

Theatre and Activism: The Agit Prop Theatre Way

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ABSTRACT

Agit prop or agitational propaganda, as the very term implies, seeks to deliberately change people's beliefs through well-planned strategies of persuasion, transformations of spectators into (spect)actors, and their subsequent mobilisation into agitating communities. Theatre is one of the channels of the agit prop. The emphasis on the deliberateness of the communication involved distinguishes this form of theatre from other forms of political theatre and from mere conversation. Many accusations have been levelled at agit prop theatre. Of these, the three primary ones are, first, that such theatre lacks artistic viability; second, that it is short-lived and works only in a certain historical context; and third, that it is only propaganda, not theatre. This paper challenges these accusations by investigating how agit prop theatre can evolve and undergo considerable artistic development to survive as good theatre and not just as good propaganda. Although agit prop does generally emerge in moments of crisis and in periods of revolutionary change, this does not imply that its value is erased once the moment passes. A good agit prop theatre company cannot, in fact, sustain itself on mere propaganda. As a case study, the paper will examine the work of the British forty-two year old Red Ladder Theatre Company. By examining in depth the specific aesthetic and dramaturgic ingredients that Red Ladder uses to achieve its aims, this article will demonstrate that artistic intent and application cannot be made subordinate to the revolutionary message, at least not for long.

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INTRODUCTION

If in the beginning was the word, theatre shows how the word can be used meaningfully. It shows, for example, how a community can be formed through the force of emotions generated by an acting unit in close communion with a receiving unit working through a mode of fiction represented within a certain space and time. What demarcates performance from other art forms is the potential for an interactive relationship between actors and audience, the engagement in a communal activity, and the fact that both actors and audience can be creators or players in the game. In this article, the performance group explored is one that makes a determined attempt to transform the consciousness of the spectators and initiate within them the idea of active struggle using the methods of ‘agit prop theatre’, a theatre form that many presume is outdated or dead following the end of the Cold War.

When considering theatrical space as a “qualitative ensemble” (Suvin, 1984: 5), whose different dimensions signify various ideological ways of perceiving possible societal relations, agit prop theatre declares its own intent. This is the creation of a radical and progressive politics of theatre in/as action.¹ Such ‘theatres’ not only reflect or mirror contemporary social and political turbulence but also exemplify the potential ability of the performing arts to generate a process of change at the individual and/or societal level.² Even a casual glance at world events is enough to confirm the dramatic role played by agit prop theatre in almost every continent/country. For example, street theatre played a role in the overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines, and in resisting the Japanese invasion in South Korea. Madang, the South Korean version of agitational street theatre, is based on traditional folk drama and western agit prop. The word agitational can be taken quite literally in this context:

Many Madang performances succeed in getting the audience in such a state of ecstatic frenzy that they are spontaneously transformed from spectators into slogan chanting political demonstrators. Many mass demonstrations were initiated or animated by Madang performances. (van Erven, 1988: 158)

Hwang Sok Yong’s *Sweet Potato* or Kim Chitta’s *The Funeral Ceremony of National Democracy* performed in 1965 at Seoul University would serve as good examples of Madang Theatre. Similarly, the activists of the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia found agit prop theatre a useful tool in mobilising the people into action (TDRb, 1990). In Australia, street performances in the mid-seventies with a strongly political content that usually voiced the despair of indigenous cultures found an emotionally charged audience (TQ, 1977: 47-70). The techniques of agit prop groups were also emulated by the Teatro Campesino, the first of the Chicano Theatres in the United States, which was founded in California as part of the farm workers’ union campaign

¹ Following Phillip B. Zarilli’s lead, I refer to such theatre not in the narrow sense of drama whose subject matter deals with the staging of a social crisis or a revolution, but rather to the entire spectrum of publicly enacted events such as rallies, meetings, marches, protests and the like that often take place during, and/or inspired by periods of social and political crisis and/or revolution (Goodman and Gay, 2000).

² It would be useful to quote Diana Taylor (1990: 178) here, who in her article ‘Theatre and Terrorism: Griselda Gambaro’s Information for Foreigners’ says: “Watching, potentially empowering when it forms a part of a broader network can be extremely disempowering when reduced to the spectator’s passive “just watching”. She continues, “In order to be empowered by seeing, to be able to look back at the monstrous gargoyles without turning into lifeless stones, we must see beyond the theatrical frame and decode the fictions about violence, about torturers, about ourselves as audience, about the role of theatre in this “pathetic drama”. Similarly, Anuradha Kapur (1991) too puts it rather well in her article ‘Notions of the Authentic’ in saying, “All theatres create their spectators into communities one way or another; the point is to consider what sort of community we should create today. Neither voyeuristic as is done in some forms of naturalism; nor one in the likeness of what we imagine traditional theatres make in their own contexts; but one that queries ourselves, displaying to us the ways in which our past and our future may be conjoined. But not without placing that wedge of contemporary perception that over and again relocates the parts that would be too easy to congeal into a false organicity.”

for recognition in the mid-1960s (EBA, 2010). Black Theatre in Africa and the Americas (*e.g.*, Matsemala Manaka's group *Soyi Kwa* and their performance of *Pula*) relies largely on agit prop conventions to arouse spectator sympathy (TDRa, 1986). Agit prop troupes were likewise used by the North Vietnamese during the Vietnam War (EBA, 2010). All over India, street theatre using agit prop techniques is hugely popular and theatre exponents like Badal Sircar and Safdar Hashmi are almost household names in the north. In England, agit prop theatre can be traced back to the early tenth century church, which designed simple narrative plays to bring to life the basic legends of Christianity; seen another way, these plays were in fact political propaganda on behalf of an organization in hot pursuit of earthly as well as spiritual power (Lambert, 1977). Seen another way, as an example of top-down control, agit prop has remained a consistent part of the Chinese government's 'education' programme in rural areas (EBA, 2010).

