

The Theatre of John McGrath: between Theatre and Theory, between the Local and the International

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In a 1992 interview with the scholar and theatre-maker Jean-Pierre Simard, John McGrath quotes the following passage from Theodor W. Adorno's *Notes to Literature*:

One does not understand a work of art when one translates it into concepts - if one simply does that, one misunderstands the work from the outset - but rather when one is immersed in its immanent movement... if the work is not to be disfigured rationalistically, *Verstehen* in the specific conceptual meaning of the word will emerge only in an extremely mediated way, namely in that the substance grasped through the completed experience is reflected in its relationship to the material of the work and the language of its forms. (1992, p. 97)

This is an iconic passage, one that has inspired much debate about the relationships between literary form and content within the general modernist discussions about committed art. It is fascinating that McGrath himself chooses this passage to frame a broader discussion with Simard and like many a McGrath interview it is far-reaching in its scope and breadth, covering themes such as the fraught transition from modernism to postmodernism, the role of committed art and the specific role of theatre within this context. McGrath does not shy away from aligning his work in what he calls an 'extreme form of parataxis' with the 'great arsenal of Marxist criticism'(1992).

Again the use of the term 'parataxis' is telling. It, too, is an Adornian term used in his 1963 essay on Hölderlin's late poetry and appears in the above-mentioned collection of essays. And despite McGrath's evocation of the singularity, even the autonomy of the work of art, he was, of course, both a theatre maker and a theatre theorist. What this term proposes, however, is a way of reading these two aspects of his creative life that does not rely on a hypotactic bind, one of opposition,

comparison, determination or causality (linked by terms such as but/because/however/therefore etc). McGrath's qualification of this parataxis as 'extreme' only highlights the fact these two aspects of his project need to be read side-by-side linked only by the paratactic term AND.

McGrath's evocation of Adorno also quotes one of the determining debates within modernist aesthetics, a debate where theatre occupied a privileged position. This is a debate that has determined the frames and contours but also the formal experiments in political theatre throughout the twentieth century. It has in many ways provided political theatre with the vocabulary to articulate itself and with a tool-kit for formal experimentation. Through the heated discussions between Walter Benjamin, Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht and Theodor Adorno, discussions that all took place within the shadow of the rise of Nazism and Fascism, the function of art and its relationship to politics becomes urgent, indeed crucial – sometimes a matter of life and death. Elizabeth Wright usefully summarises this debate in the following way:

The four protagonists in the on-going theoretical confrontation about the relation between aesthetics and politics all shaped the future course of what is now known as ideological criticism, that is, the attempt to demystify the notion of art as an autonomous practice, unchanged by the history of its production and reception. (1989, p. 69)

Indeed, McGrath's own positioning of his work within this context invites us too to consider his writing on theatre as an inflection and elaboration of the famous modernist debates about the relationships between formal experimentation and political efficacy. His own works *A Good Night Out* (1981), *The Bone Won't Break* (1990) and *Naked Thoughts That Roam About* (2002) appear at crucial moments in the development of political theatre in the UK, and although they may lack the theoretical rigour of the above mentioned more philosophical writings about the relationships between aesthetics and politics, they still appear to be informed by the basic tenets of a broadly Marxist tradition of ideological criticism. In some ways, we may claim that McGrath's theatrical and theoretical output constitute a specifically

British attempt to appropriate, re-write and adjust those debates within the post-war historical reality of Britain and its cultural legacies.

Although Brecht would be McGrath's natural ally in the above debate, the figure we would most expect him to identify with, throughout his life, McGrath always had a critical and highly suspect attitude towards Brecht. His fidelity to the local and the popular, which informed McGrath's work could also account for his hesitant stance towards Brecht. This in some ways may explain his alignment with Adorno, as unlikely as that may initially appear. However, both Brecht and Adorno were highly critical of any endorsement of the popular or oral tradition. McGrath's echoing of Adorno in the opening iconic quotation may be more of an attempt to speak as a creative writer, one who throughout his life was accused of being political, indeed polemical in many cases. The other figure that McGrath evokes from the great Marxist tradition of cultural criticism to accommodate his championing of the oral and the popular is, of course, Antonio Gramsci. And in this context the specifically Scottish aspect of McGrath's work is significant, as the work of Gramsci informed much of the folk revival in 1970s Scotland. Poets like Hamish Henderson were not only influenced by Gramscian ideas of the critical potential of the popular tradition for literary production, but also more directly translated Gramsci's works in some of the first translations available in English (Henderson 1988). In evoking both Adorno and Gramsci in an otherwise incongruous combination, indeed in the same sentence in the interview mentioned above, McGrath is not simply being cavalier in his use of Marxist cultural criticism, but attempting that paratactic application of terms, forms and tropes that allow him to engage critically with both the local and the international. On the one hand, his calling upon Adorno allows him to intervene within the high and sometimes highly strung modernist debates whose legacies we still inhabit, while on the other the mentioning of Gramsci, almost in the same breath, allows him to construct a version of the oral/popular that despite or perhaps due to its Romantic undertones sees it as critical and emancipatory.

