Strategies of Political Theatre

Post-War British Playwrights

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It is the late 1960s in Britain. The heroism and suffering of the Second World War are now more than two decades away. Although victorious, the nation has had to endure severe austerity to recover from the cost of the war. It is now returning to prosperity: between 1951 and 1964 industrial production increased by 40 per cent, there were four times as many cars on the roads and thirteen times more television sets in the home. Earnings increased by 110 per cent, and the average standard of living by 30 per cent[1]. By the end of the fifties Prime Minister Harold Macmillan could justifiably claim: 'Most of our people have never had it so good.'

Benefiting from this new-found wealth, the youth of Britain, who had not lived through a time of war, began to assert themselves. Britain, which had always been regarded by America and Continental Europe as the home of tradition and conservative values, now became the home of the outrageous mini-skirted fashion of Mary Quant and Carnaby Street and of the deafening rock music of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. The ending of conscription in 1960 meant that young men had greater freedom and more disposable income than ever before, the widespread availability of the contraceptive pill encouraged sexual experimentation, and the common acceptability of hallucinogenic drugs allowed the young to explore different states of consciousness.

Surprisingly, though, this did not lead to a society of mindless pleasure-seekers. The so-called 'hippy' youth, while unproductive in economic terms, were highly idealistic. Despite shocking their elders with their outlandish appearance of long hair and flowing clothes, and with their indulgence in sex and drugs, they adopted a high moral stance, particularly in their steadfast opposition to violence

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and intolerance, most notably manifest in their protests against the United States's war against North Vietnam.

There were also many young people who rejected the capitalism that had brought them the freedom and leisure to question it. Inspired by a revolutionary philosophy, loosely based on the ideas of Karl Marx and Mao Tse-tung, young intellectuals especially sought not only to oppose war but also to attempt to overthrow the capitalist system which they blamed for warfare. Against a background of consensual politics in Britain, in which Conservatives maintained the welfare state and the Labour Party gave its blessing to a mixed economy, there were at first the disillusioned mutterings of the so-called 'angry young men', to be closely followed by the much more agitational views of revolutionary young socialists. On the Continent this agitation erupted in the student riots of 1968, where, particularly in Paris, there were daily running battles between students and police, public buildings were occupied, and the French government, if not brought to its knees, was at least brought to a standstill. Across Europe youth was in revolt, most dramatically in Czechoslovakia, where the liberalizing measures of the so-called 'Prague Spring' were suppressed by Soviet intervention. In the West there was much talk of revolution but little application of revolutionary method, many calls for solidarity with the proletariat but little effort to implement it. So when the Paris students started drifting off for their summer vacation, the so-called *événements* passed into history, but not before they had inspired a generation of international intellectuals. The British version of the 1968 upheavals was suitably restrained: voluble protests against the Vietnam War, fulfilling Lady Bracknell's seemingly preposterous fears of rioting in Grosvenor Square, and the new sport of 'sit-ins', the occupation by students of university buildings in order to force democratic concessions from university authorities. Only in Northern Ireland, where Britain was, as Irish nationalists asserted, engaged in its last colonial conflict, did the street protests of 1968 lead to serious violence and the exposure of a political problem that at the time of writing has still not been fully resolved.

It was the late 1960s in Britain, and young university-educated writers were looking for a means to express their own concerns about

a world that was engaged in fundamentally re-assessing itself. Some, like Howard Brenton, had personally witnessed the 1968 student uprising in Paris. All were now eager at least to rattle the gates protecting the complacent British Establishment and to attack a capitalist system that had been deliberately undermining the Labour Party's efforts to create a fairer society. The demand for change grew more urgent when a Conservative government was returned to power in 1970, a government that introduced internment into Northern Ireland and was accused of sanctioning torture of terrorist suspects, and a government that collapsed after a confrontation with the miners in the so-called 'winter of discontent' of 1973 to 1974. In the United States four student protesters against the Vietnam War were shot by the National Guard in 1970, the War itself started to run out of control as it spilt over into Cambodia and Laos, CIA activity in South America bolstered corrupt regimes and led to the overthrow of the Marxist president of Chile in 1973, and President Nixon became more and more embroiled in mounting evidence of deliberate 'dirty tricks' in the Watergate Affair. The West appeared violent, oppressive and deceitful, and while Soviet Russia hardly offered a model to aspire to, there were smaller nations that showed how well they could function on Marxist principles: Cuba, Chile (for an all too brief period), Czechoslovakia (for an even briefer period), and – the old enemy – North Vietnam, which, tiny as it was, was to inflict defeat on the colossal superpower of the United States.