Put simply, agit prop is the more or less systematic effort to deliberately manipulate people's beliefs, attitudes and especially actions by means of symbols such as words, gestures, banners, movements, music, insignia, hairstyles and so on. Theatre is one of the mediums of agit prop, with three clear aspects. In essence, agit prop theatre is: (a) an interventionist theatre, (b) a historical phenomenon (*i.e.*, it emerges in certain historical contexts), and (c) generally politically left-oriented since its origins, ideology and techniques seek primarily to raise the consciousness of marginalized sections of society and induce in them the urge for self-empowerment.

In this article, I will attempt to illustrate the *modus operandi* of agit prop theatre through the work of the Leeds-based Red Ladder Theatre Company, founded in 1968. What makes Red Ladder unique is the sheer fact of its continued survival; among the large number of agit prop theatre companies that mushroomed in Britain in 1968 — such as CAST (Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre), The General Will, Belt and Braces, Foco Novo, and the North West Spanner — Red Ladder is the only company to withstand the test of time and survive today.³ Though not quite the same as it was when it began, it still attempts to impact people and their lives as directly as possible. In many senses, it is perhaps far more evolved as a theatre company now than it set out to be. Through a scriptural analysis of one of its earliest plays, *The Cake Play*, I will arrive at an understanding of the way in which an agit prop theatre text is closely intertwined with the historical developments at work during its inception. Elsewhere I have looked in depth at other Red Ladder scripts, some successful and some not, that have constructively challenged perceived negative aspects of British society and attempted to arrive at possible alternatives (Pal, 2008).

After a close reading of this text, I will look at other Red Ladder plays to discuss the broader means by which Red Ladder reaches out to its audiences. These include, in particular, the use of certain kinds of performance spaces, fanzines and ragazines, pre- and post-production rituals, and many other forms of paraphernalia. Together, I will show that these continue to be viable and provocative methods for agit prop theatre, even in the changing historical climate. It has been said that theatre does not cause revolution but rather is a rehearsal for revolution; agit prop theatre, and indeed any artistic form that seeks to 'disturb the air' (as the late playwright, Noel Greig once remarked),⁴ has a symbiotic bond with people that cannot be simply dismissed.

³ For more information on these theatre companies, see: Bigsby (1981), Innes (1992) and Itzin (1980).

⁴ Personal correspondence with the author.

TREADING THE AGIT-PROP PATH: TRACING THE EARLY YEARS OF RED LADDER THEATRE COMPANY

Originally, Red Ladder was simply called The Agit Prop Street Players — a name that clearly spells out the aim/venue/methodology of the company — and it emerged when a group from a socialist information service performed a play at the Trafalgar Square Festival of 1968. Prior to *A Woman's Work is Never Done*, which was the first full-length play produced by Red Ladder, we learn from a 1972-73 leaflet that the earlier plays were actually small units that:

...take as their subjects vital issues such as unemployment, rents, the Industrial Relations Act (...) that are the immediate concern of the audiences involved. The plays are designed to lead into a discussion of the issues raised; they aim not just to provide a forum in which experienced Trade Unionists can air their views, but to provoke even the most reticent members of an audience into participating.

Under the heading “How do you use the Plays?” the same leaflet describes the plays as:

...short, about 30 minutes each, which can be shown together, separately, or in twos, depending on the time available. A typical ‘evening’ would consist of the Housing Play, followed by a discussion, followed by the Women’s Play (...) and another discussion (...) and so on.

The leaflet continues by noting that, although there were only a limited range of plays to choose from at the time (namely the ones listed in the leaflet), future plays on ‘Collective Bargaining’, Ireland, Apprenticeship and ‘Racialism’ were to come. The leaflet also points at the company’s simple scenic requirements when it explains that the plays could be performed in a hall or large room without a special stage or curtains, “only a floor 20x20 and a ceiling height of 15 ft.” Apart from these indoor plays, the leaflet adds the availability of outdoor plays, noting that these are:

designed—unlike the indoor plays—for specific performance outdoors—on demonstration, picket lines, factory gates, etc. As well as dealing with crucial issues they add pageant and spectacle to outdoor events.

Gradually the basis of the work broadened and plays were developed that fed directly into particular struggles and issues, such as *The Big Con* (responding to the Industrial Relations Act) and *The Cake Play* (dealing with issues of productivity bargaining and worker’s compensation). By 1971, the company was renamed Red Ladder after its much loved and used prop. A policy emerged of taking theatre to ‘working class’ audiences in places where working class people usually find their entertainment, such as in ‘trade union clubs’. In 1973, the commitment of the company was recognized with an Arts Council grant of four thousand pounds and, in 1976, the company moved from London to Leeds, Yorkshire where it is still located (although it continues to tour on a national basis).

While early Red Ladder plays from 1968-73 fed directly into political disputes of the time, from 1974 onwards the work of the company diversified as did its artistic policies. Between 1974-75, Red Ladder produced *A Woman's Work is Never Done* (a.k.a., *Strike While the Iron is Hot*), published by the Journeyman Press, which dealt with the role of women at work and at home and their growing political awareness. *It Makes You Sick*, a club show about the National Health Service (NHS) by Frances McNeill, was produced during 1975-76 and was written and devised in close collaboration with the National Union Public Employees (NUPE). Steve Trafford’s

Anybody Sweating, a club show about unemployment, high rise flats and Britain in 1976, followed in 1976-77. It became known as ‘*Would Jubilee it?*’ and was Red Ladder’s counter point to the Elizabeth II’s Silver Jubilee celebrations in 1977.

