

Popular Theatre as Cultural Resistance: Engaging Audiences Worldwide

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Theme: [History](#)

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“Primarily, I am a prose writer with axes to grind, and the theatre is a good place to do the grinding in. I prefer comedy to ‘serious’ drama because I believe one can get the ax sharper on the comedic stone.” – **Gore Vidal**

“The theatre was created to tell people the truth about life and the social situation.” – **Stella Adler**

“When the play ends, what begins? Seeking conscientization: awareness leading to action” – **Sarah Thornton**

Introduction

The importance of theatre is demonstrated by the prevalence and variety of forms it takes both locally and globally in society today. Indeed, over the centuries theatre has played an important sociological and ideological role. It has been used both by communities and elites to propagate and spread ideas for the consolidation of society (Morality plays), for social improvement (Neo-Classical plays) as well as instigating and promoting revolutionary ideas (Brechtian theatre).

In many places theatre is funded by states through state theatres – playing national repertoires as well as showing international plays translated and/or modernised. However, it will be argued that as political and economic crises grow, so does the widening gap between two forms: community and state theatre. The global economic crisis has seen theatre once more developing into a useful community tool for highlighting important local issues (e.g. policing) and global issues (e.g. climate change) in many different ways (such as mass demonstrations and public squares). It will also be argued that, in general, the state deals with any upsurge in popular resistance by attempting to appropriate radical working class culture into preexisting structures to neutralise opposition. As with other art-forms, the influence of Enlightenment and Romantic ideas can still be felt today.

I will look at the development of general movements in theatre from the seventeenth century: beginning with neoclassical theatre as an Enlightenment reaction to Restoration bawdiness, the influence of Romanticism, the rise of Realism, political theatre of the 1930s leading to the Documentary theatre of recent decades, and the contrasting ideology of state and community theatres of contemporary society.



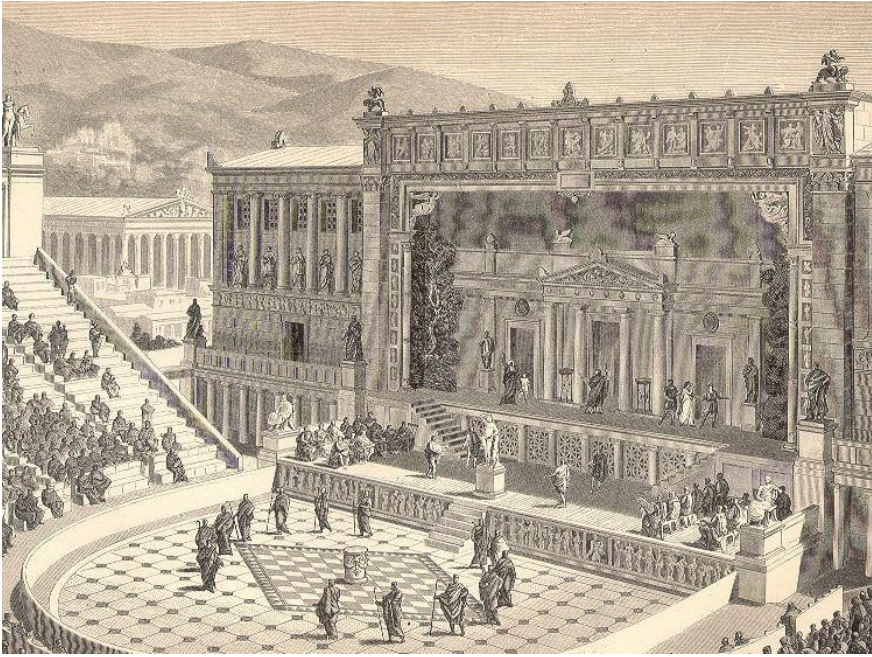
Village feast with [theatre](#) performance, artist from the circle of Pieter Bruegel the younger – central part of painting by unknown Flemish master

15-18th Centuries - Neo-Classicism v Medievalism

Medieval theatre was mainly religious and moral in its themes, staging and traditions, emerging around 1400 and developing until 1550. [Theatre](#) was an ideal way to solve the difficulties of spreading the faith to a largely illiterate population. Certain biblical events were dramatised for feast days and performed by priests. In England there were many mystery plays such as the York Mystery Plays, the Chester Mystery Plays and the Wakefield Mystery Plays.

