

ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

# **Theatres of the Left 1880-1935**

**Workers' Theatre Movements in  
Britain and America**

*Edited by*  
**Raphael Samuel,  
Ewan MacColl and  
Stuart Cosgrove**



Routledge Revivals: History Workshop Series

## Theatres of the Left 1880-1935

First published in 1985, this book examines how workers theatre movements intended their performances to be activist — perceiving art as a weapon of struggle and enlightenment — and an emancipatory act. An introductory study relates left-wing theatre groupings to the cultural narratives of contemporary British socialism. The progress of the Workers' Theatre Movement (1928-1935) is traced from simple realism to the most brilliant phase of its Russian and German development, alongside which the parallel movements in the United States are also examined. A number of crucial texts are reprinted as well as stage notes and glimpses of the dramaturgical controversies which accompanied them.



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*Raphael Samuel  
Ewan MacColl  
Stuart Cosgrove*

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#### NOTE TO READERS

The preface and acknowledgments of this book were not set until after the rest of it had been printed. Copy was dictated over the telephone and because of lateness it was not seen by the author or proof-read by RKP. As a result there are a number of elementary typographical errors on the first four pages for which the publishers apologise to the authors and readers:

- p. ix, line 26, *for heros read 'heroes'*
- p. x, line 8, *for sights of read 'fight for the'*
- p. x, line 15, *for Aristophenes read 'Aristophanes'*
- p. xi, line 3, *for Hindel Wakes read 'Hindle Wakes'*
- p. xi, line 8, *for Tolpuddle Martres read 'Tolpuddle Martyrs'*
- p. xii, line 32, *for John Savillew read 'John Saville'*
- p. xii, line 32, *for Lee James read 'Louis James'*

Samuel, MacColl and Cosgrove

#### **Theatres of the Left**

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## Preface

This book began life in 1976, when I was asked to go and see Tom Thomas in Welwyn Garden City. Tom, I was told, was dying: He had had six heart attacks. He wanted to pass on documents of something called the WTM – a kind of early version (I was told) of Unity Theatre, perhaps to record some memories. I went, partly out of duty (*History Workshop Journal* subsequently printed a selection of the documents), but also because of memories of Unity which had been my local theatre when I was a boy in St Pancras, my occasional Sunday evening church (there were club performances for members) and the scene of my only contribution to British theatrical life. (I had acted in *The Townsends*, a drama of slum life in Westminster in which my stage mother was stabbed to death, and a ‘concerned’ schoolteacher – played by a man with crinkly hair – was simultaneously courting my elder sister and trying to win her mind to higher things.)

The WTM, from Tom’s account of it (we had three recording sessions which form the substance of his narrative in this book) turned out to be very different from Unity. It belonged in spirit to the England of the General Strike (the year when Tom founded the Hackney Labour Players) rather than that of the Popular Front. It used revue and cabaret (Tom toured the Rhineland with a German troupe in 1930) rather than stage plays. It was devoted to agitation and propaganda, especially the first, rather than to ‘social significance’ (Unity’s watchword). Its dramaturgical location was the factory rather than the slum (WTM was deadset against Sean O’Casey who was one of Unity’s cultural heros). Just before Tom died we (the East London History Workshop) put on a performance of Tom’s version of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, which the Labour Publishing Company had put out in 1928. The stage was that of the Hoxton Hall, an 1858 music hall which the Quakers had bought up to save the people from drink. By then Tom had had another heart attack and it was thought unwise that

he should come. But Tom did come; and so did Charlie Mann – the writer of *How to stage Meerut*, printed in this book – and four other WTM hands. At the end they sang one of their songs – frail voices, but the words – those of a Polish workers’ song of the 1920s – were appropriately robust:

Whirlwinds of danger around us are swirling  
Overwhelming forces of darkness and fear  
Still in the sights of freedom of humanity  
Red Flag of liberty shall yet prevail

Going to Ewan MacColl was quite different. He was (I thought at the time) the first real revolutionary I had ever met, terrifyingly well organised, whether engaged in tracing the etymology of a word in a Scottish tinkler’s song, or one of the extra-mural theatrical activities he described to me – organising a production of Aristophanes *Frogs* from a minesweeper in the Pacific with the putative cast (after the war they formed *Theatre Workshop*) spread out in the Royal Navy halfway across the world. As a youth – a Manchester proletarian and Communist revolutionary of the 1920s – he had walked the evening streets with a ‘red haze of anger’ before his eyes, occasionally exalted at the thought of workers’ power, then iconoclast and dreaming of the time when the slate-roofed streets would be razed to the ground. Ewan, though much younger than Tom Thomas (he was a 16 year old motor mechanic when he formed his first WTM troupe), was far more culturally ambitious and in his narrative he describes the way he and his friend, Alf Arnitt, searched the Manchester libraries for the international *avant-garde* – the lighting theory of Appia and the revolutionary theatre of Vaghtangov in particular. The recording testified to Ewan’s terrifying mental efficiency. It lasted most of twelve hours; it was about a time – his early youth – on which he had no public ‘line’ and which, it seemed, he had not remembered aloud before. When the transcript was made, I found there was scarcely a line that could be cut, nor did I need to edit or change its order. Apart from Ewan’s own compressions, the text of ‘Manchester Theatre of Action’ (*Part 6* of this book) is a direct transcript of this recording.

When I started research on this book, I was excited to think that I had discovered a lost tradition, and having, as I thought, found it, I decided to trace it further back, first to the Socialist Sunday

Schools and the Clarion dramatic clubs, then to Eleanor Marx and Ibsenism, to Miss Horniman and the Manchester Gaiety, to the Repertory Movement and *Hindell Wakes*. In mid-Victorian times I came across a whole crop of working-class Shakespeareans, and found indeed that the Shakespeare tercentenary committee of 1864 was a kind of radical working mens' 'front'. Chartist times were particularly rewarding. I found the London trades hiring a theatre to honour the Tolpuddle Martres; the London printers taking over theatres and performing their own scripts to provide 'friendly benefits' for the bereaved and sick of the trade; most affecting of all the stonemasons, who were engaged in building Trafalgar Square, hired the Old Vic when they came out on strike in 1841 to give a dramatised version of their case.

