POPULISM, THE MAINSTREAM THEATRE, AND THE PLAYS OF WILLY RUSSELL

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by

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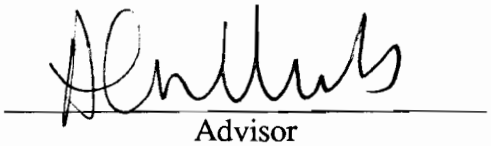

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This dissertation is dedicated with love to Jacqueline and Arnold Jones. So great has been their wholehearted support for all of my endeavors, they should be regarded as the true authors of this study.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Research Problem and Purpose of the Study

This dissertation is principally concerned with the problem of defining, examining and critiquing the relationship of populism and popular theatre, to what is generally known as the contemporary British mainstream theatre. This study examines two questions: (1) whether or not the mainstream theatre in the United Kingdom fundamentally opposes the aims and form of popular theatre, forcing the popular theatre to find its niche within the alternative sector; (2) whether or not the mainstream British theatre can act as a home--albeit perhaps one of compromise--to artists with populist ideals.

There is obviously a problem when most scholarship about the definition and boundaries of popular theatre has ignored the sector of the theatre that attracts the largest audiences and attention from the general public. I plan to analyze several definitions which blur rather than clarify the relationship between populism and mainstream theatre. The purpose of this study is to show that the populist possibilities of the mainstream, contemporary theatre have not been adequately examined in previous studies about "popular theatre," even though mainstream theatre, compared to the fringe, reaches relatively large audiences and therefore has greater influence in the general public's perception of what theatre is.

I plan to assess if anything of *practical* use can be gleaned from the scholarship on this issue to date, to consider the relevance of recent considerations of populism, including those derived from contemporary film and television studies. I will also discuss reader-response theories that debate the complicated issue of how a popular audience reacts with a piece of art, because it is clear that any meaningful discussion of populism and popular theatre must include a consideration of what must be done to attract large audiences to the live theatre.

Method of Approach

In the first half of the study, I will discuss previous definitions of populism within the wider context of popular culture as a whole. I will re-examine the terms populism and popular theatre, as well as the ideological assumptions which underwrite these definitions. Then I will use a case study. I will analyze the ideas and plays of Willy Russell, a British author who claims populist sentiments, but who has spent his career eschewing the alternative sector, writing (mainly about working-class characters) within the mainstream theatre. The case of Russell will demonstrate how the lack of critical interest in his work to date is symptomatic of the bias against mainstream artists, who are considered inferior to the avant-garde artists by established theatre scholars. Russell's enormous popularity with the general public, which is documented in Chapter Six, is testimony to his significance in the debate about popular mainstream theatre. I will specifically examine what form Russell's "mainstream populism" takes, its impact on audiences, its ideological position, its relationship with the ideas of theorists who write about the mass media, and its relationship to the fringe theatre.

I selected Russell for a number of reasons. In the first instance, Russell's work has enormous popular appeal, if number of productions and size of audiences can be used as barometers. A 1987 *Plays and Players* article about Russell has the headline: "Willy Russell only ranks below Shakespeare and Ayckbourn as Britain's most popular playwright."[1] Indeed, that ranking improves if one uses the year 1984 as an example: in the United Kingdom, more of Russell's plays were produced during that calendar year, than any other playwright aside from William Shakespeare.[2] In 1986, Russell was the third most performed writer in regional professional theatres in Great Britain.[3] In 1988, there were three Russell plays--*Shirley Valentine*, *One for the Road* and *Blood Brothers*, running simultaneously (and, in all three cases, extremely successfully) as major commercial productions in three large theatres[4] in London's West End, an achievement for a contemporary playwright that is without any parallel.

As well as many of his plays becoming staples of the British repertory movement, Russell's first play, *John, Paul, Ringo . . . and Bert*, played in the West End for over twelve months. *Educating Rita* played for over two and a half years. Two productions of *Blood Brothers* have enjoyed a combined West End run of some two years and *Shirley Valentine* not only enjoyed a successful Broadway run throughout most of 1989, but was revived in the West End just months after its original limited-run production closed in preparation for its move to Broadway. More details of Russell's prolific career appear in Chapter Six, but it should be appreciated at the outset that this author's popularity in the contemporary theatre is without parallel. As John Coldstream noted in the *Daily*

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[1] Ian Williams, "Russell's Road," *Plays and Players* November 1987, p. 8.

[2] Ibid., p. 8.

[3] The Arts Council of Great Britain releases these figures on an annual basis.

[4] Respectively, The Vaudeville (664 seats), The Lyric (948 seats) and The Albery (876 seats).

Telegraph in the summer of 1989, "It must be some kind of record for a playwright in his early forties to have two of his works revived simultaneously in adjacent West End theatres."[5]

Russell's popularity is, I would argue, surprising and noteworthy given the content of his work. Perhaps most remarkable is the popular success--in both Britain and America--of *Shirley Valentine*, a play which consists of a single actress who plays a middle-aged, uneducated, lower middle-class housewife from Liverpool who walks on to a stage, alone, and talks to the kitchen wall for the entire first act, and to a Greek rock for the second, of the single-character drama.

That points to a further reason why Russell's work is so interesting and applicable to any study of the popular theatre. The form of *Shirley Valentine*, like many of Russell's plays, can be seen as going beyond the generally perceived aesthetic boundaries of advocates of fringe theatre perceive as viable on the commercial stage--usually intense reliance on spectacle and superficial glamor, stifled artistic innovation and the absence of any recognizably subversive message due to a search for bland, profitable entertainment.

I intend to argue, in other words, that Russell's success has been achieved not through exploiting what might be termed the commercial theatre's more conservative instincts, but rather through pushing back the boundaries of the genre--albeit in an *unliterary* way--opening up the possibilities for a greater inclusivity.

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5 John Coldstream, *Daily Telegraph* 1 July 1989, as quoted in *London Theatre Record* 18 June 1989, p. 844.

Justification for the Research

It is generally assumed that "mainstreamness" tends to confer academic marginality on a playwright and his plays. The validity of that assumption is debatable, however. The terms "popular," "populism" and "popular theatre" are not easily defined and merit an extended discussion, which can be found in Chapter Two. The words "mainstream," "dominant" and "commercial" theatre appear frequently throughout this text, and their exact definition is also subjective and, consequently, extremely problematic, especially when the contexts of these terms are not considered.

Before those words can be adequately defined, it must be appreciated that the contemporary British theatre functions within an overall mixed economy, albeit one that has taken noticeable monetarist swings during the past decade, and its theatrical institutions are correspondingly hybrid in terms of their financial and cultural infrastructure.

The terms "mainstream theatre," and "commercial theatre," are used in this study to refer, in the first instance, to the sector of the British theatre that relies entirely on box-office income for its survival. That sector is now largely limited to the approximately 45 theatres (about 35 to 40 are generally active at any one time), controlled by a variety of commercial managements and producers, that make up what is usually referred to as the West End theatre. It is not, however, strictly true to say that these theatres operate outside of the influence of subsidy. Some productions are developed in subsidized theatres before transferring to the West End, and others present productions that employed grant money somewhere in their journey from the idea of the playwright to the opening night. That understood, it is generally true that productions in the sprawling marketplace commonly known as the West End, live and die according to the size of audiences that they are able to attract, and such audiences are required to pay--through the

box office-- the full economic cost, along with a margin for profit, of the theatrical fare they are attending. Projected popularity and longevity with an audience, rather than artistic or ideological merit, are usually accepted as the most important criteria when a play is being chosen for West End production.

Outside of London, the situation is more complex. There are about fifteen large provincial theatres, and several hundred smaller civic theatres and venues in Britain, that are considered in this study to be mainstream, but which offer commercial productions only part of the time, with the remainder being filled by subsidized opera, dance and theatre. The actual theatres themselves are often subsidized by local authorities, and have a mandate to provide cultural entertainment to the community at large. A third element of the mainstream--but not commercial--sector is the regional repertory companies, of which there are currently about 35. These companies--sometimes criticized for their inclination to reproduce West End successes--all rely on subsidy in one form or another, coupled with some interest in maintaining a significant box-office income, although this preoccupation varies in intensity from one company to the next and from one year to another.

The final component of what this study defines as the mainstream theatre is the "big two" major subsidized theatre companies, London's Royal Shakespeare Company and Royal National Theatre (sometimes referred to as "The Nationals"). These two theatres, housed in large, impressive complexes, are often seen as the epitome of the conservative theatrical establishment, even though they both claim to make considerable efforts to fill a variety of theatrical mandates, including those outside of the mainstream. However, to borrow the words of a report of a conference on oppositional theatre: "Theatre buildings impose certain inhibitions and restrictions: and . . . public funding from arts funding

bodies in some ways confers 'mainstreamness,'"[6] and both of these companies have expansive and relatively opulent physical facilities.

Given Richard Eyre's comments that the National is "consistently making calculations which are essentially commercial calculations,"[7] it will be seen that there is only a minor dividing line between the mainstream Royal National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the West End, even though the *pretensions* of the commercial and subsidized London theatres may differ considerably. This study is concerned with the populist possibilities of the commercial theatre, rather than of the large, subsidized companies.

There are other complexities within the commercial sector. Although there are clear differences in scale, style and ideology between, for example, the London Palladium and the Liverpool Playhouse, both theatres are considered in this study to qualify as mainstream. The commercial sector is used only in reference to the West End and a handful of provincial theatres, with the understanding that there is very little totally commercial theatre in an art form now so influenced by some form or another of state subsidy.

Where North American examples are used in this study, Broadway, Off-Broadway (although this category is no longer free from the influence of extensive subsidy), and the attendant touring circuit are referred to as "commercial theatre," with the regional resident theatres joining the commercial sector in the broad categorization of "mainstream theatre."

The opposition to the mainstream is also difficult to define (not least because it also relies on public funding), and some discussion of the meaning of terms appears throughout the text. In this study, the terms "fringe theatre," "alternative theatre," or

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[6] Andy Lavender, "Theatre in Crisis: Conference Report, December 1988," *New Theatre Quarterly*, V, no. 19 (Summer 1989), 214.

[7] Richard Eyre, *TheaterWeek* 18 September 1989, p. 27.

"experimental theatre" refer in the first instance to theatre whose primary objective is something other than financial gain. Lest one inappropriately categorizes the National Theatre as being on the fringe, it should also be noted that fringe theatre (unlike the National) is typified by an interest in political didacticism, which usually means the propagation of socialism.

Most fringe theatres and companies show disdain for the large-scale and the traditional (especially the proscenium arch and its attendant, illusionistic and/or naturalistic style of performance), and for the long established theatrical traditions. Necessity, and sometimes desire, means that the fringe usually demonstrates a determination to survive with minimal financial and other physical resources, and one also usually encounters a general sense of revolutionary irreverence.

Some fringe theatres lease or own their own buildings, others tour around small-scale venues, and still others perform in found spaces, such as union halls or community centers, rather than actual theatres. Many alternative theatres are interested in exploring the parameters of community theatre (in the British sense of the term, typically used to refer to the work of professional actors and/or companies who have a close relationship with the community they serve), the relationship between theatre and education, performance art and, of course, political theatre. Virtually all of these groups rely on some level of state subsidy for their existence, although their identity is founded on their vociferous opposition to the mainstream--usually referred to as the "bourgeois"--theatre. Most of these groups see themselves as oppositional not just to the commercial sector, but also to the mainstream, subsidized theatres.

In the United States, one would include in this alternative category (which has diminished considerably in size during the past two decades) some Off-Off Broadway groups, small-scale touring companies with political or sexual-political mandates such as

the San Francisco Mime Troupe, The Bread and Puppet Theatre, much of the Hispanic theatre movement and some other alternative companies.

It becomes clear that these two broadly defined categories of theatre are placed in opposition to one another by many critics, even though the line between the categories is neither hard nor fast, especially with plays ultimately moving from the fringe to the mainstream and performers and writers vacillating between the two categories. There are not necessarily any definite ideological distinctions between the two groups--merely certain commonalities of form that, for the purposes of analysis, separate readily into these two groups.

Another confusion arises from the terms "political" and "popular" theatre, which are often used interchangeably, even though they mean different things. On the one hand, any attempt to produce popular theatre within the British theatre is generally construed as an inherently political goal, because most populists motivated politically. On the other hand, it is doubtful whether the study of the popular theatre is best served in the broader context of the political theatre.

Most scholars study popular theatre in a bi-polar opposition: bourgeois theatre (including most film and television drama), versus the theatre of the revolution. The academic debate, with its high-art bias, centers around the conflict between those who work in the mainstream, subsidized sector of the British theatre (principally the National and the RSC) and those who work in the fringe. This particular debate has been ongoing in journals such as *Theatre Quarterly* and *New Theatre Quarterly* for almost two decades. As a result, the commercial sector is relegated to being to a promoter of decadent, artless entertainment that is supposedly hardly worthy of academic debate.

The aim of this study is to reconsider some aspects of that bias by considering the work of Willy Russell, as a case study of an author readily identifiable with the mainstream theatre. Such a study is justified because too many critics ignore the

mainstream theatre on the inaccurate assumption that it is necessarily inhospitable to populism, without either adequately defining the meaning of the term, or acknowledging the problematic and ambiguous nature of the overall audience/performer interaction.

There is a great need for an adequate assessment of whether or not a playwright with a resolutely populist ideology can thrive in the West End or on Broadway. I propose to demonstrate that Russell's great popularity qualifies his work as worthy of examination in any debate about populism. It is absurd that the work of demonstrably less popular avant-garde playwrights should be analyzed and debated, while Russell and his colleagues who work in the mainstream theatre are often afforded only the briefest sentence of dismissal.

Procedure

Chapter Two considers various existing definitions of the terms "popular" and "populism" and the confusion that surrounds their meanings. The populist theories of John Pick, Steve Gooch and John McGrath, which represent widely differing approaches to the topic, are examined in detail. The equally confusing definitions of scholars such as Eugene Van Erven, Andrew Davies and Bernard Sharratt are also examined. The chapter demonstrates how, if not why, the debate over popular theatre is shrouded with confusion.

Chapter Three extends the debate to the wider field of popular culture. The chapter questions the commonly-held perception that all live theatre and popular culture are mutually exclusive entities. I argue that this notion is inaccurate and divisive. In this chapter, I also claim that this chasm between popular culture and the theatre is largely self-inflicted and a result of the reluctance of theatre scholars and practitioners (unlike

those working within other performance media), to discuss the commercial theatre in any meaningful fashion.

Chapter Four focuses on the writings of film critics, especially feminist critics, on the dominant, Hollywood cinema, arguing that their ideas are closely related to a the theatre's complicated relationship with populism. I suggest that the critique of film scholars--which has progressed from merely denying that the Hollywood cinema had any populist impact, to a revisiting of the possibility for female dialogue within its patriarchal constraints--could be used as a model for encouraging the response of theatre scholars to the commercial, live theatre.

Chapter Five expands on that argument by using some ideas culled from reader-response criticism. It discusses the problematic notions of authorship and the possible relationship of the so-called "authorial audience" with populism. A particular focus is placed on the existence of "oppositional readings;" readings which, to date, have been particularly studied in relation to television. This leads to my general conclusion that the centrality of an individual play tends to be overstated by theatrical populists--while the experiential process of generating meaning for audience members is consequently inappropriately underplayed. It also discusses the work of Stuart Hall and John Fiske, who used mainstream television to note the existence of negotiated readings. Their work pointed out the absurdity of writing-off a piece of drama because it appears *on the surface* to be anti-populist, reactionary and/or conservative.

Extending their findings to the theatre, I argue the mainstream theatre (albeit unwittingly) may allow for a variety of subversive readings. Consequently, the commercial sector may be more inclusive of populism than is often assumed.

Russell has a very different background from most playwrights, firstly in that he is from the north of England. All of his plays, although they have broader ramifications, are set in that region. Russell's pedigree is firmly and resolutely working class. Born in

Whiston, near Liverpool, he is a former ladies' hairdresser who left school at the age of 15. Returning to full time education at the age of twenty, he finally took the public examinations typically taken by teenagers and ultimately became a school-teacher. The son of the owner of a fish-and-chip shop, Russell still lives and writes in his home town of Liverpool. Russell's background--he is genuinely working-class--and training are very different to that of many contemporary, British playwrights--such as David Edgar or David Hare--who have described their backgrounds as decidedly middle-class. As the analyses of the individual plays reveal, Russell has written almost exclusively about the working-class--an area typically seen as beyond the purview of the commercial sector.

These individual analyses can be found in Chapters Seven and Eight. I have broken down Russell's work into two main sections, using *Educating Rita* (1980) as a line of division. Chapter Seven considers Russell's works before that date, when he was perceived as a talented, if uncouth, chronicler of the foibles of working-class life. The success of *Educating Rita* ensured Russell's fame and his status of a playwright of importance--at least to the commercial managements who were finding his work to be highly profitable. His later work, I argue, reflects this change in status. Each individual analysis also contains a detailed plot summary prior to a consideration of the plays themes. It is also my hope that these two chapters will serve as the first, detailed literary analyses of Russell's work.

The final chapter is a conclusion which assesses the implications for the complicated relationship of the mainstream British theatre with populism.

Although my interview with Willy Russell is referenced throughout this study, it appears in its complete form in the Appendix. As no other comprehensive interview has, to date, been published, it is my hope that Russell's remarks may be useful to others studying his plays. So far, this task has been largely limited to first-night critics who, along with many audience members, have reacted with general approval to most of

Russell's efforts, but there has be little attempt to consider the body of Russell's work in any general sense.

An appropriate bridge to the main body of this study comes from *The Listener*'s Jim Hiley who enthusiastically claimed that "As long as Russell holds sway in the West End, there's hope for us all."[8] Perhaps there is also a measure of hope for popular theatre in Britain.

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[8] Jim Hiley, *The Listener* 13 July 1989, as quoted in *London Theatre Record* 18 June 1989, p. 843.

CHAPTER II

POPULISM AND THE LIVE THEATRE: DEFINITIONS, CONFUSION AND IMPOTENCE

Since the early seventies, it has been hard to find a piece of writing about the contemporary popular theatre, or the theatre's relationship with the term "populism," that is not shrouded with confusion, ambiguity or, at the very least, trepidation. In the introduction to the published proceedings of a 1974 Manchester University Symposium on 'Western Popular Theatre," David Mayer and Kenneth Richards evoke the notion of the foolhardy explorer venturing into treacherous waters. The very symposium, they noted, "was a brash attempt to grasp a dangerous nettle."[1] In his own essay, "Towards a Definition of Popular Theatre," Mayer went on to further note that "it is more profitable to describe various popular genres than to define what is meant by popular theatre . . . I am uncertain that a definition is possible."[2]

Rather than positively and clearly define popular theatre, Bernard Sharratt paradoxically makes reference, in the published proceedings of a second, different conference on popular drama, to "a variety of forms of art and entertainment which it would be difficult *not* to label, in some sense, 'popular.'"[3] The confusing implication is of the very word *popular* forcing reluctant commitment from the unwilling definer.

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[1] David Mayer and Kenneth Richards, *Western Popular Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1977), p. vi.

[2] David Mayer, "Toward a Definition of Popular Theatre," *Western Popular Theatre*, p. 257.

[3] Bernard Sharratt, "The Politics of the Popular," *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama,* eds. David Bradby, Louis James, Bernard Sharratt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 275.

In their 1978 work, *People's Theatre*, David Bradby and John McCormick acknowledge the confusion created by the seemingly interchangeable usage of such terms as popular drama, popular theatre, people's theatre, theatre of (or for) the people, radical theatre, political theatre, alternative theatre and other such versions. In their view, confusion is inevitable given that "those working towards people's theatre have never formed a coherent movement or school."[4] Like Sharratt, these two begin their confusing introduction with a negative consideration of what "people's theatre" is not:

> This book attempts to survey a difficult area of theatre history. It does not coincide with what is normally thought of as the popular tradition (music hall, horror shows, etc.). Nor is it the same as political theatre, though it often overlaps with this area. . . . What this book tries to do is to is . . . see how each contribution to building up a people's theatre, from whatever ideological, religious or political motives, and in whatever circumstances, has served to reinforce certain trends and strategies, to introduce new possibilities or to rediscover forgotten techniques.[5]

One is instantly bewildered. Although this verbose opening clearly informs the reader as to the authors' sympathies, they decline to succinctly define people's theatre beyond the curiously negative statements that it is not necessarily political and has little to do with the popular tradition.[6] The separation of "people's theatre" from "popular theatre" is extremely strange.

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[4] David Bradby and John McCormick, *People's Theatre* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), p. 12.

[5] Ibid., p. 9.

[6] Judging from the rest of the work, it appears to be the word "tradition" to which Bradby and McCormick objected so stringently, perhaps due to its establishment connotations and inhospitability to the notion of a romantic struggle. It remains problematic to talk about people's theatre as separate from some form of a popular tradition.

Andrew Davies, in his recent work *Other Theatres*, does not so much attempt to define popular theatre as to separate it from other kinds of theatre--indicative, perhaps, of the scholarly response of the Anglo-American academic populists who subscribe to an historical, rather than a structuralist model of the theatre. Inevitably, it seems easier for such people to describe what popular theatre is *not* (just as it is typically easier to define the limits of any historical area of research than to discuss what is contained within), rather than the more difficult task presented by the positive definition. Davies (taking his cue from Peter Brook's *Empty Space*[7]) sets up a "model of the four traditions of British theatre."[8]

These four include "the West End tradition" (for which Davies clearly has very little time), "alternative, experimental or fringe theatre," "folk theatre," and, finally "the popular theatre." Davies' approach is both unnecessarily divisive and inaccurate. He consistently refers to the West End and popular theatre as mutually exclusive,[9] and yet he also classifies the alternative theatre and folk theatre in different categories from popular theatre. One wonders what theatrical forms could be left to suffer the apparent indignity of being referred to as "popular." Davies focuses only on the stand-up comic, clowns and music-hall singers, noting that "the fluidity of popular theatre is illustrated by the scantiness of written text,"[10] an ill-considered description that seems to better fit Davies' folk theatre category.

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[7] Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin, 1972).
As Davis notes, Brook identifies four types of theatre in that seminal text: "Deadly," "Holy," "Rough," and "Immediate."

[8] Andrew Davies, *Other Theatres: The Development of Alternative and Community Theatres in Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 4.

[9] As, for example, when he notes on page 7 that "few research students or historians tackle 'non-West End' subjects such as the popular theatre."

[10] Davies, p. 5.

All of these difficulties led Eugene Van Erven to begin the chapter of his 1988 work, *Radical People's Theatre* (itself an interesting choice of term) that is headed "Popular Theatre In Historical Perspective" with the all too obvious sentence: "Popular theatre is not a concept that is self-evident."[11] That very chapter heading, of course, signals its author's attempt to make some linear sense of a complex, non-linear history, rather than approach the topic in a structuralist sense. History would appear to offer Van Erven little perspective in arriving at a reasonable, working definition of his topic, even though he devotes his conclusion to an inevitably confused and simplistic discussion of "the general features that . . . characterized the radical people's theatre's development.[12]

One might, of course, question whether the concept of popular theatre *should* be self-evident, although academics frequently approach the issues surrounding populism as if they were puzzles to be solved. Such an approach is positively pointless. The emphasis is frequently displaced away from arriving at a sufficiently inclusive definition of the terms to serve all facets of the complicated structure of the popular theatre, and towards the *limiting* of the term. Hence, Davies' categories, Van Erven's struggle to grasp the terms and the general critical propensity to become frustrated at how complex popular theatre can be. The consensus appears to bemoan how the popular theatre's ideology can vary from the progressive to the firmly reactionary, instead of *celebrating* its fascinating diversity.

In the constant quest of critics to limit the terms, to provide ideological boundaries and criteria, and to categorically say what popular theatre is not (or should not be), it is the commercial incarnations of popular theatre that tend to be most quickly and easily ignored--or described merely in pejorative terms--in the resultant confusion.

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[11] Eugene Van Erven, *Radical People's Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1988), p. 5.

[12] Ibid, p. 173.

Taking this confusion and ambiguity as its starting point, the aim of this chapter is to survey and review the existing scholarship that has attempted both to define populism or popular theatre and to suggest manifestos for its development, and especially the need for an acceptance of the terms' inevitable diversity. I have placed particular emphasis on the writings of John Pick (who places faith in market forces), Steve Gooch (who advocates a utopian form of socialism) and John McGrath (who points to the need to appropriate already existing working-class popular forms), on the grounds that their theories make for an interesting contrast in visions of the popular. Although populist theory is relevant to many cultural forms--notably visual art, film, music and literature--my intention in this section is to restrict the discussion to writing mainly about the live theatre. Indeed, one of the remarkable things about writings that are concerned with populism and the live theatre is the apparent reluctance of their authors to ever refer to other cultural or critical forms. Much of the scholarship that is reviewed below--be it the writings of practitioners such as McGrath, David Edgar, Dario Fo, or academics such as Davies, Mayer or Van Erven--largely restricts itself to a microchosmic world, never stepping outside of the live theatre as its frame of reference. As the very idea of popular art is so dependent on cross-fertilization between different cultural forms, such provincialism is problematic and, as is demonstrated below, is arguably partly to blame for the apparent lack of success of these popular theorists.

There are some divisions in thought about popular theatre and populism that are clearly evident. Firstly, there is the difference of the theoretical approach favored by academics as opposed to the less ephemeral views of those on the front line of the alternative theatre. It is interesting that the thoughts of commercial producers on these issues are much less frequently recorded or considered, perhaps because of the blanket assumption that such people are interested only in financial gain. The academics, such as Davies, Bradby, McCormick and Mayer, tend to emphasize problematic dichotomies: the practitioners,

such as McGrath, Gooch or the alternative-theatre workers surveyed by Catherine Itzen for her *Stages in the Revolution*, practical needs such as the importance of throwing in some jokes before an unsophisticated audience has the chance to get bored.

There is also a noticeably different approach between the inclination of some critics, such as John Pick, to focus on the audience as the main judging factor as to whether an individual theatrical work can be said to be "populist," while others, such as Steve Gooch, idealistically imply the audience make-up will follow the content of the piece of art itself. A third group of people (Morag Shiach, whose ideas are considered in more detail below, is one example) have pointed to the need for a compromise. There are also authors, like Alan Ayckbourn, Alan Bleasdale or Willy Russell, who refute the concept of writing for any specific audience group, claiming rather to touch all of humanity, transcending any class or ideological barriers found among the audience members.

It should be noted that some of the scholarship and practical advice discussed in this chapter is at least a decade old. That is especially significant when one considers that the decade between such writings and the present time has been characterized by anti-populist, political conservatism, which has resulted in reduced funding for alternative fringe or non-traditional theatre and, indeed, theatrical innovation in general, in both Britain and the United States. There is, therefore, some evidence to suggest that the fringe theatre is in poor shape, not least because it has been inadequately served by those who charted its direction a decade ago.

This chapter is focusing on writings about popular theatre and populism rather than scholarship that has stressed the political nature of the theatre. The political and the popular are, of course, closely related, especially as most of the existing writing about the popular theatre has been composed by authors who could reasonably be termed ideologically left-wing. Such a scholarly bias is, in many ways, highly unfortunate. The odd exception aside, one tends to be able to read only the thoughts of socialists and/or

Marxists, where popular theatre is considered. Such writers often discuss the popular theatre from the point of view of their own political ideology. This typically results in a confusing mixing of the political and the popular, and the lack of any acknowledgement that the two words may mean entirely different things. Some kind of link is largely inevitable, even desirable, but that does not mean that the populist is the exclusive province of the political left-wing.

The relationship of the theatre to politics is, of course, another hornet's nest of controversial definitions and explanations. Willy Brandt once noted in *Comparative Drama* that theatre is "the sister of politics, even if, as in many fields of life, there exists between the two a strained relationship as a rule, and harmony only as an exception."[13] Raphael Samuel commented that "theatre, as the most public of the arts, is second cousin to politics."[14] Sandy Craig said that "all theatre is political in the sense that theatre is not autonomous and is forced continually to decide in whose service it acts."[15]

Michael Kirby, on the other hand, resisted the notion that all theatre is political, arguing that "this view is based upon a misunderstanding of the word 'political'. . . . Some of the people who claim that all theatre is political seem to confuse 'political,' 'social,' and 'economic.'"[16] One of Dario Fo's remarks is perhaps the most lucid:

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13 Willy Brand, "The Political Significance of Theatre," *Comparative Drama* 7 (1973): 225.

14 Raphael Samuel, Ewan MacColl, and Stuart Cosgrove, *Theatres of the Left 1880-1935* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p. xiii.
It is also interesting to note that elsewhere in the introduction to the workers' theatre movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Samuel refers to the antagonistic relationship that reoccurs in every phase of modernism between workers' theatre and popular culture, which has normally kept the theatre of instruction as the preserve of enlightened minorities.

15 Sandy Craig, "Unmasking the Lie: Political Theatre," *Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain* , ed. Sandy Craig (Ambergate: Amber Lane, 1980), p. 30.

16 Michael Kirby, "On Political Theatre, " *The Drama Review,* 19 (1975), 129.

"political theatre has become a sort of subtitle for boring theatre, presumptuous theatre, pedantic theatre--non-entertaining theatre."[17] Fo went on to note that he prefers to call the plays of his La Commune "popular theatre, because of their content and their concern with retrieving a class-based theatre," avoiding the polemical label "political."[18]

I could have selected any of the other countless printed proclamations of this subject to demonstrate this inconsistency and confusion. Clearly, all of these people are using the words in totally different senses, although one struggles to find any printed acknowledgement that this debate, like the controversy over populism, at least partly revolves around the meaning of terms. As much as the two debates have in common, it should be recognized that the word *populist* and the word *political* can, and perhaps should, mean quite distinct and different things.

The Oxford American Dictionary defines the word "popular" as meaning "enjoyed by many people: of or for the general public." The same dictionary describes "populist" as an adjective that means "of a political party or movement claiming to represent the whole of the people." The dictionary definitions are certainly straightforward but, as Morag Shiach has pointed out, they are the product of a particular historical and geographical context.[19] One could also see the word "popular" as connected to the French word *Laique* (meaning "lay," or "secular"): a term that is derivative from the Greek word *Laikos* (meaning "of the people"). As defined by dictionaries, the meaning of the terms

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[17] Dario Fo, "Some Aspects of Popular Theatre," *New Theatre Quarterly*, 1 no. 2 (May 1985), 131.

[18] Ibid., p. 132.
It it difficult to see why such an aim qualifies the word popular and disavows the word political. More reasonably, the word choice itself would appear to be a political decision.

[19] Morag Shiach, *Discourse on Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 21.

has certainly changed over the years--perhaps even as a result of willful manipulation.[20] One also encounters the words "popular" and "populist" being used to mean very different things. Both David Edgar and Eugene Van Erven, for example, use the latter terms to refer to a debased form of the former, whereas others (like John McGrath[21]) tend to use the terms interchangeably.

Whatever their genesis, the dictionary definitions do not, in themselves, justify one commonly-held approach to popular drama as encompassing a sort of affirmative-action program to get members of the working class into the theatre. In its pure sense, popular theatre could be defined as theatre that appeals to a lot of people, whatever their social class or make up, although it is certainly the case that the term is used by many commentators (such as Van Erven), to refer to theatre that caters to an audience of working-class people as distinct from one that caters to the bourgeoisie. Indeed, it is surprisingly difficult to discuss in meaningful, non-specific terms the areas in which general public and the contemporary theatre co-exist.[22] However problematic their theses, some writers have built their arguments around the notion that popular theatre should be theatre for huge numbers of people, rather than theatre that subscribes to any specific ideological, political or artistic criteria.

John Pick, a City University (London) professor whose speciality is arts policy and management, uses the fact that theatres have become progressively smaller as a means of indicting contemporary theatrical leaders for their elitism. For example, he concludes that

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[20] For an excellent survey of the changing definitions of "the popular," see Shiach, pp. 19-34.

[21] John McGrath appears to have recently changed his mind on this topic. See Chapter Nine for a discussion of recent developments.

[22] Andrew Davis argues that, since the sixteenth century, theatre has only every appealed to a small section of the British populace. Whether or not that is strictly true, those who try to try to make theatre more of a mass art form certainly have to deal with more than a century of a lack of success in that area.

because it would take "more than 75 years for a majority of persons living within the (Greater London) area to get a seat" in the National Theatre or the Barbican Centre, it can be said categorically that "by their very natures, the two organizations cannot pursue a policy which is populist."[23] The inherent irony in the fact that the subsidies for these theatres are frequently justified on the grounds that they represent some kind of ill-defined (even a populist) national treasure has not escaped Pick who, noting that the five auditoria in the two relatively new centers have an average seating capacity of only about 900, claimed that "a tag phrase such as 'The National Theatre is Yours' belongs to that small class of statements which become manifestly untrue as soon as the majority are persuaded to believe them."[24] Pick believes that much of the populism professed by those working in the subsidized theatre is nothing short of elitist subterfuge, even on the part of those who would profess populist sentiments in public:

> although it has always been correct form to profess a desire to increase Arts audiences, the actions of architects, designers, promoters, producers, subsidy officers, copywriters and publicists have shown that there is nonetheless a deep seated desire to remain an exclusive club for the converted. We have progressively built our Arts auditoria smaller, surrounded the Arts with exclusive language codes, made booking ever more complex, and written about our work, in advertising copy and even programmes for the young, in a form of English that requires, to be fully understood, a reading age possessed only by ten per cent of the population.[25]

Pick's views arise from a belief that "British culture does not readily divide into the demanding and valuable arts (subsidized and cherished by the highly educated) and the

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[23] John Pick, *The West End: Mismanagement and Snobbery*, (Eastborne, John Offord, 1983), p. 175.

[24] Ibid.

[25] John Pick *Managing the Arts? The British Experience* (London: Rhinegold, 1986), p. 32.

popular and less demanding arts (commercial and an entertainment for the less privileged)."[26] Pick is opposed to the high art/low art dichotomy, which he believes grew up as a result of deliberately elitist practices by the arts managers, administrators and educators of the mid-nineteenth century. This position, along with his interest in the historical context of the term, obviously colors Pick's inclusive ideas of precisely what is meant by popular theatre.

One does not frequently encounter Pick's lucidly expressed views in summations of populism (such as the work by Sharratt, Bradby and McCormick, McGrath, Van Erven *et al.*).[27] One reason, no doubt, is that all of Pick's books are recent.[28] Another, though, is that Pick is perceived as an expert on arts management, rather than aesthetics, academics, playwriting or directing, which perhaps accounts for his insistence of the clear incompatibility of the *actions* with the oft-expressed *theories* of many self-defined populists. Still another possibility is that Pick is consistently critical of the avant-garde and the alternative theatre in general.

In his 1985 report on the theatre industry, Pick claimed that the theatre tends to cheerfully displace the following of popular tastes for mediated judgments by experts. One inevitable result, claimed Pick, is that theatres are spending all their time trying to do what their state benefactors *perceive* as populist policy, instead of actually pleasing large

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[26] Ibid., p. 1.

[27] Andrew Davies does make one brief reference to Pick but misrepresents his views. Davies takes issue with Pick's assertion that between 1865 and 1914, the West End theatre was the British theatre on the grounds that it is an elitist statement. Pick's comment is well justified and it is simply absurd to charge one of the most populist-conscious scholars with myopicism simply on the grounds of what is intended to be a historical observation, rather than a critical or analytical statement. Davis makes no further reference to Pick's work in his book.

[28] Pick's two major works, referenced in this chapter, appeared in 1983 and 1986. His 'business' report on *The Theatre Industry* (London: Comedia Publishing Group, 1985), is also of interest for its managerial insights.

numbers of potential theatre-goers. Given the propensity of the middle-class experts who make up the subsidizing bureaucracy, there is an inappropriate emphasis placed on "minority-interest dramas"[29] and the avant garde, at the expense of the populace at large. Thus, argues Pick, popular theatre tends to mean pleasing a kind of intermediate tier of bureaucrats who are in the business of mediating popular taste so that it falls into neat and definable political categories. For Pick, that tendency is both absurd and damaging. The theatres are placed in the position of continually producing unsalable, and therefore unpopular, "populist" programs--the term is used here in a third incarnation, meaning the theatre that bureaucrats think *should* be popular, but actually is not. True populism, whatever that may be, apparently remains elusive.

Not surprisingly, Pick's solutions to the dilemmas of populism lie in revising arts policy and management. Thus, Pick notes in a different work with similar themes (referring to the decline of the arts in terms of audiences) that "the Arts Council is the root of the problem."[30] He also advocates the forming of an "Artsbank," to introduce more venture capital into the theatre and argues, seemingly equating populism with democracy, that "at the center of an arts policy there must be critical, open, public debate."[31] "Any government, " Pick continues, "must aim primarily to remove the monopoly of high value which at present only special, privileged, art enjoys. . . . We do not need to puzzle over the maintenance of arts organizations so much as we need to find a way to restore to the British a sense of participation within their common cultures."[32] The liberal notion of a

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[29] John Pick, *The Theatre Industry* (London: Comedia Publishing Group, 1985), p. 53.

[30] Pick, *Managing the Arts?*, p. 175.

[31] Ibid., p. 180

[32] Ibid., p. 186.

"common culture," if such a thing even exists, is a difficult concept to understand without clearer definition.

Pick's views are of interest, because of his ability to cut through bureaucratic jargon and to relate populism to the economics of the theatre and vice-versa. Pick's work, however, is flawed by his using the size of an audience as the only aesthetic barometer. Thus, when it comes to defining what exactly the popular theatre he advocates is, in aesthetic or literary terms, Pick inevitably flounders. Nowhere in his work does there appear any real statement to that effect. One can find mention of certain forms of theatre that meet with Pick's approval, but it is a curious collection. On the one hand, Pick's list of "the greater" (and by that, one logically assumes, given his openly expressed sympathies, he means populist), "art of the twentieth century"[33] includes the music of Andrew Lloyd Webber, a singularly traditional artist who is frequently charged with aiding and abetting the anti-populist[34] rise of spectacle in theatre, and whose Really Useful Theatre Company prominently employs a junior member of the Royal Family.[35] Indeed, this company has specialized in productions like *Cats*, which Pick criticizes later (along with massive popular hits like *Les Miserables*), in the same book for celebrating the bureaucracy and the supportive technology of the theatre rather than acting or writing.[36] Lloyd Webber's writing and production practices seem so closely connected, it is hard to justify separating this particular composer from the style of the theatre his

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[33] Ibid., p. 33.

[34] Many would see Lloyd-Webber's contributions as anti-populist, if only because of his works' ability to fuel spiraling ticket prices.

[35] While Prince Edward's presence is perhaps not in itself an indication of a disavowal of populism, it does not make the company's productions any more accessible or relevant to the working class.

[36] Pick, *Managing the Arts*, p. 127.

company produces. One can also find Pick celebrating the fact that the long-running London stage show *No Sex Please, We're British* was staged "for the modest sum of £12,000."[37] Although his main point is to illustrate the conspicuous consumption that surrounds the subsidized houses, the resulting implication--that popular sex farces can teach the National Theatre something--is confusing. Is *No Sex Please, We're British,* the kind of populism Pick advocates, simply because large number of people attended? Or is it the inevitable result when we are freed from conspicuous consumption funded by the state? *No Sex Please . . .* certainly does not appear to have much to do with British participation in any common culture. At the very least, the popularity of such a show--which ran for more than a decade--seems at least partly related to the idea of atrophied working-class tastes discussed below in reference to the debates of Edgar, Gooch and McGrath. Is the fact that many people are "displeased" by the avant garde or minority drama sufficient reason for always subjugating to the tastes of the mainstream, however reactionary those tastes may be? All of these issues are not adequately addressed.

Pick's writing never really clearly defines exactly what popular theatre is--beyond, that is, the celebration of diversity. Although Pick's insistence on true popularity (in the numerical sense of the term) seems useful, it is clear that there needs to be some political and/or aesthetic criteria to accompany Pick's pseudo-monetarist economic sensibilities, which are derivative from Virginia and Philip Owen's 1980 monetarist article, "An Economic Approach to Artistic Innovation." Despite the absence of the aesthetic side of the equation, the presumption that such a determination has been made--by somebody, somewhere--colors much of Pick's writings.

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[37] Ibid., p. 177.

Pick's noting that what is often termed "the Arts" is no more valid than what is decried as mere entertainment, is certainly most useful, and Pick offers a list of "stuff" vaunted as true art that now appears "meager fare," as well as list of what was once considered "ephemeral popular art" that now appears--like a Louis Armstrong record--to be great art. Yet Pick admits that everyone would have a different list.[38] In doing so, Pick unjustifiably removes himself from the aesthetic debate and although he says so much about the hypocrisy and absurdity that surrounds arts policy and the low quality of so much supposedly high art, he still makes assumptions about populism that surely cannot be based purely on the size of an audience. Pick's work simply seems incomplete. That is not entirely surprising, since it is written from the standpoint of an exploration of arts policy and management and Pick appears to follow a rather narrow definition of arts policy.

A different perspective, especially on the relationship of populism to the audiences a theatre attracts, can be found in the work of Steve Gooch, whose major study of community theatre, entitled *All Together Now*, appeared in 1984. Gooch agrees with Pick about the absurdity of cultural divisions into high and low art and he also notes that "the theatre, since the arrival of television, has become increasingly the specialized preserve of a minority of enthusiasts."[39] Gooch notes that this minority art form is well covered by serious newspapers, academia and publishers at the expense of any serious study of the popular forms that "dominate the marketplace."[40] That is something of a

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38 Ibid., p, 50

39 Steve Gooch, *All Together Now: An Alternative View of Theatre and the Community* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 7.

40 Ibid., p. 7.
The marketplace seems a curious means of advocacy for a socialist writer. Gooch seems to imply that we should study popular forms because they form a part of capitalist machinations.

bizarre statement for a socialist advocating a higher degree of subsidy that utterly ignores the demands of the market place. The elitist nature of the infrastructure of the theatre industry--a frequent point of attack when all else fails--is for Gooch (as it is for Pick), a contributing factor in why comment and criticism about the arts reflect the same elitist divisions found in the actual practice of theatre.

Gooch's major emphasis, however, is on the kind of plays performed in the theatre as being the main determinant of the institution's applicability to populism. Unlike Pick, Gooch has no faith in the commercial West End theatre, supply and demand or corporate sponsorship.[41] He opens his arguments with an attack on academia and its speculations about classical theatre performance, speculations that are:

> based on a cavalier mixture of textual analysis and the little we know about the actual conditions of production to establish a groundless mythology of what is 'popular' and 'realistic' in our theatre tradition. It is touching that the fusty imagination of academia should be stirred by such speculation, but it is dangerous to allow its amateur mythologies, rooted in a kind of romantic voyeurism, to become enshrined in popular consciousness. . . . Nevertheless, green rooms . . . continue to echo with these traditional notions of "realism" and "popularity," fuelled by these speculations.[42]

In attacking these alleged "speculations," Gooch conveniently ignores the fact that all definitions of the popular and the realistic, like virtually all elements of language, are at least partially based on mythologies, if not some aspect of romantic voyeurism. It is simply untrue to claim that there is any viable and generally agreed-upon definition of "popularity."

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41 In a personal interview on December 19, 1987, Pick told me that he believed that the chairman of British Petroleum knew a great deal more about the arts than the head of the Arts Council at the time. Pick also argues throughout his work that the theatre could pay for itself, especially if the number of bureaucrats, administrative and support staff was drastically reduced.

42 Gooch., p. 12.

Gooch argues that "the drawing-room comedy" is a sort of all-purpose antithesis of all that is (or could be) populist, in that its dominance within the British theatre ensures the exclusion of members of the working class. (Davies has also complained about this form's alleged dominance of the commercial theatre). According to Gooch, not only does the drawing-room comedy ensure "a convenient meeting place"[43] for the ruling classes, but--because Gooch argues that "the best actor for a middle-class role would seem to be a middle-class actor"[44]--its middle-class base also ensures that those involved in the theatre will themselves be middle-class. The end result, then, is of a theatre that not only does not speak to the members of the working class who are potential audience members, but it also is a theatre that is "virtually closed to working-class practitioners."[45] Gooch's criticisms extend to both theatre geared to please academic tastes, as well as what he perceives to be the staple fare of the West End.

While Pick sees the free market as a useful source of populist sensibilities, Gooch's emotional criticisms emphasize the inherently evil nature of a capitalist theatre that relies on faceless bourgeois managers (typically, "a Prospero who did or didn't renew your contract for reasons which remained obscure."[46]) to disseminate fare to the public. For Gooch, capitalism inevitably forces the theatre to become like any other commodity which must be sold, and that frequently results in artistic bankruptcy. It is worth noting that the advent of any form of socialist realism often had exactly the same results.

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[43] Ibid., p. 13.

[44] Ibid., p. 13.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid., p. 38.

Gooch's comments are consistent and intriguing--especially when he notes that Brecht's concept of alienation has always been "too much for the insular, chauvinist and anti-intellectual British tradition,"[47] but his criticisms of the contemporary structure of the theatre are, however, neither particularly new nor original. His remarks about what should take the place of this elitist system, if true populism is to be achieved, are much more revealing.

Gooch argues that "there is now a whole generation of audiences for whom their most memorable cultural experience has been the surprise of turning up at a scruffy local hall with . . . no proper stage, and having their preconception of theatre as a bland, sanitized reflection of someone else's world turned completely on its head."[48] Gooch conveniently offers no numbers to substantiate exactly what he means by "a whole generation." This is problematic because one could also argue that a fringe theatrical experience--to which Gooch appears to be referring--has made only minor inroads into popular cultural tastes in Britain . This sense of false optimism is a current that runs throughout Gooch's utopian work and consistently undermines it. Consider the following paragraph:

> Since many of the needs addressed by a community theatre are hidden, the response, when it comes, is a rare experience. Comments like "I didn't think theatre was like this, there's so much in it, I want to see this again, or "I never thought I'd see my own life, the things I care about and worry about every day, up on the stage, acted out,' are typical of my own experience and that of colleagues in the same field.[49]

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[47] Ibid., p. 36.

[48] Ibid., p. 58.

[49] Ibid., p. 74.

While there is no reason to doubt that Gooch has indeed heard such audience comments, this extension of those remarks into an implication that his form of community theatre is the best way to reach the working class is tenuous at the very best. Such comments of audience praise, as quoted by Gooch, can undoubtedly be heard in equal if not greater profusion in the West End--perhaps even from the mouth of a member of the working class--which points to their unreliability as a source. Such remarks cannot reasonably be used to imply that there is something inherent in the capitalist structure of the West End that prohibits working-class identification taking place on any level.

Gooch further claims that if the rapidly expanding video business and the advent of cable TV are to be stopped from destroying the legitimate, artistic theatre, then taxes should be levied on the profits of those businesses, with the revenue in turn becoming a grant to the alternative sector--on the grounds that the mainstream facets of the industry prey on the innovations of the fringe. It seems like utopian dreaming--not to mention a form of aesthetic totalitarianism--to claim that the video business should pay a kind of artistic users' tax to the innovators. For one thing, that assumes that video and cable can never be innovative, which is patently not true. Furthermore, if the commercial arts prey on the avant-garde, one could argue with equal validity that the attack is balanced out by the reverse. It is rare to find a piece of experimental theatre or other art that does not at least take part of its context from the commercial forces it is supposedly rebelling against.

Like Pick, Gooch advocates larger auditoriums. He also suggests increased subsidy so theatres can employ larger casts and expand production costs, and representative state control. More radically, he advocates a style of community[50] operation in which both community and theatre listen to each other's demands, where theatres truly "belong" to

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[50] Gooch uses the word in its British sense--referring to professional theatre that belongs to and is part of a specific community. He does not refer to amateur theatre, the context in which the word "community theatre" is used most frequently in the United States.

their communities. In Gooch's utopian world, the influence of the market place will be abolished from the theatre, and working-class audiences will no longer have to pay to see bourgeoise performers regurgitating the ramifications of bourgeoise culture. The box-office, perceived by Gooch to be symptomatic of a great divide, would be rendered totally irrelevant, making it possible for some kind of genuine populism to consequently come to the foreground. Gooch's "bottom-up" manifesto speaks of returning culture to the people and its author becomes positively euphoric (and a touch patronizing) about the strength of the working-class spirit--a spirit of which, Gooch implies, academics and the litterati know nothing. Such knowledge is apparently reserved for those on the front line of the alternative theatre:

> practitioners who have frozen and choked in the sooty air of the cultural slums know first-hand that where the human spirit is still able to rise above the sheer physical exhaustion of the mines or the building sites, the mind-numbing onslaught of the production line, the drudgery of routine of the humiliation of the bottom rung in the pecking order. The richness of experience and the degree of perception it can possess about human character and personality, the robust sense of style and dignity it can demonstrate, and the sheer originality of its self expression, all exceed by far the stale . . . and derivative world of our received culture.[51]

Gooch ignores the problems presented by the middle-class background of many of these practitioners whose choking in the name of populism is perhaps a temporary phenomenon.

In Gooch's utopia,"adequate" economic and administrative support would make community theatre--theatre that spurned the restrictive, bourgeois proscenium arch and that was accompanied by what Gooch calls "a veritable rabbit warren of cultural activity"--possible in huge, subsidized arts centers, populated by artists in steady, long-term employment, in most every community. He notes, in a suitably understated manner, that

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[51] Ibid., p. 69.

"the aim of artists working within such a radically restructured theatre and concerned to reflect a genuine popular culture, would have to be correspondingly generous."[52] The word "generous" appears to refer to all forms of philanthropy from the moral to the financial. Such generosity would be truly impossible to enforce. It is also useful to insert a warning that Pick--who has little time for this kind of populist vision--offered to those who advocate multi-activity, community arts centers. This clearly points to the contrast between these two diametrically oppositional visions of populism:

> many theatres and arts centers . . . are forbidding in appearance, demand a high reading age even to comprehend their promotional material. . . . In seeking to make our theatres welcoming, busy places, we have perhaps gone too far in diffusing their central purpose. . . . Our theatres . . . have often seemed to try and disguise the fact that they are theatres, existing ultimately for putting on plays. . . . Instead, they masquerade as restaurants, shopping centers, bookshops, bars, citizens' advice bureaux, art galleries, coffee houses, rest rooms, community centers and so on--the real excitement is thus to be found in the foyer.[53]

The question, of course, remains as to what precisely would be done in these great centers, and Gooch identifies one of the most fundamental problems and dilemmas that pervades the thought of many of the theorists with whom this study is concerned:

> Often in the pursuit of new form to express socialist or working-class content, companies have recourse to popular forms identified with working-class culture. The problem here is that music-hall, popular music, stand-up comedy, musicals and even thrillers and westerns are all forms which have hardened and set as a result of the way in which capitalist production relations harness popular imagination and talent. Consequently their strongest performance values are those of the "hard sell," and to achieve those values you end up aping the very qualities you're trying to get away from.[54]

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[52] Ibid., p. 77.

[53] Pick, *The Theatre Industry*, pp. 53-54.

[54] Ibid., p. 78.

This problem of "hardened and set," and thus ideologically undesirable, working-class forms is very important and indicative of the difficulty of populism's relationship with politics. For all Gooch's utopian visions, he seems to have no answer here. Ultimately, Gooch's utopian solutions are as vague as those proffered by Pick. His populism can exist only within an economy which prioritizes arts funding--and, indeed, a particular sub-group of arts funding. Any aesthetic criteria is secondary to the importance of the "theatre's production relations." ("How can actors held in the thrall of a hierarchical production system, a directorial concept or a naturalistic strait-jacket, look their audience in the eye?"[55])

It is so hard to conceive that a theatre with no reliance on a free-market system would ever be in place on the scale envisaged and desired by Gooch, that much of his discussions seem practically pointless. He speaks laudably of a collective aesthetic, but the thrust of these--almost farcical--ideas revolves around the notion that individual heroes and "one on one conflicts" are outmoded and should be replaced by "a broader and more explicit social canvas."[56] Gooch's own interest in shared fate, demonstrated in plays like *Female Transport*, can be posited as an alternative, but this work was hardly a popular success, more frequently attracting the middle class crowd of whom Gooch is so critical. Gooch criticizes elitism, whether as a product of capitalism or the intellectual version, a product of the middle-class alternative theatre artists, yet he has no real workable[57] alternative. His own dramatic writings particularly seem lost in the void that exists between the bourgeois realism of the drawing-room comedy and populism in a pure sense.

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55 Ibid., p. 79.

56 Gooch, p. 82.

57 Workable, that is, without radical changes in the overall political climate that is independent of the arts.

Gooch's reference to the problems of aping working-class forms is a preoccupation that also permeates the writings of John McGrath. McGrath, a theorist, playwright, director--most noticeably of the 7:84 theatre company--and screenplay writer, has had more to say on the importance of populism, as well as how it can usefully be defined, than just about anyone else.

McGrath's seminal work, which influenced much of the theorizing of the eighties was *A Good Night Out*, published in 1981 and based on a series of lectures given by McGrath at Cambridge University in 1979. Like *All Together Now*, McGrath's book is essentially a manifesto--a manifesto to which other writers and scholars constantly refer.[58] McGrath opens his arguments by presenting the following assumptions and stating that he accepts none of them:

> 1. that art is universal, capable of meaning the same to all people;
> 2. that the more 'universal' it is, the better it is;
> 3. that the 'audience' for theatre is an idealized white, middle-class, etc., person and that all theatre should be dominated by the tastes and values of such a person.
> 4. that, therefore, an audience without such an idealized person's values is an inferior audience; and
> 5. that the so-called 'traditional values' of English literature are now anything other than an indirect cultural expression of the dominance over the whole of Britain of the ruling-class of the south-east of England.[59]

He then states that there is "an audience for working-class theatre in Britain which makes demands, and which has values, which are different from those enshrined in our idealized middle-class audience."[60] After this opening, McGrath conducts a historical survey, essentially of the writers of the post-Osborne generation. His conclusion is that

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[58] Both Davies and Van Erven trumpet McGrath's significance in the debate surrounding British popular theatre.

[59] John McGrath, *A Good Night Out* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 3.

[60] Ibid., p.3.

most of these supposedly influential figures have sold out to the very values they were assumed to be fighting against.[61] Moreover, their particular brand of theatre--angst-endowed lower-class characters with regional accents talking about the meaning of life--has itself become mainstream and inextricably linked with the establishment. Or, in McGrath's words: "what Osborne and his clever director Tony Richardson had achieved was a method of translating some areas of non-middle-class life in Britain into a form of entertainment that could be sold to the middle-classes."[62] Clearly, if one accepts that premise, the relationship of the post-Osborne generation of new Royal Court writers to populism must be seen as purely tangential.

McGrath describes a typical night in a Northern working-man's club, noting that the entertainment typically offered "bears all the hallmarks of the suffering of the working class . . . the brutality, the violence, the drunkenness, the sexism, the authoritarianism that has been part of its life since the industrial revolution."[63] McGrath explains further that a working-class audience at a club (or perhaps a pantomime) is able to adapt to all manners of shifting theatrical conventions. "This is not," McGrath claims, "because the club/pantomime audience is unused to theatre, and therefore naively accepting--on the contrary, it is the sophistication of the audience of the folk tales, able to shift ground with ease if given secure guidance."[64]

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[61] McGrath's examples include Albert Finney's love for racehorses; Tony Richardson's residency in Hollywood, and John Osborne's reported, reactionary comments about the unions running Great Britain.

[62] McGrath, p. 10.

[63] Ibid., p. 25.

[64] Ibid., p. 29.

McGrath considers the theatrical demands of the working-class to be fundamentally different than those of the bourgeoisie. One difference is in the area of directness: working-class audiences like to know exactly what is going on. Others include: the working-class enjoyment of comedy and music; their willingness to participate in openly expressed emotion; a demand for moment-by-moment effect from the performers; and immediacy. Finally, McGrath asserts that working-class entertainment is typically based on the variety show, and thus the tradition of variety should be an element of the style of theatre that attempts to appeal to the working class. Working-class audiences also do not have the "claim to cosmopolitanism" so celebrated by the middle-classes and, consequently, "the best response among working-class audiences comes from characters and events with a local feel."[65]

Although he was obviously indebted to Brecht for many of his ideas, McGrath nonetheless argued that Brecht's prescriptions for the epic theatre were hostile and cold towards the audience, focusing on pedagogy rather than shared entertainment and, to use McGrath's most extreme moment, consequently representing "Stalinism rather than collectivism."[66] Although this could certainly be construed as a misinterpretation, the evidence remains that the British working class have never warmed to Brecht to any great extent. As Davies noted: "few Brecht plays have been notably successful in Britain."[67]

This major manifesto, championed by McGrath, of using working-class cultural forms as a means of creating a new, viable popular aesthetic, was, controversially denounced by David Edgar in 1979, through the pages of *Theatre Quarterly*. Edgar set out to explain why, although the scale of socialist theatre work in the 1970s had been impressive, it had

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65 Ibid., p. 58.

66 Ibid., p. 41.

67 Davies, p. 186.

become only peripherally involved in the political manifestations of the working-class movement. Edgar described his own attempts, working with a company called The General Will, to draw on references and traditions culled, or so he thought, from popular culture. He claims the following was the result:

> the images the audiences related to . . . were not those that were drawn from popular-cultural traditions. It was rather those images that we drew from bourgeois populist culture (films and television) that created the greatest resonances. . . . The General Will . . . was employing forms that had expired more than a century ago. . . . Even those popular forms that had survived the electronic onslaught had degenerated into populism. . . . Remnants of the music-hall tradition survive in club entertainment, but the grossly reactionary nature of club acts is evidence that . . . the culture of the clubs has become bourgeois in essence (it is no coincidence that the uniform costume of club entertainers is the evening wear of the upper-middle-class).[68]

As was noted at the start of this chapter, Edgar is, of course, using the word "populism" in a very different way: he is referring to a debased type of popular culture, a kind of ultimately decadent destination that awaits popular culture once infiltrated by bourgeoise forces. This realization of the atrophied state of "pure populism" led Edgar to the conclusion that there has been very little successful popular theatre based on significant popular-cultural forms, but that most of the successful examples of popular theatre have used forms that Edgar termed peripheral to the urban British working class. Thus, Edgar felt able to justify the following inflammatory statement:

> The most potent, rich, and in many ways politically acute theatrical statements of the past ten years[69] have been made in custom-built buildings patronized almost exclusively by the middle-class.[70]

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[68] David Edgar, "Ten Years of Political Theatre , 1968-78," *Theatre Quarterly* 9, no. 32 (1979), 27.

[69] Edgar is, of course, referring to the years 1968-78.

[70] *Theatre Quarterly* 9, no. 32 (1979), 31.

McGrath took great exception to Edgar's sentiments, arguing that his comments were inaccurate, at least in so far as McGrath's own 7:84 theatre company was concerned. That group's production (claimed McGrath), of a show called *The Game's A Bogey*:

> . . . took precisely those grossly reactionary club show elements and, by a critical re-creation of both form and content, produced a show of great sophistication in both artistic and political terms, which was very far from being grossly reactionary, and which played to packed and enthusiastic audiences in Scotland . . . Edgar is essentially wrong in this idealist distinction between popular and populist--which are not opposites. And he is equally wrong in thinking that the only true 'in essence' forms of popular culture are dying a lingering death.[71]

Both sides of this argument have validity, although the debate is hampered by neither party distinguishing between the urban and rural working class. Edgar, it seems, was speaking of the urban working class, situated in an environment where mass-communication, and the homogeneity it promotes, has largely eradicated many of the popular traditions that used to exist. Yet, in his response, McGrath uses the example of the rural (and geographically remote) working-class of Scotland who still enthusiastically respond to regional and idiosyncratic popular forms, forms that are largely unsullied by industrialization. Both men, then, are largely trying to compare very different incarnations of popular-cultural forms as if they were the same thing.

This opposition became still more complicated and extreme. In the next issue of *Theatre Quarterly* after the one that contained his controversial critique of the state of socialist theatre, Edgar offered further insights through an interview conducted by Clive Barker and Simon Trussler. In the interview, Edgar noted that he "got into politics on a kind of rhetorical level,"[72] a mode of entry that perhaps partly explains his different

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[71] McGrath, p. 34.

[72] David Edgar, interviewed by Clive Barker and Simon Trussler, "Towards a Theatre of Dynamic Ambiguities," *Theatre Quarterly* 9, no. 33 (Spring 1979), 3.

emphasis from that of McGrath. Edgar justified his preoccupation with the subsidized houses partially on the grounds that he wanted an opportunity to write "about subjects that required a large number of people,"[73] and partly because he had so little time for didacticism.[74] Nowhere in the interview does Edgar makes any reference to the relevance of a particular type of audience effecting the validity of his work or its effectiveness as politically-committed drama.

At about the same time as Edgar's article, McGrath, in the lectures later published as *A Good Night Out*, addressed the issue of atrophied working-class culture in more general terms. In doing so, he anticipated possible criticism of his list of the attributes of working-class theatre, and rebuffed such criticisms in advance:

> There is a danger that in schematically drawing up a list of some features of working-class entertainment I am . . . trailing along behind the tastes of the working class, debased as they are by capitalism; and merely translating an otherwise bourgeoisie message into this inferior language. It is a real danger and I have seen people with the best intentions falling into it. But that is not the present case for two important reasons. One is . . . that these features of working-class entertainment must be handled critically.[75] . . . The second reason is this. Given a critical attitude to these features of working-class entertainment, they contain within them the seeds of a revitalized, new kind of theatre, capable of expressing the richness and complexity of working-class life today, and not only working-class life. In terms of theatre they are some of the first sounds in a new language that can never be fully articulated until socialism is created in this country.[76]

Joining in the *Theatre Quarterly* debate, along with McGrath, Edgar and Gooch was Michelene Wandor who extended the debate not only into socialism, but into issues of

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[73] Ibid., p. 15.

[74] Edgar noted that if the playwright is political in a practical way, this removes the necessity for his or her dramas to be perfect political statements.

[75] Hence the title of the chapter, "Mediating Contemporary Reality."

[76] McGrath, p. 59.

sexual politics. Wandor was clearly more interested in the relationship of socialism and feminism rather than populism or the essence of true popular culture. That led her to try and diffuse the debate away from the nature of populism. This debate was rapidly becoming not so much about the theatre's relationship with populism, but about its applicability to socialism:

> . . . the real question hinges not along the Edgar versus McGrath axis, but on the relationship between different tactics, in order to develop a fuller strategy towards the development of a soundly based struggle for socialism within the theatre.[77]

Populism, in Wander's terminology, is inextricably linked with socialism, which means that she felt she was contributing to the debate by "drawing specific attention to some of the ways in which feminism has and is influencing socialist theatre."[78] Although it is inaccurate to discuss populism purely in terms of as a means of furthering the socialist revolution, Wandor did hit upon an important aspect of the populist debate when she related the dilemmas caused by middle-class intellectuals performing plays for their already politicized class cohorts to the feminist movement as a whole:

> one of the most important areas of feminism was developed by women . . . largely from the middle classes . . . whose material position enabled them to accept wife and motherhood as a 'career' in itself, and who then not only found that 'career' wanting, but positively restricting and trivializing. The complexity of understanding the relationship between material and ideological struggles lies behind the Edgar/McGrath polarizations, and the example of feminism shows how struggle, in order to be rooted in both, has deliberately to query and cross class boundaries--both in terms of the people who produce the theatre work, and the audiences to whom it is played--in order to build alliances between people.[79]

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[77] Michelene Wandor, "Sexual Politics and the Strategy of Socialist Theatre," *Theatre Quarterly* 9, no. 36 (Winter 1980), 28.

[78] Ibid., p. 28.

[79] Ibid., p. 29.

Carry On Understudies, a book written in 1986, is evidence that Wander is still struggling with the idea of a feminist aesthetic--and, by extension, a popular aesthetic--and was questioning its validity. Her somewhat vague conclusion to all of this debate was that we should celebrate theatre's diversity while working for political reform, accepting that the labels (such as "feminist theatre") are inadequate as a means of expressing the complexity of relationships within the theatre. Wandor's ideas ultimately demonstrate the confusion that can result when the populist and the socialist are confused.

The contemporary debate on populism is assuredly most indebted to the contributions of John McGrath--for McGrath offered evidence that his populist ideas work in practice. He described the inroads made by the Liverpool Everyman when his set of short plays, set in Liverpool and called *Unruly Elements* were performed:

> The audience figures went up to 75 percent, and the audience responded to the jokes, the presence of recognizable local figures on the stage, and the style of the pieces, which varied a little, but which was on the whole full of verbal attack, not at all naturalistic in its pacing, articulateness, or compression. The plays, and the actors and director,[80] created a sense of excitement about the theatre within the community; and encouraged by a determined publicity campaign, by the price of tickets, by the informality, lack of middle-class bullshit about the theatre, and by the fact that you could get a decent pint of ale before, during and after the show, some young working-class blokes came in with their wives for a night out. They enjoyed themselves and sent their friends. . . . The way was open to a new kind of theatre.[81]

Although it is overstating the case to say that *Unruly Elements* should be venerated as the first, revolutionary moment of populism, McGrath is one of the few writers to articulate a realistic and practical, populist manifesto, albeit one not without problems. At the close of his book he takes his arguments a further step, and hits serious problems.

