivered "in character".

The use of direct address to the audience is extensive and complex, and crucial to the performer/audience relationship. It is established by the M.C. who introduces the show, chats up the audience, and lends a degree of continuity to the narrative. Many of the characters tell the audience directly about their ideas, schemes, etc. In fact most of the play, with the exception of the sketches, is played "to" the audience. This ensures a high level of involvement on the part of the audience and a sense of solidarity between performers and audience. This style of performance is inextricably linked to making the audience feel that the play is not only "for" them, but also that they are a part of it. While direct address is used mainly to create this positive connection between performers and audience, occasionally the "baddies" use it to create a sense of menace, as in the duet with Lord Crask and Lady Phosphate:

They become more serious. They turn their guns on the audience.

LORD CRASK. But although we think you're quaint,
 Don't forget to pay your rent,
 And if you should want your land,
 We'll cut off your grasping hand (43).

In this case the technique is more confrontational.

Sometimes one or more performers will fill in

necessary details or background information for the audience, both in and out of character. For example, the exchange between Sellar and Loch is interrupted by a freeze frame during which two speakers give the audience factual details about the land interests these men represent, namely the land purchased and inherited by the Sutherland family. The details not only provide a context for their exchange, but also lend it a certain irony. In the same scene, Loch himself steps out of the role to underscore the lack of sensitivity on the part of the character: "(LOCH *takes off his hat, and speaks directly to the audience.*) Believe it or not, Loch and Sellar actually used these words. (*Puts hat on again*)". These examples not only illustrate the fluid movement in and out of character (a combination of epic acting and the "aside"), but they also point to another ingredient of these plays--what I would refer to as the historical/factual or documentary material.

This use of direct address, in the form of statements, readings, and recitals, is related to the political/agitational and informative function of these plays; these are the points at which the issues are subjected to Marxist analysis or counter-information is offered as a challenge to the versions of events offered by official histories or the mainstream media. It too is not new; it is a standard feature of agit-prop and living

newspaper, but its use in *The Cheviot* corresponds most closely with that in Theatre Workshop's production *Oh What a Lovely War*, in which the factual material is interpolated into the otherwise entertainment framework. As in the case of *Lovely War*, the material is carefully positioned in order to achieve ironic or sobering effects.²⁴

These interpolations are often delivered by performers out of character or "as themselves" and can take the form of overt analysis of, or commentary on, a problem or situation presented within the play. The figure of the Old Man provides a transition between one scene celebrating the resistance of particular groups of crofters to attempted evictions and another depicting the brutal ways in which others were forced from their cottages by means of threats and torches. He steps out of his role as Minister in the previous scene and gives a summary of the problem:

At the end, all go off except the actor playing the OLD MAN, who comes to the mike and talks to the audience as himself.

OLD MAN. What was really going on? There is no doubt that a change had to come to the Highlands: the population was growing too fast for the old,

²⁴Derek Paget offers an interesting anecdote in his discussion of the impact of *Oh What a Lovely War*: "And a member of that original cast, Brian Murphy, recalled to me how McGrath himself came backstage after an early performance at Stratford East, stunned by the power of the show, and white-faced at the realization of the precise nature of the sacrifice involved in the First World War" ("Context" 244).

inefficient methods of agriculture to keep everyone fed. . . . The technological innovation was there: the Cheviot, a breed of sheep that would survive the Highland winter and produce fine wool. The money was there. Unfortunately, the people were there too. But the law of capitalism had to be obeyed. And this was how it was done:

Bell ringing. Enter SHERIFF'S MAN. reading eviction order. (14)

I have quoted only a portion of his speech, but it helps to illustrate this particular use of direct address and commentary in the play. The fact that the performers present these ideas as themselves rather than attributing them to fictional characters is significant. First, it contributes to the variety of levels in the play by creating a non-fictional frame which encourages the audience to take a more critical approach to the play and, secondly, the company assumes responsibility for the critique, preparing the way for a post-production dialogue with the audience. This is the *directness* McGrath believes working-class audiences are open to. The documentary material is sometimes conveyed directly through readings from historical sources and first person accounts of events. For instance, one scene is set up dramatically and then elaborated through readings; as a group of young women band together to prevent the constables from serving eviction orders, the Old Man introduces six readers who read brief accounts of such resistance efforts from books. Each excerpt involves a

different place (eg. Strathoykel, Sutherland) and the readings would be selected according to specific locations during the tour. Not only do the readings provide a shorthand way of communicating events and information that would otherwise be difficult to present on stage, but they lend authority and force to the play.

Sometimes this material can be of a more statistical nature and, while McGrath recognizes that many would assume that "an actress standing on a rostrum in a village hall reciting a few statistics about acreages may seem a far cry from pure art", he maintains that "[e]ven items of factual information which may have been concealed but which are relevant to people's attitudes to society can be presented from the stage as a legitimate part of theatre" ("Theory" 47) and that this can have a powerful impact on an audience. Again, *Oh What a Lovely War* demonstrated the potential power of statistics in the theatre. When 7:84 was working on their second Highland show, they were unable to obtain information concerning land ownership in Scotland until they heard about some Ordnance Survey maps on which boundaries of estates had been marked out:

I was told about a retired forester called John McEwan, who was then aged 86 and living in the heart of Perthshire, who detested the landlords so much that he had photocopied all these hundreds of maps at his own expense, stuck them together, and gone round the boundaries marked on them with a machine to calculate the acreages. He intended to publish this information, but hadn't

finished his work on it.

Two members of the company drove up to see him one night after rehearsal. He gave them a thorough political grilling and eventually decided they were alright, and they came back with one of his pillowcases stuffed with maps, sheets of acreages and ownerships ("Theory" 47).

The company printed some of the information in the programme and used some directly in the show, selecting what was relevant to the particular location in which they were performing. He describes the effect of revealing this material to the people most affected by it as "truly electric". Excerpts from this material are reproduced in the Methuen edition of *The Cheviot* and the programme for *Boom*.

I have broken the play down into its various components in order to demonstrate how *The Cheviot* differs from "straight" or literary plays, and has more in common with other entertainment forms. Neale and Krutnik identify the four major forms found in the variety comedy programme (in the context of television)--the comic song, the monologue, the double-act, and the sketch (179).²⁵ There is an obvious overlap between these elements and those I have

²⁵The double-act (i.e. the straight man trying to be serious and being interrupted by a comic side-kick) is a comic technique which has been traced back to the master/servant exchanges in classical and Shakespearean plays (Neale and Krutnik 187). The "double-act", in this strict sense of the term, does not appear often enough in McGrath's plays to be considered a main component, but it is used on occasion. The exchange between the two Highlanders who introduce Scene 5 in *The Cheviot* is one example of a double-act.

outlined above--sketch/scene, monologue, song--except that the forms are not used for exclusively comic purposes in McGrath's plays. Another difference between these plays and variety is that they employ narratives (whether historical or invented) and it is here that pantomime, storytelling, and more conventional forms of drama become relevant. McGrath himself notes that the "story" in panto, no matter how secondary, strings the other elements together: "The panto throws up a new kind of relationship, that between narrative and variety form" (*Good* 28). This is also true of "revue", the form used for *The Game's a Bogey*. Revue, in its earliest form, combined elements of music-hall, musical comedies, and often involved a plot (Wilmot 17). The only element foreign to variety, panto, and revue is the documentary material, but the blending of "documentary" with entertainment is familiar to wide audiences in Britain, if not directly through theatre, then through television and radio.²⁶

Another tradition from which McGrath draws for some of

²⁶Derek Paget examines the traditions of British "documentary" and the blending of facts with entertainment in *True Stories? Documentary drama on radio, screen and stage* (1990). It is also interesting to note that one of the most successful shows on BBC TV in the last thirty years was *That Was the Week That Was* in the sixties which was a sort of newspaper, variety, revue, documentary. The programme had an enormous impact and undoubtedly provided a model for the forms writers like McGrath were pursuing.

the features of his plays is agit-prop theatre. Agit-prop is characterized by a presentational style of performance and the merging of fictional techniques with documentary material. But more specifically, the treatment of characters and the use of strong visual pictures in *The Cheviot* and subsequent plays are elements derived from agit-prop. The characters are broadly drawn types, whose identities are established quickly through direct introductions, minor costume changes, and accents. They are often introduced by the M.C. or another actor/character. For instance, early in the play, the Young Highlander, during an exchange with two women, steps momentarily out of character to inform the audience who the approaching figures are: "Y.H. (to audience). The two gentleman were James Loch and Patrick Sellar, factor and under-factor to the Sutherland estates" (4).

Because of the long period of history which the play covers, there is no central character used as a focus; instead each of the performers plays three or more roles allowing for a panorama of characters and, as a group, they can indicate a crowd or a jury. The play includes a variety of generic characters who are identified by function (i.e. age, occupation, race, etc.) rather than as individuals, such as "first woman", "young Highlander", "crofter", "judge", and "Red Indian". There are also fictional

characters with names which have been made up, usually for comic effect, such as Andy McChuckemup, Lady Phosphate, and Texas Jim. In addition, given the historical nature of the play, there are characters based on actual figures, but usually treated in a satirical way, such as Patrick Sellar, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lord Selkirk, and Queen Victoria. The treatment of characters ranges from sympathetic to satirical according to the role they play in the struggle being depicted. The comedy, not surprisingly, is most often at the expense of the "exploiters", except for the occasional gag between highlanders.

This cartoon approach to characters is also applied to rendering the social and political relationships between individuals or institutions (i.e. levels of government, political parties, countries, etc.). This is a typical, and perhaps one of the most effective, features of agit-prop. A good example in *The Cheviot* is an episode which depicts Lord Polwarth, Minister of State in charge of overseeing American involvement in oil development. The play makes clear that Polwarth did not have the interests of the Scottish people in mind, and the point is reinforced in a song, during which the characters Texas Jim and Whitehall turn Polwarth into a puppet by pulling the strings attached to his wrists and back. After the song, they let go of the strings and he collapses into the arms of a performer who carries him off

stage. The image is a simple one, playing on the metaphor of "pulling strings", but combined with the satirical figures and song, it is an effective way of revealing whose interests were actually being served. It is the theatrical equivalent of a political cartoon.

But a consideration of the individual components and features of *The Cheviot* only tells part of the story. The strength of the company's most successful plays lies not only in the ingredients with which they are built, but more importantly in the selection and combination of those elements.

Taking the Audience Along!

The internal structure of the play offers an indication of how and why it was designed to appeal to audiences. But before turning to an analysis of specific sequences, it is important to note how interest in the audience and its involvement informs the overall shape and production context of the play. The contact with the potential audience for the show could be said to begin as soon as the company arrived in any of the small outlying places included on the tour, where the arrival of anybody, let alone a theatre company, would be conspicuous. The actual performances took place in village halls and the show

was designed for such venues. The set was a huge pop-up book with pages that turned to provide various scenes. In fact, adaptations were only necessary when, at the end of *The Cheviot's* second tour, it played in big theatres in Glasgow and Edinburgh. The village hall is obviously associated with communal gatherings, but the flexibility of the space also allows for the creation of a dance floor and general social interaction following the performance.

In the hall, contact with the audience was maximized by means of involvement before, during, and after the show. *The Cheviot* opened with the fiddler playing some Scottish tunes for the audience while the remaining cast accompanied him, prepared props and costumes or talked to friends in the audience. During the show, each member, when not actually performing, remained seated in chairs on either side of the stage or platform, in full view of and on the same level of the audience, surrounded by his/her props and costumes. McGrath explains that by using their own eighteen inch platform instead of the existing stage, "we kept closer to the audience, and had the same intimacy whatever kind of hall we were in" ("Year" xvii). Such an approach indicates the value placed on becoming, to whatever extent possible, part of the community for which they were performing, eliminating as many of the traditional theatrical barriers erected between "artists" or "actors" and their audiences.

The Cheviot opens with the M.C. who welcomes and chats with the audience. The lively M.C. or compere, speaking at the microphone positioned centre front, here played by Bill Paterson, a Scottish actor with great comic abilities, is a familiar part of the live (and televised) entertainment forms described above, although it is not clear that such a figure is part of the ceilidh. He is crucial to setting the tone of the evening, establishing a rapport with the audience, and acting as a framing figure by introducing the play and keeping the audience oriented throughout. His opening routine makes specific references to the place in which they are performing. Not only is the audience recognized as belonging to a specific place, but it is drawn into a relationship with the performers.²⁷ Then he invites them to join in the singing of a song for which a huge song sheet is provided. The choice of song, "These are My Mountains", communicates instantly the company's attitude towards the Highlands, and its celebratory and defiant tone

²⁷The reference to location may seem of minor importance, but it is a technique used by many kinds of live performers, and it often represents a gesture of friendliness towards or even respect for an audience. In fact, when performers (i.e. musicians, comedians, etc.) refer negatively or incorrectly to the immediate location, audience's can feel quite insulted. With regard to *localism* as it applies to a *sense of identity* with the performer, McGrath argues, "Even if coming from outside the locality, there is a sense not of knowing his or her soul, but a sense that he or she cares enough about being in that place with that audience and actually knows something about them" (*Good* 58).

is no doubt calculated to win the affections of the audience. The audience involvement which is established at the beginning of the show is encouraged throughout the performance.

The principles explored in McGrath's later theoretical writings are those which inform the internal dynamic of *The Cheviot*--a variety of forms and clearly worked for effects delivered with speed and energy. The pace and the movement in terms of time and space are techniques McGrath learned from film:

Working in films, as I did quite a lot between 1966 and 1972, taught me the need for, and some of the ways to get, pace and movement in a piece of theatre. What is perhaps more important, the experience of movies has led the popular audience to expect a certain level of invention and intensity and movement from a good piece of entertainment: and taught them the shorthand, the elliptical language of narrative necessary to maintain such a pace (*Good* 31).

