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British Socialist Theatre 1930-1979:

Class, Politics and Dramatic Form

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'British Socialist Theatre 1930 - 1979: Class, Politics, and Dramatic Form'

Abstract of PhD Thesis

The field covered contains the major phases of British socialist theatre between 1930 and 1979. It focuses on the issues raised by the concept of socialist theatre, such as those of class, politics and dramatic form, in order to discuss the relationships between agendas of political tasks, the development of suitable forms for their dramatic expression, and the nature of the audiences which have been attracted. The discussion draws on a range of contemporary sources which include unpublished scripts and other material, together with oral evidence from some practitioners.

The historical episodes covered begin with the career of the Workers' Theatre Movement and its successors the Unity Theatres and the Left Book Club Theatre Guild in the 1930s. It then examines how this was continued during the Second World War; and how it was affected by the political and other circumstances of the immediate post-war years. Finally it deals with the revival of socialist theatre in Britain during the 1970s.

The thesis is intended to contribute to the understanding of the relations between theatre, politics and the labour movement by means of an historical perspective on concrete examples. It examines the extent to which the different examples achieved the objectives they set themselves, and in so doing discusses the circumstances which have made successful socialist theatre possible in Britain during this period.

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Preface

This thesis is concerned with the major phases of British socialist theatre between 1930 and 1979. It focuses on the issues raised by the concept of socialist theatre, such as those of class, politics, and dramatic form, in order to discuss the relationships between agendas of political tasks, the development of suitable forms for their dramatic expression, and the nature of the audiences which have been attracted. The discussion draws on a range of contemporary sources which include unpublished scripts and other material, together with oral evidence from some practitioners.

In sociological terms the thesis is intended to contribute to the understanding of the relations between theatre, politics and the labour movement by means of an historical perspective on a series of concrete examples. It attempts to do so by including an examination of the extent to which the different examples achieved the aims which they set themselves, and it thereby also attempts to isolate the circumstances which have made successful socialist theatre in Britain possible during this period.

The historical episodes which are covered by the work begin with the career of the Workers' Theatre Movement and its successors the Unity Theatres and the Left Book Club Theatre Guild in the 1930s. It then follows how this was continued both in civilian life and the armed forces during the Second World War; how it was then affected by the political and other circumstances of the post-war years. Finally it deals with the revival of socialist theatre in Britain during the 1970s.

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Several past and present socialist theatre activists kindly shared their ideas and recollections with me: their names can be found in the text, but I am particularly indebted to Mr Miles Tomalin and Mr Jack Lindsay who showed me some of their unpublished and otherwise unobtainable material. I take this opportunity to offer them all my gratitude for their help and their company, together with the hope that any contribution this work can make to a permanent record of their struggles and achievements will repay their contribution to its preparation.

Table of Contents

	Page
Introduction.	4
1. 'Awakening the Masses' : The Workers' Theatre Movement 1930-1935	27
2. 'Affiliate with Me' : The Unity Theatres 1935-1939	88
3. 'The Terribly Urgent Struggle' : The Left Book Club Theatre Guild 1937-1939	187
4. The 1930s : A Concluding Summary	249
5. The Peoples' War and the Peoples' Theatre : Socialist Theatre During World War Two	270
6. 'A Long Way in a Short Time'? Socialist Theatre 1945-1965	326
7. 'Strike While the Iron is Hot' : Socialist Theatre 1968-1979	370
Conclusion	446
Bibliography	485

Introduction

.....All through our lives, if we make the effort, we uncover layers of this alien formation in ourselves, and deep in ourselves. So then the recognition of it is a recognition of large elements in our own experience, which have to be - shall we say it? - defeated. But to defeat something like that in yourself, in your families, in your neighbours, in your friends, to defeat it involves something very different, it seems to me, from most traditional political strategies. (1)

In this observation Raymond Williams has drawn attention to the interface between objective and subjective in processes of political change, and indicated that it is a site for political struggle and expression. This has also been the view of socialist artists, and this thesis is concerned with fifty years' experience of those who have chosen drama as their vehicle, as their attempt at 'something very different from most traditional political strategies'.

As an initial step it is important to set out the substantive issues which lie behind the concerns of the thesis, and to demonstrate their relevance to a wider context.

Murdock has listed the possible objectives of a radical culture:

Is it to convert people to a pre-defined political position? Is it to encourage people to reflect critically on their situation and move towards ways of changing it? Is it to break with the ruling conventions of representation and lay the foundations for new forms of expression that will more adequately encapsulate critical consciousness? Or is it to challenge the prevailing division of cultural labour and encourage consumers to participate in production? Each of these aims implies choices and priorities and each poses the issue of its relations to the others. (1979 p.42)

In other words the study of a radical cultural practice such as socialist theatre is likely to involve, besides the examination of political purposes in the conventional sense, the consideration of forms of expression and the relations of cultural production.

Further, if the purpose is to 'convert' or 'encourage' an audience then clearly the nature of the audience, how a desired audience is to be located and organised is another integral aspect of the study.

It follows therefore that a sociological approach to socialist theatre must be a comprehensive enterprise. It should involve, at least, a bringing together of an examination of political events and movements, aesthetic or cultural policies; texts, performances and performance contexts; also an awareness of particular audiences and performers and their relationship outside the specific locations of the performances. Such an ideal objective has been outlined in a more general sense by Williams:

..... a sociology of drama, already concerned with institutions (theatres and their predecessors and successors) with formations (groups of dramatist, dramatic and theatrical movements), would go on to include forms, not only in the sense of their relations to world views or structures of feeling, but also in the more active sense of their whole performance ... Specific studies must often temporarily isolate this or that element. But the fundamental principle of a sociology of culture is the complex unity of the elements thus listed or separated. (1977 p.139)

These methodological premises represent a substantive issue when compared with the procedures of much of theatre studies. Besides sociologists such as Goffmann (1971) and (1975), who have pursued analogies between conventions in social life and conventions in dramatic performances, others have traced the relations between dramatic forms and, in Williams' expression, 'structures of feeling', thus placing more weight with the art form itself.

Perhaps the most classic examples of this are found in the works of Lucien Goldmann and Georg Lukacs, two of the major figures in the sociology of culture and twentieth century Marxist theory.

Goldmann employed the concept of 'world vision' as:

a convenient term for the whole complex of aspirations and feelings which link together the members of a social group (a group which, in most cases, assumes the existence of a social class) and which opposes them to members of other groups. (1964 p.17)

Related to this is his concept of the 'transindividual subject', which generally refers to the social groups and classes who are the possessors and collective creators of the world-vision. In short the ultimate source of a dramatic text is not the 'I' of the author but the 'we' of the social class whose world vision it embodies, and thus it is to that and the social class with which authors can be identified. Goldmann argues that a dramatic work is a coherent whole which can be understood as the collective collation of a privileged transindividual subject. However:

It happens that in certain exceptional individuals, the structure of certain private areas of activity (writing, painting, conceptual thought, faith etc) coincide entirely or almost entirely with the mental structures corresponding to one of the transindividual subjects to which it is linked (1967 p.904)

Therefore the capacity to articulate - not create - a group's world-vision completely is limited to a few individuals in the groups, and thence is derived Goldmann's criterion of genius and of great art: world-vision brought to their highest peak of elaboration and coherence, so that the art works are microcosms of their age. Thus the contribution which the 'historico-sociological method' can make to the study of literary works is clear:

....it can, by first of all bringing out the different world visions that prevailed at a particular time, throw light both upon the content and the meaning of the literary works that were being written. The task of what one might call a 'sociological aesthetic' would then be to bring out the relationship between one of the world visions and the universe of characters and things created in a particular work. That of the more literary aesthetic would be to bring out the relationship between this universe and the specifically literary devices used by the writer to express it.
(1964 p.314)

Thus Goldmann, frequently through a close textual analysis as in his work on Racine, proceeds to homologise the writer's published work and the hypothesised world vision of the social group with which the writer can be identified; and both again to the ideational structures of the social group or class. The result, he maintains, is a close understanding of both the literary product and the structures of the social groups.

Clearly an approach to socialist theatre from within this tradition would not be completely adequate for the comprehensive task previously outlined. For although important elements in this perspective are highly relevant, to privilege an a priori view of a theatre movement as expressive of the 'world-vision' of a social group, determined by it in a purely limiting sense, is to lose sight of the active and instrumental character, or attempted character, of socialist theatre. A similar observation can be made of another tradition.

Georg Lukacs, also a seminal figure in the development of Marxist aesthetics, offers, besides the analysis of realism upon which his reputation as a literary critic largely rests, a study of the historical sources of literary representation and a view of the social reception of art. Again this work cannot be properly

discussed here but some main points can be identified.

As Lovell (1980 p.74) suggests, the pre-Marxist Lukacs argued certain propositions which continued throughout his long and bitter intellectual and political career. For example he posed an historical periodisation of literature which aimed to link an epochal development of history with the evolution of literary form - the succession from epic to tragedy to novel and so forth. Within his assumption of Marxism he developed almost a linear theory of the progressive movement of history in which at particular times a particular class is seen as the creative subject, politically, in history, and assigned the role of engendering socio-historical progress. Consequently, at certain critical points of defeat:

It would be altogether super/~~fic~~ial and wrong to suppose that, when a class turns its back so radically upon its earlier political aims and ideas, the spheres of ideology, the fates of science and art can remain untouched.
(1978 p.171)

Such a crucial point in the development of bourgeois society was the failure of the 1848 revolutions in Europe; similarly that year marked a sharp arrest of the success of realist fiction and its subsequent decline into naturalism and, by the 1930s, surrealism and subjectivist modernist writing. Lukacs asserts the artistic and political supremacy of the realism typified by Tolstoy and Balzac. In their work, he argues, individual characters are situated by narrative into the historical dynamic of their society; great realist novels present historical reality as a process revealed in human experience, mediated by particular social classes or institutions. The reader experiences how and why individuals contribute to their own fates, but also how they

are manifestations of wider historical currents.

The reader, further, surrenders to a coherent momentum of narration and empathetically identifies with its characters; a cathartic immersion as the reader gains a more vivid and complete reflection of reality than was possessed beforehand.

The naturalist fiction of Flaubert and Zola, on the other hand, was typified by description and not narration, so that empirical reality was objectified and divorced from historical change. The reader is merely a passive observer of mechanically ordered occurrences, and this, according to Lukacs, was the foundation of modernism, wherein the experience of the chaos and alienation of advanced capitalism was uncritically reflected without any indication of their sources or the potential for their solution. Lukacs prescriptions for contemporary socialist writers stem from this. He recommended the continuation of older traditions of realism with an added socialist dimension, as in the work of Maxim Gorky. They must eschew modernist literary forms developed since naturalism since they mirror and are tied to the irrationalist subjectivism of bourgeois society in decay - as such, claims Lukacs, they can only feed and not be used against Fascist ideology.

These conclusions were contested at the time in a notable polemic by the Marxist dramatist Bertold Brecht, a polemic to which we shall return later. At this point however it is enough to register how Lukacs' contribution - despite its impressive historical scope and firm sociological situation of cultural practices within specific social contexts - is also unable to

deal adequately with the comprehensive task initially described. Its assumption of the relations between politics, fiction and society in fact close off the avenues of investigation suggested by a study of socialist theatre as issues already resolved. Finally, as with Goldmann, an approach to the relations between literature and society which is fundamentally based on somewhat passive notions of reflection is not really equipped, it could be argued, to deal with a theatre which attempts to be instrumental as well as expressive. (2)

Besides this tradition exemplified by Lukacs and Goldmann another approach within sociology seeks, not so much to understand the relations between drama and society but to identify the characteristics of particular theatre audiences. This has generally, and confidentially, been undertaken on behalf of bodies such as the Society of West End Theatre Managers or, more publicly on behalf of the Arts Council of Great Britain. Such surveys follow the pattern laid down by Mann (1966) and (1967) in attempting to determine the social class composition, age and sex, educational level, leisure interest and geographical residence of audiences, together with the success or otherwise of various forms of publicity. In this vein a number of Arts Council Research Reports characterise, for example, the audiences for dance, drama and opera tours in England, or the levels of attendance at repertory theatres outside London. It is also these forms of conclusion about the nature of theatre-goers which are represented, sporadically, in the leisure pursuit statistics recorded by the Government publication Social Trends.

The concerns and findings of this areas of theatre study are obviously by no means irrelevant. However, they are also

seriously limited : they do not allow space for the examination of the plays themselves, the relations between their contents, forms of expression and performance in different contexts. for example there is no pursuit of observations made such as, for example:

the exceptional number of manual workers or blue-collar workers at Clydeside 2 or Close the Coalhouse Door is almost certainly related to the fact that both these plays are semi-documentaries concerned with the history of working-class struggles . (3)

These are observations which really need to be examined rather than simply noted.

Empirical material of another type exists (although in a more limited fashion as regards the exact scope of this thesis) in the considerable body of material studying published dramatic texts, or, deriving largely from theatre criticism, with aspects of performance as well as published text. For example studies such as those of Hayman (1979), Russell-Taylor (1971) or Elsom (1979) concentrate on the works of contemporary dramatists, either individually or in grouped 'schools'. This is done, frequently, by comment on texts and the elucidation of themes or pre-occupations within a writer's work or between writers over time. By these means categorisation or generalisation can be made, such as on the use of Shakespeare by Edward Bond or the use of history by Howard Brenton.

Once again material such as this is by no means irrelevant, but, once again it is limited. The connections with which a sociologist would be concerned - between social and political approaches and dramatic form for example - tend to be elided.

McGrath has made this important point clear:

The play itself can completely change its meaning, given the wrong theatre or wrong publicity, or even the wrong ticket prices. There are elements in the language of the theatre beyond the text, even beyond the production, which are often more decisive, more central to one's experience of the event than the text or the production (1981 p.7)

Therefore again the demands of a study of socialist theatre requires a more comprehensive method.

Finally it is worth noting the detailed and diverse historical material in theatre studies. Collections such as Bradby and Sharratt (1980) and works such as Bradby and McCormick (1978) represent studies which frequently avoid the grosser limitations suggested above, often due to the nature of the aspects of popular theatre which they seek to investigate. However there is a tendency to discursiveness which is unable, because of the absence of that continuity, to demonstrate how and why connections made are subject to pressure and change.

The point being made here is that the putative nature and scope of socialist theatre requires a comprehensive method for its study. This nature and scope can be understood further if the concept of socialist theatre is compared with some apparently similar terms which have been put forward in theatre studies. This is to say that it is useful, as a means of developing its implications, to examine not only the term 'socialist theatre' but also what has been recently, and variously, referred to as 'alternative', 'people's or popular', 'political' and 'workers' theatre.

Rattenbury (1979) has delineated the main characteristics of

'alternative theatre' groups:

- 1) They reject the limitations of the physical structures of established theatre buildings.
- 2) They reject the hierarchical and differentiated organisation of established theatres.
- 3) They often reject the use of a fully prepared script by a single hand.
- 4) They deliberately seek alternative audiences to the frequenters of established theatres.
- 5) Its members are opposed to many of the social institutions, conventions and values of the wider society.(p.34)

This awareness of the social base of theatre is similar to an important comment on 'people's theatre' by Bradby and McCormick:

The most significant development in the theatre during this century has been the broadening of its social basis.... In the course of the century, many of the most radical changes in theatre architectures and stage design as well as in the subject matter and style of the plays presented have been brought about in the course of extending the theatre to the people (1978 p.11)

They also comment that whereas there has been a variety of motive and purpose behind this movement, quantitatively the most important has been political, theatre of propaganda or theatre connected with the aims and practices of political organisations.

Craig (1980), in an assumption apparently shared by Itzen (1980), goes further to state that 'political theatre', crucially distinct from plays about politics, 'is, by necessity, a theatre of socialist political change'.(p.30) Similarly but further still, Stourac (1978) has introduced the concept of 'workers theatre'. By this definition the focus should be directed to a theatre

where the working class is involved in the writing and performing, which recognises the working class as the main historical force for achieving change, which plays to other workers on their own terrain and forms a part of the organised working-class movement by means of reflecting its problems in the light of its struggles. (p.14). Therefore its purpose in performing to the working class is to activate it socially, conducting it theatrically through a differentiated learning process (ibid). This in turn involves the bypassing of the venues, forms, subject matter, audiences and relations to them of the established theatres.

John McGrath (1979) has defined 'socialist theatre' as one that:

has as its base a recognition of capitalism as an economic system which produces classes; that sees the betterment of human life for all people in the abolition of classes and of capitalism; that sees that this can happen only through the rise to state power of the current under-class, the working class, and through a democratization-economic as well as political - of society and of its decision - making processes. 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. (p.43)

The work of these definers will be considered at the appropriate time, but at this juncture some observations can be made about the definitions and the implications which follow them.

Rattenbury's characteristics of 'alternative theatre', with the exception of number five, do not convey much in the way of purpose and motivation; they are negativistic and do not express the reasons behind the postulated alternatives nor the motives for the many rejections. Similarly, merely to 'widen the social base' of theatre carries little political purpose and leads to other

deeply ambivalent concepts such as 'popular' theatre or culture. (4) Whereas the politics and purposes behind 'workers' and 'socialist' theatre are manifest, nevertheless the former implies an amateur status and stresses the social origins of the theatre workers whereas 'socialist theatre' as a term places more stress upon the political aims rather than the relations of theatre production.

This discussion of definitions and their implications displays the distinct and manifest purpose behind the term 'socialist theatre', and it is this which has prompted its use here in preference to the others. Now a further discussion of what the term 'socialist theatre' implies can demonstrate the comprehensive method its study must involve.

The subject matter of the drama may be general or concerned with a specific issue; thus a choice has been made, an 'agenda' set, about which issues or situations are of the most importance at a given time. This agenda may have been set by others, such as political parties, campaigns or organisations, and so their relationships with the theatre workers must be examined. One feature of this will also be how the theatre workers see themselves and their products in relation to the political campaign or process; this too requires investigation.

In whatever way these relationships are conducted the theatre workers will still have to confront the problem of securing a theatrical equivalent for the politics concerned. Stage representations are here an artistic metaphor for the events, situations and arguments with which the producers are concerned

and with which they wish the audiences to be concerned.

Socialist theatre workers will perhaps necessarily, to take some examples, wish to present social explanations of behaviour rather than those of a completely individualistic psychology: the movement and conflict of social groups and classes rather than just of individuals; social and historical events rather than simply domestic ones.

As John Arden (1977) has commented further, conflict may be the basic theme of drama, but there are problems with the dramatisation of class conflict and mass movement since theatre tends to reduce the scale of this communal activity through relying for its effect on the physical actions of a very few people. He notes other problems : how is a strike to be dramatised, when the action - abstention from work - is essentially non-action? Also, theatre can easily distort, through a temptation to the spectacular, to the interesting dramatic situation, the presentation of long-drawn out and continuous struggles. Such events, consisting of routine work, tedious meetings, obscure disputes between small groups, are by no means 'dramatic' and are, as Arden points out, both essential to an understanding of political history which includes Lenin, Connolly or Gramsci, and an invitation to boredom on stage. (p.132).

Obviously this need not be the case with every subject within the ambit of socialist theatre, but it points to the need to search for theatrical metaphors, suitable forms, to deal with a variety of processes and events and attitudes adopted as a result of a variety of approaches and definitions. Therefore the question of forms of expression in socialist theatre is a central one for

sociological study here; in fact, the question helps to map the field.

Besides the conditions of production in socialist theatre clearly the conditions of reception are also highly relevant. This is to say that where performances are intended to contribute to a political movement then the circumstances under which those contributions can actually be made need to be carefully examined or defined. Put another way, can the various processes of identification, shock, release or realisation which it is possible to generate from a dramatic performance be sustained purely for its duration, or can they be connected, and if so how, with feelings and events outside the theatre? It is this crucial issue of an identity (or otherwise) between the conditions of production and the conditions of reception, crucial since it could be said to determine the success of the artistic and political elements of the project, which again points to the comprehensive approach which the proper study of this topic requires.

Another substantive issue is raised by the study of an art form of this sort, one which has frequently created debate amongst cultural sociologists. A feature of, and possibly an issue within socialist theatre is likely to be whether working people are to form the subject matter, or the audience, for the plays. This raises a wider debate, already indicated in the various definitions, of the relations between a working-class culture and the dominant culture, more particularly of the relations between a working-class culture and working-class politics as those politics seek to change and transform society as a whole. Is part

of this emancipation on overcoming of the alienation of a class from, for example, the mainstream theatre of society either as producers, consumers or subject matter, or should it be the creation of an alternative theatre apparatus which will assist the emancipation?

One starting point for this debate is the Russia of 1917. At that time a view associated with the Proletkult group was to regard the art of the past as bourgeois and therefore to be rejected, and to seek the rapid promotion of an autonomous and spontaneous proletarian culture to correspond to the dictatorship of the proletariat in politics. The new feelings and experiences of the proletariat needed artistic expression and artistic systematisation. To Leon Trotsky however it was illegitimate to think in terms of a proletarian culture in antithesis to bourgeois culture because there was no real analogy between the historic development of the two classes. Thus he argued in a famous article:

.....there can be no question of the creation of a new culture, that is, of construction on a large historic scale during the period of dictatorship. The cultural reconstruction which will begin when the need of the iron clutch of a dictatorship unparalleled in history will have disappeared, will not have a class character. This seems to lead to the conclusion that there is no proletarian culture and that there never will be any and in fact there is no reason to regret this. The proletariat acquires power for the purpose of doing away forever with class culture and to make way for human culture. (1968 p.135)

Although this polemic took place within a highly specific historical situation its echoes are still present. For example Van der Will (1975), writing in the mid 1970s, argued that despite the steady growth in trades union power and rank and file

militancy which had been noticeable at that time, the working class had been slow to find its voice in cultural affairs.

His point is that:

No class can presume to become dominant in society if in the course of its struggle for emancipation it fails to gain a distinct cultural identity ... The development of proletarian culture is linked to an historical situation where the proletariat - because of its relatively advanced organisation - can begin to establish a literature, a theatre, a musical movement, a community culture which could provide an institutional base alternative and opposition to established culture. (p. 3-4)

He continues that this is because this culture can become an indicator of and a means for the promotion of the consciousness with which the working class grasps the power of its own creativity in the political, economic and cultural spheres.

However other critics such as Johnson (1975) have disputed both the political and the artistic claims such as these. Having argued that a coherent and fully developed proletarian culture capable of expression will only be forged as the working class gains political strength - a point not unlike Van der Will's - he denies, after an examination of some working-class writers of the 1930s, that artistic skill can match the political impulse behind their use of the novel form. However strong the political commitment and sociological importance of these novels (and, by implication, other art forms) the lack of literary skill which would have been granted by absorption of the literary culture of the dominant class reduces them to merely documentary or propaganda:

There is usually a fervent desire to explain for what seems to be the first time ever what it is like to ensure the social, economic, and cultural hardships of working-class life - but unfortunately this frequently results in a catalogue of trivial details, naturalistic descriptions, and an absence of experience which has been artistically synthesised. (p.90)

In summary therefore this survey of debate demonstrates that a study of socialist theatre must confront the main issues they raise : the possibility of an alternative and oppositional socialist culture emerging and the conditions of its political success, and whether the strictures laid down by Johnson will tend to be valid or whether an altogether different problematic is needed. Such issues were also present in the polemic levelled (5) by Brecht against Lukacs, to which reference has already been made. For example to Brecht 'popular culture' was synonymous with political action:

'Popular' means intelligible to the broad masses, taking over their own forms of expression and enriching them, adopting and consolidating their standpoint, representing the most progressive section of the people in such a way that it can take over the leadership : thus intelligible to other sections too, linking with tradition and carrying it further (1973 p.108)

It followed from this that, in contradiction to Lukacs, that 'realism' itself could not be based for all time on a particular literature or set of conventions:

'Realist' means : laying bare society's causal network, showing up the dominant viewpoint as the viewpoint of the dominators, writing from the standpoint of the class which has prepared the broadest solutions for the most pressing problems afflicting human society, emphasizing the dynamics of development, concrete and so as to encourage abstraction (ibid p.109)

These famous statements from Brecht, like the debates over class culture and in fact like many of the issues raised in the discussion about what is involved in the study of socialist theatre, can only be adequately pursued through the investigation of concrete historical situations, and so therefore the material to follow is concerned to do exactly that.

To summarise the case so far, it has been argued that given the assumed features of a socialist theatre its study requires, and requires precisely because of those features, a comprehensive approach. It should include, at least, an account of the relations between theatre groups and political parties or campaigns, and between the subject matter of the drama and the forms of expression and artistic policies which are used. Further, a consideration of the conditions of production and reception should be included, and finally also a discussion of the conditions of existence of an oppositional cultural movement such as socialist theatre.

If as has been argued, such a comprehensive approach is by no means central in theatre studies in general, what remains to be discussed is how evident it is in existing studies of specifically socialist theatre. This is also a point at which to discuss how this thesis stands in relation to those studies, and to explain how it proposes to deal with the issues which have been raised.

As regards the pre-Second World War period, there are several short and general accounts, principally of the London Unity Theatre 1936-39: Clark (1979), Van Gyseghem (1979), Page (1971) and Bradby and McCorfmick (op. cit.) for example vary in how comprehensively they approach their subject but all suffer from a limitation of scope. Whereas Page makes use of short quotations from plays as illustrations, unlike the others, nevertheless like them he has no space for a detailed examination of actual texts or performances. Similarly they are obviously unable, given their scope, to consider the points raised by a longer

perspective on London Unity of the 1930s, one able to situate it in terms of developments before it and its reactions to the war years and further.

There are also treatments in more depth of the socialist theatre of the 1930s. Jones (1964) traces the early history of progressive popular theatre in Britain, leading to the labour movement stage of the 1920s. He then argues that a marked and disastrous retreat from these early and promising possibilities took place during the 'third Period' of the Comintern between 1929 and 1935, in the work of the Communist Party's Workers' Theatre Movement. Without examining any of its performances in detail, Jones maintains that their dogmatic rejection of genuinely dramatic elements in favour of agitprop rendered this entire episode disastrous. The real threads were only picked up again later in the decade when the Popular Front tactic enabled the attraction of professional theatre workers to a broad labour movement theatre. The result in London Unity Theatre (at which point, in 1936, Jones ends his account), was a highly skilled theatre capable of dramatising the crucial political issues of the day. He has repeated this theme in East German and British publications: Jones (1966), (1974) and (1975).

A recent work argues, without referring to it, almost exactly the opposite case to Jones. This is Stourac's (op. cit.) detailed and comprehensive account of the Workers' Theatre Movement 1929-35, placed alongside Russian and German experience. His point of view is largely carried over in the collection of WTM material edited and introduced by Samuel (1977). In essence the position is that the WTM represented the basis of a revolutionary socialist working-class theatre. However it was not possible for this

potential to be realised, although those weaknesses in the Movement's work responsible for this were largely the result of the political errors and lack of understanding exhibited by the Communist Party. The transformation of the WTM into London Unity Theatre as a result of the Popular Front period represents, according to Stourac, a defeat for both the dramatic and political possibilities to which the record of the WTM had hinted.

Stourac does not examine London Unity or its texts in detail, so like Jones his generalisations are based on a limited range of evidence. Like Jones he also seems to operate with an a priori conception of what actually constitutes a socialist theatre, although, deriving in large part from the different and historically opposed socialist political stances each adopts, those conceptions are seen as also opposing. (6)

Another thesis by Travis (1968) concentrates on an organisational history and chronological account of productions by London Unity Theatre between 1936 and 1946. Although this provides some valuable material it unfortunately ignores a close examination of the majority of the plays and performances concerned. There is also very little foregrounding of the political events and contexts within which they took place, two omissions most noticeable in his section on Unity Theatre during World War Two.

Where this thesis differs from these three is that it attempts to present an even level of evidence upon which to form its generalisations. This is to say that it will consider in detail both the WTM and Unity Theatre; it will go further and consider the Unity movement outside London and also the Left Book Club

Theatre Guild, an organisation which has not been discussed in detail. It will also trace how the socialist theatre movement of the 1930s developed during World War Two - including the role of the Left within the 'cultural upsurge' noted during the war years, and the theatre group of the Army Bureau of Current Affairs. This is a largely unrecorded area and a crucial one for understanding how (often the same) writers and their work developed in the changing context of the Left's relation to the state and society.

There is a larger body of work on contemporary socialist theatre. Rattenbury (op. cit.) adopts an anthropological perspective on the early history of the Agitprop (now Red Ladder) Theatre Group, focusing on how, in her view, such groups perform the function of mutually re-inforcing a belief system with their audiences. This is compared with the role of ritual in tribal societies as recorded in anthropological literature.

The main body however is published work, often accounts or self reports by practitioners - McGrath (1971), (1974), (1979 op. cit.) and (1981 op. cit.), Seyd (1975), Edgar (1975) and (1978), Gooch (1975), (1977) and (1978) and Wandor (1979) are examples. There are also collections of diverse articles on the subject (Craig 1980 op. cit.) and a general survey over the whole range (Itzen 1980 op. cit.), also a study of the specifically feminist contributions by Wandor (1981).

Rattenbury's conclusions will be discussed in due course, but at this point it can be noted that her material is limited to agitprop work during a short specific period so that again there is an example of generalisations based on a limited range

of evidence. Regarding the other works, they contain a great deal of useful information on every aspect of modern socialist theatre; further, and unlike the pre-war period, many of the scripts involved are published and currently in print. What this thesis can bring to an examination of this material is above all its historical perspective, its awareness of how different or comparable dramatic issues - such as, as will be seen, the role of agitprop - were dealt with by an evolving Left in different or comparable political contexts. Thus can its judgements and conclusions be historically informed and thus can it include and then go beyond existing work in this field.

In conclusion some final observations can be made about how this thesis proceeds. It does not set out, despite some of the comments above, to offer a complete history: it concentrates on the main peaks of activity during the fifty years in question, the 1930s and the war years, and the 1970s. Further, it is not always possible to maintain its comprehensive approach at an even level, since the amount of information it has been possible to obtain has not been level at every point. With this proviso it can proceed to examine the issues which have been raised here by examining the actual relations between theatrical practices and political struggles in concrete situations, not as discrete examples but as a long-term perspective which can identify and account for break or continuity.

This involves an understanding of the context in which socialist theatre practitioners have worked, one aspect of which are the long term trends in the Left and how it relates to society. It is with the position of the Communist Party in 1930 therefore that the thesis begins.

Notes

1. R. Williams, 'You're a Marxist, Aren't You?', in ed B. Parekh The Concept of Socialism (1975) p.242.
2. For a more detailed examination of the theories of Goldmann and Lukacs than is possible here see D. Laing, The Marxist Theory Art (1978), and Working Papers in Cultural Studies No. 4 (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Birmingham) Spring 1973, on both of which this discussion has leaned.
3. Arts Council of Great Britain Research Report No. 1: The Audience for Subsidised Drama in Scotland and the North of England (1974) p.2.
4. For a discussion of this see the articles in ed J. Clarke, C. Critcher et al, Working Class Culture : Studies in History and Theory (1979).
5. The principal sources of this debate are in E. Bloch et al, Aesthetics and Politics (1977).
6. Jones subscribes to an emphasis on advance through alliances between all 'democratic' and 'progressive' forces, and is therefore favourable to the Popular Front of the 1930s. Stourac on the other hand adopts the revolutionary socialist emphasis on the independent self-activity of the working class and its vanguard Party. In Britain these have traditionally been the policies of the Communist Party on the one hand and various Trotskyist etc groups on the other.

It is therefore predictable that their attitudes to the theatres of the 'class against class' and Popular Front periods will be underpinned by this.

1: 'Awakening the Masses': The Workers' Theatre Movement 1930-1935

You may be amazed at our audacity in bringing the Theatre on to the street. But our stage, comrade reader, is situated wherever workers gather together in work or pleasure. Our stage is the open street, the borrowed lorry, the trade union branch room, the meeting platform. We disdain spotlights, lime-lights, "stars" and other trappings of the bourgeois theatre. Our only spot-light is a Workers Britain; our only star the five-pointed badge of the Soviet State. (1)

Thus were the colours characteristically nailed to the mast in the first issue of Red Stage, the paper of the Workers' Theatre Movement. This organisation did not, of course, appear from nowhere, ⁽²⁾ but from 1930 to 1935 it came to represent the principal socialist theatre organisation in Britain which tried to combine a new art with a new politics and a new audience. To understand its trajectory and its nature it is essential to discuss the direction of the politics which nurtured it and which it espoused, those of the British Communist Party between 1929 and 1935. This discussion, as with Dewar (1976), Miliband (1972) or Woodhouse and Pearce (1975) usually follows an established critique, but for the purpose here it is also necessary to combine critique with an understanding.

Prior to the Tenth Party Congress in 1929 the CPGB had pursued a form of 'united front' policy within the labour movement. Alongside its periodic and doomed efforts to affiliate to the Labour Party, the CP had also worked within the Minority Movement in the trades unions, the National Unemployed Workers Movement, and another unsectarian but 'front' organisation in the Labour Party, the National Left Wing Movement. It also mounted Party - dominated broader groups in other fields such as the British Workers' Sports Federation. However through 1928 the Comintern,

based on an analysis of the imminent collapse of the world capitalist system, developed a new line which the British party eventually adopted. According to this R. Palme Dutt, for example, commented on the political situation:

.....new methods have been found in post-war Europe. In Italy and other countries they have taken the form of fascism; in Britain and other countries they have taken the form of the "Labour Government" and the employers - TUC conferences. The appearances may differ; the essence is the same. They are forms to maintain the might of capitalism in its decline (Dewar op. cit. p.87).

Likewise the Daily Worker was expected to 'expose the reactionary schemes of the trade-union bureaucracy, and the deceptions of the Labourites and the psuedo-Lefts' (ibid).

Consequently, in its role as provider of revolutionary socialist leadership for the working class, work within or in collaboration with the traditional organisations of the labour movement was impossible. The Labour Party was to be exposed as the 'third capitalist party' and Communist cadres were to take the initiative in situations of industrial conflict through their own organisations; the next five years were ones of unremitting sectarianism and the generation of new organisations in alternative opposition to the mainstream labour movement.

Criticism of this policy, to repeat, is well rehearsed and its consequences in Germany agreed to be tragic. In Britain also the Party lost its support amongst Left union leaders such as A.J. Cook, and its footholds in the unions themselves, and suffered severe problems in recruiting and keeping members. Nevertheless by way of appreciation it is also necessary to understand the acceptability of this approach to Party activists

since in so doing we may also understand the motivations and outlook of those who formed the core of the Workers' Theatre Movement.

Those delegates attending the 1929 conference were for most part working class with a large proportion unemployed - many in fact blacklisted since the General Strike and largely abandoned by their unions. (3) The Mond-Turner talks seemed evidence of the absorption of the TUC into the capitalist state, and, later, the failures of the Labour government and MacDonald's role in the National Government, set against the background of the Wall Street Crash and accelerating unemployment, seemed to demonstrate the bankruptcy of the reformist politics to which the working class owed allegiance.

As the economic crisis worsened and the unemployed in devastated areas bore the brunt of punitive welfare measures, it can be appreciated how this line could be accepted amongst Party members who operated it with tremendous energy for five years. Howkins (1980) has examined how the party virtually created a whole alternative culture around its members' felt position of constituting a society within society. As he comments, the political theatre of the WTM was an integral feature of it.

Any account of the WTM is now indebted to the pioneering work of Richard Stourac (op. cit.) He has provided a detailed picture of the development and nature of this theatre, upon which this thesis is content to rely and add to, whilst at the same time parting company and taking issue with a number of his assumptions, generalisations and conclusions. As Stourac explains, the WTM in London - and, it could be added, following MacColl (1973) and

Goorney (1981) almost simultaneously in Manchester - emerged from the work of young working-class Party members previously active in Left theatre work around the Clarion Players and offshoots of the LLP Theatre Guild. It expanded fitfully around the country with about thirty groups, reaching a peak around industrial struggles and the National Hunger March in 1932. This section of the thesis will now examine the WTM's link between politics and theatre and the development of its cultural theory, the contents and contexts of its performances; its organisation and relations of cultural production and its relationship with the wider political and labour movements.

The former Secretary of the WTM has recalled the politics of both the theatre movement and the Party at this time:

The political atmosphere was, you know, we felt that the revolution couldn't be far off - if it didn't happen this year, it would certainly happen in the next year or two. Capitalism was bumping along the bottom, I think was the expression We had a sort of fairy like dream of socialism, but it was much more simple, uncomplicated, than it is to-day. This brought us into the depression of 1931, 1932 - hunger marches, mass unemployment, and we were all convinced that the capitalist system in Britain just couldn't survive. (4)

The dream may have been fairy like but the search for artistic forms suitable for direct dramatic interventions into the struggles of localities was highly practical.

In part this was a logical consequence of the WTM's espousal of the 'cultural separatism' alluded to earlier - a total rejection of both the mainstream theatre as 'bourgeois' and the theatrical efforts of the LLP for example as reformist.

The task was to develop a theatre which was capable of serving the revolution by taking its politics directly to the working class:

We have abandoned the curtained stage, the footlights and floodlights, costume and make-up not because we are deeply opposed on artistic principles to these, but because they stood as obstacles in the way of our reaching the wide masses of the workers ... By freeing ourselves of all the accessories that are often mistaken for the essentials of the theatre - but which quite demonstrably they are not - we gain enormously. We gain the ability to go out to the workers instead of waiting for them to come to us. On the streets, in parks and open spaces, the fighting theatre of the working class can carry out its work of influencing the masses. (5)

The form developed as a result was 'agit-prop', more often called 'open stage' and christened 'a property-less theatre for the propertyless class' - one without costume, props, or special stages. As Tom Thomas, Secretary of the WTM for many years commented in 1930:

.....There has grown up what is called for want of a better term, the "cabaret" form, for which a stage, curtains, and lighting are unnecessary, whose properties can be transported by hand, and a performance of which can be given literally anywhere.

It is an entertainment of short sketches parodies, speaking chorus, knockabout etc, performed by a troupe of about 10, with always a political and propaganda content to each item. The items are always abreast of events, being modified or dropped as the situations demand. Thus an active group can lead its audiences in the class struggle, instead of merely commenting on the past, as naturalistic plays would compel them to do. (6)

Thus groups emerged throughout the country with names which were often themselves simple political statements (Red Megaphones, Red Radio, Hammer and Sickle Players, Red Magnets, the Rebel Players) and who performed in uniform overalls, often speaking

through megaphones and using techniques of voice and physical movement rather than characterisation and plot.

It is important to stress the international dimension to the use of this form, even though contemporary accounts stress that small numbers of British theatre workers had arrived at its use independently. Crucially up to 1933, alongside the Soviet Union, the prestige of the German Communist Party (KPD) was considerable amongst their British counterparts. The mass electoral support, high membership and militant atmosphere of the KPD captured the imagination of British communists, and formal and informal contacts between the rank and file of the two parties made the British increasingly aware of the German revolutionary cultural apparatus. For example in 1931 a WTM troupe visited the Rhineland and the following year some members of Stepney Red Radio attended an international agit-prop conference and display of work of the mass choirs in Dortmund.⁽⁷⁾ As Thomas reported:

....we had written to German comrades in the Arbeitertheaterbund Deutschlands, sending them some of our material and telling them what we were doing. They invited us to bring our group over and do a tour ... Their performances were absolutely smashing - we could see that. They were all very fine actors. They didn't change their clothes though they appeared physically different in each scene. They used a lot of music and song, drawing on the tradition of German cabaret: I said to Arthur Pieck who was the organiser, "You must have some wonderful people who write this music for you". He replied, to my astonishment, "We do it ourselves", and convinced me that given some natural aptitude, writing tunes for songs could be just as effective as the amateurs who wrote plays and sketches. (8)

At the time Thomas had reported that the WTM had 'already decided on the venue-type presentation as opposed to naturalism, and then discovered that the Germans had found the same'. They were in no

doubt about the artistic way forward.

It is interesting also to compare the artistic theory developed by the WTM - which will be examined in more detail later - with developments in the Soviet Union, especially since Thomas refers in an article of 1930 to a conference of the International Workers' Theatre Union in Moscow:

The discussions at the conference showed that the general line of development in all capitalist countries was remarkably similar, although the stages reached differed widely. The line can be summarized as: First the Cultural Theatre for the workers, performing plays from bourgeois sources (especially those showing the misery of the workers' lives). This is gradually superceded by, or grows into, the Propaganda Theatre, which develops its own revolutionary playwrights within the framework of a naturalistic stage. But in no capitalist country can the naturalistic be considered the ideal propaganda weapon of the proletariat. It demands too much in the way of resources, it is static, it invites the workers to come to it instead of going where the workers are to be found. So there has grown up what is called for want of a better name, the "cabaret" form ...

As to content "Proletarian Realism" or better still, as it includes and defines "Proletarian", "Dialectic Realism", the realism that sees beyond things that are, to the forces that are destroying them. Defeatism, mysticism, individual psychology, as an end in itself, art for arts sake, these are bourgeois virtues and proletarian crimes. Crimes that the workers won't commit if they hold on to "Dialectic Realism" as a watchword. (9)

In Moscow at this time the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP - which had emerged as the literary arm of the Party through administrative fiat out of the wealth of organisations and ideas thrown up by 1917) had been charged with the task of organising the cultural revolution implicit in the first Five Year Plan. Literature in this context was to be the emotional inflection of immediate themes not only in the struggle

for production but also against 'kulaks' and 'saboteurs'. A Pravda editorial of 1931 for example, summed up this approach.

We must educate a type of literary man who can write for the newspapers, who can give a vital, gripping description of our socialist construction, of all its gigantic achievements, and of all its failings. We need a fighting literature on contemporary themes, ... one which will daily mobilise the masses around the task of carrying out the general line of the Party. (10)

There are some clear parallels here but it should not be assumed that there was a straight cause and effect relationship. There was, arguably, very little tradition of British Marxist aesthetics for the WTM, a new wing of a new party, to draw upon and a more accurate possibility was that some authority was being invoked or ascribed for the process by which the WTM was developing an aesthetic out of its political approach and the virtues of necessity.

Discussions in WTM journals reveal this aesthetic in the making, as do prepared statements for conferences and reports of the discussions in the Daily Worker. In 1932 the first National Conference of the WTM considered a document on the basis and development of the movement prepared by the Central Committee, in which Thomas had clearly expanded and worked through the aesthetic ideas expressed in his communication with New Masses two years earlier. It was the clearest statement to date and an impressive summation and comment on two or three years' activism.

The paper (11) relates a version of the history of workers' theatre in Britain hitherto to the international experience, and to the aesthetics of such a theatre vis a vis the conventional, and to the political, organisational and practical issues which the WTM had encountered and which it was still facing. A brief analysis portrays the role of the institutions of bourgeois culture as one of

'blinding the workers to the existence of the class struggle, while particularly in times of war, they are used to drive the workers of the different countries to slaughter each other for the benefit of their exploiters...' Life as the majority experience it has become a taboo subject, covered by meaningless extravaganzas. A revolt against trivialization in the theatre has been mounted by the Left intelligentsia through the 'little theatre' and repertory movement but unfortunately by 'proclaiming themselves to be "about the battle" they lose themselves in ingenious but sterile technicalities and experiments'. Alongside this the labour movement - meaning Labour Party, LLP and Co-Operative Society-Theatre 'believes its mission is to bring the working class into contact with "great art" (i.e. capitalist art)' or produce plays dealing with the class struggle but which show no way out, 'and which therefore spread a feeling of defeat and despair'.

The WTM on the other hand, as part also of an international movement, had grown to 30 working groups as a result of a method which enabled it to play an active part 'in the stiffening of the workers' resistance to the evergrowing attacks on their standard of life.' Its experience had shown two aesthetic conclusions:

1. That the naturalistic form, namely that form which endeavours to show a picture on the stage as near to life as possible, is suitable for showing things as they appear on the surface, but does not lend itself to disclosing the reality which lies beneath. And it is just this reality existing beneath the polite surface of capitalist society that the Workers' Theatre must reveal.
2. That the unities of space and time, which are one of its main features, greatly hinder the portrayal of 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).

3. That the audiences reached by such plays which demanded a well-equipped stage were insignificant compared to the mass of workers who could not be brought to the theatre or hall to witness them.

As an alternative the WTM, again as part of an international movement, had evolved a form capable of presenting a dynamic picture of society and which was also adaptable enough to be taken to workers in struggle where that struggle was being joined. Other advantages of this 'agitprop' style were listed:

1. Its flexible, and usually short, form is quickly adapted to meet local and topical situations. The preparation of special items dealing with events as they arise, should be a matter of days only.
2. Instead of emphasising the ability to portray characters, a difficult job for workers with very little spare time, it uses instead the class experience of the worker-player, which convinces a worker audience much more than the studied effects of the professional actor.
3. The direct approach to the audience, together with the fact that the performance is surrounded by and part of the crowd, is of great value in making the worker audience feel that the players are part of them, share their problems and their difficulties, and are pointing a direct, reasonable way out.

However it is interesting to note that the document nonetheless argues that the naturalistic method should not be entirely ruled out from the workers' theatre, and that all groups should try to maintain friendly contact with workers in the dramatic organisations of the I.L.P., Labour Party and the Co-Operative Guilds. More significantly, the paper also registers the gap between these ideals and the reality of the situation at this point:

It must be said that up to the present even the best performances given have not touched a hundredth part of the possibilities of this new style, and the struggle for a higher level of technique (a higher level of effectiveness) is one that every group must undertake very seriously. To tolerate a low standard of performance is one of the worst forms of sabotage. Strict self-criticism and criticism from the audiences must be developed. Finally, the effectiveness with which our sketches are presented depends to a large extent upon the political consciousness and conviction of the players, which can only be heightened by systematically raising their political level.

What was meant by this identification between political conviction and consciousness with effective dramatic presentation was explained by the location and examination of certain problems experienced. Principally, the most dangerous was a narrowness of outlook which assumed that the audience was already familiar with the revolutionary point of view, and thus in practice was meaningless to the vast majority of workers who remained unconvinced. The only way to avoid preaching to the converted was to start from a basis which was common to a non-political working class audience and 'lead them step by step to agreeing with its revolutionary conclusions'. This problem - described as one of 'sectarianism' - was located also in the choice of subject matter:

It is the job of the Workers' Theatre to deal in a dramatic way, not only with the events of the workers' every day lives, the struggles in the workshops, the problems of working women in the market place and at home, and the current political question, but, in addition, the scandals, sensations, and injustices of capitalist society, and in every case show them as part of the class struggle.

The solution put forward was one which aimed primarily at the organisation of the movement itself, calling for a broadening of the base of the membership and an expansion of collective writing

and production at every level:

Every member of the group can help in some way. The most important method is to organise the collection of facts and information upon which the sketch can be based. First a theme is chosen, and then every member of the group endeavours to get information about it by talking to those workers it concerns. Then, at a subsequent meeting, the information is collectively discussed, the line of the sketch determined, and, if necessary, it can be left to one or two members to write it up.

Alongside this groups should actively seek recruits not only from militant workers but also 'from those whose class consciousness is not yet developed' but who are attracted to working class dramatic activity.

Stourac (op.cit) discusses the reception of this document at the conference. The principal consequence was a firm rejection of any suggestion of 'naturalism' or the curtained stage in favour of agitprop, to the extent that some groups received severe criticism for even the minimal use of props. The results will be examined below, but it is important to realise there was another input into the WTM stagings besides a theoretical approach, one which was eminently practical. Ewan MacColl has recalled his involvement with the Red Megaphones group in Salford:

Our groups were pitiful when I look back, and in our area anyway we were all youngsters without even a knowledge of amateur theatre. We had no knowledge of the skills that were needed to work in the theatre, just a desire to speak for the people we believed we were representing. So we decided that we needed all the vitality of the street theatre and some of the acting technique of the legitimate theatre, developed and made much more flexible. Our actors must be able to dance, sing, play musical instruments and act! It was necessary to train from the very beginning and look at the concept of theatre in a completely new way. To draw on the experiences that were

common in any working-class community, particularly in Lancashire in the thirties - the theatrical experiences of childhood, the street performers - escapologists, singers, tumblers - coming round the streets, creating a very lively kind of theatre (Goorney op. cit. p.14).

It seems reasonable to assume, following this point, that a group of young and working class people attempting a political theatre for the working class at this time would automatically relate to and draw from the forms of live entertainment which they and their audiences were familiar with. They would probably attempt to insert their political theatre within the particular popular culture which was the lived experience of their audiences. There is evidence that this could not be done without argument, however, as can be seen from the debate which took place in Red Stage over the use of jazz - 'jazz' here probably being taken to mean commercial popular music:

I should like to see a discussion on the sort of songs and music we use for the Workers Theatre. It seems a great pity that, when so many fine revolutionary and other great melodies are available, it is found necessary to descend to the level of the American jazz exploiters. It is true that the workers are already familiar with these, but should not our endeavour be to raise the standard of that which the workers are familiar? And in any case, jazz tunes so quickly become obsolete that we can obtain only a passing value from them. Let us have music by all means, but good music, music which will live and become part of our revolutionary history. (12)

A reply from Liverpool came down firmly on the side of an ad hoc approach at the expense of developing an aesthetic:

The Workers Theatre uses every weapon on which it can lay its hands, unfettered by an artistic or educational ideals. This is where the opponents of individualism and jazz tunes go wrong. If parodies will help us, if jazz brings us nearer to the workers, if an individual turn serves a purpose in our propoganda, then let us

use them all. We must not forget, as the first number of Red Stage said, that our art of the theatre is a weapon of the revolution. We are not out to raise the aesthetic standards of the workers, nor to develop artistic theories of working class art, our job is to speed the revolution; our place is with the masses in their class struggle against capitalism ... If we keep this aim constantly before us our technique will not go far wrong. (13)

The 'individualism' mentioned here is in reference to another debate which yields information on performance style and the bases of attitudes to them amongst the WTM. After a national conference the film critic of the Daily Worker published an account in the paper of the conference and offered criticisms. Some were on general quality and are significant ('one group seems to think it is sufficient to portray the workers as coarse-mouthed buffoons with the minimum of political education overcoming the opposition by sheer force') (14) but on a general level he sought to promote what he saw as a new approach:

Most groups are basing their presentation on individual characterisation - the basis of the bourgeois stage, in which the heroes dominate, and this, in my opinion, is distracting to the audience. This has the minimum of force in driving the message home as opposed to mass acting- which has the maximum of force - and which is the line to be followed. (15)

Asked to expand on these points in Red Stage the critic Dave Bennett argued that there was much of value in satiric comment on political events by using political types as mouthpieces. Also, the WTM was correct to use 'the rhythmic utterance of mass slogans, etc; this helps to keep in the forefront mass spirit, and teaches the audience to think in terms of mass effect, movement and action'. But 'latent tendencies towards individualism' were likely to emerge where both the type of material used and the specific manner

of presentation allowed the stressing of individual qualities of acting. He concluded that this left sketches wide open for too much individualistic expression and this was severely damaging to the material. (16)

However the replies this received demonstrate a wider range of thinking within the WTM and indications of the type of political sketches which the movement was presenting. Tom Thomas, secretary of the WTM, questioned whether there was a dichotomy between 'encouraging and developing individual acting and expression, or to confine ourselves to mass slogans and movement'. Political education was the way to counter those who might become more concerned with their personal successes than with the meaning of what they were playing, and the most effective weapon in the armoury of the movement - mass speaking - should not be blunted by incessant use, thereby ignoring the array of other weapons at their disposal. Thomas considered the position of 'mass speaking' thus:

Its effectiveness is heightened by keeping it in reserve as a climax. To insist on our playing at "full throttle" the whole time would limit our work after a while to the level of the "long live" slogans at the end of a manifesto - which everybody takes for granted. (17)

The Red Players group argued that philosophically the state Communists must fight for is that in which mass power guarantees individual security, so that far from the individual being prohibited from personal expression fountains of individual energy are released which under the present system find no outlet for expression. On this basis they felt confident to voice their experience and opinion:

Some of us are getting a little too far with this "mass" complex. Properly utilised, mass effects can be wonderfully powerful, and we make more use of them than many groups, as for instance the mass scenes and actions representing industry in "Enter Rationalisation". There is certainly valuable scope for the intelligent production of mass effects, the Red Star Troupe has made excellent use of them; but to use mass acting, mass talking and mass glaring all the time on every occasion becomes aggressively boring - and we can't afford to be boring. (18)

Nor was there unanimity over the use of props, despite a total rejection of any such traditional theatrical equipment as just so much impedimenta by some troupes. The Red Front group in Dundee described their use in their performances of Meerut, a sketch concerned with the imprisonment of trades unionists in India, in a famous case of the time which involved some British activists also:

The WTM is one of the most powerful weapons we have because when workers see a sketch performed it creates an impression on their minds. They see it in detail and are therefore able to grasp the message more clearly than by listening to a propagandist. Take the Meerut sketch as an example. The Red Front troupe have played it both indoors and out, but on the last occasion when we played it we used scenery consisting of the front of a prison with two cells; three comrades in each cell; the curtains which belonged to the hall were closed, and the lights lowered. As soon as the curtains were opened, everybody could be heard talking about the prison front. At the top we had in big letters "Meerut 1929-32 Prisoners". We could hear workers quite distinctly saying "Oh, Meerut Prison". Thus the impression was created in their minds about the Meerut prisoners. We also brought in a few things we had never tried before; you could have heard a pin drop when one comrade started to sing the first verse of the Red Flag. This in itself made us feel imbued with enthusiasm, in fact we were the Meerut prisoners, - and mind, this never happened anytime we had played it before ... At the smashing of the bars, when the comrades came through the cell windows to the front of the platform, the applause was so great that we had to wait until it ended before we could finish the rest of the sketch. (19)

Besides their own experience the Red Front felt it necessary to legitimise, it would appear, their point by reference to ARTEF groups in Russia who used scenery, lighting effects and so on and who were apparently being used as an idealised standard in WTM literature.

It is also on the sketch Meerut that some pointers to the production method and style of acting practised and advanced by the WTM exist, one of the few which enables us to build a picture of a WTM performance. The producer Charlie Mann issued some notes, How to Produce Meerut:

Four, five or preferably six members can perform this sketch excellently, but despite the sameness of position throughout, an unusually high degree of emotional intensity is necessary. All the members should be strong, vibrant and capable of expressing intense feeling, because of the limits placed on them in regard to lack of movement, change of position, etc. This means that the whole of the response must be obtained by sheer power of emotional appeal through the voice and facial expression - a task calling for the highest degree of acting ability.

..... It is important to erect the "prison bars" in the least possible time. Release this part thoroughly. Let every member have his bar and line up off stage in single file. When they come on, each takes up his position immediately and knows exactly where to place his pole - so 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and the bars are up. And the bars must not be moved from position until the time comes. ... It doesn't matter about the space between the bars being large, as long as the effect is symmetrical. You are not portraying a jail, but symbolizing imprisonment.

Make an effective "picture" by grouping properly - two kneeling, one half lying, perhaps two standing, but all close together and bursting to get the message through. The mass speaking where it occurs must be as perfect as possible. The sketch opens with the word "murder" repeated four times. Don't blare this raggedly. Let the leader count four in whispers, then all come in together - softly at first then in crescendo until the last 'MURDER!' really sounds like it. Do this well and you will grip the audience from the beginning,

and if this sketch is done properly you won't hear a breath from the audience all through it.

Inflection of the voice is most important. Bitterness, oppression, resistance, triumph of class solidarity, and nearly every emotion is called for in the right place. This sketch offers most unusual opportunities for voice acting. Take the first speech for instance. Mere statement of fact is not enough. The voice must be pent up with repressed emotion so that the audience feels what is being described.

The tempo all through the sketch must be quick. As each player finishes his speech the next comes in at once - there is no time to waste - act - act - act - is the message. Mass speaking, as nearly always, must be staccato and clear, clip the syllables short and the aggregate effect will be words that can be understood.

Get the utmost out of the words - these and your faces are your only means of expression. Understand the full political meaning behind every passage. Mean it. Get it over. Not just by speaking loudly, but by intensity, conviction. If this makes you speak loudly - and it probably will - that's all right in this sketch. But remember contrasts and inflections are much more powerful than one long shout.

When it comes to the mass-speaking line "and thrown into Meerut jail" the bars should actually tremble under the bitter emotion of the actors. But don't obviously shake them. Grip them hard and the very intensity of your feelings will do the trick ...

..... All through the sketch, which is quite short, the main things are tempo and emotional intensity. Remember your two media are words and faces. Facial expression is just as important as the words while one prisoner is speaking, the others must be acting all the time - reflecting the words. Tense, haggard, anxious, determined and other expressions suggest themselves, as the lines progress. Feel the sketch, mean it, and you will convey the message of it in a way that will strike home to the class-consciousness that is latent in even the most reactionary member of your worker-audience. (20)

There is obviously a rich seam for discussion here which will be mined later, but the crucial elements of symbolism, representation

not illusion and the use of emotion as a means of communication are clearly paramount. Mann returned to this theme in a Red Stage article written in response to requests for advice on how to organise a troupe and keep it working once formed. Stressing the importance of elocution ('learning to pronounce each syllable so clearly that no member of the audience can fail to understand you') Mann again pushed the point that:

Expression conveyed through the action of the body is very desirable to develop. Intensity, militancy, terror, oppression, and all the emotions can be put over by facial expression and physical attitude. The great thing is to feel the meaning of the words as you say them. I have seen the powerful Meerut sketch ruined by a troupe that failed to feel it. Pretty girlish voices must lose their conversational tones when expressing the terror of capitalist oppression.

A good general rule for holding the interest of the audience is to keep the action pretty fast when the subject matter allows.

It was only having mastered these points through disciplined rehearsal and experience that groups could progress to experiment with balancing one mass against another on stage, introducing sound effects and ways of 'keeping the picture moving'. (21)

It is with these clues to a WTM performance - although it should not be assumed that they were necessarily widespread throughout the movement - in mind that an approach to particular surviving texts can be made. There is evidence that this method was used effectively in sketches concerned with the most crucial and bitterly fought over industrial phenomena of the early 1930s, that of various forms of 'speed-up', whereby owners and management

attempted to increase hours and output at the expense of wages so that profit margins could be maintained without any increased investment. The effect on wages and conditions were such as to provoke strikes in many industries despite record levels of unemployment. (22)

The response of the WTM was a sketch for six players called Speed-Up. According to the stage directions, 'This sketch must be played through entirely in the agitprop style. The rhythm must be constant and strongly marked throughout, the actions harmonizing with the words. The players all wear troupe uniform, the capitalist plus a top hat'. The workers march rhythmically with heavy tread across the stage and take up positions and perform simultaneous actions representing industry whilst the capitalist leading them beckons on:

Speed-up, speed-up! Watch your step
Hold on tight and show some pep.
Move your hands and bend your body
Without end and not so shoddy.
Faster, faster, shake it up.
No one idles in this shop.
Time is money, money's power.
Profits come in every hour.
Can't stop profits for your sake
Speed-up, speed-up, keep awake.

Those unable to keep up the pace - keep in step - or who protest are sacked and replaced; the rhythm of the lines matches the actions demonstrating the work and driving home the point continually:

Here's a youngster strong and willing
Will not find the pace so killing
To do more work for much less pay -
That's the problem of the day.
Speed-up, speed-up, work with me
Help bring back prosperity.

The Capitalist exchanges his top-hat for a policeman's helmet:

Speed-up, speed-up, move along
Do not idle here too long;
Streets are free for all to tread
Except for unemployed and red.
Speed-up, speed-up, one, two, three
You cannot get away from me.

Resistance comes when one is sacked but the others stand together.

Last Worker (others continue actions):

Comrades, stop this mad refrain
Workers toil is bosses' gain.
Why should we for bosses work?
What is this, you want to shirk?
There's no place here for the red
Get your cards, here what I said?
You sack Bill, you sack me too
No longer shall we slave for you.

Cap:

Second:

This moves immediately into a revolutionary situation as the group shouts 'strike!' very quickly down the line, link arms and move off the stage; three or four workers in single file ('but with resolute steps and militant rhythm') advance on the capitalist who retreats, and a short dialogue ensues between them:

Cap:

Second:

Cap:

Third:

Have respect for your tradition
Honour God and your religion!
Fight the hypocrite and priest
Who do not work but always feast
Stop this aimless meriment
Adopt me for your government
Down with all the wealthy classes
All power to the toiling masses!

The army is called out to repress the rebellious workers with their Red Flag and shouts for a 'United Front!' but the soldiers as an obstacle are very easily dealt with.

First Worker:

Soldier:

Workers, Soldiers, we are brothers
Fight the boss, not one another.
We are workers - so are you
What this comrade says is true
Fight the boss and do not wait
We'll set up a workers' state.

As the capitalist flees in disorder the cast turn to the audience and, according to the stage directors, present a tableau representative of workers' control and ownership of industry with

the Red Army on guard, or the sketch continued 'to explain the workers' state under workers' control'. (23)

A similar content and style seems to have been used in Enter Rationalization which:

shows the curse of this problem under capitalism and contrasts it with the benefits of rationalisation under Socialism. Under the present system we see workers speeded up, sacked, and wages are reduced on stage.

"Rationalization" is represented on the stage by a robot. We then see the workers taking the only way out of the situation. The manner in which this takes place is highly dramatic: when the workers strike, the capitalist calls for the army and a group of soldiers; but instead of siding with the boss they line up with the workers and to cries of "United Front!" they sweep the parasite off the picture. The sketch then quickly turns to the effects of rationalization when the workers control industry themselves - rising wages, lower hours, better conditions ... the sketch is exceedingly powerful throughout; the massed group effects and "robot" scenes presenting an interesting technique of stage symbolism. (24)

The visual impact of these sketches, and of Meerut, can be pictured, although the question of the political content will be resumed later.

Other groups, as the self-report from Dundee suggests, were using a mix with more conventional theatrical technique, especially for indoor performances. The actions of local Public Assistance Committees and the Means Test were other themes for sketches which would have seemed likely to strike a chord with audiences. Means Test Murder, one of several sketches which dealt with the treatment of the unemployed before the PAC, requires a table and chairs and a box to represent a crystal radio set. A coroners' court has returned a verdict of suicide whilst of unsound mind upon an

unemployed man who had not eaten for two days previously and who had just been visited by Means Test inspectors. The coroner finds this incredible and cannot understand how he could have fallen through the welfare safety net of the charitable organisations. The man's wife intervenes to try to explain what it feels like to be forced to sell your home in order to live and to beg for an existence from people who treat supplicants like dirt. She introduces a retrospective scene in which she and her husband received the fateful PAC visit:

.....Worker: But that's only a crystal set.
We don't use it now.
2nd Inspector: Then SELL IT!
Worker: I've tried ... But nobody will
buy it. It's out of date now.
1st: That's nothing to do with us.
You must sell it, out of date
or not.
2nd (with emphasis): Out job is to see that you have
no unnecessary furniture, and a
wireless is unnecessary.
1st: It is a LUXURY.
2nd: And you cannot be in need of
assistance if you have luxuries
about the house. (He glances
at wife and sees wedding ring)
What! Haven't you sold your
wedding ring yet?
Wife: My wedding ring?
1st: That's not necessary - You must
sell it.
Worker: What! My wife sell her wedding ring?
Why you -
1st: You'll get no benefit until that
ring's been sold. You should get
about 30s for it.
2nd (incredulous): A wireless set ...
1st: And ... a wedding ring ...
Both: What is the country coming to?
1st: Why its sheer robbery.

The response is aggression, thoughts of theft and despair which swiftly drive the man to suicide:

Woman: Half an hour later I came downstairs
and found that in a fit of insanity
he had killed himself. He took that

way out ... because he didn't know there was another way. Neither did I then. But I do now! The Hunger Marches came to London with that knowledge. THEY came to fight to smash the Means Test. (other workers enter and form group)

Woman: The fight is not yet finished
we must continue to intensify
the fight.
All: COMRADES!
1st Worker: Organise!
All: ORGANISE!
2nd Worker: Demonstrate!
All: DEMONSTRATE!
Women: Fight!
All: FIGHT! And smash the system that
brings misery, starvation and death. (25)

Two Pictures and Three Frames is also concerned with the inquisitional methods of the PAC and used a few characters in several roles. The victim is asked about two pictures, his only property of any value. One was taken in France, and the worker:

relates in dream-like reminiscence his bloody war experiences, and the officials change into an officer, trade-union leader and newspaper man of the period ... The second picture is investigated, and while the worker again recollects his experiences - the introduction of speed-ups and dismissals - the officials represent the trade union leaders acting the "peace in industry" stunt. But when it comes to the third frame the worker explains that he has no picture yet, but he'll get one - 'of John and his mates fighting against the system that starves us'.

Comments in Red Stage (26) on this and the Unemployment Sketch (which again used PAC inspectors asking 'Has your wife pawned her wedding ring yet?', and apparently 'the use of megaphones at the end of the sketch helps to put the mass slogans over in a very telling manner') and Thomas's own recollections show the impact these portrayals could achieve.

The sketch The Two Paths dealt with 'reform or revolution' and the WTM Secretary Tom Thomas described it as one of the winners on the WTM tour of South Wales in 1932:

To interest the workers by dealing with their own experiences, it first shows the recent election and the contrast between what was promised and what has resulted. The points are made rapidly in short, self-contained scenes, using often a semi-naturalistic method. A Court of Referees - the PAC - the victims of the Means Test - police batoning unemployed - wage cuts in all industries, and the drive to tariffs, follow one another in quick succession.

The 'two paths' of the title occur also when the sham opposition of MacDonald to the First World War is contrasted with that of Liebknecht and the success of Lenin. It contained songs to accompany the words with illustrative actions and ran for a probably unusually long thirty minutes. (27)

Another style altogether emerges from a review of The First of May which dealt with the historical development of May Day in the international labour movement. 'A most thrilling and fitting climax to the May Day demonstrations' (28) it provided an opportunity for training groups in the marshalling of a large number of voices, through using thirty to fifty performers in speaking choruses of voices balanced against each other and a speaker. Current events could be dealt with in Suppress, Oppress and Depress, a popular piece within the Movement apparently which in an embryonic form pointed to possibilities of drama-documentary:

News of current events affecting the lives of the workers is received by means of a megaphone at the back of the stage, and "The Herald" "Suppress" and "Pail" in turn twist it, disguise it or ignore it as suits the occasion. Finally the worker, unable to get the truth and disgusted with the anti-working class methods of the boss press, are driven to protest, and the need for the workers' own press in the form of the Daily Worker is very logically brought out. ... a Daily Worker screen obliterates the boss press, and the end is a description of the Daily Worker and its role and use as a weapon in the class struggle. (29)

Sketches were produced both on general political themes and in response to specific issues. Lists of material available were published regularly: The Spirit of Invergordon, on the sailors' strike. 'Doctor Mac - political knockabout skit on MacDonald's cures for unemployment', 'Our Leaders, Preachers, And Teachers - a skit on the relations of Press, pulpit and government to the boss', The Fight Goes On, about the miners' strike of 1926, The Crisis, on the split in the Labour Party and the formation of the national Government. Sketches on particular industrial disputes were available for more general adaptation, and general cultural issues were also covered: The Big Parade - an amusing self-exposure of the Scouts and other organisations catering for working-class youth, and an appeal for the Y.C.L.' The issues of the moment could be dealt with ('Russian Timber "Dumping" - the forces behind the agitation to ban Russian timber, and to raise the cost of houses') in such a way as to push alternative political interpretations of news and current affairs. (30)

Both within sketches and in their own right extensive use was made of songs, original or parodies of popular tunes with WTM lyrics. Some neatly encapsulate the Party's 'class against class' politics, such as Just One More Chance - The Pleas of the Labour Party:

Just one more chance!
To show we're really out to serve you
The Labour Party really does deserve to
Get just one more chance!

Give us the job
To serve the interests of the nation
-By tariffs, wage cuts or inflation -
A fat well-paid job.

We know we pass Anomalies and Means Test
We cut your wages, that no one denies.
But, after all, for workers margarine's best!
Now they must economise.

We hope you'll
Just give us Power!
Next time we'll do our best to please you
Next time we promise not to squeeze you
So-just one more chance! (31)

One song regularly in use was Jimmy Maxton and the LLP which
attacked the parliamentary Left and the Independent Labour Party:

Jimmy Maxton and the LLP
Make a 'frontal attack on poverty'
Jimmy Maxton and the LLP
They're so outspoken and so bold
When they speak in the House they're a joy to behold!
Jimmy Maxton and all his men
'We're not out to fight your foe
You may think so, but oh dear, no!
We're out because our job's to go
And keep the workers' interest in the Gas House show
It's our duty, now and then
To march to attack, and to run back again
Jimmy Maxton and all his men.

Jimmy Maxton and the LLP
They want a 'living wage' for you and me
Jimmy Maxton and the LLP
But when your wages meet attacks
And when your boss, the Government backs,
Where's Jimmy Maxton and all his men?
'We don't want a fight, to-day
And we point out a better way.
You arbitrate, and halve your pay -
We'll make a speech, protesting, in the House next day!
It's our sad duty, now and then,
To call out the cops to down working men!'
Jimmy Maxton and all his men. (32)

Love in Industry was a complete short piece sung to different tunes,
such as, to 'I'm a Dreamer':

Boss: When I'm dreaming, in my sleep
I'm still scheming how to keep
Profits up and wages down and all things nice for me.
No more discontent and strikes
Love in industry - brotherlike
With the help of Union leaders this is what I see!

A group of happily dancing workers enter and one of their songs
(to 'There is a Happy Land'):

There is a happy shop not far away
Where we're allowed to work ten hours a day
We've no time for lunch or tea
But we don't want it, can't you see
Because we're working happily
Ten hours a day!

The boss wakes up and sings to the tune of 'Lets do that Breakaway';

Let's do that twelve hour day!
Of course, you'll get less pay
And that you'll only get by and by
Don't worry boys, here's good news
It's a packet of joy for you -
A nice wage cut - two more hours -
You'll work right through!

This meets with joyful enthusiasm from the workforce and as a result we hear another verse to the tune of 'If I had a Talking Picture of You':

The Boss wants two more hours from you,
But what are two more hours to you?
Oh, please do make it more
Oh, can't you make it more?

Boss: Happy news for you, I think I can manage four! (Exit)

This continues successively until the stage is reached when the workers are singing 'there is a happy shop ... where we can work sixteen hours a day'; then the Boss re-enters to sing to the tune of 'Woman is Fickle' from 'Rigoletto'.

There are still eight a day!
Eight hours you sleep away,
No! that must never be -
Think of your factory!
Think what your bosses lose
While you just snore and snooze -
No, that must never, never, be!

All: Eight more, eight more, that makes twenty-four!

As they sing this all are dancing round joining hands with the Boss in a ring. The workers whirl off the platform and the Boss is left, to wake up, look round and see he is alone:

But it's only a beautiful picture
In a beautiful golden frame.

He exits, mopping his tears with a large handkerchief and sobbing. (33)

An object, artistic or otherwise, becomes a product in the act of consumption, and so given examples of aesthetic background, performance styles and content it is important to consider the context in which these various songs, sketches or voice and movement routines were performed and received. Here again a large amount of informed reconstruction must be used, but WTM

publications carefully read enable some judgements to be made. As Stourac (op. cit.) argues, these contexts were largely defined by the consequences of CP politics during this period; the position on the labour or LLP left and the trades union movement leadership precluded any close involvement with the labour movement mainstream either in terms of bookings of shows by branches. A list of booked venues in Red Stage shows the range of organisations with whom the Red Players group in South London played to, ten shows in February 1932 - a tenants' association, Minority Movement branches, the LLP, Co-op and National Unemployed Workers Movement and only one branch of the tailors' union. (34) Whereas some Labour Party and LLP branches were obviously prepared to listen to and even enjoy Just One More Chance or Jimmy Maxton and the LLP (35) (expressing, as they did, some of the perennial sentiments of the Constituency Party Left), there is little evidence that trades unionists held a similar attitude to the portrayal of their leaderships they would have seen in Two Pictures and Three Frames for instance.

Some contact must have been made however since WTM literature mentions examples of shows performed to industrial and other workers. 'Our show for the Tailors' Union (U.C.W.U.) at Aldgate, which included Enter Rationalisation proved particularly appropriate, as the workers were just entering on a fortnight's back-out'. On their tour of South Wales the Red Pioneers had just finished Murder in the Coalfields ('only fairly well received by a non-political audience') in Treherbert when news of a disaster at a nearby colliery was announced:

Back in Trealaw, the sullen temper of the mine-workers against the murderous conditions can be felt. "The

centre seam blown up, and the men working the one below not even called up". "Every Act in the industry broken daily" ... These remarks we hear all around us. Our show on Wednesday night is a triumph - A packed audience at the Judge's Hall gives us a great ovation. A short meeting follows to set up the nucleus of a new local troupe. (36)

The Red Pioneers tour of Scotland in 1931 was similarly reported as playing successfully to large audiences of miners and the unemployed. (37)

Interventions in the specific industrial disputes of a locality were also mounted, both in reaction to events and as a means of attempting to provide information and link up struggle. As Ewan MacColl has recalled in the struggle against 'speed-up' in the Lancashire cotton industry in the early 30s:

In 1932, which was the year we (the Red Megaphones) probably did the most work, the struggle against the eight looms system was going on in the Lancashire textile industry. Lancashire weavers were working on looms many of which had not been renewed since the early 1800's - they were incredibly difficult to work, and an operative would be fully extended in handling four such machines. When the bosses introduced the eight-loom system they were really asking the impossible and, at the same time, the effect would have been a reduction of the labour force by fifty percent. So this produced a massive strike.

But because of its craft nature, the whole industry didn't come out at once ... the industry was largely organised on the basis of craft unions, several hundred of them, of which some might have no more than thirty or forty members, some several thousand, some a hundred thousand. So each union had to take its own decision, which virtually meant that each town had to take its own decision, since to a large extent the specialized working of textiles was zoned throughout Lancashire - one place would deal with velvets, another with twills, another with poplins and so on. The job was to bring some kind of unity to this tremendously complicated situation, and we felt that one of our functions was to go to a town just before the decision whether or not to strike was being taken by the workers, to present the facts as clearly as we could see them, so as to make them feel they weren't alone, that there were other

workers throughout the area who were taking similar decisions. Many of us had relatives and brothers and sisters working in the industry, so it wasn't difficult to become familiar with the problems, and to arrive at a terminology.

If we were due, say, to go to Wigan, in the bus on the way up we'd write the sketch and we'd try it out for about half an hour, and then put it on at the market place, by the stalls. We'd maybe be there for ten minutes before the police arrived in a van, and we'd scarper say, to the steps of the public baths and put it on there. Or we'd go to a factory, and occasionally we'd manage to get through a short play - certainly through a few satirical songs - outside the factory gate before the police came and moved us on. But as the stike became a big and burning issue throughout the country, and food was being raised on a mammoth scale for the whole of Lancashire, it became a question of going and performing on every single street of a town, putting on a show lasting about four minutes, collecting contributions and then moving on to the next street. You took a barrow with you, or a handcart, and collected food, bundles of clothing, and money, and it all went into the strikers' relief fund.

For me, the peak of that particular episode was reached when we went to Burnley, which by this time had been sealed off from the rest of the country. Imagine a situation where the police had moved in, closed the railway station, taken off all the buses ... But of course these giant lorries, sixteen wheelers like the big Pickford vans to-day, were getting through, filled with food. One day in Burnley we played to a crowd of a hundred and fifty thousand strikers, many of whom had travelled for a couple of days across the moors, and perhaps had fights on the way with the police. The first time I ever saw helicopters used was then - zooming over the heads of the strikers, trying to break the ranks. And we played through megaphones on the tops of four giant lorries to that great crowd - it really was a tremendous experience - with planks across to join the lorries into a huge stage. (1973 p. 58-60)

Other groups were capable too of responding quickly to local issues and events, such as when the Becontree Reds troupe managed to stage a sketch on rent and property outside a house where an eviction was taking place; or when the Castleford group sustained a police baton charge at the head of a demonstration,

had members arrested and prepared a sketch dealing with the events in a day. (38)

Any attempt to gauge the success or effectiveness of the WTM with its audiences faces the reconstruction problems in this area writ large. Charlie Mann has recalled an atmosphere, a form of street culture of the working-class areas of the early 1930s, through which he claimed that WTM sketches were successfully performed to non-socialist audiences:

Our costumes, and disciplined presentation attracted a crowd ... They were just ordinary people. It doesn't apply to-day. There was a sort of working class loyalty against the powers that be, it wasn't exactly socialist, but there was a feeling of brotherhood among working people which I don't find to-day ... We'd get 90% of the people ... well, let's be fair, we'd get more than 50% of the audience with us, some just on-lookers because it was something to watch, and anything from one to 10 % would be hostile, but they were generally shouted down by the others. We always got an audience and we got respect from them ... And I think with the simplicity of the material the message got across. (39)

Another recollection of the National Unemployed Workers Movement (40) indicates an atmosphere conducive to WTM activity; in the 1930s (unlike today) there was actually a dole 'queue' where men were grouped together talking.

However this must be balanced with other evidence, such as Rae Waterman of the Hackney Red Radio who recalls:

To a performance where we were once pelted with over-ripe tomatoes (not then in the luxury class). We retired in disarray to clean up, deciding that the young workers we had hoped to inspire were not yet ready for our message. (quoted in McCreery 1979 p. 297).

If effect and reaction are difficult to gauge it is easier to record the numbers who witnessed WTM performances. Besides the massive strike meetings in Burnley cited by MacColl, reports from the regional groups indicate 'mass' performances indeed: 5,000 workers at a show outside the National Gallery in Edinburgh, 'after tea we were at Islington Square in Liverpool with an audience of 5,000', 'an indoor meeting to over 2,000 workers', 'a great meeting of the Friends of the Soviet Union. The audience of about 3,000 received our show with the greatest enthusiasm', and even 'An audience of anything under 1,000 is considered small for the Red Front Group of Dundee.' (41) Even allowing for exaggeration they were clearly playing to large crowds. Nevertheless it is crucial to establish just who these huge numbers comprised. Some clues can be found in the organisation most frequently mentioned in Red Stage. Apart from the National Unemployed Workers Movement - who themselves achieved large scale outdoor meetings, rallies and demonstrations - these were Communist Party and Daily Worker Readers Meetings, Friends of the Soviet Union, Anti-Imperialism League, and similar campaigns or groups dominated by or allied to the Communist Party and its periphery. In other words it must be concluded that in most cases WTM groups were playing to politically sympathetic audiences.

Before examining the demise of the WTM it would be useful to give an account of its actual organisation and structure. Although an independent organisation in the sense that it appears to have raised its own funds and reached its own organisational decisions, it is also clear that it was in every essential respect a branch of the Communist Party. The political orientation of the

material was determined by its politics, both in the general sense and in terms of reactions to local issues and the setting of the agenda for the issues of the moment. It was expected, and welcomed, that WTM groups would attract to them 'those whose class consciousness is not yet developed' but at the same time:

In the Red Radio, in Stepney, we had some opposition from the Party I remember because they were most clear that there had to be a cell of members in each group to control the situation, give a lead and so on. They didn't like the couple of Labour Party members and anarchist types in our group, good performers or not. (42)

It was inevitable that the progress of the WTM would hinge or even depend on the attitudes of the Party to its work. Stourac (op. cit.) argues, following the recollections of his interviewees, that the CP felt the WTM was a 'diversion' from important political activity, demonstrating its unawareness of the potential of socialist theatre.

If marxist aesthetics were underdeveloped in the CPGB this was also true of cultural products. The WTM had to write its own material because, to the best of its knowledge at least, none else existed. Thus much organisational effort was exerted to encourage the writing, discussion and distribution of sketches. A Reading Committee considered and vetted material sent into it by local groups and this repertoire, together with its performance, was regularly reviewed and advertised in Red Stage. In 1933 the Secretary of the Committee produced an article, How is a WTM Sketch Written?. This repeated the advice launched by the National Conference document of a year earlier, highlighting collective writing, and also stressing possibly the key to the nature of WTM work and material throughout this period - 'one good

rule is always to make the starting point of your sketch something with which the workers are familiar, and to keep out "highly political" phrases. It has already been pointed out that the problem of assuming a revolutionary point of view instead of building up to it, was recognised as a serious one. The Reading Committee summarised the correct approach as follows:

From what the workers understand or are familiar with, to what they do not yet understand, i.e. the viewpoint of the revolutionary workers. (43)

The problem of course, would arise over gauging what they were familiar with.

