

Reading the Old Left in the Ewan MacColl and Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop and
Beyond: in Joan Littlewood's post-theatrical engagements in the 1960s.

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Abstract

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Based on archival research, recent Joan Littlewood centenary events and contemporary scholarship on the Theatre Workshop of Joan Littlewood and Ewan MacColl, this dissertation proposes to take sides with the radical class politics of the Old Left, or Communism, to read the legacy of MacColl-Littlewood collaboration in theatre, and its continuing impacts on Littlewood's post-theatrical work in the 1960s' New Left. This is to demystify the 'genius' aura bestowed upon Joan Littlewood; to re-instate Ewan MacColl's contribution to the legacy of this ground-breaking theatre famously known as that which revolutionized the West End; to retrofit Theatre Workshop as a sample ensemble of the larger frame of the radical left-wing interwar theatres while acknowledging the independent evolution of their work into 1950s, and to further complicate the thematically and textually oriented analytical narratives' efforts to analyze Theatre Workshop productions. The project aims to contribute to recent discussions that recognize and object to the tendencies in scholarship and journalism to neutralize the communist

tenets that shaped this theatre and actively informed its evolving dynamics from agit-prop forms to their last show *Oh What a Lovely War*. It defends the vital necessity of re-adjusting the interpretive lens that regards the historical left-wing theatrical endeavors as radical failures in our growingly authoritarian times, much as Chantal Mouffe defends agonistics (taking adversarial positions) as opposed to apolitical attitudes or assuming antagonisms in the presence of radical positions of class or culture (or religion, race, ethnicity, and gender). Discussing the shortcomings of late decades' response to the class politics from the historical, philosophical and theatrical angle, this research aims to bind the interwar leftwing theatrical legacies of the Workers' Theatre Movement and the local traditions of British popular performance with the Theatre Workshop stage and Littlewood's post-theatrical work to advocate for continuities and discusses the necessity of expanding the formalist, textually oriented discussions with cultural materialist paradigms that prioritize the performative stages of the leftwing theatres over any abstracting or literary discussions, and intends to foster the self-definitions and manifestos of the MacColl-Littlewood collaboration as interpretive tools in understanding their work as revolutionary, anti-Establishment and communist ensemble with a permanent dedication to resist inclusion in what Baz Kershaw calls the 'theatre estate,' and thus explore possible methods of interpretation that resist established canons, inspired by Littlewood and MacColl's foundational, leftwing resistance.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	7
1. Chapter One – The reception grounds for radical politics in theatre	26
1.1. Recent interpretations of the Theatre Workshop legacy and the Fun Palace revival	34
1.2. Criticism, scholarship and disciplinary positions	54
1.2.1. Comparing <i>Oh What a Lovely War</i> with <i>Last Edition</i>	69
1.3. Theatrical resistance, cultural aversions and critiques	78
1.3.1. Responding to the revolution	79
1.3.2. A waning cause: Labor activism and class-consciousness	82
1.3.3. Perspectives from the theatrical angle	88
1.3.4. Theoretical explorations of the cultural aversions	94
2. Chapter Two – A matter of continuities I – Popular background	101
2.1. <i>Fuenteovejuna (The Sheepwell)</i> – Nineteenth-century’s favorite classic for the working class	103
2.2. Working class leisure and the left-wing theatres in the nineteenth century and the interwar period	110
2.3. Institutional contributions to interwar left-wing drama	134
3. Chapter Three – A matter of continuities II – Ideological background	145
3.1. The Russian Avant-garde and the origins of WTM	151
3.2. Littlewood and MacColl’s access to the Russian Avant-garde and the Continental trends	163

3.3. Adaptations as local response	170
4. Chapter Four – The factors behind the evolution of Theatre Workshop’s rambunctious stage	185
4.1. Actor training and ‘faith in a sense of truth’	202
4.2. The street as a source of observation and identification	209
4.3. The nature of the Theatre Workshop realism	220
4.4. Theatre Workshop’s communism in practice	231
5. Chapter Five – Re-considering formalisms	244
5.1. Re-considering formalisms	245
5.2. De-auratization of the theatre for working-class audiences	259
Conclusion	272
Bibliography	281

Introduction

When looking at the theatrical collaboration of Joan Littlewood and Ewan MacColl, who founded the famous radical British ensemble Theatre Workshop in 1945 as the third phase of their work, I have a specific aim to advocate a few arguments. First one is to contend with and at the same time contest Joan Littlewood's legacy in Twentieth Century British theatre as a 'genius'. My contesting this position constitutes the primary premise of this dissertation, with a working hypothesis that what made Littlewood's theatre a work of genius was her formative years in theatrical collaboration with Ewan MacColl, with whom she graduated from the trends of the historical Workers' Theatre Movement in England (WTM hereafter) in 1930s. This theatrical journey had strong ties with the WTM, and MacColl and Littlewood were extremely well poised ideologically, and personally, to support the workers' cause and the class fights as a lasting tool of resisting Fascism and the social evils of the capitalist system of their times. This ideological stand had a premium impact on their theatre on both materialistic and artistic terms, but has come to be overlooked in the most recent study on Theatre Workshop by Nadine Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood's Theatre* (2011), which employs processes that treat Littlewood's career as the ultimate focus in the Theatre Workshop legacy and downgrade some useful historical givens as lesser categories that inevitably neutralize the strong dose of radicalism and class politics that shaped her theatre. Robert Leach's earlier work, *Theatre Work-Shop: Joan Littlewood and the Making of Modern British Theatre* (2006) surveys and acknowledges the historical foundations of Theatre Workshop and restores the importance of their roots from the interwar decades, but at times seizes to take the categorically formalistic arguments further than acknowledging the novelties introduced by Theatre Workshop to the British Theatre, leaving the nature of this success a mystery.

In 2014 Britain celebrated the Joan Littlewood Centenary and the theatre world praised her work on many occasions and a revival of her post-theatrical work, the Fun Palace Project was instigated, as well, to become an annual community event. Her legacy was recited all year round and her achievements were singled out as personal talents, leaving her founding-partner, Ewan MacColl little space of recognition. What I have come to observe as the journalistic, academic and artistic complicity that ignores the presence and function of the radical class politics as formative and continuing dynamics in her work offers the grounds for examination in this dissertation. My argument is that the theatrical ‘genius’ quality bestowed upon Littlewood today is an incomplete one and does not pay her lifelong achievements the respect they demand. I aim to contribute to the scholarship that recognizes her work as a brilliantly creative amalgam of the communist fervor that used theatre as a ‘weapon,’ together with popular entertainment strategies, and further highlight some features of her work that the current scholarship finds intriguing.

Therefore, as Littlewood’s theatrical genius as a 20th century woman director is gaining more attention, I find it important to clarify the originating factors of this success story, which lie hidden in the period from 1935 to 1952, from Littlewood and MacColl’s founding the Theatre Union to their settling in East London. I find the recent publications on Littlewood preoccupied with the post-settlement era and its successes. The ideological cause (her own and MacColl's WTM ideologies) that shaped her theatre is presented as such that hindered her strong directing talents, and that her talents in theatrical expression soared when they settled in

London and Ewan MacColl, the ideologue and the playwright of the partnership, quit his theatrical input¹.

I believe such an observation that Littlewood's partnership hindered her creative talents has to do with the fact that there is no established apparatus of evaluating the success or efficacy of a radical theatre, especially if it is a nomadic, dispossessed, revolutionary ensemble like the Theatre Workshop in its pre-settlement era. That period of 17 years (1935-1952) is not given much attention; it appears to me that it doesn't get the attention it deserves for a couple of reasons: First, the cultural turn has brought a diversity of representation in various artistic fields, which has given way to subcategories of political theatre to surface, like theatre of identity or theatre of multiculturalism commonly referred as theatres of culture in textbooks.² Second, in the academia, let alone theatre companies or press, the WTM is taken as a failed weapon and that the socialist or communist experiment is a - historically - failed one. Hence the write-off of the MacColl-Littlewood couple's pre-settlement era as a formative process in Littlewood's success. This position also supports the general idea that the workers' cause or the class fights are dated polemics; any discussion in the dramatic arts based on the discourse of class antagonisms or workers' cause is easily branded as a nostalgic one, signifying a lost fight. In research, I found that it is a universal claim, not a contemporary (or historical) one to call WTM a failed weapon: a 1924 publication, *The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia* by a person

¹ Nadine Holdsworth, in her recent book, *Joan Littlewood's Theatre*, mostly discusses the impact of Ewan MacColl's quitting his theatrical input affirmatively, for instance when she writes 'Yet, cut adrift from MacColl's influence, Littlewood rediscovered an earlier passion for the classics ...' Nadine Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood's Theatre*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 79.

² For example, see Chapter 3, 'Theatre and Cultural Diversity' in textbook, *The Art of Theatre A Concise Introduction* where oppositional theatres are categorized as theatre of identity, theatre of protest and cross-cultural theatre. William M. Downs, Lou A. Wright and Erik Ramsey eds., *The Art of Theatre A Concise Introduction*, (Boston: Wadsworth, 2013), 56-62.

of theatre, Huntly Carter, clearly expresses author's observation on how the ruling class deliberately buried the artistic developments in the new order in Russia, both socially and artistically. Class fights were well expressed in the WTM, but it was a circumscribed, sectarian movement; it was intended for its own audiences, in class solidarity. The current situation in acknowledging the class distinctions is no different, politically or artistically, and hence academically. However, a recent exemplary interdisciplinary academic publication, *Heritage, Labour and the Working Classes* (2011) demonstrates various disciplines engaged with the ongoing acts and politics of representation that the working-class people engage with.³ Unfortunately theatre or performance studies discipline is not involved in the scope of that project, or at least in that specific publication. This brings us to the question of why theatre art is distanced from the matters of class politics to shift towards the politics of the local, as in community theatres while it still speaks for race, gender, ethnicity or cross/multi-culturalisms. A positive step is that, performance studies as a discipline has been devising a certain discourse that performance art has risen to the challenge to claim the political act, with the assumption that "in linguistics and philosophy, the concept of 'performative' has been employed to realize utterances that constitute rather than represent social actions," and the 'cultural sense of performance', for some advocates, means liminality, subversion and resistance, the opposite of

³ *Heritage, Labor and the Working Classes* comprises essays that reclaim the cultural dimensions of working-class lives and their struggle in the industrial conflicts around the globe. Topics include local conflicts and the working-class resistance that merges with ethnic solidarity; working-class efforts towards visibility, organizing and commemorating; working-class iconographies and artefacts in post-industrialism; the silencing and the self-representation of the working-class; intersection points of local and labor histories; English labor movement festivals and ethnographic inquiries on local working-class communities. Laurajane Smith, et. al., *Heritage, Labour, and the Working Classes*, Key Issues in Cultural Heritage (London; New York: Routledge, 2011)

which means ‘be[ing] socially normalized.’⁴ This discussion also offers a passage to link some of the unique values of WTM with the precursors of performance art as discussed by performance studies discipline. Setting these performance art precursors of WTM in place would provide a point of origin to trace their continuity in Littlewood and MacColl collaboration, and finally in Littlewood’s East London stage.

An intriguing area to address in the topic of WTM’s liminality is the art versus politics (or propaganda) polemic which was already brought up in a heated debate between Georg Lukács and Bertolt Brecht in the late 1930s. If we can take a new perspective to see early phases of Littlewood and MacColl collaboration closer to being a political medium rather than a political theatre genre, it would be worthwhile to trace this art versus politics discussion in a parallel binary of traditional theatre versus performance art, assuming that performance art is closer to being a medium than being a genre. Such a discussion would be a gateway to look further upon the acclaimed capacity of performance art to manifest social acts, instead of representing them, thus being a medium for political activism. The main premise that the above suggestion of the presence of liminal norm in WTM rests upon my observation that WTM rested on a stock notion of homogeneity; the whole population involved in making and receiving that theatre was the workers' population. It was a case of self-representation and even activism, compared to contemporary efforts to take up others' peripheral causes in empathy and/or sympathy to bring to the center, as Rick Knowles describes in his work *Reading the Material Theatre*.⁵ In England, when we look at Tom Thomas’s case in 1930s England in Raphael

4 Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else*, (London: Routledge, 2001), 12; 9.

⁵ Knowles discusses a theatre company, Theatre de Complicit, again citing from Lyn Gardner’s essay “The face of the future”, as having ‘always embraced a kind of otherness ... It is attracted to

Samuel's work, *Theatres of the Left*, we see workers like him who did the adaptations from novels such as *Ragged Trousered Philantropists*, and wrote new plays, recruited new workers to their movement, represented the English movement in the German Olympics for the International Workers' Theatre Movement, acted on stage and contributed to the aesthetics and disseminated knowledge by running periodicals like the *Red Stage*.⁶ Their audience was workers, as well. Also, considering this early phase of the workers' theatres in the light of the radical theatre or the radical performance polemic that Baz Kershaw discusses in his book *Radical in Performance*, it seems that their medium grants itself to be studied within the borders of performance art, due to this homogeneity, in which the worker-actor had the capacity to have that liminal experience for himself and to present it to fellow workers or maybe experience it on their behalf. Ewan MacColl recalls the earlier phases in his theatrical activism, specifically during the phase of Red Megaphones, as he shared in the introduction to *Agit-Prop to Theatre Workshop*, "[a]t this stage I don't believe that any of us regarded ourselves as artist, or indeed, as being in anyway involved with art. We saw ourselves as guerillas using the theatre as a weapon against the capitalist system."⁷ This position in the grassroots phase of the workers' theatre agrees with Baz Kershaw's idea that the literary theatre tradition privileging the dramatic text can be challenged by performance arts to achieve any radical efficacy. Therefore, it is the right time to ask the question: how close has Joan Littlewood approached the precursors of

the marginalized and the dispossessed and takes them to the center.' Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre*, 52.

⁶ Tom Thomas, 'A propertyless theatre for the propertyless class' as in Raphael Samuel, et. al., *Theatres of the Left, 1880 – 1935 Workers' Theatre Movement in Britain and America*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 91.

⁷ Ewan MacColl, Introduction in Ewan MacColl and Howard Goorney, eds. *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop Political Playscripts 1930-50*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), xxvi.

performance art, descending from the same manner of deconstructing the authority of the written text in her famous ‘irreverent,’ guerilla manner, and what kind of criteria can we set to discuss such proximity? And how can we link such set of criteria with the WTM? Littlewood’s directing allowed and even asked for the live art of performance on the stage, due to high degrees of improvisation and liberties taken with the literary texts. Littlewood’s irreverence towards the text was just one of the ways she took down the literary stronghold of a certain order, which she believed represented the hegemony. Her treatment of the classics was irreverent, breaking all the cultural claims of the highbrows over these timeless pieces, such that Nadine Holdsworth shares a note, “Stratford East became literally and symbolically a site for counter-hegemonic Shakespeare.”⁸ Her stage had a subversive language of its own; however much the texts she was directing had the same currency, they would bend to the language of that stage, which had its grotesque kind of stage realism that bore the carnivalesque, playful, anti-illusionist, heretic performativity, reminding the audience that it was a play after all; breaking the audience free from the ‘poetic’ illusions of her own stage at the least expected moments.⁹ This is probably the reason why she was branded as the Brechtian director of Britain by Kenneth Tynan, although the Theatre Workshop had devised its own route to a rowdy, rambunctious stage language to speak to a robust popular and working-class audience.

In her recent discussions of Littlewood’s staging the classics, Holdsworth implies that the post-settlement period opened a different phase in the group’s staging of the classics, which

⁸ Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood’s Theatre*, 120.

⁹ I emphasize the word poetic here to refer to Holdsworth’s thematic approach to Theatre Workshop – or MacColl’s plays. Holdsworth finds a poetic realism in the representation of working-class communities in two of MacColl’s plays and keeps her analysis limited to the thematic and textual scope, which would typically be jeopardized in the performative environment of a Theatre Workshop production.

she describes as “completely different than Ewan MacColl’s and was more in tune with any on the humanist left [...] who regarded the Renaissance as a high point in popular culture.” Ewan MacColl is reported as the one who “worried about the bourgeois associations of the classics”, whereas “Littlewood found ‘an anti-establishment voice, an unruly and vibrant theatre connecting and speaking for the people.’”¹⁰ While this position can be taken as a fine starting point for another discussion on the public versus class binaries to highlight the populist tendencies of Littlewood that draws her work closer to radical populism, it still needs to be troubled in reference to how she staged these classics in the pre-settlement period, when MacColl’s textual adaptations of the classics were among many givens shaping her aesthetics. Like many authors writing on Littlewood, Holdsworth refers to her irreverent manner to the text and how this manner shaped her aesthetics, but there’s not many analytical reference to the fact that this may be owing to the past formative years with MacColl, among other reasons, when he was very actively writing adaptations, turning these classics into means that fit the group’s aims and providing a textual space of intervention in what Baz Kershaw calls raced and classed notions of these classical texts¹¹ Once more, I find a necessity to talk about the post-settlement activity in the light of the pre-settlement era, where many of the themes brought up can be primarily explored within the genealogy of the group’s repertory of seventeen years, from 1935

¹⁰ Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood’s Theatre*, 80.

¹¹ Beth Hoffman refers to Baz Kershaw’s ascribing the probable success of political urgencies and social efficacies to be carried out by performance art rather than the conventional theatre that privileges the dramatic text: “Baz Kershaw, in *The Radical in Performance* (1999), argues strenuously in favour of privileging ‘radical performance’ against the more canonized tradition of British ‘political theatre’ in order not only to achieve a revitalized performance practice but also to retool assumptions about art and social efficacy, elucidating the particular problems caused by the classed and raced connotations of a ‘literary theatre’ tradition that privileges the dramatic text.” Beth Hoffman, ‘Radicalism and the Theatre in Genealogies of Live Art,’ *Performance Research* 14, No.1 (2009), 99. Accessed 4/24/2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13528160903113262>

to 1952, rather than exploring their textual agreement with general thematic categories conversant with their period, as Holdsworth does primarily, in her recent book, for example when she explores MacColl's two plays, *Landscape with Chimneys* and *Johnny Noble* thematically, in the 'new wave' context of English theatre's Angry Young Men decade. My major reservation in arbitrarily applying theoretic or thematic approaches to material which has not received rigorous historiographic attention is that such an approach will inadvertently mythologize Joan Littlewood's work and treat her art as if it were not subject to the micro histories caused by the dissenting attitudes of the group during these seventeen years before settlement; as if her talents were a complete, homogenous yet somewhat inarticulate or oppressed potential in the pre-settlement phase and it reached a certain emancipation after the settlement. Such a method will only work to reinforce the myth around Joan Littlewood's authority in theatre art instead of settling for an understanding how she made theatre.

An unacknowledged WTM asset in matters of aesthetics was that, Littlewood-MacColl collaboration, ignited from a theatre movement whereby they had come to represent a cause that they had personal ties with, preserved that liminal quality of both constituting and representing the outcast and the inarticulate people on the stage. The historical WTM had pedagogical implications, which made it a revolutionary theatre: the worker audience found itself represented on the stage. There was a two-way relationship between the stage and the audience; both parties were equally involved in their revolutionary searches. In this manner, the realities of the workers' class were declared, confirmed and saved from the oppressive policies and erasure tactics of the ruling class. This aesthetic wrestled with the order on the stage and took it down. In that manner, it had pedagogical and didactic intentions. It presented a path for workers to follow; it acted to be re-enacted in its ripple effects. It sought to earn the workers a cultural

identity and a pedagogical apparatus to stay in their cause for a revolution, and the fact that they saw the worker actors on the stage doing it for them artistically or hypothetically, was an empowering moment for the worker audiences.

Graduates of the WTM, their cause (shaped with artistic concerns) had to travel the country to speak to unengaged audiences. Therefore, they can also be studied within the norms of touring companies and as a dispossessed, displaced group, whose work was shaped by the logistics of advantage or disadvantage of such displacement and dispossession. Probably caused by this type of high-cost freedom, they could experiment with a strong dose of unorthodoxy, self-licensed to handle esoteric work which seems at odds with their workers' theatre background, and also experiment with theatrical styles and improvisation, and rehearsal techniques which brought their literary text based theatre closer to the 'live art'¹² of performance, as Joan Littlewood expected her actors to cut off any well-settled gestures or styles and keep improvising, in the commedia dell'arte fashion, which in most cases gave them hard time with the censor office of Lord Chamberlain: they would never perform a play the same twice. Without access to a steady audience, dissents from the ideological grounds of mainstream left, constantly at odds with the licensing and censoring office and the funding institutions, devoid of support even from ideological allies like trade unions, the Theatre Workshop was certainly a dispossessed and displaced theatre, practicing their own priorities, in a sense their own communism that in turn shaped their art and their ensemble interactions, and their inspiring and feeding each other, and this aspect of the peculiar life of their theatre is a topic to discuss in

¹² Beth Hoffmann, 'Radicalism and the Theatre in Genealogies of Live Art', *Performance Research*, 14 (2009):1, 95-105, Accessed March 15, 2012, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13528160903113262>

terms of continuing discussions on Marxism and cultural materialism which discuss communist modes of social and artistic production in ways that acknowledge but do not limit themselves with notions of failed state experiments (as in Soviet Russia). The offspring of their work in the WTM was relying heavily on the aspect of homogeneity in the structure of this theatrical enterprise: this homogeneity in the overall phenomena of the workers' theatre caused writers, actors, reviewers and the audience to be workers and left-wing people. The production and dissemination cycles in the interwar era were not broken by any professionalized unit of theatrical production; their theatre was intact and homogenous in its making, aesthetics and reception. Although Littlewood and MacColl started admitting middle-class members like Gerry Raffles (their actor, business manager and Littlewood's partner, who was a declared, ardent communist), MacColl converted them into the left-wing cause in his training lectures and soon everyone would adapt to the frugal but ecstatically creative ways of living for theatre. This was one of the factors that helped them identify to a certain degree, even if not as much as MacColl or Littlewood, with the people they were working to reach out to: next to the Theatre Workshop style devised out of left-wing avant-garde and popular entertainment tools, this pre-settlement nomadic and frugal work-play life gained them a material and cultural capacity to reflect or express their intended audiences' realities. Arguably, their material challenges and choices brought to their stage-audience relationship a direct and liminal tone; there was a two-way communication path and the communication needed no semiotics of coding or decoding as a cultural theatre would; stage - audience interaction and accessibility were paramount. Littlewood clearly explained her intended performance climate in an interview which gives away the characteristics of intended stage-audience communication: "I like people to boo, shout, join-in, and all the rest. When we did the Hostage in a slum there was a bloody row between the British

and the Irish. I want a sense of communion. Like in the pubs ... I get stories in London from villains.”¹³ I believe this aspect lends a reliable lens to the issue of their potential radicalism or efficacy. I assume that the real problem in terms of their radical efficacy was that, that audience became a utopian community for this theatre who desperately sought its other half while trying to remain intact by itself, in its workers’ class ideologies. Littlewood’s post-theatrical work must also have been fed by this pathology and needs to be situated in some conversation with it, and arguably this divide between the historical class facts and Theatre Workshop’s search for its audience and patrons caused Littlewood to quit theatre and call it ‘obsolete’ as politics, when she was engaging with the New Left style performances and happenings in the 1960s.¹⁴ However, it is worthwhile to explore the resonances of her post-theatrical work with the New Left, as her objectives still very much promoted Old Left priorities in her environmental projects during 1960s.



Understanding and demystifying the mystical halo on Joan Littlewood’s theatre caused are the main challenges of this dissertation project. It is my hypothesis that Theatre Workshop’s stage wizardry was a culmination of many things: displaying typical features of the unsung theatrical labor activism of the early twentieth century, the Russian and continental avant-garde and the WTM’s fervor for creating a ‘people’s theatre,’ merged together with MacColl and Littlewood’s unique interpretations of the local and historical British performance traditions. This position is set to counter contemporary discussions of Littlewood’s work in ways that exalt

¹³ ‘JOAN LITTLEWOOD, Oct. 1, 1964,’ Mel Gussow Collection- 109.1 Littlewood, Joan 1964-1994.

¹⁴ Ibid.

and almost deify her ‘genius,’ as if it descended from the heavens to solve the problems of her contemporary theatre, in a *deus ex machina* fashion. It did not. Theoretical models should be explored in terms of their adaptability to such politically-buried material only after exploring its features from a subjectively built position of historical inquiry that is ready to take sides with 1930s’ Old Left radicalism of the Littlewood-MacColl collaboration. Forms traced objectively will forego again the well-hidden signs that speak for the truth of Littlewood’s dynamic commitment to her work as politics. This argument aims to free the legacy of Theatre Workshop from the academic formalistic objectiveness and the mystification of the journalistic and artistic circles. In its essence, this is a cultural materialist approach that looks beyond the productions and the texts and consequently formalisms and proposing to interrogate the engagement of scholarship with its immediate social and political climate. Alan Sinfield explains how this position paved the way for the British literary critics (including those working in feminist and minority fields) in the disintegrating political consensus of the 70s, a path away from theory and formalism, and into “possibility of relating English teaching and writing to left wing political concerns.”¹⁵ Bridging an erased timeline or retrofitting discussions on aesthetics in their historical frame of origins or ontologies can be achieved with methods of cultural materialism, which works with the presupposition that “[d]espite the powerful institutions through which dominant stories are maintained, there are other stories – subordinated perhaps, but not extinguished.”¹⁶ These subordinate yet weak stories can be followed with Raymond Williams’s method of tracing structures of feeling, which allows the tracing of these weak, unexpressed

¹⁵ Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 8.

¹⁶ Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 30.

positions or trajectories that co-exist with the dominant stories of the ruling cultural order.

Assuming in my case that these stories could be constructed with archival findings, and could, in turn contest canonisms, going back to the archive was crucial, to search for seemingly unrelated evidence that stands suspiciously out of established discourse.

As Thomas Postlewait and Charlotte Canning express in their introduction to their edited volume on theatre historiography, the archive is a dynamic, re-generative source that is ready to yield various discourses, and conducting historical inquiry requires the acquisition and professing of a certain position or identity.¹⁷ My analytical position mostly depends on the questioning of the general claims made on the legacy of Theatre Workshop, encouraged by the premise that “a community of scholars is not to be confused with an ideal of a collective; community disagreement is the norm.”¹⁸ As I am aware that this project is a major intervention into the processes of cannon formation on the Theatre Workshop, I have been concerned with the archival processes as well as professing my own ideological position that aims to side with the MacColl and Littlewood in going back to the archive and re-sorting evidence in this perspective. I have aimed at basing my analysis on the archival findings and cross-examining these findings in relation to current scholarship and journalism. For this purpose, I have resorted to the Michael Barker Collection of Joan Littlewood, Mel Gussow Collection, Donald Wolfitt Papers 1803-1984, Norman Bell Geddes Collection, Theatre Biography Collection, Fredric Herald Frith Banburry Collection at manuscript and performing arts sections of Harry Ransom Center at

¹⁷ On the re-generative aspect of the archive, Canning and Postlewait state, “[they] fully agree with Derrida that the source—as document and archival process— “produces as much as it records the event.” Accepting this perspective, [they] recognize that an archive is not merely something we use; it is, as a category of thought, a way of conceiving and reconceiving the identities and meanings of past events.’ Charlotte Canning, and Thomas Postlewait, *Representing the past: Essays in Performance Historiography* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 21.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

University of Texas at Austin; Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger Archives at the Ruskin College, Oxford; British Library sound archives and transcripts of the Theatre Archive Project and various web based sources such as the Working Class Movement Library. It is true that Theatre Workshop's radicalism is generally acknowledged in related literature, but acknowledging is simply not enough; it does not question the formation of formalist narratives that would rather ignore the radical left, anti-establishment dynamics enlivening the Theatre Workshop stage. As Christopher Balme suggests, every theatre's cultural identity surpasses "the heightened enchantment of the 'event'," because theatres exist in their own temporally and spatially structured *longue durée*.¹⁹ The related analyses therefore depend on the archival findings that help expand and interrogate the academic positions on Theatre Workshop and Joan Littlewood that inevitably operate in the binaries of domesticating and stigmatizing their radicalism. Finally, much as Chantal Mouffe challenges the post-political vision that promotes the idea that "partisan conflicts are a thing of the past and consensus can now be obtained through dialogue," and explains the importance of democratic contestation through the agonistic display of diverse radicalisms, which I believe Littlewood and MacColl succeeded in creating through a theatre of 'objectively democratic force' that contested the established social and aesthetic values, I have been inspired to contest the accepted academic reception of Littlewood as a genius, and as "a walking paradox, a rag bag of contradictions."²⁰

¹⁹ Christopher Balme works on playbills as items in a theatre's life that do not necessarily demonstrate or point to the staged production, and in a sense helps build a contextual approach to a theatre's identity that creates "perspectives that are culturally and not just aesthetically determined." Christopher Balme, 'Playbills and theatrical public sphere,' in, Charlotte Canning and Thomas Postlewait, eds., *Representing the Past: Essays in Performance Historiography*, 38.

²⁰ Chantal Mouffe explains that there is no way of overcoming negativity in social orders and in her works she proposes the model of 'agonistic pluralism' that allows conflicts and does not deny radical negativity and can distinguish between antagonism (struggle between enemies) and agonism (struggle between adversaries). Chantal Mouffe and Elke Wagner, *Agonistics Thinking*

This perspective helped me catch the subtle differences in interpretation and cite the moments when I can differ my analysis from more formalist approaches. An example would be Robert Leach's analyses of Theatre Workshop productions. Leach displays the closest position to my standing as he acknowledges the continuity of the radical left in his interpretations of Theatre Workshop. He accurately regards all left-wing tools that shaped their work, but he can also write a statement that explores the probability of the relation between Ewan MacColl and an Althusserian sense of state apparatus, or Gramscian cultural hegemony:

Not surprisingly, Ewan MacColl was never absorbed into what Althusser called the 'ideological state apparatus', those unofficial institutions of culture—the Sunday papers, the national theatres, and the like – that control much of our lives unseen, nor was he part of what Gramsci called 'the hegemony. (Leach, *Theatre Workshop*, 64)

The above statement seizes to promise any stretching of thought once the clear premise of MacColl-Littlewood collaboration is recognized: they were against the capitalism-complicit state and all its operational modes, be them cultural or ideological. Such subtle differences in position can be missed in enquiries based from aesthetically oriented approaches.

About the nature of evidence used in the analytical process, I need to acknowledge the common academic caution in approaching works of autobiography and interviews. Most of the scholars who have written on the Theatre Workshop timeline draw attention to the extreme subjectivity and creative license present both in Littlewood's and MacColl's descriptions of events, especially of dates and measures of their works' success. The interviews in the archives

the World Politically, (London; New York: Verso, 2013), xii; Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, (London; New York: Routledge, 2005),1; Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood's Theatre*, 118.

and the autobiographies of MacColl and Littlewood come with their own credibility as well as distractions. Many authors who worked with MacColl and Littlewood have had to acknowledge a certain blind spot in their interviewees' accounts of past events; they both were extremely well-licensed editors and producers and documentarians.²¹

The following chapters focus on the recent discussions on Joan Littlewood's theatrical legacy as well as certain formalist continuities and aim to contribute to the scholarship that recognizes the early radical roots of WTM and labor theatres as an interpretive category in understanding the post-settlement success of Theatre Workshop. There are several reverberating themes throughout the chapters such as the result of their improvisatory liveness that favors live interventions of actor and audience over the dramatic text to formulate how Theatre Workshop developed its rambunctious stage bordering on performance art and bringing modern, sophisticated theatre to non-theatre-going audiences. Littlewood's post-theatrical projects are discussed in different contexts, in terms of their resonance or contradictions with period trends and in reference to the theoretical frames they have been explored in so far.

Chapter one expounds on the Fun Palace project revival in reference to the scholarly opinion offered on the original project and aims to survey the widespread community event with

²¹ See Ben Harker's article, 'Missing dates: Theatre Workshop in history,' where he summarizes the difficulties of working with the historical accounts on the Theatre Workshop. He refers to MacColl's autobiography as "a dark disillusionment of the Thatcher years," and to Littlewood's as "a brazen show of preferring the theatricality of memory to the intricacies of the historical record." Ben Harker. "Missing Dates: Theatre Workshop in History." *History Workshop Journal* 66, no. 1 (2008): 272-79. Another researcher, Giovanni Vacca, who worked with MacColl in the 1980s on his folk music legacy, wrote about the necessity of "setting MacColl against MacColl," laying the foundations for caution in his phrase that "in oral cultures, and certainly MacColl's youth environment was largely oral, boasting, talking big is a normal way of discussing or arguing ... he often boasts figures that I can't possibly check but that I suspect to be some way overstated." Allan F. Moore, Giovanni Vacca, *Legacies of Ewan MacColl The Last Interview*, (Surrey; Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2014,) 8-10.

an eye on its blueprint, and also extends into the discussions on the matter of continuities from the interwar radical theatres to the current populist theatrical trends and further surveys the waning class politics in social and theatrical spheres, offering possible reasons and critiques of contemporary apolitical academic discourses.

The second chapter introduces the British labor tradition in theatrical activism as the fertile ground that fed the radical interwar theatrical environment and sets out to point to the common strategies employed in these labor theatres in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which appear in all Theatre of Action, Theatre Union and Theatre Workshop phases of MacColl-Littlewood collaboration. Likewise, the third chapter explores the Russian avant-garde as the cradle of the British WTM and its formative impacts on the Theatre Workshop stage. These chapters focus on the continuing left-wing performance trends and traditions of the interwar years as formative and dynamic features in the Theatre Workshop's legacy and the objective of the discussions is to highlight a rich plethora of a period theatrical activity that faded from academic and artistic interest, which fed and resonated with the intentions and tools that the Theatre Workshop devised in its maturing phase, before settling in London. The continuity is cited by examples from pre and post-settlement productions for demonstrating these flows and resonances.

Chapters four and five explore the ways that Littlewood and MacColl customized these formative aspects of Russian constructivism, German expressionism in design, acting, directing and authorship according to their interpretations of classical texts and their ideas of the classical theatres' modes of production. The improvisatory quality of the Theatre Workshop stage sets the key for several illuminating discussions on the accessibility (openness) of their stage and the nature of their stage realism that borders on what Bakhtin calls grotesque realism and how these

qualities bring this sophisticated theatre to the level of response from their intended working-class audiences. Moreover, their material terms of subsistence is made a topic inquiry and is explored as a source of impact upon their art to open up a category that can expand the formalist discussions and analyses of plays by including materialist aspects of their communal ensemble quality. These are the topics I survey in this project that seeks to enlarge the categories applicable to investigations on Theatre Workshop's legacy and its resonances with theoretical perspectives. These chapters work on how the Theatre Workshop, upon its graduation from the WTM as the Theatre of Action, devised its own definitions and styles per its manifestos and principles, and they aim to theoretically explore the ruling concepts of their theatre that are arguably above and beyond categorical or canonical interpretations which try to fit Littlewood's work in the postwar West End parameters and the New Left trends.

Thus, I expect to conclude this project as an exploration of the political-aesthetic collaboration between Littlewood and MacColl and as a study of the reception of Littlewood's work that neglects/downplays this collaboration, demonstrating the vital chords of Theatre Workshop success with its inception in the interwar period of vibrant leftist theatrical activity and exploring their creation of a unique theatrical activism built on these tenets.

Chapter 1 – The reception grounds for radical politics in theatre

A well-functioning democracy calls for a confrontation of democratic political positions. If this is missing, there is always the danger that this democratic confrontation will be replaced by a confrontation between non-negotiable moral values or essentialist forms of identifications. Too much emphasis on consensus, together with aversion towards confrontations, leads to apathy and a dissatisfaction with political participation.

Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*²²

The WTM is very proud to have had Ewan MacColl as its founding Honorary President ... His achievements in theatre have never been surpassed in Britain and yet his contribution has been all but ignored. This crime is due to the fact that MacColl was a passionate communist and fighter for the working class.

*the INTERNATIONALE, Ewan MacColl's obituary*²³

This chapter aims to explore and demonstrate how Joan Littlewood's legacy in contemporary British theatre tends to downplay Theatre Workshop's radical class-politics driven art, as well as downplay her theatrical partner Ewan MacColl's input during their seventeen years' partnership in making theatre. The Theatre Workshop was an ensemble that had grown in twenty-one years, from Ewan MacColl's ambitions of theatrical activism with his agit-prop group Red Megaphones to an internationally known, but domestically ignored company in 1952,

²² Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), 7.

²³ Workers' Theatre Movement miscellaneous papers: publicity, Ewan MacColl, Peggy Seeger archive at Ruskin College, Oxford.

when it settled in East London. As they entered the interest range of London's critics and theatre-going public, their original settlement intentions of playing to the working-class Londoners went amiss, and, their life as a theatre of recognition began. They might never have been known for their work had they not decided to be in London, but settling in the capital had its consequences. Current scholarship partly demonstrates and partly argues that contemporary western culture and theatre industry are averse to representing the ideas of the radical left on the stage, and the situation was no different in the 1950s, as I will discuss in this chapter.²⁴

London had hosted Theatre Workshop a few times before they settled in Stratford in late 1952.²⁵ With its settling in London in late 1952, Theatre Workshop was to break into a middle-class theatre environment despite aims of addressing the Stratford-area working-class audiences. London theatres were running on the escapist themes of French plays and American musicals and the modernist trends were confined to experimental club theatres such as the Independent Theatre Society (1891) and the Stage Society founded (1899). Modernists won some victories in

²⁴ The scholarly, artistic and journalistic debates on popular radicalism can be found in Aleks Sierz's extensive survey of how radical populism in theatre is discerned in England in the new millennium in his essay, 'Can old forms be reinvigorated? Radical populism and new writing in British theatre today.' He gives examples of views recognizing or refuting the possibility, and quotes Graham Whybrow in his opinion that radical populism is 'a workerist or Trotskyist mentality' where one breaks into the system to change public view and that 'Today this pairing of popular form and radical content is rare because the ideology underpinning that idea has been cast into doubt.' View of the fifties can be grasped in Kenneth Tynan's writings on the working-class dramas in London, especially in his phrases such as, when he writes of Littlewood's political standing to impart that she 'stands well to the Left,' adding that it was not, 'a fact of much significance; it applies to nearly every theatre company in Europe of any contemporary importance.' Aleks Sierz, 'Can old forms be reinvigorated?' *Contemporary Theatre Review* 16, no. 3 (2007), 302. Accessed 4/10/2017, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10486800600818830>; Kenneth Tynan, *A View of the English Stage, 1944-1965*, (London: Methuen, 1984), 258.

²⁵ They played at St. Pancras Town Hall in November 1946, at Rudolf Steiner Theatre in October 1947, at the Adelphi in February and March 1950, at the Embassy, Swiss Cottage and the Comedy Theatre in May and June 1952. Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 201-5.

the thirties with their Shakespeare interpretations, directed by Russian avant-garde artists, but these productions deliberately stayed out of political themes with certain exceptions such as the Birmingham Rep's production of *Hamlet* in 1925, directed by A. J. Ailiff, with Rep's director Barry Jackson stating their efforts as "aimed at making the people of England believe today that the plays of Shakespeare are really good stuff – the right thing," while having the actors dress casually and apply modern manners in acting, calling to mind the Theatre Workshop style that would 'revolutionize' West End in 1950s.²⁶ The war years reinforced audience preference towards light entertainment and most of thirties' gains were cast aside. After the war, The determinants shaping the Post-war theatre were shown in the hostile relations of individuals, their failures in communicating, and their confinement in space and their need to hold on to known truths that Williams relates as a divorce from the significance of the known world, demonstrating an impossibility of 'willed action,' and an embrace of the philosophical absurd, as well as a shattering of naturalism.²⁷ The conservative surface of the British population was also being scratched by the new youth trends and the labor optimism had waned by 1949. Christopher Booker calls the year 1956 the year of Angry Young Men, of *Look Back in Anger*, coffee bar philosophers, street riots of the Teddy Boys who caused considerable damage in South London, and rock'n roll idols.²⁸ The conflicts of the industrial age, which culminated in the inter-war period's articulate class struggle, seemed to have disappeared along with the Welfare State and

²⁶ Dennis Kennedy, 'British theatre, 1895–1946: art, entertainment, audiences – an introduction', in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre*, edited by Baz Kershaw, 3, (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 30. Accessed December 2, 2015. Chapter Doi:

<http://dx.doi.org/offcampus.lib.washington.edu/10.1017/CHOL9780521651325.002>

²⁷ Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 325.

²⁸ Christopher Booker, *The Neophiliacs*, (Boston: Gambit, 1970), 86.

the Butler Education Act. Now, the revolution virtually belonged to a different social group: the urban youth.

Dominic Shellard reports the early 50s in British theatre as one mainly dominated by the West End's escapist, entertainment oriented shows that largely hosted French plays and popular American musicals such as *Oklahoma!* and socially exploring plays such as Tennessee Williams' *A Street Car Named Desire*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1950) in London. French actors' lively employment of their whole bodies was a wonder to the British audience who knew entertainment by British actors who 'appeared to be locked in rigor mortis.'²⁹ Socially gravitating topics were popular in TV and all socially and politically concerning matters, according to Shellard, "failed to impinge upon the West End stage."³⁰ Oscar Lewinstein, a dedicated left-wing with Unity Theatre experience founded The English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre in Sloane Square to become the alternative to the West End along with the Theatre Workshop.³¹ Their 1956 production of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* premiered two weeks earlier than Theatre Workshop's earlier Behan play, *The Quare Fellow*, to make the company the cradle of social realism as it carried the mundane realities of everyday life of lower

²⁹ Dominic Shellard, *British Theatre since the War*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 20.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

³¹ The English Stage Company was founded in 1952 at the Royal Court Theatre under the artistic directing of George Devine and Tony Richardson, also a member of the New Oxford Group as Tynan, in cooperation with Oscar Lewinstein who were planning to revive the Court Theatre with a principle to "create an intelligent program for a committed public in a way that had only been sporadically possible in the West End, or had been accorded limited appeal by being relegated to ghetto status in the theatre clubs." Oscar Lewenstein regarded this theatre as the Court that closed in 1933; as the house of the great 1904-1907 season of Granville Barker, with his partner Vedrenne, "presenting Euripides, Schnitzler, Hauptmann, Yeats, Galsworthy, his own plays and no fewer than eleven plays by Shaw." Oscar Lewenstein, (1994). *Kicking against the pricks: A theatre producer looks back: The memoirs of Oscar Lewenstein*, (London: Nick Hern Books, 1994), 1; Shellard, *British Theatre*, 47.

classes to the stage, such as the domestic ironing job or the less than polite language of the London slums: “variety of regional tones that had previously been the preserve of maids, bobbies and artisans,” in the mid-50s, when “a well-formulated diction was the proof of positive intelligence.”³² Other milestones for the British theatre in late 50s was the Lord Chamberlain’s memorandum in 1957 revising censorship policies towards homosexuality on stage, the Berliner Ensemble’s 1956 London visit and the new wave’s theatre magazine *Encore*’s publication in the same year.³³ Arnold Wesker’s *Trilogy* was performed in The Belgrade Theatre in Coventry in 1958, and the venue was also home to the project titled *Theatre in Education* that coordinated collective school and theatre activities, another novelty in the English theatre that came with the Local Government Act of 1948, although it was a long-established Theatre Workshop educational activity to boost cash flow by then. The year 1958 also welcomed Harold Pinter, who was noted for “the highly theatrical combination of the linguistic and the social, the humorous and the threatening, the struggle for power and the struggle for territory.”³⁴ Finally, Royal Shakespeare Company, after a tumultuous search for home, landed in the Aldwych in 1960.

Cultural and artistic progress of the British theatre happened gradually in the fifties, but the radical versions of these new theatre matters were never easily received. Especially the radical left had various difficulties in accessing British theatre in the post-war period due to the gradual waning of the working-class consciousness, and consequently its politics and activism. We do not need large sign post today, in the rising of extreme right factions, to comprehend what

³² Shellard, *British Theatre*, 51.

³³ The Wolfendon report for decriminalization of homosexuality (1957) and other factors, social and artistic, directed the Lord Chamberlain to issue a memorandum to revise the policy and allow plays with “a serious and sincere attempt to deal with the subject,” stating, however, that exploitations of the matter would be disallowed. Shellard, *British Theatre*, 58-9.

³⁴ Shellard, *British Theatre*, 86.

that lost class consciousness has brought to the societal order. Along with these points to highlight, there are other reservations, such as the shortcomings of the art market or theatre industry in generating and sustaining interventionist theatre projects. The word ‘political’ in theatre has different contexts; types of ‘the political’ expressed in some of the works by scholars such as Philip Auslander (*Presence and Resistance*, 1992), Baz Kershaw (*The Politics of Performance*, 1992) and Michael Patterson (*Strategies of Political Theatre*, 2003), generally refer to different, non-Marxist political discourses that discuss different strategies born within the mind habits of the cultural era that erases all class consciousness, inevitably positioned, therefore, to side with the defeatist discourse claiming the theatres of the radical left as a historically failed weapon, echoes of which can be found in interpretations of Theatre Workshop’s London productions.³⁵ Raphael Samuel finds it a ‘peculiar phenomenon’ that cultural politics of late twentieth-century should be a “preoccupation of the New Left,” and that the proliferation of the socialist theatre groups should be singled out as theatres of the seventies, foregoing any connections with the original labor theatre movements that started at the turn of the twentieth century.³⁶ Writing in the 1980s when the industrial conflicts were resurfacing in

³⁵ Examples for this position can be found in Nadine Holdsworth’s recent work, where she refers to Littlewood’s post-settlement work as such that dismisses class politics. Instances include her reference to Littlewood’s technology-intensive projects with pejorative expressions like, a ‘naïve faith in the potential of technology,’ which I attempt in this project to re-contextualize Littlewood’s progressive views of technology as part of her revolutionary vision in uplifting the working class. Holdsworth also makes references to Littlewood’s ‘dismissive attitudes towards the class politics’ while analyzing how she produced the classics, solely referencing her flexibility in using upper or lower class accents. Nadine Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood’s Theatre*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 216; 89.

³⁶ Raphael Samuel, in his chapter titled ‘Workers’ Theatre 1926-36,’ further refers to limited recognition of Theatre Workshop and London Unity as a radical theatre of the thirties and forties and writes, “many of the questions discussed today (80s) were burning issues for the socialist theatre workers in the 1920s, in now-forgotten movements like the Workers’ Theatre Movement (WTM), and the idea of a political theatre can be traced back at least to the 1900s.” Raphael Samuel, ‘Workers Theatre 1926-36,’ in, David Bradby, et. al. eds., *Performance and politics in*

England, Samuel criticizes modern labor movement historians for “consistently ignoring” the cultural dimensions of politics and adds that the questions raised by the WTM “are live issues for many theatre workers today,” and if “brought to bear on history, could do a good deal to illuminate the record of the past [and] bring enlightenment and perspective to the present.”³⁷ What the contemporary theatre argues as the ‘political’ is very different from what Littlewood and MacColl held up as a revolutionary cause. For the last few decades, postmodernist aesthetic creations and definitions of the same have brought an urge to discuss postmodern categories of the political. Baz Kershaw and Michael Patterson share similar grounds refuting theatre’s capacity to accommodate radical left-wing politics; Kershaw demands that theatre leaves its place to performance art in the political arena, to free itself of the ubiquitously raced, gendered, classed, and colonially structured text; Patterson claims that theatrical tools of the radical thirties cannot trouble the matters of the post-war era.

The context of the Joan Littlewood Centenary is a starting point to reflect on how current journalism or theatre scholarship regards Littlewood’s dedication to radical working-class culture. It is true that that the group gained recognition after their London settlement and most scholarship is interested in that recognized phase. The post-settlement phase was also a period relatively freed from its playwright and ideologue Ewan MacColl’s ideas about class struggle and how to represent it on the stage. Born to a Scottish working-class family in Salford, actively involved in union organizing and vividly celebrating all kinds of folk traditions embraced by the working class in the days, Jimmie Miller (MacColl) had been infused with songs, performances, street games and literature of folk tradition that actively supported and

popular drama Aspects of popular entertainment in theatre, film and television 1800 – 1976, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 213.

³⁷ Samuel, “Workers Theatre 1926-36,” 227-8.

gave life to Labor Movement in the earlier twentieth-century Manchester. His position was determined; his ideas of art and his search for a language to express the workers' cause were a lifetime quest that he never dropped, even after quitting the Theatre Workshop that he founded with Joan Littlewood in 1945. MacColl is well known as a folk singer as he continued his career in music after ending his active membership in the Theatre Workshop. It wasn't a definitive break; he did collaborate with Joan Littlewood on plays after that, and he took a part in a London production of the *Three Penny Opera*, to continue being theatrically active in the 1980s' economic crisis in Britain, leading young workers and supporters in agit-prop protests and forming a group again to perform a play.³⁸ Leaving Ewan MacColl in the shade while acknowledging the Theatre Workshop legacy is a way of refuting the overall leftist politics that he and Littlewood made integral to the group's work.

This chapter consists of seemingly disparate parts that individually address the task of exploring contemporary interpretations of Theatre Workshop legacy. The first part discusses the recent revival of Littlewood's Fun Palace project by Stella Duffy to find that the spirit of the revival seems practically congruent with the blueprint of the project, despite some vital differences of intentionalities and structures of feeling, which I discuss partly here and partly in the following chapters. The second part offers an analysis of two productions: *Oh What a Lovely*

³⁸ MacColl's activities in theatre did not cease upon leaving the group. He visited as an actor and continued to work as an author when necessary. He even supported them financially by taking part, as he told in an interview, in a production of the *Three Penny Opera* in the Aldridge Theatre in London, playing a street singer: 'I'd left Theatre Workshop – I'd gone into Three Penny Opera [sic] to earn some money for the Theatre because everybody was still giving their earnings, when things were bad with Theatre Workshop, we'd all chip in with any money we'd earned, I mean money we'd earned on the side. I did a lot of radio programs just to earn money for the theatre. This time I was in a west end [sic] success earning money for the theatre ... I left that show after about nine months – I'd had enough of playing the same role for nine months.' Parsley, sage and politics, 6th interview, Ewan MacColl - Peggy Seeger Archives, Ruskin College, Oxford.

War! (1963) compared to *Last Edition* (1940) to demonstrate the continuities from the interwar period into the last hit of Theatre Workshop, after surveying the field discussions on the same matter. Finally, I discuss the responses in the inter-war British theatre to the ‘red peril,’ survey the post-war working-class realities as well as the mainstream theatrical trends whereby cautionary conservatism was shattered. Further, I examine the cultural settings that gave way to the neo-liberal mind habits of the first world order in its rejection of radical class politics and its reflections in the theatrical sphere with reference to the works of cultural critiques Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard and Chantal Mouffe, and Labor scholars Mike Wayne and Deirdre O’Neill, and the British theatre artist John McGrath.

Recent interpretations of the Theatre Workshop legacy and the Fun Palace revival

In contemporary theatre scholarship and journalism, Joan Littlewood is known by many names: “a theatre maverick,” “a genius of theatre,” “the mother of modern theatre,” “the founder of the radical Theatre Workshop,” “the first woman director of a repertory company,” “a director of iconic plays,” “a cultural innovator” and “the greatest revolutionary of British theatre.” These names describe a monolithic persona who singlehandedly revolutionized the British theatre.³⁹ Hence, other than being the 100th year of the Great War, 2014-15 was marked in the British theatrical environment as the Joan Littlewood centenary. The events included a round-the-year run of Theatre Workshop’s *Oh What a Lovely War!* by the Theatre Royal in Stratford, company’s home from 1952 to 1979. For the centenary the Royal Mail issued a set of commemorative

³⁹ These references to Joan Littlewood are surveyed across many sources, including the National Theatre’s and two universities’ websites, and various blogs such as *The Public Reviews*, *Theatre Cloud*, *Transpontine*, *Times Higher Education*, newspaper websites of *The Guardian* and *Telegraph* and are cited further in the chapter as their contents are referred.

stamps. Its website states: “Littlewood features on the Royal Mail’s Remarkable Lives stamps set issued in March, honoring individuals who have made a significant contribution to UK life.”⁴⁰

The centenary celebrations hosted an idea by Stella Duffy, a theatre director, actor and a novelist, who posed the question in 2013: “Who wants to do something for Joan Littlewood’s centenary in 2014, that isn’t another revival?”⁴¹ The call started a chain-reaction across the UK to initiate the opening of more than 150 Fun Palaces in Britain alone. Duffy’s idea was also taken up by theatre people beyond the British borders who opened up spaces in other countries such as Canada, Iceland, Germany and Japan. These venues opened their spaces on the weekend of 4th and 5th October 2014, just before Littlewood’s 100th birthday on October 6. The idea of Fun Palace was developed by Joan Littlewood and Cedric Price in late 1960s to support community engagement with arts and crafts, following Littlewood’s motto ‘everyone an artist, everyone a scientist’. The venues had to comply with the founding principles of the never materialized Fun Palace, which Littlewood and Price had described as “free, local, innovative, transformative and engaging.”⁴² The venues were free to offer their menu of activities to their locals for the weekend. *The Reviews Hub* blog shared Duffy’s statement about Fun Palaces as “a huge shout for culture at the heart of our communities, working towards democratizing arts and science and making them accessible to the people”, and her hope that the centenary would become an annual weekend event and inspire new generations of artist and audiences all over the world.⁴³

⁴⁰ “Special postmark celebrates the life of theatre director and writer Joan Littlewood,” Royal Mail Group Press Releases, published 7 October 2014, accessed April 29, 2015, <http://www.royalmailgroup.com/media/press-releases/special-postmark-celebrates-life-theatre-director-and-writer-joan-littlewood>

⁴¹ “News: Fun Palaces project marks Littlewood centenary,” *The Reviews Hub* (blog), July 21, 2014, <http://www.thepublicreviews.com/news-fun-palaces-project-marks-littlewood-centenary/>,

⁴² “News: Fun Palaces,” *The Reviews Hub*.

⁴³ Ibid.

Ironically, the Arts Council, whom Littlewood had repeatedly approached and who had rejected her for most of her career, funded the project.⁴⁴ Peter Rankin, who worked with Littlewood in 1960s, introduced her official biography, *Joan Littlewood: Dreams and Realities*, which he authored, during the centenary events at the National Theatre. Titled as, ‘Remembering Joan Littlewood,’ the event on September 30, 2014, celebrated the “theatre maverick’s life and work.”⁴⁵

The Fun Palace project suggested by Stella Duffy went viral across the UK, as well as on social media, sharing the events of the centenary weekend with the nation, and social media followers like me, and eventually recruiting more venues for the following year’s event and furthermore, making it annual: Fun Palaces were repeated across the globe in 2015 and 2016, too, with the same principles.

Although the Fun Palace theme is quite removed from the period of Littlewood’s career that my research focuses on, I have found the recurrence of the Fun Palace in the context of Joan Littlewood Centenary quite relevant to my attempts to illuminate the varying degrees of mismatch between the original political premises of Theatre Workshop and the Joan Littlewood legacy in contemporary English theatre. Fun Palace was a dream of Joan Littlewood that never materialized, maybe it was recourse to dreams that she could not work out on the stage; an extension of her revolutionary fervor that she found could not manifest through the theatre. So she dreamed of the Fun Palace, which had to do with space, work, ambition, talent, freedom and

⁴⁴ “A word from the producer: On Joan Littlewood, Orwell and Huxley,” *Theatre Cloud* (blog), August 5, 2014, <http://theatrecloud.com/news/a-word-from-the-producer-on-joan-littlewood-orwell-and-huxley>

⁴⁵ “Remembering Joan Littlewood,” National Theatre, accessed October 13, 2015, (link broken as of June 9th, 2017) <http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/discover/platforms/remembering-joan-littlewood>

change. Fun Palace was not a theatre. It was an idealized space to set people free through arts, science and crafts and bring a change to their life views. Upon further archival research, I found that the currently promoted Fun Palaces across the UK are mostly in keeping with the blue print of the Fun Palace projects structured by Littlewood and Price, with small exceptions, which I argue in third chapter as determining differences that acknowledged her revolutionary tendencies compliant with 1930s' progressive revolutionary spirit – a structure of feeling - rather than a 1968's spatially concerned theatre paradigm shaped in the New Left era. Still, current undertaking of the Fun Palace projects looks like a more approachable project than trying to revive her wizardry on the stage!