A watershed in Red Ladder’s Artistic development was the 1978 production of *Taking Our Time* by Steve Trafford and Glen Parkes, published by Pluto Press; this created a more analytical approach to storytelling as opposed to the simple solutions of agit prop. It was a play with music about the industrialization of the weaving industry in Yorkshire and the rise of Chartism.⁵ The play was cited as successful in that it attracted a wide, popular audience throughout Yorkshire and the north, supported by the Union of Dyers and Bleachers.⁶ In 1979, *Nerves of Steel* by Steve Trafford and Chris Rawlence was produced and explored the impact that overtime and shift working has on family life. A reworking of the Faust legend around the subject of nuclear power and arms was Steve Trafford’s *Power Mad*, which was produced in 1979-80. Taken together, all of the plays in this period can be defined as the first rung in Red Ladder’s history as a theatre company. In this decade of practising agit prop theatre, from *The Cake Play* to *Power Mad*, Red Ladder made several subtle shifts in approach including: the prioritising of form over content/ideology, the tightening of the plot structure and the development of a linear story line, the foregrounding of the feminist perspective, and the introduction of credits within the Red Ladder collective itself (*i.e.*, the crediting of various aspects of a production to individual members).

As one who has been following the progress of this theatre company for more than a decade and delving into their early records — their plays (many with illegible type script, missing pages or worn out paper), their correspondence, and indeed everything that Red Ladder archives could yield — I have observed the tenacity with which the company has handled every crisis of budget, misfortunes affecting actors and productions, and changing historical climates or political situations that adversely impacted agit prop theatre companies in Britain. It is this quick adaptability that Red Ladder demonstrated from the outset, as well as the passion and commitment of its members, that has stood it in good stead all these years. We will see later in this article how Red Ladder has also consistently devised new methods for enhancing actor audience inter-activeness and making its impact more palpable.

LANGUAGE(S) OF AGIT PROP THEATRE (TEXT AND CONTEXT): RED LADDER’S *THE CAKE PLAY*

A key ingredient in an agit prop play is the performative role played by the script. If agit prop theatre is a response to historical changes in political events, it follows that the scripts must be seen in this context to be meaningful. It is therefore informative to look at a Red Ladder script and examine its connection to the political situation that led to its birth. This requires a detailed look first at the historical context of the play below, before turning to the script’s narrative in the following section.

The earliest play that the Red Ladder Theatre archive yields is a worn out typed script with inked notes from a May, 1975 version of *The Cake Play* (the original was performed around 1968-69). This short skeletal frame of a play is pure agit prop, condensing nearly the entire history of the post-fifties crisis in Britain and

⁵ Chartism in England was a movement between 1838 to 1848 of social and political reformers, primarily working men, where the principles, practices and views of the workers were stated in the People’s Charter (published in 1838).

⁶ Information provided by “The Changing Shapes of Red Ladder” (2009, June), retrieved from Red Ladder Theatre Company’s website at: <http://www.redladder.co.uk/bm/bm~doc/changing-shapes-history.pdf>

incorporating actual political figures such as Harold Wilson (who became Labour leader in 1963), Edward Heath (the Conservative leader who propounded the ‘new conservatism’) and Denis Healey (the then Chancellor of the Exchequer from the Labour party). In doing so, its contemporariness could not have been made more abundantly clear. Clear too is the fact that the play is a perfectly fitting example of an agit prop text, as seen in its critique of social reality, engendering of protest and urging of collective action on the part of the audience (as the analysis to come will illustrate). In brief, the play deals with the growing defensive solidarity among the working class at a time when employers sought wage cuts due to poor trade, and it also grapples with possible solutions provided by authoritarian figures as well as reveals the loopholes in such solutions.

Indeed, the entire text of *The Cake Play* reads like a Nebentext, *i.e.*, almost like stage directions for the actual/lived/meta political reality existing in the here and now wherein the play was scripted (referred to as the Haupttext or primary text). In fact, at one point, the momentum of the plot breaks to discuss “The International Crisis,” spelling out clearly that the play is only an agent to foreground the complex issues involved in the struggle between the interests of Labour and Capital. So, at various moments, the text of *The Cake Play* seems to be accorded a certain exhortative function crystallized in particular rituals of empowerment. As a result, the play comes to possess the power of social interrogation and regeneration. The text intervenes in such a manner as to create an alternative set of values, where power belongs to the people. How this happens will be the focus of analysis in subsequent sections.

