PAUL FARMER

# AFTER THE MINERS' STRIKE

## A39 AND CORNISH POLITICAL THEATRE VERSUS THATCHER'S BRITAIN

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

# 9. Building the New Show

I see from a note I made on its title page that in November 1985, after we returned from Europe and just after the Tin Crisis broke, I bought my copy of *Brecht On Theatre*.[1]

This was profoundly important, even though it only really changed the specifics of Brecht's influence rather than its extent. A39 operated—though we could not know it—in the dying years of an artistic era. It coincided with what academics believe was the transition from Modernism to Postmodernism, but this was not that phenomenon, though the death might have been due to their dogmatic assertion of something entirely nebulous.

By the time of the *Points of Contact: Performance Politics and Ideology* conference at Lancaster University in April 1990,[2] at which I would see Boal describe his Aesthetic Space theory, academics present obsessively wanted to discuss the issue of whether political theatre was even possible 'in the light of the current crisis', as one of their number put it—referring to some kind of metaphysical zeitgeist accompanying the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the fall of the Berlin Wall. The political theatre workers present expressed bewilderment that such nonsense was even given conversation room. Of course it was possible—we did it on a daily basis! Nothing had changed in our communities simply because the spectacle of pseudo-confrontation between various flavours of oppression had temporarily ceased to compete for our attention in the international arena. Most of us were strictly of the 'A plague on both your houses' school of thought. We were just disgusted that the USA thought it had won—American neo-triumphalism was all the worse for its

1 Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. and ed. by John Willett (London: Methuen 1978).

2 Organised by the Centre for Performance Research.

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essential reaction to the post-Vietnam handwringing stage. It had a face and it was Ronald Reagan's, full of Botox blankness and preternaturally white teeth. This had nothing to do with our daily struggles to build communities with the aim of helping capitalism to destroy itself.

But that strange, abstract version of the world—constructed in the minds and internal dialogues of those in academia and institutions who are paid to formulate cultural analysis and to determine how the times come to be written down—had been fomenting through the 1980s as a response to the deformations of the world associated with the regimes of Thatcher and Reagan. While participating in that sad procession from scientific Structuralism, to obscurantic Poststructuralism and its ultimate staking of a claim on the era as 'Postmodernism', many of these professional thinkers would abandon Marxism, and then denounce it as 'teleological' and therefore impermissible—that had been a bedrock of the whole business as one of Lévi-Strauss's 'three mistresses'. This 'turn' was reflected in a failure to notice that it all represented nothing more profound than that aspect of the superstructure known as philosophy reflecting the development of the economic base into globalised neoliberalism. This abandonment of the most basic insight made me wonder if they had ever really been Marxists at all, or merely moved from one costume of poseur to another.[3]

The period of the 1960s/1970s and earliest 1980s, culturally the most democratic of the capitalist era, was now being closed down by its primary beneficiaries; but the rich soil of those years was where we had rooted, we unlikely artists. The countercultural tendency ascribed a general cachet to outlaws of many genres, a tendency perhaps inherited from earlier intellectual traditions like Sartre's reverence of Jean Genet. In these terms, Brecht was acceptable but Coward was not; Beckett, Pinter too, despite McGrath's disdain, because they were sufficiently weird to dismay the traditional.

Around theatre, the dominant figure in this regard was Brecht because he was anti-establishment, was the historic poster face for political theatre, and was for a revolution. For many, it did not matter which one. Of course, the details of Brechtian praxis were more complex than

3 For a simple (well, as simple as it gets) introduction to the terms of this story see for example Donald D. Palmer, *Structuralism and Poststructuralism for Beginners*, reprint edn (Connecticut: For Beginners LLC, 1995).

that and unfortunately the English language cannot even distinguish between 'Entfremdung' and 'Verfremdung'—it's all just 'alienation' to us. But now there was detail in our invocation of Brecht, and we could compare our findings so far in the ongoing experiment that was A39 with the theories of our cigar-smoking Uncle Bertolt.

