Introduction
Democracy as Performance

> In place of aristocracy there arose a vile theatrocracy.[1]
>
> (Plato)

> What happens once democracy has been used up? When it has been hollowed out and emptied of meaning? . . . What we need today, for the sake of the survival of this planet, is long-term vision . . . Could it be that democracy, the sacred answer to our short-term hopes and prayers, the protector of our individual freedoms and nurturer of our avaricious dreams, will turn out to be the endgame for the human race? Could it be that democracy is such a hit with modern humans precisely because it mirrors our greatest folly – our nearsightedness?[2]
>
> (Arundhati Roy)

Democracy tends to favour short-term decisions and put local before global interests. Perhaps, therefore, it is not the best way for our species to organise a world that is sliding rapidly from the Holocene into the Anthropocene. And maybe in retrospect democracy will one day be dismissed as a human folly. In this book I shall counter the characteristic human problem of 'nearsightedness' by taking the long view of the historian. When Roy suggests that democracy has been 'used up' or 'hollowed out', are we hearing a time-honoured complaint because people have always dreamt of a golden age when democratic politics once supposedly worked? Or has the democratic project lost conviction more recently because of the form democracy takes in the age of corporate capitalism? When today's politicians pander to the 'avaricious dreams' of the supposedly free individual, it is easy to blame them for their personal weakness and failure to tell us the truth about a degraded planet. Perhaps, however, democracy has always required politicians to be actors, speaking the lines the audience wants to hear as their only means to stay in power. If so, is democracy inherently a form of theatre? And was Plato right to relabel democracy as 'theatrocracy'?

I take up in this book the problem of political honesty. When the pre-democratic Greek reformer Solon went to watch a performance by the first

tragedian, Thespis, he complained that he witnessed a form of lying. When Thespis responded that tragedy was merely a kind of 'play', Solon lamented that this theatrical *pseudologia* or 'false speech' would soon spread to things that mattered, that is, become the norm in politics.[3] Unlike Solon, Athenian theatre audiences evidently valued *pseudologia* as a means of telling truth about the world. The problem is, there are different kinds of truth. Boris Johnson, when campaigning to become British prime minister in 2019, famously waved in the air a kipper sealed in ice and plastic, proclaiming that this wrapping was an imposition by the European Union. On one level this was a flat lie, and the relevant regulations were British. On another level, the ploy won emotional recognition from many who felt that they had lost control of their lives, and that their political selves had lost touch with their own biological selves subject to touch, taste and smell. Johnson's political instincts led him to an image traditionally associated with the King of Carnival, whose enemy was the Lenten herring.[4] In the *Washington Post* the distinguished political commentator Ann Applebaum pronounced that a doomed Conservative party was allowing Johnson to entertain them while their ship was sinking, but in the event Johnson won a triumphant victory in the next election.[5] If Johnson's stunt was an insult to the intelligence, then there were many British electors happy to see the intelligentsia being insulted, possessing enough emotional intelligence to distinguish categories of truth.[6]

In this book I shall look at democracy through the eyes of a theatre historian, seeking to develop the conversation between Solon and Thespis. I will argue that democracy always was and always will be an art of performance. Ever since Aristotle first formulated his theory of catharsis or 'purgation',[7] it has been understood that theatre works not on the intellect but on the emotions. That is why theatrical scholarship has something unique to offer political science.

In the case of Johnson's kipper there was a clash between factual truth and theatrical or emotional truth. Political persuasion always operates on the level of feeling rather than disembodied reason because reason can never resolve the question of values, of what constitutes the well-lived life. As the philosopher David Hume put it, a factual 'is' can never translate into a moral 'ought'.[8] Jonathan Haidt sums up the findings of modern cognitive and social science when he describes 'reasons' as 'the tail wagged by the intuitive dog',[9] and in another helpful metaphor he suggests that the 'mind is divided into parts, like a rider (controlled processes) upon an elephant (automatic processes).' Since the rider, in this case, evolved to serve the elephant, it follows that 'if you want to change someone's mind

about a moral or political issue, *talk to the elephant first*.'[10] Analytic intelligence is a mixed blessing when most choices are made on the basis of unconscious emotions, rationalised only in retrospect. As the neuroscientist Tali Sharot explains, 'The greater your cognitive capacity, the greater your ability to rationalise and interpret information at will, and creatively twist data to fit your opinions.'[11] The cognitive scientist George Lakoff claims that most of 'what we understand in public discourse is not in the words themselves, but in the unconscious understanding that we bring to the words', putting a figure of 98% onto the contribution of the 'cognitive unconscious', and he regrets that today politicians on the left generally have a poorer grasp of this principle than politicians on the right.[12] While science has, paradoxically, embraced human irrationality, popular sentiment clings to the idea that we make rational choices on the basis of individual free will.

