

Ideas, forms and developments in the British workers' theatre, 1925-1935.

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Introduction The following study is of an area which has received little attention in the books on theatre history, though this is beginning to be remedied. The reasons for the lack of attention are manifold, and deserve some mention in themselves.

The workers' theatre which emerged in the period between the two world wars did not consider itself part of the mainstream of theatre in this country. Indeed, for the central period with which this study deals, in the early 1930s, it hardly considered itself a branch of the theatre at all, preferring to think of itself as a special wing of a political movement. It is not surprising therefore, that it has hardly been noticed in the surveys of theatre history. Add to this the fact that it was primarily an amateur movement, without a permanent base (until the late thirties, and the founding of Unity Theatre), and its invisibility becomes even more understandable. Further, it was part of working-class culture; the part of history that is usually hidden from view, when the text-books come to be written by the representatives of the middle or upper classes. The few studies of this movement that have been undertaken have given valuable, though only partial, insights into its importance. The first systematic study, Dr. L. A. Jones's 1964 thesis *The British Workers' Theatre, 1917-1935*, is commendable in that it drew attention to a movement which had not been noticed previously by any academic enterprise, and provided a basic outline of the development of the Workers' Theatre Movement. But Dr. Jones overlays his account of this development with a conception of theatre which cannot admit to many of the positive achievements of the Workers' Theatre Movement, and tries to locate this movement within a

literary tradition of world drama which is alien to its actual aims, as we will see when some attention is devoted to the question of repertoire. Dr. Jones's study also suffers from being the first in the field, in that documents and information which were not available to Dr. Jones have appeared since his thesis was written, and have thrown light on the development of the Workers' Theatre Movement, especially the early years of the movement. This study has therefore been able to correct some of the mistakes of Dr. Jones's thesis, though no doubt errors can be found in this, as in almost any historical account.

Another, less detailed, account of the Workers' Theatre Movement is contained in the chapter devoted to the British theatre in Richard Stourac's M. A. thesis, *Revolutionary Workers' Theatre in the Soviet Union, Germany and Britain, [1918-1936]*, written for the University of Bristol in 1978[1]. This was written without reference to Dr. Jones's work, and it is unfortunate that some of the material which was available to Dr. Jones was not known about for Richard Stourac's study. However, the new material available to Richard Stourac, particularly in the form of interviews with Workers' Theatre Movement veterans, gives some valuable insights, despite the fact that it does not always tie in neatly with the documentary evidence which informs much of the present study. Richard Stourac's analysis leans in a different direction from that of Dr. Jones, and consequently adds its own distortions to the movement which it describes. In particular, it begins from a rather mechanical conception of the functions of theatre, and an over-simple set of expectations of what a political theatre movement should be setting out to achieve. The model which it projects of theatre instituting a "learning process" in its audience tends not to differentiate theatre from other forms of discourse, and does not take into account the special relationship which actors and audiences can strike up. Moreover, Richard Stourac fails to take into account the particular nature of the British theatre, and its relationship to popular culture, which the present study sees as crucial to the understanding of the development of the Workers' Theatre Movement.

Other accounts of the Workers' Theatre Movement have been either personal reminiscences, such as those of Ewan MacColl, Tom Thomas and Philip Poole quoted in the following pages, or broad outlines within a larger study, such as Raphael Samuel's essay on "Theatre and Socialism in Britain (1880-1935)". Both of these approaches are valuable, and without the accounts of those who were involved it would be impossible to get any genuine understanding of how the movement operated, but they do not preclude the need for a closer look at the issues and the forces which shaped this theatrical phenomenon. The workers' theatre in Britain, or the Workers'

Theatre Movement, as it came to constitute itself, has significance far beyond the attention which it has been afforded. I shall try to show, in this study, that the attempts of these workers and activists to dramatise their struggles, and use theatre as a tool for propaganda, place their work inside what should properly be regarded as the mainstream of British theatre development, with the established West End theatre which they eschewed as an aberration in the long view of the development of the theatre. The Workers' Theatre Movement was, however, massively handicapped in the task that it was trying to carry out, and those handicaps came from both within and without its ranks.

The attempt to build a vital political theatre in Britain took place in an unpromising climate. The nineteenth century had seen the division of theatre into two quite separate camps, the "legitimate" and the "variety" theatre. The legitimate theatre had narrowed its scope in terms of plays, theatrical forms, and audiences, and yet it still claimed the distinction of being the sort of theatre to which all serious theatre should aspire. Its legacy is still with us today, and informs the practice of contemporary theatre, as John Pick points out:

"Towards the end of the [nineteenth - I. S. ] century what was usually available in each town or city was a rough copy of the style of proscenium arch performance, managerial practices and social rituals that were generated by the theatre known as 'West End'. A new London theatrical establishment, aiming to please the most fashionable Victorian society, preferring always a highly ritualised theatre catering directly for the privileged to any of the rougher and more generally accessible forms that had often characterised British drama in earlier centuries, had established a near-monopoly of theatre practice so narrow in its social ambitions, and yet so powerful in its creation of new managerial and artistic conventions to realise them, that the administration of contemporary British theatre still lives under its shadow. "[2] It was not only that theatre aimed to appeal to the privileged, but a conscious attempt was made to exclude the unprivileged. The early part of the nineteenth century had seen a proliferation of theatre, and had seen the working class informing theatre with meanings which were dangerous and distasteful to the privileged classes who shared this arena. Their alarm is articulated in the evidence of the playwright Thomas Morton to the Commons Select Committee on Dramatic Literature in 1832:

"There is a tendency in the audience to force passages  
never meant by the author into political meanings . . .

and also we all know that a theatre is a place of  
peculiar excitement . . . I do not know anything more  
terrible than  
an enraged audience. “[3]

The attempt to exclude this rowdy and unrefined element, and, incidentally, to purge theatre of its “peculiar excitement”, was carried out efficiently and swiftly. As Professor Michael Booth noted:

“Although the term ‘middle class’, referring to audiences, could not comprehend the same kind of people in both 1750 and 1880, it is roughly correct to say that in terms of class the theatre was in much the same relationship to its West End audience in 1750 as in 1880. The intervening period had seen the theatre pass, for the first time since the medieval period, under a rule that was essentially popular; it then passed out again into middle class control. “[4] This attempt to legitimise and sanitise theatre was hastened by the action of the Bancrofts in 1880, when they removed the “pit”, the cheap area frequented by working classes, from the Haymarket theatre. Ticket prices were raised, and the entertainment was scaled down from boisterous melodramas and “vulgar” Shakespeare, to more fashionable, if dull, “cup and saucer comedies”. This became the model for a new sort of theatre: smaller, more intimate, less an arena in which society saw its concerns acted out than a social gathering in which high society endured the tedium of a play in order to show off its good taste. Auditoria were darkened, and theatres took on the character of temples to the polite art of fashionable behaviour.

Thus the West End came to be seen as the “real” theatre in Britain. Its chief practitioners gained social status, sometimes even knighthoods, and its productions received critical attention. But still, the vitality of popular theatre was not destroyed. It continued in the music halls and variety stages, where workers saw representatives of their own class practising complex skills - whether in music, comedy, acrobatics or juggling - and were invited to make their presence felt as conscious participants, rather than silent spectres viewing from behind an invisible “fourth wall”. But the denigration of these aspects of theatre was such that even those who recognised the inadequacy of the West End were at a loss to find ways of combining the true theatricality of popular forms with serious ideas. For all his unconventionality and iconoclasm, Shaw was unable to escape completely from the structures which had been instituted in the later nineteenth century:

“The music halls had drained much of the popular interest from the theatre in the nineteenth century, and variety shows and working men’s clubs have continued to do so in the twentieth. Shaw’s intention was to make the theatre worthier, more unrepentant, and no less popular, but the support for his Ibsenite theatre of social and moral challenge was dominantly highbrow. The effect has been to divide the serious playwright from his popular audience more completely than at any time since the Restoration. “[5] The founders of the Workers’ Theatre Movement began from much the same position as Shaw, and their early work included some of Shaw’s plays in their repertoire. But they were even less interested than Shaw in cultivating a highbrow audience. On the contrary, they were consciously aiming to attract a working class audience, and they were desperate to find the key which would enable workers to return to the theatre for their particular purposes. But the dominance of the forms of theatre which had taken over the West End had also asserted itself upon these rebels, and when they tried to speak in a different language they found they had no words. The popular forms which they sought were available in some degree in the Music-Hall theatres, but these had become so much associated in the minds of serious people with lowness and worthlessness that they found themselves resisting such forms. Nevertheless, they stumbled away from the dominance of the West End, and at times achieved something of the popular theatre which was needed. From their attempt sprang Unity Theatre and Theatre Workshop, both of which in turn influenced and enriched the practice of theatre in Britain.

#### Chapter One - 1925-1926: The Groundwork for the first Workers’ Theatre Movement.

The political theatre which emerged in Britain in the late 1920s and 1930s did not begin at any particular moment, nor on any particular day. In a country where class antagonisms were becoming sharper than ever before, and where the working classes were becoming more confident of their ability to organise effective opposition, the idea of using theatrical means to spread socialist (or at least, anti-capitalist) propaganda must have occurred to many workers, and a few attempted to put the idea into practice. Before the mid-1920s these attempts were infrequent and isolated, concentrated largely within the co-operative wing of the Labour Movement, and based on a very broadly educational, rather than an agitational attitude to the drama. Thus some of the earliest documented examples of theatre playing a role in the British Labour Movement come from the Socialist Sunday School, Labour college, and the Proletarian school movements[1]. Thus also the praise drama received in 1917 from Philip Snowden, then Chairman of the ILP, as “of all the arts supremely the one through which great moral teaching may be done. “[2] However, the conception of a partisan, organised theatre devoted to spreading the socialist

message throughout the working classes only began to take shape in Britain in the mid-1920s. These years of escalation of class conflict after the fall of Labour's first minority government saw confrontation in the mining industry, and increased political activity among organised workers, reaching a peak with the General Strike in May 1926. It was also a period in which the left was forced towards a re-evaluation of its adequacy to mobilise mass support. It was in such a political climate that the Workers' Theatre Movement came into existence.

The aim of this chapter will be to trace the processes which brought this new movement into being, and to describe the attitudes and backgrounds of those most influential in its formation.

The Theoretical Basis for the Workers' Theatre:

The years 1925 - 1926 saw a number of calls among those active on the left for the development of a Workers' Theatre. It will be useful to examine the ideas about culture and society which underlay these calls, in order to discover how these were to influence the practical developments which followed. This section will look at the statements and articles which had a bearing on this matter.

Indications of the "re-evaluation" mentioned earlier can be seen most clearly in the development of the left-wing press in Britain. In 1925 two new newspapers were set up, aiming for a radical, working class readership. Although a national daily supporting the Labour Party, the Daily Herald, had been in existence since 1911, it had, since being taken over by the TUC in 1922, become "the official organ of the right-wing leadership"[3]. This could not be satisfactory for much of the left, especially as the schism between Labour leaders and Labour militants had become acute. The British Communist Party, formed in 1920, had its Workers' Weekly, and before that The Call, but as "official organs" these could not hope to reach a wide readership while the party's membership remained very small indeed[4]. However, both of the left-wing newspapers set up in 1925, Lansbury's Labour Weekly and the Sunday Worker sought to reflect the views of the militant rank and file, and, more importantly, to win a mass audience for those views. Of these two, the Sunday Worker is of special interest for its Arts and Review page, something of an innovation in left-wing journalism of the time.

The Sunday Worker proclaimed itself "an organ of the left wing of the Labour movement"[5] and set out to unite some of the diverse elements which made up the left of the Labour spectrum - the Independent Labour Party, other groups on the left of the Labour Party, and the Communist Party

- under a “United Front” banner. It was not the “official organ” of any party, but the high level of participation by Communists in its editorial board, and its financial dependence on the Communist International[6] ensured that its editorial policy followed closely the political line of the Communist Party. Whether despite or because of this, it undoubtedly achieved great popularity within the Labour movement. At the Liverpool Labour Party conference in 1925 a resolution supporting the paper succeeded in winning 1,143,000 votes against the majority’s 2,036,000. This was the highest “rebel” vote of a conference which had been dominated by the right[7].

A look at the Sunday Worker’s arts and review page for its very first issue[8] gives a revealing insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the forces involved in what could be seen as an attempt to build a left-wing cultural front, and the state of their readiness at this time. The page is made up of reviews, articles, advertisements, a message of support, and a very small news item. The book review is of William Bolitho’s *Cancer of Empire*, an account of the appalling conditions for workers in Glasgow. The theatre is dealt with under two distinct headings. The *Pelican*, a romantic melodrama by F. Tennyson Jesse and H. M. Harwood is given a scathing write-up by “Macheath”, in a column headed “The Plays they Play”. This is clearly meant to contrast with the heading on the next column - “Workers and the Theatre” by Huntly Carter. Carter’s column is complemented by Rutland Boughton’s, on “Music and the Class War”, and in between these two there is an appeal for workers to send in photographs of “any phase of working class life” for publication, with the promise of a half guinea fee for any published. The advertisements on the page take up two half-columns, and are all for books. The message of support for the new paper comes from the French anti-war novelist and journalist Henri Barbusse, and the small news item tells the reader that unemployment rose by 1,635 in the previous week, to a total of 1,232,700. The page appears to fulfil a number of purposes. Firstly, it offers critical analysis of contemporary literature and theatre, including that emanating from the ruling and middle classes. Secondly, it attempts to put forward something of the theoretical basis for the development of a workers’ culture, in the articles by Rutland Boughton and Huntly Carter. These articles also attempt, like the appeal for photographs, to offer practical support for such working class culture as can be found. Finally, the space devoted to books, both editorial space and advertising space, serves as a useful display for left publishers, and reflects the high priority given to education within the labour movement.

It is worth looking at the articles on workers' music and theatre in some detail, as they represent probably the first British attempt to deal with these subjects through a national popular medium. The two writers seem well qualified for the task. Rutland Boughton (1878- 1960) was a classically trained composer, a graduate of the Royal College of Music. He had been a socialist since the early years of the century, and had been acquainted with the poet Edward Carpenter, parts of whose poem "Towards Democracy" he had set to music in 1909. This was Boughton's first unequivocal statement of his socialist beliefs, and it was followed by much practical support for Labour and progressive ideas, even where his politics led Boughton into uncomfortable controversy. Boughton had worked for many years within the Clarion movement, as a conductor and adjudicator of labour choirs and orchestras. His opera *The Immortal Hour* (1912) achieved enormous success, breaking box office records for English opera. In fact, the popularity this work achieved in smart, fashionable circles was a source of horror and embarrassment for Boughton[9]. He joined the Communist Party in 1926, giving as his main reason for joining the fact that workers cannot fulfil their artistic potential under capitalism[[10]].

Carter is best remembered for his surveys of Russian and European Theatre, *The New Theatre and Cinema of Soviet Russia* (1924) and *The New Spirit in the European Theatre* (1925). Both of these are painstakingly detailed descriptions of their subjects, though some might find Carter's writing style a little pompous. Carter also edited a symposium on European reconstruction after the war, and another on spiritualism in 1920. He was a vociferous champion of his rather individualistic line of socialism, and of the Soviet Union. He does not seem to have been a member of the Communist Party, and it seems unlikely that he would ever toe a party line. These two writers, both sympathetic to the Communist Party in some way, produced articles based on quite different approaches to aesthetics and politics. In a sense they represent two distinct and opposed strands in socialist aesthetic theory, and the fact that they are placed alongside one another without comment is perhaps an indication of how undeveloped was any sense of aesthetic theory in the British left at this time. Boughton's article takes the form of a general essay on the relationship between music and politics. Within a class society, says Boughton, music will always have a political element. Thus the disharmony in a particular orchestra with which he is familiar can be put down to political causes i. e. the snobbery of the "musically cultured", who would only make music with "members of the proletariat" on special occasions. The plea that music "has no politics" is in itself a right wing one, and "any sort of anti-labour politics is also anti-musical." Boughton goes on to give a historical sketch of the development of music in relation to the mode

of production. For Boughton, music grew to its “noblest” condition in the age of the craft guilds of the middle ages, and the greatest composer of all time was Bach, a product of those guilds. Boughton argues that the musicians of the middle ages “really had no politics, but were workers along with the rest of the producing creatures”, and it is this condition, the fact of having “no politics”, which makes their music superior to modern work. After the break-up of the craft guilds, by contrast, artists were no longer part of the producing classes, but were pressed into service as “sense ticklers of the wealthy”. The effect of this on their work was a striving for thrills or novelty to ameliorate the lack of vitality in the lives of their patrons. This tendency, according to Boughton, is demonstrated in the work of Richard Strauss. When this novelty has worn off, the artist “resort[s] to ideas of death and decay”, as can be seen in the work of Stravinsky. Thus the modern “avant-garde” is also out of touch with the workers, and is fulfilling a reactionary political role. Boughton looks forward to an age when “it may truly be said that art ‘has no politics’ - the day when there is an Art of the Workers and there are none but Workers to make it. “ Boughton’s views are reminiscent of William Morris’s writings on art, and Boughton follows Morris’s analysis of the productive basis of Art in the Middle Ages “. . . wherein the harmonious co-operation of free intelligence was carried to the furthest point which has yet been attained, and which alone of all art can claim to be called Free. “[11] Boughton also echoes Morris’s view of the “transitional stage of Socialism proving to be a ‘blank’ in the arts, until the people should ‘take up the chain where it fell from the hands of the craft-guilds of the fifteenth century. ”[12]. Thus, Boughton implies, in a society of dialectically opposed classes, music can never be entirely separate from the class war. However, such a separation is necessary in order to produce really great art, for such art “has no politics”. This condition can only be achieved in a classless society. But Boughton seems at a loss to explain the form which music should take in the present society, or what steps should be taken to facilitate its positive development, other than working towards bringing about a classless society. Consequently, the article is somewhat unfocussed, and no concrete proposals are put forward. Huntly Carter’s article, however, starts off on a different tack. Carter begins by making the aim of his weekly column clear:

“It will be, as far as I know, the first systematic attempt to awaken the theatrical consciousness of the workers in England and to convert them to a full recognition of the great importance of theatre to the Labour movement. “[13] Carter explains that he will offer a critique of the capitalist theatre, as well as try to answer the questions:

“What is the place of theatre in the Labour Movement? How does it stand? What is its influence on the working class? How can it be organised to check the evil influence of the governing classes by making the ideas and principles of Labour and its movement known and intelligible to all?”[14] While admitting that the reality of workers’ theatre is “negligible” at present, Carter clearly sees theatre as a useful weapon in the class struggle, and does not wish it to be “freed” from politics. He points to the “very high level of expression” attained by the Russian theatre since the revolution, and sees this as an indication of the potential for workers’ theatre in England. He cites with approval the case of an academic theatre in Moscow which had to withdraw a play unsympathetic to the Labour Movement, after criticism in the labour theatrical press. This demonstrates that “the Russian Theatre, like Russia itself, is practically controlled by the Workers. “ But the most important lesson from Russia’s experience is that “any fool can run a theatre with lots of money and make it financially profitable, but it requires the collective skill of the whole people to run a theatre on next to nothing and make it nationally effective. “ From this he concludes that:

The box office is the root of all theatrical evil. A labour theatre must be separated from the box office.

“[15]

While Carter makes his aim clear - “to awaken the theatrical consciousness of the workers in England” - he is less clear about how that aim is to be accomplished. Certainly, abolition of the box office could not be the first step for workers trying to create a proletarian theatre in Britain. In fact, the combination of high aims and indistinct prescriptions was typical of Carter’s writing. In this and in subsequent articles - all under the heading “Workers and the Theatre” - Carter continued to offer criticism of existing capitalist theatre and to hold up Soviet Theatre as an example of progress. As time went by, though, he seemed to become progressively more annoyed with the workers for not having responded to his call. But, since the call was so vague and confused, it is difficult to blame them.

The analyses and strategies offered in these two Sunday Worker articles may have been inadequate to the task of bringing into being a workers’ cultural movement, but their appearance at this time does at least indicate that such a movement was being contemplated and worked for by some left wing intellectuals. How seriously such a movement was being contemplated, and how prepared were these intellectuals for this task may be judged by looking a little more closely

at the figures involved, and at the attitudes and approaches expressed around this time. Carter and Boughton were part of a group of intellectuals journalists, writers, artists and educationists - who expressed a desire to see a workers' theatre brought into being. This was by no means an organised group with a coherent programme or vision, nor was it, on the whole, a producing group, comparing and sharpening the work of its members. The fact that there was no such group explains, at least in part, why the beginnings of the Workers' Theatre Movement was confused and uncertain. However, it would be useful to take a look in more detail at some of the more prominent figures involved.