Before proceeding with detailed accounts of the Fun palace revivals, I would argue at this point that Joan Littlewood gave in to the New Left idea of appropriating real-life spaces for creative and recreational endeavors due to the loss of talents and synergies in the Theatre Workshop. Below excerpt belongs to notes in Littlewood's hand writing, dated 1972, fathoming ways of bringing the Theatre Royal to full-function again as a theatre enlivened by its community after the failed attempts of creating the Fun Palace or other various street engaged projects such as Stratford Street Fair or Pavilions in Parks. In her notes, Littlewood mentions the lack of interest in the Fun Palace project and reflects on a different project titled 'Lea Valley,' described as "a design for a contemporary 6 acre work-play area where new skills could be taught and drama used as a means of stimulating creative endeavor," implying a return to the idea of making theatre after finding out that her environmental projects would not find sponsorship.⁴⁶ It is possible to infer from the below excerpt that Littlewood had to drop theatre

⁴⁶ The Lea Valley Development Plan was carried out by the local Civic Trust in East London and it incorporated Littlewood's Fun Palace project into its own plan in 1964. The Fun Palace was designed and programmed between 1961-63; its feasibility studies were completed in 1964.

out of necessity:

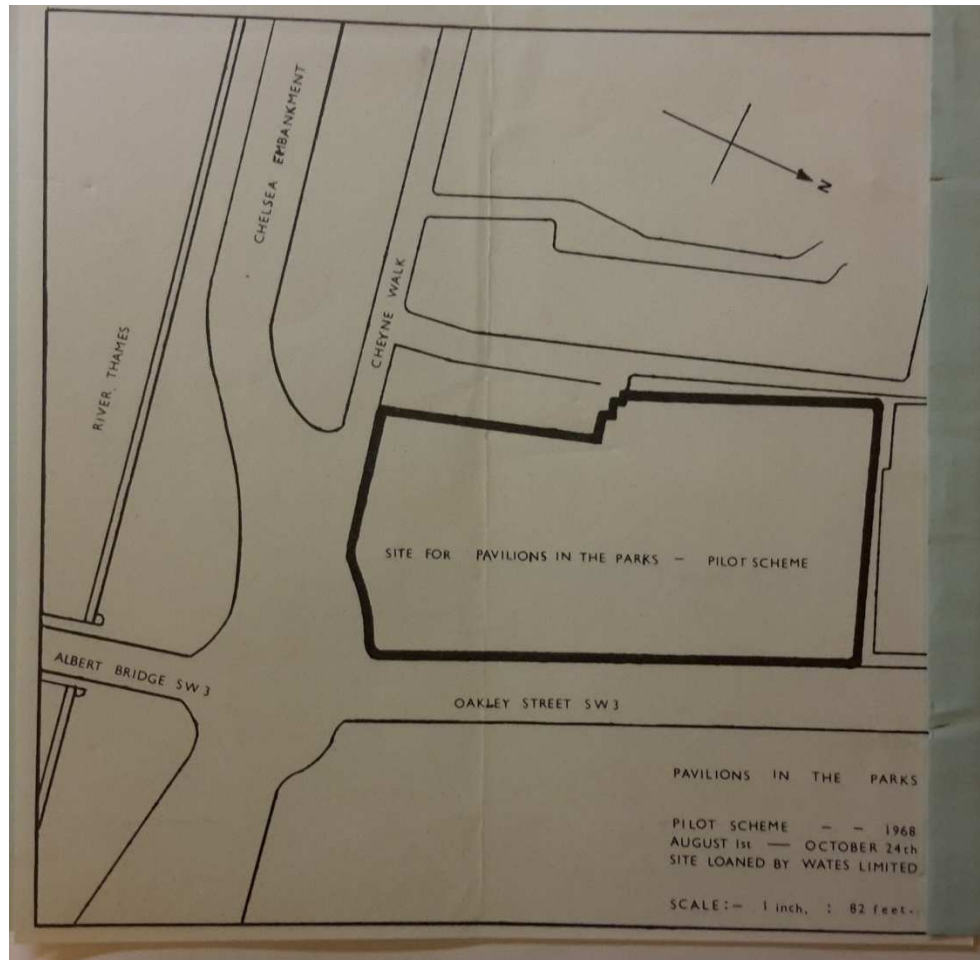
Theatre Workshop was formed into a social objective and for a long time its actors refused all offers of transfer plays or their individual services to commercial managements. The company's failing to win recognition or subsidy for its social function meant that it had finally to sell packaged replicas of its work or cease to exist. Production followed production and the energy of the nucleus of artists who trained and (?) and directed Theatre Workshop was exhausted and their work dissipated. (Joan Littlewood, 'Use of Theatre Royal Stratford, 1972,' Michael Barker Collection of Joan Littlewood, Box 2, Folder 4. Harry Ransom Center, UT Austin)

Realizing that theatre could not support itself in its progressive community tasks and following the New Left impetus of late 1960s, Littlewood developed many site-specific, as well as portable artistic spaces that could be interpreted, in my observation, both as community oriented and as moving art projects, strolling the urban geography, reminiscent of Theatre Workshop's strolling ensemble days. Site-specific projects mostly included transforming post-war debris in the Stratford area into children's parks and the larger, movable – strolling schemes

It was set up as a foundation and registered as a charitable trust in 1966, and it was withdrawn from the Lea Valley site in 1966, due to neighborhood objections. The Fun Palace project found a home in Stratford's local Lea Valley development program, but in its ideal life, it was intended as a travelling, portable site that belonged more to an urban than a community setting. See Chronology section of the 'Non program A Laboratory of Fun by Joan Littlewood Head of Project Committee' in *The Drama Review*, 130-4 in The Michael Barker Collection, Subseries E, Joan Littlewood in print, Box 3, Folder 12. Harry Ransom Center, UT Austin.

included proposals such as ‘Bubble City’ projects or ‘Pavilions in the Parks’ pilot schemes that would hopefully start as free, self-running projects and then be adopted by local authorities to stay permanent. The strolling categories chose pilot areas that were in central districts in London, for example the ‘Pavilions in Parks,’ which included inflatable, sound insulated structures for the 1968 Summer Fair, to last for three months and make audial and/or visual performing (or non-performing) slots available for applicants for a maximum of four weeks.⁴⁷ The map for the proposed pilot area demonstrates the target district, Chelsea, which is quite a distance from the Stratford East community in London:

⁴⁷ For the inflatable and portable structures in Bubble City and/or Pavilions projects, The Fun Palace Trust, which administered all environmental projects following the Fun Palace, got in touch with Allan Kaprow, who referred them to a New Jersey architecture company interested in working with the artists. Letter correspondence from Allan Kaprow to Michael Saunders Barker, dated 27 May 1967. Box 3, Folder 3, Michael Barker Collection, Harry Ransom Center, UT Austin.



‘Pavilions in the Parks’ project detail, Michael Barker Collection of Joan Littlewood, Subseries D: Fun Palace Trust, Notes on Street Fairs, Box 3, Folder 6, Harry Ransom Center, UT Austin.

Before sharing the details of the Fun Palace revival, surveying the recent scholarship on Littlewood’s Fun Palace idea will help establish the grounds for comparison. Robert Leach calls Fun Palace, “a kind of twentieth-century equivalent to the eighteenth-century pleasure gardens,” in cooperation with Cedric Price, the architect famously known for his “space-age utopianism.”⁴⁸ Characterized by informality and flexibility, Leach stresses the project to be Littlewood’s

⁴⁸ Robert Leach, *Theatre Workshop Joan Littlewood and the Making of Modern British Theatre*, (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006), 201.

conception of a “university of the streets,” offering various recreational and creative activities. However, Leach’s reference to an idea of forming “strong community link[s]” through the project does not sound like the original proposal, as I have found that the site was proposed to be open to all people of all ranks and from all districts of London and elsewhere, and makes no specific reference to a matter of ‘community.’⁴⁹ The recent revivals differ from the original project in the same sense, in my observation. As I discuss in the following chapters, the Fun Palace project had a vocation to make downtown temporarily accessible to various classes (unspecified) and groups of people, which I find closer to the notion of the millennial occupy movements, therefore the extent of its vocations for creating urban playgrounds can be debated. Likewise, the ‘Fun Palace Argument,’ published in *The Drama Review* in 1968, states wider social and urban concerns than communal ones in its description of the project:

The city today works in a constipated way, in spite of its physical and architectural limitations. The legacy of redundant buildings and the resultant use of patterns acts as a straitjacket to total use and enjoyment ... A short-life toy of dimensions and organizations not limited by or to a particular site is one good way of trying ... to catch up with the mental dexterity and mobility exercised by all today. (‘Fun Palace Argument,’ *The Drama Review*, Vol. 12:3 (1968), 129 in Subseries E: Joan Littlewood in print, Box 3, Folder 12, Harry Ransom Center, UT Austin)

Joan Littlewood describes the site in her ‘Non Program’ as “not only accessible to those living and working in the immediate neighborhood, but also accessible as a regional and national amenity ... allow[ing] random time usage [which makes the idea of community bonding a less

⁴⁹ Robert Leach, *Theatre Workshop*, 201.

likely outcome] ... [with] varied communication routes ... of a metropolitan or regional network *passing* [sic] the site,” due to the fact that the varying metropolitan destinations chosen for the site would probably differ in terms of public’s attention to the offerings of the site and the local routines of the district.⁵⁰

Nadine Holdsworth offers a deeper analysis of the Fun Palace, and refers to its difference from its contemporary projects as it stands ‘culturally inclusive,’ and yet calling it a ‘twenty-four-hour long, large-scale community center,’ interprets its communal functions in reference to Nicolas Bourriaud’s ‘relational aesthetics’ theory which draws attention to the possibility of art work’s creating a relational space in an alienated society.⁵¹ This re-emphasized notion of community-building through relational aesthetics counters Littlewood’s own accounts of her projects, such as when she expressed the following conceptions of the project in a 1964 interview: “it’s a delight place, a learn place, a toy for people. You’re not meant to look at it. You’re meant to be in it. But you mustn’t be addicted. It’s a microcosm of a city. A toy where a woman can behave like a harlot if she wants to. Not a do-good place, a do-bad place,” which potentially counters the scholarly domestication attempts to call the Fun Palace project a tool for building communities, but on the contrary, reproduces the rowdy feeling of communion that Littlewood sought in her stage-audience relationship.⁵² Further, Holdsworth refers to Cedric Price’s cooperative inspiration as a visionary architect and their proposing “a radical re-conceptualizing of cultural democracy and participative learning,” and reads the Fun Palace as

⁵⁰ Joan Littlewood, ‘Non Program,’ 133.

⁵¹ Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood’s Theatre*, 206-11.

⁵² As I mentioned earlier, Littlewood, in an interview, expressed that she aimed for a sense of communion in her productions, like in the pubs, and the interviewer noted: “anti-theatre, anti-art, anti-apathy” in her transcript of the interview titled in an unedited version, ‘Joan Littlewood, Oct. 1, 1964.’ In Mel Gussow Collection, 109.1 Littlewood, Joan 1964-1994, in Harry Ransom Center at UT Austin.

their “rethinking of the spaces” for such encounters.⁵³

To explore the nature of the Fun Palace revival, we can look at 2014 and 2015 revivals as examples. The revivals happen annually in the first weekend of October and they can be followed on the social media. The first year’s events were hosted by more than 150 venues in the UK, beyond the expected degree of engagement when the project was being discussed in various forums by Stella Duffy and others. A variety of venues opened their doors in the weekend commemorating Joan Littlewood’s 100th birthday in 2014: the weekend of 4th and 5th of October, including churches, libraries, theatre houses, parks, swimming pools, museums, schools, bakeries and cocoa houses, art and community centers. Next to institutional hosts such as Birmingham Arts Museum, London Metropolitan Archives and museums, two theatre companies opened the smallest venues for the event: Big Telly Theatre’s Fun Palace was a small size caravan and Agent 160 Theatre built a tent in the Wales Millennium Center. The event was offered freely to its neighboring citizens, to engage them through the weekend with arts, sciences and crafts. From what I could gather on Facebook, I can list these activities as baking, composing music and writing lyrics, conducting scientific experiments, water sports and games, designing costumes and wearing them, drawing and painting, children’s theatres, junk sculpture, story-telling, improvisational ‘DIY Theatres’ of random card picking and performing, sandwich making competitions, baking, street-size board games, weaving, work-outs, playing with clowns, photography, shadow puppetry, relief printing, painting with professional artists, 3D printing, building camera obscura, ice cream making, decorating, model building (e.g., flying Fun Palaces), ukulele and tambourine playing, story painting, pop and folk singing, origami and knitting, dressing up as mermaids, swimming, kayaking, yoga, giant origami, Japanese

⁵³ Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood’s Theatre*, 219.

storytelling, seniors' sharing memories, mask making, geometric crochet learning, belly dancing, language learning, stained glass works, making comics, adult face painting, and sharing international breakfasts.⁵⁴

While it is difficult to find a narrative account of the events, I could find a person's shared experience in the comments sections to Michael Billington's review of the centenary on *Guardian* on 6 October 2014. This person shared their experience in Brockwell Lido, an outdoor swimming pool:

As she would have loved the legacy dreamt up this weekend by Stella Duffy and Shelley Silas of Littlewood's long hoped for Fun Palaces. All around the country. We had ours at Brockwell Lido. And the sun shone! the mermaids dipped and flipped. You could play dominoes on the poolside or get your blood pressure taken, learn more about dance and science, sign language or the eco system. Glide on the pool in kayaks or try your hand at the cycling machines.

It all went off, if you'll forgive the word, swimmingly. Gloriously.

I think Joan would have loved it.

And to tower it all off, a screening of Oh What a Lovely War, Richard

Attenborough's directorial debut.

It was great - but you know, I'm over 50 and I can remember the impact

⁵⁴ Detailed photographs of events can be reached at Facebook page of Fun Palaces. Various events listed above are descriptions of pages with links. Fun Palaces' Facebook page, accessed October 10, 2015, https://www.facebook.com/FunPalaces/photos/ms.c.eJxFzNERwCAIA9CNeqKGwP6LtcLFnl~:PhABwjxwbDMAetM3mxjRe8~:uKWDLKTNm7P8scPk~:O3~_vsL4Zc~;bFv7p1DZt0Pytm5~_t~_rfMurbTKq7y73vmufefqeeAEuZjRV.bps.a.555668887911886.1073741833.488480977964011/555668904578551/?type=3&theater

the stage show made on me, watching it standing in the sawdust at the back of the stalls as there was then at the Theatre Royal. It was bitter and playful and terribly, terribly moving. (backscratch, 6 October 2014 (5:25) comment on Michael Billington, “Joan Littlewood: Oh what a legacy”)

Another piece indicative of events scheduled for the 2014 Fun Palace weekend was from the website of Theatre Royal at Stratford East, Theatre Workshop’s home from 1953 to 1979, inviting people to contribute to their project of building a ‘little wood’ for Joan, under the banner: “Stratford East Fun Palace ‘Petit Bois’ (A ‘Little Wood’ for Joan) in The Courtyard, Old Town Hall, 29 Broadway, Stratford, London E15 on Sunday 5 October 2014, 2-5pm” The Theatre called out to the community and asked to bring in “a real tree/sapling in a pot - or a homemade tree (use your imagination – make a tree out of whatever you can recycle!)” to assemble a forest of 100 trees for the afternoon, “in a marquee in the middle of Stratford!” the list of activities included learning to make a pin-hole camera, seed-bomb with community gardeners, twisting a balloon-dog, blowing a didgeridoo, making a wish, doing a tango, having a sing, lying back and listening to a fusion of Argentinian music and other rhythms, getting a cake for a story... and making a difference with Populace’s Change the World Workshop!⁵⁵

2015 October’s Fun Palaces took place in Australia and New Zealand, too, adding to the international network of the annual event that had already covered countries like Japan and Germany. In North America, there appeared to be two physical venues for the 2015 event; one of them in New York, Queens, Qed’s Fun Palace. North American region’s digital Fun Palace was a

⁵⁵ “FUN PALACE - ‘PETIT BOIS’ (A ‘LITTLE WOOD’ FOR JOAN)” Theatre Royal Stratford East’s Facebook page, accessed October 10, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/events/1542737622624626/>

radio show in Toronto, Canada: The Fun Palace Radio Variety Show. The show held an exclusive online space for the Fun Palace project for 24 hours for “streaming local content and connecting with Fun Palaces across the world.”⁵⁶ The other physical venue in Canada was Cathedral Village Arts Festival Fun Palace in Saskatchewan, joining in with “storytelling, science of color, hair braiding, artist cards, weaving, “frankentoy” & more!”⁵⁷

Here is how Duffy interpreted Littlewood’s dream of the Fun Palaces: “a space that would welcome populist and high art, sciences and technology, adults and children. Free and welcoming to all, the Fun Palace was to be a “university of the streets”, a “laboratory of problem solving and fun”. The utopian vision was imagined in 1960s when it seemed that technology would soon free the working people from the drudgery of manual labor, and everyone – not just the educationally and financially fortunate – would have free time and energy to learn, to explore, to play, to engage” and eventually creativity would no longer be the monopoly of the privileged elite and the process would eventually blur the work-play boundaries. Drawing attention to the elections forthcoming in seven months, Duffy saw the Fun Palaces project as a catalyst to enhance community engagement that would strengthen the intentions of challenging norms and taking risks for change. She stated that academic studies showed this kind of action would do away with voter apathy. Thus, Stella Duffy upheld the event as a form of political engagement. After the first event in 2014, Duffy wrote for *The Labour Arts Alliance*, a blog promoted by Labour Party, and claimed that the Fun Palaces across the nation provided ground for public access to arts, crafts and sciences and eventually would bring public cohesion and

⁵⁶ “The Fun Palace Radio Variety Show,” Fun Palaces, accessed 10 October 2015 (link broken as of June 9th 2017), <http://funpalaces.co.uk/discover/the-fun-palace-radio-variety-show-2/>

⁵⁷ “Cathedral Village Art Festival Fun Palace,” Fun Palaces, accessed 10 October 2015 (link broken as of June 9th 2017), <http://funpalaces.co.uk/discover/cathedral-village-arts-festival-fun-palace/>

political presence. Duffy stated in her piece that the Fun Palaces were a way of staying politically engaged in the face of political leadership that was “predominantly white, male, middle class” and wallowing in “apathy and disaffection,” promoting austerity policies by cutting away the funds for community centered programs. Duffy reported that the Fun Palace event in the 2014 October attracted more than 60,000 people in England who were mostly volunteers, “often on minimal funding [...] people who had never before created a community event, let alone one engaging with both arts and sciences.”⁵⁸ The Albany Theatre at Deptford was able to proceed with the organization of Fun Palaces events with grants secured from various sources.

It seems true that the Fun Palaces event had a political edge. Looking at the activities and the community engagement, one can see that the results were very low profile artistically, but the event did bring the communities together. In the main axis of my research, where I try to chart how studies of Littlewood’s work have aestheticized it at the expense of the radical politics that motivated her aesthetics, a return to this kind of toddling art and community cooperation is a difficult station in my pursuit. Difficulties of sustaining Theatre Workshop after losing its talents to the West End and TV seems to have caused Littlewood to embrace dreams beyond her theatre stage to fathom the emancipation of local communities, rather than the working class, although I argue that her motives were consistently resonant with the Old Left as opposed to the New Left. Her choice to focus on local communities also contributes to the arguments about the inter-war left wing theatrical weapons’ continuing into community oriented and applied theatre practices.

The centenary has been received well and without reservations by the theatre circles. In

⁵⁸ Stella Duffy, “The opportunity to create boosts wellbeing, social cohesion and public engagement,” Labour Arts Alliance, published October 15, 2014, accessed October 10 2015 (link broken as of June 9th 2017), http://www.labourartsalliance.org.uk/the_opportunity_to_create_boosts_wellbeing_social_cohesion_and_public_engagement

its first year's wake, Elizabeth Schafer, British theatre scholar, wrote in an article for *Times Higher Education* that the attempt was about doing something to bring art and science together and eventually make a difference for a community, and that "[t]his risk-taking, big, brave, counter-cultural and slightly insane project seems far more Littlewoodian than yet another production of *Lovely War*."⁵⁹

One of the remarks on Littlewood's contribution to British theatre that showed awareness of the disparities between her political vision and the centenary's direction gravitating towards yet another mythologization of her theatre, came from Jenny King, a friend of Littlewood, who had worked as her assistant from 1973 to 1976. King, who devised and produced a 35-minute film, *A Tribute to Joan Littlewood*, added to the common appreciation of her work, stating that Littlewood had broadened the classic repertoire, discovered new writers, and assembled a genuine company of extraordinary performers to create a fresh theatrical style of playing.⁶⁰ Yet she also added that Joan Littlewood had been deeply engaged with the present. "If Joan were alive now," King said, "for sure, the horrors of Gaza would be under hers and Gerry's scrutiny rather than any revival of *Oh What A Lovely War*," and probably the initiation of the Fun Palaces, too, for that same reason, in my opinion. King related Littlewood's ideas about reviving the theatre: "There is more stimulus in reality than in these endless discussions about art, all the schematic ideas for reviving theatre. They're not the answer. The answer is all around us."⁶¹

⁵⁹ Liz Schafer, "Stage Whispers: Joan Littlewood," *Times Higher Education*, published August 21, 2014, accessed October 5, 2015, <http://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/culture/stage-whispers-joan-littlewood/2015209.article>

⁶⁰ Jenny King, "A Tribute to Joan Littlewood," *Theatre Cloud* (blog), published February 4, 2015, <http://theatrecloud.com/news/a-tribute-to-joan-littlewood>

⁶¹ "A word from the producer," *Theatre Cloud* (blog).

In a press release, Teeside University reported that both the university and the historic Ormsby Hall, where the Theatre Workshop was located for eighteen months in 1946 and 1947, were official Fun Palaces. Teeside University invited a guest lecturer, Jean Newlove, the Theatre Workshop choreographer and MacColl's second wife, to give a talk on October 9, 2014, to celebrate the centenary. As an insider to the theatrical collaboration between Littlewood and MacColl, Newlove reiterated the Leftist vision of their work that, she argued, was so strong that "MI5 kept an eye on them."⁶²

Joan Littlewood's work was commemorated in different contexts in 2015, too, by restaging the musical piece, *Oh What a Lovely War!* on the occasion of the Great War centenary. The play, which parodies the dark realities of the WWI, was written and produced by the Theatre Workshop. It premiered in 1963 and became a significant success when it transferred to the West End that same year and to Broadway the following year. Theatre Workshop's home in London, Theatre Royal Stratford, keeps the show in its steady touring schedule, and it is possible to find the piece on stage, somewhere in the United Kingdom during a random visit. In 2015, the play was staged in the United States, too. The University of Illinois' Theatre Department produced the musical as part of its WWI Centenary program, and the show ran for two weeks at the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts.⁶³

The late British playwright, director and critic Charles Marowitz, in a related article to Littlewood's obituary, displayed one of the most informed sensibilities about Littlewood's legacy

⁶² "Modern British theatre made in Middlesbrough," Teeside University News Centre, published September 22, 2014, accessed January 5, 2015, http://www.tees.ac.uk/sections/news/pressreleases_story.cfm?story_id=4760&this_issue_title=September%202014&this_issue=256

⁶³ "Illinois campus commemorates the centenary of WWI with events for the entire community," Illinois News Bureau, published August 19, 2014. Accessed January 5, 2015, http://news.illinois.edu/news/14/0819WWI_MichaelRothberg_MarcusKeller.html

and dilemmas, recognizing the failure of the Theatre Workshop's mission endorsed jointly by Ewan MacColl and Joan Littlewood. He wrote, "Theatre Workshop stood in the middle of the East End with its cheap, refurbished and charming little late-Victorian playhouse, staging song-and-dance plays for the local people; but the local people never came, though they lived within yards of the Theatre Royal with its convivial bar and barrels of draught beer, and someone at the piano to lead the sing-song before the show." Morowitz thus drew attention to the fact that the Theatre Workshop's "dreams of addressing the working-class," were never fulfilled in London.⁶⁴ However, in his account of Littlewood's work, Marowitz briefly touched upon Theatre Workshop's signature form, the cabaret, as typical of "extemporizing Littlewood tradition," yet again reifying the late Theatre Workshop style as Joan Littlewood's brand. The cabaret format on the Theatre workshop stage owed much of its presence to Ewan MacColl's musical contributions and folk songs, as well as the late Victorian currents such as the music hall tradition prevalent in the 1930s that shaped the workers' theatres. Another review on the centenary by Michael Billington appeared in *Guardian* on 6 October 2014, where he wrote that Littlewood's prime achievement was "to demolish the barriers we erect between "popular" and "art" theatre," and that she had helped to "loosen up British acting and free it from the shackles of well-bred restraint."⁶⁵ The 1950s saw such novelties on the stage by progressive companies such as the English Stage Company and the Theatre Workshop, however both were left-leaning companies with the agenda of bringing the facts of life to the British stage, a residual politics of class

⁶⁴ Charles Marowitz, related articles in the obituary of Joan Littlewood, *The Telegraph*, published may 8, 2014, accessed January 5, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1408012/Joan-Littlewood.html>

⁶⁵ Michael Billington, "Joan Littlewood: Oh what a legacy," *The Guardian*, published October 6, 2014. Accessed October 10, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/oct/06/joan-littlewood-oh-what-a-legacy-centenary>

materialism in the case of Theatre Workshop.

It is possible to see from what I have shared from the centenary news that Joan Littlewood's legacy in contemporary British theatre tends to undermine her original aims, and downplay her theatrical partner Ewan MacColl's input during their seventeen years' partnership in making theatre. As Ric Knowles elucidates, local meaning-making processes generated through the "performance text" modify the contexts of works and bring variance to the meaning-making processes; different audiences and different settings will set new criteria for appreciating sensibilities expressed in these works.⁶⁶ Aleks Sierz, similarly shares British theatre director John Tiffany's views on a Scottish working-class play, *The Straits* (Gregory Burke, 2003) and relates how Tiffany compared MacGrath's use of the vaudeville to this play's extensive use of populist genres such as film, music video and contemporary dance to attract young audiences (and a dream-like feel with the movement works). John Tiffany, who identified his own background as working class, wrote about the play's populist strategies for radicalism: "The radical thing is not that it is avant-garde but that it is a reaction to the elite of the day. Literary theatre seems safe while radical populism can scare critics because they don't grasp all its references."⁶⁷ Likewise, the Theatre Workshop productions, which comprised of the same lively combination of popular references, were intended for a different audience. To the West End, they offered

⁶⁶ In his *Reading the Material Theatre*, Ric Knowles makes a materialist reading of the theatrical production and reception processes, and he regards the totality of these varying procedures that create meaning as "performance text." Same dramatic text produced in different contexts and in different geographies such as in the UK or in Canada or in a festival will assume various cultural meanings with different audiences and their expectations as the totality of the production apparatus will keep shifting according to these variances. Knowles calls this process "performance of contextual shifts," and reminds of the necessity of acknowledging "the contextual complexity in reading theatrical performances." Richard Paul Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre*, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 4; 190; 201.

⁶⁷ Aleks Sierz, "Can old forms be reinvigorated?' radical populism and new writing in British theatre today,' 304.

alternative/opposing views imbued with their radical class politics. Therefore, their productions that travelled to the West End caused a high regard for the freshness of style and radical content, but all the productions except *Oh What a Lovely War!* had to be tamed for the London theatre-goers, as only this show arrived at the West End “with all its teeth gleamingly intact,” as per conventions of what Sierz calls ‘cultural tourism,’ and Knowles calls ‘performance of contextual shift.’⁶⁸

Thus, discussions highlight the reasons why current arguments steer away from fully acknowledging the essence of Littlewood’s theatre as a radical left-wing project, but consent to absorb its aesthetic dimensions. I aim at this complacent regard for the Theatre Workshop stage and read it in the context of what Chantal Mouffe delineates as the post-political era that likes to ignore radical voices and sweep them to the margins of democracy, which I believe applies well to the current appreciation that erases the formative radical roots of the Theatre Workshop. Littlewood’s theatre was an uncomfortable but dazzling theatrical monument of decades’ militant fight against the Establishment. The discussion also seems to offer suitable tools for understanding the current state of global crises born out of the rising extremist right with support from the underdog and the working class factions of the society worried about jobs. It is possible to think that an actively engaged union activity of the workers shaped by class consciousness could have averted the cyclical occurrences of fascism that sacrifices its supporting mass in its

⁶⁸ The comment belongs in a critique in the arts section of *The Times* dated 21 June 1963, titled ‘More tears than mirth’ ‘1914 – 18 Document Moves West’: “In the past when Theatre Workshop plays have moved into the West End the effect of the transfer has been to tame them down. This is emphatically not so in the case of Joan Littlewood’s musical *Oh What a Lovely War* which arrives at Wyndham’s with all its teeth gleamingly intact.” Joan Littlewood Biography folders, Harry Ransom Center Performing Arts Collection at the University of Texas at Austin; Sierz, ‘Can old forms be reinvigorated?’ 304; Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre*, 201.

violent ventures. In the 1940s, Joan Littlewood called this the brutalization of the working class, referring to the estate's traditional use of the workers and the unemployed as fighting machines in the world wars.⁶⁹

In the Joan Littlewood centenary, the radical class politics that shaped her aesthetics was mentioned only once or twice in the reviews. Charles Marowitz's review and Jenny King's contribution to the centenary conversations, as I discussed above are the ones that touch upon Littlewood's defeat in her pursuit of representing the class struggle, as the audience response to support that kind of theatre never materialized. It would be an unfair, however, to claim that the London settlement was the only reason in Theatre Workshop's dissent from effectively representing the class cause from the point of speaking to the correct audience; however much the targeted audience was a tangibly present working class, Littlewood and MacColl's vague definitions of 'people's theatre,' popular as it was in the 1930s to come up with such inspirations of 'people' as the ideal audience, hardly materialized for them as paying spectators in their touring or settled years. If we accept the premise that the audience shapes any theatrical work – and it must be accepted for the revolutionary cause of the Theatre Workshop - it is possible to claim that Littlewood, in her collaborative years with MacColl, engaged with a hypothetical audience instead of a real one. Such facts winking at the convictions of the defeatist discourse on the WTM as a failed weapon have exacerbated the current positions in most theatre journalism

⁶⁹ In her notes in a notebook in the Harry Ransom Center's Joan Littlewood manuscript collection, Littlewood expresses her strong faith in class politics, and she expresses her extreme disappointment in the mobilization of workers as a degrading, silencing and brutalizing process that took them back to the age of barbarism. Littlewood writes in these notes that their theatre worked to express the feelings and desires of this class and that their work was created by the class struggle, to give voice to their tragedy, and help them grasp the realities of life happening around them, which, I believe, is certain to pass as an extremely relevant political attitude in today's world, as well. The Michael Barker Collection of Joan Littlewood, Box 1, Folder 4, the notebook, Harry Ransom Center, UT Austin.

and scholarship, which tend to assess their radical class politics as a lost cause and mostly attend to their theatrical style.

Criticism, scholarship and disciplinary positions

This section offers a general survey of the theatre criticism, scholarship and disciplinary formations in regards to their attitudes towards radical left. General debates on the continuing trends from the WTM practices into current theatres offer a larger scope of the tendencies to attribute the origins of politics on stage to much later periods than 1930s. As I discuss in the fourth chapter with an example from Richard Schechner's formulating the environmentalist theatres of the late sixties in the United States, scholarship engages in discussions to define the political theatre as some post-war wonder, with occasional formalistic references to movements like Bauhaus. While researching the history of forms may offer an objective/ethical category of enquiry, I argue that it is central to the objective of this research to request a step beyond the ethical, towards the political to perceive the Theatre Workshop perspective. It is true that what remains from the political action is a form, and the cause that manifested itself through that form withers from form discussions. Theatre as an industry works through a performance event in many layers, from its authorship to its publishing, use in education and even national development projects, taking a bit of its intended essence away in each expanding layer; each layer is somewhat dependent on the interpretations and comments of its immediate provider.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ A nice example to such a change is what Alan Filewod writes about in his essay 'Improvisation and theatrical power: from discipline to refusal.' In his essay, Filewod explains how the *commedia dell'arte* player became a disciplinary actor in time, professionally applying skills of improvisation, and even how improvisation itself became a field of study gradually growing into a discipline; its definitions under Stanislavsky's work; its use in the Group Theatre of the US; how theatres of the 1960s used it in their 'libratory theatrical resistance;' how it became a methodology in the theatre industry; how the British Theatre in Education movement

Also, across time and cultures, definitions of ‘the political’ change, and the socio-political trends change, and eventually, the artistic forms once incited by these trends become disposable tools for the next generations’ different needs and ideas. Indifference may shape narratives, and furthermore, official history recording tends to flatten and even eliminate data that is likely to disrupt its ‘seamless ‘continuum’ of progress,’ in Derek Paget’s terms, tending to “ignore those ‘continuities’ which do not fit, or which seem in some way unworthy.”⁷¹

There is an ironic moment in the history of workers’ theatres that attests to the discussion above. In the American Paterson Silk Strike Pageant of 1913, which was, formalistically, a merger of the German expressionism and the American pageant/parade tradition, workers and sympathizers enacted version of an ongoing strike to raise funds for the strikers. Lee Papa tells in his book *Staged Action* about the event. It was a financial failure: the IWW leaders accused the organizers for distracting the pageant and for the union loss in the strike. However, as Papa relates, “the Pageant would prove to be a launch point for the entire movement that came after.”⁷² The remark makes one think that the entire theatre movement evolved from a moment of failure in efficacy to serve its cause. Maybe it is why Joan Littlewood said in sixties, when asked if she would go in politics: “That obsolete racket. It’s more obsolete than the theatre.”⁷³

The Workers’ Theatre Movement’s (WTM) geographical span indicates different cultural and ideological impacts upon it, in spite of its unique condition of being overseen by the

used it pedagogically (likewise in the US) as well as in therapy sessions and workplace improvement regiments. Alan Filewod, ‘Improvisation and theatrical power: from discipline to refusal,’ in Rebecca Caines & Ajay Heble eds. *The Improvisation Studies Reader Spontaneous Acts*, (Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2015), 374-9.

⁷¹ Derek Paget, *True Stories*, 74.

⁷² Lee Papa, *Staged Action: Six Plays from the American Workers’ Theatre*, (Ithaca: ILR Press/Cornell University Press, 2009), viii.

⁷³ Interview with Joan Littlewood, 1964. Mel Gussow Collection- 109.1 Littlewood, Joan 1964-1994. Harry Ransom Center, UT Austin.

international policies of the Russian Communist Party. Its timeline starts rather early, following the October Revolution in Russia, and ends with the Popular Front period. However, it certainly causes fresh aesthetic trends to be employed by the left theatres in general that converge in time, for instance, with community theatres or documentary theatre, as Baz Kershaw explains how community theatres can employ both carnivalesque techniques closer to performance art and the agit-prop techniques that are more didactic and protesting. Likewise, although Kershaw formulates his ‘political carnivalesque’ observing the companies like CAST and People Show, he does not categorize Theatre Workshop as a pioneer of the political carnivalesque of the fifties and gives his examples from sixties and seventies, referencing the blurring identities and fading class consciousness of the decades⁷⁴. Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop is a direct descendant of the WTM and presented itself as a community theatre in East London in a letter correspondence between Gerry Raffles and two American playwrights, asserting Theatre Workshop as a community theatre that must “do work relevant to that community or die.”⁷⁵ I contend to think of

⁷⁴ Baz Kershaw discusses in detail what he terms ‘political carnivalesque’ and demonstrates how the 60’s and 70’s community theatres employ the strategy on a paradigm that has agit-prop on one end and the carnivalesque on the other end, according to the needs of their communities or audiences, but he regards companies like CAST (Agit-prop) and People Show (carnivalesque) as examples and does not refer to Theatre Workshop as an example who arguably inspired and guided them. There is a connection between Littlewood and CAST, but I have not come across any connections with the other group and Theatre Workshop. Baz Kershaw, *Politics of Performance Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention*, edited by Baz Kershaw, Taylor and Francis, 1992. 71-84 ProQuest Ebook Central, Accessed 04/19/2017 <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/offcampus.lib.washington.edu/lib/washington/detail.action?docID=170014>

⁷⁵ In a letter written by Gerry Raffles, dated 9/8/1973, to Marty and Nancy Ponch there is a very clear change of how they defined their work, but they did define themselves as a community theatre: “we are a small community theatre with no cash and everything we do has to be relevant to that community or die. Painful and urgent as your plays are, they gain a certain unreality here by virtue of their American setting. We have found the same thing with our own plays done in America.” Michael Barker Collection of Joan Littlewood, Box 2, Folder 7, Correspondences. Harry Ransom Center, UT Austin.

the WTM as an epic current that rose with certain historical accommodations and that had to descend in its timeline to converge with different local sensibilities and become more lyrical compared to its ambitious and far-reaching origins. Community theatres with their commitments to the relief of their immediate environments are an example to that limiting neighborhood appeal for cultural reasons that also make them economic reasons. In the US case, Lee Papa writes in the introduction to his book *Staged Action* that works of Arthur Miller and Eugene O'Neill are the direct results of the movement, and that the works of dramatists like Anna Deavere Smith continue the project of the WTM through labor dramas that liberate the movement's work from "being an isolated sub-genre left in the past."⁷⁶

Approaching the Theatre Workshop legacy devoid of an understanding of its timeline causes misunderstandings of Littlewood's craft, as well. The following quote is an instance where Littlewood's directing style gets a hostile interpretation from Maria DiCenzo, so as to be labelled a 'directocracy,' as "the vision and determination of an individual to get the project off the ground and sustain the enthusiasm," at the expense of devaluing ensemble structure and leading to internal conflicts.⁷⁷ It should be possible to reframe arguments on Joan Littlewood's directocracy once the microcosm of the communist utopia, or what I have labelled in the fifth chapter as their 'communism in practice,' which blurred the lines of work and play, was understood. Peter Rankin's account of how Littlewood wanted to lead the ensemble gives some insight to how their endeavors in living their life and making theatre were intertwined: "Joan's aim was to create a *commedia dell'arte* company, a glowing microcosm that would travel round, setting an example for the rest of the world. People would learn how to live by watching the way

⁷⁶ Papa, *Staged Action*, x.

⁷⁷ Maria DiCenzo, *The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain 1968 – 1990: the case of 7:84 (Scotland)*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 96.

Theatre Workshop lived.”⁷⁸ Although there are remarks in MacColl’s and Littlewood’s autobiographies that momentarily suggest contrary thoughts, rising to the challenge of touring without having a base (and they were both convinced that a base was necessary, only they were looking to Scotland as their ideal center), taking theatre to the provinces had their exemplary moments of overcoming difficult conditions had it not been for the communal feelings in the group. Raphael Samuel depicts the ideal communist leader quite like Littlewood, in terms of the faith that she provoked among her group members. Comparing her leadership to how Samuel describes as typical leader of the left, one can call Littlewood a visionary leader of an ensemble instead of a despotic theatre director.⁷⁹ It really is a matter of perspective.

Some theatre critics attest to the successful use of innovative devices developed in collaboration with MacColl. An example is Michael Billington’s review where he claimed Littlewood’s *Oh What a Lovely War!* the best example of the Brechtian stage and screen merger.⁸⁰ In fact, Theatre Workshop’s earlier technical and design innovations go back to 1930s. For instance, in a 1980 interview MacColl talks about their 1939 production of Hasek’s *Good*

⁷⁸ Peter Rankin, *Joan Littlewood: Dreams and Realities*, (London: Oberon Books, 2014), 61.

⁷⁹ Raphael Samuel wrote a series of articles in the *New Left Review*, summarizing the ideological and administrative characteristics of the CPGB from its inception to contemporary times. How he depicts an ideal leader of the communist party or its local factions comes rather close to Littlewood’s charismatic traits. Samuel writes that these characteristics were openly deemed necessary for keeping the underground virtues of the party intact and its members steady in their fervent following. The thought can be applied as a similar underground mode of survival imposed on the Theatre Workshop by lack of funding support, through extremely hard times of touring provinces, at the back of their only possession: a lorry. Raphael Samuel, "Staying Power: The Lost World of British Communism (Part II)," in *New Left Review*, 156, no. 1 (March – April 1986) Accessed 1/9/2016.
<http://newleftreview.org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/I/156/raphael-samuel-staying-power-the-lost-world-of-british-communism-part-ii>.

⁸⁰ Michael Billington, 'Joan Littlewood: Oh what a legacy,' the website of *The Guardian* 6 October 2014, accessed 2/14/2017 www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/oct/06/joan-littlewood-oh-what-a-legacy-centenary

Soldier Schweik. The following excerpt highlights their innovative collaboration and sophisticated design preceding the Theatre Workshop phase:

Now, to project scenes, actual moving picture onto a screen from behind the screen, while the actors are acting in front of it, is a very difficult job, and then, was a superhuman job. Because you're casting images from 8' at the very very most, sometimes 6'. As you know, the further you get back, the bigger the image becomes, the nearer you get to your screen the smaller the image becomes. But we couldn't afford more room than that, and even 8' was taking away a lot of our stage.....so we let it be known that we were facing an insuperable problem, we knew that a back-projection outfit existed in London – one – we investigated it and found that it would cost about 4-5,000 pounds to transport it and use it for a fortnight.That was out. [...] then a group of technicians came from Metropolitan Vickers, really high-grade blokes – [...] They said, what's the problem – we told them what the problem was [...] And they went away, and about a fortnight later they came back with this huge contraption on the back of a truck, which they brought into the theatre, and tried it out – sure enough, it worked, the first time.... Marvellous!!! We had something that one theatre in Britain..... had a back-projector!! ('Parsley, sage and politics: transcripts of interviews with EM' p. 8 of tape 4 transcript, Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger Archive at Ruskin College, Oxford)

Theatre Union's above-mentioned production of *Good Soldier Schweik* with a back-projector was unique in 1939. The rehearsals had made it clear that they needed a back-projector. For the first time, a revolve was used in their production, and according to Peter Rankin's account, at its every turn, a new cartoon, "drawn by Ern Brooks in the style of Joseph Lada, novel's illustrator," had to appear on the back wall.⁸¹ There was not enough distance at the back of the stage for that, so a group of technicians from the factory of Metro and Vickers offered help and built the equipment for them.⁸² The equipment was one of the few back projectors in English theatre and the Theatre Union had it in 1939, bringing a technical innovation at zero cost with the aid of their supporters. The back projector was used in many productions such as documentary works like the living newspapers.

Theatre Workshop's ground-breaking production *Oh What a Lovely War!* is usually the first that draws critics' and scholars' attention. Derek Paget, who has written extensively about this seminal performance, states that it was "primarily a work of editorship, not authorship" and concludes that Littlewood was "universally acknowledged as 'editor-in-chief.'"⁸³ Paget defines the theatrical innovations in the play as the "Stratford East Method", although in a different essay he acknowledges the inter-war avant-garde theatre's impacts and MacColl's part in the dissemination of these influences in the play.⁸⁴ The collectivity achieved in the Stratford East

⁸¹ Peter Rankin, *Dreams and Realities*, 40.

⁸² Howard Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1981), 19.

⁸³ Derek Paget, 'Oh What a Lovely War': The Texts and Their Context', *New Theatre Quarterly*. 23 (1990): 246.

⁸⁴ Derek Paget analyzes in his essay the probable influences of reading Leon Moussinac's early twentieth-century book on the Russian and European avant-garde theatre in MacColl-Littlewood collaboration and various other elements of European impact upon their work. He undertakes a similar task and traces these impacts in the continuum of works produced in their pre and post-settlement periods, namely in *Uranium 235* and *Lovely War*. Derek Paget, 'Theatre Workshop, Moussinac and the European connection,' *New Theatre Quarterly* NTQ 11, No. 43, (1995), 211-224; Paget, 'Oh Whata Lovely War,' 245-6.

was certainly not the ten years' work following the settlement in 1952. Likewise, Paget writes in his essay 'Theatre Workshop, Moussinac and the European connection' that Theatre Workshop's 'landmark productions' including *Oh What a Lovely War* resist "fit[ting] easily with the privileging" of what post-war scholarship has analyzed as the "'angry young man' and 'second wave' readings of the moments of 1956 and 1968."⁸⁵ The editing technique that Paget attributes solely to Littlewood has close ties with much earlier productions, such as Lope de Vega's seventeenth century play *Fuenteovejuna* (The Sheepwell) they produced during the Spanish Civil War, new with edited interjections during performance, at pre-arranged points in the script, by actors planted in the audience, sharing their personal statements as worker characters, relevant to the war in Spain, such as,

'My name is Arthur D. I'm a face worker at Agecroft Colliery, Pendleton. I'm on short time, a three-day week. I support the Spanish people's struggle because their fight and my fight is the same.' (Ewan MacColl, *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, xli-xlii)

Implants like above were "sandwiched between republican songs sung by the choir," or at times interspersed among passages of poetry by Hugh MacDiarmid's poem written for the war, *The Flaming Poetaster*. MacColl writes that they achieved a magnificent affect in this way where 'flat Lancashire accents of housewives and unemployed workers against the soaring voices of the choir, the rich velvety base-baritone of Paul Robeson or the stinging hail of MacDiarmid's poetry, was riveting,' adding that the style of using such contrast would become a signature of their work, as well as an eminent feature of the post-war radio-ballads in the BBC

⁸⁵ Derek Paget, 'Theatre Workshop, Moussinac and the European connection,' 211.

documentaries on folk songs.⁸⁶

Last Edition, A living newspaper dealing with the political events from 1930 to 1939 came significantly close to *Lovely War*.⁸⁷ Its textual material was developed by the whole team of actors and designers, who dispersed into public libraries to research news about WW2 casualties so that they could juxtapose them with the government's official press releases and broadcasts, which was exactly how the Theatre Workshop team gathered documentary material for *Lovely War*.

Robert Leach restores the pre-settlement period's role, in his book, *Theatre Work-Shop: Joan Littlewood and the Making of Modern British Theatre* (2006), where he states that the "Theatre Workshop brought much more that was intangible to the theatre than any other organization or person the company was responsible for making British theatre modern. This was at least partly as a result of the move to Stratford East, without which its work would perhaps not have been noticed."⁸⁸ Leach explains "making theatre" as something peculiar to Joan Littlewood in British theatre, who abolished stardom, as she had "uniquely collaborative methods, which meant actor, director, author, and designer all working together in ways that were literally not dreamed of before Joan Littlewood worked in the theatre."⁸⁹ However, there is lack of a reference to the material conditions of their pre-settlement phase that assumed every member of the ensemble as nothing less than a theater laborer before acting or designing anything. In his article "The Documentary Body: Theatre Workshop to Banner Theatre," Alan Filewod outlines

⁸⁶ Ewan MacColl, Introduction, in Howard Goorney & Ewan MacColl eds. *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop Political playscripts 1930-50*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), xlii.

⁸⁷ Ewan MacColl, *Journeyman*, (Sidgwick & Jackson Ltd.: 1990), 239.

⁸⁸ Robert Leach, *Theatre Workshop: Joan Littlewood and the Making of Modern British Theatre*, (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006), 208.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

the cooperation in the group's living newspaper piece, *Last Edition* in ways that will touch upon the continuing trends from WTM in the documentary theatres in Britain. He refers to Raphael Samuel's rigorous work on the WTM, *Theatres of the Left, 1880 – 1935* and states, "Dave Rogers, Banner's director and pre-eminent songwriter, began his career with [Charles] Parker and MacColl and his long history with Banner refutes Raphael Samuel's conclusion that the workers' theatre tradition has lost its historical continuity in Britain."⁹⁰ In his essay, Filewod talks about the two theatres that Littlewood and MacColl inspired: the Banner Theatre in Britain and the George Luscombe Theatre in Guelph, Canada, which, according to Filewod had a formative effect on the Canadian theatrical culture. He explains the anti-establishment yet rigorously disciplined acting of Theatre Workshop as one that resisted and reformulated the hierarchical distinctions of creative control, seeking instead "a craft disciplinarity that could train actors as creative artists rather than scenographic elements that could honor their own cultural traditions of artisanship and work, and which could be used in the widest possible spread of theatrical styles and textualities."⁹¹ It is possible to read this observation as one that justifies the original actors' dilemma in Jimmie Miller's (Ewan MacColl's) first group Red Megaphones, as they were all workers of some trade and they did not know how to use their bodies in acting. The agit-prop only called for standing upright and making declarations while other members held a

⁹⁰ Alan Filewod, 'Documentary Body: Theatre Workshop to Banner Theatre' in Alison Forsyth and Christopher Megson, eds. *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire [England]: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 55.

⁹¹ Alan Filewod states that the Birmingham, UK based community theatre Banner's director and pre-eminent songwriter Dave Rogers began his career with the BBC radio producer Charles Parker and Ewan MacColl, and his long history with Banner concludes the historical continuities of the workers' theatre tradition. Checking Banner Theatre's website, we see the continuing theatrical efforts on the labor front: the site indicates that Banner is the only British theatre that consistently tours Britain's trade unionists, and has performed at union events, pubs, clubs, theatres, festivals and rallies these last forty years. Filewod, "Documentary Body," 65; Banner Theatre's website, accessed 22 January 2016, <http://bannertheatre.co.uk/the-company/>

pose and they wanted to do so much more, Filewod shares from Littlewood's autobiography an instance when Jimmy Miller said to her, "only the best is good enough for the workers. Agitprop is crude in the age of Appia. Don't discount beauty."⁹² The remark foreshadows the path to the acting techniques developed by Theatre of Action, Theatre Union and Theatre Workshop successively, under MacColl's ideological guidance. Their collaborative work methods and the empowerment of stigmatized individuals are the more probable causes for Littlewood's success in making theatre, and I will discuss the details of this collaboration in coming chapters. Robert Leach shares other excerpts from a Labor MP's notes, stating that the contributions of Theatre Workshop were as important as the coming of Ibsen to the theatre of Europe, and quotes from the famous critic Harold Hobson, who claimed that Littlewood broke up the fabric of British theatre.⁹³

Nadine Holdsworth's latest work on Joan Littlewood proposes research ideas across Littlewood's career, which I argue to be a method that searches for 'illustrative instances', in Raymond Williams' terms, with limited concern for the historiographical perspective.⁹⁴ Littlewood's work cannot be discussed separately from the history of the group she founded with Ewan MacColl and such historiographical necessities haunt current scholarship's applause for Joan Littlewood's success in British theatre. For example, while discussing Littlewood's staging of the classics, Holdsworth implies that Littlewood was able to stage the classics in a unique

⁹² Filewod, "Documentary Body," 65.

⁹³ Leach, *Theatre Work-Shop*, 211.

⁹⁴ Raymond Williams cautions against taking theoretical positions without doing empirical re-working, stating the difference between empirical positions and theoretical positions as "this former extends its local names to a variety of historical situations to which they may be only partly appropriate, this latter, theoreticist tendency extends its presumptive interpretations and categories in what is always, essentially, a search for illustrative instances." Raymond Williams, *The Sociology of Culture*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 34-35.

manner, “completely different than Ewan MacColl’s and ... more in tune with many on the humanist left [...] who regarded the Renaissance as a high point in popular culture,” and describes MacColl as “worried about the bourgeois associations of the classics,” whereas “Littlewood found ‘an anti-establishment voice, an unruly and vibrant theatre connecting and speaking for the people.’”⁹⁵ In contrast, I believe that such characterization of Littlewood’s free experimentation with the classics needs to be re-examined in the light of her earlier productions of MacColl’s adaptations of Aristophanes, Moliere and Lope de Vega. I work with the hypothesis that during the pre-settlement period, MacColl’s adaptations of these classics were progressively shaping Littlewood’s future ‘irreverent’ aesthetics, partly encouraged by what Littlewood herself playfully said: “Once upon a time Jimmie was the genius and I was the handmaiden at his knee.”⁹⁶ The ease and the play attitude Joan Littlewood delivered her irreverent style with was largely a product of her interpretation of the Stanislavski method, which encouraged the breaking-down of texts to smaller meaningful units and reconstructing them to rule out dysfunctional parts. Moreover, I assume, her creative processes of the kind were also inspired and informed by the freedom and space that MacColl gave her in his adaptations of these pieces, as well as his own expressionistic textual experiments. There is no mention of the fact that MacColl’s creative liberties in turning these classics into means that fit the group’s aims could be a reason behind that sense of entitlement, and the irreverent comfort. Furthermore, as I discuss in the next chapter, having a playwright in residence was probably what kept the Theatre Union and Theatre Workshop going in arid times for the left-wing theatres, as finding new texts grew

⁹⁵ Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood’s Theatre*, 80.

⁹⁶ Peter Rankin writes, about their state as far back as 1945, that MacColl ‘was the high priest of Theatre Workshop because he was the one writing the plays,’ and he relays the above quote. Peter Rankin, *Dreams and Realities*, 58.

increasingly difficult after the repertory movement and the attraction of films for the creative talents. Therefore, it is necessary to talk about the post-settlement activity in the light of the pre-settlement era, where many of the themes brought up can be primarily explored within the genealogy of the group's repertory of sixteen years, from 1936 to 1952. My major reservation in applying theory to this historical material is that such theorizing will at best objectify and at worst mythologize Littlewood's work.

Ben Harker's works offer valuable insight to the theatrical couple's work, with historiographic priorities in exploring thematic or formal matters. Ben Harker was also an acting member and wrote MacColl's biography, *Class Act*. It is possible to find works that conclude the assets of Theatre Workshop upon acknowledging both MacColl's and Littlewood's efforts in the projects and success of the group. As discussed earlier, Alan Filewod works on the staging strategies of this theatre by keeping their timeline primarily in sight.

While theatre industry, with its precise anti-revolutionary mechanisms, works towards profitable entertainment, most theatres seeking social change have already denounced ties with radical politics, and theatre disciplines have complied with this shift that denounces the idea of the leftist cause in their theatre-making, such as in applied theatre practices. In *Applied Theatre Reader* edited by Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston, the practice is broadly defined as a set of "theatrical practices and creative processes that take participants and audiences beyond the scope of conventional, mainstream theatre into the realm of a theatre that is responsive to ordinary people and their stories, local settings and priorities."⁹⁷ Authors grant the fact that applied theatre developed in the grounds sewn by the radical movements in the 30s, and 60s, yet they

⁹⁷ Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston, *The Applied Theatre Reader*, (London: Routledge, 2009), 9.

claim an anti-left wing stance, expressing that “applied theatre is no more or less at the service of a particular ideology than any other kind of theatre,” its processes being available to all regimes.⁹⁸ The applied theatre is an interventionist theatre seeking to bring transformations of individuals and communities towards well-being and social change but keeps itself from the political context of a defined ideology. Embracing many practices such as theatre of education, theatre of development or community theatre, it works towards all the goals of historically established motives of left-wing theatres that Littlewood-MacColl collaboration accommodated in their training camps, playing to schools and to traumatized children collected from the concentration camps in Germany. Prentki and Preston claim differing degrees of participation and spectatorship on the side of the audience and thus keep the umbrella concept rather broad while thoroughly denouncing the left-wing politics. WTM gave several graduates who continued from its radical ‘legacy’ or ‘value’ into different trajectories, such as the Federal Theatre Project and Theatre Union in America, or documentary theatres in the following decades. As Ira Levine writes about the American experience, he states that the vitality, energies and purpose of the 1930’s left wing drama were gradually absorbed by such projects and were redirected to compete with the bourgeois stage and eventually turned professional.⁹⁹

The disciplinary denunciation is arguably due to the decline of the old-school left wing in the sixties. However, Robert Leach observes that the fresh theatrical responses to the sixties’ events, such as CAST (Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre) were “not unlike those of the Workers’ Theatre Movement nearly forty years before,” although he claims that the leading figures of the

⁹⁸ Prentki and Preston, *The Applied Theatre Reader*, 13.

⁹⁹ Ira A Levine, *Left-wing Dramatic Theory in the American Theatre*, (Ann Arbor, Mich: UMI Research Press, 1985), 96; 177.

new political and theatrical fringe hardly knew of their predecessors.¹⁰⁰ He gives David Edgar as an example, where Edgar claimed, “1968 can be taken as the starting date of political theatre in Britain.”¹⁰¹ In most cases, these arguments must be true, but there are cases contradicting this position, as well, such as Joan Littlewood’s featuring the above mentioned agit-prop group of late sixties, CAST in her 1968 London Summer Fair Program, which suggests somewhat an organic relationship between the grandmother of agit-prop and the 68 generation.¹⁰²

Derek Paget writes that the radical tradition’s continuity appears to be compromised, but “it has never been completely occluded; it is as present and as important, as we care to make it.”¹⁰³ Paget discusses the conductivity of Theatre Workshop as a transmitter of radical interwar formalisms through their 1963 success of *Lovely War*, calling the show an intervention in the period’s performance conventions. Stylistic impacts of the Theatre Workshop are widely discussed, referring to their origins and aims, but, as the debate on continuities take a formalistic track, they cannot bring to the conversation another aspect that foregrounds the political necessity of tracking these continuities. Back in the 1960s, Kenneth Tynan’s remarks on the previous theatrical decade sums up the political intervention in the West End in a derogatory manner, stating that Joan Littlewood’s left-wing stance was “not a fact of much significance,” as

¹⁰⁰ Robert Leach, *Theatre Workshop: Joan Littlewood and the Making of Modern British Theatre*, (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006), 207.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 208.

¹⁰² In a three-pages program list of performers in Littlewood’s project for the Summer Fair in the City of London Festival, during 8 – 20 July 1968, at Tower Place Hill (by All Hollows Church), many activities were arranged by the Theatre Workshop and sponsored by The Evening Standard with donations from the Arts Council and various companies, colleges, media and big corporates including Pirelli and Honda. The list shows under the ‘theatrical shows’ the Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre (CAST) along with Concord Theatre and the People’s Show. Michael Barker Collection, Box 3, Folder 10, Harry Ransom Center, UT Austin.

¹⁰³ Derek Paget, *True Stories?: Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage*, (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), 59.

it “appli[ed] nearly to every theatre company in Europe of any contemporary importance.”¹⁰⁴

According to Tynan, it was quite significant that Wesker ended his Trilogy with a play that showed “nothing but futility of Socialism,” and what Tynan took away from the political content brought to the West End by these writers was that the lower strata of English society “deserve[d] a more central place on the English stage,” proclaiming the revolutionary aims of Theatre Workshop a stage matter that lost the power to shape the British theatre after losing Littlewood.¹⁰⁵ Ironically, in his refutation of the radical left-wing interventions’ lasting impacts, Tynan quoted Trotsky’s claim that the proletarian culture was transitory on the revolutionary path; it should not be opposed to Bourgeois culture and art, also calling in for a study to detect proletarian drama’s roots leading to the classical elements at its foundations: a stark neutralization attempt to canonize these works as fleeting moments of intervention in the British theatrical anthologies.¹⁰⁶ Such journalistic or academic narratives regard the stylistic virtues of working-class theatre and remain closer to the camps that regard Theatre Workshop as a stigmatized avant-garde, which Ewan MacColl warned against during company’s discussions about a possible London settlement.

Comparing *Oh What a Lovely War* with *Last Edition*

Theatre Workshop’s *Oh What a Lovely War* (1963) is a cabaret form backed with documentary plays’ representation techniques. It offers its themes in a cabaret form but it handles the representation of historical facts and actualities in a living newspaper format that the group

¹⁰⁴ Kenneth Tynan, *A View of the English Stage 1944-1965*, (London: Methuen London Limited, 1975), 258.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 275.

¹⁰⁶ Tynan, *A View of the English Stage*, 320-21.

was well versed with since the 1930s. Here I will discuss the fact-handling in *Lovely War* as an evolved form of the living newspaper genre that fed Theatre Union's and Theatre Workshop's representational strategies and media usage on stage as a demonstration of my case that much of Littlewood's legacy was shaped by the time Theatre Workshop settled in London.