Given the sense of a changing world and the apparently very real possibility of restructuring society along socialist lines, it was predictable that these writers would turn to the most public and most immediate forum for expressing their concerns and aspirations, that of live theatre. It was a particularly exciting time for the theatre, since the powers of censorship by the Lord Chamberlain had been abolished in 1968, and freedom of expression on stage could now match the new liberties being explored by society at large. Only: what style should they write in, what theatrical strategy should they adopt?

One possibility was to follow the popular artistic style practised in Communist countries, that of socialist realism. For British writers this strategy was never seriously in contention. For one thing,

it depended on a consensus in the audience that the Revolution had already been achieved, that socialism and all its works were unquestionably good, and capitalism not only evil but in terminal decline. The primary purpose of socialist realist drama was to offer optimistic reassurance that the world was constantly improving, thanks to socialism. In fact, 'realism' was a crass misnomer, since the plots and character depictions were highly idealized. It was a mode that stimulated no debate, explored no contradictions. Brecht summed up the inadequacy of the style as follows: 'The passion [which] actors showed when their stage-wives were unfaithful is now shown by them when the stage-capitalist reduces wages. The public is no longer in suspense whether Romeo gets Juliet but whether the proletariat gets the power.'[2] One might add that there is in fact more suspense in Shakespeare, since it is a forgone conclusion that in socialist realism the proletariat will definitely get the power; indeed any play predicting a different outcome would have been banned in Soviet Russia.

A further well-tried strategy was that of agit-prop, abbreviated from 'agitation propaganda'. This favourite mode of socialist groups, especially in Russia and Germany in the 1920s, presented simple stories, performed by cartoon-like characters, and often incorporated songs. Again, there was no possibility of exploring contradictions or introducing subtleties. Figures were stereotyped and instantly recognizable: the capitalist with the top hat, the general with colossal epaulettes and sword. These pieces functioned well enough when performed to sympathetic audiences, helping to reinforce their socialist convictions. It was a style usually adopted by many left-wing theatre groups, CAST (Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre) being the first of many, followed by Red Ladder, Belt and Braces and others, but not common amongst playwrights who wanted to explore political situations in greater depth. David Edgar adopted something of the style for his occasional pieces like *A Fart for Europe*, written with Howard Brenton about the Common Market in 1973, and *Dick Deterred*, a 1974 parody of Shakespeare's *Richard III* about Nixon, although he denounced the use of agit-prop as a serious mode of political debate, arguing that, since all major questions had been settled in advance, 'agitprop caricature is a fundamentally elitist device'.[3] As we shall

see, John McGrath exploited the style for the specific use of his community work in the Highlands.

For deeper and more general discussion of political issues, however, writers turned to conventional modes of Western theatrical discourse. These divide broadly into two strands, what one might call the reflectionist and the interventionist. The reflectionist tradition asserts that the main function of art and indeed theatre is to hold up a mirror to nature and to reflect reality as accurately as possible, what Aristotle called 'the imitation (*mimesis*) of an action'. The interventionist mode asserts that, even if it were possible to reflect reality accurately, the undertaking is futile, since it is the task of the artist and playwright to interpret reality and to challenge our perception of it. As Brecht put it in his opposition between 'dramatic' and 'epic' theatre, the reflectionist allows us to say, 'Yes, that is the way things are'; the interventionist to say, 'I had never seen it in that way before.' Expressed like this, it becomes clear that it is possible for both statements to be made, and indeed it will be the contention of most interventionist writers that they are the true realists, because their insights reveal things as they truly are rather than as they appear to be.