Sadly, though, I have concluded that there are no traditions, except those which have been broken or lost: only a series of moments such as that which furnishes the material for this book. But as anyone will know who had the privilege of visiting Joan Littlewood's theatre in Stratford East (my own real initiation to theatre), or the old Half Moon in Great Alie Street; or who has heard the melancholy of 'The rain, it raineth every day'; or even who remembers Beatie breaking out to dance in Wesker's *Roots*; it is in such moments as these that theatre is made.



## *Acknowledgments*

This book has accumulated a number of debts in the course of a long gestation. Hannah Mitchell was my companion at the earliest stage of the work; we undertook the recordings with Tom Thomas together, and discussion with her was also responsible for much of the hidden agenda of this book – especially on the matter of the aesthetics of realism. Clive Barker, an old theatre workshop hand and latterly – in his improbable fastness at Warwick University – its living archivist, was generous in the loan and copy of documents. Richard Stourac and Kathleen McCreery, then of Broadside Mobile Theatre and engaged on a similar project (their book on the international WTM will shortly be published by RKP) lent me transcripts of interviews with the Lewisham Red Players – a generosity which seems to come more easily to the fraternity of theatre researchers than to those engaged in more conventional academic pursuits. Bert Hogenkamp of Amsterdam volunteered the best text I have so far obtained on Labour Party theatre in the 1920s – an account of the Co. Durham tour of Ruth Dodd's *The Pitman's Pay*. Alex McCrindle wistfully recorded his theatrical apprenticeship with the Glasgow Clarion Players. Hetty Bower, one of Tom Thomas's recruits in Hackney, recalled the 'coming out' of a young Jewish girl, and her excitement at the mauve curtains and modernity of two local Communist teachers – one of them the redoubtable London agitator, Kath Duncan. Ray Waterman, one of the second mothers of my childhood, introduced me to Tom Thomas, and without her urgency this book would not have been started. John Mason tracked Colindale references to the WTM in the *Sunday Worker*; Alun Howkins – then at a pitch of 'Third Period' enthusiasm supplied me with those from the *Daily Worker*; David Meyer and Tony Jackson educated me in the elements of the Repertory Theatre Movements. To these, and also to Sally Alexander, with whom over the years I have discussed many of the issues in this book; John Savillew, Lee James, David Bradby, Angela Tuckett, and Malcolm Knight, my thanks.

## ***Introduction: Theatre and politics***

***Raphael Samuel***

Theatre, as the most public of the arts, is second cousin to politics, and even when the relationship is a forbidden one – as it was on the English stage, until recently, under the Lord Chamberlain's regulations – there is a two-way traffic between them. The earliest European theatre was a drama of government and power, law and justice, albeit allegorised in the tragedy of kings and courts; and the Athenian stage also provided an arena for comedy and satire in which the political issues and factional divisions of the day were fought out. Not the least of its functions, as so often in later times, was to offer a reverse image of chaos, an imaginary resolution of conflicts which in real life were intractable. Statecraft was of course one of the great subjects of Elizabethan drama. The stage, from the time of *Gordobuc* onwards, served as a nursery of the national idea – *Richard II* and *Henry V* can remind us both of its potency and of its novelty. The private theatres of the aristocracy (banned as subversive under legislation of 1604) were a recruiting ground of faction, and the players' scene in *Hamlet* testifies to the part played by court theatre in the rivalries, intrigues and grooming of Renaissance kingship. The direct representation of politics was prohibited on the nineteenth-century English stage, but it is not difficult to identify the presence of proto-political themes, or to hypothesise the influence of theatre in the formation of sub-political attitudes. The cult of Wellington, and the re-enactment of the battle of Waterloo, the most famous of the equestrian dramas staged at Astley's amphitheatre (an annual event from its first public performance in 1829) helped to keep the military spirit alive in the alien environment of free trade liberalism; later, in the aftermath of the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny, English militarism was given a fresh boost by such booth theatre favourites – an early form of living newspaper – as the representation of *The Siege of Lucknow*. In radical politics, the enormously popular stage

adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* helped to mobilise sentiment behind the anti-slavery cause (Eliza's escape across the ice is one of the most frequently remembered scenes in memoirs of nineteenth-century childhood); Poor Law dramas, such as *The Workhouse Girl*, helped to keep the anti-Poor Law agitation alive long after it had ceased to be an issue in national politics; Siberian escape drama, a sensationalist sub-genre which owes its origin to the Paris theatre of the Restoration, and which was still a favourite at the London suburban theatres of the 1900s, helped to sustain a strongly anti-Tsarist public opinion whatever the twists and turns of government diplomacy and foreign policy. Melodrama, the great popular art form of the period, provided a universal idiom for popular religion and politics. The moral crusades of the 1870s and 1880s – as also arguably the Salvation Army and Socialism, could be said to take their cue from it, their paradigms of rescue work, if not their words of blood and fire; while the stage representation of landlords and aristocrats – stock villains in melodrama – is possibly not the least of the reasons why, right down to 1914, land rather than capital was the popular metaphor for class oppression; and why, so late as 1909, 'Peers versus the People' could still serve as the rallying cry of English democracy.

The resemblance of politics to theatre has long been a favourite theme of parliamentary commentators, observing the ritualised combat, stylised gesture and histrionic abilities of public men, and it may be that the disappearance of high politics as a subject for stage representation had to do less with the severities of theatrical censorship than with the appearance of the hustings and, later on, the rise of the platform, as an alternative space for the dramatisation of politics. Bagehot's cynical observations in *The English Constitution* on the 'complex, august, *theatrical*' parts of the constitution – not least the 'Gothic grandeur' of monarchy – can serve to underline the dramaturgical dimensions of public authority and the awe-inspiring rituals of the Crown, the Law and the Church. Theatricality is, if anything, even more apparent – though also more impromptu, in the mobilisation of popular politics, carnivalesque at one moment, melodramatic at another, but always larger than life. The idea that Beaumarchais 'stages' the storming of the Bastille, though plausible (he was an opposition playwright, who had recently taken up living quarters in the Faubourg St Antoine, and took part in the mass assault) is no doubt a canard, but it has