It is interesting to note that Dario Fo regards his work on screenplays as his "apprenticeship as a playwright": "For me the lesson of the cinema . . . meant learning from a technical point of view what people had already grasped: a story divided into sequences, a fast pace, cutting dialogue, and getting rid of the conventions of space and time" (Mitchell42). *The Cheviot* demonstrates the application of these principles to theatre; it is a play in which hardly anything comes to rest for very long. *The Cheviot* is like a

roller coaster ride in terms of effects, hitting a variety of emotional levels and giving the audience "a song and a dance, and a laugh and a cry".²⁸ The audience is sometimes drawn in with humour, but suddenly sobered by the serious implications of the situation they have just witnessed, by means of commentary, readings, or a song. These shifts away from comedy and entertainment can evoke emotion and sadness, but sometimes anger, defiance, and hope. Unlike Brecht, McGrath is willing to exploit the emotional potential of theatre in order to achieve these different levels. But this kind of manipulation is by no means gratuitous; it is an inherent part of the history being depicted, as well as part of the attempt to move an audience to think and act. McGrath was deliberate in his choice to break out of the "laxent syndrome" of Gaelic culture: "I resolved that in the play, for every defeat, we would also celebrate a victory, for each sadness we would wipe it out with the sheer energy and vitality of the people, for every oppression, a way to fight back" ("Year" xxviii).

In order to illustrate the range of levels and how they are achieved in the play, I will outline, in its components, a sequence which occurs early in the play, on

²⁸This is a well known phrase whose origins I am not aware of. Finlay Welsh used it an interview I did with him to summarize what a Scottish audience wants from a piece of entertainment.

pages 4-13:

<u>Segment</u>	<u>Music</u>	<u>Relation to Audience</u>
1. Sellar and Loch, factor and underfactor on the Sutherland estate discuss the indolence of the aboriginals and begin to negotiate a sale of the land that will dispossess them in the clearances (including a gag in which Sellar, looking for illegal spirits, sniffs a bucket into which the Young Highlander has just "peed")		Dramatic dialogue overheard
	Fiddle phrase	
2. Speakers 1 and 2 comment on the wealth of the landowners		Documentary direct to audience
	Fiddle phrase	
3 Sellar and Loch continue to deprecate the aboriginals and bargain for the land deal that will replace the local labourers with Cheviot Sheep		Contains aside by actor of Loch directly to the audience (breaking out of the dramatic illusion)
4.	Loch and Sellar sing "High Industry" to the tune of "Bonnie Dundee"	Direct to audience
5.	Gaelic Singer sings "Mo Dhachaidh" ("My Home")	Direct to audience (audience and the company join in)
6. First Girl recites a poem by the Chisholm Bard (a vehement plea for destruction and pain to be visited on the sheep and the Factor.		Direct to audience
7. Sellar pats the first Girl's baby		Directs an ironical aside and a wink to audience

- | | |
|--|---|
| 8. The two Girls panic as officers arrive with papers authorizing land clearance | Dramatic action observed |
| 9. The women and an Old Man prepare to resist the eviction | Dramatic action observed |
| 10. The Old Man introduces six readers each of which gives an account of violent resistance to evictions | Documentary (narrated directly to audience) |
| 11. Fiddle and humming "The Lord is My Shepherd" as pulpit is set up | Dramatic action |
| 12. Minister delivers a sermon chastising the rebellious "sheep" in his flock, assuring them that they have brought disaster on their own heads by their resistance and warns them to repent | Dramatic action |
| 13. The Old Man indicates that this sermon was effective save in places noted by the Second Girl and the First Girl indicates the stout local resistance to the clearances which was successful (her speech is punctuated by cheers and groans from the company) | Direct documentary to the audience |
| 14. A celebratory dance to the fiddle's accompaniment underlines the victory | |

The actual performance time is difficult to calculate, but the whole sequence occurs in only eight pages of the Methuen text. Of these fourteen short segments, music is featured in seven, direct address to the audience occurs in

seven (with an aside which breaks the dramatic illusion in another one), documentary material is provided in three, the audience participates directly in one, and only twice are two adjacent segments in the same style. The variety of techniques and the fast pace of the action give the play its energetic and lively quality.

The sequence not only demonstrates the kind of quick cutting and movement of the play, but also how the individual segments result in clearly worked for effects. The plays never introduce anything "heavy" without a little patter, music, and comedy first. The gag with the bucket immediately makes a fool of Sellar, and the sketch satirizes Sellar's and Loch's pomposity and ruthlessness--both engaging the audience and inviting it to laugh "at" the villains. But there is always an edge to satire; Sellar and Loch are in the end successful in their exploits. The more serious point is driven home by the Gaelic song which follows; it is the singer's (and the audience's who sing along) "home" which has been sold in the preceding scene. The shift away from laughter intensifies into the rage and bitterness of the poem, and eventually to the devastating accounts of the violent treatment of the people. But hope is quickly restored by the story of a victorious resistance and the fiddling, dancing, and shouting re-establish a mood of celebration. The sequence also demonstrates how the play

assumes, and depends for its effects, on a tacit understanding of the "enemy" in political and class terms. Alan Bold argues that "[o]ne of the reasons for the success of 7:84 was the way the cast drew the audience into the action as if all present at a given performance were involved in an open conspiracy against authority" (309).

The pattern is not always the same, but what is consistent is the use of comedy and music to hook or pull the audience in before forcing them into a more reflective, critical mode. Daphna Ben Chaim suggests that the distance inherent in the perception of art allows for an intense level of emotional engagement on the part of the audience (71). More importantly, she points to how twentieth century theatrical styles manipulate distance, in lesser or greater degrees, to evoke different responses:

The dramatist today chooses a theatrical style, and therefore a general distance norm, for his or her play, just as he or she chooses characters and situations. Moreover, not only have the fixed canons of genre fallen in the theatre, so have the fixed canons of style: distance is manipulated from one moment to the next in a play, inducing empathy and then objectivity and then again empathy (79).

This manipulation of distance, a kind of theatrical zooming in and out, is more clearly linked, in the subsequent plays, to the presence of characters treated in naturalistic terms alongside caricatures, and shifts between two historical periods. But *The Cheviot*, in which there are no central

contemporary figures to identify with, relies more on maximizing and minimizing the degree of audience involvement in a general way.

As I suggested above, the comedy and the songs in the play are responsible for much of the audience involvement. A good example of how the audience is drawn into the play, in an active way, is the scene set in Canada which is intended to demonstrate the consequences of Lord Selkirk's plan to populate the colonies with Highlanders. The scene opens:

Enter STURDY HIGHLANDER punting up a river. He does elaborate pantomime double take at RED INDIAN painted on the set, and punts down to the microphone. (24)

The Sturdy Highlander has been sent by the Hudson's Bay Company to the Red River Valley, but he must beware of the Red Indians (depicted cartoon style with tomahawks) who are in the service of a French Northwest Trader. The Sturdy Highlander, afraid of attack from the rear, asks the audience to warn him of the approach of any Indians:

Will you do that now? I tell you what, you'd better shout something, let me see, let me see--I know. Walla Walla Wooskie. Will you shout that? Let's have a practice--after three now, one, two, three--Walla Walla Wooskie!

He goes through several attempts to get the audience to join in until they do, with gusto--then: (25).

Then he remembers that his Granny, who enters, is deaf and asks them to wave their arms as well as shouting. The

Indians, here the villain's henchmen, thwart the audience's attempts to warn the Sturdy Highlander. allowing for extended comic business. The kind of scene is directly derived from panto, and it allows for humour through the direct participation of the audience.

The scene continues when the North West Trader appears and threatens the family with his Indian henchmen. Even this portion of the scene is treated humourously, but the comedy subsides when the Sturdy Highlander steps out of character and tells the audience about how both the settlers and the Indians were exploited in the interests of a trade war. The same performer's role changes significantly from only a few moments before. The focus is then broadened even further when he describes how this kind of exploitation "chain-reacted" around the world, in places such as Australia, Tasmania, Africa, and America. Here, as in the other segments involving documentary or historical material, the audience is expected to listen and, more importantly, to consider specific events in a larger context. The appeal is to the critical faculties, rather than to the purely emotional. The audience is drawn into a situation through laughter and then pushed back to consider the implications.

The series of patterns and juxtapositions in the play also encourages a degree of critical distance. For instance, repetition is used for comic as well as analytical reasons,

and it is applied to both character types and situations in the play. There are two haggling scenes in which characters must settle on a price. The first involves Loch and Sellar negotiating the sale of a piece of land:

LOCH. Your offer for this area, Mr. Sellar, falls a little short of what I had hoped.

SELLAR. The present rents, when they can be collected, amount to no more than £142 per annum.

LOCH. Nevertheless, Mr. Sellar, His Lordship will have to remove these people at considerable expense.

SELLAR. To restock the land with sheep will cost considerably more.

LOCH. A reasonable rent would be £400 per annum.

SELLAR. There is the danger of disturbances to be taken into account. £300.

LOCH. You can depend on the Reverend David Mackenzie to deal with that. £375.

SELLAR. Mackenzie is a highlander. £325.

LOCH. He has just been rewarded with the parish of Farr--£365.

SELLAR. I shall have to pay decent wages to my plain, honest, industrious South-country shepherds--£350.

LOCH. You're a hard man, Mr. Sellar.

SELLAR. Cash.

LOCH. Done. (7-8)

The sequence is used again in a more contemporary context when Andy McChuckemup, a Glasgow Property-operator's man, tries to buy land for a high rise motorcroft (complete with an all night chipperama called the "Frying Scotsman" and a Grouse-a-go-go), from Lord Vat of Glenlivet, a mad young laird who is reluctant to sell:

ANDY: A-ha. How does six hundred thousand suit you?

LORD VAT. My family have lived here for over a century; 800,000.

ANDY. You're getting a slice of the action. Your Honour--650,000.

LORD VAT. I have my tenants to think of. Where will they go? 750,000.

ANDY. We'll be needing a few lasses for staff and that...700,000 including stately home.

LORD VAT. You're a hard man, Mr. Chuckemup.

ANDY. Cash.

LORD VAT. Done. (*Shake.*) (50-51).

Both scenes demonstrate, in a humourous way, where control of the land, and hence the fates of the people, reside--in the past and more recently. The second is less elaborate because it achieves its ironic effect through repetition, reinforcing the idea that everyone has a price. This "dramatization" of history repeating itself is ultimately linked to the Marxist agenda of the play.

Striking contrasts are also used extensively throughout the play to encourage a critical perspective on the part of the audience. This can be seen in a simple example such as the juxtaposition of a poetic tribute to the Duke of Sutherland recited by a Victorian Gent, and the translation of a scathing Gaelic poem about the same man. Other examples are designed around the idea of counter-information. One scene includes Whitehall rationalizing the British government's decision to give the Americans control over oil development, while Texas Jim, with great satisfaction, commends this kind of attitude, and two M.C.s interpolate actual developments and statistics:

WHITEHALL. We didn't charge these chaps a lot of money, we didn't want to put them off.

TEXAS JIM. Good thinking, good thinking. Your

wonderful labourite government was real nice:
thank God they weren't socialists.
M.C.1. The Norwegian Government took over 50% of
the shares in exploration of their sector
(62).

The characters do not actually speak to one another, instead they address the audience, and the criticism is implied rather than stated. Ironic effects are also achieved through the use of songs and the doubling of performers. The song "These Are My Mountains" which is important in drawing the audience into the show at the beginning, is also sung by Sheep, Queen Victoria, and Texas Jim at different times in the play to make a point about appropriation. Doubling is a practical technique in this kind of theatre, but the company made a virtue of necessity by using the talents of individual performers to their advantage and building in certain patterns. For example, John Bett played Sellar and Whitehall, Bill Paterson played Loch and Texas Jim, and Alex Norton played Selkirk and Polwarth. While these are not the only characters these actors played, these particular pairings, like the repetition of scenes, make use of deliberate echoes (verbally and stylistically) to reinforce the pattern of exploitation. The political critique works in a more complex way than such plays are ever given credit for. The play provides wonderful entertainment, but it is also an important lesson in revisionist history and political analysis.

The final scene in *The Cheviot* depends for its impact on all of the features discussed so far. It depends on having won both the hearts and the minds of the audience. Addressing the audience directly, as they have throughout the play, all of the performers gather on stage and take turns speaking, as themselves. The closing sequence offers an opportunity to summarize the patterns in Highland history that the play attempts to outline, with an emphasis on the issues of ownership and control, and calling for action in the form of resistance and organization:

At the time of the Clearances, the resistance failed because it was not organised. The victories came as a result of militant organisation--in Coigeach, The Braes, and the places that formed Land Leagues. We too must organise, and fight--not with stones, but politically, with the help of the working class in the towns, for a government that will control the oil development for the benefit of everybody (73).

This represents a solution or a possible ending to what the M.C. introduces as "a story that has a beginning, a middle, but, as yet, no end". McGrath describes the impact they hoped the ending would have: "At the end, the audience is left knowing they must choose, and that now, of all times, they must have confidence in their ability to unite and win" ("Year" xxviii). This call for action--the positing of a socialist solution to the present situation--was a standard feature of the early plays which later disappeared as the

shows were toned down politically. The final song, sung in Gaelic and translated by the M.C., was followed by a break during which the company transformed itself into a dance band (the Force Ten Gaels) and often played until very late. The post production component of the evening was not only entertaining and celebratory, but it also offered the company members opportunities to discuss and debate the issues of the play with the audience members, occasionally leading to the incorporation of new material into the play.

What I have taken for granted so far in the discussion of performer/audience involvement, particularly during the play, is a relationship based on sympathy and solidarity. But as McGrath notes in his account of the tour, there were nights--although the exception rather than the rule--when they found themselves performing for audiences who represented the villains, not the victims, in the play. For instance, he describes Lochinver as a place inundated with "white settlers" and, because the "locals" stayed away, they were faced with an audience whose participation was minimal and laughter inhibited ("Year" xx). Neale and Krutnik make the important point that "What can count as comic is dependent in part upon socio-cultural rules, conventions, and conditions" (64). Because the play relies so heavily on comedy as a hook--what Fo refers to as a need to have "the audience to be 'inside', and take part in the rhythm of

laughter" (Mitchell 16)--it is not surprising that the people who represent the objects of ridicule did not enjoy the play. These differences in response also help to underscore how much the play depends, not just for its impact but for its actual execution, on the audience itself. While more traditional critics might regard this as a failing, it may also be seen as an illustration of McGrath's own theories of theatrical practice--in order to communicate with an audience, the show must both relate to that audience's concerns and speak its language.

The Cheviot: Critical Reception

Reviewing the play in 1973 for the *Guardian*, Cordelia Oliver wrote: "Few theatrical tours in Scotland can have penetrated the country so thoroughly or connected so completely with audiences of all ages and types" (MacLennan 55). While the success of *The Cheviot* in the Highlands necessitated a second tour, the play also received critical acclaim elsewhere and was featured on BBC's "Play for Today". More than ten years later, Peacock claims that "In retrospect the play could arguably be described as one of the most aesthetically effective political plays to emerge from the energetic and active British political theatre movement of the 1970s" ("Fact" 17). As I outlined earlier,

the company had the advantage of being composed of talented performers who were capable of meeting the unusual demands of such a show, and of working in a particularly well suited cultural and political context. But could the success be repeated?

