

THE RISE AND DEFEAT  
OF POST-1968 POLITICAL THEATRE IN BRITAIN

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1991

A major thrust behind political theatre in Britain has always been against the 'apolitical' or 'Establishment' tone of the plays presented in the West End.<sup>1</sup>

Post-1968 British drama is often referred to as "alternative", "fringe", "agit-prop", or "political". Political or socialist theatre flourished between 1968 and 1978. IN Contemporary English Drama, C.W.E. Bigsby asserts, "It is true to say that the single most significant development in British theatre in the decade 1968 to 1978 was the rise of socialist theatre."<sup>2</sup> Post-1968 political theatre in Britain was the outcome of the strong political influences of the world-wide social and political events which prevailed in the late 1960s. This alternative theatre, as a result, came to be "outrageous, defiant, unconventional, and believed all established things (including upholstered theatres) to be evil."<sup>3</sup> In his book, New British Political Dramatists, John Bull points

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at the compelling power of this theatre :

In the late 1960s a number of quite startling changes occurred in British theatre, changes which for the first time challenged the very basis of theatrical organisation, and heralded the beginning of the most consistently exciting decade of drama of the entire century. From the bruised dreams of the sixties counter-culture, a new generation of writers emerged... in agreement on one thing, the desire to create a drama that would stand in the vanguard of political and social change.

The new mood of political concern in the theatre was inspired by the social and political revolt which took place in different parts of the world in the crucial year, 1968. Among these events are the students' revolt in May, in Paris; the anti-Vietnam war demonstrations in different parts of the world; the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Russia, and the anti-imperialist campaigns in Latin America. People had been fired by such events and became politically conscious. Young people and students, in particular, began to have an important ideological role and came to realize the necessity of a revolutionary transformation of society. Catherine Itzin, in her book, Stages In The Revolution : Political Theatre In Britain

Since 1968, shows the strong political influence of the year 1968 on a new generation of people:

1968 was a historic year which politicised a lot of people. Rarely can one year be singled out as an isolated turning point, but in the case of 1968 so many events coincided on a global scale that it clearly marked the end of an era in a historically unprecedented political consciousness and activism.<sup>5</sup>

In Disrupting The Spectacle, Peter Ansoorge, among other theatre critics, emphasizes this year to be responsible for the significant development in British theatre : "Increasingly, 1968 can be marked out as a watershed in our recent theatrical, if not political history."<sup>6</sup> Agit-prop theatre was formed to investigate people's life in relation to politics and to reach a wide audience for the sake of effecting a social change.

The new theatre movement which could first be felt in 1968, had its foundations in the angry drama of 1956. The angry playwrights, in their mixture of realism and absurdity; in their struggle against a hostile capitalistic society, in favour of the working classes; in their depiction of the growing change in the family and the position of women, placed the foundations of post-

1968 political drama. Martin Esslin in his "Foreword" to New Theatre Voices Of The Seventies, states: "If the 'sixties-which started in 1956-brought us the dawn and the flowering of the new wave of British theatre, the 'seventies... were a period of consolidation, heart-searchings, and crisis."<sup>7</sup> Though the revival of drama in the late 1950s represented a threat to political and social conventions, that threat was not really radical, in particular to the theatrical conventions. Post-1968 drama brought a challenge to the existing theatrical forms and to the conventional assumptions about theatre. In its awareness of the role of theatre in the life of people in society, it defied the conventional theatrical models. While the angries focused on the family and the domestic affairs, the new playwrights focused on the public and political affairs. Political drama replaced the domestic settings by political debates and gender discussion. Unlike post-1956 drama, post-1968 drama encouraged the collaborative way of writing where individual and simple focus was avoided. Pointing at the diminishing of the role of the individual writer in the alternative theatre, Michelene Wandor, in her book, Look Back In Gender, states that in this kind of theatre, it "is not easy to trace individual plays as landmarks in quite

the same way that Look Back In Anger certainly was for its time."<sup>8</sup>

Present-day political theatre in Britain, which is a socialist theatre aiming at effecting a socialist and political change, might have its roots in the "Workers' Theatre Movement"<sup>9</sup> which took place in the 1920s in Britain. But while the earlier movement attached itself with the communist party, post-1968 political movement was not "formally aligned with any specific political party."<sup>10</sup> If the Workers' Theatre Movement cannot be counted as a major influence on post-1968 political theatre, the real influence was that of the experimental American, Jim Haynes, who, in 1968, opened an experimental Arts Lab in London. Haynes's experimentation attracted young and adventurous playwrights and directors who were elated to be provided with new theatrical styles. Though Haynes's Arts Lab closed in 1969, yet it exercised an immense influence on leftists and revolutionary theatre workers. In Theatre In Britain, A Personal View, Harold Hobson maintains that "The Arts Laboratory ridiculed all conventional drama and behaviour; the audience picked its way through a long room over the prostrate bodies of drug addicts to the small curtained-off space

at the back where plays were given. The Arts Laboratory was welcomed with enthusiasm by young anti-bourgeois intellectuals."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, fringe groups, organized by students or recent university graduates, might be considered as off-shoots of Jim Haynes's Arts Lab.

