

From Agit-prop to Agit-docs in 1930s British Theatre

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Abstract: Between 1931 and 1940, the Salford based Theatre of Action (TOA) produced a series of agit-prop plays that experimented with proto-documentary theatre forms, including the political review and the living newspaper. Among these plays was *Newsboy* (1935), a living newspaper about the rise of fascism in 1930s Europe. *Newsboy* plays a small but telling role in the embryonic stage of British documentary theatre. This article examines the social, political and artistic conditions that influenced TOA's production of *Newsboy* and reflects on the make-up and legacy of its form.

Key Words: British theatre, documentary theatre, agit-prop theatre, Theatre of Action, Workers Theatre Movement

要旨：1931年から1940年にかけて、サルフォードを拠点とするシアター・オブ・アクション（TOA）は、政治評論や生きた新聞など、原始的なドキュメンタリー演劇の形式を実験的に用いた一連のアジト宣伝劇を制作した。これらの劇の中に、1930年代のヨーロッパにおけるファシズムの台頭に関する生きた新聞「ニュースボーイ」（1935年）がある。「ニュースボーイ」は、イギリス・ドキュメンタリー演劇の胎動において、小さいながらも重要な役割を担っている。本稿では、TOAの「ニュースボーイ」制作に影響を与えた社会的、政治的、芸術的条件を検証し、その形式の構成と遺産を考察する。

キーワード：イギリス演劇、ドキュメンタリー演劇、アジトプロップ演劇、行動劇場、ワーカーズ・シアター・ムーブメント

Introduction

In the spring of 1935, the Salford based Theatre of Action (TOA), led by Joan Littlewood and Jimmy Miller (who later changed his name to Ewan MacColl), staged a variety show at a small community venue in the working-class district of Ancoats, in Manchester, England. At the centre of the event was *Newsboy*, an agit-prop play based on a poem by the Communist author V.J. Jerome and adapted by Al Saxe for the Shock Troupe, a faction of the New York Workers' Theatre Laboratory (Samuel *et al.* 273). Set in the streets of New York during the Great Depression, the play depicts the transformation of a young newspaper vendor from political apathist to staunch supporter of Communism. It owes its fast-paced, episodic structure to the Soviet living newspaper (*zhivaya gazeta*), a form of political revue developed in the early 1920s by proponents of the Russian and German 'Blue Blouse' theatres (Nadler 615) and later pursued in mid-1930s USA by the Federal Theatre Project (Eglinton 2018: 4).

Newsboy was first performed by the Shock Troupe in November 1933 and was revised in early 1935 by Gregory Novikov for the American League Against War and Fascism. Influenced by the Communist International's coalitionist 'Popular Front' policy of 1934, which promoted cooperation between communist and non-communist parties in order to stop the spread of fascism, Novikov shifted the play's emphasis from class consciousness to the condemnation of fascism. However, as Stuart Cosgrove points out, in both versions the critique of the 'bourgeois' news industry remained intact

(Samuel *et al.* 275). A clear example of this contrast appears in the last lines of the play. Whereas the 1933 version ends with a rallying call to workers ‘Time to Revolt!’ the 1935 version closes with the battle cry ‘Fight!’

Both versions of the text were published in the mid-1980s. The Saxe adaptation appeared in Goorney and MacColl’s *Agit Prop to Theatre Workshop* (1986), modified for British audiences by G. Bluemenfeld; and the Novikov revision was published in the Raphael Samuel-edited *Theatres of the Left* (1985), accompanied by Cosgrove’s brief history of the Shock Troupe. While these versions of the play survived, numerous alternative iterations, re-written during the 1930s by agit-prop groups mainly in Britain and the United States, remain off the record.

The iterability of agit-prop plays, by which I mean the dramaturgical process of amending a text to fit a specific political context, was an important structural element in agit-prop theatre. Its origin lies (at least in part) in the editorial format of Soviet living newspapers which influenced agit-prop plays from 1917 onwards (Amey *et al.* 32). This iterative structure can also be found in early experiments in documentary theatre, which drew on agit-prop techniques, and is epitomized, for example, in Erwin Piscator’s 1925 production of *Trotz Alledem!* (In Spite of Everything) in Berlin (Eglinton 2016: 9).

Newsboy emerged from this context and plays a small but telling role in the embryonic stage of British documentary theatre. This article examines the social, political and artistic conditions that influenced Theatre of Action’s production of *Newsboy* and reflects on the constitution and legacy of its proto-documentary form.

