political theatre in post-Thatcher Britain
new writing: 1995–2005
amelia howe kritzer

performance interventions
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Political Theatre in Post-Thatcher Britain
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Political Theatre in Post-Thatcher Britain

New Writing: 1995–2005

Amelia Howe Kritzer
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With my husband Bert I have shared trips abroad, many nights of theatre, and lively political discussions. I acknowledge Bert’s continuous encouragement of my work and dedicate this book to him.
In a sense, all theatre is political. Theatre’s context and referent is the world, and as John McGrath observed, ‘There is no such thing as a de-politicized world’ (2002: 199). While theatre is not the only art with political dimensions, it offers a unique forum for the political by involving audiences in a perceptible, if ephemeral, social reality through the operation of its conventions. Evidence of the close and perhaps intrinsic relationship between politics and theatre can be found in the long history of governmental regulation of theatre in degrees and forms that have not been applied to music, visual art, or written fiction. Theatre’s most basic political potential lies in its paradigmatic relationship to the polis: within theatre’s space, assembled citizens view and consider representations of their world enacted for them in the immediacy of live performance. As Richard Schechner states, drama is ‘that art whose subject, structure, and action is social process’ (121). Michael Kustow similarly describes theatre as both ‘an art and … a model of living together’ (xv).

Writing of political processes, the philosopher Hannah Arendt argued that a necessary constituent of political freedom is a space in which freedom can be exercised – ‘a place where people could come together’ (25). Theatre provides such a space, in the most tangible sense, and the conventions associated with theatrical performance provide a rudimentary social organization of the performers and spectators. Though its free status is always mediated by multiple economic and regulatory factors, theatre offers a medium for exposing problems, exploring issues, advocating action in public or private life, and experimenting with changed relations of power within the context of a form that participates in the social in a variety of direct and metaphoric ways.

Theatre’s particular power consists not only in the space or the audience assembled there, or even in its representations per se, but also in the
means of enactment – actors playing roles. The psychological interplay between the real actor and the fictional role gives theatre the characteristic that Victor Turner has termed ‘liminality’, to indicate location in a border zone of experience and consciousness. Schechner and other scholars have pointed out that theatre shares the quality of liminality with religious and social rituals involved in the formation and maintenance of individual and group identity. Erica Fischer-Lichte argues that theatre’s central function, occurring through the interactions between actor and role and between actor and audience, is the staging of identity. Fischer-Lichte suggests that the human ‘finds himself via the detour of another’ and that theatre ‘symbolizes the human condition of creating identity to the extent to which it makes the distancing of man from himself the condition of its existence’ (3, 5). Bringing together the theories of Helmut Plessner, Denis Diderot, and Judith Butler, Fischer-Lichte postulates that ‘the actor’s skill in staging the identity of a role . . . allows [the spectator] to play with different identities and possibly even encourages him to make a change in his identity’ (4). The relationship between theatre and identity traced by Fischer-Lichte in her historical analysis of European drama asserts a remarkable potential of theatre as a form of political expression. Identity structures political understanding, choice, and action. Changes in, and even heightened awareness of personal or group identity lead to changes in perception of the body politic and all that relates to it.

Contemporary theatre couples this powerful psychological interaction with a freedom often taken for granted but none the less remarkable. In Western democratic societies, theatre may deal with any subject brought to its stages. Because theatre attendance is a voluntary and conscious act, theatre is not currently subject to the restrictions placed on television and even film – forms that to a greater extent inhabit what can be deemed public environments. Taboo-breaking plays created controversy and heightened interest in theatre periodically throughout the twentieth century, from the utterance of obscenities in Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* to the explicit presentation of homosexuality in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*. Even in times and places where theatre has been restricted, the multiple meanings inherent in the semiotics of performance have given theatre the means by which to initiate forbidden discourses, such as in the staging of Jean Anouilh’s *Antigone* in Nazi-occupied Paris. The freedom of the theatre, moreover, goes beyond the ostensible topic of the play or performance presented. Theatre is always about form as well as topic, and performance has the potential to destabilize definitions and identities. The cross-gender roles in Caryl Churchill’s *Cloud Nine*, for
example, stimulated profound questioning and reorientation regarding gender identities.