By the late 1960s, political theatre groups had already appeared, but the real beginning of political theatre occurred in the early 1970s when larger numbers of fringe groups were formed. Catherine Itzin states: "The seventies were to mark the beginning of many new organisations in response to the needs of the new theatre and the demands it made."<sup>12</sup> While the angry playwrights relied on the production of their plays on two revolutionary theatre groups, the Royal Court Theatre and Theatre Royal at Stratford, East, of Joan Littlewood, post-1968 political drama was produced by various theatre groups which toured all over the country. Among the most notable groups which were largely responsible for the production of the successful plays of the first part of the seventies are the following names:

The Combination was the first community theatre in England. It was originated in 1967 in Brighton and continued its activities at Albany

in the seventies. A number of talented playwrights such as, Howard Brenton, worked with it. The Agit-Prop Street Players was another group which was instigated by the agitprop political movement. It was formed in July 1968 and concerned itself with topical problems dealt with in short sketches of about fifteen minutes' long. These playlets depended on improvisations and were submitted to continual modifications and change. They aimed at agitation and at raising people's class consciousness. Later on its name was changed into the Red Ladder. The Portable theatre group was created by Howard Brenton, David Hare, Snoo Wilson and others. It was one of the earliest groups which toured all over the country as its name suggested. CAST was a group of socialist theatre. It appeared in the late 1968 and continued to the end of the 1970s as "one of the most important, not only for its content, but also its unique style and the context in which it performed."<sup>13</sup> The General Will was started in the seventies with David Edgar as one of its prominent members. 7 : 84 was created by the playwright John McGrath. It was divided into two companies, English and Scottish. Sandy Craig writes : "7:84 began by touring colleges, arts centres and studio theatres with plays which, though they disrupted the mood

of naturalism, still belonged within that tradition."<sup>14</sup>  
The Traverse theatre in Edinburgh fertilized the alternative theatre especially in the annual Edinburgh festival. Harold Hobson sees that the best alternative theatre groups are those which emerged in Scotland: "The most famous outpost of the Alternative Theatre was not in London, but in Edinburgh."<sup>15</sup>

The changing political and theatrical climate in which these theatre groups worked, encouraged the formation of the women's theatre movement which attempted to deal with women's issues "usually excluded from the boundaries of 'legitimate' theatre."<sup>16</sup> Michelene Wandor justifies the appearance of women's theatre movement thus :

Feminist movements since the nineteenth century have challenged the traditionally subordinate roles of women in both society and in the theatre, and in the most recent wave of feminism since 1969-70 and the development of the theatrical 'fringe' in the context of British subsidised theatre, many more challenges have been made to traditional male dominance in the theatre. I wouldn't claim that these challenges have altered the face of theatre across the board, but many of the questions asked by feminism about women's place in culture can enable us to throw new and important light on plays written in the past-



seen from the point of view of a new and vital analysis of the function of gender in these plays.<sup>17</sup>

The women's movement which was created in the 1960s challenged women's subordination to men. It was directly responsible for the creation of the women's theatre movement which in its turn helped the creation of many women's groups. In 1970 the Women's Street Theatre Group was formed. It reflected "alternative theatre's preoccupation at the time with agit-prop on the streets. (It) began to demonstrate and perform in the open air, insisting on talking about what had been essentially 'private' activities."<sup>18</sup> In 1973 another women's agit-prop group emerged under the name, Women's Theatre Group which continued the struggle against the pervasive hold of stereotypes. This group was followed by other groups such as, Monstrous Regiment, Joint Stock, Cunning Stunts, Beryl and the Perils, and "Clapperclaw. Caryl Churchill, a woman playwright, worked extensively with some of such groups. Andrew Davies observes: "That Monstrous Regiment was prepared to employ a full-time writer like Caryl Churchill indicated the growing realisation that women's theatre groups needed to move away from the amateur 'anything goes' attitude of the first years and

instead cultivate certain skills."<sup>19</sup>

The women's groups met two difficulties, one concerning the problem of physical exhaustion due to touring, and the other concerning the financial problem. Yet "the women's theatre movement has undoubtedly succeeded... in 'raising consciousness' about women and drama whether it be in commercial theatre, subsidised theatre or on the fringe."<sup>20</sup> The women's movement, and women's theatre movement of the early 1970s revelled in the fertilizing political climate of the late 1960s. Michelene Wandor states : "In an era of increased class activism, industrial action, and student unrest, there was now also a political movement with which women could identify directly and which developed a number of feminist ideologies."<sup>21</sup>

The social and political changes of the late 1960s encouraged more alternative theatre groups to emerge to fulfil the demands of political theatre. The increasing number of alternative theatre groups throughout the 1970s is carefully documented by Catherine Itzin in the following passage quoted at length :

The seventies ... saw the opening  
(and some closing) of hundreds of  
small theatre venues, important in

mounting their own productions and promoting new work, and also in presenting the work of touring theatre companies. But the real alternative theatres could be said to have been the pubs and clubs and community centres up and down the country- the non-theatre places and the non-theatre audiences which most political theatre aimed to reach. In 1968 there were half a dozen 'fringe' theatre groups : by 1978 there were well over a hundred 'alternative' theatre companies, plus another fifty or more young people's theatre companies. ... In the sixties there were a handful of playwrights writing for the fringe; in 1978 there were ... 250 contemporary British playwrights, most of them working part- if not full-time in alternative theatre. The statistics alone testified to the development of a new force to be reckoned with in British theatre; an alternative which developed new audiences, a new aesthetic, a new kind and concept of theatre.<sup>22</sup>

