PAUL FARMER

AFTER THE MINERS' STRIKE

A39 AND CORNISH POLITICAL THEATRE VERSUS THATCHER'S BRITAIN

VOLUME 1

https://www.openbookpublishers.com

Paul Farmer, *After the Miners' Strike: A39 and Cornish Political Theatre versus Thatcher's Britain. Volume 1.* Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023, https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0329

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80064-912-5
ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80064-913-2
ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80064-914-9
ISBN Digital ebook (EPUB): 978-1-80064-915-6
ISBN XML: 978-1-80064-917-0
ISBN HTML: 978-1-80064-918-7
DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0329

Cover image: A39 in street theatre mode at Camborne Trevithick Day, 1985
Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

Introduction

This is the first volume of the story of a tiny theatre company in a distant part of the UK that operated like a political cell; or alternatively, of a political cell that operated as a theatre company.

A39 Theatre Group came into being because of the great Miners' Strike of 1984–85. It embraced the label 'agitprop' as a badge of honour. A39 was motivated entirely by ideology and operated within a methodology and aesthetics conditioned by the countercultural movements of the 1960s–80s. Its reference points were identified as those that could best facilitate participation in the political struggle. The members of A39 wanted to fight for their class against the government of Margaret Thatcher. That this fight took the form of theatre at all was simply because that was where the members' common experience lay, and because theatre was the medium they believed could best resist the Thatcherite forces of hegemonic capitalism.

The theatre practice that resulted was immediate, often comedic and, conducted with little access to funding other than that generated by income, was through both commitment and necessity widely accessible. Image and aesthetics meant that significant aspects of the practice could comfortably operate in spaces usually entirely dominated by loud music or, on the other hand, by the most abrasive of performance poets.

This book will locate the theatre practice in the context of the political, cultural, and artistic circumstances that could be seen as its parameters, and of the circumstances that brought it into being. The Miners' Strike was defeated, which allowed Britain in the longer term to become the country it is today: one of widening social divisions and economic disparities with permanent unaddressed crises in public issues such as health and housing. It might be described as a society that hates itself, with its various parts each either despising or resenting (or both) the others for reasons it denies its subjects, for ideological reasons, the

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0329.02

tools to understand. It was the Thatcher era that birthed this monster, enacting a huge change in the outlook of Britain that, with the aid of the Reagan regime in the USA, managed to export then globalise itself. It marked the transition from the expectation and political demand that lives and circumstances should improve, that technology would render the future better than the present, that lives would be longer, that there would be less hunger, and that people would be healthier and happier, to a vision of decline, disengagement, and ever-worsening poverty and hopelessness in which governments and mass media overtly exploit racism and division to maintain a steady state of power.

Part of that huge change has been the end of the countercultural artistic practices and communities that formed an aspect of A39's birth context, as they did for other political theatre practices such as Joint Stock, Red Ladder, Banner, as well as 7:84—founded by John McGrath whose book *A Good Night Out* is cited here.[1] So the study of A39 also provides an insight into an era of fundamental interaction between the arts and the political New Left that was taken for granted at the time but is now a novelty, though subsequent generations of 'satirical' comedians (an area in which A39 came also to operate) continue to wear its accoutrements without accepting or even understanding any of its aims or responsibilities.

There are other useful historical facets of this memoir. A39 managed to demonstrate that its politics had applications relevant to the community and cultural issues of Cornwall. There is a picture here of the host community that is recognisably different from its currently perceived nature. And it is a historical document in terms of the mediation of political argument and wider issues of communication technology. This is an arts practice in a form chosen because it was accessible without capitalisation or access to mass broadcast or distribution. It was formulated to be not only local but *personal* communication, so theatre was chosen in preference to any kind of screened medium. Around us were stirring already the early facets of the 'Third Disruption', which would transform the issues of this choice and render possible forms

1 John McGrath, *A Good Night Out — Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form* (London: Nick Hern Books 1996). The history of the formation of this phase of British political theatre was detailed in Catherine Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968* (London: Eyre Methuen 1980).

that are accessible both to small groups without the intervention of capitalised structures, and also to large audiences in cases where they can be engaged. But at the same time, social media and its exploitation in terms of advertising and political campaigning has altered knowledge and pedagogy such that propaganda looks thoroughly respectable in comparison.

This book, together with its second volume, describes a moment in the history of theatre, or maybe just the end of a moment. But in this, it also reflects both a wider cultural blossoming and its curtailment. Britain's political theatre has been a victim of the ongoing class war in the same way as its manufacturing industry, its welfare state, and its communities, killed off in the interests of profit for a few for whom nothing is too valuable to be sacrificed to their own ever-growing wealth.[2] The history of Britain in the decades since the events described here demonstrates the rightness of the arguments made by Britain's mining communities during the great strike of 1984/85; arguments which A39 was created to disseminate.

2 For a summary of factors in the demise of British political theatre reviewed at the time of McGrath's death, see Brian Logan, 'What did you do in the class war, Daddy?', *The Guardian*, 15 May 2002, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2002/may/15/artsfeatures.