Advice on production and on the training of producers, be they advocates of the drilling of disciplined movement approached by Mann's group or those with a relatively more conventional approach to theatre, was also taken very seriously. Whether the frequent references to discipline and organisation were intended or understood to be parallels with the form of internal party political organisation which members would be used to, a means of stressing the seriousness of the work ('Organization is the big thing. This means regular rehearsals, strict discipline and business - like methods ... The producer must be tactful in bringing on slower members, while not holding up the group for slackers. There's only one thing to do with slackers - chuck 'em out, hard') (44) would be difficult to judge. What is clear is that reports such as the following were rare:

An interesting and well-attended conference on methods of production was held recently in London ... Five comrades acted the N.U.W.M. sketch, and the Sailors Strike while ten others acted individually and collectively as producers. Everyone present learned a good deal and ... The suggestion made that similar

conferences be held monthly in order to give a lead in the production of material issued during the month was received with great enthusiasm. (45)

In fact this does not seem to have happened, nor does the similar activity of the 'internal' all-London shows seem to have been regular, or extended to WTM organisation outside London.

This makes it fair to estimate that the quality of production, as determined by the criteria laid down by the discussion held over Meerut, would have fluctuated widely from group to group and that the most effective presentation would have been confined to a few. How typical could this opinion have been of an all-London show at Greenwich:

The choral scheme was rather over-worked. It became monotonous. The sopranos might have been used to reply to the bass voices, etc; the unison speech being arranged so that the full effect of the various voices was obtained. A subdued sombre tone might be better than a shout. (46)

D. Allen (1975) records that the work of the Glasgow WTM was remembered as poor and crude by those who witnessed it; WTM internal bulletins (possibly with a candour allowed by less attention from a public readership) refer later to 'a poor level of singing and a poor level of production' and even, once, 'political weakness and playing for laughs instead of mainly trying to get the political message across'. (47)

Some similar reservations can be informed by revealing comments about the state of organisation in the WTM, despite the impression presented by 'Central Committee', 'Reading Committee', the sending out of material and the receipt of group reports.

MacColl (op. cit.) speaks of groups tending to 'spring up like mushrooms in the night, and quite often to disappear just as quickly' (p.60) and occasionally even the WTM Secretary Tom Thomas had to report that 'we have been able to do little outside London, except for Manchester, receiving no information on any group working despite material being sent out in many directions'.⁽⁴⁸⁾ This was not the case two or three years later, but even so in seven issues of Red Stage and its successor New Red Stage between 1931 and 1934, twenty-six groups in total provide reports. Of these two or three of the many different London groups report consistently, the four regional groups (mainly Dundee, Castleford, Manchester and Liverpool) report two to three times, and the rest once only. It would seem quite likely that a group would only have to be reported to be counted, even, as in the case of the Sunderland Red Magnets, they performed once only to a Party meeting or even not at all.⁽⁴⁹⁾ An interesting 'socialist contract' as it was called, signed between the Secretary and the Soviet youth theatre reveals not only the politics of the period but also perhaps the temptation to exaggerate generated by 'socialist emulation'. The British side agreed to:

expose, by means of artistic performances,
the impending attack of the imperialists
upon the U.S.S.R. in their struggles for
Socialism; to assist the revolutionary
organisations in Britain to expose the
treachery of the Labour Party and the I.L.P....
... to raise the number of groups in Britain
to fifty. (50)

Finally, despite many stresses to sell the papers, New Red Stage appears to have collapsed in 1933 (according to Mann due to financial difficulties made worse by inadequate organisation, a lack of regularity in publication and the absence of any effective machinery for distribution)⁽⁵¹⁾ leaving only

theoretically monthly bulletins for communication.

These faults and problems seem a suitable juncture at which to account for, debate and draw conclusions from the demise of the WTM. This came about through separable, but in the argument of this thesis fundamentally married internal and external developments. To recap, the WTM in 1930 can be seen as an aspect of the cultural life and cultural politics of the Communist Party, itself a sectarian revolutionary organisation in line with the 'class against class' policy of the Comintern - as the clauses of the 'socialist contract' with the Soviet youth theatre demonstrate. By 1934-5 however this policy, heavily influential as it was in the victory of Nazism in Germany, was put into reverse by the Comintern in favour of a new policy of a 'united front'. Dewar has examined the exact details of the change and its implications for the British party. He shows how it affected its socialist analysis and policy:

The overthrow of the capitalist system was no longer on the agenda ... War likewise was no longer ... not to be done away with short of the social revolution. War resulted from the aggressive nature of certain states. All that was therefore needed was firm support for the League of Nations, unity of the "non-aggressive" nations, unity of all and sundry who declared themselves "against" fascism, "against" war. (op. cit. p.118)

These widespread and fundamental changes in political approach also contained some widespread and fundamental implications in the field of cultural politics, as Howkins (op. cit.) notes. Also it

should be noted that the international bodies with which the WTM was connected were transformed: the International Union of Revolutionary Theatres became International Theatre and the similarly Moscow-based journal International Revolutionary Literature became International Literature; the British network of 'Workers' Bookshops' and the WTM fell into line. Thus the Daily Worker reported the formation of the 'United Front Troupe' in West Ham, ⁽⁵²⁾ and a year later recorded that, 'The WTM is directing its energies towards assisting the United Front parties in the following General Election, and has sent out a call for material such as songs, sketches and declamatory poems'. ⁽⁵³⁾

Records of its success, if any, are scarce, possibly because the new political approach forced changes in the WTM, as Tom Thomas later recalled:

The whole of our work had been against the Labour Party and the LLP as well as against the National Government. MacDonald, Snowden, Jimmy Thomas and their ilk had been sitting ducks for our attacks even before they joined the National (Tory) Government. We had lampooned Jimmy Maxton and George Lansbury, and treated Labour and Tory as the same. 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.

I was very surprised when it was put to me in 1935 or 1936 that as the organiser of the WTM and as the author of so many lampoons upon the Labour Party my continued leadership might be considered in some quarters a minor obstacle to the development of the popular front. If my resignation would remove even a minor obstacle I could not allow my personal regret to stand in the way. So I resigned after nearly ten years' hard but extremely interesting and enjoyable work. (in Samuel ed op. cit. p.125)

By this time the political situation didn't seem quite so threatening. The action was leaving the streets, anyway ... (op. cit. p.60)

A slight economic boom was mitigating the very worst effects of the depression; the massive political demonstration and serious rioting by the unemployed of 1931-32 receded rapidly. Thomas reported that, 'even after excellent work a group again falls into stagnation when the need for immediate action passes'. (54) In other words the WTM found it difficult to establish a role when the political issues and causes of the moment were changing or subject to re-definition.

Within this not simply changing but reversing political climate the WTM also suffered a major artistic blow to its self-confidence, the (apparent, published) conviction of correctness of aesthetic-political philosophy and performance skill. In May 1934 a contingent, after considerable fund-raising and training, was able to take part in an International Theatre Olympiad in Moscow. Also present, independently, were Andre Van Gyseghem and Herbert Marshall, two young English producers studying and working in Moscow alongside the pantheon of the European revolutionary artists: Bertolt Brecht, Meyerhold, Piscator and Eisenstein. Years later Marshall recalled the experience of watching the WTM there for the first time:

To the horror of us few Englishmen that were there, the most backward of all were the English. They just had crude Agitprop groups with megaphones shouting slogans - "Down with Capitalism! Up with Socialism!" (1973 p.366).

It was not just a question of technique. By this time the ideas of Proletkult were well in decline in the Soviet Union and the Soviet Writers Congress was developing the theme of 'socialist realism'. The WTM contingent were in a unique position to

appreciate what it all meant, unlike the Writers' Congress observer from the new journal Left Review, who clearly did not. (55)

Internal factors were at work also which, taken together, spelt the end of the WTM of the Red Stage period. To summarise Stourac's argument, the WTM (or rather the dominant London section upon which he concentrates) by 1934 also involved some professional theatre workers of a middle-class background, drawn to the movement more by a felt need for new and innovative theatre rather than through their embryonic socialist convictions. Thus began the process whereby agitprop and revolutionary aesthetics were gradually replaced by a more traditional and static curtained stage, a theatrical climb-down on a parallel with the non-revolutionary popular front politics of the Party. This attitude seems to be shared by Samuel (op. cit.) Howkins (op. cit.), and McCreery goes so far as to conclude that when they returned from the Olympiad a conflict between political and theatrical priorities came to a head. Politics lost, causing the decline of the WTM and the birth of the Unity Theatre (op. cit. p.303)

This point will be dealt with more substantially in later sections on Unity Theatre itself, but as a conclusion it can be countered factually. Certainly to the end of 1934 the Daily Worker was able to announce the formation of the Left Theatre ("a group of writers and poets who are now writing for the WTM")⁽⁵⁶⁾ but sweeping assertions such as Stourac's are not legitimate.

Outside London at least there is evidence that there existed a rank and file dissatisfaction with the repertoire of the WTM and also of a developing interest in what the theatre could do. Ewan MacColl for example has recalled in detail how this process took place with his young working-class troupe in the Manchester area, those who had played agitprop to the Burnley cotton strikers:

There was a chap called Alf Armitt, for instance, who became tremendously interested in theatrical lighting, and he read an article in some magazine that touched on the theories of Adolphe Appia. So with the aid of a pocket dictionary he read Appia's famous treatise on light, literally translating every word - and he was by no means an educated lad, he was a labourer. But he got himself a job in an optical-lens-grinding factory, his original idea being to find out about lenses and pinch a few ... he pinched some road-menders' lanterns to make spotlights out of ... He built a switchboard, which he refused to put offstage in any of the halls, and put it in the front so the audience could watch him ... He hadn't come across Meyerhold's theories about exposing the works, he wasn't gened up on the work of people like Piscator and Brecht, but he hit upon it all himself. (op. cit. p.60)

Goorney (op. cit.) similarly writes of this group - which by 1934-5 was the Manchester Theatre of Action - as eagerly seeking to explore political expression through theatre. Joan Littlewood, who had joined them, was in a learning position rather than directive. Attending an unspecified Left theatre conference in London in 1934, Goorney records that MacColl and Littlewood were out of step with other delegates who eschewed experimentation with form 'because the workers wouldn't understand it'. This caused the Theatre of Action to regard itself as outside the mainstream of the political theatre movement, not on political

grounds but in terms of a continued search for ideas from theatrical and dance movement theorists of the world. This was not, as they were accused, due to avant-gardism, but part of an on-going search to relate form to politics to working class audiences - a similar impulse to the first aesthetic work of the WTM:

... I remember asking one girl why she never went to the theatre, and she said, well, I've been to the theatre but it's so slow. And sure enough, we found that she did go to the cinema, to see the contemporary films of the period, which moved with a great deal more speed and were much more expertly put together than the average theatrical production. This girl worked a Jacquard loom, producing patterned velvets, one of the most complicated machines conceived by man before the computer: and we came to the conclusion that she was typical, doing this complicated job, and then being presented with a theatrical form which was simple to the point of idiocy. So from then on we had a slogan between ourselves that we had to be at least as good at our job as the people we were playing to were good at theirs. Because sheer craftsmen-like skill was something that did not exist in the theatre - you got by with all sorts of tricks, but you never considered it a real craft, a continuing craft in which you were learning from the past and from other people around you. (MacColl op. cit. p.62)

Clearly processes such as these cannot be simply judged as a conflict between political priorities and purely theatrical priorities. Those who had been brought to consider performances and politics for the first time, under massive and confrontationist conditions, were thinking, experiencing, and developing in ways which would cause conflict with the dominant ethos of the WTM even without a reversal of political approach and a supposed influx of less politically pure middle-class

professionals. On another level, but similarly, others in the WTM wanted to go further than simply put over political points quickly and simply, gaining an impact by virtue of being a diversion from the normal run of meetings. Some groups wanted to develop portable one-act plays and were aware that there was an increasing amount of material becoming available in a more straight dramatic style; the value of the assistance of a trained professional as regards voice projection and deportment were becoming obvious. (57)

Some of this new material, which seemed to be a way out of the abiding problem of repertoire, was being produced by the Left Theatre. This group, which principally included Andre Van Gyseghem, Benjamin Britten, Randall Swingler, John Allen and Barbara Nixon, did not in fact or intention write for the WTM as such. As Van Gyseghem has said they were:

convinced that there were people in the professional theatre who would also be glad to have something more important to say in their work than the plays which were being done at that time. And so we formed Left Theatre. It consisted entirely of professional actors, all of whom either gave their services free of charge or for a minimum remuneration, giving performances of plays with a social conscience and a wide appeal. (1979 p.214)

These plays will be examined in detail in the next chapter, but it is worth recording at this point that the impact was considerably less than the ambition put forward at the time:

The Left Theatre realises that the very class which plays the chief part in contemporary history - the class on which the prevention of war and the defeat of reaction solely depend - is debarred from expression in the present day theatre. This Theatre will perform, mainly in

working-class districts, plays which express the life and struggles of the workers. Politics, in the fullest sense, means the affairs of the people. In this sense the plays done will be political.
(58)

This quote neatly captures a 'period of transition' confusion - 'the class ... solely depend ... politics means ... the affairs of the people' - but the initial effect of the Left Theatre was to introduce short plays from America, the beginning of a long process of influence. These plays included They Shall Not Die on the Scotsboro Boys case, Stevedore, and Newsboy in addition to the classic Waiting for Lefty. A self-report by Manchester Theatre of Action on their production of Newsboy illustrates the way some groups were eager to use new techniques on new material:

As a form Newsboy is a definite reflection of the quickening process of the clash of modern life. It is pitched at the feverish tempo of industrialisation gone mad. A scene comes and goes with machine-like rapidity; push a lever, a character springs up like magic; push a button, he disappears, changes to another character. Conflict is the first and primary factor; within the space of sixty seconds four completely separate conflicts take place. The play is built on a series of images placed in just a position to the ideology of the newsboy, and the attempt to draw him to a better level of understanding. (quoted in Goorney op. cit. p.13)

To repeat there is some clear evidence that socialist theatre groups wanted to progress in directions blocked by the WTM line, and this cannot be explained simply in terms of political retreat or class or professional dilution.

Before moving to an assessment of the WTM in the years 1930 to 1935, some facts about its demise remain to be recorded. As will be shown in later sections, its influence continued through

the decade and through the war. However, discussion of its work and record, formally in printed Left discussion, was virtually non-existent. This is, of course, on a par with how the Communist Party encouraged discussion about its own history and record in public during the 1930's: As Saville (1977) points out, Alan Hutt's influential Post War History of the British Working Class published in 1937, smoothes over the 'class against class' period. The ambit of socialist theatre provides another example of this. Howkins (op. cit.) quotes a Communist Party journal Discussion of 1938:

The ultimate failure of the WTM can be attributed to many reasons ... The most important for us to-day is in the intense sectarianism that enveloped it, whereby an immense swing away from trends of other amateur dramatic societies was made. (p.252)

Thus the blame for 'sectarianism' was laid with the theatre movement not the Party; in any event this is a rare reference, rarer still for mentioning the WTM by name. Perhaps one of the saddest footnotes was provided by Tom Thomas, in a letter to Left Review in response to an article in 1936:

...It is perfectly true, as she says, that many active societies and groups all over the country are turning their attention to socially significant plays. But scattered, unco-ordinated as they are, they cannot exert the influence of which they are potentially capable. Interchange of repertoire, interchange of experiences, discussion of common problems, these are the next steps forward. And to this end a Provisional Committee, which includes some well-known professional theatre people, has been formed in London to make contact with as many progressive groups as possible.

Early in the new year an open discussion will be held in London to determine the degree of organisation desirable and necessary. (59)

There was no mention in letter or journal of who Thomas was, or of the WTM and its experience; nor, ever again, of the 'Provisional Committee'.

The point at issue for our purposes is more than the political cynicism which simply ignored in public its own past, where that would be a source of embarrassment. This it obviously was, and as other issues drew new people into politics and the CP later in the decade, George Orwell was correct to jibe in a personal letter in 1940 about the publisher Victor Gollanz:

... he told me that when he tied up with the Communists in 1936 he had not known that they had ever had any policy other than the Popular Front one ... Orwell also publicly, voiced his own opinion of the basis of political amnesia: ... in any western country a Communist Party is always unstable and usually very small. Its long-term membership really exists of an inner ring of intellectuals who have identified with the Russian bureaucracy, and a slightly larger body of working-class people who feel a loyalty towards Soviet Russia without necessarily understanding its policies. Otherwise there is only a shifting membership, one lot coming and another going with each change of line. (60)

This is a characteristically sarcastic view which can serve in this context: when Jerry Dawson, new to politics, became involved in founding Merseyside Unity theatre in 1937 he had no knowledge then - or until his conversation with the author fourty years later - of the WTM Red Anchors group in Liverpool. (61)

The point above all to be made is that throughout the 1930s it was politically impossible for the experiences of socialist theatre groups (largely politically homogeneous) to be discussed and analysed in such a way as to render experience cumulative.

Previous analyses of the WTM, as was stated earlier, fall into two opposing camps. For Jones (1974) the years of the WTM were essentially a set-back for the development of a labour movement theatre. Having located the source of the reliance on agitprop within the political isolation and sectarianism which were the hallmarks of Communist Party politics between 1930 and 1935, he virtually condemns the WTM out of hand:

...the abandonment of the whole tradition of English and indeed world drama was a fundamental mistake which led to the impoverishment of all the WTM's work ... The WTM refused to see any good at all in the existing practice of the drama, refused to learn from the professional bourgeois theatre or make contact with whoever or whatever was progressive in it. This condemned the WTM to an extreme form of amateurism which seriously impaired its work qualitatively ... The over-emphasis on agitprop carried to its extremity the divorce between entertainment and instruction, the unity of which is essential for the drama, as for all art ... rejecting entertainment and concentrating one-sidedly on instruction.
(p.272)

According to Jones, agitprop didacticism destroyed plot, character and dialogue: plot reduced to a mere outline, incapable of reproducing the conflicts of real life, characters were replaced by caricatures creating a false impression of the people and classes they were supposed to represent, and under these circumstances dialogue inevitably degenerated into the repetition of slogans.

Drama was robbed of its own nature and the inverted formalism of the WTM it was seen as the immediate means of solving political problems. This utilitarianism was an illusion since the subordination of art to propaganda could not aid the political struggle since agitprop forms, eviscerated by the removal of all

genuinely dramatic elements, could not deal with complicated political issues:

The drama can impart no real, deep-going understanding, in the sense that an audience is deeply moved to think over and feel the necessity of acting to transform man's condition, unless the real artistic task of portraying and interpreting man's condition is achieved. This means that the roots of human conduct must be exposed in all their depth and complexity as growing out of the social, economic and political conditions of society itself. The sectarianism which rejected all inherited conceptions of art except the narrowly didactic turned into its own (apparent) opposite - opportunism. For the sake of immediate tactical advantages - and these were highly questionable - the strategic role of the drama as a cultural force which could help man to change himself as it moved him to change his condition, was totally abandoned. (ibid p.273)

Clark (1979) notes how this rejection derives from an aesthetic approach which defines drama - with an equal rigidity - in terms of one particular form of theatre, the four-act play with a full plot and multi-faceted with finely drawn individual characters. The very form of agitprop is clearly excluded from this and therefore to be rejected. In addition, it must be noted that at no point does Jones examine any particular text or performance, still less a performance context, for this period of 1930-1935.

Stourac (op. cit.) is critical of the Movement but far from rejecting it for him it provided an embryo of revolutionary workers' theatre. He locates the reasons for his criticism in terms of the formidable problems which the WTM faced. Besides the limitations imposed by the policies of the small and isolated Communist Party it had to face a lack of enthusiasm and understanding on the part of that Party. The development of

agitation, propaganda and working-class culture needed debate at the level of theory, and performances needed serious reviewing and possible follow-up discussed, all in the mainstream of Party literature and amongst the membership as a whole. But instead of this mutually informing and strengthening relationship between culture and politics culture was essentially relegated as a political concept as well as tool.

The consequence, as Stourac argues, is that the WTM could do little with the mass of politically unconscious workers, as the simplicity of material such as Speed-Up would seem to confirm. The WTM never succeeded in moving beyond the agitational to the propagandistic in the sense in which Lenin drew a distinction between the two activities. If the form developed and insisted upon matched the politics, then both proved incapable of reaching to the mass of the working class and offering any politically educative learning process to them.

Nevertheless Stourac also maintains that the WTM still represents a genuine 'movement' which had:

an ability to respond to the events of the day and put them into a wider political framework which was probably the greatest strength of the WTM. It was due in part to the fact that the young worker-players had their roots in the very class struggle they were portraying, but it would not have been possible if they had not developed forms which were so flexible and mobile ... (the end of the WTM) ... meant the end of a militant, mobile, class-orientated workers' theatre in Britain. (op. cit. p.382,421)

This latter assumption will be challenged later, but at present the point is the acceptance or otherwise of the frameworks

adopted by two serious examiners of the WTM to date. Jones employs, basically, an 'ideal-type' of 'the play' (which is in fact highly specific in terms of the history of the theatre) so that the history of workers' theatre becomes the successful or otherwise development of this form by the labour movement.

Stourac's critical appreciation of the WTM uses a highly detailed examination to promote an alternative 'ideal-type'. For him the WTM is a largely forgotten step along the road to the building of a theatre which is a dynamic part of a revolutionary cultural arm of the workers' movement, creating-principally around the technique of montage - new forms which can mobilise audiences via the process of raising their consciousness.

Clearly in both cases a priori assumptions have defined the object of study, inevitably, perhaps, but this must alert us to the importance of creating this object of study as a point of entry into an analysis and critical appreciation of the evidence relating to the WTM. The obvious international (especially German) contacts of the WTM and its articulated political aesthetic invite a comparison with Bertold Brecht, whose claim to authority in crucial debates with Georg Lukacs rested on an apparently successful career of contact with the German working class. Beforehand though it is useful to remember that the principles and techniques now commonly associated with Brechtian theatre had their origins in a variety of Left avant-grade experimentation in Germany during the 1920s and early 1930s, as Innes (1972) has recorded in detail as regards Piscator. It is with Brecht however that we associate political critique of naturalism, and WTM documents indicate they would have applauded Brecht's concepts of the 'popular' and the 'realistic' which have been described above.

What can be said about the WTM's attempts to carry out such tasks? Brecht fails to discuss the role of the political party in determining, by purpose or default, the nature of a 'popular' socialist theatre by his definition. The role of the British Communist Party in thus shaping the WTM has been discussed, but it would be a limiting exercise to leave the discussion there, as is the tendency with Stourac. One aspect of WTM aesthetics in practice has been discussed by Stevens (1980), using Mann's How to Produce Meerut in the course of a discussion on politicised acting technique. He draws attention to how in some respects the acting here is within a naturalist tradition, with the actors feeling a part, communicating an emotion, and with as much an emphasis placed on identification as in the bourgeois theatre. The identification is with a class however, not with an individual:

This kind of performance, then welds those present - actors and audience - into a cohesive body, and it does so, through the representation of a class issue, in such a way that this limited body recognises its wider social extension in terms of class (Note, in relation to this, the significant link between content and intended effect of this performance: the symbolic freeing of the prisoners liberates the repressed class - conscious news of the audience which may in turn help to secure the real release of the prisoners ..) (p.39).

Further, in contrast to naturalism the audience is recognised as an audience and addressed as such, as an audience politically responsive and purposive. Nevertheless Stevens locates a problem with Mann's idea that the message would 'strike home to the class - consciousness that is latent in even the most reactionary member of your worker-audience'. This is because the bond, and the channel of communication it brings, with the

audience is presupposed already. It is assumed to be class-conscious, even if only latently, and it is to these circumstances that these agitprop performances were likely to be limited. Indeed, self-reports from WTM groups, as has been seen, indicate that numbers and responses were at their best during periods or instances of relatively open and aggressive class struggle.

This brings us to how the WTM regarded its communication and the consequences of what were possibly widespread assumptions such as those of Mann's. Consider these excerpts from WTM papers:

...our performances kindle in the audiences the flame of revolt against the system which means to them unending poverty and want.

Down in the suburbs where the working class habitually gathers, the Workers' Theatre Movement is on the streets. Handicapped, rough and ready, a little band of players holds a crowd of workers engrossed. The audience is of workers, toil-stained and marked with poverty, but their faces are alive with interest, pleasure, enlightenment. Why? Because the Workers Theatre Movement is dealing with life, with the real problems of the workers

...imagine the effect if they can witness sketches dealing with their own struggles in the factory as they themselves know them.

The day of propaganda by itself is past. Our period is the period of agitation. The WTM belongs to this period and is therefore a weapon of sharp, forceful agitation. Its methods are likewise sharp and forceful, breaking down the imbecilities of the bourgeois theatre, smashing the propaganda of the capitalists, opening the eyes of the workers to the truth about the crisis, and building up the solidarity of our class in the day to day struggle. (62)

Much of the same is evident (through both the WTM press and in Samuel op. cit.) in how the WTM situated its own work in terms of the - then - mass media, and its view of working class culture.

'Poison', 'dope', 'chloroform' are the terms frequently used in the literature to describe the functions of these media and cultures, as can be seen from again considering these excerpts:

Day in, night out, at work and at play, the worker is fed on propaganda calculated to keep his mind working only in the directions that those who prepare his food for thought desire. So that he cannot miss it in any walk of life, "workmens' clubs", "womens' welfare centres", "British Legions", and "Toc Hs" catch him in every direction. For the youth there are the Boy Scouts and the Church Lads' Brigades, all thumping out the good old doctrine. And shall he dare to start thinking along different lines the Labour Party and the LLP will look after his interests to see he doesn't get too far ... Poison, poison, poison. Anything will do that will keep the workers' mind occupied and keep him from seeing facts as they really exist.

...it must be realised that with all its implications, capitalist amusement is the opiate of the people in this country ... It is necessary to emphasize the present position as well as the role of the bourgeois theatre and cinema in helping the ruling class to keep the workers ignorant of the facts and contented to live a state of permanent under-nourishment, so that we can bring out clearly the job of the Workers' Theatre Movement at the present time.

The newspaper, the cinema, the theatre, the wireless (all carefully censored); day and night his mind is fed on the food provided by these instruments of the powers that be. His ideas, his opinions, are all formed or suggested for him in an easily assimilable way by those that control these forces for the dissemination of news and thought. (63)

What were the consequences of these approaches to ideology and consciousness, culture as 'lived experience' and socialist advance? Of course, it must be remembered that the political framework was one which posed the imminent collapse of the capitalist system leading to attempted recovery through war

(particularly against the one socialist state of the Soviet Union) and mass immiseration; the integration of the organisations and leaderships of the working class into the capitalist state and therefore the need to build a mass revolutionary party along Leninist lines. The main obstacles, it was clear to them - apart from the systematic class treachery of the reformist leadership - was the 'chloroform' role of bourgeois ideology, but threatening circumstances accompanied by gripping and effective presentations of 'the facts' and the 'truth' by the WTM could apparently 'lift the scales from their eyes'.

If the WTM saw its role and purpose in this way then it is scarcely surprising that on its own terms the WTM was no more successful with its non-political audiences than were the more traditional presentations of CP politics. More recent writers have dealt with the understandings of consciousness and ideology contained in the Leninist tradition (and of course the CP at this time is one of the first examples). For example Rowbotham et al (1979) have disputed the drastic over-simplifications adhering to a politics which can be reduced to the notion that a 'nascently rebellious' working class can only be 'brought to' revolutionary politics by an outside Party possessed of the correct and scientific analysis. In any event, given the national and international organisation of the British Party any contribution the experiences of the WTM might have to make to a wider political strategy would not have been considered. (Dewar 1976)

If the role of theatre in altering consciousness in different political circumstances is confined to that of bringing 'the truth' to the workers almost in a stimulus and response fashion then a serious analysis of aesthetics and politics is

circumscribed. It is highly ironic that the ideas of Brecht with which the WTM was compared earlier were written against a dogmatic assertion on aesthetics and politics, that of Georg Lukacs, who equally ironically was attempting to impose a dogma during the Popular Front period. As we have seen, only by a fairly drastic break with the principles and practices of the WTM could member groups combine progress in form with adaptation to changing political circumstances and priorities.

Perhaps the most appropriate way of appreciating the WTM is to see its role within the party and the Left. Quite apart from making the activists' endless round of meetings in a variety of 'front' organisations more attractive, the WTM quite likely played a full part in the 'alternative culture' referred to earlier by Howkins (op. cit.) The network of socials, films, bookshops, sports events, educational apparatus and so forth advertised in the party press of the time represent an alternative social life as well as expressive culture for the membership. There are, of course, precedents for this in the history of the labour movement - the Clarion cycling clubs and rambling associations, the choirs and socialist Sunday schools of the early LLP - but for the isolated, messianic and embattled CP this life should be seen not so much as any hegemonic strategy but the mutually re-inforcing cocoon maintaining affirmation and support.

The position here of agitprop - of Montagu Slater's Prologue for Punch of 1934 ⁽⁶⁴⁾ (a puppet play on international fascism, one for which the Artists' International made the puppets for the WTM - the idea of 'puppets' as characters would doubtless be the last straw for Jones) is to reduce political positions to the

basic meaning systems shared by a homogeneous group and probably few others. For cultural critics such as Theodore Adorno this form of art is dangerous but easily disposed of. In a passage aimed principally at Bertolt Brecht, he writes:

For it is just the essential abstractness of what really happens which rebuts the aesthetic image. To make this abstractness expressible at all, the writer is forced to translate it into a kind of children's language, into archetypes, and so those check-points in comprehension which precede even the constitution of language, and cannot be side-stepped even by epic theatre. The appeal to these authorities is in itself a formal sanction of the subject's dissolution in collective society. The object, however, is scarcely less falsified by such translation than would be a religious war by its deduction from the erotic needs of a queen ...

...To present processes within large scale industry as transactions between crooked vegetable dealers suffices for a momentary shock-effect, but not for dialectical theatre ... It harmlessly interprets the seizure of power on the highest level as the machinations of rackets outside society, not as the coming-to-itself of society as such. The impossibility of portraying Fascism springs from the fact that in it, as in its contemplation, subjective freedom no longer exists. Total unfreedom can be recognised, but not represented. Where freedom occurs as a motif in political narratives today, as in the praise of heroic resistance, it has the embarrassing quality of impotent reassurance. The outcome always appears decided in advance by high politics, and freedom is manifested only ideologically, as talk about freedom, in stereotyped declamations, not in humanly commensurable actions. (1978 p.144)

Adorno's highly selective reading of Brecht both here and elsewhere (1977) contain points about the possibility of socialist theatre as such which in effect dismiss it completely; but the assumption here is of communication through archetypes to a heterogeneous audience. In the case of the WTM however the simplifications and caricatures which Adorno condemns can be seen as a class enjoyment of particular situation. Thus was a

confirmatory and celebratory position advanced in the 'counter culture'.

The character, activities and shortcomings of the WTM, its rise and demise, have now been dealt with. The extent of its influence on later developments will be examined below, but it is also possible to conclude on a positive note. The WTM sees the introduction of a mobile, flexible revolutionary socialist theatre which developed its own aesthetic, aimed at the labour movement for probably the first time. And those assessing it and 1930-1935 as a whole would do well to remember Edmund and Ruth Frow's comments in reply to a critical review of the period by a modern historian:

To an activist in the labour movement during the period, the record was by no means a "dismal one". On the contrary, it was an exhilarating experience with innumerable struggles and ceaseless activity combined with study and reading. Trades union branches and trades councils were often alive with debate and discussion. Open air meetings and demonstrations were well attended while the sale of a penny pamphlet could reach a hundred thousand copies ... There can be no denying that comradeship within the movement was rich and deep. Despite the polemic and divisions, the shared participation in the struggle was exhilarating and satisfying. (1977 p.29).

Notes

1. 'The Class Stage', Red Stage no. 1 November 1931 p.1.
2. For an account of this earlier history see L.A. Jones, 'The British Workers' Theatre 1917 - 1935' (Leipzig PhD 1964) esp. p. 6-30.
3. N. Branson and M. Heinemann, Britain in the Nineteen Thirties (1973) p.103.
4. Quoted in R. Stourac, 'Workers' Theatre in Russia, Germany and England 1917-1934' (Bristol M.A. 1978) p.343.
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21. C. Mann, 'Making 'Em Work', Red Stage no. 5 April-May 1932 p. 11.
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p. 7-10. the sketch is discussed in Stourac op. cit.
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32. Jimmy Maxton and the LLP Red Stage no. 4 March 1932 p.5.
33. Love in Industry Red Stage no. 5 April-May 1932 p.9.
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45. 'Producers' Meeting', Red Stage no. 3 February 1932 p.7.
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50. 'A Socialist Contract', Red Stage no. 2 January 1933 p.3.
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53. 'Theatre Notes', Daily Worker 25th June 1935 p.9.
54. Letter in International Literature no.1 1934 p.23.
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56. 'Theatre Notes', Daily Worker 20th November 1934 p.4.
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58. A. Graham, 'The Left Theatre', International Literature no. 2 1934 p.30.
59. T. Thomas, 'The New Theatre League', Left Review vol. 2 no. 6 July 1936 p.192.
60. G. Orwell, 'Letter to Geoffrey Gorer' and 'Inside the Whale', Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters Vol.1: An Age Like This 1920-1940 (1971) p.580 and p.563.
61. Jerry Dawson (Merseyside Left and Unity Theatre), interview with the author 1978.
62. 'Our Theatre Awakens the Masses', Red Stage no.2 January 1932 p.8, and 'The Theatre - Our Weapon', New Red Stage no. 7 September 1932 p.2, p.6.
63. 'Dope for the Masses', New Red Stage no.6 June-July 1932 p.1.
64. M. Slater, 'Prologue for Punch', Left Review vol. 1 no. 3 December 1934 p.59-61. There is no mention of a performance.

2. 'Affiliate with Me' : The Unity Theatres 1935-1939

In the summer of 1935 the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern was held, marking a convenient starting point for the commencement of the united front strategy of the CPGB. Towards the end of that year Barbara Nixon reviewed the condition of the progressive theatre for Left Review. Observing that 'The theatre can be one of the most important artistic weapons in any period of social change or conflict' she concluded that 'But what is needed in England is a theatre of this kind which is permanent and which will become an artistic centre for working class and progressive audiences'. The U.S.A. had its Theatre Union, and was it 'too much to hope that within a year there will be an equally important theatrical movement in this country?' (1) Her hope was realised that same year with the founding of London Unity Theatre.

The previous section has described the residue of the former Workers' Theatre Movement in various small London groups. One of these was the Rebel Players, a member of whom recalls their work at that time:

When I joined the Rebel Players they told me I'd have to be prepared to give a show anywhere sometimes at a moments notice, and it was often like that. We used to do shows for people like the Royal Arsenal Co-Operative Society, we did one for a group of Hunger Marchers arriving in London and we did a mass chant by Toller called Requiem for the united front election in 1935 ... I began to feel we weren't really getting anywhere so we invited all our labour movement contacts to a special show so they could see what we were doing and then book us. We played this in a Co-Op hall in October 1935, Toller's Requiem for Rosa Luxemburg, a comedy called The Fall of the House of Slusher, and the play which made us. (2)

Manchester Theatre of Action had played Waiting for Lefty first and Stourac (op. cit.p.392) has described the decision of the Rebel Players to play it in London. Bram Bootman continues:

To our amazement the place was packed. People fell over themselves to get in there. We know we'd really started something but we were faced with a problem of where do we go from here? In december our stage manager, Jack Turner, and I had a look at an old church hall in Britannia Street which we could hire for two quid a week but rent free for three months providing we did it up. The idea of a theatre of our own had a strong pull so we signed the lease. (3)

A name for this new theatre was obviously important and a long series of discussions and hastily convened meetings produced one:

"Theatre of Revolution" was one suggestion, "Labour Theatre", "Trade Union Theatre" and so on from the political people, while some middle-class people who'd come in from the amateur dramatic societies wanted it to be "Alpha Theatre" or something like that. Then one bloke, Derek Verschoyle, a young chap who used to write for the New Statesman, poor chap he was killed in Normandy later on, said "Look, we want to bring people together against fascism and war, not put them off". He suggested Unity theatre and straight away everybody agreed. (4)

Unity theatre was officially opened in February 1936 with a cultural programme aimed at leading labour movement figures and including song and dance, mass recitations of Toller's work and a double playbill of Waiting for Lefty and Private Hicks by Albert Maltz. Although 'unity at an any price' has been a charge levelled at the CPGB during this period, by Dewar (op. cit.) for example, this does not seem to be the case here at this time; the theatre was opened by Edith Summerskill, newly elected to parliament on the Peace Ballot platform and a victor over the official Labour Party candidate. They remained in that building for a year until their very success forced for larger premises. These were found in an old chapel in Goldington Street near Kings Cross Station, much bigger and containing side rooms which could be used for offices and a coffee bar. Further renovation

was needed of course:

We put out an appeal through the Daily Worker and the branches for all the trades unionists, tradesmen, who were interested to come and build their own theatre. The response we got was fantastic. They'd come off the building sites, pinching materials often, and work till midnight or through the week-end. We also revolutionised the concept of theatre building, since as far as I know we were the first to put the electrician at the back of the stalls so's he could see what was happening on stage and we could move into the flies without being seen. Which is essential now but not thought so at that time. We abandoned footlights for spot-lighting from the top of the proscenium arch for quick scene changes or picking individuals out. (5)

Unity was run as a club theatre whose members paid a fee over and above the ticket price and with a system of associate membership. This was to avoid censorship by the Lord Chamberlain's office, a system and a consequence worth examining at this point.

Outside of the theatre club apparatus every play produced was required to be submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's office, which had the power to ban a play completely or to demand that cuts or alterations had to be made. The theatre critic Desmond McArthy was not alone in deploring the consequences of this during the decade:

The censorship inevitably encourages a trivial, non-controversial drama - puts a premium on it. The free, restless vitality of the American stage would be incompatible with the Lord Chamberlain's office. It is not merely a question of licence in sexual directions but of outspokenness generally ... Our plays are carefully searched for political and social criticism or allusions, and criticism is only

tolerated if muffled. Laughter, let alone resentment, is not allowed free play. (6)

One of the strictures laid down by the office was that there should be 'no representation of personalities either physically or implied by voice' and therefore on the stage the names of actual persons, countries or organisations should be 'altered to imaginary ones'. The consequences of this for political plays and satire are obvious, and left theatre workers and others of the time were aware that times of crises would more than likely lead to more repressive censorship. Various examples of encounters with the Lord Chamberlain will be described in due course, but John Allen, a producer who came to work with Unity, recalls some of his own negotiations during the 1930s:

When I was with the Group theatre we did a modern adaptation of a Volpone play, there were thirty-six references to current political figures and the Lord Chamberlain cut out thirty five of them. I went to see him and I asked him why the current figure, the only current figure which had been left in was Stalin, and he said that the Soviet Union was the only country with which Britain didn't have diplomatic relationships ... That was Christmas 1935.

...With Unity we were in constant trouble. Waiting for Lefty was in trouble because of the swearing, at least half of the usages of the word "Jeez" had to be cut off. Then I remember Where's that Bomb? which I produced. There's the point where the young writer rejects the whole thing and writes the tale on toilet paper. He suggested, he said why can't you use shaving paper instead? I said, firstly, our audiences don't use shaving paper, whatever that might be and secondly the whole point of the thing was that we were relating right-wing chauvinist politics to what you would use toilet paper for. He was a very nice man, I can't remember his name but he was some kind of Lieutenant-Colonel, Eton, Oxford and the Indian Army, that sort of thing. So we had very long and very priceless chats with him, very friendly and pointless. (7)

The main point to be registered about theatre censorship as practised in the 1930s is that it confined the types of drama Unity was attempting to develop to the club theatres; as regards outdoor or other performances, by 1939 John Allen was warning in the Left Book Club Theatre Guild publication that:

Finally, do not forget that plays have to be licensed by the Lord Chamberlain. As plays of the type indicated are not likely to be licensed without heavy cuts being made, the only possibility for productions is in the open air - street corners and lorries. But make sure that even then all police regulations are fulfilled, and write to the Lord Chamberlain describing the place where the performance takes place, so that you are safe from prosecution.(8)

In other words the socialist theatre of the Unity groups would have to be an alternative theatre - the archaic system of theatre censorship ensured that hard politics would not penetrate the mainstream.

Finally, even as a club theatre Unity was still open to prosecution. During the decade an entertainments tax was imposed on all live performances, administered by the Customs and Excise Department. All tickets had to bear their stamp; technically any theatre was open to inspection by Customs and Excise staff, but Unity found in practice that they were singled out for particular surveillance and particularly heavy fines when prosecuted for infringements - possible attempts to close the theatre which were thwarted by fund raising efforts after performances amongst their audiences.

Between 1935 and 1937 Unity appears, as Travis (op. cit.)

suggests but does not really investigate, to have concentrated on establishing and consolidating not only its own theatre organisation but also its place within the labour movement and its campaigns. At the same time it was attracting to it some radical writers and theatre workers from, in some cases, a more middle-class background or milieu. Much has been made of this, generally in passing, by writers such as Samuel (1977 op. cit.) and Stourac (op. cit.) as a point of critique, and more positively by Jones (1974 op. cit.) as a source of strength. Here again the point is worth pursuing in a little detail at this stage.

Stourac, after a somewhat cursory examination of Unity and the position of the Workers' Theatre Movement after 1935, concludes as follows:

Unfortunately, the Party's own belated self-criticism of the sectarian period led to a complete about-face in the opposite direction, which, for the WTM, had equally serious consequences, namely the influx of professionals, those who had professional aspirations, or amateurs interested primarily in theatre, not politics ... the consequent weakening of the politics of the Theatre Movement ... But the uncritical assimilation of such people was certainly in line with the prevailing policy of building a popular front ... the surrender which seems to have taken place both artistically and politically need never have happened.
(op. cit. p.414)

Although there was a place for professionals in the WTM there were none in Britain with the revolutionary experience of a Meyerhold or Piscator and therefore no critical examination of techniques to be utilised or discarded. Similarly Samuel seems to echo these sentiments when his even more cursory account speaks of 'the firm direction of professional producers being accepted without question' and yet concluding with the claim that 'Unity made few innovations artistically, and its hallmark in

later years was a fairly simple naturalism; the main thrust of its work lay in the direction of finished staging and accomplished performances.' (op. cit. p.109) Even shorter shrift comes with another comment that the decline of the WTM and the birth of Unity theatre represented a defeat for those who put politics first by those who were more interested in theatre as such (McCreery op. cit. p.303)

These conclusions will be examined in due course, following a considerably more thorough investigation of the evidence. However it is useful to try to determine just who this apparent 'influx' of middle-class professionals were and whether conclusions can be reached on their motives for allying themselves with the socialist theatre movement. Certain clues can be found in at least two identifiable groupings which provided an input to Unity from outside what would by any definition be counted as the working-class movement.

One of these was the Group theatre, which functioned in London between 1932 and 1937 under the producer Rupert Doone as an experimental and avant-garde theatre. Its work, insofar as it is discussed now, is known for the platform it offered for plays by those whose careers are generally taken as emblematic for notions of art and politics in the 1930s: Auden's The Dance of Death, and Auden and Isherwood's The Dog Beneath the Skin, The Ascent of F6 and On the Frontier. These latterly show the poets' engagement with politics, but the attitude of what might be called the 'mainstream socialist theatre' can be gauged from John Allen's contribution to the famous 'Writing in Revolt' issue of Fact in 1937:

I have asked a great many members of the Unity Theatre Club, who are all working class, what they think of Auden, and the answer has nearly always been a sort of pale praise. The majority prefer The Dance of Death to the Dog Beneath the Skin, and most of those who went at all took the trouble to go twice. Rightly, I think, they do not attack Auden's exclusiveness, his eternal adolescence, his boy-scout - mother-love complexes, his irritating neuroses, his lack of anything positive or forthright, judging that if that's the way he feels about things, that's the way he should write. The feeling is simply that he is speaking another language, writing for another class. He is the author of the dissatisfied bourgeoisie. His perceptive pen clarifies their bewilderment and prejudices; and these sentiments have little interest for the positive fighting spirit of the militant working classes. The Dog Beneath the Skin would mean nothing at all to the sort of audience who go to the Islington Town Hall where Waiting for Lefty has an electrifying effect. (1973A p.37-8)

This slightly concealed attack - which judging by Osborne's (1982) summaries of the reviews of the literary journals, was more politely hostile - is the more significant since John Allen had worked on Group Theatre productions. Jones comments on the positive aspect of Group Theatre productions in that they '... made valuable theatrical experiments with all kinds of entertainment forms (e.g. music hall and cabaret) in order to communicate their message ... Their versatility was not lost on those who were to carry the popular theatre movement forward'. (1974 op. cit. p.275). They were certainly not lost on Allen, whose developing political awareness grated with the avant-gardism of the Group and Unity appeared the solution; writing after the Second World War about Unity's Waiting for Lefty he was to recall that 'My visit to one of these performances constituted the most intense theatrical experience I had then

known'. (9) He joined Unity as a producer.

Mention has already been made of the other grouping, the Left Theatre, formed early in 1934. To repeat, it involved producer Andre Van Gyseghem, poet Randall Swingler and composer Benjamin Britten in efforts to lift the level of the socialist theatre movement in terms of repertoire and technique, develop the skills of worker-actors and present socialist plays to working class audiences in working class areas. It certainly did bring some radical American material to London but its overall achievement of its aims is dubious; by 1937 at least it had deceased and its main participants were combining their professional work with regular contributions to Unity. Andre Van Gyseghem had already assisted the Rebel Players in technical training, and his feelings around the mid-thirties have been recorded in an interview with Stourac:

What makes any creative person look for another step forward? I don't know. I felt it was something I had to do, I had to widen my horizons and get to know what other forms of theatre existed which were closely related, more closely related, to society as one knew it, and particularly the emergence of the working class as a power in the world, through Russia and other places. But I wanted to break the bounds, I wanted to push the walls down, much as Meyerhold had done in theatre, to break away from old traditions and look for something new, and the WTM seemed to be a possibility. So I went to look at them ... I was fascinated ... and I thought they had something which was almost dead in the professional theatre, which was a sort of passion, a guiding passion ... an acknowledgement of the importance of what they were saying and standing for. Whereas, the professional theatre was an entertainment, highly polished and extremely good and very sophisticated and often very witty, but passion, deeply felt, was not a paramount thing in the theatre, and I looked for

that. And it seemed to me I found it in these boys with their political ideas ... And their attempts to express these in theatrical forms seemed to me very naive and very simple and could have been much better, much more forceful, much more effective ... I would raise the quality of the technical side of their work with all the ideals and their impulses behind them. (Stourac op. cit. p.398)

Another producer associating himself with Unity at this time was Herbert Marshall. As a teenager he had gone to Moscow on a Co-Operative Society Educational scholarship and studied film under Eisenstein, simultaneously he had had an opportunity to absorb some of the influences of the Moscow Art theatre. Meyerhold, and Brecht and Piscator who were in exile there at the time. Van Gyseghem had similarly studied the theatre work of Nikolai Oklopkhov at the Realistic Theatre and both were also familiar at first hand with the American work being produced under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration.

(Van Gyseghem 1979 op. cit.) Something of the calibre of the literary contributions can be gauged from the play Stay Down Miner by the journalist Montagu Slater, himself a writer in a variety of media who had joined the Communist Party before 1930. A dramatised version of the author's reportage novel of the same name, Stay Down Miner concerns the sit-down strikes in the South Wales coalfields in 1935. It was performed by the Left Theatre in 1936 with verses set to music by Benjamin Britten, and thereafter toured the London theatres.

The first scene ⁽¹⁰⁾ is set near the pit head at Cwmllynfach where we are introduced at one and the same time to some personalities and to a community together with the setting in motion of a chain of industrial events. In a short scene age, youth and the morality of the mining valley are seen in conflict within

a family, but the background is an impending confrontation over the opening of a new seam and pit in which management is rumoured to be about to use outside labour:

Will Lewis: Rhys is a kind man, yes, with the voice of a harmonium. But there is figures behind him, Howel, and bankers behind wire netting, smooth as Judases, and London behind them all, to which Mr Rhys is saying "Yes sir. You appreciate Mr Managing Director that this will mean the extinction of Cwmllynfach? Ah! You have never heard of Cwmllynfach? then it is as well that it should be extinct. Yes, Mr Managing Director, I will get in touch with the organiser of the blacklegs and of the Company Union. He will provide me with a gang. I am at your service. We will get rid of Cwmllynfach now. These people are too independent, too stiff-necked as trade unionists. We will get men more pliable. then we can rationalise heartily".

Finally we hear that in protest at this new situation the men of one shift are trying a new tactic: they are refusing to come up from the pit bottom at the end of their shift in a sit-down strike.

Next, as Shepherd (1982) has pointed out, we see a community divided along lines of occupation, generation, church and gender against a background of organising for the strike. On the one hand preparations are laid for food supplies for the strikers, but some of the women fear for the mens' safety and wish them back; some are willing for their men to blackleg in order to put food on the table. Some of the men confront Mr Rhys at the colliery office, wishing to telephone the strikers in the pit. Mr Rhys we see as separated from the community by his managerial occupation, but he is a deacon in the same chapel as the leader Howel, and it is on the basis of this trust that he can assure that the rumours they have heard are groundless and

they agree to take their shifts to work. After their exit, he telephones the police ...

Thus the first Act leaves a divided community. Shepherd (1982) describes the next:

In the marvellous second scene of Act 2 the women watch the blacklegs arrive at the pit, their faces scanning the auditorium while Gwernt accuses the "invaders". This partially prepares us for the next scene, structurally and perhaps thematically the mid-point of the play. We see the house of the blackleg couple (suggested simply by flats and props) Llio Jones is troubled, desperately occupying herself with a record of grand opera (she fancies herself as a singer) while outside there are shouts from the picket line near her door. She tries to block out the noise. The audience role now is fairly difficult. Llio is wife of a blackleg, but she is given sympathetic staging: she is a woman alone in a room and worried. All the apparatus of traditional (naturalist) drama is there. The audience, amongst whom blacklegs were seen to arrive, are now invited to empathise with the personal problems of one. The trades unionists are nothing more than voices off, disrupting the stage image. Their voices keep breaking into Llio's room: her attempts to use high culture to drown them fail (a well packed "gest").

Slater sets the seen emotions of the individual against the heard feelings of the anonymous community: he disrupts a traditional theatrical imagery (the room, the recorded opera) with voices from the auditorium. The various discourses that make up the total performance text are split apart and we are set in the rupture, in the tension between personal and communal. (p.28)

Further into the Act the communal action defeats the scab, after continual violence between pickets, police and scab labour brought in by train:

Gwernt: You can write it in the local paper.
Boxer: Will you write it for me?

Gwernt: Yes. I write that Boxer Jones renounces Company Unionism and renounces scabbing. You will have to sign it.
Llio: Boxer - think of Mr Rhys.
Boxer: I'm not frightened of him. He's only one.
Llio: He's everybody that matters.
Boxer: Maybe they matter in London and other places. Not in Cwn.
Gwernt: It is not easy to become a miner when you come of shop-keeping people and have never worked ordinarily. You are learning one of the first things. You are learning about trades unionism.

Rumours circulated that the railwayline transporting the scab labour is going to be dynamited; the Act ends in a night-scene, invisible voices and pin-points of lamplight on stage, in the orchestra pit, in the body of the theatre. They discuss stopping the train by stones from the railwaybridges; despite Bronwen and Gwernt's powerful plea that the way for trades unionists to stop them is by solidarity action from railway workers, and that wrecking action and violence will only bring sympathy for the scabs and play into the bosses' hands, this they do. A powerful scene is created by the rhythm and individual voices all around the theatre, the darkness and the moving lamps at different points.

Act Three opens with a scene of the stay-down strikers at the pit bottom. In complete darkness apart from a miner's lamp the rhythmic noises of air and water pumps are simulated, but not in any naturalistic style: a metronome ostentatiously placed in the orchestra pit sets a regular beat which is occasionally taken by a drum or, as a relief, the crash of percussion. Eventually during this Act Gwernt and almost the entire cast we have met have been arrested, but through some of these conventional scenes Slater scatters voices with a recited chorus on the miner's life,

work and conditions:

.....Man: Another time, along main haulage
roads
Past the conveyors, trams, electric
lights
Comes fire, flood, chaos and general
death.
One thrust at the future brought that
mighty death.
Woman: Time in the shape of a mine is three
dead every day
It is a shape of time, one thousand
and seventy three in a year.

The final courtroom scene by the very structure of the court provides an opportunity for the statement of facts and arguments as evidence, together with speeches from the dock: Gwernt's mother Bronwen, representing an older generation of socialists, appeals in a climax to the audience directly: 'Tell England and Scotland ... Tell them to join Wales'.

There is, as Shepherd comments, much that can be written about this play. He rightly points to Slater's handling of different theatrical modes: realistic scenes and characters but openly displayed devices such as the metronome, the verse choruses and the use of the auditorium. Politically Slater has re-written history from the point of view of the Communist Party, not only granting priority to speeches condemning individualistic wrecking actions but also underplaying the actual levels of violence directed against the scabs in the real Cwymfelinfach. Possibly here Slater felt he was adopting his own literary advice to use 'reportage for the old world and creative work to build the new world.'⁽¹¹⁾

A contemporary review however, despite praising the performance and the technical advances of the play, was still disappointed:

What we are not made to feel, except momentarily, is the sense that this is a mass thing, that these few characters are the selected symbols of a whole community, and beyond that, a class. For instance, in the scene down the pit, the interest was concentrated on three individuals, who, as far as I remember, behaved without any indication of the fact that they belonged to a shift of a hundred men. We don't get the mass feeling as we did in Slater's reportage of the strike. (12)

The urgent need, according to the reviewer, was for a drama of social forces, and the example held up was that of Slater's own Easter 1916, which the Left theatre had produced for the twentieth anniversary of the Easter Rising. As this text has not been reprinted, it is worth an examination. (13)

A Prologue introduces a play, 'not fiction', about 'you yourselves' the audience, and the things they can make happen. Therefore they are called upon to come to the stage and act. Actors placed in the audience come forward one by one they are introduced as tram-drivers and conductors, railwaymen, a typist; also the historical characters and their activities: James and Norah Connolly, Countess Marcievicz, Sir Roger Casement, Padraic Pearse, Tom Clark and the boss of the Dublin tramways William Martin Murphy. The Prologue ends with a recited chorus:

Man: And these English -
 Public school vampires
 Feeding on Empires
 And better-paid artisans
 Their cloth-capped partisans
 You-and you - and you
 Sitting pretending that you never knew:
 Maybe you'll learn
 What way you earn
Woman: No. Let them be
 They've come to see
 Only a play
Man: We'll tickle your faculties
 With actualities
 We'll storm your feelings and not woo you.

Woman: Step aside gunman, they can't see through you.

The first Act consists of a number of short scenes building up a panorama of the great Dublin tramworkers strike of 1913. Both public events and decisions and their effects on ordinary people are introduced. In the office of the Dublin United Tramways Company the galvanic boss William Murphy is planning to undermine the massive membership of the transport workers union, led by Jim Larkin, amongst his employees. He has formed a massive fund with the Chamber of Commerce specifically to break the union, and thus he is able to send this letter to his employees:

The parcels traffic will be suspended temporarily. If you are not a member of the Union when the traffic is resumed your application for re-employment will be favourably considered ... One for every man and boy in the Parcels Department - in the pay envelopes.

This action triggers the events which occupy the remainder of the Act.

The strike is called, discussed amongst people, and Larkin arrested. This prompts James Conolly, at union headquarters in Liberty Hall, to propose a mass meeting to consider forming a citizens' army to defend the strikers. Outside a public house two or three people are well placed to witness what was to come to be called Bloody Sunday: at a mass meeting addressed by the fugitive Jim Larkin the police charge the strikers and we hear they have rampaged through the working-class areas. The Chorus from the Prologue provides information as a source external to the stage action; 440 employers have locked out 20,000 men and women workers, the T.U.C. have organised food ships for Dublin.

Events escalate as Irish railway workers overcome the hesitancy of their leadership and break the law to strike in support, whilst in a scene in Wales railwayworkers are shown to share the same attitude to the willingness of their leaders, influenced by the violence in Dublin, to allow goods to be transported to Dublin. Mass picketing is organised on the docks to prevent the wholesale import of scab labour.

The Act closes with an interview by Connolly for the Daily Herald reporter, a device permitting a direct statement of belief and intent:

Connolly: Unless the red flag has the green flag beside it the red flag's a cipher, Frank. And unless the green flag has the red flag beside it, the green flag's bunting and that's all.

To defend the strike the Irish Citizens' Army is formed.

The second Act concerns the political background to what will be in fact the Easter Rising. The British T.U.C. votes against full support for the Dublin strikers and the absence of the food ships is a disaster. In Ireland labour leaders use this vote as a reason to withdraw their earlier somewhat half-hearted support. At the same time Connolly must deal with the arguments put forward by Tom Clark, Sir Roger Casement and the Irish Republican Brotherhood. He rejects the politics of terrorism and assassination in favour of the mass popular rising, but agrees with Casement that in the event of a European war Ireland should take advantage of Britain's discomfiture. The Act ends with the outbreak of World War One and the growing self-confidence of Connolly's Irish Citizens' Army.

The final Act deals with the organisational background, commencement and finale of the 1916 Rising itself. In preparation every plan goes amiss and Slater permits us a possibly surprising observation when Connolly intends to act in full knowledge of the likely result:

Connolly: In a written tragedy there is a point where the tragedy is ended though the play has half an hour to go. To go back now would be to write the play differently from the beginning, with a different history of Ireland and a different history of England, with a different Irish working-class and a different English working class. It would be better if you could. But these stones have a trick of taking the tragic turn - otherwise maybe they'd be no story.

Madame: So you're marching us to our deaths for fun?

Connolly: We have been marched, Madame.

Madame: And you'll leave Ireland for a generation without leaders?

Connolly: ...Without the Republican Brotherhood. Maybe she'll have learnt it by tomorrow. But 'tis a costly lesson.

Thus there is a looking forward and beyond, a refusal of tragedy despite its enactment as the play concludes with the execution of Connolly. The progress of the Rising is portrayed through the use of British troops and rebels through the auditorium, the Chorus describing major events by way of a commentary and recited verses. In comparison and contrast with Stay down Miner, whose history was recent, Easter:1916 does indeed convey a greater sense of the mass and its participation in social events. Public events and private individuals are juxtaposed, the use of the auditorium and the position of the audience are all vehicles to orchestrate this. In both plays

Slater is therefore confronting some of the basic problems of a socialist drama as outlined in the Introduction. Easter : 1916 has perhaps fewer theatrical devices than Stay Down Miner, and its use of Prologue, Chorus and verse invite a comparison with the works of Sean O'Casey, but the origins lie with an author simultaneously involved with poetry, theatre and the documentary film with its fast movement between short episodes.

To repeat, these are examples of the calibre of the writing made available to Unity as the Left Theatre faded into its work as a feature of the entry of the 'middle-class intelligentsia' into the Socialist theatre movement. It is perhaps worth noting that Montague Slater, Randall Swingler and Jack Lindsay - like the more famous ~~Ralph Fox~~, Christopher Caudwell and Alan Bush - all joined the Communist Party before or just at the beginning of the 'Popular Front' period. Besides these literary intellectuals a good number of people from outside the labour movement were attracted to Unity as actors, electricians, backstage or front of house workers. For those willing to join or work with the Communist Party - sharing platforms, writing in journals, working on plays - during this later period the political atmosphere was often one of frustration with the mainstream of political life, the normal channels which would have been open to them were blocked. As John Saville has written on this:

On all the central issues of the 1930s - unemployment, the hunger marches, the opposition to Mosley, the campaign for Spain - the actions and activity of the Labour and trades union leaders could hardly be described as vigorous or inspiring. Rather the contrary. Their caution, concern for respectability, and apparent lack of awareness at the grim

prospects of a world in which international Fascism seemed to move from one triumph to another with the support of the British ruling class, were the despair and desolation of many in Britain well beyond the groups of the traditional left. (1977 p.256)

There was almost a theatrical counterpart to this. Barbara Nixon in the article quoted at the beginning of this chapter articulated a familiar theme in writings on the theatre at this time:

A great deal is said to-day about the hopeless condition of the English theatre - Komisarjevsky, Basil Dean, Hubert Griffith, even St. John Ervine, not to mention more professedly left and progressive societies, all agree that the English theatre is not only decayed but dead. They even agree about the main causes - the dominance of the commercial spirit, the treatment of theatres by their city owners merely as potential rent, the effete character of the majority of the audiences; most of them have been known to say that only a revolution can improve the situation, though it is not wise to cross-examine them further and be more specific as to the kind of revolution required. (op. cit.. p.105)

Similarly John Allen pointed to sources of discontent amongst bourgeois theatre workers which could also prompt them towards socialist solutions:

.....a socialist Britain would remove those conditions which make a career on the stage to-day absolutely untenable for anyone who really cares tuppence ha'penny about the business: conditions in which the actor, as Gordon Craig describes, is sucked like an orange until he is dry and then chucked aside, if he is lucky enough to be sucked at all - and if he is not, he starves. (Independent incomes are so essential for a "professional actor" that class distinction reaches a nauseating extreme). This situation would be removed, and the actor would be given conditions, such as exist in the U.S.S.R. which would enable him to have a say in the sort of plays in which he acted, the way in which he should act them, and so on. The Capitalist Press is careful not to mention that one of the first things the popular front

government did in France was to put the most active and enterprising directors at the head of the Comedie Francaise and the Opera Comique. (1937B p.419)

Andre Van Gyseghem again felt that 'if you wanted to perform a play with any kind of social conscience, you had to turn to America' (1979 p.214) For the politically and theatrically frustrated Unity must have offered new opportunities, new material, new politics and - Easter:1916 was first performed, according to the published text, by commission from the North London Area Committee of the A.E.U. at Islington Town Hall - the prospect of new audiences.

This was but one feature of Unity's consolidation of its own organisation and its place within the labour movement and its campaigns. Two plays in particular stand out as the most widely played, Clifford Odets' Waiting for Lefty and the mass declamation On Guard for Spain, both, to repeat, the most widely performed in the repertoire of the movement and thus deserving a detailed examination.

Lefty ⁽¹⁴⁾ opens with a cab-drivers' union meeting in America. A union official, fat, corrupt and accompanied by a gunman, moves threateningly around a committee elected by the members. He is trying to talk them all out of strike action ('We workers got a good man behind us now. He's top man of the country - looking out for our interests - the man in the White House is the one I'm referrin' to. That's why the times ain't ripe for a strike ... we gotta stand behind the man who's standin' behind us') and denounces militants as Reds. But the workers are

waiting for Lefty, their elected chairman, and discuss and recount to each other their own situations and motives, including what has led them to be scraping a living as cab drivers. Five short scenes convey this.

Joe and Edna - spotlight on part of the stage area, with the circle of men still dimly visible and amidst the smoke of the official, Harry Fatt's, cigar - are faced with a domestic crisis. Joe works all the hours he can for the cab company but nevertheless their furniture has been repossessed, they cannot afford rent, food or childrens' clothes. In the course of a furious argument - whose realism is attested by the circle of men still witnessing events - Edna, on the point of leaving Joe, forces him into standing up to the employer and the union racketeers:

Edna: I don't say one man! I say a hundred,
a thousand, a whole million! but start in
your own union. Get those hack boys together!
Sweep out those racketeers like a pile of
dirt! Stand up like men and fight for the
crying kids and wives. Goddamnit! I'm tired
of slavery and sleepless nights.

This cuts to Miller, a lab assistant, talking to the industrialist Fayette ('I like sobriety in my workers ... the trained ones, I mean. The pollacks and niggers, they're better drunk ...') who is offering him a raise and promotion. The price, however, is to supply regular 'reports' on his supervisor, Dr. Brenner, and the job is a secret project to manufacture poison gas. Miller's brothers and cousin were killed in World War One and appeals to his patriotism are useless. He quits:

Miller: Rather dig ditches first!
Fayette: That's a job for foreigners.

Miller: But sneaking - and making poison
gas - that's for Americans?

An undertone of war is also present in a scene between a young cabbie and his girlfriend, but the main theme of this relationship is the effect of poverty, low wages and the slump on their lives and prospects. In long snatches of dialogue - and all through the play the very rhythm of speech and idiom recall the feature films which were Odets' other milieu - they discuss Sid's brother who has joined the navy as his only hope of being somebody. Sid and Florrie cannot afford to find a room, rent an apartment or even go out together, still less to get married; 'We got the Blues, Babe. The 1935 Blues'.

A spotlight brings us back to the union meeting. Harry Fatt wants the theatre audience, amongst whom hecklers have been planted, to know just how hard he works on their behalf. Up from the audience comes his colleague who can explain, on the basis of his own recent experience, why the strike tactic is bound to fail at this time. But a voice from the audience, then a figure struggling on to the stage, defies Fatt and the gunman to denounce this speaker. He is a Company spy, responsible for the sacking, arrest or blacklisting of countless union members and the disruption of countless union branches. The accuser can be certain since the man is his own brother. The scab is dragged through the audience and out of the hall.

A final scene, the last explanatory tributary to the climax. concerns two medical researchers who have been dismissed, ostensibly through budgetary cuts at their private hospital but under a cloud of anti-semitism. Should they go to Russia and take up 'the wonderful opportunity to work in their socialized

medicine'?

Benjamin: No! Our work's here - America!
I'm scared ... What future's ahead.
I don't know. Get some job to
keep alive - maybe drive a cab -
and study and work and learn my
place -
Barnes: And step down hard!
Benjamin: Fight! Maybe get killed but goddamn!
We'll go ahead! (stands with clenched
fist raised high)

As a climax the union meeting - including, as has been indicated the, auditorium - is taken over by Agate with a ferocious attack on cowardly and corrupt union officials and a rousing, accelerating grounds well of support for the strike call. They should not wait around for Lefty but act now. As he speaks a man runs through the hall, breathless and anguished. Lefty's body has been found in the car-park, shot through the head. Agate (Hello America! We're the storm birds of the working class!) turns on the audience:

Well, What's the answer?
All: Strike!
Agate: LOUDER!
All: STRIKE!
Agate and Others on Stage: AGAIN!
All: STRIKE, STRIKE, STRIKE!

Although the playtext, published as a Left Book Club edition in 1937, was innovatory, Unity's production of it was quickly noted as more so. Travis, in one of his few detailed accounts of a production, illustrates why:

Concurrent with the opening of Lefty was a transport strike in London. As people arrived at the theatre they saw a picket line with

signs declaring that the Taxi Union drivers were on strike. The picket line added realism to the occasion. The audience began thinking about connections between the theatrical display and the transport strike. When they received their tickets, the customers were asked to show proper identification. They had to display their Unity theatre membership card to enter the theatre. This procedure paralleled the screening process used by union officials at a meeting.

To reach the auditorium, the audience had to climb a flight of stairs. Along the way, the walls were lined with posters listing the grievances of the taxi drivers. The patrons were seated by men dressed in working clothes. In the front of the house on a raised platform used for a stage was a table and a few folding chairs. An actor dressed as a company tough patrolled the stage area defying the audience to make a false move. By this time many of the audience members were not certain whether they were at the Unity Theatre Club or a union meeting concerning the strike in progress. Adding to the effect of the pre-production show, ushers using the language of coarse workers told audience members to mind their business. (op. cit. p.38)

Bram Bootman, Secretary of Unity Theatre Club and an actor in productions of Waiting for Lefty on countless occasions, recalls how drilling in rehearsal made their performances more mobile than this:

Odets' stage notes are quite definite on the staging, the group sitting around in a demi-circle and so on. When we entered for one of the British Drama League Festivals the rules required us to do a one act play in fifty-three minutes flat. So for the different scenes we would have, say, operating gowns on under our overcoats, rubber gloves in the pockets, a wooden box and stool to suggest poverty, a telephone to suggest an office. Whenever the lights cut we all had drilled movements to do immediately with all this so that within a couple of seconds there was another scene going on. Bert Marshall rehearsed us till we could do all this, we did the play in the fifty-three minutes flat, and we kept it that way so we could play it literally anywhere. (15).

'Literally anywhere' aptly describes the venues for Unity's Lefty, as will be seen, but as regards the theatre performances some points stand out. Travis comments that fast scene changes were not in common usage in the commercial theatre, which relied heavily on the use of intermissions and lowering the curtain to cover scene changes and frequent ones therefore slowed productions down considerably. Unity's innovation, he continues, explains a point in the following review:

.....at the back of the stage sits the committee throughout the action, always visible, though in shadow while the flashbacks are played in front. The workers are to some degree individualised, but the boss is the same man, whether playing the Trade Union Judas, the callous industrialist, or the self-indulgent theatre manager. Though not a masterpiece this piece is impressive in its starkness, brevity, and directness of attack. Given by a highly trained company on an adequately equipped stage its effect would be shattering... This performance is effective and the players of the Unity Theatre Club command our respect for portraying characters with whom they are in sympathy. (16)

This was not, contrary to Travis, the only available review; Barbara Nixon contributed a similarly constructively unflattering piece on the opening production in Left Review.⁽¹⁷⁾ Whereas she felt that the play was 'well acted, and reached a standard I have not often seen in amateur productions ... the scenes on the stage, with the exception of the doctor's interview, were well handled and played'. Nevertheless it was not 'a valuable contribution to dramatic art'. Like the Albert Maltz play Pirate Hicks which accompanied it, Lefty was 'a good piece of agitational work' and thus very useful; the crudeness in its conception was therefore excusable. More interestingly, 'The production of Lefty could have made more use of the auditorium, and thereby gained in realism ... but these are faults which the group can remove with

with more rehearsals and more experience'.

It seems these 'faults' were removed between 1936 and 1939 as accounts of the impact made by the play show. A review in Cavalcade concentrated on the audience for a double-bill of Lefty and Brecht's Senora Carrar's Rifles and who responded most to what, as Page quotes:

Theatre-goers who venture North London-wards to the Unity Theatre are fairly equally divided between upper-class "intellectual" would-be revolutionary sympathisers, who however, are rather chary of mingling with the masses, and genuine, fully paid-up Party members ... (During the Brecht) ... the "upper" half of the audience sit back happily, fully sympathetic to the women's struggle ...

...There is nothing violent said to alarm them ... The Left-wingers, however, view the play with impatience ... During the strongly proletarian Waiting for lefty, the positions are exactly 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' struggles. (op. cit. p.64)

Even this patrician piece indicates the effect exerted by the play; in content, as Jones (1974) points out, the focus on problems experienced beyond the traditional working class, and the common denominators visible is a classic Popular Front angle. The structure of the play joins together a series of personal experiences and situations to show a panoramic picture of a corrupt society by means of short and effective single scenes acting as tributaries to the dramatic conclusions into which the audience is drawn.

The basic form chosen, according to Jones (ibid) based on the black minstrel show style well known in both America and Britain,

in fact uses a variety of devices to rouse the audience and more were added in production - the use of the strike committee as a chorus to comment on the action, music, and of course involving the audience in the action. Bram Bootman also well recalls the impact:

We had, Alfie Bass it was in fact, he did this with us for years it must have been, running from outside the theatre, right through the auditorium, really breathless and agitated, to announce we've found Lefty, he's dead. Smack! You'd got the whole audience dead silent. No matter how many times we did it they were stunned. They were involved in it you see, there was no division between actor, audience, proscenium arch. This must have been the first time people had seen techniques like these applied to human situations to bring them sharp up against reality. (18)

The call to action which implicated a wide strata of society must have articulated, for many on the Left, exactly the urge to dynamic and unified action which was the political impulse of the later nineteen-thirties.

It was this play, it can be argued, which enabled Unity to consolidate itself, especially from its foundation to the move into the second theatre in 1937. Indeed, the play contributed to this success:

Eighteen months ago when we took the hall in Britannia Street we were quite unknown. To-day we are known throughout the labour movement, and the demand for our services has been so great that we were forced to look for bigger premises. (19)

The same writer attributed this to the reputation established by Lefty in performances for labour organisations. It was played wherever possible (and not just in London - a group was formed to tour in two old taxi-cabs) at the meetings, socials,

rallies and events of the Labour and Communist Parties, Co-Op Guilds or Spanish Aid Committees. A case in point was the London busmens' strike of 1937, when Unity played Waiting for Lefty around the garages for the strikers, the more apposite since the union involved, the TGWU, had an active taxi-drivers section at that time.

The other piece in great demand for agitatorial work was the mass declamation On Guard for Spain. In 1936 Randall Swingler had devised a set of verses for performance called Spain. Although this was received well by Left Review the Unity committee was unhappy -

it was very abstract, and he wanted a similar technique for it, with microphones and loudspeakers. It just wouldn't work. But we adopted Jack Lindsay's On Guard for Spain and we played this everywhere in London where there was a meeting about Spain. (20)

This declamation was a feature of the solidarity campaigns with the Spanish Republic during the Civil War. This agitation has been described frequently, but its sheer extent, variety and commitment is worth recalling. Besides the two thousand Britons who volunteered to fight with the International Brigade or the P.O.U.M., those who drove ambulances or took in refugees, some two million pounds were raised for food and medical supplies, and much of that from depressed areas. The Labour Party and T.U.C. leaderships supported the farcical policy of 'non-intervention', according to which all sides in Spain were to be denied armaments, despite this being clearly ignored by Hitler and Mussolini. Rank and file pressure forced a change here, but as Branson and Heinemann (op. cit. p.338) point out many in the

labour movement felt that their leaderships were not up to the urgency of the situation. Direct industrial or 'unconstitutional' action was taken in defiance of them and the campaigning bodies represented movement from below.

Almost every town threw up a Spanish Aid Committee to run political meetings and to raise funds. These Committees comprised not only working-class organisations but also other social groups drawn into politics for the first time, and quiet areas of the country experiencing an organisation of progressive politics for the first time. The campaign also developed a cultural wing through film, poetry, art and drama; British involvement with the Spanish cause runs parallel with the meteoric rise of the Left Book Club and its Theatre Guild, and the consolidation of the Unity Theatre Movement. In this context Jack Lindsay devised On Guard for Spain, published by Left Review in 1937 and subsequently as a penny pamphlet, together with a theoretical basis for its production.

Lindsay's position on Spain was typical of the Communist writers of the time, as can be seen from the questionnaire of 1937, Authors Take Sides on the Spanish Civil War, quoted by Sperber:

I believe Fascism to be utterly evil and destructive. I stand with every fibre of my being for the People of Spain against the murderous attack of the feudalism remnants backed by Hitler and Mussolini for their imperialist world-war purposes. I believe this is an epic conflict in which ideas like Freedom and Culture leap out with a new tremendous energy, an irresistible demand on our loyalty. To be above the battle, when such a cause is concerned, is to be sub-human. (1974 p.205)

Socialist theatre groups - influenced by the German Workers' Choirs of the Weimar period - had performed mass recitations such as Ernst Toller's Requiem for Rosa Luxembourg a few years previously, but Lindsay was unaware of this when he wrote Who Are the English?, a recitation on labour history for May Day. Shortly afterwards he was encouraged by Unity theatre to develop a poem on Spain for declamation.

A sense of urgency and crisis is a feature of On Guard, (21) as the verse initially announces its subject and purpose:

Chronicle:	What you shall hear is the tale of the Spanish people. It is also your own life. On guard, we cry!
Women:	It is the pattern of the world to-day. Have you ever known the bird-thrill, the dawn song, the wings of the wind of time threshing from your shoulders?
Men:	Have you ever followed the track blazed by the pioneers of truth, the outriders of joy, the vanguard of freedom?...
Chronicle:	Have you ever come out of the tangled undergrowth into the clearing of history
Choir:	Then you have lived in Spain. Spain of 1936 and 1937
Men:	Spain the arena, the battlefield of freedom,
Women:	The death struggle picked out by the time's moving spotlight
Chronicle:	Spain!

A theme that the struggle in Spain is a struggle against reaction all over the world, and thus of immediate relevance to the audience, occurs several times, as does the following theme articulating the experiences and aspirations of the Spanish workers:

Chronicle:	After the February elections the people sang in the streets

of work.
A Man: The echoes of time were notes of
guitars
A Woman: and the moons smelt of oranges
Chronicle: The peasant driving his wooden
plough
sang the cradle song
of a world of steel and comradeship.
The political prisoners were freed.
Chronicle: The locks of the prisons of poverty
were broken by the hammers of unity,
and brushing the cobwebs of old
night away
we came out into the factories of day.

However the verses recall the repression which had followed the
Asturias risings a few years previously, and warn of the
imminent Fascist rising:

Choir: We cried and cried again:
On guard, people of Spain!
Different
Men Franco the Butcher lurks in the
(rapidly, Canary Islands.
with Queipo de Llano in Seville mutters
menace): threats in his drunken sleep.
Batet sneers in Barcelona.
Sanjurjo waits in Lisbon for the
gong of murder to sound.
Mola, masked with a grin, chats
with death at Burgos.
Choir: On guard, people of Spain!

The Fascist rebellion is covered with a stress on the clarity
of the issues at stake, both for Spain elsewhere:

Now at last the enemy had shown his face
unmasked. No longer now
behind the veil of incense and the words
of solemnity,
no longer behind the legalised titles of theft,
the enemy hid

Chronicle: Now was the testing time of the
people,
now with the terrible trumpets
of the dawn
the moment of choice appeared.
Choir: Sieze it, Spanish people,
or lose it for evermore.

The response by the people and by international Fascism
inexorably follows:

A Man: I rose from the bed of my wife's
young body
at the call of Liberty (half
Oh feed with my blood our flag's sung)
red flame.
Comrades, remember me.
A Woman: The Fascists shot my children
first,
they made me stand and see.
Oh dip the flag in my heart's
blood.
Comrades, remember me.
Chronicle: Spain rose up in the morning,
roused by the rattle of bullets.
Unbreakfasted, the people
put the fascists to rout.
Choir: Spain rose up in the morning
Spain rose up in the morning (crescendo)
Spain rose up in the morning
and drove the fascists out.
Chronicle: Therefore they came with Moors
deceived and bribed,
therefore they came with foreign
legion scum,
therefore Mussolini sent
reinforcements,
airplanes, tanks, equipment, men,
therefore Hitler sent airplanes,
ammunition,
experts, troops in thousands
Choir: to crush the people of Spain.
Chronicle: Therefore they shot the workers
at Badajoz,
...a fist of force slogging at
every heartbeat
over the people of the invaded
districts ...

The stanzas cover the fighting in Spain, often by means of
granting a very few lines to a succession of experiences, and
mentioning many towns, cities and districts and what had taken
place there. Thus, apart from Badajoz, we are told of the
Samosierra Front, 'Toledo in the splintering rain of destruction',
'Irun a town pulled down on the heads of heroes', Oviedo, Madrid
and so on; also of the formation and role of the International
Brigades. For a declamatory poem many of the verses are tightly

packed with images and information. Not simple sloganising, the phrasing of some of the lines are more reminiscent of traditional written poetry:

We sought the heart of that alarm,
tracking the spoor of danger. We were
freedom's foresters
on that wild morning. We trod with grace
like dancers
the stage of our apprehension...

Throughout the generally unrhymed but rhythmic verses convey the dramatic urgency which those at the centre of the solidarity campaign felt; the declamation concluded with a return to the theme of the supreme importance of the survival of Spanish democracy for progress everywhere:

...drive off the fascist vultures gathering
to pick the bones of Spanish cities,
to leave the Spanish fields
dunged with peasant dead
that greed may reap the fattened crops...

Women: Listen, comrades,
if you would know our pride,
Chronicle: Can you dare to know your deepest joy,
all that is possible in you?
Then what you see in Spain's heroic
ardour
is your own noblest self come true.
Choir: On guard for the human future!
On guard for the people of Spain!