These theatre groups depended mostly on the collaborative ways. They were not run by artistic directors but by actors, designers, producers and writers, in an attempt to deminish the role of the individual playwright. The writers who worked with these groups are the ones who caught the political spirit of the alternative theatre and could transfer it into a play. Most notable

among these young writers are Howard Brenton, David Edgar, David Hare, Howard Barker, Trevor Griffiths, McGrath, and Caryl Churchill. All of these talented young playwrights worked extensively according to the collaborative method which enabled them to be drawn finally, to use Michelene Wandor's words, "into a consciousness-raising process from which they would otherwise have been excluded."<sup>23</sup> Brenton and Hare worked with the Portable, then they worked with other groups. Edgar started with the General Will at Bradford, then he continued his collaboration with Monstrous Regiment. Caryl Churchill began and continued with Monstrous Regiment and Joint Stock. McGrath devoted all his efforts to 7:84 (Scottish and English). These playwrights were drawn to write plays for such groups rather than for the established theatres. Their plays were written to suit these touring groups in which "the props and scenery were kept to a deliberate minimum."<sup>24</sup>

These alternative groups differed greatly among themselves, yet all of them shared common traits. All of them toured extensively. Their plays, which dealt with immediate political and topical issues, could be easily and cheaply produced. They could also be readily received by non-theatre

audience who were sought at non-theatre places: arts labs, canteens, working men's clubs, community centres, studios, public parks, college halls, church halls, factories, etc. Usually these plays were made short as the written text was kept to minimum. The groups developed visual metaphores and effects to counterballance the audibility and visibility problems which emerged from the non-theatrical conditions of the productions. A sort of debate at the end of the production usually happened between the audience and the members of the groups around the play's issues. Andrew Davies asserts this interaction between the audience and the groups : "An integral part of the performance was the discussion afterwards with the audience...(a) marked contrast with the tradition of the West End theatre in which illusionary and self-contained nature of the play is broken at the end of the play by the final curtain."<sup>25</sup>

The alternative or agitprop groups did not come out of the theatrical tradition. They were there to propagate socialist ideals. The working-class audience, in particular, should be helped to realize their political situation and to be made eager to reach a political revolution. "The main impetus was political rather than theatrical,"<sup>26</sup>

was the motto of agitprop theatre. Sandy Craig says : "The class struggle may be a necessary and determining condition for the emergence of socialist theatre; but the sufficient condition for such an emergence can only be found in the will of the individuals committed to the various enterprises."<sup>27</sup> The themes which the alternative theatre groups leaned on were those which related to the working-class struggle. Accordingly, they rejected, in Andrew Davies's words : "the whole paraphernalia of naturalist theatre which was for them indissolubly connected with traditional theatre buildings of the West End theatre. Under the influence of Brecht, the social realism of an earlier generation of radical playwrights like Arnold Wesker was scorned."<sup>28</sup> Though different among themselves, these socialist theatre groups evolved their own distinct experimental theatrical form which "owed little to underground experimental apart from pace, the use of music and a general concentration on image as well as words."<sup>29</sup>

An equally important impetus behind the rise and development of post-1968 political drama in Britain, besides the momentous world political events at that time, was the abolition of theatre censorship in 1968. Michelene Wandor illuminates

us here :

With its abolition it was possible for plays to be about more controversially topical and taboo subjects. Until then all overt references to, and representations of homosexuality had been excised from plays as had anything which implied lack of reverence for God, Royalty and the 'family'. The principles of 'public decency' and 'privacy', which censorship was theoretically designed to protect were tacitly acknowledged to be out-of-date at worst, and highly questionable at best.<sup>30</sup>

The abolition of theatre censorship was greatly responsible for the increase in the number of political theatre companies which rebelled against moral propriety and welcomed sexual deviation. Harold Hobson believes that the attack of this theatre "was directed as much at conventional morals as at conventional politics."<sup>31</sup> Ben Cameron sums up the essential traits of the alternative theatre which reflects an alternative culture thus :

An antagonism toward prevailing British theatre united the Fringe movement. Above all, Fringe writers soundly rejected the private, psychological drama of Harold Pinter and John Osborne. The supremacy of naturalism was also challenged; the movement openly ridiculed the limited range afforded more realistic writers. Other styles were encouraged. Playwrights

not only revelled in new linguistic freedoms (most obviously the obscene, the nonverbal, and the blatantly absurd) but often wallowed in areas once regarded as taboo: homosexuality, nudity, violence, sadism. Though this energetic response was often morally juvenile, and aesthetically crude, audiences sensed the beginnings of a more significant theatre. In daring the wrath of West End critics, in defying theatrical convention, and in exploiting the unexpected and the socially unacceptable- these writers found new power and intensity.<sup>32</sup>

Micheline Wandor divides post war British theatre into two phases : during censorship phase (post-1956), and the phase which follows the end of censorship (post-1968). In supporting her view, Wandor states :