An immediate resonance was Brecht's stipulation that theatre is a *virtuoso* art. So insistent is he on this that the word has a substantial index entry of its own in *Brecht on Theatre*. This reflects McGrath's demand for:

> The extraordinary sense of the imaginative, creative leap out of alienated living that is communicated by a good performer in a good, but dangerous, part, as he or she takes the audience on a vertiginous adventure along the tightrope of invention and wit and imagination, the free man, or woman, free in the gaze of the audience, creating him or herself as they go along, surviving, and surpassing mere survival....[4]

We knew ourselves in this quotation because we knew that journey, that situation which McGrath—though not a performer himself (he had to be persuaded not to play the drums in the 7:84 ceilidh band)—recognised: that tension of attention, holding the audience and feeling its weight and power almost physically as you are enfolded within those individual imaginations. Though this could be taken to defy our egalitarian instinct to anonymise ourselves within our collective entity, it felt true. The new show would consciously realise such possibilities.

What else did Brecht help us know about the coming work? In the section *A Dialogue About Acting*—a dialogue apparently entirely with himself, because who else could Brecht trust to formulate sufficiently intelligent questions?—there is the following call and response:

> Oughtn't the actor then to try to make the man he is representing understandable?
> Not so much the man as what takes place.... [I]f I choose to see *Richard III* I don't want to feel myself to be Richard III, but *to glimpse this phenomenon in all its strangeness and incomprehensibility*.[5]

This brilliant statement of the 'V-Effekt' was liberating because we had hitherto not dealt in individuals. The only mysteries in all our actions,

4 John McGrath, *A Good Night Out–Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form*, 2nd edn (London: Nick Hern Books 1996), p. 91.

5 Brecht & Willett, p. 27 (my emphasis).

on stage and street, had been ourselves, because we, like all our subjects, had been generalised. We were not individuals but statements of kind. Brecht made clear that we could deal in personality as long as we did not employ the disempowering lies of Aristotelian tragedy regarding the inevitability of the Fate of the Hero. If we displayed the strangeness of the individual our issues could include what it means to be a subject, what it costs.

*On Form and Subject Matter* contains a famous quote that we had used in the *One & All!* programme, invoked specifically too by McGrath[6] :

> 3. Simply to comprehend the new areas of subject matter [e.g., the extraction and refinement of petroleum spirit] imposes a new dramatic and theatrical form.... Petroleum resists the five-act form; ... Even to dramatise a simple newspaper report one needs something much more than the dramatic technique of a Hebbel or an Ibsen....
> [...] 5. Once we have begun to find our way about the subject-matter we can move on to the relationships which at present are immensely complicated and can only be achieved by *formal* means.[7]

This was immensely encouraging. Our practice differed from McGrath's. The 'new dramatic and theatrical form' Brecht refers to is that which he termed 'Epic Theatre' and, despite our smallness of scale, A39 was Epic. Although the subject matter of *One & All!* was not new (until the Tin Crisis happened), it was conceptually of a piece with the extractive industry of oil production famously cited by Brecht in insisting that it 'resists the five-act form' (*five* acts! the German bourgeoisie must have had arses of steel!); and we were certainly engaged in tasks of this type. The quotation above continues and concludes:

> The form in question can however only be achieved by a complete change of the theatre's purpose. Only a new purpose can lead to a new art. The new purpose is called pedagogics.[8]

'Pedagogics'? Teaching? Was that what we were for?

This, with its assumptions of authority, made us uneasy. But that was trumped by another uneasiness that lay at the specific point where