The most extreme form of reflectionist theatre is naturalism, the attempt to represent the external world as accurately as possible. Only in the provocative proposal of Marcel Duchamp to erect a proscenium arch over the entrance to a Metro station in Paris might one achieve exact verisimilitude (and any such project would, ironically, no doubt appear to the public as avant-garde artifice rather than an attempt at authenticity). Once one enters the theatre, however, exact imitation is rendered impossible. The action is framed, not only physically by the limits of architectural space, usually by a proscenium arch, but also by the framing of the plot, which must begin at some point and end at another. The audience knows that the actors are not the people they represent, and the performers speak more loudly than in real life and almost invariably wait for their interlocutor to finish before speaking themselves. The action is lit from several hidden sources, and the actors pretend that beyond the stage is a real world from which they step, when the audience knows full well that it is in fact the backstage jumble of old scenery and props. Audience

and performers join in a game, the rules of which require that disbelief is suspended. To his dismay, when Stanislavsky brought an actual peasant woman on to the stage in his production of *The Seagull*, she undermined the naturalism of the piece, because her genuineness drew attention to the artificiality of the theatrical conventions. It is the same problem when directors use real animals and young children in their productions: their natural and unpredictable behaviour is mesmerizing, compared with the well-rehearsed routines of the adult humans. Animals and children have not learnt how to play the same game as audience and performers. Paradoxically, naturalist theatre, which strives to come closest to reality, is justifiably termed the theatre of illusion. Far from being real, it is merely the form of theatre where one is least aware of its unreality.

For the purposes of political theatre, naturalism is a theatrical style unsuited to questioning the world about us. By purporting to present an exact copy of the world, it is not only performing a refined conjuring trick; it is also necessarily limiting itself to individual and observable phenomena, without the possibility of analysis or generalization. As the Marxist critic Georg Lukács argued, naturalism can only 'describe', whereas the political writer seeks to 'narrate', that is, not merely to record events but to establish the causal connections between events. To reproduce reality rather than to examine causes underlying the surface excludes the possibility of the kind of analysis that might promote fundamental social change. As Brecht said: 'The individual feelings, insights and impulses of the chief characters are forced on us, and so we learn nothing more about society than we can get from the setting.'[4] In this way, naturalism, however distressing the subject with which it may deal, leads to an acceptance of existing circumstances.

Predictably, none of the political playwrights under discussion attempted thoroughgoing naturalism. While some of them belonged to the reflectionist strain, they all wished to go beyond surface representation, to be realists rather than naturalists. This is similar to the distinction made by the Italian philosopher, Benedetto Croce, at the beginning of the twentieth century between the chronicler, who merely reports events, and the historian, who emphasizes what is

significant in order to discover the connection between events. Terry Eagleton indicated the importance of such coherent narrative for the political writer, for the realist 'penetrates through the accidental phenomena of social life to disclose the essences or essentials of a condition, selecting and combining them into a form and fleshing them out in concrete existence'.[5] John Berger differentiated between naturalism and realism thus: 'a distinction between a submissive worship of events just because they occur, and the confident inclusion of them within a personally constructed but objectively truthful world view'.[6] John Arden summed it up by saying: 'I draw a clear distinction, you see, between realism and naturalism. The latter means a representation of the surface of life, the former a presentation of the life itself.'[7]

Even the most realistic writers, like Wesker and Griffiths, select their material carefully. The narration of events is organized into a dramatic framework, with the plot structure following the conventional scheme of exposition, development and dénouement. The dialogue, while approaching authenticity, is written not so much to record actual speech as to offer the opportunity to debate ideas. The characters are not random individuals but, while remaining believable, operate as representatives of social types. There are several advantages to this strategy. First, it allows a measure of political analysis while having all the appeal of a story that engages us emotionally. It is, in the English-speaking theatre at least, a congenial and popular form, for, as Michael Billington has said: 'if you look at drama over the past 100 years you will find that most of the greatest writers have, in spite of constant digressions, worked inside the naturalistic mode'[8] (by which we may understand 'realistic mode', as here defined).

