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COMMITTED THEATRE IN POST-WAR BRITAIN: THE APPROACHES OF ARNOLD WESKER AND JOHN MCGRATH

By

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ABSTRACT

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When British playwrights Arnold Wesker and John McGrath met each other in 1958, they believed they shared a common perspective on contemporary British theater. Both men aspired to a working-class theater which offered a clear alternative to the commercial offerings of London's West End by breaking away from traditional forms and adding social relevance. They also hoped to challenge the established categories of theater which stripped authors of control over the means of production.

Being socialists, both playwrights dealt with the economic and cultural relationship of the working-class community to the hegemony of the upper classes. Committed theater for them meant espousing a socialist ideology, selecting art forms to support the political content of their plays, shaping a distinct role for the audience, and seeking social reform.

To achieve their goals for a committed theater, Wesker and McGrath worked together briefly in the Centre 42

movement which promised to offer affordable entertainment to the working classes and a viable outlet for working-class artists. Dissatisfied with the lack of progressive values at Centre 42, McGrath left to establish 7:84, a theater company that experimented with forms more radical than Wesker's naturalistic style. McGrath also made a more deliberate effort to engage working-class audiences and provide the impulse for revolutionary change.

Meanwhile, McGrath exchanged letters with Wesker on the nature of committed theater. Their brief debate raised old questions of representation initially explored in a well known argument between Bertolt Brecht and Georg Lukacs. They also divided over political issues which serve to point out fundamental differences in their socialist positions. Wesker identified with nineteenth century reformist socialism and McGrath held a more leftist position. Since their exchange of letters, they have sharpened their formulations about the nature of their respective socialist alliances and they have refined the forms of their plays and expectations of their audiences--Wesker has focussed more on themes about individual freedom and McGrath has more clearly defined revolutionary theater. Despite the disparity in their political positions and the deep differences in dramatic structure, each playwright maintains an abiding commitment to shaping new conditions.

To David, Wythe, and Ellen

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CHAPTER ONE

> It does not merely repeat the pious platitude that there should be room in art for the big world of reality outside, but asserts almost aggressively that a writer is great only to the extent that he can provide society in general (or the reading public of the time) with a true mirror of itself, of its conflicts and its problems. His success in this respect is determined by the fact that he himself is no spectator in the drama he depicts, he is also an actor. What is required of him is that he should be a conscious actor.
>
> -"What is ´Litterature Engagee´?" Max Adereth

When the working-class playwright Arnold Wesker began producing plays in the 60s, he was more celebrated by reviewers because he was considered a socialist writer than for any other reason. For example, theater critic for the Observer Kenneth Tynan was fascinated by Wesker´s "real, live, English Communist family on stage." Even though Wesker´s dialog seemed to him "hollow," he was attracted to a political family portrait that illustrated an authentic political experience. He wrote in a review "...the important thing about Mr. Wesker´s attempt is that they are real, and they do live" (A View of the English Stage 291). And there were other reviewers as well. Theater critic for the Sunday Times said about Wesker´s Chips with Everything that it was "the first Anti-Establishment entertainment of which the establishment might be afraid" (Centre 42 Promo #37) and literary critic David Craig praised Wesker as a

"creative socialist for our time" (Marxists on Literature 21).

Like Wesker, John McGrath was a struggling playwright in the 60s and he too found sudden acclaim as one of the angry young writers for the television program, Z Cars. As a playwright committed to the working-class perspective, McGrath was recognized particularly for his socialist alignment. Critics examined the content of his works, his class origin, and the political implications of both, to appreciate the fresh viewpoint which seemed relevant for the times. McGrath's works and Wesker's may have represented aesthetic values for these critics as well, but it was precisely for their political awareness and commitment to change that they were considered appealing.

At the time when McGrath's and Wesker's plays first appeared, however, the use of the word "commitment" had fallen out of vogue. Corrupted by party hacks of the Stalinist era, the term "commitment" had been avoided for some decades. Any intellectual likely to discuss the concept chose to write around the idea without naming it directly for fear of its political associations. A notable exception was Jean-Paul Sartre who was able to redirect its use when, at the end of World War II and still involved in the French Resistance, he began writing about 'engaged' or 'committed' literature as an attack on earlier writers like

Baudelaire who believed it possible and necessary to produce "art for art's sake." Later, in his What is Literature? (1965), Sartre made it clear that words are actions. "To speak is to act," he wrote. "Anything which one names is already no longer quite the same; it has lost its innocence" (16). Denying the possibility of a neutral literature, he argued that all writing to a certain extent reveals the writer's "situation" whether or not the posture is deliberate. But it is the "engaged writer" who "knows that words are actions," who "knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change" (17).

Even though Sartre's essays laid some apprehension about the term to rest, those who reduce committed writing to political writing continue to have objections. Raymond Williams explains in "The Writer: Commitment and Alignment" that in the late 40s and into the 50s, some of the backlash came from those who were disillusioned by the loss of Britons in the European World Wars and in the Spanish Civil war. They simply became fatigued by the pressures of commitment. Additionally, there were leftist writers who, having weathered the dry years when the causes had grown unpopular, scrutinized the writings of latecomers for signs of false commitment because there was always the danger that they were committed to the wrong principles (22-23). And finally, there were critics who avoided praising

leftist literature for its commitment out of a fear of having to conclude that political "correctness" of the writer might become one criterion of literature and that some might incorrectly assume that nonsocialist literature, for example, was void of aesthetic value (Mander 7-22). Indeed, to avoid some of the problems with these associations, Williams himself adds the term "alignment" which suggest a deeper, albeit a less conscious choice (22-23).

Nevertheless, the term is a useful one for defining a constellation of literary practices which acknowledge that art is not entirely autonomous, not a thing apart, and that committed literature, concerned with change, attends to more than content and form. The term focuses on authors as well, whose conscious awareness of their involvement becomes a way of situating their works. And it singles out artists who, although they are discontented with circumstances, are willing to work for change. Precisely that refusal to be appeased impels the committed writer to assume some responsibility for shaping new conditions. The British theater movement which began in the 60s attracted many committed artists who felt an obligation to flood bourgeois theater with ideas of political reform and, after turning to activism, became instrumental in actually creating social change and political awareness.

With their public avowal of social responsibility came a certain structure of relationships between the playwrights and the dominant culture in Britain. Implicit in that relationship was a socialist evaluation of contemporary middle-class values and a commitment to alternative and oppositional aims and practices. In the case of John McGrath and Arnold Wesker, we are speaking of an identification with a working-class consciousness. For McGrath, that identification meant advocacy on behalf of those who not only deplore the dominant culture, but challenge it. As a playwright who represents the vision of a vastly different British culture and one who agitates for a significant transformation of the economic structure, McGrath's work is oppositional. Wesker's background gives him a different role. As a member of the working classes, Wesker assumes some responsibility for the quality of life in his community. Articulating a life experience and exploring communal relationships that are different from the traditional subject matter of literature, Wesker's writings are more reformist than radical, more alternative than oppositional. But, as Raymond Williams, who first made this distinction points out, "it is often a very narrow line, in reality, between alternative and oppositional "since a meaning or practice in one situation might be regarded as acceptable, and in other might be viewed as threatening to the status quo (Problems in

Materialism and Culture 42).

Over the years since the 60s, McGrath and Wesker have molded and refined their relationships--alternative and oppositional--to mainstream literary practices in Britain. And reciprocally, their works have been conditioned and circumscribed by the structures of distribution, exchange and consumption in the British economy. As committed artists they have become increasingly aware of their audiences, and in the process, have searched out forms which might establish solidarity with the social movements with which they identified. Not only have they sought some form of expression by which they might "appeal" to the reader (as Sartre would say), but they have also needed a vehicle for mirroring their own vision. Finding a form sensitive to audience demand and an means of production equitable to the author have been contingent on a recognition of mutual personal integrity, something Adereth calls "the relationship between creative freedom and social responsibility" (463). Just as the nature of their individual commitments is fundamentally different, so are the forms they choose for representing their situations in deep conflict, and therein lie the origins of tension between McGrath and Wesker. Morally and ideologically bound by their respective, sharply focused definitions of commitment, they have rejected solutions not rigorously

adhering to those self-imposed principles. John McGrath and Arnold Wesker met each other in 1958, at the time of McGrath's first play, A Man Has Two Fathers. It had been mounted as a student production at Oxford University and had been favorably reviewed by Kenneth Tynan in the Observer. Wesker and his wife, Dusty, drove to Oxford to see the new work which had been praised for its innovation and to meet John McGrath, its student-author. They also met the student-actor who would eventually become McGrath's wife, Liz MacLennan. The twenty-five year old Arnold Wesker was already a celebrated "working-class" playwright enjoying a groundswell of praise for his most recent production at the Royal Court Theatre, Roots, part three of a very successful trilogy. Two earlier plays, The Kitchen (1956) and Chicken Soup with Barley (1957) had already established him in London as a playwright with a future.

Wesker's curiosity about McGrath was as much professional as personal. He had been attracted to McGrath's play, A Man Has Two Fathers , since it contained a socialist statement condemning both the United States and Russia for their imperialism and, like McGrath, he was interested in theater as a vehicle for socialist expression. Wesker was also curious about the student who, like himself, was an aspiring working-class playwright. Their first meeting was amicable; Dusty and Arnold Wesker

found much to admire in Liz MacLennan and John McGrath. They recognized in each other the kinship experienced by most working-class, political playwrights of that period. If nothing else, the fact of their small number brought them together (Dornan interviews with the playwrights).

Encouraged by George Devine at the Royal Court Theatre, both Wesker and McGrath began finding a niche for their plays as "working-class authors," a term signifying some sort of political alignment which had suddenly become fashionable in the press. In the beginning they had their working-class backgrounds in common and an interest in writing for and about the working classes. Not only did they share a common goal of placing class experience at the center of their writings, but there was also a recognition between them that their perspective was uncommon. For Wesker, the working-class theme appears for the first time as an autobiographical and self-conscious statement about the closeness of an immigrant family in Chicken Soup with Barley (1958), a closeness he finds characteristic of the working-class community. For McGrath, the working-class themes surface in plays of social protest and concern for the worker's condition. In their early works, both writers use their identification with "working-class" theater as a tool to articulate some aspect of the counterculture, confront capitalism, and challenge the domination of

professional West End theatre in London.

Neither Wesker nor McGrath, however, like the label of the "working-class writer," because they believe the concept is limited. That sort of epithet was exploited by British journalists who created the persona as a marketing technique for the trend in socialist drama. In 1959, one year after the appearance of Chicken Soup with Barley and shortly after the premiere of A Taste of Honey by Shelagh Delaney, T.C. Worsley wrote a particularly arrogant account of Delaney's new play in the September 21, 1959 New Statesman:

> What a sense of liberation we felt when the proletarian writers seemed to have burst through the class barrier of the sensitive novel! And, doubtless, young writers for the theatre now feel the same thing. It is an exhilarating sensation, but they had better make the most of it, for it is, as Wordsworth found and history shows, short lived. (254)

And Wesker, sensitive to the fact that some critics were already losing interest in his works because they were yesterday's news, fired back:

> So, we 'prole' playwrights must make the most of it must we? We've been given our little say and now the hierarchy is a bit tired and we must finish amusing them? ...I didn't write Chicken Soup with Barley simply because I wanted to amuse you with the 'working-class types', but because I saw my characters within the compass of a personal vision. I have a personal vision, you know, and I will not be tolerated as a passing phase. (New Statesman 28 February 1959, 293)

If anything, Wesker and McGrath would have preferred at that time to be known as 'political' writers or

'alternative' writers, even 'fringe' writers--any designation which suggested political and social change--but Wesker in particular objected to a term which symbolized at once trendiness and condescension.

Until 1956, when the Royal Court Theatre was taken over by the English Stage Company, none of the postwar commercial theatres offered working-class playwrights, especially those with a political agenda, an outlet for their works. Before that time, mainstream theater was dominated, even monopolized by West End theatre, a middle-class preserve with predominately university-educated writers and bourgeois values. Producers in the West End were not interested in playwrights like Arnold Wesker or John McGrath. Most of the material was light and undemanding of its audiences. Popular were light comedies like the revival of Charley's Aunt and thrillers (The House By the Lake with Flora Robson), or musicals like The Boy Friend (1953). The genteel drawing room was so commonplace in British theatre that drama critic Kenneth Tynan wrote:

> Nightly, in dozens of theatres, the curtain rose on the same set. French windows were its most prominent feature, backed by a sky-cloth of brilliant and perpetual blue. In the cheaper sort of production, nothing but the sky was visible through the windows, and the impression was conveyed that everyone lived on a hill. There was also a bookcase, which might even--if the producer was in a devil-may-care frame of mind--be three-dimensional and equipped with real books. (A View of the English Stage 249)

Indeed, out of twenty-one plays running in the summer of 1954, Tynan counted sixteen farces, light comedies or mysteries (251).

Bound by its conservative tradition, experiment in British theatre foundered. When Ionesco's The Lesson opened in February, 1955 it attracted little attention (Taylor Anger and After 17). Audiences had been educated to the serious verse drama of Christopher Fry and T.S. Eliot, but they were unprepared for the best that Europe had to offer. Limited travel allowances and meagre rationing of space in the newspapers had allowed critics little opportunity to develop readership interest in non-British drama, so managers, afraid of a low turnout for the relatively unknown drama, were unwilling to take chances. Some of the problem in mounting experimental drama also lay with a monopoly of playhouses by the theatre managers who owned the buildings. They assured their income by charging straight rent, or--if the production were a certain success--by sharing the production's profits, or by a combination of rent and profit sharing. Additional income might be made by purchasing an option on the production's script. In any case, management had a strong interest in assuring a full house with a long run. Clive Barker, director, actor, and editor of the Theatre Quarterly, notes that many contracts required a combination of rent and a percentage of the profits as soon as the production

began to draw crowds. He adds

> In such a case, a Theatre Manager would have a strong interest in letting his theatre only to successful productions, playing as near capacity business as possible...it would be reasonable for him to insert a clause in the contract giving him the right to serve notice of quittal, if the box office figure failed to rise above the level at which his profit began in a specified number of weeks. (Alternative Theatre 2)

Such a system made it difficult for Producing Managers, those who mounted the plays, to take risks with unconventional productions which might take weeks to attract a following.

Rental of the building for a new production was costly enough, but the rent did not necessarily include adequate lighting or sound or maintenance. Producers had to pay for those amenities and any other additions themselves. Because most of the buildings had not been significantly renovated since before World War I, the cost of maintenance alone was a problem for some producers. Management of these theatres were unlikely to risk capital for any ordinary building renovation, much less lend their support to experimental productions, many of which required smaller, more intimate houses with viewing in the round, a new concept at that time. Because most of the buildings were old and expensive to maintain, many managers eventually sold them them or allowed them to be torn down to make room for new government offices and television

studios, creating something of a short supply and driving the rents up even more.

Then, too, the audiences were generally not interested in new trends from the Continent. Unlike the audiences at the turn of the century who were the wealthy middle and upper class which had grown out of industrial wealth (Barker Alternative Theatre 8), the new audiences were mostly petit-bourgeois women. Employment during the war, high losses of marriageable men, a shift in the class structure, and a liberated etiquette had produced a new breed of single woman who was independent enough to attend the theater unescorted. Her tastes ran to plays with themes about the moneyed classes, particularly those by Somerset Maugham with settings in expensive London flats and country houses. Concurrently, a large number of women dramatists rose to popularity with plays about petit-bourgeois women who enjoy a sudden turn in fortune when they marry well. Since audiences did not change much immediately following the Second World War, few theatres would venture to accommodate the latest in French or German drama. Richard Findlater, author of The Unholy Trade wrote in 1952:

> Playgoers may see occasional Ibsen and Chekov (in bad translations), the more sensational Broadway successes, and some of the fashionable pieces of Sartre and Anouilh, but most of the names in any history of world drama are only names to Englishmen. (16-17)

As a result of economic and social pressures, English drama remained relatively unaffected by the European trends in constructivism, expressionism, surrealism. What held British drama to some measure of success was the strength of the accomplished British actor who was so strikingly talented, that audiences often attended the theater more for the acting than the staging or the content of the plays. Stratford-on-Avon celebrated its one hundredth season in 1959 with a cast of Dame Edith Evans, Sir Laurence Olivier, Paul Robeson, Charles Laughton, and Sam Wanamaker (Tynan, A View of the English Stage 258). Other uncommon talents of that era were Margaret Leighton, Peggy Ashcroft, Sir John Gielgud, Wendy Hiller, Michael Redgrave, Alec Guinness, John Neville, Dame Sybil Thorndike, Vivien Leigh, Flora Robson, Anthony Quayle, Peter Ustinov, Paul Scofield, Peggy Ashcroft and Richard Burton, but their reputations were mostly dependent on their work in traditional drama which required training in "naturalistic" gestures and the King's English. Only the most select actors could expand their repertoire to include the plays of Pirandello, Sartre, or Strindberg, partly because of their narrow training, partly because of limited opportunities to consider such roles.

Resistance to influence from foreign drama was ironically beneficial to the British stage, since political pressures at home forced some theater managers

to book unknown local playwrights who had been encouraged by the shake-up in the post-war social structure and opportunities for higher education to consider writing as a profession, an option that had not been readily available to the working classes up to that time in Britain. There appeared in the mid-fifties a spate of new writers who were anxious to find producers.

Optimism had run high for these would-be playwrights as long as the post World War II climate suggested a healthy economy. Expectations for full employment with a rapid growth in personal income and consumer confidence had been awakened by the return of Labour government to power in 1945. That hope was reinforced by the promise of improved education for the working classes in comprehensive secondary schools and Red Brick colleges, post-war institutions of higher education which opened their doors to students of working-class backgrounds. Some young men from the working classes were suddenly thrust into what seemed to be promising circumstances. One example was George Scott, an up-and-coming writer who was unexplainably sentin 1943, by the Admiralty to Oxford for six months before he was to report to service. Like many others, he returned to Oxford after the war to complete his education in the belief that upward mobility was possible for anyone with talent and industry (Barker, Alternative Theatre 35).

Freedom to choose a profession, however, turned into a false hope for many young playwrights, since few who attempted to enter the middle class achieved any measure of success.

Although many anticipated different results from the Wilsonian government, jobs did not materialize after World War II for various reasons: a flood of immigrants diverted the government's capability to subsidize retooling and encourage much needed private investment, competition from foreign markets was keener than expected, and Britain had to adjust to changing patterns of Commonwealth relations as evidenced by the reduction of income following the Suez crisis. In the making were articulate and hostile young men, many of them educated out of the working classes and prepared to fulfill their potential. They were also well groomed to express their cynical rejection of empty promises that abounded in the period of post-war optimism.

One playwright ready to register the bitterness of his generation was John Osborne whose Look Back in Anger (May, 1956) still marks the breakthrough of new drama into the British theater. It was the English Stage Company (ESC) housed in the Royal Court theatre that gave him his start, and it was George Devine, visionary director of the ESC, who began renovating the Royal Court in 1955 to feature some of the leading French works of the period and to attract important new British writers. Devine proposed a

"writers' theatre," that is, he promised the writer that the director would make no cuts without permission, and he offered the writer an open door to rehearsals. He also formed a Royal Court Writers' Group comprised of select playwrights who were invited to read scripts and attend rehearsals or performances of other writer in hopes that they might learn from each other. Furthermore, he encouraged young writers like Wesker and McGrath by emphasizing a willingness to mount drama that may not be a commercial success. He then employed would-be writers as script readers to help him screen prospective holdings. Arnold Wesker and John McGrath were both readers for the Court, although at different times. Finally, Devine approached novelists like Carson McCullers and Doris Lessing with some success, but not the results he wanted. Many novelists were not interested, and others did not produce good scripts. He finally settled on playwrights like Arthur Miller and John Osborne (Hayman, The Set Up 148-151).

Although Osborne is not a working-class writer, he made his reputation as a playwright with a working-class character, Jimmy Porter of Look Back in Anger. Porter articulates emotions that seemed innovative to post-war audiences--the powerlessness of the young, their dashed hopes and unfulfilled desire. One of his frustrations was

his job as a candy vendor, which he claimed to enjoy out of a reverse snobbism, contemptuous of middle-class values. Even though he was a graduate of a British Red Brick college, he could expect little more than the work he had. Porter blamed the rich mostly, but his criticisms were not sweeping and he did not speak for the whole of society. He spoke largely for the young and excluded who had become the frustrated and cynical. Even so, his anger seemed to voice the alienation of his age as he says:

> I suppose people of our generation aren't able to die for good causes any longer. We had all that done for us, in the thirties and forties, when we were still kids...There aren't any good, brave causes left. If the big bang does come, and we all get killed off, it won't be in aid of the old-fashioned, grand design. It'll just be for the Brave-New-nothing-very-much-thank-you. About as pointless and inglorious as stepping in front of a bus. (104-105)

Porter's resentful protest set the tone for many playwrights who followed Osborne. His bursts of anger were so influential that one critic commented that every second young writer began asking, "And how dreadful were your parents?" (Trewin 22). But it was his forthright expression more than belligerence or didacticism which served as a model for others. Devine's production of The Good Woman of Sezuan five months later in October 1956 reflected Osborne's influence which encouraged a theater of outspoken playwrights. The plays which followed over the next fifteen years so resembled this model that director

Lindsay Anderson characterized it as "a whole movement of writers working in a style characterised in ethic by a kind of non-schematic progressive conscience and in its treatment of character by a passionate concern, sometimes fierce, sometimes tender, for the individual human being" (Hayman, The Set Up 155). Others accused it of having a "left-wing bias," although it might have been difficult to find good playwrights at the time who claimed to be right-wing.

The financial success of Anger alone was enough to keep the ESC afloat. After a modest opening, Look Back in Anger was a great financial success with its box office receipts, film rights, and the profits made by transferring the play to the West End. It brought in enough money when coupled with grants and other income at the Royal Court to cover any deficits over the next five years (Hayman, The Set-up 152-153). With its financial success, the English Stage Company was able to mount over 270 plays from 1956 to 1973. More than 140 of them were written by new writers, 221 by contemporary writers, 178 by British dramatists, and many of these were British premieres (Elsom, Post-war British Theatre Criticism 81). The list is impressive: Faulkner's Requiem for a Nun, Genet's The Blacks, Carson McCuller's Member of the Wedding, Ionesco's The Chairs and Rhinoceros, Osborne's The Entertainer and Luther (see appendix). As important as these plays have become, very

few of them made significant profits at the time they were introduced to London. In fact, John Russell Taylor reports that out of seventy-one productions up to 1963, only thirteen plays at the Royal Court covered their expenses (Anger and After Appendix, 329). Without Devine's courage of conviction and Osborne's inspiration, as well as his box office successes, the Court might never have been able to encourage other new writers like John Arden, Edward Bond, David Storey, Ann Jellicoe, John McGrath, or Arnold Wesker.

Wesker frankly acknowledges his debt to the Royal Court since he was to see his first play, Chicken Soup with Barley, directed in 1958 by John Dexter at the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, and transferred to the Royal Court for a second week's run. Wesker had met, by chance, the film director Lindsay Anderson who sent this play and another (The Kitchen) to George Devine at the Court. Wesker had approached Anderson as he was standing in front of the theater where his film, Every Day Except Christmas was playing and asked the filmmaker to read one of his plays (Trussler interview 81). Anderson read the play and liked it enough to recommend it to George Devine. Chicken Soup with Barley subsequently won an Arts Council grant of £300, which he used to marry Doreen (Dusty) Bicker in 1958 (Leeming Theatre Facts 3).

When later asked why he had turned to theatre rather

than develop his talents in poetry and fiction, Wesker said, "...it could simply be that the atmosphere was one in which the drama seemed to surface to the top as the most exciting of the art forms, and certainly I was excited after having seen John Osborne's play, Look Back in Anger, which made me rush away immediately and write Chicken Soup with Barley" (Bigsby interview 1). Indeed, it is easy to see Osborne's influence on Arnold Wesker, even though Chicken Soup with Barley is not as steeped in bitterness. Like Look Back in Anger, it draws attention to the working-class consciousness and to working-class family life vis-a-vis the political milieu. Like Jimmy Porter, many of the family members learn through bitter experience that their services are not needed, but the characters in Wesker's plays also find a source of hope. In Chicken Soup they discover resilience in the strength of an indomitable Jewish mother clinging to socialism, while the family is forced to fight Mosley's Fascists in the streets outside their basement apartment.

Challenging the mother Sarah, is her son Ronnie who wants to know how she can carry on in the face of defeat. He ridicules her blind faith in a political institution like socialism: they have lost their fight, the family has dispersed, and still she holds on. In answer to those who cannot live by their convictions, in answer to those Jimmy Porters who believe "There are no more brave causes," Sarah

finally shouts, "You'll die, you'll die--if you don't care you'll die" (Vol. I, 76). Wesker later told Simon Trussler in an interview that his generation was looking for something to believe in:

> We were all of us somehow absorbing the same kind of atmosphere: the war had been a formative part of our lives, followed by the hope of 1945, and the general decline from then on. So that we were the generation at the end of that decline, desperately wanting to find something, being tired of the pessimism and the mediocrity, and all the energy that was spent on being anti-Soviet and anti-Communist. I think this was one of the things that I wanted to achieve in Chicken Soup: it seemed to me that the Left had debilitated itself by being so violently anti-Communist, that somehow a halt had to be called, and one had to say, you can't go on forever crying over spilt milk, and instead of kicking against the past you have to look for something like, for want of a better word, a vision. (83)

Wesker's ability to capture on stage the commonly held feelings in Britain--not only of anger, but also of an optimism that vindicated their political activism--made Chicken Soup with Barley representative of its times.

Despite their differences in approach, Wesker deeply admires John Osborne. To this day he counts Osborne's plays among the most important writings in British literature (Dornan interview, 2 May 1985). Although Wesker's approach is generally more positive than Osborne's, he borrows from Osborne an economy of style and individualistic characters who feel free to moralize. Like Osborne, Wesker also focuses on family tensions and the

struggle of the individual outside a group relationship. Besides being one of Osborne's stylistic legatees, Wesker profited by Osborne's financial successes at the Royal Court Theatre where, by July, 1960, Wesker had enjoyed the openings of three plays--Chicken Soup with Barley, Roots and The Kitchen.

Being slightly younger than Wesker and a student at Oxford until 1959, John McGrath's works did not open at the Royal Court until his production of The Tent in October, 1958. The play was picked up by the Court after it attracted attention at the 1958 Edinburgh Festival. It was subsequently produced for the Royal Court's Sunday afternoon performances at the Theatre Upstairs, in a low-budget showcase for new writers called "production-without-decor" (19 October 1958). These usually well-rehearsed, but simply staged plays were begun in 1957 to present untested material. Because of rising costs for producing a new play, the Theatre Upstairs was first set aside as a venue for the unknown and untried. When plays did unusually well, they were sometimes moved to the main stage. Today the plays have longer runs, and seem to lead to fewer full-scale productions than those in the early years which sponsored plays by John Arden, Edward Bond, Christopher Logue, D.H. Lawrence, and others (Hayman, The Set-Up 159). Although The Tent did not lead to a full-scale production, The Royal Court later produced a two-act musical by

McGrath, Out of Our Heads, and Trembling Giant, all in 1977. They also produced a longer play, Trees in the Wind, in 1980, and If You Want to Know the Time (1979), a special memorial performance for Blair Peach.

After their experiences with the Court, both McGrath and Wesker have a great deal of respect for George Devine, for his courage and innovation and for the start he gave the young playwrights. That Wesker remains positive about the Royal Court to this day is evidenced by his article, "Debts to the Court", in which he says, "They didn't like or understand what I wrote, but they took the risk. I'd like to think they trusted the writer. Perhaps they only trusted the directors--[Lindsay] Anderson and [John] Dexter. But whoever and however, they gave this writer self-confidence and to them I owe an unreturnable debt--unreturnable, that is, in any way other than through my work" ("Debts to the Court" 82).

McGrath, however, has became more and more disenchanted with the Court, as it became evident that the management was not as risk-taking as it had once claimed to be. In 1979, he told a class at Cambridge:

> The curious fantasy that the values of that place were anything other than bourgeois, elitist and utterly whimsical is a refinement which must have come later. What the Court was looking for was the theatrical frisson, the unusual talent exposing itself in an 'extraordinary moment', the presence of 'danger' on the stage, of the unpredictable, the over-stimulated, the hyper-

> thyroid, the abundantly vital...Perhaps there is somethingungenerous in my reaction to this experience of theatre, but it did in fact cause me to reflect on the real significance of the 'Post-Osborne' theatre, and to come to the conclusion that this famed New Era/Dawn/Direction of British theatre was no more than the elaboration of a theatrical technique for turning authentic working-class experience into satisfying thrills for the bourgeoisie. (A Good Night Out 10-11)

McGrath objected, furthermore, to the Court's appropriation of its working-class authors when it "absorbed and penetrated the bright youth thrown up by the 1944 Education Act in appreciably large numbers" (A Good Night Out 12). And he found the Court's system for choosing new works deplorable. If the play excited one of the Court's directors--Lindsay Anderson, John Dexter, William Gaskill, or Anthony Page--it was selected for production. That's how they established the trend of plays written by the 'new bourgeoisie'. Finally, McGrath spurned any suggestion that the Court was building new audiences by attracting the working classes. He told the Cambridge class: "The audience changed very little in the theatre, the social requirements remain constant, the values remain firmly those of acceptability to a metropolitan middle-class audience, with an eye to similar acceptability on the international cultural market" (15). He was nonetheless grateful for the start they gave him in commercial theater.

About McGrath's uneasy peace with the Court, Raymond Williams wrote,

> He is hard on many of his contemporaries, but mainly in terms of the social and cultural forms to which they have adapted or which they have come willingly to represent. What he says, for example, about 1956 and the Royal Court--that heavily mythicised moment--not only needed saying but comes with particular appropriateness from him, since he has at once been close to it and yet shown the possibility of other plays and other ways. (Forward, A Good Night Out ix-x)

While McGrath's points about the mainstream character of the Royal Court Theatre are valid, the Court's willingness to take a chance on unseasoned writer, especially socially committed writers, was unusual then and now.

There was little in Wesker's resume, for example to recommend him as a promising writer to George Devine, but Devine took a chance with his work anyway. Up to the time of his first play, Wesker had spent two years National Service as an airman in the Royal Air Force, and worked as a carpenter's mate, a bookseller's assistant, a plumber's mate, and a pastry cook. Born in 1932 of a Russian-Jewish father and a Hungarian-Jewish mother, he was raised with such a respect for learning that he continued to educate himself by reading and writing on his own, even after he lost his opportunity to pursue a formal education when he failed his eleven-plus exam (Leeming chronology).

Although he is widely read and enjoys an intellectual's discussion, he remains self-conscious about his family background, employment history and technical education, particularly since several critics--John Elsom,

Richard Findlater, and Walter Allen--tagged Wesker and others including Shelagh Delaney and John Arden as "kitchen-sink" dramatists. The nickname was taken from a 50s school of painters in North England known for their realistic portrayal of the working-class environment (Egbert 540). The group, including Wesker, had a reputation for being committed and involved because of their association with working-class interests.

McGrath, however, was never included as one of the "kitchen-sink" writers. One reason may be that his early successes in television script writing, particularly his cops-and-robbers series Z Cars, seemed to exempt him from a category largely reserved for playwrights with domestic themes. Then, too, some critics do not regard McGrath as a working-class writer, perhaps because he was educated at Oxford and his father was a secondary school teacher.

He claims a working-class background, nevertheless, because he grew up in the working-class neighborhood where his father taught school. He also counts his grandparents on both sides were Irish Catholic immigrants who went to England "around the turn of the century, or just before, in search of potatoes...and gold...and pavements" ("Better a Bad Night in Bootle 39). His paternal grandfather worked as a boilermaker in the Birkenhead yards and the family was settled in the area until the bombings of World War II

when they were evacuated to a council estate in North Wales. There John went to grammar school in a working-class district. When he was sixteen (1951) the McGrath family returned to Merseyside. Like Wesker, John took his turn at manual labor in a laundry near Birkenhead and on a farm, although both experiences were shortlived.

McGrath fulfilled his two-year National Service as Gunner, Bombardier, then Artillery Officer in the Army, where he was deemed officer material because of his Oxford education. McGrath seized the opportunity to sign up for officer's training in order to leave Germany where he was stationed and go to Egypt shortly before the Suez crisis. He was later shipped to Jordan and Malta as well. His travels in the Army only confirmed the political lessons first taught him by fervent socialists at the Alun Grammar School in Mold, North Wales ("Better a Bad Night in Bootle" 40).

Even though working-class writing has had a history recognized for more than a century, playwrights like Wesker and McGrath were suddenly regarded by critics of the late 50s as fresh and original, partly because traditional, middle-class drama was worn and mechanical and partly because critics were hoping for the making of a new movement, one that could show the British a new direction, one dedicated to reshaping the future of mainstream British theater. McGrath and Wesker were among

the small group of emerging artists who shared a working-class perspective, an attachment to the Royal Court Theatre, and an acute awareness of a political crisis in Britain. What made these playwrights different from their predecessors, however, was not simply the political and moral consciousness, but a need also to commit themselves to include the marginalized in their vision and to offer clear alternatives for change.

The times were also different. The works of John McGrath and Arnold Wesker anticipated, to a certain extent, the remarkable explosion of political theater in 1968. As Catherine Itzin points out in her comprehensive encyclopedia of 60s British drama, Stages in the Revolution, 1968 was the year of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the year of the Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy assassinations, race riots in America, civil rights marches in Londonderry, the beginning of Watergate, the war in Biafra, and the Six Day War in Israel. And, of course, it was the year that the Vietnam War peaked in the Tet Offensive and anti-Vietnam demonstrations raged worldwide. British theater acted like a seismograph for these events (1-11).

