

A photograph of three people in a city street. On the left, a man in a dark suit, white shirt, and brown tie wears dark sunglasses and holds a large red flag. In the center, another man in a dark suit and dark sunglasses looks upwards. In the foreground, a woman with long, curly brown hair wears a dark suit, a blue and white striped tie, and bright yellow sunglasses. The background shows a brick wall on the left and a city street with other pedestrians in the distance.

PAUL FARMER

AFTER THE MINERS' STRIKE

A39 AND CORNISH POLITICAL THEATRE
VERSUS THATCHER'S BRITAIN

VOLUME 1



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Cover image: A39 in street theatre mode at Camborne Trevithick Day, 1985

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Preface

Rebecca Hillman

‘Busking in a twilight zone of performance’

Three quarters of the way through the last century, a rich seam of enquiry emerged that explored how theatre was harnessed to achieve political goals for the working class. For some time, documenting this work was itself considered an intervention, and part of a broad effort to advance the international cause of socialism. However, the ascent of neoliberal capitalism in the years that followed not only weakened organising capacity and the industrial bases that historically supported lively ecosystems of radical art, but also the cultural frameworks that had sustained them. Cultural and analytical frameworks were eroded further by disillusionment with twentieth-century regimes, common perceptions of the organised left as having failed, and wariness—especially in the academy—of art as an advocate of political ‘truth’.

So profoundly was this shift reflected in theatre studies and in the emerging field of performance studies, that scholars questioned whether the category of ‘political theatre’ any longer made much sense, ‘except, perhaps, as an historical construct’ (Kershaw 1997).

Yet while it is true that the British labour movement and accompanying praxis went into decline at this time, this narrative does not tell the whole story. It leaves workers’ theatre hanging at the end of the 1970s despite its endurance in the following years, and despite an increase in class-conscious and materialist critiques from artists and theatre makers that has helped sustain new socialist movements over the last decade, in the UK and elsewhere (Filewod & Watt 2001, Hillman 2022a).

It also misses the work of companies like A39: a homegrown agitprop troupe who told the story of Cornish mining in the context of the struggle that was 'currently embodied in the civil war in the coalfields' (Farmer 2023: 24). A39 were formed with the explicit intention of raising support for those engaged in one of the largest and longest industrial actions anywhere on record, when coal workers in Britain went on strike to prevent pit and colliery closures between 1984–1985.

Despite the urgency of that context, the decline in interest or confidence in left movements and culture is the backdrop for Farmer's reflections in this book that A39 'operated in the dying years of an artistic era' (117). As he saw it, diminishing hope in the academy as to 'whether political theatre was even possible' contributed, ironically—tragically, really—to the closing-down of progressive praxis by some of 'its primary beneficiaries' (118).

Yet by Farmer's own admission these doubts, even his own, also fall short of the full picture. He describes political theatre workers responding to academics 'in bewilderment' at a conference in 1990, when they kept returning to the question of 'whether political theatre was even possible'. 'Of course it was possible', the theatre workers declared, 'we did it on a daily basis!' (117). Rather than having withered away, these 'unlikely artists' had taken root in the rich soil of the preceding years (118).

At a basic level, Farmer's book records political agitprop theatre that took place at a time often regarded as having gone without. This, as well as A39's struggle for funding, are reasons to suggest that what has been missing since the 1980s is not the art but its practical support and understanding.

Farmer's provocative, very readable book is the first to document the practices of A39, and one of the only existing accounts of political theatre in Cornwall. Such a record is precious in and of itself, for its contribution to the history of socialist and working-class theatre. Because of this, it is also an important response to the situation described above. Although it does not position itself as a political analysis of culture or the theatre industry, threading through the chapters are arguments on class, marginalisation, aesthetics, and efficacy, that command attention.

After the Miners' Strike: A39 and Cornish Political Theatre versus Thatcher's Britain demands we look again at any neat timeline where

history, politics, or agitprop theatre come to a halt, or even enter a twilight zone. By telling A39's story in terms that are as charged and unapologetic as the theatre he documents, and by refocussing attention to local experience, where 'nothing had changed in our communities', Farmer's account directly addresses the exclusion—at least between 1984–1992—of regional, working-class political culture in England (117).

The fact the work of A39 is only now receiving critical attention is perhaps a further indication of this exclusion. It's also an exciting prospect, though. That is, if I am an historian who specialises in workers' theatre, who also happens to live around the corner from Cornwall — and I've only just heard about A39 — what other theatre of this ilk is yet to emerge from the woodwork?

