

MODERN BRITISH SOCIALIST THEATRE:
SOCIAL REVOLUTION AND THE DRAMA OF
HOWARD BRENTON AND JOHN McGRATH

by

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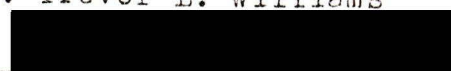
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ABSTRACT

The thesis discusses the political function and production problems of socialist theatre in a capitalist society. Britain has seen a remarkable growth of political theatre in the last few decades. This theatre is discussed within its context of Britain's changing economic and political climate since the 1950's. The thesis examines the relationship between theatre and society, the production of literature, and the cultural identification afforded to art by institutions and classes. It is argued that socialist playwrights are faced with two choices: (1) either they work within the bourgeois theatrical institutions as oppositional voices against the hegemony of ruling class ideology, or (2) they work outside these institutions, performing to working-class audiences and attempting to create a socialist counter-culture based on the working class. The careers of Howard Brenton and John McGrath represent two conflicting responses in both theory and practice by socialist playwrights to this choice. Finally, the thesis examines three plays from each playwright to show the development of differing theatrical form in relation to theoretical considerations and practical constraints.

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Chapter One

Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones.

Marx and Engels.¹

All theatre is in a sense political since it can never be autonomous from society, but workers in a socialist theatre consciously place themselves on the side of the working class and are committed to the abolition of capitalism and to the establishment of socialism. Socialist theatre recognizes capitalism as an absurd and repressive economic system. The class which controls, owns or manages private and state capital is an identifiable group. Capitalist state institutions are organised in the interests of this ruling class supported by the middle and professional classes, and to maintain this system the ruling class has developed an overpowering ideology. In opposition to this system are the exploited working class. Socialist theatre recognizes that this last class remains a potentially revolutionary force, oppressed by false consciousness and the mystification processes of the ruling class ideology; therefore the task of oppositional theatre must be to help raise consciousness by political analysis and the demystification both of history and contemporary conditions, in the knowledge that social revolution can only occur with the rise of a truly socially and politically

conscious working class. This theatre, then, is part of a class struggle conducted daily at the point of production.

The question that obviously arises from this is the critical one of how to mediate contemporary reality given the pressing and limiting conditions of any particular time. Literature cannot be separated from its historical context, and theatre, like all cultural activities, is closely linked to the patterns of production in the economy of a given society, in modern Britain an advanced capitalist one, as well as to the history of class struggle within this society. Indeed it is important that theatre itself is seen to be not just a collection of plays or texts but a means of production within the capitalist society, with managers, workers and unemployed, with complex structural relationships and varied internal contradictions. But the question of who owns the means of production poses a central irony for a socialist playwright within the capitalist system, one that the German Marxist theatre director, Erwin Piscator, had pointed out in the 1920's:

The contradictions in the structure of the theatre is nothing more or less than a contradiction in the times as a whole: it proves to be impossible to build up a proletarian theatre within the framework of our current social structure. A proletarian theatre in fact presupposes that the proletariat has the financial means to support such a theatre, and this presupposes that the proletariat has managed to make itself into a dominant social and economic power.²

Certainly the existence of local and state government subsidy in modern Britain (through the Arts Council of Great Britain) does not entirely circumvent this irony; nevertheless, socialist theatre must support and strengthen the potentially revolutionary working class. Socialist theatre of necessity must always be aware of material conditions. As Piscator himself said,

Can the theatre take the liberty of ignoring the lives of those people down there whilst it indulges in a display of intellectual abstractions, formal arabesques, changelings from its own imagination? It must be real, real to the last detail, unreservedly true. And if it is to become a motive force in their lives, how much more real and true it must be.³

For Piscator, the writer's function was primarily political. His early struggle in Germany during the 1920's to create a truly proletarian theatre represented an attempt to subject "all artistic intention to the revolutionary goal: conscious emphasis and propagation of the idea of class struggle...." His "epic" form was specifically designed to "smash the bourgeois dramaturgy."⁴ Indeed in his free adaptations of other people's work and his use of agit-prop and montage techniques, Piscator became one of the first directors to make the stage as forceful a source of meaning to the "text." His early theatre company played directly to working-class audiences in beer halls and meeting places. Piscator's "Marxist stage constructions" were designed to use all the components of theatre, including audience participation, to comment critically on society:

Political drama must if it is to fulfill its pedagogic aims, make documentary evidence its point of departure, and not the individual. On the contrary, it must maintain the most impersonal, 'objective' attitude to the characters in the subject, not in a neutral sense, but in the sense of a materialistic conception of history.⁵

Piscator's efforts though were thwarted by historical material conditions (Germany in the 1920's was undergoing rapid social, political and economic change) as well as contradictions in his own work, not the least of which was the extravagant expense of his productions which soon exceeded the means of the proletarian and revolutionary audience he originally tried to reach. But, as Terry Eagleton has suggested, a further problem can be seen within the "somewhat oxymoronic term agit-prop. Is socialist art primarily affective (agit) or informative (prop)? And what is the relation between theatre as ideological transformation and theatre as laboratory of dialectical theory?"⁶ Raising knowledge or consciousness in the working class can of course be seen as "ideologically" affective. The problem for Piscator was that he lost his working-class audience. His political theatre, through its very extravagance, became dependent on the bourgeoisie for its production.

For Bertolt Brecht, the reasons for the demise of Piscator's proletarian theatre in Germany were political: "Its increasingly didactic power came into conflict with reactionary forces which were also on the increase."⁷ Piscator's answer was to abandon his attempts to create a

specifically proletarian theatre and to try to raise political consciousness within the bourgeois theatre. Brecht himself was also forced to take this route.

What this brief account of Erwin Piscator reveals is the problem of actual production for socialist theatre given the factors of capitalist markets and the ideology of the dominant ruling class. It is also true to say that the nature of these factors will vary from society to society. What is also important to note is that the writer is never distinct from society and that drama cannot be divorced from its context: the old formulation of the "individual versus society," where the writer or individual is imagined as largely autonomous and society as an undifferentiated external force, is false on two counts. Firstly, since we come to consciousness with a language and a set of social arrangements, there can be no self separable from social being. Secondly, society is neither monolithic nor static. Indeed, what a dialectical approach to history shows is that there can and will be change in societies. Socialist theatre can never in itself cause a social change, but it can articulate the pressures towards one. Within Britain, the changing nature of postwar society has witnessed a remarkable growth of political theatre. Any examination of this phenomenon must be linked to an historical analysis of socialist theatre within the context of Britain's changing economic and political climate.

The progress of postwar theatre in Britain has not been linear, but a history of abrupt transformations of such cultural and social importance that decisive rejections of traditions have been achieved. Two such "revolutions" have been the impulses of the years 1956, which saw the now highly mythicized launching of the English Stage Company at the Royal Court and the influential production of John Osborne's Look Back in Anger, and 1968 when the political events of that year saw the creation of an alternative theatre. The first of these two "revolutions" led to the subsequent development and dominance of subsidized bourgeois theatre: the second to the ultimate development of a truly politically conscious theatre (classified variously as the fringe, alternative or touring theatre) created, at least initially, in conscious opposition to both commercial and state subsidized theatre. Of course socialist theatre did not suddenly "emerge" in either 1956 or 1968. Within Britain there had been a minority but significant tradition of oppositional theatre playing to and for the working class throughout most of this century. As early as the 1920's political theatre was evident with the rise of the Workers' Theatre Movement (WTM) which produced satirical sketches about the nature of class struggle for working class audiences. However, at certain economic and political periods the chances of production for socialist theatre have significantly increased or declined. The WTM, for example, was

politically and financially linked to the Communist Party; it declined when the CP changed its cultural policy to the "Popular Front" strategy and promoted "socialist realism." 1956 appeared to offer socialist theatre the opportunity to infiltrate bourgeois theatre. Yet why should the capitalist state help to produce a theatre which means to overthrow that state? Two possible answers arise. Firstly, the state might sponsor political drama in order to tame it. Secondly, the state supported socialist theatre might not in fact be socialist at all.

The dry and defeated theatre critic, Bernard Link, in David Mercer's play After Haggerty, prefaces every lecture on modern British drama with a reference to Look Back in Anger. The point is well made, for the moment of 1956 has become laden with heavily weighted mythologies: that it heralded the rise of "socialist" theatre; that it marked the beginnings of working-class theatre; that it even presaged a new form of theatre. The play actually presents the first example of what was to become the dominant mode of theatre in Britain; the years after 1956 and the work produced at the Royal Court were crucial in channeling the mainstream of British theatre within the newly dominant subsidized theatres. The "language" of this mode of theatre was rapidly subsumed into the state's cultural super-structure--the hegemony of which socialist theatre is committed to overthrowing--and therefore warrants a certain

amount of enquiry. In fact when Osborne defensively called the play a "formal, rather old-fashioned play" he was essentially correct. The play was new only in subject matter and its brand of naturalism was in an established bourgeois theatrical tradition. Its "difference" lay in its contrast to contemporary English plays set, as Kenneth Tynan described them,

in what used to be called Loamshire but is now as a heroic tribute to realism, sometimes called Berkshire. Except when someone must sneeze or be murdered, the sun invariably shines. The inhabitants belong to a social class derived partly from romantic novels and partly from the playwright's vision of the leisured life he will lead after the play is a success.⁸

Look Back in Anger confronted this upper-middle-class daydream through Jimmy's lifestyle and language. Indeed, Jimmy's main conviction is the value of passion. Tynan's important review of Look Back in Anger was particularly illuminating culturally in that he recognized a new potential audience for this theatre--the "new" middle class. The 1944 Education Act had produced a growing and articulate group of socially mobile intelligentsia with lower-class origins, and Tynan identified this "non-U intelligentsia"⁹ as the audience for Look Back in Anger. (By 1955 the numbers of sixth-formers and university students had doubled since 1939 and three-quarters of the students received grants.) To call this educated and

upwardly mobile group the working class is, however, a complete misnomer. These people were rapidly becoming the new professional middle class, the technocrats, technicians and teachers. The old "colonialist" upper-middle class were in decline. This new middle class was hugely represented at the theatre by the early sixties. An analysis of British theatre-audiences in the 1960's showed that while 68.9 percent of the male population did "blue-collar" jobs (working class) only 4.6 percent of theatre-goers did so, and that 40 percent of the non-graduates in the audience at the Royal Court were students.¹⁰ All of this not surprisingly shows that such audiences were certainly not working class and were predominantly members of this newly educated middle class. Indeed the same can be said of the playwrights of this period, nearly all of whom went to university (and mostly Oxbridge) and many of whom attended public school.

Nevertheless there was a change in the content of plays, in particular a concerted attack on the old middle-class values. The disaster of Suez had finally destroyed the bourgeois illusion of imperialism. At the same time this new middle class remained alienated from the old British Left: the Soviet invasion of Hungary also occurred in 1956. Above all, the fury of what were then called "Angry Young Men" was undirected and unstable. As Jimmy Porter says,

I suppose people of our generation aren't able to die for good causes any longer. We had all that done for us, in the thirties and forties, when we were still kids.¹¹

Significantly Jimmy in Look Back in Anger is a provincial graduate who runs a sweet-stall (and thus is neither classless nor working class as contemporary myth put it, but a middle-class intellectual) who tirades against the injustice of the world and the "system." In this he embodies the hopes and frustrations of this new audience. Yet Jimmy's anger is only ostensibly a class one. His main feeling is one of unfocused anger. Indeed his political resentments are vague and most of his impulses are reactionary and conservative. It is no coincidence that Jimmy is drawn, even as he mocks them, toward images of British imperialism in India. In fact what Jimmy Porter signified was precisely a sense of cultural dislocation felt by the new middle class: a class that had lost its identification with any working-class roots but had not yet found a new sense of collective identity. Clearly, too, a partial change in content was not enough to create socialist theatre. Naturalism presents political argument (if it does so) merely as the opinion of individual characters whose behaviour and relationships are inevitable rather than particular to a certain social system.

Look Back in Anger was generally reviled by contemporary establishment reviews, but its impulse and effect was ultimately conservative. Its Royal Court successors became the dominant mode of theatre in Britain but, in Raymond Williams' terms, this change was brought about by the development of a "class fraction" of an independent set of attitudes within the dominant ideology.¹² In other words, the "revolution" of 1956 represented the particular oppositional interests within the bourgeois class which were able to achieve production through the growth in size and influence of a class fraction. In theatrical terms, 1956 augmented one of those bourgeois "revolutions" that Marx had described in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte:

just when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something that has never existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from their names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language.¹³

Moreover:

Bourgeois revolutions...soon...have attained their zenith, and a long crapulent depression lays hold of society before it learns soberly to assimilate the results of its storm and stress period.¹⁴

It is within this context of a new, rising and culturally dislocated middle class, that the "post-Osborne" dramatists of the Royal Court should be viewed. Some were political (Arden, Bond, Wesker, and later Brenton, Hare), but there was certainly no coherent political thought in the new drama. Alan Sinfield has pointed out that this was partly due to pressure from the existing system of production (for example, Arden's Sergeant Musgrave's Dance 1959 covered only three-quarters of its immediate costs), but also to the essentially middle-class background of most of its producers and audiences.¹⁵ There was even explicit censorship from the Lord Chamberlain up until the debate over the mock stoning of a baby (in production an obvious doll which remains "conspicuously" silent) in Edward Bond's Saved. The context is important, for these playwrights, and the Royal Court in particular, embodied the new dominant strain of bourgeois theatre. They also created a whole new set of false assumptions, many of them taken straight from F. R. Leavis and the élitist belief in the central civilising importance of literature (the "cultural expression" of a south-eastern ruling class dominance over the whole of Britain).