The declamation was first performed at a rally in Trafalgar Square in 1937 and subsequently on a great many occasions throughout Britain by the amateur Unity, Left Book Club and other political theatre groups. A typical declamation would be performed by up to six people (the 'mass' being the audience they played to) who, as has been indicated, would break the poem down into sections, usually a section for particular points or experiences, for solo or group voices. One voice would take

up a line, two more strengthen it, and then more moving on to the climaxes, preserving the rhythmic qualities of the verse within its free form. At the same time the group would make as much use of movement as space allowed: marching, standing in parallel lines, forming apexes with chroniclers stepping forward to emphasise particular points. Some groups - notably in Glasgow, (as D. Allen op. cit. p.16 records), dressed in International Brigade uniforms and used intricate manoeuvres with a Republican flag as a centrepiece. When the declamation - which could last for up to half an hour - was given indoors, additional effects were gained through lighting and silhouettes.

The venues were such as Aid committee meetings, trades union and political party branches, Popular Front rallies and May Day processions. On the tops of lorries, in halls or on the streets the declamation was often performed to audiences of thousands. Jerry Dawson, of Merseyside Unity Theatre, recalls the situation:

When we did On Guard the impact was almost always enormous. I remember when we played it to a meeting at Garston baths, I saw people in tears even at the mention of the name of certain Spanish towns, even just the list of names could achieve that, because they knew what had happened there. These audiences didn't see declamations as something arty, as poetry being recited to them, but as an emotional expression of things they'd come across politically in their newspapers. (22)

Indeed, even veteran speakers such as Harry Pollitt and Ellen Wilkinson reported that they had rarely seen audiences so moved as after On Guard. R. Vernon Bests recalled in 1943 that after a performance, 'I not only knew intellectually that the Spanish peoples' fight was my fight, but for the first time felt that it was'. (23) The success was reflected in the

reports of the Left Book Club. By 1938 it was felt that
'On Guard for Spain ... has been among the most popular of our
productions during the past eighteen months' and Unity lectures
trained group members in declamations. (24)

Through this success mass declamation as a form began to develop.
The Left Book Club Poets Group was formed and published Poetry
and the People, a journal which was dedicated to:

trying to restore the traditional link between
poetry and the people, going out to the people
and letting them hear poetry that has some
connection with reality and their daily lives,
poetry which by its clarity and compactness of
expression stabs like a searchlight into the
confusion and contradictions of our experience. (25)

Declamations were a principal feature of their work in the two
or three years before the outbreak of the Second World War.
Jack Lindsay himself received requests for compositions from
bodies ranging from the Phoenix Theatre to local trades councils
and the strike committee of a group of Scottish building workers.
One, Defend the Soviet Union, was printed and performed fairly
extensively. In 1938 the Left Book Club duplicated Lindsay's
Five Thousand Years of Poetry, which was an anthology of popular
ballads and lyrics declaimed at Unity Theatre and Left Book Club
cultural weeks. This was possible since they believed that 'our
most valuable contribution to the theatre and to the movement
during the past year is our success in popularising mass
declamations ... (26)

Jack Lindsay provided other mass declamations also - We Need

Russia on the role of the Soviet Union in the international united front against fascism, and Who Are the English? specifically designed for May Day events, to which we now turn.

The principal theme (27) is just what is the English tradition, who are the English and what definitions are being brought into play. Once again up to twelve people are on the acting area, sitting or lying with a leader slightly raised and a red spotlight used to pick out individuals. They are dressed in overalls with red masks. The lights rise gradually:

Chorus: Who, who, who are the English?
Leader: Who are the English
according to the ruling class?
All you that went forth, lured by
great-sounding names
which glittered like bubbles of
crystal in your eyes
till they burst and you burst with
them
Man: shot to shreds (voice blurr, bombs etc)
Other Man: shot that the merchants' pockets
might clink and bulge
Women: shot that hoardings of imperial
size
might fill each blank space of the
motor-roads
with pink whore-faces beckoning
the bankrupt to buy -
Leader: You, you, you are the English
your ruling class has said it
(to
audience) you, you, you are the English
Chorus: keep then the recompense of a
sounding name
for you have nothing else.
for you have nothing else.

Points and examples of an exploited and passive mass continue and are accompanied by rhythmic movements; the men and women on stage shuffle in formation, miming the actions of groups of people such as miners, farmhands, shophands and slum dwellers who are listed by leader and chorus as apolitical and

manipulated victims, ripe for fascist ideology. Thus the definitions of the ruling class, but another is offered:

Women: I call instead on those who are
not English according to the ruling
class
2nd
Woman: We'll step back first six hundred
years or seven
and call up the peasants hoarsely
talking under the wind,
Both
Women: Their cattle stolen by the King's
purveyors
their wives deceived by whining
hedge-priests.
All
Women: Peasants, leaving your wattled
huts to haunt
the crooked dreams of Henry with
your scythes
unrolling a long scroll you couldn't
read
though you knew the word it held,
not England but -
Chorus: Justice!

An alternative tradition is invoked ('I talked with John Ball/
I was out with Jack Cade,/I listened to Wycliffe,/I was burnt
as a Lollard') and appealed to:

...Chorus: Come, you Anabaptists and you
Levellers,
Come, you Muggletonians, all
you Bedlamites,
fall in behind us, you are
not English, comrades,
Women: Come, you Luddites, you men of
the Charter ...

Again with rhythmic and mimed stage movements events and
struggles in the history of the labour movement are recounted
and this is re-asserted as the peoples' history and an authentic
English-ness. All the more important at a time of depression;

.....queues at the Labour Exchange while
the radio squeals in the shop nearby, and
nothing remains, nothing

A Man: Nothing,
Another: Nothing
Woman: Nothing
Third
Man: Nothing
Another: Nothing (All shuffle in a
dejected group, heads down)
Chorus: and nothing remains, nothing
except the mad-faces forming from
damp stairs on the plaster
the scabs of sickness and the
jagged edge
of tins in the bucket, and the
knock on the door ...

The workers listen to a new sound of revolt.

.....The moon-slit whispers,
 the rafter
 creaks to a new pulse stirring,
 the bough of silence
 cracks with a quick decision,
 men softly creeping
 through forests of hardship to surprise
 the drunken castle.

Workers, 'with the loyalty learned in mine and factory', must
take the world they have made, 'unseal the horns of plenty' and
'join once more the severed ends of work and play'. The Chorus
whisper questioningly at first, then, with increasing confidence
and finally passionately, 'Socialist Republic?, Socialist
Republic ... Socialist Republic!' Finally the 'workers of the
world unite' with clenched fists and a formation movement.

Thus Who Are the English? was performed in a similar style to
On Guard for Spain, contained some effective phrases and was
performed at events of labour movement celebration and festival.

It was this agitational aspect of Unity's work which led to
apparently the closest collaboration between the theatre and the

trades union movement. Playing Waiting for Lefty to audiences of strikers during the London Bus strike of 1937 had established a contact which enabled the strike to be the theme of their first Living Newspaper. The strike was not only the largest industrial action since 1932 it was also a significant stage in a political struggle within the Transport and General Workers' Union. This was because along with the issues of the dispute were ranged the growing strength of the busmen's rank and file movement, supported by the Communist Party, against the Executive of the union and its president, Ernest Bevin. The London busmen themselves were a highly organized group of twenty thousand, electing a Central Bus Committee with direct access to the Executive. This Committee was in turn influenced by the rank and file movement consisting of delegates from the garages. This unofficial grouping, assisted as it was by the Communist Party, was anathema to Bevin and the union officials.

The power of the rank and file movement had become apparent during the early 1930s through unofficial strikes and pressure on the leadership to resist wage cuts, redundancies and faster schedules imposed by the London Omnibus Company. By 1937, when a period of comparative economic boom had commenced, the busmen had formulated a demand for a seven-hour day: during the previous five years following the formation of the London Passenger Transport Board they had been working more miles in less time and in steadily worsening traffic conditions. Medical evidence showed a higher incidence of gastric complaints and nervous strain among busmen than any other workers. On the advice of the Executive the claim was reduced to seven and half hours; the Central Bus Committee was over-whelmingly for strike action and the Executive endorsed this despite Bevin's opposition. On May 1st -

Coronation Day - the busmen struck, stressing their medical case, 'for the right to live a little longer'.

Bevin and the Executive continually tried to undermine the strike, unsuccessfully recommending the men to return when the LPTB agreed to an inquiry (with no guarantees), and refusing to call out the tram and trolleybus workers, despite their being TGWU members who were effectively carrying bus traffic.

In the fourth week of the strike Bevin played his ace. The TGWU Executive revoked the powers of the elected Central Bus Committee to conduct the strike, and ordered the men back to work on the terms they had already rejected. The seven and a half hour day was not achieved. Thus the biggest official strike in any industry since 1932 ended in defeat for the workers - a setback not only for the busmen, but for the whole movement towards a shorter working week (Branson and Heinemann op. cit. p.143).

Next the Executive moved against the rank and file organization: membership of it was declared incompatible with union membership, three of its leaders were expelled from the union and four others debarred from holding office.

To repeat, throughout the strike Unity theatre had performed Waiting for Lefty around the garages to the strikers. Through this and through the Communist Party it had established close links with the militants involved. Thus to use the strike and its significance as the theme for a play was logical enough, but why documentary-drama? Montagu Slater, for example, a writer involved with Unity, had worked with Grierson and Cavalcanti on the film Coalface in 1935, and both using and arguing for the genre of 'descriptive reporting' or 'fictional

journalism' (1935 p.364).

However the name and style of the drama - Living Newspaper - was currently being developed in the United States by the Federal Theatre Project, part of the state-subsidized cultural projects spawned by the Works Progress Administration under Roosevelt's 'New Deal' (Goldmann, 1973). These drama-documentaries, dealing with the social issues of the day and providing calls to action, were achieving an extraordinary impact there; to those British producers working with Unity, such as Herbert Marshall and Andre Van Gyseghem, who had seen and been excited by Living Newspapers in America, these productions seemed a vindication of the Popular Front strategy in art: an innovative theatrical technique which had made politics possible on the commercial stage and had made them acceptable to audiences wider than the Left alone. Thus there was no hesitation in accepting the direct suggestion of the Federal Theatre Project that Unity attempt a Living Newspaper, and in the busmens' strike it had ready material.

Accordingly, a team collectively devised Living Newspaper No.1: Busmen when the TGWU Executive witch-hunt against the rank and file leaders was still contentious. Busmen who had been strikers were incorporated into the production process to advise on the attitudes of the workers before and during the dispute, on the nature of the jobs involved, and to furnish material for scenes using transport workers and the public. Unity personnel researched information from newspaper coverage, the minutes of meetings and transcripts of speeches and testimonies. The close contacts Unity had achieved with the strikers ensured not only that busmen took part as actors in Busmen (which ran for three months with a

comedy, The Case of the Baffled Boss), but also that they and their families made up many of the audiences. Thus the play served the constituency which was its subject.

The Play ⁽²⁸⁾ opens with the Steel Foundry overture, ballet and an offstage narrator (The Voice of the Living Newspaper) listing through a loudspeaker the strikes against 'speed up' in 1937. There is then a projection of statistics showing the rise in industrial output since 1930; the narrator links these two with the overall strategy of capital to amalgamate and raise production by increasing the pace of work. In this context is placed the formation of the London Passenger Transport Board in 1933. The opening scene blacks out to the debate in parliament over this, with the actors quoting the actual speeches of MPs and ministers of the time; the 'Voice' provides additional information such as the number of other companies which the proposed chairman of the Board controls, together with the profits arising from its formation. This fades out - through the use of spotlights on different sections of the stage area - to a series of scenes illustrating the effects of the new arrangements on the busmen themselves. For example:

Arthur: Christ Almighty!
Jack: What's up?
Arthur: My new time sheet.
Jack: What's your route?
Arthur: East Ham to Ladbroke Grove. Running
time cut again.
Jack: Your name's not on the payroll as
Arthur.
Arthur: What is it then?
Jack: Malcolm Campbell.
(Voice of Living Newspaper:) Mileage increased
5-10%. Number of miles travelled increases by
7000 over the previous year. Wages of drivers
£4.2s. a week. Chairman of Board's part-time
wage £240 a week.)

They and other busmen argue over what they should do; if the case is taken up with the union leadership the result will only be them having 'another conference by the sea'. This shifts to another scene representing a crowded bus in which a difficult passenger complains about the conductor to an inspector; this blacks out to a monologue by the driver:

Driver: It isn't as though there was anything wrong with my nerves. It's the Red ... Amber, Green. Stop. in...Stop again. What's the traffic remind me of? A St. Vitus case getting real bad. Trying to sleep in a Wurlitzer factory. The old woman trying to say it all at once. Bell again.

What does my head feel like? The flywheel of a steamroller? No. More like that Eastbourne feeling when you're cleaned out and there's five more alleged holidays to go. Nearer. Watching yourself in a nightmare miss the last train. Bell again.

I'll tell you what the Board thinks your brain ought to be like. A gyroscope. It goes so fast you can't see it move...

Sings: What is my trouble and strife?
that blasted bell.
What regulates my life?
that blasted bell.
What is the word between
Stop. Go, the Red, the Green?
What runs the whole machine?
That blasted bell...

(The bell itself sometimes takes up the refrain while the driver grimaces and points back with his thumb).

This cuts to a representation of an LPTB tribunal at which the conductor we saw earlier has a ridiculous passenger complaint upheld against him and is fined. There follows a scene between him and his wife; the conductor is complaining bitterly while she is pressing him to do something about it, why doesn't he get his money's worth from his union dues.

This succession of short scenes of compressed dialogue continues at the same rapid rate as we learn the effects of the LPTB arrangements on the public. A projection of an LPTB advertisement from the Daily Herald of April 1936: 'London prefers the queue. The English generally have preferred it. The national quality of order and fairness finds public form in the queue... London Transport perceives its value and instructs its staff to form queues at hundreds of points.' This blacks out to a scene of a bus queue which includes a busman's wife:

Conductor (off): Three inside. Five on top.
That's all thank you. Sorry
Ma, don't blame me. Plenty
more behind. (bus moves off).
Woman: Unlucky again. Lord, my feet.
Man: Hullo, Charlie, how's the
Aldgate Queue Old Comrades'
Association?
Charlie: Hullo, Joe. Association's
getting out of hand, mate,
Too big. I'm trying to
commercialize it.
Typist: I don't see anything funny
about it. I've been waiting
nearly twenty minutes and the
cold's come right through my
shoes. Buses!
Charlie: Don't worry, dearie. I've got
the bootmaker across the road
to put up a sign. There, you
can see it from here (points
across audience): 'Boots
repaired while you wait'!

The conversation continues with more complaints about the service, for which transport workers are blamed. The busman's wife defends them and places the blame on the Board; she argues that they should fight for the London County Council to take it over and run transport in a capital for its people. This in turn cuts to the dissatisfaction of the busmen, a scene introduced by the Voice's account of how the new pace of work, traffic congestion and disciplinary measure have led to pressure

for a new agreement on conditions. In this long scene the busmen eventually decide to send a resolution pressing for the negotiation of a seven-hour day to the union Executive. Another part of the stage is illuminated to show the Executive meeting in progress, which the men watch. Actual speeches are quoted, while the Voice describes how the months of 1935, 1936 and 1937 go by without result and the men grow more frustrated. Eventually they vote in favour of the rank and file policy of granting negotiating power to the Central Bus Committee; the Executive reports the Board's refusal to accept new terms, despite the union's compromise claim of seven and a half hours. Again with characters quoting from recorded speeches and resolutions, and actors placed amongst the audience to involve them in the 'meeting', the vote for strike action is overwhelmingly carried. Finally the narrator informs us that the Executive has assented and granted plenary powers to the London bus section of the TGWU; the strike is on, under rank and file control.

The proceeding of the Board of Inquiry into the dispute are shown in an episode where again the action comprises representations of the figures involved and the dialogue is selected from transcripts of statements. 'Ernest Bevin' and two of the busmen shown earlier state their case and are cross-examined; this provides them with the opportunity to expand on their working conditions and the background of their demands. In addition a doctor, witness for the union, describes in detail how he was dealt with the medical consequences of the busmen's work for several years, and how 60% of LPTB employees are dismissed due to ill health at an average age of forty-six. Nevertheless the Board rejects the medical evidence and refuses the union's claim on grounds of cost.

We now move to several short scenes designed to demonstrate the attitude and nature of the press during the dispute. First we see the 'Shark' dictating as he tickles the neck of the secretary sitting on his knee:

The calmness comma even cheerfulness comma with which Londoners are facing the discomforts caused by the bus strike suggests there is much sympathy for the men's claim paragraph ... the public comma it is hoped comma will not allow its judgement to be inflamed by such phrases as quote holding the capital to ransom quote...

From this extract from the press coverage the scene switches to a reporter interviewing a busman's wife; again, this is an opportunity to present the men's view of their hours, conditions and the effect on their family lives. The attitude of the press shifts with new developments. As the Voice informs us that the union delegate conference has rejected the Board's terms and demanded that the tram and trolleybus section be called out in sympathy (which the Executive has refused to do), we are shown the Vice-President of the Board chatting and shaking hands with a group of journalists, including the 'Shark'...

1st Secretary: Here's a good line from the 'Post'. 'Thousands of workers have trudged many miles at the instance of men better off, in many cases, than themselves ... the dispute should have been settled by negotiation and not by making life a burden for the public.'

Shark: Not direct enough. Take this down. 'The public prides itself on its forbearance and good humour under adversity... some sympathy was due to the busmen. Let the strikers now reciprocate that sympathy. The Board is not suffering from their action; the public, which is the innocent

party, is ... Surely the
busmen, demanding justice
for themselves, will not
withhold it from others?'

This blacks out to a hospital ward where we learn that one of the principal busmen from earlier episodes is seriously ill. The scene works by dialogue between the patient's wife and her friends at home, interspersed with music and adagio verses spoken by offstage voices. In marked contrast to the cynicism of the 'Shark', when a section of the stage is spot-lit to reveal a nurse by a hospital bed, we hear the dying man's message of encouragement to his workmates.

There follows a rapid succession of short pieces designed to convey a sense of events moving, moving to a head - a representation of tightly compressed passengers on the tube, the increasingly vehement hostility of the press, complaints from the public but the busmen still solid, confusion amongst commuters as to what will happen now:

- 1: It depends on the tram men now.
- 2: And the trolleybus men.
- 3: And the Underground.
- 4: That's another union. They won't.
- 5: They're apathetic.
- 6: If the tram and trolley buses struck - my God!
- 7: My paper says they will.
- 8: My paper says they won't.
- 4: My paper says the busmen are going back.
- 2: My paper says they're not.
- 8: My paper says ...
My paper says ...
My paper says ...

This last scene is taken over by the 'Voice' introducing the meeting of the London Trams Council at which delegates from the Central Bus Committee put the case for sympathetic strike action. Again the arguments heard are those voiced at the actual meeting:

that the busmen's strike was official, yet here other members of the same union were in effect doing their work. Although the Executive had ruled that the tram and trolley agreements had not been broken, the Board had in fact done so by laying the extra work on them. But against this is the reluctance to ignore the Executive and strike unofficially, with no strike pay and the hostility of the press and public. The trams Council decides against extending the strike on unofficial lines; even an addendum criticizing the Executive is rejected, leaving the busmen on their own.

This slowly fades to a busmens' social - apparently just after a performance of Waiting for Lefty - when during the singing a busman arrives through the audience with the news that the Executive has accepted the Board's terms, withdrawn plenary powers from the bus section, and that the strike is over.

Blackout. Silence.

Voice: To cover the shame of this tragic farce, the Executive Council of the TGWU searched for a scapegoat. They found one in the busman's rank and file movement. On June 4th, the Executive instructed the General Purposes Committee to investigate unofficial movements within the union. After three days inquiry, seven men were accused of having behaved in a way that was contrary to the interests of the union.

The rank and file leaders state their case before the union inquiry, and with it a scathing attack on the Executive. Quoting, in fact from transcripts, the characters point out their impeccable records of union work, how the strike had been forced on the union by LPTB policies; that the strike had been official, as had been the granting of plenary powers; their propaganda

had aimed to maintain unity. Nevertheless:

Voice: On July 12th, the General Purposes Committee issued the following recommendations - thus becoming judges: that Bros. Papworth, Payne and Jones be forthwith expelled from the union on the ground that their continued membership would constitute a danger to the stability of the union; that Bros. Haywards, Sharkey, Wate and Gravitz be debarred from holding office in the union until the expiration of two years. At a meeting which lasted exactly 49 minutes the Executive accepted the recommendations.

Finally the busmen we saw in the opening scenes discuss their next move. Some argue for a breakaway union to represent only busmen: another successfully moves that they remain in the TGWU, fight for the re-instatement of their leaders and against both the Board and the Executive. Thus the play concludes with the defeat of the strike and the sense of the need to carry on.

The structure of Busmen thus consists of, essentially, an interplay between factual material and fictional constructions. Five central scenes show actual events in which representations of real people engage in a factually verifiable dialogue. Although a matter of record, these speeches are selected and edited to provide an essential point only. They can also be structural devices to permit direct statements of fact and political line to be plausibly made within the action, as in the proceedings of the inquiry into the dispute. In each case this is immediately followed by non-factual but typical situations involving ordinary people, their predicaments and reactions to what has gone before. This establishes a close juxtaposition between cause and effect, between public events and private response.

This allows for sharp contrasts, obvious in the case of the press and the deathbed, but on a more fundamental level as well, since we switch from the formalized, legalistic discourse of the politician and the trades union official, the moralizing of the press or the dry statement of fact to the sardonic, direct and passionate speech of the busmen and their families, engaging our sympathy and partisanship.

The pace of the play is a means to create impact; each short scene makes the point it contains and is immediately replaced by the next. One point may be returned to, the press for example, but it is never allowed to be diffused through continuation over several scenes. A marked increase in tempo - a succession of an impression of confusion and the acceleration of events. By such means Busmen attempts an agitational theatrical documentary.

Its politics were obviously welcomed by Left Review, which commented that it had 'challenged the theatre to turn to the world of actuality, to the shifting scenes of the class war, the everabiding dramatic reality of our capitalist civilization'. Likewise Tribune, which also stressed the immediate verifiability of the material, the absence of statements unsubstantiated by factual evidence. Other reviews were critical of the staging, notably the documentarist Paul Rotha who had had experience of the American Living Newspapers. He found that 'the relation between the Voice and the stage action is ill-established, the continuity is lazy; the script could stand cutting'. The Spectator found 'little theatrical effect' and the play 'too long and doomed by its subject matter to end in anti-climax'. Nevertheless both these critics were also encouraging, and attracted by the potential of the medium; Tribune also considered

that 'this special kind of dramatic reporting has endless possibilities, opening up an entirely new field of theatrical technique'.⁽²⁹⁾

These possibilities were discussed at length in the journal New Theatre. It concluded that Busmen was a 'prototype for other related questions and problems of a social character with which it has hitherto been impossible to deal, owing to the difficulty of finding a suitable technique for the adequate expression of the theme'. The suitable technique was located for example in the production's freedom from the usual limits on the number of scenes', through its use of constructional sets on different levels, with parts of the stage alternately spot-lit or blacked out. this, it was argued, facilitated scene changes to ensure 'a cinematic continuity of production'; the performance techniques of Busmen could therefore 'exploit the possibilities of filmic writing'.⁽³⁰⁾

Contrasts between this 'filmic writing' and the documentary film of the time will be made below, but it is important to register that the stage techniques of Busmen employed innovations which were entirely unknown to the commercial theatre. All the reviews quoted were quick to draw comparisons with the American March of Time newsreels, which according to Fielding (1972) used current footage, archive material and the re-enactment of events to clarify or dramatize a factually anchored narrative. The use of the Voice was similarly compared to the staccato commentary used in the March of Time series, which openly editorialized its socially investigative stance. However, in theatrical terms the influences on Busmen went beyond both this and the Federal Theatre Project.

In the early 1930s Unity producers Andre Van Gyseghem and Herbert Marshall had worked in the Soviet Union, with Meyerhold, Piscator, and the former with Nikolai Okhlopkov's Realistic Theatre. Van Gyseghem's later book on the Soviet Theatre discusses Okhlopkov's statement of theatrical principles: how in his theatre the rotation of scenes or episodes was replaced by raised montage, with the action transferable from different stage sets at any time within the episode. Instead of 'photographic naturalism' insisting on details, the scene of action is merely outlined, using only essentials and simple but clear suggestion. By these means the realism of the theatre is asserted 'through theatrical means, appealing to the imagination of the spectator and at the same time providing it with a powerful stimulus'. Van Gyseghem commented that within these principles the author is free of the three-or four-act play convention, able to clarify or intensify a theme by interpolating scenes of only two or three lines, possibly set in different locales from preceding and subsequent scenes (1943 p.193-196). The film maker Basil Wright had also reported on Okhlopkov's theatricalization of film technique ⁽³¹⁾ and the Russian producer was also interviewed by Herbert Marshall in 1939. ⁽³²⁾ That year also saw an article by Van Gyseghem on the 'Realistic Theatre' in Penguin New Writing, again explaining these principles.

Clearly not every aspect of Okhlopkov's principles were incorporated into Busmen, and nor did the production and the resources behind it approach either this standard or that of the American Living Newspapers. Nevertheless it is also clear, for example in the essential outlines of scene action, the use of spotlights and multi-levelled sets, and the purpose of the projections and narrator, that Unity was employing concepts

earlier developed by European revolutionary artists. These concepts had been reduced by this time in the Soviet Union, under Stalinism, to the staging of safely traditional material, but Unity was able to use them in the context in which they had been originally devised.

This interesting attempt should be seen largely in terms of potential, however. R. Vernon Beste was to write later, during the war, that during the play's production the strike was over and the issue no longer current:

It was Dead History rather than a Living Newspaper. (33)

Such a charge could not be made against Crisis:Czechoslovakia, the Living Newspaper Unity produced as international politics finally dominated the end of the decade. As Miliband catalogues:

In the face of the labour Party's determined disapproval, the campaign for a Popular Front rapidly lost momentum. In June 1938, a resolution in favour of the United Peace Alliance, sponsored by the Co-Operative Party, was defeated at the Annual Co-Operative Congress - by 4,492,000 votes to 2,382,000; it was similarly turned down by the National Conference of Labour Women, and the Conference of the National Union of Railwaymen also voted against it by sixty-two votes to eighteen the same month. A few months later came Munich. (1979 p.259).

'Munich' was an event which was symbolic; demonstrating for many at the time the desperate need for an international united front, with the Soviet Union, against the threat of fascism and war and also the quiescent role of the British establishment in the face of Nazi ambitions.

Branson and Heinemann have described the progress of events:

Throughout the spring and summer of 1938 Hitler, who had already arrested Austria, had been putting pressure on Czechoslovakia, using the German minority in the Czech Sudetenland as a pretext. During August and early September the threats were mounting. The Czechs, however, were powerfully armed ... and ... had a mutual assistance pact with both France and Russia. By mid-September the French cabinet was nervously debating whether to fulfil France's obligations to Czechoslovakia if the latter was attacked by Germany.

It was this point on 15th September that Prime Minister Chamberlain flew to see Hitler at Berchtesgaden amid the congratulations of most of the British press, which emphasized that he was sixty-nine and had never flown before. When he returned Chamberlain had discussions with the French, ostentatiously excluding the Russians who had continued to declare that they would fulfil their obligations to the Czechs if the French did so too. A few days later it emerged bit by bit that there was an Anglo-French Plan to transfer great areas of Czechoslovakia to Germany, and that, moreover, irresistible pressures had been put upon the Czechs to accept this proposal. (op. cit. p.344)

During the next few weeks the labour movement, with its somewhat faltering leadership, launched a 'Stand by the Czechs' campaign. Three thousand meetings were organised all over the country, and the Left Book Club mobilised its members to distribute two and a half million leaflets condemning the Anglo-French Plan. The Czech forces moved on alert as Chamberlain flew to Hitler at Godesberg only to have the Plan rejected. At home war was appearing certain:

Loud-speaker vans were touring the streets telling people where to go for gas-masks; trenches were dug in the parks; the air was thick with announcements - that the Navy was being mobilised, that fifty million ration cards were ready, that

there were plans to evacuate schoolchildren. And Air-Raid Precaution volunteers ... found themselves called upon to work non-stop handing out gas-masks to the millions now queueing up (ibid. p.347)

But war was merely postponed, of course; Chamberlain flew to Hitler in Munich at the end of September and on his return made his now notorious declaration of 'peace in our time'. Hitler had obtained all the Czech territories, together with the defence installations, he had demanded.

During these weeks Unity Theatre produced Crisis - Czechoslovakia. After the war Montagu Slater recalled these circumstances:

On the day before Neville Chamberlain flew to Munich to give Czechoslovakia to Hitler, I remember driving into town wondering in a sort of daze why there was so much luggage on the cars. In the West End there was a stealthy quiet and people were digging trenches in the parks. The upper income brackets were panicking and evacuating their families. In the evening Neville Chamberlain delivered himself of a broadcast prophesying war. After the broadcast a bunch of us sat up all night writing a so-called Living Newspaper on Czechoslovakia for Unity theatre. (34)

Unity had issued an appeal to the theatrical profession for help to produce a play 'which can make a powerful contribution to peace', 'give a timely presentation of the facts and make a plea for a firm stand by the democratic countries to save peace'. Crisis - Czechoslovakia was conceived, written, rehearsed and premiered inside forty-eight hours, with scripts ready for actors arriving straight from work so they were virtually reading their lines and creating, according to Page (op. cit. p.64), light cues on the spot and new lines to cover new headlines and events. It opened up on the night Chamberlain

flew to Munich.

A producer's text (35) of this unpublished script remains and can indicate how this Living Newspaper worked. The play opens strikingly with flash and noise, voices off-stage calling or whispering in frightened bewilderment 'War? Peace? War!' cutting to an actual speech from Hitler announcing the ambitions of the Nazi state world-wide. This then switches from public events to the effects of these international tensions on a family. An A.R.P. Warden is visiting them to distribute and demonstrate their gas-masks.

Warden: Now try yours Mrs ... (She puts it on). Oh, now here's your son. I daresay he'll be using a service pattern if the fun starts.
Woman: I don't like it.
Girl: Don't be silly Ma.
Woman: It makes you feel he was here already.
Girl: Who?
Woman: 'Itler.'

The Warden ('Don't you worry, we've got a good Prime Minister. He's looking after it') argues with the son over it all, but these Chamberlain apologetics are interrupted by the Voice of the Living Newspaper, a disembodied comment from a megaphone. It says:

Voice of LN: You have spoken of War and the need to be prepared, yes. But you have given a feeling of hopelessness which is not true. War can be stopped. Not by spreading panic and dread of war but by truth. Democracy is strong! Together, the peoples of democratic countries are a force no bullying dictator can dare attack. Look!

A slow-fade-out then raise shows-on either side of the stage people representing countries; on the left the democracies

including Russia and Republican Spain, on the right the fascist states of Germany, Italy and Japan. Each 'country' carries a placard of proportionate size to its military strength and showing military details. 'Britain' vacillates in the centres. 'Czechoslovakia' points out that in May 1938 a Nazi mobilisation for a march on Prague had been thwarted by promises of French and Russian support, and this proves that democratic unity is unbreakable by fascist force. In reply 'Germany' points to her invisible friends, particularly strong in Britain. To illustrate this point a swift scene again splits the stage into two parts, one showing a British diplomat in earnest conversation at a table, drinking in the words of a gesticulating Nazi; the other part then shows two reporters attempting to get information on the important guests at a week-end party at Cliveden House, home of the Astors and headquarters of British appeasement. Information they could never publish in the British press.

Already therefore a framework of essential points has been laid down - war is not inevitable, concerted action by democratic states including Russia can stop the fascists, but in Britain there are entrenched vested interests liable to prevent this, with full media support.

A series of short scenes are then used to convey the progress of events, and public reactions, with the use of dialogue from actual B.B.C. news broadcasts ('this Peace flight, the first flight of our 69 year old Premier, has begun. We wish him God Speed') the Voice of the Living Newspaper as commentator and individual voices from a chorus picked out by spotlight. A crescendo of fast moving events climaxes in the Anglo-French Plan which is rejected (following a stage discussion, also,

by a Czech family scene) by the Czechs - 'You can't keep the people down. It doesn't seem as hopeless now'.

Mobilisation, queues for gas masks and trench digging, two gentlemen in a Conservative Club hoping Chamberlain can coerce the Czechs into submission and ally with Hitler against Russia.

Voice: Which side does the British Government favour? Look at its record.

SCENE: A man in a morning coat sitting at a small table centre, Union Jack on the table. Behind him a map of the world.

ENTER a man carrying Japanese flag.

Voice: MANCHURIA, seven years ago, 1931.

Jap: Manchuria is a prize we need, Is your approval guaranteed?

Britain: The League of course will not approve But we shall not oppose the move.

(Jap plants flag on Manchuria on the map and exit, rubbing hands).

Voice: Results to-day - the invasion of China. then - ABYSSINIA, four years ago 1934

ENTER: Man with an Italian flag.

Italian: To Abyssinia we intend Our Roman Empire to extend.

Britain: Like gentlemen, let's both agree To share the Mediterranean sea.

(They shake hands. Italy plants flag on Abyssinia and exit).

Voice: To-day: the invasion of Spain. What has the British government done for Spain?

ENTER: German and Italian.

German: It is our sacred obligation to clear of Reds the Spanish nation.

Italian: Yes even if it means we must exterminate the population.

Britain: You have my fullest sympathy But do not let my people see Here! take this screen, it will ensure That you are not involved in war.

(gives them a screen marked NON-INTERVENTION PACT behind which they march off.)

This continues until the present crisis, the political chronology thus represented in a symbolic, almost cartoon form.

Finally:

Voice: And so to-day, having received every encouragement to its threats of war, the German dictatorship threatens Czechoslovakia, the stronghold of democracy in Europe. Who is guilty of giving this encouragement? Who are the enemies of peace and democracy in Britain? (During this speech a semi-circular chorus, which up to now has stood outside the light, closes in around the man at the table.)

CHORUS: 1: You betrayed China to the Japanese aggressors.
2: You betrayed Abyssinia to the Fascist invader.
3: You betrayed the people of Spain and Austria.
4: And did your best to give away Czechoslovakia.
5: Your gentlemanly pacts have endangered the safety of our Empire.
6: You have taken no adequate measures for the protection of your own people.
7: You have surrendered every principle of collective security.
8: You have posed as the dove of peace.
9: And have acted as the herald of war.
10: You are the enemy within our gates.
11: You are the agent of fascism in this country.

ALL: Peace can still be saved, but only when the enemies of the people are rooted out. Peace can still be ensured, when the people of the world act in unity for freedom and democracy.

The very immediacy of the conditions of production of this play imposed a number of limitations which those involved were acutely aware of, as this post-war comment, again from Montagu Slater, reveals:

I still remember one of the writers pinning a little notice to his chest, "Please call me at 7.30", and going to sleep in a chair at 4 a.m; but on stage two days later the piece looked like what it was: too much of a rush job, and the fun was mostly backstage. (36)

Thus the work of London Unity was twofold: providing plays for its own theatre and outside of it for labour movement and 'progressive' venues. This could be directly agitational, as we have seen in the performances of Lefty for striking busmen, and also quick responses to events on tour were possible, as Bram Bootman recalls:

We did another tour in 1938 of Rehearsal and Plant in the Sun, the shows and our accommodation, when we weren't living in a coach it was this time, being booked through the Co-Op Guild and the Left Book Club. This all helped to start off some Left Book Club Theatre Guilds. When we got to Haworth there was a strike on at the mine. So for the miners we did Plant in the Sun in the market place at Haworth. We got stopped by the police but we were able to show them the licence we had from the Lord Chamberlain, it was pretty well irrelevant for that performance but it really impressed them. I think it was on that same tour, or certainly around that time, one of our shows was interrupted by the first testing of air-raid sirens, adding of course to the whole effect. (37).

At the London theatre contacts with union branch secretaries, particularly with the AEU and the TGWU, resulted in arrangements for the block booking of seats by their members at reduced rates. However it has already been suggested that its audiences were by no means exclusively drawn from organised labour, as proved to be the case when the black American singer Paul Robeson decided to work with Unity. Looking for a role to suit his developing politics Robeson played the lead in Plant in the Sun for six weeks, as a union organiser involved in a sit-down strike.

Although Unity made a point of avoiding any 'star' system and never mentioned names in a programme (partly on principle and partly because parts would sometimes have to be played by different actors without notice, due to working hours or the pressure of other commitments) it is recalled that Robeson's

involvement carried some side effects:

It really changed our audiences, people were falling over themselves to see what we were doing. There were always crowds around the stage door wanting to see Paul and to get his autograph. There were stories about tickets changing hands at black market prices for the West Enders who were coming along to see Paul ... but he was a beautiful man, a really fantastic character, he always insisted on keeping the democratic organisation going and he'd always take his turn to sweep up and do the other chores after a show. (38)

Thus in two or three years Unity had succeeded in establishing a niche both in the political campaigning world of the labour movement and in the theatre world. As Page notes, this is reflected in the composition of the fourteen-man General Council:

Gollanz, Sean O'Casey and Robeson all became members of the fourteen man General Council, together with four politicians (Sir Stafford Cripps, D.N. Pritt, G.R. Strauss and Joseph Reeves), three directors (Michael St. Denis, Tyrone Guthrie and Maurice Browne), two actors (Miles Malleson and Sir Lewis Casson), a composer (Alan Bush), and Professor Harold Laski. H.G. Wells signed as the first life member. (op. cit. p.63).

Another indicator of the development, theatrical, political and in terms of situation within events, of Unity lies in its comic repertoire. Both at the theatre and again in tours and outside performances skits, burlesques and comic forms were employed and four at least re-pay some examination.

The interest aroused by Waiting for Lefty had caused it to be reviewed in the TGWU journal by two London cab-drivers,

Herbert Hodge and Buckley Roberts. Their interest continued and they offered Unity a play they had devised themselves, Where's that Bomb? which was produced in 1936 by John Allen.

It opens (39) with Joe Dexter, whom we learn is an aero-engine fitter lately sacked for publishing his poetry in the 'Weekly Worker'. He is something of a working-class poet starving in his garret; his landlady, with her own down to earth perspective on life, wages and poets, shows in a visitor - smart suit, attache case and genteel manner. He is acting on behalf of 'The British Patriots Propaganda Association, of Whitehall', and has a proposition for Joe. First the background:

Gentleman: Well - you probably know that our Association makes it its business to see that the entertainment and education of the people of this country is conducted along the right lines. We keep an eye on everything - the Press, the Cinema, the Theatre, the Wireless, the Schools and the Church ... so that wherever a man may be, out of doors or indoors; working, worshipping, playing, or even sitting in his own home, he is continually being guided along the right lines, and safeguarded against the subversive practice of thinking for himself.

But the organisation is nevertheless still far from perfect:

Gentleman: ... There is one door which still remains closed to us. There is one place where a man can sit in absolute solitude, and think his own thoughts without interruption; one place where, up to the present, we have been unable to get at him.

Joe
(eagerly): Where's that?

Gentleman
(impressively): The water closet.

Joe (stares a moment uncomprehending): The bog!
Why of course! (Doubles up with laughter) The
last stronghold of freedom!

Gentle man

(reproachfully): It's no laughing matter.
A man goes in, locks the
door, sits down, and is
absolutely alone. There he
may think what he likes, say
what he likes, and do what
he likes - with no one at all
to advise him, or guide him,
or to overlook him. He is as
free as if he were on a desert
island. And such freedom is
dangerous. For all we know,
water closets may be hotbeds of
revolution, breeding - places
of revolt, festering sores in an
otherwise healthy, non-thinking
nation.

A solution has been found both to this problem and to that
of the amount of factory time workers spend there (despite the
fact that some progressive employers in the North have installed
water closet clocks and put iron spikes in the back of the seats).
Every time a piece of toilet paper is pulled off a machine will
play the national anthem, and on each piece will be printed a
little verse or story, 'designed to instil into the mind of the
worker his duty to his employer, his country, and the dreadful
danger of thinking for himself'. They would like Joe to write
these little pieces.

Before Joe can speak his landlady shows in a series of more
visitors, all hire purchase collectors come to collect, in
default of payment, his typewriter, his furniture and the coat off
his back. Thus his mind is made for him and he accepts the job;
Act Two finds it completed, the toilet paper story written, and
Joe off to bed.

But Joe is awakened:

In lurid red glow, a satanic figure
manifests itself, dressed in top hat
and frock coat, it has an enormous belly,
hooves in place of feet, a forked tail,
and horns projecting on either side of
head. It carries a bulging money bag
in its hand.

This is Money-Power, evil incarnate, whom all men serve and who
now has abandoned buying souls for hiring them. He already
controls Joe's story characters whom he can summon to life, and
does so, drilling the obedient 'Heroes of the Bog' on the stage.
A blond, ineffectual young hero, a grey haired old lady, the
hero's mother:

Mother: I am his mother - Thank God he's pure
Un-British boys I can't endure.
His wage is small, our home is mean
But I know my place, I'm sweet, serene.
And though it's a struggle, how e'er
I manage it.
What is to be will be, and nothing can't
change it.
So what if my roof's like a sieve when
it rains?
I've a wonderful son, so I never
complains

A young maiden, the Boss's daughter, and a sinister, bearded
figure who slinks furtively on stage carrying a bomb:

Fourth
Figure: I'm a Red - I'm a Red,
An injurious, furious Red.
I murder and pillage in city
and village,
the world isn't safe till I'm
dead.
For I'm a Red ferociousist,
I am;
A confiscating Socialist,
I am;
With my Russian gold I caper,

I seduce your wife and rape 'er,
It's true - It's in the paper!
I'm a Red.

Joe's story - 'Love Will Find a Way or The Strike That Failed - Complete Toilet Roll Romance' - then unfolds, with the title, plot, and characterisation of a 'hiss the villain' melodrama. Poor Mrs Dubb's son Henry has been blackmailed by the Bolshie into joining the party and formenting a strike at the works owned by Money Power. He meets the Boss's daughter whilst she is distributing soup and blankets to the starving families of the strikers and explains what has happened, after some bandiage - 'Do not Miranda me! My name is too noble to dwell upon the chapped lips of a common striker!' 'Alas! I struck against my will! The B-Bolshie made me! (strikes his chest)'. Her solution is that Henry forms a company union and if needed she will turn the tables on the blackmailing Bolshie by marrying Henry. The company unions' demands, for double the hours, half the pay and no holidays are granted, with a shout of 'Die, Villain!' the Bolshie is slain attempting to abduct Miranda, and the story ends with a docile workforce, the young couple married and Henry in the Territorials.

But at this the characters revolt and turn on Money Power, rejecting their acquiescent roles and stereotyped identities, with Joe mounting the attack on what they represent:

Money-Power: Yes, but hang it all! You can't get along without me, you know. If it wasn't for me you'd still be living in the tree-tops or in caves. I've given man an incentive (shakes money bag) to delve and build, to cultivate and conquer. Capitalism has transformed the world from savagery to civilization.

Joe: Capitalism makes men prefer savagery.
Your civilization is the civilization
of the jungle. Look at the League of
Nations!

The ensuing struggle is interrupted by Joe's landlady and the arrival of the hire purchase collectors; they are paid off by the Gentleman from the Patriots Propaganda Association but Joe finally refuses to co-operate:

Joe: Oh, you fool! Why come to me for
your toilet paper propaganda - why
come to me? Go to the Press Lords
of Fleet Street. They've been
printing the workers' toilet paper
for years.

First performed in 1936 and revived in 1938 Where's That Bomb?, as will be seen, formed part of the repertoire of other socialist theatre groups up to the war. The published edition came complete with stage notes and advice from the original producer, John Allen, aimed specifically at amateur groups and inexperienced actors. They also give clues to features of the Unity production, such as the use of a stage trap door and medieval devil's mask for Money Power, and offer some points on the form of the play:

Let me say in conclusion that whatever the literary merits of this play, its theatrical qualities make it a first-class exercise for producers and actors - It uses many different conventions and theatrical forms, naturalism, satire, burlesque, drama and so on; and none of them must be shirked. The burlesque must be broad, the mime must be clear, and the naturalistic passages natural. The line of the play is strong and simple, and the acting must be the same.

Left Review (40) praised the 'splendid charade', 'theatrical effect' and 'racy gusto' of the play, and an article by John Allen defended the play against possible, and real, criticisms of the play by the Left:

Many people think that the humour of such a play as Where's That Bomb? is so broad and vigorous that it blunts the edge of its purpose, distracting attention from the fierce attack on capitalist misconceptions which is the play's real subject. Others do not agree: for whether you like it or not, it is the humour of The Bomb that draws people in such numbers to see it, and unless you succeed in getting people into your theatre you thunder against capitalism in vain. (1937A p.33)

The Fall of the House of Slusher (41) a collectively written comic operetta, was produced in 1937 and again a year later. It is, in fact, a compilation of actual former Workers Theatre Movement material, in form and content, and only slightly more ambitious in length and scope. Sir Sam Slusher, complete with top hat and cigar, learns of the distress of one of his underlings:

Manager: The economic situation
 Is causing consternation
 They've shown their indignation
 By starting first on me.
 Please save the situation
 And stop their agitation
 Save me from mutilation
 Sir Slusher, hear my plea.

Wrapped up in this problem Slusher falls asleep, and there follows a dream sequence featuring Slusher, his manager and a chorus miming the actions of a workforce. This is the Workers' Theatre Movement sketch Love in Industry of four or five years earlier:

Slusher: (tune:
Breakaway):

Let's do that twelve hour
day!
Of course you'll get less
pay
And that you'll only get by
and by.
Don't worry boys here's good
news
It's a packet of joy for you -
A nice wage cut - two more
hours -
You'll work right through!

It continues along the lines described in the section on the WTM above, and with the same conclusion to this part('But it's only a beautiful picture, in a beautiful golden frame') and Slusher must rely on other methods to win through.

He summons his friends - the Press, the Armed Forces and the Politician - to discuss how to preserve himself; in verse, they cover cuts in the dole, speed-up and wage restraint, more camps for the unemployed, sugared by 'press dope', royal weddings and patriotism. But this is not enough: to defend Slusher against socialism - and they recount in horror the details of the Soviet Union - the only option is to have 'another little war'. Enthusiasm all round, but the Chorus re-enters and their enemies are soon dispersed:

Slusher: Now they've joined the Unity
That's the end of you and me
Chorus: No longer you're the great I am
Go on beat it, get out, scram.
(exit Slusher and 3)

They finish with another WTM - style song:

Chorus: We won't be beat
And we won't retreat
And we'll build a workers' state
before we die
We'll all unite
In the common fight

And we'll win - or else we'll
know the reason why ...
... Fellow workers come along
and we'll build a workers' state
before we die.

To repeat, this piece, performed up to the end of 1938 at least
at labour movement venues, with apparently similar works as
The Case of the Baffled Boss, appears to be classic WTM.

Herbert Hodge, the taxi-driving author of Where's That Bomb,
went on to write a comic satire on imperialism for Unity in
1937, Cannibal Carnival. Described as a 'theatrical cartoon',
an extract was published in 1938, offering a working impression. (42)

The curtain rises on a desert island, dominated by a tall tree
and a large rock, and three ship wrecked Englishmen:

Bogus the Bishop of Belgravia, dressed in
clerical collar, gaiters, and little else,
Hungry Joe, a policeman with helmet, boots,
truncheon and a grass skirt; and Mr Crabbe,
financier, scantily dressed but for frock
coat and clinking money-bag. They have
civilised the local natives from their
primitive communism (through a combination
of the Bishop's eloquence and the police
truncheon) so that they now worship Mr Crabbe.
Soon a new order complete with traffic chaos,
prostitution and unemployment has been laid
down; 'It's positively marvellous! Just
like dear old England!'

But just like in dear old England unemployment and wage cutting
cause restlessness amongst the natives. What can be done?

Bogus (pacing also): What about a tattoo?
Crabbe: Bunk!
Bogus: Or a Jubilee?
Crabbe: Played out.
Bogus: A war then. A christian
crusade, I mean.

Crabbe: And arm all these savages!
Not likely! We've got no
newspapers to work 'em up to a
proper patriotism.
Bogus: Well - what else can we do?
A Test Match?
Crabbe: Bah! (suddenly stops) I know!
Bogus
(shocked): A what?
Crabbe: A vote, my boy. Democracy!
the right of every man to
choose his own tyrant.

He explains that by such a means the system can be maintained,
with the natives voting for either Crabbe or Bogus as
government and opposition. However Egbert, a native leader,
stands and is elected as a socialist leader and the new
government declares the breadfruit on the island's tree to be
the property of all. Reaction is swift:

Joe (mounting rock and donning wig):
Silence! The Supreme court declares
the new Act to be an infringement of
the sacred rights of property, and
therefore null and void!
Crabbe (mounting rock): The patriots in council
declare Egbert to be a Marxist, a Jew
and a traitor to his country. Parliament
is dissolved! Parliament is null and void!
(Fascist salute) Heil, Crabbe!
Bogus (mounting rock): The Church declares
Egbert to be Antichrist! (Fascist salute)
Heil, Crabbe!
Joe (donning helmet): The armed forces of
the Crown declare a state of emergency.
All civil rights abrogated. Martial law
proclaimed. (Fascist salute) Heil, Crabbe!

In this coup Egbert is arrested and the 'government' manage
to turn the violence of the natives against the Jews ('Huh!
the times they've saved us!') despite the fact there are none on
the island. Egbert at his execution however succeeds in making
Joe the Executioner 'come over all class conscious' and they
lead the natives in revolution; the curtain falls on a tribal
dance around Bogus and Crabbe in the traditional cooking pot.

Bram Bootman recalls that the staging of this 'theatrical cartoon' caused some gasps in the audience as on the small stage actors would seem to throng in large numbers through the device of shinning down the tree, disappearing around the back and shinning down again. (43) At this time, however, John Allen reported on problems audiences had experienced with the play:

Economic pressure necessitated the Unity Theatre Club producing this play before the production was properly "achieved" ... the whole style of the play was new; and because the production was not "achieved", many people who saw the play admired the acting and the decor, praised the production, and enormously enjoyed the writing, but, at the same time, were sincerely dissatisfied by the piece as a whole. Why, exactly, they could not say; and nor, as things were, could anybody else, not even the author or the producer ... And the moral? Simply that enormously more care must be given to a Left Wing production than to an orthodox one. (1937 B p.421)

The political atmosphere of the Munich crisis has already been described. One by-product was that Unity had attracted, through its appeal for theatre workers to assist with Crisis: Czechoslovakia and through the political lead given by the Communist Party, a group of new writers. One of them, Geoffrey Parsons, wrote after the war of the circumstances surrounding the conception of London Unity's most successful venture in the 1930s:

It's audiences consisted almost entirely of people who were already in favour of the progressive political policy of the theatre, and some of us were wondering whether we could find a way of using Unity's considerable acting talent in a more light-hearted manner, feeling that it might be possible to induce even our political opponents to come and be subjected to the rapier of wit, whereas they would not venture within reach of the battle-axe of realistic drama.

Eventually a meeting of writers was called, at which a great many wierd and wonderful theories were voiced about new theatrical forms, but nothing in the least concrete was forthcoming until a hitherto silent young man with a rather shrill voice said he thought it would be a good deal more practical if we were to adapt a traditional form to our own purposes. As a matter of fact, he went on, he had with him a rough outline of a political pantomime. Pantomime! Consternation! A decadent form! However the young man, a civil servant whose name was Robert Mitchell, proceeded to read his first draft of Babes in the Wood. After that there was nothing to argue about. It was merely a matter of getting it completed as soon as possible, and Berkeley Fase and I were deputed to supply suitable songs. (44)

This proved to be Unity's most ambitious project, as the author, Robert Mitchell, produced the play in such a way that 'every member of the large cast had to be duplicated so that we could be sure of a full complement of actors for every performance ... and conjured up voices from people who, for the most part, had previously only sung in the privacy of their own bathrooms.' (45) It was in fact a satiric rendering in pantomime terms of the progress of appeasement.

The plot and progress of a pantomime script does not exactly lend itself to the type of discussion possible with plays, especially when the use of song and chorus can be more important than the main action and set-piece digressions are routine. In Babes in the Wood (46) the 'Babes' represent Austria and Czechoslovakia who are being deprived of their lands and rights by the robber barons Hitt and Muss, accompanied by their Chorus of Stormtroopers. Hitt and Muss are aided and abetted by the Babes' Wicked Uncle, Chancellor Chamberstrain, encouraged by the Cliveden Set Chorus and the monarchy, King Eustace the Useless and the Queen. A struggle for the Babes' confidence takes

place between Fairy Wishfulfilment and the forces of the United Front, Robin Hood and Marion. Who can rout Hitt and Muss and expose Chancellor Chamberstrain? Who can show the Babes the way out of the wood?

Threatened by the Robbers and worried by their Wicked Uncle the Babes take refuge in the wood. Meanwhile Chamberstrain the Wicked Uncle, dressed as Neville Chamberlain complete with fishing rod and making a comic descent from an aircraft, explains his predicament:

Ch: It's like this - I've promised to be friends with this chap and let him have all he wants -
Hitt: Half the estate!
Ch: And I've promised this chap all he wants -
Muss: Half the estate!
Ch: And now I realise that if they both get what they want I shall get sweet fanny adams!
Fairy: Oh that is awkward - what did you wish for?
Ch: Anything to keep the Babes away from that Robin Hood fellow.
Hitt: I must have my demands -
Muss: We'd better find a plan to get hold of the Babes and the estate - we can always divide afterwards - we have nothing but friendship for you, Sir.
Ch: Very nice of you I'm sure. The thing is, how to get all the people on the estate to let us have it!
Hitt: That's easy - I'll go and take it!
Muss: Oh, that's no good you fool. Robin Hood's men would stop you.
Ch: I've got it - You threaten the Babes -
Muss: Me?
Ch: Yes you. Keep on threatening them until everybody is scared stiff - really scared stiff.
Muss: What then?
Ch: Then I'll step in as the kind Uncle and advise them to give in so as to save their lives.
Fairy: Good. Everybody wants peace. If you keep on threatening you'll get what you want in the end - peace at any price - I know humans - and I don't like Robin Hood or the Babes, they don't believe in fairies.

Hitt: I think the plan's a bit too
obvious myself - Suppose I threaten
you, too!

Ch: Me?

Hitt: Only in fun, of course.

Ch: You mean a frame-up?

Muss: Marvellous - then I can be consulted
as a kind uncle too and for the sake
of their lives we can SAVE the children
and get the estate.

Ch: Good. Now Fairy - you must do your
stuff - you get the peace at any price
idea going -

Fairy: Right oh -
I am the Fairy Wishfulfilment
Peace at any price I say
Let aggressors get their plunder,
Even if our children pay. (Exit)

Ch: That's all right then? You threaten,
I come as the angel of peace - you refuse -
muchee muchee scare - Muss joins in -
deadlock - more muchee scare and peace at
our price! Is that understood?

Hitt: Heil, Saviour!

Ch: Oh, that's alright. It wouldn't suit my
book at all to let the Babes get under
Robin Hood's influence!

But in Chamberstrain's absence Hitt and Muss reveal their true
natures and ambitions. We hear the Stormtroopers' Chorus:

We're following our leader and we don't know where
We don't know who we're shooting at and we don't
much care
But we know we've got to kill you though we don't
know why
But blood must flow and heads must roll and you
must die ...
... If you don't agree with us the way is plain to
see
For Reds like you we have a special form of third
degree ...

All Chamberstrain's actions must be vetted by the Cliveden Set,
elegant in evening dress and on friendly terms with the Robbers:

Quartet: We own the press and scatter
Confusion in the land
Reaction's fed and watered
By our exclusive band.
Dictators are our fancy
We think that Hitler's grand
And he admires our Nancy
The leader of our band

Britain's power and glory
Depends on us, you bet
Oh thank the Lord, thank the Lord
For the Cliveden Set ...

.....

We thank thee oh tradition
From which all good things flow
Our profit and our privilege
To thee alone we owe
For these our help we'll offer
On any foreign shore
To make the rich man richer
And keep the poor man poor.

Shaking hands with Chamberstrain the Cliveden Set grant their
seal of approval to his arrangements:

We thank thee oh our Chancellor
For everything you've done
For strengthening reactions aims
To keep us in the sun
Democracy's defeated, you've made the
perfect pact
And as for the workers' wages
They won't stay long intact.

Britain's power and glory
May shrink when Fascists pass
But thank the Lord, thank the Lord
We're still the upper class.

Almost as a side show to the progress of the main story are
various scenes featuring characters who comically reveal their
role in the stage action and, by extension, in the political
world outside it. The Queen and King Eustace the Useless, for
example, discuss at one point what they want in the land of
Wonderwhy. On the one hand:

King:	Peace on earth was my intention Peace with aggressors my contention!...
...	Not to mention non-intervention!
...King:	I'm only a figurehead wearing a crown
Queen:	Between you and me it is getting him down
King:	I talk to the people with my wireless set
Ch:	When I have dictated the message, you bet -
Robbers:	Provided it's passed by the Cliveden Set

But on the other the King has a taste for fairy stories, he even
prefers these to the newspapers, to work up the right kingly

atmosphere; why read about events in the press when you cannot influence them? The Queen though claims he can 'restore confidence' and pushes him on:

Queen: Come along now - we've got a lot
of work to do so put the fairy tales
away. We've got the infants' gas
mask parade at ten - girl guides gas
ramble at eleven -
King: I know, I know, and the launching of
the big bomber at twelve. I've
got it all down on my cuff.
Queen: (pushing him round and off) Then
finish your breakfast and hurry. Things
are getting very difficult.
King: You're telling me.

Also some romantic interest is provided by a boy and girl, the rejected in the land of Wonderwhy, whose song Love on the Dole (based, as Page op. cit. p.64) comments, on the title of Walter Greenwood's novel and a scene in Waiting for Lefty was recorded in its own right and proved popular:

Love on the dole
that's a luxury we can't afford
for they don't approve of love on the dole
On the unemployed assistance board.
We've no room of our own
There's nothing but the benches in the park
Where we can sit alone
And hold our hands and whisper in the dark
But we can't do the things that other lovers do
And its hard to live on nothing but dreams
When the things you dream can never come true
There's not much sense in life to us it seems
Funny romance.

The traditional pantomime Dame plays a strong part, commenting irreverently on both action and characters and pursuing her washing business in the Palace back yard. She sells the Daily Worker, sings caustic ditties about gas masks and air raid precautions and even functions as a narrative link. It is she who Robin Hood - wearing Russian costume - wins over to the idea of Unity in the common struggle against Chamberstrain and his

friends Hitt and Muss, providing the opportunity for a number of rousing audience - participation songs. 'Oh, dear, what can the matter be' provided the tune for a number of comments such as:

They promised us Peace but their word was
a faint one
They promised us Jobs but there jolly well
ain't none!
They promised us happiness - that was a
quaint one -
But nobody happens to care.

It is the Dame too who manages to rally the opposition:

Dame: It's the way you all go on letting
the Wicked Uncle have his own way.
Can't you see what's going on under
that umbrella of his?
He's after the Babes now and when
he's got them he'll be after me,
and what chance will you have on your
own? And that's not all. The Robbers
will soon be wanting his estates and
then he'll try to make us go and fight
for him while he and his wife move to
Finsbury, they know they'll be safe
there.

Robin: She's right. He daren't take us one
by one, we've got to get together now
and stop him.

Babes: D'you mean we aren't going to let him
turn us off the estate?

Dame: Of course that's what we mean.

Robin: He hasn't a chance if we all stand up to
him and what's more, if we get rid of the
Wicked Uncle the people will see we're on
their side and that we're able to help
them. Then it will be all up with the
Robbers too and we shall all be able to
live in peace and look after the estate
properly.

Dame: Now that's what I call a square deal.
We'll never get a deal of any sort from
him, all he can do is shuffle his cabinet.

Robin: Then it's all settled?

Dame: Yes, I'm off to tell the Wicked Uncle he
can go fishing and take that performing
privy seal with him.

Robin: First of all we must sign the petition
and get everyone who hates the Wicked
Uncle to sign it too....

...Chorus (sings): We're all working together now
We're all birds of a feather now

He's got no chance whatever now
We have united at last!

The boy and girl, after a traditional pantomime 'let them marry!' routine, join in too with the song Affiliate with Me by way of a marriage proposal:

This is the kind of meeting
That I'm not accustom-ed to
My nervous heart starts beating
Each time I'm alone with you
I want to put a motion
To this conference of two
I've got a sort of notion - that it
Won't be a surprise to you ...
... Without doubt the motion's carried and
We're no longer two
'Cos I agree
That you make me
Affiliate with you.

The audience joins in with a political chorus and the Robbers with Chamberstrain are driven off. As a finale all join in with the Unity March as a rousing climax:

Join in the song that'll show we're united
And mean to get Chamberlain out
Here is a song that says just what you're
thinking
So fall in behind us and shout
Come comrades sing with us
Join in the workers' chorus
Come comrades march with us
Victory lies before us ...
... Come comrades fight with us
Till hunger and injustice cease
Join the workers' fighting front
For liberty and peace.

When the curtain finally fell Robin Hood appeared on stage alone to make this appeal to the audience:

When strife disturbs and war corrupts an age
Keen satire is the business of the stage;
And this reflection of an earlier rhyme
Must serve to carry on our Pantomime.
Fantasy has served us, reality steps in
And here our appeals to your good hearts begin.
Things were never worse than now, democracy is
dead.

Behold the Fascist giant that has raised
its head.
You who love your fellow men, and for their
future care
Unite with us, the struggle for a better life
to share
When the curtain falls upon our pantomime
tonight
Join up with the workers in the social fight.
Help us to a fuller life, to a freedom that
is true,
This is Unity's appeal, to you, to you, to YOU.

Babes in the Wood was played by alternating casts six nights a week, and had, by the time it ended, 'played for 159 performances and been seen by over 48,000 people in the course of its six months' run ... it became world famous, with 73 domestic and foreign publications carrying features on it' and 'Chamberstrain' 'achieved the distinction of a full page close up as a picture of the week in the American magazine Life' (47)

Bram Bootman, who played King Eustace the Useless in one of the casts, recalls one of the main reasons for the play's success:

We had to rehearse and rehearse to get the songs right, they were written in a sort of Noel Coward vein, with the same carry-over lines. When Geoffrey came on to play Chamberlain, without warning he bounded on wearing these rabbit teeth and moustache and we collapsed. When the show opened - it's etched on my mind, November 12th 1938 - he came on backwards, came on with a fishing net, fishing was the big hobby him and the Astors were supposed to have, he turned round and gave that toothy grin and the whole show came to a standstill. It was impossible to say the next line for a while. The Cliveden Set, they were a really good quartette in top hats and evening dress, they stopped the show as well. It was biting satire and the audience just loved it. (48)

Similarly Geoffrey Parsons again later recorded this view:

It was the entrance of the Wicked Uncle that set things off. I have never heard such a roar

of astonished delight in any theatre as that which greeted his first appearance. I think I am right in saying that it was the first time for generations that any "living figure" had appeared on the stage; certainly any living Prime Minister. And suddenly there he was, the man of Munich himself. Not, indeed, the rather insignificant figure that we had seen in countless newsreels, but the gloriously absurd, bedraggled, umbrellaman of Low's caricatures, there in the flesh before us, waving a piece of paper and toothily grinning as he promised "Peace in our Time". Neville Chamberlain was a disaster for the country but he was a gift from the gods to Unity. Hardly a week went by without some particularly fatuous phrase issuing from that self-satisfied countenance, and all the plums found their way at once into our script. (49)

Page (op. cit. p.65) comments that outside the Left press the reviews were unflattering, but this contemporary one from Goronwy Rees confirms the impressions recalled above:

Mr Chamberlain, in his role as the Wicked Uncle, shows all those qualities which has so endeared him to the British public since his apotheosis at Berchtesgaden. Everything is there, the stringy neck, the protuberant slightly maniac eyes, the awkward gestures of the novice being groomed for stardom, the terrifying moments of inspiration and irrational triumph, the lapses into despondency and disillusion; wherever he appears the audience is transfixed by a horrible fascination. And again, the Fairy Wishfulfilment, with her slightly cracked, genteel voice, is a genuine creation of popular art; all the candied blessings of the Sunday newspapers are in her voice, all the awful abysses of nonsense in the unsteady legs. It is hard to make political satire at the present day, for the reality exceeds the wildest excesses of the satirist. He is apt to appear as a feeble wit following vainly in the rear of some gigantic jester. In the Uncle and the Fairy, the Unity Theatre has succeeded completely ... (1939 p.108)

These conditions of reception will be examined in more detail below, but it can clearly be registered here that Unity Theatre in Babes in the Wood staged the most effective piece of theatre satire in Britain for many years. Seen in the context of other comic works, indeed also of the topicality attempted by Crisis:

Czechoslovakia, Babes can be seen as a culmination of agitprop and 'theatrical cartooning', parodies of popular songs and events, immediacy and rallying cries, containing the best of the WTM tradition with the theatrical skill and ambition made possible by experience in wider forms; a synthesis, if that it may be called, made possible only by the licence allowed by the pantomime form.

Previous accounts of Unity Theatre in its pre-war period - Travis (op. cit.), Page (op. cit.), Clarke (1979) and, in passing, Samuel (op. cit.) and Stourac (op. cit.) have concentrated without exception on London Unity and ignored the regional groups. In fact socialist theatre was active, principally in the main urban areas, throughout the country at this time, as the following chapter on the Left Book Club Theatre Guild will show. Some recent work on particular groups is worth examination here, both for the light it will help to shed on the next chapter and on their relationships with the London centre, political activity and theatrical developments as a whole.

Angela Tuckett (1980) has given an account of the Bristol Unity Players, a group which both grew out of and changed direction from a Workers' Theatre Movement branch which had been active with the mass movement co-ordinated by the National Unemployed Workers Movement in Bristol between 1931 and 1933. A number of individuals interested in and with some knowledge of socialist theatre had found the work of the WTM fundamentally

unsatisfactory as they:

....found it intellectually unconvincing and dramatically ineffective, and that most discussion about the WTM was unhelpful abstract generalisation which failed to come to grips with play content or audience ... What was needed was a return to realism and representation on a straightforward but new basis, to give a lead on anti-fascist, anti-war and socialist ideas which people could feel as answering their own problems as they themselves saw them. (p.5)

Bristol Unity Players were formed in 1936, 'unity' referring both to the need for political unity in the struggle against fascism and war, and to the unity of the work-place based amateur dramatic groups who comprised the Players, and the unity of player and audience.

However the only working unity that the B.U.P. were apparently able to achieve was with the Co-Operative Society and local broad left and active Left Book Club, and the presence of Sir Stafford Cripps as M.P. for Bristol East; the local Labour Party supported the National Executive Committee in banning united front activities. This obviously imposed problems for a theatre group in which the prime movers were members of the CPGB or involved in its political approach, and who were seriously attempting to play to labour movement audiences. This probably conditioned the material B.U.P. could present: On Guard for Spain, Waiting for Lefty, A.R.P. and Bury the Dead; also The Fall of the House of Slusher and a 'growth of consciousness' play of their own devising, The Bulls See Red.

Importantly, the Bristol group used songs and sketches from the American Federal Theatre Project shows and Living Newspapers for the unions aiming to rebuild their organisation. London

Unity came to perform Babes in the Wood after its success, and B.U.P. developed two mass chants on a similar theme (Unite! and London's Burning) which were in demand for pageants during the Munich period. Tuckett makes it clear that far from being part of a conveyor belt for material from London the Bristol group adapted and reworked any suitable available plays, sketches or chants for local purposes.

The Merseyside group will be discussed in the following section but they too were in close touch with London and were launched approximately at the same time; London saw itself as part of a movement rather than a theatre in itself, and besides touring and play distribution it organised theatre educational and training events. The Glasgow Workers Theatre Group formed in 1937 out of the Left in the amateur dramatic societies who were anxious to perform the new American socialist drama: Lefty Plant in the Sun, Rehearsal and Till the Day I Die, as well as Unity pieces such as Where's That Bomb? and On Guard for Spain. According to D. Allen (1980) the Group prided itself on a more inventive and inspiring staging of On Guard than London, devised quite independently. Again, the Glasgow group were involved heavily in theatre training and education, and also mounted their own tours of Scotland besides operating their own club theatre premises.

An active group which seems to have been the most independent of the London Unity network was the Manchester Theatre of Action, which, as has been described, evolved from the Salford WTM and which strove to relate progressive form to progressive content to a new audience for the theatre. If London Unity were the first to perform Brecht's Signora Carrera's Rifles, the Theatre of

Action were the first with Round Heads and Pointed Heads, also of The Good Soldier Schweik. Ewan McColl has described how the political atmosphere of the Spanish Civil War, and the enthusiasm and sense of urgency generated by the cause of Republican solidarity, enabled them to draw on 'tremendous sources of talent' for a production of Lope de Vega's The Sheep Well as a fund-raiser:

This was easily the most ambitious thing we ever did - for the first time, we felt it was necessary to have sets that did not merely consist of changing lights, so we got sculptors and painters, people like Lowry, to form a small decor group. (1973 op. cit. p.65)

The group produced Last Edition, their own Living Newspaper on the Munich crisis, which was played in constantly up-dated forms into the Second World War itself. MacColl:

We'd use the platform of the hall we'd find ourselves in, plus two great long platforms of banked-up trestle tables that went along the sides of the hall, with steps, so the audience were surrounded on three sides, with action sometimes going on simultaneously all round, sometimes moving from stage one to stage two to three, sometimes presenting the actual conflict in terms of the two side-stages versus the top stage. It was very exciting theatre indeed, and lent itself to all kinds of notions: for instance, we did a scene on the Gresford pit disaster ... and we began breaking the central stage at the back into various levels. Each level would have a different philosophical function - one would be world events - that is simplifying it a bit too much but you'll get the idea. (ibid p.66)

Goorney (op. cit.) notes that Last Edition amalgamated all the styles the group had used during the past few years: living newspaper, fantasy, satire, agitprop, music hall, folk song and

dance. (p.22). Its Munich scene - 'Who Killed Johnny the Czech?' was done in a style combining something of The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui with a gangster film. In this extract, Muscle In (Mussolini) is discussing with Siggy (Hitler) how to carve up Johnny the Czech, and set Lance the Umbrella Man and Eddy (Chamberlain and France) against Joe De Red (Stalin) and get away with it:

Muscle: But listen Siggy. My boys don't feel so good. Look at dat Spanish job. I told de boys it was easy. But it took 'em three years just da same ... And I lost plenty of my good boys, and plenty cash. Siggy, you know me. Muscle In is your friend. But no, I can'ta do this.

Siggy: Ease up, ease up. What do you take me for? A hick from da sticks? What do you tink dis is for, a ball game? (Pointing to his head) Now look. (He arranges bottles and glasses on desk). Dis is Johnny De Czech's joint. And dis is a speakeasy I control - The Viennese Cafe. Now here is the territory of Lance the Umbrella Man, and just across de street is Eddy, his echo. Now Johnny the Czech thinks dese two guys is his buddies see? Well are they?

Muscle: Boss dose guys is nobody's buddies.

Siggy: Dat's just what I think. Now listen, who is it that nobody loves, huh?

Muscle: I don't tink dat nobody loves me Boss.

Siggy: Don't be dumb. De guy nobody loves is Joe De Red, see?

Muscle: Sure, sure. Dat guy gives me a pain.

Siggy: Yeah. But he gives Lance and Eddy a worse pain. Dose two guys is scared stiff of him, dey'll play ball with any guy whose willing to take a packet at him.

Muscle: I getta you Boss, I getta you. You means you's de guy?

Siggy: No, I mean I want dose guys to tink I'm going to take a packet at him. And in exchange dey double-cross Johnny De Czech. And then - well, I double cross them. A double-double cross, get me?

Muscle
(laughing): Gee, Siggy dat's wonderful - You tell 'em you fight Joe De Red, if dey take a run-out powder on Johnny De Czech, and den you take a run-out powder on dem. You know what I tink Boss? I tink dat's beautiful. I tink you're a genius. (p.28)

Like the other groups mentioned, the Manchester Theatre of Action played short sketches and songs indoors and out at meetings and rallies, including their own mass declamations John Bull Wants You and Free Thälmann, songs by Hans Eisler and extensive adaptations of some Unity material. Similarly they were also involved in all aspects of training and theatre education. One feature which both MacColl and Goorney comment on is their ability to attract working class technicians from firms like Metropolitan Vickers to develop back projection and other lighting equipment for their more ambitious productions such as The Good Soldier Schweik; also, actors with this Group were expected through training to develop skills in dance movement, mime and music as well as stage acting.

In summary it can be said that such theatres as these, like Unity, worked on the two fronts of agitational pieces and more extensive plays, sometimes combining the two, particularly around the mass campaigns which were generated around the Spanish Civil War, Munich and the peace movement. They were no mere conveyor belts passively working on material emanating from London but were independently original and innovative.

Although London Unity was obviously envisaged as an alternative to the mainstream commercial theatre, it nevertheless seems to have made attempts to transform it. Given the politics of the Popular Front and the involvement of professional theatre workers this is perhaps unsurprising, but it is worth noting the forms these attempts took. Principally they involved the plays themselves, actors, and access to the theatre as an apparatus.

As regards the plays themselves the major obstacle was of course

the mechanism of censorship through the office of the Lord Chamberlain. His regulations included an injunction against 'the representation of public personalities either physically or implied by voice', and an edict that 'the names of actual organisations and companies should be altered to imaginary ones'. This clearly ruled out drama-documentaries such as Busmen; also, when Unity attempted to export Crisis:Czechoslovakia to the commercial stage during the Munich crisis the Lord Chamberlain demanded so many cuts that the idea was abandoned. The Unity repertoire was therefore either confined to the club theatre circuit or accommodated to suit the censor's rulings (such as limiting the uses of the expression 'Jeez' during a public performance of Waiting for Lefty).⁽⁵⁰⁾

On the other hand it has been recorded that several now famous actors owe their introduction to the theatre to Unity. The professional producers were able to make use of Unity casts for particular working-class roles. MacColl (op. cit.) has recalled in detail how the Manchester Theatre of Action was unable to use actors trained through the conventional methods and schools for the drama it wished to stage, on social grounds as much as any other. But at the same time both he and Joan Littlewood, and London Unity, made it possible for working class people to obtain theatrical training, not just through their own classes and rehearsals for the productions of the socialist theatre movement but for its own sake also. A good example can be found in an advert in the journal New Theatre for September 1939, displaying London County Council approved courses at 'The Unity Theatre School of Dramatic Studies' under the tutelage of Herbert Marshall and cheaply available from the Unity theatre. These included diploma courses in production, acting (both preparatory

and advanced) and drama; also single classes which included stage management, make-up, fencing, eurythmics for women and Shakespearean production. There also included the history and psychology of drama and 'the progressive American theatre of to-day'.⁽⁵¹⁾ This school was the most formal of the movement's attempts to open up access to theatrical training to the social classes excluded from it. Logically, given all these factors, the next step would have been the formation of some professional company, but in 1939, of course, other factors intervened to prevent this.

The close of the decade with the outbreak of World War Two was the climax of a succession of defeats for the Left. The Spanish Republic was crushed by Franco; the politics of the domestic and international united front were rejected by the leadership of the labour movement, and even then the Labour Party was an electoral failure. Finally, not only had Nazi Germany remained unchecked to the point where the international conflagration so many had worked to avoid had broken out, but the Soviet Union - formerly the progressive beacon against fascism - was now in alliance with the Nazis. But if the ultimate objectives of these campaigns were not achieved they should nevertheless be seriously discussed on their own terms, and this includes the role played by the socialist theatre in these movements.

Therefore at this point the extent to which the Unity theatres achieved the objectives they set themselves, theatrically and politically (both linked through the common factor of the attempt to build a new audience) needs to be discussed in conclusion.

Writing from Moscow in 1935, Andre Van Gyseghem considered that:

The drama of a socialist theatre necessarily evolves new themes which may lend themselves to presentation in the old form but more probably will develop new theatrical forms for themselves. (52)

How far was this prediction accurate, bearing in mind the comments from Stourac and Samuel quoted earlier, that Unity, 'surrendered' artistically and politically, or that it made few innovations and relapsed into a 'fairly simple naturalism'? The question can be best answered by examining the main forms used in turn.

Mention has already been made of the Realistic Theatre of Nikolai Okhlopkov, and how the principles behind this were quite widely discussed. Productions of Waiting for Lefty as well as the Living Newspapers were clearly heavily influenced by these, as much through limitations of resource as anything else. The film-maker Basil Wright described the Realistic Theatre's production of Pogodin's play Aristocrats (also staged by Unity) in interesting terms:

In Aristocrats, faced with the problem of handling a large cast, with constant changes of scene, and the necessity of picking out individuals or small groups for emphasis, he evolves a system which owes a great deal to the technique of the cinema (it is significant he is also a film maker) ... Oklopkov has exploited film technique with considerable ingenuity. The double stage allows isolation of characters even in a crowd scene. Each separate sequence is played to a "cut" which is indicated by a bell-stroke, a light-change, and often, a switch from one to the other ... there is no attempt at "expressionism" in the acting, which is superbly naturalistic, except where certain gestures are exaggerated for "close-up" purposes ... The audience is grouped round a double stage ... (53)

'Cinematic writing' was the term frequently used to describe the Living Newspapers, as form which opened up several new

possibilities. It liberated the theatre from the need for a certain tempo, for lengthy scene changes, and it made possible the direct juxtaposition between public and private events and other links as seen in Busmen, Last Edition and Crisis: Czechoslovakia. Thus direct political statements were made possible within the stage action which would have grated implausibly during a naturalistic portrayal. Such portrayals were in fact restricted to particular individual scenes for individual effects.

Mass declamations (such as Ernest Toller's Requiem for Rosa Luxembourg) were performed in the early 1930s and several leading WTM members will have been aware of the German mass choirs. Nevertheless the style of writing and production of On Guard for Spain were regarded as something of a break-through, a novel form of using dramatised poetry with audiences for whom either could have been alien territory. The comedies used, leading up to the satirical success of Babes in the Wood, were as we have seen described by a producer as 'theatrical cartoons'; in their use of archetypes they were often an elaborate evolution from some of the presentations of the WTM. Therefore naturalistic scenes were for the most part confined to passages within plays. Clark (1979 op. cit.) has correctly drawn attention to the diversity of forms employed by the Unity theatre; it can be added here that this diversity could be found within plays as well as between them.

But the usages of the very term 'naturalism' are worth a closer examination in this context, the sort of examination required by the memory of Geoffrey Trease (1971 p.180) of his Unity play Colony: 'My approach, I was told with apparent approval, was reminiscent of Galsworthy'. What are the meanings of the

term 'naturalism' as regards the British stage?

Raymond Williams (1980) has traced how the British stage has experienced 'naturalist drama' in terms of the relations between social formations and dramatic forms. As he explains:

The theory of naturalism, in fiction and drama, is then a conscious presentation of human character and action within a natural and social environment ...In a stricter historical use naturalism is an artistic method in which an environment is reproduced, of course as accurately and fully as possible, not because it is an observed feature but because it is a causal or symptomatic feature. (p.127)

The import of this was relatively lately realised in this country due to an actual dissonance between the development of technical means of 'life-like' reproduction on stage, the development of a theatre audience derived from a new social formation which integrated middle-class and fashionable taste, and the consequence for dramatic forms.

As a result therefore drama in which a reproduced social environment is a part of the action rather than simply a background to it, in comparison to Europe, was a late developer on the London stage and often in the variant form of Shaw or Galsworthy. Such an historical perspective illustrates the need to grasp the meaning of naturalism not merely technically, as close reproductions of characters and scenes, but in terms also of these philosophical positions. As regards this discussion it has been demonstrated how 'naturalism' in that sense certainly and inevitably informed Unity's work but also it is hard to justify how this could be understood as a 'lapse'. Again, any discussion must go further.