THE POLITICAL BACKGROUND AS SCRIPTED IN *THE CAKE PLAY*

A reading of *The Cake Play*’s historical background is vital, not only to observe the machinations of various political leaders like Wilson and Heath, but also to interpret the contemporary sociopolitical struggle in which Red Ladder took part. (Colin Leys, in his 1983 book *Politics in Britain*, provides excellent political background for this period.) If one examines the vocabulary of *The Cake Play*, one finds key terms around which the play appears to revolve: ‘Inflation’, ‘Pay’, ‘Profit’, ‘Wages’, ‘Price Controls’, ‘Rent Freeze’, ‘Depression’, ‘Slump’, ‘Doom’, ‘Social Contract’, ‘IRA’, ‘Tax Concessions’, ‘Income Policy’, and others in a similar vein. These terms make it rather transparent that the political struggle in Britain from 1960 onwards was primarily seen by the left as a struggle between the interests of labour and capital. The political system was perceived by the left to be shaped by the needs of capital in the latter’s effort to constrain, deflect or absorb the political power of the working class. By the early 1960s, the rest of the world had altered radically post-World War II with the roll-back of colonialism and increase social mobility in most industrialised countries. In Britain, however, nothing essential seemed to have changed at all, and the class system was still firmly entrenched. Hence, whether it was Labour leader Harold Wilson’s comprehensive reforms that were designed to modernize the structure of the state, or Conservative leader Edward Heath’s dismantling of the apparatus of state economic intervention created during the Wilson’s years, no initiative whatsoever seemed to change the situation in Britain. Thus, appropriate ingredients were available to Red Ladder for the remaking of *The Cake Play*. For example, when WI (all the characters playing the role of Workers were given names like W1, W2, etc.) says about the ‘Boss’, “We’ve had this bugger on our backs for the last 200 years, and it’s time we got him off,” he is, in effect, spelling out the recurrent

historical crisis riding on Britain's back while also declaring that it is high time the cause (here, the Boss—a symbol of capitalist forces) was summarily dealt with.

At the time when this version of *The Cake Play* was scripted (May, 1975), Harold Wilson and Edward Heath (one an active and the other a passive protagonist within the play) had both served their terms in heading the government. While Heath had recently been replaced that year by Margaret Thatcher as leader of the Conservative party, Wilson had been re-elected as Prime Minister in 1974 and decided to use the idea of the 'Social Contract' to repair his image with the electorate and the trade unions and thus strengthen his control over a fragmenting Labour Party. As I will continue to describe below, *The Cake Play* refers to this 'Social Contract' as "the only hope that all of us have got", and as "Harold's solution to the bosses problem".

Responding to industrial militancy among the rank and file of the party and unions, the 1971 Labour Party conference adopted a more far-reaching programme than anything it had entertained since 1945, including a "socialist plan of production, based on public ownership, with minimum compensation, of the commanding heights of the economy" (Leys, 1986: 84). At Wilson's insistence, this was later watered down by the National Executive, although the tone of party statements remained radical. The 1974 manifesto pledged "a fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people and their families" (Leys, 1986: 84). Wilson's 1974 government was a minority one confronted with a catastrophic balance of payments deficit, inflation accelerating towards 20 per cent and the pent-up frustration of a labour movement more mobilized than ever before—but not, for the most part, any more committed to fundamental social and economic change. Wilson, for his part, was as committed as ever to the view that the only realistic goal for Labour was to find an agreed-upon basis for reviving the ailing capitalist economy. He now made Labour's (perceived) ability to repair the governments' relationship with the unions the cornerstone of his policy and of his electoral appeal.

The key phrase in this exercise was the 'social contract', adopted by the party and the Trades Union Congress (TUC) to denote the set of understandings between the state, capital and labour on the basis of which the state could look for the Trade Union cooperation with its policies, and which Heath was charged with having destroyed. Wilson undertook to repair the 'social contract' so that the voluntary support of the unions could then be obtained for a new incomes policy. This background serves to explain part of Wilson's lengthy speech in *The Cake Play* when he attempts to pacify the workers:

Now I've got a perfectly ordinary flag here... (Puts flag over boot)
Here we are in times of trouble
Inflation soars and prices double
Heath policy of confrontation
Has made us a divided nation.
Now Britain's riding stormy weather
We must all work hard and pull together.
...[illegible typescript] let's get busy (...) social contract. (boot again)
Yes we'll remove all pay legislation.
If you'll ask for wages in moderation?

The speech directly underlines the political and economic situation of Britain and points to the policies of Heath as being responsible for the travails of the time. It

also refers to Wilson's attempt to pitch the 'social contract' as a viable alternative to the current situation.

By May 1975, it was clear that a final crisis was not far off. Labour's claim to be able to deliver union cooperation in stabilising the economy was now to be tested. Obviously, *The Cake Play* was well-timed. The justifiable resentment at Wilson's 'social contract' and the inability of the Labour Party to deliver is voiced by the workers at the end of the play:

So that's the social contract Harold's solution
to the bosses problem. The promises are broken.
Prices soar, and still Harold and TUC tell us to
Cut our wage demands.
But we've got a right to a living wage.
We build the cake...But they own it.
We don't need them up there, we've got the skills
and strength to run things for ourselves.
Until we do our wages will go on chasing their prices
If you want to get rid of inflation, you have to get
Rid of the boss...we don't just want more cake we
want the bloody bakery.

By creating with the audience a shared political reality (that it is shared is indicated by a point in the script that refers to the audiences' anticipated positive response to the rallying cry of the workers), the text's effectiveness was contingent upon the agreement between spectator and performer at the principles being illustrated. The text does not stop here: it also urges the audience to appreciate their own 'skills' and capabilities; it initiates the audience into a recognition and an assertion of their rights to "own the bakery" by ejecting the bosses, "You have to get rid of the boss". It, thus, thrusts the onus of collective action, of empowerment, upon the audience. In doing so, *The Cake Play* text builds upon political factuality to negotiate strategies of action with its audience. If agit prop seeks to elicit mass consciousness and direct it towards a concerted collective action, *The Cake Play's* script demonstrates the importance of deep, thorough historical grounding to elicit such an effect.