While attempting to maintain their equilibrium from the dizzying effect of these events, British theatre responded with a flood of new theater companies and venues.

Their purpose was, as journalist Sandy Craig said, was

> to restore theatre to its traditional position of importance by re-creating a fresh, unsullied language of theatre; to extend the social basis of theatre to include the working class, the oppressed and dispossessed; and to make obvious the enjoyment and the possibility of creation--particularly, collective creation--as something neither mysterious nor the privilege of the elite few but the democratic right and the inherent human capacity of the many. (9-10)

Building on the tone, style, and content of the earlier "working-class" playwrights, these later writers created their "new drama" out of the chaos of the times and the works of their antecedents. They received their final impetus from the opening which the British government handed them in 1968 by relaxing the censorship laws.

Before that time, theatre of political protest had been subject to the whims of the Lord Chamberlain who could darken the house lights on a play with one vernacular reference to homosexuality, birth control, or venereal disease. The guidelines were often broad enough to find offensive all sorts of plays. It was considered indecent, for example, to "do violence to the sentiment of religious reverence" and to "represent on the stage in an invidious manner a living person or a person recently dead" (Robertson 248). So the ridicule of Hitler, for example, was considered grounds for censorship. Up till 1939, irreverent attacks on Nazism were not allowed because restrictions were placed on satire of foreign governments.

Decisions of indecency were often arbitrary and politically motivated for the first generation of 60s protest playwrights. These were the sorts of restrictions on Arnold Wesker and John McGrath and others whose protest subject matter pressured Britain's mainstream institutions. Drawn together by the common enemy in the uneven distribution of wealth and power, by the tumultuous current events, and by the aspirations for a theatrical revolution, Wesker, McGrath and others like Trevor Griffiths, John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcey, Edward Bond, and David Edgar discovered in each other and their common aspirations for alternative theater and their desire to restore the community they had lost at the end of World War II. What they had in common, most of all, was their sense of commitment. What they had not begun to discuss in any thorough way were questions which would soon divide them: in whose service were they working? where did each of them stand relative to key questions of social reform? what style of their theater best served their aims?

Almost at once, these artists enjoyed the energy of their movement, particularly when they grasped its full impact, and the speedy realization that whatever cohesion they had achieved through a shared vision had already been splintered into special interest groups: community theater, feminist theater, theatre-in-education, actor-based theater, agit-prop, ethnic theater, and political theater.

When their numbers were counted at the end of the 60s, the hundreds of small companies added up to a staggering diversity in size and diversity. And yet, most of the committed playwrights could be categorized by two key political alignments--gradual reform or revolutionary upheaval--in short, whether or not theater is to be employed as a weapon for radical change. A study of the aims and practices of Arnold Wesker and John McGrath illustrates fully the conflict in these differing perceptions.

SECOND CHAPTER

Many literary critics and reviewers for the press mistakenly use the terms "working-class" and "socialist" interchangeably when speaking of committed writing. But taking the political alignments of the authors for granted, they tend to overlook fundamental differences in the playwrights' socialist alliances, a distinction which may explain structural differences in the content and form of their plays. And yet, if Wesker or McGrath were asked in the 60s how they would identify themselves as writers, neither Wesker nor McGrath would have used the term "working-class." Like their contemporaries and antecedents, they preferred to be known more by their political commitment than their working-class backgrounds. Indeed, most of the Royal Court's best dramatists in the 50s and 60s wrote with a political interest. Many critics understood that trend, of course, but they conveniently overlooked it when reviewing the Court's plays. No critic to date, for example, has taken note that the source of antagonism between Wesker and McGrath or any other pairing of Britain's contemporary playwrights can be attributed first to the differences in the nature of their commitment and only after that, to formal literary considerations.

Wesker's middle-of-the road socialist plays can be

traced, for example, to the early drama of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), Fabianism, and the Co-operative movement of the 1920s, and McGrath's Marxist plays can be traced to the more leftist Workers' Theatre Movement (WTM), a political theater which reached its pinnacle in the thirties. A short history of nineteenth and twentieth century political theater in Britain will clarify the distinction and illustrate the fact that socialist novelists like Robert Tressell have been around since the time of Queen Victoria, and working-class dramatists have achieved distinction since they became quite popular in Edwardian music halls. Whatever its origins, working-class entertainment grew in popularity till its peak at the turn of the century. It drew crowds again in the thirties with the run-away hit, Love on the Dole, and others. Indeed the success of working-class literature in Britain seems to parallel the strength of socialist movements. When socialist parties gain strength and Britain's electorate moves to the left, working-class literature then suddenly finds currency. Such was the case in the late 50s and early 60s when the Labour government returned to power, and the literature of socialism and the working classes began to thrive as it had thrived in the thirties.

Up until the later decades of the nineteenth century, political themes were often embedded in various forms of popular and working-class theater--particularly melodrama,

equestrian entertainment, pantomime, and the mummers' plays. A popular theme for melodrama, for example, might have been the rescue of an inept middle-class hero by the resourceful working man (Reid 81), and depictions of the Crimean battles and Waterloo were used in Equestrian drama (Bratton 112-113). Mummers' plays as well, particularly those in rural areas often mocked changes brought about by industrialism (Green 142). Very little is known about Victorian mummers' plays, but extrapolating from contemporary examples and some historical accounts, it can be said with some certainty that action, costumes, and make-up of these productions were fantastic and surreal, as opposed to naturalistic or realistic. Bizarre combinations created a satirical, imagistic theater which only suggested recognizable frames of reference. The central character of one mummers' play, in fact a traditional figure in the genre, was a "wild horse" with a costume made from a real horse's skull, but painted red and black. Three of its legs might have been human and one wooden. Dialog, full of whimsy and nonsense, also reflected the precarious balance of the real and unreal--most often for the purpose of political satire (Green 150-2).

Political themes had their place in Victorian and Edwardian popular drama, but plays were used very little

for explicit moralizing, since most of the audiences at that time felt the purpose of theatre was strictly entertainment. It was not until the various socialist groups found in drama a way of teaching ethics, that plays were used as a weapon of struggle and enlightenment, but that discovery was not immediate. Despite the proliferation of performances by poets and musicians during the early days of the ILP meetings, drama as a weapon of political reform was not well-developed, largely because it was relegated to fundraisers with light entertainment. Historian Raphael Samuel speculates that elitism in turn-of-the-century commercial theatre and gentrification of the acting profession may have also made traditional dramatic forms seem inappropriate as popular entertainment. And, too, because it was attractive to female audiences, drama seemed less interesting to the male dominated political movement, so the language of many socialist zealots overruled the use of subtle dialog required by traditional British drama. Art forms other than drama may have been considered best for the propagation of socialist aims (11).

Only the Fabians used drama to any serious extent as a vehicle for its movement. George Bernard Shaw was, of course, its most prominent spokesperson. His Man and Superman was produced by Harley Granville-Barker, a recent convert to the Fabian movement, at the Royal Court in 1905 (Britannica, 14th edition). Under Granville-Barker the

Royal Court Theatre between 1903 and 1907 featured a host of works compatible with socialist thought written by Shaw, Ibsen, and Chekhov and later "social problem" plays by Galsworthy, Barrie, and Drinkwater (Samuel 9). These writers were to influence others like Mrs. Lyttleton whose Warp and Woof was used to organize a dressmaker's union and Stanley Houghton whose Hindle Wakes features a factory-girl heroine. Despite the social content of these plays, their concentration on the individual hero or heroine and their use of the naturalistic style put them, for the most part, in the mainstream of drama which was already being produced on the commercial Edwardian stage.

It was not until after World War I that political theater, drawing on Edwardian traditions, began to expand through dramatic societies promoted by the Cooperative Societies, the Labour Party, and more particularly by the Independent Labour Party (ILP) for the purpose of educating the working classes. A sponsoring agency like the Labour Co-op or the ILP often provided a center for the trade unions at a time when the Labour Party was not a majority party in the country or even among the working classes (Samuel 27).

The ILP then used drama to promote socialism throughout England. In London it encouraged plays at their meetings as much for entertainment purposes as for propaganda,

partly to build attendance. Drama in these theater movements was a tool for exploring political themes of interest to its membership--especially anti-militarism, class conflict, and ethical themes. Unconventional attitudes about religious orthodoxy, the place of women in marriage and the professions, and new forms of family life were also prevalent, but these themes took second place to moral questions that sought a balance between idealism and materialism, liberation and violence, humanity and necessity. Despite the innovative content of these plays, the form depended heavily on the conventional theater of its time: a kind of naturalism which meant realistic drawing-room settings, an emphasis on individual achievement within the family environment, and commercial theatrical strategies.

All branches of the ILP tried some type of drama in their meetings, often in the form of dramatic recitations called "Penny Readings," but those branches with the larger membership eventually mounted works as complex as Shaw's Candida, Robertson's Caste, Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing and Ibsen's A Doll's House (Samuel 22). In the early twenties the ILP lent financial support to a national drama movement which established amateur dramatic companies and sponsored films (Samuel 22). With the help of professionals like Sybil Thorndike, Lewis Casson, Elsa Lanchester and Miles Malleson the "Masses Stage and Film

Guild" staged productions as diverse as revolutionary-pacifist drama like Upton Sinclair's Singing Jailbirds and Hamlet (Samuel 26). The Labour Party, although less ambitious at that time than the ILP, also supported cultural events. Above all, principles for social justice were given priority as they were worked out through comedies, farces, and sometimes heavy morality plays (31). Classical literature, particularly Shakespeare, was especially popular. Although the Labour Party was not as involved with cultural events, there was, by 1924, a London Labour Choral Union, a London Labour Dramatic Federation, and a London Labour Symphony Orchestra (Samuel 23).

Response by the working classes to these cultural events was outstanding. Many were attracted to middle class literary evenings, both for their low prices and for the intrinsic merits of the performances. One devotee of the penny readings was Thomas Wright, journeyman engineer. At some length, he described evenings where readings of Shakespeare, Macaulay, Dickens, Hood, Tennyson, and Thackeray enthralled working-class audiences.

> I have attended them in all parts of England, and more especially in the manufacturing districts, and I am glad to find that they are exceedingly popular all over the country. Of the many plans that have been devised for providing the working classes with that amusement of which, it is admitted upon all hands, they stand in need, the penny readings, considered upon the principle of

> judging a tree by its fruits, are the best. The many thousands of working men and boys who frequent them give unmistakable evidence of their appreciation of them; and, apart from this consideration, I know, from constantly mingling with the working men of the densely populated manufacturing towns, that the penny readings are immensely popular with them. (Some Habits and Customs of the Working Classes Engineer, 174)

Wright attributed the popularity of these penny readings partly to the vastness and variety of English literature and partly to the high quality of the performers. He also believed they were well attended because "there is no parade of special or pecuniary patronage of their class connected with them" (174). Wright was referring to the fact that, since there was no reserved seating for these performances, the moneyed classes sat with the rest. With the open seating, everyone was treated equally. The widespread appeal of the penny readings, which erased distinctions usually made about class tastes, thereby produced some levelling effect.

Closely connected with early socialist movement were the Co-operative Societies which provided a whole community with meetings for young people, concerts, lectures, carnivals on May Day and Co-operators Day, light opera, and sometimes full-length plays. Their aims were twofold: "educating members in the principles of socialism, and cultivating 'a love for the higher and better dramatic art'" (Samuel quoting Len Jones' dissertation from the University of Warwick 30). Drama was used extensively by

the cooperative movement as a strategy for education, particularly ethical and political. It was hoped that the themes of great literature would not only teach appropriate political attitudes, but also instill the membership with middle-class habits of thrift, diligence, honesty and temperance. More than not, however, education took second place to entertainment, as the latter provided release from the tensions of working-class conditions.

The Co-operatives often operated on the assumption that many of the working classes wanted to escape the conditions of their existence by adopting middle-class tastes and habits. Certainly many out of the working classes hoped for freedom from the deplorable conditions of their employment and poverty, but they were not anxious to surrender the integrity of the working-class culture which could be defined in its own terms. Even so, many upwardly mobile working women, attempting to escape their hum-drum existence as domestic servants and other menial work, attended drama classes offered by the Co-operative movement where they learned elocution, grammar, and comportment as well as the "refined" practice of reading traditional literature. At a time when the servant class was disappearing and labor was developing into a separate estate, drama offered the hope of an enriched future through cultural enlightenment. Samuel writes:

> Labour Co-op drama sometimes invoked the term 'working-class' to describe what it was doing, but the fundamental inspiration was that of access to a higher culture, elevation to a more spiritualized plane--in brief, emancipation from the working class's condition of existence. Just as poetry was read for its 'beauties' (Walt Whitman was a favourite with co-operators on this score), so literature and art generally were thought of as representing transcendent values, a purer state of being: love of them was bound up with a post-Christian morality in which reading became an act of dedication. Propaganda was subordinate to the more general aim of making 'great art' available to working people. (29)

There was also some suggestion by the cooperatives and the trade unions that the quality of life could improve through fine art and moral behavior, even if the conditions of employment remained the same. These organizations were followed in 1903 by the WEA (Workers' Educational Association), an educational association that still offers evening classes and lectures to people who have not had a full opportunity for a university-type education.

Drawing on a century and a half of tradition established by the ILP, the Cooperative Societies, and the Fabians, Wesker and others like him decided once again in the early 60s to appeal to the trade unions for help in developing the arts for the workers. What he wanted to avoid were the pitfalls of efforts like the WEA which he described as "brave ventures which failed because they were penniless, isolated or unco-ordinated" ("Arnold Wesker on the Age of Trivia," an article of unknown origin reprinted as Centre 42 promotional material). To goad the

unions into action, Wesker published an April, 1960 pamphlet entitled, "The Modern Playwright, or 'O, Mother is it worth it?" The text was originally given as a lecture at Oxford as an attack on the labour movement for neglecting their role in the arts. Not wanting to limit his audience to students, he sent a transcript of the lecture to the Secretary of every trade union in the country.

In the lecture/pamphlet he argued that the labour movement should take responsibility for developing a first-rate cultural environment for everyone, not just for the middle classes. He noted at the time that 200,000 Britons out of roughly 58 million attended the theater. Four million sat home "indiscriminately watching television" (The Modern Playwright 12). Wesker speculated that few of the theater-goers were dock workers, steel men, railwaymen, housewives, or office workers (6-7).

Later that year he addressed a New Statesman essay to George Woodcock, General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress (TUC). Wesker expanded in that open letter on his beliefs, "...we want a principle established--that art is a common heritage, not the habit of the few" ("Vision! Vision! Mr. Woodcock!" 153). Art should be made available to everyone, including the working classes, but someone forgot to tell the "stultified worker that he was as

entitled to a fair share of the nation's economic life as anyone" (The Modern Playwright 9). Linking the quality of work life to the quality of life, he said, "The social and cultural habits of a group will continue for generations unless something is done to break them just as much as the economic habits will continue unless action is taken to weaken them" (9). To assist in breaking through economic barriers, workers must have the perspective of the arts. To make those connections, trade unions should take the lead because "the distinction between man as an economic being and a social one is a false and disruptive one." Unions have the moral responsibility to make the rank and file aware that "the enjoyment and excitement of art is the enjoyment of the fruits of the struggle for a better life, and is also the only real expression of that better life" (Labour and the Arts:II).

In his youthful enthusiasm, he exhorted fellow writers to pick up poems, plays, films, "tuck them under [their] arms and go out to the public and do battle with them" ("Let The Battle Commence" 98). He envisioned an explosion of high quality literature across the country, works similar to those of Chekhov, Shakespeare, or Lorca. The bastions which he planned to assault, however, were not the offices of funding agencies. He wanted to attack the strongholds of mass culture and to invade the homes of working classes where television, darts, and football pools

were preferred to any theatrical production. Wesker was convinced that workers could improve their quality of living by changing their habits of leisure. In his estimation, their only obstacle to a better life were those who believed the working classes incapable of enjoying the arts and those in the working classes who believed the arts were not meant for them. He made his appeal in this way:

> I believe working, playing, laughing, crying, eating, singing, dancing, studying, leisure and creative art, to be not separate aspects of living, for separate people, but natural manifestations of the whole act of living for everyone to indulge in or enjoy. In other words--for example--I do not believe in serious books for intelligent people, and funny ones for simple people, but in literature for us all. Unfortunately again, however, we have managed to organize our society into classes where some of us have time to develop our intelligence and some of us are denied this time, where some of us, in other words, can develop this faculty for this whole process of living and some of us are stultified. (The Modern Playwright)

Creation and enjoyment of art, however, is so natural to human existence and so essential to a productive and satisfying life, that anyone--given an exposure to it at the highest levels--could appreciate the way it stirs the human spirit (Fears of Fragmentation 21-38).

Like his predecessors in the ILP and the Cooperative Societies, Wesker believed that class differences in taste depended more on education than on sources of income. With some optimism he said, "The man in the street no longer

says art belongs to his master and not him because those terms are no longer used; but the fact remains that the man in the street still believes that art is not for the likes of him--and the way in which he thinks this has subtly changed--it has become a sort of inverted snobbery, an isolation, a sort of 'I'm what I am and I'm proud of it'...I've always considered the role of revolution was to do away with the third class and make everything first class" (26). Since a universally accessible art could create a social revolution, it should no longer be treated as a commodity to be bargained away in the market place, but a part of the "life-or-death pursuit for an understanding of the complex world we live in," and a necessary part of everyday experience (65).

To effect the art revolution, Wesker added, every aspect of society must stress the importance of art: trade unions should promote it through their meetings and by lending financial support, the government would have to spend more on art, the schools would have to teach art with the same urgency as they teach arithmetic, and art would have to be valued everywhere as a "pursuit for sanity," rather than regarded a simple palliative against boredom as it is today ("Art--Therapy or Experience" 44). In Wesker's calculation the best art education, "the only way to communicate the impact of say, a play, was to perform it

and expose people to it" (Fears of Fragmentation 116). Art education on all levels has to be stepped up, therefore, if the survival value of art were ever to be universally appreciated.

Echoing earlier advocates of adult education and the importance of the role of the trade unions, Wesker realized that the arts, especially literature, could have a profound effect on anyone who would enjoy them. Like early members of the cooperatives, he believed that education in drama could better the lives of the working classes, even if conditions of employment remained unchanged.

Recalling the nineteenth century, the golden age of Labour's involvement in the arts, Wesker also demanded that the National Trade Union sponsor an orchestra, offer grants in the arts to TUC children, commission works of art, and create a literary community like those at the Royal Court Theatre or in Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop. Wesker hoped to reawaken through a working-class community, that included the TUC and working-class writers, a love of literature--especially the classical literature of Balzac, Steinbeck, Gorki, Miller, Chekhov, and contemporary literature of Shelagh Delaney, Doris Lessing, and Harold Pinter. He imagined a community that improved the quality of life in working-class neighborhoods, just as the Cooperatives did in the nineteenth century. But he pictured a much bigger role of change for the arts than

that developed by the ILP or the cooperatives.

Wesker's aesthetic, although neither systematic nor polished, is consistent. He repeatedly insists that since truths are recreated and illustrated through the arts, we can grasp through them "the chaos and complexity of the human condition" (Fears of Fragmentation 89). At a 1968 Tokyo conference honoring Wesker, he summed up his philosophy:

> Art is a delicate human activity, a desperate attempt by man to understand his own nature and the world in which that nature exists. It is one man's reverence for all men and for this reason commands our respect and pleasure: our respect for its reflection of man's uncertainty and his courage in attempting to overcome that uncertainty; our pleasure for its reflection of his achievements. To experience art is to bear witness to a profound human anguish or joy. (121)

Tied to the revolutionary potential of art is a primary role for artisans in the British community. Realizing the need for a center which could assume the leadership needed to organize others in this revolution, he looked to the TUC for sponsorship.

While writing the lecture for the Student Drama Festival at Oxford in April, 1960, "O, Mother, is it Worth it?", Wesker suddenly envisioned places all over England that could serve as collecting points for artists and audience, and could provide outlets for voices not ordinarily heard in London theatre. As a companion piece to

his lecture at Oxford, he and trade unionist Bill Holdsworth wrote "Labour and the Arts:II or What Then is to be Done?" a constructive proposal with a list of practical suggestions for trade union support of the arts. Among other things, Wesker and Holdsworth asked for sponsorship of a National Trade Union orchestra, a publishing house, films, theatres in industrial centers, and folk music.

Responses from the unions surprised everyone. Four unions replied: the ACTT (Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians), NATSOPA (National Society for Operative Printers and Assistants), the Tobacco Workers' Union, and the society of Technical Civil Servants. All of them wanted to help, even if they were not certain how it could be done. Then in September, 1960 the TUC (Trade Union Congress) passed Resolution 42 to investigate ways to encourage greater participation in the cultural life of the community:

> Congress recognizes the importance of the arts in the life of the community, especially now when many unions are securing a shorter working week and greater leisure for their members. It notes that the trade union movement has participated to only a small extent in the direct promotion of plays, films, music, literature and other forms of expression, including those of value to its beliefs and principles. Congress considers that much more could be done, and accordingly requests the General Council to conduct a special examination and to make proposals to a future congress to ensure a greater participation by the trade union movement in all cultural activities. (Coppieters 39)

Following that proposal, Wesker was given two £25

donations-- by a group of painters and sculptors and by the AESD (Association of Engineering and Shipbuilding Draughtsmen), and AESD also mounted an art exhibit for any town where a trade union conference might be held. Resolution 42 was just the indication Wesker needed that the unions were ready to assume a more dynamic role in the arts much like the ILP of the nineteenth century. He quoted one painter as saying, "There can never have been <u>such</u> a private viewing before. We didn't even lay on cocktails!" ("Resolution 42"). From this early show of support Wesker projected that Resolution 42 was going to affect the way the British prepare the "future, leisured generations" ("Resolution 42"). The TUC resolution became the cornerstone for a working-class theatrical project, Centre 42, which Wesker and others were about to propose.

Centre 42 became a focal point for many British authors in the early 60s who felt the new group represented an alternative to the dominant middle-class culture. Although the idea of offering alternative theater to the rural communities had been bandied about for a number of years by John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy, no one had acted on it (Barker, "All at Sea" 7). Even John McGrath joined the group briefly. He was drawn into the Centre 42 movement by Doris Lessing and Gareth Wigan, but he had already been thinking along similar lines. Before he heard

about Center 42, he and others were planning a socialist theater in a garage somewhere in the north of England (Barker letter to author December 1985). But McGrath did not stay long with Centre 42 (nor, for that matter, did Lessing or Wigan), because, although he admire the concept in general, he opposed much of Wesker's approach.

First of all, McGrath could not, even in the early 60s accept Wesker's gradualist definition of socialism. He did not articulate his differences, however, until after his experiences with the 1968 student uprisings in Paris. Following his return from France, McGrath was convinced that he wanted to work in socialist theater as opposed to writing socialist plays. In short, he wanted to direct his energies toward a more comprehensive effort of economic and social transformation than he had attempted to that point. In his formulation he drew up a distinction between social democratic theater, a practice which represented to him a form of cultural complacency, and socialist theater, which he laid out later in his "Theory and Practice of Political Theatre." Socialist theater, he wrote,

> had at its base a recognition of capitalism as an economic system which produces classes; that sees the betterment of human life for all people in the abolition of classes and of capitalism; that sees that this can happen only through the rise to state power of the current under-class, the working class, and through a democratization--economic as well as political--of society and of its decision-making processes. A theatre that sees the establishment of socialism, not as the creation of a utopia or the end of the dialectic

> of history, but as another step towards the realization of the full potential of every individual human life during the short time that every individual has to live. (43)

Its complement, social democratic theater is less practical as an instrument for the "betterment of human life for all people" because it is utopian (and thereby ineffectual), and because it seeks improvement through a "process of gradual gains within a basically capitalistic framework, needing no revolution of power or consciousness, merely material improvement which requires as its precondition the health of the capitalist system" (43). McGrath believes that as long as its proponents are content to work within the capitalist system, social democratic theater will never improve the conditions of the working classes.

Another reason McGrath had for quitting Centre 42 was his little faith in the will of the trade unions to effect real change. In his "Theory and Practice of Political Theatre" he debated the advantages and disadvantages of being supported by an organization--either a political party or a trade union. If a political party were organized and did, in fact, offer the needed assistance, McGrath could find good reasons to join forces with the group:

> There is a possibility with a political party of follow-up to make the involvement of the audience more permanent, and not just getting everybody going and then leaving them to it. It raises the possibility of the audience becoming active, becoming the actors, not passively receiving.

> There is a further benefit in belonging to a party: within the group itself there will be more coherence or identity of purpose.... (49)

But the drawback to union sponsorship was that the trade unions were too conservative in their thinking. Those most militant in the Labour Movement--on shop stewards' committees, in certain union branches, trades councils, in the universities, in tenants' associations, on community projects, in women's groups--were finding they were increasingly alienated from its national bureaucracy because the bureaucracy was unable to respond to the volatile core of groups at the center of the Labour Movement which were working towards socialism, but disagreed on the practical level. Although these groups connected as activists, there was no single, unified political party which gave them direction, nor any single issue which held them together.

Even if a viable, central political party were successfully organized, McGrath feared it become a lightning rod for the opposition who would find ways to contain it. The British Arts Council could have withdrawn support, since they did not fund subsections of political parties, and other mainstream institutions could have found equally effective forms of censure. McGrath commented, "the moment [these groups] show any sign of winning a struggle, they become the most reviled group of individuals in society, turned by the screeches of the media and the

major parties into the lepers of the Welfare State" (50). Until such an organization exists that can help him raise the level of militancy among the working classes, give depth and confidence to the Labour Movement and effect change, McGrath will have to be content with the limits of a small political theater company, but even in the 60s he was unhappily aware of the limited choices.

Just as importantly, McGrath left Centre 42 because he disagreed with Wesker's fundamental premise of wanting to educate the working classes to the classical arts. Articulating his objections in a guest lecture at Cambridge in 1982, McGrath challenged Wesker's assumptions that the working classes were philistines in need of education. Because he felt he was uniquely successful in developing the forms of working-class theater which he inherited from the nineteenth century radical traditions and from Unity Theatre, McGrath was irritated by playwrights like Wesker and others who assumed that working-class audiences lacked a refined taste in theater. McGrath's answer was that there was no one arbiter of true art or culture. He wrote, "there <u>are</u> indeed different kinds of audiences, with different theatrical values and expectations, and...we have to be very careful before consigning one audience and its values to the critical dustbin" (<u>A Good Night Out</u> 3).

He objected specifically to an evaluation of popular

tastes using the criteria of middle-class aesthetics. Working-class theater had elements that could never be embraced by bourgeois audiences: alienation to the conditions of the middle class and an enthusiasm for popular culture. The corollary to his argument was his proof that no form of art can be considered universally salutary. To that point he debated:

> 1. that art is universal,capable of meaning the same to all people;
> 2. that the more 'universal' it is, the better it is;
> 3. that the audience for theatre is an idealized, white middle-class, etc., person and that all theatre should be dominated by the tastes and values of such a person;
> 4. that, therefore, an audience without such an idealized person's values is an inferior a audience; and
> 5. that the so-called 'traditional values' of English literature are now anything other than an indirect English cultural expression of the dominance over the whole of Britain of the ruling class of the south-east of England. (A Good Night Out 3-4)

Simply stated, McGrath argued that the so-called universal forms of art are meaningless to the working-class experience. To find a legitimate art form expressive of working-class tastes, one would have to do more than add a bit of regional dialect (as did Wesker) or class-related subject matter. Forms of drama specific to to working-class needs are required. Good working-class theater, for example, mixes a variety of popular forms of entertainment like rock music or vaudevillian routines with a direct political statement of relevance to working people. Humor

and content with a local slant are also important. Undermining Wesker's argument that anyone can enjoy and benefit from the classical forms of art, McGrath agitated for new approaches with an energy and determination that was remarkable, even for a type of theater that is driven normally by passion.

The form that McGrath was to develop drew on principles for contemporary drama which were first established in Germany by Erwin Piscator, Vsevolod Meyerhold in Russia, the Workers' Theatre Movement (WTM) in Britain from about 1910 to 1939, and Bertolt Brecht. The fall of the Labour government in 1924 and a General Strike by miners in 1925 were likely incentives to the rise of the Workers' Theatre Movement (the WTM) in 1926, a theatrical movement distinctly different from that begun by the Fabians. Loyalty of the rank and file in the General Strike and deepening conflicts between the miners and the British government gave voice to a leftist group emphasizing class struggle. Closely linked to the Communist Party, the WTM offered drama that drew on traditions already begun in Germany with Edwin Piscator and with Meyerhold and Eisenstein in Russia. They were also inspired by a well-known group of miners, the Bowhill Players. Their leader, Joe Corrie, was an outspoken collier whose popular play depicting the struggle during the General Strike, In Time

o' Strife, toured the Scottish mining districts in 1928 (Mackenney, 17). Another antecedent was the Plumstead Radical Club in South London which promoted the values of the working class at a time when the press, schools, films, radio broadcasts, and churches treated their contributions with contempt.

Most of the WTM's productions were revues with monologues, songs, and sketches as they turned from naturalistic drama and the 'discussion' play to agit-prop, a form of drama which is usually written by workers for a short-lived, didactic theater that focused on political issues of class interest. Agit-prop used the dialectic and conflict to in short, fast-paced skits that were largely satirical and may include music. The skits are often a part of a larger campaign covering local and national concerns and were accompanied by leafleting. The characters developed by the WTM were based on types and the costuming depended on stereotypical recognition-- bosses wore top hats; workers wore cloth hats. The vocabulary was simple and so was the message as it tried to raise the working-class consciousness. WTM repudiated any drama which appeared imitative of middle class tastes (like that put forward by the ILP and the Labour Party), because they believed workers were the 'coming class', those who would eventually determine the future of England. As a result, they rejected the 'theatre of illusion', a naturalistic

style which accepted the fact of things as they appear on the surface. They tried, instead, a 'theatre of ideas' which looked through the surface to those controlling cultural and social forces which are usually invisible. Because it was tailored to an audience which was economically struggling, WTM's theater satisfied a "feeling of brotherhood among working people" (Samuel 213-228).

When they were full strength, the WTM had over 30 member groups nationally and their own journal and offices, but they grew estranged from the organized working class partly when, following Joe Corrie's departure, they were largely run by working-class and upper-middle class Bohemians. To compensate, some drama troupes took to the streets with theatre which featured current news and relevant issues. Using the "living newspaper," mass chant, speech-choir, popular music, and agitprop they drew attention to workers' struggles and coordinated campaigns to fight against capitalism. Many of their ideas came from Germany and the United States.

The WTM was replaced, for loss of audience, by the Left Theatre in 1934 and the Unity Theatre in 1936. These new groups hoped to break away from sectarian goals like those adopted by the WTM which had attacked socialism, and establish a more united front against fascism. They conceived a new kind of play for a new audience. Although

impressed by the Rebel Players, a British agitprop troupe of the mid-thirties, Unity's founder Andre Van Gyseghem aspired to produce plays which looked for a link between agitprop and the more abstract, or philosophical work. In an effort to encourage serious drama, his Left Theatre produced Friedrich Wolf's Sailors of Cattaro, a German play about sailors who mutiny, and a translation of Gorki's Mother. Like later works in the Theatre Upstairs of the Royal Court, his plays were often performed for one or two Sundays only--at Shoreditch, Stepney, Hackney, and Woolwich--working-class districts in London (Wesker grew up in Stepney). They also performed for clubs, especially trade unions and groups associated with the labor movement like the local co-ops, the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU), the Left Book club, and the Labour or Communist Parties (Gyseghem 209-215).

In 1938 his group was invited to perform in South Africa and they chose to depict in pagaent form the development of the Co-operative Movement starting in feudal England. Their hope was to receive some sort of funding from the London Co-op, a bid that did not meet with success. Their pagaents were quite popular, however, and the seeds of another sort of socialist drama were sown. About the series of pageants performed in South Africa (1937-39), Van Gyseghem writes:

It was not a subtle performance, but simple,

> straightforward and visually effective. Everything that was said was pertinent, but not said at too great length. This I found very impressive, a form of mass theatre which I and the actors could believe in. It is not an ideal form, because it does not go to any great depth; it shows only the broad outlines of human development. But living pictures do make an impression on the mind of an audience, and that was our aim. The theatre is a weapon, and we were using it in numerous forms. (217)

Unity was not only successful with pagaents, it also ran full length plays like Clifford Odet's Waiting for Lefty, mass recitations like Ernst Toller's A Man and a Woman, and dance productions to large audiences. Their popularity often attracted big name stars like Paul Robeson who created a stir when he turned down lucrative parts with the West End to perform with Unity. His performance in Plant in the Sun won the Howard de Walden Cup, in an annual competition sponsored by the British Drama League (Clark, 229). Their biggest success which ran 162 performances to over 40,000 people was Babes in the Woods, a musical satire with a political message. Though heavily influenced by the Communist Party, Unity Theatre found its audience as a broad based leftist theatre of the 30s. Like WTM, they found their success largely through nontraditional forms and by stressing political themes over individual conflict. At the time, the Unity proved a financially viable alternative to West End commercial theatre.

