Political Theatre, Modernist Marxism, and the Avant-Garde

by

Arthur Milner, B.A.

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

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per LTK McDevall
Thesis Supervisor, Department of English

Chair, Department of English

Carleton University
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Abstract

This thesis traces the influence of the development of Marxist theory on the development of political theatre. It demonstrates that the continuing failure of Marxism to deliver its promised proletarian revolution led Western Marxists to increasingly focus their attentions on capitalism's social and cultural superstructure, and led some Marxist theorists to reject realism—the earliest form of a critical, political theatre—in favour of avant-garde, anti-realistic forms. It argues that the political avant-garde received further sustenance from poststructuralism, and then considers the influence of avant-garde, Marxist and poststructuralist theory on a prominent Canadian academic, a respected Canadian theatre professional, and Canadian theatre in general.

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Whatever is of value in this thesis is due to those listed above. Its shortcomings, sad to say, are my own.

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Introduction

For one hundred years, theatrical realism and the avant-garde have been at war. If there is an event that marks the outbreak of hostilities, it is perhaps the 1901 publication of *A Dream Play* and its accompanying “Author’s Note,” in which August Strindberg writes that he “has attempted to imitate the disconnected but seemingly logical form of a dream. Anything can happen, everything is possible and plausible. Time and space do not exist” (209). In 1888, Strindberg had written: “Our realists today condemn the monologue as implausible, but if I can motivate it, I can make it plausible[.] It is perfectly plausible for an orator to pace the floor alone and practice his speech aloud” (59). We get a sense here of a typical impatience with the strictures of realism, but also of the distance travelled: thirteen years from “if I can motivate it” to “anything can happen.”

The field of discussion here is theatre, though of course the battle between realism and the avant-garde raged throughout the artistic world. Today, perhaps, there is an uneasy truce: artists, critics, and academics on one side of the trench; the public, with its blissfully innocent consumption of realism and its descendents, on the other.

Before examining the history of this contestation, a description of the origins of my interest in the subject is in order. My concerns, to begin with, were practical rather than theoretical. When I first entered university, in 1968, the student movement was at its height and had already shifted its focus from peace to anti-imperialist revolution—that is, from opposition to the United States involvement in Vietnam to support for the Vietnamese Communists. Under an increasingly Marxist-Leninist—i.e., Maoist—leadership, the movement came to focus less on class conflict, as in orthodox Marxism,

and more on the national struggles of third world countries against U.S. imperialism. From here it was but a short step to recasting the Canadian task as a nationalist struggle against U.S. domination.

This new socialist-nationalist movement was buttressed by an older, conservative Canadian nationalism, that of George Grant and Harold Innes, and as the sixties movement imploded into sectarian squabbles among myriad Maoist, Leninist and Trotskyist factions, the Canadian left took on an increasingly nationalist tone. And it is in this ideological context—nationalism combined with a variety of leftisms, from moderate to revolutionary—that the Canadian theatre movement of the late sixties got its start.

By the time Ottawa's Great Canadian Theatre Company (GCTC) was founded in 1974, with its mandate to produce only plays written by Canadians, theatre companies with similar mandates had existed in Toronto for five or six years. When I began to work with GCTC two years later, first as an actor, soon as a Board member and playwright, subsequently as artistic director, I had had almost no theatre training, knew a little about Brecht, but almost nothing about the history of theatre. Politically, I had followed the student movement through its various ideological contortions, up to and including the growing influence of the Frankfurt School, but as many sixties intellectuals turned toward poststructuralism, my politics, following a five-week visit to Sweden in 1976, were increasingly influenced by European social democracy.

GCTC was the first theatre company in Ottawa to limit itself to the production of Canadian plays, a decision for which it was roundly criticized in the local media. Its production of mostly political plays led to further condemnation, for being less interested

in art than politics. Nonetheless, GCTC's political character attracted left-wing activists and gave the company a continuity of support envied by other local theatres. GCTC was also asked to perform at labour rallies and other community events, and the success of these specially written and performed "agitprops" added to GCTC's recognition or notoriety—depending on one's point of view—and led to GCTC's being commissioned, by a public housing support group, to write and produce a play about life in public housing. In 1981, GCTC presented that play, *Red Tape, Running Shoes and Razzamatazz*, at a conference of the Canadian Popular Theatre Alliance (CPTA), an association of the most explicitly political theatre companies in the country. At the following CPTA conference, in Edmonton in 1983, GCTC presented *Sandinista!*, a play about Nicaragua's 1981 revolution, commissioned by a number of third world development organizations. In keeping with the temper and necessities of the times, both plays had been collectively written.

Red Tape and *Sandinista!* had been extraordinarily well received, but GCTC was finding itself isolated in the CPTA, and its work, to some extent, devalued. Every other company represented at the Edmonton conference was engaged in a more narrowly defined "popular" theatre, that is, an interactive style of theatre performed for targeted groups and/or their organizations: labour, women, aboriginals, immigrants, etc. While GCTC's productions might have been about one or another of these groups, and despite its occasional agitprop and purchased productions, GCTC's work was presentational, and for the most part the company expected its audience to buy tickets and attend plays in its theatre. For a time I contemplated moving in the direction of popular theatre; in a sense,

I was being groomed for popular theatre by the third world development agencies with which we had collaborated, and in 1982 I was sent by CUSO to St. Vincent and the Grenadines to participate in a two-week workshop organized by the Eastern Caribbean Popular Theatre Organization.

On the basis of my experience in St. Vincent, and at the CPTA conferences, I decided to stick with conventional theatre. There were a number of contributing factors. First of all, I was not very interested in the participatory approach of most popular theatre: their focus on involving the spectator or taking the content from a targeted group seemed to limit the range of ideas I wished to explore. Second, I had misgivings about the most common of the popular theatre structures, Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre, in which social conflicts were staged and audience members asked to intervene. In one example, actors performed a short play in which a female employee was threatened with dismissal if she did not sleep with her superior. Despite pretensions to complete openness, when audience interveners seemed able to settle the problem interpersonally, an actor would interrupt to steer the intervener towards the "correct" conclusion, that no interpersonal solution was available and that employees need unions to defend their rights. On the other hand, when done honestly and openly, the exercise seemed more akin to social work than politics. Finally, I believed my independence as a theatre artist was less likely to be compromised working with a company dependent on voluntary audience attendance and government grants than as an employee of a non-theatre organization, or on contract to social/political organizations. This applied most obviously to labour organizations,

which necessarily had their own self-interests that might well differ from my own conception of political priorities.

By this time, I was resident playwright at GCTC, and I continued to write in the manner in which I had apprenticed: I selected a subject that interested me, researched it, and wrote the best and most profound play I could. These plays included *1997* (about the future of work); *Zero Hour* (about CIA involvement in Nicaragua); *Learning to Live with Personal Growth* (about poverty in Canada); and *Masada* (about the founding of Israel), and they were presented to paying, general audiences in the conventional fashion. In retrospect, there was a certain self-serving wisdom to my decision: GCTC prospered, while, with the decline of left-wing politics in the mid-eighties, the CPTA and most of its member popular theatre companies soon disappeared.

GCTC had been unusual among politically committed theatres in its preference for performing for general, paying audiences; but it was unusual among the more conventional theatres for its goal of programming explicitly political plays. The search for such plays grew increasingly difficult: it seemed that the same political conditions that led to the demise of the CPTA and many of its member companies also meant that fewer plays on political themes were being written. While GCTC's reputation ensured that many writers who identified themselves as political submitted plays, these were rarely satisfying. Most, we judged, were simply not "good" enough. In other cases, it was a matter of political preference: for example, there was a period when anyone with a mental health problem considered the experience political; ours was a narrower definition. Then there were plays that assumed their politics—for example, that free trade

was evil—rather than explored them. Most disconcerting, however, was a category of plays that simply confused me: these plays seemed to defy understanding and struck me as painfully slow and repetitive; they had little, or obscure, dialogue and were filled with dance-like movement; and they either employed images that were indecipherable or rested at length on images that were instantly absorbed. I could accept that some people preferred this kind of theatre; after all, *chacun a son goût*. But what I found inexplicable was the often political terminology with which these plays were described in publicity or by reviewers: experimental, shocking, brave, disturbing, important, revolutionary. If they were experimental, I had no idea what they were trying to prove; if revolutionary, I had no idea of the revolution's goals.

I find it difficult to believe that I was so artistically naïve at the time. It never occurred to me that people who thought of themselves as political could have what I would now describe as formalistic objections to the narrative-realism of the plays GCTC produced and that I wrote. While I had disagreements with the practitioners of the popular theatre, or different priorities, I had understood their arguments. But I could not understand what possible political justification could exist for these vague, imagistic, and largely poorly attended plays. Over the next few years, I became more familiar with this artistic, political “avant-garde,” by attending a few such performances, through discussions with friends and colleagues, some of whom were engaged in “experimental” theatre, and through participation on juries. I learned that they and their supporters dismissed realism and attached an importance to the formal anti-realism of their work, and generally saw their work as in some sense “exploring people's alienation in the

modern/capitalist world.” I continued to discuss “experimental” theatre on juries or argue about it in bars, but I was too busy writing, producing and directing plays to seriously engage the “avant-garde.”

In 1995, I resigned from my position at GCTC and turned to freelance writing and directing. I also spent some time reading, and being impressed by, the classics of realism: Ibsen, Chekhov, Shaw and others. Then, in 1998, I was hired as a sessional lecturer at Carleton University to teach a course in modern drama. While I was familiar with the canon, I still knew little theatre history. I began to research modern theatre and was fascinated by what I discovered. I learned that realism had been regarded as “avant-garde,” indeed revolutionary, at the outset; and that within twenty years realism was already under challenge, and would continue to face challenges from Symbolists, Strindberg, Pirandello, Surrealism, Expressionism, Brecht, Absurdism and more. And I learned that these practitioners of new forms often attacked realism in political terms. It was time now to return to the questions that had troubled me for two decades.

The Birth of Realism

In 1873, in the preface to his play *Thérèse Raquin*, Émile Zola wrote,

... the experimental and scientific spirit of the century will enter the domain of the drama, and in this lies the only possible salvation of the drama ... we must look to the future and the future will have to do with the human problem studied in the framework of reality. The drama will either die or become modern and realistic. (Bentley, *Playwright* 6)

Zola’s essay was to become a kind of naturalist manifesto, and he is generally credited with the “invention” of naturalism in theatre. But if Zola proclaimed the revolution,

Ibsen's *A Doll House*, a commercial and, eventually, critical success, embodied it. For the next 20 years, through Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, the early works of August Strindberg, and the younger G.B. Shaw (he died in 1950 at age 96), naturalism was the avant-garde of its day, and like a proper avant-garde it broke ground in a number of areas. Naturalism portrayed ordinary people (not gods or kings), who walked and sat amidst accurate furniture and walls (not painted backdrops), and conversed in ordinary language (not poetry). In fact, naturalism required the invention of a whole new kind of acting. Before naturalism, star actors stood at centre stage (near the prompter's box and where the light was best) with lesser mortals arranged on either side; they faced the audience as they spoke, gesturing occasionally to indicate they were "really" speaking to a character beside them. Now actors faced each other and pretended the absence of the audience; and now a director was required, an "objective" eye to ensure that the scene looked "real." Of course, naturalism and realism shouldn't be mistaken for "natural" or "real." (We shall come to definitions of naturalism and realism below.) As Raymond Williams notes, an actor pretending to be a servant or a general on a Russian estate at the turn of the century, and not acknowledging the presence of an audience, is no more "real" than any other theatrical convention (*Drama* 4).

Early naturalism also differed in content from its precursors. W.B. Worthen writes,

Naturalism and realism were the first dramatic modes to consider themselves not as expressing the dominant political and social order, but as criticizing the values and institutions of middle-class society. (583)

This is perhaps an exaggeration, but it is undeniable that in their earliest incarnations naturalism and realism were associated with, and indeed inseparable from, social criticism. Peter Mercer, for example, describes the “central concern” of realism in Victorian England as “the investigation of the moral behaviour of man in society” through “an accurate and unromanticized description of contemporary society” (Fowler 200-201). These “unromanticized” descriptions could be highly contentious. As Peter Watts writes of the response to *A Doll's House*,

To nineteenth-century Europe, the idea of a woman not only forsaking her marriage vows, but also displaying a mind of her own and renouncing her duty of unquestioning obedience to her husband, was almost indecent; that she should also make him look small was scandalous. [...] In Germany [...] Ibsen was forced to write a different ending. (Ibsen 18)

Similar outrage greeted Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881), about syphilis, and Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893), about prostitution. Georg Lukács sums up realism's new concerns:

Modern drama is the drama of the bourgeoisie; modern drama is bourgeois drama. [...] The drama has now taken on new social dimensions. This development became necessary, and necessary at this particular time, because of the specific social situation of the bourgeoisie. For bourgeois drama is the first to grow out of conscious class confrontation; the first with the set intention of expressing the patterns of thought and emotion, as well as the relations with other classes, of a class struggling for power and freedom. ... Although in Elizabethan drama the representatives of several classes appear, the true human beings, the dramatic characters, are derived on the whole from a single class. (Bentley, *Theory* 425)

We have, to this point, used the terms naturalism and realism interchangeably.