Newsboy’s Agit-prop Antecedents

As I noted a moment ago, agit-prop plays were designed to be updated in response to the political conditions of a given social setting. For example, in an iteration of *Newsboy* by the London Rebel Players (later Unity Theatre), Colin Chambers notes that ‘the text was changed constantly to keep up with events and the writer Simon Blumenfeld remembers scripting a completely new version at Unity’ (Chambers 41). Moreover, in one of several accounts of TOA history, MacColl recalled producing ‘four or five’ sketches about the 1931/32 workers’ strikes in the Lancashire and Yorkshire cottonmills, ‘each one of them was open-ended [to accommodate] the organization of a specific mill’ (Samuel *et al.* 234-235).

Agit-prop plays employed characters and scenarios taken from an international ‘pool’ of themes and ideas. One of the main networks for the dissemination of agit-prop theatre in Britain was the Workers’ Theatre Movement (WTM), to which TOA was affiliated. The WTM was initially set up in 1926, but quickly faded away. It was revived to more lasting effect in 1928 by Tom Thomas and the Hackney People’s Players. The WTM facilitated gatherings and rallies and published bulletins including *The Red Stage* and the *WTM Monthly Bulletin* (‘Workers Theatre Movement,’ WCML). The latter publication contained reports on productions from WTM groups across Britain, new agit-prop plays and instructions on how best to perform them, and updates on the direction of the movement in line with British and Soviet Communist Party directives. It inspired British agit-prop groups—mostly amateur—to appear on street corners, in community halls, factories and at mass demonstrations, ‘using the theatre as a weapon against the capitalist system’ (Goorney and MacColl xxvi).

The WTM experienced a degree of success in rallying impoverished and unemployed working-class audiences in the pursuit of Communist ideals, particularly in the wake of the Great Depression and its climate of industrial action. However, as Robert Leach points out, growing artistic and political discord within the movement left it ‘unable to deal with [...] an increasingly complex political situation’ (2006: 25). Much of the agit-prop material was one-dimensional, written by amateur dramatists in tract form to convey party-political doctrine. This rigidity restricted the form’s growth and contributed to its decline. If agit-prop was a ‘weapon’ against ‘bourgeois capitalism,’ it was one incapable of transcending its own metaphor, resulting in what Baz Kershaw terms ‘ideological arrogance’ (Kershaw 79) and what David Edgar sees as an ‘elitist device’ (Edgar *ctd.* in Kershaw 79).

While the WTM’s pursuit of art-led politics may be viewed in retrospect as ideological arrogance and elitism, such criticism should not detract from the significance of the experimentation that took place in this period, of the training

ground agit-prop theatre became for a generation of largely amateur and working-class men and women, of the affront it lodged against elitist modes of theatre production, of its ingenuity in creating theatre with little to no resources, and of the influx into Britain of international theatre practices.

By 1935, agit-prop theatre may have run its course, but for groups like TOA and Unity Theatre, who maintained a belief in the theatre's ability to affect political change, the next logical step was to salvage the disruptive elements of this street theatre form and redeploy them on the indoor stage. *Newsboy*, for TOA, was precisely that step. Its amalgam of styles, including political revue and living newspaper techniques marked a break with the purely didactic approach of agit-prop street theatre and was grounds to reconcile the group's confrontation with the 'curtain theatre', a term used in this period to refer to the dramatic conventions of 19th century naturalist theatre. *Newsboy* had the potential for performers and audiences to 'regard the [theatre] experience as made up of material to be interpreted, to be reflected upon, to be engaged in—emotionally, mentally, and perhaps even physically' (Carlson ctd. in McKenzie 27).

The Round House

The venue for TOA's 1935 production of *Newsboy* was the Round House in the working-class district of Ancoats, Manchester. MacColl refers to the venue as 'a kind of Quaker Social Service Settlement; Mary Stocks was the director there at the time' (MacColl 247). The 'Settlement' in question is the Manchester Art Museum and University Settlement, a large-scale social regeneration experiment, founded in 1886 by Thomas Horsfall, the son of a wealthy cotton manufacturer (Stocks vii). How and why TOA came to perform at the Round House in Ancoats remains unclear. Minutes from the Settlement's Committee meetings and its annual report show no mention of TOA's variety show. Given its short 'two-night run', it is plausible that production arrangements had been made informally, particularly in financial terms, since TOA at this point was 'a group of penniless young people' (MacColl xxx). There are, however, several salient features of the Round House that make it a likely venue for a political theatre group disillusioned by the theatre 'establishment' and in search of a working-class audience, these include: the venue's history as part of the Manchester University Settlement; the audience demographic in the working-class industrial community of Ancoats; and the role and influence of its resident producer, Frida Stewart, under the general direction of Mary Stocks. Each of these factors is worth considering in further detail, as combined, they provide important contextual information on the type of theatre TOA wanted to develop.