Significantly the theatrical "revolution" of 1956 coincided with one of the periodic fits of cosmetic healthiness experienced by advanced capitalism. To quote the historian Eric Hobsbawm:

In the capitalist world there had never been a period of expansionism and prosperity to compare with the fifties and sixties. All the developed industrial countries shared in it, even Britain whose capitalist economy was notoriously unable to overcome its problems...if ever capitalism looked as though it worked, it was in these decades. For apart from dramatic technological progress and large profits, they brought strikingly impressive improvements in the standards of living of most people, due partly to rising wages and high employment, partly to great improvements in social security...Capitalism and its ideologists therefore looked upon the world with considerable complacency.¹⁶

By the mid-sixties, however, the myth had exploded, and the contradictions in society were particularly evident for students as they had been the ones "trained" to inherit the affluence of "technological progress"; in fact their very standards of living could be seen to be at the direct expense of the imperialised Third World. Above all, by 1968 both the social democrat and liberal myths of a gradually changing society under enlightened reform had been shattered. 1968 came to be seen as a "watershed" year, at least in terms of the political consciousness of the war-baby generation.

In material terms, of course, the concentration on the year 1968 is historically myopic. For example, it was clear that by 1963 the reforms of the 1945 Labour government in nationalising industry (coal, rail and steel) and setting up the welfare state had merely been token reforms. The

illusory "boom" described by Hobsbawm could not hide the fact that in the next slump people would be thrown out of jobs. The nationalised industries were run as state capitalist corporations, and the undoubted benefits of the welfare state could not disguise the material suffering of the poor. Analysis by Fabian socialists such as Peter Townsend established that millions of people were still experiencing poverty. In the theatre it was clear by the early sixties that the putative 1956 "revolution" had been crushed or absorbed into bourgeois ideology.

The period of capitalist expansion in 1960's Britain had brought a new "liberalism" exemplified by the half-hearted legislation of the period: suicide was decriminalised in 1961; homosexual relations between consenting adults were legalised (though "adults" had to be 21, and police and employer discrimination against homosexuals continued unchecked); abortion law reform was passed and racial discrimination in housing and employment was outlawed (though abortion on demand was denied and implicitly racist immigration laws were newly applied). In the theatre, social and political debate thrived: the pessimism of Pinter countered by the aggressive optimism of Bond, for example. Yet that debate was carried out almost exclusively within the terms of bourgeois society. Even political plays such as Bond's Saved only peripherally addressed political events.

Moreover, the new "liberalism" in the sixties marked a period of increasing disillusionment amongst the British Left. Harold Wilson's government of 1964, elected after thirteen years of Conservative rule, offered "rational," centralised planning linked to the "white heat" of the new technological revolution. Yet even by 1965 it was clear that "state corporatism" was a sham. The Wilson Labour government in fact finally proved its allegiance to capitalism when, after a futile attempt to shore up the pound, which was eventually devalued in 1967, they attempted to push through appallingly class-biased and anti-labour policies with the establishment of a Prices and Incomes Board (to regulate wage rises) and an attempt to regulate trade-union practices in the form of a white paper, In Place of Strife 1968. Its aims were to outlaw unofficial strikes and shift the balance of power from the shop stewards to the national leadership. The strategy was consistent with centralised corporatism (a sort of "unholy alliance" between big capital, organized labour and the state). The paper was never passed by Parliament, but it indicates just how anti-revolutionary the Labour government had become. In fact similar legislation was passed by the present Conservative administration of Prime Minister Thatcher.

1968, however, was a bewildering year of political activity. In Paris, students joined nine million striking

workers and almost toppled the government; anti-Vietnam War demonstrations in Chicago outside the Democratic Party Convention brought tear gas and tanks into the streets; the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia. 1968 was also the year of anti-imperialist campaigns in Latin America, student riots in Warsaw, Belgrade, Tokyo, Mexico City and Milan, and the beginning of Palestinian terrorist action.

Yet, as I stressed before, this concentration upon the year 1968 can be deceptive: the imperialist war in Vietnam, for example, had been raging for many years (though the crucial Tet offensive did take place in this year) and the contradictions apparent in imperialism and capitalism had been evident for decades. Within Britain, as around the world, the contradictions were simply clearer to see in 1968. In Place of Strife represented the "final straw" for many on the left in Britain, who now saw no possibility of "parliamentary socialism." The sixties saw a growth of the "New Left" in Britain. The pre-'68 events in Czechoslovakia and the Chinese cultural revolution of the mid-sixties were particular impulses to this growth, and as well as the University "New Left", many left "fringe parties" started at this time: the International Marxist Group, Socialist Workers' Party, Revolutionary Workers' Party, Revolutionary Socialist League. Students in particular were visibly more militant, urged on by

revolutionary leaders such as Tariq Ali, and many sit-ins were staged (Guildford, LSE). Capitalism was quite clearly in a state of crisis--mirrored by the devaluation of the pound and by a greater global awareness of its real crimes--and with this crisis a new and vicious element entered right-wing political rhetoric as it tried (and sometimes succeeded) in splintering working-class opposition. This was the language of racial politics, first voiced by Peter Griffiths in his successful election campaign at Smethwick ("If you want a nigger neighbour vote Labour"), which took on an added viciousness from a speech in which a senior Conservative politician, Enoch Powell, declared, "like the Romans I seem to see 'The River Tiber flowing with much blood.'" 1968 was also the year British troops were sent into Northern Ireland in order (as the then Home Secretary Jim Callaghan ambiguously phrased it) to "keep the peace." Imperialism has not died in Britain and the immediate consequences of '68 were the Londonderry March and Bloody Sunday(1969).

The theatre was also affected. In 1968 the office of the Lord Chamberlain was finally abolished, so ending overt censorship. The radicalization of students was also significant in terms of a changing social structure within the audiences of the theatre's dominant mode. For alternative theatre, 1968 was a psychological watershed.

Yet the emergence of a specifically political theatre did not take place until around 1971 (before this only CAST and the emerging Red Ladder could be identified as socialist theatre groups with a Marxist background). However, as Peter Ansorge insists : "It is impossible to deny, for instance, a link between the most publicized political events of 1968 and the creation, in practical terms, of the new 'alternative' circuit of arts labs, cellar theatres and environmental venues."¹⁷ Much of this theatre was political in content, certainly most of it was anti-naturalistic, but the theoretical nature of this political content was often vague and undirected if violent in presentation. Indeed the main feelings occasioned in the alternative theatre by the events of the sixties seem to have been disillusionment, despair and above all anger. Some of this anger manifested itself in Artaudian displays of violent action and language (Peter Brook's production of Peter Weiss's play The Marat/Sade in 1964 and the collectively written US in 1966).

But all the oppositional plays in this period reflect a deep hatred and healthy disrespect for bourgeois notions of "culture" and "art." What had become obvious by 1968 was that "art" is specific in form to class and that its very concept is upper and middle class. This selective use of the term "culture" is reflected in the bourgeois evaluative

uses of the term "literature" as in the phrases "English literature" or the "literary tradition." The Arts Council used a specifically selective meaning of the word "culture" to describe a Leavisite canon of "great art" with "universal" appeal. The irony is that 1968 was the year Arts Council subsidy became available to alternative theatre. No doubt the traditional establishment did not understand the nature of this new drama. When the managing director of Oxo presented a thousand-pound grant to the Royal Court in 1958 he registered in his speech a "slight criticism of policy and what is being done, and regretted the failure to discover a new Shakespeare whose work was devoid of sex, blasphemy, anti-monarchical opinions, and sensational things which don't make true theatre."¹⁸

For the fringe, of course, "sensational things" did make true theatre. By 1970, thirty-two alternative theatre groups were based in London alone (including the People Show, Portable Theatre, Pip Simmons, Warehouse/La Mama, Inter-action, Freehold); by 1978 there were at least 250 contemporary British playwrights working part-time or full-time in alternative theatre. Moreover, present alternative political theatre groups such as Red Ladder, Belt and Braces, Monstrous Regiment, Wildcat, 7:84 are overtly Marxist. The growth, then, has been sustained, but by 1970 many of the most successful of the

early fringe socialist writers, such as Howard Brenton, David Hare, David Edgar and Trevor Griffiths, had largely abandoned the fringe and adopted a policy of "strategic penetration" into commercial and subsidized theatres-- indeed all of these playwrights have since been staged at the National Theatre. However some established playwrights, such as John Arden and John McGrath, took the reverse path by turning to the alternative or touring theatre. Their decisions were based on theoretical and practical considerations as to the nature of bourgeois theatre and the need to establish an "emergent" Marxist orientated theatre that would play to the working class.

Given the current political reaction in Britain, the problems of producing a play in opposition to the ruling ideology have become even more complex so that the need for socialist theatre to demystify contemporary existence becomes even more urgent.

Chapter Two

We have to establish the fringe culture--there's no alternative to that--but if we don't also contest the central institutions then we are giving away too much.

Raymond Williams, 1979.¹⁹

The problem for socialist theatre remains the same as in Piscator's time: as long as the means of production are in the wrong hands, its contents will remain secondary. As the German Marxist critic Walter Benjamin said:

the place of the intellectual (or author) in the class struggle can only be determined, or better still chosen, on the basis of his position within the production process.²⁰

For socialist theatre three specific but interrelated areas of production are particularly important: the nature of the relation of theatre and of the individual (as writer) to society and the current nature of that society, the production of literature, and the cultural identification afforded to "art" by institutions and classes. I shall examine these in turn.

Many commentators have felt that the abrupt formation of a new and potentially revolutionary socialist theatre after 1968 has subsequently either "died" as a form of revolutionary activity (its active consciousness diluted to a merely reformist one) or, even more damningly, has completely sold out to a bourgeois ideology. Even

socialist theatre workers themselves have expressed these views. David Edgar, a socialist playwright who followed the route from fringe theatre to major subsidized theatre, said in 1978 that political touring theatre and the fringe had failed in their attempts to heighten political consciousness, and that the move from agit-prop and unconventional venues (and hence audiences) to a form of naturalism and the subsidized theatres was a considered response of companies to the "collapse of a working-class wages militancy after 1974."²¹ To support his case, Edgar cites the right-wing conservative political and economic reaction in Britain of the last decade and what he describes as the failure of an "atrophied" working-class culture to respond to new forms of theatre.

Conversely Bruce Birchall, founder of West End Theatre Workshop, has said:

The post-1968 breakaway movement became absorbed into the theatrical mainstream by state funding and what had begun as a piece of political practice ended up as a job.²²

Now Birchall is undoubtedly right in pinpointing the dangers of state subsidy, a largely undeliberate method of incorporating and nullifying socialist theatre within a cloak of "liberalism," as well as more direct attempts to censor material. The danger is even greater within the theatrical institutions themselves. As Walter Benjamin said: "The

bourgeois apparatus of production and publication is capable of assimilating, indeed of propagating, an astonishing amount of revolutionary themes without ever seriously putting into question its continued existence or that of the class which owns it."²³ It is also true that socialist theatre in Britain is constantly misrepresented or ignored by hostile critics in the media. Edgar may also be right in saying that different political conditions will tend to call forth different forms of theatre. But the connections between theatre and society are rarely straightforward.

Both Birchall and Edgar in fact represent reductionist views of the complex relationships between theatre and society. Birchall posits a view that theatre as a revolutionary weapon can be entirely autonomous of society, whereas for Edgar socialist theatre must follow the "determined" or "determining" forces of society. Crucially both theories flounder on basic oversimplification: the first that theatre can directly cause a social change; the second that social change determines theatrical change. The first view ignores the reality of the control and relations of the means of production in a capitalist society, whilst the second can ultimately offer only a fatalist and anti-revolutionary interpretation of history.

It is necessary here to stress the complexity of the relationships between, for example, the theatre and society. Marxists historically have posited an economic base (in

modern Britain an advanced capitalist one), which directly "determines" the "superstructure" of government, law, education, religion and other institutions including the cultural superstructure. However, Raymond Williams, in Marxism and Literature, has shown that the nature of this determining relationship must be questioned because Marx's use of the term "determination" has been misinterpreted. Very briefly it is necessary to reassert Williams' distinction between "abstract determinism" (or "economism" in its root sense of "setting bounds"; Edgar's argument fits this) and determinate social laws ("determine" here corresponds to an act of will or purpose):

Society is then never only the 'dead husk' which limits social and individual fulfillment. It is always a constitutive process with very powerful pressures which are both expressed in political, economic and cultural formation and, to take the full weight of 'constitutive,' are internalised and become 'individual wills.'²⁴

Moreover, the direct or determining relationship between the economic structure of society and its literary self-expression has been questioned by Williams who has shown that the development of "literature" can often appear to have an autonomous development of its own connected only tangentially with the modes of production, and the state of play in the class war. For example, Marxist alternative theatre has continued to grow in Britain despite the political reaction of the last decade. It

is worth noting that not all works published or plays produced do reflect the dominant ideology of the ruling classes. Societies do change and, as Marx himself repeatedly stated, people make their own history, though not in an arbitrary way or independently from their material conditions. Today's socialist playwrights are faced with the choice of either fighting the ruling ideology from within the established institutions or from without in touring theatre. This choice leads to the next two areas of importance for socialist theatre: the production of literature and its cultural identification.