The living newspaper genre worked prominently in shaping the documentary pieces that WTM groups produced. The premises of the living newspaper were decidedly political and revolutionary. The genre was popular in the theatres of the left in the inter-war period, as it exposed the biases of the newspapers serving as the state apparatus in building a fragmented and indifferent common sense in the nation. The founder of the genre in the USA was Hallie Flanagan, a theatre professor at Vassar College, and director of the Federal Theatre Project. However, the form was well-known and applied in the Soviet Union as well, and sources indicate that British Workers' Theatre Movement borrowed it from there, as Ben Harker refers to the 'Russian genesis of the *zhivaya gazeta*' in his article on the Littlewood and MacColl's Theatre Union's production of a living newspaper in 1940: *Last Edition*.¹⁰⁷ On the other hand, Raphael Samuel writes that the British WTM had more connections with the US Wobblies than the Red International of Trade Unions in Moscow.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Ben Harker, 'Mediating the 1930s: Documentary and Politics in Theatre Union's *Last Edition* (1940)' in Alison Forsyth & Chris Megson eds. *Get Real Documentary Theatre Past and Present* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 25-37.

¹⁰⁸ Raphael Samuel writes that the earlier WTM had to have its own playwrights, its distinctive style to reflect the working-class, and rather than propagating a moral lifting and class emancipation, it was a clear exercise in "proletkult" and reveled in this culture instead of attempting to shape or civilize it, as opposed to the main tenets of Socialism, and the William Morris school. Its distinct language and representational capacities were created by the workers themselves. Sinclair's *Singing Jailbirds* play was an example, telling the story of an IWW leader, who went through all the strife and died in the class struggle. The text of the play was critiqued in the *Plebs* as "[not] talk[ing] of and about the class struggle" but actually *being* the class struggle "dramatized and made vivid." Raphael Samuel, 'Theatre and socialism in Britain'

The technique that interplays modernist interventions with the naturalist setting and actions in plays, was in concord with the British Workers' Theatre Movement's aesthetic policy of 'Dialectic Realism,' a term coined by one of the founders of a WTM group in London, Tom Thomas, to indicate a set of dramaturgical principles to counter-pose the theatre of illusions: naturalist drama.¹⁰⁹ As Colin Chambers agrees in his article, 'Unity Theatre and the Embrace of the Real,' where suggests similar use of the form by another inter-war WTM group that survived into the post war period, the living newspaper was an acute rebellion against and an eschewing of the British reporting conventions reproducing cultural documents of and for the establishment.¹¹⁰ However, Ewan MacColl's earlier phases in activism play an important role in shaping this genre in the group's work, as well: the legacy of pamphleteering was a formative element in MacColl's artistic maturing, as he describes his early years in acting in the preface to

in Raphael Samuel, et.al. eds. *Theatres of the Left, 1880-1935: Workers' Theatre Movements in Britain and America*, (London; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), pp.40-41.

¹⁰⁹ These principles can be briefly listed as employing sketches, satires, montages of mimes and songs; using types rather than characters, and employing simple signifiers on an open platform to build context and inform the audience, such as putting on a top hat to represent the capitalists or factory bosses and a cloth cap for the workers. Texts would be simple to cut rehearsal times; deliverance would largely include choral speaking and word-clipping. Also, in the first National Conference held in London in June 1932, there was a tendency to not altogether dispense with naturalism, which was the familiar medium for most audiences. In his article, Ben Harker describes how the dialectic realism worked as a political intervention that freezes the naturalist flow of the theatrical moment, to insert a fact denied or erased by the media and thus counter the Establishment discourse. Samuel, et. al. eds., *Theatres of the Left*, pp. 46-7; 99-105; Harker, 'Mediating the 1930s,' 27-37.

¹¹⁰ Colin Chambers, 'Unity Theatre and the Embrace of the Real' as in Alison Forsyth & Chris Megson eds. *Get Real Documentary Theatre Past and Present* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 38-54. Also, there is a detailed description of WTM's dramaturgical trends in Raphael Samuel's essay "Theatre and socialism in Britain" which I can summarize as a break with the convention's dramaturgy and stage conventions in order to "replace the 'social problem' play with a futuristic repertoire – 'plays interpreting the New Machine Age from a proletarian point of view'" and mostly importantly "to transcend the written word – as in Meyerhold's 'bio-mechanics' and Eisenstein's circus acrobatics – by a theatre of swirling physical movement."

the book *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*. In the Red Megaphones phase of his theatrical activity (1931 – 1934), his and his acting partners' styles in agit-pros were very much declamatory, as the genre of living newspaper requires: "The fact is we were dealing with literary tracts not very dissimilar in tone and style to those denunciatory broadsides which eighteenth-century pamphleteers were in the habit of hurling at their enemies. The audience was never allowed to forget itself and at the end of each sketch a group of six or more young people would swing towards the onlookers and, with its maximum collective voice, exhort them to do this or that."¹¹¹ Such direct call out to the audience typical of agit-pros is not seen either in *Last Edition* or *Lovely War*, but both performances use the newsfeed to guide the audience in following the plot in a disillusioned, distanced manner, as the news shared via slides or news panels are generally of contrasting nature to the state of affairs parodied on the stage. Hence they work to guide the audience perception with counter-points and build the distancing effect. This is among the Brechtian elements in Joan Littlewood's *Lovely War* that critics write about and current scholars call 'Brechtian/Piscatorian montage.'¹¹²

To indicate the similarities between the successful 1963 production *Lovely War* to a living newspaper from the company's repertory, I take the Theatre Union's living newspaper, *Last Edition: A Living Newspaper Dealing with Events from 1934 to 1940* (1940) performed to a closed audience of club membership to escape the confines of Lord Chamberlain. It is also worthwhile to note the German expressionism's impact in their work. The couple had a chance to work with Ernst Toller, in his production of *Draw the Fires* (1935) in Manchester. Raymond Williams writes about the use of film projected onto a screen on stage in Toller's 1927

¹¹¹ Ewan MacColl, *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, xxix.

¹¹² Derek Paget, "'Oh What a Lovely War': The Texts and Their Context." *New Theatre Quarterly* 6, no. 23 (1990): 244-60.

production of *Hoppla!* as “the first and most surprising device [...] designed to show the larger outline of social events, within which the particular events of the stage action are to be understood.”¹¹³ Similarly, Williams reports use of wireless in the production that is presented through loud speakers reporting contemporary world events.¹¹⁴ These formal features were largely used in the living newspapers and the Theatre Workshop’s *Lovely War* of 1963 benefits this staging styles that were adapted from WTM trends and developed by MacColl and Littlewood.

Last Edition was a series of twenty episodes depicting the state of affairs in working-class lives. Everyone in the group and probably the audience was very well acquainted with the theme of unemployment and miners’ accidents personally, as well as culturally, as the theatre was playing to a closed club of audience on subscription. One of the episodes dealt with the Gresford pit disaster where 265 miners lost their lives. As with all episodes of the piece, this episode starts with the newsboy arriving on one of the platforms, dancing-like, shouting the headlines of latest news that don’t mention the disaster:

All the latest, last edition!
Mr Eden’s German mission.
Paris riots, food shops looted,
Van der Lubbe executed.
Loch Ness monster seen again,
Sentence passed on Ludwig Renn.
News a’Chron, Last Edition!

¹¹³ Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, 262.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Last edition! Last edition!

(*Last Edition*, The Gresford Pit Disaster Episode)

Likewise, *Lovely War* starts with actual news of that day when the war began:

NEWSPANEL: Summer 1914. Scorching Bank Holiday Broadcast . . . Gunboat
Smith fouls Carpentier in six round . . . Opera blossoms under Thomas Beecham.

(*Oh What a Lovely War*, Act I)

Although the episodic structure of *Last Edition* cannot be seen in *Lovely War*, which has a two-act structure, an episodic flow in the scene succession is still present. The acts are broken into an independent and fluid sequence of scenes that counter-play the actual realities of war displayed in the slides and news panel. The fluidity of the scene sequence is achieved with the entrance and exit of Pierrots, singers and/or dancers that highlight the cabaret style. Despite the emphasis of the episodic scene structure in *Last Edition*, Ewan MacColl recalls the piece as a variety show as well, as there were three parts of the stage that at times hosted simultaneous action, procuring an “overall effect that was not unlike a fast moving variety show, the kind of theatre that is, with which most of us were familiar.”¹¹⁵ Raphael Samuel explains that the later phases of the WTM (after 1930s) were highly influenced both by the post-war German expressionism, but that the more traditional and indigenous form of the music hall, and concert party were forms that the movement never deserted.¹¹⁶ Such variety instances fill the stage of *Lovely War*, as the fluid succession of the episodic scenes uses a similar crowd on the stage, such

¹¹⁵ MacColl, *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, xlv.

¹¹⁶ Raphael Samuel, ‘Theatre and Socialism in Britain,’ 44.

as when Act 2 enacts a moment of prayer by a nurse, who prays that their dire preparations for casualties would not be necessary, while another action at a remote spot on the apportioned stage already starts happening. Two scenes are swiftly connected by an explosion and a simultaneous slide show of various trench pictures, and soldiers sing a song offstage. Then the slide screen goes up to reveal masked soldiers miming a burial, just as the despised figure of the Great War, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, reduced to 'Haig' in the play, performs in one of the balconies above stage, affirming the fatal offense victoriously. In the meanwhile, the miming soldiers upstage sing the song 'The Bells of Hell.' There is a similarity between the dynamic and effective utilization of all stage space and added parts like balconies in *Lovely War*, and "two further platforms running the full length of each side of the auditorium" in *Last Edition* that provided a similar, divided use of stage to host concurrent scenes.¹¹⁷

Looking at the strategies of representation of the documentary facts on the stage, *Lovely War* uses a news panel installed on the upper back wall, "across which messages are flashed in during the action."¹¹⁸ Other than the news panel, *Lovely War* uses historical documents that contribute to the context of the scene, presenting facts from the period, such as posters, maps, photographs as slides projected on a screen that comes down from above the stage, as the master of ceremonies whistles and calls the screen down. Roots of the master of ceremonies, as a member of the cast, can be traced back to earlier productions, much as it appears in *Last Edition*, as well in the form of a narrator and randomly used actors on the stage to address audiences about the theme and style of the scene to come.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Chilton, *Lovely War*, 81-2; Goorney & MacColl, *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, xlv.

¹¹⁸ Stage directions, Act 1, in Charles Chilton, *Oh, What a Lovely War* (London: Methuen, 1965), 7.

¹¹⁹ In Act 1, the Munich Episode opens with an 'Actor' telling the audience about the episode, starting with the address, "In accord with our policy to give you as much variety as possible,

As I mentioned earlier, *Lovely War* relates news and documents through the news panel and the screen and uses the newsboy only once, whereas in *Last Edition*, a newsboy or a narrator on the stage works for the same function, and in some scenes, there is a ‘voice on the microphone,’ passing details of a court hearing or toll of injuries from a pit explosion. Both plays have strong documentary references to simultaneously lay bare the motives and counter the narratives of the Establishment media that sponsor a patriotic view of the Great War.¹²⁰

Upon checking the list of reference in *Lovely War*’s media sources, I find a range of mainstream national press, and also sources that appear more dedicated to bringing factual news from the trenches. This is a more hybrid compilation of media sources than that of *Last Edition*, indicating an evolution in the archival strategies. This perspective has not received much attention, most research explores how the facts are represented on the stage, technically (media-wise), and stylistically. Exploring the back office of choosing documentary pieces may pose new questions and highlight not just the stylistic continuities, but ideological/thematic ones, as well, as Carol Martin reminds us, all archive business is a power operation.¹²¹

A stylistic feature that both *Last Edition* and *Lovely War* share is the strategy of interfering the naturalistic action with a modernist/formalistic act, which is generally a

what follows is in the style of an American gangster film...” *Last Edition* as in Goorney and MacColl, *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, 30.

¹²⁰ While it is difficult to tell which documentary piece used in production was sourced directly from broadcast media, as the source material for the play lists 53 items, 8 of them are listed as press origins, comprising ‘Records of: *The Times*, *Daily Press*, *Daily Mail*, *Evening Standard*,’ ‘*The Sphere*, *Illustrated London News*,’ ‘*Twenty Years After*, published weekly 1937,’ ‘*World War*, published weekly,’ ‘*The First World War*, *Illustrated Express Newspapers*,’ ‘*Covenants with Death*, *Express Newspapers*,’ ‘*Contemporary Newspapers* (in the possession of G. Sewell),’ ‘*The Illustrated War News* (published weekly during the war),’ ‘*I Was There*, published weekly about 1934, later assembled into three volumes and published by Amalgamated Press.’ Theatre Workshop, *Oh What a Lovely War*, (London: Methuen, 2000), 94-5.

¹²¹ Carol Martin, "Bodies of Evidence." *TDR: The Drama Review* 50, no. 3 (2006): 8-15.

choreographed chorus action or singing, or, as in *Lovely War*, dancing. In *Lovely War*, Act 2, when the textile factory women workers talk about the war casualties, who were wearing the pieces they had sewn, they sing a song to cheer up, but their singing is interrupted by the entrance of two pierrots impersonating generals as the news panel flashes recent news of casualties, announcing “800,000 Germans starve to death through British blockade.”¹²² The Pierrots’ stylistic intervention in the moment is their impersonation of the generals of the fighting countries: each Pierrot puts on a general’s hat for the impersonation, he expresses the good prospects of imminent victory. The scene recalls a very early Red Megaphones piece from 1931, *Rent, Interest and Profit*, where actors stepped into characters by putting on different hats, for instance a top hat for a capitalist, which was among the simple aesthetic strategies of the agit-prop conventions of WTM in general.

Strategies of clashing verbatim accounts with mainstream media, and interfering in the naturalist acting with modernist/formalist moments are common tools in both plays. Such formalist interventions in the naturalist acting are the dialectic realism tools of the WTM trends, working in this case to indicate which scene builds an illusion and how that illusory moment of that naturalist scene can be torn on its surface with an expressive/formalist intervention. Raymond Williams writes about the conventions of expressionism, which he adds, was commonly found inferior to the classics of naturalist drama:

When expressionist drama is set against the classics of naturalism, it seems angular and one dimensional: a lively but temporary art. Yet in certain of its methods, it surpassed naturalism in its capacity for consciousness, and it is this that indicates its lasting importance: a possibility [...] of penetrating customary

¹²² Chilton, *Lovely War*, 87.

relationships and a known world. (Williams, *From Ibsen to Brecht*, 266)

Theatre Workshop staged many expressionistic plays and the formalist interventions into the naturalist acting are expressionistic moments, too, such as soldiers miming a burial duty in *Lovely War* or Gresford women's interrupting a court hearing in *Last Edition* by speaking the names of dead miners in their households and telling what they know about the cause of the accident. As Raymond Williams points out the penetrating capacity of stage expressionism into hitherto unbroken dramatic surfaces, these interfering moments break into the seemingly indomitable common sense generators: the newspapers' accounts, acted in naturalism, yet they are frozen with a musical theme fading in and out and women giving their own accounts of the facts. Thus people who are oppressed and whose troubles and sensibilities have been erased from nation's common sense are given priority and power over the Establishment. In both plays, such formalist interventions display the presence of the erasure policies in news making and restore the play to a device that can report full facts and that restores the consciousness of audience to full awareness of the true state of affairs.

Theatrical resistance, cultural aversions and critiques

This section provides a wider focus on the cultural reflexes that the twentieth-century English theatre displayed in the face of radical left-wing expressions from twenties to eighties and explores the historical and cultural processes that triumphed over the working-class culture as it receded back into the popular culture. I proceed with referring to a documentary work that proves that the class matter, albeit its extinct culture, still exists, and is experienced as a disturbing fact despite all cultural claims to the contrary. Finally, the section explores theoretical

positions of thinkers like Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard and Chantal Mouffe, offering analyses and explanation for this cultural resistance or aversion that would rather ignore radicalisms associated with class matters.

Responding to the revolution

Back in the inter-war period, the bourgeois theatre in Britain responded to the October Revolution in Russia in great fear. Looking at 1920s and 1930s, we see the period of the Red Peril on the British stage, responding with the melodramatic genre to morally scold the new Soviet regime. The Russian matter was such an immediate fear that it was frantically embraced by British playwrights with recourse to this manipulative genre, while censorship made every effort to decline plays unbiased towards the Russian Revolution.

Period's prolific theatre writer Huntley Carter, reported in his book *The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia* (1924) on the New Theatre happening in Russia. Carter wrote his book in the 1920s when Labor cause was strong and visible in the industrialized Western nations, particularly in England with a tangibly defined working-class culture. The British Labour Movement had been active a long time, organizing large-scale strikes and hunger marches (one from Glasgow to London in 1922). The Soviet Union had been recognized, and the British Communist Party founded (1920) and even the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR was established (1924).¹²³ These social and political affairs, however, were hardly translated into stage matters, as Lord Chamberlain's censorship ruled the British stage and Carter shared his observations on how British visitors failed to understand the artistic impetus shaping the new

¹²³ Steve Nicholson, *British Theatre and the Red Peril: The Portrayal of Communism, 1917-1945*, (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), xii.

Soviet theatre. Steve Nicholson explains the anti-socialist reflexes of British theatre between 1917 and 1945, stating “what was going on inside theatres of the first half of the twentieth century had little connection with what was going on outside,” despite few exceptions, such as plays by Shaw, Granville-Barker, and initiatives like the Workers’ Theatre Movement, Unity Theatre, the Group Theatre and the Theatre of Action.¹²⁴

Huntley Carter’s central premise in introducing the new Soviet theatre was that the Soviet Russia differed from Western nations in one significant aspect after the October Revolution: they revered the working class immensely. They believed their country would prosper by way of industrial development, whereby the workers would be the actors under the limelight, ideologically and socially. Carter mentioned the limitations on the side of the British audience to appreciate the new set of conditions rising in Soviet Russia, enlivening the New Theatre of the 1920s. He interpreted as both a lack of artistic interest and a fear of Communist threat, commonly embraced by the British theatres during the time, giving an example of the matter by relating some notes from the visit of a high office British citizen, Lieutenant-Commander Kenworthy, to Russia, for two months. Carter called Kenworthy’s observations on the Russian performing arts myopia due to their irrelevance. He passed Lieutenant’s remarks that he saw no prostitutes or drunkards in the streets and quoted from his observations published in 1923: “The theatre, drama, opera, ballet are flourishing ... I visited a dozen theatres, cabarets, music halls of all kinds from the largest to the smallest, and never once saw anything vulgar or indecent. So far as I can judge, any child could be taken to any theatre in Moscow or Petrograd without fear of contamination. This cannot be said of either London, Paris or Berlin.”¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Nicholson, *Red Peril*, 1.

¹²⁵ Huntly Carter, *The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia: being an Analysis and Synthesis of the Unified Theatre Produced in Russia by the 1917 Revolution, and an Account of*

The fear of contamination imparted in the brief visiting notes above displayed the conflicting interest of the ruling order of the inter-war capitalism and its social values. In Huntley Carter's examples, it is possible to see the complicit manners of random Western visitors or newspaper reporters. Hence, it is possible to ask if repelling the radical left from the stage is a matter of late capitalism or not. Radical left received little welcome in English theatrical circles even during the relatively more politicized decades in 1920s and 1930s, when left-wing politics was accessible and even familiar among the working-class. It is possible to detect an exciting period of labor and communist incentives in theatre but that could last for a brief decade, until the mid-thirties' Popular Front period changed the emotional and intellectual climate from class struggle to the necessities of uniting in a single front against Fascism. Steve Nicholson extensively surveys the theatrical atmosphere in the wake of the Great War, questioning the "supposed absence of political theatre from mainstream culture," claiming that left-wing inter-war plays "largely failed to survive as performance texts or to feature in recorded accounts of the period."¹²⁶ As I discuss in the fifth chapter, the brief work of the decade seems to have been dismissed and many continuities have been lost; the left-wing fervor can merely find reference on limited terms, as 'street theatre,' when the New Left performances of late sixties survey their own formal genealogies, as in Schechner's formulations of environmental theatre. Politically propagandistic theatre, be it for the Establishment or against it, has been largely erased from scholarly curriculums. Such material is bound to remain in the archives, and away from circulation and discussion. Much as Nicholson, exploring the extent of political climate in the inter-war English theatre in view of anti-Soviet propaganda plays, speaks about his material

its Growth and Development from 1917 to the Present Day, (Chapman and Hall Ltd.; Chapman and Dodd Ltd., 1924), viii.

¹²⁶ Nicholson, *Red Peril*, 1-2.

across time, Huntley Carter's contemporaneous writing attests to the same dismissive climate. He relates the British mainstream media activities of the period, referencing the books, reviews and articles, whose writers, he claims, "come to bury Russia, not to raise it."¹²⁷ Looking at the mainstream theatrical affairs, however, Nicholson mentions a brief period after 1941, when the Soviet Union became the most valuable ally of Britain against the Nazis, following their defeat by the Red Army. Consequently, the Russian culture, the source of all previous threat to the British values, became a celebratory phenomenon.¹²⁸ This stands as a unique phase in the reception of communist cultural conventions in Britain.

The radical expressions of the left did have a popular subscription, during 1930s. The left was articulate and present. It did not have the urgency to break into the mainstream culture; its practical aim was to reach out to the unconverted working-class people in the streets. It had a vibrant network, competitive authorship, to express its priorities and agenda. What happened to that articulate presence that embraced the WTM in the 1930s despite all cultural resistance to the Soviet experiment and a disinterested working-class audience?

A waning cause: Labor activism and class-consciousness

It may be worthwhile to track the de-politicized route of left-wing activism and give a brief historical account of what happened to the radical Left in Britain to answer the above question. James Jupp, expresses the fact that there was an epic age in the left-wing activism, a period when a Utopia seemed evident in 1930s, when 'being 'on the Left'' was almost 'self-evident'; a couple of socialist symptoms such as opposing fascism, supporting the Soviet Union were natural reactions to the events of the time.¹²⁹ Steve Nicholson also reminds that the 1930s

¹²⁷ Carter, *The New Theatre*, vii.

¹²⁸ Nicholson, *Red Peril*, 3.

¹²⁹ James Jupp, *The Radical Left in Britain, 1931-1941* (London: Cass, 1982), 2-3.

were the ‘Pink Decade’, when, an obituary in *The Times* implied, “politics invaded the innermost recesses of literature,” when publications like *Left Review* were born (1934), announcing break from ‘detachment’ and “insisting on the indivisibility of art and politics.”¹³⁰ Steve Nicholson also talks about how the theatrical left “carried out [...] echoes, if sometimes pale ones, of Soviet experiments from a decade or so earlier.”¹³¹ His references are WTM, Unity Theatre, Left Theatre, Theatre of Action and Group Theatre, who had to tackle challenges such as finding methods of creating theatre, styles of performance, relationships between stage and auditorium and the search for appropriate audiences and sites for performance.

In considering why radical left withered from sight, let alone from the stage, Jupp’s list is useful. He lists reasons such as British Communist Party’s “betrayal and its subservience to the whims of its dictatorial paymasters in Moscow” and the reformisms embraced by the British workers and the hegemony of the Labour Party on the working-class sensibilities.¹³² Politicizing the working class in the sense of drawing them to the radical left was a difficult task. The Labour Party depended mostly on unionism, and the union officials were either formal liberals or vague populists or at the most, radical syndicalist groups holding the electorate of the workers. The Labor movement had to become radical and bend towards left to break out of industrialized ghettos and nationalize its organization. Jupp explains that the movement had to rely on ‘good speakers to spread propaganda’ in the 1930s when the influence of the radio and the press was growing important in shaping the electorate opinion and the left-wing convictions were relatively more widespread than ever, in this period. Archie Harding, for example, an Oxford graduate,

¹³⁰ Steve Nicholson, *British Theatre and the Red Peril : The Portrayal of Communism, 1917-1945*, Exeter Performance Studies (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), 80.

¹³¹ Nicholson, *Red Peril*, 92.

¹³² Jupp, *Radical Left*, 201-2.

BBC's North Regional Programme Director and MacColl's boss at BBC Manchester, was exiled from London because of the politically loaded programs he produced.¹³³ British Labor, in its origins, was not in full political alignment with the radical Left, represented by the Communist Party in Britain, but in 1930s, the two came rather close, to depart again due to the central policies of the Russian Communist Party, which changed after 1936 Popular Front, and Labor's consistent politicization by the radical Left came to a halt. Jupp expresses the impossible task by stating that, "no amount of effort, whether guided by the scientific method of Marx, the organizational principles of Lenin, or the long-distance charisma of Stalin, could make much difference to the inescapable fact of Labour Party hegemony among the working classes."¹³⁴ This was the inter-war situation with obstacles in spreading the revolutionary fervor to the fringes of the working-class in daily politics. It is possible to relate the failed task of Theatre Workshop's reaching out to the 'people' with their left-wing, anti-establishment repertory with the fact that provincial working class was not on the Left. As Booker explains in *The Neophiliacs*, late 1940s were already disillusioned with the Labour Party and surrendered to the right-wing government again and by mid-50s, the trade union movement had to redefine its status as the country entered a phase of prosperity. By 1960s, 'communists' presence was negligible, and the few tenets hosting the revolutionary fervor such as students' Trotskyism were ineffective and intellectual Marxism was declining between 1950 and the mid-1960s according to Jupp.¹³⁵ Essential poverty

¹³³ MacColl writes that Harding's work was very much politically conscious. It is possible to infer from MacColl's references that Harding's and the following producers' aesthetic and factual expressions heavily informed MacColl's education in creating documentaries. Harding, although a fine 'establishment nominee,' constantly produced work with keen left-wing perspectives on the miners' situations or international affairs that eventually had him exiled from London to Manchester. This attests to the notion that the Pink Decade had a wide base of subscription. MacColl, *Journeyman*, 229-30.

¹³⁴ MacColl, *Journeyman*, 203.

¹³⁵ Jupp, *Radical Left*, 204.

and mass unemployment declined, along with fading European Fascism, diminishing the ‘old targets for left-wing emotion’ and casting the distressed regions outside of the English borders and presenting newer categories for revolutionary fervor, to attract cosmopolitan student reactions rather than that of the British working class.¹³⁶ When the British economy started showing signs of distress, after 1970, reminiscent of 1930s, and unemployment started climbing above two million, it spread among “the young, immigrants and women, all politically ineffectual.”¹³⁷ The situation was less ripe for a possibility of a mass mobilization like the hunger marches of the 1920s, as Jupp states that unemployment did return to the old distressed areas, but it did not affect the whole communities and industries. However, it is possible to trace the regional stirrings of a class consciousness in the eighties, when MacColl had one last attempt to organize agit-prop performances and even founded a ‘Workers’ Theatre Movement’ in London, which played thirties’ texts, such as *Waiting for Lefty*. A letter from the Movement administration to the International Thompson Publishing asking for the original text, dated July 5th 1990 (after MacColl died) describes their zero-budget mission in a paragraph:

The production will be a benefit for the Workers’ Theatre Movements’ ‘megaphone megafund’ appeal to raise money for megaphones desperately needed in our street work. Like the WTM of the thirties described in the ‘Theatres of the Left’ [sic], our theatre is part-time, non-profit making, and receives no funding or sponsorship. We rely on the goodwill of all participants to give their skills and time free of charge.

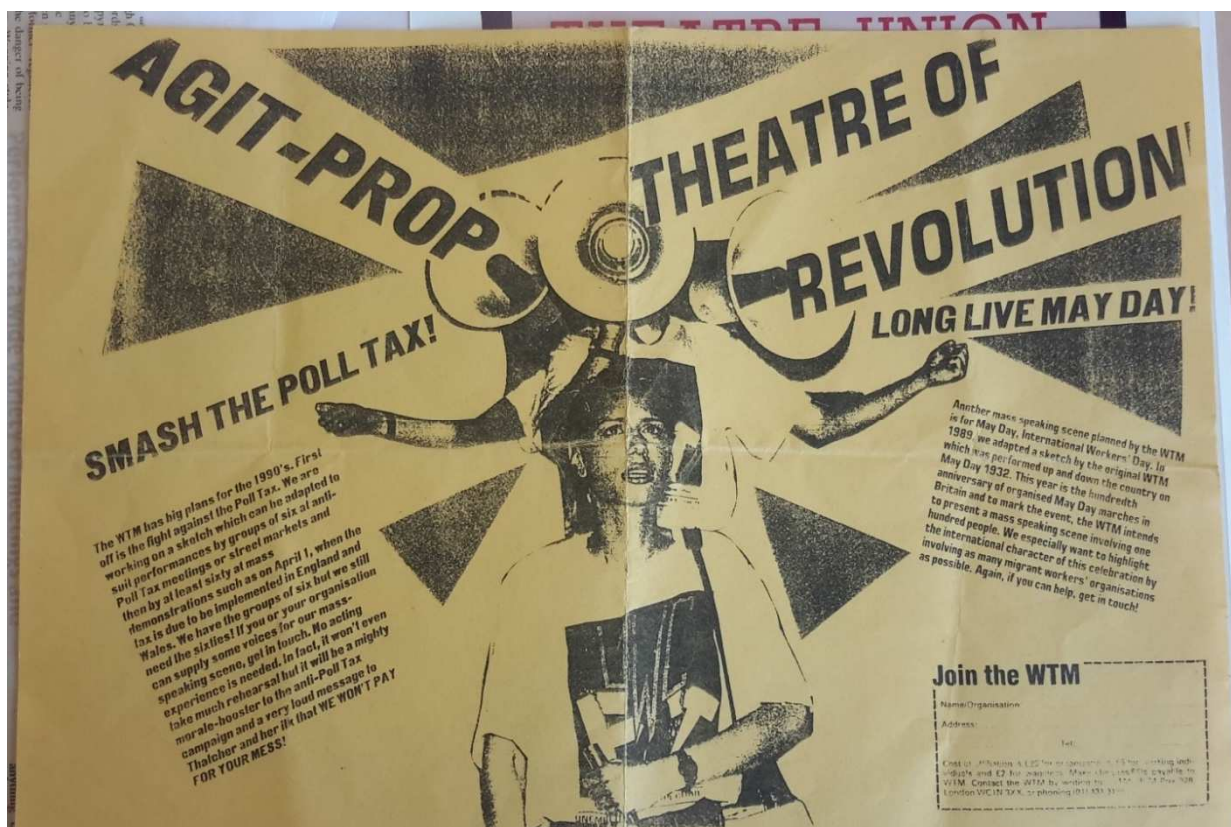
(letter correspondence between Workers’ Theatre Movement and

¹³⁶ Jupp, *Radical Left*, 205.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

International Thompson Publishing, dated July 5th 1990, Theatre,
Workers' Theatre Movement, Miscellaneous papers: publicity, Ewan
MacColl & Peggy Seeger Archives at Ruskin College, Oxford)

The flyers of MacColl's 80's WTM are interesting in the sense that they have the same
thirties' feelings in their refusing to serve the establishment requirements such as Margaret
Thatcher's poll tax as well as organizing for the May Day, with a special call to the migrant labor
force to connect and work with them:



Theatre, Workers' Theatre Movement. Miscellaneous papers: publicity. Peggy Seeger –
Ewan MacColl archives

However, in the nineties, these were small and almost marginal attempts to revive a
worker activism. By that time, miners were among the most highly paid of all British manual

workers; the best unionized and the least likely to be unemployed.¹³⁸ Miners' militancy had waned and by the 1970s Labor was thinking of itself as the 'natural party of government,' doubling its parliamentary strength compared to 1935 despite showing no signs of stronger active organization.¹³⁹ Consequently, the link that remained with the heroic past of Labor was the massive Left literature developed outside the Party, popular among a widening public with higher (tertiary) education. Thus, Jupp claims that a "Labor movement as a partially insulated sub-culture" stayed intact in England despite "a far greater intensity of the mass media barrage", working against left-wing sensibilities.¹⁴⁰ Raphael Samuel offers a historical view of the waning workers' theatre activism as a result of the vanishing context of an open-air meeting, which "for more than a century, served as the very cockpit in the battle of ideas," and also as a result of the disappearance of "a labor movement which offered – or attempted to offer – to its members an alternative cultural universe."¹⁴¹

Above is a brief exploration of the economic and cultural change that erased class consciousness and politics in post-war England to late 60s. England's mainstream culture was going through considerable shift that changed all its functionaries' preoccupations and places in society. The general outlook seems to concede to the idea that the working class in England was no more a matter of political urgency and therefore its cultural presence could be saliently assimilated into popular culture. However, the class antagonisms seem to have endured, while class consciousness has been strictly claimed to have waned down to what I can compare to the pre-Great War tableau, where working-class communities continue to live with a liminal unease

¹³⁸ Jupp, *Radical Left*, 206.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 206-7.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 207.

¹⁴¹ Raphael Samuel, "Workers' Theatre 1926-36," 227.

that they cannot define or rationally reckon with. John McGrath's theatre toils and a very recent exploration of class consciousness in Salford, UK, suggest that neither working class consciousness, nor antagonisms against it have disappeared; both are simmering in that liminal space, underneath the daily politics of liberalist distractions.

Perspectives from the theatrical angle

John McGrath, who made theatre in the 1970s for the working class, shares his observations and experiences of hardship in making theatre for the working class. His company, 7:84, which was active between 1971 and 1988, had 'a heroic touring policy' that lasted longer than that of Theatre Workshop. McGrath was one of the theatre directors influenced by 1930s revolutionary fervor and his group even performed Ewan MacColl's working-class ballet piece *Johnny Noble*. Robert Leach states that McGrath continued his work with financial support from meagre grants, but that he had to quit in 1988 when the funding started coming with kind of demands that he could not accommodate.¹⁴² In his book *The Bone Won't Break*, McGrath explains the conditions of theatre in 1970s and 1980s and describes in great detail how the left-wing theatre was perceived as a threat to the social order.

John McGrath founded his theatre company 7:84 in 1971's Britain. He chose the agit-prop style to reach out to working-class, non-theatre-going audiences in venues other than theatre houses. An Oxford-educated person who started his career in popular entertainment for TV, McGrath learned early in his career what would keep an audience engaged. McGrath chose the interventionist agit-prop style as his strategy in political theatre, and described his work as "playing to working class and non-theatre-going audiences" and "writing, directing and

¹⁴² Robert Leach, *Theatre Workshop: Joan Littlewood and the Making of Modern British Theatre*. Exeter Performance Studies, (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006), 208.

organizing shows to tour around the places where working people usually went for their entertainment, shows which had direct relevance to their lives and the story of their class.”¹⁴³ In his book, McGrath describes the hegemonic interests manifesting as obstacles in his work and further, shaping the whole culture of a nation in its direction of interests. Stating that “The government of our country has [...] used variants or imitations of all the [above] techniques to poison the sea of Britain, with the purpose of asphyxiating socialism,” McGrath refers to Margaret Thatcher’s conservative policies, culminating in an almost absolutist intellectual skepticism on the meaning of society in British people’s lives.¹⁴⁴ Mentioning Thatcher’s strategies to impose false perceptions of self by asking “What is a society?” with fearless intellectual rigour, and by claiming that they didn’t belong to society, they were all just individuals, doing the best they could for themselves, McGrath states Thatcher’s purpose as “to fragment, disperse to the wings, the remnants of class consciousness in the British working class.”¹⁴⁵ According to McGrath, the ‘self-improvement ethos’ of the working class, growing into a reluctance to be acknowledged as ‘working-class’, and the growing cultural gaps between the young and the old members of the class caused a refusal of the social class as the ‘working’ class to represent all of them. Afflictions like high drug addictions and AIDS gave further reasons to the ‘decent working folk’ to refuse any social or cultural bonds with the unemployed ‘leper colony’ of the “new, UB40 culture, . . . growing up with all the dangers of aimlessness and political instability traditionally associated with the ‘lumpen’ and ‘ragged’ proletariat.”¹⁴⁶

McGrath also draws attention to the minorities he lists as blacks, women, Asians, the disabled,

¹⁴³ John McGrath, *The Bone Won't Break: On Theatre and Hope in Hard times* (London: Methuen Drama, 1990), 3.

¹⁴⁴ McGrath, *The Bone Won't Break*, 2.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

the jobless, the gays and lesbians, even 'kids', who, he argues to have diminished class-consciousness and made it secondary to gender and racial struggles that he called short-term and insecure actions. He also refers to the ecological and environmental issues' popularity as a consolidating agency jeopardizing the call for class action. Like James Jupp, McGrath emphasizes the absence of "clear and obviously relevant development in Marxist or Socialist political theory" in the 1970s as another reason purporting to the defeatist discourse of the Left in 1980s.¹⁴⁷ Hence, according to McGrath, the presentation of the 'working-class perspective' to the society grew problematic, and became a dim and distorted vision. Competing with the Tories' interpretation of values, who were backed up by the big business and media support, exploiting taxpayers' money was impossible.

Reminiscent of the WTM tenets, McGrath states that it was necessary to retain the central role of the working class to oppose the dominance of the capitalist system. The working-class cultural values have to be redefined and the class discussions to be re-invigorated although he is aware of the fact that professing a class biased urgency would seem irrelevant, as it does "display a certain vagueness about reality, and a criminal neglect of other, more pressing priorities."¹⁴⁸ Labor had to earn greater self-confidence and skill "in producing images of itself, its history, of society, and of individual human experience of all kinds, rather than images created by and for the bourgeoisie."¹⁴⁹ McGrath also shares his views on the question of whether there is an actual 'working-class culture' anymore since its population feeds on all kinds of popular entertainment instead of creating one of its own. In this quest, John McGrath explains the kind of threat his anti-establishment theatre caused to the system's advocates: he contested the Establishment

¹⁴⁷ McGrath, *The Bone Won't Break*, 9.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

firstly by assuming that there was a culture with a set of values other than the dominant ones, secondly, because it gave a voice to the oppositional forces and made them publicly visible opponents, and thirdly because he justified, by way of creating new forms expressing lived, real experiences that were generally disqualified, erased or stigmatized by the hegemonic cultural practices.¹⁵⁰ Thus, “challeng[ing] the attenuation and whimsicality of the new modes of dominant culture,” his work had its critics, whom he sums up in his book, as ‘those with a vested interest in culture as we know it - heads of arts organisations, most critics, art-lovers, theatre-goers, film-buffs and opera fans; those with a vested interest in a right-wing political trajectory . . . And those who are dedicated followers of fashion, who write off such work as 'old hat', '60s', 'hippy' and therefore boring and cuttable.’¹⁵¹ That seems to be a wholesale cultural response to dedicated left-wing theatres, working to eliminate interventionist projects. McGrath’s case is one that shows how counter-positioned theatres are directly challenged by getting banned from public funds, so that any vestiges of threat to the hegemonic public consciousness gets removed from its operational mode.

A more current case that exemplifies the contemporary cultural situation from a working-class perspective is presented in an essay by Mike Wayne and Deirdre O’Neill, ‘The Condition of the working class: representation and praxis,’ which is titled after Friedrich Engels’ famous nineteenth-century work, ‘The condition of the working class in England,’ which was published in late nineteenth century. Wayne and O’Neill explain their theatrical experiments behind the shooting of a documentary film comparing current working class conditions with that of Engels’ time. Now after hearing from John McGrath, that the working-class consciousness is as faint and

¹⁵⁰ McGrath, *The Bone Won't Break*, 16.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

inarticulate as ever, I refer to a case study of scholars Wayne and O'Neill, as they share their version of documenting working-class life in 2013 in Salford and Manchester, referencing the same work by Engels.

Wayne and O'Neill reiterate the above observations on the working-class condition in Britain by stating the disappearance of the category of class from discourse and consciousness although their physical realities still exist in the social order. They share some facts and figures of the Labour Party, such as the backgrounds of Labour MPs, to draw attention to the reduced or almost extinct ties of Labour MPs with the manual labor. The Oxbridge graduates have nearly cleared the board from actual working-class representatives. The result is a retreat from working-class politics that leaves the party and people devoid of "tools and conceptual frameworks to understand the deeper causal forces shaping the contemporary social and economic landscape."¹⁵² They refer to academia's compliance with the system and its failure in delivering work critical of the situation. Their explicit reference is to disciplines like cultural studies and sociology that originated in processing empirical class observations, but came to accommodate increasingly unempirical and theoretical positions. They also argue that the post-war Welfare State policies were deliberately strangled by a new version of the nineteenth century Laissez-faire policies, ready to explain poverty in cultural and moralistic terms, refraining from a political discourse that acknowledges the economic determinants causing systematic poverty. Wayne and O'Neill state that "culture facilitates a way of thinking that blames individuals for their circumstances rather than socio-economic inequalities and their policy-making drivers."¹⁵³ Thus the working-class spirit that was 'the salt of the Earth' became 'the scum of the Earth',

¹⁵² Mike Wayne and Deirdre O'Neill, 2013. "The Condition of the Working Class: Representation and Praxis". *WorkingUSA*. 16 (4): 488.

¹⁵³ Wayne and O'Neill, "The condition of the working class," 489.

diminished in its self-perception and suppressed and fragmented in its self-expression.¹⁵⁴

However, Wayne and O'Neill's theatre project to lay the groundwork for their documentary film activated the Salford area people towards soul-searching and self-expression. They searched for a shared, social denominator to their erased and fragmented and culturally pathologized sensibilities. Project participants experienced emancipatory processes unveiling collective despair and frustration with their inarticulate mode of existence. They realized the kind of frustration under the surface of their day-to-day life, as they were bombarded by popular entertainment and media replete with images of the working class as "dysfunctional and pathological media fodder for daytime television."¹⁵⁵ This observation is shared by McGrath, too, who debates the question as to whether there is a working-class culture distinct from the popular culture or not. Surveying the interviewees who worked with the documenting team, I can give an example of a young woman, Ange, a black shop-keeper in Salford, who volunteered to tell her story. Wayne and O'Neill observe her transforming, in ten minutes, from being "someone who was outwardly very happy" to talk to them, into someone "who had to stop the interview because she was so upset about the conditions she herself was describing."¹⁵⁶ The engagement of the Salford locals was a process of recovering individual memory as part of a larger, collective memory. In Wayne and O'Neill's expression, "what were once fractured episodes within the life of an individual become intelligible as part of a pattern of a class-stratified society."¹⁵⁷ This study testifies to the fact that class matter exists; class-consciousness can initiate healing processes for a people whose common needs and urgencies can no longer create cultural and political outlets

¹⁵⁴ Wayne and O'Neill, "The condition of the working class," 490.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 489.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 494.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 500.

or representations for building solidarity and overcoming alienation in a society that does not recognize or represent their needs.

Theoretical explorations of the cultural aversions

Cultural schemes that tend to ignore, erase and oppress conflicting societal interests are tracked and explored in various critical works in fields of philosophy, political science, theatre, cultural studies, literature and labor studies and I have referred to examples from theatre and labor studies so far in Nicholson's, McGrath's and Wayne and O'Neill's works, along with very brief references to Raymond Williams' and Ric Knowles' expositions of short circuits in the creation of meaning during theatrical production and reception processes (Knowles) as well as methodological pitfalls in academic inquiries (Williams) that contribute to the neutralization of the cultural other. Likewise, Chantal Mouffe, Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, have critically highlighted the resistant premises of the hegemonic order in recognizing the vitalities of the radical and/or socialist/communist idea. While Fredric Jameson's cultural and literary analyses are solidly Marxist, Chantal Mouffe defends the agonistics as the new political; Baudrillard claims that the age of the political and the social has gone, as he explains the chronology of the changing definitions of the political. Such critiques of the capitalist order highlight the larger theoretical aspects of this discussion that McGrath and Wayne and O'Neill elucidate with examples from life and art. Fredric Jameson defends the Marxist mission in its efforts to stay in charge of the historical processes, explaining it as having "control over the otherwise seemingly blind and natural "laws" of socio-economic fatality," and adds that it may not appeal to people

“uninterested in seizing control over their own destinies.”¹⁵⁸ New consumerism and academic interest have turned previously insurgent art works into artistic and intellectual commodities robbed of their subversive powers and contemporary art has no historical perspective of its time, and suffers an artistic dilemma of representation and innovation as it is unable to look outside of self and with a sense of nostalgia, keeps reproducing a sense of perpetual present time; “a terrible indictment of consumer capitalism itself – or at the very least an alarming, pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history.”¹⁵⁹ Much as the Salford locals referred above cannot get in touch with their true stations in life, Jameson explains how thought processes get blocked or paralyzed and how consumerism advocates variety instead of change that has become something impossible in public perception, and “which is fantasized as the loss of everything we know experientially.”¹⁶⁰ Jameson’s comments on the theatrical climate of the 1960s come very close to the context of 1930s practice in the workers’ theatres, using drama as a weapon, as he describes the theatrical practice of the period as one pushed to its boundaries by happenings, “claiming to do away with the pretext of the text altogether and offering a spectacle of the sheerest performance as such, which also paradoxically seeks to abolish the boundary and the distinction between fiction and fact, or art and life,” and when theatrical performance was also “a form of praxis.”¹⁶¹ The blocked and paralyzed condition of the mind, freed from historical consciousness sounds like Jean Baudrillard’s interpretation of contemporary societal structures of the first world order as ‘mass.’ The masses, for Baudrillard, is like “a black hole that engulfs the social,” and, which will deliberately absorb in itself, all tools

¹⁵⁸ Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*, (London: Verso, 1998), 37.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 18-20; 9.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 60; 92.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 74-75.

and initiatives with any revolutionary vocation.¹⁶² This mass, with its “distrust in political will,” is what remains when the social has been completely removed, leaving its ‘positive brutality’ as silence, inertia and indifference, as it prefers “a football match to a human and political drama.”¹⁶³ Baudrillard also defines the different historical phases of ‘the political’, and explains the latest situation reached as its zero level. According to Baudrillard, after the classical phase, the political had a social turn in the 18th century, followed in nineteenth century by the Marxist thought’s ending the Enlightenment version of the political, changing it into ‘the absolute hegemony of the social and the economic,’ converting the political into the ‘the legislative, institutional, executive mirror of the social.’ The social reached its top point, got saturated and the political reached zero level in contemporary Western society as a result of that process. In this analysis, Baudrillard reminds us how, in fact, the socialists and the revolutionary thought aim at the dissolution of the political – and eventually giving way to the social.¹⁶⁴ For Baudrillard, there is no point in searching for any signs of revolutionary fervor once this mass has replaced the social.

These cultural analyses by Jameson and Baudrillard address the lacking political will in the social and cultural settings of the contemporary era. Likewise, Chantal Mouffe interrogates the current social and political aversion to radicalisms in her books *On the Political* (2005) and *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (2013), critically exploring the release of individuals from collective ties, and the claims that there is no more room for ‘the political’ because state systems like communism have failed, and that consensus is only possible through dialogue, and

¹⁶² Jean Baudrillard, *In the shadow of the silent majorities, or, The end of the social*, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 37.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 38; 41; 43.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 46-7.

claiming that negation or violence “belong to a bygone age when reason had not yet managed to control the supposedly archaic passions.” The partisan conflicts and collective identities are deemed as a thing of the past and are ruled out of neo-liberal urban settings. As a remedy, Mouffe proposes a new definition of political practice, namely “agonistic public sphere of contestation” that can challenge the current order, which established itself on a transparent and rational social contract missing the ontological dimension of ‘the political.’¹⁶⁵ Liberalism’s emphasis on individualism and rationalism and their failure to grasp the collectively formed identities miss the starting point of the political and leave it as an unacknowledged ‘blind spot,’ according to Mouffe, reminiscent of the unacknowledged class consciousness of the Salford people whom O’Neill and Wayne interviewed.¹⁶⁶ Mouffe states that the current artistic affairs draw a picture of ‘a hedonistic culture’ that leaves no space for art to provide a real subversive experience, and reiterating the Marxist criticism of commodification, she mentions the blurring borders between art and advertising and moreover, about post-Fordist strategies of including and partially financing counter-cultural styles and insurgent art in expanding its own networks. Mouffe, drawing from Paolo Virno, describes the current condition of immaterial labor in ‘post-Fordist’ production to have become performative, distorting the borders between work, intellectual reflection, and political action. As Baudrillard claims that the masses absorb everything given to them, Mouffe likewise states that “post-Fordist labor has absorbed into itself many of the characteristics of the political action.” Same argument is raised by Raymond Williams in his work *The Sociology of Culture* (1981) explaining how art markets adapt to social changes and include new artistic segments, and calls this function its symmetry with the social

¹⁶⁵ Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, (London: Routledge, 2005), 3;9;15; Chantal Mouffe, and Elke Wagner, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*, (London; New York: Verso, 2013), 4.

¹⁶⁶ Mouffe and Wagner, *Agonistics*, 4; 44.

order within which it operates “by selecting certain kinds of work for partial exemption from the market . . . it in one sense protects the market from other kinds of social and cultural challenge.”¹⁶⁷ Subsidies and arts council grants amount to this type of funding and the discriminations made in extending public funds can be seen in cases of McGrath’s theatre and in the comparison of Arts Council disbursements to the English Stage Society and the Theatre Workshop in the fifties. The following chapters discuss the strategies employed by the theatres of the left and consequently by their descendant, Theatre Workshop in their effort to rewind the cultural processes that precipitated into what Baudrillard calls the end of social and what Mouffe recognized as exclusively rational and hedonistic attitudes.

Conclusion

Jenny King’s memories of Joan Littlewood tell a lot. Last year’s Littlewood centenary was a way of creating meaning out of her work and bringing it to the local experience in creative and practical ways. That may sound like a successful social impact when we see hundreds of Fun Palaces across the United Kingdom where people found the freedom to try a hand in work never tried before. It is exciting to see that Joan Littlewood’s ideas, which she could not find ways of promoting in theatre alone, are coming to fruition. However, King’s insight on where Littlewood’s attention would have been in 2014, reminds one of what Fredric Jameson wrote on the restrictedness of art in the present age. Whether not looking at Gaza but at their neighborhood playground will help British people appreciate the work of Theatre Workshop or not is debatable. It is possible to say that it is a community engagement and is therefore in the fringes of the radical trends, even though scholarship proposed a discontinuity between community theatres

¹⁶⁷ Mouffe and Wagner, *Agonistics*, 86; Raymond Williams, *The Sociology of Culture*, 107.

and the historical radical left theatres. It requires a deeper look at the map where Fun Palaces were built last year, to see if they reached out to the working-class districts in London or in other British cities. There is still considerable resistance to share the left-wing tag and scholarly analyses completely sever the Fun Palace project from Theatre Workshop's radical inheritance. Contemporary Fun Palaces aim at creating a community sharing and one can think about the distance between creative community get-togethers and the solidarity of class consciousness for comprehending the extent that these revivals can meet the Fun Palace blueprint. The project can be explored as a contemporary urban interpretation of Littlewood's work with the virtue of its socially engaging dimension, and the potential to create the 'social' that Baudrillard claims lost. I believe it requires a deeper look at the map where Fun Palaces were opened, to see if they reached out to the less privileged, working class districts. Manchester's famous working class district, Salford, where Ewan MacColl was raised and began his theatre, hosts a Fun Palace at Salford Arts Theatre, but has not posted account of the event.¹⁶⁸ Although the project seems to promise a social revival, it is worthwhile to refer to the original proposals of the Fun Palace projects which were aiming more at urban wanderers than a (non-descript) community I must express that the original Fun Palace plans aimed at no such dispersed communal events; its major target was to provide temporary and successive access to major districts in London.. At this juncture, it is possible to see a reversal of the original objective that portends to the opening of major high-end districts as recreational spots to commoners, in the spirit of recent 'occupy movements,' and de-centralizing or re-routing such potential public access away from the urban center and into the various low-profile neighborhoods. However, the street fair projects are closer

¹⁶⁸ "Theatre for the people/ New writing event," Fun Palaces, accessed October 18, 2015 (link broken as of June 9th 2017), <http://funpalaces.co.uk/discover/theatre-for-the-people-new-writing-event/>

to the Fun Palace revivals, and their objectives of bringing district populations together seem to have been met by Duffy's Fun Palace events.

Chapter 2. A matter of continuities – I Popular background

MacColl and Littlewood's collaboration in theatre is largely indebted to the conventions of the inter-war period's left-wing theatrical initiatives and, as Derek Paget expresses in his analogy of Theatre Workshop as a 'Trojan Horse,' most of the techniques developed by the time they settled in London and displayed there, owe credit to the twenties' and thirties' revolutionary fervor in theatre. While all scholarly attention attests to their radical backgrounds, most of Theatre Workshop techniques in reconstructing the well-known texts and bringing fresh perspectives to contemporary matters escape this context of radical background and are mentioned as some Littlewood wizardry in making theatre. This chapter aims to bring to the fore a vibrant inter-war left-wing theatrical environment that trained Littlewood and MacColl so well that they preserved an amalgam of these styles, as they created their own added value to compound into a signature style that would be adhered to Littlewood alone. I argue that the inter-war period as a classroom of left-wing theatre gave many graduates, whose works, styles and aims can be clearly likened to Theatre Workshop's as they belonged to the same structure of feeling, but had less resources for perseverance. For this aim, I discuss the popular performance traditions' strategies that the nineteenth and twentieth-century Labor movement embraced to reach out to the working-class base of British population, and point out MacColl and Littlewood's borrowings from this popular source. Acknowledging the period's technological advances in cinema and radio as further formative agencies in their work, I bring analytical perspectives and demonstrate points of intersection with the recent scholarship on Theatre Workshop.

This chapter aims to highlight the presence of the traditional Labor matters (in terms of form and content) as continuing trends in the works of Theatre Workshop. This is a position to

counter recent academic as well as journalistic narratives that put the emphasis more on the finished aesthetic product of Theatre Workshop and see Joan Littlewood as the proprietor of credits in the success story. It is a common debate whether interwar period's revolutionary left-wing theatres had any lasting impact on the postwar and contemporary theatre's expressions. Joan Littlewood's legacy is a fine bridge to trace this debate through, as it is an acknowledged and a highly revered one, as I explained in the previous chapter, and contrary to appearances, it bears within it an eclectic palette of performances, including the left-wing performance traditions of the nineteenth century and the interwar period, WTM and the Russian avant-garde techniques in acting and design, German expressionism in writing, montage techniques learnt from the radio documentary sequences at Manchester BBC, and visually inspired by the cinema.

I conduct this analysis in parallel with an analysis of an earlier Theatre Union work, in fact their first take on a classic: *Fuenteovejuna (The Sheepwell)* of Lope de Vega to protest the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and to collect money for medical aid to send to Spain. The production is an earlier indicator of an experimental combination of British performance traditions spanning nineteenth-century popular entertainment and medieval performances, with the Russian and Continental avant-garde and the ideologically charged WTM strategies. This culmination of traditions, I argue, was largely imported through Ewan MacColl's earlier occupations in the theatrical and musical expressions of the working-class cause and such practices that MacColl and other members emphasized in their contributions were in fact more commonly embraced by other left-wing theatrical renegades than admitted. Most of the performance strategies that highlight Theatre Workshop stage as revolutionary were, in fact, common in the interwar left-wing theatrical environment. As I explained in the previous chapter, I argue that this is because the West End gets the particular attention and most of the other trends

that fed the famous theatre row are largely generalized under the tag of radical theatres. In my analysis, I survey the earlier forms of working-class leisure, to find in the following chapter's analysis that they survived in the well-known styles of the Theatre Workshop.

Fuenteovejuna (The Sheepwell) – Nineteenth-century's favorite classic for the working class

Fuenteovejuna was written in the seventeenth century by Lope de Vega on a fifteenth-century moment of conflict in peasants' lives who mustered the courage to rise against a tyrannical noble, with a background of an ensuing war between the Spanish and the Portuguese crowns, with the nobles mostly supporting the latter. In the play, the villagers rise against nobility to defend their honor, and they are pardoned by the king upon being heard of their reasons. The villagers display an exemplary case of collective action upon their rightful cause, and in this context, the play was interpreted from the nineteenth century onwards as a play that displayed revolutionary fervor of the lower classes: Stanley Appelbaum indicates in his introduction to the play that the play did not have an enthusiastic reception in its own day, but was received by the nineteenth-century literary historians differently, with an emphasis on its "unusual revolutionary statement," and was even branded "the first proletarian drama" to be staged as 'a political gesture,' and it was also made into a ballet in 1939, by the Bolshoi Ballet, titled after its heroin, *Laurencia*.¹⁶⁹ It is worthwhile here to mention that the general theatrical response to the Spanish War came from the left wing in Britain. Claire Warden writes that many theatres responded with a Spanish play: Jack Lindsay's mass declamation, *On Guard for Spain*

¹⁶⁹ Stanley Appelbaum, Introduction in *Fuenteovejuna A Dual Language Book* Lope de Vega ed. & trans. By Stanley Appelbaum, (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2002), xvi; for the ballet detail see footnote no.14 on the same page.

(1937), London Unity's version of Brecht's *Seftorq Carrar's Rifles* (1938).¹⁷⁰ According to Andrew Davies, *Fuenteovejuna* was produced later in 1943, this time by the Unity Theatre in London.¹⁷¹ The play was not performed in the Theatre Workshop repertoire until it was revived in 1955 September, to play four weeks at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, London.¹⁷²

Fuenteovejuna can be treated as an evidence of continuum in the Littlewood-MacColl collaboration, of the nineteenth century performance tracks, which interpreted this text in a revolutionary context and as a proletarian drama. In an interview, MacColl stated that the play was very popular in Spain but had never been produced in Europe until their initiative:

By this time the Spanish Civil War was just beginning, and we thought, it was 1936, we'll meet the situation with this ...play because it's about a situation that's absolutely analogous to the Spanish Civil War and it's probably one of the greatest plays in the whole Spanish repertory ...and it had never [sic] been played in Europe – this is as though King Lear had never been played in a country. It is to the Spanish and we were the first to put it on. (Parsley, sage and politics: transcripts of interviews with Ewan MacColl, 4th interview, MacColl and Seeger archives at Ruskin College, Oxford)

In Peter Rankin's account, the play was adapted and given the title *The Sheepwell* by MacColl.¹⁷³ MacColl tells in the same interview that they had advertised for the auditions and after their commercial success promoted by the Manchester Peace Pledge Union's commissioned

¹⁷⁰ Clarie Warden, *British Avant-garde Theatre*, 141.

¹⁷¹ Andrew Davies, *Other Theatres*, 129.

¹⁷² Goorney, *Theatre Workshop Story*, 206.

