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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3. One & All!

But in the 1980s the screws were tightening, the clampdown clamping down, the parties over—their celebrants retreating into the struggle for survival. There would be no more counter-cultural peacocks strutting out their trips; the butterflies had beaten their wings off against the window panes, the gossamer dragonflies had bloated into caricature, the humming from the drowsy psychedelic pond had now become the ode of bluebottle to swelling corpse. This was the time when those who had been merely playing at revolution ceased their games and the crowds parted to expose the serious soldiers who would now be attacked piecemeal.

So few turned out to be serious. But the miners—oh, the miners were serious. And how their strike exposed hypocrisy—the simple issue of the strike eviscerated solipsism and sophism. 'Are you for the strike or against?' was the Occam's Razor that trumped every other question. The strike was era, epoch, aesthetic, and intellectual environment.

When historical events occur, even in years and centuries of mass media conjuring up their own jagged sparks of hysteria, there is no way of knowing what really is going on. The daily bulletins of the BBC, expressed in the disapproving tones all labour disputes evoked in them, were constantly of the strike's deadly decline and imminent failure. As Seumas Milne would put it:

> To leaf through newspaper cuttings from the strike period a decade later is to be transported back to an Alice-in-Wonderland world of long-suffering policemen and saintly strikebreakers fighting the good fight against swaggering picket-line thugs with money to blow, of impossible return-to-work figures and fantastic power supply projections.[1]

1 Seumas Milne, *The Enemy Within: The Secret War Against the Miners* (London: Verso 2014), p. 352.

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We had effectively chosen with our own life choices our sides in this war, and we must also cope with a peculiar inversion of the class war: the progressive force and the bearers of the socialist flame were the miners, and yet rather than revolutionary change, the particularities of their struggle constituted a defence—the defence of their jobs, their industry, and communities; of the right to roam their roads from pit village to city to neighbouring regions, the right to their communities' indigenous lives, leisure, and culture. It was this defence of what already was that was portrayed as a radical threat to the way of life of a nation of which they were as much citizens as Margaret Thatcher herself, who nevertheless had referred to them on 19 July 1984 as 'the enemy within'.[2] Surely 'the enemy' would come to destroy ways of life, systems of values, traditions, family life; and this placed the mantle of 'the enemy' firmly around the padded shoulders of herself and her clones and cohorts: her public-school yes-men, her bought-in bullyboy Ian MacGregor, her national police force, and her security services.

I remember visits to the village of Betteshanger in the Kent coalfield. Before the strike, it was a neat oval housing estate that clustered around its mine. After the pit's closure it clustered around nothing at all. For all its rationalisations the Ridley Report really had not addressed technological change, but rather economic and social and political engineering.[3] Even its private claim that this should happen as an adjunct to 'the ultimate privatisation' turns out to be hypocrisy piled upon hypocrisy. The power of the miners' union would be destroyed ultimately by the destruction of coal mining itself. And the result of that in the landscape was that the very reason for the existence of the village of Betteshanger would cease to exist. What happens to places when their heart and institutions are removed? Betteshanger, and all the many places like it, would become no more than a cluster of buildings in the landscape, a list of addresses; purposeless, commonality destroyed, relationships between people severed by destroying what they had in common. Many of these communities were to become suffused with the problems of neglect, and then to become a symbol of those problems.

2 Hugo Young, *One of Us: A Biography of Margaret Thatcher* (London: Macmillan 1989), p. 371.

3 *The Ridley Report*, https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/110795.

Thatcher's coterie radically intervened in the lives of British people to strengthen its own power base at the expense of organised labour, and the leaders of the labour movement did not even join the resistance. Neil Kinnock found his diary too full to appear on NUM platforms.[4] On 13 November, Norman Willis—Secretary General of the Trade Union Congress—addressed miners and their families at an event in Aberavon. In his speech, he blamed miners for violence on the picket lines: a notable assertion in a conflict in which one side was a new national paramilitary police force armed with clubs and riot gear and mounted on horses, ranged against the amateur endeavours of those whose real life was the winning of coal. As Arthur Wakefield described the comparison:

> When we were all there we set off across the fields to walk to Harworth pit. We got there at 4.45 am but the police were there in force. Coming over the fields we must have looked like an army but compared with the police we were more like Dad's Army.[5]

Willis's claim was aimed not at those present in the hall, but at an audience beyond it. In a theatrical moment a noose was lowered from the rafters to dangle just above Norman's head, in a crystallisation of the true stakes of the game in which his hypocrisy played. When told about this, Neil Kinnock was shocked. 'The one thing I regret is not being in South Wales with Norman Willis,' he said.[6] If only his diary had not been so full. Willis's assertion begs the question: if he truly believed these people were violent, would he have felt able to come amongst them and talk to them like this?

The TUC should have been mighty. Historically, the TUC should have been the Labour Movement's teeth, coordinating mass union activity to inexorable effect. Instead it was, to our perception, its soft pale puffy arse and an ever-demanding belly, its effectiveness traded for seats in the House of Lords, establishment respectability (mostly illusory) and good suits, rotten with the right wing, the bought-off, and the sold-out. It doesn't matter who or what you are, nobody is entitled to respect through status, it must be earned. And that is why windbags still hate

4 Francis Beckett and David Hencke, *Marching to the Fault Line: The Miners' Strike and the Battle for Industrial Britain* (London: Constable 2009), p. 175.