Let me issue a final reminder about the critical importance of 1968, both because it heralded the end of theatre censorship, and therefore a fundamental change in the nature of the modern theatre industry, and also because it made possible an assimilation into theatre of all the exciting political and cultural ideas which had been building up throughout the 1960s.<sup>33</sup>

The proliferation of political theatre groups could not have been continued without the State's subsidy. The Arts Council which is founded to



encourage music and arts in Britain, began in the early 1970s to subsidize alternative theatre groups. John Bull states that "by 1978, there were at least 18 full-time subsidised socialist groups."<sup>34</sup> The amount of subsidy allotted to the alternative theatre was scanty if it was compared to that allotted to mainstream theatres. Catherine Itzin maintains : "Whilst alternative theatre was munificently funded in the seventies by comparison to the virtual non-subsidy of the sixties, it was crippling under-subsidised in relation to what it wanted to do and in relation to the amount of subsidy that went to establishment theatre."<sup>35</sup> The increasing financial support given to these groups by the Arts Council was received with reluctance because some feared the state interference in the work of the groups. As Catherine Itzin perceptively comments :

Alternative theatre- and particularly political theatre- could not have developed on the scale it did in the seventies without subsidy. This was, from the beginning, one of the fundamental ironies- that theatre companies whose stated aim and raison d'etre was to do away with the capitalist state and its institutions (including the Arts Council of Great Britain) and replace it with a socialist society could only work to achieve those ends

with financial assistance from the hated state. This, however, was a minor tension compared to the major conflicts which occurred in the area of subsidy as a whole.<sup>36</sup>

Political theatre, by the mid-1970s, began to undergo many changes due to financial, political, and artistic pressures. The state subsidy, though scanty, formed a great pressure on these groups. They found themselves divided between serving their ideals and those of the State. Moreover, after subsidy, these groups shifted from amateurs to professionals : "The influx of money led to a degree of bureaucratisation - offices, administrative staff, other overheads - and to a perspective which stressed financial considerations at the expense of political ones. Distinctions between performers and audiences were heightened." <sup>37</sup> These groups began to stop touring and get permanent locations to perform their plays at. The collaborative process of these companies began to be left out. They began to identify with particular individuals echoing the mainstream theatre's tendencies.

The political pressure which forced political theatre to change direction related to a changing political climate. Though the Labour Party, a representative of the old Left, was suspected

by these theatre groups, yet it was less despised than the conservative Party which held power in 1970. The conservative Prime Minister issued a series of repressive acts against the working-class. When Edward Heath fell in 1974, the groups felt themselves to be partly responsible for his fall due to their agitprop plays. The new Labour government disappointed them as it did not offer radical changes in the working-class conditions, or real solutions for the problems of these theatre groups. "Since the 1960s, they had fed off the rising temperature of the situation, but now the tide was flowing in the other direction."<sup>38</sup> These groups felt themselves isolated from the wider political events. They began to think about the form of their plays and the kind of audience they reached. "Some companies began to question whether their isolation from the theatrical mainstream was necessary or effective."<sup>39</sup>

The artistic pressure on these groups represented another factor for the groups' shift and change of direction. They faced the problem of having writers dealing with new themes. The collective spirit of these groups partly discouraged playwrights, especially the talented ones, who preferred to turn to the big theatres, or to television rather

than to submit plays to these groups. Moreover, the material reward was higher with the Establishment theatre. Some of the groups began seriously to think about their theory and practice. Touring made it difficult to establish a real relationship with the audience. Some of the groups tried to be more involved in the community.

Some of the characteristics of all these groups were also responsible for this decline of political theatre. The central task of these groups was to create a new working-class audience who would be the potential fuel of revolution. To effect this goal they offered short, crude and propagandistic plays which neglected all theatre tools. Andrew Davies says : "The crude slogans of early agit-prop put off many potential allies who regarded the shouted simplicities as an insult to the intelligence as well as being deeply patronising."<sup>40</sup> The plays of these groups which dealt with immediate political events, lacked depth and convincing characterization. Clive Barker discusses the defects of these groups :

In some ways, the dramatic groups were the weakest part of the Fringe, in that, for the most part, they failed to break the pattern of theatrical activity then in vogue. They simply

presented a 'poor' form of it. In fact, for the most part, they were at their strongest when they adhered most closely to traditional dramatic values, as the 7:84 companies have done.<sup>41</sup>

The problem of political theatre which began to force itself in the mid-1970s was a complex one because it relates to the relationship between socialist theatre and socialist change. As playwrights, they cannot be political leaders. Still they cannot become detached observers. "In some ways the political theatre companies were caught in a double bind: if agitation was their objective and drama merely a convenient means to the end, then why not simply forget the drama?"<sup>42</sup> Some of the alternative playwrights began to resolve the dilemma by rejecting their Utopian hopes of creating immediate revolutions which must cause socialist change. They thought of a compromise through which their message could reach more people. Here Andrew Davies comments on the obvious changes of direction of some of the talented writers of the fringe :

Many of the major figures within political theatre began to transfer their efforts into productions which could be certain of reaching large numbers of people whether in the venues of the major subsidised companies or on television. These moves reflected the depressing overall political situation for socialists, the umbilical cord to which political

theatre workers were inextricably  
attached. Others focused increasingly  
on 'community theatre'.<sup>43</sup>