William Paul, for example, shared the page we have been looking at with Carter and Boughton, for it was he who wrote the review of Bolitho's *Cancer of Empire*[16]. Paul was, in fact, one of the new publication's editors. He was an active Communist Party member, and in the General Election of 1922, before Communist Party membership had been proscribed by the Labour Party, he had stood for election as a Labour Party candidate, but was defeated in his constituency in Manchester. Paul was an enthusiast for revolutionary songs and folk music, and often performed a one-man lecture/recital of Russian and Socialist songs at Labour movement meetings and summer schools[17]. Paul's interest and enthusiasm were no doubt important factors in bringing serious debate and criticism into the *Sunday Worker's* arts page.

Charles Ashleigh was another of the Communist Party's intellectuals who was interested in drama. Though British born, Ashleigh had spent eight years in the USA, and had been involved with the American radical movement. Much of this experience is recounted in his autobiographical novel, *Rambling Kid* (1930). He served a three year jail sentence in Leavenworth Penitentiary, USA, after the trial of nearly 100 "Wobblies" (members of the syndicalist "Industrial Workers of the World" organisation) in Chicago in 1918[18]. Ashleigh had been deported by the US government, and, like Carter, had seen some theatre in Soviet Russia. In January 1925 *The Plebs* magazine carried his appeal for groups to contact him if they wanted to produce Upton Sinclair's play about the Wobblies, *Singing Jailbirds*[19]. Ashleigh was an occasional reviewer for the *Sunday Worker*, and his slamming of the professedly left-wing plays of Miles Malleon produced some protest[20]. Ashleigh also contributed an interview with Ernst Toller[21] and a rather heavy handed Christmas morality play, *The Angel*[22] to the pages of the *Sunday Worker*. *The Plebs* magazine which has been mentioned a number of times was the organ of the "Plebs League", a left-wing educational group dedicated to "Independent Working Class Education". The league set up its own National Council of Labour Colleges, which subscribed to

a Marxist viewpoint, though it was quite separate from the Communist Party. The Plebs league provided a useful forum for discussion and activity, and its magazine had addressed the question of workers' theatre in articles by Tom Ashcroft and J. F. Horrabin[23]. Winifred Horrabin, secretary of the league, and J. F. Horrabin, the magazine's editor, played a considerable part in the encouragement of political theatre, both in writings in the magazine and practical activity. J. F. Horrabin was well known on the left as a cartoonist, cartographer, and a source of information on many subjects. He played the central role in a rendering of Upton Sinclair's *Singing Jailbirds* seen by an audience of about 350 at a National Council of Labour Colleges garden party in London in July 1926[24], and subsequently performed at other venues in London. Along with Winifred Horrabin and Ellen Wilkinson he participated in play readings at Plebs Summer Schools, including readings of Toller's *Masses and Man*[25] and a "dramatic version of a scene from *The Ragged- Trousered Philanthropists*". The Plebs League particularly warmed to the plays of Ernst Toller, and published its own edition of *Masses and Man*[26]. J. F. Horrabin went on to become the MP for Peterborough in the Labour Government of 1929-31, but his practical theatrical activities seem to have stopped towards the end of 1926. had become so much associated in the minds of serious people with lowness and worthlessness that they found themselves resisting such forms. Nevertheless, they stumbled away from the dominance of the West End, and at times achieved something of the popular theatre which was needed. From their attempt sprang Unity Theatre and Theatre Workshop, both of which in turn influenced and enriched the practice of theatre in Britain. A figure who was to play a key role in the eventual founding of the Workers' Theatre Movement was Christina Walshe. Her first contribution to the columns of the *Sunday Worker* appeared in April 1925, when she wrote on a subject unconnected with Workers' Theatre - the joys of living in the country[27]. However, she later moved to London, and became the first secretary of the Workers' Theatre Movement. Walshe was a theatre designer of some repute. She had worked with Rutland Boughton on opera productions, and had lived with him from 1910 to 1923 - a cause of scandal which foiled Boughton's attempt to establish a permanent school devoted to music and theatre at Glastonbury[28]. Like Carter and Ashleigh she was influenced by European trends in Art. She and Boughton had spent some time in Berlin in 1911, and in April 1921 Boughton wrote to George Bernard Shaw that she had "been in Paris since January, studying Cubism and other kinds of shapemaking". While there she "fell in typically, with a group of Russian émigrés intent on experimenting with a new system of stage lighting - powered, it seems, chiefly on other people's money. "[29]. Though her émigré friends were presumably hostile to the Soviet Union, Walshe herself was quickly converted to the cause of socialism. Photographs of

her work, scarce as they are, confirm the influence of Cubism on her stage designs[30]. Archie Ziegler appeared late on the scene, and was probably introduced to it by Christina Walshe[31]. Ziegler had been a merchant sailor and engineer, and had then become a full time artist. Reproductions of his skilled, naturalistic drawings of ships, shipyards and unemployed workers appeared in the *Sunday Worker* in September 1926, along with a short article on the need for a workers' culture. Ziegler was involved with Christina Walshe in the setting up of the Workers' Theatre Movement, and was a member of its first Committee, but seems to have dropped out of activity soon after the organisation was formed. All of these figures were more or less directly involved in the initial founding of the Workers' Theatre Movement, though the work that they were to put into this project was to turn out to be something of a "false start", as we will see later. The Workers' Theatre Movement began as a fairly broad-based organisation, in political terms, but was soon to become very much associated with the ideas and organisational methods of the Communist Party. However, other initiatives were taken around the same time by the Independent Labour Party, and one of the figures central to these initiatives was Miles Malleeson.

Malleeson was a member of the ILP, and a friend of Fenner Brockway, the ILP General Secretary. He had achieved success in the London West End both as playwright and actor. His pacifist play, *Black 'Ell* was produced by the ILP Stage Society at the Strand Theatre in April 1925, and his play, *Conflict* was given a West End run at the Queens Theatre in April 1926. His successes in the West End earned him some criticism from the left, but his work was nevertheless popular with local ILP groups, so that when the institution of an "ILP Arts Guild" was given approval by the Party's National Activities Committee in June 1925, Malleeson became its National Director. Rutland Boughton was involved in the organisation's musical activities[32]. Malleeson set about trying to explain the aims of the organisation in a pamphlet entitled, somewhat clumsily, *The ILP Arts Guilds: The ILP and its dramatic societies. What they are and might become*[33]. As for what they were, Malleeson explained that "some fifty groups" were already in existence, nine of them in London[34]. Their work was not directly propagandist in its intentions, and in most ways they seem to have functioned as run of the mill amateur drama groups. But Malleeson saw the activities of the groups as "part and parcel of the whole Socialist demand for a fuller life. " It is worth noting the difference between this emphasis, and that which Carter articulates. Malleeson saw drama primarily as a means of cultural enrichment for those participating, worthwhile for its own sake no matter what the content, though if the play dealt with a relevant social problem, that was all to the better. Carter's vision of drama as articulated in his *Sunday Worker* articles is much

more directly didactic theatre is seen as a political tool designed to instruct its audience and win them over to a revolutionary perspective. Drama is seen by Carter as a lever in the process of change in society, rather than a demonstration of the innate humanity of the workers, and their ability to partake of the cultural treasures of those conventionally considered their superiors. These two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but the concentration on one to the exclusion of the other is likely to result in very different sorts of theatre or theatre movements. Carter's writings seem to encourage a very aggressive, class-conscious theatre, which rejects wholesale the legacy of the "bourgeois" theatre, and he looks towards the industrial processes of the twentieth century for whatever lyrical inspiration might be deemed necessary. Malleon, as would be expected of someone who earns his living from the West End, and who was to popularise the work of Moliere in his own adaptations, was far less dismissive of the cultural "heritage" left to the workers.

Malleon points out in his pamphlet that although "a percentage of the plays Socialists will want to act, will deal with the facts of the modern world, as they see it", this does not mean that all, or even a majority of the plays in the repertoire of ILP theatre groups will be propagandist in tone[35]. The recommended repertoire is to be drawn from the list put out by the British Drama League, as well as translations of plays done in "little" theatres abroad. In fact, the inspiration for Malleon's picture of what the dramatic societies might become is drawn very largely from the example of the "little theatres" which had a prominent place on the English Theatre scene in the season 1925-26. These little theatres were the fringe or alternative theatre movement of their day, a reaction to the philistinism and crass commercialism of the West End theatre of the time. They were housed in converted warehouses, drill halls, basements, furniture stores and other such unpromising venues, but they produced some of the most challenging and worthwhile theatre to be seen. The repertoire of these theatres in the 1925-6 season was drawn from the work of contemporary European and American playwrights such as Pirandello, Copeck, Kaiser, Cocteau and O'Neill, classics such as Moliere, Gogol, Ibsen, Dostoevsky and Calderon, and Irish writers like Joyce, O'Casey and Shaw[36]. Thus there was a tendency towards political radicalism in the work performed, but this tendency was more a reflection of the fact that politically radical writers tended to make use of experimental and avant-garde theatrical forms, than of the political complexion of the audiences and managements of these theatres. Malleon's scheme for the ILP Dramatic Societies envisages that they will tour this sort of repertoire in their own areas, exchanging productions and sets, and creating a new circuit of venues for drama in halls, the back

rooms of pubs, and other similar spaces. But, Malleon stresses, like the little theatres, these spaces need to be adapted -to be given “the look and feel of little theatres - to give them, at least what is essential in the atmosphere of a theatre”[37]. Malleon also looks forward to the establishment of a professional touring company, continually “on the road” in the manner of the Arts League of Service, the touring theatre company set up by a group of professional actors to take the classics of theatre to underprivileged and inaccessible communities. This latter, however, is seen as a long-term goal. ILP support for combining socialism and drama could be found in even more “legitimate” theatre circles. This can be seen in the example of Arthur Bouchier, owner, along with his wife, Kyrle Bellew, of the Strand theatre in London. As one of the founding members of the Society of West End Theatre Managers, and a founding trustee of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, Bouchier was very much part of the West End theatre establishment. His obituary described him as “one of the last of the old school of actor-managers”[38]. Bouchier joined the ILP some time in the 1920s, and in 1926 he gave over the Strand Theatre on Sunday evenings to ILP gatherings, with music, drama and propaganda. Admission to these events was free. In the same year, Bouchier wrote a pamphlet for the ILP entitled *Art and Culture in Relation to Socialism*. The pamphlet is critical of West End theatre of the day, describing it as: “. . . mainly an after-dinner resort. . . . Most of the theatres offer shows which are to be enjoyed only by leaving one’s brains in the cloakroom.

“[39]

Bouchier affirmed the unity of entertainment and instruction, and urged the founding of a National Theatre. But his perspective on what could be achieved by workers’ theatre was limited by his experience of theatre. The only alternative to the pedestrianism of the West End proposed in the pamphlet consists of encouraging groups of workers to stage Galsworthy’s plays. The writings and activities of all these individuals suggests that around 1925-6 there was a fair degree of support among left-wing and communist intellectuals for the establishment of something which could broadly be described as a “workers’ theatre”. But there was already a discernible difference of approach in the two strands outlined above. To simplify matters, we can see this as a distinction between those who took an activist approach to the use of theatre within the socialist movement, and those who favoured a more improving role. The former tendency is represented in the above summary by the figure of Huntly Carter, the latter by Miles Malleon and Arthur Bouchier. As things develop, the two tendencies would each coalesce around a different political grouping - the “activists” moving towards the Communist Party, and the “improvers” towards the

ILP and Labour Parties. This can be seen already to some extent in the sympathies of those writing in this early period.

Despite these differences of emphasis and intention, all of these writers were united in their conviction that a radicalisation of existing theatre institutions, and an increase in theatrical activity among workers were worthwhile goals. In the years 1925 - 1926 they and others associated with them set about trying in various ways to bring into being some form of workers' theatre. Huntly Carter, with his regular column in the *Sunday Worker*, at that time enjoying a circulation of 85,000[40], was well placed to articulate his ideas in support of workers' theatre. As his views on this subject were the most constant and consistent expression on this subject in Britain during this period, and as these views found some favour within the Communist Party, it will be useful to take a closer look at the themes and preoccupations in his writings.

Carter's general assessment of the state of the theatre in England in 1925 is to be found in his book *The New Spirit in the European Theatre* published that year:

“The realisation of the Workers' theatre idea is . . . taking a conventional path at present. Actual work is being carried on in alleged 'industrial' theatres at Leeds and elsewhere, and by ILP groups. Generally speaking, these organisations are actuated by the best intentions, but all the same they are jeopardising the Workers' theatre movement. They are presenting, not plays written by working men, but those primarily intended to fit the established theatre and its audience. “[41] Carter attempted to use his *Sunday Worker* column to correct this apparent fault, and his articles dwell on a number of themes. Foremost amongst these is Carter's criticism of conventional theatre for its reliance on the profit motive, and the incompatibility of this motive with progressive theatre. It was the theatrical trusts or syndicates, the large companies which dominated theatre management from the end of the first war, for which Carter reserved his bitterest invective - particularly those owned by the American “Octopus” trusts[42]. A second theme is Carter's condemnation of the lack of working class control over the means of theatrical production:

There is no place of theatrical entertainment that can be described as working class in which the goods and services are produced, consumed and enjoyed by the workers themselves. . . . there are districts, each containing 20,000 and 30,000 workers, where it is not possible to hire a hall, barn shed or privy owing to the power or privilege of the landlord or employer. “[43] Carter gave little indication, however, of what workers were to do to challenge this power. He went on to criticise the ILP line and practice of encouraging “bourgeois” theatre among workers' groups, and particularly their staging of Shakespeare at the Strand Theatre. Even more insidious in Carter's view, were the performances of Shakespeare at Leeds Free Theatre, for which there were no admission charges. These he saw as attempts to force-feed the working classes on a diet of bourgeois propaganda[44].

Carter's summary of theatre history[45] asserts that almost all theatre from that of the ancient Greeks to the Nineteenth Century has served the interests of the ruling classes, and is therefore of no use to workers. The few plays that can “feed” the labour movement include those of Romain Rolland, Buchner's *Danton's Death*, Toller's *Machine Wreckers*, Kaiser's *Gas*, a growing

repertoire from the Soviet Union and, from the United States, the works of Upton Sinclair and Michael Gold. His view of the drama in England is that it is “in the Dark Age”[46]. Carter saw the theatre as preoccupied with the theme of “who loves who” (sic. ), with only the occasional variation in what he described as schools of the “stupid” and the “commonsense”. “Mr. Bernard Shaw” according to Carter “is the leader of the commonsense school. But the commonsense is a superstition and sometimes it is stupid”. Until the arrival of real proletarian writing in England the Labour movement will have to make do with middle class writers exploring working-class themes, or with “working-class writers who are under the influence of middle class technical superstition”[47].

Even such unsatisfactory writers appear to Carter to be few and far between. Malleon’s plays are dismissed as being “in the thick of the middle-class manner”. Frank Stayton’s *The Joan Danvers* has a valuable theme but “is constructed on old-fashioned lines”. Only Hamilton Fyfe’s *The Kingdom, the Power and the Glory*, an attack on Kings, Queens and Emperors (who are depicted as imbeciles) merits the description “working-class propaganda”. Harold Brighouse’s play *The Price of Coal* is quoted as an example of a worthwhile subject marred by a sentimental love story. It is Sean O’Casey, however, who gains Carter’s fullest praise, although even he is reported to use “the traditional middle-class technique”[48]. On the subject of theatrical form and technique, Carter’s writings were no less strident, but rather confusing. He rejected the use of conventional theatre equipment, asserting that such equipment was unnecessary for plays which would be made and understood only with the co-operation of the audience, through a process he called “Machine Dramatisation”[49]. Later Carter emphasised the importance of dance and movement rather than plot in the workers’ theatre in an article entitled “Plot Me No Plots”:

“Improvisation, space, acrobaticism, and athleticism, and jazz or machine music are four essentials belonging to the Workers’ Theatre which the workers must use in their own way. “[50] The following week, however, Carter recommended that workers use the melodrama form, and that they dramatise stories from the *Sunday Worker*. An article on July 12th. 1925 informs readers that “aggressive” plays should form the basis of the workers’ theatre, and on July 19th. Carter formulated “The Rule of No Rules”, stressing the diversity of forms available to worker dramatists. Later, both Trotsky’s *Literature and Revolution* and the futurism of Marinetti was praised[51]. Later still the role of scenery was discussed, Carter rejecting the use of conventional scenery in favour of “tool-scenery” - props and mechanisms which could be used by worker-actors to accomplish the tasks of putting on a performance[52]. These prescriptions, along with essays on “made-while-you act” plays - ideas for improvisation, dramatising current events, dramatising trials[53] - and “barrel plays” satires and sketches acted in the open on barrels, soap boxes, or a couple of planks[54] - add up to a confusing diversity of ideas with little cohesiveness. Carter emphasises the aesthetic of the machine in a way which is reminiscent of Meyerhold - (“The machine as the new ideal, its qualities as the new ethics, its form and colour as the new aesthetics, its movements as the new waste-saving psychology of acting. . . . “[55]) - and is clearly very much influenced by some forms of futurism. This is combined with a sweeping dismissal of all the theatre of the past, but a recognition of the usefulness of melodrama as a dramatic form for the workers’ theatre. Carter is against using the conventional box set, but descriptions of what should replace it are vague. His faith in the possibilities of improvisation underestimates the difficulties faced by untrained performers working in this area, and suggests that his experience of such work at first hand is very limited. It is apparent that Carter’s observations on theatrical form are not linked to the actual achievements or capabilities of existing groups of worker-actors. In addition to his strictures on form, Carter had a number of proposals for the content of a workers’ theatre. Carter believed that the appropriate content could easily be plucked straight out of everyday life in the Labour Movement. Thus “the outlines of a class-conscious play” would be found if one were to eavesdrop on the discussion of a number of trade union delegates on any

“momentous” question[56]. He urged his readers to turn towards industry for their themes, in articles entitled “Dramatising the Engineer”[57], “Dramatise the Blacksmith”[58] and “Staging the Miner”[59]. Carter also used his column to sum up progress in the practical developments of the workers’ theatre. At the beginning of 1926 he offered a review of the past year’s achievements[60]. He reported that he was encouraged by the developments of 1925, and divided the existing workers’ theatre groups into two sections. The first section he described as that of the “moderate centre left”. This section included those groups of the ILP Arts Guild and the Co-op, which had been active over the past year, Labour theatre organisations, as well as “little” theatres such as the Gate - one of the more radical representatives of the “little theatre” movement. It also included factory theatrical organisations, examples of which were apparently to be found in some northern worsted factories. Associated with this section, and providing the repertoire for these groups, are playwrights such as O’Casey, Toller, Kaiser, Malleson, Sinclair and Gregson. These playwrights and organisations had also drawn in “producers, players, playwrights and critics from the Right” such as Arthur Bouchier, Sybil Thorndike and Ashley Dukes. (Presumably, Carter is referring to the right of the Labour Movement, though even then some of these individuals may have argued with him. ) This section, according to Carter, had much useful work to its credit, in terms of its achievement in putting themes related to working class life onto the stage, but in terms of form and technique it was still “anti-labour”. The other strand of existing workers’ theatre organisations Carter branded the Left Wing. From this section Carter admitted that there was little to show, but added that “the little is exceedingly good”. Unfortunately, Carter offered no examples of this work, but did furnish the reader with a stirring description of its ideals. Its supporters were:

“ . . . preparing to make a start in barns, cellars, lofts, factories etc. , to write entirely new plays dealing with their own world of scientific industrialism in a topical, satirical, burlesque way, and to construct a technique of acting out of their experience in machine movements, acrobatics, and athletics, and of scenery out of their workshop stuff. Groups are being formed. Trades Councils are co-operating. Plays are beginning to appear. . . . “[61]

This section, Carter said, had the support of the Labour Monthly and the Sunday Worker - both periodicals for which Carter had written regularly.

In fact, there is little evidence of the existence of this second group on any significant scale, so it is not surprising that Carter avoided any reference to specific achievements, contenting himself with a description of what is being “prepared”. What is clear is that the second group represents Carter’s aspirations for the British theatre, and he is trying to help it into existence with some encouraging exaggeration.