6 McGrath, pp. 38–39
7 Brecht & Willett, p. 30 (original emphasis).
8 Ibid.

McGrath joined battle with Brecht, embodied in Brecht's chart that yields a comparison between the old theatre and the new, Epic model.[9]

| DRAMATIC THEATRE | EPIC THEATRE |
|---|---|
| plot | narrative |
| implicates the spectator in a stage situation | turns the spectator into an observer, but |
| wears down his capacity for action | arouses his capacity for action |
| provides him with sensations | forces him to take decisions |
| experience | picture of the world |
| the spectator is involved in something | he is made to face something |
| suggestion | argument |
| instinctive feelings are preserved | brought to the point of recognition |
| the spectator is in the thick of it, shares the experience | the spectator stands outside, studies |
| the human being is taken for granted | the human being is the subject of the enquiry |
| he is unalterable | he is alterable and able to alter |
| eyes on the finish | eyes on the course |
| one scene makes another | each scene for itself |
| growth | montage |
| linear development | in curves |
| evolutionary determinism | jumps |
| man as a fixed point | man as a process |
| thought determines being | social being determines thought |
| feeling | reason |

McGrath quotes this chart in full, with this commentary:

> What is perhaps most striking about that list… is its hostility to the audience. Pedagogics, after all, is the art of passing *down* information and judgements, the art of the superior to the inferior. Distance, in place of solidarity, pseudo-scientific 'objectivity' in place of the frank admission of a human, partisan and emotional perspective–coldness, in place of shared experience: politically Stalinism rather than collectivism.[10]

9 Brecht & Willett, p. 37.
10 McGrath, p. 40.

Hmm. That last comment is foul, unworthy of McGrath—which he seemed to feel himself, qualifying it by clearing Brecht of the crimes of Stalin, which was nice of him. But the criticism generally is weak and, I believe thanks to this statement by McGrath, was once used against me by a theatre officer who accused me as a playwright of putting myself in the position of 'the one who knows'. My response to that was exactly as I would respond to McGrath: that there would be no point, whatever genre, form, or content you espoused, to put the performers up before an audience with nothing at all to say for fear of inferring superiority if anyone told anything to anyone. There is an implicit context: 'Listen, this issue is important to me, I have thought about it a lot and I have done some research on it and this is what I think, these are my feelings about it.' Brecht's techniques are entirely focused on encouraging the audience to weigh and critique what they are told—that is the whole point of that chart.

And a certain type of coldness was something Brecht *cultivated* in the work, as he describes again and again. Here is an example from early in the book (and thus in his career):

> I don't let my feelings intrude in my dramatic work. It'd give a false view of the world. I aim at an extremely classical, cold, highly intellectual style of performance. I'm not writing for the scum who want to have the bottoms of their hearts warmed…. The one tribute we can pay the audience is to treat it as thoroughly intelligent. It is utterly wrong to treat people as simpletons when they are grown up at seventeen. I appeal to the reason.[11]

He is determined to interact with the intelligence rather than the emotions. Later in the same piece he continues:

> I'm for the epic theatre! The production has got to bring out the material incidents in a perfectly sober and matter of fact way. Nowadays the play's meaning is usually blurred by the fact that the actor plays to the audience's hearts…. Contrary to present custom they ought to be presented quite coldly, classically and objectively. For they are not matter for empathy. They are there to be understood. Feelings are private and limited. Against that reason is fairly comprehensive and to be relied on.[12]

11 Brecht & Willett, p. 14.
12 Brecht & Willett, p. 15.

We saw the parallels between Brecht's intentions and our own in his statement '*Der Flug des Lindbergh* is valueless unless learned from. It has no value as art which would justify any performance not intended for learning.'[13] This was precisely our position when we were creating *One & All!*: not art for art's sake but theatre as counter-information, theatre as communication.

This serious disagreement between our influences was focused practically by McGrath in *A Good Night Out* through his inclusion of a long speech from his play for 7:84 Scotland, *Little Red Hen*, in which the character Old Hen recounts how her husband was victimised out of his job in 1930s Glasgow, eventually to die fighting fascists in Spain.[14] The speech was delivered in McGrath's transcribed lecture and in the original play by Elizabeth MacLennan. It is written in dialect and recounts historical events (Ramsey MacDonald's second premiership, cuts in unemployment benefits—what an arsehole he was!—the fate of the protagonists of Red Clyde, the treachery of the official organs of the Labour Party) interspersed with or illustrated through personal experience. We had been very influenced by that speech in particular—and such writing by McGrath in other plays using the same combination of factors—in writing the section of *One & All!* in which an old woman talks of losing her husband in a mining accident. The tone of the delivery of Old Hen's speech is thoroughly coded into it, we can easily imagine it in performance and that is equally true for our equivalent.