5 Arthur Wakefield, *The Miner's Strike*, p. 54.

6 Becket & Hencke, p. 176.

Arthur Scargill, who earned his respect daily in absolute commitment to the cause—in being arrested alongside his members, in knockout blows from riot shields, in character-assassinations that persist to this day; in never failing inspiration, in the knowledge he would never ask another to do that which he would not do himself. People like Norman fear people like Arthur Scargill.

Even a sympathetic treatment of the activities of the TUC and the Labour Party leadership (see for example Becket and Hencke's *Marching to the Faultline*) reveals that they attempted no more than damage limitation in private and lip service in public, dominated by those who hoped for nothing better than the backroom compromise. Certainly, by Autumn 1984, they were acting with no belief in the possibility of victory for the miners.[7] But this was perverse. October saw the government and its collaborators at their nearest to defeat when NACODS (the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers) voted overwhelmingly to join the strike. This came within one day of closing every mine in the country, until the NACODS leadership was dissuaded by what turned out—of course—to be empty promises regarding closure review procedures from Chair of the National Coal Board Ian MacGregor, acting on desperate direct instruction from Thatcher's cabal, to the everlasting regret of NACODS members.[8]

And meanwhile the stockpiles of coal on which Thatcher's creatures had predicated their entire campaign were within sight of exhaustion. They had not reckoned on the miners' fortitude in sustaining solidarity for so many months. The TUC, the Labour Party, had their opportunity now to bring their weight to bear on a critical juncture. Instead, they lectured miners on tactics before the cameras and microphones of a hostile press while the NCB waited until the picket lines went home as the pits closed for Christmas, and moved the coal then.[9]

Responding to the covert activities of the right-wing millionaire David Hart in the coalfields,[10] members of the British judiciary manifested their own class position increasingly through the strike. All but dispensing with any pretence of separation from government, they

7 See for example Becket & Hencke, p. 134.
8 Milne, p. 328.
9 Ibid., p. 19; Becket & Hencke, p. 186.
10 Milne, p. 325.

blatantly embodied one of Thatcher's foremost fighting formations, denying the miners access to their own money and even ownership of their own union, which was put in the hands of a receiver. To maintain the strike, the NUM leadership sought support wherever it might be found, and despite the position of the Labour Movement leadership there was still huge and growing support for the miners throughout the UK and beyond.

One of the ways that histories of those days are misleading is that in concentrating on the cynical activities of the various officialdoms they ignore the huge festival of belief and commitment amongst the unofficial, ardent in their wish to support the strikers and their families whose bravery was increasingly undeniable. As Seumas Milne puts it:

> Throughout the dispute of 1984–5, in the face of a wall of hostile propaganda and nightly scenes of violence played out on television, rarely less than a third of the adult population–representing around 15 million people–supported the NUM and the strike: a strike for jobs and the defence of mining communities, but also a strike for social solidarity and a different kind of Britain.[11]

It was apparent that the strike had crystallised the issues of the coming of Thatcher and we were all involved in a proxy war whether we liked it or not. This is why we still look back to those days: they made apparent what was real and what was not; they also crystallised the effects of the decades of compromise by the official leaderships of the labour movement and revealed the extent to which they had effectively negated themselves. Worse than worthlessness was their soaking-up of the committed work of the good-hearted in local branches and workplaces, rendering it meaningless, its energies dissipated in compromise in the very worst sense of that word. The key qualities of these institutions in their foundations—commitment to change, belief in the possibility of a better world free of exploitation of one class by another, of one human by another, of one gender by another, of one race by another—had been dissipated for an elite's respectability and genteel reward. This institution of British society had come into line with all the others.

Despite them, money was collected by a thousand voluntary organisations and 'Victory to the Miners!' was heard on every high

11 Ibid., p. 59.

street to the accompaniment of the shore-shingle rattle of coins in a bucket. In Cornwall, the support was twinned with St John's Lodge in the Welsh valleys. Cash also came from overseas, some carried across by ferry by teams of volunteers; and in carrier bags of banknotes from the better unions—millions of pounds, and all handed over without receipt, confident in the honesty of truth that this money would get to where it was needed and would be kept out of the hands of banks and receivers.

It took Britain's greatest broadcaster, Ray Gosling, to achieve a key insight into the essence of the issues of the great strike that Autumn. On Radio 4 in early December, he presented *Behind the Last Brazier*, which he termed 'a personal appraisal of the state of the Miners' Strike' through reflections on conversations he'd recorded around Cortonwood—the mine where it had all started what now seemed a lifetime ago.[12] One of the conversations was with the manager of the mine, Alan Hartley, in his office at the pit. Gosling noted a silent National Coal Board representative was also present in the room for the interview.

Hartley spoke of good relationships with the union and workforce, and with pride of the colliery cricket team. 'Yes,' said Gosling, 'Some might say that things are a bit too cosy here. There's a picket line outside, but is it serious?' Hartley snapped back indignantly, 'My men do their duty on the picket line as they do at the coalface!'

After a pause, this astounding moment in radio was interrupted by a quiet but urgent interjection from the NCB minder, the words of which could not be discerned, but the burden of which was clear: this was not the vision of the strike Ian MacGregor or his government sponsors Thatcher, Peter Walker, or Leon Brittan would want to hear, and Alan Hartley must provide a different response. Nevertheless, we had heard the true voice of how things should have been: communal pride, an industry united beyond class and status; the workplace as community; a socialised industry that worked as part of its society.