It is time to be more precise. “The meaning of ‘naturalism,’” writes Bamber Gascoigne, “is beyond dispute—it represents a style of theatre in which the stage-setting, the dialogue of the characters and the performance of the actors seem ‘life-like.’” Gascoigne distinguishes between naturalism and realism: the former refers to style; realism, he says,

“is concerned with the truth of the experience which it conveys” (7). This seems too subjective; how does one determine “truth of experience”? Moreover, naturalism has a more common and specific definition: Chris Baldick describes naturalism, “led by Émile Zola,” as “a more deliberate kind of realism [...] usually involving a view of human beings as passive victims of natural forces and social environment” (146-147). This kind of naturalism, generally short-lived, was inspired by the scientific revolutions of the nineteenth century, particularly the publication, in 1859, of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection*. To further complicate the matter, and returning to Gascoigne’s definition, Baldick tells us that “the term ‘naturalistic’ in drama usually has a broader application, denoting a very detailed illusion of real life on the stage, especially in speech, costume and sets” (147). For Georg Lukács, writing primarily about the novel, the chasm between naturalism and realism was wide: naturalism was mere reportage and obsessive concern with the surface details of life; realism was the portrayal of objective relationships beneath the surface. Such a distinction may be more apparent than real. Zola himself wrote that “a work of art is a segment of nature *seen through the eyes of a certain temperament*” (Furst 30; emphasis added), implying something other than a concern with surfaces. Further, by forcing details and events into a narrative, i.e., a series of causes and effects, one must explore relationships and not only isolated data. In any case, it seems that, in theatre, Zola’s naturalism turned very quickly into Ibsen’s realism, and if we confine our use of naturalism to describe the scientific, deterministic approach described by Baldick,

we should realize that such naturalism rarely does, and likely cannot, appear in undiluted form.

At the same time, we cannot subject our definition of realism in theatre to a static list of techniques. At the outset, to underline its objective approach and social concerns, and to distance itself from previous modes, realism necessitated a “detailed illusion of real life on the stage, especially in speech, costume and sets.” But realism has proved remarkably adaptable. As audiences grew accustomed to the new form, as the techniques of the avant-garde spread, and no doubt due to budgetary constraints, realism relaxed: a frame could “indicate” a window, a sofa, a living room. Chronology remained important, but the order in which events were presented need not be linear and “flashbacks” became common. Narrators could narrate and characters could soliloquize (Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie* and Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, respectively). Poetry returned, as a concern with the rhythms and texture of dialogue meshed with and, in some instances, overshadowed “real” speech (Williams, David Mamet and George F. Walker). Some playwrights, including perhaps those mentioned, might be appalled to hear their plays described as realistic, and clearly, in terms of a definition of realism appropriate to Ibsen, they are not. Nonetheless, realism, like any other form of theatre, is a set of conventions—an agreement negotiated between audience and artist—and the terms of that agreement can and did change. So long as writing and production met some constantly changing—hence elusive—minimum requirements, audiences accepted this new realism as no less representative of the external world than its earlier versions.

To complicate matters still further, what we call realism generally includes a narrative—a story in which cause and effect are discernable in the Aristotelian manner—and psychologically believable characters. In fact, while narrative and believable characters are rarely included in definitions of realism, these factors are far more representative of contemporary realism than is any particular approach to staging or any normative demands such as Lukács' for "the effort to portray the objective relationships beneath surface appearances." Strindberg, for example, wrote that an

effective play should contain or make use of: [...] A secret made known to the audience either at the beginning or toward the end[;] A reversal, [...] an upset, a well-prepared surprise[;] A careful resolution, either with or without a reconciliation. (Dukore 574-575)

These elements of Aristotelian narrative pre-date realism, of course, and were integral to Eugène Scribe's "well-made play." Scribe's enormous output of romantic and melodramatic plays (over 400 produced in mid-nineteenth century; Brockett 333) were decidedly unrealistic, and were, to a large extent, what French naturalists were rebelling against. His structure, however, was consciously imitated by Ibsen and Strindberg in their realistic work. On the other hand, Chekhov's narrative structure is barely discernable. The point is that, with the rather limited exception of some "slice-of-life" naturalism, narrative, whether "well-made" or subtle, forms an empirical and integral part of dramatic realism.

In fact, if we are to have a contemporary definition, and avoid normative demands, we should avoid both Lukács' realism as well as Zola's naturalism, and confine ourselves to: stories about psychologically believable characters staged in a manner that follows cause and effect as well as minimum requirements of the Aristotelian narrative,

i.e., the rise and fall of the plot. This, it must be admitted, is hardly a definition of realism that differentiates post-Zola realism from that of *Oedipus Rex* or *Hamlet*, nor does it describe the realism that interested Ibsen, Chekhov and their successors, so we must add three caveats. First, as mentioned above, is the effort to capture, more or less accurately, ordinary speech. Second, Zola's naturalism and the realism that ensued included "ordinary characters," not gods and royalty. As Furst and Skrine tell us, "the Naturalists expanded the thematic and particularly the social range of the arts by dealing with a greater variety of people and problems, including many drawn from the newly emergent working classes" (12). Third, as Furst and Skrine write, "the Realists and the Naturalists have in common [...] the fundamental belief that art is in essence a mimetic, objective presentation of outer reality" (8), though Furst and Skrine are perhaps being too humble on behalf of realists, who are unlikely to distinguish between "outer" and "inner" reality.

We have, then, both the method and object of realism: narratives of contemporary society aimed at the representation of reality. And it is against this understanding of realism that the first anti-realists rebelled. As Strindberg put it, "The higher fantasy has a greater reality than this actuality. The banal incidents of existence are not essential life. My whole life is a dream" (Bentley, *Playwright* 181).

The Avant-Garde

In 1962, Gascoigne wrote, "[Ibsen] is the father figure against whom we are proud to rebel" (10). In 1987, according to Raymond Williams, "[t]here is hardly a new dramatic or theatrical movement, down to our present day, which fails to announce, in manifesto,

programme note or press release, that it is rejecting or moving beyond ‘naturalism’” (*Politics* 83). Realism, even if in a form less constrained than Ibsen’s, is what the avant-garde defines itself against. Each of the various streams of the avant-garde found, and continues to find, realism inadequate to the task at hand. That task, and to a lesser extent its techniques, fall into two primary categories, the spiritual and the political.

The primary objective of the spiritual avant-garde is the search for the true, eternal self. The spiritual avant-garde is a fight against modernity and its underlying rationalism, and it sees realism as the artistic expression of that modern rationalism. The first among the spiritual avant-garde were the French Symbolists, who declared themselves formally in 1886. They aimed

for a poetry of suggestion rather than of direct statement, evoking subjective moods through the use of private symbols, while avoiding the description of external reality[.] They wanted to bring poetry closer to music, believing that sound had mysterious affinities with other senses. (Baldick 220)

In theatre, Maurice Maeterlinck and Strindberg are key figures. While the use of symbols made its way increasingly into the writing—and titles—of major realistic playwrights (Ibsen’s *The Wild Duck*, Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*), these plays, nonetheless, placed the individual in a contemporary social context. The Symbolists, in contrast, sought a return to a kind of Romanticism, without the joy.

The Symbolists’ efforts at “unconscious communication”—through “suggestion [and] private symbols”—were of lasting influence and can be seen in the theory and practice of Antonin Artaud (1896-1948). Artaud’s primary means of direct, unconscious-

to-unconscious communication was “the gesture.” He describes a Parisian performance of the Balinese Theatre in 1931:

A rippling of joints, the musical angle made by the arm with the forearm, a foot falling, a knee bending, fingers that seem to be coming loose from the hand, it is all like a perpetual play of mirrors in which human limbs seem resonant with echoes, harmonies in which the notes of the orchestra, the whispers of wind instruments evoke the idea of a monstrous aviary in which the actors themselves would be the fluttering wings. Our theater which has never had the idea of this metaphysics of gesture nor known how to make music serve such immediate, such concrete dramatic ends, our purely verbal theater, unaware of everything that makes theater, of everything that exists in the air of the stage, which is measured and circumscribed by that air and has a density in space—movements, shapes, colors, vibrations, attitudes, screams—our theater might, with respect to the unmeasurable, which derives from the mind’s capacity for receiving suggestion, be given lessons in spirituality from the Balinese theater. (56)

[...] In this theatre all creation comes from the stage, finds its expression and its origin alike in a secret psychic impulse which is Speech before words. It is a theater which eliminates the author in favor of [...] the director; but a director who has become a kind of manager of magic, a master of sacred ceremonies. [...] This is a sort of primary Physics from which Spirit has never disengaged itself. (60)

To tap this “primary Physics” in Western societies requires new rituals and extreme measures, what Artaud calls “The Theater of Cruelty,” which he compares to the plague:

The theater, like the plague [...] releases conflicts, disengages powers, liberates possibilities, and if these possibilities and these powers are dark, it is the fault not of the plague nor of the theater, but of life. [...] It appears that by means of the plague, a gigantic abscess, as much moral as social, has been collectively drained; and that like the plague, the theater has been created to drain abscesses collectively. (31)

For Artaud, Western theatre long ago had taken a wrong turn:

If people are out of the habit of going to the theater, [it] is because we have been accustomed for four hundred years, that is since the Renaissance, to a purely descriptive and narrative theater. [...] Shakespeare himself is responsible for this aberration and decline. (76)

He lays the blame on psychology, which “is the cause of the theatre’s abasement and its fearful loss of energy” (77); nonetheless, the public “has the sense of the true and always responds to it when it is manifested” (76), and “can be affected by all these grand notions and asks only to become aware of them, but on condition that it is addressed in its own language” (75). Once addressed “in its own language,” presumably a language of gesture, the results are expected to be impressive:

I defy any spectator to whom such violent scenes will have transferred their blood, who will have felt in himself the transit of a superior action, who will have seen the extraordinary and essential movements of his thought illuminated in extraordinary deeds—the violence and blood having been placed at the service of the violence of the thought—I defy that spectator to give himself up, once outside the theater, to ideas of war, riot, and blatant murder. [...] It will be claimed that example breeds example, that if the attitude of cure induces cure, the attitude of murder will induce murder. Everything depends upon the manner and the purity with which the thing is done. There is a risk. (82)

No record exists of murders committed by audience members exposed to improper and impure application of Artaud’s methods; conversely, it is not known how many spectators, having previously given themselves to “ideas of war, riot, and blatant murder,” and “to whom such violent scenes had transferred their blood,” now abandoned them. We do know that Artaud produced eight plays in his theatrical career, with, by general agreement, not a single critical or popular success; he founded two theatre companies, both short-lived; he spent nine of his last ten years in various mental institutions; and he wrote a great deal, but even such a stalwart defender as Susan Sontag would write, “Artaud is relevant and understandable [...] as long as one refers mainly to his ideas without reading much of his work. For anyone who reads Artaud through, he remains fiercely out of reach” (Sontag lix). One might expect, then, to find Artaud largely

ignored, of interest to theatre historians, perhaps, for his work with the Surrealists and his influence on the Absurdist. Instead, many continue to find Artaud “relevant and understandable.” At least five books published since 1994 have been devoted to Artaud, most with his name in the title. In one of these, Jane Goodall summarizes the Artaudian legacy:

The Artaud myth as we have received it is largely a product of the 1960s, which made known to us two Artauds. One was taken up by some of the best-known gurus of the counter-culture as the prophet of a theatre at once lost and yet to come, where holy and violent passions were to be unleashed. This was the Artaud in whose name actors explored physical and psychical extremes, and in the name of whose Theatre of Cruelty they set out to stage a visionary revolt against the dark forces of civilization. The other Artaud appeared in the work of French critical theorists and philosophers[.] Here was a more elusive figure, who problematized all the approaches (critical, clinical, theoretical) which might be taken towards him. He was presented in the company of Nietzsche and Bataille as one of the principal modern challengers to “the subject” and to knowledges predicated upon it. (1-2)

Among dramatists, too, Artaud has been of continuing interest, beyond the 1960s and the “gurus of the counter-culture.” Peter Brook, perhaps the most celebrated avant-garde director of the last quarter century, wrote of Artaud, “[I]n the desert one prophet raised his voice. Railing against the sterility of the theatre before the war in France an illuminated genius [...]” (49). Artaud’s influence, acknowledged and unacknowledged, can also be seen in such respected playwrights and directors as Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, Jerzy Grotowski, Ariane Mnoujkine and Howard Barker. Each scorned realism; each rejected the possibility of communication through ordinary language and sought an alternative in ritual and gesture; to varying degrees, each believed in the necessity of extreme measures to reach audiences.

The Political Avant-Garde

J.L. Styan separates his *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice* into three volumes: *Realism and Naturalism*, *Symbolism, Surrealism and the Absurd*, and *Expressionism and Epic Theatre* (Brecht). Volumes 2 and 3 delineate the historical development of what I have called the spiritual and political avant-gardes, and if the enemy for the former was modernity, the enemy for the latter was capitalism. These categories, however clear in theory, overlap in practice: an artist railing against modernity might be easily confused with—or interpreted as—an artist railing against bourgeois society, and vice versa. Thus Artaud, whom I, with Styan, have placed within the spiritual avant-garde, is considered by some as having a great deal to say about bourgeois society, despite the fact that his writing has no apparent political content and that he explicitly denied any interest in the political sphere. Similarly, André Breton and the Surrealists—whose “automatic writing” was, like Artaud’s, devoid of political content—claimed immense political utility for their method, joined the Communists, expelled Artaud when he would not go along, and offered Surrealism to the Communists as the official art form of the movement (the Party demurred). This combination—political claims and ambitions with a simultaneous absence of political content—becomes increasingly important as we move through the history of the political avant-garde, as does the conflation of capitalism and modernity. With these caveats in mind, we consider the first manifestation of a political avant-garde, the Expressionists, in whose work one finds considerable political content but also alternating and simultaneous attacks on both capitalism and modernity:

When the brief vogue of symbolism had largely passed [...] another antirealistic style briefly invaded the theatre. Expressionism in the theatre was essentially a product of Germany and Austria in the years preceding and immediately following World War I [and] had its roots in dissatisfaction with the authoritarian rule of Emperor Wilhelm II of Germany and Emperor Franz Josef of Austria and with the materialism of a predominantly middle-class society. It bloomed in the economic and social chaos that afflicted the two countries after the war. Like symbolism, it refused to be bound by the realistic portrayal of an illusion of ordinary life; unlike symbolism, it was dynamic—full of energy, and full of rebellion against propriety and “common sense,” as well as against authority and convention in life and in art. While the symbolists sought to escape the materialism and ugliness of their day by mystical flight into the ideal world of universal truth and beauty, the Expressionists savagely satirized the materialism and ugliness of their world or cried out against its inhumanity. (Hewitt 103-104)

The typical Expressionist hero was an anarchistic artist fighting in vain against bourgeois society, often represented by his father. Secondary characters—bosses, parents, government officials—were habitually and intentionally presented as puppets or robots, and the primary image was one of humanity caught up in the wheels of a machine. Styan lists six “characteristics associated with German Expressionism in its mature phase”:

1. *Settings* are virtually abstract and unlocalized, and the scene frequently appears angular and distorted, suggesting a bad dream. The properties are few and symbolic.
2. *The action* of the play is still broken into episodes, and these may represent stages in the hero's life or a sequence of visions as seen through his subconscious mind, as in a dream play.
3. *The characters* for the most part remain nameless and impersonal, often moving grotesquely: Kaiser always calls them Figuren, ‘figures’. They always represent some general class or attitude, their characteristics being emphasized by costume, mask or make-up, so that the conflict of forces seem [sic] to be bare manifestations of energy.
4. *Crowds* are also impersonalized, and move with mass rhythmic movements, often mechanically. [...]
5. *The dialogue* is increasingly clipped, fragmented and unreal. It became known as the *Telegramstil*, ‘telegram style’. This would be suitable for logical disquisition, were the language not also so inflated and overheated. A rain of punctuation marks is showered on the lines as words

appear to be inadequate to cope with the experience.