'Agitprop as a badge of honour'

A39 followed in the footsteps of political theatre practitioners in England and Scotland in the decades immediately prior to their formation, particularly the work of 7:84. They were also influenced by European political theatre of the mid twentieth century, especially the theories of Bertolt Brecht. Farmer discusses how A39 aimed to make a powerful, personal connection with their target audiences through popular forms and aesthetics. For example, by operating 'in spaces usually entirely dominated by loud music', their shows would start and end 'like a gig' to enable the kind of '[moments] of intense possibility' Farmer associates with music concerts (68). He explains how such approaches helped them produce class-based analysis in a way that engaged local working-class audiences, who lived through the theatrical experience with the company rather than just bearing witness (58).

He also explains how, rather than being put off by political theatre traditions associated with the organised left, A39 found strength and resource in them. Their first show *One & All — An unofficial history of tin mining in Cornwall* 'delightedly clasped' to agitprop traditions, demanding 'capitalists in top hats' and 'workers with clenched fists' in an 'avowedly didactic' conveyance of large quantities of information (62). Farmer describes A39's approach as 'a political cell that operated

as a theatre company' and declares the company 'embraced the label "agitprop" as a badge of honour' (Farmer 2023: 7).

Farmer roughly measures A39's agency for agitating audiences over ideological and industrial issues by the extent to which they managed to have 'an effect on the world beyond the theatre,' or rather 'beyond the village hall, the pub or the open air' (55). He recalls how audiences were moved by the shows, including miners and their families; the moment when district councillors became keen to engage in discussion, and the company's 'shock' on realising their radical arguments could not only be made but also valued within mainstream discourse locally (Farmer 2022: 3).

His account also explains how A39, originally formed by joining forces with an unemployed workers' collective, later found themselves at the centre of several political networks. They exercised influence within the Cornwall Theatre Alliance and extended it, acting as a bridge between various likeminded organisations and encouraging further collaboration with the Claimants Union and the Workers Educational Association, as well as members of Cornish labour parties and trades unions (ibid; Farmer 2023: 67). The later-established Cornwall Theatre Umbrella, with statutory links to Cornwall County Council and South West Arts, also came about as a result of an A39 initiative. This resonates with accounts of British political theatre in the late 1960s and 1970s, when an ecosystem of theatre companies, writers' guilds, claimants' unions, and trade unions, many of which remain active today, collaborated to support one another and strengthen the cultural arm of the labour movement (Hillman 2022b). Farmer describes the 'hinterland of community engagement' surrounding A39 as essential for the group's survival, reach, and impact (Farmer 2023: 67).

‘The history of a place remains in the land beneath
our feet’

In-between-spaces, hinterlands, and wastelands also figure as sites of transformation and exchange in Farmer's narrative. He describes walking near arsenic heaps and abandoned shafts of old tin mines and the influence of this on A39 plays. He mentions the distance between

A39 and Southwest arts, the regional arm of the Arts Council of Great Britain, as geographically one hundred miles away, but 'in more abstract ways [much] further' (55). A39 counted neither themselves nor Cornwall as part of English cultural heritage (ibid). Company members are depicted as outsiders who operated apart from 'their elders, betters, social superiors, teachers, pundits, politicians, the successful in whatever sphere...'. They would 'literally [pick] up coins discarded by official culture' (24, 60).

In *After the Miners' Strike*, place is displaced and contested, damaged or inaccessible. It is also embraced as something we belong to and that belongs to us. A39 is named after the road connecting its members in Truro and Falmouth. Although not all company members were born and bred in Cornwall, their shows were based on living there and engaging deeply with the people, the land, the past, and possible futures. They were deeply committed to honouring and animating Cornish history and its connection with ongoing workers' struggle. Through this endeavour they forged new bonds and bridges, binding people together across place and time.

The tradition of connecting history and place is often fundamental to political theatre, and characterised creative approaches to political protest throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s. It is also upheld in the work of political theatre companies active today, for example Red Ladder's tour into old mining communities with the show *We're Not Going Back* (2015), Common Wealth's *We're Still Here* produced in collaboration with Port Talbot's 'Save Our Steel' campaign (2017), or Salford Community Theatre's *Love on the Dole* (2016) and *The Salford Docker* (2019).

The other day, I spoke to a student at the University of Manchester who is interested in working-class, political, site-sensitive theatre. Inspired by 7:84, Salford Community Theatre, In Good Company, and others, she told me she wants to make theatre to assist positive change in her community when she graduates. *After the Miners' Strike...* will be an invaluable resource and inspiration for this young woman, as it will be for others who reach for theatre as a process of socialism and a tool to improve the conditions of those who work to live.

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