Once World War II intervened, however, few remembered the successes of early political theatre as it was known in

its hey-day, and the gains which Unity Theatre and others had made seemed to have had little impact on Britain's mainstream theatre. But the precedence of the WTM the Unity, and other British alternative groups carved out a tradition which held its place in a wider community. The tradition was carried over in Britain by a spate of political playwrights who appeared in the late 60s, and slightly earlier than that by Joan Littlewood. Littlewood, also of working-class origin, started up her Theatre Workshop immediately after World War II. With some assistance by Ewan McColl, her husband of a few years, she led a poverty stricken, high quality leftist theater group through an eight-year tour of Europe and a two-year production of Wole Soyinka's The Lion and The Jewel in Nigeria. Her celebrated Oh, What a Lovely War produced in 1963 became a landmark for those who were writing political theater in the 60s, and her idea for a popular socialist theater, the Fun Palace, bore a close kinship to Wesker's idea for Centre 42.

But Littlewood was not the only post-war leftist theater which carried on with the Unity spirit. Good political theater was also found at Glasgow Unity Theatre (successor to Glasgow Workers' Theatre Group 1937-1940) and in the continuing music hall tradition which perpetuated the popular tradition of theater, ballad, folksong, and

humor in pubs, union halls, and on recordings.

So when Arnold Wesker and John McGrath appeared as 'fresh and original' playwrights for the 60s, they may have seemed unusual to a string of young critics looking for an alternative to the worn-out and mechanical forms, but a fifty-five year old tradition (since Shaw's Man and Superman played at the Royal Court in 1905) stood behind them in British mainstream theatre, and a much longer history in working-class theater. As part of that tradition, they took their places on either side of the debate dividing committed theatre.

Although both mid-twentieth century playwrights work from socialist ideals and working-class backgrounds, the results are distinctly different. Between them lie the ideologies which shape their goals and the content of much of the oppositional drama in England today. The form and content of Wesker's naturalistic plays are conditioned largely by his identification with the dominant modes established by bourgeois playwrights, nineteenth century socialism, and early forms of the Labour Party. With his drama, he has been concerned mostly with promoting a resurgence of high-quality theater in terms that could be understood by the widest audiences. He therefore battled for a theater which would be even better than commercial theater because it would have social commitment and, thereby, life-enhancing values.

McGrath's plays are shaped by his subscription to the earlier radical leftist theater of the WTM and Unity theaters. They explore more experimental forms tailored to working-class tastes. Like his predecessors, his goals are to demystify theater by stripping away the proscenium and curtain with street drama, short episodic agitprop, contemporary music, and other popular forms of entertainment. His is an oppositional, not alternative, theater, an expression of struggle against the hegemony of the bourgeois ideology. It is also an interventionist theater that actively seeks fundamental changes in the infrastructure and an instrument for building a "counter-culture based on the working classes, which will grow in richness and confidence until it eventually displaces the dominant bourgeois culture of late capitalism" ("The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre' 44). Not only are the lines between the two forms--their style and function--ideology-linked, but ideology may also explain some aspects of the differences between structures of their respective theater companies, the types of audiences they attract, and their histories of public subsidy.

The contrasts seem obvious in retrospect, but when McGrath and Wesker's paths first crossed at the Royal Court in the late fifties,they appeared to have everything in common. They were both 'working-class' playwrights

interested in exploring the potential of political drama. Neither they nor their critics were aware of significant differences, especially since McGrath had not yet developed his ideas and the cataclysmic events of the 60s had not yet played themselves out. And, too, they had very little opportunity at that time to know each other. It was not until 1962 when they came together to work on Centre 42, a project which might provide affordable entertainment for the working classes, that they began to define their relative positions.

In 1970, after a decade of association, they began to articulate their polarized positions in an exchange of letters. Their debate started with a vitriolic review for the Marxist paper, Black Dwarf, written by John McGrath of Wesker's play, The Friends. Once Wesker responded, there ensued a brief flurry of letters which established clearly the points of departure. With their principles delineated, it is possible to trace influences on their plays--not only by the working-class movement in Britain, but also by the critical traditions of Georg Lukacs and Bertolt Brecht--and note the way in which these influences affected their uses for drama as well as content of the plays. What we see in the works of Arnold Wesker and John McGrath is the Lukacs/Brecht debate in motion, the application of inherited forms and attitudes which explain much about their productions and the productions of their successors

in post-war British theater.

Political commitment, which should have brought them even closer together, separated them as natural allies. It was their alignments within socialism and their politically different approaches to theater--Wesker's approach traceable to the early drama of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), William Morris, and the Co-operative movement of the 1920s, and McGrath's approach traceable to the more leftist Workers' Theatre Movement (WTM), a political theater which reached its pinnacle in the thirties--that define the boundaries of the debate. These divergent views are reflected not only in the content and forms of their plays, but also in the structure of their respective theater companies, which became an extension of their conscious attempts to bring about change.

CHAPTER THREE

Just as John McGrath and Arnold Wesker anticipated, very little came of the encouragement they had initially received at the Royal Court Theatre in the late fifties. McGrath based his predictions on the Court's internal management which was, in his estimation, fundamentally bourgeois, interested primarily in novelty, and lacking any real social or political commitment to the working classes. Wesker based his predictions on a suspicion that working-class playwrights would be treated as a "flash in the pan," ironically an expression that a drama critic later did use in reference to the working-class playwrights (Taylor, "Ten Years of the English Stage Company" 128).

The Royal Court's commitment to these writers was so tenuous that many speculated that the central purpose of the Court's director, George Devine, was strictly a theater of interesting writers and innovative entertainment (Taylor 123). And as his directorship devolved, Devine may have even lost the thrill of the earlier movement, since new plays were not coming in at their former rate, and the company seemed to have lost its initial impetus.

Devine's sense of defeat towards the end of his directorship may have also been partially the result of his illness, since he died 20 January 1966. He might also have

been exhausted after years of battling for financial stability. What Devine had discovered after the Court's initial successes with Look Back in Anger was that, even though the political playwrights attracted attention for their novelty, alternative theater as a whole had not caught on with middle-class audiences; nor had it attracted a new following among the working classes.[1] Commercial successes at the Court were rare. When a play seemed to demonstrate the ability to draw large sell-out audiences, a small theater like the Royal Court would often sell the right to produce it to a larger theater in the West End. During the first seven years of the English Stage Company, only thirteen productions covered their running expenses, and much of their revenue came from the sales of film rights or transfers to the West End. Fifty-eight main productions in those seven years lost money (Taylor 126). And many of the plays which were box office failures at the Royal Court were written by Sartre, Ionesco, and Williams, plays which are considered dramatic classics today, even though they are still not necessarily box office hits.

A sparse turnout for the performances could, in part, be attributed to a mixture of low name recognition and mediocre reviews which only resulted in a poorly informed audience. Also, as McGrath and Taylor pointed out years later, Devine may have been confused in his aims. Although he seemed committed to a social revolution through theater

at the time, Devine may not have held a clear idea of how a theater should act responsibly to society, so he appeared uncertain about what function this theater might fulfill in precipitating social reform. His primary concern, therefore, became that of producing the best drama possible at a minimum loss. Commercial interests had to be considered, when so few of the plays were box office successes--at least in the first run. Wesker's Chicken Soup with Barley, for example, met only 40% of its expenses in 1958 (26% at the box office), but when it reopened two years later, it met 90% of its expenses, and his Roots failed to achieve any measure of success until its second run in 1960 to sell-out audiences, when his play met 100% of its expenses for the first time.

At issue are familiar questions: how can artists mount any productions with new ideas if they fail to receive stable, financial support for experimental work? How can those playwrights who are marginalized, even though they are writing for the British working classes who are in the majority, find an reliable outlet that is responsive to their views? Who decides which artists are worthy of support? Who should finance works of art that lack strong public support from any sector?

In Britain these questions are largely settled by the British Arts Council, since most of Britain's theater is

publicly funded. The Arts Council has been providing support of some sort since 1945, but it is rare to find anyone who is satisfied with the system. As long ago as 1947, J.B. Priestley called the Arts Council one of the "enemies of the theatre" (Theatre Outlook 22). He was alluding to the disproportionately high sum of money received by the government from Entertainment Duty as compared to the amount restored to the theaters in subsidies. And even then, the budget which was considered unfairly small was allocated to the maintenance of buildings--a "bricks and mortar" policy--rather than allocating the money to raise the artistic level of stage production (22-32). Many complaints today about the Arts Council's policies echo those of Priestley.

The Arts Council's relationship to the artist is a complicated one, as it too is governed by a complicated network of hegemonic relations linked to Britain's mixture of capitalism and socialism and to the bourgeois culture, which lock the government policies into the values and beliefs of the dominant class. Even more, the Council is the agency which regulates, to some extent, the material resources for leisure, entertainment, art--many of the ways people relate to each other socially.

The goals of alternative playwrights have been to establish a closer relationship between the text's own comprehension of itself and its production, and to develop--

even revolutionize--the existing forces of artistic production. For greater control over the production of their plays, therefore, many contemporary playwrights have found it necessary to form their own theater companies. By managing their own theater companies, dramatists discovered greater flexibility in determining the forms, their venues, and, to a certain extent, the composition of their audiences. Wesker and McGrath are cases in point since each of them established their own companies and the histories of those companies are a part of the ideological structures which condition their works.

Around Christmas 1960, several artists--mainly writers and directors including Bernard Kops, Ted Allen, Ted Kotcheff, Clive Barker, Sean Kenny, Doris Lessing, Alun Owen, Tom Maschler, Clive Exton, Jeremy Sandford--met to toss around ideas for establishing their own means for producing works independent of the commercial establishment. Many of them had been talking informally for some time about possibilities for a system of alternative theater to respond to a "sense that society was changing too rapidly and the processes of change were no longer apprehensible to the man in the street" (Barker, "All at Sea Without a Rudder" 9). They met formally to discuss a proposed theatrical project, eventually known as Centre 42, that might offer an alternative to the commercial system

which had taken their "work and converted to its use the vigor, energy and vernacular realism, and had gently but firmly squeezed out all the social relevance, and progressive intentions" (Barker, "The Centre 42 Project and the 42 Movement" 2).

They hoped for a theater that was not judged first in commercial terms--by box office receipts, by viewing figures, by the price a film company would pay for its screen rights. They wanted an expression of alternative values, and they were searching for an instrument that would bring together neighbors isolated from each other by economic and social barriers in the class structure. They also wanted the chance to work outside London, that is, to decentralize enough to work in the regions among the communities they knew best (3). The early organizers were later joined by Frank Ward, Shelagh Delaney, Arnold Wesker, Gareth Wigan, and John McGrath.

The group's participants agreed that the purpose of Centre 42 should be to "wrest artist activity from commercial domination and, in combination with the trades unions, to establish a new social role for the arts" (Barker "All At Sea" 7). If these writers could organize the company themselves, they might surmount many of the obstacles normally placed before working-class writers: high rent, fashion-minded producers, croneyism among directors, and the narrow-mindedness of middle-class

audiences.

Their idea was not unique. Since the days of England's Unity Theatre and Glasgow Workers' Theatre Group in the thirties, several writers, including John McGrath, had toyed with possible ways to break out of the fixed traditions of established theater. Being unsure how they could accomplish their aims, they agreed to work with the Centre 42 group who seemed full of ideas for the future. Since Wesker's O, Mother, Is It Worth It? speech at Oxford which complained about a lack of union support, he had continued to look for donations by the trade unions to the dramatic arts. Although the unions had not initially provided much money, many in the group believed --on the strength of Wesker's initial success--they could eventually find reliable patronage through the trade unions or elsewhere.

They held their first public meeting on 28 May 1961 at 2 Soho Square in London to explain their purpose and to expand their base of support. Producer and director Clive Barker opened the meeting with a proposition "to create suggestions, to create potential venture, to create something which had no limit...almost a cultural revolution for this country". Director Ted Kotcheff addressed the "95% [who] seemed to be cut off from any artistic experience" because "the press, television etc. seemed to be in the wrong hands." Novelist Doris Lessing pointed to the local

excitement for adventurous theatre. Listing Encore magazine, Joan Littlewood, the Royal Court, and critics like Kenneth Tynan, Lessing called for a center in a working-class area that would be available to a young audience. She envisioned a place for games, jazz, films, and theater. Arnold Wesker then described the center which would be open to activities from morning to night with art exhibitions in the morning, tennis table championships in the evening, children's theater in the afternoon, and lunchtime concerts. He also outlined a role for the center of directing festivals and making connections with the factories and schools. Theater scenery designer Sean Kenny described the physical plant as a place which might minimize the gap between the audience and writer, a place which would dismantle the "victorian birdcage between the two" (Unpublished Minutes of the Proceedings 9). He imagined a flexible space that could accommodate a play or a circus, a place like an Elizabethan inn "where a group of travelling players come in and tell their story on the floor, and then the audience can go back to their drinking"(10-11). Business advisor Mike Henshaw insisted that the artistic members volunteer their services.

Their discussion was infectiously enthusiastic and organized, reflecting months of exchange. The atmosphere was charged with expectation and optimism. In June 1961 an "Audience-Participation Committee" was formed to explore

ways of "creating and sustaining a new kind of audience" (Coppieters 40). They decided to use as their model, Roger Planchon's socialist experimental theater group in France. In July 1961 the group went public with their plans. Their program consisted of a central plant for all the arts that should house a permanent acting company, orchestra, visual arts department, jazz band and dance company. They also announced intentions of going, when invited, to the regions for the purpose of providing entertainment and encouraging a grass roots movement which would eventually supply its own entertainment.

After a series of meetings they settled on a list of objectives for Centre 42 which would become

> -A vehicle with a more revolutionary message
> -Independent from the commercial system
> -An outlet for nontraditional writers, directors, actors
> -A link between audience and artist
> -An alliance with trade unions
> -Preparation for generations of leisure
> -A voice for Britain's popular culture
> (Centre 42 Annual Report)

And they had decided to accomplish these goals in four steps which were announced at their launching party on July 24, 1961:

-Establish in the beginning one Centre which would house facilities for all the arts under one roof.

-Set up its own permanent acting company, orchestra, visual arts department, jazz band, dance group and so on.

-Serve the immediate area around the Centre with cultural presentations, and, when invited, bring arts

> festivals to outlying areas. Invitations were to be accepted from community bodies, such as trades councils, co-op guilds, universities, or similar groups which intimated the presence of an interested but by-passed audience.
>
> -Encourage local bodies to organize their own festival or event. The Centre would simply provide the programme--the talent, and selection of plays or dances or such--from itscurrent repertoire. (Coppieters 41)

The group appeared to be working in harmony with one another, but a divided purpose was already emerging between two factions--one defined by those who, like Wesker, wanted a strong base of operations in a center located in London, taking steps one and two before accomplishing anything else; and the others who, like Barker, saw their best work being done in the regions, establishing a closer link between artist and audience and giving voice to the popular expression of Britain.

In August 1961, Clive Barker sent a position statement to the Provisional Council of Centre 42 which included among others Jennie Lee, General Secretary General of the Arts Council (later appointed Minister of the Arts under Harold Wilson), Bill Carron, president of the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU), and Frank Cousins, Secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) outlining plans, detailing financial needs, and asking for their reactions. He wanted their endorsement for the following points of agreement among steering committee:

-An acceptance of socialist values which would

de-emphasise the monetary and competitive aspects of life;

-The establishment of art's importance and of the links between artist and community;

-The search for ways in which artists could take control of their own means of expression;

-Condemnation of individual isolation and a lack of communal spirit;

-An effort to "break down all barriers, social, economic and psychological that stand between the people of this country and full participation of the arts." (Unpublished letter, 30 August 1961)

The group's unspoken hope, as suggested in the position statement, was that private donors and government grants would take their part in this venture by lending financial support, thereby enabling the proposed Centre 42 with its high aspirations to proceed without constraint. As its spokesperson Barker mentioned the expectation of first-year contributions of £80,000, a small sum when compared with most investments by the private sector in the entertainment industry.

Barker also made it clear in the letter that he was not seeking large amounts of money from the trade unions. He believed, first of all, the trade unions would antagonize the general membership by asking for large sums, (little did he know, the general membership had passed Resolution 42 over the objections of the General Council); second, he believed the inexperienced Centre 42 should wait until the operation was running smoothly before asking for

trade union money; and third, they were likely to attract too many "bandwagon jumpers" looking for easy money. Barker's greatest fear, however, was that the group's purpose might be diluted or lost, or worst yet, that they might eventually compete for the money against that West End manager who "would become a Trade Union overnight". So a second point of difference between Wesker and Barker had arisen: while Wesker was still trying to raise money through the trade unions, Barker was playing down the possibility. Withdrawing their appeal to the trade unions was a change in policy for Centre 42, a change that solved immediate relations since little financial support had been forthcoming, but created some later uncertainty among the trade unions about their responsibility to the arts. Barker would argue that the trade unions had, in any case, little interest in Centre 42's proposals.

To balance their opposing factions, the Centre 42 planning group had, meanwhile, appointed Wesker as the Artistic Director of Centre 42 and Barker as its Technical Organiser. Wesker was selected for his imagination, energy, enthusiasm, viable ideas for fundraising--even if the trade union support had not been as strong as he supposed--and he had a reputation of being committed. In April 1961 Wesker had been arrested as one of hundreds in a sit-down, anti-nuclear demonstration in Whitehall, for which he was later fined £1. In September Wesker had been arrested along with

Robert Bolt, Lord Bertrand Russell, and approximately thirty others in an anti-Vietnam War demonstration sponsored by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and sent to jail, a sentence which gave him credibility as a social reformer.

Barker was selected because he was down-to-earth, dedicated, experienced in community theater, equally energetic and equally committed. He had proved himself by his earlier work in Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop, taking part in the first productions of The Hostage and Fings Ain't What They Used T'Be at Stratford East and appearing in the West End productions of Oh, What a Lovely War!. He had also worked with Ed Berman's Fun Art Bus taking part in the first productions of The Hostage and Fings Ain't What They Used T'Be at Stratford East and appearing in the West End production of Oh, What A Lovely War! Being committed to a more leftist political and social alignment, Barker's appointment balanced the Wesker faction. After the dissolution of Centre 42 in 1969, he joined the board of directors for John McGrath's theater company, 7:84, where he found greater compatibility. Objections which he eventually raised to Wesker's policies in the management of Centre 42 anticipate the ideological objections which McGrath raised a decade later, in 1970. During the initial stages of Centre 42, however, neither Barker nor Wesker had a full understanding of his own political position, so the

clash between them in the early sixties seemed only a sign of the theater company's growing pains.

Besides, they were too busy with the formulation of their plans to arrive at a deeper understanding of their differences. Before they were officially registered as a national charity, they began arranging the festivals. Originally they had intended to wait until they had raised enough money to build a theatrical center in London before offering any entertainment, but the invitation came to participate in a festival in Wellingborough, a small town about 75 miles north of London, so they seized the opportunity to see what they could accomplish. Many of the planners, particularly Barker, felt it important to "demonstrate the power and validity of the idea," even before they had a building ("Centre 42 Speakers' Notes" 4). Believing it was "unthinkable" to turn down the invitation, the committee decided to defer fundraising for the proposed center.

By October 1961 the group was plunged into activity. Organizers drew on all the popular traditions for ideas--the Workers' Educational Association, the music associations, the travelling theaters, orchestras, and exhibitions. The final program in November included the following:

> 1. A trade union exhibition in which the work and materials of various crafts and industries were placed in juxtaposition with the work of

sculptors and painters.

2. One evening of theatre in the round.

3. A film performance of films from the Free Cinema Movement.

4. An Any Question Evening on the place of cultural activities in Trade Unionism.

5. Folk singing in the public houses throughout the town in which there was also a exhibition of work of local artists.

6. A surprise performance by Pete Seeger in one of the public houses. ("Centre 42 Speakers' Notes 3)

The festival in Wellingborough was such a success, that it was followed in 1962 by invitations from others in Wellingborough, Nottingham, Leicester, Birmingham, Bristol, and Hayes and Southall. Much of their success came from the work of the visual arts director, Beba Lavrin, the film committee run by Clive Barker (because of his work in cinema, McGrath was placed on this working committee for a short time), the efforts of Michael Kustow and Arnold Wesker as well as the artists, technicians, secretaries, trades-unionists who worked the fourteen hour days (Coppieters 44).

The second year of festivals was marked by Solly Gold, a specially commissioned play by Bernard Kops, a reading of The Nottingham Captain, a play by Wesker written for the events, and Michael Croft's National Youth Theatre production of Hamlet. There was also an E.M.I. film by Charles Parker, The Maker and the Tool about the

relationship between man and his tools complete with oral histories taken from the regions, and folk songs by Peggy Seeger, Ewan MacColl, A.L. Lloyd with many others. They also included the Tommy Watt Orchestra, a big band consisting of sixteen top British jazzmen, an original score written in the jazz idiom by Wilfred Josephs, and a performance of Stravinsky's The Soldier's Tale. There were films, poetry readings, an exhibition which gave a brief history of the trades union movement, a local artists' exhibition, and a collection of work by local children. The work was hung in factories, libraries, pubs, a bowling alley, a cinema, a betting shop, a doctor's waiting room, stores and other frequented public places (Coppieters 41-44). The events of those fifteen weeks were wide ranging and impressive.

Attendance for most of the shows was excellent, even though publicity was poor and ticket prices were sometimes too high. Although the pervasive mood for the organizers was hectic and often disorganized, many felt that "the festivals had an important impact, in that they encouraged new groups, stimulated argument about the role of art in the community and the principle of state subsidy, and released new energies" (Coppieters 44). Barker later wrote, "Whatever its failures, Centre 42 has been responsible for a change in the cultural climate of this country. it has

brought many people face to face with questions which previously they had never faced ("The Centre 42 Project and the 42 Movement" 15). He meant that Centre 42 had forced discussions about the forms and functions of working-class art.

Centre 42, however, had gone into debt. In July, 1962--before the end of the second series of festivals--Michael Henshaw wrote in the Centre 42 first annual report, "If you accept that salaries, overheads and rents are the first charge on our total financial expentations, then virtually nothing is in the kitty for the 1962 festivals and we are already contracting with firms, local councils, actors, and so on." Although they were in debt by only £450 at the end of the first of four festivals, their deficit was a serious problem for a group which already had future commitments and no visible means of future income.

At the completion of four festivals they estimated debts of around £35,000 and by June 30, 1964 they owed approximately £48,000, still very little money when one considers that the Edinburgh Festival at that time was losing £110,000 annually and smaller festivals (at Aldeburgh and Cheltenham) cost even more to launch("Centre 42 Speakers'Notes" 4). They had counted on substantial support from outsiders and yet neither the British Arts Council nor the TUC had contributed much. The only significant donation was a £16,000 grant from Gulbenkian

Foundation, but it simply was not enough[2]. Many blamed overly ambitious plans, others blamed Wesker, perhaps unfairly, for a lack of managerial expertise.

Recognizing they could not manage the festivals while raising money, they set up a Friends of Centre 42 whose sole function was development. The list of sponsorship in 1963 was impressive: Countess of Albemarle, Dame Peggy Ashcroft, Sidney Bernstein, John Berger, Robert Bolt, Bishop of Coventry, Graham Greene, Harold Hobson, Richard Hoggart, Sir Laurence Olivier, Joan Plowright, J.B. Priestley, Terence Rattigan, Sir Herbert Read, Vanessa Redgrave, Sir John Rothenstein, Peter Sellers, Alan Sillitoe, C.P. Snow, Kenneth Tynan, Lord Walston, Raymond Williams, among others. Clive Barker, Technical Organizer, and Director Arnold Wesker remained in charge.

The watershed for Centre 42 seems to have been reached in 1962-1963 when the Council of Management debated its future. Again differences between the visions of the two groups surfaced. One faction, which included Wesker, continued to promote a permanent headquarters for the organization in London, which would serve, as a nexus for working-class entertainment. He was concerned that a small organization without a home might be perceived as temporary and would lose potential donations, particularly from the unions. The other group which included Barker was concerned

about becoming too large and commercial and thereby risking the loss of their social energy. Barker resisted the proposal to turn all their attentions to a central location in London. Since Centre 42 had at least sixteen invitations to mount festivals in 1963, he wanted to continue the "social revolution" as they had begun. Barker argued that demand for their form of entertainment was coming mostly from the regions where the festivals filled the need of the people more than a center in London, and that the tremendous energy generated by the festivals would eventually support their London center. Any shift away from the festivals would, therefore, threaten their continuation ("Centre 42: Can We Control the Revolution?"). The Council of Management decided, nevertheless, to postpone the festivals for two years until they had established a home in London. Their accumulated debts effectively precluded ambitious plans for the future.

Despite the unpaid bills and lack of trade union response, Wesker and the Council began raising funds for the new center. Since most donors would be reluctant to make contributions for meeting old debts, the Council created a separate building fund, the Round House Trust. The Round House was named for the 1847 railway engine shed on Chalk Farm Road in Camden. In size and shape it seemed an ideal building to remodel for a gathering place that would collect all the arts under one roof and serve as a

meeting place for artist and public, "not as idol to the fans, but as human beings each concerned with the opinion and responsible comment and simple humanity of the other" (Barker "The Centre 42 Project and the 42 Movement" 7). With conference rooms, food, drink and entertainment, it could serve as a communal hub. Alec Coleman and Louis Mintz, a financial controller of a large dressmaking firm, donated the money needed to write off the sixteen year lease. And Arnold Wesker himself donated £10,000 from the sale of the film rights to his play, Chips With Everything. Nevertheless, Centre 42 needed an additional £600,000.

Determined not to go further into debt, the Centre 42 Council rejected commercial options like bank loans and private investors for the Round House. They wanted, ironically, to be free of judgment about the way the money was spent, so they sought unattached gifts instead. Even with Lord Harewood, Director of the Edinburgh Festival and patron of the opera, as the Chair of the Appeals Committee, relatively little money was raised. Part of their problem was Centre 42's reputation an idealistic organization lacking cost efficiency and practical experience--"a bit long-haired and starry eyed" said George Woodcock, then General Secretary of the Trades Union Council whose promises of support, contradicted by a poor showing, were always a source of disappointment to Wesker (Centre 42

promotional materials #20). Wesker, however, remained optimistic, believing that someday they would build enough goodwill to win over the Trades Council or the rank and file (Fears of Fragmentation 47-48). The Camden Council and the Transport and General Workers' Union each donated £2,500 and an anonymous donor offered £50,000 in guaranteed overdrafts, but with those exceptions, relatively little money was forthcoming.

Centre 42 might have raised the necessary contributions had large public institutions also been willing to lend their support. After twelve years of leadership by the Conservative government, however, there was little money for the arts. In any case, the Conservative government seemed unlikely to fund a group that was both artistically experimental and politically competitive. The Conservative structure for the allocation of resources through the British Arts Council so strongly favored the established art institutions that the return of the Labour Government with Harold Wilson in 1964 (one year later), made little difference in the funding. Not even appointing a member of Centre 42's Council of Management, Jennie Lee, as Minister of the Arts changed the funding practices of the British Arts Council for theater in the sixties. Seventeen years later Barker wrote that lack of government commitment was largely responsible for the unsurmountable difficulties they faced:

> The failure of Centre 42 to continue effectively after 1963 was the direct consequence of the election of the Labour Government of 1964 and its failureto fulfill expectations which had become pressing concerns during the previous thirteen years of Conservative rule. The ensuing sense of disillusionment affected not only the cultural scene but spread wide across the social and political responses of the community and gave rise to new movements and strategies in both these areas. ("From Fringe to Alternative Theatre" 49)

Centre 42 was in an odd bind. They had taken their purpose as alternative theater from the socialist values they held in common. And yet, they had to disavow overt political aims and intentions of raising money on behalf of their ideals for fear of losing their charity status. Only one gift was presented by members of the government, and that was £40,000 raised by Prime Minister Harold Wilson at a Downing Street tea party to convert the Round House into a small performing area (Täeni 412-413). In 1969, the British Arts Council offered the Round House Trust £10,000 for a "guest programme," but the money had come too late and would have, at best, promoted artists who were already known and established.

Tied to the £40,000 donation was the appointment of a new financial adviser for the Round House Trust, George Hoskins. Hoskins' appointment effectively stripped Wesker of his power as director. On the face of it, the Round House Trust was a good idea because it separated the building fund from the debts of Centre 42 allowing greater potential for

development; unfortunately it also gave license to an associative group not answerable to Centre 42's original philosophies and opened the way for exploitation of the artists who performed there. Hoskins' goal was to make the Round House self-supporting until Centre 42 could raise more money, but such policies permitted a system antithetical to Centre 42's original intentions.

The Centre 42 project had been formed so that art would not have to pay for itself. Whatever their points of difference along the way, the planners continued to agree that art should never be selected on an economic basis, that is, art should not have to pay for itself, and that profit from the artist's work should never be a consideration. The Council Members of Centre 42 stood by their statements in the 1961 Annual Report:

> We do not here question the merit of profit but we do question the attitude that views art as having to pay for itself. If we want the arts to be the social responsibility of the community then we must never consider profit from an artist's work. In other words, no such contract should ever be entered into; we feel that, however heretical a procedure it is, we should contract with an artist only to earn back that which it has cost to present his work. After that he must be free to gain from his work as and how he can. (30)

Shifting to a profit-making enterprise, the administration was violating Centre 42's original aims through the Round House Trust.

Because new policies at the Round House subverted the

group's original purposes, trustees were discouraged from raising money to meet Centre 42's debts which, with the bank interest, were quickly adding up. The Centre 42 movement was at a stalemate: they had lost the momentum for the festivals, as Barker had feared; and they lacked sufficient funds for either the building or regional theater, as Wesker had feared. The success of the Centre 42 group had been mediated by the patrons, the audiences, the town councils, other audiences, other playwrights, and so forth.

In a developed capitalist social formation the dominant middle classes may permit, even encourage, an experimental group like Centre 42 for informal distribution and consumption, but may not choose to sustain the group. The failure of a working-class theater company like Centre 42 could largely be attributed to a disjunction between the company and the traditions and practices of the ruling classes. Centre 42 sought subsidies before granting mechanisms were in place for patronage of working-class theater. Unable to function either within the dominant literary modes of production, or even parallel to them, the group's functions were eventually modified until the structure of their company and its operations were compatible with those of the commercial theater of its time.

Centre 42 limped along until October, 1970 when it

was dissolved after Wesker's resignation. Lack of money and, finally, unacceptable commercial strategies contributed to its slow death. Also contributing to its collapse were the ideological differences between Wesker and Barker, differences which go to the heart of polemics within political theater in Britain.

Wesker and Barker had recognized their incompatibility early on. When Centre 42 was still in the planning stages, Barker scribbled in the margins of one of his papers, "The difference between Arnold and me is between John Wesley and John Ball." Both historical figures were zealots in their own way: John Wesley was an itinerate Methodist preacher who depended on spreading his faith through conversion and John Ball achieved change when he led a peasant uprising in the fourteenth century. To Barker, Wesker's statements seemed to make inflated claims for the arts as an instrument for saving the wretched. Barker was thinking of statements like that in Fears of Fragmentations, in which Wesker said, "I believe that art is the means with which we break down the whole terrible wall of myths that confuse, frighten and limit us--and only when those walls tumble can we grow into real human beings (Fears of Fragmentation 38). For Wesker, any education gained through the arts is power, a key to self-determination, to more open social interactions, and to a resistance of oppression. Wesker's preacher-like metaphors rang out with moralistic overtones.

On the other hand, Barker viewed himself as a revolutionary with a volunteer following like radical leader of the 1381 peasantry rebellion. Quoting French historian Froissart, Ball once contended that "things cannot go well in England, nor ever will until everything shall be in common" (Morton 122). Ball was referring to the peasants' demands for an abolition of serfdom and compensatory payment for services at a flat rate of fourpence an acre. Barker also wanted more than a change in the social and cultural climate of the working classes. He wanted nothing less than a social and economic revolution in the ownership and management of the arts. The purpose of Centre 42 in Barker's mind was not merely a matter of morals, but of ownership of the arts. In this tongue-in-cheek comparison, Barker was also characterizing the polarized positions within Centre 42.

Those in the Centre 42 movement who sided with Barker were largely instrumental in promoting the the regional festivals. The issue of the festivals appeared to represent a simple disagreement over the allocation of resources. After all, the festivals seemed a good idea to everyone, including Wesker, and they seemed controversial only because no one could agree on <u>when</u> that money should be spent. But the issue of the Festivals actually stood for a more fundamental question of whose voice should be heard--the

professional artist or that of the local talent.

In an August 1961 letter to the Provisional Council of Centre 42, Barker wrote, "...we are trying to recreate a popular culture in this country and helping to forge a new community with a national identity and character" (3). By "popular culture" Barker meant the traditions of the people in music and other forms of entertainment, as opposed to the "classical culture" which he characterized as being already "in pawn to commercial interests." Hoping to encourage the participation of nonprofessional entertainers and open up those forms of folk art which lay outside the grips of commercialism, he deplored the infiltration of Britain by American popular culture with its "mid-Atlantic accents, pseudo-serious and pretentious concern for society, its debasement of classical and folk art in the name of entertainment, its patronisingly coy attitudes and complete lack of any ethical, moral or responsible standards whatsoever."

Barker was, no doubt, referring to commercial American 'folk singers' who professed anti-war sentiments but lacked ideological conviction. In any case, he wanted to reawaken the popular culture of his own country in each particular region and to bridge the gap between popular and classical forms of entertainment without overpowering the voice of the people.

He was also committed to the importance of locally used

language as one means for preserving working-class values. Toward that end, Barker said that Centre 42 could investigate and record the oral histories of the Scots, Irish and regional English. By establishing vernacular libraries for those groups, Centre 42 could reinforce the English language in all its variation, especially the rhythms and inflections of local accents systematically silenced by the demands of most directors. He wrote, "The people are inarticulate--we as professional artists must be ready and willing to help them to find their new ways of expression." Centre 42 could become an agent for local expression.