The first group to rebel against the alternative theatre was the Portable which used to touring and reaching non-theatre goers. The playwrights of this group, such as Howard Brenton and David Hare, preferred to invade mainstream theatre and reach broader theatre audience. In the mid-1970s other groups, like the Combination and the Half Moon, began to stop touring and have permanent locations, and to develop their theatre craft in order to attract more audience. Other groups reacted differently to the pressures undergone by writing political plays on historical themes like Joint Stock Company. Richard Boon comments on Howard Brenton and other major playwrights of the fringe theatre who established themselves as mainstream writers :

With his contemporaries David Hare, Trevor Griffiths and David Edgar, Brenton had succeeded in the nineteen seventies in forcing into the mainstream of British theatrical life both political concerns and a stylistic philosophy which had their origins in oppositional Fringe theatre. For much of the later part of the decade their work effectively set the agenda for new drama on

the big public stages of the RSC, wresting the initiative from the Stoppards, the Pinters, and the Ayckbourns, whom they saw as the high priests of reactionary bourgeois theatre-making.<sup>44</sup>

These talented playwrights, who forced their way persistently to the established theatres, were themselves members of the fringe groups whose collaborative system which challenged the writer's role, did not prevent the emergence of the creative process. In Michelene Wandor's words:

However, the individual imaginations of writers continued to function, and while the theatrical landscape became infinitely more complex, the variety of the fringe produced a new generation of playwrights, of whom a small number were responsible for the successful plays of the 1970s- the new theatrical canon.<sup>45</sup>

The defeat of the fringe theatre was "generally acknowledged." Brenton, Hare, Barker, Edgar, and Snoo Wilson admitted the failure of alternative theatre to fulfil its task. Brenton says: "I think the fringe has failed. Its failure was that of the whole dream of an 'alternative culture' - the notion that within society as it exists you can grow another way of life, which ... will in the end spread throughout the western world and change

it."<sup>46</sup> When David Edgar was asked why he preferred to work with the big theatres, he said :

I think it was two things. The prestige of small theatre is small, or it certainly was small. And there was a feeling that we were better than that, a natural progression. ... The second point, which is much more substantial, is that Howard Brenton and David Hare and I and a number of other people wanted to write plays about subjects which required large numbers of people, and also about public subjects which did not take place in rooms but in areas.<sup>47</sup>

C.W.E. Bigsby comments on the decline of political theatre in Britain in the mid-1970s :

It was a movement already on the wane by middle of the 1970s. In 1975 Howard Brenton announced the death of the 'fringe'... In 1978, David Edgar was lamenting the failure of socialist theatre. Two years later David Hare declared a fundamental change in his approach. This was clearly not unconnected with the shift to the right of political opinion in Britain and the manifest failure of socialist theatre to provoke<sup>48</sup> a change in working-class consciousness.

Like Bigsby, Ben Cameron asserts the defeat of post-1968 political drama in the mid-1970s :



This lack of ideological coherence and the failure of the Fringe playwrights to find central rallying political issues led to the demise of the Fringe. By 1973 Pip Simmons had conceded defeat, disbanded his company, and moved to Holland. In 1974 Trevor Griffiths and David Hare isolated in-fighting as fatal to the movement, and by 1976, the defeat of the Fringe was generally acknowledged.<sup>49</sup>

The defeat of the fringe theatre, which was declared by major playwrights, like Brenton, Edgar, Hare and Griffiths, who started their dramatic career as fringe writers, and who after 1974 consciously submitted their work to larger stages, was resisted by one of their contemporaries, McGrath the founder of 7:84 in 1971, which he separated into English and Scottish wings in 1973. McGrath increasingly supported the fringe small-scale groups aiming to reach working-class audience. McGrath argues : "It is indeed better and more effective for a socialist group to relate to this cross section of people than to one or other of the factions who are bidding to control them."<sup>50</sup> McGrath vehemently disputes the idea that the touring political theatre failed to attain its goals, He is against those who failed the fringe. C.W.E.

Bigsby states : "This was a view challenged by John McGrath, who regarded Edgar, along with Howard Brenton and David Hare, as evading the central task of the committed playwright : that of creating a new working-class audience for plays, raising the consciousness of those who were potentially the fuel of revolution."<sup>51</sup>

McGrath's 7-84 groups concentrated like other socialist groups on political and topical issues "but with a degree of characterisation and narrative skill that marked his work off from agit-prop."<sup>52</sup> He advocates along with other group workers the use of some popular dramatic forms as they see the necessity of the shift from the directly didactic to what entertains their audience. McGrath gave some lectures at Cambridge about the problems of socialist theatre showing his justification for entertaining the audience who should spend a good night out. His lectures are assembled in a book entitled A Good Night Out. Andrew Davies comments on McGrath's theatrical technique thus :

