

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

RECLAIMED TERRITORY: THE PLAYS OF JOHN MCGRATH
AND THE 7:84 THEATRE COMPANY CONSIDERED AS
A CONTINUUM OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY THEORIES
CONCERNING THEATRICAL FORM

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BY

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DECLARATION

No portion of this work has been submitted by this writer in support of an application for another degree or qualification from this or any other university or other institution of learning.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation proposes to examine the work of John McGrath and the 7:84 Theatre Company as part of a continuum of theatrical experimentation culminating in postmodernism. To clarify the relationship between aesthetic form and social praxis the inquiry proceeds in two salient lines of direction: the first tracing the withdrawal from "realism" of major theorists of modernist ideology, the second defining the political and social milieu which provided the matrix for the development and staging of McGrath's plays. Recognising the partisan disposition of the 7:84 Theatre Company, the focus is on not only the division between political commitment and aesthetic experimentation, but also their potential for conciliation. At stake here is the socio-political nature of dramatic form itself and the contradictions implicit in political theatre's inherent structure. Tested against actual modes of procedure in the staging of McGrath's plays, and against the plays themselves, are the modernist propositions on aesthetics and politics argued within the context of German Marxism by Bloch, Lukacs, Benjamin, Adorno, and Brecht. The inquiry into problematising representational modes is then extended to include the postmodernist resistance to both realism and modernism, seeking precisely where and how McGrath's theatre supports this opposition. Following a critical dissection of representative texts, the conclusion attempts to establish their validity as postmodernist art, wordlessly disclosing within the parameters of their own language structure what cannot be asserted effectively by the practice of politics itself.

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INTRODUCTION

The thrust of this dissertation concerns the work of John McGrath and the 7:84 Theatre Company¹ considered as part of the continuum of theatrical change from modernism to what has become known as postmodernism. Tracing first the innovations necessary to move theatre away from a declining realism, my inquiry will try to determine the extent to which McGrath's theatre may be considered legitimately within the context of postmodernist ideology and praxis.

For a number of reasons the 7:84 Theatre Company may be considered at once the most radically political and the most politically radical of post-war British Theatre Companies. Within the narrow parameters of its political commitment the process of staging theatre is central to the attack on both bourgeois theatre and the social conditions of "late

¹The plays are, apparently, to a large extent the result of collectivisation. Generally, it would seem that the "skeleton" of a play is written by McGrath and later modified or augmented by suggestions from members of the company. Since it is an impossible task to define exactly what was contributed by whom, - it becomes necessary to refer to McGrath and the 7:84 Company in tandem. Indeed, citation of either name may imply a reference to both.

capitalism." For this reason the language structure of McGrath's theatre is assessed as at once an instrument of change and a metaphor for that change. To determine the sources of this language structure, I have selected four theorists who will prove significant to McGrath's drama in its withdrawal from realism, though they serve also as a paradigm for all such theorists: Edward Gordon Craig, Adolphe Appia, Erwin Piscator, Bertolt Brecht.

While taking issue with the conventional theatre's mediated version of reality, it must be understood that any alternative theatre's version of reality, though viable, is no less a mediated version. McGrath himself seems to acknowledge this problem when discussing

a new kind of theatre, capable of expressing the richness and complexity of working-class life today, and not only working-class life. In terms of theatre they are some of the first sounds in a new language of theatre that can never be fully articulate until socialism is created in this country. ¹

The mediation of reality has become central to McGrath's dramatic language in the sense that mimesis is central to the "realism" of the bourgeois stage (and, to a great extent,

¹John McGrath, "Mediating Contemporary Reality," (originally a lecture) in A Good Night Out. Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form, (London: Methuen, Inc., 1984), p.60.

television and film).

Having said this, I should justify as the focus of this inquiry the choice of John McGrath and the 7:84 Company, rather than another theatre company eligible for scrutiny.¹ Some of these, Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre, for example, have on occasion exhibited a more insistently radical approach to political change than has the 7:84 Company; none, however, has demonstrated with such consistency a systematic programme for effecting political change. McGrath's political and theatrical objectives, about which he has written at some length,² have been demonstrated and dramatised time after time in stage productions of a consistently high order. As a result, the 7:84 Company might be considered the archetypal socialist theatre in terms of its political objectives, its durability, and its proclivity towards working-class entertainment.

Conversely, theatre companies such as Welfare State International have demonstrated a richness and complexity of material which has led to a possibly unrivalled aesthetic achievement; yet frequently such companies are not overtly

¹Red Ladder, Hull Truck, Belt and Braces, General Will, Monstrous Regiment are a few that come immediately to mind.

²John McGrath, "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre," Theatre Quarterly IX, 35 (1979): pp.43-54.

political and often are not politically motivated at all. Certainly their objectives involve no consistent programme for political or social change. The 7:84 Company, on the other hand, does operate according to its programme of systematic change, and it does so with equally impressive aesthetic criteria. These credentials qualify the Company to serve as a paradigm for the best of what has occurred in the theatre since the cultural upheaval of the late 1960s and as a repository for much recent dramatic thought and theory. Indeed, the neologistic term "Reclaimed Territory" in this dissertation's title pertains to a body of theatrical thought and practice which denied, and continues to deny, what has become of the once valid realism of Ibsen, Chekhov, and Strindberg. Instead, this "territory" treats the stage as a symbol rather than as an illusion of reality and perceives the disparate elements of theatre language - scenery, lighting, makeup, acting, direction, music, etc. - according to their symbolic function. This theatre language is not synonymous with the kind of written text which is generally thought of as dramatic literature. According to McGrath himself, "the act of creating theatre has nothing to do with the making of dramatic literature; dramatic literature is what is sometimes left behind when theatre has been and gone."¹ As essential

¹John McGrath, A Good Night Out. Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.6.

as any written text to the meaning of a play, says McGrath, are the publicity, the price of admission, and the behaviour of the box office staff.¹ That is to say, what is said on stage and done on stage may not express the sum total of meaning of a theatrical event. As a result, contemporary criticism tends to extract meaning and value from the total theatrical production. For this reason, this inquiry considers both the textural meanings of McGrath's dramatic works and the more pandemic effects of his theatre language.

My strategy in the organisation of material, then, has been to provide first, not just a litany of theatrical innovators, but specific examples of twentieth-century theory and practice denying the once innovative realism associated with Ibsen, Chekhov, and Strindberg (Chapter One). It is important to see where McGrath has absorbed such theory and practice into his own work and where he has exceeded it in order to enter the controversial realm of the postmodern. If the substance of Chapter One seems at first tangential to my argument, therefore, it should be understood as a prerequisite for the later placement of the 7:84 Company into a postmodernist setting, where the representational forms of modernism become the subject matter of a new drama. With a

¹John McGrath, A Good Night Out. Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.6.

similar purpose, the focus is next on the central argument concerning aesthetics and politics made within the context of German Marxism by Bloch, Lukacs, Benjamin, Adorno, and Brecht (Chapter Two). The Marxist debate on modernism is essential to understanding the subsequent discussion of postmodernist theory. Following this, documentary material on the development of the 7:84 Company should prove helpful in placing McGrath's work within the context of political and social upheavals of the time (Chapter Three). This is a necessarily generalised account (all such accounts of history are, to some degree or other, mediated versions of reality), my purpose being to put forward a narrative sufficiently well-documented to make clear the temper of the time, the generally volatile atmosphere of change pervading the late 1960s and early 1970s which generated radical innovation in the arts. The two chapters which follow (Chapters Four and Five) consist of a careful dissection of McGrath's texts, Chapter Four on the early plays, (Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun, Bakke's Night of Fame, The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, and Fish in the Sea), Chapter Five on the later plays (Yobbo Nowt, Little Red Hen, Swings and Roundabouts, and Blood Red Roses). Taken together, these eight plays serve as a representative sampling of McGrath's work and show its development from the first tentative "experiments" to McGrath's more mature style. During the

course of the analysis, both the 7:84 Company's debt to the past and the originality of its contribution will be explained, facilitating a clearer understanding of the reasons for its inclusion in the postmodernist camp.

Finally, I will draw together the various strands of this inquiry to determine to what extent the 7:84 Theatre Company may reasonably be considered postmodernist and where it must be precluded from this domain (Conclusion).

One point that needs to be made here concerns my relationship with John McGrath. During the course of the past eight years, my focus has been on political theatre in general and on McGrath and the 7:84 Company in particular. This intensive and time-consuming study has from time to time demanded contact on a personal level with Mr. McGrath to ascertain points of contention, establish facts, and acquire general information about the 7:84 Company. Despite a journey to England to meet personally, innumerable transatlantic telephone calls, and a plethora of letters and questionnaires, I have met with no responses to my requests. My occlusion has, in fact, been absolute. Even promises of communication from members of the Company have come to nothing. Several years of this denial have led to frustration, despondency, and the loss of any hope of access to private information. As a result, research for this inquiry has been necessarily contingent on more readily available public material. This

contingency has turned out to be a double-edged sword, inaccessibility to personal information having forced wider reading of more disparate material concerning concepts possibly of more pertinence than personal opinion, anecdote, or reminiscence. In the long run I suspect occlusion has detracted little from the validity of my thesis. If the postmodernist ethic holds true, it is reasonable to suggest that the practitioners of the 7:84 Theatre Company may find that another is realising the texts and, perhaps, subjectively producing the meaning they did not envisage or understand.

Finally, a word concerning language. Certain collective nouns such as "audience" are liberally peppered throughout the text. Generally, I have preferred to retain for these words the form of the collective singular, except in instances where for the sake of sense the plural form is preferable. This is mentioned in advance to enable the reader to follow my thinking in this matter.

CHAPTER 1

A WITHDRAWAL FROM REALISM

If, as it is sometimes said, to understand the present we must first know the past, then my initial task is to explore the "territory" in which modern theatre first flowered, terrain staked out by the great innovators and much later reclaimed by the 7:84 Theatre Company. Acknowledging that much has already been written about the theatrical practitioners of this period, my intent here is not simply to recapitulate what is already known. Indeed, the extent to which the theatrical theoreticians discussed here have exerted a substantial influence on McGrath, if any influence at all, is, of course, an unknown quantity since Mr. McGrath's inaccessibility to this writer has for several years been absolute. In any event, "influence" is not the issue here, even supposing McGrath is consciously aware of any pervading influences on his work. Eric Bentley has written of the dangers of assuming influence, whether or not such influence exists.¹ He names three fallacies that arise from the

¹Eric Bentley, "The influence of Brecht" in Re-interpreting Brecht: his influence on contemporary drama and film, eds. Pia Kleber and Colin Visser, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp.186-195.

assumption of influence: (1) the first fallacy is the taking for granted that influence is a good thing, and, even if so, the fact that the finding of such alleged influence has little to do with celebrating the author's influence; (2) the second fallacy of influence lies in the fact that the word is not clear since it rests on the assumption that post hoc must be propter hoc, allowing neither for accidental coincidence nor for natural affinity and confluence; (3) the third fallacy involves the assumption that if Writer A draws on Writer B, B is necessarily influencing A, whereas in fact, Writer B may be only made use of, exploited, by A (Bentley gives the example of Eliot's use of quotation in "The Wasteland"). In such cases influence is only a possibility. Without pursuing Bentley's argument further, it seems safe to say that any attempt to establish definite influences on John McGrath or the 7:84 Theatre Company will be, at best, problematic. One way to circumvent such problems is to reduce one's dependency on the assumption of influence, specifically the influence of the great for, as Bentley states, "Greatness does not impart greatness. It creates epigones: many little fish swimming around one big fish."¹ Instead of attempting to establish specific influences, then, my purpose is, rather, to place

¹Eric Bentley, "The influence of Brecht" in Re-interpreting Brecht: his influence on contemporary drama and film, eds. Pia Kleber and Colin Visser, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.195.

within the context of modern and ultimately postmodern theatre McGrath's own aesthetic and political contribution, to examine not so much where he and the 7:84 Company have followed, as where they have broken away. This is particularly important if one is to consider the 7:84 Company in a postmodernist context. To do this, it would seem necessary to review, no matter how briefly, where the relevant theatrical innovations, the synthesis of which constitute "modern theatre," began. Such a review, it is to be hoped, will make clear from the start what is meant by the continuum of theatrical innovation and practice of which McGrath's theatre has become a part. Necessarily selective, my focus in this chapter, except for the inclusion of a few corroborative names, will be on only four theoreticians whose work has had so marked an impact on the development of modern theatre that they serve the useful purpose of standing as paradigms for all those who would transform theatre from the moribund state into which twentieth-century realism had declined: Craig, Appia, Piscator, Brecht. Some may cavil with this selection, but, as I have said, they suit my purpose, the first two especially instrumental in the transformation of performance modes, the second two additionally significant in the exclusive context of political theatre.

To speak of the changes which occurred in the radicalisation of theatre, one must first clarify the

established theatre practice which expressionism so fiercely opposed. The realism of Ibsen, Chekhov, and Strindberg has, of course, been already dissected by others in such frequency and depth as to make further interpretation needless in this inquiry. Nonetheless, a few points are worth noting in their relation to later developments. If realism in effect asserts that imitation is the first aim in art, that illusionism is the purpose of creating drama, it implies that art concerns the familiar, the commonplace, the natural, the observed thing instead of the imagined thing.¹ On the other hand, realism at its best reflects more than merely surface details. In the plays of, say, Ibsen and Chekhov, the surface detail itself carries much symbolic weight. But, as Sheldon Cheney points out,

. . . almost never does observed-life drama touch into lastingly significant art unless another element is added, in what we may term intellectual-realistic plays. And what the modern theatre (since 1850) has achieved, of permanent value, is almost exclusively in this field where shrewd fact-observation is crossed with trenchant thought. The Realistic drama might be dismissed as a mere passing phase, had not some men of exceptional intellect lifted the photographic-familiar play to their own uses. Whether it is the deeply purposeful drama of Ibsen

¹Sheldon Cheney, The Theatre, (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1966), p.448.

or the wittily intellectual drama of Shaw, it is Realistic drama first, but drama of thought second and more important. 1

As an example of this, Cheney paraphrases the main ideas underlying Ibsen's work and states that Ibsen "treats them humanly, with expert character-drawing; but it is the idea, not character conception, that determined the situations, the plots."2

Furthermore, according to Cheney, from the viewpoint of a half century of accomplishment, one can be sure that "only the Realistic drama with this other thing added, with implications valuable in the field of social thought and of intellectual stimulation, has survived notably."3

From the standpoint of this inquiry, however, a more cogent statement by Cheney follows:

The theatre that has housed the realistic-intellectual drama has been the least theatrical in history, a place used rather than a part of the essential means and material of the art, contributing definite values to the ensemble impression. 4

1Sheldon Cheney, The Theatre, (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1966), pp.450-451.

2Ibid., p.456.

3Ibid., p.451.

4Ibid.

Cheney's point here is well made: to create the illusion of reality occurring before an audience in the present, wherever possible all traces of theatricality were expunged. As Cheney explains, the stage became "a picture so like life that its first aim was to escape notice, glamour was suppressed for fear of disturbing the illusion of actuality, and acting became subservient."¹ One may consider this a viable starting point for any investigation into modern theatre, since any departure from this realistic mode would have to be, rather, in the direction of increased theatricality. To be sure, it is exactly in this direction that twentieth-century theoreticians turned in opposition, knowing full well that an imitation of mere surface reality fell far short of what the theatre was capable of achieving. As a result, expressionism and its developments in various forms, came into existence.

Nevertheless, realism has survived and, indeed, remained to some extent the dominant form in theatre until the present. One may argue that its survival and dominance are the result of a form which can be easily comprehended by a middle-class audience and therefore enjoys a popular appeal with the great majority of theatre-goers, who belong to this

¹Sheldon Cheney, The Theatre, (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1966), p.451.

middle class.¹ Since realism appears to be the form of theatre having the widest appeal among the majority of theatre-goers, it has in consequence been shaped and used effectively as a political instrument to help maintain the superior social position of the upper and middle classes over the working class. Because this class system is generally associated with the rise of capitalism, realism may be seen as a form of theatre which helps support and perpetuate the structure and dominance of the capitalist state. In this sense, any departure from realism may be considered a political act. For this reason, the emphasis of theatrical process - which overtly denies the illusionism created by bourgeois realism - is sometimes seen as an attack on capitalism. In discussing John McGrath and the 7:84 Company, Christopher Bigsby makes clear the point:

The 7:84 Company, founded by John McGrath, created a distinctive style which involves music, dialogue, broad humour and caustic satire. This theatre grows out of dramaturgy - at its best in McGrath's own Little Red Hen, a dramatic kaleidoscope of Scottish working-class history, or in Yobbo Nowt, an account of the emerging authority of a working-class woman, told in song and brief sketches - which aims to educate, to raise consciousness, to demonstrate a

¹For Theodor Adorno's comment on this point see p.590 below.

vitality which is itself offered as a principal resource in the battle against capitalism. ¹

From a political standpoint the objection to realism is its tendency to transform the stage into a photographic imitation of the real world which permits the upper and middle classes to maintain the status quo by controlling the working classes over whom they exert a measure of superiority. This control is applied by creating the illusion of a reality happening in the present before the audience's eyes, the audience temporarily suspending their disbelief and "losing" themselves mimetically in the action occurring on stage. According to theorists like Brecht, such an illusion tends to deprive audiences of critical thought and, as a result, deprive individual products from having any social function. Furthermore, British theatre, as Christopher Bigsby explains, "had traditionally reflected in its writers, directors, and plays, the values of a particular section of English society, most major writers sharing an educational and class background which to some degree shaped or influenced their work."² Containment of the kind practised by bourgeois realism

¹C.W.E. Bigsby, "The Politics of Anxiety: Contemporary Socialist Theatre in England" in Modern British Dramatists, ed. John Russell Brown, (Englewood-Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1984), p.165.

²Ibid., p.165.

expresses a false sense of rational structure, social order, and probable causality essential for the practical application of authority. In effect, the dramatist who reduces the theatre to the fallaciousness of character and action unmistakable in bourgeois realism submits to methods which subordinate the audience to merely passive observers. In this way realism has become an instrument by which capitalism exerts its dominance over the working classes while perpetuating its power.

Perceiving realism from this political perspective, one can therefore readily understand the necessity of a socialist theatre such as McGrath's to remove itself as far as possible from such methods of subordination. Much of the more virulent reaction against realism, however, was directed not against the works of the acknowledged masters of the form,¹ but directed against a genre in decline.² If this preamble on realism seems as a result tangential to this inquiry, it (realism) should be understood only insofar as the decline of its aims led to a still continuing opposition. Indeed, major contributions to the structure of this opposition are what concern the focus of this chapter. As I have said, the

¹The "acknowledged masters" to whom I am referring are Ibsen, Chekhov, Strindberg, and Shaw.

²A notable exception of this is Brecht's rejection of Shaw.

assumption of direct influence is always speculative, even by those supposedly influenced themselves. The approach taken here, therefore, is that a continuum of self-evident theatrical innovation has occurred throughout this century and the dramatic works of John McGrath as performed by the 7:84 Theatre Company are part of that continuum. What follows in this chapter, then, is an attempt to connect McGrath's theatre with some of the more pertinent contributors to this continuum. While McGrath himself will not, and perhaps cannot, substantiate this connection, similar theatre practices or developments of them undeniably occur in both McGrath's work and the work of the great innovators; indeed, as I shall argue later, McGrath's own contribution, in its resistance to the political implications of realism, builds on and develops the move towards increased theatricality. It is to be hoped, therefore, that any recapitulation will be understood from this perspective. A more specific application of this connection will be dealt with later in the analyses of McGrath's plays.

For those who would oppose the realistic theatre at the turn of this century to create a new drama, a theatre language that would satisfy the new needs of the spirit and senses was required. To what extent the necessity of this theatre language was consciously realised by those who demanded change remains questionable. Jacques Copeau (1879-1949) has written:

They had not envisioned a recasting of the means of expression corresponding to the thing which they proposed to express. The dramatic form was not questioned. They simply took over the form as they found it, as they received it from their predecessors. 1

Clearly the new theatre had to find new meaningful ways of connecting with its new audience by departing somehow "from the methods of exposition and development which paralyze it, methods of presentation which thwart it, and architectural conceptions which, on the stage and in the auditorium, no longer fulfill its needs."2 As late as 1941 Copeau admitted that it would be

certainly a hopeless situation if the people coming to the theatre today should only accept the worn-out forms which the writers of the past century used and fiddled with time and time again without getting anything new or valuable from them. 3

In retrospect, it becomes clear that to depart from the restrictions of realism the radical changes needed in the theatre were threefold: (1) to break with realism's mimetic

¹Jacques Copeau, "Once Again: Style," Tulane Drama Review VII, 4 (Summer 1963): p.187.

²Ibid., p.183.

³Ibid., p.189.

tradition of transmitting the exposition; (2) to devise new methods of acting which would help accomplish this break; (3) to create a stage design which would dispense with the convention of the proscenium arch and darkened auditorium, both of which were instrumental in creating the mimetic effect.

Edward Gordon Craig (1872-1966) early in his career discovered that "in a rope dancer there may be more theatrical art than in an up-to-date actor reciting from his memory and depending on his prompter."¹ In his essay, "The Actor and the Uber-Marionette,"² Craig denies acting as an art form on the grounds that "Art arrives only by design. Therefore in order to make any work of art it is clear we may only work in those materials with which we can calculate. Man is not one of these materials."³ The reason Craig gives for his inability to calculate the actor's performance in the production design is that the actor, being himself flesh and blood, is subject to every conceivable change which emotion chooses to bring about. As he says, art can admit of no

¹Alexander Hevesi, Introduction to Edward Gordon Craig, On the Art of the Theatre, (London: Heinemann, 1980), p.xvii.

²Edward Gordon Craig, On the Art of the Theatre, (London: Heinemann, ~1980), pp.54-94. Originally published in Mask I, 2 (April 1908): p.5.

³Ibid., pp.55-56.

accidents: "That, then, which the actor gives us, is not a work of art; it is a series of accidental confessions."¹ Compounding the problem is the actor's practice of impersonating and representing realistically actual people. As far as Craig is concerned, the actor tries to reproduce nature, seldom inventing with the aid of nature, and "he never dreams of creating."²

Craig is convincing in his argument that mere imitation of how people act and react in given circumstances is no more artistic than is mere imitation of nature in painting or music. Moreover, he saw that, carried to an extreme, imitation could be ludicrous; since imitation - which as far as the actor is concerned takes the form of impersonation - is always one step removed from the actual thing itself, it is always spurious, never the genuine article. Concerning the actor, Craig writes:

. . . the best he can do when he wants to catch and convey the poetry of a kiss, the heat of a fight, or the calm of death, is to copy slavishly, photographically - he kisses - he fights - he lies back and mimics death - and, when you think of it, is not

¹Edward Gordon Craig, On the Art of the Theatre, (London: Heinemann, 1980), pp.54-94. Originally published in Mask I, 2 (April 1908): p.58.

²Ibid., p.62.

all this dreadfully stupid? Is it not a poor art and a poor cleverness, which cannot convey the spirit and essence of an idea to an audience, but can only show an artless copy, a facsimile of the real thing itself? This is to be an imitator, not an artist. This is to claim kinship with the ventriloquist. 1

For Craig, the theatre needed to go beyond limitations of this kind to create, not a mere copy of nature, but new and original forms never before seen in nature. To do this, the actor, as we know him, bound to nature must disappear:

Do away with the actor, and you do away with the means by which a debased stage-realism is produced and flourishes. No longer would there be a living figure in which the weakness and tremors of the flesh were perceptible. 2

Craig proposes to replace the actor with an inanimate figure which for the sake of convenience he calls the Uber-Marionette. This Uber-Marionette is a figure of symbolist vision that, instead of competing with life, will go beyond it to trance and vision. Furthermore, if the accidental is occluded from the representation, Craig has no

¹Edward Gordon Craig, On the Art of the Theatre, (London: Heinemann, 1980), pp.54-94. Originally published in Mask I, 2 (April 1908): pp.62-63.

²Ibid., p.81.

objection to the actor taking the part of the marionette, for "the mask is the only right medium of portraying the expressions of the soul as shown through the expressions of the face."¹ Like Yeats, Craig felt that theatre had sacrificed vision to the intricacies of character study and surface reality. By assuming the role of the Uber-Marionette, in which he rejected the spontaneity and chance movement of realistic drama, the actor focuses on the precision and significance of each individual movement. Nothing is unrehearsed or without reason. Rather than an imitation of life, the actor should create "the spirit of the thing,"² for as Craig advises:

If you can find in Nature a new material,
one which has never yet been used by man
to give form to his thoughts, then you can
say that you are on the high road towards
creating a new art. For you have found
that by which you can create it. ³

Craig was moving from the kind of realism practiced at its best by Ibsen, Chekhov, and Strindberg to a drama where

¹Edward Gordon Craig, On the Art of the Theatre, (London: Heinemann, 1980), pp.54-94. Originally published in Mask I, 2 (April 1908): p.13.

²Ibid., p.62.

³Ibid., p.78.

contemporary reference and personal emotion are purified by what Yeats called "ideal form, a symbolism handled by the generations, a mask from whose eyes the disembodied looks."¹

Craig's use of the actor's role is affirmed by his contemporary, Adolphe Appia (1862-1928). Although Appia arrived at his conclusions by means of a different route from that of Craig, the objective for both appears to have been the director's increased artistic control over all aspects of the production, forming a unity unique to each work. For Appia, the problem concerns the second of the two stages of making drama:

In the first, the dramatist must transpose his idea into dramatic form; then the resultant text must be transposed to meet the demands of production for an audience. Unfortunately, this second step in the process, the creation of the mise-en-scene, is not controlled by the dramatist. ²

The second step is not controlled, declares Appia, because the production is subject to caprice and arbitrary taste. As a result, the same drama may be produced in the

¹William Butler Yeats, Essays and Introductions, (London: Macmillan, 1961), p.241.

²Adolphe Appia, "The Mise-en-Scene as Means of Expression" in Music and the Art of the Theatre, ed. Barnard Hewitt, (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1981), pp.10-11.

most divergent styles according to both individual tastes and the popular taste of the time.

It follows therefore that the drama (as produced on stage) is not only the most complex of all arts, but also the only one of which one of the basic elements may not be judged as a medium of expression in the dramatist's control, a condition acutely diminishing the integrity of drama as an art form and relegating it to an inferior status. ¹

Appia, then, seeks some way for the mise-en-scene to become an integral part of the drama in order for it to become a medium for artistic expression: ". . . a principle, deriving directly from the drama's original conception, without passing again through the will of the dramatist, must be found to prescribe the mise-en-scene."²

Appia finds this guiding principle in music for, unlike spoken drama, it controls time while it expresses emotional changes. In the drama of what Appia calls the poet-musician, music finds its form in the object of its expression. Thanks to music, the poet-musician presents the audience not only

¹Adolphe Appia, "The Mise-en-Scene as Means of Expression" in Music and the Art of the Theatre, ed. Barnard Hewitt, (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1981), p.11.

²Ibid., p.13.

with external effects of emotions, the appearance of dramatic life, "but with the emotions themselves, the dramatic life in all its reality, as we can know it only in the most profound depths of our being."¹

If music, which creates and controls time, is to unify all aspects of the production, its domain must include physical setting. The setting no longer relies "upon conventions, as the opera normally does, nor upon an imitation of life as does the spoken drama." Instead, "each drama will determine its own staging, unique to itself."² This can be accomplished only by rejecting those elements essential to the conventional theatre, where the dramatist's work is completed by the actor and scene-painter. Neither actors nor scenery should contribute new information; they should merely convey the life already in the work. Integration between living actor and inanimate setting can be accomplished, according to Appia, by the mediating presence of light. Appia chooses light because, like music, it can be used to manipulate mood, emotion, and action; these elements can therefore be

¹Adolphe Appia, "The Mise-en-Scene as Means of Expression" in Music and the Art of the Theatre, ed. Barnard Hewitt, (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1981), p.16.

²Adolphe Appia, La mise en scene du drama wagnerian, (Paris, 1895), p.12; quoted in Marvin Carlson, Theories of the Theatre, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), p.294.

orchestrated as precisely as a musical score. Jacques Copeau explains Appia's theory in these terms:

Both musician and architect, Appia teaches us that the tempo of music, which envelops, commands and regulates the dramatic action, creates at the same time the space in which it unfolds. For him, the art of staging in its pure sense is nothing else but the configuration of a gesture or a piece of music rendered tangible by the living action of the human body and by its reaction to the opposing architectural volumes. Hence, the banishment from the stage of all inanimate decoration, of all painted backcloths, the dominance of the moveable prop and the active role of light. ¹

In this way the director can control all elements of the production and so unify technical aspects with the stage action. As Appia explains:

. . . a dramatic idea requiring musical expression in order to be revealed must spring from the hidden world of our inner life, since this life cannot be expressed except through music, and music can express only that life. By means of the spoken word, (the dramatist) endows it with a practical dramatic form and composes the poetic-musical text, the score; this text imposes an already living role upon the actor, a role he has now only to take on. The proportions of

¹Jacques Copeau, Copeau: Texts on Theatre, ed. & trans. John Rudlin & Norman H. Paul, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), pp.98-99.

this role determine the form of the setting through three-dimensionality (the point of contact between the living actor and the inanimate setting); the nature and the extent of the three-dimensionality determine the spatial arrangement of the setting which in turn controls the lighting and painted scenery. 1

In Appia's word-tone drama, the actor is neither the sole nor most important interpreter of the dramatist's intention; he is but one medium for the dramatist's expression. As Appia writes:

Once the actor ceases to be the dominant element in production, having no longer to "make a speech," he recedes into the background to take his place among his co-workers, the various other poetic-musical devices, ready to follow the convolutions resulting from the momentary importance of any one of them as they are brought into play. He thus becomes part of an organism and must submit himself to the laws of balance regulating this organism. 2

Relieved of "fleshing out" the role with his own experience, the actor, as nothing more than a medium for the dramatist's expression, functions in a way very similar to

¹Adolphe Appia, "The Mise-en-Scene as Means of Expression" in Music and the Art of the Theatre, ed. Barnard Hewitt, (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1981), p.26.

²Ibid., p.21.

that of Craig's Uber-Marionette. No longer is he the bearer of what Craig called "accidental confessions."¹ As Appia wrote, by means of music "the living human body throws off the accident of personality and becomes purely an instrument for human expression."²

Now, the theories of Craig and Appia advanced above have been well-recognised and are reproduced here only in order to put the work of John McGrath within the context of twentieth-century theatrical innovation. Their recapitulation is not meant to imply that McGrath's drama requires the same measure of strict directorial control demanded by Craig and Appia. On the contrary, as will be shown in Chapters Four and Five, a socialist theatre such as McGrath's demands a far more autonomous structure of production relationships in which various members of the company make, to some degree or other, a contribution. The implication is that a theatre of this kind, by its very nature, is less equipped to produce a single aesthetic vision than is a theatre which expresses the conception of one artist. On the other hand, if, as Appia contends, this were true, it would be necessary to dismiss

¹Edward Gordon Craig, On the Art of the Theatre, (London: Heinemann, 1980), p.58.

²Adolphe Appia, Die Musik und die Inszenierung, (Munich, 1899), p.36; quoted in Marvin Carlson, Theories of the Theatre, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), p.295.

virtually all drama, before or since, which did not subscribe to the strict directorial control demanded by Craig and Appia. So, the relations of production in McGrath's theatre, diametrically opposed to the autocratic control of a single vision, cannot be so easily dismissed. In fact, it will be worth taking a moment to consider where McGrath's work stands in relation to the theories discussed above.

As has been explained, Craig and Appia insisted on the reduction of the actor's art to movement behind an impersonal mask, the Uber-Marionette or its human counterpart, the contention being that any connection between the mask and living human beings should be left largely to the imagination of the audience. Regardless of increased directorial control, the objective, in Craig's case, was to go beyond a mere imitation of life and convey a vision of truth, not by a reproduction of surface reality, but by what Craig calls "symbolic gestures."¹ In the case of Appia, the actor must dispense with any accident of personality to serve as an instrument for revealing the hidden world of our inner lives. In short, both Craig and Appia support an attenuation of character in favour of a less realistic, more theatrical, means of expression, one in which, instead of reproducing

¹Edward Gordon Craig, On the Art of the Theatre, (London: Heinemann, 1980), p.61.

reality, the dramatist aims at conveying essences, what Craig calls "the spirit of the thing."¹

In the chapters devoted to the analyses of McGrath's plays, it will be seen that the attenuation of idiosyncratic traits of character in the Uber-Marionette or its human counterpart is reflected in McGrath's reduction of character to stereotype. Andy McChuckemup, Lord Crask, Lady Phosphate and Texas Jim in The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, Mrs. Beatrice Webb, Sir F. Banbury, Lady Parmoor and Mr. Baldwin in Little Red Hen, Mrs. Harrison, Mr. Cleghorn and Mr. Plum in Yobbo Nowt, Bessie McGuigan and the Rev. Murdo Smith in Blood Red Roses quite obviously are not meant to be taken seriously as real flesh-and-blood characters; they stand rather for types of people who are paradigmatic of certain values or the lack of them; they make gestures which are representative of what such "characters" might be expected to do or say in the given circumstances, but they are unrealistic insofar as exhibiting any deeper levels of thought or feeling; they are simply one-dimensional representative types, not real, idiosyncratic characters at all. As a result, there would seem to be no individual tragic dimension to such "characters" because an audience cannot be moved by the

¹Edward Gordon Craig, On the Art of the Theatre, (London: Heinemann, 1980), p.62

circumstances of an abstraction as it may be by the circumstances of the individual being abstracted. The advantage of using stereotypes becomes clear when the action generated by what the characters say or do assumes synecdochic force, permitting them as metaphors, to represent collectively a vast number of individuals. In this sense these representative types may be perceived as little more than masks, conveying the essence of the character used for accomplishing McGrath's objective of political persuasion. Their departure from conventional realism and their emphasis on theatricality clearly marks some compatibility with the Uber-Marionette: released from the task of "fleshing out" the role with his own experience, the actor, behind the mask of stereotype, becomes a medium for the dramatist's expression. In this way, the dramatist "controls" character in a way in which he would be unable where interpretation based on personal experience is permitted. From this point-of-view, McGrath's procedure may be considered firmly in the line of descent leading from Craig and Appia. McGrath, however, goes further: recognising the limitations of stereotype to "move" an audience in a way that can be accomplished by the impersonality of the Uber-Marionette, McGrath destroys further any illusion that may have been created by mimesis by differentiating emphatically between actor and character, the actor frequently stepping out of character to address the audience as actor. Such a procedure

immediately draws attention to the division between the theatricality of what has gone before (the mask of stereotype) and, not just the illusion of reality, but reality itself. As a result, the audience is simultaneously aware of both the symbolic gesture of the mask and the reality of which the gesture is symbolic. Now aware of both reality and its symbolic representation, the audience find themselves in a favorable situation to consider this relationship in terms of McGrath's potential meanings. Concerning form, Appia wrote that "Every contradiction ceases from the moment that the form and the object of the expression are identical."¹ McGrath's "open" approach to character, overtly disclosing the relationship between theatricality and reality, is one means of conveying his political meaning(s). More must be said of this apropos of Bertolt Brecht, but for now it will be propitious to defer until the discussion of Brecht later in this chapter. In the meantime, a word must be said concerning the stage setting.

Demanding a return to a stage cleared for acting, Craig opposed what had become of the conventional stage with what has been termed "reckless and daring fiats."² Concerned

¹Adolphe Appia, "The Mise-en-Scene as Means of Expression" in Music and the Art of the Theatre, ed. Barnard Hewitt, (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1981), pp.13-14.

²By an American professor-critic quoted in Sheldon Cheney, The Theatre, (New York: David McKay Company, 1966), p.493.

only with putting a frame around a piece of the observed world, the realism of the bourgeois theatre needed to be replaced with what Yeats had called "arts that enable us to pass for a few moments into a deep of the mind that had hitherto been too subtle for our habitation."¹ Craig took an incisive step away from realism by rejecting the proscenium arch, gutting the stage, and using only the crucial and essential to suggest the scene. As he wrote:

By means of suggestion you may bring on the stage a sense of all things - the rain, the sun, the wind, the snow, the hail, the intense heat - but you will never bring them there by attempting to wrestle and close with Nature, in order so that you may seize some of her treasure and lay it before the eyes of the multitude. By means of suggestion in movement you may translate all the passions and the thoughts of vast numbers of people, or by means of the same you may assist your actor to convey the thoughts and the emotions of the particular character he impersonates. Actuality, accuracy of detail, is useless upon the stage. ²

Craig's approach here is compatible with that of Vsevelod Meyerhold (1874-1940) who saw the spectator as a "fourth creator, in addition to the author, the director, and the

¹William Butler Yeats, Essays and Introductions, (London: Macmillan, ~1961), p.224.

²Edward Gordon Craig, On the Art of the Theatre, (London: Heinemann, 1980), pp.26-27.

actor,"¹ employing "his imagination creatively in order to fill in those details suggested by the stage action."² To some degree Meyerhold realised this intention when he created for the stage "suggestions of things and not the things themselves."³ In this way "his productions were moments in a dialogue with his audience."⁴

Meyerhold is mentioned here because, like Craig and Appia, he believed that "the theatre must employ every means to assist the actor to blend his soul with that of the playwright and reveal it through the soul of the director."⁵ Like Craig also, Meyerhold removed the proscenium arch, the front curtains, the backdrop, exposing the back wall, and erected centre stage a constructivist set consisting of planes, rotating wheels, cogs, bridges, and

¹Vsevolod Meyerhold, "The Stylized Theatre" in Meyerhold on Theatre, ed. Edward Braun, (London: Methuen, 1969), p.60.

²Ibid., p.63.

³Fyodor Komissarzhevsky, Myself and the Theatre, (New York, 1920), p.71.; quoted in Marvin Carlson, Theories of the Theatre, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), p.319.

⁴Paul Schmidt, ed., Meyerhold at Work, trans. P. Schmidt, I. Levin, V. McGee, (Austin Texas: University of Texas Press, 1980), p.81.

⁵Vsevolod Meyerhold, "The New Theatre Forshadowed in Literature" in Meyerhold on Theatre, ed. Edward Braun, (London: Methuen, 1969), p.38.

ramps on varying elevations.

Craig's reduction of detail to suggest the atmosphere of a scene, rather than provide a facsimile of reality, led him to such scenic devices as scaffolding, lighting bridges, bare three-dimensional stage pieces, and the daring use of colour. In On the Art of the Theatre, he advises:

Avoid the so-called "naturalistic" in movement as well as in scene and costume. The naturalistic stepped in on the Stage because the artificial had grown finicking, insipid; but do not forget that there is such a thing as noble artificiality. ¹

One might conclude that Craig's reduction of theatre to essences embraces equally setting and costume. His approach to character, movement, lighting, scenic design, and costume clearly show Craig moving toward a more "expressionist" drama in which the process of theatre is openly disclosed to the audience by its rejection "both of naturalism, with its fidelity to surface reality and interest in social questions, and symbolism, with its worship of beauty and vision of other worldly paradises."² The emphasis of expressionism on

¹Edward Gordon Craig, On the Art of the Theatre, (London: Heinemann, 1980), p.35.

²Marvin Carlson, Theories of the Theatre, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), p.346.

subjectivity, abstraction, distortion and lyric excess over mimesis and formal beauty attempted "to project human emotions and attitudes into inanimate objects, to seek truth in humanity's spiritual qualities rather than in external appearances."¹ Freed from the burden of imitating life, theatre could "preserve its artistic autonomy, that is to say, live by its own scenic means."² Indeed, actors could be emancipated from the proscenium theatre, and scenic and lighting effects be arranged in full view of the audience, "making them a part of the theatrical world."³ This procedure immediately expunges the illusion of reality, preventing the occurrence of mimesis in the audience. Where Craig and Appia step back from complete fidelity to expressionism is in the protagonist's freedom to alter the emphasis of the action and impose his own subjectivity on events. Nonetheless, their engagement with expressionist technique permits them to seize what George Simmel calls "the essence of life without the content of life."⁴ According to

¹Oscar G. Brockett, History of the Theatre, 5th ed., (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1987), p.598.

²Tristan Tzara, Oeuvres completes, 5 vols. (Paris, 1975), Vol.1, p.564, quoted in Marvin Carlson, Theories of the Theatre, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), p.343.

³Ibid.

⁴Quoted in Eric Bentley, The Playwright as Thinker, (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1946; reprint, San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1987), p.99.

Sheldon Cheney, Craig, more than anyone, was responsible for a radical change of thinking which brought a "sane Expressionism" into the theatre:

by his leadership in the fight against Realism, by his clearing out from the stage the old picturing paraphernalia, by his insistence upon the use of the stage itself, the actors, the movements, the lights, the color, as a creative medium, by his sweep of imagination that transcends all sense of surface actuality, by his ideal of 'a noble artificiality' as against that of naturalness, by his fathering of those hundreds of artist-directors, who were making over the stage from a photographic peep-show box to a theatrically articulate medium. 1

Similarly for Appia:

From the point of view of form, a work of art is not a reproduction of some aspect of life to which everyone can contribute his experience and ability; rather it is the harmonious union of various technical devices for the sole purpose of communicating to many the conception of one artist. 2

For this reason, the setting should no longer rely "upon

¹Sheldon Cheney, The Theatre, (New York: David McKay Company, 1966), pp.519-520.

²Adolphe Appia, "The Mise-en-Scene as Means of Expression" in Music and the Art of the Theatre, ed. Barnard Hewitt, (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1981), pp.11-12.

conventions, as the opera normally does, nor upon an imitation of life, as does the spoken drama." Instead, each play will devise its own staging, unique to itself.¹ For Appia the inspiration of the design must be endemic to the work itself, instead of arising from convention or external reality.

Marvin Carlson explains:

The present system of staging prevents the actor, when animated by music, from relating in any unified way to the inanimate setting around him. The solution is to allow this setting also to be conditioned by music. Scene painting must be replaced by lighting, which shares the animation of the living actor and can serve as the unifying element between him and the neutral stage space required by the movements of the music. 2

Instead of the cluttered, detailed, illusionistic settings of the realistic stage, Appia calls for a simple arrangement of spatial forms, evocative rather than specific, which would give major emphasis to light and the movement in space of the actor.³ As Appia writes:

¹Adolphe Appia, La mise en scene du drame wagnerian, (Paris, 1895), p.12; in Marvin Carlson, Theories of the Theatre, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), p.294.

²Marvin Carlson, Theories of the Theatre, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), p.294.

³Ibid., pp.293-294.

Whether properties, furniture, and other objects of the stage decor are usable or not is a secondary consideration. The main thing is to arrange the space not to suit the painted "signs," or in other words to design the fictive form of the inanimate setting so as to relate as much as possible to the real form of the actor. Only if the use of painted scenery is limited and its importance diminished, will the practical scenery have the necessary freedom. Once this is achieved the scenery will be brought into a more direct relationship not only with the actor but with the drama itself. 1

For Appia, then, the scenery has a much more functional purpose than mere imitation of reality. As Thomas Dickinson explains:

[Appia] applied to the setting a space law as absolute as the time law of music; he went beyond this and indicated the manner by which the space law of the setting could be so coordinated with the time law of the music through the medium of the living and moving actor. 2

McGrath's drama proceeds without recourse to this strict directorial control, but his tendency is to mount a production

¹Adolphe Appia, "The Mise-en-Scene as Means of Expression" in Music and the Art of the Theatre, ed. Barnard Hewitt, (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1981), p.25.

²Thomas H. Dickinson, The Theatre in a Changing Europe, (London: Putnam, undated), p.42.

utilising the facilities of each venue as an integral part of the work. Rather than a cluttered stage imitative of reality, the 7:84 Company generally stages its productions in the most austere setting, using only functional stage properties essential to suggest the scene or conveying meaning, as, for instance, the pop-up book scenery and simple chairs in The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil. This has become increasingly necessary since much of the 7:84 Theatre Company's work is transient, a single performance often taking place in the most uncompromising venue (social halls, working-men's clubs, factory cafeterias, etc.). Certainly neither the time nor the facilities lend themselves to much theatrical "scenery." The extreme simplicity in the physical setting is more compatible with Jacques Copeau's famous treteau nu (bare boards), allowing the actor "to present the text without theatrical intrusion."¹ The tendency is rather to use the available space in the most pragmatic and functional manner, the "natural" setting becoming one with the rest of the production in what Apollinaire referred to as "a total theatre piece."² The abandonment of mimetic techniques imitative of surface reality indicates a depiction

¹Marvin Carlson, Theories of the Theatre, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), p.339.

²Ibid., p.343.

of inner truth distinct from external appearance, yet it is a truth expressed largely through scenic means in which the audience is fully aware of the process occurring before its eyes. While McGrath's characters are frequently distorted to the point of abstraction in which, rather than idiosyncratic characters, they become representative types, they express by synecdochic reduction the "essence of life" in which the dramatist attempts to elicit what Apollinaire called "life itself in all its truth," with little or no reference to the actual content of mundane reality. In this sense the 7:84 Company is essentially a kind of expressionistic theatre in which deliberate distortions of reality are made to achieve predetermined effects. Such distortions are generally to a lesser degree historical (concerning content) and to a greater degree distortions of character and scene. Yet as bizarre on stage as McGrath's plays may sometimes appear, they do seem to express the essence of either the real-life drama which occurred in the historical past, or the contemporary drama which is being played out either in the actual present or in the realm of imagination. If, after all, the essence of character, situation, or scene is all that is necessary to achieve the dramatist's intention, any excessive attention to realistic detail will be superfluous, tangential, and as a result distracting. The 7:84 Company's performance modes and scenic techniques are, therefore, at the service of their

concern with essences. Their procedure appears to work well in a non-realistic drama like McGrath's because the "open" approach to setting becomes unified with the open, non-illusionist presentation of the stage action. The unity is reinforced because the "setting" used in this manner is paradigmatic of McGrath's political and social idealism. Appia has written:

In every work of art there must be a harmonious relationship between feeling and form, a perfect balance between the idea which the artist wishes to express and the means he uses to express it. If one of the means seems to us clearly unnecessary to the expression of the idea, or if the artist's idea - the object of his expression - is only imperfectly communicated to us by the means he employs, our aesthetic pleasure is weakened, if not destroyed. ¹

If the idea McGrath wishes to express is the disclosure of a fair and equitable society, the form of his work must plainly be appropriate to this idea. Rather than the illusion of an action which is supposed to be taking place at that very moment before the audience's eyes, the 7:84 Company openly confesses to a theatrical production in which the actors admit

¹Adolphe Appia, "The Mise-en-Scene as Means of Expression" in Music and the Art of the Theatre, ed. Barnard Hewitt, (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1981), p.10.

to being real people playing representative parts; nothing spurious occurs on stage; the technology is plainly visible for the audience to see: changes in the simple, often symbolic, stage properties are done openly, without pretense. The audience is rarely, if ever, tricked into believing it is watching reality. On the contrary, it is asked to see exactly what is before it, understand the process and the significance of what that means, to think about the play's content and its relationship to the working relations of the production and to the audience itself, and, finally, in the political sense, to act. In effect, the open revelation of the process of theatre "speaks" to the audience in a way that the illusion created by imitation cannot. As Theodor Adorno writes: ". . . the less words have to proclaim what they cannot completely believe themselves, the more telling they become in their own right, and the less they need a surplus of meaning beyond what they are."¹ Hence, McGrath's rejection of realism is at the service of his ostensible purpose, namely, the overthrow of capitalism and the creation of a socialist state. His nexus with Craig and Appia is at that point where process is used wordlessly to assert meaning where it cannot otherwise be asserted. This is not to imply that McGrath's theatre is

¹Theodor Adorno, "Commitment" in Aesthetics and Politics, ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.187.

based on the theatrical principles of Craig, Appia or that it has been directly influenced by either theorist; yet it is difficult to see the burgeoning of a theatre like the 7:84 Company had not the radical innovations of Craig and Appia preceded it.

One might assume that McGrath's drama has taken its form from the necessity of appealing to a largely working-class audience. Copeau declared that all great dramatists of the past appealed to the taste of the public, "whether the taste of an elite or that of the masses."¹ Copeau writes:

The nature of the public, its quantity,
its frame of mind - that is the essential,
the first postulate in the problem of the
future. ²

For a modern theatre to appeal to a new audience, continues Copeau, a new "theatre language" must be developed to accommodate the needs and tastes of the audience. Playwrights will not find such a form, however, in the "tired worn-out form which the past century willed to them; nor in the flatly realistic style of the actors; nor even in the

¹Jacques Copeau, "The Popular Theatre" in Copeau: Texts on Theatre, ed. & trans. John Rudlin & Norman H. Paul, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p.188.

²Jacques Copeau, "Once Again: Style," Tulane Drama Review VII, 4 (Summer 1963): p.181.

bourgeois trappings of the stages and auditoriums of our theatres."¹ For Copeau, theatrical form must grow naturally from the requirements of the audience:

Theatre for the masses is not necessarily theatre of the masses. . . . I believe that the more the theatre intends to appeal effectively to a wide public, to remain vivid in its memory, to influence its life on the deepest levels, the more it will have to be simplified and purified, reducing its elements numerically in order to develop their force. ²

The 7:84 Company has, in fact, used performance modes calculated to appeal to a wide public (the working classes) and to remain vivid in its consciousness (the Clearances in The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, for example, or the "Red Clyde" speeches in Little Red Hen, or the belligerent Bessie McGuigan in Blood Red Roses), attempting to have a profound political influence on the lives of its audience. To do this, it has developed its own theatrical "language" of forms "simplified" and "purified" from those of realism, forms more compatible with what John Rudlin calls "presentational action" rather than representational action.

¹Jacques Copeau, "Once Again: Style," Tulane Drama Review VII, 4 (Summer 1963): p.182.

²Jacques Copeau, "The Popular Theatre" in Copeau: Texts on Theatre, ed. & trans. John Rudlin & Norman H. Paul, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p.194.

Presentational action, like presentational production, stands in opposition to representational. The distinction is quite clear in painting. . . . An actor who admits that he is an actor, and that he has an audience before him, and that it is his business to charm and move that audience by the brilliance of his art, is a presentational actor. The difference deserves better terms, but they do not yet exist. 1

As has been shown above,² McGrath makes a sharp distinction in performance between actor and character, the actor frequently stepping out of character and presenting himself as himself, addressing the audience directly as actor, not character. This technique supposedly creates a certain confidence in the audience, a confidence in the Company's "honesty" (displayed by its openness) and in the political integrity transmitted in its tendency to demonstrate the "truth" of its socialist ideas. While the 7:84 Company frequently performs material which represents specific historical episodes, the performance itself is always "presentational" rather than representational. In this way the Company is able to appeal to a wide audience which might otherwise lose interest in the performance, and to "distance" the audience from the performance in order to make the

¹John Rudlin, Jacques Copeau, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.60.

²See pp.30-33 above.

audience consider the material in a critical manner.¹

Although McGrath in pursuit of his political purpose appeals primarily to the working class, Copeau argues that the new theatre will be "not a class theatre, a theatre which makes claims for any particular group. It will be a theatre of union and of regeneration."² Nonetheless, McGrath, in turning from what may be considered a spurious realism to a more open presentation of the process of theatre, in effect embraces, consciously or not, many methods associated with earlier forms of theatre from the commedia dell'arte to the English music hall. His procedure, in other words, for creating a new regenerated theatre language of simplified and purified forms appears to support Copeau's "periodic return to sources, to the maternal lap" in order to "become attached to this renewing of inner strength."³ Certainly, in Britain,

¹"Distancing" is a term of Hegelian origin used frequently by Brecht after 1936 to designate certain procedures intended to suppress well-known and obvious features of character and stage procedure. With the latter rendered unfamiliar and surprising, the audience is prevented from any instinctive identification and from confusing the drama with reality. Distancing effects include interludes and songs to interrupt the plot, placards anticipating later events, prologues and epilogues, admonitions to the audience, gestures, metaphors, music, and scenery.

²Jacques Copeau, "The Popular Theatre" in Copeau: Texts on Theatre, ed. & trans. John Rudlin & Norman H. Paul, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p.190.

³Ibid., p.190.

the 7:84 Theatre Company augmented what was rapidly becoming a radical departure from the moribund realism of post-war British theatre. Its return to earlier sources and its rejection of popular convention gave McGrath's new drama a revitalised sense of purpose which appealed to a class formerly pushed to the periphery of the British economic and cultural system. To make some sort of theatrical contact with this class, McGrath seems to have understood the necessity of accepting the same premise from which Meyerhold proceeded, that "the impossibility of embracing the totality of reality justifies the schematisation of the real."¹ The quintessence of theatre being its theatricality and mystery, Meyerhold believed it should "seek its most profound effects through its own means: the mime, the mask, the juggler, the puppet, the improvised action."² Through these the drama can reveal the "vast unfathomed depths" beneath surface reality by directing the audience to a more penetrating view of reality in their effort "to solve the riddle of the inscrutable."³

Meyerhold's "dialogue with his audience" led, inevitably,

¹Marvin Carlson, Theories of the Theatre, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), p.323.

²Vsevolod Meyerhold, "The Fairground Booth" in Meyerhold on Theatre, ed. Edward Braun, (London: Methuen, 1969), pp.137,139.

³Ibid.

away from the psychological insight and analyses of character so often predicated in realism and turned toward a theatricality devoid of representational content:

To create a feeling of exuberant joy in both performer and audience, Meyerhold thought it more efficient for actors to plummet down a slide, swing on a trapeze, or turn a somersault than to restrict themselves to behaviour considered appropriate by traditional social standards. ¹

The physical clarity resulting from Meyerhold's focus on the mechanics of physical movement and plastic forms in space produces a state of "excitation" which communicates itself to the spectator and induces him to share in the actor's performance."² As a result, Meyerhold's withdrawal from realism forces audience awareness of theatrical process as an end in itself. Following Meyerhold's example, the 7:84 Theatre Company has given its work what Theodore Shank has termed "a visual emphasis"³ for the purpose of elevating process over product, form over content, participation over

¹Oscar G. Brockett, History of the Theatre, 5th ed., (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1987), p.616.

²Vsevolod Meyerhold, "The Actor of the Future and Biomechanics" in Meyerhold on Theatre, ed. Edward Braun, (London: Methuen, 1969), p.199.

³Theodore Shank, American Alternative Theatre, (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1982), p.3.

passivity. If a state of excitation induced by what Meyerhold called "emotional participation" appears antithetical to a theatre so heavily committed to such Brechtian methods as distancing, it should be clear also that material concerning issues deeply felt and of special interest to working-class audiences does have an emotional impact. Brecht, I think, would have agreed that an emotional impact does not necessarily occlude thought or action; on the contrary, powerful emotions induced by the stage presentation tend to force an audience to think more critically about a situation before acting, the emotional and intellectual faculties working together as a single powerful motivator. Thus, the 7:84 Company's organisation of material - dialogue, physical action, music, songs, recitation, jokes, melodrama, etc. - is planned to force an audience into a state of excitation (emotional as well as cerebral) which induces them to participate in the performance. In general such participation is a more powerful motivator than the passive observation which Brecht so opposed, his objective being as much political as that of the 7:84 Company. Hence, incorporation of Meyerhold's methods into the 7:84 Company's work, far from being a rejection of Brechtian technique, should be seen as an appropriation of methods which work for them. Similarly, the theories of Craig and Appia have been discussed here because, in their overall impact, they have had substantive

implications for McGrath's drama. Their ideas and practices have provided the precondition for a new kind of theatre in which formal characteristics have, to some degree or other, replaced documentary effectiveness as a source of meaning. The significant features of these formal changes include the three-dimensional use of space and the disturbance of certain boundaries involving the political implications of the relationship between actors and audience, and the audience and the performance.

Even so, the focus thus far on McGrath's theatre primarily in terms of theatrical form has excluded serious consideration of its political underpinning, except insofar as any departure from realism in a capitalist society may be considered a political act. Social and political injustice being, in general, the substance of McGrath's drama, attention must now be paid to the relationship between this substance and the process of its dramatisation, between the marrow of meaning, so to speak, and its integument. Ostensibly at least, the process of theatre is at the service of political meaning, for as Erwin Piscator (1893-1966) wrote:

. . . technical innovations were never an end in themselves for me. Any means I have used or am currently in the process of using were designed to elevate the events on the stage onto a historical plane and not just to enlarge the technical range of the stage machinery. ¹

¹Erwin Piscator, The Political Theatre, trans. Hugh Rorrison, (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1980), p.188.

The use of the stage as a political forum makes clear an infrangible connection between the stagecraft of the 7:84 Company and that of Piscator, for whom "the intellectual target is and will always remain the proleteriat and the social revolution."¹ Indeed, following the example of the Soviet Proletarian Theatre, Piscator's central concern involved his search for a new language of images which would increase communication with a working-class audience, the proleteriat. Of this class he wrote:

It is not possible at this time to speak of a public which has an intellectual need or is intellectually unified. The bourgeois public is so self-contradictory, so split and divided within itself, that it is scarcely possible to use its intellectual needs as a guide. Not so the proletariat. It does choose and reject with the unadulterated instinct of its class. 2

John McGrath has written of "important and significant differences between the cultural values and traditions of the working class and those of the middle class. There are equally important differences between their respective theatre values and traditions."³ Such differences demand a theatre

¹Erwin Piscator, The Political Theatre, trans. Hugh Rorrison, (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1980), p.131.

²Ibid.

³John McGrath, "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre," Theatre Quarterly IX, 35 (1979): p.51.

language appropriate to them, for, as McGrath makes clear,

if a socialist theatre company is interested in contacting working-class audiences with some entertainment, they can't simply walk in with a critical production of Schiller, or a play written and performed in a style designed to appeal to the bourgeois scene of Bromley, or even the intelligentsia of NW1. 1

On the contrary, the performance modes of theatre require a radical transformation from the cramped realism of the bourgeois theatre, for "if a socialist theatre company or a socialist playwright wants to speak to the working class, then they would do well to learn something of its language, and not assume that the language of bourgeois theatre of the twentieth century is all that is worthy of pouring from their lips."²

Of crucial importance to Piscator, then, who saw theatre as at once an outgrowth of the shifting state of society and reflective of it, was the development of a theatre language that would appeal to the proletariat. As he wrote:

The growth of a type of drama whose form and aims are suited to our theatre is a

¹John McGrath, "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre," Theatre Quarterly IX, 35 (1979): p.53.

²Ibid., p.54.

process which cannot be separated from the general development of society in our times. The content, the problems and even the forms, cannot be chosen a la carte. The question of theatrical demand is also a prime consideration and until two years ago the bourgeois theatre had no reason to raise social, far less revolutionary, topics for discussion. 1

To be sure, Piscator argues that what happens in the theatre is the logical outcome of a struggle whose beginnings lie in the social and economic roots of our own time. As he writes:

In its most fruitful periods the theatre was deeply involved with the community, but today, at a time when the great masses of the people have been awakened to political life and quite rightly demand that the state should be reformed according to its ideas, the fate of the theatre, if it is not to be the dainty prerogative of the upper class, must align itself through thick and thin with the needs and requirements and tribulations of the masses. In the final estimate its task is to make the people who stream into the theatre aware of what is slumbering in their unconscious, vague and incoherent. 2

If there is a contradiction in the structure of the theatre, Piscator contends, it is "nothing more or less than a contradiction in the times as a whole; it proves to be

¹Erwin Piscator, The Political Theatre, trans. Hugh Rorrison, (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1980), p.132.

²Ibid., p.134.

impossible to build up a proletarian theatre within the framework of our current social structure."¹ That a proletarian theatre presupposes that the proletariat has the financial means to support such a theatre in turn presupposes that the proletariat has managed to make itself into a dominant social and economic power. Until that actually happens, however, Piscator's theatre can be no more than a revolutionary theatre using every means at its disposal for the ideological liberation of the proletariat and promotion of the social upheaval to free both the proletariat and its theatre from such contradictions. Yet, Piscator argues, it is not the theatre as an institution that is out of date but the plays and the staging. Indeed, the plays of Piscator's day were "lifeless, petrified and quite out of touch with the times."² Even film reflected more of reality, more of the real excitement of the times than the stage with its ponderous dramatic and technical machinery. For this reason, argues Piscator, a theatre that tackles the problems of the day, that meets the public need for reflection of the times we live in courageously and objectively, such a theatre will have more intrinsic social value and, as a result, will be of more

¹Erwin Piscator, The Political Theatre, trans. Hugh Rorrison, (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1980), p.173.

²Ibid., p.179.

interest to the public.

Piscator's declaration that his use of technical means was never an end in itself but always at the service of events on stage follows from his conviction that a change in the function of the theatre necessitated bringing its stage equipment up to date. As he makes clear, intellectual and social revolutions have always been closely bound up with technical upheavals. For centuries the stage had remained "a square segment, a picture frame through which the spectator gets a 'forbidden look' at a strange world."¹ Piscator stood by the principle that technical advances made outside the theatre should be put to service on the stage, which will no longer be a decorative stage-set but a constructive stage. As he explains:

The insurmountable gulf between stage and auditorium has decisively shaped international drama for three centuries. It was a drama of make-believe. The theater existed for three hundred years on the fiction that there were no spectators in the house. Even works which were revolutionary in their day deferred to this assumption, were forced to defer to it. Why? Because the theatre as an institution, as a piece of apparatus, as a house had never until 1917 been in hands of the oppressed class, and because that class had never been in a position to liberate

¹Erwin Piscator, The Political Theatre, trans. Hugh Rorrison, (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1980), p.189.

the theatre structurally as well as intellectually. This task was taken in hand straight away and with the utmost energy by the stage directors of Revolutionary Russia. I had no choice but to follow the same path in my conquest of the theatre, but in our context that path led neither to the end of the theatre, nor, at least to date, to a change in theatre architecture, but only to radical changes in stage machinery, which, taken all in all, amounted to the destruction of the old box form. ¹

Rejecting painted backgrounds, Piscator used theatre space architecturally. Instead of persuading the audience to forget it was in a theatre, he drew attention to the fact. To disseminate information and interpolate objective documentation he introduced the detached commentator and film projections. Frequently his theatrical counterpoint exposed the distinction between subjective impressions and objective reality, or between private ambitions and historical events. For example, in Rasputin, the Romanovs, the War and the People Which Rose Against Them the Tsarina is assured that the situation will be resolved satisfactorily, while projected on a screen above the stage is a list of lost battles and, above the list, a film sequence of her assassination.²

¹Erwin Piscator, The Political Theatre, trans. Hugh Rorrison, (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1980), p.189.

²Ronald Hayman, Brecht, a Biography, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p.128.

Piscator's creation of a documentary theatre included the use of newspaper reports, graphs, statistics, explanatory captions, lantern slides of photographs or documents, newsreels, and documentary film sequences to establish the socio-political milieu of the play; at the same time, propaganda was delivered by a chorus situated either on stage or in the auditorium, drawing the audience into the action of the play. The purpose of this documentary evidence is explained by Piscator:

Political drama must, if it is to fulfill its pedagogic aim, make documentary evidence its point of departure, and not the individual. On the contrary, it must maintain the most impersonal, "objective" attitude to the characters in the subject, not in a neutral sense, but in the sense of a materialistic conception of history. 1

Concerning the use of statistics as "evidence," John McGrath refers to Gramsci's mounting on the masthead of his paper Lassalle's phrase "to tell the truth is revolutionary" and then quotes Goran Therborn when he writes ". . . if you want to change something fundamentally and in a definite direction, you have to know how it works; if you want only to sit on it, then no such problems arise."² In his

¹Erwin Piscator, The Political Theatre, trans. Hugh Rorrison, (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1980), p.296.

²John McGrath, "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre," Theatre Quarterly IX, 35 (1979): p.47.

introduction to the published version of The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil McGrath describes the audience's reaction to such evidence:

We had never "written down" to some supposed audience level. It's just as well we hadn't. Direct Marxist analysis of the Clearances (c.f. Das Kapital), long chunks of readings from eye-witness historical accounts, facts and figures about oil companies and the technicalities about exploration, all were not only grasped but waited for, expected. 1

Piscator's aim, however, was a functional theatre communicating through its component parts, rather than through only the actor's speech. The technical presentation of the visual imagery, for example, reinforced dialogue or served as ironic counterpoint to the stage action. Hence, Piscator's basic attitude toward historical drama made a complete revision of traditional dramatic form. What was important for Piscator was not what he calls "the inner arc of dramatic events," but the most accurate and comprehensive epic account of the period "from its roots to its ultimate ramifications."² Drama is important for Piscator only where

¹John McGrath, "The Year of the Cheviot," The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1981), p.xviii.

²Erwin Piscator, The Political Theatre, trans. Hugh Rorrison, (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1980), p.230.

it can be supported by documentary evidence. Film is one means of achieving the necessary breadth and depth; it is inserted between acts and after decisive turns of event to provide illumination as "the searchlight of history penetrates the uttermost darkness of the times."¹ As Hayman explains:

His elaborate technology, his lifts, his conveyor belts, his complex lighting plots, his projections of the human face blown up gigantically all derive from a determination to translate history into visual imagery, while making imagery inseparable from action. ²

Piscator's sophisticated technology of the time, then, served the political function of providing documentary evidence through images in the way McGrath has done with verbal analysis, statistics, and archival information. In this way, as Peter Szondi contends, Piscator corrects the falsification that the "social drama" necessarily produced "because of the contradiction between an alienated and reified conditionality in its thematic and an interpersonal immediacy in its formal postulate."³ By means of this supplementary

¹Erwin Piscator, The Political Theatre, trans. Hugh Rorrison, (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1980), p.230.

²Ronald Hayman, Brecht, a Biography, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p.128.

³Peter Szondi, Theory of the Modern Drama, ed. & trans. Michael Hays, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), pp.66-67.

material in his mise-en-scene Piscator provided an adequate form for the historical process of reification and "socialization." As Piscator writes:

Conclusive proof can be based only on scientific analysis of the material. This I can only do, in the language of the stage, if I can get beyond the scenes from life, beyond the purely individual aspect of the characters and of the fortuitous nature of their fates. And the way to do this is to show the link between events on the stage and the great forces active in history. It is not by chance that the factual substance becomes the main thing in each play. It is only from the facts themselves that the constraints and the constant mechanisms of life emerge, giving a deeper meaning to our private fates. ¹

Central to Piscator's thought is man's relationship to society, for "a time in which the relationship of individuals in the community to one another, the revision of human values, the realignment of social relationships is the order of the day cannot fail to see mankind in terms of society and the social problems of the times, i.e., as a political being."² Since the social fabric is woven from this thread of economics and politics, Piscator's elevation of private scenes to the plane of the historical means, in effect, elevation into the

¹Erwin Piscator, The Political Theatre, trans. Hugh Rorrison, (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1980), pp.93-94.

²Ibid., p.187.

political, economic and social. Through them he attempted to make the connection between private individuals and the "historical" aspect of the twentieth century.

Piscator's elevation of the scenic to the plane of the historical - what Szondi terms "a relativizing of the immediacy of the setting by nonactualized objectivity"¹ - destroys the absoluteness of the dramatic form and makes way for the rise of epic theatre. The term "epic" refers to the narrator's critical attitude to the stage action, relating and commenting on the action but not identifying with it as in conventional realism. Such a method permits the audience to consider the material at a critical distance, even though the emotional is not entirely excluded. As Piscator writes:

Both elements, the documentary and the emotional or lyrical, are essential in drama. Yet for us, for the purposes of our theatre feelings must be clearly fitted into the overall pattern, the spectator must be able to see them from all sides as if they were under a bell jar; for our purposes, even feelings must be pressed into service as evidence to support our world view. We cannot allow them to posture independently. ²

Piscator's inclusion of film, which is grounded in the

¹Peter Szondi, Theory of the Modern Drama, ed. & trans. Michael Hays, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), p.67.

²Erwin Piscator, The Political Theatre, trans. Hugh Rorrison, (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1980), p.207.

opposing spaces of the camera and its object, permitted him to augment the stage action with what had previously escaped dramatic actualisation - the reification of the social, the political and the economic.

This epic quality allowed him to elevate "the scenic to the plane of the historical."¹ In staging such works as Hoppla, Such Is Life! (1927) and Rasputin, the Romanovs, the War, and the People which Rose Against Them (1927) it was crucial to Piscator's meaning to understand the fate of the individual in terms of general historical tendencies.

Not only does the inherently epic nature of film ("inherently epic" because documentary film "distances" the audience) transform socio-political drama into epic theatre; the juxtaposition of stage and screen action also creates the relativising effect of epic to the extent that the stage action alone ceases to be the single foundation for the totality of the work. This totality no longer emerges dialectically from interpersonal events. Instead, a combination of montage, film reports, choruses, projections of calendars, pointed allusions, etc. contribute to this totality. The diversity of simultaneous setting discloses spatially that the various parts have become internally

¹Erwin Piscator, The Political Theatre, trans. Hugh Rorrison, (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1980), p.211.

relative to one another. In a revue of this kind even time is no longer represented as that absolute sequence of events in the present so familiar in realistic theatre. Film leaves past events in the past and represents them documentarily. It can also anticipate future events in the stage action and dissipate the suspense about what will happen in the end by means of epic juxtaposition.¹

The juxtaposition of past events with present action, direct commentary by a narrator, direct audience address, songs, dances, and jokes all serve to "distance" the audience, forcing them to view the material more critically with less "emotional" involvement.

While McGrath himself has rarely used film consistently as a theatrical method, his juxtaposition of events on stage (The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil), his visual and spoken commentaries in the present contrasting with historical scenes set in the past (Little Red Hen), the actors directly addressing the audience in the present to comment on past events (Yobbo Nowt), and the use of placards and sign boards providing a form of chorus by contrasting what is spoken with what is unspoken (Blood Red Roses) can all assist the actor in creating the desired objectivity. A monologue

¹Peter Szondi, Theory of the Modern Drama, ed. & trans. Michael Hays, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), pp.68-69.

can be illustrated, and a character's motives can be demonstrated. The use of song is particularly pertinent, lending a musical and frequently ironic extension to the world depicted on stage. Usually this world is presented as taking place in the present, allowing the audience to become involved mimetically; but before that can happen, the scene is undercut by an actor stepping out of character in the real present, or by a comic song, or by a commentary, or a piece of stage business. In this way the audience is constantly teased by the conflict between the real and the illusory. The point of these comparisons is that the stage technique in the work of both Piscator and McGrath emerges ready-made from the subject of the play, or at least from what Piscator liked to call "the artistic aggregate of the subject matter."¹ If this technique "symbolises" a stage of society (the disillusion and decline of a social order), it is secondary and fortuitous. The stage technique in its turn predetermines the textural shape of the play.²

Piscator said of the actor's role in this theatre that every word must be as central to the drama as is the centre to the periphery of a circle. Put another way, everything on the

¹Erwin Piscator, The Political Theatre, trans. Hugh Rorrison, (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1980), p.257.

²Ibid.

stage is calculable, fitting together organically. Keeping the overall effect in mind, Piscator saw the actor in the first instance simply as fulfilling a function, just as do light, colour, music, scenery, and script. It is not, therefore, a question of the actor's intensifying his personal individuality by means of his ability as an actor, but of projecting his human qualities in relation to his artistic-political function. As a result, the actor who is aware of his function grows with it and takes his style from it. He no longer needs the inspiration of the moment or elaborate stock business; he need only "act out (in a higher sense: naively) his own spiritual and physical substance to be effective."¹ Perceiving in the craft of the actor a science belonging to the intellectual structure of the theatre, to its pedagogy, Piscator made "the constructive aspect of thought his point of departure."²

In the context of the revolutionary theatre, the actor's task is to act out his role in terms of class, as was required in Piscator's play, Hoppla, Such is Life! In this play each role was made to appear as a sharply etched expression of a social class. Lacking both private characteristics and

¹Erwin Piscator, The Political Theatre, trans. Hugh Rorrison, (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1980), p.122.

²Ibid., p.123.

individual complexity, the roles were developed rather as types, as representatives of particular social and economic attitudes - the attitude towards history, towards the passing of history, towards events, towards peoples and their actions. Such an attitude begins with their acknowledgement of being active, the source of their activity being a contradiction within themselves. Manfred Wekwerth has made clear this point in writing of Brecht's plays, which he insists do not have to be constantly supplemented by "correct knowledge;" instead, in their historical and poetic concreteness they can be transferred by the audience to other times and situations, for paradoxically, the more concrete they appear, the more they can be universalised or, to use Brecht's term, "historicized." Similarly in Piscator's theatre, the actor's task is a matter of conveying not only information, but also what Brecht called "the critical attitude."¹ This means that the tasks facing the actors are defined in advance. Each actor has to be quite conscious of the fact that he represents a particular social class. Only when he has mastered the spirit of the part in terms of its political significance can the actor create his role.

¹Manfred Wekwerth, "Questions concerning Brecht," trans. David Blostein, Re-interpreting Brecht: his influence on contemporary drama and film, eds. Pia Kleber and Colin Visser, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp.28-29.

Piscator even went so far in The Good Soldier Schwejk to use puppet-like types and semi-humans on which the makeup and costumes were exaggerated. As he wrote, "Everything was done to make the distinction between the types obvious and clear and to exaggerate the single figures into clownlike symbols."¹

This inquiry has, to some extent, already examined McGrath's dramatic use of character. One may view in his deployment of representative types and his use of essences the artistic-political function of character in terms of social class, representing social and economic attitudes. This can be seen plainly in such characters as O'Rourke and Gunner Crawley in Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun, in the contrast of values expressed by Bakke and the Priest in Bakke's Night of Fame, by Janet, Marie McPherson, Sellar, Lord Crask, Lady Phosphate, and Lord Selkirk in The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, by the Machonochies in Fish in the Sea, by Marie Arnold and Mr. Plum in Yobbo Nowt, by the two Hens, Ramsay McDonald, and King George V in Little Red Hen, and by Sandy and Bessie McGuigan in Blood Red Roses. Given their context, psychological analyses of these characters would be not only unprofitable, but also

¹Erwin Piscator, The Political Theatre, trans. Hugh Rorrison, (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1980), p.264.

superfluous. Rather than character motivation and development, the plays themselves are concerned with issues that involve whole classes of people represented by these types. In this sense the interaction of character demonstrates not so much the relationship between individuals as the relationship between social classes. Hence, not the stereotypical characters but the development of the historical action becomes the primary focus of McGrath's drama.¹ The reason for this, as it was for Piscator, is, of course, political. Piscator has written: ". . . we wish documents from the past to be seen in the light of the present moment, not episodes from times past but those times themselves, not fragments but a unified whole, history not as background but as political reality."² For McGrath, as for Piscator, the use of representative types permits the practical realisation on stage of this political reality.

One other connection between Piscator and McGrath should be made, and that concerns the working relationships of those involved in the production of the theatre. Piscator explains that collective effort is endemic to the theatre. He believed that no other art form, with the exception of architecture and

¹See pp.361-362 below.

²Erwin Piscator, The Political Theatre, trans. Hugh Rorrison, (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1980), p.230.

orchestral music, relies so heavily on a like-minded community effort as does the theatre. Piscator himself encouraged collective organisation because the principle of collective cooperation proved to have great advantages and transferred some of the physical and moral responsibility from the stage director. For Piscator "The cogs mesh like a well-designed machine, and from this theatre which we have based on our principles there emerges a kind of collective directorship."¹ Elsewhere in this inquiry, relations of production in the 7:84 Company will be dealt with in some detail.² It is worth noting here merely that, although McGrath claims responsibility for the initial writing of scripts, the framework is added to, documented, and built up by various members of the Company. Indeed, collectivised relations of production appear to be not only consistent with the principles of a radically socialist organisation such as the 7:84 Company, but essential if the theatre is to serve as a paradigm for its social ideals, the process and practice of theatre reinforcing and supporting the meaning of the stage action. This is what Piscator meant when he wrote "In contrast to the directorial principles of the normal run of

¹Erwin Piscator, The Political Theatre, trans. Hugh Rorrison, (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1980), p.195.

²See pp.387-392 & 469-470 below.

theatres which make the director as unfree as his subordinates, the principle of a democratic community dedicated to one idea constantly furnishes proof of its own productiveness and of its human and artistic significance."¹ Manfred Wekwerth suggests that political theatre (theatre which seeks to change the world) must somehow awaken people's courage and capacity for collectivism. If changing the means and conditions of production enlarges the sphere of human possibilities as it relates to global needs, abilities, and pleasures, then changing society must now also include the working out of individual differences in terms of those needs, abilities, and pleasures.²

Taking a quotation from Marx and Engels which states that the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class conflicts, will be replaced by an association in which the free development of each will lead to the free development of all, Wekwerth suggests that this widening sphere of human possibilities makes possible a theatre which can assume the function of performing those possibilities. That is, a socially-minded theatre should demonstrate "not only human

¹Erwin Piscator, The Political Theatre, trans. Hugh Rorrison, (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1980), pp.195-196.

²Manfred Wekwerth, "Questions concerning Brecht," trans. David Blostein, Re-interpreting Brecht: his influence on contemporary drama and film, eds. Pia Kleber and Colin Visser, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.23.

conduct as the ensemble of social relations, but also social relations as an ensemble of concretely individual people."¹ Such a theatre could describe the future not by fleshing out established historical concepts but by interpreting history truthfully for what it is: the process of people pursuing their objectives.

Differentiating specific social relationships generates in the community the strength which it needs for wider change. In this sense theatre does not merely picture society; it creates it.

What Wekwerth is describing is theatre that assimilates reality not merely as the external performing style, "realism," but rather as its real subject matter - "trial and error as play in search of the new where one least suspects it; and individual self-discovery as a community project which starts with the assumption that individuality exists because other individuals exist."²

Along these same lines, the 7:84 Company's sharing in a spirit of revolution and a concern for artistic matters may be seen by both its liberation from a system which creates

¹Manfred Wekwerth, "Questions concerning Brecht," trans. David Blostein, Re-interpreting Brecht: his influence on contemporary drama and film, eds. Pia Kleber and Colin Visser, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.24.

²Ibid.

classes, and its exploration of a dramatic form which facilitates this liberation.

Like Piscator, Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) aspired to serving the causes of the revolutionary left while reinforcing the class-consciousness of the proletariat by involving the audience in the drama's political didacticism and in its entertainment. The aim of Brecht's theory designed to promote Marxism is to disclose the relations of production that give the work its form, thus forcing the consumer into closer contact with the production process. The dramatist is no longer a faceless pedagogue, but overtly seeks the collaboration of the audience. For Brecht, "to think, or write, or produce a play also means: to transform society, to transform the state, to subject ideologies to close scrutiny."¹

Like Piscator also, Brecht began where the contradiction between social thematic and dramatic form becomes apparent - in the realist social drama. Not realism itself but what Peter Szondi calls "its internal adversary" was appropriated by Piscator and Brecht, resulting in transformation at the expense of dramatic form. But instead of simply lifting the revue element out of the antithetical structure of

¹Brecht quoted in Fredrick Ewen, Bertolt Brecht, His Art, His Life and His Times, (London: Calder and Boyars, 1970), p.199.

conventional realist drama, as Piscator had done to change it into a new principle of form, Brecht attempted to instate the scientific principle, shifting the objectivity of realism "from thematic contingency into institutional stability of form."¹ Brecht contends that the mere imitation of reality ignores the contradictions in the world; this precludes all possibility of change. Instead, he offers a new concept of realism in which aesthetic means are used to represent the world as process. Estrangement - the so-called V-Effect - is used to disclose how the laws of society operate, showing that nothing is normal and natural for all time, and hence intervening in the process. From this premise, a new concept of art emerges, art as a social practice, in which the emotions are given their place and are not opposed to reason. As reality changes, so must art if it is to capture the new reality.