Around the middle of the sixteenth century began English Renaissance theatre which was based on the rediscovery and imitation of classical works. Playhouses were established and became the sites for the production of plays by playwrights such as William Shakespeare (1564-1616), Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) and Ben Jonson (1572-1637). Genres of the period included the history play, tragedy and comedy, including satirical comedies.

All a far cry from biblical stories and Christian morality: the classical influence bringing the subject matter down to earth.



Reconstruction of the theatre of Dionysus in Athens, in [Roman](#) times.

This period lasted until the ban on theatrical plays enacted by the English Parliament in 1642.

This ban, effected by the Puritans, lasted 18 years and ended in 1660 and the theatres were reopened. The strict moral codes of the [Puritans](#) were upended and comedies became the predominant mark of Restoration plays. These plays were a form of social commentary – recurring themes were cuckolding, shaming, seduction and the inversion of wealth, class and property. However these themes also represented the upper class who tended to make up the typical audience (unlike the Morality plays) especially as most ordinary people could not afford the price of admission.

Restoration comedies were seen by many as bawdy, and neoclassical theatre was a reaction to the decadence of these Charles II era productions. Neoclassical writers advocated a return to the values and conventions of classical Greek drama. They believed that previous styles put far too much emphasis on emotions and the individual and looked to the classical style for inspiration on how to get people to see society in a more positive, collective manner by encouraging virtuous behavior. The Neo-Classical attitude could be seen in the humanism of the plot lines which encouraged the audience to empathise with the characters rather than laugh at them. The rise of sentimental comedy reflected the Enlightenment idea that without emotion, imagination and sympathy people would not be able to have the moral feelings that lead to our general ideas of justice and virtue.

The Neo-Classicists developed a set of guidelines for the [theatre](#), for example, they:

“included five basic rules: purity of form, five acts, verisimilitude or realism, decorum and purpose. Play houses generally rejected scripts or productions that did not meet these requirements. Playwrights and actors in the Neoclassical period officially recognized just two types of plays: comedy and tragedy. They never mixed these together, and the restriction led to use of the now well-known pair of happy and sad masks that symbolize the theatrical arts. [...] Comedies, which were either satires or comedies of manners, tended to focus on the lower ranks of society, while tragedies portrayed the complex and fateful lives of the upper classes and royals.”