The consensus amongst commentators is that 7:84's subsequent productions never achieved the quality of *The Cheviot*. MacLennan even entitles a short segment of her book "Not as good as *The Cheviot*, of course" for all the times she has heard the phrase. Campbell and Gifford claim: "[t]heir work [after *The Cheviot*] was awaited with more than interest but it would be perverse to suggest that after the impact, and the dash of 'The Cheviot' either 'The Game's a Bogey' 'Boom', 'My Pal and Me' or 'Little Red Hen', have had anything like the popular impact or critical acclaim" (2). Similarly, Thomsen argues "The shows following *The Cheviot* . . . are less convincing and less carefully constructed" (163) and Bold suggests "The sheer camaraderie of the Company helped them through subsequent productions which did not live up to the promise of *The Cheviot*" (309). One of the only critics to give a different account is Itzin who, with reference to *Little Red Hen* and some of the plays produced in England, claims that "1975 was a productive year both for the English and Scottish companies, and included several plays by McGrath which have been generally regarded as

amongst his best" (123).

It is difficult to assess to what extent the views expressed by critics were shared by the audiences as a whole. It is possible that the "novelty" of this theatrical approach wore off for critics sooner than it did for audiences. The subsequent plays, even more than *The Cheviot*, were created to address the concerns of particular audiences. It is also important to note that the plays referred to by the critics above include those created for urban audiences and these shows were based on different forms, and their politics were, in some cases, more strident. Before turning to them, I would like to consider a selection of plays which were targeted for Highland tours after *The Cheviot*.

Life After The Cheviot

Boom (1974) was 7:84's second Highland show and it was intended to deal with many of the issues raised in *The Cheviot*. It picks up where *The Cheviot* left off by focusing on contemporary characters and the problems resulting from a growing oil industry and American involvement. McGrath claims that the land and oil questions which had been raised in an historical context in *The Cheviot* "were, and are, the two most important social, economic, political and cultural

questions for the Highlands, and it was necessary to spend more time on them and see them as urgent, contemporary problems affecting the lives of everybody" ("Boom"9). The title itself is ironic since the people of the Highlands were not benefiting from the supposed "boom"; the main character, Angie, hopes the audience is "enjoying all the television programmes about it". While the impact of oil on the economic fabric of the area is the main basis of the play, it is explored in a variety of ways: the problem of young people choosing to leave the Highlands, the effects of land speculation on the cost of living, unemployment in rural and urban areas, the role of local politicians and conflicts of interest, and international models for the development of natural resources. The play is structured into two main parts and, unlike *The Cheviot, Boom* features a central character, depicted in more naturalistic terms, Angie, who provides a common thread throughout the play. The first part deals with his life in the Highlands and particularly his relationship with Janet, the girlfriend who has gone to Glasgow to find a future. The decision to focus on such a situation arose out of the company's discussions with young people in the area:

We drew up figures of what they [young people just leaving school] were hoping to do: what they were going to work at, whether they were going to stay in the Highlands--the question of depopulation. I remember being struck at the time by the fact that about seventy-five per cent of

the boys actually wanted to stay in the Highland area and work either on the land or in related industry, which obviously wouldn't be possible. . . . And about seventy per cent of the girls wanted to leave (MacLennan 63).

The remainder of the first part deals with traditional enemies of the people of the Highlands and features a long speech by a landlord and an episode in which Angie confronts some ruling class weekenders who are massacring the wildlife. The second part of the play deals with economic problems and the specific changes being brought about by oil development.

The play is not a ceilidh, but it adopts a form closely related to it; it is subtitled "A Concert Party in the National Interest". Like *The Cheviot, Boom* is a strongly musical play, featuring both traditional Gaelic songs and numbers written specifically for the show. It makes greater use of contemporary music as is evident in a song such as "Bright Lights, Big City" and the creation of a subsidiary band called The Nortones, in addition to Force Ten Gaels. This shift may reflect both the focus on young people in the play itself, as well as the presence of musician/actor David Anderson.²⁹ As this outline of the play indicates, *Boom*

²⁹In the introduction to the play, McGrath describes Anderson's repertoire as "more funky than most: blues, rock, and his own unclassifiable songs". He joined the company when they were doing *The Game's a Bogey* and eventually left 7:84, along with David MacLennan, to form Wildcat, in order to explore a rock-based style of theatre.

shares many of the features of *The Cheviot*, but also represents a departure from that play. In my own assessment, based only on the script and not on the play in performance, *Boom* achieves some engaging and entertaining moments, but it lacks the overall power of *The Cheviot*. In the introduction to the play, McGrath admits the failure of certain aspects of *Boom*, and claims that many changes were made to improve it as it toured.³⁰ But the revised script indicates that these problems were not entirely remedied and the tentativeness in McGrath's account of the tour seems to suggest this as well:

I haven't tried to say much about what the content of the play is meant to be, or to help the reader visualise the total impact of the play. All I can say is that night after night it worked, sometimes better than others, to the satisfaction of the majority of the audience ("Boom" 31).

In my own reading of the play, the parts did not seem to come together as a whole, and yet I was uneasy about using the terms of more conventional dramatic criticism such as "unity" and "coherence" in order to account for the problem. But an examination of the components of *Boom*, and the ways

³⁰ McGrath attributes the weaknesses to the conditions under which they were working; the members of the company selected to work on *Boom* had four weeks to develop and rehearse the script and mount the show, while performing *The Game's* & *Bogey* in the evenings.

in which they are combined, reveals some of the striking differences between this play and *The Cheviot*, and why the one is more successful than the other.

Like *The Cheviot*, *Boom* is made up of the same basic elements--songs, sketches/scenes, monologues, and readings. One main difference is that *Boom* contains many more monologues than the earlier play. The monologues in *Boom* are not only greater in number, but also in length. These long speeches bring the play to a halt for much longer than at any point in *The Cheviot*, making for a more static play.

The dynamic of *Boom* is also affected by the limited use of audience participation and comedy. Instead of the exuberant compere played by Bill Paterson³¹, this play opens with Doli MacLennan, the company's gaelic singer, who tells the story of Finn McCool (a hero of Gaelic mythology), and the opening music is a slow tune on the fiddle entitled "Lament for the Children". This leads into the song "The Music of the Highlands", but it is not clear from the text if the audience is invited to join in. Not only does the play get off on a different footing, but it lacks the obvious sources of comedy found in *The Cheviot*. Mild forms

³¹Bill Paterson and John Bett, who performed many of the satirical roles in *The Cheviot*, were performing in *The Game's a Bogey* and were not involved in this production. The point is worth making because it underscores the importance of individual performers and particular types of talent.

of humour can be found in the segments involving Angie and Janet, such as Janet's departure scene in which each of her disapproving parents slips her a five pound note without wanting the other to know. Because these characters are conceived of in naturalistic terms (in spite of the non-illusionistic framework), they demand a more muted form of humour.

The play also includes satirical figures in the same general style of *The Cheviot*, but here they verge on the grotesque. At the end of Part One, Angie is caught poaching by a hunting party which includes Honourable Dougal and Lady Florence (updated versions of Lord Crask and Lady Phosp'ate) and Tony Trendsetter sporting high-powered guns, champagne, motor bikes and a helicopter. Because of the menacing nature of these characters and the blatant brutality of their acts, they cease to be funny. There is a degree of self consciousness within the play about the use of stereotypes, but it does little to remedy the jarring effect of these characters:

FLOR: Dougal's complaining that the whole play's trying to make us look like damn fools.

DOUGAL: Nya, nya, etc.

FLOR: [*To audience*] Dougal says that the play's not fair to our sort of person--

DOUGAL: Nya, nya, nya.

FLOR: Says we just don't do this sort of thing any more--[*They all stand in a line at the front of the stage.*] Well, we don't do we?

A further problem with the scene is the clash of

styles--namely the incongruous effect of including Angie, a naturalistically drawn character, in the same scene.

Even the monologues which feature stereotyped or caricatured figures have a nasty edge to them. For instance, there is a threatening and menacing tone to the monologue delivered by Hiram F. Firam, a character who berates the Highlanders in the audience for their lack of gratitude to American oil tycoons. He lacks the humour and deviousness of figures like Texas Jim or Andy McChuckemup in *The Cheviot*. Their counterparts in *Boom* are not objects of ridicule; the audience does not laugh "at" them in the same way. There are also far fewer satirical songs to lighten the mood.

But the play does have comic moments, the best of which are the appearances of the eccentric Mister McQuirk, with his hare-brained schemes for grants from the Highlands and Islands Development Board (H.I.D.B.). McQuirk's monologues are based on an older tradition of stand-up in which a comedian assumes a fictional character and the comedy is derived from the particular story he tells or the situation in which he finds himself.³² In *Boom*, McQuirk's

³²Wilmot points out that before stand-up comedy as we know it existed (the man in a suit telling a string of unrelated jokes), "solo comics relied on comic songs, usually sung in a character costume and often telling a story" (26). He uses the example of Dan Leno: "His style, which remained the standard for other comics for many years, was to appear as a particular character--a floor-walker, or an egg salesman, or a Beefeater" (26). Devlin also notes the use of character

appearances generate comedy and provide opportunities for audience participation, while at the same time making an important point about the H.I.D.B.'s limited contribution to economic growth in the region.

Along with providing an evening's entertainment, like *The Cheviot, Boom* tries to engage its audience in political debate. By means of direct address and readings the play draws analogies between the situation in Scotland and the exploitation of labour and natural resources in other countries, such as Persia, Brazil, and Chile, citing dates and events. This play is more self-consciously socialist in that it posits specific models such as Tanzania and Cuba as socialist solutions, but it also anticipates and mocks the objections wielded by the Right. For instance the Landlord begins his monologue with: "Many people, particularly the sort of person who knows nothing whatever about the Highlands, have been going around whining a lot of socialistical piffle about the Landlords in this part of the world". Not surprisingly, the socialist position is expounded by Angie, a more developed and sympathetic character, while the criticisms are put forth by characters presented in a more satirical way.

roles as the basis for variety comics' material in Scotland; the famous comics like Harry Gordon and Dave Willis were known for these sorts of characterizations (24).

There is a problem with plausibility in the presentation of documentary material in *Boom* which is not true of the other plays. While some of the analysis and information about the international context is conveyed by "readers" or performers speaking out of character, most of it is presented by Angie himself. Without underestimating young men in the Highlands, the likelihood of an unemployed lad like Angie having Nyerere's 1967 speech about the objective of socialism in Tanzania on hand to read to the audience is not great. After his encounter with the hunting party, Angie pulls out another book and reads from it about Castro's reforms to landownership in Cuba. The information is relevant to the issues raised in the play, but I would argue that it could be more effectively and plausibly presented by someone outside the fictional frame, as it is in *The Cheviot*. Even in this presentational style of theatre it is possible to strain the audience's credulity. More importantly, the manipulation of distance--the zoom in, zoom out effect--is lost.

The play as a whole is not structured in as effective and complex way as *The Cheviot*. While *The Cheviot* involves a tremendous range of material, it is held together by a chronological structure--an episodic historical account. But *Boom* lacks the coherence of the earlier play. About trying to find a shape for the play McGrath recounts: "We knew the

main areas the show was concerned with, and I had a very loose structural idea; to use Angie and Janet as the running story to link and relate the other elements to a recognisable Highland reality" ("Boom" 9). The Angie/Janet story does not provide an adequate framework and at one point in the play Angie himself acknowledges the disjointedness and tries to fill in events for the audience: "By the way, if you're worried about the plot and things like that" (28). Because of the looser structure of the play, it does not contain the patterns of repetition which were so effective in *The Cheviot*.

But like the earlier play, *Boom* ends on a strong note. The final scene takes the form of a town hall meeting, a familiar event for audience members. The Chairwoman and Councillor Brown introduce Mr. Bellamy, a representative for an oil company that is planning to build a pumping station in that particular location. The whole scene is designed to evoke a strong reaction from the audience, particularly when Bellamy indicates the site for the pumping station by placing a sticker on a map of the area. MacLennan describes the impact of the scene:

We had a map of that village, different in every place, and we'd put the pumping station on top of a crucial place in that village. If it was the pub, that usually worked a treat. . . . This section of the play used to create an extraordinary tension in the hall. The audience desperately *wanted* someone to speak up for them, and they could see nobody was *going* to, because

the opposition were all on the platform. Then, Bill Riddoch as Angie would get up and speak--about the need for local people to control the development in their area, and for them to unite against exploitation. He used to get the audience practically on their feet. One night in particular, at the end of his speech, there was silence, then one woman shouted from the back of the hall, 'He speaks for all of us' (65-66).

This scene leads directly into the finale which, like that of *The Cheviot*, urges the audience to take control of its future.

I have focused primarily on the problems with *Boom* for specific reasons. It indicates the risks in generalizing about form; the play seems to be composed of the same elements as *The Cheviot*, but closer analysis reveals crucial differences in the content and combinations of these components. By virtue of their absence or limited use, *Boom* underscores the importance of speed and energy in creating "moment-by-moment" effect, as well as the central role of comedy. This play also illustrates the "hit and miss" nature of this kind of theatre; a new combination of people, a different set of working conditions, a particular set of issues, and the desire to experiment will result in a different kind of production. But to regard *Boom* as typical of subsequent productions would be misleading. Several years passed before 7:84 created another show specifically for the Highlands, *The Catch* in 1981. It is not clear whether this was a result of the limited success of *Boom*, finances, or

simply greater attention paid to the urban shows. What is significant is that *The Catch* proved to be both a successful production in the style of *The Cheviot* and *Boom*, but also the last of the overtly political Highland shows.

The Catch or *Red Herrings in the Minch* was developed for two main reasons. First the need to do a play dealing with the fishing industry and military presence in the Islands (Hebrides, Skye, etc.) was becoming more urgent. McGrath's note in the programme outlines:

In this climate, what began, when we first discussed doing a 'fishing play' back in 1975, as a historical piece, has now become a wander through a chamber of grotesque horrors. As we looked around the shores of the Minch, we saw increasing evidence of the insulting way this part of the world is treated by the rulers of the military-industrial complex.

