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FROM MEYERHOLD AND BLUE BLOUSE TO McGRATH AND 7:84: POLITICAL THEATRE IN RUSSIA AND SCOTLAND

Rania Karoula

Although political relations between the United Kingdom and the USSR/Russia have, historically, been temperamental, a remarkable openness, understanding and appreciation have persisted in the theatrical links between the two countries, and especially between Scotland and Russia, despite the language barrier. This essay examines the influence of the Soviet Blue Blouse group's performative agit-prop style from the 1920s on John McGrath and the 7:84 company's conception of the new Scottish theatre in the 1970s.

The 7:84 company's staging is often linked back to Brecht in the 1930s, or, more immediately, to Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop in the 1960s, but, as McGrath himself acknowledged, Blue Blouse provided a pre-Brechtian precursor for his approach. Blue Blouse and John McGrath's 7:84 company both tuned into contemporary social and political developments and made it the purpose of their theatre to give voice to the unrepresented, misunderstood audience. The two groups shared similar ambitions: in particular, a passion for making the theatre accessible to the working class, for voicing its concerns, agonies, fears and hopes, and for experimenting with new forms of expression.

As early as 1928, Blue Blouse had been described for English and American readers by Hallie Flanagan, a theatre academic at Vassar College, in her book *Shifting Scenes of the Modern European Theatre*.¹ Flanagan, the future director of the Federal Theatre Project in the United States, had visited Russia in 1926 on a Guggenheim Fellowship to study theatrical developments in Europe. While there, she became a witness to the new techniques, and was inspired to write about the more active social function and importance of popular theatre, and the need of the people "for

¹ Hallie Flanagan, *Shifting Scenes of the Modern European Theatre* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1928).

legitimate representation as protagonist on the political stage”² Flanagan commented about Blue Blouse that “it was impossible to tell where audience leaves off and drama begins” (Flanagan, 99). She was surprised to find how enthusiastic the people were about theatrical performances and how “alive” they seemed within the theatrical space (*ibid.*, 98).

Flanagan’s visit to Russia was almost ten years after the October revolution and the overthrow of the old Tsarist regime. The revolution had forced upon the artistic world a new apocalyptic vision and had rendered necessary the renegotiation of the practices and ideologies previously employed. The establishment of the Bolshevik government introduced an imperative to develop “a vast apparatus of information, news, education and propaganda.”³ The theatre responded quickly to the revolutionary call to combat illiteracy and to propagate collectivisation and regional politics. The new ways of performing included the living newspaper, mass spectacles re-enacting recent historical events (such as Mayakovsky’s re-enactment of the storming of the Winter Palace), theatrical trials, and literary montage combining slogans, poetry, speeches and other texts. Audiences became as much a part of the performance as the actors were, since the issues represented on the stage dealt directly with their daily lives.

Flanagan’s comments and observations are reminiscent of the Soviet theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold’s strong belief in the interrelation between the creative process and the audience. For Meyerhold, the theatre was a place “where author, actor and spectator are magically fused.”⁴ He wanted to break down the barrier created by illusionist pre-revolutionary theatre, which left the spectator a passive agent, trapped in the human emotion of the performance.⁵ He redefined the usage of the stage by abolishing the front curtain and cyclorama and minimizing the distance between the stage and the auditorium. As soon as they stepped into the theatre, audience members were exposed to all the lights and machinery that made a production feasible and found themselves extremely close to

² Loren Kruger, *The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France and America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 3.

³ Stuart Cosgrove, “The Living Newspaper: History, Production and Form” (PhD diss., University of Hull, 1982), iv.

⁴ Flanagan, *Shifting Scenes*, as in n. 1 above, 112.