McGrath's ambivalence towards Brecht was matched by his equal suspicion of the Historical Avant-garde. Perhaps due to the ways the legacies of the continental avant-garde have been partly re-written within both the discourses of the cold-war and

within those of postmodernism, where the emphasis is placed on formal experiment at the expense of political engagement, his view of the avant-garde tradition was somewhat dismissive. However, this could perhaps be another legacy that can help provide his work with both an international and a local genealogy. The one avant-garde tradition that McGrath does acknowledge and pays homage to in his writings is the Blue Blouse (*Siniaya Bluza*) (1923-28) that appeared in the post-revolutionary fervour of the USSR. This was an extraordinary project that at its peak probably played to over 100,000 people, achieving an international reputation. It also, and significantly for McGrath, relied heavily on avant-garde experimentation while filtering this through a more accessible popular aesthetic. Against some of the charges of elitism and formalism that were already beginning to be levelled against the previous generation of Russian avant-garde artists, the Blue Blouse was deliberately direct and agitational, more concerned with communicative efficacy than formal experimentation, utilising agit-prop techniques and the 'living newspaper' format. At the same time, they borrowed heavily from the popular and oral performing traditions and they relied on the structures of amateur club theatre for their tours and their audiences. The following account from the Moscow correspondent of the *Christian Science Monitor* of 3 March, 1928, merits quoting in full:

They sing, dance, play the accordion, declaim, act and transform costumes on the stage with sleight-of-hand rapidity. If they are still inferior to the 'Chauve-Souris' in finesse they possess more agility. Their handsprings, somersaults, and balancing features of their production... One of their most effective skits is entitled 'Industrialization'. One after another the actors come out in fantastic costumes, adorned with symbols indicating factory buildings, installation of electrical stations or other items in the program of industrialization... The theme of one of their satirical pieces is the unfortunate plight of a poor Soviet Citizen whose existence the bureaucrats in various institutions refuse to recognise, because he has somewhere mislaid his indispensable 'document' or passport... []

A piano furnishes a brisk accompaniment, usually jazz, to most of the performances, and snatches of Russian songs and melodies, played on the accordion, are interspersed. (Deak 1971, p. 36)

As we can see from this account, the aesthetic of the *Blue Blouse* managed to strike a balance between the formal experimentation of the Russian avant-garde and popular performing traditions. The ‘skits’ were structured round techniques borrowed from the circus, the cabaret and the review, all adapted and rewritten. In turn and with minor adjustments (substituting amateur club theatres for town halls, Russian songs for Gaelic songs etc), the above quotation could also read like a description of one of 7:84’s touring productions of plays like *The Cheviot, the Stage and the Black, Black, Oil*.

We can draw further links with the radical strand of the historical avant-garde. The theatrical precedent of the Blue Blouse can also be paralleled with the period’s investment in and experimentation with the form of the manifesto. Ordained by Marx as ‘the poetry of the revolution’ the manifesto trope brings together discourses of philosophy and theatricality, polemic and theory, poetry and politics in one of the period’s most radical gestures. Brecht’s own concept of ‘Crude Thinking’ can also be read within the framework of the manifesto. This fusion of aesthetics and politics that the manifesto enacts always contains within it the seeds of an often unrealisable and utopian future. Alain Badiou writes:

The Manifesto is the reconstruction, in an intermediate future, of that which, being of the order of the act, of a vanishing flash, does not let itself be named in the present... This rhetorical invention of a future which is on its way to existing in the shape of an act is a useful and even necessary thing. (2007, p. 138)

This analysis would like to propose that we read McGrath’s theoretical writings within the general context of the manifesto, in the ways they bring together an analysis of the present and always gesture towards a utopian future. Indeed, from *A Good Night Out* to his last collection of essays *Naked Thoughts* (the last entry of which is entitled ‘The Future’), for McGrath that ‘intermediate future’ that Badiou refers to is the domain of the stage. In positing the stage as such an in-between space where the future is rehearsed, McGrath’s writings on theatre also encompass a

polemical and agitational dimension, one that like many a manifesto, has the ability because of and not despite of its crudeness to arouse debate and inspire emotional polemic. At least, this writer feels this every time she introduces *A Good Night Out* to a new group of students. I am always impressed by its ability to ignite heated debate, impassioned positions, and sometimes over-the-top purely theatrical reactions.