Despite theatre’s political potential, relatively few plays of any era exhibit overtly political aims. Those that do must overcome both artistic and social challenges to find and reach audiences. First among these challenges is the audience’s desire for a pleasurable escape from the world around them. Escape in some form is inherent in the art of theatre, as actors take on the identity of characters and create an artificial world on stage, while audience members invest mental and emotional attention in these characters and their world. Pleasurable escape, however, implies distance from problems or situations that call for concrete action. Even ancient Greek audiences may not have appreciated seeing situations that were too close to current reality, since Aeschylus’s early play *The Persians* is the only Greek tragedy known to dramatize a contemporary historical event. Daphna Ben Chaim, building upon the work of Edward Bullough and Jean-Paul Sartre, theorizes that psychological distance, or the ability to visualize the art object as a fiction, is necessary to the experience of the aesthetic. In a practical sense, the theatre experience generally implies a brief holiday from responsibility, with no intrusive reminders of actual obligations. Of course, politics itself can provide such a holiday for some audience members, especially when its entertainment value is heightened by personal misconduct, as in the recent tabloid-churning adventures of former British Home Secretary David Blunkett. However, it should be obvious that distance from the issues in question heightens their entertainment value; one might reasonably speculate that the prime minister, for example, would not consider misconduct on the part of one of his cabinet members pleasurably entertaining.

Subtler in its operation, a commonly perceived separation of cultural institutions from political life poses a challenge to political art. This separation arises from a model of culture as a quasi-sacred sphere dedicated to the preservation of works that exemplify truth and beauty, uncorrupted by political discussion or topical issues more generally. Political or even topical content stands as a mark of inferior work that should be excluded from the cultural sphere. This model of culture centres on veneration of the past and established masters, as well as a philosophical belief in universally understood standards of truth and beauty. It creates an elite group of educated individuals with the power to select and interpret cultural presentations. While the idea of culture as a pure font of truth and beauty might appear ridiculously outmoded in the contemporary intellectual context, it has by no means been laid to rest,
despite the best efforts of modern and postmodern criticism. Control of the cultural sphere by a specialized and non-democratic elite remains unchanged. Postmodern critiques have actually reinforced boundaries of cultural authority through the elite nature of their discourse.

Many plays included within the canon of world drama contest the ostensible boundary between the cultural and the political. Political theatre in Britain draws upon the strengths of a rich tradition that goes back at least to Norton and Sackville’s Gorbuduc, in 1562. The Elizabethan theatre played a role in the politics of its time (see, e.g., Mullaney’s 1995 study), and the plays of Shakespeare contain a strong current of political commentary (see, e.g., Dollimore, 2003). Theatre became a symbol of royal decadence in the Commonwealth period, and an arena for expression of expanded social freedom in the Restoration. The early eighteenth century produced a vigorously oppositional political theatre; its anti-government satires brought on the Licensing Act of 1737. Late Victorian theatre included activist writers such as G.B. Shaw, John Galsworthy, Arthur Wing Pinero, and Somerset Maugham, with dramas that commented on class, gender, and other socio-political issues. Plays deeply involved with the Irish nationalist movement, such as those by J.M. Synge, Augusta Gregory, and Sean O’Casey, have formed the core of an enduring political consciousness. The early-twentieth-century workers’ movement produced overtly political plays (see Goorney and MacColl, 1986), in spite of the fact that the Lord Chamberlain’s office could withhold permission for the performance of plays considered politically objectionable.¹

More recent developments provide the backdrop against which the political expression of contemporary plays must inevitably be discussed. British political theatre acquired a unifying identity and international visibility in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the voices of young men with working-class origins were heard for the first time. The ‘angry young men’ rebelled against the proverbial patience and self-effacement of the English common people. Their anger can be viewed in the light of what later came to be known as identity politics. In demanding a place in the economic and social structure of the middle class for those not born into it, the angry young men implicitly sought changes in the organization of a tradition-bound, class-based society. Although recent reassessments of the plays of this era have offered alternate interpretations of their political significance (see Shellard, 1999; Rebellato, 1999), the unifying idea of anger brought socialist playwrights such as Edward Bond, John Arden, and Harold Pinter to public attention and created an alliance between theatre and leftist politics.
Politics and Theatre

The end of official censorship of theatre in 1968 brought greater freedom of expression and a diverse range of demands for recognition and power. Activists who organized around such issues as nuclear disarmament, feminism, gay rights, and regional identity contributed to an explosive increase in the number and variety of politically oriented theatres. The agendas of political theatre expanded beyond trade unions, socialism, and the working class, to engage with issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Companies with varied political agendas— including Foco Novo, Freehold, Portable Theatre, Belt and Braces, Gay Sweatshop, Joint Stock, Monstrous Regiment, the Tara Arts Group, Northwest Spanner, Red Ladder, the 7:84 Companies in England and Scotland, Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre (CAST), Women’s Theatre Group, and Welfare State International—were established during the 1970s. At the same time, a number of established theatres in London and other cities added small studio spaces primarily for in-house production of new plays. The small theatres, art centres, and touring companies of the alternative theatre movement began to be referred to as the Fringe—a term that in itself carried obvious political implications.

