John McGrath

Theatre and Democracy

John McGrath died from leukaemia in January 2002, having put the final touches to his last book, *Naked Thoughts That Roam About: Reflections on Theatre, 1958–2001*, edited by Nadine Holdsworth (Nick Hern Books, 2002). The following article forms the conclusion to this collection of essays, lectures, interviews, theatre reviews, 7:84 company documents, programme notes, letters, and poems, for which McGrath provides a contextualizing commentary. Like the other pieces in the book, it testifies to McGrath's faith in theatre's ability to contribute to humanity through its engagement with people, communities, and political processes – a commitment he maintained and developed to the end of his life. In 'Theatre and Democracy' he drew on the work of the Greek philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis to frame his hopes for theatre in the twenty-first century – a theatre which would operate in public dialectical debate with the society from which it evolves, and, by asking hard questions about the social processes that construct that society, provide a voice for oppositional opinion and the marginalized. The essay was reworked from a keynote address to the 'European Theatre, Justice, and Morality' conference held at the University of London in June 1999, and in its earlier form appeared in the conference proceedings, published as *Morality and Justice: the Challenge of European Theatre*, edited by Edward Batley and David Bradby (Rodopi, 2001).

THERE CAN BE FEW more devastating moments in recent theatre history than that created by the sight and sound of Ekkehardt Schall's savage rendition of Brecht's *Procession of Anarchy, or Freedom and Democracy.* Written in 1947, it is Brecht's mordantly bitter welcome to the new rulers of Germany, and rips apart their claims to represent either Freedom or Democracy, using as its basis Shelley's equally savage *Mask of Anarchy,* written shortly after the massacre of Peterloo:

> Spring returned to Germany.
> In the ruins you could see
> Early green birch buds unfold
> Graceful, tentative and bold
>
> As from many a southern valley
> Voters left their house to rally
> Forming a disjointed column
> Underneath two banners solemn
>
> Whose supports were all worm-eaten
> Their inscription weatherbeaten
> Though its gist appeared to be
> Freedom and Democracy . . .
>
> Keeping step, next march the teachers
> Toadying, brain-corrupting creatures
> For the right to educate
> Boys to butchery and hate
>
> After them behold the former
> Editors of Streicher's *Stürmer*
> All set to protest unless
> We get Freedom of the Press . . .
>
> Through the streets resounds the lash
> SS men flogging for cash
> Freedom needs them too, you see –
> Freedom and Democracy
>
> And those Nazi women there
> With their skirts up in the air
> Legs, they reckon, are what gets
> Allied sweets and cigarettes . . .
>
> Cold winds blow a requiem
> From the ruins over them
> Former tenants of the flats
> That once stood here. Then great rats
>
> Leave the rubble in their masses
> Join in the column as it passes
> Squeaking 'Freedom!' as they flee
> 'Freedom and Democracy!'

One of the great services theatre can perform for the people of any country or region or town or village is to be the instrument of authentic democracy, or at the very least to push the community as near to authentic democracy as has yet been achieved. Brecht's verses and indeed Shelley's *Mask of Anarchy*

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fulfil one of the major responsibilities of any citizen of a democracy – to draw attention to false democracy.

We live in a world where every crime a nation can commit is excused by false claims to democracy. Throughout the twentieth century, democracy has been the universally acceptable, authenticating concept in the pursuit of public relations, and the most abused system in reality.

But the theatre can and has played many other, deeper, and more important roles in the quest for authentic democracy. As we look at the constituent elements of democracy, it will become very clear where theatre can and has played a variety of roles.

What is Democracy?

I would like to consider the person who has provided perhaps the most fecund interface between Democracy and Theatre, Cornelius Castoriadis.

But first we must look for a few definitions, or, at least try to capture some of the qualities of authentic democracy. We must examine the workings of Athenian democracy, its architects, Solon and Cleisthenes, and the keywords – or concepts – it produced to define its values.

Of course democracy takes many forms. The form we in the West live under, and are now busily exporting to the rest of the globe, is called Liberal or Representative Democracy. Its main current purpose is to provide the global legal framework for the multinational corporations to increase their power and profit. In this, it is succeeding *con trionfo.*

Castoriadis lobs a grenade at this form of democracy:

> Nowhere among the political philosophers – or among those who claim to be such – has there been any attempt to provide a reasonable foundation for representative democracy. What is this theological mystery, this alchemic operation that makes of your sovereignty, one day every five years, a fluid that spreads over the entire country, enters into the ballot boxes, and comes out again that same evening on the television screen, on the faces of the 'representatives of the people'? This operation is clearly of a supernatural character, and no one has ever attempted to provide a foundation for it or even to explain it. People limit themselves to saying that under modern conditions direct democracy is impossible, therefore that representative democracy is necessary.