¹⁷³ Rankin, *Dreams and Realities*, 38.

play, *Miracle at Verdun*, many people applied; thirty of them were chosen by MacColl and Littlewood, some of whom stayed. For Theatre Union, its importance was that for the first time since their open-air agit-prop performances, in Goorney's account, 'live' music, composed by MacColl, was used again in this performance where Lope de Vega's poetic dramatic text was used like lyrics set to "the tunes of stirring republican battle songs and [were] used as a continuous thread along the production."¹⁷⁴ MacColl states in an interview that he wrote all the songs: "Spanish sounding music, and words for all the songs and I made all the songs about what was happening in Spain today – then, about the Spanish Civil War and it fitted perfectly into the context of Lope's play."¹⁷⁵ Goorney notes that the musicians had to listen to MacColl's music from him in order to play the tunes: just as the oral tradition that he grew up in stipulates, MacColl could not write music or play an instrument, so he had to keep the tunes in mind until he could convey them to the musicians.¹⁷⁶

There is also mention of a choir singing these or other 'republican' songs during the inserts (individual statements from among the audience), reinforcing the theme at predetermined moments, which will be discussed shortly, and it is not clear if the choir consisted of the singing and acting Theatre Union members on the stage or a separate chorus to sing and recite along in MacColl's adaptation of this verse drama.

Played to full houses, *Fuenteovejuna*'s cast was rather large, relying on real action as opposed to the previous expressionistic performances with static scenes. The 'real action' as opposed to highly stylized sequences became a typical strategy of Theatre Workshop seen in

¹⁷⁴ Goorney, *Theatre Workshop Story*, 17; MacColl, *Agitprop to Theatre Workshop*, xl.

¹⁷⁵ Parsley, sage and politics: transcripts of interviews with Ewan MacColl, 4th interview, Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger Archives at Ruskin College, Oxford.

¹⁷⁶ Goorney, *Theatre Workshop Story*, 17.

their documentary pieces, as well as earlier more avant-garde productions. Generally, static tableau scenes as in this play or highly stylized and choreographed moves as in *John Bullion*, are contrasted by an easy, naturalistic acting that MacColl calls here “real life.” These naturalistic moments of acting provide a highly lyrical or dramatic contrast to the scenes displaying capitalist affairs presented in highly stylized, caricatured and choreographed movement sequences such as in *John Bullion* or *The Good Soldier Schweik* productions of Theatre Union. As such, *Fuenteovejuna* offered a continuum in what MacColl calls a series of agitprop-cum-expressionistic plays depending on a series of such static tableaux and claims that the latter, with its intense action and crowd scenes, “demanded maximum area of uncluttered stage where the crowds could move and give vent to their violent feelings,” rioting “like a crowd of football enthusiasts expressing their devotion to Manchester United,” again making a seventeenth-century classical text visually and culturally relevant to the outdoor culture of his times.¹⁷⁷

Fuenteovejuna was a huge success and inspired the Theatre Union to hold rallies and agit-prop sequences in the streets, much like in the Red Megaphones days of MacColl and his comrades, encouraging them to get back to the propaganda mode in the streets, and crowds on the stage and auditorium were soon transformed to the crowds in the streets who were attending Theatre Union’s rallies, demonstrations and agit-props. With this performance the Scots poet Hugh MacDiarmid (pseudonym of Christopher Grieve) began supporting the ensemble, sharing his poetry that they might perform in these street events that MacColl called as their ‘new heights in agit-prop’ which were much better formulated than their older group declamations, occasional

¹⁷⁷ Goorney & MacColl, *Agitprop to Theatre Workshop*, xl.

songs, and tableau-like groupings of the actors that he recalls as ‘sloppy’ and lacking nuance. Their new pageants, public meetings and demonstrations that can be summed up as agit-prop, according to MacColl, “had become refined, polished and imbued with that special luminescence which a large audience generates.”¹⁷⁸ Howard Goorney also writes that with *Fuenteovejuna*, Theatre Union reached its widest audiences, and “out of that, took specially written sketches and poems relating to Spain, ... to perform at public meetings.”¹⁷⁹ Hence, *Fuenteovejuna* provided this opportunity to keep and refine the agit-prop in their repertory tools, which would become a handy tool in the coming living newspaper performance of *Last Edition* of 1940 and the ensemble retained its vital chord with the streets.

The idea of planting cast members in audiences probably started at this period, too, but these earlier plants were actual audience members interviewed before the show, who would coin in their rehearsed statements at pre-arranged moments in the action, when they would stand up, the spotlights would “pick them out and they would say their piece,” which were “personal statement[s] ... [as] planned and rehearsed interpolations” such as: “My name is Arthur D. I’m a face worker at Agecroft Colliery, Pendleton. I’m on short time, a three day [sic] week. I support the Spanish people’s struggle because their fight and my fight is the same.”¹⁸⁰

This technique gave birth to a signature performance tool that MacColl calls an integral feature in most plays such as *Johnny Noble* and *Uranium 235*, creating a kind of stage-audience banter, which was also a common feature in nineteenth-century stage-audience relationship. The number consisted of inserting rehearsed personal statements of individuals in the audience in

¹⁷⁸ MacColl, *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, xli.

¹⁷⁹ Goorney, *Theatre Workshop Story*, 17.

¹⁸⁰ MacColl, *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, xl

between fiery Republican songs or MacDiarmid's poem *The Flaming Poetaster*, written for the Spanish Civil War recited by the famous black actor Paul Robeson or the choir: "The effect produced by juxtaposing the flat Lancashire accents of housewives and unemployed workers [probably the inserts] against the soaring voices of the choir, the rich, velvety base-baritone of Paul Robeson, or the stinging hail of MacDiarmid's poetry, was riveting."¹⁸¹

As discussed above, these naturalistic inserts and juxtapositions were used in the *Last Edition* and later, in *Lovely War*, too, and contributed to the stage-audience banter in *Fuenteovejuna*, to engage the audience in the action and enhancing the liveness and improvisational quality of their productions. It is possible to observe that, with the production of *Fuenteovejuna*, Theatre Union stepped onto the path of their own unique styles from the interwar period's ubiquitous left-wing and popular performance practices. Their signature style was yet in the making, which would be the product of an experimental attitude dedicated to bringing about a certain expository documentary realism countered by naturalistic sequences representing the effects of the exposed facts on the working class. The overall atmosphere growing out of these contrasting strategies dispensed with the conventions of dramatic theatre and represented the conflicting interests of this class with that of the establishment and arguably brought an aesthetic experience to the audience that was uplifting and triumphant. Peggy Soundy's account of the *Good Soldier Schweik*'s audience response indicates this affect: "I used to travel to East Ham on the bus and I'd be sitting there with the theatre audience. I could hear them talking about the show and how they felt Schweik was, somehow, part of them."¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ MacColl, *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, xlii.

¹⁸² Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 100.

For Littlewood and MacColl, the theatre needed the working class; it was written in their Theatre Union Manifesto that the great theatres of the past were the people's theatres, and also in their contemporary situation (late forties). Littlewood believed that only an independent theatre supported by its audience could live up to the standards of the great people's theatres that they were envisioning, and for that, they needed a wide audience base that would sustain them without compromising the integrity of their work for the expectations of the funding agencies- be them Arts Council or the T.U.C. (Trade Union Congress):

On Sunday the 13th February 1949, the English actors' trade union endorsed the T.U.C.'s black circular inaugurating the witch hunt against communism. Arts Council, financed by a Labour government, helps a company of Basil Dean's which is presenting a play "Private Enterprise", the most bitter attack on trade unionism seen on the English stage in living memory. Many examples could be given to show that the British theatre is mainly reactionary and artistically feeble; the general standard in political and artistic integrity is markedly low. There is dissatisfaction among the actors but unfortunately this does not find expression in any strong, independent movement against commercial theatre. Taking into account the stranglehold which commercial agents and managements have on our theatres, it is obvious that any such movement would find it difficult to survive. The only solution would be to attract a large new audience from the workers but these do not have the money, opportunity, nor inclination to visit the theatre. (Littlewood, 'Theatre of communism,' Box 1, Folder 3, Michael Barker Collection of Joan Littlewood, HRC)

Given the sense of urgency that was continuing well into the late forties, when the above-mentioned note was taken, it is only normal in the case of Theatre Workshop to have used the appeal of the popular performance traditions, the empowering vigor of the WTM strategies and the classical texts' universal claim to truth (at least in their own interpretations) as a springboard to create that rambunctious stage that they came to be known for. MacColl and Littlewood were not only dedicated to the class cause, they also knew that they needed the working class, whom they formulated as the 'people' for their great 'people's theatre.'

Working class leisure and the left-wing theatres from 19th Century until WW2

Most labor leisure activities in the early 20th century England relied on the popular entertainment forms of the last decades of 19th century, which can be very briefly summed up as music hall, circus, and low-income level popular theatres such as penny gaffs and workers' art clubs. Looking at the British labor efforts to entertain and educate the working class, these forms of entertainment were very frequently called in to reach out to the workers and their families. Hence it is only normal to trace the presence of these forms in MacColl-Littlewood collaboration, as they, too, started out during the 1920s and 1930s when burgeoning but short-lived theatres of the left were practicing to reach their targeted working-class audiences and, in doing so, were traversing the binaries between theatre and performance, employing both venue performances such as music halls as well as carrying on agit-prop style activisms. The labor attempt to draw the non-theatre-going workers and families to the theatrical event relied heavily on these street performances, held at quarters attracting the jobless or the working-class people. Given their financial situations and interests, theatre-going was not a frequent option for the

struggling working-class and their joys were largely spared for various free street entertainments, hence the left-wing theatrical initiatives' reach-out to the streets.

A brief understanding of the popular leisure conventions utilized in labor street performances and drama, coupled with the more ideological WTM practices will help chart the blue print that went into the shaping of the Theatre Workshop signature style. In the end, it will be clearer –maybe even evident - that in the story of Theatre Workshop, there is a long, anonymous story that belongs to many left-wing British theatres in the early 20th century that deserve acknowledgement.

If we aim for the general stylistic features of left-wing theatres in Britain, we do see that much of it carries the residues of nineteenth-century popular entertainment for its popular and working-class appeal. Working class leisure was not a new thing by the time the WTM had started tapping into these entertainment trends after its birth in the currents of the Russian avant-garde. During the nineteenth century, the English working class created its own popular forms of entertainment which converged with the art of theatre, albeit remaining largely at the level of street, circus or music hall performances, and folk traditions also fed this class-biased type of popular entertainment.

Although it is difficult to see any of its definitive features in Theatre Workshop plays, it is worthwhile to note the importance of the stage melodrama of nineteenth century as explored by scholars in its capacity to serve multiple political agendas for both middle and working classes. In the nineteenth-century London, stage melodrama, which spanned the extremities between tragedy and farce, had a high appeal for the lower classes of the social stratum, while

bringing satisfactory revenues to the West End houses, too.¹⁸³ At the earlier part of the nineteenth century, before the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843, operatic genres were a popular alternative to the theatre for the elite and middle classes. Joseph Donohue refers to Walter Scott's observations on this shift in leisure preference to be caused by reasons that Scott identified in his 'Essay on Drama' (1819) as "the exorbitant size of theatre buildings, conditions hostile to both performers and dramatists and the systematic toleration of prostitutes, whose presence had driven away large segments of the potential audience."¹⁸⁴ The license privilege was granted to all theatres in 1843, with the cautionary exception of prohibiting consumption of tobacco and alcohol in the auditorium during performances which aimed at drawing a line between the less respectable popular entertainment and 'legitimate theatres,' albeit with failing results.¹⁸⁵ However, an 1844 remark by F.G. Tomlins repeats the same observations relevant in 1819: "the cultivated and propertied classes have mostly forsaken the English theatres; the portion that like theatrical performances transferring their patronage to the opera and musical entertainments."¹⁸⁶

Conventions of melodrama are debated in terms of its social and political renderings running in parallel to its escapist themes presented to its mixed audiences, ranging from the high-

¹⁸³ Joseph Donohue writes that The Adelphi, for instance, played John Baldwin Buckstone's (a prolific actor and writer) melodrama *Luke the Labourer; or, The Lost Son* in 1826, as well as many of his other melodramas, dramas, comedies, farces and burlettas. Joseph Donohue, 'Introduction: The Theatre from 1800 to 1895' in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 220. Accessed 2/22/2017 <https://doi-org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/10.1017/CHOL9780521650687.012>

¹⁸⁴ Donohue states that Walter Scott observed these conditions as cause to the alleged decline of the theatres and 'sad debilitation of the art' that gave way to legislative inquiries. Donohue, 'The theatre form 1800 to 1895,' 223.

¹⁸⁵ Dave Russell explains that the act could not bring a determinable advantage to the legitimate theatres, as alcohol drinking was common and tobacco consumption could at times breach managerial injunctions, resulting in some provinces such as Bradford with permission for smoking. Russell also adds that there were music halls where drinking and smoking were prohibited. Russell, 'Popular entertainment, 1776–1895,' 385.

¹⁸⁶ Davies, *Other Theatres*, 15-6.

fare elite audience to the working class in the pit and the galleries of the theatre auditorium. The genre had its political implications for its mixed audiences and sub-genres like the factory plays and highwaymen plays were particularly appealing to the lower classes. Andrew Davies evaluates the genre from a working-class perspective, whereas Margaret Cohen concentrates on the generic appeal on the sentiments of its audience to create ‘sentimental communities’ that contribute to the progressive Enlightenment task to expand the binaries of social (positive) versus individual (negative) rights, which the sentimental (in this case melodramatic) conflict of the genre expounded. In this way, Cohen argues that the conflict demanded a sympathetic response from the spectator to identify with the victim’s position, and created universal human response, “available to anyone regardless of rank, social status, age, gender and nationality,” only requiring “a taste to be moved.”¹⁸⁷ Emotional response as some equalizing, democratic agency that frees individuals from socio-economic limitations could bring free debate and contribute to the public sphere. There is comfort in the thought of universal inclusion when assessing a melodramatic situation that could eventually cure the conflicted communicational space between individual and social freedoms. It is possible to comprehend the appeal of such equal emotional footing on the lower classes of the society, who aspire to own the least materially liable assets of the elite classes: respectability and judgment. Skilled workers aspired for values that were characteristically middle class. Contrary to left-wing use of the genre in the factory plays or highwaymen plays, the genre’s rerouting the drive behind “the formation and evolution of working-class cultural practice,” towards this superior middle-class moral badge was a promise to eliminate the feeling of moral and emotional inferiority; that “sharper line by

¹⁸⁷ Margaret Cohen, ‘Sentimental Communities,’ in Cohen, Margaret, and Carolyn Dever *The Literary Channel: The Inter-national Invention of the Novel*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 112.

far than that between rich and poor, employer or employee, or capitalist and proletarian.”¹⁸⁸

While Sophie Nield explores a different aspect of popular theatre’s affect on the working-class audiences, this point is helpful in expanding how Margaret Cohen explores the appeal of the universal call of the sentimental conflict upon the human soul, and pointing to its consequent expansion into social and political spheres. The sentimental call to identify with and to sentimentally respond to the distressed character in melodrama could have an empowering influence on the working-class audience that put them in par with the upper classes and included them in debates on the progress of societal norms.

On the other hand, Andrew Davies notes in the genre, a more resonant theme with the labor perspective: presence of a general discontent running as a critical under current, earning the genre a radical aspect, especially in factory plays debating the injustices weathered by the working class, indicative of a pro-labor theme. An example he shares as a factory play is *The Factory Lad* by John Walker (1832) that has conventions recognizable to those familiar with the left-wing theatres of the 1930s, such as representing the strife between workers and the factory owner, including “various asides and remarks question[ing] the legal system,” and employing allegorical conventions like naming a magistrate ‘Justice Bias,’ which recalls the agit-prop conventions of employing allegorical names for stereotypes represented in sketches, as in MacColl’s Theatre of Action’s *John Bullion* with names such as ‘Deafen’em’ for media,

¹⁸⁸ Sophie Nield, refers to D.G. Wright’s note the skilled workers tend to ‘aspirations and values that were characteristically middle-class,’ and that the concept of respectability functioned in very close proximity with the concept of independence; not as something imposed upon them, but as something desired. Sophie Nield, ‘Popular Theatre, 1895–1940’ in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre*, edited by Baz Kershaw, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 96. Accessed 2/16/2017. <https://doi-org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/10.1017/CHOL9780521651325.005>

‘Birthright’ for an aristocratic boss.¹⁸⁹ However, Davies also notes that the critical attitudes displayed in this melodrama subgenre remained limited to individual scale; there were no calls for collective or class action.¹⁹⁰ Davies reports highwaymen plays as another subgenre with a tendency to have a certain celebratory tone in dealing with crime. These plays were dramatized versions of Harrison Ainsworth novels relating real crime incidents (*Rookwood* in 1834 about Dick Turpin; *Jack Sheppard* in 1840); their leading actors were the criminals themselves (Turpin and Sheppard), and the character props such as masks and canes went viral in sales across the country reminiscent of the current popular culture economies.¹⁹¹ Although bringing a repenting or punishing finale to the plays, the audience was allowed to enjoy the characters’ delighting in their criminal exploits before the penitence. These plays were banned by Chamberlain’s office in 1860. Charles Dickens novels on the stage clearly linked crime with social conditions, and an almost film-noire feature was growing in these plays with their coverage of criminal lives; their difficult-to-catch conventions employed in pantomimes and burlettas, evading the censor’s office by way of depending more on the live performance than on the text, consequently representing political topics foregone by the legitimate theatres such as “Parliamentary reform, the Peterloo Massacre and the issue of the Corn Law.”¹⁹² These thematic and generic features of melodrama remind us of the general features of Theatre Workshop repertory bringing to the foreground characters and themes ignored by the Establishment in its dynamic and improvisatory performance conventions equally difficult for the censoring office to pin down for offence.

¹⁸⁹ Davies, *Other Theatres*, 16; James Miller and Joan Littlewood, *John Bullion A Ballet with Words*, in *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, 2.

¹⁹⁰ Davies, *Other Theatres*, 16-7.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 18.

As mentioned earlier, melodrama as a genre, was far from the tools that interwar left-wing theatres sought to employ. In fact, the 1920s' antagonistic contemporaries of revolutionary theatres resorted to melodrama to emphasize the 'red peril,' as Steve Nicholson's work widely describes. However, as a typical nineteenth century genre, there were instances when pro-labor playwrights had to embed the industrial conflicts of the period within the familiar distressed virtue versus vicious rake axis of melodrama. An example is a play from Sheffield, England: *The Union Wheel* (1870), by Joseph Fox, on the complications of a local industrial conflict that gave way to violent results known as the 'Outrages,' which caused a national commission to be appointed for inquiry, and as result of the hearings, "the clandestine activities of the trade unions were finally fully revealed to an avid public."¹⁹³ Wilson introduces the working-class biography of the playwright, Fox, and discusses how his textual strategies humanize the criminal situations of the union members by displaying their side of affairs and their reasons for aggressively standing up against technological progress in business. The play did not make any propaganda, but rather seemed to aim for a reconciliation that would benefit Sheffield, a town "sullied ... in the eyes of the nation" with the extremities of the situational crime scale ranging from sexual intimidations to murder, making the case the right material for melodrama.¹⁹⁴ Wilson shows Fox's employing a number of strategies to bring the workers to an equal material (not

¹⁹³ Hilary Wilson explains the representative tones and strategies of two local melodramatic plays that took the Sheffield events and the Commission hearings as their subject. Wilson discusses how the two plays (Charles Reade's *Put Yourself in his Place* (1870) and Joseph Fox's *The Union Wheel* (1870)) clashed in terms of their intentions, which also shaped their strategies in representing the union's aggression to workers' being displaced by factory owners for industrial machines, which took to personal and melodramatic heights, as well as upset the whole city of Sheffield in the eyes of the nation. Hilary Wilson, 'The challenge of using theatre as social and political intervention in nineteenth-century Sheffield: Joseph Fox's *The Union Wheel*,' *Theatre Notebook A Journal of the History and Technique of the British Theatre* 70, no. 3 (2016): 154.

¹⁹⁴ Wilson, 'Joseph Fox's *The Union Wheel*,' 159.

sentimental) footing by employing a sympathetic middle-class character to own that “Labour [had] a right to form its combinations against the despotism of Capital,” rendering the working-class artisans articulate, “decent individuals forced to make difficult choices,” and giving them “stage space to discuss troubling issues about mechanization and progress,” as subtle means of refraining from denigrating the union activity in Sheffield.¹⁹⁵ The play comes close to docudrama, as the playwright is assumed to have sat in on the commission hearings and mentioned places are familiar spots in town, and furthermore the play comes close to realism in its depictions of locals and its “attention to speech patterns of Sheffield both in the text and through their accurate reproduction on stage,” appealing to “a local audience of all classes.”¹⁹⁶ However, the plot is typically melodramatic, replete with “sexual intrigue and thrilling incidents,” ending optimistically, relaying all hope to the providence and faith in future progress. Hence we see an example of an unlikely nineteenth-century genre exploring the complexities of industrial conflict and its local, urban impacts, developing a taste for facts, reminiscent of docudramas. It is clear from Wilson’s discussions that Fox’s play, *The Union Wheel*, was a pro-labor melodrama as far as the popular conventions of the genre allowed. It gave voice to the union cause, but brought salvation to the town weakened with wild conflicts, by way of reconciliation and individual progress and maturation, without provoking any revolutionary sentiments.

The melodramatic appeal apparently travelled inter-medially and was carried over in the folk traditions, as well. MacColl’s musical childhood and youth had many instances when his father sang heart-breaking stories of the low life. In an interview, MacColl describes his family’s hosting Scots new year (he calls Hugmanay) eves, and how,

¹⁹⁵ Wilson, ‘Joseph Fox’s *The Union Wheel*,’ 158.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

there would be all kinds of Scots traditional songs sung, ... cabbage-patch songs, tear jerkers from the 1890's and the early 1900's ... interrupted from time to time, by members of my family, ... getting up and reciting very very long tragic monologues that used to bring me to the point of tears. Things like Curfew Shall Not Ring Tonight and the Stowaway [sic] – pieces like that ... the whole atmosphere of the tragedy would build up and everybody would be weeping into their beer and drams. (Politics, Parsley and Sage, transcript of interview 2, Tape 3, Ewan MacColl & Peggy Seeger Archives)

Ewan MacColl saw such musical performances in the pubs as powerful tools to help workers embrace their stations in life: “you heard a tremendous amount of interesting stuff, not good songs, not songs of merit, but songs which reflected the social mores of the time very accurately, and the contradictions of the time . . . [describing] what it means to be a thief and go to prison . . . songs like the Wolf and Tempest . . . songs like these, was [sic] very, very welcome,” indicating his future use of working-class themes in plays like *Johnny Noble*, replete with such ballads, and *Landscape with Chimneys*.¹⁹⁷

Alun Hawkins refers to similar attributions of the folk song in terms of its 20th century examples celebrating and also comforting working-class people's simple lives.¹⁹⁸ Hawkins refers

¹⁹⁷ Parsley, Sage and Politics, Interview transcripts, Interview 2, tape 3 Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger Archives, Ruskin College, Oxford.

¹⁹⁸ Alun Howkins, “The Left and Folk Song,” review of *Class Act: the Cultural and Political Life of Ewan MacColl* by Ben Harker; *Desire, Drink and Death in England: Folk and Vernacular Song, 1600-1900* by Victor Gammon. *History Workshop Journal*. 68 (AUTUMN 2009), pp. 273-279. Oxford University Press Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40646177>

to the ballad nature of these songs exemplifying the story-telling of the Anglophone repertoire and displaying ideas of courtly love, nobility and even the mystical, as well as the uninhibited norms of rural life. The folk song is ascribed an ideological function by Vic Gammon, “to work in the realm of ideology ... to voice tensions, to work over the contradictions of human life, to mediate, to naturalize ... but most important, to pass on, often at unrecognized level, messages about appropriate roles in society.”¹⁹⁹ In her relating the folk song to the left politics, Hawkins’s source is again Ewan MacColl, whom she calls a central figure in the ‘second folk song revival’ who created a theory and a practice which brought together the broad spectrum of the vernacular and the traditional vernacular song for creating a ‘people’s culture,’ referring to his works with Charles Parker and Peggy Seeger after 1957.

Hence, folk song was a medium accommodating the melodramatic material to the service of working and lower classes to narrate and cherish ancestral traditions and reckon with the facts of their lives. Ewan MacColl had strong musical contributions to their theatre with the folk song repertory built up from his childhood. Theatre was more of a learnt skill compared to singing for him. His father had frequently performed his singing sessions at home and also at the Workers Art Club and these songs, with their melodramatic tones and also their universal care for the human situation, reminding of the human dimension of lives lived in crime that a certain class had to face as the only survival option, found their ways as musical cues to the play scripts that MacColl wrote:

In Durham County it is the same,

The pithead gear is standing still,

¹⁹⁹ Alun Howkins, “The Left and Folk Song,” 274.

And men are filled with a sense of shame

For idle hands and wasted skill. (music cue 8 from *Johnnie Noble*)

□

Another feature MacColl and Littlewood shared with the theatres of the labor was playing with the classics according to their own objectives. In the long line of left-wing theatrical strategies, a veritable source of inspiration was the penny gaffs' short versions of the classics. Davies lengthily describes these cheap neighborhood theatres offering popular versions of *Hamlet* and *Othello* as an entertainment alternative to the Shakespearean public playhouses, cutting the plays down to their twenty-minute versions. This editorial and production strategy is something worthwhile to trace, as it converts the high culture into a more palatable product for the working classes, and can be read as an earlier example of the adaptation strategy popular in the WTM period. These earlier adaptation techniques, I argue, can be deemed among the left-wing artistic policies to appropriate engaging material for representing and disseminating their cause. The penny gaffs are easier to be classified as working-class entertainment, as they emerged mostly in the working-class districts from 1820s onwards. An account of a penny gaff visit by James Grant, a journalist, gives away another feature of stage-audience relationship reminiscent of that in workers' theatres: actors frequently stopped performance to engage in a dialogue with the audience, where, Grant reported, "cross fire is thus sometimes kept up between the audience and the actors for several minutes at a time, and, to my taste, such 'keen encounters of the wits' of the parties are much more amusing than the histrionic performances themselves."²⁰⁰ Hence, in the thirties, when Theatre Union was producing *Fuenteovejuna* to full

²⁰⁰ Davies, *Other Theatres*, 2.

houses, it seems appropriate to assume this lively banter among the expectations of the audience, whose members were willing to share personal accounts of their lives in labor and of their opinions on the Spanish Civil War. The popularity of the penny gaffs was to such extent that its crowds outnumbered by factor the audiences drawn to the West End: “something in the region of 24,000 people visited London’s penny gaffs each evening,” and it was nearer to 50,000 near Christmas- a time of the year when fashionable districts were doing only around 5,000 an evening.²⁰¹ This fact begs for a moment to think about the notion of the “public playhouse” that the author compares to the Elizabethan playhouses. The case also draws some connection between the idea of ‘people’s theatre’ that MacColl and Littlewood chased even in the beginning of their Theatre Union phase, as did many other left-wing theatres. On the labor side of Shakespeare and theatre, we can see the unions’ reliance on the affect of such strategies on people: Raphael Samuel refers to Shakespeare as the ‘favorite author of the nineteenth-century working-class stage,’ and writes that *Julius Caesar* was a particular favorite of the unions with its funeral scene, as it was quite in sync with the oratory traditions of the earlier phases of the working-class expressions, providing ‘popular models of heroic achievement.’ Samuel refers to Tom Mann as the most ardent working class Shakespearean, who had formed in his early engineering days a Shakespeare Mutual Improvement Society.²⁰² Apparently coming from a working-class line of taking practical, creative license with Shakespeare and other classic authors, Theatre Workshop’s proximity to these practices can be found in their production of Shakespeare’s *Richard II* at Stratford East, Theatre Royal, at the same time when Old Vic was

²⁰¹ Davies, *Other Theatres*, 3.

²⁰² Raphael Samuel, “Theatre and Socialism in Britain (1880-1935)” in Raphael Samuel, et. al. eds. *Theatres of the Left 1880 – 1935 Workers’ Theatres Movements in Britain and America*, (London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1985), 7-8.

produced the same play. George Cooper, one of the finest actors of Theatre Workshop, explained the comparative success of Littlewood's production in an interview:

We were very favourably compared with the Old Vic production because there was a direct thing about Joan's work etc, etc, not so much interested in making pretty noises and paying too much attention to the 'beautiful verse' and . . . Joan had a chat with John Gielgud, and in that chat I think there was a moment where he says that he'd realised later in life that he was too interested in 'the beautiful sound' of the dialogue and the blank verse and all the rest of it, not really getting into what the man was saying to... you know, well 'I'm going to cut your head off' or whatever it was. In other words getting near to the truth of the line as far I can see.'

(George Cooper interview, British Library, Theatre Archive Project)

Likewise, another Theatre Workshop actor Murray Melvin explains the comparative roughness, or rawness of the Stratford production emphasizing how it was "run on a shoestring," compared to the Old Vic's "long golden cloaks, ... long fanfares, ... great long processions coming on stage," employing "just raw Elizabethan language ... spoken on the moment, rather than on the breath," which made him think "that to be the first time [he] had seen real theatre."²⁰³ Melvin's account brings the Theatre Workshop production closer to the concept of people's theatre that MacColl and Littlewood aimed at, displaying the kind of rough- almost vulgar entertainment conventions of the nineteenth-century popular entertainment.

²⁰³ Dominic Shellard interviews Murray Melvin, 10 March 2007, Theatre Archive Project, British Library Sound Archives. <http://sounds.bl.uk/related-content/TRANSCRIPTS/024T-C1142X000142-0100A0.pdf>

While MacColl and Littlewood were regarding the classical age (Elizabethan England and Athens) as the ideal model of historically or politically engaged/conscious theatre, there was a cultural gap to reckon between their current working-class audiences and the period productions of the classical plays. Littlewood and MacColl believed that the bourgeois interpretations of the classics were ‘banal,’ whereas the great theatres of the past were politically oriented and charged with revolutionary fervor. Littlewood, writing in her notes, that Shakespeare, at the end of his life “was forced off the stage by the reactionary aristocracy which gained possession of the London stage in 1610,” expressed in the same notes that it was for them “to put him back on the stage again.”²⁰⁴ In the same notes she referred to Engel’s quote: “The bourgeois have raised monuments to the classics – if they’d read them they’d have burned them.”²⁰⁵ MacColl and Littlewood saw the Elizabethan drama as a great one, “created by a great audience, a politically and culturally educated audience,” who, Littlewood stated, appalled a visiting French man, who wrote, “They’re mad! Impassioned, mouth open!” and Littlewood wrote that was “how our theatre has got to be the workers of today will love our theatre with that same passion.”²⁰⁶ Hence it is evident that MacColl and Littlewood believed that the classics were the right textual choice for the working class; the classics had to be interpreted correctly and they had to be brought back to their rightful place in life: in the life of the people – the working class. Finding the true relevance of the classical texts in the working-class cause, MacColl and Littlewood adapted various strategies of the WTM, labor and popular performance; to make the classics relevant to this non-theatre going public the texts had to be born in their entire lengths,

²⁰⁴ Political science notebook, with evaluations of actors laid in, Box 1, Folder 6, The Michael Barker Collection of Joan Littlewood, Harry Ransom Center, UT Austin.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

not as short propaganda lectures from *Julius Caesar* in a union meeting or a condensed version in a public playhouse. A case to consider could be *Operation Olive Branch*, MacColl's adaptation of *Lysistrata* in 1945, which was made even longer than the Aristophanes text, as MacColl added Scottish characters with working-class concerns. The Labour movement, in its practice of employing *Julius Caesar* scenes in demonstrations, and popular strategies, in the examples of penny gaffs and public playhouses, resonate well with Littlewood and MacColl's revolutionary vision of informing and empowering the working class. The theatres of the left and those with popular appeal were tailored to the taste and education of their patrons, who enjoyed accessing the classics in their own mode and as the journalism excerpt below indicates, even engaging in lively banter with the stage. The stylistic features of such theatres hint at a shared bulk of Theatre Workshop style: according to Andrew Davies, the popular theatre was, as opposed to the West End productions,

‘marked by its informality and diversity... locations [were] temporary and unpretentious... encouraging a crude and straightforward presentation rather than expensive production values, and the lack of proscenium barrier encourages a close and intimate relationship with the audience who are very much a part of the performance... thrive upon the contact, ad-libbing and enjoying the banter with the spectators. Improvisation, spontaneity and topicality are the uppermost, and the bill of fare usually swings from farce to tragedy within the same piece, ignoring literary dictates as to the unity of style. The fluidity of popular theatre is dictated by the scantiness of the written text ... Actors were told the outlines of the

plot and were then thrown on to the stage to fill out the dialogue to the best of their ability.’ (Davies, *Other Theatres*, 4-5)

This passage reminds Theatre Workshop’s opening production at Theatre Royal, Stratford, with *Twelfth Night*. Before the arrival of the Theatre Workshop, the theatre was staging variety type of entertainments, with striptease, and actor and set designer Harry Green said in the Theatre Archive Project interview: ‘Jane had been stripping off twice a night, weekly, the month before we arrived, but it had closed; it had been dark for the month. So people were sad, they told us... “Oh yes, what are you going to put on first?” “Oh *Twelfth Night*, if we come.” ... “Oh, that sounds good.”’²⁰⁷ Actor member George Cooper told in the same series of Theatre Archive Project interviews:

We started with *Twelfth Night*, at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East 15, and I was playing Malvolio... various incidents [took place], they threw pennies on the stage, they threw toffees on the stage, they called me ‘Big Head!’ when I appeared in my hat. [Laughing] I think the locals who turned up thought, ‘*Twelfth Night* – it must be a bedroom farce or something. *Twelfth Night*, cooor!’ you know! And then they saw it was Shakespeare. (George Cooper interview, British Library, Theatre Archive Project)

The penny gaffs, which can be described as the typical theatres of the poor, allowed a co-presence of the actors and the audience by prioritizing the stage over the text. This emphasis on performance seems to have made a comeback on the Theatre Workshop stage, known for its

²⁰⁷ Kate Harris interviews Harry Greene, 20 September 2007, Theatre Archive Project British Library, <http://sounds.bl.uk/related-content/TRANSCRIPTS/024T-C1142X000182-0100A0.pdf>

highly irreverent attitudes towards the classical texts, which will be discussed in the next chapter. These details of performance and reception conventions also suggest that such production strategies were common in left-wing or popular entertainment rather than being idiosyncrasies exclusive to Joan Littlewood's theatre.

Next to the appealing features of the stage melodrama for working-class audiences, theatres of fairground, strolling players, minors and the previously discussed penny gaffs were able to evade the provisions of the 1737 Act and give the lower classes a fair release from their daily burdens. Many of these performances escaped the confines of censorship owing to their easy forms, such as burlettas, with too many songs, and the pantomime without any words. Much acting depended on improvisation and that, just like on Littlewood's stage, always found a way out of the examiners' dictates, as the offense could hardly be proven or followed.²⁰⁸ Mick Wallis, as he writes on the "bold and various formal innovations" of London Unity, which he describes as the direct affiliate of the British Communist Party, mentions two of their pantomimes (*Babes in the Wood* in 1938; *Jack the Giant Killer* in 1940) turned into political satires that escaped Chamberlain's strict rules, daring "direct scatological satire at living individuals: Prime Minister Chamberlain appear[ing] as 'Chamberstrain'"²⁰⁹ It is safe to assume that Labor could nest its debates or messages in these unregulated performance genres intended for the Victorian lower classes, or that popular entertainment found such a leeway for transmitting its stylistic features that allow insurgency to be passed to its audience and also carry it forward in time, without

²⁰⁸ Davies, *Other Theatres*, 18.

²⁰⁹ Mick Wallis, 'Social Commitment and Aesthetic Experiment, 1895–1946' in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre* edited by Baz Kershaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 182. Accessed 2/20/2017. <https://doi-org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/10.1017/CHOL9780521651325.009>

attracting much attention or regulation. Popular entertainment allowed such continuity of insurgent performances.

Compared to the twentieth century, nineteenth century's supply of popular entertainment was markedly high. Dave Russell identifies, from 1840s, a rising appeal for popular entertainment among the larger working-class base of the society; regularity in leisure activities brought an increase in number of the permanent venues and some new types of entertainment emerged, while some of the older ones disappeared such as the fair, and only a few of nineteenth century itinerant theatre groups were able to survive into the twentieth century in rural areas as the permanent venues started attracting regular audiences from 1850s and 1860s.²¹⁰ Likewise, in his book, *Theatre Workshop Story*, Howard Goorney, talks about places that the company visited in their two years' touring, where he claims that there were towns where entire generations had never been to the theatre. It is possible to understand the reasons why people in these rural towns had stopped attending the theatre. The number of 'legitimate theatres' that supposedly took their artistic and intellectual missions more seriously, increased after the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843, and venues previously managed as saloons became licensed theatres or music halls by 1866, and music halls were granted play license in 1912.²¹¹ The monopoly exercised by the licensed theatres over authorship was broken with the 1843 Theatre Regulation Act.

²¹⁰ Dave Russell explains the increase in working-class leisure activities at the start of the latter half of nineteenth century in terms of rising real wages (by 80 per cent); the communications revolution' of the nineteenth century (press and transport developments) and a general loosening of the high Victorian religious sensibilities as the stimulus behind the rise of the entertainment sector. Dave Russell, "Popular Entertainment, 1776–1895," 372-3; 375-6.

²¹¹ Joseph Donohue, "The Theatre from 1800 to 1895," 253; Russell, "Popular entertainment 1776 – 1895," 380.

In contrast, popular theatres with the working-class appeal relied on a mixed menu of music hall, musical comedy, revues and melodramas as well as animal shows, circus, boxing with cinematic interludes. Joseph Donohue states that the popular performance venues attracted a large and varied social rank; the music hall attracted young audience with ages about 14 to 21 years, predominantly male with exceptions of young single or newly married working-class women, as well as soldiers, students, gentlemen, shopkeepers, tradesmen and their wives, who were probably attending theatres, as well, as Donohue relates a 1866 account of an eyewitness that the pit and the gallery audiences at theatres “probably attend[ed] the music halls, too.”²¹² In their competition with the ‘legitimate theatres,’ music halls started giving birth to ‘theatres of variety,’ in 1880s, taking the moral challenge of their competitors by way of increasing the number of sketches and exercising more restraint in their programs such as excluding a stock item like the comic singer and they eventually “cross[ed] class boundaries and to construct a shared comic lingua franca,” to become “clearly established as the nation’s first mass entertainment industry.”²¹³ Donohue explains the introduction of the sketch, which he describes as “a short playlet of anywhere between ten and forty minutes in length,” as an attempt to elevate the morally scorned status of the music halls. Here, it is useful to note that the introduction of the sketch in popular entertainment benefited the twentieth-century agit-prop, as it did survive in the agit-prop activism, which included short sketches in its fast-paced performance program, along with songs and declamations.²¹⁴ MacColl explains the nature of sketches in their Red

²¹² Donohue, “The Theatre from 1800 to 1895,” 381; 385.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 382-3.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 380. Also, a typical agit-prop would include a short sketch in between musical numbers and declamations. Mick Wallis gives an example: ‘A large working-class crowd has gathered at the factory gates. A flatbed truck provides a platform. The troupe of six performers ‘marches on well disciplined, singing enthusiastically and in well-marked rhythm’. The song which opens the ten-minute sketch identifies their company name and reminds the crowd how Workers Theatre

Megaphones repertory and associates their rendition style with a much earlier performance style that the streets were familiar with: eighteenth century denunciatory broadsides:

The sketches appeared to have been written to a formula which called for loud voices rather than acting ability on the side of the performers. In almost all of them there were some good lines and occasional flashes of real wit. The satire was sometimes crude but it was often very effective indeed though sometimes embedded in stodgy journalese or obscured by horseplay. The message was usually delivered at the top of the human voice in the form of slogans hurled by actors standing head on to the audience ... The fact is we were dealing with literary tracts not very dissimilar in tone and style to those denunciatory broadsides which eighteenth-century pamphleteers were in the habit of hurling at their enemies. (MacColl, *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, xxix)

The matter of respectability would be taken up frequently in the competition between the popular theatres and the 'legitimate theatres' and Dave Russell writes that the music halls, eschewed by the more 'respectable' ranks of the society devised strategies for attracting them and did so from the 1880s by building luxurious and often exotically decorated 'theatres of variety,' policing the moral tone of the entertainments, increasing the number of sketches, 'circus' and novelty acts ... seeking to contain the more vociferous aspects of audience behavior."²¹⁵ The play houses started to separate the bar area from the audience while getting rid

Movement (WTM) groups 'show you how you're robbed and bled ...' Mick Wallis, "Social Commitment and Aesthetic Experiment," 176.

²¹⁵ Russell, "Popular entertainment, 1776–1895," 382.

of the orchestra pit, starting the conversions towards respectability that Littlewood tried to reverse in her Theatre Royal at Stratford. The new prominent texts emphasized more of the indoors and privacy of the living rooms rather than outside, and more conversation was employed that stifled the action. Play writing became a decent profession with the Copyrights Act, by 1899, and according to Andrew Davies, “the lively and alcoholic music hall had been turned into the more refined and genteel Theatre of Variety.”²¹⁶

The melodramatic matter, along with its lower-class patrons, was shifting to the new medium of the moving pictures. The music halls suffered the arrival of the silent movies heavily and tried to adapt to the new medium by including cinema shows in their play bills, and when the talkies came in 1927, it was the legitimate theatres’ turn to give in to the new entertainment medium, and the radio drama was introduced in 1924, all of which shaped the feeling of reality of the new generation that MacColl and Littlewood were members of. Dennis Kennedy notes that the montage techniques that offered new notions of time and narrative were powerful attractions of the cinema and the new taste of the popular audience eliminated the more traditional popular stage entertainments, and the harsh battle of survival in the face of the electrical competitor was won by the modernist theatre.²¹⁷ Robert Leach writes of a dedicated British minority following Eisenstein’s and Pudovkin’s films, and MacColl was among these keen cinema followers in his teens, as he stated, that the Hollywood films were the period’s “staple diet of the vast army of unemployed” and added his assumption that the Hollywood films

²¹⁶ Davies, *Other Theatres*, 28-9.

²¹⁷ Dennis Kennedy, “British theatre, 1895–1946: art, entertainment, audiences – an introduction,” in Milling, Jane, Donohue, Joseph W., Thomson, Peter, and Cambridge University Press. *The Cambridge History of British Theatre*. (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 24. Accessed December 2, 2015. Chapter Doi: <http://dx.doi.org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/10.1017/CHOL9780521651325.002>

provided the main art fare for the entire working class.²¹⁸ An excerpt from an essay in the Working Class Movement Library records indicates how MacColl regarded the cinematic medium, which he saw as the main attraction of his age, and it is possible to argue that he wanted to bring the Theatre Union and Theatre Workshop stage to par with the narrative abilities of this new medium:

As an art form film belonged to the age of the internal combustion engine and the assembly-line, the age of speed and through the use of montages, rapid cross-cutting and speeding up of the projected visual images, it could reflect that speed. It could produce a quick succession of short scenes in a way that was beyond the resources of all but the most splendidly equipped theatres. More important was the fact that film actors and actresses like James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, Spencer Tracy, Jean Harlow, Sylvia Sydney were frequently called upon to act working-class roles and could do so convincingly. They were certainly more like the audiences who watched them. (Ewan MacColl, Working Class Movement Library)

Consequently, by the early decades of the twentieth century, working-class attention was distracted by a variety of entertainment forms including seaside resorts, football games as mass entertainment, along with the appeal of photography, newspapers, radio, cinematic newsfeed and gramophone. However, popular performance attractions resumed the competition with the

²¹⁸ MacColl gives a list of the Russian films that he was able to watch in 1929, in the Deansgate cinema of his district: 'I remember going there for several weeks and sitting in splendid isolation as the great epics of Pudovkin, Eisenstein, and Dovzhenko unrolled on the screen. It was, I think, Eisenstein's *October* and Pudovkin's *End of St Petersburg* which started me on the road I was to travel for the next twenty years.' MacColl, *Agitprop to Theatre Workshop*, xv; Leach, *Theatre Workshop*, 5.

technological advances; suitably licensed performances followed the working class in their summer camps, which Sophie Nield claims, worked more towards educating the working class for assimilating them to the established moral standards.²¹⁹ As I discuss in the coming sections, radio, competing with cinema, had a formative effect on MacColl and Littlewood and informed much of their documentary narrative technique, as well as preparing a base for observing and processing factual life details, which resonated well with their materialist vision of empowering workers in class struggle. Littlewood's interview notes and observations conducted for these documentary jobs gave her a rich view of the population change after work-forced migrations, local means of livelihood like fishing old fashioned butter-making, people who leave and who stay; an access to the impacted labor force and personal lives.²²⁰ In the Manchester BBC, they both learnt the affective aural montage techniques, which they frequently had recourse to in their productions.

Falling behind in the competition with these mediums especially in the provinces, theatre could offer very little for touring companies. The famous actor manager Sir Donald Wolfit's company Advance Players Association can be considered a part of the repertory movement that started adding touring schedules to their programs, which ended in introducing West End productions to the provinces as well, as far as the railways allowed. Wolfit was frequently

²¹⁹ As I discuss in the following chapter, Sophie Nield writes about how popular performance worked within the liminal space created by the more corporeal environment of the summer camps, to negotiate acts of respectability on behalf of the working class and fed and guided their aspirations for the elite values relatively within reach. Sophie Nield, "Popular theatre, 1895–1940," 86–109.

²²⁰ These notes that I mention here are my observations of her BBC documentary project at a fishers' village in Hull, which later provided the textual material for MacColl's episodic ballad opera *Johnny Noble*. Littlewood had to take these BBC jobs for financial needs when the company was disbanded during the war years. Michael Barker Collection of Joan Littlewood, Littlewood's notebook, Box 1, Folder 4, Harry Ransom center for the Performing Arts at UT Austin.

performing Shaw's plays and in a letter Shaw sent to Wolfit in 1947, Shaw congratulated him on the past season and further wrote to him, in a somewhat advising manner, about the difficulties of taking theatre to the provinces, giving the examples of two Victorian actor-managers, one of whom, namely Barry Sullivan, prospered in touring, and the other, Sir Henry Irving, suffered in the same business of taking theatre to the 'old country.'²²¹ Ewan MacColl wrote about the difficulty of sustaining a working class audience in his introduction to *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, that most provincial parts of Britain had no theatres and the ones standing had been converted to cinemas after the Great War, to no one's regret.²²² Such was the case when theatres of the left had to survive in the earlier decades of the 20th century, as the theatrical medium was gaining popularity among the middle and upper class patrons and the popular theatres, surviving the competition with the legitimate theatres, modified their acts according to the commercial demand. Dave Russell claims that the popular entertainment mediums operated within commercial rationale, as "powerful agent for the construction and reinforcement of the social and political status quo," and that it would require lengthy research to claim that they were accommodating "a space in which subordinate social classes and social groups can resist and contest dominant ideologies and engender utopian visions of the world."²²³ However, it is clear that these popular entertainment techniques inspired and guided the early twentieth-century labor movement and independent and left-wing groups in their search for a local, familiar genre to reach the 'unconverted' and non-theatre-going audiences in the interwar and postwar period.

²²¹ G B Shaw to Sir Donald Wolfit, 18 September 1945, and the term 'old country' is a letter by Shaw to Sir Donald Wolfit, dated 4 October 1947. Donald Wolfit Papers 1803-1984, Series II. Correspondence, 1928-84 Incoming Shaw, George Bernard, including flier, 1932-50, nd., b 23:5; 23:11, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

²²² MacColl, *Agitprop to Theatre Workshop*, xlvii.

²²³ Russell, "Popular entertainment, 1776-1895," 387.

Institutional contributions to interwar left-wing drama

Surveying the wider support for socialism and its theatrical expressions in the interwar period helps see the vitality of the ideological and artistic environment that ignited MacColl and Littlewood's faith in the possibility of a working-class theatre. The period was promising for a socialist and even communist intervention as left-wing institutionally took to the streets and stages to enhance its visibility and propaganda. As discussed in the first chapter, socialism found wider support during the interwar period, from the middle-class Fabians to various guilds and unions that were actively designing socialist interventions in the twenties' and thirties' theatrical circles with affiliated publishers to widespread their messages and activities. It is possible to trace common textual and performance strategies with the works produced by the support of these institutions and Theatre Workshop, and more precisely define the origins of the structure of feeling created institutionally which had to sink in the historical adversities, but resumed in Theatre Workshop's perseverance.

An active member of the arts and socialism in the 1920s was the Independent Labor Party (ILP). ILP's approach to the performative needs of socialism was more poetic than propagandistic, holding the movement in an ideal vision of 'a true brotherhood.'²²⁴ The director of the ILP Arts Guild was Miles Malleson, a playwright and actor and who toured the country to spread the ILP vision via theatre, and to organize the affiliated dramatic groups across the country, and by 1930 they held 130 groups nationwide, and charted other social activities including rambling, one of MacColl's earlier forms of activism, as the young worker activists aw

²²⁴ Ros Merkin, "The Religion of Socialism or a Pleasant Sunday Afternoon?: The ILP Art Guild," in *British Theatre Between the Wars 1918-1939*, eds. Clive Barker and Maggie B. Gale, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 162.

it as their duty to stay healthy and fit, as they perceived capitalism on the verge of a collapse and their time was coming.²²⁵ For Malleson, the director of the guild, drama could clear the ignorance of the people who live “an unnecessary misery” because of their inability to understand the facts of the system at work, while offering a “clear, ethical, educative (and sociable) path to socialism, distinct from the perceived violence of Bolshevism.”²²⁶ There was also an inclination towards a cultural service, to make high art accessible to all.²²⁷ The West End’s Strand Theatre was at the disposal of the ILP on Sunday afternoons, and regional ILP branches competed to stage their productions there. Two scenes were successfully staged from Shakespeare in 1922: the forum scene from *Julius Caesar* and the trial scene from the *Merchant of Venice*, calling to mind the popular tendencies to shorten Shakespeare plays to public taste in

²²⁵ In Manchester and Salford, MacColl’s hometown, the British Workers Sports Federation (BWSF) was active in fighting for the ramblers’ rights, demanding more lands from aristocracy for the outdoor needs and sports of the workers, but was received in hostility by the gamekeepers generally. On a frustrated streak, on 24 April 1932 Sunday, Jimmie Miller’s Young Communist League launched a mass trespass on Kinder Scout, north Derbyshire. Miller was a publicity officer, and Ben Harker observes that the campaign was managed with media awareness not typical of the Communist Party and it apparently attracted more ramblers than it could have done by the rather local terms of news distribution. The action demanded open access to the countryside along with the lifting of the current ban on open-air singing. Starting their march, they knocked a game keeper unconscious and injured his ankle. Later, five accused members were tried and sentenced to hard labour. The court case inspired more trespassing in Derbyshire and Sheffield and eventually in 1936 the Derbyshire Corporation granted limited access to ramblers to the huge lands it owned in the Peak District and in 1949, by the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act was passed. As for Miller, Harker states that rambling provided a new audience for him and he was inspired for song writing. Ben Harker, “The Manchester Rambler: Ewan MacColl and the 1932 Mass Trespass,” *History Workshop Journal* 59 (Spring, 2005): 219-228 Accessed December 13, 2011. doi: 10.1093/hwj/dbi016

²²⁶ Ros Merkin, “The Religion of Socialism,” 167.

²²⁷ Like the little theatre movement, the formation of the ILP Arts Guild was ‘a reaction to the debased art of the commercial theatre,’ and it was an affirmation of ‘a desire for access to all art’ they planned to serve their audience by introducing tools to help ‘see the reality of the world in which they were forced to live.’ Reminding that the ‘aesthetic emotion’ was common to all, in their Trotskyist trends, they offered access to the existing bourgeois art and culture, as revolution would only be a transitory phase in a revolutionary society’s progress, therefore their priority mission was to ‘to ground the socialist working class in bourgeois culture.’ *Ibid.*, 169-171.

late nineteenth century.²²⁸ This success eventually brought the formation of the ILP Arts Guild that had significant impact on the regional dramatic branches, bringing their numbers from 10 to 115 by mid-1926. Regional branches had different merits, such that Scottish groups had didactic propaganda sketches while ones in Bradford excelled in comedy and these differences were a matter of debate in the Guild, yet Ros Merkin claims that the diversity in their repertory refutes Davies' claim that the left theatre leagues were dependent on Shaw, Galsworthy and Maleson for plays. Playwrights emerged out of these competitions and lesser organizations created their own local script writers. For instance, Ernst Toller was introduced in the theatres by the ILP; a member, Ashley Dukes translated *The Machine Wreckers* for Stage Society in 1923 and the following year Toller's *Masses and Man* was produced by ILP again.²²⁹ Next to introducing new revolutionary work, ILP groups resorted to the Little Theatre Movement, the Repertory Movement, and also to West End for texts besides doing a few comedies.²³⁰ While their publishing houses (National Labour Press and the Blackfriars Press) were not so active in publishing drama, the Labour Publishing Company run by Guild Socialist issued a series of one-act plays titled 'Plays for the People' between 1925 and 1928. Also, a series of 'revolutionary plays' was published by C.W. Daniels under the title 'Plays for a People's Theatre,' apparently playing around the same idea of creating and writing for a 'people's theatre,' much like MacColl

²²⁸ Raphael Samuel also refers to Shakespeare as the 'favorite author of the nineteenth-century working-class stage,' and writes that *Julius Caesar* was a particular favorite. He adds that the funeral scene was quite in sync with the oratory traditions of the earlier phases of the working-class expressions and that it provided 'popular models of heroic achievement.' One whom Samuel calls the most ardent working class Shakespearean, Tom Mann, had formed in his early engineering days a Shakespeare Mutual Improvement Society. Raphael Samuel, "Theatre and Socialism in Britain (1880-1935)" in Raphael Samuel, et. al. eds. *Theatres of the Left 1880 – 1935 Workers' Theatres Movements in Britain and America*, (London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1985), 7-8.

²²⁹ Merkin, "The Religion of Socialism," 173-4.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 175.

and Littlewood aspired.²³¹ They issued twenty-six plays between 1920 to 1924 that generally dealt with theme of war's impact on people's lives. From ILP a new school of local playwrights emerged in various cities such as Bath, West Salford and in Scotland by 1926. Other publishing houses in the network were the Labour Publishing Company where Tom Thomas's seminal adaptation of the novel *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist* appeared in 1926, along with other periodicals such as *The Red Stage* (WTM's own periodical), *the Sunday Worker*, *Workers' Theatre*.²³² In its stronghold of cultural and artistic priorities, the ILP created the Masses Stage and Film Guild in 1929 to foster a more professional environment for larger performances and to initiate a policy for working class theatre and to "to promote a more "public-spirited attitude" to play-going," which can be interpreted within the trajectory of the left-wing objectives to reach out to the non-theatre going public.²³³ Although the movement embraced professionalism, its main financial support came from a subscription society, costing one shilling per member in order to 'avoid the "vicarious" help of the business world,' and they reached 2,300 members to produce Upton Sinclair's *Singing Jailbirds* in 1930.²³⁴ The guild terminated itself in 1931 and abandoned hopes of forming 'a People's Theatre,' and its disenfranchisement from the Labour Party brought its theatre makers closer to the WTM or to professional theatre.²³⁵ ILP's introduction of Ernst Toller made a significant difference in young theatre enthusiasts like MacColl, introducing them to the German expressionism, and other than rehearsing his earlier plays, and MacColl had a chance to work with Toller in Manchester, when he and his worker friends were hired by Toller to play in his *Draw the Fires* play in Manchester Repertory Theatre,

²³¹ Merkin, "The Religion of Socialism," 180.

²³² Davies, *Other Theatres*, 104.

²³³ Merkin, 'The Religion of Socialism,' 182.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 183.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 184.

as Toller needed real workers' vigor on the stage to express the terms of a revolt in the German Navy.²³⁶

Occasional authorship competitions in Britain earned new talents to the left cause, such as Montague Slater, who won one such competition organized by the Left Theatre, a supporting institution at the fringes of the West End. The Left Theatre's audience demanded English plays which led to a competition that introduced Montague Slater as the playwright of *Easter 1916*. It should be safe to assume that with the support of its intellectual and converted audience, the Left Theatre was able to work with the workers' theatre groups in January 1934, and their popular genre happened to be the revue, the staple working class genre with its combined humor, music and satire.²³⁷ Their Workers' Theatre Movement connection is clear in their affiliating with Tom Thomas, a WTM leader, who thought it useful that the 'militant WTM political line' was finding support in the middle class.²³⁸ Their plays were taken not only to the West End, but to the East End as well, in these early thirties when MacColl was yet about to meet Littlewood in Manchester. However, Davies indicates that these plays constantly sought their audiences; securing institutional support did not mean that they could access their targeted non-theatre-going audiences from the working class. The difficulty of attracting this population to these progressive performances was starkly recognized in 1956, in a conference of trade unionists at London Unity, where an old member of London Unity, Bram Bootman was told by a member:

We do not want plays that deal with working class lives and the struggle of working people. Our wives won't come. They say, "We know that

²³⁶ Goorney, *Theatre Workshop Story*, 7.

²³⁷ This definition of revue belongs to Andrew Davies. Davies, *Other Theatres*, 111.

²³⁸ Mick Wallis, "Social Commitment and Aesthetic Experiment," 180.

already.” Put on old-time music hall, and we will bring you block bookings galore. (Davies, *Other Theatres*, 149)

The West End, however, was not an insurmountable enemy territory at all, the Embassy Theatre played to the workers on certain days, and among such notable productions were Upton Sinclair’s *Singing Jailbirds* and Montague Slater’s *Easter 1916*. On certain days, such as Sundays, the Embassy was opened to the workers on a very low fare, and moreover, twenty-eight such plays were actually transferred to the West End theatres.²³⁹ By 1939 the Left Theatre had faded away due to lack of funding for its grand project of making theatre for the working class, one that they had hoped for the support of the Trade Union Congress (TUC) and the labor movement for financing the project. The Unity Theatre, established in 1939 by the group Rebel Players in the wake of Popular Front’s changing themes from revolutionary aesthetics to social realism, survived and at some instances, even thrived, creating provincial branches that went on their own successful paths. The Left Book Club Theatre Guild, founded in 1936, was another peer in the left-wing theatre groups, supplying radical publications and encouraging its nationwide network to read and perform these texts. Soon they exhausted their lists and relied on pageants, performances in the form of ‘political pamphlet in dialog form’ and ‘magazine stor[ies] peppered with a few lines showing an awareness of social disparities,’ reminiscent of the living newspaper format.²⁴⁰

In the timeline of various left leaning attempts in the British theatre, we see the earlier attempts of independent theatres such as the Norwich Players, led by Nugent Monk of the Maddermarket Theatre in Norwich. Taking over a chapel and a baking powder factory, they built

²³⁹ Davies, *Other Theatres*, 110.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 120.

an open stage theatre and announced the Abbey as their parent, and staged Indian plays, Japanese Noh, puppet plays, dance and a different interpretation of Shakespeare, with emphasis on the speed and pace of performance.²⁴¹ They stressed their ensemble quality and never put actors' names on the playbills or took curtain calls. Another example was Terence Gray's Festival Theatre in Cambridge, where Gray emphasized the necessity of bringing back mime and dance to theatre and wrote the book *Dance Drama* in 1926.