Here was our issue, our content of discontent. Right here, right now, this must be what our work was about. Now: who was it for?

12 *Behind the Last Brazier*, BBC Radio 4 first broadcast: Sun 9 December 1984, 12:00 on BBC Radio 4 FM (https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/8d1d9e0c8d31dbe386a9b3d86ec1ee30). The programme itself seems to be unavailable–transcriptions are from my memory.

7:84 was predicated on the knowledge of who the audience was, to deliver a specific address in a specific context to affect reality; not pseudo-generalised angst at a mythologically generalised 'human condition', but rather an intervention in human conditions. The word I would come to use was 'efficacy': an effect on the world beyond the theatre, or rather beyond the village hall, the pub, or the open air; the theatres currently being occupied by the enemy's Psyops department. Our work would be for Cornish communities and would also be a working-class voice—that particular voice in this particular place, in the context of the historical struggle currently embodied in the civil war in the coalfields.

Content and context were now in harness, but what about forms? For Sue and I, our primary experience as performers was as musicians—an artform so culturally dominant that it could not only survive without public money, it could spontaneously generate earnings in the street. It spoke to the young and the uneducated and that appeal was immediate, loud, and powerful. And this was of course what anyone would want for their theatre who was looking for success beyond the critical. Like contemporary rock/folk/dance music, our work would happen in communities, in whatever spaces we could find there. We would go out to find our audience.

To Mark, Lucy, Sue, and I, these decisions seemed natural. They caused theatre to align with the cultural circumstances with which we had all grown up, and they brought to bear attitudes, political, cultural, and artistic, that seemed innate. Those days have now gone, and those who have not experienced them may find them all but impossible to imagine. To us, *The Wild One* opposition— 'to what? to whatever you've got'—seemed the only possible position.[13] We were outside the tent of our elders, betters, social superiors, teachers, pundits, politicians, the successful in whatever sphere; and our opportunity and expertise, and the vocabulary we had been bequeathed by experts like Lennon and Dylan and Rosselson and Orwell and Sartre and Kerouac (despite himself), provided the performative hand grenades we could toss into

13 The film *The Wild One* (László Benedek 1953), about nihilistic motor cycle gangs, contains this dialogue:

> Mildred (Peggy Maley): Hey, Johnny, what are you rebelling against?
> Johnny (Marlon Brando): What've you got?

that tent. For us, outside the organised left, as the New Punk Left (the name didn't catch on–unsurprisingly, as I just made it up), there was no wish to occupy the tent, but to rip it to pieces so that exploitation, alienation, and conspiratorial crimes against human freedom could never hatch within its shelter again.

We needed to invent something new, even if only for ourselves. Nothing would be frozen. A39 was to be a permanent research process to prevent a takeover by bourgeois assumptions but also, and predominantly, to prevent boredom—the enemy of sticking power for the readily excitable.

Here was our ideology as we formed A39, and for our first work the localism of McGrath and 7:84 interacted with our burning need to express the issues of the strike after our feeling of irrelevance the previous summer. Playing Place turned out to be, surprisingly, a pit village. Our council estate was a home to workers in two tin mines, Wheal Jane and Mount Wellington, on either side of the valley of the Carnon River below Playing Place. Cornwall is a place full of secrets, only some of which I'm prepared to tell you and only some of which I know, because I only have one lifetime's worth. One is that Cornwall had the UK's highest proportion of derelict land, a result of its own mining industry not of coal but of metal, copper, and tin. We had lived here for only months, and much of that had been spent wandering the UK with Miracle Theatre. We had not even visited a beach. Now began the exploration of Cornwall in every sense.

I would wander the mining wastelands below Playing Place with our dog Matty, kicking up the arsenic heaps and staring down abandoned shafts into unlit depths thinking myself—it is true—privileged beyond measure. No tourist came to these places, only I found it beautiful; I and the Cornish who walked it in rapture with their own dogs and stared up the hillsides at the engine houses emerging from their nests of buddleia mobbed by butterflies, slow circled by buzzards over the poisoned earth.

In this Carnon River Valley, around Bissoe and Twelveheads and Crofthandy, was clearly demonstrated the first of many revelations: the history of a place remains in and on it. It sits on the land and in the hearts of its people in judgement, a perpetual reproach, because what is gone is gone but its claims live on; its demands, its expectations that, because they are the property and the properties of the dead—as the Cornish

put it 'the Old Men'—can never be fulfilled. Our collective history looks us always in the eye and shakes its head in sadness, and it will always be that way until we eventually know we have transcended it to create a world that makes sense.

The two towering headgears of Wellington and Jane on the western and eastern slopes of the valley were surrounded—around, above, below, between, throughout the snaking poisoned valley—by the remains of the industry, granite engine houses going back hundreds of years and older workings in heaps and holes going back thousands. The air stunk of tin; these hillsides, the bottom of this valley, woodwormed with mine shafts and adits—some of them gaping empty holes, some of them crowned with steel lattices. Although the hard rock mining for which the Cornish were world-famous sustained, it no longer dominated world tin production as it long had, with United Downs, just beyond Mount Wellington, known in the nineteenth century as the richest square mile in the world.