This book was written in the shadow of Brexit (Britain's vote to leave the European Union), and the presidency of Donald Trump which culminated in an attack on the US Capitol. The UK referendum was a shock to me because I live in Oxford where there was no 'leave' poster to be seen on the streets. I move in social circles where there was no debate, and the vote left me feeling that part of my identity had been stripped away since I could no longer call myself a 'European'. The immediate narratives around me were vehement: this vote was the product of 'populism', not 'democracy', because it was founded upon lies. And as the narrative built up it often took the form of: 'How could these (uneducated) people be so stupid?', 'How could they vote against their own economic self-interest?' In other social settings, a different story was told: here at last the 'people' had succeeded in asserting their will over the elite. In the USA a similar question was being posed: 'How could so many people vote for an incompetent, narcissistic liar?' And the counter-narrative went unheard: 'Here at last was a man who voiced my anger'. The failure of democracy lay not in these competing narratives, but in the lack of any arena for mutual listening.

From my perspective as a theatre scholar, it was clear that there had been a failure on the level of performance. Johnson and Trump are accomplished performers with the skill of making the spectator in the back row feel that they are being personally and intimately addressed. Rational argument was powerless against men who knew how to play on the emotions of their audience, and the rationalists achieved nothing by unmasking the lies of people who made no pretence to be truthful. Conversely Johnson and Trump succeeded in unmasking the essential

hypocrisy of the rationalists, who pretended they were not themselves driven by a complex of emotions, with outrage at human suffering tangled up with personal benefits derived from globalisation. In these political battles, two levels of *pseudologia* were at play.

Critiques of populism run into the problem that democracy means by definition rule by the people or populace, and one person's populism is another person's authentic democracy, so I prefer to see Johnson and Trump not as sources of the trouble but as symptoms. For chapter and verse on the 'crisis of democracy', we might turn to a report published in 2020 by the Centre for the Future of Democracy in Cambridge which concluded: 'Across the globe, democracy is in a state of malaise. In the mid-1990s, a majority of citizens . . . were satisfied with the performance of their democracies' – but not so any longer.[13] Dissatisfaction was particularly marked in the UK and USA, with higher satisfaction reported in regimes condemned by liberals as 'populist', particularly among the young. Meanwhile, a survey of 2350 British adults aged 18–34 in 2022 found that 61% agreed with the proposition that 'having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections would be a good way of governing this country'.[14]

The existence of this democratic malaise seems obvious enough without such surveys, and explanations are not hard to find: democratically elected representatives powerless to resist corporate lobbying or halt the rising inequality of wealth; social media killing investigative journalism, while dividing society into tribes with no common language; the internet deluging us with facts but little fact-based argument; China's demonstration that democracy is not the only way to deliver material prosperity. The term 'democracy' has ceased to resonate with people who have no living memory of fascism, Stalinism or imperial rule, though it has a much more positive ring for the educated young in places like Hong Kong, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The first problem is to know what the word means. "Democracy!" has always been a convenient rallying cry to shout at your opponent, whoever they may be. When Winston Churchill observed in 1947 that 'democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time', he spoke as an orator using a familiar ploy to claim that he himself embodied the democratic voice of the people while the ruling Labour Party was a 'dictatorship'.[15] 'Democracy' has been an unstable term since its first emergence in Athens because the word *demos* refers ambiguously both to the *common* people – those who distinguish themselves from the few, the rich, the noble – and to the *entire* people, and

populists have been adept at conflating these two definitions, bracketing themselves with the 'people' against an elite or supposed elite.[16] In a sense, the vitality of democracy lies in the battle to define yourself as a democrat, and today there seems less interest in that battle.