As its scope and aims expanded beyond specific issues to a broader expression of hopes for a less destructive and more egalitarian, spontaneous, and pleasure-based society, political theatre became a countercultural movement known as alternative theatre. Drawing on a reservoir of idealism and communitarian energy, the alternative theatre movement envisioned a refashioning of the cultural landscape. Thus the work of alternative companies often made form part of the message. They experimented with new techniques of creation, performed in community centres, pubs, schools, village halls, clubs, and on the streets, as well as in smaller theatres, and favoured what Michael Patterson calls ‘interventionist’ strategies over ‘reflectionist’ ones such as realism. The pervasive spirit of rebellion found expression in the National Theatre’s first season in 1976, which included Weapons of Happiness, a celebration of youthful anarchy written by Howard Brenton and directed by David Hare. In their survey of recent British theatre, Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright observe, ‘Not every playwright of the ‘70s was politically on the left, but being left-wing was the mood of the time’ (2001: 281).

Government arts subsidies were a major factor enabling the development of alternative and regional theatre in Britain in the 1970s, as the Arts Council increased its level of funding under the Wilson governments (1964–70; 1974–76).

When British politics made an abrupt shift to the right in the 1980s, the alternative theatre culture that had risen as a jubilant wave of
exploration and experimentation contracted to a position of opposition, while the era of Conservative Party leadership changed both material and psychological dimensions of the cultural landscape. As Thatcher’s policies gained a stranglehold on the Arts Council and other institutions, such as borough councils, that supported political theatre, funding cuts and outright elimination of subsidies drove many smaller theatre companies – especially those most associated with leftist politics – out of existence. Higher costs coupled with new requirements for obtaining corporate sponsorship and making detailed financial reports strained the resources of all subsidized theatres, exhausted the energy of many small companies, and reduced their productive capacity.

As theatres struggled to survive, the playwrights who expressed opposition to Thatcherism maintained the philosophical underpinnings of the political theatre of the 1970s, even as the tide of optimistic idealism ebbed. Their attacks targeted specific policies, directions, and effects of the Thatcher government. Howard Brenton and David Hare satirized the takeover of a large sector of British journalism by a wealth-obsessed entrepreneur who embodied Thatcher’s free market ideals in *Pravda* (1985). Caryl Churchill sharply interrogated the assumptions and values of Thatcherism in *Top Girls* (1982) and *Serious Money* (1987). Jim Cartwright’s *Road* (1986) and Kay Adshead’s *Thatcher’s Women* (1987) dramatized conditions in the north and west of England, where entire industries had collapsed and millions of workers were unemployed. Increasingly through the Thatcher era, as Peacock has pointed out, playwrights retreated into explorations of personal, rather than public, issues, while new theatre companies tended to direct their energy towards aesthetic experimentation rather than social or political goals. By the early 1990s, the energy of opposition had dissipated, and political theatre, no less than political parties of the left, had failed to articulate ideas that expressed the aspirations of the majority of the public.

Recent trends in Britain have created new challenges for political theatre. Politics has entered a less oppositional phase. The mid-1990s brought electoral rejection of Conservative politics but no renaissance of the political left. The Labour Party, which failed to oust the Tories until it recast itself as New Labour, took power by discarding socialist goals and the grass-roots passion for political wrangling with which Labour had long been identified. In the post-Thatcher era, the public shows a trend towards decreased identification with ideologies, as well as a tendency to view with scepticism the claims of political parties and organizations to offer solutions to societal problems. Divisive issues such as animal rights and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict stand in the way of re-establishing a
broad-ranging leftist coalition. The end of Thatcher’s government also
did not bring about a clear reversal of the policies she instituted. New
Labour has in some ways accommodated to Thatcher’s legacy, and the
Conservative Party has also moved towards the centre on issues such as
affiliation with the European Economic Community.