The Settlement was built on the principal that 'men and women of various classes may meet in goodwill, sympathy and friendship, that the residents may learn something of the conditions of an industrial neighbourhood and share its interests' (Rose and Woods 15). Its model derived from an earlier experiment at Toynbee Hall in London, established by Samuel and Barnett in 1884, and initially derided by critics for what was perceived as a colonialist agenda and an attempt to civilise the poor. Horsfall believed in the redemptive power of art and was particularly influenced by the Christian Socialist thinker John Ruskin and his notion that the appreciation of beauty in art offered personal and social benefits. Horsfall was engaged in frequent correspondence with Ruskin during the planning stages of the Manchester Art Museum, and later Ruskin provided 'some copies of Turner, and a copy of Holman Hunt's *The Triumph of the Innocents*' (Eagles 2009). Reflecting on the social purpose of art in his book, *The Need for Art in Manchester* (1910), Horsfall writes: 'art owes its high value to us, to its relation both to the beauty of the earth and to human feeling and thought' (Horsfall ctd in Eagles 2009). Belief in the transformative power of art, as a vehicle for the underprivileged to eschew the vice grip of abject poverty, belonged to the ideological framework of a 19th century intellectual elite. While Horsfall's motives may have appeared benevolent on the surface, underpinning his logic was a form of cultural hegemony that reified a select few to a superior status that those beneath could only aspire to join. The Bolsheviks in early 20th century Russia attempted to overturn this hegemonic order by shifting the frame of cultural production from the hands of the elite to the hands of the working class. It was an idea that TOA's variety show advocated and had it not been for the particular audience demographic, the company would have no doubt reacted with a similar sense of scorn that saw Littlewood quit her role as assistant stage manager at the Manchester Rep: 'Curtain theatre? The very words depressed me' (Littlewood 92).

The English novelist, Anthony Burgess, wrote in his memoir about an amateur stage production he saw at the Round House in the spring of 1940 called *Last Edition: A Living Newspaper Dealing with Events from 1934-1940*. This was in fact TOA's second appearance in Ancoats, five years after *Newsboy*, under a new name: Theatre Union. Burgess recalled that 'one emerged [from the Round House] into slums of squalor now rarely seen and wanted to tear them down with one's bare hands' (Burgess cited in Harker, 2009: 24). Ancoats was part of the East End of Manchester and at the beginning of the 20th century, the Settlement consisted of 'cramped back-to-back jerry-built housing, with a densely-packed, largely immigrant population all competing for a gasp of the industrially-polluted air that swirled around the cotton mills, iron foundries, coal wharves and slaughter houses' (Eagles 2009). Although living conditions and Settlement facilities had greatly improved by 1935, the economic slump of the early thirties had taken its toll on Ancoats. Mary Stocks, remarked in her memoir that 'there was small prospect of rehabilitation for the economic casualties of Ancoats in these middle years of the nineteen-thirties' (Stocks 97).

The backdrop to *Newsboy* is the aftermath of the Great Depression. The play depicts the hopeless dole queues of the unemployed and brings into focus the surge of racial bigotry that surfaced during this time, which as noted by Gilbert Jonas, had 'radicalized a significant segment of the American populace' (Jonas 137). Both themes are maintained in Blumenfeld's British version. The unemployment theme reaches a climax mid-way through the play as the following excerpt demonstrates:

At this point in the play the characters become class workers, representing a picture of the Three Million Unemployed Men and Women. This is done through the characters facing the audience and saying the following words: 'THREE MILLION MEN AND WOMEN' as in rhythmic tread they form a miserable line outside the labour exchange . . .

1st Voice. Fired from the mills.

2nd Voice. Fired from the docks.

3rd Voice. Fired from the coal mines.

4th Voice. Fired from the shipyards.