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[80] The plays' director was Alan Dossor, then artistic director of the Everyman.

[81] McGrath, p. 52.

Like Wandor, McGrath does not find the notion that popular theatre and socialism should mean the same thing to be in any way problematic. Furthermore, he suggests that true populism can only be attained if is "'about' a socialist criticism of the audience."[82] Such a critique can be effected, notes McGrath, without playing to empty seats instead of paying customers, if it is "done from a position of basic political solidarity and cultural identity."[83] If one takes this to its logical extension, McGrath implies that the only good theatre, in an aesthetic sense, is socialist theatre that actively seeks to criticize any unacceptable behavior on the part of of its audience members.[84] Such a view of populism, which in any pure sense does not necessarily have such an intimate relationship with didacticism, seems stilted at best, and is dangerously likely to ensure that the theatre will preach always to the converted. One could further argue that hiding socialist didacticism under the guise of populism is propagandist in itself.[85] As socialism languished during the eighties, it is perhaps logical to conclude that the following of popular aesthetics must be a doubtful use of one's time.

Other playwrights have offered contributions to this debate. Howard Brenton is a radical author whose work has largely played to (and, at least once, provoked the hostility

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82 Seeing that most socialist theatre is produced by the middle-class, one imagines that this critique would be conducted by middle-class, intellectual practitioners.

83 McGrath, p. 97.
Although it must be a subjective judgment, I think it is most likely that criticism is criticism, however affectionate or ideologically sound the base, and should be acknowledged as such. Few would claim that working-class audiences would enjoy such criticism which, in turn, must leave McGrath open to the charge that he is inclined to hoodwink his audiences.

84 How can one be in a position of basic solidarity with a member of a working-class audience, if that particular audience member happens to be a conservative rather than a socialist? McGrath offers no solutions.

85 It is interesting that McGrath criticizes Brecht's list of the attributes of the epic theatre on the grounds that it is necessarily hostile to an audience: a hostility that McGrath claims true popular theatre must avoid.

of[86]) middle-class audiences. In a 1987 *New Theatre Quarterly* interview conducted by Tony Mitchell (at which point Brenton's and David Hare's *Pravda* had been running for over a year at the National Theatre), Brenton explained his choice to try and stay away from the fringe and community theatres in the following terms:

> The Olivier is the biggest stage in the country, in terms of notice and attention, the nearest to being a 'national stage' which could be more powerful than any TV programme. I'd have been a fool not to try and write for it. . . . I think it's down to 'red' writers to hammer plays with socialist concerns into the center of the theatre. The theatre is an institution. It's like any other institution in Britain, be it a university, or the BBC, or a school. It's conservative, hierarchical and patriarchal. But underneath it there's a red theatre. I am a member of the red theatre under the theatre's bed.[87]

When asked about his notions of populism, and specifically, if and how he differed with the ideas of John McGrath and Dario Fo, Brenton had the following response that explains why he chooses not to explicitly draw on the theatrical and pseudo-theatrical traditions of the working classes:

> I have faith that true literacy means that the most difficult matters can be clear to anyone if they are clearly written. That's not about ripping off 'genres' or 'forms.' I don't like manipulating an audience. I think that anything worth dramatizing is best dramatized in a way that anyone can understand. It's a faith that literacy is a dramatic weapon. I try to let my plays have their head scene by scene. Manipulation of genres is condescending, and dramatists usually fuck up when they try it.[88]

Brenton's distinguishing between truth and manipulation is extremely vague and absurdly polemical. David Hare, also in a *Theatre Quarterly* interview, joined with Brenton on the

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[86] The scandal, precipitated by Mary Whitehouse, surrounding the National Theatre production of Brenton's *The Romans in Britain* in 1980 being a case in point.

[87] Howard Brenton, interviewed by Tony Mitchell, "The Red Theatre Under the Bed," *New Theatre Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1987), 196.

[88] Ibid., p, 198.

opposing side to McGrath as these playwrights explained why they had tended to move away from the alternative world of the Portable Theatre closer to the establishment world of the major subsidized, London theatres. That move, they claimed, did not detract from their commitment to the needs of the working class:

> We can now command the standards we want, the style of presentation we want, there's never any argument about how the plays are to be done, where five or six years ago there would have been. It's always the content of the work that determines everything--which I say over and over again, and I know you won't believe me, but it's true! And where can ideas be most clearly presented? There's never been any bars on ideas, even in the West End.[89]

In their responses, Brenton and Hare are, of course, expounding the view that a good playwright can reach everyone, whatever their class, and they are also criticizing the McGrath point of view of the need to critique working-class mores from a socialist perspective. One could, of course argue that audiences have wildly differing levels of literacy, so to argue that there is some pure form of literacy understandable by all seems doubtful. Furthermore, using working-class forms is not necessarily manipulation.[90] Brenton also makes no mention[91] of the audience his plays are likely to reach, although he must be aware of the class composition of the typical National Theatre house. There is also an intriguing possible contradiction in this interview. When asked about using television as a "populist' alternative to theatre, Brenton was somewhat condescending:

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89 Simon Trussler (ed.), *New Theatre Voices of the Seventies* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 117.

90 This is, to some degree, an extension of David Edgar's argument. Whereas Edgar saw populist theatre as employing peripheral working-class forms, Brenton sees it as exploiting those forms. Both playwrights appear to be questioning the very possibility of any kind of alternative, populist format away from something palatable to the National Theatre's audiences.

91 Anywhere in the interview, that is.

> I've always had a difficulty with TV. . . . The BBC is controlled by carrot-juice-drinking vicars. They run very scared these days. . . . Some writers say it's worth all the hassles as TV is the modern Globe Theatre, and that you should write to the formula of soap and naturalism and 'slip things in.' . . . I don't believe it. I met someone who wrote for *Dynasty* for a year and was a near millionaire out of it. But she was also a serious, educated woman, a feminist who was well-informed about social matters. She said she slipped a great deal against American capitalism into *Dynasty*. But I don't think anyone noticed! It's just wallpaper.[92]

Although the National Theatre is clearly somewhat removed from *Dynasty*, Brenton's response seems curious as he argues earlier in the interview that it is perfectly appropriate to be a socialist subversive working in an admittedly conservative environment.[93] It is hard to see how working from within a system one is basically opposed to should be acceptable at the National Theatre, but not in television. After all, it could be argued that, at least politically speaking, Brenton's supposedly subversive dramas have essentially become part of the (albeit more self-consciously liberal) wallpaper at the National, just as much as the television writer's attempts failed to change the political orientation of commercial American television. Both of the governing structures are equally powerful when it comes to repelling the forces of subversion. In short, Brenton's insights--seemingly skewed in order to justify his personal course of action--are most inconsistent.

McGrath's views have already been considered in great detail, but it is interesting to note that a recent interview in *New Theatre Quarterly* provided something of an update.[94] McGrath explained that he does not dispute Edgar's claim that British popular culture has been debased by capitalism, but simply argues that it has not been destroyed.

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[92] Brenton, pp. 197-198.

[93] "A red under the theatre's bed," as Brenton put it.

[94] It should, however, be noted that at the time of the interview, McGrath was still involved with the 7:84 Theatre Company, a group that he has subsequently left, due to a controversy surrounding the group's arts council funding.

When referring directly to the authors who work in the mainstream theatre. McGrath is conciliatory:

> If David Hare is best at writing passionate plays about the corruption of the middle classes and the way the class structure affects the upper and middle classes, then that's what he should write. I just don't think that it's of any help in creating a counter-culture within the working class . . . which I think is going to be richer and more helpful to the future of humanity. . . . But, yes, I do think it's a shame that when Brenton's *Weapons of Happiness* is done at the National Theatre it's viewed by audiences who look on the people involved in it as figures of fun and comedy; or that when David Edgar writes *Maydays* for the Royal Shakespeare Company he finds himself presenting images of his former comrades and, indeed, his present enemies, which is distorted and wrong--it denigrates their work and motives. . . . Distortion can easily come about in mainstream theatre[95] because a writer doesn't have adequate control over what the end result is.[96]

It is interesting that both of McGrath's examples of the "mainstream theatre" actually come from the subsidized sector, rather than productions by commercial producers, perhaps because such productions do not fall as easily into either half of this dividing axis that this chapter has so far considered.

McGrath's last statement is also questionable because authorship is a problematic concept in any area of the theatre, and it also partly depends on the willingness of t he writer to fight for artistic control--and the willingness of either director or producer to give that control up--whatever the theatrical infrastructure they are currently working within. It could be reasonably argued that the complaints of writers are largely inevitably in this most collaborative of art forms. McGrath's remarks, nonetheless, do not

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[95] McGrath, of course, makes no apparent distinction between the commercial theatre and the subsidized houses.

[96] John McGrath interviewed by Tony Mitchell, "Popular Theatre and the Changing Perspective of the Eighties," *New Theatre Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (Autumn 1985), 395.

significantly backtrack from his positions in *A Good Night Out* and his comments remain among the most useful in this debate.

The polemical but lively debates between McGrath, Edgar, Brenton and Hare are interesting, yet they have had little practical effect on the theatre's relationship with populism. Given that practitioners have a whole variety of views of what popular theatre is; its desirability; if it can exist and (should the answer be yes), how that existence can be brought about, I want to return briefly to the views of academics who have tried to make sense of the popular theatre and summarized the above debate that raged so strongly on the pages of *Theatre Quarterly*.

The problematic nature of Andrew Davies' exclusive definition of popular theatre--excluding it from the West End, folk theatre or alternative theatre--has already been considered. Although Davies' history of the British alternative theatres is probably the only book to consider the *Theatre Quarterly* debates in any worthwhile detail, Davies clouds the issues by expounding a definition of popular theatre that is absurdly narrow:

> The popular theatre is marked by its informality and diversity. Locations are often temporary and unpretentious, encouraging a crude and straightforward presentation rather than expensive production values, and the lack of a proscenium barrier encourages a close and intimate relationship with the audience who are very much a part of the performance. . . . Improvisation, spontaneity and topicality are uppermost, and the bill of fare usually swings from farce to tragedy within the same piece, ignoring literary devices as to unity of style. The fluidity of popular theatre is illustrated by the scantiness of written texts.[97]

Eugene Van Erven describes popular theatre--at least, its historical base--in a slightly different way, although with the same openly expressed political sympathies as Davies. Van Erven celebrates the politicization of the popular theatre:

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97 Davies, p. 5.

> Two main types of popular theatre emerge, then, in the twentieth century. The first conceives of the theatre as a place of communion where all social groups meet to receive their regular dose of the national cultural heritage through the designated classics. As such it is a theatre of integration and unification. The second type of popular theatre is more Marxist in orientation; it sees the theatre as a place where the oppressed classes in society are made conscious of the injustice of their predicament. As such it could be seen as a theatre of class struggle. . . . The widespread revolts of 1967 and 1968 gave the essential impulse to a radical reorientation of the popular theatre in Western Europe and the United States.[98]

It is certainly true that the political events of the late sixties politicized the theatre. But it is another thing to suggest that they politicized an already-in-place *popular* theatre. For one thing, the connections between the so-called radical and classical arms of the popular theatre seems tenuous at best. Where does the commercial theatre fit in? What about non-classical, non-radical new work? Are such contributions inherently elitist? What qualifies these two types of theatre selected by Van Erven as inherently popular? Simply the fact that they rely on subsidy? Or the fact that they employ what Van Erven subjectively terms anti-bourgeois forms?

All of these issues and questions remain largely unsolved. Also problematic is Van Erven's lack of objectivity about his so-called radical popular theatre. Witness his euphoric description, reliant entirely on absolutes:

> The radical popular theatre reaches out to the nontheatre audience by means of free admission (or the charging of minimal contributions) to their shows, which it often performs under makeshift conditions in the target audiences' working and living environment. . . . The radical popular theatre presents itself as an integral part of the working-class social atmosphere. It has learned to adapt itself to the impediments that the differing circumstances of each performance present. It employs a wide range of techniques to break through such physical and social barriers as smoke, noise, beer drinking, and the latest soccer predictions. . . . During the performance of the actual play, a relaxed interaction between actors and audience is maintained . . . theatrical illusion is constantly challenged and never given a chance to establish itself. The audience is made to feel part of the game.[99]

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98 Van Erven, pp. 13-14.

99 Ibid., pp. 174-175.

Much of the above is palpably untrue, at least using the British and North American models (Van Erven, admittedly, is also speaking of European and Central American companies and popular forms). The popular theatre (at least in the sense Van Erven uses the word), has never demonstrably been an "integral" part of the working class social atmosphere and now looks less likely than ever of ever becoming so. Its intrusions into venues such as pubs are frequently productive of a strained atmosphere, rather than the relaxed interchange between audience and performer, to which Van Erven refers. Illusion may well be challenged, but it is often done so in direct opposition to the wishes of an audience used to a realistic format and which considers realistic television drama much more its own, than the machinations of a Marxist theatre troupe lacking any real understanding of working-class culture. Van Erven implies that audiences have no right to like such evil theatrical fare--fare that forms what is generally understood as popular culture:

> There is no denying that sexually suggestive situation comedies, soap operas and melodramas are extremely well liked in working-class circles.[100] They appeal to cheap sentimentality and sexist attitudes, reinforcing rather than questioning social values and prejudices . . . the radical popular theatre . . . wants to provide its audiences with new insights into its predicament and to reveal the real faces behind the masks of the authorities.[101]

In attempting to account for the decline of radical, popular theatre during the eighties, Van Erven does not choose to critique whether the original role of the groups was ever effective or well defined. Instead, he attributes the current paucity and decline of these

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[100] It would probably be more accurate to say that they are well liked in all circles, as the vast majority of contemporary dramatic fare--in the live theatre as well as the mechanical media--falls into one of these categories.

[101] Van Erven, p. 178.

groups to their selling out. "In the early days, " says Van Erven, "theatre was a political weapon first and a means of artistic expression second. But in the mid-seventies . . . militant members, frustrated with the lack of immediate results, left; and artistic form became more of a priority."[102] As a result of this lack of militant practitioners, "the radical theatre is now more willing to make certain compromises than before."[103] Van Erven notes that the radical popular theatre has become more pragmatic, stable and has redefined its original orientation. Van Erven does finally remark that radical popular theatre has always down played the importance of the spectator and has always been a case of "highly educated outsiders coming in to perform for a working-class audience."[104] But he never extends this argument to a real consideration of why this should be so.

Davies makes the comment that his book is the only one of its kind, that it is both new and innovative. Davies' study may be "the first history of the alternative and experimental drama in Britain,"[105] from its inception to the present day[106] (although Van Erven's slightly newer work certainly has many similarities), but it is a total misconception to imply that the alternative theatre has been ignored by academics and theorists. On the contrary, one can find a great deal of academic pulp about the political machinations of the fringe but a good deal less--aside from Pick's invaluable work--about the commercial contemporary theatre that deals with its appeal and longevity in any kind

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[102] Ibid., p. 183.

[103] Ibid., pp. 184-185.

[104] Ibid., p. 188.

[105] Davies, p. 209.

[106] A perfectly adequate history could, however, be easily traced through the many articles on the subject and the histories of the companies.

of critical way.[107] Davies' conclusion is the most interesting part of the book and the most relevant to the current study. In it, Davies notes that he is unsure whether the fringe or alternative theatre has any viable future because it "has never been able to overcome certain major drawbacks, most notably the limited role that theatre plays in most people's everyday life."[108]

Davies is greatly pessimistic about the likelihood of what he terms a "middle-class tradition"[109] ever being altered, although he simultaneously notes that "there will always be a live theatre in Britain."[110] Davies goes on to criticize the ever-escalating cost of tickets in the commercial sector, the ascendance of musicals, the increasing reliance on spectacle and paucity of the straight play which may die all together. All of these, of course, are the standard cry of the alternative theatre advocate. Davies, though, goes a little further. In his final paragraph, he tolls the death knell for British alternative and experimental theatre:

> The future, therefore, seems to indicate a triad of big West End shows, of radio, television and video, and of a large but unambitious amateur movement, together with two major subsidized companies able to pick up on such fringe activities as will exist. If *Other Theatres* is the first history of alternative and experimental drama in Britain, then sadly it may also be something of an obituary notice too.[111]

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[107] There are, of course, a number of coffee-table histories and biographies about Hugh "Binkie" Beaumont, Noel Coward, Sir John Gielgud, Tyrone Guthrie, Laurence Olivier and the other mainstays of the West End, but these works invariably chronicle their subjects from a perspective of affectionate appreciation.

[108] Davies, p. 208.

[109] Ibid.

[110] Ibid., p. 208

[111] Ibid., p. 209.

Davies' conclusion does raise the question of the failings of the writers about populism that have been considered in this chapter and the consequent ramifications for the theatre as a whole. In the first place, popular theatre is a pair of words with a meaning that has defeated just about everyone. If each theorist and practitioner defines populism in a different way, it is hardly surprising that there is no coherent populist movement in the theatre. Too often, populism is discussed, as is the case with Van Erven and Davies, only in the context of the alternative, fringe or experimental theatre. Van Erven does note the diverse possible meanings of the word "populism," but then goes on to state: "my own interests, however, lie with the type of popular theatre that tries to attract traditionally nontheatregoing audiences of laborers, peasants[112] and white-collar workers."[113] Such a limiting factor makes his chapter title "Popular Theatre in Historical Perspective" inaccurate. Van Erven's conclusion opens with the line "Looking back over almost twenty years of radical popular theatre," which is a further confusion of terms.[114] If one uses the yardstick of audience size for determining whether a given piece of theatre is popular, there would appear to be very little radical popular theatre in existence, given that most politically-committed theatre has never been performed in the mega-amphitheatres beloved by many populists.

One of the few definitive conclusions that can be drawn from the above discussion of the contemporary writings about the popular theatre is that most populists--Dario Fo, who said that the "the radical difference between bourgeois theatre and popular theatre needs to

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[112] Surely an inappropriately archaic term when applied to the European and American traditions.

[113] Then whom, one wonders, can be found in the theatre-going audience? Van Erven, p. 5.

[114] Presumably Van Erven's general characteristics of radical, popular theatre do not refer to theatre that's popular but not radical, nor to radical theatre that is not popular.

be analyzed,"[115] is one notable exception--have little interest in studying the populist possibilities of the mainstream.

Even Fo, of course, has no time at all for most manifestations of the mainstream theatre. For Fo, the bourgeois theatre is epitomized by Stanislavski and the empathic response.[116] Popular theatre on the other hand "is the complete opposite. No mention is made of the individual, the isolated character above and beyond: it's about togetherness. There is a community dimension in performing theatre, and the characters are a pretext to make people 'speak'"[117] Fo uses the term "popular theatre" extraordinarily loosely. "It is important to stress that the epic (and therefore popular) theatre is realistic, not naturalistic or visceral," Fo categorically states, implying that non-epic theatrical forms can never be "popular,"[118] although he also comments that "the human factor, and passion, is (sic.) fundamental to popular theatre."[119] That is particularly interesting because passion is not a word typically spoken in the same breath as epic. One final comment from Fo would presumably scotch Gooch's idea of subsidized arts centers. Fo has little time for such bourgeoisification, offering:

> One final but important point which needs to be stressed: talking about popular theatre, theatre for the masses, means refusing to have our plays organized by public institutions or by the various state-subsidized structures. We believe it is essential to 'transplant' our plays to political spaces run by comrades of the rank and file.[120]

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115 Dario Fo, *New Theatre Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (May 1985), 135.

116 Fo does not note whether and why this kind of theatre is so popular.

117 Ibid., p. 135.

118 Ibid., p. 136.

119 Ibid.

120 Ibid., p. 137.

It is impossible to conclude this survey of the diverse writings on theatre's complex relationship with the word populism with total coherence, and it is much more useful to focus on the dilemmas, ambiguities and contradictions that have been revealed.

Firstly, popular theatre has frequently been inadequately defined by theatrical practitioners who seems to merely assume that we all know what it means. Secondly, a connection is frequently made between popular theatre and alternative theatre that suggests that the two are much more closely linked than has ever demonstrably been the actual case. The same connection is often made between popular and political theatre when, again, such a connection is tenuous at best. Furthermore, too much time has been spent exposing the ways in which a form of alternative theatre can prove its populism by rebelling from the very mainstream forms of dramas that are actually much more popular than the alternative modes. Very little time, conversely, has been spent in analyzing whether the mainstream theatre can be a populist theatre, or if its multifaceted product could be made more populist. Although populism is probably best understood in a separate context from the political, it is also worth noting that it is inaccurate to imply that every product of the commercial theatre (even if its profit motives apparently rely upon not upsetting the status-quo) must, of necessity, be reactionary and anti-working class.

Even scholars who have had useful things to say about the meaning of the term "popular theatre," and its inherent complexities and ambiguities have weakened their arguments with romantic notions of popular theatre. Mayer, for example, defines popular as "drama that is principally concerned with the widest reach of audience available at a given moment or place" [121] (an incomplete definition which ignores populist drama presented deliberately for small, self-contained groups). "Farmers, factory workers, laborers, the rural and urban poor . . . constitute the greatest number of popular drama's

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[121] Mayer, "Toward a Definition of Popular Theatre," *Western Popular Theatre* p. 263.

audiences," Mayer continues. "Their theatres are the boulevards, exhibition halls, fairgrounds . . and forest clearings."[122] The implication here is of an underclass clinging resolutely to their non-literary drama and never wishing to make inroads into the theatrical world inhabited by the intelligentsia. Mayer's popular theatre means giving the spectators what they want at the expense of satisfying the tastes of an educated class. It means drama that "reassures" (and does not challenge) its audience, and it means a drama in which the idea of a public rite is a lot more significant than any aesthetic consideration. In short, Mayer's populism would appear to have a lot to do with the animalistic urges of unsophisticated primates. All in all, it represents an unacceptably elitist position.

By far the best academic treatment of the topic of populism is Bernard Sharratt's essay, originally delivered at the University of Kent in September, 1977, which aimed to explore "the possibility of a popular, political drama today."[123] (That aim is, of course, problematic in its cavalier mixing of two quite different concepts). What is so remarkable about this essay is its virtually unilateral realization that the problems of populism cannot be solved entirely within a theatrical or political arena, but are solvable only through an understanding of the significance of recent work in reception theory that points out the importance of the act of reading--or, rather, watching, in the case of the theatrical audience--over the act of production.

Ironically, left-wing critics of film, literature and the mass media have recognized these problems. Yet, for the most part, writers dealing with the live theatre seem to have gone around in circles trying to account for why theatre in Britain is so insignificant in the lives of the working class, why popular forms are only practised by the middle-class intelligentsia and the other dilemmas with which this chapter has been concerned.

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122 Ibid., p. 263.

123 Sharratt, "The Politics of the Popular," *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama,* p. 275.

Sharratt recognized the problems of too-closely relating the history or critical nature of an art-form to the class struggle. That is a dilemma also well expressed by Pick, who provocatively pointed out that the theatre is not easily reducible to the essentials of the capitalistic system:

> It does not produce goods, nor is it a service. People do not need drama in the same way that they need food and, providing theatre is not a part of the welfare services in the way that education or the health services are. In essence, theatre-going is a curious, ancient, ultimately irrational activity. The relationship of audiences to the drama cannot be discussed in quite the same way that purchasers can be quantitively related to the food and drink that they buy and consume; nor can it be analyzed in the way that doctors and their patients are. Audiences are bound to the drama by a curious kind of aesthetic contract; neither side is wholly dominant, neither side is the simple purchaser and the other the goods or service.[124]

Most Marxist or socialist critics would find that position wholly unacceptable because it removes the commercial theatre from the potentially debased profit-promoting activity it assuredly is. I include this quotation, however, because, within it, Pick attempts (albeit incoherently) to grasp at some of the more ephemeral dilemmas of the popular theatre. That includes its curiously stagnant position in the lives of the English working-class who appear to vociferously resist the attempts of middle-class persons to create a separate working-class theatre; the highly emotive response the theatre is capable of creating; and its wholly uncertain relationship with political didacticism. As Sharratt noted, there are all kinds of problems in the creation of a popular theatre merely by appropriating atrophied working-class cultural forms, when what we mean by them is so inevitably unclear:

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[124] Pick, *The Theatre Industry* , p. 52.

> It's certainly possible to see some forms of 'popular' art as expressing the collective aspirations of a 'people,' but that notion of 'the people' has to be recognized, often, as standing in for the self-definition of a dominated class struggling to identify itself against an imposed and degrading definition by a ruling class.[125]

When it comes to using working-class forms for political aims, Sharratt had this comment:

> . . . if, at the heart of much popular entertainment is a *displacement* of the experience of vulnerability and ignorance, and if political art seeks to present and analyze the determinants of that experience, how can this be achieved without destroying the very displacement which underpins the popular form being imitated.[126]

That is an unanswered question--a comment that is particularly useful because it points to the ultimate lack of any coherent solution to the dilemmas of the popular theatre, aside from a new liberal admittance of the need for ambiguity--although one might struggle to find the vulnerability and ignorance in many of the appropriated popular forms, perhaps because they are extremely well hidden.

Sharratt, like Pick, also noted the pitfalls of the very notion of attempting theatre for a working-class audience on the grounds that an audience can never be the same kind of thing as a class: "as we enter a theatre . . . we enter into relationships with others that cannot easily be mapped onto the relations of production and consumption that constitute the specifically economic and political identity of a class."[127] Sharratt also addresses the significance of escapism (usually ignored by alternative theatre practitioners, who find it politically undesirable and inconsistent with the importance of critiquing, from the ubiquitous and often illusory position of class solidarity, the cultural tastes of the working

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[125] Sharratt, p. 276.

[126] Ibid., p. 286.

[127] Ibid., p. 276

class). Sharratt's ultimate solution defines true populism as participatory: "Perhaps it's time the 'audience' wrote the . . . play . . .time the 'readers' became 'authors' themselves, time the process of reception controlled and modified the conditions of 'production.'"[128]

In this lengthy and confusing debate over what exactly it is that constitutes popular theatre, that solution posited by Bernard Sharratt is the most useful and makes much of the debate surrounding whether "populist" forms are or are not debased, appear moot. There is nothing in Sharratt's words that limit the possibility for the "readers becoming authors" within the *mainstream* theatre, because Sharratt appreciated that the popular theatre is both ambiguous and inclusive. One merely has to look at the topic from the point of view of the audience, and not from the political aspirations of the populist theorist.

It can be seen that much of the writing about populism and the theatre has been confused, overly didactic, groundlessly utopian, inherently elitist, concerned only with one branch of the popular theatre whilst leaving for dead what the vast majority of the populace understand to *be* theatre, and of little practical consequence. Of course, much of value has been noted and much revolutionary ink has been spilled in being the "first" to treat the history of the avant-garde with the reverence usually afforded the mainstream. In the process, though, the work of those populist authors who work within the commercial sector has, along with the theatre's inextricable connection to other cultural forms, been almost completely ignored. It is time we looked again at the abilities of those authors (of whom Willy Russell is one), to be a step towards making the popular theatre truly participatory for all social classes.

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128 Ibid., p. 291.

CHAPTER III

POPULAR CULTURE AND THE LIVE THEATRE: MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE ENTITIES?

The previous chapter revealed the limitations of much of the modern scholarship pertaining to the theatre's relationship with populism. Its conclusion noted that there is no clear consensus as to what popular theatre means, where the emphasis should be placed in its execution, how to assess its success and whether any form of populism has ever been achieved in the theatre, or is likely to evolve in the near future. Problems of didactic intent are one thing; problems of definition are a good deal more central and it is the latter that charecterize this debate. The chapter also noted that most of those who deal with such topics tend not to pay attention to other cultural forms, preferring to view the theatre as a separate entity requiring special treatment and consideration, rather than it being related to other media.

In the three chapters that follow, I intend to argue that such a separatist notion is mistaken. In a related sense, I also hope to demonstrate that playwrights like Willy Russell have been able to make significant achievements in a populist sense, working within the mainstream theatre, while those who have remained ideologically entrenched on the fringes of theatrical activity have floundered in a sea of definitions and misdefinitions and have never overcome their general inability to attract, or interest, the working-class at their performances in any lasting fashion.

Comments on why that may be the case follow. Firstly, however, I want to point out just how far removed from what is generally understood as popular culture, the theatre has become. Lest that sound like a statement of the obvious, I also want to assert that this chasm is self-inflicted, a result, in part, of the reluctance of theatrical academics and practitioners with populist sentiments, to discuss the mainstream theatre in any meaningful fashion. Their considering only the fringe and avant-garde has resulted in a situation where writings about popular culture end up ignoring the theatre all together. If, in the nineteenth century, it was the West End managers that fostered theatrical elitism,[1] it can be demonstrated that is now the alternative sector and the avant-garde which, demonstrating a kind of inverse elitism, have positioned the live theatre as a minority art form--one outside of the range of the recently renewed interest in the discussion of popular culture.

What is popular culture? Some of the inherent problems involving the word "popular" have already been considered,[2] but the word "culture" attracts the same critical disagreement, as it can be defined in many different ways. Some would argue that culture is primarily related to ideas. Others have argued that the word should be given an anthropological base, giving rise to the often-expressed idea that culture is a process of general cultivation, "the state of moral and spiritual development of a particular group or individual,"[3] or, indeed, a whole way of life of a particular group of people. These "culturalists" tend to agree with Raymond Williams that culture is "a description of a

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[1] See John Pick's *West End: Mismanagement and Snobbery* for a full articulation of this theory of deliberate exclusivity.

[2] For an excellent historical survey of the changing definitions of the word "popular," see Morag Shiach, *Discourse on Popular Culture: Class, Gender and History in Cultural Analysis, 1730 to the Present* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), pp. 19-34.

[3] Shiach, p. 14.

particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values, not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behavior."[4]

Others use structuralist and semiotic approaches which, broadly speaking, emphasize the system of interconnected signs and symbols that enable a given culture to have meaning. This meaning is, to a degree, independent from the immediate context of existing economic, social and political relationships, and structuralists emphasize the system of communication, rather than any inherent meaning a person may glean from a particular culture. In other words, this latter group argues that culture does not refer to the *products*, but to the *producers* of experience.

Stuart Hall has argued[5]that these two approaches (culturalist versus structuralist), meet best in the work of Antonio Gramsci,[6] who defined culture as "organization, discipline of one's inner self, a coming to terms with one's own personality."[7] The complexity of this on-going debate is obviously too broad for full consideration here: suffice to say that just as the words "popular" and "populist" are fraught with debate, so too is the word "culture."

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[4] Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, (London: Penguin, 1965), p. 43.

[5] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms," in *Culture, Ideology and Social Process: A Reader*, eds., Tony Bennett, Graham Martin, Colin Mercer and Janet Woollacott (London: Open University Press, 1981), p. 36.

[6] The important concept of hegemony is usually associated with Gramsci. As defined by Gramsci, hegemony--which he saw as largely operating within the domain of culture--refers to two closely-related phenomena: the maintenance of control by the state through organizing the consent of the populace, rather than overt cohesion and the primacy of one social class in relation to the other classes (or groups) in a particular society. Much of the arguments about debased populist forms of culture are indebted to this concept of hegemony. For Gramsci's account, see: Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith eds. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), pp. 55-60.

[7] Ibid., p. 194.

Popular culture tends to be frequently seen as a battleground for an ideological struggle for the control of its form and meaning. On the one hand, it is often argued, the ruling class is attempting to infiltrate, either consciously or unintentionally, the consciousness of the oppressed by advocating popular cultural forms that serve its interests of hegemony. On the other, the subordinate class is trying to find a voice for its own discourse, grasping at possibilities within the dominant popular culture and resisting its repressive ideology, perhaps by finding interpretations and ambiguities never intended by its repressive perpetrators. The relative importance, and effectiveness, of those two opposing forces, if one accepts their existence, is debatable and difficult to pin down.

I do not intend here to deny the importance of hegemony nor that the ruling-classes controls much of what we generally term popular culture, imposing the constituent parts of that culture on the oppressed working-classes. Such control obviously has an enormous effect on the theatre's abilities to reach and please the working-classes. Nor do I offer any revolutionary solutions to that problem, nor take a stance on the desirability of the necessary revolution--be it physical, ideological, or both--that would be necessary to change the power structure of society as a whole. Rather, my focus is on the attempts of the subordinate class to find a voice, however small and, arguably, debased, within the present situation, however evil and/or oppressive that situation may be. My position is that this articulation is the only meaningful expression of a popular aesthetic in the present climate. No workable theatrical alternative to the systems of theatrical expression set up by those with social and political power has been fully enacted or, indeed, even fully articulated without the kinds of wholesale misunderstanding and agreement chronicled in the preceding chapter. Thus communication within non-alternative forms logically assumes a greater importance.

If one sees the desire for a more populist theatre in socialist terms, one could view my argument as advocating a kind of *interim* populism--possibilities for dissention or other expression, while the otherwise necessary socialist revolution is being formulated. Alternatively, with the theatrical left in relative confusion and general abeyance, one could see these expressions of the popular voices as the only *likely* expressions of a populist *and* oppositional view in the foreseeable future.

One should, of course, be wary of ascribing too much importance to the notion of popular culture. Bigsby summed up some of the problems of the various approaches to popular culture well, when he noted that popular culture can be "seen by turns as epiphanic and apocalyptic, as evidence of social cohesion and social dislocation, as proof of subversive energy and evidence of decadence."[8] In other words, Bigsby is saying that popular culture is, in many ways, as nebulous a concept as popular theatre, especially when the category is so fluid (as Pick noted) in that high art can become popular art, or vice-versa, with astonishing rapidity. In some ways, popular culture can take whatever form, or make whatever statement the indivual critic deems as fitting his or her particular agenda.

The singular *inclusion* of any form of theatre within the catagory of popular culture is, then, not necessarily inherently meaningful, but its *absence* is perhaps symptomatic of an unfortunate situation in which academics interested in the popular disciplines perceive the theatre as inevitably elitist. Those who write about popular culture are typically attempting to write about the culture that impacts on everyone's daily existence--they are trying to describe the very fabric of life. Their lack of interest (and/or their inability to find appropriate dramatic or critical material), in the contemporary theatre is one

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[8] C.W.E. Bigsby, ed., *Approaches to Popular Culture* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1976), p. 5.

demonstration of how peripheral to everyday life, the theories mentioned in the previous chapter notwithstanding, the theatre has become.

Popular culture as a theoretical concept may be problematic, but in practical terms the inability of the live theatre to become interwoven with what is generally perceived as popular culture is indicative of its low position in the mass-culture hierarchy. If those who are writing about popular culture find it easy, and reasonable, to omit the theatre from their revelations (whatever the theoretical position of those ideas), that is further evidence of theatrical decline--at least in terms of appeal to a mass audience.

These omissions are not difficult to demonstrate. A typical anthology of essays on popular culture usually has no submission dealing with the live theatre, although there are often pieces of work dealing with all the other branches of the so-called popular arts.

In 1964, Stuart Hall[9] and Paddy Whannel wrote a seminal study of popular culture called *The Popular Arts*. This book does not discuss the theatre (despite being written soon after the ascendancy of the Royal Court's angry young men),[10] aside from its tendency to refer to theatre as a kind of negative role model, an all-purpose antithesis of populism. Hall and Whannel do acknowledge the theatre's populist base through references to Jonson and Shakespeare,[11] but they seem to see the *modern* theatre as outside of their purview. Much of their time is spent considering an ambiguous

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9 Hall's later, more fully developed, work at the University of Birmingham's Center for Cultural Studies is also pivotal to any consideration of popular culture.

10 It is interesting that, although the production *Look Back in Anger* has been hailed as a major victory for the theatrical proletariat, to Hall and Whannell it still had nothing to do with the "popular arts."

11 Shiach has argued that any comparisons between Elizabethan theatrical populism and the contemporary theatre are meaningless on the grounds that the social, political and public relations in society as whole have shifted so much. In other words, any historical referent of the word popular is fraught with problems.

distinction between mass and popular art, in search, apparently, of some pure kind of populism. Hall and Whannel imply that live theatre fits in neither category.

The anthology *Popular Culture: Past and Present* considers the modern magazine, the motor-bike culture, football and the narrative structure of popular fiction, but no modern theatre. *Heroines of Popular Culture*, edited by Pat Browne, discusses how women are portrayed in film, television and real life, but not in the theatre. C. W. E. Bigsby's *Approaches to Popular Culture*, deals with the blues, film, television, and other mechanical media but no legitimate theatre. That is a particularly surprising omission seeing that the bulk of Bigsby's (presumably less or non-populist) publications deal with the live stage.

One interesting American example is Donald Lazere's collection of essays, *American Media and Mass Culture: Left Perspectives*. Lazere's extensive volume contains just one essay on the theatre. It is by R. G. Davis and it is, rather predictably, about the alternative (Davis uses the term "Guerrilla") theatre, rather than the mainstream, commercial theatre. In his narrowly focused piece, Davis accurately notes how a *critical* paucity has led to a *practical* inability, when the theatre has tried to become closer to popular culture. He refers to a volume by Hal Foster, entitled *The Anti-Aesthetic--Essays on Postmodern Culture*, and notes that architecture, sculpture, painting, photography, music and film are discused (in the context of "transformed" elements of postmodernism, of course). But, laments Davis, in Foster's collection there is:

> no mention of theater, that minor art in the U.S.A. And perhaps herein is the reason such piddling efforts by a few tiny protest theatres are acceptable as left[12] culture--when they are so illiterate, unintelligent,

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[12] The words "left" and "postmodern" are apparently, to Davis, somewhat interchangeable.

> hysterical, and, at best, naively agitprop. Would that my criticism were moderated by being a voice among many.[13]

Davis' views certainly have some foundation, although he makes the assumption that leftist culture and mass culture amount to the same thing, which is debatable. If Lazere's collection can be used as an archetype, it appears to be both possible and popular to construct "leftist readings" of soap operas, *On the Waterfront*, popular fiction or spectator sports (among many others), but not the mainstream theatre. The implication, then, is that one can legitimately construct oppositional readings ("left perspectives") of just about every mainstream, cultural form other than the theatre. When it comes to the theatre, however, the mainstream is ignored either for an interesting, but necessarily incomplete, discussion of the alternative sector, or for no discussion of the theatre at all. One does not find a parallel discussion of alternative film in these volumes, so it seems illogical to ignore the mainstream theatre--especially as no reason is given why there should not be a study of the mainstream theatre from a left perspective--when the dominant manifestations of every other artistic discipline are the entire focus of this book. One is left wondering exactly what the "Guerrilla Theatre" has to do with American media and mass culture. The answer, surely, is very little--it is just that proponents (like R. G. Davis) represent the only meaningful writing on the theatre's relationship with popular culture, even though the fringe theatre does not have an impressive contemporary track record when it comes to the attraction of a mass audience. The limitations of the alternative leftists and the lack of associated critical manifestos are certainly problematic, as Davis rightly points out, but the fringe is not the only way into the dominant theatrical culture.

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13 R. G. Davis, "The Guerrilla Theater, 1971, 1985," in *American Media and Mass Culture: Left Perspectives*, ed., Donald Lazere (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 607.

It is, in many ways, not entirely reasonable to criticize the compilers of anthologies about popular culture for including so little about the live theatre. The early writers, like Hall and Whannel, approached the popular arts with a zealousness reserved for an untouched field, and they saw writers already pontificating about the theatre (albeit from a narrow, elitist and uniformly "high art" perspective), in books, scholarly journals, and on the pages of the quality newspapers. They had little motivation to include it in their book.

In other words, it has been harder for popular culture to embrace the theatre, and vice-versa, because most theatre already had a clear identity as a form of "high" art before the serious study of popular cultural forms came into vogue. That was not the case, for example, when it comes to studying popular film or television: these media were simply not seen, before the mid-sixties, as legitimate fields of inquiry for the academy to pursue. For scholars determined to show the absurdity of the high/low art dichotomy, the areas of film and television were consequently much more interesting and potentially innovative than looking at forms of commercial theatre, still perceived as closely related to "high" art. The theatre's relationship with popular culture did not start with a blank slate, as did most film and television; there was a *negative* relationship of mutual exclusivity that has never been corrected. That may account for the propensity of cultural theorists to ignore the mainstream theatre, along with the indisputable fact that such theatre obviously attracts much smaller audiences than the mechanical media--and most alternative writers (as we saw with the examples of Gooch, Edgar and Hare), do not place much faith or interest in attracting large numbers of people to the theatre.

It is interesting that Hall and Whannel, for example, spent most of their time enacting, as Terry Lovell has pointed out, an almost schizophrenic duality of purpose--"the pedagogic urge to arm people against the seductions of mass culture"[14] coupled with the

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[14] Further discussion on the problems of that attitude appears below.

"equally strong . . . impulse to defend mass culture: to discriminate what [is] valuable, to celebrate what [is] authentic and enjoyable."[15] This duality, if one reads the work today, appears to be futile and ultimately self-defeating. One cannot easily do those things at once, although, in so far as the live theatre is concerned, Hall and Whannel attempted neither.

Furthermore, the omissions must be at least partially reflective of the *academic* perception of popular culture, which would tend to view most mainstream, commercial theatre as far from populist. I would argue that even those theatrical artists *without* the political vision of the populists have a tendency to criticize the commercial sector (if not the large subsidized theatres) for reasons of pure snobbery and elitism. The mainstream, commercial theatres are attacked from both sides despite the fact that, with all its attendant (increasingly expensive), spectacle and glamor, commercial theatre *is* the theatre in the eyes of the vast majority of the general public.

It is hardly surprising that writers about popular culture ignore the mainstream theatre when one considers the attitudes of some of the people who work within it. Playwrights have criticized the commercial theatre for being a theatre that "tells untruths rather than truths," and that is "repellant rather than attractive,"[16] even through no piece of theatre tells the "truth" in any absolute sense. Broadway has been called "a shop window that has nothing to do with art and entertainment anymore,"[17] and when playwrights refer to the audiences of the commercial theatre that are likely to do so in critical terms. Brian Clark, for example, has claimed Broadway audiences are "under-rehearsed. They have not seen enough Shakespeare, Chekov, Ibsen etc., and for many years now they have not

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[15] Terry Lovell, *Pictures of Reality* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), p. 3.

[16] Trevor Griffiths, as quoted in Peter Ansorge, "Current Concerns," *Plays and Players* July 1974, pp. 18-19.

[17] Letter received from Peter Nichols, 23 March 1986.

seen enough serious plays by contemporary playwrights."[18] Clark seems to claim that an audience member has no business inside a theatre unless they have the appropriate background or sophistication, which is a curious notion. Even Alan Ayckbourn, a playwright who has made his career largely within the commercial sector is not above criticizing the commercial audience: "they sometimes seem to come prepared to laugh and become disappointed if they're asked to cry as well."[19] To some degree at least, the preceding quotations are little more than truisms and I include them to point out that the criticism of the commercial theatre--especially that which focuses on the alleged reluctance of its audience to partake of anything other than mindless escapism--is often glib, and it tends to lack depth or obvious foundation. I suggest further that this criticism from within is also partially to blame for the chasm between popular culture and the live theatre.

It is important to try and assess some reasons for the relative lack of success of the theorists and practitioners discussed in the previous chapter. We have also seen that the impact of these theatrical, populist theories (in terms of practical changes in the face and/or scale of the theatre) has been limited at best. Some of the alternative, popular theatre groups have played primarily to middle-class intellectuals, others have had an all too brief life,[20] still others found inherently aesthetic goals more pressing than the political, and most live in a constant battle for funding. Things are much the same in the United States. Davis describes the New York situation, unashamedly allowing his ideological biases to intrude:

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[18] Letter received from Brian Clark, 10 May 1986.

[19] Letter received from Alan Ayckbourn, 25 February 1986.

[20] Even John McGrath's 7:84 company, arguably the most successful, alternative touring theatre in recent years, has parted company with its founder.

> The East Coast theater groups once associated with radical theater are no longer. Richard Schechner of the Performance Group was superseded by Spaulding Grey and a group of performance artists. Joe Chaiken long since disbanded Open Theatre, respectably closing down the operation when it no longer functioned. Provisional, in Los Angeles, did the same. The Living Theatre came back to the United States from its peregrinations in Europe and did not do so well; Julian Beck died of cancer. The new younger resident theatres . . . are made up of liberals with the ambitions of young corporate executives.[21]

The theatre's relationship with popular culture is a difficult one, and we have already seen some of the major problems of definition that has plagued the populist, alternative sector, as exemplified by its tendency to perceive the word "popular" as synonymous with the making of theatre more committed, socialist, alternative, feminist, artistically pure, egalitarian, Marxist and otherwise effective of political and/or social change. There are, however, other possible reasons behind this malaise suffered by the alternative sector, which tends to fall into problems closely related to the self-defeating dilemmas Lovell identified in Hall and Whannel's early work.

Like those two cultural theorists, the alternative sector is desperately trying to appeal to mass taste (otherwise it cannot achieve its political or social goals, which require that the message is seen by as many people as possible), while simultaneously disavowing such hegemony and trying to identify some "pure" form of popular culture that may, or may not, exist.

There are many problems when these two aims, as identified by Lovell, are combined. Firstly, who is to say what is authentic mass culture and what is not, without defeating the very purpose of analyzing *popular* art in the first place? Secondly, without a full analysis of *why* certain forms of mass culture appeal to particular people or groups of

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21 Davis, p. 607.
Davis has slanted these historical developments to fit his own thesis. The result is misleading--Julian Beck's death from cancer, for example, has a doubtful causal relationship with the demise of the "radical" theatre.

people, in the first place, how can any such analysis ever be conducted in any meaningful way? The answer is that it cannot.

There is also the problem of compromising political ideology, on a more fundamental level. Compromise with the commercial sector is unacceptable to many of these theorists and practitioners because of the argument that such compromise will necessarily result in the packaging and normalizing of once-revolutionary material by commercial companies whose profits depend on not offending their bourgeois patrons, which in turn means not offending the political status quo. Mass taste is not immune to established market values and pressures, and the disavowal of what Althusseur termed the "ideological state apparatuses"[22] as a means of identification, paradoxically, can be a disavowal of any alignment with what is usually termed mass tastes. Unfortunately, in the face of that problem, the alternative sector has a terrible time recognizing the need for compromise.

Although I do not want to paint the commercial theatre in a brighter light than it merits, one could argue that the mainstream theatre has at least never wasted any time in trying to define its aims. The commercial theatre, with its more explicit reliance on box-office receipts simply does not have the luxury of being able to worry about these matters--it is too busy giving people what they want to act as a *conscious* mediator in popular taste. Such a singularly well-defined purpose (and one that has remained constant over a good number of years) at least partially accounts for the fact that Broadway or the West End remain synonymous with the theatre in the minds of large sectors of the population.

Conversely, there appears to be no obvious solution to the problems of the alternative sector. As Morag Shiach has noted, those who produce and analyze popular theatre, as many other forms of populism, usually do so as outsiders (or mediators, to use a term favored by John McGrath). For Shiach, this results in:

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22 Louis Althusseur, "Ideological and State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy* (London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), p. 143.

> the writing of 'peasant poets' [being] generally presented, mediated and made sense of by someone placed securely within the dominant culture. . . Critics of television are equally clear that they are exempt from the mystifying and debasing effects of the form. . . . Even in the case of popular theatre, whose theorists identify themselves politically as in opposition to the dominant social and cultural order, the place of the theorist in relation to cultural forms is often in doubt.[23]

There can be little hope for the alternative theatre's attempts at becoming more populist while that is the case--it seems absolutely clear that the role of *mediator* of popular culture is incompatible with an attempt to create a popular entertainment that *belongs* to this form. Theatre has long been a problematic arena for political didacticism, and one lesson from the impotence and decline of the alternative sector seems to be that the mediation of popular tastes and the extension of the audience to increase both its size and diversity cannot easily be achieved at the same time. Historically, the populists have had trouble admitting the existence of diversity, both in terms of ideology as well as the members of an audience. Without such a recognition, their future appears bleak. Shiach expressed this problem eloquently in reference to the history of the popular theatre:

> The theorists of popular theatre also hoped to construct cultural forms that were untainted by the values and practices of the dominant culture. They tried to produce theatrical forms that were a completely authentic representation of the experiences and interests of the working class. All of these initiatives showed a reluctance to theorize, or even recognize, the negotiation between different cultural spheres, the extent to which writers, singers and actors produced themselves through forms available within the dominant culture, as well as in opposition to, or ignorance of, them.[24]

Little, it seems, has changed. I would also argue that the necessary admittance of diversity goes beyond an inclusion of the dominant theatre, but includes the fact that the alternative theatre must do away with what appears to be an inherent assumption that the

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[23] Shiach, p. 10.

[24] Ibid., pp. 10-11.

way the audience actually interacts with a piece of theatre is straightforward. As Bigsby has recognized (before many of the writings considered in the previous chapter were penned), this is hardly the case. "With the decline of the more simplistic models of human response," he asserted, "the need for a more subtle investigation of popular culture and of the psychology of those at whom it is directed has become more apparent."[25] The statement is well made, and especially applicable to the critical field of the popular theatre.

For Bigsby, traditional notions are useless when it comes to talking about populism and popular culture:

> the individual wishing to decipher the symbols of popular culture, to assess its method, meaning and significance, is faced with a genuine dilemma. The conventional tools of the literary critic, historian and sociologist are revealed as inappropriate or as singularly blunt instruments of analysis, because they are themselves heavily influenced by class assumptions. Indeed, the very impulse to analyze such material is likely to be accompanied by a coy apology.[26]

Quite clearly, then, if one is to discuss the point of interaction between the theatre and popular culture (arguably a more complex task than discussing merely what is generally *recognized* as popular culture), one has equal need of new tools of analysis. Simply using the theatrical world (with the quality of the play and production as primary signifiers) as a referent does not work.

Yet, when we look at writing about the popular theatre, one can find few examples of these new tools of analysis. Critics interested in structuralism, semiotics or other forms of modern criticism rarely tackle the problems of populism. As for those who attempt academic rather than practical consideration of what the theatre's relationship with

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[25] Bigsby, p. viii.

[26] Ibid.

populism should be, we tend to find them waxing lyrically about the utopian days of the early nineteenth century when Planché could make a reference to Shakespeare in a popular melodrama[27] without it appearing incongruous or going over the heads of the audience. We can also read much scholarly bemoaning of the advent of the mass media and, using what is usually defined as the "folk tradition" as a referent, academics find themselves (as Louis James has pointed out), "positing a golden age of communal creativity."[28]

On looking at the work of the largely leftist critics who want to improve the impact of the theatre on a larger, more diverse audience, one does not typically find a recognition of the complex audience/performance relationship. Instead, most of the critics mentioned in the previous chapter are largely concerned with such things as the content of the script. That often includes such considerations as whether or not the script features working-class characters reflecting the concerns of the average person, or just middle-class characters discussing their limited lives in middle-class drawing rooms,[29] whether non-exploitative character depictions of women can be found in the script[30] and other predominantly sociological methods of analysis. One can also find some concern over the structure of the narratives found in the theatre (at least, on a basic level), the size of the theatres, the importance of spectacle, the dress-codes, the price of admission, whether

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27 Pick, *West End: Mismanagement and Snobbery*, p. 31.

28 Louis James "Spectacle, Performance and Audience in Nineteenth Century Theatre," in *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama*, eds., David Bradby, Louis James and Bernard Sharratt, p. 1.

29 This, of course, is one of Gooch's central preoccupations.

30 One can find this preoccupation in Michelene Wandor's writings, as well as Helen Keysaar's volume on feminist theatre. See the following chapter for a more detailed analysis.

or not one can find a decent glass of beer in the lobby bar, and the general *style* of the drama and the theatre-going experience.

It is intriguing to compare these unsophisticated, if resolutely practical, theatrical preoccupations with the explosion of new critical methodologies--such as reader-response criticism, psychoanalysis, semiotics and deconstruction--now frequently applied to more avowedly accepted "popular" culture such as film, television and even literature in general, which recognizes that the process by which readers (or audiences) interact with a text (or a play) is highly complex and problematic for the analyst, or for the practitioner who wishes to use past experiences as a means of influencing future developments. In other words, it is clear that the alternative sector's populist theorists are limited by a critical, if not an ideological, conservatism.

It is interesting that Richard Hornby, speaking of an American model, lamented with notable eloquence the tendency of the live theatre to be slow moving, out-of-date and conservative. The fact that the theatre was (in 1977) still, at least in Hornby's view, trying to come to terms with New Criticism merely reinforces his point, which was to note that: even though New Criticism and contemporary theatre clearly had similar aims:

> the most common method used by North American actors to analyze character is still that of Bradley, despite the fact that nowadays even freshman English classes are taught not to lift character from its textual surroundings. . . . For directors and actors to discuss character in the poetic, interrelated way of the New Critics is almost unheard of. The ensemble system has come to mean, in the minds of most theatre people, that "every actor's performance is a gem," but few recognize the need to organize those gems into a coherent mosaic.[31]

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31 Richard Hornby, *Script into Performance: A Structuralist View of Play Production* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), p. 17.

Hornby's work uses the concept of structuralism to suggest more "valid, imaginative and powerful"[32] theatrical productions. Yet his ideas exist primarily in an aesthetic vacuum--their goals are expressed mainly in terms of coming up with theatre that is more true to the original intention of the playwright. Although Hornby is one of the very few writers to focus explicitly on the theatrical applications of a relatively modern critical methodology (Patrice Pavis' and Keir Elam's work in semiotics are other notable examples), he does not explicitly concern himself with the theatre's relationship to popular culture (neither do Pavis or Elam). That is not because these critics are amiss--their task is simply different. There seem to be precious few critics prepared to use innovative critical tools when it comes to discussing the theatre's relationship with audiences and its level of popular appeal.

Hornby's structuralism, as Terry Eagleton has noted, has very real limitations in that it finds "the essence of a work in the relations between the parts rather than in the parts themselves."[33] Eagleton suggests the structuralist preoccupation with language misses the point. He refers to the movement in the past tense:

> (Structuralism's) preoccupation with language was . . . a familiar obsession of academics. Was language really all there was? What about labour, sexuality, political power? These realities might themselves be inextricably caught up in discourse, but they were certainly not reducible to it. . . . What had happened to the concept of literature as a social *practice*, a form of *production* which was not necessarily exhausted by the product itself? . . . Nor were many structuralists worried about how the product was actually consumed--about what happened when people actually read works of literature, what role such works played in social relations as a whole.[34]

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[32] Ibid., p. 9.

[33] Ibid., p. 10.

[34] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 112.

One could count Hornby--who has an elitist view of the influence of an audience--amongst that number, at least judging from the fact that he tends to see the audience as merely having a tangential, if judgmental, effect (often a negative one[35]) on the primary business of putting on a good production, *after* the art has already been created. Hornby's interest is in a "good" audience that is "alert and responsive." He has little or no apparent interest in who the audience is, where they came from (and whether they will come back to the theatre), and what effect the art work in question will have on them politically, socially, or ideologically. As Eagleton noted, Hornby is not interested in how the theatrical product is consumed.

One cannot then, at least if one believes that an understanding of ideology goes beyond preoccupations with systems and language, rely too heavily on structuralism as a tool of populism, although it is perhaps a good deal more useful (at least as a directing tool) than the Bradleyesque grip on the theatre in practice that still exists.

In conclusion, it seems clear that the alternative theatre lacks the theoretical base to make any impact on what could be termed a "mass" audience in the foreseeable future. It can also be argued that the close relationship enjoyed by its practitioners and commentators with political didacticism will necessarily inherently inhibit the ability of this sector of the theatre to attract large audiences, because such an attraction requires an admittance of the existence of diversity and a willingness to compromise with the dominant theatre. Historically, the alternative theatre has not been willing to make such changes. There is a need for the alternative sector to develop its critical frame of reference to include those methodologies that recognize the problematic nature of the complicated way in which an audience interacts with a play, and to learn from the more overtly populist media of film and television.

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35 Hornby, pp. 95-96.

Assuming one accepts the validity of the first part of this conclusion, I suggest that it is therefore logical to look beyond the alternative sector for the populist voice--such that there is--in the theatre, at the end of the nineteen-eighties. Before moving to a discussion of the particular success of one playwright in that arena, I want to formulate a critical base that demonstrates the possibility of survival for a popular voice in the dominant arena, as well as examining the compromises that tend to result. As we have seen, many theatrical theorists are uninterested in such a voice because of their tendency to ignore the commercial theatre, or to write about it (its longevity notwithstanding), as if it were of necessity corrupt or crudely propagandic.

In the face of a lack of any viable alternative, such an approach is short sighted, and it plagues only the theatre. Critics in film and television are increasingly paying attention to the dominant sector of the respective art forms, in a revisionist look at their impact on audiences. It is worth examining whether the same methods could be used in the analysis of the mainstream, commercial theatre.

CHAPTER IV

FEMINIST FILM THEORY AND THE THEATRE: LESSONS FROM HOLLYWOOD?

The previous chapter suggested that there are things to be gained by those who write about the theatre's relationship with populism (as well as the practitioners in the actual business of attempting to produce more accessible theatre), taking further account of recent critical developments within the theory surrounding the mass media. The next two chapters attempt to suggest some ways that could be done by highlighting the critical approaches that seem most applicable to a consideration of theatre and populism.

One such area is feminist film theory,[1] which, as this chapter will show, is a field of inquiry closely related, despite often being ignored, to the theatre's complicated relationship with populism. Obviously, feminist film theory is essentially a sub-group of an enormous amount of critical work (much of it relatively recent), on the nature of film. Indeed, feminist film theory is itself dependent on the broader work of critics like Christian Metz, a pioneer theorist in the semiology of film, Richard Dyer or Stephen Heath, as well as literary critics like Roland Barthes, Ferdinand de Saussure and (especially) André Lacan.

Contemporary film theory is clearly a body of work far too large, and often self-contradictory, for full consideration here. Consequently, this chapter focuses on feminist film theory, on the grounds that it is particularly significant to this field of inquiry for the reasons outlined below.

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[1] Most of these ideas have been expressed in reference to film typically exhibited in movie theatres, although one can find examples concerned with television drama.

Firstly, unlike broadly similar work within the live theatre, its scholarship has focused on a well-known and easily definable "dominant" text (in this case the commercial, Hollywood cinema), meaning that the work has looked at film that attracts wide, popular audiences. Secondly, feminist theorists have attempted to understand exactly how the audience for a dramatic work interacts with the artwork in question, and how that relationship affects the production of meaning. Equally importantly, many feminist critics have acknowledged the complexity of this performance/audience relationship and stressed the need to acknowledge ambiguities and the unknown when discussing the relations of art work with consumer. Thirdly, intriguing comparisons can be made in terms of how feminist theory has developed within the live theatre differently from the mass media (for there are, as shown below, considerable differences). These differences also contribute to the explanation of why so much of the current scholarship on popular theatre is so inadequate. Finally, feminist film critics have expended much effort in trying to explain why the popular taste (especially, of course, that of women) takes the shape that it does, a finding obviously relevant to anyone committed to explaining and/or expanding the theatre's relationship with popular culture. All of these areas are amplified below.

If film and theatre are closely related at all times, then they are, of necessity, particularly close when it comes to discussing populism. Indeed, the theatre is now in a position where it must follow where film and television have led, if it is to move away from its current position as a minority art form, and achieve at least some measure of the dominant position enjoyed by film and television in the cultural fabric of contemporary British and American society. Chapter Five follows on from this consideration of feminist film theory, to include television drama in an analysis of the impact of reception theory on the popular theatre.

It is generally accepted that the popular theatre (at least in terms of drama that attracts mass audiences), of the eighties is the electronic media. Much evidence can be found for that assertion. As an example, British television drama producer, David Jones, had this comment in 1978:

> One Sunday night transmission of "Play of the Month" reaches four million people; it would take the Royal Shakespeare Company four years, playing in all its theatres, to equal that figure.[2]

The average British person is said to watch some 22 hours of television per week,[3] while in the United States alone, successful films now frequently gross over $100,000,000 at the box-office, even before video and television exposure are taken into account.

It seems reasonable, therefore, to suggest that the type of interaction commonly found, and documented (through such auspices as feminist film theory), within the electronic media will directly impact on how a person more used to the mass-media will respond to the live theatre, assuming they have been persuaded to walk through the door of the theatre in the first place.

That same idea can be expressed more logically with an example. For many people, their only frequent interaction with the drama is through the media of film and television. Thus, should such a theatrical unsophisticate visit the theatre, it seems reasonable to assume that many of his or her preconceptions about the experience of being an audience for a dramatic presentation, if not, indeed, their very behavior, will have evolved from their experiences with film and television. Through the work of feminist film theorists (among others), we know something about the nature of those experiences. If we hope to

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[2] *The Observer*, 30 July 1978, as quoted in: George W. Brandt, *British Television Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 1.

[3] As quoted in Andrew Davies, *Other Theatres* (London: Macmillan Education, 1987), p. 195.

attract some of those people (members of the working class, for example), it must be pivotal to draw on that work, because those who are new to theatre are surely likely to interact with it in a related manner to their interaction with film and television.

Little, of course, can be said with certainty about the nature of that interaction because it is so hard to quantify, beyond the expression that the connection seems logical and likely. Perhaps they will be looking for similar formats, subject matter, style or performers.[4] Certainly, it will be true that formats common within the mass media (situation comedies, for example) will be more familiar. Uniquely theatrical formats (which might encompass everything from thrust staging to non-realistic forms, as well as textual references or metatheatrical components that demand a knowledge of the live theatre) will, correspondingly, be less familiar.

If the goal of this inquiry is to provide a methodology for the live theatre to increase its popularity while maintaining what could be termed an oppositional ideology, then things become more complex. What will be the impact of the transition from an art-form (the Hollywood cinema, for example) which is typically reflective of what is usually referred to as the dominant ideology to an art form (the live theatre) that is attempting to be popular whilst retaining an alternative, oppositional ideology? Obviously, such a question is difficult and complicated to answer. Suffice, however, to say at the outset that looking at the interaction between dominant[5] film and its audience may be an exemplary key--albeit

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[4] I do not mean to imply that the conventions of the mass media are in any way original, not least because they can be traced back to the rise of the novel as a cultural icon. I do think, however, that is probably true to assert that a good proportion of the potential working-class audience for the live theatre "learns" how to watch the live theatre from the similar conventions of television and the traditional (Hollywood-style) cinema.

[5] The word dominant is being used to refer to the mainstream (i.e., not alternative art films or video). Using the word "popular" in its sense of an ability to attract large audiences, much of the dominant, Hollywood film remains, of course, enormously popular.

one that has difficulty in fitting the lock--to many of the theatre's ongoing struggles with popularity and populism.

The idea of popular theatre learning from Hollywood or popular television drama is, of course, controversial. For one thing, most of the mass media's principal motivational forces are financial gain, which accounts for its paramount interest in fulfilling audience tastes. Hence the plethora of sequels and formulaic films at the cinema, as well as commercial television's obsession with appealing to population demographics that are attractive to advertisers. As we saw in Chapter Two, there are theatrical populists (such as Steve Gooch and some of the feminist theatrical theorists whose work is discussed below) for whom no compromise between popular theatre and commercial forces is possible.

As was noted above, such theorists often ignore the existence of a commercial sector of the live theatre, or alternatively view it as a spectacle-laden lost cause, and have little or no interest in that sector becoming more populist, preferring instead to focus on the fringe theatre. The premise here is that such an approach is incomplete and unnecessarily divisive. It might be remembered that much of Willy Russell's work, for example, has successfully made the transition from fringe theatre (the Liverpool Everyman) to the mainstream commercial theatre of Broadway and the West End, and subsequently to Hollywood, which in some ways shows that all of these sub-groups are not as oppositional or diametrically opposite as many critics and practitioners have claimed.

One problem that McGrath and Edgar wrestled with continually was the apparent attraction of the working-classes to a kind of theatre--such as variety shows including authoritarianism, racism and sexism, that was--they have both argued--simply a distillation of bourgeois values, designed to keep the working class firmly in place. One frequently finds such entertainment described as being little more than placebos in the manner of the entertainment served up to the Party in Orwell's *1984*. One can explain this attraction away through discussion of atrophied working-class values, bourgeois hegemony and

similar ideologically-based ideas, but this remains a fundamental problem. Why is the working-class audience attracted--to the extent that the working classes are attracted to any kind of theatre--to the very kind of theatre that those who wish to achieve a new populism find so abhorrent? Edgar claimed it was stultifying: McGrath said--somewhat unconvincingly--you must borrow from it, revise it, and critique it from a mediating position of class solidarity. Neither, however, fully explained the reasons for the existence of the taste in the first place. Instead of viewing such tastes as a kind of inevitable evil, it surely makes more sense to consider an explanation of the roots of their formation.