With its history marked in massive granite monuments that defy time, never to be overrun by nature but grown over and round to become of it, mining is a part of Cornwall—a fundamental aspect of how the Cornish see themselves. We would create a show that supported the Miners' Strike through telling the story of Cornish mining.

It was clear that to pursue seriously this kind of theatre, it was necessary to immerse ourselves in the life and the culture and the history of Cornwall. Mark and I read books we found in libraries that discussed tin and copper mining with respect to other aspects of Cornish communities, and would sit the in library of the Royal Cornwall Museum in Truro reading the old newspapers: the *Royal Cornwall Gazette* and *The West Briton*. In the 1980s, the latter was still a significant factor in Cornish life. In those days before the internet, and with very limited local television coverage of Cornwall, the appearance each Thursday of *The West Briton* (or 'The Ancient Briton' as we called it) in village Spar shops and post offices would be the occasion of a visit from every household. It was thick and broadsheet in format, and the piles of each local edition would diminish rapidly. It still effectively functioned as a newspaper of record for Cornwall, and each copy would be worked through from the front-page headline to the euchre league results. It was a lot of reading; an old tradition of public service was still the unspoken

assumption. There is no contemporary equivalent, certainly not today's local press with its nationally owned and orchestrated reprints of the press releases of incumbent Conservatives, and tiny editorial staff told to focus on farming 'clicks' for the online version.

In those former times the local weekly newspapers—the *Briton* along with its sister papers *The Cornish Guardian* and *The Cornishman*, plus *The Cornish Times*, *The Packet*, *The St Ives Times & Echo*—and the Cornish edition of the daily *Western Morning News* enabled a large degree of shared knowledge amongst the Cornish public that was part of a wider feeling of coherence, also creating a sense of weight in public life through the demonstration of a sense of editorial duty. To fill some gaps there was also the monthly *Peninsular Voice* based in Penzance, with substantial, serious cultural coverage and a very well-informed waspish practice in local-political exposé that made *Private Eye* look cautious and understated. The resulting litigation eventually left the inspired and inspiring editor Peter Wright-Davis an exhausted martyr but the public, and A39 in particular, had much to thank him for.

The social media that is credited with now occupying the shared space then represented by print has almost nothing in common with that which it has usurped. For a while, that was one way things might have gone, but instead it has been monetarised into a market for, or the manipulation of, selectively commodified 'opinion'.[14] There is no usefully balanced view to be expertly discerned in the aetheric chatter of life in this nebulous murk of neoliberal capitalism; there is no forum in which discussion can attain significance. You can spend many days on Twitter and Facebook without coming across any ideas beyond your own, if you still have any; where they do contend it is through the rules and vocabulary of a cat fight. The sustenance of community through shared knowledge has been another victim of the profit motive. Once the focusing of attention was worth money irrespective of content, attention too was bought and sold-out. In terms of local news, this produces content as qualitatively undifferentiated parallel strands of gossip, trailed on the 'You Won't Believe What Happened Next!' principle.

14 For some idea of the full horrors of where we are with this, see e.g. Christopher Wylie's *Mindf*ck: Inside Cambridge Analytica's Plot to Break the World* (London: Profile Books 2019).

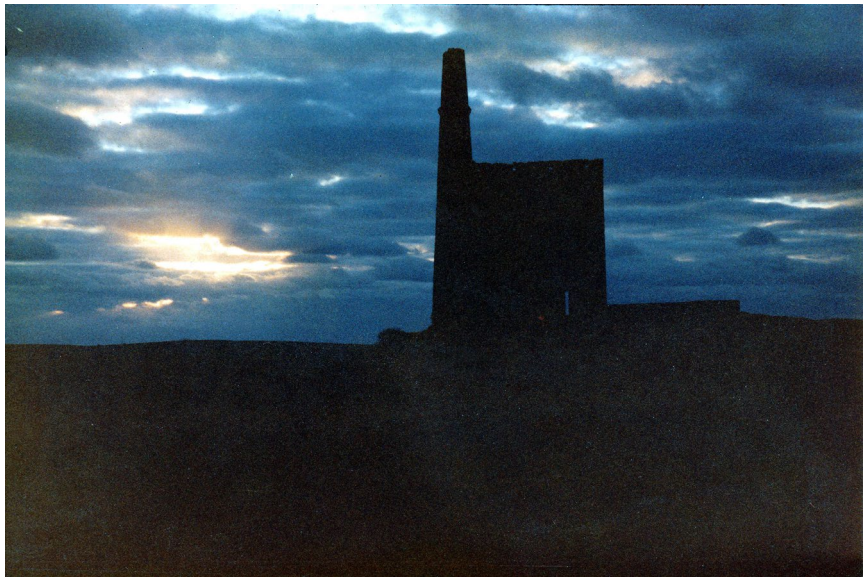

Fig. 7. The classic silhouette of a Cornish mine's engine house: United Downs, Cornwall, 1984. Photo by the author (CC BY-NC 4.0).