Political convergence and the breakdown of ideological identity
have reoriented political theatre. Drama relies on conflict and proves
most readily understood if the parties to the conflict are easily identifi­
able. Political drama in Britain today cannot rely upon familiar opposi­
tions; instead, it must structure and define a political landscape, before
it can stake out positions. Even then, a dramatist cannot be sure that
audiences will recognize the landscape or understand the positions.
As Max Stafford-Clark asserted in a discussion reported by Michael
Billington, ‘In the ’80s we all knew who the enemy was. Now we are
not so sure’ (2001). The current political environment, dominated by the
deliberately vague surface of New Labour politics, has created an ideolo­
gical vacuum that serves to disable activism and foster cynicism. The
political theatre of the 1970s continues to exert power as a model of
political drama; however, the energy and optimism that fuelled it has
dissipated.

The re-emergence of political theatre in the late 1990s thus came as a
surprise to critics and audiences. In 2003, the arts editor of the Guardian
decided to explore this phenomenon by asking currently active play­
wrights about their interest in and practice of political theatre. The
Guardian launched a series of essays in which playwrights responded to
the question ‘What is political theatre?’ A remarkable selection of dra­
matists offered a spectrum of definitions and defining strategies. Two
veteran playwrights argued against explicitly political plays. Pam Gems
insisted that politics ‘belong on the platform, in the committee room, on
the march’ (17 May 2003). Arnold Wesker asserted, ‘My own work begins
with human beings, not ideas’ (Guardian 15 March 2003). Younger play­
wrights took a more complex view of political theatre but acknowledged
disadvantages in being tagged as a political playwright. Michael Wynne
asked if plays ‘deemed political . . . will end up like the ballot box with no
one interested, no one coming?’ (3 May 2003). Gregory Burke stated that
in his play Gagarin Way, ‘there is a lot of talk about politics, but what it is
really about is community’ (12 April 2003). Even David Edgar qualified
the political aspect of his work by highlighting his fascination with the
‘human passions’ that underlie politics (19 April 2003).

Writers who personally and artistically represent ethnic or racial mino­
rities in Britain argued that, for them, politics are unavoidable. Gary
Mitchell explained that actors have approached his plays about working-class Loyalists in Ulster on the basis of whether they portray Protestants in a negative light. Kwame Kwei-Armah wrote forcefully of the challenges in working within the mainstream theatre, with its pressure for assimilation, while maintaining a distinctively Afro-Caribbean voice and viewpoint. The convergence of the personal and political became clear for him in the repeated experience of having strangers commend and thank him for marrying a black woman, in contrast to the pattern of many successful black men. Rather than seeking to evade it, Kwei-Armah embraced the political, defining his political goal as using the stage to ‘refract through the humanity of my cultural lenses’ (10 May 2003).

A pair of playwrights separated by a generation located their understandings of political theatre within a historical context. Mark Ravenhill argued that Anglo-Irish drama has long been defined by a close association with politics. He placed his own work within a ‘pragmatic, materialist’ tradition that focuses on the ‘sociological, the anthropological, the political’ (22 March 2003). With ironic humour, Ravenhill suggested that government subsidy of theatre perhaps obligates contemporary playwrights to justify the public’s investment by contributing to an understanding of society. Nevertheless, he concluded, ‘to capture the truth of the new world we live in is an exciting ambition’ (ibid.). David Hare offered a personal historical perspective in a moving evocation of what it has meant to ‘choose drama’ as a means of political expression:

Failure is our element. Theatre has changed as little as society. Yet many of us have ended up curiously buoyant, not, let’s hope, consoled but braced by the beauty of what we are attempting, in art as much as in politics. We are sustained by the thing itself, its superb difficulty … it is remarkable how many of us feel that even if it has been a lifetime of failure, it has not been a lifetime of waste’ (24 May 2003).

Analysis of the interaction between theatre and politics in Britain today, which is the aim of this study, must start by answering the question posed in the Guardian essays. This response to the question ‘What is political theatre?’ will begin with a discussion of what is meant by the political. Politics, the set of processes through which power is exchanged, structures social systems and operates at every level within a society. The ideal of liberal democracy envisons a broadly inclusive political system with equitable representation of groups and classes and peaceful resolution of conflicts between different constituencies. The incomplete realization of this ideal has formed the basis for most twentieth-century
political movements in Britain and other democracies. More recently, the ideal itself and its underlying assumptions have been questioned by postmodern theorists.

Although politics pervades social life, only a small part of its operation draws public attention. Elected officials, political parties, and governing bodies such as parliament or local councils constitute what is most often perceived as the political sphere. Such public-sector institutions as education and health care are generally understood to have a political aspect. Beyond these obvious manifestations, much of politics remains hidden unless an interested party makes it visible – in other words, makes an issue of it. Political theorist Murray Edelman has written about the visible political sphere as ‘the political spectacle’ (1988), using a consciously theatrical term to describe phenomena that are widely perceived as political. Making particular issues or actions visible constitutes the fundamental operation of political activism. Edelman characterizes political developments as ‘creations of the publics concerned with them’ (1988: 2). Obviously, the more powerful a particular group within a society, the greater control it exercises over the visibility of issues and actions. Furthermore, given the central role played by the mass media in constructing the political spectacle in contemporary societies, those with greater access to the media by definition exercise greater political power.