Barker reiterated his position in 1963 while discussing the importance of staging local festivals, "The enquiries and invitations have never been for Centre 42 to take culture to the masses, they have always been a cry for articulation" ("Centre 42: Can We Control the Revolution?"). Barker believed a need for articulation was coming from those who had lost a sense of community. Since shortly before World War II neighbor had been isolated from neighbor. New housing estates, increased standard of living, dissolution of old institutions which used to bring people together had contributed to the trend of fragmentation. Centre 42, they hoped, would provide a new way for people to come together through self-expression with

the arts (Centre 42--Speaker's Notes).

Wesker, in fact, agreed with many of Barker's points, especially those on the issue of local language. Believing that language is the basis for empowerment and self-discovery, Wesker wrote plays which gave breath to rural and domestic characters who usually have little to say in middle-class British drama. Roots heroine Beatie says, "Well, language is words...It's bridges, so that you can get safely from one place to another. And the more bridges you know about the more places you can see! And do you know what happens when you can see a place but you don't know where the bridge is?" (Vol. I, 90). Beatie demonstrates the power of language to actualize through self-expression, but she also seem to be suggesting self-promotion through language. Using the character of Beatie, Wesker is suggesting that social reform is possible through the betterment of each individual. Barker, on the other hand, argued that through a greater sense of community and an outlet for expression, the working classes could become the dominant culture, rendering useless any need for social advancement.

But Wesker disagreed with Barker on the importance of popular culture. If the arts offer education and, through education, self-determination and freer social interaction, then their contribution was sufficient. It is the fine arts which assert those truths that resist tyranny, and the

lesser forms--like those in popular culture--are wanting in this regard. In Wesker's estimation, only the fine arts are capable of shaping a man's "sensibilities and hence his humanity" and of allowing man to realize that his humanity "needs to be shaped" (Fears of Fragmentation 66).

Wesker did not oppose popular culture altogether. When performed by professionals, certain popular entertainment was acceptable but Wesker was deeply suspicious of some forms. He once said, for example, that he was sometimes "paralysed" by pop music because "The act of defiance that pop culture carries has become so desperate that it has become an act of cowardice" (Fears of Fragmentation 68). Wesker did not accept popular forms in drama and could not understand why so much was made of them when the larger stakes of production seemed a more important question. Ultimately, he did not understand that the debate over forms was a battle that was a part of the whole process of changing the culture and was a necessary factor in shaping relations between playwright and audience.

Barker and Wesker exchanged opinions on this point in a 1964 issue of Views (Spring). Wesker was making the case once more for excellence in entertainment, suggesting that art will have an impact only when "a civilisation 'sings' through its artists" (his emphasis, 45). As a way of denigrating amateurs in the arts he wrote, "As therapy, art

can involve people with no talent as participants for their own private reasons and benefits; art as an experience should be exposed only to the most professional work" (44). He meant, of course, that the recreational arts are all right for amateurs, but the serious arts are best left to the professionals. Barker questioned him closely in a follow-up at the end of the article:

> Your two categories of Art as therapy and as experience seem to split society into artist and audience. But couldn't it be argued that such a split would tend to re-inforce the passive consumer roles which capitalist society requires people to take up? (47)

Wesker's answer deflected the political implications of the question, by directing Barker to consider the possibilities of opening up the human potential through education and through an exposure to new art experiences. For Wesker, any education gained through the arts is power, a key to self-determination, to more open social interactions, and to a resistance of oppression. He told Barker:

> Neither do I talk about lessons in schools on the "appreciation of the arts". I'm talking about the need to acknowledge that the artist's work is a battlefield where ideas are fought and values affirmed...One isn't asking for an educational system that states a preference for the writings of one man rather than another, one is simply asking that differences be acknowledged so that growing generations know that a choice of values can be made, and such a choice cannot be made unless the language of art is taught. (47)

Using similar arguments, Wesker opposed amateur performances in the Festivals because they took something away from the

professionals and because he believed the professionals more capable of educating the public.

Debates like these between Wesker and Barker register radically opposing approaches to working class and political drama. Although both men had the backgrounds for understanding the nature of the working-class community, they drew their conclusions from different perspectives. Wesker viewed his working-class neighbors and their educational backgrounds from a greater distance, a position he had developed while growing up in London's East End among books and among family members who conferred on him an appreciation of fine arts. And Barker, watching the break-up of his own community and others in post-war Britain, wanted to restore and preserve the popular expression that was once identified with that community. Barker believed that theater could offer more than a nostalgic gesture to the past by offering itself as a vehicle to local expression, and doing so, forestalling the disintegration of the communal life.

Opposition between directors--more than a lack of organization--may account for much of Centre 42's internal problems. What seemed like disorganization to critics outside of Centre 42 may have been the release of energies by polarized forces. They agreed on the more abstract issues of localized language, rights of artists, ownership of production, and the villainy of government funding, in

short on revolutionary social reform through the arts. Where they disagreed so fundamentally was in their judgment of the working-class potential and in their definition of the function of working-class art. Differences between Arnold Wesker and Clive Barker were profound. Nevertheless, the Centre 42 movement might have been able to accommodate all points of view if the funding were generous enough to allow each director to develop his own ideas for Centre 42, that is, if there had been enough money for both the Round House and the festivals. Without subsidy they were forced, finally, to surrender their holdings to commercial interests.

To this day, both Barker and Wesker have mixed feelings about the movement they rode to the finish. Barker wrote in a letter on 29 June 1985:

> In more than one way, Centre 42 could not have 'worked'. In the form in which it was envisaged it was already 15 years too late. Centre 42 should have been started in 1945. It is a valid criticism that we were trying to put the clock back to another time. We also did not know nearly enough about the historical precedents. We knew little or nothing about the French turn-of-the century popular theatre movement, the Volksbuhne, that had been tried in Britain between the wars. Had we known this, we might never have been foolhardy enough to have gone ahead.

Even so, Barker recognized that Centre 42 contributed significantly to the future of alternative theater in Britain. The movement laid the groundwork for a public

debate on the importance of arts for the working classes in Britain. More than that, it forced a discussion on public funding for alternative theater. In the same letter Barker acknowledged some of the gains made by the Centre 42 movement:

> For a start, some of us gained a valuable education in cultural politics. Then, the publicity surrounding the project materially changed the debate on the arts and society. Many people with smaller projects and ideas who were struggling to survive and to articulate their policy were encouraged to come out into the open and to join with the debate on local terms. There is a sense in which the grass-roots movement, which I wanted to develop, was already on the way and Centre 42 was the blockbuster that broke on to the front pages of the newspapers and laid the ground for validated other people's work. Whatever happened after, we also laid the ground for the large increase in public subsidy under Wilson's government. One can map out the betrayal of the principles and the pursuance of the form without the content in the later development of the Arts Council, but the fact remains that theatres were built and companies subsidised as a result of our efforts.

Barker was quite right. Not long after the expiration of Centre 42, the British Arts Council and many municipal councils,including the Greater London Council (GLC) began budgeting more money for alternative theater. Documenting the growth of alternative theater in Britain, Catherine Itzin counted only about a half dozen alternative theaters in 1968, but by 1978 more than a hundred. In 1968 Britain had only 34 arts centers. By 1978, that number had increased to more than 140. In addition, there were, in 1978, at least 200 small touring venues in London and the

regions and at least 250 playwrights who were considered part of alternative theater. Just a handful of such playwrights could be identified in 1968 (Stages in the Revolution xiv). Itzin, too, credited Centre 42 for its role in forcing increased government participation.

Few, however, have acknowledged contributions made by Centre 42 in changing the direction and function of committed theater, for demanding protection for artists from commercial interests and in seeking out nontraditional audiences. Then too, few have recognized the demands that Centre 42 put on the trade unions, widening their function and involving them in the life of the community. Perhaps Centre 42 failed to some extent in each of these attempts, but it was also revolutionary in the attempt.

Barker sees each of these achievements and the influence which Centre 42 was to have on the political theater which followed. Again, in the June 1985 letter he summarized the movement's shortcomings and sphere of influence, particularly on writers like John McGrath:

> Lessons were learned. In being the first major project, Centre 42 was both after its time and before. the social development which it sought to arrest had gone beyond the point of no return. On the other hand, the artists who ought to have taken advantage of the opportunities offered by Centre 42 were largely not yet to be seen. We ended up, by default, in taking the best of the existing art forms to a wider and more democratically based audience. But the work we offered was all too often shaped by the dominant middle-class modes and was conceived too rigidly

> in terms of performance for an audience. Doubtless, given time, we might have encouraged new audiences and developed new ways of working. We didn't, but others did. If McGrath takes issue with Arnold, he nevertheless had not formulated his own ideas at that stage. Later he came up with alternatives, after Centre 42 spurred him to do this. My own later work is conditioned by Centre 42 and the need to find participatory forms of work (in which the session I led in the first Wellingborough festival opened up new avenues).

Barker suggests that Centre 42, while successful in ways not yet fully appreciated, had served its purpose as an experiment, but the time had come to test those ideas in other forms. Barker moved on to work with Ed Berman in Interaction, a project that took much of its direction from the lessons Barker learned at Centre 42. Wesker was invited to join them, but he declined. He had had enough of committee work and preferred to return to play writing. Centre 42 closed its doors 31 October 1970. McGrath's theater company, the 7:84, began touring a few months later in 1971.

NOTES

1. Clive Barker estimates that less than 3% of the audiences of the sixties were from the working class.

2. The Gulbenkian Foundation continued to fund Centre 42 with later donations of £10,000 and £6,000.

CHAPTER FOUR

Until the founding of 7:84 in 1971, John McGrath took his time to learn the trade. After his initial successes at the Edinburgh Festival and the Royal Court Theatre in 1958, he worked at a number of jobs which educated him to complexities of theater. He continued for a short while as a reader of new plays for the Court. Then in 1960 he co-authored a pilot series for television with Dudley Moore who wrote the music, and he collaborated with Moore again in 1963 on Basement in Bankok. In 1961-62 he toured England with Mike Horowitz' New Departures with one night stands of Ionesco, Becket, and some of his own plays (Mitchell 12).

McGrath joined the script department of BBC in 1964-65, writing and directing a show he co-founded with Troy Kennedy Martin, Z Cars. It was based on the American Highway Patrol television format, but written as a documentary based on the lives of the people in two small British communities. The point of the series was to focus on the realities of working-class life. The series was so popular, however, thatthe policemen eventually became the center of attention and when that happened, McGrath left the show (O'Toole).

But he did not leave television altogether. In those early days the television industry had a looser administrative structure which allowed for a certain amount

of "anarchy," as McGrath called it. The writers, designers, technical managers, and cameramen, directors were given certain license to break out of worn, old practices inherited from the theater industry.

Working on Diary of a Young Man, McGrath and his colleagues seized the opportunity to break out of the conventions of naturalism. Doing so, he attacked naturalism as a dramatic form which represents human relationships out of context by dealing primarily with isolated verbal relationships in a realistic style. He wrote:

> Naturalism contains everything within a closed system of relationships. Every statement is mediated through the situation of the character speaking. Mediated to the point of triviality. It is a way of not saying anything, of indicating that everything is tangential, and the relative to its own milieu. In terms of presenting a picture of society it can only reveal a small cluster of subjective consciousnesses, rarely anything more. Naturalism, of course, can and does achieve a great deal. But as a form, it imposes a certain neutrality about life on the writer, the actor and the audience...It encapsulates the status quo, ossifies the dynamics of society into a moment of perception,crystallises the realities of existence into a paradigm, but excludes what it refers to. ("TV Drama: The Case Against Naturalism" 101-102).

In an effort to de-emphasize the personal relationships of television drama which inevitably dominate larger social issues, Jimmy MacTaggart, Troy Kennedy Martin, and John McGrath tried to avoid camera work which would highlight dialog between two characters using two-shot and three-shot formulas. They avoided, first of all, moving the camera

until the plot required it, sometimes holding the camera in place to the end of a scene. They also attempted to break away from other cliches of camera work like the use of close-ups to involve the viewer emotionally in a character's situation and began to exploit the natural "objectivity" of the camera; that is, the way in which the television's image reduces "empathy in the viewer to the point where one is looking _at_ the screen, not being drawn into it" (McGrath, "TV Drama: The Case Against Naturalism" 102). McGrath was later to combine these techniques with Brechtian drama to develop his own forms for a working-class theater.

Additionally they experimented with devices to free the plot structure from natural time so that play time did not match TV audience time. McGrath in particular was also interested in experimenting with Brecht's alienating effects which might force even greater distancing and allow them to tell their story with minimum suggestion. He was attracted to the potential of the barest suggestion of scenery, like the use of a soundtrack and lighting to establish the sense of a forest, or the use of cartoons as a way of moving the plot along quickly, an idea he borrowed from _Tickets to Trieste_, an in-studio production starring Michael Caine.

In a later show, _The Adventures of Frank_ (based on a 1978 play, _The Life and Times of Joe of England_), McGrath tried to achieve other alienating effects by exploring the

use of Quantel, an electronic machine which could change a television image by turning it upside down, riffling it like pages in a book, distorting it into different shapes, and achieving unusual juxtaposition (Craig, "Have Story, Need Quantel!" 18). What McGrath wanted was to challenge his audiences to look beyond the surface images for the assumed values which permit those images.

Despite a valuable opportunity to try out new ideas, McGrath was never fully comfortable with television as a medium, partly because it lacked the sensuality of the large cinematic screen, and partly because he felt uncomfortable with the way in which "the television image is conditioned by all the other images that have preceded it" ("TV Drama" 102). Because each scene has meaning only in the established context, McGrath found the images of television drama ponderously slow-moving and inauthentic. There is certainly little in its deliberate rhythms which might serve McGrath's idea that theater must be fast-paced to activate working-class audiences. Indeed, he grew to believe that without the sensuality of the movie theater or the dynamic pace of legitimate theater, television offers little more satisfaction than one would get after staring at any other piece of furniture (102).

He left television finally when he decided that the medium reduced every idea to a valueless meaning. He once said, "I had to stop working in the BBC completely. I did

nothing for a year. I suppose when you're working in television you're feeding this great monster all the time and you get a kind of acquisitive mentality, constantly looking for something to put into the monster, which I recognised fortunately quite early on and stopped. It took a year to rinse that stuff out of my head and at the end of the year I wrote The Bofors Gun" (O'Toole). In addition to other objections, McGrath had grown disillusioned with the medium's bureaucracy and increased requirements for pretaping which ruled out the immediacy of live programming. The layers of centralized control--directors, producers, script editors, heads of plays, heads of series and the head of whatever with the small notepad--were cutting, altering and rejecting too many ideas before they had a chance for transmission. It had not always been that way, but television had become too institutionalized for John McGrath.

Meanwhile, he was also writing screenplays for Ken Russell, Fred Zinneman, and others. His films include Billion Dollar Brain (1967) and The Reckoning (1970) and at least two unmade films, Seven Lean Years, a thriller written for Ken Russell, and an adaptation of Man's Fate. McGrath spent eight months writing Man's Fate for Fred Zinneman and three years off and on negotiating for permission to produce it. For political reasons the film was never made.

Similarly disappointing was Ken Russell's unfinished project, Voss, an adaptation of a novel by Patrick White which McGrath admired.

In 1965, he returned to his writing for the theater. As a form, McGrath was more comfortable with film than he was with television. For one, he had considerable experience in the medium with productions of his plays, The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil (1974) and Blood Red Roses (1985), and with the writing or broadcasting of at least a dozen other productions. Secondly, he discovered some freedom from executive scrutiny once he founded his own film company. He has been nevertheless continually frustrated by the lack of money for films which go against the grain of the dominant culture. Many worthwhile cinematic projects are "desperately underfinanced, poorly acted, badly shot and put together" and are thereby "doomed to the ceneastical ghetto whose mentality encases it" (A Good Night Out 109). In a wishful mood, McGrath said of the film industry

> It would be nice to think of a British cinema which was answerable to its own audience, which explored the lives, the experiences, the rich imaginations, the mythologies, the history of the British people, which can grow from those roots to whatever heights its makers can take audiences up to. It may appear like arrant chauvinism, but I don't think British films will ever be any good, or even exist at all, unless they can be made with both eyes fixed on a Britishaudience. (A Good Night Out 110)

After some exploration with the television and film industries, McGrath returned to live theater, taking with

him all that he had learned in television to search out the form that might reach British working-class audiences. Much of McGrath's major work at that time--Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun (1966), Random Happenings in the Hebrides (1970), and Bakke's Night of Fame (1972),--falls short of the results he envisioned. In each, McGrath made some attempt to try out new styles, but the form remain largely naturalistic.

At the time, he could not predict the techniques which he would develop after his exposure to revolutionary leader Jean-Jacques Lebel whom he met during the Paris demonstrations of 1968. McGrath met Lebel after he crossed the Channel with an old Chevrolet convertible and savoured days of political turmoil driving around Paris with Lebel who introduced him to Trotskists, Maoists, and "a healthy combination of anarchists" (Van Erven, 117). Those months were a turning point for McGrath not only because he experienced minds much more radical than his own, forcing him to define himself politically, but also because Lebel's activities made him understand what he should be willing to undertake in political theatre. McGrath explains:

> ...Jean-Jacques Lebel literally created barricades and scenes of confrontation and it was--though it sound denigratory to say it--a form of theatre. The nightly confrontations with the CRS made one suddenly realise the tremendous dramatic impact of this. That is not to say it wasn't serious; it was immensely serious. But in Paris the street battles were theatre in the

> sense that they were more than themselves. There were 10 million people on strike throughout France. These battles were vital expressions of a total situation. Revolution cannot be reduced to theatre; but at times like these theatre can aspire to express revolution. The strength of these confrontations was the mobilisation of the workers in the factories. In the absence of such mobilisation, such actions become opportunistic charades. ("Power to the Imagination:" 14)

Particularly significant was Lebel's taking of the Odeon Theatre, an event McGrath considered hardly possible to replicate in England (14). He realized for the first time that, without experience and leadership, British radicals did not have the imagination to take to the streets. He suggested that socialist theater might supply the force that "will take people's vision beyond the constrictions both of Marxist and consumer-society ideologies" ("Power to the Imagination" (15).

After those months in Paris, McGrath set two goals: to outline a political agenda which had clearly defined revolutionary principles (as opposed to generally socialistic practices) and to find a theatrical form which could convey that message so effectively that his audience would recognize the need for social reform and realize the means for achieving it.

What he sought was a popular form like that which Brecht defined in his debate with Lukacs on the function of popular culture:

> Popular means: intelligible to the broad masses, adopting and enriching their forms of

> expression/assuming their standpoint, confirming and correcting it/representing the most progressive section of the people so that it can assume leadership, and therefore intelligible to other sections of the people as well/relating to traditions and developing them/communicating to that portion of the people which strives for leadership the achievements of the section that at present rules the nation (A Good Night Out 63).

Although McGrath's definition for popularism is broader than that conceived by Clive Barker for Centre 42, many of the same elements are there--the popular appeal to the working classes, the outlet for local self-expression, and the use of traditional voices. McGrath, however, was also interested in providing moral leadership through theater with a dialectal approach, challenging audiences to understand their relationship to bourgeois culture and their position in the social order. Like Brecht, McGrath's concept of popular theater encouraged audiences not only to participate in "historical development but actively usurp it, force its pace, determine its direction" (A Good Night Out 63). He did not refine his strategies for working-class entertainment, however, until he had formed and toured with his own theater company which allowed him to experiment with the forms that best achieved his goals.

John McGrath founded 7:84 in 1971 with his wife Liz MacLennan, his brother-in-law Dave MacLennan, and with the help of some friends--Victor Henry, Gillian Hanna, Feri Lean, Sandy Craig, Gavin Richards, Tony Haygarth, Stephen Rea, Roger Sloman, Vari Sylvester, Shane Connaughton,

Deborah Norton, Tamara Hinchco, Peter Sproule, John Joyce, Paul Kessel and others. Their purpose was--like that of Centre 42--to find an alternative to commercial theater which reached out to the working classes. But more than that, they wanted to create oppositional theater. The goals which McGrath layed out for his play, Fish in the Sea, also articulate the company's goals as a whole:

> The main elements I wanted to set in some form of dialectical motion were the need for militant organisation by the working class; the anarchistic anti-organisational violence of the frustrated working-class individual in search of self-fulfillment here and now; the backwardness of some elements of working-class living; attitudes to women, to socialist theory, the sexual oppression, poetry, myth, etc; the connections between this backwardness and Christianity; the shallow optimism of the demagogic left, self-appointed leaders of the working class and the intimate realities of growing up and living in a working-class home....(Introduction)

In short, they hoped to illustrate those social relationships which destroy the quality of working-class life and their ultimate purpose was to inspire radical social reformation. They chose a trademark that marks the fact that roughly seven percent of the population own 84 percent of the wealth, a visual reminder of social inequity demanding radical reform. Unlike the Centre 42 movement which hoped to effect gradual change through a partnership with the trade union movement--and their name reminds us of their identification with the TUC Resolution 42--7:84's name

keeps in view the need for a more basic overhaul of the system.

Learning from what they perceived as the mistakes of Centre 42, McGrath decided to avoid commitment to a building, opting instead to tour small communities as cultural agitators. The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil was the first play they toured in 1973, It was performed initially at an Edinburgh conference and then taken on tour for six weeks through England, Wales and Scotland with a small grant from the British Arts Council. Their home base was McGrath's living room and everyone, at first, earned the same £28 a week wage. An egalitarian arrangement worked in the beginning, but it has evolved into a company in which those members who contribute the most to 7:84 earn the most. McGrath prefers a communal-like management structure, but he has found over the years that actors raised in a capitalist society have come to expect a hierarchical structure and have little understanding how to use communal techniques like group critiques (Mortimer Interview, Part I).

A lack of steady funding has also been a significant problem. As it has developed--for better or for worse--7:84 was forced by economic circumstances to experiment with various organizational structures. At the end of their first tour in 1971, most of the company had to find other work because 7:84 had no foreseeable income. This continued to

be a problem until 1975 when the British Arts Council finally provided a grant sufficient for hiring actors over the entire year. When 7:84 could not guarantee wages and other companies could, many of the cast were hired away. Their biggest problem lay in maintaining a core of committed and involved members. With each new casting, 7:84 had to reeducate his staff to the founding principles of 7:84. McGrath's ideal company would be an army of performers who understood the necessity for a socialist change, and who could in turn enlist the audience in their common cause. As McGrath said, "To make an intervention you need consistency of purpose and identity and a growing relationship with the audience" ("Theory and Practice of Political Theatre" 48).

To that purpose, McGrath liked rehearsals to begin with a half-hour discussion. During rehearsals for Fish in the Sea, for example, they began these sessions with a discussion of Mao's essay on collectives. McGrath also liked to hold regular company meetings during productions for members to share material which they had collected while researching ideas for the play. In Lay Off (1975), for example, they researched nationals and multi-nationals; in The Cheviot, the Stag, the Black, Black Oil, they researched the holdings of the wealthy Scottish landowners. With each new cast, the company inevitably lost momentum and turnovers in staffing have cost them grants and used up precious

rehearsal time. Novitiates have also been a concern when they could not work with the 7:84 philosophy. Problems have arisen sometimes with middle-class actors who romanticized the working-class condition, but little understand the involvement and personal commitment it took to change that condition, and other problems have arisen with working-class actors who, feeling little social commitment, use the profession as an escape from a working-class profession.

Throughout the years, therefore, a large number of writers, directors, and actors have signed on and left, and some have even returned. Disputes within 7:84 are well known among the touring companies, particularly when factions have broken away to form new companies. Belt and Braces, Monstrous Regiment, Project Theatre (Dublin), and Wildcat were all formed by departures from 7:84--some amicable and some less so. Belt and Braces, for example, was directed by a one-time director of 7:84, Gavin Richards, who has maintained his independence from 7:84 yet retains close ties; and Wildcat was founded by David MacLennan, McGrath's brother-in-law.

Many of the defections seemed to occur after long absences by McGrath, an indication that stronger leadership might have been required to settle disputes. But he has often been loathe to step into conflict, and sometimes he has walked away altogether. Generally he feels he has too little time to do all that a small company requires. Unlike

Centre 42 which was plagued with the problems of opposing directors who divided the company's purposes, 7:84 has had the problem of an artistic director whose time has been divided between the two (English and Scottish) companies. And yet, McGrath has also been accused of having taken too much control, particularly over other writers who have worked with 7:84 (Mortimer interview, Part I 26). Whatever the case, 7:84 has used the talents of many of the best socialist writers--David Edgar, Steve Gooch, Richard Eyre, and John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy. After some trial and error the management structure has evolved from the time when decisions were taken by an equal vote of all the company members on tour to a hierarchical structure in which McGrath as director and writer makes most of the major decisions on advisement from his senior staff members. After McGrath decided that democracy actually crushed individualism, each new idea being diluted by a variety of suggestions for changes, he has asserted more authority in his position as Artistic Director and has delegated authority to a few others. But that decision came only after his near resignation and after deliberation. The concept violates Mao's teachings which warn against small business owners that are "blind to the strength of the collective" (Boom Introduction 9).

Ironically, it was the British Arts Council which

prevented McGrath's departure when they threatened to withdraw their funding if he,in fact, resigned. They recognized his leadership as crucial to the stability of the company because without his guidance, his deep social commitment, and his vision, 7:84 would not have continued.[1] McGrath nevertheless regrets his role as a director in a structure which treats the actor as a commodity. Given the funding structure, management problems, and the pressures of touring, McGrath feels he has little choice about his treatment of the actor in 7:84. One incentive for his remaining with the company has to be a belief that--if he could alter traditional relationships between stage and audience--he could effect radical social change and eventually that might enable a different structure within the company.

During the first 7:84 tour in 1971, McGrath simply observed audiences for six weeks. The company's circuit in the first year included conventional venues for touring companies--arts centers, universities, the Everyman Theatre in Liverpool--after which McGrath and company decided they would like to reach beyond the middle-class audiences they were attracting in those venues. They then began to look around for places which the working classes would find familiar-- pubs, union halls, village halls, and working-class clubs. They also relied more on the "bush-telegraph" than expensive advertising (Barker interview).

Since 1971, they have been exploring innovative techniques of presentation which would break down the traditional gap between actor and audience. They based their explorations on a few basic premises: if reform is to occur, it is the working classes which will precipitate it; the target audience should, therefore, be primarily from the working classes; if spectators are to be mobilized, they must be thoroughly involved during the play; and involvement will be most effective when the play is an expression of the spectators' own needs for change.

To achieve their goals, McGrath employed in his writing and direction a number of devices to encourage direct contact with the audience. In a 1971 production, Trees in the Wind, for example, he used "simultaneous actions," musical interruptions in the naturalistic framework during which the actors on three different stages surrounding the seats stepped out of their parts to speak directly to the audience, breaking down the barrier of the fourth wall. In Unruly Elements, a 1972 production, actors used a style of "heightened naturalism" in which they simply spoke more deliberately for "more directness or articulancy than one normally expects such a person in such a situation to have" (Barker interview 10). With each new play that McGrath wrote, the interactions between stage and audience grew more informal. In later productions, like The Cheviot, the Stag,

and the Black, Black Oil and Baby and the Bathwater (1984-85), McGrath dropped the naturalistic forms almost entirely and replaced them with stand up comedy routines and "epic style acting," which is described by Liz MacLennan as a gesture that is "larger than life, but fiercely true to it" ("The State of Alternative Theatre Today" 2). The epic style of acting, based on Brechtian technique, will be discussed at greater length in the next chapter.

7:84 continued to experiment with stage-audience interaction. Sometimes they were able to break down barriers by inviting people to join them on the stage and by talking with the audiences at the end of the show. Sometimes they deliberately destroyed the mystique of the stage by referring to each other by their everyday names. After the The Cheviot, they made a regular habit of asking the audiences to join them for singing, dancing, and drinking after the close of the show; often the revelry would last into the early morning hours. In the small towns they often lodged in homes and met people in pubs before and after performances, which afforded them a more intimate contact. Efforts to reach audiences were often tiring, but personal contact, they felt, was one important difference between middle-class, institutionalized entertainment and the new form they were trying to establish, a form that would not only be popular with its audiences, but would also include their reality. Liz MacLennan explained this in an

interview with Clive Barker:

> Speaking as an actress I suppose it was a question of alienation that drove me out of the more commercial channels in the sense that working in the conventional theatre your contact with the audience is on a very limited scale in the sense that you are the mouthpiece of the play for that evening and the audience see you as an actor acting well or acting badly and you certainly have no way of talking to them outside of this role. They sit on one side of the theatre or the room and you sit on the other and they come in a separate door and you come in the back door and at the end of the play they go away and they've been impressed or they've not been impressed. Working in this kind of theatre [ie. 7:84] I felt that one would be able to make a part of a statement which would carry not only the weight of your artistic experience, but also the weight of your political beliefs and one must try and do this. (7)

Response to these strategies among working-class audiences has been generally enthusiastic, largely because the actors may be known as ordinary people. Out of popular demand for more performances of The Cheviot, 7:84 even had to arrange a second tour.

After years of trying to satisfy the needs of working-class audiences McGrath has found most powerful a combination of Brechtian techniques and intimate audience involvement. And he has found that a clear, directly stated message is more effective than subtle innuendo and oblique reference, "the working-class audiences have minds of their own and they like to hear what your mind is" (A Good Night Out 54). They prefer forms which avoid metaphor and other elaborate literary structures which bury meaning. For this

reason, some of McGrath's experimental work like the Trembling Giant (1977) with cartoon-like figures have been less successful than his works which establish a straightforward message. He also felt that message more meaningful if it were delivered in a variety show format of music, comedy and dialogue. Most effective appear to be the plays which draw on traditional popular forms that once combined jugglers, musicians, bingo, strip-tease, wrestling and music (A Good Night Out, 53-59). Moreover, McGrath has discovered that the plots for working-class theater require more "moment-by-moment effect," meaning more turns in the action. And often he finds that the effect is best enhanced by heavy doses of emotion, particularly sentimentality. Plays with a slow build-up, little action, a reserve of emotion, and long-winded dialogues are, without a doubt, better suited to middle-class audiences A Good Night Out, 57).

Finally, unlike middle-class audiences who identify themselves to a larger extent with a cosmopolitan or international community, working-class audiences respond to localism, that is, characters who use the local dialect or special references with jokes and historical context to local events and subcultures. McGrath's plays for the north draw heavily on Scottish nationalism, folksongs, local humor, and local expression. Performed by 7:84 Scotland,

Joe's Drum (1979) is about a popular uprising in Scotland, and Big Square Fields (1979)--a 7:84 England production--is about land enclosures in England.

McGrath is careful when employing these strategies, however, because the worst of working-class theater is mawkish when sentiment is overdone, simplistic when the concept of directness is misunderstood, sexist and racist when the comedy is in poor taste, manipulative when emotional, and cheap entertainment can obscure judgment (A Good Night Out 59-60). What McGrath hoped to develop is a form which neither panders to working-class understanding of ideas (a kind of "tailism") nor fails to take moral leadership in criticizing working-class values. In this sense also, McGrath and Wesker could find grounds for agreement. In short, McGrath feels he can establish standards for working-class art forms without resorting to bourgeois tastes, and more than that, without creating artificial distinctions between the popular culture and bourgeois art forms.

Although he has come to expect unfavorable reviews written by middle-class journalists misunderstanding working-class theater (cf. Itzin's "Alternative Theatre in the Mainstream" as one example), McGrath was surprised by fellow playwright David Edgar's article that advances the argument that working-class forms are not possible. Edgar's position was all the more a surprise because he had worked

with 7:84 England in 1977 when the company performed his play, Wreckers, and it would seem his exposure to the goals of 7:84 had not changed his opinion that working-class drama necessitated its own conventions. Edgar stated in a 1979 lecture, delivered not long after the close of his 7:84 tour (and later published in the Theatre Quarterly) that he was skeptical about the efficacy of political theater.

Edgar doubted, first of all, the feasibility of creating a revolutionary movement through theater alone. He also disputed the claim that socialist theater would ever be successful in organizing a mass movement. Edgar concluded--as Wesker had also done in a 1971 letter to McGrath--that very little more could be done by theater groups to accomplish significant social changes until the workers themselves were better prepared for revolution: "In the absence of mass organizations of advanced workers, it is no surprise that theatre groups have found it impossible to relate in any consistent way to them. The organizational form--even the geographical spaces in which to appear--are just not present" ("Ten Years of Political Theatre" 28).

Furthermore, Edgar asserted the failure of the revolutionary left to develop a new theory of aesthetics to carry the message:

> It seems clear to me that, in the same way that the absence of mass revolutionary organizations has prevented the building of a dialectical relationship between socialist theatre and

> class, the absence of a consequent mass revolutionary culture has obviated the growth of new theatrical forms. And in the same way that the lack of mass movement forces theatre groups into the arms of bureaucratic organization, so the lack of a revolutionary culture forces them to relate to reactionary forms. (29)

Brecht's work, Edgar argued, while effective in its day needed to lead to new forms, forms that recognize theater's influence lies in a slow and deep penetration of the community's consciousness. But, he emphasized, the process takes time. To change the minds of those who presently accept capitalism without question, theater needs a form which exposes those truths that lie below the appearances, a form which would expose the social and political forces that affect human interaction.