Despite these attempts at encouragement, Carter seldom used his column to initiate or co-ordinate theatrical activity in a practical way. Such practical co-ordination seemed to interest Carter far less than the opportunity to expound his dramatic theories. An article in Rutland Boughton’s Sunday Worker music column on 22nd March 1925 suggested setting up a network of workers’ music and drama clubs, and this idea was taken up fleetingly by Carter on 12th April. Carter also mentioned that interest had been expressed in setting up a workers’ theatre in Woolwich, and suggested that a conference be called to set up an organisation similar to those in the Soviet Union. However, this idea was not pursued, nor even returned to by Carter in subsequent articles[62]. Carter’s column continued on a regular basis until August 1926, with occasional contributions from Carter after that date, mostly dealing with European or Russian Theatre. It provided interesting comments and ideas from Carter’s extensive and unusual experience, but Carter’s highly individualistic, bombastic style lessened its usefulness as an organisational tool. This failing, no doubt, reflected the limitations of Carter’s experience. Carter had worked as an actor, an artist and an art and drama critic[63]. It is clear from his writings that he was well-

travelled, and had witnessed at first hand the workers' theatre in Russia and Central Europe. However, this experience was that of a journalist and chronicler of those theatres. Carter does not seem to have at any stage been practically involved in the work of any workers' theatre groups. Perhaps more significantly, Carter shows little understanding of or familiarity with workers' organisations, whether they be trade unions, social clubs or political parties. The few references he makes to workers' organisations are somewhat clumsy and unconvincing - tending towards a mixture of romantic idealism and patronising didacticism. Carter's extensive knowledge of new trends in the European theatre was not translated into a form which was likely to strike a chord with the British labour movement, and for all his good intentions, the tone that comes across in the articles so far described resembles a haughty and irritable schoolmaster lecturing his pupils from Olympian heights. Some similar criticisms of Carter and his style were expressed at the time. A review in the Communist Party's Labour Monthly noted that Carter's book on Russian theatre and cinema had "docketed and pigeon-holed, named and catalogued" all the external facts, but failed to give "any satisfactory explanation that links the idea with the method". It also warned readers that "Mr. Carter's style is highly involved and extremely uninviting"[64]. A later review of *New Spirit in the European Theatre* was more specific in its criticisms[65]. The reviewers, "F. & I. C." found "instinctive insights" in Carter's book, but detected a lack of scientific analysis. His hatred of the "Trust" theatre was seen by reviewers as a typical "small bourgeois" reaction, and a misunderstanding of the class struggle. Carter's book, according to these reviewers, was divorced from reality:

"Wars, famines, and revolution seem to pass over without cause (stage thunderstorms, as it were); and we are made to feel that the Theatre alone matters. "[66] Carter's championing of the proletariat was applauded, but it was pointed out that there are risks for "an intellectual who places himself at the vanguard of the Proletariat - by instinct alone", particularly that the intellectual will be disappointed with the proletariat if conditions are unfavourable and it "will not be led direct towards its historic mission. " Most importantly, the reviewers questioned Carter's understanding of the need for a struggle for power before a workers' theatre such as that of the Soviet Union can be created in Britain. However, Carter's book was reviewed again in the Labour Monthly, this time by "R. P. D.", that is R. Palme Dutt, the Communist Party's leading theoretician at this time. Dutt issued an implied rebuke to the previous reviewers: A review of Huntly Carter's book has already appeared in this journal: but this review, in raising certain questions of criticism, did not give any picture of the actual achievement of Huntly Carter's work, nor did it give any positive outlook on the question of theatre. "[67] While endorsing some of the previous criticisms, Dutt took a far more positive line on Carter's contribution, and agreed wholeheartedly with Carter's analysis of what he called the "trustification" of modern theatre:

". . . his exhaustive and documented exposure of the actual workings of the Trust Theatre during and after the war constitute a strong piece of revolutionary propaganda. "[68] Though the Communist Party had no official "line" on workers' theatre, or indeed other cultural matters, this endorsement by Dutt suggests that the view of the Party's leadership, where they had any view on the matter, leaned towards the ideas offered by Huntly Carter. While Carter's ideas found favour with the Communist Party leadership, they were not necessarily popular with all of the Sunday Worker's readers. This can be seen in one of the rare examples of public debate on cultural matters that graced the pages of a left-wing paper in this period. In September 1926 the Sunday Worker's arts page ran an article from a "Clydebank Riveter", criticising the paper's implied definition of working-class art, and bemoaning the combination of "highbrow" concerns and a tendency towards "glorifying and idealising machinery and machine labour" which he claimed that the arts page exhibited[69] This was printed with a reply from one of the paper's regular reviewers, Bonar Thompson, defending the paper, and opened up a stream of correspondence

which dominated the arts page for the next five weeks. The “Clydebank Riveter” believed that the concerns of the Sunday Worker’s writers were far removed from the daily concerns of the workers. They were too metropolitan, and too “highbrow”:

“Every week there’s a chunk in this page about Workers’ Theatres, written by nice people, who deplore the fact that the ordinary Worker at any rate prefers to see Celtic and Rangers and Elky Clark to prancing across some imaginary stage yodelling Bread, BREAD, BREAD, &c. , &c. , ad. lib (see recipe for Workers’ Theatres, SUNDAY WORKER magazine page). “[70] The “riveter” wanted less about drama, more about books including detective stories and, surprisingly in view of his comments about “highbrow” art, the work of Hauptmann, France and O’Neill. He objected that the page followed the model of bourgeois literary pages, with nicely rounded essays rather than useful reviews. Bonar Thompson’s reply, while making no direct reference to the Clydebank critic, condemned the influence of the “merely mechanical” Marxists within the labour movement. This charge could more easily be levelled at Huntly Carter than the riveter, given his criticism of “idealising machinery”, but Thompson professed general support for the work that the Sunday Worker was doing. Thompson dismissed the notion that a progressive publication could usefully deal with the modern mass culture of popular song or fiction. Such works were “mawkish, witless, pointless and senseless products of a shoddy age. “ He did not suggest that workers’ theatre should be used as a weapon in the class struggle, but rather that it should bring beauty into the lives of workers who had been subjected to the inhuman degradations of industrialism:

“Those who have been fortunate enough to hear William Paul or John Goss sing some of the old songs of the folk will have realised how the industrial system has banished beauty from the world, for these songs are never sung nowadays among the Workers. . . . The inauguration of a genuine Workers’ Theatre, with Workers’ drama, written and acted and produced by Workers, will enrich and dignify our movement, and bring art and beauty into the lives of the masses. “[71] The many replies which were published in the next four weeks were slanted against the opinions of the “Clydebank Riveter”, though there is little support for the specific views of Bonar Thompson. The majority were against the idea that the Sunday Worker should devote space to sport, which served the interests of the bosses in diverting the masses from their revolutionary potential, and made money for big business. Christina Walshe dealt with the particular question of the development of the Workers’ Theatre Movement, and her contribution will be dealt with in the following section. What emerges most clearly from the letters contributed to this debate is the sheer diversity of opinions and analyses of the role of cultural questions in the working-class movement. In a reply to the debate, the paper’s editors affirmed their opposition to “highbrowism”, but noted that there was no consensus on how to define this aberration:

“‘Clydebank Riveter’ calls the Workers’ Theatre Movement highbrow; Christina Walshe retorts that he is a highbrow himself because he wants ‘more about Hauptmann, France and O’Neil [sic. ]. ‘We think they are both wrong in their accusations. We suggest as our definition of what to cut out: stuff that has no bearing on life as it interests the class-conscious Worker. The test will not be whether the author was or was not a class-conscious Worker, nor whether he had or had not a class-conscious aim - it will simply be whether his stuff is of any help to class-conscious Workers in their struggle against capitalism. “[72] The editors therefore acknowledged that their coverage should be wider, and pledged that they would pay attention to cheap reprints of good books available to workers. They also re-stated their commitment to supporting moves to establish a Workers’ Theatre organisation.

Writing at the request of the editors the following week, J. M. Flanagan surveyed the diversity of ideas expressed by correspondents:

“The Sunday Worker has been trying to find the Workers’ point of view on art. We have found that it doesn’t exist - yet. . . . Thus in attempting to write a Sunday Worker comment on the

discussion on this page one finds that one expresses what is largely an individual opinion, but one which nevertheless is based on the letters which the Sunday Worker has received on the subject. “[73] Flanagan pointed out Trotsky’s analysis, which maintained that true working-class art can only be attained when the workers have overturned the capitalist system, and are able to secure the leisure necessary for the production of worthwhile culture. Therefore the Sunday Worker should look at the bourgeois ideas in existing art, and try to foster new forms:

“. . . it remains essential to criticise Wells, Galsworthy & Co. It is also necessary to expose intellectuals like Miles Malleon who call themselves Socialists but don’t write Working class drama. It is again necessary to give encouragement to men like Huntly Carter, who have broken with the bourgeois ideas and are moving towards a new expression and new ideals. . . . Lastly it is essential that the Workers’ Theatre Movement should be developed, for this will enable many Workers to experiment and prepare for the day when they will have the leisure to create an art which will be their own.

“[74]

Thus, by following Trotsky’s thesis, Flanagan is obliged to characterise the work of the Workers’ Theatre Movement as no more than a rehearsal for the real art which the workers are destined to create after the revolution. Furthermore, no place is found in Flanagan’s scheme for the “lowbrow” arts which dominate the mass culture of the workers.

To sum up this section; the diverse theoretical positions concerning the possible institution of workers’ theatre in this period can be divided into two broad strands. On the one hand, there were those connected with the ILP and Co operative movement, who stressed the educational role of drama for those who took part in it. Close to this position were the members of the Plebs league. On the other hand, there were those associated with the Communist Party, who were more likely to stress the activist and propagandist value of theatre. This strand saw expression in the pages of the Sunday Worker. But these two strands overlapped at several points. The question of the distinction between “highbrow” and “lowbrow” art, and the relation of these to a possible “workers’ art” was problematic for all sections of the movement, and the dominant attitude tended to dismiss the lowbrow mass cultures of sport and popular music as unworthy of the aspirations of class-conscious workers. On the specific practical question of bringing into being a workers’ theatre there were a great range of opinions on how to proceed. Perhaps it was for this reason that the practical developments which followed were uncoordinated and confused.

Practical Developments:

One of the earliest attempts to set up a national workers’ theatre organisation was the formation of the ILP Arts Guild in 1925. By 1926 this organisation claimed to have over 100 affiliated drama groups throughout the country[75]. How many of these groups were consciously attempting to use drama to a political purpose it is difficult to establish. Huntly Carter noted the organisation’s tendency “to federate with any and every drama society and music choir”[76]. It is therefore likely that many of these federated groups were amateur drama groups which already existed, and that their work was similar to that of other groups affiliated to the British Drama League, and therefore was not remarked upon by the left press. Those groups that were noticed seemed to be basing their repertoire on a fairly conventional diet of Galsworthy, Shaw and Malleon[77].

Another Labour organisation devoted to the theatre was the London Labour Drama Federation. This was formed at a meeting of Labour MPs and members of the theatrical profession on July 11th. 1925 in the House of Commons[78].

The MPs included the Labour Party deputy leader (and right-winger) J. R. Clynes, and the theatre representatives included Arthur Bouchier (who became the organisation’s president) and Sybil Thorndike. This venture resulted in the affiliation of 12 London societies, a production of Capek’s *Insect Play* at the Strand Theatre, (which apparently received 3,000 applications for its

1,000 free tickets) and two delegate conferences. [79] The production of the Insect Play was repeated at the New Scala Theatre in October 1926, and received a generally favourable review in the *Sunday Worker*, though the “worker reviewer” was disappointed that the play ended “without showing how the system can be replaced by a Workers’ Republic - which surely ought to be the object of all Workers’ plays. “ The performance was also marred for the reviewer when, at the end of the evening, the orchestra, led by John Clynes (son of J. R. Clynes), struck up the national anthem. A spirited section in the audience apparently answered with a rendition of “The Red Flag”[80]. However, though this performance was judged an artistic success, it left the organisation with a deficit of £100. An announcement in the *Clarion* appealed for funds, as otherwise the organisation was in jeopardy[81]. Since there appears to be no further record of any activity, it can probably be safely assumed that this production was the Federation’s swan-song. These two organisations, along with the Plebs League, were the only existing bases for a national or regional structure of workers’ theatre groups. However, they were very much “federal” structures, with little or no control over affiliated organisations. None of them had a clear artistic policy, let alone any means of encouraging groups to follow such a policy if it were formulated. Thus there was nothing that could be described as a cohesive workers’ theatre movement, merely a collection of varied groups, some tending towards conventional amateur dramatics, some with more educational aims, and some attempting more propagandist work. However, there were larger forces at work in society, and these had their impact on the development of workers’ theatre. The crisis in the coalfields was beginning to draw in the whole of the Labour movement. The prospect of a General Strike moved closer to reality, to the alarm of Labour leaders like Ramsay Macdonald, anxious lest such a course might lose the Labour Party votes in the next election, and jeopardise their position. The National Minority Movement, a left wing pressure group dominated by the Communist Party, and at that time still operating within the official trade union movement, held a conference in August 1925, when the keynote was “Prepare for the Coming Fight”, and another in March 1926, when 883 delegates from 547 organisations, including 52 Trades Councils, issued an appeal for the immediate setting up of Councils of Action and Workers’ Defence Corps[82]. These developments coincided with a slow but steady series of local initiatives in setting up theatre groups whose aims went beyond the purely “educational”. In November and December 1925 the “Doncaster Folkhouse Amateur Company” staged 15 performances of Toller’s revolutionary play *Masses and Man* in the mining villages around Doncaster and Sheffield[83]. Perhaps more significantly, one group (possibly the Woolwich group referred to by Huntly Carter) staged a “Red Concert” at the Trafalgar Tavern on the Thames in February 1926. This is described in the reminiscences of Jack Loveman, one of the correspondents in the *Sunday Worker*/Clydebank Riveter debate, who was to go on to be a very active participant in Workers’ Theatre activities throughout the twenties and thirties. The concert included a choir which sang “Go Down, Moses” and led a rendering of the “Internationale”, and a sketch entitled “Dubb’s Reduction: A Bolshevik Ballad Playlet”. The simple plot involved an attempt by the boss, Sweatman, to impose wage cuts on a workforce led by Henry Dubb. Dubb, a creature from American labour folklore, represented the faithful, unquestioning worker. He had already made an appearance in English worker-dramaturgy in July 1925, when a sketch entitled “The Conversion of Henry Dubb” was performed at an N. C. L. C. garden party in London[84]. In this case, however, Dubb acted against his usual inclination, and refused to co-operate with the boss’s plan. Further advice was sought from a character called “Red Rosa”, whose oration provided “an explosive and revolutionary end”[85]. In Scotland, Joe Corrie, an ex-miner blacklisted by the mine owners for his political activities, gathered a group of 10 comrades to form the Bowhill Village Players in Fife. On April 5th 1926 the *Daily Herald* published his letter about the “interesting and instructive hobby” which now filled his spare time, reporting that the group’s productions of one act plays by modern authors filled the village hall (which he claimed

could seat 1,200) every time they performed[86]. Corrie himself became a prolific playwright and poet, and his plays of working class Scottish life, *The Shillin'-a Week Man* and *The Poacher* were performed by the Bowhill Village Players during the period of the General Strike[87]. These months also saw an increase in activity by the Independent Labour Party groups, with some 115 dramatic groups apparently affiliated to the ILP Arts Guild[88]. Holborn Labour Party staged what it described as a "Living Newspaper", with an "Editor" presiding over a series of serious and comic "turns" on different themes, a form borrowed from Russian workers' theatre groups[89]. Liverpool Labour Party produced Miles Malleson's *Conflict* on March 4th. 1926[90]. Bradford, Netherfield, Golders Green and Hampstead ILP were all active during April 1926[91]. However, probably the most significant event for the future Workers' Theatre Movement was the first performance of the Hackney Labour Dramatic Group under the leadership of Tom Thomas on 24th April 1926. This particular group, which was later to take over the leadership of the Workers' Theatre Movement, will be dealt with at some length in the following chapter. Surprisingly, there appears to have been little theatrical activity during the General Strike. Apart from Joe Corrie's Bowhill Village Players, no others seem to have staged a production during these nine days. Presumably, the activists of the workers' theatre decided that there were more pressing priorities in the work of the Councils of Action. The question was taken up by Huntly Carter, who pointed out in retrospect that a well-organised workers' theatre might have done a useful propaganda job in a new situation of high class-consciousness[92]. Tom Thomas, recalling the period some 32 years later, came to the conclusion that "we were not mature enough to seize the opportunity"[93]. How much Christina Walshe knew of the theatrical activity going on among groups is not clear, but she was certainly dissatisfied with the role Huntly Carter was playing with his *Sunday Worker* column. In September 1925 she wrote to spur the theoretician into concrete action:

"To the Editor of the *Sunday Worker*. The Workers' Theatre! That is what we want! And when are we going to get it?

I want to ask Comrade Huntly Carter what he is doing about it? How is it to come? There are hundreds of us that want it consciously, and millions that need it to express their feelings and desires. A Propaganda Theatre is what we want, and we are not likely to get it until we do it ourselves. An unemployed queue outside a London Labour Exchange would provide players for our mass dramas, given an organiser, and the plays thus cast would be acted with an intensity unknown to the professional capitalist stage. Why cannot we express ourselves in this way? It would result in some nasty shocks for our worthy and well clothed brothers of the I. L. P. , and that alone would be worth doing. The soul of everything has been expressed now - except the soul of the hungry man on the Dole - or without it. It is work fit for the greatest man in the world of the theatre, and Huntly Carter is one of the men to do it. But is he doing it? Anxiously watching his weekly articles in the *Sunday Worker* for signs of actual birth I have been disappointed. Are the plays lacking? Of course they are, but we don't need them - they are not written, but living in every unemployed queue. The Actors? - well there are enough of them, too, who are walking protagonists of the satire drama of modern misrule. Begin from the bottom, Comrade Huntly Carter, and start a theatre of the unemployed.

I for one will work for it. - Yours Fraternally Christina Walshe. "[94] Walshe's tone here is characteristically emotional and somewhat precious, and her remarks about the I. L. P. seem gratuitously sectarian, but her qualms about Carter's approach appear well founded, as has been shown already. However, Carter did not answer the criticisms, at least not in public. His next article dealt with futurism and Trotsky, but made no mention of Walshe's appeal. The attack on the I. L. P. , however, was answered by an I. L. P. member, Vera W. Garratt, who claimed that "the difference between the I. L. P. and your correspondent is the difference between the person who does the creating and the one who merely trots out senseless inanities. . . "[95]. To this the

Editor replied on the same page that Walshe was “one of the most brilliant stage artists in this country”, and described her work at Glastonbury as “an annual triumph”.

Carter’s failure to respond did not deter Walshe, and she began to work towards the establishment of a new arts organisation - one that would rival the I. L. P. Arts Guild in its scope, but which would represent a more activist and propagandist outlook. By July 1926 she was able to report that the “Council for Proletarian Art” had been formed by “a small group of workers”. Its aim was to “unite all those who practise any form of Art so that they can become conscious and further the interests of the working class in all their various branches of Art and Craft”. Subscriptions to the organisation would cost a minimum of 2s. 6d. p. a. to cover the expenses of “various undertakings” authorised by the organisation[96].

The Council for Proletarian Art, however, was short-lived. By the end of July Walshe was writing of a Workers’ Theatre Group, with no mention of the Council[97]. The affiliation fees were also brought down to a more realistic 6d. per head per annum. Later Walshe explained that the Council “had decided to concentrate on the theatre to begin with and also to alter its name to the Workers’ Theatre Movement[98]. Its first project would be to draw up a “skeleton scenario” for a Workers’ Revue or Living Newspaper, which would then be adapted by local groups, and would be sent to all groups wishing to affiliate. The Committee of the new organisation consisted of groups representing music, literature, art and drama, each under the direction of a specialist. What Walshe describes as the “Advisory Committee”, (it is not explained how this related to the “Committee” proper), consisted of individuals from a range of disciplines: artists Frank Brangwyn and Joseph Southall, musicians Rutland Boughton and John Goss, Theatre director Edith Craig, theatre critics Alexander Bakshy and, of course, Huntly Carter, translators Eden and Cedar Paul, sexual psychologist and theatre scholar Havelock Ellis, and William Paul. Christina Walshe was to be secretary of the “Movement”[99].