6. *The style of acting* is hard to reconstruct from the text, but Expressionist films have established its general characteristics. Known as the 'ecstatic' style, it was intense and violent, and expressed tormented emotions. Actors might erupt in sudden passion and attack each other physically. Speech was rapid, breathless and staccato, with gesture and movement urgent and energetic—eyes rolling, teeth bared, fingers and hands clutching like talons and claws. (53-54)

Like Strindberg, and using similar methods, the Expressionists abandoned realism's pretence to objectivity. As Murphy describes it,

the other dramatis personae frequently become mere functions of the distorted central subjective standpoint from which the protagonist sees them. This "anti-objective" bias occurs for example in Hasenclever's play *The Son (Der Sohn)*, where according to a contemporary review by Kurt Pinthus, the three secondary figures of the father, the friend and the governess are correspondingly exaggerated and "not depicted objectively by the writer, according to convention, but rather as the son sees them." (19)

Expressionism, as a movement of the visual arts, music, literature and drama, flourished from about 1906 to the early twenties. According to Livingstone et al.,

A number of factors determined the demise of the movement. Among them was the War, which the Expressionists had at first prophesied and then opposed, and whose end rendered them superfluous. A profound disillusionment followed when their League of Nations dream of a new mankind was exploded. Expressionism was also upstaged by more "radical" movements like Dada and Surrealism. [...] Finally, the Nazi take-over drove the survivors into silence, exile or imprisonment. (Bloch et al. 12)

Though short-lived as an artistic movement, Expressionism's techniques had a lasting impact on modern drama, especially with respect to their influence on Brecht. Moreover, some dozen years after its demise as a movement, Expressionism was the focus of an intense and fascinating debate among prominent Communists and leftists such as Géorg Lukács, Ernst Bloch and Bertolt Brecht. This debate is salient for a number of reasons:

first, as Livingston et al. state, “The arguments between Bloch and Lukács and their respective allies [were] essentially a contest over the historical meaning of modernism in general” (12); second, while there has been no shortage of left-wing proponents, modernism has had few antagonists as determined and articulate as Lukács.

A bit of historical background is in order. By the time these debates began, Nazism was well established in Germany. This was the era of the Third International’s Common Front policies of downplaying differences among “progressive forces” in an effort to build unity in the fight against Fascism. It was also the era, in the Russian Communist Party, of Socialist Realism. Bloch was living in Paris, Lukács in Moscow. Lukács’ opponents have on occasion characterized his views as the result of pressure or dictation from his Communist hosts. Clearly his freedom to write would have been constrained, but a careful reading of his defense of realism makes clear his immense distance from Socialist Realism. Moreover, as Livingston et al. have written,

[I]t would be a mistake to assume that Bloch was freer than Lukács from the worst deformation of the time. In fact, it was Bloch in Czechoslovakia who volunteered fulsome affidavits for the Moscow trials, complete with the official tales of Nazi-Japanese plots in the Bolshevik Party, at the very same time that he was resisting the campaign against Expressionism; while Lukács in the USSR, undeceived, avoided the subject wherever he could—compromising himself far less seriously. (Bloch et al. 15)

In 1934, Lukács had written *Expressionism: its Significance and Decline*, in which he condemned the Expressionists for a number of serious intellectual, technical and political failings. The Expressionists, he tells us, claimed to dramatize the “essence” of reality, but

this ‘essence’ had nothing in common with the objective summary and emphasis of the general, permanent, recurring and typical features of objective reality. The Expressionist precisely abstracted away from these typical characteristics, in as much as he proceeded, like the impressionists

and symbolists, from the subjective reflex in experience, and emphasized precisely what in this appears—from the subject's standpoint—as essential, in as much as he ignored the 'little', 'petty', 'inessential' aspects (i.e. precisely the concrete social determinations) and uprooted his 'essence' from its causal connection in time and space. [...] He does this in the objective forms (such as drama, for instance), by presenting only this experiential centre as reality, and grouping everything else around this centre, seen only from this standpoint. He thus stands in contrast to the realist writers who conceived drama as the objective struggle of opposing social forces. He finds himself in closer affinity, however, with the impressionists and symbolists[.] It is simply that with these latter (e.g. Maeterlinck) objective reality actually disappears, giving way to the impression it makes on the subject, such as abstract fear, etc., whereas the Expressionist dramatists place the writer himself on the stage as central character, and portray all the other actors only from his point of view[.] In this way, a double and insoluble dissonance arises. On the one hand, these characters become in their form mere silhouettes, who must however claim on the stage to be real living beings. On the other hand, the writer is forced to express the problem abstracted in this way in its unconcealed hollowness and vacuity; he cannot rest content with his emotional reflexes, for all their emptiness, in the way that the symbolist can. (*Essays* 105-106)

Lukács provides, as example, an excerpt from Hasenclever's *Der Sohn* (*The Son*):

The Son: And what am I to do?

The Friend: Destroy the tyranny of the family, this medieval abcess [sic]; this witches' sabbath and torture chamber with brimstone! Abolish the laws—reestablish freedom, men's highest good.

The Son: At the point of the earth's axis I burn again with enthusiasm.

The Friend: Then you should realize that the struggle against the father is what revenge against the prince was a hundred years ago. Today we are right! At that time the crowned heads fleeced and enslaved their subjects, stole their money, locked their minds in dungeons. Today we are singing the Marseillaise! Any father can still freely have his son starve and drudge, and prevent him from doing great things. This is simply the old song against injustice and cruelty. They insist on the privileges of the state and nature. Away with them both! Tyranny disappeared a century ago—let's help the growth of a new nature! (*Essays* 106)

Lukács continues, distinguishing Expressionism from naturalism (it should be remembered that Lukács sharply contrasted naturalism and realism):

[T]he content of the conflict here is basically in no way different from the typical family conflict of the naturalists[.] In both cases a phenomenon that results from the capitalist social order is presented, with the writers understanding it as such. But while the naturalists, with the almost photographic fidelity of their superficial presentation, kept at least certain (uncomprehended) features of the mode of appearance of this conflict, the Expressionist abstraction from reality only serves up as the 'essence' a childish nonsense. (*Essays* 106)

Lukács concludes:

The atrophy of content as the necessary result of Expressionism's deliberate creative method is to be seen on all sides in the tendency to the deliberate elimination of all concrete determinations. (108)

Lukács identifies Expressionism's political target as "middle-classness," but in a cultural sense and driven by "a romantic anti-capitalism" (93) in that "it completely divorced the concept of middle-classness [...] from any class connection" (*Essays* 87). This attitude has, according to Lukács, serious dangers:

As an opposition from a confused anarchistic and bohemian standpoint, Expressionism was naturally more or less vigorously directed against the political right. [...] But however honest the subjective intention behind this may well have been in many cases, the abstract distortion of basic questions [...] was a tendency that, precisely because it separated the critique of middle-classness from both the economic understanding of the capitalist system and from adhesion to the liberation struggle of the proletariat, could easily collapse into its opposite extreme: into a critique of 'middle-classness' from the right, the same demagogic critique of capitalism to which fascism later owed at least part of its mass basis. (*Essays* 87)

Because Expressionism "proceeds from the most superficial ideological symptoms of capitalism," and since it finds these symptoms in both the working class and the bourgeoisie,

it is not too hard for it to decree in place of the class antagonism [...] an 'eternal' or 'philosophy-of-history'-based antithesis between 'middle-class' and 'non-middle-class' man. The next and positive step is of course the demand for this 'non-middle-class' elite to take the leadership of society into their own hands. (93)

In 1935, the International writers Congress for the Defence of Culture established *Das Wort*, "a German literary journal in exile, as a forum for anti-fascist writers and critics" (Bloch et al. 11). The debates began in earnest in 1937, when *Das Wort* published an attack on Expressionism by a disciple of Lukács, followed by a flurry of responses. Bloch chose to concentrate on Lukács' 1934 essay, discussed above, since, Bloch claimed, "it is that essay which furnished the conceptual framework for the latest funeral oration on Expressionism" (Bloch et al. 17).

Bloch's argument on behalf of the Expressionists is no ringing endorsement. He acknowledges that "Lukács makes many accurate and subtle observations" about, for example, Expressionism's "abstract pacifism," and its "ideology of escapism." Further, Lukács "uncovers the merely subjective nature of the Expressionist revolt, as well as [the] abstract mystification implicit in its attempt to reveal the 'essence' of objects by depicting them in the Expressionist manner." In defense, Bloch argues that "abstract pacifism" was appropriate to World War I, although, he admits, after the war, "in the context of revolution, the slogan of 'non-violence' became a palpably counter-revolutionary maxim" (19). He defends Expressionism against charges of being a precursor to Fascism, offering as proof a Nazi exhibition in which Expressionist art was ridiculed, and argues that "[f]or all the pleasure the Expressionists took in 'barbaric art,' their ultimate goal was humane" (24). At an aesthetic level, "Expressionism [...]"

undermined the schematic routines and academicism to which the ‘values of art’ had been reduced” (23).

Bloch takes umbrage at Lukács for “his claim that all the content of their works reveal is ‘the forlorn perplexity of the petty-bourgeois caught up in the wheels of capitalism’, or ‘the impotent protest of the petty-bourgeois against the kicks and blows of capitalism’” (19). Curiously, try as I might, I could not find these quotations in Lukács’ essay. Perhaps the essay exists in different editions, perhaps it is a matter of translation, perhaps Bloch is quoting from a different essay, but the quotations do seem appropriate to Lukács and they do reveal another criticism of the Expressionists: that their work was repetitious and tedious.

Bloch, however, soon goes on the offensive:

Lukács’s thought takes for granted a closed and integrated reality that does indeed exclude the subjectivity of idealism, but not the seamless ‘totality’ which has always thrived best in idealist systems, including those of classical German philosophy. Whether such a totality in fact constitutes reality, is open to question. [...] But what if Lukács’s reality—a coherent, infinitely mediated totality—is not so objective after all? [...] What if authentic reality is also discontinuity? Since Lukács operates with a closed, objectivistic conception of reality, when he comes to examine Expressionism he resolutely rejects any attempt on the part of artists to shatter any image of the world, even that of capitalism. Any art which strives to exploit the *real* fissures in surface inter-relations and to discover the new in their crevices, appears in his eyes merely as a wilful act of destruction. He thereby equates experiment in demolition with a condition of decadence. [But] one must ask: are there not dialectical links between growth and decay? Are confusion, immaturity and incomprehensibility always and in every case to be categorized as bourgeois decadence? Might they not equally [...] be part of the transition from the old world to the new? [...] So the Expressionists were the ‘vanguard’ of decadence. Should they instead have aspired to play doctor at the sick-bed of capitalism? Should they have tried to plaster over the surface of reality [...] instead of persisting in their efforts of demolition? (22-23; emphasis in original)

Here we have less a defense of Expressionism than an attack on Lukács' philosophy.

Bloch concedes that the Expressionists might have been confused, immature and incomprehensible. But might they not have been reflecting "the *real* fissures in surface inter-relations"? What if Lukács is wrong about reality being a "coherent, infinitely mediated totality"? In that case, wouldn't efforts to describe that totality—Lukács' realism—amount to prettifying capitalism? If capitalism is decadent, isn't demolition in order?

In his response, published in a subsequent issue of *Das Wort*, Lukács sidesteps Bloch's challenge to Marxist totality:

[D]oes the 'closed integration', the 'totality' of the capitalist system, of bourgeois society, with its unity of economics and ideology, really form an objective whole, independent of consciousness? Among Marxists—and in his latest book Bloch has stoutly proclaimed his commitment to Marxism—there should be no dispute on this point. Marx says: 'The relations of production of every society form a whole.' We must underscore the word 'every' here[.] (Bloch et al. 31)

Lukács lists "the three main currents in the literature of our age," noting that these currents "often overlap in the development of individual writers: 1) Openly anti-realist or pseudo-realist literature which is concerned to provide an apologia for, and a defence of, the existing system." Presumably he means Symbolism and related politically conservative trends. "2) So-called avant-garde literature [...] from Naturalism to Surrealism [whose] main trend is its growing distance from, and progressive dissolution of, realism. 3) The literature of the major realists of the day [who] do not belong to any literary set [and] are swimming against the mainstream of literary development, in fact,

against the two currents noted above" (Bloch et al. 29). "[W]hich," he asks, "are the progressive trends in the literature of today?" (30).