Visibility is one path to power within a political system. A group, or even a single individual under some circumstances, may construct an issue through some type of public campaign. If successful, the campaign will capture media attention, provoke further campaigning, and eventually result in bureaucratic and/or legislative action. Interpretation provides a second, equally important means of gaining power. As Edelman observes, ‘in every era and every national culture, political controversy and maneuver have hinged upon conflicting interpretations of current actions and developments’ (2). Thus, an interested party may construct a reinterpretation of an already visible issue, initiate a campaign to promote the alternate interpretation, and seek through this campaign to convince others of that view.

A political system offers endless potential issues and interpretations. The achievement of visibility means being perceived in distinction to a mass of competing items in an array of information sources. Considering that most sources of news and information are commercial ones, the competition arises not only from different news stories but also from advertising. Reading a newspaper, one may find one’s sympathies aroused by a report of suffering in a famine, be moved to moral outrage by an article about the torture of prisoners, but actually take action to
purchase something in response to an advertisement. Given the constant and varied flow of information, any issue must fight a Darwinian battle to make it to the forefront of public consciousness. Once there, it faces the even greater challenge of holding the attention of the public for the length of time necessary to accomplish any political change. The confusion and distraction generated by the multiplicity of issues, constant streams of information, and persuasive appeals of ubiquitous advertisements play a part in generating apathy and leading to political disengagement. Disengagement, which Edelman terms ‘the power of indifference’ (8), constitutes a factor that is far more influential than activism. If, therefore, an issue threatens entrenched interests, those interests may oppose the issue not only through direct means but also by relying on the power of indifference. Indifference, in fact, plays a crucial role in keeping most of politics out of the public view entirely.

Visibility, moreover, cannot constitute an end in itself. Once perceived as political, an issue by definition becomes available for competing interpretations. An initial victory for those seeking visibility can be turned around if a competing interpretation gains ascendancy. Thus, for example, the feminist movement that achieved visibility in the United States in the 1970s by defining itself as a means of liberation was later reinterpreted, with devastating effectiveness, by a prominent right-wing talk show personality as an authoritarian ideology comparable to Nazism. Issues and goals that involve disrupting or working outside established patterns of political action are especially difficult to achieve, even when they capture attention in a dramatic manner, because they are most vulnerable to oppositional reinterpretation.

The contemporary plays and performances described as political in this study are those which attempt to create political meaning by making visible and/or interpreting particular social phenomena as public problems or issues. In other words, theatre is considered political if it presents or constructs a political issue or comments on what is already perceived as a political issue. Defined in this way, political theatre initiates a dialogue with the audience about politics within a national or cultural system shared by both the creators of the theatre production and the audience. Political theatre often addresses its audience explicitly, but its means of communication extend beyond such obvious tactics and beyond the text, encompassing such things as the style of performance, the layout of the performance area, the use (or non-use) of theatre technology, the location of the theatre, the identities of the various people and institutions involved in the production, and the information provided by programs and publicity.
The audience, of course, though conventionally silent (except for polite laughter) in contemporary theatre, is not merely the passive recipient of a play’s message. Audience presence defines live theatre (see Grotowski, 1975). The audience exercises an essential function in the creation of meaning in theatre. Its responses feed back into performance in a variety of powerful ways. A specific audience may create, either through outright organization or selective attendance, a theatre or set of theatres addressing it specifically. Theatre is not a monologue; it is a dialogue, though in most contemporary theatres the audience does not speak. Walter Benjamin’s description of the way in which meaning is created through dialogue in *The Conversation* (1913–1914) applies particularly to theatre: ‘the listener is really the silent partner. The speaker receives meaning from him; the silent one is the unappropriated source of meaning’ (*Selected Writings*, I: 6).

The power of the audience lies in its freedom to attend or not, to remain or not, and to create interpretations of the production. As Susan Bennett points out in her 1990 study, the participation of audiences in the theatrical dialogue is complex, framed by expectations about the way in which it will occur that have been formed through previous theatre attendance and various kinds of formal and informal orientation to theatre practices. A performance may reinforce these expectations or challenge them, and this choice affects the political dynamics of the dialogue.