Such an explanation, we have seen, relies upon the recognition of the complexity of the interaction between spectator and dramatic form, and, specifically, a recognition of the place of the spectator as subject. If such a recognition is not effected, notes Bill Nichols, who writes on the relationship of film with ideology, then:

> the stakes are high. Large categories of art risk being dismissed as little more than an ideological conspiracy. All Hollywood cinema, for example, may be dismissed as mindless stultification fostered upon Us by Them (who say They give Us what We want).[6]

Nichols obviously finds the idea of such a blanket dismissal to be absurd. If the words "commercial theatre" are substituted for Nichols' "Hollywood cinema," then Nichols' piece of irony sums up quite effectively the attitudes towards commercial forms of art of many theatre practitioners within the alternative sphere. It is no longer sufficient to dismiss the commercial theatre in those terms, just as most film theorists are not able to

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[6] Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 41.

arbitrarily dismiss the popular product that makes up an enormous percentage of the cinematic output of the present day.[7]

It is no coincidence that Nichols' useful work, partly on the appeal of commercial artistic forms, is cast from the point of view of an analysis of the Hollywood cinema. Studying popular film instead of popular theatre has all kinds of advantages, not least because contemporary theorists have decades of ideologically conservative and formulaic, but massively popular, Hollywood fare to analyze. The "dominant" cinema has a much firmer foothold in contemporary life than the "dominant" theatre (although it is probably inappropriate to use such a word since the modern theatre has never really ascribed to a stature that is even approaching dominance, during the past couple of decades, after the rise of the electronic media).

Some brief background about feminist film theory is clearly necessary.[8] Thanks to seminal texts such as Molly Haskell's *From Reverence To Rape*, Marjorie Rosen's *Popcorn Venus*, and Kate Millett's *The Second Sex*, a new feminist analysis of the Hollywood cinema gained momentum from the early seventies onwards. This first wave of critics essentially approached the films sociologically, listing the kind of roles in which female characters could be found in these dramas--Haskell, for example, listed a sexist progression in the image of female figures, from the vamps of the 1920s to the oppressed victims of male aggression in the contemporary period. Although some feminist volumes

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[7] This reluctance to dismiss the popular is certainly increasing. Early feminist film theorists were much more inclined to write off the Hollywood product as hopelessly debased than those who write about the subject in the late eighties. A consideration of the debate follows below.

[8] Perhaps the best introduction to contemporary feminist film theory (up to about 1980), is Lucie Arbuthnot's *Main Trends in Feminist Criticism: Film, Literature, Art History--the Decade of the 'Seventies* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1982).

about the live theatre principally still use these early techniques,[9] most more recent feminist film critics have noted the inaccuracy of Haskell's methodology and, specifically, her assumption that dramatic characters can be equated directly with women who have a real-life existence--critics using the ideas of structuralism and semiology point out that such characters can be more accurately seen as a collection of signs and symbols that govern the film's narrative.

An area where feminist film theorists have been particularly active is in the approbation of psychoanalysis and, specifically, Lacanian[10] theory. Such ideas are particularly useful when it comes to explaining the popularity of the dominant film. Laura Mulvey was one of the first theorists to use such ideas. In her seminal *Screen* essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Pleasure," Mulvey justifies its use in the following manner, claiming psychoanalysis is an effective tool when used to find out:

> where and how the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have molded him. It takes as its starting point the way film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle. It is helpful to understand what the cinema has been, how its magic has worked in the past, while attempting a theory and practice which will challenge this cinema of the past. Psychoanalytic theory is thus appropriated here as a political weapon.[11]

Mulvey is also credited with originating much of the important work surrounding how dominant film typically constructs the male as its subject and the female as its object.

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[9] Helene Keyssar's work, entitled *Feminist Theatre*, frequently uses such methodology, although it is also a celebration of the impact of women in general on the live theatre.

[10] Lacan is especially significant because he combined psychoanalysis with semiology. He essentially discusses Freudian psychology using a linguistic model in place of Freud's biological one.

[11] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3, 6.

Annette Kuhn summarizes Mulvey's findings in the following fashion, noting that, as spectacle, the cinema:

> constitutes woman as the object of looking (not only on the part of the spectators but also on the part of protagonists within the fictional space of the film), but that as such woman evokes not only the pleasurable, but also the threatening aspects of looking. This point is premised on a psychoanalytic argument linking castration anxiety with the infant's awareness, gained from looking at its mother's body, that the mother lacks a penis.[12]

Mulvey went on to note, using Freudian psychology, that the woman-image is "fetishized," as a way by which the male spectator can remove the inherent Oedipal threat presented by the woman-image. Her conclusions revolve around the fact that a viable alternative to the dominant cinema can be fashioned only if certain aspects of it are first understood and then broken down--especially the inclination of the cinema to build the way a woman is to be looked at into the spectacle itself:

> Playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, editing), cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the the measure of desire. It is these cinematic codes and their relationship to formative external structures that must be broken down before mainstream film and the pleasure it provides can be challenged.[13]

Although Mulvey's insistence that the dominant cinema be broken down is a problematic one, especially as she advocates an audience freed from voyeurism, allowed the unlikely privilege of indulging in "dialectics [and] passionate detachment,"[14] the last line of the

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[12] Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 61.

[13] Mulvey, p. 17.

[14] Ibid., p. 18.

above quotation is telling. Mulvey's work was seminal in the field because she analyzed the *appeal* of the mainstream and the popular. Whatever action is to be subsequently taken (and is certainly true that Mulvey offered nothing that was even remotely appealing to replace the "voyeuristic active-passive mechanisms of the dominant cinema"[15] that she so detested: there seems no apparent reason why an audience used to voyeurism would feel motivated to pay good money to participate in dialectics or detachment), that knowledge seems pivotal. Its importance makes it all the more surprising that an adequate similar analysis (one, that is, with an adequate critical base) has not really been attempted within the live theatre.

The cinema and the theatre are, of course, different art forms. The cinema can use the camera as a process of identification, involving subjective angles which pull an audience into a more controlled, explicitly voyeuristic situation than is possible in the live theatre. Mulvey herself noted that "cinema is quite different in its voyeuristic potential from . . . theatre."[16] On the other hand, an effective director (especially with sophisticated and tightly focused lighting at his or her behest) can do similar things to control the gaze of the audience and promote subjectivity and a specifically designed, approved "look."

Sue Ellen-Case, one of the few scholars to apply ideas from feminist film theory to the live theatre has pointed out the applicability of much Lacanian theory. Despite being careful to point out that "whereas in film the principal means of organizing the gaze is the camera, a different set of dynamics applies to the stage,"[17] Case shows the close relation-

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[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., p. 17.

[17] Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 119.

-at least in feminist terms--of the two art forms. The idea of the male "gaze" can certainly be effectively applied to the theatre,[18] as Case aptly demonstrates:

> The concept of the male gaze asserts that representations of women are perceived as they are seen by men. . . . A simple example of how everyone sees a play as male would see it might be the way a play induces the audience to view the female roles through the eyes of the male characters. When the ingenue makes her entrance, the audience sees her as the male protagonist sees her. The blocking of her entrance, her costume and the lighting are designed to reveal that she is the object of his desire. In this way, the audience also perceives her as an object of desire, by identifying with his male gaze.[19]

Case is, inevitably, less than clear about the genesis of this patriarchy, in terms of whether it principally emanates from performer, playwright or director, or some complex combination of all three. Case is, of course, talking in general terms about all of the variations of film and theatre. In doing so, however, she rather glosses over the fact that much of the film theory in this vain was derived from an analysis of the dominant film. Case, conversely, clearly has trouble in identifying a corporate body of the live theatre that can function as the antithesis of all that is feminist, in the manner of the ubiquitous Hollywood products that are easily attacked. She certainly argues that the texts of various classic dramas--from *Hamlet* to *The Glass Menagerie*--are told (textually) from the point of view of the male protagonist, with weak female characters, but one could question the extent to which Shakespeare or even Tennessee Williams make up the true commercial, or dominant, theatre. In some ways, it would have made more sense to analyze the more popular plays of the last twenty years (Neil Simon's or Alan Ayckbourn's work, for example) if the translation from film to theatre were to be strained as little as possible. Such playwrights, of course, lack academic legitimacy, which perhaps accounts for

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[18] It it remarkable that it took around thirteen years for Mulvey's ideas to be cogently applied to the live theatre.

[19] Case, p.119.

Case's reluctance to consider them in detail. Clearly, there are problematic, important differences as Case translates these theories from film to theatre, and she makes little attempt to account for the theatrical pleasure derived from melodramatic and other dominant forms of drama.

The solution to the foregrounding in the theatre of woman as object is, for Case (as it was for Mulvey), the construction of an alternative that would deny the male spectator's pleasure from viewing the woman as an object of sexual desire. One of the differences between theatre and film is that, within the theatre, once-patriarchal scripts can be be redone, possibly from revisionist, feminist perspectives (although this opens up the whole area of where a production does violence with a playscript, even if that violence is from a feminist perspective). It is theoretically possible, then, for a once patriarchal text to be revisited by the feminist fringe and given a revised production. This is a complication that does not really apply in film.

Even though the live theatre may be more complicated to analyze than the Hollywood cinema, Case's alternatives, like Mulvey's, are intensely problematic, not least because they retreat (albeit perhaps inevitably) into the areas of fringe or alternative theatre where, as we have seen, theatre and populism tend to part company. Case ultimately resorts to celebrating the work of Monstrous Regiment (an alternative feminist theatre group that fights the patriarchal dominance of the theatre), or the plays of Caryl Churchill and advocates the formation of a new, feminist poetics. Her concluding assertion (to that end) is positively cathartic, despite Case's objection to that inherently patriarchal dramatic form, in tone. For Case, the only solution must take place outside of the dominant culture. Once the patriarchal forms of representation have been deconstructed:

> the stage can be prepared for the entrance of the female subject, whose voice, sexuality and image have yet to be dramatized within the dominant culture. At this point in history, psychosemiotic strategies may provide a new kind of revolution, for in the late twentieth century the mode of

> production which is central to the oppression of many peoples lies within the ghettos of signs and codes. . . . The production of signs creates a sense of what a person is, rather than reflects it. This condition means that artists and cultural theorists may be the activists and the revolutionaries. . . . The feminist in theatre can create the laboratory in which the single most effective mode of repression--gender--can be exposed, dismantled and removed.[20]

Whilst there is much of value in that conclusion, especially the acknowledgement of the need to deconstruct forms of representation, one is left bemused as to exactly how the female subject will enter. Will this relegate to the point of worthlessness all theatre that does not follow the new poetics? Will the female subject enter from within the mainstream theatre, or from the alternative, fringe sector? Will anyone be in the audience when she enters? Without an understanding of the pleasure mechanisms of the dominant dramatic forms, it seems doubtful that an audience could be persuaded to embrace such radical revisionism.

The question, then, remains as to where this will leave the popular audience, and whether or not it is possible to create a new poetics embraceable by a populace used to dominant forms. Psychosemeotic revolutions are of little use to those who have not heard of the term, nor for those who have not been persuaded to enter the theatre where such revolutions are planned to take place. It hardly needs stating that artists and cultural theorists, whatever the powers imbued them by the ascendancy of the sign, cannot become effective reactionaries or revolutionaries unless someone (arguably a good many people), is or are watching their work.

In other words, one can find in Case's work a similar problem to that with many of the other theatrical critics who write from a revolutionary standpoint. In the first instance, little attempt is made to ascribe any value at all to the commercial theatre, which is relegated to the position of an art form worthy of attack: there is no acknowledgment that

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[20] Ibid., p. 132.

the reaction of a spectator (whether male or female) with the dominant theatre may be ambiguous and nowhere near as clear cut as Case suggests. In other words, subversion and subversive or oppositional readings on the part of an audience apparently can exist only with the creation of a radical, alternative theatre which seems--given its radical political posture and self-styled "guerilla action"--to inevitably be relegated to the fringes, From that position, perhaps, it will be praised in academic journals, watched by (largely female, if the art work is critical of patriarchy), intellectuals, and studied in universities. Yet it will pass the general populace by.

Case is not the only feminist writer whose emphasis and purview is the alternative, fringe theatre. Helene Keyssar devotes lengthy chapters in her book, *Feminist Theatre*, to the playwrights--such as Megan Terry or Michelene Wandor--whose work has been largely outside of the commercial theatre, whilst grouping together commercial playwrights--such as Wendy Wasserstein or Marsha Norman--in a chapter pejoratively entitled "Success and its Limits".[21]

Keyssar's main point is that the commercial playwrights are effectively poor relations of their more academic, theoretically correct friends. On one level, Keyssar's comment that "dramas by women that have achieved commercial success tend to take fewer theatrical risks and to be less threatening to middle-class audiences than those performed on the fringe of the theatre establishment, "[22] appears non-controversial and entirely reasonable, especially as it is generally considered to be equally applicable to the theatre at large.

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[21]Helene Keyssar, *Feminist Theatre* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 148-167.

[22] Ibid., p. 148.

Keyssar, however, casts her argument to suggest that any show that is popular is inevitably less good. She has this to say about Mary O'Malley:

> *Once a Catholic* is not a failure or a corruption of feminist theatre, it is just not enough. The positive aspect of its commercial success is that it makes us want more of O'Malley. Her next play *Look Out, Here Comes Trouble* explores the landscape of a mental institution, and does probe more deeply into the dilemmas of women, especially in relation to men. Indicatively, this play never achieved the popular success of *Once a Catholic*.[23]

The implication is that the populace at large will only accept superficial plays; profound plays being destined to popular rejection. This is an assumption for which Keyssar presents very little evidence. While it may be true to suggest that the "hit" shows by and about women have remained on relatively safe terrain, [24] Keyssar makes no attempt to assess the impact of these shows on their audiences (generally much larger in size than those addressed by their more ideologically-sound counterparts). Just as Mulvey did not address the ways in which a viewer interacts with the screen to produce meaning, nor does Keyssar. Both critics suggest that this whole area is absolutely quantifiable, rather than in any way ambiguous, which is much more likely to be the case.

Instead of bemoaning tokenism, it would be more useful to analyze the abilities of these dramas to undermine the dominant ideology of the commercial theatre. Keyssar, of course, approaches this argument from the other direction--suggesting that the commercial forces undermine the artistic intentions of the playwrights. While there is value in noting that any production can subvert the intention of its playscript, that does not justify this blanket dismissal of the ideological impact of work by Marsha Norman, Catherine Hayes, Nell Dunn, Wendy Wasserstein and Mary O' Malley:

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[23] Ibid., p. 153.

[24] Ibid., p. 149.

> The weakness common to these plays is inherent in their particular strengths: no matter how serious the topic, they are all comedies of manners, revelations of the surfaces of sexual identity and sexism; they are not challenges to the deeper social structures that allow these manners to endure.[25]

Such a stance is extremely simplistic. It assumes that the commercial and the shallow are synonymous (and that the comedy of manners can have little ideological impact), which are obvious, and inaccurate, generalizations that have been made many times before. Keyssar also implies that she, herself, knows in some concrete manner the only methodology by which theatre can challenge the deeper social structures of society. Given the lack of knowledge about the nature of the impact of the political theatre on an audience, such information seems unlikely to be in Keyssar's hands. Her position can be construed as the embodiment of an unsubstantiated bias against the commercial theatre.

Continuing in the same vain, Karen Malpede states her position clearly and succinctly in the preface to her book, *Women In Theatre*. The implication here is that feminist work and the commercial theatre are mutually exclusive entities:

> I wanted to make a volume of theoretical writings by women who, no matter what their particular craft, had created or envisioned entire theatres which, for the most part, existed outside a commercial mainstream. I have been more interested in aspiration and persistence[26] than in fame or profit.[27] I wanted a volume that would speak to young women of a brave heritage, reminding each of us that theatre must be created anew by each

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[25] Ibid., p. 150.

[26] It could be cogently argued that there is no branch of the theatre that requires more aspiration and persistence than the commercial theatre. Certainly, the mainstream theatre and the qualities Taylor identifies are far from being mutually exclusive entities.

[27] Malpede's use of the word "profit" suggests (unfairly) that those authors who choose to work within the "commercial mainstream" have profit as their primary motivation, rather than reaching as wide and as diverse an audience as possible, which seems equally likely: Given the larger sums of money to be made in the mass media compared to the live theatre, I suspect there are very few playwrights who are in the commercial theatre primarily for financial gain .

> generation and that those to whom we owe our history are those who dared to dream the dream that has not happened yet.[28]

Whilst there is certainly a good case for foregrounding the work of women from outside of the mainstream theatre, the omission of the mainstream seems to make the book somewhat incomplete. Malpede's position is that these are the women on whom the future of the theatre rests; such an assertion makes the task of making the theatre more populist even more difficult than before.

Given that there is no shortage of work celebrating the feminist fringe, it is the position of this chapter that work clearly needs to be done in understanding why the kind of theatre that remains in ascendancy in the commercial sector enjoys that position. Little has been said about the women who enjoy the commercial theatre or about the nature of their interaction with it.

Jill Dolan's consideration of *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* does include an analysis of an example of mainstream theatre--Dolan devotes a chapter of her book to the 1983 Broadway production of Marsha Norman's *'Night Mother* --but her analysis is enormously problematic, not least because it completely ignores the play's impact on its audience.

Dolan approaches her study of the production from a theoretical position that is inherently unsympathetic to the commercial theatre, and she essentially selects tenuous examples that back up her commitment to an alternative theatre. I do not want to imply that Dolan's findings are not in many ways useful, because she arrives at some interesting and accurate conclusions. Her major emphasis is on what she terms the "gender-biased politics of reception," and she finds that the critical response to the production was polarized around gender politics, with the (predominantly male) mainstream critics

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[28] Karen Malpede, *Women In Theatre* (New York: Drama Book Publishers, 1983), p. xiii.

marginalizing the play by responding to such things as the performers' physical appearance, the play's focus on domestic issues and by refusing to accept its universality. In short, Dolan found that sexist male critics were desperately trying to find some way to contextualize the playwright "that would avoid threatening the male dramatic bastion."[29]

Although Dolan's findings illustrate aptly the sexism of the New York litterati (which is hardly a controversial finding), they do not fully justify her oppositional stance towards the commercial theatre. She argues with very little evidence (beyond a design concept that differed from Norman's instructions in the script) that the Broadway production compromised its author's intent, suggesting (again, without much evidence) that the author is inevitably powerless in the face of institutional approbation. "Her collaborators . . . imposed their own readings,"[30] complains Dolan, as if such compromise does not apply to an equal extent within the non-commercial theatre. Dolan even goes so far as to suggest that the the literary industry were in a league of conspiracy with "Norman's collaborators," against the play's universal vision. That is obviously absurd.

Although such ideas seem strained at best--especially as they stand without any comment of agreement from the author in question--Dolan's most significant omission is her lack of interest in the audience, and whether or not this play was able to have any impact despite the alleged constraints of the commercial theatre. Critics, after all, are not members of the popular audience, and the latter attended this play in enormous numbers. Dolan seems to ignore this fact--even though *'Night Mother* arguably reached a more mixed, less politically-committed audience (and certainly a much larger audience) than the typical piece of alternative theatre, or the typical performance art offering in the East Village, which Dolan devotes a good deal of her book to celebrating.

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[29] Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988), p. 19.

[30] Ibid., p. 27.

Alleged political compromise aside, *'Night Mother* did run for 388 performances on Broadway, winning a Pulitzer Prize, attracting numerous press articles, and eventually being made into a film. Although Dolan notes that this play's popularity was so great that it brought in $10,000 a day at the box office, at the height of its popularity, she uses its popular appeal as fuel for her theory of institutional approbation, which completely ignores its significant impact on a large number of theatre-goers. Although Dolan justifiably criticizes the tendency of the press to focus on Norman's femininity (especially her love for knitting), the fact remains that a feminist work (although that is a controversial term when applied to Norman's plays, as this author has a problematic relationship with that category) did attract the attention of the popular press. By virtue of its success in the commercial theatre, *'Night Mother* perhaps reached the uncommitted, the unacademic and even the non-middle-class.

Although I do not mean to imply that Dolan's revelations of latent sexism are not accurate, I suggest that any critique of the allegedly nasty commercial forces, and their ability to subvert a successful play's political or feminist ideology, should be accompanied by a consideration of what the play actually achieved. *'Night Mother* played to thousands of people, yet that seems not to arouse Dolan's curiosity. She also appears uninterested in what accounted for its popularity, whether a subversive (or at least an ambiguous) reading can be made of the production and whether the commercial production was, at least, better than nothing. It is unreasonable to view a sexist critical response as negating an entire production--and there is a danger that the critic who is unsympathetic to Broadway will find evidence of tampering with universality, feminism or the author, even when none actually occurred. Dolan's approach seems to insult the audience by not ascribing them any discriminatory powers (beyond enjoying the perpetuation of the mainstream) whatsoever. There is a need for a counterbalancing argument.

Such a counterbalance can now be found within feminist film theory, and the developments in theatrical criticism have lagged behind the more liberal and inclusive approach of the feminist film critics. These latter critics have appreciated that psychoanalysis can be used as a critical tool in assessing the appeal of the mainstream forms of the performing arts and it is perhaps high time that feminists working in the live theatre follow the lead, to some degree, of their colleagues in the cinema.

Despite what is noted above about the importance of the impact of a commercial piece on its audience, I am not trying to deny that the ideology of the patriarchal order is as powerful in the modern, commercial theatre as it is in film. As Case has shown, what Mulvey terms the "voyeuristic/socopophilic look"[31] has long been as big a part of traditional theatrical pleasure as it has filmic, and illusionistic narrative has been a mainstay of the Anglo-American commercial theatre throughout the twentieth century. As we have seen, Mulvey explains eloquently that an understanding of the pleasure mechanisms of the dominant cinemas is essential if one is to try and construct any kind of alternative, because such an analysis includes:

> a beauty in its exact rendering of the frustration experienced under the phallocentric order. It gets us nearer to the roots of our oppression, it brings an articulation of the problem closer, it faces us with the ultimate challenge: how to fight the unconscious structured like a language (formed critically at the point of arrival of language) while still caught within the language of patriarchy. There is no way in which we can produce an alternative out of the blue, but we can begin to make a break by examining patriarchy with the tools it provides.[32]

One of the central points in Mulvey's essay is the contention that people are unaware that any manipulation by the very *structure* of the dramatic form is even taking place, and

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[31] Mulvey, p. 17.
The word "socopophilic" refers to the sexual pleasure than can be derived from looking at another person as an erotic object.

[32] Ibid..

that only by revealing the very mechanisms whereby meaning is produced and ideological statements made can any attempt at revolt be effected. Following Mulvey, Annette Kuhn notes that:

> it is commonly accepted that across all its forms of expression, the classic realist text is marked by a denial of its own operation in the signification process, in that the discourse seems to be nothing more than the vehicle of telling the story. The point here is that all narrative discourse does produce meaning in and by itself, and does therefore constitute a form of address to its recipients, but one of the defining features of the classic, realistic text is that its recipients are not normally aware that this is taking place.[33]

Much of this classic narrative form was at least partly derived from a theatrical model in the early part of the century: a style of theatre that, like Hollywood, often went to extraordinary lengths to hide its narrative mechanisms. In so far as commercial movies are concerned it remains largely intact. Terry Lovell notes that "Brechtianism in contemporary film criticism and practice has, with few exceptions, been appropriated for the avant-garde rather than the commercial cinema. Brecht himself found it impossible to work within Hollywood".[34] It has perhaps cracked a little more within the theatre. Most of those anti-illusionistic, self-reflexive influences (Brecht is, once again the most obvious example, but then his work never truly captured the hearts of the British working class), however, have been on the *alternative* avant-garde theatre. Although one can find anti-illusionistic references in many commercial pieces (R.G. Davis has complained that "*Evita* and *Sweeney Todd* have taken every theatrical innovation that Brecht ever created and souped

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[33] Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 36.

[34] Terry Lovell, *Pictures of Reality* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), p. 3.

it up with slimy sentimentality and revolutionary fantasy"[35]), the mainstream theatre remains heavily indebted to the Hollywood-style narrative.

Much of the fare on offer in the West End and Broadway falls within the broad boundaries of the type of drama commonly referred to as melodrama. The fact that this form has such a following has always been problematic to those who would wish to attract the populace at large to their alternative theatres that are able to offer something more ideologically correct and theatrically sophisticated than the proverbial battle between good and evil. But melodrama, notwithstanding such efforts, remains in its dominant, if much maligned (at least by intellectuals) position. In an attempt to account for melodrama's popularity with one sex, Kaplan uses psychoanalysis as a toll for discovering why it is that women are drawn to melodrama, seemingly finding both objectification and surrender to be more pleasurable than problematic. In her quest for an answer, and following Lacan, Kaplan focuses on the female version of the Oedipal crisis:[36]

> we see that the girl is forced to turn away from the illusory unity with the mother in the pre-linguistic realm and has to enter the symbolic world which involves subject and object. Assigned the place of object (lack), she is the recipient of male desire, passively appearing rather than acting. Here sexual pleasure in this position can thus be constructed only around her own objectification. Furthermore, given the male structuring around sadism, the girl may adopt a corresponding masochism.
>
> In practice, this masochism is rarely reflected in more than a tendency for women to be passive in sexual relations; but in the realm of myth, masochism is often prominent. We could say that in locating herself in fantasy in the erotic, the woman places herself as either passive recipient of male desire or, at one remove, as *watching* a women who is passive recipient of male desires and sexual actions.[37]

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[35] R. G. Davis, "The Guerrilla Theater, 1971, 1985," in *American Media and Mass Culture: Left Perspectives,* ed. Donald Lazere (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 607.

[36] Kaplan derives this from the work of post-Freudians, as Freud himself was concerned only with the (less complicated) male model.

[37] E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film* (New York: Methuen, 1973), p. 26.

Terry Eagleton, a Marxist critic sympathetic towards the analysis of psychoanalytic critical tools, also remarks on the importance of pleasure. Unlike many of the feminist critics who write about the live theatre, Eagleton openly recognizes the significance of pleasure in the appeal of dominant cultural forms. For Eagleton, the reason why the vast majority of people go to a play (or read a poem or a novel) is because they enjoy the activity:

> This fact is so obvious that it is hardly ever mentioned in universities. It is, admittedly, difficult to spend some years studying literature in most universities and still find it pleasurable at the end. . . . the fact that reading literature is generally an enjoyable pursuit posed a serious problem for those who first established it as an academic "discipline": it was necessary to make the whole affair rather more intimidating and dispiriting, if "English" was to earn its keep as a reputable cousin of Classics. meanwhile, in the world outside, people carried on devouring romances, thrillers and historical novels without the faintest idea that the halls of academia were beset by these anxieties.[38]

Although Eagleton is speaking principally of literature, he could equally well be discussing theatre. Admittedly it is true that while it may, in literary circles, be the bastions of the establishment who have avoided pleasure, the theatrical traditionalists have rather celebrated it--Coward, for example, delighted in his own elitism[39] but he was certainly never about to deny that people going to the theatre should enjoy themselves, at least as long as they had the appropriate wealth and breeding. It seems rather those who work in the alternative sector, with didactic aims and chips on their shoulders who have such a problem with the concept of pleasure, which tends to be reflected both in their inability to provide it for a large, broad audience, as well as their

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[38] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 191.

[39] John Pick's *West End: Mismanagement and Snobbery* contains an accurate, if hardly complementary, account of Coward's attitudes and activities.

continued discomfort at the large amounts of people who find their theatrical pleasure at the hands of the industry's commercial wing.

As the influence of Brecht informed much of the work in the alternative sector (McGrath's disagreements aside), this difficulty therein with the idea of having a good time, surely emanates in part from Brecht's own discomfort with the concept. Terry Lovell summarizes the dilemma well:

> Brecht's attitude towards pleasure in art was always ambivalent. It was to serve learning rather than to be valued in its own right. And where it might prejudice learning, it was not to be indulged. Hence his refusal of the pleasure of identification. Despite his insistence on the importance of art as entertainment, he was a rationalist.[40]

Lovell goes on to argue that to fully buy the notion of audience member as producer of meaning requires turning the audience into a bunch of thinkers, and to suggest that pleasure has no value politically unless used (as McGrath did to great effect) as a mediator of knowledge. There is something missing from that equation and Lovell goes some way towards identifying what could surely be described as a truer, more pure form of popular theatre. Certainly, as she identifies, it can be reactionary and conservative, but at least it appears reliable. As she identifies, this particular area of pleasure (social pleasures) has been much neglected by academics and others, and it is my thesis that the commercial theatre--not least because of its freedom from didacticism--is perhaps best equipped to offer it:

> The pleasures of a text may be grounded in pleasures of an essentially public and social kind. For instance, pleasures of common experiences identified and celebrated in art, and through this celebration, given recognition and validation, pleasures of solidarity to which this sharing may give rise; pleasure in shared and socially defined aspirations and hopes. . . These social pleasures have long been recognized, for example in the Durkheimian tradition in sociology. This tradition is politically

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[40] Lovell, p. 94.

> conservative, and the social pleasures themselves may certainly be mobilized for reactionary politics. Like the desires of the unconscious, they are not in themselves either progressive or reactionary; but a political aesthetics, which Marxist aesthetics must be. . . . This is a neglected area which Marxist cultural studies . . . have ignored.[41]

It seems reasonable to assert that such pleasures tend to be found more in the commercial incarnation of the theatre (with its emphasis on a good night out, its dependence on large audiences and general emphasis on pleasure), than on the fringe.

The above discussion is included to establish the importance of recognizing (and partially deconstructing) the appeal of a kind of theatre that is typically seen as the enemy of populism and feminism. The following chapter takes this argument a step further in its suggestion that an understanding of audience response to the commercial that is based on reception theatre reveals that populism and the mainstream theatre may not be mutually exclusive entities.

Before that, however, it remains to return to feminist film criticism to suggest that theorists have now gone a stage beyond that exemplified by Mulvey: a stage which those who write about theatre would be well-advised to join, in that it parallels many of the above arguments. Later feminist critics are revealing the limitations of approaching feminist criticism from the point of view of disavowing every element of the dominant, mainstream cinema and have turned their attention to the way in which women used it as a means of communication, despite its inherent barriers and obstacles.

Feminist critics have been giving increasing attention to what Lucie Arbuthnot terms "readings against the grain."[42] Arbuthnot herself has suggested, for example, that the film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) contains a systematic undercutting of dominant ideological themes (such as heterosexual marriage), and suggests some resistance to

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41 Ibid., pp. 94-95.

42 Arbuthnot, p. 229.

female objectification--even though the film may have been directed with the typical male audience member in mind. In other words, the film--which, incidentally, has been seen by huge numbers of people--can be seen two ways. It is at once a piece of generic, hegemonic propaganda, as well a subtle, subversive expression of feminism. Critics Claire Johnston and Judith Mayne reached a similar conclusion about the film *Craig's Wife* (1936).[43] Writing about the well-known melodrama, *Stella Dallas* (1937), Linda Williams found[44] that the film's central character is essentially a grotesque parody of femininity. Williams argued that *Stella Dallas* was a film that searched (through the methodology of exaggerated characterizations that intentionally undermine the film's credibility as a piece of domestic realism) to locate spaces whereby women could speak to each other within an infrastructure so outwardly dominated by patriarchy.

Similar interpretations have been made of more contemporary films. Robin Wood, for example, has eloquently argued that the "generalized crisis in ideological confidence" that characterized the decade of the seventies can be read clearly in the ideological ambiguity (even ideological opposition or subversion) of mainstream, Hollywood films like *Taxi Driver*, *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* or *Cruising*.[45] This led Wood to the intriguing conclusion that "we can look back to Hollywood in the seventies as a period when the dominant ideology almost disintegrated."[46] What is interesting about Wood's look at the mainstream cinema is that it asserts that some films offer more complex experiences for

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[43] Judith Mayne, "The woman at the keyhole: women's cinema and feminist criticism," *New German Critique* , no. 23, 34-35 (1981). This film, incidentally. was based on the stage play of the same name by George Kelley.

[44] Kaplan prefers to see *Stella Dallas* as a piece of patriarchal propaganda. See her article on the film in *Heresies* 16 (Autumn 1983), 81-85.

[45] Robin Wood, *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 46-69.

[46] Ibid., p. 61.

the viewer than first meet the eye. Wood is arguing that although radicalism may be taboo on the surface of mainstream, Hollywood products, that does not mean that commercial films cannot acknowledge and house oppositional interpretations. Such is the "incoherence," of many of the supposedly mainstream films of the seventies, Wood argues, that it can *only* be resolved "through the adoption of a radical attitude."[47] In other words, an ambiguous, incoherent piece of dominant film can demonstrate the incapacity of the system, and the dominant ideology, to resolve the dilemmas such a film raises. Thus, a piece of Hollywood fare like *Taxi Driver* "testifies eloquently to the logical necessity for radicalism."[48] It all depends on one's individual reading of the film.

The next chapter extends this notion of the oppositional reading and considers its implications for the popular theatre, but it seems appropriate to conclude this chapter with a clear statement of the message from feminist film critics that wholesale rejection of the dominant texts is pointless, as is an examination of the work of fringe artists (be they in film or theatre) without a consideration of their impact on an audience. To use Mayne's words: "(the) context for discussion of the women's cinema . . . needs to be opened up a bit."[49]

The same could be said about the popular theatre. We should open up the discussion to include the mainstream and the commercial sectors of the theatre. For all theatrical capitalism's sins, any discussion of populism and/or feminism within the theatre is otherwise incomplete.

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[47] Ibid., pp. 68-69.

[48] Ibid., p. 69.

[49] Mayne, p. 39.

In a similar vain, Lucie Arbuthnot has argued that:

> it is time that feminist film critics move beyond the analysis of male pleasure, in order to destroy it, to an exploration of female pleasure, in order to enhance it. Feminists who make films aimed at destroying men's pleasure are in fact making films that men rarely watch. And these films also perpetuate a male-centered view of art-making in their very opposition to men. A more important task, I believe, is for feminists to explore in greater depth our own pleasure in watching traditional Hollywood films.[50]

I would argue that Arbuthnot's comment has important ramifications (and implications beyond the circles of feminism), for the theatre. Firstly, there is in implicit acknowledgement in the above quotation that, whatever the efforts of the cinematic avant-garde, the dominant cinema will always be the main point of interaction with the art form for most women. The same could be said of the theatre, and it would surely better behove critics like Keyssar to follow Arbuthnot's advice than to merely attack the commercial theatre in an ill-defined, unfocused manner. That is to say, there seems more point in considering *how* audiences interact with a commercial play like Russell's *Shirley Valentine*, than attacking it simply on the grounds that its popular success, and commercial-sector production, somehow necessitates ideological compromise.

With apologies to Arbuthnot, it also seems that her argument can be extended beyond feminism. If the feminist avant-garde is making films that men rarely watch, then the theatrical avant-garde is similarly making plays that women *and men* rarely watch.

If such feminist films perpetuate a male-centered view of art-making in their very opposition to men, then the theatrical avant-garde perpetuates an elitist, class-centered view of art-making in their very opposition to the dominant theatre. Once more, it is a more important task to explore how the dominant theatre creates pleasure, how its

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[50] Arbuthnot, p. 218.

ideological base can be extended, and how it can be made to attract more diverse groups of people.

In conclusion, I think the point has been made that feminist theatrical criticism has not progressed beyond the "second stage" of a plea for the avant-garde and a negation of the commercial theatre as being hopelessly patriarchal and generally negative. Film theory on the other hand seem much more open to notions of ambiguity, the possibility of readings against the grain, and to the importance of the audience in the production of meaning.

This chapter has also argued that these arguments can be extended beyond the confines of feminism, into the realism of a populism that includes both men and women. For such areas, the main message of feminist film theory is the importance of the recognition of why dominant forms of drama have the popularity that they do (one method of this analysis, of course, is the use of psychoanalysis as a means of understanding pleasure or the appeal of melodrama), an understanding of the absurdity of critiquing dominant or avant-garde theatre without including (or at least mentioning) its effect on an audience and the parameters of those reactions.

Finally, I would argue that, like the film critics discussed in this chapter, theatrical populists could gain a great deal from a recognition of the likely continuing nature of the primary position of the dominant, commercial theatre, at least in terms of reaching large audiences, and a willingness to simultaneously recognize the problematic nature of hegemony and a ideology that represents only the interests of a narrow, ruling class, coupled with a willingness to work within those parameters to establish channels of discourse in apparently hostile territory.

CHAPTER V

THE MAINSTREAM THEATRE AND ITS AUDIENCE: NEGOTIATED READINGS

The previous chapter argued that theatrical populists must pay more attention to how meaning is produced in the theatre, especially the mainstream theatre, and it suggested the possibility that readings (of a play by its audience) which are somehow "against the grain" can facilitate some level of populism, just as they provided a means for female and other forms of oppositional dialogue in a mainstream cinema firmly in the grips of patriarchy and the dominant ideology.

It was also suggested that as the mainstream is already reaching relatively large audiences, it has an insurmountable start, in the populist stakes, over the fringe and avant-garde forms of theatre. The argument, then, is that theatrical populists should not (as is their wont) dismiss in a summary and wholesale manner what little mainstream theatre exists. They should rather celebrate the diversity of individual interpretations, both mainstream and oppositional, that it produces from different audience members, and recognize the mainstream theatre as an important tool in the quest for a more populist theatre.

The intention of this chapter is largely to expand this notion, with further reference to the reader-response theories of criticism and to discuss their applicability to the popular theatre. I also want to examine this apparently vague notion of oppositional or "against the grain" readings. Given the centrality of television in the world of popular drama, many of the references that follow are also taken from the work of critics whose work has primarily been in that medium.

It seems reasonable to assert, given the general conservatism (ideological and otherwise) of much mainstream, television drama,[1] that if meaningful, oppositional readings are definable and justifiable within television (which is usually accused of being the most hegemonic of the various media), then they will be worthy of study within any branch of the drama.

This analysis of reader-response criticism and television also will lead in to the discussion of Russell's work that follows, and the thesis that this playwright's initial success was at least partly dependent on his ability to appropriate the comic, dramatic forms of television, as well as his work's ability to accommodate a wide variety of possible interpretations within the general, and accessible, ideological framework intended by the author.

Speaking of an individual playwright makes an appropriate bridge to a discussion of the notion of authorship in the theatre. It is still common therein to discuss a particular playwright as being the sole author of his or her text and, indeed, to describe a given playwright as left or right wing,[2] commercial or non-commercial, feminist or misogynist, elitist or populist.

Such a notion is highly problematic. Even though theatre (and especially alternative theatre) can be less structured then some other art forms, such as film or television (although more structured than such areas as performance art or other modes of abstract expression), a given playwright must always be aware of the rules that govern him or

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1 By mainstream television drama, I refer to the typical network fare on offer in the United States, as well most of the comedy in both Britain and America. Mainstream, prime-time television is typically dominated by the series, which epitomizes the power of the dominant television text. I do, of course, recognize that distinguished (largely British) television drama by such authors as Dennis Potter, Trevor Griffiths, or, indeed, Willy Russell, does not accurately fit into this category.

2 In *A Good Night Out*, for example, John McGrath implies that Tom Stoppard is a right-wing propagandist thanks to his decision to include a symphony orchestra in the production of *Every Good Boy Deserves Favor*.

her. Using a notion of authorship derived from Macherey, who described the author as "the first reader of his own work,"[3] Robert C. Allen noted the following before considering the role of the author in television:

> Contemporary criticism has . . . led to a reconsideration of the role of the author in the production of art. The traditional notion of the author or artist as the single source of meaning within a work is difficult to maintain once one acknowledges the complex network of codes, conventions, precedence, and expectations in which every work participates and over which the author has little, if any, control.[4]

If such a statement is true, there is little validity in approaching the question of populism and the theatre simply by celebrating the work of an individual playwright, or by attempting to cultivate inherent, populist geniuses who could single-handedly create remarkable texts that would attract the populace at large in droves. Similarly, on the grounds that many authors are simply following establishing patterns that dictate their style, it is problematic to unilaterally attack any given author for putting back the populist cause.

It is most intriguing that Allen identifies television as being increasingly complicated when it comes to ascribing authorship--given the technical complexity of the medium and the extensive, pre-ordained divisions of labor, the use of team-written scripts and the like. When one considers that the most commercially successful theatrical pieces in recent years have been spectacular epics, invariably team written, using the very same principles of the modern industrial organization that are integral to television, then the same problem of authorship applies in much of the live theatre. It is, in short, becoming increasingly

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3 Pierre Macheray, *A Theory of Literary Production* Geoffrey Wall (trans.) (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 48.

4 Robert C. Allen, *Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), p. 4.

difficult to locate the author of some of the more popular (musicals are especially problematic in this regard) theatrical entertainments.

As we have seen, there is no shortage of commentators who are willing to attack the commercial theatre for its ability to subvert the pure intentions of the "original" author. Yet those same playwrights and critics rarely draw attention to the fact that the problems of authorship (and the abilities of the governing institutions to subvert), do not stop at the door of the commercial theatre.

Somewhat paradoxically, the same problems occur in the alternative theatre, where plays may also be team written by actors, director and sometimes several playwrights. Joint Stock is one well documented example.[5] If one was assessing their success in the popular arena, precisely whom is the author who could be ascribed praise or blame? If Ritchie's history of the group is to be believed, one could not even identify a consistent method of literary production (aside, that is, from the existence of a rather nebulously described "workshop," which is something of a blanket term that can describe a variety of methods of theatrical production). Ritchie described the various means Joint Stock used to generate their "original" material:

> In some cases, the point of departure for the workshop has been a book, either to be dramatized . . . or to serve as an introduction to a subject. Often, a project has started with the actors undertaking research on a community visited or lived in during the workshop . . . or alternatively with the actors researching their own social experience. . . . Again, workshops have started with a script already drafted . . . or just with a dramatic model in mind. . . . On three occasions . . . they have been improvised by the actors, although the results--writers will be pleased to note--have been generally less successful.[6]

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5 For a description of Joint Stock's problems and triumphs, see Rob Ritchie, ed., *The Joint Stock Book: the Making of a Theatre Collective* (London: Methuen, 1987).

6 Ibid., p. 18.

Certainly there is a certain artistic purity to Joint Stock's efforts, unsullied as they appear to be by the economic distractions of the commercial arena, but it is true, nonetheless, that alternative authorship (and indeed alternative *methods*: given the diversity of approaches to the theatre described in the Ritchie quotation) is as equally a problematic area on the fringe, as it is with any team-conceived, corporate-sponsored, Andrew Lloyd-Webber spectacular.

Similarly, with the development of closely-knit "groups" of actors at the National Theatre, led by established playwrights[7] who are assuming the role of director (under the control of an artistic director), it is becoming increasingly difficult to determine, in the subsidized sector, exactly who is responsible for what.

These problems account, in some measure at least, for the emphasis so many theorists have justifiably placed upon changing the infrastructure of the theatre, rather than working within it. If the role of the author at the National Theatre has become so circumscribed due to the power of the associated administrative structure and the technical complexity of the medium (increasingly the case), then Macherey's notion that an author's decisions are largely determined in advance would appear to be especially appropriate.

On the other hand, though, if one simply replaces the National Theatre's method of working (or the commercial marketplace's) with an equally bureaucratic and complex *alternative* method of theatrical organization, then there is danger that not all that much will be achieved. Certainly, the notion of the pure, creative generation of plays, unaffected by the practical and financial demands of a theatrical infrastructure, can be little more than a romantic fantasy.

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7 Alan Ayckbourn and David Edgar are two examples.

If notions of authorship are now revealed to be problematic and confusing, the same can be said for the idea of audience. We have already seen that an audience can be approached from a point of view of its class make-up--but an audience is in no way the same thing as a social class. Generalizations about an audience's role or activities are extremely difficult to make.

It is significant that much new criticism is ascribing to the audience a pivotal role in the dissemination of meaning--the word audience has, in short, acquired a whole new significance. Contemporary critics have an increasing tendency to see the actual act of reading (or, in the case of the theatre, the act of viewing) as the main determinant of meaning--that is, the words on the pages or the actual lines spoken on the stage are less significant (if they have any significance at all), than the actual point of interaction between reader and text or performance.

One can find a variety of characterizations of the act of reading. Allen suggests three options: "a sort of mutually sustained collaboration, a surrender to the thoughts of another, or . . . a battle of wits between the intentions of the reader and those of the author."[8] In her introduction to a collection of essays called *The Reader in the Text*, Susan R. Suleiman makes the general observation that there have been recent changes in the field of literary theory and criticism, and that the terms "reader" and "audience," although once simple and uncontroversial language, now enjoy new roles as stars in the contemporary literary debate:

> Today, one rarely picks up a literary journal on either side of the Atlantic without finding articles (and often a whole special issue) devoted to the performance[9] of reading, the role of feeling, the variability of individual response, the confrontation, transaction, or interrogation between texts

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8 Allen, p. 77.

9 An intriguingly theatrical word choice, which exemplifies the active role of the reading act.

> and readers, the nature and limits of interpretation--questions whose very formulation depends on a new awareness of the audience as an entity indissociable from the notion of artistic texts.[10]

The debate surrounding reader-response criticism is well-documented in several collections of essays and full length works, although it tends to be discussed primarily in literary terms--using notions of authorship derived from narrative fiction or, perhaps, poetry. Allen extends these ideas to a discussion of television--which has particular similarities to the theatre, not least in that dramatic media typically really contain three stages of reading (the original script, the practical production of that script and the interaction of the audience with the production and, by implication, with the original script).

Aside from works using a sociological and/or empirical approach to audience research, the role of the audience in the commercial theatre has not been especially well documented. Keir Elam, however, has discussed the audience's role in semiotic terms. Although Elam definitively asserts that "it is with the spectator, in brief, that theatrical communication begins and ends,"[11] he, quite reasonably, suggests dilemmas rather than offering answers. Elam, like most semioticians, sees theatrical communications in terms of codes, beginning with our entering the theatre and consequent agreement to participate in the complicated performer-spectator relationship:

> we automatically apply those codes specific to the performance--which can be termed theatric codes--that permit us to apprehend it in its own terms and not as, say, a spontaneous and accidental event or piece of film. We similarly bring into play, where appropriate, our knowledge of the generic, structural, stylistic and other rules--relating to the drama and its composition. At the same time, however, we cannot leave at home the

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10 Susan R. Suleiman, "Introduction: Varieties of Audience-Oriented Criticism," in *The Reader in the Text*, eds., Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 3-4.

11 Kier Elam *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, (Methuen: New York, 1980), p. 97.

> whole framework of more general cultural, ideological, ethical and epistemological principles which we apply in our extra-theatric activities.[12]

Elam implies that we assign meaning to an event in the theatre by drawing upon our past experiences (and our general understanding of the world) and infering the rules we have learned. Our earliest awareness of play-acting obviously occurs extremely early in life, which allows us to follow the drama and, indeed, permit it to have meaning for us. This leads Elam to the important conclusion that every member of the audience must make sense of the performance for him or herself. In other words, the actual construction of meaning is performed by each individual spectator. These constructions will vary depending on the cultural, political, ideological or other disposition of the individual interpreter. The audience, then, has a much more pivotal role in the formation of meaning (even if the resultant meaning is oppositional or even nonsensical), than their apparent passivity indicates.

Elam's conclusion, consequently, down-plays what the creative forces behind a performance can do to impose a given, approved ("mediated," to use McGrath's phrase) meaning, because of the significance of the nature of the spectator's decodification. In other words, notwithstanding the good efforts of the playwright, director, designers and performers, there will be many, possible interpretations of their text. In polemical, populist manifestos like McGrath's, this situation is not adequately acknowledged or discussed.

Peter J. Rabinowitz has applied, although not explicitly from a semiotic point of view, some of the ideas of reader-response criticism to modern drama (albeit in something of a literary manner). Rabinowitz notes that there are multiple audiences, implying that to talk about an audience as one, coherent entity (which is the way many populists talk about it,

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12 Ibid., p. 52.

with the possible exception of the acknowledgement of class divisions), is palpable nonsense.

Rabinowitz notes that there is an "actual" audience,[13] the physically existing people who watch a play. He claims that research about such flesh and blood souls is the province of sociological criticism and can be best understood by the surveys and questionnaires beloved of the marketing staff found at many large theatres. Then, says Rabinowitz, there is an "authorial audience,"[14] the people who the playwright had in mind--on the grounds that any author cannot write a play without making some prior assumptions about the intended audience's "beliefs, knowledge, and familiarity with conventions"[15]--when he or she wrote the play. John McGrath, for example, when he wrote *The Cheviot, The Stag and the Black, Black Oil*, was making a variety of assumptions about the use of the *ceilidh*, assuming a knowledge of it in the audience and making the presumption that its presence would be a way for them to accept and enjoy the play. Indeed, if we are to understand that play fully, we must share at least some of the characteristics of the authorial audience. The last type of audience referred to by Rabinowitz is the "narrative audience,"[16] the part of us that must accept what is going on in the play as being "real, " and that the characters we are reacting to are real people, the location is a real place, and the other aspects of a suspension of disbelief.

It can be seen, then, that the audience is a complex entity, and playwrights can address it in many different ways--referring directly to the authorial audience, for example, will intrude on the illusions sustained by the narrative audience.

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13 Peter J. Rabinowitz, "What's Hecuba to Us: The Audience's Experience of Literary Borrowing," in *The Reader in the Text*, p. 243.

14 Ibid., p. 244.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., p. 245.

It is the notion of the "authorial audience" that appears most relevant to a consideration of populism and the theatre. Does the key to writing popular theatre lie partly in the playwright's perception of the authorial audience? That is to say, if a writer's authorial audience is, for example, middle-class or well-educated, then others will be excluded from a full understanding of the play, even though they may be able to relate to it perfectly well on the narrative or actual levels. Moreover, if the author him or herself is middle-class and well educated, will that have a necessary impact on the resultant authorial audience? How can one possibly write for everyone, anyway? The only answer to these difficult questions would appear to lie in an acceptance and acknowledgement of the different audience interpretations that will inevitably result from one's work.

Rabinowitz uses the example of Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Gildenstern Are Dead*, noting that the authorial audience must have a knowledge of *Hamlet*. Rabinowitz also poses the following question about playwrights who borrow from classical and other sources:

> How has Stoppard managed, in *Travesties*, to create a Broadway hit despite the fairly esoteric knowledge demanded by his references? Edward Bond's *Lear* makes sense without his references to Shakespeare, which appear to undercut his radical socialism by encouraging elitism; what does he gain through borrowing that makes the sacrifice worthwhile?[17]

There are some obvious problems with those pointed questions. Clearly, a full understanding of a play is hardly necessary for a Broadway play to appeal to a lot of people as all kinds of other factors--such as the quality of the acting, the commercial stature of the performers, the level of the spectacle and so on-- must be taken into account. Furthermore, Rabinowitz makes an implicit assumption that Shakespeare is necessarily

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17 Ibid., pp. 262-263.

synonymous with elitism which is problematic--its usage as a referent is hardly "encouraging elitism."

What is interesting, however, is the overall issues that Rabinowitz raises, not only concerning authorial intention, but also his identification of the several simultaneous roles an audience can be asked to perform.

This determination gives rise to many intriguing questions. Can a play function on a populist level as well as an elitist? How can one determine an authorial audience that is not at least somewhat exclusive? It certainly would seem practically impossible for a playwright to write with no one in mind (although many authors would claim to be able to do so, or at least would claim that they write for all humanity). Are different levels of understanding by those from different backgrounds acceptable to advocates of a more populist theatre? In other words, it could perhaps be argued that the true populist work functions on many different levels, so that each member of the audience can enjoy certain aspects (one often finds authors for children--such as Lewis Carroll--making such an attempt, so that there may be "something in" their works for the adults who are sitting along with their offspring). On the other hand, some self-defined populists would probably find such a notion of difference--be it based on class, age, or education--unacceptably elitist. There is no cogent answer to any of these questions, which serves to remind us still further of the inherent problems of discussing the theatre's relationship with populism.

Many pure notions of socialist theatre have as their model the identification of a coherent political goal, to which all of the audience will be elevated, be they weak or strong in mind, arriving at some sort of collective awareness. One could find that view prevalent in the socialist theatre of the 1930s, as Samuel, MacColl and Cosgrove have identified. They quote one of Ness Edward's comments (made in 1930) about a political drama about the Nottingham Luddites, called *Machine Wreckers*:

> This play is a real worker's drama. It depicts the class struggle, the class problem; it exposes working-class weaknesses, arouses class emotions, and endeavors to carry its audience with it to make Lud's prophecy a living fact.[18]

A casual glance through Catherine Itzen's *Stages in the Revolution*, a history of contemporary socialist theatre, reveals that such a view has not gone out of style. Often, fringe groups will, in theory, appear to be less didactic than they actually are--their professed respect for ambiguity is sometimes not represented in their material or their political goals. Others, like Red Ladder, have admitted they were, at times, overtly propagandic.[19] Here is one example of many comments recorded in Itzen's book that describe how revolutionary theatres want to change--in a pre-determined fashion--an audience's mind about something. In this case, the pseudo-democratic insistence on the importance of dialogue seems little more than a smoke screen for the inevitable dialectics:

> All writing for the theatre is an attempt to arrive at a dialogue with one's audience. It is dialogue that is dialectical in that it alters by what emerges in it, from it . . . metaphors do change the world.[20]

The theories of Elam, Rabinowitz and others certainly question just how realistic--again, given the complexity of the performer/audience relationship--these aims can ever be, as long as such groups insist on such a narrow and inaccurate view of what constitutes "one's audience." Once again, the groups appear to be reluctant to accept the ambiguities and compromises implicit when any audience reacts with a given piece of theatre.

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18 Ness Edwards, *The Workers' Theatre*, as quoted in Raphael Samuel, Ewan MacColl and Stuart Cosgrove, *Theatres of the Left* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 44.

19 See Catherine Itzen, *Stages in the Revolution* (London: Methuen, 1980), pp. 39-51.

20 David Lan, as quoted in Itzen, p. 292.

The role of the audience in the theatre is, of course linked with the issue of whether a given play has any actual meaning in its own right. Once again, this is an enormously complex debate. It involves the myriad ideas of (among many others) the Russian formalists, the Prague School of theorists and reader-response critics like Roman Ingarden (who noted that a work of literature is merely a set of general directions which the reader must bring to actuality), Wolfgang Iser, Wayne C. Booth, Roland Barthes, Jonathan Culler (whose declared intention is to establish a structuralist poetics) and Stanley Fish. It was Fish who put--for the first time--the task of interpretation most firmly at the reader's door, implying that it is impossible to make any statement whatsoever about the meaning of a text, without employing previous conventions of interpretations. The full complexities of the reader-response debate have been considered elsewhere,[21] but it is worthwhile to consider briefly some of the implications for the theatre's relationship with populism.

In the first instance, consider how Robert C. Holub describes the overall effect of the reader-response debate. As a play (its production as well as its playscript), can be considered a "text," the following is particularly interesting. Holub argued that before the growth of what is known as "reception theory, " it was the text (or, in dramatic terms, the script) that:

> reigned supreme.[22] . . . Reception theory undermined such interpretative practice by viewing the text as a function of its readers and its reception. the conception of an objective and eternal work of art with a unique structure and a single, determinate meaning was replaced by a variety of

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21 There are several introductions to reader-response criticism as well as at least two collections of essays by all the major players in the ongoing debate. One is *The Reader in the Text*, and the other is *Reader-response Criticism*, ed., Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

22 I would argue that, given the continued emphasis that theatrical populists place on the nature of the play--how is written or collectively arrived at, for example--the text still reigns supreme in much discussion of the live theatre.

> models in which the completing of the work is a never-completed unfolding of its effective history, while its meaning is constituted by the interaction between text and reader.[23]

If this is the case, then it could be argued that much of the emphasis of many of the theorists discussed in the previous chapters has been somewhat misplaced, in that it often focused on what a given *production* should be *composed* of, rather than how *audiences* will *interact* with it. Alternative groups tend to devote untold energies to the establishment of egalitarian, politically correct methods of production--from the "workshop" generation of the text to the perfectly-collaborative rehearsal process. In doing so, they feel justified in the dismissal of forms of theatre that did not have the populist benefit of such enlightened pre-performance efforts.

I (obviously) do not wish to deny all the value of political and artistic work before a play interacts with an audience--after all, there would be no play without it. I do, however, wish to suggest that the *centrality* of such work is often overplayed, at the expense of interest in the experiential process of its generation of meaning for audience members who eventually experience the production. Furthermore, the important considerations of the *size* of that audience and its class make-up are also all too frequently ignored, with the inaccurate justification that anti-commercial production methods--not the experiences of an audience--are much more significant.

For critics like Fish, meaning is indeed defined in experiential terms and takes place as the reader negotiates his or her meaning through the text. Meaning, conversely, is not something that was already in place before the text and its reader (or a play and its audience), met up with each other.

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23 Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 148.

As we saw in the previous chapter, such ideas have not stopped some feminist (and other) critics from feeling able to criticize the nature of commercial, theatrical text without any consideration of the nature of their interaction with an audience. As was noted above, this interaction is, of course, impossible to fully quantify, but one can at least make an attempt to consider an audience's previous experiences--whether or not they are sophisticated consumers of theatre for example, or their political sympathies--that color their individual interpretation of any given piece of popular theatre.

It is one thing to approach these issues from a point of view of criticizing the avant-garde--is entirely another (and a much broader leap) to ascribe the commercial theatre the role of guardian of the popular consciousness. I do not mean to imply that reader-response criticism can solve the problems inherent in a consideration of the theatre's relationship with populism. Indeed, I do not believe it can do much more than point to a need for awareness and a change of emphasis in the works of populists. They must include more awareness of the experience of their audiences.

The message, then, is that those in the popular theatre should make sure that (to use Fish's words) "the reader's[24]activities are at the center of attention, where they are regarded, not as leading to meaning, but as *having* meaning."[25] These ideas can in no way solve all the very real problems of hegemony, although one could perhaps find some hope in a negotiated compromise of the ideas of some of the theatrical theorists listed in chapter two, with the reader-response theories considered here.

In the first instance, the notions of McGrath, Gooch and others that theatre's elitism and class biases simply reflect those of society at large is a fundamentally sound one. In the interim, though, and with socialist revolution unlikely, what about the present? If we

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[24] In this case, of course, we must substitute the word "audience" for "reader."

[25] Stanley Fish, "Interpreting the *Variorum*," in *The Reader in the Text*,,p. 172.

are to criticize these practitioners for their ignoring of the complexities of reception theory, psychoanalysis and the rest, do we not leave ourselves open to the demand of offering one form of analysis which will make everything come right? Before launching into a evangelical plea for allowing reception theory more prominence in discussions of theatrical populism, it seems appropriate to temper that proposed contract with a rider. Just as Terry Eagleton is able to bring the cultural evangelical down to size, so his useful comments about the relationship of literary (and, by extension, theatrical, criticism) to art with didactic aims are worthy of acknowledgement.

Eagleton notes (if we extend his literary theories to the theatre), that simply picking a critical method or a theory--semiology, semiotics, deconstruction, even reception theory--will not radically transform the theatre (or anything else for that matter) into a haven for populists. On the contrary, it is a matter of starting off with what one wants to achieve and then perhaps using part of the methodology of all of the theories discussed in this section that will help achieve these desired goals. And, in doing so, we must recognize that we are making an ideological choice. Eagleton makes no attempt to hide his personal, ideological goals:

> Any method or theory which will contribute to the strategic goal of human emancipation, the production of 'better people' through the socialist transformation of society is acceptable. Structuralism, semiotics, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, reception theory and so on: all of these approaches, and others, have their valuable insights which may be put to use. . . . What you choose to accept and reject theoretically, then, depends on what you are practically trying to do. This has always been the case with literary criticism: it is simply that it is often very reluctant to realize the fact. . . . We select the objects and methods of procedure which we believe the most important, and our assessment of their importance is governed by frames of interest deeply rooted in our practical forms of social life.[26]

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26 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp. 210-211.

Of course, it is also problematic to ignore these critical theories, because in the very act of doing so, one is forming a critical ideology of one's own (a similar ideological choice is being made if we claim that the audience's interaction with the theatre is really a very simple unproblematic thing). The point that these theories are useful tools for the populist, if they are not ignored, is, however, worthy of repetition.

That being said, we should return to the main argument. One tool that seems the most useful when it comes to answering many of the questions about populism is those ideas of reader-response criticism formulated about television. It is true to say that television is a dominant medium. At least one would struggle--outside perhaps of some locally produced, little-watched cable channels--to identify a coherent body of avant-garde television texts in the way that one can find clear evidence of an alternative theatre and, to a slightly lesser degree, film. In short then, any reading of television is basically a reading of the mainstream, the establishment and the commercial (the BBC, of course, are not commercial; although most people would describe that unusual organization as both establishment and mainstream). There simply is no avant-garde alternative that allows academics and middle-class revolutionaries to take refuge therein.

There has been a great deal of debate documented elsewhere about the opinions of contemporary British playwrights who have chosen to work principally within television mainly due to its wide audience and entrenched place within the popular consciousness. Trevor Griffiths, for example has been accused of ignoring the needs of the theatre, but he has responded bluntly and pragmatically to those who view television writing as some ·ind of downward step:

> Theatre is . . . incapable, as a social institution, of reaching, let alone *mobilizing*, large popular audiences. . . .Success in the theatre can confer

> fame,[27] prestige, wealth, critical acclaim and a place in literature, but all of them will be pickled in a sort of class aspic. . . . There are fewer cinemagoers in Britain now than there are anglers, fewer regular theatregoers than car-rallyers. For most people, plays are television plays.[28]

When discussing television drama, the British and American models diverge somewhat. In the United Kingdom, there have been a small number of plays in the seventies and eighties with a radical content; plays that have attempted to combine a didactic (usually socialist) message with the populist medium--the work of Dennis Potter, Alan Bleasdale, Willy Russell and Griffiths himself comes especially to mind. On the other hand, American drama has tended to remain more firmly in the grip of more reactionary, overtly commercial pieces of drama. Such dramas (especially when one includes the dramatic series, soap operas and situation comedies) are very much in the ascendency in Britain, consequently diminishing the importance of the rare, single playtexts considered above. The following ideas reflect that dominance, as they consider television drama in its more reactionary forms.

John Fiske has pointed out the recent trend in British cultural studies that supports the belief that pieces of drama do not have single meanings (ideologically or otherwise) but "are relatively open texts, capable of being read in different ways by different people."[29] His argument is persuasive, especially when coupled with semiotic notions of coding and decoding. Keir Elam, as we have seen, notes that theatre is analogous to linguistic communication where a coded message is "sent" by the transmitter and consequently decoded by the receiver. Given the complexity of the theatrical medium with a variety of

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27 The use of the word "fame" here is something of an oxymoron as it implies a broad knowledge of one's endeavors. Presumably Griffiths is referring to a selective kind of fame--amongst the middle and upper classes, for example.

28 Trevor Griffiths, as quoted in John McGrath, *A Good Night Out* (London: Methuen, 1981), pp. 101-102.

29 John Fiske "British Cultural Studies and Television," in Allen, p. 256.

people (playwright, director and actor, for example) sending the message, the communicative process becomes extremely diverse, sending many messages through many channels. "One of the consequences of this multiplication of components and systems," concludes Elam, "is that it is not possible to talk of a single theatrical message, the performance is rather made up . . . of multiple messages."[30]

Fiske (along with Stuart Hall, whose more recent writings so heavily influenced the direction of British cultural studies) would no doubt agree with that deduction, although it can be expressed equally well without the use of such explicitly semiotic language, and giving political ideology a greater prominence. In an essay published in 1980, Hall used a Marxist analogy based on the economic process of production. He noted the close links between television production and the act of viewing:

> Circulation and reception are, indeed, 'moments' of the production process in television and are reincorporated, via a number of skewed and structured 'feedbacks,' into the production process itself. The consumption or reception of the television message is thus also a 'moment' of the production process. . . . Production and reception of the television are not . . . identical, but they are related: they are differentiated moments within the totality formed by the social relations of the communicative process as a whole.[31]

In other words, when a program is made it is "encoded" with meaning and structure; audience members must therefore 'decode" the message before it can have any effect on them, ideological or otherwise. This process of decoding is consequently as important a part of the production process as the actual recording of the program. At the time, Hall found this new understanding most exciting, because it opened up so many new possibilities for developments in the field of so-called audience research:

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30 Elam, pp. 37-38.

31 Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language*, eds., Stuart Hall et al.(London: Hutchinson, 1980), p. 130.

> At either end of the communicative chain the use of the semiotic paradigm promises to dispel the lingering behaviorism which has dogged mass-media research for so long, especially in its approach to content. Though we know the television programme is not a behavioral input, like a tap on a knee cap, it seems to have been almost impossible for traditional researchers to conceptualize the communicative process without lapsing into one or another variant of low-flying behaviorism.[32]

The same could be said about some of those interested in a more populist theatre: there is certainly a general tendency to assume that the right kind of political theatre is capable of provoking the necessary reaction in an audience member.

Hall goes on to criticize producers of television whose ideal is "perfectly transparent communication,"[33] and who become irritated when an audience does not appear to be getting the intended message. Hall notes that the whole idea of an "intended message" is problematic, because what it really means is that the producer's (or author's) viewers are not operating within the 'dominant' or 'preferred' code. Even though the ideal of those who produce the artwork is perfectly transparent communication, what they have to confront is better described as systematically distorted communication. In other words, most producers have to face an unpleasant dose of the realities of audience interaction and the void between that interaction and their original intent.