Next to the Fabians who integrated drama in their activities from the beginning, with members such as Bernard Shaw and Granville Barker, one rather important and quite spread labor movement with a cultural agenda was Robert Blatchford's Clarion Movement, which happened to be the vehicle that attracted young Jimmie Miller (Ewan MacColl) to theatre when he was quite young. The Clarion groups were organized in 1911 into a National Organization of Clarion Dramatic Groups that helped spread the cultural impetus of socialism and share play texts. Miller family's tenant took young Jimmie (MacColl) to a play-reading of the Clarion players in Salford in 1928, when he was fourteen, and MacColl calls it 'his first individual political act.'²⁴² In an interview, MacColl relates that the Clarion Players' activities and readings brought to him a different political understanding that was more mature than his previous orientations as a young boy performing poetry recitations at the Workers Art Club. There, MacColl read plays by Ernst Toller and Upton Sinclair for the first time, and performed in Capek Brothers' *The Insect Play*, followed by *Singing Jailbirds*. A member brought the *Little Red Songbook* of the Wobblies, which earned MacColl's musical education a 'consciously political

²⁴¹ Davies, *Other Theatres*, 86.

²⁴² MacColl, *Journeyman*, 143.

direction' and the newly read plays and German impressionism had a lasting influence on him as he was stepping into the world of theatre in mid 1920s.²⁴³

The interwar period, apparently provided many independent and creative projects to take shape in left wing theatre. These movements were in sync with the era's political climate, also referred to as the 'pink decade,' although the Labor governments of 1924 and 1929 were not culturally oriented. In the following decade, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) commissioned the play *Six Men of Dorset* in 1934, which was a success and went on a tour. The Cooperative movement was an effective sponsor for some time and generated a solid list of plays and produced a pageant in 1938 on the history of British Labor Movement but they refused to start a theatre project. According to Davies, this detachment from cultural undertaking caused theatre initiatives to be embraced by the groups 'to the left of the Labour Party', such as the Workers' Theatre Movement, and the Left Book Club Theatre Guild.²⁴⁴ It is an interesting place to reflect on the culturally-lacking orientations of the period's left-wing institutions. The huge Co-op Movement spent a lot of money on a pageant but refused to sponsor a Coop Workers' Theatre in London, much to Andre van Gysegham's efforts, who wanted to endorse a social realism centered repertory. Gysegham's efforts can be put in a stronger perspective with the help of an insert here: Ewan MacColl writes in his autobiography, that when he and Littlewood received an invitation to attend the Moscow School of Theatre and Cinema in mid 1930s, the cover note explaining that a visa would be forthcoming in a few days and all they needed to do was to call at Soviet Embassy, belonged to André van Gysegham.²⁴⁵ These large left-wing institutions saw

²⁴³ Parsley, *sage and politics: transcripts of interviews with EM* tape 3 transcript, Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger Archive at Ruskin College, Oxford.

²⁴⁴ Davies, *Other Theatres*, 99.

²⁴⁵ Unfortunately, their visas never came and their dreams of learning theatre and film techniques in Moscow failed. MacColl, *Journeyman*, 217. Andrew Davies also writes of Gysegham's

culture and propaganda apart and were ready to finance only the propaganda part. It is very interesting to note that they, too, looked to sponsor financially stable productions and overlooked the need for a gradual, pedagogical build-up of audience behavior – a regular spectatorship in the working class. London Labour Dramatic Federation sponsored Capek Brothers' *The Insect Play* at the New Scala Theatre and lost 100 Pounds, but its ripple effects were far reaching as discussed above, Ewan MacColl tells about his excitement in casting in this play in the Clarion Players in Salford.²⁴⁶ Raphael Samuel relates this lacking cultural support to the growing social exclusiveness of drama as it started to attract the middle classes again by the twentieth century and to the refinement trends of the acting profession, which seems to have opposed the male character of the socialist movement.²⁴⁷ On the other hand, while standing aloof to the artistic standpoint of ILP or such organizations, the Labour Party hosted dramatic groups such as Holborn City Labour Players, who staged a living newspaper and was later expelled from organization due to alleged Communist influence. Another group was formed in Woolwich, the Woolwich Labour Thespians, which Raphael Samuel writes was controlled by the right-wing factions of the party and was used to “keep people off the street” and counter communist threats

producing plays like *Miracle at Verdun* (produced before 1934; much earlier than Theatre Union's production) and *Stevedore* by introducing a club membership with the Rebel Players in London, which was to become the London Unity Theatre in 1935. Davies, *Other Theatres*, 109-10; 112.

²⁴⁶ When MacColl was about to leave middle school at 13, in 1928, he was taken to a Clarion group by their tenant, where he would stay for a year. He recalls reading Toller's *Masses and Men* with them and that 'all the plays were vaguely kind of socialist.' He played a part in the *Insect* play that he calls a parable. Parsley, sage and politics: transcripts of interviews with EM tape 3 transcript, Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger Archive at Ruskin College, Oxford.

²⁴⁷ Regarding the male character of the movement, it is also possible to observe the traditional working class character as predominantly male. Andrew Davies writes about the leisure tendencies of the working class in Manchester and Salford area in the first half of Twentieth Century and he reiterates the 'male-dominated' traditions of the working-class culture such as pub culture, sports and gambling. Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992), 32.

to public order' during the General Strike in London.²⁴⁸ Both cases offer interesting perspectives to the British working-class activism in its preferences to mingle with communism or not, while manipulating the art of theatre. Raphael Samuel also notes that other social art forms such as music, communal singing with brass bands and propaganda addresses sufficed in expressing the “quasi-religious fervor of socialist converts and activists.”²⁴⁹

Conclusion

The above-mentioned obliviousness to cultural and educational potentials and a calculating economic mentality caused the difficult material conditions for theatres like the Theatre Workshop, who embraced all the hard work of educating, training, uplifting and building a vision addressing working-class priorities, and most of such groups either disappeared or gave in to commercial rules of the stage business in the long run. It was with the efforts of groups like the Theatre Workshop that these under-current theatrical efforts intact in form and content endured into the postwar years, but then came to be recognized as avant-garde, leaving such vigorously formative inter-war background in the shade. It is evident that the class struggle was in cooperation with the theatrical medium; the nineteenth-century theatres had labor dramas such as *Fuenteovejuna* and popular genres like melodrama played with the theme albeit refraining from revolutionary tones. Theatre Workshop's dream of a 'people's theatre' was a common currency among left-wing theatrical activists and the interwar period witnessed a rich, vibrant theatre environment competing with the new popular mediums that attracted the working-class and popular audiences. Appraised in this rich background of local traditions of expressing labor issues, most of Theatre Workshop's successes will be de-mystified and democratically

²⁴⁸ Samuel, *Theatres of the Left*, 23.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

distributed among an anonymous population of British working-class thespians of late nineteenth century and the interwar period.

Chapter 3. Matter of Continuities II Ideological Background

Although there is no aim for chronicling the MacColl-Littlewood timeline, it is evident that the ideologue of the collaboration was Ewan MacColl and his early encounters with theatre is worth tracing in the ideological, communism-related scheme of left-wing theatres in England. MacColl left school on his fourteenth birthday, on February 2nd, 1929.²⁵⁰ His family had taken Charlie Harrison as their lodger in the previous spring and Harrison had a formative influence on MacColl's life by taking him to the Clarion Players' meetings, where MacColl took parts in the rehearsals of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* and *The Singing Jailbirds*, and he also introduced him to the Manchester branch of the Young Communist League (YCL).²⁵¹ Unemployed, he spent his days in the local libraries, with a determined program of "ten-new-words-a-day," reading what he could find, from *The Communist Manifesto* to Balzac's *The Human Comedy*.²⁵² Their lodger provided that young Jimmie learnt a few words of German, and a pen friend from Saxony, who "used to write to [him] long and wonderfully interesting letters about the political situation in Germany," and MacColl also received German pamphlets, song-books and copies of journals.²⁵³ It was the time when MacColl started his correspondence with his German peers who would affect him so much so that his first performing group was called after a German blue blouse troop, the Red Megaphones.

His notes on the general feeling of frustration on the side of the working class and the unemployed explain the sentimental climate behind the agit-prop and mass demonstrations when, as MacColl writes, "in 1931, the National Government led by Ramsay MacDonald fired its

²⁵⁰ MacColl, *Journeyman*, 143.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 155.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 159.

opening salvoes against the living standards of the British working class,” stating “[f]rom he that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath not [sic].”²⁵⁴ MacColl expresses his anguish still seething in the eighties, during the writing of his autobiography: “our rulers ... are not conscious of the fact that working people possess human dignity or indeed that they have feelings of any kind ... let us hear no more of the equality of sacrifice or grinning and bearing it, or how we British can take it. Don’t bother trying to conceal your contempt for us and we won’t try to conceal our hatred of you.”²⁵⁵

With these feelings shared collectively by the members of the YCL and the National Unemployed Workers Movement (NUWM), MacColl embarked on a life of activism, protest and performance. He gives a very vivid description of one of his earlier agit-prop performances organized in Wigan market-place on the day of a local strike, in the face of usual police harassment, physical attacks by Blackshirts, and the “jeers and taunts of workers whom [they] claimed to represent”:

Small groups of unemployed miners were stationed on the perimeter of the crowd and were there to act as a defense force if necessary. An empty coal-cart had been positioned in the center of the square and this was to be our platform. We had scarcely started our first sketch when we were interrupted by a police sergeant who told us to clear off. Several miners, however, surrounded the platform and, ignoring the policeman, told us to carry on. After a few moments the sergeant went away and returned ... with an inspector and several uniformed constables. This time the crowd

²⁵⁴ MacColl, *Journeyman*, 195.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

closed ranks and prevented them from approaching the platform. After a brief argument with a group of very angry women the police withdrew, whereupon a young miner climbed an ornamental lamp-standard and raised our banner on it to the cheers of the crowd. In the course of the next ninety minutes we ran through every item in our repertoire, and then, at the insistence of our crowd, repeated it all over again. (MacColl, *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, xxvii-xxviii)

This early performance of agit-prop in MacColl's career shows the stark attraction power of the outdoors and street as a fueling initiative in Theatre Workshop productions. Their earlier works, such as *Fuenteovejuna (The Sheepwell)* (1936), despite being indoors performance, used every means to reach back out to that street again, where the real-life confrontations were seething beneath the everyday occurrences, in the sense of Victor Turner's 'social drama,' as I shall discuss in the next sections. It was the entire left-wing theatrical enterprise's objective in the inter-war period, to reach out to that almost liminal space of the working class and the unemployed population, whom they defined as the non-theatre-going public and whose attention they wanted to attract, in their escape from the converted intellectual audiences. Hence, contrary to Nadine Holdsworth's claims to have been a source of literary inspiration for a 'poetic realism,' or a 'working-class imaginary,' or an 'imagined community,' the street, the birth place of agit-prop, was the tangible, material environment where Theatre Workshop was born, similar to how Richard Schechner claims for the origins of the New Left's environmental theatre.²⁵⁶ MacColl

²⁵⁶ When Nadine Holdsworth discusses the original plays produced by Theatre Workshop, including MacColl's plays, she writes that she refers to the ideas of working class rather than tangible definitions and descriptions. This tendency, I believe springs from lack of deeper attention to how the street shaped the life of Theatre Union and Theatre Workshop other than becoming a source of observation and a literary informant. See chapter 'Poetic realism:

and Littlewood's initiations in theatre carried this first-hand experience and observant revolutionary fervor that was in permanent and alert communication with its immediate surrounding. Their journeys also took them through explorations of their contemporaries' theories and practices in theatre with a constant need to search for the local, traditional, historical parallels that the long British performance and theatre traditions implied. They believed that the WTM agit-prop performances had common grounds with the pre-modern performance traditions in England, such as mystery cycles and morality plays, and that the Elizabethan theatre was a 'people's theatre,' which they believed their times, in its political and social instability and upheaval, could be recreated with a working-class audience. MacColl's self-education on the classics is very clearly explained by Littlewood in her autobiography, *Joan's Book*, as she talks about MacColl's introductory speeches at the actor training camps they held at Ormsby Hall in 1946:

Jimmie had not lost his power to hold an audience. He would launch himself with a short peroration, and then his rhetoric would flow in a turbulent stream with quotes flung on the air like paper darts. His conclusions were often allusive, and sometimes made your hair stand on end. It was heady stuff. He would analyze a society by its dramaturgy and vice versa, jump from the apple in the Garden of Eden to the tree in Marvell's garden without a pause for breath. He would enlarge on Shakespeare's fear of civil war, drawing on the old queen's bastardy and the usurpers waiting in the wings – Essex and Jamie, her Macbeth. It was

representing working-class communities' in Nadine Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood's Theatre*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 121-163.

not long since Jimmie had started reading Shakespeare, and he was enjoying him all the more for not having read at school. (Littlewood, *Joan's Book*, 208)

It was especially MacColl's self-learnt perspective of the classics, shared by Littlewood, that embarked them on their well-known 'irreverent' interpretations as they truly believed that the classics were written to address the ills of their time, and for the people, not for the middle-class theatre patrons.

The international Workers' Theatre Movement was an influential source that shaped MacColl and Littlewood's collaboration in theatre with these space and communication-conscious tenets drawn from the need to alert random crowds in the streets. British Workers' Theatre Movement spread with Thom Thomas' efforts under the auspices of British communism which drew many supporters from the youth and unemployed factions of the population. I assume that the hostility between the left factions (between Labour Party and the British Communist Party) and the difficulty to get hired in a permanent job may have caused young unemployed people like MacColl to have started their affiliations with the communist wing instead of labor organizations. Most of the theatrical incentives described in the previous chapter relied on some connection with a labor organization. Due to his fierce trade union activities, such as involvement in the General Strike of 1926, MacColl's father was unemployed for a long time and his mother had to take the financial burdens of their household. After leaving school, MacColl himself could hardly get a steady job to reap the social and cultural benefits of unionism. He had learnt, however, the importance of having something to say and saying it effectively in quite early age, in their visits to the Socialist Clarion debates with his father.

Robert Leach summarizes the ideological divide between the British communists and British Labor, which promulgated the idea of ‘class against class’ as the British Labour tried to rid their territory from communists, and the communists called their Labor counterparts ‘social fascists.’²⁵⁷ Offering more convincing explanations, strategies and the inspiring Soviet state model to oversee and promote the working class and the unemployed (their numbers increased from half a million in 1929 to three and a half million in 1932), who were disappointed by Labor, British communists quickly boosted their membership.²⁵⁸ Russian art visited England and was met with enthusiasm. Exposed to the widespread unemployment in his town, MacColl’s earlier connections with the British communism started with the Young Communist League and The National Unemployed Workers Movement, organized, again, by the communists.²⁵⁹

Among the theatrical initiatives explained, it is possible to determine a certain style that these theatres adhered to, due to common goals of protest and revolution, albeit slight variance. The Workers’ Theatre Movement (WTM) however, demands a closer look because it was the weapon promoted by the Communist Party and it was mostly informed by the revolutionary aesthetics of the Russian avant-garde theatre. It was a propagandistic initiative; its major concerns were to instigate political awareness in the workers and to inform them of particular issues they should be concerned, and raise their morale and sense of brotherhood. In that sense, they were dedicated to positive messages to raise workers’ spirits and convince them of the worthiness of struggle, as opposed to the pessimistic state of affairs drawn by many playwrights, whom Leach calls ‘procommunist’ such as Toller, Gorky and Sinclair.²⁶⁰ Although British WTM

²⁵⁷ Leach, *Theatre Workshop*, 4.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁵⁹ For his activities in the NUWM and YCL, see MacColl’s autobiography, *Journeyman*, 195-6; 31.

²⁶⁰ Leach, *Theatre Workshop*, 14.

groups were behind most of their European peers, they produced original texts and adaptations and they had steady access to an international supply of texts provided by network periodicals. WTM's resonances and impacts are tangibly observed in both Theatre Union or Theatre Workshop phases of Littlewood and MacColl collaboration in theatre as agit-prop form was their favorite style for provoking audience response in the street or in auditorium. The Russian avant-garde had many common motives with what Littlewood and MacColl experimented upon; it called upon the lower forms of entertainment and folk traditions in performance and its three-dimensional constructivist design inspired and informed Theatre Union and Theatre Workshop stages with its open space for the flowing action and dance. Russian costume designs that emphasized minimal features were also welcome for MacColl and Littlewood, arguably however for their permanent lack of funds, other than as a design choice. Following part discusses the artistic components of the Russian avant-garde which were mainly received in Europe through the Russian Blue Blouse troupes' performances and which can cast a light on certain design and acting choices in Theatre Workshop productions.

The Russian Avant-garde and the origins of WTM

The Russian avant-garde, which preceded the October Revolution, was claimed by the new Soviet regime, too, as it offered a tool of expression for the new state and its ideological premise. The purist artistic tendencies, amalgamated with the new idealisms, helped broadcast the progressive Soviet identity to its Western peers. The Russian avant-garde clearly impacted the Continent when it met with the Western public in Berlin in 1922, Amsterdam in 1923, New York in 1924, Paris in 1925, Milan in 1927, Brussels in 1928, and finally London in 1929,

evoking strong public interest.²⁶¹ Upon meeting with peers and audiences, Russians found, much to their surprise, that their Western peers were behind them in theatrical design, acting and directing. The Russian stage had started using its space much more effectively, emphasizing the three-dimensional (volumetrical/constructional) aspect of stage as opposed to the flat and ornamental view, and had succeeded in rendering the actor's body in physical rapport with that three-dimensional space. With its appeal to 'the people,' it brought to the fore less favored performance mediums such as the circus, music hall, operetta, cabaret, danse plastique and cinema.²⁶² The ideal costume would be the absent one; the decorative stage was replaced by moving scenic devices which interacted with the actor and emphasized improvisation and spontaneity.²⁶³ John Bowlt, in his article 'From studio to stage, from surface to space,' indicates the roots of such improvisational techniques as the more traditional features of lay performances such as folkloric nativity plays where three dimensional environment and improvisational acting were common.²⁶⁴ Architectonics (three dimensionality), velocity (instantaneity), and caprice (arbitrariness) were evident features of the Russian avant-garde stage. Rhythmically organized movement was essential. The Soviet 'agit-action' or 'mass-presentation,' according to Bowlt, was indebted to the Medieval morality play, mystery cycles and public carnival in its undermining the institutional conventions of theatre and rearranging the audience and cast communion, as well as implying intense improvisation and breaking the authority of the text,

²⁶¹ John E. Bowlt, "From Studio to Stage, from Surface to Space," in *Russian Avant-Garde Theatre: War, Revolution & Design*, (London: Nick Hern Books Limited, 2014) ,4.

²⁶² Ibid., 18.

²⁶³ One example would be a stage design by Varvara Stepanova in Meierhold's *Death of Tarelkin* in 1922, where she designed 'universal furniture' that would sometimes work, and sometimes not, creating a gap of uncertainty and prediction and increased spontaneity in acting. Ibid., 26.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 19.

which resonates perfectly with MacColl's analysis of the agit-prop as he had to defend it to the WTM members advocating for social realism and claiming that agit-prop was a foreign and sectarian tool. Bowlt also refers to the design aspects developed in the Russian avant-garde movement that inserted an atmosphere of unpredictability by exploiting design aspects as in Varvara Stepanova's 'universal furniture' (in Meierhold's *Death of Tarelkin*, 1922) that would sometimes work and sometimes not, creating chance factor on the stage to accentuate arbitrariness and increased spontaneity.²⁶⁵ The constructivist movement's rearranging the traditional textual premises, such as opera librettos and dethroning the text by taking away its meaning created a generic unfamiliarity. For instance, in what Bowlt calls anti-opera, and resembles the setting to more of a circus arena than a grand opera, *Victory over the Sun* (1913) was "dominated by inhuman expressions as: Bytavy, ukravy, mytavy ...' that would eventually resonate as 'trumpeting' sounds 'flying toward [the audience]."²⁶⁶ Consequently, the avant-garde trends opened a pathway that would appeal to sensory perceptions and a state of alertness in spectatorship by way of including chance occurrences and eliminating the hierarchical premises.

Russian artists' descriptions of their work sound futuristic as they mention the performer as some live human material, which is fitting with the notion of Meyerhold's system of biomechanics. The novelties brought to the art of movement in dance and performance in the early 1920s were developed in the Choreological Laboratory opened by Alexei Sidorov, which worked in association with the Central Institute of Labor where the scientific principles behind biomechanics were developed as they experimenting with movements that range from '*danse plastique* [sic] to rhythmical gymnastics, from the ergonomic rationalization of movement in the

²⁶⁵ Bowlt, "From studio to stage," 26.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

work place to cinematic movement, . . . from outdoor physical education to acrobatics, from contortionism to the circus.²⁶⁷ Bowlt's explications of various types of agit-actions (or mass movements) as typical subversive performance to challenge conventional theatre due to their demand for enormous manpower and 'their looseness and desultoriness,' and their pointing in the direction of a 'theatre of pure method . . . [due to] a debt to the morality play, the medieval mystery and public carnival,' that reset the 'rapport between cast and audience,' very clearly explain why Littlewood and MacColl preferred to stay away from Social realism and stay on the path of agit-prop to develop their theatrical aesthetics.²⁶⁸ Their 1936 production of *Fuenteovejuna* supplied them ample material to continue with the agitational street theatre while they continued to feed their theatre productions with the interventionist editing and montage techniques learnt from cinematic visual sources and radio documentaries. Their dynamic, constructivist stage designs and movement flow was, likewise inspired by the Russian avant-garde, which in turn was influenced, by the Russian folk performance, such as *lubok*, where the plot or stories, "unlike in traditional Western theatre, tended to be a series of vignettes pursuing a narrative by analogy and metaphor, fluid and malleable according to the exigencies of performers and the audience."²⁶⁹ These were very large scale projects, where the ancillary spaces and vestibule would have to be designed, as well, presumably to evoke the feeling of 'folk spectacle,' transporting the stage and auditorium into a larger, shared space of performance and spectacle, in tune with the 'shared communality' of the new theatre, as opposed to Naturalism's

²⁶⁷ Nicoletta Misler, "Precarious bodies: Performing constructivism," in *Russian Avant-Garde Theatre: War, Revolution & Design*, 53.

²⁶⁸ Bowlt also states, as if referring to the mature Theatre Workshop stage, that the fluid, versatile, improvisational quality of chaotic, universal and uncontrollable street theatre was 'inconceivable within the polite walls of the Moscow Art Theatre or the Chamber Theatre.' Bowlt, "From studio to stage," 25.

²⁶⁹ Mark Konecny, "Flying Mice, Stray Dogs and Blue Birds: Russian intimate theatre," 66.

rigid conventions that gave the audiences the role of voyeurism. The ‘folk spectacle’ featured acrobats, folk musicians and minstrels walking around the audience and the action proceeded by interludes controlled by a so-called Cavalry Marshall, like a stage manager, “acting as a master of ceremonies and scene shifter ... supervis[ing] the rapid changes in the cabaret.”²⁷⁰ The Russian avant-garde emphasis on the art of movement was largely propelled by their fascination with German and Austrian expressionist dance (especially Kurt Joos and Mary Wigman’s techniques) and their passion for the art of the circus, as “elevated to a superior position within the synthetic arts,” emphasizing the new dance as “active and imagistic,” as it “assum[ed] a concrete meaning which expresse[d] this or that physical agitation or action.”²⁷¹ Another dominant influence upon the Russian avant-garde was the American dancer Isadora Duncan’s visits to Russia in the early 1910s. This free attitude toward the body with the emphasis of nudity and less costume resonated with the rising popularity of the circus and fairground that brought the uncommon case of professional clowns and acrobats teaching movement and contortionism to professional dancers.

However, the system had its opponents in Russia as the time of Socialist Realism drew nearer. Director Alexander Tairov strongly criticized the ‘de-humanization’ of the Russian avant-garde and Boris Arvatov, although a champion of the constructivist trends, invited artists to ‘become designers not of art, but of life,’ advocating for the practical needs of the working class on grounds that they wanted “real, scientifically organized forms, not illusions.”²⁷² Consequently Stalin’s Socialist Realism restored what seems like the classical unities: place, time and action in

²⁷⁰ Konecny refers to a 1911 production of *The Emperor Maximilien and His Disobedient Son Adolf* by Bonch-Tomashevsky, which was regarded by critics as folk drama. Konecny, “Russian Intimate Theatre,” 64-6.

²⁷¹ Nicoletta Misler, “Precarious bodies: Performing constructivism,” 53-4.

²⁷² Bowlt, “From studio to stage,” 28-9.

performance, which were declared as the ‘need’ of ‘the new spectator’ and published in the “Stage Design in the USSR during the Decade 1917-1927.”²⁷³ This was the same period when the Communist Party was changing its policy of the class-struggle to that which sought a popular front against fascism. The weapons of the class struggle informed by the Russian avant-garde were sinking altogether with the international WTM, simultaneously as Littlewood and MacColl were transitioning from Theatre of Action to the Theatre Union, still advocating for the techniques of the agit-prop, which they believed would be more efficient than social realism dictated in the Popular Front period.

Foreshadowing their likelihood of staying within the tenets of the avant-garde, the necessity for properly flowing and moving bodies was appreciated very early by MacColl, in their Red Megaphones demonstrations, where they aspired to dance like the German dance group they saw in Salford, doing a constructivist movement piece called the ‘Dance of the Machines.’ MacColl and other worker-actors had choreographed a similar movement for their mass declamation in the Lancashire and Cheshire cotton industry conflicts: “mostly [a] mass declamation enlivened by rhythmic movements based on the working actions of a weaver and a mule-spinner.”²⁷⁴ Similar choreographic logic emerged throughout Theatre Workshop productions, such as in Theatre Workshop’s ballad opera, *Johnny Noble* (1945), where David Scase, an actor member tells the building of movements: “Five men and a gun, fighting off an attack on their convoy. Joan asked me to show what each member of the gun crew did. By

²⁷³ Bowlit, “From studio to stage,” 28-9.

²⁷⁴ MacColl, *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, xxv.

repeating the movements over again, the orders and the shouts, Joan actually created a ballet, a dance sequence out of it.”²⁷⁵

Another choreography resonating with constructivism from *Johnny Noble* is interesting as it is inserted in a naturalist street scene:

A typical sequence has Johnny, the central character, sitting on a box during a night-watch aboard ship, a short contemplative scene which is shattered by alarm bells signaling the approach of enemy planes.

Immediately Johnny becomes a member of the gunnery squad and then, as the bombs begin to crash down, becomes part of the gun's mechanism. A tremendously exciting moment of theatre lasting some three or four minutes, then the stage is a street again with children playing hopscotch, neighbours gossiping and a young woman returning home from work.

(MacColl, Working Class Movement Library)

Workers' Theatre Movement was the primary source of influence in MacColl's early work. The international WTM was conceived out of the Russian avant-garde, in the birth of the Blue Blouse troupes founded by a Russian journalist, Boris Yuzhanin, in 1923. Blue Blouse was a propaganda theatre performing 'living newspapers' to educate workers on the current state of affairs by playing to them at factories, industrial complexes and workers' art clubs. They had several teams of performers who used very simple and symbolic costumes and props such as jumpsuits to indicate the workers, top hats to indicate the capitalists or very big pens to indicate

²⁷⁵ Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 45-6.

bureaucrats. The German workers picked up on the blue blouse groups' performance in 1927, when the Russian Blue Blouse toured Germany, and incidentally, Brecht was among the viewers to later develop much of his theories of theatre for the working class. General instances where we can recognize similarities with the Theatre of Action, Theatre Union or Theatre Workshop works include examples of stage design, costumes, movement and choreographed action on constructivist stages.

An example for tracing such similarities would be a Blue Blouse performance titled *Proposing to the USSR*:

[A] woman wearing a blue blouse with the inscription 'Soviet Russia' came on stage. Then some men also came on stage wearing blue blouses plus top hats and derbies representing England, France, Italy and America. The men sang songs, but they just couldn't get by without proposing to Soviet Russia and kept hanging around her. The woman accepted their collective proposal in a derisive manner and, while making, or, rather, singing all kinds of caustic remarks, she agreed to be proposed to. (Artists' Biographies and Contexts, Nina Enseevna Eisenberg, *Russian Avant-garde Theatre*, 125-7)

This performance resembles an early agit-prop piece MacColl's group received from London, *R.I.P. (Rent, Interest and Profit)* that was performed in the street with such representative costume of jumpsuits. About this performance, Howard Goorney writes that the actors represented not characters but types that could be easily identified by their street audience. The costumes were identical: "bib and brace overalls and top hats with 'R. I.' and 'P.' on them,"

whereas the worker would be identified by the cloth cap.²⁷⁶ In the western fringes of the Soviet revolution, British counterparts needed to convince their working-class audiences of the need and success of a revolution, so it was arguably, more crude, propagandistic and declamatory in nature: MacColl tells it as a “seven or eight minutes of knockabout comedy, some simplified Marxist analyses, two songs and a mass declamation.”²⁷⁷

The licensed Blue Blouse troops, whose numbers at one time exceeded four hundred in Russia, were, formalistically speaking, descendants of the Russian variety show, the cabaret and the revue that Mark Konecny refers to as the Russian intimate theatre in his essay, ‘Flying Mice, Stray Dogs and Blue Birds: Russian Intimate Theatre.’²⁷⁸ The Russian origins of the genre, contrary to its European counterparts, signified the bourgeois culture of elite Russia, and Konecny claims that the Blue Blouse theatre experimented with the form to adapt it to the ‘people’ of the new Soviet regime. Such “move towards the lower forms of spectacle,” the revue, cabaret or the circus’s rising to prominence was partly due to the displacement of the elite from its theatre-going status, and the remaining public had to be won over by these familiar ‘lower’ forms of spectacle, which were more moldable into political propaganda tools. This explanation casts a light on the logic of Theatre Workshop’s recourse to the popular entertainment strategies for a working-class appeal. Their repertory was quite limited, and when the Blue Blouse groups opened in the 1920s in centers like Moscow and Leningrad, their subject matter was entirely different from their versions of the pre-revolutionary period; the repertory consisted of plays of satirical nature in contemporary revue format, which were written by progressive writers such as

²⁷⁶ Goorney, *Theatre Workshop Story*, 2.

²⁷⁷ MacColl, *Agit-Prop to Theatre Workshop*, xxi.

²⁷⁸ Konecny, “Russian Intimate Theatre,” 69.

Nikolai Aseev, Osip Brik, Sergei Tratiakov and Vladimir Maiakovski.²⁷⁹ The shows included declamations, parades, monologues, singing and dancing, and gymnastic displays. Attracting many young talents, the Blue Blouse toured abroad and had great impact on Western audiences. Their Germany tour in October 1927 had 150,000 spectators and caused numerous Blue Blouse groups to form across Germany, Czechoslovakia, Great Britain and the United States, causing great influence with bio-mechanics, and their sets and costumes.²⁸⁰ As the Russian Blue Blouse troops were touring internationally, their British counterparts were gradually forming an identity in 1924, when the Guild of Proletarian Art was founded which would become the British WTM in two years. Tom Thomas' Hackney People's Players was a leading group and Thomas was writing and adapting plays for the WTM.²⁸¹ Form and content were a great matter of debate, and when the *Sunday Worker* periodical published a survey on the type of material and form to adopt, the readers' response came to suggest mostly the revue form with abounding satire, displaying their preference for the familiar popular entertainment genres. It is possible to relate to Thomas' writing a twenty-minutes revue-style adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland* on that occasion: *Malice in Plunderland* with stereotyped figures of contemporary politicians represented as the playing cards in the trial scene of the novel, with rapid dialogue in a staccato rhythm, setting the piece clearly apart from the naturalist stage conventions of the period.²⁸² It is

²⁷⁹ Entry on Nina Evseevna Aizenberg, Artists' Biographies and Context, *Russian Avant-garde Theatre*, 125-6.

²⁸⁰ Konecny, "Russian Intimate Theatre," 70.

²⁸¹ As already mentioned above, Tom Thomas was the leading London writer and director in starting the WTM in Britain. His first adaptation was from Robert Tressell's novel, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, which was performed by a WTM group in 1927's Hunger March and on various occasions. MacColl writes in his autobiography that they were rehearsing the play when he joined the Clarion Players in Manchester. Leach, *Theatre Workshop*, 14; MacColl, *Journeyman*, 154.

²⁸² Davies, *Other Theatres*, 105.

interesting to note that the Russian Blue Blouse troupes strategically appropriated the revue style to reach their intended audiences, whereas in England it was the audience response to a survey, deliberately sending in a genre request. Tom Thomas' next work *Strike Up!* was in the revue style, again, but it was harshly condemned by the WTM and from then on, there was a significant shift towards the more propagandistic agit-prop performances. The Blue Blouse groups were disbanded in early 1930s, in the face of Socialist Realism, yet its impacts were deep in Europe and England. Similarly, the German WTM claimed the necessity not of aesthetics but of purpose for their theatre, and in England, Ness Edwards wrote in the *Workers' Theatre* that the major aim should be to organize the workers for the conquest of power and intensify the feelings necessary for the class struggle.²⁸³ The Communist Party leader Harry Pollitt stated that, in case the workers could not be convinced of the Communist case, "then the W.T.M. could be relied upon to do the job effectively."²⁸⁴ At that point, the sectarianism of WTM rejected local traditions and insisted upon agit-prop, and this was among the reasons why MacColl had started considering 'curtain' theatre for their future path. MacColl believed that agit-prop could be taken as a firm base for developing the kind of theatre they needed to reach the unconverted (the non-theatre-going working class), as opposed to the general opinion against the form. He indicates in his autobiography that those opponents of agit-prop, who claimed that the form was an alien form and ignored British theatre traditions, were seriously mistaken by believing that the British theatre history began with Marlowe and that "it conveniently forgot to mention the country rituals, the mumming plays, mysteries and moralities," which he regarded as the base for all sketches in the agitprop repertoire in terms of form and content, resonating with what Bowlt

²⁸³ Davies, *Other Theatres*, 106.

²⁸⁴ Leach, *Theatre Workshop*, 16.

observed in the agit-action genre.²⁸⁵ On the other hand, he did recognize the need for expanding into a theatrical venture and drop the sectarian aspects of speaking only to the ‘converted’ and could never appeal to the non-political spectators with its dry and heavy sloganizing.²⁸⁶ Likewise, Mick Wallis explains this withdrawal from agit-prop in terms of ‘oversimplified sectarianism’ in the WTM that could afford only short sketches for getting attention under police threat, and also in their “militat[ing] against refinements of analysis and always push[ing] propaganda towards crude slogans.”²⁸⁷ This was the argument of most of the WTM members in the national conference of WTM groups in London, who had returned from the Moscow Olympiad of Workers Theatres, shaken in their observances in Moscow, by the fact that they were pretty far behind their continental peers. MacColl writes in his autobiography that Littlewood and himself, representing Theatre of Action, tried to defend the agit-prop style as a base for exploring ‘curtain theatre,’ referencing their own *Newsboy* production, where they “had attempted to extend the boundaries of the agit-prop form,” which “made no demands on [them] as actors ... [as they] were clumsy, didn’t know how to move properly, and knew nothing about developing [their] voices.”²⁸⁸ They also shared a remedial approach that foresaw “writing better agitprop sketches, by dealing with specific issues instead of trying to make each sketch into a dramatized version of a communist pamphlet ... by giving the sketches more immediacy, by using songs and music, by borrowing from the technique of the circus, the music-hall, the pierrot show,” which is in fact a very short summary of the blueprint of the Theatre Workshop stage.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁵ MacColl, *Journeyman*, 213.

²⁸⁶ Davies, *Other Theatres*, 107.

²⁸⁷ Mick Wallis, “Social commitment and aesthetic experiment, 1895–1946,” 177.

²⁸⁸ MacColl, *Journeyman*, 213; 208.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Littlewood and MacColl's access to the Russian Avant-garde and the Continental trends

Derek Paget's analogy of Theatre Workshop as a Trojan horse that brought in radical current to the closed circuit of post-war British theatre explains the formative impact of the avant-garde trends upon Littlewood and MacColl.²⁹⁰ Preceding their collaboration, MacColl had been introduced to the German expressionism and the continental atmosphere in politics through his communication with peers and texts recited at the Clarion group and later in his Red Megaphones agit-prop group. He also was an avid movie-goer in his days of unemployment and during his employment at the BBC Radio in Manchester, he followed how different montage techniques could work in a radio documentary. Meanwhile, Littlewood's thirst for genuine theatrical expressions caused her to drop her scholarship at RADA, where Stanislavsky's techniques were taught by a Russian émigré, Theodore Komisarjevsky in 1930s, although it is uncertain if Joan Littlewood was his student.²⁹¹ Komisarjevsky was also influential in London theatres' 1925-6 season, when he produced Ibsen, Chekhov and Gogol plays at Philip Ridgeway's Barnes Theatre, challenging the West End naturalism with their "tone and tempo,

²⁹⁰ Derek Paget analyzes in his essay the probable influences of reading Moussinac's book in MacColl-Littlewood collaboration and various other elements of European impact upon their work. He also traces these impacts in the continuum of works produced in their pre and post-settlement periods, namely in *Uranium 235* and *Lovely War*. Derek Paget, 'Theatre Workshop, Moussinac and the European connection,' *New Theatre Quarterly* NTQ 11, No. 43, (1995), 211-224.

²⁹¹ Kate Bailey gives a short list of his students as John Gielgud. Charles Laughton and Peggy Ashcroft. His tenure in the school seems to have coincided with Littlewood's term, but it is not certain that he taught her, however Littlewood formulated the basics of her actor training completely relying on her interpretations of Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares*. Kate Bailey, 'Avant-garde and actuality: Interviews with stage director Katie Mitchell and set designer Vicki Mortimer,' *Russian Avant-garde Theatre*, 94.

the primacy of mood over detail.”²⁹² England’s connections with the avant-garde movements were limited to a few pioneering theatre companies. Edward Gordon Craig visited Moscow twice; first in 1912, to collaborate with Stanislavsky on the production of *Hamlet* at the Moscow Art Theatre, and second in 1935, to meet with Meyerhold and other theatre directors and artists. Few British theatres were following the continental trends in the 1920s and there was some publication on the works of European and Russian stage designers and directors.

Although Nadine Holdsworth’s latest academic narrative dismisses the origins of their theatrical design and refers to Appia’s influence in Theatre Workshop in a general category, Adolphe Appia’s work was a source of inspiration and learning to MacColl’s very early work.²⁹³ His partner Alf Armit in the Red Megaphones agit-prop group, who was a worker like MacColl, had a deep individual interest in Adolphe Appia’s work. As they gradually understood the necessity of going indoors, comprehending the limits of street theatres, they found that lighting work demanded special attention, and they explored the issue in the local library, discovering Appia’s theories in one of those rare publications translating the continental avant-garde.²⁹⁴ MacColl states in his autobiography that Alf Armit was a ‘vertical-lathe operator’ who had been a foundational member of the Red Megaphones and an active member of the Labour League of Youth. He writes that Armit’s research on Appia earned them, other than a sound theoretical base for lighting, “three spotlights which he had made out of ten-pound barrel type biscuit-tins fitted with 500-watt lamps ‘borrowed’ from the floodlighting equipment used to illuminate the Salford greyhound-racing track,” which was, MacColl states, their first lighting equipment, “no

²⁹² Mick Wallis, “Social commitment and aesthetic experiment, 1895–1946,” 172-3.

²⁹³ Nadine Holdsworth’s references to Appia’s influence are general and there is mention of John Bury’s constructivist set designs. Holdsworth, Joan Littlewood’s Theatre, 8; 91.

²⁹⁴ Howard Goorney, *Theatre Workshop Story*, 5.

dimmers, no floods, no switchboard, just three converted biscuit-tins and an off/on wall switch.”²⁹⁵

Another source in the thirties, was a book translated from French in 1931: Leon Moussinac’s *The New Movement in the Theatre*. Moussinac’s book is interesting as it offers a particularly sound source for most of MacColl-Littlewood couple’s vision of their ideal theatre. Robert Leach gives a brief summary of content and refers to Moussinac’s eschewing naturalism, praising Russian revolutionary theatre, speculated on the need for a ‘people’s theatre,’ and finally compared the Russian agit-prop troupes to the commedia dell’arte groups. All of these positions, but especially the last one on commedia dell’arte troupes’ resembling the agitprop troupes, resonate highly with MacColl-Littlewood manifestos for all phases of their theatre.²⁹⁶ Similarly, Derek Paget writes on the Moussinac book as the vital source that introduced the novelties of the radical left-wing theatres, and particularly of Meyerhold’s techniques and refers to Clive Barker’s note that it was possible “virtually to document quotations in Littlewood’s subsequent productions.”²⁹⁷ In late 1940s, Joan Littlewood was reading Group Theatre’s stage designer Mordecai Gorelik’s book *New Theatres for Old*, where he described the new theatres synthesizing the theatrical avant-garde by 1940s across America and Europe.²⁹⁸ Another book in

²⁹⁵ MacColl, *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, xxxi.

²⁹⁶ Robert Leach, in his book *Theatre Workshop*, refers to the difficulty in early 1930s’ Britain, to find informative material on advanced theatres of the Continent and America and states that Leon Moussinac’s book was translated from French into English as probably one of the very few sources to refer to and illustrate the new theatres of the Continental avant-garde, communist Russia and the United States. Robert Leach, *Theatre Workshop Joan Littlewood and the Making of Modern British Theatre*, (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2010), 8-10.

²⁹⁷ Derek Paget, “Theatre Workshop, Moussinac, and the European connection,” 215.

²⁹⁸ This detail is a note from her notebook, where she wrote down names of many other theatre people such as Belasco, Craig, Appia, Antoinne, Pirandello, O’Neill. “Joan Littlewood’s Notebook containing production notes on Rogues Gallery; Prague; Voice exercises; Labor Party Meeting of 10 April 1948” The Michael Barker Collection of Joan Littlewood, Box 1, Folder 2, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

their curriculum is mentioned by Peter Rankin to be Vsevolod Pudovkin's *Film Technique* book and Ewan MacColl mentions their reading the period's "theatrical press and magazines like *New Theatre* and *Theatre Arts Monthly*' which kept them 'informed of what was happening on the other side of the Atlantic.'²⁹⁹

Next to these impacts, Joan Littlewood's movement training was largely based on Laban's movement technique and the Eurhythmic movement system that Bowlt describes as a component of Meyerhold's bio-mechanics. Littlewood's own notes for a physical exercise titled 'Eurhythmics and the beginnings of biomechanics' include, other than walking or running to various rhythms, "unemployed men, scrubbing the floor, shoveling, throwing heavy weights, pick axe," enacting menial labor, which seems to re-enforce the working-class imaginary in their training.³⁰⁰ This also resonates uniquely with why Laban chose Manchester as his base for work in exile: there was the Barton Swingbridge, the Ship Canal, Trafford Park and the docks, where he could observe the moves of workers and in one instance, he had even instructed a gang of workers while they were heaving crates on to a truck: 'Quick! Now, we bend, throw! Yes, find your own space! Have you got the rhythm? Lift and swing ...'³⁰¹

The earliest time when English stage was informed of Meyerhold's biomechanics, according to Claire Warden, was when Huntley Carter visited the Soviet State and wrote his observations of the arts in his two books published in 1925 and in 1929. Warden argues that the movement of the body was important for the revolutionary WTM groups to declare freedom

²⁹⁹ For Rankin's account, see Rankin, *Dreams and Realities*, 36; for MacColl's account see Goorney & MacColl, *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, xxxiv.

³⁰⁰ "Training classes," Series I, Subseries A, Notebooks, Box 1, Folder 5, The Michael Barker Collection, Harry Ransom Center, UT Austin.

³⁰¹ Littlewood, *Joan's Book*, 181-2.

from the shackles and demands of capitalism upon their physical moves and strength. She makes an analysis of a WTM production, *Their Theatre and Ours* (1932) where the workers act both sides: sloppiness of the music hall and the revolutionary theatres' worker-actors' restrained, disciplined and self-assured postures and moves that owe their techniques to biomechanics. As I explained above, biomechanics was a fitting tool for the worker-actors to develop a rhythm of action suited for their needs, because it had in its founding principles the necessity to suggest a rational movement flow for factory workers in the new Soviet State, as the originating moves were devised experimentally at the Choreological Laboratory. Warden also emphasizes the importance of the physical action as that which breaks the omnipotence of the text of the bourgeois tradition: such display of physical strength, rigor and discipline was powerful in its referencing an imminent working-class revolution.³⁰²

As the above example of Laban's interest in movement and his instructing the workers shows, Theatre Workshop's expectations of an effective movement design were answered more by Rudolph Laban's technique than Meyerhold's. Warden expresses both to be strong influences in Littlewood's work, despite their differences. Indeed, Joan Littlewood cared deeply about the inner life of a character to be displayed authentically by the actor. It is possible to find in her rehearsal notes and feedback to actors that her actor had to have a rich imagination and a deep understanding of the world of the character and relations with other characters. In her notes on the rehearsals and play discussions, Littlewood wrote that it was imperative to bring in the study of the play "more wealth to the discussion, more imagination, real [sic] study," warning against "mental sloth," and requesting a mutual stimulation between the producer and the actor, claiming

³⁰² Claire Atlee Warden, *British Avant-Garde Theatre*, 156-7.

the otherwise (“a production sustained only by the producer”) to be an ‘empty shell.’³⁰³ This expectation must have made Laban a better model for movement design for Theatre Workshop, whose work concentrated on the inner motives, thoughts and feelings of people in movement. Claire Warden emphasizes the difference between Meyerhold and Laban to be Meyerhold’s taking the reflexes in the body as the initiative to action, whereas Laban formulated that it was one’s inner emotions revealed in their bodily movement and interaction that would dominate movement, rendering “the whole, living person.”³⁰⁴ In this case, I would argue that Laban was the main source of movement design for Littlewood due to a note I found in her correspondence with Gerry Raffles where, upon sharing her discomfort with MacColl’s acting, explains she never believed in the external approach: “I have never believed that you can produce an effect from the outside.”³⁰⁵ This is interesting to note, as their early performances have been received as the English performances closest to Meyerhold, probably due to the highly stylized and synchronized movement sequences that conveyed the plot in the absence of any naturalistic narrative stage tools.³⁰⁶ Yet the same letter correspondence with Raffles illuminates that point: Littlewood wrote in the same letter that she did resort to the external methods in their earlier

³⁰³ Another note explains how Littlewood cared about the use of imagination: She took notes on Howard Goorney’s rehearsal performance as such: “Howard – an actor with unusual gifts, ... his imagination has not been sufficiently sharp ... the work is nearly always hard, angular, ..., forced without moments of vocal or physical serenity or repose. There is never any flow. He repeats himself, produces acting clichés and in fact is so honestly bad that it is painful. HOWARD IS NEVER DISHONESTLY BAD [sic]. Howard should extend his imaginative efforts.” ‘Report on Acting in Theatre Workshop,’ Box 1, Folder 3, The Michael Barker Collection, Harry Ransom Center, UT Austin.

³⁰⁴ Warden, *British Avant-Garde Theatre*, 159.

³⁰⁵ Joan Littlewood’s letter to Gerry Raffles, dated 21 October 1948, The Michael Barker Collection of Joan Littlewood, Box 2, Folder 9, Joan Littlewood correspondences, outgoing, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

³⁰⁶ It was a critique of their *John Bullion – A Ballet with Words*, written by the *Manchester Guardian*’s Teddy Thompson, calling the Theatre of Action as ‘the nearest thing any British Theatre has got to Meyerhold.’ Goorney, *Theatre Workshop Story*, 10.

productions as she believed the actors “could not assimilate [her] productions.”³⁰⁷ Littlewood believed in the idea of ‘creating an actor’ in that letter, and she wrote that she used the external method before she began to mould the actors into her idea of an actor.³⁰⁸ This archival detail suggests that the maturing acting styles in Theatre of Action and Theatre Union started with crude propaganda and highly synchronized, stylized action to evolve into an acting capacity where Theatre Workshop actors could apply more of Stanislavsky’s psychological naturalism than Meyerhold’s external approach to acting.

The American Federal Theatre Project’s living newspapers were also very influential on Theatre Workshop’s path, along with the Russian blue blouse troupes. Warden writes about the connection regarding the American text, *Newsboy* that Theatre Union produced in the living newspaper form. *Newsboy* originally belonged to the Laboratory Theatre in New York and was popular among British WTM groups. Ewan MacColl worked with materials from the Wobblies, and he also wrote that earlier in their timeline, they were receiving their “regular supply of sketches” from London, where he claims there was a healthy network of flourishing WTM groups that probably received most of their plays from New York.³⁰⁹ Claire Warden also mentions the German influence, which directly impacted the Littlewood-MacColl collaboration due to Ewan MacColl’s working for Ernst Toller in Manchester Repertory Theatre in his play, *Draw the Fires* (1935), when Toller was not pleased with professional actors’ physical

³⁰⁷ Goorney, *Theatre Workshop Story*, 10.

³⁰⁸ In her autobiography, *Joan’s Book*, Littlewood wrote how she explained to one of their hostesses, Ruth Pennyman of Ormsby Hall that everybody could act and that people were all acting most of the time, and ended with an ironic remark: “Our politicians, popes, barristers, and rabble rousers are all actors but con-men, spies, crooks and plain-clothes policemen are even better.” Joan Littlewood, *Joan’s Book the Autobiography of Joan Littlewood*, (London: Methuen, 2003), 199.

³⁰⁹ MacColl, *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, xxi.

performances of menial labor. Other than Toller, Erwin Piscator's experimentation with technology on the stage and his use of large projectors inspired the Theatre Workshop production of *The Good Soldier Schweik*. German expressionism's influence in MacColl's writing can be traced in his plays like *The Other Animals*, where the plot unravels in the mind of the protagonist. These textual, design and technical strategies informed all of Theatre Workshop's productions and acknowledging these causalities and continuities would highlight the mysteries in Littlewood's later productions, such as *Macbeth* taken to Moscow and Zurich in 1957. Littlewood's *Macbeth* was reconstructed similarly, unfolding in flashbacks in Macbeth's mind, much to period's critical disapproval and current academic mystifications. Robert Leach refers to MacColl's use of expressionism in his "mixing verse and prose, and fact and fiction, his ability to move from public politics to private life ... the dreams that punctuate *The Other Animals*," yet MacColl's rich variety of styles is hardly acknowledged as a formative source for all Theatre Workshop productions, and Leach writes for this *Macbeth* production: "The originality of this conception may be hard to comprehend today."³¹⁰

Adaptations as local response

An important reason behind Theatre Workshop's perseverance and survival in the face of hostile conditions, I argue, was their having a playwright-in-residence. Creative and critical texts were paramount to the success of left-wing theatres and Ewan MacColl earned Theatre Union and Theatre Workshop most of its staying power in their long run. Play writing was an important part of work that ensured continuous activity in revolutionary topics, yet most groups' activities

³¹⁰ Leach, *Theatre Workshop*, 65; 113.

were halted by the scarcity of proper plays for performance. The permeable boundaries of the professional theatres and the left initiatives in London allowed ‘unenthusiastic playwrights’ to opt for the ‘long runs’ accommodating income rather than writing for the ‘experimental’ theatres.³¹¹ As I referred briefly in the previous section, the matter was solved at times, as textual adaptation was a creative strategy in many left-wing theatrical clusters, helping them articulate a local working-class response on current topics, creating freedom and sustenance for the theatres of the left.³¹² Generally, the adaptation versions of well-known pieces would be shorter, in a revue style, featuring caricaturized versions of political people; the pace would be fast and synchronized. Most of the groups resorted to Shaw when in doubt about what to play, consequently blurring the stylistic aspect of performances. In the post-war period, even a relatively well-structured and supported group like the London Unity was facing its end for it could not manage, among other reasons, to introduce any new plays of ‘lasting merit.’³¹³ This vantage point attests to the importance of having a permanent playwright in the company, which Theatre Union and Theatre Workshop had: Ewan MacColl. A brief look at *John Bullion* (1934), one of their earlier adaptations, will show the extent of the adaptation trends’ impact upon them and highlight the grassroots versions of Theatre Workshop’s technique in textual adaptations, movement and design.

³¹¹ Davies, *Other Theatres*, 59.

³¹² As mentioned earlier, The Progressive Players in Gateshead was one of these groups who were committed to developing new writing next to ‘rejuvenating old masterpieces.’ Other than Tom Thomas’ adaptations of Robert Tressell’s novel *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist* and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* as *Malice in Plunderland* (1929), The list of plays of interest, Raphael Samuel writes, included Shaw’s *Candida*, Robertson’s *Caste*, Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, two medieval miracle plays, and Ibsen’s *Doll House*. Davies, *The Samuel, Theatres of the Left*, 21.

³¹² Davies, *Other Theatres*, 141.

³¹³ *Ibid.*

When MacColl and Littlewood attended the London convention of British WTM, where agit-prop versus socialist realism was being discussed, they watched *Hammer*, a short, three act play that a group of combined WTM troupes devised after attending the Moscow Olympiad (to find how far they were lagging behind the Russian and German troupes).³¹⁴ MacColl writes that as the ‘showpiece’ of the reformed English WTM, it was impressive with several musical items with a set of Brecht/Eisler songs “performed by a small choir and a four-piece orchestra,” yet, it was only a “curtain raiser ... calculated to demonstrate the superiority of the curtain-theatre approach,” and it wasted “the crude energy, the burning enthusiasm and the spirit of defiance, the bold challenge and the denunciation of the enemy, the raw satire which were the hallmarks of the agitprop,” bringing instead “the kind of bloodless acting which the West End theatre had made fashionable.”³¹⁵ After *Newsboy*, the couple embarked on a defiant project of adapting *Hammer* play to their own superior version of theatre, titling it *John Bullion – a Ballet with Words* (1934) whereby, evidently they were able to practice the novelties of the avant-garde forms staged on the Continental theatre after they laid hands on Leon Moussinac’s book, *The New Movement in the Theatre*. *John Bullion*, deals with the ruling elite’s war mongering schemes that reach a certain climax to get sabotaged by the industrial work force denying to take part in preparations for war. In accordance with the constructivist and expressionist trends that were shaping their writing and their training in the WTM legacy, the play’s movements were fully choreographed,

³¹⁴ As mentioned in the previous chapter, the discussions were on the for and against agit-prop axis. MacColl and Littlewood were for agit-prop and believed the contrary to what their counters thought: According to MacColl, agit-prop as a form was not an alien form; those who thought so were wrong, and implied that English theatre had begun with Marlowe; forgetting, according to MacColl, ‘to mention the country rituals, the mumming plays, mysteries and moralities from which [their] classical theatre had evolved.’ *Ibid.*, 213.

³¹⁵ MacColl, *Journeyman*, 214.

and naturalistic dialogue was mostly omitted. MacColl briefly describes the adaptation strategy as such:

For a start, we reduced the number of characters, then cut out all of them and introduced new ones in their place. This necessitated a change of dialogue which, in turn, resulted in several scenes being shortened and then cut out ... We finally cut out all the dialogue and substituted for it catch-phrases spoken by a chorus of typists. The décor, which in London production had included a naturalistic office with desk, ... now became a bare platform with a raised wooden plane standing along the back wall ... Downstage were the three skeletoid wooden stools, six, seven and eight feet high. Seated on them and attached to them by chains were three young women, clones of the script's original secretary. Their faces and bodies were painted white and they wore black panties and bras. The main character, John Bullion, was made up to look like a grotesque clown and had a stomach padded to Falstaffian proportions covered by a waistcoat fashioned from a Union Jack. The production was a kind of ménage-a-trois of styles borrowed from agit-prop, constructivism and expressionism [which] were to play important roles in many of our productions.

(MacColl, *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, xxxiv-xxxv)

John Bullion was a ballet with six movements, performed on a constructivist set, “designed to facilitate the movement of the actors rather than to represent anything” as indicated

in the opening notes of the script.³¹⁶ The set consisted of three levels used for different purposes of dramatic generalizations and the stylized dance movements, with sloping and intersecting planes at various heights. Theatre Workshop's well-known aural and visual montage techniques are evident in this play with the use of 'caption voices' and a mutograph. The "curtains are dispensed with and the transitions from one movement to another are achieved by using documented sound sequences," arguably a BBC documentary technique.³¹⁷ A notable use of off-stage, disembodied voices appears along with this production that MacColl and Littlewood used frequently, most recognizable in the *Last Edition* living newspaper and in *Lovely War*.

MacColl's poetry recitations and radio acting in Archie Harding's radio features in BBC Manchester significantly informed Theatre Workshop strategies. An example is the use of narration, mostly referred as a meta-theatrical feature in his plays, which was, according to Robert Leach (who compares this meta-theatrical feature to the stage manager in Thornton plays), a textual strategy to interfere with and demystify the world of the play and bring the performance of the class struggle to the foreground.³¹⁸ In *John Bullion*, both the narrative technique (as a lighting technician introduces the next villainous character) and the montage technique using disembodied voices as link items are used. Tracing the roots of these intervening techniques, it is possible to find BBC Manchester of 1930s, where MacColl could learn different types of feature productions from Archie Harding and his successor John Pudney in creating documentaries. Pudney, MacColl writes, who gave him the chance for scriptwriting, had

³¹⁶ Jimmie Miller and Joan Littlewood, Notes in *A Ballet With Words John Bullion* in MacColl and Goorney, *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, 2.

³¹⁷ MacColl and Goorney, *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, 2.