⁵ “For Meyerhold a performance is theatrical when the spectator does not forget for a second that he is in a theater, and is conscious all the time of the actor as a craftsman who plays a role. Stanislavsky demands the opposite: that the spectator become oblivious to the fact that he is in a theater and that he be immersed in the atmosphere in which the protagonists of the play exist” (E. Vakhtangov as quoted in Marc Slonim, *The Russian Theater: From the Empire to the Soviets* [London: Methuen, 1963], 172).

the actors. Meyerhold's stage dispensed with any unnecessary decorations and props; instead it was filled with steel girders, steps, swings, bars and bridges across its width. So, for example, in *The Magnificent Cuckold* (one of Meyerhold's most famous productions),

the stage was completely denuded, no curtains, no rafters, no backdrops. It was occupied by a milk-like construction with platforms, stairs, wheels, rolling discs, windmill sails, a trapeze, a viaduct, and inclined surfaces.⁶

Meyerhold's theatrical experimentation also placed an emphasis on the political function of the theatre. By "the merging of cinema, radio, circus, music hall, sport, and comedy," by fusing modern design with political content, by redefining the relationship between actors and audience (having his actors enter through the audience and placing the theatrical action in any part of the auditorium), Meyerhold created a theatre that challenged already established stage theories, and served the needs of a new audience and of a new ideology (*ibid.*, 258).

Working contemporaneously with Meyerhold (and directly influenced by him) was the Blue Blouse, an agit-prop group that combined the new avant-garde theatrical experimentation with past oral and folk traditions, thus creating a more accessible popular aesthetic. The group's presentations employed the format of a "living newspaper," and they were aimed at communicating their messages effectively to a larger than usual audience that included all the previously excluded groups. When asked what the Blue Blouse was, its official magazine (*The Blue Blouse*) replied that

it was a living newspaper, a presentation in "agit-form" of reality, a "montage of political facts"; it was adaptable to widely different conditions of performance; it was created by the working class; it used all the means of theatrical expression, especially those derived from the work of Vsevolod Meyerhold and Nikolai Foregger; and its texts aimed for the qualities exemplified in the work of Vladimir Mayakovsky, Nikolai Aseev and Sergei Tretyakov – brief, precise, and compelling; it was derived from "popular forms"; and it sought out its working-class audiences in their own locations.⁷

The main aims of a Blue Blouse performance were to entertain and inform the illiterate public about actual social and political events reported in newspapers and magazines. Their "Simple advice to the participants" stressed that

words in BB are everything, movement, music, acting add to them, make them more expressive, more meaningful, able quickly to

⁶ Slonim, *The Russian Theater*, 247.

⁷ Robert Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 169.

organise the feelings and will of the audience—content and form are equally necessary.⁸

Direct involvement with the creative process and the performative aspects of the production were also all-important. The group felt that by striking a balance between the formal experimentation of the avant-garde and popular means of presentation, and then relating both to the political content of their work, they would achieve a more powerful performance.

Such a performance would not last longer than an hour. The presentation would take place in a local theatre and start with the actors' parade through the audience, thus instantly involving them in the performative process. The parade would be followed by the dramatization of international and national news, presented in a satirical manner, accompanied by folk and jazz music, posters, acrobatics, dancing and bio-mechanic gestures. Hallie Flanagan, who observed such performances while in Russia, commented that:

These actor/acrobats take possession of Russia's free, high stage, they leap upon the bare boards or upon the machines. They need no curtain to separate them from the audience for they have no illusion to maintain. They never pretend to be imagined characters, they remain members of the society which they illustrate on the stage.⁹

The Blue Blouse's performance was stripped of all those elements that could create an illusionist effect for the public and avoided the conventions of naturalist presentation. The combination of popular and avant-garde techniques aimed at assaulting realism in the theatre, and brought the actor and the feeling of the theatrical stage closer to the destitute and illiterate Russian people, entertaining, but also informing them about the political changes that affected their lives.

The Blue Blouse movement thus managed to develop a revolutionary dramaturgy both in form and content that could reach large audiences and achieve an international reputation, and a new Soviet type of play with actuality as its subject, that expressed the benefits of socialism/communism but, at the same time, exposed the defects of the system, or of the people who ran it (Leach, as in n. 7, 168). As the Moscow correspondent for *The Christian Science Monitor* commented:

They sing, dance, play the accordion, declaim, act and transform costumes on the stage with sleight-of-hand rapidity.... One of their most effective skits is entitled "Industrialization". One after another the actors come out in fantastic costumes, adorned with symbols indicating factory buildings, installation of electrical stations or

⁸ Blue Blouse, "Simple Advice to Participants," in *Twentieth-Century Theatre: A Sourcebook*, ed. by Richard Drain (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 182.