Fiske, referring explicitly to Hall's work, notes that earlier work in the discipline that implied that the dominant tradition simply reproduced itself in the forms of drama that it sponsored, has now been superseded. Fiske describes Hall's later work as being a turning point in contemporary British cultural studies, because it acknowledged the notion that television programs (and, by extension, pieces of theatre), have several meanings rather a single, possible interpretation. Fiske implied that this discovery suggests the existence of:

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[32] Ibid., p. 131.

[33] Ibid., p. 135

> a necessary correlation between people's social situations and meanings they may generate from a television program. [Hall] thus postulates a possible tension between the structure of the text, which necessarily bears the dominant ideology, and the social situations of the viewers, which may position them at odds with that ideology. Reading or viewing television then becomes a process of negotiation between the viewer and the text. Use of the "negotiation" is significant, for it implies both that there is a conflict of interests that needs to be reconciled in some way, and that the process of reading television is one in which the reader is an active maker of meanings from the text, not a passive recipient of already constructed ones.[34]

When reading the work of those (such as McGrath, Van Erven, Davies, or Gooch) who chose to oppose the mainstream and who would advocate the formulation of an entirely new kind of theatre, the word "negotiation" is not a frequently encountered term. Yet, if the way an audience interacts with an artwork is a process of mediated compromise, one is justified in viewing polemical revolutionary theatre practices with cynicism. If Hall and Fiske are right, then such efforts would simply be substituting one form of compromise for another, after losing the advantages of a style of theatre (the mainstream) that already has some sort of place within the framework of the popular consciousness. One can argue, then, that audiences will always arrive at negotiated meanings whether they are in the West End or a union hall. Rather than changing economic infrastructure, we should perhaps care more about understanding, and *using*, this process.

In many ways, the above quotation says exactly what Fish explained, extending his ideas to the drama and viewing it from a more explicitly ideological perspective. Whatever its source, Fiske's statement has important ramifications for the relationship of populism with the theatre. In previous chapters, we have seen how the mainstream, commercial theatre is usually written off as being hopelessly reactionary, and irrelevant to the concerns of the working class who need their "own" theatre. Yet, if one considers the

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34 Fiske, p. 260.

argument developed by Hall and advanced by Fiske, that opens up the possibility for reactionary readings of the dominant "texts" of the commercial theatre, depending on the social situation of the particular audience member, whether or not such a possibility was intended by the (usually) bourgeois forces that put that production together.

There are of course, limits and boundaries, and I do not mean to imply that an audience member could easily read, for example, a plea for a socialist revolution into a mainstream production of *Bye Bye Birdie*. As Hall noted, "encodings will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which the decodings will operate."[35] That does not mean, however, that the encoder (the director, for example) can say with any degree of certainty how meaning will be decoded; aside perhaps from being sure that there will be some measure of compromise.

It seems reasonable to accept the arguments that the contemporary British theatre has a tangential relationship with the working-class, and what loose relationship there is has largely centered around the "good night out" principle. In other words, working-class people who are not theatrically sophisticated, tend to perceive theatre--and want to attend it--in the style epitomized by Shaftesbury Avenue or the streets that surround Broadway; that is, in its mainstream, commercial and non-didactic form. With a few minor[36] exceptions, the working-classes in Britain and America have never embraced the alternative theatre or the avant-garde, and the innovations discussed in the previous chapters have apparently made no inroads into the concept of persuading them to do so. Now, if these subversive readings of the text are existent and quantifiable, there would

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[35] Hall, p. 135.

36 The Everyman in Liverpool is clearly one, and the erstwhile success of John McGrath's 7:84 company with some of their productions are others. It is generally accepted, however, that one will not find large numbers of working-class people at the Bush, the Arts Theatre, New York's Public Theatre, the Royal Court or the other much-lauded citadels of rebellion and experimentation.

appear to be a clear argument for focusing energy on what form they might take and, perhaps, how the actual creators of the art form--playwright, director or those who control the theatrical infrastructure--may influence or encourage them. In other words, it could be argued that the true popular theatre can be found *within*, and not in direct opposition to, the mainstream, commercial theatre.

It is worth considering how Fiske develops these arguments further. He notes that Hall claims there are three broad categories of reading (or, in the case of theatre, viewing). "The dominant reader" accepts the dominant ideology, the "negotiated" reader accepts the dominant ideology in a general sense, but makes small small adjustments, while the "oppositional" reader is a person "whose social situation puts them into direct opposition with the dominant ideology."[37] (The example of an oppositional reader given by Hall, is that of the "the viewer who listens to a debate on the need to limit wages, but 'reads' every mention of the 'national interest' as 'class interest.'"[38])

The fascinating conclusion is that however intentionally bourgeois the values that an author puts into his or her text may be, many people will simply not accept them and replace them with their own interpretation. Fiske summarizes this in terms of the medium of television:

> The preferred reading theory proposes that TV programs generally prefer a set of meanings that work to maintain the dominant ideology,[39] but that these meanings cannot be imposed, only preferred. Readers whose social situations lead them to reject all or some constructions of the dominant ideology will necessarily bring this social orientation to the reading of the program.[40]

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37 Ibid., p. 260.

38 Hall, p. 138.

39 The same can surely be said about the preferences of the commercial theatre.

40 Fiske, p. 261.
Once again, by logical extension, this could refer to bringing such a social orientation into the commercial theatre.

Some considerable research has been done in television to show that these subversive readings really do exist--Fiske himself refers to a number of possible readings of the ideologically-conservative television show *Magnum, P.I.*, as well as pointing to the work of several other researchers who have studied how subversive readings of dominant texts tend to be manifested.[41]

Another useful point made by Fiske surrounds the notion of popularity. Once we accept that an audience (or a potential audience) is not "a homogeneous mass,"[42] but rather a group made of many smaller groups of people, all of whom can be placed somewhere along a scale reflecting the degree of acceptance or opposition to the dominant ideology, then it rapidly becomes obvious that any given television program must appeal to a variety of social groups (with varying ideological positions and class make-up) to be popular.

It is easy to extend that argument to the theatre. Quite simply, in order for a piece of theatre to attract a large number of people (that is, to be popular, assuming we are using the word "popular" in such a way) then it must be open to a variety of interpretations (or negotiated readings), by the different groups that make up its potential audience. Only if these groups find some way to express their own voice, their own relationship with the ideology of the bourgeois, will they read the text or attend the performance. If a theatrical performance does not admit such ambiguity--as much alternative, avant-garde or guerilla theatre does not--then it is hard to see how it could ever attain the populism that it is striving for.

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41 The reader will recall that the previous chapter noted Robin Wood's analysis of the film of the 1970s, as well as Lucie Arbuthnot's similar conclusions in reference to the film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.

42 Fiske, p. 267.

One can see here one of the major problems when popular theatre, political theatre, alternative theatre, feminist theatre and the like are all viewed as synonymous; as being different ways of expressing the same revolutionary goals. In the most basic of terms, they mean very different things. Furthermore, if one accepts the centrality of the audience in the production of meaning, then it would seem that populism and political didacticism are mutually exclusive.

There are distinct ways that a text can make it easier to admit the existence of ambiguity of meaning--Fiske, for example, suggests that the hero-team, so often a part of popular television, "is an significant ideological formation . . . as it provides for a greater "openness" than the single hero. Its greater variety of opportunities for identification enables various social groups to negotiate appropriate points of entry into the dominant ideology."[43]

Such critical work has not been done in the theatre (although there is a populist case for advocating that there should be more theatrical versions of situation comedies or buddy movies), perhaps because those interested have been too busy defining populism in terms of the avant-garde. Another factor is the apparent incompatibility, if one accepts these ideas, that grows up between political didacticism and popularity. It was noted in the previous chapters that virtually all of the scholarship on the theatre's relationship to populism has been produced by those who write from a politically committed--usually from the far left--stance. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that there has been no great enthusiasm or willingness when it comes to pointing out multiplicity of meaning or in the suggestion that the dominance of a given text or ideology is not as powerful as once thought, if one accepts that each audience member will always bring his or her own individual construct of meaning to the work, whatever the ideological intentions of those

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43 Ibid., p. 267.

behind the production of the text. Such scholarship would hardly improve the lot of the working-classes or create the "right" kind of new popular aesthetic.

It can be argued that those playwrights who have embraced commercial forces and are frequently accused of selling-out--Willy Russell, Alan Ayckbourn, Wendy Wasserstein, Marsha Norman and Neil Simon, for example--are actually, by including (albeit possibly unconsciously) a multiplicity of subversive readings within their texts, allowing for a much truer populism, and a much more egalitarian theatrical experience for all concerned, than those playwrights who have worked exclusively in the alternative theatre and who have expounded a great deal of energy trying to "appeal" to the working-classes. They could, instead, have been producing work that admitted a multiplicity of readings, thus removing the necessity to go to all the trouble of trying to attract the working-classes to an unfamiliar environment in the first place.

There are problems here of course. Such a theory does not take into account the enormous difficulty, on a practical level, of finding subversive readings in the work of a writer such as Neil Simon. Nor does it account for the fact that the theatre, unlike film and television, has--as an institution--an aura of middle-class exclusivity that is likely to prevent members of the working-classes from entering its doors in the first place. That would offer them little chance to execute their subversive, negotiated readings of the text. Similarly, these ideas will not satisfy those who, like Althusseur, saw and see the commercial sector of the theatre as inherent pro-bourgeoise and anti-working-class, purely by the nature of its capitalist identity.

Such dilemmas notwithstanding, the theatre can learn a great deal from recent cultural studies, especially those that have reduced the primary position typically granted to the actual text--now seen as only a small part of the meaning process. Popularity, then, is more justifiably connected with difference and multiplicity than didacticism. Fiske summarizes the above discussion well. His remarks in the following quotation are

slightly revised to fit the argument in question a little more appropriately. Although Fiske discusses television, I have substituted the terminology of the live theatre. His comments are still applicable:

> Cultural studies sees the [theatrical] experience . . . as a constant dynamic movement between similarity and difference. The dimension of similarity is that of the dominant ideology that is structured into the forms of the [production] and is common to all [of] the [audience] for whom that [production] is popular. The dimension of difference, however, accounts for the wide variety of groups who must be reached if the [production] is to be popular with a large audience. These groups will align themselves to the dominant ideology in different ways, and these ways will be paralleled in the different reading they make of the [production] that is common, or similar, to all. The play between similarity and difference is one way of experiencing the struggle between hegemony and resistance.[44]

The intentions of this consideration of reader-response criticism, along with the attendant conclusions, have not been to prove McGrath, Edgar, Van Erven, Davies or Gooch as being either correct or incorrect in their assumptions or aims. Indeed, the emphasis on an audience member as a producer of meaning, makes Gooch's insistence on the need for the change in the theatrical infrastructure all the more justifiable, on one level at least. Similarly, McGrath's emphasis on performing what an audience actually wants and is used to, even if that format appears at first glance to debased and symptomatic of an atrophied cultural form, holds up well when the centrality of the audience is considered.

On the other hand, though, this chapter has suggested that didacticism and populism are uneasy bedfellows. It is also clear that the theatre will never improve its increasingly problematic relationship with popular culture without an admittance that popular forms are ambiguous in their meaning and ideological impact on any given audience member, just as they are diverse in their styles. One does not need to negate the dominant culture,

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44 Ibid., p. 269.

or attack it as the antithesis of all that is popular. The populist--especially one who recognizes the apparent impossibility of his or her task--can better work from within the dominant structure, consequently saving a good deal of misguided energy in creating from scratch a viable alternative to the commercial, mainstream forms of the theatre that are as ingrained (and as popular) in the consciousness of the masses as they are of the bourgeoisie.

Commercial theatre does have a potentiality for populism, its class biases and apparent ideological totalitarianism not withstanding. Certainly, that relationship is problematic and self-contradicting, but then so is the relationship of the avant-garde with popular theatre. It would behove those in the theatre to follow the lead of their leftist colleagues in television who, Donald Lazere indicates, have now:

> moved away from the Frankfurt School's wholly disapproving view. . . . The consensus today is that even the most commercial productions can provide many pleasures, in spite of the negative features of the system as a whole.[45]

Rather than producing plays for politicized members of the middle-classes, attacking capitalists in big hats in a local union hall populated by militants and academics from the local college, or struggling to find a form of didactic agit-prop that can also be subtle and aesthetically pleasing, it seems a good deal more sensible to analyze the relationship of the working classes with the commercial theatre in more detail. Perhaps in so doing one could harness the latent, if ambiguous, energy present in the citadels of escapism--comedy, middle-class melodrama and non-intellectual spectacle--found in such profusion on Broadway or in London's West End. They may be more inclusive, and potentially subversive, than one might think.

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[45] Donald Lazere, *American Media and Mass Culture: Left Perspectives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 233.

CHAPTER VI

THE CAREER AND IDEAS OF WILLY RUSSELL

FRANK: You seem to be under the impression that all books are literature.
RITA: Aren't they?
FRANK: No.
RITA: Well, how d' y' tell?
FRANK: I–erm–erm–one's always known really.[1]

In the above quotation from Willy Russell's *Educating Rita*, the character of Frank realizes his obligation to teach the working-class Rita--for whom a book is a book--the difference between literature and hack writing, high and low art, significant culture and mere entertainment, if she is to succeed in the stolid British educational system. In attempting to do so, he is reduced to a stutter, realizing (like many of the critics discussed in the preceding chapters) that the rationale behind this usually arbitrary distinction cannot be articulated in any logical, viable manner.

There are very few references in contemporary drama to the absurdity of this high art/low art deliniation--after all, most playwrights who work in the live theatre have literary pretensions and are anxiously hoping their work will be accepted by the present and future establishment as belonging to the former category rather than being pejoratively reduced to the latter. One would, then, hardly expect their plays to expose the very distinction as being absurd. After all, art tends to be seen as worthy of prosperity, whereas mere entertainment largely exists only for the time at which it was written. Most playwrights hope their plays will have a life beyond the immediate time of

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[1] Willy Russell, *Educating Rita* in *Educating Rita; Stags and Hens; and Blood Brothers: Two Plays and a Musical* (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 190-191.

their first production, thus legitimizing them as works of art (and consequently making larger profits for their creator). Such planning for the future ensures that these works have very little to do with popular culture.

I use this quotation as an opening example, because it concisely illustrates the populist sentiments of Willy Russell, a commercially successful playwright who,despite beginning his career in a manner firmly grounded in the style of the alternative sector, has worked almost entirely within the mainstream[2] theatre, and who is apparently unconcerned about artistic legitimacy (at least, if it comes at the expense of entertainment).

After suggesting, in the first half of this study, the theoretical possibility for the existence of a meaningful form of populism within the mainstream sector of the theatre, this second part is devoted to a study of the work and impact of one playwright, Willy Russell, whose achievements mirror somewhat the ideas and possibilities expounded in the preceding chapters. I plan to demonstrate that, due in part to the existence of the negotiated, even oppositional, readings mentioned in the previous chapters, this author's plays--which are accessible to broad, diverse audiences--have had a greater impact (certainly in numeric terms and perhaps even in ideological terms) than anything produced on the fringe in past two decades and, indeed, that they uniquely contain a disguised, even an unconscious, plea for a more populist theatre within their very texts. Moreover, the plays have a definable aim, notable style and intelligent themes, going beyond the morally-bankrupt populism so commonly associated with forms of art patronizingly

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[2] Virtually all of Russell's important plays have begun at the Liverpool Everyman, a small regional theatre with its own permanent company, that is well known for its cheerfully populist sensibilities. The Everyman partially relies on subsidy for its existence (its grant from the Arts Council in 1985 was about £250,000). Russell's success however, is a result of the fact that all of his major plays have been produced extensively in the West End and the rest of the commercial sector of the theatre.

designed for accessibility by the working-class. As one critic has noted, unlike much of the commercial dramatic products produced live and on tape or film, "Willy Russell is about populism with meaning."[3]

For many theorists and practitioners, of course, there is only so much meaning (in the ideological, political sense of the word), possible in theatre that relies explicitly on the capitalist economy. Commercial compromise is unacceptable to many alternative playwrights on the grounds of the ideological and artistic compromises it necessitates. In the study of Russell's work that follows, I want to analyze whether such compromises--often taken for granted as being mandatory--can be shown to be inevitable if one is to work within the commercial sector. For those who find working for the commercial sector unacceptable on any grounds, there is little of interest in Russell's work, for the playwright has not made any attempt, either within or outside of his dramatic texts, to challenge the commercial theatre's capitalistic mode of operation; rather, he has just tried to work within its confines, to the best possible effect. Too often, though, that less radical option is dismissed by alternative commentators as useless, without full or fair consideration.

With some notable exceptions, Russell's popular success has been accompanied by critical acclaim. Reviewers' comments about individual plays are examined in more detail below, but it is worth noting at the outset that Russell's first major play, *John, Paul, George, Ringo . . . and Bert* was the winner of the *Evening Standard*'s, *Plays and Players*' and the London Theatre Critics' awards for best musical in 1974, the latter of which is generally regarded as London's top theatre honor. *Educating Rita* was the winner of the Society of West End Theatre's awards for the Best Comedy of 1980.

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[3] John Connor, *City Limits*, 29 October 1988, as reprinted in *London Theatre Record*, 8 October 1988, p.1349; all references to the *London Theatre Record* are hereafter cited as *LTR*.

Three years later, Russell's self-adapted screenplay for *Educating Rita* was nominated in Hollywood for an Academy Award. Also in 1983, the Society of West End Theatres, among others, designated *Blood Brothers* as the best musical of that year. In 1988, *Shirley Valentine* won the Laurence Olivier Award[4]as the best comedy of the year. In the words, then, of Guardian critic Nicholas de Jongh, virtually all of Russell's work has been "festooned with awards."[5]

The only other contemporary British playwright who has come close to this combination of popular, commercial success with critical acclaim[6] is Alan Ayckbourn, whose plays (unlike Russell's) have consistently focused on the foibles of the suburban, British middle-class. This is a more traditionally commercial field of dramatic inquiry--with traceable ancestry--than Russell's examination of the problems of the working and lower-middle classes. As Ayckbourn himself admitted in 1980, it is a good deal easier to make a career in the commercial theatre writing about the middle-classes: "If I was a working-class dramatist, I'd have a much harder time of it because my reflected audience would be that much smaller; . . . it's a tougher battle. . . . Then I'd be better off writing for television."[7]

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[4] The Laurence Oliver Awards is the new title of what was previously known as the Society of West End Theatres' awards.

[5] Nicholas de Jongh, *The Guardian*, 30 July 1988, as reprinted in *LTR*, 15 July 1988, p. 1003.

[6] Unlike with Russell, whose first play received much interest, critics, for the most, have only begun responding favorably towards Ayckbourn's later plays, principally those written after 1980.

[7] Alan Ayckbourn, as quoted in Ian Watson, *Conversations with Ayckbourn* (London: Macdonald Futura, 1981), p. 109.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the remarkable popular appeal of Russell's work, which has encompassed television, as well as film and the live theatre, he has not been the subject of countless academic articles, theses or dissertations in the vogue of his fellow practicing, contemporary British authors. Bigsby has commented that the academic tradition is suspicious of popular culture because it is based upon material that is generally available and easily accessible. That reluctance would certainly seem to be confirmed by the academic industry that surrounds contemporary playwrights.

The modern guardians of the poetic tradition of British drama--such as Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, or Edward Bond--are, of course, revered in establishment literary journals devoted to the study of their work. In Pinter's case such analysis has been continued virtually to the point of absurdity. The political writers who try and taunt the middle classes into social action through the fringe theatres and the subsidized sector--Trevor Griffiths, Howard Brenton, Caryl Churchill, David Hare, David Edgar, even Snoo Wilson--are quite frequently discussed by academics and students with a social conscience. Even those authors and groups who have mainly labored in the supposed obscurity of the low-budget avant-garde--John McGrath, Steve Gooch, Red Ladder, Joint Stock, the Portable Theatre, Monstrous Regiment or Ed Berman and Inter-Action--have been immortalized in historical volumes, or "checklists" of available material on these authors, which usually justify their existence by pointing out how infrequently those who work outside the mainstream have had their work considered, chronicled and analyzed.[8]

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[8] Andrew Davies claims in the introduction to *Other Theatres* that his work forms the first "history of the fringe," seemingly ignoring the efforts of Sandy Craig, Catherine Itzen, or as host of other writers, and also assuming that the alternative sectors of the theatre can be easily grouped together to create such a history.

Authors like Russell, however, tend to be ignored.[9] None of the works discussed in the previous chapters consider his work in any detail. Although it must be admitted that much of Russell's enormous popular success has come only in the past six years, after some of these works were written, one still encounters enormous prejudice against the commercial sector. Perhaps Joan Littlewood summed up the attitude of the alternative critics best in 1961, when she claimed that; "the West End has plundered our talent and diluted our ideas."[10] Two decades later, such a view still prevails, with most academics and fringe artists viewing assimilation with the mainstream theatre--the enemy--as undesirable.

Such critics can be equally scathing about the repertory movement, which spawned authors like Russell, because they tend to see it as an integral part of the decadent, established theatrical hierarchy--a farm system, as it were, for the West End. The repertory movement is, in reality, an interesting and ambiguous mix of alternative and mainstream forms. As we have already seen, advocates of the alternative theatre (who dislike ambiguity and compromise) prefer to wrongly believe that the two sectors can be kept completely separate.

Eugene Van Erven's work, for example, ignores the repertory movement all together, presumably because he (inaccurately) saw it as outside his interests of writing about theatres that attracted "traditionally non-theatre going audiences."[11] Robin Thornber

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[9] For all its protestations to the contrary, it is a fact that most fringe commentators, like their mainstream counterparts, are based in London and tend to emphasize alternative goings-on in the capital in their writings. Thus, the amount of material about authors working from the North of England is not as great as it might otherwise be.

[10] Joan Littlewood, as quoted in Andrew Davies, *Other Theatres* (London: Macmillan Education, 1987), p. 157.

[11] Eugene Van Erven, *Radical People's Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1988), p. 5. Van Erven would, however, have been well-advised to look at the efforts of the Liverpool Everyman in attracting audiences hitherto unfamiliar with the theatre.

does refer briefly to *John, Paul, George, Ringo . . . and Bert*, as a "successful" production at the Liverpool Everyman (although without any comment as to its quality or impact) but he starts off his unsympathetic and biased discussion of the English regional repertory movement with an absurdly reductive paragraph:

> Once upon a time, the regional repertory theatres were the fringe. Now they are the mainstream of British theatre. Soon, when Shaftesbury Avenue withers away, they will be the establishment rearguard. Real drama is going on the streets, returning to the tradition of strolling players from whence it came.[12]

Shaftesbury Avenue, which attracts about nine million people annually[13] does not seem in imminent danger of withering away. Furthermore, it is hardly surprising then that Thornber seems to find little of value in the contemporary repertory movement, especially in those theatres where management are "forced to keep a wary eye on their box-office revenues--and that means playing safe."[14] Thornber seems to think that doubtful truisms (that only "safe" plays attract large audiences, or that the commercial values of Shaftesbury Avenue are dragging the theatre towards some kind of inevitable, art-less extinction) needs no further explanation or substantiation. By implication, Thornber writes of Russell--and other Liverpool playwrights such as Alan Bleasdale[15]--

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[12] Robin Thornber, "First Tragedy . . . Then Farce," in *Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain*, ed. Sandy Craig (Ambergate: Amber Lane Press, 1980), p. 165.

[13] This 1982 figure, including all West End theatres, is taken from John Pick, *The Theatre Industry* (London: Comedia Publishing Group, 1985), p. 45.

[14] Thornber, p. 175.

[15] Alan Bleasdale is the author of the theatrical plays: *Are You Lonesome Tonight?* (1985) (a play about Elvis Presley); *Having a Ball* (1981) (which deals with a male vasectomy);*No More Sitting on the Old School Bench* (1977) (a dark comedy about an inner-city school); and the critically-acclaimed BBC-TV series about unemployment, *The Boys From the Blackstuff* (1982). Also from Liverpool, Bleasdale and Russell are close friends and their plays--derived principally from working-class life--have a lot in common,. Bleasdale's more explicitly political pieces have never enjoyed the commercial

as unimportant to "real" drama because of their inclination to write plays that subsequently transfer to the West End, which according to Thornber "can only, in the long run, have an unsettling effect on repertory theatres' policies."[16] Russell, then, becomes something of a *bete noir* to the regional theatre movement, in Thornber's eyes, mainly because of having the effrontery to be popular enough to attract the attention of the commercial sector.

Andrew Davies also mentions Russell in a perfunctory manner, taking essentially the same position as Thornber. Davies admits that the Liverpool Everyman has fostered, in its time, "a lively program" (a patronizing phrase suggesting didactic ineptitude), but the fact that it launched authors and performers, including "Willie Russell [sic.],"[17] towards national prominence is seen as detrimental: "this yet again demonstrated how the fringe and the reps. are regarded as suitable training grounds for the hopefuls, making it hard for them to sustain their own distinctive forms of theatre."[18] Once again, no attempt is made to find anything of value in Russell's work, which was apparently disqualified from consideration by virtue of its commercial transfer and wide popular appeal. One wonders exactly what Davies has in mind for this utopian "distinctive" form of theatre--it is hard to imagine a more overtly regional, and consequently distinctive, playwright than

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success of Russell's dramas, although they have often been frequently produced in British repertory theatres (especially in the North of England) over the past decade. In the British press, as in the minds of the general public, these two authors (usually viewed as members of the same Liverpool movement) are frequently confused with each other. Bleasdale wrote a humorous piece about this confusion in the program to the London production of *Shirley Valentine*.

[16] Thornber, p. 175. Pick's figures show, if anything, that the repertory movement--which typically attracts about half as many people as visit the West End, to a slightly greater number of theatres--is in graver danger of extinction.

[17] Davies, p. 180

[18] Ibid.

Russell--that the regionals should or could embody. Davies makes no further explanation aside from implying that it definitely must not be sufficiently popular for it to make a profit in the commercial sector.

Willy Russell's Career to Date

Russell began writing as a song-writer, and it was at the age of twenty that he decided to become a playwright. The seminal event to precipitate that decision, in February 1971, was his seeing the Everyman Theatre, Liverpool's production of John McGrath's *Unruly Elements*, a sequence of six one-act dramas "with monologues in a kind of Joycean Prose"[19] linking the plays, that was to be later re-titled as *Plugged-In to History*, and published in 1972 in *Plays and Players*. Russell has commented: "It was the first time that I had seen anything that was relevant to my life."[20] McGrath's production, discussed in Chapter Two above, was clearly the beginning of a new era at the Everyman. In so far as this production reached a young working-class man, with no prior interest in the theatre, Russell's regard for this play would appear to at least partially validate McGrath's claims for this production.

At the end of that same year (1971), Russell's *Keep Your Eyes Down* was produced as part of a student production at St. Katherine's College, Liverpool. In June of 1972, the college produced the same play, together with an additional piece called *Sam O'Shanker*, under the collective title, *Blind Scouse*. The same production was taken to

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[19] Malcolm Page "NTQ Checklist No.1: John McGrath," in *New Theatre Quarterly* 1, no. 2, 403.

[20] Willy Russell, as quoted in Martin Cinnamond, "Atlantic City's Likely Lads," Program for *Blood Brothers* (Bristol: Proscenium Publications, 1988), n. pag.

that year's Edinburgh Festival Fringe, where it was performed at the Rifle Lodge. John McGrath happened to see this fringe production and persuaded Alan Dossor, then the artistic director of the Liverpool Everyman, to see it too.

This important breakthrough happened at the same time that Russell was writing his first television play. Set in a factory, *King of the Castle* was eventually transmitted by BBC Birmingham on November 12, 1973. Dossor's experience in Edinburgh, however, led to Russell writing his first play for the Liverpool Everyman, *When The Reds . . .* (1972), an adaptation of Alan Plater's play, *The Tigers are Coming OK. When the Reds . . .*, in a production directed by Pam Brighton, played the Everyman from March 28 to April 21, 1973. The following Christmas, Vanload, the touring company sponsored by the Everyman, presented a new, greatly reworked, musical version of *Sam O'Shanker* around local pubs, clubs and community centers.

Russell's big breakthrough came in 1974. *John, Paul, George, Ringo . . . and Bert*, a play about the Beatles, was commissioned by Dossor at the Everyman, where it opened on 15 May . In August the play transferred to the Lyric, Shaftesbury Avenue, where it ran for over 12 months, closing at the end of August, 1975. Two major national tours of Britain followed the West End run, and the play was also revived at the Young Viv during 1983. According to Russell, a Broadway production was planned but, due to litigation by Paul McCartney, it was never produced. Similarly, a screenplay commissioned by the Robert Stigwood organization and completed by Russell, was never made into a film.

Two of Russell's television plays, *Death of a Young Man* and *Break In*, were also written during 1974. Russell was still teaching at this time, a profession he had undertaken after passing a teacher's training course in 1970. "Starving in garrets is fine if

it's just yourself," he explained, "but it's not fair to inflict it on your family on the strength of a few successful plays."[21]

In 1975, Dossor commissioned a play called *Breezeblock Park*, a working-class comedy of manners, which was produced under his direction at the Everyman during May. Dossor then directed a new version of the play at the Mermaid Theatre, London, opening on September 12, 1977; this production subsequently transferred to the Whitehall Theatre, in the West End, where it ran for four more months. Although there was American interest, Russell has explained why *Breezeblock Park* never made it to Broadway:

> *Breezeblock Park* was optioned for Broadway and I am a member of the American Dramatists Guild. This company wanted to pay one quarter percent below the Dramatists' Guild minimum and I refused. And the producers were telling me that I was being ridiculous, jeopardizing the production for one-quarter percent, and I told them that the same could be said of them. Nothing came of it.[22]

In 1976, Russell wrote a radio play called *I Heard the News Today*, and the BBC Birmingham television play *Our Day Out*, which was to be transmitted nationally three times to huge audiences, and subsequently made in 1983 into a musical play for the stage, produced both at the Everyman and at London's Young Vic. 1976 also saw the first production of the play *One for the Road*, under the title *Painted Veg and Parkinson*[23] at the Manchester Contact Theatre, where it was directed by Caroline Smith. Under its final title, the play was to tour nationally, be performed at the Liverpool Playhouse in 1980,

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[21] As quoted in Williams, *Plays and Players*, p. 8.

[22] Willy Russell, in a personal interview with the author, December 22, 1988, at Russell's office in Liverpool, England. Unless specifically stated otherwise, all subsequent quotations from Willy Russell used in this chapter, come from the author's interview.

[23] *Parkinson* was the name of a popular British television talk show during the 1970s.

and finally reach the West End in a new updated version, as a vehicle for popular comedian, Rus Abbott, during 1988. It is remarkable that it took so many years for *One for the Road* to reach the West End. Russell has described the reasons as:

> A set of accidents really. After its Manchester premiere, it went on tour, and it was due to go to London--but we just couldn't get a theatre. There were thirty plays queueing for stage space. Bob Swash[24] actually kept the cast on salary for about three months, waiting for a theatre, but in the end we had to let it go.[25]

Russell's next television play for schools, written after the Manchester premiere of *One For the Road*, entitled *Lies*, was transmitted by the BBC in November of 1977.

In 1978, Russell wrote a play for Yorkshire Television entitled *Daughters of Albion* and he also wrote *Stags and Hens*. The play was originally produced by students at Manchester Polytechnic, where Russell was a Fellow in Creative Writing, and it was subsequently revised as a stage play. The Liverpool Everyman produced it, under the direction of Chris Bond, in October 1978. It has been subsequently seen in an enormous number of British regional theatres.

Educating Rita was written during 1979. Commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company and directed by Mike Ockrent, *Educating Rita* was first performed at London's Warehouse during June of 1980, before transferring to the much larger Piccadilly Theatre[26] in September of the same year. A major national tour followed the two-and-a-half year West End run (over 850 performances) in 1982 and Russell wrote the

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[24] Bob Swash Productions (sometimes in association with Bill Kenwright productions) are the production company responsible for the commercial transfer of virtually all of Russell's plays. Andrew Lloyd Webber's Really Useful Company was responsible for the Broadway production of *Shirley Valentine*.

[25] Williams, *Plays and Players*, p. 8.

[26] The Piccadilly has over 900 seats.

screenplay for the Lewis Gilbert film version in 1981, prior to the film's release in 1983. An attempt at a Broadway production failed disastrously before it reached New York. Russell has described the process of the Americanization of *Educating Rita*:

> The Royal Shakespeare Company disposed of the rights to the play to an American producer whom I had never heard of. Technically, they had the right to do so, but in terms of procedure it was appalling. The first thing I knew of this was when this woman called me at one o'clock one Sunday afternoon and said, "Hello, my name is Doris Cole Abrahams and I'm presenting your play in America. . . . A huge fight evolved, which lasted for about six weeks. I ended up being able to keep Mike Ockrent, the original director, but I got stuck with Lucy Arnez and Larry Luckenbill. It was only a try-out in Cape Cod in order to get it right . . . fix it the American way. And Mike and I said to the producer that it had turned into a play about somebody who spoke beautifully and wanted to speak even better. We told the producer that we would go through the misery of staging the production. Given that she has cast these Americans and there was no way they would be able to do English, especially regional English, we re-wrote it for Americans. That died in Cape Cod.

Following Russell's experiences with Abrahams, he decided that the only way the play could be "Americanized" was if it was its emphasis on the British class system was turned into a drama about American blacks, on the grounds that they are denied access to the traditional educational system in a roughly similar manner to the English working-class. Thus, Russell collaborated with American playwright, Ntozake Shange[27] to produce a black version of *Educating Rita.* The new play was produced briefly by the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia, as the final production of their 1982-83 repertory season. Although the play received largely positive reviews, it has now seemingly sunk without trace, Abrahams having apparently lost interest in any New York production, once it became a black play. Russell, a playwright who likes to have a good deal of

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[27] A poet as well as a playwright, Shange is best known the author of *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*, and *Boogie Woogie Landscape*. The former play has been performed in the West End, as well as on Broadway.

control over major productions of his work, felt that the horrors of this process "scuppered" *Educating Rita*'s American life for good.

Chicago's Steppenwolf theatre company, however, finally presented the original, English version of *Educating Rita* Off-Broadway, opening on April 22,1987 at the Westside Arts Theatre, where critics reacted by making comparisons with the now-successful and well-known film version, in some cases seemingly assuming that the film came first. The play had moderate success Off-Broadway, lasting for some 101 performances prior to its July 19 closing. Russell also wrote a educational television play, *The Boy With The Transistor Radio*,[28] during 1979 and a five-part TV serial for the new London-based Channel Four--*One Summer*--during 1980.

Blood Brothers began life as a non-musical play commissioned by Paul Harman's Merseyside Young People's Theatre company for Secondary school children, and it was first performed in 1981. The musical version opened in Liverpool on January 8, 1983,[29] from where it transferred to the Lyric Theatre, London, opening on April 11, 1983. After a hesitant start, the production proved reasonably popular and ran for over six months, eventually closing on October 22. A further touring production[30] was prepared, directed (like the original) by Chris Bond and Danny Hillier, and it went out on the road in 1984.

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[28] *The Boy with the Transistor Radio* and *I Read the News Today*, along with an unproduced television play called *Terraces* and the original version of *Our Day Out* have been collectively published in: Willy Russell, *Studio Scripts: Our Day Out and Other Plays*, ed. David Self (London: Hutchinson Educational, 1977).

[29] Even the Liverpool production was heavily financed by Bob Swash (to the tune of £50,000), which clearly indicated that this production was essentially intended as a pre-West End try out.

[30] This production was notable for its inclusion of John Conteh in the cast. Conteh, a well-known British boxer with no theatrical experience, played the role of narrator and perhaps helped attract large audiences to the theatres at which *Blood Brothers* played.

Russell sees the genesis of *Blood Brothers*, like all his plays, as being the next logical link in a Liverpudlian chain:

> You have to see *Blood Brothers* as coming out of a tradition that was begun back in the late sixties here in Liverpool, largely started by John McGrath and Alan Dossor at the Everyman, which came out of a fusion . . . let's say it started with Brecht, let's say the next link in the chain was Joan Littlewood, let's say the next link in the chain was the explosion of popular culture in music and poetry which McGrath then became aware of, and he became the next link in the chain. From the example that McGrath and Dossor set, the next links in the chain are the likes of Willy Russell and Alan Bleasdale. So, I can see exactly in terms of theatrical production in Liverpool where *Blood Brothers* came from.

A stage version of *Our Day Out* was presented at the Everyman during April 1983, and it was also produced at London's Young Vic, opening on August 29 (the limited run began immediately after the same group's revival of *John, Paul, George, Ringo . . . and Bert)*, and *Our Day Out* occupied the stage until September 30. Both productions of *Our Day Out*, which required large numbers of local schoolchildren for the many children's roles, were directed by Bob Eaton.

Russell then spent a period of time writing music. His next major play, *Shirley Valentine*, was commissioned by Glen Walford, by now the artistic director of the Liverpool Everyman Theatre, where it opened on March 13, 1986. This production is well known because Noreen Kershaw, the original Shirley Valentine, became ill with appendicitis and Russell himself took over the role and performed the play for the remainder of its sold-out limited run (from March 13 to April 19, 1986).

On January 22, 1988, *Shirley Valentine* opened at London's Vaudeville Theatre, for a limited season, and the production closed on April 30 of the same year. The cast of one (Pauline Collins) and entire creative team recreated the London success, virtually intact, on Broadway in February of 1989. That production, which starred Ellen Burstyn in its latter stages, closed on November 25, 1989, after over 300 performances.

Remarkably, *Shirley Valentine* was revived in the West End just over one year after its initial closing--one of the fastest revivals in contemporary theatre history. This new production, which featured a different location (Liverpool became Glasgow, Scotland), director and performer opened at the Duke of Yorks Theatre on June 28, 1989. At the time of writing, it is still running. The film version of *Shirley Valentine* was released in September of 1989. August 1989, meanwhile, saw the beginning of production (in Liverpool) of the film version of *Stags and Hens,Dancing through the Dark*, under the direction of Mike Ockrent. Russell adapted his own script as the screenplay for the film.

When *Shirley Valentine* opened initially in the West End, a London revival of *One for the Road* was already playing (it had opened on October 21, 1987 and had a successful run, finally closing on April 23, 1988), at the Lyric Theatre. Another production of *Blood Brothers* at the Albery Theatre, which opened on July 28,1988, completed Russell's trio of simultaneous West-End successes. At the time of writing (over 15 months after this *Blood Brothers* revival opened), this production is still playing at the Albery Theatre.

Willy Russell's Ideas and Theories

It is interesting that the start of Russell's career was so firmly grounded in the traditions of the alternative theatre, albeit its more coherently populist wing, represented by McGrath. One can only speculate about the effect of that orientation, but it seems to have absolved Russell from much of the criticism levelled by fringe artists directly at the commercial sector[31] and it also seems to have caused a good deal of confusion about

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[31] See the following chapter for a fuller discussion of the critical responses to Russell's plays.

where Russell's plays stand and what category (good or bad, in the polarized eyes of some alternative theatre practitioners) contains his work.

It is intriguing that, in his description of the impact of *Unruly Elements*, McGrath noted (supporting his own thesis) that very few of the traditional theatre-going population in Liverpool came to the production.[32] McGarth saw the reason as being because their tastes were already catered to by the West-End tours that came to the city, and the more traditional regional theatre productions at the Liverpool Playhouse. It is revealing, nonetheless, that even at the height of his populist success, McGrath never sort to include *all* of the classes--only the working classes (in small numbers) and the student-bohemian set from the local colleges (in much larger numbers), and he also made the doubtful assumption that there were no working-class people among the loyal patrons of the traditional theatre. Russell, in comparison, was to take the lessons he learned from *Unruly Elements* and apply them to the West End, thus arguably appealing to McGrath's audience, as well as the "regular theatre goers' for whom McGrath had so little time. I would argue that Russell's approach is the truer, more inclusive, form of populism.

As I noted above, Russell's rapid rise to the heights of commercial, theatrical success is particularly remarkable given his background. Russell's unique contribution to populist theatre derives largely from his genuinely working-class heritage. All of Russell's dramas are about working-class characters, a fact that is, in itself, unusual for the commercial theatre--few other playwrights in the twentieth century have achieved commercial success (in the live theatre) by writing realistically about the working-classes.[33] Moreover, Russell's authentic working-class background means that he has

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[32] This description is quoted above, on page 43.

[33] In Britain at least, almost all of the successful writing about the working-classes has been done on television, principally in acclaimed soap-operas like *Coronation Street*, *Eastenders* and *Brookside*. There are isolated examples of successful dramas about the

never encountered some of the problems of dislocation faced by the educated middle-class playwrights.

John Osborne or Arnold Wesker in the fifties, as well as Hare, Brenton or Edgar in more recent years, were in some ways writing dramas that expressed their own sense of being alienated from *any* class. It is interesting that in most of these playwright's cases, the fact that they were originally from northern, working-class homes was undermined by their university educations,[34] In other words, the writing of an author like Osborne ultimately did not so much reflect the dilemmas of the still trapped and uneducated working-classes, but rather the problems of one of its educated, disenfranchised members who found himself ostracized, belonging to neither group.[35]

The appeal of such characters in Osborne's work and in the playwrights who have followed, has largely been to middle-class audiences, or to members of the new red-brick-educated intelligentsia who flocked to the Royal Court in droves for the revolution spear-headed by Osborne and, in much smaller numbers, have kept it going ever since. Russell, on the other hand, who did not go away to university, never became divorced--neither intellectually nor even geographically--from his working-class roots. One result of that lack of upheaval is that his plays consistently reflect a feeling that they were written from "within," and not from the point of view of someone now cast on the outside. As Russell has explained: "I'm very glad that I never went through the

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working-classes--Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey*, for example--but these have been very rare in the commercial sector. No playwright other than Russell has ever had a string of commercial success all dealing with the lives of the working classes.

[34] Even John McGrath, of course, went to Cambridge University.

[35] *Look Back in Anger*'s Jimmy Porter is, of course, the classic example.

University process. I think the fact that both Alan Bleasdale and myself are not university writers is significant when you look at our work and who it relates to."[36]

In other words, Russell and Bleasdale are writing for a different audience, arguably more revolutionary in type, than Osborne or his non-working-class followers at the Royal Court, whose impact received the following description from Russell.

> There were a host of playwrights who were seen as working-class. They didn't write for the same audience that comes to see my plays now. I don't think they didn't want to. I suspect that they never realised that they could have reached their mums and dads as well as their peers and tutors.

Unlike more academically-revered "populists," Russell has always avoided the problem appropriately identified by Morag Shiach when she noted that "in the case of popular theatre . . . the place of the theorist in relation to cultural forms is often in doubt."[37] That does not apply to this particular playwright.[38] Russell, although he is a playwright who largely avoids self-conscious theorizing, does not have a doubtful relationship with the cultural form he writes about, and even perpetuates. Shiach quite rightly said "those who write about popular culture generally place themselves outside its sphere,"[39] but Russell places himself firmly *within* it, which adds to the credibility, authenticity, and perhaps the popularity, of his work.

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[36] Williams, *Plays and Players*, p. 8

[37] Shiach, p. 10.

[38] One could, of course, argue that Russell's enormous financial success removes him from the working-class in the most resounding of manners. Nonetheless, his plays to do not seem to reflect that new division, at least as yet.

[39] Ibid., p. 10.

It is, however, not enough to say that a working-class background only affects a playwright's ability to write about the mores of the working-classes. Russell has explained that his attitude towards the middle-class--and, indeed, the class war in general, is largely determined by his background:

> I'm not engaged in the class debate in the way that quite a lot of playwrights in seventies were, because it seems to me that many of them wrote from a hatred of the middle class, because they *were* middle class, which I was not. So I never had that hang-up about the middle-classes, I have never had a hatred of the middle-class. It never bothered me. What I've had a hatred of is the *division* between the classes.

That position, of course, is somewhat illogical, not least because it implies that all members of the working-class are likely to be uninterested in the class struggle. Furthermore, hating class-*division* must involve some antipathy towards those who perpetuate and benefit from such divisions. It perhaps should also involve an attempt to change--through the theatrical medium--the structure of society, as it seems doubtful that such barriers could ever be removed merely be removed merely from empowering the working-class to seek greater fulfillment working *within* those structures. Moreover, this could also be construed as indicative of Russell's reluctance to challenge any of the structures of the theatre for which he writes, thus justifying his own activities and, indeed, his profiting from them. On the other hand, Russell's comment does tend to point to the apparent self-absorbed nature of so much of the contemporary theatre that is revered as politically didactic.

In other words, Russell argues (with some foundation) that he writes about a disenfranchised class, whereas playwrights from middle-class backgrounds are conducting lengthy theatrical discussions to expunge their own (and their middle class audience's) collective guilt, rather than actually write anything entertaining, interesting or even useful to the working classes.

The fact that Russell is a working-class author also seems to mean that he is not afraid of criticizing the class, in part because he lived with many of its unacceptable aspects, on a daily basis. As self-criticism is a popular feature of all drama, and comedy in particular, there is no reason working-class audiences should not want the same thing. Franca Rame has remarked on the middle-classes' enjoyment at self-flagellation, and authors like Coward, Travers, Simon and Ayckbourn have (it could be argued) based a career upon it. It does not seem beyond the boundaries of reason to assume that a similar taste might exist within the tastes of the working classes.

Unfortunately, that apparent willingness on the part of working-class audiences to embrace self-criticism intimidates most fringe artists--even McGrath whose plays were never able to fully grasp the importance of this--who are uncomfortable with any criticism of the working class. Russell, however is adamant (after McGrath, to some extent), that one should not mediate contemporary reality in order to have the middle-classes look at the working-classes in a middle-class context, through middle-class eyes. Rather, the true populist should:

> write plays that have a complete and popular base. But you don't mediate it, you write honestly through those experiences which are recognized by the people who are represented on stage and in doing so, you might as well articulate the fact that you can have a lot of fun along the way. Too much theatre about the working-class has been a question of stoning babies to death and people having no communication with their parents. That's one side of things. But there is another side of things that is totally about the celebration of life itself, and it doesn't have the didactic argument at the center of the play.

The one aspect of that comment, then, that tends almost never to be reflected by the fringe is the *honest* depiction of working-class experiences. There are perhaps a number of reasons why. In the first instance, many fringe authors simply do not know enough about working-class life in order to be able to depict it honestly. Secondly, politically

didactic playwrights tend to want to foster class identity and prefer to criticize middle-class characters rather than working-class--indeed, it is extremely problematic for them to show working-class characters in a bad light, at least without putting them in some sort of context whereby the "correct" behavior is suggested either through other characters or in an often (inevitably) heavy-handed "message" at the end of the play. Ironically enough, it is equally difficult--as Russell rightly notes--for overtly didactic authors to show any of the "fun" behind a working-class existence. After all, if your aim is to be a proponent of the emancipation of the working-classes, one is not inclined to show the oppressed, pre-revolutionary situation in a positive light, otherwise the playwright would defeat his or her own purpose.

"I think you have got to be ruthlessly critical of the working-class, because I don't think they will believe you otherwise," is Russell's way of explaining why he wrote plays like *Breezeblock Park*,[40] that depict working-class characters in a very negative light. Most authors with a mission do not feel comfortable with such ruthlessness. This contradiction, apparent mutually-exclusive, between entertaining an audience and instructing or empowering them towards change, is a major problem that clearly lies at the heart of the populist debate and has already been noted in the previous chapters. McGrath made some important strides in the direction of unifying the two, but one could argue that he never went far enough in foregrounding honest, unpretentious entertainment. The fact that Russell has a less demonstrable political commitment than his mentor truly seems to make it easier for him to write more entertaining plays.

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[40] See the following discussion of *Breezeblock Park* for a fuller consideration of the legitimacy of the working-class comedy of manners.

Speaking of authors who view the theatre primarily as entertainment, Alan Ayckbourn had some enlightening--even populist, if rather anti-didactic--comments within this area. Ayckbourn has claimed to be on an evangelical crusade that tries to convince people that theatre can be enjoyable:

> but every time I start doing that, some hairy bugger from the left comes in and tells them it's instructive and drives them out all over again. If I want to be instructed, I go to night school. I may be instructed in the theatre, but I don't go in there predominantly for instruction: I go in there for entertainment. . . If you put a label on a whisky bottle with 'For Medicinal Use Only' on it, it rather puts you off the drink.[41]

Ayckbourn, of course, is not well known for his interest in increasing the diversity of audiences at the commercial theatre, although it is nonetheless inaccurate to assume that he has no interest in appealing to the working-class. Judging from his remarks, as recorded by Ian Watson, he simply believes that, within the mainstream theatre, it is largely impossible.

Russell, on the other hand, is a firm believer that not only do the working-classes make up a substantial portion of the West-End audiences, but also he thinks that the commercial theatre is the theatre they want to go and see. Indeed, if one attempts popular theatre without some of the familiar elements of the commercial sector, disaster is the likeliest result. He described the experiences of those at the Everyman who wanted to broaden the class-base of their audiences:

> I remember a huge problem at the Everyman was that we all thought we were doing all the right things to get working-class people to come in from Kirby.[42] We weren't. I remember talking to some people and saying:"Why is it that you don't like going to the Everyman, but you will

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[41] Ayckbourn, as quoted in Watson, pp. 108-109.

[42] A working-class suburb of Liverpool

> go to the Empire[43]for the pantomime?" This guy says "I've been in the fucking Everyman. It's a disgusting dump. Me and my wife are not going to get dressed up in our best clothes and go and sit where there is fucking sawdust on the seats and all that stuff." You have got to address that. Working people do want to go to the theatre. But they don't want to dress like students.

Once again, the mistakes at the Everyman include a lack of willingness to compromise, coupled with the misguided assumptions that the alternative theatrical experience should not borrow from the mainstream, even though that is the point of reference for much of the audience. The research on exactly how many working-class people attend the commercial theatre is inconclusive, although it seems generally agreed that working-class patrons form what is best described as a substantial minority of the audience at the commercial theatre.[44] Of course, given that the audience for the commercial theatre is so large, compared to subsidized institutions,[45] that means that most of the working-class people who are exposed to the theatre see commercial--not fringe--productions.

Russell believes that the working-classes are not to be found in the cheap seats, either: "They'll pay their £20 and have the best seats in the place," as a matter of pride. Many alternative theatre practitioners would prefer to believe otherwise, but Ayckbourn has also commented on the propensity of the working-classes to enjoy a good, even a rather decadent, night out. His views are rather similar to Russell's, except that Ayckbourn is more negative and more content to stay in the business of merely amusing the middle-

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[43] The Empire (2550 seats) is Liverpool's major, mixed-use theatre. Although it produces an annual pantomime, it has no permanent company of its own. The Empire is predominantly the Liverpool representative of the West End, even though it is partly reliant on subsidy, like virtually all British theatres.

[44] As Pick points out, all of this audience-based research tends to be confusing, not least because they tend not to reflect the fact that there is a small group of people who visit the theatre extremely regularly, whilst a majority of the population never go at all.

[45] According to Pick's figures, 9 million people attended the West End theatres in 1982, compared to around 350,000 attending the productions of the subsidized touring companies. *The Theatre Industry* (London: Comedia Publishing Group, 1985), p. 44.

classes. Ayckbourn seems to think that attracting the working-classes--especially its male members--to the theatre is virtually impossible:

> Theatres go through awful convolutions trying to attract the working-class. They make the theatre very dirty and very unpleasant and very smelly, and then say 'Well this will encourage people: they won't think it's stuck-up rubbish.' But then, that's not the answer, because most people in the working-class, particularly if they go out for the evening, want to put on their very best clothes and want to go somewhere very nice. . . . So then you try and make it very comfortable and very pleasant, but then it begins to look a little snooty, so I don't quite know how on earth you win the audience. The first thing you've got to do is have very good draught beer. . . . But where is the art in all this? To me theatre is an art; it has to be something that takes ninety percent of your concentration. . . . All of the plays I admire require at least silence.[46]

Ayckbourn's remarks are defeatist in that they imply that it is virtually impossible to attract a working-class audience to legitimate, meaningful theatre, whatever efforts are made, without compromizing the theatrical experience. He does, nonetheless, accurately identify many of the problems inherent in writing commercial pieces for the working-classs--issues of education, artistic integrity and pedagogy inevitably become entwined--which perhaps shows something of the scale of the adversity that Russell's popular success has had to overcome.

A major undertaking of most of the fringe companies in the past two decades has been taking theatre out to working-class venues. Russell sees those efforts as highly problematic, especially if they are run by middle-class people. According to Russell, this was the situation at the Everyman, where the university-educated, middle-class people who ran the theatre were desperate that their theatre would be somehow relevant to the typical person from Liverpool, yet they:

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[46] Alan Ayckbourn, Watson, p. 109.

> had a political passion for the working-class but not an understanding. I would fell terribly embarrassed when I would go out with Vanload, this outreach group who would throw a play on in a pub. I would die of embarrassment. They would walk in and say "Hello! We're actors and we'll put on accents as well." . . . I remember once that they got into this old-people's home and started singing "Roll Out the Barrel" I remember this old man saying, "Doesn't anyone understand that we like rock and pop music?"

Although there has certainly been effective outreach theatre, Russell correctly identifies the problem that so much of it ends up patronizing--especially in its insistent on clinging to an outmoded model of proletarian tastes--the working class that it was intended to serve.

The next major area in which Russell differs from most supposedly populist playwrights, is his rejection of the notion that a playwright can have a particular audience in mind, or should aim to deliberately write for the emancipation of the working-classes to the exclusion of all else. Instead, he clings resolutely to the notion that he is interested only in writing artistically-valid plays, rather as if his work existed in an aesthetic vacuum. It is most interesting that, like John Pick, Russell argues that high quality, easily accessible material will always attract large, diverse audiences. In other words, he claims that those in the alternative theatre should have faith in the non-theatre going public who can be galvanized into attendance, if the production--specifically, the script--is of sufficient quality:

> All I'm interested in is writing good plays. Now a good play will have a life thereafter. Many, many, many of the plays which are written for the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company have a very high profile premiere and then very few productions thereafter. That seems to me to say something about the nature of those plays . . . that they're only talking to a culturate. I don't set out to do that. I set out to talk to an audience that has no brief, that brings no foreknowledge.

In other words, Russell (again, like Pick) is prepared to accept the populace at large as the arbitrator of artistic quality, which is a most problematic position, not least because it inaccurately assumes that the populace at large is making some kind of unilateral decision about their tastes, rather than reacting to the desire of the bourgeoise to use the commercial theatre as, to use Althusseur's phrase, an "ideological state apparatus"[47] that reproduces the means of production by ensuring the submission of the working-classes to the rules of the established order. For Althusseur, those cultural forces were all-powerful and it was no easy matter for the working-class to break out from their hegemonic clutches. An European Marxist like Dario Fo recognizes that fact, which is one of the reasons why the Italian populist chose not to work in established theatres.

Althusseur's (and Fo's) ideas are rejected by Russell who says he is "not easy prey to bourgeoise conspiracy theories," and claims that a good play will be frequently produced because people will always want to go and see it. Russell refuses to see populism as necessitating only playing to the working-classes:

> That's fine for the Fos. It just doesn't happen to be my attitude because I don't operate from a divisive class position. I think you can embrace everybody in theatre. . . . I think I have crossed--it might be arrogance on my part, I might be completely wrong--but at least it's always my aim to cross those class barriers, not to accept those barriers or support their existence.

For all this laudable idealism, "plays which work do not go out of the repertoire," is a doubtful comment and seems to suggests that producing revivals will always be a complete waste of time and that there is no value in work that does not sell well. On the other hand, no one has really developed an alternative, non-elitist barometer (other than

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[47] Louis Althusseur, "Ideology and the State," in *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 141-148.

popular appeal) for determining the quality of a given play. This remains a problematic area.

Russell's statement, though, about plays premiering in a highly visible manner, at one of the major subsidized companies and then disappearing after a single production, has a great deal of foundation--plays like David Hare's *Wrecked Eggs*, David Edgar's *Maydays* and Howard Brenton's *Weapons of Happiness* have tended to attract very little attention after their National Theatre premieres, perhaps not least because of the physical resources these plays require as well as their overtly intellectual appeal. As well as attacking the products of the National, Russell is also firmly opposed to the "romanticism" of the aims of those in the alternative theatre:

> Would it be better if *Blood Brothers* were playing in a semi-derelict barn in St. Helens[48] where the people who were coming to see it had paid sixpence to get in and could stand at the end and display their class solidarity and say: "Yes, we've learned an important lesson from this . . . the didacticism was absolutely there to behold?" Would the interaction have been better if the play had been on stage at the Lytleton or the Olivier or the Barbican? I mean, what is the alternative to the West End with all its faults?

That inaccurate rhetorical question notwithstanding, the pragmatic Russell is not really *interested* in looking for an alternative to the West End, because he argues that it is not possible to meaningfully evaluate the interaction between an audience and a play. In other words, Russell's position is that it is nonsense to imply that the commercial theatre somehow impedes a playwright from moving an audience, be it aesthetically or ideologically. For Russell, the quality of that interaction simply cannot be measured. Ill-founded generalizations about the class make-up of an audience should be avoided, just as one just cannot know if an audience will take the playwright's message--or just a part

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[48] A small, industrial town in Lancashire, England.

of it--to heart, misinterpret it or ignore it altogether. Indeed, Russell has argued that there is little or nothing a play like *Blood Brothers* could do to make a conservative audience member more aware of class, because that audience member would simply find a variety of ways to temper or reject the political side of the play's message. Russell appears to have some sort of understanding of the problems caused by negotiated and oppositional readings, and he realizes that the audience cannot be forced to interact with a play as its author would necessarily wish.

Of course this lack of knowledge about the way in which an audience responds to a play (which is what Russell apparently means by the word "interaction"), applies, as far as we know, to the alternative, fringe theatres as much as it does to the commercial sector. What's more, the fringe audiences are as likely to negotiate a meaning of any given play that reflects the very prejudices with which they went into the theatre--in other words Russell argues that the exposure granted by the commercial theatre is more important than any differences (should there be any) in the class make-up of the audience or their propensity to allow their minds to be changed.

The inclination of the alternative sector to ignore this whole area of negotiated readings has been noted above, which appears to give some credence to Russell's rejection of the theory that the commercial theatre is somehow debased or unsuited to reaching a broad-based audience in any meaningful manner. Russell, of course, has no solutions to this dilemma other than suggesting that it justifies a kind of all-embracing theatrical liberalism, admittant of a variety of theatrical situations (both commercial and non-commercial) that all might reach working-class audiences in some minor way or other.

For Russell, it seems reasonable that if the ideological capacities of the theatrical performance are largely unmeasurable, then there is more chance of some tangible result emanating from a large quantity of theatrical performances, all of which may impact on

humanity in a different way. If the impact is to be of a nature of which Russell approves, this assumes, of course, that all of these plays will be written by authors who subscribe to the same liberal-humanist code as Russell[49]. He uses a cliched--if accurate--metaphor to summarize his views which express the idea that all populism in all sectors of the theatre has some benefit: "I'm for more singing in the churches."

One problem with this liberal-pluralist approach to popular theatre is, firstly, that it tends to be very difficult to analyze without having to resort to highly ephemeral and emotive ideas. In justifying working within the commercial sector, yet having populist aims, one finds Russell being forced to resort to difficult notions like the argument that a "good" play (and Russell ascribes almost a spiritual quality to such unilateral artistry) can somehow cross the barriers of class. Consider Russell's position on McGrath's manifesto for a truly populist theatre:

> I think John (McGrath)'s form of theatre is absolutely valid but it's not the only form. I've seen John get it totally wrong. I've seen shows that had all those ingredients[50] . . . what they didn't have was balls and soul and heart and something beyond. I'm not saying sub-text, but that is what I mean. Popular theatre has become decadent. You see the style without the content. In John's case, I think it's a question of theory overriding instinct. John says you have to include jokes . . . songs . . .direct address. I don't believe that. I believe you can engage an audience at a primal theatrical level that completely defies John's theories.

Such notions as heart and soul (not to mention "balls"), tend to be greeted by academics with almost universal scorn, and their centrality in Russell's arguments does not help one use Russell's work as a kind of populist prototype. More accurately, Russell seems to

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[49] Given the popularity of such conservative, commercial-sector authors as Jeffrey Archer or Andrew Lloyd-Webber, that assumption is unlikely to be entirely justifiable.

[50] Russell is referring to McGrath's list of the differences between bourgeoise and working-class tastes. McGrath suggests that effective working-class theatre should contain (in order); directness, comedy, music, emotion, variety, effect, immediacy and a sense of identity with the performer.

suggest that true populism can only be achieved by a creative genius whose work embodies these problematic, pseudo-spiritual qualities. All of this is highly nebulous.

In his own defence, Russell is able to point to the popular success of plays like *Educating Rita*, which contain none of those McGrathian elements but are popular successes nonetheless, although with a middle-class as much as a working-class audience. On the other hand, Russell is not worried that his commercially-successful plays are not reaching members of the working class, because he claims that the West End is a sprawling, popular market-place:

> I can work in the sprawl, in the commercial marketplace of the West End. I've never written a play for the West End because it's just a geographical term. It's anonymous, it's just a collection of theatres, all with different managers, all with different producers.[51] The West End really is the popular theatre in London. Not the Bush, not the Kings Head,[52]not the Royal Shakespeare Company, not the National Theatre. You go and see coach loads turn up at West End theatres. Find out how many of those theatre tickets are booked through agencies to people who live in Scunthorpe, Northumberland[53]who are in London for the weekend. It's quite staggering. You don't have a large regular audience that goes with the West End. You exhaust the dedicated middle-class theatregoer in the West End, in about three weeks. If your play cannot appeal above and beyond the dedicated theatregoer, the already converted theatregoer, it will fall as flat as a pancake and it will be off, three weeks later. That is why I know the West End to be more the sprawling, popular pit than most people realize.

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[51] That diversity of ownership has, of course, been decreasing in recent years with the advent of corporate ownership--such as the Maybox Group which now operates six West End theatres--of several venues.

[52] Both the Bush and the King's Head, Islington are prominent London fringe venues outside of the West End.

[53] Both are Northern working-class towns.

As to the question of whether or not working within the commercial sector inevitably compromises the actual work of the populist playwright, through nervous, capitalist producers interfering with the production process, Russell's response is that it is up to the playwright to remain firmly in control. He regards situations where such compromise as taken place as usually being a result of the lofty playwright's refusal to become involved with the bald pragmatism that is inevitably becomes a part of all theatrical productions:

> The problem with some authors is that they write for the theatre bur rather despise the rough and tumble of theatre itself. . . . if you're working in the theatre, you're going to have to get your hands dirty with things like contracts, money, agents. . . . It is show and it is business and you've got to be able to deal with those, and you've got to be able to say 'I want to go with that designer,' and stand by it. In your contract, you have the right to approve director, designers and actors.

That may well be the case, but such control does not extend to the power of the institution of the West End to subvert the material presented within it. Although I have already expressed the opinion that such alleged subversion is often overstated, or assumed without evidence, I do want to clearly acknowledge the opposing view. For example, the fact that the recent West End production of *Blood Brothers* had a top ticket price of £20 is a form of elitism that its author cannot control, nor can the playwright control the almost mythic aura of elitism that can pervade a theatre like the Albery--an Edwardian space once part of Charles Wyndham's opulent empire that is decorated in the style of Louis XVI, complete with portrait medallions of the kings and queens of France. It hardly seems the ideal venue for a theatrical lesson of the class-based nature of English society, as the theatre was itself designed to appear exclusive--a marketable heritage which the new, corporate owners have shown little interest in changing (although Russell would argue that there is no reason why the working-class should not *enjoy* dressing up and attending such an exclusive venue). At this point, however, one again arrives at the

need to somehow assess the ideological impact of a play on the audience--a measurement that Russell claims is impossible. No one has ever shown that the fringe theatres, with their more austere surroundings and cheaper ticket prices have had any more didactic effect than their much-maligned West End cousins.

The subsidized sector, once seen as the savior of all these problems, offers few solutions. Russell's only experience with the major subsidized houses has been the Royal Shakespeare Company's commissioning of *Educating Rita*, which very rapidly transferred to the West End after a brief run at the Royal Shakespeare Company's Warehouse. Russell now says that he has made a conscious decision not to work with the subsidized companies, essentially because of their elitism and preoccupation with high art. Russell defends the commercial theatre against its detractors but has very little time for the subsidized companies because:

> I do feel that, there, an audience comes along to worship at the shrine of art and they are conditioned, before they enter to go to the National Theatre or the Royal Shakespeare Company--I do not mean all of the audience, but quite a large element--and as they give their ticket stub in, they check in their critical faculties as well. They say "this is the National Theatre," or "this is the Royal Shakespeare Company." I cannot criticize this. I will sit here and enjoy this. I will not go to sleep, although I may desperately want to go to sleep because this play is so boring, because the leading critics in London and the people who really revere art have said that this is the place to be, and I can then go home and say that I have been to the National or the RSC.