the merit of highlighting the dramatic character of great public events. A political demonstration is necessarily an act of street theatre, albeit one with a multitudinous cast, and a rhythm and tempo of its own. Readers of Samuel Bamford's *Passages in the Life of a Radical* will know how carefully Peterloo was stage-managed, before the proceedings were brutally interrupted by the charge of the Manchester yeomanry. Much the same ritual accompanied the processionings and appearances of the Chartist orators and leaders, including, on occasion, the use of cavalry escorts; while at the 'monster' torchlight demonstrations the impromptu firing of pistols, and brandishing of pikes, heightened the make-believe by simulating a revolutionary catastrophe. The international socialist movement of the period of the Second International (1890-1914) was a prolific source of proto-theatrical forms most memorably in the invention of workers' May Day. Dramatic pageants and festivals were the major forms of mass mobilisation, while at indoor meetings, readings and recitations, of the kind described in chapter one of this book, were as much a customary part of the proceedings as the political lecture or address. No Russian Beaumarchais has ever been hypothesised as the impresario of the storming of the Winter Palace, but the theatricality of the event made it an irresistible subject for Meyerhold when, in the following year, he staged his revolutionary mass spectacles. (By the same token, it is interesting to note that Romain Rolland, in his 1900s campaign for the establishment of a 'People's Theatre', stages *Le Quatorze Juillet*, re-enacting the storming of the Bastille as a mass spectacle, though tempering the revolutionary example with a humanist message, and making the leading protagonist an individualised heroine from humble life.)

Theatre seems to exercise a 'metaphysical' influence on politics or at any rate an influence out of all proportion to its size, or the number of its audience. Quite often it seems to prefigure or anticipate major political themes, as though a live performance on stage constituted a kind of symbolic recognition of the entry of some new issue into the arena of public debate. Thus the free woman, in the person of Ibsen's *Nora*, was walking the boards of the London stage for some years before the emancipatory movement of women forced itself on to the agenda of national politics; while at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, the magic of Irish nationality was being proclaimed a dozen years before it was taken up by the

heroes of the Easter Rising. A number of other examples suggest themselves, where the stage might be seen as *anticipating* politics rather than reflecting it, and life as imitating art. One might be the idealisation of the English gentleman, as a lovable eccentric rather than a military or playing-field hero, a stage stereotype which crystallises in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and which was enchantingly amplified (at least so far as West End audiences were concerned) by 'Mad Dogs and Englishmen' (in Noel Coward's *Cavalcade*) and the society comedies of Freddie Lonsdale. A more clearly documented case would be the extraordinary resonance of R. C. Sherriff's *Journey's End*, which inspired or released a whole series of influential anti-war writings (and anti-public school memoirs); and by bringing the trauma of the First World War to the centre of the stage helped to create the climate of opinion for the Peace Ballot and 1930s pacifism. Again, to take another familiar example, one might suggest that the protest movement associated with the Aldermaston marches and the first CND was announced, and the cultural revolution of the 1960s prefigured, in the Royal Court's production of *Look Back in Anger* both in its iconoclasm and its rediscovery of the 'good, brave causes' of the past. Lastly one might consider the possibility that experimental theatre – the abolition of the proscenium stage, the development of theatre in the round, and the notion of theatre as an open space – provided an imaginative paradigm for the campus revolt of 1968 and the anti-authoritarian movements associated with it.

The idea of propaganda theatre – the subject of this book – could be traced back to very early times, if one were to think in terms of anticipations rather than of lineage. One obvious prototype would be the late medieval morality play, a theatre of the churchyard or the street, with its ritualised combats of good and evil, its stock characters and its intense audience participation and involvement. Another would be the 'theatre of instruction' advocated by Rousseau and practised by Diderot against the 'theatre of entertainment' of the privileged. It was conceived of as a vehicle of popular enlightenment, to combat superstition and priestcraft; in a later version, championed by Michelet, theatre was conceived of as a kind of social church, a school for patriotic and republican virtue. Both these ideas were embodied in the didactic play (the *pièce à thèse*), a recognised dramatic sub-genre in later nineteenth-century France, and they were the leading idea of the 'people's theatre' experiments which, in the 1890s and 1900s, grew up on the periph-

eries of the socialist movement, and as auxiliaries of the Bourses de Travail. A more influential example for the socialists of the time was the 'ethical' drama which took its imaginative model from Ibsen. Like the 'theatre of instruction' of the philosophies, it was self-consciously an alternative to the 'theatre of entertainment' ('after-dinner theatre' as it was derisively labelled) of the rich. It took 'stage realism' as its watchword, 'sociological' drama as its object. Ibsenism had an enormous influence on middle-class revolutionists, as for instance Bernard Shaw and the Avelings in Britain, Fernand Pelloutier in France, but neither ethical drama nor its naturalist offspring were popular art forms; they found their home, typically, in the burgeoning 'arts' theatres, such as Stanislavsky's theatre in Moscow, or the Royal Court in London, catering to a 'concerned' minority of the professional classes, and more artistically-inclined scions of the bourgeoisie.

The socialist movement of the period of the Second International (1890-1914) worshipped at the shrine of art; it conceived itself as a messenger of high culture, bringing education and enlightenment to the masses. But the very reverence for high culture made socialists diffident about attempting to instrumentalise it. The absolute autonomy of art was unquestioned, and the writers, painters and musicians who came into the socialist ranks were treated with exaggerated respect. 'We do not wish to domesticate them', wrote Jules Destrée, one of the architects of the very impressive cultural politics of the Belgian Workers' Party, 'but to allow them all possible liberty, Nor do we admire an artist because he is a socialist but because he is an artist and produces masterpieces.' Kautsky maintained a similarly abstentionist position in relation to the future: 'communism in material production, anarchy in intellectual production' was how he defined the socialist state. Art might carry a social message, but it was the common sense view of ideologues and aesthetes alike that it served the movement best if it remained true to itself, absorbing emancipatory ideas, but expressed, in the first place, artistically. The German SDP, despite the ambition of its educational aims, resolutely refused to embroil itself in cultural controversies, and when the issue came to a head, in 1896, refused to intervene even in matters which affected its own publication: 'equal rights in the cultural sphere', i.e. workers' access to art, was the summit of its ambition. These tendencies were reinforced by the activity of socialist cultural groups – the educational associations, arts circles, theatre groups, orchestras and choirs established

in the ambit of the socialist parties. Even when launched, like the Free People's Stage in Berlin, with the aim of applying 'socialist principles' to the arts, they tended to develop enthusiasms of their own and to find their place in a wider orbit. Repertoires, typically, were diversified, and even when a nominal allegiance to the parent organisation was retained, the gravitational pull was exercised by audiences, performers and followings.