An interview with Walshe in the Sunday Worker outlines further the philosophy of the new organisation:

> |-----r “Of course, a real Workers’ Theatre cannot develop for years but our movement has come about from the dire necessity of preventing the wholesale drugging and perverting of the Workers’ sense of beauty before it is too late. . . . Intellectuals are not needed. Those with creative minds will soon realise their job and settle down to it. “[100] According to Walshe, “quite a few plays” had already been sent in, two of them by miners. An instruction circular was being drawn up giving detailed guidance for groups. Walshe acknowledged that early efforts were likely to be crude. To those who objected that the results may be Socialism, but were not art, the reply would be: “Very well, then, come along and write a better one - one that is Socialism and Art. “ But for the time being, it was the Socialism that was required. Art could come later. Walshe’s optimism about finding new plays was not to turn out to be justified. In fact the paucity of repertoire was to be a recurring problem for the fledgling Workers’ Theatre Movement. It was highlighted by the Woolwich Workers’ Theatre group, who wrote to the Sunday Worker complaining that while they had players, a stage with electric lights, and support from the Trades Council, they lacked working class plays. Charles Ashleigh replied that while revolutionary plays were lacking, material could be evolved from group improvisations. Some initiatives of this kind had already, apparently, been taken by miners’ groups in South Wales[101]. Another approach to the problem came with the Sunday Worker’s announcement of a play competition[102], with a reward of publication and 100 free copies for the author of the winning play. It must be assumed that the response, if any, was unsatisfactory, since nothing more was heard of the idea. Undaunted, the Workers’ Theatre Movement continued its preparations. The “Clydebank Riveter” debate drew from Christina Walshe a defence of the new movement, a message of support from a Russian correspondent forwarded by Walshe to the Sunday Worker[103], and a manifesto. This announced that the plays to be performed would be

clearly propagandist in nature, featuring:

“(a) Class War as a central theme.

(b) Incidents of strikes, lockouts, blacklegging, fascism etc.

© Criticising leaders’ attitudes, policy of government. (d) Experiences of revolutionary work, converting work mates, etc.

(e) Problems of women, domestic life, factory life, birth control.

(f) Children’s problems, children versus parents, education, feeding etc. “[104] Plays would have to be simple so that they could be cheaply and easily performed in Trade Union or Labour Halls, and would “take the form of satirical comedy, farce, revue, tragedy and group speaking”.

A feature which distinguished the new Workers’ Theatre

Movement from other Arts organisations of the time was the apparent centralism of its constitution. Whereas the

I. L. P. Arts Guild had been content to let existing societies federate with it, and get on with what they had already been doing, the Workers’ Theatre Movement was keen to set out in advance the correct themes to be dealt with. The requirement that individually or collectively written plays “should be submitted to the central advisory committee for criticism and approval”[105]

suggested a desire to unify the methods and content of the Movement’s repertoire to an extent which had not previously been in evidence. By the beginning of October 1926 the advisory committee had been joined by Monica Ewer, drama critic of the Daily Herald, Archie Ziegler, the working class novelist Carnie Holdsworth, and Beth Turner. How active the committee was is difficult to gauge, since minutes of meetings seem not to have survived. Certainly, there is no information about the founding of the movement in Monica Ewer’s Daily Herald column, nor in any of Huntly Carter’s articles at this time, suggesting that their membership of the committee was largely nominal. Tom Thomas’s recollections suggest that Ziegler and Walshe were the most active members of the committee[106].

The move from theory to practice for the organisation came with a dramatic reading of Upton Sinclair’s *Singing Jailbirds*, staged by J. F. Horrabin’s group in Lewisham for Plebs League groups and Communist Party controlled campaigns. Thus this group became “the first official group of the Workers’ Theatre Movement”[107]. And on October 6th. 1926, the Workers’ Theatre Movement held what it announced as its first “demonstration”. This consisted of speeches from Archie Ziegler, Rutland Boughton and Christina Walshe on the possible development of the movement, and sketches from the East Lewisham Young Communist League group, Stepney Young Comrades and St. Pancras Young Comrades. The East Lewisham Labour Choir sang and led the communal singing. Communist Party Chairman Tom Mann presided over the proceedings, and it was announced that further performances would be given by “the central experimental group” of the Workers’ Theatre Movement[108]. These “further performances” soon materialised. Scenes from the American play, *Passaic*, about a textile strike, and several musical items were performed in Holloway on 12th. November, as a joint benefit for the North Islington Labour Party and the Miners’ relief fund[109].

A Workers’ Theatre Movement Variety presentation was staged at the Venture, Portobello Road on 10th. December[110]. At this performance, criticism from the audience was invited at the end of the show. The Workers’ Theatre in Woolwich celebrated its opening on 14th. December 1926, at the Plumstead Radical Club. This consisted of a performance of two plays from the newly published “Plays for the People” series put out by the Labour Publishing Company, *Mrs Jupp Obliges* by Margaret MacNamara and *The Bruiser’s Election* by Stephen Schofield. Both of these were rather uninspired comedies in which a wily working class character uses trickery to get the best of some gullible members of the ruling class. J. F. Horrabin had reviewed both plays in *The Plebs* when they were published, and he found *Mrs. Jupp Obliges* “mild fun, suitable for a sideshow at bazaars”, while *The Bruiser’s Election* was “very thin farce”, and “an insult to the intelligence of any Labour audience”[111]. Huntly Carter also spoke at the

meeting about Russian Theatre, and good wishes were received from Sean O'Casey. Plans were also apparently in hand to produce another play by Upton Sinclair, Bill Porter, based on the prison experiences of American short story writer O. Henry[112]. This production appears not to have materialised.

The existence of the new Workers' Theatre Movement, the continued activity by I. L. P. and other groups, and the increased attention paid by the left press to theatre activities had created a new, more promising situation for the formation of an effective and vital political theatre movement in Britain. The mood of optimism was expressed by Jack Loveman in a letter to *The Young Worker*, telling how the Workers' Theatre Movement demonstration had convinced him of "how simple and irresistible a weapon the theatre is"[113]. And a writer signing him or herself "X. Q. P." took the optimism a stage further in stating that:

> |-----r "the Workers' Theatre will grow, through mistakes and crudities, into an instrument we can use for the freeing of our class"[114] For some time to come, though, the mistakes and crudities Chapter Two.

The Hackney Group: The Workers' Theatre Movement's new nucleus.

While Christina Walshe was engaged in the formation of the Council for Proletarian Art, and, later, was gathering her "advisory committee" of well-known names for the Workers' Theatre Movement, other work was being carried out. Though this work may have been less ambitious, it would eventually overtake Walshe's efforts, and prove of more lasting value. This was the work begun by one Tom Thomas in Hackney, leading to the formation of the Hackney Labour Dramatic Group. The fact that this Hackney group achieved so much must be due, at least in part, to the ability and far sightedness of Thomas himself. Before considering the work I shall therefore devote some space to Thomas's background, as explained by him in an unpublished, tape-recorded interview with Clive Barker in 1968, and in Thomas's own article, "A Propertyless Theatre for the Propertyless Class"[1].

H. B. Thomas (known to everyone as Tom Thomas) was born in Dalston, East London, in 1902. His father, a staunch trade unionist and President of the London Society of Basketmakers, was a supporter of the Liberal Party. Thomas became an "emotional and ill-formed" socialist largely in reaction to the attacks which the Daily Mail made on any measures for reform:

"Disgust turned to loathing as I read the campaigns which it ran against the reforms which the Liberal government of Mr. Asquith was introducing. 'Ninepence for fourpence' shrieked the Mail, in horror at the new National Insurance scheme. The proposal to pay a pension of 5s. a week to persons of 70 who had actually not contributed a single penny to the cost of providing it, was almost a criminal act in the Mail's eyes, a loosening of the moral fibre of the nation. In the same issue I would read fulsome descriptions of country house parties, presentation parties, etc. The clothes worn and the meals eaten received the full flunky treatment. I was nauseated by such selfishness. When I sang in the church choir 'He hath put down the mighty from their seats and exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He hath sent empty away', I looked at the occupants of the pews, and it was clear to me that He hadn't done any of these things and it was about time somebody else did.

"[2]

Thomas's education was taken further by his own voracious reading of Shaw, Wells, Galsworthy, and Darwin; by his observations of poverty in his neighbourhood, and by the situation of his own family - not in abject poverty, since his father was a skilled tradesman, but still having "to pinch and scrape to provide food"[3]. The first world war and the Bolshevik revolution added to Thomas's socialist conviction, and he joined first the Independent Labour Party, and then the Labour Party, when individual affiliation became possible in 1918.

At this time Thomas was also working as a clerk, and studying a course in commercial subjects at a London County Council evening institute. The course included some English and Drama, which

Thomas greatly enjoyed, so that when faced with a choice of studying for a degree or equivalent in the commercial subjects, or continuing the non-vocational literature and drama studies, he chose the latter:

“I decided to follow the studies which would teach me how to live, and not merely to get a higher level of pay in capitalist society, which seemed likely to collapse of its own rottenness within my lifetime. “[4] Thomas joined the amateur Drama group at the institute, the Queen’s Players, run by A. C. Ward, who was later to become a distinguished scholar, especially of Shakespeare and Shaw. The group seems to have been a fairly conventional though serious one, drawing its repertoire from the works of Shakespeare, Shaw, Yeats, Lady Gregory and J. M. Synge. Thomas played leading roles in many productions[5]. Thomas also became acquainted with the repertoire of the West End Theatres, and was appalled at its triviality.

It seems clear from Thomas’s account that he had considerable understanding and ability in both the fields which formed his central interests; politics and the theatre. One might contrast the experience of many of those Christina Walshe had gathered on her Workers’ Theatre Movement advisory committee, who, while skilful in their artistic disciplines, and vaguely committed to socialist ideas, had little political understanding, and less experience of the workings of the Labour movement. Thomas brought together his political and theatrical interests in a small way at first, with the simple aim of enlivening the normally dreary Saturday night socials which the Labour Party organised in the area. The socials themselves had no purpose beyond “something to do on a Saturday evening”, and Thomas’s own motivation didn’t go much further:

“They’d take a school hall, and have a little speech, and have tea and biscuits, and then something else. Well. . . my idea was, this would be the ‘something else’.”[6] “Something else” in the first instance was a play by Gwen John, *Sealing the Compact*, which Thomas found in the library of the British Drama League. The play depicts life in the home of a northern mining family during a pit strike, and contrasts the empty moralising of a middle class doctor, called to attend a dying child, with the necessity for working class solidarity and action if the situation is to be changed. The play is short and simple, and was presented by Thomas and his friends simply, without a stage, and with a minimum of furniture. It was, apparently, “most enthusiastically received”, and was repeated several times at other socials. [7] This success led Thomas to set up a more permanent theatre group, the Hackney Labour Dramatic Group, early in 1926. Thomas mentioned that this was “supported by the Hackney Trades Council”, and claimed to include “all shades of working class opinion”[8]. The nature of the Trades Council’s support is not explained, but it is likely to have been more moral than material. Founder members of the group included Herbert Butler, later M. P. for Hackney South, and Kath and Sandy Duncan, two teachers who were well known and respected ILP (later Communist Party) activists. There were also other members of the ILP, and the group numbered around twenty members. Butler and the Duncans, however, didn’t stay beyond the first production[9].

The group’s inaugural performance took place on April 24th. 1926, at the Liberty Hall, Stoke Newington. It received some praise in advance from Monica Ewer, drama critic of the Daily Herald, who had, apparently, “never read a better programme” than the evening of four one-act plays advertised by the group[10]. The plays were:

The Twelve Pound Look by J. M. Barrie, *The Man on the Kerb* by Alfred Sutro, *A Woman’s Honour* by Susan Glaspell, and *Augustus Does His Bit* by Shaw[11]. Ewer was right to praise the choice of plays, and it would be useful to examine the programme in a little detail. It is a varied programme, illustrating a fairly wide range of debates and ideas, and presenting the audience with some challenging material. Two of the plays, those of Shaw and Barrie, were comedies (though treating of important themes), while the other two used melodramatic and expressionistic techniques to make their points. Of the four, the Shaw play contained fewest challenges to its audience. Written in 1916, and first performed in 1917, it was sub-titled “A True to Life Farce”,

and Shaw himself described it as “only a sketch, and a very trifling one at that”[12]. The plot revolves around the figure of Lord Augustus Highcastle, an upper-class Government administrator in time of war, who is tricked by the flattery of his brother-in-law’s girl-friend into giving away vital military secrets. The other character in the play, the working-class clerk, Beamish, serves as a foil to Augustus’s stupidity. The play shows something of the hypocrisy of the ruling class, with Augustus more concerned at his possible social embarrassment than he is about the lives of those who may be affected by his actions, but it is nevertheless a light hearted piece, its satire pointed rather than hard-hitting. Augustus is presented as an amiable buffoon, and any political criticism is far from explicit. Nevertheless, the farce would serve as an enjoyable curtain raiser, or a welcome light relief in the programme, and contains much to amuse a class-conscious audience.

The Twelve Pound Look by Barrie, while still a comedy, is a more serious play. Dealing with women’s equality and independence, it had been part of the repertoire of the suffragist Actresses’ Franchise League. In fact, this was the only serious play to remain in the AFL’s repertoire after the organisation degenerated into an entertainment corps for the troops in the first world war[13]. The plot concerns one Harry Sims, who is about to be knighted in a few days time. He has hired a typist to answer his letters of congratulation, but is shocked to discover that the woman from the agency is none other than his former wife, Kate. His shock is all the greater when he finds that Kate left him not, as he had supposed, for another man, but because she felt suffocated by his patronising attentions and appalled at his obsession with material gain. By working secretly for six months she earned the twelve pounds she needed to buy a typewriter - the symbol and means of her independence. Kate warns Harry Sims to watch out for the “twelve pound look” in his present wife’s eyes, a warning which is underlined at the end when the future Lady Sims asks her husband, apparently inconsequentially, how much a typewriter might cost. A Woman’s Honour also deals with feminism, though its style is very different. Susan Glaspell had been among the founders of the prestigious American Experimental theatre, the Provincetown Players, formed in 1915 by Glaspell along with her husband George Cram Cook, and the then unknown playwright Eugene O’Neill. A Woman’s Honour was written in 1918, and published in a collection of plays in 1926[14]. It is set in a prison cell, where the central character, a man, is facing trial for murder. The man, it seems, has sacrificed his own chances of acquittal by refusing to give his whereabouts on the night of the murder, since this would compromise “a woman’s honour”. The publicity given to this dilemma by the man’s lawyer brings a series of women to the cell to visit the man. Each of these represents a different social type, signalled by their titles: the shielded one, motherly one, silly one, cynical one, mercenary one and cheated one. Each of the women claims that it is their honour which is at stake. From their discussion it emerges that the concept of “a woman’s honour” is a device by which men make themselves appear noble, and far from being a protection, is a restrictive burden upon women. They argue over who has the best claim to be divested of this burden, but are eventually foiled by the prisoner, who decides to plead guilty. The play is lacking in dramatic action, but is an interesting experiment in expressionism, and offers an unconventional and intriguing analysis of women’s roles, with its implied thesis that in a male dominated society even apparently positive attributes of women are constructed by men to consolidate their power. The final play on the list (though there is no indication of the order in which these plays were presented) was Alfred Sutro’s The Man on the Kerb. This was the oldest of the plays, having been written in 1908, but it was very topical since it dealt with unemployment. Unemployment was just beginning to rise sharply, and had reached an unprecedented 1,357,000 in 1926[15].

The two characters in the play are Joseph Matthews, a clerk, and his wife, Mary. Their baby girl, Minnie, is heard offstage. Joseph has been without work for three months. In order to alleviate their dire poverty, Joseph has been out all day begging, but has received only some tobacco from

a policeman. Mary talks about getting a job making matchboxes - the sort of piece-work done by women at home for meagre wages. A further disadvantage of this work is that the materials have to be bought in advance, and in the first few weeks it is impossible to earn any money, since it takes some time to learn to make the matchboxes quickly enough. Such a course would be impossible, since the family is on the verge of starvation, but for the fact that Mary has picked up a purse left by a woman in a tube station. The pair agonise over whether they should open the purse, but then Joe hears a policeman passing, and, on impulse, rushes out and hands over the purse. The curtain falls on a tableau of desperation, with the baby crying, Mary intent on suicide, and Joe crying to God. The play is easily dismissed as coarse melodrama, and melodramatic it certainly is, but in fact it describes a real enough situation, and if well acted could have been a powerful piece. Of the programme as a whole it is worth remarking on several points. Firstly, it is clear that none of these playlets could be described as straightforward propaganda, nor even are they the work of working class writers. However, to describe them as Dr. Jones does as “the sort of thing that any enterprising repertory theatre would produce”[16] is to underestimate the care which has gone into the selection. Though the targets in *Augustus Does His Bit* are easy ones, such a play would be useful to put a working class audience at its ease, inducing confidence to deal with the less easily accepted arguments of the Barrie and Glaspell plays. The strong emotion of the *Sutro* play adds another dimension to the programme, linking it directly with the current economic situation. From a limited choice of material Tom Thomas forged an effective and useful first programme.

Some note should also be made of the prominence of feminist issues in the programme. This probably reflects in part the sparseness of the material available. While the bourgeois stage was wary of such issues as feminism, at least a few writers had approached this issue with some seriousness. A direct depiction of class struggle, however, could be depended on to alienate the sort of audience for which these plays were written. On the other hand, it is to the credit of the Hackney Group that they presented these issues seriously to their labour movement audience. The influence and importance of women's struggles has been easily and often dismissed in labour history. Questions about women's independence and women's role in society are too often answered with empty appeals to working class solidarity. That such ducking of the issue was avoided is a positive aspect of the programme. The enthusiasm which greeted this venture convinced Thomas and his friends that the group had potential for a more ambitious and serious role. However, in order to fulfil such a role the search for a more appropriate repertoire needed to continue in earnest. Thomas recalled that he:

“... spent many hours in the library of the British Drama League, searching for plays which dealt with the realities of the lives of the working class in Britain, and which analysed or dissected the social system which had failed to prevent the war, had completely failed to deliver the ‘homes for heroes’ promised during the war, and maintained a class system in which the wealthy flourished, and the great majority of people were their wage slaves. But I could find no such plays.”[17]

The lack of plays both relevant to the immediate situation, and written from a socialist perspective forced the group to rely, for the time being, on those plays which “had some modicum of ‘social significance’”[18]. But in the longer term it was clear that new plays would have to be written. Unlike many of those wishing fervently for the institution of a workers' theatre, Thomas was himself prepared to write such plays.

Very quickly the original aim of simply having “something else” to fill the evening at a Labour Party social was superseded by a set of more ambitious aims. These were expressed in an article

which Thomas wrote for the Sunday Worker in August 1926:

“The Hackney Labour Dramatic Group has been doing good work to help the miners by giving performances at concerts &c. The group exists to help forward the Workers’ Theatre Movement[19] in order to combat the propaganda put forward in the capitalist owned theatres. The difficulty of finding plays of propaganda value or of Labour interest has yet to be solved, and the only way out is for labour Dramatic Groups up and down the country to construct their own plays out of their own experiences - heightened for dramatic purposes - and so by exchange of plays build up a real working class repertory. In the meantime we must use every suitable play we can lay our hands on, and if these are not sufficient, use other plays for the express purpose of developing our technique so as to be ready to tackle the real working-class plays when they arrive.”[20] In retrospect, Thomas added another objective to those listed in the article:

“... we all agreed that we had to find plays with a political message which we could then aim at performing outside the ranks of the movement. It has always seemed to me the least useful of activities just to talk, to perform, to the people who are already with you. . . . The whole of our purpose was that we should get out of that as soon as we could, but we obviously had to build up our skills, abilities, equipment and what-not, before we could hope to do that. . . . The essential thing was to get outside a closed circle.”[21] The plays chosen for the autumn season were also listed in the Sunday Worker article quoted above, and included Capek’s R. U. R. , Gwen John’s Sealing the Compact, a new play written by a group member, Bernard Woolf, giving a view of the enemy camp at election time, entitled Lady Betty’s Husband, a mining play, The Night Shift, which had already been performed, and some other, unspecified, mining plays[22]. Of these, Sealing the Compact was apparently most useful, and was often performed at Labour Party meetings[23]. In November 1926 the group performed three one-act plays for the Stoke Newington Labour Party[24]. There is no record of which plays were performed, though they were presumably drawn from the above list. One notable feature of the advertisement for this performance, however, is the fact that the group had, by now, adopted a new name: “The People’s Players”. No reason is given for this change of name, but, as well as being less cumbersome than the original, it is consistent with the objective of reaching outside the “closed circle” of those involved in labour politics. It may also have reflected some concern on the part of the group not to appear too closely connected with the Labour Party, in the wake of that party’s failure to support the workers during the General Strike. Thomas himself left the Labour Party and joined the Communist Party just after the General Strike[25].

