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David Wiles

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

*Introduction*  
*Citizenship and theatre*

Citizenship is the preoccupation of today. As I write these words in February 2010, the *Guardian* newspaper has just launched an online pamphlet on Citizen Ethics, prompted by Michael Sandel's 2009 Reith Lectures, with many figures from public life contributing their views.<sup>1</sup> The Marxist literary critic Frederic Jameson in 2002 lamented the re-emergence of political philosophy 'trailing after it all those ancient issues of constitutions and citizenship, of civil society and parliamentary representation, of responsibility and civic virtue, which were the hottest topics of the eighteenth century just as surely as they are no longer our own. It is as though nothing had been learned from the challenges of the revolutionary century just concluded . . .'<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Habermas was, I believe, closer to the mark in dubbing modernity 'an unfinished project' rooted in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.<sup>3</sup> Citizenship is a contested term that has resonances for people of many different persuasions, potentially a liberal rallying point, potentially despite Jameson's protestations part of an agenda for radical change. So why has this concept, rooted in antiquity and in the eighteenth century, become again so necessary?

In the first instance, most readers of this book will inhabit a multicultural society where ethnicity and cultural tradition do not marry up with any homogenizing concept of nationhood. The idea of 'citizenship' unhooks the state from ideas of nation, whilst affirming that ethics and feeling cannot be separated from membership of a particular political community. It offers a language through which to address fraught issues like the wearing of Islamic headscarves in schools, or the placement of rehabilitation centres within the 'community'. The term 'citizen' was not a watchword of the American Revolution because citizens by definition have to be citizens of somewhere particular, and unlike centralized France the USA was a

<sup>1</sup> [www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/feb/20/citizen-ethics-time-of-crisis](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/feb/20/citizen-ethics-time-of-crisis)

<sup>2</sup> Jameson (2002) 2.    <sup>3</sup> Habermas (1996).

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federation of states; it was the Fourteenth Amendment of 1868 that gave the term resonance, asserting that black and white alike, if born in the USA, were automatically ‘citizens of the United States’.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, the collapse of the Marxist project, to which Jameson looks back, has left a certain vacuum. In my student years it was axiomatic that ‘good theatre’ and ‘subversive theatre’ were synonymous terms, and the promise of alternative ways of living was harnessed to the ideal of ‘alternative’ theatre performed in dark basements. Today the planet has shrunk and boltholes no longer exist. The problem of the future is how we can live together in a world of diminishing environmental resources, where communication technologies have made the boundaries of the nation-state increasingly porous. Citizenship addresses the fundamental problem of cohabitation.

Third is the issue highlighted by the *Guardian* pamphlet, the perceived lack of a shared ethical framework in societies stripped both of religious consensus and of the passions engendered by nationalism. In its printed text, the *Guardian* highlights Michael Sandel’s phrase: ‘The hollowing out of the public realm makes it difficult to cultivate solidarity.’<sup>5</sup> I shall return at the close of this book to the idea that in a world of media manipulation and personality politics there is no space for any serious public engagement with moral issues. The *Guardian* seeks to position its own forum within this public realm, a realm which includes theatre as we infer from the *Guardian*’s choice of contributors. Jude Kelly tells the reader that ‘art is a fundamental right of every human being’, while Kwame Kwei-Armah declares that when writing for the National Theatre his job is to ‘hold a mirror up to nature’.<sup>6</sup> I shall not unpack at this point the assumptions that lie behind such statements, beyond asking the obvious questions: what is this thing ‘art’ that like food we have a right to consume? And is theatre primarily a mimetic representation, or is it a social event? The relationship between theatre and the public realm needs historical investigation if satisfactory answers are to be found for the contemporary problem of how theatre configures with citizenship.

Do we need citizenship? Do we need theatre? Let us return to first principles with the help of a nineteenth-century novelist. Leo Tolstoy places the seduction of Natasha Rostov at the centre of *War and Peace* as the pivot upon which the plot turns. Natasha enters the Moscow Opera House as an innocent, and at first all she can see on the stage is artifice: canvas

<sup>4</sup> See Heater (2004) 70.    <sup>5</sup> *Guardian* 20 February 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Kelly’s text in the newspaper version, Kwei-Armah in the online pamphlet.