Adding Russell's comments to the fringe positions discussed in the previous chapters, it seems that the major, subsidized nationals tend to be attacked from both sides in the populist debate, pleasing no one. Those, like Russell and Pick, who advocate a diverse marketplace for the theatre, attack their bureaucracy, their pompous obsession with high art and their inability to attract the working-classes to their auditoria in any numbers. On the other hand, radical fringe critics tend to see the National and the Royal Shakespeare

Company as representatives of everything that is to be detested about the commercial sector--Davies, for example, has railed against the National's rigidly hierarchical structure.[54] The relationship of the popular to the commercial, in theatrical terms, may be a problematic argument with two clear "sides" emerging. Compromises and the British mixed economy notwithstanding, it seems that no one, however, sees the solution to a more populist theatre as lying in the hands of the major, subsidized companies. The fact that the National or the R.S.C. are palpably not populist--slogans like "The National Theatre is Yours," notwithstanding--seems one of the few things largely agreed upon by both sides in this debate.

Another target attacked by both the liberal populists like Russell and Pick and the proponents of the socialist fringe, is the literary industry--theatre critics, commentators and academics--that surrounds the theatre. Socialists tend to argue that such people are politically and artistically conservative and tend to ignore anything outside of the mainstream; liberal populists claim that their continued veneration of high-art leads to anti-populist elitism. It is interesting that Russell--who claims that reading such publications as *New Theatre Quarterly* or *Drama Magazine* makes potential dramatists feel that they are being funnelled into one approved style or direction--is much more comfortable criticizing the intellectual writers about the theatre than the more frequently maligned producers and corporate financiers who are normally criticized for the theatre's many shortcomings. Whereas many would consider the theatrical press to be too influenced by fads and popular tastes, Russell takes the directly opposing position, arguing that it is outrageous that theatrical journalists should not only present the potential audience with what they *should* go and see, but they also feel free to criticize the populace at large for

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[54] Davies, p. 192.

supporting popular--but (in the critic's opinion) ideologically or politically suspect--theatrical fare:

> I don't think they have the faith in ordinary people that I have--ordinary, non-theatre-going people. . . . all of the middle-class people who go to the theatre are very good at not complaining, are very good at sitting there and being bored actually going along with boring . . . theatre. Now you tend to find that working people who go to the theatre would say that it is a heap of shit and leave at the intermission without feeling any guilt about it. A middle-class audience cannot say it's a heap of shit if they've been told by Michael Radcliffe[55] . . . and the rest that it is a very important piece of work . . . and so you come back time and time again to the emperor's new clothes.

Critics and commentators are, by any standards, easy targets, but Russell's comments--echoed by Pick--about their mistrust (even those who profess political liberalism) of anything accessible and popular are well-taken. Once again, he identifies an institutional bias towards universal, high-art that by its very definition can never be truly populist.

One of McGrath's ingredients of working-class theatre--a truly populist theatre--was the word "localism," an interesting quality and surely integral to an understanding of how Russell has been able to combine the mainstream theatre with the production of plays with a populist heart. Liverpool has long had a reputation of being a citadel of British popular culture. High-art devotees, however, tend to view the the theatre as having little to do with any of that. As we have seen, even fringe critics prefer to use Liverpool as a kind of forlorn victim whose artistic soul has been strangled--in a parallel manner to the destruction of its once-strong industry at the hands of the conservative government--by the pillagers from the West End. Despite this attack from both political

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[55] The theatre critic for the London *Observer*.

sides, Liverpool's unique culture has endured and permeates the work of authors like Russell.

John Pick has little time for these misinterpretations of the state of culture in this particular city, and he was mortified when an Arts Council publication equated the economic deprivation the city has suffered with cultural deficiency, although it was using this argument as justification for perhaps increasing the subsidy offered the Everyman. Pick, however, saw such posturing as merely making the Everyman a pawn in a bureaucratic game. He responded with heavy irony:

> The equation is of a numbing crudity. The authority with which Liverpool (Liverpool of its two great football clubs, the Beatles, the Scaffold, Carla Lane,[56] its Garden Festival, its magnificent museums development, its writers' theatre, its great cathedrals, its folk clubs and its pub poets, its Walker Art Gallery, its great scouse comics and its nervy local radio stations) is assumed to suffer the greatest cultural deprivation in England suggests an unusual degree of authority in the speaker.[57]

For those, like Pick, who are interested in popular culture and work to destroy the high art/low art division, Liverpool is a proud example of a conglomerate of working-class forms of culture. Writing about Liverpool, a city whose inhabitants have legendary pride and resilience, makes it harder for Russell to write with any sense of embittered anger or, for that matter, with restrained deference to the working-class:

> Liverpool has always been built on self-criticism. It's at the center. . . . Liverpool has a great disregard for pomposity, that's the true spirit of the place. If it goes, it goes. . . .We've never felt inferior, we've never felt regional and we've certainly never felt provincial. So we've never felt any sort of axe to grind on that front . . . if the Beatles had felt inferior to what was going on and wanted to be accepted in a London way, they would

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56 The author of several successful situation comedies set in Liverpool and using working-class characters.

57 John Pick *Managing the Arts? The British Experience*, (London: Rhinegold, 1986), p. 166.

> have been covering the songs of Cliff Richard or Tommy Steele. But no, they said "Give us those rhythm and blues records that are coming across on the fortnightly boat from New York. We'll make it with that music.

In other words, the performing arts arguably have a closer relationship with popular culture (and indeed with the general populace) in Liverpool than perhaps in any other provincial city in Britain or the United States. Consequently, there was a proud and well-developed populism already in place that is relatively easy for Russell to reflect in his plays. Liverpool has a regional, cultural identity that is highly developed and its inhabitant's qualities of humor, resilience and optimism in the face of adversity, as expressed in the work its playwrights, poets and musicians, are consequently well known across the country. Liverpool's geographic isolation and its economic history as a port undoubtedly had a lot to do with why it was never ground down by the industrial revolution in the manner of much of the rest of England. "It was a trading place," says Russell, "and trading people have to depend on their language and their wit are so they are lighter of foot and sharper."

Whatever the reasons for the richness of this city's cultural heritage, one could perhaps argue that the situation in Liverpool is about as close as it is possible to be to some form of pure, working-class culture. Given that populist base, it then becomes easier for a playwright like Russell to write plays with universal appeal which can cross class lines. Like all forms of working-class culture, of course, the Liverpool version is a hybrid of the genuine and the imposed. Indeed, in newer cities with a less-celebarted popular cultural heritage, forms of genuine working-class culture would be even harder to identify. Russell admits that these forms are very difficult to articulate in a meaningful way:

> It's easier to define a high-art culture than it is to describe the hybrid working-class culture . . . just as I don't want the class division, I really don't want those cultural divisions. I want the concert hall and the opera

> stage and the poetry book to mean just as much to Joe as they do to Joseph. Now one is chipping away at that.

One problem, of course, is the question of where those working-class cultural forms begin and end. Once again, Russell's approach is liberal in that he acknowledges that working-class culture is a hybrid form, partly imposed from above and partly derived from an older language of the people. One of the reasons, however, for the freshness and honesty of Russell's work is that he refuses to wax nostalgic about the folk culture of pre-industrial society, acknowledging that much of it has, inevitably, gone for ever, simply because industrialization and the advent of relatively homogeneous cities means that song become no longer a necessary from of communication.

Once that language of the people has disappeared, Russell argues that there is very little that anyone can do to bring it back, because it would then become a form of "self-conscious revivalism" or "nostalgia; nostalgia being memory for the sake of memory and not memory for the sake of insight," both of which are worse, and more morally bankrupt, than the simple absence of the cultural forms themselves, now relegated to their rightful place in history. It is unquestionably significant that it is the realistic, nonidealized perspective that Russell holds on the city whose culture he celebrates that makes his work so honest and effective. Never a regional bigot, Russell is prepared to condemn "Liverpool jingoism and chauvinism," and refuses to have anything to do with those who exploit the regional identity for commercial means. For that reason, Russell claims, he is finding that he is writing less and less within the Liverpool idiom, so as not to be associated with people who use the idiom in a debased form.

Even more significantly, Russell argues that much of the British left-wing refuses to admit that society has changed. Given the diminishing prominence of the working-man's club, for example, its position as a model for political theatre is clearly archaic:

> The labor party still sees the working-class in a sort of black-and-white, grainy, 1930s manner. So much of what happened within the labor movement closed its eyes to the fact that life was changing. . . the reason it has been so easy for this government to whittle away at the welfare state is that the welfare state was established and was then seen to be some marvellous icon that could never be questioned.

Pick has pointed out that one of the qualities exhibited by commercial managers throughout the history of the theatre is their recognition of the closeness of the relationship between theatre and fashion. In Pick's view commercial managers tend to be more aware of what theatrical trends are currently in vogue than their colleagues in the subsidized and fringe sectors who tend to work within the much more long-term time span that surrounds "timeless" high art. Pick asserts that the commercial sector's wisdom comes from a kind of showman's instinct, more personal contact with the general public, high-profile, administrators (rather than faceless subsidizers), the absence of unnecessary bureaucracy and the financial necessity (due to there being no cushioning government subsidy) of efficient management. For Pick, the commercial sector has to be abreast of fashion and changing tastes because its very existence depends on it.

Just as the study of popular culture involves the perusal of ephemeral materials that can change or vanish as quickly as they arrived, so popular theatre is a slave to what is fashionable. One can, of course, argue that all theatre is based on fashions, that successful plays are works that happened to come along at exactly the right moment to strike a chord with the public. Certainly, this is a view to which Russell subscribes:

> So much about theatre is about fashion. I mean that in its smaller sense. . . . I value fashion, but if you don't catch the wind, it doesn't matter how good the play is, how radical it is, two years earlier it would have opened and closed. Two years later, it wouldn't have happened. . . . Again, theatre is largely about fashion and it's about economics, it's about politics and all those things. And there's no doubt that the best of times in theatre are when all those things seem to come to the same firmament.

Russell himself would probably not be offended at the charge that his plays are popular because they are fashionable at the moment. Of course, he is able to point to fifteen years of enormous popular success to those who would suggest that his work is more ephemeral than is actually the case. That success, however, is perhaps more due to an awareness of the changing nature of tastes, which accounts for Russell's willingness to constantly revise his plays. Popular icons are constantly changing, which is why Russell's earlier plays tend to date quickly--that are full of references to popular cultural icons which become irrelevant in a matter of months. For the 1988 West End revival of *One for the Road*, Russell was forced to choose to either extensively update the script or present it as a 1976 period piece, because the script appeared so trapped in the time it was written.

Playwrights such as Harold Pinter, who have less of an interest in accessibility and wide, popular appeal, do not have that problem. For example, a twenty-five-year old play like *The Homecoming*, written in the more overtly poetic (and less culturally specific) language of high art, still seems as up to date today as when it was first written. Such language, however, and perhaps such universality, precludes Pinter from being a widely *popular* writer,[58] in a society that places a premium on the exciting and the immediate, even if his plays are consequently deemed worthy of a form of high art that transcends time.

If timelessness and populism are mutually exclusive entities, as Russell seems to consider them to be, then that is a price that he is prepared to pay, even if the critical establishment of the art world does not appreciate the sacrifice, and uses it as an excuse for criticism:

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[58] McGrath has noted that *immediacy* is an important quality of drama that appeals to the working-classes.

> Ultimately, I don't write for prosperity, I write for now. And those guys[59] measure everything with the yardstick of prosperity--will it be around in fifty years time? What would these same guys have been saying about the songs of Irving Berlin or (George) Gershwin. They would have dismissed them as merely popular. They can only venerate the sort of work we're talking about when history has condoned it. Then they are safe. They can elevate it into what they call high art. And it's only when they are allowed to do that that they will look at it seriously.

In summation then, it is possible to characterize Russell's positions in the following way. His liberal views, and his admiration for the days when Arnold Goodman and Jenny Lee ran the Arts Council and formulated a "political commitment to a liberal ethic in Britain" are essentially within the broad center of the political spectrum.[60]

One can find no desire in Russell's remarks to change the fundamental structure of the theatre, and there is a tacit acceptance of the existence of the mixed theatrical economy. Russell claims to support neither total commercialism not total subsidy, on the grounds that artists who feel able to ignore the box-office also tend to feel free to ignore the wishes of the audience. On the other hand, he seems to advocate some of the large subsidy given to the two large national subsidized companies being spread throughout the theatre, which would of course make the situation even more hybrid and confused than is already the case.

It is not surprising that this playwright, who would prefer to look to Shakespeare (who had "great instinct" to go along with his "profound theories") for his populist inspiration, rather than Brecht, is never going to adequately represent the popular theatre for those who strive for a drama of political change. On the other hand, though, Russell's ideas--and his plays-- are unusual and defiantly successful.

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[59] Once again, Russell is referring to the theatrical commentators found in drama journals and "quality" newspapers.

[60] Lee was Minister for the Arts in Harold Wilson's first Labour government. Her paper, "A Policy for the Arts," was the first document ever set before the British government that was entirely devoted to the arts. Goodman was chairman of the Arts Council during the same period.

One can attribute his large popular success among all classes of audience to his genuine working-class background and his consequent willingness to realistically criticize the mores of the working-class; his grounding (and belief) in the popular theatre devices of the fringe, as advocated by McGrath, coupled with his ability to combine them with traditional, illusionistic and cathartic theatre that is sufficiently palatable to commercial managements and large audiences; his concerns for the fashionable and the immediate; his hands-on insistence that all of his plays must remain relatively unscathed when produced by commercial managements; his plays' high, emotional content which gives them the significant, if unquantitifable qualities, of soul and heart; and, his quintessentially Liverpudlian stoic wit that allows his plays the regional base that seems common to most successfully popular culture. The Northern, regional theatre is a fertile breeding ground with populist potential that is too quickly written off by those who claim to advocate a revolutionary, popular theatre.

I would not want to stake ridiculous claims for Russell's work, nor for his positions, which are essentially middle-of-the-road and open to levels of compromise. On an artistic level, his plays are largely unremarkable and their scripts tend to rely on bathos, sentiment and forced catharsis. Certainly, there is little about them that is revolutionary in form, although there has never been any other commercially successful one-woman play featuring a middle-aged housewife. In many ways, it is Russell's commercial success that is revolutionary rather than any aspect of his literary abilities.

The dilemmas identified in the earlier chapters are still with us. Russell's writing sheds no new light on the complex relationship between dominant and popular cultures, nor does it attempt to deconstruct the components of the popular, separating the authentic from the imposed, although Russell is outspoken about the abilities of "those who are

the arbiters of taste" patronizing the working-class by assuming that working-class tastes still barely extend beyond forms of variety entertainment.

There is, nonetheless, no new vision for the theatre inherent in Russell's ideas, but rather an inclination to go on struggling in a hybrid, imperfect structure.

The succeeding chapters turn to Russell's plays in an attempt to consider their themes and form and to what extent they confirm his positions and stated aims. One does not have to turn to literary analysis, however, to note that Russell's writings (more than virtually any other contemporary playwright) tend to meet with approval of their audience, whether in the regional theatre of Liverpool, London's West End or Broadway.

For those who find the plays' lack of anger at the system problematic, Russell merely offers accessible, easy to understand, plays that reflect working-class characters in a realistic and remarkably progressive light and suggests that working-class lives are as worthy of dramatic treatment as the upper echelons of society whose foibles have occupied Broadway and the West End for years. Philosophically, Russell admires E.M. Forster's famous liberal phrase that features prominently in Frank's education of Rita: "only connect."

CHAPTER VII

THE EARLY PLAYS; THEATRICAL SITUATION COMEDIES

The outline of Russell's career detailed in the previous chapter revealed that he is a highly prolific and--judging at least from the lengthy commercial runs of most of his plays--popular writer. Although Russell has written, to date, several television plays, three screenplays and many one-act dramas, several of which were originally intended for production in schools, this chapter (and the one that follows) concentrate on Russell's full-length work for the theatre; namely, the plays that have received a commercial production in a major theatrical center or centers.[1]

The rationale behind the following literary analyses is a desire to use them as a tool for assessing the nature and validity of the revolutionary populism that I have, up to this point, claimed can be ascribed to Russell's pieces of theatre. The previous chapters have concentrated on the relationship of the theatrical infrastructure to populism, but these following chapters focus on the playtexts themselves, as the major written evidence of Russell's dramatic innovations. With those aims in the mind, the following analyses emphasize the ideological content of the plays, as well as the scale of their departure from what could be termed traditional commercial theatre fare. Popular theatre, by its very definition, does not easily withstand a traditional literary analysis that might focus on psychological motivation, hidden themes or obscure, symbolic sub-plots--Russell's plays

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[1] Two of Russell's plays--*Our Day Out* and *Stags and Hens*--had their London productions as limited runs at the Young Vic.

intentionally are too simple and accessible for the wholesale application of the critical tools of high-art literary criticism.

Although Russell's contributions to the mechanical media are outside of the purview of this study[2] of the commercial theatre's relationship with populism, I do want to note (as I am arguing that populism can be recognized in a mass medium) that it is significant that Russell has worked extensively in television and films, seeing all three of these media as equal tools in his desire to reach all classes of people. Although the mechanical media obviously place differing demands on a dramatist, Russell's work is, stylistically and thematically, essentially similar within all three media, which typifies his inclusive approach to drama. That unusual fluidity of style perhaps accounts for the relatively easy transition of *Our Day Out* (analyzed below) from a television play to a piece of live theatre, and the equally simple transitions of *Educating Rita* and *Shirley Valentine* to the Hollywood cinema. This unusual progression makes clear that Russell has little time for the oft-expressed boundaries of high (i.e. live theatre) and low (i.e. television or commercial cinema) art.

In many ways his ability to transcend the boundaries of the various mechanical media is evidence that the commercial theatre can be seen as a populist, mass medium. The films of *Educating Rita* and *Shirley Valentine* began life as plays and their popular appeal also began there--in many ways the possibility for success of the films was directly related to the popularity already enjoyed by the previously-established live versions. Although Russell's work in television has doubtless enabled him to reach an audience that does not go to the theatre, it is significant that many of his television plays generally follow themes that are developed at greater length and with more sophistication in the full-

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[2] One television play, *Our Day Out*, is included because it later became a legitimate, theatrical musical.

length theatrical dramas. The very plays themselves can also be seen as following a logical progression towards the more complete articulations of the themes that preoccupy Russell as a playwright. As a consequence the interpretations of Russell's seven major plays that follow are reflective of his overall style and preoccupations as a dramatist working within a wide range of media.

The plays are considered in two groups, using the 1979 commissioning of *Educating Rita* by the Royal Shakespeare Company as a chronological, ideological and thematic line of division, on the grounds that it marked a sudden increase in Russell's status and fame which had obvious and clearly evident repercussions for his dramatic frame of reference. His three plays written since that date (*Educating Rita*, *Blood Brothers* and *Shirley Valentine*) have all been remarkable popular successes and have broad thematic frames of reference (the first two include considerations of middle-class life, while the last named goes beyond the overtly materialistic considerations of class in favor of a discussion of sexual politics and personal fulfillment). Prior to that time, however, most of Russell's output (*John, Paul, George, Ringo . . . and Bert*, *Breezeblock Park*, *One for the Road*, *Stags and Hens* and *Our Day Out*[3]) had a narrower frame of reference and, I would argue, is most interesting not for its dramatic innovations, but for its unabashed determination to reflect working-class life in a more realistic, straightforward manner than had ever been attempted within the commercial spectrum.

Each of these seven plays are considered below, in chronological order. Each analysis begins with a plot summation, followed by an analysis of the play's characters and themes and its impact (as a dramatic playtext) on Russell's relationship with the popular theatre.

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[3]The theatrical version appeared after this 1979 division (April, 1983), but the play seems to belong in the earlier group, not least because it was based very closely on the television version, which was written in 1977.

John, Paul, George, Ringo . . . and Bert (1974)

Plot Summary

Taking place during the rise of the Beatles in the late sixties and early seventies, *John, Paul, George, Ringo . . . and Bert*[4] has an open setting, covering many locations. It is the story of The Beatles told through the eyes of a fictional character named Bert--who recounts his tales to a character called "the Kid." The scenes featuring the dialogue between members of the band itself are enacted, these dramatic vignettes being fused with Bert's narration. There is a band on the stage which punctuates the show with Beatles music.

At the start of the play, Bert tells the kid (and the audience) that the Beatles are secretly reuniting for a concert at the Liverpool Philharmonic Hall, although the group *Wings* is billed. The Kid is unimpressed, having hardly heard of the Beatles. The dialogue is replaced by a scene featuring the band members, in which they are cheerfully reuniting for a nostalgic single concert, at the behest of Ringo Starr. As that scene fades, we see Bert telling the Kid that he was an ex-member of the Beatles, back in 1958. The scene shifts to 1958 and we see Bert interacting with the young Beatles who eventually tell him that he is fired. There are then several scenes (set both in seedy Liverpool clubs and in Hamburg) re-enacting the early stages of the group's career, with Bert assuming a variety of roles. Assorted establishment figures (including Hitler) appear and reject the group's abilities.

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[4] *John, Paul, George, Ringo and Bert* has never been published. The following summation is based on the draft (there are several different ones in existence, none of which are easily available) prepared for the Nottingham Playhouse production of the play in 1980. The Nottingham manuscript can be obtained on loan from Margaret Ramsey Ltd., 14A Goodwins Court, London.

Brian Epstein, the Beatles' manger, eventually features in the play. In a monologue, Epstein tells the audience that he was convinced of the artistic value of the Beatles' music, and begins to take the increasingly-successful group in hand. *Beatlemania* develops and Bert tells the audience how Liverpool suddenly became the "cultural center of the universe." At the end of the first act, Bert recounts how his girlfriend's pregnancy forced him to marry her. The marriage trapped Bert who subsequently lost much of his interest in music and other forms of culture.

At the beginning of the second act, we see the Beatles at the peak of their success, beginning to be manipulated by others. The British Ambassador to the United States holds a party in the group's honor, at which they are treated by the establishment as working-class curiosities. In their turn, the belligerent Beatles begin to enjoy compromising their public image. Eventually drugs take the place of Epstein as the main influence in the Beatles' lives. Bert's wife leaves him, and Brain Epstein dies, leaving the group adrift. Apple Records, their attempt to create a business owned and for artists is abused by the greedy. Other influences--Alan Klein (portrayed as a gangster), Linda McCartney, Yoko Ono, mysticism--participate in the group's destruction. They fight and a backdrop of newspaper headlines details the group's split.

The final scene sees Bert--trying to find his lost youth now the domestic responsibilities that tie him down have dissipated--rushing in to see the supposed surprise concert with which the play opened. However, it turns out to be a fantasy. The doorman tells Bert no-one is playing at the hall that night. Bert resists the Kid's invitation to go and see a new group and takes his place with the actors playing the Beatles in a final still-life tableau.

Analysis

John, Paul, George, Ringo . . . and Bert was Russell's first major play and, its popular success--it ran in the West End for over 12 months--notwithstanding, it is clearly an early, even a naive, piece of work. Significantly, its open style--perhaps best described as loosely reflective of the fused traditions of Bertolt Brecht and Joan Littlewood--is a form to which Russell never fully returned. He described how it came about:

> When I was first commissioned to write (*John, Paul, George, Ringo and . . . Bert*), I said to [Alan] Dossor; "Do you want me to write this observing the unities or within the [Everyman] house style?" (I think the assumption was that if you spoke with a heavy Liverpool accent, as I did, you wouldn't know how to do that . . . they thought I was a primitive who worked on instinct). Actually, I really wanted to write a play based on the unities, because I had never done it . . .but he made me write it in the house style.[5]

The review format of the play, its open admittance of artificiality and its use of direct audience address have a good deal in common with the style of popular theatre advocated by McGrath, whose ideas were greatly admired at the Everyman. It is interesting that Russell's first play has a form closer to what could generally be termed a fringe style than any of his subsequent work. It is also significant that (aside from the fact that the play was produced by a commercial organization within the mainstream, commercial theatre) *John, Paul, George, Ringo and . . . Bert* subscribes to many of the qualities that McGrath and other fringe artists have seen as the essential criteria for a piece of popular theatre.

Russell's play is certainly a direct piece of work, largely devoid of obliqueness or innuendo. There are no subtleties of character, nor is there any great, new psychological or other insight on the real-life figures that Russell includes in the play--the musicians are

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[5] Willy Russell, in a personal interview with the author, December 22, 1988, at Russell's office in Liverpool, England.

treated as the semi-mythic icons that they hold within the popular consciousness. All of the scenes in the play are fully explained to the audience, even if that is achieved at the expense of strained credulity or obvious dramatic devices. Before Bert assumes the variety of character vignettes that he plays in the show, each transition is clearly noted to avoid confusing even the most theatrically illiterate person.("Are you the audience?" says John to Bert before he assumes that function at a representation of an early Beatles concert.[6]) The play's themes and the playwright's intention--the character of Bert clearly functions as Russell's alter-ego, allowing him to tell the story of The Beatles from the point of view of someone who never met them, a populist decision in itself--are always clearly and directly stated and the playwright makes little attempt to depict nuance or ambiguity.

McGrath also suggested that popular theatre must contain comedy. Russell's play is told in the most lighthearted of manners, which aggravated some critics looking for a more serious treatment ("It is a frivolous show about a fascinating subject,"[7] complained Michael Billington in his review of the London production). The text itself contains a multitude of examples of incidents which seems exploited entirely for their comic effect. Much of the play's humor comes from the verbal banter between the members of the group, although there are also several examples of broader, more physical comedy, such as when the group broadly and comically pantomimes the process of hitchhiking. Richard O'Keiff described the humor in the original Liverpool Everyman production:

> The opening flashbacks, where the Beatles, clad in cracked leathers and greasy combed-back hair, hitch a lift to a gig in some tatty corner of the

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[6] This quotation (as well as all subsequent quotations from the play) is taken from the author's original manuscript, as revised for the 1980 Nottingham Playhouse production. There is no pagination in the manuscript.

[7] Michael Billington, *The Guardian*, August 16, 1974, p. 8.

> Merseyside littorial are very funny indeed. We watch them eating fish and chips on stage and insulting the audience: we are treated to a hilarious skit of London sounds, late 'fifties style, where Tiny Tim and the Titular Three sing--and I quote--"*Ooee Boppa Ooee Boppa Shang A Lang A Wah Wah,*" whose climax is the death of the love-lorn biker under the wheels of a fish-finger lorry.[8]

It will be clear, then, that there is nothing subtle about the unrefined humor in this play, which exploits established working-class patterns of comedy, ensuring that the deliberately crude jokes are accessible and show no propensity towards being perceivable as high-minded witticisms. It goes without saying that music must be a great part of a play about a pop group. Most of the music in the play (aside from the comic parodies like the one mentioned above) consists of well-known Lennon and McCartney standards, but the songs are not used simply as frivolous moments, but rather as a means of emotional expression and release (something that McGrath claimed was foreign to middle-class audiences who tend to believe that "music is there for a bit of a romp to make it a jolly evening"[9]). That is far from the case with *John, Paul, George, Ringo . . . and Bert,* and Russell uses the Beatles' songs to underscore dramatic as well as comic moments (Brian Epstein's death is underscored by *Yesterday*, projected scenes from the Beatles' tour are accompanied by *Long and Winding Road*; and when Lennon utters his famous quote about the Beatles being more famous then Jesus Christ, the band plays *Boy You've Got to Carry That Weight*). Russell is, then, prepared to use the songs ironically, giving them a meaning not originally intended. Thus the Beatles' sacking of Pete Best, their original drummer, is accompanied by a slow, plaintive treatment of *With a Little Help From My Friends*, a song written, in actuality, as an upbeat tune for Ringo Starr, Best's replacement.

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[8] Richard O' Keiff, *Plays and Players*, July 1974, p. 57.

[9] John McGrath, *A Good Night Out* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 56.

The review format of the show lends it many of the elements of the next McGrath criteria--variety--and the principally melodramatic form of work allows the audience to enjoy the moment-by-moment effect of the play. Thus, impresario Alan Klein is treated as a pantomime villain, the death of Epstein is designed to provoke sadness, the upper-class characters are figures of ridicule and so on. There are no slow build-ups to great dramatic moments nor lengthy pauses whose aims are largely metaphysical. The response demanded of the audience is clear, simple and immediate and must be obviously worked for (in a highly direct manner) by the performers concerned--the script explicitly calls for considerable interaction (detailed below) and the playwright obviously intends for each evening's performance to be a largely unduplicatable event, just as a typical pop or rock concert sets out to a unique event.

McGrath's last populist criteria was localism, of both material and performer. Although this play was as great a success across the country as it was in Liverpool, rather disproving McGrath's theory, it is nonetheless set in Liverpool, a city (as was noted in the previous chapter) with a clearly definable local identity and the play's language (and style of humor) is very much that of the city and its region. Russell creates as little distance as possible between performers and audience--the script calls for the members of the show's band to be "busking" outside the theatre as the audience enters ("this should be for real and they should try and earn as much money as possible") and the character of Bert opens the second act, while the houselights are still up, with a beer in his hand and the line: "

> Alright? Been havin' a drink in the bar have y'? Good bar isn't it? Terrible pint though--(*Holding his pint of lager up*) This is the Guinness!

I have analyzed this play with regard to McGrath's criteria for a popular theatre to make the point that that the extensive commercial productions of *John, Paul, George, Ringo . . . and Bert* did not appear to get in the way of it ascribing to many of the values of popular theatre from which McGrath has claimed the commercial theatre was and is so alienated. It also reveals that the West End institutions are sometimes prepared to allow quite a considerable amount of subversion and criticism. Members of the commercial establishment, from the British Ambassador to a money-grabbing theatre manager who tries to use the Beatles to exploit the handicapped for their publicity value, are uniformly portrayed in a negative light in this play. Obviously, this was an unusual production (not least because producers Michael Coldron and Robert Stigwood imported Alan Dossor's Everyman Theatre production virtually wholesale from Liverpool), but that does not detract from its impact. One can, it seems, criticize the commercialization of art while in a commercial theatre.

"Here for the first time I can remember is a showbiz musical which does not subscribe to the showbiz values," commented Irving Wardle after the show's London opening. "Getting on does not mean getting better; piling up the loot may be a form of artistic suicide."[10] The fact remains that a populist piece of theatre, about a pop group that was probably the most notable example of a popular-cultural icon of an entire decade, did play the West End and most of the major, British touring theatres in the mid-seventies, despite the fact that it is never mentioned in books and articles that summarize the progression of the popular theatre in Great Britain. It is absurd that such a major piece of popular theatre is ignored, seemingly just because it was performed at commercial venues.

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[10] Irving Wardle, *The Times*, August 16, 1974, p. 23.

Ironically, the role of a group like The Beatles is as problematic for many populists as Russell's plays, because both play and its subject do not easily fall into the categories of genuinely populist or debased cultural forms. Both have an ambiguous identity. Nonetheless, simply classifying this play as mainstream theatre, purely because of its success in the commercial sector, seems limited at best and probably completely inaccurate.

There seems little question that the work is accessible to all classes and to all ages and it was known during its run for attracting young audiences to the Lyric Theatre. "You can always tell when it's a young audience," said Russell in 1982, looking back on the play's success, "because the dear seats are sold last and usually in the West End the twelve pound seats go quickly because it's the geriatric section . . . the kids always buy the seats up at the top."[11] The price of seats was, admittedly, comparable to other West End musicals and reviewer Adrian Henri warned people against the "West End ambiance,"[12] but such economic factors did not seem to have much effect. More significant, perhaps, is the means by which the story is told. Russell's narrative is through the eyes of a member of the Liverpool working-class who knew the Beatles only as a fan and was unable to have any impact on their career progression or to intervene to stop their inevitable destruction, even though this group were speaking for the working-class youth of Liverpool. As reviewer (and Liverpool poet and populist) Henri noted hyperbolically, comparing this ordinary working-class man to classical literature: "He is Bert McGhee, our narrator, our Everyman, our Dante to guide us through a modern

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[11] Willy Russell, as quoted in *Educating Rita: Comments and Study Aids*, Edited by Albert-Reiner Glaap (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Moritz Diesterweg, 1984), p. 29.

[12] Adrian Henri, *Plays and Players*, September 1974, pp. 57-59.

Purgatorio."[13] Henri, although hardly a dispassionate reviewer, saw the play's themes as universal. He viewed the work as being essentially every man's *Oedipus*:

> A couple of hours of nostalgia for all our adolescence that is totally timeless, as inevitable as Greek Tragedy. . . . The four most loved, courted, wealthy people in the world stumble towards their downfall: as with King Oedipus, it is the height they must fall that moves us. Like him, their fate is unavoidable, like the Greek audience we know the story, know the end. "It's all gone shitty again," Lennon, dejected sits amongst the ruins of someone's bright idea for the great reunion.[14]

If *John, Paul, George, Ringo and . . .Bert* can be shown to have the form and accessibility of popular theatre, what of its ideological content? Does it take clearly oppositional stance to the bourgeois culture and incite change? Although one could not call the play a didactic piece of theatre--for one thing, it is far too romantically simplistic--there are some clearly defined thoughts behind the play, many of which embody themes that run through most of Russell's later, more sophisticated works.

In the first instance, there is an obvious effort to break down the high art/low art barriers. The very act of writing a legitimate theatre piece about a pop music achieves that to a certain extent,[15] but Russell goes farther. Consider Epstein's speech about the appeal of The Beatles:

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] A comparable West End attempt at chronicling the rise and fall of a popular cultural icon was Alan Bleasdale's 1985 play, *Are You Lonesome Tonight?* Although it did not enjoy the initial success of Russell's play, Bleasdale's version of Elvis Presley's life had a similar style, employing an actual imitation of the artist, music, scenes from the singer's life in largely chronological order and a generally inclusive, romantic approach that suggested that the pure art of the musician's work was ultimately destroyed by outside influences. *Are You Lonesome Tonight?* had its American premiere at the San Diego Repertory Theatre, where it opened on September 6, 1989.

> I'd always supposed I was as happy and as sad, as contented and as lonely as everybody else. It was certainly bearable . . . life. But it was also a disappointment. I found art much more exciting than life itself. I'd look at a lovely painting, or listen to music, I'd close my eyes and then it would become exciting, alive, vital; I'd sink into music, immerse myself in it, live inside it . . . really live. But then, the music would be over, it would always end. And then, then the music was past, there was only . . life really! And it never lived up to the promise of the music, the painting. And them, then I saw the boys. And the boys, they were life . . . but not ordinary life, they were life like the paintings and the music promised.

The speech could be criticized as lacking a profound sub-text, as being overly-romanticized, cliched, or even inarticulate, but there is a clear attempt on the part of the author to compare the group's appeal with the other, more accepted arts, a determination to see their work in those terms and to suggest that their music had a relevance beyond the immediate context of popular music.

Big business (indeed inhumane capitalism) in general is criticized heavily in the play, especially at the close of the second act, when Russell depicts the Beatles as partly helpless victim of an establishment that was out to destroy their art. In a similar vein, a scene set at a party thrown for The Beatles by the British ambassador is treated with heavy satire, suggesting that the upper-class characters who attend the party have no feeling for the group's art but are simply going through with a charade because of the group's economic power. Working-class humor and knowledge certainly emerges triumphant from the following exchange between Ringo and the ambassador's wife, a piece of dialogue that accessibly debates some measure of the proverbial high art/low art dichotomy:

> WIFE: Aren't you the percussionist in the combe? [sic]
> RINGO: Me? No. I'm just the drummer in the group (*She laughs, not because of anything she has heard but because she's been told that this mob are supposed to be entertainingly comical*)
> WIFE: That's what I do like about working-class humor, it's so primitive in presentation. Almost a verbal reconstruction of the paintings by the Primitives; don't you think?

> RINGO: That depends on whether you subscribe to the theory that the form of humor under discussion is humor rooted essentially in an' oral rather than literary tradition. The basic an' fundamental essence of workin' class humor is its brutal disregard of pretension as displayed by its great reliance upon deflation even when it's required to be self-effacing. (Pause) Don't y' think?
> WIFE (*moving away*) Yes . . . well if you'll just erm . . . yes

There is assuredly a remarkable sense of authenticity in this play in the way in which it depicts the language of the working-class--in a positive, optimistic manner showing possibilities for working-class intellectualism and humor--and the working-class existence as a whole. Nor is it entirely true to say that Russell heavily romanticizes the working-class existence. The character of Bert is portrayed as a weighed-down malcontent--his job is stacking stockings in a factory--trapped by pregnancy and economic deprivation, with evenings spent watching The Beatles his only pleasure. The play does not celebrate working-class culture to the extent that it denies the great longing felt by Bert and his contemporaries to escape from its confines.

John, Paul, George, Ringo . . . and Bert was, as we have seen, an unusual play. It is hardly a socialist or even a political drama. From a feminist perspective the play is sexist--every depiction of a woman is a negative caricature out to destroy the supposedly pure male comradeship of the Beatles, from Bert's nagging wife to the ignorant but pretentious wife of the Ambassador.

Russell makes no attempt to critique the injustice of a society that forces the people represented in the play by Bert to rely on a musical group as a kind of cultural panacea in the face of economic depravity. The play offers no suggestions for the way out of the need to hero-worship. The Beatles are celebrated as enigmatic, romantic poets more than as representatives of the working-class, and the play's sympathy lies with a utopian form of culture--a popular band that is highly successful and whose music is mass-marketed, but somehow remaining untainted by capitalist forces--that is utterly unworkable. One

could argue that this play was acceptable to commercial forces because romantic nostalgia took the place of political didacticism. On the other hand, though, *John, Paul, George, Ringo . . . and Bert* was a form of popular theatre with a message. Unlike many people, its creator recognised the importance of cultivating a closer relationship between the live theatre and the other media more closely associated with popular culture. This significant play deserves far more than being clustered as another example of a decadent, middle-class musical.

Breezeblock Park (1975)

Plot Summary

The first act of *Breezeblock Park* is set in Syd and Betty's council house on a large public housing estate, on Christmas Eve. Their moody nineteen-year-old daughter, Sandra, appears briefly and cynically expresses her scorn for the fake, pseudo-middle-class trappings that make-up her mother's Christmas decorations. Vera and her heavy-drinking husband, Tommy (Betty's brother), arrive at the house and Betty and Vera discuss the quality and expense of Betty's new couch. Syd and Tommy stand helplessly by, each other's allies, mainly speaking only at their wives' commands. Sandra returns briefly to announce that she will be bringing home a new boyfriend, a student from the local college, for the first time later in the evening.

Reeny (Betty's sister, and the most pretentious of the family) enters with her compliant, non-sequitor-spouting husband, Ted, and their demure son, John. Betty and Reeny then launch into a ridiculous, never-ending game of oneupmanship, focusing on

who has central heating, the quality of Betty's furniture and other materialist rivalries; their repetitive banter hidden behind false complements and modesty. Sandra arrives with her boyfriend, Tim, and announces (to the horror of her family) that she is pregnant.

The second act takes place in Reeny's house on the following Christmas Day. Vera and Reeny discuss Betty's shame over her daughters pregnancy with falsely-sympathetic glee. Reeny's down-trodden son John, who is revealed to be taking Valium, meekly parrots his mother's truisms. The family talks about the upcoming wedding and begins to enjoy the drama of the idea of a new baby, Reeny and Betty arguing over names and the cost and quality of baby supplies. Syd, however, tells Tommy in confidence that Tim privately told him that Sandra and he intend to live together without marrying. The men assume that the decision is Tim's and decide (violently, if necessary) to put his ideas right. Tim arrives and tells the "team" of family men that it is Sandra's decision not to marry. Their response is that Sandra simply does not appreciate the benefits of the "women's club" that she is about to invited to join. Tim replies that Sandra desperately wants to run away from her working-class background and discover a more cultured lifestyle. John, full on unexpressed anger, surprisingly speaks in support of Sandra and destroys Reeny's sofa as a means of proving his point. The men leave with Tim to try and change his mind about marrying into the family

Now alone, the women decide that the young couple must live with them, until they can afford a place of their own. Sandra arrives, and her mother tells her sympathetically that the child to be can act as a bridge between estranged mother and daughter. In return, the exasperated Sandra tells the women that there are no plans for a marriage. Tim and the men return, however, and it becomes clear that Tim has bowed to their pressure. He now wants to marry Sandra and share a house with her parents. Sandra is incensed and tries to leave, but the remaining characters block her exit. Finally, Betty lets her daughter

through the enclosing circle. After sending Tim ignominiously after her, the remainder of the group resume their party game and as normal a Christmas as they can muster.

Analysis

Breezeblock Park is a very different play from *John, Paul, George, Ringo . . . and Bert* and, at first glance, appears to be an undistinguished example of a comedy of manners; trivial, drawing room fare (a sofa even plays a central role in the play's plot[16]) of the manner of which the commercial theatre has made its living for decades. Clearly reliant on the traditions of British farce and full of manipulatively funny lines, *Breezeblock Park* appears to be made up of cliched characterizations that ensure that the comedy, as Michael Billington noted, "won't win any prizes for originality."[17] This play may at first appear to be the very style of bourgeoise theatre populists must rebel against.

As the play is subservient to the dramatic unities (indeed, its rather forced structure is the epitome of theatrical traditionalism), McGrath's criteria for popular theatre obviously do not fit as well as they did in the previous example--this piece appears bound by the very theatrical conservatism that the fringe artists were fighting against in their collective attempt to make the theatre more relevant to the working-class. This play, then, appears to be an unremarkable (if extremely comical and successful in terms of reaching large audiences) example of a piece of dominant theatre. It is, after all, little more than a comedy of manners. This superficial interpretation, however, proves inaccurate. What is

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[16] It is perhaps prophetic of this play's working-class appropriation of a middle-class form that this sofa is physically attacked during the course of the dramatic action!

[17] Michael Billington, *The Guardian*, September 13,1977, p. 9.

particularly noteworthy about *Breezeblock Park*, is that the farce is a comedy of *working-class* manners and that fact alone makes it highly unusual and important.

Like the traditional comedy of manners, *Breezeblock Park* is essentially about how people behave rather than what they do or why they do it, and the play's largely artificial and self-conscious characters see pseudo-refined artifice as being essential to a civilized existence. Just as in the historical model of the comedy of manners, which "stresses the particular amenities of style and sophistication,"[18] the inhabitants of *Breezeblock Park* play a game based on the edicts of fashion and live in fear of being ridiculed for lack of expert knowledge, wit or taste. In short, there is a conscious code of ideal behavior that pervades the world of this play and the characters compete for who can best live up to it. Those who do not succeed risk collective scorn being poured upon them. Like any comedy of manners, *Breezeblock Park* is "more interested in the quality of social behavior than in the conditions which produce it,"[19] which accounts for its lack of overt didacticism.

There are some fascinating differences from the traditional model, however. These are indeed working-class manners: the women are dominant and play the manners game much more expertly than their less sophisticated husbands. Taste and fashion is largely expressed through crass materialism, wit through half-remembered jokes, and knowledge through misunderstood clichés. The play's interest in the need to be charming and witty and other affectations of behavior is firmly rooted in working-class traditions. In other words, just as the comedy of manners traditionally parodies middle-class behavior, its impact relying on the vicarious pleasure of seen one's own society's mores affectionately

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[18] Harold R. Walley, *The Book of the Play* (New York: Charles Schribner's Sons, 1950), p. 257.

[19] Ibid., p. 258.

satirized, so *Breezeblock Park* carries precisely those same themes into the purview of the working-classes, giving them access to what is generally regarded as the most sophisticated (and traditional) form of drama. Rather than simply relegate a historically resilient--and undeniably popular--form of drama to the garbage heap of decadence, *Breezeblock Park* has realigned and reclaimed it, ploughing new ground for the theatre in that it takes over a middle-class form and uses it to express the dramas and frustrations of the working-class. The supposed triviality of this form should not detract from the significance of Russell's achievement. This is an excellent example of the positive results of re-examining mainstream forms and not, like Gooch and other theorists, merely dismissing them.

Michael Billington reacted to the play's theme of a young woman finding an articulate voice in a sea of atrophied, meaningless English rituals by making comparisons with works like Arnold Wesker's *Roots* (1958) or Mike Leigh's *Abigail's Party* (1977).[20] The comparisons, though, had to remain broadly thematic--neither of these plays are true working-class comedies of manners and both are written from the perspective of an outsider. One would have to look to the popular comedy series of television for a similar piece of work to *Breezeblock Park*,[21] which again demonstrates Russell's close relationship with mass-media forms. It is significant that there is no obvious comparitive within the fringe theatre, as this points to the reluctance of the alternative sector to deal humorously with the realities of working-class life.

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[20] Michael Billington, *The Guardian*, September 13, 1977, p. 8.

[21] Perhaps the best example might be Johnny Speight's scripts for the comedy series *Till Death Us Do Part* (the original British source for the popular American television series *All in the Family*, as produced by Norman Lear).

Why has this form not been significantly claimed for the working-class by popular theatre artists before, who have traditionally assumed that the form is inherently and hopelessly middle class? One possible explanation is that rather than merely express working-class angst or desperation, the comedy of manners form requires that the playwright criticize the behavior of the characters (it is from such an action that the humor evolves in all comedies of manners). *Breezeblock Park* is no exception. Such criticism, however, presents all kinds of problems for devotees of the political theatre who see their role as building up the working-class rather than deflating or ridiculing them, or even aspects of their behavior.

Russell has described the problems *Breezeblock Park* caused when originally produced at the Everyman, a theatre more used to the style of McGrath or *John, Paul, George, Ringo . . . and Bert.* They are significant and worth quoting at length:

> *[Breezeblock Park]* was radical because it absolutely criticized the people who were up on stage, as well as in a sense celebrating them. Now the middle-class people who run the theatre--great champions of the working class--were terrified about putting that play on. Dossor was wetting himself about it. We had two previews and we had a very broadly based audience and of course people were pissing themselves over laughing at their own manners because it was not done. Plays about the middle-class were usually about the middle-classes. For years, the middle-classes had loved to laugh at themselves and here, suddenly was an opportunity for a working-class audience to laugh at itself. . . . We got to the first night, the press night, and Chris Bond had me against the wall saying that they play should never have been allowed on an English stage. . . . There was a sort of agreement to only write about the working-class as if it was sitting in the kitchens of England plotting revolution. Now this was by people who no longer lived among, didn't even come from, the working-class. But I still sat in one of the kitchens in England, in a working-class household, and my experience told me that most working-class people were not plotting revolution, they were actually popping Valiums and going crazy. And that's what *Breezeblock Park* came out of. People had to bow to the fact that this play was different and it did open their eyes to their own slightly patronizing attitude.[22]

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[22] Personal Interview with Willy Russell, December 22, 1988.

That last comment of Russell's appears to have a lot of foundation, because there clearly was (and is) a reluctance on the part of the middle-classes to face the mundane, non-didactic realities of working-class life. As an example, the play's director, Alan Dossor, after acknowledging the discomfort the play causes to middle-class liberals, has said that the play "is strong and raw and makes absolutely no obeisance to middle class liberal standards,"[23] and is thus true, popular theatre if only for that reason.

The manners that Russell chooses to criticize in the play are certainly open to ridicule. The character of Reeny, for example, is a melodramatic villain, whose nouveau-riche aspirations force her to stoop to all measure of atrocities--giving her son drugs, taking a vitriolic pleasure in her sister's suffering, horrifying her expectant niece with exaggerated tales of horrors of child-birth--hidden behind the hypocritical veneer of genuine concern, a game of forced politeness that was familiar to many.

Russell mercilessly attacks the other foibles of working-class life such as an obsession with material possessions (especially if one is the first to have something), an inability to speak directly about sex or illness, inverted snobbery, ignorance, drunkenness, tyranny, lack of artistic taste and tenderness and a variety of other peccadillos and serious flaws. His methodology is largely that of one-liners and contrived but accessible comedy that attempts to duplicate working-class life as exactly as possible without trying to sanitize any aspect of it. The result is a surprisingly disturbing play that utterly belies one's expectations of the form that it follows.

Breezeblock Park perhaps depicts better than any other contemporary drama the moral and creative bankruptcy of working-class lives while shamelessly revealing the clannish, working-class themselves as being complicit in this pathetic philosophy of life by

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[23] Alan Dossor, as quoted in Michael Coveney, "Everyman in Good Humor," *Plays and Players* , August 1975, p. 15.

tyrannically preventing the escape of those who try to leave. The play's message goes beyond manners and it contains two distinct points of views from two different characters trapped in the working-class existence. The audience's sympathy is intended to first go to Sandra, the teenager who wants to escape into the utopian world of Bohemia represented by her student boyfriend:

> I want a *good* life mother. I want something that's got some meaning left in it. I want to sit around and talk about films and--and music. I want a house where we don't have the telly on all day, where we don't worry about the furniture. I want books on the shelves, Mother an--oh--for God's sake, I want paintings on the wall and red wine on the table and lots of different cheeses. I want--I want--I want . . .[24]

Sandra is obviously describing a rather ephemeral, and utopian, lifestyle but Russell is clearly saying (and this desire would appear to be perhaps autobiographical), that this is the only way she can give words to her vision of a softer, more caring and less materialistic world. Her desires are little, even pointless, but still devastatingly important to her, even though she expresses her desire for an environment with people that have taste in convoluted terms. On the other hand, though, Russell switches the audience's sympathies deftly a few seconds later when he has Betty argue persuasively that her bankrupt materialism is simply the only enjoyment open to her in her stultifying working-class existence, and Sandra has no right to deny her these pleasures:

> if it wasn't for the few things I buy, I would have cut my throat years ago. But *she* begrudges me my few pleasures. I wouldn't mind, but I'm not asking for very much am I? I live on an estate that's like a–a–a camp for refugees, my only entertainment's a Saturday night in the social club, I work forty-nine weeks a year doin' a job that took me half a day to learn. An' she begrudges me the few pleasures that I get. Well, I'm tellin' you, Miss Criticize–many's the time, many's the time that a trip round the

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[24] Willy Russell, *Breezeblock Park* (London: Samuel French, 1978), p. 55.

> supermarket an' a new find on the shelves has stopped me goin' home an' puttin' my head in the gas oven.[25]

This is an interesting debate that is at the heart of the typical working-class existence--rather more central, one might argue, than the contemplation of class-based revolution--but it is rarely discussed in such terms in pieces of alternative, allegedly popular, theatre. *Breezeblock Park*, by virtue of its farcical form, manges to articulate this debate in an entertaining, accessible way that allows for self-recognition but a measure of escapism as well. In short, the play seems more than most to be reflective of the complex life of the working-class, rather than the one-dimensional view of its horrors popular elsewhere.

I do not want to imply that *Breezeblock Park* is a perfect example of popular theatre because there are some inherent problems. Most significant is the danger that, especially when placed in the context of the West End away from its original Everyman production, a middle-class audience would enjoy laughing at the foibles and ignorance of the working-class from a position of superiority. Russell, however, has argued that the play simply made middle-class audiences uncomfortable while the working-class "laughed themselves silly, " a form of intriguing exclusivity that perhaps demonstrates what accessible theatre is really all about. Also problematic, though, is the fact that one does detect from the playwright a certain implied superiority to the characters that he invites the audience to share.

When Betty mistakes a vibrator for a drink-stirrer, Russell clearly intends us to laugh *at* rather than with *her*. There is also a interesting speech in which Ted (trying to impress the educated Tim) describes his visit to a production of *Waiting for Godot*:

> it was about these two tramps waiting for his mate of theirs . . . All this audience was sitting there waiting for him as well. I could see straight away what was goin' to happen though. I'd been in there five minutes

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25 Ibid., p. 55.

> and I knew . . . His name's not in the programme y'see, this Godot. Well, it's common sense, if his name's not in the programme, he's never gonna show up. Y' could wait a hundred years an' he'd still never walk on the bloody stage. But all the rest of those stupid buggers in the place– they didn't have the sense to work it out for themselves. I slipped out to this cafe next door and read the paper . . .[26]

On one level this--admittedly funny--speech perfectly illustrates the sanctimonious, arrogant working-class ignorance that Russell is unafraid to criticize and Sandra is desperate to escape from. On the other hand, though, Russell is holding up Ted as an object of ridicule for a superior audience. We are obviously real theatre-goers, even if merely on the strength of our attendance at this particular production, and Russell is obviously assuming that the audience knows all about Beckett and Godot, otherwise the implicit joke would make no sense, and certainly would not be at all funny. All in all, this comes very close to what McGrath called the meditation of reality, the placing of working-class life in a palatable middle-class context for the amusement *of* the middle-classes. This speech, however, seems exceptional and not indicative of the general attitude of the play.

Such problems aside, however, one could reasonably assume that the intention of the playwright was to honestly depict what he has classed "my vision of hell" from the point-of-view of genuine experience--Ted's ignorance is largely there to help us understand the importance of Sandra's escape. The play, it seems, is genuinely aimed at working-class audiences and has a freshness and honesty and, perhaps most significantly, a sense of realism, that allow it a context of popular theatre arguably unlike any other written by any other playwright.

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26 Ibid., p. 45.

Critiquing the working-class in a format reserved for the middle-class for the best part of a century is unusual indeed and especially noteworthy because it invites criticism from all sides of the political and social spectrum--one is inevitably going to be attacked from all sides. Russell's farce, admittant of a liberal philosophy that is not afraid to expose working-class vices while simultaneously providing (through Betty's speech, quoted above) some explanation of the social and economic factors that bring such atrophied moral bankruptcy about, surely qualifies as a form of radical popular theatre. Unlike most forms of popular theatre, it is the fact that *Breezeblock Park* has its foot placed firmly in mundane reality that has caused many commentators to be uncomfortable with its difficult and ultimately ambiguous message. Its relative success (a four-month West End run) also proved that it is possible to deal with working-class life in a commercial setting, and to deal with it bluntly and directly. "The play wants to say that living in Liverpool can be fucking awful," said Dossor, "and it just says it."[27]

Breezeblock Park shows that good popular theatre is likely to be ambiguous and open to several interpretations, against the grain and otherwise, yet it also shows that it also possible to find an unmediated working-class voice in the West End--a voice that is prepared to speak blunt reality and apparently make no concessions to middle-class tastes. Although there is no real evidence, it seems a reasonable speculation to suggest that most alternative theatres would not have been able to embrace such a truthful, yet necessarily ambiguous, depiction of working-class reality.

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[27] Dossor, as quoted in Coveney, *Plays and Players*, p. 15.

One for the Road (1978)

Plot Summary

One for the Road[28] is set in a house on a massive housing development a few miles from a major northern city, and the decor is reminiscent of the tastes of people who are first-generation middle class. At the start of the play, Pauline is berating her husband, Dennis, for tolerating some neighborhood children ("the Parnes kids") who do not come up to her standards of suitable behavior, especially as she thought the move to this new estate would enable the couple to move up. Pauline tells Dennis that many of his fellow residents suspect the children of severing the heads of the garden gnomes in the gardens on the estate. Dennis' parents telephone--they have got lost on the symmetrical estate in an attempt to find their son's house which they have visited many times before. Pauline and Dennis are awaiting the visit of Roger and Jane, who is the leader of the estate's social structure. While Pauline is hoping that the hyper-critical Jane will be impressed with the furnishings, Dennis is lost in reminiscences about the dreams of his youth

Jane and Roger arrive, and Jane is instantly critical of Pauline's flawed attempts at being a middle-class hostess, although from Roger's comments the audience learns that the petit-bourgeoise Jane and Roger have a shallow knowledge of social niceties. Jane launches into a criticism of the Parnes family, centered on their alleged exploits of covering cabbages with paint, reasoning that the children's wantonness comes from their

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[28] There are two versions of *One for the Road*: the original text, published in 1980 and an updated version, revised and rewritten during 1985. This summary is based on the original, although most of the plot changes are minor--for example, while the play originally took place on the eve of Dennis' thirtieth birthday, the later version is set on the eve of his fortieth. References to media figures are updated and there are a variety of other small differences between the two texts.

liberal parentage--their mother advocates disarmament and their father teaches art. Roger, to Dennis' horror, suggests starting an estate vigilante force to curb these undesirable forms of art. Dennis tells Roger of his impending birthday and dissatisfaction with his dull life. Roger, however, has forgotten his youthful dreams. Pauline tells Jane, who fuels her worries, that she is concerned that Dennis refuses to let her open the desk. Jane is about to destroy the desk claiming it will reveal Dennis to be a pervert, when Dennis appears and interrupts her. As the curtain falls, his parents call again. They are still lost.

The second act takes place later the same evening. At the after-dinner conversation, the restless Dennis refuses to play along with social banter and becomes so exasperated he throws away all of the bland music that people have kept buying him. Jane claims he is having a nervous breakdown caused by sexual problems. Dennis says he is leaving to reclaim his lost youth and his identity as a wandering outsider. Roger tries to talk him out of it by telling him he needs to have an extramarital affair. When Jane sees Dennis packing, she suddenly asks him to take her with him, Pauline appears dressed to go away and Roger completes the list of would-be wanderers. Dennis exits, leaving them all behind, only to shortly reappear saying that leaving is just a dream.

He unlocks the desk and reveals aerosol paint and his identity as the estate's maverick artist. Once again, Dennis leaves and returns after a few minutes, saying that he ran away from a truck that offered him a lift. Instead, as the curtain falls, he and Jane arrange a regular time when they can meet for an affair.

Analysis

One for the Road, in many ways, can be seen as a companion piece to *Breezeblock Park*. Both plays are concerned with a character trying to escape from stultifying social rituals and both depend on the traditions of British farce (especially the reliance on broad, highly visual humor, one-line jokes that build on each other with great rapidity and comic situations set up early in the play so that the author can effect a pay off before the play's climax). *One for the Road* is another domestic drama and its appeal largely relies on the audience recognizing exaggerated elements of their own behavior and that of those around them. In many ways, this play is another variation on a comedy of manners.

The escape motif notwithstanding, Russell's targets in this play are rather different. Whereas *Breezeblock Park* attacked the older generation (who never aspired beyond their class, despite their obsession with material possessions), *One for the Road* satirizes a younger generation who partially escaped from working-class environments into the equally bankrupt world of the lower middle-class, symbolized in this play by their ownership of their new and ugly homes on a massive, inhuman estate--a home that Dennis' working-class parents are unable to find (a sense of dislocation which is obviously symbolic), allowing their son's wife to treat them with contempt. The housing development is a bleak environment, devoid of any soul, and Russell depicts it as pretentious, confused and lacking any foundation. The estate's inhabitants have little education--and have forgotten its value--and view any artistic sensibility with suspicion.

Like Betty, Pauline is the aspiring, awkward social climber looking for validation while the character of Jane is essentially a younger version of Reeny (although, unlike Reeny, she is partially redeemed at the play's climax), in that her hypocritical social charms hides genuine unpleasantness. Jane--for whom even sex is an orchestrated

science--is the antithesis of any genuine cultural awareness--her tastes evolve from attempting to ape the middle-classes. If she needs reassuring as to her progress through the class ranks, she just looks at paintings of the working-class by L. S. Lowrey--whom she describes as "a primitive" and feels superior to those depicted:

> I look at all those people streaming out from the mill, dead people with dead lives, nothing left to them, going nowhere, all of them. I look at them and I always think how lucky we are.[29]

Russell's principal point is that these characters' superiority to their working-class roots is entirely illusory, as they have simply switched one inhumane lifestyle for another--Jane and her contemporaries are also going nowhere and their lives are as dead as the mills' employees. Russell appears to be blaming these characters--unlike the downtrodden members of earlier generations of the working-class, these people are choosing to ignore the possibilities of their new-found relative affluence and class mobility.

As in *Breezeblock Park*, the female characters are dominant in *One for the Road* with the men--although more liberal and rational--typically cowering to their rules, grumbling gruffly and conspiratorially among themselves and secretly disobeying their wives' wishes like children. Both plays, it should be noted, restrict their environments to the domestic realm.

One for the Road is in many ways a much less serious play--and ultimately less satisfying than *Breezeblock Park*, not least because of its inherent triviality (Antony Thorncroft, reviewing the 1987 London production described the play as "insubstantial, off-the-peg Russell"[30]). This triviality is perhaps more noticeable because of the class of

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[29] Willy Russell, *One for the Road*, (London: Samuel French, 1980), p. 26.

[30] Antony Thorncroft, *Plays and Players*, January 1988, p. 35.

the play's characters--this play's action is much closer to the more traditional suburban world so-often exposed by Alan Ayckbourn or Mike Leigh, which makes this play seem less radical and generally less worthwhile. On the other hand, though, it does answer the criticisms of those who suggest that the commercial sector is only in the business of reifying the middle-class experience. If nothing else, *One for the Road* is an examination of a working-class dilemma. Furthermore, the play clearly states that the appropriation of middle-class manners is not the way for the working-class to improve their lot, which is a statement worth making. *One for the Road* is certainly a fun and an enjoyable play in production, indicative of Russell's interest in the pleasure of his audience, a preoccupation that Chapter Five revealed as being in short supply within the alternative sector.

The play is certainly no socialist polemic. Unlike Sandra's, Dennis' escape seems optional and voluntary--it is as much an escape from his age and mental outlook as from his class-based surroundings--and the play essentially becomes a plea for a more open-minded, warm-hearted liberalism which the author implies (by the characters', and especially Jane's, sudden reversal at the play's climax) is already present within us. Dennis is simply anxious to awake what Russell implies is already there, as when he says to Jane:

> Look at you--I remember when you were young. God it's difficult now but yeh, you were young once an' I know you had dreams like we all did. Didn't you? You used to wear faded jeans all the time--I remember now. What happened? You had long hair and slim hips and wide hopes for the future. I'll bet you don't even remember that do y'? You used to laugh a lot and joke and sing.[31]

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31 Russell, *One for the Road* (1980), p. 32.

Although Dennis has higher aims, when his dreams are expressed in these concrete terms, lusting after hair, dreams and less body fat seems trivial indeed.

Admittedly, none of the characters, including Dennis, go through with their desired rebellion which is perhaps this play's most telling statement although the ultimate message appears to be that one should retain the essential structure of lower middle-class life (Russell is hardly suggesting these people should return to their class of origin: one need only look to *Breezeblock Park* to see the playwright's views on the working-class existence), but infuse it with a spirit of openness and unpretentious gentility, which is hardly a radical or even a realistic message.

Shallow materialism does come in for some satirical treatment and there is, in the later version of the play especially, an amusingly satirical treatment of the character of Roger--an essentially working-class man who has understood the form of middle-class values without their meaning. He describes his typical Saturday which finds him:

> pushing a wire trolley around a hypermarket telling yourself that any moment some tantalizing and uninhibited feminist will accost you and recognize immediately your dedication to sexual equality by virtue of the fact that you obviously know your way around the store and thus must always do the shopping. Turned on to unknown heights by this discovery of a truly non-sexist male she will insist on having you there and then amidst the bin bags and frozen pizzas.[32]

For the most part, however, it is not hard for the audience to feel superior to the characters, not least because the farcical form of the play means that its symbols of middle-class life (like garden gnomes) are exaggerated to the point that they lose their referent to reality. The farcical structure of this play overpowers its themes. The result is this play's enormous popularity (especially in its revised form) might at least partly result from a West End audience laughing at ignorant characters who know less about wine and

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[32] Willy Russell, *One for the Road*, (London: Samuel French, 1985), p. 15.

art than they do. I would suggest, however, that such a possibility is an inevitable sacrifice if one is to write a play that is intentionally ambiguous rather than didactic and entertaining rather than polemical.

It is interesting, nonetheless, that the 1987 London production starred Russ Abbott in the role of Dennis, a well-known British stand-up comedian whose television popularity has an essentially working-class following. Abbott's presence--which suggests that Russell's "authorial audience" was indeed the working-class--no doubt accounted for much of the play's new-found popularity which allowed this play to compete with other London entertainment almost as a variety act, thus attracting much of the out-of-town tourist business. Some critics (such as Michael Billington[33]) complained that Abbott inappropriately dominated the play, introducing his own television characters into the drama, but others (such as Clive Hirschhorn, who described Abbott as "a versatile entertainment machine,"[34]) celebrated his talents as a kind of populist clown. This latter response perhaps shows that Russell's work, even when not at its best, does retain a certain kinship with working-class cultural forms and the style of popular theatre. It is hard to imagine playwrights like David Hare, David Edgar, Caryl Churchill or John McGrath allowing a star known for improvisational comedy to dominate their scripts and letting a subtle, verbal comedy of manners be overtaken by broad farce. Once again, it can be seen that the commercial theatre can be a hospitable environment for the very style of entertainment that critics like Davies and Van Erven dubbed as "popular theatre." The presence of Abbott, known for his improvisational comedy, in this play points to the ridiculousness of Davies' exclusive theatrical categories. Davies claimed that the West

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[33] Michael Billington, *The Guardian*, October 23, 1987, as quoted in *London Theatre Record*, October 8, 1987, p. 1349.

[34] Clive Hirschhorn, *The Sunday Express*, October 25, 1987, as quoted in *London Theatre Record*, October 8 1987, p. 1350.

End was "serious" and "laden with prestige," while the popular theatre was the home for "popular entertainers . . . improvisation, spontaneity and topicality"[35] It is clear that *One for the Road* contains elements of both traditions, and is ambiguous precisely because popular theatre (with its confused genesis and mixed attributes of genuine popular culture and the product of hegemony) is *inevitably* ambiguous, otherwise it would not *be* popular theatre.