Perhaps a firmer case for criticism can be based on the primacy given by Unity producers like Herbert Marshall to the acting philosophies of Stanislavski and the Moscow State Theatre. It is clear that it was Stanislavski and not Brecht who exerted an influence at this time. Although some works by Brecht - notably Signora Carrera's Rifles and Round Heads and Pointed Heads - were performed, poems generally translated by Marshall or Isherwood published, and one theoretical essay on The German Drama Pre-Hitler published in Left Review ⁽⁵⁴⁾ (where Brecht was described as one of the major influences on Mr. Auden and Mr. Isherwood), and Marshall and Van Gyseghem had worked with Brecht and Piscator in Moscow, the German Marxist dramatist was still an unknown quantity. Stourac ⁽⁵⁵⁾ makes much of this point as a critique of the professional producers such as Van Gyseghem who acted as 'gatekeepers' here, but it is worth pointing out again how the staging techniques from the American Federal Theatre Project and the Soviet Realistic Theatre, and the inheritance of the WTM still evident in the Fall of the House of Slusher, themselves comprise ample scope to develop revolutionary forms for revolutionary political content. But why exactly should the use of Brecht be preferred over Stanislavski? Firstly, 'illusionism' of any kind was out: the desired critical awareness amongst audiences was to be helped by displaying and not concealing the mechanics of production. Secondly, actors should not only be always aware but demonstrate their awareness of the presence of the audience. Actors, thirdly, should never embody a character but demonstrate it from a certain distance, quoting lines and repeating incidents. Finally the purpose of the whole enterprise was political and the emphasis throughout was to be placed on social truth.

In contrast the Stanislavskian performance was one based on acting derived from his training method known as the 'System':

The principle objective of the System was thus to aid the actor in creating an illusion of actuality on stage and in convincing the audience that he was portraying a real person, that his feelings and thoughts were exactly those of the character he embodied. Embodiment becomes the key to this particular style of acting. (Eddershaw 1982 p.131)

Actors' training therefore was to be concentrated on the 'creative if', how to imagine themselves in a character's given circumstances and how they would react to changes in them; awareness of 'body language' to create exact movements when in character, with corresponding vocal resources; concentration to enable actors to behave as if no one were watching them, and finally a method to work on play texts. Through this each actor finds his or her character's motivating force in the play, divides each of their scenes into units headed by that character's intentions, and generally therefore approaches a play composed of unity of roles and where in performance the audience is persuaded that the actors are the characters they are portraying.

Some idea of how all this was adopted by Unity has been supplied by Geoffrey Trease, who recalls how Herbert Marshall presented actors with a questionnaire to complete after the first play reading, and quotes a sample:

What parts of the play stood out most clearly?
With whom did you find you most sympathised and by whom were you particularly moved? How would you generalise about the character, e.g. petty bourgeois, heroism of progressive people, etc?
What in your opinion did the author want to say and what did he actually say? Do they agree or differ?... Each player was also ordered to "make a close analysis in writing of the character",

which was to include his "social background and development to the position in the play, during and afterwards." (1971 op. cit. p.181)

But again the issue revolves around philosophical position rather than technical means. Quite apart from Eddershaw's (op. cit.) case that there is in fact similarity between Brecht and Stanislavski also, Marshall's questionnaire is aiming at an understanding and acting performance which can hardly be said to rule out the political positions advanced by Brecht. On balance, of the two contrasting statements of Van Gyseghem in 1935 and Stourac and Samuel in 1977, the verdict tends to lie with Van Gyseghem.

Formal and technical innovations aside, other important criteria of success must be the extent to which Unity built up a new audience, a working class constituency to match the politics it wished to advocate. Again the evidence is contradictory. Like the WTM, the Unity Theatres played to the activists of the labour movement and to various campaigns; unlike the WTM the campaigns over Spain, Czechoslovakia, the peace movement and anti-fascism drew in a far wider spectrum than the isolated revolutionaries of earlier in the decade. Nevertheless there is a recognition that still the net could have been cast wider; we have seen Geoffrey Parsons post-war comment that 'it's audiences consisted almost entirely of people who were already in favour of the progressive political policy of the theatre' and later in the same article he describes the political as well as theatrical success of Babes in the Wood in these terms:

But we also attracted many middle-class people who genuinely applauded our anti-fascist

sentiments, and furthermore, the bait of entertainment landed those other fish we were after, and night after night the "carriage trade" parked their glossy cars outside the little theatre, many of them hating what we had to say but drawn to listen nevertheless ... the shafts struck home, and may a hitherto unquestioning follower of the National Government was made to think again.(54)

The point being made here is that at this exceptional moment the pantomime had driven home its message to a wide audience in the best ideals of the Popular Front; it also suggests that this was one of the features of the moment which made it exceptional.

Finally, a judgement on Unity Theatre can best be made in the context of a discussion of the socialist theatre movement as a whole during the decade, and it is its final aspect which concerns the next section.

Notes

1. B. Nixon, 'Theatre Now', Left Review vol 2 no. 3 December 1935 p. 107.
2. Bram Bootman (formerly Secretary of London Unity Theatre), interview with the author 1978.
3. *ibid.*
4. *ibid.*
5. *ibid.*
6. D. McCarthy, 'Theatre Censorship', New Statesman July 2nd 1938 p. 14.
7. John Allen (formerly producer, London Unity Theatre and Secretary to the Left Book Club Theatre Guild), interview with the author 1979.
8. J. Allen, 'Report', Left News no. 40 August 1939 p.1374
9. J. Allen, review of H. Clurman, The Fervent Years in Our Time vo. 6 no. 8 March 1947 p.188.
10. The text used is that in ed. J. Lucas, The 1930s: A Challenge to Orthodoxy (1978) p. 201-264.
11. M. Slater, 'The Purpose of a Left Review', Left Review vol. 1 no. 9 June 1935 p.364.
12. L. Butt, 'Stay Down Miner' in Left Review vol. 2 no.9 June 1936 p. 475.
13. M. Slater, Easter 1916 (1936).
14. The text used is that in ed. J. Salzman, Years of Protest (1967) p.156-177.
15. Bootman, interview op. cit.
16. New Statesman April 25th 1936 p.532; quoted in Travis (op.cit.) p.37.
17. B. Nixon, 'Private Hicks and Lefty', Left Review vol. 2 no.8 May 1936 p.415.
18. Bootman, interview op. cit.
19. T. Foster, 'How the Unity Theatre Club was Born', Daily Worker September 28th 1937 p.4.
20. Bootman, interview op. cit.
21. The text used is an unpublished actor's copy, broken down into voice parts, shown to the author by J. Lindsay. Another version is in ed. V. Cunningham, The Penguin Book of Spanish Civil War Verse (1980) p. 253-263.

22. Dawson, interview op. cit.
23. R.V. Beste, 'Mass Declamations', Our Time vol. 2 no. 11 May 1943 p.6.
24. J. Allen, 'Report', Left News no.25 May 1938 p.822.
25. J. Allen, 'Report', Left News no.29 September 1938 p.982.
26. J. Allen, 'Report', Left News no.25 May 1938 p.822.
27. The text used is an unpublished actor's copy, broken down into voice parts, shown to the author by J. Lindsay. Another version is in Left Review vol.2 no.8 May 1936 p.353-357, entitled Not English?:Reminder for May Day.
28. The text used is that held in the Morris Library, University of Southern Illinois at Carbondale. The play was not published.
29. R. Jardine, 'Busmen', Left Review vol.3 no.15 April 1938 p.922; Tribune 4th March 1938 p.5; P. Rotha, 'London's Living Newspaper', World Film News vol.3 March 1938 p.65; D. Verschoye, 'Busmen', Spectator 18th March 1938 p.467.
30. 'Busmen', New Theatre no.5 March 1938 p.3.
31. B. Wright, 'Soviet Theatre', Left Review vol.3 no.10 November 1937 p.584.
32. H. Marshall, 'An Interview with Oklopkov', New Theatre no.2 September 1939 p.6-9.
33. Beste op. cit. p.7.
34. M. Slater, 'Ann As I Remember Her', Nothing is Lost:Anne Lindsay 1914-1954 (1954) p.5. This booklet was a memoir published by Edgell Rickword for the Writers Group of the Communist Party in 1954.
35. The copy is held in the Morris Library, University of Southern Illinois at Carbondale.
36. M. Slater, 'Anne As I Remember Her' op. cit. p.5.
37. Bootman interview op. cit.
38. *ibid*.
39. R. Guillan and B. Roberts, Where's That Bomb? (1937). This name was a pseudonym for Herbert Hodge.
40. D. Kahn, 'Unity Theatre Club', Left Review vol.2 no.15 December 1936 p.833.
41. The text used is the unpublished copy held in the Morris Library, University of Southern Illinois at Carbondale.
42. H. Hodge, 'Cannibal Carnival', in ed. E.A. Osborne, In Letters of Red (1938) p.109-125.

43. Bootman, interview op. cit.
44. G. Parsons, 'Robin in Babes in the Wood', in Nothing is Lost (op. cit.) p.11.
45. op. cit. p.12.
46. The text used is the unpublished copy held in the Morris Library, University of Southern Illinois at Carbondale.
47. G. Parsons, op. cit. p.12.
48. Bootman, interview op. cit.
49. G. Parsons, op. cit. p.12.
50. J. Allen, interview op. cit.
51. New Theatre no.2 September 1939 p.37.
52. A. Van Gyseghem, 'A Letter From Moscow' Left Review vol. 1 no. 7 April 1935 p.276.
53. B. Wright op. cit. p.585.
54. B. Brecht, 'The German Drama:Pre-Hitler', Left Review vol. 2 no. 10 July 1936 p.427-433.
55. Stourac op. cit. p.404-407.
56. G. Parsons op. cit. p.13.

3. 'The Terribly Urgent Struggle' : The Left Book Club
Theatre Guild 1937 - 1939.

Accounts of the Left Book Club such as Samuels (1961), Lewis (1970), Reid (1979) or the more carefully critical Murdock (1979 op. cit.) and Jeffery (1978) simply note in passing the work of the Left Book Club Theatre Guild, even though in activity at least it was amongst the most successful initiatives in socialist theatre during the decade. Some of its members at the time however would, perhaps, have used the word 'progressive' rather than 'socialist', a point which can be explained in the context of the parent group itself.

The Left Book Club was simultaneously a publishing initiative and a political force. Originating in an attempt by publisher Victor Gollancz to circumvent a hostile commercial marketing network, in the organisation of consumption - the formation of readers' groups to discuss titles and issues, the distribution of a political newsletter to members - the Club proved a powerful vehicle for the promotion of Popular Front politics. As Gollancz described it (and the quote was used verbatim to promote the London Unity Theatre in one of its leaflets):

The aim of the Club is a simple one; it is to help in the terribly urgent struggle for world peace and for a better social and economic order against fascism, by giving all who are determined to play their part in this struggle such knowledge as will immensely increase their efficiency. (1)

Thus the initial and primary focus was on the information and education required for 'men of goodwill' to take part in the struggle against fascism and war. As Murdock (op. cit.) notes, at one level Gollancz simply took over the model provided by the Book of the Month Club. For 2s 6sd per month each member received a copy of the monthly 'Choice' book together with the Club journal, Left Book Club News later simply Left News. Members could also

buy additional books at reduced prices. The Club was an immediate startling success, moving from a membership of 20,000 within six months of its foundation in 1936 to a peak of 57,000 by 1939. The books were selected or commissioned from publisher Gollancz's main list by a board consisting of himself, John Strachey of the Communist Party and Harold Laski, a professor of Politics at the London School of Economics and one of the most prominent 'fellow travellers' in the Labour Party. This board maintained a strict control over the choices, with Gollancz doubtless feeling that the heavy, in fact life-saving, subsidy which his firm provided to maintain the Club entitled him to an autocratic control. (Murdock op. cit. p 29)

Although the Club published memorable accounts of British social conditions (Wal Hannington's Ten Lean Years and Problems of the Distressed Areas; Orwell's controversial The Road to Wigan Pier, successful popular histories of the labour movement such as Allen Dutt's Post-War History of the British Working Class and contemporary political debates (Attlee's Labour Party in Perspective and John Strachey's The Theory and Practice of Socialism), the principal interest was in foreign affairs, particularly the politics of other countries and the threat of fascism. This in itself reflects the shift in areas of political attention for the Left after 1935. As Jeffery writes:

By 1937 the international situation was rapidly deteriorating. The war in Spain continued, M.P.'s cheered in the House of Commons when British ships were sunk by Fascist submarines in the Mediterranean and in April Guernica was attacked. In July 1937 the Sino-Japanese war broke again with the Japanese making huge and rapid advances. In Moscow, Marshall Tuchachersky, the Russian representative at the Jubilee celebrations of George V was sentenced to be shot for allegedly holding secret talks with the German army. In March 1937 the first gas mask

factories were opened in Britain and air-raid sirens were tested for the first time. Throughout the year the British Army was rapidly refurbished and the slogan "Join the Modern Army" appeared. By February, 1938, Eden had resigned as Foreign Secretary and by March Germany had occupied Austria. In Britain, the response to the worsening international situation took the form of the growth of a popular movement against Fascism but there was also a growing sense of bewilderment with government policy and of anger with press coverage of events. (1978 op. cit. p.12)

Therefore besides education the aim of the Club was the promotion of a Popular Front - taking part and building support for the many groups aiding the Spanish Republic, urging a united front of the European democracies with the Soviet Union against the fascist powers and the threat of war, and achieving this through the unity of all domestic 'progressive forces' against the National Government. Besides its local discussion groups therefore the Club set tremendous store by its marches and mass rallies, amongst the most massive and successful of the decade. The platforms of such rallies were typically dominated by Harry Pollitt of the Communist Party, isolated Labour Lefts such as Stafford Cripps or Ellen Wilkinson, and clergy, writers and academics together with non-socialist politicians. This was calculated to appeal to an uncertain or uncommitted audience being drawn into active politics for the first time, and to give credence to a movement claiming to be a genuinely 'national' movement of the people countering the reactionary and dangerous policies of a Government falsely claiming to be 'National'.

Within this movement the Communist Party was able to attempt to build the Popular Front which it would have proved incapable of building alone. The Left Book Club offered the ideal vehicle for the promotion of the line adopted by the Comintern after 1935.

Yet at the same time it should be recognised that for many worried about the progress of international events the Party offered the only serious courses of action. Jerry Dawson, who helped found Merseyside Left and Unity Theatre in 1936, has recalled the start of his own involvement:

I was in Spain on holiday, as a student, when Franco mounted the revolt and the fighting started. I was in the wrong part, the Fascist part, actually and what was going on made me determined when I got back home to wake people up, the one thing on my mind was to do something about Spain ...
...I was socially aware but not what you'd call politically aware at the time. I joined the Communist Party because it seemed the only one which was taking all this really seriously, was really going to do something about fascism and Spain. (2)

Feelings like these were widespread, as Communist Party membership figures show, and the role of the mainstream labour movement reveals that the CP was the only organisation which was 'really going to do something' about fascism and Spain. As Branson and Heinemann have argued:

...the dominant Labour leadership appeared to many to be failing to match up to the situation. Particularly among the frustrated left wing there was widespread impatience with a "constitutionalist" posture which seemed to lay more stress on getting people to vote Labour at the next election than on forcing changes in present government policy, while the TUC leaders were resisting calls for challenging the government by industrial action and appeared anxious to channel activity into relief work for the victims of the war. (op. cit. p.339)

Yet there was more to the activities of the Club than this. By forming nuclei of 'progressive' people in areas members hoped to inject some energy even if not influence, as a report from Staffordshire shows:

This is a desolate area from every point of view; half the adult population is more or less permanently unemployed (miners of course) and has been for five or six years. Meantime all working class bodies have steadily decayed and the people as a whole are terribly apathetic and without hope. Besides the local Co-Ops, the local Labour Party is the only progressive organisation that has managed to keep its head above water - and that only under great difficulties. So you can imagine our difficulty in forming any kind of Group here. However, we finally managed it, and last night got five members together for a discussion on "Soviet Democracy" ... Two of our members are workers in the Co-Op, one is a miner, another is a commercial traveller. (3)

There was another aspect which the Groups' convenor John Lewis explained:

(the Groups) ... constituting as they do in many cases, practically the only progressive organisation to which people can belong and providing a sufficiently broad basis to make it possible for those to join who cannot as yet, committ themselves publicly to any political party ... In many cases the Group has actually brought a new impulse and spirit of optimism into existing political organisation, and while the Groups do not aim at themselves constituting a political, party, nevertheless the urgent importance of restoring the flagging vitality of Left Wing political organisations throughout the country cannot be exaggerated ... We find that wherever a live Group exists, it exerts a powerful influence upon the political and intellectual life of the district, and is frequently able to take the initiative in arranging really important meetings, conferences and week-end schools. (4)

A Group also could enable contact between hitherto isolated 'progressives' in areas where the labour movement had not so much decayed as never really emerged. In prosperous suburbs in the south of England, Left News reported early, as Jeffery quotes:

Great activity is to be found in such supposedly reactionary places like Plymouth, Brighton and Bournemouth, which shows what some of us always

believed, that the less highly organised the progressive movements in such places, the more hungry souls are eager for a Left organisation to bring them together and break down their isolation. Tom Mann filled the Bournemouth Labour Hall with a crowd of middle-class intellectuals and not only did them good but made them all love him. (op. cit. p.14)

Certainly, Left News reported the activities of flourishing Groups in seemingly improbable places - including Left Book Club premises incorporating library, meeting room, offices etc in Chichester, Gloucester, Harrow, and successful mass performances in Rugby and Maidstone.

In these circumstances - the bringing together of the isolated, often new to organised politics, and the realisation of the importance of reaching out beyond the normal Left circles, it was probably logical that the LBC should develop its own 'counter culture' through a wide variety of social and cultural activities alongside traditional political forms. Book choices were discussed in socials and coffee mornings, week-end and summer schools in the country and seaside resorts were frequent, and cycling, rambling and other sports clubs were incorporated on a scale unprecedented since the days of the Clarion Movements before the First World War. Culture and politics were combined in probably the most successful fashion by the Left Book Club Theatre Guild, which was formed one year after the launch of the Club itself in 1937.

The Left Book Club Theatre Guild has been formed to assist in the formation and running of theatrical groups. This it proposes to do in the following ways:

- 1) By publishing duplicated copies of short plays, sketches etc.
- 2) By preparing lists of one, two and three act plays suitable for performances by Left amateur theatre groups.
- 3) By collecting royalties and securing, where possible, special terms for groups affiliated to the Guild.
- 4) By publishing a pamphlet which gives advice about forming and running groups. When possible, speakers will be sent to attend inaugural meetings, and we shall shortly arrange a panel of technical experts who will give technical assistance in producing plays, lighting etc. (5)

In promoting '... the production of plays that will further the cause of peace and progress' Gollanz combined enthusiasm with practicality:

...groups should start in a small way. We believe that performances of one-act plays, sketches, burlesques and mass recitations well performed ... are of infinitely more value than a bad full length performance. If a group is not firmly established, a bad public performance may be enough to kill it altogether. By far the most valuable possession a group can have is a reputation for putting on good shows. (6)

From the beginning the 'experts' Gollanz mentioned, and the organising force behind the Guild, were provided by the Unity Theatre in London.

The Unity producer, John Allen, became Secretary of the LBCTG and in the year of launch 1937 he published three significant and at this period representative contributions to an expanding debate on art and politics. 1937 saw the publication of Alick West's Crisis and Criticism; The Mind in Chains, edited by C. Day Lewis, and, posthumously, Ralph Fox's The Novel and the People and Christopher Caudwell's Illusion and Reality; these contributions from the theatre have seemingly been squeezed out of the record possibly by virtue of their emphasis on the practical and

immediate rather than the theoretical.

Allen's article The Socialist Theatre written for the presumably 'converted' audience of Left Review, states not only a Popular Front position but also the use of a Popular Front position:

The situation to-day is definitely this: that although it is not possible to draw many actors together on a pro-Socialist basis, it is possible to get them on an anti-Fascist one. Most of them have wits enough to realise from example that Fascism is more an enemy than a friend of vital theatre, but they have not wits enough to perceive, nor intellectual courage enough to admit, that a Socialist Britain would remove those conditions which make a career on the stage to-day absolutely untenable for anyone who really cares about the business... the actor would be given conditions, such as exist in the U.S.S.R., which would enable him to have a say in the sort of plays in which he acted, the way in which he should act them, and so on. (1937B p.418)

Similarly, in a discussion, briefly, of the problem of using popular rather than esoteric form for the expression of socialist ideas, Allen admits that the use of an obviously popular form is not ideal. Nevertheless he cites the currently running play by Elmer Rice, Judgement Day to conclude that:

....it is probably the fact that Elmer Rice has sacrificed complete truth for melodrama that has given his play its immediate popular success. Thousands of people will come to see his melodrama, and will go away amazed at this great exposure of Fascist justice, who would never dream of going to a theatre that was known to have Left-Wing sympathies. (ibid. p.420)

Conditions were extremely favourable now that 'the English theatre is springing to life in a way that a year ago would not have been thought possible', with Left amateur groups emerging all over the country and a great and immediate demand for such socialist plays as had been published. However the major

problem to be faced by these groups was one of technique, adopting the axiom of 'aesthetically convincing' from the bourgeois theatre to ensure that high standards of production would not allow an audience to be distracted by faults and thus be confirmed in the attitude that art and politics can never be combined.

This somewhat discursive piece was improved upon later by his article in the Writing in Revolt issue of Fact. It surveys the meteoric success of Unity Theatre from 1936 ('when there was almost no theatrical activity amongst the British working classes') to the present:

The Unity Theatre Club has risen within a single year from an organisation with no assets except a few actors with stout hearts and a vigorous but undeveloped talent, to one that has its own theatre and equipment and two well-trained companies. It has a membership of fifteen hundred, and seventy performances of Waiting for Lefty and thirty-five of Where's that Bomb? to its credit. (1937A p.33)

In seeking to present uncompromising political material to as wide an audience as possible the Club had always insisted on its plays being as rich in entertainment as possible to attract its audiences ('unless you succeed in getting people into your theatre, you thunder against capitalism in vain'). This point takes on a greater perspective, stated Allen, when the position and function of the theatre is contrasted with that of the political meeting. He quoted Randall Swingler, a poet associated with the Left Theatre:

The validity of a play depends upon its ability to convince, not upon its purely intellectual argument, but upon its ability to be felt as true ... Anything said on or

from the stage is only an expression of opinion with which it is always possible to disagree ...
... The force of drama lies in the fact that it must compel the spectator to undergo a process of experience whether he likes it or not ... All experience changes a man ... He may go away violently hating or disagreeing with the play, but if it was true, it has changed him, because he was emotionally implicated with the development of events on the stage. (ibid p.33)

Therefore Allen considered that:

The political theatre has, therefore, to cater for two kinds of audiences, the "unconverted", for whose benefit the political message must not be sugared but humanized; and the already converted, the politically conscious, who require entertainment in their plays so long as it is not at the expense of a clear political line ... the twofold activity I have described is being followed by groups all over England. (ibid p.34)

He discussed two recent Unity productions, Where's That Bomb? and Cannibal Carnival in this light, and proceeded to outline the tasks facing this theatre as a movement. Given that the standard of production - and therefore the expenses of production - had to be high, and that simultaneously ticket prices had to be kept low to appeal to working class audiences, it followed that 'the margin of profit will always be extremely small, and three successes will not be enough to make up for one failure'. Thus the formation of the Left Book Club Theatre Guild was particularly opportune since the theatrical movements he had outlined were ripe for a national organization to achieve the solution to the financial and other problems - gaining 'the organization support of the whole working-class movement through already existing organizations, Trade Unions,

Co-Ops, and so on'. (ibid p.35).

Both of these articles concluded with the same statement on the future of socialist theatre: it depended on the writing of suitable plays and organizing a regular (in Left Review a regular 'working class') audience for them. It is interesting to see how various themes combine and collide in the handbook for groups which Allen wrote and distributed for the LBCTG (the front cover states 'Organized by the Unity Theatre Club') in 1937, the widely circulated Notes on Forming Left Theatre Groups. The pamphlet combines a political introduction stating the case for Left theatre, a down to earth practical guide for groups including a model constitution, and a lengthy series of notes on the history of popular theatre. Politically the Notes seem on the one hand firmly Popular Front: as an example of a theatrical basis for activity they cite Unity's production of Waiting for Lefty where apparently the cast of twenty were drawn from a number of parties including the Liberals, and the audiences 'are not solely confined to members of the working class'. Whereas it states again that theatre can present left-wing ideas and problems to, and exert influence upon, those who would never think of attending a political meeting, the model constitution supplied, that of Unity Theatre, states simply at one point that:

The objects of the club are to produce, present, and exhibit to its members and their guests, stage plays and films of social significance and educational value ... (1937C p.19)

Nevertheless the Notes also stress not anti-Fascism per se so much as the promotion of the idea 'that the theatre is a first-rate recreation'. This is to overcome the fact that

capitalism has appropriated "culture" to such an extent that the right, or even the possibility of self-expression has become the exclusive property of the middle and upper classes'. The Left-wing theatre movement had the potential to offer a means of self-expression to the factory worker, since even through the very basic technique of the mass recitation 'he can experience, even more vividly than if he were playing some considerably larger role, the exalting sensation of addressing an audience with words in which he passionately believes, and that of communion with other people on the stage'. Similarly there was scope for electricians, sempstresses and other manual workers 'to apply their talent to the work they have been taught to do, but which they can now practice with freedom and imagination for a cause in which they believe'. Even involvement simply in front of house arrangements was a vital part in a successful presentation of a play. Pointing out that few forms of activity can surpass the theatre for combining learning with entertainment and instruction with fun, Allen shrewdly identifies an interesting and little discussed angle:

All this activity, therefore, is a practical means of furthering the cause; and the tremendous amount of co-operation that is needed among the different people concerned in putting on a play, is in itself a splendid lesson in practical socialism.
(ibid p.3)

On a strictly practical level the Notes offer advice on how to form a group and what to do with it once it has been formed. Definite proposals should be put to a meeting advertised to anyone interested (for example local Labour Parties, Communist Parties, Socialist League and I.L.P. groups, Y.C.L. organizations, Peace Councils, Co-Operative Guilds and amateur dramatic societies) from whom should be elected a good secretary,

('business-like with a good knowledge of politics and an understanding of the theatre') good producer and stage manager. Political enthusiasm should not obstruct the importance of good theatre, its presentation being understood as as important as political content.

Once formed, a group should be realistic in the tasks it set itself and here again Allen offered the example of the Unity Theatre. New groups should confine themselves for months to mass recitations, short sketches and one act plays performed for the meetings, rallies, socials and dances of 'organizations' - the present strength of Unity both in terms of experience, training and skill as well as contacts. Outdoor work and the writing of mass recitations were particularly to be encouraged. More advanced groups, that is, those capable of doing at least Waiting for Lefty or Where's that Bomb?, should think seriously about acquiring their own theatre building, albeit a converted rented church hall. This offered great advantages for publicity and opportunities for staging experiment and expansion. On the financial side groups were urged to use a system of full and associate membership. There was, of course, other reasons to use the system of the theatre club and these lay with the law, particularly on tax and the workings of the Lord Chamberlain's office which dealt with theatre censorship.

Only plays licensed seven days before performance by the Lord Chamberlain could be legally performed in public. Allen offered some advice on dealing with him:

At the present time the Lord Chamberlain exercises a rigid moral censorship, but a fairly lax political one. The cases in which

he has banned excessive use of the word "bloody" or mention of the most necessary parts of the human anatomy are innumerable and notorious. He dislikes use of the word "Christ", "Jesus" or variations - you may say "Gee" but not "Jez" - and he refuses to allow God or any living person to be represented at all. But the occasions on which he has banned a play for being politically subversive are extremely few, and it is important to realize this ...
...The only point on which the Lord Chamberlain is really touchy is over relations to foreign countries, especially if international relationships with those countries are at the time at all strained. This, however, is not to say that in times of national crisis he would not exercise his prerogative more rigorously ...
(ibid p.8)

None of this applied however to a private performance of a play, that is, one performed for members of society paying a membership fee over and above the ticket price, and their bonafide guests. Under these conditions neither hall nor play need be licensed, and licensed plays could be performed on Sundays. The advantages to a political group like the Unity Theatre Club were obvious. Finally, on the practical side, any performance was subject to entertainments tax via the local customs office (unless all proceeds were for charity or if costs were 50% or less than the total takings), and groups were also advised of the need to pay royalties for performances - out of fairness to authors and the encouragement of new writing and repertory work as well as any legal requirements.

This could not have presented a greater contrast to the advice provided for WTM groups - for whom censorship was a matter for the police on the streets. Clearly in drawing up and circulating these Notes Allen and his Unity Theatre colleagues were encouraging more of a socialist (or anti-Fascist) engagement with the mainstream theatre apparatus than had ever been the case in

the past. This becomes more apparent in the final section of the Notes where Allen attempts to situate the developing new political stage within a sophisticated account of the history of a theatre engaged with society and a theatre of the people:

...for the greatest periods of the theatre of the past have been those when the theatre has had its basis in the support of the whole people - the theatre, in fact, has rarely existed when it has not been in the finest sense "popular". It has flourished as a possession of the people or not at all. To prove which point, and to show that our movement is not an idealistic pilgrimage, but something as deep as socialism itself, we shall consider briefly the pattern of the theatre of the past. (ibid p.11)

This brief consideration includes the very origins of theatre in primitive and ancient religious and other rituals, and the highly 'popular' and highly political work of Sophocles, Euripides in the age of Pericles in ancient Greece and the simultaneous theatrical and political decline of Athens. Detailed, concise and pointed, the Notes trace the loss of 'religious innocence' and gradual gaining of 'humanistic maturity' of theatre, and observes that the very uniqueness of the art, the experience it offers which cannot be duplicated by any other, can be found in 'theatricality', or the 'convention' of the theatre. This point was established for greater employment later in the argument. As regards the Roman Empire the development of the theatre purely as an entertainment was contemporaneous with the appearance for the first time of a large trading, shop-keeping middle class.

A revival was contained in the bible narratives dramatised by the early Catholic Church, leading eventually to the introduction of the vernacular and the banishment of these dramatizations from

Church precincts. Then 'perhaps the most exacting moment in the whole story' when the mediaeval craft guilds took over the touring and production of plays and pageants, religious yet written and performed in the vernacular. After an unfavourable comparison with the development of the Commedia del Arte Allen traces the emergence of professional troupes and popular theatre in buildings for the purpose, which in England reaches its apotheosis in the Elizabethan theatre and the plays of Shakespeare. He continues:

The story of the modern stage is the story of increasingly successful attempts to make the stage as little like the theatre and as much like real life as possible. The result is the fatuous content and the tedious conventions of the modern theatre. (ibid p.16)

This leads Allen back to his earlier point about theatrical convention, and to support his argument he uses probably the only article by Brecht in Britain during the 1930s, The German Drama: Pre-Hitler, from Left Review ⁽⁷⁾ in 1936. He takes forward Brecht's experience that 'neither the highly developed stage technique of the post-war theatre nor its dramaturgy, permitted us to present on the stage the great themes of our times ...' as the starting point for socialist theatre:

...plays that show the conditions under which the people of England are living and working, the things they enjoy, the things they hate, the things they remember, and the things to which they look forward or for which they hope ... (ibid p.12)

Allen concluded his piece with a word of warning:

Anything done in the theatre must be done theatrically. There are texts that live and texts that do not live when spoken aloud on the stage. Paragraphs from Capital and statistics from The State of

Britain do not live on the stage merely by virtue of their excellent matter, and anything that does not live on the stage, however wise, witty or wonderful it may be, will not only leave your audience unmoved: it may even antagonise them seriously. And you can only learn to tell the difference between dead and living texts by constantly hearing words read aloud, by reading them aloud yourself, and watching carefully what effect they make on anyone else who may be present listening.
(ibid p.18)

As Secretary Allen provided a regular Report in Left News, the monthly bulletin for all LBC members, and in addition edited Theatre for the People, a special paper for LBCTG workers. The Reports show the practical ways in which London Unity assisted and supported the Guild groups along the country, as well as providing information on each other's activities and ideas. The support took three main forms: help in forming and gaining support for a group, training in all aspects of the theatre and help with the publication and circulation of plays. After one year, in January 1938 Allen reported that 208 local LBCTG Groups were in operation, representing one theatre group in every four Left Book Club Groups. For those attempting a start the advice was: Do Waiting for Lefty in your area; contact local amateur dramatic societies and if they were unwilling to join a Group then 'persuade them to do a Peace play in connection with the local trades unions, trades councils and co-ops - 'Explain to them how much money can be raised by plays ... and the extent to which plays will vivify a political meeting and increase the size of the audience. (8) Headquarters also offered to send an authoritative speaker on any aspect of the theatre, or the LBCTG, to any group at its own expense and representations could be made nationally on a theatre group's behalf to a trades union,

organization and even to a local Left Book Club branch, after some incidents, so that 'in the future even the most politically minded Groups will not be so blind to the value of the theatre. (9)

Headquarters - an office placed in the London Unity Theatre building - undertook a responsibility for training in a serious way:

... we have at last been able to do some really useful work in sending experts round to Groups to help with production, make-up, elocution and organizational problems. (10)

Regular summer schools were held in the North as well as in London, where problems identified could be dealt with:

I have attended a large number of Theatre Guild productions during the last few months, and have found an encouragingly high standard of acting, but not, on the whole, good production. We propose to run the School this year in a more organized fashion than we did last year's by concentrating on two main courses, Production and Stage Management. All the various aspects of the theatre will be studied in the course of the school, movement, characterisation, speech, singing, the history of the theatre, the modern theatre, and so on, but the emphasis will be on teaching people how to teach their Groups, rather than on teaching them how to act, sing, or dance themselves. We are therefore especially anxious that absolutely as many producers as possible shall attend the School. (11).

A Report exists of the activities of one such school in September 1938:

The Left Book Club Theatre Guild Summer School at Summerhill, Leiston, was extremely successful. Between thirty and forty groups were represented, and probably the most inspiring evenings we had were those on which the Groups gave a report of their activities and discussed difficulties and the direction for future work. A considerable degree of clarity with regard to policy was achieved by lectures, readings and discussions on the technique of the American Living Newspaper, one of

the most stimulating of which was led by Will Lee, a prominent member of the cast of Golden Boy. Other notable productions, such as The Cradle will Rock and Pins and Needles were also fully discussed. Other lectures included a magnificent synthesis by Alan Bush of the relationship of the arts to the political movement, an analysis of the Stanislavsky method of acting and production by Bert Marshall ... lectures on the social history of the theatre by John Allen, on "A.R.P." by Professor Haldane, on play production by Andre Van Gysegheem, and "Mass Declamation" by Randall Swingler. Two performances of Plant in the Sun were given in Leiston for the local Spanish Medical Aid.

Perhaps the most important event in the school was the writing and production of a Living Newspaper on ARP ... we strongly urge that the play should be produced at all towns at which Professor Haldane is to speak on his forthcoming tour ... Liverpool and Newcastle are holding week-end schools in September. There need to be more of these ... (12)

The American influence at this event is highly significant and will be discussed in detail below. Perhaps more common was this:

A successful conference of Northumberland and Durham groups was held on October 19th at Newcastle. The attendance was large and the discussion lively. Proceedings were opened by a long and comprehensive account of the Stanislavsky method of acting by W.G. Farrell. This recognition of the need for technical development was admirable. More than anything the movement requires the support of those who can make the theatre work their chief political and spare time occupation. (13)

What 'more than anything the movement required' were suitable plays and sketches, as the principals of the LBCTG were only too well aware. Allen's Notes of 1937 stressed this, and Groups were faced with the search for material and the more formidable task of writing their own. Practical help could be offered:

To meet the situation that has arisen through the rapid increase in the number of Groups, and the lack of suitable plays to meet their requirements, we have organised a Play Clinic. Its function is twofold: to get more and better plays immediately -

which it is trying to do by making as far as possible personal contact with the authors, and secondly, to probe the whole question of left-wing literature and theatre by means of lectures, discussions and classes. (14)

Also, specific suggestions appeared, particularly as regards Living Newspapers (a point which will be pursued below) which it was clearly hoped that groups would produce on their own local conditions. Unity Theatre's production of Busmen was quoted as an example, and ambitious plans were laid to maintain this momentum with other productions throughout the country with LBC branches in mind:

We at headquarters will try to bring out regular Crisis Living Newspapers in collaboration with Unity Theatre ... We hope to send out the first very soon, so do prepare for them and discuss it with your local Group and political parties so that you will be able to arrange mass performances all over your locality. The first will probably be based on the current choice of the Left Book Club, The Military Strength of the Powers. This is a chance to form new theatre Guilds in the LBC Groups, who will surely welcome this new means of disseminating the ideas contained in the Club books. (15)

A case in point was the encouragement to make use of the controversial book Tory MP by L.B.G.T.G. groups during the General Election of 1939. The book listed every Tory MP together with known facts about their attitudes and notable quotes such as "I believe Hitler to be a great instrument of peace in the world". The possibilities were various:

Write little scenes around the facts. They can be simple dialogues based on the main theme of the book ... Have the facts put by a chronicler, supported by charts and posters. Contrast them with scenes showing poverty, bad housing conditions, low wages etc. Don't forget a scene showing the threat of fascism and illustrate it with the remarks of tory MPs ... A General Election is approaching. The consequences to this country and to a great part of the world may be

disastrous if a strong Tory majority is re-elected. This ought to be remembered by the Guilds - Use Tory MP against your Tory MP.(16)

Finally help was available for the new writer:

There is, as I have announced elsewhere, a Play Department at Unity Theatre with which the Guild is in close collaboration. Will everybody who has written a play or a sketch send it in to Unity Theatre, as not only is there a good chance of it being published but also the author will receive helpful criticism and advice from the Play Clinic. (17)

Alongside the encouragement of such immediately topical pieces as these the LBCTG office maintained a regular play circulation. Besides organising London and regional contacts to arrange bookings and maintain liaison with labour movement outlets and venues, on receipt of 7s. 6d. per year the office sent groups copies of each play the Guild published or which a sympathetic publisher produced, 'probably about twenty a year'. Importantly, the Guild made available in pamphlet form in 1938 the List of Plays Recommended by Left Book Club Theatre Guild for Production by Left Wing Amateur Groups. As a source of clues this is obviously worth some examination.

The pamphlet (18) comprises sections on one act, 'longer' 'full length' and 'plays for advanced groups', together with a list of technical books and useful addresses. Of the first category a variety of subjects and mood are represented together with a brief word on what would be required of a group to produce each item. Several of them deal with the process of politicisation:

Brothers by Jack Lindsay ('shows how a policeman suddenly becomes politically conscious as a result of his brother getting hurt in a strike; he himself joins the strikers'), The Bulls See Red by Ruth Tucker ('An incident in the Bristol riots of 1932. The partiality of the police in dealing with the hunger marchers brings the hitherto unpolitical Mr. and Mrs. Bull onto the side of the workers'), You've Got to Fight by Miles Tomalin ('Scene: Cable Street, October 4th 1936 ... The case for and against absolute pacifism put clearly and simply'), and Private Hicks by Albert Maltz ('What happens when a member of the National Guard refuses to fire on unarmed strikers. One of the very finest plays that have come out of America') are examples. Anti-war plays figure largely of course: Slickers by John Hammer ('Shows up the profits from the armaments racket, the close connection between war and the stock exchange, and the need for mass action to prevent war ...'), Passing Unnoticed by Ruth Tucker ('A crowd of people collected near the Cenotaph, Armistice Day. Their comments on proceedings make pointed criticisms on another of our national institutions. Needs delicate treatment'), Knock, Knock, Knock by W.A. Ratlkey and H. Allan Smith ('Anti-war : original, amusing, and, in places, moving. Some splendid parodies of Great War poems, and a witty satire on War Office recruiting methods') are amongst some of them.

Spain and fascism were also themes: Stop Press by Vera Barclay ('A Fleet Street cafe in the early morning. Some compositors are incited by the return of one of their number from Spain to smash up an article about "red atrocities" and strike against printing further nonsense'), The Secret by Ramon Sender ('How a worker in Barcelona keeps his secret against severe third degreeing by a Fascist general and finally turns the tables on his

persecutors') were two.

Also included were sketches 'recommended to those who want something unpolitical', 'diluted politics but general social criticism' and 'good for groups in backward districts' by Joe Corrie, or Cedric Mount's Dirge Without Dole or Twentieth Century Lullaby. The 'longer play' section was also largely made up of material written by new contemporary writers and concerned with the same topics and areas.

Waiting for Lefty and Where's That Bomb, the two Unity successes previously discussed were included together with another Clifford Odets piece on Communist underground organisation Till the Day I Die.

'Full length plays' could of course, and did, include the works of Sean O'Casey, Ernest Toller and Karl Kapek, as well as plays by the new American writer Elmer Rice: the anti-fascist melodrama Judgement Day, We the People (...this play shows the upsurge of the whole American people against social disparity and injustice. Magnificent, but very difficult to stage'), and works by Kateyeff and Gorki on the Russian Revolution. English writers included C.K. Munro with plays on war provoked by armament trusts and the use of racism by employers to divide their workforce, and the two plays written under his own name by the Unity writer Montagu Slater, Stay Down Miner ('A play about the South Wales stay-down miners strike of 1935. Shows the conditions that drove the men to strike and why they chose that particular method') and Easter 1916. Thus although this section cast its net wide enough to include D.H. Lawrence's A Collier's Friday Night ('A simple truthful picture of its subject. Strongly recommended to groups

who want something unpolitical') it also listed militant labour movement plays such as Upton Sinclair's Singing Jailbirds on the Wobblies, and Miles Malleson's Six Men of Dorset on the Tolpuddle Martyrs, as well as Slater's piece on the Welsh sit-down strikes of two years earlier.

Finally the 'plays for advanced groups' included Auden's The Dance of Death and Auden and Isherwood's The Dog Beneath the Skin together with works by Toller and Tretickor. Mass recitations - Toller's Requiem and Jack Lindsay's Who Are the English? and On Guard for Spain as well as a mention that 'other shorter ones are obtainable from L.B.C. Theatre Guild'.

The selection on offer was thus clearly varied and comprehensive. A strong American contingent with an emphasis on anti-fascist and pro Spanish Republican, and anti-war (both pacifist and war as an extension of capitalism) materials. Trades union struggle was also present but it could not be taken as the principal focus of the list by any means.

Left News between 1938 and 1939 regularly listed the plays and sketches performed by groups all over the country, and this also provides some important clues to the work of groups in action. For these two years thirty-two different plays are mentioned, of which four stand out as by far the most frequently performed nationally: Clifford Odets' Waiting for Lefty, Jack Lindsay's On Guard for Spain, Odets' Till the Day I die and A.R.P. (it is unclear whether this is the Living Newspaper spawned by a LBCTG school mentioned by Allen above or the part-documentary and play format adopted by Vance Marshall in a 1938 Unity play of the same name). Behind these four Where's That Bomb?, Private Hicks, Rehearsal, and

Bury the Dead come close behind, representing an American contribution of fifty percent to the repertoire of the British socialist theatre movement.

This, at the time, seems to have been welcomed and encouraged for two reasons. Jerry Dawson of Merseyside Left Theatre:

The American theatre at this time was supplying the whole of the British working class theatre with a great deal of material. Clifford Odets, Albert Maltz, Ben Bengal, Irwin Shaw, they were quicker in the field than we were and we were very largely dependent on them. But I don't think this was a bad thing. We were getting material of a better quality in some ways than what we had been used to, although I know that to some extent Waiting for Lefty might appear now to be something less than the masterpiece it appeared to us at the time. What was possible with a play like that, for all its Americanism, was that it could touch fundamentally on the basic experience of those Liverpool audiences. Here was a play about people forced to scrape a living as cab drivers because of unemployment in their own industries, and the need for strike action for a living wage. Such a thing would happen as, during a performance of the scene where a scab is frog-marched out of a meeting through the audience, on one occasion somebody in the audience got up and hit the fellow playing the scab in the face, he had identified so completely with the experience being offered by the play that he translated it into physical action. So although it was American the experiences offered by the play were ones we could interpret through our own knowledge. (19)

In Glasgow, according to D. Allen (1980 op. cit.), the Glasgow Workers Theatre Group was formed by enthusiastic readers of Proletarian Literature in the U.S.A. and the residue of socialist amateur dramatic groups who by 1937 were anxious to perform Lefty after works by O'Neill and Dreiser. Reference has already been made to the prominence granted to American speakers on Left theatre at LBCTG conferences, and it is clear that contact was regular and thorough, and the esteem held was high. Angela Tuckett (op.cit.) whose family were prime movers in

Bristol Unity Players, lived in the USA between 1937 and 1939 and supplied them with the successes not only of the Odets works performed by the New York Group Theatre but the various socialist hits - musicals, comedies, Living Newspapers - of the Federal Theatre Project: songs from Pins and Needles, the review written for the American International Ladies Garment Workers Union, such as 'Sing Me a Song of Social Significance', 'Whatever It Is I'm Against It', and 'One Big Union for Two', as well as One Third of A Nation and Archibald McLeish's Air Raid and Marc Blitzstein's The Cradle Will Rock. Similarly, Goorney (op. cit. p.7) notes that as early as 1934 Ewan MacColl and Joan Littlewood had begun to use some of the earliest Living Newspapers from the New York Workers' Laboratory Theatre in their Manchester Theatre of Action. It is hardly surprising that a later American commentator was to make the mistake of assuming that the Unity theatres had been set up for the purpose of bringing American material to Britain. (20)

The ready availability of suitable material was one obvious reason for this American influence, as Dawson points out. Nor were there any practical difficulties, as John Allen recalls, despite his Notes:

The whole thing with Waiting for Lefty was extraordinarily unclear. One or two of us who had an eye on these things were acutely embarrassed about the royalties. I think every so often we sent a small cheque to Odets' agents but we never paid anything like the royalties we should have done. But the Americans were marvellous and never sent over any demands or even made any enquiries. We were so relieved we never went into it. (21)

The other reason is that the American progressive theatre had become by 1938 the model and inspiration for British socialist

theatre workers just as the German movement had been for the WTM five or six years earlier. The impact of the Works Progress Administration and its Living Newspapers has already been discussed; in Britain even The Times had gone so far as to call them 'the most successful American theatrical experiment of this generation'. (22) Also, many of the Federal Theatre Project workers were involved also with organisations such as the Group Theatre and the Workers Laboratory Theatre who were pioneering anti-war and socialist works by Odets and others. As we have seen this work was readily used by the British.

The texts or contents of some of these plays obviously repay examination. Plant in the Sun by Ben Bengal attracted attention, as we have seen, in London Unity's production through its starring of the American Communist singer Paul Robeson, and concerns a sit-down strike. According to a somewhat abstruse review of the time by Goronwy Rees:

There is no element of fantasy either in the setting or in the construction: the action is limited completely to the possibilities of a few hours in the packing room of a great mail order house. The purpose of the play is not to express opinions about politics; the words and actions of the characters are devoted entirely to the practical difficulties and necessities of organizing a sit-down strike. The motives are not personal but political: the cause of the strike is the dismissal of one of the characters without sufficient reason, and none of the characters has any reason to strike except as a member of a group which is threatened, and the action of the play is indeed the growth and strengthening of the group unity. There is no conflict between the personal and the political life: the private emotions are subsidiary to the political ...

...Finally there is no attempt either to raise or to solve a problem. The strike is defeated, brutally and decisively, and the play does no more than show how under the pressure of a single act of injustice the solidarity, loyalty and capacity for action of the packers increases. I do not know what conclusion can be drawn from the play; but the sense it gives that history is thus and thus, that this is the reality of political action effects a profound release of emotion and gives satisfaction that cannot be equalled by an attempt to impose a solution. (1939 op. cit. p.112)

Page explains briefly and more directly that the theme of the play is trade union recruiting and recognition and the continual guerilla struggle to maintain and improve wages and working conditions. Six non-union men fight for recognition, drawing in the women workers, and losing their fight but through it learning through experience how basic solidarity can overcome differences and 'grow like a plant in the sun'. (op. cit. p.63)

Albert Maltz's Private Hicks, as has been mentioned, and his Rehearsal, according to D. Allen (1980 op.cit. p.47) were also on the growth of consciousness theme, whereas Odets' Till the Day I Die dealt with the German Communists' underground resistance to the Nazis.

The play (23) opens in a Berlin basement where a group of four are turning out leaflets on inflation and low wages destined for a factory. The dialogue gradually reveals their lives: secret leaflet distribution, uncertainty over the reliability of an acquaintance, news of the suicide of an arrested comrade. The strain on their lives and relationships are obvious, as is the strain of abandoning their old interests and identities. But they can be sustained:

Ernest: My present dream of the world -
 I ask for happy laughing people
 everywhere. I ask for hope in
 eyes: for wonderful baby boys
 and girls I ask, growing up
 strong and prepared for a new
 world. I won't ever forget
 the first time we visited the
 nursery in Moscow. Such faces
 on those children! Future
 engineers, doctors; when I
 saw them I understood most
 deeply what the revolution
 meant.

This scene is interrupted by the Gestapo and following his arrest Ernest undergoes a brutal interrogation. We learn later from two of the Nazis, Captain Schlegel and Major Duhring, that Ernest is a potentially important informant; also of disagreements and conflict between old liberal Germany and the brutal opinions and actions of the Nazis. Ernest learns that he is to be released - but followed constantly so that his party contacts can be identified. He will be arrested again if he does not prove valuable. Eventually he returns to Tilly, the girl of the first scene, and in her room, angry and exhausted, he explains what has happened:

Ernest: I know that till the day I die
 there is no peace for an honest
 worker in the whole world.
Tilly: Till the day we die there is steady
 work to do. Let us hope we will
 both live to see strange and
 wonderful things. Perhaps we will
 die before then. Our children
 will see it then! Ours!

Later as the dawn breaks Tilly tells him that she is carrying his baby. Before bed, however, L'Humanite brings even more good news:

Ernest(suddenly
sitting up): What united front?

Tilly: The united front in France.
Ernest: It has happened?
Tilly: I thought you knew.
Ernest: In France they have joined to make
a solid front against the fascists?
Tilly: Please don't get so excited,
Ernest. (calms him)
Ernest: Our work is bearing fruit? In
that beautiful classical country?
The united front!

The juxtaposition of two new pregnancies here is abruptly disrupted by the arrival of Ernest's brother Carl, who has been followed; successful evasive action is taken. Later, in a scene of a harrowing branch meeting Carl is also successful, despite Tilly's protests, in having Ernest blacklisted throughout the Communist underground as a security risk.

The climax finds Tilly and Carl producing leaflets, under an obvious personal and circumstantial pressure. Ernest arrives, with a story of how he had been re-arrested, driven around by the Nazis during raids and placed outside courtrooms so that he would appear to be an informer. He has decided on suicide, but first he leaves them with a message:

Ernest: Day must follow night. Now
we are ready; we have been
stepped in a terrible fire,
but soon all the desolate
places of the world must
flourish with human genius.
Do your work, comrades.

Till the Day I Die, with a number of scene and set changes, could obviously have posed problems for amateur groups but at the same time the frequency of its performance suggests that they were prepared to tackle them, and to attempt the level of emotional intensity at which much of the acting would have been pitched.

As D. Allen (1980 op. cit.) notes, the structure of the play does not lend itself to touring agitational theatre, but it should also be pointed out that it contains much that would have been ideal for meetings : exposure of Nazi philosophy and brutality, the grim reality behind the romance of underground resistance, the calls for a united front, all of which again were the stuff of Left Book Club choices. The portrayal of the Communist Party as the political dynamo behind the events would also have been welcome in some quarters.

The Merseyside group's performance is still remembered by

Jerry Dawson:

In the summer of 1939 we began production of yet another Odets play, Till the Day I Die. Remembering our quarrel with the Lord Chamberlain we sent the script away immediately, and we were informed that we had to take out every reference to Hitler, the S.S. the Gestapo, and make it into some sort of Ruritanian Kingdom. Between our beginning rehearsals and our first performance the war broke out and the Lord Chamberlain let us know that all references to Hitler and the rest could go back in. (24)

Irwin Shaw's Bury the Dead was written with a more experimental technique in mind. The Unity producer Andre Van Gysegheem had seen it in America, and the New York Theatre Guild production of Miracle at Verdun in 1931 which had inspired it, and produced it at Unity Theatre.

The published text (25) indicates a spot-lit stage littered with sandbags with a platform to the rear. A group of soldiers are burying corpses, and are joined by a Rabbi and a Catholic priest. As they are simultaneously reciting their different funeral

services the corpses rise up from their graves in the trench, represented by the platform.

First Corpse: Are you afraid of six dead men? You, who've lived with the dead, the so-many dead, and eaten your bread by their side when there was no time to bury them and you were hungry?

Third Corpse: Are we different from you? An ounce or so of lead in our hearts, and none in yours. A small difference between us.

Second Corpse: To-morrow or the next day, the lead will be yours too. Talk as our equals...

Scene changes are carried out by the spotlight and there is a frequent aural accompaniment of the rumble of artillery fire of varying volume. The news that the dead are refusing to be buried is greeted by disbelief by the general staff; we see Generals accusing a Captain and an examining doctor of drunkenness but they persist. The Generals come to see for themselves.

Beforehand we see the reaction of some of the troops:

Bevins: It amounts to the same thing, Charlie. They should be alive now. What are they - a parcel of kids. Kids shouldn't be dead, Charlie. That's what they musta figured when the dirt started falling in on 'em. What the hell are they doing dead? Did they get anything out of it? Did anybody ask them?...

Also a press reporter is thwarted from using the story by government pressure on the newspaper and set to do a romantic story.

The exhortations, threats and blandishments of the Generals cannot convince the corpses that it is their patriotic duty to be buried; they want to know why their lives were sold for a few yards of mud and how the General would feel about being dead at

twenty. Nor can their far more intellectual Captain persuade them to lie down:

Captain:

Men must die for their country's sake - if not you, then others. This has always been. Men died for Pharaoh and Caesar and Rome two thousand years ago and more, and went into the earth with their wounds. Why not you...?

First Corpse:

Men, even the men who die for Pharaoh and Caesar and Rome, must, in the end, before all hope is gone, discover that a man can die ~~for Pharaoh and Caesar and Rome, must, in the end, before all hope is gone, discover that a man can die~~ happy and be contentedly buried only when he dies for himself or for a cause that is his own and not Pharaoh or Caesars.

Short and rapid scenes begun and cut by spotlight show a panic among businessmen and the clergy over these undead, and panic amongst the general staff over the possibility of the news getting out. Not that they need have any worries about the media:

Voice:

It has been reported that certain American soldiers, killed on the field of battle, have refused to allow themselves to be buried. Whether this is true or not, the Coast-to-Coast Broadcasting System feels that this must give the American public an idea of the indomitable spirit of the American doughboy in this war. We cannot rest until this war is won - not even our brave dead boys. (Blackout)

Eventually a General hits on the idea of bringing the women -

wife, lover, sister, mother - of the dead soldiers over to persuade the men to see the error of their ways. They attempt this, and the very long scene which follows shows each 'dead' soldier arguing with his wife, or lover, mother or sister, from which we build up a picture of each one's background and what they wanted out of life and what they want now. We hear of a zest for life, of there being too many things left to do, of the important things to be said to those now fighting, of the refusal to accept that it is too late to do anything about the poverty which had afflicted a life. One soldier has had part of his head blown away and is reluctant to let his mother see his face, but she insists, the scene ending in hysteria.

When the women fail in their task the play moves rapidly to its conclusion. A sense of different Voices speak and are occasionally lit as the news that 'it didn't work' finally becomes common knowledge. The reactions of priests, scientists, businessmen and the military are interspersed by short comments - 'Plant a new crop! The old crop has worn out the earth. Plant something besides lives in the old and weary earth ... Put down the sword and hang the armour on the wall to rust with the years. The killed have risen'. 'Live' soldiers refuse the General's orders to machine-gun the 'corpses' and make common cause with them amidst the cries of one of the wives - 'Tell 'em all to stand up! Tell 'em!' - the dead and the original burial party move off together leaving the stage empty of all but a stricken General, huddled over the machine gun as it points at the empty grave.

Bury the Dead in its Unity production was not altogether well received by an otherwise sympathetic critic Desmond McCarthy; who felt it was composed of 'six sentimental and repetitive scenes' (26)

However the Merseyside group's production drew admiration from the local press:

One of the most striking of the season's contributions to peace propaganda was seen in Liverpool last week-end when the Merseyside Left Theatre Club produced Irwin Shaw's Bury the Dead... The company gave the play a fine production. The general level of presentation was, indeed, astonishingly high, considering the nature of the play itself and the problems of staging that it involved. By the use of curtains, inset scenes, spotlights, and the orchestra well, the unnamed producer - the whole cast was anonymous - achieved a fine fluidity of action, backed up as he was by excellent work behind the scenes. The acting, too, had distinction ... in a cast of thirty-four there was not one weak performance and several were impressively skilful ... essentially a team effort of high achievement. With this production the Merseyside Left Theatre Club has jumped at one bound into the front rank of the season's amateur achievement. (27)

This play introduces the issue of 'peace propaganda' - the politics of the peace movement and its theatrical representation during the later 1930s. It is clear from Left News that the Club was a proponent of the line of the Communist Party, which followed the foreign policy of the Soviet Union, so that right up to the beginning of the war in September 1939 it argued that a united front of France, the U.K. and the Soviet Union could ensure the maintenance of world peace, and that talk of an inevitable war was defeatist. An international peace front was central to any policy concerned to halt Fascist aggression. There were other strands involved which lent a major impetus to peace groups such as the Peace Pledge Union, which had 100,000 members after less than two years' existence.

International events between 1936 and 1939 (the years of the LBCTG) - militaristic expansion by Japan, Italy and Germany, Fascist aggression in Spain - clearly focused attention on the possibility of war whilst the experience of 1914-1918 was still fresh in the memory. Saville (1977 op. cit.) recounts the great increase in literature on the profits and war - mongering activities of private arms manufacturers, adding another dimension to the moral issues of an armaments - led selective economic revival matched against high unemployment. There was widespread fearful speculation - fuelled by the popular literature of the period, to say nothing of actual events such as the saturation bombing of Guernica in 1937 - of the consequences of aerial bombardment. Also, as Malcolm Smith points out, many on the Left felt their own fearful speculation on the consequences in many more ways, and not without reason:

If bombing war there had to be, however, the answer of the government would have to be authoritarian. In the Great War, the military doctrine of attrition had produced, ad hoc, state control on a wholly unprecedented scale - state direction of industrial production, conscription and a manpower budget, the use of the Defence of the Realm Act to break strikes and the creation of state propaganda machinery to control the flow and content of information. In a bombing war, it was clear, state control would have to be even more thorough. "Air Raid Precautions" were not even mentioned publicly until 1934 for fear of provoking nervousness among the population, although government expected that one of its major roles in a future war would be the control of a panic-stricken population. It was, for example, a central feature of British defence planning for most of the 1930s that the British Army could not send a large contingent to the Continent in a future European war because it would be needed at home for civil defence purposes. By the 1930s the Imperial policing experience of the British Army made it one of the most effective urban riot control organisations in the world. (1980 p.230)

Three plays can be taken as samples of the anti-war political theatre of the LBCTG. Bury the Dead, as we have seen, focuses on an essential waste of war, with 'straight' pacifism tempered only by the role of the businessmen and with one highly significant line - 'only when he dies for himself or for a cause that is his own and not Pharaoh or Caesar's'. John Allen described the Living Newspaper A.R.P.:

This will last an hour, though certain passages may be cut ... the early part of the play shows air raids during the Great War, celebrations of the Armistice, passages from the speeches of various politicians at Disarmament and other conferences between 1921 and 1935, and the new arms race. These things are shown, not talked about. The play then shows a meeting of Borough Councillors to discuss the proposals of ARP, their negotiations with the Government over the question of expense, the final compromise, and the various scenes and conversations showing the frightful horror of modern warfare, the inadequacy of the Government's present schemes, and so forth. (28)

Hence then international politics and their consequences for ordinary people are directly highlighted in a way which would have dramatised the events, arguments and experiences which would have been the stuff of meetings and rallies, articles and lecture tours.

Another piece was Moore's Ark by the writer Frank Tilsley. This one-act play (29) opens with a stage dominated on one side by an 'ark', a box the size of a small room painted grey and with an indication of bolts and metal strength, and containing a door which itself indicates limited space inside. A man, in fact 'a practical scientist of considerable ability' is loading boxes into it, on this side of the stage which is the only section to be properly lit throughout. An occasional stab of a searchlight

or an unobtrusive aeroplane drone (a stage direction recommends a vacuum cleaner to create this effect) suggests the events which have produced the stage action. Three women enter, one of whom, is Mary, the fiancée of Moore, the scientist.

Their conversation establishes that war is imminent and that Moore has been employed by 'Sir Joseph' to build this construction as a shelter. Sir Joseph has failed to interest the War Office in this project. Moore is fully expecting the annihilation of London and the country, but safe in their shelter Moore can see some hope in the prospect:

Moore: When we get out of here, in three weeks time, we might be the only young couple left - I mean with proper resources and the means of starting life again ... You and me, dear, perhaps we're the founders of a new civilisation. What we've learned, here, about all the things that have landed us all in this awful mess, about machines that produce so much goods that the produce has to be destroyed, about people who are willing to sacrifice their responsibility for their personal conduct to half-baked dictators, about governments that want only peace and arm themselves to the teeth to show how peaceful they are ...

He is interrupted by loud engine noises but their panic is premature; the noise is a car heralding the arrival of Sir Joseph and Lady Margaret with a companion, Lord Kingsbury. It becomes apparent that he too has been invited to join them in the shelter. Moore is unhappy about all this since Lord Kingsbury is leading munitions manufacturer and worse:

Moore: I've not spent three years working on this thing to save all the hides that have been too thick to care a

curse about ordinary folk like me, and who've been too busy denying that we're capable of self government and scheming out ways of coercing us, to find out whether we really are or not ... decent, honest and generous people will behave in a decent, honest and generous manner in any situation you like to put them into ... Democracy depends not on what people can be cajoled into voting for in moments of national hysteria, but on what they really feel about things most of the time.

Nevertheless Moore calms down, remembers his position and adopts some amicability towards his employer and guest. He loads their gear into a time-lock: once shut the door remains so for twenty-one days, proof against people, 'outsiders' as well as blast and gas attack.

However another party arrive: a General and his entourage escorting a major financier, who are all to take refuge in the shelter just as a major air battle is about to commence. This is the last straw for the scientist, who retaliates:

Moore: You've done enough damage in this world, but its ending with this war. You're certainly not going to continue when it's over. I've spent three precious years of my life making this thing so that it would be an oasis of sanity in a world crazy with irresponsibility, so that half a dozen ordinary, decent people could start life again, and I'm not going to have it ruined by you - any of you!

But Moore finds the ordinary people - chauffers, a secretary in the party - too intimidated to join his rebellion; as the General threatens his arrest events force the pace. A massive wave of approaching aircraft ('they can't be ours!') causes a

frantic scramble around the door of the 'ark' and Moore makes his decision; when the door slams shut he and Mary are outside, refusing to participate in the establishment's effort to preserve the old order and defiantly willing to take their chances.

Moore's Ark is a flawed piece with its points made only by long didactic speeches by Moore himself. Nevertheless it manages to combine all the points of the broad peace movement of the time: war and capitalism, privilege and protection during air raids, the apocalyptic consequences of aerial bombardment, and feelings of impotence amongst the mass of ordinary people in the face of remote political structures.

Thus the content and politics of a good section of the LBCTG repertoire can be commented upon. Jerry Dawson is in no doubt to-day:

All our material, our sketches, the American plays, the songs which we used right from the very beginning, were concerned with the danger of war, Fascism, unemployment and the collapse of the capitalist economy. (30)

Out of the most frequently mentioned performed plays at least half are on a growth of consciousness and political awareness theme, some with a militant labour movement setting; of the others anti-Fascist resistance and warfare are generally treated politically rather than simply morally, and it would be difficult to argue that the socialism took a secondary place. The significance of this will be returned to later in the discussion.

The contexts in which this material was performed must be

considered. Spanish Republican solidarity work clearly provided many opportunities for classic agitprop work. Mass declamations such as Jack Lindsay's On Guard for Spain, and to a lesser extent the slightly earlier Spain by Randall Swingler provided the reason for the foundation of the Merseyside group, and Jerry Dawson recalls the circumstances:

It was a year before we actually performed in a theatre. At the start we played day in and day out at meetings - either at rallies on the tops of carts or in trades union meetings, meetings at the Picton Hall, anything of that kind. Mainly mass declamations, and then a thing we wrote ourselves, Insurgents Aid Committee. This was a satire on the non-intervention committee, which was in fact an insurgents' aid committee. This was improvised stuff, we had caricature figures who were members of the non-intervention committee, but what we ever did at a meeting depended on what had happened politically in the previous week. We were always adapting or changing it to meet the needs of the particular situation. (31)

Agitprop was performed by LBCTG groups in other fields, as was reported in an issue of Left News which made the point that the urgency of the situation demanded a response when or where it was needed:

I want to report on two excellent performances by our Group. We learnt last Saturday about the Sunderland rent strike, so we got to work, all the members gathering round, and in four days learnt and performed Simon Blumenfield's rent strike play. We put in a few additions about the Sunderland strike.

Last Friday we went down to Sunderland and performed the play twice, once on each estate where they are striking. At the first one they had built us a platform on the estate's field nearby and assembled in their hundreds to hear the play. We were late in getting there (we couldn't find the place) but the crowd waited patiently for three-quarters of an hour and gave us a rousing reception.

Remarks like this were passed: 'I'm sending the wireless back. This is better than the wireless", etc.

They joined in loudly with the play and booed the landlord and clapped every militant speech. They were a grand audience, and took a collection for our expenses although they are a very poor estate.

Lots of the first audience followed us a mile to the next estate, where we performed again, and not one of the crowd left until the play was finished at 10.40 p.m. They invited us to go down to play another play next week.

I'm sure our play made the crowd more determined than ever not to pay the extra 6d demanded, because at the end, when the Secretary in the play said: "Are you going to pay the extortioners' tribute? Are you going to pay your 6d on Monday?" There was a terrific yell of "No!"

The audience was entirely working class and included practically everyone on the estates. This is the work our Theatre Guild is very proud of doing, and although we worked terribly hard to get the play ready in four days, we none of us thought the work was wasted. (32)

A Tribune round-up of LBCTG work included this report:

The Contact theatre group in Beckenham have developed a special technique of performing short topical sketches, written by the group itself. They have added to the success of countless local political meetings. They perform without make-up or props, in a simple uniform, adopting a style which might be called "agitprop" in the best sense of that expression. (33)

It is impossible not to see the direct legacy of the Workers Theatre Movement here. Topicality was apparent also when Liverpool's first performance of Bury the Dead co-incided with Hitler's occupation of Austria. (34) Awareness of such points ensured a continual discussion in Left News of art and propaganda, purpose and achievement in the performances of the

LBCTG. Justifying political art and explaining that its propaganda was quite legitimate was a commonplace throughout the 1930s, particularly when artists and intellectuals were drawn into political activity. The task was both to convince political people of the value of this work and to assert its legitimacy within mainstream criticism and thought. The question of whether plays should reach definite conclusions about the problems they dealt with - such as the rent strike play - was one important issue discussed by Frank Jones in the pages of Left News:

...One can therefore maintain that a play which even shows these modern problems in a forcible way is necessarily progressive. Both Belzac and Balzac created really progressive art by giving a true picture of the decadence of the feudalists and effete bourgeoisie of their time. Dickens, Victor Hugo and Zola, who gave true pictures of life in their times and touched on urgent problems, may certainly be called revolutionaries although they offer no "solutions" in their works. So that in certain circumstances progressives can perform plays which do nothing but show life as it is in its true colours.

What are these "certain circumstances"? The working class and the politically-conscious intelligentsia of the middle-class usually have a clear view of the world to-day. for such an audience a play which simply shows the problems of to-day would not be sufficient. they already know what is happening, and what they need is a lead as to what is to be done. But we must not forget the huge mass of people who have not yet got this clear vision ... for them a play which presents problems vividly may be very valuable. (35)

Also, it was repeatedly stressed that content could not outweigh presentation, that art could be propagandistic but must still remain art:

It is true that at a time when reactionary forces try to suppress the content of plays and when more and more emphasis is laid upon form, progressive Groups quite naturally tend to go to the other extreme, and concentrate on content at the expense of form. But this

attitude certainly defeats its own ends, which are to impress and convert new audiences. We are not afraid to put over propaganda, but we want to put it over in such a way that it is successful, and one can surely say that the better art it is, the more successful it is. (36)

To help them along this path Groups should always realise that they are not slaves to a text. Plays are capable of an infinite variety of interpretation, they can be cut, to suit certain particular requirements, audiences can be connected to the stage action through actors mingling with them so that tempo and enthusiasm can be raised or controlled. Points like these were made in response to letter received from local Groups. Thus were the points of John Allen's Notes of two years earlier re-iterated. Both he and another contributor also presented a means to an end in 1937 and then 1939:

The success of a theatre group seems to depend ... on its grasp of the fact that its work must not be isolated and sporadic but as much an integral part of the labour movement as the LBC itself... (37)

...Art appeals to the emotions ... The emotions aroused by the art of the theatre can be utilised by the LBC for further intellectual development. (38)

In other words as an 'integral part of the labour movement' the LBCTG through contact with audiences across the spectrum of political commitment was to aim to lay the groundwork for political education. But although there was considerable discussion in Left News and at training schools on technique, production and form there is a contrast with the earlier work of the Workers Theatre Movement. Early on John Allen pointed to the 'enormous diversity of theatrical thought prevailing among the groups' and argued that:

We should have a common theoretical basis to our work, and agree at least about certain general principles governing our work. In the Unity Theatre Club we found that the absence of a common theory gave rise to so many dangers that political and theatrical instruction was introduced long before regular classes.(39)

Nevertheless it is the diversity of material and hence the diversity of form and presentation which comes across from the socialist theatre of the later 1930s. As was discussed in terms of the WTM, agitprop conditions of performance largely determine the possibilities of the form and thus much of the possibilities of the use of agitprop. Yet the mass declamation demanded more of an audience, and not just, as John Allen noted, in the case of On Guard for Spain, 'because it lasts nearly half an hour and the language is far from easy'.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Jerry Dawson realised this:

Nothing would seem sillier in some ways than to take something which sounded so arty as "choral speaking". Yet they weren't seen as arty, we were giving people in an emotional form the things people were familiar with from their newspapers ... Again, one's got to remember that this arose spontaneously, it didn't arise out of any knowledge of, say, the German Workers' Choirs. We didn't know about Toller's Requiem until later.

Nevertheless the effect of these performances depended largely on a pre-existing identity of the conditions of production and those of reception. Similarly with other work:

In the same way although we were working in caricature theatre with the Insurgents' Aid Committee these caricatures were seen quite clearly as a mere slight ~~exaggeration~~ of the people who were doing the dirty on the Spanish people. (41)

But besides such pieces, as we have seen, groups were attempting plays such as Bury the Dead. The Merseyside experience again:

Here again, perhaps more in our production than in others, the formal changes were very striking. To some extent it was the old expressionist technique applied to new material. We arranged that the grave should be the orchestra well of the theatre, so that already we were breaking away from the proscenium stage... as the dead rise up all the action is seen through their silhouetted heads.(42)

Bristol's performances, according to Tuckett (op. cit.) were first mounted during Chamberlain's flights to Munich, and gave rise to invitations from Co-Op Guilds, community centres and branches of the British Legion (p.14). Goorney has recorded how in Manchester the Theatre of Action tried to experiment with new techniques in their productions of the anti-militaristic The Good Soldier Schweik (borrowed from Piscator's pre-war German production) and Miracle at Verdun (1980 op.cit.p.16-19). It has already been noted how groups were encouraged to attempt Living Newspaper productions (such as from Tory MP) and some did; this was to make use of some of the most advanced theatrical techniques derived from the revolutionary avant-garde artists of Bolshevik Russia. Finally, the style of Odets work such as Waiting for Lefty and Till the Day I Die with their use of a combination of social and psychological realism and fast scene changes, or the use of spot-lights and multi-levelled sets in Bury the Dead, or again the use of audience involvement and the auditorium as well as the stage in Lefty, indicate a willingness to work from but beyond the old simplicities of agitprop. They were clearly attempting to devise new forms to meet new needs.

Besides the more predictable political work the latter 1930s see a novel activity for socialist theatre groups: participation in the festivals of 'straight' amateur dramatic groups organised by local authorities or the British Drama League. Samuel (1977 op. cit.) notes this with a certain cynicism, hinting that this

represents a retreat from the proper and legitimate concerns of a socialist theatre movement. (p.109) Groups' successes in these festivals and competitions were recorded in Left News, as these examples make clear:

Bedford Theatre Guild won first prize at the Bedford Music Festival, defeating the local Dramatic Club which was far older and more experienced than themselves. It was the Guild's first appearance on the public stage, and their play was Dirge Without Dole...

Will@sd@n Group ... entered for the Welwyn Garden City Dramatic Festival with On Guard for Spain and came seventh out of over 20 items. (43)

In addition Tribune's ⁽⁴⁴⁾ round up of the LBCTG which mentioned such festivals records that four-fifths of 603 finalists in 1939 had shown 'progressive' plays. Clearly some groups were adopting John Allen's advice on making contact with local amateur dramatic groups. A letter in Discussion, a Communist Party discussion journal which may not have been in common circulation with the Left Book Club, raised the following observation, (under the heading A Real Workers' Theatre Movement, obviously as we have seen an allusion to the WTM):

We must remember that within the ranks of these societies the majority of the members are workers devoted to the interests of the theatre, and that these workers can and must be won by a policy of real and vital theatre. It is imperative that we do not shut ourselves within a Left amateur movement, but that we maintain the liveliest interest in what is happening in the amateur theatre up and down the country. (45)

Allen to-day recalls only a highly variable response from local amateur dramatic groups - 'then, as now, bound up with Lady Windermere's Fan' - and Jerry Dawson recalls a notorious attempt by the Merseyside group to intervene within the mainstream

amateur theatre:

There was a festival in, of all places Chester, at the Royalty Theatre, and I went down and got onto the committee, alongside Colonel So and So and Sir this, that and the other, and when it came to putting out the advance publicity ironically enough it was our material that was used on all of it - because of the fact that formally it was a breakthrough, just the idea of lights being on during a performance and using the auditorium and so on. We went on with a triple bill which included Waiting for Lefty and Where's That Bomb? We hit Chester with three aggressively political plays.

By the end of Waiting for Lefty the Bishop of Chester walked out and the manager dropped the curtain on us. We all ended up in court for offending against the Lord Chamberlain, because we had left in lines in Lefty he had objected to. It brought us enormous publicity, with questions in the House about riotous behaviour in Chester, and headlines in the American papers about "British censor insults U.S. dramatist."

Why did we go in for all that? It was partly a question of taking any opportunity to put over our point of view, taking up any offer that came our way and also a bit of an adventure. We didn't bother with the cuts partly through inefficiency but mainly through an aggressive kind of rejection of the Chamberlain's right, you know, his right to tell us what we could or couldn't say.

It was the kind of material which would offend the attitudes and expectations of that normal theatre audience. Although we'd been brought to book on a legal technicality it was clear that our real offence was to bring politics into the theatre, not only that but into the posh theatre, not in the halls and meetings but the posh theatre. (46)

One point at least which can be made about the experience of more fortunate groups who succeeded in such festivals or competitions is that it provides us with a reasonably objective standard. As performers and producers some of these groups at least were achieving a high level of competence and skill which,

to quote again from the round-up provided by Tribune, 'showed they could compete with the best of the art for art's sake lot',⁽⁴⁷⁾

At this point an assessment can be made of the Left Book Club Theatre Guild. Firstly, we must establish what questions must be asked of their work, what criteria can be legitimately employed here. To what extent was this initiative successful? Certainly the Left Book Club movement as a whole failed in the task it set itself. The Popular Front did not materialise, Spain fell to Franco and the decade ended with the cruel irony of the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the outbreak of the dreaded world war. But to so judge the LBCTG a failure would be on the same level as judging Brecht's early work a failure on the grounds that Hitler achieved power. Other perspectives are needed here.

All the key political initiatives by the Left throughout the 1930s - the struggles against the Means Test and to organise the unemployed, the unemployment rallies, the anti-fascist demonstrations and support for Republican Spain - were rank and file activities taking place largely outside the traditional structures of the trades unions and the Labour Party, as has been noted previously. Here of course lies the basic reason for the hegemony of the Communist Party over these various struggles and its intellectual as well as political leadership of the LBC; here also lies the basic reason for the success of the Club in attracting readers, members and participants in its mass rallies and demonstrations. If we examine these means of articulation and mobilisation of the socially concerned of the time, then the conclusion must be that the LBCTG was the theatrical wing and expression of a quite spectacular success. The extent and intensity of the Spanish solidarity work, which has been

described, is a case in point. The rise of the Club itself, to repeat, was meteoric, and the Theatre Guild was claiming 208 groups by Christmas 1938, after about a year of its existence.

Perhaps a more apposite question is whether the groups succeeded in the tasks they set themselves. Allen on the need for new material:

The present drama in America and the Soviet Union started as a local and topical affair. And that's what we want: people living in or near a specific centre of industry to write plays about the conditions of that industry ... We want to be able to publish a series of plays which will give a complete picture of the lives and conditions of the people of England, what they remember of the past, what they love and hate in the present, and what they look forward to in the future.

Remember the word "drama" originally meant "thing done". So let's have plays of action, plays that show a man doing something, and the pressures of the circumstances that made him do it. The function of the theatre is to show the theory and practice of socialism in action, not to explain it in abstract.(48)

The dominance of American material and the reasons for this, the plays of the Recommended List have been noted; but to what extent did Allen's appeal have a response? How successful was the LBCTG in encouraging and promoting new playwriting from its local groups? There are some clues from Left News, in terms of plays mentioned:

Leeds have had a great success with two plays written by one of their own members ... We have published four new plays. Two of them are those that have been so successful in Leeds. The other two are militant T.U. plays, one on conditions in a sweat shop, the other on the Hire Purchase racket, which appearing at the same time as Ellen Wilkinson's Bill in the same subject, should be extremely useful.

...Rotherham are producing a play by one of their own members on mining conditions, which will be given at all meetings welcoming the release of Mick Kane...

...South Shields are writing a Left Review, with parts of which they hope to work up a Left Wing Pierrot Show for performance at local seaside towns...

...New playwrights ought to be able to deal dramatically with local industrial and social problems, as Clogs (the famous Sheffield play written by a local miner), for instance, deals with a miner's life in South Yorkshire. (49)

Also, references are occasionally made to Groups devising their own tableaux and pageants at festivals, and once or twice a Living Newspaper. Allen, as we have seen, held great hopes for these and the LBCTG, trying to encourage groups to devise their own on their own local situations and conditions, and intending to issue a series from headquarters at Unity Theatre. But as he now recalls:

There wasn't a regular series. We might have done but for the war - I think we could have got a group ready to do a left-wing Living Newspaper on something instantaneously, off the cuff. But the war put an end to that idea. (50)

There is little evidence that Living Newspapers as a form really flourished on a widespread scale in Britain in the 1930s, nor, apart from individual adaptation and re-working of existing scripts, does it appear that LBCTG produced their own writers and material of plays rather than agitprop, despite the hopes of Allen and Left News. No British equivalent of Waiting for Lefty appeared in the later 1930s. Nor can it be said that the LBCTG produced a particular contribution to marxist aesthetics, in the sense that the Workers' Theatre Movement's critique of naturalism and advocacy of agitprop were attempting to make one. Where their work was inserted in some form of theoretical framework it was with regard to the creation of a 'popular theatre', a

symptomatic concept which is worth examining here.

As part of its broad strategy of political education the LBC published - and promoted through its lectures and schools - popular accounts of working class and labour movement history. In this context should be understood Allen's account of English theatre history in his Notes and other articles; also Lindsay's situation of the mass declamations within the popular oral poetic traditions he had identified. (1937 op. cit.). In fact it could be said that much of the marxist literary criticism of the latter 1930s was concerned to demonstrate the popular radical tradition within which classic novelists and poets could be inserted: Dickens, Shelly and the Romantics, Milton, Swift and so forth could be constructed into some form of tradition just as Lukacs constructed a literary Popular Front at this same time. Contemporary political activity, principally the building of alliances against the enemies of the peoples' hard-won democratic and trades union rights, was part of this tradition. This therefore explains Allen's point in reports like this:

The main aim of the dramatic work was to express through the theatre the same interpretation of life and politics that the books express through the printed word. This has the effect of broadening the basis of appeal since hundreds will come to see plays who will not come to political meetings. But in doing work of this kind in a really artistic way something more is achieved. Here is the beginning of the indispersable popular basis for a real revival of drama in Great Britain. Everyone knows how much the amateur theatre has done to revive the drama, but it suffers from its inevitable reflection of the futility and superficiality of modern society. The Left drama on the other hand lives because it understands, because it reveals reality as it is. (51)

Thus rather than developing an aesthetic basis for its work it

can be argued that the LBCTG was more concerned to see itself in the light of an old line of 'popular' (i.e. mass-based and progressive) theatre and thereby to carve its niche in the struggle for a Popular Front.