Brecht therefore opposed the "mystic gulf" of Wagnerian drama, which fused the elements of theatre into one seductive and overpowering whole to engulf the audience in an aesthetic totality. In doing so, he avoided the sense of Aristotelian catharsis whereby the audience is purged of the emotions of pity and fear and replaced with an exhilaration generated by

¹Peter Szondi, Theory of the Modern Drama, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), p.69.

the discovery of new truths the practice of manipulating the audience's emotions, "the latter of which left them with no better understanding of their universe or the social conditions of their time."¹ Of his own time he wrote:

. . . everything easily slips into the insubstantial and unapproachable, and we begin to talk of Weltanschauung when the world in question has already dissolved. Even materialism is little more than an idea with us. Sexual pleasure with us turns into marital obligations. The pleasures of art subserve general culture, and by learning we mean not an enjoyable process of finding out, but the forcible shoving of our nose into something. Our activity has none of the pleasure of exploration, and if we want to make an impression we do not say how much fun we have got out of something but how much effort it has cost us. ²

To avoid suspense and this sense of catharsis, Brecht suggests that the scientific eye, to which nature has been largely forced to submit, should focus on those people who subdue nature and whose lives are now determined by its exploitation. The reason why the new way of thinking and feeling has not yet penetrated the great mass of men is that

¹Martin Esslin, Brecht, a Choice of Evils, 4th ed., (London: Methuen, 1984), p.117.

²Bertolt Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre" in Brecht on Theatre, ed. and trans. John Willett, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p.204.

. . . the sciences, for all their success in exploiting and dominating nature, have been stopped by the class which they brought to power - the bourgeoisie - from operating in another field where darkness still reigns, namely that of the relations which people have to one another during the exploiting and dominating process. 1

Brecht therefore insists that the theatre should depict the interpersonal relationships that belong to the age in which nature has been mastered or, more precisely, it should show the division between people created by this "gigantic joint undertaking."² The contradictions may be found within any situation identified, not necessarily opposed but denoting one and the same thing in its contradictory aspects. Such contradictions appear as the socio-historical expression of the conditions represented. Division, however, does not necessarily imply a former unity. Human beings produce contradictions, and Brecht's dialectical process discloses relations between people and their contradictory interactions in social life.³ Brecht makes clear that the necessary condition for this depiction is a renunciation of dramatic

¹Bertolt Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre" in Brecht on Theatre, ed. and trans. John Willett, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p.184.

²Ibid.

³Elizabeth Wright, Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation, (London: Routledge, 1989), p.25.

form. The increasingly problematic nature of interpersonal relationships calls the drama itself into question, since dramatic form contends that these relationships are unproblematic.¹ As Brecht writes:

We need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself. ²

The shifts in emphasis from dramatic to epic theatre have been listed too frequently to warrant inclusion here, but it is clear such shifts replace the essentially dramatic transformation of subject and object into one another with an epic confrontation. Brecht's non-Aristotelian theatre encourages a new attitude, another way of seeing, in which stage sets, instead of looking like conventional ready-made constructions, appear to be constructions in progress, requiring active interpretation as regards their function. Stage properties are used not so much as realistic background

¹Peter Szondi, Theory of the Modern Drama, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), pp.69-70.

²Bertolt Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre" in Brecht on Theatre, trans. John Willett, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p.190.

as something to be acted upon. Each play necessitates its own special stage set to reveal its particular point, the emphasis being on the relation between stage and audience as joint participants in the production of the text. In this way the audience remains aware of reality and, as a result, is in a position to assess the text's continuing usefulness as regards the stage events.¹ Hence, scientific objectivity is changed into epic objectivity and permeates all aspects of the stage play - its structure, its language, and its mise-en-scene.

In Brecht's theatre the stage action no longer embodies the entire performance as had the unfolding of dramatic events in the past, a circumstance leading to the occlusion of the fact of the performance. The progression of events is now the object of a stage narrative or, as Peter Szondi puts it, "the stage is to these events what the narrator is to the object of his narration."² Indeed, it is the confrontation of the two that produces the totality of meaning. Similarly, the audience is neither excluded from the play nor pulled into it by the suggestive power of illusion which seduces the audience into ceasing to be an audience. Instead, as an audience, it is confronted by the events presented as objects for

¹Elizabeth Wright, Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation, (London: Routledge, 1989), p.26.

²Peter Szondi, Theory of the Modern Drama, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), p.71.

consideration. No longer can the action change the time of the performance into an absolute unfolding of time in the present because it does not, by itself, complete and dominate the work. Instead of focusing exclusively on the conclusion that develops naturally in the present of the performance, the performance acknowledges the existence of both past and present, replacing the dramatic concern with ends with "an epic freedom to pause and reflect."¹ Now that the performer himself has become the object of the theatrical performance, the performance itself can go beyond the performer and ask questions about the causal grounds for his actions.

Brecht's primary theatrical device, the Verfremdungseffekt, used to "estrangle" or "distance" the audience to the extent of preventing empathy and identification with either situation or characters, is intended to instill a critical attitude towards stage action. Prevention of empathetic illusion or a mimesis of reality tends to disclose the workings of societal processes and human behaviour, in effect revealing the causal processes of individual and societal motivation.²

¹Peter Szondi, Theory of the Modern Drama, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), p.71.

²Douglas Kellner, "Brecht's Marxist Aesthetic: the Korsch Connection" in Bertolt Brecht. Political Theory and Literary Practice, eds. Betty Nance Weber and Hubert Heinen, (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1980), p.32.

Estrangement is a mode of critical seeing that goes on within a process by which man identifies his objects, setting up a series of social, political, and ideological interruptions that remind the audience that representations are not given but produced.¹ Estrangement thus signifies a particular way of seeing the world, which can be understood only insofar as "one recognises it in its movement."² For Brecht, movement should be seen not as the result of some external impulse, but as self-movement, which is to say the ceaseless seesaw interpenetration of internal contradictions. Brecht's theory argues that the causes of human relationships are inherent to the relationships themselves. The cause of social movement, for example, lies in the division of society into contradictory groups. In the theatre representation of human relationships, therefore, is conceivable only as the depiction of the contradictions inherent in a given phenomenon or, to put it another way, the depiction of a condition from the perspective of its potential movement. Contradictions within social phenomena, however, do not always appear at the surface. Indeed, the essence of a thing is frequently concealed by its appearance; in fact, appearance usually seems

¹Elizabeth Wright, Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation, (London: Routledge, 1989), p.19.

²Manfred Wekwerth, "Brecht Today," Drama Review 12 (Fall 1967): p.119.

more crucial than the essence itself. Estrangement, then, seeks methods of dismantling the habitual way of seeing a given phenomenon in order to disclose the contradictions within it and so unmask its reality. A method of this kind allows the essence of a given phenomenon to pierce and so undercut its appearance at every moment. In the theatre this transparency puts into historical perspective the relationship between human affairs and social appearance.¹ Contrary to popular misconception, estrangement does not dispense with identification but examines it critically, employing montage to demonstrate that no representation is immutable. Since it may be directed at an ideology such as Marxism, it is political in that the audience is never just the recipient of a representation, but is included in it. In this way it forces the audience to relate themselves to a pre-existent social order by examining their representations as connected to a mode of production. Indeed, in Brecht's theory, the audience is theatricalised by being made aware of the fictional elements in their own existence. For Brecht, estrangement is an instrument for changing reality; it is a social device, undoing the effects of reality under bourgeois capitalism. Brecht's objective is to encourage the audience

¹Manfred Wekwerth, "Brecht Today," Drama Review 12 (Fall 1967): pp.119-120.

to transform the social reality which continues to produce distorted objects, including human beings.¹

In traditional theatre the audience generally views stage action as if it were present when it is actually happening. In this circumstance empathy or identification with the protagonist takes place, so that the protagonist, losing concreteness and truth, takes on a generically human quality. In contrast the historical view attempts, through a variety of practical measures (in the text, the music, the acting, the set design, the choreography, etc.), to reveal the contradictions in the processes being represented so that the historical conditions which make these processes possible are revealed simultaneously. The actor tries to give the impression that, though he performs only a single action, it implies a choice of several alternatives, including the opposite of what he is performing. Indeed, all his actions are the outcome of a choice, many alternatives being ideologically concealed or not even considered. Such exclusion, however, does not release the actor from the responsibility of having made the wrong choice. In Brecht's view, the audience itself should assume this responsibility. This critical, dialectical style of acting Brecht saw as

¹Elizabeth Wright, Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation, (London: Routledge, 1989), pp.19-24.

inherently Marxist since each action is shown to contain its own contradictions and also because the actor's critical attitude to the character provides social, political, and ideological insights meant to motivate the audience to press for radical changes in society. Everything is done to give historical processes the stamp of something striking, contradictory, not self-evident or "natural"; for the purpose of the defamiliarising method is precisely to permit the audience to exercise productive social criticism.

In its totality the play can be defamiliarised or estranged by using the prologue, a curtain-raiser or, as Piscator demonstrated, the projection of scenes and captions, no longer possessing the absoluteness of conventional drama; referring now to the newly-disclosed fact of "representation," it becomes the object of this representation. The actors can estrange themselves by introducing themselves to the audience or by speaking of themselves in the third person. Never is the actor permitted to submerge himself entirely in the character. Instead, as Terry Eagleton has remarked, "alienated acting hollows out the imaginary plenitude of everyday actions, deconstructing them into their social determinants and inscribing within them the conditions of their making."¹ In this way the "void" hollowed out by

¹Terry Eagleton, "Brecht and Rhetoric," New Literary History 3 (1985): p.633.

alienated acting renders a piece of stage business exterior to itself, forging a space between actor and action and in the process attempting to deconstruct the ideological self-identity of quotidian social behaviour. Brecht hints at the origins of this process:

One easily forgets that human education proceeds along highly theatrical lines. In a quite theatrical manner the child is taught how to behave; logical arguments only come later. When such-and-such occurs, it is told (or seen), one must laugh. It joins in when there is laughter, without knowing why; if asked why it is laughing it is wholly confused. In the same way it joins in shedding tears, not only weeping because the grown-ups do so but also feeling genuine sorrow. This can be seen at funerals, whose meaning escapes children entirely. These are theatrical events which form the character. The human being copies gestures, miming, tones of voice. And weeping arises from sorrow, but sorrow also arises from weeping. ¹

If, then, understanding is possible only by participation in specific forms of social life, as Brecht suggests, the theatre's task is to expose the process by which we come to grasp meaning only by an act of "theatrical" miming. Children acquire understanding by miming demonstrated gestures and arrive at "required" emotions only by way of exhibiting

¹Bertolt Brecht, "Two Essays on Unprofessional Acting" in Brecht on Theatre, ed. and trans. John Willett, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p.152.

motions considered "appropriate" to them. As a result, utterances "represent" not referents but practices, "gestures, miming, tones of voice." Brecht's theatrical method, therefore, as with the Verfremdungseffekt, is simultaneously representational and antirepresentational, at once mimetic and performative. His description of a child copying miming suggests the possibility of performing the performing of a performance, as if the child begins as a Brechtian actor, performing what he does not at first feel, but by doing so, ending up as an Aristotelian actor. Brecht's aim is to reverse this process, forcing us to learn emotions through sharing in specific forms of social behaviour, returning the audience to its original childlike condition. In the theatre, like children the audience observes new forms of behaviour and so develops the forms appropriate to it. In both theatre and childhood meaning is not "representational" but the effect of representation, the result of miming certain practices.¹

Acting, then, is the process of imitating the motions of behaviour without really feeling the emotions behind it. For Brecht, acting is a kind of fraud, and conspicuously fraudulent acting, of an amateur or alienated kind, forces one's focus on that void between action and the formation of

¹Terry Eagleton, "Brecht and Rhetoric," New Literary History 3 (1985): pp.635-636.

emotion within the self. Brechtian acting, then, is closely connected with Brecht's notion of historicisation as a related means of distancing the dramatic events and helping the audience to see the specific and changeable conditions shaping a character's situation. In his "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting" Brecht writes:

The actor must play the incidents as historical ones. Historical incidents are unique, transitory incidents associated with particular periods. The conduct of the persons involved in them is not fixed and "universally human"; it includes elements that have been or may be overtaken by the course of history, and is subject to criticism from the immediately following period's point of view. ¹

Certain critics - specifically Martin Esslin² - have denied this, declaring that any ideological influence stemming from Brecht's plays comes from the intellectual content of the plays themselves and not from the style of acting. What Brecht wanted, of course, was to change the audience's belief that human nature remains constant through all the changing

¹Bertolt Brecht, "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting" in Brecht on Theatre, ed. and trans. John Willett, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p.140.

²Martin Esslin, "Some Reflections on Brecht and Acting" in Re-interpreting Brecht: his influence on contemporary drama and film, eds. Pia Kleber and Colin Visser, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp.142-146.

dialectics of history. Esslin does not deny the Marxist idea that human nature changes through changing social conditions, but he is unconvinced that a detached, critical rendering of, say, King Lear would be more effective than a naturalistic rendering in making the audience aware of it or more critical of Lear's misguided actions. Indeed, of the many productions Esslin has seen performed in the best naturalistic style, none has convinced him of the stability of a human nature unaffected by social change.

Similarly, in Esslin's other example, Othello, that pride in a woman as a piece of personal property is a concept which burgeoned from a certain type of social organisation and is not inherent in human nature will quite naturally dawn on most audiences, no matter in what acting style the play is performed. Esslin admits that setting a play within its historical context, showing the social, political, and philosophical implications of the time it depicts, is important. His skepticism concerns the efficacy of "acting in a detached style" in accomplishing that particular task. As he makes clear, the staging, the direction, the design, the interpretation of the lines have a much greater impact on the meaning than the style in which the lines are delivered. For Esslin, the actor can never become Othello, nor does the audience completely identify with the character on stage. The actor, rather, uses the gestus of showing himself or herself

to impress the audience with his or her skill as an actor, no matter what the style.

In the Verfremdungseffekt of which Brecht speaks, however, the contradictions inherent in the style of acting are more than just a way of impressing the audience with the actor's skill. By clearly showing the separation between the actor and his persona, between actor and audience, and between past and present, such contradictions become themselves the subject of a performance. This can be accomplished only by non-empathetic distancing - Esslin's own translation of Verfremdungseffekt - for Brecht shows us what certain characters did in the past while simultaneously showing us that they may have done the wrong thing. In effect, each action is shown to contain its own contradictions, providing insights intended to prove powerful incentives for the audience to press for radical changes in society. It would appear that such explicit contrasting of the results of actions performed under diverse social conditions would lead to clarification concerning the change in human nature exposed to those conditions. Even where knowledge is conveyed, it is a matter of conveying not only information but also an attitude, what Brecht himself called the "critical attitude":

As we cannot invite the audience to fling
itself into the story as if it were a river
and let itself be carried vaguely hither
and thither, the individual episodes have

to be knotted together in such a way that the knots are easily noticed. The episodes must not succeed one another indistinguishably but must give us a chance to interpose our judgement. ¹

By impersonating quotidian behaviour in contrivedly hollow ways, the dramatic gesture represents it in all its insufficiency, in its rigid control of material conditions and historical possibilities, representing at once the same absence that it produces. The stage action represents the quotidian action as differenced through what Terry Eagleton calls "the former's nonself-identity, which nevertheless remains self-identical - recognizable - enough to do all this representing rather than merely to 'reflect' a 'given' nonidentity in the world."² What Eagleton means here is that a certain structure of presence must be retained, for verisimilitude between stage and society can be impaired only if it is first asserted as fact. As Eagleton writes:

Brecht was particularly keen on encouraging his actors to observe and reproduce actions precisely, for without such an element of

¹Bertolt Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre" in Brecht on Theatre, trans. John Willett, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p.201.

²Terry Eagleton, "Brecht and Rhetoric," New Literary History 3 (1985): p.633.

presence and recognition the absencing of the alienation effect would be non-productively rather than productively empty. The internal structure of the effect is one of presence and absence together, or rather a problematic contention of the two in which the distinction between "representation" and "nonrepresentation" is itself thrown into question. The stage action must be self-identical enough to represent as nonself-identical an apparently self-identical world, but in that very act puts its own self-identity into question. 1

This self-annulling or self-invalidating of the theatrical signifier serves as political metaphor, for if political society understood its distinguishing difference, a need for representational theatre would cease to exist. Political society must be represented as a production simply because it does not recognise itself as such, a situation which inevitably results in a self-contradictory aesthetic since the concept of production itself disputes classical notions of representation. Brecht's alienation effect makes profitable use of this contradiction, positing social reality's prior existence and revealing it as fecklessly impotent. In other words, while converting social processes into rhetoric, it unmasks them as social practices. Such demonstrable social attitudes or basic dispositions Brecht called gests. A gestus demonstrates the relation of people to

¹Terry Eagleton, "Brecht and Rhetoric," New Literary History 3 (1985): p.633.

one another. To view social reality gestically is to define its essence by means of gesture, denoting "the curve of intentionality, the class of socially typical performance" to which "the complexities of action or discourse may be reduced."¹ Even if all discourse is gestic, some needs to be more rhetorical than the rest since its purpose is to unmask "the repressed rhetoricity of nontheatrical utterances,"² a disclosure which, for Brecht, is inevitably materialist since it concerns contextualising speech and action in terms of their institutional conditions. This, one assumes, is what Manfred Wekwerth means when he speaks of "an encompassing, genuine materialism of the theatre, if one takes it as a premise that in society human relationships are materialism."³ The Brechtian gestus is the pose calculated to demonstrate the character's estrangement from the role assigned to the actor; the actor does this by supplying contradictory attitudes, gestures, and modes of speech disclosing the difference within the subject, his "being for himself as against his being for others, who confront him

¹Terry Eagleton, "Brecht and Rhetoric," New Literary History 3 (1985): p.634.

²Ibid.

³Manfred Wekwerth, "Questions concerning Brecht," Re-interpreting Brecht: his influence on contemporary drama and film, eds. Pia Kleber and Colin Visser, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.25.

similarly divided."¹ This occurs because estrangement is "not only of objects but of subjects also; the play of dialectical contradictions in language does not discriminate between the two."² A gestic acting style permits the actor to unmask human activity, since the gestic style of acting always demonstrates this relationship. As Wekwerth argues:

And isn't the gestic style of performance itself this human activity, in that it shows everything in a definite relationship to the audience, setting out to astonish them, make them angry, plead with them, sharpen their hearing, invite sympathy, and bring out their protest? ³

The critical attitude toward what is demonstrated, as required of an audience by Brecht, is unattainable without the basic gestus of wonder. The gestus "why does it have to happen this way instead of another?" generates both insight and the pleasure of self-discovery and self-confirmation. For this reason, as Wekwerth argues, "the elementary founding principles of theatre - gestic music, gestic speaking, gestic

¹Elizabeth Wright, Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation, (London: Routledge, 1989), p.52.

²Ibid.

³Manfred Wekwerth, "Questions concerning Brecht," Re-interpreting Brecht: his influence on contemporary drama and film, eds. Pia Kleber and Colin Visser, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.25.

silence, gestic movement, gestic gesture, gestic writing, gestic metaphor - create a relationship between people and their objective, be it discovery or pleasure, thought or play."¹ When the processes of reality are observed with accuracy and presented with artistry, then estrangement ascends to the level of an artistic process: the critical attitude becomes a source of enjoyment. Theatre must make it enjoyable to ask critical questions about even the most common of quotidian phenomena. As Wekwerth argues:

Couldn't the role of pleasure make the function of Brecht's theatre and indeed all contemporary theatre - whether its subject be serious or amusing, instructive or playful - more complex and at the same time more concrete, in that the effect of this theatre is measured not only by the communicated content and form but also by the increase in humanity's capacity for enjoyment? Indeed, one would think that this is where its main business lies - which means nothing but that needs are most often satisfied through art when new ones are awakened. The awakening of curiosity, thirst for knowledge, capriciousness, anger, happiness, sadness, courage and exuberance is at the same time an extension of people's capacity to enjoy, and their capacity to change, which increases, or at least can increase delightfully. But in the new society man, through his individual goals and their extension, is at once creator of historical

¹Manfred Wekwerth, "Questions concerning Brecht," Re-interpreting Brecht: his influence on contemporary drama and film, eds. Pia Kleber and Colin Visser, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.26.

possibilities and progenitor of social tendencies. 1

The point here is not a matter of reaching some idealised human being, but of helping actual people to achieve self-realisation. The development of one's potential, therefore, should not be confined to some idea of "humanising," in which one approaches an already accepted human nature. The potential of a society established on scientific analysis also allows for the possibility of the unexpected. Wekwerth suggests that the capacity to enjoy, what one may call the consciousness of personal development, is possibly a most effective impetus of socialist society.¹

One should not, however desist at analysis and discovery of societal relationships, but rather transform these discoveries into impulses pertinent to mankind as a whole. In the "scientific age" of which Brecht spoke, knowledge and science have become direct productive forces; as a result, it becomes necessary for a theatre bent on transforming this reality to make them a subject for performance. Indeed, Brecht utilized the science and knowledge of his day not so

¹Manfred Wekwerth, "Questions concerning Brecht," Re-interpreting Brecht: his influence on contemporary drama and film, eds. Pia Kleber and Colin Visser, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.27.

²Ibid., pp.27-28.

much to reify knowledge at the expense of art, but instead to create once again - by means of the new developments in science and technology - the reified and enjoyable art long since relinquished by a middle class which has settled for substitutes.

At a time when human interactivity is becoming increasingly complex, it goes without saying that increased knowledge and understanding of connections are necessary to depict activity of this kind in the theatre, for they enable it to weave increased knowledge into even stronger impulses. As Elizabeth Wright argues:

Brecht does not want knowledge reduced to the status of a commodity, but would like it to be combined with pleasure in making new discoveries, coupled with displeasure at the present state of affairs. Knowledge is to become praxis, that continual adjustment of meanings which results from the interaction of changing human need with the contingencies of nature. For Brecht knowledge is that which results in a process of continual transformation of the world as we know it. ¹

Brecht's point seems to be that the reification of science and technology demands their contemplation and appreciation in such a way as to produce pleasure. Indeed, only the most

¹Elizabeth Wright, Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation, (London: Routledge, 1989), p.25.

strenuous effort of reason can result in new sensuous pleasures in art. For Brecht, human emotion is not something set apart from class conflict; it is closely involved with it. Human joy and misery are not resolved in the postures of traditional theatre; rather the audience is made to view the contradictions as productive in their absurdity, even though they are necessary to the movement from one position to another. Pleasure is derived from the recognition of shifts in meaning, whether comic or tragic.¹ Even emotions which appeal logically to reason are more authentic, for the strongest feelings are those liberated by reason if only by dint of their capacity to keep the scientific era alive by transforming it. Brecht called this concept naivete. Manfred Wekwerth explains:

Reason becomes more reasonable when it appears in the naive, concrete desires of men. And the naive, desires of man become more naive through reason, because they become fulfillable. And so, if the theatre of the scientific era wants to add pleasure to the era, there is no other way but to further the science of pleasure in such a way that science, even everyday knowledge, becomes a pleasure in itself. Naivete, synonym for this synthesis, is one of the surest ways by which art can arrive, through the reasonable representation

¹Elizabeth Wright, Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation, (London: Routledge, 1989), p.44.

of reality, at the realization of reason
in man's pleasure. 1

Brecht's concept of naivete, then, does not take precedence over acknowledging and understanding but follows from them; naivete is reinforced by the absorption of knowledge, permitting complexity to be understood naively. One must acknowledge one's desire for enjoyment while recognising the strenuous effort needed to produce it. In the theatre one demands facility and lightness in production precisely because the things represented weigh heavily enough in themselves.² Manfred Wekwerth again:

But isn't it precisely the huge reification of technology and science which asks that a person contemplate and savour them naively - as his own doing? Aren't the feeling of desire, the raising of curiosity, the awakening of passion, of anger, of protest, of agreement - in short all subjective emotions, all individual feelings today - a particularly urgent form of alienation, a reworking of what Brecht calls the 'social causal nexus' into an individual driving force? Isn't that driving force today decidedly the causal nexus? Isn't the new naivete that Brecht demands of the theatre a concrete demand for that 'philosophical folk-theatre' which draws its life from philosophy and entertainment - that is,

¹Manfred Wekwerth, "Brecht Today," Drama Review 12 (Fall 1967): p.123. . .

²Ibid. p.124.~

from pleasure as the beginning and end of all knowledge? Surely here that 'end-in-itself' is realized which Marx sees as the most important reason for human existence, and which is fulfilled only through an enormous effort of society? 1

The audience's critical attitude to the play's material should not be considered only as an exclusively rational, neutral, or scientific attitude. It is also an artistic, productive, and appreciative attitude which represents in aesthetics a practical criticism of nature, including man's own nature. As far as Brecht is concerned, in its significance, range, and pleasurable content, such an inquiring, dynamic, original attitude is in no way inferior to the old Aristotelian catharsis.

Despite John McGrath's reservations concerning Brecht's theory and practice,² their respective methods of staging have too much in common to be dismissed as coincidental. One can only assume that McGrath has taken from Brecht, directly or indirectly, what has proved most useful to the 7:84 Theatre Company. Brecht's insistence on the portrayal of

¹Manfred Wekwerth, "Questions concerning Brecht," Re-interpreting Brecht: his influence on contemporary drama and film, eds. Pia Kleber and Colin Visser, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.34.

²John McGrath, A Good Night Out: Audience, Class and Form, (London: Methuen, 1981), pp.37-43.

interpersonal relationships belonging to the age depicted has been the ergo propter hoc of McGrath's renunciation of dramatic form, the fact of the performance itself producing a confrontation that enriches the totality of meaning. In a play like The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, for example, McGrath breaks with traditional dramatic form by distancing the audience in a number of ways. The opening scene of the play serves to demonstrate McGrath's methods. A fiddler begins the play with a Scottish reel to which the audience can stamp their feet. Props, costumes, and musical instruments are arranged on stage in full view of the audience. Following the reel, the M.C. comes on stage and, after applause for the fiddler, welcomes the audience, comments on the weather and conditions in the hall. He proposes to start the evening with a traditional (and particularly apt) song in which the audience can participate. As backdrop to the song, the Company positions on stage a huge book, opens the first page and, as in children's "pop-up" books, a row of mountains pops up from in between the pages. The M.C. then announces that there will be more songs and a dance, but in between there will be a story:

M.C. It begins, I suppose, with 1746 - Culloden and all that. The Highlands were in a bit of a mess. Speaking - or singing - the Gaelic language was forbidden. (singing stops.) Wearing the plaid was forbidden. (SINGER takes off her plaid, sits.) Things

were all set for a change. So Scene One -
Strathnaver 1813. 1

After the M.C.'s introduction, a page of the pop-up book is turned, and a cottage pops up from between the pages. The audience is transported to a scene in the Scottish Highlands in the past of 1813, but a Young Highlander comes on and speaks about the past in the present:

Y.H. The women were great at making it all seem fine. But it was no easy time to be alive in. Sir John Sinclair of Caithness had invented the Great Sheep; that is to say, he had introduced the Cheviot to the North. Already in Assynt the Sutherland family had cleared the people off their land - and the people were not too pleased about it. 2

Thus far nothing has been done to involve the audience mimetically in an ongoing action in the present nor to convey information to the audience by means of the conventional methods of the exposition. On the contrary, audience participation in the music, the intriguing, unrealistic "scenery," and the direct audience address has occluded any sense of mimesis. The effect of estrangement here is

¹John McGrath; The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, (London: Methuen, 1981), pp.2-3.

²Ibid., p.3.

striking, for the coalition of the virtually empty stage and real bodies forces the audience to recognise from the presence of both illusion and actuality that people are united by illusory alliances. Aesthetics and politics are indivisible, as the aesthetic becomes a metaphor for a political condition, forcing the audience to perceive illusion as part of reality. Immediately following this narration, the audience is shown the relationship between the Young Highlander and two women in the past. This is followed by a conversation between Patrick Sellar and James Loch:

SELLAR (with a Lowland Scots accent). Macdonald [sic] has told me, Mr. Loch, there are three hundred illegal stills in Strathnaver at this very moment. They claim to have no money for rent - clearly they have enough to purchase the barley. The whole thing smacks of a terrible degeneracy in the character of these aborigines . . .

LOCH. The Marquis is not unaware of the responsibility his wealth places upon him, Mr. Sellar. The future and lasting interest and honour of his family, as well as their immediate income, must be kept in view. ¹

This scene in the past is at once interrupted by two speakers in the present who comment on the action while Sellar and Loch "freeze":

¹John McGrath, The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.5.

SPEAKER 1. Their immediate income was over £120,000 per annum. In those days that was quite a lot of money.

SPEAKER 2. George Granville, Second Marquis of Stafford, inherited a huge estate in Yorkshire; he inherited another at Trentham in the Potteries; and he inherited a third at Lilleshall in Shropshire, that had coal mines on it. ¹

In this opening scene of the play the audience is neither excluded from the narrative action of the play nor entirely seduced by the illusion of reality as if the action were taking place in the present. Rather the audience is kept aware of the fact of the performance while being asked to give serious consideration to the events of the narrative. The audience has, in effect, been "distanced" to the extent that empathy or identification with either their situation or the characters has been prevented by the dramatic form so that a more rationally critical attitude is adopted toward the stage action. In this instance, the intrinsic self-movement of contradictions is evident within the divisive relationship between the two opposing social classes depicted in the scene. For example, Loch says:

LOCH. They are living in a form of slavery

¹John McGrath, The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.5.

to their own indolence. Nothing could be more at variance with the general interests of society and the individual happiness of the people themselves, than the present state of Highland manners and customs. To be happy, the people must be productive. ¹

The essence of the situation here is concealed by the appearance that Loch gives it. Brechtian estrangement techniques ("freezing" the action while speakers comment on the action) help to undercut appearances and unmask reality by disclosing the intrinsic contradictions within the situation. As, for instance, one hears the conversation between Sellar and Loch, one can evaluate its veracity in terms of what one sees and hears about the Scottish landowners. At the same time, one is impelled to make comparisons between that situation and the situation of the present in which the process of exploitation is continued. Hence, by preventing empathetic illusion, McGrath is able to disclose in true Brechtian manner the causal processes leading to changes in societal movement and motivation. As a result, the representation of human relationships has been depicted from the perspective of their inherent contradictions leading to potential movement. By hearing and seeing what the actors are saying about their characters, the audience is able to compare

¹John McGrath, The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.6.

the contradictions within the historical social groups more clearly, and to use their assessment of that situation in understanding the present. This dialectical method of presentation is, of course, Marxist in its assumptions, so that the method of presentation is entirely compatible with McGrath's political objective. By viewing the actors miming characters in the past and commenting on the relationship between them, one can see the intrinsic contradictions in this relationship, that what some characters are doing may be wrong, and that they might have acted differently. At the same time, a certain structure of verisimilitude is retained in order for the deconstruction process to occur. Hence, as the theatrical process puts its own self-identity into question, an apparently self-identical world is exposed as what Terry Eagleton calls "a nonself-identical world."¹ The complexities of action and discourse are reduced to the essence of a socially typical performance. Hence, the social attitudes and dispositions demonstrated by the actors are revealed gestically, demonstrating the relationship between the "characters" and the social groups they represent. Yet the performance goes further: as Wekwerth has suggested, this gestic style of presentation focuses what is happening on

¹Terry Eagleton, "Brecht and Rhetoric," New Literary History 3 (1985): p.633.

stage into a definite relationship with the audience: first the audience may be shocked at the recognition of such cold exploitation of the working classes, feeling resentment, even anger at Sellar and Loch and their capitalist masters, so that they respond to the appeal being made on stage by watching and listening more acutely, sympathising with those exploited to the extent that their protest is carried over against such exploitation in the present time. McGrath's approach here echoes Brecht's insistence that the style of acting should lead the audience to see the possibility for action in the world outside the theatre. When the processes of reality are observed accurately, as they appear to be in The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, and when the production in its entirety forms a unified artistic whole, as the assimilation of ceilidh, satiric and Gaelic songs, stereotype, exaggeration, distancing, and moving narrative appear to make this play, then the audience's critical attitude becomes a source of pleasure. The acquisition of new knowledge and the satisfaction of one's curiosity can increase the capacity to change, and the consciousness of his personal development is itself a source of enjoyment. The style of acting used by McGrath is designed to disclose both the workings and the machinery of society which surround the modern playgoer in everyday life, so that the playgoer will notice and criticise and, ultimately, transform them instead of accepting them as

inevitable.

In addition to pointing out historically significant forces and relationships at work in the past, Brechtian historicisation is intended to suggest the continued impact of the dramatised conditions in other historical periods. This is clear in Little Red Hen, where the confrontation of past and present is forcefully conveyed in the parallel scenes concerning an older generation of working-class militants who draw their strength and conviction from the days of the "Red Clyde" (John MacClean, Jimmy Maxton, John Wheatley, Willy Gallagher), and the new generation of Scottish activists. By personifying these generations in the characters of the Young Hen and the Old Hen, McGrath is able through their eyes to contrast the earlier time of high hopes with the present moment of aspiration. Indeed, by showing through a series of gests what went wrong in the first period, McGrath's purpose is to serve the interests of those who are now working for a better future for the people of Scotland.

It is beyond the scope of this inquiry to investigate Brecht's influence on "feminist" theatre per se, even though adaptations of Brechtian technique by women playwrights have been considerable.¹ More to the point will be an

¹Such adaptations are evident in the work of Roberta Sklar, Karen Malpede, Myrna Lamb, Megan Terry, Jo Ann Schmidman, Martha Boesing, Joan Schenkar, and Denise Hamilton.

application of Brechtian theory to two of McGrath's works dealing with issues of gender.

In certain plays, McGrath focuses as much on the problem of gender as on the abuses of capitalism or, more accurately, he has shown that our perceptions of gender are based on social roles, gestures and styles which have been developed and exploited by capitalism. In these plays McGrath's ideological relationship with Brecht results from McGrath's depicting the roots of women's oppression as much in the capitalist system as in patriarchal conditions. One imagines it a comparatively easy task for McGrath to transfer Brecht's models of class struggle to the specific situation of women. Where Brecht was primarily interested in social contradictions or class antagonisms, McGrath depicts the effects of capitalism on the relationship between men and women, the suppression in the private sphere considered a secondary phenomenon resulting from the same cause.

In Yobbo Nowt, for example, the audience is made aware that the social predicament the protagonist finds herself in is as much the result of the socially constructed nature of gender distinctions as of social class. Indeed, the difficulties of this double burden are what the play is about: Marie Arnold must learn to shake off her dependency on her worthless husband while at the same time contending with the second-class social role a corrupt political system has

imposed on her. Her husband suppresses Marie not from individual but from social motivations: he too is a victim of capitalist society. What this means in real-life terms is made abundantly clear by McGrath's use of Brechtian distancing techniques: in the opening scene Marie declares her situation directly to the audience in a ballad, and then as the action begins, the "narration" is continued by both a singer and a chorus, explaining the meaning of what Marie is doing and feeling as the action continues on stage. In addition, Marie herself addresses the audience directly, breaking with any sense of mimesis. These Brechtian devices are designed primarily to convey Marie's self-observation of her private and social roles to the audience. McGrath here develops something very much akin to the empathy between actor and audience Brecht praises in his essay on "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," a relationship in which the

performer's self-observation . . . stop
the spectator from losing himself in the
character completely . . . Yet the spectator's
empathy is not entirely rejected. The audience
identifies itself with the actor as being
an observer, and accordingly develops his
attitude of observing or looking on. 1

¹Bertolt Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" in Brecht on Theatre, ed. and trans. John Willett, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p.93.

Occasionally, as in the section called "Arrows of Desire," the audience is given a flashback to a much earlier time, so that the implications of the change from Marie's situation then and her situation now are clarified. This transformation results in an indictment of not only socially constructed gender distinctions, but also the political system which has created such distinctions.

McGrath based Yobbo Nowt on Brecht's adaption of Gorki's novel The Mother, which told the story of a working-class woman's growth to political consciousness and militancy in Russia at the beginning of this century. McGrath, however, updating the story to Britain in the 1970s, treats the narrative on a strictly individual level. As he explains:

. . . one feature of comparison with both Gorki's novel and Brecht's play is striking. In telling this story today, we could not show Marie's learning experiences as including the vital strength of a coherent mass marxist [sic] movement. It would have been unrealistic to pretend that they would. We know from our own experience, and that of the many people like Marie whom we meet throughout Britain, that such a movement is our greatest need. 1

Rather than create a wider, historical context for

¹John McGrath, Introduction to Yobbo Nowt, (London: Pluto Press Limited, 1978).

Marie's distress, as in Brecht's use of projections in The Mother, "to show the great movement of ideas in which events were taking place,"¹ McGrath exposes the private and often painful experiences of one representative working-class woman, implying the real need for such a movement of ideas.

Since her plight is representative of millions of other such women throughout England, one might justifiably consider Marie the essence of working-class womanhood. Where McGrath differs from Brecht is in his occlusion of tying-in Marie's individual experiences with mass social movements which could transform the situation. On the other hand, McGrath clearly connects with Brecht in Marie's concrete existence as one half of a social dialectic which will inevitably result in change. His social thematic appears to be the solidarity of women against men of the exploiting class.

Similarly, Blood Red Roses applies Brechtian theory to sexist issues rising from capitalist attitudes and exploitation. As in the plays discussed above, McGrath's adaption of characteristic devices of epic dramaturgy - the frequent use of songs, specific date and place names, announced scene titles, chorus, direct audience address, even announcements of the political party in power - tend to move

¹Bertolt Brecht, "Indirect Impact of the Epic Theatre" in Brecht on Theatre, ed. and trans. John Willett, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p.58.

the drama away from the mimetic effect which induces the audience to become emotionally tied to character. The narrative concerns the life of Bessie McGuigan, a working-class woman whose strength of character is contrasted with the masculine weakness and inadequacy of both her father and her husband. During the course of her evolution from childhood to middle age, Bessie is challenged by a series of humiliating sexist confrontations, each representing a specific male-dominated institution entrenched in the capitalist state - the church, the government, the local Labour Union, private industry, multi-national corporations. The confrontations are presented in a series of gests, for instance, the revelation of Reverend Murdo Smith's basic disposition and attitude towards women and marriage. Such scenes give evidence of McGrath's growing ability to write "gestic language," making the lines physically actable and conveying the basic posture and attitude of the speaker as well. At the same time, McGrath cleverly reverses the characters' gender roles - the disabled father keeping house, the inadequate husband at home and out of work - so that the male is put in the position usually assumed to be female. In this way the audience is made to see gender roles as inventions arising from social conditions which have caused the characters to take on these alternative identities. McGrath juxtaposes this double standard between the sexes, as

he does in another play Swings and Roundabouts, with the double standard between the social classes, a powerfully didactic lesson for a working-class audience. This parallel between domestic and social roles is strengthened in the scene in which Bessie's marriage is collapsing while simultaneously the men who run the Labour Unions won't support the strike because (1) it involves a majority of women and (2) they (the men) are too weak to stand up to multi-national corporations. In either case, an ironic contrast is underscored between social roles based on assumptions about gender and on actuality. McGrath is explicit in showing that women like Bessie fight real injustices stacked against them, whereas male socialists like her husband are frequently role playing without any real purpose. What becomes clear as the play develops is that domestic tensions and tragedies grow out of the broader social condition - Bessie's half-hearted reconciliation with her husband at the end of the play is a measure of what has been lost in the struggle against oppression. In this way, McGrath shows that the personal is political, thus augmenting the content of political theatre as Brecht defined it. In both Yobbo Nowt and Blood Red Roses, the intimate, often domestic scenes and settings tend to disclose the nexus between the public and private lives of women, the intensely personal terms in which they may see what Brecht calls "social relationships." Brechtian theory

de-emphasises the inner life in favour of an "idea of man as a function of the environment and the environment as a function of man,"¹ but, in contrast, McGrath focuses on the connection between inner and social realities. One should, after all, as Karen Laughlin has observed, "draw attention to the family, marriage, and the traditional work of women as a basic part of any political structure, thus redefining or expanding the parameters of the environment that should be of interest to the political playwright."²

As in McGrath's other work the actors in these plays demonstrate a viewpoint of their own, a social attitude, which affects his/her posture, voice and facial expression as in Brecht's concept of gestus. The interpersonal relationships, what happens between people, provides the material for the audience to "discuss, criticise, alter." To facilitate this, the structures of Yobbo Nowt and Blood Red Roses, while retaining some degree of linear development (the protagonists' chronological progress through life), are to some degree episodic as Brecht advocated, like chronicles, expressing at

¹Bertolt Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" in Brecht on Theatre, ed. and trans. John Willett, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p.97.

²Karen Laughlin, "Brechtian theory and American feminist theatre" in Re-interpreting Brecht: his influence on contemporary drama and film, eds. Pia Kleber and Colin Visser, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.160.

once the public world of social relationships and the protagonists' inner lives, giving the audience the opportunity to interpose its judgement. Things happen on stage sequentially as well as simultaneously, allowing scenes to break up the action and by juxtaposition to bring the audience to a recognition of masculine assumptions underlying women's traditional role. A disclosure of this kind during a scene tends to undercut the action and give it new or additional meaning.

The frequent inclusion in McGrath's drama of reflective and satiric songs serves, in addition to their functional purpose of distancing, to convey a body of middle-class and working-class ideas. In both structure and content these plays stand in sharp contrast to the "culinary opera" criticised by Brecht and may be seen, as certain works by Brecht himself are,¹ as a significant attempt to politicise the musical theatre form.

If the work of John McGrath and the 7:84 Theatre Company appears, in the Brechtian sense, far removed from the performance modes of the conventional realistic theatre, it should be understood also that much of what the 7:84 does is but an adaption of Brechtian theory rather than a strict interpretation of it. On the other hand, these adaptations are

¹The Three-Penny Opera for example.

compatible with the theory itself, a response to changes in the "given conditions of men's life together" of which Brecht himself speaks.¹

A word must still be said concerning the importance of these innovations to postmodernism, but this will be better placed after consideration of the Marxist debate on modernism in the next chapter. What I have tried to show here is the extent of McGrath's dependence on certain theatrical innovators of the past (and by implication all such innovators) who, for either aesthetic or political reasons, have withdrawn from the practice of making an imitation of surface reality. I am going to maintain that the power of McGrath's plays as performed by the 7:84 Theatre Company resides as much in their formal properties as in their documentation of historical material. Since polysemy allows their content to be appropriated one way or another, their political value is as likely to be found in their formal characteristics as in any uniform conceptual view. As a result, they expose the audience to an assault on representation from within its very practice in an attempt to undermine the ideological reproductions of the culture they serve. This is why a move toward theatricality by Craig,

¹Bertolt Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre" in Brecht on Theatre, ed. and trans. John Willett, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p.182.

Appia, Piscator, Brecht and others provides the precondition for a new reality in McGrath's drama. Not only does it attempt a return to the concrete, the actual, but it presupposes a unity which could be obtained if only things were otherwise. As with Meyerhold's "fourth creator,"¹ to experience the changing and contradictory choices of stage subjects/objects, the audience needs to be drawn into the production process. To avoid a diminution of meaning, the audience is required to co-produce. For this purpose, McGrath alternates the old communication between character and character with Brecht's technique of turning to the interested party.

McGrath's dramatic form is derived from a semiotic understanding of theatrical practice in which the traditional forms, genres, and practices of theatre collapse and the occupational distinctions between actor, dramatist, director, stage manager, scene shifter, and audience are eroded in order to absorb better the performance tradition. On stage dramatic dialogue vies with music, sound effects, gestures, sets (or non-sets), stage properties, lighting, mime, mask, and costume. This sublation of the dramatic text to other theatrical elements is compatible with the notion of theatre as a social practice, a cooperative effort which will

¹See p.34 above.

gradually erode the distinction between producers and consumers, for it is this experience with strange material that demands consideration and, as a result, draws the audience into the performance. The significant features of this performance disturb the traditional parameters of theatre, namely those between practitioner and audience, audience and product, product and practitioner. The impact of the four innovators focused on here makes itself felt in the way the form of involving the audience has become the basic structure of McGrath's drama, as if there is at work another force in the sheer bravura of what happens on stage, in the virtuosity of the performance. When the diegesis and the observation of the theatrical process come together as "entertainment," the world is transformed into what John McGrath calls "A Good Night Out." When, however, this performative mode becomes dominant over the denotative mode, accidental meaning may subvert any didactic intention. That is to say, when theatricalisation of experience undermines reference anything can happen in the communication process, both between one character and another, and between stage and audience. Indeed, from a postmodernist viewpoint, such subjective interpretation is desirable. According to Elizabeth Wright, to theatricalise is "to engage in a fictive experimenting with the interaction of language and experience, to explore the very ground of representation."¹ One may

¹Elizabeth Wright, Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation, (London: Routledge, 1989), p.97.

with justification apply to theatricalisation what Dana B. Polan says of the social practice of a cinema of spectacle and its insertion as aesthetic practice into the fabric of daily life:

What we find is an "entertainment in its virtually etymological sense - a holding-in-place, a containment, in which awareness of any realities other than the spectacular gives way to a pervading image of sense as something that simply happens, shows forth, but that cannot be told. This is the fiction of spectacle, its Imaginary. 1

Wider than the sense in which one usually takes fiction to mean simply a narrative that did not actually happen, fiction here seems to denote the practice by which an audience embraces an aestheticisation of politics similar in many ways to the process of aestheticisation of which Walter Benjamin speaks in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."² Polan makes the point that in fiction an aestheticising activity pre-empts the demands of other

¹Dana B. Polan, "'Above All Else to Make You See': Cinema and the Ideology of Spectacle," Postmodernism and Politics, ed. Jonathan Arac, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p.56.

²Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1955); reprint, (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p.217.

practices by transforming them. Although this substitution of other forms of human signification and interaction by the involvements of theatricality/spectacle may well include an activity of fiction at the level of narrative (Polan gives the example of whether or not the characters are real), fictionalising is really a broader process that replaces analysis, commentary, and distanced criticism with the immediacy of observation, the complexities of perception.¹

In writing of film, Jacques Derrida contends that any signification conveys a potential multiplicity of meanings, but that an institution of specific ways of constructing meaning occludes this potentiality. Referring to the act of signification as a "coherence in contradiction," Derrida argues that the belief that beneath the flux of chaos and appearance resides an underlying meaning, a coherence that determines sense, is nothing but a myth, one in which validity of interpretation is founded on the assumption of the presence within acts of signification of meaning and significance. In refuting the false claims of such "coherence," Derrida's purpose is to support practices that occlude social definitions of signification.²

¹Dana B. Polan, "'Above All Else to Make You See': Cinema and the Ideology of Spectacle," Postmodernism and Politics, ed. Jonathan Arac, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p.56.

²Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in Writing and Difference, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp.278-293.

Derrida's concept of coherence in contradiction, the idea of fixing the ephemera of experience within representation, may itself appear to be in contradiction with a central premise of theatricality/spectacle as social practice - the premise that theatricality/spectacle itself is a deconstruction of coherence, a disordering of orders for the sake of visual show. What Derrida apparently values in deconstruction (for example, where he sees contradiction in what had been seen previously as coherence) is an activity which has in fact become a part of theatricality/spectacle's attraction: an experience of play that goes beyond a binding into the logic of diegesis and representation. This clearly has been the case in both film and theatre, particularly with reference to the musical form, where the focus has been either entirely or in part on trading narrative sense for theatricality/spectacle. In such productions there is a kind of leap from quantity of visual effect into a realm of different quality, exceeding diegesis and becoming an explosion of sights and sounds, of energy and motion. This is a world without background in which phenomena exist or mean only in the way they appear. One way in which spectacle appears is in realism, although the attempt to portray actuality does not necessarily have anything to do with the reality of the world portrayed. Realism can become a detachment of surfaces from a fundamental history. In such a

scenario, only that which is shown exists.

Jean-Francois Lyotard speaks of cultural signification in the twentieth century building much of its momentum from a discrediting by the natural and social sciences of the explanatory models, the narratives and myths that validated earlier periods.¹ In contrast to the fictions of premodernist periods, the condition of the postmodern focuses on the seductiveness of means and a coterminous denial of ends. Although, perhaps, in John McGrath's case this state is problematic, it does seem true that theatricality/spectacle's primary function is that postmodern discrediting of significance for its own sake. Abandoning the necessity for diegetic myths, theatricality/spectacle adopts an attitude in which the only tenable position is the "reveling in the fictiveness of one's own fictive acts."² In this sense, contradiction itself becomes a new coherence, a kind of seduction, resolving the issue of Derrida's "coherence in contradiction" by transforming non-sense into sense. Modernist arguments against narrative or against illusionism

¹Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

²Dana B. Polan, "'Above All Else to Make You See': Cinema and the Ideology of Spectacle," Postmodernism and Politics, ed. Jonathan Arac, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p.59.

may well become anachronisms before a new mass culture that appropriates many of the strategies of the postmodern and so acquires as its very quality forms of antinarrative and antirealism that have been part of the modernist radicalisation.¹

The superficiality of theatricality/spectacle - its inability to mean more than it shows - is one reason why political drama that attempts to oppose existing political structures simply by showing those structures falls into the trap of merely confirming problems and abuses without offering a way beyond them. Although it may indicate the texture of the modern world, that is all it can do: beyond revelation or confirmation, theatricality/spectacle appears to provide no significant qualification of a represented situation.

When Elizabeth Wright speaks of "the notion of resistance to any imposed reified meaning" as being central to the project of "those who believe in the radical potential of modernism,"² John McGrath's involvement in postmodernist concerns becomes increasingly evident. Wright suggests not only resistance in an overt political sense, but resistance

¹Dana B. Polan, "'Above All Else to Make You See': Cinema and the Ideology of Spectacle," Postmodernism and Politics, ed. Jonathan Arac, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p.60.

²Elizabeth Wright, Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation, (London: Routledge, 1989), p.96.

to any transference of the current power structure. As a result, the very activity of reference is problematised by investigating the intrinsically dialectical structure of perception. As Wright continues,

In postmodernist art everything is subject to a V-Effect and so the concept becomes redundant. A perennial V-Effect is the result of the mismatch between signifier and signified, the uncanniness of the concrete, which itself resists the attempt to name and define it. ¹

The resistance to definition undermines the collectivity of the audience and supports acknowledgement of the marginal in experience. According to Jean-Francois Lyotard, both the modern and the postmodern are typified by an aesthetics of "experimentation," in which art grasps for what cannot be said, sensed but as yet unreified, regardless of whether a recipient of the communication yet exists:

What is at stake in artistic language today is experimentation. And to experiment means . . . that if the artefact produced is really strong, it will wind up producing its own readers, its own viewers, its own listeners. In other words, the experimental work will have as one of its effects the constitution of a pragmatic situation that did not exist

¹Elizabeth Wright, Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation, (London: Routledge, 1989), p.96.

before. It is the message itself, by its very form, that will elicit both the one who receives it and the one who sends it. They are able then to communicate with each other . . . sometimes this takes centuries, sometimes twenty years, sometimes three, and there are times when it happens right away. ¹

While it is evident that in McGrath's plays the 7:84 Theatre Company self-consciously explores history for its repression of the political facts of life, my contention is that their "experimentation" involves probing the constitution of the subject at the confluence of social and subjective forces. This, I think, is what connects the work of the 7:84 Theatre Company to that of innovators like Craig, Appia, Piscator, and Brecht. The impact and meaning of its work resides not so much in its documentary effectiveness as in its formal properties. For Craig, the focus on essences in character, setting and costume, on spiritual qualities rather than on external appearances, leads him to seek a vision of truth through symbolic gesture and increased theatricality. Appia's pursuit of the perfect balance between idea and the means used to express it leads to the harmonious union of various technical devices, a theatricality intended to produce

¹Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thebaud, Just Gaming, trans. Wlad Godzich, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p.10.

the same "noble artificiality" of which Craig spoke. In both Craig's case and in Appia's, a radical transformation of the stage was necessary to communicate "the hidden world of our inner lives." Like Appia, Piscator worked towards a functional theatre communicating through its component parts instead of only the actor's speech, but Piscator's drama burgeoned from a collectivised effort, rather than the single vision demanded by Appia. Brecht appropriated Piscator's techniques of distancing to force audience involvement in the production of the text. By renouncing established dramatic form, Brecht was able to depict the dialectical contradictions within society in order to unmask reality. For each of these innovators, experience is theatricalised, not to exclude meaning, but to provide an understanding which would be inaccessible in any way other than through theatricality. Their politico-aesthetic purpose is intrinsic to the work as a theatrical object, a strategy which challenges the audience's assumptions that a written and spoken text can compete with what is simply seen.

If my focus on these four innovators has seemed excessive, it is so only to make clear the modes of transition from realism to a postmodern theory which subsumes much of the transition before advancing a new realism. As will become clear, the forms of modernist theatre become, for McGrath, the subject matter of a more postmodern approach. Hence the

necessity for detailed focus in this chapter. It is, indeed, insofar as McGrath and the 7:84 Theatre Company have, in the manner indicated by Craig, Appia, Piscator, and Brecht, broken away from the more traditional format of realism that their work is able to provide meaning which offers a way beyond merely showing problems without offering a solution. The 7:84 Theatre Company provides an understanding of the condition of representation for both character and audience in such a way that it can have access to such understanding only by way of a theatricalisation of experience. The ultimate aim of this inquiry will be to establish the extent to which the work of John McGrath and the 7:84 Theatre Company is able to turn such experience into a theatrical object of contemplation, a realisation that would place McGrath's drama, as will be seen, securely in a postmodernist context. To accomplish this task, it is first necessary to understand modernism through the Marxist confrontation concerning the relationship between aesthetics and politics, a debate which defined the most appropriate mode of representation for the progressive artist committed to reproducing reality.

CHAPTER 2

ON THE FORM OF REPRESENTATION

The debate among the five Marxist theorists, Georg Lukacs, Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, and Theodor Adorno, focuses on the issue confronting the politically committed artist at a time when technological progress was effecting a radical transformation in the production and reception of art. It is relevant to this discussion of John McGrath's theatre because the debate centres on the demystification of art as an autonomous practice, unchanged by the history of its production and reception. This will be seen to be important to a theatre such as McGrath's in which techniques of distancing and discontinuity not only demystify theatre, but force the audience into an awareness of the political implications of such demystification. As will be explained, Brecht and Benjamin promoted an aesthetic of contradiction which defined the contours of a work of realism within a context of a declared political struggle (Marxism). They promoted the positive political and ideological function of avant-garde techniques as procedures for changing the function of art by

offering the audience a productive role and the opportunity to intervene in the class conflict. Such a concept is pertinent to a popular theatre such as the 7:84 Company, which employs performance techniques radically different from those of traditional realism because it shows how form can point the way towards a specific content, namely, how it could reveal to the audience that they themselves were involved in the production process. Since performance modes used by the 7:84 Company are adjusted to appeal to people of a specific class, time, and place, the discussion of the confrontation among the German Marxists will precede an investigation into the political and social milieu of that place and time. Such an investigation should help to clarify the need for a theatre such as the 7:84 Company and, ultimately, to place it within the context of postmodernist ideology.

The Communist Party's aesthetic stance, as expressed by Georg Lukacs in a series of essays¹ symptomatic of the administrative tone of official culture within the Comintern during the Popular Front,² manifested itself in an assault

¹Initially, Lukacs wrote for Linkskurve, the organ of the Association of Proletarian Revolutionary Writers created by the KPD in late 1928. Later essays, such as "Grosse und Verfall des Expressionismus" and "Erzahlen oder Beschreiben?" appeared from 1934 onwards in Internationale Literatur. Unless otherwise indicated, my references are to Lukacs's essays which appear in Aesthetics and Politics, (London: Verso Books, ~1986).

²Having abandoned political responsibilities in the Hungarian Communist Party, Lukacs turned to aesthetic writings and gradually acquired a commanding position as a critic within the ranks of the German literary left.

on Expressionist art. The ensuing debate concerned the conflict between Expressionist art and social realism, an issue of crucial importance to Brecht's (and hence McGrath's) aesthetic position. The most trenchant rejoinder against those who would attack Expressionism (Lukacs) came from Ernst Bloch in a number of published papers which included his essay "Discussing Expressionism."¹

Bloch and Lukacs

From 1931 onwards Lukacs developed an aesthetic theory which anticipated the cultural policies of the Popular Front period. The term "Popular Front" is used here in the sense that Lukacs himself defined it:

The Popular Front means a struggle for a genuine popular culture, a manifold relationship to every aspect of the life of one's own people as it has developed in its own individual way in the course of history. It means finding the guidelines and slogans which can emerge out of this life of the people and rouse progressive forces to new, politically effective activity. ²

In effect, these policies indicated appreciation of the

¹Ronald Taylor, trans., ed., Aesthetics and Politics, (London: Verso Books, 1986), pp.16-27.

²Georg Lukacs, "Realism in the Balance" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.57. First published in Das Wort, 1938.

classical heritage of the Enlightenment, repudiation of irrationalism to modern developments in literature, and identification of irrationalism with fascism.¹

The purpose of art, for Marxism, is the humanising of that which has become reified. Both the objective world of the product and the institutional relations that the market induces acquires a rigidified form which appears real and beyond criticism. Marx regards the reification of the product as a delusion in which imaginary characteristics are given the status of real-life objects. Lukacs points out that when human beings also become fixed in this way in their social interactions, this false objectification permeates the activity of individuals so that the delusion creates an estrangement from their real potential.

To counteract the effects of reification under capitalism, Lukacs calls for an art of "totality," a nexus of "concrete" experience and "abstract" understanding of how in the modern world such experience can be realised. The writer's task is somehow to make clear the contradictions between concrete (the dialectical advance of human beings toward the overthrow of capitalism) and abstract (the evolution of idea and culture) by a particular mode of

¹Rodney Livingstone, "Presentation I" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.10.

representation. For Lukacs, this mode is a realism which expresses an objective reality.¹

In the January 1934 edition of Internationale Literatur Lukacs attacked Expressionism² as a phenomenon within German culture. He contended that philosophies such as Neo-Kantianism, Machism, and Vitalism had prevailed in Germany prior to the First World War, expunging the links between ideology and economics or politics which permitted a critical view of imperialist society as a whole. As a literary extension of these dominant philosophies, said Lukacs, Expressionism had only added to the tenebrity, pursuing essences through stylisation and abstraction. Far from being the objective essence of the total process of reality, which Expressionism purports to be, Lukacs sees such essences as merely subjective. In fact, Bloch himself, in defining Expressionism as the shattering of images and dislocating of the surface reality from its original, admits to its subjectivity. Lukacs sees Bloch's definition as separating images from their context and then, in a stylised, abstract way, taken in isolation. For him, this procedure repudiates

¹Elizabeth Wright, Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation, (London: Routledge, 1989), pp.69-70.

²"Expressionism" has been generally represented as the first German version of modern art.

any connection with reality.¹ Lukacs's critique here is directed at the Expressionists' method of using language "expressively" rather than referentially, thus conveying only their own subjective feelings instead of their stated objective: the essence of reality.² For Lukacs, rather than conveying essences, Expressionist art in fact revealed their decomposition.³

Bloch rejects Lukacs's disregard for specific artefacts of the Expressionist movement. His choice of second-hand examples prevents Lukacs from getting to the heart of the matter, which Bloch defines as the imaginative works which make a concrete impression in time and space, a reality the observer may re-experience for himself. Instead, as Bloch points out, Lukacs cites literature about Expressionism as a basis for literary and critical judgements. As a result, Lukacs's method is limited to being little more than a concept of concepts, an essay on essays dealing with expressionist tendencies and programmes applied by commentators on the

¹Georg Lukacs, "Realism in the Balance" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.40. First published in Das Wort, 1938.

²Rodney Livingstone, "Presentation I" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.11.

³Lukacs, loc.cit.

movement.¹

Bloch defends Expressionism as "ideologically a not insignificant component of the anti-war movement"² and aesthetically as a reaction against the crises "which emerged just at the moment when the old surface reality collapsed"³ before the advent of an as yet nascent proletariat. As a defense against frequent accusations of elitism and cultural nihilism, Bloch emphasises Expressionism's underlying humanism and its proclivity to "popular," traditional artistic forms. For Bloch, its purpose was to undermine the schematic routines and academism to which artistic values had been reduced. Rather than formal analyses of art works, Expressionism focuses on human beings and the real "substance" of life.⁴ As Bloch argues, the Expressionists' ultimate goal is humane: ". . . their themes were almost exclusively human expressions of the incognito, the mystery of man."⁵ Because of this latent humanism, Bloch contends that the Expressionists in fact returned to popular art. Indeed, artists from many

¹Ernst Bloch, "Discussing Expressionism" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), pp.18-19. First published in Das Wort, 1938.

²Ibid., p.22.

³Ibid., p.23.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., p.24.

European countries found in Expressionism an approach closer to their own popular traditions than most other styles of art.¹

In rebuttal, Lukacs maintains that Bloch's definition of popular art confuses the issue. As he writes, "Popular art does not imply an ideologically indiscriminate, 'arty' appreciation of 'primitive' products by connoisseurs. Truly popular art has nothing in common with any of that."² On the contrary, Lukacs declares, authentic popular art is closely allied with the aesthetic form most accessible to the people, namely realism. Lukacs disavows realism as simply a description of surface detail; its significance resides in its ability to reveal human beings in the range of their relations to the real world. Furthermore, realism depicts tendencies in society which as yet have not had the opportunity to disclose their full human and social potential. Indeed, the mission of the avant-garde is to recognise and reify such underlying trends.³ Bloch insists upon the fragmentary nature of modern social experience. He accuses Lukacs of taking for

¹Ernst Bloch, "Discussing Expressionism" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.26. First published in Das Wort, 1938.

²Georg Lukacs, "Realism in the Balance" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.53. First published in Das Wort, 1938.

³Ibid., p.48.

granted a "closed and integrated reality" which proclaims "totality," a linking of "concrete" experience with "abstract" understanding of how this experience can realise itself under prevailing conditions. Bloch questions whether such a totality in fact constitutes reality, for if it does, then Expressionist experiments with disruptive and interpolative techniques are but meaningless games, as are all such experiments with discontinuity, such as montage. In Bloch's view, reality includes the concept of discontinuity. His criticism of Lukacs is based on Lukacs's premise of operating with a closed, objectivist conception of reality which forces his rejection of the attempt to shatter any image of the world, even that of capitalism. For Bloch, Lukacs's mistake is his readiness to consider a willful act of destruction any art which exploits the real fissures in surface inter-relations. It is the mistake of equating experiments in demolition with a condition of decadence.¹

Responding to Bloch's explanation, Lukacs argues that capitalism forms a unitary whole, most obviously at the moments of crisis which Bloch associates with fragmentation, a "truth" denied by Expressionism's characteristic subjectivism. Only when the great works of realism are

¹Ernst Bloch, "Discussing Expressionism" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.22. First published in Das Wort, 1938.

appreciated as wholes will their true value be perceived, declares Lukacs. In contrast to the one-dimensionality of modernism, the value of realism lies in its inexhaustible diversity. The greatness of writers such as Shakespeare, Balzac, and Tolstoy resides in their ability to appeal to a broad cross-section of people because their works permit access from so many different angles. Indeed, it is this very accessibility which endows the great works of realism with their enduring resonances.¹

As Lukacs perceives it, the task of the realist (as opposed to the avant-gardiste) is twofold: ". . . first, the uncovering and artistic shaping of these connections (i.e., the connections within social reality) and secondly and inseparably from the former, the artistic covering of the connections that have been worked out abstractly - the sublimation of the abstraction."² According to Peter Burger, by "covering" Lukacs means "the creation of the appearance of nature."³ For Burger, the organic work of art

¹Georg Lukacs, "Realism in the Balance" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.56. First published in Das Wort, 1938.

²Georg Lukacs, "Es Geht um den Realismus," ed. F.J. Raddatz, in Marxismus und Literatur. Eine Dokumentation, (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1969), vol.II, p.69 f.

³Peter Burger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.72.

attempts to disguise the fact of its own making. Just the opposite holds true for avant-gardiste work which openly declares itself an artificial construct. For this reason, Burger considers montage the fundamental principle of avant-gardiste art. It deliberately calls attention to its make-up of reality fragments, breaking through the appearance of totality. As a result, the avant-gardiste objective to expunge art as an institution is realised in the work of art itself. Hence, the aim of revolutionising life by returning art to its praxis becomes a revolutionising of art.¹

The purpose of an organic work is an impression of wholeness. Since its individual parts have meaning according to their level of correspondence to the whole, they always refer to the work as a whole even when they are regarded individually. But in the work of the avant-garde the individual parts possess a much greater autonomy and, as a result, can be interpreted individually without considering the work as a whole. Yet only to a limited degree can one speak of an entire avant-gardiste work as "the perfect embodiment of the totality of possible meanings."² Because for Lukacs avant-gardiste art is devoid of reality and life,

¹Peter Burger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.72.

²Ibid., p.73.

it "foists on its readers a narrow and subjectivist attitude to life (analogous to a sectarian point of view in political terms)."1

The politico-cultural context of this exchange between Bloch and Lukacs was the Popular Front. For Lukacs, easier access to realism "produces a richly complex yield in human terms."2 Comprehension of avant-gardiste art, 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."3

Bloch's defense avoids direct confrontation of Lukacs's argument that the function of art is to depict objective reality in organic works from which all extraneous material is excluded. Instead, Bloch emphasises the authenticity of the experience latent in Expressionism. In response, Lukacs argues that the subjective impression of fragmentation is, in theory, an untenable position. Concluding that Expressionism misrepresents the social whole, Lukacs nonetheless omits the point that the unity of the social whole is "irreducibly

¹Georg Lukacs, "Realism in the Balance" in Aesthetics in Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books: 1986), p.57. First published in Das Wort, 1938.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

contradictory."¹

If the Marxist discussion of Expressionism seems tangential to my focus on political theatre, it should be understood that the realism of contemporary bourgeois theatre, as has been explained, has long been an effective instrument of the capitalist state and of the theatre employed to recreate and perpetuate it. By transforming the stage into a photographic imitation of the real world, realism has permitted the upper and middle classes to maintain the status quo by controlling the large masses of working-class people over whom they enjoy an edge of superiority. The Marxist debate concerning the validity of Expressionism therefore becomes pertinent to a consideration of a radically political theatre such as the 7:84 Company. Indeed, the argument is crucial, not only because, as will later be seen, the 7:84 Theatre Company employs a wide variety of expressionist methods,² but also because the force of its political statement is disclosed within the parameters of its own language structure, which is its source of meaning.

What Bloch and Lukacs term "Expressionism" is an

¹Rodney Livingstone, "Presentation I" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.14.

²See detailed analyses of texts, Chapters 4 and 5 below.

aesthetic movement which, in Germany, resulted in the first German artefacts of modern art. Prior to the First World War German theatre was in the vanguard of the arts, treating the elements of theatre language - stage decor, costume, lighting, acting style - according to their symbolic function rather than as an illusion of reality. Even so, Expressionism preserved to some degree the illusion of reality.

Acknowledging the nonrealistic, symbolic function of Expressionism, an audience "suspends disbelief" in order to enter into the illusion, just as a reader does with fantastic material such as in a fairy story in which, in reality, events are unlikely to occur. The laws of nature and probability are supplanted by the laws of poetry, in which the theatre practitioner is at liberty to refashion the actual world in order to make his point. As a result, the world of the Expressionist stage is symbolised by unrealistic sets with radically simplified forms depicting buildings or even a bare stage containing only a solitary tree. A distinction between these two methods of portraying reality should be made clear because the symbolic tendencies of political theatre are profoundly indebted to the scope and latitude of Expressionist drama. The two approaches are not, therefore, mutually exclusive. While Expressionist drama obliges its audience to accept as "real" its more grotesquely symbolic iconography, it must also be admitted that the acknowledged masters of the

realistic style - Ibsen, Chekhov, Strindberg - also use their sets as symbolic forms, scrupulously chosen and arranged to describe the material world in which the characters live and struggle to accomplish their ends.¹

Although realism remains to some extent the dominant style in theatre, experiments have been attempted in many other directions.² Such experiments frequently reject realism's premise that the stage should resemble the actual world, that the characters should speak in ordinary, commonplace language, or that their motives and actions approximate those of real life. Craig, for example, operated on the premise that the function of drama is not to hold up a mirror to empirical reality but to provide an image of the world, depicting it as it appears in one's imagination rather than to one's senses. For example, on the realistic stage the lack of human communication might be shown by a number of stage characters in a conventional room talking in the customary way; but as they moved about, they would be

¹For example, Ibsen's inclusion on stage of ordinary household objects such as stoves and tables indicates more than just a typical nineteenth-century middle-class Norwegian home; his set may be seen to symbolise the social and material world from which his characters cannot escape. In this sense Ibsen's realistic set is a representation of social and material realities which may inhibit and defeat the human spirit.

²See Chapter One above.

obstructed by the furniture on stage; as they talked, they would fail to comprehend one another because a lack of suitable words would obscure their meanings.

Working with the same theme Ionesco cluttered the stage with empty chairs and had the actors talk nonsense, believing they were communicating with real people sitting in the chairs.¹ Abandoning probability, Ionesco expressed his sense of life in imagery. Expressionism of this kind depends on visual metaphors to establish meaning and, in this sense, may be seen as an extension of poetry.

It is precisely here that the Marxist discussion of Expressionism reveals its pertinence to a theatre like the 7:84 Theatre Company. The Company's theatrical language - lack of mimetic gesture, simplified sets, the synecdochic force of character, the presentation of reality in an unrealistic manner, the creation of a stage context in which actors and audience commingle and inter-relate² - is alien to the illusionism of the bourgeois stage. The work of the 7:84 Theatre Company thus appears diametrically opposed to the fundamental precepts of Lukacs's argument. Whereas Lukacs

¹Eugene Ionesco, "The Chairs" in Four Plays, trans. D.M. Allen, (New York: Grove Press, 1958).

²The 7:84 Theatre Company's "theatrical language" will be examined in closer detail in the analyses of specific plays (Chapters 4 and 5).

argued from a position of maintaining the status quo (he was living in Moscow at the time of writing the essays), the Expressionist theatre of the 7:84 Theatre Company operates from a position of a complete volte-face of the social structure. Yet Bloch and Lukacs apparently shared an amicable relationship which, to some extent, tempered the cogency of their arguments. Brecht, on the other hand, harboured no such cordiality for Lukacs and, taking into account Brecht's enormous impact on modern theatre, his entirely logical criticism of Lukacs's remarks deserves serious consideration.

Brecht Against Lukacs

In what has been called "his richest and most seminal essay of the period,"¹ Lukacs expressed a theory of literary realism that he sustained throughout his life. This comprised a contrast between naturalism and realism, the concept of character as a link between the social and individual, the denial of both reportorial and psychological exposition, the disparity between passive description and active narrative, and the endorsement of Balzac and Tolstoy as paradigms for the development of modern realism. For Lukacs, Balzac and Tolstoy were, like other great exponents of realism, historically

¹Stuart Hood, "Presentation II" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.61., referring to the essay Erzahlen oder Beschreiben?

involved with the bourgeoisie during its emancipation and, as a result, were in a favourable position to reveal the contradictory forces of history. Balzac, for example, because he was present at the advent of capitalism, witnessed the reification of what was taking place at the time. As a result, he was able to apply social meaning to incident, supplying diegesis within the context of totality. Lukacs distinguishes this style of epic writing from what he calls factual description. Avant-garde writers such as James Joyce, on the other hand, instead of grasping the ideological sources of their world, are not only enmeshed in reification, but capitulate to a fragmentation of experience without showing its cause or any way of overcoming it.¹

Regarding them as bourgeois writers, Brecht dismissed Lukacs's choice of the great nineteenth-century realists as paradigms for contemporary proletarian and socialist writers. Brecht's point is that by adopting the literary forms of writers like Balzac and Tolstoy the contemporary writer is in real danger of becoming tedious and therefore losing his/her readers. As far as Brecht is concerned, realism is not merely a question of form. Methods become exhausted; when new

¹Fredric Jameson, Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp.195, 203.

problems appear, new methods are demanded. As reality changes, so must modes of representation.¹

Brecht argues that if the novels of Balzac and Tolstoy were the result of a specific period of class history, now replaced by another period, it is obviously impossible to recreate the procedures of their work in this later period of history, particularly one dominated by antagonism between the social classes.² The contradictions in the life-process in the final struggle between the bourgeois and the proletarian class cannot be simplified or reduced to the elements of literature such as plot, character, or setting for the creation of great individuals. Individuals should take the same proportion of space in a book as they do in real life. For Brecht, realistic "characters" develop naturally from the accurate depiction of the processes of human existence. One cannot simply create a great individual and have him/her respond to other characters in significant and lasting relationships. Certainly the drama - the range and emotions of the characters - is infrangibly connected to social function and this connection should constitute the substance

¹Bertolt Brecht, "Against Georg Lukacs" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.82.

²Stuart Hood, "Presentation II" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), pp.62-63.

of the depiction, for the interactions between human beings in competitive struggle only reflect the condition of developing capitalism (capitalism, according to Brecht, produces and shapes individuals in an entirely different way from the production of individuals under socialism).¹

Having undergone radical changes, twentieth-century capitalism can no longer necessarily produce individuals of the kind created by Balzac and Tolstoy; on the contrary, the resurrection of individuals of this kind in the modified conditions of late capitalism would, according to Brecht, result in the opposite of realism.² The solution "does not involve undoing techniques but developing them."³

Owing to its use of "fragmented" techniques such as interior monologue or montage, Lukacs had accused "modernist" writing of formalism; but as far as Brecht is concerned, it is in fact Lukacs himself who has declined into formalism by trying to establish directives for literary creation from established traditions, regardless of historical reality's inexorable process of change. By simply checking whether or

¹Bertolt Brecht, "Against George Lukacs" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), pp.77-78.

²For example, the situation of women in both the US and USSR prevented the specific pattern of conflicting passions typical of Balzac.

³Brecht, op.cit., p.69.

not a work is like other existing works said to be realistic, one cannot determine whether a work is realistic. Instead, it is necessary to compare the depiction of life in a work of art with the life itself which is being depicted, not with another depiction. This is because intelligibility in a literary work is not guaranteed simply because it is written like other works which were understood in their time. Works understood in their time were also not always written like the works before them. Steps had to be taken to make them intelligible. A living, combative literature which fully captures reality has to keep abreast of the rapid development of reality.¹

True realism was, for Brecht, both "a political and philosophical vision of the world and the material struggles that divided it."² As he argues, "Realism is an issue not only for literature: it is a major political, philosophical and practical issue and must be handled and explained as such - as a matter of general human interest."³ Subsequently, Brecht exposes Lukacs's extremely narrow range of literature

¹Bertolt Brecht, "Against Georg Lukacs," in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.85.

²Stuart Hood, "Presentation II" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.63.

³Brecht, op.cit., p.76.

on which his premise is founded, narrow even within the novel genre itself. Brecht accuses Lukacs of formalism because he based his theory of realism on only a few nineteenth-century novels at the exclusion of other literary genres, such as lyric poetry or drama.¹

Declaring a need for innovation in the arts, Brecht emphasises the essential freedom which permits the artist to fail if need be or to succeed only in part, for "literature cannot be forbidden to employ skills newly acquired by contemporary man, such as the capacity for simultaneous registration, bold abstraction, or swift combination."² Brecht therefore attempts to demystify theatre, not to expose the real, but to establish a proper relationship to reality. Demystification reveals the dialectic in operation and is additionally valuable because it forces the audience into making dialectical moves themselves. To disclose the contractions of history Brecht, skeptical of all codes and representations, experiments with the form, disrupting the action, spacing it, and sometimes "freezing" it, in order to reveal the contradictions at different levels of the social

¹Bertolt Brecht, "Against Georg Lukacs" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.70.

²Stuart Hood, "Presentation II" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.63.

order.¹ Lukacs, on the other hand, wants real contradictions to be exposed in a single unified diegesis, but Lukacs insists on this happening without revealing the artifice involved, as he himself puts it, "the artistic covering up of the connections achieved by the work of abstraction, the sublation of abstraction."²

The central argument between Lukacs and Brecht is Lukacs's inability to acknowledge that avant-garde techniques (montage and documentation, for instance) are in themselves a form of ordering which transcends realistic presentation. Lukacs ignores Brecht's Verfremdungseffekt as a powerful epistemological force, accusing Brecht of formalism. Brecht reverses the charge of formalism by exposing the inadequacy of traditional forms of writing at a time when the world being represented has so radically changed.

In Brecht's view a common error is that technical ingenuity renders works of art unintelligible to the masses. Citing his own experience as a playwright as evidence that working-class audiences readily accept experimentation and

¹Elizabeth Wright, Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation, (London: Routledge, 1989), p.73.

²George Lukacs, "Reportage oder Gestaltung" in Fritz Raddatz, ed., Marxismus und Literatur: Eine Dokumentation in drei Bänden, II (Reibek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt), quoted in Elizabeth Wright, Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation, (London: Routledge, 1989), p.74.

innovation in the theatre, Brecht pointedly remarks that proletarian readers might find the leisurely pace of narratives by Balzac or Tolstoy arduous work. To Brecht it is obvious that in order to reach the proletariat in the tumultuous period of its climactic struggle with capitalism, art itself has to be transformed simultaneously with the revolutionary transformation of the people and the structure of society. Since it is in the best interest of the masses to receive a faithful image of reality, artistic works must be made comprehensible to the masses; that is to say, they must be popular.¹

Acknowledging the validity of Brecht's contention, one must clarify the concepts of "popular" and "realism" in order to employ them. Using the term in the Brechtian sense, "popular" means

. . . intelligible to the broad masses/adopting and enriching their forms of expression/assuming their standpoint, confirming and correcting it/representing the most progressive sections of the people as well/relating to traditions and developing them/communicating to that portion of the people which strives for leadership the achievements of the section that at present rules the nation. 2

¹Bertolt Brecht, "Against Georg Lukacs" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.80.

²Ibid., p.81.

According to Brecht, popular art, i.e., art for the broad masses, is essential for the many who are oppressed by the few, "the people themselves," the masses of working-class producers who were for so long the object of politics and must, in Brecht's view, "now become the subject of politics."¹ The people, says Brecht, were at first held in check by convention, the term "popular" being assigned as a historical, static, undevelopmental connotation. According to Brecht, the concept of this form should be opposed and resisted.²

The notion of what is popular suggests a people who not only take part in historical development but also assert hegemony over it. Brecht contends that people make history by transforming the world and, in consequence, their own destiny, "a fighting people and therefore an aggressive concept of what is 'popular.'"³ That the 7:84 Theatre Company is aggressive should be clear from the marked radicalism of its socialist ideology and from its pragmatic performance style, though its "realism" should be distinguished from that of bourgeois theatre. This new realism is not derived from specific

¹Bertolt Brecht, "Against Georg Lukacs: IV Popularity and Realism" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.8.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

existing works in the Lukacsian mold, but it uses every available means to interpret reality in a format that people can understand. Rather than transcending historical contradictions for a passive audience, McGrath adopts Brecht's aim of creating an active audience which will expose such contradictions. Indeed, the audience has to be jolted out of its customary torpor if it is to abstract from its experience. For McGrath, the audience is a necessary component of the work, which is left "open" and incomplete until the audience participates in its completion. This, of course, denies the Lukacsian model of literary criteria for realism, for where Lukacs encourages a depiction of the world as organically whole, inspiring the politically radical with utopian idealism, McGrath, like Brecht, depicts it as fragmented and malleable, in such a way as to motivate the audience into the active participation of re-writing it. This is why Brecht insisted that one's concept of realism "must be wide and political, sovereign over all conventions."¹

Brecht's own definition of "realistic" might have been custom-made for use by the 7:84 Theatre Company:

. . . discovering the casual complexities

¹Bertolt Brecht, "Against Georg Lukacs: IV Popularity and Realism" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.82.