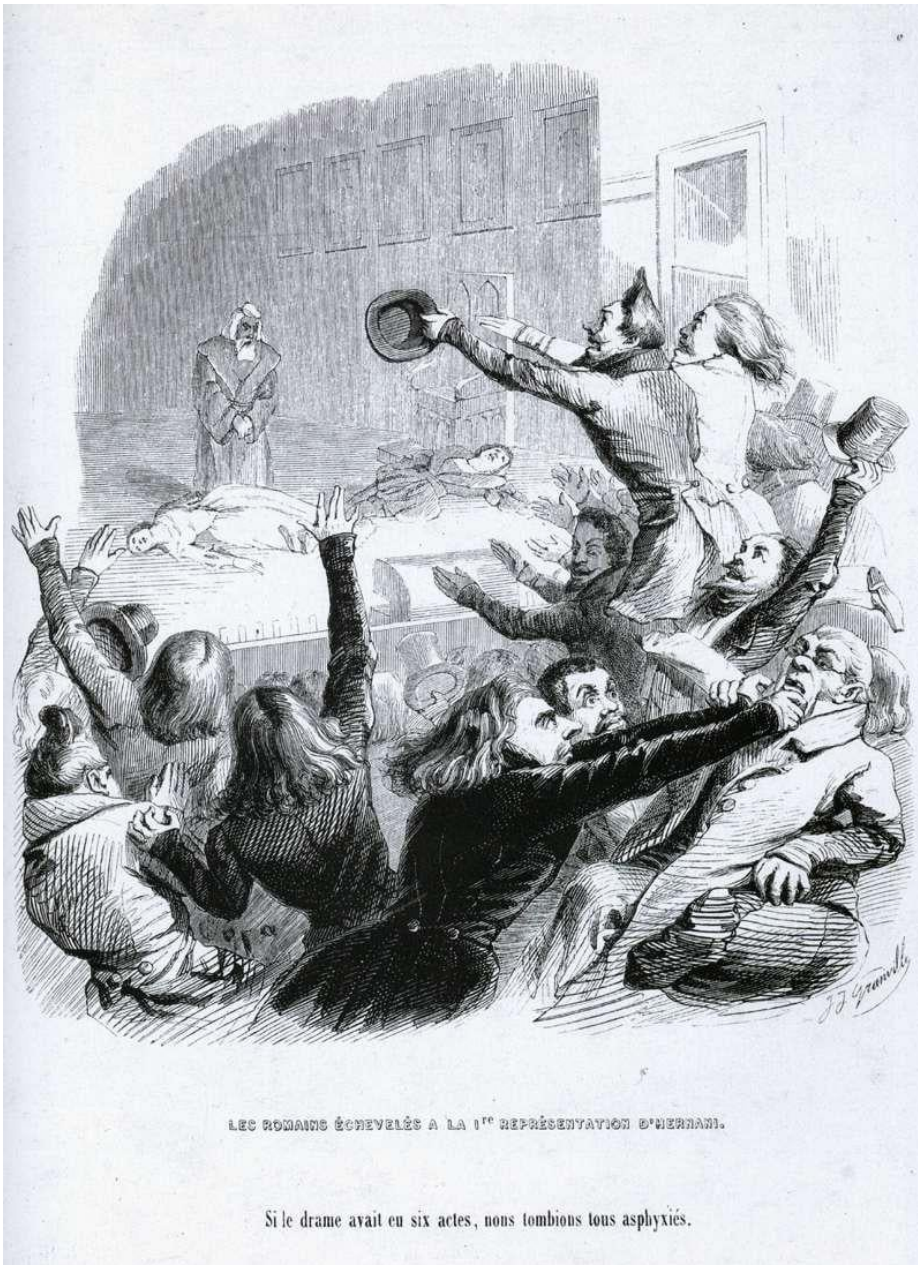
19th Century - Romantic reaction and the rise of Realism

The growth of Romanticism in Germany and France eventually affected writing for the theatre as romantic nationalism and a growing interest in a return to medievalist faith in feeling and instinct as a guide to moral behavior. These two opposing philosophies of Neo-Classicism (Enlightenment ideas rooted in science and reason) and Romanticism (based on feeling and faith) eventually clashed in France where the Comédie Française maintained a strong Neo-classical hold over the repertory.

The tensions between the two opposing outlooks eventually resulted in conflict. On the night of the premiere of the drama *Hernani* by Victor Hugo (1802-1885) in 1830, riots erupted. They became known as the “battle of [Hernani](#)”, whereby:

“The large crowd that attended the premiere was full of conservatives and censors who booed the show for disobeying the classical norms and who wanted to stop the performance from going forward. But Hugo organized a Romantic Army of bohemian and radical writers to ensure that the opening would have to go ahead. The resulting riot represented the rejection in France of the classical traditions and the triumph of Romanticism.”

Hugo’s Romantic army of writers and artists attacked [Classicist](#) positions and called for “Down with theories and systems! Let us tear away the old lath-and-plaster hiding the face of art! There are neither rules nor models; or, rather, no rules but the general laws of Nature!”



[Premiere](#) of the drama *Hernani* by Victor Hugo in 1830

This triumph of Romanticism meant move away from structure and realism and the rise of a more personalised, individualistic philosophy looking inwards to the self, not to mention an irrational rejection of progress and a return to medieval ideas of faith and hierarchy.

By the 1870s political events and social reforms led to the popularity of the Realist movement and a rejection of Romantic idealism. The Realist movement began in the mid-19th century as a reaction to the irrationalism of Romanticism. However, it was also a reaction to neoclassicism which had become elitist and aristocratic in its assumption of knowledge of Greek and Roman history and myth. The Realists returned to basic ideas of equality, influenced by the French revolution and the Utopian Socialists. Realist ideas had a profound affect on both the theatre and its [audiences](#):

“The achievement of realism in the theatre was to direct attention to the social and psychological problems of ordinary life. In its dramas, people emerge as victims of forces larger than themselves, as individuals confronted with a rapidly accelerating world.”

Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906), the Norwegian playwright, is known as the “Father of Realism” and he wanted a theatre that was closer in style to real life on the stage. Ibsen attacked middle class society’s values and his plays were based on unconventional subjects, e.g., euthanasia, the role of women, war and business, and syphilis. In *A Doll’s House*, Ibsen questions the roles of men (main provider of the family, public image) and women (limited education) in marriage and society, as well as showing poverty and failed relationships. Realism offered a new type of drama, one in which the public and society could relate to. Ibsen developed the form of the [Well-Made](#) play:

- “1. Soliloquies and asides were discarded
2. Exposition in the plays was motivated
3. Causally related scenes
4. Inner psychological motivation was emphasized
5. Recognition of environmental influences
6. Acknowledgement of socio-economic milieu”

He encouraged a style of dialogue which would be more realistic and easier to understand. However, what Realism did have in common with Neo-Classicism was the desire to make theatre more useful in the progressive development of [society](#):

“The mainstream theatre from 1859 to 1900 was still bound up in melodramas, spectacle plays (disasters, etc.), comic operas, and vaudevilles.[...] Technological advances were also encouraged by industry and trade, leading to an increased belief that science could solve human problems. But the working classes still had to fight for every increase in rights: unionization and strikes became the principal weapons workers would use after the 1860s—but success came only from costly work stoppages and violence. In other words there seems to be rejection of Romantic idealism; pragmatism reigned instead. The common man seemed to feel that he needed to be recognized, and people asserted themselves through action.”

Other writers in the Realistic form include George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) in England and Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) in Russia. Shaw made fun of society’s norms for the purpose of educating and changing society. He used witty humor to present contemporary views and the showed their consequences putting forward his own ideas. Chekhov’s plays concentrated on psychological reality showing people trapped in social situations and having hope in hopeless situations.

20th Century and Modernism

The influence of Realism continued into the twentieth century where it morphed into different forms such as Naturalism and Socialist realism. Meanwhile the Romantic influence on Modernism could be seen in the characteristic emphasis on an internal life of dreams and fantasies in Symbolist [theatre](#) and in the subjective perceptions of reality in Expressionist theatre in [Germany](#).

Realism, on the other hand, flourished in Russia where Konstantin Stanislavski (1863–1938) and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko (1858–1943) founded the Moscow Art Theatre in 1897. Both were committed to the idea of a popular theatre. Stanislavski developed “psychological realism” which differed from his own Naturalistic early [stagings](#):

“Naturalism, for him, implied the indiscriminate reproduction of the surface of life. Realism, on the other hand, while taking its material from the real world and from direct observation, selected only those elements which revealed the

relationships and tendencies under the surface. The rest was discarded.”



[Stanislavski](#) and Olga Knipper as Rakitin and Natalya in Ivan Turgenev's *A Month in the Country* (1909).

The revolt against theatrical artifice with Realism and later Naturalism produced a new type of theatre which made Stanislavski famous and his theatre very successful. Later in the 1930s Stanislavski's method would become an important element in the Socialist Realist ideology introduced by the USSR Union of Writers in the mid 1930s. The aim of Stanislavski's [method](#) was ultimately to absorb the audience completely in the fictional world of the play.

The contemporary playwright, Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) in Germany, reacted to this method which he believed was 'escapist' as he felt that any radical content would be blunted, that catharsis would leave the audience complacent. However, Stanislavski believed the audience would observe and learn from the action on stage (using the dialectics of thesis/antithesis/synthesis) in an updated politicised Neo-Classicism. If action proceeded from awareness then the audience would not be complacent but would achieve catharsis through political action instead.

Brecht, in the Modernist fashion, developed what he called Epic theatre which sought to historicize and address social and political issues. He used innovative techniques, one of which he called the *Verfremdungseffekt* (translated as 'defamiliarization effect', 'distancing effect', or 'estrangement effect'). To do [this](#), "Brecht employed techniques such as the actor's direct address to the audience, harsh and bright stage lighting, the use of songs to interrupt the action, explanatory placards, the transposition of text to the third person or past tense in rehearsals, and speaking the stage directions out loud."