The group performed Karel Capek’s R. U. R. , a play about a revolt of Robots which served as a parable of workers’ revolution on January 29th. 1927[26], and followed this with a performance of Shaw’s Mrs. Warren’s Profession and Elmer Rice’s The Adding Machine[27]. By the middle of 1927 the group numbered about twenty members, and had experience of fairly complex, demanding work, in the Capek, Rice and Shaw plays, though none of these were outside the orbit of ambitious and enlightened amateur drama groups, and the ILP sponsored drama organisations had drawn on a very similar repertoire. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the London Labour Drama Federation had fairly recently performed the Capek brothers’ Insect Play. Elmer Rice’s The Adding Machine, a striking expressionistic play about an alienated clerical worker, Mr. Zero, who is replaced by an adding machine and murders his boss, had first been produced by the American progressive theatre company, the Theatre Guild, in 1923. It was also produced by the ILP’s Arts Guild in March 1927[28]. Shaw was, of course, a staple of amateur groups, though the particular play chosen by the People’s Players would have caused a stir in many groups, concerned as it is with the economic basis of prostitution. It had been staged by Bouchier at the Strand in 1926[29]. By Thomas’s account, at least the Shaw and Capek plays succeeded in reaching fairly large audiences, with between 300 and 400 people packing into the St. Matthew’s Hall in Upper Clapton at an admission price of one shilling[30]. Despite the overlap in repertoire,

the People's Players saw themselves as quite distinct, and ideologically different from the ILP's dramatic organisations:

“We regarded the Sunday performances of the Malleson group. . . as falling right inside the category of what we did not want to do. . . This again was an already converted audience”[31] The distinction was not based on repertoire, but on objectives and audiences. Thomas was coming to the conclusion that the context of a performance was in many ways as important as the play performed. The People's Players also had the beginnings of an original repertoire, with the election playlet by Bernard Woolf mentioned earlier, and a short play by Tom Thomas about Chiang Kai Shek, who at that time was supported by the Soviet Union as a revolutionary leader[32].

While the People's Players was developing its repertoire, Christina Walshe's Workers' Theatre Movement was moderately active. Its “Experimental Group” evidently had some contact with Joe Corrie and the Bowhill Village Players, for it performed a programme consisting of Corrie's *In Time o' Strife*, along with an American play about a textile strike, *Passaic*, and a contemporary satire, *Baldwin's Dream*, on 16th March 1927, at the Progressive Club, Camberwell[33]. William Paul's review of this performance[34] was encouraging, and included the information that there were now six groups active in London. The next week's *Sunday Worker*[35] included an appeal to the Labour movement from Christina Walshe to raise £500 to establish a Workers' Theatre building. Predictably, nothing seems to have come of this over-ambitious and somewhat inappropriate appeal, which reveals some confusion about what should be the movement's priorities at this early stage. This confusion may have contributed to the fact that after a couple of performances at the end of April[36] the Workers' Theatre Movement appears to have had a lull in its activities for a period of four and a half months. A clue that all was not well comes in an article signed “B. R.” (probably Barrett Robertson) in the *Sunday Worker* at the beginning of April 1927, urging support for the workers' theatre to “help it overcome the preliminary difficulties which it is at present facing”[37]. However, on September 11th., an advertisement for an “All London Conference” of the Workers' theatre Movement appeared in the *Sunday Worker*. The conference was to be held at the Bethnal Green Library, and would be attended by “well known speakers”. Unfortunately, no report of the conference appeared in the *Sunday Worker* and I have been unable to trace any other record. However, the *Sunday Worker* of 25th. September 1927 includes a list of names and addresses of London Group secretaries of the WTM, possibly gathered at the conference. Seven London groups are listed;

Central, East London, Islington, St. Pancras, Woolwich, Lewisham and Hackney[38]. The Hackney group was scheduled to meet the following evening. The *Sunday Worker* also included a report of a performance by the Bowhill Village Players at Cowdenbeath including the first act of *In Time o' Strife*[39] and of plans to found a Workers' Theatre Movement in Scotland. However, the increase in activity that might have been expected after the conference seems not to have come about, and the only reported developments until the end of the year were the founding of a group at Levenshulme, Manchester[40], and a joint performance by two London groups in December[41]. It seems that much of the original impetus of the movement had been lost, and it was certainly not operating as Christina Walshe had envisaged.

If the movement's organisers were hoping that their next production, on January 3rd. 1928, might attract an enthusiastic response and a revival of the organisation, they were to be disappointed. This programme of plays[42] at the Caxton Hall, Westminster, arranged in conjunction with the Westminster Labour Party and Trades Council, was given something of a hammering by the reviewer in the *Sunday Worker*, “J. M. F.” - probably J. M. Flanagan, who had contributed at the request of the *Sunday Worker* to the “Clydebank Riveter” debate (see page 42). With only a few provisos, the reviewer condemned the choice of plays, the standard of acting, the music and songs, and the failure of the group to find techniques appropriate to the needs of workers. Of the

plays, only *The Cat Burglar* received anything approaching an enthusiastic response from the reviewer, who described it as containing “plenty of good class-war stuff”. *The Forge* was described as “a maudling (sic. ), snivelling drama”, and *The Bruiser’s Election* was dismissed as “frankly tripe”. Any reading of these plays confirms the reviewer’s opinion. *The Bruiser’s Election* has been dealt with in the previous chapter. It is undoubtedly a very inferior sketch, both crude and heavy handed. *The Forge* concerns a young man, Tom Dixon, who works on a night shift in a foundry. After an improbable opening in which he reads aloud from Shelley’s poem “Evening, Pont a Mare, Pisa”, an even more improbable argument ensues with his fiancée over the question of whether one can retain one’s “soul” in the noise of the forge hammer, which sounds intermittently through the play. After the introduction of Tom’s mother and father (who have lost interest in life’s higher things through their contact with the foundry) the play ends predictably with the news that Tom has been killed by the hammer, which continues to pound away, as it did on the night he was born. The best one can say about the play is that it is well-intentioned. Its plot is improbable, schematic and pretentious, and the view it offers of working people is patronising. In his interview with Clive Barker, Thomas also mentions *Light the Candles, Please*, a play which was indeed advertised as part of this programme. This he describes as “a most repulsive play. . . suggestively pornographic all the way through, without any point to it. It was like a low music hall sketch. “ Though he couldn’t recall any other parts of the programme, he could remember this “because it was so repulsive, and the idea that an organisation calling itself a workers’ theatre should put on a thing like this is my dominant impression of the whole thing. “[43] In his later interview with Richard Stourac, Thomas repeated the above description, and recalled some more details of the programme, including another play: “. . . they put on a play about a man and a woman who’ve got their last crust of bread and they fight and argue about who is to eat it, until suddenly there’s a bit of a squabble and it falls on the floor and goes down a crack in the floor. Ideologically very unsound. “[44] This appears to be a description of H. E. Bates’s *The Last Bread*, published in the “Plays for the People” series in 1926. This tallies with Thomas’s description, except that it’s a sixpenny piece, not the bread, which is lost between the floorboards in the play. One point omitted from Thomas’s description is that the cause of the couple’s poverty is that the man is on strike. This, if anything, makes the play even more dubious - a cautionary tale on the evils of striking. The other play advertised as part of this programme was Stephen Schofield’s *The Judge of All the Earth*. In this a Guardsman and a woman arrive at the Judgement seat[45] to hear the final verdict on their lives. The Guardsman has “lived in sin” with another woman, and the woman has had an illicit relationship with an artist. However, their fear of judgement disappears as they talk. On the other hand, the pompous Bishop who arrives next recalls his condemnations of those in poverty, and realisation of his own cruelty soon throws him into despair. The God they all await fails to arrive, but they realise that it is human judgement which is important, as, in the words of the final stage direction: “The light comes on again - they look for God and see each other”[46].

This is an interesting play, and makes some valid points about religious hypocrisy. However, it fails to present any class analysis of society, or to show any of the material conditions determining the attitudes it condemns. Its detachment from any notion of political struggle makes it an unlikely choice for a workers’ theatre. Appropriately enough, the play is dedicated to Christina Walshe, who suffered the same sort of condemnation as the woman in the play for her relationship with Rutland Boughton.

While the material was mostly weak, the actors’ interpretation and skill at this performance appears to have been no better. According to J. M. F. the actor playing the hero of *The Forge*: “. . . had only one expression and only one voice. His gestures were ill-timed and exaggerated. He was much more at home in the ‘Cat Burglar’. . . but here, too, one noticed the same lack of range and exaggeration. With hard training he could do much better. “[47] Others, apparently,

showed more ability, but still were not free from “glaring errors and weaknesses which one finds in amateurs”. This was not just the “old” technique of stage acting, it was the old technique badly presented.

“One has expected that the W. T. M. would attempt to work out a new technique to suit Workers without much leisure to give to the older methods of acting, but apparently in this matter the W. T. M. has no policy. The old technique was attempted - which is not in itself a bad thing - but with so little success that one was forced to the conclusion that the W. T. M. started its public work before it was really prepared. “[48] Worst of all, it seems, was the singing:

“Two young ladies ‘obliged’. One sang about butterflies kissing rosebuds, and the other about a ‘dear little orange blossom’ . . . And this is the Workers’ Theatre Movement!”[49] It seems from this description that the new young Workers’ Theatre Movement was caught in multiple confusions over how it saw its role. The ‘nature’ songs performed by the two young ladies were, it is to be assumed, attempts to elevate the workers’ understanding of natural beauty, and indeed this was also the theme of *The Forge*. This attempt sat uneasily with the attempts at propaganda, and the experiments in expressionism. The whole undertaking seemed a far cry from the “manifesto” of the workers’ theatre which Christina Walshe had published in the *Sunday Worker*. J. M. F. ‘s review of the Caxton Hall performance contrasted with the report on the same page of a performance by the Bowhill Village Players. They had presented Corrie’s complex and skilful play about the miner’s lockout, *In Time o’ Strife*, to a crowded public hall in Kirkcaldy:

“The natural playing of it by the people who fought and suffered moved the audience to enthusiasm and the author was called. “[50] J. M. F. ‘s review proved controversial, and the following week the *Sunday Worker* published a number of letters, both for and against the reviewer’s criticisms. Of the three letters in support of the show, one was by Mary McGlynn, “secretary of the Central Group of the W.T.M. “, another by Blaise Wyndham, “producer to the W. T. M. Central Group”, and the third by W. W. Evans, “An ordinary member of the Trade Union and Labour Movement”. Evans, while claiming to enjoy the show, rather damned it with faint praise:

“Anyone could find fault with the acting, but realising that they were only actors doing their best, we overlooked a lot and applauded. “[51] Mary McGlynn also failed to answer the criticisms put forward in the review, but pleaded mitigating circumstances:

“Can ‘J. M. F. ‘ tell us where to find suitable plays with simple settings for us to produce, bearing in mind we have appealed extensively for such plays? “Does ‘J. M. F. ‘ know where to find comrades who will, at a moment’s notice, be prepared to sing whatever songs he would choose after other comrades have failed us? “Is ‘J. M. F. ‘ ignorant of the fact that we are only amateurs, and a comparatively new movement, having been restarted only a few months, the enthusiasts who inaugurated it having left us?”[52] The last point is interesting, and explains the lack of activity over the previous months. It would seem that the distinguished group that Christina Walshe had enlisted as members of the “advisory committee” had grown disenchanted with the project. This is not surprising, given the diverse experience of these people, and their lack of a common political perspective - let alone any common political attitude to cultural matters. The vacuum had been filled, it seems, by people both lacking in theatrical experience (thus having to fall back on clearly inadequate published material and the most conventional of concert pieces) and lacking any clear political perspective. Blaise Wyndham’s reply to J. M. F. ‘s piece simply expresses outrage at its “carping and vicious criticism”, without answering, or even considering, any of the points made. Of those supporting J. M. F. ‘s point of view, one anonymous correspondent felt that “it may turn out that you [i. e. “J. M. F. “ - I. S. ] have done a world of good to the W. T. M. by a little plain speaking. “ Another correspondent, P. J. Higgins, had come away from the performance at Caxton Hall “rather disappointed”, and praised J. M. F. for showing “courage” in writing an article that would inevitably lead to accusations of pouring

cold water over a new initiative. A more cynical reader might have felt that the reviewer could have shown more courage by signing the article with his or her full name.

The other letter broadly in support of J. M. F. came from J. Mark Phillips, director of the Manchester Workers' Theatre. Phillips agreed with J. M. F. that the London WTM had started its public work before it was really ready, and went even further:

"If the London Workers' Theatre which purports to give the lead to the provinces is giving performances such as described by J. M. F. , then it would be better if it had not come into existence. "[53] Phillips also offered an explanation of the weakness of the performance:

"Lack of organisation appears to be the cause of the trouble. There is little or no co-operation between the more talented individuals of each group, and there is no coordination between the different groups. The Manchester section, seeking in vain for help from London, has decided to write its own plays and songs.

"[54]

Phillips went on to describe the work undertaken in Manchester, which had begun about two months previously. Two or three performances had been given, but although these were of a higher standard than that of the London Group, the participants had still felt them to be unsatisfactory. The group had therefore decided to decline all invitations to perform until they could achieve a better standard. To this end they had embarked upon a full but realistic programme of work:

"Co-operatively we have composed three new Labour songs, arranged a medley of well-known Labour songs, harmonised negro spirituals and sea-shanties for choir, and given a class bias to popular comedy numbers. The dramatic section is busy on a political satire.

"[55]

They had also given some thought to style, although Phillips pointed out that they had received no guidance on this important and difficult matter from London:

"A more or less uniformed [sic. ] style should be adopted, but in absence of any lead in the matter we have decided to adopt simple symbolical settings. For the ordinary interiors curtains are to be used, and furniture and other props sparingly, but effectively. Certainly the orthodox stuffy crowding of furniture, &c. , in the commercial theatre should be avoided. "[56] This attitude contrasted with that of the producer of the Caxton Hall show, whose despairing question to J. M. F. displays little thought about how simplicity of setting might be turned to advantage:

"Has 'J. M. F. ' ever taken a bare platform, a few bits of wood, twelve yards of painted calico, and eighteenpence in the way of funds, and tried to rig up a stage, proscenium and scenery?"[57] Such constraints might have made a producer ask whether elaborate settings were appropriate to a workers' theatre. Instead, Blaise Wyndham seems to have accepted uncritically the values and conventions of the commercial theatre.

J. M. F. replied to his or her critics by referring them to the comments of the other correspondents, and pointed out that nobody had addressed themselves to the central question: "Is the W. T. M. proceeding along traditional lines, or is it trying to build a Workers' Theatre?"

Finally, J. M. F. suggested that members of the WTM would be better employed trying to answer this question than "in displaying bad temper at honest criticism. " This challenge was taken up the following week in a letter from a B. B. Walker of Doughty Street, London. Walker, who did not mention whether he or she was connected with the WTM, was sceptical about the idea that workers' theatre demanded a new technique of acting:

"This is as absurd as to say that the Sunday Worker should not be written in ordinary prose or that a Socialist cartoon should not follow the well-tried rules of draughtsmanship. The same technique in any art can be used to show entirely opposite points of view. "[58] A new technique of acting, said Walker, would be required only for a new style of play, but such plays had yet to be written. Comrades should concentrate on trying to learn existing techniques, rather than

indulging in experiments. J. M. F. replied that while it may be necessary to use old techniques for the time being, this did not mean that no effort should be put into finding new techniques. These would not be found by “‘experimenting’ out of the blue sky” but would grow “out of the demands of a particular situation”. J. M. F. readily conceded that the Sunday Worker was written with the same technique as capitalist newspapers, but added that it was also trying to develop new techniques through its publication of workers’ correspondence. The Workers’ Theatre Movement was urged to look towards “the beginnings of the modern theatre” (meaning, it is to be assumed, the mystery plays of the middle ages) and to the techniques of the Russian Blue Blouse groups for hints on how to develop suitable forms through improvisation, without theatrical training or the time to acquire such training.

The chief form of expression should be burlesque, since “nearly every worker is able to ‘take off’ his boss, or the vicar, the squire, the foreman, the major, or anyone else who may adopt superior airs. “[59] The Manchester Workers’ Theatre was commended for its decision to work on political satire, and J. M. F. concluded by pointing out that “it is not necessary to have a set play and the elaborate trappings of the conventional stage”. Correspondence continued the following week with an article by Joe Corrie, whose Village Players had no tuition in stagecraft, but apparently met with success wherever they performed. This, claimed Corrie, was due to the fact that they knew the life they described, and limited their presentations to “simple kitchen scenes and incidents of everyday life, without any plot in most cases. “ The question of “a new technique” was somewhat side-stepped:

“We have not lost any sleep so far over a new technique. In fact we have no idea what this new technique is. A series of articles on the subject would be a good thing. In fact we know little of the old technique. Still we can hold our audiences, a thing which many of our ‘superiors’ cannot do. I am afraid we will not be able to consider a new technique for a wee while yet. We have so much to master in the old style to keep us busy meantime. “[60] While the style was old, the theme was new and original, and for this reason they were beating the professionals at their own game[61].

Interestingly, Corrie presented himself as somewhat separate from the WTM, unsure whether his ideas “will be of interest to the W. T. M. or not”, but addressing himself to potential playwrights who are agricultural workers, fishermen or engineers, who might be able to write a play about their situation and form a group to perform it. To this end he advocated “district drama” as the initial goal for the WTM, and displayed some impatience with the abstractness of the previous arguments.

As has been mentioned, the show at Caxton Hall which prompted all this correspondence was seen by Tom Thomas, who was shocked and annoyed at the low standard of the work. He nevertheless saw the advantages of maintaining links between groups, and agreed to attend a committee meeting:

“I attended a meeting somewhere in the West End somebody’s flat, I think, or a small hall - a meeting of the Workers’ Theatre Movement, (of which I’d only had vague intimations up to that time) to re-establish the Workers’ Theatre Movement. I went along and found them terribly woolly. . . in fact the Workers’ Theatre Movement was really, as far as I could gather, an aspiration rather than a fact. . . . The general aim seemed to be so much what. . . we were doing. . . or aiming at in Hackney, that I think I was elected the Secretary, or something of the sort. “[62] Thomas’s impressions bear out J. Mark Phillips’s previously quoted charge of lack of organisation. As Thomas observed:

“Chris Walshe. . . seemed to me a little impractical on all questions of organisation, plays and so on. And Ziegler equally so. And there didn’t seem to be anybody else there that knew anything about it at all. “[63] Thomas nevertheless put it to the Hackney group that the Workers’ Theatre Movement at least offered a potential medium for spreading their work and ideas throughout the

Labour movement, in a way that they could not achieve as an isolated local group. He therefore proposed that the Hackney People's Players should "become part of this Workers' Theatre Movement. . . and try to develop it, rather than start something de novo." [64] This proposal was accepted, and Thomas wrote to Christina Walshe enclosing the draft constitution which the Hackney People's Players had drawn up, to serve as a model for other groups. However, he learned that the WTM had in the meantime "collapsed" [65], leaving the Hackney group as the inheritors of a now defunct movement, faced with the task of reviving it.

The exact nature of the collapse which Thomas mentioned is not explained, but it is likely that the strength of criticism which followed the Caxton Hall show was enough to discourage those immediately responsible for the programme. However, at least one group seems to have continued for a little while, and presented a programme of plays (including Edwin Lewis's much criticised *The Forge*) at the Ladies' Tailors' Hall, East London, at the end of February 1928 [66]. Mary McGlynn, who had written to the *Sunday Worker* as secretary of the Central Group of the WTM became secretary of the new Hammersmith group, though there is no evidence of how this group fared [67].

The Hackney group's assumption of the leadership of the WTM was to bring about a significant change of direction for the movement. The immediate effect of this was not great, since the movement remained small and obscure, nevertheless it was to prove positive in the long term. While previously the WTM had good intentions but lacked practical insights into how it could approach its intended audience, the Hackney People's Players was beginning to develop an effective language with which to communicate socialist ideas. This can be seen in its first production as "the Hackney Group of the Workers' Theatre Movement", an adaptation of Robert Tressell's novel, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*. This was certainly a step forward for the group from its previous repertoire, and its importance warrants a detailed examination of the play and its reception. *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* Thomas had read Tressell's novel many years earlier - he had bought a copy during the first world war, at an anti-war meeting on Finsbury Park [68]. On re-reading it he realised that it contained most of the ingredients of the socialist plays for which he had been searching:

"The book depicted the life of working people with tragic realism. It criticised the capitalist order of society in new and striking ways. And it showed the utter emptiness of the catch-phrases by which the 'philanthropists' who slaved their lives away in misery, for the benefit of their masters, were bamboozled into voting for their oppressors at elections. The plight of the working class had been depicted in many novels, but this was almost the first novel to be written by a victim of the system who had himself suffered from hunger, unemployment, and the personal humiliation of a gifted man at the hands of ignorant but all powerful employers." [69] The realisation that Tressell's novel contained material "not just for one play but for a dozen" [70] brought with it the dilemma of deciding which play was to be chosen. This was complicated by the fact that the only edition of the novel then available was an abridged version, edited to end with the suggestion that Owen, the socialist protagonist, could find no solution to his problems but suicide. It is interesting that, although Thomas could not have been aware that this was a departure from the intention and spirit of Tressell's work, he was certain that such a downbeat ending was out of line with the rest of the book:

"The original version ended, of course, with the assumed suicide, and I rejected this because it was against the main tenor of the book. . . . [71]" The final scene in the novel was omitted. . . . After the abounding confidence in the socialist future of mankind in Owen's great oration, it would have been wrong for the audience to be plunged into Owen's final tragedy. [72]

The ending which Thomas contrived was much more positive. Owen, having learned of his dismissal, is prevailed upon by his work-mates to give one last lecture on the workings of

capitalism and the possibilities of socialism. The content of this lecture is taken from two chapters in the book “The Oblong”, Owen’s lecture on class divisions in society, and “The Great Oration”, delivered in the book by Barrington, on the nature of socialism. On the question of how socialism is to be brought about, Thomas deviated significantly from Tressell’s faith in the newly formed Labour Party, and its potential for parliamentary reform, introducing a more cautious note:

“OWEN: I’ll tell you frankly that I don’t know exactly how it will be done. I’m not a prophet, and it’s still a long way ahead I’m afraid. Whether a worker’s party getting a majority in parliament could restore the land to the people who live and work on it, and the factories to the people who built them to be used for the common good peaceably, or whether, as I fear, the owners would resist with all the forces at their disposal, I don’t know. “[73] However, the conclusion of the lecture neatly brought the audience into the action of the play by turning the auditorium into the body of the meeting:

“HARLOW: . . . I’d like to move as a resolution that it’s the opinion of this ‘ere meeting that Socialism is the only remedy for unemployment and poverty. (Turns and addresses himself to audience) What d’you say, mates?