SYMBOLS AND SYMBOLISM IN *THE CAKE PLAY*

At the broad thematic level it is easy enough to see how *The Cake Play* functions as agit prop: contemporary reality is held up as a backdrop and criticized so as to engender protest. The presence of personae such as Wilson and Healy (and that of the invisible but present Heath), as well as the specific language in the script, ground it firmly in the current sociopolitical situation. But, there are other agents that facilitate the realization of the purpose behind its performance. These include the use of meaningful symbols:

Ritualisation entails the repetitive use of emotionally charged symbols in symbolically significant locations at symbolically appropriate times. New symbols need not be introduced in rites in order to get people to change their political beliefs. The American flag can be as valuable to the civil rights marchers as to the Ku Klux Klan in defining what is good for the community. The trick is to introduce dramatic variations on these powerful symbols, to change their meaning by changing their context. (Kertzer, 1998: 92)

That the play is named *The Cake Play* is in itself symbolic and, within the text, the ritual creation of one tier of cake upon another augments the symbolism of the title. This symbolism is elementary. Situationally the 'play' is between workers and owners for a larger share of the 'cake' which is, spatially, being 'baked' by the workers in a location metaphorically called a 'bakery'. Simply speaking, the cake refers to the output that will earn (a) profits for the owners and (b) wages for the workers, while the bakery serves as a symbol of all the forces of production. The 'play' is for a just distribution of the cake. The two sides (*i.e.*, owners and workers) are marked by their characteristic attitudes: on the one side there is every effort, mostly foul, to ensure that the profits remain within the ambit of the minority class, and, on the other, the sheer resentment at the underhand means of the opposing faction generates fierce resistance. As each layer of cake gets erected, so does the distance between the labourers and the capitalists, symptomatic of the class struggle in the class hierarchy. Thus the 'play' (also a synonym for 'performance') is for the benefit of an audience that has obviously allied itself with the working class and aims to usher in far reaching changes through joint effort. Hence this is not idle play or pastime but a deliberate activity that hopes to be consequential.

The play includes other paraphernalia used effectively by agit prop theatre such as slogans, songs, cheers, expressive gestures and uniforms, which, within a ritual activity, acquire "a sentimental significance symbolizing the common feelings about the movement, their use serves as a constant reliving and re-enforcement of these mutual feelings" (Kertzer, 1988: 72). In *The Cake Play*, the Profit bag and the flag hat worn by the Boss (who sits symbolically on the shoulders of the worker — also the narrator — WI) and the coat worn by the workers mark out the different modes of dressing typical to a class/profession. At one point, a worker is shown to desire the hat which obviously represents a higher social structure or a successful material condition, and, as he reaches for the hat, he significantly sheds his working coat. In this way, the worker's attire infuses a sense of self importance and provides one of the means by which people see themselves in certain roles. The role of 'accepted' symbols, and the symbolic more generally, is an important part of agit prop performance because such symbols allow the audience to identify with individual characters.

The use of the megaphone and press card by the character 'MM' records the role of the National Press in aiding and abetting the capitalist classes. The megaphone through which MM speaks is redolent of sensational headlines; the same MM corrects the Boss when the latter wails: "O my God!! What am I going to do? I can't pay them any more. It's bad for my cake" MM is quick to alert him: "Don't be silly. It's bad for the national cake". This clearly attempts to show the way the press manipulates language to suit its own purpose, to serve its own assumed ideological stance and to befuddle the common man.

But the working class too is equipped, with drums and cymbals that are resonant of a militant position and that reverberate through the atmosphere to drown out the sound of the megaphone. In one instance, this militancy is augmented by the song, only one line of which is available in the play but which is enough to declare the purport and message behind it. "Let's All Pull Together" is meant as a rousing song to enlist support and build cohesiveness amongst the workers.

The working class characters also use a down-to-earth prosaic language while speaking, and this is far more effective compared to the frequent use of rhyme by the

Boss and his coterie. This is unlike earlier literary paradigms where the nobility spoke in verse form, their poetic language adding to their grand stature. Here, the verse form is mere scurrilous rhyming which points out that, under the surface of their authoritative images, those in power are rogues who have no compunctions in using the most devious underhand means to retain their power. Their language reads almost like a spoof of the heroic verse form.

Underlining the agit prop mode of the play and reinforcing the theme of class struggle are the use of the red ladder, the flag and signboards with significant words like ‘Inflation’, ‘Profit’”, etc. that are propped up at apt moments. The colour red for the ladder (and of the song “red flag” played by WI on the trumpet) is a symbolic vehicle bearing an alternative understanding of political reality, an alternative basis of social solidarity (*i.e.*, a communist ideal). That the expropriation of symbols can undermine strength (a strength that grows through time) is seen by the way in which all kinds of schemers find shelter under the national flag. Traditionally a flag is not simply a decorated cloth but the embodiment of a nation. It arouses feelings of pride and fervour. In *The Cake Play* this aspect is satirized, for the national flag is literally treated like a coloured cloth (umbrella like) that will protect or cloak all kinds of corruption, representing, then, a nation gone to the dogs.

In evolving into a complex ritual complete with attempts at generating mass participation, and in deploying complex symbolism including iconism, the script of *The Cake Play* presents itself as a viable option to contemporary reality. This empowerment occurs because all of these facets form an alternative matrix of potent conventions/signifiers. To repeat an earlier comment, the text does not accord itself the status of the dominant order; it seeks, through its alternative signifiers, to suggest that power belongs to the people as a whole. Again, to reiterate, it seeks to erase the spatial boundaries of the performance area, thus:

demystifying the gap between performer and audience, and making the political consciousness-raising which followed a performance something which was also shared, thus helping to politicise the theatre-going process itself. (Wandor, 1980: 10)

The conscious emphasis and propagation of the concept of class struggle in this detailed examination of *The Cake Play* demonstrates the importance of a focused script as a basic element of agit prop theatre. However, as subsequent sections of this paper will elucidate, a forceful script alone cannot sustain such theatre.