This is not, however, all that McGrath's writings on theatre do; they also create a very specific, revisionist genealogy for British political theatre. They deliberately look back at that watershed moment of 1956 for British theatre. This is the year that saw the staging of Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* and the first UK tour of the Berliner Ensemble. David Edgar writes:

At the time, the play and its message were anatomised in leading articles, discussed by school debating societies, and worried at in the pulpit. In retrospect, its first production at the Royal Court has become, in the words of Mark Ravenhill, the creation myth of contemporary British Theatre (2006. p. 22).

From *A Good Night Out* onwards and in his own productions, McGrath radically revises this 'creation myth' of British theatre, by drawing on and in many ways helping to delineate a local and popular genealogy for British political theatre, one that itself is seen to be heavily inflected by the experiments of the continental avant-garde. McGrath goes further back than 1956 and draws on the traditions of political theatre established from the 1930s onwards by such figures as Ewan McColl and the Salford Red Megaphones, Joan Littlewood and the various Unity Theatres. As he claims, 'a different story was being told' (1981, p. 17).

This coupling of the local and the international that McGrath's work constantly aspires towards is perhaps most evident in his use of theatrical conventions – the toolkit or 'arsenal' mentioned in the above quoted interview. Focusing on one specific convention might work as a test case of the kind of aesthetic but also political work that his application and reactivation of theatrical conventions perform in his work. The last public lecture delivered by McGrath at a conference organised by the

late David Bradby at London University in 1999 was entitled ‘Theatre and Democracy’. McGrath starts this lecture by extensively quoting Brecht’s poem *The Anachronistic Procession, or Freedom and Democracy*. Significantly, however, he quotes this in performance as created ‘by the sight and sound of Ekkehardt Schall’s savage rendition’ (2002, p. 228). In turn McGrath is aware that Brecht’s poem is itself a re-writing of Shelley’s *Mask of Anarchy* (1819), his response to the Peterloo riots and the massacre that followed them. Indeed, Brecht’s engagement with English Romanticism, particularly its radical strand, according to more recent criticism, has informed his own thinking about the relationships between form and content, between realism and the lyric and broadly speaking between theatre and politics. Robert Kaufman writes about Brecht’s essay-translation of Shelley’s poem:

Brecht claims, as he begins his essay-translation, that ‘the great revolutionary English poet P. B. Shelley’ demonstrates how a vital fusion of aesthetic experiment, speculative imagination, and lyric song may lead to, rather than away from, critical mimesis of the real (the latter being virtually synonymous, throughout ‘Weite und Vielfalt’, with commitment). (2005, p. 135)

It is fascinating to note that McGrath too draws inspiration from the radical Romantic tradition, in his attempt to at once discuss the constitutive relationships between theatre and democracy, but also and significantly to find an aesthetic form that can accommodate them. The form or trope of the procession seems apt, as it brings together the poetic and the performative, drawing on both a popular performing tradition (that has a long and distinguished history from the Mysteries onwards in the Anglophone world) and on the literary inheritance of radical Romanticism. It is one of the forms that McGrath adapts and reactivates in his own work. These intricate intertextual echoes that link Shelley, Brecht and McGrath through the trope of the procession highlight McGrath’s acknowledged debt to both the popular performing traditions that the procession evokes and the more literary legacies of Romanticism. Shelley’s *Mask of Anarchy* itself draws heavily on both the ballad tradition and the procession form. His poem features the Masks of Murder, Hypocrisy, Fraud and Anarchy. Banned for 30 years after its original publication it has since been regarded

as one of greatest poems of protest but also of agitational ‘call to arms’. Here are some characteristic verses:

Ye who suffer woes untold,
Or to feel, or to behold
Your lost country bought and sold
With a price of blood and gold.

Let a vast assembly be,
And with great solemnity
Declare with measured words that ye
Are, as God has made ye, free.

Let the charged artillery drive
Till the dead air seems alive
With the clash of clanging wheels,
And the tramp of horses' heels.

Stand ye calm and resolute,
Like a forest close and mute,
With folded arms and looks which are
Weapons of unvanquished war,

And that slaughter to the Nation
Shall steam up like inspiration,
Eloquent, oracular;
A volcano heard afar.