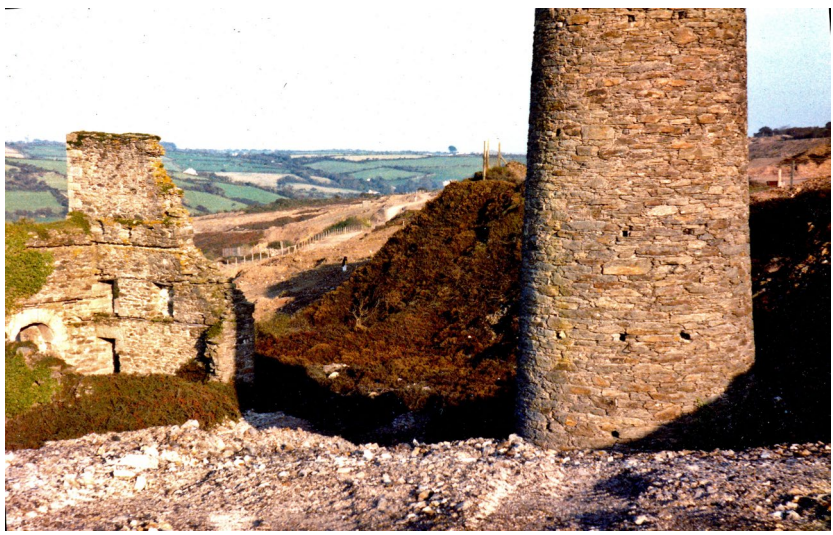

Fig. 8. Granite mine buildings on the slopes above Wheal Maid, 1984. The Carnon Valley can be seen in the distance. Photo by the author (CC BY-NC 4.0).

Fig. 9. The bare ground of Cornwall's hard rock mining, 1984, poisoned by arsenic and other heavy metals in mine waste. Much of this has now been reclaimed by vegetation but then, with the industry still active, the process had hardly begun. Photo by the author (CC BY-NC 4.0).

Fig. 10. Wheal Jane tin mine at Baldhu, 1984. Then still very much in operation, it was the great hope of modern Cornish mining. Photo by the author (CC BY-NC 4.0).

Newspapers in the archives, a few old books about mining and the people of Cornwall—it wasn't a substantial list of resources. It later turned out that Nick Darke, contemporaneously writing the Restormel community play *The Earth Turned Inside Out*, used an entire sermon quoted from a Cornish Methodist preacher in A.K. Hamilton-Jenkin's *Cornwall and Its People* that we also put into *One & All!*.[15] No doubt there was more out there, but, operating without assistance, we hadn't found it yet. (Other sources we used are detailed in the Bibliography.)

We collectively discussed the results of the research alongside the issues and events of the Miners' Strike, then Mark and I—as the would-be writers in the company—began work to put the show together. We did not approach it as an integrated play, but as a series of discrete episodes. Mark christened this form 'cabaret documentary'. We decided which topics we wanted to include and listed the forms we would use, then Mark and I composed the elements individually.

Everything was an experiment, everything an exercise in discovery. A repeated theme of the play, and much Cornish historical and creative work, is emigration. At each of the many times of slump, the Cornish have been forced to leave for far distant lands in order to pursue their lives and livelihood in hard rock mining. I wrote a song called *The Tinners' Jig*, and we worked on a comically minimal dance to go with it. In balancing the various demands on the song in terms of conveying information and McGrath's 'unwritten entertainment contract',[16] the piece turned into something we had not expected. The middle eight of the song was–

> All along the shorelines you can see the families kissing goodbye,
> They say, 'Good luck, good fortune, learn to write soon,'
> But the departing tinners are so sad, you can see they feel their lives are ending.

15 A. K. Hamilton Jenkin, *Cornwall and Its People: Being a New Impression of the Composite Work Including Cornish Seafarers 1932, Cornwall and the Cornish 1933, Cornish Homes and Customs 1934* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles 1970). *The Earth Turned Inside Out* was later reworked as *Ting Tang Mine*. See Nick Darke, *Plays: 1: The Dead Monkey/The King of Prussia/The Body/Ting Tang Mine* (London: Methuen Drama 1999).

16 John McGrath, *A Good Night Out*, p. 75.

> Haggard faces, dark-rimmed eyes, it certainly seems that they must die soon,
> But maybe they can live a little longer and some money to their families be sen-ding

Though the sadness of the verses was played bathetically for comedy, this section was delivered as melodrama, with the final syllable extended until the singer ran out of breath. As this indicates, there came to be a strong element of irony and mockery of the sentimental in the show. This section led into the story of Constable Rosevear: the true tale of a St Austell policeman who, during a food shortage, became so appalled at hoarding by warehouse owners to drive up prices that he led tin miners in an assault on the stores. This scene took the form of doggerel delivered by a music hall style cliché policeman, all knee-bends and hello-hello-hellos. The effect of this was to parenthesise his appalling fate, to be 'hanged in the town, then strung up in chains on St. Austell Down'. There is a vulnerability in laughter, and here the material played against audience expectation in a sudden, chilling ending (see Fig. 11).

The modular approach to the show was predicated on previous experience in music and in street theatre but also in the traditions of political theatre, including McGrath's description of the Blue Blouse movement[17] and, in particular, agitprop. We delightedly clasped these traditions to ourselves, demanded there should be capitalists in top hats, and insisted on workers with clenched fists (see Fig. 12). The show was avowedly didactic, conveying large quantities of information. It was eventually called *One & All!–An unofficial history of tin mining in Cornwall*, and was social history told entirely in terms of the tin miners, Bal maidens,[18] and their families. 'One and All', the official motto of Cornwall (in Kernewek 'Onen hag Oll'), was used here as a socialist slogan. The play worked through the history of the industrial revolution here in its mining and engineering heartland, and up to the South Crofty strike of 1939, which we used to satirise the distortions of the media in covering the Miners' Strike, their tacit deference to the elitist misanthropies of the employer, and the personal attacks visited on the

17 McGrath, p. 26.

18 Bal maidens: women who worked on the surface at Cornish mines, often breaking up lumps of ore for the 'stamps'.

trade unionist; the interruption of any statement of principle and intent so that the aim of the strike could be misrepresented. This strategy of the media was still shocking to us at that time, our demand for justice in better representation not yet replaced by the cynical resignation that is now the keynote national state of mind (see Fig. 13).