The 'People's Theatre' projects of the period were particularly liable to escape the Party orbit. They were started, typically, on the fringes of the socialist movement, by sympathisers rather than activists, and with the philanthropic aim of giving the masses access to dramatic art. They depended, for their survival, on building up an independent following: unlike the orchestras and choirs, they could not be integrated into Party cultural life (the festivals, galas and anniversaries which did so much to establish a socialist presence); unlike the writers and poets they could not be published in the columns of the Party press. Some developed into arts theatres, playing to minority audiences, and making their reputation on the performance of uncensored plays. Many foundered for want of popular support. The German *Volksbühnen*, the most successful (by the 1920s they had a mass membership of 50,000), though started with the aim of applying 'socialist principles' to the theatre, seem to have settled down, by the 1900s, to a mainly classical repertoire. The local dramatic troupes, started in association with workers' or socialist clubs, often set out with a propagandist intention, but they were peculiarly subject to the demand for entertainment, more especially when they were engaged in fund-raising: the Belgian Federation of Socialist Theatre groups, organised in 1909, made a determined attempt to put on 'message' plays (*pièces à thèse*), illustrating both socialist principles and 'rationalist morality', but the proportion of 'message' plays dwindled, and those that survived seem to have done so by their effectiveness as melodrama – the single most popular class of play. The Clarion dramatic clubs, started in 1910, made a speciality of playing Bernard Shaw but, like the Co-op drama groups of later years, most of their effort seems to have gone on the production of entertainments, or, more occasionally, of simple moralities.

Left-wing drama in these years, whether produced for the arts theatres, or for local and 'popular' performance, seems to have been socially conscious rather than politically engaged. Like other cultural initiatives of the period, it was conceived of as a form of

spiritual uplift, taking on the powers of darkness, and exhibiting the light of knowledge. Realism, as in the democratic melodrama favoured in Belgium, had to be ennobling, showing tableaux of working-class misery, relieved by individual heroism: as Fernand Mercier, a leading protagonist of 'social theatre' in Belgium, and a popular playwright, put it, 'dramas . . . which describe simply all the devotion, all the self-abnegation, all the sacrifices and all the heroism of the proletariat'. As in socialist songs of the period (English readers will be familiar with the 'Red Flag') there was a strong emphasis on redemption through martyrdom and suffering. Many of the propaganda plays of the period, too, seem to have been written and performed as moralities, offering ideal characters to imitate, and celebrating the victory of virtue over vice. Thus Maurice Pottegher inaugurated his 'People's Theatre' in the Vosges with a drama directed against alcoholism (a major theme in socialist literature and drama of the time, as well as in working-class politics). The Belgian Socialist Theatre groups, in their *pièces à thème* made anti-clericalism a major theme, alongside anti-alcoholism and anti-militarism.

The 1920s and early 1930s, the period of the theatre movements with which this book is principally concerned, opened up a whole new epoch in the socialist imagination and in the relationship of socialist movements to their theatrical auxiliaries. It was the crystallisation of a self-consciously proletarian aesthetic, of a futuristic dream in which socialism was no longer an escape from the proletarian condition but rather a realisation of workers' power. Instead of the deference to high culture, there was an iconoclastic desire to break with it, no less apparent in, say, the Plebs League – the trade union based and mainly Labour Party federation of working-class autodidacts – than among Communists. Instead of moral uplift, there was agit-prop, a self-consciously revolutionary art. There was a corresponding growth in Party-mindedness in both the Communist and Social Democratic Parties of the period, and an assertion of the Party's leading role in the arts (this was true even in Britain, where Herbert Morrison, the ambitious secretary of the London Labour Party, constituted himself as a kind of cultural impresario, forming a Labour Party Symphony Orchestra and a Labour Party Federation of Choirs and Dramatic Societies). The shyness about instrumentalising art was replaced by a determination to grasp it boldly.

Interestingly, and paradoxically, the workerist turn in socialist



politics, led to, or at least was accompanied by, a remarkable openness to experimentalism. The period of this book, in fact, is one which sees, in all the arts, an alliance between communism and the *avant-garde*. The socialism of this time was exuberantly futuristic, and as in Russia, so in Germany and other parts of Europe, including to some degree Britain, communists and socialists took up, or were taken up by, modernist movements. The idea of socialist art took on a whole new configuration of meanings in which pastoral ideas of beauty, as epitomised in the work of Walter Crane and William Morris, were replaced by a machine aesthetic which celebrated factory industry as a source of workers' power. In theatre, the alliance of communism and the *avant-garde* was particularly fruitful, and it was from the Russian and German models of agit-prop that the British and American troupes described in this volume took their cue.

This book is concerned with a moment rather than a continuous historical tradition, a moment which, as the introductory chapter argues, was lost with the advent, in 1935, of the Popular Front. It was as sharply distinguished from the 'People's Theatre' projects of the pre-1914 years, as from the 'Socialist Realism' of the Popular Front and after. Yet it raises some of the enduring questions which have recurred in every phase of modernism, whatever its political hue, in particular the attempt to escape from art to anti-art, and theatre to anti-theatre. It exemplifies the difficult and, as some would argue, impossible relationship between an artistic movement and organised political parties, while at the same time showing them (if only for a relatively brief period) in tense but fruitful association. It also exemplifies the *antagonistic* relationship to popular culture which, notwithstanding its democratic ambition, has normally kept the theatre of instruction as the preserve of enlightened minorities.

There is no continuous history of socialist or alternative history to be discovered, rather a succession of moments separated from one another by rupture. Yet each of these moments, when looked at closely, appear as creative, not only for the movements concerned, but also for theatre generally. Rescuing them from oblivion, then, as numbers of scholars have been attempting to do in recent years, is not – or ought not to be – a sectarian affair of committed socialists. It may have something to say to all those who have experienced the importance of theatre in their lives.