If literature is a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected, then it becomes of crucial importance for it to grasp that reality as it truly is, and not merely to confine itself to reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface. (33)

It is clear why Lukács places naturalism, Expressionism and Surrealism in the same category. All, he says, concern themselves only with surfaces. The "authentic realist," however, is concerned with totality, with causes, with objective relationships. As an example, Lukács compares Thomas Mann's realism to James Joyce's Surrealism. Both authors show the "disintegration, the discontinuities, the ruptures and the 'crevices'" in the minds of their respective heroes, which Bloch "very rightly thinks typical of the state of mind of many people living in the age of imperialism." According to Lukács, Bloch's mistake is that

he identifies [...] this state of mind with reality itself. He equates the highly distorted image created in this state of mind with the thing itself, instead of objectively unravelling the [...] origins [...] of the distortion by comparing it with reality. (34)

While Joyce is content to depict the "ruptures," Mann

knows how thoughts and feelings grow out of the life of society and how experience and emotions are parts of the total complex of reality. As a realist he assigns these parts to their rightful place within the total life context. (36)

Lukács indicates another problem with the anti-realists:

[I]t is but a very narrow doorway which leads to Joyce or the other representatives of avant-garde literature: one needs a certain 'knack' to see just what their game is. [...] In realism, the wealth of created life provides answers to the questions put by the readers themselves[.] The taxing struggle to understand the art of the 'avant-garde', on the other hand,

yields such subjectivist distortions and travesties that ordinary people who try to translate these atmospheric echoes of reality back into the language of their own experience, find the task quite beyond them. (Bloch et al. 57)

Finally, it should be noted that Lukács was adamant that a particular ideology was not required of the realist artist: In “The Ideal of the Harmonious Man in Bourgeois Aesthetics,” he writes that it is insufficient to proclaim one’s socialist credentials but describe only the “degradation and destruction of the individual”; one must “describe with passionate vividness the daily, even hourly, resistance which mankind maintains [...] in defense of human integrity” (Adams 906). But political commitment is not a requirement of realism:

[The] dedicated artist [...] may consider himself ‘uncommitted,’ he may seek refuge in skepticism, he may even claim to be conservative, [but] unless profoundly confused about social and intellectual issues, [...] his revolt will emerge clearly in his work. (Adams 907).

Whatever their ideology, Lukács had no doubt that the reality described by the great realists, past—he includes Cervantes, Shakespeare, Balzac, Tolstoy, Gorky, and Thomas and Heinrich Mann—and future, would be congruent with Marxist reality.

[A]ll these can appeal to readers drawn from a broad cross-section of the people[.] The wealth of the characterization, the profound and accurate grasp of constant and typical manifestations of human life is what produces the great progressive reverberation of these works. The process of appropriation enables readers to clarify their own experiences and understanding of life and to broaden their own horizons. A living form of humanism prepares them to endorse the political slogans of the Popular Front and to comprehend its political humanism. Through the mediation of realist literature the soul of the masses is made receptive for an understanding of the great, progressive and democratic epochs of human history. This will prepare it for the new type of revolutionary democracy that is represented by the Popular Front. (Bloch et al. 56-57)

Brecht was an editor of *Das Wort*, but, according to Livingston et al., “his name was used for prestige reasons on the masthead, and he had no say in its policy” (62). In 1938, he wrote a series of responses to Lukács, though none of these was published in his lifetime. “Whether Brecht submitted them to *Das Wort* in Moscow and they were rejected, or whether his own characteristic tactical prudence dissuaded him from ever sending them remains unclear” (62). Brecht was brought into the debate when Lukács, towards the end of his response to Bloch, conscripted Brecht to his side of the argument:

In the third number of *Das Wort*, Brecht published a one-act playlet (*The Informer*) in which he turns to what is for him a novel, highly differentiated and subtle form of realism as a weapon in the struggle against the inhumanity of Fascism. By depicting the fates of actual human beings, he provides a vivid image of the horrors of the Fascist reign of terror in Germany. He shows how Fascism destroys the entire foundations of the human community, how it destroys the trust between husbands, wives and children, and how in its inhumanity it actually undermines and annihilates the family, the very institution it claims to protect. Along with [...] Brecht one could name a whole series of writers—the most important and the most talented we have—who have adopted a similar strategy, or are beginning to do so. (58-59)

Brecht was not amused. In his journal, he recorded the following:

Lukács has welcomed *The Informer* as if I were a sinner returning to the bosom of the Salvation Army. At last something taken from life itself! He has overlooked the montage of 27 scenes and the fact that it is really no more than a catalogue of gestures, such as the gesture of falling silent, of looking over one’s shoulder, of terror, etc.; in short, the gestures of life under a dictatorship’. (Bloch et al. 58)

Brecht was at the time—and has remained—an important catch for the forces of anti-realism. His own theory of the stage, known variously as “epic theatre,” “the alienation effect,” or *Verfremdungseffekt*, had lasting influence, and in contrast with most of the

political avant-garde, he reached a large audience and his plays remain part of the Western canon.

The prevailing realism, Brecht argued, tended to pull the audience in, to trick it into thinking that what was being presented was “reality” and therefore unchangeable.

Brecht’s dramaturgy was intended to do the opposite: to keep the audience at a distance and constantly remind them that they were watching a play. In his theatre, Brecht wrote,

The spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play. The production took the subject-matter and the incidents shown and put them through a process of alienation: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding. When something seems “the most obvious thing in the world” it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up. [...] The dramatic [realistic] theatre’s spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too—Just like me—It’s only natural—It’ll never change. [...] The epic theatre’s spectator says: I’d never have thought it—That’s not the way—That’s extraordinary, hardly believable—It’s got to stop. (Worthen 890)

In his journals, Brecht wrote in support of Bloch and called for the freedom of an artist to experiment:

[W]e shall allow the artist to employ his fantasy, his originality, his humour, his invention, in following them. We shall not stick to too detailed literary models; we shall not bind the artist to too rigidly defined modes of narrative. [...] For time flows on, and if it did not, it would be a bad prospect for those who do not sit at golden tables. Methods become exhausted; stimuli no longer work. New problems appear and demand new methods. Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change. (Bloch et al. 82)

He also argued that ordinary people were far more open to new forms than was commonly supposed:

I shall never forget how a worker looked at me when I replied to his suggestion that [...] it would destroy the artistic form. He put his head on one side and smiled. A whole area of aesthetics collapsed because of this

polite smile. The workers were not afraid to teach us and they were themselves not afraid to learn. I am speaking from experience when I say that one need not be afraid to produce daring, unusual things for the proletariat so long as they deal with its real situation. There will always be people of culture, connoisseurs of art, who will interject: 'Ordinary people do not understand that.' But the people will push these persons impatiently aside and come to a direct understanding with artists. (84)

For Brecht, Lukács was one of these "people of culture, connoisseurs of art," who will be pushed aside by "ordinary people." Nevertheless, it is necessary to ask how much of substance separated the two men. Lukács had in fact praised Brecht's *The Informer* despite its being, according to Brecht, "no more than a catalogue of gestures." Further, in 1957 Lukács was to call Brecht "the greatest *realistic* playwright of his age" (Lukács, *Meaning* 89; emphasis added). Clearly, the two were temperamentally quite different. Moreover, Brecht's attack might have been motivated in part by his assumption that Lukács was aligned with Comintern artistic policy. Walter Benjamin recorded the following from a 1938 conversation with Brecht:

We went on to discuss Russian literary policy. [...] Brecht: 'They [Lukács and two others] are, to put it bluntly, enemies of production. Production makes them uncomfortable. [...] And they themselves don't want to produce. They want to play the apparatchik and exercise control over other people. Every one of their criticisms contains a threat. (Bloch et al. 97)

Brecht referred to his own work as realistic, in fact more realistic than realism, claiming that his non-realistic technique was better at portraying "reality" than the kind of realism promoted by Lukács. In Brecht's view,

Realistic means: discovering the causal complexes of society / unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power / writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up / emphasizing the element of development / making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it. (82)

While Lukács would have differed with Brecht about his anti-realistic techniques (which will be considered below), and while Lukács might have been more nuanced in his understanding of “the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power,” Brecht’s understanding of reality (as opposed to realism) is quite conventional and has more in common with Lukács’ view than it does with Bloch’s. Brecht is unconcerned with “the *real* fissures in surface inter-relations” and whether “reality is also discontinuity.” Brecht and Lukács agree that art can and must “[discover] the causal complexes of society,” and Brecht accepts without question both “totality” and Marxism. Lukács, unlike Bloch, could accept without hesitation Brecht’s claim that “the human being must be grasped as the totality of social relationships,” and “[t]he individual, precisely the flesh and blood individual, can be understood only by way of processes wherein and whereby he exists” (Bentley, *Playwright* 218). On the other hand, Lukács would strongly disagree with Brecht that “only the Epic form can enable the dramatist to find a comprehensive image of the world” (Bentley, *Playwright* 218), and this brings us to a consideration of Brecht’s techniques.

Brecht had started out as an Expressionist, but soon found Marxism and left the fold. In 1928, he had an immense popular success with *The Threepenny Opera*, which he had intended, with its portrayal of capitalists as criminals, to appall its audience; instead, a bourgeois audience came in droves and cheered. Chastened by his “failure,” he developed his *Verfremdungseffekt* and entered his “didactic period,” writing a large number of largely forgotten plays. Then, in exile, he wrote the plays that cemented his

reputation. Lukács, in 1957, described Brecht's work in the "middle period, the period of his turning towards communism":

Brecht's political didacticism, his attempt to impose intellectual schemata on the spectator, turned his characters into mere spokesmen. He based his new aesthetic on a contempt for cheap theatrical emotionalism. The full blast of his hatred was directed towards the 'culinary' aspects of the contemporary bourgeois theatre. [T]here is no doubt that Brecht, despite his exaggerations, was right to reject this particular theory. The truth is, Brecht's dramatic theories were the product of an—at the time, quite justified—local polemic. Brecht's actual dramatic practice changed radically after the rise to power of Hitler, during his long years of exile. But he never subjected his theories to revision. [...] Where Brecht's characters had once been spokesmen for political points of view, they are now multi-dimensional. They are living human beings, wrestling with conscience and with the world around them. Allegory has acquired flesh and blood; it has been transformed into a true dramatic typology. Alienation-effect ceases to be the instrument of an artificial, abstract didacticism; it makes possible literary achievement of the highest order. [...] That Brecht clung to his earlier theories should not conceal from us this fundamental change. (Contemporary 88-89)

Lukács is not alone in his conclusion that there was a significant gap between Brecht's theories and his work, particularly in his most successful plays. Bentley, for example:

Brecht habitually overstates any proposition that is serviceable to his art. [...] He does not eliminate stage-illusion and suspense; he only reduces their importance. Sympathy and identification with the characters are not eliminated; they are counterpoised by deliberate distancing. (*Playwright* 219)

Gascoigne:

It is by now a commonplace that [Brecht's] techniques failed, fortunately, to eliminate the audience's emotional involvement with his characters. [...] One should add in fairness, that Brecht's theorizing was often inconsistent and that he has been frequently represented by his most extreme statements, whereas once, for example, when describing *The Mother*, which conforms more nearly to his theories than most of his plays, he admitted that it merely used the emotional involvement of the spectator "less unhesitatingly" than the work of other playwrights. And late in his life, confronted with his inconsistencies, he wearily

made the very sympathetic protest: "I cannot rewrite all the notes to my plays." (123-124)

It should be noted, too, that the Expressionistic techniques used by Brecht to "alienate" his audience were time-dependant. Such breaking of convention as exposing the lights and the bare stage soon came to be accepted within the conventions of narrative realism, as did narration and his episodic (rather than "well-made") structure. Finally, as

Livingston et al. write,

The most important of Brecht's claims in his polemic with Lukács was his assertion that his own plays found a vital resonance within the German working-class itself. (Bloch et al. 67)

Brecht's utility to the political avant-garde rested on the same claim, one which, again according to Livingston et al., "needs some scrutiny."

Brecht's biggest successes in the Weimar period—above all *The Threepenny Opera*—enjoyed a large bourgeois audience, in ordinary commercial theatres. His fuller conversion to Marxism post-dated them. His greatest plays were then written during exile and war without any contact with a German audience of any kind[.] When they were finally staged in East Germany after the War, their audiences were certainly in the main proletarian, but since alternative entertainments (to use a Brechtian term) were not widely available in the DDR, the spontaneity and reality of working-class responses to the Berliner Ensemble remain difficult to estimate. (66-67)

Thus, it seems, Brecht found his largest audience in the same place as did other major playwrights.

To summarize, Brecht's utility to the political avant-garde rests on three factors: his techniques, his theories, and his popularity among working class audiences. His techniques, however, have been largely assimilated into conventional realism and, accepting that they once did "alienate" audiences in the manner he intended, they no

longer do so; his later, most successful work, did not correspond to his theories; and he found his most reliable audiences among the bourgeois, theatre-going public. Finally, his later plays, with their coherent narratives and psychologically believable characters, and despite their originality and their indebtedness to Expressionistic technique, fall quite comfortably into contemporary narrative realism.

Before proceeding, I want to turn briefly to two other prominent avant-garde artists of the era, also profoundly influenced by Expressionism. Unlike Brecht, there is no argument about Meyerhold and Mayakovsky's break with realism. Zygmunt Hubner describes their method:

The first means of establishing closer contact with the spectator [...] is the destruction of "the fourth wall." This constitutes a break with the "bourgeois" tradition, characteristic of illusionistic theaters, that separates the stage from the public. The removal of the curtain and footlights and the extension of the proscenium furthers the fluid transposition of the, action from the stage to the audience. The spectator is supposed to be engulfed by the action; the actors located in the audience are to prod him into active participation in the spectacle. The actor in the bourgeois theater pretends not to notice the spectator; the actor in the agitational theater addresses the spectator directly, looking him straight in the eye. (143-144)

Hubner evaluates the practical application of these theories:

To what extent are the intentions of the creators of agitational theater fulfilled in actual practice? Let us say quite simply: to a negligible degree. *Mystery-Bouffe*, the first attempt at agitational theater by Mayakovsky and Meyerhold, which was staged in Petrograd on the first anniversary of the October Revolution, was a colossal failure with the audience, which had been provided with free tickets. *The Dawn* enjoyed greater success, although even in this case it was qualified. The spectacle produced the desired reaction only on days when the auditorium was filled with organized groups of Red Guards, who could be manipulated along the lines of military discipline, or perhaps even "rehearsed" at an earlier point. Once or twice it happened that orators from the audience got up on stage to make improvised appeals, inciting the people to do battle with the enemy. It was 1920, for the Soviets the war was not yet over. [...]