The major debates about political theatre, and the various forms of drama and performance that have come out of those debates, focus on different ways of engaging the audience in dialogue and shaping audience reception. Clearly, theatre’s capacity for political communication encompasses all the means through which it organizes the audience’s experience and produces the theatrical spectacle and the performance. The audience brings to the theatre a willingness to involve themselves in a reality different from their usual everyday life, an expectation that the production will give them an opportunity to create meaning for themselves through interpretation, and a capacity to join their imaginations in the joint enterprise of creating this theatrical reality. Political theatre, characterized by a ‘transgressive alterity’ (Murray, 1997), creates a collision with existing assumptions, ideas, or perceptions about society and politics. This collision, which may occur by means of any combination of dramatic content, performance style, and theatrical context, serves as the initiating mechanism of the dialogue between production and audience. This collision must be created in partnership with, not in opposition to, the audience. To bring about a change in thinking, the theatrical dialogue must stimulate internal dialogues in which audience members themselves use the new perceptions and ideas made available in the
performance to challenge perceptions and ideas they had previously recognized or accepted. Unlike the scripted dialogue of the stage play, the internal dialogue of any given audience member remains open-ended, moving towards change in ways and towards conclusions that cannot be scripted or even completely predicted. Benjamin poetically evokes this action: ‘The speaker immerses the memory of his strength in words and seeks forms in which the listener can reveal himself. For the speaker speaks in order to let himself be converted’ (ibid.).

Benjamin’s suggestion runs counter to the stereotyped concept of political theatre as a polemic that demands agreement or disagreement. However, to the extent that political theatre provokes thought, interpretation, and discussion, it necessarily invites challenge and revision to the issues and interpretations it presents, as well as to the style and context of its productions. On a more fundamental level, the idea that speaking expresses the desire for conversion relates to the quest for identity that Fischer-Lichte posits as the basis of theatre. Conversion is more powerful than persuasion; it implies not just a change of mind, but a change of identity. In the context of theatre, the speaker – the playwright perhaps, or the ensemble of actors playing roles – seeks identity through the perceptions and interpretative acts of audiences. At the same time, the audience itself assumes a mask while in the theatre, performing an illusion of unity through simultaneous presence and silence. The conclusion of the performance breaks the audience’s illusion of unity, as they resume their individual identities. The detour created by laying aside individual identity offers the audience member the power to interpret the speaker – assign it an identity. The identity shifts inherent in this almost paradoxical interplay of passivity and power both complicate and intensify the creation of political meanings in theatre.

Theatre that, for the purposes of this study, is not defined as political does not arouse its audience to an awareness of the political. Its created realities exclude social phenomena perceived to be political or controversial. Its subjects and forms do not invite comparison with political power, challenge existing systems of power, or provoke reinterpretation. Of course, as the opening quotation from John McGrath implies, even apparently non-political theatre can and often has functioned politically within a society. The Roman emperors, for example, with their ‘bread and circuses’ policy, seem to have understood that drama with emphatically non-political content, such as the domestic farce, could contribute to the maintenance of power by representing opposition and conflict as ridiculous. Theatre that does not attempt to draw its audience into a dialogue about politics may serve the existing power structure by
contributing to apathy and disengagement. While this study does not focus on plays, performances, or theatres that lie outside its definition of political, it is important to remember that all theatre serves some political purpose, and that this purpose can usually be identified if the question is asked.

Theatre interacts with politics in part by imitating its operation within a society. This imitation is most apparent in the theatrical environment and conventions, such as the positions from which actors customarily perform. Theatres and performances create sets of social dynamics, exercising power over a group of people within the boundaries of a particular time and place. The structure of the particular theatre or production determines where the performance occurs, who is admitted and on what terms. It determines not only which subjects are addressed and which excluded, but also to what extent the process and means of selecting and presenting the subject is revealed. Different types of theatre exercise different degrees and forms of power. One may draw a clear contrast, for example, between types of interaction with the public created by a traditional theatre located in a bounded space and admitting only ticket-holders, and a street-theatre performance, which intervenes in the social life of passers-by. The audiences for these different types of theatre constitute very different social/political entities. The traditional theatre audience has entered into a kind of contract, accepting the constraints of selective admission, space, and convention in return for the right to experience the performance. The audience for street theatre finds itself unexpectedly caught up in the event, whether they wish to be or not, but may exercise their freedom to disrupt the performance or walk away from it with no loss of money or breaking of an implicit contract.