³¹⁸ Robert Leach, *Theatre Workshop*, 73.

removed Harding's narrating technique which "had become a kind of liturgical necessity" in Harding's productions and replaced them with the 'caption voices':

No lengthy passages of beautifully crafted narration for Pudney, no dessicated prose that could be bent and angled by cunning inflections. No soloist and no choir. Instead there were the caption voices reading adverts about forgotten cures for warts, bunions, ... brisk statements culled from newspapers, official documents, government reports and royal circulars. In place of the undesignated voices, the rough, smooth, less smooth, official, angry and fluent voices of the classic feature programme, he introduced the characterized voice, almost always accented or in dialect. Not the italicized dialect of a Bridson script, where it was used as an interesting exhibit; now it was a counter of the harsh officialese of the Caption Voices. (MacColl, *Journeyman*, 233)

It is possible to see the parallels between the disembodied voices MacColl and Littlewood used in *John Bullion* and this idea of caption voices: the cast includes a hyper-pathetic voice, an ultra-unpleasant voice, a sanctimonious voice, a BBC announcer's voice, and an echo of Pye's (described in the cast as 'Reverend, a fashionable creeper') voice. These voices speak for what we may call the secondary cast, who are the typists of the office setting, who move in very precisely matched movement sequences with the sound and lighting cues. The voices also speak short and very precisely intonated sentences with stops in them to match with the movements of the typists that act like automatons, demonstrating what I observe as a sharp degree of physical, emotional and mental alienation resulting in moods available for abuse and manipulation by their bosses:

[THE SECOND MOVEMENT] ... Lights flash up, stylised typist discovered poised in an insouciant attitude on desk down left. 1_2_3_ Typist takes imaginary powder puff (1,) flicks it (2,) powders her nose (3). 1_2_ Miss Banks enters (1,) takes one step and looks shocked (2,). 3_4_ Typist shrugs shoulders (3,) plants hands on hips (4). 1_2_3_4_ Miss Banks takes four determined and offended steps which land her down centre. On (4) she turns and faces the typist grimly.

'I / used / to be / his sec-re-tri. /'

These words are spoken by a hyper-pathetic voice coming from offstage.

Miss Banks makes four movements expressing the sense of the phrase. The voice offstage repeats 'I used to be his secretary' in the same rhythm.

(John Bullion, Second Movement, Agit-Prop to Theatre Workshop, 3)

After omitting the naturalistic cast and turning them into part of their constructivist stage design, MacColl and Littlewood employed a cast of allegorical stereotypes with actual speaking cues. These characters are typical agit-prop representations of working-class contempt displayed towards establishment figures, whose devious schemes will be displayed shortly: Birthright (Sir Weldon, an armament's boss), Winmore (Lord, an aristocratic coupon-clipper), Deafen'em (Mister, a big noise in the Press), Fortune (Mister, a large piece of Finance Capital), Dancy Pye (Reverend, A fashionable creeper), Banks (Miss, a used-up secretary). Remaining cast includes other typists, newsboys, mannequins, crippled ex-servicemen, munition workers, an electrician, chorus of children and crowd of workers.

To briefly refer to the plot of this play with six movement sequences, the first sequence displays scenes of expressionistic war dances accompanied by a native drum-beating. Dances are initiated by a masked 'witch doctor' to be replaced in a climactic moment by a second figure "in evening clothes and tall hat, a huge grotesque caricature of a man," who dances a modern, weird version of the war dance. The second sequence displays the compromised female office workers who clearly are abused by these characters. The third sequence commences with a musical cue from the Ballets Russes' 1921 production, *Chout* (The Buffoon), composed by Serge Prokofiev, the buffoon-like characters' (Birthright, Deafen'em, Winmore, Fortune) strictly synchronized dancing acts of greed and abuse, with an intense background sound projection reflecting the urban flow outside ('a deep motor-horn, sounding once in the rhythm of a telephone bell ... heard above the music,' ringing phones, motor horns, sirens and newsboy shouts).³¹⁹ In the fourth movement there is the business deal setting where all four of the above stereo-typed characters try to get shares of companies while following the results of a peace conference, and as they hear about the suspended conference, their joy and frenzy get escalated by the sound cues of machine guns (initially produced as typing sounds of female workers) and heavy artillery; the sequence ends in a climax featuring mannequins in swimming suits and gas masks and the sounds of a children chorus. All movements displayed are robotic for the secretaries and pompous for the bosses.

³¹⁹ According to the website of the National Gallery of Australia, where an entry on the Ballets Russes displays visual detail of an exhibition titled 'Ballets Russes The Art of Costume,' the ballet *Chout* (The Buffoon) had also a six movements structure. Serge Prokofiev was commissioned by the famous producer/writer/choreographer Serge Diaghilev to compose for this ballet project that never became quite popular. The website of National Gallery of Australia, 'Ballet Russes The Art of Costume,' <http://nga.gov.au/exhibition/balletsrusses/default.cfm?MnuID=3&GalID=22>; the website of the Royal Opera House <http://www.roh.org.uk/people/sergey-prokofiev> accessed 3/17/2017.

In contrast to the stylized frenzy, the fifth movement opens with an electrician dashing onto the stage, whose whole speech “must be made to sound spontaneous,” as opposed to the highly mechanized, stylized and de-humanized characters of the previous movement; he comes as the “electrician of this damned show” to fix the blackout (that happens in the transition of the movement sequences) and talks to the caricatured bosses in their actor’s names and next to this intervention, in a meta-theatrical manner, he introduces another wicked character, the clergyman, the Reverend Dancy Pye, and the setting transforms to that of a church for him to preach on the subject of peace. A double of the clergyman appears to act as “a caricature of his pulpit manner ... sounding like a gramophone running down.” The last movement sequence has a musical background from another Russian composer, Alexander Mossolov that sets the rhythm for the typists’ and the bosses’ movements which are synched “with robot-like precision.”³²⁰ After more display of greed and frenzy by the caricaturized types, a blackout happens again and two workmen appear at work moving to the rhythm of Mossolov’s music; the vicious businessmen cross the stage in a rhythmically organized move that gets more and more lethargic and then they break their line and move into a frenzied individual rhythm as the savage dancer of the opening

³²⁰ Sixth Movement, *John Bullion* in Goorney and MacColl, *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, 9. Regarding the musical cue in the background, as there is no reference to the title of the musical piece, it is highly probable that they used Mossolov’s famous composition *Iron Foundry* that was also composed for a ballet production *Steel* (1927). The text refers to the piece in the last movement as *Steel Foundry*, so there appears to be a confusion of the name of the Ballet and the musical piece. A classical music blog editor Rob Barnett refers to Mossolov’s work *Iron Foundry* as ‘an early example minimalism,’ where ‘[w]hirring machinery hammers away and horns stride across the aural texture in manic intensity,’ and he calls it ‘music of a metallic nightmare.’ It is interesting that the editor compares Mossolov’s piece to a Prokofiev composition (*Scythian Suite*), which allows for the probability that the musical cue in this movement was indeed *Iron Foundry*, in competence with the previous Prokofiev piece from another ballet *Chout*. Wikipedia entry, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Mosolov, *Classical Music on the Web Blog*; “Alexander Mossolov,” blog entry by Rob Barnett <http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/oct99/mossolov.htm>, Accessed March 17, 2017.

movement and they cry “WAR WILL BE DECLARED [sic],” after a shrill voice cries ‘war,’ and a mutograph follows, “pass[ing] slowly across the back wall.”³²¹ News relayed on the screen of the back wall relate how the workers of the aggression nations declare that they will not obey orders and that a strike is called to sabotage the war preparations, simultaneously factory sirens and the ‘internationale ... flowering into’ several languages are heard offstage; workers fill the stage from all directions as the businessmen and the reverend collapse and fall on each other down center stage and the crowd of workers march out, as their tune and lights fade out.

Among the catching aspects of this 1934 production are a meta-theatrical figure: a stage technician walking in to fix an electrical circuit and therefore his presence on the stage is a performative intervention calling in the real life; interrupting the theatrical time with the real time and creating a co-presence of the world of the audience with the world of the stage. The worker who will not step into a character, is immune, as a worker figure, to the willful schemes of the figures of the establishment. He stays out of the plot and he calls the actors playing the businessmen by their real names. Moving about very naturally, practically bouncing around the precariously constructivist stage, he disrupts the characters’ roles to begin the next movement, makes shattering noises and diminishes the self-importance of the pompous characters. Thus, the worker/technician figure is projected as the ideal power that ensures the flow of life. His presence is casual; a typical counter-point to the previous constructivist movements of the de-humanized characters, representing the sensible one as the worker, promising relief and continuum, as opposed to the general view of the working-class people in the social hierarchy which is closer to the soulless, entrapped liminal mode in what Victor Turner defines as the *communitas*. This is a typical WTM strategy refusing to reproduce the naturalist depiction or

³²¹ Sixth Movement, *John Bullion*, 9-10.

images of working-class life; to aim for a change and upliftment by way of employing workers as empowered/empowering figures as opposed to the grotesque, caricaturized stereotypes dehumanized and enslaved by the rhythms of Capitalism. The worker's entrance to fix the electric circuit can be considered a montage into the frenzied greed scenes of the capitalist figures that stands out as a counter-point. The grotesque renditions of the capitalist 'types' are juxtaposed with the worker's natural ease and flow of motion, parodying the establishment figures and praising the promised, ideal working-class image, which Holdsworth refers as a continuum of the Marxist aesthetic that "stress[es] the importance of creating full-rounded working-class consciousness" as she builds the context of poetic realism to depict the type of realism in MacColl's plays.³²² In the play, the worker image is represented more than once: other than the technician intervening, there is a worker representation that is presumably inspired by Toller's scenes in *Draw the Fires*. The last movement in *John Bullion* includes two workmen, 'naked to the waist, throwing imaginary shells from one to the other on the upstage plane,' moving to the rhythm of Mossolov's music, with red light at the background, resonating with Ernst Toller's expressionistic play produced by the Manchester Rep, where MacColl and his worker-actor friends took part replacing the Rep actors who disappointed Toller: the play dealt with the mutiny in a German fleet in the Great War and most scenes contained, like the last movement sequence in *John Bullion*, 'stokers and trimmers, trimmed to the waist [as with the two workers in *John Bullion*] shovel[ing] coal into the furnaces throughout a complete scene, and... the high point of the drama occure[d] when the stokers throw down their shovels and refuse to carry on working.'³²³ Likewise the two workmen in the last movement stop work and join the marchers

³²² Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood's Theatre*, 133.

³²³ MacColl, *Agit-Prop to Theatre Workshop*, xxxii.

who fill the stage. While this may be a textual resonance that originates from the text *Hammer*, the intensity represented by the display of labor throughout a scene is likely to have influenced MacColl's ideas of representing the worker on stage and at work.

Ewan MacColl used the montage technique to as a structural intervention where counterpoint scenes phase in and out of each other with the aid of lighting or visual or aural media insertion. Robert Leach refers to the use of montage in MacColl's writing in connection with Eisenstein's 'montage of attractions,' which meant more than the use of contrast or the juxtaposition of unexpected sequences; Eisenstein's conception of montage was "dynamic and provocative ... arrang[ing] vivid incidents ('attractions') ...[as] a means of stimulating the audience into making meanings."³²⁴ The montage technique is employed in plays where the two realities of the establishment and the working class are at war, and Theatre Workshop plays always emphasize the righteousness of the working class with various strategies to defeat and ridicule the capitalist order. Some of MacColl's plays demonstrate less of a confrontation between these two clashing worlds; the working-class life is depicted more naturally, with constructivist interventions nevertheless, that alter the flow of the plot and insert a tragic reality, as in *Johnny Noble* where scenes can shift from a street setting depicting a naturalistic neighborhood at sixes and sevens, to a bombardment scene, turning the protagonist into a mechanical part of heavy artillery.

Thus, what we may call segment use of naturalism in representing the working class in their earlier works relied on montage techniques that disrupt the logical flow of scene/movement sequences. Media inserts created successful interventions, too, such as a newsfeed in *John*

³²⁴ Leach, *Theatre Workshop*, 73.

Bullion, inserted by a radio announcer, and later by use of a mutograph, with the probable aim of increasing the dramatic effect by employing convincing popular media devices, and also containing them in competing for medium that gets the popular attention.

The movements described in the play text include pirouettes, gambols, thrusting, flying or mechanical movements, expressive gestures and freezing. In his previous attempts for a dance number in shows or an actual dance mime, MacColl's indoor theatre project members, although impressed by the thought of dancing, had had disappointing experiences, and thought that they had abandoned the agit-prop phase prematurely.³²⁵ Their first movement teacher was trained 'in a Margaret Moris dance studio' to earn them some preliminary ease in movement, but left before they recruited Joan Littlewood. Therefore, the moves indicated in the text appear to be rather ambitious for this stage in their production history; given that there is not much evidence of a critical reception, we cannot be sure if this text was acted as is. Howard Goorney writes of a Manchester Guardian critic Teddy Thompson's account of them being "The nearest thing any British theatre has got to Meyerhold," and that they were received negatively by the Communist Party, accused of paying art more attention than politics.³²⁶

Conclusion

The 1939 Non-Aggression Pact between Russia and Germany dissolved many of the groups active in left-wing theatre, and when we look at Littlewood and MacColl's Theatre Union

³²⁵ MacColl, *Journeyman*, 209.

³²⁶ According to Goorney, the Communist Party said that politics and art could not mix and that they were acting like prima donnas when they should have been active in a day-to-day politics. Goorney, *Theatre Workshop Story*, 10.

in the period, it is possible to say that they had already embarked upon their blueprint of ‘people’s theatre’ indicated by their Theatre Union Manifesto in 1935. This notion of their ‘people’s theatre’ was not unique to them; we can see many of these left-leaning theatres aiming at some kind of ‘people’s theatre,’ and Raphael Samuel calls it a term ‘frequently invoked’ in the period ‘often by high-minded philanthropists . . . represent[ing] an aspiration rather than an achievement.’³²⁷ All in all, it is evident that there is a period in the history of British theatre that produced work in par with that of Theatre Union and Theatre Workshop. Their starting points were mostly the same and the tools they set out with were identical; most of the materials were shared in a network, allowing them to stay up-to-date with their historical contemporaries up to a certain point in their timeline. The fact that most of these groups could not last into the 1970s should not mean that their legacies can be erased or obscured by virtue of their transferring productions to the West End or not.

This chapter concludes the presence of shared matter and aesthetics by the interwar British revolutionary theatres that were largely impacted by the Russian avant-garde features imported through WTM, as well as by their own traditions in popular labor leisure from the earlier century. To briefly sum up, the traditional labor entertainment depended on the music hall, variety theatres with music, satire and humor, folk singing and theatre performances exulting melodramatic survival conditions of the lower classes, topical, informal enactments of shortened Shakespeare plays where improvisation and stage-audience banter were the norm, and implying definite precedence of stage-audience relationship over the text. The performances used temporary locations mostly without the proscenium arch. What came with the Blue Blouse tradition was the movement of the workers’ theatres (WTM) that was mostly followed from the

³²⁷ Samuel, *Theatres of the Left*, 50.

United States and Germany. The movement brought a supply of revolutionary texts and some unique forms like the agit-prop since it aimed at reaching the unemployed and the working-class people. It had an allegorical language representing types, movements would be quick and synced and the whole sketch would have to be very swiftly performed, its setting quickly installed and packed away as there would always be a police chase in its wake. Other than agit-prop, the Blue Blouse groups spread the variety theatres appropriating the basic features of the avant-garde to come up with the living newspaper form, where they could get factual, convincing ideas across to their intended audiences in simple designed settings, costumes and in counter-point scenes montaged to the scenes reproducing the Establishment's desired common sense. The Russian avant-garde impacted rare British companies also through different paths, with touring companies, teachers at schools like RADA, and artists working together with the Russians and through publications on the new Russian and European theatre. The new theatre language had its emphasis on minimal stage and costume design to add depth and dimension to it; emphasis on the actors' interaction with stage props and even empty space was paramount and the text was no more the top item on the list of theatrical urgencies in expression. The European expressionism brought back Medieval performance traditions and the Russian avant-garde had already recognized the need to draw in the fresh, carnivalesque atmosphere of the fairground and circus. All these aspects regularly feature the Theatre Union and Theatre Workshop stage.

Chapter 4. The factors behind the evolution of Theatre Workshop's rambunctious stage

The Theatre Workshop stage, with its mixed inheritance of the British popular and labor conventions of nineteenth century and the WTM's ideological aesthetics in theatre and performance, was also able to develop its own interpretation of this bulk of entertainment and propaganda in its reach for a 'people's theatre.' Their touring years were like an incubatory process where they developed their own themes in play writing and priorities in acting, design and audience relationship that reached its maturity and critical recognition in London. Yet their recognition in London included them in categorical explorations devised for the West End trends and traditions of 1950s. I argue in this chapter that the Theatre Workshop productions can be discussed in alternative categories that more tangibly recognize their strong commitment in radical class politics. I propose alternative sources for exploring this commitment as a permanent theme in their theatrical work and even in Littlewood's post-theatrical activities in 1960s' London.

Theatre Workshop style developed from a mixture of medieval performance styles (commedia dell'arte and moralities), popular performance traditions (circus, music hall, variety), Russian constructivist design, German expressionism in MacColl's writing, Stanislavski's psychological realism in acting, Marxist realism in observing life and applying these observations in their acting in intricately devised set of fully developed 'given circumstances,' as well as by their constant limitations in resources and a practiced faith in communism that created a frugal life style reflected as necessities into their productions' minimalist, practical design aspects. Littlewood's sense of truth to convey the real as it is, along with their commitment to working-class struggle guided the group's maturing aesthetics from its quite early phases, into the well-known, rambunctious and almost carnivalesque stage. By the time

they were recognized at the West End in late 1950s, with Brendan Behan's plays, their experimental combination had matured into what I argue to be grotesque realism as Mikhail Bakhtin depicted in the carnivalesque aesthetic. Experimenting was perceived as a must in their quest for a revolutionary theatre and it was exercised on all levels: authorship, design, technical apparatus, and acting. Their method relied on interrogating everything known about theatre in their day and they set out on an experimental journey toward their own theatrical 'truth.'

Their Marxist premise of recognizing and representing the realities of the working class was declared many times by MacColl:

We needed a working-class audience in order to survive; without it there could be no real development, the theatre could never be anything more than a charming toy. How in the world could one possibly build a great theatre unless one identified with and drew sustenance from the people who, in our society, produce wealth - the working class? (MacColl, 'Theatre Workshop,' Working Class Movement Library website)

Further, he quoted from Karl Marx to group members who had a tendency to question their cause for touring for the working-class provinces: 'The ability to get at the basis of reality and skill in portraying its basic content made great artists of the past the outstanding critics of their time; it made realism an objectively democratic force.'³²⁸ Next to MacColl, Littlewood took notes in her notebook explaining their theatrical venture, which seem like lecture notes, maybe compiled for the political seminars given to the young group members during the war years. In

³²⁸ Ewan MacColl writes here that they quoted Marx to those members of the group who had doubts about the possibility of continuing with their cause in making theatre or how the working class would benefit the classics. MacColl, *Journeyman*, 266.

one instance, she mentions that they may get “bombed off [their] stage, but that they can take the theatre with [them]” as the agit-prop groups did.³²⁹ These undated notes also indicate her strongly shared faith in class politics, whereby she expresses her extreme disappointment in the workers getting degraded, silenced and brutalized by being sent off to war, taken back to the age of barbarism. Littlewood writes in these notes that their theatre worked to express the feelings and desires of this class and that their work was created by the class struggle, to give voice to their tragedy, and help them grasp the realities of life happening around them. The unknown, uncharted territory ahead of them required experimentation as their primary method, and it is evident that they turned to the period communist models as their ideal examples to follow in their search for a sense of direction, explaining their cause referring to the new Soviet theatre and to the communist leaders, taking these institutions in as the ideal model for producing theatre and creating a spectatorship. Littlewood wrote, “Remember Lenin’s words: ‘If I know a little, I will endeavor to know more.’ And we can never know enough about our job as revolutionary artists as the people who must sing of class struggle.”³³⁰ In these notes, Littlewood drew very explicit parallels with the proletariat theatre of the Soviets and their own work. In her view, the success of Russian revolutionary theatres was achieved by talking “straight to a hungry but excited audience” and by getting the new audience of workers to identify fully with every aspect of that theatre, from its actors to costumes and posters at its halls. “To them, theatre was real. It was life. It excited them, enthralled them. Maybe in this country, we’ve only seen this kind of thing at a

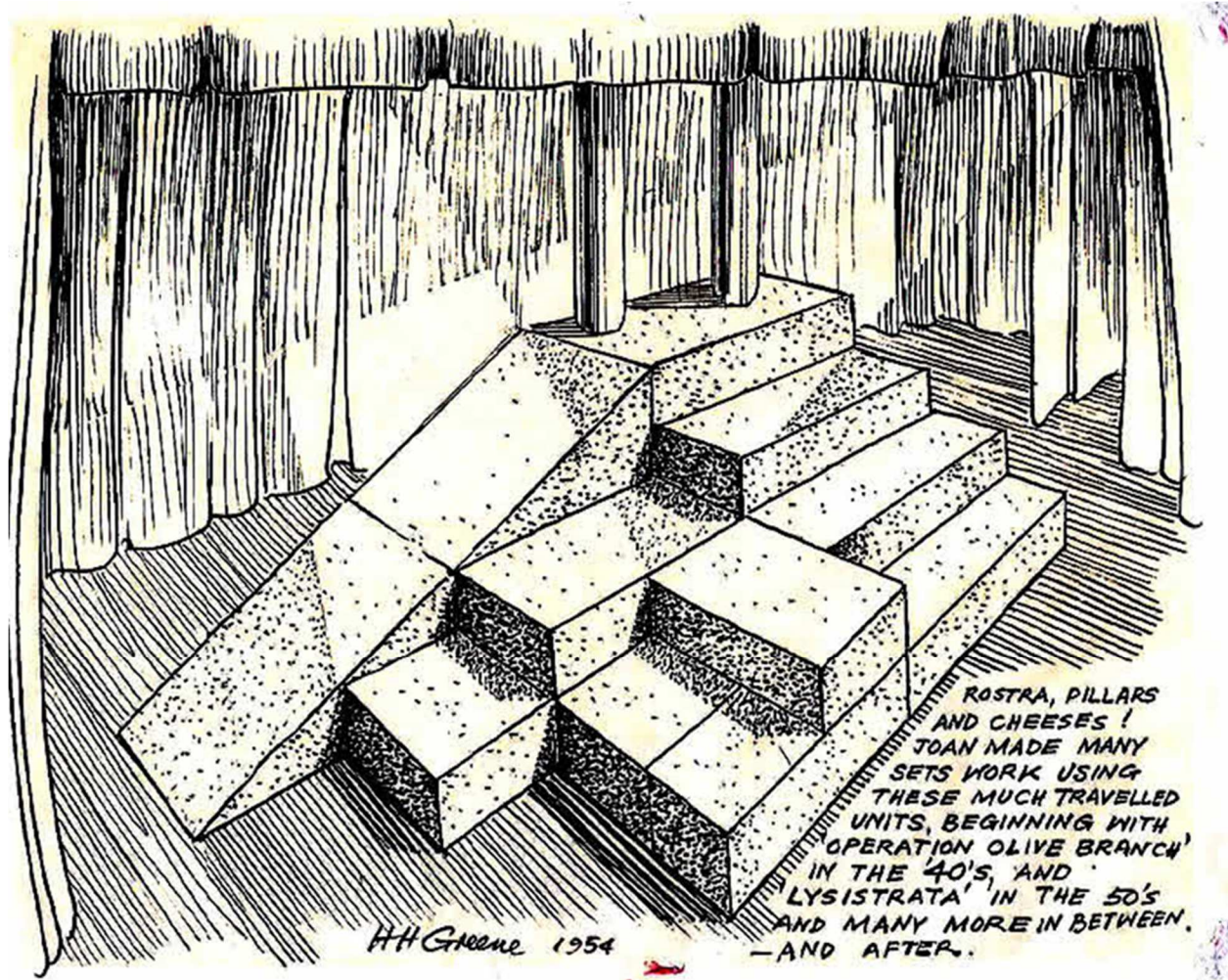
³²⁹ Joan Littlewood’s notes in Political Science notebook, Series I, Joan Littlewood 1937-1975, Subseries A, Box 1, Folder 5, in the Michael Barker Collection of Joan Littlewood, Harry Ransom Center, UT Austin.

³³⁰ Littlewood’s notes, Political Science Notebook, Michael Barker Collection, Harry Ransom Center, UT Austin.

football match.”³³¹ Moreover, Littlewood explained in the same notes that the Elizabethan audiences in the pit area were watching with the same excited amusement: another reason why the classics had to be re-interpreted to bring their revolutionary content to the fore and freed from the conflicting interests of the middle class. The workers wanted the best and they had no time to lose; they had to be given the truth in all aspects of their theatre: in text, design, and acting, and the theatre had to get rid of all of bourgeois theatres’ pretentious extensions that sever the audience from the stage, actor and the action. On the contrary, the audience should be involved in the action both physically and mentally. Her formula was to make the stage a three-dimensional, solid and real space, to give depth to the scene, for instance by thrusting the flat basement of the stage and the scenery out towards the auditorium and allowing actors to play on these platforms. This architecture can be seen in Harry Greene’s sketches and production

³³¹ It is interesting to find that this analogy is the same with R.H. Packman’s observations in his introduction to Leon Moussinac’s book, *The New Movement in the Theatre*, where he wrote about theatre being a mass phenomenon and how in England sports usurped that function as the leisured and cultivated classes, he wrote, had lost this power to react with intensity and primitive violence. Packman, *The New Movement in the Theatre*, 18.

pictures:



Theatre Archive Project, British Library images

Littlewood and MacColl's objective to grasp and interpret the truth required careful, historically conscious observation of everyday life; observation of people's relational gestures, speech patterns, and socially motivated actions in the streets, and Theatre Workshop was adept in taking the street into their texts, auditions, training, rehearsals, and productions. The result would be that the performed world of their plays would "accurately depict the realities of their moment

in history.”³³² Their documentary pieces were already an edited version of researched data found in newspapers, and their original plays relied on documentary material, as in the case of MacColl’s *Johnny Noble* and *Classic Soil* plays. Such attentiveness to the present moment worked particularly well in their adaptations of classics, almost deciphering an unidentified but congruent structure of feeling in these classics, and making this revolutionary interwar structure of feeling available for its audience’s recognition, such as the necessity of rising against a tyrannical, brutalizing rule as in *Fuenteovejuna* during the Spanish Civil War or organizing the basic infrastructure of a community to stop war preparations as in *Operation Olive Branch*; bringing the classics down from the world of literary and dramatic canons to the audience’s realities of everyday life. Shakespeare’s and Jonson’s plays produced by Theatre Workshop displayed recognizable themes reverberating in a sixteenth or seventeenth-century text, stripped from all West End conventions, making the speech not poetic but functional and the characters not pompously classical but plain in costumes as well as in acting:

[M]odern dress production of Ben Jonson’s *Volpone* ... transposed to modern day Italy, as a satire on spivs and hangers-on; Mosca rode a bicycle laden with pineapples and champagne, Corbaccio wheeled himself around in an invalid chair and Sir Politic Would-Be, the Englishman

³³² Rivkin and Ryan, in their introduction to Marxist criticism in literary theories, introduce the reflectionist Marxist criticism on such terms of holding a mirror up to the conventions of historical moment so well that despite the fictional quality of the work (a novel, in the exemplary case of Georg Lukacs’s critique in *The Historical Novel*), it ‘accurately depict[s] the realities of [its] moment in history.’ Hence the works can speak about the social struggles in shifting historical phases such as feudalism to capitalism in England, beyond authorial intention; making these social dynamics available for discernment even when the author has no intention of emphasizing them in his fiction. Julie Rivkin & Michael Ryan, “Starting with Zero,” in Julie Rivkin & Michael Ryan eds., *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, (Malden; Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 240.

abroad, wore swimming trunks and carried a snorkel.’ (Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 101-2)

Despite Nadine Holdsworth’s claims that the classics were not popular with the Theatre Workshop in their pre-settlement period and were merely their practical funding sources until they settled in London, citing Kenneth Tynan’s views on MacColl’s “deep-seated aversion to the classics, which he deemed counter to the company’s aim to attract a popular working-class audience,” it is clear that the company held a high esteem for these timeless works, as they declared in their two consecutive manifestos of Theatre Union and Theatre Workshop.³³³ In the Theatre Union Manifesto, MacColl and Littlewood expressed their urgency to look at their times in the face, just as Greek theatre and Elizabethan theatre managed, and wrote, ‘[t]o those who say that such affairs are not the concern of the theatre ... we would say “Read Shakespeare, Marlowe, Webster, Sophocles, Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Calderon, Moliere, Lope-de-Vega, Schiller and the rest.”’³³⁴ Their idea of popular theatre was derived from their understanding of these classical theatres, as they expressed in their Theatre Workshop’s 1945 manifesto: “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 fearlessly on Society as did Ben Johnson and Aristophanes.”³³⁵ As I stated in the second chapter, MacColl’s adaptations of these classics, including works of Lope de Vega, Moliere, Aristophanes, had a distinct working-class perception of their relevance to their own times, precisely because he started reading them quite later after he left school, in the

³³³ Holdsworth’s statement regarding MacColl’s ideological positions against the classics is borrowed from Kenneth Tynan, (see end notes, 1: ‘Tynan, *Profiles* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1989), p.182’ Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood’s Theatre*, 275), whose interpretation of Theatre Workshop is completely biased, in a manner that writes off any left-wing emphasis, as I introduced in the first chapter.

³³⁴ For manifestos, see Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 25.

³³⁵ Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 42.

libraries of Manchester, free from any academic or cultural implications, and he enjoyed them all the more for it. He was twenty-four when he read Shakespeare for the first time.³³⁶ His courageous adaptations reflect that new-found joy with an unhampered perspective, where he can insert a typical working-class Scottish female character in Lysistrata's proto-union community of women, speaking with a Scottish accent devised by Hugh MacDiarmid, their poet friend. In the spirit of that freedom and urgency to get the true message across, Littlewood created her own production aspects, re-structuring the plays to render the intended message more strongly, and she was at times criticized for it, as in the *Macbeth* production they took to Switzerland and Russia in 1957, which was on the repertory before the settlement, too. As discussed earlier, the production was in modern dress and the structural arrangement applied to the text was received coldly in the Moscow Art Theatre. She had set it between 1914 and 1945, made a general of Macbeth who turned out a dictator, and finally killed by a firing squad; all events took part in the general's mind before his shooting. This strategy to go into the mind of the protagonist was used by MacColl in his expressionistic play, *The Other Animals*, which provided a surrealist central space to manage and represent the workings of the inner world of a war prisoner. Likewise, Littlewood seems to have used the same strategy to re-arrange the plot of the play for the clearer emphasis of the message. Nadine Holdsworth notes Littlewood's tendency to "play around with textual authority of the classics ... through a creative approach to improvisation, cutting, re-ordering and embellishing," however, along with their experiences of creating documentaries which featured almost all of these interventions listed by Holdsworth, who called these strategies as "Littlewood's idiosyncratic staging," Littlewood, as student of

³³⁶ MacColl, *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, xvii.

Stanislavski, fervently believed that she had a right to get the text in better order if necessary;³³⁷ it was her understanding of Stanislavski's technique to correct a playwright where needed to render a consistent and well expressed meaning. Littlewood's own working notes explain how she studied Stanislavski's promptings to interfere with the text wherever necessary, by dissecting it to its parts, to "understand its faults" and "find the parts which be rewritten be made more truthful and improve the whole." Littlewood adds that mistakes such as 'false objectives' and 'extraneous units' will be found even in the best dramatists and that they should be cleared.³³⁸ Likewise, her defense of her production displays her congruence to this position as well as to the manifestos they created with MacColl:

'In presenting Shakespeare in modern dress, we are not trying to be clever or experimental ... we try to wipe the dust of three hundred years, to strip off the 'poetical' interpretation which the nineteenth-century sentimentalists put on these plays and which are still current today. The poetry of Shakespeare's day was a muscular, active, forward-moving poetry, in that it was like the people to whom it belonged. If Shakespeare has any significance today, a production of his work must not be regarded as a historical reconstruction, but as an instrument still sharp enough to provoke thought, to extend man's awareness of his problems, and to strengthen his belief in his own kind.' (Gorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 154)

³³⁷ Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood's Theatre*, 90; 115.

³³⁸ Littlewood's Stanislavski notes, notebook, The Michael Barker Collection, Box 1, Folder 6, Harry Ransom Center, UT Austin.

Holdsworth also writes that the Theatre Royal was to become ‘the site for [the] ambitious campaign’ of re-animating the social and political significance of the English Renaissance classics, which is obviously a problematic statement given the facts above, precisely because it sounds like creating a new production concept after settling in London, for the mere sake of displaying the social and political relevance of these classics. Besides seeing, in a materialist sense, the need to start with Shakespeare in Stratford, which was a way to attract audience for box office, MacColl and Littlewood’s strategies in reaching back to the classical ages had a very practical reason: they wanted to create the same popular drama that they believed existed in these ages. It is not a tribute to a favorite period of authors, which Holdsworth’s statements sound like, when Holdsworth connects Littlewood’s appreciation of the classics to her seeing productions at young age, thus stripping Littlewood’s appetite for the classics away from the company’s manifestos.³³⁹ However, the post-settlement strategies in producing the classics were mainly financially concerned decisions, as the local audience was never a solid working-class population as they hoped, but they did look for ways of relating to the plays, an audience expectation which proved the need for the colloquial language already used by Theatre Workshop until then. The colloquialism of Theatre Workshop’s classics appealed to them, however, audiences who expressed a preference for the classics were few, and Littlewood eventually had to rely on producing what could be transferred to the West End.³⁴⁰ What drove Theatre Workshop

³³⁹ Holdsworth describes how Littlewood was impressed by Gielgud’s acting of the classics and assumes this early affection to be the basis for the kind of aesthetics developed in Theatre Workshop for the classics and claims that her reading of the classics was completely different from MacColl’s. Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood’s Theatre*, 79-80.

³⁴⁰ Goorney describes how the earlier phases of their Stratford tenure was challenging them financially; he writes that MacColl’s plays brought the kind of audience that was the closest to their intended popular audience, but that these plays could not be produced without subsidy. Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 99-101.

productions in the settlement period, I would argue, was more of their hard-pressed situation with concerns of financial liabilities of being in London and keeping well-trained talent in the ensemble. For instance, their opening with *The Twelfth Night* at Stratford had more practical reasons than starting an ambitious classics campaign; it was for box office concerns at a new place. It was a well-rehearsed play as it was on their school tours' repertory; Littlewood called it "[their] bread and butter," so they were relatively at ease with playing it to less educated, more robust audiences like students in Scotland and Salford locals, and it was also their favorite play in the sense that it was the show that paid their wages after long tours of tough luck.³⁴¹ Therefore, it is possible to say that such preferences were at times practical solutions in their survival strategies which eventually came to be interpreted as artistic policies.

Stepping back from the details of the complex stage language of Theatre Workshop that was matured over almost two decades, from 1934, when MacColl and Littlewood started working together to 1956, when Littlewood produced *The Hostage* in East London, there is an evident line of production, as Robert Leach writes, that brought a culmination of process from the earliest works to Brendan Behan's famous play.³⁴² If we consider the basic premise of Theatre Workshop as a revolutionary ensemble that sees the present tense of production as a communicative medium and wants to manipulate the live experience of spectatorship at the other end of that performance to the fullest, we can have a better view of their intentions. There is also the need to acknowledge the ensemble dynamics, how they were a closed group of idealist theatre people and that certainly each member earned the group an added value and affected other members in that closed, organic relationship: we can see how MacColl's expressionistic

³⁴¹ Littlewood, *Joan's Book*, 430; Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 148.

³⁴² Robert Leach, *Theatre Workshop*, 163.

textual models could have informed Littlewood to cut and paste the *Macbeth* text and run it in the mind of the protagonist, much to the surprise of her contemporaries and current scholarship.

In the following sections, I argue that Theatre Workshop's realism differed from the West End, "Angry Young Men" realism that continued the naturalistic trends of the previous decades. Their agit-prop inheritance was closely indebted to their organic link with the life outdoors; the street, and this propaganda item frequently featured in their productions. The street as a source and as the intended performance space (or environment) for disseminating the facts to the people offers layers of functions that surpass mere thematic notions as a source of inspiration, as in the case of Holdsworth's exploring 'poetic realism' as a thematic, hence literary model for representing community in two plays by MacColl, yet Theatre Workshop productions continuously undermined the text. Therefore, any literary or textual analysis must be regarded within the totality of the present of their performance, which manipulated both theatrical time of the stage and real time of spectatorship, in their agit-prop spirit that constantly regarded and communicated with its environment in a performative manner.

It is possible to trace Joan Littlewood's dislike for naturalism in acting and she did defend socialist realism against naturalism. While complaining about Ewan MacColl's bad or "dishonest" (she would call "ham") acting to Gerry Raffles in a letter while on their Scandinavian tour (Goorney notes as Sweden tour between October 13 to November 6, 1947), she simply wrote, "I don't want any naturalist acting."³⁴³ I find that her premise in rejecting naturalism as an older and middle-class style is congruent to the earlier WTM premises and it relates to her idea that the form and content were inseparable: she wrote that no divorce between

³⁴³ Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 201.

form and content could be possible and also, “you can [not] take the old, conventional (?) dated forms and pour new life into them with so-called revolutionary material ... [it] can be no more than a series of clichés or slogans”³⁴⁴ She called such acting “ham,” and she was particularly displeased, once, with MacColl’s dated (19th-century attitude) style of acting and called it dishonest and ‘ham,’ arguably because of these formulations. She had her unique ideas about acting; she believed that everybody could act, and she had an uncanny insight to see who could act which character: Howard Goorney, one of the oldest members of the Theatre Workshop, was chosen at the age of seventeen, when he had stopped by at a rehearsal to ask if he could join and he was picked as old shepherd character in the *Good Soldier Schweik* (1939) production, which proved to be a sound choice. While there were instances of using live trees stolen from a forest for the production of *Treasure Island* (1953), which seems like a compromise that favors naturalism on stage, on the acting side, naturalism was not tolerated: Littlewood complained about the need to train the West End actors hired for transferred productions, whose feet were earthbound by the West End realism in its heyday; her complaint was that they could not go beyond their regular individual gestures.³⁴⁵ The Theatre Workshop’s resilience in the face of the

³⁴⁴ Littlewood’s notes, Political Science Notebook, Box 1, Folder 5, The Michael Barker Collection, Harry Ransom Center.

³⁴⁵ Harry Greene tells in the Theatre Archive Project interview: “Another thing I did - ... Went to Epping Forest to get trees, dug up the roots – we were lucky we weren’t caught! Anyway, yes we dug up these trees, and then got some barrels from the local brewery, and filled them with earth, and put the trees in with the roots and watered them everyday, so we had live trees for the whole of a particular production.” Regarding the naturalist acting she complained about in the West End, she wrote in her autobiography that while they had three shows in the West End when *The Hostage* was transferred, too, that she had to run from show to show to “combat the artist’s deadly enemy – slowness, milking the part,” by actors who had “never been called upon to move except in his own individual way,” and that his feet were “stuck in a slough of naturalism.” Kate Harris interviews Harry Greene in the Theatre Archive Project. 20 September 2007, Harry Greene Interview Transcript, British Library, <http://sounds.bl.uk/related-content/TRANSCRIPTS/024T-C1142X000182-0100A0.pdf>; Littlewood, *Joan’s Book*, 547.

era's realism was, I argue, a product of the long line of evolution initiated by the revolutionary Russian theatre along with its contemporary continental trends in avant-garde. As I mentioned before, Leon Moussinac's book *The New Movement in the Theatre* was translated into English in 1931, with introductory comments by Edward Gordon Craig and R.H. Packman, where they both compared the British stage with its Russian and European contemporaries, to condemn its naturalism, which Packman analyzed as a result of the scientific age constantly addressing the mind for proof and conviction, presumably linking the undesired verisimilitude resulting from the demands of the three unities with the British empiricism. Both applauded the Russian communist conventions in theatre which reduced the design elements to a scarce, functional presence and cleared the space for a crowded, flowing motion; it employed masks (and uniforms, too, for same reasons) that reduce characters to types that would appeal to a feeling of abstract, collective identity and called it "gallery of types"; applied deliberate improvisation which looked spontaneous, all for satirical and destructive intentions.³⁴⁶

Typified personas appeared more frequently at the earlier phases of Theatre Union's work, when they were closer to the agit-prop traditions of 1930s. As I discussed in previous chapter, their production of *Joan Bullion* depended on such 'gallery of types' that came to stage as churchman, the capitalist factory owner, the high-ranking military, all stereo-typed; mechanized in speech and action, named after their faults (e.g. Winmore -the businessmen, Deafen'em -the media) performing the war mongers of the Establishment. Their exaggerated, synced moves tend to explain Littlewood's ideas on acting as she believed that the real actors

³⁴⁶ R.H. Packman, Introduction in Leon Moussinac's *The New Movement in the Theatre*, 8-10. These details were discussed in the previous chapter and they refer to the same principles of caprice in acting and stage architectonics in Russian avant-garde design. See reference to Popova's broken furniture and use of uniforms in costume design.

were the real-life statesmen, politicians and bosses, or in short, the ‘gallery of types,’ that she ridiculed and obscured on her stage as grotesque characters; she genuinely advised her actors to refrain from such acting.³⁴⁷ This point lends itself to a discussion of moral performance on the Theatre Workshop stage, as well, re-instating the validity and truthfulness of the lower, marginalized characters by truthful acting, while ridiculing and down-grading establishment ‘types,’ by two-dimensional, mechanized moves and representations. Moments of naturalist acting on Theatre Workshop stage, would be inserted as segments demonstrating the natural frankness of the working-class character. These would be counter-point scenes linked into the stylized movement sequences or scenes by way of montage, as in documentary structure. The segment naturalism would briefly highlight a moment of a fact clashing with what the common sense or the media upheld as acceptable truth and thus expose a scolded or erased working-class sensibility, fracturing in a sense, the surface of the social order. Other than such inserts, the Theatre Workshop productions needed no naturalism on stage to evoke a sense of truth in their audience; their commitment to true movement flow and action ignited by the true feeling in actor created the exact sense in reception. An example is a scene in *Johnny Noble* where two men approach the port on a small boat and their moves synchronized with sound and light are described by David Scase, an actor member as strikingly effective:

I was sitting on the deck and the other man was standing. 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 emphasize that, [Littlewood] had the green and the

³⁴⁷ Packman, *The New Movement in the Theatre*, 16.

port light going up and down with the ship moving at sea. This was all there was on 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.” (Gorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 45)

David Scase had been a merchant seaman during the war, before he joined Theatre Workshop. This was a common feature of acting members, as hardly any of them were professional actors. This brought a rich source to the ensemble to draw upon in bringing real-life experiences to acting, as the above choreography that Littlewood devised in sync with light and sound was devised after Scase’s memories and as Gorney states, “Littlewood was able to make use of an actor’s background and draw on his experiences,” and the lack of naturalistic setting that denied any definition of location enticed the audience imagination to freely “evoke their own place and memories,” creating a potentially immersive spectator experience.³⁴⁸

As above example suggests, contrary to tendencies to categorize their work within period West End trends, such as the 1950s’ ‘new wave,’ which came with the realistic representations of working-class sensibility on the West End stage, Littlewood and MacColl’s sense of truth permanently clashed with common sense and their kind of truth had to be told differently. Their basic Marxist premise was inculcated in MacColl’s musical youth. As discussed in the previous chapter, MacColl described the songs and their performances as strong, efficacious vehicles in workers’ embracing their tough situation in life: “you heard a tremendous amount of interesting stuff, not good songs, not songs of merit, but songs which reflected the social mores of the time

³⁴⁸ Gorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 45.

very accurately, and the contradictions of the time . . . [describing] what it means to be a thief and go to prison . . . songs like the Wolf and Tempest . . . songs like these, was [sic] very, very welcome.” MacColl recalled how he used to “weep buckets” when his father sang “tear-jerking Irish songs” in the pubs. The few options of the low life were captivatingly conveyed in these songs in a melodramatic theme, and sometimes the stories would be presented in short, improvised acts, as well, which had to have a powerful impact on the audience, and had to end in an enticing climax. Truth needed a powerful form to be told; it was what both Littlewood and MacColl knew from very early on. MacColl disclosed his very early entanglement with the necessity to present not just the truth, but the necessity of presenting it powerfully, in the following interview excerpt:

We used to hold concerts on rainy days . . . right through the whole of working class Britain. . . rainy days, going to somebody’s house, and you put on a play, which you made up. And that play was maybe just . . . it was just there for the illuminating one line . . . STRIKE TROLONEY! STRIKE TRUE!! And that was the end of the play. The whole idea was so that one would be allowed to declare that marvelous resonant line! (Laughs) . . . the plays were not written done, they were improvised and it was up to you to think of the best and the most dramatic line and the good dramatic line could stop the play you see. Nobody could top a line like that one. So the play was over at that point.’ (Interview scripts, Parsley, sage and politics, Ewan MacColl & Peggy Seeger Archive, Ruskin College, Oxford)

Joan Littlewood had the same particularly sharp sense of truth which she deployed in actors’ rehearsals, which I believe fed this realism. Ewan MacColl tells, Littlewood “had few

illusions about theatre”; she had a sense of clarity regarding how ideal stage language should convey the truth. For MacColl, her charm was “the sense of truth which informed everything she did. She invested even the smallest walk-on with the deep, shining passion of real art, so that one felt impelled to watch the maid collecting teacups and then loading them on a tray, when one should have been watching the mistress stabbing her lover.”³⁴⁹ Thus I argue that rather than being pre-occupied with ‘isms,’ Littlewood was occupied with the notion of truth in acting the real inner and outer lives, about which she took long pages of notes in her notebook, titling them “faith in a sense of truth.”

Actor training and ‘faith in a sense of truth’

Brian Murphy recalls his viewing Theatre Workshop’s *Richard II* at Stratford East when he was young. His early impressions of the actors are quite telling: “They didn’t appear to me even in my callow youth – to be actors, they seemed to be people.”³⁵⁰ This frankness in actors’ movement about the stage was a result of Littlewood’s demand on the actor to search for their truth- smaller objectives maybe in the Stanislavskian sense, but truth in all of their acts and to refrain from thinking about the result of the action but instead about the action itself, as small parts of the larger objective. According to Howard Goorney, initial rehearsals were not concerned with words but instead would concentrate on developing a feeling for the realities of the play’s time and place, “in quite physical terms ... as the key to the relationship between characters and the objects around them. Richard striking Gaunt with his glove as the climax to their confrontation; how the gardener handled his plants; the feel of the texture in materials,” in

³⁴⁹ Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 211.

³⁵⁰ Alec Patton interviews Theatre Workshop Actor Brian Murphy in the Theatre Archive Project, 8 January 2008, Brian Murphy Interview Transcript, British Library Theatre Archive Project, <http://sounds.bl.uk/related-content/TRANSCRIPTS/024T-C1142X000090-ZZZZA0.pdf>

the case of *Richard II*.³⁵¹ Improvisations would be carefully exercised, as well. Parts would be swapped for developing a sense of entanglement and by the end of these initial rehearsals, most of the infrastructure would be worked out and the actors would comfortably work with the script, paying no attention to the literary tracks of “blank verse business,” by “really get[ting] down to the character, ... getting near to the truth of the line,” coached by Littlewood to the true feelings the lines evoked:

Look, you are wanting the throne aren't you? You've got to get rid of this homosexual freak, this Richard II, so what are you going to do to achieve that end?' etc, etc. And she'd really get you sort of... 'ooh... I must get rid of this bastard and all this sort of thing. (George Cooper interview, British Library Theatre Archive Project).

In her letter to Gerry Raffles, in the 1948 Scandinavia tour, Littlewood wrote that she was not happy with MacColl's acting, calling it external and that he sang his parts. She expressed her disbelief in any external method towards acting, which makes one question her assimilation of Meyerhold in her method, and even though they were recognized as the closest group in England to Meyerhold by Manchester Guardian after their performance of *John Bullion* in 1934. However, the puzzle resolves itself when we read about her quasi confession to Gerry Raffles on how she used to “produce more externally than [she did then], ... as the actors then could not assimilate (?) [her] production” and that they could afterwards.³⁵² It is possible, therefore, that it took for her to bring her actors to a certain standard of acting, as in the examples above, as their

³⁵¹ Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 161.

³⁵² Letter to Gerry Raffles. The Michael Barker Collection Series I, Subseries C, Correspondence, outgoing, Littlewood to Raffles, 1947 and later. Box 2, Folder 9, Harry Ransom Center UT Austin.

productions shifted and evolved from the more agit-prop informed styles towards more sophisticated realist pieces as Shelagh Delaney's and Brendan Behan's texts as well as Shakespeare- which Littlewood did not hesitate to edit and re-write for her productions. Both in her letters and in her autobiography, Littlewood wrote about the possibility of creating an actor, which, as previously discussed, stemmed from her idea that anyone could act, and that we are all in a mode of performing throughout our days, and further that the real actors were the ones who needed to fool the people, such as church men, capitalists, statesmen and the media. The ensemble hardly recruited people from acting profession and her eccentric casting proved that. She could bring about some inner truth in actors' play that guided their motivation in action. She asked them to develop a purpose for each action, a method motivated by the Stanislavski method of breaking action down to units of objectives and working to deliver that objective truthfully. In what she called 'faith in a sense of truth,' as she took the phrase down as a title on her notebook's page, for an acting exercise, I argue that she meant a pursuit of inner truth or purpose for each action objective. Littlewood was more interested in the individual's will in creating their environment than creating an environment to shape or determine that purpose/objective. I believe this is why she did not believe in the external method, although she did work with it in the beginning phases of her career with MacColl, which was largely shaped with WTM aesthetics under the Russian constructivist influence. In the evolution of their work, she wrote in her notebook during the war that socialist realism should be implemented against naturalism, and that casting to types (as in Packman's 'gallery of types') would not get them far in the art of acting:

Once you get beyond the cast to type worker and cast to type scab (?) and capitalist and get down to the problem of man the real person the

individual you inevitably find that your search for truth leads you along the paths of realism – socialist realism – not along the naturalist lines of professional theatre. (Michael Barker collection of Joan Littlewood, Harry Ransom Center)

Her preference for the Stanislavski method and her dislike for mechanical, result-oriented action are quite apparent in the lines she wrote in her notebook: “One fault which this work in units and objectives will clean us of is the fault which many of us have – thinking about the result of our work – thinking about the finished product instead of about the action which must prepare it.”³⁵³ Moreover, this application of Stanislavski method of dissection enabled her to get rid of dysfunctional parts of any play from any playwright to ensure her planned production’s integrity. Next to that kind of intervention, Littlewood subscribed to Stanislavski’s definition of ‘scenic truth’ which she renamed as ‘artistic truth,’ to be achieved by surveying the regular flow of life for catching and synthesizing its striking details of dramatic (presumably artistic) quality to render the whole work artistic.³⁵⁴

³⁵³ Here it is clear that Littlewood calls for a kind of segment intending, and goes on to write that “the work will be so much more truthful if we go in easy stages, setting ourselves creative objectives, following that light till we are past it and then travelling into the next ... so in acting we must avoid shouting after the result, we must act with the truth [sic] of purpose ... we must act with integrity of purpose” Stanislavski Notes in Littlewood’s notebook, The Michael Barker Collection of Joan Littlewood, Harry Ransom Center, UT Austin.

³⁵⁴ Littlewood, in her notes on an acting exercise, deliberated on different types of truth discussed in Stanislavski’s book *An Actor Prepares*, which I can roughly differentiate as naturalistic and artistic (Stanislavski’s scenic) truths. She wrote her ideas as such: ‘the truth that is created automatically and in the plane of actual fact ... in fact this kind of truth is present all the time, and all around us and is (?) not fiction at all ... at most of the earliest rehearsals imagination was [sic] used but there were many elements created automatically and on the basis of fact ... the second kind of truth that which Stanislavsky calls the scenic type [sic] of truth is the thing that we have seen on the stage rarely- more often in other art forms ... Stanislavski says that this kind of truth is equally truthful with the first, but it originates in the plane of imaginative and artistic fiction ... even naturalism can be imaginative, the early rehearsals of the cellar scene

Barring conventional naturalism and promoting instead a form of inner realism that sprung from the actors' sense of conviction and purpose in acting each unit of objective, Theatre Workshop stage became very animated and lively, exuding a sense of truth. The following exercise Littlewood devised for actor training will make it clearer: She asks the actors to hide a small object (a pin) and then to search for it. Then she asks the actors if this was an act and replies herself that it was not an act, and even if they guessed that it was "a phoney," it was a search – an actual search for a pin. She then repeats: "Actuality – not act."³⁵⁵ Then she wants them to put the pin back and repeat the search and that it should be "an act" this time. Then she asks if it was easy: "Did you search? Were there objectives? Clear and physical? True activity? Truth?"³⁵⁶ Following this exercise, she writes that they have discerned "the difference between an actual search and an imitative search or rather a false search, already knowing where the object of [their] search lies." She writes in her notes about the importance of the scene "being lived" and about the actors' belief in what they are doing. This exercise relates to us the content of her "faith in a sense of truth" and how she uses it to dispel mechanically motivated action and moves on the stage. Littlewood made her actors adept in creating detailed given circumstances, which was another tool for convincing the actors of the truth on the stage: "the more you define and enunciate the given circumstances ... the more you will be able to feel and create a scenic truth in which you can believe on the stage." Tapping in the actual life truth which can be called the naturalistic or factual reality was not enough; as the above excerpts on *Richard II* rehearsals

were imaginative naturalism ... for us the most important attribute of artistry is selectiveness. The ability to select from the actual whole these elements which will render the whole in artistic form is what we need most." Stanislavski Notes in Littlewood's notebook, The Michael Barker Collection, Harry Ransom Center.

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

suggest, the actors had to work their imagination, too. Littlewood never gave actors their scripts, but instead asked them to imagine certain situations for developing the given circumstances. Actors who worked with Littlewood also tell about the rigorous movement and voice training among many other subjects and her way of putting ideas in actors' heads for the role they would be playing as to their purpose of being in the scene, rather than telling them what to do. The extensive training included fencing, acrobatics, art of movement, dance, speech delivery, voice, singing, and style classes and she asked actors to see variety and music hall for the comic improvisation classes, as well as visiting art galleries and looking at painting.³⁵⁷ Littlewood's expectation from the actor was to keep this search of truth and the sense of the objective fresh during each performance. In case that didn't happen, and if an actor felt comfortably settled in a part, she would ask for a new work on the role. These inner workings of the actor by way of using imagination and with Jean Newlove's devising 'specific movements linked to the Laban

³⁵⁷ Theatre Workshop actress Dame Joan Plowright tells about the rehearsal process: "It was a very extensive training, and one that would fit an actor for any company, any period, whether it was classical, contemporary or even musicals, because we had classes in where you learnt the style of text, you know to be able to deliver a text in the style that was necessary. You can't do contemporary kind of rhythms in Molière. And then there was animal improvisation where you had to become an animal. ... Oh, we were encouraged to go and see It was in fact an education as well as a training for theatre. And of course, we would go to the theatre. We saw everything at the Old Vic because we got to the dress rehearsals." Regarding the second part of the training explained, I can refer to Peter Rankin's interview in the same project: "she never told actors where to stand or exactly what to do, she put ideas into their heads. I mean, for instance, if we're doing a crowd scene in *The Marie Lloyd Story*, which is a show in 1967 – not one that Joan cared very much about – but say you're doing a station. Instead of saying, 'Right, well you come on over here, you go over there', she said, now, [that] each of us had to work out who we were at the station, why we were at the station and what we had to do. Were you a porter? Or were you somebody coming to collect an old friend, or what? And we all invented little characters." Andrew MacKay interviews Joan Plowright in the Theatre Archive Project, 23 April 2010, Dame Joan Plowright Interview Transcript, British Library Theatre Archive Project, <http://sounds.bl.uk/related-content/TRANSCRIPTS/024T-C1142X000294-0100A0.pdf>; Helen Temple interviews Peter Rankin, 9 May 2007, Peter Rankin Interview Transcript, British Library Theatre Archive Project, <http://sounds.bl.uk/related-content/TRANSCRIPTS/024T-C1142X000174-0100A0.pdf>

efforts to help bring out the right feelings’ as well as helping to cope with John Bury’s constructivist sets of ‘sloping ramps and low tunnels’ in the flow of these movements, helped keep the performances provocatively alive.³⁵⁸

Stanislavski’s methods interpreted by Littlewood provided the basis for the pursuit of truth in every act of the actors; their innately constructed motives in these acts, flowing with their Laban technique created the intended sense of truth, and yet these acts had to be re-invented after carefully considering the notes that Littlewood gave to actors after each performance. One feedback that she gave to Howard Goorney very well explains the range of freedom and commitment of a Theatre Workshop actor: “The clownerie at the warm-up was brilliant ... in performance what do you do? Plan and do marvellous things plus add and add self-abnegating, self-destroying banalities which produce embarrassment.”³⁵⁹ Such bitter feedback from Littlewood to actors made most Theatre Workshop actors’ lives very difficult and insecure, but certainly built a very lively and high tension relationship between the role and the actor: once the actors stopped responding truthfully to their parts, in other words, “once a scene or a play had ceased to grow,” it would be broken down and built back until that truthful response was recovered.³⁶⁰ The Theatre Workshop stage was not only about improvisation; ad-libbing was used sparingly (like when Behan shouted into the action) and only in tune with the rhythms and structures of plays. The liveliness of that stage was indebted to the pursuit of truth in every motive and action; the technique used was Stanislavski’s breaking parts into small personalized objectives and required high skills from the actors to orient themselves very quickly per the part given to them, frequently in very short notice that they could juggle the given circumstances,

³⁵⁸ Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 167.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 173.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 175.

relations and the objectives: Clive Barker recalls his acting experience in mid-fifties, in *The Hostage*:

I never remember rehearsing Act III of *The Hostage* ... I only remember Joan throwing her script down at four o'clock in the afternoon ... We went off asking each other when we were going to rehearse it ... A crafty woman, leaving us floundering. Not that she ever used that to dominate the actor, but she used that creatively ... to make the actor find his response to the situation. (Gorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 175)

I would argue that these re-configurations of acts kept the actor more corporeally, mentally and emotionally astute on the stage; more personally invested in the relational and spatial aspects of the scene, and in their communicative medium with the audience. Such inclusivity earned the Theatre Workshop stage a life-like quality that acknowledged various times (real and theatrical) and complex relations on and across the stage; multilayered in its performance and communication, much like the outdoors life it was born in, in the interwar days of agitation and propaganda.