Sometimes it happened that the entire auditorium rose up from their seats and sang “The Internationale” along with the actors. But [...] from day to day it grew increasingly difficult to fill the auditorium, and the spectators became more and more unwilling to enter into the game. (144)

This was the predicament for the political avant-garde in the fifties: the Expressionists, Mayakovsky and Meyerhold, had bequeathed an aesthetic legacy, but as explicit political dramatists they had had few successes; and Brecht, Expressionism’s most brilliant and successful descendant, turns out to have been more realist than avant-garde.

Livingston et al.:

[T]hat the overall structure of Brecht’s dramaturgy was always potentially lucid and comprehensible to the spectators for whom it was designed, cannot be doubted. The magnitude of this achievement is suggested by its very isolation. After the Second World War, despite a plethora of socialist writers, no comparable work was produced anywhere in Europe; while in the West, the ascent of Beckett (critically consecrated by Adorno) as a new avatar of ‘high’ art, was actually to provoke Brecht to plan a play deliberately intended as an antidote to *Godot*. (Bloch et al. 67)

It was time for the political avant-garde to find new models, and, as Livingston et al. indicate, Theodor Adorno played a central role.

Adorno joined the discussion in earnest in his 1958 challenge to Lukács’ *The Meaning of Contemporary Literature*. “Lukács still behaves like a Cultural Commissar,” Adorno tells us (Bloch et al. 153). His *ad hominem* remarks continue:

The pedantry of his general manner is matched by his slovenliness in matters of detail. [O]ne might well wonder whether a man who can write like this, in such obvious ignorance of the craft of the literature which he treats in such a cavalier manner, has any right at all to an opinion on literary matters. [...] Indifference to style, we may remark in passing, is almost always symptomatic of the dogmatic sclerosis of content. (Bloch et al. 154)

On more substantive issues, and at the core of his criticism, Adorno argues that “the principles of form which Lukács anathematizes as unrealistic and idealistic, have an objective aesthetic function” (163), “but these are the very procedures and techniques [Lukács] wishes to sweep away” (153). Moreover,

[T]here is no way of preserving the antithesis between realist and ‘formalist’ approaches which, like an inquisitor, he erects into an absolute standard. [T]he novels of the early 19th century [...] which he does not scruple to hold up as paradigms of the novelist’s art, are by no means as realistic as all that. It is true that Marx and Engels might have considered them so in their polemic against the marketable romantic literature so fashionable in their day. Today, however, we see [...] romantic and archaic, pre-bourgeois elements[.] (163)

“[T]he negativity of society,” Adorno argues, has reduced us to disconnected individuals: “loneliness is inescapable.” But if we accept the “objective unreality” of this condition,

then it is scarcely possible to resist the inference that, taken to its logical conclusion, loneliness will turn into its opposite: the solitary consciousness potentially destroys and transcends itself by revealing itself in works of art as the hidden truth common to all men. This is exactly what we find in the authentic works of modern literature. They objectify themselves by immersing themselves totally, monadologically, in the laws of their own forms, laws which are aesthetically rooted in their own social content. It is this alone which gives the works of Joyce, Beckett and modern composers their power. The voice of the age echoes through their monologues: this is why they excite us so much more than works that simply depict the world in narrative form. The fact that their transition to objectivity remains contemplative and fails to become praxis is grounded in the nature of a society in which the monadological condition persists universally, despite all assurances to the contrary. (166)

In his 1962 essay, “Commitment,” a response to Sartre’s *What is Literature?*, Adorno challenges Sartre’s notion of the committed artist, continues his defense of modernism, and argues that works of art which reflect the world “merely assimilate themselves to the brute existence against which they protest” (Bloch et al. 177). He

considers three “committed” works that deal with fascism and the holocaust. In Brecht’s *Arturo Ui*, “[t]he true horror of fascism is conjured away” (184); Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* “becomes obscene” when “[f]or the sake of political commitment, political reality is trivialized” (184-185); and Schoenberg’s *Survivor of Warsaw*, “by turning suffering into images, harsh and uncompromising though they are,” ultimately “makes it easier to continue to play along with the culture which gave birth to murder” (189). Such committed art “invariably [...] implies, purposely or not, that even in so-called extreme situations, indeed in them most of all, humanity flourishes” (189). For Adorno, there is a contradiction at the core of committed art: on one hand it claims political truth; on the other, it insists on finding humanity and hope where none is possible.

There is an alternative, however, but it requires that “every commitment to the world must be abandoned to satisfy the ideal of the committed work of art” and “the minimal promise of happiness they contain cannot be had for a price less than total dislocation, to the point of worldlessness” (191). However, “the curmudgeons” (the left) and “the philistines” (the right) “are allied against the alleged incomprehensibility of the new art” (191). Adorno supplies two examples of this new, powerful art:

Kafka’s prose and Beckett’s plays [...] have an effect by comparison with which officially committed works look like pantomimes. [They] arouse the fear which existentialism merely talks about. [...] He over whom Kafka’s wheels have passed, has lost for ever both any peace with the world and any chance of consoling himself with the judgment that the way of the world is bad[.]” (191)

This formulation is powerful, but nonetheless incorrect: Adorno ignores the many who have read Kafka and recovered quite nicely. There are other inconsistencies. While Adorno states that “The late Brecht was not so distant from official humanism.

A journalistically minded Westerner could praise *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* as a hymn to motherhood” (188)—implying that the play’s political content could be easily missed— he argues that Kafka and Beckett provide a profound and devastating critique of capitalism. As Livingston et al. note, Adorno forgets that the same journalistically minded Westerners “are never done extolling Kafka as the analyst of ‘totalitarianism’ and Beckett as the only undeluded poet of ‘the human condition,’” (149).

Errors aside, Adorno’s defense of modernism represents a profound shift, not so much in aesthetic philosophy, as in the nature of Marxism itself. As Livingston et al. conclude,

Adorno’s essays were not so much a Marxist defence of modernism as the expression of a distinctively modernist Marxism: his positions were, *mutatis mutandis*, those of modernist ideology itself. (149)

To trace the rise of this modernist Marxism and its impact on Marxist aesthetics—and the resulting impact on political theatre—we must first consider the history of Marxism itself.

Marxism and Modernism

What distinguishes Marx from earlier socialists was his claim to have discovered historical laws. In *The Communist Manifesto*, he summarizes these as they apply to the bourgeois epoch:

The essential condition for the existence, and for the sway of the bourgeois class, is the formation and augmentation of capital; the condition for capital is wage-labour. Wage-labour rests exclusively on competition between the labourers. The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due

to association. The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable. (Cahoone 101)

Marx shared with previous and later socialists a desire to redistribute the technological, material and intellectual wealth created by capitalism. Lukács, citing Lenin, acknowledges Marx's debt to the rise of capitalism:

Lenin repeatedly stresses most emphatically the connection of Marx's thinking to classical philosophy and economics, and sees the strength of Marxism as lying precisely in the way that 'it in no way rejected the most valuable acquisitions of the bourgeois epoch', but on the contrary appropriated and reworked them. (*Essays* 68)

A problem arises when one considers Marx's statement that "[the bourgeoisie's] fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable." If it is inevitable, then we can just sit back and wait. But Marx had also written, "The proletarian movement is the self-conscious independent movement of the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority" (Cahoone 100). This self-consciousness of the proletariat was also an inevitable consequence of capitalist development, but a question arises: was the demise of capitalism inevitable, or did it first require a self-conscious proletariat? Marx had written: "a portion of the bourgeoisie goes over to the proletariat, and in particular, a portion of the bourgeois ideologists, who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole" (Cahoone 99). Was the function of these bourgeois ideologists to plot the course of capitalism's inevitable downfall and direct the proletariat to inevitable victory, or were they to raise proletarian self-consciousness?

Marx's writings provide myriad support for both interpretations, and the dispute generated a major division among Marx's heirs. One group, variously referred to as orthodox, scientific, "scientistic" or Eastern Marxists, highlighted Marx's laws of history and the notion of historical inevitability; the second, Marxist humanists or Western Marxists (including Lukács, Adorno and others of the Frankfurt School) highlighted consciousness. Orthodox Marxists had no doubts: theoretical sophistication equipped them to direct. For Lukács and, initially, other Western Marxists, they were there to teach.

The unexpected resiliency of capitalism—following widespread revolutionary optimism in the years after each of the great wars and during the 1930's depression—led to crises among both orthodox and humanist Marxists: the former grew impatient waiting for the inevitable; the latter wondered, if two world wars and a depression were not sufficient to raise revolutionary class consciousness, what was? The orthodox had the Soviet Union to fall back on, and they did, with stronger defenses of Stalinist brutality. Meanwhile, the disappointments of the Russian revolution only exacerbated the humanists' despair.

Lukács, however, remained unshaken. Until his death in 1971, he remained confident of the necessity of Marxist revolution, and of consciousness. But other Western Marxists began to look more closely at capitalism's resilience: why had the proletariat in every economically developed country—in the very countries where Marx had predicted revolution—turned their backs on revolutionary socialism?

They found answers, they believed, in a further exploration of Marx's writings. Marx had written that the base determined the superstructure. Previous Marxists had tended to examine the economic base; Western Marxists now turned their analysis to the ideological superstructure. Marx had also asserted that "The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie" (Cahoone 93). If this was the case, wasn't every "progressive" reform of capitalism—universal suffrage, public education, reduced work hours, public health care, pensions, etc.—not the achievement of an increasingly conscious working class, but simply an effort to undermine class consciousness? More to the point, didn't every single institution of capitalist society—family, church, schools, labour unions, media, arts—exist for the same undeclared purpose? Gramsci wrote that capitalism survived through coercion and consent: there were, of course, the institutions of coercion—the police, the courts, the armed forces; but capitalism owed its longevity to its ability to win the consent of the proletariat to its own oppression. This formulation at least allowed for the possibility of "informed" consent: an individual might decide that the conditions of his life were preferable to the risks of revolution. But with the Althusserian reformulation—coercion becomes the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA); consent, the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA)—any possibility of informed consent is removed. The proletariat becomes nothing more than an ideological victim of state institutions, thus rendering both irrelevant and impossible proletarian self-consciousness. Only Marxists with the proper scientific analysis—Althusser for example—could penetrate capitalist ideology and only they could direct the socialist revolution, whether the proletariat wanted one or not. While

Althusser's ideas were not welcomed by the Communist Party, he remained a loyal member:

It was not in fact until the late 1970s [...] that he could contemplate criticizing the Party in public. [A]ll of Althusser's contributions to Marxist theory were made from within the confines of a rigidly Leninist party, whose line in most non-theoretical matters (except when it did not seem Leninist enough) he loyally supported. (Jay 392)

Althusser may well have taken Western Marxism further down the road back to orthodox Marxism than Adorno and the Frankfurt School had been willing to go; for example, he claims for Marxism the status of a natural science in a way that they would likely not. But he did not reject the Frankfurt School's "Marxist totality"; instead, using Freud and Lacan, he extended it into psychological processes never before explored by Marxists. For Lukács, totality implied a reality of subtle causes and effects, penetrable by consciousness, to which capitalism was vulnerable. For Althusser, capitalism was a "total system," inhabiting every corner of the superstructure, and thus impenetrable to ordinary consciousness; and for this, the Frankfurt School had laid the groundwork with, as Fredric Jameson describes,

its premise of a 'total system,' which expressed Adorno's and Horkheimer's sense of the increasingly closed organization of the world into a seamless web of media technology, multinational corporations, and international bureaucratic control. (Bloch et al. 208)

Althusser found hope for the overthrow of capitalism in a Leninist Communist Party, though how such a party could lead a revolution without the support of the proletariat remains unclear. Indeed, Althusser's contemporaries, like the Frankfurt School, found the Communist Party at best irrelevant. Jameson's 1977 observation was more ominous:

Whatever the theoretical merits of the idea of the 'total system' [...] it would seem to me that where it does not lead out of politics altogether, it encourages the revival of an anarchist opposition to Marxism itself, and can also be used as a justification for terrorism. (Bloch et al. 208)

Herbert Marcuse, the member of the Frankfurt School most prominent in the U.S., had already endorsed similar conclusions:

I believe that there is a 'natural right' of resistance for oppressed and overpowered minorities to use extra legal means if the legal ones have proved inadequate. [...] If they use violence, they do not start a new chain of violence but try to break an established one. [T]hey know the risk, and when they are willing to take it, no third person, and least of all the educator and intellectual, has the right to preach them abstention. (117)

These "oppressed and overpowered minorities," it should be noted, are not "the people" or the working class, who "are indoctrinated by the conditions under which they live and think and which they do not transcend" (98). There do exist "forces of emancipation" but "[t]oday, they are hopelessly dispersed throughout the society" (112-113). If Marcuse doesn't explicitly advocate violence, he does provide its justification: America is "radically evil" (83), "a society of total administration" (84), and a "democracy with totalitarian organization" (97)—in short, fascism or its subtle equivalent. Moreover, there's no time to lose:

[T]he speeches of the Fascist and Nazi leaders were the immediate prologue to the massacre. [I]f democratic tolerance had been withdrawn when the future leaders started their campaign, mankind would have had a chance of avoiding Auschwitz and a World War. [E]xtreme suspension of the right of free speech and free assembly is indeed justified only if the whole of society is in extreme danger. I maintain that our society is in such an emergency situation, and that it has become a normal state of affairs. (109-110)

Marcuse was drawing a parallel between the French Resistance of World War II and the new anti-fascists. Quite a number of sixties revolutionaries, using a similar logic, were

reaching a similar conclusion: that American and European capitalism differed from fascism in detail only, and that, just as individual acts of violence had been justified and necessary against the Nazis, so they were justified and necessary against capitalism's now "total system." But for the Red Army Faction (Baader-Meinhoff) in Germany, the Red Brigades in Italy, and the Weather Underground in the U.S., such logic did not remain theoretical: they turned to bombing, kidnapping and murder.