Raymond Williams has pointed out that there are two senses in which "literature" is produced in society.²⁵ On a material level this means that literature requires natural resources, capital and labour, and their deployment involves commercial institutions and economic forces. On the other hand literature is produced as a concept. However, the "cultural " identification afforded that literature depends upon the verdicts of the cultural institutions. This immediately presents a problem for socialist theatre in that such institutions as the Arts Council or the Universities are primarily bourgeois and part of the state's cultural superstructure. Within the established theatre, a play both as text and performance, must always be related to the pressures and limits of literary forms and conventions, and cultural institutions. There is

another problem or perhaps advantage immediately apparent for the socialist playwright, in that what bourgeois institutions define as "good art" or "literary culture" is actually despised and (with good reason) hated by the potentially revolutionary working class. Bourgeois "culture" may have great meaning and power to its followers, indeed University English Departments exist largely on the basis of this significance, but those outside this ideology historically will find themselves in opposition to it. The élitism of critics like F. R. Leavis still dominates the British bourgeois view of culture: "in any period it is upon a very small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends."²⁶ The Arts Council, ironically the major subsidizer of alternative theatre from 1968 on, has appointed itself the arbiter of public culture with a mission to educate the "philistine" working class. An extreme example of this sort of social engineering was expressed in 1967 by Lord Goodman, former chairman of the Arts Council:

I believe there is a crucial state in the country at this moment. I believe that young people lack values, lack certainties, lack guidance; that they need something to turn to...I do not say that the arts will furnish a total solution ...but I believe that once people are captured for the arts they are redeemed from many of the dangers which are occupying the attention of the government in a completely unprofitable and destructive fashion.²⁷

Given these attitudes, the possibility of bringing a play to

an audience, and in the case of socialist theatre this may mean a working-class audience, largely depends on institutions that are ideologically interwoven with and financially dependent on the capitalist system.

This all points to the crucial economic problem in a capitalist society of the ownership and control of the means of production, distribution and exchange. The production of socialist theatre depends in part on a contradiction in the ruling ideology it is committed to overthrowing, since it must rely, in whole or in part, on state or capitalist funding. Although, as we have noted, there has been a history in Britain of socialist agitational theatre playing directly to the working class, free from state or institutional control, a revolutionary writer working within the normal channels of publication--unless his work can actively work against these channels--runs the risk of his ideas being absorbed by the existing production apparatus. As Walter Benjamin said:

The revolutionary struggle is not fought between capitalism and the mind. It is fought between capitalism and the proletariat.²⁸

Socialist theatre can provide information and analysis; it can also directly raise political and class consciousness. Most basically it provides socialist entertainment: at its best it can demystify the ideology of the ruling class by being part of a potentially revolutionary counter-culture. David Hare (co-founder of Portable Theatre) has pointed out

that theatre is ideally placed to expose the lie of the ruling ideology, for it can dramatise both the reality (the truth) and the illusion, and put opposing "fictions" in conflict.²⁹ In political theatre this conflict is observed as a dialectical process. Yet the question still remains: where and to whom do you expose the lie? Roland Muldoon of CAST, a socialist theatre group founded as early as 1964, has pointed out two of the most common criticisms of political theatre:

The two questions which really piss me off most are: 'Aren't you preaching to the converted?' If all the people we'd ever played to were converted we'd be out winning. And the other question is: 'You don't tell us how.' They really want the drug, they really want the dream.³⁰

Muldoon's comments point to the key problems in socialist theatre and perhaps the key debate amongst socialist playwrights. Is it enough for socialist playwrights to have political plays performed at the National in front of a largely uncomprehending, well-heeled, middle-class audience, augmented by American businessmen and English University students? Can such plays embarrass or even change the dominant ideology, or does their presence at the National merely help the state to present a liberal front? Alternatively, do touring political theatre groups help to create a revolutionary counter-culture or are they in danger of performing in a cultural ghetto?

These questions are central when we remember the need

posited by Eagleton, Williams and others to abandon "literature," based on specific "texts," in order to see the social relations of cultural practice. This is particularly true of drama where the "text" can only take on meaning as it relates with,

institutions (theatres and their predecessors and successors), with formations (groups of dramatists, dramatic and theatrical movements), with formed relationships (audiences, including the formation of audiences within theatres and their wider social formation), as well as to 'forms' not only in the sense of their relations to world-views or structures of feeling but also in the more active sense of their whole performance....³¹

Indeed the primacy of the "text" can only be thrown into question when we consider performance/audience relationships. Brecht required his audience to think, not simply to view a scene and achieve the Aristotelian notion of catharsis through the temporary stimulus of emotions.

Given the inherent contradictions in the capitalist system, the tensions in a society can be expressed through the dialectics of drama. The montage form of Brecht's drama is not designed to develop actions but to represent social conditions. However, form and content also must respond to an audience. Obviously there can be no "text" in drama (as opposed to dramatic literature) without an audience, but the social identity of this audience is crucial too. A working-class audience may respond to the same piece of theatre in a different way from a middle-class one. The "primacy of the

text" in bourgeois subsidized theatre often results in productions that ignore the class structure of society and of the theatre itself. It is important also to note that theatrical form relates ultimately to content and that both are overtly political. Acknowledging that leads to a completely different relationship between audience and performance. True socialist theatre cannot depend on a "Stanislawskian actor" performing in "such a way that the audience listening to him just happen to be there."³² Neither is it enough simply to change some of the stage conventions and hope to create a revolutionary theatre. The "proscenium arch" has established a convention in the bourgeois theatre that firmly places the play within the existing ideology. The mystical "fourth wall," as Dario Fo has pointed out, is not just that "magic moment" which divides the audience from the actors but also the particular lighting:

the solidly entrenched sets..., the aquarium atmosphere the actors are placed in, the corpse-like make-up on the actors' faces, their gestures and voice projection, with its fixed cadences, sung, whispered or shouted, giving the audience the feeling of being like peeping-toms spying on a story which is totally remote from them and which is ever there on the other side of the fourth wall.³³

The audience in the bourgeois theatre sign an unwritten contract to stop talking and listen politely once the lights are dimmed, and at the end, suitably purged of their emotions,

re-animate to give the required response. Now this may be an unfair description, certainly I should hope that not all audiences are so passive, but to make an audience really think requires a total reappraisal of our assumptions about life and society, including the received notion of "history," and about the social nature of theatrical performances. This has been and will continue to be the task of socialist playwrights. To break the false consciousness produced by the alienating process of living within capitalist society, a writer must distance his audience from its normal role in order that it may question its preconceptions. It is also crucial to point out again that this task will differ according to the nature of that audience. For example, a socialist playwright who writes for a working-class audience must create a certain sense of class solidarity in a group who have come to regard theatre itself as middle-class (which is not to say that certain unique forms of theatre are not still alive in working-class culture).

Now all this amounts a very stern and complicated task for socialist theatre. It is, however, an essential one; indeed, the demonstrative techniques of Brecht's epic theatre are designed to destroy this concept of an "observing audience":

The A-effect consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one's attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar immediately accessible, into something

peculiar, striking and unexpected.³⁴

The dialectical nature of this mode of thinking is clear; seeing things out of their normal context allows an audience to distance itself from normal perception and to perceive contradictions in the conditions of society. Yet whatever techniques the playwright adopts to raise his audience's social consciousness, he must always face the problems of getting his work produced.

John McGrath, drawing largely on Raymond Williams' Marxism and Literature, identifies three main elements of literary production:

The residual, which draws its source from a previous period but is still effectively alive in the present; the dominant, which exercises hegemony over the period culturally; and the emergent element, by which, and I quote, 'new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships are being created. But it is exceptionally difficult to distinguish between those which are really elements of some new phase of the dominant culture, and those which are substantially alternative or oppositional to it--emergent in the strict sense, rather than the merely made.'³⁵

In terms of modern (post-'56) British theatre this corresponds to the West End(residual), the major subsidized theatres (dominant), and the fringe and touring companies (emergent). The West End in structure "resembles a nineteenth century small capitalist enterprise...its central contradiction...is the old one between the social or

group-effort means of production and the private ownership of those means."³⁶ The dominant form of the subsidized theatre as "power-structures reflect the nationalised industries: they are capitalist structures but without the need to make profits."³⁷ It is to the emergent that we must look for the potential of a "highly principled,"³⁸ creative Marxist cultural intervention.

McGrath also identifies three main areas of activity for political theatre:

Loosely speaking they are: first, the struggle within the institutions of theatre against the hegemony of the bourgeois ideology within those institutions; secondly, the making of a theatre which is interventionist on a political level usually outside those institutions; and thirdly and most importantly, the creation of a counter-culture based on the working class, which will grow in richness and confidence until it eventually displaces the dominant bourgeois culture of late capitalism.³⁹

McGrath sees playwrights such as Bond, Brenton, Edgar, Griffiths and Hare as a challenge to bourgeois ideology from within the theatre institutions themselves. Despite the undeniable importance of this challenge as a socialist weapon, McGrath warns that "they are in constant danger of being appropriated in production by the very ideology they set out to oppose."⁴⁰ McGrath cites the distortions imposed on Brecht's plays in the British theatre or the way Trevor Griffiths' The Party was staged at the National, where the character of an old Trotskyist revolutionary

from Glasgow was taken over by Lord Olivier and "became a vehicle for a star to communicate with his admirers."⁴¹ To take the second example further, the published prologue of The Party promotes a general question about the relationship between politics, economics and entertainment by having Groucho Marx quote from Karl Marx (an allusion to the '68 anarchist slogan in Paris "Je suis Marxiste, tendance Groucho") and Lenin:

Revolutionary phrase-making is a disease from which revolutionary parties suffer at times when the course of revolutionary events is marked by big, rapid zig-zags. By revolutionary phrase-making we mean the repetition of revolutionary slogans irrespective of objective circumstances at a given turn in events, in the given state of affairs obtaining at the time.⁴²

In this Griffiths invites us to perceive the superficiality of the play's own political infighting when seen against the background of the May 1968 events in Paris. But crucially this prologue was cut from the National Theatre's production. Thus an assertion in the play such as "the only thing you're allowed to put in to the system is that which can be assimilated and absorbed by it"⁴³ loses its intended ironic edge. The play had been changed in production from a positive and political argument in favour of socialism that appears to disintegrate into pessimism over the possibility of change.

Indeed it could be argued that political plays in both the dominant and residual theatre merely illustrate the

Marcusian theory of repressive tolerance.⁴⁴ It could also be argued that such political plays in being performed largely to the middle classes implicitly recognize that the bourgeoisie remains the progressive class within society (a reformist class or an intellectual "vanguard" perhaps). Yet the central irony and contradiction of capitalism is that it creates a working class whose interests are opposed to it and who will eventually overthrow it. It is in this sense that the present "emergent" theatre rightly sees the working class as the potentially progressive class within society. This class has its own culture, despite the refusal of the Arts Council to recognize this fact. It is precisely this recognition of the revolutionary potential of the working class that prompts McGrath to describe political theatre groups as 7:84, Red Ladder, Belt and Braces, Monstrous Regiment, Broadside and others as directly interventionist. This is also a recognition of the political function of theatre in class terms, and it is through this recognition of the need to make theatre for working-class audiences that the true counter-culture (as opposed to a fringe ghetto mentality) will grow.

Chapter Three

I'd rather have my plays presented to nine hundred people who may hate what I'm saying than to fifty of the converted.
Howard Brenton.⁴⁵

Better a bad night in Bootle than a good one at the National.
John McGrath.⁴⁶

The theatrical careers of Howard Brenton and John McGrath have followed almost reverse paths. Brenton was a product of the 1968 touring fringe theatre who subsequently adopted the tactic of "strategic penetration" into the dominant subsidized theatre. McGrath was a successful commercial writer for theatre, television and film, who from 1968 began to reject establishment venues and formed a Marxist-based touring theatre company in 1971. In many ways, these two writers' different theoretical and theatrical responses to historical and material conditions and the means open to dramatists to help effect socialist political change represent the key debate over the direction of British socialist theatre.

Howard Brenton was born in Brighton in 1942, son of a policeman turned methodist minister. He attended Grammar school, taught in Yorkshire, and then went to Cambridge after a short spell at an art school. Brenton seemed, then, to have the typical upwardly mobile background of the majority of theatrical people. However, after his first full-length play, Revenge, was put on at the Royal Court in

1969, Brenton wrote for the fringe groups, Brighton Combination and Portable Theatre. Portable, founded by Tony Bicat and David Hare, was not political in its conception, but it was motivated by a desire to find new audiences outside the "official culture." It was also a touring theatre company, and Brenton has said:

If you set up an antagonistic theatre touring to people who have never seen the theatre before, it transforms itself into political theatre. It has a political effect. And the anarchic antagonistic theatre becomes increasingly one of political content. This is what happened to us.⁴⁷

Brenton has acknowledged, too, that the restricted physical spaces available to the experimental early fringe enforced a particular proximity between actors and audiences which engendered "an almost moral force in the writing and presentation,"⁴⁸ and from that "you begin to want to write about how people conduct themselves in life as groups, as classes, as interests."⁴⁹ The Brighton Combination, in particular, had a reputation for aggressive theatrical experiment and community involvement, and there is no doubt that this heavily influenced Brenton's later stylistic dexterity. In fact the attempt to find new audiences led to Brenton's experiments in creating complete environments or particular languages for plays. The short plays Gum and Goo, Heads and The Education of Skinny Spew (all 1969), for example, were all produced after or during rock concerts at Bradford University. The presentation of these plays was

specifically anti-naturalistic: very few props; adults playing children; interruptions in the action; situational scene-changes and caricatures rather than fully drawn characters. Brenton admits of an early play that, "Politically I had no ideas, I was very immature. But I had an instinct that there was a conflict I wanted to get at between public figures."⁵⁰ In particular, his early plays show his fascination with the mythologies surrounding our conception of crime and law and order. By 1974 the conflict that emerges in Brenton's plays is clearly between capitalist state myths of history and the reality of the people's history and the pressures of modern existence. In fact, the complex dialectical relationship between past and present becomes central in much of Brenton's later work; particularly The Churchill Play 1974 and The Romans in Britain 1980.