Edgar took this gradualist stance after working nearly a decade with political theater. His background combined the political philosophy of Marcuse, the counter culture of the sixties, and an apprenticeship with The General Will theater group in the early seventies which gave him some experience with the various forms of political theater. Furthermore, he believed agitprop, once superior to naturalism or realism[3] as a dramatic structure depicting political realities, had been rendered inadequate by a recent emphasis in leftist theater on entertainment over education. Edgar added that agitprop's techniques were "incapable of dealing with questions of consciousness, precisely because they portray only the assumed objective

essence of a situation, rather than the dynamic between how people subjectively perceive that situation and the underlying reality" (29). Theater for contemporary audiences, essentially the educated bourgeois, demanded a combined form that not only accounted for invisible truths, but also included well-developed, three-dimensional characterizations which more fully portray the way people operate and their motivations.

The new form should, moreover, be disruptive and shocking like Brechtian theater, but should be more accessible than most Brechtian theater. He wrote, "What is obviously needed is a way of transforming the techniques that have been developed in metropolitan theatres into forms that are formally and geographically accessible to audiences directly involved in struggle against exploitation and oppression" (32). In the absence of a mass revolution, however, playwrights should assess realistically what they were able to accomplish and what their strategies should be to meet those ends. With the appropriate forms, Edgar argued, alternative theater should be able to educate audiences effectively to the gap between a genuine crisis in the present system of government in Britain and the response of Britons to that crisis.

In his attack, Edgar implied that alternative theater companies like the 7:84 had indulged in an illusion which

failed to admit the actual composition of their audiences, the realities of social revolution, and the obsolescence of their work. Edgar concluded, in effect, that political theater should abandon its aim of playing to working-class audiences, who were more attracted to other forms of entertainment, and should concentrate its efforts on targeting a ready-made clientele, the bourgeois intellectual.

John McGrath's response to Edgar's essay was clearly that of anger and disappointment. He answered Edgar first in a scribbled postscript to a 1979 Theatre Quarterly article "The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre," in which he objected to Edgar's "indifference to the development of working-class culture, and an attempt to substitute an inept variety of high culture with a low one" (54). He took exception to Edgar's proposal for "deserting the working class and settling down to experimenting with 'the upending of received forms' for the cosmopolitan cultural elite..." (54). Later he accused Edgar of an "attitude that comes from a profound but automatic elitism, and is usually coupled with ignorance of the complexity of the nature of popular culture, and lack of experience of it" (A Good Night Out 63).

McGrath was outraged because he had spent two decades of work in political theater and half that time, at least, identifying the features of working-class entertainment, and

he was disappointed that Edgar would undervalue his work, would too readily dismiss it. Even more, he was surprised that Edgar had failed to mention 7:84's innovative use of local, popular forms like the Ceilidh [4] in Scotland, the noson llawen in Wales, the Talent Night in a Dorset pub, a fiddle band in the Shetlands while discussing the development of popular forms. Indeed, Edgar had recognized their use of the folk form, but he had referred to such forms as "atrophied" (A Good Night Out 33), somewhat surprising a judgment as 7:84 seems to be making a valuable contribution to the Unity tradition of political, working-class theater where popular forms were valued, but never thoroughly explored.

Unfortunately, McGrath's contributions to British theater are rarely given the full credit they deserve. Edgar's judgment is not uncommon for critics with middle-class readerships. One example might be Benedict Nightingale, critic for the New Statesman for more than twenty years, who confessed after reviewing his own treatment of McGrath's works that he has perhaps been too harsh in his evaluations of 7:84 productions (Dornan Interview). Casual disregard by London's critics has been particularly problematic when 7:84 has needed recognition for its ground-breaking work in the board rooms of the British Arts Council, a government body uninfluenced by the

thousands in the Highlands who have attended 7:84 productions.

Like Centre 42 which preceded it, 7:84 is annual subjected to the scrutiny of its operations by a public that is skeptical of its politics and ignorant of its contribution to British theater. Their distrust appears to be compounded by a political bias against the radical principles which inform much of working-class drama. In 1973, the company was scheduled, finally, to receive the Arts Council annual grant when they were suddenly taken to court for slanderous language in their production of The Bollygombeen Bequest written by Margaretta D'Arcy and John Arden. The story concerned evicted tenant farmers in Ireland and to that point, 7:84 had handed out the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of absentee English landlords with the playbills. D'Arcy and Arden settled the suit out of court, even though they did not believe their play was libelous, and the judge would not allow the testimony of historians, sociologists, politicians, and journalists who gathered to speak on the historical oppression of Ireland. When informed that these were famous playwrights, the judge replied, "I've never heard of them. I have no pretensions to being called a man of culture!" (Itzin Stages 36).

Shortly following the court action which totally silenced Bollygombeen Bequest, McGrath was called into the Arts Council and was told that the play was offensive to

the Ministry of Defence because of its violent scenes which attacked the tactics of Provisional IRA and the British troops who were sent to Ireland. McGrath explained:

> His argument was, 'Well, the taxpayer is paying the Army, the military in Northern Ireland and surely it is contradictory for the taxpayer also to pay for us to undermine their work.' My argument was that, as far as I knew there was more than one taxpayer. If we could have, as a subsidy, a proportion of the money that the Army got, proportionate to the number of people that supported us, as opposed to the number of people that supported the Army, then we would be well funded. But that argument didn't get a lot of credence. (Mortimer Interview, PartI 13-14)

The Arts Council representative then told McGrath that 7:84 was not going to receive the annual grant as expected. McGrath has hesitated to call it censorship, but it has become a text-book case of clumsy suppression after 7:84 was made an example for all theater companies applying for financial support from the British government. Shortly after the threats of litigation subsided, 7:84 established two companies--7:84 Scotland and 7:84 England--which received funding fairly regularly from 1975 to 1984, when the Arts Council withdrew all support from 7:84 England.

Their first annual grant was in 1975. Up to that point 7:84 had been receiving subsidy on a play-by-play basis. Budgets with information about venues, potential revenue, and production costs had to be submitted months in advance for each play. Even then the company received less than they requested, so all the projections had to be modified to meet

the Arts Council allotment. Not permitted to carry over an excess from one play to the next, they had then to prove they had a loss. The process prevented any yearly planning and kept 7:84 under the authority of the British and Scottish Arts Council for approval of every play.

Despite inconveniences of the funding practices, the Arts Council grants have been crucial to the companies' operations. The value of the subsidy was never clearer than it was in 1984 when 7:84 England lost its funding. The company fought to retain their grant with an elaborate appeal and letters. In the appeal he suggested that the Arts Council had made a mistake by not placing the achievements of 7:84 England in the highest class. The English company had, first of all, won awards for the three preceding years: in 1981 they had won the Critics Choice at the Edinburgh Festival for <u>One Big Blow</u>, in 1982 they were awarded a Festival Fringe First for <u>Rejoice</u>, and in 1983 they had won the Critics Choice award and a first for <u>Spike in the First World War</u>, after which 7:84 took the play on a record-breaking tour. McGrath noted that the company had also participated in the Glasgow International Festivals, Mayfest twice, one of few companies invited to do so. Also included in their appeal to the Arts Council were more than fifty letters of support from trade unions like the Post Office Engineering Union (POEU), the Transport and General Workers'

Union, and the National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers, from actors and actresses like Glenda Jackson, from other socialist theater companies like Foco Novo, from the Universities of Warwick and New England (Australia), from the ex-mayor of Great Yarmouth as well as representatives of the BBC and the National Theatre ("Reasons for Not Terminating the Active Life of 7:84 Theatre Company England").

Through a catalog of awards and supporters McGrath was trying to prove "artistic standards," the criterion that the Arts Council uses in selecting award recipients. The concept of standards of excellence is so elusive that playwrights are forced to speculate about its meaning. Wesker has the old-fashioned idea that merit is recognizable in any form:

> I think what is meant by excellence is the excellence of the imagination, the excellence of the thought, and the excellence of the execution. And I think if an audiences is confronted with an empty space and six very fine performers performing without any props, that would be recognized as excellent if it were excellently done. I think that the objection is just against tatty productions--which hope they will get by because their hearts are in the right place, when very often one ends up with sloppy thinking and sloppy production (Griffiths, "Playwriting for the Seventies" 61).

More radical playwrights, however, believe that the Arts Council has set up the National Theatre with its hefty grants and a definition of excellence established by middle- or upper middle-class audiences which all must follow

regardless of their annual budget, audience needs or company aims. Others perceive a well entrenched group of judges who use tradition and convention as arbiters. As John Arden says, "... they tend on the whole--unless you've got an odd, eccentric Prime Minister--to appoint a series of people who fall within the standards already laid down by previous holders of the job" (Griffiths "Playwriting of the Seventies" 61). And, of course, many believe that the definition of excellence is stamped by the political bias of the Standards and Reassessments Committee at the Arts Council.

The struggle for a stable funding source has persisted to this day. After nearly two decades of vulnerability and a decade of the Thatcher government, 7:84's annual subsidy is once again in danger of being withdrawn. In 1989, the Scottish Arts Council plans to increase the company's grant by four percent to £135,000 (by contrast, the Scottish Opera will receive £3.2 million), but thereafter the company will have to apply for funding on a play-by-play basis. Citing management problems and variable quality of the work, Anna Stapleton of the SAC denied that the decision might have been politically motivated.

But the announcement came less than a year after the Arts Minister for the Thatcher government, Richard Luce, gave a speech loaded with innuendo. Ostensibly referring to

a new scheme of fiscal accountability for the arts, he chided the arts world to recognize that the "collectivist mentality of the 60s and 70s is out of date" (3), and that they must "accept the economic and political climate in which we now operate" (2). Particularly telling was the following paragraph:

> The business of the arts is to pursue excellence and enrich the human spirit. I believe in state funding for the arts for this purpose and I want to get that message across. But I need the help of the arts world to do so. That help is frankly not most effectively given by abusing the politicians who have to take the decisions. ("Richard Luce Sets the Scene for Government" 4)

Disconcerting is its threatening tone. Not only that, the passage is unsettling because of its joining of two seemingly disparate ideas--reward for excellence and the admonition against criticism. Luce appears to be speaking only of the funding process, but the deep structure of the statement signals a more serious message. Liz MacLennan's response to both the SAC announcement and Luce's speech is simply "We are stalked without mercy" (Letter, 22 May 88). The general fear at 7:84 was that the SAC was "using all the 'quality of work' arguments to disguise political hostility." In any case, the 7:84 plans to satisfy the SAC's requirements.

So knitted is the class structure to the funding of alternative theater in Britain that McGrath has categorized theater groups by the grants each group receives. The type

and size of the subsidy determines and is determined by the relationship of the theater group to the general mode of production, but is also dependent on the relationship of the group to commercial theater, the choice of the ruling classes. Thus, West End theater--including the Aldwych and perhaps the Royal Court--makes up the first sector. The largest subsidized groups--the National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company, and the main repertory theaters like the Crucible in Sheffield make up the second sector. And in the third sector are the alternative theaters and the touring companies, most of which are oppositional and playing to working-class audiences.

McGrath points out that his categories for theater correspond roughly to three categories drawn up by Raymond Williams describing the different economic sectors in Britain, each with its own mini-ideology and therefore, each with its own relationship to the economic base. The "dominant" sector of British theater, or that which exercises hegemony over the others, would be the National Theatre and those repertory theaters receiving large amounts of subsidy from the government. The "residual" element, or theater which has been held over from another period, would be most commercial West End theater with its nostalgic musicals and revivals or imitations of drawing-room comedy. The "emergent" element, or that theater which outlines new practices and new relationships, would be the fringe

theater and touring companies whose future is always uncertain, partly because future funding is always uncertain ("Theory and Practice of Political Theatre" 43-45). The structure of McGrath's categories reflect again the dominance of bourgeois tastes and accordingly a determination of "artistic standards" by the British Arts Council.

In answer to the complaints about class and political biases and to those who would object to their withdrawal of subsidy from certain theaters like 7:84 England, Sir William Rees-Mogg of the British Arts Council said that, since its formation in July, 1945 the Arts Council has been committed to public support without censorship. He quoted the Arts Council's first chairperson, Maynard Keynes, "...everyone, I fancy, recognises that the work of the artist in all its aspects, is of its nature, individual and free, undisciplined, unregimented, uncontrolled. The artist walks where the breath of the spirit blows him...The task of an official body is not to teach or to censor, but to give courage, confidence and opportunity..." (The Glory of the Garden, iii). And then to explain the Council's priorities he pointed out that one of their first commitments is to address the imbalance of monies to London by distributing more funds to the local authorities of each region. Making no apologies for the money given to the National Theatre,

however, he simply stated that the regions needed more. Rees-Mogg did not say how the regions would receive more, especially when he was forced to recognize a limited source of funding. Even so, in defense of their record for distribution of funds, he could have argued that the Council had doubled the number of its annual grants since 1950 and had encouraged hundreds of new theater projects.

They had, in fact, funded so many different applicants they had decided to revise their policies. Instead of offering small amounts to the many small groups who applied for the money, they had resolved as of 1984 to be more selective about its recipients. They based their formulas on several principles: improving the standard of quality in the arts, increasing funds to the regions, redressing historical imbalances which favored some art forms over others, matching locally raised funds. He seemed to be telling Britain's theater companies that political motivation played no part in their funding policies. But the debate does not end there.

Charles Marowitz, director of Open Space, spoke out frankly, "the establishment merely tolerates alternative theater" (Itzin, Stages 158). He was referring to the disparity between the percentage of the total allocation for drama which goes to the establishment theaters and that which is alloted the alternative theaters. In 1973, for example, sixty alternative theater companies divided

£250,000, half the £500,000 grant received by the National Theatre alone. In 1977/78 the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) received between them £4.2 million, £4.75 million went to theater buildings, and 33 touring companies had to divide £872,000 which amounted to less than £26.5 thousand each (Stages 158). Consequently, the British Arts Council funding--because it is unpredictable and seemingly arbitrary, and because it is the main source of income for most theater companies--has both encouraged new theater companies and has caused many of them to attenuate. Many theater companies have also failed, even though their staffs were generally willing to work for less than minimum wage, and even though their best known writers received surprisingly little compensation for their work. Wesker's income is a case in point.

Despite his continuing popularity around the world, particularly in Japan and Sweden, Wesker's average annual income, fluctuating between £9,000 and £24,000, is modest. Because he has had a play in production somewhere in the world every day since the early seventies, most of his money comes from abroad. For example, Wesker's income in 1970/71 was roughly:

	UK	ABROAD
Theatre	800	2,207
Amateurs	330	-
radio	67	500
Television	40	2,050

Publication Rights	800	1,130
	£2,037	£5,887

(Hayman, The Set Up 286)

To this day, writers for alternative theater who work outside of British theater can generally expect to earn more than their domestic counterparts, and those who work in mainstream theater can expect to earn more than those in alternative theater. These inequalities are largely the result of British Arts Council practices which favor artists at the three largest institutions and leave very little for anyone else.

Many British writers complain about these discrepancies and to other objectionable Arts Council policies as well--an apparent ideological bias, a lack of clear funding formulas, and unfair representation on the Drama Panel-- as problems which invite charges of censorship and repression in the arts (Griffiths, "The Drama Panel Game"). In the last two decades the Arts Council has altered its structure slightly by placing on the panel more socialist playwrights (McGrath served on the panel briefly), in an attempt to correct some of the problems, but few are satisfied with the results. Criticism of their disbursements comes from all sides: conservatives object to money that is given to any left-wing drama, believing that the national showcases should receive all the support; recipients are predictably dissatisfied by the allocation formulas; and the far left criticizes the entire scheme as a system of dependency which reduces left-

wing drama to pandering.

One of the most controversial critiques has come from a member of the socialist community, Bruce Birchall, who contends that increased Arts Council funding has raised the expectations of socialist theater companies to their own detriment. The net result, Birchall claims, has been a conditioning of its recipients.

In an unsigned 1977 article for Wedge, Birchall alleged that political theater groups have been spoiled by increases in equity wages which have more than doubled (from £18-£30 a week minimums in 1974 to a £38.50 minimum in 1977) since the Arts Council has raised its funding levels. Seduced by the comfort of higher wages and dreading the possibility of unemployment, subsidized actors have "begun to see themselves as professional 'theatre workers' like their Equity chums, whose skills they rather admired" (8) and have forgotten their original motives for being in theater. The "Invasion of the Grant-Snatchers" is the term Birchall gave to theater groups who have grown so concerned with bookings and subsidies that they have been altering scenes in plays and making other compromises to avoid offending potential donors. They even found themselves "defending the very establishment organisations they had set up their own companies to oppose. They did so without voicing so much as a teensy weensy remonstrative ideological critique to

justify what they were doing..."(8) In short, working-class theater companies have been corrupted by grant money--from the Arts Councils, private sources, or the Trade Unions-- to the point of being cut off from their intended audiences. He concluded that if socialist writers want reform, the Arts Council grants might have been more effectively spent producing leaflets, pamphlets, and newspapers.

Predictably, leftist theater companies and writers were offended by Birchall's allegations, but Birchall must have gathered some of his material from the dramatists themselves. Earlier that year Theatre Quarterly had sponsored a round robin discussion among fifteen leftist dramatists (including Arnold Wesker, Bruce Birchall, John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy, Caryl Churchill, David Edgar, Michlene Wandor, and Steve Gooch) which confirmed his worst fears. The group had begun by identifying the changes in political theater since the mid-sixties. Acknowledging the boom in professional opportunities over the preceding decade, Gooch then added:

> ...the greater the resources you're using in the theatre--the larger the sums of money involved--the less freedom you have. In other words, it's easy enough to be free and 'doing your own thing' when you're all on social security, or when you're working in a small place with a small number of people. But the more you try and work with bigger resources, the more your hands are tied administratively. And in the end, politically. (Griffiths, "Playwriting for the Seventies" 36)

Arden agreed with Gooch. He then regretted that few

playwrights took risks losing money with the same daring of the late George Devine at the Royal Court Theatre. And Michlene Wandor agreed with Arden generally, but then argued as a feminist writer that political writers are more likely to be cut off from subsidy. Wandor's remarks raised from the playwrights a litany of ways in which they felt inhibited by British patterns of patronage: the size of casts, the need to promote sensationalism, the public's preference for realism which discouraged experimentation, the need to pay actors who have learned to expect bourgeois wages, disinterest in certain subject matter (like feminism), and the lack of solidarity among the theater companies and writers. They blamed many of their problems on Arts Council requirements. The writers felt most oppressed by British Arts Council requirements for accountability: companies had to prove that they were reaching certain audiences and that their political positions were unsupported by other grant giving institutions.

At that same meeting Birchall reluctantly noted, "We have had political intellectuals and we have had political playwrights in the past, but the dominant culture has always tended to trivialize them, or to make them reformist if they become successful" (Griffiths, "Playwriting for the Seventies" 51). The dominant culture is felt nowhere more forceably than through the Arts Council funding. Faced with

the threats of subsidy cuts, theater groups had lost sight of their drive to effect the full influence of socialism.

For the most part McGrath might agree with Birchall's assessment, but would add that the crux of the problem lies not so much with theater companies that are willing to be appropriated by the system, but with the capitalism itself which is corrupting as it fractures social structures into haves and have-nots. McGrath understands that theater, by its definition as form of representation--representing the experience and history of the people--is more closely linked to social reality than other forms of art and is thereby more deeply affected by the myriad institutions of the capitalist system--parliament, civil service, education system, church, the media, the army, the police force--than most cultural work and activity. Even when theater functions as an art form that encourages emancipation from the whole of capitalism, contradictions are inevitable. One of the contradictions is that works created by the best socialist writers are consumed by a demand for their novelty and discarded. He wrote, "...good as these works may be, the process is not contributing to the creation of a new, genuinely oppositional theatre. They become 'product' and the process remains the same: they are in constant danger of being appropriated in production by the very ideology they set out to oppose" ("Theory and Practice of Political Theatre" 46).

As one element of social domination, the Arts Council has thus shaped modern British drama, particularly in political theater. Because of funding practices, company membership changes constantly and many companies have subsequently redefined their aims and objectives. Because of funding practices, plays are shaped by available resources, so they tend to use smaller casts and minimal scene changes. Because of funding practices, the content of alternative theatre, as well, seems to have been mediated through a false consciousness created by the condition of living under capitalism. Organization problems such as these lead one to believe that the counter-culture, produced by the dominant culture, also finds itself neutralized, reduced or incorporated by the hegemonic.

And yet, as Raymond Williams has pointed out in Marxism and Literature, it is virtually impossible for any dominant social structure to maintain a consistent hold on the cultural process. The finite but significant openness of many works of art produces breaks in the system through which a shift is recognized by forming and formative processes. The process is centered on institutions which appear to be fixed and present, but are moving, being constantly redefined by emerging ideologies. In literature the structure is particularly evident with the emergence of some new formation which begins to push aside literary

convention. Often linked to its antecedent, its appearance is not always noticed or identified, and yet it may exert pressure long before it attains classification or definition (132-134).

The breech in the dominant order often opens up by the individuality of the author which asserts itself out of the full range of human practice. It can be seen, for example, in the emergence of the politically committed writer where it surfaces out of the subjective content of art, arising out of "the subjective as distinct from the objective, experience from belief, feeling from thought, the immediate from the general, the personal from the social" (Marxism and Literature 129). Williams sees the personal impulse as an endless challenge to the ideological systems of seemingly absolute formations which are rendered relatively powerless by the challenge: "...no mode of production and therefore no dominant social order and therefore no dominant culture ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy and human intention" (125). For this reason art is not linked directly to the dominant mode of production. Even as an arm of the hegemonic body is embracing one form of theater, multiple possibilities for displacement are calling the relationship into question. But, as Williams points out, new vitality "depends crucially on finding new forms or adaptations of form" (126).

Each in its own way, Centre 42 and 7:84 have exerted

individualistic pressure on Britain's dominant mode of theater. As oppositional theater, Centre 42 demanded artistic freedom from commercial constraints, primarily by seizing their own means of production. They also established a theater for and by the working-classes, an idea that had been suggested by many up to that time, but had remained untested. Through experimental work in Centre 42, a modicum of independence was won for later theater companies through government funding, and working-class authors gained in respect through the institution which was later known as "fringe" theater. After the emergence of Centre 42, British political theatre created solely by individual initiative and personal commitment has achieved a more open climate, more democratic practices of management, and a higher standard of performance for both middle-class and working-class entertainment.

In a later development, 7:84 explored innovative ideas for popular forms, using audience response as one standard of measure along with the ideals of socialism and the values of the working class. If nothing else, these companies as examples of British alternative theater have challenged the drama of the West End by competing with them for audiences and by questioning the conventions of British theater. As a result, a rich multiplicity of productions in Britain today continues to attract audiences in a time when television is

a more convenient form of entertainment.

NOTES

1. Little recognized in this statement are the contributions from McGrath's family that also keep the company running. Liz MacLennan's fine acting and unflagging commitment have been given little credit. And the whole family has had to adjust to the tour's timetables and pressures, uncertain income, and hectic pace. They have sacrificed many middle-class comforts, like security and stability, that could have been provided by a steady writing job with BBC which would have made McGrath restless.

2. More extensive definitions for agitprop, naturalism, and realism will appear later.

3. Much of my understanding of McGrath's communal purpose and the forms which support those aims comes from an excellent article by Gunther Klotz, "Changing Functions and Forms of Modern British Drama" Hungarian Studies in English, Debrecen, 1979.

4. A Ceilidh is a gathering--"with or without the aid of whiskey" that becomes a collage of singing, dancing, and story telling. It includes audience participation and local politics, often stories of oppression.

CHAPTER FIVE

After a decade of association as colleagues in alternative theater, Arnold Wesker and John McGrath began to articulate their relative positions. Fifteen years of professional experience and personal lessons from the political upheaval of the sixties made possible a clear statement of differences. Their debate began in 1970 with a vitriolic review of Wesker's play, The Friends, written by John McGrath for the Marxist paper, Black Dwarf (12 June, 15) and was carried on over a few months through three letters: one written by Wesker to McGrath on June 18 in answer to the review, a reply by McGrath on July 6, and a final rebuttal by Wesker on October 4, 1970.

Wesker's play, The Friends, concerns the breakup of a designers' cooperative for working-class artists by the impending death of one of its members, Esther. Since they had hoped to effect radical reform with their workshop's ideals, her death represents for them not only the loss of a friend, but also the potential dissolution of their cooperative energy and a diffusion of their influence. They each seem anxious in their personal search for a sense of coherence and for values they can believe in. Sometimes provocative, sometimes elegaic, the play also discusses why friends have trouble communicating, especially in troubled

times. To that point, malicious and vengeful disputes dominate the second act as the friends turn on each other. In their arguments they vent repressed anger which has been allowed to fester, partly because of class differences. Shortly before her death, Esther condemns violence as a warning to her friends about their bickering, but she is barely heeded. A weak reconciliation among those who are mourning her death ends their quarrels.

Esther rejects violence for the personal pain and suffering it brings. Hatred born of ideological conflict, particularly when it leads to a rupture, frightens her. Esther's idea of a revolutionary is one who seeks alternatives to a violent resolution of differences. Foolish men "who enjoy the violence of opposing [a capitalist society]" (II, 106) are merely rebels, not revolutionaries. But her ridicule of violent upheaval is only one examination in The Friends of the concept of revolution. Her brother Manfred reviews a long string of scientific revolutions with the implication that they transformed civilization with more long-lasting effect than political overthrow. And Simone, the only middle-class member of the artisan's workshop, argues that because the working classes are not as politically educated as they should be, revolutionary moments yield the platform to reactionaries and bigots who are unaware of nonviolent, and therefore more constructive, alternatives. Simone will join

the cause of the worker, but without battledress, "In the end there is sweetness...in hidden places, someone is always rising up to take wing, and I want to be there" (II, 125).

Exploring the variety of revolutions, the friends seem to be searching out ways in which their workshop might have succeeded. They hope that the mere establishment of a cooperative which seeks to set standards of a working-class aesthetic is seed enough for a revolution of their own. In any case, their goal--an artisan's workshop which effects lasting reform for the working-class--reminds us of Wesker's aspirations for Centre 42. The end of a working-class artist's cooperative movement through the impending insolvency of Centre 42 was clearly on Wesker's mind as he wrote The Friends. Indeed, seven months after the play's opening, Wesker resigned from the Roundhouse Trust, a fund-raising wing of Centre 42, and urged similar action for the Centre 42 Council, a recommendation which also closed their doors. Never again did he join forces with other working-class artists to revolutionize the structure of British theater nor did he try again to appeal to working-class audiences through his drama.

In his review McGrath mentioned the failure of Centre 42, but he also had more important topics to discuss. Having just spent time in Paris where he discovered the

"real theatre of revolution," (Mitchell 396), he had become frustrated with the lack of clear action within the British political theater movement and with those who claim to believe in a socialist revolution, "but somehow can't act on it" (Letter 6 July 1970).

Wesker's play to him was symptomatic of a decade of British working-class theater which hints at revolution, and advocates reform. Theater touted by many as oppositional was to him nothing more than "romantic, nineteenth century pre-Marxist utopian socialism" which found its audience among the middle-class elite. Referring in his review to Wesker's "tremulous flirtation with 'progressive' ideas," McGrath attacked the gradualist ideology expressed in The Friends, a political philosophy which was common to Britain's nineteenth century socialist groups and still finds its adherents today in the labour movement. At the end of the review came for Wesker the unkindest cut of all:

> Wesker and his people are stuck in the sad attitudes of an Aldermaston marcher's reunion rally; Wesker could outdo Tiny Tim himself in hard-line nostalgia, albeit for a different decade. What he must do is not to confuse anybody including himself into thinking that he is in any way socialist or that this play relates in any way to any possible form of socialist theatre. (15)

McGrath had attacked Wesker's art and his politics. He later telephoned Wesker to warn him about the article and to assure him that it was not a personal attack, but Wesker

was not mollified.

His initial reaction to McGrath's review was to defend himself as a good socialist, the son of a Communist and one who had always be known as a socialist playwright. He was outraged by the insinuations that his papers were not in order. He wrote angrily to McGrath deploring his "old-style Stalinist degree-making" which passed judgment on others' political purity in public. After considering the accusation over the years, however, he realizes today that he is not comfortable with the socialist label.

Even though the position is not a popular one among his contemporaries in political theater, Wesker calls himself these days a "simple, old-fashioned humanist," (Itzin interview 20). The description seems appropriate to a sensitive playwright seeking spiritual wholeness for himself and a fragmented world. After two decades of reconsidering those socialist values which call for violent instruments of change, he has decided to spurn the labels of socialism altogether. There were some signs of this change in 1971 after his debate with McGrath, when Wesker said with some disappointment in himself and others that most great art reflects the "conflict between what men would like to do and the way they end up doing it" (Interview, "System and the Writer" 11). The long discussion in The Friends about revolution also points to

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McGrath was, therefore, essentially accurate about Wesker's politics. Even though Wesker has always aligned his political views with the leftists, particularly with the William Morris tradition in England, he has never actually endorsed revolutionary socialism. Instead, he has preferred evolutionary strategies which might, in the end, afford workers more freedom and self-determination. In the summer of 1968, the same summer that McGrath was in Paris, Wesker explained to an interviewer that he saw social revolution "in a tragic perspective" in which human value is weighed against conflict and disorder (Anderson 27). A case in point would be the mixed feelings he held about the Cuban revolution. While he admired the courage of the revolutionaries in the early sixties, he was less positive about the results of revolution itself. In 1965, Wesker dedicated his play, The Four Seasons to the "romantic" revolutionaries of Cuba because they too were undaunted by the threat of failure:

> not because you would ever win if
> the big fight came
>
> but because you are not afraid that you
> might lose.

Nevertheless, in a 1970 letter to McGrath, Wesker argued that any radical overthrow of the system has its liabilities: "Cuba still suffers from the withdrawal of U.S. technicians and capital, despite aid from Russia and

China" (4 October). And as time wore on, he had similarly mixed feelings about the Centre 42 movement, a "revolution" which changed very little in Britain even after it had been fought at great personal sacrifice.

Wesker may not advocate violent overthrow, but he does agree with the Morris tradition which believes in the power of the arts to improve the quality of both society and the lives of the individual. And like Morris, he applauds many practices of the working-class culture and strives through the arts, to temper those values which have a "crippling" effect on man. He told McGrath that one should "analyse working-class values, not all of which work for good and many of which imitate the pettiest of the upper class," (Letter 4 October 1970), and address those self-destructive elements in his working-class art. Because of his conviction that reform should be led by the socially committed artist, British Arts Council Director Jennie Lee also recognized some similarity to the Morris tradition. In an August, 1962 Encounter, she wrote, "William Morris had the same vision and fought against ugliness and everything shoddy with all his many-sided genius" (96). Other comparisons between Wesker and Morris appeared frequently in the popular press of the sixties as well. Many saw a kinship between Wesker and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's social attitudes, a celebration of individual

freedom and tolerance for religious and political diversity.

In any case, his more explicit use of Morris' writings comes from a portion of a speech on "Socialism," an address given in March 1886 at the Victoria Hall, Norwich. Morris warned the workers that they will lose their opportunity to take charge of their own destinies if, after wresting control from the upper and middle classes, they do little to assume some responsibility for what remains to be done:

> ...and accordingly the Trade Unionists and their leaders who were once the butt of the most virulent abuse from the whole of the Upper and Middle classes are now praised and petted by them because they do tacitly or openly acknowledge the necessity for the master's existence; it is felt that they are no longer the enemy; the class struggle in England is entering into a new phase, which may even make the once dreaded Trade Unions allies of capital, since they in their turn form a kind of privileged group among the workmen; in fact they now no longer represent the whole class of workers as working men but rather as charged with the office of keeping the human part of the capitalists' machinery in good working order and freeing it from any grit of discontent.
>
> Now that's the blind alley which the Trade Unions have now got into; I say again if they are determined to have masters to manage their affairs, they must expect in turn to pay for that luxury...remembering that the price they pay for their so-called captains of industry is no mere money payment--no mere tribute which once paid leaves them free to do as they please but an authoritative ordering of the whole tenor of their lives, what they shall eat, drink, wear, what houses they shall have, books, or newspapers rather, they shall read, down to the very days on which they shall take their holidays like a drove of cattle driven out from the stable to grass.... ("The House, A Lecture in Birmingham" 9, and Preface to Their Very Own and Golden City)

Impatient with the trade unions for passively abdicating the role of their own leadership, particularly in their failure to dream about the potential for Britain, Wesker passionately urged the workers to take charge of their own destinies, to become more aggressive about assuming responsible leadership within their own working communities. In the play Their Very Own and Golden City, he elaborates on that expectation with his lead character, Andy, who tells the story about some people stranded on an island who build a boat to take them to the mainland. The design and structure of the boat is good enough to take them much further than anyone could imagine, however. As Andy explains, "they don't seem to realize they could live on it, trade in it, travel right across the world in it..." (Vol. II, 178). The story is an analogy, of course, for the shortsightedness of the trades unions which could take their members much further than they have done.

Although he hoped for stronger leadership directing the membership and shaping structures to meet social need, Wesker neither encouraged nor anticipated revolutionary overthrow by the trade unions. Because he accepted some, but not all of Morris' revolutionary ideals. he offended by some comparisons with Morris, especially those which trivialize the content of his plays. Wesker therefore took exception to McGrath's remark in the Black Dwarf review

which characterized I'm Talking about Jerusalem as a play about "admiration for hand craftsmanship and the rural utopia" (15).