McGrath ... outline(s) the elements from which he believes a popular and radical drama can be created, amongst them being directness, comedy,

music, emotion, variety, localism,  
and a sense of identity.<sup>53</sup>

The decay of socialist drama in the mid-1970s was partly due to the playwrights' differing degrees of commitment and their concerns for alternative theatre. They were radically different in their political views, their attitudes towards establishment theatre and audiences, and possible alternative. The final defeat of alternative socialist theatre groups was reached in 1979 with the unexpected victory of the conservative party and with Mrs. Thatcher as a Prime Minister. The spirit of conservatism which prevailed in the eighties, rather than the difference among the members of socialist theatre, greatly disappointed the alternative theatre groups as their hopes for a socialist change had been shattered. The radical failure was shown in 1983 after Mrs. Thatcher had been elected for five more years. In 1981 Martin Esslin wrote with great perception : "The 'eighties, so much already clear, will be a period of crisis and violent readjustment. That is the challenge of the new decade : it can only be met through constant and ever-increasing awareness of the problems and achievements of the past, constant and increasing critical insight into the

tasks of the present and future."<sup>54</sup> In 1984, Andrew Davies comments on the effect of political climate on political theatre as "endemic"; Davies goes on to say that the election of Mrs. Thatcher in 1979 "heralded a downturn in the fortunes of the labour movement and therefore a further questioning of the part that political drama could play."<sup>55</sup>

In the 1980s the amount of money given to the alternative groups by the Arts Council was cut down. Under-subsidised groups like women's groups, and black theatre groups, among others, reduced the number of their casts to five or three. The major theatres possess substantial resources which served the bourgeois playwrights. Catherine Itzin elaborately comments on the issue of subsidy and its destructive impact on the alternative theatre in the early 1980s :

As subsidy had been crucial to the growth of political theatre, so it would be instrumental in its decline. And there were signs in 1979 that subsidy to alternative theatre would be reduced. In their first budget, the Conservatives cut the government allocation to the Arts Council... The theatre industry responded with anger.... At this stage even the establishment theatre was concerned about the fate of alternative theatre, given the cuts and its relatively

low priority in the subsidy hierarchy. It was not inconceivable that subsidy to this area of\* theatre would dry up altogether by the mid-eighties.<sup>56</sup>

As Catherine Itzin perceptively thought, in the mid-eighties things became worse concerning subsidy and its distribution. There was no fairness in the distribution of the meagre amount of money allotted to the Arts. In 1990, Richard Boon supports this view : "To add insult to injury, the very financial constrictions which threatened writers from the left paved the way for a resurgence by those on the right. Money could still be found for more reliable box office names like Stoppard and Ayckbourn."<sup>57</sup>

The triumph of conservatism can relate to the triumph of the established theatres to attract the fringe talented writers such as Brenton, Hare, Edgar, Barker and Griffiths. The big theatres offered a great attraction to these young dramatists who were tempted to widen their horizons and reach broad audiences. "The NT and The RSC... offer much greater status for those who work within these institutions, an attraction when the fringe's financial rewards are so meagre. Productions are extensively reviewed in the national

press." 58 The resourceful theatres could pick up the experimental drama of the fringe by opening new buildings affiliated to the old ones : the Royal Court Theatre opened Theatre Upstairs, the National Theatre opened the Cottesloe, the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) opened Other Theatre in Stratford and the Pit in the Barbican. In its acknowledgment of the political theatre the Royal Court Theatre created the post of writer in residence which encouraged talented and experimental playwrights like Brenton and Caryl Churchill, etc. to write their best dramas. Peter Ansoage observes :

An immediate problem arises when this kind of work becomes of interest to more conventional theatres. Towards the end of 1972 the Portble writers made a gallant effort to interest the major repertory theatres in their group production of England's Ireland. This was a conscious policy to infiltrate the work of the fringe writers into larger auditoria around the country. It was part of a programme which included Brenton's Measure for Measure at the Northcott, Exter, the same author of Magnificence performed in the downstairs theatre at the Royal Court, and a season of plays under the direction of Richard Dyre (with David Hare as literary manager) at the Nottingham Playhouse. 59

Supporters of the alternative theatre found that "The post-1968 break-away movement became absorbed into the theatrical mainstream by state funding, and what had begun as a piece of political practice ended up as a job."<sup>60</sup> The Arts Council which gave support to the alternative groups, together with the big theatres, which attracted the most important playwrights of their generation, attempted to contain the fringe. Martin Esslin laments this situation thus : "The amulatory, truck-based pioneers of a truly working-class theatre did not reach the bulk of the working-class audience; and once the writers of that movement had been swallowed by the establishment sector they lost their foothold in that hypothetical - and idealized - audience for good and all."<sup>61</sup>

Post-1968 political theatre in Britain, which was manifested in the theatrical activities of different alternative groups had some lasting merits which went side by side with its demerits. These merits relate to the staging techniques which destroy the restraints of the well-made play, and to the interaction between the performers and the audience. Political theatre succeeded in creating lasting political results, and great changes in consciousness. It also could create

so many serious and highly skilful politically-committed playwrights such as Howard Brenton, David Edgar, David Hare, Howard Barker Snood Wilson and Caryl Churchill. Critics differ in their evaluation of contemporary political theatre in Britain, but most of them agree that it left lasting political results. In 1980, Catherine Itzin sees that political theatre had "succeeded in penetrating the bourgeois theatre with content and persone,"<sup>62</sup> though it failed to mobilise the masses. In 1984, Andrew Davies enumerates more positive aspects of political theatre :