This led into a big finish item, the *Ode to Wheal Jane*. Wheal Jane mine at Baldhu (Fig. 10) was seen at that time as the great hope of Cornish mining, the first deep mine opened in Europe for fifty years. But it came into the world reliant on a global commodity market and now found itself operating amidst the ever-more untrammelled capitalism of the 1980s, with the new factors of Thatcherite monetarism and Reaganomics rampant in the world. In these circumstances contemporary Cornish mining maintained a perceptibly fragile existence. It needed a tin price of £7500 a tonne to keep it alive, at the time surpassed substantially but by no means securely. Behind the scenes, the price was maintained by an organisation called the International Tin Council (ITC) through strategic buying. We would be hearing much more about the ITC within a very short time.

In the 1980s, the industry still had the atmosphere of the gamble that was traditional in Cornish mining, never nationalised like the coal industry; resurrecting and dying through centuries of boom and bust, from ridiculous riches to poverty and pain, with the worst suffering reserved for the poorest, the working miners and their families.

The play began:

> Look up at the hillsides in almost any part of Cornwall
> and you will see the remains of some forgotten tin mine.

Contemporary Cornish mining was nowhere near as ubiquitous as it had been, but was totemic. Modern tin miners were now well-paid in Cornish terms and were firmly organised in the Transport and General Workers' Union. They were the custodians of the image that Cornwall cherished of herself: rather than a backwater holiday destination, for the Cornish she was the centre of a world wide web of hard-rock mining expertise and engineering excellence.

Ode to Wheal Jane, as an illustration of the precarious nature of the Cornish industry, proved to be all too prophetic.

The show also included a song in the Kernewek language—*Tre Bosvennegh*, which means 'Bodmin Town'—which we found in the book *Hengan* by Merv Davey, and used to introduce an impression of the famous Cornish singer Brenda Wootton in performance of her best-known song *Lamorna*. Again, this was McGrath's Unwritten Entertainment Contract in action. Audiences loved this character, 'Brenda Woodburner', with her backing band of musical tinners executing the Shadows' Walk, and Sue was a singer to equal even lovely Brenda, who would soon start coming to our shows herself (see Fig. 14).

Having come up with a list of the elements of the show and populated the list with performance styles and content, we began to rehearse. Sue and I had become involved—through Keith Spurgin, the local Workers Educational Association organiser who had helped to organise Roll Up Theatre—with a new community and unemployed centre in Truro. The ideological actions of the Thatcher government had thrown so many people out of work across the UK that unemployment was itself becoming an industry. The employment situation here was anyway usually chronic, with the Cornish proverbial 'proper job' generally considered an unlikely discovery. To the UK state, Cornwall was (and is) like a distant corner of empire exploited only for raw materials and the exotic. It was the place where recession hit first, and recovery came last and often not at all, commonly still experiencing the last depression when the next one hit. Cornwall had yet to completely recover from the effects of the Great Slump in the late nineteenth century when the Tin Boom had burnt out, her people as so often before assembling at her ports like their Irish Celtic cousins, to be shipped overseas. It took until the 1960s for Cornwall's population to reattain the level of a century before.[19]

Altogether, this was a great market for a centre to mitigate the issues of unemployment; not financially but socially, emotionally, and intellectually. It was set up in the basement of St Paul's Church on Tregolls Road in Truro, a Victorian edifice ill-advisedly constructed from some kind of crumbling stone (these days abandoned and perpetually

19 Bernard Deacon, *Population Change in Cornwall Since 1801*, https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/bitstream/handle/10036/19712/PopulationchangeinCornwallsince1801?sequence=1.

awaiting demolition), and so it was called The Crypt Centre. It was supported by Church Action with the Unemployed and the Bishop's [of Truro] Forum and it would also host office space for the WEA and other humanitarian initiatives. It was proposed that our new theatre company be based there, and we also became involved with its organisation and management. We had absolutely fallen on our feet.

There was a long, stone room in which we could rehearse (working around the pillars that held up the church above) and hugely useful photocopying facilities. There was even a CBM microcomputer, though being without a printer or even a word-processing programme (both hardware and software were very expensive in those days), nobody knew what to do with it, so I wrote it a programme to randomly generate poetry.

Our decision that the new company was to be called A39 Theatre Group was made in the face of ideas for more characteristically agitpropista names, Red this and Red that (hmm, come to think of it 'Red This & That' was an opportunity missed). 'Red Jelly' was one of my suggestions, I remember. With nomenclative inspiration of this quality to draw on, perhaps we were wise to name ourselves instead after the road that connected our two towns, Falmouth and Truro, with its genesis in a mini roundabout almost under a railway bridge, then winding south west to north east across Cornwall. We liked the fact that the A39 was so inclusive while being generally overlooked in favour of the A30 and the A38 as the recognised highways into Cornwall, as though it sneaked out somehow and slipped in sideways.