The form of interaction, no less than issues of access and cost, has often moved politically oriented theatrical productions towards the less formal and more socially integrated arenas of street theatre, pub theatre, or storefront theatre. Such productions, as Susan Bennett argues, may simultaneously challenge both the structured understandings of everyday life and the cultural ‘frame’ created by the audience’s expectations of theatre (p. 3). In addition, they may serve to equalize power among audience members, cancelling the advantage enjoyed by the more experienced and knowledgeable. Even more significantly, performances of street theatre create a sense of revolutionary movement as they confront the status quo and engage the attention of random members of the public, offering them privileges of spectatorship that they had neither sought nor expected. Productions located in traditional theatre structures and employing the convention of a silent audience in a fixed
location may serve to reinforce existing power relations within the audience; furthermore, their structure does not challenge the theatrical framing mechanism or, by extension, the basic underpinnings of society. At the same time, a production located in a traditional theatre may be able to make a stronger impact on an audience as a result of resources available in its specialized space (i.e., set, lighting, soundproofing) and because certain forms of expression (i.e., nudity, obscene language, simulated gunplay) not permitted in public spaces are generally protected within the bounds of legitimate theatre.

Even at its most mainstream and serious, theatre does not occupy a position of power in Britain or other contemporary societies. It exists outside the central structures of government and industry, and occupies only a minor place in the institutions of business, education, and religion. Theatre’s position within contemporary culture is marginal compared to commercial television and film. On one hand, theatre’s marginality lowers barriers to participation. Furthermore, its perceived unimportance, coupled with the understanding that its presentations lie in the realm of illusion, allows it a degree of freedom not evident in official productions (such as televised press conferences by political leaders, parliamentary debates, or political party meetings), television programmes, or commercial films. On the other hand, its marginality limits reception: street theatre or other informal venues reach only those people in the immediate environments, while the audience for traditional theatre is limited to those with sufficient resources who consciously choose to attend theatre. Theatres and producing companies generally depend on a variable combination of ticket sales, public funding, grants from charitable foundations, and corporate sponsorships. Competition for the support selectively given by such funding sources contributes to the relatively weak political position of theatres.

This set of circumstances highlights the problem long acknowledged by practitioners of political theatre: genuine impact is rare, and the process to it uncertain. The challenge becomes even more difficult when a company or production seeks to change minds, rather than to provide a sense of solidarity for audience members already in agreement with the position or cause being expressed. Theatre cannot compel change; it can only attempt to inform, provoke thought, change attitudes, and perhaps point the way towards action. Works with overtly political messages may fail to attract individuals or groups not already sympathetic to their point of view. Plays with political messages that are subtle, covert, or implicit may not be clearly understood. In either case, the work’s impact may be slight or non-existent. Producing organizations and dramatic works
most often attempt to negotiate this set of contradictions by combining
the appeal of novelty, elements of entertainment, and a message that is
persuasive rather than dogmatic and often coded or indirect. The multi­
dimensionality of such works diffuses their political intent and impact.
Occasionally a production tactically or inadvertently confronts the audi­
ence’s expectations in such a way that some will walk out. Their action
breaks the mask of the audience, brings a reassertion of individual
engagement on the part of those who remain, and intensifies the experi­
ence of producing meaning for those audience members. The failure of
political theatre, as in any type of production, occurs when audiences
remain but cease to engage with the performance.

This is not to say that political impact is impossible to attain. From the
beginnings of modernism in the late nineteenth century, theatre has been
used as a forum for making social phenomena visible and, in some cases,
defining them as political issues. Notable examples of success have cre­
ated models of effective strategy. Gerhard Hauptmann’s *The Weavers*
(1892), a watershed political play, took as its subject the 1844 revolt by
cloth weavers in the Silesian district of Germany. It used the then-new
style of naturalism to expose the working conditions of poor workers.
The extent to which *The Weavers* collided with dramatic expectations
conditioned by romanticism and melodrama can be discerned from the
commentary of a contemporary critic, Edward Everett Hale:

> In ‘Die Weber’ [Hauptmann] goes as far as one can readily imagine the
stage can go. [The play does not take] the weavers’ strike for a back­
ground, or a setting, or a situation... The play takes the strike itself for
its subject. There is no hero and no heroine; characters there are, but
only because there must be people on stage to have any play at all (40).

The model provided by Hauptmann attempts to create an accurate and
compelling representation of a social injustice. This model still demon­
strates its viability.