Participation by the body politic was essential under the Athenian regime, and laws were established to facilitate such political participation. In the modern world, we witness an abandonment of the public sphere to specialists, to professional politicians, interrupted only by rare and brief periods of political explosions known as revolutions.

> There was in the Greek world an explicit recognition of the power and the function of Government. In the modern period, where Governments are nearly omnipotent, we notice that in the imaginary sphere and in political and constitutional theory the Government is hidden behind what is called the 'executive' power. This term is tantamount to mystification, it is a fantastic abuse of language, for the 'executive power' does not 'execute' anything. The lower echelons of the administration do engage in 'execution' in the sense that they apply, or are supposed to apply, pre-existing rules. When the Government wages war, however, it does not 'execute' any law; it acts within the very broad bounds of a law that recognizes it has this 'right'. And this we have seen in reality, in the United States with the Vietnam war, Panama, Grenada, and now we are probably going to see it again in the case of the Persian Gulf, after which time Congress will be unable to do anything but approve of the action.

To this we can now add the use of nuclear-tipped shells on the civilian populations in and around Basra, and the destruction of Serbia.

Democracy has been severely distorted by this multinational form of Representative Democracy. There are surely more health-giving fruits of democracy, of humanity's attempts to find a way to live well together. Let us look first at some of the basics . . .

1 First of all, a democracy needs *borders:* a *demos* or community seeking to run itself on democratic lines draws a boundary, and almost all those within are citizens with rights and responsibilities. Those excluded are non-citizens. Exclusion however is both geographical (i.e., those outside the borders) and internal (i.e., certain people within).

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The boundaries geographical are always being contested and defended: e.g., Europe and national sovereignty, the great debate now being conducted. The boundaries, limits, to the *demos* are used to defend the *demos* from tyranny from without, and to define the limits of the population; but attitudes to 'foreigners' and immigrants living within the borders vary. Who is included, who is excluded is a site of contestation, now as it was in Ancient Greece.

It cannot be assumed therefore that anybody who manages to live in a *demos* automatically becomes a citizen. Things are a little better than in England in the eighteenth century, when Lord Hardwicke declared in 1757: 'Our men of property are our only freemen.'

Clearly the *demos* needs to defend itself from would-be tyrants from within, and there must be limits for definition of the qualifications for citizenship to have any meaning. Nevertheless, the boundaries within can be used for anti-democratic ends, can be used to exclude women, the young, or landless people from the franchise, to disempower the inconvenient.

Of course the voices of the excluded have to be heard, and the values of the included celebrated, upheld, and scrutinized. The borders of democracy, especially the internal, have to be constantly contested.

2 Within the borders, every citizen is part of the decision-making process. To make reasonable decisions, every citizen needs one thing: accurate, unbiased, and full information. Without it, their decisions are based on lies, misunderstanding, propaganda, and prejudice, so are worthless.

If we pause to consider the sources of most of our population's information today – the *Sun* and the rest of the Murdoch and its rival press, television news, the fruits of the Government's spin doctors' labours, and the advertising industry – we can have little doubt that the foundations of information upon which today's consumers/voters take action are distinctly shallow.

3 An essential element of Cleisthenes' reforms that led to Athenian Democracy was the concept of *isegoria,* literally the equality of freedom of speech. This was not theoretical, or gestural, but meant that every (male) citizen who chose to was given equal time and opportunity to speak on the affairs of the city.

Today, the story goes that Tariq Ali and Howard Brenton wanted to speak, in a play, on the affairs of the City, and sent it to the Royal National Theatre. The director was delighted to receive a play from these two controversial writers, but when told the subject was Tony Blair, he rapidly passed on to the next American musical.

Perhaps it is naive and utopian to try to recreate the Athenian parliament in our mass society, but democracy demands a climate where the freedom to speak one's mind is granted equally to pro- and anti-government voices. It remains a concept central to the operation of authentic democracy.

4 Democracy implies that the will of the majority prevails. Yet this can rapidly become a tyranny of the majority, as in Northern Ireland, whose majority was deliberately manufactured – a majority who for many years chose to tyrannize the minority in the name of democracy.