In trying to assess its success in doing so we must deal with the difficult task of relying on self-reports on audience size and reception. Certainly Left News supplies some good examples of these:

Merseyside Group in January twice filled the David Lewis Theatre, Liverpool, with Lefty, Hewers of Coal and I Can't Sleep. Audience of 700 each night...

...Glasgow Group gave On Guard for Spain at the May Day demonstration in the afternoon and then Lefty and Spain for the Trades and Labour Council at a cinema holding 2,000. Several hundred turned away.

...Wolverhampton gave several performances of Waiting for Lefty and Twentieth Century Lullaby before 100 percent T.U. audiences back in November, selling all the tickets in advance through personal contact.

...Belfast gave Till the Day I Die to an audience of between four and five hundred, who gave them a very enthusiastic reception. They had excellent Press notices. (52)

Yet once again as seems from Tuckett (op. cit.) and Jerry Dawson; also D. Allen (1980 op. cit.) the great majority of these performances would have been at meetings or rallies organised by peace groups, Spanish Aid Committees, the Communist and Labour Parties or Co-Operative Guilds; trades union branches and the various 'front' organisations of the CP. It is an open question, as with the WTM, whether the audiences came for the meeting rather than being attracted by the performance. But again the novelty value of a performance had drawing power, a point noted at the time by even the non-Left press. (53) Certainly there can be little

doubt that the LBCTG, by its constant performances at these venues, was building if not actually the popular theatre they envisaged then a progressive culture reflective and expressive of a broad movement.

Self-reports, of course, are not always reliable, as is now recalled regarding the claim that the Guild comprised 208 Groups by 1938:

I sometimes think that when John Allen claimed two hundred groups or whatever it was, what was going on was that somebody only had to write in and say they'd formed a group and it was so, even if they hadn't performed. All the same, there were a great number and some were at a very high level of ability. (54)

They were really extremely ephemeral...groups formed, dissolved and then maybe the same people would form a new group or join another one ... so you're not really losing people or groups you're in a state of constant transformation. I would imagine there were about twenty stable groups, and they were in the great urban centres. (55)

These centres, judging from Left News, would have been greater London, Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow, Newcastle and Bristol principally. According to Jerry Dawson's recollection of Bury the Dead, Tuckett (op. cit.) and D. Allen (op. cit.) the groups in these centres were proud of their own individual and superior productions of particular items as compared with London Unity. No mere passive recipients of received material, the theatrical culture of this broad movement was well set to flourish. The Tribune round-up mentioned earlier seems to bear this out : whereas there were a large number of Groups throughout the country in 1939, the 'strongest and most well established ones' were in 'key centres', of these, some such as Sheffield were able to secure the voluntary services of sympathetic professional

producers, a circumstance apparently reflected in their work. (56)

This strength in diversity is also perhaps reflected in organisation and nomenclature. Despite headquarters' keenness that each group should have 'Left Book Club' in its title, groups definitely using the material and part of the network - their activities were reported in Left News - had their own ideas. Merseyside were the 'Left and Unity Theatre Club', later simply the 'Left Theatre Club', Bristol Unity Players were reported in Left News instead of the Bristol LBCTG they dwarfed, and Glasgow reversed the trend of the later 1930s by calling themselves a 'Workers Theatre Group'; Manchester remained the 'Theatre of Action' and we have already heard of the 'Contact Theatre' group active in Beckenham.

Clarke's account (1979 op. cit.) of British socialist theatre mentions, as a footnote, a point in passing in Hugh Thomas' biography of John Strachey. To Clarke the point 'in no way clarifies the complex tensions between the political and theatrical developments of the theatre in the years preceding the Second World War' (p.238) Thomas's point is unquoted, but is this:

Gollanz was outraged that the communist-run Unity Theatre group were trying to absorb the Left Book Club Theatre Guild, on the grounds that the communists, in their efforts to woo the Labour Party, thought that the disciplinable Unity Theatre groups were more appealing to Labour than the more adventurous Left Book Club people. (1973 p.173)

No source or any supporting evidence is offered, and we are left with the impression of Communist Party manipulation of a 'front' organisation to augment its current political strategy, in this

case to the detriment of an adventurous political theatre. The comment is worth examination since it does raise the issue of relations between political and theatrical developments, and issue largely ignored by other commentators on the Left Book Club.

Thomas' argument implies a dichotomy between the Unity groups, 'more appealing to labour' and LBC groups, 'more adventurous' presumably in political content as well as artistic style than their safer C.P. counterparts. Had he examined the actual work of these groups Thomas would probably not have made that statement. As we have seen, the same principal plays, sketches or declamations were performed by a range of groups in the latter 1930s, and the Left News announcements suggest that both Unity and LBC theatre groups considered themselves part of the same movement to achieve the same ends. But a return to the political content of the performed plays leads to another point altogether.

Howkins (1980 op. cit.) speaks, in an article on the culture of British Communism, of 'a badly conceived and even worse managed Popular Front, in which the issue of working class power was not even on the agenda' (p.143) Similarly, Trotskyist critics of the Party such as Hugo Dewar (1976 op. cit.) are cynical about an apparent subordination of all of fifteen years of the Party's revolutionary marxist politics under an alliance of the most unlikely allies who were clear what they were against, and never publicly discussed what they were for. But before such neat conclusions are reached about the Left Book Club surely the work of its branches such as the LBCTG should be considered; unfortunately no commentator has done this in any detail. From what has been discussed so far, to what extent does the LBCTG fit

the usual accounts of the Popular Front politics of the Left Book Club? Does its known repertoire add up to a particular political perspective known to LBC critics?

Waiting for Lefty has been described by Samuel, a writer apparently holding the post - WTM socialist theatre of the 1930s as a retreat from revolutionary politics, as:

a play which breathes a revolutionary spirit and dates from an earlier period ... its tremendous final appeal to the "storm-birds of the working class" has not lost its political, or theatrical force... (1977 op. cit. p.109)

Similarly the whole drive of On Guard for Spain ('What you shall hear is the tale of the Spanish people/it is also your own life') is for immediate and positive action to stop the Fascists. In Till the Day I Die it is the militant Communists who are the protagonists and the achievement of the French Popular Front is presented as the fruition of their work. Some other popular plays, as we have seen, focus on the growth of political consciousness alongside trades union organisation. Allen's Notes encouraged groups to connect with the labour movement but their material, echoing the sentiments of the rank and file, could hardly be judged likely to 'woo' the labour movement leaderships. The structures of that movement did not permit the views on the ground to be translated into policy, thwarting the Popular Front idea; at the same time it is clear that the theatre of the LBCTG was well to the Left of the type of politics some writers have associated with that idea.

Another point can be made here on the LBCTG in relation to its parent body. Murdock considers that the role of the LBC member was passive:

In fact the voice of the rank and file was largely excluded from the published titles, except when they gave interviews to documentary researchers... Despite the readers' groups and the ancillary activities, the Club conspicuously failed ... to turn its readers into collaborators or even to allow them to participate in the selection of titles. (op. cit. p.29)

Even allowing for the inevitable fluctuations, disparities and variations around the country this passivity, to Murdock partly imposed from above, does not extend to LBCTG participants. John Allen was aware, as we have seen ('the tremendous amount of co-operation that is needed among the different people concerned in putting on a play, is in itself a splendid lesson in practical socialism') and Left News makes clear that it was essential to draw members into activity and to develop and learn from their creativity.

Finally the LBCTG can be summarised as follows. A sizeable and nation-wide network of groups, many of whom reached a high standard of performance, achieved an active cultural expression of the major Left campaigns at the time. It related its cultural practice to these campaigns when, as with Spain, they developed into popular struggles, and achieved this through a diversity of theatrical forms which were at the one time innovatory and at the same time situated theoretically in terms of the English literary expression of radical popular struggles of the past. Despite problems with producing their own plays and playwrights the Guild was an exception to the arguable LBC rule over a passive role for its membership. Politically it is also perhaps an exception, with a strong emphasis on approaches to the labour movement - not just simply 'all men of goodwill' - and a socialist politics in the material by no means watered down.

Perhaps the most important point about the LBCTG is one of time. The Guild properly starts in 1937, and with the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the outbreak of war in 1939 its demise was instant. To have built what it did in two years was a remarkable achievement and must be, paradoxically, one of the main successes of the Left theatre movement in the decade.

The three inter-related principal exponents of socialist theatre in the 1930s have now been examined. It remains to draw together an over-view discussion of this period, and this is the task of the following section.

Notes

1. Quoted in B. Reid, 'The Left Book Club in the Thirties', in ed. J. Clark et al, Culture and Crisis in Britain in the 1930s (1979) p. 194.
2. Dawson, interview op. cit.
3. J. Lewis, 'News of the Groups', Left News no. 16 August 1937 p. 473.
4. *ibid.*
5. V. Gollancz, 'Editorial', Left News no. 13 May 1937 p. 338.
6. *ibid* p. 339.
7. B. Brecht, 'The German Drama: Pre-Hitler', Left Review vol. 2 no. 10 July 1936 p. 427-433.
8. J. Allen, 'Report', Left News no. 21 January 1938 p. 671.
9. *ibid.*
10. J. Allen, 'Report', Left News no. 23 March 1938 p. 722.
11. J. Allen, 'Report', Left News no. 24 April 1938 p. 784.
12. J. Allen, 'Report', Left News no. 29 September 1938 p. 992.
13. J. Allen, 'Report', Left News no. 31 November 1938 p. 710.
14. J. Allen, 'Report', Left News no. 22 February 1938 p. 710.
15. F. Jones, 'The Choice of Plays', Left News no. 37 May 1939 p. 1282.
16. F. Jones, 'The Guild must keep step with events', Left News no. 40 August 1939 p. 1374.
17. F. Jones, 'The Choice of Plays' op. cit.
18. Quotes are taken from the copy held at the Marx Memorial Library, London. Another possible date is 1937.
19. Dawson, interview op. cit.
20. This was J.W. Collier, 'Theatre Documentary', Theatre Arts no. 7 vol 31 1947 p. 65.
21. Allen, interview op. cit.
22. The Times 31st March 1938 p. 12.
23. C. Odets, 'Till the Day I Die' in Famous Plays of 1936 (1936 p. 503-568).
24. Dawson, interview op. cit.
25. I. Shaw, 'Bury the Dead' in Famous Plays of 1936 (1936 p. 327 - 391)

26. D. McCarthy, 'Bury the Dead', New Statesman May 14th 1938 p.834.
27. Liverpool Weekly Post, March 1939; quoted in a Merseyside Left Theatre Club pamphlet (circa 1939) shown to the author by Jerry Dawson.
28. J. Allen, 'Theatre Guild Report', Left News no.30 October 1938 p.1625.
29. F. Tilsley, 'Moore's Ark', in E.A. Osborne (ed) In Letters of Red (1938) p.225-245
30. Dawson, interview op. cit.
31. Dawson, interview op. cit.
32. Letter quoted in F. Jones, 'The Guild Must Keep Step with Events', Left News no.40 August 1939 p.1373.
33. J. Lewis and F. Jones, 'Our Club Guilds Give Life to the People', in Tribune June 2nd 1939 p.5.
34. Dawson, interview op. cit.
35. F. Jones, 'The Choice of Plays', Left News no.37 May 1939 p.1251.
36. F. Jones, 'Form and Content', Left News no.36 April 1939 p.1251.
37. J. Allen, 'Report', Left News no.20 December 1937 p.632.
38. Anon. 'The LBC and the Fight for Democracy', Left News no.34 February 1939 p.1179.
39. J. Allen, 'Report', Left News no. 14 June 1937 p.412.
40. J. Allen, 'Theatre', Fact no. 4 July 1937 p.38.
41. Dawson, interview op. cit.
42. Dawson, interview op. cit.
43. 'Reports' in Left News no.36 April 1939 p.1252 and no. 29 September 1938 p.981.
44. J. Lewis and F. Jones in Tribune June 2nd 1939 p.5 op. cit.
45. 'Actor', 'A Real Workers' Theatre Movement', Discussion vol.3 no. 2 March 1938 p.42-4.
46. Dawson, interview op. cit.
47. J. Lewis and F. Jones op. cit.
48. J. Allen, 'Where are the New Dramatists?', Daily Worker 21st June 1937 p.7.
49. J. Allen, 'Reports' in Left News no. 29 September 1938 p.992 and no. 37 May 1939 p.1282.

50. Allen, interview op. cit.
51. J. Allen, 'Retrospect and Prospect', Left News no. 29 September 1938 p. 980.
52. 'Reports', in Left News no. 29 September 1938 p. 981, and no. 36 April 1939 p. 1252.
53. For example the Liverpool Daily Post review quoted in the Merseyside Left Theatre Club pamphlet op. cit.
54. Dawson, interview op. cit.
55. Allen, interview op. cit.
56. J. Lewis and F. Jones op. cit.

4: Socialist Theatre in the 1930s : A Concluding Summary.

An overview of the socialist theatre in the years discussed in the previous sections is useful at this juncture for another reason than the logical break provided by the outbreak of the Second World War. This is because the 1930s are accepted as a decade emblematic for an examination of the relations between art and politics; social and political considerations are permitted in the literary criticism of works of this time to an extent unparalleled by most other modern periods.

However just as the dramatic works examined by this thesis are outside the conventional literary canon for the most part, so some of the conventional critical assumptions employed will be challenged in the overview below.

Several major points have emerged from the discussion so far. Firstly it is useful to clarify the political contexts, the two apparently contrasted political contexts, within which the socialist theatre operated during the 1930s.

Politically the record of the parliamentary Labour Party presented major opportunities to the Marxist Left, of which the only serious contender was the Communist Party. The economic slump of 1929 was soon compounded when the leadership of the Labour Government joined with the Conservatives to form the 'National Government'. Domestically this administration embarked on a policy of major reductions in public expenditure, including the levels of unemployment benefit administered by the authoritarian Public Assistance committees and the Means Test, despite the persistence of high unemployment, irregular employment and poverty until 1939. In foreign policy the British government was generally considered

to be more concerned with neutralizing the Soviet Union than the aggression of fascist Italy and Germany; indeed, wishing to use the fascist powers to crush the Soviets. It refused to take any opportunity to assist Spanish democracy against Franco, and its attitude to Nazi expansionism stands condemned as 'appeasement'.

The events of the 'National Government' episode implicated the Labour Party in all this and it suffered successive electoral defeat throughout the decade; despite the radical campaigns with which the 1930s are associated the mass of working people remained sufficiently unmoved even to vote Labour in substantive numbers, and the road was clear for Conservative domination throughout these years of domestic and international crisis.

Saville's comments on the Labour leadership bear repeating:

Everyone in the labour movement was concerned about unemployment; the bitterness of those years has not been exaggerated. But... the general failure to maintain a national campaign against the major social evil of the decade was typical of Labour's general political attitudes and approaches. Despite, for example, the extraordinary passion evoked by the Spanish Civil War, the Labour Party never conducted a major campaign throughout the country on any of the issues involved, except for a desultory attempt after the 1937 Annual Conference. All the major political campaigns and initiatives for which the 1930s are remembered were conducted either against the expressed wishes of the Labour leadership or without their approval ... The energies unloosed around these issues, and the political commitment entered into, can at no point be credited to the Labour leaders ... to characterise the Labour leadership as incompetent and ineffectual is not only a judgement of hindsight, it was precisely and exactly what was pronounced at the time, by increasing numbers of Labour activists as well as by non-Labour commentators.
(op. cit. p.241)

He pursues a similar argument regarding the trades union

leadership. According to Saville unionization was the key to the revitalization of the Labour movement - and the Labour vote - after the early traumas. But, crucially, the unions failed to respond with any vigour to the geographical shift in employment opportunities towards the Midlands and the South-East.

Therefore it was largely left to the Communist Party to attempt to occupy the leadership vacuum which this situation created. However at this time the Party was also in the final analysis an agent of international policies determined by Stalin's perception of the immediate interests of the Soviet state. Thus the 'class against class' policy of approximately 1930-1934 (which sees the career of the WTM) which is generally considered - despite the domestic reasons which would have made the policy plausible to activists - to have been completely inappropriate for British conditions.

In addition Samuel (1980) has made some pertinent observations on what may be termed the culture of Party life at that time, amplifying those of Howkins (op. cit.) considered earlier. He points out that the Party continued the proto-religious tendencies of the pre - 1914 socialist sects from amongst whom it had been formed : a firm framework of orthodox texts, a special language, political education as catechism and demands for exceptionally high levels of personal dedication. This, he argues:

all tended to make Communists into a peculiar people, an esoteric community set apart ... The triple combination of numerical weakness, police harassment and trade union and employer blacklisting, combined with a high sense of historical mission to turn the Party into something

of a persecuted sect - the character which it increasingly assumed in the years between the General Strike and the Popular Front. (p. 50)

This period of the Popular Front - again, to a large extent only possible because of Comintern directive - demanded not only a reversal of political approach but also a fundamentally different mental universe from this for Party activists. The extent to which this was possible and done was overdetermined by the nature of the Labour Party and trades union leaderships to whom appeals for unity were addressed, or the structures of those organisations which effectively blocked or stalled any moves for unity from the rank and file. This attempt to build a broad alliance of all sections of the labour movement and progressives to pose a unified opposition to fascism at home and abroad (as distinct from an attempt to build a revolutionary vanguard Party based in the industrial working class) clearly, as can be seen from the Left Book Club, drew in large numbers. But the progressive counter-attack to a 'National' Government reactionary at home and ignoring fascism abroad faced the familiar impasse. Ernest Bevin's attitude to anything associated with the Communist Party has been illustrated by his role in the TGWU during the London busmen's strike; similarly the domination of Labour Party conferences by such right-wing union block votes ensured that any CP - inspired initiatives would be thwarted in the mainstream organisations of the labour movement. At one point Stafford Cripps and Aneurin Bevan were expelled from the Labour Party for supporting the Popular Front campaign.

Thus this tactic too was a failure. Nevertheless it is important that one of Saville's points is borne in mind here:

But without the Communist Party the history of the 1930s, from about 1933-34 onwards, would have been very different. They provided the dynamic behind the organisation of the hunger marches, much of the opposition on the streets to Mosley, and a great deal of the extraordinary effort to support Republican Spain in the Civil War, including the recruitment of a high proportion of the British section of the International Brigade from amongst Party members. The Party was also central to the radicalisation of the student movement, and its influence over intellectuals was not inconsiderable. (op. cit. p.248)

This then was the overall political context within which the socialist theatre operated, one featuring two apparently distinct, discrete and divergent political strategies. It is important to state again that British socialist theatre was not invented in the 1930s (other research will quite likely demonstrate lines of continuity to, and beyond, the pre-1914 socialist sects to which Samuel refers) but nevertheless the nature of the CP in 1930 made the formation of the WTM particularly appropriate, as well as largely determining its nature.

An isolated, isolationist revolutionary Party exhibiting the characteristics of a sub-culture within society is the more likely to develop an artistic wing as much to serve its own needs as to conduct propaganda. Thus, overall, the WTM performances were largely confined to its own constituency in terms of contexts and venues although again there is evidence to suggest that detailed local study may modify this judgement. Certainly, even making allowances for over-enthusiastic claims, WTM groups did perform to large numbers of people at very specific times and places. This very specificity is the point, however, and in terms of the objectives which the members set themselves their efforts to dispel the 'dope' and 'chloroform' affecting the minds of unconvinced workers proved more difficult than they

assumed : between 1930 and 1934 the mass workers' theatre was never closer to emergence than the mass revolutionary party.

The WTM however, despite these obvious limitations deserves a far more worthy status than that of a footnote in the history of British socialist theatre. Its contribution must be placed in the context of the early 1930s. In 1935, in the article which is in fact of some significance, Montagu Slater maintained that one of the conditions for literary advance on the Left was a theoretical advance:

One of the functions of a Left Review is to begin to catch up the leeway of forty years stoppage of Marxist theory in England... We are still in the period in England where the last two volumes of Capital itself are available only in a poor (and expensive) American edition of what must be one of the world's worst translations. Engels's Origin of the Family is also available in an American edition. Marx's essays, or some of them, are available, if you're lucky, in an inadequate edition bearing the imprint of a publisher who no longer exists. These are pointers only but significant. (1935 op. cit. p.364)

This is one illustration of the fact that the WTM had to find its own way in the area of cultural theory; its parent Party also regarded it in an extremely restricted role. Therefore the 1932 WTM Conference Document, which has been described, and which represents perhaps a rationalization of recent experience in Britain and Germany coupled with existing raw material, is of particular significance. It codifies, for this section of the British working-class movement, both a politics of representation as well as some practical guidelines as to how working people could be drawn into activity in this area.

Further, it is also to the WTM's credit that it made a good start at building, possibly for the first time in Britain, a flexible and mobile socialist theatre aimed at the militant sections of the labour movement and attempting to situate its practice at the theoretical level also. Thus it contributed to accustoming those sections to the role that theatre could play in their campaigns and organisations.

The fact that the WTM was so clearly tied, had its agenda set, by the Communist Party ensured that it would be a part of any shift in political style and priority of that body. But it should also be borne in mind that, as has been indicated, there is evidence of dissatisfaction internally over the self-imposed limitations of WTM work which may have accelerated without any change of line. Furthermore although the WTM as an organisation was obviously a casualty of the Popular Front, Samuel also points out (1977 op. cit. p.109) that the break should not be exaggerated. The fate of an organisation should not necessarily be taken as a guide to the fate of the ideas and experiences it stimulated. It has been described how The Fall of the House of Slusher directly continued, in 1938, WTM material in content as well as form, agitprop performances and conditions were undertaken and encouraged by both the Unity Theatres and the Left Book Club Theatre Guilds; less directly, the discussions in Red Stage over the 'rhythmic utterances of mass slogans' and the sketches based on changing immediate events respectively indicate early examples of the mass declamation and the Living Newspaper. Despite the political dichotomy represented by the 'class against class' and Popular Front strategies of the 1930s it would be to over-privilege the political as a determinant to assume a similarly neat divide in the area of socialist theatre.

This point can be pursued as regards dramatic form. The inadequacy of some previous accounts of the aesthetics of the WTM and Unity have already been described. Writing of the Glasgow Workers Theatre Group Douglas Allen states a similar argument in a different way:

What we see in the work of groups like the GWTG is in fact a distinctive form which defies the traditional simplistic division between agitprop and realism. The GWTG, for example, rejected the bourgeois realism of the proscenium stage ... yet they employed the "psychological realist" acting methods of Stanislavskian naturalism. And while they rejected the sloganizing and abstractions of agitprop, they employed its minimalism, its dynamics, its use of theatrical space and audience involvement... Odets's Lefty seemed to combine the best of all these features, with its psychological realism and identification of the characters, its minimal stage settings and audience dynamism. (1980 op. cit. p.50)

In other words this was a development rather than a retreat from the WTM; Unity's use of Stanislavski for example was selective and only one example of the diversity of forms used both between and within plays.

Politically also the evidence from the theatre groups suggests that some of the characterizations of the political work of the Popular Front may be premature. The essential argument of Dewar (1976 op. cit.) can be taken as symptomatic of one view. According to this fascism and nazism are not only moral evils but also the structural expression of capitalism in decay; therefore not only the fascists but also the social system which produced them must be defeated if their threat is to be eradicated. It follows that it is not only insufficient, it is misleading and dangerous to build opposition purely on the common denominator of being

against fascism - it should be built on the common denominator of being for the socialist alternative to the decline of capitalism. By this means only could unemployment, fascism and the threat of war be eliminated, not by diluting socialist politics to become acceptable to a 'front' so broad that it negated the hegemonic role of the working class and its revolutionary Party.

This critique is derived from a study of conference resolution, Comintern documents and speeches or articles by the CP leadership. Within the Left theatre however there is evidence that political activity out on the ground was by no means always on the basis which writers such as Dewar contend.

The Unity theatre movement parallels the Left Book Club movement, itself the classic expression of the Popular Front cultural politics. The repertoire has already been discussed, and it has been noted how the widely popular and successful Waiting for Lefty would hardly fit the 'unity at any price' bill drawn up by Dewar. Whereas the published list of recommended plays for the LBCTG which has been examined does not privilege traditionally labour movement-orientated plays, and although for London Unity at least the trade union collaboration of Busmen seems to have been exceptional, nevertheless Plant in the Sun, Private Hicks and Rehearsal (all concerned with growth of consciousness themes and, in the light of Saville's comments, with basic union organization) were all widely played. It is also interesting to note how Babes in the Wood, although less explicitly socialist than the (revolutionary?) socialist farces Cannibals! Carnival and Where's That Bomb? nevertheless urged its audience to 'join up with the workers in the social fight' and to 'join the workers'

fighting front for liberty and peace'. Further specific research would be needed to identify how far these sentiments accorded or were out of step with local Popular Front campaigning, but the frequency of these performances around the country suggest that this traditional focus of socialist politics was by no means ignored.

Some main points have emerged also concerning the dramatic forms used in this period, and these can be extended beyond the registration of agitprop and the advances made by Waiting for Lefty. A phrase used of this play by critics was a 'cinematic quality', and again we hear of 'cinematic writing'. These were the years of massive expansion in cinema audiences,⁽¹⁾ and cinema techniques (regardless of any denunciations of cinema content) would probably have exerted some influences on the political theatre - recall, too, the factory girl who complained to Ewan MacColl that the theatre was 'too slow'. There are further considerations to 'cinematic writing' however which become apparent when the drama-documentaries of the Left theatre - the Living Newspapers - are seen in the context of the rise of the documentary film movement associated with the 1930s. This indeed is one of the reasons why such attention was paid to the play Busmen, above, since it provides such a contrast with the films of the Crown Film Unit under John Grierson which have dominated the history of British documentary.

As has been noted, in developing Living Newspapers groups were employing concepts earlier developed by European revolutionary artists. These concepts had been reduced by this time in the Soviet Union, under Stalinism, to the staging of safely

traditional material, but Unity was able to use them in the context in which they had been originally devised.

This presents a contrast with the documentary film of the period. As Lovell and Hillier (1972) note, Grierson was aware of but consciously rejected the avant-garde film practice of Vertov and Eisenstein. Basil Wright seems to have been unable to use the forms which he had witnessed in the Russian theatre. By being both aware of and influenced by such techniques, the producers of Busmen, on the other hand, could avail themselves of a mode of address impossible in the naturalistic cinema. Some examples are quoted scenes of LTPB officials shaking hands and chatting with the press, the 'Shark' dictating to the secretary sitting on his knee, and the juxtaposition of objective conditions and events with subjective responses. These artifices were self-conscious and displayed, unlike the concealed artifices employed by some documentary films to ensure a 'naturalness' of impression. (2)

The use of narrative devices in Busmen presents an obvious contrast. Here the Voice, secured in a flow of verifiable information, does not always claim objective comment: it campaigns on behalf of the documented. One can imagine a Grierson-esque film on the work of the bus driver, and how that film's structure and composition could not admit any statement on working conditions.

There would have been, of course, other reasons why such a film could not admit any statement on working conditions. These lie in the relationships between the film units and the state.

Sponsored as it largely was by government bodies - a sponsorship which Grierson's conception of the state and of documentary found not only unproblematic but laudable - the documentary films of the 1930s could hardly have developed into a politically

oppositional practice. (Khun 1977).

Unity's position outside such an apparatus obviously rendered it more freedom, although it too was subject to pressures which are described above. Finally, another contrast can be found in the relations of cultural production themselves. The involvement of busmen at every stage instituted new relations between documentarists and documented, a democracy impossible in the social ornithology of the film units. Also in many - not all - of the documentary films the images of the documented have been appropriated, if not actually expropriated. This is to say that miners did not see Coalface nor trawlermen Drifters, but Busmen represented the audience back to itself, interpreted the experience of the class back to itself as well as to a wider audience.

These plays represent a fascinating suggestion of the potential which existed in 1930s documentary far beyond the narrow range which has usually occupied so much critical attention.

The other apparently innovatory form was the mass declamation. Although Jack Lindsay, as we have seen, has claimed originality here, WTM experience and the performance of works by Toller had already indicated the possibilities of the use of spoken and acted poetry in the right contexts. Lindsay himself at this time was firmly within the Popular Front impulse of Marxist writers to identify and assert a tradition of popular, democratic and radical values within English culture and history. This surfaced in his theoretical perspective for mass declamations in 1937.

Lindsay argued in Left Review, that 'poetry has always found its vitalisation in a socially valuable relation to the speaking

voice'. This article sketched out an organic relationship between classical poetry and recitation: this had given rise to vivid popular forms and lyric constructions surviving only by oral tradition. The essential point was the relationship of poet to audience and the nature of that audience rather than the mere speaking aloud of poetry. Economic developments culminating in capitalism had driven a wedge between poetry and the speaking voice as surely as it had done between producer and consumer. Thus the poets had lost solidarity with their audiences, which was the valid social relation, and consequently the 'method of recitation had lost its tincture of social reality'. The English Romantic poets had attempted to 'rediscover the secret of poetic diction as the first step towards the re-creation of an homogeneous audience - an audience that would feel a solidarity of sympathy', but the immaturity of the revolutionary forces of the time had prevented this. The task now was to take up where they had left off, 'to apply the solution of Shelley and Byron in terms of the new situation'. (1937 p.515).

There are certain similarities here with some of the lines of argument advanced in Christopher Caudwell's Illusion and Reality, posthumously published following his death in action in Spain that same year. But whereas Caudwell was vague on the future of poetry and its role in political struggle, Lindsay proposed a definite course of action which encapsulated the determining sense of urgency which characterises Marxist artistic writings of the time:

Here, then, I make my plea for Declamation,
Mass-Recitation, as the initial and primary
form of our new poetry. For there we get
the most direct contact with the new audience...
For the peculiar nature of the social struggle

of our day, as we near the terrible death-agonies and convulsions of Imperialism, demands of the poet that the core of his expression, his sense of the human whole, should be overwhelmingly political. He seeks contact with his audience in conditions of increasing danger; and his methods must be based on this fact. Mass declamation becomes the form of contact from which endless new developments can stem... (ibid p. 516)

In other words a new direction for political poetry was to be attempted, one which aimed to return to an organic link between poet and audience through material expressive of political urgency.

Such a statement of the relation between work and audience introduces the question of what can be concluded about theatre and audience in the socialist theatre movement through the 1930s, what can be summarized from the evidence.

The point made about the WTM was that its politics largely confined it to playing to self-selected audiences can be extended to the later theatre with its far less sectarian approach both politically and in terms of the theatre in general. This is to say that the functions being performed by theatre within the Left rather than to the wider public outside it show a continuity throughout the decade which could be said to unite otherwise diverse theatrical approaches.

The impact made by On Guard for Spain has already been described; the literary Left of the time was ready with the explanation. Edgell Rickword has described the declamation as, besides 'a totally new breakthrough', as a 'thing that could have come off only in a time of exceptional emotional intensity'.⁽³⁾ Similarly Vernon Beste, writing during the war, analysed its impact in these terms:

One thing was clear, however; without my knowledge of the Spanish situation, without the speeches which had preceded it, the mass declamation would have been of small value in rousing me. Mass declamations are not suited for explanation or argument but only for the re-inforcement of them through the senses... Left diehards turn up their noses at making appeals to the emotions as a means of stirring the people to action. They would be right to do so if that were the only appeal that were made - more, they would be correct to point out the Fascist nature of such methods... There is no reason, however, why we should depend only on intellectually acquired conviction, for such conviction remains shallow unless it is quickened by feeling. (1943 op. cit. p.3)

This role for the declamation can be compared with Geoffrey Parsons' account of the role played by Babes in the Wood in the campaigns at the time of Munich. Besides his claim that 'the shafts struck home, and many a hitherto unquestioning follower of the National Government was made to think again', Parsons recognised that the pantomime:

was an inspiration of great value to all those members of its audience who were actively engaged in anti-fascist struggle, for it gave them an enormous lift to be able to laugh themselves sore at the satirical treatment of the appeasers and everything they stood for, and to end the evening with the sense of determined solidarity that was engendered when the cast and a large part of the audience sang the Unity march. (1954 op. cit. p.12)

Thus it can be said that the success of these performances arose not just from their quality but from the frequent identity between the conditions of production and the conditions of consumption. Both performers and the majority of the audiences were involved to varying degrees in the same movement or campaign, both were already in rapport, and the ground was already prepared

for the enthusiastic response which the performances created. On Guard for Spain and Babes in the Wood, and also as we have seen Waiting for Lefty therefore probably performed the same function as Meerut or Means Test Murder or Speed-Up and Enter Rationalization: a confirming and celebratory experience for those involved in the struggles with which the plays were concerned. This itself should not be easily dismissed as a limited and restricted role. Some of these plays seem to have successfully galvanised those who were nominally members of a movement or nominally supporters of a cause into actual political activity. The enduring status of the Spanish cause in the British labour movement testifies to the effectiveness of the pre-war anti-fascist movement in this respect at least, and thus by implication the theatre groups which helped to cement their commitment.

The satirical impact of Babes in the Wood demonstrates another function of Unity Theatre, one which becomes clear when it is compared to the role of other media at this time. Radio, whilst enormously popular, excluded according to Branson and Heinemann 'unorthodox religious views and left-wing politics', it made 'little attempt to give even an appearance of impartiality' and steadily offered 'traditional middle-class culture, self-improvement tempered by triviality, and establishment views'. (op. cit. p. 274). Jeffery has identified one of the principal strands in the foundation and success of the Mass Observation organisation in the 1930s as:

a deep distrust of the press, and criticism of the press to fulfill its supposed function, that is, to bridge the gap between rulers and ruled, to tell the public of the moves and thoughts of its elected leaders and to tell the leaders of the opinions of the electorate. During the Abdication Crisis the press had

imposed self-censorship, pages had been torn out of foreign magazines before they reached the public... the public wanted the facts and got nothing but rumour. (op. cit. p.2)

For the Left this failure was interpreted politically. The Times and The Observer were owned by the Astor family and completely committed to the appeasement policy of the establishment; further, the Astor family home at Cliveden was identified, correctly or otherwise, by Communist journalist Claud Cockburn as the centre and pro-fascist political powerhouse of the appeasement policy. His phrase 'the Cliveden Set' was as we have seen used to great effect in Babes in the Wood.⁽⁴⁾

The point here is the status of the socialist theatre as a form of communication. Several examples have been discussed: for the Lancashire cotton workers Ewan MacColl's Red Megaphones believed the task was to supply information about developments in their struggle elsewhere; the way Unity casts approached Living Newspapers at times suggests that they aspired to providing an information system as a rival alternative to the press, the BBC and the cinema newsreels. It does appear to be the case that they did offer alternative political views and information with the same contemporaneity but more force and analysis than the dominant media; given the described position of those media the Living Newspaper idea was a valuable tool for the Left culture. As with plays such as Tory MP, or on state air-raid precautions or a number of the WTM sketches on the topics of the day the task was undertaken of providing an alternative perspective on events complete with its own symbolism and visual imagery.

It was stated initially how an examination of material largely outside the conventional literary canon entails a challenge also

to some of the conventional critical assumptions associated with it. As we have seen the Living Newspapers contrast vividly with the film documentaries which are assumed to comprise the 1930s documentary movement. More questions are raised when the critical comment attracted by On Guard for Spain is considered.

For A.T. Tolley On Guard is 'an object lesson in how inanity of feeling goes along with inanity of rhetoric'. (1975 p.319)

According to Hugh Ford:

If On Guard had any value at all, it was the somewhat negative value of supporting the work of propagandists. If it enjoyed a certain popular acclaim, it was because those who heard it were already excited about Spain. Its only striking feature was a fresh, vigorous style, redolent of the style of the eighteenth-century broadsheets, which, if recited by the trained person, might make even the substance of the poem palatable. (1965 p.142)

These two critics are, knowingly or not, taking a cue from an article by Stephen Spender which appeared in the same 1937 issue of Fact which contained John Allen's article The Theatre.

Spender singled out On Guard for attack; ~~sle~~zing particularly on the lines 'I rose from the bed of my wife's young body' Spender accused Lindsay of:

...putting words into the mouth of a young militia lad in Barcelona. Writing such as this may be effective recruiting propaganda, but it is supremely untruthful as poetry. These lines are not bad because there are no conceivable conditions in which one man might experience the sensations they record, but because this man's case is represented as typical, so that the lines have the air of a generalisation. Such writing is simply a record of the hysteria which the poet shares with his audience and himself and does not see at all from the outside. (1937 p.27)

It is worth discussing this criticism since, as we have seen, it can almost be taken as the predecessor of the later positions of Ford or Tolley. It is also symptomatic of Spender's evolving conception of the relationships between the poet, politics and poetry at this time. He shows here his limiting insistence that valid poetry could only deal with that which had been experienced. Thus his own Spanish war poetry, from the outside, separates individuals from causes and from history, and, in a conscious imitation of Wilfred Owen, rejects 'the propagandist lie which makes the dead into heroes in order that others may imagine that death is really quite pleasant'. (ibid p.26) One need not concur with the aggression of Douglas Garman's review at the time⁽⁵⁾ - basically, that Spender was insisting on a fundamental differentiation between the poet and the rest of humanity because of the poet's profounder intuitions of life - to realise that Spender had completely failed to grasp what the declamation was about. It was, and remains, illegitimate to take a few lines of On Guard and subject them to literary criteria which ignore the conditions of performance. Also, alongside a rejection of the possibility of a socialist artist being able at that time to regard the struggle of the Spanish people 'from the outside', Jack Lindsay later provided a rebuttal of a more basic nature. He pointed out that it was not a case of lines being 'put into the mouth' of the militiaman but an expression of the cruelty of the war which had been forced by the fascists. Any 'hysteria' was Spender's, and his interpretation was not shared by the audiences who saw the declamation performed.⁽⁶⁾

A more legitimate critical criteria both for On Guard and for the socialist theatre as a whole at this time could be constructed from a denominator common to the WTM, Unity and the LBCTG. All of

these initiatives, through their day-schools, training systems, conferences and publications, sought actively to involve ordinary working people in every aspect of theatre work. This aim may have been unevenly achieved but the consideration of audiences as far more than passive recipients of material was strong and no mere sociological experiment; it was a conscious effort to transform the relations of cultural production along with the cultural products themselves. This has been recognized by Edgell Rickword and expressed in this way:

The real triumphs of the socially conscious literature of the time were not individual achievements ... The real triumph was the drawing into the cultural ambit of a significant number of men and women who were barricaded out from participation in what was regarded as a middle-class preserve. Our aim was a political one, to eradicate fascism, and this could only be done by the fullest co-operation of the masses. (7)

But in August 1939 many anti-fascists sustained the demoralization of the Soviet-German Non-Aggression Pact, signed soon after Franco's victory in Spain. One month later Hitler invaded Poland and Britain was at war; the Communist Party soon fell in behind Moscow to denounce the war as 'imperialist'. Thus the masses were drawn into eradicating fascism without the CP. The next section is concerned with the place of socialist theatre within the developments and consequences of this situation, and within the war as a whole.

Notes

1. C.L. Mowat, Britain Between the Wars 1918-1940 (1968) p. 246-248.
2. Some examples of such concealed devices in the documentary films can be found in E. Sussex, The Rise and Fall of British Documentary (1975) p.68.
3. Quoted in A.T. Tolley, The Poetry of the Thirties (1975) p.320.

It has already been noted how the early work of the WTM prefigures the mass declamation and the living newspaper; an account of even earlier examples can be found in L.A. Jones, 'The Workers' Theatre Movement in the Twenties', Zeitschrift fur Anglistik und Amerikanistik. Vol.3 no. 14 January 1966 p.259-281. However what could be claimed to be a 'totally new breakthrough' after the ground had been prepared was the highly poetic, Greek-chorus quality of Lindsay's declamation, nonetheless effective in a mass political campaign, which took declamations to a new height.

It also took a combination of American influence (and through that the Soviet cinema and theatre), the cultural centrality of the documentary form as well as hostility to the mass media to raise living newspapers to the level achieved in the later 1930s.

4. Whereas M. Gilbert and R. Gott, The Appeasers (1963) p.46 describes this view of the 'Cliveden Set' as a myth, the fact that the story was so widely believed is itself an important comment. This argument is pursued in P. Cockburn, The Years of 'The Week' (1968) passim.
5. D. Garman, 'World in Revolt', Left Review vol. 3 no.8 September 1937 p.498-499.
6. J. Lindsay, After the Thirties (1956) p.38.
7. Quoted in A.T. Tolley op. cit. p.321.

5: The Peoples' War and the Peoples' Theatre:
Socialist Theatre during World War Two

The processes whereby the Communist Party of Great Britain adopted the positions it did during the early stages of the Second World War, and the precise details of the determinants of those processes, remain a subject for discussion and debate. (1) For the purposes of this chapter however it is sufficient to note that having welcomed the German-Soviet Non Aggression Treaty as 'a dramatic peace move to halt aggressors', and declared initially that the war against fascism could and must be won, by the end of September the Non-Aggression Treaty signatories were urging the Western powers to make peace. Thus by early October the Central Committee of the CPGB stated that the British, French and Polish Governments bore 'equal responsibility with German Fascism for the present war', and that it was 'unjust and imperialist' (Pelling 1975 p. 112-3).

Consequently, the party began to suffer from a degree of public hostility that it had not experienced since the early nineteen-twenties. Its propaganda meetings were broken up by angry mobs, and its speakers were assaulted, rescued by the police, they were as often as not taken into custody and charged with using "insulting words". Even the distribution of Communist literature was made the excuse for prosecution. (ibid p. 114)

The fall in membership was dramatic and included resignations such as that of veteran International Brigade commander Tom Wintringham. The Left Book Club splintered, and although it continued as a book club and presumably an educator until 1948, it was effectively finished as a political force from this time on.

Nevertheless the Party was not without its propaganda successes in the two years which saw the British defeat in Norway, the fall of France and Dunkirk, the threat of invasion and the intensive bombing raids on London and other major cities. ~~The~~

Daily Worker, within a framework of presenting the war as a capitalist venture depriving the working class of its hard-won rights and living standards, capitalised on discontent over hardships, 'trekking' ⁽²⁾ and military mismanagement. The Party's opposition to the war culminated in its organisation of the Peoples' Convention, a purportedly 'broad left' movement presenting the following aims:

Defence of the people's living standards.
Defence of the people's democratic and trades union rights.
Adequate air-raid precautions, deep bomb-proof shelters, re-housing and relief of victims.
Friendship with the Soviet Union.
A people's government truly representative of the whole people and able to inspire the confidence of the working people of the world.
A people's peace that gets rid of the causes of the war. (Pelling *ibid* p. 117)

Within days of the convention's first rally in 1941 the Daily Worker was suppressed by the coalition government, despite the fact that, as McLaine's use of Public Records Office intelligence material suggests, the CP was having more effect on the morale of the War Cabinet than on that of the nation (1979 p. 192).

Three examples illustrate the nature of the socialist theatre at the time. In Manchester the police succeeded in closing a tour of the successful Living Newspaper Last Edition which has been described in an earlier section. The Manchester Theatre of Action had included a final scene to their panorama of life and politics in the 1930s which:

urged the workers not to sacrifice themselves
for the Capitalist system which in peacetime

exploited them; they had nothing to gain by fighting each other, the real enemy was at home. This reflected the view that the only war that could be supported was the class war and that international conflict was against the interests of the working classes of all countries who always bore the brunt of the hostilities. This admittedly minority view needs to be set in the context of the refusal of the Western powers to co-operate with the Soviet Union in the pre-war years when the outbreak of hostilities might have been prevented.
(Goorney op. cit. p. 22)

It is worth remarking here on the residual influence of CP politics apparent in this play, since Goorney records earlier that the prime movers of the Theatre of Action (MacColl and Littlewood) left the Party as early as 1934.

Christmas 1940 saw London Unity Theatre stage a pantomime, Jack the Giant Killer, almost a year after its great pantomime success with Babes in the Wood. Indeed, this pantomime was advertised as 'another pantomime by the authors of Babes in the Wood' (Geoffrey Parsons and Berkley Fase) and references to Babes are in fact never far from the text. (3)

Apart from the Chorus the cast comprises Jack and Jill and their mother, the Dame; the Wicked Baron Mouthpiece, the two Bad Boys and the Home Front Fairy. The action is basically verbal fencing between the roles to satirise the war outside:

Dame:	Here we are, pushed here, plagued there, evacuated, drilled, ticketted, docketted, chivvied, worried, frightened, attached - it's not right, and all the Prime Minister can promise us is "Blood, toil and sweat"! Blood, toil and sweat, he says, for what?
Jack:	Sh, Mother - be careful - there's someone coming -
Baron (approaching):	Excuse me -

Dame: Granted.
Baron: Madam, I must remind you
 that such remarks are
 calculated to spread alarm
 and despondency - I shall
 report you -
Jack: Report Mother? What for?
Baron: For defeatist talk.
Jill: Nonsense! She's only
 repeating what the Prime
 Minister said -
Baron: Ah! (coughs awkwardly)
 What a man! What a command
 of adjectives!
Jack: What's the use of adjectives?
 You can't bring the cost of
 living down with adjectives...
Jill: You can't stop bombs with
 adjectives.
Baron: Nobody tries to. But you can
 use them to make people so
 enthusiastic that they forget
 the cost of living and forget
 the bombs.

This continues with the revelation that Baron Mouthpiece is, in fact, the government, since he is money-power, monopoly, an essential ingredient behind all activity from fixing the bank rate to appointing a bishop. There is a simple answer to complaints and problems about this:

Baron: You know full well we must
 defeat the giant first,
 and we must all sacrifice
 to do that.
Dame: Sacrifice, sacrifice, I've
 had that word flung in my
 face so often I've begun to
 feel like a burnt offering
 myself.
Jack: Sacrifice for what, may I ask?
Baron: You may not. At least you
 may, but not if you expect
 an answer that means anything.

The Baron ('he's carrying on where the Wicked Uncle left off') fends off demands for deep shelters ('people who meet in deep shelters think deep thoughts') and the class inequalities of evacuation and countryside safety with encouragement to 'go to it' to 'get rid of the giant'. This Act climaxes with the

'GO TO IT' song except that the Dame, with audience participation, is encouraging her children and listeners to 'go to' union and protest meetings to demand proper air raid precautions and the maintainance of living standards.

Next we meet the two Bad Boys, respectively the leaders of the trades union and labour movements who are now proud to be part of the war-time coalition governments. They drown all complaints in bureaucracy and their own careerist self-interest. All sing together:

Baron:	This Golden Boy is sitting pretty now.
Dame:	Just as Ramsey Mac did years before him.
Baron:	Oh, he's the darling of the City now.
J & J:	Profiteers and bankers just adore him.
Bad Boy:	I'll hook a seat in the upper house.
Baron:	A baron we'll create him.
Dame:	He'll be Lord Renegade of Turncoat House.
J & J:	Unless the workers liquidate him.

The Dame decides she'll have to sell Daisy, the pantomime cow, which leads to quick-fire topical references to the bureaucracy of the Milk Marketing Board, the scope of Baron Mouthpiece's activities in running the nation, and the Bad Boy's collaboration:

Bad Boy I:	Identifies the national cause with his own - real love of country.
Jack:	He ought to love his country - he owns enough of it!

Eventually the cow is sold, but when all war-time deductions are made Jack is left with a bag of beans; 'compensation gold - no use till after the war'. Jack, Jill and the Dame are distraught, but along to help comes the successor to Fairy Wishfulfillment

from Babes in the Wood , the Home Front Fairy, who introduces herself:

In me you see the Home Front Fairy
My job is to keep you bright
My motto's the same as last year's fairy
"Everything's going to be all right"...
...I deplore this call for war aims
It will be made clear to you
That our aims aren't the same as your
aims
When the appropriate time is due ...
...We fight for self-determination
And are ready to discuss
How to free each subject nation
Providing it's not oppressed by us...
...I confess I was a member
of the late lamented Link
The parties that Von Ribbentrop gave
I remember
And Hitler was splendid I used to think -

And still I can't help wishing he'd turn on
the Reds
So that fairies like me could sleep safe in our
beds.

The Fairy shows Jack the beans are magic beans; planted, we see them grow into a tree marked 'Social System'. All you have to do is start at the bottom and work your way up to become like the two Golden Boys. But Jack doesn't want to get to the top of the tree, he wants to get to the bottom of 'this giant business'. He, Jill and the Dame all remember their husband and fathers going off to fight the giant in 'the giant hunt to end all giants'; once again it is happening, 'and unless we do something about it they'll always be a giant to kill'. The Fairy protests, but as they do not believe in her she vanishes. The 'collective workers' (in Russia) fit in here:

Jill: Perhaps the collective workers
would help us.
Jack: They are helping us, but they're
not going to help Mouthpiece,
and it wouldn't be helping us if

they did. But they
can't do everything
for us, we've got to
deal with our own
giants like they did.
They took the opportunity
last time and we've got
to take it this time. First
I must find out who the
giant is.

All agree and the show ends with Jack, the Chorus and presumably the audience singing 'A New World Will be Born' from Babes in the Wood.

Jack the Giant Killer therefore sets out the issues around which the CP was campaigning at this time, together with the demands of the Peoples' Convention, and decorated with topical jokes and references. It is however something of a pale shadow of Babes in the Wood, altogether more didactic and with little of the same pantomime fun. It seems unlikely that it had anything approaching the same satirical impact, but its confident enactment of what Goorney called 'this admittedly minority view' would have performed a valuable confirming function for the embattled minority.

The most interesting example from this period is U.A.B. Scotland, written by Harry Trott for the Glasgow Workers Theatre Group shortly before the group dissolved. It is a Living Newspaper in the American Federal Theatre Project style with a varied and ambitious script. (4)

Initially we are taken through a debate on stage between a Worker and an off-stage Loudspeaker taking the role of Capital. Labour and Capital debate the nature of the slump and unemployment from both their positions, and the politics of profit and

production are explained with the movement of boxes, similar to 'The Great Money Trick' of The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists. From these abstractions we move to some human illustrations of what these economic policies and practices involve:

(Spot picks out Worker, stage left. He is standing before a door marked "Docks". He makes a gesture to push open the door. As he does so, the face of Capital appears at the upper half).

Worker: Any jobs, mister?

Capital: No work.

(Blackout. Spot picks up Worker, further to right. Another door, marked "Mines". The face of Capital at upper half)

Worker: Any jobs, mister?

Capital: No work ...

This continues through several industries until the Worker is driven from the stage by crescendo Voices: 'No work! Unwanted! Unemployed!'

Next another link man in the form of some seeker after knowledge who mingles with the crowd around the start of a Hunger March. In two scenes Joe MacDonald, the Worker, explains life on twenty-six shillings a week, and we get the flavour of the Glasgow working people. Our 'seeker' wants to know more about the unemployment issue, for example what are those in responsible positions doing about it? The Loudspeaker commentator arranges for a spotlight to pick out particular Members of Parliament, and we hear, quoted from Hansard, several speeches made in the Commons during the 1920s and 1930s:

Loudspeaker:	Mr Hely Hutchinson, Conservative
	M.P. for Hastings (Flash up right)
Hutchinson:	I would take away the vote from
	those who had been in receipt of
	the dole for more than a fixed
	number of weeks in any year,
	restoring it when the recipient
	had been in steady employment
	again for a fixed number of weeks.

Similarly quotes are read from published Public Assistance Committee reports on the condition of the unemployed, together with various moralistic strictures on their behaviour; three short scenes counteract this by demonstrating through Joe's family the physical and mental effects of the poverty of long-term unemployment. To this is added the punitive rituals of the U.A.B. offices, as Joe faces a tribunal:

Chairman: According to the records, you have been out of work for six years. What are you doing about it?
Worker: I've tried to get work sir.
Chairman: What did you work at last?
Worker: A turner.
Chairman: Mm. Are you SURE you've tried to find work in your trade?
Worker: Yes sir.
Chairman: But six years! Surely you could have found SOMETHING to do in that time; if not at your trade then something ...
...That's pretty thin, you know, Macdonald. You fellows have always the same whine... It seems to me six years is too long a time to look for a job without finding it ... Why don't you go to a training centre. I'm sure it would be the best...
Worker: I went to a slave-training camp - two years ago.

This cuts to Joe's experiences at a Government Training Camp where he led a delegation to protest about the food and conditions, walked out in disgust had had his dole suspended for six weeks.

Next a series of short scenes as international politics intrude, scenes of confused shouting around political and religious soap-box orators climaxing in a newsboy's placard 'War Declared':

Figure of Capital as Dictator. Spot remains throughout.

Drums.

Spot on man working at a bench. He looks up

and listens.
Loudspeaker: War!
Spot on landworker.
Loudspeaker: War!
Spot on clerk.
Loudspeaker: War!
Spots on group composed of miner, housewife,
shopman, busman etc.
Loudspeaker: War!
Spot on the Worker.
Worker: War!
Drums die away. Blackout.

After this, paradoxically, a return to the human dimension brings good news: talking to her friend in their living room, we learn from Mrs Macdonald that the war has brought Joe a job after six years of unemployment. But Joe's entry disrupts this; he cannot handle the work and is on the dole again. Two young clerks, filling U.A.B. records, recite various names, addresses and medical records between gossip; Joe is number 37 and we hear he suffers from 'organic debility'.

This is an introduction to a documentary scene where the Voice describes who is reading from official documents: Sir John Boyd Orr, 'Eminent Nutrition Expert', and Dr. C.M.McGonigle, medical Officer of Health for Stockton on Tees, both quote their evidence that there are vast numbers of people in Britain forced to 'live below the economic level which ensures adequate diet and proper health'. The Voice also tells us that the British Medical Association reported in 1935 that the adult requires a minimum diet of 3,400 calories per day; however the Ministry of Health had contradicted that by preparing its own minimum diet of 3,000 per day. At this three figures dance on to the stage, each wearing a sash marked '1,000':

We are three simple calories
With tummies we agree
When in your food, we'll do you good.

I'm A, I'm B, I'm C.
We're little chaps
And yet perhaps
Your physical condition
Is strong because we save you from
Malignant malnutrition ...

... One day the Ministry of Health
An invitation sent
We took a bus, the lot of us
And off to Whitehall went ...

... Oh marble halls, oh corridors!
Oh parlour grim and black
With doors like eyes to watch for flies
We three alone came back.
Our comrades gay
Are filed away
Inside the web official
Their mourning crepe is bright red tape
Marked 'extra-superficial'
But still its some
Relief to one
To know there IS a minimum.

Joe MacDonald joins the Hunger Marchers and the play concludes
with a documentary-style mass declamation, complex and packed
with facts and ideas and political statements:

(Typical Scotsmen and women, which means
miners, engineers, fishermen, fisher-girls,
farm labourers men and women, and the
symbol of them all - the Worker).

Five million people
Five million Scots, men, women and children
Twenty million acres of land.
Coal, iron and steel
Ships, locomotives and tubes.
Boilers, engines
Machinery, railways
Bridges and dams, docks and quarries
Fisheries, farming
Sheep-rearing and agriculture.
SCOTLAND

Is that the picture?
That is the picture.
SCOTLAND
But there is another side to the picture?
Let us show you the other side of the picture.

Bad health
Low standards of life
Slums, binges and dreary cities
Insanitation
Poverty and malnutrition

UNEMPLOYMENT

One person in ten in Glasgow on the U.A.B.
Bracken, deer and ruined cottages desolate
by the roadsides.
Weeds and bracken crawling up the stone-dykes
The good earth given over to the weeds and
the bracken
SCOTLAND.

Intending to 'sharpen the knife-words on the whetstone of your interest' the verses compare the current depression and labour migration with the Highland Clearances, and state facts and figures relating to ownership of land and wealth in Scotland and the disparity between investment, national income and population in England and Scotland. In the midst of a projected culture of whiskey, footballers, comedians, heather and Hollywood class and nation are foregrounded:

What does Scotland mean to the shipping Lords?
To the steel barons?
To the Nimmos?
The Lithgows?
To the Elgins, Cargills and Colvilles?
What does Scotland mean to THEM?
Are you standing in the queue?...
... Which is YOUR Scotland?
What are you making of your country?
What are THEY making of it?
Of their Scotland
Your Scotland?

These discrepancies between classes in Scotland and between Scotland and England during the depression should be grasped when the call comes:

Into the cities
Into the factories
We need guns. We need shells.
Play your part in the ploy,
Imperialism's the game.
Fight, damn you, fight
Not the bracken! Don't fight the bracken!
The shootin' wouldn't be the same without it.
Fight for your King and country - England.

Irrigate with your blood
The rich soil of a foreign land.

This sentiment is repeated later:

Fifty thousand families in houses unfit
for habitation?
A land fit for heroes to live in.
Defeat Hitler and build a new Europe
What about a new Scotland?...

...Half a million new houses needed
What do you say? When do we begin?
Stop building. There's a war on.
WHOSE WAR?

Again and again the brutal facts of Scotland's condition are
driven home, and any economic revival is bound to lead, as
before, to another slump.

What are we going to do about it?
Why must the sum of our efforts prove always
a Flodden in the grim page of our history?
There must be a solution
What is it?
What's the solution? (CURTAIN)

U.A.B. Scotland therefore draws together the dilemmas of the
Communist Left in 1939, particularly as articulated through a
Scottish republican socialism. It contains the typical features
of Living Newspapers of the decade, with short scenes, loudspeaker
narration and commentary, fictional personal experience
juxtaposed with objective documentary evidence enhanced in this
case by dance and the poetry of the mass declamation. According
to Allen:

It was ambitiously staged with a large cast,
multiple scene changes, and intricate lighting
and sound effects, but only one remembered
performance of the play took place, at the
Athenaeum Theatre in February 1940
(1980 op. cit. p. 47)

The same conditions which affected political activity, regardless of policy, also affected theatres. The conditions of life imposed by at least the early phases of the war - the large - scale movement of people around the country through conscription, evacuation and labour transfer; blitz, black-out, long working hours and restrictions on transport after dark - were conducive neither to the patterns of theatre going and the growth of theatrical organisations, nor to political activities and organisations, which had been expanding before hostilities. Also, whereas the Coalition Government soon lifted its prohibition on 'all large gatherings for purposes of entertainment and amusement whether indoor or outdoor' (Hariss 1970 p. 19) as appraisals of aerial bombardment were revised, it imposed an entertainments tax of 35% to raise revenue from admissions prices on all live entertainment. Actors and musicians were not exempted from conscription, and:

in February 1940 the Spectator estimated that of the 18,000 in the theatrical profession (the figure excludes stagehands and musicians) only 3,000 were working, and then at reduced rates. (Hewison 1977 p. 13)

These conditions, inimical to the theatre, were obviously inimical to political parties. For the Labour Party the consequences were disastrous for several years; as Hinton (1980) remarks, once the Party was deprived of virtually its sole activity - electoral politics - by Coalition Government, its membership were given nothing to do and its organisation faded away. The fortunes of the Communist Party changed rapidly after June 22 1941, when Germany attacked its onetime ally the Soviet Union and the Party consequently fell in behind the war effort, as we shall see. For the time being however it is

important to account for the cultural context in which the socialist theatre movement, after U.A.B. Scotland and Jack the Giant Killer, asserted itself. The centralisation and planning of production by the state in economic life during the war had its counterpart in the cultural field also, and it is to this somewhat neglected aspect of war-time artistic life - worthy of far more attention than writers such as Hewison (1977) have granted it - that we now turn.

In February 1941 a new Left cultural journal Our Time (in fact under a similar editorial committee to the pre-war Left Review and absorbing the paper ration allowance of a Left Book Club offshoot, Poetry and the People) stated its defence of the arts at this time:

These activities are not luxuries or decorations on the border of social life, they are necessities to its development as essential as food and sleep. And like food and sleep there is now too little of them. The people who write here want to restore these essentials to living.(5)

Writing of this immediately after the war Jack Lindsay recorded:

Where the material necessities of life have been rationed, the things of the spirit, if by no means unrationed, have been provided in quantity and quality for the mass of people in a way which pre-war days have no parallel. Men and women, brought sharply up against the stark facts of life and death, and often forced to carry on without any of their customary supports, have shown an increasing readiness to turn to the message and stimulation of art. In hundreds of ways the arts have come closer to the people, and the people

have begun to build up artistic expression for themselves ... the need for entertainment awakened by the blitz period did not pass away; it remained, deepened. From one angle it remained simply a demand for amusing songs and shows. But all the while it was also developing in new directions. Slowly but surely it was providing a genuine mass audience for art, music and drama of an increasingly high level. And often the people, thus stirred, were not satisfied to stay passive, to keep on merely receiving. They proceeded to work out ways and means of expressing themselves, of actively claiming their cultural heritage. (1945A p.8)

Lindsay has provided here a comprehensive account, one of the few if not the only in such detail from a socialist perspective, of the war-time work in the theatre and other areas of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA), which was formed somewhat casually out of a number of voluntary organisations in 1939. What happened to cause Lindsay's enthusiastic conclusions about its record?

The Council sponsored, either through direct grants, loans or guarantees against loss, an extensive range of concert tours, exhibitions, and theatre, by non-profit making bodies which were exempt from Entertainments Tax if their material was 'educational or partly educational'. By 1940 work for the Council was accepted as national service by the Ministry of Labour and deferment from conscription was granted on condition that performances were given according to the needs of factory shifts.

Thus the Old Vic and Sadlers Wells, bombed out of London, toured the mining towns of South Wales and County Durham and the cotton towns of Lancashire with regular and successful performances of Shakespeare, Ibsen, Goldsmith and Shaw. A number of observers commented on the tours of the specially erected hostels for Royal Ordinance factory workers, frequently in remote areas,

where several performances a day were given to fit the shift system:

It is a startling fact that, at the beginning, only about two per cent of these hostel audiences had ever seen a stage play before. In the early days many of them did not know how to behave before live players. They hardly seemed to realize that the peopled stage before them was not an inanimate cinematographic screen. Gradually they acquired a theatre etiquette and ceased to talk, walk about and drink tea during the performances. They came to know the actors who stayed in their hostels and they came in this way to have an opportunity of learning what few citizens in ordinary times ever know, that the people in the theatre are expert craftsmen in their trade, trained and disciplined to difficult tasks. (Evans and Glasgow 1949 p.44)

Others such as Jack Lindsay, with less of the Victorian anthropologists' approach to the situation, grasped the new potential:

The ordinary barriers between audiences and performers are broken down. The actors live and eat among the workers, workers may look in on rehearsals; the plays form a basis for discussion with the audiences, which show an intense spirit of participation. "They can't stop commenting." says Walter Hudd, who pioneered the hostel shows. The lack of scenery and heavy props gives a freedom of method and approach. The audiences are mostly unused to any theatrical conventions, but know the cinema with its quick transitions, its unfettered range over space and time; and so they will accept any dramatic method that can convince them on its own merits, and the dramatist has full scope for any that he can use with skill. Twelfth Night or The Shoemaker's Holiday has been put on, through pressure of time, in the Elizabethan way with no scenery or scene divisions, not even any pauses between the acts; and the girls think it quite right and natural. (op. cit.p.21)

With its brief to 'maintain the highest standards and to distribute art to the people' (6) CEMA established an organisation enabling tours of plays under the deliberately vague category of 'partly educational' by non-profitmaking companies. According to Lindsay in some areas these tours led to amateur dramatic groups forming amongst the munitions workers, with the appointment of full-time directors to work with groups of factories. This pattern was repeated with Civil Defence Groups, fire stations and ambulance centres besides industry. In addition, the Council was able to spearhead a regeneration of the repertory theatre, often in alliance with the local authorities: York Repertory was transformed from bankruptcy to surplus and weekly audiences of 10,000 by 1944, and similar theatres were established in Swindon and elsewhere for the first time. Non-profit making club theatres (thus avoiding the Lord Chamberlain's Office) increased, and through these innovations it appeared, that for reasons other than the bombing, the concentration of theatre in London began to shift.

The tensions and contradictions within this work will be discussed in due course, but at this stage it is important to register with CEMA that:

....the size and ardour of the audiences which its activities attracted far exceeded all expectations ... It has been the constant experience of actors during these tours to play before a completely unsophisticated audience, one unaffected by convention or theatrical prejudice, and find an audience wonderfully appreciative and capable of boundless understanding and intelligence... the post-war possibilities for the Council in this direction will be innumerable.
(Noble 1947 p.107)

Four months after the launch of Our Time (which recorded many of these changes during the war and provided Lindsay with much material), the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union brought about a dramatic shift in the policy and approach of the British Communist Party. Again, the details are available in accounts such as those by Pelling (ibid) but the consequence was a wholehearted support for the war effort in industry, support for a declaration of war aims, and agitation for the lifting of the ban on the Daily Worker and for a 'Second Front' in the West to relieve pressure on the Soviet Union. Churchill's unequivocal public support for Russia, and the epic resistance of the Red Army and events like the siege of Stalingrad, created tremendous public interest in the country. Calder notes:

The expressions of Anglo-Soviet solidarity fostered by Aid to Russia Weeks, Stalingrad Festivals and other junketings up and down the country. The Communist party, taking advantage of the fact that its members controlled most of the British supplies of films, photographs and even information about the soviet Union, was able to take the lead in organising them under the auspices of local authorities. (1971 p.402)

Nevertheless it would be mistaken to attribute the tremendous increase in party membership in this period, as Pelling appears to imply, to 'waves of Russophile sentiment' (ibid p. 120). Croucher's study of the engineering industry during the war comments as follows:

In general, the new line dovetailed neatly into many aspects of the popular view of the war. For many people the CP had re-entered plausible politics ... By the end of 1942 it claimed its peak membership since its foundation ... The typical party cadre during the war was the AEU member; AEU members formed by far the biggest

single industrial bloc at the party congresses between 1942 and 1945, with approximately one third of the delegates. The TGWU, by contrast, could usually only muster roughly half of the AEU's strength ... More and more factory branches were set up to organise the members in the workshops as the existing members recruited among the newcomers in the industry. By the beginning of 1943 Coventry, for example, had no less than thirty-three factory branches ... In many respects these years were the hey-day of the Communist engineer. Certainly in terms of numbers, positions held in workplace organisations and political influence with the rank and file, they represented the apex of the Communist party's achievements from its formation to the present day.

The CP's increased influence derived largely from their intimate association with the idea of a radical restructuring of British war industry by sweeping away the obsolete ideas and methods of organisation whose rationale rested largely on "red tape", bureaucracy, inefficiency and the need for a whole stratum of people to service and defend the status quo. The cry, not only of the left but of a wide cross-section of society, was for greater efficiency in industry irrespective of who might lose authority or position. (1982 p. 144)

Similarly Hinton's local study of Coventry concurs with this view:

...the CP... was able to fuse workers' immediate economic interests, their hostility to the employers and their support for the war effort and the Soviet Union into a productioneering campaign which played a leading role in producing the expansion of membership between 1941 and 1942 (1980 p.103)

Although a large strand of this was, or could at the time be argued to be in accord with at least some sections of the Coalition Government, the War Cabinet was well aware of the quandary in which it found itself. Davidson (1980) has analysed what he describes as 'the great equivocation of the Second World

War': how the Allies could couple their desire for a return to the pre-war status quo in occupied Europe with their need to support the anti-Nazi partisans - who owed their strength to their role as radical movements of national liberation. A similar problem confronted the British government on the domestic front. McLaine's use of Public Records Office files of the Ministry of Information leads him to this conclusion:

Broadly speaking, the Ministry's policy bore two principal aspects: first, praise of the Russian ally with as little mention of communism as possible, and, second, sabotage of the British Communists' publicity for Russia. It was hoped that such a policy would simultaneously fulfil the government's wish to appear as Russia's stout ally and deny the communists any reflected glory from the Soviet war effort, thus circumventing the seductive appeal of communism to the British people. (op. cit. p. 201)

To this end the Anglo-Soviet liaison section of the Ministry of Information secured the co-operation of the Soviet Embassy in its efforts to keep the initiative in organising campaigns away from the CP, the Embassy 'disinteresting' itself completely in the fate of organisations such as the Russia To-Day Society, the Friends of the Soviet Union and the newspaper Russia To-Day' (ibid p. 202). These organisations, satellites of the Party, were low on the Ministry's priority list of acceptable bodies to be granted aid and information. As for the extent to which the Party was aware of what was going on is a matter for further research, but some of the frustration over, for example, the Albert Hall twenty-fifth anniversary of the Red Army celebrations - organised by the Ministry to dispel any feeling that the Government was not fully behind the Soviets and to further steal the initiative from the CP - comes over in R. Vernon Beste's

report in Our Time. Louis McNeice had declaimed Salute the Red Army through a microphone, but this official attempt to make use of mass declamations as a form had failed, according to Bests, through its impersonal tone and remote conception. There was no unity between performers and audience since the people were used merely as spectators. This was compared unfavourably with the pre-war experience of performers of On Guard for Spain, and the Ministry was urged to make use of this because it could 'make war stories and towns far more poignantly moving for us than any falling cadence of Spanish place names in 1938. (7) The advice was ignored.

Nevertheless the CP campaigned hard around the Soviet involvement in the war and a variety of theatrical initiatives were launched as a part of this broad campaign. It is to these that we now turn.

In the early days of the London blitz the Unity Theatre Outside Show Group toured the tubeshelters, and Anne Davies (who had played Robin in Babes in the Wood) described some of their work in 1940:

The first effort was at the Tilbury - an enormous goods yard at the edge of the East End where up to 15,000 people bed down every night. We had contacted a few friends there, and they promised to prepare things for us. We treaded our way in, stepping over legs, bundles, prams, past stacks of margarine boxes, round tracks and carts and finally settled on some bales of paper. Then the guitar began to strum and the community singing started. It went over quite well, but there was something wrong. When we went over it afterwards we decided that we couldn't tackle the job

merely as "Unity Theatre doing shows", we must become a part of the organisation of the shelter committees, and our work must harmonise with theirs, and help with their activities. So when a call came for a show over the week-end, I got down to the job of contacting the committee to find out what was wanted, and under what conditions we should be expected to work...

...Sunday came and six of us set off again for Belsize park. We arrived too early. We went out for a cup of coffee... and had a very narrow shave when the back of the cafe was blasted when several bombs fell just behind it. In the Tube... they were anxious to forget the horrors outside and were ready for anything. Some songs got them interested... prepared the way for a couple of sketches, solos, songs and jokes. Ten minutes at one end of the platform, and finally a show at each end of the lift shafts. Even when these items had to be done sideways on, with occasional trains roaring through, they went over big, and the crowd was almost as pleased as we were. I say almost, because to us, this means a tremendous step forwards. Something has been done, and we know better now how to work, and most important of all, we have found that our work fits in with the feelings of the people, and the work of their committees. (from a bulletin quoted in Travis op. cit. p.163)

There is a definite sense of unity with popular feeling here, so although no mention is made of any political content to the sketches, if there was any at this stage it would presumably have relied on satirical comment on war profiteers, a pro-German establishment or upper-class military incompetence. Certainly the experience of this work stood the Group in good stead when it returned to the political mainstream in 1941. A detailed description in Our Time of the tube shelter work comments as follows:

"The Germans are fighting the Russians/
The Russians are rather hard pressed/
The Germans are fighting the Russians/so
why don't we strike in the West?"... The chorus roared out with such zest that I

felt sure that some of the sleepers in Whitehall must have stirred uneasily in their strange dreams.

These performances are determined by their audiences and their success is due to their masterly handling of peoples' desire to help create their own amusements. People would indignantly repudiate any attempt at self conscious education - political or otherwise ... but encouraging people to sing the nonsense they all want to sing anyway and then showing them how to voice their back garden opinions in the same tuneful jingles produces results. (8)

A one-act play Brown mentions as played in the tube shelters is John Bishop's Frau Kremer of Ebenstadt. The play ⁽⁹⁾ is set in the kitchen of a working-class home where Karl Kremer, an elderly former member of the Social Democratic Party is eating with his daughter-in-law Erna, whose husband is in the army, and a Hitler Youth lodger Ernst who is awaiting call-up. The ground is soon introduced through the old man's cynical reading of the newspaper ('it says here that we have captured Kiev. That's the third time this week') and the predictable blind faith in the Fuhrer of the youth and the passive gullibility of Erna. Their argument centres around the war in Russia: the old man alone is convinced of the Russian strength, he alone remembers an article - 'just after the pact was signed' - praising her superior air-force.

A neighbour enters to let Erna know she has been mentioned on Radio Moscow, to which she has just accidentally tuned in. They listen, hear Erna's name mentioned together with the news that her husband Ludwig has been killed in action. This is followed by a propaganda message:

Announcer: For eighteen hours your
 husband was in our hospital

and we did all we could to save his life, and he died holding a picture of you and your children in the garden of your home. He was a good soldier. But we ask you, Erna Kremer, why was your husband on the Beresina? And what benefit are his crosses to your children? Is it right to go into other peoples' homes, to kill women and children? Ludwig Kremer did not want to do that.

You wrote him in your last letter that you hoped he would soon be home again. You all want peace, and we want peace, but Hitler doesn't want it. He wants war. Why should women be made to suffer? Hasn't there been enough blood spilt? But Hitler doesn't understand that... Now we are giving you this sad news, and you should tell others that enough blood has been spilt. Do all you can. Your husband was a good soldier.

In the midst of her grief and the support of both the old man and the lodger comes Party Member Bremenhardt, a Nazi functionary 'responsible' for the block of flats. He is investigating a report that tenants have been illegally listening in to foreign broadcasts. He is completely oblivious to the distress and entreaties around him, and lectures:

Bremenhardt: I must finish. It is my duty. Even if this Red report were true you are acting disgracefully. If your husband is dead, you should be proud that he died fighting - proud that you have sons whom you can give to our Fuhrer.

Erna: Never. Never. Not while there is breath in my body. I would kill them first. Kill them. Do you hear?

Bremenhardt is driven out, threatening to report them all for their criminal conduct.

F.J. Brown's account of the shelter shows has this to say on the play:

The tense hush that fell on a lively, high-spirited audience when they were taken in imagination to that little German household was astonishing. In an electric silence they watched a tragedy that they knew was near to their own lives and heard questions posed that lay in their own minds. A few seconds of awed silence and then a wild outburst of applause followed the descent of the curtain on the implied solution of the greatest problem of our times. (10)

This eye-witness account points to the fact that Frau Kremer, simple enough as it appears as a sketch, was addressed to an audience whose own domestic lives and routines were, by their presence in the tube shelters and the events in their neighbourhoods outside, palpably overturned; whose husbands and sons may well have been in the services, and who thus identified with the predicament of the German woman. The review continued with some ideas about these shows:

The desire to create - to participate actively - exists side by side with a conditioning in favour of passively lapping up the worst that is offered. I venture to say that why the Unity Group has done so much to waken the sleeping partner in this uneasy alliance is because they do not start out under either of the two great illusions. They commence operations on the lowest common denominator. Thus - by no apparent contradiction - they can lead people to follow nonsense rhymes with political opinions and can jump from a slightly risque burlesque of a striptease act to the almost unbearable drama of the Kremer household. Extremes meet for the same reason that they meet in a Chaplin film; that they both rest on the hair-trigger emotions of normal life. (11)

The success here was due, as we have seen, to the Group's work before they had such material to present. Unity Theatre through

the Russia To-Day Society sought to promote this material by publishing suitable one-act plays and sketches for amateur groups. Fratu Kremer was published in pamphlet form with According to Plan, a one-act play by Geoffrey Parsons - one of the co-authors of Babes in the Wood and Jack the Giant Killer.

According to Plan (12) is set in a barn near Smolensk. A number of soldiers from a Panzer Division, separated from the rest of their company and without petrol, rest up and wait around for relief. They consist of a dedicated Nazi who is wounded, a young private, a corrupt and dissolute colonel and the cynical Lieutenant Klein. Waiting for their colonel to return with news, the Nazi and the cynic argue over the course of the campaign, providing the opportunity for strong statements of which the best are reserved for the cynic:

Klein: Moscow! If you could look out of this door, Max you'd have something else than Moscow on your mind. God, what a sight! Endless plains stretching in every direction - deserted. Nothing but fields from which the crops have been gathered; villages from which the population have fled. Where shall we end up, Max? Deserted Slav plains ... and no petrol. Over there, in the distance, I can see a forest; those'll be birch trees, and every tree in the forest saying with its rustling leaves: "We shall never be German". And what do you think there is among the birch trees? I'll tell you, Max; hundreds of partisans waiting for night to fall. A birch forest and empty plains. And the mighty German army in sole possession of the empty plains, in the person of one Colonel crawling on his belly, six destroyed tanks littered with corpses, and one that won't go for lack of petrol. (He leaves the door and stands over Gruber). Where have we landed? Where has he landed us, that mad carpet biter of yours?

Much of the sketch is taken up with the verbal sparring within the room until eventually Klein - along with the young private who emerges as an ex-Communist - overpower their Colonel, secure the wounded Nazi and surrender. This is not before Klein's cynicism develops into a more political outlook on their fate:

Klein... I know we shan't get to Moscow.
This is the end, I tell you: the
end of marching into other countries
that have been handed to us by their
rotten rulers. This is the real
thing. We've met our match this time,
and I'm glad. We've trailed over the
whole of Europe, bringing death and
destruction and now its our turn to
experience what it means. I wish to
God they would defeat us while there
are still some Germans left. And I
hope to God that those who are behind
us will know on whom to avenge themselves
for us and for ...

After their surrender the play concludes with an epilogue from a Red Army soldier; having warned the audience that the fight will not be such a simple one by any means he concludes:

...but despair is a plant that doesn't flourish on Soviet soil. We shall give them blood for blood and death for death until we've rid the world of such barbarians, and people are free to live their lives in peace and liberty. Yes, we shall destroy them all right. The end is certain; it is for the peoples of the world to make it swift. Comrades, let us get on with the job.

The poet Nancy Cunard described the impact of According to Plan as 'little short of devastating emotionally', and leaving the audience feeling hopeful 'despite these terrible days of Russia's increased ordeal.⁽¹³⁾ At times such as the siege of Stalingrad, or in the midst of the spectacular Russian advances later in the war, it can be understood how this piece could connect with people already being officially encouraged to support their Soviet

allies. Unlike that official propaganda however, which attempted to boost Russian culture without boosting communism, According to Plan, despite its naive and idealised view of the Red Army, does insist on political as well as nationalistic resistance and places responsibility on Nazism rather than the German people as such.

Other plays toured included two of the very few post - Revolution Russian plays to be known in Britain: Dostigaeff's This is Our World, a series of sketches and scenes explaining the ferocity of the Russian war effort - owning their own country, the Soviet workers were more willing than most to defend it; and Afinogenef's Distant Point which concerned anti-Nazi resistance in Europe.

The Russia To-Day Society's pamphlet Theatre is Our Weapon urged this quoted material on 'Co-Op Guilds, YCL branches, amateur dramatic societies in your area', and Andre Van Gyseghem (whose own authoritative account Theatre in the Soviet Union was published in 1943) added a comment:

Now, minds are open to new viewpoints; now, there is an eager interchange of ideas and a much greater willingness to absorb new ones. Now, too, any actual comment made by our theatre on the life of the audience meets with a much more alert and critical understanding - now is the time when people are more readily disposed to see the connection between our theatre and life. (14)

This indeed seems a fair comment given the size and enthusiasms of the audiences for CEMA plays. At this point it is worth examining how, in addition to the Anglo-Soviet solidarity work already covered, the socialist theatre movement asserted itself in the new conditions.