Secondly, by portraying recognizable characters on stage in acceptably realistic situations, the audience has the opportunity to compare their experience with that portrayed in the play. In the realistic mode we are able to see characters sufficiently like us to be able to consider their behaviour in terms of predictability.

However, the interventionist writers feel that this is not in itself sufficient. To begin with, there is the question of the reality one is attempting to reflect. Modern physics has disposed of the solid ground

of a material universe and replaced it with a model of a universe in constant flux. Sociology has shown how much individuals are products of social forces. Psychology makes us aware of the levels of mediation that affect our perception of the outside world. The individual writer's perception of reality must of necessity be subjective. Any attempt to achieve objectivity effectively means accepting an established consensual view of the world about us, precisely what the political playwright wishes to challenge. So the modernist willingly embraces and acknowledges a biased non-objective viewpoint, and employs a form that challenges not only how the world is ordered, as realism does, but challenges our perception of the world itself: 'Objectivist representations disregard the subjective moment, the will of the representer who aims at the constant productive alteration of the conditions and circumstances given to him.'[9]

The words are Brecht's, the major modernist to use interventionist techniques in his theatre to political ends. Brecht's methods are now so well known that a brief summary will here suffice. As far as his characters were concerned, they were to be viewed not as unchanging and circumscribed entities but as contradictory, alterable beings, as products of social forces, implying that, if their circumstances were to change, then they too would change. The strategy of his theatre was therefore not to induce empathy with the central characters so much as to judge their behaviour within the social context. To this end he urged actors to develop an acting style critical of the role they were playing, employing so-called *Verfremdung* or 'distanciation'.

His plots were structured in such a way as to avoid the sense of inevitability that accompanies traditional linear construction. This so-called 'epic' technique told the story in leaps rather than in seamless sequential narrative, the acid test being whether it is possible within the play to change the order of many of the scenes without disrupting the narrative. The strategy here is again to alert the spectator that the events that are unfolding are not inevitable but that there are or were alternative courses of action. The action is therefore often set in the past or in an exotic, possibly fabulous location, so that the spectator may more easily contemplate events at a distance. The outcome

of these events is also often revealed in advance so that the spectator may forgo suspense about the ending to focus attention on the way the plot develops.

Despite some lingering prejudice about the gloomily Teutonic quality of Brecht's work, his example in fact reawakened the possibility of the theatre being truly theatrical. No longer limited by the attempt to imitate reality, playwrights were once again able to create plays that are vigorously theatrical, exploiting the visual quality of 'gestic' action, employing songs and poetic expression, using the stage to represent exotic locations, above all rediscovering the 'fun' (*Spass*) of the theatrical event.

The primary intention of what Brecht himself called his 'pedagogy' was not to reflect reality but to challenge it: 'Reality has to be altered by being turned into art so that it can be seen as alterable and treated as such.'[10] By attempting to show reality in a new and truer light, he could claim to be a true realist. All his methods are directed towards challenging our perception of reality and towards renegotiating the function of theatre, as he saw it. Traditional so-called 'Aristotelian' theatre allegedly portrays conflicts on stage and allows them to be resolved there. The spectators respond passively, their emotions are exhausted. In Brecht's non-Aristotelian theatre the spectators are encouraged to judge and make choices, so that they enter into a critical dialogue with the stage action. Their response is active, their emotions are aroused. For this reason, Brecht was convinced that his methods were the most appropriate to generating political awareness.

The two opposing camps of the reflectionists and the interventionists, of the realists and the modernists, or in Brechtian terms, 'dramatic' and 'epic' theatre, have repeatedly argued the merits of their respective positions, never more intensely than in the famous Lukács–Brecht debate of the 1930s.[11] There were four major areas of dissent.