*Part 1*

# *History*



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# *Theatre and socialism in Britain, (1880–1935)*

Raphael Samuel

## I

British socialism, in the formative years of its existence, seems to have had an especially strong appeal to those who, whatever their particular walk in life, regarded themselves, or were regarded by others, as 'artistic'. The term was then a great deal less exclusive in its connotations than it was to become with the advent of 'highbrows' and a self-consciously minority avant-garde. It was freely applied to certain classes of artisan, as well as to the many classes of under-labourer (e.g. engravers and copyists) engaged in the lower reaches of the cultural industries and trades. It was also widely used as a synonym for the unconventional and Bohemian, for those who (like Edward Carpenter's gardener-comrade, George Hulkin) were 'not too exact or precise about details'.<sup>1</sup> A house-painter could be regarded as a 'bit of an artist', like Owen, the hero of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, or Robert Tressell, his real-life original, whose frescoes have recently been retrieved.<sup>2</sup> The artistic impulse was particularly strong (though sometimes unacknowledged) in the more revolutionary wings of the socialist movement – nowhere more so than in the 'impossibilist' and apparently severely Marxist Socialist Labour Party, for whom, in the early 1900s, James Connolly was spouting translations of Freiligrath's poetry on the Glasgow street corners, and whose members' staple reading (when not *The Communist Manifesto*) was Eugene Sue's romantically revolutionary fictions.<sup>3</sup> To these one might add the thousands of scribblers who contributed verse to the socialist press (as late as the 1930s there was still a poetry-lovers' corner in *The Daily Herald*); the amateur librettists who mounted operatic and choral concert-meetings; and the open-air 'stump' orators who electrified the crowds by reciting verse as much as by preaching the socialist Word – Shelley's 'Men of England' was for decades a standard peroration in platform oratory, as it had been in that of John Bright during the 1840s.<sup>4</sup>

The aesthetic components of socialism were, in its early years, open and acknowledged. British Marxism, as Belfort Bax noted, was in the first place a 'literary' movement and its most famous exponent was neither a trade unionist nor an economist but the poet-artist, William Morris.<sup>5</sup> 'The first revolt', Sidney Webb noted in 'The Historic Basis of Socialism' (one of the *Fabian Essays* of 1889) came from the 'artistic' side, in the rejection of 'squalid commercialism' and mechanical market laws.<sup>6</sup> In the epoch of Walter Crane and the first May Days, it was pictorial art (of the kind lovingly gathered together in John Gorman's *Banner Bright*) which both shaped the vision of the socialistic future and provided a visual allegory for the Golden Age of the past – that processional dance of bucolic peasants and artisans which served as an emblem of the solidarity of labour and the brotherhood of man. The struggle between labour and capital was conceptualized in terms of the age-old division between rich and poor rather than that of employers and employed; it owed more to 'democratic readings' from the poets than to detailed engagement with the class system. 'Socialism' wrote Keir Hardie, 'was the poetry of the poor': it exalted the masses; it transported them from the mean conditions of their everyday existence to a state of imaginary transcendence. Like poetry, it depended for its enchantment on the willing suspension of disbelief, a self-abandonment to the power of the Word. This was certainly the leading appeal of Ramsay MacDonald, in later years Labour's first Prime Minister, who intoxicated his listeners with the spell of beautiful images. The famous oration on the death of Keir Hardie, delivered to a rapt audience of the Glasgow ILP in 1916 – the speech which made him the idol of Red Clydeside – is a representative example:

Keir Hardie: there was your old-fashioned man. Every line, every item of his home, his own characteristic. There was your man of individuality. You saw him in the Strand in London, crowded with thousands upon thousands of feet; this great river of ordinary commonplace humanity, where even strong individuality is apt to be lost. But there he was like a great boulder of whinstone, telling of the freshness of the hills. There he was, this strong individuality, amidst men, and yet above men: human and yet separate. You sing in Scotland 'I to the hills will lift mine eyes'. There are some men who are

like the hills; when you look at them you feel that strength, that power of eternity, that solidness which does not pass with a generation, but which stands the storms and the climates, which gladdens your eyes and which your children to generations will see after you have gone and slept and been forgotten. There are some men whose personalities give you the impression of eternity and unshakeable foundations and everlastingness. Hardie was one of those men. Such a man of rugged being and massive soul, of imperturbable courage and of mystic insight, was the man who founded the I.L.P.<sup>7</sup>

There is no doubt that MacDonald saw himself in this light, 'a man of rugged being and massive soul', a politician who was also a poet and a singer, a mystic who carried within him the vision of the city on the hill. In his peroration – which had an extraordinary impact on listeners and was talked about in Glasgow 'for years afterwards' – the religious and aesthetic notions of transcendence are fused:

The old order passes away, and you and I, standing once more at Hardie's tomb, having lingered the past hour with his memory and thoughts of him in our minds, we go back into the world to do our duty, to reconstruct society, to rebuild the fabric that has fallen, to make good the walls that have been crushed; to put a new idea, a new beauty, a new holiness into the lives of the people of Europe.

The cult of beauty, deriving from the Pre-Raphaelites, and earlier still from Shelley, as well as from such better known sources as Ruskin and Morris, and no doubt owing much, too, to the 'aesthetic' movement of the 1880s and 1890s, formed part of the 'common sense' of the Socialist movement of the time. It was the imaginative basis both of its critique of individualism and its vision of a collectivist future. Socialism was the talismanic term for the beautiful; it represented, in the moving terms of Oscar Wilde's *Soul of Man Under Socialism*, all that was potentially 'fine'; capitalism, by contrast, was an incarnation of the 'base', the 'mean', the 'sordid'. Visually socialism was represented not by the proletarian fist, but by the flowing robes of the indeterminately medieval peasants, artisans and goddesses of Walter Crane's engravings. Beauty

comprised both *nature* and *culture*, the unspoiled and the innocent – the simple home, the dignified work, the craft that was ‘true to materials’ – but also the highest products of literature, music and the fine arts. It was a unifying, integrative principle, a way of restoring wholeness to the world. Hubert Manning, Ann Veronica’s civil servant suitor – ‘a socialist of the order of John Ruskin’ – wanted to shout when he saw beautiful things, ‘or else . . . to weep’.<sup>8</sup> Robert Tressell, the Hastings house-painter, was no less ecstatic when, in the coda of his novel, he projected the ‘gilded domes and glittering pinnacles’ of the beautiful cities of the future ‘where men shall dwell in true brotherhood and goodwill and joy’.<sup>9</sup> ‘We also had a handsome “hammer man” who worked shifts at the local steel forge’, Alice Foley recalls of her Bolton Socialist Sunday School. ‘He was remarkably well read and a passionate devotee of poesy and beauty. After separation into small groups he introduced us to purple passages from Keats’s *Eve of St Agnes* and his lovely intonation of an *Ode on a Grecian Urn*:

Thou still unravished bride of quietness  
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time  
still lingers in the chamber of memory.’<sup>10</sup>

Ethel Snowden, ‘a great snob’ according to the jaundiced Diary entry of Beatrice Webb, but a very popular speaker at ILP assemblies, sounded a similar note in her speeches. ‘There is a great deal of truth in the words of that distinguished Frenchman who said that we can “live without bread, but not without roses”’ she told a mass assembly of London and home counties co-operators in 1927:

. . . What he meant was that life without music and musical appreciation, without art and artistic understanding, without books and the power to read and comprehend, without earnestness of spirit and spiritual devotion to the community’s interest, is not life, but existence. Therefore we struggle to add something to the richness of culture not only to our own lives, but to the lives of everyone around us. I emphasise the need of culture to make us gentle and good, to banish hate from our hearts, and to plant therein righteousness and the love of humanity. A mind of culture makes good things possible to us, and enables us to love what is beautiful and

true. Our movement is only one of many struggling for that ideal. Co-operation is eternally and in all things the law of life. Let us take up this task eternal, this burden, and this message. Confident in the righteousness and nobility of our great cause and lofty principle of co-operation, let us go forward hand-in-hand and heart-to-heart, certain that in God's good time that cause, the eternal cause of our common humanity, will be carried to a crowning and triumphant victory.<sup>11</sup>

As in MacDonald's funeral oration over the body of Keir Hardie, as in that vast outpouring of ILP rhetoric, transcendental longings, aesthetic ideals of beauty and ambition for cultural attainment are fused in a single discourse.

In another, more heroic, idiom, early socialism drew heavily on literature for its imagery of struggle. Thus, for example, one finds George Edwards, the self-educated secretary of the Agricultural Workers Union (he had been taught to read by his wife), signing off an annual report in 1909 as follows:

Courage then, my Brother,  
The day has come at last;  
The clouds are lifting quickly,  
The night is breaking fast.  
Be strong then of courage,  
Our cause is just and right.  
And he who holds by justice  
Is sure to win the fight.<sup>12</sup>

Shakespeare, that favourite author of the nineteenth-century working-class stage, was a frequent source of texts. *Julius Caesar* in particular – 'a mighty political drama, not just an entertainment', as the young J. R. Clynes discovered when reading it in the library of the Oldham Equitable Co-Operative Society<sup>13</sup> – seems to have provided some popular models of heroic achievement. Socialist funeral addresses, like that of Ramsay MacDonald on Keir Hardie, drew heavily on Mark Antony's oration in the Forum, while other famous passages served as calls to duty and service. Alfred Greenwood, the very militant secretary of the South Yorkshire glass bottlemakers, and a friend of Eleanor Marx-Aveling, fills his quarterly trade union reports with quotations from Shakespeare and



the poets. Dealing with a historic lock-out, whose effects were still being experienced in 1886, he turns to:

There is a tide in the affairs of men,  
Which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;  
Omitted, all the voyage of their life  
Is bound in shallows, and in miseries.  
On such a full sea are we now afloat;  
And we must take the current when it serves,  
Or lose our venture.<sup>14</sup>

And comments: 'if this philosophy could have been realised, not only the Thornhill Lees and Conisbro disaster might have been averted; but also a great portion of its train of evils which has since marked that event.' J. R. Clynes kept his boyhood memories of *Julius Caesar* with him when he sat on the Opposition benches in the House of Commons: 'The haughty Tribune who reproved the mechanics for daring to walk abroad on a labouring day "without sign of their profession" was typical of many who sat on the benches of the House of Commons in my boyhood; and men of like spirit sit there yet.' One of the most ardent of these working-class Shakespeareans was Tom Mann, a leader of the great dock strike of 1889, the stormy petrel of industrial syndicalism in the years 1911–14, and for the last twenty years of his life the Grand Old Man of British Communism (he was chairman of the Party when he died in 1943). As a young engineer in Chiswick he had formed, with his workmates, a Shakespeare Mutual Improvement Society. Later, in his family life, he instituted 'joyous evenings' at which everyone present had to sing, recite 'or at least read' something of Shakespeare. In hospital, after his eighty-first birthday, he recited to his fellow patients. 'Indescribable fire and music would fill his tiny sitting-room in those last years as he strode about it', his biographer, Dona Torr, records, 'roaring out his favourite passages, plunging into the angry flood and emerging, a bulky symbolic figure, bearing upon his shoulder the tired Caesar':

Well, honour is the subject of my story.  
I cannot tell what you and other men  
Think of this life; but, for my single self,  
I had as lief not be as live to be  
In awe of such a thing as I myself.

I was born free as Caesar; so were you . . .  
 The torrent roar'd, and we did buffet it  
 With lusty sinews, throwing it aside  
 And stemming it with hearts of controversy;  
 But ere we could arrive the point propos'd,  
 Caesar cried, "Help me Cassius, or I sink!"  
 I, as Aeneas, our great ancestor,  
 Did from the flames of Troy upon his shoulder  
 The old Anchises bear, so from the waves of Tiber,  
 Did I the tired Caesar . . .<sup>15</sup>