We started rehearsing *One & All!* (musical theatre was not yet such a big sore on the face of the drama, so I demand we are forgiven the exclamation mark) in the Crypt Centre in early 1985. There is a newspaper cutting from, of course, *The West Briton* with a photo of the three A39 performers taken at one of our first rehearsals, dressed in randomly selected costumes: Sue wearing a striped jumper she had knitted for me, Mark sinister in shades and suit, me in a tailcoat and that bloody blue beret doing a Chuck Berry 'duckwalk' with a black Fender Stratocaster. It was published the following Thursday in the *What's On* arts section. We were a media fact, if nothing else yet.

Part of the deal with the Crypt was that we ran theatre workshops for the WEA, and through this we began to build what turned out to

be another necessity of what would these days be termed 'socially engaged art': a hinterland; a social and/or cultural and/or political/personal context. Through participation in the unemployed workers' movement, we began to make contact with other community groups in similar situations to the Crypt, and members of Cornish Labour parties (who were on the whole to the left of Neil Kinnock's soggy-stumbling yet divisive leadership), trade unionists, and those we met through our research. The piece in *The West Briton*, we discovered, made us known to the Cornish theatre world. Although we had not yet done anything, apparently not doing anything could be quite a good career move.

I also participated in, and sometimes ran, Truro Writers' Workshop, inaugurated at The Crypt. At first this consisted mainly of volunteers at the centre, but then began to attract those from further afield. It was an uncommon kind of initiative in those times. We would set each other exercises: to write from titles or first lines perhaps. I found the working through of formally constructed writing tedious, especially the application of punctuation that steered everything onto railway tracks of conformity. I preferred free verse or concrete poetry and the short and the strange generally—odd assemblages of words that seemed to suggest each other, their peculiar combinations leading to unsought places. The question was what to do with such writing. In the capitalist world, writing too must be distributable in the commodified packaging of books, otherwise it seemed cursed to remain private. Such insights were clues to where my own work would need to go.

The logistics of the time, in a Cornwall that was all but job-vacancy free, was that the journey of artistic discovery mixed with community volunteering was supported in the form of Supplementary Benefit (supplementary to the Unemployment Benefit that had to be qualified for and which was time-limited to one year), for which we must all 'sign on' once a fortnight at the Jobcentre, identifying ourselves with our yellow (later white) 'UB40' cards. It was through the existence of this support mechanism that the UK Welfare State had become the basis for British revelation in the arts, with a global significance far beyond its population size. In this capacity it was even celebrated in Wham's/George Michael's breakthrough hit *Wham Rap*. Much of this benefit money was thus an investment, reaping rewards in national kudos and foreign exchange, but this did not prevent the Thatcher

government essaying early skirmishes in the war on its existence, as an aspect of the class war that the Conservative Party never ceases to fight. So another activity at The Crypt was a Claimants Union to defend people against the increasing number of Catch 22s being built into the system. We never lost a case, and enjoyed an excellent relationship with the union branch of the Civil and Public Services Association (CPSA) at the local Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS) office on Truro's Lemon Quay. At one stage, The Crypt Centre would be assailed in the pages of the local press for being 'run by communists' and 'displaying anti-DHSS posters', and we could happily reveal that the posters had actually been provided by the very workers we were supposed to be attacking. It was important that A39 had such a hinterland of community engagement.[20]

At first, the work in our rehearsals was to share and work up the ideas for the sections, arranging and rearranging the order. So the show was structured to a set list like a music act, which for Sue and I at least was what we were used to. This encouraged an aesthetic imported from the music mode too, of performance straight out to the audience rather than towards each other. There was no attitude to a fourth wall, that dividing line and defining relationship of most theatre, because there was no possibility of any such pretence, or of any pretence at all. The audience was frankly acknowledged at all times. The play was performed as a performance. The attitude was that the creative act in theatre should itself be part of the spectacle; that the value of the performer was demonstrated in the ability to conjure up a character before the audience's very eyes. This was the showbiz of agitprop.

The previous October, Elvis Costello and the Attractions had played at the Cornwall Coliseum along the south Cornish coast at Carlyon Bay. I loved Costello's work, but live he brought new dimensions to the music: he didn't just sing it, he didn't just play it—he lived it, and this was the mode in which he *performed* it. The bitter world his lyrics explored, a musical equivalent of the literary Greeneland, was conjured up as the world of the stage.[21] The driving, intense music of The Attractions formed

20 An example of a statement of principles of 1970/80s Claimants Unions can be found at https://www.eastlondonbigflame.org.uk/files/9.3_ClaimantsLeaflet.pdf

21 '"Greeneland," as critics have called it, is a place of seedy degradation where the possibility of moral identity is always qualified by a sense of conditional failure,

the soundtracks of a series of films that were invisible but embodied in the figure of Elvis Costello as he expressed it all in everything he was. He is an astonishing performer, intensely theatrical while staying absolutely true to his material.

But this was hugely exceptional. Theatrical moments in music were most commonly present as a group emerged onstage and seized the world by beginning to play, the miracle of their music born again; performance, *theatre!* But this quality was then generally abandoned, its excitements and demands allowed to deflate as the small repertoire of possibilities of the mainstream gig played itself out and the performance moment was hopefully resurrected only in clichéd gestures to get the audience to clap along as the band built up to a big finish, to invoke the ritual of the encore: this even in the heady days of the counterculture when musicians were both prophets and gods—even in *punk* for Christ's sake! It was all a bit pathetic.