London Unity Theatre by the early 1940s had, by virtue of conscription, virtually a new team to collectively devise the revues in the style which had been so successful before the war. Travis (op. cit.) records, with few details, that Get Cracking, on Russia and war production, Lift the Ban, on the campaign to lift the ban on the Daily Worker and Let's Be Offensive, on the demand for a Second Front to relieve the Red Army were enthusiastically received by audiences. Besides these topical items Noble has recorded how a more widespread critical interest was aroused by Unity's old-time music hall Winkles and Champagne in 1944, and excellent notices were received for their premiere of Sean O'Casey's The Star Turns Red in 1941 (op. cit. p. 93)

Within Unity Ted (now Lord) Willis emerged by 1945 as a principal writer and organiser of tours. ⁽¹⁵⁾ His own plays included Sabotage, on managerial inefficiency and war production, All Change Here, which used the work of a woman bus conductor to dramatise the positive social changes the war's disruption of normal life could engender. Another was The Yellow Star on Jewish oppression and resistance in Europe; his most successful, Buster, toured from 1943 to 1946, featuring the progress of an East End family through unemployment and war:

...it shows a family reaching out from the appalling position of being not wanted - having no place, no opportunity - through the sacrifice and struggle shouldered in the war towards new possibilities...

...with only a dozen in the cast Buster could and did go everywhere. During August and September Bristol Unity Players toured Southern Command Ack Ack batteries, army camps and hostels as well as factories, works canteens and community centres. It was a tremendous effort in war conditions. Many of the cast were working long hours. Travelling conditions were exhausting and leading characters had to be changed at short notice; yet somehow

Buster was kept going. (Tuckett op. cit. p.21-22)

This quote points to a role London Unity quickly adopted, one which it had performed successfully in the past with regional Unity Theatres and groups of the Left Book Club Theatre Guild - supplying material, practical advice and assistance and education in theatre. Between 1941 and 1942 Unity Theatres opened or were re-opened in Leeds, Birmingham, Glasgow and Oxford following tours and help from London. This network formed into a National Society, which the actor - producer Tyrone Guthrie praised as 'playing a part in bringing the people closer to the idea of a National Society. Such theatres have put on plays which have expressed the thoughts, aspirations and hopes of many of the ordinary people of to-day' (quoted in Lindsay 1945 op. cit. p.23). Similarly Peter Noble commented on how Unity was acting as a bridge between the professional theatre and the considerable amateur movements, 'attracting the help and enthusiasm of professionals at all levels' (op. cit. p. 95)

This is a reference to their work with the British Drama League, which had an affiliated membership of 5,000 groups by 1944. In 1943, according to Lindsay, the League set up a Play Encouragement Committee at Unity's suggestion in order to stimulate the writing of topical plays on social themes, 'for use for the war effort'. 158 were submitted in one year of which several were circulated.

Tuckett has provided an account of the local work of Bristol Unity Players during the war. Besides Buster, the Players had used a childrens' anti-fascist play from America, The Revolt of the Beavers, as well as Bishop's Erna Kremer, with the Co-Op

Guilds and community groups with whom they had been in contact before the war. They took advantage of new opportunities which were presented too:

When the British Aid to Russia Council was formed under the Lord Mayor in October 1941, with official representatives from each party, the churches, trades unions, the Co-Operative Society and many of the biggest firms, it sponsored an Aid to Russia Week that November. Three local dramatic societies put on plays; but Unity's was the only play about modern Russia. This was Hubert Griffith's The Peoples Court. It created such a deep impression that B.U.P. at once put into rehearsal Distant Point... At exactly the same time the Workers Educational Association Players began rehearsal, so Joan produced it for both as a joint effort... The result was a triumph which delighted three capacity audiences in July 1942 and the proceeds went to the Bristol Theatre Royal Appeal fund: Unity Players' long struggle to win support for the idea of a Bristol peoples' theatre had begun to bear fruit (1980 op. cit. p. 17-18)

In addition they dramatised in pageant form a local history by Samuel Bale, An Account of the Labour and Socialist Movement in Bristol, entitling it Now is the Day and covering the years from 1864 to the opening of the Second Front:

In the enormous crowds - 7,000 people stood in Queen's Square on May Day 1944 - watching intently were men and women who themselves had taken part in the earliest scenes, one Labour councillor played the part of his own grandfather. (ibid p.22)

Other work included Landmarks of Liberty, scenes from the European anti-Nazi resistance, devised by the Co-Op youth clubs and housewives' section and widely performed in Bristol parks during the summer of 1942; also, in conjunction with the WEA, an adaptation of the American Robert Ardrey's critique of ivory tower isolationism, Thunder Rock. Close contact was maintained with London Unity.

John Hill's (1977) account of the Glasgow Unity Theatre - of which the pre-war Glasgow Workers' Theatre Group were a component - provides something of a contrast. Initially an outside show, group performed revues, masques and sketches - such as We Are This Land, combining poetry with short sketches on the Russian way of life - to troops, hospitals and trades unions, largely on behalf of the Soviet Union and the Second Front demand. However this diminished as the company's concerns seem to have centred more and more on full length plays. Besides Afinogenef's Distant Point and some continuity with pre-war work in Odets's Golden Boy and Awake and Sing, and close contact with the Abbey theatre of Dublin through a production of O'Casey's Juno and the Paycock, the Glasgow group broke new ground in presenting new work by local writers which was concerned with the lives of the Scottish working people whom they were seeking to attract to their theatre.

Where clear alliance is obvious between the Bristol and Glasgow groups can be seen from their statements of aims. Having asserted their aim of building a Scottish native theatre, Glasgow continued:

We in Glasgow Unity theatre are a group of workers interested in the theatre, who intend to put on real plays for the entertainment and education of our fellow workers. Our main purpose is to build a Peoples' theatre in Glasgow. All our activities are centred on this aim, for we believe that Glasgow has great need for a Real Theatre, where life can be presented and interpreted without prejudice or without being biased by the controlling interests which have so far strangled the professional theatre. (quoted in Hill op. cit. p.63)

Similarly the Bristol group listed its opportunities:

A chance to put on quickly some of the foremost plays of our time. Plays that stand for progressive action and ideas of all the peoples against the most ruthless exploitation.

A chance while doing so to build up an audience of workers who have never seen in the theatre anything of use to themselves. We shan't have a Peoples' Theatre until we the people want it, build it and make it ours. (Tuckett op. cit. p.20)

In other words either through touring literally to any venue or through building up a theatre base, groups at this time were doing their utmost to build on the interest in theatre, curiosity about the Soviet Union, and connection with the mainstream of public concerns which they had achieved or found developing to establish the permanent, progressive, 'peoples' theatre' which had eluded them during the campaigning days of the Popular Front. Similar impulses led the Co-operative Movement to form the Peoples' Entertainment Society in 1941, with two principal aims:

The first is to build an organisation capable of financing and launching plays and popular entertainment of every type. The second is to band together in every town and city those people who are interested in entertainment as playgoer "consumers" and as amateurs. Inspiring the whole purpose is the idea of democratic control. (16)

High hopes were attached to the P.E.S; Our Time spoke of 'the vast potentialities of the Co-operative movement and ultimately the labour movement .. this lifts on to a new level the developments brought about by the people themselves in the sphere of drama,' (17) and Noble considered that the PES and CEMA, by organising touring companies to visit every town with a Co-Op society and assisting them to purchase and run theatres, constituted 'a formidable non-commercial bloc to combat the decay of the commercial theatre'. (op. cit. p.110)

By the end of the war the PES had bought theatres at Chatham and Huddersfield, and built one at Guildford; it also helped to

stage J.B. Priestley's They Came to a City and How Are They At Home?. Under the direction of Anne Davies (of Unity Theatre, and the lead in Babes in the Wood) a professional company was formed to tour plays with Co-Op Movement themes, such as The Rochdale Pioneers, on its origins. In addition a mass pageant, usually referred to as a 'spotlit commentary', was performed by the Co-Op Society at the Empress Stadium in London in June 1942. This was Montagu Slater and Benjamin Britten's An Agreement of the Peoples, and it continued a pre-war tradition begun by Slater, Randall Swingler, Britten and Andre Van Gyseghem. Since An Agreement was widely remarked on and subsequently performed by the Bristol Unity Players and others, it is worth an examination here. (18)

A spotlight finds a raised podium, occupied by a man wearing a tin-helmet and binoculars, in an otherwise dark and empty stage. He is approached by another man wearing vaguely eighteenth century clothes. One is a roof-top fire spotter, the other apparently is Jonathan Swift's Gulliver; returned, and interested to learn that 'much of England its life and expectations for a year now have turned on its alliance with a certain Union of Socialist Soviet Republics'. What is going on? As the fire-spotter explains we see the night shift taking their places in and around the arena: foundrymen miming the actions of a foundry producing castings for Bren guns, A.T.S. women taking their places around an anti-aircraft gun; a mobile first-aid unit prepares for an air-raid.

New details of ARP services enter as air-raid sirens sound; the fire-spotter explains that as much is being produced for the USSR as for ourselves, and also his enthusiasm for them:

Spotter: What is there wonderful about
 them? They built Dneiperstroy.....
 and blew it up. They fought on a
 two thousand mile front from the
 Arctic to the Black Sea. They
 died in legions. They killed in
 millions. Falling back they
 scorched the earth foot by foot.
 They fought through the summer.
 They went on fighting through the
 Russian winter. There was no limit
 to what they would sacrifice.

The narrator also celebrates the dockers, engine drivers and Merchant Navy crews (they cross the arena in distinctive costume) and Gulliver begins to understand his emotion, an agreement of the peoples has taken place whereby the manufacturing nations of the West are supplying the Russian spirit with the war materials to finish the job. Moreover Britain, stirred to fight for something in which she believes, is producing the same spirit - we see a series of military training displays by commando units, and Gulliver is reminded of the sea-going explorers of his own day and earlier. Voices from France, Holland and Norway call for British action to relieve their oppression. We see a dramatic reconstruction of the British raid on St. Nazaire, and a verse comment:

These we pushed forward as an advance guard
What shall we say to them if no army follows?
Vaagso, Bruneval, St. Nazaire, Boulogne
Are names we remember after the newspapers
have finished
As a few rounds to find the range: as a drumming
Of tympani before the orchestral
Attack.

C.M. Joad, an eminent philosopher and CP sympathiser who had achieved national popularity on the BBC 'Brains Trust' programme then appeared with a speech. Discussing reasons for bravery, Joad contrasted the heroism and sacrifice of the Russian people,

fighting hard to preserve a way of life they enjoy, and the Nazi war effort based on fear and the holding of life to be cheap. A ballet dance accompanies an unwinding poem; the dancers also include pilots, engineers, doctors, celebrating again the Russian resistance, strength and invention:

Women: These dancers came from yesterday
And yet their pointed tip-toes say:
When plan and foresight are the rule
As in the classic Russian school
That which is disciplined is still
Life that becomes self-critical
In finding ways of living well
Till living is so finely wrought
That you would say the body thought.

The philosopher's discourse is interrupted by news; we hear an eye-witness account of the raid on St. Nazaire and the Nazi atrocities in reprisal. The spotter, as this reaches crescendo, issues a number of pledges to the oppressed peoples of Europe on behalf of Britain:

Spotter: ...That we shall attack, and that quickly. That we shall maintain this Alliance and build on it not only in the confident expectation of an early overthrow of Hitler and Fascism, lasting and complete, but also the hope of good life for ourselves and our children.

An Agreement of the Peoples therefore encapsulates in a spectacle form a familiar theme of national unity and strength against the enemy, but with two additional elements which, as we have seen, the War Cabinet was attempting to exclude from the national consensus: that the Soviet resistance was based as much on socialist feeling as much as patriotism; and, less erroneously, ⁽¹⁹⁾ an articulation of the mood that the war must be for something as well as against something - 'the hope of good life for ourselves and our children'.

This leads to another point in the domestic version of Davidson's 'great equivocation' : the need, recognised by the Ministry of Information, to buoy up the widespread aspirations for the post-war world for morale purposes, to answer the call for an authoritative statement of war aims, and to bow to the War Cabinet and especially Churchill's desire for silence on these subjects. Calder (op. cit.) has described in detail how this equivocation was resolved to Churchill's discomfiture; the debates over the publication of the Beveridge Report, outlining a future welfare state and National Health Service, and over the passing of the 1944 Education Act, are the main cases in point. Probably the best example of the role of the socialist theatre in the articulation and affirmation of these views can be found in its work with the Army Bureau of Current Affairs (ABCA).

In 1940 the central council for Army Education had been empowered to establish a programme of both voluntary and compulsory courses for troops, largely discussion-based and led by a regular series of civic studies and current affairs pamphlets called The British Way and Purpose. Under the auspices of W.E. Williams the Army Bureau of Current Affairs produced a series of background papers for weekly sessions where an officer-in charge led off on a pre-arranged topic. According to Addison (1975) by 1943 some sixty per cent of home-based units at least were operating the scheme, with its level and effectiveness being largely determined by the interest and enthusiasm of the commanding officer.

ABCA personnel were continually seeking out methods of presenting material more effectively, and those such as Major Michael MacOwan, who had been a professional theatrical producer in

civilian life, had been adapting the role-play and dramatising of actions used in training for these purposes. MacOwan commissioned Stephen Murray, a conscripted writer, to produce United We Stand on the war effort, then, according to Noble, (op.cit. p.96) he saw and was impressed by a production of Arthur Arent's One Third of a Nation in 1942, one of the Living Newspapers of the American Federal Theatre Project. This appeared an ideal technique for producing plays for scattered army units and MacOwan obviously seems to have turned to those with the most experience of the Living Newspaper technique - Unity Theatre.

The first script - written by 'factory worker Miles Tomalin' (Noble ibid; in fact Tomalin was a largely unpublished Cambridge poet and a Communist veteran of the International Brigade) was not in fact a Living Newspaper but as we shall see nevertheless very much in the genre established by Unity. Tomalin describes the genesis of his play What's Wrong with the Germans?:

This was one of two scripts commissioned by ABCA, with the intention of convincing the War Office that a Dramatic Unit for the Services would serve a good purpose. The first was Stephen Murray's, as you note. The second was to have been written by Montagu Slater, but he fell ill, and gave my name to Malcolm MacOwan, a professional producer then in charge of the new unit. Montagu, a personal friend, had seen some work of mine that followed the Living Newspaper Technique initiated by American writers under Roosevelt's New Deal administration.

Major MacOwan approached me with a suggestion that the new script should be based on an assessment of the enemies we were facing. He had jotted down some disconnected notes which seemed to me could be welded into a continuous story. He was pleased with the results, though he made some changes to my original conclusion. He wanted the piece to end with the final assumption that the Germans as a race are unfitted for power.

In my opinion this was an insensitive and dangerously racist idea, which could not be applied to a nation en bloc, so I changed it back. (20)

What's Wrong with the Germans? (21) opens with the entry of a nervous young officer who addresses the audience of assembled troops in a space between them and the curtained stage:

Officer: Well, I-er, I've been asked to take a discussion this afternoon, I'm afraid it's at very short notice and I haven't been able to do much in the way of ... to prepare extensive notes, the fact is that owing to certain unforeseen - to a technical hitch the programme you were to have had has had to be cancelled and I'm here to fill the gap. You must forgive me if I-or, I hope you'll make some allowances... Well, it has been left to me to choose a subject for discussion... As we're at war with Germany it would be a good thing to ask ourselves, what is it about the Germans and what ought we to do about them? That leaves it pretty broad but I think we could get some useful ideas on the main points. What sort of person is the German, that's really the point, in fact is there such a person at all?... so, who'll be the first to give us his ideas?

After some shuffling a soldier - in fact an actor planted in the audience - speaks up with the idea that Germans are naturally belligerent and after causing two world wars they should be crushed once and for all. But a different soldier-actor disagrees, disapproving of stereotyping and explaining that he was billeted with a German family after the Great war. A loudspeaker off-stage (announcing itself as 'The Voice of ABCA. ABCA knows everything') introduces the stage scene of Herr and Frau Guttermann sitting at

a table. The second 'soldier' forgets the audience and becomes absorbed into the scene, which concerns his leave-taking. He has enjoyed his time with them, and has a final word with their son Klaus:

Klaus: It has been good for Germany to lose, because she has become much freer. Now we see who wins the peace.

Soldier: Who ever heard of winning a peace!

Klaus: It is something. But winning a peace is not like winning a war, which somebody else has to lose. We can all win the peace. Germany has too little food and too little money, but she has freedom. We shall do something fine with that freedom, you see.

Soldier: Anyway, for gawd's sake don't let's have any more wars.

Herr G
(hastily): No, no, never again.

Frau G
(heart-felt): Please God, no more wars.

The soldier continues in the role of narrator, explaining to the audience how he'd gradually lost touch with the Guttermanns, but how he'd heard that Klaus was getting involved in politics and speaking at meetings. The 'Voice' takes us to witness the last one he spoke at; Klaus delivers a short speech to the audience in praise of liberalism and tolerance when suddenly:

(Commotion at the back of the auditorium. Men in Nazi uniform push in. There is some argument and shouting. From the intruders comes the Young Man, now a Nazi official. He strides down the central gangway.)

Nazi Official (half way to stage):

Silence! Everybody is to stay in their places. (Someone rises. Nazi Official swings his rubber truncheon ostentatiously)

Sit down, you (to all):

Nazi Official:

The exits to this theatre
are guarded. If anybody is
lucky enough to get that far,
there are plenty of my men
to deal with him at the door.
(Muffled scream) You will
leave when I permit you.
Everyone will be searched
at the door, where German
patriots will be sorted from
those who feel otherwise.
Heil Hitler!

Nazis at back:

Heil Hitler!

Klaus stands up to them and an audience member claims his rights,
only to be dragged out of the hall. Klaus is then very badly
beaten up on stage and dragged out also. The scene climaxes with
a vicious Nazi speech ending in a blackout.

In marked contrast this cuts back to the Lecturer. Awed by this
display the discussion returns to its original theme. But the
soldier wants to know what's happened to Klaus and the Guttermanns.
A spotlight picks out Frau Guttermann, cowed and frightened, from
whom we learn that Klaus has been executed and her husband taken
to a concentration camp. As she is joined by the Nazi Official
and the ghost of a Mayor he has recently shot we hear that her
Germany is dead, imprisoned or terrified. As the Nazi boasts of
power and conquest the Mayor warns him that he can never really be
in control of Europe:

Mayor:

There are men all over Europe,
even perhaps in your own country,
whose bodies have escaped you, and
whose spirits you have not broken.
You must be constantly on guard,
never at ease for a moment, always
looking over your shoulder. I can
see that one evening as you
swagger down the street, in the
shadow of a doorway a young man
will be waiting...

Lights fade and rise to reveal a partisan, who shoots the Nazi and then finds himself with a British soldier - 'This is D-Day and the Second Front's on'. The Lecturer (to their surprise at first - 'Soldier: it's O.K. chum, one of those ABCA do's, quite harmless really') draws them into the discussion; both have vehement and definite ideas about Germans and what should be done; as the partisan says, we who have suffered Nazism will have something to say about forgiving and forgetting. The soldier adds that what really must be destroyed 'is the idea those Germans got hold of, it's a killer and you can't just sit back and laugh at it'.

The loudspeaker announces the German surrender (prematurely, the device is to focus attention on a problem which will be eventually far from abstract) and the Mayor adds some new perspectives to conclude. To the partisan: revenge begets revenge, and so the whole tragic cycle will begin again; to the amiable British soldier: good nature should not cloud political awareness and recognition of danger signals; generally: German militarism must be crushed but 'you must at the same time remember that the family of European nations is a family and must be given the means of living and working together'. Suddenly the Voice announces Hitler's escape. The play thus ends on a note of unity: everybody knows what to do with him!

The play is thus open-ended, as befits a discussion leader, and as Tomalin intended did not allow quasi-racist conclusions to predominate. It also provides some practical education in fascism. There is a clear descent from the great pre-war productions of Clifford Odets's Waiting for Lefty: the actors planted in the audience, the action happening through the auditorium. MacOwan

(unlike Tomalin of course) could well have been unaware of these techniques, but his recollections of their impact can be considered alongside, as we have seen, Jerry Dawson's of Lefty:

When the Nazis came into the nissen hut it really was quite frightening because it did give the audience in that hut the feeling of what it's like to be in a police state, when a perfectly peaceable meeting could be suddenly broken up by armed men. Stephen Murray played the Nazi chief absolutely magnificently... he was terrifying. ...One place we did it, a young soldiers' unit, they were all very young, and I thought there was going to be a riot because they screamed, they yelled, they booed when he shouted his Sieg Heils and they were about to get up on the stage and get him. It was an astonishing piece of audience participation. (22)

Similarly Tomalin himself recalls:

I saw a performance at a military base on Primrose Hill. The man taking the part of the young lecturing officer played it very deftly - there was audible groans from the men at the prospect of another tedious evening. (23)

What's Wrong with the Germans? virtually coincided with a political controversy over ABCA itself. Churchill and Lord Page-Croft, his Under-Secretary for War, were bitter opponents of any current affairs discussion of any kind in the forces and fearful of the consequences politically. The ABCA pamphlet on the Beveridge report was withdrawn; after 1943, according to Hawkins and Brimble, 'little attempt was made by the War Office to promote discussion about the principles of democracy and attention was largely focussed on the machinery of democratic institutions'. (op. cit. p.143) Controversies over the politics (frequently

socialist) of civilian lecturers were not uncommon. Tomalin remembers a crisis after his play was broadcast on the B.B.C.:

I heard a pleasing story about this script, I am not sure from whom, but probably one of the cast. The War Minister at that time (if my memory holds) was Grigg, with whom another political figure of the day, Lord Page Croft was on bad terms. When the broadcast was announced as an entertainment intended for army audiences, Page Croft wrote a furious letter to Grigg, asking him why he allowed this Communist propaganda to be served to the troops.

Grigg had neither heard nor read it. No doubt he resented this interference from an unwelcome source, but he could not disregard it. He ordered a special performance at Broadcasting House. MacOwan led his company round to Langham Place, knowing that on the outcome might depend the continued existence of his Dramatic Unit. The Minister sat with a copy of the script on his knee, following it closely. He said not a word until the performance was over. MacOwan, on tenterhooks, awaited the verdict.

"Damn good stuff," said Grigg. "Give them more of it". I have never had praise from a less likely quarter. (24)

The ABCA Play Unit survived, as ABCA itself, according to Addison, survived a Cabinet inquiry into political bias ordered by Churchill. (op. cit. p.149)

The Play Unit went forward from this as a permanent company of thirteen soldiers and five A.T.S. women drawn from the Central Pool of Artists; eventually one group toured home-based units and camps whilst another toured overseas. The group was jointly responsible for devising scripts; they were also responsible for their own set construction and removal, lighting and electrical work as well as the research and discussion over the final writing. Besides Miles Tomalin, and the screenwriter Briget Boland, the Unit attracted some of the experienced writers and producers from Unity and the socialist theatre movement:

Jack Lindsay, Andre Van Gysegghem and Ted Willis; also the Indian Communist novelist Mulk Raj Anand. Their task, as recorded by Hawkins and Brimble, was 'firstly to provide factual information in a more easily assimilable form, and secondly to stimulate discussion by expressing on stage some of the partially developed thoughts in audiences' minds'. (op. cit. p.172) Entertainment was also required, and as each subject was discrete both that and the conditions under which it would be performed determined the approaches used.

Therefore the ABCA scripts were a synthesis of different forms resulting from the pragmatic task of developing suitable treatments of themes. An example was It Started as Lend Lease, which in Arnold Goldmann's words:

explained in simplified and stylised documentation the multi-national co-operation involved in the building of war material. Stylistically bare and expository prose briefs the audience on the complicated military and economic equations. When all the sums are done a British vernacular voice interrupts the American narrator from the audience, and then poetry was used to go beyond the merely quantitative arguments. (25)

Poetry or what was referred to as 'heightened prose' which Jack Lindsay was drafted in to contribute, was a Unity innovation within Living Newspapers which had not been attempted by the U.S. Federal Theatre Project. As Lindsay recollects: (26)

Lend-Lease was effective through the simple exposition of complex arguments and the use of symbolism. It used poetry to put the human side of the whole question, the split between vast economic schemes and simple human needs which the play tried to conclude in harmony. The troops didn't know they were hearing poetry, they were just straight emotional statements.

Another feature, besides the use of naturalistic scenes along the lines used by What's Wrong with the Germans? were cartoons of Churchill and Uncle Sam arguing down the telephone. This mixture of forms within a play had also, of course, been pioneered by Unity theatre.

Within six months and from a repertoire of five plays (others included Famine by Raj Anand, The Japanese Way - outlining in a non-racist fashion Japanese culture and behaviour - by Van Gyseghem and J.B. Priestley's Desert Highway on the issues of the war) the Unit gave some fifty-eight performances to twenty thousand troops, in anything from well-equipped garrison theatres to cramped Nissen Huts. Their impact seems to have owed much to speed, timing and the (for the writers) old techniques of 'cinematic writing' which the Left again had pioneered in difficult touring conditions for 'non-theatrical' audiences.

It is interesting that the most advanced and important experiment in the dramatic sphere should be made by the Army - and for mass audiences. The ABCA plays with their cinematic techniques and complicated lighting effects are not devised for highbrow coteries but for the rank and file of the Army, who enjoy and understand...

Lindsay's point here (1945A op. cit. p.25) was also borne out by a contemporary comment from MacOwan on their progress:

We have given the troops verse at two o'clock in the afternoon and heard them applaud it to the echo; we have made them leap in their seats with realistic dive-bombing and listen, hushed, to a Japanese cradle song. We are still learning and, we hope, still shaking them (quoted in Hawkins and Brimble op. cit. p.172)

However at the end of the war a programme of these plays was presented at the Arts Theatre in London - Lend-Lease as The Great Swap and also Where Do We Go From Here?, which raised the discussion on what sort of post-war society the audience wanted. Montagu Slater, an old comrade and collaborator of the authors as we have seen, raised a number of artistic criticisms:

Where Do We Go ... has less of the Great Swap's qualities of wit, poetry and unity and makes matters worse by trying to add the one incompatible quality of character building. By contrast, Great Swap deals with people sometimes as figures in an isotope, sometimes We Go treats them as human, all-too human, but human in one dimension since we only have time for one minute scenes. So instead of poetry we get the effect of a sentimental weepy, the subject is not covered but sketched in lightly and the piece is kept going in the end by a bag of producer's tricks. It is an interesting contrast and helps to show what the Living Newspaper ought and ought not to attempt.(27)

Slater had not, as he admitted, seen these plays 'in the field', or witnessed the way they might supply facts and arguments always for the purpose of provoking a discussion. The actor Alan Badel, who had been seconded to ABCA from the Parachute Regiment, has recalled productions of Where Do We Go From Here? (28) in such circumstances:

The officers always used to occupy the front rows and we were in our own uniforms, whatever unit we'd come from, and so we were all other ranks and we were sitting behind them, and so eventually of course we used to get very adept at it and we'd place ourselves just two or three rows behind the last row of officers and then we'd start heckling. We'd keep on heckling and going harder and harder to force the officers to turn round and actually do something about us, and we'd wait until we were almost arrested, you see, before bursting through and jumping on the stage and then everyone realised that although we were troops we were part of the performance. The play was about class distinction and already we'd created one within the audience because the troops sitting behind the officers were in a way being made a fool of by us.

Therefore without being the artistically coherent piece Slater required this play was still effectively carrying out its task. Where Do We Go was also clearly concerned with the war aims discussion, and a part of the radicalisation of the forces which produced the massive vote for Labour in 1945; indeed, the News Chronicle considered that had the ABCA plays received a wider showing they would have been worth tens of thousands of votes for Labour. (29) These points are worth examining.

Addison (op. cit.) has provided a thorough and sober account of ABCA's contribution to the massive electoral landslide. ABCA was in fact only the most prominent instance of a widespread war-time phenomenon of discussion groups and 'brains trusts'; the London Fire Service, for example, had up to fifteen thousand men and women per week in informal discussion groups on current affairs. The political significance lay the most, according to Addison, in the actual stimulation of thought and discussion. Whereas the Left were obviously quick to draw parallels with the Putney Debates of Cromwell's New Model Army, ABCA also has to be understood in terms of other movements and developments which Addison traces back to the 1930s - documentary film, the Left Book Club and the Penguin Specials, a Leftward shift in the mass circulation press such as the Daily Mirror or Picture Post. (30)

Nevertheless, although obviously a great deal of further research would be needed to enable any confident generalisations, reminiscence illustrates that at particular times and places the mood in the armed forces moved to the Left in conjunction with the activities associated with ABCA. For example Leo Abse, an aircraftman in Cairo in 1944:

...a number of us had created, with the approval of the forces educational authorities and as a part of the recreational facilities for the troops in the Delta and for those on leave from the desert, a mock Parliament. Here the citizens in uniform were able to debate the shaping of the post-war world for which we all yearned. When elections were held the Parliament acquired a very large socialist majority, and this, together with its continued success, provoked the bewildered Colonel Blimps of Middle East Headquarters to fury. One fateful night, when some 600 of us were gathered there, they moved in with the military police bent, in fact on suppressing this alien institution just at a time when I, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, was about to nationalise the Bank of England. The Blimps intervention was not relished, and the young servicemen of all political parties protested against it. That night I nationalised the Bank; but in the morning I was arrested. The military authorities refused my challenge of a courts martial, and I was taken under escort to Suez and kept in custody to await the arrival of a boat which was to take me to a hot and arid island in the Persian Gulf, where I was to be quarantined.

They also ordered a rigorous censorship of all forces letters for Britain... but news was smuggled out to Westminster... I was released to Liverpool... Later an embarrassed Air Minister had to explain to a sceptical House of Commons that I had been moved because my "enthusiasms" were disturbing the forces of the Middle East. (1973 p.40)

Similarly the Indian Naval Mutiny and trades unions general strike in Bombay in February 1946 in support of the independence demands of the Indian Congress - met initially by the shooting down of two hundred people in three days - was supported by a similar mock Parliament in Deolali, leading again to its prompt dissolution by the army authorities. (Davidson op. cit. p.154) Such instances of action and reaction may only have been isolated and sporadic; it is extremely difficult to quantify. But there is much contained in this comment on the consensus generated by ABCA discussions by an artillery officer in 1941, quoted by Hawkins and Brimble:

The men felt that our only chance of survival, as a nation, was in a saner and wiser politics

than we had known for many years. They wanted to know what kind of a world would be theirs when the war had finished, and how they would reconstruct the happiness that had vanished. (1947 op. cit. p.127)

Within this the rapid and ingenious firing of salient points achieved by the ABCA Play Unit, the active audience involvement and encouragement of participation, was a noteworthy contribution to how post-war expectations were structured and articulated. This conclusion on the role of a - relatively - socialist theatre is a suitable point at which to discuss its role during the war period as a whole.

As has been noted in earlier sections, the goal of the socialist (or 'progressive') theatre movement in the latter part of the 1930s was very much the creation of a 'peoples' theatre', where 'people' was understood in the great radical traditions of English popular history. Just as with their efforts to combat fascism, the cultural Left sought the maximum involvement of 'the people' in 'the people's theatre', which can stand alongside accounts of its achievements in industrial organisation.

The achievement was not in the creation of a literary culture - quite the reverse; that culture made a definite shift away from the social engagement of the 30s and towards isolation or the Right, as Hewison (1977) as analysed in detail. Similarly in the theatre, Jack Lindsay commented thus:

How has the playwright responded to the changed condition of the theatre? On the whole, not very much. Of course due consideration must be given to the peculiar difficulties of the creative worker in wartime, especially if, as is likely, he or she has been conscripted into the forces or some tiring warwork. Still, the time-lag between the onward mass-movement and the hesitant creator

is more evident in the theatre. When the Arts Theatre Club in 1943 arranged a play competition, over 500 entries were submitted, but the winning text was a slight work with only a flimsy relation to the contemporary situation. (1945A op. cit. p.25)

Nor would it be accurate to claim that significant innovations in dramatic forms were achieved; as has been seen, the Living Newspapers of the ABCA Play Unit, the pageants of the Peoples' Entertainment Society, the sketches of the Russia To-Day Society or even the pantomimes such as Jack the Giant Killer were essentially continuations under new conditions of a range of pre-war forms and productions: documentary 'cinematic writing', declaimed verse, the use of naturalistic scenes and audience participation techniques were all already tried and tested. A point which should be stressed here however is that probably the Left writers (such as Lindsay, Tomalin, Van Gyseghem or Parsons) had the experience in the techniques, the versatility, and the experience of hard touring work with non-theatrical audiences necessary to rise to the possibilities opened up by tube shelter audiences or ABCA.

For these writers, and the group around Our Time, the signs that the literary intelligentsia were shifting away were not a problem at this time. It appeared to them that they had achieved the mass popular base for their theatre at last, and indeed this is where their achievement lies. It is curiously the reverse of the pre-war situation, then a Left literary culture but only a far more confined or sporadic mass base. This was because their work was simultaneously in rapport towards the Soviet Union - in problematic competition with official policy of a different direction, for democratic planning in industry, and in affirming the structure of post-war expectations so widespread as to ensure the Labour

victory in 1945. Parallels can be drawn with the successful theatrical interventions into the campaigns around Spanish solidarity and Munich, but it is doubtful that these pre-war struggles carried with them anything like the same scale and momentum.

Socialist theatre activists like most on the cultural Left were well aware of this and shared the general optimism, if not actual euphoria, about the future. Beatrix Lehmann in Our Time, for example, considered the widespread activity of the discussion groups together with developments in the theatre to represent:

...an awakening to the true democratic right of a free people to express itself by an informed, majority voice in the direction of its affairs... this same people can become articulate in the direction of the theatre for the common good. It can make the theatre elastic to its immediate needs, and the voices of experts in the actual, living work of the theatre can inform, guide and clarify the audiences, drawing them into theatre to be awakened, stimulated and encouraged. (31)

Less pedagogic, and expressing the heights of the contemporary idealism - and, as will be seen later, the simplistic view of the state which seems to have been one immediate result of the war - is Jack Lindsay's programme for poetry under the new conditions:

We shall resume vitally the whole body of poetic tradition by the effort to achieve unity with history, with the masses who all over the world at various stages of political awareness are struggling towards the classless society. For the achievement of that society, by restoring wholeness to man, restores to them the participation in art; and all the technical and scientific work of past ages will be embodied in the machinery begetting a world of plenty, so the culture of such a world must arise out of all that has concretely expressed the human universal in preceding stages. Our task is therefore dual. To bridge the gap and make art a part of common life; to resume the whole tradition of our art

on the new level. (1944 p. 28)

How these hopes and successes fared in the immediate post-war world will be examined next.

Notes

1. A basic compilation is provided in ed. J. Attfield and S. Williams, 1939: The Communist Party and the War (1984)
2. This was the name given to the migrations of the well-to-do to country accommodation prior to air raids. It is discussed in A. Calder, The People's War (1971) p.244-5.
3. The text used is the unpublished copy held by the Morris Library, University of Southern Illinois at Carbondale.
4. The text used is the unpublished copy held in the archive of the Scottish Playwrights' Association in Glasgow.
5. 'Editorial', Our Time vol. 1 no.1 February 1941 p.1.
6. Quoted in I. Evans and M. Glasgow, The Arts in England (1949) p.19.
7. R.V. Beste, 'Mass Declamations', Our Time vol.2 no.11 May 1943 p.30.
8. F. Brown, 'Let the People Sing', Our Time vol.1 no.10 January 1942 p.27.
9. J. Bishop, 'Frau Kremer of Ebenstadt', in A. Van Gyseghem (ed), The Theatre is Our Weapon (1941) p.3-8.
10. 'Let the People Sing', op. cit. p.28.
11. Ibid p.28.
12. As published in The Theatre is Our Weapon op. cit. p.9-19.
13. N. Cunard, 'According to Plan', Our Time vol.1 no.9 December 1941 p.25.
14. The Theatre is Our Weapon op. cit. p.2.
15. This observation was made by Montagu Slater in a review of Willis's plays in Our Time in 1945. He also described All Change Here as 'confused, nibbling without dealing properly with the issues it raised'. 'All Change Here', Our Time vol.4 no.10 May 1945 p.9.
16. J. Lindsay The British Achievement in Art and Music (1945) p.25. Although this thesis concentrates on theatre it can be registered here that great popular interest was evident in every art form during the war period. This book by Lindsay again covers each in some detail.
17. Anon, 'The People's Entertainment Society', Our Time vol.4 no.3 October 1944 p.6.
18. The text used is that published in Our Time vol.2 no.4 July 1942 p.1-11.
19. A convincing account of how the Soviet war effort was, and officially, nationalist rather than socialist is found in I. Deutscher, Stalin: A Political Biography (1965) p.451-485.

20. Miles Tomalin, letter to the author 1981.
21. The text used is an unpublished copy shown to the author by Miles Tomalin.
22. Michael MacOwan, interview by A. Goldmann in A Theatre at War (BBC Radio 4 13th March 1975). Quotes are taken from the programme script held by the BBC Radio Library.
23. Letter to the author, 1981 op. cit.
24. Ibid.
25. A Theatre at War op. cit.
26. Ibid.
27. M. Slater, 'The ABCA Plays', Our Time vol.5 no.1 August 1945 p.20.
28. A Theatre at War op. cit.
29. J. Lindsay, letter to the author 1981.
30. On the relations between the press and society at this time see A.C. Smith, Paper Voices: The Popular Press and Social Change 1935-1965 (1975)
31. B. Lehmann, 'Discussion Groups', Our Time vol.2 no.7 November 1942.

6: 'A Long Way in a Short Time'? Socialist Theatre 1945-65

The previous section concluded with the high hopes of 1945, the sense of hope and achievement which the socialist theatre movement shared with the Left as a whole. Before examining the fate of the movement during this period a note of explanation about the role of this section is required.

This thesis is concerned primarily with the major features of the history of British socialist theatre, represented, as has been explained, by the 1930s, the war years and the 1970s. The period covered by this section is essentially a linking one between these major points and therefore it is somewhat shorter and employs less detail than the others. Its focus is on a phase of comparative lull within the series of heightened episodes which occupy the work as a whole.

This section therefore links two high points by explaining first the fate of the socialist theatre and the Left within which it operated after the war and how its aims and achievements were subjected to a series of determining pressures.

Miliband has offered some notes on how in the first few years after 1945:

The mood was sufficiently strong to carry the Government forward to the achievement, in the first three years of office, of much that had been promised at the Election. By 1948, it had ensured an orderly transition from war-time mobilization to peace-time reconstruction. It had placed on the Statute Book the nationalization proposals of Let Us Face The Future... And it had brought into being a National Health Service and a new comprehensive system of social insurance. In housing, in education, in welfare, it could well boast to have done more than any Government had done before - and to have done it in the midst of acute economic difficulties.

In a different context, it could also point to its ready recognition of the fact that there was no alternative to India's political independence, which went with the political independence of Burma and Ceylon.

These achievements were real, and of permanent importance, but even in those first years of social and economic reform, the Government's impact on post-war Britain was profoundly ambiguous. (1979 op. cit. p. 286)

Examples of this ambiguity can be found in several areas. Foreign policy was one where the Labour Left tried to oppose a retreat from the idealism of the war years, particularly for example as regards the British military presence and suppression of the Communists in Greece. The Soviet Union consolidated its domination of Eastern Europe, and Western Europe through the economic aid of the American Marshall Aid Plan was gathered into an opposing camp. Eatwell has provided a balanced comment:

Within three years the wartime co-operation of the great powers had turned into hostility. Many have sought to analyse this development in terms of, on the one hand, Soviet expansionism, or, on the other hand, American hostility to Communism. Others have focused on the decline of Britain, and her role, especially in seeking an American commitment to the old world. There is an element of truth in each of these perspectives, but the cold war cannot be analysed easily; it was the result of complex pressures and responses. Almost certainly it could not have been avoided. Moreover, a concentration on post - 1945 disunity is in some ways misleading: wartime co-operation was the unusual situation. (1979 p.89)

The full significance of this will be expanded upon later, as its domestic consequence was marked and severe.

A severe balance of payments crisis and a stagnation of

industrial production - most crucial in the coal industry during the harsh winter of 1947 - were coped with by the acceptance of soon-expended United States loans and a variety of domestic austerity measures such as cuts in rationing. According to Eatwell this was not conducted with any political acumen:

The government made some efforts to explain the economic situation, but in general it failed to convey an accurate picture of Britain's economic position to home opinion. People were aware that there were serious problems, but they did not fully understand the causes of these troubles. Labour's propaganda was essentially negative, appealing for harder work and more production ... The cuts appeared to be the result of incompetence rather than of necessity or as part of a plan. (ibid p.83)

Indeed the very issue of a 'plan', of a democratically planned economy whose commanding heights were under public ownership, soon proved another bone of contention. The Labour Government could of course rely on the co-operation of the trades union movement, generally, in maintaining an industrial discipline based on the consultation processes during the war years. This limited consultation was as far as industrial democracy was to proceed, however, as writers such as Miliband have concluded:

As for the effective control of the nationalised industries, the Conservatives found the Government much more than half way in their own camp. Though ultimate control was vested in the Minister and provision made for a measure of parliamentary accountability more formal than real, the Government's conception of public ownership ensured the predominance on the boards of the nationalised corporations of men who had been, or who still were, closely associated with private finance and industry, and who could hardly be expected to regard the nationalised

industries as designed to achieve any purpose other than the more efficient servicing of the private sector ... had the Government been determined that nationalisation should make little appeal to the voters, it could not easily have managed the business better. (op. cit. p. 288)

A National Union of Railwaymen survey of 1948 indicated that 45% of the respondents felt that their jobs were unchanged, while another 45% felt that frustration had increased after a year of nationalisation. Fewer than 15% thought that they had a share in the running of the railways. Fabian Society research revealed a similar pattern in mining, but no heed was paid to conference calls to 'socialize the nationalised industries' ⁽¹⁾ Thus already here too disillusionment was seeping through the new Government's natural constituency of support.

An almost euphoric mood of optimism was widespread in 1945 amongst socialist theatre circles also, as we have seen. There was confidence enough for Jack Lindsay to link both together in an official Government publication, 'A cultural revolution has been initiated. No greater testimony could be made to the deep democratic upsurge which has been part of our national war effort' ⁽²⁾.

This was expressed in a highly ambitious project launched from London Unity Theatre by its emergent prime mover, Ted Willis. This was to amalgamate all the regional Unity Theatres into a national society which would then control the activities of the Unity companies in Britain. Local groups were urged to obtain permanent premises and attract paying audiences to them, rather than tour out to where the audiences actually were; it was felt

that this foundation of attraction had been laid during the war. This conception of the future work of Unity hinged in turn on a conception of the relationship between theatrical amateur and professional, which had worked at London Unity during the 1930s, and of the audiences themselves, which certainly seemed a concrete possibility given the CEMA experience.

Within a revealing comment on attitudes towards political style and content, professionalism as such was to be the aim:

Unity has left behind the rather narrow propaganda play, apt in its own day but no longer adequate for the time. Artistically and politically, so far as resources allowed, we have taken our place in the people's struggle against fascism. These phases have been successfully concluded and neither the narrow nor the negative will take us further. The people have developed a breadth of interest and confidence which demands a new expression. This breadth of interest is truly national but not exclusive. It is still somewhat naive but will respond readily to the best. (quoted in Marshall 1948 p.102)

Even if 'the people' are still artistically naive they demand a technical competence in performances which must be satisfied:

Therefore the amateur theatre must raise its standards. Unity Theatre means to do this. Amateur actors and producers can reach a high standard but the professional can reach higher. Therefore, Unity aims at creating a professional theatre alongside its amateur companies. (ibid p.103)

In what was to prove a relatively lasting experiment in London and Glasgow, Unity introduced an apprentice system. According to this scheme actors, drawn from the Unity amateur ranks, were employed full time and received continuous training alongside their work - and for a long period this represented the sole opportunity for working people to enter or be trained

in the theatre. Thus it was possible to erode the traditional amateur - professional divide; this training (which included political education in 'peoples' theatre') continued alongside professional appearances in a local touring repertory company, was an innovation of wide implications which has never been repeated. To assist this process regional Unities were encouraged to contribute their best actors to London; there, it was planned and proposed, a theatre to rival the West End in professionalism would also possess a full-time staff of travelling producers and a library of instructional material. Eventually this would also be built up to be the case in the localities.

Before examining the progress of these schemes it is worthwhile to discuss the material which the socialist theatre movement was presenting at this time, and the direction in which it was moving.

Bram Bootman, a founder member of London Unity Theatre has recalled friction with Ted Willis, and not simply over his new proposals:

When we came back from the war we weren't wanted. He had his company there and our job was to drum up support for them. We said to hell with that, we want the theatre back doing what it used to be doing.(3)

The reasons for this type of attitude can be explained by this review of God Bless the Guv'nor in 1946, adapted by Willis from Mrs Henry Wood:

... a period burlesque which went on just a little too long. It attacked the twin

"evils" of drink and trades unionism, and the audience was invited to join in the cheers for the honest young employer's son and to jeer the villainous trades union organiser... at any rate, it was different (Noble op. cit. p.186)

Elsewhere however great hopes were attached to the results of the Arts Theatre season of ABCA Living Newspapers; according to Montagu Slater it stimulated great discussion on revolutionising stage technique - 'thanks to the army a frozen theatre is being thawed out'. ⁽⁴⁾ A permanent civilian company presenting regular Living Newspapers was envisaged: Theatre 46 based at London's Scala Theatre. In fact this project opened with Montagu Slater's A Century for George, an interpretation of labour movement history sponsored by the A.E.U. A Century covered three generations of life in 'Coketown', industrial unrest and the rise of trades unionism culminating in the class consciousness of the armed forces in 1945. Critics felt however that the writing did not match the grandeur of the central ideas. ⁽⁵⁾

The Living Newspapers were more successful. In Manchester the Theatre of Action had reformed as soon as possible after the war. Members pooled their own resources and recruited their own actors who formed, under the direction of Joan Littlewood and Ewan MacColl, the Theatre Workshop in Kendal in 1945. Their manifesto, echoing that of the Left Book Club Theatre Guild of pre-war days, stated again the principles of a peoples' theatre:

The great theatres of all times have been popular theatres which reflected the dreams and struggles of the people... We want a theatre with a living language, a theatre which is not afraid of the sound of its own voice and which will comment as fearlessly on Society as Ben Jonson and Aristophanes.

Theatre Workshop is an organisation of artists, technicians and actors who are experimenting in stage-craft. Its purpose is to create a flexible theatre-art, as swift-moving and plastic as the cinema, by applying the recent technical advances in light and sound, and introducing music and the "dance-theatre" style of production. (Goorney op. cit. p.42)

Goorney describes now in Johnny Noble by Ewan MacColl (which followed the fortunes of a young merchant seaman and his girlfriend through unemployment and the 1930s, Spain, the war years and 1945) a ballad opera form using traditional tunes and poetry as a narration was used, orchestrating light and sound, voice and movement. The former merchant seaman who played the leading role has recalled the effects which were achieved and how they were carried out:

I was taking the pitch and toss of the boat, the forward and aft movement, whereas the man who was standing was taking the roll of the boat. Starboard to port. So in fact, we were side by side, moving in slightly different directions. On the side of the stage, to emphasise that, she had the green and port light going up and down with the ship moving at sea. This was all there was on the stage, two actors, two lights and the sound of the engine going "debum... debum... debum". People have told me they were literally feeling seasick at the end of the scene.

... Joan asked me to show what each member of the gun crew did. By repeating the movements over and over again, the orders and the shouts, Joan actually created a ballet, a dance sequence out of it; but by incorporating realistic sound, bombers coming in, guns and shots, the scene had all the drama of a gun crew fighting off an aeroplane. (ibid p.45)

Using these refined techniques which they had developed in the 1930s Theatre Workshop toured the North of England, playing to non-theatre goers in a great range of venues on the

shoestring budget of whatever resources they could raise. At this point the Workshop reached its apex with its production and touring of Uranium 235 on the atomic bomb. Inspired by Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the play, in many scenes and through a variety of different styles, explained the history of atomic energy, an accurate account of quantum theory and atomic physics, and finally the Manhattan Project. 'Neutrons' and 'Protons' danced an atomic ballet, splitting with Alfie Particle (the Alpha Particle); Einstein, Planck and Bohr were German knockabout comics. In May 1946 the Workshop played a week at the Butlins' Holiday Camp at Filey, which Goorney recalls:

The response of the working-class holiday audience was less restrained than the scientists, as might be expected, every scene, including the Atom Ballet was applauded, sometimes cheered, as though it was indeed a Variety Show. Uranium was not an easy show - it was telling an involved story through many different theatrical styles - but the audience was thoroughly absorbed. So much so that when the time came for me to "interrupt" from the audience as part of the action, I was man-handled by a large, outraged lady, and told to "get out if you don't want to listen".

The warm response of the Butlin holidaymakers to Uranium 235 was a confirmation of what we had always believed - that there was no necessity to play down or compromise when faced with a working class audience. Our performances at Filey came to be regarded as something of a milestone, and we felt we had come quite a long way in a short time towards creating a popular theatre. (ibid p.53)

Our Time also commented on how Theatre Workshop was playing to miners and fishermen at Blyth, schools, villages, and Sheffield steel workers; later it said of Uranium 235 that:

its use of ballet and mime had brought a new element into the Living Newspaper -

from now perhaps an essential element.
For here is a means of avoiding that
jerky progress from fact to fact which
is the besetting weakness of documentary.(6)

In Glasgow it was also felt that a popular theatre was in
creation with the Glasgow Unity Theatre's production of The
Gorbals Story. Hill describes its opening at a Glasgow music-
hall:

The first night on 2nd September 1946
caused a storm, adroit showmanship only
serving to add fuel to an already explosive
play. White Glasgow's Lord Provost and
numerous civic and literary dignitaries sat
in the stalls, above them in the circle as
guests of honour were a large contingent
of squatters from the Glasgow suburbs,
whose leader Peter McIntyre was allowed to
harangue the audience from the stage before
the rise of the curtain. The play made
its own bitter comment on the housing
situation of the time:

Peggie: Ye'd think the Government would
 dae something about these people -
 traillin' about lookin' for rooms,
 I think it must have been the
 blitz that caused it.
Hector: It was before the blitz - it was
 bad before the war.
Peggie: It's a funny thing tae me - a' thae
 sodgers that came here - nane
 o'them had to go about looking for
 a room.
Hector: That was different, Peggie.
Peggie: Was it? The People's War, and
 only the sodgers get hooses.

This was a situation of which the audience
needed little reminding. Squatting was
becoming widespread nationally, and only
four days earlier, the story of an eviction
of thirty families from a hotel in Glasgow's
Charing Cross had hit the headlines - an event
in which MacIntyre himself had been a
participant. (1977 p.66)

According to Hill the play uses an episodic structure to unfold
the way of life of eight families sharing one kitchen, the

characters and situations which appear and slacken over a twenty four hour period. By April 1947 it had been estimated that the play, having been toured, had been seen by over 100,000 people, and by the end of 1946 it had taken £5,800 in box office drawings - over £4,000 of which had been made from its Glasgow performances. Further, 'it had attracted that truly popular audience the company had never quite succeeded in bringing into the theatre before' (op. cit. p.68)

It can be said therefore that these initiatives were taking up the issues of the day - local or national - and developing forms of documentary theatre to express them, forms more innovative and imaginative than some of the examples from the pre-war London Unity Theatre which we have already examined. Again there is the mixture of forms within a play and the use of a variety of media.

There is a significant example also at this time of the topical Living Newspaper. Collier describes London Unity's Black Magic:

Black Magic deals with Britain's coal crisis and with an eye to recruitment for the mines. When it was written it was prophetic. It was first produced at the tiny Unity Theatre before a shivering audience who had advance notice of the many severe full restrictions that were announced two days later. The London Times referred to it as "a series of stage posters" while Theatre Newsletter called it "the slickest documentary yet written for the English stage". The really significant feature is that the script was commissioned and the production sponsored by a Government department, the Ministry of Fuel and Power. (1947 p.66)

Performed in the midst of the fuel crisis during the severe winter of 1947, Black Magic is worth recording here as the first,

and only, case of a British Government directly sponsoring a production by a socialist theatre company. It is also one of the few, if only, examples of a socialist theatre company supporting the policy and explaining the predicament of that Government.

Collier continues:

Because of the success of this venture other Government departments are now nibbling at the idea of sponsoring such shows, and powerful bodies such as the great trades unions are also interested. The pangs of re-adjustment are severe in Britain to-day and there is a premium on the dissemination of new, disturbing, uncomfortable ideas. The people are shocked. The theatre, if it will, can help ensure that the shock galvanises rather than stupefies. (ibid p.66)

However these encouraging beginnings came to nothing, or rapidly receded, almost as quickly as they had emerged. It is now necessary to trace the different factors which attacked this early encouraging situation, and their consequences for the development of the socialist theatre movement in the post-war years.

Firstly, the scheme to mount a national organisation of professional companies proved to be a disaster for the Unity Theatres, one for which veterans such as Jack Lindsay and Bram Bootman held Willis responsible for its damage to the Left theatre movement. (7) Certainly whereas commentators such as Travis (1968 op. cit.) seem to deal with the professionalism issue as the summit of Unity, in fact it was a major factor in the decline of the network of Unity Theatres. In London it soon

became clear that the 250-seater theatre was too small to regularly support a professional company; the touring which had been a feature of the pre-war work was now impossible. Debts accumulated and the project was short lived. This meant that the London base was unable to assist regional groups such as the Bristol Unity Players, who, according to Tuckett, had great difficulty in re-forming after the war. They had not the resources to participate in a national society, and whereas before they would have been helped by London, the centre was now by necessity pre-occupied with maintaining its own building. As a result,

There was to be no Bristol Unity Players to help understand the new problems of the perplexing era now opening of atom bombs, wage freeze and cold war, with dispersed war workers and ex-service people going home to cultivate the garden and leave affairs to "them" for a while. (1980 op.cit. p.25)

In Liverpool the Unity Theatre continued, with a labour movement advisory committee comprising trades unionists, Labour, Communist and Co-Op Party branches; in 1948 they staged One Hundred Years Hard for the centenary of Liverpool trades council. In this labour movement history George Garrett played a Hunger Marcher and Bessie Braddock her own mother in a musical documentary form. Yet despite having nearly seven hundred thousand members through its various affiliated bodies, this group felt the whole project far too ambitious and disassociated itself. (8)

The result of the failure of the professional project, and the severe financial problems it entailed, was that the structural pattern of the pre-war Unity Theatres or the Left Book Club Theatres Guild - a centre in London in a supporting relationship

with regional centres, always independent in many ways but, if starting out, able to make use of advice, expertise and material of all kinds, came largely to a halt.

In addition to this the enthusiasm over the discovery of a new audience proved to be premature. Theatre 46 (situated, incidentally, in the West End of London) folded soon after losing AEU support as audiences dwindled - 'the lads didn't come'.⁽⁹⁾ By 1948 Jack Lindsay had to admit that 'during the war CEMA faced a buoyant and expansive situation, in which a great deal would be achieved with very little organisation ... with peace it is more difficult to get at the new audiences'.⁽¹⁰⁾ This was by no means confined to the Left theatre movement; Charles Landstone, an actor who had spent the war in the CEMA tours of the hostels, factory canteens and bases, has recalled that an interest was awakened by the work. But only about a twenty percent residue remained afterwards, and he has stated the position well:

We had high hopes of it. We thought that the work we and ENSA were accomplishing must have a lasting result ... At the end of the war, all of us thought that all that remained to be done was to provide new buildings and new theatres for this vast new audience. But, unfortunately, an extraordinary thing happened. The audience dispersed from their hostels, their camps and their war centres and, in a flash, appeared to have left their interest entirely behind them. Except in cosmopolitan London, the theatre, both in its "commercial" and "non-commercial" aspects, seemed, for the first few months after V.E. Day, to be back in the worst periods of the nineteen thirties. It was as if these newcomers were saying "Theatre? That's something we went to during the war. We want to forget all about the war". This reaction lasted the best part of a year, and a large part of the audience was lost, and has not yet been regained. (1953 p.60)

Clearly the Left theatre movement had over-estimated the extent to which the genuinely deep and widespread audience interest had

been conditioned by war time life and circumstances. What it had also over-estimated was the extent to which, and the level at which, the state under the new Labour Government would support the war-time theatre apparatus after the war, as CEMA was re-established as the Arts Council of Great Britain in 1946.

The Council - 'which was fortunate in eliciting the services of a number of distinguished men and women'⁽¹¹⁾ - was considered to be a subtle balance between the acknowledged need for state subsidy and a nervousness over the prospect of a Ministry of Arts. The Council was not only imprisoned by limited resources (in 1946 it was claimed that in that year the Danish subsidy for theatre in Copenhagen, and the French subsidy for opera in Paris, each doubled the total annual budget of the Arts Council)⁽¹²⁾ but also by the assumptions and approach which had been a characteristic of the war-time CEMA. A tension in the war-time work of CEMA was intimated in the previous chapter; it largely concerned a fear of cultural debasement, which was expressed as a real danger:

The centre of the danger lay in a passive audience with no standards of its own, readily receptive of whatever might be offered. If the new enthusiasm for the arts was going to last, and it was recognised on all sides that there was a new enthusiasm, then it became evident to the CEMA Council that the emphasis must be shifted to a considerable degree. (Evans and Glasgow op. cit. p.46)

During these tours of the hostels, also, not all of the participants were as enamoured as Walter Hudd or Jack Lindsay with the contexts and conditions. Whereas some actors felt that the informality and intimacy engendered increased mutual

understanding between performer and audience, raising knowledge of and enthusiasm for the theatre, others appear to have reacted negatively. They felt that under these conditions the illusion of the stage - a pre-requisite within their dramatic perspective - was lost. The result of all this had been, in 1942, to concentrate on support for professional organisations and not the amateur movements which were much in evidence - a decision whose significance appears to have been lost on the Left commentators of the time. Rather than a general support for access to and participation in theatrical activity, the new Arts Council, through a mixture of both lack of resources and a traditional conception of culture, adopted this approach set out by its Secretary-General in 1951:

High standards can be built only on a limited scale. The motto which Meleager wrote to be carved over a patrician nursery might be one for the Arts Council to follow in deciding what to support during the next few straitened years - "Few, but roses" - including, of course, regional roses (quoted in Hutchinson 1982 p.60)

Thus when Jack Lindsay came to interview Mary Glasgow of the Arts Council for Our Time in 1948, a tension came over from the published discussion : particularly over such issues as 'broadening the Council's base' the enthusiastic ideas of the interviewer were consistently stalled by the interviewee. (13)

Some direct consequences of the Arts Council policy can be identified. Theatre Workshop, based again in Manchester, performed not only their own material but theatrical classics also in ways which actively carried out the aims of the Arts Council Charter (but not its policies) : schools work, tours of mining areas where the audiences were strangers to theatre-

going, in any form of venue which was available. Apart from some occasional help from trades unions and organisations based in the communities where they played, the Workshop received no financial aid other than through its own fund raising. The relentless and grinding struggle against financial and physical hardship which, it has been recalled, the company mounted, must surely have deterred or defeated other companies in similar circumstances.

The Glasgow Unity Theatre had attempted in 1947 to enter the first Edinburgh Festival, despite the organisers' position that no aspect of Scottish theatre was up to international festival standard. The Arts Council withdrew its support (in the form of a guarantee against loss), ostensibly because of low artistic standards but, as emerged in the subsequent controversy over and the critical acclaim for The Gorbals Story, in reality because of the conviction that the working-class audiences it attracted precluded desirable artistic standards. Thus Glasgow Unity became dependent financially on touring The Gorbals Story, particularly in England, at the expense of developing its basis in Scotland. Again in 1949 the Arts Council denied support actually on the grounds that the group was playing outside Scotland - despite the fact that grant aid would have permitted a proper return there. Problems like these inhibited the company until its eventual bankruptcy in 1951. (Hill op. cit.)

As a final comment on the Arts Council and state support for the arts in the late 1940s and early 1950s, a parallel can be drawn with the expectations which had arisen over the nationalised industries. The Left cultural commentators, such as those centred around Our Time, had grasped the importance of the active

participation of people in the theatrical initiatives which had appeared during the war - forming their own drama organisations, taking part in productions, developing and controlling their own cultural expressions - not simply as an audience for material organised on their behalf by others. Instead of this the organisations closest to this idea - the Peoples' Entertainment Society of the Co-Op Movement, the Miners' Welfare Association in South Wales - proved short lived as regards supporting drama, leaving only the Arts Council of Great Britain. Consequently, given the policy adopted by the Council following the CEMA, the participation by ordinary people in cultural life declined alongside audience figures. As with nationalisation, a remote and bureaucratic organisation managed from above, and those below were excluded from yet another aspect of national life in the post-war world. In fact, as we have seen, by 1947 it was too late; the essential battle over the direction of state subsidy for the arts had been lost in 1942.

Another factor is crucial to the understanding of what happened to the 'peoples' theatre' idea after 1945. At the Edinburgh Festival:

An attempt was made to create a form of Alternative Festival aimed at attracting support from the Labour Party and other Left wing groups. Organised largely by Norman and Janice Buchan it included Theatre Workshop, Glasgow Unity Theatre, clowns, folk singers and a group of Scots poets led by Hugh MacDiarmid. Any suggestion of commitment was suspect in those days and apart from Uranium 235 and Unity's Time of Strife, it was largely ignored by the media, and the People's Festival lasted only two years. (Goorney op. cit. p. 79)

The fact that theatrical commitment could be considered 'suspect'

by 1948 indicates a major if not actually profound switch in cultural - political alignment inside three years. What has come to be known as the Cold War had in fact begun before the close of hostilities - it is probably more accurate to consider it a permanent situation since 1917 - but by this time was in full motion.

The Communist Party of Great Britain had been supporting the Labour Party and then the Labour Government, albeit with criticism, virtually since the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union of 1941. A growing critique of the new Government's foreign policy, however, was led to a climax by the establishment of the Communist Information Bureau, the Cominform, by Stalin in late 1947. In reaction, possibly, to the escalation of conflict with the West this was an attempt to impose a uniform subordination of the Communist Parties and Governments to Soviet policy, leading to a number of purges, clashes, and an open break with Yugoslavia. In a parallel with a previous 'left turn' of the early 1930s, the world was divided into two mutually exclusive and hostile camps. The CPGB drew its conclusion:

When the world is clearly divided into an imperialist and an anti-imperialist camp, with a Labour Government as active partner in the imperialist camp, and carrying through a capitalist solution to the crisis, it is necessary that important changes in the policy of the Communist Party to meet this situation should be made. (14)

A first feature of this was a revival of the 'progressive - national cultural heritage' approach whereby, as in the days of

the Popular Front, a lineage of artists, writers and poets was invoked whose work reflected a native radical tradition. The struggle now, however, was against 'The USA Threat to British Culture': a cultural counterpart of the political struggle against a perceived U.S. hegemony in the political and economic spheres, and, eventually, of the opposition to the Korean War.

A second and predictable feature of the new line was the reaction it provoked - or more likely allowed to re-surface and gain control - in the Labour Party and trades union movement. The Party expelled 'fellow travellers' from the parliamentary party and, through an ever increasing list of prescribed organisations, from work with the constituency parties. Despite the primacy given to electoral work and the use of parliamentary institutions in the new CP programme of 1951, The British Road to Socialism, both in its own right and in alliance with the mass reformist party the CP was condemned to an electoral impasse.

The consequences in the trades union movement were equally serious. The CP's attacks on the Labour Party, the U.S. Marshall Plan and the overall international tension manifest in the Berlin Blockade and the coup in Czechoslovakia, prompted a strong statement in 1949 from the General Council of the T.U.C.:

Statements made officially by the Communist Party in Britain prove beyond question that sabotage of the European Recovery Programme is its present aim. Communist influences are everywhere at work to frame industrial demands for purposes of political agitation; to magnify industrial grievances; and to bring about stoppages in industry. (quoted in Pelling op. cit. p.154)

On the grounds that Party members were directed from outside the trades union movement, the TUC later asked the unions to consider banning them from key union posts and positions as union delegates. This actually took place in some unions, notably the TGWU, and elsewhere the atmosphere was such as to make the continued occupation of elected office difficult.

It should also be noted that the industrial context in which this took place was one in which the consensus - based participation in planned production, encouraged by the Government, which had been a feature of industrial activity during the war had soon been replaced by conflict and confrontation as employers' organisations sought to re-assert their managerial control. Croucher's history of the shop stewards' movement in the engineering industry during the war concludes as follows:

Almost immediately after the war, the political leadership of the shop stewards' movement came under savage attack both industrially through sackings, redundancies and victimisation and politically through the maelstrom of the Cold War. Those who had been more than willing to call on the support of the shop stewards to prosecute the war effort turned viciously against their erstwhile allies in an attempt to decapitate the most political and active from the body of work-place trades unionists. An enormous amount of propaganda was heaped on the heads of the stewards, who had become "subversives" and "extremists". The beginnings of the process which was to lead, in the 1970s to the full-scale deployment of the media against workplace representatives could be discerned. (op. cit. p.356)

Although it would be incorrect to speak of a 'McCarthyist' climate comparable to the events of the United States, nevertheless there was a rash of discriminatory employment policies by companies such as the John Lewis Partnership. Some

local authorities such as Liverpool (whose councillors, at one time, had carried portraits of Stalin aloft with those of Churchill during the war) tried to follow suit, or to prevent their premises being used by the Communist Party or its satellite bodies. (15)

Cultural critics at the time and subsequently have noted how the intelligentsia was a conformist and not a dissenting one; just as the economic climate of paper rationing, war-damaged publishing houses etc discouraged any cultural expansion, so too did the intellectual climate. The previous section pointed out how the war witnessed something of a retreat from the socially aware, Leftish consensus amongst large sections of the intellectuals of the 1930s, towards a self-consciously 'non-political' stance amongst younger writers. The argument was that the Left theatre movement was far more concerned with the prospect of new mass audiences to really register this shift, and in any event it failed to halt it. Again this process continued so that Hewison is confident to summarise as follows:

Books and broadcasts, leading articles in the serious newspapers and magazines and scare stories in the popular ones, created an atmosphere in which there was safety in conformity, and no encouragement at all to think freely. (1981 p. 24)

In other words on every front - mainstream politics, industrial organisations, intellectual work and cultural affairs - those from the centre of the Labour Party leftwards were, within a very few years, on the defensive or in full retreat. Within this context the other problems which beset the Left theatre movement (the resources and policies of the Arts Council, the

failure of the attempt to professionalise the Unity Theatre movement, the decline in audiences) were such as to present insurmountable obstacles after the high hopes and expectations of the end of the war.

An example can be offered of how London Unity Theatre responded to the situation. Bram Bootman has recalled how:

We only really picked up the audiences in the post war years by doing what we did best of all, the satires. We did a satirical revue which attacked the Cold War, American policy, McCarthyism, and it was really successful because the same team was doing the writing. They were snappy, sharp, brilliantly lit and nicely costumed, and people came in their hundreds to see them. (16)

This was the revue What's Left? which featured songs by Geoffrey Parsons and Berkeley Fase, the team which had written Babes in the Wood, Jack the Giant Killer and According to Plan for Unity in the past. Our Time, in one of its last issues before the magazine folded in 1948, published the lyrics of Oklahokum (17) from the revue, with words to fit the tunes of the hit musical - 'we print them in the hope that you will better enjoy the constant plugging of Oklahoma on the air:'

Atlee: Oh, our exports are comin' on nicely
Oh, our exports are comin' on nicely
To help keep our people contented
and gay
Another White Paper's been published
to-day.

Oh, what a beautiful mornin'
What if the outlook is grey
I've got a beautiful feelin'
Dollars are comin' our way.

Bevin: Oh, the factories are callin'
for manpower
Oh, the factories are callin'
for manpower.
But I need a large army to
ward off attack
In case someone tries to stab me
in the back?

Covering conscription and re-armament, fuel policies
and international affairs, the verses are sung by
representations of Labour Cabinet Ministers:

Morrison: Everything's up to date now in our
programme
We've gone about as far as we can go.
We've nationalised the mines, the
transport and the gas
And now's the time to think of going
slow.
What do you say, boys, if we change
the tempo
We've got to think about the middle
class.
For if they don't support us we shall
be in an awful hole
We need the bourgeoisie behind us at
the poll.
So please let's have no nonsense about
working-class control.
(All): We've gone about as far as we can go
We've gone about as far as we can go.

The fate of the Left in the Labour Party is also used to drive
home a point about the present nature of the Party:

Morgan Phillips Trio: Some MPs like that Zilliacus
Seem to me they no longer
back us.
They don't like our programme;
to sack us
They have got the urge.
Cryptos and their friends better
look out
Morgan P's got his little black
book out
They'll behave or else sling their
hook out
For we'll have a purge.
Those left-wing fellows give me the
pip
They'd better do as we tell 'em
Or else the executive'll crack the
whip
And have 'em up and expel 'em.
That's a job I know how to handle
See me with my bell, book and
candle.

Exorcising Bolshevik scandal.

That has got to stop.

We want no smarty in the party with the
pinks on the top.

Finally the last song concentrates on national independence:

Um-m-m-m-m Mister Marshall on our knees
we thank you for your aid
Though the terms are tough, it's true
enough
Without your plan we'd never make the
grade.

Um-m-m-m Mister Dewey our most humble
friendship we affirm
And we'll always sign the dotted line
When you begin your presidential term.
For though they call Great Britain great.
We know we're only the 49th State...

Therefore What's Left?, from this evidence at least, continued in
the Unity satire tradition laid down by Babes in the Wood and
would have performed a similar function; an entertaining and
confirming one for those who, in the Cold War atmosphere, were
once again assuming the difficult and isolated identity of the
embattled minority. The revue attracted the attention of the
authorities once again, as Bram Bootman has recalled:

One night when we had a block booking from
the Fire Brigades Union there were some
tickets left over. John Horner - he was
the FBU leader, he was in the Party, his
brother was Arthur Horner the miners'
leader - started selling some tickets
outside in the street. Immediately we
got reported by two inspectors from the
Lord Chamberlain's office, selling tickets
for a club theatre to non-members. So we
set up a defence fund for the fine, we
easily paid it, it was three hundred and
forty three pounds. The story was that
this was all due to the C.I.A., trying to
close us down, it was certainly the mood
of the time to believe things like that.
I would say that review was the last of our
triumphs. (18)

What's Left? apparently received wide press attention, but whilst
full of praise Our Time made a critical comparison with Unity's

X not so

pre-war successes which sounded a warning note for the organisation in the future:

These sketches by Berkeley Fase and Geoffrey Parsons are back to the level of the pre-war successes with the effective satire which comes from hating the system. But in those days there would be a company touring the country with it and there would be no talk of a limited run. (19)

With the collapse of the professional company and the problems created for the regional groups there was not the organisational infrastructure to really exploit a stage and political success.

Bootman recalls that this was one of the last London Unity events to really attract audiences. Throughout the 1950s the theatre tended to decline, with the exception of some premiere productions of Sartre's plays and Brecht; What's Left? seems to have been the last of its theatrical interventions into political campaigning. At least, it was with the possible exception of Unity's role in one of the most significant years in the history of the British Communist Party, in 1956.

In that year the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, in closed session, heard Krushchev denounce the Stalinist terror of the 1930s in unequivocal terms. Details of the speech were leaked through the British press, as CPGB delegates had only heard the other significant event, the permission of a relaxation in the international discipline associated with the Comintern and thus a possible end to Soviet domination of European Communist Parties.

The impact of these events provided additional stimulus for the Party group associated with the New Reasoner, a discussion journal edited by John Saville (20) and E.P. Thompson. This group became the focus of demands for far more inner party democracy and discussion, and for the truth about the Krushchev revelations. Any possibility of some evolution in this direction however was soon overtaken by international events. As the Anglo-French invasion of Suez occupied the attention of one section of the Left in opposition to an imperialist action, the CP was faced by the brutal suppression of the popular rising against the Hungarian regime by Soviet tanks. An accumulation of disquiet over the nature of the Warsaw Pact government, matched by a horror at the fate of the Hungarian rebels and their portrayal by the leadership of the British Party as it obediently supported the Soviet action, tore the CPGB apart. Bram Bootman has recalled the end of his own involvement with London Unity Theatre during this time:

Everybody was in a terrible state over Hungary, I said, whenever we've had these crises before we've done a Living Newspaper. So we did a Living Newspaper. Andre Van Gyseghem produced it, it was simple but with the spotlights and split levels, steps and rostrum it was very theatrically effective, just as before. Without taking any side in the issue we kept changing the script every night as the headlines changed. We did this Living Newspaper, but we did something we hadn't done before, we went one step further by having a meeting with the public, the audience, after the show. I used to take the chair, and people like the journalist James Cameron or Kingsley Martin of the New Statesman would speak. My God, those meetings would be intense, lively, people would be storming up to the platform wanting to speak. Needless to say I fell into great disfavour over this. I kept saying in reply that the Communist Party had got to send a speaker along. The man they sent was drunk out of his mind on the night and it was a disaster. Come the Annual General Meeting at Unity they rigged somebody up to be chairman in my place, they never even recorded

a vote of thanks for my work over the last year, never mind the last twenty. So that was that. I walked out and I never went back. (21)

Parting company from the Communist Party soon followed, and Bootman was by no means alone in the socialist theatre movement. The impact of this year on the CP as a whole has been recorded, often by participants, in some detail. At least one third of the membership resigned or were forced out, and although the Party and some historians have characterised this as an exit of the intellectuals, a more major effect was upon the industrial base already weakened by the Cold War. The Party lost control virtually of the E.T.U. and the Fire Brigades Union as officials resigned; E.P. Thompson, at the centre, has recalled poignantly how the so-called 'exodus of the intellectuals' was a deliberate myth:

For the veteran leader of the Derbyshire miners, Bert Wynn, solidarity with our critique meant (as for many others) severing connections within his own heart; for the full-time organiser of the Leeds Communist Party, Jim Roche, formulating the position of socialist humanism meant getting out his tools and returning to the cutter's bench; for the pit delegate from Ballingry, Lawrence Daly, it involved not only a critique in theory but in political practice, as he initiated the Fife Socialist League, and carried the highly politically conscious miners of West Fife along in its own "discourse" of agitation; for the shop stewards' convenor at Briggs Motor Bodies (Dagenham), Johnny McLoughlin, it involved calling for an organised movement of the Marxist Anti-Stalinist Left. So that illusion is not only a lie...it stems from an ulterior intellectual contempt for the intelligence and moral sensibility of the working class. (1978 p.325)

Thus for the first time since the foundation of the CPGB in 1920 there was no longer to be a single organisation with a claim to any hegemony over movements to the Left of the Labour Party,

either in industrial organisation, cultural activity or the development of Marxist theory. Thompson continues that the generation of 1956 did not move to the right: '...did not say that God had failed; we said we had failed, and that we meant to clear that failure up.' (ibid p. 330) In many respects it could be argued that the subsequent history of the British Left is a history of attempts to 'clear that failure up', of the problems and opportunities set in motion by the organisational and theoretical fragmentations of the Communist Party in 1956. The consequences for the socialist theatre movement will be examined in due course.

1956 is a symbolic year in the history of the British theatre also, although critics such as Hewison (op. cit.) have argued that the full impact of this can only be understood in terms of the desert which preceded it. The economic condition of the commercial stage has been identified as a major contributor to this by Elsom:

After the second world war the theatre industry, notoriously unstable at best, was in a state of approaching chaos. About a fifth of the theatres in London had been destroyed or badly damaged by bombing; others were battered or just neglected... The aftermath of war and the mass media, together with Entertainments Tax at ten percent of gross receipts, provided a packaged nightmare to post-war theatre companies...
...Sometimes nearly half the gross receipts from a West End production would disappear in rents, rates and taxation, before an independent impresario could start to pay off his production costs and, of course, his actors. Under these circumstances, the independents were naturally cautious: most would only risk cheap, "sure-fire" productions of mystery plays, light comedies and revues. (1976 p. 8-9)

Hewison (op. cit.) similarly lists the major factors which forced the theatre to 'play safe': the Lord Chamberlain (still, as we

have seen in the 1930s, ex-military or colonial governors) exercised a censorship over 'offensiveness', the club theatres (effectively widening the gap still further between the avant-garde and the commercial stage) declined in numbers, from twelve to one in five years in London for example; extraction of revenue by the state in the form of the Entertainments Tax was nowhere near matched by financial input from the Arts Council. There was also a fear of both an 'horizontal' and 'vertical' monopoly of ownership of large sections of the theatre industry. 'Horizontal' monopoly through a particular group of companies (known in fact as 'The Group',) controlled and managed by one individual which owned six theatre chains, a theatre property and insurance firm, and the leading play-producing management, so that in fact 'The Group' or its subsidiaries controlled eighteen out of forty-two functioning West End theatres, and seventy percent of the main regional touring theatres. Similarly on the main touring circuit thirty-four out of fifty-three theatres were owned by 'The Group'. It was consequently feared that a 'vertical' monopoly ownership of every other facet of the theatre-set and wardrobe, production, actors' agencies etc would be created. Certainly writers such as Elsom or Hewison (op.cit) attribute the lack of any significant writing, material or production in the British theatre from 1945 to 1956, or the emergence of any significant playwrights, to this economic pressure and absence of any genuine diversity within the apparatus. Certainly those who established the Royal Court Theatre in 1955, in Browne's account, (1975) saw it as first and foremost a writers' theatre, one dedicated to new work and as such of necessity a vehicle apart from the mainstream commercial network. This theatre staged John Osborne's Look Back in Anger in 1956 and is thus generally considered to have made possible a portrayal of life outside the confines of the comfortable middle classes. It remained, however,

very much a writer's theatre and for all it represented a 'breakthrough' for critics, others have registered serious points concerning exactly what 'post-Osborne drama' can be said to have achieved:

Its greatest claim to social significance is that it produced a new working-class art... Of course it did nothing of the kind. What Osborne and his clever director Tony Richardson had achieved was a method of translating some areas of non-middle class life in Britain into a form of entertainment that could be sold to the middle classes... What the Court was looking for was theatrical frisson... cherished not because of its class origin or significance, but because it was "thrilling", i.e. new and stimulating... Of course the other great significance of this kind of theatre is supposed to be that it "changed" the audience for the theatre... the "new" audience for this kind of theatre was, if not in origin certainly in ultimate destination, merely a "new" bourgeoisie, mingling in with the old, even indulging in miscegenation. (McGrath 1981 p. 9-12)

The case McGrath wishes to stress is that despite the critical acclaim for this end to 'country-house' drama and the genesis of what is now the dominant dramatic mode of 'mediating contemporary reality', it remained firmly within traditional theatrical culture or successfully absorbed all into that culture. There was no place here for the popular theatre ideals of what remained of Unity or Theatre Workshop, with their insistence on taking challenging material out to audiences well outside of the dominant theatre apparatus. It is to the demise of two main projects of this nature by the mid 1960s - in other words to a focus on the reverse side of this coin of theatre history - to which we now turn.

In 1952 Theatre Workshop took the decision to establish a

permanent theatre base in the East End of London; instead of taking theatre out to people the policy now was to become a part of a particular working-class community via an old theatre building at Stratford East:

...now we had the opportunity and the facilities to put on a wider range of plays. It was the end, also, of the uncomfortable journeys in the back of the lorry, the nightly rigging and de-rigging, the irregular meals and the ever-changing digs... We had no longer to face the booking of halls, publicity and all the other problems connected with one-night stand touring. It didn't take long to discover that we had exchanged one set of problems for another and that life, while different, was not all that much easier. (Goorney op. cit. p.98)

The company now faced the problem of building up a regular and hopefully local audience, and the consequences until this was done of the relentless struggle for financial survival given an inadequate level of Arts Council and local authority funding. Financial stability thus involved box office returns, and in London this meant critical acclaim; in turn this transformed the nature of the theatre from the company which had formed in 1945, still more that of 1936.