The "cultural revolution" for which Wesker fights in Britain is, in fact, more metaphorical than cataclysmic (see also Chapter One). Like some aspects of Morris, the Fabians, and G.B. Shaw, he believes that education is a more practical means for change than upheaval. Also like his antecedents, Wesker believes that a lasting and productive change can only grow out of knowledge: "One idea will act upon the imagination of another man who will produce another idea; and we know how ideas have activated movements and revolutions." Using a gradualist's argument for revolutionary change, he concludes "...the only validity ideas have in art are in the way they make an impact on people and what it brings them to do" (Interview, "System and the Writer"). The concept of education through the arts has a long history of support beginning with Marx and Engels who, believing in power of knowledge, placed great importance on education as a determiner of the future. The difference is, of course, that Marx and Engels foretold a more explosive, form-destroying role for education.

Nevertheless, if socialism has any validity at all for Wesker, it serves as a tool not only for man and his work but for personal contact: "how to live and treat other

people" (Rothberg interview 497). Wesker said in a 1966 interview, at a time when a social revolution seemed immanent in the West, that socialism will be necessary even in the new economic order, "when men are not competing for survival" because "there is such a problem to being a human being at all that to complicate it even more with economic problems is to confront people with the wrong battle." He concluded by saying, "...it follows that once the economic battle is over there is still the battle of being alive, of being a human being--"(Gordon interview 17). Wesker's commitment to socialist theater continues to be moral, in the sense that it may indirectly improve man's condition, more than it is political.

While Wesker rejected the prospect of revolution and the more violent proposals coming out of socialism, he had not given up altogether on his socialist ideals. At the time of his exchange of letters with McGrath in 1970, he had not considered the possibility that they may not have shared a common political tradition. So when McGrath accused Wesker of departing camp, Wesker responded by quoting Simone's speech from The Friends, a speech which he altered slightly for the letter:

> In your haste to mobilise support you've given blessings and applause to the most bigoted, the most loud-mouthed, the most reactionary instincts in the people...And now I will neither wear cloth caps nor walk in rage nor dress in battledress to prove I share his cause; nor will I share his

> tastes and claim the values of his class to prove I too stand for liberty and love and the sharing between all men of the good things this good earth and man's ingenuity can give. Now shoot me for that! (18 June 1970)

And when McGrath wrote that Wesker displayed in the Trilogy a "lamentable ignorance of the strengths and values of the working class itself" by wanting to bring to them "the values of a good liberal education," Wesker reminded him of the human value of the arts for everyone, especially for those from the working classes who waste their hours betting the football scores and drinking. To Wesker, a true counter-revolutionary is one who will stand opposed to such popular practices, because such a stand is obviously on the frontline of change:

> ... against the wall I would still declare you to be the counter-revolutionary because I've always spoken about what the working man could be and felt anger that he's abused for what he is; and in doing this it was necessary to tell him what he is as I know him from experience. He's my class and my background and therefore what I say I say from love and a concern for wasted lives. You might want him to remain only a happy 'pint-drinker' but I say you are patronising and insulting to do so. He is capable of infinitely more and within him is a spirit which I want to see as other than the sour doctrinaire and uncharitable spirit such as emanates from your article. That's what my revolution is about. (18 June 1970)

Since Wesker's priority lay in a liberal arts education for the working classes, he argued for this change, one that should make a significant difference in the quality of life, so he was suspicious about any promises of economic

reform that seemed, in the end, to settle for less. But when he could see that their argument was leading nowhere, Wesker appealed to McGrath with Peter Weiss' "Lay down the ice-axe, comrade." He had had enough of the quarrel and did not want to continue any further.

But McGrath wanted a polemical argument in which ideas were exchanged, as he put it, "to mark out positions, to define [their] values, to awaken the contradictions, to heighten the ideological temperature, to confront each other's consciousnesses boldly..." Hoping to deploy the historical dialectic as an instrument to reset the course of British alternative theater, McGrath wrote one month later, "We need polemics. We need to reach conclusions, to take up positions, to make decisions--all of which will no doubt be transcended, opposed, acted upon, challenged, altered--but we must struggle with force and energy for correctness, for demystification, for action" (6 July 1970). His drive toward a debate seemed hopeful of converting a fellow working-class playwright whose politics needed some correction.

In pursuit of those ends, McGrath requested that Wesker put aside his distaste for such debates, a distaste which McGrath believed was the function of a more general phenomenon: a mixture of an obsolete fear of Stalin, the British aversion to contention, the British propensity for reticence and understatement, and a misguided spirit of

reform.

The revolutionary rhetoric took Wesker by surprise. He had not considered that option for some years. In the October letter he wrote, "We are not in a revolutionary situation in this country, however unfair is the distribution of wealth. When you urge people to an action that is absolutely remote to them then you are a counter-revolutionary because you are encouraging the dissipation of energies and discrediting our political judgment." Following that, Wesker's advice to McGrath was to depend on art and education as vehicles for the transformation of capitalism. And he added to that advice, a warning to exercise patience: "...you have to face the fact about the nature of art and education that their impacts are not immediate. Their effects accumulate over a period of time...the answer is neither exciting nor romantic..." Then he made an observation that David Edgar was to echo nine years later, that, while some in Britain are being exploited, the nation is not ready for a revolution, and to act on that assumption is to exaggerate the conditions. (Letter, 4 October 1970). Wesker would not jettison his reformist views. He could see no reason to do so. He asked McGrath in the same letter, "What does being a reformist mean? You advocate that we should 'get in amongst' the mass media; doesn't that involve compromise?

What is the advantage of compromise over reform?"

McGrath was unwilling to tolerate what he saw as Wesker's revolutionary-reformist contradictions, "contradictions that run through Eduard Bernstein, through Karl Ebart and Ramsay MacDonald and Attlee and Mendes-France, through Sweden and Norway and Denmark, right down to Harold Wilson," McGrath also attacked Wesker's approach to drama. Referring to these contradictions, he argued in the July 6, 1970 letter,

> They lead to your failure to grasp an argument and dispute it ruthlessly,to your claim to be a socialist without one word on the subject of class struggle, class consciousness [in the Friends]..." [They also lead to a failure to] reveal certain truths about our condition, to raise the questions, to fight with these forms until they are capable of holding more and more, of doing more and more.

A portrait of Lenin over Esther's bed was not enough. And to flirt with bourgeois concepts of revolution was to squander theater's potential which lay in opposing ideological bankruptcy and in articulating the strengths of working-class values.

To McGrath, a play is an argument which forces the audience to take sides. Failure to challenge audience response beyond a passive understanding was, to McGrath, an abrogation of a committed playwright's prerogative and responsibility. The playwright of the counter-culture and an obligation to social action are inseparable:

Are we going to create a revolutionary culture,

> whose task is to transform working class culture, as it now exists, and to work with the political movement to create a revolutionary consciousness amongst the people? Or are we going to sit on our arses and moan about the backwardness of the people? (Letter, 6 July 1970)

To be true to his ideals, a political playwright uses his works to critique the conditions which resist change. To that end, the issues must be addressed on stage and explored. The playwright who fails to engage the medium on behalf of class struggle, ignores the most valuable resource, the theater, a resource "of inestimable value to humanity." McGrath:

> ...though [the theatre] may not be socially of the greatest importance, it is a place where certain values can be maintained. At a time when the visual image is dominant, with all its sense of flux, imprecision and ambivalence (qualities that endear it to ruling classes everywhere), the theatre can be a place in which the precision of the word and the disciplines of verbal structure are kept alive. It can be a place where humanity remains essentially at the centre of the experience, where truths and insights can be communicated at their most naked, directly from one person to another person in the same room. (Letter, 6 July 1970).

Because it has the power to touch its audiences with "truths and insights," the oppositional playwright must use the plays more directly for social change: to move his audiences to question the conditions beyond the theater's walls, beyond the dimensions of the performance. McGrath does not believe theater can actually cause social change:

> It can articulate the pressures towards one, help people to celebrate their strengths and maybe build their self-confidence. It can be a public

> emblem of inner, and outer, events, and occasionally a reminder, an elbow-jogger, a perspective-bringer. Above all, it can be the way people can find their voice, their solidarity and their collective determination. ("The Year of the Cheviot" 30)

Nevertheless, McGrath sees the role of theater going beyond that of a purely critical force. Although theater in the streets is most effective, theater within four walls can still aspire to express revolutionary ideas and make an impact. The best of the early experimenters in agitational theater were Russian and German. Among them were Meyerholt who "was using the theatre as a building with some people in it to present new forms of ritual" and Mayakovsky who "was using the visual elements of theatre, incorporating a sort of futuristic style, and his own highly charged verbal style, to present images of a transforming society" ("Power to the Imagination" 14). In formulating the type of theater which 7:84 would perform, McGrath was deeply influenced by these models and even more by the theater of Bertolt Brecht.

To develop an attitude of inquiry in the spectator, Brecht experimented with the "Alienation Effect" (Verfremdungseffekt). The "A-Effect," as it is sometimes called, is a strategy to hold the spectator's involvement at a distance from the play's unfolding actions. For that purpose, the theater is stripped of its magical effects whereby the audience might momentarily accept the play's

illusions through the use of scenery which contains only minimal suggestions of a setting and with actors whose posture is one "of a man who is astounded and contradicts" (Willett 137). The actor, avoiding a transformation into his character, continually questions the validity of the character's relationship to others.

Using a stylized gesture, the actor forces audiences to remark, like him, on the stage directions, the lines and the character's part in the action. The character, meanwhile, has not been developed by the author to stand alone as an individualistic figure, but is drawn from life by the author and the actor as a conceptual device. Says Brecht, "...the characters are not simply portraits of living people, but are rearranged and formed in accordance with ideas" (Willett 278). While they regard the character as a third person being examined, the actor and the audience engage in a direct exchange which tears down the fourth wall of the stage and interrupts the inclination of the audience to identify with the character. The play's content also pressures the spectator by presenting a problem which must be solved and by pressing the spectator to make moral choices.

In these ways, the Alienation Effect deliberately inhibits illusion and causes ordinary objects to seem unfamiliar. After experiencing a provocative theatrical production, one that forces an examination of events on the

stage, the spectator may gain new insight and a critical attitude of history and everyday events. Brecht:

> Characters and incidents from ordinary life, from our immediate surroundings, being familiar, strike us more or less natural. Alienating them helps to make them seem remarkable to us. Science has carefully developed a technique of getting irritated with the everyday, 'self-evident', universally accepted occurrence, and there is no reason why this infinitely useful attitude should not be taken over by art. (Willett 140)

Like a scientist using his reason to question invisible forces and relationships, the spectator is asked to employ "an extremely cold, highly intellectual" curiosity about the play's phenomena. Brecht's plays demand a bourgeois education and sophistication of audiences which enable them to enjoy a play which renounces emotional involvement in the plot or its characters. He wanted a "quick-witted audience that knows how to observe, and gets its enjoyment from setting its reason to work." Referring to those from all classes seeking sentiment, Brecht said, "I'm not writing for the scum who want to have the cockles of their hearts warmed (Willett 14).

Brecht was reacting, of course, to the theater at the time of Hitler which subverted reason through a mob response. Deeply suspicious of the highly emotional experience, he preferred to appeal to the spectator's powers of understanding. Brecht did not discount the emotional response altogether, but when it was a factor in

shaping empathetic imitation of an admirable character for example, it became a conscious choice. Careful education of the working-class theaters and their audiences was the key to the critical attitude he hoped to engender.

Similarly, McGrath has hoped to make available to his audiences a clear understanding of relationships and their social contexts. But after a few years on the road with 7:84, he has decided not to adopt the Brechtian A-Effect. Although he still considers Brecht's theater "of immense value," especially efforts to embrace new dramatic forms and subject matter, McGrath is concerned about "its hostility to the audience" (A Good Night Out 37-40).

Arguing that Brecht's approach to theater was primarily pedagogical and not necessarily appealing to working-class audiences. McGrath also pointed out with some disappointment that, at a time when the workers most needed support against Hitler for Communism, Brecht was trying out his "pseudo-scientific 'objectivity' in place of the frank admission of a human, partisan and emotional perspective--coldness, in place of shared experience..." (A Good Night Out 41). He feels that Brecht squandered his opportunity as an oppositional playwright to establish solidarity among his working-class audiences by diverting his attention to the Epic Theatre, a form which drew crowds, but unfortunately, "98 per cent of the time they

were the hated bourgeoisie" (41). Brecht did not deliberately exclude the working classes, but because of the size of the production company and the patronizing nature of the forms, his plays were best performed "within smart bourgeois theatre" where the structures of bourgeois theater could be maintained. McGrath remarks with dismay that the Berliner Ensemble, Brecht's theater company torn apart by rival factions, has become a symbol of power struggles in the theater and has all but given up its ability to produce innovative theater. He concludes:

> There is a sense in which all cultural work which is at all conscious of class struggle must place the question of class power in the centre of its ideology. But I think that with Brecht the problem is that of displacing class power into a rather bourgeois form of artistic privilege, which does have certain correspondences with the political hierarchies of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. (43)

Troubled by Brecht's disproportionate interest in dramatic technique, especially at the expense of developing a working-class based audience, McGrath has adopted the the goals of social change, the Brechtian language, and some aspects of the Brechtian forms, particularly techniques which infect the audience with an awareness of their role in social change. Like Brecht he also replaces the traditional forms of European high culture with popular forms developed in the German and Russian theaters of the 20s and 30s and adopted from the British Music Hall. His work tends, moreover, to be anti-naturalistic.

Nevertheless, McGrath has rejected strategies which might distance his audiences. Keeping in mind working-class tastes in entertainment, he chooses instead to offer to foster a growing relationship with his audiences. He does this by seeking to understand his audiences and to create performances on their terms. "Identification should take place between the performers and the audience on a personal level," McGrath wrote, "which is certainly not the case in bourgeois theatre" ("Theory and Practice" 48). McGrath's works are not intended for the intellectual, nor are they meant to appeal to bourgeois audiences. The 7:84 deliberately promotes an informal setting where the ticket prices are reasonable, a decent pint of ale is available at any time, and "some young working-class blokes [come] with their wives for a good night out" (51-52). To evoke a critical attitude, McGrath uses a warm, familiar atmosphere where he can develop a feeling of community, and his characters can exchange dialog with the audiences outside the traditional conventions of theater. Even though he has discarded distancing devices like the A-Effect, McGrath has, on his own terms, developed a dialectical structure within a more congenial setting.

McGrath's combination of Brechtian techniques, Eisenstinian film devices and German expressionist drama work well for his purposes. His plays are quite popular in

working-class districts where his audiences are receptive to the ideas and responsive. One newspaper report has it that "several miners who had not before been out on the picket-line, went out and picketed, after seeing 7:84 England's production of Six Men of Dorset" ("No Politics Please"). The plays draw particularly well in the Highlands where the working-class Scot, often seeing his own history for the first time, welcomes direct expression of his local concerns. McGrath justifiably believes he has developed a real socialist theater, one that honestly appeals--more than Bertolt Brecht, Clifford Odets, or Sergei Eisenstein--to the working classes. Although seen by some middle-class critics like Catherine Itzin as "out-dated didacticism" ("McGrath Ten Years After" 7), the plays have power and appeal.

McGrath's successes have convinced him, more than ever, that Wesker, and other playwrights like him, have force-fed the working classes with a fare of empty rhetoric that hints at sustenance, but offers no real nourishment or relief from oppression. He urged Wesker in his letter to turn away from middle-class naturalist drama and concentrate "on bringing a truly socialist consciousness to bear on the mass forms of television and film." Wesker should "relate directly to the conflicts and history of the working class," by demystifying the bourgeois forms.

McGrath further suggested that Wesker might be more

successful with the working classes using popular forms of culture like television, music, and film, an idea that McGrath shared with Brecht. At that time he felt that much work was yet to be done, however, to explore the potential of the mass media, since "the cultural forms so far developed by an urban working class cynically fed on escapist rubbish under capitalism are not, as yet, either matured or even viable." Thinking he had a sympathetic ear, he asked Wesker for advice:

> But what are we to do about it? You are an artist. The forms of television are potentially art forms. In the hands of David Mercer, the TV play has a certain stature. Peter Watkins has produced television films, which, to say the least, cannot be dismissed. The Series, much abused, has the same potential as the Victorian weekly magazines held for Dickens. Similarly, the pop song today has, if anything, rather more potential than the Tudor lyric as Wyatt found it. In the cinema, the comedy, the adventure-story, the drama, the epic are all forms which may not yet have revealed their full powers. Do we walk away from all this, because Coronation Street is not Barchester Towers, because Mick Jagger isn't Beethoven, because The Dirty Dozen isn't Chekhov? (6 July 1970)

Pressing Wesker as an ally in the struggle to redefine working class drama, McGrath envisioned a radical reshaping of theater's purpose with new cultural values, values that place human needs before commercial profit and an exploitative culture:

> At a time when the visual image is dominant, with all its sense of flux, imprecision and ambivalence (qualities that endear it to ruling classes everywhere), the theatre can be a place

> in which the precision of the word and the disciplines of verbal structure are kept alive. It can be a place where humanity remains essentially at the centre of the experience, where truths and insights can be communicated at their most naked, directly from one person to another person in the same room. (6 July 1970)

And then he asked Wesker to abandon old, worn out forms, bourgeois theatrical experiences for the working classes.

In response, Wesker firmly denied that accepted cultural values necessarily "imitate" bourgeois values, "sometimes they do; sometimes they don't" (4 October 1979). By that, he meant all classes contribute to the shaping of the best in theatrical entertainment. The middle classes, for example, look sometimes "down the scale" for entertainment values.

Offended by McGrath's remark that the working-class audiences at Wellingborough involuntarily sat through Centre 42's shows, Wesker bristled all the more at his suggestion that the working-class playwright should adopt popular forms of entertainment, which seemed to him inferior. He was reminded of a statement made by the Economic Planning Commission (the P.E.P.), who when it was proposed that they might withdraw art funding for the working classes, responded, "A large section of the population is completely indifferent to anything that comes under the general heading of culture, and they have every right to stay in this state of non-grace" (P.E.P. 319). Wesker was equally outraged that the forces on the left

(like McGrath) and the power elite on the right would not support funding in the fine arts for the working classes. The government justified a cut in funding for the working classes by smugly arguing, "The appetite for culture in this country is less voracious than many of us pretend..." (330) and McGrath's position on the arts did not disprove their case. Wesker believed that if theater were going to be written for the working classes, it must shaped by cooperation among the working-class artists and it must be informed by standards of highest quality. For all he could tell, those standards were best defined by literary convention.

The debate between McGrath and Wesker on forms was remarkably similar to earlier discussions which Wesker had with Clive Barker when the latter tried to promote popular entertainment at the festivals. Despite continued opposition to his ideals, Wesker remained steadfast to his convictions. He wrote to McGrath in the June letter, "Both you and the [P.E.P.] inherit the same ruling-class attitude--a peculiarly English sneer at the notion that the working class could or should ever be interested in more than pint drinking...In fact, you and they are repeating the ancient ruling class arguments that the workers are best left happy and undisturbed" (Letter, 18 June 1970). McGrath and company had their own manner of undervaluing

the working class audiences.

Not only did popular entertainment represent to Wesker just another way of patronizing the working classes, certain forms of the popular culture-- folk art, for example--seemed to Wesker "primitive." He denounced all the rest as unfulfilling:

> ...the actual experience of Led Zepplin or the Moody Blues, however much I enjoy them, is different from the feeling I experience listening to Mahler or Pergolesi...there is a difference between art and entertainment, with art having the additional advantage of containing entertainment in its blood; (Letter 4 October 1970)

Whether produced by members of the working classes or for the working classes, the most efficacious forms of art are perceptive and demanding of our intellect and feeling, and engage "all our being...leaving us refreshed rather than spent, or exhausted by muscles well used rather than soporific" (Letter 4 October 1970). No argument--for class or for revolutionary causes--could justify a use of the lower forms to Wesker. Indeed, he could not vindicate popular forms of art for any political reasons, partly because he felt the working classes deserved better, partly because he felt these forms were inadequate to the task of expressing human values.

In his defense, Wesker summoned the authority of Georg Lukacs whose Marxist case for traditional literary forms, specifically realism, against the experimental forms

introduced by Brecht is well known. Lukacs, like Wesker who followed him, believed in the mandate on art to express the truth. To that point Lukacs disapproved experimental constructions which distort reality in favor of the classical forms of art, particularly in literature, which recreate a truer picture of the human condition:

> Those who do not know Marxism at all or know it only superficially or at second hand, may be surprised by the respect for the classical heritage of mankind which one finds in the really great representatives of this doctrine and by their incessant references to that classical heritage..."But all this is long out of date," the modernists cry. "All this is the undesirable, outworn legacy of the nineteenth century," say those who--intentionally or unintentionally, consciously or unconsciously--support the Fascist ideology and its pseudo-revolutionary rejection of the past, which is in reality a rejection of culture and humanism. (Studies in European Realism 4)

Experimental forms are not only weak stylistically, they falsify and mislead, lending credibility to slander and misrepresentation.

Like Marx and Engels before him and Wesker after him, Lukacs believed that the greatest works of literature are founded on the potential which the writer has for a truthful account of reality. The artist, like any individual, is a participant in the social process, and as such, is connected to contemporary historical movements. As a member of society and therefore a constituent part of the historic whole, the artist's vision, if undistorted, represents a truthful account of material reality,

particularly when he uses the concreteness of his own life as it relates to the historical moment (The Meaning of Contemporary Realism 54). For Lukacs this connection between the part and the whole makes the writer accountable to a faithful account of reality in the work of art. He writes:

> It follows that everything in a writer's life, every individual experience, thought and emotion he undergoes, however subjective, partakes of a historical character. Every element in his life as a human being and as a writer is part of and determined by, the movement from and towards some goal. Any authentic reflection of reality in literature must point to this movement. The method adopted will vary, of course, with the period and personality. But the selection and subtraction he undertakes in response to the teleological pattern of his own life constitutes the most intimate link between a writer's subjectivity and the outside world. (55)

Failure to connect the personal experience with the larger, historical context, and more particularly, a deliberate refusal to reflect reality authentically because of a perverse desire to express alienation, fragmentation, or isolation is to Lukacs a "willful twisting of reality" (The Meaning of Contemporary Realism 49). The work of art must show a balance between the generality of history and the particularity of the individual. The individual consciousness is best described as mediated through the social reality.

In drama, Lukacs explains, the characters bear much of the weight of the authorial interpretation because in the

limited experiences of the characters lie the reader's orientation to the meaningful structures of the work. The realist--as opposed to the modernist like Brecht--examines the contradictions, tensions, and conflicts between the individual and the social environment using concrete detail and a focus on the individual to avoid distortion and to reveal deeper complexities. The greatest realistic writers begin in the particular and move, not to any ordinary reality, but to an historic movement, thus establishing the dialectic between the individual and history ("Franz Kafka or Thomas Mann", The Meaning of Contemporary Realism).

Believing, moreover, that truth will emerge if the writer simply allows the story of the character and his integral relationship to the community unfold without manipulation, Lukacs looked to the classical heritage of literature to model the central problems of man's existence when he determined that characters "once conceived in the vision of their creator, live an independent life of their own; their comings and goings, their development, their destiny is dictated by the inner dialectic of their social and individual existence. No writer is a true realist--or even a truly good writer, if he can direct the evolution of his characters at will" (Preface to Studies in European Realism 11). Without contrivance, the realist must seek out true-to-life figures that act as types which embody

both the individual and the typical, the idiosyncratic and the universal, which is meaningful to the reader as a reference to a knowable experience.

Unlike earlier drama in which ethical value judgments rest upon accepted metaphysical foundations, contemporary drama has the problem of "an individualism which relates to the external world within a reduced scope of expressive significations" ("The Sociology of Modern Drama" 159). Instead of a hero who acts in a morally certain environment, the new drama features an isolated individual who often becomes a proxy for something external to him, something which is not always given definition. The individual is additionally absorbed by his environment and helpless to act on his own. He is alienated from others, lonely, and "detached from the particularities of individual men," so much so that a sense of the individual's personal tragedy is meaningless: "Literature shows man only in the succession of his feelings and thoughts, which means it cannot entirely exclude the causes of the feelings and thoughts; at most it will somewhat conceal a portion of these causes, this is, the external world, which is their immediate origin" (161). Rather than a reflection of modern man's true condition, this state as described by the modernists exaggerate the displacements in the relations among men.

Lukacs described distortions such as these in

anticipation of Pinter or Beckett or Brechtian drama. What concerned him was the breakdown of literary forms which depended on the interrelatedness of ethical systems. In Lukacs' view, the subordination of art to the doctrinaire purposes of the artist overemphasized the subjective, trivialized the thematic material of drama, and alienated the reader (or audience) who has little access to the author's mind. Lukacs wrote to that point of view:

> In realism, the wealth of created life provides answers to the questions put by the readers themselves--life supplies the answers to the questions put by life itself! The taxing struggle to understand the art of the 'avant-garde', on the other hand, yields such subjectivist distortions and travesties that ordinary people who try to translate these atmospheric echoes of reality back into the language of their own experience, find the task quite beyond them. (Aesthetics and Politics 57)

Lukacs was speaking, in this instance, about movements in art like expressionism and surrealism to Ernst Bloch and Hanns Eisler, but he could well have been referring to egregious examples of such failure in the literary works of the modernists, particularly Bertolt Brecht, whose intellectual approach misconstrues reality by centering on the limits of the individual's own experience. While excluding an accurate depiction of the larger social context, Brecht manipulates reality in his drama to fit a predetermined purpose. Using techniques like montage, artists like Brecht sacrifices a sense of the whole,

thereby losing connection with reality and a penetration into the network of relationships. Says Lukacs quoting "that expert on decadence" Friedrich Nietzsche in reference to the artificiality of modernist devices, "'The whole as such no longer lives at all; it is composite, artificial, a piece of cerebration, an artifact'" (Aesthetics and Politics 44).

Even though he has developed his own definitions for the terms "naturalism" and "realism"[1] in his discussions of art, Wesker agrees with Lukacs on these and many other aesthetic principals. Like Lukacs, he has condemned the artist who ignores reality to exercise a narrow, personal view at the expense of truth, who introduces some form of plot which satisfies a "wish-fulfillment," or turns to material which conveniently illustrates the author's point of view. For these reasons he was compelled to remind McGrath in the letters that England--despite the uneven distribution of wealth--was not in a revolutionary state that McGrath had described. "There is injustice in Britain," wrote Wesker, "but no oppression--we cannot borrow 'other people's urgency" (Letter, 4 October 1970). Writing in his notebooks four months later, Wesker attacked playwrights like McGrath and Brecht by implying that they are propagandists of sorts who twist their art out of political necessity. In the February, 1971 journal entry, Wesker differentiated between "construction" in art and

"arrangement." In the former instance, artists "cheat" by contriving to select characters and present pat situations that fit their "construction" of reality:

> He can make every character behave in the way that allows his spokesman conveniently to say what it is he, the writer, wants said; everyone is conveniently quiet, has conveniently said the wrong things, conveniently disgraced themselves. (Distinctions 166-67)

In the case of arrangement, artists also select material, but in this instance, the selection is "more human, tentative, as flawed as the human condition with which it is concerned. It deals in complicated and quintessential truths" (Distinctions 24). Although he is not troubled by the overly subjective, solipsistic forms of modernism, as Lukacs was in his writings, Wesker is nonetheless concerned with verisimilitude and an undistorted exploration of the truth "from nature or the imagination or both, in a way such as to re-create and at the same time illuminate our experience of nature and the imagination" (Distinctions 164). There are no better examples of his painstaking attention to detail than the recipes he provides in his plays for the food that his characters prepare on stage, or the minute explanations he gives for replication of the Norfolk accent, or the long stage directions he uses to instruct the actor about the mood of a character.

Just as he believes that all art deals with reality and must correspond to reality, Wesker also argues that one

cannot fully reproduce the experience in the theater. In this respect, Wesker's aesthetic differs from Lukacs'. Fully cognizant of the need for a shorthand language to represent some of the detail from everyday life, Wesker writes:

> The concept of 'realistic art' is a concept involving contradictions. The re-creation of total reality in any artistic medium is impossible. It is even impossible to experience total reality, reality being the sum total of so many different elements. (164)

The controls that Wesker deliberately uses to capture reality are two-fold: traditional theatrical conventions and a selective use of 'inherent symbols' which are "inevitable, unavoidable, unambiguous" in drama. He also uses ideas which are juxtaposed without predetermined design. For examples he turns to his own work, The Friends, in which he links the concept of sterility with discussions about the DNA molecule of heredity, family photographs, and death (307-310). Wesker defends his use of these devices in plays like The Four Seasons or The Friends by explaining that they are natural "within the play's terms of reference" (Distinctions 313), and he takes some pains to explain his use of 'inherent symbols' for several reasons: to answer the critics' claim that some details in his plays are not realistic, to ridicule those critics who overlook the obvious on the hunt for symbols, to reinforce the point that he did not write the plays "to fit a theory"

(Distinctions 315). It is through these 'inherent symbols' that Wesker connects the individual to a larger historical context. Referring to the use of these symbols, he makes it clear that they refer to a knowable community of relations and that he includes them without doctrinaire intentions. Like Lukacs, he believes that "no great work of art is without meaning," but he also believes that the message should never control the work, but grow out of its characters and situations and out of the artist's own perceptions after close observation of nature and natural behavior.

Wesker's interest in fullness of character and his opposition to characters, which are made important more for the ideas they represent than for their veracity, is reminiscent of an earlier debate which Marx and Engels carried on with German socialist Ferdinand Lassalle whose polemical play, Franz von Sickengen (1859), was the subject of controversy. Although the play expressed agreeable political sentiments, Marx and Engels called it "tendentious." By that they meant that the playwright's biases dominated the characterization of the play. Marx advised Lassalle to "Shakespearize" more, that is to build well-developed characters who are so realistic that the audience may share in the illusion. And again referring to Lassalle's play, Franz von Sickingen (1858), Marx said, "I

consider Schillerism, making individuals the mere mouthpieces of the spirit of the times, your main fault" (Marx and Engels, Literature and Art 48).

Their complaint with Lassalle was that he did not adequately represent the causes of Sickingen's downfall and he was unable to illustrate the forces at work in the events of 1520 through the use of his characters because he used stock figures. More than structure or plot, Engels critiqued Lassalle's work on the author's realistic depiction of the class struggle and the portrayal of that struggle through characterization. He wrote, "Realism, to my mind, implies, besides truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances" (41). Although ideology is the content of literature, individualization is foremost in capturing the truth of the times. The unique qualities of the character are made significant by his typicality. If too intellectually conceived, however, the character becomes a token and cannot adequately represent the intended abstraction. Engels believed, in fact, that the best artists of socially significant literature simply select honestly wrought individual characters and thereby subordinate their own biases to artistic truth. In doing so, they inadvertently reveal conditions as they should be portrayed. If an author like Lassalle understands less about the conditions than he should, the characterizations

similarly suffer.

For that reason, he praised Margaret Harkness in an 1888 letter, for her City Girl because, although it was "guided all the time by the principle that the emancipation of the working class ought to be the cause of the working class itself," he found no evidence that she wrote a Tendenzroman, a novel written "to glorify the social and political views of the author" (42). He added, "The more the author's views are concealed the better for the work of art" (42).

Even though little can be said with certainty about their critical theories because they wrote so little on the topic, Engels may have based many of his views on Marx' postulate that society is an organism in which every activity is related to every other. In such a model, a truthful characterization will naturally reflect the interrelatedness of the whole and will, thereby, illustrate universal qualities as well. Marx' own position on realism is unclear. Believing that novelists were better suited than "politicians, publicists and moralists" to reveal essential truths, to express the "character of the object," he particularly trusted the classical heritage in literature to reveal the social conditions faithfully. He listed Balzac and Shakespeare among his favorites. Although he prized essential truth and believed that as a universal it could not be restrained, he offered very

little in opinion about the best forms for the expression of truth. Later socialists like Lukacs were to insist on realism, however, in a belief that of all the forms, it best served social need, and their judgment was based, perhaps out of humanist concerns, on the authenticity of the characterization as much as the accurate description of class relations and a faithful picture of living conditions.

Even though the novel and the modern forms of drama were essentially bourgeois, Lukacs, and later Wesker, preferred the classic style because they too believed it satisfied their need for an opportunity to explore the human quality in literature, for example with characters which were fully developed, three-dimensional and self-determined. To Wesker, naturalism means recreating reality according to nature, "everything that is naturally experienced" Distinctions 164). Like the naturalists of late nineteenth century literature, he sought to draw attention to the working class condition, but unlike Zola and other representatives of the earlier movement, Wesker ignored a preoccupation with determination or an exaggeration of life's emptiness.[3] In this respect also he agreed with Lukacs who wrote, "There is no necessity for a writer to break with his bourgeois pattern of life in making this choice between social sanity and morbidity, in

choosing the great and progressive literary traditions of realism in preference to formalistic experimentation" (The Meaning of Contemporary Realism 80). Whether writing about Shakespeare's Shylock or William Styron's novel, Sophie's Choice, Wesker is concerned with what did happen and what could have happened. Like most realists, he is occupied not by "the trivializing of reality by art, but the limit of art by reality" (Distinctions 231).