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/emphasising the element of development/making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it. 1

If he is to free himself from modes of narrative which are too rigidly defined, the theatre practitioner must be given free reign to employ his originality, his fantasy, his humour, and his invention.

Brecht contends that a sense of outrage at inhuman conditions can be instilled by a variety of methods: by direct description (emotional or objective), by narrative and parable, by jokes, by over-emphasis and under-emphasis.² In the theatre reality can be conveyed both in objective and imaginative forms. Brecht makes clear that a surface imitation of reality does not necessarily convey the truth. Working-class people are aware of this and show their acceptance and their appreciation of new methods which help to convey the truth (Brecht cites the popularity of Piscator's theatre as well as his own). On the other hand, the working

¹Bertolt Brecht, "Against Georg Lukacs: IV Popularity and Realism" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.82.

²Ibid., p.83.

classes reject everything that does not fulfill its purpose of conveying the truth.¹

Supporting Brecht's view of popular entertainment as art, John McGrath, in his essay "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre," explains how the form of his plays is largely determined by the demands of a working-class audience who expect more moment-by-moment effect from their entertainers. Working-class audiences are quite capable of expressing their disapproval of a performance. Unlike middle-class audiences who have been trained to sit still for the long period during the slow build-up to a great dramatic moment, working-class audiences expect a high standard of success in gaining effects and respond favourably to the results of skill and hard work.²

McGrath does not, of course, mean to imply that working-class culture is necessarily elemental, crude, or obvious. On the contrary, since the purpose of socialist attrition is the transformation of the conditions of production which create a working class to begin with, it would seem inconsistent to offer an encomium to forms which

¹Bertolt Brecht, "Against Georg Lukacs: IV Popularity and Realism" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.83.

²John McGrath, "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre," Theatre Quarterly IX, 35 (1979): p.53.

not only perpetuate an independent working-class culture, but by extension imply an outdated system of production relations in the theatre itself. If, after all, the upper and middle classes are tied to the fetishised forms of society, unable to see their historical determinants while the working classes have a keener understanding of the total socio-economic and historical context, why bind the working classes to an anachronistic form of representation? Furthermore, why isolate a separate working-class culture when the socialist objective is to expunge class distinctions of this kind? Emphasis on separate class cultures may have the effect of increased self-confidence among members of the working class, but the distinction between separate groups of people can often widen the division while simultaneously hindering socialist reform of the whole of society. As Steve Gooch has shown, simple recognition of cultural inequality is inadequate for reform of an established class system. As a sine qua non for escaping existing social conditions, the elements of imagination and intuition are conspicuously absent.¹

Nonetheless, the theatre practitioner must play to his audience and McGrath, practical journeyman that he is, presents on stage what is necessary to accomplish his ends.

¹Steve Gooch, All Together Now, (London: Methuen, 1984), p.78.

Far from playing "down" to his audience, he frequently fully documents his work with direct Marxist analysis, readings from eye witness accounts, technical data, facts and figures which substantiate his argument.¹ While his presentation to a working-class audience may not appear as "sophisticated" as that of the bourgeois stage, which is cramped by the narrow and rigid conventions that the pretense of presenting real happenings imposes, McGrath's theatre challenges its audience to "think," as Brecht's theatre purported to do. For this reason, the 7:84 Company demonstrates a "montage" of serious exposition, direct instruction, music, dialogue, visual and verbal humour, and caustic satire.

Walter Benjamin

Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" pertains to this inquiry because what it says about art (the art of film, in particular) in the period of "late capitalism" has substantive political implications for the theatre. Benjamin predicts that the effects of new technology will transform theatre into a kind of laboratory which separates literary and aesthetic forms from any ideological purpose within existing relations of

¹As in The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, for example. See quotations on pp.365-368, 370-372.

production by forcing them to acquire more progressive uses, specifically, a new political function for the arts completely altering the relations between writer, work, and audience. Benjamin perceives this new technology as a way of emancipating the means of production from the grip of the apparatus of the capitalist state so as to ensure their availability to socialist concerns.

Benjamin's point of departure is a certain kind of relationship between artistic work and spectator, which he denotes as marked by the presence of "aura."¹ The notion of aura can most easily be interpreted as "unapproachability": the "unique phenomenon of a distance however close it may be."² Aura first developed in cultic ritual, but for Benjamin, the phenomenon of aura is actually attached to art that has developed since the Renaissance. What is decisive is the resulting division from the loss of aura. Benjamin has traced this division to developments in techniques of reproduction. Acceptance marked by the presence of aura requires both uniqueness and authenticity. "The technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a

¹Walter Benjamin, Illuminations, trans. Harry Zohn, (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p.221.

²Ibid., p.222.

plurality of copies for a unique existence."¹ But such categories as uniqueness and authenticity become irrelevant to an art (such as film) whose very design includes reproduction. A change in techniques of reproduction is accompanied by a change in forms of perception which will result in a change in the "character of art as a whole."² The contemplative acceptance of art by the bourgeoisie is to be replaced by the at once distracted and rationally testing acceptance by the masses. Rather than an ethic based on ritual, art will now be based on politics.

The uniqueness of a work of art at one time contributed to the uniqueness of the institution in which it was displayed. Even though the work of art was transportable, it could never be seen in two places simultaneously. When a work of art is reproduced by the camera, the uniqueness of its image is destroyed. As a result, its meaning changes. Actually, its meaning increases and fragments into many meanings. As it travels, its meaning becomes diversified. Hence, when one sees an original work of art, one is cognizant that somewhere one has seen its reproduction. The uniqueness of the original work of art refers to its being the original

¹Walter Benjamin, Illuminations, trans. Harry Zohn, (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p.221.

²Ibid.

of a reproduction. It is no longer unique for what is shown by its image; its primary meaning "is no longer to be found in what it says, but in what it is."¹

The original work of art's new status is a rational consequence of the new means of reproduction. Even so, a process of mystification again enters. If the meaning of the original work of art no longer resides in what it says but in what it is, how can its unique existence be assessed in our present culture? It is assessed as an object whose value is determined by its rarity, a value which is gauged by the price it can command on the market. Yet it is still a "work of art" and art is assumed to be greater than commerce; its market price is therefore considered a reflection of its "spiritual value." The spiritual value of an object, however, unlike that of a message or an example, can be explained only in terms of magic or religion. Since in modern society neither magic nor religion retain much viable power, the work of art is permeated with an aura of ersatz spirituality. Works of art are given the status of "holy relics," relics which are primary proof of their own survival. Their history is scrutinised for evidence that their survival is authentic. They are considered art when their line of descent can be

¹John Berger, Ways of Seeing, (London: British Broadcasting Corp. and Penguin Books, 1977), p.21.

established as genuine.¹

The ersatz spirituality now attached to original works of art (which reflects their market value) has become a replacement for what works of art lost in an age of mechanical reproduction. The function of art is now nostalgic. As John Berger has written:

It is the final empty claim for the continuing values of an oligarchic, undemocratic culture. If the image is no longer unique and exclusive, the art object, the thing, must be made mysteriously so. ²

Peter Burger summarises the importance that technical development has had for the evolution of the fine arts:

. . . because the advent of photography makes possible the precise mechanical reproduction of reality, the mimetic function of the fine arts withers. ³

Burger goes on to insist that the example of the l'art pour l'art movement as a response to photography is a contrived

¹John Berger, Ways of Seeing, (London: British Broadcasting Corp. and Penguin Books, 1977), p.21.

²Ibid., p.23.

³Peter Burger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p.32.

explanation. Far from being merely a response to a new means of reproduction, l'art pour l'art is a reaction to the tendency in bourgeois society for works of art to lose their social function (Burger characterises this development as the loss of the political content of individual works). For Burger, however, the development of art cannot be ascribed to changed techniques of reproduction. In his view the evolution of art beginning with artistic innovation for its own sake (l'art pour l'art) and regressing into Aestheticism cannot be divorced from the tendency toward the already latent division of labour in bourgeois society. The individual products of the distinct subsystem "art" no longer take on any social function.¹ The social function of art is an issue to be addressed in a subsequent section of this inquiry concerning Theodor Adorno.² Central to Benjamin's argument here is the question: Does the meaning of art belong to those who can apply it to their own lives or to a cultural autocracy of specialists and collectors?

In Benjamin's view the plastic arts have always resided within a certain preserve; in the beginning this preserve was

¹Peter Burger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p.32.

²See sub-section "Adorno: Commitment and Aesthetics," pp.173-180 below.

considered sacred. Yet the institution for which the work was made - the cave, the temple, the cathedral - was also physical. Since art was inseparable from the ritualistic institution for which it was created, the art experience became the experience of ritual, isolated from the rest of life for the purpose of exerting power over it. Subsequently, the preserve of art became social by entering the culture of the ruling class, even though physically it was isolated in the institutions of the ruling class. Although the emphasis had shifted, art's authority still remained inseparable from the authority of the institution.¹

According to Benjamin, modern technology has expunged art's authority by removing its images from any special preserve. Owing to modern techniques of reproduction, images of art have become readily available, ubiquitous, and, as a result, valueless. No longer having power over the mainstream of life, they have simply become a part of it. Few people recognise this situation because the means of production are invariably used to maintain the status quo by creating the illusion that the only change is the current availability to the masses of art reproductions which permit them to appreciate art as the cultured ruling class has always

¹John Berger, Ways of Seeing, (London: British Broadcasting Corp. and Penguin Books, 1977), p.32.

done.¹

The authority of the art of the past, Benjamin believes, is lost forever. A language of images has supplanted it. What has become crucial is who uses this language of images and for what purpose. For Benjamin, what is really at stake is the fact that classes of people who are isolated from their own past are far less at liberty to choose and to act than classes who are able to locate themselves in history. This is why, as John Berger writes, "the entire art of the past has become a political issue."² Instead of serving a useful communal purpose, the aestheticising of the art object renders it merely a tool for reactionary politics which manipulate the collective factor for the purpose of exploiting the aesthetics of war. Benjamin believes that the new technology will produce a politically progressive effect, apparently unable to see that it would ultimately lend itself to commodification. Benjamin predicts that the ascendancy of the cinema will erode the unique presence of the stage actor, his charismatic effect on the audience curtailed by the discontinuity created by montage techniques. In short, he considered the impact of the new technology intrinsic to the technical process itself,

¹John Berger, Ways of Seeing, (London: British Broadcasting Corp. and Penguin Books, 1977), pp.32-33.

²Ibid., p.33.

assuming that a transformation in production relations would result. A transformation in the "forms and instruments of production" is the means by which a politically committed art can participate in the class struggle.¹ Benjamin foresees the erosion of the distinction between author and public, currently maintained by the artificial means of the bourgeois press. To do this, the press itself must be transformed from its merely reportorial institutions to one which actively intervenes and mobilises the public.² An obvious parallel is discernible here with Brecht's - and hence McGrath's - theatre. Benjamin implies a specific concern with aesthetic reception, insisting that theatre utilise modern technology for the purpose of breaking the mimetic spell exerted over the audience by the theatre of illusion. Such a theatre refers to the conditions of its own production by disrupting the dramatic action with direct audience address, songs, film clips, and captions for the purpose of shattering the usual method of perception. For Benjamin, Brecht's epic theatre derives a lively consciousness from its focus on the fact that it is theatre, treating elements of reality as though in an experiment, with the conditions at the end instead of the

¹Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer" in Reflections, ed. Peter Demetz, (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), p.228.

²Ibid., p.225.

beginning of the experiment. Reality is not brought closer to the audience, but distanced from them; when they recognise the conditions as real, it is not with the complacency found in naturalistic theatre, but with astonishment.¹ The ramifications of this concept for a revolutionary theatre such as McGrath's makes necessary a later consideration of his work in postmodernist terms.

Theodor Adorno and Lukacs

In his opposition to Lukacs's theory of organic art ("realistic" art in his terminology), Adorno took a similar stance as Bloch took in support of Expressionism. Whereas Lukacs endorses the organic work of art as an aesthetic norm, a perspective which leads him to reject avant-gardiste works as decadent,² Adorno supports the avant-gardiste, non-organic work as a historical norm, condemning as aesthetic regression Lukacs's efforts to sustain realistic art in the era of modernism. Adorno sees the techniques of art developing according to their own logic, so that when society changes, appropriate aesthetic criteria come into force.³

¹Walter Benjamin, "What is Epic Theatre?" in Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt, (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp.147-154.

²Georg Lukacs, The Meaning of Contemporary Realism, (London: Merlin Press, 1962), p.84.

³Theodor Adorno, "Reconciliation Under Duress" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.162.

Criticising Lukacs's position that in modern art the emphasis on style, form and technique is grossly exaggerated, Adorno contends that works of art that ignore their own form destroy themselves as art. As far as Adorno is concerned, Lukacs mistakenly calls formalism the restructuring of the elements which make up a work of art in accordance with laws appropriate to them, a restructuring, incidently, pertinent to the "immanent meaning" which Lukacs calls for, rather than meaning arbitrarily superimposed from outside.¹ In Adorno's view, Lukacs's problem is in recognising the objective function of formal elements in determining the aesthetic content of modern art; instead, Lukacs "wilfully misinterprets them as arbitrary ingredients added by an over-inflated subjectivism."² The objectivity occluded from modern art which Lukacs expects from the subject matter when placed in "perspective," is actually sustained by the practices which erode the subject matter and restructure it in a way which does establish a perspective, yet these are the very practices he would like to abolish. "He remains indifferent to the philosophical question of whether the concrete meaning of a work of art is in fact identical with the mere reflection of

¹Theodor Adorno, "Reconciliation Under Duress" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.153.

²Ibid.

objective reality,"¹ and also to Adorno's belief that "the content of works of art is not real in the same sense as social reality. If this distinction is lost, then all attempts to provide a real foundation for aesthetics must be doomed to failure."² More to the point, as Adorno contends, is the assertion that ". . . the difference between art and empirical reality touches on the former's innermost being."³ Adorno's position is that art's function is not simply to duplicate nature but to extract from it its essence and image. This task is accomplished only when art crystallizes reality from its own formal laws.⁴ As far as Adorno is concerned, an indifference to style is "almost always symptomatic of the dogmatic sclerosis of content. The false modesty implicit in a style which believes itself to be dispassionate as long as it abstains from self-reflection, only succeeds in concealing the fact that it has purified the dialectical process of its objective, as well as its subjective value."⁵

¹Theodor Adorno, "Reconciliation Under Duress" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.153.

²Ibid., p.159.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., pp.159-160.

⁵Ibid., p.153.

Lukacs had transposed Hegel's critique of romantic art, as a historically necessary symptom of decay, to the art of the avant-garde. For Lukacs, Hegel's belief that an organic work of art constitutes a type of absolute perfection suggests to him (Lukacs) that the culmination of art belongs to the past - although, unlike Hegel, he concedes that perfection may be attainable in the present. The great "realistic" writers who burgeoned during the rise of the bourgeoisie are, for Lukacs, paradigms of social realism. Even so, Lukacs tries to diminish the consequences of his historical-philosophical construct by also conceding a bourgeois realism in the twentieth century. In contrast, Adorno contends that avant-gardiste works of art are the only possible authentic expression of the contemporary state of the world. Like that of Lukacs, Adorno's theory also had its foundation in Hegel but does not accept assessment which Lukacs simply transposed to the present (negative view of romantic art versus high estimation of classical art). Adorno takes to its conclusion the historicising of the art forms that Hegel had undertaken. He concludes that no historical type of the form-content dialectic will be given a superior rank to any other. The avant-gardiste work of art, therefore, presents itself as the historically necessary expression of alienation in late-capitalist society. To suggest comparing it with the organic unity of classical or realistic work is illogical. At

first one gets the impression that Adorno has broken with any normative theory, although it is easy to see how, by way of radical historicising, the normative again emerges in theory.

Although, for Lukacs also, the avant-garde is the result of alienation in late-capitalist society, it is also the result of the bourgeoisie's myopia concerning actual historical counterforces moving toward a radical socialist restructuring of this society. From this political perspective, Lukacs sees the possibility of a contemporary realistic art. Adorno, of course, does not share this perspective; on the contrary, for him, avant-garde art becomes the only "legitimate" art in late-capitalist society. So-called "realist" works are suspect because they retrogress from an already achieved level of artistic development. Rather than exposing the myriad contradictions of modern society, the organic work creates the illusion of a wholeness and coherence in the world, even when the contents explicitly show a completely different intention. Art provides knowledge of reality, not by reflecting it photographically from a particular perspective, but by revealing whatever is veiled by the empirical form. This can only be done if art is given autonomous status.¹

¹Theodor Adorno, "Reconciliation Under Duress" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.162.

The argument between Lukacs and Adorno concerning the legitimacy of "realistic" and avant-gardiste (organic and non-organic) art focuses on artistic means and the change in the kind of product required. Even so, neither Lukacs nor Adorno emphasises the assault that the avant-garde movements launched on art as an institution. This assault, however, is the seminal factor in the development of modern art because it first exposed clearly art as an institution by disclosing such an institution's controlling influence on the effect of individual works. When the significance of the breach in the development of art is not considered as part of the avant-garde's assault on art as an institution, the formal problem (organic versus non-organic work) becomes necessarily the primary focus of attention. Once the historical avant-garde movements had exposed the institution of art as the answer to the question of the efficacy or inefficacy of art, no form could declare that it had exclusively eternal or temporally finite validity. The historical avant-garde movements simply invalidated a declaration of this kind. But since Lukacs and Adorno make such a declaration again, they prove that their thinking is still governed by a pre-avant-gardiste period dominated by circumstantially-conditioned stylistic change.¹

¹Peter Burger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp.86-87.

While acknowledging that Adorno clarified the significance of the avant-garde for contemporary aesthetic theory, one must also realise that he emphasised exclusively the new type of work, not the avant-garde's intention of reintegrating art into the praxis of life. Consequently, the avant-garde becomes the only logical choice for an art that is endemic to our time. Since the historical avant-garde movements have been unsuccessful in expunging art as an institution, they may be judged in some sense a failure. But Adorno insists that while this failure might be justified, the avant-garde movements did occlude the possibility that a given school can lay claim to universal validity. No longer can one deny legitimately that "realistic" and "avant-gardiste" art exists side by side. The meaning of the rupture in the history of art induced by the avant-garde movements is not endemic to the dissolution of the institution of art but to the dissolution of the possibility of establishing the validity of aesthetic norms. This has ramifications for any critical approach to works of art: a normative criterion is displaced by a functional one in which the objective of examination would be the work's social function, resulting from the confluence of stimuli inside the work and a sociologically defined audience within the institutional structure.¹

¹Peter Burger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.87.

Adorno: Commitment and Aesthetics

Social function as a criterion of value raises the question of the validity of political theatre as a form of art. Practitioners of political theatre appear generally as firm in their political beliefs as they are to aesthetic idealism. Recognising this commitment to functionalism, one might conclude that political theatre considered as art is already doomed. But functional works existing as a means rather than as an end in themselves display a functional logic which is their own utility (Benjamin gives the example of architecture). The attempt to apply aesthetics as a kind of ornament is merely a detraction from their function. On the other hand, those who contend that a functional creation is necessarily "aesthetic" insofar as it heeds its own law of form have plainly missed the point since they assume objectivity - what Adorno calls "matter-of-factness"¹ - is in command of aesthetic beauty, which is exactly the kind of adornment which discredits its functionalism.

The autonomous, non-functional theatrical creation, which is functional only in the self-referential sense, aspires teleologically to an aesthetic "beauty." For Adorno, "the autonomy" of art consists in its resistance to serving the

¹Theodor Adorno, "The Dialectics of Functionalism" in Aesthetic Theory, trans. C. Lenhardt, (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), pp.89-90.

prevailing power structure. The disparity between non-functional and functional theatre lies in the assumption that whereas non-functional theatre endorses the questionable ideal of aesthetic beauty, functional theatre, deferring to its function, becomes superfluous and is misconstrued as an adornment posing as a teleological end in itself. According to Adorno, the function of functionality is thus eroded. As he explains:

Literalness is barbaric. Completely objectified art becomes a mere fact and ceases to be art. The crisis of functionalism opens up the possibility of choice: either to give up art or to change its concept. ¹

For Adorno, the decline of the auratic element in art is the result, not of machine production, but of a process immanent to the work itself in which it resists appropriation by any specific ideology. The magical element, rejected by both Brecht and Benjamin, stands in dialectical relation with a kind of freedom in which the work discloses a self-reflexive meaning in its own production process. Such a process will become mere utility-value if refunctioned in Brecht's political sense. Indeed, politicising it, changing it into

¹Theodor Adorno, "The Dialectics of Functionalism" in *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt, (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p.90.

"committed" art, simply expunges its natural resistance to commodification.¹

In objection to this corruption of the aesthetic by the political, Adorno misses Brecht's point that the didactic play is not mere propaganda. Rather, his use of the Verfremdungseffekt exposes the dialectical element, a sort of split consciousness, which encourages the audience to engage in the kind of interventionist thinking which considers events with regard to the possibility of change and transformation.²

Adorno's position denies the attempt by Brecht and Benjamin to politicise the arts; it also disavows a ready-made totality such as the one asserted by Lukacs. For Adorno, only a modernism uncorrupted by social concerns can nullify the false and so transform the subject. Adorno's problem is his inability to comprehend how a transformation of consciousness could result in a transformation of social conditions. Resistance to reification can be seen only in certain forms of high modernism, and for Adorno such a position conceives the artist in some sort of god-like stance, uncorrupted by any didactic purpose.³

¹Elizabeth Wright, Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation, (London: Routledge, 1989), p.81.

²Ibid., p.84.

³Ibid., p.85.

If Adorno is right, and formal properties in the theatre should not be understood directly in political terms (a position disputed by John McGrath as well as Brecht), such properties do, nonetheless, have substantive implications including political ones. From a historical perspective, all authentic art, including theatre, seeks the liberation of form from content, and an undertaking of this kind may be interpreted as a metaphor for the emancipation of society. This is because form, which may be defined as an aesthetic complex of specifics, represents the relationship of the theatrical work to society. Clearly, the emancipation of form tends to alter the status quo and, as a result, the structure of bourgeois theatre. This is why theatre is revolutionary. As Adorno remarks, "It participates in politics even though it is apolitical."¹ Indeed, when members of the 7:84 Theatre Company commingle with the audience and even involve the audience in the stage action, the form of the production has become synonymous with its teleological meaning.²

That form itself can be subversive is clearly apparent in circumstances where capitalism has infiltrated the social structure to the extent that it has become all-pervasive.

¹Theodor Adorno, "Political Option" in Aesthetic Theory, trans. C. Lenhardt, (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p.362.

²See, for example, p.353 below.

Political theatre opposes empirical reality because empirical reality is perceived as a dominating continuum of self-duplicating ideology. Theatre is either politically active or indifferent depending on whether its plays are at the same time destructions of reality, transforming reality into something other. In McGrath's play, Yobbo Nowt, for instance, the character Marie chooses to change at once her way of life and her social status, a transformation which will necessitate the destruction of capitalism as it is manifest in British society. For Marie, the economic and social repercussions of capitalism are empirical reality. The burlesqued characters, the situational relationships, the humorous yet functional dialogue, the tirades and soliloquies which amount to public lectures effectively unmask the spectrum of capitalist abuse. At the same time, McGrath's treatment of form serves an equally functional role by permitting actors to shed their roles as characters and address the audience directly, tell jokes, break into song in a way incompatible with the realism of traditional theatre, exaggerate human qualities for satiric ends, and, as in the Brechtian epic, make graphic demonstrations. Form used in this way tends to keep an audience aware of their presence in the theatre. According to Adorno, a deliberate departure of this kind from the realism of the bourgeois stage is nothing less than a subversive and destructive assault on the

established form of an institution whose existence preserves and sustains the interests of capitalism. Unity of the theatre's social and aesthetic criteria depends on whether the theatre can supplant empirical reality while at the same time strengthening its relation to that supplanted reality. As Adorno makes clear, theatre that succeeds in doing this has the prerogative of disregarding the question posed by those in political power as to what it is about and what its "message" is.¹

Central to this discussion of the 7:84 Theatre Company in terms of modernism/postmodernism is the relationship between the theatre and the prevailing power structure, specifically how with the advent of bourgeois capitalism the function of the theatre radically changed; for while theatre previously had been assumed to represent universal values, it now served as an instrument of a privileged class. The challenge to the form of representation was politicised, not by modernism, but by the avant-garde's expunging art as a cult object and using it as part of a revolutionary praxis. To escape reification, the avant-garde's politicised art dictated a radical transformation of form. Hence the pertinence of this discussion to the theatre of John McGrath, in which form has

¹Theodor Adorno, "Political Option," in Aesthetic Theory, trans. C. Lenhardt, (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p.362.

been radically changed from that of the theatre which preceded it.

Benjamin and Brecht rejected the traditional autonomous work of art with its habit of drawing in a passive audience. For them, new techniques of production made available by the modernisation of technology could be used to change the function of art, not only disclosing the political in the cultic, but offering the audience a productive role by intervening in the class conflict. Indeed, without the auratic element, past political and social experience could now be revealed by the new technology, emphasising discontinuous experience at the expense of the continuous. While acting as the means of a heightened perception, the new technology would simultaneously investigate that very perception, disclosing a previously hidden sign system and making clear past communal experience. The whole apparatus of production now made itself available as an instrument of liberation from the stranglehold of the institution.¹

It is important to have considered all this because McGrath's socialist drama, being very obviously a politicisation of the stage, takes much the same approach as that advocated by Benjamin and Brecht. The Marxist debate on

¹Elizabeth Wright, Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation, (London: Routledge, 1989), p.87.

modernism has been put forward here to give some meaningful context to the radical performance modes used by the 7:84 Company and ultimately to lead logically to a consideration of the 7:84 Company within a postmodern setting. The postmodernist use of technical mediation, however, actualises the work differently from what Benjamin and Brecht suggested. It frequently presents rather than signifies, breaking with the old theatrical codes by implying a knowledge of the condition of representation for a subject by using methods which permit such knowledge only by way of theatricalising experience.

Postmodernism

Without implicating oneself too deeply in the widespread controversial debate on the issue of postmodernity, however, it will be nonetheless helpful at least to give a sense here of the complexity of issues which may be seen as a logical extension of the Marxist debate on modernism explained above. Indeed, a reading of the above Marxist debate is crucial to an understanding of postmodernism, hence its inclusion. It is hoped that this will provide the necessary context for assessment of the degree to which the 7:84 Company may be legitimately considered a postmodernist theatre.

In the Marxist debate on aesthetics discussed above, Lukacs and Adorno argued to retain the autonomy of art, while

Bloch, Brecht, and Benjamin attempted to undermine it. Convinced that "high" art in its avant-garde form develops useful contradictions while "popular" art conspires with capitalism, Lukacs and Adorno saw the eroding of the distinctions between "high" and "low" art generated by technological developments in media as destructive, unproductive and, hence, problematic. Bloch, Brecht, and Benjamin, on the other hand, viewed the blurring of such distinctions by the media as both productive and constructive. Central to the debate on postmodernism is this issue of the relationship of art to mass culture, but the wider discussions concerning the term "postmodernism" extend beyond questions of aesthetics to the perception of a fundamental shift in history, culture and politics in general. As Fredric Jameson writes:

. . . this problem is at one and the same time an aesthetic and a political one. The various positions which can logically be taken on it, whatever terms they are couched in, can always be shown to articulate visions of history, in which the evaluation of the social moment in which we live today is the object of an essentially political affirmation or repudiation. ¹

Seen in this light, the "postmodern" might be considered not

¹Fredric Jameson, "The Politics of Theory: Ideological Positions in the Postmodernism Debate," New German Critique 33 (Fall 1984): p.53.

so much a concept as a problematic, a complex of heterogeneous questions which will not be assuaged by a superficially unitary solution. Furthermore, any stance taken in the name of the "postmodern" assumes, by definition, a position on the modern, hence the importance of the Marxist debate discussed earlier. Finally, the "political" and the "aesthetic" constitute the indivisible, coterminously present, aspects of the postmodern problematic.

The period of modernity may be seen as beginning with the commitment made in the eighteenth century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment to infinitely perfectible progress of social and political institutions through the power of reason. During the second half of the twentieth century, however, this Enlightenment view of a rational ordering of the social totality has been seen by some (Jean-Francois Lyotard, for example) as false optimism, since it did not calculate its consequences in the twentieth-century totalitarian nightmare of Fascist and Communist regimes. For this reason, the postmodern sociopolitical view is generally one in which the project of the Enlightenment - which conceived human emancipation by means of social management and the example of scientific invention - is seen at best to have failed or at worst to have been the cause of the problems with which the twentieth century is afflicted.

Jurgen Habermas is one who does not subscribe to this

view, believing that the Enlightenment project may still be realised, though in a corrected form. He considers a denial of an art for the masses (made by Lukacs and Adorno) as a refusal to acknowledge the changing conditions of the times. Indeed, he sees the new communication technologies as an unprecedented means of attaining a harmoniously integrated society, one in which the previous separation of realms of expertise, involving the separation of "experts" from "public," will be dissolved. The project of modernity formulated in the eighteenth century included the development of objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to "their inner logic."¹ To be sure, the disintegration of a unified view of the world has fragmented cultural modernity into three Kantian distinctions of autonomous value spheres: science, morality, and art. Habermas characterises these respectively as structures of cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical, and aesthetic-expressive rationality, each under the control of specialists who appear to be more logical in these particular ways than other people. Consequently, the gap widens between the culture of the experts and that of the general public. The increments of culture through specialised concentration,

¹Jurgen Habermas, "Modernity - An Incomplete Project" in The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster, (Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1991), p.12.

however, do not necessarily filter down to quotidian practice. The differentiation of science, morality, and art has led to the autonomy of the segments treated by the specialist and their separation of the hermeneutics of everyday communication. This division creates the problem of whether to retain the intentions of the Enlightenment or whether to declare the entire project of modernity a dead issue.¹

Habermas sees the fragmentation of culture not as a necessarily negative division, but as an opportunity for art to cast off its autonomy and become reintegrated into everyday life. Opposing any reversal of this fragmentation into separate spheres of knowledge, Habermas insists that the division should be deliberately facilitated and ameliorated. His objective is that art become a part of common communicative practice even while retaining its special function. That special function, like the avant-garde's transformation of aesthetic experience, concerns the centrality of an expressive subjectivity freed from the demands of utility and morality. Habermas sees the celebration of the untamed energies of mind and body - of

¹Jurgen Habermas, "Modernity - An Incomplete Project" in The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster, (Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1991), pp.10-11.

madness, intensity, desire - as the only means of opposing a modernity conceptualised exclusively in terms of economic and administrative rationalisation.

Condemning antimodernism as reactionary, Habermas insists on a critical reappropriation of modernism. His position is quite simply to uphold the aesthetic principles of modernism against an emerging postmodernist aesthetic by incorporating avant-garde aesthetics into his project for modernity. Habermas charges the postmodernists of simply repeating the aesthetic experience of modernity by declaring the discoveries of a decentred subjectivity as their own, freed from the imperatives of utility and morality. In other words, Habermas sees postmodernism as nothing more than a dialectical continuation of modernism, the project of modernity having not yet been fulfilled. Habermas also raises a point of contention concerning the relation between the problem of specificity and universality in philosophy, and the social and epistemological fragmentation which is taken to be characteristic of postmodernity. Indeed, this would appear to be the fundamental issue of modernity and postmodernity: are we currently experiencing the final exhaustion of the Enlightenment project, or do our present confusions arise because this project has been only insufficiently and imperfectly realised? In other words, is there a dialectical continuation of modernism in postmodernism, or is there a

decisive break?

J.G. Merquior sees an obvious continuity between modern and postmodern attitudes toward art. Merquior suggests that beneath modernism's purism lies the fervour of moral indignation against bourgeois culture. Disgruntled by the course of civilisation, "advanced" artists have become embattled against the mind of common man. As a result, modernism, besides being anti-democratic, evinces a structural illiberalism in its artistic praxis. Modernism generally means obscure, "difficult" art which is "highly impersonal and irretrievably subjectivist,"¹ since the meaning of many works remains beyond the reach of most readers or viewers. Modernism, therefore, finds itself in a strongly authoritarian position, what Merquior calls "a tyranny of the creative imagination over the public."²

Merquior sees the virtues of postmodernism simply aggravating modernist vices. He perceives a contradiction between self-referring form and its dependence on interpretation. In fact, postmodern propaganda has simply exploited an idea alluded to by modernist idealism: namely,

¹J.G. Merquior, "Spider and Bee: Towards a Critique of the Postmodern Ideology" in Postmodernism. ICA Documents, ed. Lisa Appignanesi, (London: Free Association Books, 1989), p.45.

²Ibid.

that the liberties of experimental art are a metaphor for social emancipation. For this reason, Merquior sees postmodernism as largely a sequel to modernism rather than a denial of it, yet without any visible improvement.

Furthermore, Merquior calls postmodernist skepticism of notions like objective truth or universality of meaning "a modernist invasion of theory by aesthetic concepts or the surrender of 'ideas' to the ethos of 'form.'"¹ In postmodern thought truth and meaning are ad hoc functions of "infinitely transformable language games."² For Merquior, postmodernists are so incensed against all referentiality that they make a virtue of impotence on the assumption that modern civilization is worthless. Since postmodernism's "deeper meaning" re-enacts this modernist indictment of the modern age, it therefore stands or falls on whatever cogency such an indictment may have. Merquior therefore asks a provocative question: "What if the idea of the crisis of modern culture, instead of mirroring historical reality, is a figment of the humanist imagination?"³

¹J.G. Merquior, "Spider and Bee: Towards a Critique of the Postmodern Ideology" in Postmodernism. ICA Documents, ed. Lisa Appignanesi, (London: Free Association Books, 1989), p.47.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

Jean-Francois Lyotard is highly critical of this scenario. For Lyotard modernism is still caught in an "aesthetic of the sublime," permitting a representation of the "unpresentable" to be shown as a kind of transcendental value, while focusing on "beautiful form." Unlike Habermas who wants to complete the modernist project as the final phase of the Enlightenment and so conclude a unifying interdisciplinary discourse, Lyotard argues that consensus violates the heterogeneity of language games. The postmodern, on the other hand, seeks new presentations, not merely for the sake of novelty, but to convey a more powerful sense of the unpresentable. The postmodernist however, rather than working by pre-established rules, searches for new rules and categories within the work of art in order to formulate the ground rules of what will have been done. In other words, the rules of "the game" are discovered and formulated after the event insofar as the meaning of the text - which the author initially neither foresaw nor understood - is realised by another, rather than being consciously and deliberately placed there by the author. Both the modern and its continuation in the postmodern are characterised by Lyotard as an aesthetics of "experimentation," in which art confronts the sensed but inexpressible, even though there may as yet be no recognised subject as the appropriate receiver of the communication. What Lyotard means by "experimentation" is that any cogent

aesthetic expression will produce its own audience. The communication itself, by its aesthetic form, will elicit both the transmitter and the receiver of the communication. Then - and only then - does communication occur.¹

Acting upon Nietzsche's view that no comprehensive system based on a fixed ontology can exhaust a world of endless becoming, Lyotard similarly rejects any single unifying explanation of the world. As a result, he inquires into the "ruses" by which the limitations of any traditional language game can be violated.

Since the words "popular" and "democratic" no longer mean what the traditions of folklore and of democratic politics originally denoted, Lyotard is as skeptical about mass culture as he is about consensus. Both terms are now synthesised and condensed in the blanket term "pop," a commodity producing its own public. Resistance to this "cultural industry" can be introduced by the inclusion of "an effect of uncertainty and trouble."² It is, says Lyotard, useless to introduce concepts or "produce argumentation." One should aim at "a feeling of disturbance, in the hope that this disturbance will

¹Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thebaud, Just Gaming, trans. Wlad Godzich, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1985), p.10.

²Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Brief Reflections on Popular Culture" in Postmodernism. ICA Documents, ed. Lisa Appignanesi, (London: Free Association Books, 1989), p.182.

be followed by reflection. . . . it's up to every artist to decide by what means s/he thinks s/he can produce this disturbance."¹

Lyotard's idea of resistance to any author-imposed meaning is central to postmodernism because it implies resistance to any transference in the prevailing power structure. As a result, it involves the questioning of any referentiality by focusing on perception itself. Everything in postmodern art becomes self-referential and hence, as Elizabeth Wright has shown, subject to Brecht's Verfremdungseffekt, even though such resistance to definition may undermine the collectivity of the audience.²

As has been stated, the purpose of introducing here the ongoing debate on postmodernism is to determine some context in which to assess McGrath's theatre in terms of contemporary thought and theory. Unfortunately, definitive interpretations have given way to the constitutive vagueness and portentousness one has come to associate with general accounts of postmodernity. Indeed, this can be seen in the diffusion of the term "postmodernism" itself. In such circumstances,

¹Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Brief Reflections on Popular Culture" in Postmodernism. ICA Documents, ed. Lisa Appignanesi, (London: Free Association Books, 1989), p.182.

²Elizabeth Wright, Postmodern Brecht. A Re-presentation, (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p.96.

one can only seek some generally acceptable viewpoint compatible with the main concerns of all relevant parties (assuming such a viewpoint exists) as to what is meant by "postmodernism." Confusion occurs when "modernism" and "postmodernism" are used as both aesthetic categories and terms for cultural phenomena which coincide with epochs of history. Modernity has been defined as the period of modernisation, while postmodernity has been understood as the period of consumer society within corporate capitalism, the period of fundamental transformation of technology, and as the period in which the great narratives of the Enlightenment have lost their credibility. It should be recognised, however, that the sense in which I am going to apply postmodernism to McGrath's theatre is limited, for purely practical reasons, to the division between representation and reality in the realm of aesthetics. This is consistent with the view expressed by Peter Dews when he writes:

In the domains of architecture and the visual arts, the word possesses a more or less determinate meaning, referring to a renunciation and critique of distinct traditions, of a levelling technocratic functionalism in architecture, and of a programme of negation in modernist art which led from abstract expressionism, through minimalism to conceptual art. ¹

¹Peter Dews, "From Post-Structuralism to Postmodernity: Habermas's Counter-Perspective" in Postmodernism. ICA Documents, ed. Lisa Appignanesi, (London: Free Association Books, 1989), p.37.

Demetri Porphyrios has similarly shown that the core of the postmodern condition comprises a preoccupation with fragmentation (the disintegration of the compositional and stylistic systems that lived on from earlier years, including the modern avant-gardes), ironic commentary and parody (reaching for a redeeming image in the world of parody, mockery, or nostalgia), phantasmagoria at the expense of material quality or significant meaning, and the demise of the public realm in which questions of public\private are silenced since they are considered anachronistic and irrelevant in a world dominated by the mass media. These preoccupations converge under the general "umbrella" of the postmodern ideology of pluralism.¹ The problem with the notion of plurality is that since modernism consists of so many models (Joyce, Proust, Picasso, Stravinsky, etc.), there will be as many different forms of postmodernism as there were of high modernism, since these postmodernisms are specific and local reactions against those models. As a result, the effacement of certain separations in these postmodernisms leads to the dissolution of the older distinction between high culture and "popular" culture, including kitsch.²

¹Demetri Porphyrios, "Architecture and the Postmodern Condition" in Postmodernism. ICA Documents, ed. Lisa Appignanesi, (London: Free Association Books, 1989), pp.89-90.

²Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and the Consumer Society" in The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster, (Seattle, Washington: Bay Press), p.112.

Lyotard has called into question the interplay of independence between the unity of tradition, consensus, and universality. He distinguishes between artistic practices which aim at repeating that "interplay of independence," and ones that via experimentation can no longer be accounted for within the terms set by tradition. The avant-garde may be located within the movement beyond the mere negative response to tradition. Postmodernism's alluding to the reality of the present is indicated when Lyotard asks whether we can still arrange the multiplicity of events that inform us of the world by subsuming them under the concept of a universal history of man. As Andrew Benjamin argues:

If multiplicity cannot be understood or interpreted in terms of a single determination, where does that leave the practice of an art criticism that can no longer depend upon universal values? Is there an artistic practice and an art criticism whose temporality is not reducable to the temporality of tradition? ¹

For Benjamin, this conflict concerning the existence of absolutes, universal values - what Lyotard refers to as "grand narratives" - can be recognised only in terms of a factiousness which acknowledges the absence of a final

¹Andrew Benjamin, Art, Mimesis and the Avant-Garde, (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p.135.

resolution. Lyotard argues that in post-industrial society and postmodern culture "the grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation."¹ As a result, Andrew Benjamin concludes, "justice can only be done to dissensus within pluralism."²

The revolt against modernism intensified with the advent of conceptualism in the late 1960s, the opposition specifically against the formalist version formulated in Clement Greenberg's theory that art works should be confined to the effects specific to their own medium. Greenberg saw modernism as the historical proclivity toward self-referential autonomy, to be accomplished by exclusive focus on all that is specific to an art form: its own materials and traditions, its very difference from other art forms and practices. As he writes, "The essence of modernism, as I see it, lies in the use of the characteristic methods of the discipline itself not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence."³ Greenberg's assumption, simply put,

¹Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.37.

²Andrew Benjamin, Art, Mimesis and the Avant-Garde, (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p.135.

³Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," Art and Literature, (Spring 1965).

is that the artist, with his special gifts and training, expresses "the historical essence of civilisation" through modes of understanding and expression which are peculiar to his art practice. The special characteristic of the form necessarily makes it an autonomous sphere of activity, completely separate from quotidian social and political life. The autonomous nature of the art form means the questions asked of it may only be properly put, and answered, in its own terms: all other forms of questioning are inadmissible. In modern times - as Greenberg saw it - the function of an art form is to preserve and enhance its own special sphere of civilising human values in an increasingly dehumanising technological environment. In consequence, the conception of art practice has collapsed inward upon itself to produce an art object which is the "human essence" made form, "civilisation" made substance.¹

Many of the arguments supporting Greenbergian theory, however, assert a postmodernism which simply re-theorises a pre-Greenbergian modernism. This is postmodernism's attempt to further what might be seen as an ethic of emancipation, a questioning of the very institution of art considered as a contribution to knowledge and social awareness. From a

¹Victor Burgin, The End of Art Theory. Criticism and Postmodernity, (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1986), p.38.

critical viewpoint, this stance may be equated with the Habermasian position of maintaining through critical discourse a modernist avant-garde in conditions where an avant-garde is no longer appropriate. In other words, whereas the modernist avant-garde had been concerned with bringing art into consciousness as a social institution and breaking its autonomy, its inappropriateness in postmodernism doesn't necessarily exclude the possibility of a critical and socially emancipatory role for art, the function of which should be perceived in more specific terms.

In associating autonomy with Greenbergian theory, what is sometimes overlooked is that even formalist abstract art can, in certain conditions, have to some extent a critical social content which derives from its very claim to autonomy. Furthermore, any radical political theory offering emancipation must allow some autonomy to the subject. As Adorno has shown, the concept of an oppositional art is a product of the bourgeois consciousness of liberation. Adorno writes that art

is not social only because it is brought about in such a way that it embodies the dialectic of forces and relations of production. Nor is art social only because it derives its material content from society. Rather, it is social primarily because it stands opposed to society. Now this opposition art can mount only when it has become autonomous. By congealing into an entity unto itself - rather than obeying existing social norms and thus proving itself to be "socially

useful" - art criticizes society just by being there. Pure and immanently elaborated art is a tacit critique of the debasement of man by a condition that is moving towards a total-exchange society where everything is a for-other. This social deviance of art is the determinate negation of a determinate society. 1

According to Adorno, while the autonomy of modern art exhibits a mimetic relationship to the condition of the subject under a rationalising modernity, it simultaneously negates technological means-end rationality. One may reject Adorno's opposition to popular and mass culture, yet still accept that no liberating social change can be foreseen without some degree of autonomy being given to the subject, resulting in an abyss between the subject and discourse. To be sure, without such autonomy no such change could be accomplished.²

At a time when even the most shocking artefacts of a once reactionary modernism have been absorbed into official culture, becoming as Habermas writes "dominant but dead,"³ modernism itself, if it is to be saved at all, must be

¹Theodor Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), p.321.

²Michael Newman, "Revising Modernism, Representing Postmodernism: Critical Discourses of the Visual Arts" in Postmodernism. ICA Documents, ed. Lisa Appignanesi, (London: Free Association Books, 1989), p.123.

³Jurgen Habermas, "Modernity - an Incomplete Project" in The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster, (Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1991), p.6.

exceeded. This issue of progress beyond the modern has become the imperative of postmodernist ideology. The postmodernist break with modernism in the late 1950s and early 1960s concerned its definition of the plane of representation. What had been a uniform surface in modernist painting became a densely textural site in the work of Rauschenberg and other postmodernist painters. Similarly, as Rosalind Krauss has shown, the logic of modern sculpture led not only to its own deconstruction, but also to the deconstruction of all the arts propagated by distinct and autonomous disciplines.¹ A new language of the visual and performing arts has thus emerged based on an expanded field of operations for each of its disciplines, on new relationships among them, and on the use of technological means. As a result, painting and sculpture may be seen as single entities in a diverse field of forms, all derived structurally. Hence, the postmodernist break is now seen in terms not of medium but of structure oriented to cultural terms. In this way, the avant-garde's questioning of representation is reaffirmed in postmodernist art, in which the mandate is to change the object itself. Postmodernist practice is not necessarily defined in terms of any given medium, but rather "in relation to the logical operations on a

¹Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in an Expanded Field" in The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster, (Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1991), pp.31-42.

set of cultural terms, for which any medium . . . might be used."¹ Hence, not only has the nature of art been transformed, but so also has the object of criticism, leading to a practice which erodes the division between creative and critical forms.

Whatever position is taken toward postmodernism is clearly defined by some kind of political affiliations and historical agendas. One's conception of postmodernism is crucial to any representation of historical reality concerning which aspects are emphasised and which ignored. From one viewpoint, to accept the end of modernism is to hold the conviction that the present time is marked by the end of individualism (though I shall show this is not the case), what Jean Baudrillard calls "the death of the subject," a time when the great narratives created by the individual have been lost to a consumer society in which the humanities are only marginal and opposition is made problematic. A skepticism now exists concerning the validity of the authorial role and the relevance of the signatory gesture. Self-expression and the belief that we can control our own destinies have been cast in doubt as just, "two more cultural myths,"² in the face of the conformity and paralysis of individual will induced by the

¹Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in an Expanded Field" in The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster, (Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1991), p.41.

media as they seek to manufacture consent and re-form us into unquestioning consumers. These concepts suggest not so much a decisive break with the past as an uneven and spasmodic transition to the present. Within postmodernism lies the conflict of old and new cultural and economic modes and of the vested interests they embody. In this way postmodernism emerges as a resistance to the official culture of modernism. A postmodernism of resistance aims at a critical deconstruction of tradition. Its purpose is to question rather than exploit cultural codes, to reveal rather than conceal social and political affiliations.

Since the advent of conceptualism, an obvious feature of postmodernism is the reference to both tradition and to the vernacular. The return to past styles certainly may be considered "postmodern" insofar as modernism perceived tradition in terms of a progressive evolution in which no question of regression to earlier stages was considered. Moreover, a modernism so opposed to modern "mass culture" found the vernacular objectionable. It is worth noting, however, what is actually represented in individual instances of such postmodernist gestures. A return to the past discloses that therein reside the meanings which are lived by and struggled over in the present.¹ One may also use the

¹Victor Burgin, The End of Art Theory. Criticism and Postmodernity, (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1990), p.45.

vernacular to open up art to the wider semiotic scenario of our lives to initiate the questioning of art and mass-media meanings and values.

In The Postmodern Condition Lyotard speaks of a crisis of legitimation which arose when the positivist vision of a unified totality of knowledge built on observation dissolved with the realisation that "natural science does not simply explain and describe nature, . . . it describes nature as exposed to our method of questioning."¹ As a result, a single "reality" or "unified knowledge" which provides the common ground upon which scientifically rational demands can be met, is no longer considered tenable. The "truth" that was the ideal objective of the allegorical works of humanism has been replaced by "relativity" and "legitimation" in postmodernist works. Lyotard's answer to this crisis of legitimation refers to a "performative" utterance which has in itself no descriptive function (e.g., "keep off the grass" or "I thee wed"). That is to say, the performative is an incitement or commitment to an action. This concept leads Fredric Jameson to the conclusion that science justifies itself, not by producing a replica of some external reality, but by simply producing more work, more ideas.² Scientific

¹Werner Heisenberg, Physics and Philosophy, quoted in Elizabeth Bruss, Beautiful Theories, (n.p.: Johns Hopkins, 1982), p.15.

²Fredric Jameson, "Foreward" to Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.xvi.

research thus replaces the master narratives of legitimation with smaller narratives at work locally in the contemporary social system.¹ Similarly, Jameson proposes an analagous "crisis of legitimation" in art. Modernism found itself in crisis with the recognition in the 1960s that its formal experiments were exhausted and its political utopianism no longer credible. With the crisis of legitimation art has now shifted to operating with "local" narratives which are continually in process. Practitioners of the arts may no longer see themselves as purveyors of the general, the "good for all time." Instead, they now address the specific conditions of their particular professional and social lives. To acknowledge this situation is to work not for "posterity" or "truth"; it is, rather, to work on those particular projects which seem critical at a particular historical moment in time (for example, in the present time, the issue of feminism). A postmodern art problematic, therefore, is one which focuses on the overlapping of the aesthetic and the political. Yet, as Michel Foucault writes:

. . . the problem isn't so much to define
a political "position" . . . but to imagine

¹Fredric Jāmèson, "Foreward" to Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.xvi.

and bring into existence new schemes of politicisation. To the great new techniques of power (which correspond to multinational economies or to Bureaucratic states) must be opposed new forms of politicisation. 1

Robert Sayer and Michel Lowy have advanced the view that we are still extensively within the purview of Romanticism and that, far from being a nineteenth-century phenomenon, Romanticism is an essential component of modern culture.² They define a "unifying element" in opposition to capitalism "in the name of pre-capitalist values."³ In consequence, identifying Romanticism with the modern, one may come to consider confusions and complexities surrounding the postmodern as a turning point, a motion away from Romanticism. One may then further identify a postmodernist left aesthetics as opposition to capitalism, not in the form of pre-capitalist values which are in themselves Romantic, but as a form of post-Romantic theories of representations in general. Such representations, by subverting the modernist assumption that art is a form of symbolisation independent of

¹Michel Foucault, "Interview with Lucette Finas" in Michel Foucault - Power, Truth, Strategy, (n.p.: Ferel, 1979), p.72.

²Robert Sayer and Michel Lowy, "Figures of Romantic Anti-Capitalism," New German Critique 32 (Spring-Summer 1984): p.42.

³Ibid., p.46.

other symbolic systems, show the impossibility of the modernist ideal of "higher" values independent of history and social forms. Further undermining modernist artistic autonomy is evidence by demonstration of the essentially "intertextual" nature of the production of meaning, admitting that art (including theatre) can no longer be considered outside the complex of other representational practices and institutions with which it is contemporary.

What emerges from these considerations is that, in fact, at least two positions on postmodernism are now in place which must be applied to John McGrath's theatre: one aligned with neoconservative politics, the other related to poststructuralist theory.

Considered mostly in terms of style, neoconservative postmodernism counters the formalist aspects of modernism with a return to narrative (in literature), ornament (in architecture), and the figure (in painting). Not only is this position stylistically reactionary, but it also supports a return to history (the humanist tradition) and the return of the subject (the artist/dramatist as auteur). Poststructuralist postmodernism, on the other hand, proclaims the decline of individualism, "the death of man," not only as the creator of original art works but also as the centred subject of representation and history. Rather than a return to representation, this form of postmodernism shows that

representation is more constitutive of reality than transparent to it. It will be my contention that these two concepts of postmodernism, although apparently oppositional, play an important part in McGrath's drama.¹

In neoconservative postmodernism eclectically derived modes and styles are recycled, the classical frequently resurfacing as "pop." But this history to which postmodernism returns is little more than a reduction of historical periods to a pastiche of enduring styles. Jameson has distinguished pastiche - through which postmodernism expresses the inner truth of the new economic social order of multinational capitalism - from parody by its neutrality, by having "lost its sense of humor."² Jameson defines pastiche as "the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language."³ It is through pastiche, according to Jameson that postmodernism incorporates kitsch so that forms of high modernism are integrated with the mass culture of the present age. Since, with the poststructuralist "death of the subject," we no longer live in

¹Hal Foster, Recodings. Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics, (Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1989), p.121.

²Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" in The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster, (Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1991), p.114.

³Ibid.

an age of unique individualism and stylistic innovation,

all that is left is to initiate dead styles,
to speak through the masks and with the
voices of the styles in the imaginary museum.
But this means that contemporary or postmodernist
art is going to be about art itself in a
new kind of way; even more it means that
one of its essential messages will involve
the necessary failure of art and the aesthetic,
the failure of the new, the imprisonment
in the past. ¹

Jameson suggests that this confinement has resulted in a
"realism" borne of the recognition that we are condemned to
seek the historical past through our own pop images and
stereotypes about the past, with which we have lost all
contact. As a result, Jameson sees postmodernism as deficient
in the critical potential of high modernism, yet nonetheless
supporting "the logic of consumer capitalism."² What
Jameson is apparently uncertain of is whether there is also a
way in which postmodernism resists that logic.

As it did for eclectic historicism in nineteenth-century
art, the return to history implies a flight from the present
toward tradition, which is conceived as a redemption of

¹Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer
Society" in The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture,
ed. Hal Foster, (Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1991),
pp.115-116.

²Ibid., p.125.

history. The return to tradition may be seen as a new political form of anti-modernism which blames modern culture for the ills of society and seeks reparation in a return to the old human verities. Such a view, however, would seem to overrate the cogency of culture and underrate the power of capital as a force destructuring social forms.

If postmodernism is considered as a style, which is set in opposition to modernism (both the identifying style of the artist/author/dramatist and of the "spirit" of an age), it is a style which insists on a return to history. As Jameson has argued, in the name of style and history postmodernism has most often resorted to pastiche. Yet the very eclecticism of pastiche precludes the concept of style as the signature expression of an individual artist or period. It would appear that pastiche's relativism would undermine the possibility of planting historical references or even to think historically in the first place. As Hal Foster argues, ". . . this Postmodern Style of History may in fact signal the disintegration of style and the collapse of history."¹

The point here is that neoconservative postmodernism discloses itself by the very cultural present it would abandon, while simultaneously disclosing this same present as

¹Hal Foster, Recodings. Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics, (Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1989), p.127.

marked not by stylistic innovation, but by its implosion in pastiche. This present is revealed also by the undermining of history, rather than by any real sense of it, and by presenting the "death of the author," rather than a spiritual catharsis of the artist/dramatist as creator and centre of meaning. This is the postmodern moment in which history becomes fragmented and the subject is dispersed in its own representations.

Poststructuralist postmodernism differs from the neoconservative variety insofar as it displaces modernism, not because, as neoconservatives believe, it is catastrophic, but because it has been ameliorated. Furthermore, whereas the neoconservative adversarial position on modernism is a matter predominantly of style, demanding a return to representation, the poststructuralist opposition focuses on more epistemological matters concerning the modern, such as the ideology of formalist concerns.¹

The two postmodernisms oppose each other most radically, then, on the issue of representation. Assuming that the reference of its images and meanings is a given, neoconservative postmodernism insists on a return to representation. Poststructuralist postmodernism, on the other

¹Hal Foster, Recodings. Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics, (Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1989), p.128.

hand, questions the veracity of visual representation, exploring the truth content of the meaning and order which realist, symbolic or abstract codes reinforce. Indeed, it is this problematising of representation that firmly places this postmodernism in the poststructuralist camp. As Jameson argues:

The contemporary poststructuralist aesthetic signals the dissolution of the modernist paradigm - with its valorization of myth and symbol, temporality, organic form and the concrete universal, the identity of the subject and the continuity of linguistic expression - and foretells the emergence of some new postmodernist or schizophrenic conception of the artifact - now strategically reformulated as "text" or "écriture," and stressing discontinuity, allegory, the mechanical, the gap between the signifier and signified, the lapse in meaning, the syncope in the experience of the subject. ¹

Like that of modernism, postmodernism's function is to appropriate the practices of a discipline in order, as Clement Greenberg insisted "to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence,"² yet it does so only to subvert the discipline, that is, "disentrench" its given medium, not only as an

¹Fredric Jameson, Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p.20.

²Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," Art and Literature, (Spring, 1965).

autonomous occupation but also as a mode of representation with guaranteed referential and ontological meaning. As a rule, postmodernism focuses not on the formal purity of artistic means, but on networks of power and knowledge in social representations. Hence, it becomes clear that distinct forms of expression, established in the Enlightenment's separation in areas of competence, are no longer viable. With the destructuring of the object and its field has come a decentring of the subject, both artist/performer and audience.¹

The point here is that in both postmodernisms the subject is decentred; representation is disentranced, and the referent (sense of history) undermined. Despite their differences, both postmodernisms would seem to express the collapse of art. If, indeed, such is the case, the poststructuralist "critique" of representation and history may be considered compatible with the neoconservative "return" to representation, to the subject, to history. In this sense textuality and pastiche are symptomatic of the process of reification and fragmentation under multinational capitalism. Central to postmodernism then is the notion of resistance to definition by problematising the very activity of reference by

¹Hal Foster, Recodings. Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics, (Seattle Washington: Bay Press, 1989), pp.130-131.

playing on the innately dialectical structure of perception. It may thus be characterised as a continuing discourse between the body of modernist work and the present, accompanied by a questioning of the ethical nature of representation, of its social value, or who and what gets represented, and by whom. There is, thus, no dominant stylistic direction or "movement" to postmodernism; rather, there are strategies that focus on these issues and make ingenious use of the means available.

To summarise then, considering McGrath's drama in terms of postmodernism means seeing it less as a representation than as a textual site attempting a critical deconstruction of tradition. Rather than "quoting" this tradition, it will incorporate it to the point where the line between "high" and "low" art seems increasingly difficult to draw. Its opposition to capitalism, moreover, will be implied by its historical passage out of Romanticism, producing through the results of experimentation its own audience who can respond to the new form. Relinquishing its autonomy in favour of a pragmatic political function, this postmodern theatre will create in its audience a feeling of disturbance which will lead to later reflection. As theatrical innovators such as Craig, Appia, Piscator, and Brecht rejected the modern drama that preceded them (Ibsen, Chekhov, Strindberg), so the 7:84 Company as a postmodernist theatre, rather than merely "flashing back" or "feeding back," to quote Lyotard, will

rather address issues of representation by "ana-lysing, ana-mnesing, and reflecting."¹ A postmodernist theatre of this kind might be expected to pay homage to the innovations of the past in a manner that is antithetical to them. This does not necessarily make the homage any less sincere; it does, however, inject a note of humour that contradicts the heroic, high-seriousness of the modernist playwright. One might therefore expect a comic theatre which shows a reverence for the originals while ironically subverting their aesthetic principles. Such a postmodernist theatre, therefore, demands a double view: sameness and difference, unity and rupture, filiation and revolt. To explore the notion of McGrath's theatre as "postmodern" will require a careful dissection of its work. Before beginning this task, however, it will be useful in what follows to give a brief overview of the development of this theatre and the social conditions from which it grew.

¹Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Defining the Postmodern" in Postmodernism. ICA Documents, ed. Lisa Appignanesi, (London: Free Association Books, 1989), p.10.

CHAPTER THREE

TOWARD A NEW THEATRE

The Dislocation of British Society

The Second World War changed both material and emotional conditions in Great Britain. These changed circumstances provided a context in which the 7:84 Theatre Company could develop. It is worth noting this context before tracing the development of the Company. Post-war Britain, like its American counterpart, felt an initial confidence in a military supremacy which, if it had once enjoyed a reputation for invincibility during the great days of Empire, now proved precarious and temporary. Peter Schjeldahl's contention that the war "apotheosized American power, pride, and delusions of moral grandeur"¹ has substantive implications also for the situation in Great Britain insofar as Britain remained the world's ranking colonising power.

A sense of doubt seems to have begun early. Austerity

¹Peter Schjeldahl, "Our Kiefer," Art in America, (New York: March, 1988), p.118.

already gripped the nation as the Empire began to disintegrate with the loss of India (1947). Perhaps this loss of economic and territorial supremacy forced Britons to accept a new image of themselves, one which no longer subscribed to the tradition of noblesse oblige, the conviction that those who are economically fortunate are responsible for those who are not. Such a belief might have been viable in a society not only economically reliable but politically and technologically superior; but once the economic and political substructure of that society becomes tenuous so that the technological superiority can no longer be maintained, the principle of noblesse oblige becomes untenable. Whether such a concept was feasible for the majority of the British people is unclear; with two-fifths of the world's inhabited surface under the hegemony of Great Britain, one can scarcely imagine the British people unaccustomed to visualising themselves as anything less than a formidable benevolent power and, at least to some degree a paragon of Western civilisation. When, therefore, the loss of Empire came, forcing the British people's perception of themselves to change while simultaneously trying to function in a model community located somewhere in the pre-war past, adjustments became necessary.

But even before the collapse of Empire, Great Britain had relinquished much of its leadership following the American lend-loan agreement and later the American use of atomic weapons in Japan. The development of a Soviet bomb and

limited American success in Korea exacerbated this unaccustomed sense of insecurity. As Christopher Bigsby argues:

At first this change seems to have registered as a sense of disturbance in the social and psychological world, a bafflement over social process . . . Something was over. Some ultimate security had been destroyed . . . The very structures of art began to dislocate under pressure. The sense of consonance implied by the rationality of language, the integrity of character, and the coherence of plot began to succumb to what seems at times to be a kind of cultural paranoia. ¹

Bigsby's reference here is to the situation in the United States, but a comparable sense of American disillusion is pertinent in that as integral members of NATO and the Western Alliance Britain and the United States had traditionally shared an accord based on democratic liberalism which tended to give the impression of an indivisible future. As Bigsby has shown, America's self-image was increasingly unclear. Race segregation, the cold war, and multiple political assassinations gave way to mounting fears as events focused on South-East Asia. Indeed, the one issue above all others which raised doubts about models of behaviour and national purpose

¹C.W.E. Bigsby, A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama: 3 Beyond Broadway, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.4.

was, I think, Vietnam. At stake was a failure of morality incompatible with the myths and values of America's past. Resistance to the war expressed itself in what is now called the "cultural revolution" of the 1960s and 1970s as political activists demonstrated in parades and protest marches to dramatise their actions. Furthermore, as Bigsby again writes,

The demonstrators at such parades tended to see themselves as a form of theatre; indeed, since they were in effect performing for the television cameras, they were. The attempt to levitate the Pentagon was itself an odd mixture of the comic, the farcical, the absurd, and the tragic. ¹

Vietnam, as Bigsby writes elsewhere, "theatricalised the streets."² Just to be there - on the campuses, in the streets - was to play a role in the central drama of the time. Opposition to a value system upheld by the "Establishment" expressed itself in alternative "lifestyles." As Theodore Shank writes:

Within the alternative culture it was not only acceptable to drop out of the established culture's universities and employment, but it was also desirable to withdraw the support of one's

¹C.W.E. Bigsby, A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama: 3 Beyond Broadway, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.324.

²Ibid., p.314.

labour and tuition fees. It became both a necessity and a badge to live frugally - used clothing, inexpensive shared housing, food from money provided by middle-class parents, food stamps, unemployment benefits, welfare. 1

Although Vietnam supplied the images, the visual metaphors governing the moment, the counter-culture took root and burgeoned in places far beyond the purlieus of an American context. In France, for example, the events of May, 1968 were to have wide social repercussions. John Bull writes:

What happened there that spring is historically without precedent - the creation of a potentially revolutionary situation within the context of a stable and securely affluent society. It was a situation that was fermented and stage-managed not by the traditional organs of political conflict - the unions and political organisations of the working-class - but by a young, radical and alienated intelligentsia. A movement that started in a university in the suburbs of Paris was briefly to bring France to a standstill, and then to threaten even the Gaullist regime, as serious attempts were made to construct a revolutionary counter-society that would by-pass the machinery of the modern state. 2

Provisional attempts were made to form an alliance between

¹Theodore Shank, American Alternative Theatre, (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), p.2.

²John Bull, New British Political Dramatists, (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1984), pp.10-11.

students and workers, but the "revolution" remained the creation of a political avant-garde as distrustful of the labour unions as of government.¹ The method of the French Communist Party and the Communist union to confront the government along the traditional lines of increased money and decreased working hours expunged the possibility of real political change. John Bull explains:

The struggle began over a number of specific university-oriented issues, and, although the occupations spread rapidly from educational to industrial sites, the link between the two areas was never properly made. Nor could it be, for there was at heart a fundamental split. The traditional organised Left still thought and acted in accordance with a vitalised version of Marxist analysis, based on the primacy of class-struggle - a struggle which in France as in England had become institutionalised into little more than an annual squabble about pay rises. The revolutionary avant-garde had already moved beyond this position, and were increasingly to do so as events developed and they discovered just how far their critique could be pushed. 2

What the avant-garde demanded was, in fact, nothing less than a redefinition of political struggle for the individual on an everyday basis. The dominant interpretation of the

¹John Bull, New British Political Dramatists, (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1984), p.11.

²Ibid.

struggle as it emerged in England was that of the Situationists.¹ Peter Stansill and David Mairowitz explain:

They developed a theory based on an exhaustive theory of the conditions of life inherent in overdeveloped capitalism - the forced consumption of commodities produced in abundance, the reduction of life to a spectacle, the stupefactions of urbanism and ideology, the hegemony of the bureaucrats, the alienation of labour. These theorists sought to break the stranglehold of modern life through the abolition of the class society, of the commodity production system and of wage labour, and through the transcendence of art and culture by their absorption into everyday life. 2

The expansion of a limited political struggle into a total cultural context makes clear the traditional Left's inability to cope with the dynamism of the Situationist movement. The Situationists apparently saw the traditional view of political struggle as a necessary ingredient in the process of fragmentation and alienation with which it should have been in opposition. Conflicts over terms and conditions effected little change in the fundamental relationships of people in society. To define a distinction between work and leisure,

¹John Bull, New British Political Dramatists, (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1984), pp.11-12.

²Peter Stansill and David Mairowitz, eds., Bamm: Outlaw Manifestos and Ephemera 1965-1970, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1971), p.131.

moreover, was to miss the point that they are both a part of the same "spectacle of consumption."¹ As David Edgar wrote:

Revolutionary politics was seen as being much less about the organisation of the working-class at the point of production, and much more about the disruption of bourgeois ideology at the point of consumption. ²

The emphasis here is cultural rather than political, the values of the establishment contrasted to those of the alternative culture. The focus is shifted from the traditional Left arena of class-conflict and mass struggle, and directed instead to the "consumption of values."³

The convulsions of 1968, then, marked the possibility of a radical shift in national and international politics and disclosed to the British people that "its ideological component was by no means clear."⁴ The new optimism generated by Harold Wilson's campaign declaration that he

¹John Bull, New British Political Dramatists, (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1984), p.11.

²David Edgar, "Ten Years of Political Theatre, 1968-78," Theatre Quarterly VIII, 32 (1979): p.26.

³Bull, op.cit., p.14.

⁴C.W.E. Bigsby, "The Politics of Anxiety: Contemporary Socialist Theatre in England," in Modern British Dramatists, ed. J.R. Brown, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984), pp.164-165.

would implement the programme of socialist reforms introduced by the Atlee administration had come to nothing. In the 1970s the British parliament's inefficacy following James Callaghan's failure to unite the Labour Party emphasised Britain's declining role in world affairs. Despite Margaret Thatcher's attempts to dismantle the 1945 socialist programme, increasing unemployment and a rapidly declining economy have reduced Britain in terms of its gross national product to nineteenth in the world economy.¹

Britain's economic difficulties offer another parallel to those of the United States, where the transition from an industrial to an electronic, technoscientific society has forced areas of industry, manufacturing and agriculture into upheaval. But in Britain, where the economic power structure was largely dependent on a formerly lucrative but now antiquated colonial system which has all but disintegrated, the transformation has been even more traumatic. Paul Smith writes:

¹From 1964 to 1969, roughly the period which saw the rise of the counter-culture and the advent of the new wave of political theatre, the average percentage increase in industrial production was: in Japan 17.3, United States 7.1, West Germany 5.7, France 5.7, Italy 7.9, and United Kingdom 3.0 (Figures derived from Main Economic Indicators 1960-1975, OECD, 1976, and referred to in R.D. Cornwall, World History in the Twentieth Century, (Burnt Mill, Harlow, Essex: Longman Group, 1980), p.238.

Critics and supporters alike often speak of the current "Americanization" of Britain and its culture. The changes that have been wrought there in the 1980s will indeed appear familiar to Americans accustomed to scenarios of deindustrialization, the rise of service industries, rampant consumerism, the globalization of markets, etc. But, as one might expect, such scenarios can produce greater fragmentation, even a greater effect of shock, in a culture that had seemed so immovable, so insular, and so wrapped up in its own sense of history and continuity.¹

In terms of theatre, then, what I am going to propose is one major theme pervading post-war British drama - loss. This includes not merely material and territorial loss, but loss of self-image and identity. Debacles like May 1968 and Vietnam subordinated theatre's imagery and tactics to imply the power of language and gesture to attract attention and transmit meaning. Viewed in this way, it is easy to consider street demonstrations against America's intervention in Vietnam or against Great Britain's occupation of Northern Ireland or France's Situationist uprising as a piece of extended street theatre, a street theatre which invited its participants to play out their contradictions in the world, denying any distinction between art and reality. Art and ethics fused. Theatre became a means and not an end.

¹Paul Smith, "Terminal Culture? The British Edge," Art in America, (New York: September, 1987), p.37.

In the United States theatre companies like the San Francisco Mime Troupe, El Teatro Campesino, and the Bread and Puppet Theatre dramatised the extent to which Vietnam dislodged American values, undermined America's myths and morality, and corrupted its language. At stake was not only America's sense of its own identity as a champion of freedom, but also its self-image as a protector of virtue opposed to injustice, political autocracy, and violence.

In Great Britain, Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre, the first avowedly socialist theatre in the nation, staged outrageously blasphemous, agitational, and anarchist satires against the political establishment.¹ Yet although American myths and values had been undermined, it was still possible for something to be retrieved by simply withdrawing from Vietnam which, of course, is what America ultimately did. For Great Britain, however, no such easy remedy was available. The loss of Empire and its coterminous diminution of economic advantage and prestige has been irreparable and absolute.

It was at the level of language that theatre companies were particularly in revolt, language being indispensable to understanding and expression of meaning. The speciousness of

¹Some of CAST's more successful efforts include John D. Muggins is Dead (1965), The Trials of Horatio Muggins (1967), Harold Muggins is a Martyr (1968), Muggins' Awakening (1970), Come in Hilda Muggins (1973), Confessions of a Socialist (1978), and Hotel Sunshine (text unpublished).

Vietnam, Harold Wilson, and Watergate exposed the necessity for a language not completely defiled and emptied of meaning. To be sure, opposition to American intervention in Vietnam was frequently in terms of language perpetrating a policy of public mendacity at a time when the consciousness of the nation was seeking a real transformation. As Christopher Bigsby writes:

In a fundamental sense these playwrights were in revolt against the word. They saw themselves as representing and addressing those whose marginality was assumed at a linguistic no less than a social level. The language which they were forced to use in order to communicate was historically stained. It was more than a symbol of the coercive power of society; it was a primary agent of that power. The demeaning language of the racist, the sexist and the politically dominant had already infected the nature of daily discourse. The battle, therefore, had to be waged first at this level before the power which it masked and facilitated could be actively engaged. ¹

This concern with language was equally true of theatrical companies which regarded dialogue, narrative and plot as theatrical conventions with a power over actor and audience. While the substructure of art remained intact, the established foundations of society could scarcely be destroyed. Political

¹C.W.E. Bigsby, A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama: 3 Beyond Broadway, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.293.

commitment, therefore, also involved aesthetic experiment, moving from the social realism of the mid-1950s (Osborne's Look Back in Anger, 1956, for example) to the conscious exploitation of stereotype by the avant-garde.¹ As Bigsby writes:

The self trapped in the constraints of a naturalistic environment quickly deferred to a self liberated through challenging its own density, its own social, moral and metaphysical fixity. An assumed solidity of identity was exploded, the social components of that identity being exposed through a conscious use of caricatures, a resort to puppets and masks or even a deliberate theatricalising of relationships. ²

The accuracy of language was, therefore, constantly checked against the validity of experience. The theatrical avant-garde focused on both form and function, on both transforming the world and on the imagination for that transformation.³

¹By the theatrical avant-garde I mean American groups such as the San Francisco Mime Troupe, El Teatro Campesino, Bread and Puppet Theatre, and British groups such as Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre, the 7:84 Theatre Company, Red Ladder, and Welfare State International.

²C.W.E. Bigsby, A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama: 3 Beyond Broadway, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.294.

³Ibid.

A new theatrical language had become necessary in the first place because the conventional forms used by modernist theatre had been put to the political purpose of sustaining capitalism in its domination of society. Despite nationalisation of industries, trade unionism, and the welfare state, private and state capital in Great Britain is controlled by a ruling class whose position of power is supported by middle and professional classes dependent on the hierarchy of the social order for their superiority over the working class. Since this arrangement works in their best interest, the ruling and intermediate classes perpetuate the system in order to sanction and continue class rule by endorsing an ideology which pervades all areas of human consciousness. Bourgeois theatre is one facet of society which helps that sanctioning ideology. Opposed to the ideology are those oppressed by it: the working classes, the exploited, and individuals and minority groups within the other classes.

In order to compete in world markets the ruling class tries to extract from workers increased production for less capital investment. As McGrath demonstrated in Yobbo Nowt, the system works in such a way as to exploit the working classes in ways which keep them on an inferior social level and, hence, reinforce the class structure. Socialist theatres such as the 7:84 Theatre Company are deliberately agitational

to the extent of disturbing the complacency of this class structure with enough impact to motivate forces which will ultimately effect a classless society. In defining socialist theatre, John McGrath tempers his idealism with realistic restraint:

It is, in my opinion, a form of theatre which is searching, through the experience and forms of the working-class, for those elements which point forward in the direction of a future rational, non-exploitive, classless society, in which all struggle together to solve humanity's conflict with nature, and to allow all to grow to the fullest possible experience of life on earth. But it would be Utopianism, political and cultural, to imagine that the art of such a classless society can be produced without a long phase of struggle and development, which we are deep within at this moment. ¹

Socialist theatre, however, may cover a diversity of politically-motivated objectives. Even so, in their opposition to capitalism and its abuses, the various oppositional attitudes and political stances share much common ground. David Edgar's viewpoint, which in the past has differed so strongly from that of John McGrath, could be representative of almost any socialist faction:

But what all those plays had in common, apart from their zeal to explain contemporary phenomena

¹John McGrath, A Good Night Out. Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form, (London: Methuen, 1981), pp.21-22.

- often through plays that started some time ago and eventually arrived at the present day
 - was that the people who wrote them had come into the theatre at a time when there was a consensus shared between play-makers and their audiences that British society was rotten at the root, and that it was the proper business of the theatre to anatomise its rottenness and point the way to radical change. 1

It is in a socio-political scenario of exactly the kind described above that the new wave of political theatre recognises the sense of unease and instability in British society. With an acute sensitivity to the consequences of the loss of Empire, influence, and prestige in Great Britain, the individual finds he is unable to locate himself in a reassuring world; a widespread sense of bewilderment, dislocation, and instability has left him defenseless against a form of alienation expressed through, but not originating in, class divisions, exploitation and social impotence. In a scenario of this kind one might well consider the "realism" of bourgeois theatre as absurd as society's own concern with appearances rather than with substance. In its attack on the political system which is responsible for these conditions, contemporary political theatre attempts to educate, to raise consciousness, to demonstrate an energy which is itself the

¹David Edgar, "Public Theatre in a Private Age," BTI/Datec Special Reports 1 (Autumn 1984): p.1.

antithesis of capitalist inertia. To be sure, what makes theatre the ideal medium for the socialist writer is its unique power to penetrate beneath the surface of capitalist falsehood.

The dichotomy between bourgeois theatre and the avant-garde which opposes it derives from the question of whether modern theatre can seriously address issues of a technoscientific, post-industrial society in a theatre based on pre-industrial craft. As has been discussed, one reaction to the problem is political theatre's rejection of illusionism, which is itself a rejection of the bourgeoisie and its convenient system of containment. Containment of this kind expresses a sense of rational order, probable causality, and reasonable structure necessary for the efficient exercise of authority. Even so, as Christopher Bigsby writes:

If people refuse to conform to fixed notions of propriety or to behave rationally, if events generate their own logic, and if language provides little more than an ironic comment on action which defies equally the laws of probability and those of good taste (the laws of taste themselves constituting a declaration of faith in moderation, in law and order, social and metaphysical), then the apparatus of power is effectively thrown out of gear. ¹

¹C.W.E. Bigsby, "The Politics of Anxiety: Contemporary Socialist Theatre in England," in Modern British Dramatists, ed. J.R. Brown, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1984), p.171.

As a result, the prospect of a positive denial of meaning is itself a negative endorsement of authoritarian power. The most profoundly subversive theatre, therefore, is not, perhaps, the kind which "challenges versions of history and exposes the mechanisms of power, but that which acknowledges the authoritarian power, the ideological force of language, the coercive strength of myth, and the social and metaphysical reassurance implicit in realism."¹ But as Theodor Adorno argues, "Not the least of the weaknesses of the debate on commitment is that it ignores the effect produced by works whose own formal laws pay no heed to coherent effects. So long as it fails to understand what the shock of the unintelligible can communicate, the whole dispute resembles shadowboxing."²

What needs to be clear is that valid evidence of direct social change resulting from theatrical performance is extremely difficult to provide.³ During the cultural crisis

¹C.W.E. Bigsby, "The Politics of Anxiety: Contemporary Socialist Theatre in England," in Modern British Dramatists, ed. J.R. Brown, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1984), p.170.

²Theodor Adorno, "Commitment" trans. F. McDonagh, in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.180.

³An exception is specific change in the conditions of local farmworkers made by the Chicano company El Teatro Campesino.

of the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, society itself was transformed radically. Rather than causing this change, political theatre reflected the change, its aesthetic response to capitalism's abuses serving as a paradigm for its political purpose of social transformation. The point is that within theatrical technique and form lies a political "message" far more subversive than reactionary content. Seen in this light, the theatre practitioner who declines to subordinate theatre to the speciousness of character and action becomes more defiant to authoritarianism than the more literal dramatist who, though concerned with humanitarian issues, has capitulated to methods which reduce the audience to nothing more than passive spectators. In effect, what expresses the need to retrieve the bond presumed to exist before fragmentation took place within the capitalist structure is a complicity between dramatist and audience. In this sense theatrical form, in which *The 7:84* expose the plight of the working-class woman in Yobbo Nowt or in which the diverse interest groups of The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil make their case for material possession of the Scottish Highlands, becomes a metaphor for the meaning of the plays. As Adorno has written, "The moment of true volition . . . is mediated through nothing other than the form of the work itself, whose crystallization becomes an analogy of that other condition which should be."¹ It is precisely this focus on

¹Theodor Adorno, "Commitment" trans. F. McDonagh, in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.194.

the form of representation which has distinguished theatre companies such as the 7:84 Company for more than twenty years.

The 7:84 Theatre Company - A History

The 7:84 Theatre Company's choice of name draws attention to a statistic published in The Economist in 1966 which declared that 7 percent of the population of Great Britain owns 84 percent of the capital wealth. Since the Company presents a socialist perspective on British society, its name had the useful purpose of informing its audiences of political, social, economic and cultural discrepancies in Britain's capitalist system. Where feasible, the 7:84 Company suggested through the medium of drama socialist alternatives.