Secondly, the attempt to tour *Blood Red Roses*, a play about industrial politics, in the Highlands, reinforced for the company the importance of creating specifically for these audiences. About the experiment, McGrath notes:

In the more industrial areas [of the Highlands], Thurso, Stornoway, it [*Blood Red Roses*] went down a treat. In the quieter, rural areas there was a some disappointment: this is not for us, they told me--and they had different attitudes to industrial battles, and to the abrasive character of Bessie, the heroine. There was, in plain words, a clash of cultures. They had come to expect from our Highland shows since *The Cheviot* not only a show directly about their lives and their history, but also in a form that related to their own kinds of entertainment (*Bone 72*).

The Highland response to *Blood Red Roses* helps to illustrate the extent to which *localism* and *immediacy* contribute to the appeal and success of these kinds of plays. As a result, 7:84 decided to develop a new show around issues which had been of importance to the region for some time and they reverted to the musical format of the earlier shows.

Like *Boom*, *The Catch* deals with a contemporary context and it is an "issue" play held together by a narrative device. In this case, the framework is the story of Mary Hill, who while on holiday with her husband in Blackpool, succumbs to a yearning to explore her Scottish roots and leaves the fun fair behind for a coach trip to Skye. McGrath describes the motif which informs the story:

When the coach stops beside a sea-loch in the evening, she hears the seals calling her, and won't get back on the bus. He [Arthur], furious, rescues their luggage, but, as in the story of the Seal-wife, her coat is left behind. All this, you will understand, is far from naturalistic (*Bone* 73).

The couple is befriended by a local fisherman who takes them on a journey through the Minch. What the Hills and the audience learn is the "catch"--that this seemingly untouched landscape is not what it appears to be.³³

³³This sense of the title is summed up in the play's closing song whose refrain begins: "That's the Catch/Yes that's the Catch/For nothing's what it seems to be to-day". But it also plays on the idea of a fisherman's catch, the people being "caught", and the many policies which work in terms of a

While this play also deals with a wide range of issues such as the impact of technology on the fishing industry, NATO presence, the expansion of Stornoway airport for military purposes, biological warfare and the anthrax experiments on Gruinard island, it does not suffer from the disjointedness of *Boom*. The story of the Hills is introduced and held together by a narrator (not unlike the M.C. in *The Cheviot*) and Donald James, the fisherman, who takes them on the boat ride. The journey motif links the episodes together in much the same way as the chronological scheme in *The Cheviot*, and his role as storyteller/tour guide provides an effective way of presenting and contextualizing the issues.

Because of the framing devices, *The Catch* is a more integrated play than *Boom*, but it is also more consistent in terms of style. It is more like *The Cheviot* in that there is little concern with achieving any degree of realism even in the central characters, and it recaptures the humour and variety of the earlier play. So *The Catch* is able to move from the nightmarish opening sequence at the fun fair, to a song performed by a Klyescu Puffin and a Castlebay Crab (accompanied by Arthur on the banjo!). The play indulges in relentless satire with caricatures of a U.S. Marine, SDP supporters, and Free Presbyterian Church members, but the

"catch 22".

seriousness is always balanced by humour, resulting in a lighter tone than is evident in *Boom*. The increased number of satirical songs, such as those about the EEC, NATO, and the SDP, also contribute to liveliness and comic impact of this play.

The Catch shares with the other plays the tendency, characteristic of this kind of theatre, to present complex political issues in visual, often humorous terms, with the aim of clarifying and underscoring the ironies of a given situation. A good example is the U.S. Marine's demonstration of American defence plans for Stornoway airport; using the figures of Ivan, John Bull, Miss America, and Bonnie Scotland, the strategy is played out through the analogy of a football game. But some issues, such as the anthrax experiments on Gruinard, are dealt with in a serious, documentary way, recounted by a series of narrators.

The Catch is a significant production in the company's history for a number of reasons. It demonstrated that ten years after *The Cheviot*, they could still create an overtly political play (in some ways more scathing in its criticisms than earlier ones), using presentational, musical forms, and still generate an enthusiastic response from audiences. The audience figures for the autumn tour of the play indicate an average of eighty percent attendance rates in the Highlands and Western Isles, as well as the three week run at the

Edinburgh Festival.³⁴

McGrath's and MacLennan's personal accounts of the production do not reveal any of the tentativeness which characterizes the accounts of *Boom*. McGrath recalls: "We kept a log of audience comment and reaction for that tour, and it revealed an enthusiasm and sense of owning this kind of theatre, and a feeling of detailed involvement in what happened to it, that showed that our feelings for the form, our political identification with and public articulation of popular concerns and our on-going relationships with the communities were all receiving strong endorsement from large popular audiences" (*Bone* 73). MacLennan introduces her discussion of the production by stating that "For me it was the most co-operative and fulfilling of all the Highland tours including *The Cheviot*" (98) and describes the involvement of audiences in different locations according to their specific concerns: "In the ports, for example, worries about the fishing quotas, and the EEC directives, elsewhere--especially if there was a strong nuclear presence--defence issues" (104).

³⁴The charts of audience figures were made available to me by Elizabeth MacLennan. There is a breakdown for the Highland and Western Isles tour which indicates venue, capacity and total attendance for the each performance. The figures range from 68% in AppleCross, Village Hall (capacity 70, attendance 48) to 120% Dornie, Village Hall (capacity 150, attendance 180).

They also point to the critical acclaim *The Catch* received. The whole issue of "critical acclaim" is a contentious one, and more often than not, McGrath complains that the critics do not understand the work and hence their negative reviews cannot be taken seriously. It seems hypocritical to then take advantage of positive reviews by influential critics when they are available. Nevertheless, they are important pieces of information in any attempt to understand the impact of a given production. Both McGrath and MacLennan refer to reviews by Harold Hobson and John Fowler. The Hobson review which MacLennan quotes at length is interesting because it also offers a sense of how the play was staged:

McGrath's technique is based on the music hall and this gives him wonderful chances, with a few strips of painted cardboard, to summon up visions of a coach party, an aeroplane, and a dinghy rocking on a stormy sea, as well as a darkling glen backed by the sun setting over the quiet, misty coast. It is here that his heroine, played rather beautifully by Mary Ann Coburn as a girl who has just come over from Blackpool, wistfully has a vision . . . and Simon Mackenzie, piloting the girl and her husband across the waters, sings a threnody on the decline of the herring industry that floods the heart with sadness and a melancholy joy, which spills over into a mournful dignity in the antiphony of Mr. McGrath's lamentation on the effects of germ warfare. If you miss seeing *The Catch* your life will be the poorer for it ever afterwards" (101).

She quotes two different reviews by John Fowler and they are significant because one describes the show in Edinburgh and

the other in Stornoway. Writing for the *Glasgow Herald*, he claims:

The gift of the 7:84 Company Scotland is to make political theatre fun, a rare combination. . . the audience was soon happily singing along in rebellious chorus. If it goes with a swing in Edinburgh, what a hit it will be in the West Highlands (MacLennan 103).

Later, reviewing a performance in Lewis in the Outer Hebrides, he writes: "Four hundred people came out in the rain, and in spite of the apocalyptic message, laughed immoderately. Seeing *The Catch* in Stornoway was for me a remarkable vindication of the argument that John McGrath puts forward in his book . . . *A Good Night Out*" (104). Further evidence of reactions to the show are recorded in the log book that the company kept of the tour and letters written to and about the production. MacLennan includes a letter published in the *Stornoway Gazette* which clearly indicates not just the sheer enjoyment of the show, but also the confidence, encouragement, and solidarity it helped to inspire (104).

The Catch represents an achievement, but also a turning point in the work of the company and more specifically in its Highland shows. MacLennan argues: "It was also the last show to date, apart from *Baby and the Bathwater* in which the preparation, research, discussion, writing, re-writing, rehearsal, performance and development

of the performance throughout the tour bore the particular imprint of John McGrath's style, his way of working, and our joint experience as part of a group" (98). In this way, the next Highland show, *The Albannach* (1985), marks a striking departure from the plays discussed so far. The play is a musical adaptation (by McGrath) of the novel of the same name written by Fionn MacColla, published in 1932. It relies almost entirely on a dramatic rendering of the story and, with the exception of some songs and the use of direct address by the main character (who narrates his own story), it is not based on the variety format of the previous plays. It follows the Clydebuilt season in 1982 which was the beginning of an increasing reliance on adaptations of existing plays, written in a naturalistic mode, also from the twenties and thirties. While this new direction was, on one hand, an attempt to pay tribute to neglected writers and popular works of the past, it was also a practical move in terms of generating suitable new material for the company to produce. It is worth noting that with the exception of the occasional second tour of a play, such as *The Cheviot* and *The Albannach*, the company mounted new productions every year.

The Albannach also marks the beginning of the conscious depoliticization of the company's work. Gone from the programme is the usual paragraph explaining that

"Inevitably we talk politics: because it is a reality of life today" and the play itself opens with the Narrator addressing the audience:

Hello, and welcome to 7:84's new show; it's nice to be back in . . . As you know, we usually bring something about life in these parts--but hell of a political: this time, we thought we'd make a change--something bland and completely non-controversial; so we decided to do a book...

The novel itself was important at the time it was written because of its realistic treatment of Highland life, and the story deals with the coming of age of young man named Murdo. He tries to escape the claustrophobic existence of life in a community of Seceders (Presbyterian Free Church) in the Highlands for a university education in Glasgow, but, when his father dies, he is forced back to assume responsibility for his mother and the croft. The play explores conflicts within Highland life and the focus is on internal, not external, enemies of Gaelic culture, namely Scottish Calvinism. The story is told from a personal perspective, with no attempt to relate Murdo's experience to an economic or international context. Murdo and the lifeless community are revived, not by socialism, but by the spirit of Gaelic music.

Even a preview notice for the production in the *Glasgow Herald*, by Charles Hart, underscores the shift in the company's work, describing *The Albannach* as "[b]igger

because there will be 11 people on stage, including the folk band Ossian, and more ambitious because it marks a move away from the overtly political declamatory style with which the company has become a mite too comfortable over the years." The same article quotes McGrath's comments about the show in which he stresses the scale, rather than the politics, of *The Albannach*: "I felt *The Catch* was the end of the line for those particular shows . . . We have to keep developing, keep growing, otherwise we can too easily be pigeonholed." Hart goes on to make a connection between this attempt at "artistic versatility" and the withdrawal of ACGB's grant to 7:84 England in the previous year.

It is possible that the move to increase the scale of the Highland shows was made in the interests of asserting the importance of this aspect of the company's work, because it was at this time that the various strands (Highland touring, large-scale Mayfest shows, and small-scale industrial tours) were being formalized. The decision to include music written by Eddie McGuire and performed by the popular Scottish folk band Ossian may also have been related to a need to insure the success of the show. *The Albannach* received enthusiastic responses by critics and audiences. Entries and reviews included in the log book for the tour indicate high attendance figures and praise the quality of the performances, the inventive staging, and the music--from

Aberdeen to Stornoway. The dances which followed many of the performances helped to draw audiences and made the tour both an enjoyable and exhausting one for the cast.

Ironically, the ambitious move to take a larger scale show to the Highlands was not looked upon favourably by the Scottish Arts Council. MacLennan recalls the drama officer's comments at the end of that year, "'You took a cast of eleven on a Highland tour. You must be out of your mind.'" and claims "It became a black mark against us--a sign of lack of New Realism!" (148) It is not surprising that the subsequent Highland shows in the eighties were scaled down to casts of three and four, toured for shorter periods of time, and relied on sponsorship by McGrath's own Freeway Films. *There is a Happy Land* (1986) is a history of the Highlands told through "the Songs that sprang from the People" and *Mairi Mhor: The Woman From Skye* (1987) is the story of Mary MacPherson (1821-98) who wrote some of the most important songs in the Gaelic language. While these shows re-introduce some of the polemical tendencies of the earlier plays, they are mainly celebrations of Highland life and traditions.

The Highland plays remain one of 7:84 Scotland's important achievements. This work represents a commitment, over a period of fifteen years, to addressing the history and contemporary concerns of the people of a particular

region. The marxist analysis of political and economic problems, and the practice of regarding the Scottish situation in an international context, were part of a deliberate attempt to inform, empower, and mobilize people. But the plays were first and foremost a celebration of Highland culture and "a good night out"; the consistent use of music, songs, and comedy within the plays, as well as dances following the performances, attest to this. The most noticeable changes in this area of the company's work over the years involved the shift away from the polemical and documentary treatment of issues found in *The Cheviot, Boom,* and *The Catch*, to the narrative and celebratory plays of the eighties--*The Albannach, There is a Happy Land,* and *Mairi Mhor*. In spite of these thematic and formal differences between actual plays, the productions were characterized by economical but inventive staging techniques and always designed to work in small and unequipped spaces. But most importantly, what all the plays have in common is an interest in maximizing the involvement and participation of the audience for whom they are created.

Playing for Urban Audiences

While the urban shows share some of the features of the Highland plays, they deal with different subjects and

draw on different traditions of popular entertainment. This separate strand in the company's work grew out of lessons learned while touring *The Cheviot* and it further demonstrates McGrath's theory about the need to vary the language of theatre in order to reach different audiences. *The Cheviot* had toured venues in the industrial belt of Scotland, as well as the Highlands, and it was well received in both areas. McGrath relates the success of the play with urban audiences to the fact that "the families of well over half the working-class of those areas settled there *from* the Highlands for precisely the reasons given in the play" and they "responded to the *ceilidh* form with recognition and pleasure" (*Good* 70). But it also became apparent that, like the Highlands, the industrial areas had their own specific concerns:

The Cheviot, popular and appreciated as it was, did not touch on the urban misery, the architectural degradation, the raw, alcohol-riddled despair, the petty criminal furtiveness, the bleak violence of living in many parts of industrial Scotland (*Good* 71).

There were also new venues associated with the urban working-class which had not as yet been explored, namely the circuit of miner's clubs and union halls. The show directly following *The Cheviot* which was created for this particular context was *The Game's a Bogey* (1974).

The venues for this new strand of the company's work

are central to understanding *The Game's a Bogey* as an event. Touring working men's clubs and union halls not only required tapping into a new network of people, but it also dictated the form of the play. In order to set up a touring circuit members of the company approached various organizations, as MacLennan recalls:

And we simultaneously went around trades councils and shop-floors and made our own contacts, arranging where to play. . . . Doli went to Fife, Bill and Alex, John and Dave to the trades councils, to Whitburn, Glenrothes and so on. I went to talk to the head of the STUC . . . about what they thought their relationship should be with 7:84. They were very helpful at *all* those levels, very interested, and placed great importance on our work (60).