EASTON: I second that resolution, and the sooner we gets it the better. And I reckon meself we all ought to get in the Union and stand up for ourselves as a beginning.

PHILPOT (To audience): Those in favour - all of yer - shout ‘AYE’ Let it go. One. . . Two. . . Three. . . (And the curtain should quickly descend on a great shout of ‘AYE’ from the audience)[74]

This was somewhat at variance with the scene as described in the book (“The resolution was then put, and though the majority were against it, the chairman declared it was carried unanimously. “[75]) but provided an appropriately energising finale, engaging with the audience in a rousing act of affirmation. As Tom Thomas confirmed:

“By bringing down the curtain on a great shout of ‘Aye!’ . . . (and this invariably occurred) - the audience participated in the triumph of Owen and his ideals. “[76] The play was rehearsed in the winter of 1927, and first performed either late in 1927 or early in 1928, probably at the Ladies’ Tailors’ Hall, a trade union centre in Great Garden Street, East London[77]. It received “a terrific reception”[78] and it was clear that there was scope for many more performances. With material that accurately reflected the lives and aspirations of British workers, the group now felt confident that they could approach workers more directly than hitherto, by offering the play for performance in Working Men’s Clubs[79]. While the working Men’s Clubs had begun as political, and in some cases radical institutions, the sort of entertainment on offer in them in the late 1920s consisted in the main of fairly standard variety acts, as well as the occasional costume drama from a stock company, as can be seen from advertisements and announcements in the periodicals Club Life and Club and Institutes Journal for this period. The innovatory nature of the People’s Players in this context is emphasised in a report of a performance at the Mildmay Club in Hackney:

“The Political and Educational Council put on a surprise innovation on Thursday evening, when the People’s Players. . . obliged with a serio-comic play, ‘The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists’. A thoroughly good, interesting performance, with acting of the highest capable class. The entire company received a wonderful ovation at the conclusion, which was well deserved. Ralph Manky (Chairman) and Jimmy Barnes further popularised themselves by putting on such an original show. “[80] The popularity of the show with the Mildmay audience is confirmed by the fact that it was booked again by the club for a performance on May 31st. [81] and by Tom Thomas’s account of its reception:

“When I got there the chap at the bar said ‘Who’s the guv’nor here?’ and I said ‘Well, I’m not the guv’nor, but I’ll answer for the group. ‘ And he said to me ‘Well, I always tell people who are putting on shows that they must finish by quarter to ten because we have to close the bar at ten and they must have their drinking time. So I’m telling you that at a quarter to ten I’ll ring a loud

bell and if you haven't finished they'll all walk out on you. 'I said, 'I'm sorry, but this is a play, and we can't leave it in the middle'. Well, the house was pretty full and sure enough at quarter to ten the bell rang out, but not a single soul got up to leave - the best tribute. "[82] The play was booked by the nearby Tottenham Trades and Labour Club for performance on June 1st., earning another enthusiastic review for this "much-discussed play"[83]. By the beginning of October 1928, the "Hackney Group of the Workers' Theatre Movement" had performed *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* fourteen times to Labour Parties, political organisations and, as Monica Ewer of the *Daily Herald* put it: "frequently at working men's clubs. . . , thus getting propaganda before the unconverted. "[84] Estimates of the number of performances of the play in all vary between 30[85] and nearly 40[86] in a period of about a year[87]. The former figure is more likely to be accurate, but even so this represented a considerable achievement for a part-time, unfunded group with only a little experience of play production.

The play was quickly published by the Labour Publishing Company, though the only review of the published version I can find took an unusually negative view of both novel and play: "The novel, good as it is, is bad. Your play, good as it is, is worse. "[88] Surprisingly, only two other groups seem to have attempted a further production of the play[89].

However, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* represented a considerable step forward for the group, and, in so far as it represented its nucleus, for the Workers' Theatre Movement. The group had not only drawn on a rich and powerful source of socialist propaganda, but had also found a way of approaching workers on a class basis which opened the way for introducing political ideas. The one-act plays with which the group had started had fulfilled certain needs within the labour movement, and the single productions of major plays - the Shaw, Rice and Capek had added to the group's range. But in both of these phases the group had been limited to an audience which was in the main familiar with the ideas presented. *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* made ideas so concrete, and used settings so recognisable, that the group could feel confident in performing for audiences that had no acquaintance with socialist theory, or with the presentation of such ideas in the form of theatre. The play did, however, have one disadvantage - its length. While this enabled it to deal with complex and abstract arguments, it inevitably limited the contexts within which the play could be performed. A whole evening had to be available, so it could not be combined with other events, and it could certainly not be performed out of doors. If the group were aware of this disadvantage, they must have considered it a small price to pay for the success of the play in reaching a new audience. Nevertheless, the task which the group would have to face if it were to develop further was that of combining the brevity of its early repertoire with the complexity of ideas presented in *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*. For this the pedestrian formula of exposition/action/denouement which dominated the one-act plays of the conventional stage, and which had been followed (often clumsily) by the "radical" playwrights of the "Plays for the People" series would not do. The search for alternatives to this formula would dominate the next years of the Workers' Theatre.

### Chapter Three.

#### The Workers' Theatre Movement and the Communist Party: Politics and Theatrical Form.

Ironically, just as the Hackney group hit on *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* as a useful way of taking socialist ideas both to the labour movement and to uncommitted workers, developments within the Communist Party began to push the group in a different direction. As has been seen, after the General Strike Tom Thomas had left the Labour Party and joined the Communist Party, and whether or not this was true of the Hackney Group as a whole, the change of name to "People's Players" served to lessen the group's association with the Labour Party section of the left. The adoption of the title "Hackney Group of the Workers' Theatre Movement" took the group further into the arms of the Communist Party, as the Workers' Theatre Movement saw

itself as more radical, both politically and artistically, than the ILP and Labour Party dramatic organisations, and used the Communist dominated Sunday Worker as its central channel of communication. However, up until 1928, this drifting change of emphasis had made little practical difference to the group. The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists was performed often for Labour Party branches, or in working men's clubs where there was a strong Labour Party influence on the club's controlling committee. While it may have rankled that the group was described by the Mildmay Club Secretary as "associated with the Labour Parliamentary Party"[1], the confusion was understandable - perhaps even tactically desirable - and certainly didn't warrant any sort of rebuttal. Nonetheless, there was a clear difference of emphasis between the objectives of Thomas's group (and by extension the Workers' Theatre Movement) and the groups of the ILP Arts Guild or the London Labour Drama Federation. The Workers' Theatre Movement was more committed to developing new work, and to a more activist role for the theatre, while the ILP and Labour Party groups were more ready to admit an "improving" role for work in the theatre. The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists had opened up a new "circuit" for socialist-inspired entertainment - the working men's clubs. It might have been thought that the next logical step would be to return to the clubs with new material, strengthening the contacts and developing the work. But this was not to be so. The Workers' Theatre Movement did not return to the working men's club circuit for the rest of its existence. The surface reason for this is easy to see, and can be related to the changing line of the Communist Party of Great Britain.

The Communist Party and the "New Line":

Since its inception in 1920, the Communist Party in Britain had followed Lenin's advice in his pamphlet "Left Wing' Communism, an Infantile Disorder", and offered support, though critical support, to the Labour Party, in the belief that the Labour leaders would eventually discredit themselves in the eyes of the mass of workers, who would then turn to the Communist Party as the only organisation able to mount an effective attack on the bourgeoisie. Although the Communist Party had always been unsuccessful in its attempts to affiliate to the Labour Party, individual members of the Communist Party could still retain individual membership of the Labour Party, until the Labour Party's Liverpool conference in 1925. The Communist Party urged its members to vote Labour in elections, and a number of official Labour Candidates in the General elections of 1923 and 1924 were also Communist Party members. Even after 1925, there was strong support for Communists in many Constituency Labour Parties, and a number of Labour Party Branches defied the Liverpool Conference resolution, and refused to expel Communists. In December 1925 the Communist Party was instrumental in setting up the National Left-Wing Movement, a broad alliance of Communists, ILP members, and other left-wingers, with Communists in the majority on the National Committee. The Left-Wing Movement attracted wide support, and its membership grew steadily. The Left-Wing Movement also had an equivalent organisation within the trade unions, the "National Minority Movement", which after the General Strike claimed the support of nearly a million members - a quarter of all trade unionists.

However, a significant minority within the Communist Party leadership was unhappy with this situation. They saw no chance of the Labour Party being transformed, or even influenced towards Socialist policies, and were afraid that the Left-Wing Movement was serving as a buffer or barrier for those potential recruits to the Communist Party who were disenchanted with Labour policies and were moving leftwards. This minority within the British Communist Party was supported in its stance by the Executive Committee of the Communist International, which decided at its 9th. Plenum in February 1928 that Lenin's earlier advice was out of date, and co-operation with reformist organisations was no longer consistent with a revolutionary approach. This was elaborated in a theory which characterised reformists as "social fascists", and saw left-wingers as the most dangerous of all reformists, since they were likely to ensnare and disarm militant

workers with their dangerous illusions. The 9th. Plenum decision was to determine the policy of the British Communist Party for the next six years, though its implementation was not immediate or uniform. For the next two years, the implications of the “New Line” were a subject of confusion and controversy within the Party[2], with the hard liners against reformism eventually winning out. The new policy was particularly to affect those organisations which had been set up by the Party to work with other left groups. The Left-Wing Movement was effectively wound up by the Party, and the Minority Movement in the unions changed from being a left-wing pressure group within the existing structures, to an organising base for the creation of new, Communist controlled unions to challenge the reformist leadership. The extent of the swing by the Communist Party can be seen in its manifesto for the General Election of 1929, which it contested under the policy slogan “Class Against Class”:

“Prior to the formation of the Labour Government in 1924 the Communist Party, although the leaders of the Labour Party were as treacherous then as now, advised the working class to push the Labour Party into power whilst sharply criticising and exposing the leaders of the Labour Party. Today this policy is no longer possible. . . . It is now no longer possible for the Communist Party or the trade unions to bring pressure to bear on the Labour Party from within. It is a completely disciplined capitalist party. . . . . Class is against class. The Labour Party has chosen the capitalist class. The Communist Party is the party of the working class”[3] Most historians, whether hostile or friendly to the Communist Party, have in retrospect judged this policy disastrous[4]. Its effect was to isolate the Communist Party from the rest of the left, since it attacked not only the leaders of the Parliamentary Labour Party which would have been justified, and may have been supported by others on the left outside the Communist Party. - but also the rank and file members of the Labour Party and the ILP. The effect of this is summed up by John Saville as follows:

“The Communist Party, operating the line of ‘Social fascism’, . . . effectively removed itself from the possibility of exercising any serious political influence, and its main field of work after 1931, and the only one where it made any impact, was among the unemployed. “[5] Implications of the “New Line” for the Workers Theatre. The Workers Theatre Movement was different from other so called “front” organisations in that it was not formed at the behest of the Party leadership. Indeed, the original impetus for its formation had come from outside the Party. Its existence was therefore not part of a policy strategy for theatre or propaganda, and in most respects it operated quite independently from the Party. In fact the Party leadership lacked any real interest in the activities and ideas of the Workers’ Theatre Movement, as will be seen later. Despite this lack of support or encouragement from the Party, the leaders, and many members, of the fledgling Theatre Movement tried to act in accordance with the Party line, and since the line was supposed to apply to all areas of activity, they endeavoured to apply Communist Party policy to their theatre work. Thus the change of line at the end of the twenties and beginning of the thirties was bound to have repercussions for the work of the movement.

The over-riding effect was that the Workers Theatre Movement, identified as it increasingly was with the Communist Party, suffered the same isolation and general ineffectiveness (though with some notable exceptions) which afflicted the Party itself. More specifically, this new policy was to affect the Workers’ Theatre Movement’s assessment of its own work, its relationship with other organisations, and the conscious attempts which it was making to develop a new repertoire, which was to become a search for new theatrical forms.

Self-evaluation:

The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists had undoubtedly been a success with its audiences, and this success could not be denied. However, it could be argued that there were aspects of the Hackney group’s production which did not fit in with the Party’s new line, and it can be seen in Workers’ Theatre Movement documents that this led not only to an abandonment of the particular

strategy embodied in the production, but also to an eventual downgrading of the importance and significance of this work.

As with the implementation of the new policy in other areas, this did not happen overnight, but can nevertheless be seen clearly in an account of the group's history which appeared in the Workers' Theatre Movement magazine, *New Red Stage* in 1932, when the "Class Against Class" policy was well established. This account, which appears to have been written by Tom Thomas himself, acknowledged the success of *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* in achieving the close identification of worker-audiences, but found the political message at the heart of the play inadequate:

"Its weakness lay in the fact that after this telling exposure of capitalism the audience was told, and voted usually with a tremendous 'Aye!' that 'socialism is the only remedy for unemployment and poverty,' without, however, having any light thrown on the crucial question of HOW socialism is to be won. "[6] Clearly, the question of how socialism could be won had an unequivocal answer in the view of the party hierarchy - by adherence to the party line, and repudiation of reformism. Without such direction, the audience might be moved leftwards, but still end up in the camp of the social fascists. Although Thomas's script implied a criticism of Labour's parliamentary road to socialism, this did not amount to a strong enough attack on the Labour Party. If, as the Communist Party's 1929 manifesto had asserted, the Labour Party was now "a completely disciplined capitalist party", it was clearly necessary to mount an explicit attack on all sections of the Labour Party and the ILP. Interestingly, and perhaps significantly, the sentiments expressed in the passage quoted above were disowned by Thomas in his interview with Barker in 1968. When confronted with this passage as quoted by Dr. Leonard Jones in his 1966 thesis, Thomas failed to recognise it as his own account of events, and took issue with its author, supposing it to have been written by Dr. Jones himself:

"There was in fact, as in Tressell originally, a very schematic account of how Socialism is to be developed . . . . And anyway, the whole point of that appeal at the end was that it was . . . direct and emotional. Any attempt to say 'And we shall do it by this or that or t'other way' would be just foreign to the whole thing. "[7] It may be objected that there is a difference between how socialism is to be "developed", and how it is to be "won", but nevertheless Thomas's later assessment, made without the constraints of the Communist Party line, seems more appropriate. There was little point in criticising the play for failing to achieve an objective which it never set out to achieve, particularly as it succeeded in other areas which were extremely valuable. The criticism is, however, typical of Communist Party practice in this period, showing as it does a preference for fairly empty calls to action, rather than clear analysis of prevailing conditions. A later Workers' Theatre Movement article on "The Technique of the Workers' Theatre Movement" again refers to *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* in its review of the Movement's earlier years. However, here the Play is criticised not for its content, nor for its artistic and financial effect, but on the grounds that "we were emphatically not getting to a wide mass of workers, but to an audience mainly composed of workers who already shared our view-point"[8]. This article was signed by the National Organiser, who at that time was Tom Thomas, but again, when Thomas was shown the passage during the course of his interview with Clive Barker, he found it impossible to believe that he had written it. While agreeing that such comments held good for the other plays mentioned (*The Bruiser's Election*, *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, *R. U. R.* and Thomas's later play *The Fight Goes On*), with regard to *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, the situation was quite different:

". . . the whole point of [*The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*] was that we had, for the first time, broken out of the circle of friends, and by taking this to thirty clubs, we had really presented it to a completely non-political, even, in some cases, to a hostile audience. "[9] Thomas's later assessment is more plausible, and is backed up by the reports of the clubs themselves. It is likely

that the apparent desire in the early 1930s to distance the Workers' Theatre Movement from the success of this production was based on the change in the Communist Party Line. The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists had put the movement in closer contact with reformist organisations than had previous productions, and it had failed to stress the unique vanguard role which the Communist Party had earmarked for itself, so any praise for this work had to be highly qualified. Ironically, the play was criticised for failing to reach "the wide mass of workers" when this was precisely what it was beginning to achieve. Furthermore, the actual policy which the party was now practising was to have the opposite effect, tending towards the isolation of the Communist Party from the mass of workers.

In itself it is a small matter that the Workers'

Theatre Movement assessed its own work on The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists in such a negative way. However, it is a significant indication of the way in which adherence to the Party line could override the understanding and experience which arose from practical theatre work. Relations with other organisations. As has already been seen, the Workers' Theatre Movement always considered itself distinct and different from other arts organisations on the left, by reason of its more activist definition of its role, and because of its commitment to forming a new repertoire of appropriate plays. However, in the early days, this distinction had little practical importance for the organisation. While the movement made it clear that it would not emulate the work of the ILP Arts Guild and similar organisations (though in truth, as has been seen, there was a considerable overlap in the available repertoire), it did not go so far as to revile such organisations. With the gradual hardening of the anti-reformist line, however, this was to change. Both in its statements of policy, and in the content of its plays, the Workers' Theatre Movement was to become much more stridently anti-reformist. Even at a relatively early stage in the implementation of the New Line, the atmosphere of distrust and hostility between the Communist Party and other left organisations was to make itself felt upon the Workers' Theatre Movement. A ripple of this hostility can be seen in the minor controversy which surrounded a particular performance in December 1928. The Hackney group performed four one-act plays as a benefit for the women strikers at the Rego Garment Factory in the East End of London. The strike was itself significant in terms of relations within the Labour Movement, as it was supported by the Communist Party, but never given official backing by the women's union, the Tailors' and Garment Workers' Trade Union. This strike, and a later one at the nearby Polikoff's factory, were to lead to a split in the T. G. W. T. U. , and the formation of the Communist backed United Clothing Workers' Trade Union.

One of the pieces in the programme to be performed was a Song-Scena by Tom Thomas, a series of songs and short mimes depicting the Russian people's progress from serfdom to socialism. For this, Thomas needed a choir, and happened to know that the Labour College in Earls Court a college set up by the National Council of Labour Colleges, and funded by the South Wales Miners' Federation and the National Union of Railwaymen - had such a choir. Seven students from the college were duly enlisted and sang, but, according to an account on the front page of the Sunday Worker, their participation was to cause them problems:

"A student at the Labour College is asked to sing at a Workers' Theatre Movement function. Six other students agree to help him. A sentence announcing their intention appears in the Sunday Worker. The students duly perform, and the leader is expelled. The others strike for his reinstatement and they, too, are expelled. "[10] The Sunday Worker was certain of the reason for these expulsions:

"These students are, in fact, victims of the war on militants with which the whole official trade union movement is occupied. "[11] The students, according to the Sunday Worker, appealed to the T. U. C. General Council for reinstatement. A paragraph in the Sunday Worker the following week announced a campaign to support their reinstatement, but thereafter the incident appears to

have been forgotten. The whole story was vigorously denied by the National Council of Labour Colleges. In a belated statement responding to critical resolutions from its own branches, it asserted:

“1. That the National Council of Labour Colleges has no control over the residential Labour College in London . . . . The College is entirely controlled by the N. U. R. and the S. W. M. F.  
2. That we have enquired at the Labour College as to whether the statement made and repeated in the Sunday Worker that the students - or any of the students were expelled ‘for taking part in a concert for the Rego Strikers’. We have been definitely informed that there is no truth whatsoever in that statement. “[12] The actual truth of the situation is impossible to fathom from this distance in time, but the episode serves to illustrate the growing atmosphere of hostility on the left even between the Communist Party and those organisations like the N. C. L. C. which professed a Marxist philosophy. On the other side of the coin, relations between individuals from different groups could remain cordial, as can be seen from the fact that the N. C. L. C. students were happy to cooperate with Thomas’s group for the performance. However, as the “official” hostility between the Communist Party and other left groups became more intense, such informal contacts became more difficult. This meant that the Workers’ Theatre Movement was able to develop its revolutionary political line avoiding any compromise with reformist ideas, but it lost many opportunities to work in mass working-class organisations. This was bound to have a negative effect on the quality of its political expression, as ideas and theatrical techniques would only rarely have to be tested on a potentially hostile audience, or even an audience with a moderately different political perspective. Thus the Workers’ Theatre Movement was condemned by its association with the Communist Party, and by the Communist Party’s line during this period, to be constantly “preaching to the converted”. This was not necessarily a bad thing in itself, but was likely to be a bad thing if it became the only way in which the Movement came into contact with the public. Nevertheless, within the limited ambit of organisations approved of by the Communist Party, the Workers’ Theatre Movement was involving itself directly in more political work. As well as the benefit for the Rego strikers, there were performances for the Hunger Marchers, the National Minority Movement and the International Class War Prisoners Aid Organisation. The Hackney Group had clearly moved some way from the original aim of merely putting on an evening of left wing entertainment, and the movement now saw itself as a resource for the left - or at least one particular section of the left.