John McGrath is from a working-class background, his father serving as a school teacher in the working-class community of Birkenhead. In 1971 McGrath founded the 7:84 Company, drawing its ideals from the perspective acquired in his youth. Prior to this, he served in the British Army and read English at Oxford University. It was in his third year at Oxford that McGrath staged his first play, A Man Has Two Fathers (1958), which received a favorable review from Kenneth Tynan in The Observer where it came to the attention of George Devine at the Royal Court Theatre. McGrath has written:

A Man Has Two Fathers had everything in it.
It was constructed like a poem with about
five or six levels of meaning running through

it. It was really, on different levels, about the struggle between America and Russia, between two kinds of imperialism. It was about psychological disorientation. It was described - to my surprise - as theatre of the absurd. Which it certainly wasn't [sic].¹

A Man Has Two Fathers is an allegory about relationships, in which a man has two father-figures to choose from: one is "a disreputable tramp," the other "a pillar of the community."² Having been swayed back and forth between each, first rejecting society and then submitting to it, he finally, in rejecting both, frees himself from the constraints of society, leaving the two fathers to discover that they are, in fact, father and son.³

It was during this time that McGrath also wrote his only naturalistic drama The Tent for the Edinburgh Festival of 1958. This grew out of his association with Sanford Meisner, who had introduced McGrath to a method of rehearsal technique which evoked a form of improvised relationship between actors. McGrath developed this technique by writing two scripts which lent themselves to relationships of this kind.

¹Simon Trussler, ed., New Theatre Voices of the Seventies: Sixteen Interviews from Theatre Quarterly 1970-1980, (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), p.101.

²John Russell Taylor, Anger and After, (London: Penguin, 1962; reprint, London: Methuen, 1983), p.210.

³Ibid.

One was Tell Me; Tell Me; the other was The Tent.¹ J.R. Taylor interprets The Tent as, in essence, a dramatic inquiry into the meaning of responsibility.² The action of the play was based on an incident about which McGrath had heard while in military service: during the occupation of the Suez Canal Zone, an army captain orders a private to shoot an Egyptian civilian.³ Much of the play is concerned with the captain's argument with the private as to why the event should be "covered up." He presents various "daydreams," finally convincing the private not to reveal what has occurred. The failure of the drama seems to be, as J.R. Taylor has suggested, that the private's reasons for the cover-up "are never made clear either on an intellectual level or, as presumably intended, on an emotional level, since neither of the characters finally becomes sufficiently alive for belief in the relationship between them to become a vital issue."⁴

Shortly after McGrath's production of The Tent, the Oxford University Dramatic Society produced McGrath's next

¹Simon Trussler, ed., New Theatre Voices of the Seventies: Sixteen Interviews from Theatre Quarterly 1970-1980, (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), p.101.

²Ibid., p.211.

³John McGrath, "Better a Bad Night in Bootle . . .," Theatre Quarterly V, 19 (1975): p.40.

⁴John Russell Taylor, Anger and After, (London: Methuen, 1978), p.210-211.

play Why the Chicken? (1958) for the Edinburgh Festival of 1959. The action concerns a well-meaning, middle-class social worker seeking acceptance from a gang of working-class youths following an off-stage incident in which she causes one of the boys to fall to his death during his attempt to rape her. Despite her persistence, however, the group's resistance is steadfast; even in the burgeoning romance between the ringleader and the girl, the two are destined to remain within the confines of their classes:

It was a clash really between working-class consciousness and living and feeling . . . and Oxford consciousness. I never worked that out, never articulated it, but that's what it was. And the working-class kids, interestingly, end up smashing the youth club. I suppose that was how I felt about the Oxford consciousness, actually. ¹

John Russell Taylor admires the offhand, irreverent comedy in the first half of the play but complains that

once plot intrudes (did the earnest social worker or did she not push the gang leader over a cliff in order to repel an attempt at rape brought on by her own coquetry?) the play goes to pieces, forces its initially

¹Simon Trussler, ed., New Theatre Voices of the Seventies: Sixteen Interviews from Theatre Quarterly 1970-1980, (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), p.102.

credible characters to take up quite incredible positions in obedience to a preconceived and decidedly artificial system of sociological principles and suppositions. 1

Between 1959 and 1963 McGrath was employed reading play scripts for the Royal Court, but after resistance from the management to staging his own plays, he worked at television script editing and eventually directed the successful television series Z Cars. After a season's collaboration on the series with Troy Kennedy-Martin, McGrath returned to play writing. As he explains:

[Television] was a much more subtle form of ideological penetration of the population - and a lot more effective. But I didn't come across any serious political or ideological confrontations at that time because that was a time of liberal influence, not the time of organized reaction which we now have. And because of that liberal atmosphere, I was able to work. But slowly, the bureaucracy grew, in part through technological advance, through the development of video tape. At first Z Cars was done live, fifty minutes every week. You can't do that now, they won't let you, except for half an hour at midnight or something, it has to be taped, has to be reviewed constantly - from the idea to the synopsis to the script to the re-writes and the rehearsal script, then in rehearsal, in studio, after it's shot and before it goes out, it's reviewed by

¹J.R. Taylor, Anger and After, (London: Methuen, 1978), p.211.

this elaborate machinery at the BBC. Now that was beginning to happen in 1964 and 1965, which was partly why I got out. Partly because television is such a demanding medium, it drags stuff out of you and gives you nothing back. And partly because that machinery was beginning to be really effective. 1

During this time McGrath wrote a play script, Basement in Bangkok (1963), which was produced by Bristol students, although he himself did not attend. According to McGrath:

It was dreadful. . . . it had one or two good songs in it, but that was about all. . . . It took me at least six months to a year just to recover from the television mentality - everything that glitters you grab, and put on the screen . . . 2

In 1966, however, his play, Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun, made a successful opening at the bourgeois Hampstead Theatre Club. Drawn from McGrath's military experience, the play is an epitaph to the cold war.³

Following the situationist uprising in Paris (1968), McGrath wrote Random Happenings in the Hebrides (or The Social

¹Simon Trussler, ed., New Theatre Voices of the Seventies: Sixteen Interviews from Theatre Quarterly 1970-1980, (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), p.103-104.

²Ibid., p.104.

³See the analysis of Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun, pp.296-325 below.

Democrat and the Stormy Sea, 1970), the story of a young man's awakening to political consciousness. Having risen above the working class, the protagonist, to be politically effective, must return to his roots. Of this play McGrath has said:

The interesting thing about that play was that I began to write it in April 1968, and in May 1968 things started happening in Paris. And I went over and spent some time there, until they started exporting foreigners. And the importance of the thinking around that whole time, the excitement of that whole complex set of attitudes to life which that para-revolutionary situation threw up, was incredible - the thinking about ordinary life, the freshness of the approach, the urgency and the beauty of the ideas was amazing. But what didn't happen was organization. For a lot of reasons. A lot connected with the French Communist Party, a lot connected with the fact that the rest of the Left was split and disorganized, and with the fact that much of the student leadership was middle-class and not dedicated to social revolution, and with the power of DeGaulle and his wiliness as a politician. I came back and left the play, actually, for about six months to a year, and then I finished it. But it was changed by that whole experience. Apparently it had nothing to do with Paris and people throwing paving stones, but that experience went into it. That conflict. 1

In 1971 McGrath toured his play, Trees in the Wind (taken from a quotation of Mao Tse-Tung, "Wind will not cease even if

¹Simon Trussler, ed., New Theatre Voices of the Seventies: Sixteen Interviews from Theatre Quarterly 1970-1980, (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), p.106.

trees want to rest"),¹ establishing a company which would later be known as the 7:84 Theatre Company. With the support of a small Arts Council grant, the production toured from the Edinburgh Festival to various venues around England, Scotland and Wales. Much of the Company's success in surviving its first season can be attributed to the company members taking below subsistence-level wages (no more than £28 per week); McGrath, at that time collected no salary.² Following the tour, McGrath wrote a series of one-act plays entitled, Unruly Elements which included Angel of the Morning, Plugged Into History, They're Knocking Down the Pie Shop, Hover Through the Fog, and Out of Sight, all of which were written for the Everyman Theatre in Liverpool. According to Ronald Hayman, Plugged Into History makes use of a familiar theme in much of British Alternative Theatre, that is, violent masochism as a response to status quo, as illustrated in David Hare's Plenty as well as several of Stephen Poliakoff's characters.³ McGrath's use of a female alter ego, as seen in Why the Chicken?, is seen again in Plugged Into History. The action

¹Catherine Itzen, Stages in the Revolution, (London: Methuen, 1980), p.121.

²John McGrath, A Good Night Out. Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form, (London: Methuen, 1981), pp.118-119.

³Ronald Hayman, British Theatre since 1955, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p.89.

concerns a masochistic, middle-class mother who finds herself involved with an aggressive working-class labourer, recently rejected by a middle-class girl. The play reaches its climax when the middle-class mother wants him to inflict her with the same kind of pain he imposed on the girl. The mother's motives are exposed by her orations read from imaginary newspapers. Within the context of recent history, she discloses her masochistic desires as reflected by the sufferings of the masses. Kay, the mother, says:

When I read my papers, I feel plugged into history, I feel the course of events coursing through my veins. I feel taken over, crushed, by many many men. I feel occupied, a house, squatted in, defiled. I feel like a deserted ballroom being defecated in by a halted army. I feel like South America after the Yankees have finished with it, like Dresden after the bombing. I feel like a shed full of cats. I feel like a midnight zoo. I feel like a clump of trees outside a barracks, full of soldiers in rough khaki having under-age tarts. I feel like Pompeii the next morning. I become a human news-tape, mile after mile of me, torn out, ripped off, abandoned. Do you know why? Do you begin to? It's because I feel everything, all the way through me. 1

McGrath synthesises contemporary political and social injustices through his characterisation of Kay. As the

¹John McGrath, Plugged into History, published in Plays and Players XX, 19 (November 1972): pp.VIII-IX.

play progresses, she acquires the symbolic function of embodying all suffering inflicted by humanity. David Bradby and John McCormick offer some keen insight:

John McGrath's play Plugged into History is just one of many recent works which attempt [sic] to attack and overcome this common sense of being bullied into passivity. By suggesting that the media numb and paralyse a creative response to the world around us it points to a rejection of the media's basic claim: that of bringing us into instant contact with world events. It shows that this claim is illusory since we can only suffer, not act upon the events presented in this way. ¹

In addition to the scripted shows, the 7:84 Company made appearances in "lunchtime shows" for several rallies including the Edinburgh Trades Council's May Day rally, and a protest rally by workers in a Glasgow factory.²

In their second season (1972/73) the 7:84 Company mounted and toured five new plays, recruiting additional playwrights from the Alternative Theatre Circuit.³

¹David Bradby and John McCormick, People's Theatre, (Totowa NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978; reprint, London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1978), p.162.

²John McGrath, A Good Night Out. Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.118.

³John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy's The Ballygombeen Bequest, stopped by a court injunction shortly after its opening, and rewritten as Sergeant Musgrave Dances On; Trevor Griffiths's Apricots and Thermidor, performed at Cranston Street Hall; and in 1972, Underneath.

McGrath's contributions to the season were Soft, or a Girl?, for the Everyman Theatre, Underneath, and a collaboration with John Arden on Sergeant Musgrave Dances On. In addition, the 7:84 Theatre Company Tour revived Plugged Into History.

McGrath describes Underneath as "about . . . building bridges, in a very broad sense, and also specifically."¹ The story concerns two bridge builders, the first a designer proposing to build a modern experimental bridge which is likely to topple. If advancement is to be made, he considers the expense of a few lives negligible. Though actually a kind, gentle man, his elitist views make him contemptible. The second bridge builder is a labourer eventually killed on the bridge. While working with him, the designer's son, an upper-class dropout, sees the labourer killed. Like many of McGrath's protagonists, the son, through his experience, reaches political and social awareness. McGrath notes: "It's about a conflict of ideology again. And about the value of human life."²

Although initially McGrath controlled the Company with a benevolent autocracy, this method was contradictory to the essence of the Company's philosophy, being responsible for the

¹Simon Trussler, ed., New Theatre Voices of the Seventies: Sixteen Interviews from Theatre Quarterly 1970-1980, (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), pp.106-107.

²Ibid., p.107.

departure of various company members to establish other political theatre companies. As a result, the Company soon began working as a collaborative effort. During its second season, its relations of production began to reflect the content of the work. As McGrath explains:

From enthusiastic autocracy at the beginning (Trevor Griffiths once referred to me as "il Duce") to a form of collective control, within a year, was not bad going: meetings, endless meetings became part of our weekly schedule, held in basements in Rotherham, board-rooms in Aberdeen, once in the back of a truck - and in countless smoke-heavy dressing-rooms the length of the island. We discussed just about everything, from the growth of the nation-state to nylon sheets, by the way of "what we ought to be doing is . . .," and "what are we in this dump for?" ¹

In his first book, A Good Night Out, McGrath describes his commitment to a small-scale popular theatre for working-class people, in contrast to the large subsidised houses which cater more exclusively to the socially elite.² McGrath explains his discontent with the bourgeois theatre:

The devices and conventions of the theatre are very much a part of the language, and

¹John McGrath, A Good Night Out. Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.119.

²Ibid., pp.18-35.

can, at times, be decisive. They do indeed have meaning, quite apart from that they "carry" in terms of "content." And in the case of bourgeois theatre, the meaning of these devices and conventions is most frequently one which supports the cultural, social, political and economic dominance of the ruling and middle classes, and is hostile to the growth to full cultural maturity of - and of course any increase in the political power of - the working class. 1

Although the Company's focus is primarily on current issues, a substantial number of socialist-based plays are set in the past, for example, John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy's The Ballygombeen Bequest and Sergeant Musgrave Dances On, Red Ladder's Taking Our Time, David Hare's Fanshen, and Steve Gooch's Will Wat, If Not, What Will? and The Women Pirates. In these works the ideology of the Company is advanced without a direct assault on specific governmental policy, thus avoiding unwarranted attention from presiding administrations.² Such plays serve as a model for social change, drawing from what is obviously regarded by the Company as a reliable source of probability: history. Obviously here is the predominantly Marxist view that future ends can be accurately predicted and evaluated by past events. This

¹John McGrath, A Good Night Out. Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form, (London: Methuen, 1981): p.20.

²Ibid., p.48.

appears to be McGrath's concern when he wrote The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil (1973). The play describes specific events in history which reveal the exploitation of Scottish resources and unethical acquisitions of land that leave the Scottish workman without a stake in his own future. This type of drama provides an allegory indicating that oppressed people, their futures not predetermined, can direct their own lives.¹

McGrath's insistence on a "variety of pace and intensity" rather than the static, slow pace of bourgeois illusionism has led to experimentation with various performance styles from the ceillidh in The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil (1973) to the political satire of The Glory of the Garden (1985). It is not necessarily the content of middle-class theatre he opposes, but rather the realist and modernist forms which perpetuate real social injustice:

For the record, bourgeois theatre has created great valuable works which should be performed and treasured. This does not mean one therefore approves of capitalism any more than an appreciation of Sophocles implies approval of slavery. 2

¹See the analysis of The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, pp.351-396 below.

²From an unpublished lecture given by John McGrath at King's College, Cambridge Conference on Political Theatre, April 1978; quoted in Catherine Itzen, Stages in the Revolution, (London: Methuen, 1980), p.128.

McGrath has, therefore, included in his form various styles of music, dialogue, humour (both visual and verbal) and caustic satire. As he explains, theatre forms should survive on their accessibility to an audience. In recent years theatre audiences have come to accept the forms of representation as they have the political content. Knowing working-class needs, McGrath has devised representational forms specifically included for working-class appeal.

In 1973, the 7:84 Company experimented with collaboration between writer/director and actors as part of the production process. The failure of this effort broke the company into two factions. From this rupture came Belt and Braces, yet another alternative theatre in the north of England. Simultaneously, McGrath was establishing 7:84 Scotland, a company of the same socialist ideals, committed to the needs of the local Scottish community. Though the Company's home base was Edinburgh, it made regular tours of Scotland, playing particularly to industrial centres such as Glasgow.¹ In 1973, 7:84 England produced Adrian Mitchell's Man Friday and in cooperation with Belt and Braces, The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists, as 7:84 Scotland opened its first season with the overwhelming success of McGrath's The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black

¹Since McGrath's departure from the 7:84 Theatre Company in 1988, the Company has been based in Glasgow.

Oil.¹ This play was extremely popular in Scotland, since it unmasked the structure, the very financial nature, of the British social classes and the injustice that a structure of that kind inflicts on the working-class community. Another contributing factor to its success was the incorporation of Scottish customs (localism), drawing from the traditional ceilidh, and other popular forms of theatrical variety. Its initial success led to its adaptation for a BBC drama.²

In 1974, 7:84 England temporarily suspended production. McGrath concentrated on maintaining 7:84 Scotland's popularity with two new plays, Boom, which like The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil is concerned with the propriety of the North Sea oil industry, and The Game's a Bogey, a comparison of contemporary Glasgow with turn-of-the-century Glasgow seen from the perspective of Scottish poet John MacLean. Again, McGrath makes use of both traditional and popular theatrical forms: the ceilidh, comic sketches and song.³

1975 was a particularly productive year for both companies. After regrouping, 7:84 England mounted a full season. In that year alone, McGrath wrote or revived Little

¹See pp.351-396 below.

²Catherine Itzen, Stages in the Revolution, (London: Methuen, 1980), p.123.

³Ibid.

Red Hen, Fish in the Sea, Lay Off, Yobbo Nowt, and Soft or a Girl?. Little Red Hen, considered by Catherine Itzen among McGrath's best works,¹ is set in Scotland in 1975 during a period of heightened political activity, when a revival of Scottish socialism seemed viable.² McGrath once again uses a historical perspective by contrasting this period with the days of "Red Clyde."³

Fish in the Sea, like Trees in the Wind, takes its name from a Maoian reference, comparing the Communist Party to the head and body of a fish and the people to the water through which it swims.⁴ The play was originally written for the Everyman Theatre in Liverpool in 1971 but apparently tabled in favour of the immediate production of McGrath's three one-act plays instead.⁵ In 1975 it was included in the 7:84 Scotland tour. Like that of The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, its content attacks multinational corporations.

¹Catherine Itzen, Stages in the Revolution, (London: Methuen, 1980), p.123.

²See critical analysis pp.469-510 below.

³The socialist movement in Scotland in the mid-1920s.

⁴Itzen, loc.cit.

⁵Angel of the Morning, Plugged into History and They're Knocking Down the Pie Shop.

Fish in the Sea toured England with 7:84 England before taking residence in a more permanent location at the Half Moon Theatre in London. The revival of Soft or a Girl? also toured with 7:84 before its run at the Half Moon Theatre. The play is a modern Romeo and Juliet, the action of the play beginning during the war on a Wapping roof-top. Working-class Mr. Hurley and middle-class Mr. Martin are brought together in a temporary classless ritual in the name of national unity. The two men reflect on the free society they had worked to save. When a romance begins between Hurley's boy and Martin's girl, their inability to come together targets a still extant class system. After Hurley and Martin have died, the two men play out what might have happened had they lived. The ending is more disastrous than the first as the two indulge in the hypocrisy that perpetuates class structure.

In that year (1975) 7:84 England also toured Yobbo Nowt and Lay Off. Yobbo Nowt is the story of a working-class housewife who reaches political consciousness by throwing off the fetters of domesticity and addressing what it means to be both working-class and a woman in capitalist society.¹

In 1976, 7:84 Scotland introduced at the Edinburgh Festival McGrath's Out of Our Heads which disclosed the relationship between alcoholism and various current political

¹See analysis pp.442-469 below.

issues. At the same time 7:84 England produced Shane Connaughton's Relegated, Steve Gooch's Our Land, Our Lives and McGrath's The Rat Trap, all of which were included in the 7:84 Theatre Company tour of 1976.¹

In 1977 Trembling Giant, showcased at the Royal Court before making the annual tour. Its fairy-tale narrative served as a metaphor for capitalist dominance over Scotland. A storyteller reads from a "rewritten" history book explaining how George (the symbol of British Imperialism) became a giant. As Catherine Itzen notes:

The metaphor for money is beans and beans means . . . big business.

One bean leads - through investment, and the organisation and exploitation of labour - to a British bean monopoly and a Giant George who is then forced to imperialise to increase his wealth and size. In this historical panorama, Scotland's role has, of course, been one of alliance and collusion - and the play shows the Scottish peasants sold out in 1707 by McDukee, symbol of the Scottish bourgeoisie. 2

In this adaptation, Jack represents the socialist reformer who is incapable over the course of 300 years of persuading the

¹Catherine Itzen, Stages in the Revolution, (London: Methuen, 1980), pp.125, 381-382.

²Catherine Itzen, Tribune XLI, 52 (30 December 1977): p.12.

Scottish peasants to protect their investments. Feeling unthreatened, George frees Jack from bondage on condition that he complete three tasks: (1) kill the giants in the East, (2) in the Far East and (3) in the West. McGrath carefully weaves these objectives into historical context. Jack travels through the decades, subduing Russian, Chinese and American superpowers finally to confront the Scottish working class with the option of breaking away from George and establishing an independent Scotland.

Simultaneously, 7:84 England produced David Edgar's Wreckers and McGrath's The Life and Times of Joe of England, the drama of a boy who, like Dick Whittington, leaves England's north to seek his fortune in London. During the journey, he discovers the corrupt nature of capitalism, but, even so, falls victim to its lure.

In 1978, 7:84 Scotland produced Dave Anderson's His Master's Voice. The play concerns a youth in the recording industry whose activities expose corruption in the media, the Labour Party, and capitalism itself.

A particularly problematic time now began for both 7:84 Companies. Despite the popularity of both Companies with working-class audiences, the company members responsible for its characteristic identity began to disperse. The disintegration was due to exhaustion and the probability that the original company members had contributed all they could

within the confines of the Company. Inevitably, the standard of performance at 7:84 England dropped below its usually high level.¹ John McGrath explains:

While the audiences continued to want shows, internal wrangling in England, and in Scotland the break-up, mainly through sheer exhaustion, of the nucleus of people who created the company's identity in the early years, led to great difficulties and strains. 2

The Scottish Company imposed a one year moratorium to reassess its commitments. With great effort 7:84 England mounted two productions through 1978: a revival of McGrath's Underneath³ and Vandaleur's Folly, commissioned from John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy. The Arden/D'Arcy play satirised the Anglo-Irish conflict from the early days of the Ralahine Co-operative and the Orange Order; the play employed both melodrama and historical perspective.⁴

Reassembled, 7:84 Scotland, produced in 1979-1980 McGrath's Joe's Drum, Swings and Roundabouts and Blood Red

¹John McGrath, A Good Night Out. Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.125.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., pp.125-126.

⁴McGrath's use of historical perspective echoes its use in Brecht's Mother Courage.

Roses, "a play about a militant, a Celtic fighting woman."¹
 McGrath describes his audiences' interest in the plays and the purpose they serve:

. . . most coming out say they really enjoyed it. And many see the stuff they read in their papers and watch on the TV questioned, indeed contradicted: they see a perspective on life that many of them share but are told is not applicable, and are more confident of their own views, their own perspective. And others come out disagreeing, but at least aware that the way of looking at life imposed on the people of Scotland by the Tory consensus of the south-east of England is not the only way of looking at life. And all come out knowing that the working-class movement is not only about strikes, wrecking the economy and wage demands, as they had been led to believe. And that culture is not exclusively in the hands of the rich or the higher-educated: they have culture too, and this theatre is part of their culture, and for that reason they can look outside Bruce Forsyth and Crossroads towards their own humanity, and dignity, and creativity, towards, in fact, the immense potential of the human race. ²

The 1980s have seen great political and social conflict in Great Britain. As a result, both 7:84 Companies have followed much the same approach in their more recent works. In 1981 McGrath introduced Nightclass (at Corby,

¹John McGrath, A Good Night Out. Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.126.

²Ibid., p.126.

Northamptonshire and London) and The Catch at Edinburgh; in 1982, Rejoice! at Edinburgh and London; in 1983, On the Pig's Back at Kilmarnock, Ayrshire; The Women of the Dunes, produced in Dutch at IJmuiden, Netherlands, and Women Power; or Up the Acropolis, an adaptation of plays by Aristophanes, and V-Signs at Edinburgh.¹

In 1984 7:84 England produced Six Men of Dorset, an adaptation of a play by Miles Malleson and Harry Brooks for Sheffield and London. The Baby and the Bathwater was shared by both companies. It opened first in Dunbarton, Cumberland (1984); a revised version played in Edinburgh in 1985 before continuing in London (1987). The Company also produced School for Emigrants (1984). In 1985, McGrath wrote The Albannach, an adaptation of the novel by Fionn MacColla, for Edinburgh and Behold the Sun, for Duisburg, Germany. During the British Coal Miners' Strike he wrote The Garden of England. 7:84 England opened the 1986 season with McGrath's All the Fun of the Fair.²

In his book, A Good Night Out McGrath notes a distinction between the 7:84 Company and other political theatres use of the stage as an open forum. As he writes:

¹D.L. Kirkpatrick, ed., Contemporary Dramatists, (Chicago: St, James Press, 1988), p.355.

²Ibid.

So even in this rather oblique way, the theatre is by its nature a political forum, or a politicizing medium, rather than a place to experience a rarefied artistic sensibility in an aesthetic void. Theatre launches even the most private thought into a public world, and gives it a social, historical meaning and context as it passes through the eyes and minds of the audience. It is a place of recognition, of evaluation, of judgement. It shows the interaction of human beings and social forces. ¹

Within the context of an increasingly dislocated society, the receptiveness to a theatre which actively engages people in both a concern for issues and a recognition of the significance of form is encouraging; indeed, the success of such companies as Red Ladder, Belt and Braces, Hull Truck, Monstrous Regiment, Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre, The General Will, Joint Stock Theatre Group, North West Spanner, The Broadside Mobile Workers Theatre and others has resulted in a working-class theatre.

The purpose of this overview of the history of the 7:84 Theatre Company is to provide a context for their work, to describe the kinds of concerns and activities in which McGrath and the Company were engaged during this period. Clearly, not all of the Company's work has been effective theatre; McGrath's early work, for example, seems unsure of its

¹John McGrath, A Good Night Out. Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.83.

direction and often fails to exploit the occasional flashes of brilliant comedy which cry out for development.¹ Yet from the process of trial and error, the many experiments, the conscious development of the theatre as a political forum, the concern with representation, the positivist specificity, the constant reclaiming of territory originally staked out by Brecht and others, a new theatre has emerged, appropriating many of the stylistic methods and techniques of modernism, yet using them as the object of theatre and moulding them to a new purpose.

John McGrath's Socialist Ideology

One might assume that John McGrath's commitment to creating a socialist theatre is a response to the injustices of a capitalist society which panders to those who control society's economic base. McGrath's commitment to divesting the dominant class of power in order to create a working-class culture probably reflects his own working-class background in Birkenhead, Merseyside, and Buckley in North Wales, although it is as likely that he sharpened the accuracy of his perspective as a student at Oxford, as a British Army officer, and as a film and television writer.² Having had ample

¹As, for example, A Man Has Two Fathers, The Tent, and Why the Chicken?

²Some of his film and television credits include: Billion Dollar Brain, The Bofors Gun, The Reckoning, Virgin Soldiers, Z Cars and The Compartment.

opportunity to explore both the possibilities of middle-class advancement and the manner in which the middle class maintains control over the working class, he has for the purpose of social change used the theatre as a political forum and as an aesthetic medium.

McGrath discusses the various forms of political theatre, stressing his distrust in the theories of all but socialist theatre:

There is the anarchist theatre, for example, which, when it is conscious of anything at all, see [sic] the struggle for state power as a self-defeating aim and appears to insist on every individual making their [sic] own bid for revolution and immediate fulfillment. Or the social democratic theatre which, in its rare moments of theoretical insight, sees the betterment of the working class as a process of gradual gains within a basically capitalistic framework, needing no revolution of power or consciousness, merely material improvement which requires as its precondition the health of the capitalist system - all that is to be arranged thanks to the great man in whose hall we now prepare to dig holes and fill them in again.

I can't speak for those varieties of political theatre; I disagree with their theoretical base and rarely enjoy their practice. So I can only talk about socialist political theatre. ¹

McGrath's socialist response to inequities resulting from

¹John McGrath, "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre," Theatre Quarterly IX, 35 (1979): p.43.

class distinctions has led to his creation of a theatre meant first as a forum of social ethics and second as an artistic expression of working-class life. Indeed, McGrath has explained that commitment to the text, the collaborative structure of the company, attention to accuracy of historical detail, and the democratic nature of the rehearsal process naturally result in aesthetic quality.¹ McGrath describes socialist theatre:

Before somebody says 'All theatre is political' - a statement which should be banned from this discussion as diversionary, if true - let's agree to talk about the theatre that exists somewhere within the shadow (or at least the penumbra) of the idea of Marx and the Marxists. Let's talk about theatre that has as its base a recognition of capitalism as an economic system which produces classes; that sees that this can happen only through the rise to state power of the current under-class, the working class, and through a democratization - economic as well as political - of society and its decision-making processes. A theatre that sees the establishment of socialism, not as the creation of a utopia or the end of the dialectic of history, but as another step towards the realization of the full potential of every individual human life during a short time that every individual has to live. Socialist theatre. 2

McGrath suggests three basic ways in which theatre relates to

¹John McGrath, "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre," Theatre Quarterly IX, 35 (1979): p.47.

²Ibid., p.43.

the relationship between the economic structure and the cultural, social and political practices of society. He cites Marx and Engels in advancing the proposition that the ideology of a culture is that of the dominant class. The economic superstructure determines all internal subcultures: government, education, industry, commerce, religion. McGrath has described the role of theatre and all forms of artistic expression within this framework as potentially viable symposiums of socialist content which express subject matter through a complementary means of production:

Literature, which I take here to include theatre, can often appear to have an autonomous development of its own, connected only tangentially with the modes of production, and the state of the play in the class war. This development can be affected by internal factors of uneven development, by other elements in the social and cultural life of the society - even by individual talent, or the absence of it. 1

McGrath denotes three principal elements of literary production: the residual, which extracts many of its sources from periods past, though the residual is still active and concerned with issues of the present; the dominant, which exercises its will over the remainder of society; the

¹John McGrath, "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre," Theatre Quarterly IX, 35 (1979): p.44.

emergent, by which established ideas are challenged and the development of new ideas, philosophies and practices are fostered. He stresses caution, however, in determining whether modes of production are truly oppositional or just new phases of the dominant culture.¹ In order to draw these elements into social perspective, McGrath argues:

'[I]t is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness' - 'the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary'.²

McGrath sees the role of political theatre as three-fold. First, to break with bourgeois ideology by creating a counter-ideology which disclaims the hegemony of theatrical institutions as a means of perpetuating the will of the dominant class; second, to create theatricality which addresses what McGrath calls "interventionist" political and social issues outside the theatrical institution. Third, to establish a working-class counter-culture, and to develop it until it can displace the current dominant culture of the bourgeoisie. As McGrath explains:

¹John McGrath, "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre," Theatre Quarterly IX, 35 (1979): p.44.

²Ibid.

It is important here to see theatre not just as 'plays', but as a means of production, with bosses, workers, and unemployed, with structural relationships and varied contradictions. It is through its structures as much as through its product that theatre expresses the dominant bourgeois ideology. 1

Starting with the premise that the theatre has become as much an expression of bourgeois dominance as the multinational corporation, McGrath argues that the primary purpose of political theatre is to investigate its own structure in relation to others about it. This procedure will enable it to deny conventional theatrical hierarchy as a perpetuation of bourgeois ideology. Hence, it negates a work's social content by virtue of its "nearsightedness."

By examining alternative factions of theatrical practices and their identifying ideological characteristics, one might come to understand how the 7:84 Theatre Company chose its current working-structure and what it hoped to achieve by its choice.

McGrath separates British theatre into:

- 1) The commercial theatre - viz., the West End
- 2) The established subsidised theatres - i.e. The National, Royal Shakespeare Company, the major repertory companies
- 3) Fringe and touring companies 2

¹John McGrath, "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre," Theatre Quarterly IX, 35 (1979): p.44.

²Ibid.

At first glance one might assume that a correlation exists between the sectors of literary production and British theatre. For example, a connection may be perceived between the commercial theatre and the "residual" element; as a structure requiring investors, management, employees earning generally minimal salaries, and a product yielding a profit, this sector, despite its theoretical "high-risk," usually produces high dividends. McGrath discusses the commercial theatre's strategy in diversifying investments to avoid financial loss among investors:

A good manager will contrive devices to lessen the risk of total failure - as in Harold Fielding's recent mounting of four musicals back to back, with each unit of investment spread over all of them. ¹

Although this structure is indicative of capitalist society, where collective effort creates a product whose dividends are paid out to a small percentage of shareholders, instances exist in which writers, directors, actors with "star" status, even designers, collect a percentage of the profits. Moreover, the element of fame should not be overlooked. Fame must be regarded as an economic incentive, as exposure in a

¹John McGrath, "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre," Theatre Quarterly IX, 35 (1979): p.44.

commercial production may lead to further engagements throughout various commercial media. The "dominant" sector represented by theatres like the National and the Royal Shakespeare Company may be compared to economic power structures reflecting nationalised (subsidised) industry, eliminating the necessity of a profit. McGrath argues:

What they need to make is the individual reputation of the new masters - and to balance their books, give or take a few million pounds. Sometimes they have a spurious air of democracy, even worker-representation on their boards, and, to enhance their reputation, sometimes they even tackle bold subjects, like the Russian Revolution, safe in the hands of Robert Bolt. 1

The dominance of these theatres lies in their power to dictate to all sectors of society the parameters of what is to be appreciated; in this way they impose a standard of values upon the various classes. They are generally considered the criterion of theatre art in Britain.

"The Fringe," as the "emergent" element has become known, generally struggles to survive while it pursues its intended goals. Very often it disintegrates in quality with the loss of the group's initial will or the dispersing of thought which

¹John McGrath, "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre," Theatre Quarterly IX, 35 (1979): p.44.

gave birth to the group initially. Fringe companies are usually dependent on subsidy from both regional and national granting bodies, for example, the Arts Council. Often, their survival is dependent on a form of censorship, requiring a sensitivity to the attitudes of those institutions. Many fringe companies, because of their size, are able to manage themselves in a democratic or collaborative framework and organise their material for audiences outside the established commercial theatre. Although the situation with the fringe companies is potentially elitist, certainly the opportunity exists, as John McGrath argues, for

a highly principled, creative Marxist cultural intervention, giving back to the public something valuable for a small amount of public money, organized in a genuine democracy, demanding new skills and imaginative efforts to create a new kind of culture of the highest standards, for and of the working class. So enriching the Labour movement and helping it to make its ultimate victory a worthwhile victory. ¹

McGrath agrees with Marx and Engels's viewpoint concerning the ownership and control of the means of production, although he contends that public ownership in itself is insufficient as is a mixed economy. He sees the need for public control both on

¹John McGrath, "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre," Theatre Quarterly IX, 35 (1979): p.45.

national and local levels as a counter-measure against this insufficiency and against exploitation. On the difficulties of fulfilling a socialist ideology, McGrath is explicit:

The capitalist system preserves itself from this principally by means of the state, which has at its disposal not only its myriad apparatuses - parliament, civil service, education system, church, the media, and all their output and mystification and manipulation - but also a police force and an army. Both of these are trained to deal with enemies of the state and will do so. So the state becomes the central political problem for a Marxist, together with the party or the means of overthrowing that state and replacing it with a socialist state. 1

Whether the impact of theatre on political revolution is overestimated here - indeed, whether a theatrical performance, including social drama, has any social relevance whatever - remains problematic.² On the other hand, social drama seen in terms of class, demonstrating to local audiences real, pertinent issues directly affecting them, may make a profound contribution to the struggle of the Labour movement toward the

¹John McGrath, "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre," Theatre Quarterly IX, 35 (1979): p.46.

²It may be argued that all of 7:84's work can be termed "social drama" in that the company actively seeks to address topical issues of local relevance, and that the content of these productions is pertinent to the audience on a social level.

emancipation of the working class.

McGrath takes issue with political dramatists who challenge the hegemony of bourgeois ideology within the parameters of methods used to perpetuate the "dominant" theatre of bourgeois realism. Like Trevor Griffiths's work at the National, John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy's The Island of the Mighty at the Aldwych, and David Edgar's Destiny at the Aldwych, many plays demonstrative of great social struggle nullify their own philosophy by contradicting the play's content with an antiquated process perpetuating the hegemony of the dominant class by means of a social hierarchy distinguished by various degrees of control and economic value. According to McGrath, "They become 'product' and the process remains the same: they are in constant danger of being appropriated in production by the very ideology they set out to oppose."¹ Even so, theatre of this kind possesses some value:

This challenge to the dominance of bourgeois ideology on its own ground is important; it creates allies for the movement and is a weapon to use, and we are not in a position to throw any weapon away. ²

¹John McGrath, "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre," Theatre Quarterly IX, 35 (1979): p.46.

²Ibid.

McGrath recommends a more agitational theatre. Even though the political content of theatre may focus audience attention on broad topics such as racism, sexism, the workings of multi-national corporations, or the government's stand on either foreign or domestic policies, agitational theatre generally addresses more local community issues. To persuade its audience to act upon the issues concerned. To be sure, agitational theatre may be used to support a striking body, to support fund-raising for a community event, or to present a partisan view of imminent legislation. Though the effect of any of these may seem inconsequential, it is vital, as each contributes to the overthrow of the capitalist system. This can be achieved only by raising the consciousness of workers who have become mystified by the class system and their place in it and, as a result, divided from other workers on matters political.¹ By presenting political issues through an historical perspective, an altered worker-consciousness may develop toward the truth of the capitalist system.

Born out of a will to implement their ideals, fringe companies constantly redefine their objectives according to the viewpoints of their transient members. The organisational structure of many companies being democratic, the conflict

¹John McGrath, "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre," Theatre Quarterly IX, 35 (1979): p.47.

between aesthetics and business may disrupt the overall concept of production.

McGrath has noted that within the nature of political theatre's conception and practice, company members require ideally both specialised and general theatrical talents as well as a commitment to the politicisation of the work. Nonetheless, companies very often need to compromise, enlisting either the theatrical talents regardless of their lack of political conviction, or politically committed members with a deficiency of talent.¹ As McGrath argues:

There are, further, the specific problems of the theatre workers. Actors in a capitalistic system have been brought up to believe in a hierarchy, and to hold together in a kind of emotional bond to protect themselves against the hierarchy, and this leads to a reluctance to criticize other actors publicly. Furthermore, the nature of the work is such that the actors are interdependent on stage, so that the necessary processes of democracy, of criticism and self-criticism, have certain barriers erected against them, which are the result of working within a capitalist system. ²

Difficulties of this kind frequently lead to philosophical conflict and flux within the company. A company may stand

¹John McGrath, "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre," Theatre Quarterly IX, 35 (1979): p.48.

²Ibid.

firm on its initial ideals, or it may permit a natural progression of ideas beyond its original intentions, but in any event some unity is generally maintained by the dedication of members to creating an effective counter-culture.

Other difficulties concern socialist theatre's opposition to established theatrical principles. For example, the mystique resulting from nineteenth-century romanticism generally permeates the theatrical approach of actors, writers, and directors. McGrath's theatrical approach usually includes the performer's direct address to the audience, communicating with the audience not only as actor but also as a member of the community. Such a method establishes a relationship with the audience that is beyond the purlieus of bourgeois theatre. On the other hand, theatre practitioners are often hesitant to accomodate audiences or are unwilling to broaden their skills beyond specialised fields. In fringe companies particularly, actors from working-class backgrounds have entered the theatre to promote themselves into middle-class respectability and fear associating with the working class in case they are condemned to it. Theatre practitioners with the necessary professional skills often lack political conviction. Social activists involved with the organisational structure of the company may become so absorbed with socialist theory that they disregard the theatre's purpose of communicating with an audience. Some actors who

find themselves in the position of taking unpopular political positions or representing unlikable characters have difficulty performing effectively in a political context.¹

McGrath recommends socialist theatres affiliating themselves with political parties, yet this too presents difficulties. Party affiliation, instead of exciting an audience to action with "nowhere to go," may add support for a specific issue and follow up in an active response in ways that unchannelled agitation cannot. Party affiliation would direct the principles of specified issues for both audience and company alike, thus contributing to the identity of the theatre company. To clarify the realities of theatrical effect toward a political end, McGrath argues:

The question of affiliation to a political party or organization raises the issue of what theatre 'can and should do'. The single-issue agitprop piece very rarely actually persuades anybody intellectually. Rather it is a show of support - part of a publicity machine, evidence of energy in that cause which impresses the ditherers and the 'don't knows' in the audience. It can relate a single issue to wider questions, thus informing the audience, but it rarely changes their prejudices. 1

It is important to consider in social terms the objectives of

¹John McGrath, "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre," Theatre Quarterly IX, 35 (1979): p.49.

²Ibid.

political theatre. If politically-oriented productions are meant to lend support in the struggle against capitalism with the intent of replacing it with a dominant working-class culture, then support for the organisations of the working class must be an objective. Unless the audience for such material is indeed politically prepared and motivated, the material itself becomes useless.

Political theatre today serves generally as a forum of political discourse as well as a reflection of society, but it was not always under the control of the bourgeois class. Removing control of theatre from bourgeois ownership has resulted in the return of an aesthetic form to the common people. A connection may be seen here between McGrath's efforts and Augusto Boal's view of theatre belonging to all of society. As Boal states:

In the beginning the theatre was the
dithyrambic song: free people singing in
the open air. The carnival. The feast.

Later, the ruling classes took possession
of the theatre and built their dividing walls.
First, they divided the people, separating
actors from spectators: people who act and
people who watch - the party is over! Secondly,
among the actors, they separated the protagonists
from the mass. The coercive indoctrination
began!

Now the oppressed people are liberated
themselves and, once more, are making the
theatre their own. The walls must be torn down. 1

¹Augusto Boal, Theater of the Oppressed, (New York: Urizen Books, Inc., 1979), p.119.

Aristophanes believed that drama should not only produce pleasure but also serve as a model of morality and political viability. Even Aristophanes found opposition; Eratosthenes declared that the "function of the poet is to charm the spirits of his listeners, never to instruct them."¹ Even today some purists see the arts as a spiritual address rather than an intellectual or moral one. Theatre as art means many things to many people, and people go to the theatre for a multiplicity of reasons. Political theatre, socialist theatre especially, must, however, be recognised for its accessibility to working-class audiences and its role as a catalyst for social change. McGrath has made his position on this issue quite clear.²

7:84's Place in "Cultural Revolution"

Form being the relationship between art (in this case the theatrical event) and society (the audience), any digression of form from bourgeois realism may be seen as a criticism of capitalist ideology. For this reason, it appears to have been a conscious choice by the 7:84 Company to challenge capitalist ideology by producing plays in which the content and form did deviate from conventional realism.

¹Augusto Boal, Theater of the Oppressed, (New York: Urizen Books, Inc., 1979), p.xiii.

²See above p.257 above.

The term "cultural revolution" is used here to denote the discarding of popularly accepted conventions and ideas. It is seen as a means toward social change. The 7:84 Company appears to be part of a cultural revolution for two reasons: (1) within the context of its work it tries to change social and political attitudes, and (2) it seeks to change these attitudes by developing a theatrical genre which departs radically from the entrenched theatrical modes which preceded it.

Starting from a distinctly socialist viewpoint, the 7:84 Company attempts to expose and motivate people's attitudes against those aspects of the established capitalist culture which have proved offensive and abusive, particularly to those who generally suffer most under capitalism - working-class people. As a result, some significant alternative to traditional theatrical practice had to be devised which would accomplish this purpose. McGrath's combination of historical context (undermining the transcendence traditionally accorded text and performance), socialist and feminist commitment, and presentational techniques not generally associated with the entrenched theatre supporting capitalism marked the 7:84 Company as a viable alternative with working-class appeal.

Whether a cultural revolution really occurred at about the same time the 7:84 Company began staging plays is problematic. Western culture appears to be not significantly

different today from that of twenty-five years ago. On the other hand, there can be no doubt that serious attempts were made more or less contemporaneously with the escalation of American forces in Vietnam to undermine and transform the established mores of late capitalism. It appears to have begun with the political events of May, 1968 in Paris when nine million striking workers and students rallied to protest against the state (the Situationist Revolt). American involvement in Vietnam had peaked with the Tet Offensive; angry crowds stormed the Democratic Convention in Chicago as Mayor Daley's police responded with tear gas and clubs. Innocent students were fired upon by the National Guard at Kent State. Also in 1968, the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia and both Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King were assassinated. Contemporaneously with Richard Nixon's election, anti-imperialist campaigns were launched in Latin America.¹ World-wide political unrest foreshadowed radical social and cultural change. At this time most of Britain's alternative theatre companies emerged; the 7:84 Company was one of these companies.

Succeeding in revolution of any kind means that today's revolutionaries are tomorrow's establishment; in order to

¹Catherine Itzen, Introduction to Stages in the Revolution, (London: Methuen, 1980), p.1.

sustain the momentum of change, there must always be opposition to the establishment must be constant. Catherine Itzen explains the aims of revolution:

[The] law holds true only for those who accept the established system and its values, who accept that there is a 'room at the top' worth reaching. For those who reject the system - and for most that meant the capitalist system - the establishment is the enemy of the people and therefore their enemy. Not to strive for, but to struggle against. ¹

The Chinese cultural revolution of the 1960s demonstrates how a cultural programme of change formally imposed on society soon becomes an established convention. Unchallenged by political opposition, it denies society the right to dynamism or constant amendments to the cultural configuration.

John Russell Taylor indicates that the success of the "new dramatists," beginning with John Osborne and his play, Look Back in Anger (1956) led to a new generation of dramatists in Britain. Even more than the successes of Edward Bond, David Mercer, Tom Stoppard, Joe Orton, Peter Nicols and others, the new dramatic thrust, according to Taylor, was due to "inspired confidence," opening the way to social realism

¹Catherine Itzen, Preface to Stages in the Revolution, (London: Methuen, 1980), p.ix.

and agitational propaganda.¹ In the years to follow (1968-1978), playwrights and theatre companies adopted dynamic political platforms, which, in the revolutionary spirit, presented social opposition to the establishment and challenged the ideological foundations upon which it rested. Taylor also acknowledges that the revolutionaries of this genre, too, were susceptible to becoming the establishment of the next as had been true of Osborne and Pinter. But his contention, as stated, is that:

. . . new concepts do actually change the sensibilities of the public, so that the innovator does not have to turn into a reactionary once he achieves a position of power and responsibility; he can go on doing his own thing and developing along his own line, only now with public acceptance instead of mistrust or outright rejection. 2

Opposition to the established social structure was particularly true during the period of Conservative Party domination, when theatrical opposition to capitalism became part of the revolutionary process,³ for the majority of such

¹John Russell Taylor, The Second Wave, (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980), pp.9-15.

²Ibid., p.11.

³Catherine Itzen, Preface to Stages in the Revolution, (London: Methuen, 1980), p.x.

companies were "not, for the most part, just socially committed, but committed to a socialist society."¹ Britain's first theatrical revolution of this period followed the English Stage Company's production of Look Back in Anger at the Royal Court in 1956. Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop at the Theatre Royal and the Berliner Ensemble's tour of Britain also influenced the changing shape of dramatic form. What Sandy Craig refers to as the "subsidy revolution,"² (the establishment of local and federal arts councils which would sponsor and encourage art as a strategy toward transcending the class boundaries) was a reaction to eradicate Britain's rigid class boundaries by altering popular consciousness and developing a common culture. The National Theatre, on the other hand, is illustrative of the static state of class consciousness on a broader scale. The National's plush seating, state-of-the-art technical facilities and general atmosphere of anonymity hardly created a place conducive to merging class cultures.³

In 1968, when the new wave of political dramatists seized

¹Catherine Itzen, Preface to Stages in the Revolution, (London: Methuen, 1980), p.x.

²Sandy Craig, ed., Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain, (Ambergate, Derbyshire: Amber Lane Press Ltd., 1980), p.12.

³Ibid.

the public's attention, underground theatre groups began to emerge. 1968 was a year of general abundance, yet the world was in turmoil: demands were made for the distribution of the world's wealth. Sandy Craig describes:

Ideologically, the possibility of material freedom was complemented by demands for cultural and creative freedom: one of the most significant calls from the barricades of Paris was for "power to the imagination." ¹

The Theatres Act of September, 1968, which relieved the Lord Chamberlain of his power to censor any dramatic text, opened "a new frontier" for writers of political agitation and contemporary social issues. But with this freedom came uncensored spectacle and experiments in scurrility. It became apparent, however, that these alternative theatres were shocking the "wrong" audiences. They attacked a bourgeois sub-culture which Sandy Craig called, "the cultural ghetto of the alternative society."² While aesthetic freedom had been achieved, responsibility had been neglected. Craig describes the implications:

¹Sandy Craig, ed., Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain, (Ambergate, Derbyshire: Amber Lane Press Ltd., 1980), p.15.

²Ibid., p.17.

It is sometimes thought that the best conditions for art are those which impose boundaries, that total aesthetic freedom leads only to decadence and self-indulgence. In part this may be true; but though the early groups had total aesthetic freedom there was one important limiting factor which acted as a useful creative lubricant: lack of money. Financial restrictions, underpinned ideologically by a revolt against the materialist values of capitalism, imposed an economy of means on the productions, proscribing the use of cumbersome stage technology and detailed, expensive naturalistic sets. ¹

Out of this apparently nihilistic chaos came a more structured wave of political playwrights - specifically John Arden and Arnold Wesker. In the early 1960s, Wesker established a network of political agitators in alternative theatres around Britain which would be controlled and organised ultimately by the Labour Party. His objective was apparently to provide theatre to everyone without imposing establishment culture on the masses. As it turned out, Wesker's attempt to enrich the culture of the working class resulted in the imposition of his own cultural values on a public unwilling to abandon its own cultural identity. As a playwright, he became alienated. In an attempt to address local and community-based issues, John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy, instead of trying to create a

¹Sandy Craig, ed., Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain, (Ambergate, Derbyshire: Amber Lane Press Ltd., 1980), p.17.

national theatre network, took their work directly to the people. By 1968 their collaborations with Inter-Action and the Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre developed as part of a political theatre movement organised in a programme of social change.

Thus far political theatre has not been shown capable of organising and executing a cultural revolution. Socialist theatre, however, in its commitment to social change, can provide, as Sandy Craig describes,

. . . information and analysis, it can boost confidence and strengthen solidarity, it can 'raise consciousness' or, most basically, it can provide socialist entertainment. It can help re-establish the belief in socialism, it can help persuade the doubtful, it can sow seeds of doubt in the critical. It may even, on occasion, be influential in 'converting' someone to socialism: though for most socialists there was no Pauline conversion on the road to a socialist Damascus. It doesn't man the barricades or the picket lines: it raises the analysis, it puts meat on the bones of socialism. 1

While socialist theatres participate in social change, they are obviously not the leaders of a social or political movement. Socialist theatres generally conform to two basic

¹Sandy Craig, ed., Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain, (Ambergate, Derbyshire: Amber Lane Press Ltd., 1980), pp.36-37.

principles: (1) the content of the plays depicts people of the present reacting to events of public significance (the socialist playwright, in opposition to the accepted convention of characterisation evolving from the individual's psyche, often creates character to depict the attitudes of the working class and is then frequently rejected for poor development.); (2) the relationship between the stage and audience is far more intimate and direct than that of the conventional stage. As the spectator becomes drawn into the stage action, he becomes active rather than passive as communication between the stage and the audience is transmitted, received and responded to.

The 7:84 Theatre Company has proved to be consistent and tenacious in its programme for social change. Within the context of cultural revolution and political opposition, the 7:84 Company, with its strong political ideology, well-executed organisation and firm commitment, stands out as a successful opponent to the dominant theatre tradition supporting capitalism. In the early works, such as John Arden's and Margaretta D'Arcy's The Ballygombeen Bequest, to break from conventional form the Company employed various agitprop techniques, cartoon characters, songs, shock-tactics

¹Sandy Craig, ed., Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain, (Ambergate, Derbyshire: Amber Lane Press Ltd., 1980), p.43.

and slap-stick comedy to superimpose a Marxist perspective on the form.¹ With The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil (1973), the Company adopted popular forms of entertainment, breaking completely with bourgeois realism or "high" modernism. The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil employs the ceilidh, a Scottish dance which has been developed with traditional music and stories into a new and culturally pertinent theatrical form. The emphasis of McGrath's works has been two-fold. First with endless variation, his plays can be seen as surveys of the historical development of capitalism from the perspective of the working class and, in turn, the working class's response to the course of events. Secondly, as Craig describes:

McGrath's . . . theme is central in a play, written around the same time, that remains one of the few dramatic productions of the seventies to fulfil the double Shakespearean injunction - to hold the mirror up to nature and to show the very age and body of the time its form and pressure. 1

McGrath's recurring theme is illustrated in the political education of the socialist hero. Through a series of hardships and a process toward political consciousness, the

¹Sandy Craig, ed., Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain, (Ambergate, Derbyshire: Amber Lane Press Ltd., 1980), p.44.

protagonist usually steps out of the working-class crowd and with individual determination addresses social evils.

McGrath's skill in achieving a positive reaction from an audience may be attributed to: (1) using popular, working-class forms of entertainment, (2) associating the needs of the protagonist with those of the audience and (3) leading the audience to the same kind of social consciousness as the protagonist in order to act against the establishment.

The cultural revolution of the 1960s-1970s was not only resistance to the oppressive establishment of cultural tyranny; it was not just an alternative seeking respite from capitalist exploitation; it was, for the most part, a broad cross-section of working-class people in Britain, Europe and even the United States demanding not only a rejection of capitalist agendas, but also the installation of socialist structures for an improvement in the standard of living for the working class. Although equal distribution of wealth was most probably at the heart of the issue, cultural identity and freedom of cultural expression also took their places as priorities in the struggle.

McGrath and the 7:84 Company address these particular issues directly within the context of moving toward socialism as a viable political alternative in Britain. Their theatrical form, with its commitment to developing popular, working-class entertainment, reaffirming local culture (i.e.,

the Gaelic language which was banned in Scotland by the English as part of their programme of cultural oppression), consistently works toward questioning the legitimacy and morality of the capitalist structure, raising local political issues (usually by-products of capitalism) and enervating the consciences of their audience so that they (the audience) might act in support of the revolution - against the established system.

The 7:84 Company practises the ideal it preaches. Its form reflects the socialist ideology of its content. Although the plays are initially written by McGrath, production relations discourage social hierarchy; members of the Company research and offer opinions on politics and aesthetics, discuss, create and contribute in a workshop environment where the group decides which ideas will be adopted, rejected, or adapted either as Company policy or as part of an aesthetic exploration of political ideology in the form of theatrical presentation.

Political Theatre, Meaning, and Aesthetics

Although it is a commonplace that all theatre is political,¹ one is reluctant to perceive the stage as an

¹This thesis contends that a collaborative art such as theatre demands political involvement through its use of form. On a more personal level, I believe that involvement is necessary lest one's fate be delivered to those who might inhibit it.

appropriate place for the representation of political matter. Since social change is entirely pragmatic, it is, self-defeating as an aesthetic goal. Even so, in a world in which the importance and urgency of political and social events are intensified by the intrusion of the media, it becomes increasingly difficult to deny the importance of such events. In the final decade of a century marked by infiltration, espionage, anarchy, terrorism, torture, intelligence and counter-intelligence, revolution and counter-revolution, hot and cold wars, and now glasnost and perestroika, in which the stability of Eastern Europe, immutable as it might once have seemed, appears finally to be unhinged, what content can be more urgent and meaningful than political content?

It is essential that serious theatre disclose the multiplicity of the world, that it address such crucial and pandemic issues. Even though much modern theatre deals with "escapist" entertainment,¹ any valid theatre designed for a serious-minded audience must confront the political situation in which people currently find themselves. Because the political condition is inextricably bound to human experience as a whole, theatre which tries to disclose a comprehensive

¹For example, English drawing-room comedies, musical revivals, adaptations of mystery novels, and the current Broadway trend toward the "operatic" blockbuster musical.

account of that experience must deal with the political condition of humanity. What results is the confluence of art and politics.

The nexus between art and politics is, as John McGrath has acknowledged, by no means a static relationship.¹ On the contrary, sensitive to the historical phenomena to which Brecht referred, the relationship is in a constant state of flux. It is impossible to consider the relationship between art and politics as static, fixed, immutable, existing in some remote time beyond history; taking into consideration the influence of past, present, and future, a relationship of this kind is determined by the facts of the present. As McGrath explains, one should not take for granted one absolute relationship between art and politics at any one time; any such relationship must be assessed in terms of the context of one's own experience, insight, skill, and talent.² As McGrath explains:

. . . the theatre is, or it can be, the most public, the most clearly political of the art forms. Theatre is the place where the life of a society is shown in public to that society,

¹John McGrath, A Good Night Out. Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form, (London: Methuen, 1981), pp.87-89 ff.

²Ibid., pp.82-83 ff.

where that society's assumptions are exhibited and tested, its values are scrutinised, its myths are validated and its traumas become emblems of its reality. Theatre is not about the reaction of one sensibility to events external to itself, as poetry tends to be; or the private consumption of fantasy or a mediated slice of social reality, as most novels tend to be. It is a public event, and it is about matters of public concern. ¹

These matters of public concern to which McGrath refers reveal the attitudes of a mass audience to the public; in this way theatre becomes not a place of aesthetic sublimation, but a political forum. As such, it objectifies subjective experience by exposing even the most personal thought and feeling in a social, historical context.²

Capitalism, however, often creates a false consciousness which mediates experience. The process of living under a system of this kind, in which a bourgeois audience becomes increasingly alienated from a complex and hostile environment, permits the power structure to manipulate the audience into giving credence to an over-simplified version of contemporary reality. Unquestioning in their assumptions, masses of alienated people accept on faith a mediation of reality, even though simultaneously seeking an alternative.³

¹John McGrath, A Good Night Out. Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.83.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p.84.

Manipulation of this kind tends to distort perception to the point where theatre is divorced from pertinent contemporary issues, from significant human struggles, and from trends in thought and history. In this way a mediation of reality controls the population as a whole, discouraging thought or the demand to participate in power or to take control of their own lives by exercising the freedom to think and act. If it is to be of any significance whatsoever, political theatre must work with material of this kind. In this situation didacticism and propaganda may threaten the sincerity of commitment. As Theodor Adorno explains in the context of discussing Brecht's reduction of reality in order to penetrate reality's essence:

The political falsehood stains the aesthetic form. Where Brecht distorts the real social problems discussed in his epic drama in order to prove a thesis, the whole structure and foundation of the play itself crumbles. ¹

This endless questioning of assumptions about society and about life itself, about where the assumptions came from in the first place, and about their assessment in terms of the individual's own situation are, according to McGrath, the

¹Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," trans. F. McDonagh, in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.186.

essential content of drama. They are endemic to the process of creating theatre, pervading all areas and, in essence, creating a new theatrical "language." Every aspect of a play develops on a number of levels; as many dimensions as possible must be incorporated into the substance of the play, including the critical apparatus appropriate to that fully-developed dimension. Rather than being non-artistic or unimaginative in its teleological function, political theatre addresses the interaction between social forces and people, exposing that interaction for critical assessment and judgement.¹

In the assessment of drama, then, one may consider meaning a legitimate criterion of value, including the myriad ramifications implied by all the elements of theatre. The finest drama, therefore, develops in richness on multiple levels of meaning at once, permitting the audience to acknowledge this interaction of social forces and men and assert its potential as a critical audience (this is particularly important in the postmodern sense in which no author-imposed meaning is considered). A criterion of this kind demands that drama question rigorously the set of assumptions about life on which it is crafted and have a critical, questioning relationship with its audience. This

¹John McGrath, A Good Night Out. Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form, (London: Methuen, 1981), pp.87-89 ff.

questioning attitude behind a work is what a play is "about."

As McGrath writes:

But one thing that this kind of theatre can be "about" which is common to all good theatre is that extraordinary sense of the imaginative, creative leap out of alienated living that is communicated by a good performer in a good but dangerous part, as he or she takes the audience on a vertiginous adventure along the tightrope of invention and wit and imagination, the free man, or woman, free in the gaze of the audience, creating him or herself as they go along, surviving and surpassing mere survival, taking the audience on into the concentrated world of the child at play, but bringing into the play, as it were, the restless tokens of a changing reality. This role of theatre, this temporary, imaginative release from the chains of alienation and predictability is perhaps one of the most important things that it is "about," and can rarely be matched in intensity or presence by any other experience of art. It is this that can be ultimately the most subversive element in theatre, because it can create the appetite for throwing off those chains more frequently, for coming out of retreat and onto the offensive. ¹

If McGrath is correct, the content of political theatre may be considered as aesthetically valid as that of other drama. A vital force in determining the content is the audience itself, if only for the pragmatic reason that what interests and appeals to an audience will possess any

¹John McGrath, A Good Night Out. Popular Theatre Audience, Class and Form, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.91.

practical existence on the stage. Plays which strike against those powers which have created all-pervasive feelings of alienation, anxiety and despair will have strong audience appeal. But even though the dramatic action may be presented in a theatre "language" to which the audience can react and by a company which has carefully cultivated a sense of trust in the audience, the presentation may not, according to the above criterion, result in great theatre. As Theodor Adorno contends:

The rudiments of external meanings are the irreducibly non-artistic elements in art. Its formal principle lies not in them, but in the dialectic of both moments - which accomplishes the transformation of meanings within it. The distinction between artist and litterateur is shallow: but it is true that the object of any aesthetic philosophy . . . is not the publicistic aspects of art. Still less is it the "message" of a work. The latter oscillates unhappily between the subjective intentions of the artist and the demands of an objectively explicit metaphysical meaning. In our context, this meaning generally turns out to be an uncommonly practicable Being. ¹

It is necessary, then, for the theatre practitioner to react to his material with a sensitivity generated by strong emotion and to utilise all his resources to transmit his

¹Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," trans. F. McDonagh, in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), pp.178-179.

reaction to the audience.¹ An emotional struggle is only one element which allows drama to be transmitted from one mind to another through the multiple-layered textures of theatre, a struggle demanding accurate observation of character, social manners, and the conflict of classes and individuals. The experience of theatre is made meaningful by the element of wonder, by imagination and intuition, which binds together the disparate elements. This is what a play is about, though neither writer nor audience may be aware of it. The conscious attempt to convey a significant "theme" does not bestow a work with aesthetic value; what accomplishes this function is the unconscious but deeply-felt emotional power with which the theatre practitioner approaches his material, his skill in vitalising the audience into understanding and feeling, a similar emotional intensity towards the material. Questions as to whether the purpose of theatre is to inform, persuade, or entertain are pointless. All these purposes may be endowed with value depending upon the degree of applied emotional intensity. As Adorno argues, "Even if politically motivated, commitment in itself remains politically polyvalent so long as it is not reduced to propaganda, whose pliancy mocks any commitment by the subject."² Even so, from the standpoint

¹John McGrath, A Good Night Out. Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.94.

²Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," trans. F. McDonagh, in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.178.

of aesthetics, propaganda might still be considered within the parameters of works with a less obvious teleological end. Such intensity is surely possible even for the purely political objective of propaganda. As Peter Schumann has argued, "art, like religion, must disclose a new order of experience; both can describe exalted states and epiphanies of the geist, the spirit."¹ If political theatre has sometimes failed to reach this ideal state, its failure is scarcely the result of its focus on the real. For McGrath, the focus on real working-class experience is more likely to result in compelling drama than either "universal truths" or the illusion of reality so often staged by the bourgeois theatre. On the other hand, as Adorno contends, "the less works have to proclaim what they cannot completely believe themselves, the more telling they become in their own right; and the less they need a surplus of meaning beyond what they are."²

The point here is that postmodern theatre of the kind that the 7:84 Company has become is, in a real sense, always about itself; though subject matter may intrude, the ongoing revelation of the process of theatre (including relations of

¹Florence Falk, "Bread and Puppet Domestic Resurrection Circus," Performing Arts Journal II, 1 (Spring 1972): p.22.

²Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," trans. F. McDonagh, in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.187.

production) must itself be regarded as content. This is why it has been necessary to examine in some detail representational forms appropriated by McGrath from theatrical innovators of an earlier time. When the experience of theatre is seen as a microcosm of life, the process itself becomes a new order of human experience.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF TEXTS - 1

Overview

Having considered the work of John McGrath and the 7:84 Theatre Company in a more general sense, including the relationship between aesthetic form and social praxis, it remains to look carefully at analyses of specific texts. Some justification for the selection of these texts seems necessary. Works chosen for analysis have been selected as (1) representative of McGrath's work at a particular time in the aesthetic development of the 7:84 Theatre Company; (2) representative of the Company's best work in that period; and (3) the 7:84 Theatre Company's work considered most effective in supporting the thesis of this dissertation.

The texts are presented in chronological order. In Chapter Four the work has been selected from McGrath's early, formative years as a young dramatist (Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun, Bakke's Night of Fame), and, with such plays as The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil and Fish in the Sea, demonstrate the transition to a more mature, less "realistic" style. Chapter Five focuses on representative

works of that mature style, revealing the rich diversity of socialist themes and the necessary formal organisation accommodating them.

Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun

Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun was first performed at the Hampstead Theatre Club on April 12, 1966, that is, prior to the formation of the 7:84 Theatre Company in 1971.¹ That it is the work of a young writer from a working-class background is obvious if the attitude expressed through the characters to institutions established by capitalist society is McGrath's own attitude (as one reads or watches the play, one tends to assume that it is an expression of the playwright's attitude).²

The richness and innovation in dramatic technique apparent in McGrath's later work, such as Fish in the Sea or The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, but occluded from Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun, suggest the extent to which the work of the 7:84 Company has been a collaborative effort, although it is difficult, if not impossible, to verify who contributed what. My own contact with the 7:84 Company

¹The touring company for Trees in the Wind ultimately established itself as the 7:84 Theatre Company.

²Other plays of the period expressing a similar working-class attitude by McGrath are The Tent, Why the Chicken? and Bakke's Night of Fame.

has produced nothing which will clarify the matter. As a result, it has been necessary to draw conclusions from careful observations of the text and from what McGrath himself has written about his work. Doubtless McGrath himself developed and changed as a playwright over the next few years, but certainly the works attributed to him as first performed by the 7:84 Company show a striking development in their assimilation of theatrical, particularly Brechtian, stagecraft. Nonetheless John McGrath's earlier works, though as I have said not as fully developed in terms of form as the later plays, are committed to raising political consciousness concerning the plight of the working class. Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun is representative of these early works, emphasising as it does the futility of working-class labour and consequently the abandonment of purpose.

The setting for Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun is a British Army camp in North Germany in February, 1954. As the audience comes to realise, the spare, stark stage set of barbed wire, small hospital beds and a guard hut suggests a coldness and isolation indicative of the isolation within the characters themselves. A squad of British gunners, occupied only with the singular task of guarding the British Bofors Gun, an anti-aircraft device long made obsolete by high-speed jet bombers, remains on constant duty to protect the Bofors Gun. It is apparent that most of the soldiers have been

assigned to this duty for some time; they are undisciplined and lax as the result of tedious, inconsequential ritual. They have been accompanied for one week by a new Lance Bombardier (their superior) who is scheduled to be transferred the following day back to England for officer training. Lance Bombardier Evans is just eighteen, from the suburbs of Manchester. He has a working-class background but on a mathematics scholarship has won a place at Cambridge University after his national service. The members of his squad range in age from twenty to thirty-two; they are all working class and there is resentment that their immediate destinies are controlled by an adolescent. The central action revolves over the timespan of one night and involves Evans's ability to organise the watch, in shifts, insuring the safety of the Bofors Gun and maintaining a decorum of military regularity. Downstage of the guard hut, protruding from the wings and dominating the scene is the front end of the Bofors Gun. The starkness of the scene is reminiscent of Osbornian theatre of the 1950s or even of the Theatre of the Absurd. Indeed, the nature of McGrath's material suggests the influence of Beckett, particularly when at the opening of the play Gunner O'Rourke asks Evans, the young Lance-Bombardier serving his first guard command, why they are guarding the Bofors gun (it only later turns out that the weapon has been obsolete for years). Much of the absurdity - and hence the

sardonic humour - is created through McGrath's use of irony, as when the young and inexperienced Evans insists on the men keeping themselves in readiness according to strict military procedure, even though the obsolescence of the Bofors gun renders this procedure absurd. Later, the audience learns that Evans's motive in using this "facade" is to be sent back to Britain the following day to be considered by an Officer Selection Board. Evans acknowledges his motives when he says:

I dream all day about home, but the laugh is, when I'm there I can't stand the place. I don't know what I'm doing here, nor why, nor who for, not even where I am on the map all that accurately. All I know is that I have to go home. I will even offer myself up as a jumped up eighteen-year-old joke of a Second-Lieutenant for just one chance to get home. ¹

Hence, the scene exposes not only the bizarre nature of the characters' situation, but also the absurdity of the British occupation of Germany. This is further exposed when a conversation between Gunners Crawley and Rowe discloses that the British soldiers are without live ammunition, a disturbing circumstance for the two gunners, who feel a necessity to defend themselves, not against the Russians, for whom they are

¹John McGrath, Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun, (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1966), p.37.

ostensibly on guard, but against the German resistance which has assumed the British failure to attack the Russians is an indication that Britain is not on Germany's side.¹

Furthermore, throughout the play O'Rourke's sardonic attitude to the military "establishment" emphasises the absurdity of a military institution based on class and, by extension, the injustice of the whole class system which capitalism has created. As Gunner Crawley later complains:

What pissy-knickered bombardier sits down
every Friday in the Regimental Sergeant-Major's
bungalow, spits the boot polish out of his
mouth from licking the R.S.M.'s boots, and
says to himself: "Right, Gunner Crawley
307, no pay-night piss-up for you, gunner,
no revels with your muckers in the NAAFI,
no two sausages, egg and chips for you,
mate, no wunderbar wunderbeer downtown in
the Y.M., no - nothing like that, soldier -
you're on rotten guard." Who is it says
that, then? 2

The military institution is criticised indirectly also in a conversation concerning Evans's promotion between Evans and Gunner Flynn, who is the only member of the group with whom Evans has any kind of friendship:

¹John McGrath, Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun, (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1966), pp.35-36.

²Ibid., p.13.

EVANS: I've only got to get through tonight, Bill, and I'm off. I'm going back home tomorrow for an Officer Selection Board. I just found out. Four o'clock train. Night boat from the Hook. Harwich Sunday morning. Woolwich Sunday afternoon. Manchester Sunday night. How about that?

FLYNN: (pleased) You crafty bugger. Fancy not letting on.

EVANS: I swear to you I just found out, but don't tell the others, Bill -

FLYNN: Well, well, what about that: I can't pretend I'm not jealous. In fact I'm green with envy, sod you. But that's great. Really great.

EVANS: I'm glad you're pleased.

FLYNN: Well what did you expect?

EVANS: I don't know. I thought - well - privileges, getting on: they're not popular.

FLYNN: (laughing) Ha, you're going to be a successful man, Terry, and there's no point in fighting it; and you want it, don't you?

EVANS: If it comes, it comes, if it doesn't, sod it. My dad sells parafin in Wythenshawe. What do I want to be an officer for?

FLYNN: Of course.

EVANS: I suppose you don't?

FLYNN: What? I don't what?

EVANS: Want to get on.

FLYNN: Ah well, not really. No, I don't think I do. (Pause. EVANS is worried by this).

EVANS: Er - is it true Bill that you wouldn't take a stripe?

FLYNN: If I wouldn't take a pip, I wouldn't take a stripe now would I?

EVANS Do you mean you -

FLYNN: I have no desire for improvement. Besides, you've never been in an Officers' Mess, have you?

EVANS: Er - no, I don't suppose I have.

FLYNN: Well I had the misfortune to be brought up in one to the age of ten. A strict sort of infancy it was.

EVANS: Really?

FLYNN: I've never been into an Officers' Mess since. Nor shall I. I prefer animals.
(Pause) Besides, my father was shot.

EVANS: I'm sorry. I didn't know. (Pause)
I wondered why you hadn't got on.

FLYNN: (laughs a little too loudly) Dear old Lance-Bombardier, you're a terribly nice bloke, but you must admit you're a bit of a simpleton -

EVANS: Am I?

FLYNN: Do you suppose everybody wants to get on?

EVANS: Well - in a way.

FLYNN: (laughs again) That's the stuff that built the Empire. Well, tell me, why isn't O'Rourke a sergeant and Featherstone a colonel? Because they're too stupid, do you think?

EVANS: I don't know. But somebody has got to be an officer, and carry the can.

FLYNN: Don't let it be me, that's all I ask. Never be on the side of the judges, Terry - my motto for the day.

EVANS: No, I suppose not.

FLYNN: I despise people who are taken in:
by pips and stripes and wigs and chains.

EVANS: Does that include me, Bill? 1

The focus here expands beyond the confines of the military to the whole issue of "getting on in the world," an issue which involves those who are prepared to accept "success" on capitalism's terms ("pips and stripes and wigs and chains") and those who are not. Flynn's more socialist - or at least non-capitalist - viewpoint here prepares the audience for the later actions of the more radical O'Rourke. Evans, only eighteen but already ambitious in the capitalist sense, is prepared to accept the hypocrisy required for "getting on." This point is clear when Evans adopts the "fixed smile of conversation with a superior"² as in his "best voice" he answers the telephone:

EVANS: Gun-park guard room . . . Bombardier
Evans speaking sir . . . Very good sir,
I'll see to that sir . . . (laughs) well
yes I was hoping to sir . . . (beams, pleased)
Thank you very much sir . . . Goodnight
to you sir. 3

It is further underscored when Evans asks to be called

¹John McGrath, Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun, (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1966), pp.17-19.

²Ibid., p.20.

³Ibid.

"bombardier":

EVANS: . . . I suppose you'd better call me Bombardier, do you mind?

FEATHERSTONE: No, I don't mind. I thought you might mind, really. It's not what you call matey, having all your mates call you Bombardier. Still, if that's the way you want it, Terry, Amen, so be it.

EVANS: It's not so much that I want to be called Bombardier, it's just - well, I think it might be better - do you see what I mean?

FEATHERSTONE: Yes. So we know where we stand sort of thing.

O'ROURKE: (looking at the ceiling) That's right, so we all know our place . . . 1

Evans's immature self-importance and hypocrisy, however, are contrasted with a lack of respect shown by the men under his "command." Their derision is to some extent justified by Evans' own weakness resulting from his desire for popularity. Yet Evans's weakness extends to ambivalence about even this:

FLYNN: You're terrified of not being liked, aren't you, Terry?

EVANS: Well - yes and no. 2

¹John McGrath, Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun, (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1966), p.20.

²Ibid., p.42.

Evans's situation is one in which he has lost control of the men under his "command" because he (Evans) is too weak to exercise his authority by punishing those who have disobeyed orders. His desire "to be liked" is motivated by his need for the comfort of going home to England. Yet Evans's homesickness represents not only exile from his surroundings, but from his culture, his class and its people. He is in flux, an individual who aspires to lift himself out of the working class, to "get on" and achieve happiness by joining the ranks of the purposeful and successful middle class. For Evans this is paradoxical. His sense of duty and regulation is often overshadowed by a mix of compassion, desire to be accepted (and liked), while still maintaining a position of power and control. But the true nature of Evans's dilemma is pointed out by Gunner O'Rourke:

O'ROURKE (looking at the ceiling): That's right,
so we all know our place: some run with the
foxes, some hunt with the hounds.

EVANS: Well, it's not so much that even -

O'ROURKE: A - a. Can't run with both now,
Bombardier, can we?

EVANS: Well no, but -

O'ROURKE (sits up): Tell me though, do you
feel yourself, - at heart, you know - do
you feel yourself to be a fox man or a hound
man? That interests me that.

EVANS (quietly): I'm against blood sports, on

the whole. 1

Evans's is a no-win situation; by elevating his position within a class context, he alienates himself from the only faction of society with whom he feels "at home." It is therefore impossible for him to reach any sense of fulfilment. He is a tragic character destined to fail as the result of his poor commitment to one desire or the other. As McGrath has written:

Yes, it was all about, really, the difference between Evans, who is climbing out of a working class mentality into a middle-class one, with everything that that entails - and the total, life-destructive fanaticism of the desire to get out, get on, which is not simple. It's not a simple ambition syndrome, it's also connected with the homesickness within himself. It's very interesting, this homesickness thing, because very few people believe it or understand it, but in fact I think that homesickness is an emotion, an overwhelming, over-powering emotion . . . 2

It is through Evans's mediocrity and weakness that he is realised as representative of the British middle class, sacrificing its integrity at the altar of self-interest. Such

¹John McGrath, Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun, (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1966), pp.20-21.

²John McGrath, "Better a Bad Night in Bootle . . .," Theatre Quarterly V, 19 (1975): p.44.

an interpretation juxtaposes Evans's shallowness with the tenacity of the working-class characters (Flynn and O'Rourke, for example). The contrast is underscored when O'Rourke and Featherstone fail to return from the NAAFI on time for their guard duty. Evans finds himself in a tenuous situation: if he reports the two men, he will appear to be out of control of his command and a lengthy courtmartial of the men will prevent his return to England for officer training; if he fails to report them and is caught, he will be demoted. Either way, he will lose his trip back to England and his appointment with the Officer Selection Board. McGrath's meaning is clear enough: capitalism has produced a privileged, but incompetent, class which attempts to "get on" at the expense of a more experienced, more competent, and essentially more honest working class. This meaning is established and developed throughout the first act of the play. The act ends with Evans waiting nervously for the men to return and, finally, Sergeant Walker's inopportune entrance.

Act Two consists of a rigorous working out of the situation established in Act One. Evans will not admit to Sergeant Walker the truth concerning O'Rourke's and Featherstone's profligate behaviour. Ostensibly, Evans appears to be protecting O'Rourke (he says he will not send a man to prison for eighteen months), but Flynn is shrewd enough to detect Evans's real motive (he won't jeopardise his trip

home by charging O'Rourke and then waiting for the court martial). This situation is compounded when O'Rourke's attempted suicide is reported. When Featherstone brings back the unconscious O'Rourke, he cleans the vomit from his clothing with a mug of urine. The ammonia from the urine wakes up O'Rourke, enabling McGrath to bring events to a head by making Evans's situation more and more tenuous.

After a heated exchange, Evans persuades O'Rourke to go on guard duty, although one gets the impression that O'Rourke does it out of pity for Evans. When Sergeant Walker and Second Lieutenant Pickering arrive to inspect the guard, they are told Evans has gone to inspect the sentries. They decide to return in fifteen minutes. Evans, meanwhile, encounters O'Rourke, and in their conversation O'Rourke reveals his deep-seated resentment for Evans, in fact his resentment of the many humiliations resulting from a privileged class-system:

O'ROURKE: Bearing in mind that I'm nothing,
bearing in mind that I'm a heap of shit,
and you - even you I have to lick the boots
of - now what would you say my next birthday
would make me? 1

What O'Rourke is getting at is that at twenty-nine he no

¹John McGrath, Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun, (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1966), p.75.

longer feels like taking orders from the eighteen year-old Evans, particularly since O'Rourke has no difficulty in detecting and despising Evans's hypocrisy when he purports to be concerned with O'Rourke's welfare rather than his own trip home.

EVANS: . . . Anyway, I'm off to England - tomorrow - so it makes no odds to me, either way.

O'ROURKE: It would if I tried again. Wouldn't it? (Laughs) By Christ. Yes, it would. I might be dead, but you'd be in the mire, wouldn't you? (Laughs)

EVANS: Would you try again?

O'ROURKE: Aha, I have you worried now, my beauty.