The Fabians, though less literary in their inspiration than the Marxists, or those working-class autodidacts who figure so prominently in the annals of Labour representation, drawing their idiom from *Pilgrim's Progress* and the Bible, and claiming Ruskin or Carlyle as the teachers who had set them on their path, made an outstanding contribution to British theatre in these years, and if there is one field in which the Fabian strategy of 'permeation' may be said to have triumphed – albeit not one which they would have thought to acknowledge – it was that of dramaturgy. Quite apart from inventing the 'discussion' play and initiating, with *Widower's Houses* (banned by the Lord Chamberlain in 1892, but zestfully maintained in an underground existence by the first 'fringe' theatres and by socialist drama and play-reading groups), those 'sociological dramas' in which the issues of the day were put on stage, Bernard Shaw, by his championship of Ibsen, precipitated that revulsion from Irvingite histrionics and turn to a more naturalistic 'lifelike' style of presentation which has remained the dominant mode in English acting from that time to now. Granville Barker – one of the recruits to the Fabians in the Society's 'second Spring', and a member of its Executive Committee between 1907 and 1912<sup>16</sup> – was hardly less influential on English theatre practice, initiating the project for a national theatre which has come to fruition in our own times. His management of the Royal Court Theatre between 1903 and 1907 brought a whole new repertoire on to the English stage – Shaw's work most notably, Ibsen and Chekhov; later, the 'social problem' plays of Galsworthy, Barrie, Drinkwater and others. Fabians, as Ian Britain notes in *Fabianism and Culture*, largely officered the Stage Society,<sup>17</sup> which before the Barker-Vedrenne seasons at the Court was the sounding board of the

theatrical avant-garde; while in another sphere (oddly neglected by the Society's historians) Fabians played a leading role in the foundation of the Repertory movement.<sup>18</sup>

In general, it is difficult to overestimate the influence of socialist ideas on English theatre practice in this period. By any account it was vast, and quite out of proportion to the influence of socialist ideas in the country as a whole. Socialists had been the earliest partisans of Ibsenism, not only Shaw but the whole circle around Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling, who had championed him in the socialist press when his works were still unknown in this country (Eleanor was taking the part of Nora in a privately staged performance of *The Doll's House* five years before it was given a public performance; she taught herself Norwegian in order to translate *An Enemy of the People* and *The Lady from the Sea*).<sup>19</sup> The socialist and trade-union agitations of the period found an immediate and sympathetic repercussion on the stage – as in Mrs Lyttleton's *Warp and Woof* (1904) 'with its poignant reminder of what Society clothes cost those who made them'<sup>20</sup> (the Women's Trade Union League used it in their efforts to organize a dress-makers' union); Cicely Hamilton's *Diana of Dobson's* (in the production of which Margaret Bondfield, then an organizer for the National Federation of Women Workers, and later a Labour Cabinet Minister, played the role of documentary adviser)<sup>21</sup>; and Granville Barker's *The Madras House*, which also rehearsed the plight of the shopworkers, though in a tragic rather than a comic vein. At second or third remove, translated into the language of social guilt and moral choice, the socialist propaganda of the time, and in particular the questioning of bourgeois morality – the sanctity of private property, the hypocrisies of organized religion, the 'bad faith' of bourgeois marriage – can be seen as providing the whole agenda of Edwardian 'ethical drama' (the plays of John Galsworthy in this period are paradigmatic), as also, in a lighter vein, for the 'regional' playwrights of Dublin, Glasgow and Manchester. The socialist influence at the Gaiety Theatre Manchester was, according to the testimony of those who acted there, a dominant one: Stanley Houghton, the author of *Hindle Wakes*, with its factory-girl heroine, claimed to be a socialist by conviction though a Liberal in nominal political commitment;<sup>22</sup> Harold Brighouse's *The Price of Coal*, if not his *Hobson's Choice*, entered into the repertory of 'social problem' drama. Indeed the

Edwardian stage, in its preoccupation with the documentary and the naturalistic, as also in its radical individualism, could be said to have prefigured what were to be some of the most abiding preoccupations of the British Left, and the major components of its unofficial culture, certainly down to the 1950s, and arguably to the present day.

It is surprising, in the light of the foregoing, how little direct part theatre played in the cultural practice of the early socialist movement. Whereas the suffragettes, for example, produced a whole theatre of propaganda, and a mass of one-act plays designed to further the cause, there was a singular deficiency in their socialist equivalent, nor did drama play a leading role in Socialist cultural life. A number of reasons might be suggested for this absence. First there was the increasing social exclusiveness of the theatre, which in the 1900s was ceasing to be a popular art and losing much of its popular following. Then there was the gentrification of the acting profession, a process which, paradoxically, the new and more 'realist' drama, though often proclaimedly anti-bourgeois, served rather to enhance than to subvert, since it excluded popular dramatic forms, such as fantasy and melodrama. Second, and closely related to the first, there was the quasi-religious fervour of socialist converts and activists which consorted uneasily with the ironies and rationalities of the discussion play. Third, there was the predominantly male character of socialist activism. Most of all perhaps there was the vitality of other art forms in which the message of socialism could be expressed, in which the transcendental longings which accompanied them could find an emotional release, and in which its aesthetics could find more appropriately dramatic forms.

The main cultural thrust of the early socialist movement was in music, the 'indispensable expression' (as an ILP journal put it) of the 'seriousness' of the Movement, 'and of the happiness there is in it'.<sup>23</sup> At open-air meetings brass bands and communal singing were used very much as they were by the Salvation Army, as ways of gathering a crowd. At branch meetings, the singing of socialist anthems and hymns, such as Edward Carpenter's much-loved 'England, Arise', served, like congregational singing, to express what a Clarion Club called 'the joys of fellowship' and the yearning for a better life. 'Have singing at all the meetings', ILP branches were advised in September 1903. 'A good hymn puts everybody