Development of repertoire During the years that followed Tom Thomas devoted his prodigious talent to expanding the repertoire of his Hackney Group, and by extension, the repertoire of the Workers’ Theatre Movement. The conviction that the Workers’ Theatre Movement must be set apart from other cultural groups on the left was a spur to experiment with new theatre forms, but even without this consideration, it was clearly necessary for the group to find fresh pieces to perform if it was to remain viable. After the success of *Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, it appears that the Hackney Group grew in numbers. In order to keep members interested, and to develop the skills of the group, Thomas devised a programme of four short pieces which could be slotted in to different events. Two of these were original short plays by Thomas himself, one was a compilation of songs and mime sketches (the *Song-Scena* mentioned earlier in this chapter), and the last was an adaptation of a piece by Upton Sinclair. This programme carries the hallmark of transition in form, combining elements of stylisation and naturalism. The Sinclair adaptation was a section from the epic play *Hell*, published in 1923. The structure of the play is ingenious. It is a verse drama in four acts, in which Satan arrives on Earth, and turns the planet over to his business manager, Mammon, who devises capitalism as a means of systematising the torture of the damned. The final act, which the Hackney group staged, deals with war, and is summarised by Sinclair as follows:

“On the eve of a great battle the soldiers in the trenches revolt and refuse to fight. Civil war is

about to take the place of world war; but the gates of Heaven are opened, and the angelic hosts are released. Comrade Jesus pleads for brotherhood; but the actors on the stage, who have been criticising the play as it progresses, insist that this is Bolshevism, and declare a revolt against the Author, with the result that the play breaks up in a riot. “[13] As well as the Pirandello-esque use of actors, Sinclair’s play makes use of slides and elaborate stage machinery. It was certainly a departure in style from anything the group had done previously, and must have required considerable adaptation from Sinclair’s grandiose scheme for the small group to have attempted it on their slim resources. However, as it was only one part of a long and complicated plot, it could not have been entirely satisfactory for the audience, and its political message, apart from the generalised condemnation of war, would come across as muddled. *Women of Kirbinsk* was a short play that Thomas wrote to deal with the fact that there were a large number of women in the group. It is set in Russia during the war, and the menfolk are away at the front. Of the eight women characters, seven are members of the Village Committee set up to deal with the harsh conditions, scarcity of labour and lack of fuel. The women have put all of the village’s property and livestock into common ownership, and have decided that in order to survive the winter they will need to make use of the wood growing on the land of the “Barin”, a semi-feudal landowner. They have already cut down some of the wood, and now need to transport it to the village, but the only available horse is wanted by the other woman in the play, Anfisa, who needs to travel some distance to see her dying father and get his blessing. More urgently, the Barin’s man has threatened the women with shooting if they try to take the wood off his land, and this has caused some of the women to have second thoughts about their action in taking the law into their own hands. Most of the play is taken up with discussion of this dilemma, with the class-conscious Marya arguing that it is absurd to leave the wood where it is and most likely die of cold, and the teacher Irina convinced that the Barin will see their point of view if he is approached politely, and if not the women can use some of the huts for firewood and huddle together in one or two huts for the winter. The young Katerina supports Marya, but the other women vacillate, and are inclined to side with Irina. They fear the Barin and his men, and more importantly, they fear the power of the Cossacks and the police behind him. Eventually they are won over to Marya’s point of view, and Marya backs down on the question of allowing Anfisa to have the horse for a day. But just as the majority resolve that they will go ahead and requisition the wood, the Barin arrives, threatens the women with violence, and orders that the Village Committee be disbanded. The women unite to stand up to him, but when the sound of sleigh bells is heard outside the Barin thinks that the Cossacks or Police have arrived to put the women in their place. In fact, it is Andrey, the only young man left in the village, who has been visiting the local town. He brings the news that the revolution has defeated the Barin’s class, that the men are coming back from the war, and the land will be transferred to the peasants.

This is a skilled and effective piece, with the characters well drawn and convincing. The way in which the different women’s attitudes are determined by their material interests is shown subtly but with good effect. There is no sudden conversion to revolutionary ideas out of thin air, as often in propaganda pieces. The women are shown without condescension, emerging as strong and capable figures, and the temptation to fall back on stereotypes is avoided. It is clear that Thomas’s skill as a dramatist was developing rapidly. The other play by Thomas was *The Fight Goes On*. Unfortunately, no copy of this piece has turned up in the course of research, but a review of a version issued by the Workers’ Theatre Movement the following year gives an account of the plot:

“The scene is laid in a little mining village in Durham during the lockout of 1926. Jack Howard, the miner hero, comes home from jail to find his wife dead, the village starving but still firm, and the colliery preparing to rush blacklegs to the pit. Without a moment’s hesitation, knowing he is sentencing himself to further imprisonment, he goes out to join his “marras” in the picket-line . . .

On that note of dauntlessness the curtain falls. “[14] Thomas was also responsible for the structure of the Song Scena mentioned earlier, which was the subject of the controversy with the Labour College students. Again, no written version of this has survived, but it is described by Monica Ewer in her enthusiastic review of the performance:

“There were seven little scenes illustrating the Russian workers’ rise from slavery to freedom, and each was accompanied by a song. They were most artistically produced, and were a striking example of what brains and taste can do, without any great expenditure, except of time and trouble. “[15] This piece also drew on the services of a “Communist Orchestra”, though the composition and other activities of this intriguing group are not known.

Davyd Raymond, the Sunday Worker reviewer, was very impressed with the programme:

“At last it looks as if we are going to have a Workers’ Theatre worthy of the workers’ mission. Last Sunday’s performance at the Tailor’s Hall, Whitechapel, opened the eyes of those of us who have been a little skeptical about the Workers’ Theatre Movement. “[16] Raymond praised every item, only finding that Women of Kirbinsk lost much of its effect in being too long. The Fight Goes On was, according to Raymond, the “star” turn of the evening, “a remarkably fine piece of work”. Both Raymond and Ewer made special mention of the effect of a huge demonstration offstage, which Thomas accomplished by the ingenious device of placing the actors in the highly resonant backstage lavatory, and slowly opening the door to give the impression of the demonstration approaching[17].

Thomas used other unconventional devices to make an effect. To show the march of the Red Army Cavalry in the SongScena, a canvas was stretched across the stage, and only the top half of actors sitting on the backs of others was seen[18]. More use was made of lighting effects than had previously been possible, as the group had used the income from its performances of Ragged Trousers Philanthropists to make its own portable lighting set, and to construct a portable proscenium, curtains and props[19].

Despite the success of this programme, it appears to have received few further performances[20].

The Workers’ Theatre Movement’s own later assessment was that the very sophistication of the effects and lighting had made the programme less portable, and therefore less useful, than was desirable, and that this experience led the group towards a search for “a more flexible form”[21].

It is certainly true that the programme displays in itself a grappling with questions of form, combining elements of naturalism in Women of Kirbinsk and (as far as can be ascertained from the available synopsis) The Fight Goes On, with the stylisation of the Song-Scena, and avant-garde, anti-naturalistic devices in Hell. Politically the programme presented a standard left mix of anti-militarism, appeal to workers’ solidarity, and sympathy for the Soviet Union. Only the last of these elements could be seen as associating the group particularly with the politics of the Communist Party, and even then, such sympathy was widespread among activists on the left in the ILP and Labour Party, as well as the Communist Party. So although the performance was staged just about in the period of the “New Line”, the politics presented reflected the politics of the previous period of the united front, and there was nothing that was likely to upset those on the reformist wing of the Labour Movement who may have formed part of the audience.

The same could not be said of the group’s next play, Malice in Plunderland. In this the new politics of the Communist Party and a novel method of theatrical expression were combined. This short play was written specifically for a Communist Party Conference (probably the All-London Rally at Bermondsey Town Hall on April 20th. 1929[22]), and for the first time the group engaged in an open attack on reformism. Thomas apparently came up with the basic structure in a dream[23], but the setting is a familiar one to an English audience. The play takes the form of the court scene from Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland, only in Thomas’s version the “cards” have contemporary political significance. The central character is the Knave of Hearts, or “The

Right Hon. Philip Ramsay McThomas”, an amalgam of Labour leaders, with a particular resemblance to Ramsay MacDonald. He is charged by the court cards that he has:

“. . . knowingly and with only one large wink, conspired against the present system by organising a secret society . . . called the Labour Party by which he intends to seize land, mines, railways, factories, houses etc. and restore them to what he designates their rightful owners, namely the workers and lower orders, without compensation to their present owners.

“[24]

This in addition to demanding Trade Union rights for workers, the destruction of the British Empire, and the abolition of armaments. The capitalist press forms his jury, with only the Daily Herald as witness in his defence, but he nevertheless succeeds in convincing the court, by quoting his record and that of the Labour Government, that he and his Party are actually essential to the maintenance of capitalism. However, the court still needs somebody to try, so “McThomas” names the true guilty party - the Ace of Diamonds. This card, representing the Communist Party, is dressed in overalls, wears the five pointed star which is the emblem of the Soviet Union, and eagerly pleads guilty to the charge of attempting to hand over the wealth of the country to the workers. The end of the sketch has been lost from the only copy available, but, as Dr. Jones points out[25], it is likely to follow the pattern of Carroll’s original. Thus the Ace of Diamonds would declare the whole court to be “only a pack of cards”, and it would collapse before the audience’s eyes.

Thomas’s adaptation of Carroll is witty and pointed. Certainly, at a Communist Party conference it is likely to have been received enthusiastically, as it illustrated the Party’s new line very clearly. Right-wing Labour Party leaders McDonald, Snowden and Thomas are identified as the main enemies, with the Communist Party as the powerful scourge of capitalism. No progressive role is found for rank and file members of the Labour Party. The play, as it stands, contains little explanation of socialism, though perhaps this is remedied to some extent in the final speeches of the Ace of Diamonds which are missing from the available copy. Though the criticisms of the Labour leadership which it embodies were certainly justified, the importance and strength of the Communist Party is very much exaggerated. This may be regarded as a fault in the narrow terms of political analysis, but there is no doubt that the play said what its audience wanted to hear, and said it in a way that was both clever and extremely funny. In this way it must have contributed a great deal to the success of the rally at which it was performed.

For the Hackney Group’s next production they chose to return to the play which had inaugurated the practical work of the first Workers’ Theatre Movement back in 1926, Upton Sinclair’s *Singing Jailbirds*. With their new lighting board and equipment they could give a fuller production than the “rehearsed reading” which the earlier Plebs group had managed, though they had to forego the luxury of a dress rehearsal in order to prevent the vicar who had rented them the hall from seeing the play and almost certainly banning the performance[26]. A review in *The Educational Worker*, the organ of the Communist-led Teachers’ Labour League, praised the acting and production techniques, and was in general enthusiastic about the play, but sounded a note of caution:

“One can criticise the play itself by saying that there is too much of a ‘Christian Anarchist’ savour about it. Too much emphasis is placed upon the individual sufferings of Adams [the I. W. W. leader in the play who is clearly meant to represent Joe Hill - I. S. ] and too little upon the mass struggle. There is too much of the ‘one-man-must-die-for-the-many’ idea about it. “[27] The movement’s later assessment of the production was that “artistically it was a triumph”, but discussions after the play had concluded that it was predominantly defeatist in outlook, and therefore should not be part of the repertoire of the workers’ theatre[28]. Thomas later gave further reasons why he thought the play was unsatisfactory:

“Looking back on it, it’s not a very good play, nor is it a very hopeful play, but there was a sort of

tradition that this was the thing one ought to do. . . . I realised that, for example, *Singing Jailbirds* was very sectarian. It was an American play dealing with an American situation, with a lot of American language, and a situation which wasn't understood by English people at all - the sort of audience that we were aiming at - and that we must, we must not do that sort of thing any more.

"[29] The play certainly does revel in the martyrdom of its central character, and seems to offer death as a quite acceptable way to bring about social change. When the Police chief seems about to suffocate his "wobbly" prisoners, their leader, Red Adams, responds with:

"Here is our chance to win the strike! . . . We'll die singing for Solidarity! It will be another Black Hole of Calcutta! It will be the end of the boss-class in California! It will make the One Big Union!"[30]

Nevertheless, one feature of the play which was new to the group was the large number of songs which accompany the action and carry it along. The Song-Scena had, of course, introduced some songs into the group's repertoire, but these had been performed by the Labour choir, which was not actually part of the group. With the Hackney group's next production, *Strike Up*, the group actually began to write some songs of its own, albeit to well known tunes, and to set them within the familiar context of a variety revue.

Before looking at this revue more closely, it should be noted that groups other than the Hackney Group of the Workers' Theatre Movement were attempting some work, though none were as thorough in their attempts to build a long lasting troupe as was Tom Thomas. In March 1929, a Workers' Theatre Movement West London Group performed *Corrie's In Time o' Strife*, but does not seem to have followed this up with further work[31]. The "experimental group" which Christina Walshe had written of hung on as the last representative of the groups which had formed the Workers' Theatre Movement in 1926, and in June 1929 this group staged a production of Toller's expressionist play *Masses and Man* at the London School of Economics. This attracted some criticism from a correspondent to the *Sunday Worker*, for being "defeatist and bourgeois-pacifist and therefore reactionary"[32].

There had also, it seems, been some work outside London, though the extent of communication between London and the provinces is not clear. In Glasgow, *Get On With the Funeral* was given a public reading by its author, William McKinnon, under the auspices of the Workers' Theatre Movement[33]. This play attempted to involve the audience directly in the action, by the intervention of a stooge in the auditorium who shouted "stop" when the desperate, poverty-stricken central character was on the verge of murder and suicide. This intervention was designed to open up a discussion with the audience about the proper way out of degradation. Perhaps more significant, however, was a performance by the Manchester Group shortly after the London Workers' Theatre Movement's disastrous Caxton hall show. The high point of this programme (which the reviewer, Barrett Robertson, judged too long, and badly thought out) was a sketch written by the group entitled *Still Talking*. Like Thomas's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, and McKinnon's *Get On With the Funeral*, this made use of the auditorium to provide part of the action. It showed:

". . . three Parliamentary parrots - representing the Tory, Liberal and Lib. Lab. parties - expounding the same policy in different words . . . the climax of this sketch, in which the workers rush the platform, chase off the candidates, and give the real policy of a fighting party, created considerable enthusiasm . . . .

"[34]

The group also presented a comic fantasy called *Conscription*, in which "company directors, dudes and parsons" appeared before a workers' tribunal pleading that they should be exempted from work for various bogus reasons.

In Liverpool a Workers' Theatre Group connected with the Teachers' Labour League performed Corrie's play *The Traitor*, and *The New Saint*, an adaptation of a story from a collection of Soviet stories, in which a superstitious Russian peasant woman is so impressed with the work of the

representatives of the local Soviet that she places a picture of Karl Marx among her icons, to the fury of the local priest[35].

Despite these experiments in the regions, London remained the centre of the Workers' Theatre Movement, and the Hackney Group was central within London. Thomas tried to stimulate further interest in the movement outside Hackney, duplicating scripts and distributing them to correspondents. In October 1929, in his role of National Organiser of the Workers' Theatre Movement, he issued a leaflet on "How to Start a W. T. M. Group", and a list of recommended plays[36]. The list is a sad reminder of the paucity of available repertoire, especially indigenous repertoire. Of the 15 plays listed, only four were by British authors; five were by Upton Sinclair and three were by Ernst Toller. Thomas also contributed his own views on Workers' Theatre to an article in the Sunday Worker. In this he put forward the hard-line interpretation of the "class against class" policy, as applied to drama:

"More than any other form, drama is inescapably propaganda for one set of ideas or another. Consequently, when it does not set forth definitely the ideas of the class-conscious working-class, it cannot fail to be propaganda for the present system, either directly or by implication. The most subtle form of all is what might be called "Sham-Left" drama. On the face of it, it is critical of capitalist society, it reveals the conditions of the workers, it may even show them revolting against these conditions, but it must never depict them as being strong and self-reliant enough to be victorious in the struggle. "[37] To illustrate this, Gorky's *The Lower Depths* is cited as "a classic example of bourgeois pessimism", in contrast to his more optimistic novel, *Mother*, which is described as a proletarian masterpiece, and a valuable weapon. Sean O'Casey is similarly dismissed for his pessimism and individualism, as is the capitalist-controlled theatre in general, and the musical stage (the revues of Cochrane) in particular. But proletarian drama does exist, we are told, in Germany and the Soviet Union, and can be built in Britain provided it keeps "on the path of proletarian propaganda". *Strike Up - Development of the Revue Form* Thomas decided that a new form was needed to put the British Workers' Theatre Movement on the correct path, and he began to look around for novel ideas. He had read about the work of the Manchester Group, and was impressed with the idea of using actors in the audience, a minimum of props, and a combination of flexible theatrical elements. He decided that the next step for the Hackney Group must be in a similar direction. For a while he had "been writing parodies on various popular songs - giving them a twist on the Salvation Army principle"[38], and after the production of *Singing Jailbirds*, he combined these parodies with short sketches and monologues to produce a revue, *Strike Up*. The songs were adaptations of currently popular songs from the new "talking films", so that Al Jolson's "Sonny Boy" became the song of a bloated capitalist singing lovingly to his moneybags "Cuddle up to me, money boy", and "The Wedding of the Painted Doll" became "The Opening of the Talking Shop", a satire on the ineffectiveness of Parliament and the lack of difference between Liberal, Labour and Tory M. P. s. "Broadway Melody" became "Workers' Melody" - a hymn of praise to the achievements of the Soviet Union: "They're building up in Soviet Land They're building socialism.

The workers there are right on top. The parasites they've made to hop. The more they make the more they pay But here it's just the other way In five year's sped they'll be right ahead In the workers' Soviet Land. [39] There was also some use of stooges in the auditorium to get the audience to join in with a cry of "Yes, strike!" at the appropriate moment, a device reminiscent of the climax of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, and seeming to anticipate such plays as Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty*. Thomas also included a line of female dancers, and a monologue in the character of a Market quack in Hackney, selling patent medicine but revealing that the real problem with the health of his working class customers was the fact of their exploitation. [40] The show was first staged in Conway Hall at the beginning of February 1930,

and was apparently well appreciated by the audience. However, it did not meet with critical acclaim from the Daily Worker critic, whose review was headed “Slavish Copying of Jazz Not Good Propaganda - Do We Want Our May Day Demonstration To March To ‘Sonny Boy’?”[41] As well as deploring the use of “Jazz” tunes, the writer was unhappy with the depiction of the London coster, which smacked too much of the music hall. Thomas wrote in to defend the production, quoting the class conscious lyrics of the “Workers’ Melody”, and defending the use of the music hall format, which reflected “a favourite working-class amusement”[42] The controversy over whether this was an appropriate direction for the Workers’ Theatre Movement to take was serious enough that a discussion of Workers’ Theatre Movement policy, with particular reference to Strike Up, was organised at Circle House, in the East End[43]. Whether the objections of the Daily Worker were repeated at this discussion is not recorded, but if they were they did not deter the group from repeating the show. It was performed as a benefit for the British Workers’ Sports Federation at a Communist Party Trade Union Hall in March 1930, and received a less hostile review in the Daily Worker[44], though the dancing chorus line was still slated. This new reviewer was particularly impressed with the sketches, “Suppress, Oppress and Depress” and “Gas”. The first dealt with the distortions of reality in the capitalist press, and the second with capitalist preparations for war. The whole show was repeated at a Daily Worker event, at which Harry Pollitt spoke, in May 1930[45], and parts were repeated at meetings and socials around London. The two sketches previously mentioned continued in the repertoire of the Workers’ Theatre Movement for many years.