EVANS: I'm not worried for my sake - but -

O'ROURKE: Of course you are. What odds does it make to you whether I'm alive or dead? You said so yourself - none at all. In fact, I think you'd prefer me dead. You find me an embarrassment, don't you?

EVANS: Of course I wouldn't prefer you dead -

O'ROURKE: I worry you don't I?

EVANS: Of course you do, but -

O'ROURKE: Of course - I might not decide however, to go it alone: had you thought of that?

EVANS: What do you mean?

O'ROURKE: (looks at him) I mean, if I was to stick this bayonet in you, my prime young Lance-Bombardier, first - I could take you with me, as it were. A kind of clean sweep: don't you think?

EVANS: I don't think you would Dan.

O'ROURKE: Oh really? You don't think it would give me great pleasure to put an end to your pathetic existence? You don't think I owe it to the world as my final and only contribution to progress?

EVANS: Oh come off it, Danny.

O'ROURKE: (sharp) Call me O'Rourke. Call me Gunner O'Rourke, Lance-Bombardier. Even a heap of shit can be called by its rightful name. ¹

What provokes O'Rourke to take his final action is the injustice and hypocrisy of a class system which expects a grown man like O'Rourke to defend with his life such an obsolete weapon as the Bofors gun. This is made quite clear when O'Rourke turns to the audience and expresses his resentment for his social position and his consequent vocation by addressing the audience directly with the following speech:

O'ROURKE: The Bofors gun, sirs is a mighty fine thing. It is primarily a light anti-aircraft gun, designed - beautifully designed, you will agree - for the role of protecting infantry in the field and forward headquarters of all kinds from low-flying enemy aircraft. You have observed what we call the magazine, into which we slip the little shells, four at a time. By Jove, sirs, when she fires one single shot, 'tis thunder, but when

¹John McGrath, Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun, (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1966), p.77.

she challenges the strafing attacker on non-stop repeat, oh sirs, she bucks and sweats and strains with joy, and delivers herself of thirty-two great little rounds per minute, belittling the thunder, and deafening the very welkin itself. You may have observed also, sirs, the two grand little seats, where the operators operate. One finds the height, his butt the angle, and do you know, sirs, that in the latest model of all, they say that one man does both, with the aid of electrical assistance. It is indeed a fine gun, the Bofors light ack-ack. It has been, of course, obsolete since 1942, the year it was put on the market, and even the ultimate in Bofors guns has no particular role to play in the event of genuine war, with its nuclear fission. Even, need I say it, in the event of a more conventional conflict, it will be found to be very rarely in the same spot as the more mobile aircraft of today, and even if it were, they are too fast and too small, to present a suitable target. It is an inefficient and obsolete weapon, sirs, of which our Army has many thousands: and you have, in your wisdom, asked me, Gunner O'Rourke, to guard it with my life, thinking that, as my thirtieth year looms up to strike me between the eyes, I would indeed do anything, anything, to preserve and shelter from all Bolshevik harm, a thing so beautifully useless, so poignantly past it, so wistfully outdated, as my youth, or a Bofors gun. I would, and I shall, lay down my life for it. I have tried already, and failed. Here, in the sacred presence of the Bofors gun, I can only succeed. ¹

For the first time in the play the verisimilitude of the action has been broken, for when O'Rourke addresses the

¹John McGrath, Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun, (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1966), p.82.

audience directly, he admits in effect what the audience is watching is not reality but merely a play. Hence the audience becomes aware that a demonstration is being made and that they are expected to formulate an opinion about it which will, ultimately, lead to action. For the first time, in effect, McGrath has broken with the mimesis of traditional theatre in favour of a direct appeal. This, of course, is Brecht's Verfremdungseffekt, which, coming as it does toward the end of the second and last act, is a radical departure from the conventional mimetic "realism" of everything which has occurred on stage before.

At the same time, one may identify here McGrath's incursion into territory staked out years before by Jacques Copeau in his insistence on what John Rudlin has referred to as "presentational" rather than "representational" acting.¹ Clearly, for McGrath's political purpose, the direct presentation of material (ideas and information) is more likely to result in political action than is the mere representation of it. Later in this inquiry examination of McGrath's more mature work will reveal an increasing tendency to present rather than represent, a key factor in postmodernist drama.

Immediately following O'Rourke's speech, while Pickering

¹See pp.46-47 above.

and Walker insist on Evans's finding O'Rourke, O'Rourke deliberately falls on his bayonet, which he has strategically positioned for the purpose. When Evans finds O'Rourke's body before Walker and Pickering arrive, his real lack of sympathy or compassion for O'Rourke - and hence his base selfishness and hypocrisy - are now confirmed.

EVANS: Wake up! For God's sake, wake up,
 O'Rourke - look -
 (He turns him over and sees blood all over
 his stomach.)
 Oh.
 (He bites his lip, not knowing what to do.
 He tries to find out if O'ROURKE is still
 alive. Then a long pause as he realises
 that he is dead. He gets up slowly. A wild
 rage comes over.)
 You bastard. You -
 (He kicks him.)
 You vicious bastard. I'll get you for this.
 You're on a charge.
 (Kneels down, whispers.)
 Do you hear that - you're on a fizzer -
 All right? Battery Commander's orders,
 eight thirty in the morning, best boots,
 best B.D. - smiling, understand?

(SERGEANT WALKER comes back to the hut.)

WALKER: Bombardier! Bombardier Evans!

EVANS: You didn't have to do this to me, did
 you? You wanted to. You wanted to. 1

Sergeant Walker, also representative of the working

¹John McGrath, Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun, (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1966), pp.83-84.

class, recognises Evans's shallowness:

EVANS: W- will I get to Blighty tomorrow,
do you think, Sarge?

WALKER: Is that all you can say? 1

Recognising the extent of Evans's sycophancy, Walker puts him through his paces by ordering him to respond to a series of orders as meaningless and absurd as those which O'Rourke has had to endure:

WALKER: You won't be going home, you know.
Not for donkey's years.

(Loud.)

Sah! Mr. Pickering sah! We have found
Gunner O'Rourke!

(To EVANS): Stand up, Bombardier. That's
it, lad, stand to attention, here comes
the Orderly Officer. Now then. Stand at -
ease! Atten - shun! As you were - shun!
As you were - shun! As you were - shun!

(As the curtain begins to come down, PICKERING
appears.)

Bombardier Evans, sir, and Gunner O'Rourke.
(To EVANS): Saluting! To the front - salute!

(EVANS salutes).

Mark time!

(He marks time, saluting, like a pantomime
chorus, as PICKERING looks sharply at WALKER,

¹John McGrath, Events While Guarding the Bofors
Gun, (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1966), p.84.

and WALKER indicates the body.)

Gunner O'Rourke, sir. 1

The play ends here, McGrath having defined clearly two attitudes toward life, toward "getting on": the one full of obsequious sycophancy and hypocrisy, the other retaining at least some measure of decency and integrity. That the first is indicative of capitalism and the second of socialism may seem something of a simplification but the play nonetheless conveys McGrath's point with some impact. For one thing, there is keen irony in that both Evans and O'Rourke basically want the same thing: to escape the tedium and drudgery of working-class futility. Both fail to transcend the limitations of their class regardless of their apparent achievements. O'Rourke revealed earlier that he was at one time a sergeant, but, unable to assimilate into another rank of society, constantly disregarded the rules and subsequently was demoted, destined to remain a gunner. Throughout the play he demonstrates an apparently irrational, self-destructive tendency. It is only in his final monologue² that he discloses the true extent of his discontent. By causing his

¹John McGrath, Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun, (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1966), p.84.

²See pp.310-311 above.

own death, O'Rourke both escapes a working-class destiny as well as controlling his own destiny. In doing so, he additionally controls Evans's destiny, knowing that the incident of his death will reflect badly on Evans, keeping him in Germany for the remainder of his national service, Evans's least desire. In his final monologue, O'Rourke sums up the fate of his social strata by revealing the insignificance of his labour as the result of ruling-class ineptitude. If the play serves as a metaphor, it identifies certain unalterable characteristics of the classes; that despite human aspirations (the overwhelming will to succeed) and the desire to improve one's own conditions, there is a power, a gravitational pull of one's roots. This power is not only an indelible marking of class, but also frequently a strong component of one's psychological makeup. Both Evans and O'Rourke are controlled, to varying degrees, by their inability to break with the pull of the past. To deny that past means to negate their own culture and perpetuate the ruling-class consciousness of a bourgeois society.

Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun demonstrates a conflict as universal in capitalist society as the dilemma that faces the characters in the play. The conflict may be seen as a battle for power, acknowledging the working class as a valuable, essential and equal segment of society. The dominant class, typified by Evans and the Orderly Officer,

like the middle class, strive to maintain superiority over the working class by filling all positions of power, leaving only vacancies of futile labour, controlled by superiors. It is this system which perpetuates the system of class-based domination. In undermining the value of the working class and perpetuating its futility, it eventually reaches a point where in order to succeed, the dominated class has no option but to become a liability on the society which takes its contribution for granted. As Evans, representative in this instance of the ruling class, gradually concedes to his subordinates' requests and subsequently abdicates control over them, his place, too, evaluated by the system, is reduced to no more value than that of his subordinates. By opposing the regulations of the system, Evans is in effect conceding licence to his superiors to forever relegate him to the confines and restrictions of the dominated working class.

The play's meaning concerns McGrath's abandonment of established ruling-class ideology. Keeping in mind that Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun was written in 1966, five years before the 7:84 Company was established, its philosophy of rejecting the capitalist system perhaps turned McGrath inward to examine his own processes and, eventually, to work in a manner which incorporated the ideology expressed in the content of his plays with form and process by which the plays were devised and produced. It is a dangerous practice, of

course, to make assumptions about a writer's creative processes, particularly when the writer in question is, for one reason or another, inaccessible. Nonetheless, one cannot help but consider the connection between the play's subject matter and McGrath's own military experience. As McGrath has expressed, those few who found themselves thrown into middle-class society by the random selection of candidates for officer training suffered to overcome many of the daily rituals, finding difficulty in viewing society from the perspective of a dominating class. McGrath explains:

. . . I came back to the officer selection board. Now, to be an officer in the British army, you have to be thick, but cunning. So, for some reason I passed, I suppose very much in the spirit of idle curiosity as to what this was all about. Because I had no idea, really, of what the class structure of the army was at that time. I found myself slung into the officers' training course with a load of public school boys. There were a few of us who were . . . normal people, you know, grammar school boys, and we just clung together and thought what a very strange world we'd found ourselves in. 1

From what he has written in public statements, one can with some justification make the assumption that both McGrath's

¹John McGrath, "Better a Bad Night in Bootle . . .," Theatre Quarterly V, 19 (1975): p.40.

experiences in the army and at Oxford provided him with a very different perception of societal structure, specifically, the British ruling class. As he has described,¹ by experiencing the lifestyle of the middle class and the attraction thereof, he was able to discern the system's ability to perpetuate itself, while still extracting various talented individuals from its ranks, by luring them into a ruling-class consciousness to perpetuate the system's oppression of the working class either through practice or teaching. McGrath:

There was that sneaky moment in the army when I copped out of going back to Germany and decided to get this commission. That was when I really began to suss out what was going on . . . and see the other side of the fence, as it were. From the inside. And then going to Oxford, and finding out 'where the ruling class is at,' and the size of the gulf between my experience and life-style, and the experience of the ruling class. And over the years, you find out just what they're trying to do, which is to cream off good brains from the working class, put them into this very conditioned ruling class environment which Oxford is, so that by the time you leave, if you're any good you will automatically join the ruling class by becoming a stock-broker or a politician or a television producer, or something like that. Or else you will reinforce their ideology by teaching it to other children. And that's a very, very competent method of the soft-sell brainwash. 2

¹John McGrath, "Better a Bad Night in Bootle . . .," Theatre Quarterly V, 19 (1975): pp.39-48.

²Ibid., pp.40-41.

McGrath it would seem, like so many of his characters, reaches a plane of social consciousness after experiencing bourgeois culture first-hand, enabling him to decipher the intent and methods of the system which strives to preserve a ruling class by maintaining a chasm of cultural differences which extend the status quo.

Concerning stage technique, I mentioned earlier that in certain respects Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun is reminiscent of Osbornian drama of the 1950s. By this I meant that if Bofors Gun displays any measure of invention and originality at all, it would appear to be more in terms of its content than its form. Unlike the bourgeois theatre, which still depicted a more ritualised version of British middle-class life than the actual "lived" experiences of contemporary audiences, Bofors Gun attempts a depiction of stark realism approximating Osborne's depiction ten years earlier in Look Back in Anger (1956). The lifestyle Osborne depicted in this and other plays is that of a non-conformist working class expressing in the vernacular an anxiety and despair at the general condition. What emerges, as Raymond Williams has explained, is "the general state of feeling,"¹ a virulent, almost inarticulate sense of anger at what life

¹Raymond Williams, "New English Drama" in Modern British Dramatists, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p.33.

has to offer. The feeling of frustration and impotence resulting from injustice, class conflict, and the general sense of loss was appropriately depicted in working-class characters not unlike those portrayed in Bofors Gun. Williams refers to this work as "the drama of a state of mind,"¹ since its primary concern is less with social depiction than with a lifestyle resulting from a state of mind which expresses this sense of loss.

Comparison with British drama of the 1950s is made here because, even though Osborne and others continued the traditional structure of existing theatrical models, their breakthrough came on a social and emotional level. If this breakthrough appeared to make a powerful political protest in its day, the dramatic vehicle by which the protest was made was, by comparison with later developments, conventional. These developments included the San Francisco Mime Troupe's introduction in 1959 of mime and masks into its diverse range of methods, and the Bread and Puppet Theatre's practice of using sculptured puppets in its dance performances (1961). Later, British theatre too broke with traditional psychological realism: Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre (1965) revived earlier forms to facilitate its own black

¹Raymond Williams, "New English Drama" in Modern British Dramatists, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p.34.

comedy into a radically new "cabaret" theatre, and Welfare State International (1968) took to the streets in its attempt to satisfy the real needs of specific communities by liberating the imagination.

Opposition to the realistic theatre in these radically innovative theatre companies lay in their concern with appearances. The approximation to reality of a real-looking box-set with real-sounding characters might be acceptable if it were not for the omission of a whole range of inner-experience never clearly expressed on the surface. Indeed, the more "real" a representation of empirical reality appears, the less real it may actually be. Criticism of this kind, as has been discussed earlier in this inquiry,¹ is advanced by those who believe that beneath the surface of empirical reality lurks a more impalpable but significant reality. It follows that exploration of that reality requires penetration of the surface in a way that traditional realistic drama is unable to do. From this viewpoint, therefore, traditional realistic drama is incapable of exploring the contemporary human condition (the alienation lying beneath the surface). In order to disclose the fundamental reality beneath the surface, theatre must introduce new dramatic effects to penetrate appearances.

¹See Chapter Two.

According to the evidence of the plays themselves, such a realisation came to McGrath some time after he had written Bofors Gun, although the plays of Anouilh, Sartre, Brecht, Beckett, Giraudoux, and Ionesco had already to some degree set the example by extending the theatrical vocabulary to plumb the depths as well as skim the surface of human experience. As a result, the play's treatment is more traditional, unlike McGrath's later works which utilise the stage as a public forum in which character, performer, and audience interact.¹ One should, however, keep in mind McGrath's assimilation of Copeau's "presentational" acting mentioned above.² McGrath's later plays are far richer in formal qualities and possible meanings.³ Furthermore, the play's attenuation in terms of meaning and organisation preclude it from serious consideration as dramatic literature and theatre,⁴ and his

¹See the analyses of The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, pp.329-367, Yobbo Nowt, pp.404-429, and Blood Red Roses, pp.489-537. below.

²See pp.41-48 above.

³Plays such as The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, Fish in the Sea, and Yobbo Nowt employ a wider range of theatre language: direct audience address, songs, non-chronological sequencing, visual comedy, stereotyping, etc. Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun is more simplistic in its thematic presentation of capitalist abuse and socialist ideology.

⁴John McGrath, A Good Night Out. Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.6.

general attitude toward theatre would appear to be more that of practical journeyman. As McGrath has written:

I am not particularly bothered with the aesthetic categories of the thing. I spend too long arguing with actors who bring abstract, received notions of what is "right" and "wrong" and "proper" and "improper", "correct" and "incorrect" in the theatre to spend any more time on worrying about the correct categorisation of style, convention, and the consistency thereof. It works if the audience get it with the same sense of wonder and rightness and relevance that you as a group "got it" with - if the instinctive reaction is not jarred by any incongruous worries, if the subterranean connections are made and the scene itself is gripping, for good reasons. That's the end of aesthetics. These problems solve themselves. 1

The play, in effect, should be assessed only in terms of theatre, and as such, while lacking the wide diversity of effects that McGrath was later to put to such imaginative use, it directs the audience's focus to the central action without jarring it by "any incongruous worries." Beneath the surface of this central action lies a powerful social consciousness rooted in the discontent and resentment that capitalism has bred in the working class. Although Bofors Gun may be considered static when measured against the diverse repertoire

¹John McGrath, "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre," Theatre Quarterly IX, 35 (1979): p.47.

of theatrical effects in McGrath's later work, its political and social meanings are clearly and powerfully expressed. McGrath's social and political affiliations are therefore made abundantly clear, but in terms only of the play's expressive content, not in terms of expressive form. The critical deconstruction of tradition which marks his later work with a cogent originality is scarcely hinted at here.

Bakke's Night of Fame

John McGrath's play Bakke's Night of Fame is based on the novel A Danish Gambit by William Butler, an obvious reference to the quotations from and allusions to Hamlet that occur within the context of the story.

The setting throughout the play is a cell in a U.S. prison where Bakke is incarcerated for the alleged murder of "a girl," although the exact circumstances of the crime are never explained. In Act I, scene 1, the action of the play - if one may call the incessant conversation "action," - concerns Bakke's attitude to and his relationship with the few people who enter his cell on the night before his execution. Throughout the entire play these people comprise Olin, the assistant chief warden; a priest; Soames, the chief warden; Contina, the executioner; a cell guard, a corridor guard, and a trustee.

Initially, the conversation concerns Olin's attempts to

satisfy Bakke's demands for his last meal, a mundane conversation in which Bakke's attitude seems deliberately to provoke Olin, the assistant chief warder, to irritation:

- OLIN: Listen, kid - how about some peach pie? (Bakke shrugs, indifferent). Go on, you know you like peach pie. Didn't your mother ever bake you peach pie? (Bakke shrugs again.)
- BAKKE: It doesn't really mean much to me, you, know -
- OLIN: It's food though, huh? Better 'n potatoes?
- BAKKE: (Pause) What have you done to my potatoes, Olin?
- OLIN: Uh?
- BAKKE: My French fries? You cancelled 'em?
- OLIN: (Lying) Cancelled - Have I can - oh come on now Bakke - (Pause) I will say I wanted to check up you were sure about having just a dish of potatoes, but now I know your reasons, kid, that's fine. But what about some peach pie to go with 'em? 1

Bakke's final request in response to Olin's offer of anything he desires is to meet his "buddy," that is, his executioner. This is a request which Olin, who is very careful to proceed according to protocol, declares he cannot

¹John McGrath, Bakke's Night of Fame, (London: Davis-Poynter Ltd., 1973), p.3.

even consider.¹ Bakke, however, seems to delight in devising "awkward" situations which disturb and embarrass those concerned with propriety. For example, he finds ingenious ways of exposing the absurdity (from his point-of-view) of the priest's beliefs. He also engages in a macabre conversation with the cell guard concerning the physical effects on the victims of the electric chair. The thrust of Bakke's conversation, however, is his penetration of the assumptions the priest has made concerning their respective roles as the penitent criminal (seeking contrition) and the compassionate priest (bestowing forgiveness and, hence, salvation). Hence:

BAKKE: . . . don't be condescending with me. Don't do that. I know where I am and what I'm doing here. And where I'm going in five hours, - Okay?

PRIEST: I see. (Pause) Would you like me to go, Bakke?

BAKKE: Mm? Yes. But tell me about them first. The ones you've seen. How'd they take it? At the end?

PRIEST: Oh, pretty well. Fine.

BAKKE: No breakdowns?

PRIEST: They held up rather well. All of them.

¹John McGrath, Bakke's Night of Fame, (London: Davis-Poynter Ltd., 1973), pp.3-4

BAKKE: Sat there pretty still, huh?

PRIEST: Well - (Fidgets) Well, for example one of them was crying.

BAKKE: I thought you said none of them broke down?

PRIEST: Oh no, no he didn't - he just cried. Tears just came in his eyes, There were a few in mine too, and I'm not ashamed of that.

BAKKE: You think I'll weep?

PRIEST: Oh, I -

BAKKE: You think I'll break down?

PRIEST: You afraid you might?

BAKKE: What do you think, Father?

PRIEST: I'm interested to know why you care so much.

BAKKE: Don't you think that couple of minutes is kind of important to me?

PRIEST: (Nodding) Yes, son. More important than you are able to realize.

BAKKE: Look, don't call me son.

PRIEST: I'm sorry. I forgot you're not Catholic.

BAKKE: It's not that.

PRIEST: What is it?

BAKKE: It's just you're not my father. Okay? (Pause) I won't call you Father, you don't call me son. How's that?

PRIEST: (Laughs) I can see it's pretty hard forming any kind of relationship -

BAKKE: You're not. You're not forming one. You had one already made before you

came in. 1

What seems to be of importance in this conversation is Bakkes's pragmatic, materialist approach to life (indicative of the "existential" attitudes of the time) as opposed to the pretentious assumptions made and expected in others by society, particularly capitalist society as embodied in the character of the priest. As the action/dialogue continues, it becomes clear that Bakke is deliberately vindictive against the attitudes which have convicted him for a crime we are led to believe he probably didn't commit. He creates a situation which makes the cell guard appear to be dishonest. He continues to embarrass Olin. Yet despite Bakke's apparently perverse attitude, the audience can understand why Bakke acts as he does, they can at least understand why he holds his beliefs and responds to life the way he does and, therefore, not only accept Bakke's point-of-view, but also sympathise with him. In this way Bakke emerges not only as a classic existential anti-hero, but as the main protagonist of the play. Bakke's pragmatic, objective approach to reality is clear when he attempts to break through the silence of his captors:

¹John McGrath, Bakke's Night of Fame, (London: Davis-Poynter Ltd., 1973), pp.8-9.

BAKKE: So he's not going to let me see my buddy?

OLIN: Your buddy?

BAKKE: Fellow's going to murder me.

OLIN: Oh him. You got it wrong kid, he's not a murderer.

BAKKE: Going to kill me though. Right, Bert?

OLIN: Subject's fair-boat'n, kid.

BAKKE: Why's that?

OLIN: Just is.

BAKKE: You mean I'm not allowed to talk about capital punishment for the rest of my life?

OLIN: Not with me, you're not.

BAKKE: But I'm talking to Bert. What do you say, Bert - is the guy going to murder me, or not?

OLIN: Leave off it, Bakke, I told you.

BAKKE: I wasn't talking to you.

OLIN: Well while I'm here the subject's no good. ¹

When baiting the priest, Bakke's next ploy is to ridicule certain problematic aspects of Christianity and its attitude to contrition:

BAKKE: (Suddenly, after thinking a bit.)
Say - What's all this business about confession?

¹John McGrath, Bakke's Night of Fame, (London: Davis-Poynter Ltd., 1973), p.24.

PRIEST: Mm?

BAKKE: I mean - what's the point of it?

PRIEST: (Softly) It has to do with contrition.

BAKKE: Yeah. But when you guys hear a confession, there's nothing else you can do about it - right?

PRIEST: Do about what?

BAKKE: You know - about the things you hear.

PRIEST: If you mean is confession inviolable, then yes it is.

BAKKE: So Jack the Ripper could come and say he just killed a hundred girls or so - and you couldn't do a thing about it?

PRIEST: If I had a problem like that, I'd have to go to my Bishop.

BAKKE: Yeah? And the Bishop?

PRIEST: I couldn't answer that. I'd do whatever he told me to do. ¹

As this dialogue progresses, what becomes clear is that society demands contrition and penitence from those convicted, that is, it seeks a kind of vengeance. Since, as will be seen presently, Bakke himself is accused of seeking vengeance, societal hypocrisy is exposed. Underscored here as in much of the dialogue are two different attitudes to life - neither of them necessarily the "correct" one. Bakke's attitude is

¹John McGrath, Bakke's Night of Fame, (London: Davis-Poynter Ltd., 1973), p.27.

essentially one that refuses to accept the normal assumptions of society. He questions everything, lies when he has to (sometimes for effect), and provokes innocent people into exposing the fragility and absurdity of their accepted beliefs. Bakke explains his actions this way:

BAKKE: Okay I'll tell you. I get to wanting to feel certain things. Just then, at that moment, I wanted to feel myself breaking down. I wanted a taste of it. So I got the goon to say something detestable. I knew if I talked about the chair, or women, he'd be bound to say something. Well, he wasn't really very good: he was a little detestable, but not wholly. It didn't kind of quite click. So finally I just had to sit back there and work up the whole feeling, sort of ad lib. It wasn't very satisfactory, but it was enough to get me to jump him: and to get a little, slightly phony taste of break-down. What's the trouble. 1

McGrath cleverly exposes societal hypocrisy by contrasting Bakke's lack of immunity during a confession to the priest to the guaranteed immunity of members of the church congregation. This ends the first scene, the content of which has been, in effect, to reveal a kind of personality at odds with and therefore unacceptable to the norms of society. As

¹John McGrath, Bakke's Night of Fame, (London: Davis-Poynter, Ltd., 1973), p.30.

the scene ends, the spectator tends to wonder whether Bakke's condemnation and sentence have been the result of this lack of public approval.

Scene 2 begins, as did the opening scene, with Bakke lying on his bunk, smoking. Nothing seems to have changed. When Soames, the Chief Warder, enters the cell, Bakke again makes the request to meet his executioner, and is again refused. In a sort of perverse spite, Bakke complains he's hungry, the implication being that Olin has deprived Bakke of proper nourishment and a condemned man's request for his last meal. Although the kitchen is closed, Soames and Olin, revealing some guilt, agree to find someone to cook Bakke a steak, salmon, and a chocolate cake. Bakke's sudden demands seem to ridicule the solemnity of the whole situation, disclosing, from his point-of-view, its inherent absurdity. This incongruity is underscored further when Bakke demands a candle in his cake.

When the warders leave, the priest returns and offers Bakke immunity during confession. He also tells Bakke that he will try to persuade the executioner to see him.

As the scene and the dialogue develop, it becomes clear that Bakke has progressed beyond making bourgeois assumptions of the kind made by the general public, as represented by those who enter the cell, particularly the priest. This is plain in the conversation about revenge in which Bakke says:

BAKKE: Me. I say they should've castrated the guy. Hung'm upside down. Let him die from the crotch.

PRIEST: But listen Bakke, a man who could do such a thing is clearly sick, terribly sick -

BAKKE: Sick? Who the hell isn't sick? Listen if I found that little kid all cut up and I'm not mad enough to murder that guy on the spot, boy - (shakes his head.) Mister, when men are so pathetic they don't need vengeance any more, well - screw them.

(The Priest shakes his head. Pause. Bakke is thinking about something).

All I can say is, they ought to do away with executioners: they ought to find some way of spreading the killing among the whole goddamned people . . . You know?

PRIEST: Don't you believe in forgiveness at all?

BAKKE: Now and then.

PRIEST: You know, in an odd sort of way, I think you feel a kind of repentance.

BAKKE: You think so?

PRIEST: Yes I do. If, as you say, you believe you should be punished for your crime, then surely you must be sorry for it, truly sorry.

BAKKE: That, Bert, is something you know nothing whatsoever about. ¹

The way in which Bakke is deliberately taunting and

¹John McGrath, Bakke's Night of Fame, (London: Davis-Poynter Ltd., 1973), p.43.

testing visitors to his cell is made clear when a trustee brings his food. Bakke, full of potatoes, is no longer hungry. When Bakke declares that even his name is false, the priest is visibly shocked. The audience can scarcely resist feeling a sense of society's absurd reaction to the truth as opposed to the appearances which it is assumed are true.¹

Reinforcing the theme of reality and appearance, the dialogue gradually reveals that Bakke was once an actor whose problem was that he felt his roles too intensely; because of this, he had difficulty distinguishing between appearances and reality. In his first and last performance of Hamlet, Bakke, in the title role, knocked Ophelia unconscious.²

Taking from his underwear a plastic spoon sharpened to a point, Bakke announces that he has "a good act planned for tonight."³ The "act," of course, will, as Bakke declares, "make a good scene better."⁴ The dialogue which follows is revealing:

PRIEST: Then you do care what people think
of you after you've gone.

¹John McGrath, Bakke's Night of Fame, (London: Davis-Poynter Ltd., 1973), pp.44-48.

²Ibid., p.50.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p.51.

BAKKE: Friend, that's just these people.
And what they think of Bakke. Not
me. After all the whole thing's a
performance - got to keep that in mind.
(Pause) And don't you forget my immunity,
Mister.

PRIEST: (After thinking, looks at BAKKE hard.)
You know, son, I don't know who you
are. How can I help you, when I don't
know where the performance ends and
you begin?

BAKKE: Just don't try to help me, Bert. It's
not expected of you. And the performance
doesn't end anywhere - like I told
you, it's all performance.

PRIEST: Right down to the heartbeat?

BAKKE: Even that. Boy, when I played Hamlet,
I thought my heart was just going to
break out of its walls, and stop. 1

Several levels of reality are apparent here. First,
there is the 7:84 Theatre Company putting on a performance of
McGrath's play, but the actor playing the protagonist declares
he is not that character but someone else. That is, he is an
actor playing a character who is playing a character.
Furthermore, this "character" has once played Hamlet and, in
fact, quotes from Hamlet during this play; to complicate the
levels of reality even further, he infuses lines from Hamlet
with the putative "reality" of the stage action of this play,

¹John McGrath, Bakke's Night of Fame, (London:
Davis-Poynter Ltd., 1974), p.51.

distancing the audience from "reality" by several stages. This procedure - as an effective stage mechanism - is not, of course, new to theatre. Modern dramatic practice has attempted to reduce aesthetic distance to the point of its virtual exclusion. Consequently, as Oscar Budel argues,

. . . the propagators of phrases such as "activating the audience," "restoring the unity of audience and stage," even those among them who pretend to arrive at their conclusions by means of historical considerations, misconceive the nature of theatre. 1

Although the loss of distance results in a diminution of aesthetic appreciation, the performance is presented for its art rather than its "reality." Again, a similar concatenation between stage and audience had been achieved by earlier theatre practice. In plays such as Beaumont- Fletcher's The Knight of the Burning Pestle (1607) and Jonson's Every Man in his Humour (1598) and Bartholomew Fair (1614) the audience may be forced to acknowledge a distinction between theatre and life, between stage and audience. The two spectators in Every Man in his Humour, serving as a kind of chorus, comment on every twist of the plot, the one taking sides with the

¹Oscar Budel, "Contemporary Theatre and Aesthetic Distance" in Brecht, ed. P. Demetz, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p.61.

audience, the other with the dramatist. In Bartholomew Fair the stagekeeper, addressing the audience directly, warns them in advance what to expect, while the prompter makes a tacit agreement with the audience unsuspected by the performers. In The Knight of the Burning Pestle a strict division is maintained between the stage audience (George and Nell) and the real audience (except at the end when Nell invites the real audience to her house for tobacco and wine). The stage audience never communicates with the main actors, not even with Ralph once he has assumed his role. The forced separation of the inner and outer plays establishes a considerable degree of clarity. The focus on theatricality throughout the play forces the audience to be aware of the ironic contradictions of the play as a whole.

In Bakke's Night of Fame McGrath uses distancing in a similar way (possibly by way of Brecht) to comment on the hypocrisy of society and on life itself. When Bakke quotes from Shakespeare, Olin completely misunderstands what Bakke is trying to do, but his effort is not lost on the audience:

BAKKE: Comedy. History. (to PRIEST.) Pastoral. Sentences cannot be too heavy, nor plots too light. (Loud) We are the only ghosts, and spirits that we see are ours not royal father's.

OLIN: Bakke, in sixty seconds I'm going to slug you. You're just cracking up all fancy, kid, and you're worrying me.

BAKKE: It shall to the barber's with my hairy

leg and pate, friend. Why man - (Takes hold of OLIN's chin) Thou'rt old. Where is thy father?

OLIN: (Snaps) Dead!

BAKKE: (Calming down) Then he plays the fool nowhere but in his father's house. Farewell.

OLIN: (Baffled) Will you be alright with him, padre? ¹

During the course of their conversation in which Olin becomes more and more frustrated, what becomes clear is the inability of people to break out of their normal codes of conduct, trapped as they are in the prison cells of their own assumptions and "normal" codes of conduct. What this scene seems to show us are the different levels of reality on which Bakke is thinking and, consequently, on which the play is developing. A conversation between Bakke and the Priest makes this clear:

BAKKE: You like my interpretation?

PRIEST: All that was supposed to be Hamlet?
Didn't sound like Shakespeare to me . . .

BAKKE: Hell no - it was Hamlet.

PRIEST: Bakke's Hamlet?

¹John McGrath, Bakke's Night of Fame, (London: Davis-Poynter Ltd., 1973), p.55.

BAKKE: Yeah. I had a whole lot going on there, Bert, d'you notice? Bugging Olin a bit but not too much, for a start, and then Hamlet - for you to understand it, and keeping Bakke going - boy . . . some performance.

PRIEST: And were you being Bakke when you did it?

BAKKE: (Suspicious) Did what?

PRIEST: I think you know what I mean.

BAKKE: Guess I don't though.

PRIEST: Were you being yourself then? Were you acting or not?

BAKKE: When?

PRIEST: When you killed her. (Pause) Are you afraid to talk about that? Is it too real for you?

BAKKE: (Smiling) You still think I did it?

(BAKKE laughs uproariously. The PRIEST is completely baffled, but as the possibilities hit him, he becomes increasingly horrified. The door is thrown open and the CELL GUARD enters followed by a little man with a small instrument case).

CELL GUARD: It's the barber, Bakke. 1

So Act I ends, with the final absurdity of the barber's arrival, adding a bizarre touch to the proceedings. McGrath's playing with various levels of the representation of reality

¹John McGrath, Bakke's Night of Fame, (London: Davis-Poynter Ltd., 1973), pp.55-56.

indicates his awareness that representation is an inescapable problem for the dramatist, yet Act One is only a minor step away from the conventional mimetic technique used in Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun. Although characterisation and action may seem "contemporary," the form is still representational in the conventional way. One senses that McGrath is seeking some method of reaching beyond the confines of the form, but as yet is unable to find an appropriate escape route.

Scene 1 of Act II begins with more confusion of role playing and reality. The priest makes an attempt to penetrate Bakke's role-playing to find the "real" man. At one point he says to Bakke, "Do you know why you can't get God into your life? Because God is too hard a reality."¹ The play continues along these lines, comparing reality to a stage set. According to Bakke, belief in God does not fit the particular role he is currently playing. The priest's response is as follows:

PRIEST: And for this role you risk hellfire
and you are ready to turn your back
on the most beautiful and sacred of
all man's realities? On everything
that God your Father can give you?

¹John McGrath, Bakke's Night of Fame, (London: Davis-Poynter Ltd., 1973), p.59.

BAKKE: Bakke doesn't understand you, Bert, and he doesn't accept gifts, - so stop coming on so strong: the character's right but the dialogue's lousy.

PRIEST: I'm asking you to let God into your act.

BAKKE: That's a hell of a funny thing for a priest to be asking.

PRIEST: Yes it is, but if you'd do that much I could at least bring the act into reason. Bakke, abide by reason. Love reason. You see life only for its falsities, you see life only as a setting: but those settings are real, the whole set is real, - and it's you who are false, not the world, and not God. 1

In essence, the priest is here suggesting to Bakke to "play it safe," that is, to believe in God because the consequences of the alternative belief are too awful to contemplate. Bakke, perspicacious to the end, can see the hypocrisy of this attitude. He can see clearly that if the rational God that the priest believes in does exist, He will understand Bakke's empirical reasoning based on the "evidence" of Bakke's life. This is a far more honest and open attitude than a "just in case" belief, as expressed by the priest.

Throughout the play Bakke has embodied what might be termed an "existential" attitude in the sense that he believes

¹John McGrath, Bakke's Night of Fame, (London: Davis-Poynter Ltd., 1973), p.60.

that man is the sum total of his acts. This attitude has resulted in Bakke's expressing a viewpoint that is indicative of the so-called existential anti-hero. Now, protected by immunity, he declares his innocence to the priest:

BAKKE: So off, off, off on the chase. Knowledge. Of things, rocks and rivers, bowing and winking their way from their world to my world. Then people - handsome civilised actors, in mid-speech, moving into the world of my knowledge. Then the self - the un-self - moving into the world of my knowledge. Like I was telling you, you've got to act it out, knowledge becomes reality, not just being it, but knowing it, acting it out. So you get to the point where to be really means to act. With the whole world of my knowledge. And like I say that gets fatiguing. Oh man - how you want that curtain to fall. To stop thinking. To stop acting. To die, in order to be. To stop the wandering, poor Bakke's nutty wandering. Until one night some chance, some vision brings along this fight outside a foreign bar. Or nearly anyhow. Let's put it this way, Bakke's rehearsed that kind of cheap melodramatic business a thousand times before, and comes to centre stage pretty much without thinking about it. So there's this Punch and this Judy - and a prop - a bottle. Nasty words. Very nasty words, and many bottles have been emptied by both. And then - Punch, Judy. Wham! Judy! It's over. Because all such action is quick and unpredictable. No-one ever thought - I'm killing you. Or thought: it is happening. I'm all ready to applaud but Punch the poor bastard's looking at me now all pastey [sic] white and in need of a toilet, so - into the grave leaps Bakke, crying: You better check on out, buddy, - and, se defendo, exit Punch, fast, while

Bakke picks up the bloody end of the bottle and sits down on the kerb to examine it in amazement. What a property! And I know her by her blood as it were. So I talk to my Judy while I wait. And pretty soon the cheerful cadets are there, wittily arguing, and the third act is drawing to its close. Too poetic for you, Bert? 1

In the light of this confession, the priest believes Bakke is committing suicide, although Bakke sees his own immanent death as murder. But as the priest declares, "This boy doesn't know the truth from appearances."² And this, in essence, is what the play seems to be "about." When the priest betrays Bakke's trust by informing Olin of Bakke's innocence and that Bakke has under his belt a plastic spoon sharpened to a point, his betrayal is based on the appearances with which Bakke has presented him, not on any definitive "truth" that the priest has discovered. During the rest of the scene Bakke amuses himself by taking "vengeance" on the priest, hinting that he has a second plastic spoon sharpened to a point, manipulating the situation so that the cell guard threatens the priest with a rifle. The scene ends as Bakke manipulates the priest to see Olin about Bakke's meeting his

¹John McGrath, Bakke's Night of Fame, (London: Davis-Poynter Ltd., 1973), pp.66-67.

²Ibid., p.71.

executioner.

In Act II, scene 2 the priest returns to tell Bakke that he has spoken to Contina, the executioner, who will speak to Soames about coming to Bakke's cell. After a brief exchange concerning why Contina would want to become an executioner, the priest accuses Bakke of being only an amateur actor, since he has confused performance and life.¹ In fact, according to the priest, Bakke is just "pretending to act,"² just "acting that you're acting" in order to avoid facing reality. The priest's speech, considering it is to a man about to be executed, is a bold one:

PRIEST: You can't face the reality of death any more than you can face the reality of life, and you're so afraid and so small inside you need a role, you need Bakke, to play it right down to death itself. But God is too real an audience for you, son, and a bad audience for an amateur. To accept him as your audience you'd have to say: I'm Bakke, and I'm sinful, and I'm scared to hell - wouldn't you? But you haven't the courage of someone who has faced life, alone, and can face death as death must be faced - alone. But you have never been able to face anything; you have always play-acted and sought vengeance on the world for your own impotence.

¹John McGrath, Bakke's Night of Fame, (London: Davis-Poynter Ltd., 1973), p.84.

²Ibid., p.84.

That was why you killed - wasn't it, Bakke? That was why the real Bakke killed, murdered that woman for no better reason than revenge for the toughness of reality itself. Bakke. Say the truth - Say it aloud to hear yourself say it. Say you killed her. Touch reality. I defy you. ¹

Immediately following this speech, Olin appears in the cell with Contina. After complaining to the priest of his (the priest's) officiousness, he says Bakke can have five minutes with Contina. Bakke immediately tries to play on Contina's conscience for what he (Contina) is about to do. Under the circumstances, the exchange is a shocking and bizarre one:

CONTINA: It's not murder.

BAKKE: Sure it is. Listen: what's it like to pull that switch? Give you a feeling?

OLIN: (Putting hand on Bakke's shoulder.)
If that's all you've got to ask, kid,
the interview's over.

BAKKE: (to CONTINA) You married?

CONTINA: I am.

BAKKE: Kids?

CONTINA: One.

¹John McGrath, Bakke's Night of Fame, (London: Davis-Poynter Ltd., 1973), p.85.

BAKKE: Couldn't you sweep floors or something? Load ships? Do man's work? Aren't you healthy?

OLIN: Okay -

BAKKE: Hey - boy or girl?

CONTINA: Boy.

BAKKE: Going to grow up to be an executioner? Yeah?

CONTINA: Who knows?

BAKKE: Or maybe the little bastard'll get himself executed. I tell you: I figure an executioner's kid's bound to grow up kind of rotten.

CONTINA: (To OLIN.) Listen, I don't see the usefulness of this.

OLIN: There is none. Interview's over. You can go on upstairs, Contina.

BAKKE: When you pull that switch on me, buddy, I want you to think of something: one day your little boy's going to be sitting there. All strapped and wired. And someone as ugly as you's going to blast him from life to death: - all because you were his daddy.

CONTINA: Fellow, when I pull that -

OLIN: Go on, Contina, I told you to go upstairs -

CONTINA: When I pull that switch tonight, I'm going to think of only one thing: Bakke's burning up! Bakke!

OLIN: Move Contina! Goddamn it!

BAKKE: (As OLIN propels CONTINA out of the cell.) Hey killer! Keep watching me! See if you can outstare me! My-eyes'll be open on you even after! 1

¹John McGrath, Bakke's Night of Fame, (London: Davis-Poynter Ltd., 1973), pp.87-88.

After Olin has hustled Contina out of the cell, Bakke produces his second plastic spoon. The cell guard corroborates Bakke's story. Eventually, the priest admits his complicity but begs Bakke "for God's sake, be merciful!"¹ Bakke explains that he doesn't like the priest because the priest assumed Bakke would play "sinner to your saint. But that wasn't how it was, and you just couldn't adapt, Bert."²

When the lights flash an ugly orange colour as Contina tests the electric power, the priest says as he leaves, "I'll be praying for your soul, Bakke."³ Bakke's response is incisive:

BAKKE: That's right. You learn your part and stay in character. You'll be alright. Don't let them bug you too bad - okay? ⁴

As the play ends, Bakke is still lying on his bunk, smoking, as he was at the beginning. In the interim, not much has happened in terms of action, but personalities have been

¹John McGrath, Bakke's Night of Fame, (London: Davis-Poynter Ltd., 1973), p.90.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p.91.

⁴Ibid.

stripped of their pretensions, and the audience perhaps feels it knows more of the truth of Bakke's situation.

In retrospect, Bakke's Night of Fame is not, perhaps, a completely successful play in terms of theatre, in part because it is a "static" play dependent on endless conversation, and in part because it is never entirely clear, I think, what McGrath's intention was in writing it. It is the work of a young dramatist who has not yet absorbed Gordon Craig's prediction that "the theatre of the future will be a theatre of visions, not a theatre of sermons nor a theatre of epigrams."¹ Nor does the play dispense with illusionism so that its "language" becomes, as Artaud advocated, a system of signs, gestures, and attitudes having an ideographic value, that is, a visual emphasis. On the other hand, its ambiguity is effective as a device for forcing awareness of many possibilities, for creating potentially disturbing and compelling emotions in the spectator. McGrath is successful in producing in his audience a feeling of disturbance which, as Lyotard has suggested, will be followed by later reflection. In this sense it is a powerful piece of political theatre, exposing the inequalities and injustices of a bourgeois society created by capitalism.

¹Edward Gordon Craig, On the Art of the Theatre, (1911; reprint, London: Macmillan, 1962), p.54.

At this early juncture of his career McGrath appears to be far more interested in exposing abuses in capitalist society than he is in "a good night out." Consequently, Bakke's Night of Fame, although critical of capitalist abuse, is essentially a play in the mold of bourgeois theatre, none of McGrath's later experiments with visual and auditory devices as yet apparent. Even the character of Bakke, though unusual, is acceptably "realistic." Indeed, the transition from the essentially illusionistic drama of Bakke's Night of Fame to, say, The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil or Yobbo Nowt is a measure of McGrath's development as a dramatist. Bakke's Night of Fame, although now somewhat "dated" in the same sense that much "Pop" art and hyper-realism are marked as products of their time, as are the "existential" viewpoints of Sartre and Camus, is therefore a useful yardstick in the development of the 7:84 Company. To what extent this development is indebted to past or contemporary aesthetic theories is problematic. Much of what the 7:84 Theatre Company did in its later and more mature works might have resulted largely from trial-and-error experimentation. Yet taking into consideration McGrath's radically socialist viewpoint and the many references to Brecht, Piscator, Meyerhold, etc., one cannot ignore the many innovations and experiments which preceded the 7:84's more mature work. Because of this, Bakke's Night of Fame may be

considered an important contrast to the later work.

The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil

The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil may be perceived not as a play in the conventional sense, but rather as an entertainment, a political protest and a reinforcement of Gaelic culture. The form of the play serves as a subversive protest which challenges the parameters of bourgeois realism and the society which this "realism" represents and perpetuates. Since form constitutes the relationship between society and what happens on stage, it is generally considered subversive and critical of capitalism if it digresses from the bourgeois "realism" created for capitalism's self-perpetuation and dominance.

The Ceilidh, which is the form McGrath chose for The Cheviot, may be considered subversive, not only in its implicit retreat from bourgeois realism, but also in its explicit cultural and political admonition of capitalism. Indeed, a "left" aesthetic of this kind may be considered oppositional to capitalism in its historical passage out of the romanticism associated with modern culture¹ and into whatever lies beyond the modern - what has been called not altogether satisfactorily the postmodern. As has been

¹See pp.203-204 above.

altogether satisfactorily the postmodern. As has been explained,¹ the cultural theory emerging from the late 1960s and early 1970s demonstrates the impossibility of modernist pretensions to artistic independence in terms of "higher" values, independent of history, social forms, and the unconscious. It will be worth examining the application of postmodernist theory, then, in McGrath's choice of the Ceilidh as his dramatic form, a form whose incisive reproval of capitalist ideology would appear to be the reason for its considerable success among the working classes.²

To some extent the early scenes of this play have been discussed on Chapter One, as have episodes from some other works by McGrath.³ To avoid recapitulation, the issues discussed in some detail earlier (dealing with McGrath's appropriation of Brechtian technique) will be touched on with less emphasis here. Nonetheless, it is necessary to consider the plays as a whole for the purposes of analysis. For this reason some repetition of scenes is necessary, although the focus and discussion will, for the most part, be different.

As the house doors open, the audience entering the hall are welcomed by a fiddler playing Scottish and Irish reels;

¹See Chapter Two.

²See pp.99-115 above.

³i.e. the non-illusionism of Brecht, variety, music hall, Dada, etc.

the audience is encouraged to join in clapping or stamping their feet in time. The rest of the Company sets the stage with costumes, instruments and stage properties, while making casual conversation with the audience. Although the platform stage has not been eliminated, the interaction between company and audience is reminiscent of "living" or "environmental" theatre, where performers move freely among the audience, entering "life," even though the scripted action of the play has not yet begun. The absence of the proscenium arch which is responsible for the bold use of stage space echoes aspects of Craig's work with space. So too the abandonment of the traditional theatre recalls the work of Antonin Artaud, who encouraged actors and audience to share in a ceremonial rejection of artificial divisions. From the beginning an unspoken understanding concerning the process of theatre production exists between audience and performer. The simple stage platform, generic furniture and "pop-up book" scenery suggest that the Company have stripped away the theatrical artifice of illusion to present a literal account of historical events, rather than merely a representation of them, while still maintaining certain dramatic conventions. The focus on process and the rejection of illusion evokes Brecht's determination to use the theatre as a kind of lecture hall where audiences can be informed; at the same time, the literal presentation of performers' skills reveals real bodies

on the virtually empty stage, forcing the audience to recognise from the presence of both illusion and actuality that people are united by illusory alliances. McGrath's use of the stage as a public forum will be discussed later,¹ but what distinguishes his work from the lecture room or the circus is his ability to create, as did Brecht, "living illustrations of historical or imaginary happenings among human beings."² McGrath's use of "pop-up book" illustrations as his "scenery" seems to support, on another level of reality, Brecht's technique of providing "living illustrations" to demonstrate a point; though one cannot be certain of McGrath's motives, the "pop-up book" does serve this double function. It is clear that the apparent simplicity of McGrath's setting carries something of the "noble artificiality" of which Craig speaks, suggesting the atmosphere of a scene, rather than providing a facsimile of reality.³ Appia, too, calls for a simple arrangement of spatial forms whose practicality will provide the necessary stage freedom. The abandonment of an artificially contrived

¹See pp.381-396 below.

²Bertolt Brecht, "Kleines Organon fuer das Theatre," Versuche 12, (1948), p.110. Also quoted in Martin Esslin, Brecht: the Man and His Work, (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1960), p.133.

³See pp.35-36 above.

"realism" strengthens further the nexus created between performer and audience by the collective method of production, drawing the audience more intimately into the stage action. At the same time, McGrath seems to acknowledge Meyerhold's remarks concerning the impossibility of embracing the totality of reality¹ by effectively reducing the real to a theatrical schematisation which suggests the essence of that reality. Such sets require active interpretation by an audience regarded, as Brecht demanded, as joint participants in the production.²

The fiddler's music is immediately followed by the M.C., who welcomes the audience to the hall, discusses the weather, etc., while eliminating from the start any attachment to "characters" which would hinder critical objectivity. A kind of localism³ is encouraged through the Company's apparently casual interaction with the audience and through the M.C.'s deceptively "impromptu" discourse; as a result, the audience tends to accept the Company's "values," particularly those pertaining to the issues demonstrated during the course of the production.

To this point, insofar as all representation has thus far

¹See p.49 above.

²See pp.78-79 above.

³See pp.201-202 above.

been excluded, nothing has suggested a "serious play" in the traditional sense; on the contrary, McGrath appears more interested in gripping the attention of his audience by presenting a wide variety of entertainment in which the audience themselves can participate. To be sure, variety is one of the prime objectives that McGrath lists in his definition of socialist art.¹ By way of shifting focus through a succession of fast-paced theatrical modes, McGrath is able to provide a coherent demonstration of political and social issues in a credible, and therefore convincing, manner. McGrath apparently sees working-class entertainment in terms of constant variety:

from a singer to a comedian, to a juggler,
to a band, to a chorus number, to a conjuror,
to a sing-along, to bingo, to wrestling, to
striptease, and then back again to a singer,
and a comedian, and a grand "altogether now"
finale, with great ease. 2

In contrast, McGrath describes bourgeois realism as "more a question of variation of pace and intensity while doing essentially the same thing throughout."³ Typically, middle-

¹John McGrath, "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre," Theatre Quarterly IX, 35 (1979): p.53.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

class realistic drama has a structure of one or two acts of concentrated dialogue spoken by a small number of representative characters. The actors convey the action of the drama by total immersion in the characters they are playing. The object is to give the audience the illusion that they are watching reality occurring in the present. Even the set is made to look as realistic as possible. Perhaps because it is the accepted drama of the upper and middle classes, bourgeois realism of this kind is generally considered more likely to produce high art as, indeed, it has during the illustrious past of Ibsen and Chekhov. McGrath, however, believes that working-class variety offers substantially more creative possibilities:

I offer no value judgements on these formal elements, merely note that the second is no less bizarre in its essence than the first, and one might be forgiven for seeing more creative possibilities in the first. ²

This conviction has led McGrath to use, as Apollinaire urged, a wide range of music, dance, dialogue, pathos, burlesque, verbal and visual humour, etc. in his own drama. Contrasting the two approaches McGrath has written:

¹John McGrath, "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre," Theatre Quarterly IX, 35 (1979): p.53.

Working-class audiences demand more moment-by-moment effect from their entertainers. If an act is not enough they let it be known, and if it's boring they chat among themselves until it gets less boring, or they leave, or they throw things. They like clear, worked-for results - laughs, respectful silence, rapt attention to a song, tears, thunderous applause. Middle-class audiences have been trained to sit still in the theatre for long periods, not talk, and bear with a slow build-up to great dramatic moments, or slow build-ups to nothing at all, as the case may be. Through TV and radio and records, working-class audiences have come to expect a high standard of success in gaining effects. They know it comes from skill and hard work, and they expect hard work and skill. 1

As The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil continues, the M.C. encourages the audience to participate in singing "These Are My Mountains" (sung nostalgically by a Scottish audience, but later used ironically by such characters as Texas Jim, Queen Victoria, etc.). The M.C. informs the audience that:

Later on we're going to have a few songs like that one - if you know the words, join in - and then we're going to have a dance, and in between we'll be telling a story. It's a story that has a beginning, a middle, but, as yet, no end - 2

¹John McGrath, "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre," Theatre Quarterly IX, 35 (1979): p.53.

²John McGrath, The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.2.

The M.C. is seen here performing real acts in real time, the combination of Copeau's treteau nu and the actual physical body making clear to the audience by the present actuality and later illusion that illusion is part of reality. McGrath's profound use of the Verfremdungseffekt here permits him to show the audience the latent content of this drama manifesting itself. By providing this introductory scene that plays out the "true" time of the subject as against the "false" time of history, McGrath breaks with conventional theatrical codes and actualises the work so that, as Pontbriand writes, ". . . the material is used not only to signify but to present; it signals more than it signifies."¹ What this material signals is the aestheticisation of a political condition, compelling the audience to recognise that illusion is a part of reality.

Following a Jacobite song in Gaelic, the M.C. tells the story of the exploitation of the Scottish Highlands, beginning in 1746 with the Clearances to make way for the Cheviot breed of sheep, then by the stag-hunting landed gentry, and most recently to appropriate North Sea oil. With specific historical reference, the play discloses that the dispossession and suffering of the Highland people was the

¹Chantal Pontbriand, "The Eye Finds No Fixed Point on which to Rest. . . ," (trans., C.R. Parsons), Modern Drama XXV, 1: pp.154-162.

result of a continuing process, started by a rapacious few but now controlled by multinational oil corporations. All this is again narrated in "real" time, until a young Highlander enters, assuming the role of the narrator by addressing the audience directly. Two Strathnaver women take up the dialogue and action with the Young Highlander. No attempt at mimetic gesture is implied. On the contrary, as Copeau advised, the actors make no pretense at being anything other than actors. The audience is constantly reminded that they are not witnessing real events but sitting in a "theatre," listening to an account of selected historical events. The Cheviot is in this sense a strictly historical play, absolving the performers and the author from being cramped by the narrow and rigid conventions that the pretense of illusionist drama imposes. Within the confines of traditional (bourgeois) "realism," the author demonstrates action only through those characters involved; sociological background or omniscient comment is impossible. By discarding these conventions, McGrath dispenses with the tedious ritual of naturalistic exposition through which characters laboriously establish names and relationships within the framework of apparently casual, "natural" conversation. On the contrary, the characters can now explain to the audience who they are, what their relationships are, and what the action on stage is all about. Lord Selkirk, for example, introduces himself when he

steps to the microphone and announces, "I am Lord Selkirk and I have a plan."¹ When he discloses that in competition with French investors in the Northwest Company, his company (Hudson's Bay) will send Highlanders to the Red River Valley to curtail transactions with the Indian tribes, an irony is created by McGrath's dispensing with the pretense of realism while he presents through fictional dramatisation, historical reality in an unrealistic manner. Like Brecht, McGrath eliminates the distraction of suspense by hinting in advance how the play will end. He provides the necessary diverse background material: what the landowners' real motivations are in contrast to what they say they are, lists of factual evidence as supportive documentation, etc. The lives of individuals are understood in relation to the effects of the powerful trend of social, economic and historical forces. In this sense McGrath's characters, generally presented as comic types, acquire synecdochic force, the single character or action representing the whole. For example, Mr. Sellar, Lord Crask, Lady Phosphate, Andy McChuckemup, Texas Jim, etc., though exaggerated comic simplifications, are representative of their social class. Indeed, the exaggeration reinforces the stereotype. In this sense, the play is at once a study of

¹John McGrath, The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.23.

human relations and class relations. Not the attenuated characters but the story in which they are involved becomes the main focus. Rather than impersonate the characters, each actor narrates the actions of another person at a definite time in the past. The actor demonstrates his/her estrangement from the role by supplying contradictory attitudes, gestures, and modes of speech revealing the difference within the subject and showing a definite relationship to the audience. Indeed, as Brecht saw, the critical attitude toward what is demonstrated is unattainable without the gestus which provides insight and the pleasure of self-discovery.¹ For example, the actress playing the character of Harriet Beecher Stowe goes through the motions that character might have made, mimics the tone of her voice, imitates her facial expression, but only to the extent of what Martin Esslin would call "quoting" them.² A clear distinction remains between the character being portrayed and the actress portraying her. Moreover, the actress retains her freedom to comment on the actions of Harriet Beecher Stowe, as she does in the delivery of her ironic speech about the Duchess of Sutherland.¹ Remaining firmly in the persona of the character, she is able

¹See pp.93-94 above.

²Martin Esslin, Brecht: The Man and his Work, (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1971), p.137.

to "turn out" to the audience, allowing her the opportunity to reveal her personal thoughts and as a result transcend the immediate "reality." Her potential for expressing how the world might be changed is thus increased.² McGrath's intention appears to be compatible with Craig's attempt to go beyond an imitation of life to convey a vision of truth, not by a reproduction of surface reality, but through symbolic gestures. Unlike Appia, however, the performer openly reveals her own personality, contributing another view of the "character" or of the "action." The performer's revelation of self, of course, rather than persuading the audience to forget it is in a theatre, draws attention to that fact, thereby forcing its awareness not only of the overt theatricality, but also of itself as an audience involved in the proceedings. Even so, McGrath presents certain scenes or fragments of scenes in the past, in the traditional manner, as if they were occurring in the present. This is a constant throughout his work, the reason being, as Terry Eagleton has shown, that a certain structure of presence must be retained, since verisimilitude between stage and society can be impaired only

¹John McGrath, The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.23.

²See p.349-350 below.

after it has first been established as fact.¹ In other words, society must be represented as a production to help it to recognise itself as such. Hence, a self-contradictory aesthetic results since the concept of production itself refutes traditional forms of representation.

Like the actors who remain unconcealed behind character, the musicians in The Cheviot sit in full view of the audience on the stage itself. The songs are used skillfully to relieve the pressure of action and to give the audience an opportunity to reflect.² Besides the functions mentioned above,³ "These Are My Mountains" is also used to supply information. Other songs, for example the duet sung by Lord Crask and Lady Phosphate satirise the social pretensions of such characters by establishing a viable relationship between actors and audience. While "The Battle of the Braes" and Texas Jim's eulogy to oil supply crucial information, the Gaelic songs force a change of mood and pace, besides provoking poignancy and a time for reflection. The inclusion of music makes clear the extent to which McGrath intended The Cheviot for a working-class audience. While he has stated his conviction

¹Terry Eagleton, "Brecht and Rhetoric," New Literary History 3 (1985): p.633.

²As does the aria of an opera.

³See pp.353-354 above.

that middle-class audiences consider the inclusion of music an embarrassment and a threat to seriousness, he demonstrates clearly that working-class audiences appreciate music for its own sake and for its emotional release.¹ In this sense the songs are used to express basic attitudes: despair or resignation, defiance or submission.

The story of The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil unfolds in a number of separate situations, some fully rounded and complete in themselves, others merely fragmented scenes. Beginning with the Clearances, it documents with actual facts and figures the Highlanders' resistance to police brutality. For example:

'Ardnamurchan, Argyll. A half-witted woman who flatly refused to flit was locked up in her cottage, the door being barricaded on the outside by mason-work. She was visited every morning to see if she had arrived at a tractable state of mind, but for days she held out. It was not until her slender store of food was exhausted that she ceased to argue with the inevitable and decided to capitulate.' ²

'Knoydart, Inverness-shire. John McKinnon, a cottar aged 44, with a wife and six children, had his house pulled down. The ruins of an old chapel were near at hand and parts

¹John McGrath, "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre," Theatre Quarterly IX, 35 (1979): p.52.

²John McGrath, The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.17.

of the walls were still standing. There MacKinnon proceeded with his family. The manager of Knoydart then appeared with his minions and invaded this helpless family even within the walls of the sanctuary. They pulled down the sticks and sails they set up within the ruins, threw his tables, stools, chair and other belongings over the walls, burnt up the hay on which they slept, and then left the district. Four times they came and did the same thing.' ¹

The action then focuses on the relationship both between Sellar and Loch, the factor and under-factor of the Sutherland estates, and between Sellar and the common people; subsequently, it focuses on the trial of Sellar. After this trial, the audience perceives the results of emigration when the archetypal Highlander confronts the French trader and the Indians. Later episodes include the incursion by the stag-hunting gentry, exploitation by the whisky makers, and the start of the oil boom. The total effect of the play is built up through the careful and sometimes ironic juxtaposition of contrasting episodes which create a montage effect, forcing the audience to make critical comparisons. Since the action of the play spans about two-hundred thirty years, there can be no unifying characters; only a number of autonomous elements stand in dialectical relationship to one

¹John McGrath, The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.18.

another, interrupting the narrative flow and breaking the illusion of reality. McGrath's purpose appears to be the initiation of change by revealing dislocation and alienation expressed through class divisions. To accomplish this purpose, McGrath has created a theatrical language readily understood by large numbers of working-class people. This is necessary since language is not only manipulated and exploited by power but also determines the way we perceive power in the first place.

A Part of McGrath's theatrical "language" consists of presenting accurate and specific documentation of historical facts while ubiquitous interruptions break any illusion of reality. The contrast tends to make an audience feel that rather than simply watching another piece of fiction, they are being offered important information which has relevance to their own lives and experience. For example, at the beginning of the play an apt exchange of dialogue occurs between Sellar and Loch:

SELLAR: MacDonald has told me, Mr. Loch, there
are three hundred illegal stills in Strathnaver
at this very moment. They claim they have
no money for rent - clearly they have enough
to purchase the barley. The whole thing smacks

¹John McGrath, The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.18.

of a terrible degeneracy in the character of these aboriginals . . .

LOCH: The Marquis is not unaware of the responsibility his wealth places upon him, Mr. Sellar. The future and lasting interest and honour of his family, as well as their immediate income, must be kept in view. ¹

When the two characters suddenly "freeze," indicating time held in suspension, two "speakers" interpose to substantiate with documentation what has just been said. These speakers are but two in a number of personages who serve the traditional function of chorus:

SPEAKER 1: Their immediate income was over 120,000 pounds per annum. In those days that was quite a lot of money.

SPEAKER 2: George Granville, Second Marquis of Stafford, inherited a huge estate in Yorkshire; he inherited another at Trentham in the Potteries; and he inherited a third at Lilleshall in Shropshire, that had coal-mines on it.

SPEAKER 1: He also inherited the Bridgewater Canal. And on Loch's advice, he bought a large slice of the Liverpool-Manchester Railway.

SPEAKER 2: From his wife, Elizabeth Gordon, Countess of Sutherland, he acquired three quarters of a million acres of Sutherland - in which he wanted to invest some capital. ²

¹John McGrath, The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.5.

²Ibid., pp.5-6.

When the two speakers exit, never to reappear, Sellar and Loch reanimate:

SELLAR: The common people of Sutherland are a parcel of beggars with no stock, but cunning and lazy.

LOCH: They are living in a form of slavery to their own indolence. Nothing could be more at variance with the general interests of society and the individual happiness of the people themselves, than the present state of the Highland manners and customs. To be happy, the people must be productive.

SELLAR: They require to be thoroughly brought to the coast, where industry will pay, and to be convinced that they must worship industry or starve. The present enchantment which keeps them down must be broken. 1

This ironic exchange not only advances the plot, it also supplies the necessary specific information advocated by Piscator to help the audience understand the significance of the action and sense the injustice implicit in the action. In effect, the audience has in the Brechtian sense been made to think. As was demonstrated earlier with this scene,² Loch conceals the true essence of the situation with appearance. McGrath's appropriation of Brecht's Verfremdungseffekt undermine appearances and unmask reality by disclosing

¹John McGrath, The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.6.

²See p.104 above.

contradictions intrinsic within the situation. By comparing the situation revealed by Sellar and Loch with the current situation in which the process of exploitation is continued, the inherent contradictions which will lead to change become clear. Without belabouring a point made earlier, a more accurate understanding and assessment of the present is entirely compatible with McGrath's political objective. If satisfaction is derived from the method, it is the satisfaction of discovering new "truths," the emotion felt when enlarging one's conscious understanding. At the same time, the focus on specific, localised conditions of problems appearing critical at a particular moment in history subverts the modernist assumption of "higher" values independent of history and social forms. Indeed, "truth" has been reduced in the postmodernist sense to the relativity of specific phenomena to localised conditions. Stimulating the audience's critical faculties through the disclosure of social relationships, the play attempts to create conditions which motivate social change. Later in the play, an actor approaches the microphone to address the audience, not as the old man he is made up to play, but, in the manner that Copeau recommended, as the actor behind the character:

OLD MAN: What was really going on? There is no doubt that a change had to come to the Highlands. The population was growing too fast for the old, inefficient methods of

agriculture to keep everyone fed. Even before the Clearances, emigration had been the only way out for some. But this coincided with something else: English - and Scottish - capital was growing powerful and needed to expand. Huge profits were being made already as a result of the Industrial Revolution and improved methods of agriculture. This accumulated wealth had to be used to make more profit - because this is the law of capitalism. It expanded all over the globe. And just as it saw in Africa, the West Indies, Canada, the Middle East, and China, ways of increasing itself, so in the Highlands of Scotland it saw the same opportunity. The technological innovation was there: the Cheviot, a breed of sheep that would survive the Highland winter and produce fine wool. The money was there. Unfortunately, the people were there too. But the law of capitalism had to be obeyed. And this was how it was done. 1

Again, the audience is shown an actor in "real" time playing the part of an actor out of "false" time narrating actual events that occurred in the real past. One may interpret this playing with informational modes in the recovery of the history of others as McGrath's critique of conventional representation. Aesthetics and politics become united, the aesthetic serving as metaphor for a political condition. When the actor steps out of the character of the old man and into the real present, it is not to intensify his own individuality as an actor, but to project his human qualities in relation

¹John McGrath, The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.14.

to his aesthetic-political function. This function is to convey at once specific information and what Brecht calls "the critical attitude."¹ What follows is the vivid revelation of a whole culture destroyed by the economic power of capitalism. McGrath's method is to inhibit the process of identification between the audience and the characters by creating a distance between them, enabling the audience to look at the action in a detached, critical spirit. The method has enabled McGrath to reveal in a new light a segment of history which previously had been largely unknown or misunderstood; it has helped him also to create a new understanding, not only of how capitalism works but of the human suffering involved. To some extent this has been accomplished by using well-documented specifics. If such an accomplishment seems too "sophisticated" for a largely uneducated, working-class audience, McGrath's experience in Scotland with his touring company has proved otherwise. As McGrath has explained:

Direct Marxist analysis of the Clearances (cf. Das Kapital), long chunks of readings from eye witness historical accounts, facts and figures about oil companies and the technicalities of exploration, all were not only grasped but waited for, expected. ²

¹See p.68 above.

²John McGrath, The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, (London: Methuen, 1981), Preface, p.xviii.

In this way McGrath, like Piscator, supplies a form which clarifies the causes of a particular historical and social moment in time. Using factual documentation as "evidence," McGrath is able to explore and disclose the constraints and mechanisms of life which force particular men and women in their particular social relationships to become political. Where McGrath departs from Piscator, it seems to me, is in his total disregard for elevating the lives of private individuals to the plane of the historical, in his tacit denial that the multiplicity of specific facts and figures which provide documentation of the world can be subsumed under the concept of transcendent truth. On the contrary, McGrath's theatre takes a more radically postmodernist approach of addressing localised conditions of particular lives relative to a particular historical context, thereby subverting modernist convictions concerning universal values independent of history and social contexts. This may seem a somewhat subjective reading of McGrath's drama, but there is little evidence within the work to convince one to believe otherwise. It is for this reason that the work of Piscator and others has been addressed in Chapter One. While one is at liberty to assume Piscator's influence, it is interesting to note where McGrath draws away from Piscator, in effect by including him and then going beyond what has been learned from this inclusion, only to exceed him. As part of this theatrical continuum,

McGrath's theatre may, in this sense, be perceived to occupy a place this side of modernism.

Having provided evidence of capitalist exploitation, McGrath then uses his M.C. (serving the function of chorus) to make a direct warning:

M.C.: One thing's for certain, these men are not just figures of fun. They are determined, powerful, and have the rest of the ruling class on their side. Their network is international. ¹

The warning is made credible by the citation of actual names of some of the 127 companies owned by the Vestey Brothers, who own 100,000 acres in Sutherland and Wester Ross: Red Bank Meatworks, Monarch Bacon, Blue Star Line, Booth's Steamship Company, Shipping and Associated Industries, etc. But the warning apparently comes too late, for when a crofter fails to understand his wife's use of Gaelic terms, we infer that the Highland culture is to some degree already lost:

WIFE: You'll take a dram? Get a wee drammie
for the visitors -

CROFTER: A what?

WIFE: A drink.²

¹John McGrath, The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.57.

²Ibid., Preface, p.71.

The cabals of Whitehall, the collusions of Texas Jim and Polworth only confirm one's suspicions: that the exploitation continues in our own time. The five masters of ceremony again acting as Chorus, having recounted what amounts to a catalogue of capitalist injustice, define in the most specific terms McGrath's social criticism:

M.C. 2: A whole new culture is waiting to be destroyed.

M.C. 1: By economic power. Until economic power is in the hands of the people, then their culture, Gaelic or English, will be destroyed. The educational system, the newspapers, the radio and television and the decision-makers, local and national, whether they know it or not, are the servants of the men who own and control the land.

M.C. 3: Who owns the land?

M.C. 1: The same families - the MacLeods, the Lovats, the Argylls, the MacDonalds, the Sinclairs, the Crichton-Stewarts and the Sutherlands.

M.C. 4: Plus the property dealers.

M.C. 5: The shipowners.

M.C. 3: The construction men.

M.C. 2: The distillers. The brewers. The textile men.

M.C. 5: The sauce-makers.

M.C. 4: The mustard kings.

M.C. 5: And the merchant bankers.

M.C. 3: The new ruling class!¹

¹John McGrath, The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.55.

As the crofter and his wife prepare to vacate the land, the Gaelic singer sings "Mo Gachaidh." In the final, sad chorus the rest of the company join in before expressing the following indictment of capitalism:

The people do not own the land.
The people do not control the land.

Any more than they did before the arrival
of the Great Sheep.

In 1800 it was obvious that a change was
coming to the Highlands.

Then, as now, the economy was lagging behind
the development of the rest of the country.

Then, as now, there was capital elsewhere
looking for something to develop.

In those days the capital belonged to southern
industrialists.

Now it belongs to multi-national corporations
with even less feeling for the people than
Patrick Sellar.

In other parts of the world - Bolivia, Panama,
Guatemala, Venezuela, Brazil, Angola, Mozambique,
Nigeria, Biafra, Muscat and Oman and many
other countries - the same corporations have
torn out the mineral wealth from the land.
The same people always suffer.

Then it was the Great Sheep.

Now it is the black black oil.

Then it was done by outside capital, with
the connivance of the local ruling class
and central government -

And the people had no control over what
was happening to them.

Now it is being done by outside capital,

with the connivance of the local ruling class and central government.

Have we learnt anything from the Clearances? 1

Regardless of one's political persuasion, the play is profoundly moving owing to the substantive credibility of injustice, the emotional power of the Gaelic songs and lyrics (which have a curiously persuasive effect whether or not one is versed in the language), and the sheer power of the play's variety and energy. The play demonstrates in its more celebratory moments a positive attitude toward the solidarity of Scots working-class people. On the other hand, written primarily (one imagines) to arouse social and moral indignation and resentment in the audience, the play effectively employs parody, caricature, and denunciation to accomplish its didactic ends. In this sense, it is essentially a negative play.

Included in McGrath's theatrical alphabet is his declared commitment to a directness of style and analysis which aims "to educate, to raise social consciousness, and to display a vitality which is itself offered as a primary weapon against capitalism."² Directness of this kind, however, encourages

¹John McGrath, The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, (London: Methuen, 1981), pp.72-73.

²John McGrath, "Better a Bad Night in Bootle . . .," Theatre Quarterly V, 19 (1975): p.49.

attenuation by allowing content to become too fully known; no effect is conceived without cause, no sense of the spiritual is impervious to the power of reason. The idiosyncratic, individual self is subordinated to class function (Lady Phosphate, Andy McChuckemup), real flesh-and-bone character to role (H.B. Stowe, Duke of Sutherland), and the multiple ambiguities of human motivation and confused facts of circumstance to a complete and fully revealed presentation of a situation (Did the Sturdy Highlander perhaps beat his wife? Was Loch basically a good man who wanted to make enough money to educate his children?). The world of The Cheviot is reduced to a process in which entire classes are known and summarily dismissed by the omniscient minds of theatre: capitalist landowners are presented as one-dimensional cynical oppressors (Duke of Sutherland), the Highland people are transformed into exploited labourers only (Mary McPherson, Sturdy Highlander), the nouveaux riches into ruthless hypocrites (McChuckemup, Texas Jim). In other words, the reduction of reality into a theatrical language demanded by the limitations of its audience and the objectives of the dramatist has led to attenuation comparable to that characterised by the bourgeois theatre.

Yet, while recognising the validity of this viewpoint, one hesitates to direct such criticism at McGrath. His own

statements in print concerning mediated versions of reality¹ suggest he has taken attenuation in his own work into account, and his constant questioning of assumptions brings his material close to some bedrock of certainty. Indeed, without comic exaggeration and attenuation of character, much of the humour would be diluted. If the audience is not deprived of a complete picture of reality, it is at least given a simulation as close to reality as one can expect within the confines of the language structure. In any event, this is theatre, not reality, and if theatre can convey accurately the truth of that reality without presenting the reality itself, this will suffice. Limited to the confines of the language structure in which the audience thinks and comprehends, McGrath offers a symbolic version of reality which facilitates his twofold purpose: a "good night out" and meaningful social change.

While McGrath's theatrical "language" is derived from a variety of sources (musical comedy, circus acrobats, Brechtian "epic" theatre, English music hall, etc.), an affinity is clearly apparent with Antonin Artaud's concerns that "theatre will not be given its specific powers of action until it is given its language."² Artaud's new language of theatre was

¹John McGrath, A Good Night Out. Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form, (London: Methuen, 1981), pp.36-60.

²Antonin Artaud, The Theatre and its Double, trans. Mary Caroline Richards, (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p.89.

meant to transcend the spoken word, expressing itself through gesture, movement, and attitude. As a result, it became necessary to replace the mere imitation of commonplace "reality" with a more powerful expression beyond the articulation of words. Artaud, in effect, wanted to force a closer relationship between art and experience by "breaking through language in order to touch life."¹ While the more working-class aspects of McGrath's "language" might appear more mundane than those apparently envisioned by Artaud, in essence a strong similarity exists in their objectives: to use whatever theatrical methods are deemed necessary to convey a sense of reality to the audience, to "touch life." Certainly by the end of The Cheviot the audience feels closer to an understanding of the reality of what has happened - and is still happening - in the Scottish Highlands. McGrath has here chosen the Verfremdungseffekt as his principal instrument for estranging the "natural," in effect invoking, through its break with mimetic illusionism, that feeling of disturbance of which Lyotard spoke. Ultimately, one assumes, the disturbance will lead to reflection and subsequent action. In some sense, McGrath has produced, by ana-lysing and ana-mnesing, an audience which will respond in this way to the radical

¹Antonin Artaud, The Theatre and its Double, trans. Mary Caroline Richards, (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p.89.

transformation of form. How has he produced this audience?

In his book A Good Night Out McGrath devotes a chapter (originally a lecture) to theatre as a political forum, a concept particularly pertinent to the plays under consideration since it constitutes a radical departure from the generally accepted purposes of the conventional theatre. Again, since the concept implies the use of theatre as a means toward a greater teleological end rather than as an entity in itself, it echoes Artaud's beliefs in a theatre serving as a kind of forum in which Man acquires altered perceptions of himself, and by this revelation effecting Man's salvation from himself. This concept is indeed, central to Artaud's "theatre of cruelty," which confronts audiences with their own submerged, unconscious ineptitude. Furthermore, when theatre forcibly exposes those involved to one another's immediate presence, it reveals not only its democratic possibilities as a form of communication, but also the kinds of aesthetic approaches crucial to a genuinely "socialised" theatre. Indeed, the term "political theatre" does not necessarily define a specific product, nor does it imply a specific aesthetic model. As Steve Gooch has explained, it denotes, rather, the production process behind the work, the relationship of the total theatrical work to society, and the relations of production within the company itself.¹ Such

¹Steve Gooch, All Together Now, (London: Methuen, 1984), p.75.

considerations, of course, affect not only political theatre, but to some extent all theatre. It is crucial, therefore, to distinguish as far as possible the aesthetic parameters which include the majority of political theatres. According to Gooch, the content of the work should be staged in a popular and entertaining dramatic form and be "of some significance to the local community."¹ The Cheviot was apparently of direct interest to its first Scottish audiences who wanted to be given information concerning the economic exploitation of the Highlands; if they already had access to the information, perhaps they wanted to see it disclosed in public and responded most favourably to the documentation of facts and figures as well as to the portrayal of decades of historical process depicted through documentary, caricature, songs, music, and cabaret-style repartee to define the general tendencies behind the specific events. Although an audience may ostensibly focus on the surface subject matter of a play, the play itself is rarely about what it seems to be about. It has been noted already that the motivation behind many "historical" plays has sprung from the need to address contemporary concerns,² the concern with a particular

¹Steve Gooch, All Together Now, (London: Methuen, 1984), p.75.

²See pp.244-245 above.

subject being more implicit in the production of a play than the ostensible "subject" itself. For theatrical companies creating drama collectively as the 7:84 does, it becomes essential to discover their real concerns, the raw material of the play's subject matter. In this sense the intellectual and emotional disposition of theatre practitioners with regard to subject matter is as important as the play's content.¹

An overtly "political" play concerned with social meanings of immediate relevance is hardly justification in itself that it will appeal to a socially wide audience. The collective experience and deeply-felt concerns of theatre practitioners themselves are more likely to have an impact on an audience. If the creators of theatre have had first-hand experience of working-class conditions, as McGrath has had, the probability that their creation will somehow connect with a working-class audience is that much better. As Steve Gooch has argued, "plays always possess an 'inward' face, however important their 'outward' qualities."² It is inconsistent, therefore, for plays to be judged by their ostensible subject when the acting for the most part is inwardly directed. The universal influence of Stanislavsky is still strongly felt in

¹Steve Gooch, All Together Now, (London: Methuen, 1984), p.76.