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backdrops, cardboard sets, an overweight prima donna. Her interest is in Moscow's social elite around her, and her own flesh exposed in an unfamiliar evening gown. The atmosphere progressively catches her up; she forgets her fiancé and surrenders without resistance to the seducer who invades her box. The action on stage mirrors her downfall: the woman carried off and lamenting, the male strutting his dance, a final vision of Hell. The theatre is a space of social performance, and a site of seduction where morality collapses. Natasha ends the novel learning from Rousseau about natural breast-feeding, and avoiding elegant French codes of female behaviour. The novel, not theatre, was the medium through which Tolstoy felt he could articulate truths both about unique individual Russians and about what Rousseau termed the 'general will', the transpersonal force which took Russians to victory against Napoleon. In Tolstoy's novel the aristocrats of St Petersburg are torn between their nationalism and their love for the French institution of theatre. In a Russia defined by its vast rural estates, Tolstoy celebrates the household and the relations of landlord and peasant as a form of society more natural than any aristocratic salon or confraternity of burghers. Although Moscow organically regenerates itself after its burning, we do not find in Tolstoy any notion akin to 'citizenship', for there was, and some would say there remains, no room for this republican and secular ideal in a society shaped by Czarist and Orthodox cultural traditions. Tolstoy's Russia defines its identity in opposition to France, and republicanism is a feature of the French other, an inadequate creed that collapses into Napoleonic imperialism.

Tolstoy's critique of theatre echoes Plato and Rousseau whose thinking I shall examine in the course of this book. His premise is that theatre is a social event which under the guise of cosmopolitanism binds together a certain social class, and its power lies not in any appeal to reason but in its seductive hold upon the emotions. Art for Tolstoy is at root 'a means of union among men, joining them together in the same feelings'.<sup>7</sup> Richard Rorty takes a similar view of the world when he contends that the principle of loyalty is always prior to the principle of reason, rationality being but a device to ensure the survival of large groups.<sup>8</sup> For Tolstoy, ethical values should be formed not in the public realm but in the intimate environment of the home, where novels like *War and Peace* will be read. It follows that it is an illusion for *Guardian*-reading theatre-goers to imagine their experiences will somehow generate a better world, for they attend the National Theatre

<sup>7</sup> *What is Art?* in Feagin and Maynard (1997) 171.<sup>8</sup> Rorty (1998).

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merely to be reassured in their pre-existent convictions, and in their social position. Such is the Tolstoyan challenge.

Let us consider in this light a recent National Theatre venture, Mark Ravenhill's play *Citizenship*. A typical review accessed via the National Theatre website records:

I Went To Watch Citizenship Last Night With My School @ The National Theatre. It Was Awesome. The Way Mark Ravenhill Managed To Use Comedy To Show An Actually Quite Meaningful Piece Of Drama Was Really Good. And His Characterisation Of All The Teens Were Pretty Much Spot On. Me And My Class Mates Were Left Comparing The Characters To Other School Mates. Definately A Good Job Well Done.<sup>9</sup>

The spectator treats the play as a reflection of her social reality and transmits by the word 'meaningful' some recognition of thematic content. But it is clear that the spectator is echoing a certain academic discourse, and we have no means of knowing whether this mirroring of reality and sense of a lurking meaning will allow her 'to go out into the world and ask some new questions of it', as Ravenhill hopes.<sup>10</sup> The word 'awesome' catches an emotional reaction, hinting at an experience shared with classmates, perhaps affecting the dynamics of that group. I saw Ravenhill's play when it toured to the Oxford Playhouse, sitting near the front amid a small group of older spectators some of whom had obviously come by mistake. The auditorium behind was filled with teenage groups, mostly female, vociferous in their enthusiastic response and creating a sense of engaged participation and interchange with the stage more familiar to me as a theatre historian than as a patron of the Playhouse.

We can analyse Ravenhill's play on two levels. We can focus on the text, or dramatic content, and consider how the play *represents* teenage sexuality, portrays a world where young people are excluded from the public realm, and satirizes government attempts to teach citizenship via essays on multiculturalism and lifeskills training in motherhood. There is an available academic toolkit which makes this kind of analysis quite straightforward. Much harder to pin down is the performance as social event. What kind of bonding united the auditorium as a whole, or the teenage subgroups inclusive or exclusive of their teachers or youth leaders? Were the teenagers being educated in theatre-going so they will become regulars in later life? Were they all bound for university, aware that they do not themselves sit at the bottom of the social heap but finding cathartic

<sup>9</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=oyR4u7jDsHY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oyR4u7jDsHY)

<sup>10</sup> Ravenhill (2008) viii. Text of the play on 233–92.

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liberation in seeing their sexual anxieties articulated on stage, and social liberation in the shared recognition of those anxieties? These questions confront us when we think of theatre as a social practice, and the answers are far from obvious.