PROPS OF AGIT PROP THEATRE: RED LADDER’S PARAPHERNALIA

While a strong script is essential for the propagation of an idea/ideological stance, other dimensions contribute significantly to the making of a successful agit prop production. This involves the psychological conditioning of the spectators through pre- and post-performance activities, as well as through the performance itself. Red Ladder used a variety of such strategies. Chief among these were handouts, leaflets, fanzines, and ragazines. (While the handouts and leaflets are like announcements of an upcoming production, similar to a poster, the fanzines and ragazines are like small magazines that dwell on the issues of the play through perspectives offered by the cast and crew, share personal details about the actors that have some bearing on the play concerned, and circulate helpful information for those in need, such as counselling help lines. They are primarily both the same thing – but the ragazine

initially targeted the African Caribbean young people for *No Mean Street* and references the black kids with the word Raga. The fanzine references the reader as a Fan and is non cultural specific.) In addition to these paper-based materials, Red Ladder also had meetings with youth workers and/or members of the target audience prior to the production; follow up sessions (involving: discussion inviting suggestions, solutions, criticism and comments; show reports; and making the audience perform role plays and helping them to draw up a agenda for themselves); and recording Red Ladder's achievements in forthcoming production advertisements. These are responsible for: (a) underlining the issues/themes of the play, (b) emphasising the status of Red Ladder as a Theatre Company actively involved with such issues/themes, (c) locating the target audience that is affected by these ideas, and (d) the collective realisation of the play in terms of its success, both as a performance and as an agency for suggesting viable solutions to the issues taken up within the play or putting forward plans of action that the audience can explore. It is only appropriate, therefore, that this section focuses on such features beyond the plays themselves for a more complete knowledge of Red Ladder's mode of functioning as agit prop theatre.

With a significant focus on taking 'artistic risks' within the artistic policy of Red Ladder, one perceives not just a theatre catering to youth demands but a stylistically different and challenging theatre. For example, *Last Night* by John Binnie, the story of a pregnant teenager, an old man and a refugee, was produced in autumn 1999 and is set on New Year's Eve of 1999. Red Ladder's millennium play in spring 2000, *After the End of the World* by Mike Kenny, was a comedy that studied respect and morality where the major characters are Stick, a teenage boy living with Chintz, his single parent mum, and Wrinkle, his disabled grandmother. In autumn 2000, Red Ladder produced Noel Greig's *Picture Me*, an international story set in England and Mumbai exploring the emotional impact of HIV/AIDS on a British Asian teenager.

It is evident, even from this abbreviated list of repertoire, that the centre of attention in the nineties was young people, their individual/societal identity and the factors responsible for the problems of recognition/misrecognition that accompany the making of these identities. As one of the fliers put it "Red Ladder believes investment in young people is an investment in the future." Another area of special interest that Red Ladder focused on in the nineties was individuals with a disability, handicap, or special needs.

If traditional agit prop could not be sustained in the eighties due to changing target groups and altered needs of the times, in the nineties it underwent almost a complete makeover. Red Ladder's work could now be seen as hand in glove with the work of youth clubs and social welfare organisations. The political agenda of Red Ladder now seemed limited to a concentrated effort to negotiate with the Arts Council for continued funding; quite a veering from the early sixties when Red Ladder's political programme was to protest against the malfunctioning of the government. Thus, the shift from the purely agit prop and overtly political theatre practiced during its inception, to the strong theatre for social action or community theatre into which Red Ladder developed in the nineties, can be seen as an outcome of the demands of changing times. In the following sections I will look at three of the ways in which Red Ladder now strove to get its message across: its initiation of leaflets and more novel means such as fanzines, its exploration of the endless possibilities of performance space, and its consequent redefining of pre- and post-production rituals.

LEAFLETS AND FANZINES

In keeping with the nature of this target audience in the nineties, the leaflets/fanzines began to incorporate those features that would be most instructive. Obviously the design of these brochures had to be handled with skill so that they both caught the eye and provoked thought in the viewer. The usual information about the company — its mission and goals, its staging requirements, quotes from reviews of past plays, acknowledgements (mainly to funding agencies) and the credits — all remained as before. But the information about the actors and the company members involved with a particular production was now made more personal, almost on a one-to-one basis with the audience. Using humour, the actors' or Company members' revelations from their lives and their perspectives on the theme of the play were a deliberate attempt to erase performer-spectator distance and generate a spirit of collective understanding about a problem. Often, as with Philip Osment's *Sleeping Dogs* (1993) and Paul Boakye's *No Mean Street* (1993), the programmes included the writer's intent and viewpoint, thus demystifying and making accessible the absent writer such as to connect authorial subjectivity with that of the audience. Both strategies of personalising the performing/production unit were tactical moves to lower any resistance offered by the largely youth audiences to which the plays catered. Put simply, they desacralised the performance space. The question and answer stratagem employed earlier was further supplemented by the use of scores that placed the respondents in categories (*i.e.*, by 'scoring' the number of points respondents received for particular answers on the questionnaire); such categorization aimed to generate within the respondent the desire to change (especially if the category was one with negative overtones).

A new characteristic of many nineties ragazines and fliers was the inscribing of the British Sign Language (BSL) on the handouts emphasizing the need for more people to learn the language to enable greater and better communication with the hearing and speech impaired. Augmenting this proposition was the listing of help lines complete with addresses and phone numbers, providing handy options to be tapped during personal crises. The cartoons and other illustrations too seemed to make suggestions that would aid youth club workers and other individuals to resolve difficulties.