²Ibid., p.77.

the emphasis on the actor's exploring the complexities of character, often regardless of whether there is, in the text, any complexity of character to explore. Assumptions about performance values are, consequently, to some degree determined by the ostensible subject performed on stage. Since a personal consistency is naturally imposed on a play by a single dramatist, it seems reasonable to insist on a solid inner substructure of the plays themselves, permitting actors to explore their depths and make a more profound connection with the audience by focusing on the skills of outward presentation. A potential danger is that a more compelling theatre might tend to trigger the release of inner tensions, failing to bring into focus the broader conflicts and concerns which lie beneath the surface. The easy manipulation of attitudes may reinforce emotional dependency.¹

In conventional theatre, where audiences are required to "lose" themselves in the illusion of the play, both actors and audience are expected, as Brecht said, to "hang their wits up in the cloakroom."² The likelihood that the characters in the play possess some sort of intellectual life, particularly one which seems to contradict their "actual" situation, as

¹Steve Gooch, All Together Now, (London: Methuen, 1984), p.77.

²Quoted in Steve Gooch, All Together Now, (London: Methuen, 1984), p.77.

Marie does in Yobbo Nowt,¹ is the kind of situation largely ignored in conventional theatre. The conflict usually involves one-dimensional characters deprived in their personalities of the conflicting inconsistencies of real life.

Still at issue is the sense of being trapped in a one-plane perception of reality. Yet despite the paradox of a theatre which insists on its audience adopting a critical attitude to a reality it, in fact, readily accepts and wittingly participates in, there is a further complication concerning working-class theatre. If bourgeois culture tends to be more subtle and sophisticated, often to the point of pretentiousness, working-class culture does not necessarily have to be elemental, crude, or obvious. To be sure, since the objective of socialist attrition is the abolition of production relations which create a working class in the first place, it seems unreasonable to offer an encomium to forms which not only perpetuate an independent working-class culture, but also imply an outmoded system of production relations in the theatre itself. In other words, why differentiate a separate working-class culture when the aim is to abolish such class distinctions? Though such emphasis on separate class cultures can result in an increased self-confidence among the working classes, the focus on

¹See pp.442-443 below.

separate and distinct groups of people can sometimes serve to widen the division while, at the same time, obstructing socialist transformation of the whole of society. Clearly, mere acknowledgement of cultural inequality is inadequate as a panacea for the inequities of an established class system. The elements of imagination and intuition, crucial to escaping existing conditions, are conspicuously absent.¹

This imaginative element is not merely a matter of illusionism, of Brechtian alienation, or of actors addressing the audience directly. It is primarily a matter of creating a stage context in which actors and audience commingle and inter-relate as they do in The Cheviot. When performers first appear on stage, it is their actual and immediate presence to which the audience responds. The response to recognition of an actor under the make-up is unique to theatre and requires that to some degree the performer acknowledge it because, being a performer, whatever he does will be perceived or overheard. He cannot simply "be himself" because all the panoply of theatre have prepared the audience for a theatrical performance (and all that that implies). What the performer does may seem to be one-sided, but there is the implicit acknowledgement of the audience's presence in the dependency

¹Steve Gooch, All Together Now, (London: Methuen, 1984), p.78.

on it of the performer's presence. It is essential for this relationship to be understood for any theatre form which hopes, as Steve Gooch puts it, to "go out" to its audience, appealing to their conscious awareness of existence beyond the confines of the stage's simulated "reality."¹

When a performer therefore looks at an audience, he replaces the dignity and humanity excluded from theatre by bourgeois practices of naturalistic consistency in texts, psychologically "realistic" acting, and directorial "concept." People want to enrich their lives by knowing about others and enjoying their company. To a large extent, I think, this accounts for the success of The Cheviot. Originally performed before Scottish audiences who already knew the material or who wanted to know about it, the play made the connection between actors and audience by employing unpretentious but entertaining forms which "spoke" to the audience. Theatre alone holds this potential for an approach which permits actors to engage in this kind of dialogue, to face their audiences eyeball to eyeball, even at the height of comedy or in the depths of despair. Aesthetics and politics are here united. The aesthetic becoming a metaphor for a political condition, helping the audience to see that illusion

¹Steve Gooch, All Together Now, (London: Methuen, 1984), p.78-79.

is part of reality. Again, the necessity of the theatre's relations of production becomes clear. It is difficult for actors and audiences to believe in an emancipated socialist art dominated by a hierarchical production system which turns its actors into mere objects on show. It is almost impossible for actors on stage to realise successfully the ideas which the play embodies if the relations of production are autocratic. In this sense the radical transformation of modern theatre is more likely to be effected through changes in production relations which liberate the relationship of performers both to their material and to their audience than through the impact of subject matter.

Although John McGrath had, apparently, been working on the idea of The Cheviot and the historical background to it for fifteen years (indeed, the published play bears his name), the whole company was drawn into the process of making it.¹ Each member checked some areas of research and was at liberty to contribute ideas, musical suggestions, humour, and to question everything being written. The final result, therefore, represents the talents, skills, and beliefs of the company as a whole. Moreover, as McGrath explains:

If other actors decide to perform the piece,

¹John McGrath, The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.77.

they should try to create the same identification with what they say and do - something quite different from normal actors' learning of lines. 1

The crucial question concerning the mixing of dramatic forms such as music and dialogue is whether their fundamental approach is "inward" or "outward." Music and dance often involve a performer externalising what Steve Gooch calls "a particular state of mind."² Dialogue, on the other hand, often explores or enters into a set of relationships. Unless the context is well-considered, the sudden change from one to the other can therefore create a rapid imbalance in the dynamic of the performance. Serving as a kind of shock tactic, change can, as Lyotard explained, be a deliberate component of the play's aesthetic strategy. At other times, provision is made in the change from conventional dialogue to a more lyrical kind of expression by increased emphasis on a character's inner tensions, which then necessitate expression.³ Clearly, in a play such as The Cheviot, where the characters are not explored in any psychological depth,

¹John McGrath, The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.77.

²Steve Gooch, All Together Now, (London: Methuen, 1984), p.80.

³Ibid.

the transition from one mode to the other does tend to have some shock value; in fact it embodies much of the play's charm and becomes an integral part of its aesthetic. The successful blend of these approaches is due to the juxtaposition of different modes when they are connected by a unifying "voice" or manner, as they are, for example, by Marie in Yobbo Nowt.¹ The Cheviot contrasts superficially "realistic," serious characters (generally the "heroic," exploited workers) and grotesquely exaggerated comic characters (the villains), both of which perform appropriate music and comedy. The relationship between them is stated directly with little sensitivity to the various shades of difference. The unifying voice linking not only the contrasting groups, but also the episodic plot covering approximately two-hundred thirty years is the "chorus" of singers, readers, masters of ceremony, and single characters (such as the old man) who serve no other functional purpose. As Steve Gooch has stated:

The relation between characters' internal consistency and their outward face is therefore crucial to any kind of theatre which goes out to its audience. On the one hand it is important for the actor that there is a strong core of characterisation which enables the character to stand with its feet on the ground - a degree of realism which also enables an audience to

¹See pp.445-448 below.

orient itself within the terms of the piece overall. On the other hand it is important that characters are not consequently so 'landbound' that they cannot lift out of the mundane, and that audiences - who go in the expectation of something different, something special - are taken away from and beyond the familiar. 1

While much contemporary drama focuses on a protagonist who may be considered the "hero" or central character, and its situations are generally one-to-one or one-to-two confrontations, the complexities of real life are rarely of this kind. People's lives are generally far more open and accessible and the situations people find themselves in are usually far more dependent on the rest of the community. In other words, owing to mass production, democratic government, the speed of communications, and the increased power of the lower and middle classes, modern life has become increasingly collective. Steve Gooch has described how working-class life, particularly, has been subject to this tendency longer than that of any other class and -

. . . the more one lives the realities of economics and power in concert with others, the greater the release offered by wit and humour and the more one develops an 'eye' for character and an 'ear' to the responses

¹Steve Gooch, All Together Now, (London: Methuen, 1984), p.80.

of others. At the same time one learns to pitch one's own responses towards the common dialogue and to develop a public 'persona' to mediate between personal concerns and commonly accepted norms. ¹

A more democratic and collectivised context of production relations provides the opportunity for a similar release. If the general concerns of a majority of local people are either implicit or explicit in a play's content, as they clearly are in The Cheviot, most of the conventional concepts of dramatic "unity" are violated. In a modern transient society, with almost instant access to information by way of the computer and television set, with high-speed communications and increased specialisation, the distinction between ambition and achievement, between consciousness of events and control over them, grows even wider. Society consists of a complexity of specialised interests and skills moving farther and farther apart as that society widens and expands. Rather than focusing on one specific unit in the complex (as does, for instance, bourgeois psychological drama), theatre, if it hopes to engage realistically the concerns of the whole society, has to focus on the relationships between different sections of society, rather than merely portraying only the surface

¹Steve Gooch, All Together Now, (London: Methuen, 1984), p.81.

reality. Rather than relying on the irresolution of conflict to provide a dramatic tension and thus internalise the issue, theatre should be exploring the main currents behind that reality, defining issues so that the tensions behind them become public.¹ The central issue in The Cheviot is an example of this. Embittered by the tragedy of their past, the people of the Highlands are aware of the challenge facing them today. Owing to the impersonality and remoteness from their lives of the decision-making process, some of them have come to believe their future is something beyond their control, something pre-determined. As McGrath points out in his Notes to the published play (originally programme notes):

This play tries to show why the tragedies of the past happened: because the forces of capitalism were stronger than the organisation of the people. It tries to show that the future is not pre-determined, that there are alternatives, and it is the responsibility of everyone to fight and agitate for the alternative which is going to benefit the people of the Highlands, rather than the multi-national corporations, intent on profit. Passive acceptance now means losing control of the future. Socialism, and the planned exploitation of natural resources for the benefit of all humanity, is the alternative the play calls for. Not the "socialism" that merely begs concessions from capitalism, but the kind that involves every individual

¹Steve Gooch, All Together Now, (London: Methuen, 1984), pp.81-82.

in the creation of the future he or she wants, that measures progress by human happiness rather than by shareholders' dividends, that liberates minds rather than enslaving them. 1

By clearly articulating the issues in such plays as The Cheviot, Yobbo Nowt,² and Little Red Hen,³ the tensions behind them are "externalised" and made public in a kind of political forum. McGrath makes this clear as he continues in his Notes:

The Highlands have so much that is good, rare, even unique in human experience. If the people there, and the working people of the rest of Scotland realise that there is a choice, that it must be made soon, and decisively, then not only can what is good be saved, but a future built in the Highlands, and in the whole of Scotland, that could inspire the rest of the world. 4

Not only is a more pandemic and more explicit social view required, therefore, but the centralising of an audience's identification on the personal situation of an individual or small group within society can only approximate this kind of

¹John McGrath, Notes to The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.77.

²See pp.444-445, 449, 454-456 below.

³See pp.476-477 below.

⁴McGrath, op.cit., pp.77-78.

social nexus if what is off-stage is reflected in what is on-stage. In The Cheviot, for example, the landowning class, represented by Sutherland, Whitehall, Selkirk, Polworth, and Lady Phosphate, are shown gaining their advantage through a number of different characters and in a variety of situations. The working class (Janet, Mary McPherson, the Sturdy Highlander, the Crofter, etc.) is shown in a similarly anonymous way, and the interest for the audience lies, not so much in rediscovering a piece of Highlands history through identification with an individual, but through individuals who, variously from time to time, carry the advance of the interests of the common people on their shoulders. The objective is to generate dramatic excitement and involvement in the shared fate of a community. Within this context the unity of collective interest is primary to the other unities of time, place, action, and character. The Cheviot, as do other plays which range over an extended period of time, moves location from country to country (from Highlands to Virginia to London) and, as do other plays in which characters live, die, and are replaced by others, attempts to appeal to a core of common interests rather than persuade an audience to identify with a single protagonist.

This also has consequences for the structure and form of the play. Since the action takes place over a wide geographical area and historical range, the unity of its

social stance needs to be consolidated by some kind of narrative function. The position of narrator - halfway between the play's internal action and its audience - is significant, since it is another way of taking the play to the audience. Instead of the audience traversing from its own world to the world of the play, a midway forum is established to which both worlds relate.¹

Fish in the Sea

Unlike some of the earlier plays, such as Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun and Bakke's Night of Fame, which focus on the effects of the capitalist structure of society on individual character, Fish in the Sea² exposes the social and political inequities of capitalism in their relationship over a period of time with a "typical" British working-class family. Although McGrath acquired the initial idea for the play's subject matter from factory occupations at Mold in Flintshire and Fisher-Bendix in Kirkby, he has stated that it was the 7:84's performance in an unoccupied engineering

¹Steve Gooch, All Together Now, (London: Methuen, 1984), p.82. This is discussed further in the analysis of Yobbo Nowt, pp.407-409 below.

²John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977). First presented at the Everyman Theatre, Liverpool (Directed by Alan Dossor) and then by 7:84 Theatre Company (England) (Directed by Pam Brighton), 1972-73.

was the 7:84's performance in an unoccupied engineering factory in Glasgow which most related to the occupation in the play.¹ On a political level it may be seen as more critical of specific capitalist and socialist abuses than McGrath's earlier work. As McGrath has written:

The main elements I wanted to set in some form of dialectical motion were - the need for militant organisation by the working-class; the anarchistic, anti-organisational violence of the frustrated working-class individual in search of self-fulfillment here and now; the backwardness of some elements of working-class living: attitudes to women, to socialist theory, to sexual oppression, poetry, myth, etc.; the connections between this backwardness and Christianity; the shallow optimism of the demagogic left, self-appointed leaders of the working-class; and the intimate realities of growing up and living in a working-class home on Merseyside. 2

These were, for McGrath who was himself from Merseyside, the main elements of working-class Liverpool, and "the conflicts between them are at the centre of the play."³ Indeed, according to McGrath, the play is trying to do two things:

one is to analyse and set in motion these

¹John McGrath, Introduction to Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.i.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

elements. The other is to call for more maturity, and more determination, from the working class, its allies, and the socialist movement in Britain. 1

Having the playwright's stated purpose at hand before seeing or reading the play is helpful, and it remains in this inquiry to assess to what extent McGrath is successful in achieving that purpose. That the play itself was successful from a commercial standpoint is evidenced by its extensive performance record: after some initial acclaim at the Liverpool Everyman, 7:84 (England) mounted a production at the Half Moon Theatre in London, then toured England and Wales in working-class clubs, community centres, small halls, and theatres, playing to predominantly working-class audiences.² The physical construction of many such localities would indicate, perhaps unintentionally, a reference to Craig's occasional rejection of the proscenium arch, his gutting the stage and using only what is essential to suggest a scene. Certainly, in McGrath's determination to bring theatre to working-class audiences, one perceives an affinity with Meyerhold's intention of creating for the stage

¹John McGrath, Introduction to Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.i.

²John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.3.

suggestions of things and not the things themselves,¹ and, in many locations, to Okhlopkov's abolition of the conventional stage space.

The action of the play takes place in Liverpool in the early 1970s. At the beginning of Act I McGrath is quick to point out that the style is neither "epic" nor naturalistic. According to McGrath, the actors must create real characters but be prepared to express that reality in a variety of ways, sustaining throughout the play a relationship with their characters and the audience by way of their own personal stage personae.² In effect, McGrath is suggesting that the actors, rather than impersonate the characters, adopt the Brechtian technique of narrating the actions of another person at a definite time in the past. The character being shown and the actor demonstrating that character remain differentiated.³

Similarly, McGrath insists, "the settings for the scenes, while varying in degrees of verisimilitude, should maintain consistency through the quality of their wit and

¹See p.35 above.

²John McGrath, Introduction to Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.1.

³This approach to acting style is discussed in more detail on pp.92-94 above.

perception."¹ This, again, is another attempt by McGrath to reject "realism" in order to use stage properties as a means of underscoring meaning by effective demonstration. The purpose of McGrath's specific directions at the beginning of Act I is to ensure that "the whole production creates a level of contact and communication with the audience over and above the realities of any one character, or group of characters."² Release from the usual limitations of realism permits three of the characters, as the play begins, to speak directly to the audience, as actors, about events in the play. The actors/characters are looking back on the events, inviting the audience to join with them in making sense of what happened. Hence, "distance" between character and audience is diminished as the audience becomes "involved" in the stage action. From a political perspective McGrath's method of audience involvement could (at least in theory) lead to political understanding and, ultimately, political action. His purpose appears to be the immersion of the audience in the stage action in an effort to force a reaction. Yet, instead of a realistic representation of these events, the actors, by appearing as actors before they become characters, present

¹John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.1.

²Ibid.

merely a pastiche of a realistic performance, leaving the audience caught somewhere between reality and its representation. In a sense, the stage becomes here, instead of a mere representation, a textual site in which both dramatist and audience participate in a deconstruction of tradition. Since this tradition is so intimately connected with a romantic capitalist past, political meaning is manifest in the form of deconstruction itself. While no claim is made here to equate the 7:84 Company with radical postmodern theatres in which totality of meaning is transmitted wholly through performance,¹ it is clear that McGrath's use of performative techniques contrast incisively with his pastiche of realistic representation, rendering his deconstruction that much more effective.

Mr. Maconochie, Yorry and Willy come on stage together, and the dialogue is significant in notifying the audience immediately of what the play is about. It is also an arcane disclosure of McGrath's theatrical technique:

Mr. Machonochie: Life, and exploring, goes on.

Willy: How to make sense of it.

¹I am referring here to the way the theatrical experiments of Samuel Beckett, Jerzy Grotowski, Joseph Chaiken, Richard Foreman, and Robert Wilson use the form of involving and implicating the audience as the basic structure of their drama.

Yorry: How to save anything useful from it. That's what we want to know.

Mr. Machonochie: It all goes on, you see, life, as before, without any connections. Exploring, the same country, without a map or even a memory.

Yorry: Not making any maps for those who come after us - scattering bits and pieces of our skin and bone down the back-alleys of our minds, leaving them to rot, for the dogs to wrangle over.

Willy: Dogs ourselves, wrangling over our own bones, snapping at each other, greedy for the scattered remains of our own loves, struggles, victories, defeats.

Mr. Machonochie: How to make sense of it.

Willy: Go back to where it all began. 1

The action does indeed go back to 1968 when Maconochie's son Derek joins the ping pong team of a church in Tyn-y-Gongl, Wales. Instead of dramatising the action, however, McGrath has Mr. Machonochie relate the events of the action as narration. Only later do we see the actual events dramatised as action and dialogue. Even then, there is little attempt at realism, and what dialogue there is is interrupted by a song from Dafydd. Rev. Griffiths then introduces his son Iowerth, who turns out to be Yorry, a character whose entrance completely breaks with realism when he begins talking directly to the audience about his life at that time in the past.

¹John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.1.

Willy also offers some reflections on this past action until Rev. Griffiths ends the reminiscence by dramatising the past action as if it were happening on stage in the present. Hence, a quasi-realistic dramatisation of past events is presented in the present while characters on stage who participated in these past events simultaneously narrate and comment on the events in the present. There is, in effect, little concern for chronology or verisimilitude. McGrath is far more interested in exploring, defining, and analysing the significance of the action and then demonstrating his findings in Copeau's presentational manner than in simply presenting a dramatisation of the action in the mimetic manner of traditional realistic theatre. Clearly, McGrath is paying homage to the realistic style in a manner that is antithetical to it, suggesting a reverence for realism while subverting the aesthetic principles of the original. As will be seen throughout this investigation of McGrath's work, his pastiche of earlier forms subverts those forms while commenting on their political implications in the present. This technique creates a lightness of effect which tends to contradict the heroic, high-seriousness of modernist drama. In this way, McGrath's work - or, rather, the performance of his work - provides a double view: sameness and difference, unity and rupture, filiation and revolt. Now a double commentary of this kind is very "typical" of postmodernist practice, as is

evidenced in, say, Jasper John's flag paintings or Lichtenstein's affectionate subversions of abstract expressionism. By incorporating older forms of representation into his work, McGrath is able to make the line between so-called "high" art and the more commercial forms of English music hall, commedia dell'arte, knockabout comedy, and popular song increasingly difficult to draw again, this is not to make claims that McGrath's theatre is a strictly performance-based theatre of the Beckett-Grotowski-Chaikin-Wilson type. But undeniably postmodernist elements appear and reappear throughout his work.

The action focuses next on the feast on Sports Day and alternates between narration and dramatisation with occasional songs injected for entertainment, although the songs are also functional in the way they comment on and advance the plot. For example, when the Machonochie daughters, Sandra, Mary and Fiona, enter for the first time, their entrance is underscored with the following song:

ENTER THE MACHONUCHIES

Totties, judies,
Jumbo-jumpered beauties
Fancy, Fruity
Rooty-tooty-tooty,
Sexy, Firey,
Flaming-with-desirey
A giggle, a wiggle
A something makes you wriggle.
Strange young girls
Strange young girls

They'd keep Shelly from his poet-ry
 They'd keep Nelson from the war at sea,
 They'd keep Longford from pornography
 That's a definition of a Machonochie

Totties, judies
 Jumbo-jumpered beauties, etc. 1

Following the song, the stage direction reads:

Enter the MACHONUCHIES, in a line; FIONA,
 MARY, AND SANDRA, done up to kill, followed
 by MRS. MACHONUCHIE, and then MR. MACHONUCHIE.
 They line up impassive, to watch the sports. 2

At the same time there is much humorous stage business, such as the running race in which most of the participants are focusing on Fiona, Mary, and Sandra Machonochie (who have just arrived). Yorry then continues with his narration, which is autobiographical, and after the Machonochies leave, Willie adds his viewpoint, in effect shedding light on events which Yorry cannot know. Hence, this multi-faceted narration adds "realism" to the action in the sense that the audience knows more about the reality of the situation than it would had the story simply been dramatised without the given viewpoints of these two characters.

¹John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.5.

²Ibid.

In an episode which at first seems unrelated to what has occurred thus far, Daffyd tells a gory tale of Sweeny, the ancient Irish King, which is not only heavily socialistic in its implications, but also emphatically critical of atrocities committed in the name of Christianity. This is one of many examples which occur throughout the play of McGrath's view of Christianity as an instrument used by capitalism to keep the working-classes in their place.¹

Following Daffyd's story, Willy and Yorry continue the narration of the action, which in essence concerns Yorry's romantic attachment to one of the Machonochie girls. Much of Yorry's romantic feeling is expressed in the song "I Found Out Love." The song is punctuated by the distant singing of a Welsh hymn by Yorry's father and a speech in poetic form by Daffyd before the scene ends.

At this juncture it might be useful to consider the striking contrast between McGrath's technique thus far and that of his earlier work. In Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun and Bakke's Night of Fame, for instance, McGrath's purpose is to involve his audience in a gripping dramatisation of reality, a reality which discloses how some of the more unpleasant yet less obvious aspects of the capitalist

¹For a similar attitude towards Christianity, see the analysis of Yobbo Nowt, pp.460-462 below.

structure have affected individual people, particularly working-class people. Insofar as the action of these plays is presented in the traditional mimetic manner of realistic sets and actors acting out their roles in the present, they are conventional in structure, even though their subject matter might be considered topical or even radical. A strong political viewpoint is advanced in both plays, and in both cases much of the existential philosophy prevailing at that time is expressed through the characters (we have shown that both O'Rourke and Bakke may be justifiably considered existential anti-heroes).

Fish in the Sea, on the other hand, makes no attempt at this kind of realism. On the contrary, McGrath has deliberately organised his material in a way which tends to destroy verisimilitude and, hence, mimesis, and replace it with a double-edged commentary on both aesthetics and politics. The characters are not the intense, desperate, representative anti-heroes of the earlier plays (although certainly a connection may be made with the character of Andy); generally they are ordinary working-class people leading ordinary working-class lives. Indeed, the actors slip in and out of their roles with ease, at times demonstrating the character in the Brechtian manner, at other times talking as actors to the audience in the presentational manner of Copeau, completely abandoning the guise of character. As they

do in Piscator's drama, the actors represent the essence of particular social classes, expressing social and economic attitudes, rather than psychological differences. In this sense, the interaction of characters "represents" the relationship between social classes. For this reason, not the stereotypical characters but the development of the historical action now becomes the real substance of the play. McGrath differs in this from Piscator, as has been shown, only insofar as his focus on social classes depicts particular events at particular times in history. Never, as far as can be determined, do these social classes as presented carry with them any sense of universality. Hence, as Manfred Wekwerth advocated, McGrath's theatre depicts truthfully the process of people pursuing their objectives.¹ McGrath's purpose in distinguishing these particular social relationships is to help build in the community the strength needed for wider change, hence not only depicting society but also creating it. In addition to this method of presenting the material, McGrath intermittently interrupts the action with stage "business," jokes, and songs, giving the general impression more of an entertainment than a serious presentation of

¹Manfred Wekwerth, "Questions concerning Brecht," Re-interpreting Brecht: his influence on contemporary drama and film, eds. Pia Kleber and Colin Visser, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.24.

reality. Insofar as this is, in fact, a "serious" representation - or presentation - of reality, his methods facilitate a crossing the line between "high" art ("serious" drama) and "low" art (entertainment). As has been seen,¹ this is important for acceptance by a working-class audience who are only too familiar with working-class reality and are, consequently, more interested in "a good night out" than any simulation of reality. Nonetheless, McGrath's focus on the working class and also on working-class issues evokes concerns associated with Erwin Piscator's "documentary theatre."² To be sure, the Machonochie's story is a fictional one, but the depiction of working-class conditions and capitalist abuses is real enough and presented "not as hitherto, an aesthetic evaluation of the world but a conscious will to change it."³

Scene II opens by disclosing how the relationships between the members of the Machonochie family are affected by their working-class status. When Derek appears in a police cadet uniform, Mrs. Machonochie turns to the audience and says:

¹This has been evidenced in The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil and is also addressed in the later analysis of Yobbo Nowt.

²See pp.58-61 above.

³James Roose-Evans, Experimental Theatre: from Stanislavsky to Peter Brook 3rd ed., (New York: Universe Books, 1984), p.66.

Mrs. Machonochie: I'll have to give him confidence.
 He always lacked confidence, did Derek.
 (To Derek) Very smart, isn't it? Turn around. 1

This is a way of involving the audience, of explaining the reasons for the action and demonstrating it. It creates a real relationship between the actor and the audience in Copeau's sense, instead of the artificial one of an actor pretending to be someone else somewhere else, as if the audience were not there. The actor's acknowledgement of the audience and, by extension, the whole process of the theatrical enterprise is, from one point-of-view, more open and honest, a technique based on the assumption that such openness and honesty will foster audience confidence in the actor's integrity. The political implications of such an approach are obvious and have been well documented by Steve Gooch,² although the roots of the method may be seen to go back to Brecht and Piscator.³

The domestic scene which opens Scene II is followed by a musical interlude at the dance hall featuring an anti-capitalist song called "Dance the Up and Down," a satiric

¹John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.14.

²Steve Gooch, All Together Now, (London: Methuen, 1984), pp.75-77.

³See p.74 above.

piece reflecting the problems of working-class factory life, but also facilitating the pairing-off of the Machonochie girls with their respective partners. Specifically, the scene focuses on Mary and a sardonic character named Andy. The tension between the two and the action to come is underscored by the song "Loving is Dangerous," sung by Mary.

Subsequently, while the set is being changed within view of the audience, Willy comes on stage and explains directly to the audience how the scene is considered complicated, and the audience tends to suspect that he is referring not only to the human relationships. Willy then elaborates on how Yorry, now a student at the university, has fallen in love with his memory of Mary. Following Yorry's recitation of a poem to the moon, the audience is treated to a piece of stage business involving the new stage set, a high hedge with three gateways cut into it running across the stage. The given directions are as follows:

At the end of the poem FIONA comes in wrapped round VINNY. There follows a short, sharp farcical sequence involving the three gateways and the hedge. Yorry dashes into Gateway 1, to hide. FIONA and VINNY drift into it. Yorry emerges, bedraggled, having crawled across two gardens, from Gateway 2. As he does so, SANDRA and WILLY come on from the other side - he dashes back in. 1

¹John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.22.

Hence, in the space of only a minute or two, the audience has been exposed to an ominous song, a deliberately visual scene change, a complete break in verisimilitude when an actor drops his "mask" to talk directly to them about the process of what is happening on stage, the recitation of a lyrical love poem, and a sequence of physical comedy which cunningly advances the plot. Clearly, McGrath has veered sharply from the rather sombre early plays to what might justifiably be termed "an entertainment." While recalling Apollinaire's plea for, among other things, music, dance, burlesque, acrobatics, and comedy, such an entertainment is far more responsive, I think, to work being done in the United States by, for instance, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, than to the European theatre of the time.¹ Nonetheless, the fragmentation and quick cutting of scenes results in the disturbance of certain theatrical boundaries, for example those between actor and audience, between character and audience and between actor and character. The disturbance suggests theatricality turning in on itself to engage problems of artistic representation itself. No longer is the performance itself excluded from the totality of meaning; rather, as Brecht saw,² meaning is

¹The San Francisco Mime Troupe was itself profoundly influenced by Brecht. Early in its existence it staged an adaption of Brecht's The Mother.

²See pp.79-80 above.

expanded by the confrontation between the progression of events and the performative method of relating that progression. In this way, both the events and the narrative depicting them become objects for consideration. With the performer now the object of the theatrical performance, the performance itself can go beyond the performer and question the causal grounds for his actions.

Yorry, meanwhile, sings "Lonely as the Dark Side of the Moon," and this song "takes off into space fantasy and builds very big, then crashes down back to Yorry, lonely."¹

Interspersed with this variety of entertainment, however, is a dialogue between Mr. Machonochie and Willy which demonstrates the extent to which the British worker is held firmly in the grip of the capitalist "machine":

Willy: I do need the money though. I mean,
me and Sandra's got to get somewhere, haven't
we?

Mr. Machonochie: It's normal, if you're getting
married, but it's not essential.

Willy: We're nowhere on the Corporation waiting-
list, and they've knocked down all the little
houses, and flats cost a bomb.

Mr. Machonochie: Don't get downhearted, young
love will see you through.

¹John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.24.

Willy: The money at this place is ridiculous.

Mr. Machonochie: Yeh, Robertson's only paying himself forty thousand this year.

Willy: Is that right? The fellers were saying he's going to sell up, plant, trade, order-books, even us.

Mr. Machonochie: Who said that?

Willy: Jacky.

Mr. Machonochie: He's right. Consolidated Metals of America are buying us out for over a quarter of a million.

Willy: Do we get a slice, like on a transfer fee?

Mr. Machonochie: We get bugger all. In fact, less than bugger all: Consolidated Metals owns tin-mines in Bolivia, steel-works in Venezuela. Compared with what they pay out there, they'll reckon we're on the gravy train. And if we cause trouble, bang, closed, like Courtaulds. I wonder whether George Brown still reckons he's a socialist? ¹

Mr. Machonochie attempts to persuade Willy to go on strike, the scene being presented in a realistic manner to which a working-class audience might respond; yet McGrath never allows the scene to become so realistic that it has the power to depress its audience; on the contrary, Yorry enters dressed as a young student militant and makes a speech which is at least as ironically critical of socialist propaganda and

¹John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.31.

futility as it is of the capitalist structure it ostensibly targets. Yorry is supposed to be speaking to an imaginary group of students, but in fact the actor playing Yorry is making his political points in a demonstration directly to the audience:

Comrades! The time has come for the working-class of this country to hurl off the yoke of centuries of oppression and degradation. But how can they, seduced as they are by the momentary improvements in their standard of living, blinded as they are by the dubious joys of television and the lies of the bourgeois press, unless we, the student vanguard, go down and open their eyes and turn their struggles for wages into struggles that raise the ultimate question - the question of political power? They must rise up, force the sleepy heads of the TUC into calling a General Strike, now, and bring down this shameful, corrupt government of moneylenders and march into Whitehall tomorrow holding the reins of the power machine, grabbing capitalism by the throat and demanding Power for the People?

(To audience) After a childhood and youth spent in mortal terror of a worker so much as knocking on the door, I had suddenly clutched their cause to my bosom with all the fervour of Hercules holding up the sky on his back while Atlas went off to do the dirty work for him. Meanwhile, in reality . . . 1

The scene then shifts to Willy at a factory machine with Mr. Machonochie insisting that he come out on strike. Then the

¹John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), pp.31-32.

focus moves back to Yorry:

Comrades, the hour draws near. As the historical crisis of British imperialism matures to the point of irresistible conflict, every so-called debate in parliament becomes in fact a dialogue between the Tory and Labour bankrupts on how to meet the resistance of the working-class most effectively. There is no doubt, there can be no doubt at all that the Don Quixotes of Toryism would long ago have impaled themselves on the windmills of working-class militancy if it weren't for the Sancho Panzas of reformism.

(To audience) The language was getting a bit more fancy every time I opened my mouth. The funny thing was, the more I said, the more powerful I became as a champion of the workers, the further I got away from them. Christ, even behind the locked doors of my childhood at least I had a relationship with the working-class: pure terror. At this time in my life the working-class was no longer a lot of people I lived in the middle of and inescapably knew: it was an object of pure fantasy. It came to replace the moon of my teenage poetry. And like the moon, the distant contemplation of it drove men mad. ¹

Following this, the relationship between Mary Machonochie and Andy is developed, an episode which ultimately leads to a piece of stage "business" in which Andy performs a musical on-stage quick change and, after receiving a rifle, marches off with a UDA military contingent. If the audience finds the

¹John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), pp.32-33.

rapid cutting from one episode or set of relationships to another somewhat fragmentary, McGrath's reason for the procedure is clarified by Mr. Machonochie's next line:

Mr. Machonochie: Bits and pieces of what was happening to us.

Willy: We'd got no idea where they were going, where we were going. We weren't going anywhere. Nothing, actually, was happening.

Mr. Machonochie: My lad joining the police. Mary's feller getting the push, going to Ireland to support the Rangers.

Yorry: Me, zooming off into a student's fantasy-land.

Willy: Me, supposed to be settling down. Preparing to be a dutiful husband.

Yorry: Then, one day, I decided quite suddenly to stop having fantasies, and do something. (The other TWO go off). In the middle of last year I got overpoweringly sick of the endless abstractions and rubbishy rhetoric of a university full of middle-class kids training to inherit the reins, and the whip of society - there I go again, I really must stop it - and to piss off out of it and do an honest day's work. I never was going to benefit greatly from the further study of French and German, anyway. I went home to tell my dad. 1

This short episode may be seen as referring to the play's title, for central to the organisation of McGrath's material

¹John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.35.

is an idea taken from Mao's analogy of the Party or Front as the head and body of a fish, and the population as the water through which it moves. In his introduction to the play McGrath cites Brigadier Frank Kitson, the British Army "counter-insurgency" expert:

If the fish has got to be destroyed, it can be attacked directly by rod or net . . . But if rod and net cannot succeed by themselves, it may be necessary to do something to the water which will force the fish into a position where it can be caught. Conceivably it might be necessary to kill the fish by polluting the water . . . the first aim of those involved in counter-subversion is to gain control of the people, because in most cases this is a necessary prelude to destroying the enemy's forces - and in any case it is the ultimate reason for doing so. 1

With this in mind the audience begins to realise that McGrath's method of disclosing reality, while fragmented, is a particularly truthful one in the sense that it addresses and examines many disparate aspects of reality in order to come to some bedrock of truth about that reality even if at first the fragments of human life seem unconnected. This appears to be a more accurate and therefore more convincing method of

¹John McGrath, Introduction to Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.ii., citing Frank Kitson's Low Intensity Operations: Subversions, Insurgency, and Peace-Keeping, (1971).

depicting reality than the old mimetic method of the conventional "realistic" stage because it simulates how the truth of reality usually reaches us - not as a sudden epiphany of life but in the disparate shreds and shards of varied experience until the totality of knowledge yields up something which we consider Truth. In this sense McGrath's technique here is at once viable and justified and, although employing methods which may at first seem inappropriate to "legitimate" theatre, more realistic. This seems a long way from the unity which Craig and Appia had intended, but in what way is such work postmodernist? One reason is that it is marked by an eclectic historicism, in which old and new styles and modes are reappropriated and recycled. Yet the use of pastiche tends to deprive styles not only of specific context but also of historical sense. "History" appears reified, fragmented, fabricated - in short, theatricalised. This self-referential theatricality, constantly reminding the audience of the illusory and hence transformable nature of the world, creates an awareness of the theatricality of life itself. Throughout the play, fragmentary scenes, clusters of images, and disconnected fragments of songs serve as metaphors for a theatrical reality which can only be engaged subjectively. The modernist theatre of Ibsen, Chekhov and Strindberg created an illusion of reality to "seduce" the audience into involvement; Craig, Appia, Piscator and Brecht attempted in

their various ways to draw a distinction between illusion and reality. John McGrath and the 7:84 Company, it seems to me, have tried to deconstruct the distinction between illusion and reality by recognising illusion as a central element in self-formation, in grasping the reality of subject and objects. As Elizabeth Wright explains, "The come-back of illusion as a 'normal' concomitant of perception is the central contribution of the postmodernist theatre, opening the way for a politics of postmodernism."¹ The technique also permits McGrath to depict many aspects of working-class life which interest him: working-class idealism, the struggle for a better life amidst humiliation and degradation, a working-class view of Christianity, the hypocrisy of the British socialist movement, and the situation of working-class women, to name a few. This sexist issue is underscored when Mary says:

Men. They think all they've got to do is put their arm round you, breathe their stinking breath up your nose, whisper a few corny phrases, fumble for your tits, and bingo, you'll satisfy their every whim. Once that's all over, and you're lumbered with them for life, all you've got is cooking and washing and ironing - you're supposed to be a lovely, warm, kind person that everybody loves - mum. Mum's the word. 2

¹Elizabeth Wright, Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation, (London: Routledge, 1989), p.52.

²John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.40.

As a continuation of Mary's line of thinking, Mrs. Machonochie who is mashing potatoes, says:

Mash, you buggers, mash. If I'd put you in ten minutes earlier you'd just melt, wouldn't you? I ought to give 'em that powder potato, they never notice the difference except some nosey parker'd find the packet in the bin and suddenly scream they'd been poisoned. One thing about having babies inside you, at least you stuff down yourself what you fancy, and they can't complain: but once they cut that cord - oh mother, they never stop letting you know. 1

The similarity between women and potatoes is nicely defined when Fiona enters:

Mary: Conned again?

Fiona: Yeh, conned again.

(They go off. MRS. MACHONOCHIE scrutinizes the potatoes.)

Mrs. Machonochie: You take a person. You peel her off. You cook her till she's all soft. You drain her off. (viciously) Then you mash her. 2

Mrs. Machonochie further defines their situation when she

¹John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.40.

²Ibid., p.41.

says:

Trouble with you lot is you don't know what
you want. You spend half your life chasing
fellers, and the other half moaning 'cos
you caught one. Where's your independence?
Where's your dignity? 1

Finally, the veracity of Mrs. Machonochie's observation is
reinforced by a song sung by the Machonochie sisters:

Drifting
Drifting

Anyway
The wind blows 2

Immediately following the scene, the focus switches to an
episode which depicts capitalist manipulation:

Mr. Machonochie: We're out on strike again.
Sandra: Oh no.
Willy: Yes, love. Nothing else to be done.
Mr. Machonochie: We were due to get the pay
rise today, the one we had the last strike
over. Pay packets exactly the same as last

¹John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto
Press Ltd., 1977), p.43.

²Ibid., p.42.

week. Except they had a little note in them, saying: Dear Employee, As from yesterday this enterprise is under the control of Consolidated Metals of America, Inc, whom I am sure you will serve with the same loyalty and devotion as you have served me. For the moment they find themselves unable to ratify our most recent pay agreements, so for the time being they would ask you to accept wages at their normal rate. I wish you all much happiness under the new management, Yours F. Robertson.

Mary: They can't do that.

Mr. Machonochie: They've done it. 1

The scene is underscored by a song which serves as a commentary on the action:

FISH IN THE SEA

Little sharks
In the sea
Live on fish
Like you and me
As we glide
All around
And we hear
Not a sound
Through the strange
Green light
We move left
We move right
The Fish in the Sea
The Fish in the Sea 2

¹John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), pp.43-44.

²Ibid., p.44.

Here at a typical moment of crisis in working-class life, Act I ends. The audience is left "hanging," wondering what will happen to the various relationships between Yorry and his father, between Mary and Andy, between Sandra and Willy, between Fiona and Vince, and between Mr. Machonochie and the company for which he works.

The play thus far has reached a point where fragmentation and montage appear to be the rule rather than the exception. Rather than return to representation, the play is a critique in which representation is shown to be more constitutive of reality than transparent to it. As a result, the audience, as they watch events on stage, appear to focus as much on the form of representation as on what is being ostensibly represented. They are, in effect, seeing real acts in real time, as well as a fictionalising of past events in the present. Hence, again, the postmodern double view in which the spectator can no longer rely on a clear demarcation between "creative" drama on the one hand and "critical" drama on the other. This is the sense in which I see much of McGrath's work as less of a representation than a textual site in which questions about representation are asked and explored

Act II begins when Yorry says:

Suddenly I found myself in the presence
of a real, live strike: sitting in the heart
of a family of strikers. The great names
of the past resounded in my ears, Lenin,

Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Gramsci, the Petrograd Workers' Councils, Connolly, the Wobblies, Joe Hill; the events of Paris in sixty-eight seemed about to blossom into a genuinely worker-based uprising on my very doorstep. The theoretical outpourings of my university days all, suddenly, seemed about to move into vital living relationship with a real struggle. The point of praxis had been reached. Unfortunately nobody else seemed very excited about it. 1

The immanent strike has created a tense situation for Sandra, who has to get married and wants a big wedding. A conflict between idealism (striking) and the real need for money is realistically depicted and this leads to another speech directly to the audience by Yorry:

It all seemed so far from the spirit of nineteen hundred and five, and nineteen seventeen. I thought about Che Guevara in the Bolivian jungle, of the Chinese on their Long March, of Gramsci dying in prison: it didn't seem to be the same universe. At one point it looked as if they were going to go back to work and suffer defeat at the hands of the American imperialists, so their Sandra could have a white wedding. 2

After Sandra has sung her pathetic plea for a white wedding, the audience learns from Willy what eventually happened:

¹John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.48.

²Ibid., p.49.

But we didn't go back to work. And Sandra compromised: she wore an off-white satin suit, and went to the Registry Office by taxi, and we got the back-room at the "Legs of Man", where you could buy your own beer and they let Mrs. Machonochie bring her own sandwiches and trifles in paper cases, and the lads had a whip-round for us and somehow scraped up forty quid, and it brought tears to my eyes. If anything made me determined, that was it. Even Sandra felt a bit different after that. ¹

At this point, as the Machonochies sit idle in their living room, Yorry addresses the audience directly:

Basically Bernstein thought he could revise Marx; I suppose for two reasons: one, because obviously capitalism has started operating with a bit more subtlety, and was giving far more concessions to the organised working class in the way of wages and fringe benefits, and secondly, because it looked as if the whole working class was getting the vote at elections. On a simple numerical calculation, Bernstein reckoned that there were more workers than bosses, so the revolution would immediately come at the next General Election. But Marx knew all about those developments, of course. As Rosa Luxemburg clearly pointed out, better wages don't alter the basic structure of capitalist society, with one class exploiting the labour of another, accumulating more and more capital from the profit. Equally, as Gramsci showed time and again, the bourgeois state would never open its institutions, like parliament, to the masses, unless it had already converted

¹John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.50.

those institutions into means of repressing the masses. Bernstein was fundamentally using devious, and wrong, arguments to re-write Marx because he was terrified of revolution. And from his fear and that of the corrupt Second International, sprang all the Western social democratic parties that have divided the working-class of Europe, bolstered up the power of capital, and screwed up revolution ever since: from Ebert in Germany, who allowed Rosa Luxemburg to be clubbed to death with a rifle-butt, to Harold Wilson and the Labour Party: who are capable of far, far worse. ¹

McGrath has here allowed the character of Yorry - or rather the actor behind the character - to present a history lesson directly to the audience, supplying important historical information which will permit the audience to consider the material in an historical context and make comparisons, not only between the given information and the situations in the play, but also between the given information and their own real-life situations. McGrath's technique is, in effect, at the service of political praxis. At the same time, the flashbacks and fragments of human life, the facts and figures of capitalist abuse, the specific references to actual historical evidence, accumulate into a panorama of working-class experience, both personal and public, as if seeing life through both ends of a telescope, the big picture

¹John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.51.

and the little picture. This is an altogether broader spectrum of vicarious experience than that presented in the traditional theatre. In Fish in the Sea the audience feels the push/pull in and out of dramatic space and time, which tends to add a politico-historic richness and depth to the consciousness of events depicted, instead of follow their simple cause-and-effect linear development. In this sense "realism" appears to be a paradox, for the less "realistic" the presentation, the closer to reality the meanings of the play apparently become. This, as I have tried to show in Chapter One, reflects the general progression of modern theatre away from realism in its effort to grasp the "real" itself. For Craig and Appia this progression involved a concern with essences, "the spirit of the thing." For Piscator and Brecht it concerned a depiction of dialectical contradictions within society in order to unmask reality. Similarly, McGrath's theatre has moved away from a representation of the real toward the real itself.

Next the action switches to a development in the Mary/Andy relationship. Andy, an Irish-Protestant sympathiser, has planted a bomb in a barroom, and people have been killed. Now Andy is evading the police and asks Mary for sanctuary. But Mary, though still fascinated by if not attracted to him, refuses to help a killer. Nonetheless, she agrees to meet him the following night.

Immediately, the scene again changes to the interior of the factory where Mr. Hackett, the factory manager, is caught stealing spare parts (the corrupting influence of capitalism). This incident inspires Willy to sing a song which really isn't a song in the traditional sense but rather a political commentary on the action. Far more than serving as mere "entertainment" value, McGrath's songs often have the functional purpose of making a character statement, extending and bolstering visual effects past the boundaries of the stage, supplying comic punctuation, and reiterating the style of a scene or even the whole play. In Willy's song the character is given a chance to reflect aloud and enunciate ideas which risk being too simple in straight speech. At the same time the song is an economical way of conveying thought and feelings about matters which could be depressing and tedious to a working-class audience had they been presented dramatically. The "entertainment," in effect, has a political purpose:

Willy: (Sings) They own this rotten workshop
 but we earn them their dough,
 And when we want some for ourselves, they'll
 say we have to go.
 There's labour cheap and well-controlled,
 they say, in Franco's Spain:
 Why don't they go and have a look, and not
 come back again.

All: A boss, a boss, who'd ever trust a boss,
 etc.

Willy: Your multi-national leaders, can swing
 from state to state,

If profit's bad in England, then they won't
hesitate
To chuck us on the dole-queue, and bugger
off to France;
Will Mr. Wilson stop them? - there's not
a bloody chance.

All: A boss, a boss, who'd ever trust a boss,
etc. 1

Shortly after this song, Yorry complicates the plot even further by confessing his love to Mary. Almost in the same breath, he explains his political intentions:

I'm going to do quite a lot too. I don't know exactly what yet - but I'm ready for anything. I want the movement to spread, across the whole of Merseyside, the whole of the North of England, join up with what's going on in Scotland, and declare a Workers' Republic and cut off everything south of Nottingham 'till [sic] the reactionary forces of the South are so weakened by uprising among the workers of Bristol, South Wales and London that they capitulate without a shot being fired, then we encircle Birmingham: the last bastion of reaction; take it, and the country becomes a federation of Soviet republics, Scotland, Wales, the North, the West, the Midlands, the South-East and the East, with the capital in Manchester; and individual parliaments in each republic. So the factory councils and the area councils and the local branches of the political organisations can have their say, and really run the country. And the universities will only operate for six months in the year -

¹John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.62.

they don't do much more anyway - the other six months, everybody in them, staff and all, will spread out and work, among the people. And those who are to go to university will be elected by the others at their work-place, or in their commune - just like in China after the Cultural Revolution - what do you think about that? 1

Yorry's speech exhibits an admirable idealism, but one which an astute audience is quick to recognise as impractical, ambiguous, and, in this post-glasnost era, probably futile. Presumably McGrath is at once expressing a need by the frustrated individual in search of self-fulfillment for militant organisation by the working class; at the same time the speech expresses the shallow optimism of self-appointed leaders of the working class. Yet Yorry had once written poetry to Mary, and when she asks "What happened to those poems you talked about?" he is forced to answer, "The ones I wrote to you? I'm not a real poet, I burnt them. No loss to literature."2

Despite ambitious idealism of this kind, the strike grinds on, and as it does so the funds run out. A scene between Willy and Mr. Machonochie explains the development:

Willy: So the occupation wore on, month after month.

¹John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), pp.63-64.

²Ibid., p.64.

Mr. Machonochie: The strike fund ran out. The unions wanted a settlement, because they were running out. The only people who didn't seem to give a bugger were Consolidated Metals of America. They never even showed up. Nobody.

Willy: I went with some of the lads down to their other castings place, at Stoubridge outside Birmingham. We knew they didn't recognise any unions there, but we were a bit taken aback by what happened. We went along at dinner time, to get to talk to them, tried to call a meeting outside the gates - but the manager locked them in. Locked the bloody gates. We managed to talk to one or two of the lads through the wire - they told us we were woistin out toime - then a couple of older blokes came along and told us to bugger off. So we did. I tell you - Birmingham.

Mr. Machonochie: It was getting a bit hard on some of our fellers though - them with young families, or big rents, or HP to keep up, or all three together. The local shops round us were fantastic - they had to send to Blaenau Ffestiniog for more slates. Slipped the wives packets of this, that and the other. But we'd vanished out of the news, nobody was interested. Things looked bad. ¹

Here McGrath is demonstrating just one of the many injustices perpetrated by capitalism on working-class people. The scene satirises socialism as it is represented by the British Labour Party when three Labour MPs in suits sing:

Band: Three Labour MPs
Looking for someone to please

¹John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.66.

If anyone's going to lose us a fight,
 It's three Labour MPs.
 Three MPs: We will give you pie in the sky
 And you can watch it flying by -
 If you'll votey, votey, votey, votey,
 If you'll vote for us.
 Band: Three Labour MPs,
 Oh what a disease -
 If ever the bosses are shaking with fright,
 Get three Labour MPs. 1

Essentially, McGrath's purpose is to show the destructive effects of capitalism on one working-class family, and in this respect Mr. Machonochie's speech is pertinent:

(To audience) All joking towards one side,
 we knew we'd had it, the minute those Labour
 MPs burst in on the act. They told us how
 clever they were being at getting questions
 asked in the House of Commons, at sucking
 up to American lawyers and accountants,
 how wittily they parried the thrusts of
 the managing director over cocktails - but
 it was perfectly obvious they's come to
 get us back to work at any price. But the
 lads were getting desperate, and prepared
 to fall for it. So negotiations began,
 led by our fearless head office negotio-crats.
 And life went on. I got worried about the
 missus, me being out nights so much. And
 the missus got worried about Mary - her
 being out nights so much. 2

Meanwhile, Andy, pursued by the police, continues to

¹John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), pp.66-67.

²Ibid., p.67.

pester Mary. When Mary complains to her mother, Mrs. Machonochie replies:

No reason to let it happen to you as well. They're geniuses at passing the burden on to some poor woman: that's what they think we're for, really: holding their head, taking the blame for the world they've made such a mess of. ¹

When Derek returns in the middle of the night, it becomes clear that he is now a plain-clothes detective looking for Andy. When, subsequently, Mary and Andy appear together, Andy expresses his alienation in a powerful speech before the two of them separate forever:

I'm not afraid of prison - that's nothing, nothing at all - like going out - nothing to worry about. Until you stop worrying about things like that, you can't begin to live. The most difficult thing we've got to do, is to get in contact with what we really desire: that's difficult. You can find yourself wanting to piss in the street - away you go, piss in the street - but that's nothing more than wanting to break the rules: you can get used to pissing in the street, pissing in the parlour - there's no more to it than doing it. You can get to want to take a few risks - shoot a few soldiers, blow up a few pubs - but you get used to taking those risks. You're

¹John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.69.

[sic] whole life's a bloody risk. But at least you're out of the risk of dying alive through sheer bloody slavery. It's only when you don't mind dying, don't mind getting put away for a lunatic or a criminal, you get to feel what maybe you really want. And do you know what it is I really want? Just one other person on the earth to feel the same. Freedom. That's what it is. I can walk, I can fly, I can play snowballs with fire, I can spit in the eye of the sun and the moon, I can dig with my hands through to Australia: but without one other person, I can't love. Without you, how can I love? I want to know what loving means. 1

Andy's speech reveals much about the desperate situation of the frustrated man locked into working-class limitation and its consequent lack of freedom. McGrath has focused on such characters before.² Apparently to these types such limitation and lack of freedom are unacceptable and express themselves in rejection of societal norms, alienation, violence, and a ready acceptance of death.

In contrast, the scene changes to Mr. Machonochie reminiscing about his life and his disillusion under various Labour governments. Now he wonders if the new generation - as represented by Willy and Yorry - will be determined enough to

¹John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.73-74.

²O'Rourke in Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun and Bakke.

make the change. After a short scene in which Yorry reaffirms his socialist values by giving away his late father's house to Willy and Sandra, we hear that Andy has gone beserk and, in a fit of violence, broken all the windows in the Machonochie household. When Andy corners all of them in the local church, his attitude is distinctly iconoclastic:

Andy: I want to behave this way. I want to
break into this House of God and terrorise
people, because I'm sick of people being
so bloody reasonable. ¹

When Andy threatens Yorry with a pistol, he is overcome by force. He is disarmed, and Mary refuses to accompany him. Desperate and betrayed, Andy leaves, and Mary and Yorry are drawn closer:

Yorry: Mary.
(He takes her hand. She lets him.)
We'll be all right.
(She bites his hand. He watches her. After
she stops.)
Stay with me. I can try to look after you.
Mary: I want a baby, and I want to go.
Yorry: Go?

¹John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.79.

Mary: On my own, with the baby.

Yorry: I want you to stay, with me.

Mary: I'd be just as much on my own.

Yorry: We can try.

Mary: (shrugs) We can try. 1

That, in essence, is the end of the play; if the audience wonders what the meaning of the action is, Mr. Machonochie and Willy come on stage to clarify the significance, or perhaps the futility, of the action:

Mr. Machonochie: They never did catch him. His sort always get away with it; they're always on the loose. We didn't know what to make of it. It all goes on, life, as before, without any connections. Exploring, the same country, without a map or even a memory.

Willy: The union leaders and the new bosses came to some sort of agreement. An extra thirty bob on the pay, five pence an hour extra on the overtime, no extra holidays and the same hours. But they strung it out until the wages freeze, so nobody's getting it anyway. The one bit they didn't freeze was chucking me and Mr. Mac on the dole. He got a bit of redundancy payment, I hadn't been there long enough: I got shown the door. It had been agreed at a high level: twenty per cent to go. And in six months, the lot of them will be out, the

¹John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.81.

works will be knocked down, and the land sold for development.

Mr. Machonochie: Not making any maps, for those who come after us: scattering bits and pieces of our skin and bone down the back-alleys of our minds. Leaving them to rot, for the dogs to wrangle over. 1

What McGrath has done here, in very specific and personal terms, is to analyse and define the abuses of capitalism on the ordinary working-class person. This is an ongoing thing. As Yorry and Willy further explain:

Yorry: After the settlement, I read in the Wall Street Journal that Consolidated Metals of America were planning to rationalise their European production. The work that Robertson's had been producing was going to be done in Germany, and transported in great big containers all over the Common Market. Capitalism was changing: the question was: were we going to change with it - fast enough, big enough and well enough organised to catch up with it?

Willy: They'd worked a flanker on us again. They weren't going to win, in the end. But how were we going to learn from it? What were we going to remember ourselves from all that lot? 2

At the end, as becomes so abundantly and regrettably

¹John McGrath, Fish in the Sea, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.82.

²Ibid.

clear, nothing has changed. Life goes on as before, but as McGrath shows it is a dangerous world to introduce to a new generation of workers:

Mr. Machonochie: Sandra had her baby. He didn't look like anybody we knew so she called him Alexander.

Sandra: God knows what sort of a world we'd brought him in to. All these buggers did was argue.

Willy: It's always the same, love, when you've lost a match.

Mrs. Machonochie: Then it's time you started winning, isn't it?

Mr. Machonochie: Yes.

The answer to the question of how people like the Machonochies can win is not given directly, but the play itself, giving up its autonomy to a political function, points to the practice of interference by its critique of official representations as it crosses the frontier between illusion and reality. John Berger speaks of alternative uses of informational modes such as photography sharing with sociology and positivism:

. . . what they shared was the hope that observable quantifiable facts, recorded by experts, would constitute the proven truth that humanity required. Precision would replace metaphysics; planning would resolve conflicts. What happened, instead, was that the way was opened to a view of the world in which everything and everybody

could be reduced to a factor in a calculation,
and the calculation was profit. 1

Edward W. Said declares that this is, in fact, how much of the world is represented, a tiny minority of oligarchies controlling approximately ninety percent of the world's information and communication flows, affiliated with an even smaller number of governments.² The rhetoric of objectivity, balance, realism and freedom goes on while such commodified items such as "the news" convey ideological images of the world to determine political reality for a vast majority of the world's population, untouched by interfering secular and critical forces. Fish in the Sea tries to break out of "the disciplinary ghettos in which as intellectuals we have been confined, to reopen the blocked social processes ceding objective representation (hence power) of the world to a small coterie of experts and their clients."³ Its implied criticism of official modes of information and representation point to a theatre of interference in which the accepted forms

¹John Berger, "Another Way of Telling," Journal of Social Reconstruction 1 (January-March 1980): p.64.

²Edward W. Said, "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community," The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster, (Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1991), p.157.

³Ibid., p.158.

of modernism are deconstructed in order to recover a history previously either misrepresented or rendered invisible. McGrath's implied opposition to modernist ideology, though indebted to theorists such as Craig, Appia, Piscator and Brecht, in no way reverts to a pre-modernist theatrical ethic; on the contrary, its turning-in on itself, through the use of pastiche, to question its own modes of representation place it in a postmodernist realm of opposition to those forces which would keep us all in our assigned places.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS TEXTS - 2

Yobbo Nowt

McGrath's play, Yobbo Nowt (1978) attempts to set in dialectical motion the need for a militant organisation by the frustrated working-class person in search of self-fulfillment. The play concerns Marie Arnold, "a nobody" (the meaning of the title) with two children and an unfaithful husband, a working-class woman trapped inside her acceptance of her own domesticity. McGrath's immediate task is to establish the audience's understanding, in a detached, critical way, of the quality of Marie's life. McGrath, however, does not present us with an exact and literal portrayal of working-class life which could so easily become a major depressant to a working-class audience who know those conditions only too well. Through imagination McGrath appeals to the fantasy and energy of the audience to go beyond present conditions and accept a vision of a changed world. For example, the play begins with Marie's ballad in which she

explains that "she's a nobody - a yobbo nowt."¹ The song, of course, serves as an effective means of addressing the audience directly and as a pleasant and entertaining diversion from actual reality which, for some members of the audience, will be, perhaps, working-class reality. But immediately following, Marie says to the audience:

Hell, I must get moving. (Tries) I can't.
I'm knackered. (Tries teapot - it's cold,
but she pours another cup, and doesn't drink
it) Even the tea's got no warmth left in
it. And the fire wouldn't light this morning.
And the bacon's all froze together like
stripey toothpaste. 2

Speaking directly to the audience, the publicness of the occasion is acknowledged and shared in a common forum or, as Steve Gooch has called it, "the floor of the house."³ Provided such a scene is rooted in a recognisable and convincing view of reality, as Theodor Adorno has advised,⁴ its vision can offer a persuasive account of a changed world.

¹John McGrath, Yobbo Nowt, (London: Pluto Press, 1978), pp.1-3.

²Ibid., p.2.

³Steve Gooch, All Together Now, (London: Methuen, 1984), p.82.

⁴Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," trans. F. McDonagh, Aesthetics and Politics, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.180. See also pp.589-590 below.

Following Marie's speech, a singer, serving as Chorus in commenting on the action, providing both new information and another viewpoint, sings:

The kids have shot off to school
Dribbling tin cans down the street
They're tactical, commanding and cool -
Einsteins with brains in their feet. . . . 1

After the song, and after Marie reprises hers, Marie says:

I'm nobody. Yobbo nowt. All the rest of
them seem to be up to something. Growing.
Learning. Flirting. Mending fuses, making
electricity hum. That's Jack - he started
off as a boilerman but he's doing night-classes
and now he's going to be an electrical fitter
in the plastics factory. He could get a
job anywhere - as long as there's electrical
juice shooting down the wires, they'll need
Jack to see it on its way. Spurt. Spurt. 2

Again Marie is talking directly to the audience, providing information (that Jack is a boilerman taking classes to improve his career) which the audience would not otherwise know, unless the information were transmitted in the contrived manner of the bourgeois stage, the actors pretending no audience were present, but that the information was just

¹John McGrath, Yobbo Nowt, (London: Pluto Press, 1978), pp.1-3.

²Ibid., p.2.

casually mentioned in the course of events. All these methods of taking the production "out" to the audience - the songs, the monologues, direct audience address, and narration - share the function of making specific, often private events, public knowledge, acknowledging the publicness of the occasion. The view that such directness in theatre is "didactic" or coercive must also assume that it is aesthetically superior to express private and social conflict obliquely and surreptitiously. McGrath's approach, however, rather than drawing an audience into a private vision of the world which creates its own "reality" (a kind of didacticism in itself), is to take out an interpretation of a wider social reality, collectively perceived, the ultimate judgement of which occurs in that halfway zone where the concerns of actors and audience are equally confronted. I recognise that McGrath's methods do not place emphasis on bodily movement in space as the exclusive focus of performance, as in the work of, say, Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, or Pina Bausch.¹ Yet when the actors of the 7:84 Company take a production "out" to the audience, exposing themselves as real people in real time confronting an audience forced to see itself seeing, they are engaging a

¹Some theorists, Elizabeth Wright or Josette Feral, for example, consider the focus on bodily movement in space the distinguishing factor in postmodern theatre. My contention is that many forms of postmodernism are necessary to counter the many modernisms against which postmodernism reacts.

performance mode equally postmodern in its subversive implications against a modernism which reinforces capitalist ideology.

In the section of Yobbo Nowt entitled "Never Be The Same," Marie briefly fills in information on her background which the audience needs to know:

It wasn't always like this. Christ, no it wasn't. I just don't know what's come over me - I think they must be right about the lead poisoning in the water - makes you lethargic, and dull, and pathetic. But the others drink the water. So it must be me. Perhaps I started life too young and I don't mean at the early age of three weeks. I mean life. I was a woman when I was twelve - them was the days. 1

Now Marie, being a forcibly domesticated, working-class mother, is not untypical of millions of others who find themselves in the same seemingly inescapable situation of domestic drudgery. McGrath makes clear that Marie's predicament, however, is as much the result of the socially constructed nature of gender distinctions as of social class. As has been explained earlier, the difficulties of this double burden are what the play is essentially about.² Although

¹John McGrath, Yobbo Nowt, (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p.3.

²See p.108 above.

McGrath avoids linking Marie's plight with a wider historical movement of ideas as Brecht might have done, his disclosure of the painful abuses to one working-class woman implies the need for such a movement of ideas.

But Marie is more than just an individual character: she is representative of many thousands of such people, but they may not form the group which attends theatre or will ever avail itself to watching this play. Yet to convey any sense of acceptable realism at all, it is necessary for Marie to speak in the colloquial language of her class. Yet the language needs, for the play's didactic purposes, to be accessible on as broad a social plane as possible. It needs to be able to "open out" to its audiences and be approachable by them. It needs to strike chords of recognition in the audience who may then - through points of sympathy and involvement with the individual characters - be led to consideration of the situation as a whole. In plays such as Yobbo Nowt and The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, where the central concern of the action focuses on a group of people (whether in the play an actual group or one person representative of the group), the unifying effect of language becomes even more crucial. The dominant "voice" of the play will be that of the working class amongst whom the play is set; since the language of each character will necessarily establish its own relation to this central norm, a common

language will be shared by most of the play's meaning. Rather than the full weight of meaning being supported by the literary and idealised dialogue of individual representatives of specific and characteristic attitudes, the dialogue can unfold more naturalistically through a succession of speeches made in the vernacular, the totality of which becomes the "voice" of that group. Nonetheless, increased use of the vernacular is further evidence of McGrath's moving beyond a modernism radically opposed to mass-media culture. To be sure, use of the vernacular provokes an examination of working-class and mass-media meanings and values and, indeed, the conventional nature of language itself. From McGrath's more postmodernist viewpoint, language is arbitrary, "truth" having been replaced by "relativity" and "legitimation." McGrath's use of the vernacular, therefore, assumes here the triple role of (1) increased audience appeal; (2) further moving beyond modernism toward a more popular front; and (3) further questioning of established representational modes of communication and belief systems based on those modes.

In the section of Yobbo Nowt called "Bedtime," the whole stage "action" is conveyed by a singer, the chorus, girls, boys, a girl singer, and all of them combined. This is effective and, perhaps, necessary since the scene concerns a night of unsatisfying sex for Marie, the only physical action on stage being Marie's exiting (goes to bed), Jack's following

her, and Marie's re-entry.

In the next section Marie has shaken herself out of the past and talks to the audience in the present. In the section called "Alma Strikes" McGrath offers another viewpoint of the situation, the point-of-view of Jack's lover, Alma. Though we may not agree with Alma, her viewpoint helps the audience to understand why she does what she does. Again, the story is carried forward through direct audience address and through the vivid imagery of Alma's song. Everything is "played out" to the audience for consideration.

In the section called "Brawn for Tea" Marie throws Jack out of the house for good, although it becomes obvious that he has suppressed Marie not from individual but from social motivations, he too being a victim of capitalist society. After a fairly conventional scene in terms of acting and presentation, a girl singer enters and, striking a mock-tragic pose, sings:

Calamity
Disaster 1

and this is followed by the chorus's comments. The singer's melodramatic pose and comments seem to offer an ironic

¹John McGrath, Yobbo Nowt, (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p.12.

commentary on the stage events, the singer being in the world of the audience rather than in the world of the stage action.

From this point on, the play is concerned essentially with Marie's efforts to survive in a capitalist society, the strategy permitting McGrath to articulate the complex problems suffered by working-class people (and in this case, particularly, a working-class woman) under capitalism. During the course of the play, McGrath makes clear that Marie's domestic problems derive from her inclusion in the largely accepted stereotype of a woman: a fundamentally passive person, emotionally unstable, devoted to a life of homemaking and motherhood. Until quite recently, this representation of fundamental "femininity" was passed off as being inescapably "natural" to women as part of their biological gender. In recent years the accomplishments of the feminist movement have defined the way in which the collusion of women in their own oppression has been accomplished precisely through representation. Theorists have argued that the traditional representations of women do not represent a biologically-given "feminine nature" which is unchangeable because it is natural; on the contrary, what women have to adapt to as their "femininity" is itself the product of representations. As a result, representations cannot be simply tested against the real as this real is itself constituted, as quotidian common-sense reality, in representations. A search for the

"truth" of the representation therefore becomes irrelevant; it is its effects which are to be questioned. This McGrath does in series of revealing episodes involving Marie. By using theatre as a political forum, he is able to explain and demonstrate things which could not be so demonstrated as effectively in a lecture hall. For example, in the section entitled "A Garden Full of Snow" Marie goes to the Labour Exchange to look for work. This is a scenario probably only too familiar to many working-class members of the audience (one imagines), but since the scene is treated comically and much of the verbal exchange expressed in song, it never becomes oppressive or mundane. On the contrary, Marie exudes so much energy in her own desire to go out and do something, as opposed to the bureaucrat David's listless response, that the irony of the contrast appears comic. Nonetheless, McGrath is able to use the scene to show the difficulties unemployed working-class people face in an impersonal and apathetic bureaucracy. David laughs when Marie expresses in song her simple but very real problem:

All I want is some cash in my hand - (he laughs)
 It's not mad -
 It's not wrong -
 and it's certainly not very funny.
 It's not very funny. 1

¹John McGrath, Yobbo Nowt, (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p.14.

Later in the scene McGrath is able, through the dialogue, to satirise one aspect of the capitalist system which results in frustration for the worker:

DAVID: You people seem to think that the capitalist system owes you a living - well it doesn't.

MARIE: Is that what it's called?

DAVID: That's right.

MARIE: And it's the best we can think of?

DAVID: Yes - sometimes it needs people, sometimes it doesn't - and when it doesn't - pht.

MARIE: But I thought it was good for everybody?

DAVID: Yes, but not all the time.

MARIE: Then it ought to be changed. I've got no money, and my kids won't have anything to eat tomorrow night, and the rent's not been paid for a fortnight - it's not on, your capitalist system, how do you go about changing it?

DAVID: (shocked, then) Well, we've thought of something for people like you. We take a lot of money from you when you are working, and give some of it back when you're not. It stops you harbouring dangerous thoughts.

MARIE: Well - do I get any?

DAVID: No. Unfortunately you don't qualify - no stamps.

MARIE: Oh for Christ's sake.

DAVID: Don't get extreme now Mrs. Arnold, be moderate in all things. We have another scheme for people like you.

MARIE: What's that?

DAVID: Social Security.

MARIE: Oh no.

DAVID: So take this form, and your blank new cards, and tell your whole story all over again to another man in another office, and he'll give you just enough money to stop you wanting to change the capitalist system. ¹

Now this kind of problem, the absurdity of a stubbornly impersonal capitalist bureaucracy, would be extremely difficult to articulate on a lecture podium; the specific human needs of actual personalities, the various shades and qualities of frustration, the sense of hopeless endeavour, of getting nowhere and that the "deck is stacked" against one, would be virtually impossible to define in any literal or powerful way. But by playing "out" to the audience, by using the stage as a public forum where such matters can be observed, considered, and understood, McGrath has presented the issue clearly and perspicaciously. It is precisely at the frontier between what can be represented and what cannot that McGrath's postmodernism is staged, not for the purpose of transcending representation, but to expose the system of power that permits certain representations while blocking, disavowing or invalidating others.

In the scene entitled "When the Snow begins to Melt"

¹John McGrath, Yobbo Nowt, (London: Pluto Press, 1978), pp.16-17.

Marie is interviewed by Mrs. Harrison (for which read "harrassment") at the Social Security Office. When Marie declares that she wants to stand on her own feet, the following dialogue ensues:

MRS. H.: Come back tomorrow. And the day after. And eventually you might get a Giro. We won't tell you what you're entitled to. That's not the policy. We'll work something out, and stuff it in your grasping hand. And you'll be grateful to the Welfare State, because otherwise you'd starve. And that we can't allow, not in a civilised country. Come back tomorrow, Mrs. Arnold.

MARIE: Tell me something. Why am I your enemy?

MRS. H.: The whole world is my enemy, because I deal in money and misery. For some, genuine need, genuine tragedy. For others, greed and cunning. Working out which is which - that makes everybody your enemy. But I am human. I have a husband, and a cat. I'm very fond of the cat (smiles). We won't let you starve, Mrs. Arnold.

MARIE: No - you'll insult me, humiliate me, pry into my laundry basket and end up giving me just enough to keep me off the streets - how's that then?

MRS. H: (sings)
In days gone by, Mrs. Arnold,
The weakest went to the wall,
The pauper's grave, the poor house
Disgrace to one and all -
But poor men rise against their masters,
Starvation leads to hate -
If you've nothing to lose you'll risk it -
So enter the Welfare State.

David comes on.

DAVID: (sings)
A state of almighty confusion

A world of half true lies
 Where helping's a word for controlling
 And truth means compromise -

BOTH: So don't be surprised if you're cheated
 By the hand that's supposed to feed -
 In the land where the rich speculator
 Is the judge for the poor man's need.
 Fal-la-la - Fa-la-la-la. 1

To his complex portrayal of abuses suffered under capitalism McGrath has here added another dimension. Throughout the play he is able, by augmenting layer upon layer, to draw a disturbing picture of the capitalist state. Yet since this might be considered a working-class entertainment as much for a working-class audience as anyone else - indeed, the use of the vernacular, the music-hall type songs, and the jokes are all very typical of working-class entertainment. McGrath has shrewdly opted not to make this a literal portrayal which could be too depressing for a working-class audience. Instead, he has treated the material as high comedy, where Mrs. Harrison is far less subtle and more obvious than she would be in real life, and where Marie is told exactly what the capitalist system is about, and where Mrs. Harrison and David suddenly burst into hilarious song. McGrath had, as a matter of interest, based Yobbo Nowt on Brecht's adaption of

¹John McGrath, Yobbo Nowt, (London: Pluto Press, 1978), pp.18-19.

Gorki's novel, The Mother. Yobbo Nowt, of course, has turned out to be a very different play from Brecht's adaption, not the least reason being McGrath's concern with entertainment which will appeal to the working classes (this is not to imply that Brecht's play is somehow devoid of working-class appeal, but its audiences have, I suspect, leaned more generally toward the well-educated, "cultured" segment of society interested in the aesthetics of Brechtian theatre rather than simply "a good night out"). McGrath has achieved this working-class "entertainment" by avoiding the literal and "realistic," yet by making the play realistic enough to be at once recognisable and significant.

In the section called "Three Slices of Pie" McGrath has Marie say:

They've got a system going in this country that works great for some, and doesn't work so great for others; and they're frightened in case somebody notices. So if the system's mucking you about, they give you just enough to shut your mouth about it. And then, they pretend it's charity. That much I've found out. And I want to find out a whole lot more. ¹

Marie also describes receiving her unemployment cheque:

They wouldn't give it to me in my hand. I had to go and prove I needed it desperately,

¹John McGrath, Yobbo Nowt, (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p.21.

then they'd prepare it, then when it was
all ready, they'd show it me, then they'd
post it. 1

After enduring this humiliation, Marie decides to join the capitalist system when the system itself, to avoid paying her relief, finds her a job in an electronics factory. As Mrs. Harrison remarks, "Oh, I am pleased to hear that, I really am - so is the taxpayer."² Act I ends with Marie and her children drinking port and lemon as an unwittingly ironic toast to the future.

During Act II, however, it begins to dawn on Marie that "I'm being conned - taken advantage of, 'cos we need the work. I'll have to look into this capitalist system - I'm not at all convinced it doesn't need scrapping."³ Working long hours for minimum wages, Marie gradually learns exactly how the capitalist system works. This is revealed to her by characters who are representative of particular social groups or institutions. The first of these is Potshot, a student of structural semantics temporarily working in the factory. He explains the company's economics:

¹John McGrath, Yobbo Nowt, (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p.25.

²Ibid., p.27.

³Ibid., p.33.

Turnover in nineteen seventy-three, five hundred million pounds; profit, seventy-four million pounds, number of employees, eighty-five thousand. Average profit per employee nearly one thousand per year - that means they're making twenty pounds a week out of you, and you, and you. And me. Next year they intend to make more. How will they do this? I hear you ask me. They will attempt to produce and sell more goods, and pay the same wages. They will employ every trick in the bosses' book to cheat you of your share of the increase in the firm's prosperity, and yet make you work harder; they will try to achieve this by uniting with other employers of this country, to attack the trade unions - which are the only organisations to defend the interests of you, the workers. And their main weapons in this attack are confusion and apathy. 1

This is, of course, at once an indictment of both the capitalist system and the attitudes of the working class who suffer under it; again, it has been much easier for McGrath to present both sides of the issue in theatre used as a political forum than as a literal statement from the podium. For the audience this is, after all, only a play, a fiction, and Marie is only a fictitious character who may be quickly forgotten after departure from the theatre. On the other hand, the play does make very clear the real problems that real people experience and to which they can relate, and it can make the audience think about the issues and understand them better,

¹John McGrath, Yobbo Nowt, (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p.35.

perhaps even admit to their own shortcomings in the same situation. Potshot continues:

Now, this conspiracy of profiteers, usurers and parasites, i.e., industrialists, financiers and shareholders, form [sic] the backbone of the ruling class, and of the British State - which is more permanent and more powerful than any elected government, which, in fact uses governments, of whatever shade, as its servants. And this ruling class is quite clever. It may, in fact, concede some of the unions' demands, in the way of wage rises; and use them to justify price increases, which will further increase the profit, and make the higher wages actually worth less. In this way the capitalist system actually uses the unions to defeat the workers. Why then, join the union? Answer: to turn it into what it should be - a weapon to overthrow the entire capitalist system. 1

Clearly such plays as Yobbo Nowt, focused on groups of people whose collective fate is crucial rather than on an individual character (and clearly Marie is more than that), offer the opportunity of a new kind of dramatic dynamic, more relevant to the contemporary world. In dramatic dialogue the "publicness" of the context is admitted, characters speaking to what Gooch calls "the floor of their common concerns"²

¹John McGrath, Yobbo Nowt, (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p.35.

²Steve Gooch, All Together Now, (London: Methuen, 1984), p.83.

rather than to each other as individuals, as in bourgeois drama. The stage dialogue between two people functions as if it is audible to everyone else and shared by everyone else. In their speeches individuals articulate the essence of the common predicament. Sharing common values, characters collectively sustain and complement each other, the totality of their words being most crucial. At the same time the particular essence of this kind of dialogue, the act of being audible to everyone else, of addressing the "floor of the house," being a casual kind of public address, is much the same as turning out and engaging that other public forum, the audience. For example, to find out more about capitalism and what can be done about the injustice of her situation, Marie questions her local Labour candidate, Mr. Cleghorn. McGrath is able to satirise the ineffectiveness of the Labour Party and make public a widely held view when he has Mr. Cleghorn say:

The British voter's quite content
With compromise for government. 1

When Marie asks whether the Labour Party is going to scrap the capitalist system, Mr. Cleghorn replies, "Out of the question."

¹John McGrath, Yobbo Nowt, (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p.47.

We'd lose the middle-class vote."¹ Cleghorn's view of voters is satirically expressed in his song:

Cos they don't really care
 They watch the news on B.B.C.
 They watch the ads on ITV
 They read the press we must keep free
 They're all confused, they're all at the sea
 And that's the way for Harold and me. ²

Recognising that the Labour Party offers no hope of changing the system, Marie next calls the director of a widely-circulated newspaper. She speaks with Williams, the director's assistant, and learns, in effect, that the newspapers are also a part of the system. As Marie explains:

You weren't exactly telling me lies, one by one - it's just, what all you said added up to - that was a lie. And millions of people believe it. What possible reason can you have for doing that? ³

The answer is profits, and the newspaper's attitude is expressed in William's song:

The world you watch on the news (Ev'ry day)

¹John McGrath, Yobbo Nowt, (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p.47.

²Ibid., p.47.

³Ibid., p.48.

In the press and radio
Is a world we pick and choose (for our pay)
A world it's safe to show.

For the media-men with camera and pen
Know what you all should see,
So off they go and find it, then -
It's simple as BBC

We're dignified and wise (No you're not)

Manipulate with skill
We have no need for lies (not a lot)
For truth obeys our will. 1

This, like most other songs and speeches in the play, reveals how the actor's work is somewhat different from conventional acting. Virtually all the major roles are two-way characters, involving a certain lateral thinking. The ability to remain firm in the persona of the character, yet turn out to the audience and speak to the audience, gives the opportunity for characters to reveal the world of their innermost thoughts, for the realm of the imagination to be explored and dramatised on stage, thus transcending the immediate "reality." For example, in the section entitled "Pitter Patter" Marie, alone talks directly to the audience expressing her thoughts:

My hobby was getting me nowhere - still it
was better than ballroom danceing. Less sewing.

¹John McGrath, Yobbo Nowt, (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p.49.