But the bookings were only a first step and they were well aware that playing a miner's club would be a different experience than performing in a village hall in the Highlands.

One of the main differences between the two, quite apart from the makeup of the audience, is the occasion for the performance. In the case of the Highland tours, audiences go to the hall, community centre, etc. with the intention of watching the show. But clubs are organized for the benefit of members who are out for a night of drinking and entertainment--the performance in this context is just part of the entertainment provided for a group who will gather regardless. McGrath recalls the keen awareness of the

potential for failure in such a setting and, in *A Good Night Out*, he offers a detailed account of the first performance of the play in a miner's club in Glenrothes, and describes how the play "took the trouble to contact and reassure the audiences, to show the signs of class solidarity in a theatrical and personal as well as political way, and to speak the language of the audience in a new and intriguing way" (76).

Subtitled, "7:84's John MacLean Show", *The Game's a Bogey* uses the story of John MacLean, a socialist hero from the days of the Red Clyde, as a framework for dealing with contemporary problems in industrial areas. The choice to focus on MacLean was based on the same rationale for highlighting the victories in the history of the clearances in *The Cheviot*. But rather than tracing the history of Clydeside socialist politics chronologically, *The Game's a Bogey* intercuts between MacLean's era (approximately 1903-23) and contemporary life in Glasgow. The connection between "then" and "now" is made late in the play when MacLean calls for a Scottish Worker's Republic, and the actor playing him steps out of the role to declare the need for this kind of self-determination in the present. It is this basic argument that holds the different segments of the play together.

This play clearly takes the form of a variety show and

even describes itself as such. Lachie MacDonald, the keystone cop in pursuit of John MacLean, occasionally makes the performers continue their acts, insisting that this be a "fun-loving, all-Scottish, variety show" and Bill Paterson opens the show, as himself, welcoming the audience and promising "a few songs, some acts, some facts about a man who lived fifty years ago, and some facts about the way we live today." The opening is of particular interest because of its "show-biz" style. Paterson introduces himself and the band members with a few wisecracks, and the band even plays a "mock-30s intro-number". The whole introductory sequence (speeches and song) stress entertainment--"Have we got a show for you tonight." There seems to be a conscious attempt to downplay the idea of "theatre"; the only two performers who function primarily as "actors" (they do not actually play instruments) are introduced quickly by name, while the musicians' introductions are more elaborate. Bands are a more regular feature of club entertainment than are theatre groups.

The songs, monologues, and sketches are all performed in the same presentational style used in *The Cheviot*. But the main differences between the plays are evident in the "content" of these elements. For instance, both the Highland and industrial shows make extensive use of music, but not the same kind of music. The former make use of traditional

Gaelic songs and folk music, while the latter rely on more contemporary forms of music, especially rock. Not surprisingly, it was for *The Game's a Bogey* that musician David Anderson and singer Terry Neason, "of the molasses-candy-black-velvet-voice" joined the company. The functions of the songs, as in the other plays discussed, range from filler numbers like "Let's take a walk down by the Clyde", and satiric pieces about football fans, to powerful, evocative songs that are thematically related to the scenes, such as "She's a Girl". The music is calculated to give the show an urban "feel".

The subject matter and the language of these plays are as specific to the industrial areas as those of the Highland shows are to rural areas. The strands of the play which depict contemporary life revolve around a young couple, Geordie and Ina, and a young rebellious thug, McWilliam. These characters are treated, like Angie and Janet in *Boom*, in a way that achieves a naturalistic effect, but through broadly sketched traits and situations. They are presented in a sympathetic light, but sympathy is evoked only long enough to engage the audience's interest in them--the real emphasis is on the "system" in which they try to survive. The idiom/accents as well as the dilemmas of these characters are typically working-class Glaswegian, giving the play a strong "local" feel. Ina, an eighteen year old

afraid of being "left on the shelf" marries Geordie, "a feller with a job", and in spite of their hopes, they end up in a downward psychological and financial spiral. While the situations are all too real and recognizable, the play deals with them in often humorous and non-realist ways. It also includes caricatures of policemen and industrialists in the spirit of *The Cheviot*, in fact, Andy McChuckemup makes a reappearance.

The monologue, as a component of the play, takes on a different function than it did in *The Cheviot*. Because of the presence of three-dimensional characters such as Ina and Geordie, like Angie and Janet in *Boom*, the monologue provides a shorthand way of introducing and developing them. Ina's first monologue acts as a kind of summary of her experiences and aspirations, and while it is amusing, it also evokes sympathy for her as a character. McGrath is deliberate in his use of this technique:

Monologues are important because the extended exposure of one character allows the audience to come close to an understanding of them, and allows them and the actor to play out a great deal of the relationship between that character and their context--society, community, family, class. It allows them to reveal their history, their motives, and their hopes for the future, to come closer and at the same time to have a distance, a perspective, a self-awareness that is not so easy in naturalistic scenes. Because they have to deal directly with the audience, the audience will judge them as they will judge a person they meet for the first time. The audience's critical faculties will be heightened, even while they are enjoying themselves

(MacLennan 132).

The same device is used to ironic effect in the monologues of Andy McChuckemup and Lavinia McBungle. Both of these characters, treated in satirical terms as their names indicate, deliver extended speeches directly to the audience. These comic monologues are a major source of humour in the play, but they also expose the hypocrisy and greed of these figures. On a more serious level, MacLean's speeches in the play (actual addresses he gave in his lifetime) constitute a series of monologues and make up a large part of the political analysis within the play. As an historical character of immense reputation, he is allowed to speak for himself, but more importantly, these speeches delivered to a contemporary audience are those he addressed to crowds of workers in his own day.

The advantages of the variety show format and the freedom from narrative or naturalistic restraints is demonstrated in the sketches in *The Game's a Bogey*. The TV quiz game episode is a source of humour, with its send up of the English game show compere and his assistant Brassie, but it also provides a effective means of indicating what Ina and Geordie will come to experience in their lives. While on their honeymoon, they stumble into roles as contestants on "Beat the System" and learn a hard lesson about how difficult it is to do just that. Geordie turns the wheel,

cranking out commodities, until the buzzer goes, and then Ina can spend the money he has earned. Each time they think they are gaining ground, their spending power is actually diminished and it becomes more difficult to keep up. The scene makes use of a popular form, the game show, to illustrate both the dilemma of the wage labourer in a capitalist system, but it is also a shorthand, yet powerful, way of depicting the couple's "future". The point is reinforced when the same dilemma gets played out on the factory floor later in the play.

The same principle of economy is applied to the staging of these plays. The urban tours required sets as portable as those for the Highlands. The published scripts of many of the urban plays include stage directions, as in the case of *The Game's a Bogey*. The note calls for a mainly clear acting space with a lamppost to one side marking the area for MacLean and the band on the other side:

Other 'sets' are portable objects brought onto the central area for the scenes where they are required. Most require nothing. The 'Beat the System Machine'--a contrivance based on a the trivial competition devices of T.V. games--should turn round from its glittery side to become, later, the 'work-machine', the real thing. Lighting can be simple or ambitious, depending on available resources. The main visual impact is in the costumes.

This kind of versatility is a common feature of the set design for these shows. Often all the scenery requirements

are met by a few well designed items which have multiple uses, as well as the occasional painted back cloth--but always treated in stylized terms.

The scenic aspects of the productions are ultimately secondary to engaging the audience, emotionally and intellectually, through the play itself. Like *The Cheviot, The Game's a Bogey*, hooks the audience with comedy and powerful songs before it ventures into gloomier territory. For instance, the scenes depicting Ina's and Geordie's "courtship" and wedding are humourous and lively, but both of them reach desperate states later in the play. The same pattern is applied to the presentation of McWilliam who becomes increasingly unhinged. The audience is drawn into the stories of these young contemporary figures, but also encouraged to view their problems in a broader context and in a complex way. But the final note of the play, if not celebratory, is certainly positive and defiant. MacLean, as the symbol of the Red Clyde, has the final word and appeals to the working-class to take control of its own future. The closing song asserts the need to "Get them [the capitalists] out".

The urban shows, like the Highland plays which followed *The Cheviot*, received mixed responses. Comparing *The Game's a Bogey* to the first play, Joseph Farrell claims:

it never carried the same conviction. The disquisitions on surplus value sounded contrived

and the straight statement palled. There was an undeniable force in the dialogue and the thrust of the action and a great deal of broad humour in, for instance, the grotesque policeman who shadowed MacLean, but the politics were not so well integrated or such a natural expression of the events depicted (51).

Angus Macleod, who regards McGrath as an entertainer first and foremost, believes that the lack of subtlety politically is not sufficient reason for dismissing the play:

That the message is more an extreme didacticism is no ground for dismissal either since it is the politics, always, which are really objected to and not the tactic. Indeed, it is the way that the political/moral 'message' is put across--the flagrant, continuous harassment of the audience's feelings by the author--that is the very entertainment of 'The Game's a Bogey' (13).

In light of this emphasis on entertainment, it is interesting to consider a review of a Dublin performance of the play for *Plays and Players* which focuses almost entirely on the quality of the performances and power of the show:

The Game's a Bogey, John McGrath's unerring blend of John MacLean's pioneering political speeches in Glasgow, all the versatility one had thought long disappeared from Variety, and the simplest presentation of real people in real situations was a winner from the opening night. The dedication, the talent and the impact is nothing short of devastating. . . . The versatility is unbelievable. Bill Paterson slips out from behind the drums to don hat and coat and become MacLean on a soap-box before our eyes . . . Allan Ross doubles as a towering piece of satire and fiddler extraordinary. Terry Neason is worth her own show as a singer. Alex Norton embodies the deprived loser, the urban reject MacWilliam, with bitter, destructive savagery, eyes blazing with rabid

hatred for everyone and everything. At times this ceases to be a presentation and achieves the status of the thing itself. See it on its home ground and tremble (Archer 34).

Even those who found the blatant political message hard to swallow generally agreed that the show contained brilliant moments, but they were far less forgiving about the next play, *Little Red Hen*.

For all that McGrath's work is criticized for being "formulaic"³⁵, the urban plays actually differ more from one another than do the Highland plays. What remains consistent is the nature of the political analysis, and as Macleod suggests, this may be the source of objections more than the plays themselves. *Little Red Hen* (1975) helps to illustrate how strong reactions to the politics of a play can completely overshadow an appreciation of its artistic and entertainment qualities.

In formal and stylistic terms, *Little Red Hen* employs many of the techniques already discussed, but it differs from *The Game's a Bogey* in that it moves away from the variety show format and is held together by a narrative instead. Thematically, it continues the history of famous Scottish socialists begun with the "John MacLean show", but

³⁵In my interview with McGrath I asked how he addressed this complaint. He recalled a director of the Scottish Arts Council saying "Oh, it is the formula again" and McGrath replied: "When you go to an Ibsen play do you say 'Oh, it is the formula again', or do you say it is another Ibsen play?"

expands it to include Willie Gallacher, James Maxton, and John Wheatley. The play is also structured around a "then" and "now" scenario; the Old Hen, a crusty seventy-five year old socialist, tells her grand-daughter, a committed young SNP supporter, the story of her life as it unfolded personally and politically, in the days of the Red Clyde. In the opening scene, Henrietta finds the Young Hen performing as part of a troupe doing a Harry Lauder routine which McGrath describes as "an appalling 'light entertainment from Scotland' show, all dressed up in Japanese tartan" (*Good* 67). She then uses the troupe to act out the scenes from the past as she tries to teach her grand-daughter an important lesson about the need for a Scottish Socialist Republic, not simply an independent Scotland. While the premise may seem far fetched, the play was actually inspired by many people of that generation who McGrath and company met while on tour in the industrial areas, who still express strong feelings about that time. Both *The Game's a Bogey* and *Little Red Hen* use the leaders and the supporters of Red Clyde earlier in the century as a positive model of a working-class political movement, in much the same way that the "victories" of the people were used in the Highland plays to encourage resistance and hope.

Given that the production included many of the same dynamic performers who had made the previous shows such

successes, it becomes increasingly clear that the critical controversy surrounding this play was based more on the relentless attack it made on the Scottish Nationalist Movement, than on any inherent artistic failings. The play's ability to hit raw nerves becomes obvious in an account by David Campbell and Douglas Gifford, "former wholehearted admirers" of 7:84 until *Little Red Hen*:

By all means warn as the Cheviot did against Nationalist excesses; but never again should the company descend to the cheapness of its emotive, associational smear of the SNP in 'Little Red Hen'. . . . In all the cheap jibes about policies on postage stamp size papers, in all the distortions to make the SNP into a party that they are not--as in the claim that after independence there won't be any place or need for other political points of view-- in all this McGrath flouted his avowed aim of giving facts from a socialist point of view. . . . We must regret the decline into the sort of arrogance we see in a 'Little Red Hen' which lumps together the shoddy second rate opportunist, the facile and perhaps fascist, jingoist Nationalist with men and women who genuinely respond with an honesty, energy and devotion to the plight of their native country (7).

Such a response suggests that some targets for satire are more acceptable than others. As long as the company's work was attacking "enemies" about which there was a consensus, particularly outsiders, then the socialist sentiments appealed to a broader spectrum. This case helps to demonstrate the implications of party affiliation or non-affiliation for political theatre companies. The show not only divided audiences, it also had an impact on the

company's internal structure. Doli MacLennan objected to the treatment of the Party and left the company at this time (MacLennan 77).

But the controversy did not stop the company from venturing into other areas of Scottish working-class life and politics. Two plays in the late seventies are based on critiques of their audiences in different ways. *Out of Our Heads* (1976) examines the serious problem of alcoholism and its impact on different aspects of working-class life. The political angle focuses on the crippling effects of alcohol through the figures of Davey, a frustrated shop steward, and his fellow worker, Harry, an alcoholic. Davey, the committed socialist and labour organizer, becomes sickened and disillusioned about the apathy of the people he has worked so hard to protect:

I spend my life doin' battle with the capitalists on behalf of the workers, tryin' to organise for a better life for myself, for my kids and for everybody else: and where is everybody else? In the boozier. They don't even want to know.

But the play looks beyond the alienation of the worker to explore the consequences of alcoholism for working-class women. June, Harry's physically battered and psychologically devastated wife, represents an important step in the company's treatment of social problems affecting women. The show had a strong appeal once again for younger audiences because of the attention to the process of socialization,

both in terms of attitudes towards alcohol and gender roles.