Clearly a theatre that seeks to demythologise or demystify is by its very nature subversive (of the capitalist state) and questioning. To quote A. P. Foulkes from his useful recent work Literature and Propaganda:

It [such art or theatre] challenges habits and modes of perception, and produces new ways of seeing and interpreting processes and relationships. To do this successfully, it must be unpredictable, surprising even shocking, and it must be inventive enough to avoid being submerged by an integration propaganda which will naturalise techniques in the guise of reproducing them.⁵¹

Of course this is exactly what Brecht set out to do with his epic theatre, but the quote applies equally well to Brenton:

I think it's crucial that in public, truths be told. Also I dream of a play acting like a bush fire, smouldering into public consciousness.⁵²

Indeed Brenton sees himself as a realist in a positive sense of the term. This requires a rejection of bourgeois naturalism which is presented as a product for audience consumption. By posing problems that are limited (by space or situation) or too easily resolved, and presenting human nature and reality as universal and/or ahistorical and unchanging, naturalism supports the dominant ideology and its culture; its narrative continuity suggests inevitability and invites the audience to identify itself with the action. A socialist definition of realism comes from Brecht:

Realism means revealing the mask of cause in society/unmasking the dominant viewpoints as viewpoints of those who dominate/writing from the point of view of the class which, for the most urgent difficulties, holds the broadest solutions/emphasizing the moment of the development/concrete character and possibility of abstraction.⁵³

To return to Foulkes' quote, the methods of presenting this demystifying "realism" "must be unpredictable, surprising even shocking." Despite his 1975 claim that "I think the theatre's a real bear-pit...not the place for reasoned discussion,"⁵⁴ Brenton's plays have always been argumentative, even dialectical in presentation. Stylistically, Brenton's plays are extremely aggressive and sometimes explicitly shocking. He has himself described the style of

one of his plays, Hitler Dances, as "the sense of being fluid, working very rapidly, ensemble playing, the rapid creation and dismemberment of effects, the involvement of story-telling, the juxtaposition, stylistically, of things that are quite different in a very powerful series."⁵⁵ The "text" of Hitler Dances was devised collectively by Brenton and the Traverse Workshop Company. In fact this breaking down of the division of labour between writer, director, set designer, actors and stage-hands had been crucial to Portable as well.

This anti-naturalistic style can be seen as typical of all Brenton's works and derives, in part, from the practical circumstances of the company's presentations. To gain the attention of a rock concert audience, for example, it would obviously be disastrous to try to create the naturalistic illusion of a "slice of life." More importantly, the anti-naturalist impulse of much socialist theatre arises from the need to break the "spectacle" that is theatre (and modern life) and engage the audience in thought.

The idea of confronting bourgeois assumptions was in fact one of the key phrases of the late sixties. Brenton, himself testified to the enormous influence of the events of May 1968 in Paris:

May '68 was crucial. It was a great watershed and directly affected me...May '68 disinherited my generation in two ways. First it destroyed any remaining affection for the official culture.

The situationists showed how all of them, the dead greats, are corpses on our backs--Goethe, Beethoven--how gigantic the fraud is. But it also, secondly, destroyed the notions of personal freedom, freak out and drug culture, anarchistic notions of spontaneous freedom, anarchist political action. And it failed. It was defeated. A generation dreaming of a beautiful utopia was kicked--kicked awake and not dead. I've got to believe not kicked dead. May '68 gave me a desperation I still have.⁵⁶

In a series of pamphlets, the situationists had described modern Western society as the "Society of Spectacles." Their theory was based on a partial revision of Marx and stated that the focus of capitalist domination was at the point of consumption, not the point of production. To Brenton the fringe theatre seemed to present an opportunity to reach new audiences and attack the establishment at the point of consumption. In 1973, Brenton claimed the fringe as a weapon in a repressive society:

It could be the surviving democratic means of communication. If the police surveillance and interference became very heavy and the Arts Council was nobbled...the back street activity, almost on the level of being an abortionist, an illegal doctoring service, could be one of the few surviving possible means of communication with people.⁵⁷

Portable was for Brenton a means of attacking the establishment:

The bastards won't do our plays, we'll do them ourselves. It was against the bastards, it was boiling for a fight against the established values in the theatre.⁵⁸

Between 1969 and 1972, Brenton was to produce his "complete environment" plays in a variety of alternative venues including a methodist church (Wesley), an ice-rink (Scott of the Antarctic), and in pubs and clubs with a series of lunchtime plays with the intention of trying to counter assumptions about theatre. Yet Brenton was ultimately to see the reality of the capitalist control of production. Even by 1974 Brenton felt that the fringe was becoming an arty clique performed by and for the left intelligentsia and students. He also felt that his ideas needed a larger stage:

I think the fringe has failed. Its failure was that of the whole class of an alternative culture--a notion that within society as it exists you can grow another way of life, which, like a beneficial and desirable cancer, will in the end grow throughout the western world and change it. What happens is that the 'alternative society' gets hermetically sealed, and surrounded. A ghetto-like mentality develops. It is surrounded and in the end strangled to death. Utopian generosity becomes paranoia as the world closes in....Reality is remorseless. No one can leave. If you're going to change the world, well there's only one set of tools, and they're bloody and stained but realistic. I mean communist tools. Not pleasant.⁵⁹

Ironically when Portable became overtly "political" in its themes it went bankrupt as a result of two group-written shows, Lay By and England's Ireland. The latter play in particular came up against massive restrictions to its production because of its sensitive theme (the situation in

Ireland). Significantly in many of Brenton's own later plays the tension and force of his drama comes from the potent struggle between the will to commit violent, destructive action and the need for a slow and careful building of political consciousness. Frequently Brenton also examines the problem of the possibility of revolutionary change in a country where middle-class reactionary traditions and values tend to smother everything that threatens their own security. Yet ironically, as Brenton's plays have become more political, he has moved into the establishment theatre, receiving a commission from the National Theatre in 1976. Brenton feels that the function of this kind of political theatre is to speak to the left about the left:

Writers on the left have to be a vanguard. They have to provide survival kits for people who are active politically. That is how I've seen the work so far. Also their work has to be at the service of the working class. But in the ways that are difficult to describe because you are not performing to the working class. Therefore you are addressing them to people who are a potentially political vanguard. And that is why the plays often have painful issues. Like Stalinism; what the party is; what violent action is; the actuality of working-class life; working-class consciousness.⁶⁰

In writing about Stalinism, communism, socialism, said Brenton, "You have no alternative but to tell the truth."⁶¹ The risk here is the possibility that what you say will be abused by the right-wing press or even by the production

system of subsidized theatres .

A further problem arises in the assumption that the audience of the subsidized theatres will contain a socialist "vanguard." Such a view could also lead to charges of inverted élitism. Brenton defends his policy of "strategic penetration":

The question is what dominates...theatre? Just as who dominates the government is the crucial thing. We don't have a socialist government. You can't grow a socialist government in community work, because we are in an advanced society and you can't go back to some ill-defined village society. A socialist government has to run the country before a socialist theatre can dominate the arts. And if socialist theatre doesn't dominate the arts something else will.⁶²

This is of course a central contradiction of socialist theatre in a capitalist society. Power and resources as well as creative outlets are inevitably centralized in the subsidized theatres. Brenton believed that the fringe counter-culture had failed, yet Portable's main failures derived from their inability to attract working-class audiences and to achieve their own theatre space. In fact much of the '68 fringe breakaway movement became a merely novel rather than a truly emergent element of literary production. In 1975, Brenton attempted to create a new theatre in which socialist plays could be performed. The barriers to such an operation were financial, but success might not necessarily have created a working-class theatre. Arnold Wesker's Centre 42 failed to attract working-class audiences because

he was trying to impose his own culture on them.

Brenton may be right in saying that the dominant culture must be demystified from within (certainly in a decade of apparent political reaction in Britain the work of playwrights such as Brenton represents powerful, thoughtful moral and revolutionary socialist perspectives), yet it is true too that this approach significantly underestimates the essential role of socialist theatre in raising the consciousness of the working class. Brenton justified his move from the fringe to the National Theatre by stating that he wanted "to get into bigger theatres, because they are, in a sense more public. Until that happens, you really can't have any worth as a playwright."⁶³

This view is opposed by John McGrath:

The National Theatre is a political statement. In its structures and its productions, it embodies a set of values and assumptions that are demonstrably those of the ruling class: Even when it attempts 'left-wing' plays--it gobbles them up into its high-cultural meritocratic maw.⁶⁴

These views carry authority, for McGrath's early writing career was typical of the young playwright heading via Oxbridge connections towards the Royal Court. McGrath had a working-class upbringing in Birkenhead, Merseyside and Buckley, North Wales. He attended Grammar School and was a "beneficiary" of the 1944 Education Act which gave him a grant to go to Oxford University after doing his time in the

Army. In 1958, his first play, A Man Has Two Fathers, was performed at Oxford and was reviewed by no less a luminary than Kenneth Tynan (Oxford) in the Observer. As a result, George Devine (Oxford), asked him to work on a play with Anthony Page (Oxford) at the Royal Court. McGrath seemed to fit the role of the rising working-class writer heading into the bourgeois theatre, yet McGrath has said that his experiences in the Army, at Oxford, and the Royal Court alerted him to the brutal power of the British class system.⁶⁵

After a short and frustrating period reading play-scripts at the Court and fighting to control the production of his plays, McGrath left to write for the BBC. This decision was prompted by a desire to use the popular medium of television to present socialist alternatives. With Troy Kennedy-Martin, McGrath co-authored the innovative series, Z-Cars. What was revolutionary in its format was the rejection of the "cops and robbers" cliché: the policemen in the series were used as tools in order to present a "kind of documentary about people's lives."⁶⁶ Technically the series was also innovative. As a director, McGrath used a minimum of camera angles which changed only to register a specific point or new piece of information. The effect was a gradual building of information instead of the previous use of the wide-angle unselective shot, based on the big screen. McGrath and Kennedy-Martin eventually

left Z-Cars when the policemen themselves became television stars--the subjects and not the device. McGrath grew sceptical about the value of this undoubtedly popular form because of the impossibility of retaining individual control. In this he differs from socialist playwrights such as Trevor Griffiths, who argue that a play on television will make contact with literally millions of viewers. McGrath has argued that socialist plays on television, whilst important, encounter particular problems in presenting an oppositional ideology. He quotes Enzensberger:

There is precious little chance for the people who are productive to take over their means of production: this is just what the present structure is designed to prevent. However, even under present circumstances, the relationship is not without a certain ambiguity, since there is no way of running the mind industry without enlisting the services of at least a minority of people who can create something.⁶⁷

These contradictions are even more apparent in the film industry where huge financial resources are required for production. Between 1966 and 1972 McGrath worked in that industry, directing and scripting such films as Billion Dollar Brain (with Ken Russell), The Virgin Soldiers, The Bofors Gun, and The Reckoning. Ironically, his material gains from this period enabled him to found a touring Marxist theatre company in 1971. His rejection of established theatre venues indicates McGrath's emerging belief that intellectual commitment can never be enough for a writer. As Walter Benjamin said,

political commitment, however revolutionary it may seem, functions in a counter-revolutionary way so long as the writer experiences his solidarity with the proletariat only in the mind and not as producer.⁶⁸

Between 1966 and 1968 McGrath had written successful plays for the commercial theatre. In 1968, however, McGrath was in Paris to experience the "para-revolutionary" situation:

The thinking about ordinary life, the freshness of the approach, the urgency and beauty of ideas was amazing. But what didn't happen was the organization. For a lot of reasons. A lot connected with the French Communist Party, a lot connected with the fact that the rest of the left was split and disorganized, and with the fact that a lot of the student leadership was middle class and not dedicated to social revolution, and with the power of De Gaulle and his wiliness as a politician. And there in the middle of all that, you have the absolute contradiction....⁶⁹

This density of experience and the need for unity and consciousness building exposed McGrath to the contradiction in his own life as a socialist writer working within the bourgeois theatre. His answer was to found the 7:84 Theatre Company in late 1971.

The setting up of 7:84 overlapped with a period between 1970 and 1972 when McGrath was working at the Everyman Theatre, Liverpool. At the Everyman, McGrath experimented increasingly with popular forms of entertainment, particularly the use of song and comedy. A 1971 play, Soft or a Girl?, was a musical in the form of a rock-concert

with scenes interspersed to create a story about class society. The rock-concert is a specifically working-class form of entertainment, and significantly Soft or a Girl? played to packed audiences at the Everyman, eighty percent of whom were working class.

The creation of the 7:84 Theatre Company was a further extension of McGrath's application of theory to practice. The name of the company is a political statement: 7 percent of the population own 84 percent of the wealth (these statistics were taken from a government report that was revealed in The Economist in 1966). With 7:84, McGrath has developed a socialist theatre based on Marxist theory that directly strives to raise the political and social consciousness of the oppressed by presenting entertainment which in form and content relates to the lives of the actual working class. McGrath's own developing Marxist position is clearly indicated in the dialectical nature of his plays, and the form and content (in practice the same thing) of his work reflects his deep commitment to the emergence of a counter-culture based on the experiences and (positive) values of the working class in order to oppose, and one day succeed, the cultural ideology of the ruling class. This concern has included a search of various theatrical forms that can have a direct relevance to the British proletariat. Indeed we have already seen in this study that form is inextricably

linked to content and that both are overtly political. The same can also be said of established theatrical institutions which generally exclude popular audiences. Such class and cultural distinctions are intensified by the excessive ticket prices of West End and subsidized theatres. With this in mind, 7:84 has rejected established theatres wherever possible, choosing to perform in village halls, working-mens' clubs, trade union halls, factories, or arts centres.