The contrast between the Stanislavski's and Brecht's methods show very differing attitudes to the audience capacity for understanding and assimilating the content of a play. Charlie Chaplin (1889-1977) used this effect by speaking directly to the audience at the end of his film *The Great Dictator*, which some believe led to a decrease in his popularity. The audience may feel that the actors are speaking down to them, or insisting on radical action without first knowing and understanding all aspects of the issue being presented. It has to be questioned whether it is necessary to 'knock people out of their complacency' and to give an audience credit for their ability to understand the message solely from the action on stage. The Modernist experimentation with forms also led to elite forms of culture such as James Joyce's (1882-1941) *Finnegans Wake* as the ultimate indigestible example.



[Photograph](#) of *Mother Courage* and the dead Kattrin (Internationalist Theatre)

As the century wore on other types of political theatre emerged such as the differing forms of Documentary theatre of the 1960s and 1970s. This [style](#) of theatre “uses pre-existing documentary material (such as newspapers, government reports, interviews, journals, and correspondences) as source material for stories about real events and people, frequently without altering the text in performance. The genre typically includes or is referred to as verbatim theatre, investigative theatre, theatre of fact, theatre of witness, autobiographical theatre, and ethnodrama.”

While the presentation of pre-existing material may seem dry and undramatic, it was the partisan interpretation and presentation of the material which gives it its artistic power. In other words, its Realist, rather than Naturalist, interpretation made all the difference to what may appear to be a Naturalist form (i.e. using material verbatim).

Another type of alternative theatre which emerged in the late twentieth century (though in some countries it has been around a lot longer) is Community theatre. It refers to a style of theatre which exists in the community itself and can be created entirely by the community, as a collaboration between the community and professionals or put on by professionals especially for that community. Ideologically it can have a vary wide outreach and can be [seen](#):

“to contribute to the social capital of a community, insofar as it develops the skills, community spirit, and artistic sensibilities of those who participate, whether as producers or audience-members. It is used as a tool for social development, promoting ideas like gender equality, human rights, environment and democracy. Most of the community theatre practices have been developed based on the philosophy of education theorist Paulo Freire’s approach of critical pedagogy in theatre and implementation techniques built by Augusto Boal, known as Theatre of the Oppressed.”

Paulo Freire’s (1921–1997) method was to promote social change by getting the audience to participate in critical thinking through dialogue, identifying concerns, solutions and examining different perspectives. The plays would be [performed](#) “on streets, public places, in traditional meeting spaces, schools, prisons, or other institutions, inviting an alternative

and often spontaneous audience to watch.”

Freire’s approach attempted to stimulate social change by encouraging the audience to build capacities for critical thinking through participation in active dialogue. The participants would identify issues of concerns and discuss possible solutions, with an enhanced tolerance for different perspectives with regard to the same problem. Such plays are then rarely performed in traditional playhouses but rather [staged](#) “on streets, public places, in traditional meeting spaces, schools, prisons, or other institutions, inviting an alternative and often spontaneous audience to watch.”

Augusto Boal’s (1931–2009) approach also breaks down the ‘invisible wall’ between actors and audience but the difference being that the audience determines the action on stage not the playwright. For example, Boal writes:

“The spectators feel that they can intervene in the action. The action ceases to be presented in a deterministic manner, as something inevitable, as Fate. Man is Man’s fate. Thus Man-the-spectator is the creator of Man-the-character. Everything is subject to criticism, to rectification. All can be changed, and at a moment’s notice: the actors must always be ready to accept, without protest, any proposed action; they must simply act it out, to give a live view of its consequences and drawbacks.” [1]



Augusto Boal [presenting](#) his workshop on the *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Riverside Church, May 13, 2008.

21st Century - State Theatre v Community Theatre

In the twenty-first century State Theatre and Community Theatre exist side by side but as the global economic crisis deepens the traditional repertoire of the State theatre may seem to become out-dated and distant from social issues.