What if that moment of intense possibility at the beginning of it all was not abandoned? What if it could be just the beginning of an event of continuing significance? In *One & All!,* the theatre moment was also evoked in the opening and closing of the show: it started and ended like a gig with an adaptation of a traditional song performed by Dick Gaughan, *Craigie Hill*—a song about enforced emigration from Ireland, also a continuing motif of Cornish history.[22] So we arranged it as *Carnkie Hill* to evoke the cost of dead Cornish mines, a cost the coal miners were about to discover in their own communities as Thatcher and her hard-man McGregor at the National Coal Board set about systematically destroying England's, Wales's, and Scotland's mining communities simply in order to remove their union as a political force.

What were we as performers? How would we perform this stuff? Was it slow, was it fast? Was it passionate? Was it kind? Was it hard? Was it loud or was it quiet? Was it neutral as though performed by

where "the center cannot hold." It is a world in which [novelist Graham Greene's] protagonists find their moral identities in terms of rebellion and reaction, and seem unable to conceive of a world they might support. In Greeneland, apparently, the reader can discover a world as it should not be, never its obverse ideal.' Laura Tracy, 'Passport to Greeneland', *College Literature*, 12.1 (1985), 45–52.

22 *Craigie Hill* can be found on Dick Gaughan's album *A Handful of Earth*, Topic Records 1981.

masks? Keith Johnstone's *Impro* was a major theatre text of the time.[23] His theories on story were compelling and have influenced me ever since—we had less time for his exploration of mask work as possession, instinctually perhaps reacting against its metaphysics. This was not the way A39 would go.

Through *Impro*, Johnstone's work on improvisation at the Royal Court and afterwards had informed the theatre workshops around which Roll Up Theatre, including Mark and Lucy, had formed in Falmouth. The practice that informed the book had much in common with Chris Waddilove's improvisation sessions at Group 64 in London, at which Sue and I had first met in 1974. Johnstone's iteration of improvisation as a part of theatre, and his techniques for stimulating and developing it, rendered *Impro* not only a standard manual but pretty much a philosophical treatise. The book is founded on Johnstone's own perceived need to cure himself of his education through the development of a teaching practice that was stimulating and freeing, rather than punishing and inhibiting. The effect on a theatre practitioner of undertaking extensive improvisation is analogous to the effects of LSD on musicians. Instead of being a machine for the replication of lines of dialogue in response to the stimulus of the appropriate cues, suddenly your entire intelligence and creativity are present and engaged in the entire performance. The transformation is permanent. You find yourself alive and exploring on stage and eventually you find the tightrope where you and the audience meet in the tension of their attention. The easiest way to locate this is through the stimulation of laughter, which is perhaps why most improvisation goes immediately for the comedic. But having found yourself awake and aware on stage there is certainly no temptation ever to go back to more traditional performance. A39 was always a product of this awareness and used its techniques in rehearsal to feel ourselves towards a performance style that we discovered to be big in dynamics. We came to formulate our theatre as being of and in the everyday, a dialogue with audience.

Yet how could we assume a shared aesthetic basis with this notional audience of which no knowledge yet existed? We would need to invent everything from scratch live in the public view in the most public of

23 Keith Johnstone, *Impro* (Bungay: Methuen 1981).

public places. And this could assume no prior knowledge of the social event of theatre: who could go, where to go, how much to pay, who to pay. I found a formulation of this approach in Brecht's *Messingkauf Dialogues*:

> The other day I met my audience
> In a dusty street
> He gripped a pneumatic drill in his fists.
>
> For a second he looked up. Rapidly I set up my theatre
> Between the houses. He
> Looked expectant.
>
> In the pub
> I met him again. He was standing at the bar.
> Grimy with sweat, he was drinking. In his fist
> A thick sandwich. Rapidly I set up my theatre. He
> Looked astonished.
>
> Today
> I brought it off again. Outside the station
> With brass bands and rifle butts I saw him
> Being herded off to war.
> In the midst of the crowd
> I set up my theatre. Over his shoulder
> He looked back
> And nodded.[24]

We were performers who set up our theatre in these public places in the public gaze. We performed in the end exactly who we were—we ourselves in the presence of this audience of these people here in this place, Falmouth, Truro, Helston, Hayle, St Ives, Pendeen, Bodmin, Calstock, Liskeard, Wadebridge, Newquay, St Agnes, Redruth, Camborne: wherever, whenever, here/us/now, performing or enacting or being/living this thing now; not hiding.

24 Bertolt Brecht, 'Fragments from the Fourth Night', in *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, trans. and ed. by John Willett (London: Bloomsbury 2012).

Fig. 11. 'There are laws more important than those made in court'–the true story of Constable Rosevear. Photo by George J. Greene (CC BY 4.0).

Fig. 12. The class war, wrong side winning: Lord Knacker gets his topper shined. Photo by George J. Greene (CC BY 4.0).

Fig. 13. *One & All!*–the 1939 South Crofty Strike: the Convener gets to speak. Photo by George J. Greene (CC BY 4.0).

Fig. 14. *One & All!*–McGrath's 'Unwritten Entertainment Contract' in action: Brenda Woodburner And Her Boys. Photo by George J. Greene (CC BY 4.0).