PERFORMANCE SPACE

Most agit prop theatre companies choose unconventional performance spaces and rearrange the theatre space in such a way as to make the spectators conscious of the theatre environment. The main aim is to take theatre to people who do not have a direct access to theatre. By the nineties, the venue resurfaced as a strong aspect of concern for the company (in much the same way as when the company was called Agit Prop Street Players to indicate where it performed). The Company now realized that it would have to seek different spaces than the ones it had been performing in to date.

Performed throughout the UK in rural settings, large cities, to young offenders, in schools, community colleges, to young people with disabilities, in fact, anywhere a bus could be parked, Lin Coghlan's *The Bus Shelter Show* (1990) took place inside a bus. The bus, on loan to the company from Yorkshire Ryder Bus Company, was converted so that the action happens around it, underneath it and inside it. The action focuses on the relationships between three young people (Se, Jan and Mikey) and an older homeless person (Rosie) who had left home in the mid-1950s. To

escape from her court hearing and her mum's boyfriend, Jan thinks of the bus she has "nicked" and which only needs a starter motor to get it going. Se lives with and looks after his father and hates it when people call his Dad "Paddy". Mikey is Se's best friend and has the chance to join the army; he knows how to fit a new starter motor and they all know where to get one: the local bus depot. Rosie left home in the 1950s when she was 18 and lived in a hostel for 20 years; she sees the bus as her shelter, somewhere for her to live. Writer Lin Coghlan chatted to young people hanging around the streets (as the programme informs the reader) and, based on the things they said, wrote this play to explore issues raised as important to them.

As the performance deals with a number of issues, different aspects of the play may affect young people in different ways, dependent on their own experiences, cultures and where they 'hang out'. For instance, at one stage in the play the focus is on Mikey who has decided to join the Army, ostensibly to escape from the environment he lives in where he has little or no chance of securing employment. The issues involved in this are explored via his relationship with other characters. Neville Robinson, who played the character of Mikey, said that in reality this was a regular occurrence, especially in rural areas or areas of high unemployment where they took the performance. Young men did sign up for nine years just to escape their environment rather than from any real desire for a life in the armed forces. The performance tackles many other issues, including racism, homelessness, alcohol and personal relationships; these are all raised throughout the play (for follow up later in the post-performance discussions). The aim is to encourage young people to reflect upon what they are saying, thinking and doing and, above all, to ask why. Various one-liners from the play serve as starters for discussion, which provides ideas and guidance for youth workers. When Mikey asks Rosie, "Why do you live the way you do?", we are forced to question—is it Rosie's fault that she lives 'like that'? Do people make themselves homeless? Why isn't there anywhere for her to go? What is there for young people if they leave home? Similarly, when Se asks his Dad not to let people call him "Paddy" anymore, we are faced with the issue of racism and stereotyping people. When and why do people use abusive names for each other? Why does Se's Dad allow his friends to call him Paddy? Why do people put down people from different ethnic groups than their own?

The pre- and post-production rituals around the performance, which will be examined in the next section, provide perspectives to answer some of these questions.

PRE- AND POST-PRODUCTION RITUALS

The Bus Shelter Show reflected upon the issues some young people deal with every day and the questions youth workers always ask them in their efforts to address these problems. Before the tour began, Red Ladder held previews with workers and young people in every part of the locality to discuss the content and format of the play. As follow-up, the idea of a 'fanzine' as a starter for discussion was used to encourage young people to compose comments and ideas. The company suggested that the contents were ideas for things to be done or things that young people had done locally and could include contacts for local information and events, help lines and support groups, and comments about the local area, including good things, bad things and those requiring change. Another method used in follow-up work was drama or role play. The young people identified something that had happened to them or someone they knew that made them feel powerless; perhaps they kept being moved on from the town centre or were harassed about hanging around the bus

shelter. They then decided who they wanted to meet to try to get the situation changed—it could be a policeman or a local councillor whose character they would then take on and create a role play for what would happen if they meet up with these young people. The idea was then to talk about how it felt and who had the power.

The potential of the bus was exploited to its full extent. Because one was ‘inside the set’ (at one stage the engine is actually started up), the dramatic distance between actors and audience was reduced. The tiny space, though posing considerable physical problems to the actors, added to its intensity. The play would go on all around the audience which created both a deep sense of involvement and a healthy lack of reverence for the performing space—the audience would start to comment and interact with the performers.⁷ A remarkably simple idea for solving the problems of accessibility, the play proved especially useful in rural areas where young people had no building of their own. Not surprisingly, the play worked best and attracted most young people when the aforementioned preparations had been done, and when the performance took place at an appropriate time and in the best place for its young audience. In Leicestershire for example, where the play was done mainly in school car parks, audience numbers were down because of the hot weather and the local industrial holiday fortnight.

The Red Ladder *Bus Shelter Tour* proved that one does not need a theatre or stage to produce meaningful and good drama. This play deliberately went to meet young people in the most typical places where they could be found and focused on and asked them to discuss the issues that concerned them.