All. (*Louder and louder in desperation*) FIRED FIRED FIRED. (Gorney and MacColl 15)

The repetition of the word 'fired' was particularly poignant in a venue whose audience was directly or indirectly involved in the workplaces enumerated in this scene. Audience constituency at the Round House reflected the Settlement's demographics of predominantly working-class men and women and a strong children's presence, interspersed with a minority of university faculty members, students and administrative staff (Stocks 30). Playing to an indoor audience whose constituency was parallel to the agit-prop street gatherings was not only an important factor of identification with the play's core agenda, but also a means of bridging the transition between street and stage without abandoning 'everything they'd learned in the Agit-Prop theatre' (MacColl 242).

The Round House building was refurbished in 1928 after a significant financial donation from Alice Bickham, the widow of a former Settlement director. It was transformed from the dilapidated former chapel, built in 1821, to a fully functional community centre, boasting a new steel frame roof and water-tight basement equipped with club rooms and baths, a kitchen and canteen and a 'wide shallow stage with its curved cyclorama' (Stocks 68). The unique form of the Round House with its stage whose wings extended deeper into the auditorium than a conventional 'end on' proscenium stage, allowed for greater proximity to the audience. The necessity of a direct connection with the audience or breaking the 'fourth wall' was a contingent of agit-prop street theatre in which the strategy of planting performers amongst the audience was frequently used; both for its surprise theatrical effect, but also for the purpose of identification between audience and performers that it induced—the experience of community. TOA used this device for the production of *Last Edition* in 1940 where the stage 'in addition to the central platform or stage proper, had two further platforms running the

full length of each side of the auditorium so that the audience was enclosed on three sides' (MacColl xlv).

Another key proponent in the transformation of the Round House was the arrival of Frida Stewart as resident producer in 1934. Stewart came from a privileged background in Cambridge and her family was known for its support of social causes. She pursued musical studies, which took her to Italy and Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, where she observed the rise of fascism. On return to Britain in 1932, Stewart became a member of the British Communist party. As a producer at the Round House, she was able to draw on her family affiliations to attract 'wide and unexpected circles' and to produce work of 'imaginative scope' (Stocks 96).

This unique combination of elements, from the site's position at the heart of an immigrant, industrial work force, almost synonymous with MacColl's own childhood neighbourhood in the suburbs of Salford; to its working-class audience burdened by unemployment, a prime target for an agit-play; and its Communist 'insider' with Frida Stewart, all contributed to TOA's arrival in the spring of 1935.

At the limits of agit-prop

Until the production of *Newsboy*, the majority of MacColl's work with TOA's precursor group the Red Megaphones had been devoted to agit-plays distributed via the WTM. Very little material was required to put these pieces in motion, and the brevity of the texts meant that lines could be learnt and modified in transit between one performance site and another. Agit-groups built up repertoires that could be deployed according to the demands of each location and updated to address a particular constituency. Performances took place in public spaces such as entrances to factories, market squares or at public rallies and the plays operated on a dialectical structure, presenting, through a conflict of ideas or values, a particular case of working-class injustice at the hands of a bourgeois authority, and ending, with the invitation (and often direct demand) to the audience to join forces in the pursuit of a resolution. One of the popular agit-plays of the late 1920's was *Meerut*, a piece that exposed the excessive prison sentences given to trade unionists arrested for organizing a rail-strike at Meerut in India in 1929. The trial theme reappears in *Newsboy* and occupies the last quarter of the play (Scenes 5 and 6). It is introduced through a character referred to as the 'Indian Worker' and is developed through heated dialogue as the Worker tries to convince the 'Prosecutor' of his innocence. The culmination of the scene, played in complete darkness, comes as the Prosecutor whips the Worker into submission. *Meerut* was written by the North London Hammer and Sickle Group and MacColl describes the simple staging of the piece as follows:

It could be performed by four, five or six actors of either sex. Its 'set' consisted of wooden poles carried by the actors, three of whom would stand with poles held vertically in front of them while the other performers knelt down with their poles held at the horizontal. In this fashion the front of a cage or prison-cell was created. There followed a group declamation lasting five or six minutes at the end of which each of the players would extend a hand through the bars and call for a show of international solidarity with the *Meerut* prisoners. (MacColl xxii)

What stands out in this description is the static, almost two-dimensional, nature of the staging. Aside from the gesture through the 'prison bars' at the end of the piece, the performers' physicality is relegated to a secondary position. The emphasis is on the delivery of the message and its proximity with the audience. In his instructions on how to stage *Meerut*, Charlie Mann of the Lewisham Red Players, devotes half of the text to effective vocal delivery, outlining the importance of inflection, emotion, tempo and clarity before ending the message with the following remark: 'Remember your two media are words and faces' (Mann, WCML).