In a recent essay entitled 'Why feelings trump facts' inspired by his participation in a parliamentary enquiry into 'citizenship and civic engagement', the political scientist Matthew Flinders observes that 'citizenship' means little to younger British people who have a new focus on 'belonging'. Quoting multiple international surveys that identify a growing gap between governors and governed, he laments the methodological failure of the social and political sciences to address the problem of 'feelings'.[17] Flinders points us towards a wider social transformation, where, within the context of what has come to be called 'identity politics', a new sense of self yields a changed attitude to democratic debate.

In her 2022 BBC Reith lecture, the Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie argued for the importance of disagreement and commented on the moment when she first came as a student to the USA more than two decades earlier: 'I quickly realised that in public conversations about America's difficult problems – like income inequality and race – the goal was not truth, the goal was to keep everyone comfortable. And so, people pretended not to see what they saw, things were left unsaid, questions unasked and ignorance festered. This unwillingness to accept the discomfort that honesty can bring is in its own way a suppression of speech.'[18] The word 'honesty' can all too easily be used as a cover for conscious or unconscious hate speech, and in this book I shall scrutinise these troublesome categories of 'honesty' and 'sincerity'. Adichie points us towards a marked swing of the pendulum in determining how freedom of speech must be balanced against the wish not to hurt others.

An extreme case arose as I worked on this book when Kathleen Stock, a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sussex, awarded an OBE for services to education, was driven from her post by charges of hatred for transsexuals. Her brand of feminism which only a few years earlier looked radical and progressive was viewed by many in 2021 as reactionary. My concern is not with the rights and wrongs of the charge against Stock, but with a cultural context where democratic debate became impossible. In Stock's angry words, the students and more importantly colleagues who condemned her en masse had learned to 'mark disagreement as an instant sign of bad and corrupt character. "Of course someone like HER shouldn't have a platform", they say. "She is a bad person". Case closed. It's a remarkably handy and self-serving worldview. . .'[19] Adichie

expressed herself no less bluntly: 'There is something honest about an authoritarianism that recognises itself to be what it is. Such a system is easier to challenge because the battle lines are clear. But this new social censure demands consensus while being wilfully blind to its own tyranny.'[20] These are controversial positions, but they point to a problem of the moment. Democracy is a culture of disagreement, allowing differences to be resolved through words rather than violence, and when words are understood as a form of violence and moral categories are not open to challenge, then democratic debate is constrained, for better or worse.[21] Democracy is manifestly under challenge from the far right, while on the left it has slipped down in the order of priorities, and perhaps the concept has just become too difficult.

The disengagement of the young from citizenship and democracy has complex causes, but a new sense of 'who I am' and 'my right to be who I want to be' looms large, along with a new sense of my ethical obligation to others. Scepticism about democracy is not linked to any diminished passion for social justice, rather the opposite, and the problem is that democracy seems an ever less plausible route to achieve social justice. Universities have done little to create a culture of democratic debate, with the transformation of collegiate structures into managerial structures, consumer satisfaction the mark of good teaching, and grant income the measure of professional success. It is not my intention in this book to wade any further into the muddy waters of contemporary public argument, but rather to step back from the contentions of the present in order to establish a context for these arguments. It is all too easy to imagine that a golden age of democracy has vanished, but historical scrutiny reveals that at any given moment in the past democracy was riddled with contradictions and cruelties. It has always been a quest rather than a state of being, and I continue to value the quest for 'true' democracy. As Sophia Rosenfeld argues, 'truth, like democracy, isn't something that simply exists in the world. It is, rather, something that we must always consciously and collectively forge.'[22] If this is to be achieved, a shared understanding of what has gone before is indispensable.

Theatre-makers understand that their job turns upon moving the emotions of others, not upon being themselves. Novelists have the same need, and when Adichie argues for 'honesty', she writes not as a philosopher but as a writer and teacher of writing concerned with censorship of the imagination, an inevitable consequence if her private self is going to be identified with the characters she imagines. Politicians are trapped in the same bind, playing roles that they think will secure instinctive

identification or approval, constantly attacked when a gap appears between the role and its creator. Through his historical work on the 'fall of public man', Richard Sennett has done much to inform my perspective on Western democracy. Sennett drew on the metaphor and institutional realities of eighteenth-century theatre in order to argue that before the age of Romanticism someone (normally male, to be sure) could enter the public sphere without feeling that a vulnerable private self was invested in every civic action.[23] In a useful essay on 'performance and democracy', the British theatre scholar Nicholas Ridout takes his cue from Sennett when describing his own experience of trotting out 'ready-mades' in political conversation, prompting him to conclude that becoming 'other than oneself ... is a precondition of democratic politics'.[24] The problem of role-playing is a perennial one. Theatrical communication is both complex and reciprocal, which is why, given the disciplinary lacuna which Flinders identifies in the realm of feeling, political science has much to glean from theatrical scholarship. Feelings have a history, and the search in modern political life for revelations of an authentic 'I am' is historically produced.[25]