First, Lukács attacked modernism because of its subjectivity. If the writer perceived and responded to reality as an isolated individual, he argued, then it was impossible to offer political insights, since these must depend on a consensus. Instead, the realist offers

> an image of reality in which the opposition of appearance and essence, of the individual case and the general rule, of the immediacy of the senses and abstract conceptualisation etc. is resolved. The immediate effect of the work of art is to dissolve the oppositional elements into a spontaneous whole so that they can form an inseparable unity for the reader.[12]

By rejecting the attempt to record the 'appearance' (everyday reality) and insisting instead on depicting a subjectively perceived 'essence' (underlying reality), the modernist was divorcing art from the real sphere in which political action could take place.

The modernist counter-argument (an argument that has become even more emphatic in our present post-modernist age) is that there is no longer any objective reality to be reproduced, and that modernist writers are simply being more honest in acknowledging the subjectivity of their response. As Fredric Jameson puts it:

> Realism, by suggesting that representation is possible, and by encouraging an aesthetic of mimesis or imitation, tends to perpetuate a preconceived notion of some external reality to be imitated, and indeed to foster a belief in the existence of some common-sense, everyday, ordinary shared secular reality in the first place.[13]

Furthermore, while in many manifestations of modernism, e.g. Expressionism, it is true that the subjectivity of the writer led to an inward-turning apolitical stance, this need not be the case. Brecht's perception of reality may have been subjective and he may have shared with other modernists a sense of despair at the sorry state of the world about him, but his Marxist convictions offered him a non-personal, objective and scientifically reasoned solution. Brecht was able to employ modernist techniques without embracing their defeatist ideology: 'It is precisely socialist writers who are able to learn highly developed technical elements from these documents of despair. They see the way out.'[14]

As is apparent from the quotation from Lukács above, the second claim for realism was that it offered a complete and coherent account of reality, a necessary prerequisite for political action.

Modernism, on the other hand, presented a fragmented vision of re-ality, one that failed to depict a clear chain of causality. Lukács was particularly critical of montage, which he condemned as the 'tech-nique of juxtaposing heterogeneous, unrelated pieces of reality torn from their context'.[15]

Brecht countered that it was an ahistorical and reactionary viewpoint to insist on continuing to write within the tradition of nineteenth-century realism, that it was essential to embrace new forms and to adapt them to political ends, in fact, to develop a theatre 'for the scientific age'. In a memorable image, Brecht stated: 'If you hit a car with a coachman's whip, it won't get it going.'[16] As has been argued, it is precisely the disruption of the even flow of scenes that contains the political message that there is no inevitable process of cause and effect but that reality offers alternatives at each juncture.

The third objection Lukács made to modernism was that it was not a popular form. The masses accepted realism, whereas modernism remained unintelligible to the majority: 'the broad mass of the peo-ple can learn nothing from avant-garde literature'.[17] This assertion is borne out by daily observation. One has only, for example, to consider how the tabloid press comments on modern art to recognize that the average British citizen has little time for aesthetic experimentation. Despite wishing to influence popular thinking, playwrights like Bond and Barker have had great difficulty in being understood let alone well received by anything other than an intellectual minority.

The modernists might reply, as Brecht did, that once again new forms are needed, but that these need not present difficulties to the masses. Indeed, he would claim that by drawing on popular traditions both within Europe and in the East, and by basing a theatre on the commonplace interaction surrounding a street accident, he was offer-ing a type of performance that was more natural and accessible than the familiar but inauthentic style of conventional realism. As John Berger argues:

> It is claimed that the style of naturalism (called realism) is the most accessible to the masses because it is nearest to natural appearances. This claim ignores most of what we now know

about the process of perception, but even more obviously it is belied by child art, folk art, and by the ease with which a mass adult urban population learns to read highly formalized cartoons, caricatures, posters, etc.[18]

To this list one might now add popular music videos and television commercials, very popular forms that make extremely sophisticated use of montage.