The company was fully aware of the sensitive nature of the material, but they felt that their relationship with their audiences was strong enough to withstand the pressure. This was a necessary direction for the company, according to McGrath:

Just as we need to reassess critically the forms of popular entertainment as we use them, so we must reassess our audience's ideology. The contradictions within the working class are many, and much of working-class life is backward and reactionary--not to say self-destructive--sexism, racism, authoritarianism, abuse of children, alcoholism, willful intellectual self-mutilation . . . Therefore, I think, a great deal of popular theatre has got to be 'about' a socialist criticism of the audience. . . . but it must be done from a position of basic political solidarity and cultural identity (*Good* 97).

With regard to the play's actual impact, he claims: "I don't know what concrete differences it made to men's drinking habits--maybe some, temporary ones--but it certainly made a difference to people's attitudes to the situation of battered women in Scotland, and to the refuges" (*Good* 98).

As with other productions, *Out of Our Heads* evoked a range of responses. It is possible to find the sort of sarcastic, dismissive account of the play such as the review of a performance in London: "And from this deftly staged scene [a flashback to Harry's schooldays] it is hard to avoid the conclusion that, before the booze had ever taken its grip, Harry was just as mulish, his friends just as

oafish, and his wife-to-be, if anything, even more looney. It is hardly the fault of drink that these characters are not revolutionaries" (Stothard 32). Juxtaposed with this is a recollection of the play by a young Scottish woman years after the production. She had just joined the company's production crew for the Mayfest production in 1988, and when we discussed her attitude towards 7:84's work over the years, she referred specifically to *Out of Our Heads*, which she saw at age fifteen, as "an important experience", one which "left a mark".

Joe's Drum (1979) was another play which criticized its audience--but this time the attack was on the Scottish population as a whole, with little attempt at sensitivity. The play was McGrath's response to the failure of the devolution vote of 1979. In his scathing remarks in the preface to the play, he blames everyone from students to unions and political groups for the "dangerous bored fatalism in the air, an uncharacteristic passivity" and offers the play as "both an expression of anger and frustration, and a tocsin to alert the audiences to the full monstrosity of what was going on".

McGrath delves further back in time than usual in the urban plays to conjure up the figure of "General" Joe Smith, an eighteenth century cobbler from the Cowgate in Edinburgh, a hero of the people best known for inciting riots with his

drum. The political events have forced him from his grave:

I've been deid and cauld in the earth two hundred year, and I've slept in my grave through mony's the disaster-- aye--through Napoleon's wars and the Kaiser's wars and Hitler's wars too. But the thunderous apathy of the devolution vote has finally roused me from the sleep of the just--Ye had yer chance to beat yer ain drum--And what did you dae? Oh, I'll tell you what you did . . .
Naethin' ye've done naethin' (8).

The audience is as much a part of the subject matter of this play as are events of the past:

(Goes and peers at the audience) From the look of ye--well maist of ye--ye're the common cry--ye're what the ancient Greeks used to call the Hoi Poloi--or what the politicians call the Great Unwashed--ye're what I'd call the Mob. And if you are entitled, if you are *qualified*, to belong to a guid auld Scottish Mob--then you have a *responsibility*: and in my day, every man, woman and child took their responsibility seriously.
(Beats drum) (9).

For the remainder of the play, Joe, his apologetic wife Jeannie, and a series of historical personages use earlier political struggles to try to illustrate the importance of "fighting".

The play is openly confrontational and contains many long speeches, but also includes good songs and comic routines. This was the company's first production after David MacLennan, David Anderson and Terry Neason left to form Wildcat, so the music was written and performed by the folk group Finn McCuill. This tendency to include guest musicians, as they did again later in *The Albannach*, is

practical on one level, but also important to the quality and appeal of a production. Bold argues that after having become "predictable and repetitive", *Joe's Drum* marked a return "to basic principles of showmanship" in 7:84's work (309).

While the shift in the political tone of the Highland plays is not evident until *The Albannach* (1985), there is a striking development in the urban plays written by McGrath directly following *Joe's Drum*. Published together as "Two Plays for the Eighties", *Blood Red Roses* (1980) and *Swings and Roundabouts* (1980) represent formal and thematic departures from the work of the seventies.

Of the two plays, *Blood Red Roses* is more in keeping with the earlier work because it deals with labour disputes and union politics from an overtly socialist perspective. But the programme suggests a self-consciousness about its own political approach, describing industrial militancy as "now distinctly out of fashion" and justifying the choice of subject matter: "it seemed important--if a little unfashionable--to take a longer look at one of these militants, and at the whole question of what 'fighting' means in the age of the multiple war-head".

While the focus on the importance of "fighting" is a continuation of the main theme of *Joe's Drum*, *Blood Red Roses* presents its case in a far less confrontational way.

The play tells the story of the central character, Bessie Gordon, covering the years between 1951-79. Bessie, a strong and spirited girl from the Highlands, moves to the city with her father, and gets a job in a factory in East Kilbride, where she becomes actively involved in labour politics. The scenes are presented in naturalistic terms, but punctuated by introductions, songs, and monologues. The techniques are not new ones, but the arrangement differs from previous plays. These devices frame and embellish, but they are not part of the action or the "story" in the same way that they were in earlier plays. Each episode is introduced by the Announcer who gives a title or a one-line summary, as well as the time, place and the government in power at the time--but he never intrudes during the actual scenes. These "introductions" function more like those in Brecht's plays. The songs (less prominent than usual) are performed after the close of an episode. Rather than interrupting the more conventionally dramatized scenes, the monologues constitute mini-scenes in themselves, offering us insight into the characters. While the structure is an effective one, it is far less radical in its form than earlier plays, and represents a return to a dialogue-oriented approach. It is not surprising that this play was adapted as a film for television.

Another significant feature of *Blood Red Roses* which

indicates a shift in the tone of the plays in the final scene. Noticeably absent is the speech or song directed at the audience, reinforcing the play's message/argument and calling for action. In this case the characters or the actors do not step out of the play to do this; instead the closing scene between Bessie and her daughters ends and there is a "(*Crossfade to singer*)" followed by:

Now that is our story
 A tale that goes on--
 Is it true or a lie or a fiction?
 Is it right or mistaken the story we tell:
 Is it fit to be told to your children?
FADE

This development was not accidental, and McGrath attributes it to the changing attitudes of people in the theatre business--not audiences:

There's a difference now of mood and tone about what we can do and what we can't do. We tend not to end the show with a 'Kick the Buggers Out' number--in the early years we'd make a gesture, usually a musical one, of solidarity with the audience's political struggles, which would be oppositional, strong, and fervent. Now we tend to make that solidarity apparent in different ways--possibly in more subtle, understated, less fervent ways ("Behind" 12).

But he maintains that audiences continued to demand and respond favourably to strong political statements. Since McGrath seems never to have set out to please his colleagues in the "profession", one can only assume he was catering to the funding bodies.

The other play in the volume "Plays for the Eighties" could be described more as an anomaly than a development. McGrath claims that he wrote *Swings and Roundabouts* as a variant on Noel Coward's *Private Lives* (Bone 67). The play deals with the events in a night at a "cheap and nasty" hotel outside of Falkirk, where the paths of two honeymoon couples cross--a management consultant and his second wife and a young working-class couple. The play is about the issue of class and how, in combination with gender, it works to define people. But this familiar territory is explored in almost entirely naturalistic terms, which McGrath acknowledges in the programme notes as "a departure from our familiar style". This deliberate attempt in the Thatcherite eighties to "soft pedal on the agitational politics and to expose more gently the realities of the way class works" was received in different ways by different audiences:

It was remembered by many of the less political people who came to see it at The Citizens Theatre, Glasgow, as one of the our most effective pieces. In the Gents at Paisley Trades Council they reckoned we'd gone soft, were backsliding (Bone 69).

One thing was clear; despite occasional forays into overtly political material, 7:84's work took a different shape in the eighties.

For the Clydebuilt season of 1982, the company turned to the past for a body of plays. Although plays such as *Men*

Should Weep and *In Time of Strife* deal with the realities of working-class life, they are naturalistic in form and are more like period pieces than the presentational/confrontational plays the company had done earlier. It is also at this time that McGrath's own plays ceased to be the cornerstone of the company's work. Of the plays produced between 1982 and 1988 by 7:84 Scotland, only *The Baby and the Bathwater* (1985) was written solely by McGrath for an urban tour. Significantly, this one-woman show which takes a critical look at the writings of George Orwell in a series of sketches, has been described as "noticeably more cerebral and abstract than anything 7:84 had previously attempted" (Farrell 52).

While the urban shows as a whole demonstrate a greater degree of experimentation, particularly in formal terms, they also reveal the company's compromises more clearly than the Highland shows. Perhaps the visibility of the urban shows made them more vulnerable to criticism, but the toning down of the politics also had much to do with the audiences for those plays. In MacLennan's view, it became more difficult to use the language they were accustomed to using; as she explained in an interview:

I think there is more of a problem with polemic now, in the 80's, than there was then [at the time of doing their first urban show, *The Game's a Bogey*]. I think it is because the language of polemic has become devalued. I think that in the ten years since Thatcher arrived on the scene,

there has been a very concentrated attempt to remove the language of politics from people's lives, and I don't think its an accident. . . . She and her team have done a very good job unfortunately, particularly among young people who feel that they can't do anything about anything. You have to tread very carefully talking the language of politics, so it's a much more difficult job now.³⁶

Interestingly, the Highland audiences seemed to remain more open to polemic, but only as long as it was directed at issues related to their own lives, such as the land question. Also the form of these plays remained more consistent. Because McGrath funded the later Highland tours through his own production company, Freeway Films, he had a greater degree of artistic control.

I have selected the plays discussed in this section on the basis of both the scripts available to me and in order to indicate the range of experiments and the developments in 7:84's work. The plays illustrate how McGrath achieved in practice the theories he outlines in *A Good Night Out*. Or, put another way, they offer examples of the experiments he was theorizing from. He makes full and varied use of the ingredients he believes are central to working-class forms

³⁶It is important to note here that, although she does not specify, MacLennan is really talking about "class" politics. While there was an growing openness to strong statements about gender, race, and sexual orientation in the eighties, a Marxist vocabulary and the belief in socialism as a solution to current social and economic problems seemed increasingly dated.

of entertainment, as he defines these elements. But the plays also tell another story; as the artistic products of a company over a period of almost fifteen years, they bear the scars and the rewards of changing conditions within the group itself and external to it. The different patterns of development evident in the Highland and urban productions are also instructive because they reinforce McGrath's theories about adapting the language of theatre for different audiences. For this reason, *Blood Red Roses* is a particularly interesting case; in an attempt to bridge the gap between these audiences, the company learned an important lesson about the political and entertainment values of those groups.

In a larger context, McGrath and 7:84 made an enormous contribution to Scottish theatre through their commitment to experimenting with theatre as an entertainment and informational medium, and to providing theatre for audiences in industrial and rural areas of Scotland. In both cases they toured to and performed in locations and venues which had not been visited by theatre companies before, let alone by plays about their own lives. Angus Macleod, writing in 1976 about the reactions to *The Game's a Bogey*, reminds his readers that "the hysterical critics of McGrath very often fail to notice that their own protests are McGrath's greatest justification. That is, up until three or four

years ago, no one could attack Scottish political theatre simply because the genre . . . did not exist" (12). The work of the company was enjoyed by broadly based audiences and, particularly in the early years, attracted what Bold describes as a "cult" audience: "Just as committed young Scotsmen of the 1960s had worn badges proclaiming their allegiance to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, so in the 1970s the red badges of the 7:84 Company were conspicuous by their presence on Scottish lapels" (308). They also had an influence, like Theatre Workshop in the fifties and sixties, on a whole generation of young theatre workers who they trained and, in some cases, politicized.

Finally, it is necessary to address the political impact of 7:84's work. This is unfortunately an almost impossible thing to measure. First, the criticism frequently directed at this kind of work is that it preaches to the converted. One thing that is clear is that McGrath has never pretended to want to convert mass uninitiated audiences to socialism. The plays are deliberately "local" in the general sense of that term; they were written for a specific audience and designed to take that audience in a certain political direction. The plays assume a shared, collective body of experience, language, and attitudes towards social and political institutions. This is not a failure or weakness; it is the strength of theatre work which is rooted

in a community. It is precisely by being able to capture the familiar, in its humorous and serious aspects, and to articulate the shared identity of a community that this kind of theatre has the power to make audiences feel important--that they matter--and to remind them that their values and way of life are worth fighting for. The importance of validating an audience's experiences, particularly one not accustomed to seeing itself represented on stage, cannot be overestimated. At the end of his introduction to *The Cheviot*, McGrath asserts:

The theatre can never *cause* a social change. It can articulate the pressures towards one, help people to celebrate their strengths and maybe build their self-confidence. It can be a public emblem of inner, and outer, events, and occasionally a reminder, an elbow-jogger, a perspective-bringer. Above all, it can be the way people can find their voice, their solidarity and their collective determination. If we achieved any one of these, it was enough ("Year" xxvii).

But theatre always operates within a social and political context; even McGrath has acknowledged that in order for theatre to have any major impact, it must be part of a larger movement or climate for change ("Popular" 396). The absence of this kind of momentum in the eighties made it difficult to "talk politics" in the same way that it was possible to do in the late sixties and early seventies, but what is significant is that 7:84 continued to find ways of adapting its practices without abandoning its aims

altogether.

I have already noted that McGrath's theoretical/political position changed very little by the late eighties and early nineties. In spite of the toned down plays of the eighties and the increasing reliance on more conventional forms such as naturalism, he was far from admitting defeat. His work after leaving 7:84 is marked by a return to the bold, confrontational, audience-oriented experiments of the earlier years, but on a more flamboyant scale, and the reviews are as enthusiastic and as scathing as they ever were. McGrath continues to believe not only in socialism, but also in the importance of theatre as a forum for debate--and in this belief he is not alone.

AFTERWORD

Embarking on a study which involves the recovery of overlooked or undervalued traditions leads to certain inevitable pitfalls. In the process of redrawing the map of theatre history in such a way that not only includes, but foregrounds, the popular political tradition, I have tried to demonstrate the biases and shortcomings of more conventional forms of dramatic and theatrical criticism. Among the pitfalls I refer to is the fact that the relative shortage of available material on the work of alternative theatre companies results in the creation of a "canon" within that tradition. In other words, I am aware of the fact that by having to rely on available information, I have necessarily excluded groups who have not gained attention, but are doing important and innovative work. There is a layering effect which occurs as some groups become larger and more established; so it is possible to find a book about Joint Stock and Welfare State, and a collection of scripts produced by Monstrous Regiment, but information about other companies may be confined to a short journal article or no published sources at all. This problem of forming or reinforcing a canon within a non-traditional area is difficult to overcome, and can only be remedied as more critical and academic attention is paid to the recovery and

documentation of this kind of theatre.

