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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2. Into A39

Our careers with Miracle Theatre were over. I would have resigned, but no one was interested. I did not want to repeat that experience. It is an effective test of motivation to spend months doing something very hard. A lack of value will become apparent on waking every morning when the question will sooner or later arise: why am I doing this? If there is no specific answer for this question you are engaged in an act of faith, and when it applies to the presentation of the work of a sixteenth/seventeenth-century writer, it is a matter of national faith. Shakespeare is an established religion every bit as much as the Church of England and, it now seemed to me, performed very much the same functions—affirming an implicit set of values with Shakespeare at the top and England firmly attached as Culture's peak: blue riband, blue-blooded, more prestigiously high-culture than even Mozart and Wagner.[1]

But do Shakespeare's virtues in any way justify this? Removing the assumptions and the necessity to believe in the object of faith, and any investment as a facet of the national image, how is Shakespeare as an experience of theatre? I was sick of participating in what I saw as the blurred-eyed defence of an out-of-date misanthropist, who wrote some poetry entirely to my taste then eked it into interminable plays through tricksy padding:

> DUNCAN:
> This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air
> Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself
> Unto our gentle senses.

1 For a comprehensive exploration of this aspect of Shakespeare see Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History From the Restoration to the Present* (London: Hogarth Press 1990).

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BANQUO
This guest of summer,
The temple-haunting martlet, does approve,
By his loved mansionry, that the heaven's breath
Smells wooingly here: no jutty, frieze,
Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird
Hath made his pendent bed and procreant cradle:
Where they most breed and haunt, I have observed,
The air is delicate.[2]

Nimble and fireworky though it may be, how does this justify any claim on our time? This passage haunts me, and not in a good way. I even wrote my own version of it:

The castle sits on its arse in the grass
Amidst some shady garden.
I think it made that awful smell
Cos I heard it beg my pardon.

Often, Shakespeare's dross simply outweighs the poetry; sometimes each negates the other into nothing. Hamlet's soliloquy, at great length (not just the bit you know),[3] seems to me to cancel itself out of meaning. Perhaps there was some staging challenge to cover at the time and there was a need for lots of words to distract (though there is nothing inherently wrong with that–many good artistic decisions are made for logistical reasons). The dialogue of the duel scene in *Romeo and Juliet*[4] makes me feel physically sick, and Shakespeare's jokes are never funny. Surely Will Kemp would not waste his time on such tosh but would take it away and replace it with sex and farts and falling over. If there is some overwhelming intrinsic virtue in this, it has never been apparent to me. It is certainly not unassailably self-evident. It was questionable, and therefore must be questioned: this material was nearly four hundred years old and occupied the stages of the English-speaking world to the exclusion of far too much of everything else that discussed more relevant issues, like the Miners' Strike for example, that continued still. Distanced by centuries, I told myself after that long Shakespearean summer that if ever I found myself again in a theatre seat in front of anyone uttering the

2 *Macbeth* Act I, Sc. 6.
3 *Hamlet* Act III, Sc. 1 'To be or not to be…. Be all my sins remember'd'.
4 *Romeo and Juliet* Act I, Sc. 1.

words 'Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania',[5] I had my own permission to eviscerate myself and sod the mess for the cleaners. Shakespeare's effective exclusion of the new and the news in the theatres of Britain was far too convenient for all the wrong people. As Gary Taylor has noted:

> The important questions, the questions that matter beyond the intellectual enclosure of Shakespeare specialists, do not concern the meaning of particular words or the motives of particular characters; they concern the blunt fact of his cultural dominance. When did people decide that Shakespeare was the greatest English dramatist? The greatest English poet? The greatest writer who ever lived? Who did the deciding? What prejudices and convictions might have influenced their decision? On what evidence, by what reasoning, did they justify their verdict? How did they persuade others? How did they discredit rival claimants? And once Shakespeare's hegemony was achieved, how was it maintained?[6]

My pursuit through the routes of the summer of something creative and rewarding had perhaps been too directed, too rigorous and unyielding, but we have only one life and we will be a long time dead. And perhaps in what we had done there was somewhere some slight chance of significance (I hope that's not too dogmatic) that we had casually allowed to slip away by not pursuing it with everything we were: in sitting too long perhaps through easy evenings, in doing too little in those long afternoons; by not talking about every aspect of what we did all the time, by failing to walk every path in every town, by leaving too many opportunities unaddressed, people unspoken to. Surely so much effort should have some result somewhere, should register something, should count as some small weight in some sort of scale. In the matter of theatre perhaps there was still some possibility, and any opportunity it represented must be retained and owned.