The street as a source of observation and identification

An awareness of everyday life as part of a larger historical moment was the common currency of revolutionary theatres at the beginning of the twentieth century. As I discussed in the previous chapter, left-wing theatres had one aim in common: to take the theatre to unconventional places, to the non-theatre-going public. The Russian Revolution had overthrown an elite class and it had to convey all means of information and propaganda to reach its 'people'.

The labor movement in the West was similarly eager to organize and network, and the most common and handy tool in reaching out to the working-class population in these days was to find them where they would be in the day: in the street. In doing that, theatre artists could rely on a rich legacy, ranging from medieval forms such as *commedia dell'arte* or the morality plays to parades, pageants, circus, carnival, street tumblers and fairground as familiar genres of entertainment to draw the indifferent crowds in. Indeed, the street offered the major genre of recreation for the jobless in England. The sense of deprivation that came with layoffs and lack of funds deepened the distinction between the street wanderers and the employed workers whose membership in labor unions gave them access to theatre, summer camps and even new technology such as wireless and gramophone.³⁶¹ The unemployed population, much to its embarrassment, could afford no other activities than spending the day idly outside and developing a taste for what outdoors had to offer freely, which were inclusive and spontaneous in nature. Street leisure was well established by 1930 in areas like Manchester and Salford, including informal and highly communal, uncommercial activities that could range from gambling schools, corner gangs, and monkey parades (which Ewan MacColl recalls as tentative, preliminary dating rituals) to street markets in the neighborhoods.³⁶²

I argue that both Littlewood and MacColl's personal backgrounds and their observing street life brought an acute sense of the reality of working-class to the Theatre Workshop, informing a theatrical aesthetic that sharply digressed from mainstream theatre's naturalism. This sense of reality was beyond a literary or thematic interest as Nadine Holdsworth suggests in her exploration of the street theme in MacColl's plays in context of 'poetic realism.' The outdoors or

³⁶¹ Davies, *Leisure*, 7.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 170; Ewan MacColl, *Journeyman*, 74.

the street as a biting site of poverty and desolation of the working class had made a very early entrance in MacColl's childhood, as he and his friends watched the embarrassment of the unemployed population spending time in the streets. Littlewood had conducted many interviews and done researches on Salford life, observing the conditions of the community in a documentary *Classic Soil*, a retake on Friedrich Engels' 1844 work, *Condition of the Working Class in England*. Similarly, she conducted interviews for BBC Manchester, with people in Hull, a fisher village, during the war years when their theatre was closed. Both documentary works gave birth to MacColl's two plays, *Classic Soil* and *Johnny Noble*. The documentary origin of these plays attest to materialist origins of representation that is truthful to the working-class conditions reigning the streets and communities in MacColl's plays. However, there is a tendency to poeticize these origins either by putting them in conversation with various 'new wave' plays and claiming that '[their] theatrical image captured MacColl and Littlewood's belief in grassroots activism,' or by reconstructing these origins as imaginaries or mere autobiographic input.³⁶³ I propose to reconsider the extent of social imaginary, documentary or autobiographical categories of origins in this play by discussing the general reverberation of the Marxist realism in the group's observations of everyday life, as well as their autobiographic input as real people immersed in these conditions that they represent. Lastly, I draw attention to the fact that the live performance has the last say, and there – on the highly improvisatory Theatre Workshop stage, anything can happen, which in a sense downgrades literary and thematic discussions to a secondary level of relevance.

³⁶³ Holdsworth refers to two plays (*The Gorbals Story* (1946) and *Men Should Weep* (1947)) written after *Johnny Noble* to have influences upon MacColl and Littlewood. Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood's Theatre*, 132.

The plight of the working or unemployed people was at display most acutely in the street and so the street became a source of inspiration and knowledge that fed the acting style and production strategies of the Theater Union and Theatre Workshop stages. The actors were advised to carefully observe the actions of people in the streets.³⁶⁴ Brendan Behan would wander the Angel Lane at Stratford East in London, where The Theatre Royal was located, and talk to all kinds of people from vendors to regulars and add their language to the next day's show.³⁶⁵ Joan Littlewood believed that it was easier to mount a show than to keep it alive, as real as it gets in life; the morality plays and commedia dell'arte, as traditional forms born out of social behavior in publicly shared spaces, helped her and Ewan MacColl to create and sustain the special kind of truth that earned Theatre Workshop productions the improvisatory and ever changing qualities that upset the censoring office. The episodic morality play *Uranium 235*, had types rather than characters, as in commedia dell'arte. The agit-prop style, which is the main point of convergence between the public space and political performance, was also frequently inserted into Theatre Workshop's experimentations with genre. Moreover, the improvisational necessities of the itinerant medieval troupes were highly resonant with Theatre Workshop, who spent long time touring the provinces as well as foreign countries. Peter Rankin, in his interview for the Theatre

³⁶⁴ In the Theatre Archive Project interview, Brian Murphy shared Littlewood's advice on observing real life: "'Go watch the street...,' she said, 'Well, do anything that's creative and artistic, do that. Go out, watch people, look at people in the street and do all those things'." Brian Murphy Interview Transcript, British Library Theatre Archive Project.

³⁶⁵ Littlewood tells Behan's adding skits to *The Hostage* from the street: "Brendan would trot along [Angel Lane] everyday joking with the stallholders, shopkeepers and flower sellers. Sometimes their cracks would turn up in the show or his interruptions which became a feature of the performance. If the show eventually transferred to the West End, the ad libs would have to go or the Lord Chamberlain would be down on us again. Arts Council had already refused us a guarantee against loss because ... 'the script must be submitted to [them] two months before it [was] performed.' It was no use arguing or telling them that *The Hostage* would never be finished." Littlewood, *Joan's Book*, 537.

Archive Project, stated that Kenneth Tynan had recognized the influence of commedia dell'arte on *The Hostage*. The idea of 'a company going around the country and living on its wits,' resonating with the commedia troupes, was very popular with Littlewood.³⁶⁶ Most of the Theatre Workshop plays had street scenes and that feeling of vitality reflecting common and real people's acting. These gestures and speech was carried on to classics such as Shakespeare's *Richard II* on their stage, which kept audiences at the edge of their seats when another version was produced at the Old Vic simultaneously, which a member described as merely 'satisfactory,' compared to Theatre Workshop's production.³⁶⁷

Both Robert Leach and Nadine Holdsworth have explored the reference to community and street in their analyses of Theatre Workshop plays. Leach relates *Johnny Noble* as a play that "strives for the community ideal," and refers to the fleeting, 'shifting and uncatchable' notions of community, such as whether it can be deemed as a class or that it can be broken down to smaller populations, but mostly that it "affects the present in so far as it refers either to a never-existent past or to a dreamed of future."³⁶⁸ However, Leach also refers to MacColl's own notions of community which impart the necessities of belonging in a community and developing loyalties, which contrast Leach's own theoretical positions regarding the nature of communities. Clearly, community belonging and its implications were an autobiographical category for MacColl as opposed to Leach's philosophical explorations. As I stated earlier, Littlewood matured their stage realism by drawing from members' autobiographical assets and the palpable facts of (street) life, necessities of building communities were something that all of Theatre Workshop members

³⁶⁶ Peter Rankin interview, British Library, Theatre Archive Project.

³⁶⁷ Brian Murphy shared in the Theatre Archive Project interview that he had seen the Old Vic production of *Richard II* before seeing Theatre Workshop's, and compared to the latter, the Old Vic's only 'satisfied his leanings.'

³⁶⁸ Leach, *Theatre Workshop*, 67.

could relate. MacColl gives an example to this shared sense of belonging to the same class in his description of how Theatre Union successfully mounted a hunger march scene in *Last Edition* (1940), which would normally have been very problematic in a naturalist setting:

The theme of unemployment ran like a thread through *Last Edition*. It was a subject about which we were well informed. Some of us, indeed, were experts on the subject and there was scarcely an actor in the group who hadn't been on the dole ... for many of us the most potent symbols of the thirties were the unemployed hunger-marches ... with our three connected stages it became a very simple matter. The hunger-march episodes in *Last Edition* were an amalgam of ideas drawn from agit-prop sketches, *Schweik* and *Waiting for Lefty*. (MacColl, *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, xlv)

It is possible to comprehend the idea of community as a reality for MacColl and his group members, also for the audience that they shared symbolisms, and a sense of identity. The street scenes and ideas were a result of that autobiographical category, and Holdsworth refers to Andy Medhurst's argument on the richness and vitality that such "recourse to the experiential" to "facilitat[e] awareness of the various ways in which class is located, embodied and lived."³⁶⁹ Yet, expanding upon Leach's argument of the notion of community as a romantic imaginary, Holdsworth refers to MacColl's biographer Ben Harker's notes on the autobiographical resonances of *Johnny Noble* with his earlier childhood memories that, according to Holdsworth, "may go some way to explain its nostalgic and romantic construction of community," echoing

³⁶⁹ Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood's Theatre*, 127.

Leach in replacing autobiographic and documentary categories with social imaginaries and romantic constructions of communities.³⁷⁰

I would propose retrofitting the street as a factual category due to Theatre Workshop's origins in agit-prop and street performances. The street was Theatre Workshop's point of initiation, back in early 1930s as a progressive WTM group, MacColl's Red Megaphones. Next to such a place in their history, the life outside, in the street, as I mentioned above, was both an inspirational and a factual source of observation shaping their sense of reality. Social and historical awareness of everyday life was the common characteristic of the revolutionary theatres in the 1920s and 1930s, who were in search of their audiences in the streets: the unconverted, non-theatre-going public. Leon Moussinac's book *The New Movement in the Theatre*, which arguably set most of Theatre Union and Theatre Workshop standards, saw these agit-prop theatres comparable to the traditional commedia dell'arte troupes. R.H. Packman, who wrote the introduction to the book made a claim so as to call the new Soviet proletariat theatre the new host of that tradition with its loyalty to the "gallery of types" and improvisations, expressing that the types performed on these stages make their audience recognize the common character and establish an intimate relation between represented types and their ideal collective self. He made an emphasis on the affect achieved whenever these types (or masks, in the quote) reproduce the speech patterns of the audience and even go further so as to randomly address them.³⁷¹ These typical agit-prop features of reproducing types and having an interactive rapport with the audience, according to Packman, were the commedia dell'arte traditions and these quality traits of fine theatre necessitated "a mass phenomenon," and that only 'a people's theatre' could

³⁷⁰ Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood's Theatre*, 128.

³⁷¹ Packman, *The New Movement in the Theatre*, 16.

achieve such intensity and that “the Russians [were] the Greeks” of their “modern world.”³⁷²

Besides ultimately resonating with all the three manifestos of Theatre of Action, Theatre Union and Theatre Workshop, these observations stress the importance of the outside as opposed to the inside, the street of the common people as opposed to the living room or/and drawing room of the elite and middle class or, as I argued, romantic notions of social imaginaries. Their earlier productions in the Theatre Union phase in the 1930s, for instance *Fuente Ovejuna*, which MacColl adapted as *The Sheepwell* in the days of the Spanish Civil War, despite the commercial success, inspired them to take parts of it to the street again, in an agit-prop manner and extended the anti-war message to the non-theatre-going public.

In exact accordance with this socialist and propagandist premise, what was on the Theatre Workshop stage was in the streets and what was on the streets was on the Theatre Workshop stage, so much so that Littlewood never worked on actors’ blocking but “trained them,” according to Peter Rankin, “in sensitivity” that they would know what to do while moving on the stage. An example Rankin shared explains the case perfectly:

... if you're trained in sensitivity, you're not going to bump into people, because Joan taught people to respect each other - she said, 'If you bump into somebody by mistake, you must apologise' - on the stage, because otherwise you're dead. If somebody brushes past you and ignores the fact that they've done that, she said 'you're both dead or you're mad'. And so, she would do an exercise like, the princes – she did it in *Henry IV*, she would walk past Brian Murphy, the actor, and she would deliberately

³⁷² Packman, *The New Movement in the Theatre*, 18.

brush his shoulder and then they would turn and they would take off hats that they didn't have and say 'I'm terribly sorry, terribly sorry', and then you had a little human moment which works and so there we are doing this crowd scene in *The Marie Lloyd Story*, but everybody's got that in their heads and in their bodies that you don't bash into people, so if there's a guy who's got a trolley and he's got luggage on, you have to respect that and if you're in a hurry or whatever and so on, and therefore when Joan started the scene we all did what we had to do, our jobs, and there before your eyes was the most beautiful crowd scene without anybody being told what to do or where to go..." (Peter Rankin interview, British Library Theatre Archive Project).

The Theatre Workshop stage, where there would be no rehearsed blocking or a prompter on the side, and no stage make-up on faces, and no footlights as Murray Melvin tells in the interview held for the Theatre Archive Project, was the absolute stage of revolution for the English theatre that the West End represented. Melvin noted that the empty, open stage was dramatic all by itself in the fifties and very much opposite of what the theatre row had, with its ornamented, colorful designs.³⁷³ The real-life aspect of the Theatre Workshop stage had make-up used only in cases where stylized acting was necessary like in a farce, but that would be handled by simply painting on men's face a moustache or sideburns or applying cigarette ash for shade if playing old age.³⁷⁴ In keeping with the Stanislavski training, Joan Littlewood frequently advised her actors to go watch the people in the streets to grasp their gestures and speech patterns for

³⁷³ Murray Melvin interview, Theatre Archive Project, British Library.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

inspiration and imagination. As mentioned earlier, Ewan MacColl was an expert on street life, too, having grown up in the streets and familiarized himself with most of the forms of street entertainment and time-killing. In an interview, he talked about his childhood and adolescence spent in the streets, first watching and then joining in these free adults' activities, which provided a rich source to draw from while writing his plays for the Theatre Union and Theatre Workshop:

... after all if you were living in that kind of environment, where there were three million unemployed, and you had no job, and you lived in the streets which were blackened from 150 years of smoke and grime, ... And to us kids standing outside, it was also a very thrilling experience, because here you were observing the adults who didn't realize they were being observed by the children. ... that's right, we were the flies on the wall.

(Parsley, Sage and Politics, MacColl interview transcripts, Interview 3, tape 2, Ruskin College, Oxford)

As Leach and Holdsworth discuss in detail, the strong memory and the reality of the street shaped MacColl's scripts, too, and one of their most successful plays, *Johnny Noble*, opens with a scene where two narrators tell the audience, "On this dead stage [they] will make society appear, and gradually characters begin appearing under light and create the morning street: three youths playing pitch-and-toss (the gambling game) upstage center, an unemployed man, yawning, standing left center, a small girl child doing an abstracted hopping dance, later joined by two more girls to start a singing game."³⁷⁵ In his autobiography, *Journeyman*, Ewan MacColl wrote that the school children who had been taken to view the show and asked to write a

³⁷⁵ Ewan MacColl, *Johnnie Noble*, 1st and 2nd music cues in Goorney and MacColl, *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, 36-7.

response essay, had described, “almost without exception, ... in great detail, the streets in which they themselves [had] lived,” and the school children in South Wales and County Durham had given a similar response.³⁷⁶ Hence it is possible to assume a materially realistic depiction of the street life to have been successfully constructed, but not as one that addresses one’s imaginary of an ideal space or community: a palpably recognizable, lived experience of space or community that can address children’s tangible, unmediated sense of reality.

Exploring the autobiographical or documentary origins of MacColl’s plays suggests a literary or textual approach to Theatre Workshop productions, as well, however, what Theatre Workshop said in their original texts or adaptations was only half of their legacy; the fact that their transfers to the West End had to be ‘tamed’ indicates that their defiant stage language had the last say in any case. Therefore, I would argue for the necessity of stepping back from textual or thematic approaches to the works of Theatre Workshop, whose productions could be regarded in a capacity of what Hans-Thies Lehmann terms ‘the production of presence,’ that is, in their living stage where more interventions than what is textually signified were allowed and even encouraged. Robert Leach writes of a critic’s response to *Johnny Noble*, “as ‘marvelous and beautiful until in the middle of the bombardment, Miss Littlewood herself stepped forward, her huge forehead glistening under the wing spots, and delivered a rhetorical lament on behalf of bereaved proletarian womanhood. At that moment [...] everything turned false,’” and Leach writes that which turned false was “Wardle’s preconceptions, his assumptions of dramatic decorum, which were undermined.”³⁷⁷

³⁷⁶ MacColl, *Journeyman*, 252.

³⁷⁷ Leach, *Theatre Workshop*, 186.

Consequently, even though reconsidering the textual aspect of Theatre Workshop plays will develop rich debates on the creative licenses manipulating social imaginaries or autobiographic or documentary facts, it is clear that Joan Littlewood would respect none of that poetry or aesthetics as long as she decided to interfere and give the Theatre Workshop perspective in direct reconciliatory manners, which resonate with the frustrated agit-prop spirit, and their living newspaper productions, as an extremely performative intervention that fulfills their objectives of putting discourse and facts together as grotesque dramatic contrast.

The nature of the Theatre Workshop realism

Theatre Workshop stage, with its improvisational quality, almost recreated the ephemerality of life. This unpredictable quality which was perceived as a threat by the censoring office of the Lord Chamberlain, indeed had a strong anti-establishment voice that, I argue, despite Littlewood's declared subscription to socialist realism in her notes, lends itself to Mikhail Bakhtin's interpretation of the temporary emancipatory capacity of the carnival, which he elaborated as grotesque realism. Both Nadine Holdsworth and Robert Leach observe the working of the carnivalesque on the Theatre Workshop stage, when Leach writes of the "minor and illegitimate" forms of drama they resort to (he lists as agit-prop, pierrot clowns and music hall) to eschew any stage inclination towards naturalism. While adding the exception of their use of naturalism in their inserts of counter-point scenes in plays like *Last Edition* and *Lovely War*, as discussed previously, the carnival atmosphere does interfere with any tendency to expect or guess the order of events and transpose conventional structures of hierarchy, infusing the production with a transgressive atmosphere. This feature clearly links their work with the legacy of the Russian performance and stage design that they discovered in the 1930s through various sources, where an experimental mix of performances (cabaret, music hall, vaudeville, circus and

agitational action) had captured, especially in Meyerhold's experiments.³⁷⁸ Much like Bakhtin analyzes Rabelais's work to develop his theory on the anarchic virtues of the carnival place, Clive Barker, actor member of Theatre Workshop and author of MacColl's biography, *Class Act*, wrote about Littlewood that she 'respected life in a Rabelaisian quality, which [had] a very serious, philosophical, humanist core at the heart of it ... [and that Littlewood had] once said to [him] "Life is a brief walk between two periods of darkness, and anything that helps to cheer that up and brighten it [was] valuable."³⁷⁹ Leach refers to the use of meta-theatrical devices in bringing the effect such as pierrots in *Lovely War*, and gives a song line from *The Hostage*, "We're here because we're queer, / Because we're queer, we're here," and Princess Grace's following remark: "The trouble we had getting that past the nice Lord Chamberlain," and then: "This next bit's even worse."³⁸⁰ Leach observes these textual (or improvisational) details as properly carnivalesque due to their being subversive and celebratory at the same time, while emphasizing values of being a community, brought to the center despite their being dispossessed and marginal communities in Theatre Workshop plays. Leach also refers to the corporeal presence of the actors (and characters) emphasized in these plays that unsettle the idealistic and moral values of the social system.

³⁷⁸ As previously discussed, later phases of the Russian avant-garde, in its state-sponsored search for a revolutionary medium of expression, was a source of inspiration for people like MacColl and Littlewood. John E. Bowlt discusses Meyerhold's productions of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, *The Death of Tarelkin*, and *The Bed Bug* (1929) with Stepanova's 'jump suits,' and the use of universal furniture which sometimes functioned and sometimes not, increasing the chance factor on the stage and amplifying the 'dynamic volume, ... turning the stage into a laboratory for experimenting with forms and movements which one day might have been extended into real life.' Bowlt, "From studio to stage, from surface to space," *Russian Avant-garde Theatre*, 22.

³⁷⁹ Howard Goorney gives a list of people who worked with Littlewood and their impressions of her and this quote was from Clive Barker. Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 176.

³⁸⁰ Leach, *Theatre Workshop*, 169.

Further exploring the function of the carnivalesque in Theatre Workshop plays, it is possible to relate this corporeal presence of the actor on the stage to the communal values of the ensemble's life style that I will discuss in the following section as their 'communism in practice,' as well as to their freed body languages trained in Laban's movement techniques.³⁸¹ Their raw stage language and preference for unsettling texts were conceived much earlier than settling in London and examples of this can be seen in MacColl's adaptation of *Lysistrata*, and another classic they produced in 1945, *Love of Don Perlimplin for Belisa in her Garden*, a short, surrealistic play, by Garcia Lorca, who called his own play "an erotic alleluya [sic] in five scenes."³⁸² For MacColl, the project was an act of defiance and a reaching out for beauty in the face of 'the profession of theatre,' but the Kendal audience did not receive the play well; left the building avoiding eye contact with the members working at the foyer, and the following morning was worse:

Suddenly we had become pariahs, untouchables, moral lepers. People with whom we had become friendly during the last few months now crossed over to the other side of the street ... When Howard Goorney, who had played the role of Perlimplin, turned up at a rehearsal saying that the town was ripe for a lynching, nobody laughed. (MacColl, *Journeyman*, 248)

MacColl asks at that instance in his autobiography the exact question to ponder here:

"What was it about *Don Perlimplin* that made the worthy burghers and burghesses react so

³⁸¹ The phrase in fact belongs to Robert Leach. He tells an instance when in Moscow, Littlewood refused to attend a party at Maxim Gorky Theatre when the stage staff was not invited along with the actors and refers to the unsavory conditions Littlewood found in Moscow under communism as he explained 'communism in practice.' Leach, *Theatre Workshop*, 138.

³⁸² MacColl, *Journeyman*, 247.

violently? What raw nerve did we touch? ... was it merely that any public declaration of sexual passion or any mention of sexual deprivation made them nervous?"³⁸³ Regarding another adaptation that MacColl created in reference to Moliere plays and commedia dell'arte, *The Flying Doctor* that they played with *Johnny Noble*, MacColl writes about Kendal audience's reception: "they were no less confused by *the Flying Doctor*, a commedia dell'arte-type production, in which a company of bawdy grotesques played havoc with a respectable audience's sense of decorum."³⁸⁴ Dr. Luis Meana, lecturer in Spanish at Manchester University and a personal contact of Lorca's, who assisted them in interpreting *Don Perlimplin*, said to them that Lorca would certainly have enjoyed what they had made of it, but also added that in Spain, it was performed only as a puppet show, for the Spanish regard for Perlimplin was "an old cuckold, a figure of fun."³⁸⁵ Theatre Workshop's raw humor could successfully restore a dramatic character restricted with generic implications of its moral inappropriateness back to flesh and bones on a theatre stage as transgressive performance, which resonates with Baz Kershaw's observations of the carnivalesque style as it became, "the symbolic overthrow of hierarchic sociopolitical order," and in typical veins of the British alternative theatre that "ignor[ed] the traditional critical [and formalist in this case] categories ... mix[ing] celebration and social criticism, to combine carnival and satire."³⁸⁶ Likewise, Theatre Workshop production's reinstating the flesh and blood into the traditional puppet play celebrates the corporeal freedom of human being and tickles the boundaries of common sense.

³⁸³ MacColl, *Journeyman*, 249.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 246.

³⁸⁵ Littlewood, *Joan's Book*, 177.

³⁸⁶ Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance*, 69.

The carnival, for Bakhtin, in its “grotesque realism” temporarily triumphs against the Establishment, yet this fleeting triumph earns its temporary dissidents, most commonly the underdog, a lasting tool for coping with inflexible social systems: an anti-establishment voice that becomes an aesthetic of its own kind that disrupts and ridicules the ‘eternal,’ ‘indisputable,’ and ‘complete’ truths owned and propagated by the ruling classes. As the following analyses will conform, the Theatre Workshop stage conventions created a livelihood where, as Bakhtin defined in the case of the carnivalesque, “people were ... reborn for new, purely human relations.”³⁸⁷ If we transpose the carnivalesque qualities of the marketplace or the fairground to the theatre stage, it becomes a spectacle of the utopian ideals, instead of an experience; however, with its interactive rapport with its audience, Theatre Workshop was capable, on many occasions, of conjoining its audience into the stage action, as part of their revolutionary agenda. Such analogy explains the rough, lively and ‘irreverent’ stage language of Theatre Workshop which was, in Bakhtin’s description of the carnivalesque style, “frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came into contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times.”³⁸⁸ Such language - the carnivalesque idiom that Robert Leach discusses in the context of their new, post-settlement plays, as “ever changing, playful, undefined” and “filled with pathos of change and renewal,” explains the Theatre Workshop interpretation of the classics, too, in a manner negating the West End traditions in speech, acting and design.³⁸⁹ Much as the carnival became the parody of the ‘extracarnival life’, in Bakhtin’s description, the Theatre Workshop stage became the fresh and transgressive idiom,

³⁸⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Rabelais and His World,” in Rivkin and Ryan eds., *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, (Malden; Oxford: Blackwell Publishing), 46.

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

almost bordering cultural performance, to bring a revolution to the West End, with its emphasis on the free and inspired and changing body movements as a positive reference to the human presence freed from the established requirements of the system/space that they are subjected to. Their actors, trained ‘in sensitivity,’ never needed blocking prompts and could maneuver the most crowded scenes with real-life care and precision on the stage. The stage, for a Theatre Workshop actor, was like the street; it was almost like life itself – it was open to the real personas and likewise, it was open to raw talent; a space of tension, into where “a genius could walk in off the streets.”³⁹⁰ On such terms, MacColl-Littlewood collaboration created a space that was pulsing with the truth of real time, as well as creating the theatrical time; the stage was at all times exposed to practical necessities of the moment, such as actors’ having to shout back at Behan during performance of *The Hostage*, and consequently open to the anarchy that these allowances would bring, and in fact such interruptions were generally provoked in their plays and fulfilled by planting actors in the audience to start a stage-audience banter. As with the open display of carnal affections and sensuality in *Don Perlimplin*, where exotic flamenco, black paper birds, velvet green curtains that changed tone with lighting and “black lace fans folded across Perlimplin’s nuptial coach by two naughty sprites,” set the stage, Theatre Workshop endorsed the “material bodily principle” of the carnival that brought its cultural and systemic environs down to a material bodily level- to a degradation to moral orientations– and consequently down to a subject of mockery, and held a distorting mirror onto the Establishment claims of eternal, abstract, indissoluble righteousness.³⁹¹ Arguably, the corporeal materialism of

³⁹⁰ This is the famous Theatre Workshop actor, Harry Corbett’s impression of Littlewood: “She always retained the feeling that a genius could walk in off the streets.” Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 176.

³⁹¹ For production details of *Don Perlimplin*, see Littlewood, *Joan’s Book*, 177.

their carnivalesque stage would also have a restorative dimension: their lively stage-audience banter would draw the spectator-participants in to the action, and work the liminal norm upon them, as Baz Kershaw delineates the political efficacies of performance art (which Theatre Workshop style comes close in its equal emphasis on the real and theatrical time, high-degree improvising in acting and stage-audience relationship) to offer the spectator an experience similar to that of a ritual participant, and to restore the distorted sense-ratios of working-class people who were bound to operating machine parts in industrial scale manufacturing, living the physical alienation of their mechanical environment.³⁹² The corporeal excess parodying and refuting its surrounding structures is, according to Bakhtin, is the main feature of grotesque realism.³⁹³ While laughter and music featured all performances of the Theatre Workshop, this lowering feature of the grotesque realism relates well to their parodies, especially the famous *Oh What a Lovely War* in its capacity to degenerate and ridicule the ruling sentiments propagating

³⁹² The distorted sense-ratio in its original context is associated with the problem of extreme mediatization of developed societies. Marshall McLuhan discusses in his essay 'The Galaxy Reconfigured' the impact of print technology on the processes of knowledge production and reception with its indirect effects on human perception and his epistemological processes. He establishes his viewpoints on his descriptions of the medium on the premises that mankind creates tools that will, at various capacities or scales, duplicate his own capacity of doing things and then will internalize the tool and add it to his world of perception like a part of his own corporeal being, which will eventually cause a shift in his own sense of self, changing sense ratios. I believe that the Marxist definition of physical estrangement resonates with this distorted sense-ratio when applied to the industrial workers' mechanized actions in the production processes that would alienate them socially and deprive them of potentials to become comfortable in their own skins and personas. As per Baz Kershaw's formulations of the political efficacies of performance art, Kershaw writes, citing Victor Turner, that spectator's experience is similar to that of the ritual participant; it is a *liminal* role (betwixt and between), and known to the participant as both real and virtual; it is a *ludic* role as well, by way of which the participant gets into a frame of mind to experiment with "norms, customs, regulations, laws, which govern her life in society." Marshall McLuhan, "The Galaxy Reconfigured or the Plight of Mass Man in an Individualist Society" in *The New Media Reader*, eds., Wardrip-Fruin, Noah, and Nick Montfort. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003), 194-202; Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London: Routledge, 1992), 24.

³⁹³ Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 176.

the necessities of war, which, in fact was found offensive by the retired army officials and relatives of the deceased. Bakhtin also writes that such mocking realism of the carnivalesque that celebrates the bodily, material aspects of humanity differs from the much sober and grave ‘purely formalistic literary’ parodies of modern times that deprive their object of any chance of a rebirth and regeneration as the degenerating parody does in its “atmosphere of freedom, frankness, and familiarity” and the familiar speech legalizing profanities, oaths, curses and thus creating an ‘extraterritory’ for the people where these insurgencies and purgation were recognized.³⁹⁴ On many occasions, this extraterritorial space that recognized the de-classed or marginalized communities built the stage-audience relations of Theatre Workshop. At Butlin’s Holiday Camp at Filey, where they played *Uranium 235* to the vacationing working-class families, Howard Goorney was “man-handled by a large, outraged lady, and told to “get out if you don’t want to listen,”” when it was his part to interrupt the play and throw in adverse comments as part of the action.³⁹⁵ Theatre Workshop, in its faith in the possibility of progress in this ultra-permissive space signifying the extra-territories, or the fringes of the establishment set out to empower the working class or the disenfranchised communities by diminishing the grasp of the dominant social and cultural patterns on its stage. Thus, they offered an uplifting parody of the state of affairs for the underdog, and threw an offensive commentary onto the privileged sections of the society reproducing the oppressive environs. Critics’ accounts on various Theatre Workshop productions reiterate this quality that was consistently produced on the Theatre Workshop stage: A French critic Pierre Marcabru observed MacColl’s adaptation of *The Good Soldier Schweik*, produced in 1956 in the Paris Third International Theatre Festival to have “a

³⁹⁴ Bakhtin, “Rabelais and His World,” 47-8.

³⁹⁵ Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 52.

sharp reality ... in a sense, “slang” showing the courage of Theatre Workshop ‘in its espousal of the vulgar,’ with ‘devilish coarseness,’ and with characters who seemed to have come ‘straight off the street without having been made theatrical by the tradition of dramatic art.’³⁹⁶ Critic Harold Hobson wrote it was “caricatural, charade-like, simplified and exaggerated.”³⁹⁷

The Marxist premise of the ensemble, as expressed by MacColl, to ‘get at the basis of reality and portray its basic content,’ and to become ‘outstanding critics of their time,’ to create a realism that would become ‘an objectively democratic force,’ was delivered in their parodies. This offers an alternative perspective to claims stating that “[i]n many ways, Renaissance classics were an illogical choice for the Theatre Royal and its local, largely working-class community,” as the above Marxist premise informed Theatre Workshop’s way of bringing classics to the present working-class audiences; the objectively democratic force of seeing through a non-conformist, unbiased lens provided a freedom on their stage to represent events and characters in their pure, uncensored fashion.³⁹⁸

The sense of experiential chaos on the Theatre Workshop stage was another feature in actor training. Practical necessities, such as tackling plays with a cast that at times tripled their population and having to adapt to different sets during touring created tough conditions for the actors and presumably, the chaotic, carnivalesque atmosphere on the stage was also the sum of actors’ experiential/immersed experiences of acting, ‘caught up bodily’ in the austere circumstances of Theatre Workshop productions: Josephine Smith, Theatre Workshop’s wardrobe mistress, who was interviewed in the Theatre Archive Project, explained how the

³⁹⁶ This was Pierre Marcabru’s comment in the souvenir book of the festival. Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 153.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ MacColl, *Journeyman*, 266; Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood’s Theatre*, 80.

actors had to use limited number of costumes and props for a variety of characters they were playing:

One of the most difficult ones [shows] to dress, I should think, was *The Good Soldier Schweik*, ... And it had... the most people in it, you know, characters in it ... the company was rarely [more] than about fourteen or fifteen so you can imagine there were doubling and trebling up! I even stumped Joan that time [with the production of *Schweik*] because I was saying, 'Well, if George leaves the boots at... on the off [side]... there, for somebody else - whoever - to pick up, then he can leave them there and George can get them back'. Even she gave up! She said, 'You know what you're doing.' (Josephine Smith interview, Theatre Archive Project, British Library)

Thus, the liveness of the Theatre Workshop stage was a product of many things: acting was to become an experiential behavior, a continuous search for truth by way of creating smaller objectives personalized by imagination and understanding the given circumstances in the Stanislavskian sense; the right feeling had to be achieved in that search for the truth in action, for instance in *Richard II*, Harry Corbett, Littlewood's Richard, "[had] found the right energy for 'I wasted time, and now doth time waste me,' by having one ankle tethered to a stake, so that he could only walk in a circle."³⁹⁹ The movement flow was supervised by their Laban technique instructor and choreographer Jean Newlove, to bring about and sustain these expressive energies guiding the actor.

³⁹⁹ Rankin, *Dreams and Realities*, 108.

I would argue that these strategies towards achieving the right performative mode or design aspects to create truth come close to the affect that Hans-Thies Lehmann discusses in his essay ‘The present of performance,’ to create a ‘production of presence,’ where he claims that, arguably contrary to the dominant theatrical aesthetics, the act of live viewing and the live acting will deter the completion of the aesthetic experience and the actor, therefore, will cease to become an object for the viewer (and vice-versa). According to Lehmann, the aesthetic regard is possible and complete only in reflection; it is a secondary construction: ‘a secondary manner reflection.’⁴⁰⁰ It is very obvious that from this secondary manner of reflection – that aesthetic regard – is built the whole of the theatre industry which the Theatre Workshop steadfastly resisted, and hence their continuous maintenance of the carnivalesque liveness on their stage: this can be read, I argue, as a way of refuting their own contribution to the industry. What mattered for Theatre Workshop was on the stage; it was live, organic and freshly produced each time, recreating that “production of presence (*not* [sic] mimesis or representation)” in Lehmann’s terms, which, coincidentally like Littlewood, Lehmann compares to the capacity of sports events’ producing of such co-presence.⁴⁰¹ On the contrary, the aesthetic aspect is constructed in the post-viewing and it creates a scheme to categorize and relate to artistic trends or academic canons, such as the ‘new wave.’ These are the products of the secondary – retrospective regards of the experience of the presence, and just as Alan Filewod explains how these secondary constructions can go so far as to create a disciplinary approach to improvisation, Baz Kershaw brilliantly calls this secondary scheme that Theatre Workshop defiantly rejected, ‘the theatre

⁴⁰⁰ Hans-Thies Lehmann, “The Present of performance,” in *The Improvisation Studies Reader*, 365.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 365.

estate,' which are, in Filewod's words, 'the complex of industry, professionalism, economy and canonicity.'⁴⁰²

Theatre Workshop's communism in practice

Howard Goorney writes that their pre-settlement reasons for financial distress were different from those incited by the post-settlement situation: the touring period's plays were "too avant-garde," and their politics, "no doubt, suspect."⁴⁰³ Post-settlement period, according to Goorney brought its unique challenges unforeseen previously; funding agencies advised them to "move to a more 'theatre-conscious area of London'."⁴⁰⁴ Interestingly, Goorney imparts this advice as the beginning of the "vicious circle of needing to transfer plays in order to survive," which proved their initial projects of building a local working-class audience in Salford unfeasible. Apparently, a theatre had to make money to get a subsidy; those outside of the commercial loop had scant chances of receiving grants. Thus, Theatre Workshop, who stood off from the commercial line of business was always in the peripheries of funding circuits. Sadly, as Peter Hall, an actor member, explained, the transfers as a funding source naturally changed the repertory: "[o]nce you're a transfer theatre, however you rationalize it, once you need a West End success in order to pay to keep going, you're doomed, because you're looking for something different."⁴⁰⁵ It is safe to argue this to be the cause that made Littlewood call theatre and politics 'obsolete' and look beyond theatre for her socially progressive projects such as Fun Palace and London summer fairs.

⁴⁰² Alan Filewod, "Improvisation to technical power: from discipline to refusal," 377.

⁴⁰³ Goorney, *Theatre Workshop Story*, 177.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 177-8.

Thus, permanently broke, the Theatre Union and the Theatre Workshop had to rely on different types of capital to keep going in a harsh inter-war and post war climate such as hard work, faith in a communist imaginary and chance. Their career saw a few turns that were major disillusionments to test their faith in the possibility of a working-class theatre, despite their strong faith in the necessity of the same. The German-USSR Non-Aggression Pact in 1939 was one of their dark moments when they found that the state they made their utopia would not sustain their communist imaginary. In the post-war period, the failings of the Labor Government, inauguration of whom they had celebrated victoriously, made them see that the one patronage they could ever get would be from the working class, who, as I referred earlier in Littlewood's notes, had no interest in being saved by the theatre or having access to quality art. Moreover, Theatre Workshop's resistance to the mainstream machinations of art production did not make things easier. Michael Coren shares an interesting moment from their post-settlement fund-scavenging turns, when, on the day of the meeting with the vicinity town hall for the raising of their subsidy, Joan Littlewood dropped their funding agenda and joined the protests being held outside the town hall, and they lost the raise, apparently living by the maxim, in Coren's words, "that it is the duty of the artist to bite the hand that feeds them."⁴⁰⁶ Their repertory was a precarious one for the conservative provinces that they aimed at conquering for secure and independent patronage; their bookings could leave them flat when the news of their productions reached places in their advance, such as a letter they received from a parson in February 1947 that they could not get the St Joan's Hall because of *Lysistrata*, which MacColl formulated into a

⁴⁰⁶ Michael Coren, *Theatre Royal 100 Years of Stratford East*, (London: Quartet Books, 1984), 36.

strike spirited anti-war propaganda.⁴⁰⁷ These are just two examples of their common suffering due to their resisting, uncompromising attitude. They literally acted like a people's theatre with solid financial support, which was not true. Acting was their business, nonetheless...

Every member had to do everything, there was no division of labor. Coren briefly refers to this when he writes

Joan was obsessed with everybody being versatile. If you wanted to act, write, direct or whatever, first of all, you had to paint and decorate and use a vacuum cleaner. It had two aims: it made the actors feel what it was like to perform fairly menial tasks, and it was also the only way to keep the theatre in one piece. (Coren, *Theatre Royal*, 30)

Sometimes they simply got lucky and received almost providential help: in the rehearsals of *Good Soldier Schweik* back in 1938 they had interested engineers walk in to build them a back projector that was impossible to obtain otherwise. And in 1948, when an American war jet carrying technical equipment for the entertainment of American troops crashed in Derbyshire, the Theatre Workshop crew ran to the area to clear the wreck of all usable design equipment that would serve them for years.⁴⁰⁸

Discussions around the enclave theory offer some useful keywords to think about Theatre Workshop's peculiar life as a theatre in search of its audience. Their resistance, their will to

⁴⁰⁷ Littlewood wrote to Raffles in a letter dated February 1947 that they could not get a previously arranged booking because of *Lysistrata*: "the parson won't give us St Johns Hall again because of *Lysistrata*" which was the place to be booked in the region of Middlesbrough. Correspondence, outgoing (Littlewood to Gerry Raffles) Subseries C, Box 2, Folder 9, The Michael Barker Collection of Joan Littlewood, Harry Ransom Center, UT Austin.

⁴⁰⁸ Coren, *Theatre Royal*, 27.

independence and their commitment to the communist, statist imaginary that failed them, made them, I argue, like a communist enclave or a commune in and of itself. They were devoted to their autonomy, collectivity, self-learning, intellectual and creative community. These are keywords deduced from Karl Marx's earlier definitions of *Bildung* as John Roberts explains, as communities of collective self-learning, which came to be adapted by the left thinkers such as Nicolas Borriaud (his references to *relational aesthetics*) Jean-Luc Nancy (his developing the theory of *literary communism*) and to explain radical (or revolutionary) modes of artistic or literary creations in the hostile climates of the post-war period, the eighties and in the recent tides of neo-liberalism.⁴⁰⁹ Deducing from Roberts's explication of how the communist form and the communist practice survive intact in enclaves, it is possible and helpful to think of Theatre Workshop as a communist enclave practice. Moreover, given the fact that these discussions tend to continue in the direction of how these enclaves and literary communisms can and do shape current and future creative radical artistic processes as well as how they stay conversant with the new definitions of the communist imaginary (freed from the defeatist discourse claiming communism as a failed state experiment), the enclave theory seems to be an expansive, open ended model applicable to the un-formalistic yet structural continuities in Littlewood's work, such as the Fun Palace projects. I aim to work on the idea of approaching Theatre Workshop as an enclave regarding Roberts's essay and Nicholas Ridout's work, *Passionate Amateurs*. Regarding the Theatre Workshop as an enclave helps clarify their production mode and its effect on their stage, and can propose a model to assess the match between Fun Palace projects' faring with the type of ideology that the Theatre Workshop operated on.

⁴⁰⁹ John Roberts, "Introduction: Art, 'Enclave Theory' and the Communist Imaginary," *Third Text* 23, No. 4, (2009), 353. Accessed 3/8/2017. DOI: 10.1080/09528820903116494

Roberts gives examples for this type of ‘utopian “enclave” practice’ from 1960s and mentions the Artists Placement Group project which Fun Palace Trust was related in the 1960s, when Littlewood was less interested in making theatre and was cooperating with large industrial corporations like 3M and Honda in her Bubble City Projects, which were, in the spirit of Fun Palace, prioritizing the emancipatory interaction of the individual with their surrounding space, ever so adamant in her faith in the progressive use of technological advances. The relations between industrial giants and artistic spheres of design created an uncharted space of social and artistic possibilities, which created not only leading-edge designs, but new forms of social relations in producing art works; in Roberts’ words, producing “forms of socialised art work outside the official orbit of the artworld and its mediating institutions.”⁴¹⁰ Roberts explains that despite contradictions in the traditional Marxist premise that shunned all kinds of utopianisms, such socialized art projects have come to work well with the communist imaginary in the post-war period and especially after 1989 (collapse of the USSR) as they can keep the horizons open for future radical modes of artistic creation.⁴¹¹ Indeed, like a “foreign body within the social,” in Roberts’s terms, or like a social body within Baudrillard’s unsocial, Theatre Workshop’s surviving without any sponsoring agencies, and in hostile environments recall Roberts’s reference to Slavoj Žižek’s explanation of how certain ideas (and practices in our case) survive their own “defeat in sociohistorical reality ...[to continue] to lead an underground spectral life of the ghosts of failed utopias,” and preserve the communist praxis.⁴¹² As the ‘foreign – and benign

⁴¹⁰ Roberts, “Art, ‘Enclave Theory’ and the Communist Imaginary,” 355.

⁴¹¹ Roberts explains the artistic domain as a primary space that allows ‘egalitarianism, equality and free exchange.’ Ibid., 354.

⁴¹² Roberts here refers to Žižek’s work *In Defense of Lost Causes* (2008) as he discusses the under-cover survival of communist thought and practice as ‘a messianic defence of communist praxis as a utopian disaffirmation of the present,’ in conjunction with references to Fredric Jameson’s work, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science*

- body' against the social system and for the working class they keenly tried to make into an audience and convert to the working-class cause, I argue that the Theatre Workshop was the exact model of the enclave that Roberst describes as, "in them, the differentiation process has momentarily been arrested, so that they remain as it were momentarily beyond the reach of the social and testify to its political powerlessness, at the same time that they offer a space in which new wish images of the social can be elaborated and experimented on."⁴¹³ This is how they could develop their carnivalesque stage language where they could hold a grotesque mirror to the prevailing order, as I have discussed in the previous section. Their self-proclaimed seclusion as a 'close-knit group,' with Littlewood "demand[ing] loyalty and affection and effort as if she was a schoolmistress-cum-mother-cum-psychiatrist," was also their curse; or maybe an inevitable result of their failed access to funding agency and their intended audiences. In any case, as my opening example shows, Theatre Workshop was abandoned by all the systemic consequences of the Establishment they were fighting against; surviving against odds, on ideas and extremely practical earning and money-saving solutions like keeping members versatile in all kinds of jobs and actually keeping them working outside of theatre to bring in funds, playing the schools' curriculum classics to the students, organizing actor training courses for cash flow and living in the theatre's premises against rules. The peculiar life of their ensemble rests on idealist premises borrowed from ideas of older practices of theatre, such as *commedia dell'arte* and from communist ideals such as having no stars, living like the propertyless working class; an amalgam of MacColl's idea of "a propertyless theatre for the propertyless working class" and Littlewood's

Fictions (2005), in terms of Jameson's discussions of science fiction literature and counter-cultural practices as 'a covert (discreet) dialogue with the communist tradition.' Roberts, "Art, 'Enclave Theory' and the Communist Imaginary," 354-5.

⁴¹³ *Ibid.*, 355.

idea of a commedia dell'arte troupe, travelling and living on their wits and displaying the utopia ruling their art and business.

Employing imagination as a tool in discovering the actor's relation to the act and emphasizing the interiority of acting, delivered through Laban's movement techniques, I have previously discussed the liveness that can be reproduced constantly on the Theatre Workshop stage. When transferring her shows to the West End theatres, Littlewood used to take extra time to work with the traditionally trained actors for synching them with her image of the role. Robert Leach gives an example of a scene being cut from *The Hostage* in its transfer from Theatre Royal Stratford East to the Wyndham's at the West End: the removed scene had to include a jumble typical of the Irish house, when the breakfast tray carried to the hostage would be plundered on its way by the surrounding inhabitants. Leach writes that this crowded scene of breakfast plunder was removed because the emphasis was to be on the relationship: "stealing bits of the breakfast was jettisoned, presumably to retain the purity of their relationship."⁴¹⁴ I argue that among possible reasons of keeping such a dynamic and crowded plundering scene out from the West End stage was that such a dynamic crowded-action scene was an expertise of the Theatre Workshop actors, 'trained in sensitivity,' as discussed previously, without any knowledge of blocking. Littlewood did find the West End actors bound in their feet, without proper training to move in personal freedom. This inhibition in movement was a common ailment in the British theatre and it matches the arguments that John Roberts refers as 'the relationship between "communist form" and a "communism of the senses,"' whereby he associates the downgrading on the sensory perceptions (as in the rejection of the Russian avant-garde for a more didactic socialist realism) with Stalin's 'retardation of cultural form and

⁴¹⁴ Leach, *Theatre Workshop*, 165.

conservative foreclosure of the senses,’ and claims that ‘State-Communism produced the very opposite of what Marx imagined as the *re-aestheticisation* of experience under communist social relations.’ Roberts explains that it was among the major agendas of Marx’s idea of individual emancipation to free one’s senses, which I argue, was accommodated in the Russian avant-garde theatre, which proved too artistic for Stalin, as discussed in the previous chapter, and following the steps of the agit-prop instead of the Popular Front’s social realism, Littlewood and MacColl did stay closer to the Marxist imaginary of ‘*re-aestheticisation* of experience.’⁴¹⁵ Theatre Workshop was a freedom and healing enclave to its members and audiences; the Swedish actress Kristin Lindt would simply get in the nude any time she saw the sun shine, she would either climb a tree or a roof and sing, and that did cause some problems with the social circles Theatre Workshop was enclosed with.⁴¹⁶ They played a clowning version of *The Flying Doctor* in a dark hangar of a disused factory to children rescued from concentration camps, who were so emotionally sterile that they only ‘booed’ at supposedly comic moments as well as at “the slightest suggestion of aggression, with a clown’s slapstick, or even a feather duster.”⁴¹⁷ A

⁴¹⁵ In his description of the relationship between ‘communist form’ and a ‘communism of senses,’ Roberts explains how the State-Communism produced something contrary to Marx’s idea of ‘the destruction of bourgeois culture,’ eventually releasing the senses ‘from the reified social forms.’ In this aspect, what Littlewood encountered in the West End actors seems to be this kind of shackled body movement reproducing societal expectations and norms. Hence these actors would naturally fall short in conveying a chaotic breakfast plunder. Roberts, “Art, ‘Enclave Theory’ and the Communist Imaginary,” 356.

⁴¹⁶ Joan Littlewood vividly describes how once they had to trace the garments of the actress to where she was to find her: “She was a child of the sun. No matter where she was, in the frozen north or deep south, if a ray of sun appeared, her clothes would be off. In the heart of Manchester she sunbathed on the roof of the Central Library. God knows how she got there.” Littlewood, *Joan’s Book*, 166.

⁴¹⁷ Littlewood writes in her autobiography of their performing to these children brought from Germany, of every nationality, aged from almost three to seventeen, all with tattoo marks and various bruises. They did not speak English, so the company decided to perform a clown version of the play. Littlewood writes that they were their first visitors and the children were suspicious of their aims, they did not react to any performative gesture, and they reacted to a member’s

member who joined after the war, Ben Ellis, suffering the mental and emotional disorders of the war, was cured while playing MacColl's part in the *Lysistrata* adaptation, *Operation Olive Branch* after MacColl had been arrested for deserting the war.⁴¹⁸ Labour MP, Tom Driberg, their long-time supporter, wrote this review in the following day of this high-tension performance that helped cure Ellis (to appear on *Reynolds News*, Sunday January 12th, 1947):

Any of these people could be earning ten times their present income in the commercial theatre. Several have refused good offers. They just believe in what they are doing. They have certainty in their mission – plus humour and a notable lack of conceit.

As they sit round their log fire at Ormesby at the end of the day's work, they break easily into singing – folk songs, American work songs, bawdy army songs.

I have never come across any community, religious or political, or any group of stage people, so free as they are from personal pettiness. They are completely and unselfishly single-minded. In fact, they illustrated for me

narrating the play in German, but were soothed after the fact that he, too, had been a victim at the camps, when the Englishman in charge explained so in Yiddish. The company later learned that it was a custom among the kids to boo whenever somebody was taken to the gas chambers. Littlewood writes that gradually they could break the ice and when they asked the children upon leaving what to play next time, the children unanimously asked them to play 'the camp,' and Littlewood's note on that request attests to Theatre Workshop's capacity of processing raw, documentary material: "Though I'd known the healing power of theatre all my life, those children taught me a great lesson. Playing the camp can banish the camp; playing fear can drive out fear; and aggression ritualized sometimes becomes art." The children were adopted in the UK and USA and they kept in touch with Littlewood, sending her letters and pictures. Littlewood, *Joan's Book*, 171-2.

⁴¹⁸ Ellis was carried to the show from the hospital and back and Littlewood writes about his performance: 'Ben spoke quietly, simply, but with passionate conviction – pale as he was, half-naked, the effect was profoundly moving. In the audience, absolute silence.' *Ibid.*, 237.

the meaning of the Gospel text, 'If thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.' (Littlewood, *Joan's Book*, 237-8)

Driberg's account testifies to Theatre Workshop's blurring the lines between their life and art, immersed in their utopia on and off the stage, quite removed from creating what Roberts calls 'the *de-temporalising* effects' of the art, 'through its actual distance from the world of everyday social relations,' and thus approaching the realms of relational aesthetics whereby, in my understanding, the artistic parties' or individuals' interrelations (or 'the sociability of the artistic exchange itself,' in Roberts's words) create an aesthetic value.⁴¹⁹

In the current that echoes the defeatist discourse of communism's statist failure, Nicolas Ridout is among the thinkers who apply a remedial thinking mode that can work on theatre and performance practices, to save the idea of communism from the claws of this defeatist discourse. However, compliant with the spirit of the times, he writes that he is not writing about 'communist theatre,' but does suggest definitions and models to apply to theatrical activities in search for a communist potential in them. The 'passionate amateur' is for Ridout, that person who "either knowingly or not, in pursuit of this communist potential," and who is disposed to reject the "establishment of our now dominant understanding of the relations between work and time."⁴²⁰ Thus, Ridout places his arguments in the historical context of work-life and earnings balance, lack of which caused the working-class resistance in the first place. In this historical resistance, he places his passionate amateur as a person of theatre; 'a theatrical variant of a

⁴¹⁹ Roberts, "Art, 'Enclave Theory' and the Communist Imaginary," 355.

⁴²⁰ Nicholas Ridout, *Passionate Amateurs - Theatre, Communism and Love*, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 6.

historical figure' that can be called the 'romantic anti-capitalist.'⁴²¹ With their romanticizing gaze backwards in the past, the romantic anti-capitalists lacked the solid materialism necessary for the proposition of progressive models according to many Marxists. This critique resembles the difficult case of matching utopian communalism with the communist imaginary, which Roberts proved possible in his essay discussed above. Ridout, likewise, gives examples of thinkers, including Marx, Lukács and Engels (along with William Morris, Ernst Bloch, and the members of the German Jena Cell of the start of the previous century) who used a recourse to the past; looking back "either to democratic Athens or to the "Homeric" era's "primitive communism" for metaphorical and ideological resources."⁴²² Ridout offers to think in terms of theatrical practice and performance on grounds that the performance may offer a scene from this anti-capitalist past, or it may become a kind of 'nonwork or "play"' that offers respite from the social and economic norms and its contingencies born of capitalism.⁴²³

The Theatre Workshop as an ensemble seems to fit this theoretical model, as well, exposing some of its liabilities. To begin with, the Theatre Workshop members, according to Peter Rankin, worked eighteen hours – which he writes would have horrified the Equity, Iexcept that Equity didn't have much to do with Theatre Workshop in those days because none of the actors were receiving a minimum wage.⁴²⁴ Furthermore, as referenced previously, their relations were not on good terms with the trade unions. This is the realistic part of the nonwork context that is a fitting definition for the production terms and relations within Theatre Workshop as their work was like life itself as one member, Max Shaw put it: "Our lives were monastic but it didn't

⁴²¹ Nicholas Ridout, *Passionate Amateurs*, 6.

⁴²² *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴²⁴ Rankin, *Dreams and Realities*, 105.

matter because we didn't have any money to out anyway. There was nothing else to do but get on work."⁴²⁵ Obviously, Theatre Workshop's monastic or communal style in life and art was being shaped out of necessities.

Littlewood and MacColl's looking back at the great theatres of the past and seeing the new Soviet theatres comparable to them converges well with the idea of romantic anti-capitalism or utopian communalism, starkly exposing at the same time, the flip side of these positions that were criticized by the materialist currents of Marxism. The long hours of work, deprived of benefits available to the actors within the Equity system, and the necessity of bringing in funds from other part-time jobs or playing at West End productions like MacColl did, even after he left active membership in the group, do point out the dilemmas of being a member of an enclave like Theatre Workshop that resembles groups like the 'Jena Cell' of romantic Germany, who "live together, in literature [in our case, theatre], [as] a way of living a critique of this life, the expression of their ambition for 'an entirely new social function for the writer [and actor, designer, technician, director and maybe even the audience, in the case of theatre] ... and consequently for a different society."⁴²⁶

Conclusion

The Theatre Workshop was consistent in its political commitment, its artistic expressions, policies and ensemble living. Littlewood and MacColl's intention to create a truthful and an objectively democratizing theatre culminated in a stage language that was a mixture of medieval and popular traditions, left-wing ideologies and interpretations of theatre art and its circles. Their autobiographical ties with the working-class cause and their self-learnt and practiced Marxist

⁴²⁵ Rankin, *Dreams and Realities*, 106.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

premise shaped their stage and brought success in creating a space of communication with their popular audiences, merging the environmental alertness of the agit-prop sketches into their stage conventions and building a grotesque realism for their biting parodies. Their realism and carnivalesque liveness were largely fed by the colloquial materialism of street life, potentially defying the theoretical frames of imagined communities or working-class imaginaries and moreover, as the production always had the last say, textual and literary explorations of Theatre Workshop plays are bound to remain secondary to any performance-related discussion. Hence, Theatre Workshop productions need to be considered in totality with their meta-textual and even meta-theatrical conventions, which can propose alternative ways of discussing works of politically committed ensembles.

Chapter 5- Re-considering formalisms

Richard Schechner's including Cedric Price and Joan Littlewood's Fun Palace project in a 1968 issue of *The Drama Review* provides a case to consider the contrast where we can see how Littlewood's intentions are shaped by the Old Left's structures of feeling while being situated in a New Left environment and predominantly discussed and theorized within the framework of this era and its spatially driven performance paradigms. From this premise, this chapter focuses on how explorations of this project and its vital chords with the Old Left can be demonstrated by proposing a different method from formalist approaches; a method that is concerned with exploring the relationship between socially acceptable norms and conventions and the given text (or project in our case) with the premise that accepted norms of treating the text cannot suggest a totality; there will always be divergent, uniquely different structures simmering towards the surface to propose new ways of treatment. Scholarship at times finds this method elusive as Raymond Williams called these structures 'structure of feeling' as they "signal that what is at stake may not yet be articulated in a fully worked-out form, but has rather to be inferred by reading between the lines," therefore is a "trajectory" rather than a "form," or as Alan Sinfield refers to Williams' work on cultural materialism, they are "subordinate, residual, emergent, alternative, and oppositional cultural forces alongside the dominant, in varying relations of incorporation, negotiation, and resistance."⁴²⁷ The focus of the chapter loosely connects another topic with the Fun Palace project, as how Theatre Workshop stage can bring a sophisticated modern theatre to the working-class audience in a manner that they can

⁴²⁷ "Structures of feeling," in Oxford Reference, 2010-01-01. Accessed 1 April 2017, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100538488>; Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*, 9.

communicate eye-to-eye is explored theoretically in reference to Hans-Thies Lehman's explications of the efficacies of producing the present. The liminal norm already discussed in previous chapters this time explores the *communitas* feature of the Working-class audiences. These explorations offer perspectives on some unworked puzzles in Littlewood's post-theatrical projects such as her cooperating with the industrial giants and even the City of London that she very explicitly hated in the 1930s and 1940s.