What exactly sporadic acts of violence were to accomplish was not clear.

Whatever the moral parallels between the Resistance and these new anti-fascists, at a practical level, the French underground was an adjunct to international armed forces arrayed against Germany and its allies. Could sporadic violence incapacitate capitalism? Hardly. Would it weaken the resolve of the capitalist state? More likely the reverse.

Marcuse hints at a strategy:

To enable [the people] to become autonomous, to find by themselves what is true and what is false for man in the existing society, they would have to be freed from the prevailing indoctrination (which is no longer recognized as indoctrination). (98-99)

People could not, even with instruction, understand existing society: they did not even know they were being indoctrinated. Before they could be autonomous, before they could find "by themselves what is true and what is false," before they could become Marx's self-conscious proletariat, something would have to be done to them: "they would first have to be freed." But not freed from capitalism—that would require the support of the masses. Before they were in any condition to give that support, they would have to be freed from the prevailing indoctrination. Rendered incapable of reason by capitalism's "total system," perhaps what they needed was a shock; and perhaps violence would do

the trick. Perhaps some revolutionary violence would wake them up and force them to consider the conditions of their lives in a new, fresh light.

We have travelled some distance from our discussion of the political justifications of modern art. But the connections should be clear. If the reasoned speeches and writings of Marxist intellectuals were unequal to the task, how could reason in artistic form—i.e., realism—possibly rouse the sleeping masses? If shock was required in the political sphere, surely it was necessary to the artistic sphere as well.

The Contemporary Political Avant-Garde

One should not perhaps hold Adorno responsible for too much. His writing might have been deeply influential, or he might be an example of what was in the intellectual air. But in promoting the political effect of artists such as Kafka and Beckett, he did two things: he disconnected political content from political effect; and he raised the bar for effect—political art was now to deprive its audience of “any peace with the world.”

Realism, of course, has its particular form, but its efforts to reflect the structure of social relations lies in its content. Brecht, too, was concerned with content, which his *Verfremdungseffekt* was intended to heighten. For Expressionists, as well, the content was clear: their form might have been rebellious but so were their main characters. In each case, a political lesson, subtle or obvious, was in the content. For Adorno, political content and intention sacrificed art and effect: far from encouraging rebellion, such art “makes it easier to continue to play along with the culture which gave birth to murder”

(Bloch et al 189). True political art requires an abandonment of political content—“total dislocation, to the point of worldlessness” (191).

Conventional realism, as Brecht observed, played on the spectator’s emotions by encouraging identification with characters. Still, for Lukács, the effect of realism was primarily intellectual. Brecht, by reducing such identification, had greater intellectual ambitions. Such art, Brecht and Lukács claimed, showed how society operated—and might even motivate people to seek change; but nowhere in their writings do we find the equivalent of Adorno’s ambitions for art, that it “for ever” deprive the reader or spectator of “any peace with the world” (Bloch et al. 191). Adorno, of course, was not the first to introduce contentless politics, nor was he the first to raise the possibilities of emotional disturbance to such heights: with respect to the former, as noted above, Breton and the Surrealists had claimed political utility for their automatic writing; as for the latter, Artaud had challenged “any spectator” of his theatre “to give himself up, once outside the theater, to ideas of war, riot, and blatant murder” (82). Such conflation of overwhelming political effect with an absence of content reached its intellectual heights in the writings of Adorno and threw the door wide open to modern political theatre.

In the sixties, many walked through that door. Initially, political theatre groups like the San Francisco Mime Troupe and Bread & Puppet Theatre had started out allied to the anti-war movement and used satire to oppose U.S. involvement in Vietnam. But other groups, including Julian Beck and Judith Malina’s Living Theatre, Richard Schechner’s Performance Group, and Joseph Chaikin’s Open Theatre, turned to shocking audiences into “awareness,” through techniques reminiscent of Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty. While

each of these groups were caught up in the political spirit of the time—the Open Theatre, for example, produced *Viet Rock*, a stage treatment of the Vietnam War, in 1966 (Styan 169)—the Living Theatre was the most explicitly political. Beginning in 1964, the group toured Europe “for four legendary years, becoming involved with left-wing movements as a ‘guerilla theatre’ wherever they went—most notably in the Paris riots of 1968”

(Styan 161). Beck describes the response to a Living Theatre performance in Germany:

When we played the *Mysteries* in Berlin in 1965, the German audience cried out: “You are using the same techniques that the Nazis used! the same mass hypnosis! the same appeal to emotional response and that’s dangerous! You have to be rational! When Julian Beck sits in the middle of a stage, lit by a spotlight directly over his head and hypnotizes us with magnetic voice and you enchain us by repeating slogans until we echo them and seduce us to come onto the stage and open our throats in a surge of ecstasy, when you make us crazy with your wordless physical contortions, with shrieking and anguish, until we want to scream, you rob us of our rational ability to see the world, to assess it and act accordingly. You make us into brainless animals [...]” (chapter 58)

Beck responds to his audience’s concerns:

What is the difference between techniques used in *Mysteries* and Third Reich ceremonies? Now, rituals have their own magic which is contained in their appeal to the psyche. The psyche hates and the psyche loves. And are we more prone to one than to the other? Ritual arouses feeling, and killing comes out of feeling that is non-feeling, and the new world will come out of feeling. Ritual that is nationalistic—which extends feeling and then limits it—ritual which turns inward and not outward is toxic, murderous. In *Mysteries* we form a circle and invite the public to join us without making it a law ... We appeal to free will ... We arouse it. (chapter 58)

Beck’s arrogance in the face of criticism from his German audience, which would have included many who had lived under Nazi rule, is breathtaking. And we find here a narcissism of small differences in Beck’s distinction between “ritual which turns inward” and that which turns “outward”: all ritual delineates those who participate from those

who do not. Further, when he writes that “we [...] invite the public to join us without making it a law,” he ignores two obvious points: first, that the Nazis used ritual before they had the “legal” power to compel participation; and second, the immense social pressure that can be brought to bear on individuals in intense theatrical environments.

With the decline of sixties radicalism, most of the companies that practiced Artaud’s methods for political ends disappeared; and those that survived appealed to a shrinking minority taste. But the process that the Surrealists had initiated and Adorno had advanced—the erasure of a distinction between the spiritual and political avant-gardes—was now virtually complete.

The avant-garde has long held realism responsible for theatre’s aesthetic death as well as for its periodic decline. It claimed for itself an ability to attract large audiences, through modes of expression able to communicate across class, urban-rural, and, in some cases, ethno-linguistic barriers. In this it has clearly failed. Brook describes the work of avant-garde artists, including Grotowski (whose theatre, he says, “is as close as anyone has got to Artaud’s ideal” (60)) and Beckett (whose *Waiting for Godot* is perhaps the most successful avant-garde play of all time), as “theatres for an *élite*. [...] Beckett only rarely fills an average sized auditorium. Grotowski plays for thirty spectators—as a deliberate choice” (60). This presents a difficulty for the political avant-garde: the ability to reach a substantial audience would seem a necessity, and this would seem particularly true for theatre, which, unlike literature, cannot reach a virtual community of widespread readers but must bring its audience into the same room; it is truer still of avant-garde theatre which tends to be more production-dependent than narrative realism and must

therefore be seen, not read. Early avant-gardists might have been justified in an expectation that audiences would grow, but almost a century has now passed since the dawn of Expressionism.

It is possible that political theatre might sacrifice breadth for depth; that small audiences are acceptable if the art touches that audience in the way and to the extent prescribed by Adorno and Artaud. There are, of course, testimonials, like Adorno's to Beckett, of the profound effect wrought by avant-garde art; but there are similar testimonials to the effect of realism. To what extent these profound effects have led to lasting changes, in the testifying individual's political outlook or activity, awaits empirical investigation. We should mention, however, a self-defeating aspect of Adorno's formulation: how often do we need, or can we stand, to lose "for ever [...] any peace with the world"? Would not once a year be more than enough? Would not such a powerful theatre be charting its own demise?

In the absence of large audiences or acceptable claims to profound effect, and with the demise of sixties radicalism, the political avant-garde might have died a natural death. Fortunately—for the political proponents of avant-garde art—a whole new generation of theorists and theories was waiting in the wings. Some have argued that, like the Western Marxists before them, the early poststructuralists were motivated by the reluctance of the working class to rise up against capitalism—in the latter case when French workers failed to support Parisian students in 1968. Others, Lilla for example, situate the break with orthodox Marxism a dozen years earlier:

[I]n 1956 (so the story goes) the myth of the Soviet Union was shattered in France by Khrushchev's secret speech to the Twentieth Party Conference

in Moscow in February and the suppression of the Hungarian revolt that autumn. This brought an end to many illusions: about Sartre, about communism, about history, about philosophy, and about the term “humanism.” It also established a break between the generation of French thinkers reared in the Thirties, who had seen the war as adults, and students who felt alien to those experiences and wished to escape the suffocating atmosphere of the cold war. The latter therefore turned from the “existential” political engagement recommended by Sartre toward a new social science called structuralism. And (the story ends) after this turn there would develop a new approach to philosophy, of which Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida are perhaps the most distinguished representatives. The problem with this textbook history is that it vastly overstates the degree to which French intellectuals stripped themselves of their Communist illusions in 1956. What it gets right is the role of structuralism in changing the terms in which political matters generally were discussed. (165)

This “textbook history,” as Lilla describes it, “vastly overstates the degree to which French intellectuals stripped themselves of their Communist illusions in 1956” (165).

He then outlines poststructuralism’s political impact:

By the mid-Seventies the structuralist idea had declined from a scientific method informed by political and cultural pessimism into a liberation anti-theology celebrating difference wherever it might be found. [T]he structuralist experience had changed the terms in which political engagements were conceived philosophically. It was no longer possible to appeal to a rational account of history, as Sartre had, to justify political action. It was not clear that one could appeal to reason at all, since language and social structure loomed so large. One could not even speak of man without putting the term in quotation marks. “Man” was now considered a site, a point where various social, cultural, economic, linguistic, and psychological forces happened to intersect. (169)

Poststructuralism includes a far too varied and complex collection of theories to further summarize here, nor is such a summary necessary: few practicing dramatists are familiar with poststructuralism in detail. What they are more likely aware of are a few broad postulates, without knowing whether these have their roots in Marx, Nietzsche, Saussure, Heidegger, Lévi-Strauss, Foucault or Derrida. One can, then, suggest the various broad

arguments poststructuralism has made available to contemporary avant-garde artists. First, its denigration of reason undermines the goals of Lukács' and Brecht's (different) conceptions of realism. Second, its denigration of the autonomous subject renders impossible realism's concept of character. Third, its valorization of madness, "transgression" and "limit-experiences" has given new life to artists such as Artaud. Of course, the connection here is not indirect: Lilla writes of the importance of "Foucault's discovery of Surrealist and avant-garde figures such as Georges Bataille, Antonin Artaud, and Maurice Blanchot" (143). Rainer Friedrich tells us that "postmodernism, in demolishing all traditional canons, has created its own, and Artaud certainly occupies a prominent place in it" (284). "Artaud," Goodall tells us, "appeared in the work of French critical theorists and philosophers, most notably Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze" (2).

While poststructuralism's notion of the absence of the integrated subject, and its valorization of "transgression" and "limit-experiences" are perhaps the most salient argument in favour of the avant-garde, it is the negative argument, the attack on realism as partner to bourgeois society, that has had the greatest impact. For Jameson, realism is

at one with the whole philosophical programme of secularization and modernization. [...] The artists' [...] service to ideology [is] the production of a whole new world—on the level of the symbolic and imaginary—which will henceforth constitute the objective lived appearance of that equally objective production of the infrastructure of the emergent market system of industrial capitalism. (373-374)

Barthes, according to Eagleton, considers realism both dishonest and authoritarian.

Signs which pass themselves off as natural, which offer themselves as the only conceivable way of viewing the world, are by that token authoritarian

and ideological. [...] In Barthes's view, there is a literary ideology which corresponds to this "natural attitude," and its name is realism. (117)

Worthen, in an anthology that is perhaps the most widely used in North American universities—and notwithstanding his claim that Ibsen's *A Doll House* "was a rallying point for international feminist demands for the vote and for other legal rights and protections for women" (589)—writes that "Because realistic drama usually sees [the] world as an all embracing 'environment,' [...] its social themes don't finally lead to a call for social change" (583).

These formalistic arguments are extended by Ric Knowles, who teaches drama at the University of Guelph and at the University of Toronto's Graduate Centre for the Study of Drama. His "project," in *The Theatre of Form and the Production of Meaning*,

is, in a sense, to politicize form, to examine form itself as a material agent of cultural affirmation (or reproduction), on the one hand, or cultural intervention, on the other. I want [...] to ask what cultural work is done by different dramatic forms and different dramaturgical structures, whatever the subject matter or thematic content of the works. (15-16)

"The politicization of form is not a new project," Knowles writes, citing Bakhtin, Medvedev, and the Russian Formalists. "Their attempt to link Marxist and formalist approaches" was continued by Jameson, in whose work "Marxist interpretation is considered to reveal the latent *content* of form: ideology" (16).