By 1973 the Company had developed into two separate touring groups, 7:84 England and 7:84 Scotland, though McGrath continues to write for both of them. The companies work as socialist collectives. In an introduction to his play Boom, McGrath describes 7:84's production methods:

Firstly we do not 'improvise.' Virtually everything, down to the smallest throwaway, is written or discussed before the performance. Secondly, the actors do not write their own material. The shows are conceived and controlled down to the smallest detail by the writer/director with the fullest consultation, discussion and contribution from the collective company.⁷⁰

Working-class venues create particular demands and creative possibilities for the socialist playwright or company, and the popular forms of working-class culture have become central features of McGrath's 7:84 plays. McGrath, like the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, views popular culture not as "the inert object of sociological description, but as the site of a political struggle."⁷¹

The commercial exploitation of the working classes has penetrated and debased all levels of their culture; that is to say, there will be as much violence, racism, sexism, chauvinistic patriotism and crass commercialism in working-class entertainment as in any other form. Consequently, to counter these contradictions in working-class culture, McGrath has adopted a critical approach to popular forms and has specifically warned against what he calls "tailism," that is trailing behind the tastes of the working class and either underestimating an audience's capacity to understand a play on many levels of meaning or its ability to take criticism. When David Edgar dismissed working-class culture as "atrophied" and "reactionary" (and there is no doubt that many elements, such as strip shows and quiz games, are extremely reactionary) he was in fact adopting a reactionary approach himself. Working-class reaction has historical reasons, reasons that can be grasped in the contradictions of modern society. Most importantly, the concept "popular" is one capable of infinite change: in fact the term "popular" itself is historical and developmental. In addition, most definitions of the term "popular" tend to be class biased--as in the derogatory use of the term used by bourgeois critics (whether in literature or music). Equally damaging is the "proletcult" attitude which considers that anything popular with the working classes must necessarily be good. For McGrath

what is needed is a critical examination of the contradictions implicit in "popular culture." This in turn requires at times a socialist criticism of the audience--but it must be an informative criticism, not one based on insults or bourgeois preaching. As McGrath argues "it must be done from a position of basic political solidarity and cultural identity."⁷²

McGrath in A Good Night Out quotes a crucial passage from Brecht's polemic against George Lukacs:

Our concept of what is popular refers to a people who not only play a full part in historical development but actively usurp it, force its pace, determine its direction. We have a people in mind who make history, change the world and themselves. We have in mind a fighting people and therefore an aggressive concept of what is 'popular.'

Popular means: intelligible to the broad masses, adopting and enriching their forms of expression/assuming their standpoint, confirming and correcting it/representing the most progressive section of the people so that it can assume leadership and therefore intelligible to other sections of the people as well/relating to traditions and developing them/communicating to that portion of the people which strives for leadership the achievements of the section that at present rules the nation.⁷³

This critical but positive approach to popular culture demands a complete re-thinking of the notion of theatre. For example, the "language" of theatre takes on a different meaning if we discard the received bourgeois notion of making "dramatic literature." A socialist playwright must be involved with an entire "language" which

includes

not only the text, the mise-en-scene, lighting, performances, casting, music, effects, placing on stage, ...but also the nature of the audience, the nature, social, geographical and physical, of the venue, the price of tickets, the availability of tickets, the nature and placing of the pre-publicity, where the nearest pub is, and the relationships, between all these considerations themselves and each with what is happening on stage.⁷⁴

Now this may seem a "philistine" view to a "sensitive" critic seeking "universal literature," "tasteful art" or an "aesthetic experience," yet this is precisely the point such theatre makes. Socialist theatre has to be aware of "all the elements of the language of the theatrical event."⁷⁵

After 8-10 years of actually working with and writing about the working class, John McGrath listed some generalised differences between the demands and tastes of bourgeois and working-class audiences. He regarded the list as highly contentious, and certainly it is true that his generalisations must not be taken as absolutes. Nevertheless, critically judged, they provide a useful guide to the "language" of working-class theatre. The differences come in the areas of directness, comedy, music, emotion, variety, effect, immediacy to people's lives, localism and local identity, with a performer. Briefly McGrath asserts that a working-class audience will be more receptive to all these elements than a bourgeois audience. In fact these areas

or at least some of them, are likely to occur in all existing forms of working-class entertainment: I am thinking particularly here of club variety shows and pantomime.

McGrath also warns of "tailism" here:

directness can lead to simplification; comedy can be racist, sexist, even anti-working class; music can become mindlessness; emotion can become manipulative and can obscure judgement; variety can lead to disintegration of meaning and pettiness; effect for effect's sake can lead to trivialization; immediacy and localism can close the mind to the rest of the world, lead to chauvinism, and 'Here's tae-us-wha's-like-us'-ism; and a sense of identity with the performer can lead to nauseating, ingratiating performances with neither dignity nor perspective.⁷⁶

One fact that must always be remembered is that British working-class culture tends to define itself locally or regionally rather than nationally, the dialects are a prime example of this. For example, forms of entertainment in urban industrial areas, with dense pockets of population, will be very different from that of a village hall in rural Yorkshire. Even in forms that are widespread, such as pantomime, much of the entertainment's impact comes from a personal knowledge of the actors as well as from satire and jokes on local characters and events. This sense of cultural identity does not exclude class identity or even the wider "ideological attribute" of working-class internationalism. The "language" of McGrath's plays, then, reflects a strong sense of cultural identity with their

audiences.

One of the principal tasks that McGrath has undertaken is to retell the suppressed history of the working class:

its formation, centuries of suffering and pride, the victories as the people moved towards a greater degree of emancipation, the distortions of purpose as they approached complete power, the lessons of the political struggles, the divisions within the people today and the mystification that prevails as the ruling class pretends it no longer rules.⁷⁷

In McGrath's plays the dominance of capitalism is not shown to be inevitable and the future pre-destined, but as capable of change. It is worth noting that several of the features that McGrath identifies as part of his working-class theatre appear on Brecht's list of anti-theatrical forms, such as emotion (as opposed to objective reason) and the involvement of spectator or solidarity (rather than turning the spectator into an observer). Yet, as McGrath points out, Brecht, like Brenton, wrote for a predominantly middle-class audience so that estrangement becomes essential for them.⁷⁸ McGrath, however, talks directly to the working class in working-class venues:

Now and again when you are appealing to the solidarity of the working class, you have to assume that a certain degree of solidarity still exists. For too long the working class has been seen as the loser. We celebrate strengths and criticise weaknesses. We want to give a sense of confidence, of the possibility of change.⁷⁹

Significantly, he often uses satirical representations of oppressors, but his stage techniques are usually the reverse of Brenton's and are designed not only to capture attention in venues where theatre is not a norm but also to promote class solidarity and thought.

McGrath views one of 7:84's roles as a theatre of intervention:

polemical, openly political, and whose avowed aim is to gain support for a particular party or position inside the working class, and among its potential allies...its ultimate purpose is agitational. It uses theatrical devices to explain, elucidate, remind and essentially persuade its audience to think differently.⁸⁰

This support can be for a strike, a struggle, fund-raising, for or against a piece of legislation, or it can be concerned with more general issues, such as racism, sexism, alcoholism, or the role of multi-national corporations. However, the ultimate aim of 7:84 is to help create a counter-culture grounded in revolutionary socialism and the values and culture of the working class. And it is in this sense that 7:84 has become a truly emergent element of theatrical production.

Chapter Four

Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.

Romain Rolland.⁸¹

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule.

Walter Benjamin.⁸²

Much of the early work of the fringe depicts the tranquil surface life of British society as a sham; in reality, it is a society in a state of collapse. Howard Brenton's early "plays for public places" often concentrate on individuals who choose to plot a perverse but definite line of action through this disturbed and complicated world. Peter Ansorge considers those early protagonists "...are frustrated not by the judgements of their society but the lack of any definite code of justice."⁸³

A typical early Brenton work is Christie in Love which was commissioned by the Portable Theatre in autumn 1969. The play is based on the true story of John Christie, who killed and buried numerous women in and around his house in Notting Hill Gate during the 1950's. The play stresses this historical context by opening with a tape-recorded broadcast of the facts of Christie's life. Yet the force of the piece derives from the strange sense of pity that is evoked for the notorious Christie. In Brenton's words, the play's basic device is

a kind of dislocation, tearing up one style for another, so the proceedings lurch and all interpretations are blocked, and the spectator hunting for an easy meaning wearies and is left only with Christie and his act of love.⁸⁴

The play also exemplifies Brenton's use in his early plays of "complete environments" in a rejection of traditional theatrical space. The setting is a pen made of chicken wire, ten feet by six, filled with old newspapers. This "set" is used variously as Christie's garden, front room, a police station, an execution shed and a lime pit. This space is a deliberate artifice, and the audience is required to sit all around and very close so that the proximity of the "set" and actors forces the audience to become involved in the drama.

The play opens with two policemen digging up bodies. Eventually they resurrect Christie himself, who, with the help of a female dummy, leads the policemen through the history of one of his crimes. The policemen are portrayed as "stage coppers," complete caricatures who mirror public distaste for Christie's actions through their stylised speeches:

I've heard some nasty things in my life. But burying English ladies in your own backyard just about takes the candle.⁸⁵

The constable cheers himself up while digging by reciting obscene limericks, whilst the Inspector tells terrible

jokes and voices police platitudes. The jokes are unfunny and badly told, yet the cartoon-like coppers prepare the audience for the appearance of an "horrific" Christie. The lights are turned off and Christie rises from the pen, lit only by the hand-lamps of the policemen. In Brenton's words,

Christie's first appearance is in the Dracula tradition. Happy horror, creeps and treats. He rises from the grave luridly, in a frightening mask. It looks as if a juicy evening's underway, all laughs, nice shivers, easy oohs and aahs.⁸⁶

Christie is then heard on tape delivering a long speech of hatred against women, whilst the Christie actor gets excited, pants, and finally mimes an orgasm. Immediately the lights go on, Christie removes the mask and reveals himself to be a "sad, apparently respectable middle-aged man."⁸⁷

The effect is deliberately anti-climactic. Christie is presented as an entirely naturalistic character amidst the stagey horror and comedy presented by the "set" and policemen. The "Hammer-horror" view of Christie is both the policemen's and the public's distorted perception of him. As the Inspector says,

I dunno, it's disappointing. Why can't a mass murderer be just a bit diabolical. Why can't a pervert like you, already in the annals of nastiness have fangs or something.⁸⁸

Christie's normality, as opposed to the representatives of authority's artificiality, reverses the moral focus in the play. In life, Christie has become almost a legend, but here his ordinariness is incomprehensible to the policemen who can find no real clue to the motivation behind the crimes. Christie's perverse crimes are revealed in context to be "acts of love." After "murdering" and having sex with the dummy victim, Christie pours himself some tea and declares "I was in love with her."⁸⁹ The constable who has been a figure of fun in the play, now makes a "real" shocked declaration of an outraged society:

Love's the bleeding moon. And bleeding doves
loving. And bleeding Frank Sinatra crooning.
And a nice church ceremony, and the Mrs.
tearful-eyed at the photograph. We went to
Clacton for our honeymoon, my wife and me. The
sea was gentle as a baby. The moon was smoothly
yellow. That were love. Not a corpse, in a
dirty garden...⁹⁰

Yet the constable's romanticized notions are undercut by the fact that, from Christie's point of view, love is necrophilia in a garden. Brenton here attacks "humanist" notions about people: "We humanely cannot deal with Christie."⁹¹ The Inspector concludes that society "has got to love in bounds. Else it gets criminal."⁹² Their "humane" response is to hang Christie.

In his early plays, Brenton concludes that the surface of society--what the situationists referred to as the

society of the spectacle--is a farce, what lies underneath, the monster in the garden, is the reality. He attacks existing mythologies by disrupting the narrative (or the spectacle) and using caricature to attack his audience's presumptions. Yet despite Brenton's theatrical versatility, his social and political criticism in these early plays remains undirected. What for example is Brenton's view of Christie? Is he merely "part of a sinister natural process"?⁹³ Is his pursuit of a path of erotic fulfillment to be applauded?

As Brenton testified, Portable's methods of working closely with new audiences actually politicized him in the same way that events of 1968 had sparked his consciousness and fired his anger. His plays accordingly became increasingly dialectical particularly in the interplay between action and language, society and the individual, the historical process and the experience of the present moment. Paradoxically, Brenton felt that these ideas needed to be produced on bigger stages.

Brenton's The Churchill Play, performed at the Nottingham Playhouse in 1974, is set in a concentration camp in England in 1984. A Conservative-Labour coalition has passed a new Industrial Relations Act which has allowed them to imprison militant trade unionists and strikers (the analogy in the play is obviously to the injustices of the Long Kesh internment camp in Northern Ireland). This image of the

future is offset by one from the past as the camp's internees rehearse a satirical portrayal of Winston Churchill as an obsessive hypochondriac, completely out of touch with the British people, and haunted by a spectre of gloom called Black Dog. In fact The Churchill Play begins with the internee who plays Churchill dramatically rising from a catafalque (another example of one of Brenton's recurrent stage devices).