Another limitation has been imposed by my specific interest in socialist theatre, in that I have only been able to point to, but not account in a detailed way, for the splintering of alternative or political theatre in the seventies and eighties into more localized struggles based on issues such as gender, sexual orientation, and race. But this does not alter the arguments I have presented in any substantial way, since the developments and the problems encountered on these fronts have been much the same. For instance, Lizbeth Goodman, who works primarily in the area of women's theatre in Britain, subtitled a recent conference presentation "Theatre under Threat, Women's Theatre even more so?" Goodman's point is that while women's theatre groups have encountered specific problems in funding because of the systematic underprivileging of the work of women in British theatre, they share many of them with alternative theatre companies generally.

These sectors within alternative theatre also share larger patterns of development. While I described the impact on socialist companies of the decline of radical class politics by the late seventies, it is important to note that groups defined in terms of different political agendas have undergone similar cycles. Using feminist theatre once again as an example, in her account of *Monstrous Regiment*, Gillian

Hanna describes the difficulties of continuing their struggle in the mid to late eighties in the face of feminism in retreat, and the backlash of "post-feminism" (lxvi, lxxi). In spite of the specific nature of the battles being fought, theatre groups in general, who define their work along social/political lines, inevitably are forced to respond to developments in the larger political context. This was as true for the Workers' Theatre Movement in the late 1930s as it was for socialist theatre companies in the late 1970s.

The "fragmentation" of the alternative theatre movement can be seen as a positive development in that it led to the growth of widespread activity in the form of community theatre, but for some it also weakened the potential for a more concentrated, large-scale movement. In Pam Brighton's view, "Political energy has been colossally fragmented, both in the theatre and in politics, by those movements" (Lavender "Symposium" 119). But, on a more positive note, recent conferences and campaigns indicate the recognition on the part of a wide range of practitioners for the need to pool resources and organize nationally to insure the survival of alternative theatre.

This leads me to the optimism I expressed at the beginning of this study. One might ask how is it possible to be hopeful for the fate of alternative theatre in light of

the degenerating funding situation and irreparable damage caused by the loss of so many companies in the eighties? In spite of the mounting odds, existing companies are struggling to survive and new ones continue to emerge. The growing solidarity between theatre workers in different sectors is also encouraging; the "Autumn 90 Theatre Campaign" and the "National Campaign for the Arts" have been instrumental in intensifying the protest for government support of the arts and for creating support networks for theatre companies whose livelihoods are under immediate threat. They have exerted pressure on political parties to recognize these issues and to formulate arts policies.

It is evident from publications such as *The Alternative Theatre Handbook* and *New Theatre Quarterly*, and a wide range of theatre festivals, that there is continued and growing interest in pursuing theatre as a tool for social action, not just in the U.K., but internationally. There are also strong indications that funding bodies, both nationally and locally, are recognizing the role of theatre (and the arts generally) in the areas of urban renewal and the growth of communities. Outlined in a 1989 Arts Council brochure entitled "An Urban Renaissance" are projects which include a three-year programme of events in Barrow-in-Furness directed by Welfare State International, the Hope Street Project in Liverpool, and the CAVE in

Birmingham--all designed to use theatre and arts training to involve local communities in cultural projects. I would argue that the existence, let alone the funding, of this kind of community theatre work would not have been possible without the relentless efforts on the part of theatre workers in alternative theatre generally to break new ground.

It is also worth noting the role that popular traditions of entertainment have played in these community projects. In an article by Douglas Anderson entitled "Bums on Seats: Parties, Art, and Politics in London's East End" in *The Drama Review* (Spring 1991), I was delighted and reassured to find that a veteran like Roland Muldoon was producing alternative cabaret/variety theatre for enthusiastic local audiences at the Hackney Empire. Anderson writes:

Clothing aside [Muldoon had had to buy his first suit], his methods and philosophy remain wildly unorthodox. He is still a fervid collectivist. Pointing with pride to a list of commandments hanging on his office wall, he insists that the socialist principles which fueled the early CAST work are still observed in its new Hackney Empire phase (45).

After a brief outline of the variety of work which is performed at the Hackney Empire, Anderson describes the programming as "a repudiation of a set of assumptions which plague the English-speaking theatre" and claims: "it

challenges the primacy of the two-act play; it acknowledges that a community is made up of diverse audiences with different theatrical tastes; it rejects the notion that art is universal, and that 'high art' is of more value than popular culture; it celebrates diversity by freeing the arena for as many different events (and points of view) as possible; it encourages the patron to return several times each month, reestablishing the theatre as a central meeting place in the community" (45-6). The other two ventures which Anderson profiles in the article--The Albany Empire under the direction of Teddy Kiendl, and the Theatre Royal, Stratford East under Philip Hedley--only serve to affirm both the endurance on the part of experienced, committed theatre workers, and the demand for and viability of popular political theatre.

The Implications for Theatre Studies

The many sources I have relied on in order to reconstruct a history of popular political theatre, and the increasing attention paid in theatre journals to the social/political context of theatre practices indicate that advances have been made in expanding the boundaries of drama and theatre studies. It is often difficult to gain access to some of this work, as Susan Bennett has noted in her study of

theatre audiences:

Those practices which share little with traditional theatre and which cannot be absorbed into institutional playing spaces have, for a long time, been ignored. The companies are hard to find because they do not play in the 'usual' spaces, their texts are not published, their concerns are seldom those of dominant critical practice, and significantly they are often uninterested in the traditional theatre-goer or dialogue with academia. But the expansion of non-traditional theatre into many different communities brings theatre to people who may never before have had the experience of the theatrical event and who therefore assign theatre a place in their cultural boundaries which is little restricted with traditional definitions and expectations (181).

In my view, the functional as well as entertaining role ascribed to theatre in these new contexts is of primary importance in understanding the potential of theatre as a form of expression and warrants the trouble sometimes required in finding it and learning about it.

There are certain practical difficulties which alternative theatre presents for the teaching curriculum, as I myself have found. Even within a text-based drama course, it is possible to make some progress; for instance in a course devoted to post-war British drama, I have chosen to teach productions by Theatre Workshop (including *Oh What a Lovely War*) along with some of the standard Royal Court plays, and I have included *The Cheviot* and plays by Monstrous Regiment in addition to those of Brenton and Hare. But it is not enough to simply add scripts to an already

existing body of texts. A real effort must be made to make more constructive use of historical and theoretical discourses and perhaps even to take advantage of electronic technology to record what is essentially an ephemeral form.

I will end on a practical note about what I believe to be the role of academics in relation to this kind of work. The attempts in the U.K. and in North America in recent years to create archives which can preserve the work and histories of theatre companies present an important opportunity for researchers. Often academics have the time, skill, and resources that practitioners do not have to make this material available to larger audiences. This means breaking down methodological and disciplinary boundaries, as well as the prejudices which have been entrenched in literary studies about the value of practical and socially relevant work. It seems to me that academic studies can only benefit from the revitalizing impact that popular political theatre has had for audiences everywhere.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen, Douglas. "Glasgow Workers Theatre Group and the Methodology of Theatre Studies." *Theatre Quarterly* IX.36 (1980): 45-70.
- Anderson, Douglas. "Bums on Seats: Parties, Art, and Politics in London's East End." *The Drama Review* 35.1 (Spring 1991): 43-59.
- Anonymous. "Grant Aid and Political Theatre 1968-1977 . . . Part 1." *Wedge* 1 (Summer 1977): 4-8.
- . "Grant Aid and Political Theatre: Part 2." *Wedge* 2 (Spring 1978): 39-43.
- Ansorge, Peter. *Disrupting the Spectacle: Five Years of Experimental and Fringe Theatre in Britain*. London: Pitman Publishing, 1975.
- . "Portable Playwrights: Howard Brenton, David Hare, Malcolm Griffiths and Snoo Wilson talk to Peter Ansorge." *Plays and Players* (Feb. 1972): 14-23.
- Archer, K. "The Game's a Bogey." *Plays and Players* (Dec. 1974): 34.
- Arden, John. *To Present the Pretence*. London: Eyre Methuen, 1977.
- Bailey, Peter. *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control 1830-1885*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978.
- . "'Will the Real Bill Banks Please Stand Up?' Towards a Role Analysis of Mid-Victorian Working-Class Respectability." *Journal of Social History* 12.3 (Spring 1979): 336-53.
- Baker, Michael. *The Rise of the Victorian Actor*. London: Croom Helm, 1978.
- Barker, Clive. "Alternative Theatre/Political Theatre." *Holderness* 18-43.
- . "From Fringe to Alternative Theatre." *Political Developments on the British Stage in the Sixties and*

- Seventies*. Rostock: Wilhelm-Pieck-Universität, 1977.
- . "The Politicisation of the British Theatre." *Englisch Amerikanische Studien* 2 (1980): 267-78.
- Ben Chaim, Daphna. *Distance in the Theatre: The Aesthetics of Audience Response*. 1981. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1984.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Understanding Brecht*. Trans. Anna Bostock. London: NLB, 1973.
- Bennett, Susan. *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Bigsby, C.W.E. "The Language of Crisis in British Theatre: The Drama of Cultural Pathology." *Contemporary English Drama*. Ass. ed. C.W.E. Bigsby. Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies 19. New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc., 1981.
- Bold, Alan. "The Impact of 7:84." *Modern Scottish Literature*. London: Longman, 1983.
- Booth, Michael R., Richard Southern, Frederick & Lise-Lone Marker, and Robertson Davies. *1750-1880*. London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1975. Vol VI of *The Revels History of Drama in English*. VIII vols.
- Bradby, David, Louis James, Bernard Sharratt. *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama: Aspects of Popular Entertainment in Theatre, Film and Television 1800-1976*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.
- Bradby, David, and John McCormick. *People's Theatre*. London: Croom Helm, 1978.
- Bream, Paul. "Inter-Action at the Almost Free." *Plays and Players* (Oct. 1972): 26-27.
- Brecht, Bertolt. "Against Georg Lukacs." Trans. Stuart Hood. *New Left Review* 84 (1974): 39-53.
- . *The Messingkauf Dialogues*. Trans. John Willet. London: Methuen, 1977.
- Brenton, Howard. "Petrol Bombs Through the Proscenium Arch." *Theatre Quarterly* V.17 (1975): 3-20.
- Brown, John Russell. "The Subtle Perils of Subsidy." *Theatre Quarterly* III.11 (1973): 33-39.

Browne, Terry. *Playwrights' Theatre: The English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre*. London: Pitman Publishing, 1975.

Brydon, Gillian M. "Governance of British Theatres: A Canadian Report on Theatre Boards in the U.K." *Canadian Theatre Review* 40 (Fall 1984): 42-45.

Bull, John. *New British Political Dramatists*. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1983.

Callow, Simon. *Being an Actor*. London: Methuen, 1984.

Cameron, Alasdair. Introduction. *Scot-Free*. London: Nick Hern Books, 1990.

Campbell, David, and Douglas Gifford. "7:84--Heroes and Villains." *Chapman* IV.2 (1976): 1-8.

Chambers, Colin. "Socialist Theatre and the Ghetto Mentality." *Marxism Today* (August 1978): 245-50.

---. *The Story of Unity Theatre*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989.

Chambers, Colin, and Mike Prior. *Playwright's Progress: Patterns of Postwar British Drama*. Oxford: Amber Lane Press, 1987.

Cheeseman, Peter. "A Community Theatre-in-the-Round." *Theatre Quarterly* I.1 (1971): 71-87.

Chisholm, Cecil. *Repertory: An Outline of the Modern Theatre Movement*. London: Peter Davies Ltd., 1934.

Churns, Penny, and Paddy Broughton. "John McGrath's 'Trees in the Wind' at the Northcott Theatre, Exeter." *Theatre Quarterly* V.19 (1975): 89-100.

Clark, Jon. "Socialist Theatre in the Thirties." *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties*. Eds. John Clark, Margot Heinemann, David Margoles, and Carol Snee. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979.

Coppieters, Frank. "Arnold Wesker's Centre Fortytwo: A Cultural Revolution Betrayed." *Theatre Quarterly* V.18 (1975): 37-54.

Coult, Tony, and Baz Kershaw, eds. *Engineers of the Imagination: The Welfare State Handbook*. 1983. London: Methuen Drama, 1990.