The result was that whatever Sue did with it, our 'Grandma' speech felt cosy and cloying in performance. I disliked that part of the show, an aesthetic dislike of the principle of individuals wistfully and lovably recounting the effects of the passage of history reflected directly in their own lives. It's 'warmth' (in contrast to Brecht's espoused coldness) felt horribly analogous to the ominous warmth experienced when pissing yourself. (I'm told.)

My own experience of history felt nothing like that, more like Aimé Césaire's 'My ear to the ground, I heard tomorrow pass by'.[15] If it didn't feel true, it was simply using emotion to make a political case. It was dodgy. It was icky. It was emotional manipulation—and it failed as

13 Ibid., p. 31.
14 McGrath, pp. 68–69.
15 *'l'oreille collée au sol, j'entendis/passer/Demain'* –Aimé Césaire, 'Les pur-sang', 1946.

agitprop in also being ambiguous: a fascist too may mourn her husband and we may mourn with her, but what do we learn of fascism from that?

I did not want to work through emotion—or rather there was only one emotion I was interested in and that was anger: to keep putting fact on fact, knowledge on knowledge, understanding on understanding until the audience walked out in disgust into the night and burned something down, preferably capitalism.

So—pedogogics. As it turns out, not a million miles from agitprop anyway, and perhaps they are actually synonyms.

There were other aspects of risk in an 'Old Hen'-type holiday in naturalism from the rigours of the Epic. One is the well-understood perils of essentialism. What are we showing in our work? Well, the possibilities are many and various but even if we accept the pedagogic role—that we are members of our communities who have researched and formulated our ideas and brought our audience here tonight to pass on our conclusions—we of course cannot deal with all the issues and oppressions of capitalism, imperialism, and war at the same time. McGrath accepts a need to critique the working class too—after all, the treachery detailed in Old Hen's speech was permitted and perhaps partially enabled by the Scottish working class—but neither he nor we had got round to that yet. In the meantime, to dip into the granny musing on her past in terms of close family and political awareness and commitment was to infer much that needed to be examined. The view expressed here by McGrath of our heritage and experience had nothing much in common with the working-class histories of any of the members of A39. Unexamined, McGrath had chosen to counter an artificial Scottish heritage that was the target of *Little Red Hen* with his own equivalent.

Worse than our echoing of Old Hen reminiscent was my experience in a performance in St Ives. During the scene we called *Camborne Tram*, I was playing a 1920s Cornish miner retired from the gold mines of the Rand, now living in their spoils in the form of my big bungalow in Illogan Highway. I came out into my garden, greeted my neighbours stage right and stage left, sat in the Cornish sun, and opened my copy of *The Camborne Packet*. But I began to cough; coughed and coughed; coughed and coughed and coughed until I froze into a seizure. Then I was discussed like a laboratory specimen by two posh comedy doctors,

Dr Knacker and Dr Benefactor, played as though by James Robertson Justice and Dirk Bogarde, who diagnosed my Miner's Con and described the tiny quartz crystals from dry rock-drilling glittering in my lungs, wearing them away with every breath. They shared their prognosis of my imminent death as though I had never really been alive, just one of a mine's inventory of mechanisms.

This night as I coughed and coughed (I hated doing this: eventually the retch reflex would kick in), one of two women sitting four feet from me in the front row of the audience began to well up, then lost control and the tears streamed down her face as she turned for comfort into the arms of her younger neighbour. At the end of the show the younger woman approached me and apologised for her mother, whom I had reminded of her dead husband—a Cornish miner who had himself died in just that way, of pneumonoconiosis. She thanked me!

After this I dialled the performance down to diminish the realism. I don't want to emote for a living and I don't want to puke for a living. I don't want to make people cry—I would rather they punched me. Brecht was right. McGrath was wrong.