The legacy, then, of *One for the Road* tends to be mixed messages, perhaps also because it is far from being Russell's strongest play. On the whole, however, the text maintains an anti-establishment veneer and a sense of fun and immediacy which (depending on individual interpretation) could result in an intriguing, if messy and confused, populist production with nods to a variety of theatrical--both commercial and alternative--traditions.

Stags and Hens (1978)

Plot Summary

Stags and Hens is set in men's and women's bathrooms of a Liverpool dance hall, both of which (along with the corridor that links them with the main part of the club) are simultaneously visible on the stage. Maureen, Bernadette, Carol, Frances and Linda are out celebrating Linda's marriage of the following day to a man called Dave. Linda's envious friends feel that she is most fortunate to now have her own husband. Linda, though, disappears into a stall and begins to cry. The women revel in the details of

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[35] Andrew Davies, *Other Theatres* (London: Macmillan Education, 1987), pp. 4-5.

Linda's marriage ceremony, as well as expressing surprise that Linda wanted to come to this seedy club.

The next scene takes place in the men's room, next door. Robbie, Billy and Kav carry in an obviously-drunk and comatose Dave (who does not speak or even become conscious for the entire play). The three chat about the women on the dance floor whom they plan to seduce. Kav scrawls graffiti--a picture of a naked woman without a head--in the bathroom which the other's admire as a fine piece of art, although they recognize that it will soon be cleaned off. Eddy enters and complains that when Dave is married he will start losing interest in the local soccer team. Robbie, Billy and Kav are about to return to the dance floor when Eddy lectures them about loyalty to the still-ill Dave, who he says should not be left alone. They finally leave and we hear noise from the women's bathroom: they (except Linda) are also about to hit the same dance floor.

Robbie and Billy return to the gents, humiliated by women who have spurned them. Linda emerges from the stall and tells Frances that the only reason she is getting married is because Dave proposed while dancing and the proposal sounded like part of the music.

In the Gents, Eddy delivers a monologue to the silent Dave, telling him that he is trapping himself by marrying. The other men are arguing over women when Peter enters. Peter obviously plays in the band, and he reveals he knows some of the men as he used to live in the neighborhood of the club before moving to London. Recognizing him, Kav, Robbie and Billy are impressed with Peter's fame and ask for autographs. Eddy interrupts by entering and revealing that Linda is out on the dance floor.

The second act begins with Bernadette and Carol discussing their verbal banter with the men. In the gents, Eddy attacks Linda for dancing with different men and criticizes his friends for being impressed with Peter's fame.

Across the hall, the women reveal that they also have seen the men. They are desperate that Linda not see her husband-to-be. Linda, however, is unconcerned by Dave's presence and refuses to go anywhere else. In the corridor, Linda and Peter meet and reveal that they are old friends, although they have not seen one another for some time. Peter is surprised Linda is still in the area. Frances sees Linda and Peter in a mock embrace. Unabashed, Linda and Peter go off to dance.

Frances reports back to the other women and tells them that Linda and Peter used to date each other. Now realizing why Linda wanted to come to this club, the women decide that they have a duty to stop her from spoiling her "nice" wedding. When the women confront Linda, she tells them that she may not now go ahead with the wedding. Her friends blame Peter.

In the corridor, Peter tells Linda the band will not be able to play, as the club is literally falling apart. He also tells her that she should have come to London with him when he left, and he offers to take her with him now, merely giving her "a lift." Linda tells Peter for the first time that she is getting married the following day. Amazed, Peter asks Linda if she loves her husband-to-be and Linda replies that her friends tell her that she does.

The men have discovered that the wedding might be off and Eddy aggressively refuses to let Linda jilt his friend. He blames and berates Peter who denies knowing about Linda's marriage. Eddy grabs Peter and forces him to look at Kav's piece of bathroom art as an example of what the group can do. Peter suggests Kav goes to art school, an idea which Kav finds idiotic. A defiant Eddy tells Peter to leave and never return. The men, led by Eddy, march into the ladies in pursuit of Linda, who is being told by Bernadette that it is natural to have doubts. Eddy tells the defiant Linda she must marry Dave and the men carry Dave in sight of Linda, but the two single-sex groups

begin to pair off for the evening. Linda has no luck in eliciting any response from the still-comatose Dave, and then escapes by smashing the window of the gents. Everyone leaves except for Eddy who is left telling the unhearing Dave that Linda is gone and that he and his mate now: "can go anywhere."

Analysis

Stags and Hens focuses on young people and uses marriage as an avoidable symbol of being trapped into a working-class world. Merely by setting the play--which contains much humor, like all of Russell's dramas--in a pair of public toilets, Russell violates many of the high-art sensibilities that typically surround more traditional comedies of manners. Harold Walley described such comedies as plays that "appeal specifically to that civilized and discriminating segment of humanity to whom personal personal and social manners are a matter of genuine moment." That description is seemingly very far removed from a play set entirely in rest rooms--not typcial fare for the civilized nor the discriminating--the play's possible dramatic content notwithstanding. *Stags and Hens*' success in repertory and at the mainstream Young Vic, makes nonsense of Davies' statement that the mainstream theatre always has "an establishment tone."[36] Steve Gooch, has referred to alternative authors who had paid attention to the cultural slums.[37] In setting a play in the bathrooms of a decrepit working-class slums, it seems that Russell is prepared to delve into the actual slums of working-class life and not restrict himself to cultural metaphors.

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[36] Ibid., p. 162.

[37] Steve Gooch, *All Together Now*, (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 69.

The play's conception is a bold one, clearly grounded in an earthy reality and its subject-matter and style are certainly accessible to working-class audiences almost to the point that middle-class spectators--at least those with self-consciously refined tastes--are excluded.

Unlike *One for the Road*, *Stags and Hens* retains a crude sensibility that seems stronger than the ambiance of any West End theatre. Although the danger is still present that an audience could smugly laugh at the working-class misogyny presented in the play, from a position of superiority, *Stags and Hens* remains an obviously serious play with an undercurrent of darkness that deals with an area almost never touched previously by the commercial theatre.

Apparently set in Liverpool, the play has a distinctly local identity which bothered Tom Lubbock who was reviewing the 1980 London Old Vic production. "One imagines (*Stags and Hens*) holding a particular interest for a Liverpool audience, " Lubbock wrote (the play, after all, is largely about whether or not working-class Liverpool offers anything at all to those who remain there). "The spectacle of the play comes to include the spectacle of its own, its proper audience."[38] Lubbock's comment is revealing because it demonstrates how well this play holds its identity with the community that spawned it, resulting in an intriguing sense of dislocation when experienced by an outsider. As with most genuine examples of popular culture, according to McGrath, the play's sense of localism is very strong. Lubbock's comment would seem to suggest that merely assuming that the play's identity would be destroyed by its being produced elsewhere would appear to be inaccurate, as the play has sufficient force to withstand such transitions.

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[38] Tom Lubbock, *Plays and Players*, August 1984, p. 32.

Although *Stags and Hens* is very much a Liverpool play, it does contain once again the familiar themes and characters that ally it with Russell's earlier work. As in his previous plays, Russell is not afraid to criticize the working-class. Indeed, in this play, the working-class characters largely decide their own destiny unfettered by or aided from middle-class outsiders. This singularity of purpose is what gives this play its surprising darkness--the working-class young are seen as complicit both in remaining part of the working-class and in making their own class-identity so stultifying. In other words, the play is one of the more savage indictments of young, working-class mores ever to be reach the English stage. The lack of any normative character (aside from Peter who says very little) has caused Russell to worry about *Stags and Hens* being misinterpreted:

> This is probably the play of mine that is most open to misinterpretation and to bad productions because there is no articulate middle-class character or articulate teacher figure. Many of my plays have a teacher figure who acts as a leader . . . a Jesus figure or an A.S. Neale figure who is able to encourage a process of articulation and in some cases to simply state the theme of the play, the playwright's attitude if you want to be crude about it. But *Stags and Hens* just presents it as it is.[39]

Once again, its setting is an atrophied, working-class, social ritual--in this case the pathetic attempts of the young to find a mate that will allow them to conform to the established values of their class. Linda's friends (all with noticeable Roman Catholic names, which suggests that Russell is criticizing the church for its part in working-class repression), are conservative traditionalists who have agreed to their role in working-class society without any rebellion or even any real sense of irony. Although they recognize the limitations of their lives (Bernadette complains in the play's opening seconds

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[39] Personal Interview with Willy Russell, December 22, 1988.

complains that her "feller . . . wouldn't lift a bloody finger,"[40] Maureen admits that "You give up bein' a girl when you get married,"[41] and the superstitious Carol complains that "Gettin' married is a terrible liability, y' know"[42]), the women have never entertained any thought that they have any alternative to their traditional working-class role as validated wife and, ultimately, mother. Their personal happiness subjugated to a sense of duty, the reactionary group will go to enormous lengths to prevent Linda from breaking the ranks of oppression. As Bernadette tells her friend: "Every woman has doubts. But that's all they are, doubts. Y' don't act on feelings like that. . . . Who'd be married today if we all took notice of how we feel?"[43] When she realizes that Linda might not marry, Bernadette's first concern (before she becomes annoyed at Linda's refusal to follow established social rituals) is that her wedding present may be wasted, which again shows Russell's willingness to attack working-class materialism.

Russell's portrayal of the occupants of the men's room is equally critical. All of the men are obsessed with shades of macho posturing and are out of touch with their feelings and unable to effectively communicate with the opposite sex--symbolized by Dave's drunken silence as Linda re-examines her motivations for marrying--except through the cliched, objectified and empty lines that make up the mating ritual. They are a little less convinced of the necessity of marriage than their female counterparts, but their doubts evolve mainly from concerns about how the presence of women disrupts male bonding. In times of adversity, they talk largely rhetorically about the importance of loyalty and

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[40] Willy Russell, *Educating Rita, Stags and Hens and Blood Brothers* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 13.

[41] Ibid., p. 28.

[42] Ibid., p. 50.

[43] Ibid., p. 65.

unity--which essentially means the denial of individual expression. They are unable to cope with women who do not subscribe to their idea of appropriate female behavior--Robbie complains that Dave's wife-to-be orders men's drinks and "acts like a docker"[44] and Kav declares that "a woman has got a responsibility to her feller. No tart of mine's gonna turn fat."[45] We are also led to understand that Dave is hoping Linda's original spark will disappear after the marriage. Similarly, the male group are collectively appalled when Peter enters wearing boots that the men associate with women. Russell suggests that the character, Kav, does have some artistic sensibilities but can not and will not recognize the value importance of art, nor its ability to act as an escape route for its owner from the working-class environment.

Russell's most interesting character is that of Eddy, an aggressive man who is determined to be successful in his own terms--ignoring the importance of education, relationships or society's definition of success. Eddy is essentially an inverted snob and his lack of flexibility and general embittered conservatism ensure his position at the lowest point of society. Russell has said that:

> I don't know a prototype of Eddy, but I recognize him. I see him all the time. And he's a puritan and he is a conservative. And he doesn't want the world to change. And he doesn't want women to get in the way of things because he does want to enjoy that male faculty. If you think about it, a lot of English life is still based on that--men with men. Women make things muddy. Women don't talk about things because even when they are talking about things like carpets and sofas, they are talking about feelings. Now someone like Eddy can't cope. He doesn't want to go in that area. He has a rigid code of behavior and women upset that, because they won't be (in his words) logical, practical and straightforward. Eddy's an old-fashioned character, but the tragedy is that he is still around as a youth.[46]

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[44] Ibid., p. 20.

[45] Ibid., p. 23.

[46] Personal Interview with Willy Russell, December 22, 1988.

Eddy provides much of the play's menace, as well as a good deal of its poignancy. The author's obvious affection for the character ensures that the audience is not being pushed into one approved interpretation of this sad man, but they are encouraged to arrive at their own negotiated reading--be it sympathetic or otherwise.

Unimpressed by anything, Eddy uses his position as head of the men's local football team to exercise his will. At the play's climax, his closing speech to the still comatose and now-abandoned Dave is perhaps one of Russell's best moments. Clearly, we are intended to take Eddy's words ironically. Unable to make Linda stay in the working-class fold through means of physical force, and abandoned by his trivial, disloyal cohorts, Eddy is reduced to inarticulate cursing, desperate, angry and defiant to the end:

> Bastards. They've bailed out on us Dave. They've left us. (*Starting to pick him up*) They've all gone Dave. She's gone. She's fucking gone Dave. The bitch. (*He gets Dave standing.*) Well fuck them all. (*He starts to carry Dave towards the doors*) They've gone. She's gone. Well y've got no baggage weighin' y' down. There's nothin' holdin' us back now Dave. We can go anywhere.[47]

It is patently obvious that the two can go nowhere.

The most striking thing about *Stags and Hens* is its defiant and stark portrayal of working-class conservatism and the ability of the play to depict the inevitable progression of wasted working-class lives, as well as detailing the apparent complicity of those individuals involved. Once again, the reasons for the pathetically reactionary positions of these characters remain peripheral to the main action of the play, a work that is based on their actual manners, father than the reasons *for* them. Russell is, nonetheless, careful to note the power of ignorance caused by a lack of education--the men scoff at the idea of

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[47] Willy Russell,*Stags and Hens*, p. 72.

Kav going to art school, even though they realize that his rest-room graffiti will just be painted over; the women, meanwhile, make fun of students. Like the characters in *Breezeblock Park*, these young people work at mindless, stultifying jobs ("we don't wanna talk about us, it's dead borin'," says Kav to Peter. "We just fuckin' work"[48]), and the decrepit nature of this nightclub is obviously meant to symbolize the industrial decay which makes up the environment in which these people live: Bernadette says that she expects the group of friends will all live and die "round here," to which Carol responds with a reference to the club: "It's a dump isn't it eh? It's like this place."[49]

Stags and Hens is a savagely comic indictment of the behavior of the working-class. Once again, Russell is essentially making a plea for a kind of gentle liberalism, but this play is remarkable in a populist sense because it puts the solutions to the dilemma firmly in the hands of the working-class themselves--Russell suggests that these characters make it impossible for each other to escape from their deprivation. Although any one of them could, in theory, follow Linda and Peter's escape into a world of self-determination, it is the social pressures of their peers that is the biggest obstacle, rather than the inequities of the class system itself. In *Stags and Hens*, Russell was also not afraid to make the bold choice of creating the seediest, most atrophied, of working-class environments to make his point, even at the risk of offending the commercial theatre's "traditional" audience.

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48 Ibid., p. 40.

49 Ibid., p. 17.

Our Day Out (1976 and 1983)[50]

Plot Summary

Our Day Out has an open setting and the theatrical version was originally produced in the round with a set merely consisting of some simple benches. The play follows the progression of a field trip that a liberal schoolteacher, Miss Kay, has organized as an enjoyable day out for her "Progress Class," a euphemistic way of describing the remedial children who are considered beyond academic hope. As Miss Kay--and Susan and Colin, two other young teachers--have a liberal reputation, the nasty Mr. Briggs is sent on the trip by the headmaster to supervise behavior. As the hired coach--driven by a driver who hates these inner-city children-- makes its first stop at a local restaurant, the bad behavior of the children has already angered Briggs, whose insistence on organization and discipline conflicts with Miss Kay's humane approach to the trip. The children steal from the cafe--although mainly as a reaction to the high prices, specially inflated for schools--and return to the bus, where one pupil, Linda, declares her love for the young teacher, Colin. Miss Kay lies to help the children get away with it. Against Briggs' wishes, Miss Kay declares that the next stop will be at the zoo, where the children "borrow" many of the animals to take back with them. An irate keeper catches

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50 There are three versions of *Our Day Out*. The play was originally written in 1976 and broadcast by BBC television. It was published a decade later as *Our Day Out and Other Plays* in an edition edited by David Self (London: Hutchinson, 1987). Russell adapted the play as a musical for the theatre for an Everyman production, opening on April 8, 1983. This text was published by Samuel French (London, 1984). It was subsequently re-adapted for a London setting, opening at the Young Vic on August 20. I have included a brief consideration of this play at the end of this chapter because this play is essentially early Russell from a thematic standpoint, but its chronological appearance in the theatre places it later than the four plays already considered above.

the thefts just in time. Briggs, whose trust has been betrayed, closes the first act by calling Miss Kay's pupils "animals."

At the start of the second act, the children are outside a local castle that is by the sea. Briggs tries to organize the tour with military precision and declares his sense of desperation that the children--who are bored--have so little interest in their heritage. One child, Carol, just wants to stare out at the sea. Briggs attacks Miss Kay for letting the children roam free around the castle--Miss Kay retorts that these academically rejected children at least deserve a good day out before their inevitable progression to unemployment. Meanwhile, Carol disappears and Briggs finds her on the top of a cliff threatening suicide because she does want to return to her miserable life in the city. Briggs, softening, talks Carol into returning, but she slips at the last moment. Briggs grabs her and carries her back to the bus. Briggs, whose philosophy has now changed, suggests a trip to the fair where the whole group has a wonderful time. Arriving back in the city, Miss Kay tells Briggs that she has pictures of him smiling and having a good time. Under the guise of getting the film developed, Briggs take this piece of evidence and exposes it to the light. As the play ends, we hear Carol's parent screaming and cursing at the vulnerable child.

Analysis

Our Day Out was one of the most successful television plays ever broadcast[51] and its theatrical incarnation was essentially true to the original script, with the addition of music. This is assuredly one of Russell's minor works, aimed largely at children and teenagers,

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[51] The play was so successful that it was re-broadcast on three occasions--during December 1977, January 1978 and January 1979.

with a relatively narrow frame of reference. Once again, however, the piece appears to subscribe to many of the edicts of popular theatre--there is a large amount of comedy, music and sentimentalized emotion, the play has a localized setting (both the Liverpool and London productions used large numbers of local schoolchildren) and this accessible drama avoids complex subplots or thematic ambiguities and uses moment-by-moment-effect to show the audience the instant result of each machination of the plot.

One is also struck by its remarkable authenticity; it details life in an inner-city school from the point of view of the pupils with remarkable accuracy and, given that it was originally written for the Everyman, the play's subject-matter is close to its intended audience's life and experience--it is a rare indeed to see a children's play that overtly suggests that theft can be justified and generally sanctions a good deal of immoral (or ammoral), if ultimately harmless, behavior.

Our Day Out's theatrical run was also remarkable for its ability to bring a young audience to the theatre and generally create a non-traditional theatrical atmosphere--*The Guardian* noted that being at the Young Vic production was like "being a witness to an unusually relevant end-of-term play."[52] Another critic saw the importance of attracting children to the Young Vic:

> A high proportion of the audience is the same age as the cast and they giggle and snort at the love songs and cheer and stamp at the rest. If they get an inkling of the dire future that lies ahead of them--unless a fairer system is devised--then something will have been achieved.[53]

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[52] Rosalind Carne, *The Guardian*, as quoted in *London Theatre Record*, August 29 1983, p. 686.

[53] Diana Simmonds, *City Limits*, Ibid., p. 687.

It is hard to think of a piece of fringe theatre that has crossed two media and been such a palpable hit with young people. One has a sense that Russell cares about this intended young audience--the play is undoubtedly written as if the author were on the young people's side, which is further testimony to Russell's refusal to write as if he were in an aesthetic vacuum.

As well as being an entertaining piece of popular theatre, *Our Day Out* does make some political statements about the educational system, although they remain essentially part of the same emotive plea for liberalism that has been seen in each of the other plays that are analyzed above. Miss Kay is essentially a realist who is helplessly struggling within the system rather than attempting to change it, while disciplinarian Mr. Briggs functions more as a reformable melodramatic villain than a meaningful representative of the establishment. The headmaster's comments about Miss Kay's ability to keep the undesirable low achievers out of everyone's sight makes a cogent political comment, however: "By and large I reckon she does a good job. She keeps them well out of the way with their reading machines and plasticine."[54]

The play also contains some interesting debates between Miss Kay and Briggs, immediately before the conservative reverses his attitudes, in which Russell comes closer to direct political criticism of the system than at virtually any other point in his plays. Speaking as the mouthpiece of the playwright, Miss Kay asserts that it is impossible to educate these children because they are deliberately kept in ignorance, through a deliberate paucity in educational funding, to avoid creating too many over-educated, unemployable school-leavers. Miss Kay describes her Progress class as being essential the victims of a deliberately exclusive casting policy reminiscent of Huxley's *Brave New World*:

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54 Willy Russell, *Our Day Out* (London: Samuel French, 1984), pp. 3-4.

> Stop fooling yourself. Teach them? Teach them what? You'll never teach them because nobody knows what to do with them. Ten years ago you could teach them to stand in a line, you could teach them to obey, to expect little more than a lousy factory job. But now they haven't even got that to aim for. Mr Briggs, you won't teach them because you're in a job that's designed and funded to fail! There's nothing for them to do, any of them; most of them were born for factory fodder, but the factories have closed down.[55]

This speech, unlike most Russell plays, places the manners of the characters in an overtly political context, allowing us to see the misbehaving children as sad and helpless victims of a divisive educational policy. The children are also seen as victims of urban blight and callous working-class homes: Returning to the city, one pupil complains "It's bleedin' horrible when y' look at it isn't it?"[56] The affection-starved Carol even says to the nasty Briggs "Sir, you know if you'd been my old feller--I would have been all right wouldn't I?"[57] Most significantly, Russell chooses to leave his audience with the screams of the fragile Carol's violent parent ringing in their ears. As is the case with all his plays, Russell views the working-class as complicit in their own oppression and uses emotional symbols like the beauty of fresh air or the fun of a day at the fair as evocative juxtapositions with the depressing decay of everyday life. One is struck that these contrasts are relatively trivial--just as Sandra's needs away from Breezeblock Park were largely illusory, so the school children's day out is inherently ephemeral and transitory, which is perhaps is what gives this play its necessary ambiguity, as well as its heart and emotional power.

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55 Ibid., p. 39.

56 Ibid., p. 53.

57 Ibid., p. 48.

Our Day Out is a populist plea for a warm-hearted, fair and liberal world with more equality, jollity and smiles on more people's faces. One could certainly argue that this play, performed and viewed largely by children, is not an overtly political piece of drama, but the fact remains that it combines an authentic, rarified working-class experience--an experience accessible to the very youngest members of a working-class audience--with its humanist but nonetheless left-wing politics clearly in evidence for all to see. Its working-class characters are generally presented as intelligent, street-wise, free-spirited and realistic, and their behavior is not mediated or stereotyped for middle-class consumption.

If only for these achievements, *Our Day Out* is a warm-hearted, notable addition to the existing body of popular theatre. Analyses of Russell's later, wider-ranging plays continue in the following chapter.

CHAPTER VIII

RUSSELL IN THE EIGHTIES: COMMERCIAL RAMIFICATIONS OF EDUCATION, CLASS AND FEMINISM

The plays analyzed in the preceeding chapter represent Russell's early work. His first play, *John, Paul, George, Ringo . . . and Bert* was closely related in style to the early work of John McGrath that was so influential in the beginning of Russell's career. The succeeding three plays, *Breezeblock Park*, *One for The Road* and *Stags and Hens* were essentially variations on the realities of working-class life, and these accessible works, like the television play, *Our Day Out*, made no pretensions towards grand themes.

This chapter, however, is devoted to Russell's three latest plays, all of which represent the playwright at a more mature stage. It is significant that Russell in the eighties spread his dramatic range somewhat, while retaining his accessible style. Each of the three major, successful plays that are analyzed below represents an interest in a particular theme. *Educating Rita* is a discussion of education as it applies to the working class. *Blood Brothers* is a musical that focuses on class division. *Shirley Valentine*, Russell's latest work, represents his most explicit intrusion into an area usually reserved for the feminist fringe.

Educating Rita (1979)

Plot Summary

Educating Rita is set on the first floor of a Victorian-built university in the north of England. At the opening of the first scene, Frank, a university professor in his early fifties, is drinking from a bottle of whisky hidden in his office. Rita, a 26-year-old ladies' hairdresser, enters and introduces herself as someone who has enrolled in the Open University "because I wanna know. . . everything." The two attempt a discussion of literature, but Rita has read only popular material and has no knowledge of the classics. Offering to find her a new tutor, Frank says that he cannot help Rita because he is not equal to what this demanding student wants. Rita, who wants only Frank as her teacher, says that she will come again the next week. The second scene opens with Rita telling Frank that she envies the "proper students," while Frank tells Rita that her first essay, on *Rubyfruit Jungle*, is useless because of its subjectivity, when criticism is an objective science. When Frank tries to tell Rita she must discipline her mind if she is to pass an exam, Rita switches the conversation to Frank's personal life. He reveals that he has split from his wife and lives with Julia, a former student, and he explains that he used to write poetry.

At the start of scene three, Frank is horror-struck that Rita has written an essay on Forster (whom Rita finds boring) with almost total reference to Harold Robbins. In scene four, Frank is appalled by Rita's latest essay, on Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, in which she suggest that inherent staging difficulties could be solved by doing the play on the radio. This leads the two into a discussion of culture, both high and working-class, and Rita claims that she does not see any culture, only people telling the working-classes what to

do. She also reveals that her husband, Denny, is becoming increasingly adamant that she no longer attend the university.

In scene five, Rita arrives without her essay, which Denny has burned along with all her books, after he suspected her of having an affair with Frank. Frank wants to go the pub and discuss Rita's marriage but Rita insists on returning to the study of Chekov. Rita asks Frank, who is drinking again, why he stopped writing poetry. He replies that instead of writing poetry he found himself trying to create literature. Not fully understanding, Rita instead drags the reluctant Frank off to an amateur production of *The Importance of Being Earnest.* Rita visits Frank in her lunch hour in scene six to report her attendance at a professional theatre to see a production of *Macbeth,* which she loved.. As Rita leaves, Frank invites her to come to a dinner party at his and Julia's home. Rita agrees to attend.

Frank opens scene seven by berating Rita for her non-attendance at the dinner party. She explains that she was too intimidated to come--and worried that she would be assigned the role of court jester. In scene eight, Rita reveals that she has left Denny and moved back in with her mother. Although upset, she wants to know what Frank thought of her essay on *Macbeth.* He replies that it was passionate and moving, but useless as a tool to pass exams. Rita, who has realized that the working-class cultural forms are empty and alienated, resolves to change, write in the approved manner, and pass the degree.

The opening scene of the second act takes place as Rita returns from summer school, where she has impressed her tutors. Rita has now moved in with a new middle-class flat mate, Trish. She begins to criticize Frank for his continued drinking, telling him that he is ruining his life. Frank has decided to introduce Rita to a new poet, Blake, but Rita is already (to Frank's dismay) familiar with him.

In the second scene, Rita appears with a disguised northern accent as she feels--thanks to Trish's influence--that the discussion of literature precludes its use. Frank is both jealous of Rita's new male friends and appalled at her loss of identity. He tells Rita, to her delight, that her latest essay is exactly like those written by the students at the regular university. Frank is very drunk in the third scene, due to his students reporting him for giving a lecture while inebriated. The administration has suggested he takes a sabbatical out of the country. Frank is irritated by Rita's latest essay which interprets Blake's poem *The Blossom* as being concerned with sexuality, when Frank feels it is an uncomplicated piece about actual blossom. Rita now resents Frank's treating her as if she were still ignorant of the ways of literature.

Rita arrives late in scene four, and she is now finding less and less time to talk with Frank, who has discovered she has left the hairdressers to work in bistro. The two spar before Frank ends the scene by handing Rita his poetry and suggesting that she critique it. In the fifth scene, Rita appears in Frank's office unannounced, to tell him how impressive she found his poetry, especially now that she can understand all of the symbols. Rita attacks Frank's self-pity and his resentment of her growth.

After a brief scene in which Frank leaves a message for Rita on the telephone about her examination, the final scene of the play begins with Frank packing for Australia. Rita, who has achieved a good pass in her exams, has discovered that her flat mate is not all she thought--Trish has tried to commit suicide. Rita is now thinking of having a baby and re-embracing some of her working-class roots. The play ends with the audience thinking that Rita is about to offer Frank a sexual favor in return for all that he has done, but instead she simply begins to cut his hair.

Analysis

Educating Rita is Russell's best known play and probably his most accomplished work Its success (and that of the screenplay that followed) transformed Russell's status as a writer, essentially changing his perceived role from that of a comical storyteller of working-class foibles to an influential contemporary dramatist. The play is different in style, language and sophistication from any of the work that it followed.

By most standards, *Educating Rita* was an unlikely prospect for a major commercial success. In the first instance, it is a play about higher education (and the issues behind the topic), a subject infrequently touched upon in the theatre.[1]

Although the play is a comedy, it seemingly has little in common with the farcical, well-made domestic snapshots of working-class life considered above, nor is it all similar to the populist, fringe style of *John, Paul, George, Ringo . . . and Bert.* At first glance, this urbane, sophisticated--even verbose--drama would appear to have more in common with the output of the subsidized companies during the past two decades than with working-class theatre that may or may not make a profit.

That similarity is not just coincidental. Considering that *Educating Rita* was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company,[2] it perhaps should not be surprising that the play is peppered with references to E.M. Forster, William Blake, Henry James, T. S. Eliot and other literary figures. Furthermore, *Educating Rita* has no reliance on

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[1] Other relatively contemporary dramatic treatments of education--with some similarities to the themes of this play--include George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Arnold Wesker's *Roots*, Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, Simon Grey's *Quartermaine's Terms*, *Butley* and *The Common Pursuit*, Julian Mitchell's *Another Country*, and Mary O' Malley's *Once a Catholic.*

[2] The Royal Shakespeare Company commissioned the play for their alternative, Warehouse theatre--from where it transferred almost immediate to the West End's Piccadilly Theatre.

variety, music, spectacle or other species of theatrical glamor, as it takes place entirely in the office of a university teacher. There are just two, remarkably unglamorous, characters--a fading, drunken lecturer and a married, 26-year old Liverpool hairdresser who has a thirst for an education. Throughout the course of the play, these two characters simply talk to each other (making reference to a galaxy of characters whom we never meet) and actually *do* very little else. Minor dramatic conflicts--such as Rita's husband's negative reaction to her educational growth, or Frank's girlfriend leaving him--take place off-stage and their consequences are simply reported. The principal conflict, however, between Frank and Rita is largely intellectual--the two simply extend their respective forms of literary criticism and class identity (with their differing measures of subjectivity) to each other's lives. There is a relative paucity of moment-by-moment effect--this play builds much more slowly than the other Russell works and its sense of immediacy and simplicity obviously suffers in the process. In short then, the style and dramatic form of *Educating Rita* marked a new departure for Russell and this play at least would appear to be the antithesis of what McGrath and others would consider to be a genuine piece of noteworthy popular theatre.

I will argue, however, that *Educating Rita* is a remarkable piece of popular theatre for many reasons, even if it is an unusual example of that genre. In the first instance (its subdued style notwithstanding) *Educating Rita*, nonetheless *was* an enormous popular success, which gave Russell ammunition for his argument that McGrath's ideas on popular theatre were limited:

> if it's an absolute fact of life that you need the things in a play that McGrath says, why is *Educating Rita* known throughout the world when it is two people who come into a room and talk to each other over thirteen scenes?[3]

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[3] Willy Russell in a personal interview with the author, December 22, 1988, at Russell's office in Liverpool, England.

There are really only two possible answers to that question--either this play does not somehow qualify as popular theatre or there is a need for a more inclusive definition of what constitutes theatre that is able to appeal across class divisions.

Aside from its long run, national tours, and remarkably large number of overseas productions, the play itself has even become a type of dramatic metaphor for the education of the adult--especially female--working-classes. A panel at the 1987 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Atlanta, had the title: *Educating Rita: A Non-traditional Approach to Teaching Adult Student Writers*. The Open University itself, capitalizing on the success of the play, produced a recruitment brochure with the heading "You could be a Rita too!",[4] one tangible, demonstrable testimony, which goes beyond financial gain or ephemeral consciousness raising, to the high level of awareness this play enjoyed. That appropriation also goes someway towards demonstrating that this play's appeal went beyond the educated middle-classes. As Russell has noted, the very title of *Educating Rita* has "become almost a phrase in the English language for women who have decided to do something with their lives."[5]

This play is also remarkable for reasons other than its transferring an unusual subject into a great popular success. It is a work that accessibly considers in considerable, dramatic detail the dilemmas that surround the inherently elitist nature of both the literary industry, and the educational system, as well as exploring the difference between literature and pulp fiction, the validity of a subjective, untutored reaction as compared to a pseudo-objective, trained critical response and the atrophied nature of working-class culture--in short the very high art/low art dichotomy that is central to this study. No other

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[4] As quoted in Albert-Reiner Glaap, *Educating Rita: Comments and Study Aids*, Frankfurt an Main: Verlag Moritz Diesterweg, 1984), p. 49.

[5] Interview with Willy Russell, December 22, 1988.

successful contemporary play has examined the boundaries of what constitutes literature in such a extended fashion.

Educating Rita, however, has many similarities to Russell's previous works, its greater degree of sophistication notwithstanding. Russell would claim that it is a play concerned with an individual called Rita, rather than a work with a preordained theme. Once again the play is essentially about a character trying to escape from a wretched working-class existence, clinging to the idea that life could somehow be better, although with a shallow, undeveloped (and extremely selfish and non-communal) notion of what should replace the working-class deprivation that must be avoided at all costs. This time, of course, the means of escape is through an education, as a woman tries to use knowledge as a passport to a more fulfilling life. Unlike the characters in *One for the Road* (and her husband), Rita has realized that material gain alone is not sufficient to effect a real change in life. Rita tells Frank that most working-class people would not understand her desires to escape from inevitable, expected motherhood to a world of self-determination:

> I've tried to explain it to me husband but between you an' me I think he's thick. No, he's not thick, he's blind, he doesn't want to see. You know if I'm readin', or watchin' somethin' different on the telly he gets dead narked. I used to just tell him to piss off but then I realized that it was no good doin' that, that I had to explain to him. I tried to explain that I wanted a better way of livin' me life. An' he listened to me but he didn't understand because when I'd finished he said he agreed with me and that we should start savin' the money to move off our estate an' get a house out in Formby. Even if it was a new house I wanted I wouldn't go an' live in Formby.[6]

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6 Willy Russell, *Educating Rita, Stags and Hens and Blood Brothers* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 179.

Formby (a Liverpool suburb occupied primarily by members of the first-generation middle class), of course, represents the province of Pauline, Jane, Roger and Dennis, where new home-owners pointlessly ape the manners of the middle class.

As was the case with Russell's previous work, *Educating Rita* features an honest, realistic and sometimes critical depiction of working-class life and people. In particular, Russell uses Rita's frustrations as a means of conducting a savage indictment of the cultural fodder that is fed to the working class. Using a discussion of *Peer Gynt* as a catalyst, Rita remarks that most of the people in her neighborhood feel that life has no meaning and would welcome the chance to engage in a similar quest to that of Ibsen's hero. She also notes that although she has read about working-class culture, she does not feel like she has truly experienced anything cultural. It is significant that Rita (unlike many real-life, fringe playwrights who take a less realistic approach to the working-class existence) does not differentiate between so-called authentic cultural forms and their debased counterparts, when she notes that:

> I don't see any, y' know, culture. I just see everyone pissed, or on the Valium, tryin' to get from one day to the next. Y' daren't say that round our way like, cos they're proud. They'll tell y' they got culture as they sit there drinkin' their keg beer out of plastic glasses.[7]

Frank's response it that this situation is fine, assuming the people are happy. Rita retorts that they are not and complains that there is a "disease" that inflicts the working-class, who are misrepresented by the right-wing, popular press. Up until this point, these are relatively conventional left-wing sentiments--the popular press, in particular, is a familiar target for contemporary dramatists.[8] Rita, however (and, by extension Russell), goes on

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[7] Ibid., p. 194.

[8] Howard Brenton and David Hare's *Pravda* is perhaps the best known dramatic exposure of the political and ideological hypocrisies behind the controlling mass-media.

to complain about the pursuit of money, saying that the trade unions' concentration on material wealth is complicit with the establishment in covering up the essential problems of the working-class. At this point, the play's sentiments become separated from the sentiments of most leftist theatre, which typically studiously avoids any criticism of the union movement. Russell not only attacks the unions but is also critical of the force with which members of the working class can resist the escape of one of their own. Such problematic complicity--even though Russell is careful to explain the situational motivation--is very rarely seen in populist, fringe theatre. Rita is speaking of her husband, who deeply resents her attempts to become educated:

> Denny tried to stop me comin' tonight. He tried to get me to go out to the pub with him an' his mates. He hates me comin' here. It's like drug addicts, isn't it? They hate it when one of them tries to break away. It makes me stronger comin' here. That's what Denny's frightened of.[9]

Russell makes it clear that Rita feels ostracized from the members of her own class as she pursues her goal, and he tends to equate the possibility for Rita to change her life with individual effort, rather than class-based collective struggle. He suggests that the peer pressure that surrounds working-class life has to be ultimately ignored if one is to find a life with meaning. In other words then, in Russell's play it is the working-class people themselves who subscribe to the notion that "music an' clothes an' lookin' for a feller" are "the real qualities of life,"[10]and who "never tell y' things that matter."[11] It would be reasonable to see Rita's self-made climb towards class-mobility as essentially an example of the right-wing creed of hard work, sacrifice and self-help making it possible for

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[9] Russell, *Educating Rita*, p. 195.

[10] Ibid., p. 183.

[11] Ibid., p. 177.

anyone to escape their surroundings, were it not for Russell's insistence on satirizing what Rita wants to escape *to*.

On the other hand, though, it would also be inaccurate to say that *Educating Rita* ignores the fate of the people an intrepid individualist like Rita is leaving behind. Rita understands why her husband resists her educational growth and she treats his misogynistic jealousy with a gentle compassion that shows how much she cares about the human consequences of a class-based society:

> I see him lookin' at me sometimes, an' I know what he is thinkin', I do y' know, he's wonderin' where the girl he married has gone to. He even brings me presents sometimes, hopin' that the presents 'll make her come back. But she can't, because she's gone. . . . I told him I'd only have a baby when I had a choice, but he doesn't understand. He thinks we've got choice because we can go into a pub that sells eight different kinds of lager. He thinks we've got choice already: choice between Everton an' Liverpool, choosin' which washing powder, choosin' between one lousy school and the next, between lousy jobs or the dole.[12]

At no point in this play does Rita entirely lose her links with the working class, nor does she become merely an isolated individual who can be easily assimilated into the middle class without damaging the overall system. At the crisis point in her educational pursuit--after her husband leaves--Rita says that the reason she has returned is because her mother fleetingly recognized how limited and debased working-class "cultural" forms have become. The speech (about Rita's joining her family and peers in singing a song learned from a jukebox) that closes the first act of the play is certainly sentimental, emotive and even unrealistic, but it does firmly place Rita in the context of her class just when her status as an assertive individual is in danger of diminishing her class identity within the play. The powerful speech has the effect of giving Rita's educational quest the

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12 Ibid., pp. 197-198.

status of a representational journey for a forgotten class. Rita is struggling for an education for *others* in her position, as much as for herself:

> I did join in with the singin', I didn't ask any questions, I just went along with it. But when I looked around me mother had stopped singin', an she was cryin', but no one could get it out of her why she was cryin' Everyone just said she was pissed an' we should get her home. So we did an' on the way I asked her why. I said "Why're y' cryin', Mother?" She said, "Because--because we could sing better songs than those." Ten minutes later, Denny had her laughing and singing again, pretending she hadn't said it. But she had. And that's why I came back.[13]

In many ways, Rita's desires for taste and culture are similar to those of Sandra. Like the teenage escapee, Rita also hungers for taste and a seemingly unpretentious world where books (literature rather than pulp fiction), plants, the right wine, and gentle but sophisticated conversation are everywhere. What makes this play much more complete than the comedies that preceded it is that Russell addresses the other side of the equation by critiquing the shallowness of the existence that Rita wants so desperately.

Much of the action of this play follows Frank's sadness as the educational and examination system forces Rita to suppress her originality, wit and personality; to stop reading populist literature in favor of established classics; to suppress personal opinion in favor of recognized critical sources and to choose the pretentious way of analyzing Blake's poetry over a simple awareness of the poet's uncomplicated simplicity. As Rita's development progresses, she also disguises her "ugly" northern accent, decries her roots and becomes shallow and pretentious. Finally, the play reaches its crisis as Frank tells Rita that her desires have no soul, to which she retorts that such discrimination (and irony) comes only from the lips of those with unbridled opportunity:

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[13] Ibid., p. 208.

> RITA: I've got a room full of books. I know what clothes to wear, what wine to buy, what plays to see, what papers and books to read. I can do without you.
> FRANK: Is that all you wanted. Have you come all this way for so very, very little?
> RITA: Oh it's little to you, isn't it? It's little to you who squanders every opportunity and mocks and takes it for granted.
> FRANK: Found a culture have you, Rita? Found a better song to sing have you? No--you've found a different song, that's all--and on your lips it's shallow and hollow and tuneless. Oh, Rita, Rita, Rita . . . [14]

The message of the play is that Rita has indeed (like the characters in *One for the Road*), substituted one mediocre existence for another. This time, of course, Russell's target is middle-class liberal intellectualism rather than shallow materialism, but the message is essentially the same, inclusive Russell philosophy--a true, meaningful life can only be arrived at through combining the attributes of the two class-based lives--unilaterally deciding, as it were, to collapse the barriers of class discrimination. By the end of the play, that is precisely what happens to Rita. Her middle-class, tasteful roommate, Trish, tries to kill herself, which teaches Rita that happiness and taste are not mutually inclusive. Her bohemian new boyfriend, Tiger, turns out to be too childish and Rita is contemplating having a baby or spending Christmas back with her working-class family. Russell, then, leaves us in no doubt that Rita has changed--that she had the ability to compete with the "proper" students given the chance--but that she also needs to remember her class loyalties, that *Rubyfruit Jungle* has merit, and not be overly impressed with pomposity or pretension, be it literary or social. Making that connection--and embracing both sides of the class divide--is Russell's notion of what Rita's education has been.

Educating Rita is a problematic vehicle, like all of Russell's plays, for a radical, political agenda. Some have suggested that the play is largely a simple, and traditional, romantic comedy about two characters who simply ultimately move closer together.

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[14] Ibid., p. 228.

Furthermore, the educational system remains intact and relatively unscathed throughout this play--even though the play indicates the system's inherent class biases, it never challenges them. Rita wants to succeed, yet she is perfectly content to work within the divisive system--she sees her rightful place as in the Open University and she envies the "proper" university (with its proper students) that surrounds her because she views them as better and more legitimate. The educational hierarchy, then, is still rigidly in place. The kind of essays that Frank purports to hate, and the kind of vapid, regurgiative writing that he is terrified of Rita producing, is the style of work that gets good marks at the play's beginning as well as at is conclusion. No one seems to care, and at no time do Rita or Frank complain about the system that excluded Rita's participation until it became almost impossibly difficult for her. As Russell has noted:

> Frank is making a distinction between the sort of prescribed books that are to be studied and the sort of books you can just read. He is not putting a value judgement on either, because he patently despises the examination system, *and* probably would despise a Harold Robbins because it is a syntactical aberration.[15]

Frank, obviously, is no champion for the working-class--indeed, he is *uninterested* in the working-class. His relationship with Rita does not change his myopicism, because their relationship is framed in such a non-ideological manner. Frank, like Russell, is primarily interested in Rita as a individual, as a kind of perky, rejuvenative spirit who is able to reawaken him from what was rapidly becoming an inevitable, drunken slide towards death. Frank's value-system never changes in the course of the play. As Russell has noted: "I don't think Frank learns anything from Rita other than that Rita Mae Brown is a good novelist."

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15 Interview with Willy Russell, December 22, 1988.

Thus, although the play examines in considerable detail the high art/low art dichotomy, it would be overstating the case to suggest that this play is making a plea for more inclusive syllabi in higher education--it is not advocating that *Rubyfruit Jungle* replace anything on the biased standard curriculum. One could also reasonably argue that Rita's transition through the barriers of class and education is ridiculously unrealistic, as she goes from virtual illiteracy (believing that Yates is the name of a chain of bars, Forster a variety of lager and Eliot the name of the Chicago cop who caught Al Capone), to graduate status seemingly in a matter of months, and mainly between the end of the first act and the start of the second. Such a fairy-tale development, it could be argued, trivializes the problem of educational access by suggesting that great working-class differences produced by effectively segregated school education can be papered over by the alliance of an enthusiastic teacher and a hard-working student. In short, then, there is a lot of possible opposition to the notion that *Educating Rita* could be seen as a a radical or even a populist piece of theatre.

To complete this analysis, however, I will suggest some ways in which *Educating Rita* can be seen as a example of popular theatre taking place within a mainstream structure--much of the play's problematic relationship with the left comes from Russell's unabashed honesty about working-class reality, his insistence on the value of choice and freedom, and his insistence on entertaining rather than writing political propaganda. None of these things, however, disqualify *Educating Rita* from being a piece of popular theatre.

Educating Rita, despite its literary and educational subject matter, remains an accessible play. This is no mean feat when one considers that such material could easily have been shaped into a perpetual in-joke for the educated classes. *Educating Rita*'s accessibility, then, evolved from a conscious choice on the part of Russell:

> I wanted to make a play which engaged and was relevant to those who had no knowledge of literature, those who considered themselves uneducated, those whose daily language is not the language of the university or the theatre. In short I wanted to write a play which would attract, and be as valid for, the Ritas in the audience as well as the Franks and the Trishs.[16]

For the most part, Russell achieved what he set out to do. Although a knowledge of the play's twelve literary references is certainly desirable, this play does not rely on foreknowledge. Russell has explained whom he imagined as his model audience:

> One could easily have written a play that has literature as part of its theme, a play that complemented their foreknowledge of its audience, especially when I was writing for the Royal Shakespeare Company in a theatre like the Warehouse. I could have had gales of laughter from all sorts of allusions, but I kept firmly in my mind the idea of my mother who has never heard of E.M. Forster or William Blake going to see the play and not intimidating her, so that she could have an equally valid theatrical experience a someone who could get more out of the references to Blake, Forster and the rest.[17]

Russell's point is an accurate one, and this determination fits in well with the fact that this play celebrates the working-class identity of Rita, without any mediation or patronage. As Albert Glaap noted in a study of the effect of language in contemporary performance, Rita's language "is the language of the working-class people in and around Liverpool with its regional and social varieties, grammatical deficiencies and vulgarisms."[18] The play celebrates this language by treating Rita's attempts to lose her accent with heavy satire.

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16 Willy Russell, *Educating Rita*, ed.Albert-Reiner Glaap (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Moritz Diesterweg, 1984), p. 6.

17 Interview with Willy Russell, December 22, 1988.

18 Albert Glaap, "Perspectives on Language in Performance," *Studies in Linguistics, Literary Criticism, and Language Teaching and Learning* (Tubingen: Guner Narr Verlag, 1987), p. 671.

Throughout the play, Rita is alive, vibrant, compassionate, intelligent and honest, and, by the play's end, she has become the only spark in Frank's otherwise dead life. The two characters end up changing places, in many ways, which further suggest the artificiality of the class-based barrier that divides their two existences. By the conclusion of the play it is Frank who is desperate for subjectivity, originality and personality, telling his disbelieving students that "assonance means getting the rhyme wrong," and it is Frank who is reading and appreciating *Rubyfruit Jungle*. Glaap has noted that "Frank's language adopts some of the features that were characteristic of Rita's language when she first came to see him."[19] On the other hand, it is Rita who is making statements like "It becomes a more rewarding poem when you see that it works on a number of levels."[20]

In short , the message of *Educating Rita* is that these barriers are transcendable, if one has the individual motivation to break them down. It is significant, however, that as Frank "learns" from Rita he becomes increasingly unacceptable to the university establishment. His new penchant for subjective honesty, coupled with his drinking, leads to his taking a forced sabbatical at the conclusion of the play.

Like most good popular theatre, *Educating Rita* is an optimistic piece and it is inclusive enough to appeal to wide-ranging audiences. Although it cannot be described as a play that advocates political empowerment, it certainly has the capacity to suggest the importance of education as a tool for working-class emancipation. Furthermore, by creating an accessible play that essentially sees the play from Rita's working-class point of view, it is written to galvanize others to follow her course. One interesting demonstration of this script's capacities is the acclaimed 1987 Off-Broadway production by the Steppenwolf Company, which interpreted the play in a direct manner,

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[19] Ibid., p. 674.

[20] Russell, *Educating Rita*, p. 221.

downplaying the romance implicit in the script, making Frank appear comparatively weak and self-destructive, and portraying Rita as a desperate, determined woman who is, to use William Henry's phrase, "no winsome waif but an embodiment of sheer will-power."[21] Some critics, such as Clive Barnes, missed the gentle romance in the Steppenwolf version of *Educating Rita*, but the production impressed most reviewers as a piece that showed the power and hunger of the working class and their ability to usurp the position of their mentors. No one was in any doubt that this was a play about education and the British class system, even if did happen to be very funny and *pleasurable*.

All of the plays analyzed in the previous chapter noted the inherent theatricality of Russell's work--its preoccupation with one-liners, physical humor and other attributes of popular theatre. Although *Educating Rita* is a more sophisticated piece, it is worth noting that it is still a highly theatrical play, written by an author whose dramatic, comic reflexes often overpower his thematic or character-based preoccupations, often to the frustration of the higher-minded critics. Simon Howard, reviewing the original production, complained that "an idea sometimes makes way for an unnecessary quip,"[22] a criticism which seems accurate. In it these quips, however, that ensure the play's lightness and accessibility. Interestingly, when Albert Glaap interviewed Russell and suggested that the end of the first act is a thematic turning point, Russell responded with his usual anti-intellectualism and claimed that this part of the play is best described as "a cranking-up moment. It's the moment where the drama cranks up to its next level."[23]

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21 William Henry, *Time*, May 25, 1987, p. 38.

22 Simon Howard, *Plays and Players*, June 1980, pp. 19-20.

23 As quoted in *Educating Rita* , ed. Glapp, p. 25.

Similarly, this play ends on a broad joke, a *double entendre* based on Rita's profession and the audience's curiosity about the nature of her relationship with Frank. Most playwrights, it seems fair to assume, would have preferred to finish the play with a powerful synthesis of the play's issue: Russell prefers the kind of gag that British farce has made its own, and its inclusion ensures that any of the high-mindedness created by the play's subject-matter is largely dispelled.

Educating Rita will never satisfy many of the demands of the political left, largely because it focuses on an individual, refrains from attacking the system and takes a liberal, inclusive outlook on life--perhaps best exemplified by the lesson Rita learns that is based on Forster's words: "only connect." Russell has never denied the play's inclusivity and he summed up how, at the end of the play, Rita is essentially trying to shape the best of both worlds and both classes:

> At the end of the play what I'm trying to show is somebody who synthesizes the best of what she can gain from literature and what she can get from *Rubyfruit Jungle*. . . . One's talking about a complete woman. It's also, of course, something to do with class. I'm talking about somebody who synthesizes the best of two classes and trying [sic] to attack the divisions really in teaching, in education, and in the class system. And so it's the division and it's the elitist way in which literature is dealt with that I really object to.[24]

Such liberalism notwithstanding, this play remains an accessible piece of theatre (which can be understood on several different levels) that is both funny, theatrical and realistic. Working-class life is not artificially revered, but it is depicted honestly, truthfully and with great compassion. Most importantly, perhaps, *Educating Rita* has a proven capacity to empower and to advocate education of the populace at large. Russell suggests that Rita is merely representative of an entire lost class whose achievements could be equal to those on the other side of the barrier. The play is a remarkable

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[24] Ibid., p. 22.

combination of the didactic and the popular. Its existence within the mainstream theatre does not appear to have detracted from its substantial themes, its refusal to indulge in the literary games of high-art drama and its applicability to audiences of all social classes.

Blood Brothers (1983)

Plot Summary

Blood Brothers, takes place on an open stage with two semi-permanent areas--the Lyons house and the Johnstone house. The area between the two houses acts as communal ground for street scenes, park scenes and other exteriors. The first act begins with a narrator telling the audience about the Johnstone twins who never knew that they shared a name and killed each other--the description is followed by a preview of the play's last scene; the deaths of Mickey and Edward.

Mrs. Johnston enters and tells the audience of her life--typically working-class and containing a good deal of sadness and debt--through a song. Mrs.Johnstone's several children scream out their needs, showing the audience their mother's financial desperation. We then see her at work cleaning Mrs. Lyons' home, a large, middle-class house. Mrs. Lyons reveals that her husband is away for the next five months, and also that she is unable to have children and her husband refuses to adopt.

Mrs. Johnstone learns that she is pregnant with twins and she tells Mrs. Lyons that she does not know how she will be able to manage. The desperate Mrs. Lyons suggests that Mrs. Johnstone gives one to her--she would fake a pregnancy and pretend the child was hers. Mrs. Lyons tells her cleaner she could see her child each day. Mrs. Johnstone is reluctantly talked into the deal, which is sealed by her laying a hand on The

Bible. When the twins are born, Mrs. Lyons immediately takes one, refusing to allow the now-repentant Mrs Johnstone to keep it for a few more days. Mr Lyons has now returned and we see Mrs. Johnstone go to pick up the baby when she works at the Lyons'. Mrs. Lyons is jealous and talks her husband into firing Mrs. Johnstone, paying her off with cash. Mrs. Lyons uses the superstition that says parted twins who learn they are a pair shall both immediately die, as a tool to prevent Mrs. Johnstone from ever telling anyone about their agreement.

In the next scene, Mickey--the twin that Mrs. Johnstone kept--is seven years old. Edward--who was given to Mrs. Lyons--enters and the two boys start a friendship even though Edward reports that he is forbidden by his mother to play in this area. They find out they are the same age and resolve to become best friends and "blood brothers." Mrs. Johnstone recognizes Edward, and gently forbids him from coming to the area again.

Mickey arrives at the Lyons', in search of Edward. When Mrs. Lyons realizes who he is, she refuses to let Edward, who is picking up working-class habits, go out and play with him. Linda, a friend of Mickey's, is playing with Sammy and Mickey and other children in the next scene. They go to get Edward, who warily appears to join them Mrs. Lyons, meanwhile, is having the beginnings of a breakdown and tells her non-comprehending husband that the family must move out of the neighborhood as soon as possible. The japes of the children, meanwhile have attracted the attention of a policeman. Although all are equally guilty, when the policeman takes Mickey home, he threatens prosecution. When he takes Edward home, however, the officer has a drink with Mr. Lyons and offers to forget the whole thing, blaming it on bad associations.

Edward goes to tell Mrs. Johnstone about his family's impending move, and she secretly gives him a locket with a picture of Mickey, so he can remember his friend. After the move, we see both Mickey and Edward bemoaning their absence from each other. Mrs Johnstone then reveals that her family is also moving, as they have been

reassigned to a new council-owned house. The family sees the move to the country as a chance for a new start.

As the second act opens, Mrs. Johnstone sings about the improvements in the life of her family. Edward, now fourteen, is leaving his parents to go to boarding school. Mickey is off to school also, and a romance is beginning with Linda. Elder brother Sammy, who is unemployed, is in serious trouble with the police. At Edward's boarding school, his teacher tells him to give up his locket. Edward refuses, and is sent home. Mrs. Lyons sees the picture inside Edward's locket, but her son refuses to tell her where it came from.

Edward meets Mickey again and the two eventually recognize each other. He also sees Linda, who says she finds Edward attractive even though she is Mickey's girlfriend. Mrs. Lyons follows her "son" to Mrs. Johnstone's home, where she offers to bribe her nemesis into moving again. Mrs. Johnstone refuses. The desperate Mrs. Lyons unsuccessfully tries to knife her.

As their ages progress from 14 to 18, we see vignettes of Linda, Mickey and Edward having fun together. Edward's announcement that he leaves for university the following day puts an end to these long, combined summers of friendship. Edward, before he goes, promises a continued friendship and tells Linda of his affection for her, even though he knows and recognizes that she belongs to Mickey. We then learn that Linda is pregnant by Mickey and the two decide to marry. In the meantime, Mickey loses his job at the factory. When Edward returns from university for Christmas, there are no parties in the economically-desperate neighborhood and Mickey resents his former friend's affluence and optimism. The desperate Mickey allows Sammy to talk him into acting as a look-out for an armed robbery, despite his wife's objections. Someone gets shot, and the innocent Mickey is sent to jail for seven years.

When he is released, he is mentally disturbed and dependent on drugs. Linda, who has remained loyal, manages to find her husband a job to the delight of his mother. It is Edward who has helped get Mickey the job and Eddy--now Councillor Lyons--and Linda are seeing each other, although the relationship appears largely platonic. Mrs. Lyons enters and points out Edward and Linda holding hands to Mickey, who grabs a gun and goes wild.

The final scene takes place in a council meeting where Edward is speaking. Mickey bursts in with a gun and threatens Edward, asking him if it is he who is really the father of Linda's child. The police arrive and tell Mickey to put down the gun. Mrs. Johnstone bursts into the room and tells her two sons the truth about their being twin brothers. Mickey reacts with deep anger, screaming "Why didn't you give me away, I could have been him!" Mickey waves at Edward with his gun, although he has no intention of shooting him. The gun explodes and kills Edward. The police open fire and kill Mickey.

In an epilogue, the narrator asks the audience if superstition, or the British class system, should be blamed for the tragedy. The play ends with Mrs. Johnstone expressing the hope that this has all merely been an imaginary story.

Analysis

Blood Brothers is, arguably, the most significant British musical of the 1980s. Coming at a time when the form was dominated by apolitical, spectacular, expensive--and somewhat anonymous--epics, usually with a derivative plot and minimal dialogue, designed for the international market, Russell's first original musical impressed most critics by its simplicity, regionalism, class-consciousness, gentle didacticism and its

earthy determination to give as much weight to the spoken word as to the sung concept-number.

There were, however, a number of dissenting critical voices who attacked *Blood Brothers*, both its original London production in 1983 and its 1988 revival. No critics were ambivalent about *Blood Brothers*--the critical responses tended to be either euphoric or vicious. *Blood Brothers* is an unusual piece, an amalgam of different theatrical forms and influences. I will suggest here that this piece's populism--especially its coupling didacticism with working-class traditions--made both high-art devotees and left-wing purists uncomfortable, which accounts for it being attacked from both sides of the very class division that the musical was attacking, which is ironic indeed. Audiences, by contrast, have mainly reacted to the show with enormous enthusiasm, precipitating two extensive national tours and so early (and long-running) a London revival.

Although there has been some disagreement about the seriousness, artistic validity and political usefulness of Russell's musical, there is not room for any doubt as to what *Blood Brothers* is about. In the show, Russell is making the statement that environment and opportunity are much more influential in shaping a child's fate than genetics or hereditary concerns, and that the omnipresent British class system has the power to divide natural kin. Edward, the given-away child, enjoys a large vocabulary, a public-school education, a university degree and, ultimately, a position as a community leader. Mickey, by contrast, remains in the stultifying environment of the working-class which means a pathetic school, a dead-end job that turns to dust in times of economic recession, desperation, crime and ultimately mental and physical ruin as the system blames the hapless individual for the effects of his devastating environment. By the end of the play, Mickey's middle-class twin has unwittingly taken everything--including Mickey's wife--leaving the proud, working-class young man an empty shell, torn apart by poverty and the anguish of jealousy and missed opportunity.

If Russell's earlier plays showed the possibility of surmounting the great class divide, *Blood Brothers* is much less optimistic. Whereas the personality of a Sandra, Dennis, Linda or Rita was potentially enough to lift them into the unknown beyond the cast of their birth (assuming that they follow through with their individual willpower), the characters of *Blood Brothers* are fated to play-out their class-based destinies, powerless in the grip of the divided Britain in which they live.

If working-class Mickey commits a crime, he can expect severe punishment. If middle-class Edward does the same thing, he is treated leniently, as even the law recognizes the power of privilege. Clearly, *Blood Brothers* marked a significant thematic realignment, perhaps even a more developed sense of political anger at the *structure* of society, in Russell's work.

Russell makes certain that his audience sees class division as the true evil of his piece. At the conclusion of the play, the narrator (who has been present throughout the play, impersonating a variety of characters) steps outside of Mickey's anguish that he was not the one given away, outside of the play's climactic pair of violent deaths, and utters a summarizing rhyming couplet one might expect to find at a touring agit-prop performance, but never at the conclusion of a popular, commercially-produced West End musical:

> And do we blame superstition for what came to pass?
> Or could it be what we, the English, have come to know as class?[25]

As was the case with *John, Paul, George, Ringo . . . and Bert*, Russell flirts with a pseudo-Brechtian, openly theatrical style in *Blood Brothers*. The narrator not only breaks the illusionistic style of the musical on several occasions, acting as an ironic commentator on the plot and suggesting the inevitability of the tragic conclusion, but he opens the play

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25 Russell, *Blood Brothers*, p. 158.

(after "showing" the audience what is about to happen in the play's final scene, so that the suspense of the climax is instantly removed) by inviting the audience to use their *intellects* in judging what motivated the characters to "play their parts." The audience is clearly expected to realize that class is the main issue:

> So did y' hear the story of the Johnstone twins?
> As like each other as two new pins.
> Of one womb born, on the self same day,
> How one was kept and one given away?
>
> An' did you never hear how the Johnstones died,
> Never knowing that they shared one name,
> Till the day they died, when a mother cried,
> My own dear sons lie slain.
>
> An' did y' never hear of a mother, so cruel,
> There's a stone in the place of her heart?
> Then bring her on and come judge for yourselves
> How she came to play this part.[26]

The narrator continues to enhance the pseudo-epic style of this piece by demonstrating a comic contempt for theatrical illusion. After reappearing to play Mrs. Johnstone's gynecologist seconds after playing the Milkman, the narrator remarks to the audience, "Actually I've given up the milk round and gone into medicine,"[27] a line that also has the easily-overlooked effect of making the multi-character convention more accessible to those used only to illusionistic theatre.

Given this overt emphasis on class; the use of contrasting scenes alternately showing wealth and squalor; an emphasis on the class system rather than individual will; a disregard for many of the conventions of traditional, illusionistic theatre; and a willingness to point out the play's message to the audience, one might have expected this

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26 Ibid., p. 81.

27 Ibid., p. 85.

musical to have been revered by left-wing populists and disliked by the typical West End audience. In fact, basically the reverse was true.

The reasons for that apparent disparity lie with the fact that *Blood Brothers* pays only supercilious homage to Brecht before assimilating his ideas into essentially the very style of theatre he was originally reacting against. *Blood Brothers* remains a highly emotive and melodramatic piece of popular theatre that can be described as, to use Michael Coveney's words: "a rather strange hybrid of operatic melodrama, sentimental romance and ebullient social comment."[28]

My earlier remarks notwithstanding, the appeal of *Blood Brothers* seems to have little to do with its ideological position. Rather, Russell remained firmly in touch with the affectionate sentimentality that permeated his earlier work. *Blood Brothers* is a melodrama with an incredible plot--albeit no more contrived than the typical Italian opera, Victorian melodrama or Shakespearian comedy. The musical is more explicitly derivative from the traditions of myth, fairy-tale and legend than the epic theatre, which (I would argue) accounts both for the relative disaffection of both high-minded and politically-committed critics, as well as its enormous popularity with the mainstream audience at large. Once again, Russell had written an authentic, realistic, honest and sentimental piece of popular theatre from a genuinely working-class perspective and, once again, this curious fusion confused many ("You have a bloody mess,"[29] moaned socialist reviewer Lyn Gardner after witnessing a revival whose popularity perplexed her).

The standard definition of political, popular theatre simply was not sufficiently inclusive to recognize the ability of a deliberately odd folk-ballad, complete with that

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[28] Michael Coveney, *Financial Times*, January 9, 1983, as quoted in *London Theatre Record* (hereafter abbreviated to *LTR*), January 1, 1983, p. 49.

[29] Lyn Gardner, *City Limits*, August 4, 1988, as quoted in *LTR*, July 15, 1988, p. 1004.

colorful genre's weird superstition, self-criticism and sentimentality, to make a socialist point that was accessible to a diverse audience. Most critics seemed simply unable to believe that an audience was relishing the kind of contrived plot that they thought no one had taken seriously since the late nineteenth century.

The appeal of this play in many ways crystalizes the debate surrounding popular theatre, and the inability of the fringe to cope with the politically unacceptable machinations of the popular, working-class tradition. *Blood Brothers* tends not to subvert expectations of the melodramatic genre and specializes in stereotypes. Working-class Mrs. Johnstone is a feisty and long-suffering fighter (in itself a working-class cliché that most middle-class socialists find offensive), an honest, wholly-good woman who maintains the tolerance and sense of humor of a saint during times of incredible adversity. Middle-class Mrs. Lyons, on the other hand, is selfish, snobbish and neurotic, to the point of being willing to commit murder. Similarly, a working-class upbringing renders Mickey courageous, gregarious, unkempt and uneducated, while middle-class Edward is intelligent, quiet, neat and lonely.