⁹ Hallie Flanagan, "The Soviet Theatrical Olympiad," *Theatre Guild Magazine*, September 1930, 10.

other items in the program of industrialization... The familiar types in state institutions with preoccupied faces and the inevitable bulging portfolios are hit off neatly, while a huge red pencil in the hands of the "bureaucrat" adds a further element of the grotesque and the ludicrous. A piano furnishes a brisk accompaniment, usually jazz, to most of the performances, and snatches of Russian songs and melodies, played on the accordion, are interspersed.¹⁰

This example demonstrates how the Blue Blouse's living newspaper attempted to theatricalise society, to expose its audience to the absurdity of the bureaucratic system, and, through its combination of avant-garde aestheticism, satire and socio-political concerns, to open up political debate. It challenged the new order that was in the process of being established by Stalin and offered a fresh, accessible view of social, economic and political complexity to an audience with no formal education.

In short, the Blue Blouse's collective expression of performative action provided a new model for the configuration of the aesthetic and the political in theatre. And it is this avant-garde expression that John McGrath both acknowledges and draws inspiration from when formulating his ideas on popular/working-class theatre in his book *A Good Night Out*. While describing in detail the entertainment offered on a typical 1960s-1970s working-class night out in Manchester (which involved bingo, wrestling, brutality, violence, drunkenness, strip tease and finally dancing – all occurring under Ernie's [the MC] watchful eye), McGrath wonders "is this, then, working-class entertainment, the raw material of a future proletarian theatre?"¹¹

To answer his question, McGrath looks at the Blue Blouse example. He points out that, like 7:84's, their performances were based on actual socio-political events, using a variety of performative techniques:

1. the dramatic form
2. forms derived from dance and gymnastics
3. techniques derived from the plastic arts
4. musical numbers
5. film.

McGrath thought that the clear, sharp texts on which Blue Blouse relied complemented the performance rather than detracting from it.¹² What he most admires in the Blue Blouse theatre movement is their ability to combine knowledge of popular performing traditions with the more formal experimentation professed by Eisenstein and Meyerhold.

¹⁰ František Deák, "Blue Blouse," *The Drama Review*, 17 (1973): 36.

¹¹ John McGrath, *A Good Night Out* (London: Nick Hern, 1996), 25.

¹² *Ibid.*, 26-7.

The influence of the Blue Blouse on McGrath's vision of popular theatre is particularly palpable in his emphasis on directness, comedy, music, emotion, variety, effect, immediacy and localism, both in terms of material as well as a *sense of identity* with the performer. The 7:84 company that he founded with Elizabeth MacLennan and David MacLennan mounted numerous shows exhibiting these elements. They incorporated music, songs and comedy into an energetic mode of performance which combined enacted episodes with comment and factual information spoken directly to the viewers. Their material was always derived from recent and past historical events and directly related to the experiences of the intended working-class audience. *The Cheviot, The Stag and the Black, Black Oil* remains one of the best examples of McGrath's vision/theory of popular theatre, incorporating all of the above elements, and is a clear testament to the influence of the Blue Blouse "method." McGrath, in his search for a more dynamic and involved theatre, revisited and adapted the agit-prop style (considered unsubtle by most political playwrights at the time, such as Arnold Wesker, David Edgar and David Hare) in order to create a theatrical experience relevant to the lives of his target audiences.

The Blue Blouse influence on 7:84 was confirmed in 1982, when the company toured the Soviet Union. The tour was one of three, by different companies, organised in the early 1980s by John Russell, then a doctoral student at Birmingham and General Secretary of the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR.¹³ The purpose was to maintain links during the cultural boycott of the USSR introduced by the Thatcher government in 1980. All three tours featured innovative companies, rather than RSC or the National Theatre, partly for financial reasons, and partly because the tours aimed to build connections with Soviet youth theatre. When this tour began, the relationship between the UK and the USSR was at a particularly low point: a Soviet diplomat had been expelled from Britain and had left on the Moscow flight preceding the one taken by the company. McGrath and the company visited Moscow, Tbilisi and Leningrad for two weeks each. The company had devised a programme especially for the tour, entitled *Scenes and Songs from Scotland*, drawing on highlights of the theatre's Scottish productions.

¹³ Especial thanks are due to John Russell, subsequently Professor of Russian and Security Studies at the University of Bradford, for sharing original material with the author of this article, and for answering additional queries from the *SSL* editor. The tour was partly funded by the Moscow-based Union of Soviet Friendship Societies, and partly by the Scotland-USSR Society, but there was also "a large accompanying group of theatre lovers from all over the UK," who "paid for their own visit" at a cost of £326 for two weeks.