Re-considering formalisms

On proceeding with the analyses of the selected productions of MacColl-Littlewood collaboration and theatre Workshop's post-settlement works, I found myself contemplating the need to primarily resort to the archival findings for this project. Before proceeding, I was aware that I was about to embark upon the kind of analysis that I upheld as insufficient and distracting – I was about to make another formalistic interpretation of Theatre Workshop productions. However, there is a need to adopt a different, more expansive perspective to the works of Theatre Workshop to take the current understanding further, expanded with the historical paradigm of Theatre Workshop's permanent investment in class politics.

Joan Littlewood wrote in her notebook that there could be no 'revolutionary material' in theatre that could be taken up separately, and that no divorce between the form and content was possible.⁴²⁸ This was her argument on the necessity of completely eschewing naturalism; naturalism could not simply engage with the idea of revolution. Theatre Workshop knew that it was not possible to "take the old, conventional and (?) dated forms and pour new life into them

⁴²⁸ Joan Littlewood, Political Science Notebook, The Michael Barker Collection, Box 1, Folder 5. Harry Ransom Center, UT Austin.

with so-called revolutionary material.”⁴²⁹ Theatre Workshop brought their stage to a point that converged with the working-class sense of reality, but also took care to lift them from their need to peek at dancers’ legs at the revue: the proscenium arch was removed in order to give the workers a chance to feel involved in the action; actors were made “flesh and blood instead of charming or dirty or ugly or interesting”; the stage became a three dimensional, solid, real space, thrust out from the flat planes that actors could move on and the space made into “something for the workers to get hold of – understand – both physically and mentally”; the lighting, make-up, costume had to go along with the realism in acting and dynamism in lighting which were “part of the architectonic of [their] production.”⁴³⁰ Littlewood, almost reiterating MacColl, wrote in her notebook, at the end of these observations that the workers wanted the best, that they had no time to lose. She had a sense of urgency about answering these needs and in looking back at the Elizabethan theatre, she saw her ideal audience, which a French ambassador, after his viewing a Shakespeare play, reported as “mad! Impassioned, mouths open!”⁴³¹ Littlewood wrote that she wanted the workers to “love [their] theatre with that same passion. Not with the (?) chocolate chewing appreciation of the stalls (?) who like to have their jaded appetites titillated by the curve of a chorus girl’s leg or the sugar coated (?) in a bedroom farce.”⁴³² For all these affects, the techniques had to be revolutionized to accommodate politics and theatre. Political understanding, Littlewood wrote, “in [their] case, involve[d] a deep ... search for truth.”⁴³³

As per Littlewood’s own notes, where she claims that there can be no separation between revolutionary form and content, I would argue that MacColl and Littlewood rejected pure

⁴²⁹ Joan Littlewood, Political Science Notebook.

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

⁴³¹ Ibid.

⁴³² Ibid.

⁴³³ Ibid.

formalism which did not serve the class cause, albeit developing aesthetic tools to render this cause effectively. MacColl writes in his autobiography that his plays were experiments in form: “*Johnny Noble, Landscape with Chimneys and Uranium 235* ... experiments in theatrical form,” and “the others were what [he calls] genre experiments,” only to express a few lines below that his attempt was “to evolve a dramatic utterance which would crystallize, or at least reflect, a certain kind of working-class speech.”⁴³⁴ Despite the essentialism and the idealism that this confession carries, their stage could eventually win a working-class audience in the provinces (South Wales and County Durham) according to MacColl, but it had taken them seven years (presumably between 1945 to 1952) and “even so a full house was still a rare phenomenon.”⁴³⁵ Hence, the analysis required needed to be informed of the stage-audience relationship of Theatre Workshop, as well as their idealisms which brought them extreme frugality to count as a factor that shaped their stage. The structures of feeling guiding their perseverance, touring policies, research and creative processes lurk up in various moments that are not necessarily acted on the stage as part of a play. None of the plays written and produced as result of the collaboration between Littlewood and MacColl lend themselves, in their intentions, to formalisms, although most of their collaboration was a search for a competent form to entice the non-theatre-going working class to political awareness. MacColl-Littlewood collaboration never fashioned their productions for theatre consumers, but rather they intended to create a living space, an animating, co-creating, performative zone; a communicative medium to entice its audience into a form of thinking, reacting and attitude.

⁴³⁴ MacColl, *Journeyman*, 268-9.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, 293.

General tendency in scholarship on Littlewood's later career is to see this phase when her work was watered down or she dismissed class politics, giving way to a "self-created function as jester."⁴³⁶ Littlewood herself eschewed theatre and called it as 'obsolete' as politics, and expressed in an interview in 1964 that "the printed word bit for the theatre [was] out of date," signaling her future, post-theatrical occupations.⁴³⁷ However, tracing the class struggle thought as a structure of feeling is quite possible when we look at her Bubble City projects or the famous Fun Palace project. These projects may seem to the formalist eye like the end of Littlewood's theatre, but I argue that they inherently run on the same class-politics driven performance motive. As discussed in the first chapter, Richard Schechner published the Fun Palace project in the 1968 issue of *The Drama Review* where he wrote on his observations on the environmental theatre and seemingly included the Fun Palace project under this concept. Schechner refined the concept in 1994 as "environmental performance," meaning "one in which *all the elements or parts* [sic] making up the performance are recognized as alive."⁴³⁸ Schechner's original conception of the environmental theatre relied on six tenets that broadly implied the expansive potentials of theatre by formulating possible interventions in its conventional set of relations; its use of space for the performance and audience; expanding possibilities of performance space; variations in focus; multiple and independent appeals of production elements upon audience and the replacement of the text with the process of performance.

⁴³⁶ Leach, *Theatre Workshop*, 143.

⁴³⁷ Mel Gussow Collection- 109.1 Littlewood, Joan 1964-1994, Harry Ransom Center, UT Austin.

⁴³⁸ Richard Schechner, "6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre," *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 12, No. 3, Architecture/Environment (Spring, 1968), pp. 41-64 Published by: The MIT Press Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1144353> Accessed: 30-08-2016; Richard Schechner, *Environmental Theatre, An Expanded Edition Including "Six Axioms for Environmental Theatre"* (New York; London: Applause, 1994), x.

The Fun Palace project fulfills Schechner's explications of environmental theatre and yet resonates with Theatre Workshop's Old Left manifestos and initiatives in many aspects. Schechner's observations of the performative street interventions of 1968 coincide with the New Left, yet I argue that a clear divide is perceivable between the New Left trends and Littlewood's Fun Palace project as it lends itself to the Old Left tenets albeit its extreme reliance on technology, live communication and spatiality as annexed by Schechner to the definitions of environmental theatre.

As I discussed earlier, during the Joan Littlewood centenary in 2015, the Fun Palace project re-emerged in the UK and went viral across the globe. Surveying archive material, I have found that the recent annual Fun Palace events held across the UK, in her birth week in early October, are quite in keeping with the ideas of community engagement in most of Littlewood's post-theatrical spatial projects, but the idea of community service in the Fun Palace project is debatable with its implications of accessing the metropolitan wanderers and strangers rather than community populations. The original Fun Palace idea relied widely on cooperation with the greater City of London to provide access to urban spots, parks or unused buildings, as Littlewood's wish was resonant with the spirit of occupying urban spaces temporarily but officially, which I believe, has residues of the agit-prop spirit of the 1920s and 30s, under the auspices of the British Communist Party and the international sponsorship of the Soviet Communist Party. Here, I argue that it is possible to see Littlewood's need to be in rapport with a central power, which is very unbecoming for the destructive spirit of the New Left in 1968, which can be read as her projection of utopian inclinations from the 1930s: to be overseen and to be in cooperation with an ideal and lasting model of a central left-wing state power.

Littlewood's Fun Palace project would ideally be portable and accessible to a diverse population of Londoners (class specifics not elaborated) at major urban spaces in the city for a temporary period of time. It would be a state-of-the-art technology space abounding with various media outlets, space for creation, fun and curiosity, located at the heart of the city within instant reach of all types of public/private transport. With its vision of broad accessibility, high technology, city and commoners' intermingling at its central locations, the original project was resonant with the Old Left that was more didactic and visionary for the workers, wanting the best for them in terms of access to technology and amenities; aiming to animate and educate them like a benevolent dictator or like a producer director aiming at animating the foyer:

ARRIVE AND LEAVE [sic.] by train, bus, monorail, hovercraft, car, tube or foot at any time YOU [sic.] want to – or just have a look at it as you pass. The information screen will show you what is happening, no need to look for an entrance – just walk in anywhere. No doors, foyers, queues or commissionaries: it's up to you how you use it. Look around - take a lift, a ramp, an escalator to wherever or whatever looks interesting.

CHOOSE [sic] what you want to do or watch someone else doing it. Learn how to handle tools, paint, babies, machinery or just listen to your favorite tune. Dance, talk or be lifted up to where you can see how other people make things work. Sit out over space with a drink and tune in to what's happening elsewhere in the city. try starting a riot or beginning a painting – or just lie back and stare at the sky.

WHAT TIME IS IT? [sic] Any time of day or night, winter or summer – it really doesn't matter. If it's too wet that roof will stop the rain but not the

light. The artificial cloud will keep you cool or make rainbows for you.
Your feet will be warm as you watch the stars – the atmosphere clear as
you join the chorus. (Mimeo and Ms material on Fun Palace Project, Box
3, Folder 9, The Michael Barker Collection, Harry Ransom Center, UT
Austin)

While it can be understood as a failing or diluted move of socialist thinking that gets itself pre-occupied with urban centers instead of considering the suggested benefits for the underprivileged, in its need to stay temporary, as a “a short-term play thing in which all of [them] can realize the possibilities and delights that a 20th Century city environment owes [them]” and “must last no longer than [they] need it,” leaving targeted population undefined.⁴³⁹ I argue that its contrasts with the destructive revolutionary tenets of 1968 are its offering an accommodating, free urban space, “with architects, designers, engineers, cyberneticians, cooks, topologists, toy-makers, flow masters, think clowns, [that] offers you the occasion to enjoy, 24 hours a day, space, light, movement, air, sun, water, in a new dimension”; its planning to mobilize “international, national and private organizations,” setting up a trust for its administrative and financial burdens and finally leaving all direction in the hand of teachers, scientists and artists.⁴⁴⁰ The motive of animating the audience is seen commonly in 1930s, for example in Brecht’s work, and also in MacColl’s and Littlewood’s discourse. The spirit of the 1930s’ finding only the best fit for the working class, and serving them with only the best in terms of technology, culture, art is quite removed from the spirit of 1968 that Hans Enzensberger claims to have sprung from the middle class, and to have advocated for anarchy in the urban

⁴³⁹ Mel Gussow Collection Container 109.1, Littlewood, Joan 1964-94. Harry Ransom Center for Performing Arts at the University of Texas at Austin.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid.

space and a deconstruction of many technological, social and artistic norms (like traditional theatre), starkly contrasting, I would argue, the working-class motivation to reach for the amenities of a better life in their inter-war revolutionary fervor and their more practical post-war attitudes.⁴⁴¹ It is possible to historicize Schechner's new-found environmental theatre axioms as an attempt to read the response of theatre to the new civic movements of the late sixties. In his survey of the exemplary historical models of environmental theatre, Schechner gives little credit to the agit-prop movement of a similarly, yet more radically responsive theatre of the Russian avant-garde or the WTM of the 1920s and 1930s, although he does mention American street theatre. Schechner's including Littlewood's Fun Palace project in his periodical provides a case to consider the contrast where we can see how Littlewood's intentions are shaped by the Old Left's structures of feeling (instructive, reforming revolutionary), whereas Schechner mostly observes and describes his contemporary situation that is the New Left described by Enzensberger as destructive and revolutionary in character. The New Left's actors were mostly middle class, such as anti-war youth, draft centers and campuses – except for the civil rights marches - and Schechner observes the political edge in their mobilizations, instigating a new theatre, appropriating the streets as “public arenas, testing grounds, stages for morality plays.”⁴⁴² In an anthropological approach, he compares the conditions of the new environmental theatre, with its use of mixed audience and performance space, to a set of performances from non-literate rituals to Bauhaus projects. Schechner writes in his article, “everyday street life is marked by movement and the exchange of space; street demonstrations are a special form of street life which depend on the heightened application of the everyday regulations. The ever-increasing use

⁴⁴¹Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “Constituents of a theory of the media,” in Marris, Paul., and Thornham, Sue. *Media Studies: A Reader*, (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 73.

⁴⁴² Schechner, *Six Axioms*, 55.

of public space outdoors for rehearsed activities is having its impact on the indoor theatre.”⁴⁴³ Arguably, Ewan MacColl’s Theatre of Action sprang from similar tensions in 1934, in the wake of the divide between WTM’s emphasis on agit-prop (and later social realism) versus the need to explore the indoors theatre by the young theatre activists. The streets were the roaming ground of left-wing activists to affectively reach the non-theatre-going public with their dramatic propaganda. 1930s’ agitation and propaganda on the streets originated from Soviet Russia and these street activisms were shaped and instigated by the communist ideology, in contrast to the New Left’s revolutionary environments that were shaped more by random civil disobedience and protest of the historical moment. I would argue that Schechner’s observations of this newly mobilizing political edge are anthropological rather than political or sociological, and they are spatially concerned perspectives that partly constitute the scope and method of performance studies discipline. The agitation and propaganda performances of the interwar period had similarly trackable/observable spatial configurations. Although an agit-prop cannot be categorized as a random event in terms of its intentionality, its impacts in terms of its breaking into the public space and altering its flow and consciousness highly resonate with the environmental theatre that Schechner describes.

Another novelty that Schechner explores among the six axioms of environmental theatres is the interventionist capacities of the technical crew in stage management. Littlewood consented to a cybernetic theatre project drafted by a technician, Gordon Pask, although there is no indication that it was realized. The project completely resonates with Schechner’s vision of including performing technicians, where he describes some of the technical features of a Czech performance he saw in 1967 (referred as the Czechoslovak Pavilion at the Expo 67 World

⁴⁴³ Schechner, *Six Axioms*, 50.

Exhibition): “the creative technician will demand fuller participation in performances; and at many times during a performance the actor will support the technician, whose activated equipment will be ‘center stage.’”⁴⁴⁴ Here the performance created with the technical aid of complex visual and audial systems differs somehow from Pask’s project which developed a possibility of varied audience response that could alter the plot of the play, interfering with the through line and thus gaining theatre an advantage over TV and cinema. The project included “a physical communication system which [was] fairly inexpensive and capable of installation in any conventional theatre ... [with] special procedures for programming a dramatic performance which involves a number of techniques entailed in plotting and scripting any play that is performed in the cybernetic theatre system,” allowing various scripts for a single play, hence requiring modifications and adaptations to have been previously prepared, as well as an audience of 50 – 100 for informal tech run. There is a note by Pask in the project that Littlewood was open to these ideas, and that she even “instrumented some of them in Theatre Workshop,’ eventually giving in to financial constraints, to have to reshape her inclinations in including audience response ‘in the direction of architecturally novel structures to accommodate a novel form of dramatic activity.’”⁴⁴⁵

As Schechner describes the features of this new theatre concept, he reads social activism as performance, whereas Littlewood’s objective is arguably, to create a space for such social action, which is in keeping with the spirit of the old Left, where an ideal state model sponsored revolutionary progress. Schechner’s list of the features that create the environmental theatre

⁴⁴⁴ Schechner, *Six Axioms*, 48.

⁴⁴⁵ Gordon Pask, ‘Proposals for a Cybernetic Theatre,’ Michael Barker Collection of Joan Littlewood, Series I, Subseries D: Fun Palace Trust, Box 3, Folder 11, Harry Ransom Center, UT Austin.

excludes similar historical responses of theatre to political circumstances such as WTM or Blue Blouse, even though they fit in with the spatial frame of his descriptions. I observe the differences to be that the WTM was propaganda but the 68 events were self-induced series of reactions. Early twentieth-century hunger marches in England happened before the communist party interventions yet they were organized by the labor organizations and they come close to the norms of the civil rights marches that Schechner lists among his examples. The street had been a mature environment for the representation of political strife earlier than 1968. It is possible to think that what brought the performative circumstances to Schechner's observations was that they were happening in his time and space: at visible urban space and most importantly, they mostly echoed the progressive middle class, as the owner of that urban space, who differed greatly from the marching thousands in the Hunger Marches of the early 20th century in Britain and the social drama occurring had quite different affects. Joan Littlewood's Fun Palace would have been a temporary intervention in the twenty-first century occupy spirit to validate visibility and a 'carnavalesque' presence of unspecified urban communities, yet it did aim at providing non-discriminate access to major commercial urban districts, and that arguably signifies a class-oriented approach to occupying places, deliberately expressed in the typically Marxist revolutionary propositions of reversing capitalist urban expansions: "building a short-term play thing in which all of us can realize the possibilities and delights that a 20th Century city environment owes us."⁴⁴⁶ The diehard political attitude of Littlewood continued in the same spirit in her more spatially-oriented interventions in everyday life as she worked in her Bubble City projects and London Summer Fair projects of 1967. In a leaflet prepared for the Bubble City

⁴⁴⁶ Mel Gussow Collection Container 109.1, Littlewood, Joan 1964-94. Harry Ransom Center for Performing Arts at the University of Texas at Austin.

project, there is a question, “Where are the activists in East London?” and the answer is given under: “in the tenants’ associations; in the new playground associations being formed all over the country; among the young parents and grandparents concerned about their children’s future,” and a mention of a number of playground associations being formed across East London.⁴⁴⁷ It is easy to assume that Joan Littlewood eschewed both theatre and politics in her last working phase as disillusionment runs rampant in her interviews, but given examples show that she did not lose her progressive revolutionary fervor in her projects. She continues to think and act like an old-school leftist. She is for the masses, for technology, for cultural and class-related emancipation. Her projects are cooperated with technologies of industrial scale, although that seems like a betrayal of fight against the capital. Even as Littlewood’s anti-establishment stand seems to have been impacted by late 1960s as she was adapting to the business aspects of theatre and setting up the Fun Palace project as a trust, including a lord and an earl on its board, and a prominent scientist Buckminster Fuller, known for his humanist theories and fiction besides his scientific work; cooperating with the City of London that she explicitly despised in the 1940s by taking place in the city’s Summer Fair; cooperating with big industrial business like Honda, 3 M Corp, in the spirit of the Artist Placement Group initiative that encouraged and organized design artists’ working in big industrial labs of these huge firms; openly expressing that both theatre and politics were useless and stating that she became what she attacked, it can be said that Joan Littlewood’s progressive spirit of the Old Left turned to saving children from the streets, emancipating metropolitan populations in benevolently regulated spaces.⁴⁴⁸ In a 1973 interview

⁴⁴⁷ Bubble City (Pamphlet), The Michael Barker Collection, Series I, Subseries E, Box 3, Folder 12, Harry Ransom Center

⁴⁴⁸ Even though there is no indication that Littlewood officially cooperated in the Artist Placement Group project, examples from her post-theatrical work suggest such a working context with large industrial corporations under the auspices of London Summer Fair of 1968. A

that Littlewood gave to the *Sunday Times*, where she was asked how football could become a spectacle, her answer was like a summary of how they regarded theatre for their targeted audiences: “The day of a match should be a festival, a pageant of sporting and other happenings ... [with] a choice of alternative activity while the match is taking place ... It would be better than hanging around the pubs and getting bored ... the [football] clubs (she cites West Ham particularly) are possessive and secretive ... It’s what we’re battling; exclusiveness,” expressing her attempts to cooperate with the district clubs to no avail.⁴⁴⁹ Thus, as she shares her ideas on how to enliven football, which she compares to theatre in terms of its dependence on the public, she gives away her unerring position to stand for inclusion, education (she also throws in the idea of discussing the game after the match so that “really fervent fans and youngsters” could be kept off the streets) and entertainment. This position of Littlewood is a clear extension of their commitment to include the underdog in the affairs of the community and the nation in a beneficial fashion and her use of an excerpt from a progressive architecture periodical, *Archigram*, as an epigram for her Bubble City project’s leaflet attests to her Old Left orientations while keeping up with the norms of community engagement and service:

press release titled ‘Industry helps the Arts Bubble,’ and a press statement from the Corporation of London titled ‘City of London Festival Big Day for the Children in the City’ mention Fun palace itinerant Trust’s Mobile Fair Project that includes ‘toys, games and entertainment structures and events such as a 50’ windmill with bells and clastons, an inflatable world where everything inflates, a humanoid, a bubble environment, and a human kaleidoscope, you can shout at a wall and watch it change color according to your tone.’ A churchyard was spared to designers working with Joan Littlewood to try their ideas and major industrial corporations such as Dunlopillo, 3 M Company and Pirelli Ltd and Honda donated material The overall design belonged to one of the Archigram Group founders, architect Peter Cook. Press Release for City of London Festival summer fair, 1968, The Michael Barker Collection, Series I, Subseries D, The Fun Palace Trust, Box 3, Folder 10. Harry Ransom Center.

⁴⁴⁹ John Lovesey, ‘What the game needs,’ *Sunday Times*, January 7, 1973, The Michael Barker Collection of Joan Littlewood, Series I, Subseries D, Mimeo and ms. material on Fun Palace project, Box 3, Folder 9. Harry Ransom Center.

We are nearing the time when we can all realize our aspirations. It is too simple to see this merely as the amassing of objects, but they represent pretty accurately the directions outwards that our mental environment can reach: to the furthest imaginable limits. This is the crux of the matter: in the past, the indulgences of the mind and in intellect (as applied to artefacts) was the privilege of the rich. (*Archigram* 8, Bubble City (Pamphlet), The Michael Barker Collection, Series I, Subseries E, Box 3, Folder 12, Harry Ransom Center)

These examples can testify to the continuing structure of the old left feeling in Littlewood's commitment to inclusion of and bringing access to the marginalized people in all affairs of the society even as she is submerged into the 1960s' spirit of events and "happenings."⁴⁵⁰ Her outlets for her aims and her motives changed, but her intentions did not alter. She was never formalistically concerned with the outcome of her work and this kept her operating tools and projects dynamic and adapting to the new conditions. Littlewood proposed to produce the civic action as she shifted from directing theatre to enticing people to get active, imaginative and animated at a customized urban space sanctioned by the City or local government. Hans Enzensberger regarded the New Left with a certain skepticism due to its inherent sadism in enjoying the spectacle of destruction (he uses the German word *schadenfreude* that online Merriam-Webster translates as 'a feeling of enjoyment that comes

⁴⁵⁰ The City of London Festival that Littlewood contributed with her itinerant Mobile fair Project included a 'happening' by the architect Peter Cook, listed in their contribution to the festival. The content of the happening is not specified, only explained as, "'Blow up a Column' or 'A Column Blown Up and Down' by Peter Cook, Architectural Association and Archigram." Press Release for City of London Festival summer fair, 1968, The Michael Barker Collection, Harry Ransom Center.

from seeing or hearing about the troubles of other people’) of technological tools along with various other structures. This is another contrasting point with the traditional left of the 1930s’ propagandist art as MacColl had, at various times, expressed the importance in their work, like Brecht, to come as possibly close to the new versions of the mass media as possible and include it on their stage. The two periods’ comprehension of revolutionary action, therefore, were quite different.⁴⁵¹ The details shared above can only be gathered in a perspective that is ready to take sides with the Old Left radicalism of the Littlewood-MacColl collaboration. Forms traced objectively will betray signs that speak for the truth of Littlewood’s sustained commitment to her work as politics that prioritizes progressive class politics.

De-auratization of the theatre for working-class audiences

The transgressive liveness of Theatre Workshop’s carnivalesque stage was a means of taking their highly disciplined work and their sophisticated art to the working class, to raise awareness of the dysfunctions in the social system in which they were scorned and motivated for upward social mobility, and left socially and culturally dispossessed. In his epilogue of *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, Howard Goorney offers useful insight to the matters of ‘playing down’ or

⁴⁵¹ While it may sound off the topic, MacColl’s observations on the class difference can be extended into this conversation, as he refers in the following excerpt to how working-class people maintained their personal care more robustly than middle-class people, arguably exposing the fact that they would not destroy amenities or technological assets, as their fight was about a democratic access to such amenities: “I’d already recognized the fact that middle class people once they roughed it a little bit, [were] incapable of really looking after themselves, whereas working-class people who never had any of the amenities ... up until the age of 18 I’d never been in house that had a bath. I bathed in ... from the time I was 14 I used to go in the back yard and I used to turn a hose on myself, winter and summer. Of cold water ... we had one cold water tap and a kitchen sink ... that’s all we had.” Peggy Seeger, Ewan MacColl interview at Grass Roots Studio Portland, Nov. 1982. Tape 13 Transcript p.8, Audiotapes/Cassettes Documents Parsley Sage and Politics: Transcripts of interviews with Ewan MacColl in Ewan MacColl & Peggy Seeger Archives at Ruskin College, Oxford.

‘writing down’ for the working class. Such terms are used in middle-class perspectives expressed in views of playwrights such as David Edgar, whom Goorney refers for his statement that the most powerful political theatre had been made “in custom-built buildings patronized almost exclusively by the middle class.”⁴⁵² Goorney disagrees and writes that the impact of such plays were largely negated by the fact that they were “inaccessible to those directly concerned – the working class,” and states “it is possible to write ‘up’ as well as ‘down’.”⁴⁵³

Hans-Thies Lehmann offers a fruitful perspective that helps define and theorize Theatre Workshop’s highly improvisatory stage as a tool for reaching out to non-theatre-going popular or working-class audiences. Theatre Workshop’s stage resonates with what Lehmann terms the ‘production of presence,’ in their strategy to reach the working-class and other marginalized communities: Lehmann describes the Benjaminian extensions of liveness – how the live experience, in its immediate urgency deters the conditions for aesthetic conception and moves things towards the grasp of the audience that, in Benjaminian terms, would cost the art work its aura. MacColl and Littlewood prioritized the audience response and sought to bring all high-brow inclinations of theatre down to earth; to some level that their audience could appreciate and see eye-to-eye. That is a strategy that affirms Lehman’s reference to Walter Benjamin’s description of the process whereby things are moved “within reach so that they can be touched” that causes the “de-auratization of the arts.”⁴⁵⁴ I argue that Theatre Workshop’s intended stage-audience relationship which informed all their acting, writing (and adapting), and design facilities, in fact rested on this premise of bringing the artwork into the reaches of the ‘people,’ or the masses for Benjamin. From an acting point of view, the eclectic styles of dance, mime and

⁴⁵² Goorney, *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, 203.

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁴ Lehmann, “The Present of performance,” 364.

clowning and variety promoted in the company helped bring about the carnivalesque effect, which ultimately worked to strip away any claims of high art. Goorney writes about how Littlewood helped him with rehearsing the language of *Richard II*:

[W]ell-known speeches still seemed to present problems and Joan was able to help me Gaunt's 'This England' speech by destroying the feeling of respect and awe with which I approached it. I clowned it, put it into gibberish and generally sent it up. Having in this way broken down the artificial barrier I had erected between myself and the speech, I was able to tackle it, without worry, through the verse and its rhythms. Sometimes physical efforts were used as an antidote to any tendency to be carried away by the beauty of the poetry ... bringing out the essential meaning of the verse. (Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 101)

The raw stage language that had to be trimmed on its way to the West End had the aim of bringing their work closer to the resonances of their audiences: Their displaying "face-to-face encounters" between audience and actors (as in Behan's case and by planting actors in the audience) and thus opening their stage to audience intervention and creating a "co-presencing of the individual [as the actor] with the social bodies" of the audience, and consequently running on simultaneously theatrical and real time, create a liminal norm for the Theatre Workshop stage that brought forward the performative aspect for the much needed organic ties with its environment: their 'people.'⁴⁵⁵ Looking back at their earlier performances such as

⁴⁵⁵ The terms I use here, such as 'face-to-face encounter,' 'co-presencing of the individual [as the actor] with the social bodies' belong to Jon McKenzie, in his essay 'The liminal-norm,' where he lists general aspects of performance as an embodied transgression. Jon McKenzie, 'The liminal-

Fuenteovejuna, which was successful commercially, we see that the theatre-going audiences were not enough for MacColl and Littlewood; they had to reach out to the public sphere out in the streets and have that “face-to-face encounter” in any case, in the agit-prop spirit, accessing the live space and time of the non-theatre-going people in Manchester. As a remnant of such urgencies, their stage was conducive to such transgressions and looked to generate a two-way communication to make the spectator a part of the action as intended by the left-wing revolutionary theatres. By generating such performative aspects that transgress theatrical conventions and create states that the audience is awkwardly both in and out of the spectatorship experience (by the two-way communication where actors recite their parts directly to the audience, questions and interruptions are provoked, etc.) the Theatre Workshop brought matters that seemed beyond the grasp of the working class to the working-class reality and understanding. Ewan MacColl’s own play, *Uranium 235* which Littlewood calls in her autobiography as “a historical pageant for the advancement of science,” was launched in its short version in Newcastle and it had to have Bill Davidson in its “center, as an ambiguous figure,” because part of the production encouraged interruptions and provoked questions from the audience and he would be the one to answer, because he was the one who instructed MacColl on atomic physics in his writing process. Littlewood writes that the stage was flooded with young enthusiastic audience members “arguing, questioning, examining [their] sound and lighting equipment.”⁴⁵⁶ Same play was performed to universities as well as vacationing working-class families. *Uranium 235* featured in a crowded, free program of wrestlers and rumba At Billy Butlin’s Holiday Camp at Filey, and received, according to Littlewood, the same treatment they

norm,’ in Henry Bial and Sara Brady eds. *The Performance Studies Reader*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 10.

⁴⁵⁶ Littlewood, *Joan’s Book*, 191.

were giving to anyone else, shouting and clapping, “as if it had been a music-hall turn.”⁴⁵⁷

However, Goorney’s account of the campers’ reception is much more optimistic: for him, the warm response was a confirmation of what they believed, “there was no necessity to play down or compromise when faced with a working-class audience.”⁴⁵⁸ This episodic morality play performed to its audience the complexity of the scientific processes behind the creation of atomic bomb, as well as the universal ethical burdens of the scientists as its co-creators. The atomic particles’ interactions were represented as frenzied gang couples’ dance sequences, in colloquial moves and language that appealed to popular audiences as well as university students and lecturers. The idea of compromise or playing down, I believe, was part of the profession’s prejudiced regard for the popular entertainment forms which basically made up the larger ratio in Theatre Workshop’s style. By the same token, the Russian avant-garde’s experiments were initially promoted by the Soviet regime to the extent that they could fit the arts to the people’s comprehensions. However, it is interesting to note that the same artistic compromise was also a Stalinist policy, as discussed in the previous chapters that looked at promoting a more didactic and propagandist art within the tenets of social realism. As I will discuss in the coming section, it is easy to discern that both the highbrow prejudices of the establishment theatre and the Stalinist restoration of the unities that discarded the experimental and more sensual avant-garde, operated against the working classes that were seen soulless or without needs for proper life standards by the elite and uneducated masses by the revolutionaries who believed that theatre should be didactic or propaganda – allowing less of the aesthetic medium to negotiate through sensual,

⁴⁵⁷ Littlewood, *Joan’s Book*, 200.

⁴⁵⁸ Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, 53.

evocative expression, reception and emotional response.⁴⁵⁹ The Soviet experiment with the avant-garde that, as Bowlt writes, “scarcely affected the public for whom it was intended, for the ‘new consumer was uneducated, if not illiterate, and had little appreciation of the niceties of Cubo-Futurism, Suprematism and Constructivism.”⁴⁶⁰ That also applies to the lives of the English popular entertainment consumers – the working-class - who, in my observation, were somehow trapped in a liminal sphere that resonates with Victor Turner’s description of liminal entities and their *communitas*, mostly in their “possessing nothing,” being reproached by the elite as being vulgar and having “no status, property, insignia,” or else to “indicate rank or role, position” in society; generally behaving “passive or humble”; “obeying their instructors implicitly, and accept[ing] arbitrary punishment without complaint” and with a tendency to “develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism,” and with a potential to “submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders,” who in the working-class interpretation of the scheme could range from a vacation camp director who ruled every move of the vacationers at Butlin’s to their union leader or factory boss.⁴⁶¹ These aspects are given by Turner as descriptive features of a cast of awkward, less-motivated people in the progress of ritual, who are in the process of becoming something more and they are expressed as liminal. Turner describes the liminal phase as a transitory mode. Its characteristics are rudimentary and unstructured and make up the ‘*communitas*’ as opposed to the more hierarchical, saturated social system of ‘politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of “more” or

⁴⁵⁹ John E. Bowlt quotes from Boris Arvatov who rejected the constructivist art and the aesthetics sought in mechanization and called on to theatre artists to ‘become designers not of art but of life,’ and to ‘move into life,’ for the ‘working class want[ed] real, scientifically organized forms, not illusions.’ Bowlt, ‘From studio to stage, from surface to space,’ *Russian Avant-garde Theatre*, 29.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁶¹ Victor Turner, “Liminality and *communitas*” in *The Performance Studies Reader*, 98-9.

“less.”⁴⁶² It is possible to regard the working class as the bottom of such a rational politico-legal-economic structure; a class of people in the larger ‘social drama’ resonating with the characteristics of *communitas*, in terms of their projections or image in the social structure with their sense of despair, lowliness, lack of motivation and unresponsiveness to the calls for class-consciousness.⁴⁶³ In one of her analyses of Theatre Workshop productions, Nadine Holdsworth also refers to Stephen Greenblatt’s description of how “‘low-life excursions’ and mastery of “‘tavern slang’” [in Shakespeare’s *Henry IV*,] stage a transgression “for the pleasure of what Victor Turner calls ‘*communitas*’ – a union based on the momentary breaking of the hierarchical order that normally governs a community.”⁴⁶⁴ Holdsworth refers to Greenblatt’s textual exploration of the liminal and *communitas* in Shakespeare’s *Henry IV* concentrating on the character Hal in the play, as he observes the low life that he will be ruling, which need to represent some scenes in the play that Littlewood, in her version of *Henry IV* ruled out, so “in her version, the vision of ‘*communitas*’ [held] sway,” according to Holdsworth.⁴⁶⁵ Thus, repeating her textual approaches to Theatre Workshop productions, Holdsworth arguably disregards the

⁴⁶² Victor Turner, “Liminality and *communitas*,” 98-9.

⁴⁶³ These observations also rely on MacColl’s expressions of contempt for the ruling elite, shared in the second chapter: ‘our rulers ... are not conscious of the fact that working people possess human dignity or indeed that they have feelings of any kind ... let us hear no more of the equality of sacrifice or grinning and bearing it, or how we British can take it. Don’t bother trying to conceal your contempt for us and we won’t try to conceal our hatred of you.’ Regarding Victor Turner’s term ‘social drama,’ the hunger marches of the working class and the unemployed in the earlier decades of the twentieth century can be regarded as such, as they did become something of a conventionalized behavior performed publicly and more than once, although with no results. MacColl, *Journeyman*, 195; for definition of Turner’s ‘social drama’ as events that ‘occur on all levels of social organization from state to family,’ that arise out of conflict and work themselves towards ‘their denouements thorough publicly performed conventionalized behavior,’ which either resolve the tension and restore the status-quo or cause deeper unsettling results, see Clifford Geertz, “Blurred genres,” *Performance Studies Reader*, 67.

⁴⁶⁴ Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood’s Theatre*, 116.

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

performance dimension that can speak the complex liminal language of its audiences, and create *communitas per se* on its stage and auditorium. Despite acknowledging the biographical assets inherent in these productions (which she ascribes solely to MacColl), Holdsworth's view denies Littlewood and MacColl's first-hand experiences and their identification with this liminal state of de-classed, impoverished working-class people. Holdsworth's interpretation of Littlewood's comparing her actors as "nuts, clowns and villains," to Shakespeare's own actors as "leary misfits, anarchists, out of work soldiers and wits who worked their ideas in pubs," reflects the biased views: "in line with her reputation as 'a walking paradox, a rag bag of contradictions,' Littlewood both asserted the importance of her endeavor to promote the relevance and popular appeal of Shakespeare, and simultaneously, undermined the seriousness of her theatrical experimentation."⁴⁶⁶

I argue that the Theatre Workshop, working class, created a theatrical language to communicate with the working-class *communitas* in its productions and eventually de-auratized the theatre art for their interest and comprehension, hence her undermining any seriousness of her theatrical experimentations. In its grotesque realism, Theatre Workshop stage translated human affairs into the views of this class, which bourgeois theatre considered as 'writing down,' ascribing and limiting working-class entertainment genres to the lower styles of popular entertainment. However, Theatre Workshop's objectives leaned more towards communication than entertainment in their revolutionary aim to uplift that class. Turner writes of *communitas*, (which can be described as liminal, transitory, co-dependent and submissive) and structure (as differentiated, rational, and saturated) as contrasting modes of existence, following each other's tenure and without the other, neither can exist. It is very interesting at this point to reflect on the

⁴⁶⁶ Holdsworth, *Joan Littlewood's Theatre*, 118.

nature of the communist revolution as professed by Trotsky that the revolution and the working class are temporary vehicles to access the riches and the life style of the bourgeois and therefore the bourgeois art and values should be understood well. Much as Turner writes that *communitas* is a transitory phase towards structure or as Trotsky implies that the revolution is a temporary tool on the path to higher life standard, when the model is applied as objectives for a working-class theatre, the results are worth a debate, as the historical trends do imply progress in the economic welfare for the working class, but it is difficult to say if that progress happened culturally, and if the working-class modes of behavior have exceeded popular cultural inclinations or not. However, considering how the liminal term lends itself to the projections or image of working-class behavior, the perspective offers to stretch some thought on how the liminal groups as part of a *communitas* tend to respond to a certain raw theatrical style composed from the various elements of popular entertainment and avant-garde techniques in acting and design, and are more likely to be animated by them, if not be moved to political will or action. This appears to explain Howard Goorney's objection to David Edgar: "David Edgar goes on to assert that the form and language of these plays requires [sic], for their understanding, a cultural or academic background denied to the majority of people, thus rendering them even more inaccessible. It is possible to write 'up' as well as 'down'!"⁴⁶⁷ The Theatre Workshop managed to make sophisticated modern theatre accessible for the popular audience, stripping it from its highbrow aura. They did it without reproducing and exposing the values and expectations of the 'structure' or the Establishment upon the working class or the popular audiences.

The liminal norm as an agency in popular genres of entertainment has been explored previously, in ways that I argue to be working contrary to the endeavors of Theatre Workshop.

⁴⁶⁷ Goorney, *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, 203.

Sophie Nield explains how popular entertainment traditionally works as a tool of containment of the lower classes, in her explorations of nineteenth and early twentieth-century popular entertainments, particularly at the seaside vacation camps.⁴⁶⁸ It is possible to compare the fenced environment of such camps (from the Theatre Workshop accounts), to a place of containment and distraction. According to Littlewood, “the shows were continuous, and free – one never-ending variety show,” as a continuous entertainment or distraction; a hell for the free-spirited Theatre Workshop crew, who made up games of escape by digging tunnels, and yet a happy hell for the campers, who made no attempt of stepping beyond the fences and wander into the beach that was only a hundred yards away.⁴⁶⁹ Such places, Sophie Nield explains, allowed popular theatrical genres to operate within the corporeal potentials of the seaside camps that Nield calls liminal environments, to debate and promote the acceptable norms of social behavior, and enlarge the cultural domains of the establishment. The WTM and its Russian avant-garde origins of the revolutionary theatres also used the stage to display the proud stature of the worker figure, promoting a cultural identity for the working class. For example, Tom Thomas’s *Their Theatre and Ours* (1932) stages the contrast between the classes by emphasizing the highly disciplined, organized and synchronized moves of the workers as opposed to the sloppy moves of the professional actors, opening, for example, with a troupe of six performers “march[ing] on well disciplined, singing enthusiastically and in well-marked rhythm.”⁴⁷⁰ These moves were propaganda itself with an aim to guide and direct the rise of the working class; to guide the

⁴⁶⁸Sophie Nield, “Popular Theatre, 1895–1940,” *The Cambridge History of British Theatre*, by Baz Kershaw, edited by Baz Kershaw, 86–109. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. <https://doi-org.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/10.1017/CHOL9780521651325.005>

⁴⁶⁹ Littlewood, *Joan’s Book*, 201.

⁴⁷⁰ Mick Wallis, “Social Commitment and Aesthetic Experiment,” 142;176-7.

liminal transition from their consumerism of the popular entertainment's jingoism to self-disciplined, empowered workers' image.⁴⁷¹

Thomas and others insisted that WTM troupes be precisely drilled. A typically arresting sight would be a group of uniformed players—wearing neat workplace overalls – acrobatting into a perfectly sculpted chevron of bodies poised for action. This swift but tight control embodies the optimism, aptitude and power of young women and men with future vision.' (Mick Wallis, 'Social Commitment and Aesthetic Experiment,' 177)

Resorting back to Lehmann's term 'secondary manner reflection' whereupon, I claim, the theatre industry which Kershaw calls the theatre estate is built, certainly had its own versions in the Soviet theatre and the WTM that MacColl and Littlewood looked upon and learned from, as their ideal theatre estate. The intended co-presence of the actors and the audience, in Theatre Workshop's methods that extend the usual borders of ephemerality, had no scruples for the secondary manner of reflection that their local (British) theatre industry created and which they avoided for seventeen years of their touring business. Joan Littlewood would not even read the reviews to the group members, probably because she wanted to stay as the primary source of feedback and to spare the actors any chance of a self-created security on the stage. They cared

⁴⁷¹ As I discussed in the second chapter, the artistic premise for these performances was set in the Russian Avant-garde trends set by Meyerhold and his cooperating designers. The ideal, effective and efficient motion flow, along with 'its physiological extension and visual registration' were being devised in the Choreological Laboratory under the auspices of the Soviet state and the mixing of folkloric genres with the new theatre had brought various experiments in movement and design that revolutionary theatres like Theatre Workshop followed. Nicoletta Misler, "Precarious bodies: performing constructivism," *Russian Avant-garde Theatre*, 53.

for the reviews as long as they could get them recognition for funding, otherwise the ensemble was kept sterile from its own promising potential for commercial success, until the West End transfers started stealing their actors, probably causing a deeper hatred in Littlewood against theatre business. Littlewood, in her later career, turned down invitations from the American universities for lectures. The estate of theatre proved MacColl right on his word upon leaving the group during talks of London settlement: that they would eventually become an avant-garde theatre working to appeal to the critics; the estate's working upon them would end them, and it did, and Littlewood's techniques have been called, in a mystifying fashion, 'idiosyncratic' and herself, "a walking paradox, a rag bag of contradictions."⁴⁷² That is the theater estate's view of the Theatre Workshop. The new theatre of the Soviets, had it survived the Popular Front and WW2, clearly would have been Theatre Workshop's adopted theatre estate. We can safely assume that this was the model of the theatrical environment in Littlewood and MacColl's imaginary when they were embarking upon their experimental 'people's theatre'. I find it possible, therefore that, when Littlewood showed no hesitation in cooperating with a central power of the city she once explicitly hated, namely City of London, in her Bubble City, Summer Fair and Fun Palace projects, she is conversant with the image of that kind of estate, from her Old Left structure of feeling. The Soviet model for the people's theatre was a promise— in which the worker-actors sincerely believed; the work was not viewed as futile and all the preparations for the empowerment of this class were undertaken with a sense of vitality and urgency.

⁴⁷² Holdsworth's reference to Kenneth Tynan, *Tynan Right and Left: Plays, Films, People, Places and Events* (London: Longmans, 1967), 317, in Holdsworth, end notes to *Joan Littlewood's Theatre*, 280.

Conclusion

It is possible to trace continuing trends of the Old Left into the New Left in Joan Littlewood's post-theatrical work, as she embraced happenings, the purer design and space related projects, going beyond the theatrical forms and assuming creative relationships with artefacts and space. Both Fun Palace project and the Theatre Workshop stage have been used by Littlewood to bring the unobtainable to the underprivileged populations; the 1960s' larger social context shifted from class fights to a need to catch up with technology and to imagine forms of utopia and the Fun Palace can be imagined as an urban rehearsal ground for the imminent revolution, this time of technology and new work-leisure formulations. However, slum districts continued to live the permanent misfortune of poverty and neglect and Littlewood's Stratford projects that scholarship concentrates on in context of community engagement had more of a direct spatial intervention, such as converting derelict spaces to children's play parks. These progressive steps towards betterment and bringing the unobtainable to the communities or audiences can be assumed in the same vein of de-auratization of an art work or bringing an unlikely artefact or environment to the grasp of locals. Interwar years' state power benevolently involved in the progress of the people was, for Littlewood and MacColl, and many other working-class citizens, the new Soviet state, which arguably shaped their imaginary of a utopian central power that Littlewood wanted to project upon the City of London in her 1968 projects that relied upon funding and permissions for land use.

Conclusion

What, then, is the legacy of the workers' theatre movement of the 1930s? A belief in the power of live performance for touching audiences where they are most vulnerable, for creating images of themselves that can stand up to the insults of the employers and the state, and, ultimately, for reminding them of the importance of resistance.

Lee Papa, *Staged Action*⁴⁷³

The conflicts and disadvantages of undemocratized conditions of earnings and labor balance and its social implications are consistently present in our day of extreme specialization, micro-management, cultural and media policies of distraction and even aggravation. It is the basic premise of Marxist thought and method to sustain a historically-conscious distance from daily affairs to keep in sight the totality of the continuously dispersing, re-generating and blurring trajectories of social, cultural and political schemes, and to re-consider potentials for redefining interests, and for politicizing any given circumstance with the “objectively democratizing force” of that basic perspective and intention. In our day, when the global affairs exacerbate polarizations based on false social and economic paradigms, it is time again, to discuss class politics and its remedial potentials with reference to the interwar left-wing activism expressed in the theatrical medium of labor dramas and WTM conventions, as well as drawing parallels with the New Left's environment of resistance. The discussion would serve its means if

⁴⁷³ Lee Papa, *Staged Action: Six Plays from the American Workers' Theatre*, (Ithaca: ILR Press/Cornell University Press, 2009), 165.

the primary objective remains unhampered by formalistic categories of debate. Formalisms will serve this aim in so far as they can explain the relevance pitch, and the uniquely converging and diverging manners of expressions in different decades, of the same intention and necessity.

Formalist categories of debate would serve our Marxist aims better if they remained exploratory categories rather than determinist ones to claim what trend continues or expires.

Thinkers like Raymond Williams, Fredric Jameson, David Harvey and Chantal Mouffe clearly describe the refined methods and implicit mechanisms of hegemony, cleansing the social conscious from the contents of radical, anti-establishment discourse. Buried under common sense, these issues are no longer common stock of social sense/awareness in the first world order and ways for meeting these sensibilities even half way is difficult under given circumstances that will not recognize them, content and attitude-wise. However, there is an emerging hope in the recent performance studies discourse, especially when coming across scholarly remarks such as Sara Brady's, where she says, "the collapse of politics and theatre can be best identified and analyzed by scholars of performance. The field of performance studies has long argued for the study of actions that occur outside of conventional theatre spaces. Coupled with that challenge is the –yes, political – imperative to recognize performance when we see it. That is the only way forward."⁴⁷⁴ This position is not exempt from the inevitable canonization processes in exploring disciplinary boundaries. Yet the urgencies to reinstate class politics into the discussions of democracy are pressing once again, and I am convinced of the need to reclaim the working-class matter from the expired categories of failed state experiments, or failed weapons of activism and self-assertion.

⁴⁷⁴ Sara Brady, *Performance, Politics and the War on Terror – "Whatever It Takes"* (Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2012), xvi.

I have attempted in this project to question the recent academic accomplishments on the Theatre Workshop legacy. As a candidate in theatre and performance studies scholarship, who believes in the urgencies of eliminating distractions and biases of the canonical perspectives from research on working-class matter and representation in our field, I found my general position to be closer to that of a cultural materialist's, concerned with "what [literary research] is all for," and occupied with the notion that "professional accomplishment is not enough."⁴⁷⁵ I proceeded with a claim that I shared the political urgencies of Littlewood and MacColl, taking sides with the radical leftwing agenda that was best professed in the 1930s, to wane gradually, losing the culture and media wars, although its tangible premises remained as intact as ever, with a growing and more diverse population base expanding working-class definitions. First chapter was a survey of current disciplinary positions on the radical left-wing material with case studies from Theatre Workshop productions, bridging the timeline between the pre-settlement and post-settlement productions of the ensemble, interrogating claims of formal discontinuity. In this opening chapter, my focus was on the recent interpretations of Theatre Workshop legacy that echoed the de-politicized objectivism of the academy reflecting the widespread cultural aversions to class politics. The first chapter also extended into the popular interpretations of Littlewood's legacy that initiated in 2014 the Fun Palace revivals, resonating with Littlewood's local (Stratford East) projects but eventually undermining the more expansive Old Left trajectories still pulsing in the Fun Palace blueprint that would like to engage with more general, popular categories of participants than a community's inhabitants. Second and third chapters

⁴⁷⁵ Alan Sinfield observes cultural materialism's intentions to reach beyond professional accomplishment as opposed to other literary and critical positions in its recognizing a necessity "to consider the general implications of intellectual work." Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 8.

constituted the common aim of bringing to the fore the rich leftwing ‘theatre estate’ of the 1930s that bore the origins and shaped the roots of Littlewood and MacColl theatrical collaboration, with emphasis on MacColl’s artistic and ideological input that shaped the creative environs of the ensemble, and of Littlewood in ways that would re-emerge like some mystical idea ahead of its time, in the London productions, as in the structural arrangements of their 1957 *Macbeth* production, unidentifiable to the critics of the time or scholars working within the theatre discipline. These discussions were conducted on formalist grounds that explore the origins of some signature style tools such as montage and caption voices in the earlier productions of Theatre Union exposing their Russian avant-garde curriculum and the early inter-mediality in their work. Early labor drama and the popular appeal of the melodrama among working class were discussed with examples demonstrating Littlewood and MacColl’s prioritizing of the local and traditional expressions of the labor matter in popular genres and different mediums. The formalisms were thus broken into their historical compounds to display origins and that they could be retrofitted into the interwar efforts of leftist theatre and activism.

The fourth chapter proposed alternative approaches to the Theatre Workshop stage taking their performative liveness as a key to start discussions on their Marxist premise of observing life materially and truthfully, without moral or any other conflicting reservations, working in tandem with the Stanislavski method on inwardly processing these observations and Laban’s movement technique on rendering them in physical action. These methods allowed the Theatre Workshop stage to take the parody beyond the text to the material and bodily level to demonstrate the carnivalesque that Bakhtin has defined as operating at grotesque realism mode. Thus, it was possible to interrogate claims of poetic realism to be working in MacColl’s texts, from the premise that the street was an essential and a materialist source of learning and performing for

Theatre Workshop as opposed to suggested literary contexts that were popular in 1950s West End realism. Furthermore, Theatre Workshop stage allowed interventions in multiple layers and any literary or textual exploration, when talking about this stage, must consider this interventionist capacity as the final determinant. This allowance and even encouragement, I have argued, was what kept them immune from the conventional theatre's operatic modes: Littlewood did not mind spoiling enchanting aesthetic moments of her theatre for the sake of stepping up on the stage and delivering lengthy rhetoric on social injustice. Such alert, accessible and transgressive features of their stage, with a performative awareness of its intentions as well as its environment had to be discussed in alternative ways; new positions had to be taken and the focus had to shift to Littlewood and MacColl's own intentions rather than the products they delivered. The peculiar life of their ensemble, their choices and principles that kept them going in the face of postwar hostilities of austerity and conservatism in the British nation was another topic that has not yet been explored in scholarship as a formative paradigm in their legacy. The topic offered rich outlets that helped develop further links between touring years and Littlewood's post-theatrical work, working with theoretical Marxist methods that do not accept the general notion of failure linked to the failed state experiment of the Soviet Russia, and instead focus on the interstices that operate as an enclave that maintains the communist modes of production in hostile environments and on the formulations of relational aesthetics that shift the focus on production processes from the product to the relations that produce it. These discussions are in the French Marxist vein and they helped highlight relational aspects of living and working in a close-knit ensemble structure and the results of these relational productive modes such as highlighting the probable source for Littlewood's original *Macbeth* production to have been a result of her close theatrical partnership with MacColl who continuously used such textual and

structural interventions in his adaptations as shown in *John Bullion* text. Littlewood's reconstructing the central narrative of the play in Macbeth's mind space, who transformed into a typical mid-twentieth-century authoritarian figure. MacColl used similar literary devices borrowed from German impressionism and this production's reconstructing strategy resonates with these expressionistic strategies already used in previous Theatre Workshop productions.

The last chapter was an attempt to more fully employ Raymond Williams' structure of feeling method as an exploratory frame on the Fun Palace idea, looking at its point of inception in the New Left, published by Richard Schechner in his 1968 issue of *The Drama Review*, while, I argued it to be operating more within the trajectory of Old Left feelings and aspirations. The discussion aimed to reconsider formalisms, again, and looked at the historical moment that bore a canon of performance studies, and how that canon, from its birth was exclusive in its choosing of origins, only scantily recognizing American street theatre, but leaving the agit-prop logic out of its defining contexts. However, applying the performance terminology to the essential modes of operation of agit-prop by defining the intended working-class participants (rather than audiences) as liminal and in their capacity to create *communitas*, it was evident that the street performances as activism in the interwar years, lent themselves to defining categories of performance art. Furthermore, Theatre Workshop's transgressive or 'idiosyncratic' stage language came closer to the performance art, surpassing conventions of theatricality. This was due to Littlewood and MacColl's deliberate retention of agit-prop among their expressive tools, adding to their stage that subversive and inclusive atmosphere that kept audiences excited and engaged.

I have found it a promising pursuit to explore the evolution of the communist fervor of the interwar years into the space and community focus of the New Left. There is an interesting

field of research within the converging categories of the communist imaginaries, popular entertainment, and environmentally focused community service or engagement that Theatre Workshop's timeline and Littlewood's career line suggest. Theatre Workshop, in Derek Paget's expression, a Trojan Horse, and in theory, as a communist enclave, can be considered to have found itself in the community theme in a decade after settling in London, and worked to adapt to this evolved version of leftist occupation with the narrower terms of working-class reality; the revolutionary class matter had evolved (or declined) into a service-oriented community matter, which, arguably, was like trying to fit in a narrower outfit for Theatre Workshop. Nonetheless it offered a medium where Theatre Workshop could sustain its "utopian disaffirmation of the present."⁴⁷⁶ Littlewood's Fun Palace project and other spatially focused community engagements such as converting derelict district patches into playgrounds or inviting local football clubs to sponsor activities that could keep youth off the streets can be complicated by surveying evolving norms of communist praxis, in reference to post-Stalinist communist theories of 'communism in reconstruction,' that "presuppose, in the wake of the growing neo-liberal closure of the political process East and West in the mid-1980s, the need for a philosophical and cultural engagement with communist form, the communist imaginary and a (liberatory) communism of the senses."⁴⁷⁷ I believe that the Fun Palace particularly resonates with the idea of creating a communist form that will liberate the senses and stir curiosities and help create productive individuals for the ideal community. It is also imperative to explore the relations of populist forms with these

⁴⁷⁶John Roberts refers to Slavoj Žižek's work, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (2008) as a "a messianic defense of communist praxis as a utopian disaffirmation of the present," whereby he discusses the change in the late twentieth-century praxis of communism as reversal from the communist imaginary into the utopian imaginary, acting like "ghosts of failed utopias, which haunt the future generations, patiently awaiting their next resurrections." John Roberts (2009) "Introduction: Art, 'Enclave Theory' and the Communist Imaginary," 354.

⁴⁷⁷ Roberts, "Introduction: Art, 'Enclave Theory' and the Communist Imaginary," 359.

theorized templates of communist forms, which can highlight the reasons for various progressive theatre people's comparing progressive theatres to football games, as R. H. Packman (in Moussinac's *The New Movement in the Theatre*), Littlewood, MacColl and Hans-Thies Lehmann have, in different decades of the twentieth century.

Ewan MacColl stayed faithful to the Old Left in his music career, and declared that in his theatrical activism of 1980s when the industrial conflicts in England brought the radical left back into focus. He and his famous Critics Group, invested in exploring essential forms of folk music, aimed for a 'folk-theatre' which was among the early examples of pub theatres, due to their itinerant pub programs. Soon enough, with an ambitious move, they embarked on what was to become known as the Festival of Fools, that had gained recognition as "an event of considerable merit" by 1968 and was about to become a professional touring company in 1970, before they split.⁴⁷⁸ MacColl's permanent investment in class politics was self-evident. Interestingly, in his folk singing career with Peggy Seeger, he could tap into the kind of audience they sought in Theatre Workshop's auditoriums in the Singers Clubs, whose membership surveys showed that 67 per cent were manual workers under twenty-four years of age, "young, eager, denim-clad, ready for anything we could give them in the way of songs and information about songs."⁴⁷⁹ Eventually, Ewan MacColl was able to reach the intended working-class audience in his singing career. This may hint at matters of audience response and political efficacy debated in reference to suitable genres or mediums. Both Littlewood and MacColl finally eschewed theatre and sought for new forms of reaching out to audiences or participants. This is likely to cast a different light on the appropriateness of theatre medium for radical politics, however much we

⁴⁷⁸ MacColl, *Journeyman*, 308-9.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 293.

may succeed in bridging the gaps in the timelines of revolutionary theatres in Theatre Workshop's case. However, that does not authenticate the tendencies to rip this theatre from its defining features in order to neutralize its lasting commitments to working-class politics. As I have emphasized, commitment to this kind of topic will not prioritize any form or medium over the other, as both Littlewood and MacColl have demonstrated in their post-theatrical careers and I believe this is the correct attitude if we are to remain occupied with "what it is all for."

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