In respect of modern citizenship, Ravenhill's *Citizenship* poses a further question. The play was commissioned as part of the National Theatre's 'Connections' programme, which included training sessions for teachers and directors of youth theatre groups, and it was written for amateur performance.<sup>11</sup> How do we compare participation in a community activity with the watching of a skilled professional production? We are thrown back on competing definitions of 'citizenship'. If we impose a local frame upon the term, we shall think of teenage actors exercising a kind of citizenship when they perform Ravenhill's text for their peers, functioning as active members of their community, not passive consumers of culture. On the other hand, if we give the term a national frame, we shall sense something rather valuable in the teenagers' participation in a wider cultural world. Though virtual encounters through blogs and iPhones complicate the old dichotomy of local and national,<sup>12</sup> such networking cannot in my view substitute for the complexity of human interaction generated by a shared physical presence in a public space.

Today this Arts Council policy statement of 1996 sounds quaintly archaic:

For five hundred years, drama has been at the heart of England's creative life . . . England is rightly regarded as a world centre for drama and its plays are exported throughout the world . . . In recognition of this the Arts Council of England spends a large proportion of its funds on drama . . . Just as German culture has found its highest expression in its musical tradition – or the Italian renaissance in its visual arts – so the English genius has been seen above all on stage.<sup>13</sup>

Though Ravenhill is certainly esteemed abroad, government funding of the arts in England can no longer be justified, at least publicly, on such aesthetic or nationalistic grounds, but a play that educates the young in citizenship is consistent with modern political values and is eminently fundable. Whatever Ravenhill may do to satirize the citizenship education provided by an uncaring state, he is trapped in a circle that positions him as part of that education, and the intensity of his writing no doubt reflects his awareness of being ensnared. The National Theatre has to reconcile the twin ideals of democratic diversity and national homogeneity which justify

<sup>11</sup> On the context and implications, see Deeney (2007).

<sup>12</sup> See for example Gray (2001).

<sup>13</sup> Arts Council (1996). On arts policy, cf. Everitt (2001).

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its funding, and the director of that theatre, Nicholas Hytner, chooses his words carefully. 'We want to tell the stories that chart the way the nation is changing. We want to bring front-line reports from new communities and generations, and we want to see the present redefined in the context of the past.'<sup>14</sup> As a front-line report on the state of the nation, Ravenhill's play happily fits this twenty-first-century agenda.

Although we may wince now at the rhetoric of 1996, unhooking citizenship from nationhood is not so easily accomplished. Advice to would-be immigrants to the UK sets out the paradox. 'Britain is a country where people of many different cultures and faiths live. What brings British people together is that they listen to different points of view, they have respect for equal rights and they believe that community is important.'<sup>15</sup> A coherent national identity is deemed at once to exist and to not exist. A 2008 government report by Lord Goldsmith recommended that school leavers in a rite of passage should swear an oath of allegiance to Queen and Country, and that a British national day should be established.<sup>16</sup> These proposals were derided in the press for epitomizing the very antithesis of Britishness – the sort of thing that Americans do and *we* don't. The national 'we' refuses to be eradicated.

No study of citizenship can ignore the phenomenon of national difference. Since De Tocqueville, individualism has been recognized as a distinctive feature of a USA that is at once a state and a union of states.<sup>17</sup> The American rhetoric of citizenship emphasizes inclusiveness, asserting that every minority has its place in a land that is understood to be diverse, and attention to minorities helps to explain why the United States has never generated a 'National Theatre' on the European model. The German *Bundesrepublik* is likewise formally a federation, and the term *Staatsbürgerschaft*, the nearest approximation to 'citizenship', is federalist in the way it links the state (*Staat*) to the burgher of an autonomous city. Ethnicity rather than political membership has over a long period shaped the sense of being German. Conversely, in France, with its history of centralization and imperialism, Frenchness has long been regarded as a product of cultural assimilation: to absorb French language and literature and relinquish other cultural bonds is to become French.<sup>18</sup> England, with its mixed Anglo-Saxon and Gallic background, and uneasy relationship to Anglophone Scotland,

<sup>14</sup> [www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/?lid=7083](http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/?lid=7083)

<sup>15</sup> [www.lifeintheuktest.gov.uk/textsite/test\\_intro\\_20.html](http://www.lifeintheuktest.gov.uk/textsite/test_intro_20.html)

<sup>16</sup> 'Citizenship: our common bond', published 11 March 2008: [www.justice.gov.uk/docs/citizenship-report-full.pdf](http://www.justice.gov.uk/docs/citizenship-report-full.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Bellah *et al.* (1996) is a classic study. <sup>18</sup> On France and Germany, see Brubaker (1992).