Hannah Arendt's experience as a stateless Jewish refugee helped her see a gap between democracy as defined by the Athenians and the later ideal of democracy as an electoral system intertwined with a sense of universal human rights: 'We are not born equal', Arendt argued, in defiance of the preamble to the US Declaration of Independence, 'we become equal as members of a group on the strength of our decision to guarantee ourselves mutually equal rights.'[26] Though Francis Fukuyama proclaimed notoriously after the collapse of the Soviet Union that Western liberal democracy had become a universal ideal which marked 'the end of history', from Arendt's perspective 'liberal democracy' is a flat contradiction since of its nature the democratic state creates inequity through exclusion.[27] Her Jewish background alerted her to the role of Protestant Christianity in defining freedom as a function of the individual will rather than public life, and she turned to Athens for an alternative model. The democratic Greek *polis*, claimed Arendt, 'provided men with a space of appearances where they could act, with a kind of theater where freedom could appear.'[28] Democracy and theatre emerged in Greece at the same historical moment, in a symbiosis that broke down when democracy became a matter of individual rights.

Arendt blamed the atrocities of the French Revolution on a romantic quest for personal authenticity, and argued that politicians who follow their convictions and aspire to truth and sincerity are doomed to fail because the dark 'life of the heart' is always distorted and transformed by

the 'light of the world'.[29] If feelings are transformed through the process of their public representation, then liberal politicians seeking to persuade the public of their sincerity and personal authenticity are forced to choose between self-deception and hypocrisy. Nowadays only 'deception', Arendt argues, 'is likely to create a semblance of truthfulness',[30] whereas in antiquity, where truth was a philosophical not a political virtue, what mattered was the character of the speaker as defined by his actions.[31] Arendt drew inspiration from Aristotle's argument that in the theatre what counts is not character but 'action', and applied this principle to democratic politics.[32] From her perspective, the modern problem of democracy is one of performance. Over the centuries Christianity, which draws much of its thinking from Plato and from Judaism, has created a cultural mistrust of appearances, denouncing the inherent immorality of actors and of theatre. Recognising this cultural legacy, Arendt insisted that no amount of *honesty* will of itself stir a crowd of individuals into collective action because emotions respond to *appearances* rather than realities.

Chantal Mouffe is a Belgian political philosopher who owes much to Arendt when she pulls apart two strands shaping modern political life. 'On one side we have the liberal tradition constituted by the rule of law, the defence of human rights and the respect of individual liberty; on the other the democratic tradition whose main ideas are those of equality, identity between governing and governed and popular sovereignty.'[33] Because there is no rational way to synthesise these two ideals of liberty and equality, Mouffe urges that democratic politics should be 'agonistic', but not 'antagonistic'.[34] Seeing no end to the process of trying to reconcile these opposites, Mouffe adopts the Greek term *agon* to capture the positive ideal of a structured and performative contest. A theatre performance in Athens was termed an *agon*, part of a public competition, and Greek tragedies and comedies feature a further *agon*, a set-piece verbal contest between two dramatic characters.[35] Liberalism prioritises the rights and freedoms of the individual over those of the community, and because the Athenians for better or worse, in what was never an easy human process, tried to put community first, they help us set liberalism in perspective.[36] I have not couched this book as an assault on liberalism, but rather as an attempt to understand the limitations of a tradition that has made me the kind of person I feel myself to be.

The most important theoretician whom I will draw upon in this book is Plato. Plato describes a recurrent process whereby democratic anarchy spawns demagogues ('leaders of the *demos*' or what we would today call 'populists'), and a demagogue quickly morphs into a dictator or 'tyrant'.