As the year 1984 began to darken into its own evening, we had lived in Cornwall one year mostly committed night and day to Miracle Theatre. This place still felt far from a home, but at last now we had time to investigate it properly.

Through the mysteries of council house exchanges, Sue and I found ourselves living in a flat in the village of Playing Place. When first I had heard that name I had not believed it was real. I had never heard a place

5 *A Midsummer Night's Eve* Act II Sc. 1.
6 Taylor, ibid., p. 5.

name like it; but that was true of so many places in Cornwall—the mark of Kernewek, its shallowly-interred language. I discovered that Playing Place was a literal anglicisation of the Cornish 'Plen an Gwari', which was the Kernewek term for a theatre or, to be more exact, for an open-air arena for the performance of mediaeval Cornish-language mystery plays. Miracle Theatre had been named after these plays and initiated itself through performing them. During the interminable tour we had visited one of these old theatre places: Perran Round, near Perranporth. It was huge, and it was apparent that the plays must have involved crowds—entire communities—both as performers and audience. Theatre had been part of Cornish popular culture.[7] What might that mean for theatre workers here, now?

Historical context. Cultural context. Context.

More than this, the manuscripts of these old miracle plays still exist, though in the Bodleian Library in Oxford; a long way from their birthplace in Glasney College, that is now nothing more than a silhouette picked out on the ground of an open space in Penryn. It had been a dissolute victim of the activities of Henry Tudor Junior, who agreed with Proudhon that property is theft, as long as it was someone else's property.[8] The scripts of the three plays of the *Ordinalia* cycle comprised a vault of poetic wealth that ensured the Cornish language a continuing existence. It was not dead as long as it was there to be read, its sounds reconjured in the air like a spell evoking the ancient relationship between land, language, and people. Theatre here was a defensive citadel for Cornwall's sense of herself as something distinct, discrete.

Given this relationship between theatre, place, and people, the current state of British theatre here in Cornwall and everywhere else–locked away in specialist boxes with cultural sanctions that guarded every entry, even the purchase of a ticket–amounted to a theft every bit as bad as any of Henry Tudor's. This factor of the people's lives had

7 For information on the particular role of the Plen an Gwari at Playing Place, see https://www.keaparishcouncil.org.uk/st-kea-truth-legend-and-the-rounds-at-playing-place/. For more general information on the mediaeval theatres of Cornwall see Will Coleman, *Plen an Gwari: The Playing Places of Cornwall* (Cornwall: Golden Tree Productions 2015).

8 French: La propriété, c'est le vol! Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Qu'est-ce que la propriété? ou Recherche sur le principe du Droit et du Gouvernement*, 1st edn (Paris: Brocard 1840), p. 2.

been taken away and reserved for the privileged; its benefits, whatever they may once have been, reshaped through specialisation, and now exclusive. Literally. A painful facet of working in theatre was that it meant leaving the normal world of interaction. None of those who lived around us on our Cornish council estate would voluntarily expose themselves to theatre, except the panto for the kids at Christmas. But in these days, as the miners fought on through the winter, it was obvious that almost all means of communication in the UK had been occupied by the enemy as in the early days of a coup. That was an appropriate analogy for the Thatcherism that was by now systematically setting aside the consensual aspects of the uneasy British post-war settlement, that had anyway subtly kept the socialist assumptions that underpinned the Welfare State always the lip-service side of realisation, by begrudging bestowals of favours instead of rights; by liberal expression rather than rational conclusion.

Socialism, even (or perhaps especially) in the Labour Party that was still theoretically dedicated to it, had become an endlessly hollowed-out concept, the shiny carapace of a void like a cheap foil-wrapped Easter egg. As an ideology, it was always carefully separated from its institutional attainments by, for example, the tonal indignation of BBC reactions to each small victory of the working class, whether won by strike or vote—the puzzled unspoken warning that such sins must result in falling tears; its official accent incapable of speaking the language of equality without parenthesis or, in later-night programmes, irony. It found the implicit tones of Thatcherism much easier to pronounce, and the newspaper proprietors found this occupying force very much to their millionaire taste. The at-all-costs destructive purge of every aspect of organised labour was of a scope that none of these opinion-formers seemed capable of reporting, and this they had in common with its enactors, who did not seem to know what they were doing either.