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Wales and Ireland, is currently looking to the United States for a notion of citizenship that accommodates cultural and ethnic diversity, while at the same time it is unwilling to relinquish a more European idea of the 'nation' which implies an element of *natio*, common 'birth'. In an England that still proclaims itself not a republic but part of a United *Kingdom*, heaping moral value onto the term 'citizenship' is a novel project.<sup>19</sup>

It is never possible to shake off bonds created by history, even in a republic formed of immigrants like the USA, and the role of theatre in creating communal memories is often an important one.<sup>20</sup> I recently had the task of chairing a seminar that brought together an Austrian and a Polish theatre practitioner, and I found the mutual incomprehension revealing. For the Austrian, the Polish work made no sense and appeared regressive in its insistent rhythms and mythopoeic bricolage of classical material. From the Polish point of view, conversely, the idea that we can strip human beings down in Beckettian fashion to the minima of language and body seemed nihilistic. I could only reconcile this clash of principles by looking at national traditions. In a Germanic context, anything that smacks of the *Volk* is suspect because of the way national myths were manipulated by Fascism, and any valid aesthetic must now be founded on minimalism and first principles. In Poland, on the other hand, where the cultural trauma of Stalinism followed two centuries of state dismemberment, religion and folk tradition seemed to rescue Poles from a sense of dehumanization or non-being. An aesthetic based on residues of cultural memory appeared therefore to be a natural form of creative expression. There is manifestly less attachment to nation in long-established nation-states like Britain than in newly autonomous nations, and any account of citizenship needs to take note of this difference. Poland, with its history of incursions from Prussia, Russia and Austro-Hungary, finds sources of solidarity in its language, literature and religious practices that may appear incomprehensible to native speakers of a globalized English language.

Such diversity makes the work of the historian all the more important.<sup>21</sup> Citizenship is a function of the spatial unit to which the citizen belongs, and that unit can take different forms, including the local community, the city, the city-state, the nation, the republic, and arguably the 'world'. Of all these, it is the 'republic' that has been tied most strongly to the moral ideal of the 'citizen'. While 'democracy', rule by the collective *demos* or public,

<sup>19</sup> For the English political context, see the introduction to Brannan, John and Stoker (2007).

<sup>20</sup> On nation and memory, see Smith (1999).

<sup>21</sup> Useful historical surveys of citizenship include Riesenberg (1992), Heater (1999), Faulks (2000), Heater (2004) and Magnette (2005).

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was an invention of Athens, the ideal of the ‘republic’, which implies ownership of the *res publica* or ‘public thing’, was a creation of Rome. Rome was too big for democracy, and the senatorial class was entrenched in its power, but within the Roman Republic an element of face-to-face encounter and democratic voting was powerful in symbolic terms, offering a moral right to riot when senators forgot that the state ultimately belonged to the people. Emotions attached to a *republic* are not the same as emotions attached to a *nation*, since the one term traditionally implies ownership, the other nativity.<sup>22</sup> ‘Civic republicanism’ is today the standard label given to the school of political thought that opposes individualistic liberalism, and includes figures like Michael Sandel.<sup>23</sup>

Republics are self-evidently human constructs, unlike ‘nations’ and ‘communities’. Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* developed an influential critique of nationalism, from a republican perspective. His argument is that ‘all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.’<sup>24</sup> In Anderson’s historical model, ‘imagined’ religious and dynastic communities were replaced in the Age of Enlightenment by ‘imagined’ national communities, powerfully influenced by the medium of print. My own point of departure is different, for I believe we should not undervalue the phenomenological experience of false and genuine communities. Thus, for example, the proposal that all British school leavers should swear allegiance to Queen and Country was widely perceived as a ceremony that would create false community. Anderson’s parenthesis ‘(and perhaps even these)’ points to a philosophical hole at the core of his method: what relationships, then, are not ‘imagined’? By inference we are pointed back to the unique authenticity of familial and neighbourly relationships. Anderson’s historiography focuses upon discourse and textuality at the expense of performance, and he has many perceptive things to say about the impact of print-capitalism, but he is not interested for example in how the reading of a newspaper in an eighteenth-century coffee-house might constitute a performance, creating a small community of minds and bodies within the public sphere. It is, I shall argue, the very nature and purpose of theatre to create communities, and most forms of pre-modern theatre maximized the audience’s awareness that it embodied a community that transcended familial and neighbourly relations.

<sup>22</sup> In defence of nation as an ideal, see e.g. Miller (2000), Kymlicka (2001) 203–64. On the tension between republic and nation, see Taylor (2004).

<sup>23</sup> Kymlicka (2002) 294–9, Finlayson (2005) 108–13.      <sup>24</sup> Anderson (1991) 6 – first published in 1983.