Brecht describes the development of his aesthetic, but it was apparent we needed to realise our own. His work and thought is more contingent than people assume. I have seen the Royal Shakespeare Company perform *The Good Person of Szechuan* and it was awful. They appeared to have no idea of Brecht's purposes, or they had chosen to disregard them and plaster on their own, which left it too insubstantial to justify all this effort. Once you discounted the idea that theatre is a virtue in itself (which Brecht himself ardently rejected), there was nothing worthwhile left. The best Brecht performance I have seen was by Havant's amateur Bench Theatre Company in May 1982. In the area to work on a boat on Hayling Island, I saw a poster advertising their production of *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*. Despite the monstrous nature of what the play depicts, this was a *joyful* evening. They gave us the text to use for ourselves, they didn't roll it round their tongues to wring out every iota of meaning in actorly indulgence. And they did this in their own community. It was light, it was playful; they enjoyed it and so did we, in exactly the same way. And yet we understood the ways Hitler happened, shared the insight of a German who lived through it and fought it every step of the way and yet could not stop it happening in his name.

If A39 was not going to charm with our heart-warming character studies like Old Hen, what was *our* aesthetic? The comic-strip doctors? The capitalist in the top hat? The neutral narrators of *One & All!*?

We can only be influenced by the things we know. One of the greatest art forms of the second half of the twentieth century, the one I had grown up with along with millions of others like me, was the television situation comedy. If we look back at the hermetic worlds of examples like *Hancock's Half Hour* and *Steptoe and Son*, or later examples such as *Nightingales* or *Fifteen Stories High*, we see how close they are to the Theatre of the Absurd—nearly as much NF Simpson as Galton & Simpson.[16] In the Theatre of the Absurd, as in Magic Realism, the world is consistent even though it is not our world. This consistency is the aesthetic, which can encompass certain elements of form and content, but is strained and undermined by others. *Steptoe and Son* could venture into the horrors implicit in the 'situation', the emotional dependency in symbiosis with emotional exploitation that kept the characters together in eternal confrontation and frustration; but the system must quickly be redeemed by an appeal to/by the familiar and the familial in the face of a hostile world 'outside'. Tony Hancock continually put his career at risk in an attempt to discern and refine whatever it was that was essential to his 'situation', discarding catchphrases, co-stars, and writers to ensure and reassure that it was himself that embodied that essence. No successful examples of this genre could survive the introduction of a single 'sensible' character, i.e. one that was not entirely of its world, devoid of any aspect that extended beyond its boundaries.

The aesthetic has a real power, it is not arbitrary. It relates to something significant though abstract, a feeling of life. Old Hen was not a part of our aesthetic (and, I would argue, undermines McGrath's), though the two-dimensional comedy doctors were. What else was? What else was not?

16 *Hancock's Half Hour,* BBC Television 1956–61, written by Ray Galton and Alan Simpson; *Steptoe and Son*, BBC Television 1962–65, 1970–74, written by Ray Galton and Alan Simpson; *Nightingales*, Channel 4 Television UK 1990, 1992–93, written by Paul Makin; *Fifteen Stories High,* BBC Television 2002–2004, written by Sean Lock, Martin Trenaman and Mark Lamarr. Other examples are legion – pick your own!

Brecht came up with a simple description of how Epic theatre was to function in the twenty-ninth item in Brecht on Theatre, *The Street Scene–a Basic Model for an Epic Theatre*:

> It is comparatively easy to set up a basic model for an epic theatre. For practical experiments I usually picked as my example of completely simple, 'natural' epic theatre an incident such as can be seen at any street corner: an eyewitness demonstrating to a collection of people how a traffic accident took place[…]. [T]he demonstrator acts the behaviour of driver or victim or both in such a way that the bystanders are able to form an opinion about the accident.[17]

Oh! That simple! Pedagogics—what happened on the street. Not acting, but demonstrating what happened. It was not necessary for anyone to believe the demonstrator really was any of the people involved, just for them to engage with the 'performance' (in the lightest sense) of events. In Bench Theatre's *Arturo Ui*, they didn't so much recreate the play as, yes, demonstrate it, as though they were showing us the sort of thing it might be. Rather than 'The Play's the Thing!', *to* play is the thing.