The play portrays a nightmare sense of cause and effect between what Churchill said in the war, the present (Long Kesh in 1974), and a repressive future. Churchill's famous "blood, toil, tears and sweat" speech, spoken during the play-within-a-play, contains the line "Victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terrors, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory there is no survival."⁹⁴ Yet the result of this "victory" is shown to be fascism itself. The nightmare logic of The Churchill Play stems from an awareness of Walter Benjamin's warning that the past may be expropriated by the ruling classes so that history is not seen as a linear evolution, which at its best can lead to a form of social reform, or which at its worst can lead to an inert fatalism in the face of the "unchangeable" forces of history.⁹⁵ Brenton here considers history as a "shocking constellation of historical epochs" (Terry Eagleton)⁹⁶, in other words, the continuous practice and

process of class struggle that is integral to the theory of historical materialism. In fact "history," as Eagleton points out, is not simply a theoretical construct but a political one too.⁹⁷ Indeed one of the major climaxes of the play graphically shows how the myths of the past are the distortions of the ruling classes, the "posthumous" creation of their own self-justifying line of causality. This climax occurs during a scene in the prisoners' play, set in wartime Peckham by the edge of a land-mine crater. When Churchill comes to see the damage, the prisoners first dramatize the myth of Londoners telling him "We can take it, gov. Give it 'em back,"⁹⁸ then the reality of Uncle Ernie telling Churchill, "We can take it. But we just might give it back to you one day."⁹⁹ The statement then is one of class warfare; it is Churchill who has distorted the past. Churchill in the play angrily asks, "Who won the war?"¹⁰⁰ Uncle Ernie tells him the truth, "Don't you know that? I did. And she did. People won the war."¹⁰¹ As Brenton says: "The official past has nothing to do with real history, it has everything to do with the present."¹⁰²

In a note in the programme of The Churchill Play, Brenton describes a meeting with an old Portsmouth man who told him of his wartime memories of the town:

He spoke of the panic, the looting, the hatred for police and wardens, the universal anger, the trekkers who walked out of the city onto the Downs where they camped for weeks (the same thing

happened in Glasgow). He was not describing defeatism or cowardice. They occurred but so did the kindness of neighbour to neighbour, the legendary 'dawn cups of tea after the raid.' What was extraordinary and overwhelming was that the torrent of stories, impressions and comments was nothing less than a detailed account from personal experience of the beginning of a popular rising, a people's revolt that was on the boil in a bombed English city thirty-five years ago.¹⁰³

Walter Benjamin is again relevant here:

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it 'the way it was really' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes.¹⁰⁴

The resistance of Uncle Ernie, the possibility of a popular uprising in Portsmouth or Glasgow during the war, is the memory that Brenton (or the internee) seizes as it flashes up "at a moment of danger"; that image of the past that can correspond with the dangerous present (the resistance to British imperialism in Ireland or the fight against Thatcher) and propel society into a socialist future. With this dialectic in mind, glib and smug historic mythologies (Churchill "won" the war, communism "creates" Stalinism) can be exploded. If class warfare disintegrates into fatalism or passivity, the result may well be the internment camp in The Churchill Play. The internees of the future in the

plays are shown to be victims of capitalist brutality, fuelled by the perverse logic of assumptions such as "a strike will lose profits therefore the dissidents have to be contained" (such assumptions lie behind Thatcher's explicit statements of class warfare during the 1984 miners' strike). In the play, the prisoners revolt, but the forces against them are too strong. The answer proposed by Brenton is a kind of guerrilla warfare: stay alive, but fight. A prisoner, Mike, says,

They'll concrete the whole world over any moment now. And what do we do? (A slight pause. Smiles.) Survive. In the cracks. Either side of the wire. Be alive.¹⁰⁵

The interplay between past and present is crucial to Brenton's work and represents a huge political progression from his early plays. The corresponding move has been from fringe to National:

These plays are big in cast, staging, theme, and politically declared ambition (they do want to change the world, influence opinion, enter fights over political issues); they are 'Jacobean' in a mix of the tragic and comic taking great pleasure in the surprises and shocks of entertainment the huge stage can arm the playwright with as a showman, they are epic in that they are many scened, full of stories, ironic and argumentative, and deliberately written as 'history' plays for now.¹⁰⁶

I might add that they are written for middle-class audiences, and hence designed to deliberately disrupt bourgeois assumptions. In fact, Brenton's versatile and experimental

forms combine with ideas that anger the "high-cultured" sensibilities of the English middle classes. Nowhere is this more evident than in the "critical" response to his most controversial play, The Romans in Britain.(1980)

It has become impossible to discuss Brenton's The Romans in Britain without noting its hysterical reception from the British media. Brenton was no stranger to controversy; his version of Measure for Measure (1972) saw the Northcott theatre-board call in a lawyer to advise on a possible libel suit over his identification of Macmillan as the Duke and Enoch Powell as Angelo. In June 1980 A Short Sharp Shock, a satirical attack on the Tory cabinet, opened at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, amidst calls by Tory M.P.s for the Arts Council to deprive the theatre of its grant. Reviews of The Romans in Britain at the National were almost uniformly bad and plainclothes policemen were called in to determine whether charges of obscenity should be brought against the play. Part of one scene (the attempted buggery of a Celt by a Roman soldier) was singled out by critics and local politicians for particular abuse. The Sunday Telegraph critic, Francis King, called the play "of dubious argument as history and of even more dubious merit as drama."¹⁰⁷ The then Tory head of the GLC, Sir Horace Cutler, was so "shocked" that he walked out of a performance, and Freddie Weyer, the chairman of the Arts committee, called it "the most disgusting display I have

ever seen and heard. I find it difficult to repeat some of the dialogue in the play to close friends. I'm not narrow-minded, please don't think so, I'm very broad-minded."¹⁰⁸ Amongst this chorus of "sensitive" critical response came the voice of the Sunday Times critic, James Fenton: "The play is a nauseating load of rubbish from beginning to end....It is advertised as unsuitable for children. It is unsuitable for everyone."¹⁰⁹ The self-appointed guardian angel of England's moral worth and cultural values, Mary Whitehouse, brought a private prosecution against the director, Michael Bogdanov, for procuring an act of indecency on stage. Mrs. Whitehouse neither saw nor read the play. The neo-nazi National Front picketed the National Theatre urging the patrons not to see such "smut" and "to keep queers off our stages."¹¹⁰

The criticism of the play, then, was directed at two areas: the play's ideas and how it was presented. Yet crucially many of the attacks on the play were either class or politically biased. In fact a careful examination of Brenton's play shows its powers as a tool for demystifying the history of the Celtic people and exposing these historical lies as they continue today with the British occupation of Northern Ireland. Truly subversive drama can always expect such a critical response.

The first part of the play is set in Britain in 54 BC and centres on the second expedition of Julius Caesar--it

ends with the startling entrance of the modern British Army. Part Two is situated variously in Britain in AD 515, over one hundred years after the last Romans left Britain in a period conventionally known as "The Dark Ages," and on the Irish border in 1980. The central thesis in the play links the subjugation and repression of the Celts in England (54 BC) by the Romans, in Britain (AD 515) by the Saxons, and in Ireland (1980) by the British. Despite King's assertions that the play's use of history is dubious, Brenton's use of social and political history tallies with known fact. The start of the play distinguishes three social groups, Celtic, Belgaic and Roman. The Celtic group, ruled by the Mother in the play, is precisely situated (north of St. Albans) and several references in the play stress the ancient and established rights of the Celts in Europe (Caesar refers to the Celts of Northern Italy whose defeat by the Romans began the period of Celtic decline¹¹¹). This representative group of Celts is threatened at the start of the play by both the landing of the Roman Army and the advance of the warlike Belgaic tribes.

In scene two, the Mother is under pressure from two envoys from the Belgaic Cassivellanus to ally against the Romans. The Mother, in front of her tribe, rejects the Romans as a myth, but later reveals to her husband that the Roman Army is real and that she has made alliances with the Trinovantes (Belgaic) who are in alliance with the Romans.

Politically this move is essential to the safety of her tribe, but her attempts to save her people are ruined by two Roman soldiers who accidentally come across her group and massacre most of them. Caesar converts this accident into policy in the play. His historian, Asinus, refers to the Mother's tribe as "the ancient stock of Britain."¹¹² To Caesar, the tribe are merely a trifle, symbolically represented by his bad tooth that he eventually prises out with a knife, but he literally rewrites his own history as he narrates his "version" of events to his official biographer. His logic is that of a military figure. He is angry at the massacre, but for him the victims are merely a "wretched bunch of wog farmers."¹¹³ What Caesar represents is the forcible imposition of an alien culture onto the indigenous Celtic people. This is symbolized when he puts a pendant of Venus around the neck of Marban, one of the Mother's foster children who is training to be a druid. Caesar insists that the "old Gods are dead."¹¹⁴ Marban is defiled by the Roman God (as he was defiled by his treatment by stray Roman soldiers) and consequently kills himself, but not before he has given an ironic rejoinder to Caesar's remarks in his prophecy that the Celts must "Abandon the life we know. Change ourselves into animals...deadly, watching, ready in the forest."¹¹⁵ Marban here describes the resistance to come from the Celtic people against their imperialist oppressors.

The historical veracity of Part One is built up in careful detail. Much of what is known about early Celtic culture comes from the oral tradition of ancient Ireland which was eventually recorded by the Christian monks in the sixth century AD. Celtic Ireland was relatively untouched by Roman culture until nearly half a millenium after Gaul was, as Dillon and Chadwick note, "Celtic Britain forms a bridge between the two Celtic realms of Gaul and Ireland."¹¹⁶ They also point out that the high prestige of women "is a feature of early Celtic civilization and especially of Celtic mythology."¹¹⁷ In the play the Mother fosters three children (Brac, Viridio and Marban), another normal feature of Celtic society.

All this detail establishes the first links between the community and the future Celts of Ireland. Early in the play, Conlag and Dauí, the two Irish criminals on the run, meet the foster brothers and confess murder and to having been cursed by the priests in Ireland. Dauí is killed by the brothers and his blood used to bless the ground (Conlag escapes only to be killed by the slave that he has captured). The brothers' reaction in context is a perfectly moral one since Marban is training to be a Celtic druid or priest. The priests in the Celtic community were religious leaders and judges. Caesar himself testified to the supreme position held by the druids

amongst the Celts: "They believe that the execution of those who have been caught in the act of theft or robbery in some crime is more pleasing to the immortal Gods."¹¹⁸

The three foster brothers in turn meet three stray Romans. Viridio is killed; and Brac mortally wounded; his dying screams through the rest of the scene add a terror to the symbolic events that follow. It is at this point that the famous "rape" scene takes place as the third soldier attempts to bugger Marban while the second soldier explains that they are part of an empire. Dramatically the moment is deliberately designed to shock an audience into a realization of the meaning of empire. Yet the rape by the Roman Empire is not just the physical assault on the Celtic community, but also a cultural defilement because Marban is a priest. The parallel extends to Caesar who later tells Marban,

On the mainland I burn your temples. Your
priests that will not serve the Roman Gods--I
kill. I desecrate their bodies...because there
are new Gods now.¹¹⁹

At the end of Part One the link with modern Ulster is graphically made as the British Army shoots the slave that had killed Conlag. Caesar and his staff drive in also dressed as British Army Officers. The effect again is the familiar Brenton technique of a disruption of expectation, violently catapulting the past into the present. Brenton

prefaces this part with a quote from Terence: "Nothing human is alien to me." The irony of this statement in the play is obvious (it is Caesar who actually refers to this quote in the play).

Part Two has one single setting, a field of harvested corn in Ulster, and focuses on the character of Chichester, a British Army assassin, and the visions of the past in AD 515 that run through his head. Chichester in fact stays on stage during the Anglo-Saxon scenes to suggest that they are part of his dreams and ultimate madness. The play carefully follows the parallels set up in Part One. In fact, as Philip Roberts has shown,¹²⁰ one of the play's major successes is the tightness of the parallel time schemes in Parts One and Two, both of which take place in a single day. The parallels are emphasized by the lighting of each scene. For example, both the suicide of Marban and the creation of Arthurian myth by the two cooks of AD515 in the final scene are set in moonlight to suggest an end but also a birth of resistance. In Chichester's visions, the Celt, Cai, is in conflict against both the Saxon invaders and the Christian religion represented by the priests. Like the foster brothers, Cai pours blood upon his land as a blessing to the old Gods. Previously he had buried a Celtic idol in his field to guard him. Chichester had found this idol near his family home in Colchester, and in his mind the field becomes both the Irish cornfield and the field

of Saxon invasion; Chichester as an Anglo-Saxon by his very presence is an invader in Ireland. Cai is killed by one of his daughters, Corda, as his stubborn resistance is shown to be futile. She and her sister become criminals, like Conlag and Dauí, but they also become the start of guerrilla resistance echoed in the IRA figures who confront Chichester, particularly the Irish woman who is Chichester's liaison with O'Rourke, the man Chichester has to kill. As Roberts points out, the bridge between fifth-century and twentieth-century Britain is by means of one of the most subtle moments in the play.¹²¹ O'Rourke's full name in the play is Sheamus Naill O'Rourke, a celebrated name in Irish history. From the fifth century on "the ruling dynasty of northern and central Ireland were the Ui Neill, the descendants of Naill Noigiallach."¹²² The confrontation then is between the history and culture of Celtic Ireland and the historical crimes of the English in Ireland (allegorically linked to the Roman rape of Celtic culture).