By now, I'd really begun to get stuck into it - well, it riled me the way they all went on - as if I was mad even to think of questioning anything. And when I get riled, watch out. 1

This kind of narration would be inappropriate in the conventional theatre, and its occlusion may deprive the play of some power. It helps the audience understand Marie better, distinguishing her various personal interests and motivations from her public appearance and effect, encouraging the audience to sympathise with her and understand the complexities of the situation. Much of the wit and humour, the shrewd awareness and the irony of working-class conditions is rooted in this recognition of a situation and the intuitive insight which goes beyond it. The potential of such a form for conveying how a situation might be improved is, consequently, much greater. For instance, when Marie seeks the answer to her problem by questioning Mr. Plum, a young curate, he explains the function of religion working within the capitalist system:

. . . it's an image - no more, no less -
for just as death gives a meaning to life,

¹John McGrath, Yobbo Nowt, (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p.50.

so our image of our place in a mystical after-life gives meaning to our random, incoherent, otherwise meaningless existence in this life: of our true place in this life. That's what it's for, you see - that's its function. 1

Such an explanation of the church's purpose scarcely comes as a surprise, but later Marie responds:

MARIE: How come it's materialism when I want money, and Godliness when they get it? All that patter - who's paying you? The Queen and the government and the Bank of England, I bet, and you're stuffing people's heads with rubbish of all descriptions just to shut them up.

MR. PLUM: No - no, no. What we have is what people want. I service the people's fantasies, just like a mechanic services their motor cars, that is all. Make them content with what they have chosen.

MARIE: But it's impossible to choose anything else with people like you around.

MR. PLUM: Then you'll have to get rid of me. And I won't give up without a struggle.

MARIE: You are my enemy. 2

In the minds of the audience such a dialogue as this suggests many possibilities for the future. Mr. Plum's mundane attitude toward religion is essentially the same as that

¹John McGrath, Yobbo Nowt, (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p.51.

²Ibid., p.52.

expressed in Marx's view of religion as "the opium of the people." His hypocrisy is what many in the audience have, in any case, probably suspected; but the irony of having Mr. Plum state the church's position so blatantly - indeed, the irony of Mr. Plum's whole personality, his use of expletives and blasphemy, his pragmatic, even callous, attitude - creates a kind of humour of the unexpected which gives the scene considerable impact. Marie's reaction, however, reveals her intellectual capacity, despite her lack of formal education and her working-class origins, suggesting the possibility that Marie is capable of an intellectual life quite contrary to her actual working-class situation. From the political point-of-view, of course, McGrath is able to demonstrate quite articulately the exploitive "no-win" situation the working classes find themselves locked into in a capitalist society. At one point towards the end of the play Marie, and consequently the whole group she represents, acquires almost heroic stature when in her forthright, often ungrammatical working-class vernacular which nonetheless comes straight from the heart, she says simply:

I'm just fed up being pushed around by the capitalist system. I want it scrapped, it's wrong, and I think we can do better, and I've come to the conclusion that the best place to start is here, right here. 1

¹John McGrath, Yobbo Nowt, (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p.57.

The solution for the predicament that Marie and her kind find themselves in comes from Potshot:

There are, as you may be aware, a number of organisations working to replace bourgeois society with various forms of socialism. You must join one of them. As there are several, you will be confronted with a choice . . . But you must choose, and join, and work, or you will remain confused and apathetic . . . I have made my choice. I certainly intend to influence you to join my particular groupuscule or sect. However, there are other ways of working for socialism . . . Eventually there will be one revolutionary organisation which will be created and controlled by the working class of Britain. To create that, we must all give everything. If we do - it will succeed . . . 1

This is the task that lies ahead for Marie. Meanwhile, she has achieved a measure of independence by standing on her own feet and confronting, as a woman, what life in present-day England has to offer and demand from her. To what degree she has been successful is made clear when her husband returns from a spell as a merchant seaman and says, "Whatever's happened to you, love? You're certainly not the girl I married." With pride and confidence Marie answers, "No, I'm not. Come back when you're prepared to find out who I am now. Not before."² The final rendition of the song "Yobbo

¹John McGrath, Yobbo Nowt, (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p.58.

²Ibid., p.62.

Nowt," now delivered in an altogether different, more ironic, context, underscores Marie's development and the meaning of the play.

The method of treating theatre as an open, accessible and candid form, which is the method used by the 7:84 Company, has implications for the nature of dialogue. The more one perceives dramatic performance as a kind of address, the more inconsequential become the traditional literary qualities of dramatic literature. McGrath has distinguished the aesthetic difference between dramatic literature and theatre.¹

In the early seventies the revolt of young actors against dramatists seems to have been against a form of writing which used the actor as a literary mouthpiece rather than offered a reality which the actor could in some way use. The reality in theatre to which everyone present relates is actual performance. Dialogue conveying a well-defined description of character and situation for the use of the actor and permitting inventiveness and originality in performance is the kind of dialogue which takes advantage of its potential for ingenuity and improvisation in production. The most appropriate place for fine writing is where it underscores and deepens an already established stage reality. For example,

¹John McGrath, A Good Night Out. Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.6.

the rather complicated analysis of capitalist society in Britain as experienced by an initially lethargic, inexperienced working-class housewife may not sound too promising as material for a musical comedy. But by the time McGrath has finished dissecting, analysing, examining, explaining, and demonstrating the complex make-up of the capitalist state together with its myriad abuses, not only is the audience highly entertained both by the satiric songs and dialogue and the human interest story, but they have also grasped how this political process affects their own lives in terms of exploitation, unemployment, and deceit (religious, journalistic, and political).¹ So when Yobbo Nowt focuses on one individual who experiences, confronts, and tries to change the system, that individual is seen as part of a major social process of change, rather than as just a poor, unfortunate housewife as she might be portrayed in a sentimental bourgeois drama. In this way McGrath reaches for the essence of the situation of which Craig and Appia spoke. The audience have grasped the essentials of the theoretical and historical ideas relevant to her - and possibly their - situation.

¹Much the same approach was employed in the 7:84 Company's later efforts, such as Blood Red Roses (1979), Night Class (1981), Rejoice! (1982), V-Signs (1983), School for Emigrants (1984), and The Garden of England (1985).

The sense of an open forum, then, is an important aesthetic approach which the different production relations of the 7:84 Company offer from conventional theatre. When any reaction to society becomes both theoretically legitimate and, in practice, demonstrable, the dramatic potential of the "free zone" of the imagination becomes truly accessible. As McGrath himself has stated:

So even in this rather oblique way, the theatre is by its nature a political forum, or a politicizing medium, rather than a place to experience a rarefied artistic sensibility in an aesthetic void. Theatre launches even the most private thought into a public world, and gives it a social, historical meaning and context as it passes through the eyes and minds of the audience. It is a place of recognition, of evaluation, of judgement. It shows the interaction of human beings and social forces. ¹

The possibility of a theatre which can engage society on issues concerning the whole of society now becomes that much greater, as does the potential in theatre for the discovery of a new and fundamental purpose within an increasingly dislocated society.

Little Red Hen

The 7:84 Theatre Company's sixth major production, Little

¹John McGrath, A Good Night Out. Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form, (London: Methuen, 1981), p.83.

Red Hen¹ toured Scotland from September to December, 1975 and was later performed in Ireland and London in 1976.² McGrath explains that while the 7:84 Theatre Company works as a collective, its members do not write the plays in committee. Their modus operandi is to use to best advantage the special skills of individuals within the company while still subjecting the results to discussion and criticism. McGrath declared Little Red Hen his creation as a writer, reinforced by the contribution of company members:

Dave Anderson, as the main tune writer, contributed to the lyrics of some of the songs. Elizabeth MacLennan not only did a great deal of research, but also gave much to the character of the Old Hen. Bill Paterson's knowledge of Glasgow, Bill Riddoch's knowledge of the North-east of Scotland contributed greatly to their parts, and David MacLennan's research and arguments greatly affect sections of the play. 3

McGrath's aim was to present a history of twentieth-century Scottish socialism in order to define its failure as instruction and direction for those in the present who work for "a better future for the people of Scotland."⁴ As McGrath writes:

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977).

²Ibid., p.iii.

³Ibid., p.iv.

⁴Ibid., p.iii.

Wherever we go in the industrial areas of Scotland - and Clydesdale in particular - we meet up with an older generation of working-class militants who constantly astonish us. Active, articulate, passionate and well-informed, they draw their strength and conviction from the days of the 'Red Clyde' - days when the naked greed and ruthlessness of the capitalist system were plain to see; days when John Maclean, Jimmy Maxton, John Wheatley, Willie Gallagher and many other great activists and speakers expressed the demand of the Scottish working-class for the overthrow of capitalism and the creation of a socialist Scotland.

During the 1914-1918 war, Glasgow was the centre of opposition to the senseless slaughter in the trenches, the exploitation of the workers in their factories to keep the slaughter going, and the rent-profiteers who owned their homes. After the war, in 1919, Glasgow workers led the strike for a forty-hour working week to absorb the unemployed. There were 30,000 unemployed in Glasgow, and thousands more coming back from the trenches every week. On Bloody Friday, trouble flared up at a mass meeting in George Square. That night, the soldiers arrived and set up machine guns on top of buildings in the city centre, and a howitzer in the City Chambers. The leaders were arrested. There was no violent revolution. But the anger, and the activism, continued. By 1922, the movement was so strong that ten out of the twelve Glasgow MPs returned at the election were socialists.

That generation saw Scotland on the move - in a big way. Today, we are told, Scotland is on the move again. The UCS work-in, the activism of the Scottish miners, the promised economic miracle of the oil industry, the upsurge of nationalism - all point to an atmosphere at least of energy and debate. 1

This long quotation is included here because a prior knowledge

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.iii.

of the past is helpful in understanding the material with which the play deals.

Little Red Hen is written in two acts. As the audience enters the auditorium (or hall or club), they hear "one or two quiet tunes from the musicians."¹ The scenery on stage is pared down to a minimum. The stage directions read as follows:

On stage, four plinths, with fronts painted as the top of Greek columns, of varying height. As the show progresses these plinths are used for the politicians, and turn, flap, extend, etc., to become armchairs, cupboards, etc. - in fact all scenery needed for the show. At the back of the stage, against a sky-cloth, a large painted cut-out of Glasgow tenements. Where possible, this is flown out and a large cut-out of the Palace of Westminster flown in for the whole London sequence in Act One. 2

The functional, and frequently non-representational, use of stage properties is reminiscent of Meyerhold's "machine for acting," which rarely, if ever, enhanced the decorative capabilities of stage scenery. Meyerhold would sometimes remove the backdrop, exposing the back wall of the theatre,³

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.1.

²Ibid.

³See pp.35-36 above.

and build a constructivist, mechanical set requiring no scene changes. In Little Red Hen McGrath's set is similarly reductionist, the one set, in effect, serving in all scenes. Certainly, in the functional pragmatic use of stage properties and "scenery," McGrath, like Craig, Appia and Meyerhold, has made a radical departure from the static, "realistic" yet romanticised stage of the bourgeois theatre. At the same time, one recalls Piscator's use of technical elements as a metaphor for social and political reform. As has been shown, McGrath, like Piscator, frequently chronicles real events (providing much substantive evidence, even when the protagonist is a fictional character) in attempting to change the course of social and political reality. In this way the imbrication of the aesthetic and the political is used effectively. Once the audience is seated, an official voice is heard suddenly over the speakers:

Voice: Clear the stage now, come on, boys
and girls - (BAND disperse, shrugging) . . .
Ladies and gentlemen - tonight, at your
very own (hall/club/theatre) we are proud
to bring you - at immense cost to the tax-
payer, no expenditure spared, not one penny
of the Scottish Arts Council's budget languishing
unravished, ladies and gentlemen - you asked
for it, you're going to get it - at long
last Seven: Eighty-four Theatre Company
presents - HARRY LAUDER! ¹

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.1.

From the beginning the audience has been made aware that this is no realistic play in the mimetic sense; on the contrary, any sense of mimesis has been shattered by the direct addressing of the audience by the voice, which not only reminds the audience that they are not watching reality, but emphasises that this is the 7:84 Theatre Company presenting a simulation of a Scottish national hero. An obvious connection may be made here with Copeau's open declaration of the actor on stage¹ and with Brecht's attempts to break down the barriers between actor and audience.

Blast of accordion music, and mock Harry Lauder appears, Och aye-ing, tells a few corny jokes and goes into a song. At chorus, all the COMPANY come on dressed identically as HARRY LAUDER and go through a Lauder routine of songs and dances, ending with 'Keep Right on to the End of the Road,' then go, leaving the YOUNG HEN on stage. The overall impression is one of the old-style Tartan variety show, with yards of ersatz tartan, kilts, bonnets, etc., sentiment and joviality, climaxing in welter of emotion on the last number. 2

Indeed, the appearance of Harry Lauder immediately signifies the tone of the play as more that of an entertainment,

¹See p.41 above.

²John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.1.

certainly something on which a working-class audience, as McGrath sees it, will focus. Having "hooked" his audience with this spectacle, McGrath immediately introduces in the opening section, called "Two Hens," the Young Hen, breaking any sense of verisimilitude by speaking, as Copeau advised, directly to the audience:

Young Hen: Keep right on to the end of the road, eh? Aye, that's just what we're going to do, OK, keep right on to the end of the road until our own lovely Scotland's a nation once again: that's what I'm doing - and anybody who says any different should be dumped south of the border draped in a Union Jack, so they should. (Sings) Flower of Scotland, etc. 1

The speech emphatically states the Young Hen's idealistic political purpose which is undercut when the Old Hen, seated in the audience, waves her stick at the Young Hen and says:

Old Hen: Will yuh come down offa that platform and stop makin' a damn fool of yourself, Henrietta? 2

A sort of affectionate antagonism between the Old Hen and the Young Hen continues until the following lines are spoken:

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.1.

²Ibid.

Young Hen: Granny! Would you no' be so obscene

Old Hen: Away and play wi' yoursel'.

Young Hen: Granny! Would you no' be so obscene
in front of these people? You're emberrassin'
me.

Old Hen: I don't give a damn for these people,
I'm too far gone in my dotage to give a
damn for anythin' but the truth. ¹

Clearly, no attempt is being made here to present a play mimetically. In Brecht's manner, two actors are demonstrating a difference of opinion between two stage characters, but there is never any deception that the Old Hen and Young Hen are anything more than characters played by actors to make a political point. Indeed, acknowledgement of the presence of the audience ("these people") reminds the audience, again as Copeau advised, that these are actors performing a routine on stage. At the same time, the audience is made aware of itself as an audience being made aware of itself. Hence, McGrath is able to draw the audience into the action and meaning of the play. Having established this fact, McGrath moves the "plot" forward, allowing the Old Hen to "flashback" to the past:

Old Hen: You've more chance of Bonnie Prince
Charlie comin' back from the grave to claim
his rightful throne - when Scotland's free.

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.2.

There's two Scotlands, Hen, and don't you forget it - there's the Scotland that's you and me, that's been robbed and cheated and worked to the bone when it suits or thrown on the queue at the burroo when it doesnae suit - that's one Scotland; and there's a Scotland that owns factories like yours and sweat-shops like I worked in, and grouse moors and mountains and islands and stocks and shares, and says what goes - and there's only one of them can be free at a time - and don't you go kiddin' yourself it's going to be the workers -

Young Hen: We're all gonnae be free.

Old Hen: You know nothin'!

Young Hen: Scotland's on the move, Gran -

Old Hen: Aye, but do you know which way you're goin'? Or how you're gonnae get there? Do you buggery -

Young Hen: Gran!

Old Hen: I've seen something like it before, an' I'm for tellin' you about it - and listen tae what I'm tellin' you - for you'll need to remember (STAGE MANAGER comes on to remove tartan drapes) - Aye, you carry on, son, get rid of that rubbish - nineteen twenty-one. Scotland was on the move - and what was it we did then? Oh aye - it was the shimmy - Scotland, hen, was on the shimmy. (Sings) ¹

The Old Hen then breaks into a song typical of the 1920s, and then says:

Old Hen: Oh there's worse to come. The whole place was doin' the shimmy - and I don't

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), pp.2-3.

just mean in the dance hall. The industrial proletariat of Scotland was on the march - and by God they had some great men to lead them - and they had the right ideas - Jimmy Maxton, John MacLean, John Wheatley, Willie Gallagher, Davie Kirkwood, Manny Shinwell - well - could they speak? You had to hear it to believe it - and you did go to hear it - thousands went to hear it: and the word they were speakin' was socialism. Not your wittery-wattery buggered-up capitalism with knobs on you get now - the real thing. Come away and hear them at it - 1

Immediately following this introduction of characters from 1921, the characters perform short monologues in which they explain their political stance and the reasons for it. Gallagher, who has spent time in Moscow, wants to transform Great Britain into a communist society. MacLean believes the workers must acquire possession of the land and all means of production in order to use these cooperatively by the whole community for the advantage of all. Maxton believes in socialism as a means of obtaining Home Rule for Scotland, and Wheatley advocates a Labour majority in parliament as a means to establishing socialism.² Clearly, McGrath's breaking with chronology here serves to establish that the audience may not expect a play in the traditional sense of persuading the

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.3.

²Ibid., pp.3-5.

audience that the action is taking place before their eyes in the present. Not only does McGrath make a simple break with chronology, but he also creates a situation where the two hens in the present are looking back to the past and reflecting and commenting on the characters and actions of the past. This viewpoint allows the irony of characters with knowledge of subsequent events to analyse and evaluate the actions of the past in terms of the present. The historical figures, however, argue among themselves and converse with the Old Hen in the present, signifying again that chronology - and hence a sense of traditional "realism" - is not important to this presentation. The plot development of the play being thus largely episodic helps to facilitate McGrath's depiction of both the public world of social relationships and the inner lives of the protagonists. Events happen on stage sequentially as well as simultaneously, permitting the audience to interpose its judgement. A method such as this tends to undercut the action, giving it new or additional meaning. McGrath's manipulation of chronology here only reinforces the postmodernist deconstruction of traditional diegesis, as if postmodernist ideology, rather than being represented, is itself manifested in the performance mode. Indeed, one might interpret the thematic element here as the condition of the subject within the slipperiness of representations, the dramatists task being to explore its

effects and ramifications. Rather than a self-transcending experience, McGrath's play is reduced to an ordinary empirical object, a thing in the world, undifferentiated from the other objects.

Possibly alluding to the suffering characters in Gorki's play, the next section bears the title "The Lower Depths of Bridgeton." It begins with the Old Hen yelling for the rest of the company to come on stage to listen. As the company members set up the scene (a family interior) in full view of the audience, the Old Hen says:

Old Hen: They're supposed to be bloody actors, this lot, and they spend half their time singin' an' the other half drinkin'. I bet there's half of them no' paid up their Equity dues. (To COMPANY) Now I want some proper actin', d'you hear? There's proper theatre-goers and theatre critics and God knows what else paid good money to see you, so none of your cheap satirical rubbish - d'you hear me? Are you right? (Calls FIDDLER) Hey you, big fella, put down that can and set the mood with some suitable music . . . (FIDDLER agrees, plays quiet tune). 1

Clearly, as much as in any developmental story McGrath is here involving his audience in the process of theatre itself, and one must assume that the relations of production are an

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.6.

integral part of his political meaning.¹ To underscore this approach, McGrath has the Old Hen show the Young Hen scenes from her own past (the Old Hen's) so that it becomes clear that the Young Hen is acting out the part of the Old Hen in her youth. First they watch a scene in which the Old Hen's father (the Young Hen's great-grandfather) brings home Charlie Sullivan, a political activist for Jimmy Maxton. Charlie tries to convince the family to act politically by supporting Maxton, and while he is still speaking, the Old Hen speaks over his voice:

Old Hen: Could that boy argue? He made George
Bernard Shaw sound like Basil Brush. I
sat mesmerised: a whole new side of life
I'd never even knew existed - and a whole
new side of Charlie Sullivan I'd never even
knew existed. 2

The Old Hen not only narrates and brings to life a scene from the past (the introduction of the man who will become her husband), she also explains and comments on it. Again, the audience is watching the past and present simultaneously, a technique which helps the viewer to see the connections

¹For Steve Gooch's explanation of the importance of production relations, see pp.353-358 above and Steve Gooch, All Together Now, (London: Methuen, 1984), p.75.

²John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.8.

between the two. Again apparent is the postmodernist double-view in which the audience, half-immersed in the diegesis of the past, is kept alert to the reality of the present, transcending neither but aware of McGrath's drama as an empirical object to be considered. McGrath's application of Brecht's Verfremdungseffekt signifies a way of recognising the world by the interpretation of internal contradictions. The representation of human relationships is here conceivable, as it was in Brecht, as a depiction of the contradictions inherent in a given phenomenon. The contradictions within social phenomena do not, however, always become apparent at the surface; frequently essences are concealed by appearances, so that appearances seem more crucial than essences. The device of estrangement here, however, allows McGrath to dispense with the usual means of representation (mimesis) and so, by revealing the contradictions within the phenomena, unmask reality. Rather than identifying the stage characters and action, the audience tends to examine critically the whole idea of identification. Hence, estrangement techniques tend to be political because the spectator is never simply the recipient of a representation, but is included in it. In this way the audience itself is theatricalised.

Little stretch of the imagination is required to ascertain the concatenation here between Piscator's use of montage, from which he could cut from scene to scene, time

period to time period, and McGrath's technique of imaginatively switching from past to present to help underscore his meaning. Although the audience is as yet unaware of it, McGrath has set up a relationship between the Young Hen (as the Old Hen in her youth) and Charlie Sullivan which will later be developed romantically. The Old Hen explains how she became involved in political activism and sings the "Red Hen" song. The scene ends with the following stage direction:

During the last part of the song, YOUNG HEN goes back into the room, in her character as the YOUNG OLD HEN, worn out. CHARLIE comes in, and persuades her to set off again with more pamphlets. As the song ends she comes back on to OLD HEN as herself. 1

As will have been noticed, Little Red Hen is not divided into the usual numbered scenes, but into named sections. In the section called "Victory, And Off to Westminster," McGrath vividly creates the atmosphere and enthusiasm of the time by interspersing the Old Hen's memories with speeches by Maxton and Wheatley.² A presentation of this kind, while dispensing with mimesis completely, accomplishes several

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.10.

²Ibid., pp.10-11.

objectives: most obviously, it expresses material which presumably is of interest to working-class audiences, but instead of a realistic dramatisation which the audience is supposed to believe is going on before its eyes, McGrath employs a treatment in which the Old Hen narrates and explains what has happened, and this explanation is documented when actors representing actual historic figures demonstrate actual historic viewpoints to a modern audience. The audience, in effect, is seeing the big picture (national political events) and the little picture (the Old Hen's personal story) at the same time - again, shades of Piscator's cutting from scene to scene for similar theatrical or filmic purposes. While this is occurring, the room set is transformed back into plinths, and the whole presentation is punctuated by the ironic contrast of the Twenty-Third Psalm and the "Red Flag."¹ It is this constant variety of presentation that tends to force one to see Little Red Hen as an "entertainment" (in the empirical sense) rather than as a conventional play. Again, immediately following this diverse mixture, the stage directions read:

MAXTON and WHEATLEY, with their suitcases,
get on to the train - two stools side by

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.11.

side facing the audience. The BAND starts a slow train rhythm that speeds up as MAXTON and WHEATLEY, excited and determined, sit discussing what they are going to have to do at Westminster. As the rhythm works up to full speed, WHEATLEY jumps up and starts to sing a mock 'tough' number 1

After Maxton and Wheatley finish their song, another historical figure, J. Ramsay MacDonald, enters and addresses the audience in rhyming couplets, a form which tends to enhance the satiric tone by emphasising the absurdity of the material:

MacDonald: J. Ramsay MacDonald speaking
 A great parliamentary career's what I'm
 seeking:
 I may look like a bit of a smarty
 But in fact I'm in the Labour Party.

When they say that my politics are soft
 I remind them - I was born in a croft
 And though I now hob-nob with grand lords
 I once fearlessly criticised the landlords. 2

The inevitability of the rhyme in the last word of every second line tends to make the form unsuitable for graver or more "serious" material, possibly because of the simplicity of the form. In any event, as McGrath uses it here, much of the

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.11.

²Ibid., p.13.

humour derives from the listener's anticipation of the rhyme which, when it arrives, reinforces the absurdity of the meaning. As a result, a song of this kind produces effective satire.

When Maxton and Wheatley encounter MacDonald, they realise that they have done nothing more than join "his Majesty's loyal Opposition."¹ This is nicely expressed when McGrath, with deft irony, makes the actor playing MacDonald acknowledge that he is on stage:

MacDonald: Oh, come on now - don't forget,
 I'm your boy -
 I'm dead Red.
 I am a big wheel in the ILP -
 Surely you boys are going to vote for me?

Maxton/Wheatley: (Together) We'll think about
 it . . .

MacDonald: Good -
 Then at this point I will be gone.
 You'll be seeing more of me anon.
 (Pauses) I'm going to exit left. I think
 that's significant. Of course, it won't
 look left to you. It'll actually look right
 to you. But if it looks right to you, I'm
 satisfied. 2

MacDonald's literalness here acknowledges the actor behind the

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.11.

²Ibid., p.13.

role, in effect narrowing the gap between art and everyday life, between fictional space and time, and real acts by real bodies in real time. The result of doing so is an implied criticism of the former practice of maintaining the division between art and life, between illusion and reality. To the extent that it uses this literalness as a deconstruction of tradition, even as it participates in a pastiche of that tradition, the play may be considered postmodern. The play on words here is almost Elizabethan in its complexity. The reference to being "left" (Communist) is obvious enough, but McGrath complicates the issue of left and right in two ways: (1) he uses it to mean "correct," so that the further "left" politically MacDonald moves, the more "right" (correct) his move appears to Maxton and Wheatley; (2) he uses it to break again with any sense of verisimilitude by reminding the audience that this is an actor on stage demonstrating the ineptness and hypocrisy of people like MacDonald. Much of the satire in Little Red Hen is of this kind, invoking various levels of meaning for an astute audience (it is clear from this that McGrath considers a working-class audience this astute).

With the section called "Cocktails" the scene changes to a party by wealthy Labour supporters in a smart London interior. The party is populated by historical figures such as Ramsay MacDonald and Mrs. Beatrice Webb or parodies of real

people such as Admiral Jellicoe (Admiral Jelliroll). Class consciousness even among socialists is revealed when a Suave Young Man comes on stage and says:

Suave Young Man: (Comes and chatters excitedly to the audience) We think they're going to be awfully droll - haven't you heard? They're going to be fascinating - in an appalling sort of way: we're getting fifty-six brand new Labour MPs - all to ourselves - one simply can't wait. Lancashire lads, doubtless in clogs, with all the latest scandals from Heckmondwyke - what a laugh: tiny Welsh miners with their Davy lamps to lighten our darkness; the girls are agog, one hears; gruff Yorkshire terriers, chattering tales of muck and brass; in Bradford - I think that's in Yorkshire; and the Scotties, oh, there's a thrill, in kilts, with claymores, skirling away on their bagpipes - muttering strange incomprehensible sounds about Lenin, and bloody revolution. And all of them, all of them - well, nearly all of them - breathing fire - one simply longs to see them. ¹

As the scene progresses, the characters serve essentially to show London society's prejudice and snobbery against socialists, particularly socialists from the provinces. Again, McGrath's treatment of the material focuses on satire and satiric song so that the audience is amused and entertained while seeing the absurdity of a prejudice based on

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.14.

class consciousness which they have most likely experienced themselves.

The next section, entitled "Hard Words at Westminster," shows the two hens dismantling the cocktail party set in front of the audience, with no pretense at realism or that what is happening on stage is anything other than the process of theatre. The Old Hen describes Maxton's and Wheatley's entrance into the House of Commons, and this is then dramatised when Maxton makes a lengthy and powerful speech concerning the dangers of withdrawing funds from supplying milk to babies, as it was in an act issued on March 12, 1822. What Maxton says is specific and compelling, but the scene is satirised when a British baronet constantly interrupts on a point of order, the point of order obviously more important to the baronet than the issue at hand.¹ The scene ends with the Old Hen explaining that Maxton's and Wheatley's remarks resulted in their expulsion from parliament.

In the section called "A Cunning Ruse," Ramsay MacDonald sings a song which demonstrates the timidity and weakness of the Labour Party as opposed to radical socialism:

MacDonald: I might have known we'd have trouble
sooner or later.

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), pp.17-20.

And one of those wild men would be the instigator.
 We must have good manners, dignity, sweet
 reason.
 These damn Glasgow keelies are guilty of
 treason -

And now they're proposing to storm through
 the land
 Attacking our democracy, red flag in hand;
 Mocking our parliament, rousing the rabble
 Frightening the voters and stirring up trouble.

If they lose then we all lose, our party
 is dead
 If they win then I'm done for - they'll
 chop off my head.

Now nothing in my view could possibly be
 more sinister
 So I've conspired and colluded with the
 Tory Prime Minister
 Democracy will be served, parliament will
 win
 They're too dangerous to be out, so we'll
 let them back in. 1

Wheatley and Gallagher do get back into the House, but by
 skillfully manoeuvring make their return appear as if the
 British parliament has given in to their demands. The Old
 Hen, however, has misgivings:

Old Hen: The day they boys were sucked back
 into the Westminster whirlpool was a black
 day for every worker in Scotland - aye,
 and in England, too. If they'd told that
 lot of bourgeois bum-lickers to stuff their

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press
 Ltd., 1977), p.20.

parliament up their backsides, they might have saved the Labour movement. If they'd gone off to the workers and the ordinary party members and organised a rebellion against MacDonald and his tomfoolery, they would have had all the support they needed. And something might just have emerged to shake the mighty ruling-class off the backs of the working people. ¹

When a character provides this kind of information to a working-class audience, the audience can begin to understand in detail the political developments which have resulted in the society with its myriad problems that the audience itself knows and possibly wants to change. This is not to suggest that a play like Little Red Hen is likely to motivate people to go out and make radical political changes; but it does, I think, help the audience to understand what has taken place in the past and this, in turn, helps it to understand better the present. To be sure, McGrath frequently focuses on the present and makes clear the nature of the problems which confront working-class people. Since these problems are frequently highly complex, they are often neither understood nor available to the working classes except through the medium of political theatre of this kind. McGrath also presents his material often in an emotionally-charged context which can

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.21.

instil resentment, indignation, even anger in an audience. A play like Little Red Hen, therefore, while not likely to cause direct political change, can at least help to create the atmosphere in which the seeds of change are sown. Directing drama to this political end is conducive with ideals held by Piscator, who not only created dramatic content reflecting issues with which the working class is concerned, but with remarkably innovative technical means involving stage properties (films, treadmills, cartoons, etc.) used as metaphor for social reform, he penetrated working-class resistance to a theatre previously meant to appeal only to a "more educated" class.¹

The section called "Ramsay in Power" again shows the weaknesses of the Labour administration, suggesting its subservience to the upper classes as represented here by royalty. The exchange between MacDonald and King George V is particularly effective as satire because exactly the right tone is established by McGrath's use of Popeian rhyming couplets.² The section is satiric insofar as McGrath ridicules the whole capitalist social structure through the insecurities and manipulations of those in power and the

¹See pp.56-57 above.

²For reasons why the rhyming couplet is appropriate to effective satire see p.485 above.

cringing obsequiousness of the loyal Opposition:

King George V: So we are to call upon a socialist government? Grandmamma would rather jump up on the table and show her knickers.

We suppose we might as well let them play at being Prime Ministers and Home Secretaries, that sort of thing - as far as we can see it won't make any difference to anything serious - our City owns all our money, our industrialists own our industries, our Church owns the minds of our people, and whatever happens we shall still be king. We have our army, our navy, our air force and our police constables to see to that.

(J. RAMSAY MACDONALD in court dress, bobbing and bowing)

MacDonald: Sire, I know the country's not going the way your grandmother meant. But I really would like to have a wee shot at government. Just a year or a year and a half, eighteen months, something like that.

King George V: Yes, so they tell us. But look here, if you're going to pretend you're Prime Minister, you must do us the elementary courtesy of cutting out the silly songs.

MacDonald: Sire, there is but one song, sire, I desire, sire, to sing - And that, sire, save your reverence - God Save The King.

King George V: Yes, we know all that.

MacDonald: Do you know the second verse, sir, it's all about the Scots . . . ?

King George V: Yes, we are the king - now. You, Mr. MacDonald, presided at a rally, we think you call it, at Prince Albert's Hall at which our subjects sang not only the 'Red Flag', but also - dreadful to relate - the 'Marseillaise'! Today the 'Marseillaise', Mr. MacDonald, tomorrow the guillotine.

MacDonald: I don't know that one, sire. How does it go?

King George V: It's F sharp: with a heavy downbeat - ha-ha.

MacDonald: Sire, I did protest, I said it was a disgrace.
But a horrid man from Glasgow told me to shut my face.

King George V: Well, don't let it happen again.

MacDonald: Only by hard persuasion and clucking like a spinster
Can I stop the 'Red Flag' being sung in the Palace of Westminster
But I shall stop their yodelling, from their mouths I'll wean it
Or make quite sure that if they do sing, they certainly won't mean it.

King George V: Good, we can see you are our man. We, of course, are above politics.

MacDonald: Yes, we are, sir -

King George V: No, we are. Kindly ensure that the rest of your government is made up of honest, God-fearing, respectable bum-lickers like yourself, or we'll dissolve you.

MacDonald: Sire, my earnest -

King George V: (Shouts) Get out! We are a busy man!

(J. RAMSAY MACDONALD goes out backwards, bowing.
KING GEORGE V yawns.) 1

In a scene of this kind the exaggeration is humorous and

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), pp.23-24.

therefore entertaining, in part, I think, because the deflation of authority is frequently a source of humour to many. At the same time, as in all good satire, a serious criticism lies beneath the surface comedy. McGrath has wisely chosen this form to convey a political meaning to an audience who would probably not sit through a conventional play. For this reason the diverse mixture of theatrical techniques which McGrath employs is justified (again recalling Piscator's work of the 1920s). Again, the postmodernist critique of former representational modes is seen manifesting itself in latent content in shrinking the division between art and everyday working-class life.

In the section called "Meanwhile, Back in Glasgow" it becomes apparent that not only is the Young Hen meant to represent the Old Hen at an earlier time, but also that they are able to move in and out of a particular scene at will. For example, after some canny political talk by Wheatley, the stage directions read:

During Wheatley's speech, some changes to HEN's interior. CHARLIE sits in there on his own, looking dejected. OLD HEN calls across to YOUNG HEN, who has been listening to WHEATLEY - and points to CHARLIE. 1

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.25.

This is followed by a conversation between the hens:

Old Hen: Psst - !

Young Hen: What's up wi' him?

Old Hen: Away in and out; maybe he's waiting for you.

Young Hen: Where's my mother?

Old Hen: Oot.

Young Hen: My faither?

Old Hen: Oot.

Young Hen: Ma brother?

Old Hen: Oot, Oot, Oot - the lot of them.
What an opportunity . . .

Young Hen: Oh, God aye, you're right - what am I keeping him waiting for?

(She goes into the scene)

Hello, Charlie - what're you lookin' so glum for? If you can gie me the answer in less than two hours. ¹

Here McGrath establishes the convention that whenever a demonstration of the Old Hen's past is required, the Young Hen will become the Old Hen. The subject is dispersed in its own representations as history itself is fragmented. The developing "romantic" relationship between Charlie Sullivan

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.25.

and the Old Hen (in her youth), for instance, is dramatised with the Young Hen as the youthful Old Hen. A procedure of this kind, of course, destroys the sense of mimesis and creates a confusion between the levels of reality, the reality of the past (with the Young Hen "playing" the Old Hen) and the reality of the present (with the Old and Young Hens as separate people conversing). At the same time, in dramatising the scene of the past, McGrath is able to make Charlie reflect on the sterility of the Labour government:

Charlie: (Angry) It's a bloody lum-hat government like a' the rest. Listen to this. (Reads)
 'It is a cabinet of old and ageing men; the average age is nearly sixty. It is a cabinet of dullish men with a large contingent of recruits who have spent most of their lives in the Tory or Liberal parties. It is a cabinet largely of rich men and of men who have inherited comfortable fortunes: of capitalists or landlords or brewers.
 'So far as Labour is concerned, many of them have never even worked for their living at all, let alone had experience of poverty. And, as for Socialism, not more than five or six of the whole twenty would call themselves Socialists, and each one of them would give a different definition of that much-abused term . . . ' (Stops reading) 1

For McGrath, the distinction between true socialism and a Labour Party working comfortably within the confines of the

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.25.

capitalist system is a marked one which should be clearly seen. Unlike his previous satiric attempts to make this distinction (for example, the caricature of Ramsay MacDonald), McGrath here documents specific evidence (taken from an actual report) of what happened in the past.

Nonetheless, McGrath never allows a scene to become too "serious" or depressing for his audience, and the burgeoning romance between Charlie Sullivan and the (then) Young Hen is treated as pastiche rather than a parody of a Hollywood romance:

They go and look at the river, with ripple-lighting effect used without too much subtlety over the whole set. MUSIC in. A romantic song of the period, such as 'The Moon Belongs to Everyone', is sung by a smooth SINGER in a tuxedo. An artificial full moon on a stick bobs up and down romantically (?) behind the Glasgow tenement backdrop. The essence of the song remains: the trappings - tuxedo, SINGER's manner, piano style, lighting, moon effect, are sent up. On the last note of song, LIGHTS go out.

The Old Hen, who should be playing the piano, mischievously accompanying her own young romance, gets up as the LIGHTS come up again.

Old Hen: (to audience) And that was how I got my man, Charlie Sullivan. 1

The Old Hen accompanying her own romance on the piano again

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.27.

fuses past and present, enabling the audience to see the irony of the hopes of the past in terms of the disillusionment of the present. The technique is significant if McGrath's purpose is to help those in the present learn from the experience of the past.

The section called "Sleeping Arrangements" demonstrates the results of social and economic difficulties that working-class people endure. To avoid letting the scene become too oppressive to a working-class audience who most likely know such difficulties only too well, McGrath enlivens the scene with humour and song. Parody shades into pastiche. It is with the second of two songs (one romantic, one humorous) that Act One ends with the following stage direction:

All sing this again as one of the COMPANY
says that it's interval time, and there's
a bar, so I will if you will, so will I . . . 1

Again, there is a fusing of stage and audience, destroying verisimilitude, keeping the audience aware that a demonstration is being made, but it is not a demonstration in a deceptive way. Rather the relations of production are such

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.32.

that the audience is asked to join with the company in a "good night out," but one in which mutual understanding can be of benefit to all. In this way the audience, observing new forms of social behavior, develops the forms appropriate to them. Meaning, in this sense, is not representational but the effect of representation.

Act Two begins with a section called "The Implacable Foe." It introduces another historical figure in the person of Prime Minister Baldwin, whose solution to the failing economy is to demand a cut in wages for the working classes, specifically the miners. When Ramsay MacDonald and Mrs. Beatrice Webb appear on stage to deprecate general strikes, the Old Hen says:

Old Hen: . . . Aye, but it wasnae just the politicians. The miners' leaders stood firm as a rock, but they had to put the matter in the hands of the General Council of the British TUC. 1

This speech is immediately followed by a song satirising the British Trades Union Council:

(Enter, to MUSIC, some of the General Council of the TUC, 1926)

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.35.

TUC: (Sing) We're the British TUC, TUC, TUC
 We're the British TUC, let's do a deal -
 We don't want a revolution
 To change the constitution
 That's not our cuppa tea you see

- Let's do a deal -

The Tories aren't waiting
 While we're cogitating
 Volunteers they are massing
 While we sit here gassing
 They've organisations
 To run railway stations
 They've student tram-drivers
 With monocles and fivers
 They've black-leg coal miners
 Protest and they'll fine us -

Our members have pleaded
 That we do what's needed

So we formed a Committee
 But Oh what a pity
 We're the British TUC
 We've done sod all. 1

The Old Hen tells of the ever-expanding miners' strike of 1926
 until the following stage directions are given:

LIGHTS change. TWO MEMBERS OF THE COMPANY
 come on to read, as themselves, from newspapers,
 etc., of the time. (These readings can
 vary to suit locality of performance.) 2

Again, McGrath focuses the audience's attention on the process

¹John McGrath; Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press
 Ltd., 1977), p.36.

²Ibid., p.38.

of the theatrical production itself, using actors to slip in and out of character at will. The two actors mentioned in the stage direction now assume the roles of readers and are joined later by three other actors in their reading of specific material of the time. This somewhat unorthodox method of conveying information in a stage "play" is particularly effective here for it supplies documentary evidence that working-class people would be likely to find of interest.¹ The readings consist of newspaper reports, quotations from high-ranking members of the clergy and the B.B.C., the viewpoint of an American observer at London docks, a comment from the Liberal Home Secretary and from an unemployed car salesman, an ironic remark from an Oxford undergraduate, and a range of comments and quotations from the side of the strikers. This multiple viewpoint technique allows McGrath to concretise his material in order to force his audience to see the complexity of the situation and understand what the failure of the strike meant for the ordinary working-class people involved in it and affected by it. At the same time McGrath is able through his stage technique to distinguish between the purely representational "presentness" of traditional and modern theatre and the literal objecthood and theatrical presence of real bodies on stage, a distinctly

¹This is Piscator's influence.

postmodern approach to making the audience conscious of themselves as embodied.

In the section appropriately called "Bone Soup," the Old Hen continues her personal story of suffering in the depression years of the 1930s. After she (then the Young Hen) has given birth to twins, Charlie joins the loyalists in the Spanish Civil War and is killed, leaving the Hen with three children to raise (one of whom is the Young Hen's mother).

In the section called "Let's Go with Labour" the audience is offered an account of how George (the Old Hen's brother) grasped the opportunity during the Second World War to "get up" in the world by manufacturing doors for the building industry. The scene takes the audience up to 1951. It allows McGrath to demonstrate how the more enterprising of the working classes may improve their situations, contrasting the younger and older generations.

The final section of the play, called "Enter Scotland's Oil," brings the audience up to the present and to the end of the Old Hen's story. An exchange between the Hens is pertinent in conveying McGrath's meaning:

Old Hen: There you are, my girl, that's my story - I saw Scotland on the move, hen - it began with hundreds of thousands of people on the streets of Glasgow singing the 'Red Flag', demanding socialism. It ended wi' this shemozzle we've got now - a string of Labour governments doing the Tories' job for them, and the TUC doing the bosses'

job for them: one and a quarter million people out of work. And Glasgow? . . . well . . . that's my story.

Young Hen: Here, Gran, that's a terrible story, so it is - but do you no' think you've left out a few bits?

Old Hen: The bits I've left out would keep you here a' night - how that Labour government of Atlee's sold its soul for a few million dollars of Marshall Aid - and if I got on tae Harold Wilson and Reginald Prentice: in the name of -

Young Hen: No, no, no, I was meaning the good bits - I mean folks do have better houses and mair food in their belly, and better dole money and better wages now than they used to . . .

Old Hen: Oh aye, after the war we got quite a lot started. There's a wee bit to show for a' these years, batterin' away. I should bloody hope so. But do you remember Jimmy Maxton? John Wheatley? Willie Gallagher? What they stood for? Do you remember John MacLean - what he died for? No' a few bob here and a high-rise flat there, hen - no: never that - surely we're no' gonnae be satisfied with that - it's life we're talking about: how everybody can make the most of the short time they've got to live. No' just a few people - everybody. That's what socialism's about. ¹

The Old Hen, however, grasps this opportunity to ask the Young Hen:

Old Hen: . . . Now - what I'm wantin' to know

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.44.

from you is - just what do you propose to
do that's any different? 1

This, of course, is the central question that the play asks,
and McGrath attempts to answer it by first presenting answers
which are not viable. This is accomplished first of all by a
song sung by three Scottish National Party politicians:

SNP Politicians: It's a revolution
Since we came on the scene -
All: And we're laughin' all the way to the
bank
For though we know we're just ornamental
Nothing more than a monumental - prank -
To be frank . . .
We're the craze,
We're the craze,
Nowadays,
We're the craze. 2

This is followed by two absurd speeches supporting Scottish
Home Rule, one by a Scottish MP (Banff), the other by William
McCashin:

McCashin: Fellow Scots, others. William McCashin
speaking. As things looked quite promising
for this great movement of ours, I thought
I'd better join it. I'm a thinker, and

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press
Ltd., 1977), p.45.

²Ibid.

an Edinburgh lawyer. So I'm a pretty quick thinker.

Now many witless people, some having the misfortune to be non-Scottish, have accused us of not having any policies. That's not true. We have. I remember them well. In fact I have them written on the back of this piece of paper. I will put them to you in the form of questions and answers. In that order, question, then answer. Thus you might well ask: What is your policy on housing? You might well ask that. Well, our policy is: After independence there will be housing in Scotland. But it will be Scottish housing - that just about covers that one . . . 1

The absurdly satiric speeches are presented as representative of how the Old Hen sees her modern-day counterparts. Clearly, for McGrath, Scottish Home Rule is not an option for solving the myriad problems connected with capitalism. To be sure, in the printed version of the play McGrath quotes at the front of the book from a speech by James Connolly made in 1897:

If you remove the English tomorrow, and hoist the green flag over Dublin Castle, unless you set about the organisation of the Socialist Republic, your efforts would be in vain. England would still rule you. She would rule you through her capitalists, through her landlords, through her financiers, through the whole array of commercial and industrial institutions she has planted in this country. 2

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.47.

²Ibid., p.ii.

For McGrath, it is important to see, Scottish Home Rule is a worthless pursuit unless it includes the restructuring of Scottish society along socialist lines. This seems to be what the Old Hen means when she answers the Young Hen's question, "Is that how you think we are?":

Old Hen: It's no' so far off . . . some of
yous are a sight worse -

Young Hen: Aye, I know, I've got tae admit
it - but some of us is a lot better - in
my branch we want mair than freedom for
Scotland - we want social justice.

Old Hen: Social justice? What the hell kind
of a Tory expression is that?

Young Hen: Tory?

Old Hen: How can you have social justice without
economic justice? - and how can you have
economic justice without socialism? You
know fine what I'm sayin' . . .

Young Hen: But some of us are socialists.

Old Hen: Aye, so you say - but where are ye?
Let's hear from you.

Young Hen: The first thing we've got to do
is get Scotland free, then you'll see where
the socialists are.

Old Hen: Do you no think that might be a wee
bit late? Let's be hearing from you now,
before your bankers and your think-tank
and your failed Tories take you over completely.

Young Hen: Aye, but first we must get independence,
so we've got to stay united. After
independence . . .

Old Hen: Oh God. Here we go again - do you
no' see what I'm sayin' to you? Now come

on - for it matters, girl: what are you gonnae dae any different from us? You're gonnae move your parliament from London to Edinburgh, but it's gonnae still be there tae keep the people quiet and under the thumb - what difference is any of that gonnae make? None at all. And your precious oil - look - there's not one man - or woman - in your party gonnae make that much impact on the multinational corporations - all you'd be gettin' after independence is a few people grabbin' a bigger slice of the same bloody capitalist cake - come on, girl - I'm waitin' for you tae speak.

Young Hen: Aye, well, I cannae get a word in edgeways -

Old Hen: Well try to avoid stupid expressions like social justice - you lot don't read enough, you use words that don't mean anythin'. You've learnt nothin' from two hundred years of working-class history. All you can do is - Scotland! Well, don't forget, I'm for a free Scotland: free of England, aye, but free of capitalist greed, misery and exploitation - right. Go. 1

A dialogue of this kind permits McGrath to present his argument for a free socialist Scotland directly to the audience in a sort of public forum Gooch has advocated, to help them consider the issues from all angles, to make well-informed decisions in order to one day act upon those decisions in solving problems. Finally, McGrath is able to sum up the central argument of this play in the following dialogue:

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), pp.48-49.

Young Hen: And Scotland's on the move - right now.

Old Hen: And so were we - but do you no' see the mistake we made: we put politics - that's Westminster and government, up here, and it failed us. Then we put economics - that's unions and General Strikes and abolition of capitalism, up here - and it failed us: why? Because the two must go together. When the working-class of Scotland gets itself on the move, and organised, for both together - then you'll see something. That's what you should be fighting for. 1

This is a vital piece of information, in effect what the play has been about, acquired from the wisdom of the Old Hen's experience over many years. That McGrath has been able to show so many facets of that experience - much of which has been acquired through toil, disenchantment, tribulation, heartbreak, and misery - is testimony to his ability to keep an audience alert and entertained, to show them "a good night out." While McGrath's methods of accomplishing his aims - the use of music hall sketches, variety, original songs, street songs, burlesque, polemical overstatement, pastiche, parody and satire - may not appear to some to fall within the parameters of "legitimate" theatre, they are keyed accurately to the specific audiences that McGrath has either selected and targeted, or that have, as Lyotard predicted, burgeoned and

¹John McGrath, Little Red Hen, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1977), p.49.

developed as a corollary of a cogent theatrical expression. In either case, such methods would appear to be justified in accomplishing his objectives.

Swings and Roundabouts

Written and first produced in 1980,¹ Swings and Roundabouts is a critical assessment of social aspiration and the parameters of "success." Unlike some of McGrath's earlier work, it makes no heavy-handed commentary on the rights of the working class to reclaim their lands² or on the great evils of capitalism and the righteousness of socialism,³ or on the dangers of multi-national corporations' control and exploitation of the people.⁴ It is, rather, a careful and apparently accurate examination of how the different classes define success, what they are prepared to sacrifice to attain it, and how the gap between social classes is maintained and encouraged.

Swings and Roundabouts concerns two newly-wed couples, one upper-middle-class and one working-class, brought together

¹First published in 1981 by 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press, Edinburgh.

²As in The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil.

³As in Yobbo Nowt and Fish in the Sea.

⁴As in The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil and Fish in the Sea.

by chance to share adjoining rooms at a "typically" pretentious and tasteless franchise of a large hotel chain near Falkirk. Andy and Ginni, a young working-class couple from Edinburgh are honeymooning at the hotel on the "wonderful, never-to-be-forgotten Neptune's Fork Hotel Group Newly Weds Bliss Bargain Weekend." Andy is an assistant television repairman and Ginni is a secretary for I.B.M. The other couple, Freddie and Rosemary, have had engine trouble on their way to the Isle of Skye for their honeymoon and are forced to take lodging overnight until the car is repaired. Freddie is a management consultant; Rosemary is awkward and clumsy, with an interest in studying animal conservation. She has been convinced, however, that this interest is a waste of time, since she is pretty and from wealthy stock, the insinuation being that she will have no trouble finding a suitable husband. This is Freddie's second marriage and "not, I fancy, my last."¹

The first act exposition leads us to believe that Andy, having consumed vast quantities of alcohol at his stag party the night before and then over-indulging in cheap champagne at his wedding reception, has passed out on his wedding night. Simultaneously, stage action in the next room indicates that

¹John McGrath, Swings and Roundabouts, in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press, 1981), p.103.

Rosemary is menstruating; she goes to bed leaving Freddie disappointed. Moving to the balcony for a cigar, he meets Ginni at the adjoining balcony, and in their brief encounter they discover that despite their decidedly different backgrounds, they are very similar in nature: determined, aggressive and, relative to their own "worlds," successful. Having both been disappointed by their new spouses on their wedding night, they decide to meet outside the hotel for an illicit encounter. While Freddie and Ginni are elsewhere, Rosemary wakes to discover her husband missing; she assumes he has gone to the bar. The monologue in this scene reveals that her youth was spent accompanying her father, in the employ of the British Army, around the world, seeing "the desert, the veldt, the outback, the bush, the great out-of-bounds."¹ But in all these places, she notes that the exiled British were all the same: drinking the same drinks, talking the same talk, laughing the same laugh; and that it was this sameness she was constantly trying to escape. She also indicates that she was previously engaged to an Army officer who simply "vanished." Despite her own desires, she has relegated herself to the role of wife for no other reason than that she has been groomed for it:

¹John McGrath, Swings and Roundabouts in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press, 1981), p.105.

Poor old Freddie. He so desperately wants to have his will of me: I wouldn't agree to it before we were married. I did with Colin [her former fiance], but not with Freddie. He drives so hard, pushes and shoves and insists and organises. I suppose most men are like that - quite a lot of women too. I'm far too old to live at home, and I'm disastrous at everything else, and marriage is what I was trained for (sigh). I'll just have to go through with it. ¹

She believes that she is incapable of achieving anything for herself in life. The women of her class simply marry and no more; it is what is expected of her, and she never seriously considers otherwise. For her class and gender, this behaviour is considered "appropriate," and that is largely what this play is about: what people consider is appropriate behaviour for themselves and how these parameters are dictated by a tradition embraced by a rigid class system. It exposes how the deeply-instilled attitudes of the oppressing upper class manipulate a brain-washed, unquestioning working class; at the same time, the play explores how rigid attitudes toward women force them into roles and situations not of their choosing. Hence, underlying the action of the play is an implied criticism of the political system responsible for social conditions which have given rise to distinctions of both class

¹John McGrath, Swings and Roundabouts in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press, 1981), p.106.

and gender. Indeed, the double standard between social classes is juxtaposed with a similar double standard between the sexes. It is the absurd difficulties for human beings created by this tradition that are exposed in this play.

Directly after Rosemary's soliloquy, Andy wakes up ill. Forgetting that his room is en suite, he rushes out the door and down the corridor to the bathroom. He returns to discover that he has locked himself out and that Ginni is not there. Rosemary attends to the commotion in the hall, discovers Andy and invites him in until a receptionist can be located for the key. This scene, like that between Ginni and Freddie, reveals that Andy and Rosemary are innately similar. Owing to their circumstances and not their actions, they consider themselves failures. The following dialogue illustrates the relative attitude of the juxtaposed classes to one another:

ROSEMARY: It's not the feeling of being in
a hotel that bothers me.

ANDY: No?

ROSEMARY: I had the misfortune of being brought
up in hotels all over the world.

ANDY: Oh . . .

ROSEMARY: It's the feeling of being married
that's spoiling my honeymoon.

ANDY: Oh, I see (looks around) Where's your
free champagne?

ROSEMARY: We're not on the Wedded Bliss package,
I'm afraid. We're only here by accident

really. We're supposed to be in Skye by now, in a secluded little hideaway with a view of the torpedo range. My husband's very interested in torpedoes. But we broke down and the garage man couldn't mend the motor. Freddie is very angry. I was quite terrified. You're not a mechanic are you?

ANDY: No - electrician - well, TV sets, TV engineer - I put them, well I work wi' the bloke that puts TVs in houses, Rental Service. I cannae fix cars. I can fix tellies: well - plugs: but i [sic] cannae fix cars.

ROSEMARY: Do you think you're a failure?

ANDY: No. I don't think I'm a failure. I know I'm a failure.

ROSEMARY: Me too.

ANDY: You? You can't possibly be -

ROSEMARY: Oh yes. It's quite possible.

ANDY: Aye, I suppose it is. It's funny to think of a woman being a failure though, for me. I mean, I'm a man; I've got to do all those things: get a car, a house, maybe start up my ain business: argue, push, grab every opportunity, take control. A woman shouldnae have to do all those things. I'm no' sayin' you couldnae: but - you see what I mean - being a man, I've got tae. It's a terrible strain, it really is. Sometimes I think it must be quite nice to be a woman. 1

Both Andy and Rosemary have very definite ideas of what their roles are and cannot see beyond the conventions that society

¹John McGrath, Swings and Roundabouts in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press, 1981), p.109.

has devised for their specifications. Andy never even considers that an upper-middle-class woman is capable of being a failure. Since, in his view, Rosemary's only duty is to her husband, and success is measured in monetary terms, her success is the result of Freddie's financial success. Andy's assessment of himself as a failure stems from his inability to act as the result of a feeling of inferiority. Because he has always been led to believe that he was limited by class barriers, Andy has never considered surmounting the obstacle that separates him from the elite. His vision of success is marred by convention; the best that he could realistically hope for himself is to become a licenced TV repairman and maybe one day own his own rental service, but even that seems out of his grasp.

Andy's sense of inferiority is, perhaps, justified by the fact that all working-class individuals stand inevitably accountable to their employers, who are traditionally middle-class. Their obvious perception of success, therefore, is that of their employers. For this reason, working-class individuals who aspire to success or, at least, grandeur, frequently emulate what they think are the lifestyles of the middle and upper classes:

ROSEMARY: So you feel that you must strive to be a successful man: with a car, and your own business and taking control: so you can both be comfortable.

ANDY: Something like that.

ROSEMARY: And the more you strive, the more uncomfortable you feel?

ANDY: Aye, I do.

ROSEMARY: It all sounds horribly familiar:
I don't suppose you drop things?

ANDY: No: how, familiar?

ROSEMARY: Well, all my life I keep striving to be a splendid woman - I feel I should be efficient and yet feminine, compliant and yet have a mind of my own, able to service a property and rear a family, and be a hostess at drinks for important guests, and be a flying buttress to a man's career - and all the time simper away like a hopeless wee girl. But I'm simply a non-starter at any of those activities. They said so on my school report - and the more I strive, well just like you, the more uncomfortable it makes me, I break things all the time and I don't think I'm cut out for marriage.

ANDY: Then what did you get married for?

ROSEMARY: Oh it's the done thing, isn't it? ¹

But, as indicated above, the dilemma is that the entrapments of the foreign lifestyle alienate them from their identity, that is, of course, if they have interpreted those entrapments correctly to begin with. Freddie indicates that this whole hotel chain typifies how the middle class panders to the

¹John McGrath, Swings and Roundabouts in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press, 1981), pp.110-111.

working-class desire to imitate it, and offers, for a price, a cheap, crude and ingenuine facsimile of upper-class living.

Freddie describes:

What's a luxury? I'll tell you - it's knowing what you want and getting it. Most people don't know what they want: they are sold something - and once they've paid for it, they have to persuade themselves that it was really what they wanted all along. (pause) Actually - it's just as well, because that's the way I'm afraid it just has to be. All these lower class oiks have bullied their employers into handing over more and more cash - now they want something to spend it on: but what? Well, living like their employers of course. So what do we sell them? Crap - crap food, crap clothing, crap music, crap houses, crap hotels - all at great expense: and they consume it all, and go on strike for more. Pathetic. But it's just as well. Their choices have to be strictly limited to what we can offer, cheaply and repeatedly. When you're a management consultant, you have to understand these things. But I must say it's extremely unpleasant being forced to spend the night amidst the fruits of one's labours. Even worse having to eat them. 1

Rosemary's definition of success is far more introspective. She recognises the futility of climbing the ladder to reach a prescribed semblance of what is generally considered to be success. She acknowledges that it is the "successful" who set

¹John McGrath, Swings and Roundabouts in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press, 1981), pp.121-122.

the parameters, facilitating their talents rather than seeking to fulfil their ambitions:

You don't have to pretend with me Andy. You'd rather count your toes than climb a ladder. You're just like me. Freddie lives his whole life on processes and projects. He needs a project to utilise his processes, and when he's got a project, he processes his project until he has achieved it. Then he looks for his next project to process, and the next. And the next. Looking at mountains, that's a looking-at-mountains project, driving through the countryside - that's a getting-to-your-destination project. Getting married - well, that's a getting-one's oats project and a home-comforts project - it's one of the most advantageous projects of the lot, as far as Freddie's concerned. But you're probably uncomplicated, like me: you probably hope it's just because it would be nice. ¹

Rosemary is not influenced by the spurious pretensions of either class; she knows the simple things that would bring her happiness, but believes that they are beyond her grasp. She is willing to abandon any efforts to attain "real" success in order to play the part of what she thinks a successful upper-middle-class woman is.

After a long wait, and following the dialogue between Rosemary and Andy, Rosemary finally goes downstairs to call

¹John McGrath, Swings and Roundabouts in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press, 1981), pp.111-112.

reception to find a spare key for Andy's room. Simultaneously, Freddie and Ginni return from a failed attempt at infidelity. Rosemary sees them enter the hotel but says nothing. The married couples return to their respective rooms with their respective spouses, Andy unaware of his wife's activities.

Act Two opens in the hotel dining room; Andy and Ginni are discussing the standard of the hotel. Andy is typically uncomfortable but impressed; Ginni is aware that the place caters to hard-working people who don't know that they are being taken advantage of by those whom they are trying to emulate. Rosemary and Freddie enter the dining room and are seated. Here Freddie reveals that he, in particular, consulted on the scheme to make the food for the hotel a more economically feasible venture. He is, in essence, responsible for the low quality product he is receiving. He condemns the working class for partaking of it, while he reaps a profit, thus exploiting both their gullibility and desire. The paradox is that the key to his financial success is a working-class misinterpretation of what is valued by those they emulate, and it is precisely this that Freddie preys upon, and what ultimately brings him further success; it is the working class that perpetuate their own exploitation by playing right into the hands of those who would exploit them. Freddie:

Two more hours before the car's ready, and nowhere open but this pretentious dump. Cheap and nasty this place - cheap and nasty like its clientele . . . What sort of garbage are we condemned to for "luncheon"? Ha! Gourmet! It's pre-packed in East Kilbride, this muck, and shoved under a micro-wave: my firm re-organised Gourmet Pre-Packed Home Cooking Ltd. about eight months ago - they were losing a fortune cooking their own food and sending it out in little vans every day. We said, look - just buy up huge quantities of cheap tinned stuff, and mix them together, in the most revolting combination you can think of, push your prices up and deliver weekly in a bloody great truck. Absolutely rational, absolutely efficient, lots of satisfied customers - they got the contract with Neptune's Fork and they're making a packet. I've sacked all the cooks and the van-drivers, and put the truck drivers on an incentive bonus in lieu of overtime. Brilliant. 1

In addition, Freddie here makes reference to being responsible for laying off numerous workers in order to downgrade the quality and raise the profits. Andy, in his conversation with Rosemary the night before, described how he was made redundant by a management consultant for much the same reason and put out of work for fourteen months. It is just another way of distinguishing how each of these couples typifies the attitudes of their class and the relationship between the two, while manifesting the same basic wants and needs: to live a

¹John McGrath, Swings and Roundabouts in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press, 1981), pp.118-119.

decent, comfortable life; to be "successful," which ultimately will bring them happiness. It is this "success" that is relative to the quality of their lives in general. Since success means advancement or achievement, any improvement on the existing conditions of either class's life is deemed "success."

The next scene is set in the coffee lounge. Rosemary and Freddie are seated. Once again, Freddie describes what appeals to the working class and why this cheap hotel is so successful:

They like it: the proles. They've seen it on T.V. - some money-grubbing marquis does a commercial to pay for his pleasuring in Mayfair - stands there munching sweets with his coffee - now they all want to do it: a touch of class. Ghastly. Mind you, I'm not snobbish. I think the old Marquis is just a ghastly . . . - Still - the fact is - he's making money out of it and they're losing money . . . so I suppose he's got that to be said for him: he's not stupid. 1

Andy and Ginni join them. In the following dialogue, it is discovered that there is also a link between Rosemary and Ginni; Ginni works as a secretary for I.B.M.; Rosemary inherited a portfolio of I.B.M. shares from her grandfather.

¹John McGrath, Swings and Roundabouts in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press, 1981), p.125.

McGrath has also purposely given Ginni and Freddie similar traits: the will to strive and improve their conditions and a clear understanding of how the class system works and their places in it. Similarly, Andy and Rosemary share an awkwardness, an uneasiness with unfamiliar surroundings (a hindrance to advancement), the inability to see the full scope of their existences and a reluctance to pursue their ambitions. The following dialogue ensues:

GINNI: (to Rosemary) [referring to Andy] I've never been able to quite fathom some of his moods. But he's always very kind. Even when he thinks he's being aggressive. Too kind.

ROSEMARY: Like the North American bison.

GINNI: The what?

ROSEMARY: The buffalo. The whole of North America used to be carpeted with roving herds of buffalo. Sixty or seventy million faintly ridiculous creatures, looking like a cross between a camel and a Highland cow, but they were immensely strong, and very useful - in fact they provided everything that human beings needed to live on - food, clothing, even wigwams were made from buffaloes. And when they moved together in a stampede, nothing could stop them: they used to turn over railway trains, and chop the pioneers in their covered wagons into little pieces as they thundered by in their thousands, for hour after hour. But on their own, each one was too kind - and too trusting. A skilled hunter would creep up on a herd, then pick off the leader. The others would look to see whether the leader was worried, but no, he would just stand for a minute or two. So the others would graze on. Then he would topple over; those very near would perhaps take fright. And then some others

would come up to look at the dead ones, and sniff them, and they would throw up their heads and bawl. So he would shoot them. Then usually a bunch would run off, but he would shoot their leader, and the others would turn back in dismay and swirl around, and the idea was that the hunter could keep them milling around in circles for as long as he liked, just shooting those who tried to start a movement away from the centre. (Pause) In this way, one man could kill one hundred buffaloes in an hour or two. In thirteen years they killed about forty million, till there were only a hundred or so left on all the rolling prairies between Texas and Calgary. (pause) Poor buffaloes. They ended up as leather armchairs. Or glue. (pause) What will you end up as, Andy? 1

This complex analogy, comparing Andy to the buffalo, is typical of McGrath's technique for representing societal classes with individual characters.² Rosemary illustrates Andy's vulnerability, like that of the buffalo, to exploitation by those who are in a position of power. Her description of the buffalo epitomises the working class:

. . . immensely strong, and very useful . . .
everything that human beings [the ruling

¹John McGrath, Swings and Roundabouts in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press, 1981), pp.132-133.

²A typical example of this is Evans's representation of the ruling class and O'Rourke's representation of the working class in Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun.

class] need to live on . . . and when they moved together . . . nothing could stop them . . . But on their own, each one was too kind - and too trusting. 1

"Too kind" is precisely how Ginni describes Andy earlier in the scene to Rosemary; and by "too trusting," Rosemary refers more to the working class's naivete than their "trust" per se. The description of the hunt metaphorically describes how the ruling class exploits and manipulates the working class to the extent of its usefulness and then discards it. Rosemary asks Andy "What will you end up as, Andy?"² foreshadowing the inevitable outcome of Andy's destiny, like that of the whole working class, as a vehicle toward the perpetuity of ruling-class domination. The description of how the hunter shoots the leader to keep the herd milling around in circles while he continues to pick them off one by one is reflective of the futility experienced by the working class in relation to succeeding, achieving and even surviving in a world geared only toward the upward mobility of the dominant class and the perpetuation of a system that keeps the working class, like the buffalo, in the compromising servitude of the ruling

¹John McGrath, Swings and Roundabouts in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press, 1981), p.132.

²Ibid., p.133.

class. Rosemary continues: "(To Freddie) You remind me of Buffalo Bill. He ended up in a circus."¹ Rosemary's keen insight here neatly sums up Freddie's character, his place in society and the inevitable negative effect he will have on his own condition. Her comparison of Freddie to Buffalo Bill, who eventually becomes self-redundant as a buffalo hunter with the extermination of the buffalo, indicates that the essential ingredients of Freddie's exploits, as they reach short supply, will lead to his demise. The livelihood of both is supplied by the naivete of the less-fortunate; the defeat of both is caused by the exploitation of the less fortunate.²

Freddie, while lacking either the vision or the responsibility pertaining to the eventual outcome of his actions, does, at least, understand that the class system maintains a certain level of economic standards. Though certain injustices are experienced by the lower classes by means of exploitation, they are sustained for the overall good of society. By creating classes and bosses, British society permits those few in financial power to make the decisions for

¹John McGrath, Swings and Roundabouts in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press, 1981), p.133.

²One may speculate that McGrath is indicating that both the working and middle classes might profit by encouraging working-class advancement rather than its exploitation.

the many, which according to Freddie is essential in maintaining economic security for the nation as a whole. He maintains that to pretend that the classes don't exist negates the true nature of the system that keeps Britain from becoming a third-world nation. Again, it is his contention that while a large strata of British society would like to believe that there is no class system, and often pretend that there isn't, they must ultimately rely on just such a system for their relative livelihood. Because success is relative, the class system requires an evaluation of the individual's point of departure in relation to his advancements. So whether or not the class system is considered ethical, it is still, at this stage, the only viable economic option. Freddie explains:

It's been fashionable for some time to pretend that class doesn't exist any more in Britain. The proles trying to disguise themselves as respectable bank managers, the youth inventing this "class-less" get-up, with woolie sweaters and Dacri-Nylon trousers and party frocks. The socialists claiming that they were the party for all, and Ted Heath burling on about the "Property-owning democracy". Yuk. Well, that's all gone, thank goodness. What this country needs is a strong and a rich, and a confident layer of men, to run it efficiently. Motivated, dedicated chaps, who feel in their water that their ideas are good, and are right, and will work. If those men don't appear soon, and assert their authority, and seize the possibilities of the new technology - Britain is doomed to joining the Third World in twenty, no, ten years' time. Those are the facts; and at last we've got people running the show now who aren't afraid: of the facts, or of the consequences. They're

giving motivation, and incentive, to management: but more important, they're giving them the confidence to be what they are: bosses. Upper class. Leaders of men. And if this country is not to degenerate into some sort of Ethiopia, the gap between [sic] those men in the upper classes and the proles who carry on their orders must get bigger; and it is getting bigger. (Angrily) Where are these bloody people? I don't say this as a political argument - not at all: this isn't politics [sic] It's survival. I know. I'm a management consultant, I study the workings of industry: top, middle and bottom layers. I know what's wrong. I see it every day. The confidence of management has been undermined. The placidity of the workforce has been destroyed by notions of democracy and equality. Well, industry isn't democratic, and they are not equal. (Angry) Waiter!! As far as I'm concerned, this sort of place is perfect for them - this is their prize for voting Labour. Fine. They can have it. The spoils of victory. We can sell them this over and over again, here, in Blackpool, on the Costa Brava - and they are happy with it. Look at that wee man - a satisfied customer. Good. The new working class are happy with their new baubles. Excellent. Now just let them stop whining for more, and let us get on with running the country, or we're all in for trouble. You might think I'm a snob. Or a power maniac. I'm not. You could say my problem is: given the situation that we're in, and the system we live by - I can see the solutions. I get very little pleasure out of all this. Most of my life I'm fairly miserable. I can't have - straightforward relationships with women any more: my first wife just couldn't stand my . . . demands. Rosemary - hm I just don't know. She's very - compliant. No, my life's not a bed of roses. Don't go thinking I'm a happy man. But at least I don't have to stay here any longer. 1

¹John McGrath, Swings and Roundabouts in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press, 1981), pp.136-137.

While Freddie insists that the class system is required to keep the economic foundations of the society stable, he fails to recognise the crux of the ethical dilemma: while he and others like him decide on what's best for the nation and its people, a power bestowed by the monetary success of ruling-class individuals, he overlooks the point that ultimately he is in a position to choose, to alter the destiny of the working class, as is indicated in his line: ". . . at least I don't have to stay here any longer."¹ And he's quite right; while he is now at liberty to escape the confines, entrapments and limitations of the working class and its culture, those who belong to it are relegated to it indefinitely. Despite his insistence that this system is Britain's only viable option, he never addresses the fact that by this system, not one of the four characters has been "successful" in finding happiness. In fact, it has stood as an obstacle between all of them and the possibility of satisfaction. The point that Freddie and Ginni are far more suited to one another, as are Andy and Rosemary, but are eternally separated by class barriers is a prime indication of McGrath's thinking.

The final scene reveals both bedrooms with their

¹John McGrath, Swings and Roundabouts in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press, 1981), p.137.

respective couples. Rosemary is packing away her grey nightie, which she describes as a shroud, indicative of her loss of hope for any future happiness. She enters the bathroom and applies make-up to lend herself confidence. When she reappears, both her hair and make-up are garishly attended, much like Ginni's. There is both an implication and paradox here in Rosemary's belief that she can begin fulfilling her desires by exploiting her appearance to manipulate those around her. She has learned this from Ginni:

I just like to look my best, I find it makes a difference to almost everything. . . . It makes me confident. I think if I went about like a wee backle I'd never have got my job for a start. I mean, if you're - well - like me and you want to get on, you have to make something of yourself. ¹

The product of gender oppression, Ginni has adapted to find success in whatever form it may be available to her. Without even considering that she is victim of both her sex and class, she utilises her only marketable assets - her physical appearance. Rosemary, on the other hand, may find that this strategy, alien to her, will not succeed for the mere reason that it comes not from the instinct to survive. As Rosemary

¹John McGrath, Swings and Roundabouts in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press, 1981), pp.126-127.

imitates the devices of the working class, so too does Ginni imitate an attitude of false propriety, one which is alien to her but which she believes will elevate her from the realm of the working class:

ANDY: Ginni, I'm feeling an awfy lot better -
er - do you fancy - a wee rest?

GINNI: In the middle of the afternoon?

ANDY: Well - it is . . . why not?

GINNI: Can you not contain yourself until
tonight?

ANDY: No.

GINNI: Well you'll just have to. I'm not
very keen on that kind of thing, it feels
like you're a sex maniac, and anyway, I've
got other things on my mind . . . I fancy
going for a walk while the rain holds off,
don't you? That's a much better idea. ¹

Ginni's belief that sex, even on one's honeymoon, in the middle of the afternoon is inappropriate, is a confirmation of her willingness to adapt in order to make advancements in her position. She believes that by emulating the dominant class, she is capable of transcending her class, just like those that Freddie describes as "the proles trying to disguise

¹John McGrath, Swings and Roundabouts in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press, 1981), p.139.

themselves."¹

At the end of the final scene, Andy sums up their destinies, controlled in perpetuity by the class system:

ANDY: . . . I mean, I'm only a TV mechanic.
You're . . .

ROSEMARY: What?

ANDY: You're the wife of a man who tells the bosses who to lay off . . .

ROSEMARY: But I'm not a management consultant . . .

ANDY: No. You're not. But you're doomed to fill the gap by the side of one. And I'm doomed to fill another gap as a T.V. mechanic with hopes of running his own wee shop.

ROSEMARY: Why?

ANDY: That's the way it is.

ROSEMARY: For the time being.

ANDY: Your husband will be waiting to go to Skye.

ROSEMARY: Yes - into the whirlpool.

ANDY: Aye.

ROSEMARY: There's something terribly stupid about all this, isn't there?

ANDY: Aye. 2

¹John McGrath, Swings and Roundabouts in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press, 1981), p.136.

²Ibid., pp.140-141.

As this passage and the title of the play suggest, the classes and those who comprise them are very different, and it is highly unlikely that success can be found outside of one's relative environment, the environment which has nurtured and prepared one for dealing with the struggles and obstacles which are indigenous exclusively to that environment (class). In a world of swings and roundabouts, where some go back and forth and others go round and round, there is little chance of changing one's direction. The swing will continue moving back and forth; the roundabout will continue to go round and round.

Clearly, in this play McGrath has made another rigorous dissection of the relationship between the social classes. In certain ways, however, it may be seen as a technical step backwards. Unlike much of McGrath's earlier work, Swings and Roundabouts does not incorporate song, radical attenuation of character for purposes of caricature and parody, destruction of distance between character and audience, audience involvement, etc. It is, rather, presented as a "straight" play, the action presented as if occurring in the present as in the traditional "realistic" theatre. One can only assume that here form is at the service of function, and the form that McGrath has chosen for Swings and Roundabouts is

¹John McGrath, Swings and Roundabouts in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press, 1981), pp.140-141.

appropriate to its function of conveying his theme concerning the entrapment of social classes. Whether the play would be enhanced by the addition of more technical variety is problematic, but certainly it is important to consider the audience that McGrath was trying to reach. One suspects, with this play, that McGrath had not only a working-class audience in mind, that perhaps his focus was on a predominantly middle-class one which would respond more readily to a theatrical form to which it was accustomed. One can, in any event, consider the effect of the play on an audience consisting of both classes, drawing the audience together in the realisation of their own exploitation and confusion. If, indeed, this was the case, then McGrath's more conventional technique in this instance is not only understandable, but justified in accomplishing its political end.

Blood Red Roses

Blood Red Roses was first presented by the 7:84 Theatre Company (Scotland) at the Church Hill Theatre, Edinburgh, August 18, 1980. It was published the following year.¹ In his Introductory Notes McGrath defines his purpose:

The struggles of the working-class to protect
the advances made in their standards of

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981).

life go on. But they have suffered, are suffering serious setbacks. And militancy in those struggles particularly industrial militancy - is now distinctly out of fashion Once the media got the message, a series of vicious campaigns against "The Wreckers" - (remember Red Robbo, who ate babies) - has undermined the already shaky morale of the shopfloor organiser. Managements all over Britain are getting away with murder - sometimes quite literally. And people are now beginning to suffer for it.

In this situation, it seemed important - if a little unfashionable - to take a longer look at one of these militants, and at the whole question of what "fighting" means in the age of the multiple war-head. And to try to see where exactly the battlefields are, and who is on whose side . . . 1

A purpose of this kind - with its weighted emphasis on socialist values - naturally leads to consideration of the play as a product of a capitalist economy, in a theatre largely funded by the state organisation (the Arts Council), and dominated by bourgeois cultural and ideological values. After its original production, the play was revised and revived in both 1981 and 1982, competing against a trend toward industrialisation (within a capitalist framework) which is illustrated by the subsequent privatisation of various national corporations, such as British Telecom and British

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), p.iii.

Airways. At this time a sense of defeatism and loss of confidence in the trade unions resulted in the coal miners' strike of 1984-85. People were dissatisfied with the lack of jobs, dissatisfied with economic conditions, tired of being controlled and manipulated by corporate powers, oppressed by a class system and unable to succeed in any respect without submitting to the whims of such a system. The play looks carefully at what "fighting" the industrial overlords means, how it can be effective, what hindrances stand in the way and how the working class allow themselves to be exploited even to the extent of alienating the only people who have the insight and determination to subdue the manipulation of the controlling classes.

The relations of production within the 7:84 Theatre Company have been discussed above,¹ but in the introduction to his play Boom² McGrath defines further the process by which the plays usually develop:

There has been a certain amount of speculation as to how we arrive at our scripts. Perhaps it would be as well to clarify the situation. Firstly, we do not 'improvise.' Virtually everything, down to the smallest throw-away,

¹See pp.259-264 above.

²John McGrath Boom in New Edinburgh Review, (August 1975): 9-31.

is written or discussed before the performance. There have been odd moments of reaction to events in the hall: people falling off the stage, microphones failing to work, etc., which are on the spur of the moment, but these are rare. Secondly, the actors do not write their own material. The shows are conceived and controlled down to the smallest detail by the writer/director, with the fullest consultation, discussion and contribution from the collective company.

The aim of our working method is to open the writing and directing processes to discussion by the company as these processes are taking place, so that every member of the company knows what is being said - how and why - and feels part of the creation of the show, not alienated from it or the mere instruments of it. Individuals may disagree politically or artistically with certain sections. Their disagreements are heard and argued over, and either accepted, rejected or incorporated in a modified form. Writing a play can never be a totally democratic process. They are skills which need aptitude, long experience, self-discipline and a certain mental disposition in one individual. They demand leaps into the dark, liberated instincts, arrogance of the imagination and autocracy of the intuition. ¹

In effect, what McGrath was apparently attempting to do was "move forward from that concept of the writer, without jettisoning the whole writing process. To de-mystify the role, without castrating the talent."²

McGrath, of course, was not the first to attempt a less

¹John McGrath, Introduction to Boom in New Edinburgh Review, (August 1975): p.9.

²Ibid., p.9.

autocratic organisation of production relations. In the United States the San Francisco Mime Troupe and El Teatro Campesino had both developed along collective lines, as had the self-declared "first socialist group in Britain,"¹ Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre (1965). McGrath, however, had expressed his aim in print articulately, so that by the time Blood Red Roses was created in 1980, the methods of production were clearly defined and well-established. As McGrath has written:

How were we going to move forward? Basically, by trying to see our job not as expressing the writer's individual state of mind, psychological obsession, etc., but rather as finding the way to present to certain specific people certain specific facts about their lives, or facts that affect their lives, using an equally specific form. In other words, our job was to act as mediators between people and a chunk of their present history. Further to that, it was our job to present alternative ways of doing things to this audience and, because we were mostly socialists, to show socialist alternatives.²

As will be shown, in Blood Red Roses McGrath does show alternative ways of approaching working-class problems while

¹Catherine Itzin, Stages in the Revolution, (London: Methuen, 1980), p.12. Also in "CAST Revival," Plays and Players I, 1: pp.40-41.