*Blood Brother*s also dabbles with what Lyn Gardner called "dodgy ideas,"[30] presumably because she preferred that they not muddy the waters of political theatre. Gardner was referring to the play's use of superstition and its inference that some kind of fate or destiny plays a part in the progression towards the inevitable climax. The narrator, after all, tells the audience that once Mrs. Johnstone has sworn on The Bible to give her child away, "Now there's no going back, for anyone."[31] After Mrs. Johnstone has mistakenly put her shoes on the table, and swallowed Mrs. Lyons' edict that parted twins

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30 Ibid.

31 Russell, *Blood Brothers*, p. 189.

must never be told of their real identities, the narrator becomes a dark, brooding chronicler of the inevitable effects of myth:

> Shoes upon the table
> An' a spider's been killed
> Someone broke the lookin' glass
> A full moon shinin'
> An' the salt's been spilled
> You're walkin' on the pavement cracks
> Don't know what's gonna come to pass[32]

Although these lines could be taken ironically, Russell nonetheless utilizes their power to lend this musical its tragic inevitability. Critics like Gardner, and populists like McGrath or Davies would no doubt prefer such doubtful, non-Marxist, pseudo-spiritual concepts as a belief in the existence of disembodied evil or the devil, and a declaration of the power of fate, banished from a play that purports to deal with class and its ability to bring about the tragic death of a young, working-class man, but Russell knows how significant superstition can be within working-class lives, including his own. He intends to use superstition in his typically assimilative fashion--suggesting (as Shakespeare did in *The Tempest*) that rational and irrational elemental desires invariably co-exist in a kind of self-contradictory union, the two elements of which should be recognized:

> I believe in both of them. I hate superstition but I am a hyper-superstitious human being myself and so I don't make any apology for that and I don't think one knocks out the other. I think they are complementary.[33]

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[32] Ibid., p. 95.

[33] Interview with Willy Russell, December 22, 1988.

This may well be gibberish from a didactic standpoint, but one cannot help be struck by both Russell's honesty, inclusivity and alignment with class he is writing about. In other words, this approach to myth strikes a responsive chord in the typical audience member and Russell knows and wants such a reaction.

If much of *Blood Brothers* is potential anathema to the left, it has also been attacked from the other side, on the grounds that it is simply not good theatre, because it does not follow the well established rules and regulations for the competent, modern musical. Mark Steyn was the show's most vocal critic.[34] Steyn was incensed that the show did not know how to apply "Broadway rules to a British subject" and argued that Russell was at fault for not finding a distinctive musical style to characterize each twin, and for providing "meandering doggerel" as lyrics that accompany "trite, old-hat pop songs."[35]

Steyn's cultured criticisms (and his implication that the musical form has certain sacred regulations), written from the point of view of an elder scholar defending his art form against the vulgarities of a young upstart, essentially seem to be a response to Russell's insistence on using contemporary, popular and easily accessible forms of music which have a familiar, simple--even banal--melody and a repetitive[36] structure. Despite taking a very different stance from the general climate of critical opinion, Steyn was unable to see Russell's populist motivations. Those pop songs, after all, were adept at maintaining a simple sense of immediacy of which John McGrath would have been proud.

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[34] Steyn reviewed the 1988 revival in *The Independent* and several other journals. He did not see the original 1983 London production.

[35] Mark Steyn, *The Independent*, August 1, 1988, as quoted in *LTR*, July 15, 1988.

[36] It could be argued that criticizing a musical for repeating certain melodies is anachronistic. Certainly, Andrew Lloyd-Webber's pieces sometimes contain repeated, varied musical treatments of the same basic melody.

Seeing that *Blood Brothers* can easily be attacked from both sides of the cultural spectrum, can it be truly be defended as a worthwhile piece of *commercial*, popular theatre? I believe such a defense is possible--indeed, its identity as honest, *popular* theatre is precisely why it is so open to attack. Audiences, it would seem, had no trouble relating to the play's traditional emotionalism nor to the "appalling" score that so rankled Steyn.

It is important to appreciate that *Blood Brothers* is largely another version of Russell's insistence of treating working-class lives with affectionate honesty. Thus, the scenes in the play in which the young Mickey and Eddie interact as children have a youthful joie-de-vivre, vivacity and playful simplicity that clearly resulted from this show's early incarnation as a a brief, non-musical play for schools--and that has little to do with the traditions of the West End. Such naive childishness and idealism seems far removed from most popular theatre. Russell, however, artfully persuaded audiences to buy his genuine depiction of the poetic beauties of being young, whatever class you happen to be from. The narrator's words made no class distinction, as Russell was arguing of the potential for humanistic union among the young of different classes:

> There's a few bob in your pocket and you've got good friends,
> And it seems that summer's never coming to an end,
> Young, free and innocent, you haven't got a care,
> Apart from decidin' on the clothes you're gonna wear,
> The street's turned into Paradise, the radio's singing dreams,
> You're innocent, you're immortal, you're just fifteen.[37]

That same humanist sensibility explains a song in the musical called "My Friend," in which the working-class Mickey envies Edward's middle-class attributes, while Edward in turn envies what Mickey has (his knowledge of profanity, charm with women, "great" mother, and freedom, for example). The message is that both boy's lives are equally

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[37] Russell, *Blood Brothers*, p. 138.

valid, which is a highly unusual position to take in a play about class, although such good-hearted optimism is pivotal to this play's ability to grab emotions.

Russell's unabashed, unmediated honesty also results in the admittance of the significance of superstition and the characterization of Mrs. Johnstone as an ironic humorist in the grand Liverpool tradition, even as her world falls apart around her. Although Russell does not shy away from criticizing aspects of working-class behavior (Mrs. Johnstone has money troubles largely through her dependence on credit, while Sammy is presented as a nasty, inhumane character), it is also significant that the humanist Russell refuses to wholly indict the middle-classes and thus he makes the character of Edward as reasonable and sympathetic as possible, in the interest of focussing the audience's hostility towards the barriers of class and away from the individual:

> There was no way in *Blood Brothers* [that] I wanted to indict the middle-class characters in it. I wanted that audience to love Eddie just as much as Mickie or else the play is palpable nonsense. You've got to care about the two human beings who are much bigger and who, for as long as it is possible in that play, bridge the class differences.[38]

As was the case with Educating *Rita*, Russell's first interest in *Blood Brothers* is in maintaining the theatrical effectiveness of his work. The best example of this is the play's unabashed reliance on emotion, and its avoidance of epic didacticism in favor of the establishment of a kind of ritual, collective catharsis. Instead of ending with the narrator's Brechtian observation (quoted above), the play concludes with Mrs. Johnstone singing a song entitled *Tell Me Its Not True*, which in performance has a high emotional impact, heightening the audience's sympathy for Mrs. Johnstone yet allowing them to expunge much of their possible anger in what is essentially a ritualized group catharsis. Russell

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[38] Interview with Willy Russell, December 22, 1988.

has argued that this closing song is a pivotal reason why audiences typically have leapt to their feet at the end of *Blood Brothers* and began cheering, and he also claimed that an audience (especially a working-class audience) feels insulted by a play that ends with a statement in which the playwright tells the audience what they should be taking away from the production. Russell described his probable reaction as an audience member:

> I'm going to feel very let down. I'm going to feel insulted. I'm going to reject the play. I am going to walk out saying, "What a heap of shit. Why cripple that good play with that sort of ending?" Also, I would leave the theatre feeling unresolved and I would feel that the playwright cheated me because he put the weight of the play on to my shoulders. Now it's not my responsibility to take on the weight of the play. I think it is the playwright's role to find a way, when you've taken an audience through something as dark as that, to allow the catharsis to happen, to allow the cleansing. That's why you get the song "Tell Me It's Not True," which lyrically is desperate, but it's deliberately written elegaically . . . so it will emotionally soar.[39]

Russell is essentially arguing against the validity, as well as the popularity of the epic theatre, even though *Blood Brothers* assimilates some of its techniques. Most intriguing is Russell's determination to expunge audience anger at his theme of class repression (and not make demands of them in terms of feeling any responsibility for that repression) which hardly makes good sense from a political point of view--most Brechtians would argue that such a catharsis, with its consequent elimination of audience thought, weakens or even destroys the play's didactic power. Russell on the other hand clings resolutely to such ephemeral notions as theatrical instinct and claims that the very *popularity* of *Blood Brothers* is utterly dependant on its ultimately elergaic climax:

> Instinctively, [the ending] is right. Now it's wrong in many ways dramatically. If you look at it, it's cracked. The play's ending and you sing a bloody song for three and a half minutes. But you take that away from an audience, you take that away from *Blood Brothers*, and we wouldn't be sitting here talking. There would never have been *Blood*

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39 Ibid.

> *Brothers*. It would never have existed. Forty-nine students in a dank hall might be sitting here an watching it and going "Right on, man," but no way would you have got to people.[40]

That, of course, is a matter of opinion. Russell's position is essentially that theatrical considerations are more pivotal than the political--one must hook an audience first, and incite them to advocate change later. In the case of *Blood Brothers*, of course, audiences were indeed hooked by the play's plea for inclusivity. Such was Russell's determination to demonstrate that humanity could be greater than class division, that he brought his two main characters together throughout that play, when he could just as easily have shown them living their two separate lives--the two are one (for as long as possible) in utter defiance of social probability. This is a unusual slant on issues of class division, but is one that unmistakably struck a popular chord, especially when it was combined with the aforementioned tradition of folk myth and legend.

The critic Benedict Nightingale was moved by the play's humanist sentiments and its artful combining of a socialist message with the stuff of which fairy-tales are made: "It is in this eerie yet strangely plausible bond," Nightingale wrote of the relationship between the twins, "that the true fascination of the evening is to be found."[41]

That fascination has taken this musical to the heights of popular success. Although it appears to have necessitated didactic compromise along the way, Russell has essentially proved the workability of his assimilative, humanist ideas a further time--to the point, in this case, that both the commercial theatre and diverse audiences have enthusiastically embraced a melodrama in which the British class system is clearly indicted as the main villain. Many fringe artists have attempted to do precisely that, with no success. Russell, however, added a large measure of emotionalism, "theatrical instinct," and the authentic

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[40] Ibid.

[41] Benedict Nightingale, *New Statesman*, as quoted in *LTR*, April 9, 1983, p. 263.

traditions of working-class life and the folk-ballads that have traditionally chronicled the forced optimism behind the social deprivation that Liverpool has endured, and made the whole unlikely mix work extremely well.

Perhaps its success came because Russell evoked much of the spirit of Liverpool in this work--such qualities as good nature, grit, determination, and realistic concern for the rawness of working-class life, exactly as it is lived. It could also be because this musical is so pleasurable to watch.

Shirley Valentine (1987)

Plot Summary

Shirley Valentine is set in the kitchen of a semi-detached house. At the beginning of act one, we see the play's only character, Shirley Valentine, begin to prepare the evening meal. She pours a glass of wine and spends the rest of the first act addressing the audience--in a naturalistic manner without acknowledging the inherent theatricality of the situation--from the kitchen.

At the start of the monologue, Shirley discusses her daughter, Milandra, an archetypical selfish teenager who has moved out of the house, and her son, Brian, who is living in a squat. She also reveals that her husband, Joe, becomes very upset if his tea is not on the table as soon as he arrives home from work. Shirley says that she always said that she would leave her husband when their children grew up: but by the time that had happened, she found that she had no place to go.

She tells how men lose interest in women after they have slept with them the first time. Although she is anxious to point out that she is not a feminist, Shirley does have a friend, Jane, who is a self-declared feminist. Jane will soon be going on a holiday to Greece and has invited Shirley to join her. Shirley (who feels it is impossible for her to go to Greece because her husband could not cope with being left alone) will miss her, because she is the only person with whom she can talk.

Shirley then reveals that Jane has paid for her to go to Greece and has handed her the tickets that morning. Shirley tells the audience that she will give Jane back the tickets the following day, although it is clear that she would like to go with her. She continues to talk of the possible trip and the effect it would it have on her husband, despite the fact that her son told her to go ahead. The mention of the son sends Shirley off on a tangent, telling anecdotes from the times when her children were young.

Shirley describes her own school experiences as utterly wretched--her headmistress predicted that Shirley Valentine (that is Shirley's maiden name) would get nowhere. One particular incident where she was humiliated in front of fellow pupils still plays on her mind. After that, Shirley concentrated on being rebellious and gave up on academic endeavors entirely. She explains how she has recently met one of the school's much-lauded, high academic achievers, who has become a high-class prostitute. The most memorable part of the meeting for Shirley was the question her old friend asked: "Didn't you used to be Shirley Valentine?" Shirley explains that in the early days, her marriage to Joe Bradshaw was enjoyable, but their personalities have now evaporated. Although Shirley believes she has the right to go to Greece, she declares herself unable to run away. As she lays a plate on the table, the back-door opens signaling Joe's return and there is a black-out.

The second scene takes place three weeks later. Shirley, now dressed in travel clothes, begins the scene by announcing that she has decided to go to Greece after all, and that Jane will be picking her up at four. She is nervous about having all of the travel documents in order, anxious for the welfare of her family while she is gone, and has not told Joe, despite preparing in advance all of his food for the next two weeks. She reveals that the catalyst that determined her decision was Joe's offensive response to--and his refusal to eat--the meal the audience watched Shirley prepare during the first scene. After the decision has been made, she has been enjoying the stupified reaction of others. Milandra has been back at home, simply treating her mother's home like a hotel with room service and declaring a trip to Greece by two "middle-aged women" to be "disgusting."

Such setbacks notwithstanding, Shirley has determined to go to Greece and think positively about the age of forty-two. She takes a last glance around at her kitchen and announces that it is only 2.20 p.m. With the audience seriously doubting Shirley will take the plunge, the act comes to an end.

The second act takes place on a Greek island, specifically in a secluded section of the shoreline that is dotted with rocks. Shirley enters, looking tanned and dressed in a bohemian manner. A parasol is on the stage. Instead of the kitchen wall, Shirley is now addressing a rock on the shoreline.

Shirley explains that Jane has left her alone, having found a male friend (on the plane) who, by virtue of appearance at least, appears an archetypical sexist. Shirley has enjoyed being alone but has found that her status as a woman by herself makes those around her uncomfortable, as their usual erroneous assumption is that she is desperate for company. A working-class family from Manchester has attempted to befriend Shirley, although she has little time for their disaffection with Greece purely on the grounds that it is not like England.

One evening after dinner, Shirley explains, she met a man called Costas although she refers to him as Christopher Columbus because she discovered her sexuality through and with him. Although Shirley loves Costas' flattery, it is clear that she recognizes that it is empty, repeatable rhetoric and she appreciates the affair for what it is. Costas has fulfilled Shirley's romantic fantasies--such as sitting at a bar table by the sea--and thoroughly enjoyed doing so. Shirley has realized in the fulfillment of her dreams that this is where her personality and individuality have been lost, and she realizes that much of her life, up until this point, has been wasted. To Jane's horror (she reappeared after her affair waned) Costas took Shirley on his brother's boat. Her time there was so blissful--although she had fallen in love with self-expression rather than Costas--that for the first time she entertained the idea of not going back to England and remaining in Greece instead.

Shirley did, however, go to the airport for the flight home after saying good-bye to Costas. In the check-in line, Shirley asked Jane why there was so much wasted life in the world. She had replied that it is something men do to women to be unsatisfactory. That was unsatisfactory for Shirley, on the grounds that she knew that her husband was as unfulfilled as she was. The realization made Shirley walk away from the flight home. When she reached Costas' tavern, she found that he was trying to seduce another woman. Shirley assured Costas she has come back not for him, but for a job and she tells the audience that she has been working there for three weeks, and is an especially big hit with the bewildered British tourists.

Joe has called her in Greece. Although initially annoyed, he pleaded for her to return. Shirley told him that it was impossible, because the woman he loved no longer existed. Finally, however, he decided to come to Greece to try and take her home. He will be arriving that evening. Shirley is hoping he will take a holiday, stare out to sea and finally

begin to understand. She is expecting that Joe will not recognize her, which will allow her to introduce herself as Shirley Valentine, and invite him to join her for a drink.

Analysis

If *Educating Rita*, with its hairdressing heroine and two-character dialogue, and *Blood Brothers*, with its class-based but humanist agenda, were unusual plays to be commercial productions and popular successes, Willy Russell's most unusual move was yet to come. *Shirley Valentine*, a one-woman monologue consisting of the musings of a 42-year-old, uneducated housewife from Liverpool, who addresses the wall of her sanitized kitchen during the first act, and a rock off the coast of a Greek Island during the second, was a bold move indeed. Although Russell was not the first contemporary male playwright to attempt to deal with the internal and private psyche and frustrations of a middle-aged woman,[42] *Shirley Valentine* was, by any standards, highly unconventional West End and Broadway fare, if only for the situation of its central character.

Although there are obvious links to the popular tradition of stand-up comedy (links that Russell clearly exploits in *Shirley Valentine*), the one-person show based around a fictional character, does not have an auspicious history in the commercial theatre, as such austere pieces of theatre tend to be linked with fringe, individual *tours de theatre,* by artists such as Spalding Grey, or with the avant-garde traditions of authors like Beckett,

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[42] Alan Ayckbourn's *Woman in Mind*, one of the playwright's darkest pieces to date about the inner, fantasy life of the frustrated wife of a suburban vicar, opened in the West End (also at the Vaudeville Theatre) several months before *Shirley Valentine*. Also somewhat ironically, the Public Broadcasting System broadcast Alan Bennett's *Bed Among the Lentils* (a monologue about the lonely private life of the wife of a vicar, who in this case finds solicitude in a sexual relationship with an Indian grocer) two nights prior to *Shirley Valentine*'s opening on Broadway.

for whom repetition, pauses and monotony are merely opportunities for potent symbolism for a audience that enjoys the challenge of metaphysics.

If that structural aberration were not enough, there have also been precious few commercial plays portraying male characters in unflattering terms and centering on the needs and desires of women, let alone being concerned with such a superficially unglamorous heroine as Shirley. Her appearance is mundane--her Greek lover kisses the stretch-marks on her skin--and her often coarse dialogue consists principally of urban colloquialisms, largely unpoetic and often ugly words that pretend to have no meaning beyond their immediate and principally disposable usage. Her lack of education and avowed anti-intellectualism means that she would appear to lack the language of feminist discourse, and she is hardly in a position to intellectually debate the role of women in society (or, indeed, her *own* role) in the manner of, for example Caryl Churchill's Marlene or Maria Fornes' Fefu. [43]

Invoking the names of female playwrights is appropriate because while Rita functioned essentially as a representative of the working-class who happened to be female, with *Shirley Valentine* Russell charts the territory of sexual fulfillment, misogynistic oppression, wasted female lives and the importance of self-fulfillment and feminist emancipation, entering waters hitherto largely reserved for the feminist, fringe theatre. As Claire Armistead remarked in the first line of her *Plays and Players* review: "Any male playwright who sits down to write a full-length play on the innermost emotional life of a woman must, one might think, be presumptuous, or reckless, or both."[44]

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[43] The character of Marlene appears in Caryl Churchill's play *Top Girls* (London: Methuen, 1983). Fefu is the major character in Maria Fornes' *Fefu and her Friends* (produced in 1977).

[44] Claire Armistead, *Plays and Players*, March 1988, p. 26.

Such presumption was apparently justified because *Shirley Valentine* enjoyed critical acclaim and euphoric audience reaction both in the West End and on Broadway, the first Russell play to appear there. The largely male critics who form the coterie of first-night reviewers in both London and New York also gave the play uniformly favorable notices, although there were some whispers of disaffection from feminists. Not surprisingly, given the above analyses of the Russell works that preceded *Shirley Valentine*, this latest play has more in common with its author's previous offerings than with any uniform, political--or sexual-political--philosophy. The play can be interpreted--especially its implications for feminism--in several different ways, although two things remain beyond doubt. *Shirley Valentine* has had a profound impact on the audiences of the commercial theatre ("They've fallen in live with Shirley,"[45] reported Howard Kissel), and Russell's brand of populism is an honest amalgam (he does not care if a feminist tract and an emotive tale of clichéd escapism are mixed on the very same pages) that is significantly different from the offerings of any other writer. Like *Blood Brothers* this more recent piece of popular theatre can be easily attacked from both sides of the political spectrum.

Most liberal feminists would be obliged to admit that *Shirley Valentine* makes unique strides for a commercial West End and Broadway offering. In the first instance, this play does not overtly address the male spectator as an active subject--there is no male hero in the narrative with which the audience (in its typical male incarnation) is encouraged to identify. Instead, there is Shirley's unseen husband, Joe, who is presented as a weak-kneed agent of oppression, who just "likes everything to be as it's always been."[46]

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[45] Howard Kissel, *The New York Daily News*, as quoted in *New York Theatre Critics' Review* (hereafter cited as *NYTCR*), February 16 1989, p. 376.

[46] Willy Russell, *Shirley Valentine*, (London: Samuel French, 1988), p. 2.

Shirley makes it clear to the audience that she would like to leave Joe, and we are clearly intended to sympathize with her desires to be rid of a man who thinks the clitoris is a Ford automobile, who refuse to eat Shirley's egg and chips--and throws it in the lap of his wife--because it is not served on the requisite day, and who believes that parroting the empty words "I love you," can act as recompense for a life of oppression. One of the most unusual aspects of this unseen character is that his very masculinity is not just seen as a agent of oppression, but is actually ridiculed.

Joe is clearly helpless without Shirley's support--when she leaves for Greece, she knows that she must iron his clothes in advance, prepare and freeze his food, and persuade her mother to cook for him. At the end of the play, his anger dissipates as he realizes how much he needs his wife, as he can no longer function as an effective father (or, indeed, a human being) without her. Once Shirley has reached the decision to live life for herself, the audience is left in no doubt that her will is infinitely stronger than Joe's. At the end of the play Shirley affectionately (and confidently) parodies her husband's macho posturing:

> I got this letter sayin' he was comin' to get me. To take me back home. Ah, God love him, he must have been watching Rambo. He'll be here soon. I hope he stays for a while. He needs a holiday.[47]

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47 Ibid., p. 32.

Shirley Valentine is not immediately identifiable as a sexual object, the play contains no nudity or overt titillation (even when Broadway and West gloss are added[48]), and Shirley's down-to-earth monologue tends to down play the audience's typically problematic role as voyeur observing a secret and mysterious woman's world. It is hard to accuse Russell of using female sexuality for exploitative or voyeuristic purposes when he has Shirley compare sex with a supermarket ("It's just a lot of pushin' and shovin' an' y' still come out with very little at the end"[49]), discuss the clitoris in the same sentence as public transport, and refer to men with terminology such as "the walking groin."[50] Furthermore, it is rare indeed for a middle-aged woman in a drama to directly address her insecurities about her less than perfect body, caused by the insensitive remarks of her daughter:

> I'd even convinced myself that I wasn't really that old, that me hips weren't as big as I thought they were, that me belly was quite flat for a woman who's had two kids. That me stretch marks wouldn't really be noticeable to anyone but me . . . But sittin' . . . after she said that . . . I suddenly had thighs that thicker than the pillars in the Parthenon. Me stretch marks were as big as tyre marks on the M6[51]

Ultimately, her worries prove unfounded as her body is accepted, in the realm of the play, as an attractive part of her identity--even to the point of it attracting a Greek lover,

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48 Some critics who are more sympathetic towards the alternative sector have argued that Broadway and the West End inevitably exploit even a non-sexist script by promoting a production that subverts the author's original intentions. Jill Dolan's views on Marsha Norman's *Getting Out* were discussed in Chapter Four. For an account of the alleged violence done to the script of Nell Dunn's *Steaming* by a patriarchal West End production, see Helen Keyssar, *Feminist Theatre* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 155-156.

49 Russell, *Shirley Valentine*, p. 5.

50 Ibid., p. 26.

51 Ibid., p, 19.

who kissed those very stretch marks and declared them to be worthy of pride. It is also important that Russell is anxious to make clear that Shirley does not merely trade one unacceptable male in her life for another, more palatable fellow. She knows from the start that Costas' seductions are merely routine for a man who selects a new woman each week, and Russell consistently deconstructs (through Shirley) Costas' hacknied, romantic lines. After quoting his speech flattering her stretch marks, Shirley adds "Aren't men full of shit,"[52] and fantisizes about Costas' likely reaction (one of horror) if he himself woke up with stretch-marks. Shirley sees through empty flattery, and the audience enjoys and *shares* the fact that she is too much of a realist to be moved by the cruder forms of patriarchy.

On the Greek island, Shirley clearly does not fall in love with the Greek waiter but with self-fulfillment, as evidenced by her lack of jealousy when she sees Costas approaching another woman, her self-fulfilled contentment to spend much of her time alone, and her lack of scruples about putting the phone down on her frantic husband when he tries to shame her into returning home, hoping that the woman who has now been emancipated could somehow be obliged to return.

The female spectator--and especially the older and/or working-class female spectator--then, do not find themselves entirely excluded from the play's address, nor is the play's female character seen as acting passively in the face of male authority. As we have just seen, in the case of *Shirley Valentine*, the reverse would appear to be the case.

The woman's role as mother, typically a pivotal feature of the dramatic depiction of women and frequently a device in the relegation of women to supporting roles, is remarkably seen in a negative light in this play, where it is presented as clearly subservient to the role of individual expression and freedom. For Shirley, motherhood

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[52] Ibid., p. 26.

has been oppressive, and it is a role to escape from: "Why should I go back and become that woman again, when that woman isn't needed anymore?"[53] Shirley becomes determined that her identity as a mother will not signify her identity for the rest of her life, once the demands of the immediate nurturing function have been satisfied. She is also prepared to turn on her child (a rare moment indeed in contemporary drama which typically revers the role of motherhood[54]), when she realizes the selfish nature of her demands, and assert her own identity with the full support of the playwright and, he apparently intends, the audience. When Shirley recounts telling Milandra about her selfishness, the speech is poignant and sympathetic, not least because the compassionate Shirley began by saying how much she missed her daughter:

> I've never said that or whinged an' whined because, because I believe that kids have to have their own lives. But there's many a time y' know, many a time that I would have loved to sit down with y' an' talk, go to town with y', have a meal with y', share a laugh, just, like not as your mother but as another human bein'. But I couldn't because you had your own interests--none of it to do with me.[55]

By the second act, Shirley is tormented by the insignificance of the life she has lived, which leads her to the surprisingly strident declaration: "My life has been a crime."[56]

For all *Shirley Valentine*'s remarkable accomplishments, I do not however, want to imply that the play has anything other than an extremely problematic relationship with a feminist aesthetic, and feminism in general. One all-too-obvious problem is the play's

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[53] Ibid., p. 29.

[54] Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles*, in which the central character ultimately finds happiness in the role, despite some feminist sensibilities, is a good example of this reverence.

[55] Ibid., p. 18.

[56] Ibid., p. 27.

unsympathetic depiction of Jane, a woman whom Shirley says calls herself a feminist because "she reads *Cosmopolitan* and thinks all men are potential rapists."[57] Shirley's remarks could be seen as making an offensive joke, largely at the expense of the positions of radical feminism.

As described by Shirley, Jane is essentially an evil personification of the patriarchal cliche of what constitutes feminists: wronged, self-serving, unbalanced women who take their tea without milk, who are out of touch with the realities of life--and whose unmitigated hatred of men stands in the way of the genuine emancipation of women like Shirley. Later in the play, Jane is also revealed to be a true hypocrite, as she immediately deserts Shirley in Greece for an affair with a man she met on the plane. When Shirley has a sexual encounter, however, Jane reacts with patronizing horror, which only strengthens Shirley's resolve. Ironically, by the climax of the play, Shirley is revealed to be the true radical with Jane joining the crowd of returning British holiday makers willing Shirley to return to her oppressive, former life.

One could argue that Russell's strongest anti-feminist point is that Jane's radical *feminism*--specifically her myopic view that what Shirley calls "unused life" is the fault of men--prohibits her from seeing the *humanist* truth--that men and women are unfulfilled and, in Shirley's words "die . . . long before we're dead."[58]

On a rather more complex level, some feminist critics have argued that the play is sexist not least because it equates Shirley's sexual liberation with political revolution. As reviewer Lyn Gardner succinctly put it: "Russell's suggestion that female fulfillment lies in the discovery of the clitoral orgasm and an extended Greek vacation is on a par with the advice meted out by *Cosmopolitan*."[59] The discovery in question, of course, comes at

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[57] Ibid., p. 3.

[58] Ibid., p. 30.

[59] Lyn Gardner, *City Limits*, as quoted in *LTR*, January 15 1988, p. 79.

the hand of a man and, given the structure of the play, Shirley's sexual encounter with the sensual Costas, coming after years of Joe's ineptitude, is seen as pivotal to her new level of self awareness--her new confidence is not so much the result of self-determination as it is the validation of her identity by Costas.

It is Costas who finds her physical imperfections attractive, who provides the requisite orgasm, who moves the table to the sea so Shirley can enjoy a dream come true, and who in general facilitates Shirley's self-discovery--it is no coincidence that Russell has Shirley nickname him "Christopher Columbus,"[60] because her liberation needed an external explorer to find it.

It is also possible to accuse Russell of essentially concocting a male fantasy of female liberation, which largely involves sexual emancipation and a new vivid and exciting personal identity. Not surprisingly, such a fantasy turned out to be highly marketable in the patriarchal West end. "The sun-kissed, sexually free and sexually contented Shirley of Greece," noted Gardner, "is much more akin to the male ideal of the 'perfect woman' than the frustrated and depressed housewife of the first act."[61] Gardner did not care to note that Shirley is, of course, also much closer to what one might consider the *female*--even the feminist--ideal. It hardly needs stating that Shirley is, after all, much less oppressed at the end of this play than at the beginning.

Clearly, one's response to the ideology of *Shirley Valentine* is likely to vary according to the nature of one's politics. Therein, of course, may lie part of the explanation for this play's popularity. The play supports the liberal feminist position, a critical approach that typically accepts the notion that theatre inherent communicates universally, rather than merely to women. Jill Dolan notes that liberal feminism "takes its cue from liberal

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60 Russell, *Shirley Valentine*, p. 25.

61 Gardner,*LTR*, p. 179.

humanism," relying on "values claimed to be universally human."[62] Like all Russell plays, *Shirley Valentine* argues that individual awareness and humanist appeal, effected by working within the system, will ultimately produce emancipation, both of woman and the working-class. On the other hand, most cultural or radical feminists would likely be opposed to this play (politically), as it collapses gender categories, partially blames women for conspiring in their own oppression, and does not expose the inherent evil of patriarchy in any direct way. Russell's working-class men are victims too. *Shirley Valentine* even promotes union between the sexes, as Russell is very anxious to point out that Joe is equally as trapped in his existence as Shirley. As Shirley notes in the play: "I've looked at Joe an' I know it's the same for him . . . It's the same for everyone."[63]

Like all of the Russell plays analyzed in this and the previous chapter, *Shirley Valentine* is open to attack from both sides of the political spectrum, perhaps leading to the conclusion that populism and feminism do not easily go well together--just as populism and radical, left-wing politics are far from being the same thing. Even Frank Rich recognized that *Shirley Valentine* was far from being a feminist tract, calling the play "feminism West End style," with "a mild level of ideological daring."[64] All of these criticisms notwithstanding, I intend to argue in the last part of this analysis that is absurdly reductive to relegate *Shirley Valentine* to the category of commercially-compromised liberal fare, designed to assimilate the positions of the fringe sector and make plays palatable for the middle-classes.

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[62] Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988), p. 3.

[63] Russell, *Shirley Valentine*, p. 30.

[64] Frank Rich, *The New York Times*, as quoted in *NYTCR*, February 16, 1989, p. 373.

The start of this analysis noted some of the ways in which this play is noticeably different from most pieces of commercial theatre, and highlighted some of its more radical positions and style. Yet, I would claim that *Shirley Valentine* qualifies as true popular theatre for reasons that go beyond those.

Russell writes honestly, without regard for pretension and, as demonstrated once again by *Shirley Valentine*, he makes no apology for criticizing--even blaming--the working-class (in this case a working-class woman), for their unfortunate existences. He has explained his views on Shirley's position:

> Men conspire . . . women conspire . . . Shirley traps Shirley. She really traps herself because she indulges Joe, because the first time he says to her "Why isn't my tea on the table at 6 o'clock tonight," she puts it on the table instead of throwing it at him. So many women get into that[65]

It is sense of genuine, emotional commitment that perhaps explains the appeal of the play. Like *Blood Brothers*, *Shirley Valentine* seems to get beneath the surface of ideology, to succeed in the more ephemeral and less quantifiable theatrical realms of emotionalism, pathos and an ability to expose the *truth*--the unpleasant realities of life as it is actually lived.. The critic Michael Coveney,[66] reviewing the original production of the play at the Liverpool Everyman, was clearly struggling for words to express the *personal* investment that Russell demonstrably has in his character's life, when he noted that Russell is "an *instinctive* feminist, nothing to do with the metropolitan fringe theatre or vegetarianism."[67] In other words, Coveney seemed to appreciate Russell's disregard for what could perhaps be termed *high-art feminism*, the educated, intellectual world of

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65 Interview with Willy Russell, December 22, 1988.

66 Coveney is a former editor of the journal *Plays and Players*.

67 Michael Coveney, *Financial Times*, 17 March, 1986, as quoted in *LTR*, p. 295.

Churchill or even Hare, where plays are viewed by the the converted, leaving women like Shirley to languish in their oppressive hell.

In a later review of the revival production, Coveney called the play "the best feminist play of the 1980s for the simple reason . . . that it does not conform to a metropolitan, po-faced, vegetarian view of feminism."[68] Certainly, Coveney's comments could be interpreted as the relieved remarks of a male critic able to wholeheartedly embrace a non-threatening, pseudo-feminist manifesto, but he nonetheless makes a serious point. Shirley's criticisms of the poker-faced Jane, it should be remembered, are coming from a unemancipated character who, in reality, would be highly likely to hold those *very* views. As Russell has noted:

> Shirley's understanding of a feminist is not . . . my understanding of a feminist. Shirley has never even rubbed shoulders with feminism. So she just has the Greenham Common, reported by *The Sun* and ITV[69] concept of the feminist. Shirley is too deep a thinker to be convinced that they are all lesbians, but that is the image that has been put across to her. So, she's never really thought deeply about feminism. So when she says, 'I don't hate men, therefore I'm not a feminist,' the association in her brain is with the radical, man-hating creature. Which she's not.[70]

Russell's argument--that Shirley has an independent life out of the control of her creator--can be used in all kinds of ways and Russell has even suggested that Shirley's preoccupation with her sexuality may be merely a joke at the expense of the audience. "It's a Liverpool thing," claims Russell, "to take something that is fairly mundane and normal, and through its humor build it into an epic tale." Russell's avowed realism--with

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68 Michael Coveney, *Financial Times*, 29 June, 1989.

69 *The Sun* is a right-wing, British tabloid newspaper; Independent Television is the commercial competitor to the BBC. Greenham Common was the location and name of a feminist protest against the existence on American Cruise missiles on British soil.

70 Interview with Willy Russell, December 22, 1988.

its inherent implication that most feminists are out of touch with the needs of working-class women in Liverpool--is precisely what gives this play so much impact.

There is no doubt that *Shirley Valentine* celebrates Shirley Valentine, in all of her mediocrity, and the character is never an object of pity nor derision--Coveney described her as "a Beckettian figure in reverse."[71] Through Shirley, Russell consistently has the audience find itself taken in by her stories, only to have Shirley reveal that she is one step ahead. In the second act, for example, just as the audience is getting used to the idea that Shirley talks to inanimate objects like walls and rocks that do not reply to consequently rhetorical questions, Russell has Shirley come out with the line: "It's a Greek rock. It doesn't understand a bleedin' word I'm saying,"[72] which reveals what we thought was an eccentricity to be a one of Shirley's humorous devices, that the audience has so naively accepted. Shirley always triumphs.

Her language is so rich and evocative, her naivety so completely recognizable and her humor so funny and insightful ("Marriage is like the Middle East," she quips. "There's no solution."[73]), that the audience is left with a clear sense of a far from bitter woman with remarkable, even unique, mental and emotional resources that have simply never been tapped, thanks to an educational system that ignored her talents and a husband who conspired to keep her in her subservient place. The oppression that Shirley has undergone seems all the more profound because of her stoicism, and because the women's movement has passed by a class and generation of women who still believe they must provide sex to keep a man's interest, and who are still unable to sit in a hotel,

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71 Michael Coveney, *Financial Times*, January 22, 1988, as quoted in *LTR*, 15 January, 1988.

72 Russell, *Shirley Valentine*, p. 23.

73 Ibid., p. 4.

alone. Their plight may appear anachronistic to the sophisticated middle classes, but that would appear to be an inevitable by-product of Russell' populist accessibility.

The brand of populism that *Shirley Valentine* represents is largely the same brand that I have detailed in each of the preceding analyses of Russell's plays. Although the settings are different, and the targets and style increasingly sophisticated, the plays' major commonality appears to be the unerring and optimistic belief of their creator that working-class people, men and women, if sufficiently motivated, are perfectly able to transform their own lives. Whatever one's political view of that position, the fact remains that it is a cogent and unabashed populist statement, not in any way a distillation of the more radical politics of the fringe.

It seems unreasonable to damn a playwright for his good-natured, albeit unfashionable, optimism. Russell's success seems to demonstrate that it is liberal inclusivity, accessibility and hope, that most easily constitute popular theatre. Russell's writing speaks to audiences of all classes and, while simultaneously advocating change, it sees the world in terms of a warm humanity. Frank Rich perhaps summed up Russell best when he noted that: "If he had written *A Doll's House*, Nora would have waltzed back through the door and invited Torvald out for a drink."[74]

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74 Rich, *The New York Times*, *NYTCR*, p. 373.

CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION

This study has been principally concerned with the relationship of populist with the mainstream theatre. The first six chapters consisted of a largely theoretical analysis of the complicated relationship between the concepts of populism and mainstream theatre, while the second half focused on the contributions of one author, Willy Russell, as an example of a playwright who has tried to create a populist theatre within the walls of mainstream theatrical institutions. It now remains to draw an overall, general conclusion.

The complexity and subjectivity of the issues discussed here, such as: the meaning of terms like popular and culture, the relationship of the popular with the political, the existence of a pure form of working-class culture; and the willingness of the theatrical establishment to support works that criticize the status quo suggest that attempts at definitive analyses of these issues are counterproductive, because the available evidence does not allow for certainty without inappropriately papering over the cracks of ambiguity. Firstly, whenever one is trying to assess the value of the mainstream theatre, as opposed to the alternative theatre, one is inevitably drawn into an attempt to analyze both the quality and the nature of the interaction between performance and audience. Unfortunately, it is impossible to do so, given that there is no reliable methodology for the assessment of the propensity of the individual audience to accept, modify or reject the intended message of any production, aside perhaps from the reader-response research discussed in Chapter Five, and even those ideas tend not to delve into the problematic questions of whether or not a message received in a theatre will have a direct impact on people's beliefs, activities or their lives in general. As Van Erven noted, even Brecht had

"no absolute way of measuring the deeper, long-term sociopolitical impact of his works."[1]

It is impossible to say with any certainty that an alternative theatre audience will be ideologically or otherwise affected by a production to a greater extent than a mainstream audience, or vice-versa, even though this lack of fact has not stopped authors like Jill Dolan or Andrew Davies from implying that the mainstream theatre has a tendency to subvert, destroy or otherwise modify the intent of the author of any piece of theatre that is produced within its buildings. Such an assertion is of doubtful accuracy, not least because all theatre is a compromise between the wishes of the people involved, and it is difficult--especially without the help of a statement from the author in question--to prove that the commercial sector has a more negative impact on the populist sentiment or the political idea, than the alternative sector. There are so many factors at work here, including the attitudes of the individual producers (commercial or otherwise), and the power, commitment and inclinations of the creative artists involved.

If the nature of the performance/audience interaction and the relationships of the creative artists with theatrical institutions are highly problematic, then so is the question as to exactly what theatre it is that the working-classes wish to attend--if they wish to attend the theatre at all. It has long frustrated many populists that the British working-class of the nineteen-eighties has only a peripheral relationship with the theatre, and the theatre that it seems to prefer may be, and often is, quite different from the theatre that those who promote a more populist and inclusive theatre would wish. I have suggested some reasons below as to why this may be the case, but, in general, the mutual apathy and miscommunication displayed by both the theatre community and the British working-class, remains highly disturbing. Any debate about which sector of the theatre is more

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[1] Eugene Van Erven, *Radical People's Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1988), p. 189.

adept at reaching the working-class often seems moot, given the relatively low levels of participation in the legitimate theatre by people who are not from middle-class backgrounds.

When working-class people *do* participate, there has been little research done that assesses which sector of the theatre they actually attend. Some theatres, like the Liverpool Everyman, have a reputation for a working-class ambiance, but hard facts about which theatres the working class *actually* attend are nebulous. One also finds sporadic references to working-class audiences forming a substantial minority of the audience for West End theatre, yet this does not seem to hamper the general assumption that the West End is a middle-class institution. Conversely, alternative theatres tend not to have any kind of definite proof of the class make-up of their audiences, and I know from personal observation that performing in a union hall or community center (in the manner of Red Ladder or the San Francisco Mime Troupe) is no guarantee of attracting a working-class audience, as the middle-class intelligentsia from the local college are probably more likely to show up in large numbers. While there have been isolated reports of innovative productions that have apparently attracted enormous *working-class* audiences (7:84's *The Cheviot, The Stag and the Black, Black Oil* is one notable example[2]), there is a lack of reliable evidence in this area.

Chapter Two revealed that there is no general agreement on what the words popular and populism mean in the 1980s, whether they contradict each other, and whether or not those words must come laden with heavy ideological and political commitment, if they are to be fully expressed. In the absence of such an agreement, it is hardly surprising, therefore, that there has been no concrete, generally agreed-upon manifesto for the

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[2] The achievements of this production are sympathetically detailed in: D. Keith Peacock, "Fact Versus History: Two Attempts to Change the Audience's Political Perspective," *Theatre Studies*, no. 31/32 (1984-85/1985-86), 15-31.

development of a popular English theatre, which has contributed to the fact that it has floundered in recent years, especially in the face of a political climate characterized by unsympathetic conservatism. One need only look at the 1988 symposium and conference which attempted to discuss the response of the British theatre to the present political situation.[3] In many ways, the debate reflected many of the contemporary dilemmas within the British Labour Party--whether the oppositional voice can reasonably make ideological compromises in the interests of appealing to more voters. Some argued that the Labour Party should oppose capitalism in all its forms, while others that capitalism should somehow be harnessed for the good of the working-class.

Some of the speakers at the symposium claimed that there is a need for a physical base for theatre relevant to the working-class. Pam Brighton's scheme, for example, was essentially a reworking of the utopian ideas of Steve Gooch, discussed in detail in Chapter Two. Brighton argued that the working-class would be best served by "something in bricks and mortar . . . as a center for socialist work,"[4] an idea that is fanciful rather than practical, for the very reasons discussed with reference to Gooch. At the same discussion, John McGrath stated that most artistic directors feel inappropriate pressure to bring in a mass audience, which means that they have

> slipped very imperceptibly from the popular . . . to the populist, equating big working-class audiences watching silly shows with some sort of

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[3] A meeting was held at Goldsmiths' College of the University of London on 7 May, 1988 entitled "Theatre in Thatcher's Britain: Organizing the Opposition." Sponsored by *New Theatre Quarterly* and Goldsmiths' drama department, the precedings of the meeting were edited and recorded by Andy Lavendar in *New Theatre Quarterly* V, no. 18 (Spring 1989), 113-123. The meeting was followed by a conference entitled "Theatre in Crisis," held at Goldsmiths' on 4 December, 1988. Lavendar reported on those findings in *New Theatre Quarterly* V, no. 19 (Summer 1989), 210-216.

[4] As quoted in Lavendar, "Theatre in Thatcher's Britain," p. 116.

> political statement. They're now using the old forms of popular theatre just to get bums on seats.[5]

McGrath's comments are perplexing because they would appear to contradict his earlier position when he noted that David Edgar was "essentially wrong in this idealistic distinction between popular and populist--which are not opposites."[6] In 1988, McGrath appeared to be making that same distinction himself. One also wonders exactly what these anonymous "silly shows" might be, and the phrase also suggests that McGrath is inclined now to down-play the importance of the mass audience. After all, his earlier work suggested that he did, at least at one time, consider the attraction of a big working-class audience to be some kind of political statement. It would certainly be an unusual event in the serious, legitimate theatre.

This general confusion was also typified by the arguments over whether or not the West End production of Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money* could be considered political theatre--Pam Brighton claimed that this piece was "in total conflict with the socialist theatre," which seems both unduly harsh and absurdly narrow, while at the later conference, a group that purportedly discussed "Working Inside the Mainstream," focused only on the subsidized companies and regional repertory theatres, completely ignoring the commercial sector.[7]

It can, therefore, be seen that the alternative sector is no clearer on its aims, nor with regard to its self-definition, than at any other point in the 1970s. The debate over the alleged difference between "populist," and "popular," was clearly a red herring.

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[5] Ibid.

[6] John McGrath, *A Good Night Out* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 34.

[7] Andy Lavandar, "Theatre in Crisis," *New Theatre Quarterly* V, no. 19, 210.

The first six chapters of this study also found that the inclination of some populists to ignore the possible contributions of the mainstream theatre is unfounded. The argument generally offered as the justification for this omission is that the "bourgeois" theatre (i.e. the mainstream theatre) is merely part of the tendency of the ruling classes to reproduce the economic system that supports their own interests. The leftists claimed that the system reproduced itself through institutionalized culture, which penetrated the collective mind and consequently legitimized and maintained class rule and oppression. So, they often dismissed the mainstream theatre as merely being an agent of that legitimating ideology.

This argument is simplistic. It equates only the commercial with the bourgeoise by obscuring the fact that much of the subsidized sector epitomizes bougeoise values at least as explicitly as its commercial neighbors. This dismissal of the commercial sector, with its contingent implication of a ruling-class conspiracy theory, also ignores the fact that there has never been any viable alternative articulated by oppositional voices. The theatre, moreover, simply does not neatly divide into the bourgeoise and the non-bourgeoise, either from a managerial or an audience standpoint. Hence their confusion, for example, in which category to place the regional repertory companies. Was the commercial West End production of Dario Fo's *We Won't Pay, We Won't Pay*, merely another piece of bourgeoise theatre? My close examination of the mainstream theatre in this study revealed that it is a diverse operation (far less bureaucratic than the subsidized sector and with a closer, more personal connection to the desires of the working-class) with a variety of complex aims that go beyond the financial and the conservative. Some commercial producers appear to have "a highly-tuned sense of what is popular and good, and that is recognized instantaneously, by a kind of showman's instinct."[8] This instinct appears to go beyond catering to an audience's more base instincts.

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[8] John Pick, *Managing the Arts?* (London: Rhinegold, 1986), p. 143.

As I suggested in Chapter Three, the forced chasm between what is generally accepted and studied as popular culture and what is legitimate theatre is deceptive. It is the result of a tendency to try and discriminate between the "atrophied" and the "genuine" examples of the popular theatre. As this distinction is virtually impossible to make (Morag Shiach appropriately noted that "to nineteenth-century folk song collectors, Music Hall was debased mass culture," while "to recent historians, it is a vibrant and oppositional form of mass culture."[9]), there would seem to be more point to viewing the theatre as inclusively as possible. It seems strange that critics like Andrew Davies make the self-damning observation that "Alan Ayckbourn is the only playwright in Britain who might justifiably claim the label 'popular,'"[10] and yet apparent have little curiosity as to why that should be the case, nor any interest in looking at Ayckbourn's work in more detail to see if it is as reactionary as is commonly supposed by the alternative sector. In 1988, Trevor Griffiths categorized Ayckbourn with Conservative M.P. Jeffrey Archer as a part of the "triumphalist right,."[11] which is a chronic oversimplification, albeit one with which many left-wing writers would agree. Although few seem unduly concerned, there remains an unfortunate scarcity of analytical material about the impact of mainstream, popular playwrights.

Chapter Four, concerned with the tendency of feminist *theatre* critics to ignore the dominant theatre, even though the dominant film is attracting so much attention from feminist *film* critics made essentially a similar point, noting the ill-founded dismissals of the mainstream theatre by Dolan, Keysaar, Case and others. Such an approach seems

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[9] Morag Shiach, *Discourse on Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 5.

[10] Andrew Davies, *Other Theatres* (London: Macmillan Education, 1987), p. 189.

[11] As quoted in Lavendar, "Theatre in Thatcher's Britain," p. 115.

merely to exasperate the theatre's elitist and non-populist identity discussed in the previous chapter. The final piece in this equation was made most conclusively in the fifth chapter, in noting that those who write about theatre and populism have a disturbing tendency to ignore the importance of the spectator. I am certainly not the first person to find that--Eugene Van Erven stated, in his conclusion, that " [popular theatre's] flaw has been to miscalculate the importance of the spectator, despite its professions to the contrary."[12]

Van Erven's briefly-explored conclusion offered no solution to correct that problem, and it is my conclusion that the reader-response notions of negotiated and oppositional readings bare considerable further, detailed, examination from the point of view of the legitimate theatre. In so doing, it might be possible to reach a point where Van Erven's perceptive statement about the popular theatre --"the moment the spectator walks out of the venue . . he ceases to be of interest,"[13]--is no longer accurate.

To summarize, it can be seen that a decade of sustained conservatism has progressively weakened the alternative sector's power and influence, a weakness that has been made considerably worse by the way in which the alternative sector has conceptualized itself. It has demonstrated a problematic vanguard mentality, has often ignored the inevitable complexity of the theatre's relationship with popular culture (a heterogeneous term that embodies everything from extreme conservatism to opposition, important subcultures and resistance), and has consequently created a great distance from the working-class spectator. Much of the alternative sector shows a total lack of regard for the needs or desires of the working-class spectator.

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12 Van Erven, p. 188.

13 Ibid., p. 188.

The plays and opinions of Willy Russell are positioned in this study as the antitheses of this limited and ineffective response, and I conclude that they represent a more useful approach to the popular theatre than some of the theories and practical work discussed in the first half of the study. I do not, however, wish to make outrageous claims for Russell's work. Some of his plays are more satisfactory than others, and I have tried to note in the individual analyses the times when Russell's work appears to lapse into product that almost justifies the commonly-held response to the West End that I have spent so long berating as inaccurate. Furthermore, as I have argued that the answer to the problems of populism and the theatre certainly does not lie unilaterally in the contribution of any single playwright, but in a variety of different approaches, I do not imply that Russell is any kind of savior of the popular theatre. He would certainly resist such a label, especially as he has continually claimed to have no direct interest in didacticism or in reaching the working-classes in an evangelical fashion. Russell claims an interest only in writing plays, for everyone, about individuals who often happen to be working-class.

That being said, Russell's contribution to this debate is an important one, and his plays offer an alternative and useful conception of the popular theatre. After considering in depth the playtexts themselves, it is my conclusion that Russell's plays have largely avoided falling into the traps that have ensnared so much of the alternative sector, when they have tried to attract working-class audiences.

In the first instance Russell is (or at least was) a relatively uneducated member of the working-class, who writes about working-class characters from that standpoint. In doing so, he avoids the problem identified by Van Erven, who noted that the popular theatre "is very much a theatre of highly-educated outsiders coming in to perform *for* a working-class audience."[14] Russell's success also demonstrates that the commercial theatre is

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14 Ibid.

perhaps not as bound in the world of the middle-class as is often assumed. The assumption, as articulated by Pam Brighton,[15] that the commercial sector only reifies the middle-classes does not take Russell's contributions into account.

As it is often stated that this sector of the theatre will only support escapist, bland and conservative fare set in middle-class drawing rooms, it bares repeating that this study has shown that Russell successively wrote successful plays that demonstrated: the propensity of commercial forces to destroy the art of a popular music group; the stultifying horror of growing up in a working-class family; how mindless materialism can destroy liberal ideals; sexism in the toilets of a decrepit Northern club: the deliberate classism that denies low achievers educational opportunity; the nihilistic elitism of British higher education; and the sexism of a society that traps and exploits middle-aged women. Thematically at least, Russell's achievements are impressive.

The individual analyses of the plays have shown that Russell's relationship with political theatre is problematic at times, and his themes are essentially liberal, humanist pleas for the power of self-expression. I have already noted that the popular and the political are not easy bedfellows, but Russell's avowedly popular drama (at least in terms of the huge audiences they typically attract) plough a useful middle ground. They are, however, hardly dramatic documents that are likely to incite revolution, except perhaps of the individual spirit. Russell's focusing on the unpleasant aspects of the working-class life, and the positive reception that approach appears to have enjoyed from the working-classes themselves, led Alan Dossor to a most perceptive conclusion. Looking back on his experience with the bluntly honest *Breezeblock Park*, which appalled many middle-

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[15] As quoted in Lavendar, "Theatre in Thatcher's Britain," p. 116.

class liberals, Dossor came to the realization that "Popular theatre may not always coincide with our developed notions of Good Theatre."[16]

In 1984, John McGrath proposed a controversial manifesto for a popular working-class theater. Although I have noted elsewhere that McGrath's influence on Russell was considerable, and that the younger man's plays owe a lot to the theories articulated in *A Good Night Out*, I want to suggest a new list of the populist achievements that can be derived from the plays of Willy Russell, apparently so popular with audiences.

I have already noted that my overall position is a relativist one--my conclusion is that there is little point in defining popular theatre or populism in any new polemical way, because they are complicated terms that cannot be pinned down definitively. The list that appears below, however, represents Russell's contribution (from within the mainstream theatre) to this complicated debate. This legacy is too important to be ignored.

Russell has shown that it is possible, in the mainstream theatre, for a member of the working-class to gain prominence by writing about the working-class with honesty and authenticity. It also appears that working-class audiences, in particular, respond to truthful depictions of their lives, even if such dramatizations do not correspond with anyone's preconceived ideological notions. Russell's brand of mainstream populism recognizes the theatrical traditions that permeate working-class notions of theatre--thus, his plays tend not to place a heavy, ideological burden on an audience, nor do they leave an audience trying to "figure out" the playwright's hidden message. Russell's theatre is inclusive and aims to speak to everyone, rather than a single class of people, and it celebrates humanity. It works to collapse the barriers of class rather than to raise them higher, and points to the ability of individuals to overcome those barriers. Russell's popular theatre is written in a language that all can understand, and he resists the

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16 Alan Dossor, as quoted in Michael Coveney, "Everyman in Good Humor," *Plays and Players*, August 1975, p. 15.

temptation to use complex references or language that can be understood only by the highly-educated. For Russell, populism means allowing the audience to have an emotional experience that is ultimately purged by traditional notions of catharsis, offering a good night out, with equivalent technical and artistic standards to the work that can be seen on television or on film, and utilizing theatrical institutions that are familiar and in surroundings that provide a glamorous alternative to the mundane nature of everyday life. Russell's theatre celebrates the possibility that things could be better and is able to empower the members of an audience to take control, in an individual and immediate way, of their own lives.

The above list--my distillation of Russell's essential contributions to this debate--is a good note on which to finish. A the very least, it raises some dilemmas that, if answered by those who write about the relationship of the theatre with popular culture, might enable the live theatre to break out of the isolated, elitist world in which it is increasingly finding itself. Unless the mainstream theatre, and those who write within it, are given the critical attention they deserve, and unless we start seeing the theatre as part of a broader cultural context, it seems that any relationship the live theatre may have with populism is in grave danger of withering away.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW WITH WILLY RUSSELL, DECEMBER 22, 1988, LIVERPOOL

JONES: Would you say that your work has been analyzed much from an academic standpoint?

RUSSELL: I've tended to avoid that school of study that ends up providing footnotes for an author's work. I've always had a suspicion that most playwrights who expound theories on playwriting and politics are actually just articulating the theory that governs their own writing and their own politics. So I've tended to avoid that. I'm not in any sense taking an anti-intellectual stance--or an anti-knowledge stance, or an anti-research stance--because I, you know, enjoy myself the study of other people's work and learning more and what have you. But I don't think that should ever get in the way of the prime function of the playwright which is to provide magic that occurs in the walls of a theater starting at seven-thirty on a Wednesday night. And I've seen in so many cases, what is written about the playwright, about the plays, damage that interaction between the play and its viewers and that is why I've shied away from that. The theatrical Levis types have not been beating my door down. In fact, I'm studied far more, for example, in Germany than in this country. The reason is because a terrific Professor of English at the University of Dusseldorf came to see me. He was a smashing guy. His approach was actually "I like theatre," so, you know, he would always get an interview from me.

JONES: Some people argue that you can split populist playwrights into those who work at the National Theatre and speak to the middle-classes, and those who work in alternative or community-based environments. Your plays seem to fall into neither category.

RUSSELL: All I'm interested in is writing good plays. Now a good play will have a life thereafter. Many, many, of the plays which are written for the National, the RSC, have a very high profile premiere and then very few productions thereafter. That seems to me to say something about the nature of those plays--that they're only talking to a culturate. I don't set out to do that. I set out to talk to an audience that has no brief, that brings no foreknowledge. You write a play like *Educating Rita*--one could easily have written a play that has literature as part of its theme, a play that complemented the foreknowledge of its audience, especially when I was writing for the RSC in a theatre like the Warehouse. I could have had gales of knowing laughter from all sorts of illusions, but I kept firmly in my mind the idea of my mother who has never heard of E. M. Forster or William Blake going to see the play and not intimidating her, so that she could have an equally valid theatrical experience as someone who get more out of the references to Blake, Forster and what have you.

JONES: In the seventies we had a fairly vociferous alternative sector. As well as people like David Edgar who said that the only meaningful statements ever made in the theatre had been said to the middle-classes, in places like the National Theatre.

RUSSELL: That sells periodicals and newspapers. I'm sure he would laugh at that as much as I would laugh at that if you presented him with it today. I mean he also said, which probably was never reported as much, that it becomes increasingly difficult to

write plays as one gets older because as one gets older, the less sure one is of any of one's views.

JONES: I'm particularly interested in the huge commercial success of your plays. I just went to see *Blood Brothers* last week in London and I guess my premise is that the only meaningful popular aesthetic of the 80s can be found working in that environment. But it strikes me that there were some problems. When I was there, there was a full house of people. They didn't look particularly different from any other middle-class, West End theatre audience. The top ticket price was getting up to £20 . . .

RUSSELL: But, let me add, the cheapest musical in London.

JONES: At the end of that show, which is clearly based on class, the narrator in almost the last line of the play says "Could It Be What We the English Have Come to Know as Class." Hundreds of people lept to their feet, even though many of them perhaps wouldn't even recognize the existence of class. What sort of statement is being made by that approval, assuming the audience is saying a little bit more than just "Well done, Willy Russell"?

RUSSELL: Well, you see, I could say that that is an arrogance on your part. How could you possibly evaluate the interaction of that audience with that play? Isn't it possibly a situation of you not being immediately sympathetic to the idea of the West End, actually going in with a bit of a grudge anyway and coming out and describing it in terms which support your disapproval which you went in with in the first place. I'm not engaged in the class debate in the way that quite a lot of playwrights in the seventies were, because it seems to me that many of them wrote from a hatred of the middle-class, usually because

they were fucking middle-class, which I wasn't. So I never had that hang-up about the middle-class, I have never had a hatred of the middle-class. It's never bothered me. What I've had a hatred of is the fucking *division* between the classes. There was no way in *Blood Brothers* I wanted to indict the middle-class characters in it, I wanted that audience to love Eddie just as much as Mickey, or else the play is palpable nonsense. You've got to care about the two human beings who are much bigger and who, for as long as it is possible in that play, bridge the class differences. So if I go into any theatre anywhere and I see an audience that is composed of, you know, a truly popular audience that spans the class range from the aristocracy to the working-class, I can't measure the quality of the interaction. No way would I presume to . . . they might have all had a dreadful time. I remember once a classic occasion being in Darlington, we had a play of mine, *One For the Road*, on tour. The hero of the piece, Dennis, spends all his night trying to break out of this stultifying dormer-bungalow estate and his neighbor, Jan, who I wrote as a arch-bitch-witch spends all her time trying to trap him and keep him where he is . . . I mean, she's almost a fascist, you know. And I remember one night we had to meet the local friends of the theatre after a first night there and I was talking to Pru Scales who played this fascistic character and this woman came up and she said, "it was just a marvellous play. Your part, where you tried to keep that reprobate in order . . . just such a thing to see on stage . . .our values being shared and celebrated." And of course, that wasn't the point of the play at all. And that made me realize you can never determine the level of interaction of the audience. You can try your best all the time . . .

JONES: But that interaction is not wholly dependent on your play, is it?

RUSSELL: No it's not. But then again, when I used to do folk clubs, I remember being in a folk club one night and watching a guy singing Ralph McTell's *Streets of London*

and the whole audience really getting off on this reaching out . . . you know, poor guy walking around with his bag and all that. I remember coming around to the car park and there's a guy going to get into his car and a wino asks him for a couple of bob and he says "Fuck off. How dare you!" And he'd just been in there completely lost in the sentiment of it all. I can have my opinions about it, you can have your opinions about it, but I don't think we can ever define the level of interaction between audience and theatre on a given night.

I suppose what I'm objecting to is a sort of implicit-in-the-question romanticism. Would it be better if *Blood Brothers* was playing in a semi-derelict barn in St. Helens where the people who were coming to see it had paid sixpence to get in and could stand at the end and display their class solidarity and say yes we've learned an important lesson from this . . . the didacticism was absolutely there to behold? . . . Would the interaction had been better if the play had been on the stage at the Lytleton or the Olivier or the Barbican? I mean what is the alternative to the West End, with all its faults?

JONES: Let me posit this. Although I'm not the typical audience member, it seemed to me that in that production that there were things that were working against the actual play itself . . .

RUSSELL: Give me an example.

JONES: In some ways you wrote the play with a pseudo-Brechtian structure--you know what's going to happen at the end, you have a narrator who tells the audience that class is the root cause of the play's conflict. All that appeared to me to be subverted in that production which seemed to go for an almost entirely emotional response from its audience.

RUSSELL: Yes. You're talking about a production. Now it's not my production, so I'm not going to defend that which I don't necessarily go for. But don't assume that I'm Brechtian, because you have to see *Blood Brothers* as coming out of a tradition that was begun really back in the late sixties here in Liverpool, largely started by McGrath and Dossor at the Everyman which came out of a fusion. Let's say it started with Brecht, let's say the next link in the chain was Joan Littlewood, let's say the next link in the chain was the explosion of popular culture in music and poetry which McGrath then became aware of--and he became the next link in the chain. From the example that McGrath and Dossor set, the next links in the chain are the likes of Willy Russell and Alan Bleasdale. So, I can see exactly in terms of theatrical production in Liverpool where *Blood Brothers* came from. And, in the seventies, what McGrath did was understand that there is no point--he says it brilliantly in his book--there's no point in mediating contemporary reality in order to have the middle-class look at the working classes in a style of theatrical presentation that is purely acceptable to the middle classes. What you can do is have plays which actually have a complete and popular base. But you don't mediate it, you write honestly through those experiences which are recognized by the people who are represented on stage and in so doing you might as well articulate the fact that you can have a lot of fucking fun along the way, because so much of theatre about the working class was a question of stoning babies to death and people having no communication with their parents. That's one side of things. But there is another side of things that is totally about the celebration of life itself, and it doesn't have the didactic argument at the center of the play. Now, to go back to the production. The original production in the West End--would you say the original production was more to your political liking, as it were?

JONES: Yes. And aesthetic liking.

RUSSELL: Yes, I agree. It's always difficult because the first production is always the best for me anyway . . . one's ideas are realized . . . but let's not get into that because as I said, I don't want to talk about someone else's production. But it was a cleaner, straighter, simpler, more straight-forward production . . .

JONES: To say the least, yes.

RUSSELL: And yet not that many people came to see it. There's an argument to say that the gloss of this production might be a price worth paying to get more people into see it. But then you're going to say to me, "Ah, yes, but haven't you demeaned the level of interaction, haven't you whored yourself to allow them to see it?" And I'd have to say to you that I'd still prefer the original production to be on. I still think as many people would come to see it. But that doesn't take account of the bald pragmatism and day-to-day commercialism of getting a play on in the West End.

JONES: I fully accept that. But implicit in all you have just said, I think, is the implication that "get them in and then even if they only get a tiny . . ."

RUSSELL: No, I don't agree with "get them in at all costs," I've seen so-called popular theatre which . . . I mean, I would close the theatre down rather than "get them in," because its vacuous.

JONES: Like?

RUSSELL Again, I don't want to give you examples because many of the examples, in fact all of the examples, have been perpetrated by friends of mine.

JONES: How about theoretical, if not practical, examples?

RUSSELL: Well, I've certainly seen stuff at the Everyman and Playhouse here which has just got the *style* of popular theatre without the *content*. Don't forget what McGrath did when I was very eager to become a playwright and was soaking up everything. I saw plays like *Fish in the Sea* . . . really tough plays with a debate going on at the center of them . . . but told in a completely accessible, popularly recognizable style. What one has seen in later years is the style of them without the content.