Solon saw this situation coming, even before Athenian Democracy. His notion of *demossion kakon,* or public evil, saw that injustice to a minority would infect the entire community, and saw its avoidance as a prime human responsibility.

The device used by most modern countries to ensure the rights of minorities is a written constitution, to which any group or individual may appeal. It is indeed a matter of growing concern that Great Britain and Northern Ireland does not have one.

5 The cornerstone of democracy everywhere is equality of justice: *isonomia* – equality before the law for every citizen. It was an essential element in Cleisthenes' reforms. This was related to two other concepts: *dike,* which was really a sense of right and justice, and, by extension, the defence of the weak in society; and of course *dikaiosyne,* justice itself. Aristotle observed that 'the determination of what is just is the ordering of the whole of society'.

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In a society whose laws have been created for centuries by blatant class interest, and which doesn't even have a written constitution to appeal to, can we claim a true sense of right and justice? Can we claim every citizen is equal before the law when rich individuals and corporations can hire for huge fees the most devious barristers? When the police condemn a poor black before he gets to court, where he then has to meet the magistrate's prejudice?

Of course, when trust in equality before the law breaks down, people see violence as their only resort. Then that 'violence' is contained and condemned, and a vicious circle of repression sets in, and democracy goes out.

6 The most vaunted attribute of democracy is that it means equality for all. Yet everywhere we see inequalities: not only before the law, but inequalities of gender, age, influence, access to power, opportunity, even of life-expectancy. Then there is the major inequality between rich and poor, within our society and globally bolstered by birth, education, and social contacts. What do the opinions of the voters of Rochdale matter, when the City and the media have the ear of the Prime Minister? Some, as Orwell noted, are more equal than others.

7 On a more positive note, the concept of *isotimia* helps bind together a society. Meaning literally 'of equal honour', it refers to the equality of every citizen's political rights (and responsibilities). Citizens are not just taxpayers, nor consumers, but, in Philip Brooke Manville's phrase, 'shareholders in a corporation whose profits are moral excellence'.

Close to this lies *philotimia,* literally love of honour, but in ancient Athens conceived as the individual honour essential for the good of the community: the pride of athletes winning honours for their country, the pride of international recognition for individual achievement of all kinds, scientific, literary, cinematic, academic, artistic. The love of honour for one's country's sake, as well as one's own.

8 There are several other keywords that flesh out the qualities of democracy: *aidos*, a reverent respect for the judgement of others; *graphi paranomon,* the prohibition against proposing laws that would be against the good of the citizens; *euthynai,* a legal process for the examination of the conduct of anyone who held public office, and for the audit of their accounts, i.e. accountability.

Perhaps the concept that draws us even closer to the theatre, however, is that of *hubris* – defined by Victor Ehrenburg as 'the overbearing attitude of man both towards the gods and his fellow men'. And a whole society can commit *hubris* just as much as an individual.

Castoriadis: the Social Imaginary

One of the most thoughtful and helpful of the interfaces between democracy and the creative, the concept of the Social Imaginary, comes from the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, the Greek thinker who died in Paris recently. If I may, I'll cite his work for the illumination he throws, first, on the role of socialization in human history:

> I hold that human history – therefore also the various forms of society we have known in history – is in its essence defined by imaginary creation. In this context, 'imaginary' obviously does not signify the 'fictive', the 'illusory', the 'specular', but rather the creation of new forms. This creation is not determined, but rather determining; it is an unmotivated creation that no causal, functional, or even rational explanation can account for . . .
>
> Each society creates its own forms. These forms in turn bring into being a world in which this society sees itself and gives itself a place. It is by means of them that society constitutes a system of norms, institutions in the broadest sense of the term, values, orientations, and goals of collective life as well as of individual life. At their core are to be found in each instance social imaginary significations, which also are created by each society and which are embodied in its institutions.

Clearly the role of a public theatre in the processes of socialization is vital. But a theatre dedicated to a critical challenge to its society can play a much more important role in the creation of a genuine theatre.

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'Philosophical interrogation' – and I would add, theatrical questioning – 'does not halt before any postulate presented as ultimate and unchallengeable.' Here Castoriadis makes a remarkable leap:

> The same thing goes for democracy. In its genuine signification, democracy consists in this, viz., that society does not halt before a conception, given once and for all, of what is just, equal, or free, but rather institutes itself in such a way that the question of freedom, of justice, of equity, and of equality might always be posed anew within the framework of the 'normal' functioning of society . . .
>
> I will say that a society is autonomous not only if it knows that it makes its laws but also if it is up to the task of putting them into question.