The historical antecedents of interwar agit-prop theatre derive from cultures of performance in which the transgression of private/political authority through interventions in public/social spaces is of characteristic significance. Carnival is one such example. In his introduction to *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin analyses the transgressive function of the carnival, arguing that the 'carnival celebrated the temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and the established order;

it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions' (Bakhtin 10). Agit-prop bears similarities with the conditions of the carnival insofar as it attempts a reversal of hierarchical norms. Where it departs from the *carnavalesque* is in its dogmatic pursuit of a working-class social order. While the simplicity of agit-prop street theatre was part of the allure and widespread adoption of the form worldwide, as mentioned previously, it was also part of the forms' demise. This strictly utilitarian approach to theatre rendered the form untenable and is the context in which MacColl makes the following remark: 'a suspicion had grown in us that limitations in production ideas were an implicit feature of Agit-Prop theatre' (MacColl 241). The conflict is already apparent in the term 'agit-prop' itself. Agit-prop is a composite of 'agitation' and 'propaganda'. The former is synonymous with motion or action and derives from the Latin *agere*, 'to do'. The latter, etymologically more complex, is identified by the OED in the context of the 17th century Roman Catholic Church as the Latin diminutive of *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, a congregation devoted to teaching Christian faith. In the Soviet context the term 'agit-prop' was coined by the Communist International to designate a 'special division of agitation and propaganda...to oversee all Soviet institutions involved in political education' (Peter Kenez ctd in Mally 196). The agit-prop form, restricted to 'two media' and one message was to an extent in denial of its etymological roots: dynamism of movement and educational exchange.

Newsboy maintained the key characteristics of early agit-plays like *Meerut*. It employed group speech, direct audience address and sparse symbolist staging, and it maintained a central dialectical motif: to transform and supersede the bourgeois ideological status quo, symbolized by the Newsboy, through the call to and embodiment of class consciousness. Where it breaks stylistically with agit-prop street theatre is, for example, in its use of dance. Scene 3 is a 'chaotic ballet' led by the Newsboy, in which the characters from Scene 2 return on stage to perform individual gestural loops and repeat previously uttered words. *Newsboy* also introduced basic conventions of characterization. Though still a long way off the level of sophistication in *Last Edition*, in many ways the successor to *Newsboy*, the roles demanded greater attention to detail (costume, class, voice, movement) than its earlier street counterparts. MacColl notes the challenge it represented for his fledgling company: 'it was one thing to learn, parrot-fashion, a mass declamation and one could be drilled into carrying out a series of simple manoeuvres. But to act!' (Goorney and MacColl xxx) Perhaps, most crucial of all though, was the introduction of spotlighting. Not only did it mark the beginning of a technical infrastructure, which was provided by Alf Armit in the guise of a home-made lighting board for the Ancoats show, but it introduced a depth of field to the stage and the ability to flit, as in cinema montage, from one scene to another at the press of a button. For TOA, *Newsboy* was the opportunity to put into practice new ideas gleaned from an array of homegrown and international left-wing political and artistic influences of the twenties and early thirties. It was also the company's first trial at producing a living newspaper.

Pushing the limits: the living newspaper

The original US version of *Newsboy* was an early attempt at an English language living newspaper; a form that Nikolai Gorchakov attributes to the amateur readings of daily newspapers in Soviet clubs, delivered by 'Red Amy men, factory workers, or villagers' (Gorchakov, 145). The living newspaper crossed over to the professional Soviet stage in 1923 under the guise of a revue/cabaret called *The Blue Blouse* by an eponymous group at the Moscow Institute of Journalism (Drain 183). Whereas the initial function of the living newspaper was to convey simple readings of Soviet party-political matters to largely illiterate audiences beyond the reach of news networks, it began to take on theatrical effect through the introduction of make-up, costume and impersonation. One of the key structural developments was the separation of text 'between an individual and a chorus, who conversed with each other' (Gorkachov 145). This brought group declamation to the form and the ability to emphasize particular elements of content in sloganized fashion. The textual split induced a new relationship between performers and spectators, whereby readings and reactions to news items amongst the former could create a layer of meta-commentary directed at the latter. Thus, it was possible to engineer spectator identification with or estrangement from particular conditions of existence as prescribed by the news. In this configuration, the news item was