The tour was documented both by Russell, who also acted as 7:84's interpreter, and by theatre reviewers who accompanied the performers. Russell recalls that the Blue Blouse link drew comment at the Moscow performance at Friendship House by the eminent Russian writer Alexei Surkov, the former head of the Soviet Writers Union and then Chairman of the USSR-GB Friendship Society, who would have been active in the 1920s; the connection was also recognized by other older members of the Soviet audience.¹⁴ Similarities between the Blue Blouse and 7:84 were again mentioned and explored by Mikhail Shvydkoi, later Russian Minister of Culture, when he interviewed John McGrath for the *Teatr* journal.¹⁵

Though very successful with viewers both in the Soviet Union and back in the UK, McGrath's popular theatre, like the Blue Blouse's, was not received as favorably by mainstream drama critics who tried to apply standard theatrical criteria to 7:84's productions. While the Blue Blouse had eventually been "killed off" by socialist realism and Stalin, McGrath has been faulted for placing undue emphasis on his audience's response to each show. Colin Chambers has commented that

for someone who has done so much to present history on the stage, McGrath has a curiously unhistorical view; present context overwhelms text, therefore one judges a play by where it is performed and not for what it says and how it says it. But where does that leave "our" theatre and the "good night out" recipe? It denies the possibility of learning from or using "their" theatre even in the individual way that McGrath himself learnt.¹⁶

Chambers's main argument against McGrath's work revolves around its inability to be readily reproduced, as it depends on the composition of the audience and the context in which it is seen. However, one cannot but wonder whether the emphasis should rather be placed on the work's durability rather than its reproducibility. Are we not still discussing and getting inspired by McGrath and the Blue Blouse? Is this simply cultural nostalgia, as Bernard Sharratt would argue, or are we genuinely interested and invested in learning and experimenting to produce "new versions of

¹⁴ John Russell, "7:84's Red Badge of Courage," *Soviet Weekly* (February 5, 1983), 8, and see also Russell, "The Huge Red Banner": 7:84 Theatre Company Scotland's recent tour of the USSR," *Drama*, no. 148 (Summer 1983): 17-19. Since 2013, the National Library of Scotland has held the 7:84 archives, including material on the USSR tour (NLS MS acc. 10893: 204-208), with content for the show, programmes and publicity, correspondence, press-cuttings, reviews, and photographs: <https://www.nls.uk/catalogues/online/cnmi/inventories/acc10893.pdf>.

¹⁵ Mikhail Shvydkoy, "Estetika Soprotivleniya" [The Aesthetics of Resistance], *Teatr*, 4 (April 1983): 135-136.

¹⁶ Colin Chambers and Mike Prior, *Playwrights' Progress: Patterns of Postwar British Drama* (Oxford: Amber Lane Press, 1987), 73.

very old traditions,” to paraphrase McGrath, for a kind of theatre that moves beyond established criteria?

McGrath explains very clearly that the theatre is the most public, the most clearly political of the art forms. Theatre is the place where the life of a society is shown in public to that society, where that society’s assumptions are exhibited and tested, its values are scrutinized, its myths are validated and its traumas become emblems of its reality. Theatre is not about the reaction of *one sensibility* to events external to itself, as poetry tends to be; or the *private* consumption of fantasy or a mediated slice of social reality, as most novels tend to be. It is a public event, and it is about matters of public concern (McGrath, *Good Night Out*, 83).

McGrath’s use of the words *life, political, public, society, reality, event* signifies his desire to find a theatre with the potential to create a different system of meaning or form of expression, a different language to tell stories from an alternative perspective to bourgeois culture. This theatre would offer a radical intervention in the status quo, and become yet again a place where struggle, pathos and desire are materialized and communicated to the audience.

This kind of socially active and querying theatre is more pertinent nowadays than ever, and the lasting legacy of both *Blue Blouse* and McGrath’s *7:84* can be seen in the incorporation of their techniques in contemporary theatre, in community performances and in youth theatre. The audience is invited to participate, to challenge perceptions and views actively, and to sustain the theatre’s role as an agent of social, political and historical change.

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