The loss of confidence in political theatre did not detract in any way from the lasting contribution which it had made. One achievement, for example, was the assertion that, contrary to the commercial stage, politics and art could not be separated. It was noticeable that the old... drawing-room play disappeared almost completely. ...The social dimension of drama-the public' which had been ignored by the West End stage and even by writers like Beckett and Pinter with their concentration on the anguished individual- was also an essential part of political theatre. ... Although 'stars' and 'stardom' were still an integral part of the West End, with parts of it and elsewhere in the subsidised theatre the area of consultation and



participation had been widened. Finally, political theatre in Britain did try to take drama back to the people, touring and playing in front of audiences who had never been theatre-goers—unlike earlier writers such as G.B. Shaw who failed to match his words with his deeds. Never again would theatre and drama automatically be equated with traditional theatre buildings.<sup>63</sup>

like Andrew Davies, Ben Cameron believes in the important impact of the political theatre movement of 1968. He writes in 1981 : "In creating a new context for political theatre in Britain, in encouraging daring experimentation, and in sponsoring frequent interaction between young playwrights, the movement nurtured an impressive number of talents, many of whom continue to write in a consciously political, although more mature style."<sup>64</sup> As for Martin Esslin, he handles the impact of post-1968 political theatre from different perspectives. In New Theatre Voices (1981), Esslin imparts his view :

Here... we merely encounter the futility of expecting short-term results from political theatre. Over a longer period what matters is the change of consciousness, the gradual humanization of increasingly large number of people. And

in this respect the results already achieved are more than impressive: one only has to see recordings from dramatic offerings of the 'fifties to realize to what an extent the subject matter, the language, and the social range of drama have been widened in the last decades. It is not only the Anyone for Tennis kind of play that has been beaten back into its last bridgeheads in the West End, it is a whole arid, narrow, bigoted, intellectually and morally despicable ethos of an entire way of life that was still dominant in the fifties. This is where real revolutions happen - and they have decisively happened in this country.<sup>65</sup>

In the final assessment, political theatre in Britain after 1968 had, as shown above, some lasting merits which were generally recognized. Its defeat, which was also generally acknowledged, relates mainly to two kinds of causes : internal and external. Internal causes relate to the question which links drama with social change. Both Shaw and Brecht used the stage to propage their political ideals. Not all of their plays endured the test of time. They are remembered more for those plays (for example, Saint Joan and Mother Courage) which deal with some lasting human traits. Political drama, with the exception of that of the talented playwrights, who, though experimental and socialists,

could draw the public attention, had its seeds of destruction. Many of the political theatre groups ignored their theatre tools and focused on pedagogic and propagandistic slogans. Sandy Craig tries to analyse this "switch from agitprop to naturalism" saying : "Theatre doesn't spark off revolutions; very rarely is a performance the direct cause of riots."<sup>66</sup> She believes that political theatre can participate in social change through the theatre's traditional role of "teach and delight". Political theatre workers felt divided between the requirements of political propaganda and those of good theatre. In Martin Esslin's words :

Too propagandistic a commitment produces, inevitably, cardboard figures and bad drama- and bad drama will inevitably be unconvincing propaganda, while good drama will always also give the other side a fair hearing, and as such displease the pushers of the party line. Brenton, Griffiths, Barker, Hare, Mercer, Bond, and even John McGrath are clearly, highly conscious of this dilemma.<sup>67</sup>

The external causes behind the defeat of contemporary political theatre in Britain refer to the conservative switch in politics. This conservative trend was noticeable as early as the mid-1970s. It was a conservative spirit which took hold of all phases of life not only political life.

It also dominated Britain as well as Europe and America. In England it culminated in 1979 with the victory of the conservative party. It is a victory which dominated the whole eighties, reaching the early nineties. This victory of conservatism is strengthened by the decline of socialism in Eastern Europe. The decline of political, socialist theatre in Britain coincides with the decline of socialism. Instead of the highly propagandistic socialist plays of the late 1960s, and the first half of the 1970s, there appears a new trend towards realism and family plays with domestic and small-scale settings. Brenton, for example, though lamenting this decline, yet he tries to readjust himself to the new climate. Writing in 1990, Richard Boon observes : "Finding a new voice for the post-epic eighties, and the desire to describe a new politics, born out of defeat and rooted in the psychology of the individual, are two of Brenton's dominating concerns in the later work of the decade."<sup>68</sup> Like Brenton, Caryl Churchill could cope with the change of the eighties. Her highly successful play Serious Money (1987) as well as Brenton's Pravda (1985) which were written to satirize the City and the Press respectively can be considered, in Richard Boon's words "as rare examples of large-scale, leftist plays that

confront Thatcherism in the public arena."<sup>69</sup> Though epic in scope and was written to satirize the bourgeois capitalists, Serious Money retains the features of good drama, those features which characterize her dramatic art. "Her theatre stretches beyond topicality to comment on man's nature in general through her portrayal of contemporary men and women."<sup>70</sup> This switch to realistic and psychological drama which was perceived in the mid-1970s, affected also American drama. Sam Shepard's change of direction towards realistic plays dealing with the family coincided with the conservative universal spirit which affected both life and art. In an earlier research entitled "Harold Pinter's The Homecoming and Sam Shepard's Buried Child : A Comparative Study", the researcher pinpointed Shepard's change of direction and its reasons :

The impetus behind Shepard's turn of writing is both personal and artistic. His later plays, with their apparently conventional themes and form, partly reflect a new turn in both society and art with which he wants to cope. The later Shepard, according to many critics, must have been entangled in the conservative turn<sup>71</sup> in society and art by the mid-seventies.