- Coveney, Michael. *The Citz: 21 Years of the Glasgow Citizens Theatre*. London: Nick Hern Books, 1990.
- Craig, Sandy, ed. *Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain*. Ambergate, Derbyshire: Amber Lane Press Limited, 1980.
- Cunningham, Hugh. *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution c. 1780-c. 1880*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980.
- Davies, Andrew. *Other Theatres: The Development of Alternative and Experimental Theatre in Britain*. London: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1987.
- Davison, Peter. *Contemporary Drama and the Popular Dramatic Tradition in England*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1982.
- Devlin, Vivien. *Kings, Queens and People's Palaces: An Oral History of the Scottish Variety Theatre 1920-1970*. Edinburgh: Polygon, 1991.
- Drescher, Horst W. "John McGrath--7:84--A New Concept of Theatre." *Papers on Language and Literature*. Eds. Sven Backman and Goran Kjellmer. Gothenburg Studies in English 60. Goteborg, Sweden: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1985.
- Edgar, David. "Exit Fascism, Stage Right." *Leveller* (June 1977): n. pag.
- . "Ten Years of Political Theatre, 1968-78." *Theatre Quarterly* VIII.32 (1979): 25-33.
- . "Towards a Theatre of Dynamic Ambiguities." *Theatre Quarterly* IX.33 (1979): 3-23.
- Edwards, Ness. *The Workers' Theatre*. Cardiff: The Cymric Federation Press, 1930.
- Elsom, John. *Post-war British Theatre*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976.
- Farrell, Joseph. "Recent Political Theatre." *Chapman* VIII.6 and IX.1 (Spring 1986): 48-54.
- Findlater, Richard. *Banned! A Review of Theatrical Censorship in Britain*. London: MacGibbon & Kee Ltd, 1967.
- . *At the Royal Court: 25 Years of the English Stage*

- Company*. London: Methuen, 1981.
- Gaskill, William. *A Sense of Direction: Life at the Royal Court*. London: Faber and Faber, 1988.
- Gooch, Steve. *All Together Now: An Alternative View of Theatre and the Community*. London: Methuen, 1984.
- Goodman, Lizbeth and Gabriella Giannachi. "The Arts Council in Crisis." *Plays International* 5.10 (1990): 14-16.
- Goorney, Howard. Epilogue. Goorney and MacColl 199-205.
- . *The Theatre Workshop Story*. London: Eyre Methuen, 1981.
- Goorney, Howard, and Ewan MacColl, eds. *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop: Political Playscripts 1930-50*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986.
- Griffiths, Malcolm. "The Drama Panel Game: An Inside View of the Arts Council." *Theatre Quarterly* VII.25 (1977): 3-19.
- Hammond, Jonathan. "A Potted History of the Fringe." *Theatre Quarterly* III.12 (1973): 37-46.
- Hanna, Gillian. Introduction. *Monstrous Regiment: Four Plays and a Collective Celebration*. Gillian Hanna comp. London: Nick Hern Books, 1991. xiii-lxxxiii.
- Harris, John S. *Government Patronage of the Arts in Great Britain*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.
- Hart, Charles. *Glasgow Herald*. 27 February, 1985.
- Harvey, Sylvia. "Whose Brecht? Memories For the Eighties." *Screen* 23.1 (1982): 45-59.
- Hayman, Ronald. *The Set-Up: An Anatomy of the English Theatre Today*. London: Eyre Methuen, 1973.
- . "Subsidy: its Effects on Policy and People at the National Theatre and RSC." *Theatre Quarterly* II.6 (1972): 63-71.
- Hill, John. "Towards a Scottish People's Theatre: the Rise and Fall of Glasgow Unity." *Theatre Quarterly* VII.27 (1977): 61-70.
- Hirst, David. *Dario Fo and Franca Rame*. London: Macmillan, 1989.

- Hohne, Horst. "Political Analysis, Theatrical Form and Popular Language in Charles Wood, Henry Livings and John McGrath." *Political Developments on the British Stage in the Sixties and Seventies*. Rostock: Wilhelm-Pieck-Universität, 1977. 7-41.
- Holderness, Graham, ed. *The Politics of Theatre and Drama*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992.
- Holledge, Julie. *Innocent Flowers: Women in the Edwardian Theatre*. London: Virago Press Limited, 1981.
- House, Jack. *Music Hall Memories: Recollections of Scottish Music Hall and Pantomime*. Glasgow: Richard Drew Publishing, 1986.
- Hunt, Albert. *Arden: A Study of His Plays*. London: Eyre Methuen, 1974.
- . "Political Theatre." *New Edinburgh Review* 30 (1975): 5-6.
- Hunt, Hugh, Kenneth Richards, and John Russell Taylor. *1880 To the Present Day*. London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1978. Vol. VII of *The Revels History of Drama in English*. VII vols.
- Hutchison, David. *The Modern Scottish Theatre*. Glasgow: Molendinar Press, 1977.
- Itzin, Catherine. *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968*. London: Methuen, 1980.
- Jenkins, Hugh. *The Culture Gap: An Experience of Government and the Arts*. London: Marion Boyars, 1979.
- Jones, Gareth Stedman. "Working-Class Culture and Working-Class Politics in London, 1870-1900; Notes on the Remaking of a Working Class." *Journal of Social History* 7.4 (Summer 1974): 480-508.
- Jones, Leonard, A. "The Workers' Theatre Movement in the 'Twenties.'" *Zeitschrift fuer Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 14 (1966): 259-81.
- Kamerman, Jack B, and Rosanne Martorella. *Performers and Performances: The Social Organization of Artistic Work*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983.
- Klotz, Gunther. "Alternatives in Recent British Drama." *Political Developments on the British Stage in the*

- Sixties and Seventies.* Rostock:
 Wilhelm-Pieck-Universität, 1977. 42-58.
- Lagden, Jim. "Theatre in the Market Place." *Theatre Quarterly* I.1 (1971): 83-85.
- Lavender, Andy. "(NTQ Symposium) Theatre in Thatcher's Britain: Organizing the Opposition." *New Theatre Quarterly* V.18 (1989): 113-123.
- . "Theatre in Crisis: Conference Report, December 1988." *New Theatre Quarterly* V.19 (1989): 210-16.
- Loveman, Jack. "Workers' Theatre." *Red Letters* 13 (1982): 40-46.
- Mayer, David, and Kenneth Richards, eds. *Western Popular Theatre. The Proceedings of a Symposium sponsored by the Manchester University Department of Drama.* London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1977.
- MacColl, Ewan. "Grass Roots of Theatre Workshop." *Theatre Quarterly* III.9 (1973): 58-68.
- . "Introduction: The Evolution of a Revolutionary Theatre Style." Goorney and MacColl. ix-lvii.
- MacKenny, Linda. "A National or Popular Drama?: The Debate Between Scotland's Conventional and Popular Drama Traditions, 1927-47." *Chapman* VIII.6 and IX.1 (Spring 1986): 42-47.
- MacLennan, Elizabeth. *The Moon Belongs to Everyone: Making Theatre with 7:84.* London: Methuen, 1990.
- Macleod, Angus. "The 'Bogey' Man." *Chapman* IV.2 (1976): 12-15.
- Maguire, Tom. "Under New Management: The Changing Direction of 7:84 (Scotland)." *Theatre Research International* 17.2 (Summer 1992): 132-37.
- Marshall, Norman. *The Other Theatre.* London: John Lehmann, 1947.
- McConachie, Bruce A., and Daniel Friedman. *Theatre For Working-Class Audiences in the United States, 1830-1980.* Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985.
- McGillivray, David, ed. *1989 British Alternative Theatre Directory.* London: The Conway McGillivray Publishing

- House Ltd., 1989.
- McGrath, John. *The Albannach*. Unpublished playscript, 1985.
- . "Behind the Fringe." *Plays and Players* (April 1983): 11-13.
- . "Better a Bad Night in Bootle." *Theatre Quarterly* V.19 (1975): 39-54.
- . *The Bone Won't Break: On Theatre and Hope in Hard Times*. London: Methuen Drama, 1990.
- . *Boom: A Concert Party in the National Interest*. *New Edinburgh Review* 30 (1975): 12-30.
- . "Boom: An Introduction." *New Edinburgh Review* (1975): 9-10, 31.
- . *The Catch or . . . Red Herrings in the Minch*. Unpublished playscript, 1981.
- . *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*. London: Methuen, 1974.
- . *The Game's A Bogey: 7:84's John MacLean Show*. Edinburgh: EUSPB, 1975.
- . *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form*. 1981. London: Methuen, 1984.
- . *Fish in the Sea*. London: Pluto Press Limited, 1977.
- . Personal interview. 19 May, 1988.
- . *Joe's Drum*. Aberdeen: Aberdeen People's Press, 1979.
- . *Little Red Hen*. London: Pluto Press Limited, 1977.
- . *Out of Our Heads*. Unpublished playscript, 1976.
- . "Popular Theatre and the Changing Perspective of the Eighties." *New Theatre Quarterly* I.4 (1985): 390-416.
- . "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre." *Theatre Quarterly* IX.35 (1979): 43-54.
- . "TV Drama: The Case Against Naturalism." *Sight and Sound* 48 2 (Spring 1977): 100-05.
- . *Two Plays For the Eighties: Blood Red Roses and Swings and Roundabouts*. Aberdeen: Aberdeen People's Press

- Ltd., 1981.
- . "The Year of the Cheviot." Introduction. *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*. London: Methuen, 1974.
- Meech, Anthony. "A Short History of Hull Truck, 1971-1980." *Theatre Quarterly* IX.36 (1980): 11-23.
- Minihan, Janet. *The Nationalization of Culture: The Development of State Subsidies to the Arts in Great Britain*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1977.
- Mitchell, Tony. *Dario Fo: People's Court Jester*. 1984. London: Methuen, 1986.
- Mulgrew, Gerry. "The Poor Mouth?" *Chapman* VIII.6 and IX.1 (Spring 1986): 63-65.
- Murdock, Graham. "Radical Drama, Radical Theatre." *Media, Culture and Society* 2.2 (1980): 151-68.
- Neale, Steve, and Frank Krutnik. *Popular Film and Television Comedy*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Nicoll, Allardyce. *English Drama 1900-1930: The Beginnings of the Modern Period*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.
- . *Late Nineteenth Century Drama 1850-1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959. Vol. V of *A History of English Drama 1660-1900*.
- Page, Malcolm. "The Early Years at Unity." *Theatre Quarterly* I.4 (1971): 60-66.
- Paget, Derek. "'Oh What a Lovely War': the Texts and Their Context." *New Theatre Quarterly* VI.23 (1990): 244-60.
- . *True Stories? Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990.
- Peacock, Keith D. "Fact Versus History: Two Attempts to Change the Audience's Political Perspective." *Theatre Studies* 31-32 (1984-5/1985-86): 15-31.
- . *Radical Stages: Alternative History in Modern British Drama*. Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies, Number 43. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1991.

- Priestley, J.B. *Theatre Outlook*. London: Nicholson & Watson, 1947.
- Purdie, Howard. "Starve and Rep, Feed the Theatre." *Chapman* VIII.6 and IX.1 (Spring 1986): 56-61.
- Rame, Franca. Introduction. *We Can't Pay? We Won't Pay!* By Dario Fo. Trans. Lino Pertile. London: Pluto Press, 1978. v-xii.
- Rawlence, Chris. "Political Theatre and the Working Class." *Media, Politics and Culture: A Socialist View*. Ed. Carl Gardner. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1979.
- Richards, Kenneth. "Actors and Theatres 1880-1918." Hunt, Richards, Taylor 61-127.
- Ritchie, Rob, ed. *The Joint Stock Book: The Making of a Theatre Collective*. London: Methuen, 1987.
- Samuel, Raphael, ed. "Documents and Texts from the Workers' Theatre Movement (1928-1936)." *History Workshop Journal* 4 (1977): 102-142.
- Samuel, Raphael, Ewan MacColl, and Stuart Cosgrove. *Theatres of the Left 1880-1935: Workers' Theatre Movements in Britain and America*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985.
- Seyd, Richard. "The Theatre of Red Ladder." *New Edinburgh Review* 30 (1975): 36-42.
- Shank, Theodore. "Political Theatre in England." *Performing Arts Journal* 3 (Winter 1978): 48-61.
- Sinfield, Alan. *Literature, Politics, and Culture in Postwar Britain*. Berkeley: University of California, 1989.
- . "The Theatre and its Audiences." *Society and Literature 1945-1970*. Ed. Alan Sinfield. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1983. 173-98.
- Stevenson, Randall. "Scottish Theatre 1950-1980." *History of Scottish Literature*. Ed. Craig Cairns. Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987.
- Stothard, Peter. "Out of Our Heads." *Plays and Players* (June 1977): 32.
- Stourac, Richard, and Kathleen McCreery. *Theatre as a Weapon: Workers' Theatre in the Soviet Union, Germany*

- and Britain, 1917-1934.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986.
- Stuart, Charles Douglas, and A.J. Park. *The Variety Stage: A History of the Music Halls from the Earliest Period to the Present Time.* London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1895.
- Theatre Quarterly*, ed. "Playwriting for the Seventies: Old Theatres, New Audiences, and the Politics of Revolution." *Theatre Quarterly* VI.24 (1976-77): 35-74.
- Thomsen, Christian W. "Three Socialist Playwrights: John McGrath, Caryl Churchill, Trevor Griffiths." *Contemporary English Drama.* Ass. ed. C.W.E. Bigsby. Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies 19. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 157-76.
- Triesman, David. "Cultural Conflict and Political Advance in Britain." *Marxism Today* (May 1978): 162-68.
- Tynan, Kenneth. *A View of the English Stage.* London: Davis-Poynter, 1975. St Albans: Paladin, 1976.
- Van Erven, Eugene. *Radical People's Theatre.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.
- . "7:84 in 1985: 14 Years of Radical Popular Theater in Great Britain." *Minnesota Review* 29 (1985): 103-16.
- . "Theatre for the People: An Interview with John McGrath of the 7:84 Theatre Company." *Minnesota Review* 27 (1986): 117-22.
- Van Gyseghem, Andre. "British Theatre in the Thirties." *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties.* Eds. Jon Clark, Margot Heinemann, David Margoles, and Carol Snee. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979.
- . *Theatre in Soviet Russia.* Faber and Faber Ltd, 1943.
- Walvin, James. *Leisure and Society 1830-1950.* London: Longman, 1978.
- Wandor, Michelene. *Carry On, Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.
- Watson, Ernest Bradlee. *Sheridan to Robertson: A Study of the Nineteenth-Century London Stage.* 1926. New York: Benjamin Bloom, Inc., 1963.
- Watt, David. "'Art and Working Life': Australian Trade

- Unions and the Theatre." *New Theatre Quarterly* VI.22 (1990): 162-73.
- Welsh, Finlay. Personal interview. 13 May, 1988.
- Wilkes, Angela. "Making Fun of Fleet Street." *Sunday Times* 16 Dec. 1984, 37.
- Willet, John, ed. *Brecht on Theatre*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1964.
- Williams, Raymond. "Building a Socialist Culture." *Leveller* (March 1979): n. pag.
- . "Drama in a Dramatised Society." 1974. *Raymond Williams on Television: Selected Writings*. Ed. Alan O'Connor. Toronto: Between the Lines, 1989.
- . *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review*. London: NLB, 1979.
- . "Social Environment and Theatrical Environment: The Case of English Naturalism." *English Drama: Forms and Developments*. Essays in Honour of Muriel Clara Bradbrook. Eds. Marie Axton and Raymond Williams. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1977.
- Wilmot, Roger. *Kindly Leave the Stage! The Story of Variety 1919-1960*. London: Methuen, 1985.
- Wilson, A.E. *Edwardian Theatre*. London: Arthur Baker Ltd., 1951.
- Wilson, Ann. "Deadpan." *Canadian Theatre Review* 57 (Winter 1988): 11-16.
- Wolff, Janet. "Bill Brand, Trevor Griffiths, and the Debate about Political Theatre." *Red Letters* 8 (1978): 56-61.
- . *The Social Production of Art*. London: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1981.
- Woodfield, James. *English Theatre in Transition 1881-1914*. London: Croom Helm, 1984.