removed from its authoritative print framework, uncoupled from its 'top-down' chain of distribution, and through enactment placed in a live, oral discourse. Though rank and order were still observed within this discourse, the use of costume and caricature in readings, aspects of the Bakhtinian *carnivalesque*, opened a space for dissimulation and subversion of authority. What first began as a simple act of reading news in a public space began to develop into a powerful propaganda tool for or against the party-political line. Its transition to the professional stage introduced further propaganda techniques including elaborate physical language, new modes of editing (collage and montage), and recourse to film, photography, phonography and other media that could manipulate the tenor, veracity and reception of the information being presented.

In an essay on the relationship between the living newspaper and Jacob Moreno's *psychodrama*, John Casson identifies another antecedent of the the living newspaper in early cinema. He traces its lineage back to the 1890's and the 'use by filmmakers of fakery—of models and actors to re-create news stories of which they had no live film' (Casson 113). The problem of document veracity arises here. Casson exposes the tension between the 'authority' of the written word and its reproduction through non-written media. He critiques the perceived objectivity of the cinema camera, a claim famously expressed in the inter-titles to Dziga Vertov's documentary film *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929). Vertov states that the film is an 'experiment' and a quest for an 'absolute language of cinema [...] based on its total separation from the language of literature and theater' (Vertov 1929). Casson demonstrates that the 'mechanical eye' is just as susceptible to duplicity and trickery as the 'human eye', and cinema is of course just as capable as any medium of serving a propaganda machine.

Cinema along with constructivist art (particularly collage) played an important role in shaping the form of living newspapers. Eisenstein's concept of the 'montage of attractions' was of particular influence in this regard; and the term 'montage' appears in *Newsboy's* subtitle: 'in montage from the poem by V.J. Jerome' (Goorney and MacColl 13). Eisenstein experimented with his theory while still working in the theatre, bringing it to fruition in the early 1920's in his shift from stage to film. He defines the concept as follows:

An attraction...is any demonstrable fact (an action, an object, a phenomenon, a conscious combination, and so on) that is known and proven to exercise a definite effect on the attention and emotions of the audience and that, combined with others, possesses the characteristic of concentrating the audience's emotions in any direction dictated by the production's purpose. (Eisenstein 4)

At the core of Eisenstein's idea is Marx's theory of dialectical materialism and the precept that quantitative differences can make qualitative changes (Sellars 163). For Eisenstein the quantitative changes occur in the carefully engineered juxtaposition of scenes (and their sequential timing) to induce a meta-filmic, subliminal narrative that drives 'the production's purpose'—the qualitative change. In his first full-length film, *The Strike* (1925), using actors from the Proletkult Theatre, Eisenstein deployed his montage technique with full force. In the film's culminating scene, he intercut an epic narrative sequence depicting the brutal suppression of a factory uprising at the hands of State authorities, with the scene of a horse being slaughtered in an abattoir.

Montage is a key dramaturgical device in *Newsboy*. The play juxtaposes spoken narratives as well as different styles of *mise en scène* to produce a form of meta-commentary on the manipulative capacity of news media. The play begins with the Newsboy standing in a single spotlight, shouting headlines from the bourgeois newspaper 'New Chronicle Empire'. The headlines include statements such as 'Cup Final Draw'; 'Plans for Royal Jubilee'; 'Six Kings at Royal Wedding' (Goorney and MacColl 14). Soon a Young Man and Lady pass by, followed by a blind woman begging for money, a 'Charitable Gentleman' and an 'Unemployed Figure'. The characters switch rapidly from individual caricatures of class types to voices in unison that provoke the Newsboy to question the validity of the newspaper headlines. The transition from this street scene (Scene 2) to the ballet scene (Scene 3) operates a modal shift from individual characters delivering single lines of text to a chorus of 'chaotic bodies' and a cacophony of voices, arranged in space on split levels as the

following stage directions indicate:

...all the figures who have thus far passed in the street scene come on stage and, working on three parallel planes with the same dance movement, go through movements which bring out their individual characteristic movements. All face the audience. They combine voices with characteristic gesture...In the meantime, the 1st Newsboy elevates himself above the others, upstairs centre. The characters keep moving back and forth across the stage, intermingling with their own words the words of the Newsboy...at the height of this chaos, the voices rise to a crescendo, terminating in the words 'HEY BOY'...as they say these words, all the figures veer towards the Newsboy...