Rise like Lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number,
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you-
Ye are many - they are few. (2012)

Brecht’s re-working of Shelley’s poem appropriately pays respect not only to its content but also to its form, something that is clearly indicated in his title, *The Anachronistic Procession, or Freedom and Democracy* (1947). Here are the first and last stanzas, also quoted by McGrath:

Spring returned to Germany
In the ruins you could see
Early green birch buds unfold
Graceful, tentative and bold.

.....
Cold winds blow a requiem
From the ruins over them

Former tenants of the flats
That once stood here. Then great rats

Leave the rubble in their masses
Join in the column as it passes
Squeaking 'Freedom!' as they flee
'Freedom and Democracy!' (2002, pp. 229-30)

Brecht's poem parodies the idea of the procession as an inherently democratic form, turning it into one of demagoguery and 'false democracy'. It is this idea that McGrath himself comments on and finds useful in his thinking about theatre and democracy. He writes:

One of the great services theatre can perform for the people of any country or region or town or village is to be the instrument of authentic democracy, or at the very least to push the community as near to authentic democracy as has yet been achieved.

Brecht's verse and indeed Shelley's *Masque of Anarchy* fulfil one of the major responsibilities of any citizen of a democracy – to draw attention to false democracy. (2002, p. 230)

And this attention is drawn, according to McGrath not solely through the evocation of ideas and the content of a theatrical work, but also through the specific forms it utilizes. The procession emerges as one such form, that McGrath himself calls upon regularly throughout his work. *Border Warfare* (1989) opens with one such procession. This was a promenade performance that started with a procession led by huge puppets representing Hunger, Famine, Anarchy etc (possibly also quoting Shelley). The play, which deals with the fraught historical relationships between Scotland and England, opens with a presentation of the relationships between the past and the present in the form of a corpse, wheeled on in a pram:

CORPSE:

I was a Pict and slain by a Scot
An Anglican peasant by an English army,
A Gael by a Gollach,
A Presbyterian tortured by Mary's men,
A Tim shot through the head by an Orangeman,

A Pisky by Cromwell,
 A Highlander by Cumberland,
 I was a heretic burnt by Knox,
 A Comyn stabbed by Bruce,
 A Crofter's child with cholera on the boat to
 Nova Scotia,
 I was the flower of Scotland
 Broken at the stem,
 I was a soldier on the Somme, I was drowned in the Minch
 A young wife with T.B. in the slums of
 Paisley.
 I was a miner when the roof went,
 A witch at the stake,
 A still-born child,
 A baby with AIDS:
 Let me now lie in peace.
 Put me in the earth with decency and
 Thoughtfulness. (1996)

There are many ways in which this procession too can be read as 'anachronistic': in the ways it mingles the past with the present; in the ways it resists a linear, mono-lingual and mono-cultural past; in the ways it refuses to read that past as heroic but insists on reading it through its ruins; and in the ways it opens the performance through the evocation of death, which should really be its end. For, of course, a good four hours of performance follow the call to let this CORPSE 'lie in peace'.

And in reactivating the trope of the procession, McGrath's work draws on the genealogy of processions from the medieval mysteries, but crucially via Brecht and the radical Romantic legacies.

These legacies can also be seen in the title of his last published collection of essays, *Naked Thoughts That Roam About*, which quotes Wordsworth. This brings together 'Reflections on Theatre' from as early as 1959, in a remarkable display of consistency of thought, commitment and passion. This fidelity to the poetic but also to the polemical runs throughout the book, which ends with the above mentioned essay, 'Theatre and Democracy'. Once again McGrath makes a special case for the particularity of theatre to 'unmask' false democracy. In this instance, and continuing his life-long engagement with radical Marxist thinkers he refers to the work of Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997), a Greek-French philosopher and psychoanalyst

who lived and worked in Paris (one of the founding members of the influential group *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, 1948-67). Castoriadis's particular brand of left thinking champions the idea of workers' self-management and later in his life he was more concerned with the ethics and politics of the so-called 'project of autonomy'. In this, autonomy for citizens is always seen in conjunction with democratic institutions (and not necessarily the state per se). For Castoriadis, and hence the attraction for McGrath theatre is such an institution, fundamental for the workings of democracy, for unmasking false democracy and, crucially, for imagining the future (Castoriadis 1998). This fusion of libertarian socialism and psychoanalysis with theatre at its heart proves very inspiring for McGrath. In a gesture that brings together polemic, theory, theatre and utopia this last section of his final book is entitled: *The Future*.

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