McGrath's debate with Wesker over the definition of revolutionary drama, the use of popular forms, and the administration of a theater company is more than a matter of form or ideology. It originates in epistemological differences.[4] Like most socialists McGrath wants to reveal essential truths and to express the "character of the object," but he believes the task is not quite so easy as representing surface reality. McGrath's calling in the theater grew out of the perception that the role of the working classes in its struggle against the hegemony of the bourgeois ideology is not readily apparent. The playwright, therefore, must grasp, then interpret on stage the inter-relationships of reality that are hidden from view for the average person in a presentation/re-presentation dialectic. McGrath points out, for example, that the dependence on workers by the capitalist state in Britain is easily apprehended. But "the correspondence between the new ideology of technological social democracy,

the servile welfare state, and the stuff to be seen on these stages" is less obvious ("Theory and Practice of Political Theatre" 45). For McGrath there are no universals in art because there are no universal audiences. There are only signifying practices and competing interpretations of reality which order and interpret personal experience. As an alternative playwright his duty is to reexamine the practices in class terms and to demystify power relations. McGrath explains:

> For that class consciousness to be there, more than the individual worker's own immediate, family, and local experience needs to be present in his or her mind. Very often that experience itself has been mediated through a false consciousness created by the process of living under capitalism, and requires representation: also, the experiences of other workers in other towns doing the same job or in other countries working for the same multi-national, or at other times in history, or even just down the street, need to be presented. Theatre is a graphic way of presenting other people's experience--even of re-presenting our own experience and history to ourselves. This is a valid social function of theatre. ("The Theory and Practice" 47)

The forms chosen for revealing that which is normally suppressed must therefore be dialectical, throwing the responsibility of discovery and understanding onto the audience. But the writer for working-class audiences must first be direct in his message, without that the dialectic may not begin.

Wesker's approach, on the other hand, is that of the realist who posits a real world independent of the

playwright's imagination and vision, a world which is, nonetheless, knowable to the playwright's apprehension and a world that is recognizable to the audiences. Wesker believes that the artist has no mandate other than that of being honest and of honestly portraying human experience. As an answer to those who, like McGrath, try to dictate self-imposed purposes for art, he writes, "Theories about what art must do and the way people must conduct their lives are more to do with wish-fulfillment than with truth" (Distinctions 164).

Theirs is a clash not only in ideology, but in the way they experience the world. For McGrath, art redefines surface appearances to show things as they really are. Confining art to one simple reflection of reality is asking the impossible. To seize the revolutionary character of art, the writer must reach beyond the accepted, stabilized images and fixed attitudes of the historical situation toward a depiction of new models. Producing art is a process that aspires to new perspectives, a process that begins with the artist and is validated through audience response, a process that recognizes itself as a construct. As such, the artist is continually seeking new materials, new techniques, new forms of expression.

In sharp contrast to McGrath, Wesker believes that the artist has not only access to the truth, but also the

powers of perception to reveal those truths. It's not the structures of artists' works, but "it's the quality of vision, the perception of reality, their values which create the true affinities and divisions between artists" (139). Once again echoing Lukacs' emphasis on the writer's intentions, Wesker says about himself as a writer that he "begins with experience rather than ideas." Drawing a distinction between his works and those by others which are more doctrinaire, he says:

> I'm not a writer who illustrates ideas, or explores ideas through invented characters and situations; rather I'm a writer whose experience drives me to organize that experience into a play or story because it seems to illuminate to me some aspect of human behaviour. (Distinctions 142)

And elsewhere he says his plays "are attempts to continue arguments [he has] had with friends and relatives and people that [he] worked with...The plays continue human relationships as well as arguments..." (Theatre at Work 78-80). The greatest works of literature are those which spring from the artist's experience, and so it is through the author's careful observation and straight forward presentation that he produces art.

If the author's theory of knowledge and ideology contribute to the literary form, then the playwright's relationship to the audience is also a factor. As a realist Wesker historicizes reality and accepts a shared understanding of that reality as a natural fact. He not

only trusts his audiences to recognize that reality, but he also trusts them to embrace the values, ideas and images embodied in his works. Nevertheless, the burden of responsibility for successful theater rests not on the audience, but on the playwright and the production. The humanistic truth he reflects, however, seems to appeal best to the middle classes, and the literary conventions he employs are best understood by middle-class audiences.

As one who challenges the validity of realism, McGrath sees art as a form of social production which acknowledges the plurality of viewpoints and therefore chooses one kind of drama based on the assumptions of rural, working-class audiences. The plays becomes "less a reflection of, than a reflection on, social reality" and the playwright invites the audience to co-produce the meaning (Eagleton Marxism and Literary Criticism 65). By focussing on the spectator's response as much as the play's content, McGrath has developed a relationship between the stage and the audience new to working-class theater. He trusts his working-class audiences to understand his goals and to respond responsibly by engaging in the machinery of revolution.

Both playwrights draw on honored lineages in nineteenth century traditions in working-class and socialist theater, both have paid their dues to the

disappointing business of fund-raising in the arts, and both have practiced their aesthetic philosophies with high ethical standards and consistency. More than that, their debate echoes an earlier exchange between theoreticians in literature, and because they are both practical more than theoretical, they have added significantly to the history of ideas on this subject, bringing more contemporary experiences to bear on the issues.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez said in 1982, "In reality the duty of a writer--the revolutionary duty, if you like--is that of writing well" (1). Both Wesker and McGrath seem to recognize that that is their charge and they respond to it with grave seriousness. It is appropriate that British audiences and, crucially, the British Arts Council recognize their value as a challenge from emergent forces, as new ideas which undermine and revitalize the old. It is equally important in the spirit of cooperation and for the future of socialist theater that they likewise recognize in each other the value of opposition and the value of the other's contribution.

NOTES

1. As Raymond Williams has noted in Keywords, the definition for 'naturalism' is a complex matter. It would appear that American contemporary usage of the term differs

from the British, and their respective applications of the term often fail to account for the nineteenth century French origins. After careful reading in Distinctions and other essays by Wesker, I have finally decided that Wesker's definition of naturalism comes closest to that used by Stuart Hall in a 1961 issue of Encore. Naturalism to Hall is a form that is basically realistic with the added features of "the desire to recreate working class life, the preoccupation with humanist values, and an interest in the attack upon Establishment values through social criticism" ("Beyond Naturalism Pure" 13).

In the Official Program of the Edinburgh International Television Festival, Raymond Williams argued that form includes the 1)methods of presentation, 2)varieties of selected experience, and 3) the relations between producer (or, in this case, the playwright) and the audience. The latter sections of this chapter attempt to demonstrate how the forms which Wesker developed, even though he calls them 'naturalism' correspond to the forms of realism which Lukacs preferred.

2. Published under the pseudonym "John Law."

3. Lukacs uses the term, naturalism, in reference to the French nineteenth century dramatic style that takes incidents from ordinary life and introduces no additional characters to discuss moral and social theory. The characters tell their own tales in their own words, but they distort the truth: in this case, by attempting to say too much about human nature, by relying too heavily on extraneous detail and thereby sacrificing a focussed account of the human condition. Naturalism fails because it obscures meaning and, more importantly, ideology. With an emphasis on social, biological, and economic determinism as a way of accounting for behaviour, naturalism also removes human responsibility for events over which one seems to have no real control Despite their inadequacies, Lukacs finds in both literary forms--naturalism and modernism--assumptions of realism because, even in their opposition, they address social and historical realities.

4. Much of this argument using epistemological models and their application to Wesker and McGrath is based on Terry Lovell's Pictures of Reality: Aesthetics, Politics, Pleasure, in which she discusses Brecht and Lukacs, but makes no mention of Wesker or McGrath.

CHAPTER SIX

McGrath's debate with Wesker in 1970, coincidentally or not, marked a turning point in their respective careers. For the most part, they were moving in new directions anyway. But the letters became a milestone of sorts which signed off the end of a decade that was generous to the first generation of 60s political playwrights and began a period which introduced the second wave. Among them were committed playwrights like McGrath, less bound by convention and more consciously political than their forerunners.

Because he had found his direction and support of his audiences, McGrath looked forward to the 70s with great confidence. Fully aware of what he wanted in a "truly revolutionary theatre," he launched 7:84. Although the company's first few years were marked with a number of notable productions in Trees in the Wind and Occupations by Trevor Griffiths (performed by 7:84 England in 1972 and 1974 respectively), and The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil (performed by 7:84 Scotland in 1973), they struggled with a fair-minded arrangement of payment without sacrificing needed leadership, uncertain funding, and definitions of leadership. Restricted to some extent by the threat of funding cuts by the British Arts Council,

McGrath and company nevertheless explored fresh subject matter and new forms. McGrath experimented with Brechtian theater and, with his new audiences in mind, discarded it for other stylized, more appealing forms. Unlike Wesker, he found his direction quickly after those early years.

Wesker, on the other hand, suddenly found himself without support in the 70s. Like other first generation 60s playwrights who had risked reputation and sometimes professional opportunity to fight the rigidity of Britain's class system, he was unfortunately trapped by the changing climate. After a decade of being a spokesperson for socialism and working-class playwrights, he found himself surprisingly unpopular in the press, and even worse, the new generation of playwrights had no longer any use for him. Joe Orton expressed the sentiments of many who found Wesker's work outmoded:

> Every good play expresses something of the time in which it was written and at the moment we're living in a very sick society. During the 50s, when people were still concerned with changing the world and finding useful political solutions, plays like Arnold Wesker's Chicken Soup with Barley were quite representative. But today there is a general sense of despair about politics because we know it can't provide any real solutions. Still, I would never claim I was a pessimistic writer. I'm too amused by the way people carry on to give in to despair. (Lahr 166)

And yet, Wesker had accomplished what he set out to do--the government supported theatrical groups that would never have found earlier success, working-class playwrights were

welcome in a variety of venues, social protest in the theater was the rule more than the exception. In any case, Wesker's future at the beginning of the 70s looked uncertain. Wesker had come to the end of his most productive decade. With some sadness and bitterness he had also laid his hopes for Centre 42 to rest. Indeed, he regarded his career with mixed feelings: he had not exhausted his ideas, nor had he lost his will to do battle with his plays; nevertheless, he had lost his original fervor.

The next few years did indeed bring deep disappointments to Wesker. The Old Ones, scheduled to open at the National Theatre in 1972, was withdrawn from production by Kenneth Tynan. In an unprecedented and unrelated incident also in 1972, the actors hired for The Journalists rebelled, refusing to perform in his play. And his 1977 play, The Merchant, suddenly lost its star Zero Mostel, who died of a heart attack shortly before opening. During this difficult period, Wesker slowly began his shift away from themes which directly reflect the socialist faith in the collective effort to a focus on one or two lone characters largely isolated from the stream of human activity. It was a remarkable turn-around from his earliest works which were popular primarily because they spoke for the individual who engages in the concerns of his age.

Shortly after World War II, Wesker's plays, which carried a mixed message of disillusionment and hope were celebrated by Britons who were themselves feeling some measure of despair and yet a longing also for a sign of optimism. The trilogy--Chicken Soup with Barley (1957), Roots (1958), and I'm Talking About Jerusalem (1958-59)--excited audiences who were attracted to his faith in the power of humanism, his confidence in his working-class background, and his concern for the leftist movement in Britain which appeared to be dying. As critic Stuart Hall wrote, "The sense of life to which Arnold Wesker responded [was] not somewhere in the distant future, to be brought about by the rising and falling of anonymous masses of people: it [was] here and now, pushing through the crevices of our class society and our class culture, breaking fresh ground where it can, taking root in people's lives..." ("Something to Live For" 113).

Critics and audience were particularly responsive to the struggles of Wesker's Jewish, working-class stage family with strong socialist roots, largely because the family speaks for a similar loss of purpose and a profound disappointment in the Welfare state, but also because they retain their enthusiasm, self-initiative, and feisty spirit. The Kahn's son is a young agitator whose story runs through all parts of the trilogy. In Chicken Soup with

Barley (1957), he joins his Communist mother in organizing anti-fascist act in London's East End. The play covers two decades of frustration in political activism, during which Ronnie and his mother Sarah struggle to hold on to their commitment.

Defeated first of all by an apathetic system, they find themselves also opposed by Ronnie's sister who is tired of political in-fighting. Ada complains particularly about party labels that stand between people: "God in heaven save me from the claptrap of a three-penny pamphlet. How many friends has the Party lost because of lousy, meaningless titles they gave to people" (Vol. I, 42). She continues, complaining next about working-class activists like her parents who do not really want to eliminate "the jungle" of industrialism, but surreptitiously hope to own the industrial complex themselves. Later, a friend is critical of Sarah for using simplistic terms, like good and evil, to explain everything. Speaking of Sarah he says, "For her the world is black and white. If you're not white so you must be black." He added, "The only thing that mattered was to be happy and eat. Anything that made you unhappy or stopped you from eating was the fault of capitalism. Do you think she ever read a book on political economy in her life? Bless! Someone told her socialism was happiness so she joined the party" (Vol.I, 62).

Even Ronnie, tired of the struggle, accuses her of

putting her party loyalties before the needs of the family. He is disillusioned with communism after the Russian invasion of Hungary. But Sarah does not falter in her conviction, "Socialism is my light, can you understand that? A way of life" (Vol.I, 74). Begging Ronnie not to decamp, she tells him about a neighbor who saved Ada's life with a bowl of chicken soup with barley. Through this anecdote, it becomes clear that the community spirit of cooperation and caring is more important to Sarah than particulars of the party's ideology:

> Nothing means anything! There! Philosophy! I know! So? Nothing! Despair--die then! Will that be achievement? To die? You don't want to do that, Ronnie. So what if it all means nothing? When you know <u>that</u> you can start again. Please, Ronnie, don't let me finish this life thinking I lived for nothing. We got through, didn't we? We got scars but we got through. You hear me, Ronnie? You've got to care, you've got to care or you'll die. (Vol. I, 75)

Ronnie tries to embrace her words, but he fails, "I--I can't, not now, it's too big, not yet--it's too big to care for it, I--I..." (Vol.I, 75).

The scene is uncomfortable, partly because Sarah seems to demand too much. Like Ronnie, audiences today feel they probably can not follow Sarah's advice, but they respond to the sincerity of someone who <u>does</u> care in an age when it is more fashionable to be cynical. In the mid-fifties, audiences were rather startled by the emotional outbursts. John Garforth, for example, writer for <u>Encore</u>,

commented at length on the weaknesses in Wesker's impulses, but ended his article by praising them:

> He has little idea of what we should do, but by God he cares! He cares enough to traipse around the country begging support from philistine trade unionists, he cares enough to go to gaol against nuclear diplomacy, to look naive and perhaps look pompous, because it is the only thing to do. Maybe these things are grotesquely insufficient, as we all feel when we vote Labour and sit down in Trafalgar Square, but we have to do something, if only to show we care. For when we stop caring, we may as well be dead. (Vol.I, 43)

Wesker's search for values, his passion, and his relentless sense of responsibility caught the imagination of many who had already been stirred by Osborne and Arden.

What they imagined in Wesker was a simple worker who revealed the truth about working-class life and socialist ideals in one or two gripping dramas. What they got was a playwright who was driven more by a righteous indignation than a political ideology, and who refused to conform to the latest fashions, and who planned to make a career of playwriting. Wesker was not their simple worker-poet or a party mouthpiece, but a complex playwright concerned about the basic morality which protects the individual. He subscribed to socialist values as long as they coincided with humanist issues. Hence, socialism in any narrow sense was never the issue so much as a protest against the many variations on tyranny which constrict the human spirit.

Indeed, throughout his plays run the passionate belief

in the potential of humankind and a brooding over the obstacles that deaden aspiration. Some of his sensitivity is personal, to be sure, in that he has fought what he saw as an attack by small-minded critics and other 'lilliputians' in his profession, but from the beginning--long before he believed in a conspiracy among London critics--he has championed the rights of Jews, of Palestinians, of his family, of the Irish, of women, of indeed anyone whose individualism is threatened.

Particularly in the early years, Wesker's "ongoing struggle to achieve justice" was the primary focus of his plays, and socialism was seen as a remedy for social injustice. In Roots (1958), for example, he indirectly attacked the crippling effect of class attitudes. In this second part of the trilogy we never see Ronnie Kahn, but we feel his influence on Beattie Bryant, an impressionable, young girl from a rural poor family who would like to know as much as he does about politics and classical music. Throughout, she badgers her family with Ronnie's teachings:

> It's no good having friends who scratch each other's back,' he say. 'The excitement in knowing people is to hand on what you know and to learn what you don't know. Learn from me,' he say, 'I don't know much but learn what I know'. (Vol.I, 114)

Beattie's family is annoyed, but polite for the most part, and listen even though they are absorbed by other, everyday details of their lives. She continues with her preaching

and teaching as she puts on for them a record of Bizet's L'Arlesienne Suite,

> Now list. This is a simple piece of music, it's not highbrow but it's full of living. And that's what he say socialism is. 'Christ,' he say. 'Socialism isn't talking all the time, it's living, it's singing, it's dancing, it's being interested in what go on around you, it's being concerned about people and the world'" and she dances around the room. "Listen to that Mother. Is it difficult? Is it squit? It's light. It make me feel light and confident and happy. God, Mother, we could all be so much more happy and alive. (Vol.I, 128-9)

The scene has a description of socialism which is very close those which Wesker used in his 1960 pamphlet, O,Mother, Is It Worth It? which he used to stir up trade union support for Centre 42.

In the third act the tension mounts, however, as it becomes more and more apparent that the city boy who seems to know so much about intellectual matters is not planning to honor his commitment to her. Beattie's family is justifiably angry with Ronnie and with her. They argue with Beattie, urging her to re-embrace their way of life. As long as she believes that she has learned very little from Ronnie, she heeds their advice, but she is also angry that she has no roots, no understanding of the forces that rule their lives, and no power to change things.

Beattie is frustrated until she again discovers another opportunity to teach them something. She begins by quoting Ronnie and stops. She can carry on without

him: "D'you hear that" D'you hear it? Did you listen to me? I'm talking. Jenny, Frankie, Mother--I'm not quoting no more...God in heaven, Ronnie! It does work, it's happening to me, I can feel it's happened, I'm beginning, on my own two feet--I'm beginning..." (Vol.I, 14).

Much of this play is autobiographical. Like Beattie, Wesker achieved some measure of actualization by talking about the virtues of self-education. But he goes beyond the autobiographical to attack class prejudices, both from inside and outside the working classes. He makes it clear that unspoken strictures limit the working classes who can better their lives with a will to overcome the inertia of custom and habit. And Roots addresses the problem of post-war apathy by suggesting that the British middle-class could also improve their own lives, if only they would take some initiative to loosen the rigid class structure.

Wesker continued exploring themes about the stunted human potential in the third part of the trilogy, I'm Talking about Jerusalem (1958-59). Here again is the Kahn family, but it's much later. Ronnie's sister Ada has married a veteran of the Spanish Civil War and World War II. The couple wants to move to a rural Norfolk area where they can live a natural, rural, noncapitalistic life making handcrafted furniture, where they can reintegrate work and living.

Being from the city and already corrupted by the

invidious power of capitalist competition, however, Dave makes some mistakes of his own. And his success is further blocked by others who are also contaminated by the post-war industrial system--by disloyal and dishonest customers, by workers who take no pride in their work, and by competitors in the factories who can produce furniture at a much lower cost. Dave and Ada eventually give up their venture and return to the city, much against Ronnie's advice. Sounding the earlier indignation of his mother, he regards their failure as symptomatic of the contradictions in their generation:

> They sang the Red Flag in Parliament and then started building atom bombs. Lunatics! Raving Lunatics! And a whole generation of us laid down our arms and retreated into ourselves, a whole generation! But you two. I don't understand what happened to you two. I used to watch you and boast about you. Well, thank God, I thought, it works! But look at us now, now it's all of us. (Vol.I, 215)

By this time Sarah has grown philosophical. She has learned to accept political defeats, "Did you expect the world to suddenly focus on them and say 'Ah, socialism is beautiful', did you silly boy? Since when did we preach this sort of poverty?" Ada joins Sarah by explaining to him that being successful in any idealistic enterprise requires a whole philosophy of living. One cannot succeed in a capitalist system merely by making a solitary gesture; one cannot achieve satisfaction with anything less than a

"complete statement," and that requires many others to join in public and economic cooperation. Without the help of others, their efforts amounted to nothing more than a foolish experiment.

It would appear that Wesker is here advocating socialism because it can afford to protect the worker in a nonprofit enterprise. There was certainly a time when Wesker believed in the unqualified power of socialism to shield the worker from a profit motive. But more than advance the cause of socialism in Jerusalem, Wesker is criticizing any system that becomes too large to make allowances for the nonconforming individual, in this case the artisan who wants to employ old-fashioned technique. As Wesker later said, "I don't believe it is any more pleasant living in a socialist than a capitalist society if you are still a tiny cog in a huge industrial machine. The notion that you own the machine is no comfort" (Avis). Conscious of being lost in the system, Dave points out the futility of his dreams to Ronnie:

> Face it--as an essential member of society I don't really count. I'm not saying I'm useless, but machinery and modern techniques have come about to make me the odd man out. Here I've been, comrade citizen, presenting my offerings and the world's rejected them. I don't count, Ronnie, and if I'm not sad about it you musn't be either.

Dave then challenges Ronnie to follow up his own dreams, to pursue his own socialist ideals, to act on his beliefs.

In the end we see the hope of Jerusalem slipping away, partly the fault of Ronnie's irresolution and partly the inability of Dave's community to support him in his vision.

Discussing the socialist themes of his trilogy to the Morning Star, Wesker said the plays demonstrate that"you must pay attention to three component aspects of human activity and relationships if you wish to build a socialist society":

> The first [in Chicken Soup] is the importance of maintaining a political stand in public. The second [in Roots] is to do with private relationships--you don't only have to talk about a better society, you have also to consider your private actions as far as possible. And thirdly [in Jerusalem] there is the question of man's relationship to his work. (Avis)

And it could also be said that Wesker's corollaries to the socialist themes are that individuals need freedom enough to make a political stand in public, even when the stand is not fashionable; one also needs the freedom to be a participant in the political arena, even with a working-class background or a limited education; and one needs the freedom to earn a living wage in a climate that values high quality products made by the individual, even when they are not profitable. In short, hindsight shows us that while Wesker's themes have been read largely with a socialist interpretation, they may also be seen as humanistic. Moreover, those themes which appear to be inherited from the politics of his Communist mother, even in his earlier

plays about work and exploitation, can more accurately be read in terms of Wesker's Jewish background and its passionate concern with freedom and justice for the sanctity of the individual.

If I'm Talking about Jerusalem was significant for its discussions about economic relationships, then even more important was The Kitchen (written first in 1956 and rewritten for production in 1959) which had its setting in the workplace. Here again is a statement of Wesker's outrage at the inhuman treatment workers receive when production schedules take priority over the employees' personal problems. One of the few plays of its kind, the Kitchen focuses almost exclusively on workers at work, in this case, where food is being prepared and served. The pace of the rush hour is pressured and unrelenting. Even when the workers fight violently with each other, fall in love, incur accidents, and collapse from the strain, the meal hour proceeds as usual and customers are served with dispatch. At the end of the lunch hour the new cook objects to the pace and the impersonal treatment, but waitresses and cooks carry on with business as usual:

PETER: What do you want?
KEVIN: Well, speak a little human like, will yer please?
PETER: No time, no time. Next.
CYNTHIA: Two cod.
JACKIE: One cheese salad.
VIOLET: One ham salad. [Tearfully after someone else has knocked into her].
BETTY: My steaks ready yet?
VIOLET: A fruit flan and two coffees.

GASTON: About time.
BETTY: I´m sorry.
DAPHNE: Two roast chicken...(Vol.II, 45)

During the interlude Peter tries to bring into the factory-like atmosphere the human touch:

> We are all given a chance to dream. No one is going to laugh, we love each other, we protect each other--someone tell us a dream, just to us, no one else, the ovens are low, the customers gone, Marango is gone,it´s all quiet. God has given us a chance now, we never have the opportunity again, so dream--some--who? Dimitri--you, you dream first. (Vol.II, 49)

But no one can think of anything significant to talk about, and few want to reveal their personal selves. Later, when pressed by his work, Peter remembers a disappointment in his own failure to relate a dream: "I can´t, I can´t. I can´t dream in a kitchen!" (Vol.II, 61).

Only when Peter, the erratic fish cook, violently loses his temper is the assembly line brought to a stop. Mr. Marango the proprietor has become angry with him for feeding a vagrant, Monique, his lover, has just spurned him, and when orders have backed up, Violet has tried to serve herself from his station. Unable to stand the pressure, Peter attacks the gas line which feeds the stoves. His hands are badly hurt in the fight that ensues. Only then does the boss take notice of his workers. Peter comments sarcastically, "Now he cares." As they help Peter to the hospital, Mr. Marango questions the workers´ ingratitude, "Why does everybody sabotage me, Frank? I

give work, I pay well, yes? They eat what they want, don't they? I don't know what more to give a man. He works, he eats, I give him money. This is life, isn't it?" And he shouts at Peter, "What more do you want? What is there more, tell me?" (Vol.II, 68-9). We can assume that, once Marango collects himself, service as usual is resumed.

Although the play brings the workers into focus and denounces their exploitation, nowhere does Wesker advocate a socialist corrective. To read the Kitchen narrowly as an ideological statement overlooks a deeper commitment in Wesker's principles to basic human compassion. Following the success of the Kitchen, Wesker wrote a variety of plays which similarly featured men frustrated in their professions by a society that holds a flagrant disregard for the individual.

In Chips with Everything (1960), a banker's son and a young serviceman who can't stop smiling are tyrannized by the officers and their demands of conformity to regulations. For some perverse Oedipal reason, Pip wants to be an enlisted man, although he qualifies for officer's training. He refuses to join the officers, even when he has no real sympathy for his mates. He says with disdain that the working classes breed babies and they eat chips with everything, "Chips with every damn thing" (Vol.III, 17).

Despite Pip's desultory personality and his

unconscious choice to associate with the working classes to rebel against his wealthy father, we are drawn to his cause, his right to be a rich boy in a working man's army. And we watch with some feeling of helplessness as the officers wear him down. As critic Glenda Leeming points out, the conversion happens in stages, first as Pip first realizes why he's rebelling, and then decides "he is incapable of becoming one of the chip-eating masses" (Wesker 62).

Smiler's case is even sadder. Because they are unable to "train him to the maximum of efficiency, discipline, and obedience," that is to stop his smiling, the officers torment him with insults and repetition drills to the last scene in which he appears a completely broken man. He has run away in a blind fury and has returned a bewildered child. His mates bathe his bleeding feet and put him to bed, but the Pilot Officer wants him arrested anyway for desertion. In defiance, the men surround him on his bed, all except Pip. While the Pilot Officer is shouting out orders for their arrest as well, Pip begins to change from an airman's uniform into an officer's. He has capitulated to protect the men:

> Don't worry, Charles, nor you, Ginger, nor you, Andrew--none of you, don't worry, you shan't be harmed--it was a good act. We like you for it, we're proud of you, happy with you--you do agree, don't you, sir? These are men we need and these are the men we must keep. We are not hard men,

> Charles--don't think ill of use, the stories you read, the tales you hear. We are good, honest, hard-working like yourselves and understanding; above all we are understanding, aren't we, sir? There, that's a good fit, I think. (Vol.III, 67)

Pip then takes the roster and reads it with the authority of an officer. The destruction of Pip and Smiler is complete.

Capitalism and the army as institutions would have been easy targets for Wesker's social criticism. The focus of his attack, however, was not primarily on the threat of capitalism or the military _per se_, but more specifically on the forces of destruction that he apparently finds isolatable within any system, forces that undermine the human spirit, forces that arise in all aspects of human endeavor and cut across the boundaries of all institutions. What destroyed Pip and the Smiler, for instance, was intolerance for diversity, a pernicious impulse that is not restricted to any one ideology or government body.

Narrow-minded authority which kills the "yeast of a creative artist's personal vision" was the theme of Wesker's next major play, _Their Very Own and Golden City_ (1963-64). In it, he attacks petty ill will, jealousy or lack of faith which stands in the way of implementing a grand and new project. The "lilliputian" mentality, as Wesker later put it, refers to "the mean-spirited person who feels compelled to reduce people to his own miserable stature" (_The Journalists_ 144). He offered examples:

> The lilliputian lover competes with his (or her) loved one instead of complementing her. The lilliputian journalist resents the interviewee's fame, influence or achievement rather than wishing to honour it or caution it or seriously question it. the lilliputian bureaucrat (involved in the same process, but in reverse) seeks to maintain his own size by not acknowledging the possibility of growth in those over whom he officiates; he doesn't cut down to size, he keeps down to size. The lilliputian revolutionary is more concerned to indulge resentments or pay off private scores than to arrive at justice. (The Journalists 12)

One victim of a lilliputian bureaucracy is Andrew Cobham of Their Very Own and Golden City who tries to find support for building six model cities, six golden cities which he hopes will "lay the foundations of a new way of life for all society" in "England's green and promised land" (Vol.II, 176). It is a dream he has had since he was young: "cities of light and shade...cities for lovers that frighten no one...cosy cities, family cities...cities for crowds and lone wolves...cities with sound for the blind and colour for the deaf" (Vol.II, 187-88). He needs to find, however, trade union endorsement and 16,000 subscribers who will pay to build the cities in installments over five years' time.

Andy's project bears an uncanny resemblance to Wesker's the early stages with Centre 42 --its six music festivals, its push for subscriptions and its compromises. Like Wesker, Andy is hampered by a disbelieving political climate, and he is ultimately defeated by short-sighted

bureaucrats and politicians who, ignoring the potential of art to act as a remedy for insane behavior in this world, succumb to "tarnished values and confused manners" (a phrase Wesker borrowed from Ruskin). His efforts are so frustrated by a lack of support in government and labor unions that only one city is ultimately built, much to Cobham's disappointment. What finally disheartens him is the unavoidable fact of compromise. Although he achieves some degree of public acknowledgement for his work, he has bargained away his dreams. And he bitterly blames the leftist political forces around him:

> Prefects! That's all; the Labour movement provides prefects to guard other men's principles for living. Oh we negotiate for their better application, shorter working week and all that but--prefects! They need them, we supply them. (Vol. II, 202).

He feels betrayed by the very community he had sought to endorse. And out of this experience he concludes that--whatever the political affiliation--there are politicians who need to control the outcome, even at the expense of those who would like to support their cause. Cobham makes his point between clenched teeth, "I don't suppose there's such a thing as democracy, really, only a democratic way of manipulating power. And equality? None of that either, only a gracious way of accepting inequality" (Vol.II, 202-203). The play ends with a flashback to the hopeful, or possibly ironic, words of Cobham as a young man who asserts

his faith in a benevolent outcome, whatever the obstacles:

YOUNG JESSIE: They've locked us in.
YOUNG ANDY: I can't believe there's not one door open in this place
YOUNG JESSIE: You and your stories about golden cities--they've locked us in.
YOUNG ANDY: I know there's a door open, I tell you...
YOUNG JESSIE: He's found one, he's found one--Paul's found an open door...
YOUNG JESSIE: How did you know, my ragged-arsed bothers?
YOUNG ANDY: Because we're on the side of the angels, lass.
YOUNG JESSIE: --and are people good?
YOUNG ANDY: Aye--and people are good... (Vol.II, 203-204)

Cobham's disillusionment must have been Wesker's way of expressing his own pain at the pending demise of Centre 42. Especially in scenes where Cobham asks if it's "better to risk defeat or compromise," Wesker must have been weighing the dire consequences of his refusing to compromise his own artistic aims against the economic survival of the Roundhouse. Like Cobham, Wesker resented the political in-fighting and commercial considerations that dominated and exploded their ideals.

During this period of intense wrangling with the directors of the Roundhouse and Centre 42, Wesker wrote two plays which began to show his shift away from explicitly socialist themes--The Friends (1967) and The Old Ones (1970). In the Friends, as McGrath pointed out in his Black Dwarf review, Wesker began to question the effects of social revolution as compared to scientific revolution, of collective ownership, of sacrificing friendship and unity for a cause. And in The Old Ones, political institutions

play no appreciable role at all. But in all these plays Wesker tenaciously pursues old themes which champion the rights of the individual. And he seeks those abstract qualities that make human relationships worth redeeming, while repudiating the forces that make men suffer.

In The Friends and The Old Ones, we find once again defiance in characters who are oppressed, in this case by old age and death, and once again, themes of hope and despair in an utter rejection of defeat. Fashionable or not, Wesker continued to articulate the Jewish temperament of "melancholy optimism" and nineteenth century socialist ideals which protect the common man and believe in the restorative value of high art. His ideas in these plays have not changed. They are essentially echoes of his trilogy or Chips or The Kitchen, pronounced earlier as good examples of socialist theater. But two changes have occurred: Wesker's characters are no longer the mouthpieces for socialist themes since they are no longer victims exclusively of economic and social oppression, and the expectations of his audience have shifted. Having been educated by the changes of the 60s, they now expect more leftist, radical theater. So Wesker's plays with their nineteenth century socialist principles seemed oddly out of place next to Edward Bond's plays, the 7:84, Belt and Brace Roadshow, or the Gay Sweatshop. Although Wesker moved slightly away from socialism in the selection of his

subject matter, he has not changed as significantly as his readership which, at the same time, shifted to the left. In retrospect, we can also recognize some aspects of his earlier work that indicated a basically conservative approach.

Speaking in 1977 to the communist newspaper, the Morning Star, he defended the consistency of his position:

> I think that while I've lost none of my capacity for outrage against inequality and injustice, and racism and so on, I suppose I'm more and more worried about contributing toward the creation of a state of society which then considers it is doing me the favour of giving me my liberty.
>
> I suppose more than anything I am disturbed at what appears to be the emergence of Socialism in the east as a system which graciously, and often not so graciously, confers and takes away individual liberty and feels it has the right to do so. (Chambers)

Because it deliberately ignores the collective, his statement sounds almost reactionary for a socialist playwright. And many reading it would feel vindicated in their long-held opinions that Wesker was only a socialist in the abstract. And yet, those who expected a Marxist socialist were bound to be disappointed because, although he has always concerned himself with socialist issues against exploitation and for a social justice, he was never fully in agreement with all of socialism's aim. Indeed, he subscribed more faithfully to a profound individualism, and in that conviction was a source of conflict with the

collective principles of socialism. After the collapse of Centre 42 in 1969, and while Wesker was under attack from McGrath and others, he simply resolved that conflict by rebuffing any group identification, particularly a political affiliation.