...now, for the first time. we were under the constant scrutiny of the national critics. It wasn't something to avoid, even if that had been possible, and when good notices appeared it brought in the audiences. It did mean, however, that as actors began to be singled out for their performances, offers of work would sometimes follow and they were tempted away to bigger, if not better, things. Also... we were now becoming increasingly dependent on the goodwill of the critics. Eventually their favourable response to a particular show would lead to offers of transfer to the West End which, in the absence of a subsidy, we were in no position to refuse but which also ultimately led to the break-up of the Company. (ibid p.101)

The productions through the 1950s and early 1960s included Shakespeare and O'Casey, The Good Soldier Schweik and Brecht; Sheelagh Delaney's A Taste of Honey, the musical Fings Aint Wot They Used to Be and, with particular success, Brendan Behan's The Quare Fellow and The Hostage. But the company which staged them, including an influx of conventionally-trained and experienced actors, was undergoing a change of practice:

There was also to be less emphasis on the training and discussion which had formed an integral part of the work of the first ten years - a trend that was hastened in 1958 by the switch from classics and revivals to contemporary plays and the resulting West End transfers. Dance and movement ability and social awareness essential to an actor playing in MacColl's Uranium 235 or The Other Animals were hardly necessary when appearing in Fings or A Taste of Honey... (ibid p.103)

In terms of the ideals which had originally caused the foundation of the Company, and put into practice with the performances of MacColl's work at the Filey camps, Theatre Workshop was in fact now failing with every success it achieved. A case in point is the play which is the most acclaimed of Joan Littlewood's post-war work, Oh What A Lovely War. The original production (it was significantly altered for the West End transfer) used the documentary material and multi-media techniques which had been a feature of the company's pre-war work; further, the use of the pierrot troupe - identically dressed and performing mime actions - dates back to Littlewood's earliest work with the Workers' Theatre Movement.

The influence of the WTM, clear as it is, on Oh What a Lovely War has been ignored by critics; scarcely their fault since, as has

been argued, the WTM had long since been submerged without trace in the Left's perception of the history of theatre organisations, and had never emerged at all into mainstream criticism. Rather more to the contemporary point, the legacy of earlier Theatre Workshop experiments and successes was not considered. If it had been then the quoted view of Ewan MacColl (who had previously left the Company) would have provided a suitable epitaph:

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. It is sometimes said that shows like Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be and Lovely War were the high point of Theatre Workshop's existence. I think they were the nadir, the low point. They symbolised the ultimate failure of Theatre Workshop. Here was a show, Oh What a Lovely War, which was ostensibly an anti-war show. Yet it was running in the West End. You had, for example, a retired general in the audience saying "Good show, damn good show, that is the real thing." I maintain that a theatre which sets out to deal with a social and human problem like war and leaves the audience feeling nice and comfy, in a rosy glow of nostalgia, is not doing its job, it has failed. Theatre, when it is dealing with social issues, should hurt; you should leave the theatre feeling furious. It was at this point we could say farewell to the dream of creating a working-class theatre. (ibid p. 128)

To repeat, therefore, the inability to secure a stable financial basis for the Company, on one level due to Arts Council policy but on another level due to Company policy, had led to a relationship with the commercial stage which both resulted from and helped to rationalise a shift in political perspective. Its very success marked a failure and a retreat from the possibility

of success within the objectives Theatre Workshop had set for itself.

The idea that the promise of the contemporary dramatists could be little more than a fashion, soon to be subsumed into the self-regarding literary culture, was not lost on observers at the time. The playwright Arnold Wesker proposed the antidote:

I want to write about people in a way that will somehow give them insight into an aspect of life which they may not have had before; and further, I want to impart to them some of the enthusiasm I have for that life. I want to teach.

I want to write my plays not only for the class of people who acknowledge plays to be a legitimate form of expression, but for those to whom the phrase "form of expression" may mean nothing whatsoever. It is the bus driver, the housewife, the miner and the Teddy Boy to whom I should like to address myself. (22)

This is now taken to be the opening philosophical statement of Centre 42, a project which, without reference to it, was in the traditions of cultural activism and arts access which had been promoted during World War Two; the same emphasis was placed on cultural democracy in the sense of equality of opportunity to actively participate in artistic activity. It was to the labour movement that Wesker and his steering committee turned for support.

In 1960 the annual conference of the TUC carried a resolution (number forty-two) supporting the principle of a far greater participation by the labour movement in cultural activities and noting that in the past it had only to a small extent supported the direct promotion of plays and films, 'including those of value to its beliefs and principles.' Given promising contacts with

trades union leaders Wesker's group decided to postpone altogether more ambitious plans for permanent centres, and:

In the autumn of 1962, Centre 42 organised a series of festivals for Wellingborough, Nottingham, Leicester, Birmingham, Bristol and Hayes (Middlesex). Each was mounted at the invitation of the local trades council. The Nottingham Festival had the support of 56 separate unions from the Basford and District Bleachers' Association to the large National Union of Mineworkers. Each one-week festival included art exhibitions (local and childrens' art as well as "highbrow" art) theatre. (Bernard Kops' Enter Solly Gold, Stravinsky's The Soldier's Tale Wesker's The Nottingham Captain, Charles Parker's radio/theatre ballad The Maker and the Tool) plus folk, jazz and poetry concerts. (Itzen 1980 op. cit. p. 116)

The ambitions of Centre 42 lay outside those of the socialist theatre movement and as such its rapid failure and decline will not be described here. However the whole episode raises issues - and not just the failure of the Arts Council to be interested and the failure of the TUC to match verbal support with financial support - which are of direct interest. Coppieters, (1975) in his comprehensive account of Centre 42, makes the point that in the festivals the gap was large between trade union blessing and the composition of the audiences, and indicates a possible reason:

Wesker probably did not understand the psychology of the trade unionist, and did not know how to harness the response that was there. He made the mistake of thinking that the local bodies of the unions were in better touch with the rank and file: while, in the event, the festivals showed the trades councils how out of touch they were, when it came to getting people into performances. They turned out just not to have the contacts. There was a time when the trades councils were the powerful bodies, but now effective power rests on the shop floor, with the stewards. (p.48)

In other words it can be said that whereas the pre-war socialist theatre movements had naturally approached the rank and file through political principle or due to the hostility or indifference of the official leadership, Centre 42 approached the official leadership, at a local level, only to discover it was not capable of carrying its support over into activity amongst the members.

So far this section has been concerned to identify the factors which, it has argued, were responsible for the arrest, crisis and decline after its success during the war of the socialist theatre movement - despite the critical attention which the British theatre has received since 1956. A wider context, both political and cultural must also be described here as a pointer to some important future developments.

The 1950s and early 1960s were a period marked by a discussion of the changing character of the working class, the labour movement and the political consequences of visible social changes. Material changes were often exaggerated but nevertheless genuine, as regards full employment, a right to social security, slum clearance and freedom from domestic labours and the access to new leisure through consumer goods. Critcher has described how:

The sense of change had a real material basis... But social democratic politicians and intellectuals were often paralysed by the apparent transformations of the capitalist demon... The response was often to abandon socialist terminology and join the chorus pronouncing the end of capitalism, referring, like Crosland, to "present day, as opposed to capitalist society." Underlying this dilemma, however, was the inability to conceptualize class and capitalism except in terms provided by the experience of inter-war

life. If capitalism was synonymous with rampant profiteering, mass unemployment, international crises, and a world of war, fear and fascism, had not capitalism disappeared when the state controlled the economy, the economy was expanding, there was a shortage of labour and the main "threat to world peace" came from a "communist power"? The political theory of social democracy could not break through these ideas; nor could the student of working class culture conceive of a working class without the extended family, back to backs, or mild beer. Both kinds of thought were profoundly empiricist and oblivious to their own historical specificity: they sought to explain only that which was immediately observable against some stereotypical past.(1979 p.16)

It was in response to this , of course, that the discipline of sociology investigated the 'embourgeoisment' thesis, and the emergent area of cultural studies came to terms with Hoggart's The Uses of Literacy. Of more direct concern here is the effect of these changes and certain assumptions about them within the Left and the labour movement. This same period saw the rise again and strengthening of the shop steward system in industry, as the genuine increases in the prosperity of trades union members were achieved by bonuses and special payments agreed locally between shop stewards and local management. Thus did the situation arise of which, as we have seen, Arnold Wesker saw a side effect; an integration of union officials with Government at a national level, but a largely independent and intensely locally-organised rank and file. In the aftermath of the Cold War two new 'folk devils' then appeared, the shop steward and the unofficial strike, both commemorated in two British films of the period, I'm All Right Jack and The Angry Silence.

The Labour Government under Harold Wilson was elected in 1964 in an atmosphere of a need to modernize a society and economy which was,

with hindsight, beginning to experience the end of the post-war boom, as Wiggery has described:

Although, by previous British standards, the level of capital investment was high, it was clearly inadequate to face the economic "miracle" of Germany and later Japan. Britain, which had been at first artificially shielded from the sharpening competition from its European competitors, whose factories were physically devastated, now was exposed to head-on competition. America, whose clear dominance over the world capitalist system was clearly established after the war, was less and less willing to support Britain as a junior economic partner. And British manufacturers themselves were increasingly exporting their cash, finding their capital forced abroad by the strength of the British working class. The disintegration of the Empire was also beginning to affect the home economy adversely. The pound, the sterling area and the City, remnants of the high noon of imperialism, which had acted as a buffer against trade rivals in pre-war conditions, now tended to act as a brake on growth. And the determination of the City of London to remain world financial centre increased Britain's trading vulnerability. For, as Chancellor after Chancellor was to find, as soon as the economy starts to expand out of a recession, its propensity to suck in imports forces another cutback which in turn depresses investment. (1976 p.163)

The fate of the Wilson Government will be considered in due course, but it is worth noting here two effects of 'modernization' and the political consequences of prosperity; perhaps little remarked at the time, they mark a shift in the culture of the labour movement.

The Daily Herald closed in the early 1960s despite a readership double that of the Times, Financial Times, and Guardian combined; largely through an inability to attract and sustain sufficient advertising revenue. (23) The final national daily with a socialist perspective and a working class readership was allowed to collapse without any effort by the Labour Party and the TUC to save it,

almost as if it were felt that such organs were no longer relevant. Similarly, in 1964 the National Council of Labour Colleges (a provider of socialist education to the working-class movement since 1909) agreed to enter the general educational apparatus of the TUC. Immediately the TUC Education Committee instructed its regional education officers not to have classes on such subjects as public speaking or the history of the British working-class. (24)

The point at issue here is that, lacking the theoretical grasp and political analysis to examine and understand the nature and specificity of the economic situation, the leadership of the labour movement allowed the former cultural institutions of the movement to fall. The consequence was to be realised only too soon.

Of the cultural institutions of the wider society it is the rise of television as a mass medium which is the most marked here. The relationship between television and the theatre, particularly the socialist theatre, must be a factor to be aware of at points in this thesis from now on. Some observations can be made immediately regarding its role in future developments.

A history of television drama cannot be attempted here, but it can be said that the possibilities of technology were soon exploited to create a 'grammar' of television writing in its own right which could satisfy audiences expecting the standards of the theatre and the cinema. The social realism critics pointed to in the post-Osborne theatre became almost the language of single plays, serials and soap opera due in no small part to the influence of producers and technicians who had been formed by the documentary film makers of the Crown Film Unit and the 1930s. In turn this created a demand for actors capable of taking on the working-class roles

which were being created. It has already been recorded how the Unity Theatres alone, through their philosophy of the peoples' theatre, had attracted, trained and granted experience to exactly the people who could occupy this space. The actors and theatre workers who owe the launch of their careers to the Unity movement include: Bill Owen, Lionel Bart, John Slater, Alfie Bass, Roddy McMillan, Stanley Baxter and Andrew Keir; also Marjorie Thomson, Violet Carson, Betty Henderson and Oscar Lewenstein. (25)

In other words a new and unwelcome function was opening for the Left theatre - servicing and supplying the mainstream media with trained personnel as well as ideas.

More immediately television usurped one of the former mainstays of Unity's activities. On some occasions since its inception Unity had achieved considerable artistic and political success with satire. Biting satire which no other medium was willing or capable of performing; however television by the early 1960s was carrying out a similar task to vastly more massive audiences with shows such as That Was The Week That Was. The impact of certain episodes has become part of contemporary political history, even in the undeserved role as scapegoat. (26)

Using, it has been claimed, (27) writers once associated with Unity, it had permanently altered the possibilities for the socialist theatre.

In conclusion however the demise of one phase of the history of British socialist theatre offers some direct continuity with its successors, in a different political and cultural context. An article briefly tracing the history of London Unity in 1967 can be said to symbolise its decline through its argument that the supply of actors to the professional stage should be regarded as 'a political and artistic victory.' (28)

It pondered the possibilities

It is worth discussing this criticism since, as we have seen, it can almost be taken as the predecessor of the later positions of Ford or Tolley. It is also symptomatic of Spender's evolving conception of the relationships between the poet, politics and poetry at this time. He shows here his limiting insistence that valid poetry could only deal with that which had been experienced. Thus his own Spanish war poetry, from the outside, separates individuals from causes and from history, and, in a conscious imitation of Wilfred Owen, rejects 'the propagandist lie which makes the dead into heroes in order that others may imagine that death is really quite pleasant'. (ibid p.26) One need not concur with the aggression of Douglas Garman's review at the time⁽⁵⁾ - basically, that Spender was insisting on a fundamental differentiation between the poet and the rest of humanity because of the poet's profounder intuitions of life - to realise that Spender had completely failed to grasp what the declamation was about. It was, and remains, illegitimate to take a few lines of On Guard and subject them to literary criteria which ignore the conditions of performance. Also, alongside a rejection of the possibility of a socialist artist being able at that time to regard the struggle of the Spanish people 'from the outside', Jack Lindsay later provided a rebuttal of a more basic nature. He pointed out that it was not a case of lines being 'put into the mouth' of the militiaman but an expression of the cruelty of the war which had been forced by the fascists. Any 'hysteria' was Spender's, and his interpretation was not shared by the audiences who saw the declamation performed.⁽⁶⁾

A more legitimate critical criteria both for On Guard and for the socialist theatre as a whole at this time could be constructed from a denominator common to the WTM, Unity and the LBCTG. All of

Notes

1. D. Rubenstein, The Labour Left and Domestic Policy 1945-50 (1980) p.7.
2. J. Lindsay, The British Achievement in Art and Music (1945) p.36.
3. B. Bootman, interview with the author 1978.
4. M. Slater, 'Theatre in 1946', Our Time vol. 6 no. 6 January 1947 p.135.
5. J. Lindsay, 'Review', Our Time vol. 5 no.12 July 1946.
6. M. Slater, 'Theatre in 1946', op. cit.
7. Bootman, interview op. cit. and J. Lindsay, letter to the author 1982.
8. Jerry Dawson, interview with the author 1978.
9. Bernard Miles, interview with the author 1982. Lord Miles, an actor with the CEMA tours, worked briefly with Theatre 46.
10. J. Lindsay, 'Interview with Mary Glasgow', Our Time vol. 7 no. 5 January 1948 p.108.
11. I. Evans and M. Glasgow, The Arts in England (1949) p.58.
12. *ibid* p. 33.
13. J. Lindsay, 'Interview with Mary Glasgow', op. cit.
14. Quoted in H. Pelling, The British Communist Party (1975) p. 142.
15. Jerry Dawson, interview op. cit.
16. Bootman, interview op. cit.
17. Quoted from the extracts published in Our Time vol. 7 no. 12 September 1948 p. 311.
18. Bootman, interview op. cit.
19. Anonymous, 'Ohklahokum', Our Time vol. 7 no. 12 September 1948 p. 324.
20. An account has been provided by J. Saville, 'The Twentieth Congress and the British Communist Party', in ed. R. Miliband and J. Saville, The Socialist Register 1976 (1976) p. 1-24.
21. Bootman, interview op. cit. The writer Mervyn Jones refers to this play in his article, '1956: Days of Tragedy and Farce' in ed. R. Miliband and J. Saville op. cit. p.85.

22. A. Wesker, 'Let Battle Commence' in ed. C. Marowitz et al New Theatre Voices of the Fifties and Sixties (1981) p. 96.
23. J. Curran, 'The Press as an Agency of Social Control: An Historical Perspective', in ed. G. Boyce et. al Newspaper History: From the 17th Century to the Present Day (1978) p. 51-79.
24. K. Worple, 'A Ghostly Pavement: The Political Implications of Local Working Class History', in ed. R. Samuel, Peoples History and Socialist Theory (1981) p.23.
25. Bootman, interview op. cit. On the early history of television drama see R. Hudson, 'Television in Britain: Description and Dissent', in Theatre Quarterly vol.2 no. 6 June 1972 p. 18-25.
26. G. Wyndham - Goldé, Facing the Nation: Television and Politics 1936-76 (1977) p. 209-39.
27. Bootman, interview op. cit.
28. H. Landis, 'Which Way Unity Theatre?' in Labour Monthly May 1967 p. 236-8.

7: 'Strike While The Iron is Hot': Socialist Theatre 1968-1979.

History does not usually suit the convenience of people who like to divide it into neat periods, but there are times when it seems to have pity on them. The year 1968 almost looks as though it had been designed to serve as some sort of signpost. There is hardly any region of the world in which it is not marked by spectacular and dramatic events...(1)

A casual list of world events in that year seems to bear out this statement. In 1968 began the Tet Offensive in Vietnam which, besides being of long term significance for the military situation there provided an impetus for the world-wide protest movement against the American involvement. In China the Cultural Revolution and its social convulsions were in full spate, whilst in Czechoslovakia an attempted liberalisation of the regime was met by a military invasion from the USSR: both these events had their impact also on the theory and organisation of the Left internationally.

In Latin America a series of anti-imperialist struggles and popular agitation included a massacre of protestors at a meeting in Mexico City shortly before the Olympic Games. At those Games, a black American gold medalist raised the 'black-power' salute in a powerful symbol of the radical consciousness currently fermenting amongst black Americans; perhaps equally symbolic in that year was the murder of one of the progenitors of that consciousness and leader of the non-violent movement for civil rights, Martin Luther King. Elsewhere in the U.S.A. in 1968 protest at the Democratic Party Convention in Chicago was brutally suppressed by what many observers described as a police riot.

In Europe a massive wave of student demonstration and occupation in Italy, Germany and France (and to a lesser extent also in

Yugoslavia and Poland) culminated in the 'May Events' in Paris, where the student protest united with the labour movement in an anti-state general strike which eventually hastened the departure of de Gaulle from office.

Britain produced her own student movement and wave of occupations, together with the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign and its massive demonstration in Grosvenor Square. Also in 1968 in Britain, a notorious speech by Enoch Powell had the effect of placing race, racism and immigration firmly on the political agenda. A year after the 1967 Abortion Law Reform Act came the publication of some of the first books and pamphlets and occurrence of some of the first demonstrations of the emerging womens' movement.

The direct political consequences of all these events varied widely - for example the conservative Richard Nixon was elected in the USA whereas the conservative de Gaulle was eventually ousted in France - but several longer term consequences can be identified in Britain.

In the midst of a cultural movement of music and lifestyle, indolent but seeing itself as rebellious,⁽²⁾ students had become an identifiable social group and in spite of, or because of the opportunities and vantage points presented by their privileged position, had moved to the Left. As Hobsbawm had stated of the student and youth revolt:

To state that the heart of this rebellion was in sectors of middle-class youth is not to diminish it... The important thing to note is that this rebellion became a movement of the political left, appealing (however confusedly) to Marx as a symbol of the revolutionary transformation of society... The student generation of the

late 1960s became the first in the history of the developed capitalist countries to turn to the left en masse... (1978 p.133)

Although this movement had only a tenuous connection with the organised working class it was nevertheless instrumental in forming, or regenerating, parties of the revolutionary Left, such as the International Socialists or the International Marxist Group whose mentors were the Trotskyist and Leninist traditions and who were opposed to the Communist Party and the parliamentary road of the Labour Party. If the hegemony of the Communist Party over British Marxism had been fractured by the events of 1956 it was the events of 1968 which made it possible for other parties to claim to fill the gap. This gap was in theory as well as in organisation, as new issues had to be explained in Marxist terms: the reasons for the apparent economic stability and success of Western Europe; the nature of the Soviet and Eastern European states; the nature of contemporary imperialism, and, eventually, the nature of 'womens' oppression and the bases of racism. The answers to each of these questions had clear political and organisational implications.

This movement had a less tenuous connection with the artistic movements which it had accompanied and sometimes generated. In London for example, besides the network of arts laboratories and community arts projects developed by some of those rejecting the orthodox career paths for which they had been trained, grew the Agitprop Information project. This began as a service designed to improve the propaganda, meetings, events and demonstrations of the Left, through poster design and production and then eventually street theatre. Several Vietnam Solidarity Campaign demonstrations from 1967 to 1968 had been accompanied

and enlivened by satirical sketches featuring huge puppets and signs, cartoon placards and other symbols.

It was from this climate that the new British socialist theatre emerged or was given the opportunity it required. The events of 1968, it has been said, prompted the growth of political consciousness of many who were to become involved in socialist theatre, and in many respects it can be said that these theatre projects were a major point where the new politics of 1968 came into contact with the organisations of the working class, albeit gradually and tentatively at first.

The Agitprop Street Players (later Agitprop Theatre) produced five sketches covering new developments in the Greater London Council tenants' rent struggles at the invitation of the Tenants' Action Committee who had been in contact with Agitprop Information. These sketches were, according to a contemporary pamphlet,⁽³⁾

...performed to meetings of tenants called by local tenants associations, mainly in the East End of London, in the evenings and also at blocks of flats during weekend days; also Squatters (1 play) performed in the street near a squat, in the nearest shopping area, and outside the town hall when a protest was being made at a Council meeting inside (squatters accompanied the group to distribute leaflets...)

The same pamphlet contains descriptions of some of these plays, often featuring Joe and Lil, two GLC tenants, and their struggle against the Conservative leader of the Council, Sir Horace Cutler:

Rent Play No. 2... Joe and Lil are congratulating one another on sending Horace packing. The narrator... enters and reminds them that though the GLC has promised not to evict, it might sue for debt. They don't know what they'd do in those circumstances and don't want to think about it. Joe demands his dinner when... a large letter is dropped on the stage. They open it, it's a summons for debt but they insist on reading it as a birthday letter from Lil's dad and decide to visit him as he must be going ga-ga. They exit singing "We won't pay the rent" and are brought back on by two policemen. Narrator slaps brow in despair.

A judge appears backstage centre and one of the policemen takes off his helmet to become a clerk of the court and reads the charge "because you didn't pay extra". Narrator turns to the audience and tells them that Joe and Lil can only win the case if the other tenants support them. They try to speak but are quashed by the Judge. The Clerk reads more, charging them with just about everything including Living. Defence counsel doesn't appear and the Narrator appeals to the audience to do something. Prosecution calls Horace Cutler as the first witness: "The scum are guilty milord, guilty before they were born". Second witness is Harold Dracula Wilson who also insists they are guilty. Judge calls for a verdict and the court shouts "guilty!".

Narrator shouts "stop!"; the Court freezes; he makes Cutler and Wilson the accused and Joe reads the charges: not providing more jobs, homes, higher wages, putting up prices and rents. Lil asks the audience what they should plead and all shout "Guilty!". All sing "Not a Penny on the Rent".

Narrator stops them, tells them this is only a dream and they really are being sued for debt. What can they do? Narrator suggests a one-week token rent strike. Horace hears and screams and grovels, "Anything but a rent strike, we'll lose a million pounds a week". Harold calls him to heel and beats him for bungling. Joe, Lil and the Narrator shout them off the stage and all sing and dance "Not a Penny on the Rent".

Very short sketches such as this were widely performed to London tenants through bookings by tenants' association delegates through 1968 and 1969. A participant in Agitprop at the time has recalled the reactions to the two tenant figures, Joe, and Lil played by a man in drag:

The women in the audience absolutely loved him. There was always a row of women in the front killing themselves. They laughed partly because the whole thing was so gross and far-fetched and silly, partly because the form of music hall and drag was part of the tenants' cultural heritage. Lil was presented as a strong, dominant woman, as the activist in the rents campaign: and the women in our audience were themselves in the forefront of the struggle. In that sense they "identified" with Lil - and he made them laugh. (Itzen 1980 op. cit. p.42)

Elsewhere at the same time the group CAST (the Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre, formed, as has been seen, by a group expelled from London Unity Theatre) were also active. Beginning in folk clubs and student venues, CAST played John D. Muggins is Dead, on the Vietnam War, and later Mr Oligarchy's Circus, on capitalism and the Labour government, and The Trials of Horatio Muggins, on the student Left and the labour movement. A distinctive style evolved quickly:

We were allowed on in the interval. We soon learned that we had to work fast, cut fast, to get at least a laugh a minute if we were to stop them going for a beer in the middle of it... The most important thing CAST did in the history of political theatre was turn to the audience. 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... our influences were working class entertainers - Chuck Berry and Little Richard for instance - they were really present on stage and they influenced our acting style more than any avant-garde experiment.. (ibid p.14)

Clearly what was happening here was a revival of a form of agitprop theatre on a scale unwitnessed since the day of the Workers' Theatre Movement - an episode of which the new practitioners were unaware. The Agitprop pamphlet, largely a practical guide, examined its principal features:

Try to find central images... central ideas or central characters (e.g. Cutler and Housing Minister). Then you can improvise round these. Or choose known dramatic or entertaining images, e.g. circus, auction, horse race, beauty contest, fashion show, wrestling match, and transfer your political situation and characters to that framework. This often enables an audience to see its situation in a different light which is more revealing; the contrast is also funny...

Ideas should, if possible, be symbolic or otherwise depend on easily understood caricatures... Props... should be big. Collect them - exaggerated top hats for capitalists, big hands and fists on sticks, pound and dollar signs, banners spelling out slogans. Step-ladders are very good - they are easy to take with you and they give different levels making it possible for the capitalist to look down on the workers and for him to be "deposed" during the action. (4)

Other suggestions for constructing a sketch owed much to theories of montage put forward by Eisenstein fifty years previously - quick cutting from one kind of relationship of actors to audience or to each other, groups of actors or placards making statements. Costumes should never conceal the person behind the character, perhaps only ordinary clothes with a special hat or prop to show who or what is being represented. The principle here was to allow the audience to see people communicating ideas to them.

in a striking way and to avoid an audience position of passive consumption. Another technique recommended here was devised from Victorian melodrama, that of over-exaggerating movements in a 'melodramatic' way and so that the audience is aware it is being done deliberately, thereby adding to the humour and helping to avoid a patronising feeling.

A comment also appears on techniques to help ensure a 'straight political line structure to the play':

It's a useful technique to use a narrator, an actor with a loud voice who stands to one side and tells the story to the audience (like a circus ring-master or music hall master of ceremonies) while the others act it out in mime with occasional lines. The narrator can enter into conversation with the characters at certain points and, in effect, speak for an audience, ask questions to them. The advantages are that it avoids the problem of inventing a lot of dialogue and the difficulties of actors being heard by an audience, especially in the streets... As the words are nearly all coming from one direction the audience can listen to then without having to switch its eyes from the action. (5)

Besides the Agitprop Street Players and CAST the pamphlet mentions theatre groups attached to the Camden Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, Brighton and Sheffield Revolutionary Socialist Student Federations, and a Schools Action Union group based in Cambridge. Amongst the sorts of practical ideas these groups were putting forward in the pamphlet was a discussion on what they felt 'agitprop' or 'street theatre' could achieve:

Articulate the spectator's situation to him, make him realise the political/social reality or at least question the assumptions normally foisted on him, communicate facts about his or someone else's situation. Street players

may work on a rational or emotional level. They may state a definite message ending with a recommended course of action. (e.g. keep up the rent strike), or state the alternative and leave the spectator to make the decision, or re-state more clearly the situation in a way that will make the spectator think and try to find out more for himself. Depending on the audience chosen, it may clarify and re-inform what he already believes, thus giving him encouragement, or it may just stir him out of routine acceptance of the way things are.(6)

In other words from the new music culture, from ideas of montage derived from art school and drama college, the new groups were developing an essentially visual style of theatrical cartooning. However before the early 1970s they experienced difficulty in maintaining a productive contact with the working class audiences they sought. Roland Muldoon recalled this period of CAST's history later:

...we got sucked in to the whole Vietnam Solidarity Campaign. We did concerts all over the place. And eventually and alarmingly we began to find out that we were doing them to students and we were losing what we'd originally had with CND, which had a trade union working class base. We were getting pulled into the counter culture alternative thing. (7)

When the GLC rent strikes collapsed the Agitprop theatre group attempted to find a new audience amongst strikers at Ford's Dagenham, some of whose union shop stewards had also been active in the rent strikes. In the spring of 1969, during a dispute over wages and unofficial strikes, Ford management offered a bonus scheme linked to productivity to the strikers, an offer which also included a loss of bonus penalty clause regarding workers involved in unofficial stoppages. Simultaneously the Labour Government was attempting to pass a bill, In Place of Strife, which contained legal curbs on trades union activity.

Agitprop performed a street play called Stick Your Penal Up Your Bonus for Fords workers queuing for strike pay. According to Itzen (op. cit. p.43) the sketch had an impact because the group had bothered to stand in the rain and support the strike, but there is evidence that the group concluded differently at the time:

...Ford strikers at Dagenham (1 play) mainly on the incomes policy and anti-trade union legislation, performed to men queuing for strike pay - reactions: "Why don't you do a day's work!" - it was a bit pretentious of us really. At that stage in the struggle theatre of any kind is irrelevant. You have to join in and fight or work somewhere else. (8)

In any event it has been recorded that the group drew some important conclusions from this, according to Seyd:

It meant that we got into sharp focus how important it had been to have the political and organisational backing of the Tenants' Action Committee at the time of the rent strike. This was a vital political and organisational experience for the group. We realised then that we had to relate to working people through their own organisations and not stay on the outside of the labour movement. (1975 op. cit. p.36)

Given this decision the political and industrial events of the late 1960s and early 1970s, together with a new phase of activism within the Labour movement, created conditions which looked likely to make that relation possible.

The previous chapter indicated the fragility of the British economy behind the affluence and rise in living standards during the 1960s, and the political events of the later Wilson Government

have been mentioned. Industrial unrest in Britain never approached the explosive level of France and Italy during this period, but nevertheless the late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed an unprecedented level of strikes and industrial action in political contexts. As the intellectual ferments associated with the student militancy of 1968 found expression in a renaissance of Marxist history and theory, so, albeit out of sequence, the traditional motor of change was seen by many of the 1968 Left to be moving again.

As the previous chapter indicated the Labour Government after 1964 faced a deteriorating currency situation and an almost permanent balance of payments crisis, and also the gradual return of unemployment on a significant scale. Its responses included a prices and incomes policy leading to a pay freeze by 1966, and also, within the rhetoric of modernisation, a rationalising of traditional industries such as mining, the docks and the railways. The TUC at first complied with this, with the result that up until the late 1960s strikes were largely unofficial and therefore under the auspices of local workplace based trades union leaders.⁽⁹⁾ This situation intensified with the increasing personal intervention by Wilson into major industrial disputes - on the employers' side - most notably in that by the National Union of Seamen.

The trades union leaderships themselves gradually became alienated from this until eventually they successfully opposed an attempt by the Labour Government to restrict the activity of the labour movement in its measure against unofficial action, In Place of Strife.

The election of the Conservative Government under Edward Heath in 1970 accelerated this process, seeing a series of dramatic confrontations politically as well as economically as the nature and intentions behind its effort to contain the organisation of the working class movement became obvious. The threatened closure of the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders yard in Glasgow produced an occupation and the largest mobilisation of the Scottish labour movement since the war in support. The penal clauses of the 1971 Industrial Relations Act - implemented when five docks shop stewards were gaoled for contempt of court in 1972 - were opposed by official union action, and openly political strikes against unemployment were taking place also. Finally in 1972 the national miners strike destroyed the credibility of the Conservative Government and paved the way for further action in 1973 which created the conditions which made a general election necessary.

On another political level the years of the Wilson Government had eroded confidence in the Labour party; for example a study of Liverpool by Hindess (1970) revealed an empty shell of working class involvement in and membership of the party. Situations were also occurring where rank and file trades union members, in the apparently more frequent circumstances of struggle, were placing confidence in their own workplace - elected leaders rather than their national structures. Therefore conclusions such as these were being drawn of this time:

The ideas of the revolutionary Left, seeds carefully if somewhat dustily shielded from the light of twenty years' boom, returned again to the working-class soil from which they had come. The books of Marx and Lenin, of Trotsky and Luxemburg began to find readers again in the movement which thought it had outgrown them thirty years ago..by the end of the sixties, in some unions, in a

few factories, in a couple of towns, revolutionary trade-unionism had been reborn into a world of immense working-class possibilities. Born not by some intellectual whim but out of the realities of the modern class struggle (Widgery op. cit. p.260)

The emergent socialist theatre groups of the time were intent on contributing to this process.

It has already been recorded how this period saw the realisation by the Red Ladder Theatre Group that their only route to achieving their objectives was to relate to working people through their own organisations. According to Seyd (op. cit.) this was attempted with an hour long play, which took a year to devise, on the political and industrial struggles of the 1960s. After considerable negotiation The Big Con received its first performance at the Institute for Workers' Control Conference in 1970; subsequently it was possible to make bookings for trades union week-end schools, branch meetings and socials, the play continually changing in the light of audience criticism and discussion, as an increasing number of industrial contacts made use of it as a functional tool for involvement.

These contacts facilitated occasions such as Red Ladder's performance - seven times in three hours, to different sections of a twenty thousand strong march of trades unionists - of The National Cake, a sketch attacking the Industrial Relations Bill in 1971:

There are three bakery workers, men and women, in overalls, and the boss stands on a ladder looking rich and greedy.

The workers produce a big section of pink cake, and stand it up against the boss's ladder. He looks pleased, gives them their wage and they give it back to him in return for their slice of the cake; it isn't very big but they enjoy it. The boss isn't satisfied either, "More cake", he says.

The workers decide to ask for more pay for producing more cake, and one of them steps forward to negotiate. They erect another large section of cake, so that the cake grows high up the step ladder. They get more money as promised and pay it to the boss. But the slice of cake he gives them is still the same size - rising prices, inflation. Meanwhile the forward brother has taken off his overall, "I think I negotiated very well. I'm going to be a trade union official". He rests one foot on the ladder and puts on a hat with a big white Feather...

The boss has made prices go up so much that international competitiveness goes down and there is a crisis. The British boss is fainting and lurching, but along comes Heath, grinning and lurid, offering to prop him up. Here comes the Bill, a cooling-off period for the workers' strike; a legally binding agreement; a huge fine to be handed over by the union official; bars clapped over the shop steward's head, and the last poor worker hammered for going on sympathy strike. Wallop.

But the workers pick up a giant strike knife to cut into the cake. They use it to poke into action a reluctant Feather, he begins to thrash about and comes up with a voluntary wage freeze and demonstrations on Sundays only. The workers use their strike knife to cut off the heads of Heath and the boss - "We don't just want more cake, we want the bloody Bakery!" (10)

The play was also performed to the mass picket outside Pentonville Prison a year later in similarly memorable circumstances:

It is a few hours after the fifth dockers' shop steward has been imprisoned for defying the Industrial Relations Act. The dockers picketing the police-packed prison gates with placards like 'Internment

Has Come to England' and 'You Won't Have Enough Cells for All of Us' are joined by a march of solidarity by three hundred printworkers from Briant's who have occupied their factory to prevent its closure. The two fronts against the employers' offensive of mass unemployment and shackling the unions have joined to become a mighty example of working-class strength, confidence and solidarity. The atmosphere is tense. The T.U.C. is on the verge of being forced, by mass pressure, to call a general strike. (Seyd op. cit. p.37)

These are, of course, classic examples of agitprop. Essentially a series of striking visual concepts - not just worker and boss with top hat and overalls, the large white 'Feather' to represent the attitude of the trades union leadership under Vic Feather, but the very cliché of the concept of a national 'cake' from which only limited slices can be cut - succeed each other in a rapid communication by means of loaded images.

Other groups were performing similar work at this time. The Bradford - based company The General Will together with writer David Edgar toured three or four shows on the Conservative government between 1971 and 1974. Stat of Emergency dealt with the events of 1972, The Dunkirk Spirit with post-war Britain, and The National Interest with the Industrial Relations Act. Edgar has described their techniques:

In our first show, which was very crude, we wanted to explain the techniques of repression contained in the Government's Industrial Relations Act. To do this, we set the Government up as a group of Chicago hoods, and reproduced that scene in the gangster film when the gang gets round that model of the bank they're going to rob with a lot of little model cars and vans and simulates the robbery. And our bank was a factory, and our little model cars and vans were clauses of the Act and the idea of the "robbery"

was to keep the workers inside the factory. So the Boss would say, now you, Fingers, you come round to the front from this side-street here, with section 32 subsection 1.

Later on in the same show, to make clear the provisions of the Act concerning incitement, it was in effect illegal under the Act to support an "unfair industrial action", we got the people there to sing a song supporting a wildcat strike and then we arrested the entire audience for contempt of court.

In later shows, we became a bit more ambitious about what we'd attempt to do. In our second show, State of Emergency, for instance, we had a long sequence attempting to explain a complicated dispute in the docks, which concerned containerisation. I won't explain how it worked, it involved a lot of cardboard boxes, but what it did do, you'll have to take this on trust, was to explain a highly complicated industrial dispute in a way that other people could understand...

...in our third show, The Dunkirk Spirit, we got even more ambitious, and attempted to explain the Labour Theory of Value, the Surplus Value concept, inflation, recession, the role of international finance, in short, the history of Western capitalism since the war, ...we did quite well on international money, which we structured in a scene set in a casino. We spent many acrimonious days converting international finance dealings into terms that could be expressed in a game of three-card brag between Germany, Britain and the United States, and a lot of people were kind enough to say that we'd shed a little light on that impenetrable mystification (1975 op.cit p.92-3)

Groups such as these, of which there were a small but growing number by 1973, also soon discovered the classic limitations of agitprop, just as they had been discovered, unknown to them, nearly forty years earlier by some in the WTM. The General Will aimed for working-class audiences, but as Edgar was later to recall:

We began to realise that our shows had to do two things - to be entertaining in commenting on events the audience would know about, and

to provide a context in which to view events - a political, theoretical context. And because of these factors, the plays worked best with what the jargon calls "advanced workers" - at things like TASS weekend schools, shop stewards, Labour Party and IS socials. They worked badly with apolitical workers. The Nadir of the whole experience was a NUPE gig in Bangor, playing to striking workers, and they couldn't relate to it at all. (Itzen op. cit. p.143)

Red Ladder (when they were still called the Agitprop Street Players) had come to this view of the politics of their sketches:

Most of our plays end in fights or victories (for the tenants, the workers). This is a ham solution really, a bit false. The alternative is to stop the play before the fight happens and show the decisions that have to be made by the spectators. We're trying that more now. (11)

Seyd also concludes that whatever the strengths of agitprop, and the group had tested these in circumstances of mass demonstration, a mature socialist theatre required more:

In our experience, unless the audience is already relatively class conscious, agitprop falls on deaf ears. This doesn't mean that it has no function as a form, just that it is important to realise where that function ends and where the limitations are so that they can be overcome through other theatrical methods of representation. (op. cit. p.40)

His argument is that whereas agitprop has many advantages of clarity, simplicity, speed and portability there can be problems with its need to rely on archetypal representations of reality. Politically it assumes, in fact relies on, the fact that the audience agrees with the fundamental characterisation of the issues, and if the audience does not the sketch can do little to affect them. There are further problems with agitprop which

limit its usefulness:

...we also find that it is unable to fulfil the artistic task of portraying and interpreting the way people operate, and contradictions as they grow out of the social, economic and political conditions of society itself...agitprop cannot do this because of its tendency towards "St. George and the Dragonism" - the good guys and the bad guys. (ibid p.40)

In other words it is clear that by around 1973 or 1974 some at least of the agitational theatre groups which had been engendered by the events of 1968 and honed by the confrontations of the early 1970s were seeking new methods of theatrical representation to be able to deal with a wider range of political situations than those where audiences were already mobilised. In the case of Red Ladder this would probably have been encouraged by their involvement with the discussion - based educational component of the trades union week-end school. Edgar as a writer, for example, as is clear from Itzen's (1980 op. cit.) account, was increasingly concerned to explore the inter-relations of public and private events as a keynote of socialist theatre and therefore began to experiment with different forms in the following years. To understand how it was possible for groups to develop in such ways as these it is necessary to understand the pattern of organisation and finance within the theatre companies which had become established by the mid-1970s, and so it is these factors to which we now turn.

It has already been demonstrated how from its inception the Arts Council of Great Britain had been concerned to promote 'high

culture' artistic activity by professionals rather than the activities which had sprung up amidst the population as a whole. Nevertheless in 1967 its reconstituted charter had presented it with objectives which included the development and improvement of knowledge, understanding and practice of the arts, together with the increase of the accessibility of the arts to the public throughout Britain. The Council established panels and committees for categories such as Drama, Literature etc to exercise these functions, and by 1969, in response to pressure from artists, it established a New Activities Committee to deal with applications for support from outside these existing categories. Further, in 1971 an Experimental Projects Committee was set up to deal with hitherto unclassifiable drama work.

By this time experimental, 'fringe' drama, community theatre - by groups taking a variety of material to audiences of non-theatre goers in non-theatrical venues, and education - through - drama in schools, was becoming a feature of theatre work which was looking to the Council for support. A Council Working Party broadly approved this. Within this category came the socialist theatre groups, and so the paradoxical situation arose whereby revolutionary political theatre companies were largely maintained by an agency of the state they wished to overthrow. All in all, however, the relative extent of this subsidy was small, as Itzen has pointed out:

In 1973, the fringe was receiving only 4 per cent of the total allocation for drama, which was then £3.2 million. This had more than doubled in 1977-78 to £16 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 (i.e. £500,000). In 1977-78 between them the National Theatre

and the Royal Shakespeare Company had £4.2 million - all the rest of drama £6 million. Of that £6 million, £4.75 million went to theatre buildings; touring (thirty three companies) received only £872,000. New projects (58) received £229,251. By 1978 support for community arts had become official Arts Council policy... The figures spoke for themselves: the fringe remained seriously under-subsidised particularly in the light of the evident significance of its work through the seventies. And the amounts of subsidy that went to alternative theatre as compared with the establishment theatre was disproportionate. (op. cit. p.158)

For many associated with the movement this reflected the politics of the Arts Council itself. Whereas the 'fringe' category of theatre might actually be improving the accessibility of drama for the population through their target audiences, venues and material - and received a funding on this basis - the structure and domain assumptions of the Arts Council would ensure that financially speaking this aspect of its activities would remain marginal. In a notable polemic Malcolm Griffiths (1977) attacked the Council for elitism and complete lack of democratic accountability, both in how members were appointed and in how decisions were taken, and for an obfuscating bureaucratic structure. This theme has been pursued by Braden (1978) and Hutchinson (1982 op. cit.) and indicates a contribution by the new theatre groups: their practice focused attention on the politics of subsidy, on which cultural policies should be pursued in Britain, and on the nature of the agencies which should promote those policies.

More immediately however within this situation socialist theatre groups were attracting a level of funding from the Arts Council; Red Ladder, for example, received £4,000 in 1973 which had risen to £43,000 five years later.⁽¹²⁾ Subsidy would take the form of a capital grant to buy or to maintain equipment, bursaries or awards

to individual writers, or annual revenue grants for wages and guarantees against loss over ticket sales. None of these awards were necessarily renewable; further, as devolution of the Arts Council involved financial negotiations with Regional Arts Associations, amongst whose members were local councillors, the possibilities of censorship through political hostility were always present.⁽¹³⁾ These uncertainties were factors in the formation of the pressure group, The Association of Community Theatres, the trades unionisation of playwrights into the Theatre Writer's Union and finally the block unionisation of the 'fringe' into Equity.⁽¹⁴⁾ The differences which these forms of financial assistance could make have been described in 1977 by the socialist writer Steve Gooch:

If everyone is supported by the dole there is not a great deal of money for publicity, set, costume, for production purposes, for commissioning a script, for paying the director or the stage management and so on. The alternative theatre which exists to-day, and which in my opinion has reached its peak in the work of the large socialist touring groups, has been fought for. The resources which those groups now command in terms of national and local subsidy and in terms of support from trade union and labour movement contacts, every pound of those resources has been fought for over the last few years. But they still do not compare at all with the resources that are enjoyed by the subsidised theatre and the regional theatres in general. The result is that you are working with fewer resources, which makes your task that much more difficult, and you are also working in a tougher ideological context. Your work is challenged much more frequently and you are forced to examine its content and meaning much more rigorously than you would be in the conventional theatre.⁽¹⁵⁾

Despite this still tenuous and ambiguous status by 1976-77 around twenty socialist or feminist theatre companies were in receipt of financial aid from the Arts Council, a subsidy which in many

cases enabled full-time professional work. For the first time since the Second World War the state was financing socialist theatre to an appreciable degree.⁽¹⁶⁾ It was this, basically, which made much easier the development of these groups beyond the limits of agitprop, which they had reached by the early 1970s.

Three projects can provide examples of the work which was being produced by 1973-1974. A lengthy process of political debate within the Red Ladder group resulted in the decision to produce a play which would give equal weight to issues of class oppression under capitalism and womens' oppression under patriarchy; a play which would deal not only with 'issues' such as equal pay and the unionisation of working women but also with the relationships between men and women, the politics of the family and how these interact with politics in the conventional sense. The result was A Woman's Work is Never Done, also known and published under the title Strike While the Iron is Hot, which the group first performed at an AUEW school in 1974 and subsequently toured widely until 1976.

On a bare set⁽¹⁷⁾ with the minimum of equipment we see the wedding of Dave and Helen, a conventional couple ('it's a big step, but I know I'm doing the right thing. Dave and I were meant for each other. All I've ever wanted is to marry him and have his kids') but the dream soon turns sour. Helen finds a life of children and housework dull and frustrating, and she feels alienated from her husband's activities:

Dave: Oh, I can't manage tomorrow night,
love. I've got a union meeting.
Helen: Oh, it's alright, isn't it? You
can go to the union meeting but
you can't go out with me.
Dave: It's different. It's work, the
union.
Helen: It's a night out with the lads.
Dave: It's not a flaming night out
with the lads.
Helen: Then why do you always come
home drunk then? Unions!

She eventually breaks out and finds a job herself, either in a garment sweatshop or a school canteen according to different versions of the text, and at work she learns through experience the need for strong organisation to defend her interests. She also decides in another scene to proceed with an abortion, a decision which involves direct statements to the audience about nurseries, child care, and the conditions which can make genuine freedom of choice possible.

A long scene with Dave and his friends and their wives in a pub is the opportunity to present facts and arguments about an impending dispute about wages and parity at the car factory where they all now work. Dave and George use pint and half-pint glasses to demonstrate profit and surplus value, also their case for parity with other workers in Coventry. They use this same technique to explain the case for the women to achieve parity with other women, which they claim will be the result if their strike succeeds. Helen, holding her half-pint glass up against her husband's pint, is still far from convinced that this is all there is to it:

Helen: I'm still not getting as much
as Mike and I'm doing the same
work.
George: Well of course not, love. You're
on a woman's rate.
Dave: A woman's wage, love, you
wouldn't get as much, would you?
(Mike echoes agreement)

Helen: Oh... I see. I think I've got it. That means I should go on strike for parity with Mike. (Uproar from the men)

Dave: No, no, love. You've got it all wrong. What you're talking about there is equal pay.

George: Equal pay.

Dave: Not parity.

George & Dave: That's completely different.

Helen: Well I don't see the difference. (To the audience) Do you? (To Mary) What do you think, Mary?

Mary: Well, I don't know...

George: Well of course there's a difference...

Mary: Hang on...

George: Listen, there's...

Mary (cutting him): Hang on. I don't know about this parity and equal pay thing, but what I do know is that I'm his cook, his nursemaid...

Helen: His cleaner...

Mary: Yes, and his baby minder. And what do I get out of it?

George: My undying love and affection. (The men laugh)

Dave: Who's for another beer then? (The men are)

Helen: George. (She lifts up a pint glass) I think I'll have a pint this time.

Men (to each other): Hello!

Next we see what happens when these ideas are carried into conventional trades union practice. The management is determined to avoid conceding to the equal pay demand at all costs, and when they and the trades unionists engage in a mock battle on the red step-ladder, conceded by a large umbrella labelled 'PROFIT', this is the one left to the end. Having had their own demands granted the men agree to a job evaluation study, and the comic Job Evaluator studies the workers and obediently places the women a grade below the men. When the women reject this the closure of the factory is

threatened. Meanwhile Helen and Dave have their own dispute; in bed, Dave argues that job, family and now union activity is too much for her, but Helen has her own solution to this problem:

Helen: No, Dave. I'm not giving up my job. I'm not going back to asking you every time I want a bob or two for something. Oh, look, Dave. Work's not that marvellous, but for the first time I've got a life of my own at work. And with this closure threat, we've got a real fight on our hands. So your just going to have to start helping at home. You can start - with the ironing.

Dave: Oh no. You're not getting me doing woman's work.

Helen: You'll soon do it, love - if no one does it for you (exit).

At the factory the women take things into their own hands. They strike for equal pay with the men, and, fearing that the male-dominated union structure will not take their case seriously, they call for a mass meeting which includes the audience. This is an opportunity to present a range of arguments for and against, and again to repeat the reality of the women's lives. Eventually the men are brought round and the strike for equal pay is united.

Finally, we return to a domestic scene with Helen and Dave - who is ironing. In the midst of their struggle all is still not settled in their personal lives, as Helen wants Dave to work at the creche during a strike meeting, which he thinks is hardly the best place for his trade union experience. The play ends with a song, statement and question to the audience on the need for the changes which Helen and her friends have been demanding, at home, at work, in the labour movement and thus the dual nature of the struggle against capitalism.

Strike While the Iron is Hot therefore invites the audience to discuss, poses a question about a general struggle which is in progress rather than the celebration of a victory by proxy. Helen goes through a succession of experiences from which she draws her conclusions and against which the audience are invited to test their own lives. Theatrically it clearly contains a number of agitprop elements: the red ladder which gave the group its name and which had been in use from the earliest days, enabling not only a physical distancing of power and authority figures such as managers but also implications, as in this play when the male trades unionists step onto the ladder during negotiations and subsequently relegate the womens' equal pay claim. Also, the costume and exaggerated manner of characters such as the Job Evaluator belong to agitprop. However as Seyd (op. cit. p.40) stresses it is the use of the visual image as a metaphor in Strike While the Iron is Hot which displays an agitprop heritage and forms a key scene in the play. In this example it could be said further that whereas the white 'Feather' for the trade union official in The National Cake (a symbol of cowardice, simultaneously the name of the T.U.C. General Secretary whose commitment to the Industrial Relations Act struggles was doubted) was a statement, the use of the pint glasses in the discussion of equal pay is an invitation to reflect, in keeping with this play's intentions to provoke debate.

Besides this there is a clear influence of Brecht in the introduction of each scene with a placard announcing what is to follow ('The Disputed Pint', 'Parity Begins at Home') and the contradiction to be aware of, the use of songs and music outside the development of the story and the direct statements from actor to audience. These examples of the principles of epic theatre were designed to offset those elements of the play derived from

the mainstream theatre: believable characters undergoing believable emotions and an unfolding storyline.

Besides such touring plays other projects were aimed at a specific community, such as The Motor Show by Steve Gooch and Paul Thompson, performed by The Community Theatre in Dagenham in 1974. Funded by the Arts Council as part of an effort to establish an arts centre in Dagenham, this show covered the history of the Ford Motor Company and was aimed at the Ford workers in the local car factory. Gooch has described its genesis:

When we went there first of all we met a group of shop stewards from the factory and told them about the play, what we were planning to do, and invited and involved them in the business of research, that is to say we questioned them very closely about their own experiences of trade union struggle at Fords. We also invited them to participate in every stage of the work process, in the general outlines of the story, the issues and main topics of the play, also the kind of approach, the kind of style they thought would be popular. We fed back to them the work we had done and invited them to criticise. They came into rehearsal, they could see the way the show was developing and we also listened to their comments when we were performing the show and attempted to keep that dialogue between us and them continuous. The response was good. (18)

Thus the play adopted the trade union activists' perspective of their situation and the events which had led to it.

The Motor Show (19) uses a variety of styles over twenty four scenes, commencing with the arrival of the Model T Ford and the work practices introduced for its mass production. Henry Ford is portrayed as a gangster figure, Mr Big, and the early conflicts are over wages paid which are seen as compensation for the demands of the production line; five dollars a day, but with this regime:

Barker: Name?
Joe: Carruthers.
Barker: That Jewish?
Joe: No
Barker: Oh good. I wanna see you on
parade Monday morning at 7 a.m.
on the dot, smiling all over,
buttons shining, shoes I can
see my face in. From now on we
got our eye on you.

A 'Union Man' acts as a narrator providing documentary material, facts and historical evidence, at this stage on the brutal repression by 'Mr. Big' of the workers organisations with the added weapons of the unemployment of the 1930s. We see 'Mr. Big', 'General' and 'Chrysler' as hoodlums in a pool hall and, as in their game, Big is excluded from their markets and cartels. The solution is to expand abroad, and thus Big's comes to Dagenham.

This plant is established under the English stewardship of Sir Merciful Merry ('Good news for the USA/I'll do whatever they might say/I'll take good care of the motor plant/while they're away') but problems accumulate for Mr. Big: the Second World War disrupts his source of raw materials and his American labour problems continue. However the war solves these problems together, with the demand for munitions and a new approach to industrial relations, as we learn in a conversation with the journalist 'Miss New Deal':

New Deal: But what about your principles,
Mr. Big? You said you were
anti-war.
Big: I was wrong. A man makes
mistakes. In times of need I'm
as patriotic as de next man.
New Deal: And the unions?
Big: Now we're all one big happy
family together, I don't see
why de unions shouldn't be
part of dat family too. I'll
even collect deir dues for 'em.
New Deal: I believe collecting dues is
one of the traditional ways for

the men to pass on news and
organise.
Big: Is dat a fact? Well, in dese
troubled times, Miss New Deal,
we have to loin to trust one
another.

Back in Dagenham the men return from the war to find that the women who have been doing their jobs have established a good workplace union organisation, including, for the first time, shop stewards, conceded by the company's need for continued production. At last the union seems to be, in the words of their song, 'A formidable force in a trembling land'.

International affairs are represented around a map by figures such as John Bull, Uncle Same, Europa, Chrysler and Big again, including, from now on, 'The Guy Asleep Under the Blanket', an ignored and despised figure from the Third World. Big acquires another British plant, and we see his management style in action with the contrived sacking of shop stewards' leader Johnny McLoughlin. The resultant strike is settled by the agreement over 'procedure'. We see this in action following a fight caused by a typical production-line incident precipitated by George the foreman:

George: Yes! Easy George they used to
call me. No more! You're
eight 'n' arf seconds late.
Eight 'n' arf seconds of
company time!
Reynolds: Look George, I only went...
George: I don't wan'a know!
Reynolds: Me zip got stuck!

In a farcical scene the chain of the grievance procedure is followed and exposed. Again and again in several scenes we see Big's company attempt to solve both its own created problems and those generated by the vicissitudes of international capitalism by pressure on its workforce through redundancy, speed-up and the weeding-out of the union militants capable of leading a fight

against this.

This finally takes the form of a staged boxing match between George the Foreman and Wally the Worker, seconds Lady Scanlon-Jones and Moss Birch, Mamsel Europa and Mr Big; judges Wilson and Heath, commentator John Bull. By this method the recent history of industrial relations both at Big's and nationally can be represented in terms of blow and counter blow, and the roles of national figures included:

John Bull:	Well, whatever Mr Big's plans, Wally's seconds have been following a tactics course for their claim prepared by Ruskin College, Oxford. (The bell rings) And out they come!
Round Three:	The 1971 Nine Week Strike! (Wally whacks George) And straight from the bell Wally goes in with a hard claim for parity again. Ten pounds and a thirty-five hour week. A very sound punch. (George hits Wally scornfully) And George counters straight away with an almost de ~~vis~~ isory company offer of two pounds. (Wally whacks George who goes down) And Wally fights back! A strike! Well, things have certainly hotted up this round! Unprecedented solidarity from the men! One week! Two weeks!
Big:	Unfair punch!
John Bull...	And there's a split between the seconds! Lady Scanlon-Jones has gone over with Mr. Big to talk to Judge Heath....

Eventually, to cries of 'fix!' an unfavourable settlement is reached. Amidst inflation and cut-throat international competition 'The Guy Asleep Under the Blanket' stirs - he's Abdul the Arab and his control over oil supplies has the motor companies cornered.

The final scene (entitled 'The Working Class, January 1974') features a miner who has a message for the car workers. The miners' determination and solidarity have thwarted the state's drive for pay restraint and anti-union legislation twice in recent years, and that determined solidarity is the worker's best weapon. The story of past struggles which the play has shown are all part of the present day and must be continued if society as a whole is to change.

Gooch has described the response to the play from those to whom it was addressed and from whose experience it had come:

But when they finally came to see the show the response was very enthusiastic indeed. They were amazed at the degree of professional proficiency which was displayed. I think they expected something more amateur. They were delighted by it, they were surprised to see something like that in just a local hall. And they also felt very supported in their own struggle by the way we treated the story. (20)

Itzen states that The Motor Show was subsequently toured outside Dagenham and became a model for many subsequent shows (op. cit. p.163) Designed for a specific purpose and a specific audience, its style combines documentary commentary, a stylised realism portraying work on the shop-floor, and a satirical knockabout element apparently derived from agitprop and the variety show. Again, songs are used as a commentary, the audience is invited to participate and this is used to cement their involvement in its themes inside and outside the theatre.

The most successful of the socialist theatre projects at this time was the tour in 1973 of The Cheviot, The Stag and The Black, Black Oil by 7:84 Scotland. A few years earlier the writer

John McGrath, experienced in film and television serials and in theatre at the Liverpool Everyman, formed the 7:84 Theatre Group, the name based on the statistic that seven percent of the population owned eighty-four percent of the wealth of Britain. After a number of productions a separate company was formed to work in Scotland, initiated by the development of North Sea Oil and the prospect of the effects of capitalist opportunities in the Highlands. The Cheviot, written by McGrath but collectively researched and worked on by the company, set out to explain the history of the Highlands in terms of popular struggles against the ravages of capitalist enterprise and ownership and the meaning of those struggles for the present day.

The Cheviot (21) opens to find the company tuning its instruments on a stage largely bare except for a large pop-up book, the opening pages of which will provide the scenic backdrops to the story. It is Strathnaver in 1813, and by a hard-pressed crofting family on the Duke of Sutherland's estate we learn the facts of the Duke's holdings. His factor, Patrick Sellar, introduces the plans to turn the area over to Cheviot sheep, and has this advice regarding the inhabitants:

Sellar: You will not find this
 estate pleasant or
 profitable until by
 draining to your coast-
 line or by emigration you
 have got your mildewed
 districts cleared. They
 are just in that state of
 society for a savage
 country, such as the woods
 of Upper Canada - His
 Lordship should consider
 seriously the possibility
 of subsidising their
 departures. They might
 even be inclined to carry
 a swarm of their dependents
 with them.

The cast enact the eviction of the tenants to make way for sheep, their resistance and its suppression, with readings from eye-witness accounts of the time. A narrator also provides a linking commentary and perspective:

Alex: 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, inefficient methods of
 agriculture to keep everyone
 fed. Even before the
 Clearances, emigration has
 been the only way out for
 some. But this coincided
 with something else: English -
 and Scottish - capital was
 growing powerful and needed
 to expand. Huge profits
 were being made already as
 a result of the Industrial
 Revolution, and improved
 methods of agriculture.
 This accumulated wealth
 had to be used, to make
 more profit - because this
 is the law of capitalism.
 It expanded all over the
 globe. And just as it saw
 in Africa, the West Indies,
 Canada, the Middle East and
 China, ways of increasing
 itself, so in the Highlands
 of Scotland it saw the same
 opportunity...

This 'law of capitalism' is obeyed and produces a round of depopulation through brutal eviction and emigration to a harder and dangerous life in North America. Parallels are drawn with the treatment of aboriginal populations in colonies the world over.

Again in the 1880s tenants in the Braes area of Sky unite in a rent strike basically against the remnants of a feudalistic agricultural system; after massive fights with the police Lord Macdonald is forced to settle. In Glendale however two gunboats, a transport ship and a hundred marines were sent against the

crofters. At the same time we meet Lady Phosphate and her friends, out shooting, representing what could be called the cultural exploitation of the Highlands. They have made the tartan fashionable in court circles, along with Highland landscape painting and Sir Walter Scott, but as they farcically machine-gun the game they reveal their true relationships with the genuine Highlanders: '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'. One of the old traditions carefully fostered by such people was that of loyal soldiering, and thus the Highland regiments were raised to subdue, ironically, the native peoples of other lands whose resources were needed. However we are also reminded of an incident during the Crimean War when the Duke of Sutherland attempted to raise a regiment of the 93rd Highlanders from amongst his tenants, only to receive a sullen reaction and then this reply:

Old Man:	I am sorry for the response your Grace's proposals are meeting here, but there is a cause for it. It is the opinion of this country that should the Tsar of Russia take possession of Dunrobin Castle, we couldn't expect worse treatment at his hands than we have experienced at the hands of your family for the last fifty years. We have no Country to fight for. You robbed us of our country and gave it to the sheep. Therefore, since you have preferred sheep to men, let sheep now defend you.
All:	Baa-aa.

The scenes cover the struggles and occasional victories of the Highland peoples as well as their oppression and destitution

at the hands of landowners; in time, these are the multinationals:

John: Question: What does a meat-packer in Argentina, a merchant seaman on the high seas, a docker in London, a container-lorry driver on the motorways, have in common with a crofter in Lochinver?
Billy: Nothing at all.
John: Wrong. They are all wholly-owned subsidiaries of the Vestey Brothers.

This culminates with the discovery of North Sea Oil, and the show argues that the effect on the Highlands of an oil boom by multinational capitalism will be a new form of the Clearances: just as in South America and Africa the mineral wealth will be torn from the land by ruthless non-union firms, rising land and other prices will drive out the indigenous population - the oil could benefit everyone but as things stand the only real beneficiaries will be modern equivalents of the Dukes of Argyll and Sutherland. The politics of the play are unequivocal:

Liz: Nationalism is not enough. The enemy of the Scottish people is Scottish capital, as much as the foreign exploiter.

A Gaelic song of the Clearances ends the play:

Remember you are a people and fight for
your rights,
There are riches under the hills where
you grew up.
There is iron and coal there, grey
lead and gold there,
There is richness in the land under
your feet.
Remember your hardships and keep up
your struggle
The wheel will turn for you
By the strength of your hands and the
hardness of your fists

Your cattle will be on the plains
Everyone in the land will have a place

And the exploiter will be driven out.

McGrath has explained how the form of this play derives from more than the combinations of music, documentary material, naturalistic scenes and cartoon characters which was a hallmark of socialist theatre at this time, even if it clearly included them:

One truly popular form of entertainment in the Highlands, past and present, is the ceillidh. This is usually a gathering at which all, or most, of those present, with or without the aid of the whisky, sing a song, tell a story, play an instrument, have a good blether, and occasionally end up dancing until the next morning. 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. In the West, they were also one way of keeping intact the Gaelic Culture - language, literature, songs and manners. "Ceilidh parties" also go from place to place to entertain and be entertained, and are very popular. I wanted to keep this form - an assembly of songs, stories, scenes, talk, music and general entertainment - and to tell through it the story of what had happened to the people. And to end the evening with a dance, for people to get a chance to talk and have a good time. (1974 op. cit. p.26)

At a time of an oil crisis and debate over North Sea oil - and a debate within the Left on nationalism initiated by the electoral success of the Scottish Nationalist Party (and a break-away from Labour, the Scottish Labour Party) - The Cheviot was toured to over 30,000 people throughout the Highlands and islands of Scotland. McGrath (op. cit.) has described the impact the play often had, asserting a culture through its participatory music, dance and song in Gaelic and English, and re-asserting a consciousness of a history which had frequently gone unarticulated. As he stresses, a key point was to avoid the 'Highland lament' tradition of recalling exploitation and to

celebrate the popular struggles and victories of the past, linking them to an analysis of the present and the action which needed to be taken to achieve success in the future.

The politics of these three plays are representative of the socialist theatre groups of the 1970s. The election of the Labour Government in 1974 and the subsequent emergence of James Callaghan as Prime Minister did nothing to suffocate the revolutionary Left which had burgeoned since the late 1960s; quite the reverse, although , as we shall see, it caused its assumptions many problems. Almost immediately an economic crisis was dealt with by an approach for assistance to the International Monetary Fund, who granted aid on condition of substantial cuts in public spending in such areas as education and the National Health Service. This also had implications for public sector pay policy, and whereas trades union leaders agreed on a limit to pay increases in a concord known as the Social Contract, this did not prevent a series of protracted national strikes up to 1979: firemen, lorry drivers and local authority manual workers all took industrial action against the incomes policy of the Labour Government. At the same time it was argued - and analysed in detail in publications such as those of the Glasgow Media Group - that trades unions were now a 'folk devil' which had created a 'moral panic';⁽²²⁾ the same status had also been 'achieved' by welfare claimants at a time when unemployment steadily continued to rise.

Another feature of the 1970s was the emergence of Nazi-type organisations such as the National Front on a scale unprecedented

since the 1930s. Their apparent electoral appeal for the 'protest vote' and street violence against black people and the Left generated a consternation, expressed first in violence at counter-demonstrations such as in Lewisham in 1977, and subsequently and successfully in a 'popular front' organisation called the Anti-Nazi League. This placing of fascism and unemployment on the political agenda stimulated a revival of interest in the 1930s and the re-print or publication of memoirs and accounts by participants in similar struggles at that time: Hannington's Unemployed Struggles and Ten Lean Years (1936/78), McShane's No Mean Fighter (1978) Jacobs' Out of the Ghetto (1978) are some of the well known examples.

Reference to the past was also a feature of the rapid growth of the womens' movement since the 1960s, particularly by those participants intent on generating an impact on the British Left. Rowbotham's Hidden from History (1973) and Women, Resistance and Revolution (1972), for example, were simultaneously records of the role of women in the working class organisations during class struggles of the past, and validations of the modern efforts by women to overcome their subordination in both society and the labour movement in the present day. All through the 1970s an identifiable Womens' Liberation Movement, diverse and heterogeneous, campaigned for legislative change such as over equal pay and the TUC's Charter for Working Women, which sought to improve the position of women within the trades union movement; or against proposed legislative changes to restrict access to abortion facilities by means of a National Abortion Campaign. As Wandor has pointed out, the very plurality of the issues which were taken up:

...reflects the objective problem of linking campaigns...which are about external conditions of work, with the more subtle implications of changing people's attitudes to each other and to their own self-image. In particular the question of organisation highlights the difficulties facing feminists who challenge inequalities within the home, in the family, in attitudes to housework and sexuality, where the struggle still takes place behind closed doors. (1981 op. cit. p.16)

As feminists strove to link the personal with the more conventionally political they explicitly raised questions about forms of organisation which relied on hierarchy, division of labour, competitiveness and authoritarian leadership. Largely through the womens' movement these questions also began to be raised within the organisations of the Left at this time - a new politics which required Marxism to produce a theoretical account of the oppression of women, and required Marxist organisations to practise these analyses in both public and private arenas. During the 1970s feminists within the International Socialists produced the group and Journal Womens Voice, and a collective of Communist Party women produced Red Rag, both intending to be a focus for this process.

All of this was reflected in the politics and means of working in many of the socialist theatre groups. Seyd (op. cit.) had described in detail the collective approach adopted by the Red Ladder group (whereby decisions are taken by vote, all members are involved in policy and output decisions, divisions of labour carry checks and balances) and how this enables more control by the practitioners of their working environments. This was seen as an aspect of the socialism of many of the socialist theatre groups, whether they were collectives producing their own work or groups relying on an individual writer.

These groups were also within the revolutionary Left. The experience of the Wilson - Callaghan Government did not point to the possibility of the Labour Party proving a vehicle for socialism, and the savage military overthrow of Allende's elected socialist government in Chile in 1973 cast doubts for many on the feasibility of the gradualist, part - parliamentary political strategy advanced by the Communist Parties of Britain and Europe. However only rarely were the groups explicitly associated with particular parties (such as the International Socialists or the International Marxist Group), remaining in positions of support to the broad campaigns organised by any. This raises the question of the actual organisation of their work - the venues, the contexts and the audience - to which we now turn.

These groups clearly wished to address their work to audiences which would not normally be found in a theatre building. The following self-descriptions can serve to illustrate this:

Broadside provides made to measure plays for unions, work places or communities. Written with the help of rank and file workers, plays are used to stimulate discussion, liven up meetings, raise funds and entertain.

Foco Novo aim to find a new model of performance and to open up theatre to new audiences through the Labour Movement, colleges and theatres.

Wakefield Tricycle aim..to take specially written and relevant entertainment to non-theatrical venues.(23)

Seyd (op. cit.) has also described how Red Ladder realised that to achieve their desired audience they had to play in venues

near to and in the context of their audiences' lives, and which did not exert any alien cultural pressures. Therefore they, and many other groups, performed in pubs and working-mens' clubs, community centres, union meetings and so forth. In so doing they were also being seen to fulfil the criteria for Arts Council support in that they were increasing the accessibility of theatre to the population.

A key element in carrying out these ends lay in the groups' relationships with the organisations of the Labour movement and the political campaign bodies. One stage of this was in the writing of material together with the sponsoring of a performance or tour. For example Red Ladder worked with NUPE shop stewards on Tyneside for a scene in A Woman's Work is Never Done and NUPE subsequently sponsored a local tour of the play in 1975. In 1976, for the fiftieth anniversary of the General Strike, the South Wales Executive of the NUM sponsored the production by Foco Novo of The Nine Days and Saltley Gates, a play which contrasted the miners' defeat in 1926 with their victories in the early 1970s. This contact and endorsement enabled a subsequent tour of The Nine Days around the clubs of the Yorkshire coalfields, leading to a close collaboration over new material for the play. As the reputation of the 7:84 company grew in Scotland after the success of The Cheviot, the Scottish TUC and individual unions sponsored further 7:84 plays, and this connection with the labour movement often characterised their audiences, as John McGrath explained in an interview:

Clydebank shop stewards, for example, book the town hall and pack it - and we get help from individual militants (many in the Communist Party) who mobilise before a 7:84 visit. Without

that you get a very small audience.(24)

During their tours of the Highlands, where audiences were to be found in often small communities, contact between members of the group who were from that region and the particular localities ensured attendance by those to whom the material was in fact addressed.

Of the twenty socialist theatre groups listed ⁽²⁵⁾ in 1976-7 nine specifically state that national or local branches of trades unions, shop stewards' committees or trades councils had been sources of booking. Initially at least these contacts had been done on an individual basis, at the initiative of particular activists, rather than, for the most part, as an officially accepted element of the trades union movement. Nevertheless if this meant that trade union involvement, although occasionally deep, was in national terms sporadic, at least it was taking place at the level the theatre groups desired as opposed to the experience of Centre 42 in the 1960s.

In addition groups worked closely with specific campaigns, as the all-women company Roadgang reported in 1978:

Roadgang has worked in the street, pubs, clubs, community centres, colleges, and union halls, performing cabaret - type shows. Much of the work has been written and performed for particular organisations such as the Nursery Action Campaign, housing groups, National Federation of Womens' Aid, and the national Abortion Campaign...we're now trying to expand the numerous contacts we have to include Womens' Groups throughout the country.(26)

Some other examples are the tour by 7:84 (England) of Barrie Keeffe's play Sus, as part of a campaign to abolish an archaic 'stop and search' law used mainly against black youth, and against

the passing of the Scottish Criminal Justice Bill; the late 1970s also saw a number of plays on racism and the National Front which were toured to Anti-Fascist Committees and the Anti-Nazi League groups.

Before discussing the impact and role of these plays on their audiences - and discussing again who those audiences were - in more detail, it would be useful at this point to examine some plays of the late 1970s. By this means it will be possible to conduct this discussion in terms of what those plays were intending to achieve.

Red Ladder produced It Makes You Sick, a show about the political issues within and around the National Health Service, in 1976, and following the group's decision to base themselves in Leeds the play was extensively toured in the north. According to Shank (1978) the play follows the fortunes of a hospitalised factory worker in a bed next to a private patient, and much of the action concerned a critique of private medicine, including a song ending with this refrain:

If its heart attacks or hernias
A bloodclot or a bruise
If you want a quack
You pay your whack
And you can jump the queues (p.58)

A contemporary review describes how the injured worker:

...gradually understands the need for solidarity amongst hospital workers, and between them and the rest of the labour movement - even when that means the orderly refusing to serve his meals as part of a go-slow...

This was interwoven with cameos around other areas of the NHS: the overworked GP dishing out Valium like Smarties; the slimy consultant chatting up his private patients; the nurse full of the ideology of caring and self-sacrifice that stopped her becoming militant; the male and female orderlies who are initially treated as the most radical because they're at the bottom of the hospital hierarchy; the patient's hard working and depressed wife. (27)

It Makes You Sick follows the same basic form as A Woman's Work, including the use of a graphic visual image to make a point; a ward orderly makes a point about public and private medicine in the same way as 'The Disputed Pint', only in this play by means of helpings of mince on a plate.

The play was toured at a time of cutbacks on health and social services spending by the Labour Government and it urged - to the criticism of the quoted reviewer, who found this too limiting - support for trades union struggles within the health service and made links with the wider working-class struggles against capitalism.

Belt and Braces Roadshow, whose members had originally worked with 7:84, toured several plays in the 1970s of which a good example is England Expects,⁽²⁸⁾ written by Gavin Richards. The play follows the fortunes of Maureen, a young girl from Belfast, and her progress from ignorance through to a revolutionary political consciousness. This is done through a series of experiences at work, as her multinational employers announce redundancies. This provokes a strike, then an occupation during which the realities of the movement of capital around foreign subsidiaries are exposed. The occupation is disrupted by a government proposal to establish worker participation in management as a condition of financial aid to keep the firm viable; most of the workforce accept this only to find the redundancies imposed in any event.

The play ends with the defiance of Maureen and her friend during police questioning following their arrest at a Right to Work march. The conclusion is a rousing rock song on the need to 'smash capitalism', confident and aggressive instead of confident and caricaturing like many of the other songs which punctuate the story. As a show it featured hard political entertainment throughout, including a bizarre German professor of economics, woken up and dusted down, who comes on like Rip Van Winkle to explain the theory of surplus value. Gavin Richards supplied production notes to the published version of the text which explained the approach behind the particular construction of the show:

The stage is set as for a rock show and organised flexibly so that it can accommodate the variety of performing talents required easily and smoothly.

Lighting is brash and bright, drawing on the conventions of rock shows or pop concerts rather than on those of the naturalistic theatre. Occasionally, spots are required, especially in the second half. Unless otherwise indicated, the play is performed throughout on microphones. The style of acting must be confident, and is essentially "out front".

The music must be non-acoustic and of a high professional standard. By experience, young working-class audiences are far more discriminating in their musical appreciation than in their knowledge of dramatic techniques. For this reason, the show was constructed to form a bridge for these audiences between styles of music with which they were familiar and the less familiar territory of drama and political debate.(29)

7:84 built upon their earlier success, as had been noted, and developed the complexity of their material. This review summarises Blood Red Roses, toured first at the end of the 1970s:

It relates the private world of its characters to public and political events set against the background of twenty years of industrial decline. All this is alone in a style which is entertaining and accessible to widely differing audiences. The play is about Bessie Gordon, who comes "from a long line of Celtic fighting women". She fights against her schooling and the unhealthy conditions in her factory. She marries the shop steward and learns to channel her fighting spirit till she takes on the multi-national which has bought up her firm, and, by co-ordinating fellow workers all over Europe, beats it.

However, the multi-national closes the firm, her husband leaves her, and to cap it all the Tories win the 1979 election. But her spirit is as strong as ever and the play ends on a note of affirmation not despair. Though the play's style is direct and its political position clear, what it provides is not propaganda, because it explores and questions, asserting its values and ideas rather than a particular political doctrine... There's a scene in which, with the washing piled to the ceiling, her two daughters squabbling, and her husband hidden behind a paper, Bessie tries to take a call from a phone box in Lisbon where (it's 1971) a Portugese trades unionist is risking his life to speak to her... Constantly, Blood Red Roses examines the problems and contradictions at the point where political involvement and personal life touch and collide. (Mortimer 1980 p.40-1)

In these senses the play takes the form of other 7:84 work in the 1970s, such as Fish in the Sea (which covers the events in and around a family during a factory occupation modelled on the Fisher-Bendix dispute in Liverpool). Although this play was described by one reviewer ⁽³⁰⁾ as structurally and also politically flawed in its handling of the political and personal levels, an over-elevation of the occupation tactic as a strategy, and a subordinate dramatic and political role for the women characters, it clearly attempts the same themes. Once more documentary, naturalistic and agitprop material is marshalled together with

songs and rock music. A recurrent feature is the short speech delivered directly to the audience by a character, such as on this occasion during the struggle over the factory:

Mr Maconochie
(To Audience):

All joking aside, we knew we'd had it, the minute those Labour MPs burst in on the act. They told us how clever they were being at getting questions asked in the House of Commons, at sucking up to American lawyers and accountants, how wittily they parried the thrusts of the managing director over cocktails - but it was perfectly obvious they'd come to get us back to work at any price. But the lads were getting desperate, and prepared to fall for it. So negotiations began, lead by our fearless head office negotio-crats. And life went on. I got worried about the missus, me being out at nights so much, and the missus got worried about Mary - her being out nights so much.(31)

Characters in these plays - and also England Expects - deliver these sorts of monologues which simultaneously express the psychological development of the individual, as he or she passes through various learning experiences, and also indicate wider pressures and influences on members of the working class. This device (as common in the work of Belt and Braces and 7:84 as the use of the strong visual image in the work of Red Ladder) marks a development in socialist theatre alongside the increasingly sophisticated use of music and the variety of theatrical techniques used within the plays.

Returning now to the discussion of audiences in terms of what the shows were intended to achieve, it is clear that the plays

immediately discussed should be understood in terms of different intentions, and this in turn should be incorporated into a discussion of impact, role and audience. This is to say that plays such as Blood Red Roses or Fish in the Sea, unlike a play directly associated with a specific theme or campaign, can be said to be designed to promote an overall attitude or frame of reference; a contribution to a culture as a way of life, in this case a way of life of political activity.

In the case of plays directly concerned with specific ideas or issues the political success of a performance clearly rests largely with the presence of an organisational framework, as Seyd has recorded in the case of Red Ladder:

The show, then, takes place in a context where the structure of the sponsoring organisation is visible...the structure of the sponsoring organisation continues to exist after the event and is a machinery (this or that part of the labour movement) through which those who saw the show can continue discussing, and even take up in practice, some of the ideas they and the show come up with...
(op. cit. p.38)

Nevertheless there is evidence that some groups did not always succeed in this respect. In 1977 the Pirate Jenny group toured an anti-facist play by David Edgar, Our Own People, which prompted this observation from one of the actresses:

All too often political theatre groups get from their fellow radicals what amounts to the same treatment one is used to from bourgeois critics: a theatrical critique of a play as an isolated thing, written, performed and over. There is rarely any real attempt to use the work done by these groups as a stepping stone to the daily work of socialists in the area.(32)

A year later, touring another play, Pirate Jenny developed this observation on the realities of the relations between the Left and the possibilities of socialist theatre:

All too often we perform to audiences really anxious to discuss and, more importantly, to take up the issues raised in a play. But through lack of any real leadership enthusiasm quickly wanes, and the Left has missed another opportunity... The play raises many issues about education... Audiences have been large and often anxious to take some action. But as in the case of our previous play on racism by David Edgar, too few of the committed Left have turned up to channel an enthusiastic response into action.

The cost and strain of putting on touring political theatre is enormous. Pirate Jenny and other groups need your help. Apart from your presence at productions, we need clean, comfortable accommodation for the company when on tour which we are more than happy to pay a fair price. In this way, the company can make contact with other socialists in the towns in which we play and obtain some constructive feedback on our work.(33)

It is clear from this that the situation described by Seyd for Red Ladder was an ideal one. It bears repeating that the overwhelming majority of the groups were touring, as distinct from establishing co-operative work with localised labour movements and the Left in particular cities as had been the case in the past. In addition, no single Party exerted hegemony over Left activity at this time. Therefore the opportunities for developing the political potential of the socialist theatre groups were only unevenly realised.