*The Weavers* also provides the starting point for what Neil Blackadder
has termed ‘the theatre of opposition’. Blackadder focuses on the response
to late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century plays that ‘confronted
the audience with depictions of human and social relations, and
approaches to theatrical representation, which forcefully challenged
conventional thinking’ (14). Although, as Blackadder points out, theatre
norms had recently evolved in the direction of enforcing silence, these
plays provoked such profoundly strong opposing reactions that audience
members actually performed their sentiments for and against the particular
play, in the form of protests and riots in the theatre. Confrontational tactics in the plays of this era begin with naturalistic and realistic styles, which involve partial nudity and frank language, coupled with explicit representation of socially taboo subjects, such as childbirth in Hauptmann’s *Before Sunrise* (1889). The shock value of the earliest of these plays depends on making visible situations and behaviour that were hidden and denied in bourgeois society.

The tactics of confrontational theatre have evolved over time. Social realists like Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw tempered the confrontational nature of their plays by placing the confrontation within the action of the drama and using sympathetic characters to interpret situations. Shocking material, such as inherited syphilis in the son of a respected man, is filtered through an unambiguous moral lens via characters involved in the action, rather than being presented directly to the audience. Both Ibsen and Shaw gained their reputation for confrontation by setting up moral positions in opposition to the conventional morality and religion of their day. They highlighted the inadequacy of these institutions for channelling social energies to benefit weaker members of society; however, they did not directly accuse audience members of hypocrisy or moral weakness. Agit-prop plays developed out of the workers’ movements of the early twentieth century, as the lengthy and indirect methods of social realism did not serve the movement’s need for brief, exciting, and easily produced dramatic pieces. Agit-prop tactics arouse the audience to a unanimous sentiment of opposition towards a third party with power or authority. Further developments of theatrical confrontation include challenges to accepted language and traditional structures of plot, character, and visual design, as well as transgressive use of national, religious, and cultural symbols.

Confrontational plays force the audience into a binary choice of acceptance or rejection. Their value lies in the directness and strength with which they contest the status quo. They are most important in bringing an issue to visibility. The vehement emotions they evoke tend to preclude complex interpretation – at least, not during their period of initial public exposure. Rejection may mean closure of the mind or leaving the performance, while acceptance may derive from the desire to be part of a rebellious faction. Though often successful in gaining visibility for an issue, shock tactics gradually lose their power as the audience becomes accustomed to whatever originally provoked outrage. As is clear in contemporary language on stage and off, what generates shock in one generation may be taken as the norm by the following generation.
Bertolt Brecht, whose first plays were of the confrontational type, attempted to engage the audience in ways that would provoke inner dialogue rather than merely approval of or disagreement with a stated message. Building on the work of Erwin Piscator, Brecht sought to create a theatre that rejects a static dramatization of political arguments, and instead solicits audience interpretation of the situations presented. Brechtian theatre attempts to stimulate audiences’ inner dialogues through alterations to existing conventions (e.g., estrangement) that model dialogic interaction and increase audience consciousness of its participation in the creation of meaning. Epic theatre presents working-class audiences – a constituency used by the powerful as a reservoir of passive compliance and politically valuable apathy – with social analysis through images and situations that provoke debate about the conflicts they encapsulate. Brechtian theatre models the dialectic thinking it seeks to promote in three important ways: (1) using direct address of the audience to comment on the dramatic action, (2) structuring narrative in the form of brief scenes familiar in agitprop, and (3) foregrounding theatrical mechanisms such as lighting to constitute them as a presence, both part of and separate from the representation. Brecht’s alienation effects also serve to set up a perceptible dialogue between actor and character. Central to Brecht’s project was the use of styles and conventions associated with working-class venues such as the music hall. In such venues, as Blackadder points out, audience response was not as constrained as in bourgeois theatre; interruptions in the form of comments or spontaneous applause were expected. Through the use of techniques such as a lighted auditorium, Brechtian theatre prevents the audience from assuming its mask of collective anonymity by acknowledging individual presence and identity. In his theoretical writings, Brecht urges the creators of political theatre to avoid traditional dramatic forms, with their narrative emphasis, stylistic unity, and emotional closure, in favour of theme-driven, episodic, open-ended, actor-focused productions laced with ironic humour, enlivened with music, and framed within a patently artificial historicized context (see Brecht, 1964).

Brecht’s influence pervades contemporary theatre. Brechtian models, having made their way into the theatrical mainstream, no longer necessarily signal or define political theatre. Though Brecht’s work remains an essential reference point for discussions of political theatre, contemporary practice questions its reliance on the intellectual at the expense of emotional and sensual experience, and the changed context created by what Fredric Jameson terms ‘late, consumer, or multinational capitalism’