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British sensibilities have long responded to the dream of connection to a community rooted in time immemorial. Seventeenth-century English radicals, for example, claimed that the people were still subject to a 'Norman yoke' in the belief that somewhere in an earlier and uncontaminated Anglo-Saxon past lay a world akin to Eden.<sup>25</sup> Raymond Williams, in *The Country and the City*, showed how British writers repeatedly manufactured fakes of country life, but paradoxically he laid bare at the same time continuities in the desire of writers to fight the logic of profit with an ideal of rural community. Material traces of the past visible through his Welsh study window reminded him of an enduring 'structure of feeling' which pitted a communal country life against urban alienation.<sup>26</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy from a French perspective argues that historians too easily postulate lost communities, whereas it is actually the experience of loss that constitutes communities. Rousseau is a paradigmatic figure here, inventing the citizen of a free, sovereign community in response to the harsh and godless reality of modern 'society'.<sup>27</sup>

In 1960 John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy wrote a 'community' play for a Somerset village in which they were living.<sup>28</sup> Neither so English as to trouble the Irish D'Arcy, nor so spiritual as to trouble the secular Arden, the story of Christ's nativity seemed to be the perfect vehicle for community theatre. However, the centuries-old nativity play is now in crisis. Defending himself in the right-wing press in December 2007 against charges of repressive political correctness, Trevor Phillips, Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, roundly supported the school nativity play: 'In spite of its growing consumerist tinge, Christmas is a moment when our whole nation can celebrate the story of hope, togetherness and compassion symbolized by the Christian tale; you don't have to be a Christian to share the values of community and family. There is room for everybody at this inn.'<sup>29</sup> The rhetoric of 'nation' fuses with the rhetoric of 'community' in this secularizing, assimilationist rhetoric, but however attractive Phillips' metaphor of an inn with many guests may be, British policies of multiculturalism are increasingly hard to reconcile with the idea of 'one nation', as we are reminded when Phillips notes that 'Mohammed' is 'the second-most-common name for new babies in England'.<sup>30</sup> It was once assumed that modernity entailed the decline of religious belief, but in most parts of

<sup>25</sup> Hill (1964).    <sup>26</sup> Williams (1975).    <sup>27</sup> Nancy (1991) 9–10.

<sup>28</sup> *The Business of Good Government*.

<sup>29</sup> 'Why be ashamed to celebrate Christmas?' *Evening Standard* 10 December 2007.

<sup>30</sup> The statistic incorporates multiple spellings.

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the world the case has proved otherwise, with religion very often a foundation for the feeling that one belongs to this and not that community. The secular notion of ‘citizenship’ has, and has long had, a role to play in providing an ethical counterweight to the metaphysical claims of religion and of nation.

Citizenship was for many centuries not only a secular but also a masculine ideal. Attesting to the value of public life, it implicitly downgraded domestic life, which along with forms of ritual activity comprised the traditional sphere of women. Until the twentieth century, republicans commonly identified the citizen as a man who takes his place in the ranks to fight for his city, while nationalists, because of their emphasis on birth, were more inclined to develop female hagiographies, around figures like Joan of Arc or Good Queen Bess. Though public life continues to be dominated by men, the ideal of citizenship evolved in the twentieth century to underpin the moral case for equality. It was logical enough that advocates of citizenship who had long resisted essentialist arguments about nation and religion should also learn to resist essentialist arguments about gender. Aimee Beringer in 1900 looked back nostalgically to the eighteenth century when women were able to flourish in the ‘public’ profession of dramatist. In the Victorian period, she lamented, women succeeded as novelists, but had no access to the life experience needed for the stage, so as to ‘listen to the heart of the world, and get the echo of its throbs over the footlights’. Today, Beringer concluded, the aspiring female dramatist ‘must first become a citizen of the great world, and then serve her apprenticeship to the lesser, that of the theatre’.<sup>31</sup> Her speech reveals how the eighteenth-century ideal of citizenship was already being used at the start of the twentieth century to demand a place for women in public life, a public life that included the public realm of the theatre. The gap which Beringer takes for granted between the private world of the novelist and the public transactional world of the theatre has shrunk since 1900. More women now write more plays, but theatre is less connected to the public sphere of the citizen.

The republican arguments of the German-Jewish political theorist Hannah Arendt (1906–75) have proved something of a challenge to feminism, since Arendt’s resolute attachment to the public realm with scarcely any mention of gender can be seen either as masculinist or as liberating.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Beringer (1900) 368 – a paper read to the Society of Women Journalists. My thanks to Anna Fokas for this reference.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Warner (2002) 58. See Arendt (1958) 8 for her most striking discussion of gender, related to the parallel creation stories in Genesis.