Community theatre is a form which, like the ballad form in music, is capable of tackling and analysing contemporary issues in a very short period of time. However, the tendency of the

state is to try to absorb all opposition into its own conservative narrative and 'de-fang' it. This tendency is discussed by the poet Fran Lock in [detail](#):

"This matters, because the people traditionally holding the purse strings, controlling the presses; the people responsible for funding us and publishing us, are the same power elites who decide what constitutes a valid working-class voice, and an acceptable working-class identity. Arts Council England, for example, has nothing to gain from supporting people and projects who challenge or threaten their traditional business model, and most major publishers are wary of a working-class poetics that openly and explicitly acknowledges the politics of its own oppression. To have your work "out there" in any meaningful sense, to secure the invaluable financial assistance by which a creative project lives or dies, is to accept that your work, and that you, as a person, will be mediated, filtered and enmeshed, by and in the machinery of a grossly unequal hierarchy. By this method we are compromised. We tailor and shape our voices and ourselves to fit their image of us, and our working-classness is depoliticised and de-fanged through an act of caricature. By this mechanism is the triumph of working-class representation transformed into the tool by which working-class participation in the arts is edited, eroded and policed."



A street play (nukkad natak) in [Dharavi](#) slums in Mumbai.

Another important aspect which she alludes to is the problem of monolithism ('shape[ing] our voices and ourselves to fit their image of us') which is the way dissent can be silenced by portraying minority groups as being made up of similar people all sharing similar views. As Kenan Malik [writes](#):

"Multiculturalists tend to treat minority communities as if each was a distinct, singular, homogenous, authentic whole, each composed of people all speaking with a single voice, each defined primarily by a singular view of culture and faith. In so doing, they all too often ignore conflicts within those communities. All the dissent and diversity gets washed out. As a result, the most progressive voices often gets silenced as not being truly of that community or truly authentic, while the most conservative voices get celebrated as community leaders, the authentic voices of minority groups."

These are the kinds of difficulties community theatre faces, in particular, problems which are more accentuated where access is provided by a State theatre. However, in the streets, manipulation or outright censorship/rejection is much more difficult. And like the original Morality plays, the community theatre may have an ideological aspect which is equally difficult to moderate.

The Romantic/Modernist influence can still be seen in 'mainstream' [non-community theatre] in the emphasis on (formal) experimentation over (sociopolitical) content in projections of the future of [theatre](#), for example:

"We can see the seeds of theatre's future coming from three directions. Firstly, in the experimental works in the new theatre groups and companies, which may we call; off the existing established theatres. Secondly, in the rise of theatrical movements originated from the experimental works were done in the last century. Thirdly, in the works of few established theatres - and here we stress the word 'few' - these works mainly done by some daring directors."

However, not all writers are blind to the growing sociopolitical and economic crises developing globally, as one [writer](#) notes:

"The future predictions of trends in theatres. Well, it is true that technology has really affected theatres in terms of audience attendance and also changes in the overall appearance of the live performances in order to attract more audiences but will there be changes in the 21st-century trends in the cinema industry? Well, experts project the following changes in future: Need for community and people interactions will lead more people to the theatres. The increase in smaller theatres located in all parts of the country to attract more people to the theatres. Younger directors and actors will ensure more performances in the smaller theatres and the main focus will be on issues, news, and concerns of the immediate community."

Thus, it can be seen there are mixed opinions on the future of 'official' theatre based in large and small theatres. It could be speculated that the 'small theatre' end and community-based theatre would be set for conflict as the professional and the amateur clash over what is to be portrayed and how, particularly if the issues raised and their resolution are perceived from widely differing ideological perspectives.

Conclusion

Throughout the last four centuries theatre has been pushed and pulled in many directions. It has been used by cliques for their own class entertainment. It has been forced many times in the direction of benefiting the greater good and dragged back again to serve elite agendas. However, the importance of theatre for examining social, political and more recently animal and climate issues, in an immediate and negotiable way, will ensure that theatre as a mirror of society will be a difficult form for the state to control.

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country [here](#). He is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization.

Note

[1] *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Augusto Boal (Pluto Press: London, 1998), p.134.

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