Finally, the major objection to modernism is that raised most eloquently by John Peter in his fine and provocative work *Vladimir's Carrot*. In essence his argument is as follows: Beckett may create stunning stage metaphors of the world, but those metaphors are not verifiable in the way that, say, the characters and incidents of Ibsen's realistic plays are, despite over a century's distance from them. We cannot reasonably be asked to comment on the veracity of the behaviour of characters who spend their lives confined to dustbins or are buried immovably in a pile of sand. One either accepts Beckett's vision or one doesn't. It is, to use John Peter's expression, 'a perlocutionary act', an assertion that is not open to debate. As such, it is dangerously irrational, fascistic even, because we are unable to question the image set before us:

> Both [*Waiting for Godot*] and the 'perlocutionary act'...
> expect and depend on, complete and unreserved acceptance;
> they both ask for a suspension of what Popper calls 'the
> critical powers of man'. Such a reaction is contrary to
> everything we have come to understand by the experience of
> art. Art of any kind is, or we think it is, the creation of other
> worlds with which we can have a dialogue. And if we are
> engaged in a dialogue we can neither suspend judgement nor
> simply submit, not even in delighted recognition or a feeling
> of identity.[19]

In Brecht's case, John Peter argues, by writing so-called 'parable plays' he created artificial worlds where the world of work, far from being the focus, is merely a theatrical setting for the imagined events of the play:

> The make-believe settings often undermine Brecht's intentions, precisely because his plays have such a powerful social and political drive...*The Good Person of Setzuan* is weakened by its lack of a sense of community. People appear to know each other and they tell us what their family ties are; but Setzuan never comes across as a village where life has its ways and people have their habits and social functions. The population is no more than a backdrop, and this fatally weakens the play's argument which is about the survival or otherwise of personal integrity in a community founded on greed.[20]

In this sense, Brecht, as a modernist, is profoundly apolitical.

Just as it is a simplification to assert that in realistic theatre the audience remains totally passive and does not engage intellectually and critically in the events of the play, so it is simply not true that audiences do not question the validity of modernist images. Beckett's visions of existential despair provoke the spectator into searching for a reason to continue living. Even at his most didactic, Brecht challenged the audience to find their own answers to the contradictions revealed in his plays.

There are many valid theatrical strategies for stimulating political debate, and a whole range of them have been used in British political theatre. It is therefore worth recalling David Edgar's words:

> Bertolt Brecht once remarked that the 'proof of the pudding was in the eating,' a comment that might appear blindingly obvious until one observes that the major preoccupations of many socialist theatre workers are with the origins of the recipe, the cleanliness of the spoons, the decision-making methods employed by the chefs, and the address of the restaurant.[21]

Thus, while it is convenient and illuminating to discuss reflectionist and interventionist strains as polar opposites (and the table on p. 24 and the way this volume is arranged imply precisely that), in practice playwrights will draw on elements from both modes: the realist may accord symbolic meaning to quite realistic situations; the

Reflectionist/Interventionist: a comparative table

Reflectionist	Interventionist
Realism	Modernism
Reflection of reality	Analysis of reality
Objective	Subjective
Recognizable world	Autonomous world
Complete, rounded	Fragmented, open-ended
Usually set in present	Often set in past
Scenes linked sequentially	Montage ('epic' structure)
Human nature unalterable	Human behaviour alterable
Actions derived from character	Character derived from actions
Empathy	Distance
Psychology	Social forces
Set design imitates real world	Set design consciously theatrical
Limited to everyday behaviour and language	Uses many theatrical elements (songs, poetry, etc.)
Lays claim to being popular	Lays claim to being popular
Change urged by considering world as it is	Change urged by positing alternatives

modernist may present action and dialogue that could be taken from everyday life. It would be more appropriate to think of the two strains as the ends of a spectrum rather than as mutually exclusive categories.

At one end of the spectrum, then, we have the reflectionist strain of realism; at the other the interventionist strain of modernism. The former appealed to some British political playwrights of the 1970s because it allowed them to portray a familiar world where injustice could be easily recognized. The latter appealed to others because it seemed to offer greater possibilities of analysing the causes of this injustice. As it happens, there had been two British models of political playwriting, who had over a decade earlier been working in the two differing modes: Arnold Wesker and John Arden. They offer convenient paradigms for the varying strategies of the political playwrights we shall be considering.