Shortly after Wesker's debate with McGrath, Wesker wrote another play set in the workplace. He wrote The Journalists (1972) after spending six weeks observing the staff of the Sunday Times in which he used a format very similar to that of the Kitchen, in that each employee operated out of a work station and the story unfolds amidst productive activity. Like the Kitchen, there is remarkably little plot. The emphasis of the play is rather on the methods of production and the motives of the workers who are,in this case, situated in a newsroom. Significantly, because Wesker was beginning to drop his socialist themes, the play was not about worker exploitation, but about the harm caused by jaded and cynical newspaper writers. Finding in the journalist a mirror of lilliputianism in all of us, Wesker's attacked the corrupting effect of what he sees as a way of life in Britain--the sardonic remark, the lack of appreciation for excellence, the need to mock seriousness.

The lead character in the Journalists, therefore, is not one of the oppressed, but among the oppressors. She is a news analyst who searches out likely subjects which she

uses as object lessons for her readers. One of her targets is a National Health Service gynecologist who refuses to perform an abortion on a 12-year old girl. Mary wants her reporters to find out if the doctor's married, if she has had an unhappy love affair, if they can get a photograph of her, "even if it's of her peering reluctantly round a door" (106). Over the objections of others who call it 'Harold Robbins' journalism, Mary carries on. Without bothering to look first for the truth of the matter, Mary suspects everyone's motives, except her own.

Among the giants she tries to topple is a charismatic MP who is allegedly the leader of a band of young people who act as a foil for the 'Angry Brigade' and who play Robin Hood for the elderly. They are suspected of robbing supermarkets for old-age pensioners and banks for the strikers' payroll. Also they allegedly kidnap a store manager to teach him a lesson in civility. Mary is determined to expose them, "It's sentimental nonsense which belongs neither to our nature, our history or our situation and I despise it" (The Journalists 121).

Trying to warn Mary to back off, her editor tells her that as a journalist she should not exaggerate the facts to support her construction of the truth. As one of the other characters later said sardonically, a journalist is one "who possesses himself of a fantasy and lures the truth

towards it" (133). Attempting to counter that impulse in his staff, the editor admonishes Mary, "You can't reveal, you can only inform." She must examine the complexities of the news before arriving at simplistic judgments, regardless of how morally correct she believes she is:

> ...we have the power to tip it one way or the other; not simply by what we say but the way we say it. The habit of knocking down gods is very seductive and contagious and we're very good at being spiteful. I'm not all that proud of the history of journalism, Mary, but I don't want to the Sunday Paper perpetuating it. (The Journalists 121)

As it turns out, Mary's speculation about the gang and its leader seem to be correct, and the paper has the opportunity to break the news first. But the editor kills the story without telling her, partly because the details are unconfirmed, largely because it appears that Mary's son is one of the idealistic bandits. We are left wondering if the editor's choice was in the best interest of reporting the truth and, whether Mary would have made the same decision if she were put in a similar position. More than that, for the first time in Wesker's plays we are forced to realize in the Journalists that it is not only tyranny that causes suffering, but also the demeaning effect on management which is driven to keep the machinery in motion. Even the oppressor may be intimidated by the system. The topic is something of a switch, since up to that point, Wesker's had focused exclusively on victims of oppression.

Using the Journalists, Wesker fully developed the destructive nature of intimidation, an idea which runs throughout his works to one degree or another, but becomes particularly potent in his plays about employer/employee relationships. In The Journalists and The Old Ones, however, where power struggles lie outside of economic relationships, Wesker laid out other forms of intimidation: the brutal potential of the press, and in The Old Ones, the scarcity of time and the pain of inevitable deterioration for those who "have nothing to lose but their life" (III, 160).

The theme of intimidation is handled somewhat ambiguously in The Wedding Feast (1972) when a magnanimous, but arrogant employer violates British class etiquette by attending uninvited the wedding party of an employee. At evening's end, the shoe manufacturer Litvanov has been humiliated by the very people he controls in his factory and he has been forced to accept the wide disparity between his station and theirs, even though he was born a peasant. Critic Benedict Nightingale rightly points out that it is the system itself that is under fire, rather than the manager or the worker (Dornan Interview). It is the system which drives apart human beings and which blocks a recognition of their commonality. But, depending on the director's preference or even the audience's viewpoint, the play could accommodate just as easily either a socialist

or capitalist interpretation. More important, Wesker could have tipped the balance himself in the writing, but he opted instead for a delicate handling of both sides. An earlier Wesker might have portrayed a less sympathetic, flatter figure in Litvanov--someone more like Officer Hill in Chips or the Kitchen's boss Marango--but the mature, yet still self-righteous Arnold Wesker settled for the more judicious theme which somehow makes everyone a victim.

Nowhere is his defense of the individual over the state more in evident than it is in his reshaping of Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice. In Wesker's Merchant (1975-76), Shylock tends more to his scholarly pursuits than to his wealth. But when his close gentile friend Antonio wants to borrow money, he cannot lend it, according to Venetian law, without a contract which specifies when the loan will fall due and what the conditions of the default should be. To make a mockery of the regulations governing jews in business, which both Antonio and Shylock find injust, they agree to draw up a bogus contract which requires a pound of flesh as recompense in the event that Antonia must default. In this respect, the openhearted and generous Shylock is similar to the expansive Litvanov and, like the manufacturer, cannot accept that a basically good man like him must be governed by humiliating laws and customs. In the end, Portia saves Antonio, just as she

does in Shakespeare's version, but the Venetian courts punish him anyway by taking away his books. A victim of the system which drives a wedge between two well-meaning parties, Shylock leaves the courtroom quite embittered.

Two points make The Merchant important for the discussion here. First, the play comes closest to exploring Wesker's understanding of the conflict between the individual and the state. Not long after he wrote The Merchant, Wesker lined out his distinction between 'state-right freedom', in which the individual is subordinated to the state, and 'birth-right freedom', in which the state entrusts the individual with certain "responsibilities of freedom" (Distinctions 223-226). In his spring, 1979 essay he argued that the conditions of a state-right freedom should be tolerated only in times of crisis. But, he lectures, citizens should be educated sufficiently to recognize a true crisis. Possibly recalling his stern words to McGrath in which he wrote, "we cannot borrow 'other people's urgency'," Wesker warned against assuming that any national dilemma constituted a crisis. He admonished Britons to keep some perspective, to maintain an awareness of history and to call upon the "nation's collective conscience, a kind of ever-present and constantly added-to body of writings which persistently nag away and question what a majority has taken for granted, or been misled into accepting, or been forced to accept"

(224). He was referring to the contributions by legislators, judges, philosophers, politicians, and, of course, artists, who keep the debate over the endowment of individuality and free thinking alive.

Second, The Merchant is yet another example of Wesker's drift away from explicitly socialist themes. Indeed, lengthy discussions tend to raise religious questions more than political ones. From the time of The Merchant on, over the last twelve years, Wesker has written mainly one-acts, in which an institution, political or religious, is rarely mentioned (One More Ride on the Merry-go-Round, which is not a political play, is an exception). He has concentrated, instead, on isolated persons, mostly women, who are imprisoned by disease, stereotyping, loneliness, mistakes in judgment. In Mothers, Yard Sale, Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon, Annie Wobbler, they are alone--separated from lovers, at odds with their children, out of reach of family, unfulfilled by their profession. In each of the vignettes the women endure their isolation, but they also fight their oppressor, however abstract, demonstrating always a fierce determination to maintain self-respect and dignity. Only in Caritas (1980), a play about a cloistered nun, is the woman situated within a system. But here the system is again threatening as she feels the attempt to absorb her.

But in all of the later plays, regardless of the circumstances, the woman fights bravely to overcome her private oppressor.

It is difficult to say why Wesker has brought his talents to bear almost exclusively on these figures. In many ways, they remind us of his own shaken confidence since the days when he realized he was no longer part of the latest London craze in theater. He told a Guardian interviewer, "I don't think I've quite recovered from that disastrous production of The Friends in London. It was the director's fault--my fault. I allowed the actors to be terrorized by one other actor" (Leeming, Wesker 93). Wesker may also find the one-woman production easy to cast and easy to produce since he has had some trouble finding a venue. And too, having been accused for many years by feminists of not understanding the female psyche, Wesker may have made these women a deliberate study in fortitude. Or, and this seems most likely, the portraits of these women may be in some way autobiographical.

In his essays, in his large productions and small, Wesker consistently and staunchly defended the primacy of the individual. Early Wesker celebrated individuality in the working classes, in families and at work. Later Wesker found interest in the individuals from all socio-economic levels, but they are isolated. The full spectrum of his works illustrates more accurately a spirited outrage at

intimidation in all its forms and "supremacy of the human being over the state, over repressive authority, over that which aims to frustrate initiative, cripple imagination, induce conformity (Distinctions 283).

This emphasis contradicts, of course, earlier characterizations of Wesker as primarily a socialist writer. Where convenient, Wesker drew on his socialist upbringing and sympathies, but over the years he has refined his stance and his writings to reflect a less political and more "universal" interest in the human condition. As Barker described it, "Wesker's work shows a decline of faith in corporate action and a retreat into individual concerns, a redefinition of the meaning of revolution from the social to the personal" ("All at Sea Without a Rudder" 10)

The watershed appears to fall in the early seventies, around the time of his debate with McGrath. From that point on Wesker's plays deal more and more with those who were abused, not by a particular system, but by misfortune. And the solutions, if offered, could rarely be construed as political. That is not to say, however, that Wesker has lost his sense of commitment. To the contrary, he is still writes with all his principles in full view. But without socialist solutions for his isolated figures, the palliatives seem so weak that the characters graphically

illustrate what Wesker has been telling us all along, that because of differences in values, experiences, personalities, and backgrounds, communication between human beings is "far more difficult than [we] imagined" (Distinctions 8).

Where Wesker's plays have left off, with isolated individuals battling the forces which create barriers between human beings, McGrath's plays began. In most of his earliest works--Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun (pub. 1966), Random Happenings in the Hebrides (pub. 1972), and Bakke's Night of Fame (pub. 1973)--we find lone heroes, some of them wildly rebellious, in direct conflict with social institutions, and not always offering socialist solutions. Unlike some of Wesker's later lead characters, however, McGrath's figures always protest social injustice, even while suffering personal abuse. In Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun, for example, we have Gunner O'Rourke, "a brawling, hot-tempered, sardonic, irresponsible man, brooding on reaching his 30th birthday" (Mitchell 402). After becoming "blackly drunk," O'Rourke exposes the hypocrisy of his superior officer and the absurdity of his guard duty when he first throws himself out of the NAAFI canteen window and later commits suicide. O'Rourke's death is a real inconvenience to Evans whose hopes for promotion are ruined. He dies next to the Bofors gun, drawing attention to the pettiness of a system which

demands wasted manhours to guard obsolete weapons that Evans says, "somebody might need... later on, when the time comes" (9). In O'Rourke's last speech he says sarcastically

> ...as my thirtieth year looms up to strike me between the eyes, I would indeed do anything, anything, to preserve and shelter from all Bolshevik harm, a thing so beautifully useless, so poignantly past it, so wistfully outdated, as my youth, or a Bofors gun. I would, and I shall, lay down my life for it. I have tried already, and failed. Here, in the sacred presence, of the Bofors gun, I can only succeed. (83)

The lone character in Bakke's Night of Fame, in this case a prisoner in his last night on death row, is similarly manic, possessed by an "ultimate despair deep within" (Bofors Gun 8). Although cool on the surface, he too reveals a quiet desperation while he toys with the consciences of the warden and priest, both corrupted by the immoral system of capital punishment. He plays a game in which he seduces his jailers into into questioning their sense of reality, making them doubt their confidence in the truth. At one point, for example, Bakke drops hints of his innocence to the priest who believes he might have, at last, heard what actually happened when the girl was murdered. But Bakke then calls himself a compulsive liar. Using lines from Hamlet which call into question the problem of appearances and reality, he also discloses that he was once an actor. And yet, his earlier hints seem so truthful that the priest and the audience are left

wondering if he were, in fact, innocent of the crime for which he was finally electrocuted.

Jimmy Litherland in Random Happenings of the Hebrides, or The Social Democrat and the Stormy Sea is another misfit, although not quite so uncontrollable as Bakke or O'Rourke. As a young city boy from Liverpool trying to find a home in the Scottish islands, he often finds himself at odds with their values and, as a result, strays momentarily from his own goal to advance the case for socialism in the Hebrides. Litherland is a person accustomed to winning and, like Bakke and O'Rourke, forces or manipulates others to get what he wants. Unlike Bakke and O'Rourke, however, he ultimately learns the value of communal life and the collective solution. After being rejected by Catriona (a part written for Liz MacLennan), Jimmy goes off to London in his newly elected position as a Labour MP and marries a fashionable woman with conservative connections. He rediscovers the importance of the Hebrides in a battle against an American owned corporation that wants to relocate to a more profitable area, destroying local opportunity for employment and ruining family businesses. Although the play lacks the confidence of many that follow it, Random Happenings demonstrates the first signs of the style which McGrath was soon to develop. It is the style of a political theater in which the hero is no longer the central feature of the work and vague themes of

social injustice found in earlier plays give way to issues clearly aligned with radical socialism.

Unruly Elements, also published in 1972, was another play written during a period of transition. Performed originally at the Everyman Theatre (Liverpool) as a May Day celebration of six pieces, the published version contains only three short vignettes. They are tales of the urban wounded, almost every character is somehow maimed psychologically, the human dignity destroyed by the pressures of a post-industrial society, by the corruption of a "commercially oriented media world" (Gibbs interview XIII). In "Angel of the Morning," the neurotics are the seductive Tralee, a sentinal for 'urban-guerrillas' who have chosen to loot the home of a middle-aged, white collar worker, and Mr. Lodwick who cannot decide which is more alarming, the news that his daughter robs banks to support a terrorist organization or the notion that her friends have stolen his life savings.

In "Plugged-in to History," Derek and Kay have no hope of meaningful communication. Their failure to talk to each other as strangers on a park bench is representative of the ruptured male/female relationships in their private lives. Derek has been carrying on a violent exchange with a woman whom he genuinely loves, and Kay responds with stories that sound like news bulletins:

> Thailand Secures Itself Bankok Monday. High Thai Military men revealed late last night that in 'soft' areas in Northern Thailand vulnerable to Red infiltration, American Pacification experts had already taken over the administration of villages and communities. 'We intend to re-organise these people', said an anonymous American peace leader, 'in such a way as to facilitate their total retention of the democratic freedoms without external interference in their affairs..." (VII).

As McGrath says, "She eventually breaks under the pressure of being 'plugged in' not to her own history but to an artificial one created by an outside power. (Gibbs Interview XIII)

The last piece in Unruly Elements, "They're Knocking Down the Pie-Shop," concerns a daughter who, unjaded by losing causes, tries to motivate her family into actively protesting the loss of a small pork pie shop to monopoly capitalism. Her engineering brother hopes they will, in the construction process, widen the road. Her father is "theoretically correct" but unmoved, and her mother rushes out to buy the last pies before they are replaced by an American "posh" hotel. What makes this play transitional is the political content which only occasionally centers on specific socialist causes, thereby linking it to earlier works, and the stylized pieces which are McGrath's experimental attempts to get away from the theater of naturalism. The loose format is reminiscent of agit-prop, which is usually played as a series of stories without a storyline using cartoon-like props and scenery, and

television commercials. The scenery here , for example, consists of oversized objects--a six foot tooth brush, a ten foot coke bottle, giant detergent boxes--to break out of the mimetic mode.

The loose structure of monologues and the exaggerated characters are a clear departure from the naturalistic plays which he wrote earlier and the first sign of the resolution he had made between 1968 and 1972 for a workers' theater. The forms were not new, of course, since much of British political theater in the 60s and 70s was already experimenting with similar devices, but they were an experiment for McGrath and a trial run for later plays.

By the time that Fish in the Sea was published (1977), McGrath had clearly hit his stride: he and the others had taken 7:84 through its infancy, he had worked with the Ardens on a new version of Serjeant Musgrave's Dance (1972), and he had realized some measure of success with Trees in the Wind which was first performed at the Edinburgh Festival in 1971, and had repeat performances at the Northcott Theatre (Exeter) in 1975 and at the Royal Court in 1980. More important, with Trees in the Wind he had begun to work with music in a serious way, something he had not tried since the two short plays he wrote with Dudley Moore in 1960 and 1963. But the focus on a love interest with four realistic characters was a throw-back to

a naturalistic structure, so McGrath deliberately looked elsewhere for ideas.

By 1977, 7:84 had also had a second hit in their first 7:84 production, The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil (pub. 1974). It is a play which protests the appropriation of Scotland's land over the centuries by the power structure--for raising sheep, for hunting grouse and stag, for exploiting the oil reserves--to the exclusion of the people who belong to the land. Using the Scottish Ceilidh, it was McGrath's first real attempt to use local issues as primary subject matter and the vernacular in Gaelic folk song and dialog. Added to that, The Cheviot was popular for its rollicking humor and song, despite the grave subject matter, and for the unforgettable images of the reenactment of the closure evictions. His satire of the Scottish aristocracy drew a guffaw from one "tweedy lady" and her "tweedy husband" from Skye who said, "It's so nice to be able to laugh at oneself," and a young boy picked up the more serious theme: "It'll be great round here when all this starts happening--when people start demanding their rights" ("Year of the Cheviot" xvi).

The balance of merriment and message was deliberate, since it was important to the point of the play and to McGrath:

> One thing I had insisted on was that we broke out of the 'lament syndrome'. Even since Culloden, Gaelic culture has been one of lament--for exile,

> for death, for the past, even for the future. Beautiful, haunting lament. And in telling the story of the Highlands since 1745, there are many defeats, much sadness to relate. But I resolved that in the play, for every defeat, we would also celebrate a victory, for each sadness, we would wipe it out with the sheer energy and vitality of the people, for every oppression, a way to fight back. At the end, the audience left knowing they must choose, and that now, of all times, they must have confidence in their ability to unite and win. ("The Year of the Cheviot" xxvii-viii)

Being their first production, The Cheviot also became an instructive exercise for the 7:84 in playwrighting, since the members wrote it cooperatively. McGrath was proud of the process initially, "Not the purist's improvised theatre. Not 'collective creativity', or group therapy. But a written text that all the company were part of, and deeply involved in, and excited about" ("The Year of the Cheviot" xi).

Nevertheless, McGrath changed his mind about the open process of composition, while writing Boom (pub. 1975) because, as a routine method for composition, it became cumbersome and divisive. McGrath was somewhat defensive about taking over the writing process. He discussed it in the play's introduction: "Writing a play can never be a totally democratic process. They are skills which need aptitude, long experience, self-discipline and a certain mental disposition in one individual. They demand leaps in to the dark, liberated instincts, arrogance of the imagination and autocracy of the intuition" (9). McGrath

apologized possibly because Boom drew more directly on revolutionary material than any play to date and that Boom was not as successful structurally as The Cheviot.

With its potpourri of short scenes about socialism in Tanzania, land redistribution in Cuba, and land speculation in Scotland, Boom reminds us of Unruly Elements. Another play written in 1975 is The Game's a Bogey, again a loosely formated series of scenes that Gunther Klotz, drawing an analogy to the term Living Newspaper, labelled a "Living History Book." The form echoes an agit-prop technique that forces the spectator to concentrate on the relationship of the scenes because every image is making a point. Often one scene will present a dialectical opposition to another, or the sequence will repeatedly reinforce an idea. The juxtaposition, in either case, creates a dynamic montage that requires close spectator attention and disciplined writing.

McGrath seems to enjoy the loose structure because it allows him to feature all the elements of working-class theater--short messages of local and current interest interspersed with humor and music. The "Living History Book" also breaks away from the middle-class emphasis on the individual and gives him plenty of political material. Furthermore, the format is flexible and adapts itself well to the erratic nature of a touring company. But using the form repeatedly he risks formulaic and predictable works

which audiences can ignore because they think they have heard it all before. A loose structure also risks a potentially diffuse message that has little effect. The technique is best used in short scenes with familiar subject matter, since it tends to be confusing if the scenes are sustained.

The loose structure is also unsuited to a play which attempts to uncover a complex set of hidden relationships. Such is the case with Baby and the Bathwater which has scenes that are deeply moving, but the overall message is lost while one tries to keep up with the monologues delivered by the six different and unrelated characters. In the play are George Orwell, a young girl who has won a trip to Russia, a middle-aged civil servant, a Guatemalan woman who has suffered at the hands of the Yankees and the guerillas in Central America, a South American singer, and a Yankee soldier fresh from Central America. Each is somehow satirizing America's irrational fear of a Russian takeover and the heartless demolition of human life and property in the name of protection. One of the most interesting and complex characters is Orwell who makes no apologies for being an upper-class spokesperson for the poor and, in that regard, parodies himself. But he also deplores the use of his works as a propagandist weapon against Russia and makes a plea to leave Central America in

peace. The built-in contradictions are too complicated for the serialized nature of the play in which none of the characters appear together and only a few appear twice, so the cohesion of the play must be accomplished in the end by the audience. Klotz finds McGrath's technique of stringing many small scenes together innovative, "although this type of play has not yet succeeded in integrating its personal stories with the levels of documentary information..." ("Internationalism and Present British Drama" 41).

Achieving continuity and cohesion in his scripts is less a problem when McGrath either develops a strong story line or uses a character or group of characters to carry the theme. Looking for a more personal story for Fish in the Sea, McGrath brought back the misfits in Andy and Yorry. Andy is a wild man in the tradition of O'Rourke and Bakke, but the matured McGrath does not give him the same romantic treatment as he gave the earlier heroes. Andy is neither the likable, impulsive rebel that we find in O'Rourke, nor the perceptive insurgent of Bakke, but a unfulfilled and violent anarchist whom McGrath condemned as counterproductive to organizational efforts. His character, however, sets in motion a dialectic which includes "the backwardness of some elements of working-class living: attitudes to women, to socialist theory, to sexual oppression, poetry, myth, etc." (Introduction).

In Fish in the Sea, McGrath finally pulls together the results of his experimental probes and develops a purposeful plot with complex characterization without an emphasis on one individual. The heroic action, for example, is spread over three figures in the father and Yorry who are constructively working as political activists and Mary who resists the more destructive elements of working-class life, and, at the same time, believes in the strength of the community. Yorry's background as an overprotected boy is interesting in that, in his enforced isolation, he has become an outsider like Jimmy Litherland, O'Rourke, or Bakke, but he quickly overcomes his alienation by immersing himself in the communal effort. Although the storyline of Fish in the Sea is episodic, it is held together by the strength of these characterizations and by the metaphor suggested by Mao Tse Tung that the "Party or Front [is] the head and body of a fish, and the population [is] the water through which it moves" (Introduction), showing the value of the people as a life-support system for any movement. Lyrics to the songs, some of McGrath's cleverest, carry the theme through the sung narrative and choruses.

An older version of Mary surfaces in a later play, Yobbo Nowt (pub. 1978) about a single mother trying to raise two teenage children after she throws her worthless

husband out. At first, Marie is naive about the exploitation of women in the workplace, but she quickly learns about the tricks of employers who pay low wages during a prolonged "training period" and thereafter for piece work. She is also educated to the humiliation of capitalism by a social worker, a newspaper publisher's assistant, the wife of an industrialist, and a Labour candidate whose contact with her fails to sensitize them to the oppression of a working-class woman. She is a "yobbo nowt," nobody worth anyone's attention.

Strangely, the play drew fire from feminists who objected, one can only speculate, to her self-deprecation and degradation by others. Their reaction is surprising since McGrath often writes parts for courageous women who often must carry the flame alone. Such a part was Bessie McGuigan's in Blood Red Roses (pub. 1981) who carries on as a union organizer regardless of her weak husband, willful children, and loss of job when the plant closes. When she tries later to get work, she finds herself blacklisted. In the last scenes, she is pregnant again, this time with the baby of a 22-year old. Her situation is daunting in light of an eroding class consciousness, the "charred industrial battlefield," the "corpses" of empty factories, the "unemployed and the youth" (84). Still, Bessie's last words, said somewhat sardonically and out of despair, are "Fight on, eh?" Blood Red Roses was filmed for BBC IV

(1986) with Liz MacLennan as Bessie and, shortly thereafter, was adopted for the schools in Strathclyde, Scotland.

Another remarkable female figure developed by McGrath is the Guatemalan Rigoberta Menchu who tells her story in Baby and the Bathwater (first performed in September, 1984). Quietly she speaks of the invasion of American forces in Central America and the effects of destabilisation on her community. Taken from an eye witness account published by New Left Books (I..Rigoberta Menchu), her shattering words are those of a woman who has endured massacres, family loss, and anguish. Given characters like Bessie McGuigan, Rigoberta Menchu, and Mary, and given the conscious effort McGrath makes to avoid the cheap laughs he could get with sexist humor in pubs, the feminist response to Marie's character in Yobbo Nowt and the old socialist woman in Little Red Hen is difficult to explain. McGrath's own response is unequivocal:

> Sometimes I think that there is a sort of coterie of women in London who tend to be middle-class, who are removed from the working-class experience of life. They want to see a completely idealistic approach to the relationship of men and women on stage. For our audiences this would be an utter waste of time. These London women don't understand the realities of our audience, don't credit them with perception and intelligence. Our strongest and most intelligent supporters in Scotland are women and that's because we show the reality of the working-class women. Frankly I get thoroughly pissed off with this idealistic, wanky criticism, because it

> really is a middle-class fantasy world that they're trying to thrust on our work. (McFerran interview 13)

Besides the use of strong characterization to shape a play, McGrath has turned occasionally to historical sources for plot. Little Red Hen is one of the more successful of McGrath's lessons in history because it not only relates how well known socialist MPs leave Scotland with good intentions, but are absorbed by London's parliamentary system. Their stories are related by an ordinary woman with extraordinary means to analyze the truth for her granddaughter.

Joe's Drum is another historically based play about General Joe Smith of Edinburgh who could stir people to action with his drum. His function is to prod his audiences into voting. To that purpose, he chides them for their apathy in a recent election which gave seats to the Tories. And then he tells stories from history about Scottish heroes who have battled for the people so they might have protected civil rights. In the course of the play he introduces Tom Muir and Robert Dundas who speak for themselves and for others like James Connolly. The detail of history is somewhat tedious for those who are not Scottish and the structure again is that of a string of characters. But the characters relate fairly well to each other and create a pattern of meaning, even though the play seems complete at the end of the first half.

Lately McGrath has been working on recovering the history of the Scottish people, a trilogy that may contain The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil as the first part and, as the second part, Border Warfare, a play about "the making of Edinburgh, the Borders, the lowlands, and the current north/south divide" (MacLennan letter, 20 July 1987). Border Warfare will be shown at the Edinburgh Festival in August, 1988. Linda Mackenney of the 7:84 has supplemented McGrath's historical work with a 1983 revival of The Gorbals Story (1946) about working-class life in Glasgow, and a 1985 reconstruction of Men Should Weep (1947) about Glasgow tenement life in the 40s. Mackenney also brought out in 1985, In Time O' Strife (1929), a play about the life of the collier Joe Corrie.

Given the recurring socialist themes of exploitation and economic hardship, repetition is a real danger for McGrath's audiences, and yet, the surprising variety of non-naturalistic devices and forms which he has developed keep the performances lively. Indeed, because the themes and plots are fairly predictable, his plays are generally noted for their invention and their unflagging spirit.

One wonders what compels McGrath to continue writing socialist works at a time when Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher is dismantling socialism by starving Britain's

National Health Service, crushing unions which strike, and privatizing the government's holdings at such a rate that the trend appears irreversible. Indeed, the condition of socialism in Britain looks critical. Not only could the government funding for 7:84 evaporate, but their audiences could turn to the television out of apathy.

The 7:84 company is, to be sure, discouraged, and John McGrath and Liz MacLennan have obviously considered other opportunities. McGrath has worked occasionally in New Zealand, Australia and Hollywood. The company, moreover, has played the Brecht festival in Toronto and at the Alliance Festival in Sydney, Cape Breton (both in 1987). But, as Liz MacLennan writes, "Our [1987] election result was unspeakable...but the need to change things is more than ever pressing" (Letter, 20 July 1987). Certainly they believe that the political climate will change precipitately, once Thatcher's policies have their full effect. Perhaps the 7:84 sees the need now more than ever for educating the public. Furthermore, they must sense the necessity for maintaining cohesion among their followers. At a time like this, "preaching to the converted," a perceived weakness that was once levelled against their work by many critics including David Edgar and Bruce Birchall, now boosts their ranks and shapes the community by lending it some sort of unity.

Still, the frustrations of looking for venues,

enthusiastic audiences, and stable funding must often seem as difficult today as they did thirty years ago, when McGrath, and Wesker as well, had the energy which each new generation enjoys. The force that drives them on is perhaps nothing more than dedication and commitment to an ideal. They are both dreamers of sorts, spinning out moral visions of what could be and what should be. For the "melancholy optimist" in Wesker's plays, the dreams are often articulated in an abstract and emotional expression that suggests the possibility of progress within the system. McGrath's plays, however biting and sardonic, are just as hopeful, advancing the potential of a world without exploitation, once the system undergoes a radical overhaul.

And both playwrights do battle for the rights of the worker, using their drama to educate all parties to the destructive elements of the ruling class. In Wesker's estimation, however, courage, blind determination, and a passionate conviction benefit the individual more than the support of a political community. Moreover, individual rights include access to a middle-class education, including the fine arts, and freedom from intimidation or the tyranny of alienating ideologies. For McGrath, the achievement of the workers' rights is conceivable only when the people realize they are being exploited and make moves to effect change. Until that time, workers are freer by

knowing "that their values and their ways of living are good, worthwhile, and something that we like, something that's got a richness, and a depth, and a fruitfulness which is of more value in the ultimate than the values of the middle class and the upper middle class who're actually doing the exploiting" (Gibbs interview, XIV). Education for them must include increased awareness of their own worth and strategies for seizing control of their future.

Finally, both playwrights thrive on opposition and contradiction. Their plays fulfill their own need to rewrite the British tradition in theater, to challenge the social condition, to write "against the grain," as Terry Eagleton would have it. Saturated by their own history--family background, social and political relationships--and shaped by their language, their texts unfold, sometimes with and sometimes athwart the ideology of the antagonist. Both agitate for social reform and challenge and shape the theater of the West End, just as they condition each other. Whether or not their 1970 debate had a direct impact on their writing, and the evidence is not clear either way, recognition of the other's purpose contributed from that point on to a clarification of their positions and a refinement of form.

Certainly, the emphasis of their writing changed as did their relationship to the theater community. Since 1970, Wesker has written more about his Jewish experience

and has largely concentrated on one-woman casts. His writing has also become less and less overtly political. During the same period, McGrath's work with 7:84 has introduced him to new material, and he has become more self-consciously interested in the revolutionary aspects of socialism. Neither playwright has compromised his values, however, or altered his fundamental view of human relationships. But a variety of factors--including their exchange with each other--has made each playwright increasingly self-conscious of his political position and style.

In his essay on "Commitment," Theodor Adorno doubted the possibility or efficacy of committed literature. Pointing to the gap which comes between reality and a reflection of it, an aporia created by the shaping of reality into an aesthetic form, he remained skeptical that committed art could successfully achieve a meaningful reference to the real world and, if it did, it could not stand as an aesthetic experience. Even if the artist's notions were politically motivated, they remained "politically polyvalent," as long as they were aesthetically conditioned by form (Aesthetics and Politics 176).

Wesker and McGrath implicitly accept the risks of both possibilities. To writers like them, the conscious

commitment of the authors, the authors' intent to become involved, is as important as the appeal they make to their audiences. Neither playwright deludes himself into believing that his plays will effect immediate change or that the spectators will find themselves unconditionally persuaded by their arguments. But they believe, like Brecht, in offering the choice, "the structured possibilities for reflection on the nature of capitalist (and socialist) relations and the place of the spectator within them" (148). They risk, of course, the possibility that "Bad politics becomes bad art, and vice-versa" (Adorno 187), but set against that risk is their drive to refine their art and their need to attract audiences, and too, the pressures they feel from each other to sharpen their respective political positions.

What is at stake in the debate between Arnold Wesker and John McGrath is not simply the question of whether the audience will enjoy a plurality of political views represented on stage, but also whether artists may enjoy the freedom to express those views in whatever form they choose. This aspect of their exchange is drawn straight from the heart of the debate between Brecht and Lukacs whose arguments Wesker and McGrath put to test in their theater practice.

Concerned with the question of artistic integrity, Raymond Williams has raised the possibility that a

committed literature which could be politically offensive and asked if it were possible that a fascist could be a good writer. He answers the question himself, "It is better to recognise social reality, which in our own time as in other has produced good and even great reactionary writers, as well as all the others whom we may prefer, for different reasons, to honour and remember" ("The Writer: Commitment and Alignment" 23). For that reason, we cannot give a literary evaluation to the writings of Arnold Wesker or John McGrath on the basis of their political alignment alone. But we can admire them for their moral impulse to make a commitment to change and, because of that commitment, we respect their efforts to contribute enduring works to ameliorate the human condition. We can also admire the works themselves on their literary merit and on the contributions they have made to our understanding of commitment in theater. Williams points out that that conscious step towards commitment, committing "far enough to social reality to be conscious of this level of sociality," is significant not only for the artist, but for all of us.

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