Together, the organs of the intelligentsia, from Radio Three to *The Guardian* to ITV, revealed themselves inadequate to anything beyond their own sectional interest; and my neighbours on the estate walked back from the village Spar shop carrying their copies of *The Sun* like a merciless virus into the hearts of their families.

In a world of media controlled by a sick state or Rupert Murdoch or Robert Maxwell, in which the technology of the media was all but

unattainable and its means of distribution determinedly reserved for approved voices, there was a role for theatre as a dissident, dissonant voice in addressing the community of those present. There was no opportunity for Lord Rothermere to intervene. And anyway, we could refuse him entry.

So that winter was spent in conversations on the basis that the engagement with theatre would go on. Mark Kilburn and Lucy Kempton were a couple Sue and I knew from Roll Up Theatre, an unemployed workers' theatre group that had once worked with Miracle on presenting the *Ordinalia*. We spent New Year together in their cold winter-let flat in Falmouth listening to Mark's beloved jazz and The Smiths' *Hatful of Hollow*. Mark also brought to the discussion a book by John McGrath, *A Good Night Out*.[9]

McGrath was a famously angry man, one of those who gave birth to what the 1960s became; a playwright who also wrote for television and film, determined to break out of the arts ghettoes and address The People and to move the discussion of The People from the abstract to an infinite number of particulars. He had co-founded the theatre company 7:84 and its Scottish branch, predicated on touring plays about specific histories, stories, and issues to the people they directly concerned. The aims of 7:84 did not include the attainment of status within high art—that part of a culture that is used as an advertisement for the culture, as shopfront and hagiography, divorced from everyday experience—with the necessity for specialist presentation and interpretation. Like the music of Mozart, high art does not accuse those who, in their entitled exercise of power, fear the very possibility of accusation because they know that stripped of their careful constructed consolidated contexts, they would have no useful excuses; that, like so many of those dark museum paintings that were taken to define the fine in Fine Art, there is no apparent means of engagement, understanding, or judgement that does not rely on the Art Historical parsing of the exclusively educated.

7:84 based themselves in ideas of the Popular, the masses' own arts—modulating down the centuries through forms accessible and rewarding to the masses: cheap and cheerful, professional and virtuoso, amateur and idiosyncratic, peripatetic or embedded. The project for McGrath

9 John McGrath, *A Good Night Out–Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form* (London: Nick Hern Books 1996).

was to enter the popular and inject into its vocabulary the stories of the perpetual struggles whose protagonists it entertained but too often otherwise ignored. The purpose was to establish communication with a popular audience, rather than the elite whose artistic tastes are those generally subsidised as 'Culture'.

McGrath proposed rules of engagement in terms of specific examples of popular culture in performance, like the pantomime in which sophisticated modulations of identity (the phenomenon I discuss elsewhere in this work as 'levels of pretence') are an integral part of the entertainment itself; and an evening's entertainment in a Manchester Working Men's Club in the 1960s that included singing acts, a comedy act, a wrestling bout, and bingo. From such roots, 7:84 Scotland toured shows like *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*, *The Game's a Bogey* and *Little Red Hen* like a performance equivalent of Gunning's 'Cinema of Attractions'.[10]

McGrath established to our satisfaction that popular culture contained all the modes needed for the full engagement of political dispute, in models of theatre in which each side of the audience/performer divide frankly acknowledged the other. This tradition also incorporated the work of the modernist German experimenters that grew through Expressionism and had their progeny in the subsequent growth of British political theatre through the 1950s, into the 60s and 70s; at which point I had collided with it in London.

But although socialist politics was a significant facet of the political aspect of the alternative society's culture and events, I was looking for something else in its performance aspects at that time: not the application of agreed principles but the exploration of the hope/idea/ideology that there WERE no principles, no rules, no limits; that possibilities were endless, that affect itself could transform, awaken, liberate. Even in the dark spaces of Oval House, enlightenment could occur—and enlightenment of what nature if not political? What kind of freedom could be sought if not that from oppression by a dominant class that rendered this world unspeakably unjust and unforgivably boring, that constrained all vision of what might be within the tedious bounds of an

10 Tom Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde', in *Early Cinema: Space Frame Narrative*, ed. by Thomas Elsaesser (London: British Film Institute 1990).

officially approved version of what already was? To break rules was to diminish capitalism—it was not merely the state that must wither away: first its iron bars of assumption and control would need to be shaken from our minds.