VOICE: How long are you going to stand there shouting yer guts out? (Gorney and MacColl 14)

The scene serves as a clear example of the group/individual split that influenced the early development of the living newspaper. It is within this mirroring structure, between the group and the individual on stage and the audience as group and audience member as individual off stage, that the transfer of the play's dialectical message operates. Underpinning the effect is the simulated displacement of power from the hands of a bourgeois authority, here symbolized by the slogans of the newspapers—the authority of written language - touted unquestioningly by the Newsboy, and his 'awakening' by fellow comrades, who can be read in this scene as part of the same working-class group. Shortly after this scene, the author(s) includes a note on the changing status of characters in the play:

All through the play, the characters change from class-conscious workers to symbolic figures of an entirely different nature or realistic characters which vary greatly from scene to scene. (Ibid 15)

At the beginning of this article, I outlined the importance of stock characters in facilitating the iterability of the agit-prop text. Here we find evidence of a more sophisticated level of characterization whereby shifts in status and mode of delivery, symbolism/realism, are used to affect the degree of identification between performers and audience. However, in continuity with the agit-prop street plays, characters do not operate in psychological terms, they remain largely symbolic entities, identifiable through external features such as costume, gesture, demotic speech, and crucially by juxtaposition with each other.

The rise of the document

One of the immediate effects of the living newspaper on English language agit-prop theatre was an increase in semiotic complexity. The composition of the text shifted from the dual media concerns of the street, 'words and faces', to a multiplicity of media on stage. This led to new dramaturgical concerns with the meaning of space. The space could no longer exist as a simple support for action; it now took on a meaning of its own, separable from the actions. This in turn led to the proliferation of non-textual space in which dance, light and later on recorded sound and mixed-media could develop their own semiotic signatures, intertwined but also independent of each other. In pragmatic terms, the result was that agit-plays began to get longer. Most agit-prop street pieces were no more than five minutes long and tended to operate with single scenes. This was partly a reaction to the environment and the ever-looming threat of police deterrence and partly the result, as we saw earlier on, of the absence of discursive space. *Newsboy* however, ran at around 15 minutes and contained 7 scenes. Five years later, *Last Edition* 'comprised 20 scenes and ran for two hours' (Harker in Forsyth and Megson 26). Agit-prop groups like the Red Megaphones would usually perform back-to-back 'repertoires' of sketches in which themes and characters would inevitably overlap. This repertoire system was a precursor to the episodic structure of living newspapers. While the former may have lacked the calculated juxtapositions and the diagetic complexity that characterized the latter, the ability to pass from one state to another and maintain a credible performance

is a structural continuity worth noting.

There is also an important compromise at work in the conjoining of one form with the other. The political impact of agit-prop street theatre was one of its most interesting assets. The pieces unfolded in what we might term the ‘present tense’ of a specific location, that is, the plays were subject to the immediate consent or rebuttal of their audience and would often operate concomitantly with a political event (a demonstration, a strike and so on). The immediacy of this political affect was softened by the indoor aesthetic and economic conditions of the new hybrid form. Although here, MacColl rightly voices a word of caution on misguided romanticism regarding the impact of street theatre, remarking that anyone who believes that agit-prop ‘can win an audience more easily than other kinds of theatre has more imagination than experience’ (Gorney and MacColl xxvii). On the few occasions that his group was able to attract a sizeable audience, the ability to pierce the public sphere and directly influence the course of events was palpable. An example of this is MacColl’s story of a Red Megaphones sketch at a marketplace in Wigan. It took place at the time of a local miners’ strike ballot:

We had scarcely started on our first sketch when we were interrupted by a police sergeant...several miners, however, surrounded the platform and...told us to carry on...the sergeant went away and returned shortly afterwards with an inspector and several uniformed constables. This time the crowd closed ranks and prevented them from approaching the platform. After a brief argument with a very angry group of women the police withdrew, whereupon a young miner climbed an ornamental lamp-standard and raised our banner on it to the cheers of the crowd. (*Ibid* xxvii-xxviii)