Knowles is no friend to modernist theatre:

The retreat from application, representation, and (psychological or perspectival) depth that these modernist dramaturgies enact can also be seen as a retreat from social and political responsibility into a realm of "pure" form or pure aesthetics; or as a retreat into "pure" philosophy or metaphysics as objectless speculation engaged in for its own sake, as exercise; or perhaps most seriously as a dehumanizing of the work that

leaves it open for appropriation by other ideologies of purity, including, most famously and frighteningly, fascism. (56)

Knowles spends most of the book describing the form of theatre with his preferred latent ideology, and that form turns out to be “the ‘authenticity’ of collective and collaborative creation” rather than plays “shaped by the imagination of a single author” (79). In what seems like a return to popular theatre groups of the early eighties (discussed in the introduction), he recommends the production of plays within communities—he cites as example feminist, homosexual and rural communities—or at least by theatres with organic connections to their communities, plays that, as he puts it, “emerge from shared political commitment of some sort” (81).

Knowles runs into a few difficulties with his formal distinctions. He privileges process over product, and, when assessing work arising from communities with a “shared political commitment of some sort,” is invariably generous. Conversely, his evaluations of plays that fall within his quite narrow definition of realism are invariably harsh. But his formalist criticism seems remarkably subjective when evaluating plays that are neither community-based nor realistic—plays that might be considered modernist or avant-garde. For example, the “orchestration” and “formal pattern” of Tremblay’s *Les Belles Soeurs* (about working class women in Montreal), Murrell’s *Waiting for the Parade* (about women in Calgary during World War II), and Highway’s *Rez Sisters* (about Native women) are guilty of a “capacity [...] for the comfortable containment of potentially disruptive social concerns,” and this “perhaps [...] accounts for the popularity of such plays” (62). Worse, however,

all of these plays [...] involve the representation, orchestration, and manipulation of an ensemble of objectified female characters' bodies and voices within a masculinist, modernist aesthetic design that is naturalized rather than interrogated. (63)

Knowles is far more positive about Toronto's DNA Theatre. Despite his acknowledgement that its productions "are structured spatially and temporally through analogies of music, poetry and the visual arts" (180), he concludes that, in DNA's work,

The necessity for an audience to "make meaning," not only of performances, actions, and fragments of light, sound, and language, but also of various positions on urgent social issues, shifts the argument beyond the aesthetic and into the social realm. (182)

Why "orchestration" precludes the audience's construction of meaning in one case but not the other is left unclear. Furthermore, Knowles writes that DNA artistic director Hiller Liitoja "shares with his modernist predecessors a tendency to treat life—including a disturbing number of naked girls in his productions—as 'raw material' for his art" (253). Here, however, Knowles consigns his feminist concern to an endnote, where—one assumes—it will not undermine his assertion of DNA's contribution to the political struggle.

Similarly, Knowles finds reason to praise George F. Walker's *Love and Anger* and *Nothing Sacred*, and Judith Thompson's *Lion in the Streets* and *White Biting Dog*, because these plays

manage, in their different ways, to foreground and denaturalize their inherited structural principles together with their ideological weights, and they thereby succeed in perverting those structures and opening up, again in their different ways, the disruptive possibility of genuinely productive cultural intervention. (52)

There is a case to be made that Walker's later work, including the plays mentioned above, are, despite their departures, comfortably within the contemporary bounds of the narrative realism he disdains, and Knowles seems to hint at this when writes, approvingly, of Thompson's work that "there is even less sense here than in Walker's plays of a unified or essentialist view of the individual" (Theatre 50). Knowles contends that Thompson's work opens up "the disruptive possibility of genuinely productive cultural intervention." Yet there is little that distinguishes Thomson's work from that of

the archetypally [sic] modernist tradition of Genet, Ionesco, and Beckett—the tradition that Martin Esslin invented by labelling a diverse group of modernist plays "the theatre of the Absurd." (53)

It would seem that Thompson's work, with its chiefly subproletarian characters and its presentation of the impossibility of communication and transcendence, most closely resembles the earlier plays of Harold Pinter. Knowles never mentions Pinter, but Esslin himself includes Pinter among "the major dramatists of the Absurd" (Esslin 263). It may be that there is a case to be made that Thompson's plays represent a significant departure from "the archetypally modernist tradition" of Absurdism, but Knowles doesn't make it. He characterizes Thompson's work as opening up "the disruptive possibility of genuinely productive cultural intervention"—and not as a return to a "modernist form of closure" (54), but this seems a very fine, if not arbitrary distinction, especially since Knowles has warned us that plays in the modernist tradition are open to "appropriation by [...] fascism." In any case, such fine distinctions are unlikely to be perceived by audiences.

Notwithstanding the dangers of modernism's possible appropriation by fascism, Knowles saves his big guns for an attack on realism. Presumably immune to fascist appropriation, narrative realism has nothing else to recommend it:

Barthes views narrative as a monologic, conquering force and notes that "it may be significant that it is at the same moment [that the] human 'invents' at once sequence, narrative, and the Oedipus." He argues elsewhere that "The pleasure of the text ... is an Oedipal pleasure" [D]e Lauretis explores in more detail the connection between oedipal desire and narrative. Beginning with the observation that "sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end," de Lauretis demonstrates that the linear narrative constituting Aristotelian "action" is governed by a (sadistic) oedipal logic. (34-35)

But narrative realism is guilty of more than a sadistic logic; It—Knowles uses "naturalism"—"was consolidated at the height of industrial capitalism, with which it conspired in its constructions of linear 'progress' and the separation that it effected and enforced between the realms of technology and values, nature and culture" (213). The implication, of course, is that realism cannot challenge capitalism, since the "latent content" of the realist form is capitalist ideology.

Knowles is editor of *Modern Drama* and an editor of *Canadian Theatre Review*. Among Canadian academics, Knowles is one of the most involved in professional theatre, and has an audience among theatre professionals; for example, he coordinated the presentation of academic papers at A Celebration of Canadian Plays and Playwrights, a recent conference whose sponsors included the Stratford Festival and the Playwrights Union of Canada. Knowles' recommendation of collective creation and community-based production will likely fall on deaf ears—these are difficult to finance and even more

passé than realism. The irony is that, while Knowles promotes political theatre and implicitly dissociates himself from the avant-garde, his book, with its relentless attack on realism for its “sadistic logic” and latent, capitalist ideology, is likely to be read as a defense of avant-garde political theatre. It is worth citing an admonition from Lukács:

Brecht’s influence shows once again how misleading it is to argue from the theory to the work and not from the work, its structure and intellectual content, to the theory. (*Contemporary* 89)

While aspects of poststructuralist theory are apparent in the analyses of theatre academics, when we turn to considering the avant-garde among contemporary theatre professionals we would expect to find less indication of poststructuralist influence. Daniel Brooks is a successful freelance director in Canada and a moderately successful playwright. He has a reputation for political theatre, attributable largely to his co-authorship (with Guillermo Verdecchia) of *The Chomsky Lectures*, based on the writings of Noam Chomsky. In May 2002, Brooks was the keynote speaker at the annual conference of the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres. PACT is the management organization representing almost all of Canada’s large and mid-sized theatre companies, as well as many smaller ones, and its annual conference attracts some sixty or seventy artistic directors from across the country. I had participated in six such conferences between 1990 and 1995—I was PACT president from 1993 to 1995—though at this conference I attended only the keynote address, which Brooks began, as befits a rebel artist, by insulting his bourgeois hosts:

I don’t know what it is you all do. I don’t know what you’re going to talk about in your meetings—probably money. [...] I don’t really know why you’re here. I don’t even go to see plays in your theatres. I don’t go because I usually don’t like them.

He then acknowledges his contemporary left-wing views by listing the various subjects he had considered discussing:

Months ago I thought I might have something to say about cultural diversity[.] I could talk about society—about political and corporate corruption and runaway greed, and impending ecological disaster (it's easy to rant, maybe because there is a lot to rant about), but you can get that elsewhere—I could even give you a reading list and some Web sites that cover the naughty deeds of corporations and the miserable state of consumerist culture. People like Noam Chomsky, Maude Barlow and Jello Biafara do it far better than I ever could. I could talk about how we in the theatre are complicit with the forces that are destroying first our minds and second our planet, and as much as I believe that, I'm not sure what it means.

He continues, completing his sketch of a society in which the “ruling elites use governments and organisations like the IMF and free trade agreements to rule the planet and use their complete control of media to keep people stupid.” He then implicates his audience of artistic directors and general managers:

But this is a theatre conference—we are a pure art form, we like to forget how we are part of this society. [...] We like to think it's OK that we go begging to Esso and the Bank of Montreal and all those generous institutions that do what they do in the world. After all, we live in the world, and so we have to do business with the powers that be. It can't be escaped. I once heard of a group of doctors who wanted to boycott companies involved in the arms industry. They did not want to buy anything made by companies that also made weapons of mass destruction. Unfortunately, they could not find a light bulb that was made by a company that did not also make weapons of death. We live in this world, and we have to play.

Having drawn a picture of “total system” capitalism, he moves on to lament the division of labour in theatre and castigates his audience for not being open enough to the advice of theatre technicians. He then reprises the dire political situation (“The corporate agenda is clear: profit, and the ownership of everything.”) and laments the “stunning absence of

political engagement or dissent in the mass media.” Finally, as he turns to the actual subject of his speech, he asks:

How does theatre live in society, with what language must it speak, and what must it *say* or effect? [...] There is very little social dissent in the theatre of today. We barely understand what social, political, intellectual or spiritual dissent is. (emphasis in original)

Everyone is waiting. Does he recommend to the assembled artistic directors of the nation that they produce plays about free trade, corporate ownership, media concentration, cultural diversity or any of the myriad subjects he has covered in his catalogue of society’s horrors? Absolutely not. Does he name a few playwrights whose work might serve as models for confronting society’s problems, or suggest that playwrights be commissioned to write such plays? No. To ameliorate the “stunning absence of political engagement or dissent” in our theatre, he offers one single suggestion to the élite of Canadian theatre gathered before him:

Dissent can even be aesthetic. For example, I believe designers far too often seek architectural harmony and balance in their sets, are far too quick to settle on a particular palette. The aesthetics of design can also have the quality of social or spiritual dissent.

Then, for the next forty minutes, he laments the absence of sufficient time for rehearsal in English Canadian theatre:

In the world in which we live today, time is accelerated, things happen very quickly, and we are obsessed with a kind of materialism that demands product and more product. We must produce quickly and efficiently. Quality, love of the product, the meaning and dignity of work in the theatre, the very quality of Theatrical Time are under constant pressure from this voracious system of production. More, and faster. We in the theatre have not escaped this McWhirlwind of fast production. [...] This has been said time and time again—the three- or four-week rehearsal is a travesty. It is next to impossible to create truly powerful theatre in these short rehearsals.

What would be the benefit of longer rehearsals?

[W]herever I go in this country, theatre people [...] talk about how their local theatre is failing. How it is boring. How few risks are taken. People—that is, we—talk of stylistic stasis, and to that I must add—an appalling lack of experimentation. [...] Allow me to generalize: I think we all want exciting theatre, we all imagine there to be such a thing, a thing that transforms us, that reminds us how profound and terrifying and beautiful our mortality is, how crude and perverse our reason is, how vain we can be, and how noble. Artaud wrote: “We are not free and the sky can still fall on our heads, and the theatre has been created to teach us that first of all.” We all imagine a theatre that subverts power, that gives power. Powerful theatre. We all have a dream of what that is.

And whom does he cite as exemplars of this powerful, subversive theatre? Artaud, of course, and “the sublime works” of Ariane Mnouchkine, Peter Stein, Peter Brook, Giorgio Strehler, Pina Bausch, avant-gardists all, and not a playwright among them: politics without content.

Everyone wants longer rehearsals: theatre companies cut rehearsal time and produce plays with increasingly small casts because these are the easiest ways to reduce expenses. But when Brooks declares that the “the three- or four-week rehearsal is a travesty,” he is talking about avant-garde theatre. There are excellent directors—too few, to be sure—who, with little complaint, do brilliant work in three or four weeks. Conversely, there are directors who spend six or sixteen months in rehearsal and turn out shoddy work. What Brooks is describing is not a major problem facing theatre companies, but rather the political avant-garde’s solution to capitalist oppression: aesthetic dissent and longer rehearsals.

We find in Brooks a variety of artistic and political influences. Politically, while we hear an echo of the Frankfurt School’s “total system” capitalism, this more likely

derives from Chomsky's work. His complete divorce of politics and content resonates with Adorno. His demand for "a thing that transforms us[,] a theatre that subverts power, that gives power" seems a mixture of Artaud, Adorno, and perhaps Foucault. Another hint of a poststructuralist influence might be read in his desire for a theatre that reminds us "how crude and perverse our reason is." What is apparent here, as it was with the Living Theatre, is the complete assimilation of the theories and methods of the spiritual avant-garde into theatre with explicit political intent.

Serendipitously, Knowles has reviewed Brooks' play *Insomnia* (co-authored with Verdecchia), which was performed at the Festival de Théâtre des Amériques in 1999. In Knowles' *The Theatre of Form*, published the same year, Brooks is mentioned briefly, both times as co-author of *The Chomsky Lectures*, which "gains much of its impact through its theatrical interrogation of the monologism of the lecture format itself" (258, endnote 33). Knowles' praise for *Insomnia* is less restrained:

Another of this year's best shows, and certainly among its most sophisticated, precise and powerful, was *Insomnia*[.] Both genuinely funny and truly terrifying, this work [...] is stunningly simple, direct and clear as it shifts from what first seems slightly heightened domestic drama through stylized (stand-up) comedy of political postmodern angst to nightmarish neo-Expressionist horror, all without losing its sense of coherence, its remarkable technical precision and its evocative use of, among other things, smell. [Brooks] registers the best performance I've seen him give as an actor, notably in the remarkable and risky mid-show political rant (about, among other things, late-capitalist, neo-conservative corporatism), which drew applause the night I attended (in the immediate wake of the most recent Harris vicTory in On-Tory-o), and in the extended movement sequence of window-smashing and mad scribbling that succeeds it. *Insomnia* is a masterfully intelligent and controlled depiction of a world and characters who are not only mad and out of control, but disturbingly well worth losing sleep over. (*Urban*)

As Knowles points out, this seems a great deal like Expressionism revisited.

