

WHAT CHANCE POPULAR THEATRE ?

John McGrath

In a recent article ('we should be the poorer without the Arts Council', *Guardian* 29 Dec 1981), Lord Goodman tells us that the Arts Council has two 'conspicuous and golden virtues: it accepts no political control from its paymaster and, equally important, having bestowed money on its beneficiaries it does not seek to impose any direction on them as to its detailed use.'

My direct experience is that these virtues are not so unassailable as Lord Goodman would have us believe. The current scandal over the position of Richard Hoggart, the reported anxiety of the Tory Minister to replace Sir Roy Shaw with someone who does not dine in the same circles, the interest Mrs Thatcher has shown in the credentials of individual members of the Council, and the alarming change in age, attitude and imaginative response of the average Committee person, all point to an element of political control.

The Arts Minister is unhappy with the Arts Council's annoyance with commercial sponsors of opera who get huge, prestigious advertisements for remarkably little money, while the Arts Council gets scant mention for too much money. It is clear Mr Channon and the government want their generous friends in industry to get the maximum return on their enlightened investment. Given the amount of political control this



7:84 Theatre company in rehearsal

government has been exercising, the Arts Minister will ensure that his Arts Council changes either its attitude or its personnel.

The idea that the Arts Council does not itself exercise control over the way its clients use their grants is one of those liberal fantasies (like the independence of BBC News) which must surely be smiled at by babes in arms. What the Blessed Arnold has left out is that most companies are dependent on the Arts Council for *next* year's money — there-

fore they must inflect their policies heavily towards acceptability if they wish to stay in business.

But on the whole, Lord Goodman has a point. The paymasters in Downing Street do not need to 'control' the Arts Council nor does the Arts Council need to police the majority of its clients: there already exists an ideological consensus about the basic and most vital areas of policy and belief — these are rarely even questioned.

The first, which may explain why this Government has been so 'generous' in its grant-in-aid, (a 7.5% increase announced for 82/83), is that the Arts Council exists to support mainly middle class activities: operas, concerts, theatres and art exhibitions being of course open to the many, but frequented on the whole, by the few.

The second assumption is that the most important artistic activities — certainly those to be given the largest slices of the cake — are those that take place in central London, and have the dual purpose of representing this Kingdom in the cosmopolitan culture and of enhancing the environment of the metropolis: Covent Garden, the Royal Festival Hall, the National Theatre, and the Royal Shakespeare Company on their way to the Barbican.

The third assumption is that art is not, and should not be, 'political' — that is to say, it should contain some of the contorted values of the capitalist state, implicit or explicit, in its structures and its inner meanings. If its values, implicit or explicit, are *not* those of the capitalist state, it is 'controversial,' 'political,' and, *in extremis*, 'totalitarian.' Therefore art must concentrate on 'refining the language of the tribe' — but not on introducing a new, uncouth vocabulary.

The fourth assumption, the one which makes the others easier on the conscience, is that 'art' is a universal entity, almost a Platonic Ideal, which of course the working classes could partake of, if only they were educated to it: alas, so runs the Weskerite Fallacy — they are *not*: they are Outside Art. So the provision of artistic nourishment for the working classes can safely be postponed until *after* their Education.

Given these four assumptions which form part of the present consensus on what art *is*, or should be, it is hardly surprising that the notion of Popular Theatre, with a different set of values, is receiving something of a pummelling in England these days. In spite of the presence of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* in the West End, followed by several other pieces of theatre — popular and otherwise, — from the touring companies, these companies have been drastically

reduced in number by the Arts Council. Of those who remain, more and more have become apprentice-sheds for the more highly subsidised, doing variants on the Royal Shakespeare Company theme, rather than being genuinely popular in content or intention. And the few touring or community companies attempting to make a kind of theatre that at least acknowledges the existence of the working class, and making that theatre accessible to popular audiences outside central London, are having a hard time.

To begin with, they find their grants, in real terms, less than adequate for the demands of the work. Petrol, transport and accommodation costs, timber, and printing — all the basic materials of their work — have inflated out of all proportion to their grants. Wages have to be kept low, which drives out all but the really committed or the really desperate. Income cannot increase greatly: you simply can't charge £8.50 per seat in a community centre. And local authorities find it very hard to help either the venues or the visiting companies in the way they once could. Yes, times are hard, but perhaps no harder than they are for many millions of people today.

What adds to the problems of popular

touring theatre in the early 80s, is the gradual depoliticisation of the theatrical profession. It is no longer fashionable to be involved in politics as touring theatre, as it once, not long ago, was. Due in part to the overall success of the depoliticisation campaign of the Thought Police, in part to a massive backlash against some hysterical activities within Equity which failed to bring about the millennium, and in part to fear of losing jobs through association with the Left, this movement within the profession is accompanied by a massive reversion of film, television and stage to safe, sweet and profitable nostalgia.

The main result of all the work of the late 60s, and the 70s, has been the creation — with Arts Council help — of an audience, all over Britain, of working people, students, youth and progressive individuals within the professional middle class, who want this kind of theatre; and some of them will help to organise visits of companies or support the activities of their local community group. This audience is large, and growing, and does not believe itself to be outside art, any more than it believes that it should go to the National Theatre for its political education. This audience is there waiting for the

theatrical profession to get its head out of the 20s, and the Arts Council to start putting its money towards the many with a bit more determination, and for writers and directors to realise not so much a moral duty to make theatre for popular audiences but rather the excitement that a dialogue with this audience can generate, and the richness of the experience and language of those millions whose lives create the wealth of this country.

The trade union and labour movement should also try to develop a more sophisticated, demanding and informed approach to the problems of art and the people. It's no good demanding that the National Theatre goes to Dagenham, if all the actors 'despise' the audience: it won't work. The point, as always, is to start with the consciousness of the people: it is the best, and most difficult, struggle the theatre can offer.

There are still quite a few of us working in popular theatre. I feel confident that by the end of the 80s there will be many more, and that the demands of the audiences will have forced us to produce work that is more subtle, more complex, and more artistically mature. Between now and then, a lot of hard political work has to be done.




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