in good humour.' 'If possible, have at every meeting a soloist, quartet or reciter.'<sup>24</sup> Vocal or instrumental performances were a regular feature at ILP Sunday evening lectures, the 'musical programme', as it was called in the advertisements, lasting for perhaps an hour and being followed by the 'propaganda address' (by the 1900s some ILP branches could boast their own orchestra). Choral singing was a major feature of the life of the Clarion League, with the formation, in the 1890s, of a Clarion Vocal Union 'for the performance of unaccompanied choral music, for the enjoyment of the members, and for the service of Socialism': its principal musical aim was 'to revive interest in the wealth of glees, madrigals and part songs so popular in days long ago, when England was really a musical nation'.<sup>25</sup> Even the Labour Party, culturally the least ambitious organization ever produced by the British Left, felt obliged in its early years to maintain a musical side. In 1925 the National Executive was sponsoring a Choral Union 'to develop the musical instinct of the people, and to render service to the Labour movement';<sup>26</sup> and in London there was even a Labour Party symphony orchestra.<sup>27</sup> Singing was if not a necessary then certainly a much-admired accomplishment of Labour leaders. Thus one finds George Lansbury in 1909 delighting his local branch with a rendering of 'Nancy Lea';<sup>28</sup> Herbert Morrison, as secretary of the South London Federation of the ILP, scoring a 'great success' with his rendering of a ballad 'in the musical interlude of a great political demonstration held at Lambeth baths';<sup>29</sup> Rosslyn Mitchell, a Labour MP of the 1920s 'who prided himself more on the fact that he was a singing member of Hugh Robertson's famous Orpheus choir than on his seat in the House of Commons'.<sup>30</sup> On the far Left, Willie Paul, editor of the *Sunday Worker* in the 1920s, had a long-standing reputation in the Labour and Socialist clubs as a singer and entertainer (during the First World War he had made a small living at it: in July 1926 one finds him advertised to sing a group of folk and Labour songs at a cinema in Tottenham, 'Proceeds for miners' relief fund').<sup>31</sup>

The place of drama in the early socialist movement was more uncertain and it served as an adjunct to other activities rather than – as in the case of 'singing for socialism' – a spearhead. In the SDF and the Socialist League – the Marxist organizations set up in the 1880s – 'dramatic entertainments' were put on as a way of raising Party funds, and livening up social occasions – 'Two Laughable

Farces, Singing and Instrumental Music' were the Sunday evening's fare when the Clerkenwell Branch of the Socialist League held a benefit for its new branch premises in May 1888.<sup>32</sup> When the Southwark branch of the SDF held a Grand Concert in February 1886, H. M. Hyndman (the leader of the Party) occupied the chair and recited *The Birds* of Aristophanes; John Burns sang several songs 'in a masterly style' including 'The Mikado' in costume. Miss Hanlon was 'greatly pleased' with her renderings of 'The Kerry Dance', 'The Lost Chord' and 'Come Back to Erin'. The Misses Paul, Mrs Burns, Mr Jack Cole and friends 'gave an amusing sketch'. Mr Jack Cole gave a selection from comic opera and a recitation, 'The Walrus and the Carpenter'. Mr C. Sykes 'gave an entertaining character sketch . . .'<sup>33</sup> The new trade unions, like their mid-Victorian predecessors, used musical, comic and dramatic entertainments as a way of raising strike funds: during the great Dublin transport workers strike of 1913 Delia Larkin, sister to the strike leader, set up a Workers Dramatic Company which went on tour to mobilize funds and support.<sup>34</sup> Only the Fabians, of the early socialist organizations and societies, seem to have incorporated drama as a normal part of their branch life; their repertoire was very much of a piece with the 'advanced' drama being put on by the Stage Society and the burgeoning 'little theatres'.

As in the case of the Owenite and Chartist movements of the 1830s and 1840s, the most systematic theatrical activity was among the children, those who attended the Socialist Sunday Schools. Here operetta, cantatas, fairy plays and *kinderspiel* (a kind of morality play for children) were a staple fare. Pantomimes such as *Dick Whittington*, *Ali Baba* and *Aladdin* were regularly staged for the Christmas concert;<sup>35</sup> recitations and sketches would be performed as the children's contribution to May Day, or in aid of branch concerts (the dramatic class at West Leeds made its debut in July 1908 with 'the jealous scene' from *Othello*).<sup>36</sup> Drama was also very much to the fore in class work. 'It was customary for one of the young members to recite', Alice Foley recalls of her Bolton Socialist Sunday School, 'I recall most vividly a girl student, the possessor of a deep dramatic voice, who at monthly intervals intoned scenes from Longfellow's *Songs of Hiawatha*. We delighted in Hiawatha's childhood, his later wanderings, hardships and prophetic idealism, but especially did we youngsters thrill to

the brief wooing of the lovely “Laughing Water”. Our reciter seemed to fling the syllables Min-ne-haha at us, instead, I thought, of gently caressing them, but we shared in the simplicity of the marriage feast: Leaving Hiawatha happy/With the night and Minnehaha.’<sup>37</sup> At the Bristol Socialist Sunday School – a heterodox affair since the members of the Bristol Socialist Society were of all faiths – Christian, Jews, Secularists, Spiritualists, Marxians, Fabians, Theists and Theosophists – the superintendent, R. S. Gillard, wrote a pantomime with a Socialist moral ‘which was several times successfully performed by the elder children’.<sup>38</sup> The Parkhurst, Glasgow, Socialist Sunday School produced the expressively titled plays *The Poor House* and *Simple Life* for the anniversary concert of the local socialist Hall.<sup>39</sup> North Salford Socialist Sunday School in 1909 were performing ‘an original Socialist musical play’, *The Snow Fairy*, for their Easter concert.<sup>40</sup> A popular *kinderspiel* in the Scottish schools, widely staged in 1908–9, was *Brotherhood*, a dramatization by the Superintendent of the Paisley Sunday School of a story ‘Joy cometh in the morning’. The principal parts were taken (as so often happens in such affairs) by ‘semi-grown ups’ and the choruses sung by the boys and girls.

A pleasing feature of the play which commends itself, is, that the whole school takes part in it. It is also educative; the economics and ethics of Socialism being taught right through the play, and from a propaganda standpoint, it is excellent. The play opens with a school scene, the children all singing ‘We’re a merry, merry band from the Socialist school’, after which Modesty, the teacher, gives a beautiful lesson on ‘Brotherhood’. The children then go to Brotherhood Castle, given by Lady Goodwill only to those who agree to love and serve each other. All the different characters of modern society are represented: a Bankrupt Private Trader, a Working Man and his Wife, an Ideal Philanthropist, a Minister, a School Teacher, a Bottom Dog and a Socialist Student. All these relate their troubles to each other, and show up the iniquitous system which modern society is living under; and consequently, Lady Goodwill being converted to Socialism hands over Brotherhood Castle to all those who need it. The court scene is most educative. All the children are in court, with red flags, singing ‘Lift the Socialist Flag on High’ and