Brecht's demand for virtuosity could be reassessed in the light of this simple formulation, not just of epic theatre itself, but also its social, cultural, and political role, the depiction of the car crash that is late capitalism. No one was going to sit down in a shawl and deliver a naturalistic homily in this form of theatre. In terms of our sense of our own developing aesthetic, this was entirely useful and would strongly influence the play that was forming—an Epic theatre biodrama of the Cornish engineer Richard Trevithick, described as though his whole life was an incident in the street.

Richard Trevithick was a name that had already come up within *One & All!*, so there was a strong element of continuity of content between the two shows, with a sense of a single developing practice. Trevithick's fate was a scar on the benevolent face that capitalism presented as its own; a scar carved as industrial capitalism came into its own in the Industrial Revolution, of which Cornwall was a major centre through its world domination of hard rock metal mining. This demanded ambitious engineering in order that it might happen at all, so Cornwall dominated

17 Brecht & Willett, p. 121.

that too: the equipment to make significant inroads into her granite was a very specialist construction.

Just as significant was the need to pump Cornish mines clear of water so they could be driven deeper and the lodes and veins followed down into the world. Left to themselves, Cornish mines would be nothing but deep black wells, vertical lakes of metal-tanged silence. They must be pumped clear all day and all night or be abandoned forever and surrendered to stillness—the death that was now being enacted in the vestiges of Cornwall's defining industry, as though her lungs were being surrendered to a slow pneumonia. Then her engineers, too, would fail.

Newcomen had brought Savery's steam engine to bear on the task of mine drainage, the stationary pumping of water being one of the few things for which these cathedral-like constructions were suitable. Their inventions were merely developed by James Watt—this we had described in *One & All!*. The capital demands of these machines brought the need to keep the miners' work eternal, without the free time necessary to tend smallholdings and fishing nets. This trampled on the culture of the miners and drove them down into that wet night in all the hours there were, to make profits for the mine owners, the Mineral Lords and Adventurers, the beneficiaries of Cost Books and Count Houses who paid a heavy toll to the need for steam because there was no coal to be found in Cornwall. To heat the water to boil into steam, coal must be brought here by ship. It was expensive.

Trevithick was, from his earliest years, a prodigy in iron, and he soon joined other Cornish engineers in using all their ingenuity to make the giant engines more efficient. James Watt demanded high licence payments for the use of his steam condenser and used his patent to inhibit Cornish developments that could turn their inventors into competitors of Boulton & Watt. Trevithick, a natural hothead nicknamed the Cornish Giant in a land of small Celts, found himself in the unnatural surroundings of the courtroom. His literary skills were vestigial and so the giant was constrained to his disadvantage and to the benefit of the greedy and the cunning or, as they were now known in Thatcher's Britain, of the 'entrepreneur'.

When Watt's patent ran out, Trevithick—legal chains removed—rose from height to height and higher yet. Using high pressure steam, a technology Watt struggled for years to suppress, Trevithick rendered

Watt's condenser obsolete and drove the effective size of the engines down from monument to table top. For convenience he mounted them on wheels, then connected them up to those wheels; and on Christmas Eve 1801 himself made the first journey on a steam propelled vehicle 'Going up Camborne Hill coming down,' as the Cornish song says, and caused the new century to give birth to the modern world. In 1804, at Pen-y-Daren, Trevithick ran a locomotive on rails to tow a train of trucks, twenty-five years before Stephenson's Rocket. He went on to pile innovation on innovation but gained no lasting fame or fortune and died in poverty in 1833 working as a manual labourer at the age of sixty-two, a long way from home.

We would use Trevithick's story to 'demonstrate' how capitalism came to be what it is and why its time is gone.

What form could this demonstration take?