What I was looking for then was the opportunity to imagine what had so far never been; to find a way of life that needed nothing but itself to fulfil and involve, that was not based on the need for more but was all that life might be. This is the process that I identify as socialism.

I'm not going to try and define socialism, which is anyway a conceptual alliance of millions, billions of forgotten people spread through place and time: in the Peasants Revolt and before, in the Levellers and the Diggers in the seventeenth century, in the French Revolution's call for 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity', in the American colonies' invocation of 'Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness'. It was present in the Russian revolutions and the Long March, in revolutionary risings throughout the world throughout the history of what passes for civilisation. Regardless of how the powerful have suppressed or perverted it, the struggle for these aims always recurs, no matter how many times we are told that history has ended.

To be a socialist is to wish to progress the human project, in the knowledge that we are currently wasting our time, or rather that others are wasting it for us. Having to divorce our labour from ourselves and sell it in the market, not being able to achieve integrity, damages us in body and in consciousness. It is the certainty that there is a path to this progress that we can identify and it lies in the embrace of equality and working in common. When Proudhon said 'property is theft', he was not talking about your iPhone, he was talking about the planet and the things it holds that existed for billions of years before there were humans and, if we continue to be stupid, will exist for billions of years after there are none. Yet mysteriously it is all 'owned' by some very temporary people or entities they have conjured into being. When the last scorched landscape is enveloped by the exploding sun, there will be still a title deed in some earthquake-buried bank vault beneath a flattened city asserting Ozymandian claims of ownership on behalf of a dynasty lost for eons. If you could see through the past of the tiny patch of planet you cling to, you would see a time when it was appropriated with at least the threat of violence. That was the birth of property and of

kings. When their interests demanded the change that would eventually enable capitalism, their organised power enacted 'Enclosure' and took away your right even to be where and what you are, all achieved through various forms of terror, and drove our ancestors to their concentration-camp cities, their slums and factories, and delivered us to the rule of their markets. And this is where we are still, awaiting some next step. Socialists work to claim that step, so that it doesn't lead to some new circle of hell but instead takes us some way further towards being all we can be once we realise that is the achievement to validate human existence.

The availability and commitment to such a quest of someone from my class and background in itself marked one of the achievements of the Welfare State. The ending of unnecessary sickness and hunger—and the new-found (and, it turned out, short-lived) comparative wealth of working-class people—made it apparent that the end of urgent want merely revealed a new emptiness, that when the stomach ached no longer other forms of need could be discerned, as expressed in the songs of The Kinks and The Who,[11] in the nihilisms and working-class deadpan of the Mods. The uniform streets of suburbia, the commodities and clothes of mass production, were fertile ground for the seeds of their own destruction in new forms of revolution. The greatest triumph of the Welfare State was to create the knowledge that it was not enough. It was a starting point, a place of departure that had taken so many wasted lifetimes to attain, the least that civilisation should be.

So I looked to the art of the underground to begin to discover this place beyond the full belly and a job for life, four walls and a roof, a wage packet at the end of the week, an ambulance when you were ill, a fire engine when your house was on fire, and a coffin when you were dead. It was my generation alone that could name this quest, because subsequently all those things would begin to be taken away from us. And that huge larceny was just beginning in Thatcher's 1980s.

My earlier search would be answered in the bizarre, the extreme, the unplanned, the indescribable, the unscripted, the unspeakable, the unformulated; beyond form, beyond musical scales, beyond semantics, beyond sense. So the exercise of the skills and techniques that theatre

11 E.g. *The Kinks Are the Village Green Preservation Society*; *Muswell Hillbillies*; *Tommy*; *Quadrophenia*.

was did not attract me, though I enjoyed it when I saw it. I sought out The People Show, performance art, anything else that did undescribed things. I was a member of Birkenhead Dada for a brief season. I frequented the musical borderlands where performers often outnumbered audience, like the Little Theatre in the Tottenham Court Road, London home of free jazz; the guitar oddness of Derek Bailey, the saxophone abstractions of Lol Coxhill; the minimalist looped musical mantras of John Martyn; I pursued something truly new, or something truly old in the extreme modal guitar of Martin Carthy, with its odd tunings and drones, and in the early work of Steeleye Span—it is impossible now to recover how strange that music sounded.