The conservative tendencies which were largely

responsible for the defeat of post-1968 political drama in Britain could not be expected to be lasting or permanent. Looking at this turn in society and art from a historical perspective, we might see this change as inevitable being subjected to life's law of change. Life proceeds not according to straight lines but according to waves, according to ups and downs, according to actions and counter actions, according to revolutions and counter revolutions, and according to culture and counter culture. This view can be confirmed if we survey the political, social, and literary and artistic history of a given country, or of the whole world, as one entity. In England, during the era of Queen Elizabeth I, the political and religious aspects of life were inseparable. The voice of the puritans was suppressed only to gain power with the defeat of monarchy, and the victory of the puritans who started a short republican reign under Oliver Cromwell's leadership. The Puritans themselves were also defeated in 1660. The Restoration Age, famous for its moral laxity, was sharply contrasted with the rigidity of the previous era of the puritans. The Augustan age which follows the Restoration, was conservative and classical as opposed to the liberal and romantic, metaphorically-considered, ways of living of the

Restoration age. With the advent of the nineteenth century this life's law holds true. The Romantic Age testifies this law of the inevitability of change and counter conflicts. The Romantic Age was considered a revolution against the neo-classical age preceding it. With the advent of the modern age enhanced by the spread of science and the triumph of industry, by the middle of the nineteenth-century, this eternal life struggle took the form of a conflict between rigid (classical) and liberal (romantic) views of life; this conflict began to have other names, capitalism and socialism.

Capitalism as a school of thought and a political system began to dominate by the middle or the nineteenth century. It was resisted by socialists and communists in the nineteen twenties, an era which saw the rise of the Workers' Theatre Movement, which slightly affected the 1968 political drama. John Galsworthy and Shaw were prominent figures who fought by the side of the workers against capitalism. But this period had been eclipsed by a new conservative turn in the country that continued until the end of World War II. Since then, the conflict between capitalism and socialism reflects the conflict between the ruling parties, the Labour and the Conservative. The

long conservative reign in Britain which began in 1979 and remains up till now, should not be thought of to remain permanently. It is a view which the liberals wish to believe in. They think that there are still some hopes in the end of Mrs. Thatcher's rigid rule. John Major, the conservative Prime Minister, who has come after Mrs. Thatcher, is less detested by them.

The inevitability of change applies to all the arts as well, since they truly reflect political and social changes. If we consider literature since the Elizabethan age up to the Romantic age, we notice a ceaseless alternation between romanticism and classicism. With the emergence of the capitalistic system replacing the feudal system of previous ages, we see counter conflicts between capitalism and socialism. Shaw, a formidable playwright, who dominated the last part of the nineteenth century and at least one third of the twentieth-century, was viciously attacking both the romanticism of the previous era and capitalism, helped in this by writers far less in stature. With the prevalence of the drawing-room comedy as well as the poetic and religious drama of T.S.Eliot and Christopher Fry, the hold of socialism greatly declined. A conservative attitude dominated



the theatre until the mid-1950s when the angry group of playwrights appeared to resist the status-quo. As leftists, their drama offered a rebellion against the political, social and, to a lesser degree, the theatrical conventions. The political playwrights of post-1968 movement came to continue the struggle of the angries. Yet the latter group was more radical in their counter action against the capitalist state. To their disappointment they failed in effecting the revolution they aimed to reach. Soon they began to be dispersed by personal, artistic, and political reasons. A conservative spirit has come stronger than before to counteract the liberal spirit of the seventies. Life's law of the inevitability of change touches both life and art.

Now the nineties have already arrived and the conservative party still holds power. The Eastern block rebels against Stalinism and the communist rule. Two views here are raised; the first one sees no prospect in having a counter revolution as the whole world is dominated now by one capitalistic power, America. The other view, which the liberals might hold, is that the fall of dictatorship in Russia effected by Gorbachev's Perestroika and by millions of the

impoverished people who fought for freedom, might give hope for better applications of socialism. Richard Boon comments on the prospects of the theatre in the ninties :

In Britain today the theatre remains in crisis, but the greater issues of political life may be undergoing another sea-change. The solidity of the present government seems finally to be cracking, and the opposition has found a new unity and sense of direction, though its agenda could scarcely be described as radical. Events in Eastern Europe provide a powerful if uncertain model of fundamental change on the left. The way may be clearing for Brenton to return to what he has done best: the large-scale challenge to the left to ensure that both its policies and its underlying vision are firmly rooted in a profound awareness of the historical and national lessons of socialism.<sup>72</sup>

None of these two views is absolutely true. According to life's law of the inevitability of change, we must expect change. But things are less clear than before and we find ourselves at crossroads. Time and future generations can provide an answer to the question : what will be the future of the theatre ?

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