Just as the individual has to rely on him/herself for salvation, so society can look for no help from God, revealed truth, or any outside agency:

> There were in the ancient world no 'constitutions' in the proper sense. Once one exits from a sacred world, from the imaginary signification of a transcendent foundation for the law re God and an extra-social norm for social norms, the crucial problem of self-limitation arises. Democracy is quite evidently a regime that knows no external norms; it has to create its own norms, and it has to create them without being able to lean on another norm for support. In this sense, democracy is certainly a tragic regime, subject to hubris, as it was known and was seen in the second half of the fifth century BC at Athens; it had to confront the issue of its own self-limitation.

Then he makes the connection between authentic democracy and theatre very plain:

> Finally – and unfortunately I cannot dwell on this immense theme – there is tragedy. Although its many different significations can by no means be reduced simply to political aspect, tragedy also possessed a very clear political signification: the constant reminder of self-limitation. For tragedy was also and especially the exhibition of the effects of *hubris*, and the demonstration that contrary reasons can co-exist (this was one of the 'lessons' of the tragedy *Antigone*) and that it is not in obstinately persisting in one's own reasons (*monos phronein*) that it becomes possible to solve the grave problems that may be encountered in collective life (which has nothing to do with the watery consensus of contemporary times). Above all else, however, tragedy was democratic in this, that it was a constant reminder of mortality, that is, of the radical limitation of human beings. What is specific to *hubris* is that there are no marked boundaries; no one knows at what moment *hubris* begins, yet there is a moment when one is in *hubris* and that is when the gods or things intervene to crush you.

I'm sorry to have quoted the good Cornelius at such length, but in my discussions with him I felt nothing but admiration for and almost total agreement with his profound and humane perception, his ability to connect the individual and society through the 'social imaginary', and so to express what I feel passionately theatre ought to be doing in a society calling itself a democracy.

In all areas central to the working of a democracy, theatre has its role to play:

- *In celebrating and scrutinizing the values within the borders of the Demos.*
- *In contesting these borders, external and internal.*
- *In giving a voice to the excluded.*
- *In giving a voice to the minority.*
- *In constantly guarding against the tyranny of the majority.*
- *In demanding the right to speak publicly, to criticize without fear.*
- *In giving a voice to the oppositional.*
- *In seeking true and balanced information.*
- *In combating the distorting and anti-democratic powers of the mass media.*
- *In questioning the role of large corporations, national and transnational, to influence both the law and the government of the day.*
- *In defining and redefining freedoms for the age.*
- *In questioning the borders of freedom.*
- *In giving a voice to the less equal.*
- *In demanding impartial justice and equality of all citizens before the law, rich or poor.*

It may well be argued, for reasons both honourable and dishonourable, that theatre exists in the realm of art, and these tasks for democracy operate in the realm of politics. To which I would reply in two ways. One: theatre, of all the arts, surely works at the interface between the creative and the political, calling together audiences of citizens to

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contemplate their society or its ways. And two: the theatre can only renew itself for audiences and for theatre-makers if it is part of the times it lives in. Pure art there has never been, least of all 'pure' theatre.

But let us turn now to the less tangible role of *paedia,* the formation of the democratic personality, the inculcation of values, the renewal of ideologies and ways of thinking.

Castoriadis rightly draws attention to the relevance of tragedy to the democratic ethos. The *hubris* or excess of classical tragic heroes is directly related to the very openness, the constant questioning of human and social limits as imposed by the consensus of any society. We have only to look at Euripides' heroes and heroines to find a group of people who wittingly or unwittingly went too far ahead of the norms of society to survive.

In the modern theatre, it is often the playwright who assumes this tragic, going-too-far role. Wedekind, for example, in *Spring Awakening*, Georg Büchner, Ibsen, Strindberg, O'Casey, Arden, all pushed the boundaries of their society's acceptable nexus to an unacceptable extent. All became hate-figures in their societies, and were punished in various ways for their *hubris.* Perhaps it is a function of the transition from classical collective values to modern individual values that the heroic actions are not so much looked at objectively on the stage as embodied in the creative heroism of the individual author. Whether the *hubris* is presented in its context on the stage, or is an act of creative defiance by the playwright, its effectiveness as part of a learning *paedia* or socialization process relates to two main features:

1 Its *accuracy:* the audience must recognize and accept the emotional and social veracity of what is happening on stage, must identify with the core situation, whatever style may be used to present it.