What is striking about this description of the event is the displacement of the performance frame away from its focus on a designated performance space and group of performers—MacColl’s Red Megaphones atop a coal cart in a Wigan marketplace—to a new frame defined by MacColl’s gaze as spectator, in which the protagonists consist of miners, women and officers of the law and the scenario deals with the clash between authority and the expression of working-class culture. The scene culminates in a victory symbolized by the raising of a banner and the frame then returns to the coal cart and the ‘original’ performance continues, but not without a sense of uncertainty as to who and what the performance is about. This moment of interchange between the diagetic reality of the agit-play and the spontaneous, transgressive outburst from within the audience fits, like a hand to a glove, the very ideological purpose of agit-prop theatre. That is, the audience’s conscious identification with the subversive tactics that will allow it to upturn the status quo and challenge the dominant class order; that which maintains the control of the ‘forces’ and ‘relations’ of production in a traditional Marxist sense (Eagleton, 36).

The shift indoors incurred a shift in performance tense, from ‘present’ to ‘past-present’, and with its roots in living newspaper forms, *Newsboy* shows a degree of tension between tenses. That tension is already at work within the name ‘living newspaper’ itself: the ‘living’ or ‘present’ aspect of the event is attributed to the performative utterance, that is, the delivery of news items, which are themselves caught in a ‘present-past’ paradigm. The news item functions as a record, a postscript of the live event. In the living newspaper, the live event is re-lived in performance in a relationship as ‘other’ to its former selves. Its otherness is depoliticizing, since although the news item is brought into a present juncture, it is already removed from the political context in which it originally took place, and furthermore, it has now been transposed into an ocular space for critical scrutiny: the theatre. At first glance the agit-prop street play seems to have a greater potentiality to ‘act’ within a political event, or even ‘become’ the event, whereas the living newspaper is better placed to ‘react’ to the political event, to depoliticise the event. *Newsboy*, in living newspaper mode, became a reflection on historical injustices that sought to inform its public of violent repetitions by bringing past events back to life. *Newsboy* thus became a theatre of memory, a theatre of documents, it shifted TOA’s trajectory away from the political radicalism of agit-prop street theatre towards the search for radical artistic expression inside the theatre.

This trajectory, from theatre as a political weapon to theatre as a critique of political weaponry, is part of the foundational core of the documentary theatre genre itself. The implications of this shift in understanding of the political

efficacy of the theatre was captured in the critical writings of two prominent German documentary theatre directors: Erwin Piscator and Peter Weiss. Weiss claimed in 1968 that ‘Documentary Theatre, so long as it does not itself take to the streets cannot compete with an authentic political event [...] It cannot issue a challenge to the authorities from a theatre auditorium which will carry the same force as a march on government buildings or on military centres [...] the result is still a form of artistic expression, and it must be a form of artistic expression to have any validity’ (Weiss 41). Weiss’s observation was in direct contrast to the art-led political vision of his former mentor, Erwin Piscator, whose documentary theatre experiments of the 1920’s held that the dialectical opposition between truth-bearing documents and witness-bearing live bodies on stage could be extended beyond the auditorium into the streets. Reflecting on his 1925 documentary production *Trotz Alledem* (In Spite of Everything) Piscator wrote, ‘There were thousands in the Grosses Schauspielhaus [...] Theatre had become reality, and soon it was not a case of the stage confronting the audience, but one big assembly, one big battlefield, one massive demonstration. It was this unity that proved that evening that political theatre could be effective agitation’ (Piscator 96).

For Weiss, ‘effective agitation’ was not the role of the theatre, and neither was the street its stage. TOA reached the same conclusion with *Newsboy* in 1935. The notion of ‘artistic expression’ in Weiss’ note relies on memory. It relies on a displacement of performance frames away from the everyday, away from the frame that cannot discriminate the borders between its performative self and the performativity of its others, away from the frame in which textual structure is open-ended, updatable in the here and now and invariably without the focal depth for self-critique. For that performative other to exist, that which Weiss terms ‘artistic expression’, a temporal and modal shift is required, a change in conditions whereby the accepted mode is one of reflection and the accepted temporality is one of the past-present and the accepted text is predestined for the archive. In this frame, within the walls of the theatre, artistic expression emerges from the cleavage between tenses; between the delivery of the past that aspires to affect the present, but always with the knowledge that the present is elsewhere: in the streets, in market places, in government buildings and military centres, and that only the past, brought forward through its myriad documents, is present on stage—even on the most superlative of evenings at the Grosses Schauspielhaus.

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