Other types of play, as we have seen, were concerned more with the affirmation of an attitude. Arguing that working-class

entertainment had been debased by commercialism but could nonetheless be developed with more humanity and value, McGrath has described the intentions of 7:84 here:

We try to raise the consciousness of the need for action. We don't give answers or ask people to join a particular party, but it is important, nevertheless, to present a correct analysis. To do this we present a bold picture...simplified but not simplistic... For too long the working class has been seen as the loser. We celebrate strengths and criticise weaknesses. We want to give a sense of confidence, of the possibility of victory.(34)

Hence the stress in plays like Blood Red Roses on the personal within the political, and the different functions which this and the 'giving a sense of confidence' can carry out for different audiences have been described on a tour of this play:

This bond, expressed more politically, was just as strong at the Star Club in Glasgow where the audience of activists might have come straight out of the story told on stage. At Rogart the audience was entertained, educated, provoked; in the Star Club, encouraged and re-informed; at the Scottish TUC Womens' Conference in Stirling, full of women like Bessie Gordon, celebrated. (Mortimer op. cit. p.41)

Similarly a participant in the Foco Novo tour of The Nine Days and Saltley Gates has said this of their performances in the working-mens' clubs of the coalfields:

What evenings we had with that play around those clubs, in Yorkshire and Scotland particularly! The miners were out of their minds over it. They'd all be sitting in their club, tables piled with booze. They laughed, they cried...the biggest cry was at the end when the General Strike got smashed. (Itzen op. cit. p.263)

Other socialist theatre practitioners have put forward a different perspective on the audiences the touring groups have generally attracted in recent years. For example David Edgar, whilst acknowledging that some groups have achieved a loyal and vigorous following in certain areas, has concluded as follows in 1981:

Left-wing theatre has not found and kept a mass, working-class audience...What radical theatre has done is to gain a huge public of people who are involved, in some way or another, with political struggle - an audience consisting largely (but not exclusively) of teachers, lecturers, social workers, health visitors, journalists, broadcasters, white collar workers, trade union researchers and officials, left party members, campaign supporters and so on.
(1981 p.41)

Clearly in these ten years the success of the socialist theatre movement in gaining the public it was seeking has been uneven. This chapter has already hinted at some of the factors behind this, and these hints can be developed into a discussion with the assistance of evidence rather more objective perhaps than some self-reports by participants.

In 1978 the Arts Council commissioned Mass Observation to conduct a Survey of Small-Scale Drama Groups' Audiences. The survey studied tours by the community group Triple Action Theatre, the feminist Monstrous Regiment group and 7:84. The purpose was to determine who their audiences were and to what extent they were not being reached by the larger scale live theatre. It concluded that in this sample:

They make some incursions into those social groups in the population not normally found in theatre audiences,

but with notable exceptions at particular venues, the demographic characteristics are broadly similar to those found in most theatre audiences - largely middle-class and with an advanced formal education.
(p.7)

The 'notable exceptions at particular venues' were performances by 7:84 at Clay Cross Miners' Welfare Club and Workington Trades Hall Social Club. According to the self-completion questionnaire issued to the audience - which also featured a very high response rate - 67% of the Clay Cross Audience were manual workers and 50% were members of a political or 'community' organisation. At Workington both figures were in the region of 40%. Taking both venues together 60% of the audiences had heard of the theatre group before and 40% had actually seen them before. In these 'notable exceptions' those - the majority or large minority - who were 'non-regular theatre-goers' amongst the audiences indicated that they were much less influenced by prior direct publicity such as posters or advertisements. The biggest single cause of their presence at the performance was being encouraged to come or brought along by relatives or friends. Again taking both together, between 40% and 65% of the audiences thought that the plays provided 'a very good social commentary' for them.

This survey and the points made above together provide information for generalisations to be made about how desired audiences were achieved, and also about the circumstances under which an impact was made upon them by performances. Clearly where theatre groups had established a close relationship with a sponsoring organisation - a campaigning body, a political party, a union branch, where 'sponsoring' can be understood as supporting and using rather than simply 'funding' - this relationship could be and was translated into an audience of working people and their families who would not normally be theatre attenders. Equally clearly in this respect

success hinged upon this relationship, and where groups (such as 7:84 in the Mass Observation Study) had established this it could be built upon to create a 'word of mouth' reputation within and around labour movement, political and community groups. If the extent to which such relationships could be built up was uneven from group to group this was a reflection of a number of possible factors: how far labour movement and other activists in particular localities were aware of, interested in or convinced of the possibilities of socialist theatre; how far groups were able to produce work to attract that interest and maintain a reputation; placing these together, how energetic and enthusiastic local activists were prepared to be in organising an audience for a show.

Seyd's account (op. cit.) of Red Ladder's work in the early 1970s demonstrates how the group - and in this they were joined by a number of others - went to some lengths to ensure that any political interest their shows aroused was not dissipated. Besides recognising the importance of the context of a sponsoring organisation, the group also chaired a discussion amongst the audience immediately after the performance. By this means the issues which the shows raised could be explicitly aired, talked through and clarified, and thus not only could the group obtain some direct indicators from audiences about their performance but an organisation present could channel the interest shown in a constructive direction. But if this displayed a developed political responsibility, the quoted comments from members of the Pirate Jenny group show that this was not always reciprocated. This is to say that the extent to which the potential of socialist theatre was realised, in direct terms of political awareness and activity, could also depend on the extent to which the Left was aware of and able or willing to make use of that potential.

A comment should also be made here on the dramatic forms which had emerged and their role in the effectiveness and impact of these shows. As we have seen, a combination of several forms (agitprop, realistic narrative, 'epic' forms) were in use within a single show, and particular attention was being paid to the use of the theatricality of rock music performances. McGrath (1981 op. cit. p.54-9), in the course of an argument on popular culture as a site of political struggle, has extended this to define, on the basis of the touring experience of 7:84, the characteristics of a working class audience's responses to live performances. These are: a preference for directness, a desire to have points of view clear and straightforward; in contrast to middle-class theatre audiences they are accustomed to more comedy and music in performances, both varied and of a high standard of delivery, and are far more open to the expression of emotion on stage. Again in contrast, working-class audiences demand moment by moment effects in a show rather than long, slow developments and also expect variety in style within extended live performances. His final observations concern how these audiences relate to particular material. In McGrath's view they respond more to an immediate relation between the stage material and their own lives, including a local connection; they also well appreciate a sensed identity with the performers, appreciate finding that the performers know and care about where they are performing and who they are performing to.

It was obviously the sensitivity of 7:84 to these ideas, and their incorporation into their performance style, which McGrath argues was a principal factor in the rapport which the group were able to achieve with audiences of working people. There are a number of points which bear discussion here and to which we shall

return below. However before moving to a summary of the socialist theatre in this final period three final areas need to be introduced for comment.

The 1970s can be noted as a crucial period for the presentation of an debate around socialist drama on British television. It has already been pointed out how this new - in the context of the span of this thesis - medium had probably usurped the satirical function of socialist theatre which London Unity had developed so well in the past. This decade contains the development of full television expressions of other aspects of the range of socialist drama.

The writer Jim Allen, in partnership with the television professionals Ken Loach and Tony Garnett, produced several short plays such as Spongers - contrasting the 1977 Royal Jubilee celebrations with the desperation of working-class life on the dole - and a major series, Days of Hope, which covered the history of the labour movement from 1914 to the defeat of the General Strike from a Trotskyist perspective. These were all screened on BBC television. They also, particularly in the case of Days of Hope, attracted considerable controversy from the establishment and generated a level of theoretical activity within Marxist film studies which the live theatre groups never succeeded in gaining. (35)

Around the same time Trevor Griffiths (previously successful on the commercial stage with plays around socialist ideas such as The Party, Comedians, and Occupations) made a deliberate move to concentrate on television drama. Besides the televising of his previous work the 1970s saw his major series on Independent

Television, Bill Brandt. This followed the progress, conflicts and dilemmas of a Left Labour M.P. in and outside parliament. As Itzen (op. cit. p.169) records, these plays were in a traditional naturalistic television form, a limitation Griffiths was prepared to accept in order to address the massive audiences which television offered.

By the end of the 1970s the relations between this television work and the socialist theatre companies were being thought by some commentators in terms of 'either-or'. For example writing of the live theatre groups Murdock has observed this:

But even at their best, these shows only reach small numbers on relatively rare occasions, whereas television reaches large numbers on a regular basis. A touring company would need to be on the road from now until the end of the century to gather the kind of working class audience that watched Days of Hope or Bill Brandt (1980 p.164)

On the other hand Edgar argued that the very situation of this audience presented problems which the work of Griffiths in particular did nothing to resolve:

The inherent problem with television as an agent of radical ideas is that its massive audience is not confronted en masse. It is confronted in the atomised, 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). The television audience, approached in the midst of their private and personal existence, are much more likely than collectively - addressed audiences to take an individual, personalised (and therefore psychological rather than social) view of the behaviour demonstrated to them (1979 op. cit. p.29).

To Edgar this problem is exacerbated by remaining within the dramatic forms television has developed: uncritical identification with central characters, the structuring of expectations through familiar programme scheduling, for example, were endemic to standard television drama and inimical to the impact of socialist drama.

The validity or otherwise of these two positions is a subject which must await further research elsewhere. At this point it must be sufficient to state the fundamental limitation of approaching the subject in terms of 'either' address a real mass audience, 'or' address a much smaller audience but effectively. This approach obscures the relations between theatre and television writing and performance, and not simply in terms of the passage of writers and actors between the two media. McGrath's observations on popular culture and the responses of working-class audiences include comments on the effects of the very forms of film and television on those responses; he observes further (1981 op. cit. p.30) that this extends to his own use of pace and movement in narrative, the rapid cutting between widely different styles and subjects in plays such as The Cheviot. This can be taken further still. The dependence of agitprop elements on striking visual imagery, their use of potent visual symbols such as the pint glass or the white feather, both indicate how far the ground for their impact has been prepared for them by the television medium. Documentary and current affairs programmes regularly make use of cartoons and symbolism, frequently for the explanation of complicated arguments; a theatre of visual imagery must surely be affected, consciously or not, be affected by this just as surely as the work of Clifford Odets for the stage gave rise to the critical term 'cinematic realism' years before.

This is to say that although the point can be no more than noted here, future research on the relations between socialist stage and television drama could profitably move beyond the 'either-or' debate to an investigation of the mutual relations and interaction between work in the different media.

Another area is the theatre apart from the touring 'fringe' companies and the mainstream commercial theatres of the West End and the regional repertories. The Royal Court Theatre in London, as was described in the previous chapter, was created as a space for new writing talent. During the 1970s this space, and also that of the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company, was occupied with increasing frequency by dramatists with a radical or Marxist perspective on society.⁽³⁶⁾ Edgar draws on examples of writers here such as Edward Bond, Howard Barker, David Hare and Howard Brenton to support an argument on the need for more effective theatrical technique in socialist theatre (a point to which we shall return), whilst also commenting thus:

The plays themselves are not, of course, performed anywhere near the working class: most of Bond's work has been premiered at the Royal Court, who have also produced two of Barker's plays; Bond and Barker have both recently written for the Royal Shakespeare Company; Brenton has worked and Hare is about to work for the National Theatre; Brassneck and Comedians were both premiered at the Nottingham Playhouse, and the latter was transferred, via the Old Vic Theatre, into the West End. (1979 op. cit. p.34)

To this list can be added the women writers Caryl Churchill and Pam Gems whose plays Queen Christina, Piaf, Traps and Cloud Nine were also produced for the RSC or the Royal Court in the 1970s. The point to be made overall is that whereas, as Edgar says, the work was performed in locations which place it outside the

focus of this thesis, during the 1970s a culturally prestigious theatre apparatus became increasingly to be associated with radical productions and social themes. It should also be observed that theatre as such, the very medium, was attracting in the 1970s this core of talented writers and performers who had chosen this as the medium of expression for their ideas on society and social change.

The reference to Pam Gems and Caryl Churchill introduces the third area for comment, that of the development of specifically feminist contributions during this time. Michelene Wandor has described the position of women in theatre as follows:

The theatre industry, like other cultural industries, operates through a hierarchial structure, in which artistic and administrative decisions are largely in the hands of men. This situation exists not as a result of a massive and conscious conspiracy among men to put women down, but as a far more complex consequence (part conscious, part unconscious) of received assumptions about relations among and between the sexes, based on an ideology which assumes that the biological differences between men and women must necessarily mean that their fields of social activity must be different, and that men's work is socially more important than women's work. (1981 op.cit. p.7)

Thus the following situation regarding writing and publishing should not be so surprising therefore:

Although women have written for the theatre more in the last decade, we are still in a minority. Contemporary Dramatists selected by an advisory board of 32 men and one woman, is a compendious volume listing 321 playwrights working in English throughout the world. Of these 34 are women (under 10% of the total) of whom 14 work in England. The British Alternative Theatre Directory.... 1980 - compiled by a woman, Catherine Itzen, will include any playwright who wants to be listed; out of 327 playwrights only 38 are women. (ibid p.61)

Nevertheless a later edition of The British Alternative Theatre Directory indicates that within the 'alternative theatre' camp some slow but significant changes have been taking place:

The Alternative Theatre Directory for 1982 lists 71 women playwrights, 40 women theatre directors, 27 women theatre designers. Of the 101 new entries this year to the listings of alternative theatre companies promoting feminist ideas. There are 16 companies devoted entirely to womens' and/or feminist work (in 1973 there were none; in 1976 there were two; in 1979 three). Many of these women theatre workers are feminists and/or socialists. (Itzen ed. 1982 p.15)

This reflects of course the growth in the politics of the womens' movement which is a feature of this period. Some of these companies - Monstrous Regiment, Major Diversion, Roadgang, the Womens' Theatre Group and Beryl and the Perils are examples of 1970s groups - were formed by women to propagate and to explore the issues in womens' lives and social situations which the movement raised. Just as this gave rise to tension and debate as the groups of the revolutionary Left and even the wider labour movement were forced to confront these issues, so this process took place in the socialist theatre groups also - Gillian Hannah, an actress with Monstrous Regiment, but formerly with 7:84 and then Belt and Braces, explained in an interview in 1978 how dissatisfaction with the resolution of these issues in practice could impell feminists to their own groups:

...no matter how genuinely willing groups that are dominantly male may be, there comes a point...when something has to be done, when a show has to be got on..there comes that inevitable moment when someone says: "Look, I wish you would stop going on about women. We have to get this show on." That's been my experience many, many times. I'm not counting the deliberate unwillingness that you often encounter - that's something

else again, which we all know about... And what is so wonderful about The Monstrous Regiment is that there is never any question of that... In a male-dominated theatre group, as I say, there always comes that snapping point when the women's experience is regarded as trivial and irrelevant. But with us we do allow all those things in... because they are not irrelevant. There is a whole way of looking at the world and at plays which make judgements about what is relevant and irrelevant. The basis for those kinds of judgements has got to be dismantled and the values used to make them have got to be re-considered. (37)

During the 1970s Monstrous Regiment devised and toured SCUM, which examined the involvement of women in the Paris Commune and the effect of active political involvement both on them and their men; Vinegar Tom, partly set in the seventeenth century and using the treatment of women suspected of witchcraft to make generalisations about women's experience as such, by means of cutting to music and songs on contemporary themes. Kiss and Kill explored ramifications of the theme of violence, both in its familiar sense as found in war and society and in the less familiar sense of how its nuances affect women's lives. Again Gillian Hannah has spoken of the specifically feminist contribution which these types of play have made to radical political drama:

But when I think of what I, in the recesses of my mind, consider to be male drama, I think about a sweep of history, something broad and heavy. The Belt and Braces play Weight, about coal-mining, would be archetypal male drama, not just because it's about coal miners and physical work and dirt, but because it's like taking a chunk out of a mountain and sticking it down on the stage, really solid. That's what I see when I think about maleness in plays. The male playwright's sensitivity is often like an empire builder - it wants to consume the whole world and then

spit it out again in its own image. I think there's a tendency amongst male left-wing playwrights - because of their desire to write about capitalism, which is a global phenomenon - to ignore the minutiae of day to day existence: the women's movement has always maintained that the personal is political. (38)

It could be argued that the effect of feminist perspectives percolated through to the work of the socialist theatre companies; comparing The Motor Show with Blood Red Roses for example, in the latter play a strong female character is herself the interface between personal life and political struggle and this is a dominant theme. In The Motor Show, performed some six or seven years earlier, the play as we have seen falls under Gillian Hannah's description.

Micheline Wandor's examination of sexual politics and the alternative theatre concludes with this summary of its development:

Across the spectrum of sexual politics in the alternative theatre there has been an interesting development: the vivid visual imagery of the early street theatre, with its spontaneity and its attack on stereotypical "feminine" imagery gave way in the mid 1970s to a period of consolidation and the development of a theatre of argument, a theatre which explored what it would mean to reclaim the experience of women and gays from the militant sexual-political perspective of the period. Such a reclamation entailed reversing the conventional priorities of male heterosexual experience, and also altering its class perspective... The third phase, towards the end of the 1970s, showed a return to some of the early spontaneity, but now in a different context; instead of using dressing-up and visual imagery to challenge the audience's assumptions about real-life oppression, the new spontaneity revolved round an examination of the way the theatrical forms themselves work to represent sexuality. This development has come

about not simply as a result of an abstract or theoretical decision that this is the "correct" thing to do, but from the confidence and freedom which many women performers have developed as a result of that early simple agitational work.
(1981 op. cit. p.49)

It can be said therefore that through the period under scrutiny the politics of the women's movement were expressed in alternative and socialist theatre just as they were finding expression in the political sphere as such. Just as in the political sphere as such this movement, in its search for expression (and a 'constituency' audience of women in general rather than the specific sections of the population aimed at by other groups), often found it necessary to develop its own companies to further its own priorities. A continuing relationship between the mainstream socialist and the feminist groups nevertheless can be seen objectively in the development of character and theme in plays by the end of the decade.

1978 saw the tenth anniversary of the political events of 1968 which began this section, and it also saw the first attempts by the socialist theatre movement to critically review its own progress over these ten years. This discussion forms a convenient entry to a conclusion of this chapter as a whole and a summary of its main points and arguments.

The opening issue of a new journal Wedge ('a revolutionary magazine of cultural practice and theory') featured a two-part article which launched a thorough critique of the stage the movement had reached. The anonymous author focused in two issues on the argued effects of Arts Council subsidy and a

'professionalising' of socialist theatre. The argument is discursive and the most forthright generalisations are never supported by evidence, and so a summary must remain within similar limitations for the time being.

In the 1968-1970 period, according to Wedge, plays written to service the struggles in which working people were engaged supplied a suitable political tool. Other groups now in the field had their roots not in politics but in the experimental, cultural avant-garde. In any event the decision to turn to theatre work as a full-time activity reflected a reversal of the original priorities and once down this road political possibilities were steadily diluted. One factor, apparently, was a widespread 'closed-shop' agreement through the actors' trade union Equity, by which socialist theatre companies became dominated by formal drama-trained professionals. At a time of high unemployment in the theatre the touring radical groups were seen as an easier route to find work.

The expectations and needs of this, what proved to be a craft elite, were different from those of their founders: an essentially theatrical preoccupation - as distinct from a need emerging through political expression - led to the lighting and music technology being introduced, and the actors' wish for more conventional roles led to the use of 'believable' characters and thus a relapse into naturalism in plays. In either case the task was to impress the Arts Council in the competitive rush to secure and maintain subsidy and not to assess a suitable intervention in a political struggle. The only actual relationship with the working-class which these groups established was with the trades council secretaries and union district officers involved in booking the shows, which in turn led to a neutering of the political content

of the work in order to be acceptable to these figures within a 'reformist, right-wing bureaucracy'.

The author further argued that the insistence of the Arts Council that each company earn a reasonable proportion of its income forced groups to plan tours months in advance in order to secure income from performances. Each of these had often to be separately applied for through the committee structure of Regional Arts associations and local authority departments, a time scale which effectively precluded flexible and mobile responses to events which were still topical. Responses to major strikes or other national events could not be made by groups committed to a full and pre-arranged schedule of performances of another plan on another subject.

In other words the Wedge pieces posited a political and artistic regression over this time in an argument reminiscent, as we have seen, of some of those advanced over the end of the WTM earlier - in fact the History Workshop Journal publication of WTM material and accounts of its career had occurred the year before.

Edgar (1979 op. cit.), in an analysis published almost simultaneously, ⁽³⁹⁾ similarly diagnosed a general crisis or loss of direction in the socialist theatre movement but his approach was very different. Unlike the Wedge author he identified causal factors outside the movement: the collapse of the militancy of organised working class action after 1974 (and the fact that its political content had been grossly over-estimated by the Left): the lack of a revolutionary organisation and culture with any deep root in the working class. Consequently - and here Edgar relied on Seyd's account of the Red Ladder group - socialist theatre groups

had discovered that their primary agitprop forms had been made possible only by the militancy which had now evaporated, and new techniques were needed for new situations to take account of this. To date the intervention of socialist theatre into working class struggle had been 'patchy and peripheral' and if there was to be any hope of improvement new forms needed to be found and developed.

Edgar located the potential source of these new forms in, as we have seen, the 'politically acute theatrical statements' of dramatists such as David Hare, Howard Brenton or Edward Bond. It was futile, he argued, to search for an alternative source in British popular culture; as regards live entertainment this was populist, commercial and 'atrophied' and in the case of television - even, to repeat, in the efforts of Trevor Griffiths - the dominant forms themselves precluded their use as an agency of radical ideas. Only some use of the techniques of the radicals working in the Royal Court, disturbing familiar experiences and expectations by the very surprise of stage images to examine the dynamics between the surface and essence of society, could deal with complex political issues, including the politics of the personal. His example was Monstrous Regiment, a group whose work bridged the audiences of the Royal Court and the supporters of political campaigns who would form their audiences at arts centres.

These two very different views are both serious critiques from inside the socialist theatre movement and together they raise some fundamental issues. The Wedge piece - insofar as its points can be substantiated - clearly raises an important matter regarding the effects of Arts Council subsidy even though, as Edgar points out, it ignores the wider political reasons for moves away from agitprop. Edgar's political assessment was generally

shared on the Left, as Hyman indicates:

In the early 1970s it was common to exaggerate and idealise the advances in the level and character of working-class struggle, to diagnose a radical break with many of the routines and traditions of previous decades. Those who interpreted the short-term escalation of militancy in these terms have been disorientated and demoralised by the setbacks of the past two or three years. (1978 p.26)

However Edgar virtually dismisses the work of the socialist touring groups, political and theatrical, and spotlights only that element of its experience which appears to support his overall argument. Clearly a more comprehensive summary is required.

It has already been demonstrated that if the socialist theatre groups were uneven in their success in building an appropriate audience for their work some success was nevertheless achieved. This success in turn owed much to the extent to which sponsoring organisation, subject matter, presentation and venue all combined to offer an appropriate package for the target group. The experiences which have been discussed of The Motor Show, Foco Novo's The Nine Days and Saltley Gates, Red Ladder and NUPE together with 7:84 all illustrate how sweeping and inaccurate are generalisations such as Edgar's; rather than dismiss more than ten years work it is necessary to isolate those factors which could spread the successful experiences more evenly. Some factors which inhibited the construction of a mass popular audience can also be listed. Although Red Ladder and the North-West Spanner group decided to base themselves in Yorkshire and the North West respectively in the early 1970s it is true to say that the socialist theatre movement was a national touring one. Therefore, as has been pointed out, the opportunities for establishing and

maintaining contacts with appropriate organisations in particular localities were more restricted than if the groups were permanently based in an individual area. Similarly, opportunities to convince the desired constituencies of the value and potential of socialist theatre to them were thus also restricted. It could also be argued that unlike the pre-war period, when the radical Left could be said to be homogeneous, at this time no single one of the several competing revolutionary parties exerted any hegemony over radical politics, theoretically or organisationally. One consequence here was that this lack of any unified or even coherent socialist movement hindered the acceptance and promotion of the culture of a socialist movement.

Further, one effect of Arts Council subsidy - one oddly missed by the author of the Wedge articles - was to make work in arts centres attractively easier than performing in working-class venues. A member of North-West Spanner has explained that this was:

Easier to arrange - all you have to do is ring up the Arts Association. To go into a factory means 95 phone calls to one person, someone inexperienced in putting on theatre. You've got to tell them how to go about it, sometimes print their tickets for them, go and see them, spoon-feed them. (Itzen 1980 op. cit. p.304)

A member of the Pirate Jenny group has also described the financial and other pressures the company has had to face:

The Arts Council actually pressurize us through the system of funding. We have to use the Regional Arts Associations, they and the Arts Council actually give you a grant each week you go on tour, if you do five gigs in an area. For example, in the East Midlands we did five shows, therefore the East Midlands gave us £300 for that week and the Arts Council gave us £300. The Arts Council

touring department get very up-tight and call you unambitious, which were the words which were used to me, if you use this too often. But if you don't use it, they tell you you have to go into the theatres and arts centres, which isn't what we want to do. You're on a financial tightrope yet also trying to get the play on in a place where it will be seen. And then you have other problems: being able to put up your lighting, being able to get a mains electricity supply so you can do proper lighting, making sure you haven't got kids playing on skateboards while you're trying to perform, that you haven't got a jazz band upstairs with no sound-proofing in between. (40)

It is a fitting comment on the dedication and belief in their purpose of the socialist theatre groups that a number of them at least overcame these problems to take their work into the places and to the people they wished to attract.

The very diversity of the Left produced a diversity of functions performed by socialist theatre. Classic examples of agitprop at times of confrontation and mass action such as pickets, demonstrations and rent strikes; asserting class identity, consciousness and pride as a precursor to action by restoring a sense of history - either for miner, car-workers or Scottish farming or fishing workers; rallying support around an individual issue or cause such as the Anti-Nazi League or to prevent anti-abortion legislation; examinations, such as A Woman's Work, of what being an activist politically aware in the domestic and personal spheres as well as at work and in society actually means; promoting a culture of resistance and political awareness; and also the political examination of issues and institutions in society. Therefore a discussion of political efficacy here must take account of these different purposes. Once again there is the obvious confirming role of helping to solidify pre-existing support at particular moments; also, again, a role of

galvanising the nominal supporters of a cause into actual activity, as for example in performances of It Makes You Sick for local anti-NHS cuts campaigns. Success here could owe as much to the organisation and expertise of the sponsoring groups as to the performers. Less immediately assessable is the political impact of the efforts of groups like 7:84, Belt and Braces or CAST to create or revivify a popular entertainment tradition within a socialist ideology; what can be said is that such a tradition could play a vital part in the 'sense of confidence' which underlies purposeful action. In the long term this could prove more important than the instant responses to situations of struggle which the Wedge argument saw as the prime function of socialist theatre, and precluded by the Arts Council machinery; as has been seen, this function is limited completely to those situations and has little to offer outside them.

The theatrical forms and means of communication developed should also be seen in these lights. The earliest plays and sketches of the decade featured an agitprop of the television age, going beyond 'the top-hatted capitalist and cloth-capped worker' to make use of memorable visual images which could provide a peg upon which to hang the political points. Just as contemporary television makes use of cartoon-type images to explain economic arguments and so forth in current affairs programmes, so political rhetoric can often be simplified by the media into repeated, resonant phrases: 'the pound in your pocket', 'at a stroke', 'winter of discontent' being some examples. By setting up its own images, teasing familiar ones ('the national cake') in this context agitprop was not so much supplying information and concepts as attacking and exposing those already available; using a similar and familiar form of communication for its own

purpose. The use of a concrete image as a tool to explain a point - the half-pint glass of A Woman's Work, the plate of mince of It Makes You Sick - which with some practitioners was a direct contribution of the earliest experiences, similarly extends the visual image as a pedagogic aid. This can be traced back through to the pieces of bread which explained 'The Great Money Trick' in Tressell's The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists.

Later plays can almost be seen as a genre, an area of drama combining the cartooning of agitprop, the sequential character development and story line of conventional drama, but, as in Blood Red Roses, with naturalism's rules of space and time overturned if juxtapositions of different spaces and times can establish a point. Music, a narrator establishing a relationship with the audience which enables he or she to make direct statements to them; a variety of styles within the same performance. All of these features indicate the impulse to adapt and explore forms which were capable of dealing with the themes and political ideas at stake, and also indicate the groups' seriousness of purpose in utilising drama as such for their politics.

John McGrath had instructions for the cast of The Cheviot, which became a characteristic of the 7:84 style:

I threw the material at the company, told them they were entertainers now, not Chekopian actors, and to work on their acts and bring them in for us all to see. Being good Scottish actors - who had all worked in many different situations, from Ibsen via panto to speling on strip-shows, this is what they did. (1974 op. cit. p.26)

We have already seen Roland Muldoon's idea of 'presentationism' for the style of CAST, derived from the speed and stage presence of rock and roll performers; the stage notes to England Expects speaks of an 'upfront' style. All of these acting and stage performances seem to be efforts to come to terms with the styles of live entertainment familiar to working class audiences; the popular culture critically analysed so closely by McGrath - rather than, as with Edgar, dismissed as 'atrophied' - was therefore a determining influence on the performance styles of the socialist theatre groups at this time, supporting their objective of a radical popular entertainment tradition.

This decade ended, like the 1930s, with a marked gap between the political aims of the Left and the socialist theatre movement and political reality itself. No revolutionary alternative to the Labour Party and Government emerged or seriously looked like emerging; as the debate between Shaw and Birchall ⁽⁴¹⁾ reveals, the various parties of the revolutionary Left which had been revived by the events of 1968 found themselves small, isolated and fraught by dissension and confusion ten years later. They could not adequately relate in theory or in practice to the collapse of the industrial militancy of the early 1970s upon which their perspectives had been based.

1979 saw a petering out of the Labour Government amid a series of major strikes against its income policy; a low status for trades unions, nationalisation and other causes identified with Labour in public opinion, and an onslaught by a self-confident and aggressive Right-wing Conservative Party settled the outcome of

the General Election.

The period covered by this thesis therefore ends at a point of retreat and confusion for the Left and a consequent need for examination and evaluation. This need extends to the socialist theatre movement also, and, in the light of the experience of that movement over fifty years, the following and concluding section will attempt an assessment in terms of the movement's approach to class, politics and dramatic form.

Notes

1. E. Hobsbaum, '1968 - A Retrospect', Marxism To-Day May 1978 p.130.
2. For accounts see for example J. Nuttall, Bomb Culture (1970).
3. How to Use Street Theatre, (Agitprop Information Pamphlet, n.d. circa 1970 p.7-8).
4. Ibid p.3
5. Ibid p.4
6. Ibid p.1
7. Interview with S. Craig. The Leveller no.14 April 1979 p.18.
8. How to Use op. cit. p.6.
9. On these points see R. Hyman, 'Industrial Conflict and the Political Economy', in J. Saville and R. Miliband (eds): The Socialist Register 1973 (1973) p.101-55.
10. J. Condon, 'Pulling the Red Ladder out from the TUC', Socialist Worker 20th November 1971 p.5.
11. How to Use op. cit. p.4.
12. Itzen (1980) p.47.
13. This was attempted by Conservatives on the North-West Arts Association who attempted to withdraw subsidy from the North-West Spanner Group in 1977. For an account of this episode see Itzen (op. cit.) and M. Dickinson, 'The Purging of North-West Arts', New Manchester Review no.46 December 1977 p.6-7.
14. These organisations are examined in Itzen (op. cit.)
15. Interview with S. Shepherd, Renaissance and Modern Studies vol 21 1977 p. 7-8.
16. For example the Annual Report and Accounts of the Arts Council for 1976-1977 list a total of eighteen groups - which could be described as socialist by the Alternative Theatre Directory - receiving a total subsidy of around £400,000. (p.66-69)
17. The text used is that in M. Wandor (ed), Strike While the Iron is Hot: Sexual Politics in Theatre (1980) p.21-62.
18. Interview with S. Shepherd op. cit. p.14.
19. S. Gooch and P. Thompson, The Motor Show (1975).
20. Interview with S. Shepherd op. cit. p.15.

21. J. McGrath, The Cheviot, The Stag and the Black, Black Oil (1974).
22. See The Glasgow University Media Group, Bad News:vol 1 (1976); also instructive is S. Cohen, Folk Devils and Moral Panics (1973).
23. C. Itzen (ed), Alternative Theatre Handbook 1975-1976 (1976) p.9,18,55.
24. C. Chambers, 'A Sense of Confidence', Morning Star January 11th 1978 p.4.
25. In Itzen (ed) 1976 op. cit.
26. Roadgang Theatre: 'Women on the Road', Socialist Challenge 23rd February 1978 p.15.
27. Michele Roberts, 'It Makes You Sick', Spare Rib no.44 March 1976 p.41.
28. G. Richards, England Expects (1977).
29. Ibid p.64.
30. M. Wandor, 'Positive Discrimination', Spare Rib no.39 September 1975 p.39.
31. J. McGrath, Fish in the Sea (1977) p.67.
32. Pirate Jenny Theatre Group: 'Our Own People', Socialist Challenge 15th December 1977 p.22.
33. Pirate Jenny Theatre Group: 'Alternative Theatre:Why the Left is Losing Out', Socialist Challenge 22nd June 1978 p.15.
34. Quoted in Chambers op. cit. p.4.
35. Days of Hope stimulated considerable activity in the theoretical journal of film studies Screen; for a summary see C. McArthur, Television and History (1978).
36. The work of these writers is discussed fully in Itzen (1980) op. cit.
37. Interview with P. Hulton, 'Feminism and Theatre': Theatre Papers no.8, Dartington College (1978) p.10.
38. Ibid p.8.
39. Edgar's article was first published as 'Political Theatre: Part I' Socialist Review no.1 April 1978 p.16-19, and 'Political Theatre:Part II', Socialist Review no.2 May 1978 p.35-38.
40. S. Shepherd, 'Pirate Jenny:An Interview with Jenny Rees', Renaissance and Modern Studies vol 22 1978 p.121.
41. This debate took the form of rival analyses of the International Socialists/Socialist Workers Party organisations. See M. Shaw,

'The Making of a Party?', in J. Saville and R. Miliband (eds) The Socialist Register 1978 (1978) p.100-146, and
I. Birchall, 'The Premature Burial: A Reply to Martin Shaw,
in J. Saville and R. Miliband (eds) The Socialist Register
1979 (1979) p. 26-51.

Conclusion

This thesis began by discussing the implications of the concept of socialist theatre and how these required an examination which would be a comprehensive account in terms of class, politics and dramatic form. It was noted that such a comprehensive account was not the dominant approach within the sociology of drama or theatre studies. The preceding sections have provided a continuous historical study of the principal peaks of the British socialist theatre between 1930 and 1979 - namely the 1930s, the years of the Second World War, and the 1970s - together with a linking section covering the period of comparative lull between approximately 1948 and 1968. This historical material can now be used to generate some concluding observations around the issues which were set out initially.

Those issues, which it was argued arise from an examination of the implications of the concepts of socialist theatre, can be summarised as follows: the functions intended and performed by the theatre; its relationship to and role within political parties, movements and campaigns; the interaction between subject matter, form of expression and artistic policy; its conditions of production and reception and hence its relation to and the nature of its audiences; finally the conditions of existence of a socialist theatrical culture. These five elements cannot essentially be separated but for the purposes of organising this discussion they will be considered in turn.

Socialist theatre workers have intended several functions to be performed by their activity. In the early 1930s the WTM saw

itself as a dynamo for the revolutionary Left. By presenting its analysis of events and situations to workers on their own ground the socialist theatre could help the Party dispel the clouds of illusion in their minds and help to generate a revolutionary consciousness. This was thus a propagandist function both limited and intensely ambitious, and although explicitly, if not baldly, canvassed in this period more than any other it has been confined to it. The revival of agitprop on a wider scale in the early 1970s also employed the assumption that the simple - but skillful - presentation of a revolutionary analysis could itself accelerate the development of a revolutionary consciousness, thereby placing the theatre in a vanguard position. The emphasis therefore, as Stourac (op. cit.) demonstrates, is the recognition of theatre as a dynamic force in its own right within the class struggle which can affect and revolutionise the consciousness of the audience.

In terms of the historical development of British socialist theatre during this period there are two occasions when this assumption has been a starting point. But on both occasions for a variety of reasons the theatre has gone beyond this, although clearly affecting consciousness is always a main thrust of socialist activity. London Unity in the 1930s described itself as:

a people's theatre, built to serve as a means of dramatising their life and struggles, and as an aid in making them conscious of their strength, and of the need for united action. Its aim is to help in the terribly urgent struggle for world peace and for a better social and economic order against fascism, reflecting contemporary life... (Marshall 1947 p.99)

In Manchester at the same time:

The Theatre of Action realises that the very class which plays the chief part in contemporary history - the class upon which the prevention of war and the defeat of reaction solely depends - is debarred from expression in the present day theatre. The theatre will perform, mainly in working-class districts, plays which express the life and struggles of the workers. Politics, in its fullest sense, means the affairs of the people. In this sense, the plays will be political. (Gorney op. cit. p.11)

This is the concept of the 'people's theatre' which as we have seen continued through the war years, when in fact it came closest to fruition. The term 'people's' has come into use during periods of political stress upon 'unity', although at the same time it has often been taken by its users to be synonymous with 'workers'. In any event this function both contains the earlier propagandist one and goes beyond it and its strictly utilitarian aim to attempt a socialist theatre as a cultural apparatus in its own right. Further, this cultural apparatus, by giving expression to the political perspectives and aspirations of progressive forces, is intended to simultaneously provide an artistic equivalent to the political purpose as those hitherto denied access to both power and theatrical culture gain both. The persistence of the censorship mechanism of the Lord Chamberlain's Office until its abolition in 1968 in fact assisted this in organisational terms by requiring a distinct club theatre system.

The groups of the 1970s have also based themselves on the politics of presenting the situations of those denied and struggling for power - rank and file industrial workers, women,

specifically Scottish workers, for example; those also generally denied representation by serious drama as well as denied power. This has taken the form of intervention around specific issues such as strikes as well as (but without the stated intention of building a 'people's theatre') the promotion of an overall attitude. In McGrath's terms, a feeling of self-confidence, of the possibility as well as the necessity of victory.

These functions obviously overlap and can be seen as differences of emphasis largely dictated by differences of situation. Around a specific struggle or campaign socialist theatre workers have often sought to clarify the feelings of those involved - by de-mystifying other versions of events or even just by providing information about them - and strengthening their determination to continue. This has also included, as we have seen, devising or adapting forms designed to achieve exactly that.

Without necessarily being grounded in a particular issue socialist theatre has also pursued this, expressed as we have seen in terms of promoting or developing an attitude for the audience. Either directly or in a less focussed way the theatre has performed a confirming role for those involved in various struggles or campaigns, cementing or developing commitment by humour, excitement, recognition and group enthusiasm.

It is easy to disparage or dismiss this activity. For example Rattenbury appears to do this in her concluding judgement on 'alternative' theatre:

In my opinion alternative theatre groups
are attempting to create a cultural
community which includes most of their

spectators and which will authorise and confirm their own beliefs. Just as ritual can serve to consolidate and authorise beliefs, values, and attempts to give man some control over forces beyond his technical control, so alternative theatre can be seen to act, for its committed adherents, much as ritual acts in other social situations. (op. cit. p.2)

In other words this theatre is limited to an essentially confirmatory or celebratory function for a self-selected group which share its domain assumptions. It cannot be denied that this has been a continuous function. Also, it is worth reflecting on Vernon Beste's comments during the war about mass declamations and the use of emotion, a point which extends beyond that particular form. If a commitment to socialism is to endure, to survive the various obstacles, defeats and disappointments of organised politics then it needs to be based on an emotional feel as well as an intellectual grasp. Therefore the socialist theatre is able to provide through its shared experiences some at least of the sustenance required by the wider movement of which it is a part. Whether this should be a source of disparagement or not depends, of course, on the prior standpoint of the observer.

But there has been more involved than this. It cannot be claimed, for example, that all or even most of the texts which have been examined conclude with easy victories, with the defeat of the stage enemy as a compensation perhaps for its continued dominance in the world outside. Busmen, The Babes in the Wood, What's Wrong with the Germans?, The Cheviot and Fish in the Sea in fact conclude with an invitation to participation following understanding, to action, with the idea that the stage representations are connected to a real and continuing situation elsewhere. This then opens up the possibility which was

observed of the role of On Guard for Spain - that of drawing into practical activity those who might otherwise have remained simply nominal supporters of a cause.

It can also be argued that the view stated by Rattenbury assumes a static political sphere, one in which isolated and frustrated small organisations create regular confirming rites rather in the manner of religious sects. The section which examined socialist theatre during the Second World War was concerned with a dynamic political sphere, broadly defined. Debate will continue over the precise nature and quantity of 'war radicalism' between 1939 and 1945 but historians such as Hinton (op. cit.), Davies (1984), Addison (op. cit.) and Calder (op. cit.) seem agreed that by 1945 the majority of the British people wanted a clean break with the poverty, insecurity, anti-Sovietism and laissez-faire incompetence of the 1930s. The Left was thus within the mainstream of popular aspiration instead of attempting to influence it from the outside, for the only identifiable time within the period which has been studied.

The function of the socialist theatre was thereby different also. It maintained a number of crucial issues in the arena of public debate, and located this as we have seen with the civilian population at work or in shelter and also the army where and when all this was possible. These issues included the political character of the war (What's Wrong with the Germans?), the - argued - nature of the Soviet war effort and British relations to it (According to Plan, An Agreement of the Peoples), and the future nature of Britain after hostilities (Buster, Where Do We Go From Here?). In so doing an attempt was made to

articulate and give structure to inchoate feelings of dissatisfaction and pressure for change. It has been recorded how the political developments which culminated in the electoral victory of Labour in 1945 were accompanied throughout by theatrical interventions which could provide an entertaining centrepiece for political discussion and debate. Therefore under these specific circumstances, the efforts to build a 'people's theatre' successfully harmonized with the groundswells of pressure for social change.

These functions which have been identified could be said to assume or even demand for their success degrees of homogeneity of outlook between performers and audience. Such homogeneity may not of course always exist, especially at times when political hegemony over the Left is not exercised by a single organisation. One consequence of this, as will be discussed later, is the staging of material of greater political independence or which has a more independent approach to the very purpose or function of a particular play. An example is Red Ladder's A Woman's Work/Strike While the Iron is Hot. As we have seen this play essentially poses questions about the long-standing issue of the relations between men and women at home, in the workplace and the labour movement; it is designed to provoke debate. Given the nature of the subject the play would be quite likely to divide an audience, since obviously it cannot be assumed that a male Left trades unionist will automatically be in sympathy with the portrayal of Helen and her situation.

In other words the socialist theatre (including, in the past, the ABCA plays; a discussion around Where Do We Go From Here?

in that context would clearly go in many directions) has also taken up the function of provoking or challenging an audience and dealing with the consequences and not just hoping to carry them with it. Here again therefore is a dynamic situation in which the theatre is able to question as well as to confirm, regardless of the overall movement of which it is a part.

Before moving to a summary of these points it is relevant to discuss the functions which the socialist theatre has performed for the theatre workers themselves. This is a legitimate consideration because the previous sections have revealed individuals who have been involved with socialist theatre for many years, despite setbacks; this and the hard work involved in touring also suggests that participation offers rewards which are worth discussing. An important point is contained in John Allen's observation in the 1930s that the co-operation and group collaboration demanded by the very activity of putting on a play; to repeat, 'itself a splendid lesson in practical socialism'. The experience of taking part, and learning, could also be said to involve, given the processes of becoming skilful at any style of performance, processes of self-realisation and fulfillment and the pleasure and enjoyment which they can generate.

This can also be a unique political experience. Michelene Wandor has noted how when Red Ladder began their collective devising of Strike While the Iron is Hot the nature of the material prompted them to examine the power relations within the group; as she quotes:

It was certainly true that till then the men, and the most articulate men, were dominant in the way the plays were written... The

significant difference between this and plays we'd done before was that here for the first time there was a kind of meeting point of people's personal experience and the sort of Labour movement politics we'd been into previously. (1980 p.10)

Such processes were not always resolved in this way, of course as the experience of feminist theatre workers demonstrated. Nevertheless again a personal - political learning experience took place, here resulting in the formation of new companies.

Therefore throughout an examination of the progress of British socialist theatre in these periods we should bear in mind that the very participation for those involved has created valuable experiences which have sustained their practice.

What can be said, then, about the functions which this theatre has carried out? Clearly, at times of heightened confrontation such as the mass demonstrations of the early 1930s and 1970s, or smaller local struggles such as the GLC rent strikes or the LBCTG at the Sunderland rents campaign in the late 1930s, or the round of meetings and rallies over Spain, an initial common framework between performers and audience has allowed groups to solidify, confirm and even celebrate the commitment of those actively seeking to achieve change. It has also sought a wider role than this, through both nationally touring companies and locally based activities in permanent theatre buildings: the role of an oppositional cultural apparatus concerned not only with specific issues but also to give expression to the continuing experiences, values, history and enjoyments of its sought audience. This has supplied alternatives to the dominant versions of history, current events and allotted roles in society supplied by the institutions of a capitalist culture, its news media and its political discourses - including those of

its trades union leadership and the Labour Party. In both this relatively narrow and relatively broad function it has provided the security, perhaps, of a confirming culture to an embattled minority, but also the offer of an alternative to the uncertain or uncommitted.

That this is by no means static has been demonstrated by the cultural sides of social change in Britain during the last war. During such a period of convulsion, which affected every area of society, the socialist theatre was able by virtue of its experience as well as its intentions to connect with and articulate ideas and aspirations amongst those outside the confines of labour movement politics. This indicates how it can rise to an occasion and contribute to its political consequences.

Finally sections of it at least has been willing to provoke, to challenge and to create controversy amongst its natural constituency of the Left, be that in times of political crisis and self-searching with the Living Newspaper on Hungary in 1956 or more generally with the relations between men and women. Far from a history of sympathetically uncritical service therefore the socialist theatre also contains examples of presenting challenging material which could simultaneously support the views and experiences of some whilst forcing questions on those of others.

Intertwined with the idea of function must be the issue of dramatic form. As was argued initially, the question of form

in fact helps to map the field in the study of socialist theatre since the very range of likely subject matter will compel a search for suitable theatrical metaphors. It will also be clear from the historical examples which have been considered here that the very range of performance venue, context and purpose which have been involved will itself introduce practical considerations affecting, consciously or not, the nature and use of form.

Agitprop was the first dramatic form to be developed by an identifiably socialist theatre movement during this period and, albeit with mutations, it has been a consistent feature. We have seen how despite the demise of the WTM as an organisation ~~forms~~ of agitprop persisted in elements of Unity's work - not just Slusher but more subtly in Cannibal's Carnival and Where's That Bomb?; LBCTG open-air performances. During the war the educational element of the ABCA plays seem to have been derived from agitprop forms, and after it the mime actions used by the Manchester Theatre Workshop are very likely to have been derived from the agitprop experience of Ewan MacColl and Joan Littlewood. Further on, the agitprop phase of the early 1970s was incorporated by some groups into their more developed plays. Clearly therefore agitprop as a form of communication, and the characteristics of it which has lent it such popularity in socialist theatre need to be examined.

For much of the WTM agitprop or 'open stage' was essentially a reconciliation between necessity and political aesthetics. It wanted to portray class, and the workings of class domination in capitalist society, and not the psychology or behaviour of individuals. It wished both to recruit and to play to working people anywhere, and to respond immediately to struggles and

events. Therefore all but the most rudimentary props were ruled out, along with costumes or stage areas: the need for mobility and flexibility co-incided with the desire to portray class types not individual characters. Juxtaposing these class types and their confrontations could not be done within the traditional groundrules of theatre as they saw it and so therefore the traditional play was ruled out; at the same time the actors they recruited largely do not seem to have possessed or aspire to have possessed the skills needed to present one. Instead the class experience of the groups was to be used to convince their audiences; both physically and experientially at one with them their conviction was to be an important vehicle of communication.

Physical movement and voice to technique were to be the mainstays, and as MacColl recalled from Lancashire this could be allied to the commercial forms of popular live entertainment with which the audiences were familiar. There was often, despite the sectarian exclusiveness of the politics, a recognition of the need to establish common points of familiarity with which to connect: points of form, points of common experience and, as with Meerut, points of genuine or assumed common political understanding. Within this framework visual effects could be achieved and used to register the political message.

This continued through the 'theatrical cartoons' of the Unity satires and infact it could be said to be a feature of cartoon satires as a genre. The costumes of Bogus, Crabbe, and Money-Power, like the top hat for the WTM capitalist, are there to drive home the essential nature of the role or relationship embodied in each. Again, this was a feature of later agitprop but in the

early 1970s the use of visual imagery was importantly different. As we have seen with the early Red Ladder and General Will groups resonant visual images were made far more from physical objects, and these could then be made into or be taken to be political statements in their own right, pegs upon which the messages could be hung. The form of communication here is essentially that of the parable, and its effectiveness can be gauged, perhaps by the nature of historical or literary events which become lodged in the popular imagination: King Alfred burning the cakes, Oliver Twist asking for more, Nelson's blind eye, Sir Walter Raleigh and the cloak; each a powerful image around which to build and remember a story or incident. In the same way phrases or images from political discourses given prominence by the mass media can be teased, inverted or exposed.

Here then are the roots of the persistence of agitprop or at least recognizable elements of it within British socialist theatre. Its flexibility lends itself to the variety of venues and situations in which players have wished to intervene, its skills do not require extensive dramatic training. Its power, in the right circumstances, to register messages effectively is based on a sound principle of communication through the use of image.

At the same time theatre workers have felt it limited, as both in the early 1930s and 1970s political contexts altered and performers also appear to have wished to develop artistically. It is at these points that the use by critics of the term 'naturalism' is introduced, meaning in this context the very opposite of agitprop politically as well as theatrically - merely reproducing the surface phenomena of society without attempting to explain its workings. This simple dichotomy however ignores a

point made by Wandor:

Historically, artistic movements which seek to represent the experiences of oppressed groups reach initially for a realistic and immediately recognisable clarity. Thus French realism in journalism and fiction followed the 1848 revolution; in the twenties and thirties the impact of the Bolshevik revolution led to a politicisation of avant-garde art and literature, and to the emergence of a new realism based on the socialist experience. Such realism has a radical impact when the content is new, when the selection of ordinary everyday elements in life are shaped into a work of art. (ibid p.11).

In other words those wishing to stage their own or others' experience of oppression - be that to an outside audience or back, politicised, to the group itself; busworkers, Scottish landworkers, women at home and the workplace etc - will wish to portray it accurately, to represent believable and everyday activity. However the range of plays discussed above shows that there is little evidence that groups at any time have been content to remain there. A variety of techniques have been used to insert these representations in their political contexts, to also include the objective events and processes to which the characters subjectively respond. In the Living Newspapers verifiable factual material was introduced by impersonal devices external to the action; contemporary groups have favoured the use of a particular character to make direct comments to the audience as a narrator. Juxtapositions and movements between space and time have been achieved, in the case of Waiting for Lefty thereby establishing what amounted to a genre.

It can be said therefore that the initial notion, illustrated by Arden (op. cit.), that the very demands of the likely subject

matter of socialist theatre will create pressures resulting in formal innovation was correct. The period considered has indeed been marked by pioneering techniques, in the context of political campaigns or perspectives rather than, by and large, for their own sake.

This would seem to argue against the concept of some final, total or holistic form for socialist theatre, which as we have seen is to share Brecht's definition of the nature and function of 'realism'. It is also to contradict the positions adopted by writers such as Jones (op. cit.) and Stourac (op. cit.) who seem to adopt a priori standpoints on form in socialist theatre on the basis of a more limited range of evidence. Instead, form can be said to be a product of the never static but shifting relations between resources, political tasks and contexts, even though some important lines of continuity have been identified.

Another shifting relation has been between the socialist theatre and political parties or groups. Clearly this period offers a comparison between two quite different experiences. The British Communist Party is crucial in one way or another to socialist theatre from 1930 to the doldrums of the Cold War and the disarray of 1956. Throughout these years it set the agenda politically, either directly or indirectly through the Left Book Club or various agencies during the war. Setting the agenda has meant establishing a general framework of what the political issues were and also what approach to them was to be taken. It follows therefore that any judgements about the correctness or otherwise of a political line should be directed at the Party rather than the theatre movement, as two examples can show.

Agitprop persisted even within Unity but the WTM as an organisation was so effectively aborted that Tom Thomas seems to have been excluded - or felt excluded - from its successors. There seems to have been, in public at least, no debate over the WTM experience which could have drawn out its positive aspects in a cumulative way. Had this happened then it may have assisted the further development of an aesthetic for socialist theatre; but, of course, if this could not have been accommodated within the 'people's theatre' cultural politics of the Popular Front then it would not have developed in any case. The fact that this was a feature (although as has been argued by no means the only one) of the progress of the theatre through the 1930s has meant that techniques, theories and experience has largely been lost to a later movement until after they could have proved useful.

The other example concerns the decline of the theatre after its pinnacle during the war. According to Pelling (op. cit. p.131) the CP opposed the calling of the 1945 election on the grounds that a continued coalition government would be likely, given the relations between the CP and the state, to include the Party in the alliance. This view of the relationship was one-sided, of course, and during the election the CP managed both to support the Labour Party and stand candidates against it. This confused attitude to the Labour government continued until Stalin clarified the matter for them through the Cominform.

It was in the context of this confusion that we must consider what has been described above as the naive approach of the Unity activists towards the State and the new government. The political theory and experience existed to prompt a more realistic

prognosis of the behaviour of the government, and therefore a more cautious approach to the resources of the theatre. The political and cultural climate might have been outside the control of Unity, but the decision to turn professional and its disastrous consequences was, and a contribution to it must have been the wrong, or typically confused political guidance available.

To these negative examples can be added an observation about the function of the plays. Throughout the period when the socialist theatre was to all intents and purposes synonymous with the CP it cannot be said that plays were mounted with the intention of challenging or provoking the Left, in the way which was to occur to some extent later. The significant exception seems to have been the Living Newspaper Hungary:1956, at a time when the whole Party was convulsed, and as we have seen there is evidence that action was taken against at least one participant. In other words it can be argued that when one party exercises such hegemony over socialist theatre the full range of its possibilities may not be realised.

There is also a positive aspect to this period however, one which can be held up again as a contrast to later developments. By virtue of this hegemony the CP was able to support a coherent and co-ordinated movement: plays could be published, criticised and discussed after performance; this could be circulated around the country as an integral part of national campaigns. Similarly other expertise was circulated in terms of education and training in every aspect of theatre work, and successful groups in one region could offer every assistance to emergent ones in another. Presumably also local political branches or

groups of activists could be encouraged to participate in cultural politics when they were unaware or reluctant. The very existence of this political and organisational coherence could also make national tours by amateur groups - be they the WTM or the LBCTG - feasible in terms of venue and also practically in terms of accommodation and support. Thus was made possible a British socialist theatre movement in every common understanding of the term, one which proved capable of grasping every opportunity presented by the war.

The more contemporary movement, since what can be claimed to be essentially a revival since the late 1960s, is a direct contrast, with attendant strength and weakness. During the latter part of the period studied the CP lost its hegemony over the political Left fairly decisively, the Labour Left did not prove capable of capturing this ground and neither did the variety of generally competing revolutionary organisations which accelerated in activity but not influence after 1968. With obviously a few possible exceptions therefore these groups were within the ambit of the revolutionary Left (as distinct from the Tribune Group or the CP) without being directly under the auspices of a single organisation, either in terms of detailed policy or personnel.

Therefore the experience of a highly organised movement was not repeated. Groups, until at least the meetings of The Association of Community Theatres in 1979, were generally isolated from each other and with little opportunity to see each other's work; the day-schools and conferences of before did not take place, and nor did the circulation of plays between them other than those few which were published by commercial publishing houses of the Left by the end of the 1970s. This may not have

been the obstacle which it may seem. As will be discussed later, the 1970s groups were professional and thus in less need of the encouragement and support which could have been required to sustain an amateur movement. In addition, if the arguments (or rather allegations) of the Wedge article are substantially correct then the reliance on a small portion of the Arts Council's budget for funding would have resulted in an atmosphere of mutual competition rather than co-operation between them.

Nevertheless in other respects, as the discussion in the final section has indicated, the lack of Left political homogeneity in the organisational sense in the 1970s created problems for socialist theatre groups. These included lack of help with the sheer practicalities of touring as well as the need for an organised political framework which could build on the interest they had created. The experience of building up a national network of contracts and support was only partially realised and therefore the achievements and potentials were only partially realised also.

On the other hand, on the positive side there was the comparative political freedom which accompanied this situation. Whereas the 1970s groups were, for the most part, within the orbit of ideas of the revolutionary Left as distinct from the mainstream Labour Party, they were also for the most part unaligned to a particular organisation. As Itzen quotes:

Red Ladder had the good sense to realise that if they were identified with a particular organisation they would lose the confidence of working-class audiences. So the agonising over which organisation to join was short-lived. (1980 op. cit. p.47)

This is to illustrate how the modern socialist theatre sought an independence which was visible to the constituency it sought to serve, perhaps also a status as a voice in its own right. This is not to claim that the CP exerted rigid control and direction over the earlier theatre; the issue is one of a political atmosphere which served to set an agenda for socialist theatre. This agenda has concerned subject matter alone because there is little evidence that such an atmosphere was created during these periods over form, with the debateable exception of the WTM and agitprop. Not only was the range of definitions of what constituted an issue worthy of dramatisation broader but the presentations of them could afford to be allusive.

Therefore during a phase of confusion or retreat by the labour movement, or in fact during any circumstances, a theatre group could decide a priority over which there might not be a consensus, or which raised deep and long-lasting concerns rather than immediate issues of the moment. Besides the function of provoking and challenging the Left, which has been mentioned, groups could work out their own analysis of current problems and relate them to their interpretation of historical experience. One example, by the end of the 1970s, was Red Ladder's tour of Taking Our Time. This was based on the rise of Chartism and the Plug Riots in Yorkshire during the 1840s:

But as the title implies it was more than a historical narrative about Chartism. A major theme was the smashing of a popular culture, the values and way of life of the handloom weaving communities of the West Riding that millowners, state and church had to destroy. For the new mills required a well regulated work force subject to the discipline of the capitalist clock... The working class was born. In the play we described this conflict through two related plots: the struggle

between a Methodist preacher and Tom,
a travelling tinker-clown; and the
experience of one weaving family
facing unemployment and starvation at
the transition. (1979 p.50)

The play thus made reference to class solutions to problems of economic and technological change, and the role of a class culture within this, and of the need for the type of mass political movement represented by Chartism. This itself was a political intervention through analogy at a time when the trades union leadership was reluctant to challenge the re-elected Labour government's policies, and with exceptions struggles as such were at a low ebb.

Worthy of comment also is the attitude of the political organisations towards socialist theatre. Stourac (op. cit.), to repeat, argues convincingly that the CP did not really understand or know what to do with the WTM; the idea seemed to be that their sketches could enliven a meeting and play some part in recruitment or boosting sales of the Daily Worker. Even later, in a different political climate, John Allen as we have seen had to assist some local LBCTG groups in convincing political groups of the value of their work. Also, as late as 1977 some socialist theatre groups considered that the general level of response to them from the Left was purely in terms of theatre criticism and too rarely in terms of a discussion of how a performance could act as a catalyst for local political work. Clearly therefore it would not be unjust to claim that a persistent lack of understanding has never been far from the organised Left's attitude to socialist theatre during the period studied. There are probably a number of reasons for this. An article describing the unavailability of Marxist aesthetic (or other) writings in English in 1935 has been quoted, merely one illustration of an underdevelopment of

serious aesthetics in British Marxism, and with some exceptions which have been covered it cannot be said that between 1930 and 1979 the Labour Party and the TUC showed any serious interest in socialist theatre or any other art. The puritanical seriousness of the early CP has been described, and it would be premature to assume that this tendency has disappeared from the Left at large; in consequence theatre work would likely be rather disapproved of as a pleasant diversion from the serious grind of 'proper politics'. Finally, it is quite possible that the legacy of the Stalinist censorship and repression in the arts has sapped the confidence of the Left to make judgements about them, for fear of appearing dogmatic, philistine or unresponsive.

This has particular relevance at times when, as we have seen, the theatre moves in new directions for reasons amongst which it has been suggested that the political should not be over-privileged. Theatre workers are likely to wish to experiment or to move in new directions, prompted as much by an internal logic of artistic development as much as new analyses of political circumstances. The developments from agitprop are two good examples. It follows therefore that a political organisation would need to be sensitive to the specifics of making theatre to derive the most from its potential, and acknowledge that those specifics may at times be out of step with the organisation's priorities. This is to say also that the organisation should not ignore, by merely treating it as an adjunct, the contribution which the specifics of theatre may make to its own practice.

Another strand has been the record of the socialist theatre movement in attracting and building the audiences it desired. Recent issues of the HMSO publication Social Trends ⁽¹⁾ confirm that theatre attendance is a minority pursuit, and there is every reason to assume that this is far from being new. The task therefore has been to reach out to a new audience for the new drama, attempted, with the exceptions of London Unity and Theatre Workshop's Stratford East, by playing where the audience was rather than encouraging it to enter a theatre building. What conclusions can be drawn about the success of this task? The historical experience shows a number of positive examples and it is necessary to highlight the factors which made this possible.

In some respects this can be done quite easily. We have seen many examples of local or national confrontation or campaign, where numbers of people are already mobilised, they are often receptive to theatre work around the issues in question, whether the purpose is solidarity or satire. More difficult to assess has been the effort to establish a permanent presence or 'people's theatre'. Clearly again under the favourable conditions (national political moods, an existing enthusiasm for art into which to intervene) of the Second World War this could be established rapidly and equally rapidly dismantled when those conditions changed. Rather more to the point has been the attraction of audiences outside such specific periods, when the political tasks and processes are recognised to be more uphill. Describing the tour of Taking Our Time to Yorkshire audiences totalling 10,000 in 1978, Red Ladder has this to say:

The organisation of these tours was central to the show's success. Many of the venues had never put on a piece of theatre before.

Opening them up for our show was challenging and difficult. It often required months of painstaking negotiation with club committees, worried for their bar profits, doubtful about getting an audience, and wary of the political sounding nature of the play. And even when the venue had been won the task of getting the audience to it could not be left to a few randomly placed posters and a scattering of handouts. Trade Unions, Community Associations and schools needed to be convinced to sponsor and organise their members and pupils to go to the performance. Publicity had to be sufficiently thorough to draw any potentially interested people in the county as a whole. (ibid. p.1)

On this point it is worth re-iterating the conclusions which can be drawn from the Mass Observation study quoted above. This (1978 op. cit.) revealed that where 7:84 had achieved audiences consisting in large part of non-theatre going manual workers, a crucial factor in their presence had been encouragement by friends and relatives. Therefore this points to the crucial role played by sponsoring organisations (on their own understanding or after prompting by the group) and the roots they may or may not possess amongst the target audience. This has always been recognised - to recap, the WTM, the local Unity companies, the LBCTG under John Allen~~x~~ and the various companies during the war had all stated or been urged to realise the importance of good relationships with, in fact being part of the work of, a variety of organisations within the CP sphere of influence. It has been the theatre group to organisation to target audience relationship which has largely determined the levels of success in this respect of socialist theatre, and therefore those levels have been uneven. In the modern period it is only the strength of these relationships which can lift the theatre groups from out of the arts centres network which some quoted practitioners have stated can be temptingly easy.

Some observations can be made about how the movement has related to its audiences, those non-theatre goers whom it has albeit sporadically been able to attract, through its form of presentation. For many practitioners this has revolved around the question of arriving at a popular idiom, a form to which the audiences can relate and through which points of understanding can be registered. This reaches its most acutely observed with McGrath's (1981 op. cit.) critical appreciation of commercial entertainment for the urban working class, and its adoption not simply through the use of songs and music but also through the very means of addressing and behaving towards an audience. There are other examples from the past; the 'cinematic writing' of the Living Newspapers and Waiting for Lefty, as the theatre absorbed techniques from the emergent mass medium of the day; the pantomime, dance and mime of Babes and Theatre of Action's work are cases in point.

It should be noted that socialist theatre has successfully pushed beyond this also. The Greek chorus style of the mass declamation (derived more than likely from Jack Lindsay's training as a classical scholar) remains as probably one of the most ambitious theatrical ideas to be used in a political campaign in this period. Further, the 1930s and 1940s sees also the full use of the auditorium, with actors moving through and action taking place within the audience, actors placed in the audience and so forth; this at the time was pushing back some frontiers of what had been attempted in the British theatre, and as we have seen it was extremely effective with audiences unused to any dramatic conventions.

These avant garde initiatives (avant garde but developed in a campaigning context) can nonetheless be seen in the light of a popular idiom. They show a physical closeness to and physical involvement with the audience which denies the naturalistic pretence of its non-existence and simultaneously shows a relation to it of open directness, all a reflection of the desired political relations.

In other words it can be said that through this period the socialist theatre at its most effective has based itself in popular idioms but having done so has been prepared to move on, taking the audience with them.

The final issue is that of the conditions of existence of an oppositional socialist culture and the contribution of live theatre to it. The introductory chapter raised some of the main questions which have surrounded this sort of idea, and in the light of the historical experiences which have been considered some general observations can be made. Firstly however it would be useful to return to the early discussion of definitions as an entry point.

To recap, the term 'socialist' theatre was deliberately chosen from amongst several other terms, the closest rivals (and as we have seen historically the most used) being 'workers' theatre and 'people's' theatre. 'Workers' theatre places the emphasis on the class membership of the theatre workers as much as the audience, and as such can carry a different meaning.

Morley and Worple (ed. 1982), in their study of the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers, point out in a parallel context that working-class writing can be argued to be a covertly political activity but it should not be assumed to be overtly socialist. Therefore what is at issue is the theatre of the working-class movement, which may be comparable to but is essentially different from 'community' theatre, ⁽²⁾ but some of the practitioners of 'people's' theatre seem to have sought a combination of both.

In this way the problematic of Johnson (op. cit.) and Trotsky (op. cit.) - who dismiss both the artistic and logical possibility of a separate proletarian culture - is misplaced. The evidence of the previous chapters shows that the theatre of the British working class movement in this period has sought to make critical use of the dramatic methods of the past as well as to develop its own innovations. This has been its attitude to the mainstream theatre despite its intention to create a theatre of opposition.

However during the period the socialist theatre does exhibit two distinct phases, more fundamental to its production than the political or the artistic: the amateur and the professional. From 1930 to the early 1970s we have been concerned with an amateur movement, deriving funds from sympathetic labour and political organisations and its own receipts. The class origins of its practitioners was varied; Samuel (1977 op. cit. p.106) notes of the WTM that it reflected its locations of strength from the industrial North to heterogeneous London, and despite the later involvement of a small number of professional producers this seems to have remained the case until the modern phase.

A principal focus of this movement was, as we have seen, the encouragement of the involvement of ordinary people at every level in the theatre, the attraction and training of those who had never acted, written or worked in stage technology before but who were interested in a theatre for the working class movement. Again to repeat, the activists in the anti-fascist campaigns were well aware of the political implications of this.

We have also seen how, both because of and notwithstanding the national and international political climate, 1945 was a watershed. According to Raymond Williams:

I thought that the Labour Government had a choice: either for reconstructing the cultural field in capitalist terms, or for funding institutions of popular education and popular culture that could have withstood the political campaigns in the bourgeois press that were already gathering momentum. In fact there was a rapid option for conventional capitalist priorities... I still believe that the failure to fund the working-class movement culturally when the channels of popular education and culture were there in the forties became a key factor in the very quick disintegration of Labour's position in the future (1979 p.73)

In terms of the theatre this was manifested in the Arts Council and its pursuance of professionalism, a policy decided in 1942 for reasons which included the nervous reaction of the literary establishment to an upsurge of popular involvement. It has been argued that this was an important strand in the virtual shipwreck of the confident socialist theatre of the war. Another consequence was that the focus of the 1970s socialist theatre, able to use the advantages of professionalism through Arts Council funding, was to provide a service to the wider movement rather than an opportunity. This is to say that in clear contrast to the 1930s and 1940s the theatre groups

were not, and could not be, concerned with the involvement of their target audience in the very processes of making theatre. Therefore and in contrast again the practitioners were largely drama school trained and full-time, itself fundamentally restrictive and limiting in the role which could be played.

It is worth mentioning again to continue to set the scene for answering the original question, how the failure described in this thesis and summarised by Williams persisted. Through the 1960s the Labour Party and the TUC failed, through lack of theoretical grasp or simply through lack of vision, to maintain the surviving sympathetic national newspaper and the long standing emphasis in trade union education on the history - and ideals? - of the movement. Thus alongside the electoral consequences must be placed the marginalising of socialist cultural activity from the concerns of the official movement.

All these considerations assist a discussion of the nature and conditions of existence of an oppositional socialist culture. Further assistance, in the light of the historical experience described in this thesis, can come from an understanding of the specific contribution of theatre to it. This understanding is the more pertinent since as we have seen not only have some of the functions of the earlier socialist theatre - notably up to the minute satire - been usurped by television, but the sheer scale of the television audience has prompted some to dismiss the inevitably small scale activity of the live theatre.

Some of the writers covered have addressed themselves to this issue. Edgar (1975 op. cit.) for example argues as follows:

The theatrical form, unlike the form, for instance, of newspapers, can combine the objective and the subjective, events and the participants in them, the conflict of role and motivation. It can do so because it can combine, in the one the ideal and the real.
(p.94)

This provides, in fact, an accurate summary of the intentions and practice of much of the dramatic forms which have been described here. However the same evidence suggests that film can offer the same function; as we have seen from the 1930s, 'cinematic writing' and the influence of the cinema was crucial in pushing the socialist theatre in such a direction. An argument for the specifically live theatre needs a further element. Edgar himself provided this later (1978 op.cit. p.29) in an argument which centred on the collective situation of the theatre audience, making the point that people addressed en masse are much less likely to take an individual and non social view of the behaviour presented to them than those addressed in the domestic and atomised situation of the family home, as is the case with television.

This is particularly appropriate therefore, if we extend this argument, to the use of theatre as a socialist intervention, as the behaviour, progress and final consciousness of the individuals represented on stage become symbols of possible collective behaviour, progress and final consciousness. Further, by taking theatre into the lives of an audience - a valid phrase when dealing with non-theatre going audiences - and making the live contacts between producers and consumers, it is the very 'liveness' which contrasts sharply with the images of the technological media. This itself is worth considering when those images and political discourses are to be confronted and challenged. These are simply some examples of why socialists

cannot dismiss theatre purely on the statistical approach to its audience; such an approach also obscures the fact that live theatre can actively seek out a particular audience for a particular theme in ways mass media cannot.

Before moving to a conclusion it is also worth, at the risk of digression, to indicate some directions in which the practice of socialist theatre can contribute to socialist politics at the theoretical level. One example is the work of Jack Lindsay, whom as we have seen played an important part in the socialist cultural work of the 1930s and the war years. It was this experience which prompted him to produce a paper for a CP Writers and Historians' Group meeting in 1945, a paper whose starting point was:

In our period we have seen a continual interplay between ideas and political results, economic forms and spiritual conflict, which cannot remotely be covered by the all too simple relations of economics and politics which marxism was able to tolerate during its earlier phase. (1945B p.1)

The paper proceeded to attack the notion, derived actually from Plekhanov, that culture is a reflection of the economic mechanism as un-Marxist as well as false. Rooting his argument in Marx's own writing Lindsay maintained that the crucial factor was not the 'economic' but 'production', which involved mind and consciousness as well as tools and social relations. Thus the cultural level was within production, as for example primitive ritual was not a reflection of work but work at a new level. He continued:

...I want to make it clear that Marxists have got to make a definite choice. They have got to stand by Marx with his thesis of the Whole Man and of Culture as 'produced' (that is, part of the whole dialectical process which involves economic activity); or they have got to reject that Marx and stand with Plekhanov etc on the thesis of Reflection which was developed out of statements of Marx that are orientated away from the problem of Culture, polemically aimed against idealism from the angle of political economy, and that are therefore distorted when they are taken to oppose Marx's thesis of the Whole Man. (ibid p.17)

Lindsay has recorded (1982 p.301) how these ideas were badly received at the meeting. Also, in the Cold War which was shortly to follow Marxism retreated under various onslaughts into dogmatic assertions which had no space for innovation and advance.⁽³⁾ However, Lindsay has also pointed out (ibid) how at this same meeting the only support he received was from a young army officer - E.P. Thomson. Some of these ideas have, of course, informed Thomson's own work and also that of Raymond Williams. It can be argued that the origins of their theoretical stances lay with Lindsay and, through him, the experience of the socialist theatre of the 1930s and 1940s. Thus that experience can then be said to have made an enduring contribution to British Marxism.

Another example is Red Ladder's A Woman's Work/Strike While the Iron is Hot. It has been noted how through the 1970s the Left was compelled by the womens' movement to confront the oppression of women as women politically and theoretically. Not only did the making of the play put the group through the politics of the relations between men and women but the analysis offered by the play put their audiences through the same experience. In both senses this play was prefigurative, in advance of the theoretical

and organisational efforts which the Left was required to make. It thus contributed actively to a theoretical debate and development, and in a more direct way than Lindsay's work was an integral part of political progress within the working-class movement.

It is this issue of the conditions of existence of a socialist theatre which in fact unites the themes of function, form audience and political organisations, and it is this which forms the conclusion reached by examining the phases of peak and trough in British socialist theatre in this period.

It is clear that the socialist theatre activity is directly related to the scale of wider political activity, be it that the traditional labour movement or wider campaigns. It would be incorrect to argue that it is dependent on this scale, since the theatre has played a debating and questioning role within the Left as such, but in terms of a successful contribution to political developments the theatre has thrived at times of struggle and movement.

An organisational context has been vital to maximising its potential. In political terms the ideal is for an organisation which could provide the support of the 1930s CP, but with review and debate taking place about theatre work at every organisational level and publication. Such an organisation is vital for building venues and audiences from outside those accustomed to theatre going and for providing, if directly needed, channels for discussion and action afterwards. Thus much will depend on its

understanding of the logic of artistic developments and theatre, and its own openness to challenge and debate.

There is here too the question of finance and resources. Any political or labour movement body seeking to replace the Arts Council would ideally also replace not only its parsimony but also its cultural inegalitarianism, thus encouraging and sustaining the self-expression of an amateur. Thus would some of the educational and cultural structures upon which the labour movement leadership formally turned its back in the recent past be revived, as the processes of making, discussing, funding and touring theatre became part of more of the mainstream movement.

Although generalisations about dramatic forms need to be scrutinised, the effective socialist theatre of this period has used forms which are interactions between elements of a popular or commercial idiom and the continual search for theatrical equivalents for the themes and subject matter chosen. From this techniques and innovations would be produced which can engage an audiences's mind as well as heart, and it is the subject matter itself and the characteristics of the audience sought which will drive the forms in this direction.

These are the basic ingredients, so to speak, of a socialist theatre successful in the terms it sets itself, and in that sense they form its conditions of existence. They form the ideal position as judged by past experience, and as such may be worked towards and progress made towards, but never perhaps finally reached. In any event if anything emerges from this study of British socialist theatre between 1930 and 1979 it is

that despite peaks and troughs, and the remarkable speed with which either have developed, it has been a consistent and not a transient feature of British theatre.

The question remains of whether this consistency can endure, and this can best be addressed by stepping outside the period which has been formally studied. How do the prospects appear in 1985?

Some of the points identified in this thesis are being pursued. Interest in the history of socialist theatre has begun to accelerate, both in terms of scholarship and practical production. A network of researchers in 1930s labour movement theatre has been formed through Manchester University, bringing together academics and former participants to exchange and disseminate ideas, material and perspectives. One consequence could be a greater critical awareness within theatre studies of the tradition of the British socialist theatre.

Nor is this confined to academic circles; it is becoming evident amongst theatre workers also. In 1980 the North West Spanner group revived Waiting for Lefty and a Nottingham group toured Stay Down Miner. In 1984 the TUC sponsored a national 7:84 tour of Six Men of Dorset, a 1934 play on the Tolpuddle Martyrs which included one of the original actors in the modern cast. This process has been at its most fruitful in Scotland. 7:84 Scotland have revived an unpublished Glasgow Unity success of the 1940s, Men Should Weep, and in the aftermath of the 1984-1985 miners' strike produced Joe Corrie's In Time O'Strife, written in 1926 by a participant in the miners' lock-out in Fife. Besides

drawing attention to neglected plays of the movement this work, in conjunction with theatre archivists at Glasgow University, is playing a key role in the re-discovery, reclamation and assertion of a radical Scottish people's culture. (4)

Socialist theatre continues to contribute to political events and campaigns. In 1985 the Confederation of Health Service Employees sponsored a tour of Safe With Us by Red Ladder, a play which draws on their earlier It Makes You Sick in examining the issues facing the National Health Service. (5) During the miners' strike of 1984-85 the 7:84 group toured The Garden of England, based on events in the Kent coalfield, and socialist theatre during the strike was not confined to the professional companies. A group of women from miners' wives support groups around Thurnscoe produced agitprop sketches on pickets, police and the strike which they took around the coalfields to raise money and support. (6) This continued the classic role of agitprop and also, in the circumstances of its origin, points perhaps to the participation derived from extremity characteristic of the war years.

There is also evidence that the issue of funding and resources is being addressed. In the context of reduced funding for the Arts Council (and its withdrawal of financial support for 7:84 England) the trades union movement is showing signs of moving into this field. Both the Scottish Trades Union Congress and the Lancashire Association of Trades Councils have appointed Arts Officers, whose responsibilities include liaison between unions, artists and art bodies and the promotion of the involvement of trades unionists in the arts. (7) Therefore besides the direct sponsoring of particular shows which has been mentioned there is the emergent possibility of something more established.

This is to say that instead of relying on ad hoc links with enthusiastic individuals for formal trades union promotion of touring theatre - which, as has been indicated, has largely been the case in the past - socialist theatre activists may in future have some institutional provision with which to work.

It is important not to assume too much from what may be fragile beginnings. Nevertheless a form of institutional structure within the labour movement would go a long way towards resolving at least two of the major issues discussed in this concluding section. The principles underlying the appointment of these Arts Officers, of providing a service and involving their members, could prove a means of dealing with the dilemmas of professionalism imposed by the Arts Council: the undoubted benefits of obtaining the services of professional theatre workers can be maintained, but unlike the consequences of Arts Council funding the active participation of ordinary people can also be stimulated. The evidence which has been discussed also indicates that where there are examples of 1970s socialist theatre groups achieving breakthroughs in new audiences this has largely been the result of positive relationships with sponsoring organisations and in turn these organisations' positive relationships with target audiences. These Arts Officers - apparently more locally based and involved than the TUC - inspired projects of Centre 42 - might also be able to generalise those relationships through some form of organisational structure. This itself would be of major importance in sustaining what might otherwise be one-off initiatives.

This argument is quite possibly speculative. But this brief summary of current prospects demonstrates that this thesis has

not examined a closed historical episode but part of a moving picture. There is every likelihood that this picture will remain as a consistent presence in British theatre.

Notes

1. Social Trends has recorded that of their sample of professional men 7% had attended the 'theatre/opera/ballet' in the previous month, as compared to 2% of the skilled male sample and 1% of the semi and unskilled male sample. 6% of the total female sample (which was undifferentiated by occupation) had attended, compared to 4% of the total male sample. (HMSO, 1980 p.236).
2. For an account of 'community' theatre during this period see N. Khan, 'the Public-Going Theatre' in ed. S. Craig Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain (1980 p. 59-76).

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3. These ideas were later more thoroughly developed in J. Lindsay, The Crisis of Marxism (1981).
4. L. Mackenney, 'The Strife of a Miner Genius' The Guardian June 18th 1985 p.9.
5. Labour Weekly June 7th 1985 p.15.
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AC : Author's copy.
BJL/UH : Brynmoor Jones Library, University of Hull.
BL/UO : Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.
CUL : Cambridge University Library.
MML/L : Marx Memorial Library, London.
ML/USIC : Morris Library, University of Southern Illinois at Carbondale.
SPA/G : Scottish Playwrights Association Archive, Glasgow
WCML/M : Working Class Movement Library, Manchester.

In addition the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick contains some recently deposited scripts from Bristol Unity Players, and Professor Clive Barker at the Department of Theatre Studies, University of Warwick, holds a number of Theatre Workshop scripts.

The place of publication is London, unless where otherwise stated, for all published sources listed.

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