Note the “risky mid-show political rant (about, among other things, late-capitalist, neo-conservative corporatism).” When Knowles writes, approvingly, of “political postmodern angst,” we can almost hear Lukács groaning: yet another play about “the forlorn perplexity of the petit bourgeois caught up in the perplexing wheels of capitalism” (Bloch et al. 19). Lukács might further describe how, in *Insomnia*, the author might claim to have dramatized

the “essence” of reality, but this ‘essence’ had nothing in common with the objective summary and emphasis of the general, permanent, recurring and typical features of objective reality. [He] abstracted away from these typical characteristics, in as much as he proceeded [...] from the subjective reflex in experience [and] ignored the ‘little’, ‘petty’, ‘inessential’ aspects (i.e. precisely the concrete social determinations) and uprooted his ‘essence’ from its causal connection in time and space. (*Essays* 105)

In other words, the generalized depiction of alienation is ideologically and rhetorically ascribed to “late-capitalist, neo-conservative corporatism,” but the author fails to make any substantive connection between the two. A different writer might substitute a rant about high taxation, government bureaucracy, gun control or abortion and, with equal validity, connect these with alienation, “window-smashing and mad scribbling.” In the case of a Vancouver theatre company, a similar juxtaposition of art and politics is taken to a comedic extreme. The Leaky Heaven Circus performs clown-based, collectively adapted, traditional stories for Christmas-time family audiences; its 2000 production of *Typhoon*, for example, was described as

a fairytale journey featuring characters like King Arroginus, Queen Pamper, Sir Bumble and Zamyarzai performing circus acts and magical tricks. Fifteen children and Mosey the dog round out the cast of 40. (Vancouver)

According to Colin Heath, a regular performer with the company, artistic director Steven Hill runs the development workshops and rehearsals in a democratic and somewhat anarchic manner, but Hill insists—against some opposition—that each performance end with the cast singing an adapted version of Les Rice’s “The Banks Are Made of Marble”:

I’ve traveled round this planet,
From shore to shining shore,
And it often made me wonder,
All the things I heard and saw.

(chorus) But the banks are made of marble,
With a guard at every door,
And the vaults are stuffed with silver
That we all have sweated for.

(chorus)

I’ve seen the people working,
From dawn till setting sun.
I’ve heard the children saying,
“Our work is never done.”

(chorus)

I’ve seen my fellow workers,
Throughout this mighty land,
We will fight to sing together.
In one big circus grand.

Holiday audiences, for the most part unaware of Leaky Heaven’s “democratic” organization, are said to respond to the song with some confusion.

Brooks recently received the Elinore and Lou Siminovitch Prize, the richest award in Canadian theatre (sponsored by the Bank of Montreal), and has won three Dora awards and the Pauline McGibbon Award for directing, and two Chalmers awards for playwriting. His address at the PACT conference was excerpted in *The Globe and Mail* and published in the Playwrights Union of Canada newsletter. While he began his career

with small, avant-garde theatres in Toronto, he has increasingly been hired to direct for the larger, more conventional companies. This might seem odd: why would these large, conventional theatres hire a dramatist who denounces them and their work, and who advocates a kind of theatre they do not produce? The answer to this question points to the resilience of the avant-garde, but to answer it, we must first consider theatre's economic base.

Jameson describes the artistic milieu of 1977:

[W]hat was once an oppositional and antisocial phenomenon in the early years of the century, has today become the dominant style of commodity production and an indispensable component in the machinery of the latter's ever more rapid and demanding reproduction of itself. [T]hat the masterpieces of the most recent schools of American painting are now sought to embellish the splendid new structures of the great insurance companies and multinational banks [...] are but the external symptoms of a situation in which a once scandalous 'perceptual art' has found a social and economic function in supplying the styling changes necessary to the *société de consommation* of the present. (Bloch et al. 209)

It is no surprise that Jameson finds in the visual arts his strongest example of a "scandalous 'perceptual art'" becoming "the dominant style." On the other hand, he is wrong in so far as he connects this dominance primarily to "commodity production" in the "*société de consommation*." In fact, of all art forms, the visual arts are the most protected from the marketplace, given the relatively small number of individual consumers and the correspondingly increased power of professional arbiters of taste: academics, critics and curators (which might explain why visual art attracts the strongest public protest, such as, for example, widespread opposition to the National Gallery's purchase of Newman's "Voice of Fire." If we are looking for the artistic consequences of the "*société de consommation*," we will find them not in our galleries or banks, but in

(North American) film, the result of its high exposure to the marketplace, and here we find, not “an oppositional and antisocial phenomenon [that] has today become the dominant style,” but, for the most part, banal narrative realism.

Theatre exists in a middle ground, somewhere between the visual arts and the movies. There are few private, for-profit companies and a large number of subsidized, not-for-profit companies. Among the latter, the large companies receive small subsidies (as a percentage of their budgets), and the small companies receive large subsidies (again, as a percentage of their budgets). And, as we found in the visual arts, it is among these smaller companies, those most protected from the marketplace, that we find “an oppositional and antisocial phenomenon [that] has today become the dominant style.”

The larger theatres cannot produce such avant-garde work; they must cater to the marketplace or bankrupt themselves. This does not mean that the artistic directors of the larger companies do not consider avant-garde theatre courageous, challenging, “real” theatre. In fact, as I have learned in my years of theatre work, they do: as a rule, the artistic directors of the larger companies speak sadly of the aesthetic risks that financial constraint prevents them from taking; they support avant-garde companies on funding juries; and they invite Daniel Brooks to berate them. Finally, they turn away from a narrative realism whose content might be more challenging and provocative, but which might nonetheless attract an audience; and in this they have the support of modernist Marxists, poststructuralists, and Knowles and Brooks.

Conclusion

My “project” has been to show how the development of political theatre has been influenced by the development of political philosophy. It would not have occurred to the first political playwrights to write about anything but society as they saw it. To a certain extent they were formalists: they demanded a form suitable to the depiction of existing society, and that form was narrative realism. But as capitalism was proving itself disappointingly intractable, political dramatists turned to more direct, confrontational forms, and political philosophers began to scrutinize capitalist culture for an explanation of its resilience. As poststructuralists were finding that explanation in the Enlightenment, in the notion of progress, and in reason itself, left-wing dramatists redoubled their efforts to distance themselves from reason’s artistic partner, realism. Thus, in both politics and theatre, attacks on capitalism turned to attacks on modernity itself. The irony, as many commentators including Lilla and Jurgen Habermas have pointed out, is that it is only from the standpoint of modernity, with its notions of democracy, equality and justice, and using its method of reasoned argument, that such attacks can be launched.

The avant-garde has failed as political theatre first and foremost because it is unable to attract an audience. However appropriate to the contemporary situation in theory, if people do not see it, it cannot achieve the desired effect; and, unfortunately for its advocates, “effect” is a *sine qua non* of politics. Nonetheless, decades of small audiences have not discouraged new generations of avant-garde artists from fruitless “experiments” in search of new and more powerful methods of changing spectators’ lives. In order to release artists with political pretensions from the stranglehold of

modernist and postmodern aesthetics, it may be necessary to first free ourselves from “modernist Marxism” itself.

The practical failures of Marxism, both to lead to revolution in the industrialized countries and to thrive in those countries where revolutions have occurred, produced a variety of responses. Some, particularly in the Soviet Union and the orthodox Communist parties, pressed on, confident in the inevitability of their mission. Others, the British Labour Party for example, retained the Communist goal of abolishing capitalism but pledged themselves to democratic means. In continental Europe, however, the working class and its organizations abandoned Marxist goals as well as means, and opted for an extensive network of social policies aimed at the reform of capitalism rather than its abolition. Western Marxists, however, and the poststructuralists who succeeded them, extended Marxism to account for its failure, and elaborated a “total system” theory of capitalism.

The “total system” theory of capitalism cannot be disproved, short of revolution and the creation of a Communist utopia. Practical improvements in the condition of the proletariat or in developing countries can be readily described as an opposition “neutered by material goods and technology.” It may be time to join the social democrats of Europe who, having abandoned Marxist methods, have gone a great way toward achieving Marx’s original goal of making the material goods and technology created by capitalism available to the masses.

Like the “total system” theory, the constructs of poststructuralism are similarly “undisprovable.” It may be time to turn away from both “total system” theory and

poststructuralism, despite their occasionally useful lessons, just as we have learned to turn away from solipsism—not because they are logically inconsistent but because we cannot live our day-to-day and political lives in Adorno’s hopelessness, as if reason did not exist, or as disintegrated subjects in search of limit-experiences.

“Total system” theory and poststructuralism have proved no more beneficial for theatre than they have for politics. As Bentley notes, there is a danger in subjecting theatre to external demands:

What offers itself as theater must submit to be judged as theater and not appeal to a higher court. [...] Respect for an art means respect for the medium through which that art functions; the limitations of the medium are happily accepted, not combated or ignored. [...] The critic of theatre must be permitted to say when a work bursts the theater’s bounds, as [...] political theater [is] clearly tempted to do. (*Search*, 368-369)

Lukács’ defense of realism stands, despite his Marxism, because he justified realism in its own terms. He had confidence in the power of realism to describe and explain social relationships; and he had confidence in the intelligence of audiences to learn from realistic works, and in their ability to apply what they had learned. In short, he accepted the central tenets of the Enlightenment and its 18th century liberal proponents.

For fifty years, the Enlightenment and its defenders have been anathematized by the most prominent of left-wing theorists, though there have been exceptions. According to Jay, Habermas, the youngest of the Frankfurt School Marxists and the only one still alive, “remained far more positively inclined to the emancipation claims of the Enlightenment than were Horkheimer and Adorno” (Jay 466).

It was time now, Habermas suggested [in 1981], to cast aside the overly pessimistic assumptions of the earlier Western Marxist tradition and

acknowledge [...] the legitimate achievements of modernization, even in its capitalist form[.] (Jay 506)

Eric Hobsbawm, prominent historian and long-time Communist, stated recently,

I believe that whatever the limitations of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment it was the only principle on which it is possible to demand improvements or rights for every human being.

Habermas is in his seventies, Hobsbawm in his eighties. Perhaps it is more significant that a younger generation of French philosophers and academics (Luc Ferry and Alain Renault, for example, editors of *Why We Are Not Nietzscheans*) have rejected both Marxism and poststructuralism.

I began this investigation into the history and defenses of avant-garde political theatre in an effort to understand the attraction of the avant-garde to dramatists with political pretensions. In the process, I learned a great deal about the interconnections of political and aesthetic theory. On the other hand, my skepticism about the applicability of the avant-garde to political theatre has not been mitigated, and there is a certain disappointment in this realization. As noted at the outset, I can understand that some people prefer avant-garde art, but the avant-garde's rejection of narrative and character is now more than a century old—nearly as unoriginal as narrative realism—and while its techniques have enriched realism, its application to political theatre has rendered such theatre marginal as an art form and useless as politics. Narrative realism is the most popular and flexible form in existence—it is, after all, story-telling—and, while obviously suited to endless banality, it is equally suited to the exploration of social relations.

We have no more empirical evidence for the political efficacy of realism than we have for that of the avant-garde. On the other hand, realism might at least educate the artist. As Lukács describes, realism imposes a discipline on the political artist:

[T]he portrayal of a story, a real plot, leads inevitably to testing feelings and experiences against the external world, weighing the living interaction with social reality and finding this light or heavy, genuine or false, whereas the psychologistic or surrealistic introspection of the decadents [...] simply offers the superficial internal life a completely unrestricted field, entirely free from any criticism. The danger that arises from this false subjectivism, the uninhibited living-out of the writer's internality, is that he stands facing a world of free experiment in which he can mingle uninhibitedly as he will. His characters then fail to obtain any independent and autonomous life of their own. The immanent dialectic of their fates, therefore, cannot lead the writer anywhere beyond his original intent and prejudices, and cannot refute these prejudices through the fearless portrayal of the real developmental process in actual life. And we know that the essence of apologetics consists precisely in this adjustment of reality. The less the writer arbitrarily dominates his characters and plot, the greater are the prospects that realism will prevail. (*Essays* 145)

Brooks, in *Insomnia*, provides only an ideological connection between “late-capitalist, neo-conservative corporatism” and “window-smashing and mad scribbling.” Realism provides some protection against the dangers inherent in such avant-garde abstraction, by forcing the playwright to provide the social details that connect cause to effect. He or she might be able to do so; if not, the “authentic realist” would abandon the project and, perhaps, the political conception. This is not merely theoretical: in my own history of playwriting, I can attest that research to get the facts and details right, and efforts to create psychologically consistent characters, has led to the rewriting of scenes, the abandonment of projects, and, on occasion, to the reconsideration of political views.

Realism requires that we eschew political rants (by the author; as Strindberg noted in his realistic phase, characters, if motivated, can rant all they want). Realism requires

that, Brecht notwithstanding, we trust the spectators to remember they are in the theatre (in my experience, this not a major problem), and that the play they are watching is not “reality” but an effort to describe it. Finally, realism requires that we trust that knowledge and consideration, on all our parts, will produce the best political outcomes, and that we trust in the possibilities of what Habermas describes as “communicative action,” a form of reasoned argument informed—but not obliterated—by modernist Marxism and poststructuralism.

To return to political theatre: the tragedy is that, by virtue of having concentrated their efforts in the avant-garde, artists with political pretensions have found themselves speaking only to each other and a few aficionados, and have abandoned the most popular and communicative form of theatre to those with nothing much to say. The “executive of the modern state,” that “committee for managing the common affairs” of “late-capitalist, neo-conservative corporatism,” would not have it any other way.

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