According to Plato, tragedians in the theatre praise tyrants, likening them to gods, and for this reason he bars them from his idealised Republic, leaving them to 'circulate round other cities, attracting crowds and hiring men with fine, loud persuasive voices to drag the citizens towards tyranny and democracy'.[37] Democracy and tyranny sit next to each other on Plato's spectrum of constitutions, and he saw theatre as a device for securing the tyranny of demagogic rule. The persuasive or convincing voice of the tragic actor merges in his analysis with the voice of the demagogue to build the same collective surrender of rationality and admiration for a factitious hero. Plato's description of Greek tragedy seems counter-intuitive until we recall that in Greek city states most so-called tyrants were populist orators who won the support of the *demos* by suppressing aristocrats. In Athens it was the populist tyrant Peisistratos who first established the festival where tragedies were performed,[38] the playwright Aeschylus had a close relationship with Hieron the 'tyrant' of Syracuse, while Euripides wrote not only for Athens but also for the Macedonian 'tyrant' Archelaus.[39] For Plato, who believed in rule by a deserving elite, the thread that binds the actor and the demagogue is rhetoric, the power of a public speaker to command the emotions of a crowd and subject them to his will.

Aristotle was more sympathetic than Plato to the democratic ideal, and looked for a middle course. Unlike Plato, he recognised that the only alternative to rule by violence was rule by public persuasion, and this meant giving a central place to the art of rhetoric. He knew that mass juries and political assemblies would never be composed of philosophy students, and that collective decisions would always turn upon emotion rather than logical argument. He grasped also that emotion cannot be separated from cognition. 'The emotions', Aristotle wrote, 'are those things that bring about change to make people alter their decisions.'[40] Although his influential *Art of Rhetoric* analysed the psychology of emotion, he steered clear of addressing the problematic art of the performer. Writing a generation after the death of the great playwrights Sophocles and Euripides, he lamented that nowadays tragedies win the prize in dramatic competitions thanks not to playwrights but to actors, 'and the same thing happens in political contests because of the decay of polities'.[41] Put another way, it wasn't what you said that counted in the democratic Athens he knew, but how you performed those words. Aristotle's phrase 'decay of polities' refers to precipitate edicts passed in defiance of the constitution, and he goes on to complain that 'where the laws are not supreme, demagogues arise. Merged into a single entity, the *demos* turns into a king'. Like toadies

paying court to a monarch, demagogues 'get their power because the *demos* controls everything, and *they* control the thinking of the *demos*.'[42]

Today Western liberals are caught in an intellectual trap. They complain about spin, mendacity and emotional manipulation, but lack any positive ideal of rhetoric of the kind that Aristotle and later Cicero in republican Rome tried to elaborate. How in practice can a politician be both honest and a consummate performer? If we seek a politician whom we judge to be 'honest' rather than 'eloquent', it is likely we shall be drawn to some individual whom we trust because they resemble ourselves, and this individual meanwhile will fail to win trust from people unlike ourselves. The human tendency to identify provides the entrée to leaders like Trump and Johnson, adept in the role of a flawed, rebellious human being who speaks as he thinks, and both are probably honest liars in the sense that they know how to bring themselves to believe what they say in the brief moment of saying it. Cicero established a principle that countless later orators have echoed. In Churchill's phrasing of the mantra, for example, the orator who wants to convince the multitude 'must himself believe. He may be often inconsistent. He is never consciously insincere.'[43] Gorgias, a flamboyant Greek rhetorician, set out the paradox of theatricality in these terms: 'The deceiver is more honest than the non-deceiver, and the deceived is wiser than the undeceived.'[44] Many who vote for populists like Trump and Johnson are plainly not naïve but share this view.

When democracy was reinvented in the eighteenth century, it was tied to procedures of *representation* via a system of elections. This was different from the participatory Greek system based on mass meetings and lotteries for the random selection of officers. The cultural climate of the Enlightenment put a premium on rationality and amongst the educated classes it was taken for granted that elected representatives would be more capable of reasoned deliberation than the common people, often demeaned as 'the mob'. Our modern thing called democracy was inspired not by quarrelsome Athens but by the Roman Republic, and this Rome was seen to be governed by free citizens, men with a decent level of education and property, capable of engaging in deliberation that was emotional but also reasoned. When the republican ideal slowly yielded to the modern democratic ideal of full adult suffrage, the educated and property-owning classes did not instantly relinquish their grip on power – and perhaps they never did. Greece was not the cradle of modern democracy, but it remains a revealing social experiment showing how a shared understanding of agonistic performance allowed power to shift with a minimum of internal violence.