²John McGrath, Boom in New Edinburgh Review, (August 1975): p.9.

simultaneously employing theatrical alternatives. For example, it has become something like a pattern for McGrath's plays to begin with an actor approaching the audience directly, in effect denying the possibility of illusionistic reality. The first scene of Act One, like many other scenes (though not all) in Blood Red Roses, begins with a song of original lyrics applied to a traditional or well-known tune which foreshadows or comments on the action of the scene:

A story, a story
 Of Anger and War
 A story of Death and Adventure
 A story that starts in the high heelan hills
 And ends in the far distant future -
 A father, A father
 Comes hame frae the war -
 But where is his wife and his daughter
 His wife she is gone to the ends of the earth
 And his lassie's at hame by the fireside -

 So watch now and question
 The tale that unfolds -
 Is it true or a lie or a fiction?
 Is it right or mistaken the story we tell -
 Is it fit tae be tellt tae your children? 1

To begin the play with a song of this kind immediately notifies the audience that they are about to see a demonstration of something which happened in the past and that

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), p.11.

they, the audience, are not expected to "lose themselves" in the mimetic sense in an action apparently taking place in the present. The audience are reminded that what they are about to see is a "story" and that they will have to make a decision concerning its veracity. The convention departs from the "action" of the scene to reflect on the characters or circumstances much like the aria of an opera. The technique distracts the audience from becoming emotionally tied to any of the characters and provides them with a more objective view of the situations depicted. Now when the Verfremdungseffekt is applied in this way, rather than creating characters, it forces the audience to acknowledge real bodies in real space and time, while simultaneously forcing them to see themselves seeing. As a result, the division between theatre and life, illusion and reality becomes blurred. Having been made aware of this, the audience tends to question the meanings and problems of representation. This method of audience involvement is expanded when an announcer says:

Scene One: The Soldier From the Wars
 Returning . . . The Year - 1951 . . .
 The Government: Tory (indicates set) - a
 Council house somewhere in the Highlands.
 Sound: Curlew calling - 1

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), p.11.

The announcement indicates the structure the form of the play will adopt. Each scene has its title, a specific date and place, and an emphatic notification of the political party in power, a procedure which becomes increasingly ironic, owing to both the frequency of the Tory incumbency and the inefficacy of the Labour government. The announcer is providing important information directly to the audience, acknowledging their presence in the theatre, rather than permitting the information to be slowly revealed to the audience through the action of the play. By dispensing with expositive dialogue, McGrath achieves two objectives: he eliminates the contrived and stilted dialogue that is synonymous with exposition while addressing the audience directly, providing them with necessary information that need not be played out. This practice lends a certain "honesty" to the play and serves to create reliable personae around both the Announcer and the Chorus. Because the information that both supply is declaimed directly to the audience, there is no question of credibility or accuracy in their account of the events. Their remarks tend to be accepted as true.

The first scene concerns the return from the wars (World War II, Korea, Palestine, Malaya) of Sandy Gordon, a sergeant in the Seaforth Highlanders. After twelve years, his wife has departed with another man, and only Sandy's daughter Bessie remains. Sandy supplies some necessary "background" material:

SANDY: It is I in the flesh - apart from the tin bits - eh? The day after you were - how can I say this? Made, er - started -

BESSIE: Conceived -

SANDY: Exactly, conceived, the day after you - yes - in March 1939 I was 19, I went off to Glasgow, I made my way to the Army Recruiting office in Bath Street, and I volunteered for the Seaforth Highlanders. I thought they would take me there and then, but no - they took my signature, my pulse-beat and my temperature and sent me home to await my papers. Six weeks later, on the platform at the railway station, Janey told me the news: of you. Two days later, I was a soldier. The day I finished my basic training, war broke out: and I never saw you until 1946 . . .

BESSIE: I remember the day -

SANDY: I'm glad I stayed in though - Palestine, Malaya: interesting. Got made up - three stripes: Sergeant Gordon . . . Then the Chinese bazooka got me. (pause) Home now, though. (pause) As I walked along from the train, I knew it was the right thing. (pause) I didn't expect a hero's welcome - getting your leg blown off is just plain bloody stupid, incorrect military procedure, fit only for National Service Second-lieutenants and nignog privates from Paddy-land. But I did think she'd at least be in after twelve years. 1

This background material is necessary to understand the reasons for Bessie's motivation rather than Sandy's, since

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), pp.12-13.

Bessie becomes the protagonist of the play who must somehow engage in the struggle to rise above the working-class exploitation and sexist conditions that capitalism has imposed.

Desperate and homeless, Sandy and his daughter move to Glasgow to stay with Sandy's sister, Ella. The song which opens Scene Two is pertinent to the action:

Oh pack your bags my bonnie lass
 And lie without sleeping till the morning
 In pain and fear your father lies
 Tho' he'll no' shed a tear come what may -
 Then off they set for Glasgow town
 Never feart, the lassie leads the way
 And not a care will cast them down -
 They've lost but they will fight another
 day . . . 1

The Chorus's omniscient narrative foreshadows Bessie's strength and leadership and her zeal to combat injustice as will be revealed later in the play. This is immediately followed by the Announcer's explanation that it is now the following night near Glasgow.

ANNOUNCER: Scene Two: Blessed Are the Meek
 for They Shall Escape the Attention of the

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), p.14.

Authorities. The Time - Still 1951. The Government - still Tory. The Place: a street in the centre of Glasgow . . . It is approaching midnight. 1

No attempt is made to let this information emerge from the dialogue in the traditional way. Instead, the audience is asked, in effect, to accept another convention in which an actor (as an announcer) simply tells them what is supposed to be happening on stage, so that, far from becoming "lost" in the action, the audience focuses on the process of the stage technique as if this were the subject matter of the play. This, I think, is McGrath's intention since the process of theatre, particularly the production relationships among the actors, among the actors and the rest of the company, and among the actors and the audience, is related to the meaning of the play.

The action of Scene Two, in which the twelve-year-old Bessie reacts violently to an abusive young police officer who accosts them, demonstrates Bessie Gordon's "fighting spirit," that is, her tendency to react aggressively - even belligerently - when she considers the circumstances appropriate. This attitude, as the song which begins Scene

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), p.14.

Three indicates, is considered an admirable trait by McGrath and, one assumes, is meant to appeal to a majority of the audience:

So hold your head up bonnie lass
 And never let your pride be easy broken
 You're strong in heart, you'll no' go wrong,
 You'll see him safe and guard him come what
 may
 Then off they set and journeyed on
 Till they came to a door that took them
 in
 But blood runs thick till cash runs dry,
 And soon they'll be off travelling once
 again . . . 1

In contrast to Bessie's spirit, Sandy, now out of uniform and disabled, shows a tendency to succumb to his adverse domestic circumstances in his sister's duplex. He reflects:

SANDY: Three months ago grown men jumped at
 the sound of my voice. Sergeant Gordon,
 the black bastard of the Seaforths. - I
 put a man on a charge for going into battle
 without braces - 2

Sandy's loss of manhood, as he is no longer capable of providing for his family, and Bessie's new-found strength and

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), p.17.

²Ibid., p.19.

determination to fight for equality, shedding her aura of acceptability and femininity, are now disclosed and developed. Sandy's decline is contrasted to Bessie's burgeoning tenacity in the song which begins Scene Four:

A soldier's a man till
 He's shot or he's shelled:
 And then he's a soldier no longer -
 He's thrown by the wall
 To grow old and to grieve,
 And to think of his life and to wonder . . .

A woman's a lass till
 She fights for her pride
 And then she's a lassie no longer
 Then she walks in the world
 With her head held up high
 And no man shall dare be her master . . .
 (Tune: Charlie, oh Charlie . . .) 1

Again, this narrative indicates not necessarily the attitude of the characters but rather accepted popular perceptions. By the use of this device, the audience identifies immediately with both the truth and absurdity of this observation.

Three objectives are accomplished in Scene Four. The Announcer divulges that it is now four years later, 1955, in a classroom near East Kilbride. The Reverend Murdo Smith addresses the girls in Bessie and Catriona's class, describing

¹John McGrath; Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), p.20.

what their duties in marriage will be and what criteria they need to employ in choosing the right kind of man to provide for them. This is one of a series of sexist confrontations representing male-dominated institutions entrenched in the capitalist state, in this case, the church. First, an acutely Chauvinistic viewpoint is expressed by the Rev. Murdo Smith:

REV. MURDO: Now you'll be wondering why I have asked your teacher to take the lads off to another room: well I'm not going to say anything it would do them any harm to hear - no, it's just so we can be more relaxed together: for you are all fifteen, coming up sixteen, many of you leaving us next summer for the big wide world, and all of you, I should imagine, young women. And what I want us to discuss today is marriage. Now boys are inclined to scoff and crack jokes about marriage, perhaps because they think marriage is not so important in a man's life. A man will, usually, have so many more things with which to occupy himself. But to you girls, well - marriage is what life is all about: so let's discuss it without the boys making silly jokes about it, shall we?

CATRIONA: Sir, what should you do if you think you're pregnant?

REV. MURDO: That is a large question, Catriona, which can only be answered in the context of even larger questions still. But they are not the ones we are discussing today.

CATRIONA: It's legal -

REV. MURDO: Marriage, my dear, is something that rises above the merely legal - it is a sacrament, a sacred bond, a pledge to God and to your partner - only those who are weak or incapable of carrying their burden have to slither down into the gutter of divorce.

BESSIE: Now wait a wee minute -

REV. MURDO: You will all, I am sure, have
your vision of your Dream Man - perhaps
tall, perhaps dark, perhaps handsome -

CATRIONA: Perhaps rich, perhaps sexy, perhaps
wi' a car - and stamina . . .

REV. MURDO: Quite, Catriona - but are these
the qualities you should look for when a
man presents himself to you as your partner
for life? Now tradition has it, of course,
that the man takes the initiative in these
matters, he 'pops the question' so to speak -

BESSIE: He makes me sick (Murdo looks at her).
You make me sick . . .

REV. MURDO: (recovers, then -) But we all
know you have your little feminine wiles,
your flutterings, your enticements, to draw
the man of your choice into your snare,
as it were -

BESSIE: I'm gonnae stick one on him -

REV. MURDO: So you must know exactly what
you are looking for in a man - the qualities
that will make for a lasting marriage -
one that will not end in the tragedy, the
shame of the Divorce Courts, as so many
do -

BESSIE: (seething) Hold me down, Catriona,
would you?

REV. MURDO: For he is, after all, the man
whose children you will bear and rear and
devote your life to, whom you will have
to send off happy to his work in the morning
and welcome home with good food and good
cheer in the evening - 1

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), pp.20-22.

The Rev. Murdo Smith's attitude toward marital relationships is not uncommon, but McGrath uses the scene shrewdly to reveal Christianity as a hypocritical instrument of capitalism:

REV. MURDO: You see, being a Christian means turning the other cheek on such mindless provocations - though I shall of course be speaking to your headmistress. I said sit down, Bessie . . .

BESSIE: I'll get you. One day, Mr. Smith.
(sits) 2

Finally, Bessie, whose aggressiveness has been increasing throughout the scene, can contain herself no longer, and as Murdo Smith continues, she exhibits the belligerence which is so essential to her characterisation:

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

(Through the end of the last speech, Bessie has been bearing down on him carrying her desk.

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), p.22.

At the end she raises it, and brings it down
on his head). 1

The exaggeration inclines the scene to parody, yet it is effective in establishing Bessie's character and in eliciting the audience's sympathy for her. In addition to advancing the action insofar as it develops and adds to the many abuses against which Bessie, being a working-class woman, must struggle, the scene is highly entertaining in its humour, a humour based on the deflation of pomposity and authority. While it has become customary for McGrath to mount a criticism against the Church as a manipulative part of the capitalist "machine," he is skillful here in relating it to the sexist issue insofar as Bessie, serving as a representative type for the militant female, is exposed to the injustices and indignities of the capitalist structure. Hence, in a single scene McGrath is able to depict hypocrisy, sexism, the deception of the Church, and the reaction of militant working-class women as products of late capitalism. By demonstrating the class of socially typical performance, McGrath has defined its essence by means of gesture, the gestic acting style allowing the actor to unmask a certain

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), p.22.

human activity.

Scene Five breaks the pattern McGrath has so far established by presenting from Sandy a long monologue in which he traces the belligerent strain in Bessie to her ancestors - "the daughters of Boadicea."¹ Sandy then comes to the realisation that he has been fighting in the wrong wars - capitalist wars - rather than staying at home to fight for something worth fighting for:

And many's the night, as she grew, I saw
her mother flashing out of her. And I wept
for what I had lost. Not my leg: no. Her.
Jane Fraser. You see, I had run away from
her fight, the battle she offered me. I'd
chosen to fight Adolph Hitler, Rommel, Mussolini -
then Palestine, the Stern Gang, the Chinese
in Korea, anybody, rather than do battle
with her. And now it was too late. 2

He goes on to set up the following scene - he is keeping house, unable to find work with his disability and Bessie is out of school searching for a job. McGrath poses the irony of the daughter working while the father keeps house, indicating an insistence to break with conventional gender roles.

Scene Six, while further developing Bessie's belligerent

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), p.22.

²Ibid., p.23.

character as she defends her cousin Catriona's rights against capitalist abuse in the factory in which they both work, introduces the audience to Alex McGuigan, who will later become her husband. He is a self-confessed Communist and the local Shop Steward, and it is he who, by coercion, forces Bessie to join the local union (AEU). The scene ends with the irony of Bessie's inviting the Communist Shop Steward to meet her father, who has lost a leg fighting against Communism, the implication being that Sandy should have been fighting his real enemy, capitalism. Bessie's character takes a strong foothold in this scene, placing her dogma and dedication to just and fair treatment within the context of the worker and the conditions of his exploitation. She has previously been identified by the audience as a fighter; now with a cause, we perceive her as a volatile force within her class.

Scene Seven consists of another monologue by Sandy in which he defines the role played by the British Army - as the instrument of capitalist England - in subjugating Scotland. As in The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, he cites historical examples with dates, names and places:

One week, out of interest, I began to explore some military activities nearer home. And I got quite a shock - Do you know how many times the British Army has been used against the Scottish people, in Scottish streets? No? Well neither do I - because it is impossible to add them up - Culloden - oh aye we all know about that. But the Food Riots that were put down, what they called the King's

Birthday Riots in 1792, the Friends of the People agitation, the militia riots at Tranent, the Clearing of the Highland straths, the Weavers Uprising in 1820 - right through to the marines landing on Skye and Tiree in the Crofters War in 1882, and the tanks in the streets of Glasgow in 1919 - my goodness - the British Army never seemed to stop turning out for action against the people of Scotland. I found this area of great interest, and began to try to organise my findings into book form, but the wee man at the local library assured me that no publisher would find such a thing of interest. ¹

McGrath's depiction of the British Army as the instrument of capitalism subjugating Scotland is one of the many disparate images which contribute to McGrath's total picture of capitalist abuse. At the same time, the device lends the theatrical event a certain credibility and a depth beyond the edifice of theatrical entertainment. Through it the audience begins to acknowledge that the play is remarking on social conditions, supported by facts and eliciting a response by presenting identifiable correlations between history and the present. This manipulation creates a sympathy with the protagonist and the identification with her condition is intended to draw a supporting response from the audience.

Scene Eight begins with another announcement:

¹John McGrath; Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), p.31.

ANNOUNCER: Scene Eight: A Turn-up for the Books. The year: 1959. The Government: Tory - BUT: there has been a General Election, and the results are coming in thick and fast - Will the Tories be given their marching orders? We shall see. The year: 1959. The place: A Maternity Hospital in the West of Scotland: outside the Delivery Room . . . 1

In this scene, in which Bessie has her first child, Janey, two complications occur. The first concerns the lump that has developed on Catriona's breast, the first of several growths which will lead to her death. The second concerns Alex's reaction to the new baby, which is essentially an attitude of indifference, since he has just heard on television that Harold Macmillan has been re-elected to office; though he attempts a weak appearance of enthusiasm for the baby, his mind is obviously elsewhere:

Alex: . . . (Midwife passes him the baby)
 Would you look at that? Are y'another bonnie fechter? We're gonnae need you to get rid of these Tories, eh? (to Bessie, ignoring the baby) Christ Bessie what are we gonnae do? Another five years of the Tories . . . how can folk no' see what they're up to? What they did? After eight years that's included Hola camp and Cyprus and invading the Suez Canal and manufacturing H-bombs - I'm ashamed of the working-class of this

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), p.31.

country. I'm ashamed and disgusted that we are so stupid, self-centred and ignorant. 1

McGrath's point is apparently to show another sexist attitude, albeit an inadvertent one, in which the male marital partner exhibits a lack of empathy bordering on callousness for his wife. So far McGrath has been building a detailed portrait of the many aspects of Bessie's life so that the audience may see what it means to be a working-class woman prepared to stand up to various abuses, political, social, and sexist. Now that such abuses are becoming intolerable to a woman of Bessie's aggressive spirit, it becomes clear that the marriage cannot last. This counterpoint of domesticity and political activity often creates an absurd paradox; while the family try to "pull together" and maintain a domestic routine, they are at the same time trying to implement a change in conditions around them. Both causes are each in its own way crucial: the domestic concern, a personal and independent concern but one which will determine the family's happiness, and the larger political concern which will inevitably affect masses on a class basis.

Scene Nine develops the various relationships. It is two

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), p.34.

years later, 1961, in Alex and Bessie's home in East Kilbride. Sandy's sister, Ella, is visiting him; she tells Sandy that she disapproves of Bessie's working. Presumably her disapproval is the result of generations of gender classification and her perception of what is "appropriate" on the basis of sex. The double standard as it is exemplified between the sexes is likewise manifested between the classes. And at times McGrath will juxtapose the contradictions and double standards.¹ The contrast between the attitudes of the two women is apparent in the following conversation:

ELLA: You're as hard and heartless as that mother of yours. And if you go off and desert your daughter, as your mother deserted you, that little girl will grow up as bad as both of you . . .

BESSIE: (looks at her) I'm no' deserting my daughter -

ELLA: Then where are you all day?

ALEX: (reasonably) Ella, listen, you've no right -

¹A prime example of this technique is in John McGrath's Swings and Roundabouts in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press, 1981). In this work, what is deemed as appropriate behaviour for working-class men as a reaction against the class system is taboo behaviour for their spouses for the mere fact that they are women. The evolution of equal rights is represented as only just beginning to penetrate class boundaries; the gap between men and women is still unscathed by demands for social justice. See the analysis of Swings and Roundabouts, pp.510-534 above.

BESSIE: Keep out of this Alex.
 (to Ella) I'll tell you where I am all day -
 I'm at my work. I'm staying up late with
 the grown-ups, O.K.? And when my daughter
 grows up she'll love me and respect me for
 it, just as I love and respect my mother
 for doing what she had to do.

ELLA: Well -

BESSIE: And if you say one more word, I'll
 do something I'm likely to regret, so don't.
 I'm away for Jane . . . she's my daughter.
 My responsibility. And she's going to be
 alright.

(Bessie goes. Ella gets up with attempted
 dignity)

ELLA: Well - I suppose I'm just old-fashioned . . .
 but if I had been that lassie's father,
 I'd have put her across my knee. And if
 I'd behaved like that in front of my husband,
 I'd have had a few bruises before the morning -
 and no worse for it either 1

Bessie's strength is then contrasted with the weakness of the
 men, a masculine weakness of which they (the men) are
 apparently unaware:

ALEX: Sandy - I admire your daughter -

SANDY: I should hope so, you married her.

ALEX: Aye - but . . . she scares the hell
 out of me . . .

¹John McGrath; Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the
 Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's
 Press Ltd., 1981), pp.38-39.

SANDY: Good.

ALEX: I'm not so sure I'm gonnae stick the
pace -

SANDY: No, maybe you won't. Her mother had
the same effect on me. I was fortunate,
of course: World War Two.

ALEX: Aye. What do you advise?

SANDY: St. Bruno.

ALEX: What, pray to him?

SANDY: No, smoke him: a pipe-smoking man has
more of a chance of survival, in my experience -
a slower, more deliberate manner - a great
deal of paraphernalia to hide behind, in
times of stress, and the delusion of a philosophical
attitude to life . . .

ALEX: Thanks. 1

Clearly a major difference between Alex and Bessie is Bessie's
sincerity in fighting her cause, in defeating the injustices
of capitalism which, being a woman, she has suffered only too
often. For Alex, however, the fight to overthrow capitalism
is simply a way of life devoid of any particular objective:

ALEX: Victory? don't frighten me. My father
was a red, my mother knew John Maclean,
my grandfather was put in prison in 1916
and again in 1923; and I've been fighting

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the
Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's
Press Ltd., 1981), p.39.

the class war since the day I was born:
 it's my element, like the birds need the
 air and the fish need the sea . . . Christ
 knows what I'd do if we actually won. I'd
 be useless, out of date, without the necessary
 skills . . . I think I'd suffer that, though -
 I've given up a lot of my life for the day
 capitalism crumbles . . . everything I believe
 in follows from that . . . 1

Alex's description epitomises the attitude of working-class socialists who not only thrive on the cause of combatting social injustice but need to be sustained by it in order to give their lives purpose. The cause is all-consuming and despite the many mundane moments of domesticity which often juxtapose the characters' political intentions, it is vital to their existence. What McGrath seems to be showing in this scene is that women like Bessie fight real causes to defeat the injustices stacked against them, whereas men like Alex are simply role-playing, without any meaningful purpose. It is this nice shade of difference which underscores even further the frustrations of women.

Scene Ten reveals the extent of Catriona's illness and ends with her death. Since most of the characters in the play appear to be representative types, one may see Catriona as a working-class woman of lesser strength than Bessie who

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), p.40.

succumbs to the working-class conditions that capitalism has created.

Also in Scene Ten the audience learns that Alex has taken another job, one that pays less money than the one he had. This circumstance, however, does not prevent him from persuading Bessie to complicate her life even further by consenting to become a Senior Shop Steward:

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

BESSIE: Alex - my life's too short already
wi' trying to work and be a mother - how
can I go to all those meetings, negotiating
committees, combine committees - they're
trying to close this place: you know what
that means for the Senior Shop Stewards -
work, work, work. You're not on.

ALEX: Think, Bessie. Think what it's all
for.

BESSIE: Aye, a better life - for some other
people, at some other time, in the future.
Well, I'm here now. I want my life. 1

It is, however, this very complication of Bessie's life, which Alex has persuaded her to accept, which will destroy her marriage and, to a large extent, her future happiness.

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981)., p.45.

McGrath has effectively demonstrated the vulnerability of women's lives to the selfishness of men.

Scene Eleven, which concludes Act One, depicts the difficulties for labour unions of opposing multi-national corporations. Nonetheless, the enormity of the challenge is exactly the kind of struggle on which Bessie's belligerence thrives:

BESSIE: (spoiling for a fight) Right, you bastards - you want a fight, you're gonnae get one.

ALEX: (to audience) At last, Bessie McGuigan had found some worthy opposition. Would she win? See Act Two. ¹

In this way Act One ends the way it began, with a direct addressing of the audience, a procedure invoking the problem of representation and denying any sense of stage reality.

Act Two begins in similar fashion, the announcer making no pretense that the audience is watching anything but a stage production:

ANNOUNCER: Are you all back? Right - Act Two. Scene One: Boadicea v. The Roman Empire -

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), p.48.

The Time: January 1968. The government - well, Labour. The place: Scottish Accounting Machines plant in East Kilbride, the new young Personnel manager's office. 1

Again, attention is drawn to the process of theatre itself. No illusion is attempted; in effect, the audience is told that here is a demonstration on the stage of something important, yet the emphasis is as much on the demonstration itself as on the ostensible subject of demonstration. The apologetic, almost grudging reference to the Labour Government implies a lack of confidence in an institution which has, from some viewpoints, repeatedly betrayed its followers. The purpose of the first scene is to provide a specific demonstration of how workers and the unions which represent them are manipulated by multi-national corporations. For example, when Bessie is confronted by her Personnel Manager Mr. Eagleton, she refuses to discuss the problem without a witness. When she momentarily leaves the office to ask a co-worker to accompany her, Mr. Eagleton calls a superior on the telephone:

MR. EAGLETON: (on phone) Mr. Grundyen please - it's urgent . . . Hello Mr. Grundyen, Eagleton here - this rationalisation plan we discussed

¹John McGrath; Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), p.49.

in London on Monday - there's going to be a lot of local opposition - I've just had the female senior shop steward in here . . . Yes, bloody Bessie McGuigan. She's gone off sounding all militant, threatening to bring production to a stop . . . But would we get an import licence to bring the parts in from Holland, it's a Labour government? . . . Ah, I see - well, how accommodating of them . . . so - we go ahead - . . . do you mean we could last out indefinitely - . . . I see, so we actually save money? Fine, say no more, I'll be the Rock of Gibraltar . . . yes - have a pleasant meeting in Paris, Eric - bye. 1

Some dramatic irony occurs here when the audience knows the circumstances which Bessie doesn't: that Bessie's strike will be defeated because the company, being a multi-national corporation, can import parts from Holland more cheaply than it can make them in Scotland. This elicits sympathy for Bessie's "fighting spirit" in the following conversation between Mr. Eagleton and Bessie:

MR. EAGLETON: Very well. Certain technological advances in coiling procedures have enabled us to install a plant in Cumbria which will produce more and better components in one day than the two shifts on Area D produce in a week. We intend therefore to transfer production of all European magnetic-B coiling to Barrow, and consequently to cease production

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), p.50.

in Area D. The two shifts will be given adequate notice and redundancy payments will be made. Area D will be used for storage. (shrugs) I don't have to explain this to you, Mrs. McGuigan, but I'm quite happy to keep you in the picture. And your witness.

BESSIE: O.K. Janice, you come with me to see the Convenor.

MR. EAGLETON: I ought to warn you that we are not in breach of any agreement -

BESSIE: Oh yes you are: this government paid you a bloody fortune to expand production in this town - to provide employment for these people. You took it. Now you're taking away jobs and giving them to a machine in Cumbria. That's a serious breach in agreement. Secondly, there are agreed methods of consultation with unions and shop stewards in the event of even thinking about sacking folk - this bloody multi-national has never consulted anyone. That's another breach. Yon Grundyen in London thinks he's God Almighty - well he's no' - nor are you God Almighty's wee boy . . . though you're gonnae need to turn some water into wine before this strike's over - 1

Immediately following this conversation, as if to underscore and comment on it, a song introduces Scene Two:

There they go out the door
Hard and angrily
Soon they'll come beat on it
Wild and hungrily

¹John McGrath; Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), pp.50-51.

No man dare speak tae them
 Sae insultingly
Wi'oot he kends
 The women are up again -

CHORUS: Come and dae battle then, chairmen
 and managers
 Come and dae battle directors and shareholders
We'll stand all day till we close down your
 factory
 Bugger the lot of ye big multi-nationals - 1

The song continues to the tune of Donald MacGillivray and is followed by an announcement which defines the content of Scene Two:

ANNOUNCER: Scene Two: Divide and Rule. Time -
 April, 1968. Government - still, well -
 Labour. The place: a picket line outside
 S.A.M., East Kilbride, too early one morning. 2

The scene's title "Divide and Rule" refers to the betrayal of the women in the strike by the men. This is important because the year is 1968, a time when virtually anything seemed politically possible. Again the announcer's reference to the Labour government sounds apologetic, and well it might since the scene shows clearly that the factory women on strike are

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), pp.51-52.

²Ibid., p.53.

fighting not only the multi-national corporation, but also the Labour government which has provided it with an import licence to acquire the materials needed to break the strike. The situation is made clear, and the power of the opposition disclosed, in a conversation between Bessie and Alex:

ALEX: There's no chance of winning, Bessie. They're getting all the parts they need from Eindhoven, with an import licence from the Labour government - you're no' going to get your fifty women's jobs back, and your ex-Convenor is a man - and he agrees with the men - get back to work. Think again.

BESSIE: So it's no' just the multi-nationals we're fighting. It's our own union - and the men we work with as well -

ALEX: Aye. It is.

BESSIE: Right well. And guess who's gonnae be our next Convenor? You'll no' get away with that wi' me - None of you. O.K., Isobel - back to work, ten weeks out for nothing - sorry about that, it was my fault. I underestimated the divisions within the working-class: and above all the treachery of the male of the species: but I won't do that again - oh no, Alex - get back to your office in Glasgow and telephone London and tell them I'm wanting to make direct contact with the International Department of the T.U.C., right - and I'll be doing that whether they say yes or no. I'm going away to Barrow-in-Furness tomorrow - and I'm wanting to talk to the folk there - and then I'll be convening an I.R.M. shop stewards' combine meeting in Liverpool as soon as maybe - and I'll be contacting shop floor organisers in every I.R.M. plant in Europe - personally. O.K.? ¹

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), p.55.

Part of the power of this play is the penetration and clear presentation of the complexity of Bessie's struggle. Not only is her struggle against the abuses of capitalism - particularly such newly-fledged leviathans of late capitalism as multi-national corporations - and against the betrayal of a Labour government which operates quite comfortably within the capitalist system. Being a woman, her struggle is also against the opposite sex, the men who won't support the strike because it involves a majority of women, the men who run the Trade Unions and are not strong enough to stand up to the corporations or the government, even Bessie's own husband who has taken a pay cut to lead a quiet life while he burdens his wife with increased responsibility. Certainly the male of the species - as presented in context - appears to be a weak, selfish, spineless, and incompetent creature in the face of Bessie's belligerence. Indeed, Bessie's predicament is clearly expressed when, in the midst of domestic chaos, she is trying to speak on the telephone with members of her organisation, while Sandy and Alex are incapable of persuading her daughters to go to bed. Finally, Bessie hangs up the phone and confronts Alex:

BESSIE: . . . I hear you're having it away
 wi' some bit of stuff from your office -
 (starts to dial)

ALEX: Aye - we've given Jane Fonda a start
 in the Education Department - what are you
 saying?

BESSIE: If y'are - don't. Stop it. Now.
 (listens) Curses - engaged. (hangs up,
 looks for next number) Harlow 371432 - Where's
 the code book?

ALEX: Were you serious just then?

BESSIE: That's what I was told . . .

ALEX: Jesus Christ - who's your friendly informant?

BESSIE: Never you mind.

ALEX: Do you believe them?

BESSIE: No. Or I'd batter you. But there's
 something going on. Mind you, I'm no' surprised,
 I mean I'm away a lot, eh, and no' exactly
 doin' the female thing.

ALEX: Bessie - hold on a wee minute - what
 are you saying?

BESSIE: (anger) It's O.K. - I'm just taking
 on a multi-national corporation, pretty
 near single-handed - certainly wi' no help
 from you and your union. So are you surprised
 I'm no' all coy and sexy when hubby comes
 hame frae the boozier?

ALEX: Bessie, you're talking a load of crap,
 will you stop it?

BESSIE: Oh aye, crap is it? Christ, you couldnae
 even get the girls tae bed -

ALEX: What's that got to do with it?

BESSIE: Trying to be bloody nice. You're
 too concerned about your own image -

ALEX: Bessie are you trying to provoke me?

BESSIE: (exasperated) Why should I stand here,
 apologising to you, for no' coming on all
 feminine, when I do everything in this house,
and a job of work, and fight a war against
 a multi-national in my spare time, and you
 sit there reading the paper and worrying
 about your image. If they need sleep, they

must go to bed, whether it makes you feel
unkind or whether it doesnae . . . 1

This is the beginning of the deterioration of their relationship, and the deterioration increases as Bessie becomes more successful in the T.U.C. The extent of her success is described by her co-worker Isobel on the eve of victory in Scene Four:

ISOBEL: (as drinks are poured) Why you should never forget tonight Janey, is because tonight we're celebrating the first time a big multi-national corporation has had all its workers in all its plants in the whole of Europe organised to support each other over a dispute. And we won. And they lost. They couldnae win because we were better organised even than they were. It's a day of history, Janey, and you're lucky to witness it. 2

The effects of Bessie's success, however, are also registered in Alex's speech:

ALEX: I'll drink to that. Bessie, you and the women at S.A.M. have succeeded where the mighty trades union organisations of Europe have failed. I feel proud, and a

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), pp.61-62.

²Ibid., p.66.

bit ashamed. Here's to Victory . . . 1

This male weakness in the face of female strength is summed up by Sandy:

SANDY: None of this can compensate for my lack of involvement in a good scrap. For the last twelve weeks, I've seen Bessie go out that door at six in the morning and come home at midnight exhausted, and up again at 5:30, ready for more. Why? She's a good fight on her hands . . . This phone here - my goodness, for two years - I've been speaking with Spaniards, Greeks, Dutchmen, Algerians, even members of Parliament. Oh yes, we were all roped in for what they call "the struggle". And this last effort - after twelve weeks - she's won . . . I could have advised the gentlemen in New York not to bother - if you cross our Bessie it's just a matter of time before you get a bloody nose. But the difference in her . . . and me, well I'm baby-sitting wee Alison while they're away celebrating - and I suppose I'm quite happy. To my way of thinking, there's two purposes in living, there's enjoyment like reading or playing with the grandchildren or growing scarlet runners, that's one, but there's no flavour to that, no value in it, without the other: and that's fighting - the struggle. Either one, without the other, is foolish: but together, they are the reasons for carrying on. 2

Scene Six consists of a monologue by Alex in which he

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), p.66.

²Ibid., p.64.

explores the depth of his own shame and inadequacy. More than a monologue, it is a simple narrative spoken directly to the audience and explains how Alex feels in the face of Bessie's strength. It also describes the complexity of their relationship as they become further involved in political agitation to the point where Alex seriously considers leaving Bessie for good. He does not leave, but he is "not happy with the set-up."¹ What is clarified in Alex's monologue is the contradiction in his fight against working-class oppression and his inevitable encouragement of perpetuating the women's role as "wife." He discovers that women are oppressed on the basis of gender within the larger class oppression. The monologue is followed by another reflective verse by the Chorus of Alex's discontent and restlessness, indicating that the increasing domestic tension between Bessie and Alex is growing out of the conditions created by the "struggle" and their over-all social condition.

Despite the apparent success of the strike, in Scene Six the audience sees the price of this "success" when Bessie and her co-workers are issued a letter notifying them of "'Total closure,' 'transfer of all production elsewhere,' 'sale of the

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), p.69.

site,' - 'Redundancy of all personnel.'"¹ Bessie's efforts have come to nothing. Moreover, she is despised by many of her former supporters. The effect of the irony of this injustice on an audience may be profound, but one can only imagine the effect on a working-class audience who have had personal experience of capitalist injustice. The play derives much of its power from the irony of scenes such as this.

Thus far the audience has heard in different scenes three monologues from Sandy (Act One, Scenes 5 and 7, Act Two, Scene 4) and one from Alex (Act Two, Scene 5). For convenience they have been called monologues here, but they are not true monologues in the sense of a character speaking his thoughts aloud on stage. Rather, they are narratives or explanations giving necessary information directly to the audience. Such explanations, of course, depart from the conventional method of transmitting information through the context of the dialogue between characters in a play. They are more in keeping with Brecht's method of demonstration, or Gooch's idea of the theatre as a public forum. Act Two, Scene Seven consists of a fifth "monologue" advancing the action, or at least commenting on it, from the viewpoint of one of the characters. Hence, McGrath presents his story from multiple

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press, 1981), p.71.

viewpoints, a method which helps the complexity of reality to be better understood:

BESSIE: The next six months were very bad. We did the lot, short of occupying the factory. We had meetings with the management, meetings with the unions, meetings with the government, the Scottish office, the District Council, the Regional Council, with the local M.P.s and the Provost and the Church of Scotland and every Trades Council in the area. And we had mass meetings, aye - but as the months went by and we were just keeping the gates open by pure will-power, the meetings got smaller, and quieter, and sadder. Because it was only a routine: the ritual struggle against closure, as seen in the factories throughout the land. We gained a certain amount of time, but we knew we couldnae win. And that is terrible tae bear. To fight knowing you are gonnae lose, well - it takes away the dignity of the combat - it turns fighting words into speechifying, and worst of all - it induces cynicism - and if I hate anything, I hate cynicism. No, those six months were bad. And harder to bear without Alex: he, of course, had left me - he went off to live in Glasgow with a nice, quiet wee woman that worked for the corporation, and I'm sure they were very happy. He sent money for the girls - just as well, with the price of things, and Janey away tae University and Alison having to be turned out just so or she'd go to her room and cry - aye - it was just as well we got some money from him. Especially when it all came to its inevitable conclusion, and the gates of S.A.M. East Kilbride closed for the last time. Because we'd fought so hard, most of the folk got other work - but not all. And certainly no' me. I was out. Infamous Bessie McGuigan - her that closed down S.A.M. - her the communist that lost all they folk their jobs - her the unemployable . . . Well, I was due a spell in the house, and I had plenty to occupy my mind, and my old accordion to squeeze a tune out of, and my father to clean up

round. And the girls. Oh aye, the girls -
my darling daughters -

And - I acquired a young man . . . 1

When Alex comes on stage to make the announcement which begins Scene Eight, a slight change in the format occurs:

ALEX: Er - Scene Eight: Young Lochinvar Rides
Again. The time: 1978. The government -
well - Labour. The place - my bloody
house . . . 2

The scene is a long one that focuses on the domestic relationships and on the changing attitude toward the political struggle against capitalism. When Sandy asks Bessie if she isn't, perhaps, getting too old for the struggle, Bessie's answer is emphatic:

BESSIE: No, I'm still fighting and I'm gonnae
carry on fighting till they count me out -
the trouble with this bloody Labour government
is it's so bland, and the alternative is
so terrifying, none of us know where tae
land the first punch - 3

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), pp.72-73.

²Ibid., p.73.

³Ibid., p.77.

To her daughter's snide accusations against the Communist Party, Bessie replies:

BESSIE: Janey - I've spent my life fighting
for a better life for myself and the women
I work with, I gave my best to that struggle,
I lost my job and, aye, Alison's right,
I wrecked my marriage for it. But I would
not regard that as wasting my life, and
I'm certainly not finished yet - not by
a long way. O.K.? ¹

The two speeches reveal much of Bessie's character and certainly indicate to the audience that Bessie's life of struggle has not been a waste, even if its accomplishments seem small. They also indicate that Bessie is far from finished as a fighter of causes. Again, McGrath immediately establishes a typical domestic atmosphere devoid of any political imposition. It is once this association is established with the audience that he now superimposes the issues that concern the characters, thereby implicating those who have similar associations (the audience) desiring political consciousness. McGrath has carefully woven together social, monetary, domestic and psychological ramifications of the lifestyle created as a reaction to working-class

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), p.78.

oppression and attempts to account for each development within this realm by offering probable causes for the various attitudes of the characters involved.

Scene Nine begins with a long "monologue" from Bessie in which she explains how she took a job at McArdle's Electronics under her maiden name, partly to deceive her employers' "Secret Police" who keep files on militants, and partly to strike a blow for women's dignity. Upon discovering who Bessie really is, however, McArdle's terminates her employment. The local union - run by Alex - cannot respond to her request for help. Despite Bessie's life-long struggle to help her co-workers, the majority vote is against going on strike to save Bessie's job. This particular turn of events serves to illustrate the kind of potential futility that is often encountered by those who have sacrificed their own futures in an attempt to improve the conditions of those around them. Even those for whom the strike action was meant to benefit have now turned their backs on the principles for which they stand in order to attain some immediate satisfaction, in essence, cutting off at the throat those few with the facilities to actually improve conditions. As the scene continues, Alex enters to explain that the Union members declined to support Bessie's cause, fearing negligible gains and probable defeat as was experienced in Bessie's last inconsequential "battle" with the management. In contrast to

Bessie's unrestricted determination, McGrath characterises the impotence of the unions and their insensitivity to people they purport to represent. This characterisation creates an interesting counterpoint: the unjust treatment of workers and their often unrelenting determination to confront those injustices with the ineffectuality of the structures that are meant to protect them. In McGrath's portrayal, the unions are depicted almost as contemptible as the management. Nonetheless, Bessie's defeat brings her together with Alex, and the warmth of their relationship reveals to the audience the extent of what has been lost in the struggle:

ALEX: . . . there's no good calling folk names:
find the reasons for it all - fight them.
And that's a long, boring fight, Bessie -

BESSIE: I know about long boring fights - I
fought one - it cost me you.

ALEX: No, I lost you, Bessie - you just never
underestimate yourself. You're a bonnie
fechter, none better. I'm not - I'm a coward,
at heart - but I'm trying to make it work
for me . . . Know what I mean?

BESSIE: Aye. You just keep going on and on.
And one day it'll turn out the union's no'
so right-wing as we thought . . . I know
your game fine. But they - that lot - that
just slunk away wi'out a murmur . . . they're
still bastards -

ALEX: No. They're people who've been manipulated
by the capitalist state: which is enemy
number one . . .

BESSIE: Aye - but how are you going to get
rid of it, without them? Don't tell me
"they'll be back -"

ALEX: Sooner than you think.

BESSIE: You're a terrible naive optimist under
all that shrewd cynical pessimism, Alex
McGuigan: Maybe that's what I saw in you,
all those years ago . . . Poor Catriona.
I think of her a lot these days, wi' her
phantom pregnancies -

ALEX: Do you?

BESSIE: Well - she should have had a better
life. And lived longer.

ALEX: Come on. The divorce is through - I
can buy you a drink.

BESSIE: Oh - your woman'll kill you . . .

ALEX: Only the one -

BESSIE: (laughs) Aye - that's right, only
the one. (they go) 1

Scene Ten consists of another "monologue," the seventh in the play and the fourth by Sandy. First he explains how the Romans failed to subdue the population of Scotland, and then he describes how the English ruled their empire:

Our own empire - how was that kept in check?
The Blood Red Roses - the red-coats, the
English - or should I say the British soldier,
has kept order throughout the world for
centuries . . . Feared, and respected by
untold millions, of all colours and creeds.

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), pp.81-82.

Enforcers of England's will. 1

But Sandy explains that war has changed, that armies are no longer needed:

War - it's best left to computers, they are the weapons of the new empire: a man does not need to be a man anymore - the fight is inside our heads: all we need is will-power, and clear thinking, and the determination to refuse to comply. 2

This description reveals how Britain has kept control over its possessions and interests through the use of military might but how the world is now controlled by imperial powers - the commercial powers, and he indicates that the only weapons against such a force are cunning, will power and the refusal to comply. He implies that in a world no longer determined by geographical borders but rather by economic barriers, this is the only effective weapon to disable the industrial overlord. The Blood Red Roses (a term once used to describe British soldiers) in their invasion and colonisation of foreign lands is aptly superimposed on the action of this play, for though

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), p.83.

²Ibid.

there is no military invasion, the workers find themselves the victims of corporate invasion by multi-nationals which are as guilty of oppression as any invading force; and so Blood Red Roses takes on a slightly new connotation.

Scene Eleven, the final scene of the play, takes place on election eve, 1979, with the Conservative Party under Mrs. Thatcher's leadership about to be elected.

The Announcer returns in Scene Eleven to say:

Where You Went Wrong was . . . The Year:
1979. The Government: Well - Labour, but
a New Dawn is about to break over the charred
industrial battlefield that is Britain:
the corpses of our empty factories and yards
will be brought back to life; the wounded -
the unemployed and the youth - will be tended
with healing care; and a new pride and confidence
will burn in our breasts - for there is
about to be an election: now is the Winter
of our Discontent to be made glorious summer
by Sir Keith Joseph . . . 1

This is a particularly good example of McGrath's direct exposition woven with a romantic description of Scotland's industrial rejuvenation. The play on Richard III's speech is meant to evoke the same response - that is to encourage the spectators to reaffirm their commitment to the cause by

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), p.84.

indicating the potential for prosperity. Bessie and her daughters have watched the results on television, and the following conversation defines the problem of what has become of working-class militancy in the modern age:

JANEY: It's a disaster.

ALISON: It's the English, that's what it looks like to me . . .

BESSIE: No. It's the erosion of class consciousness, if you want to know. Working people in England and quite a few in Scotland see their own, individual interest - less income tax for some, buy your own council house for quite a few, and the price of a loaf of bread for millions - but they don't see themselves as part of a class, that must stick together . . . they've been driven into their own private cosy selfish fantasy-world, and now they're gonnae suffer for it. Because the others know they're a class, and they'll stick together until the day we drive them out.

JANEY: Shall we turn on the telly, see what's happened?

BESSIE: No. Sell it, that's what's done it as much as anything - the private fantasy-machine. Robert MacKenzie and his swingometer, Robin Day and his fearless questions - 1

Having shown how and why a mass-manipulated society has stopped fighting for its rights, the play ends, but not before

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), pp.85-86.

Bessie announces that she is again pregnant. When Janey asks, "What about Dad?" Bessie replies:

BESSIE: Alex will understand . . . He knows
me quite well. I'd like him back, but he'll
no' come back now . . .

JANEY: Well - it's your life -

BESSIE: No - it's his: or hers - Fight on,
eh? ¹

Here, the play ends, as it began, with a song:

Now that is our story
A tale that goes on -
Is it true or a lie or a fiction?
Is it right or mistaken the story we tell:
Is it fit to be tellt tae your children? ²

Considerable irony is implicit in the lyrics of this song because although the specifics of the action are, of course, fictional, the allegorical story of the militant working-class woman in a capitalist-dominated society is, in essence, true. The final line is especially poignant since one has the uneasy conviction that future generations will suffer - and fail - in

¹John McGrath, Blood Red Roses in Two Plays for the Eighties, (Edinburgh: 7:84 Publications and Aberdeen People's Press Ltd., 1981), p.86.

²Ibid., p.87.

much the same way. One is left at the end of the play, therefore, with ambivalent feelings of admiration and enthusiasm for Bessie's fortitude, tenacity, and courage, and dismay at what capitalism has done to her and millions like her. On the other hand, Bessie has indicated that despite all the odds, personal satisfaction and some semblance of happiness can be achieved as long as one does all one can to improve one's condition, not to accept social injustice and to "fight on." It is the struggle that has given her life meaning and the resolution that she and those like her contribute some hope for a better future for the working class that allows her to look on the forthcoming birth of her child as a blessing rather than a condemnation.

Seen as a whole, the play appears to fall into the same stylistic category as much, though not all, of McGrath's other work, specifically The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, Yobbo Nowt, Fish in the Sea, and Little Red Hen. These plays may be seen, with some justification, as McGrath's most mature work in the sense that they offer something new to theatre: documented material concerning the suffering of working-class people as seen from a socialist viewpoint, but told with a variety of theatrical techniques calculated to appeal to a working-class audience. Though a new wave of political theatre companies flowered contemporaneously with the emergence of the 7:84,¹ it is difficult to name one as

¹Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre, Welfare State International, Hull Truck, and Belt and Braces are a few companies which come immediately to mind.

consistently unified in style and purpose as the 7:84 itself. Those who condemn political theatre for its functional objective might consider the moral purpose always implicit within the political, and they might ask themselves also whether the political ideology of McGrath's plays in fact detracts from their value as plays. For while universal meanings may be drawn from specific political circumstances, what appears to be of more significance is the value of dramatic content as seen in terms of a specific historical context. This approach has been referred to as "cultural materialism."¹ It is an approach which may be more appropriate to a consideration of McGrath's work, for, it would appear, rather than an aesthetic idealism which "transcends" the specific circumstances of the play's creation, McGrath's mature work is rooted in the material forces and relations of production which produced it. This would appear compatible with Lyotard's view in which "the great narratives" (universal values, transcendent truths) have lost their credibility to the point where the multiplicity of events which inform us of the world can no longer be subsumed under the single concept of a universal history.² As has

¹Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, eds., Political Shakespeare, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p.vii.

²See pp.193-194 above.

been explained,¹ "truth" has in the context of postmodernism been replaced by such concepts as "relativity" and "legitimation." Lyotard's "solution" to this crisis of legitimation is a commitment to action, addressing specific localised conditions of particular lives which appear critical at a specific moment in history. McGrath's specificity in focusing on particular social relationships at a particular period in political history undermines the modernist assumption of "higher" values independent of history and social forms. Coterminously, his methods of fragmentation, montage, pastiche, direct audience address, comedy and diegetic song suggest the "intertextual" nature of McGrath's production of meaning, implying his theatre's affinity with other representational practices. One might argue that McGrath's recycling of eclectically derived theatrical modes results in a reduction of history to a pastiche of dead styles, "the failure of the new, the imprisonment of the past."² Yet artists in the past have returned to earlier styles and used them in new ways to develop something original of their own.³ The originality of recycling older styles and

¹See p.201 above.

²Fredrick Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" in The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster, (Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1991), p.116.

³Picasso and Joyce come immediately to mind.

modes is not so much in what is recycled as in how it is recycled and to what new purpose. Furthermore, the originality of creating a new realism by returning to the past affirms the individualism of the author, not as in the past for creating something out of nothing, but for creating something out of the old. Hence, if eclectic historicism implies a flight from the present toward tradition, it is only to carry that tradition a step further in its amelioration. To a large extent this amelioration is accomplished in McGrath's theatre, not only by its return to certain forms of representation, but also by its interrogation of the truth content which representational codes demand. In this sense, it is at once neoconservative and postculturalist in its approach. Indeed, it is in both the recycling of past representational styles and the problematising of representation itself - imploding its own form, so to speak - that McGrath's theatre may be considered postmodern, for in returning to much of what has occurred in the theatrical past (including a self-critical form of bourgeois realism), the 7:84 Company has gone beyond the past, beyond modernism, to create something uniquely its own. In the Greenbergian sense, the function of even such an eclectically derived form as McGrath's enhances its own special sphere of civilising human values through modes of understanding and expression peculiar to it. This, it seems to me, denies what Jean Baudrillard

calls "the death of the subject," insofar as postmodernism embraces eclecticism in using the past to comment on the present. Mixing old and new cultural codes, McGrath's theatre resists the official culture of modernism and questions tradition by using its forms of representation for a different purpose. To the extent that it has set itself in opposition to modernism, one may consider McGrath's theatre as identifying the "spirit" of an age which has disavowed transcendence in favour of a "relativism" which demands a return to history. It does not pretend to political neutrality. It accepts that no cultural practice is ever without political significance and, without pretense, it confronts this situation head-on. Herein lies its value.

CONCLUSION

The thrust of this dissertation has been to show where as part of a continuum of theatrical experimentation the work of John McGrath and the 7:84 Theatre Company has entered the realm of the postmodern. McGrath may be said to have "reclaimed" the "territory" of the past if only because a return to tradition is essential to exceed for both political and aesthetic purposes the achievements of his immediate predecessors. If the stamp of twentieth-century theorists leads to the assumption that McGrath's art is an essentially eclectic one, a closer look makes clear that despite the imprint of the past, a new kind of theatre emerged from the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, one based on skills, techniques, and relations of production which separated it from what had gone before.

The analyses of texts disclose that the company provides a stage for those excluded as much from the culture as from the political and economic system of the capitalist state. The anguish, frustration, resentment, and alienation which had been ignored for so long by both conventional realism and radical modernism now tended to draw people closer as it

encouraged them to join in communality. This retreat from the elitism of a theatre which supported and hence represented capitalist ideology and praxis has been seen as a criticism of it while simultaneously demonstrating the social alternative.

To accommodate a shift from one set of cultural and social attitudes to another requires a change in theatre "language." Liberated from the shackles of illusionism, this language became transformed into what Antonin Artaud had called for: a system of ideographic signs, gestures, and attitudes, what Theodore Shank has called "a visual emphasis."¹ The way this new language was imparted changed radically the traditional relationship between the actor and his character, between the actor and his audience, between the character and audience, and between members of the audience. The change in these relationships undermined the division between the event on stage and the historical fact, between theatre and life; actors and audiences tended to explore the theatre space in a spirit of communality by participating together in a celebration of this environment.

While the transformation to a more visual theatre mentioned above has led to the development of a new theatre language, many of the methods used have guaranteed audience alienation. According to Theodor Adorno, a bourgeois audience

¹Theodore Shank, American Alternative Theatre, (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982), p.3.

can adjust itself to almost any ideology if the material itself is presented realistically. "By contrast," Adorno argues, "when the social contract with reality is abandoned, and the literary works no longer speak as though they were reporting fact, hairs start to bristle."¹ Adorno's argument, however, fails to consider the receptivity by the audience of even the most radical innovation on the understanding that it is a theatrical experiment and not a facsimile of reality. Even so, if the realism of the bourgeois stage tends to promote a sense of reassurance, a sense of unease is clearly felt when faced with unrealistic modes, the unintelligible temporarily unbalancing the audience. An audience would certainly find it difficult, as Adorno argues, "to listen patiently to a text whose language challenges signification and by its very distance from meaning revolts in advance against positivist subordination of meaning."² Political theatre portraying character, historical reality, and the use of language in terms of a rational model, therefore, may motivate reassurance rather than subversion. Apparently insecurity of this kind has infiltrated many political theatres in their

¹Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," trans. F. McDonagh, in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.180.

²Ibid., p.179.

disillusionment with the rate of social progress as well as their skepticism over the nature and status of art.¹ This is substantiated by the many expressions of self-doubt and by the number of theatrical companies that have simply given up trying. Political theatre practitioners of the early part of the century operated on the assumption that their work opposed and impeded repression; now it is becoming clear that their work may have actually promoted and advanced the cause of repression. Adorno describes how, for the purpose of political criticism, political reality can be trivialised, for instance through the use of satire (he gives as an example Chaplin's performance in The Great Dictator).² When this occurs, political satire can reinforce repression by pacifying and appeasing the opposition. The insecurity, dislocation, and alienation which political theatre seeks to counteract is, therefore, sustained by political theatre itself. Whether this is, in fact, true is undetermined, as is the contrary belief that political theatre's pragmatic functionalism is capable of radical social change. Adorno himself appears to

¹The infiltration of insecurity into political theatre is discussed by C.W.E. Bigsby in "The Politics of Anxiety: Contemporary Socialist Theatre in England" in Modern British Dramatists, ed. J.R. Brown, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1984), pp.172-176.

²Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," trans. F. McDonagh, in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), pp.184-185.

endorse the general impression that, although political theatre is incapable of activating immediate political and social action, it can provide an atmosphere of change in which political ferment can increase.¹ John McGrath has also articulated his views on this problem.² Even so, recognising the function of political theatre and the audience's uneasiness with any retreat from "realism," it seems clear that the autonomy of theatrical form is in itself socio-political in nature. This is, perhaps, what is meant when it is so often said that all theatre is political. The imparting of a message, even though politically radical, is already attenuated by its accommodation to the world. Theatrical form which rejects popularisation and adaptation to the market, however, involuntarily becomes an attack on them. But Adorno argues:

The attack is not abstract, not a fixed attitude of all works of art to the world which will not forgive them for not bending totally to it. The distance these works maintain for empirical reality is in itself partly mediated by that reality. . . . Works of art that react against empirical reality obey the forces of

¹Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," trans., F. McDonagh in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.180.

²John McGrath, "The Year of the Cheviot," preface to The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, (London: Methuen, 1983), p.xxvii.

that reality, which reject intellectual creations and throw them back on themselves. There is no material content, no formal category of artistic creation, however mysteriously transmitted and itself unaware of the process, which did not originate in the empirical reality from which it breaks free. ¹

Political presence through the pretext of form, then, the temporary stabilising of the here and now compels the imagination to go where it need not debase itself. Through form political theatre wordlessly asserts its function and meaning. As Adorno continues:

. . . it is to works of art that has fallen the burden of wordlessly asserting what is barred to politics . . . This is not a time for political art, but politics has migrated into autonomous art, and nowhere more so than where it seems to be politically dead. ²

The pervasion of theatrical form impels the attitudes which committed works merely demand. In this way, political theatre which asserts itself as art contains within itself the source of its own transcendence: its inner meaning is always more than the work itself.

¹Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," trans. F. McDonagh, in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.190.

²Ibid., p.194.

One point that this inquiry attempts to clarify is the conviction that political theatre may be seriously considered as an art form as a result not of the totality of political effect extracted, but of the political and social implications of political theatre's own inherent structure. The 7:84's aesthetic response to political and cultural crises in the capitalist milieu from which it grew and now operates is largely a reaction against the illusion of realism employed to recreate and perpetuate that milieu. The 7:84 Company expresses its reaction through the development of its own theatrical form, for form, as Adorno explains, is "knowledge as non-conceptual object."¹ Even in its most sublimated work there is a hidden discord, or to use Adorno's phrase, an implied "it should be otherwise."² Political meaning, therefore, is mediated through an implied contradiction in the form of the work itself "whose crystallization becomes an analogy of that other condition which should be."³ Adorno explains:

This mediation is not a compromise between
commitment and autonomy, nor a sort of mixture

¹Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," trans. F. McDonagh, in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.193.

²Ibid., p.194.

³Ibid.

of advanced formal elements with an intellectual content inspired by genuinely or supposedly progressive politics. The content of works of art is never the amount of intellect pumped into them: if anything, it is the opposite.¹

Owing to equitable relationships within the Company and its long-term goal of crafting exalted works of art, the 7:84 Company indicates a purpose for which it serves as paradigm. Theodor Adorno calls this "the creation of a just life."²

Doubts about the adequacy of language may threaten the validity of social models, but ultimately they also undermine the power of authority itself. The correct analysis of a political or social situation is not enough to satisfy the aims of modern political theatre; instead, it attempts an exploration of the distorted and specious language which is the problematic instrument of that exploration. As it does so, it approaches an exploration of reality. If, as I contend, the development of form reflects political theatre's resistance to tyranny and corruption, it is supported by Adorno when he writes:

It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives, but to resist by its form alone

¹Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," trans. F. McDonagh, in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.193.

²Ibid., p.194.

the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men's heads. In fact, as soon as committed works of art do instigate decisions at their own level, the decisions themselves become interchangeable. ¹

As a result, recognition that alienation, dislocation, isolation and insecurity cannot be expunged by a simple transformation of the political system has led political theatre to work indirectly through form to reveal the essence of reality.

There is, of course, a potential danger here that political theatre might develop its own stereotypical conception of reality. As Fredric Jameson writes:

In the Brechtian aesthetic, indeed, the idea of realism is not a purely artistic and formal category, but rather governs the relationship of the work of art to reality itself, characterizing a particular stance toward it. The spirit of realism designates an active, curious, experimental, subversive - in a word, scientific - attitude towards social institutions and the material world; and the "realistic" work of art is therefore one which encourages and disseminates this attitude, yet not merely in a flat or mimetic way or along the lines of imitation alone. Indeed, the "realistic" work of art is one in which "realistic" and experimental attitudes are tried out, not only between its characters and their fictive realities, but also between the audience and the work

¹Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," trans. F. McDonagh, in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.180.

itself, and - not least significant - between the writer and his own materials and techniques. The threefold dimensions of such a practice of "realism" clearly explode the purely representational categories of the traditional mimetic work. 1

Clearly, political theatre's innovations in form should be regarded in the Brechtian sense as "realistic" modes of interpreting empirical reality. From this perspective, Adorno's advice² concerning the alienation of audiences by breaking the social contract with reality now becomes invalid. When, therefore, in The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil the members of the 7:84 Theatre Company who are interpreting a specific scene from local history turn to address the audience directly, destroying any sense of illusion, or Marie in Yobbo Nowt develops the narrative by suddenly breaking into song, then political theatre creates a far more accurate and profound realism than the evasion and mediations of the bourgeois stage. Even so, the ubiquitous reappearance of the old realism remains problematic. Concerning this problem, Fredric Jameson describes a situation which has apparently already occurred in art:

¹Fredric Jameson, "Reflections in Conclusion" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.205.

²See p.590 above.

In our present cultural situation, if anything, both alternatives of realism and of modernism seem intolerable to us: realism because its forms revive older experiences of a kind of social life . . . which is no longer with us in the already decaying future of consumer society: modernism because its contradictions have proved in practice even more acute than those of realism. An aesthetic of novelty today - already enthroned as the dominant critical and formal ideology - must seek desperately to renew itself by ever more rapid rotations of its own axis: modernism seeking to become postmodernism without ceasing to be modern. 1

The contradictions of which Jameson writes are as true of theatre as of other art forms. What had previously been considered fragmentation and distortion of reality for purely aesthetic reasons may now be seen as a more accurate interpretation of reality than its immediate predecessors for, as Jameson explains, "In these circumstances, indeed, there is some question whether the ultimate renewal of modernism, the final dialectical subversion of the now automatized conventions of an aesthetic of perpetual revolution, might not simply be . . . realism itself!"²

Jameson explains the function of this new realism by first defining the circumstances of society which justify its

¹Fredric Jameson, "Reflections in Conclusion" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed., R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.211.

²Ibid.

existence:

The reification of late capitalism - the transformation of human relations into an appearance of relationships between things - renders society opaque: it is the lived source of the mystifications on which ideology is based and by which domination and exploitation are legitimized. Since the fundamental structure of the social "totality" is a set of class relationships - an antagonistic structure such that the various social classes define themselves in terms of that antagonism and by opposition with one another - reification necessarily obscures the class character of that structure, and is accompanied, not only by anomie, but also by that increasing confusion as to the nature and even the existence of special classes which can be abundantly observed in all the "advanced" capitalist countries today. If the diagnosis is correct, the intensification of class consciousness will be less a matter of populist or ouvrierist exaltation of a single class by itself, than of the forcible reopening of access to a sense of society as a totality, and of the reinvention of possibilities of cognition and perception that allow social phenomena once again to become transparent, as moments of the struggle between classes.

Under these circumstances, the function of a new realism would be clear; to resist the power of reification in consumer society and to reinvent that category of totality which, systematically undermined by existential fragmentation on all levels of life and social organization today, can alone project structural relations between classes as well as class struggles in other countries, in what has increasingly become a world system. 1

¹Fredric Jameson, "Reflections in Conclusion" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), pp.212-213.

This view of realism includes what is absolute in the resistance to modernism: the demand for a radical change of perception in "a world in which experience has solidified into a mass of habits and automatisms."¹ Even so, the traditional assumptions would, as Jameson says, "no longer be thematized in the conventional modernistic terms of desacralized or dehumanizing reason, of mass society and the industrial city or technology in general, but rather as a function of the commodity system and the reifying structure of late capitalism."²

The resistance of realism to the power of reification in consumer society involves McGrath's theatre in substantive ways. While McGrath rarely, if ever, attempts a literal imitation of reality, he does include mimetic techniques in which actors demonstrate a scene as if it is occurring in present time. While no pretense is made that this is anything other than a simulation, it is possible for an audience to "lose" itself momentarily in the action as if it were real. This procedure is necessary to carry the action forward, despite constant undercutting by estrangement techniques which lead to distancing and fragmentation. What, in fact, McGrath

¹Fredric Jameson, "Reflections in Conclusion" in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.213.

²Ibid.

does here, rather than present the artificially contrived realism associated with the bourgeois stage, is to make a pastiche of that realism by giving a conventional, "deadpan" dramatic rendering and then undermining this "serious" rendition by distancing the audience through the direct address, songs, flashback, scenic disclosure, and audience involvement. This mixing of traditional theatrical codes and actuality, rather than signifying, signals the aestheticisation of a political condition, forcing audience recognition that illusion, too, is part of reality. Hence, audience awareness of the concept of production itself expunges the traditional forms of representation which help to create that concept. It is as if McGrath's theatre, vacillating between the realistic modes advocated by Adorno to ensure audience acceptance and modernist techniques which promote repression rather than alleviate it, has subsumed the methods of realism and modernism, not simply to undermine them, but to force recognition of the theatrical object itself. This can be seen throughout McGrath's mature work, but specifically in the scenes in The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil where the "realistic" conversation between Sellar and Loch is suddenly subverted when the action is "frozen" to allow two "speakers" to provide documentation concerning the wealth of the landed gentry; or, again, in Fish in the Sea when Yorry describes directly to the audience his

life in the past, before the past action is dramatised as if it is happening in the present. This aspect of McGrath's theatre, then, combines performance and pastiche, not simply to convey its political content, but to involve the audience in a recognition of representational modes which subvert more radically the political condition. In this way, experience is theatricalised to provide understanding inaccessible in any way except through theatricality, disclosing the experience represented as an object for contemplation.

McGrath's theatre breaks with modernism, too, in even more radical ways. Historical context undermines the transcendent significance traditionally accorded to the literary text and permits one to recover its histories. This can be seen in the many references to specific historical situations in McGrath's texts, the reading of actual statistics and numbers, eyewitness historical accounts, and factual documentation. The dramatic action of plays like The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, Little Red Hen, Blood Red Roses, and Fish in the Sea addresses specific localised conditions of particular lives which appear critical at a particular historical moment in time. Nothing in McGrath's work suggests a reading of universal values or transcendent truths independent of history and social context. When he writes of the Clearances in the Scottish Highlands in The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil or

the injustices done to British working-class women in Yobbo Nowt, the focus is on only those critical problems with no reference or allusion to the general, "posterity," or "the truth for all time." On the contrary, Marie's problems in Yobbo Nowt are pertinent only to the situation of a certain kind of woman of a particular social class living under the inequities of late twentieth-century capitalism. In this, McGrath's objectives appear to support Michel Foucault's view that "the problem isn't so much to define a political 'position'. . . but to imagine and bring into existence new schemes of politicisation."¹ Following Foucault's argument, McGrath's intention, it appears, is simply to combat specific capitalist injustices with new forms of politicisation which will expunge injustice and inequity. The old modernist political utopianisms appear anachronistic here. Indeed, the eliding of injustice and the amelioration of society is the teleological purpose of McGrath's work, and it is the reason why it must be detached from immanent criticism which seeks only to reproduce it in its own terms, regardless of its socialist and feminist commitment. Opposing the modernist assumption of "higher" values independent of history and social forms, McGrath has reduced the "Truth" to the

¹Michel Foucault, "Interview with Lucette Finas" in Michel Foucault - Power, Truth, Strategy, (n.p.: Ferel, 1979), p.72.

relativity of specific phenomena to localised conditions. This is a practice which emphatically post-dates modernist convictions.

Similarly, McGrath's focus on issues of gender only corroborate this positivism. Marie Arnold's confrontation with the deceptions of the capitalist state and Bessie McGuigan's feisty opposition to the power of corporate multi-nationalism reveal a specific cynosure. Within these situations lie no generalities or transcendent truths. The audience is shown specific problems relevant to particular localised private and social conditions. That is all. The audience itself must decide, on the evidence of what has been shown, what is to be done. Never do the plays attempt to mystify their perspective as the natural, obvious or right interpretation of allegedly given facts. On the contrary, they simply register the commitment of particular people to the transformation of a social order which exploits people on grounds of race, gender, and class.

Further subverting modernist artistic autonomy, McGrath's introduction to his drama of representational practices outside the modernist ideal of autonomy renders impossible the assumption that theatre is a form of symbolisation independent of other representational practices and symbolic systems. His use of the Ceilidh in The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, synecdochic types in Little Red Hen, popular song

and working-class vernacular in Yobbo Nowt, effects created by montage, chronology, sequencing and simultaneity, fragmentation, and the editing of scenes in ways more commonly used in television and film again undermine modernism's opposition to mass culture. Even the return to past styles such as McGrath's pastiched versions of realism in all the plays, but extensively in Swings and Roundabouts, deny modernism's insistence on a progressive evolution in which a regression to earlier stages is untenable. This last point only reinforces the concept of a theatre resisting what Jean-Francois Lyotard calls modernism's "aesthetic of the sublime," the representation of transcendental values through "beautiful form." To the extent that the above concepts mark the 7:84 Theatre Company as a positivist phenomenon intent on unmasking a reality divested of all romantic pretensions it may be seen to move beyond a romantic modernism toward a more realistic, nonromantic postmodernist aesthetic.

Fredric Jameson has declared that this postmodernist aesthetic has lost its sense of individualism (Beaudrillard's "death of the subject").¹ He accuses practitioners of postmodernism of speaking with the voices of dead styles, a

¹Apparently Jameson prefers to ignore the stylistic originality of Richard Diebenkorn to Susan Rothenberg in painting, John Cage to Phillip Glass in music, or Welfare State International to 7:84 Theatre Company in theatre.

practice which unavoidably discloses the failure of art and its imprisonment in the past.¹ As far as the 7:84 Company is concerned, Jameson is right insofar as McGrath's theatre has appropriated many methods and stylistic innovations from the past from Gordon Craig to Bertolt Brecht, for new styles rarely if ever emerge ready-made overnight. Indeed, that has been the substance of much of this inquiry. What McGrath has done, it seems to me, is to use the forms of the past as a foundation on which to build a new form which questions the appropriated forms of representation from the past even as it appropriates them. Rather than simply present a litany of past forms, McGrath uses pastiche, parody, irony, and distancing techniques to undercut these past forms of representation and further to question representation itself. His individualism is clearly manifest in the viable mixture of forms now directed to a political end. Far from imprisonment in the forms of the past, McGrath has created a new form out of the combination of past forms which permits him to explore critical conditions in the present by returning to the past. Furthermore, his positivist conception of reality which excludes any notion of universality or transcendence

¹Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" in The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster, (Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1991), pp.115-116.

emancipates him from the "great narratives" of the past which Jameson declares have now been lost to consumer society.

Resistance to the commodification that Jameson speaks of can be introduced, according to Jean-Francois Lyotard, not by argument, but by an aesthetics of experimentation which produces "a feeling of disturbance," followed by reflection. When in The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil the Scottish people learn what happened and is still happening in the Highlands, or in Blood Red Roses working-class people recognise the indomitable power of corporate multinationalism, a feeling of disturbance would certainly be a natural reaction. But McGrath's experimentation with representational modes is more likely to reject what Adorno called "the social contract with reality," so that the plays "no longer speak as though they were reporting fact."¹ In this case the form of representation will most likely generate a far deeper disturbance in an audience than any expressed political ideology. Later reflection is intended to reveal how representation is used as a political instrument to maintain the prevailing power structure by exploiting cultural codes by concealing within representation political affiliations.

But far from supporting "the logic of consumer

¹Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," trans. F. McDonagh, in Aesthetics and Politics, trans., ed. R. Taylor, (London: Verso Books, 1986), p.180.

capitalism" of which Jameson speaks, McGrath discloses the inequities of such a system, this disclosure serving as a resistance to the official culture of modernism.

I said earlier¹ that both neoconservative and poststructuralist postmodernism play an integral part in McGrath's theatre. Neoconservatism becomes apparent in the recycling of eclectically derived representational modes, for instance, the pastiche realism, flashbacks, and fragmented scenes in Little Red Hen, The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil, or Blood Red Roses. According to Jameson, this is no more than a reduction of history to a pastiche of enduring styles, allowing the vernacular and kitsch of working-class entertainment to be integrated with the forms of high modernism. While this neoconservative aspect of postmodernism demands a return to representation (it takes the referential status of its images and meaning for granted), poststructuralist postmodernism advances a critique of representation, questioning the truth content of visual representation and the layers of polysemy it supports. For example, the constant switching from past to present and back again in Little Red Hen allows the Young and Old Hens in the present to deliver tacit critical commentary on the ways the past has been presented including their roles in shaping it.

¹See pp.204-205 above.

A substantial portion of these scenes is staged as a realistic representation, but McGrath's distancing effects tend to subvert this representational mode associated with the misrepresentation of bourgeois capitalism and so question its veracity and the ethical nature of its use. Similarly, Blood Red Roses uses a fairly straightforward representation of the narrative, but the verisimilitude of the representation is undermined by monologue, direct audience address, and the technique of "playing out" to the audience. As a result, the audience watches a sequence of images on stage which are constantly subjected to an ongoing critique by devices which undermine their representation. When the subject becomes decentred, representation is disentranced, the referent undermined. In this way, by playing on the dialectical structure of perception, McGrath's theatre problematises the activity of reference. Once reference has become problematic, the audience (society) can only see itself as represented by a production. Since the concept of production itself refutes traditional forms of representation, a self-contradictory aesthetic results.

The way I have here defined postmodernism and applied its characteristics to McGrath's theatre will be seen to differ from the way some other theatres considered postmodern have been perceived. The theatrical experiments of Jerzy Grotowski, Joseph Chaikin, Richard Foreman, and Robert Wilson,

for instance, are conceived as an art form at the juncture of other signifying practices. Central to these theatres is the concept of bodily movement in space as the focus of performance. Clearly, John McGrath's theatre is not of this sort. Nonetheless, it can be seen to turn sharply from the forms of modernist theatrical praxis to achieve its political ends. What I have tried to make clear in this inquiry is precisely where and how in representative texts McGrath has incorporated postmodernist strategies into his work to meet his socialist ideology. To do so, I have tested the central arguments of the current postmodernist debate against performances and texts of his plays. To summarise, then, close inquiry makes clear that the 7:84 Company may, with justification, be considered a postmodern theatre to the extent that (1) it returns to a kind of illusionistic realism which, when undermined by methods of estrangement, forces audience recognition of the theatrical object; (2) it uses historical context to undermine the transcendent significance traditionally accorded to the text, allowing one to recover its histories; (3) its socialist and feminist commitment reinforces its positivism and challenges conservative approaches to criticism; (4) it forces a method of detaching the text from immanent criticism which seeks to reproduce it only in its own terms; (5) it attempts a deconstruction of tradition while incorporating signifying practices not

generally included in traditional theatre; (6) it resists commodification to a consumer society by discarding the romanticism and universality associated with modernism; (7) by playing on the dialectical structure of perception, it problematises the activity of reference; (8) it uses the basic structure described above to involve or implicate its audience for a political purpose.

In the originality of their combining these disparate postmodernist elements, John McGrath and the 7:84 Company have made a substantial contribution to postmodern theatre. Their new realism is more profoundly rooted in reality than the imitative theatre meant to perpetuate capitalist society. Their language structure, in its function as criticism, stands as a metaphor for change, for defying authority, for questioning assumptions, for democratisation, for freedom from a culture of consumerism to one which will include those previously considered marginal.

APPENDIX

CHRONOLOGY OF STAGE PRODUCTIONS BY JOHN MCGRATH AND THE 7:84 THEATRE COMPANY

1958	John McGrath <u>A Man Has Two Fathers</u> <u>The Invasion</u> <u>The Tent</u>	Oxford Oxford & Edinburgh Edinburgh & London
1959	John McGrath <u>Why the Chicken?</u>	Edinburgh
1960	John McGrath <u>Why the Chicken?</u> (revised) <u>Tell Me Tell Me</u> <u>Take It</u>	Tour London London
1961	John McGrath adaptation of Chekhov's <u>The Seagull</u>	Dundee
1963	John McGrath <u>Basement in Bangkok</u>	Bristol
1966 (12 April)	John McGrath <u>Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun</u>	Hampstead Theatre Club
1968 (25 January)	John McGrath <u>Bakke's Night of Fame</u>	Hampstead Theatre Club
1969	John McGrath adaptation of David Caute's novel, <u>Comrade Jacob</u>	Falmer, Sussex University
1970	John McGrath <u>Random Happenings in the Hebrides</u> or <u>The Social Democrat and the Stormy Sea</u> <u>Sharpeville Crackers</u>	Lyceum Theatre Edinburgh London

1971 (August)

John McGrath

Trees in the Wind7:84
Edinburgh &
Tour

Trevor Griffiths

Thermidor7:84
Cranston St.
Hall, Edinburgh

John McGrath

Unruly Elements (includes Angel of the Morning, Plugged into History, They're Knocking Down the Pie Shop, Hover Through the Fog, Out of Sight)
Plugged into History
Soft or a Girl?Everyman Theatre,
LiverpoolLondon
Everyman Theatre,
Liverpool1972 John Arden & Margaretta D'Arcy
The Ballygombeen Bequest

7:84 Bush

Trevor Griffiths

Occupations

7:84 Tour

John McGrath

Plugged into History (revival)7:84 Tour &
Bushadaptation of Brecht's The Caucasian Chalk CircleOut of Sight (revival)UnderneathLiverpool
7:84 Tour,
Everyman Theatre,
Liverpool
LiverpoolFish in the Seaadaptation of Peter Terson's
Prisoners of the War

Liverpool

John McGrath & John Arden

Serjeant Musgrave Dances OnStirling &
7:84 Tour

1973 7:84 & Belt and Braces

The Reign of Terror and the Great Money Trick (adapted from Robert Tressel's Ragged Trousered Philanthropists)Oxford
Playhouse &
Tour

John McGrath

Fish in the SeaEveryman Theatre,
Liverpool

- 1973 John McGrath (cont.)
The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil 7:84 Tour of Scotland
 (April/June)
 Adrian Mitchell
Man Friday 7:84 Tour
- 1974 John McGrath
Trees in the Wind New York
The Game's a Bogey 7:84 Scotland, Aberdeen

Boom Golspie, Sutherland
Boom (revised) Aberdeen & 7:84 Tour
- 1975 John McGrath
Fish in the Sea (revised) 7:84 Tour & Half Moon
Lay Off Lancaster & London

Yobbo Nowt 7:84 Tour, York & London
Little Red Hen 7:84 Scotland, Edinburgh
Oranges and Lemons Amsterdam
My Pal and Me (Soft or a Girl? revival) Half Moon
 (adapted by Bill Colvill)
- 1976 Shane Connaughton
Relegated 7:84 Tour

 Steve Gooch
Our Land, Our Lives 7:84 Tour

 John McGrath
The Rat Trap 7:84 Tour, Amsterdam & London
Out of Our Heads Edinburgh & Aberdeen
Little Red Hen London
- 1977 David Edgar
Wreckers 7:84, Exeter & Half Moon

 John McGrath
Trembling Giant (English version) 7:84 Tour & Royal Court

- 1977 John McGrath (cont.)
Trembling Giant (Scottish version) Dundee &
 London
Out of Our Heads (revival) 7:84 Tour,
 Royal Court &
 Lancaster
- Mum's the Word (revision of Yobbo Nowt) Liverpool
The Life and Times of Joe of England 7:84 Tour,
 Basildon,
 Essex &
 London
- Oranges and Lemons Birmingham
- 1978 John Arden & Margaretta D'Arcy
Vandaleur's Folly 7:84 Tour &
 Univ. Theatre,
 Lancaster
- John McGrath
Underneath (revival) London
- 1979 John McGrath
Joe's Drum Aberdeen
Big Square Fields Bradford &
 London
Bitter Apples Liverpool
If You Want to Know the Time London
- 1980 John McGrath
Swings and Roundabouts Aberdeen
Blood Red Roses Edinburgh
- 1981 John McGrath
Blood Red Roses London
Nightclass London & Corby,
 Northamptonshire
Left Out Lady (revision of
Yobbo Nowt) New York
The Catch Edinburgh
- 1982 John McGrath
Blood Red Roses (revised) Liverpool
Rejoice! Edinburgh &
 London
- 1983 John McGrath
On the Pig's Back Kilmarnock,
 Ayrshire
The Women of the Dunes (in Dutch) IJmuiden,
 Netherlands

1983	John McGrath (cont.) <u>Women in Power; or, Up the Acropolis</u> (adaptation of plays by Aristophanes)	Edinburgh
1984	John McGrath <u>Six Men of Dorset</u> <u>The Baby and the Bathwater</u>	Sheffield & London Cumbernauld, Dunbartonshire
1985	John McGrath <u>The Baby and the Bathwater</u> (revised) <u>The Albannach</u> (adapted from Fionn MacColla's novel) <u>Behold the Sun</u>	Edinburgh Edinburgh Duisburg, West Germany
1986	John McGrath <u>All the Fun of the Fair</u>	London
1987	John McGrath <u>The Baby and the Bathwater</u> (revised)	London

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