2 Its *relevance:* the core situation must reflect the central, most profound realities of its time, must speak to its audiences about a truth that matters in their lives, whether social, moral, political, emotional, or individual. Needless to say, the theatre must use all possible means to reach every citizen in the *demos,* and not itself act as an excluding agency, whether by the price of its tickets, the manner of its box-office staff, its location or its impenetrability.

Theatre Today

The combined Arts Councils can clearly be seen by their actions as agents for the security forces, a kind of MI6 of the imagination, determined to crush all oppositional theatre, to insist on what Castoriadis called the 'closure of the social imaginary', to stifle the dialectic of history, in fact to bring about the ultimate wet dream of the politician in power with dictatorial tendencies, to bring about the end of history.

The subsidized theatre, towards which one could once look for adventure, now has been taught that it must embrace the values of the commercial theatre, indeed become a major contributor to the West End by selecting for its productions only shows that will, or could, make money when transferred into the West End's electronic arcade.

So let us look at the values of this commercial theatre, which dominates now as in the 1950s. The huge successes, the multi-million pound Really Useful businesses, are the musicals of one, Andrew Lloyd Webber, or imitations of them. Their storylines are slender, and either whimsical or mildly melodramatic. They are packed every night with citizens seeking not recognizable relevant *hubris* but a fawning, flattering escape from reality. We must pause and ask why these musical escapades are the most triumphant pieces of theatre of the 1990s? Why their titillating sexism, their bland 'moralisms', their refusal to question anything, fit so well with the ideology of our so-called socialist society?

But let's look outside London, at what used to be called 'the provinces' but are now known as 'the regions'. Most of the brave, bold questioning theatres have either been closed down by Arts Council decision – like the Liverpool Everyman – or are now run by administrators, the management experts, the New Realists who know a safe bet when

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they see one, and are not given to punting on long odds.

But here and there, rather like the readers and dissidents in *Brave New World* or *Fahrenheit 451,* small, heroic groups still huddle together trying to 'get away with' genuine theatre-making, with creative thinking, with playing a tiny but significant role in the democratic process. Jude Kelly's work in the West Yorkshire Playhouse; small touring companies in Newcastle and Nottingham: there are still a few out there, trying to break the intellectual and imaginative closure on our society imposed by Jim Callaghan, Margaret Thatcher, John Major, and Tony Blair.

The rest would rather like to be a touch bolder, but prudence and managerial expertise forbids.

The Future

I can't end there. Apart from being a ridiculous optimist, I embrace Ernst Bloch's Principle of Hope, and believe the dialectic of society can never be stopped or suppressed for too long. There is in every human being, as well as a proclivity to passive authoritarianism, a spark of perception, of self-interest, of anger at injustice, of the desire that Blake saw in every mortal that will not allow the human spirit to be finally broken.

I would propose that theatre today would regain its role, dignity, and audience if it were to take as its project the responsible drive towards what Castoriadis calls 'authentic' democracy, if it once again saw its role as setting in motion the major forces, the conflicting ideologies, the central realities of our time, as finding the theatrical images and characters, style, and language for such setting in motion, as the fearless pursuit of the consequences of such setting in motion, as struggling to extend the limits of our thinking about our society, as breaking out of the closure and complacency of much western civilization, as risking the *hubris* of the personal and political, as becoming an excellent part of the socializing process, the *paedia* of our *demos*, and as making its work available to the whole of our society, not to the few.

On another level, to return to Brecht's wonderful *Procession of Anarchy,* the creation of a genuine comedy form for our times with a coherent basis in philosophy as well as a talent to entertain on a random basis, would be more possible if it were to explore the difference between authentic democracy and the state of bad-faith pseudo-democracy we live in. There are enough yawning gaps between our pretensions to social equality, equality before the law, freedom of all kinds, to motivate a million comedies. There is a need for a sharp, satirical theatre to scrutinize our values, to contest the borders of our democracy, to give a voice to the excluded, to the minorities, to guard against the tyranny of the majority, to criticize without fear, to seek true and multifaceted information, to combat the distorting power of the mass media, to define and re-define freedom for our age, to demand the equality of all citizens for the short time we have on this earth before we die.

From all of this you may detect that I am brooding on a new play. I have always argued that a writer needs to reinvent the theatre every time he or she writes a play. I hope you will wish me luck in this daunting task, and in the most difficult task of all, making all the levels of thought, imagination, perception, research and analysis, characterization, style, language, a way to engage the audience, the work with the actors, the designer, the musicians, all work together as theatre: the most thrilling and important social event ever invented by humanity.

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