JONES: Yes. In that same book you mentioned, *A Good Night Out*, McGrath quotes at length a piece by Franca Rame about why Fo's company chose not to work in the established theatres anymore. She talks about how the middle-classes come into these theatres and it being something akin to getting a good birching after a sauna. You went in and were told how terrible the middle-classes were and rather than subvert middle-class consciousness, the effect was almost to help the digestion. What's your reaction to those theories?

RUSSELL: That's fine for the Fos. It just doesn't happen to be my attitude because I don't operate from a divisive class position. I think you can embrace everybody in theatre and I don't think you have to say "we're only going to play factories from now on--fuck the middle classes", because it seems to me, from the evidence I have, to be untrue. I read from *Shirley Valentine* recently on a trip to Germany. I was reading in places like Cologne, Berlin, Dusseldorf. Often the readings were arranged by the British

Council and you would have German aristocratic women, dripping in jewelry, coming up to me at the end of the reading, crying and saying "That's my life." I'd just read a play about a woman in working-class Liverpool who's chained to a sink and talking to the wall. I crossed--it might be an arrogance on my part, I might be completely wrong--but at least its always my *aim* to cross those barriers. Not to accept those barriers. Not in fact to support those barriers.

JONES: I accept that too, but you must wonder sometimes what the effect of *Blood Brothers* is on a middle-class punter who is paying £20 to see the show. Now I know that's extremely difficult to assess but . . .

RUSSELL: Well, I think that's a very patronizing attitude to take, you see, because you assume that the £20 seats--and only a *few* of the seats in the theatre are £20--are occupied by middle-class punters. Now the working-class man and his wife who go to stay in London say on a Friday and Saturday night on a mini-break weekend want to go to the theatre. They'll make sure they pay their twenty-bloody-quid and have the best seat in the place. You know, I remember a huge problem at the Everyman was we all thought we were getting working-class people coming in from Kirby, you know, and I remember talking to some people and saying "why is it you don't like going to the Everyman but you'll go to the Empire for the pantomime?" and this guy says "I've been in that fucking Everyman. It's a disgusting dump. Me and my wife are not going to get dressed up in our best clothes and go and sit where there is fucking sawdust on the seats and all that stuff." You've got to address that. Working people do want to go to the theatre. But they don't want to dress like students. I sorry to be deflecting a lot of these questions. Its not out of any desire not to answer any of your questions. It's just that I don't share a lot of their original premises. And that's why I think one has a completely different attitude.

I think another different reason why one has a completely different attitude is the fact that I have never been cast on the outside and I think that a lot of the questions you have, the starting point of them, is of really the sort of sixties and seventies playwrights whose links with the working class tradition were severed when they went to university and were then imbued with all sorts of guilt. And that's never happened to me. It's never happened to Alan Bleasdale. I think it is part of the reason that we write the plays we do, in the way that we do, for the audiences we do. Neither of us have ever been divorced--not only intellectually--geographically we haven't.

JONES: Just to stay with *Blood Brothers* for a moment, many theatre people have said, starting from Brecht and going on, that the way to make people think in the theatre--assuming you want to make people think which you may or may not want to do--is to avoid a primarily empathic response. Somehow you've got to get people out of the illusion and make them realise the centrality of class.

RUSSELL: Thank God Brecht's talent was often bigger than his theories. He broke his own rules and made watchable plays.

JONES: It seems that the climax of *Blood Brothers* is a highly emotional one.

RUSSELL: Sure.

JONES: If you accept the premise that you want to make people more aware of class division in that play (which, in my view, many people simply can't accept), is invoking such emotion from an audience in any way problematic?

RUSSELL: I'm trying to find a way to answer that two-pronged question in the best way. The fact is that if a truly Thatcherite human being--if Thatcher herself went in to see *Blood Brothers*, no matter how I had written that play, it would not enhance her understanding of class divisions in Britain because she would not want to know about it. Now, a lot of people must wander in to that play not wanting to know about. I don't think I'm going to be capable of getting under their skin with a play. I hope I can but I don't assume that I am going to be able to, because if somebody is rigidly opposed to acknowledging the class in Britain, then they are going to find a thousand reasons to argue with *Blood Brothers*, and to dismiss, if you like, its "message". The reason that the ending is as it is really has nothing with that sort of Thatcherite model. The reason its there is purely because of dramatic catharsis. Let's say we ended the play with the narrator walking out and saying, " Could it be superstition that is to blame for what has come to pass, or could it be, what we the English, have come to know as class." Curtain down.

What I saying is that my theatrical instinct tells me that in an audience . . . Say I am in that audience and I know about class, right? I'm on the side of this playwright, and totally with him in his play, and it gets to the end of the play and this prat walks out, stops everything, and tells me what to take away from this play, then I'm going to feel very let down. I'm going to feel insulted. I'm going to reject the play. I am going to walk out saying, "What a heap of shit. Why cripple that good play with that sort of ending?" Also, I would leave the theater feeling unresolved and I would feel that the playwright cheated me because he put the weight of the play on to my shoulders. Now it's not my responsibility to take on the entire weight of the play. I think it is the the playwright's role to find a way, when you've taken an audience through something as dark as that, to allow the catharsis to happen, to allow the cleansing. That's why you get the song "Tell Me It's Not True.' which lyrically is desperate, but it's deliberately written

elegiacally. It's written so it will emotionally soar. I'd rather look to Shakespeare to give me advice on how to structure a play than Brecht. Because Shakespeare had profound theories, but he also had great instinct and he never allowed his theories to dominate his plays. And that is why the end of *Blood Brothers* is like it is. Instinctively, it is right. Now it is wrong in many ways. Dramatically, if you look at it, it's cracked. The play's ending and you sing a bloody song for three and a half minutes. But you take that away from an audience, you take that away from *Blood Brothers*, and we wouldn't be sitting here talking. There would never have been *Blood Brothers*. It would never have existed. Forty-nine students in a dank hall might be sitting there and watching it and going "Right on, man," but no way would you have got to people.

JONES: You could argue perhaps also in *Blood Brothers* that if you were to take the tack that it should be about class, that it should be more right on or whatever . . .

RUSSELL: How can it be more right on? If you're saying make your plays more boring, then I 'll accept that. Because, you know, if I made my plays more boring I would really be considered as an English dramatist. They would write about me as mainstream figure. I would be invited to write my views in little boxes in sort of *The Sunday Times* over the Christmas period, and, fuck that, I don't want it. Because I don't want to be boring.

JONES: Let's address the use of superstition in *Blood Brothers* for a moment. It's a theme that runs through the play. If a statement is being made about class, or unfairness, or even humanity, doesn't the element of superstition--I don't think I'm the first person to say this--take away from that? It seems that the play is saying that once the shoes are on the table, these people are going to kill each other.

RUSSELL: Go back to Shakespeare. Go back to *The Tempest.* Where does he finally come down? On the side of the savage outside of the intellect? Doesn't he understand that you cannot have fullness unless you can somehow synthesize these two in the human condition? Doesn't he understand that? Doesn't he understand the powerful elemental forces of both, and that we as a species are constantly trying to align . . . we are human beings because unlike the dog that can just follow its emotions and its needs, we were given this brain as well and this brain is always trying to make better this animal force in us. But we are animals and we often forget that we are open to all sorts of animal irrationalities--which actually I think are also very rational--and elemental desires and belief in things that are above us. I believe in both of them. I hate superstition but I am a hyper-superstitious human being myself. I don't make any apology for that, and I don't think one knocks out the other. I think they are complementary.

JONES: You have a lot of evil characters in *Blood Brothers.* It's largely a melodrama, isn't it?

RUSSELL: I suppose it is, because I couldn't write it skillfully enough for it to be anything other than a melodrama . . .

JONES: That wasn't the implication of the question!

RUSSELL: No, it's all right. I like melodrama. I had had the idea for *Blood Brothers* for a long time but I was trying to write it, and nothing was happening, so I gave up the afternoon and read a copy of Christopher Hampton's adaptation of *A Doll's House.* I'd always avoided the play because I'd always been told, hectored, into believing that it was

merely a feminist play--and therefore a problem play. Well, you can take it whatever way you want in terms of those areas but it goes far beyond that. It's a play about sewing the seeds of guilt, it's a play about deceit. Once Nora initially hides that money situation, there's been a mutation, a little maggot has been formed and it is going to eat away. Now that interpretation of *A Doll's House* may be open to debate, of course, but one always forgets that the great things of drama are based on the simplest of human needs and failings. Something like a tiny bit of guilt or a hidden secret can eat away and ultimately cripple whole families--or governments, as we saw in Nixon's time. We'll probably see it again.

JONES: But you're not saying, are you, that the reason those two kill each other in *Blood Brothers* is because of the validity of the superstition?

RUSSELL: No. Inevitably as a dramatist, I couldn't help but dove-tail it so it happened right at the moment that the mother came out with that. But, no. That's why there's the line--just in case anybody was asleep--"Do we blame superstition or could it be class." Which many reviewers, I have to tell you, take great exception to because they think it is political theatre. Tub thumping. They feel got at.

JONES: There was one review in *City Limits* that was saying that the character of working class mother as a feisty little fighter was something of a cliche, and it was also saying that mixing superstition in it doesn't make it politically right . . .

RUSSELL: There's no point in asking me to criticize critics because my mother always brought me up never to mock the afflicted. They go to see it, they have their views, they have their prejudices. I much prefer it when they go in and say that it was brilliant. But

sometimes they don't. There's just not a lot of point in me commenting about what some soft twat says about it in *City Limits*. I certainly won't change the prejudices of that particular reviewer, you know. The only time I take exception . . . the one review of *Blood Brothers* that rankled me bitterly was Mark Steyn in the *Independent* because he basically wrote an essay saying that *Blood Brothers* is pre-*Oklahoma*--the songs do not carry any of the action. Well, it's palpably untrue. And then, to illustrate what an appalling lyricist I was, he quoted six or eight lines that occurred at various points in the show. And he misquoted them all. He was quoting lines I had not written to say what an appalling lyricist I was. Now I was tempted for the first time in my life to write to a critic but I decided it was a lost cause. No, I once did write to a critic. Robert Cushman had really hammered *Blood Brothers* in its original production. And then he went on to write in all sorts of periodicals what an awful show it was. And then--we had a terrible time with the original production of *Blood Brothers*, you know. We almost closed after four weeks but we struggled on--about four months afterwards, he came back to it in his column telling people they were *wrong*, that they should have stayed away. The audacity of it. "I can put up with your bad review and all that, but surely this isn't playing the game." He wrote a letter back to me saying "How dare you complain. You're young, you're healthy and you're making a fortune." It struck me that it was total jealousy. How can you open up a debate with a guy who says that to you?

JONES: Speaking generally, do you think its true to say, historically, that working class audiences have been deliberately excluded from the theatre?

RUSSELL: My understanding is that in the Elizabethan times there was a large, sprawling audience that included members of the working class.

JONES: It has been said that around the middle of the nineteenth century a division grew up between art and entertainment . . .

RUSSELL: Once you had an emergent nouveau riche, they want to display gentility. And so rumbunctuousness and frankness and directness and bawdiness and all the--I won't say qualities because that's a sort of value judgement--but all the hallmarks of working-class culture are sort of pushed aside because the nouveau riche is aping the aristocracy. They always get in wrong in assuming that the aristocracy is gentile because of course they're *frigging* and *fucking* everything in sight . . .

JONES: As Rita says in fact . . .

RUSSELL: Yes, there's that cliche that the (aristocracy) are far more in touch with the working classes anyway than with the despised nouveau riche . . . and it is inevitable that when they see the major mode of communication as the theatre. They will push the rabble as far away from the stage as possible, into the gods, and not have them seen by the gentility in the boxes. You also have a situation in which the most savage industrial revolution anywhere in Europe takes place, so theatres in the towns and the cities do not have a working-class audience going to them because the working-class is completely flogged into submission and kept away from them. By this time the appropriation of the theatres is complete because the middle-classes are looking at their own manners and using the theatre to look at their own manners--some of it highly critical and highly brilliant. I'm not putting down the bourgeoise plays, I love many of them. But they are bourgeois plays because they are written by the bourgeoisie for the bourgeoisie. By this time, you have a generation of working-class people who have never known the habit of going to the theatre, who have been totally intimidated, who would never dare to presume

to go into these places . By the time we get to Victorian times, the working-class in man in England was a white nigger. It's as simple as that. He couldn't go to the theatre. He probably wouldn't want to, given what was on offer. If he was represented on the stage, it was as a bumbling oaf or as a patronized, servile jack-the-lad. His role was never examined on the stage. And so what they do, politically, is open these things, which I hate, musicals. I hate the so-called love affair the British have with the musical. Maybe I just never saw an example of it, but all the music I hear from them seems to be bloody awful stuff.

JONES: You mean from the early part of the century?

RUSSELL: Yes. It should be consigned to the sodding bin. We have passion and nostalgia for that shit. And they'll be talking in glowing terms in forty years time about light entertainment on the television--fifties variety shows--Tatty tack. And I don't think working people ever liked that stuff. Those who are the arbiters of taste patronize and say "that's what they'll like--a comedian, a load of bloody girls kicking their legs, a ventriloquist." It's a bloody insult, you know. Of course, what happened was in the twenties and thirties--and thirties and forties--you still had this middle-class stranglehold on the theatre, excluding whole sections of our society. And certainly you had politically-conscious movements which started to try once again, to go to the working place and the rock face--sort of American living newspaper theatre--but it was all politically self-conscious. Then of course, it made *Look Back in Anger* happen. It was a combination, I suppose, of George Devine, John Osborne, Ken Tynan and a massive amount of grammar school kids who had gone to university and found themselves having to write about the guilt of going through the university process and coming back and not being able to talk to their friends. I don't sneer at that. At the time that was revolutionary. I

mean, imagine seeing *Look Back in Anger*--I don't think it is a fine play at all, I have to tell you, I think it is a bit of a trial--but imagine, at the day, the only thing you had been able to get to see, was Anouilh, Rattigan and Coward and theatre didn't speak for your generation. and just as Bill Haley hit the first chords you walked into the Royal Court and this play was happening. It must have been pretty bloody sensation and of course, it made so much that came later possible.

JONES: *Look Back in Anger* surely did not make theatre any more accessible to the working class.

RUSSELL: That's why I said *who* made it possible. It was a question of George Devine because of the policy of the Court. It was Tynan because he was such a good, influential critic. It was Osborne because he wrote the play and it was because the time was right. So much about theatre is about fashion, I mean that in its smaller sense, you know. I value fashion but if you don't catch the wind, it doesn't matter how good the play is, how radical it is, two years earlier it would have opened and closed. Two years later, it wouldn't have happened because someone else might have come in to the Court or someone might have been fired or whatever . . . . And then you had the host of playwrights that were seen as working class. They didn't write for the same audience that comes to see my plays now. I don't think they didn't want to, I suspect that they didn't realize that they could have reached their mums and dads as well as their peers and tutors. What happened then was you have people who weren't quite in the mainstream of the university playwrights, you had Wesker, who actually looked at the situation from another perspective really and brought in a kind of regionalism with *Roots*. And people like Rudkin starting to work with idiomatic structure and McGrath, who was slightly too young to be caught up in the Royal Court thing probably sitting down as a playwright,

and saying "Well, they have taken over all of that ground. There is no point in me writing a play like that. If I am going to be successful, I am going to have to write a play that says something different." Anybody who writes you know, has to be fairly hardheaded, even if it's a non-articulated hardheadedness. As I say, Wesker had the beginnings of the idea of taking plays to the working classes, sort of guerilla outreach. Actually I don't agree with that. Looking back with the luxury of hindsight, I don't think it was the right thing to do. I have never thought that was a good idea.We did it at the Everyman, we used to try and take out theatre to the working classes . . .

JONES: Why don't you like that?

RUSSELL: Because it's patronizing.

JONES: In what way?

RUSSELL: Well, if I've gone out for a drink and five guys rush in and put up a wrestling ring and put on this play and everything . . . well, I'd be insulted and annoyed. I'd rather just have the drink I'd gone out for in the first place.

JONES: You mentioned a moment ago that it's patronizing to say that the working-class person doesn't want to spend £18.50 and that they *want* to dress up and go to an opulent theatre . . .

RUSSELL: Well, yes, I think they'd rather pay £12.50 but that's going to be an argument about economics. What I mean is, they will go to *Phantom of the Opera* and pay £50 for a pair of tickets.

JONES Because it's a good night out?

RUSSELL: They want to be at the *Phantom of the Opera.*

JONES: That show has some of the elements that McGrath refers to in his book. He indicates that there all these things you've got to do to appeal to working-class audiences.

RUSSELL: I disagree with that aspect of John's theory.

JONES: Could you expand on that?

RUSSELL: I think it's a question of theory overriding instinct. John says you have to include songs, you have to include jokes, you have to include direct address, and I don't believe that. I believe you can engage an audience at a primal theatrical level that completely defies John's theory. If it's an absolute fact of life that you need the things in a play that John says, why is *Educating Rita* known throughout the world when it is two people who come into a room and talk to each other over thirteen scenes? It doesn't contain any of that yet it is a massive, popular success.

JONES: That's what I'm trying to find out. Why is it?

RUSSELL: Well, because I just think that John got it wrong.

JONES: But are you saying it can't be analyzed beyond that?

RUSSELL: I think John's form of theatre is absolutely valid but it's not the only form. I've seen John get it totally wrong. I've seen shows that had all those ingredients, but what they didn't have was balls and soul and heart and something beyond. . . . I'm not saying sub-text, but that's what I mean. Again, I go back to what I said earlier about seeing the style only. It's become decadent. You have that populist theatre *style* but the content isn't there.

JONES: You're obviously a brilliantly creative person. If we want theatre that represents a meaningful popular aesthetic--that's going to be successful, accessible, all of those things that many of us believe in--are we just looking then for creative geniuses like Willy Russell, or is there some way to . . . ?

RUSSELL: No, because in presenting you with my potted history of English theatre, I was trying to say I am one of the beneficiaries of all that has gone on before. And I assume that people in the future will benefit from my little contribution to that chain of events. No it's not a question of creative geniuses. Again, as I said, theatre is about fashion and it's about economics, it's about politics, and all of those things. And there's no doubt about it that the best of times in theatre are when all those things seem to come to the same firmament. When Arnold Goodman and Jenny Lee were running the Arts Council, theatre in Britain was, I think, healthier than it is today, because we had a better economic base. We had a political commitment to a liberal ethic in this country. We had some awful masterbatory theatre along the way and, like Goodman, I'm not a devotee of total, blind subsidy because I saw some awful work perpetrated. When people felt that they could ignore the box-office, they began to ignore the audience. I don't think that's good for theatre. Neither do I think that taking away subsidy is good for theatre. I haven't really worked out where I stand on that, but I've always had a deep suspicion of

total commercialism and of total subsidy. I don't know what the answer is, I just know that every person who writes a play has to be true to himself as an artist and, at the time, write the best, the most truthful, the most honest, the most engaging thing that he can write at that particular time. And then go through the hell of trying to make sure that it gets onto the stage in the best realized way.

JONES: You mentioned a moment ago some of the desires of the working person going to see theatre. An argument that's been made by some people is that the working class culture, if you would, that you're trying to appeal to.

RUSSELL: No, I'm not trying to appeal to. I've also sought to include . .

JONES: . . . that you've also sought to include. Anyway, the argument is that the working-class culture has been in some way bastardized or atrophied by the bourgeoise. For example, if you went to a working-men's club in Manchester, you'd find an autocratic atmosphere, you'd find racism, sexism--precepts that liberal . . .

RUSSELL: And you'd go a long way to find any evidence of bleeding culture in there. My experience of working-men's clubs was that they were appalling and were patronizing. Somehow and for some reason, people went along with it. I mean *Educating Rita* is about that. Rita's speech about when Rita's mother says "we can sing better songs than those," is about that. I hated that. So, when you had middle-class playwrights sort of coming in and saying yes, that's terrific. Let's write plays *a la* what happens in the working-men's club, I throw up my hands in despair. Because I don't want plays to be as vacuous as what happens in a working-men's club.

JONES: Why are they like that?

RUSSELL: Probably the working men's club, when the movement started, served a rather important need of that time. But they have atrophied. They are now really out of step with the needs of the working-class. I think so much of what is wrong with the Labour Party is the same thing. It's still sees the working class in a rather sort of black and white, grainy, 1930's manner. Now I think probably working men's clubs in the days when people had very little leisure time served an important role, but they haven't grown. So much of what happened with the labor movement closed its eyes to the fact that life was changing. For example, the reason it's been so easy for this government to whittle away at the welfare state is that the welfare state was established and was then seen to be some marvellous icon that could never be questioned. We did produce a certain welfare state dependency. Fifteen years ago, you would have people saying "they can sort it out for me," "It's my right to have this, that and the other." It created a certain sort of dependence which became in Tory hands "it's those liggers living on the back of the state." Now, the labor movement should have questioned that a long time before the Tories were able to get in and say that, but we managed to set up something so good we assumed it was infallible and that it would always stay that way in a changing world in which Britain was being forced to accept almost by the day that it was a diminishing power that couldn't call the shots, that if the rest of the world moved it had its effects in Britain. Now that's the macrocosm. To talk about the microcosm of the working men's club. You now how conservative working-class people are . . . . On the news, just the other night, a working men's club had decided to allow ladies into the men's bar. Jesus. This is 1989. There was a report of other clubs that still wouldn't have that going on. I don't want to take that as a model for life. I'm not going to say that I'm going to write my plays with bingo in the middle and a lousy three-piece band playing appallingly

through terrible amplifiers and dreadful, dreadful surroundings with awful anti-human substances used on the tables and appalling colors around. Neither am I going in to wish *my* tastes upon them. But it would be nice to break down the stranglehold of that taste, that conservative working-class taste.

JONES: But do you think that's a layer that's been imposed . . .

RUSSELL: I do. I suspect it has. But I'm not easy prey to conspiracy theories.

JONES: As a playwright, can you hope to get beneath that layer? That's what McGrath was saying to some degree, isn't it? Is there some kind of pure form of working-class culture there? Many of your plays contain characters reminiscent of that conservative ideology--Reeny for example.

RUSSELL: The working-men's club has actually never been that big a thing here in Liverpool. Liverpool geographically was in Lancashire, but we spoke a different language than the rest of Lancashire. Unlike Lancashire it was never ground down by the mills, the pits, the factories, because it was a trading place. And trading people have to depend on their language and their wit and so are lighter of foot and sharper. I don't think of the characters of Reeny and Betty and people as being out of that, but I know what you mean. If they lived further East. they would go into working men's clubs. But is there a pure working-class culture? No, I don't think of it as pure because its a hybrid culture really. I spent a long time being involved with traditional English music which you could say was part of the culture of the people. And there's a very good book by James Reeves called *The Idiom of the People* which certainly helped me articulate my own views as an artist. as did the work of A.L. Lloyd who was very involved with folk

song. But, at the same time, as I was reading those books, I realized that we were talking about . . . that we were in danger of romanticizing something that was dead. We'd lost the song makers in our community, by and large, because industrialization tends to do that. You'll always find a living, singing tradition within agricultural, rural areas, but once you get into the towns, it tends to shatter.--partly because of the sort of communication systems you have in towns, it is not as necessary to carry things in songs. I'm fairly inarticulate about this . . . I am aware of, without really being able to define it, the difference between a high art culture and what we, for the sake of convenience, can call a working-class culture. And it's easier to define a high-art culture than it is to describe the hybrid working-class culture. High art culture is refined art--opera houses, poetry books, concert halls, theatres. Just as I don't want the class division, I really don't want those cultural divisions. I want the concert hall, and the opera stage, and the poetry book to mean just as much to Joe as they do to Joseph. Now, one's chipping away at that. How you ever achieve that, I don't know, but it would be better if you didn't have a high art culture and a polarized working-class culture.

JONES: Where does your writing fit into that? Does it do the chipping away? I know, for example, that Rita reads the wrong books and she asks Frank . . .

RUSSELL: How do you tell literature, yes.

JONES: His response is . . .

RUSSELL: One's always known really , yes.

JONES: There is a plea in there, is there not, for a removal of those barriers?

RUSSELL: Yes. The writers of those original works do not set up those barriers, because any writer, no matter what the form is he's working in, any writer worth his salt, is trying to reach everybody. But we do have a literature industry, an opera industry, a theatre industry, and the spokesmen are generally people who think that art is only for the few and reinforce that view time and time again.

JONES: I know you had three simultaneous London productions of your plays last year. As your plays move into the West End, do you find "the industry" makes your plays suffer?

RUSSELL: Well I'm not talking about the hands-on section of the industry. One can cope with that and take responsibility. The shapers, the makers, of the stranglehold are the writers *about* it, the communicators *about* it, it's not the direct communicators themselves. I know for example when first I wanted to write drama, I diligently read *Theatre Quarterly* and *Drama Magazine*, I could feel all the time being pulled into one approved direction, one approved style. There was a Michael Radcliffe piece in *The Observer* past that presents us with what he thinks we should go and see. And he wants us to be guilty about going to see what we do see. (Mark) Steyn has written that it's a disgrace that *Drama Magazine* should ever have awarded best musical to *Blood Brothers*--basically saying what Cushman said, that we should not go to see that. I don't think they have the faith in ordinary people that I have. Ordinary, non-theatre going people. All of the middle-class people who go to the theatre are very good at not complaining, are very good at sitting there and being bored and actually going along with boring, fucking theatre. Now you tend to find that working people who go to the theatre would say that it's a heap of shit and leave at the interval without feeling any guilt about it. A middle-

class audience cannot say it's a heap of shit if they've been told by Michael Radcliffe and the rest that it is a very important piece of work. And you come back time and time again to the emperor's new clothes. It's the commentators who are the cornerstones of the literature industry and what can you say about them? One tries to get on with one's job, knowing that one has the approval of the audience. That's the starting point, you know. If anybody writes about you, it's nice to have them say that they appreciate what you're doing rather than saying you're a heap of shit.

JONES: But ultimately . . .

RUSSELL: Ultimately I don't write for prosperity, I write for now. And those guys measure everything with the yardstick of prosperity--will it be around in fifty years time? What would these same guys have been saying about the medium of film fifty years ago, what would they have been saying about the songs of Irving Berlin, Gershwin, people like that. They would have dismissed them as merely popular. They can only venerate the sort of work we're talking about really when history has condoned it and then they're safe. They can elevate it into what they call high art. And it's only when they are allowed to do that, will they look at it seriously. They want to discover that which got lost. They are buggers for pulling crap off library shelves. It got lost because people didn't fucking like it, that's why. Plays which work do not go out of the repertoire. It's interesting that Coward went right out of favor with critics, but his plays never stopped playing--the good plays not the bad ones. He lived to see himself become venerated.

JONES: You've had several plays performed on Shaftesbury Avenue. Does the nature of those theatres, all those years of West End elitism . . .

RUSSELL: Which play are you talking about?

JONES: Say *One for the Road.*

RUSSELL: I don't go along with that idea of the West End you see. The West End is the sprawling popular market place. What I have decided not to do is to go work in the big subsidized houses . . .

JONES: Why not?

RUSSELL: Because I feel that, there, an audience does come along to worship at the shrine of art and they are conditioned, before they enter to go to the National Theatre or go to the RSC--I don't mean all of the audience but quite a large element--and as they give their ticket stub in, they check in their critical faculties as well and say, "This is the National Theatre, this is the Royal Shakespeare Company, I cannot criticize this. I will sit here and enjoy myself. I will not go to sleep. I desperately want to go to sleep because this play is boring. No, it's not boring because the leading critics in London and the people who really revere art have said that this is the place to be. And I can then go home and say 'last night I went to the National Theatre or last night I went to the RSC.'" They don't go to see plays--some of those people. There are a lot of plays that have to go on at the RSC and at the National because they couldn't go on anywhere else because they couldn't get an audience anywhere else. Sometimes because they are such big plays that they can't be produced commercially. No one would take a risk on them. Now, I'm not in that position. The way I carve out my situation, I don't have to do that. I can work in the sprawl, in the commercial marketplace of the West End. I don't write for the West End, I've never written a play for the West End because it's just a geographical

term. It's anonymous, it's just a collection of theatres, all with different managers, all with different producers. The West End really is the popular theatre in London. Not the Bush, not the Kings Head, not the RSC, not the National. You go and see coach loads turn up to those West End theatres. Find out how many of those theatre tickets are booked through agencies to people who live in Scunthorpe, Northumberland in for the weekend, it's quite staggering. You don't have that built-in audience in the West End. You exhaust in about the first three weeks, the dedicated theatre-goer in the West End. If your play cannot appeal above and beyond the dedicated theatre-goer, the already converted theatre-goer, it'll fall flat as a pancake and it'll be off, three weeks later. So that's why I know it to be more a sort of sprawling popular pit.

JONES: Accepting that we have a National Theatre, for all its sins, do you think it could ever be a true theatre of the people?

RUSSELL: Well, London's the capital city, we have to have some big theatre there, why not have the National Theatre? A lot of people like to go to it, they can put on great productions because it's got--well it hopes to have--a sound economic basis, it's got extremely talented people working there. I've nothing against the National Theatre at all. What I would like, is to have the same funding throughout. I know Richard Eyre would and probably everybody who works at the National. They don't want to be there at the expense of the rest of us. I do think that there was a period when the true national theatre in England was in regional theatre. It was when the ideas that Goodman and Jenny Lee carved out at the Arts Council started to bear fruit and you had more and more of the regional theatres starting to risk new plays. I mean some of them stayed atrophied and would for ever, but there was a glut of them in the seventies that now--we took it for granted at the time--seems to have gone away.

JONES: Do you find big differences as your work moves from regional theatres to the West End? Does your work get compromised more away from the regions?

RUSSELL: That doesn't happen. The problem with some authors is that they write for the theatre but rather despise the rough and tumble of theatre itself. Well, go and be a poet or a novelist because if you're working in theatre, you have to get your hands dirty with things like contracts, money, agents--I always say it is composed of those two components in the word, it is show-business. It is *show* and it is *business* and you've got to actually be able to deal with those. And you've got to be able to say, "All right, I want to go with that designer," and stand by it. You can't pull out and say they fucked it up because, in your contract, you have the right to approve the director, designer, costume, actors.

JONES: You've always been very much a regional playwright, many of the academic theorists have, when discussing populism, made the point that great popular culture is essentially regionally based, and the most successful exponents of populist theory have kept a regional base.

RUSSELL: Absolutely. In Liverpool, we've never felt inferior, we've never felt regional and we've certainly never felt provincial. So we never really had any sort of axe to grind on that front. We've always had, for example, a style in dress that has never aped London. Now, the down side of that is that awful sort of Liverpool jingoism and chauvinism which I despise because that becomes perverted. But, at root, there is no sense of being inferior. If the Beatles had felt inferior to what was going on and wanted to be accepted in a London way, they would have been covering the songs of Cliff

Richard and Tommy Steele. But no, they said, "Give us those rhythm and blues record that are coming across on the fortnightly boat from New York, we'll do that and we'll make it with that music."

JONES: Is that regional identity being threatened in Thatcher's Britain? Things are becoming more homogeneous especially now Northern cities have a sort of yuppified, selective prosperity.

RUSSELL: I know what you mean and I agree. It's not so much the external threat from the establishment, it's the inner threat.. I was having a conversation with Alan Bleasdale about five years ago. I remember saying to him that increasingly I was moving away from using the idiom. I think if you look at my more recent plays, say if you look at *Shirley Valentine*, it doesn't rely heavily on a Liverpool idiom at all. Part of the reason for that is that when I began writing--again, after the example of McGrath, I was more sustained than McGrath because he largely wrote short pieces--when I started writing full-length plays in the Liverpool idiom, it was not done. That was not the language of theatre, not the language of the pop-song, not really even the language of poetry. It was not even the language of local radio. On local radio in Liverpool, you didn't have any stations using Liverpool voices, they were all sort of mid-Atlantic. I began writing plays in the idiom, Alan Bleasdale began writing plays in this idiom, other people began writing plays in this idiom and I wouldn't necessarily say we were responsible because it began happening in all sorts of other idiomatic regions as well . . .

JONES: Like poetry with the Liverpool poets.

RUSSELL: Right, like poetry. For example, they started to let Liverpudlians runs local radio, to speak in the native Scouse idiom. They started to sell things in Scouse and in so doing, to my mind they debased it. It became very decadent and so that's why I started, I think, to move away. What's the use of being an artist in Paris when the tourists have discovered Paris? It's that sort of thing . . . when the tourists have discovered Toulouse-Letrec is down the way, Toulouse-Letrec has gone. But I didn't want to remove myself geographically and I *don't* want to remove my self geographically because I think that all that shit is just a bit of opportunist commercialism. The only reason they'll read dedications on the radio in scouse is because they can get more from it, ultimately. I see that sort of threat reducing the power of idiom, sapping it. Secondly, using it for nostalgia--nostalgia being memory for the sake of memory and not memory for the sake of insight. Using it to sell goods, robbing it of any political content, watering down the language so it doesn't offend--trading on it. Once you see that happening to your language, it's very difficult really. One doesn't want to write a play and be mistaken for being a part of that debased use of the language. It bothers me.

JONES: But if you don't use the local idiom, doesn't the purer voice disappear, ultimately?

RUSSELL: It's always been a tradition in Liverpool that once the media gets hold of your language, you change it. That's why language does change very fast here. Once it becomes common currency, it becomes passe, especially for kids. One is always aware of that in Liverpool. If the whole of the idiom had been aprobated, then we're in deep trouble. I write for what I hear and not from a literary base. I don't see words on the page, I hear them first and then they are recorded in writing. If I hear a particular voice and it's Liverpool, then it will be Liverpool. I mean Shirley is very much a Liverpool

character but one had to make her above, beyond and better than any other use of idiom in Liverpool at the moment. There's not one line in that play that any of those D.J.'s could touch.

JONES: Why?

RUSSELL: They haven't got the fucking wit that she possesses. Anyway, let's not be romantic and sentimental. Liverpool evolved because of economic needs and geographical determining factors. So what we have is a large Victorian city after the industrial revolution, which is now over. It's a different city. Do we want Liverpool to become a museum, do we want it to become the Albert Dock writ large? The Albert Dock's a beautiful place, what's done within in is debatable, but at least it's been done in such a way that you can see the beauty of it. But if we take that to its logical conclusion, we're all going to be a museum.

JONES: And where does that leave the populist voices?

RUSSELL: I don't know. Certainly, there's a great move to dampen the authentic Liverpool voice. Alan Bleasdale and I are always innundated with complaints about showing the down side of Liverpool. I mean they run a campaign of civic pride. Well, they've probably got more to be proud of internationally in Alan Bleasdale and I than a thousand things they float, but they won't come near us. "Keep them quiet. They might open their mouths and say things we don't want them to say." But Liverpool's always been based on self-criticism. It's at the center. They're more interested in bringing people in from the outside who say they can clean things up. I don't want it to be a museum. I 'm not like the people who put up statues to say that the Beatles came from

here. It tends to be outsiders who do that. I like the fact that I can live and work here and nobody goes on about me being Willy Russell the playwright. Because Liverpool has a great disregard for pomposity, that's the true spirit of the place. If that goes, then it goes. There's nothing we can do about it. Like I said before about the folk songs, you can't protect something like that, because then you have something worse, you have self-conscious revivalism. Change is inevitable. I'm not absolving myself from responsibility but really it is the next generation who will tell how its handled.

JONES: Although you've stopped using the idiom, I think *Shirley Valentine* is the strongest play you've written. Perhaps its a reaction to all this. Was it hardest to write?

RUSSELL: It's tougher. It's tougher with every play you write anyway. I could never deny this idiom, because it's my being you know. But as I say, I always have to try and write in a way that is not part of that bastard version of the language. As long as one continues not to be parochial and writes universally through this idiom, then it's always going to be available. I'm not interested in writing about Liverpool, I'm interested in writing about everywhere, about every man and every woman. So if one can continue to do that, then I can always shake down the idiom and reuse it in a pungent and potent form.

To go back to what we were saying before, I think you've go to be ruthlessly critical of the working class because I don't think they'll believe you otherwise. You might find this interesting. When I originally wrote *Breezeblock Park*, it was a very big departure in terms of the Everyman because the Everyman house style was in a tradition of Brecht and Joan Littlewood--song, direct address, using performing skills as well as acting styles. When I was first commissioned to write *John, Paul, George, Ringo . . . and Bert*, I said to Dossor, "Do you want me to write this observing the unities or within the house style"-

-I think the assumption was that if you spoke with a heavy Liverpool accent, as I did, you wouldn't know how to do that. They thought I was a primitive who worked on instinct. Actually, I really wanted to write a play based on the unities because I'd never done it. And I knew it was important to learn how do it. But he made me write it in the house style. And then I was commissioned to write a new play and I knew I wanted to write play that observed the unities of time and space and so I wrote *Breezeblock Park* which was completely radical, to put that sort of play on at the Everyman, you know. But also it was radical because it absolutely criticized the people who were up on the stage, as well as in a sense celebrating them. Now the middle-class people who run the theatre--great champions of the working-class--were terrified shitless about putting that play on. Dossor was wetting himself about it. We had two previews and we had a very broadly based audience and of course people were pissing themselves laughing at their own manners because it was not done. Plays about manners were usually about the middle-classes. For years, the middle-classes had loved to laugh at themselves and here suddenly was an opportunity for a working-class audience to laugh at itself which was . . . I mean I hadn't realized it before sitting down to watch the play with the audience. But we got to the first night, the press night and Chris Bond had me against the wall saying that that play should never have been allowed on to an English stage. He's since changed his opinion. But there was a sort of agreement to only write about the working-class as if it was sitting in the kitchens of England plotting revolution. Now this was by people who no longer lived among, didn't even come from, the working-class. Most of them were middle-class anyway. But I still sat in one of the kitchens in England, in a working-class household, and my experience told me that most working-class people were not plotting revolution, they were actually popping valiums and going fucking crazy. And that's what *Breezeblock Park* came out of. People had to bow to the fact that this play was different and it did open their eyes to their own slightly patronizing attitude.

JONES; The Everyman was middle-class run at that time?

RUSSELL: It was run by people who lived the middle-class life style, university, theatre directors and all that, and yet they had a great passion to make the theatre relevant to the people in whose city it operated. And they had a political passion for the working-class but not, I think, an understanding. I mean often the embarrassment I would feel when I would go out with Vanload, this outreach group who would throw a play on in a pub. I mean I would die of an embarrassment. They would walk in and say "Hello! We're actors and we'll put on accents as well. I'm going to sing a song to you." I remember going out with them once, we did an old people's show, they got into this old-people's home and started saying "Roll Out the Barrel" and I remember this old man saying "doesn't anyone fucking understand that we like rock music and pop music." You know that assumption that a certain people want a certain thing and that you can give it to them, You know, these 80 year olds, it didn't stop at roll out the bloody barrel.

JONES: But if you don't take the theatre out to people . . . any outreach can be inevitably a bit like that.

RUSSELL: It can and I'm talking about the early days. When people like George Costner started to write for it--George had a deeper understanding of the sensibilities of the culture of a pub--he was able to write shows in a different way and make it work. He used better, sharper actors.

JONES: That's a difficult dilemma. How do you get that understanding? How do you do that with pandering to the atrophied nature of so much of that culture? How do you do

it without repeating Noel Coward with working-class characters? There are two dilemmas, I think, as regards *Breezeblock Park*. There's a danger of showing working-class dilemmas to middle-class audiences and that being patronizing . . .

RUSSELL: But, you see, I've never heard anybody pursuing this argument using Forster's words "only connect." No one complains about the TV dramas of the sixties and seventies dealing with those very same issues--[Colin] Welland's work, for example. How about the people on the telly being patronized? It's all right to have that interchange with people in their living rooms but not in the theatre.

JONES: Did you find middle-class people coming to *Breezeblock Park* and laughing at Betty?

RUSSELL: The working-class people came and laughed themselves stupid. The middle-class people got very defensive. They felt they shouldn't be sneering. Well God help them. You don't think for one second that that woman should *not* be laughed at? She's outrageous. But I lived with her as my Auntie Dolly. I was brought up with her. One wanted to be on the outside and laughing, because on the inside it was hell.

JONES: Would it be fair to describe the play as a working-class comedy of manners?

RUSSELL: It was also my vision of hell. Yes, it was a deliberate attempt to write a bit like Ayckbourn--who I was very taken by, although he was often sneered at for being a craftsman. Something clicked.

JONES: A lot of your plays contain characters like Jane and Reeny--nouveau-riche types who care only about new sofas. There are usually characters like Dennis and Rita who are trying to break away from their influence. Often your characters poorly articulate articulate exactly what they're after. Sandra refers to not watching TV, plants, wine, pictures on the wall, a desire for a kind of intellectual life. What does that mean? Does she just want to be middle-class? Also in *Educating Rita*, and in your later plays, I get the sense that you're seeing the superficiality of that. Frank, for example, tells Rita that she's come an awful long way to get so little.

RUSSELL: I was a much younger playwright writing *Breezeblock Park* and in *Educating Rita*, I finally realized the play I'd always been trying to write through *Breezeblock*, *Stags and Hens* and *One for the Road* . . . I finally got to grips with that escape. I put it center stage and was able to examine it in much greater depth, all the points for and against. What Sandra does is see what what she wants to see. She associates her boyfriend with a softer, more caring world, more liberal, more gentle, not full of any of the people she'd seen before she met her boyfriend. And the only way she can describe that is in terms of the material things. That's very autobiographical--I came from a house in which we wouldn't have a plant, we wouldn't have a picture, we wouldn't sit at the table, we'd have food on our knees whilst watching telly. So when I first moved into a different world, before I went to college, and started to mix with people, I'd go into people's houses and they'd have all these things--they didn't live their lives for things, it was just a natural expression of their sensibilities on the whole. One used to want not the pictures, not the plants but what one saw as the ritual way of living. A calmer, more fulfilling life. It's only later on that you find out that is just a particular veneer and that life can be just as arid, if you think it will be better if you have the right pictures on the wall and the right plants. I think, if it had not been done, now I would

write an indictment of all that. What you're probably not seeing in the printed version is the speech I originally wrote for Sandra which explained how she wanted books and plants and her mother was looking blankly at her. Finally she said "For Christ's sake mother, I want coleslaw!" which brought the house down--so much laughter you couldn't continue the play. I cut the line because I didn't want laughter at that point. I wanted the whole of her pain to come out--she wanted something that was so little, yet it was important to her. How can you explain that you want taste? That was what she meant--in the days before you could get it at the supermarket. I sympathize to this day with Sandra's desires but in that play there was not room to write--there weren't the characters really to have a full dialogue on the question because we didn't have Frank there do say it was all a heap of shit.

JONES: Does it have to be a heap of shit, this thing Sandra wants?

RUSSELL: No, because I just think that is a symbol of something. There's a line in the Paul Simon song *Hearts and Bones*. "The thought that life could be better is woven indelibly into our hearts and our brains." It's what my plays are about, the thought that life could be better. I am not interested in how life could be better. I am not interested in whether Rita goes to her mother's, has a baby, finishes her course, or goes to Australia. I am interested that she has got to the point where she can look at those alternatives and feel that she has choice. That for me is the triumph of Rita. I am not interested in whether Shirley stays in Greece, with Joe, without Joe or whether she goes back with him. I am interested that Shirley has changed as a character. No matter what she does, from then on, she will do it in a different way. Those cries for escape in the plays just reflect my own endless desires to find some Nirvana. It's what we're all looking for as

human beings, you know. Stupid as it is to assume it's there to chase, I think that it's a bigger stupidity in life to think it is not possible to seek for something better.

JONES: Will you make any changes in the script for the New York production of *Shirley Valentine* ?

RUSSELL: I'm taking the whole unit to present the play as English. Simon [Callow] will direct, Bruno [Santini] design and Pauline [Collins] act. I certainly will change nothing before previews . . . I may change the odd thing for reasons of understanding, the odd reference that people can't follow.

JONES: That's very interesting. Alan Ayckbourn did a complete American version of *How the Other Half Loves* and it was a complete disaster . . .

RUSSELL: And you don't half feel dirty afterwards.. . .That happened to me with *Educating Rita*. Originally what happened is that the RSC went and disposed of the rights to a producer who I had never heard of without may so which technically they had the right to do, but it terms of procedure it was appalling. The first thing I knew of this was when this woman called me at one o'clock one Sunday afternoon and said "Hello, my name is Doris Cole Abrahams and I'm presenting your play in America." So a huge fight which lasted for about six weeks evolved. I ended up being able to keep Mike [Ockrent], my original director, but I got stuck with Lucy Arnez and Larry Luckenbill . . . It was only a try-out in Cape Cod in order to get it right . . . fix it the American way. And Mike and I said to the producer that it had turned into a play about somebody who spoke beautifully and wanted to speak even better. So we said to the producer. Look we'll go through the misery of staging this production. Given that you've cast these

Americans, and there's no way they'll be able to do English, especially regional English, so we wrote it for Americans. It died in Cape Cod.

JONES: Does that script exist? I wouldn't mind seeing it.

RUSSELL: It does exist. I don't know where the hell it is and I'm not going to let you see it. There's also a black version of it. Eventually what happened was that this producer was giving me such a hard time . . . I couldn't be damned any more. She got me one weekend and I said there's only one fucking way this play could work as an American play and that's if you understand that the English working class are like the blacks in America. Go away and find a black writer, thinking then I would never be bothered with it thereafter. So I had no excuse to not go into New York and meet with Ntezaki Shangi. So I went to New York, met with Ntezaki--she was great. I knew that no-one was going to watch it, that it would never go to Broadway or anything like that. Anyway, it was ultimately produced at a theatre down in Atlanta. It was quite well reviewed and all that . . . by this time, I'd got out of the clutches of Doris. I knew that the play was scuppered. It had been frigged around and I'd had enough of that and I resolved never to get involved in that kind of thing again. I'm pretty definite about the way an author should be treated. There was a production of *Breezeblock Park* that should have gone on on Broadway. First of all the Beatles show was stopped going there because of litigation by Paul McCartney, so that didn't happen. Fair enough, although actually I think that probably had the biggest chance of any of being successful over there because of . . .well, because of obvious reasons. And then *Breezeblock Park* was optioned and I am a member of the American Dramatists Guild and this company wanted to play one quarter percent below the dramatists guild minimum and I refused. And the producers were saying that this is ridiculous, you're jeopardizing the production

for one quarter percent and then I told them that the same could be said of them, but nothing came of it. A number of things have gone in stock--*Stags and Hens*, *Breezeblock* has been done in stock but never anything on Broadway.

JONES: One trend there of course is the emergence of regional theatres . . .

RUSSELL: Yes, I don't take Broadway seriously. I've been getting everybody really pissed off over here because I can't excited about a situation in which one man controls the fate of an entire production has to be ludicrous, you know. But I'm not going to break my arm when the plays are done in every other country in the world. If America loses out, I'm sorry America. There should have been a production of *Blood Brothers* opening at the WPA. Again, it was silly.

JONES: With reference now to *Shirley Valentine*, do you think it's difficult, or even arrogant, to try to get inside a woman's mind, as it were?

RUSSELL: No. Next question.

JONES: Why not?

RUSSELL: Because one writes about human beings. It's not a question of gender, it's a question of humanity. If you are going to write a play to say the things that Shirley says, it's simpler, it's actually easier--I didn't know this at the time, I only realized it later one when people kept saying. "Why do you keep writing about women?"--and apart from obvious things like influences and being brought up in a largely matriarchal society because men were working shifts all the time when I was a kid. I was brought up by my

aunt and I was always privy to women's conversation and women's talk and all that. Stuff was going in without my knowing it. Apart from that, if you're going to write about thoughts, emotions, feelings and articulate those, it's much easier to do it through the language of a woman than of a man because women do have that language. It is an approved of language for women but it's not for men. Men feel those things, men want to talk about those things but it's very difficult. Maybe occasionally they do it in a one-to-one situation but from what I know of women, you put six women together who have never met and within half an hour they will touch upon feelings, emotions--perhaps just as dishonestly as men. But there is a greater touching upon those things than you ever get with a disparate group of men, for example. So, writing a play in which one woman talked was easier than writing a play in which one man talked. I did toy with the idea of writing a companion piece which is when Joe walks into the house and finds that she has gone to Greece. And I couldn't find a way to get him talking that didn't look like a sort of long soliloquy and a false piece of work.

JONES: In the context of the play you did write, is Joe equally as trapped as Shirley?

RUSSELL: Yes. I do want to write about men. I'm very intrigued as to why men get that trapped. I don't know why it is and I very much want to find out. I don't like them as much actually. I find them boring bastards most of the time . . .

JONES: Men?

RUSSELL: Yes. All the men friends I have--and I don't have that many--but the handful of close male friends that I have all of them are men who are prepared to acknowledge that they have a femininity within their masculinity, they can articulate their feelings.

JONES: Nonetheless, part of the reason Shirley is trapped is because of Joe is it not? For most of the play, he is presented in a very negative light. He gets upset when his dinner is not ready and all the rest of it . . .

RUSSELL: I don't think he wants to trap her . . . I don't think he set out to but men do it all the time--men trap women. You've got to say that he is an old bastard but I don't think he's an evil man. We see more of Joe in the film.

JONES: What I'm getting at is if Shirley is trapped as she obviously is . . .

RUSSELL: What traps Shirley? Marriage traps Shirley--using the word marriage for relationship.

JONES: Don't men bring about that?

RUSSELL: No, men conspire. Women conspire. Shirley traps Shirley. She really traps herself because she colludes as women do, because she indulges Joe, because the first time he says to her "Why isn't my tea on the table at six o'clock tonight," she puts it on the table instead of throwing it at him. So many women get into that. So many women do it because it doesn't really matter because they pour their energy and their hope and their love into their children and then when the children go they turn around and there's nothing left, it's all gone. I think marriage should be a renewable contract for both parties once the kids have grown up. That would save a lot of heartache. I am married and I've been married nearly nineteen years. I like being married, and I want to be married, but I acknowledge that marriage is very hard work and you only stay married

if you want to work at it. And certainly if you can't communicate with words than I don't think any relationship can really survive for any great amount of time. I mean there's no doubt if things are bad in bed that is going to cause trouble, but conversely, you can't sort out the problems of non-communication by making it good in bed again . . you've got to have both of those things, I suppose. Both forms of communication.

JONES: What's the play's relationship--if it has one--with feminism? For example, you have in the character of Jane, something of a negative characterization--she does on the plane to Greece everything she's opposed to. She's shown to be a hypocrite.

RUSSELL: Well, how many women do you know who wear feminism as a badge and then the second a guy comes into the room, they kill, they'll abandon all their women for a guy? But they're not feminists you see, they call themselves feminists because it's convenient at a particular time.

JONES: Did you get any negative response to that character?

RUSSELL: No. Not at all. Yes, there was one reviewer on *Kaleidoscope*--a girl--she raved about the play and then said but Mr. Russell must display his awful anti-feminism by having Shirley say that she is not a feminist.

JONES: So why do you have Shirley say that she is not a feminist?

RUSSELL: Because Shirley's understanding of a feminist is not your understanding of a feminist or my understanding of a feminist. Shirley has never even rubbed shoulders with feminism. So she just has the Greenham Common concept of the feminist, as

reported by *The Sun* and ITV. Shirley is too deep a thinker to be convinced that they are all lesbians, but that is the image that has been put across to her. She's never really thought deeply about feminism, so when she says "I don't hate men, I'm not feminist," the association in her brain is with the radical, man-hating creature. Which she's not. I don't think those people are feminists anyway. I think she's getting confused about what a feminist is. Because *she's* the feminist. *Shirley Valentine* is a feminist for Christ's sake, because she's the humanist.

JONES: The character of Milandra interests me. She's a negative character, obviously in that she wants Shirley to do everything for her. Do you see her as better off as a member of the younger generation? By virtue of being young and drinking in wine bars, is Milandra unlikely to end up like Shirley?

RUSSELL: No, she's a bloody witch, Milandra. She should have been strangled at birth. She's a cow. But again, Shirley has conspired in that, Shirley has always run around after her and done everything which is what happens to women in marriages. They tend to fall into that trap and sacrifice themselves for their children. If you're a woman who sacrifices herself to every whim of your child, then that child will go on expecting that from you until you've told the child that things are changing.

JONES: The night I saw *Shirley Valentine*, there was a lot of applause at the opening of the second act as it is revealed that Shirley did go to Greece. Did you expect that reaction?

RUSSELL: No, I didn't. I mean I knew I wanted that sort of little *coup de theatre* with the audience going out and assuming she's still going to be in the kitchen and then

suddenly seeing Greece. But because we had originally done the play at the Everyman on an open stage, I had sort of forgotten the effect that I originally wanted and forgotten the power of a curtain. Pauline plays it so well, she plays the opening of the act extremely well. It was great overhearing a woman going out at intermission and saying "If I come back and she's still there, I'm going to bloody kill her." But then she goes and then there's this great *woosh.* Audiences don't expect that. They think because of the economy, the sort of economy of writing that's forced upon us . . . I worked a lot with a director called Chris Bond. New playwrights would bring their scripts to Chris and they'd say things like "I've set in all in one room with like two chairs," and he'd scream "Get Out, you fucker! Give me the Alps with the elephants on them. I'll get them. I'll show you the elephants." He's great. Great for young writers. Don't censor your imagination. And yet I think, probably because of naturalism and what have you, and costs and things like that, there has grown up in the audience's mind an expectation that the visit to Greece will take place during the interval. We'll come back for the second act and she'll be back in the kitchen, so the great *woof*! is the fact that she's in Greece.

JONES: In Greece, the thing that she's escaped to, seems to be a discovery of her sexuality to some extent . . .

RUSSELL: A closer reading of the play, I think, will show that it's not solely the discovery of sexuality. She does make a point of saying "I've falling in love, I haven't fallen in love with Costos, I've fallen in love with the idea of living." She does make a point of saying that he wasn't a predatory man, it wasn't a question of . . . it just sort of happened on that day. But she doesn't become a sort of vivaciously sexual animal because of this act. It make her discover something within herself. Obviously, it's partly sexual because physiologically that is how it occurs, patently in the day. But it

strikes something deeper psychologically. Anyway, I've short-circuited your question . . .

JONES: Well, you could argue that seems on one level to be a fairly superficial solution to her problems ., . . .

RUSSELL: I have seen critics saying that. Generally feminist critics saying "Oh, what an awful play it is. All he is saying is find the clitoris and you'll be all right." Well, I'm not saying you'll be all right but it's pretty damn important to find it, so . . . and, who knows, look at the play carefully. Who knows how much truth is Shirley telling you there. Is she telling you the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth or is she actually into making outrageous Shirley jokes about the clitoris and Joe and the headboard? It's a Liverpool thing to take something that is sort of fairly mundane and normal and then through its humor build it into an epic tale.

JONES: Do you ever feel the need to criticize the structures of society more in your work. For example, when Rita gets done with the Open University, she says that she might go to a "proper" university. The hierarchy is still rigidly in place. The kind of essays that get good marks, the kind of thing that Frank despises her becoming is nonetheless what gets good marks.

RUSSELL: Absolutely.

JONES: Do you ever have a desire to write something that--I guess it would compromise the humanity of what you do to some degree--where that's challenged in some way. The rigidity of the system that denies Rita any access, at the end of *Educating Rita* has not in

any way been really threatened by her presence You don't really suggest that there's anything wrong with the proper university. That functions as something that is better, really. You never really challenge that . . .

RUSSELL: Well, no. Because I wasn't out to do that really.

JONES: Will you one day write a play where the actual structure of society would be challenged? Where Shirley's marriage would be exposed for its inherent problems? Not about people just struggling and trying to escape from a situation, but a play that advocates a change *in* that situation?

RUSSELL: Well, I don't know if I would write such a play and I wouldn't be able to tell until I had written the play because I never begin a play from the point of a view of an issue. I never begin a play from the point of view of its politics, because its politics will emerge through the characters and through the fact that I am writing the play. So it will inevitably be imbued with my view . . . so really I can't answer that question because the question assumes that the author is the master of this theme and, in my experience, it's always been that he is at the mercy of his theme. He can't select what he will write about. It selects him.

JONES: How does it do that?

RUSSELL: How many times have I written plays about somebody trying to break out of a situation, somebody trying to escape? I have never consciously set out to write one, ever. And I will probably write them until the grave beckons. I never sit down to write

them. Every time I write a play I think that it is profoundly different from its predecessor, only to find that it's very close. What can you do?

JONES: To go back to that issue of the audience again. Do you think many Shirley Valentine's have been to see *Shirley Valentine*?

RUSSELL: You're determined to pursue this question in one form or another! The answer is yes. And no. The easiest place for me to judge that actually is more often than not when I give readings. When I give readings I generally throw open the evening for questions afterwards and I get a response back from the audience and I always get this statement or a version of it: "How did you write about me when you don't even know me?" from women in the house. I do get, when the play is in production, a fair number of letters from women saying, you know, I've just watched my life unfold before me. I think with *Rita*, it was crucial that she was of a working-class background, just because the education system is so bound up by class but I don't think it matters so much with Shirley. People can look at Shirley through middle-class eyes. Her experience is not intrinsically a working-class experience, and there are many other women of different classes who relate to her.

JONES: This is the very last time I'll address this--and you can always put me in one of your introductions like the person finding Samson and Delilah within *Educating Rita.* Anyway you look either at *Rita* or at *Shirley Valentine* and you see an incredible consciousness-raising potential. In other words, if you go and see *Shirley Valentine* and you are Shirley Valentine--and then are millions of them around . . .

RUSSELL: Yes, there are.

JONES: because of your profound sense of reality. Of all the authors around today you probably the one that hits that closest to the way it actually is. There's a great potential there for that to really change lives of people.

RUSSELL: I'm sure it's true with *Rita.* I don't think I have any great dispute with you here. *Educating Rita* has almost become sort of a phrase in the English language now for women who decide to do something with their lives and I had oodles of women writing to me and saying it was because of you that I left my husband, started education and all that. I would maintain that all I did was articulate for them what was on the tip of their tongues. And that is merely the job of the artist, isn't it, to articulate what is around? There is no doubt that *Educating Rita* did that. *Educating Rita* came at a time when, in English society, in that precise way, that dilemma had not been articulated. It was always being articulated in some small way here and there, but there wasn't like a play which just got it by the scruff of the neck . . . I didn't sit down, I can't claim any credit for that because I wasn't sitting there writing a play on behalf of these poor fucking women who, you know, didn't feel fulfilled, I was writing a play about *Rita.* From me. I can't claim credit or accept responsibility, in a sense, for that because it was not my primary intention. Obviously, I am glad that my plays affect people but I'm also worried that my plays affect people, because I sometimes think, what about the girl who actually didn't have the character, the moral fiber to pursue this course, that went to see my play and thought, "I'm going to do that," and came unstuck?

JONES: I was just expressing some of the frustration I felt at *Blood Brothers* whenI wanted to turn around to the audience and say, "Do you realize that you are applauding a statement you're really appalled by?"

RUSSELL: But you're a puritan, you see and I'm not. That's your problem. I like better and bigger singing in the churches. We obviously beg to differ on that point.

JONES: I just hate to think that *Shirley Valentine* is seen only by people who can look arrogantly at their own lives and say "I'm not trapped like that."

RUSSELL: Oh, it's quite the opposite. Most people have a different reaction.

JONES: But most of the people who see an RSC production of *Educating Rita* are sitting smugly with their own university degree . . .

RUSSELL: I think this is your problem not mine, I really do! I mean you say *most* of the people who see an RSC production of *Educating Rita*, You can't say who are they are or where they come from without researching the entire audience. I think your comments reveal something about you. I understand that. I used to have that feeling . . not quite the same but it had an element of that anger. It's gone now, I don't possess that any more. I don't think that any more because I don't think that these people are conspiring against me in any way. As I say, the evidence of *Shirley Valentine* is that most people see it and identify with it . . .

JONES: as a universal.

RUSSELL: Absolutely. One interesting thing we observed at a first preview at the Vaudeville is that towards the end of the play, when there were men and women sitting together, as the second half progressed, men and women would move closer and closer

together and you'd often see men and women hugging and holding hands by the end. I was staggered by that, completely staggered by that.

JONES: Yes, you'd have thought the opposite. Let's talk briefly about *Stags and Hens*. At the end of the play, as the ranks close up, there's that curious moment of male bonding. Perhaps you'd expound on that. Does that bonding stop the escape or do you see it as something positive.

RUSSELL: I've always had that ambivalence because when I was a kid--you go through the sort of gang phase, you know. I could never be doing with it, because I could never be doing with lowest common denominator thought and I could never be doing with the group idea. And yet for the other people who could do that it seemed rather secure and attractive, as long as they didn't look up and look out, they had something like family, or a nation. I can see that it is very attractive for those who can participate in it, but I cannot. Ultimately, I would always be for individualism rather than group mentality.

JONES: But it has some value?

RUSSELL: Not really, I think the play is written from the opposite pole to be honest.

JONES: It's just that the ending seems slightly ambiguous.

RUSSELL: What with Eddie saying we can go anywhere? Well, they can't go fucking nowhere can they? That's what it is about.

JONES: A lot of your plays have highly evil characters, like Eddie . . .

RUSSELL: I don't think Eddie is evil, you see. I think Eddie is a interesting fellow . . . *Stags and Hens* is probably the play of mine that is most open to misinterpretation and to bad productions because there is no articulate middle-class character or articulate teacher figure. Many of my plays have a teacher figure who acts as a leader.. if you like a Jesus figure, or an A. S. Neal figure who is able to encourage a process of articulation and in some cases to simply state the theme of the play, the playwright's attitude, if you want to be crude about it. But *Stags and Hens* just presents it as it is. I mean Peter comes in from the outside but Peter doesn't say that much. There's no attempt to explain Eddie. He just is as he is and that's why it's open not so much to misinterpretations as to different interpretations. That's why it is valid for you to say that Eddie appears evil because I have not put Eddie's *raison d'etre* in the play. I have recently written a screenplay of it and I kept thinking, I was wondering if audiences would think he was homosexual. I know him. I don't know a prototype Eddie but I recognize him. I see him all the time. And he is a puritan and he is a conservative. And he doesn't want the world to change and he doesn't want women to get in the way of things because he does want to enjoy that male faculty. If you think about it, a lot of English life is still based on that--men with men. Women make things muddy. Women don't talk about things because even when they are talking about things like carpets and sofas, they are talking about feelings. Now someone like Eddie can't cope. He doesn't want to go in that area. he has a rigid code of behavior and women upset that, because they won't be, in his words, logical practical and straightforward. Eddie's an old fashioned character but the tragedy is that he is still around as a youth.

JONES: Frank, of course, is your middle-class representative in *Educating Rita*.

RUSSELL: Yes, very much so.

JONES: And you intend, do you not that he learns as much from, Rita as Rita does from him?

RUSSELL: No, I had this conversation with Mike Ockrent who directed the play originally and Mike said "Give me my key in directing my play." He wanted a key from Frank's point of view and I said, well, it's about a man sliding towards death who suddenly realizes it. Frank's senses are reawakened by Rita. I don't think he learns anything new from Rita in an intellectual sense because he knows everything. He tells Rita, "You will leave me. You will walk away." He knows the inevitablity of the parent-child, teacher-pupil situation. He knows that if he is going to be successful, she has to walk away from him. She is going to have to be bigger than him. She can't teach him about his failure to truly understand about the working class because he is not interested in the working class. He is interested in Rita, you know. And when she screams at him: "You pass a pub doorway and hear all singing so you think that we are all surviving with the spirit intact,".he accepts that he is wrong but he has got no desire to learn more about the truth of that situation. He is not going to go himself and look deeper into the culture of the working class, he is only interested in how it affects Rita, and therefore how it affects him. So I don't think in many ways Frank learns anything from Rita other than that Rita Mae Brown is a good novelist.

JONES: By extension of that, isn't the literature that he perceives as one needs to know, broadened somewhat?

RUSSELL: Yes but one does not make a great deal of it in the play. Frank says, when Rita says about reading Harold Robbins and people like that, she says, "You mean I shouldn't read that?" He says, "By all means read it, but don't think that you can start going on about it in an examination." He is making a distinction between the sort of prescribed books that are to be studied and the sort of books you can just read. He is not putting a value judgement on either, because he patently despises the examination system and probably would despise a Harold Robbins novel because it is a syntactical aberration.

JONES Are you saying in that play that Harold Robbins would be equally valid on an examination syllabus?

RUSSELL: No. But I am not saying that E.M. Foster should either, nor Blake, nor Willy Russell.

JONES: What lies in the future for you now?

RUSSELL: Mostly production work for me immediately. I have the film version of *Stags and Hens* going into production. If I can get a couple of weeks or months within that, I would like to record an album of songs. When I've got time to write a play, I feel guilty using that time to go and record songs, which is a bit of an indulgence. There are many people who can write good albums of songs, but there are not many people who can write Willy Russell plays.

JONES: No major new plays coming?

RUSSELL: No but I have to face that edge of the abyss some time soon.

JONES: Has anything even been written about your work that you have ever admired?

RUSSELL: That's difficult. I don't think that I could be the judge. I don't think I have read anything about my work that has made it easier for me to write my next play. I'm not particularly interested in being studied or being published or what have you. I'm interested in the play. That is where it all happens for me.