It is Chichester in fact who first introduces the idea of Arthur; Camulodunum, he says, "is one of the sites for Arthur's last battle AD 515."¹²³ By the time he meets O'Rourke, Chichester identifies the link between Roman, Saxon and the British in Ireland, but in his madness he identifies himself with Arthur as the Saviour of the Celts:

Because in my head, there's a Roman spear. A Saxon axe. A British Army machine-gun...The weapons of Rome, invaders, Empire.¹²⁴

But his cries of liberal humanism are shown to be not only meaningless in the face of the real and justified anger of the Irish people but also insulting to the historical truth of the Protestant conquest of Ireland. The Irish woman articulates this anger:

I don't want to hear of this British soldier's humanity. And how he comes to be howling in the middle of my Country. And how he thinks Ireland is a tragedy. Ireland's troubles are not a tragedy. They are the crimes his country has done mine. That he does to me, by standing there.¹²⁵

Chichester is then shot dead. The audience is shocked into a realization that sentimental liberalism cannot be enough. In the final scene of the play, two cooks make an uneasy alliance with Cai's daughters. One of the cooks invents the story of a "king who never was...a golden age, lost and yet to come."¹²⁶ For Brenton, Arthur was an invention, created "for a good historical reason. He was needed. He gave voice to the aspirations of a defeated people."¹²⁷ The Romans in Britain is epic in scale, and presents a powerful demystification of history and is an important voice in the debate over Northern Ireland. As Brenton says, "what my play says is that all empire is bad. The Republican cause is just. The border is a crime. But bald statements are no good. To convince an audience of the

truth of my arguments, I find myself writing about Britain in 54 BC and a British officer going off his head in an Irish cornfield today."¹²⁸

In a foreword to his translation of Brecht's Galileo Brenton approvingly quotes the slogan that Gramsci so admired: "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will." It is a phrase that Benjamin, encountering the same age of fascism as Gramsci, also adhered to. Indeed the link between Brenton and Benjamin is more than superficial; both plant seeds of hope based on a dialectical understanding of past, present and future. In fact Terry Eagleton has convincingly linked Benjamin's anti-historicism with the "permanent revolution" theories of Trotsky, and the analogy fits for Brenton too. Yet Eagleton points out that Marxism "holds out other strategic slogans too."¹²⁹ Having taken the point of Rolland's formula it might be possible to say: "Given the strength of the masses, how can we be defeated."¹³⁰ It is with this latter slogan in mind that we must return to John McGrath.

Chapter Five

Are we going to create a revolutionary culture, whose task is to transform working-class culture, as it exists now, and to work with the political movement to create a revolutionary consciousness amongst the people? Or are we going to sit on our arses and moan about the backwardness of the people?

John McGrath.¹³¹

John McGrath's plays have always been concerned with class analysis, but his pre-7:84 plays concentrate primarily on the alienation of the working-class individual in a capitalist society. McGrath's early success, Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun (Hampstead Theatre Club, 1966), was originally written for the Royal Court. His subsequent film version, The Bofors Gun (1968), achieved even greater popularity, and its largely naturalistic style reflects his attraction to this form before 1968 in theatre, film, and television (McGrath stopped writing for Z-Cars in 1965).

Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun is set in a British Army camp in North Germany, early February 1954, and clearly reflects McGrath's own frustrations as a National serviceman in Germany. The inexperienced N.C.O., Lance-Bombardier Evans, is a Manchester working-class Grammar School boy who has won a scholarship to Cambridge and "is climbing out of a working-class mentality into a middle-class one, with everything that entails."¹³² The conflicts in the play derive from the feeling of futility

experienced by those who are driven to "futile alienated work."¹³³ In fact, Evans represents the cultural dislocation and ambivalence of the rising middle classes of the fifties in the clash between his ambition and his own homesickness. McGrath describes the whole play as about

Two kinds of consciousness, one of which is going along with the rules of the game--not very good at them, but getting better all the time--and the other, the root-consciousness of the oppressed, who are driven to futile, alienated work, and who react, quite understandably, with a kind of passionate abandon, abandonment of purpose, and fall back on to immediate, slightly irrational and self-destructive emotions.¹³⁴

The whole play can be seen as a symbol of the fraud of capitalist society, a theme later to be integral to McGrath's 7:84 plays. The dislocation in society extends to the incongruity of a British Army squad defending an obsolete gun in a foreign environment. The setting of the play obviously refers to the Cold War (indeed the physical cold and boredom that the soldiers feel while on guard adds to the sense of alienation in the play). Evans is on his last night of duty before returning home for officer training, yet his well-meaning manner compromises his sense of command in that he allows his guard to go off to a NAAFI canteen while on duty. While there, O'Rourke nearly drinks himself to death and tries to kill himself by jumping out of a window. Evans refuses to charge O'Rourke, ostensibly because he is too humane to let O'Rourke face the certain

heavy charge, but in reality because of his desire to return home. As O'Rourke points out, if Evans charges O'Rourke he will have to wait for the trial. Throughout the play, it is O'Rourke who confronts Evans with his central dilemma: his class contradiction. In a vain attempt to keep control, Evans has tried to make the guard refer to him as "Bombardier." O'Rourke sardonically replies,

That's right, so we'll all know our place: some run with the forces, some hunt with the hounds... Can't run with both now, Bombardier, can we?¹³⁵

Evans' feeling of exile is treated sympathetically in the play, but is offset by his ambition. In a gripping dialogue between Evans and O'Rourke (who has been propped up to appear to be on guard), O'Rourke taunts Evans into trying to discover why he should want to die. Evans' anger finally explodes into the truth, "I don't bloody well care,"¹³⁶ as the notes in the play explain, Evans is a "nice boy trying hard to be liked, and not really succeeding; he lacks a basic level of humanity."¹³⁷

Up to this point, the play has been predominantly naturalistic. O'Rourke now breaks the illusion by talking directly to the audience in sales patter:

It is an inefficient and obsolete weapon, sirs, of which our army has many thousands: and you have in your wisdom, asked me, Gunner O'Rourke, to guard it with my life, thinking that, as my thirtieth year looms up to strike me between the eyes, I would do anything, to preserve and shelter from all Bolshevik harm, a thing so

beautifully useless, so poignantly past it, so wistfully outdated, as my youth, or a Bofors Gun. I would, and I shall, lay down my life for it. I have tried already, and failed. Here, in the sacred presence of the Bofors Gun, I can only succeed.¹³⁸

O'Rourke then kills himself, and the final of the irony of play is that Evans, promotion hopes gone, is provoked into gratuitous aggression. Fully aware that O'Rourke is dead, he kicks the body and tells O'Rourke he is on charge. The vicious game that is played out in the social situation is shown to have affected everyone.

The influence of existentialism is apparent in this play: crisis reveals true character. Evans' humanity is seen under stress to border on viciousness. The conclusions here are similar to Jean Paul Sartre's: there can be no escape from the pressures of public responsibility except by suicide (or madness). The British class system is shown to be brutal, and O'Rourke's self-destruction is that of a working-class individual unable to cope with his situation by playing the game (as Evans does). Significantly, O'Rourke's anger is largely unfocused. His fury is a class one (more so than Jimmy Porter's for example) and his alienation is real: his work is futile, pointless, and in the service of a hated and despised class. Yet McGrath at this point does not reveal the alternatives to O'Rourke's self-destructiveness.

In McGrath's first play for 7:84 Scotland, The Cheviot,

the Stag and the Black, Black Oil (1973), the historical process rather than the individual is central. In this play, the plot is history: the history of two hundred years of capitalist exploitation in the Highlands of Scotland since the battle of Culloden in 1746: the clearances of the people from the land by English and Scottish landowners, first to gain pastures for the profitable Cheviot sheep and later to give the aristocracy hunting ground, and the current plundering of Scottish oil resources by British and American big business.

The form of The Cheviot is the Highland ceilidh, an entertainment which combines story-telling, song and dance. Historically, it was also a way for people to meet and discuss local events. As McGrath says, "the role of the ceilidh was very much a double one--of re-inforcing the Gaelic culture, which we were also trying to do, and of a political getting-together."¹³⁹

In the play, McGrath combined the ceilidh's elements of folk-music, dancing, and comedy, with direct Marxist analysis of the Clearances in Highlands, readings from eye-witness historical accounts, as well as the facts and figures about the most recent capitalist exploiters, the oil-companies. Significantly, the play received an enthusiastic reception not only in the Highlands but also in industrial areas of Scotland. The play is a graphic example of popular theatre using popular forms to relate to the actual history of working people and to show the need for a

socialist alternative to capitalism.

McGrath's demystification reclaims popular history from the lies of the ruling classes and from romantic fantasies about the past. The early part of the play concentrates on the "clearings" made by the landowning Sutherland family (the same example is used by Karl Marx in Capital) and the role played by James Loch and Patrick Sellar, factor and under-factor to the Sutherland estates. To quote Marx:

Between 1814 and 1820 these 15,000 inhabitants, about 3,000 families, were systematically hunted and rooted out. All their villages were destroyed and burnt, all their fields turned into pastorage. British soldiers enforced the mass of evictions, and came to blows with the inhabitants. One old woman was burnt to death in the flames of the hut she refused to leave.¹⁴⁰

The history is told through a mixture of song, documentary material and sketches. Gaelic songs and dialogue are used occasionally in the play as examples of Highland culture and as a reminder that the Gaelic language and the plaid were forbidden by the British after Culloden: "A whole culture was systematically destroyed by economic power."¹⁴¹ Significantly, though, for every defeat suffered by the Highland people a victory is celebrated. For the play does not just describe the historical process of capitalism, but shows that there is an alternative that calls for organisation and political action.

The "set" for The Cheviot consists of a small platform

with a circle of chairs for the members of the cast. All props, costumes and musical instruments are arranged around these chairs in full view of the audience. "Scenery" is provided by a huge pop-up book. The actors each play several parts in the play whilst maintaining a level of personal communication with the audience. The play begins with the whole company singing James Copeland's "These are My Mountains," and this song becomes a motif for ownership of wealth in Scotland. It is sung with increasing irony and minor modifications by representatives of the three eras of exploitation: first the sheep, then Queen Victoria, and finally Texas Jim, an aggressive oilman. Loch and Sellar are presented as a comic double act, yet their comic songs do not cover their viciousness. As they say in the song, "High Industry" (to the tune of "Bonnie Dundee"), "What value a culture that cannot be sold?/The price of a culture is counted in gold."¹⁴² Immediately after this song, the historic resistance, particularly by the Highland women, to the attack on their way of living, in fact their very lives, is recounted in a series of readings in which the bloody beatings inflicted on the women by the police are told in graphic detail. The ally of the Landlords is presented in the figure of the Church Minister who tells his "sheep" that "the troubles that are visiting you are a judgement from God, and the warning of the final judgement that is to come."¹⁴³ The established Church supported the might

of capitalism, and capitalism became more more brutal and bloody in its methods:

English--and Scottish--capital was growing powerful and needed to expand. Huge profits were being made already as a result of the Industrial Revolution, and improved methods of agriculture. This accumulated wealth had to be used, to make more profit--because this is the law of capitalism."¹⁴³

Patrick Sellar was eventually put on trial on a charge of culpable homicide for burning down the house of Margaret Mackay, a centenarian, while she was still in it (the incident recounted by Marx). Both the murder and the subsequent farce of a trial are dramatised in the play; Sellar is acquitted.

The Cheviot uses a variety of comic forms. Some of the scenes are straight pantomime routines such as a scene set in Canada when a "Sturdy Highlander" asks the audience to shout to him when "Red Indians" come up behind him, or the melodramatic presentation of a truly awful poem by Lord Francis Egerton in honour of the first Duke of Sutherland. Yet the comedy is designed both to relate history in an entertaining manner and to make an audience think. The scene in Canada plays on popular British conceptions of "Red Indians" and French Canadians and then undercuts this laughter^d by linking the repression of Gaelic culture to the rape of Indian culture in Canada:

Sturdy Highlander: But we came more and more of us, from all over Europe, in the interests of a trade war between two lots of shareholders, and in time, the Red Indians were reduced to the same state as our fathers after Culloden--defeated, hunted, treated like the scum of the earth, their culture polluted and torn out with slow deliberation and their land no longer their own.¹⁴⁴

The course of the play introduces us to the hunting aristocracy, in the caricatures of Lord Crask and Lady Phosphate, a "philanthropist," Harriet Beecher Stowe, who actually visited the Duchess of Sutherland and published a defence of her in her highly romanticized and historically ridiculous book entitled Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands, and to the hilarious but ruthless figure of Andy McChuckemup:

So picture it, if you will, right there at the top of the glen, beautiful vista--The Crammem Inn, High Rise Motorcroft--all finished in natural, washable plastic granitette. Right next door, the 'Frying Scotsman' All Night Chipperama--with a wee ethnic bit, Fingal's Caff--serving seaweed-suppers-in-the-basket, and draught Drambuie.¹⁴⁵

The play ends with an analysis of the politics of oil in Scotland (and the alliance of American companies with Whitehall), the new ruling class of merchants, financiers, merchant bankers, and property dealers and construction firms, and the realities of the ownership of land in Scotland (statistics compiled by John McEwan, for example, showed that 0.1 percent of the population of Ross and

Cromarty own 97 percent of the land). Above all, the play exhorts the working people of Scotland to organize and fight capitalist exploitation:

At the time of the clearances, the resistance failed because it was not organized. The victories came as a result of militant organisation--in Coigeach, The Braes, and the places that formed Land Leagues. We too must organise, and fight--not with stones but politically, with the help of the working class in the towns, for a government that will control the oil development for the benefit of everybody.¹⁴⁶

In Blood Red Roses (7:84 Scotland, 1980), McGrath successfully interweaves two crucial themes of history told from a socialist perspective with the growth to full political consciousness of a fighting working-class individual. The play tells the story of Bessie McGuigan, a "Celtic fighting woman," who becomes a militant trade unionist and takes on the might of a multi-national corporation. Yet the play also relates the history of the years between 1951 and 1979, from the return of twelve-year-old Bessie's father, Sandy, from the wars, to the election that brought Sir Keith Joseph ("the John Knox of monetarism") to office.

The main protagonist is shown in the play to be doubly exploited by the forces of capitalism: both as a member of the industrial working class in an East Kilbride factory and as a woman and mother. In fact the personal story of Bessie's family and friends is intimately interwoven with the political and historical developments in the play.