CONCLUSION

In theatre, as in many performance genres, many elements converge to produce an event and the audience collaborates through its response to the performance; the ultimate integration takes place in the mind of each spectator. The human mind has a tremendous ability to respond to stimuli and, more than most other form of theatre, agit prop theatre recognizes this strength of the performative arts.⁸ It aims to manipulate the mind of the audience through many direct and indirect, simple and sophisticated ways. As this article has detailed, a script with a clear political intent using language that underscores the ideological leanings of the play, tools such as the leaflets, fanzines and ragazines that are used to directly interact with the audience pre- and post-production, and the venue chosen by the company for a particular production are all essential if theatre in the agit prop mode is to be a relevant medium for conveying political messages. In this way, agit prop theatre is an important example of how aesthetic and dramaturgic materials play important roles in mediating social and individual action.

When the Agit Prop Street Players changed their name to Red Ladder Theatre Company, it was a tacit acknowledgement of the shift from an overt declaration of the nature of the company to a more symbolic one. The politics of the company, and its ideology and methodology as an agit prop theatre company, however,

⁷ Information from an article in ‘Young People Now’, October 1990, p. 39, entitled “Bus fare” by Tim Burke, in the Red Ladder archive.

⁸ As communication theory (also referred to as transmission model theory or reader-response theory) describes, a spectator interprets speech, gesture, the scenic continuum, and other complex messages as an integrated text, according to the theatrical, dramatic and cultural codes at his or her disposal. A spectator will, in turn, assume the role of transmitter of signals to the performers (laughter, applause, boos, etc.), along visual and acoustic channels, which both the performers and fellow members of the audience may interpret in terms of approval, hostility and so on. This multi-pronged feedback process, featuring an intercommunication among spectators, is one of the major distinguishing features of live theatre (cf. Barthes, 1964; cited in Elam, 1980: 38).

underwent little change. It continued to function as a collective for a long time, address issues of interest to the labour class, and look at neglected subjects like gender; in other words, the company promoted the more peripheral voices of society. However, various dimensions detailed in this article demonstrate that Red Ladder had to continually develop the art and craft of its functioning to ensure its survival and continued relevance.

This can be seen clearly in the events that took place in 1985. This was the year in which Red Ladder suffered through cuts in funding and a series of misfortunes including flop shows. It was an important year in driving home to Red Ladder the realisation of the challenges it faced.

With the appointment of an Artistic Director, the very structure of Red Ladder changed from a collective to a hierarchy. This led to more efficient management and planning of the company's schedule of events. The mode of scripting too altered as the collective scripting of plays gave way to the commissioning of playwrights to write on a particular topic. From catering to the needs of the labour class and propagating measures to lessen their angst, the company gradually converted to one that saw tremendous potential in the youth of the country. So, it took on youth oriented productions: plays that engaged with relevant issues such as race or sex or gender, the domestic versus the public, tradition versus modernity, employment or career, and so on. Its effectiveness in handling such issues is marked by the fact that today Red Ladder is perceived as one of the foremost youth and community development theatre companies in the U.K.

Recognized success allowed Red Ladder to take risks with form so that artistic experimentation seeped into its plays and spilled over to the resource kits, *i.e.*, the fanzines and ragazines. Keeping in mind the consumerist culture of the twentieth century which the target audience, the youth, was a party to, the language of the plays as well as the resource kits underwent a change with an increase in the personal and social register as against the political. Along with language, the tone of the plays too reflected a decreasing emphasis on anger at a situation. This gave way to an increased stress on furnishing constructive solutions. The 'protest' element seemed to have given way to the idea of 'Help/Care Lines', the message being that self help was possibly a speedier way out of a crisis than governmental laws and political action.

Red Ladder's heightened artistic endeavours led to training programmes for directors, theatre workshops, theatre schools for British Asians (a summer training programme), and more interaction with theatre companies from outside Britain (such as Theatre Direct in Canada and an 1998 visit to India with theatre companies in Delhi). Although there is a shift from the aggression underlying 'agit prop' to the focus on artistry behind 'theatre', the plays continue to voice the anxieties of marginalised/oppressed groups. In other words, mainstream, urban plays meant for sheer entertainment and typical proscenium arch theatre are still out of bounds for Red Ladder.

While the company now may have the façade of a hierarchical structure, its spirit is still that of a collective. All decisions are taken collectively. For instance, plays written by commissioned playwrights are preceded by intensive sessions with members and actors of Red Ladder thrashing out the selected theme. It still aims to take theatre closer to non-theatre venues and make it accessible to those who otherwise are not exposed to theatre. It persists in using venues such as community centres, the streets

and even, as we have seen, a bus. It also continues to use minimalist props, costumes, scenery, etc. so that it remains a more affordable alternative to expensive commercial theatre without compromising on the artistic merit of the plays or of the performances. Its work to reach out to similarly minded theatre companies outside Britain reveals Red Ladder's effort to make the foundations for such theatre firmer by giving it a global standing: to build a global platform or forum for propagating a certain genre of theatre.

Not all theatre companies last, particularly not all agit prop theatre companies. Indeed, agit prop theatre is frequently meted the kind of treatment that one typically associates with an illegitimate child. Ultimately, as with any theatre company, the difference between those agit prop theatre companies that last and those that do not comes down to the quality of the plays they produce.

The article began by declaring its intent to challenge myths regarding the transient nature of agit prop theatre and its perceived inability to survive beyond a certain historical moment. The detailed case study of Red Ladder has highlighted some interesting issues. While the company may not be using agit prop as it traditionally did, it makes a continued use of agit prop theatre techniques, even in the genre of community theatre. The importance of these techniques to reach audiences on a psychological level remains valid in its current work to help the youth negotiate the challenges they face. Such hardy examples indicate that those who announce or assume agit prop theatres' death would be making a grave mistake.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to acknowledge the anonymous reviewers for their comments and Sophia Acord for her meaningful interventions.