Bessie, during her long fight against International Registration Machines , eventually loses her husband, Alex, a trade unionist and Communist Party member, who is unable to let politics reach into all areas of his life. Despite his real conviction about the need to fight capitalism, Alex retains the ambivalence of an "old-fashioned need for the wife to look after the weans."¹⁴⁷ Each scene is presented by the Announcer, who prefaces the action by explaining the theme of the scene, its setting, the year and the political stripe of the particular capitalist party in power. Near the end of the play, after Alex has left Bessie, the audience hears a self-conscious Alex make the announcement "The time 1978. The place--my bloody house."¹⁴⁸ In the course of the scene Bessie brings on the Announcer, now Terry aged twenty-two, as her "young man." Significantly, too, at the end of the play, Terry and Alex gone, black-listed for being a militant, and the depressing results of the 1979 general elections coming through on the telly, Bessie is still shown to be literally productive as she announces that she is going to have another baby and "will fight on."¹⁴⁹ Conversely, Bessie's workmate, Catriona, is only able to have false pregnancies and dies of cancer whilst Bessie has her second child. Catriona is not able to fight:

I thought once or twice maybe I'd do something crazy, like going in an aeroplane to America, or getting drunk--but I couldnae see why--I'm no' that sort of person.¹⁵⁰

For Bessie, her "social function" as producer of the next generation cannot exclude the revolutionary one of trying to change society.

The dialectic between the need for organized political activity and the "richness of experience" is embodied in the character of Bessie who, in a time of temporary defeat, does not "moan about the backwardness of the working classes" but analyses the situation through her own practical experience:

It's the erosion of class consciousness, if you want to know. Working people in England and quite a few in Scotland see their own individual interest--less income tax for some, buy your own council house for quite a few, and the price of a loaf of bread for millions--but they don't see themselves as part of a class, that must stick together...they've been driven into their own private selfish cosy fantasy world, and now they're gonna suffer for it. Because the others know they're a class, and they'll stick together until the day we drive them out.¹⁵¹

As McGrath says, Blood Red Roses was written in response to the fact that, "Managements all over Britain are getting away with murder--sometimes quite literally. And people are now beginning to suffer for it."¹⁵²

The play is "epic" in structure in that it contains many scenes and firmly places the individual within a social, political and historical context. Song is used as a running commentary between the scenes, and the tunes are those of traditional Scottish folk songs (preserving the sense of localism in the play). In addition, the songs and the

Announcer continually draw the audience's attention to the fact that they are watching theatre: a representation of conditions, and not an illusionistic portrayal of life. The songs serve to separate each situation; indeed, the scenes are dense in action and often many years elapse between them. These techniques and the jump-cutting between scenes control the pace of the narrative and are filmic devices; McGrath has noted that he learnt them while working in the movie business. Moreover these techniques are entirely familiar to popular audiences. Each scene or episode, then, though believable and dramatic in its own right, is also representative of a particular social condition, and the audience is encouraged to look for the underlying reasons and meanings behind each dramatic situation. For example, many of the scenes represent a basic conflict between two views that demonstrate the contradictions inherent in a capitalist system. One such scene is a classroom confrontation between the 15 year old Bessie and the patronizing and sexist Rev. Murdo Smith. Rev. Murdo lectures on the "virtues" of marriage:

It is a sacrament, a sacred bond, a pledge to God and to your partner--only those who are weak or incapable of carrying their burden have to slither down into the gutter of divorce.¹⁵³

Bessie's response is more direct: "You're speaking a load of shite--sir."¹⁵⁴ Rev. Murdo ends his lecture with a clear example of the anti-militant and sexist attitude of

of the establishment Church:

So--what are the qualities we must look for in a man. Kindness I suppose, patience, a good, hard worker, diligent and uncomplaining, at the factory and at home, a steady, sober, reliable person, above all--one who will listen to your complaints and understand your little problems, who will guide you on the path of life to acceptance and contentment: a lot to ask of a man? Yes--but then: you'll be giving him a lot: your life....¹⁵⁵

At the end of this speech Bessie brings her desk down on Rev. Murdo's head. The "plot" of this short scene is relatively unimportant to the development of the narrative. What is important in the scene is the representation of the position of the Church and state schools in regard to social change (both in personal and production relationships), and the gestural representation of an answer to this repression from a growing class and feminist consciousness.

However, Blood Red Roses is non-Brechtian in the emotional identification required between performers and audience. This level of identification has fostered a developing relationship between 7:84 companies and their audiences. McGrath's socialist theatre is polemical, agitational, and informative, and this means often confronting an audience that has quite understandably become alienated from the reality of contemporary existence through the process of living under capitalism. Socialist theatre can re-present working-class experience and history

to the working class itself. As McGrath says,

Any serious piece of theatre that questions all assumptions, that scrutinizes contemporary reality with a sense of history and without fear of engaging in politics, must inevitably tell a different story, with different values and a different perspective, from that received on the TV screen and from the pages of the Sun [a right-wing British newspaper].¹⁵⁶

Blood Red Roses, confronts the media's lies that the militant working-class movement is simply concerned with strikes, wrecking the economy and wage demands. The play in fact portrays the reality of a manipulative multinational company that exploits by dividing and ruling the workers of Europe (when the strike is on at East Kilbride, IRM increases production at its factory in Barcelona). Fighting the multi-nationals requires international class solidarity, and an understanding of economic and cultural imperialism (the title of the play refers to the red coats of the British Empire's soldiers).

The revolutionary strength of McGrath's plays, however, comes in the linking of complex theoretical and political truisms to the personal lives of the working class. McGrath himself has said,

The theatre is the one medium that forces, by its very limitations, that confrontation between an abstraction and a person, between a system and a group of individual people, between social history, or political theory, and the actual life of a man or a woman. The project of theatre should not be to 'humanize' (i.e. diminish) the

abstractions, or the theory, rather to enlarge them, simultaneously enlarging the concept of the human, in a dialectical manner.¹⁵⁷

And it is through a recognition of the relationship between personal and public, political, historical experience that true class and political consciousness can grow. This is what happens to Bessie in Blood Red Roses; her instinctive rebelliousness (revealed in her violent childhood actions) becomes a fighting feminist/communist consciousness through a constant questioning of her own experience. In other words, her progress is achieved through active struggle, and Bessie's own personal struggle against oppression represents the collective political and class struggle against the forces of capitalism.

Yet this struggle to arrive at class consciousness is also presented in the play within its historical context, particularly through the character of Sandy. Sandy returns from the war as a reactionary bigot, but through his research into military history he begins to uncover the lies of official history. In a series of key speeches, mostly spoken directly to the audience, Sandy first relates his findings about the occasions that the British Army has been used against the Scottish people in Scottish streets, then his feelings of defeat and confusion after Suez, and finally the realities of modern warfare and economic imperialism:

But who now rules the world? Of whose Empire are we the colonial people? Look around--we see no soldiers, no military parade with drums and fifes, bugles or bag-pipes. No gun-boats, no show of strength...And yet there is fear--I can smell it...Long black hulks glide underwater out of the Holy Loch, full of terrible destruction, quiet as the grave.¹⁵⁸

In the course of this speech, Sandy links the Roman Empire and the British Empire to the economic imperialism that closes a factory in East Kilbride, the petroleum jelly bombing in Vietnam, and the British Army in Germany and Belfast (the same analogy is used in Brenton's The Romans in Britain). The tone of the speech is very personal--a direct communication with every member of the audience--and its effectiveness relies on the actor who plays Sandy developing a reciprocal relationship with the audience in the course of the play. At the end of the speech, Sandy articulates the need for class consciousness:

the fight is inside our heads: all we need is will-power, and clear thinking, and the determination to refuse to comply. If I was a soldier now--and we all are soldiers now--those would be my weapons.¹⁵⁹

John McGrath described Blood Red Roses as a "domestic epic"¹⁶⁰: an apt term when we consider the amalgamation in the play of radical domestic realism and external epic which articulates the potent relationships between personal experience and organized political activity, society and the individual, history and the present, language and action,

emotion and reason. Above all, McGrath has succeeded in redefining his position as a writer within the production process, despite 7:84's partial reliance on the Arts Council grants: "The dialectical nature of my writing continues to provoke dialectical reactions--in that the size and enthusiasm of working-class audiences grows, while the Arts Council tries to cut our subsidy."¹⁶¹ The real significance of this is that the cultural identification afforded to McGrath's 7:84 plays is not by the Arts Council, Leavisite critics, or bourgeois intellectuals, but by the working class of Britain. More specifically, by creating a touring, interventionist theatre which performs in working-class venues, McGrath has remained in control of his means of producing drama in a way that has proved impossible for a writer like Howard Brenton.

Earlier in this study, I quoted a question posed by Terry Eagleton: "Is socialist art primarily affective (agit) or informative (prop)?"¹⁶² McGrath's plays provide the exemplar of Eagleton's own answer: "any socialist involved in teaching knows that nothing is more effective ideologically than knowledge."¹⁶³ Yet there is one further premise that must be essential to any social revolution: the need to organize. McGrath has lamented the lack of any mass Marxist movement in Britain at the moment: 7:84's attempts to help create a revolutionary counter-culture have been dedicated to the creation of such a movement. In

Blood Red Roses, Alex articulates the essential difference between socialist drama within the dominant mode of theatre and the truly emergent oppositional theatre outside the dominant mode which speaks directly to a potentially revolutionary class:

Alex (to Bessie): Educate Agitate Organise--all they fools in Hampstead can educate and agitate: it's up to you and me to organise: I mean it.164

Conclusion

The future is clearly one of struggle, and absolute unremitting commitment to that struggle.

Trevor Griffiths.¹⁶⁵

Socialist theatre is by definition committed to the overthrow of a repressive capitalist system and is created in conscious opposition to the elitist ideology of the ruling class. We have seen in this study that the work and production of Brenton and McGrath represent two of the options open to socialist dramatists both within and in opposition to Britain's capitalist state: within the institutions of theatre, challenging the dominant ideology; outside these institutions as interventionist theatre, helping to create a counter-culture that is truly working-class. In a sense, any conclusions about the political, social and cultural importance of such theatre as a weapon in the class struggle can only be provisional--the cultural re-emergence of a revolutionary proletariat requires a long struggle against reaction and repression in modern Britain. Obviously the need for a revitalized working-class consciousness becomes crucial in an age of mass media and mass alienation. Moreover, for any Marxist the problem of class consciousness is inseparable from the problem of obtaining an historical consciousness, a recognition that people are a motive force in history and that society is

changeable. Terry Eagleton has said that in one sense the task of the historical materialist is to "rewrite the past in order to redeem it in its revolutionary validity."¹⁶⁶ And this applies equally to the task of the socialist playwright; he/she must demystify both history and contemporary existence.

We have seen how Brenton's aggressive, satirical and dialectical form of writing has been explicitly designed to disrupt the assumptions of bourgeois audiences in the subsidized theatres. Many of Brenton's plays speak critically to a "vanguard" on the left--an extremely problematic concept which can readily lead to charges of intellectual and cultural élitism. Brenton has certainly avoided the larger pitfalls, yet vanguardism must always remain an illusion whilst the potentially revolutionary working class remain in their alienated state. However, his plays also serve the important function of raising sensitive and in many ways crucial political issues as a principled opposing voice within middle-class theatre.

McGrath's career has developed along the opposite lines, from an oppositional theatre which voiced class issues within the commercial theatre to a truly working-class form of entertainment playing to and for the workers and utilising their forms of entertainment and culture in a critical and dialectical manner. McGrath's form of working-class theatre is emergent in a real sense, avoiding the

ghetto mentality of the fringe of the sixties and seventies by a constant development of form and theory and a concentration on issues that affect the lives of working-class people.

Historical plays such as Brenton's The Romans in Britain and McGrath's The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil represent powerful responses to history, cultural and economic imperialism. and the nature of the class struggle. Both were remarkably successful in terms of attracting audiences and in fulfilling Brenton's and McGrath's own stated aims. The Romans in Britain was certainly able to embarrass the Establishment by presenting such a sensitive political issue as the British occupation of Northern Ireland in an historical and dialectical manner. The controversy that surrounded the play in fact had the inevitable effect of filling seats for performances. The Cheviot, on the other hand, marked a breakthrough into popular culture for the 7:84 company; it played directly to over 33,000 people in the Highlands of Scotland.

In fact it could be argued that the opposing paths adopted by playwrights such as Brenton and McGrath represent in themselves a dialectical response by socialist theatre to the problems of audience, ownership of the theatrical means of production, and cultural identification. Yet a post-script to the production history of The Romans must be added here. In 1983 a proposed production of the play by the drama

department at Swansea University was banned by the Swansea Little Theatre and Swansea University authorities for fear of prosecution, despite the Courts' rejection of Whitehouse's attempts to prosecute Bogdanov. The history in the play relates directly to the political and cultural history of Wales and its modern inheritance. While such puritanism and right-wing censorship exists in British society, the reality of who controls the means of production presents a barrier to the production of truly subversive drama within established theatrical institutions.

Brenton noted in the introduction to his Plays for the Poor Theatre that there may come a time when socialist ex-fringe writers will be forced by economic, political and historical circumstances to return to the touring circuit. Given the political reaction of the last five years, that time may be fast approaching. Above all, socialist theatre is committed to socialist political change, and socialist revolution requires a revolutionary proletariat. It is this basic commitment to raising the consciousness of the working class in Britain, and consequently to fostering a truly popular counter-culture, that will continue to make the work of socialist playwrights and companies such as John McGrath and 7:84 (England and Scotland) important to the socialist movement in Britain.

Notes

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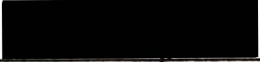
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