In Strike Up Thomas had found his way to a form which suited the agitational purpose of the Workers’ Theatre Movement well. The individual items could be performed separately or in differing combinations to fill the available space at a meeting or rally, and could be staged with a minimum of props. The only drawback of the show was that, for the full effect, music was required, and there were no musicians in the group. Thomas had hoped that developments in recording techniques would soon enable him to use gramophone records as accompaniment[46], but the technology did not advance as quickly as he had hoped. Thomas had also moved across the divide which separated the “legitimate” stage from the “variety” stage, and this was a significant development. Up until this point the group had drawn their repertoire either from the “progressive” end of the British established theatre (as with the early productions of Shaw and Barrie) or from the experimental repertoire of the Little Theatres. Thomas’s own adaptations (The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists and Malice in Plunderland), skilled as they were, were primarily literary, rather than from a theatrical tradition, and his original work (Women of Kirbinsk and The Fight Goes On) was naturalistic in form. In attempting a revue, Thomas was making his way towards popular theatre forms, and away from the forms which had dominated the legitimate theatre in Britain since the end of the Victorian period.

The first, hostile reaction of the Daily Worker illustrates the place which such popular theatre forms now occupied in the minds of many intellectuals - even communist intellectuals. The music hall was beneath the cultural level which progressive thinkers aspired to, and the “Jazz” tunes borrowed from the new mass medium of the Cinema were similarly tainted. The reasons for this can be traced back partly to the sectarian policy of the Party, which treated all mass media as “dope” designed to create a quiescent working class. In the same way that activists had to either tread the party line without question, or would be denounced as “social-fascists”, objectively serving the interests of the ruling class whatever their subjective intentions, so the expression of culture had to stay squarely on the Party line, or it would be helping the bosses. The logical consequence of this attitude was that the Party had to develop a separate culture, challenging the ideas and assumptions of the mass culture around it, as well as the culture of the reformist organisations. But while the Party itself remained small and isolated, this “counter-culture” would also be likely to turn in on itself, speaking to its own members in a language not easily understood

by those outside. This was the very opposite of the proselytising function that Thomas had hoped for from the Workers' Theatre Movement, so contradictions were built in to the movement from an early stage. [47] This desire to form a separate Communist culture was, however, only part of the story. Above all, the Communist Party believed it was engaged in a "serious" struggle with capitalism - and indeed the issues of poverty and unemployment which it addressed were vitally important. But the earnest determination with which the Party comrades approached their tasks was often to inhibit that sense of fun and humour which was needed to make a real impact on working people. The recollection of Philip Poole, who was to become secretary of the Workers' Theatre Movement in the early thirties, illustrates this aspect:

"You were supposed to be politically active every day of the week. I remember once seeing a Party member coming out of what was then called the Hackney Empire . . . music hall in Hackney, and I was absolutely horrified that this comrade should take an evening off and go to the music hall . . . terrible crime![48] Such dismissal out of hand of popular theatre forms which might have been useful to the Workers' Theatre Movement was to hinder the movement considerably. Particularly, the question of how humour might fit into the serious struggle to change the world was, in the attitude of the Party and its very active members, highly problematic. Since much of the repertoire of the variety stage was based on humour, there were dangers involved in drawing too heavily on it. Maurice Dobb, one of the Party's leading ideologues, had made a rare statement on the role of theatre in the movement in 1929[49]. In it he reiterated the view of R. Palme Dutt, in his previously quoted review of Huntly Carter's work:

"Like all capitalist institutions, the capitalist theatre is built on the passivity of the masses. Its most developed expression is the music hall, which seeks to bemuse the spectators with a jumble of contradictory sensations in rapid succession. "[50] Dobb held out little encouragement to those who wished to move in the direction of a workers' theatre. "Clearly," he stated, "any big results in this direction cannot be expected until after the social revolution. " To expect anything other than a few exceptional cases of workers achieving some worthwhile theatre in a bourgeois country would be "Utopianism". However, "in a limited field" a workers' theatre might do some useful creative work, in the form of "burlesque and satire, semi-cabaret, semi-circus commentaries on current events (like the Russian 'Blue Blouses')"[51]. Thus, from this point of view, the stylistic options open to the class-conscious workers were very limited. Dobb poured scorn on not only the "trust" theatres of the capitalists, but also the "Little Theatres", and on the "reformist" theatres of the Labour and ILP sympathisers. Notwithstanding his half-hearted endorsement of burlesque, satire and the rest, workers were not to draw inspiration from the most readily available of popular theatre forms, as the music hall was, for Dobb, the most developed expression of the "dope" theatre. The workers should not be too ambitious, but should follow patiently in the footsteps of their Russian comrades, and perhaps when we have had a social revolution, we might get a revolutionary theatre. Bearing this in mind, one can see why the music hall elements in *Strike Up* met with a negative response from some sections of the Communist Party. But the proof of the pudding was in the eating, and the fact that scenes from the show were in demand at events was the most important gauge of its effectiveness. *Strike Up* was a success as far as the Hackney Group was concerned, and it fulfilled the function for which it had been designed. The group now had a series of flexible "turns" which could serve the political purpose which they saw as the primary reason for the group's existence. However, the wide criticism of the revue had shown them that the variety format had to be treated with kid gloves, and if they could find a way of achieving the same flexibility without attracting the possible stigma of having emulated the "dope" theatre of the music hall, this would be preferable. Thus it was necessary to find ways of operating which would not only solve the theatrical problem which the group had set itself, but which would also satisfy the demands of political and cultural propriety which the group perceived as stemming

from the ideologues of the Communist Party.

Relations with the Communist Party:

It might have been expected that the Hackney Group's stalwart support for the Party line would have earned it reciprocal support from the Party. However, it seems from Thomas's account, and that of many others involved in the Workers' Theatre Movement, that this was not the case. The Party was happy to use the group to fill a gap at a conference, but considered its activity very peripheral to the real business of class struggle. At one meeting, Thomas put the question of support to one of the Party leaders, Tapsell, but was not encouraged by the response. Tapsell;

“... obviously hadn't followed what we were doing, and put across a very . . . sectarian line; we didn't bring the name “Communist Party” into it, or something of that ilk. “[52] More active support from the Party could certainly have been useful. The Workers' Theatre Movement could get by, publicising its work through informal contacts and occasional publicity in the Sunday Worker, but the use of the more formal structures and channels of communication which the Party had set up would have ensured a wider coverage. Thomas believed that the Party would “sell” what the Workers' Theatre Movement was doing on the basis that this was “a new method of putting ideas across to the unconverted” and “a better way of going on than dull, boring meetings”[53]. Even a modest degree of support from the Party would have resulted, Thomas believed, in “a vast accession of strength”. However, such support was not forthcoming. The Workers' Theatre Movement had to work at its own publicity and organisation without help.

It is not difficult to see a connection between the Party's sectarian line and its attitude to the Workers' Theatre Movement. Along with the condemnation of reformism came a political puritanism which often took original, imaginative ideas as trivial. If the Workers' Theatre Movement's sketches had the potential to reach the unconverted, might not that, in itself, make them suspect in the eyes of the Party's leaders? For those who were not with the Party must be counted as against it, and anything which appealed to such people could not be squarely on the Party line. Reaching those outside the movement, (unless they were members of the unemployed, who were, almost by definition, politically bona fide), was less important than establishing the “correctness” of the current position. And as for dull, boring meetings, perhaps they were part of the price to be paid for the privilege of being a revolutionary. Those members of the Workers' Theatre Movement who were also members of the Communist Party would never have criticised the Party for its lack of support. Such criticism would be tantamount to questioning the wisdom of the Party line, and this was something that was just not done by loyal members. Thus the organisation found itself in the difficult position of directing the main thrust of its political attack at reformism; in the process it alienated many potential recruits without even gaining the support of its own party:

“We cut away, so to speak, our support from the other working class parties . . . without getting the access of strength, or the support from the Communist Party that such a development would seem to have merited.

“[54]

If organisational support from the Party was to be vainly hoped for, another, perhaps more important, form of support could only be dreamed of. This was some sort of theoretical underpinning or debate through which the movement could examine what it was trying to do, and what it was actually achieving. Apart from the two short articles by R. P. Dutt and Maurice Dobb which have already been quoted, there had been no theoretical debate or guidance from the Party leadership on the question of the political/cultural role of the theatre. This was in line with the Party's general stance. The Communist Party of Great Britain was less inclined to theoretical debate than any of the other sections of the Communist International, and developing a radical cultural theory was among the lowest of its priorities. This was in marked contrast to the German

Communist Party, which had begun, like the British Communist Party, with a dismissive attitude to the German Agitprop troupes, but had gone on to support them substantially, and had taken cultural debate seriously, even if no single coherent policy emerged[55]. The British groups were also hampered by having no support from radicals in the professional theatre. Nowhere in Britain were there intellectual theatre workers like Piscator, Wangenheim and Brecht in Germany - people who were devoting considerable time and resources to the development of political theatre forms, and who also had experience of radical theatrical innovation in the established theatre. And even if there had been, it is unlikely that the Workers' Theatre Movement would have approached them. The leaders of the Workers' Theatre Movement to some extent shared the political puritanism of the party leaders, and considered themselves as quite set apart from those who earned their living from entertainment, whether they came from the "legitimate" or the variety theatre:

"... we regarded the professional theatre, I'm afraid, as a monolithic block earning their living in a rather distasteful way. "[56] Nor, in Britain, was there any mass working class theatre organisation equivalent to the German Volksbuhne, which might interest the Party as a possible recruiting ground, as well as providing a mass base for the Workers' Theatre Movement's audiences.

Thus it was, hampered by political sectarianism, only meagre theatrical experience, and lack of any mass base for its activities, that the workers' theatre in Britain entered on a new phase of its activity. Paradoxically, this was to be a phase of unprecedented expansion. Isolated from the rest of the labour movement, hardly noticed by the Communist Party leadership, the British Workers' Theatre Movement had few resources to deal with such expansion. Perhaps it was the realisation of this weakness that made it look outside Britain for inspiration and ideas.

Chapter Four.

From Hackney Group to National Organisation.

International Contacts 1929-32

During 1929, the first moves to set up an international organisation of Workers' Theatres were made. These came through an organisation called the "Red International of Labour Unions". This was a Communist controlled International Trade Union body. Its British section was known (pessimistically but accurately) as the "Minority Movement". The "AgitProp department" of this international organisation published a Trade Union Propaganda and Cultural Work Bulletin, which first mentioned British developments in an international survey in April 1929:

"The West London Labour Theatre Society Group, which is closely connected with the Council of Workers' Education, staged a play on March 25th. written by a Scots miner-poet, called 'During the Struggle', which describes the miners' strike of 1926. "[1] In September 1929 an article in the same journal by a correspondent by the name of Sokolovsky proposed the formation of an international organisation of workers' theatres, and called for an international congress of such bodies[2].

By November 1929, Johann Meteiko was able to report in the same publication that an International Workers' Dramatic Union had been formed, with an organisation committee already in operation. Affiliated sections included the German Workers' Dramatic Union, with more than 400 branches, the Paris Theatre "Phalange Artistique", the Belgian "Theatre Proletarien" and the Czechoslovakian Workers' Dramatic Union. Several Soviet theatre organisations, such as the Young Workers' Theatre, Blue Blouse and Proletcult had also joined. However, no mention was made of the British Workers' Theatre Movement. Nevertheless, Tom Thomas had already been in contact with one German "adviser", Hans Knabnick[3], and at some time during this period he began correspondence with a Soviet playwright, Anatoly Glebov[4]. Thomas recalled Glebov as his best contact, with whom he discussed a number of problems. This personal contact was, according to Thomas, to prove more useful in the long run than the various organisational links

set up through the international movement.

Around 1930, however, such links did begin to have some impact on the British Workers' Theatre Movement. In May 1930 Thomas gave a report on the 11th. conference of the German Workers' Theatre League, which had recently been held in Dortmund, Germany, to an open conference organised by the Workers' Theatre Movement in the East End of London. In his announcement of this London meeting, Thomas explained how the German organisation had developed from a purely "cultural" league, and now adopted the slogan "The Theatre of Struggle". Further: "This new slogan demands complete revision of the activities of the groups. A new form has been developed like that of the cabaret or the revue, and the old naturalistic stage setting has been abandoned. Scenery and sets are no longer essential; the front curtain is dispensed with; and a show is produced which can equally well be performed in a theatre, on the platform of a meeting, or in the open air. "[5] The conference at Circle House was called to discuss the possibility of developing along similar lines in Britain. The German workers' theatre was also brought to the attention of the thirty-five or so delegates who attended the first Workers' Theatre Movement weekend school at Woodlands, Kent, at the beginning of June 1930. Here, a German comrade reported on the achievements of the German workers' theatre, and especially on the work of the Hamburg troupe, "The Riveters". As well as describing the cabaret and agitprop techniques of the group, the German comrade explained that sketches were always written with reference to a clear political line - that of the Communist Party. He also "criticised sharply the mistaken attempt by the W. T. M. to wed decadent and erotic Jazz tunes to a revolutionary message"[6]. This criticism was endorsed by others, so that new songs were devised at the weekend school, and a Soviet Air Force song, "Propeller", was translated. A number of new sketches were written collectively by the thirty five or so members and sympathisers who attended. Thomas later recalled that Rutland Boughton attended this weekend school[7], but no indication of his views on the music debate are contained in the Daily Worker report, showing, perhaps, the extent to which Boughton's influence within the Communist Party had declined since 1926.

By this time international contacts were moving apace. From June 15th. 1930 to July 11th. 1930 the Soviet Union mounted an "Olympiad of the Theatres and Arts of the Peoples of the U. S. S. R. ". Tom Thomas attended part or all of this event, and described his impressions in detail in an article in Labour Monthly. Thomas praised the Soviet Theatre's "great achievements and an artistic technique which at its best is ahead of anything the capitalist world can boast of in the realm of the theatre . . . "[8]. In the middle of this "Olympiad", from June 25th. -29th, the International Workers' Dramatic Union held its first congress[9], which Tom Thomas attended. This congress produced a resolution which commended agit-prop and cabaret forms of theatre to its members, while stressing the need to use all theatrical techniques available. There was some disagreement with the Russian comrades, who were less dismissive of the potential of full length plays for the revolutionary theatre, but the Germans, the most advanced of the delegations from the capitalist countries, won the day[10].

Thomas's participation in this congress was hampered by language problems; he spoke some Russian, but no German, and found it difficult to follow much of the debate. He also recalled that there was some pressure to conform to the prevailing view - ". . . there was the right thing to say, and to be quite safe, you'd go on saying the right thing"[11]. The congress was not reported in Britain until late December, but by then the large number of delegates which the British Workers' Theatre Movement was able to attract to its conference duly agreed with the I. W. D. U. 's conclusions:

" Comrades who had reserved their interest for the evening's entertainment missed a fine report by Comrade Tom Thomas on the National Theatres of the Workers' International Theatre Union. In the ensuing discussion the cabaret form of presentation, which is proving the best vehicle for propaganda, was specially stressed, and later formed the keynote of many speeches made during

the evening . . . . The conference stressed the increasing need for more street performances, by which propaganda may be carried over in a simple and direct manner with dramatic symbolism. “[12] The link with the German Workers’ Theatre was strengthened in 1931, when a British delegation took an Easter trip to Cologne and the Rhinelands. This was partly financed from Workers’ Theatre Movement funds[13], and, according to Thomas, had a profound effect on those attending:

“Their shows were very flexible. If there was any sort of interruption they would stop the play and say, ‘Well come on, we’ll argue it out, that’s what we want you to do’. There was no illusion about it . . . . They were all very fine actors. They didn’t change their clothes though they appeared physically different in each scene. They used a lot of music and song, drawing on the tradition of German Cabaret . . . . We could not hope to emulate the brilliance of the German performances. But by adopting the revue style - which we had already been working towards - we could, almost at once, achieve the freedom of the streets, however crude our initial material and performances might be.

“[14]

Thomas also noticed a good deal of what he later termed a “hurrah patriotism” element in the work of the German groups, consisting of over-simple militant sloganeering. This element was fine, he thought, for those who were already won over to socialist views, but would cut little ice with the “unconverted”[15]. Thomas maintained that in his own work, with the possible exception of sketches written for Party conferences and rallies, he eschewed such effects. However, it can be argued that the British Workers’ Theatre Movement exhibited a fair degree of “hurrah patriotism” (or, more accurately, as German writer Arthur Pieck characterised the work of many German groups, “hurrah sozialismus”) of its own as time went by. International contact, particularly with Germany, during the 1930-31 period, was influential in determining the Workers’ Theatre Movement’s orientation in terms of the forms of theatre which it favoured. The move away from naturalistic representation, and towards a more stylised theatre language had already begun in the Workers’ Theatre Movement, so this was certainly not a new idea. In fact, elements of expressionism had always been present in the work of the Hackney Group, and in the left-wing theatre as a whole. Upton Sinclair, Susan Glaspell, Elmer Rice and the Capek brothers had all prepared the Workers’ Theatre Movement for a sharp break with the staid realism of the drawing-room comedy, the Shavian discussion play, or the problem plays of Galsworthy. The wide influence of Ernst Toller’s work on the Labour movement had likewise served to associate stridently anti-realistic forms with politically revolutionary politics[16]. The revue, *Strike Up* had opened up a new avenue, as the Workers’ Theatre Movement began to explore the possibilities of forms associated with the variety theatre and music-hall - the dance turn, the monologue and the parody of current popular tunes. While what Thomas and the others of the British delegation saw in Germany was related to the popular theatre and variety forms which they had tried to make use of with *Strike Up*, it had two distinct advantages over the revue material which the movement had already moved towards. First, it was associated with the German Communist Party, which was acknowledged throughout the Communist International as theoretically the most advanced of the sections. What was prescribed by the German Communist Party could not have any of the undertones of frivolity or “dope” which many in the Communist Party associated with the British music hall and variety stage. By adapting forms from outside British cultural traditions it was thus possible to side-step the vexed question of whether these were “highbrow” or “lowbrow”. Secondly, it had the added dimension of being designed for performance out of doors. This aspect was to become an important guiding principle in the period of the Workers’ Theatre Movement’s rapid expansion from 1929 to 1932, and it was undoubtedly the example of the German workers’ theatre which had provided the inspirational example. But in taking up the model of the German agitational theatre, the Workers’ Theatre Movement had to pay a price. The German agitprop

theatre had developed at least partly out of a tradition of cabaret which did not exist in Britain. This had incorporated elements of expressionism, dada, satire, revue and clowning in a form which was immensely flexible, and which had attracted intellectuals and revolutionaries to develop and sharpen it. By 1930 Piscator had been experimenting for ten years with theatre forms which combined technical innovation with political directness, and had coined the term “epic theatre” for his new style. This style fed on the directness of cabaret, the lack of distance between audience and player, the constant shifting from one medium to another, and the juxtaposition of different elements to create new resonances of meaning. In fact, the avant-garde theatre in Germany was not only politically progressive in many instances, but it had made use of the forms of popular theatre with which workers were familiar, and to which they could easily relate. The German agitprop troupes had the immense benefit that they could take up these forms and almost without adaptation use them for the direct political purpose to which they aspired. The British Workers’ Theatre Movement had no such progressive sector of the theatre to which they could turn. The historic rift in the British theatre between “legitimate” and “variety” had ensured that the “straight” theatre on the one hand remained politically and theatrically lifeless, and the music hall on the other steered clear, for the most part, of political controversy, and even, in some cases, defined and supported the “jingo-ism” of the ruling classes. But while the German cabaret style was well suited to its purpose, and had been extremely well executed by the German agitprop troupes (often under the direction of enlightened theatre professionals) it did not have the resonances for British workers that could be found in the music hall or variety stage. The other influence on which Strike Up had drawn was, of course, the cinema, in its parodies of current film songs. This was to be expected, as in Britain the new “talking pictures” had rapidly drawn a mass audience away from the already declining music halls. But the political worthiness of the cinema was also highly suspect in the eyes of the Party, and the so-called “Jazz” tunes which the Workers’ Theatre Movement had parodied were thought of as irredeemably bourgeois, as the comments of the German adviser at the Woodlands weekend school made clear. Thus, again, the inexperienced theatre movement was limited in the range of forms which were available to it, and forms which would be familiar to British worker audiences were proscribed. While contact with the German groups provided a role model to aspire to, it could not provide a great deal of practical support. It is for this reason that, looking back, Thomas took a rather jaundiced view of the involvement with international organisations. Thomas was later elected to the praesidium of MORT (a later manifestation of the International Workers’ Dramatic Union, taking its name from the Russian acronym for the International Union of Revolutionary Theatres), and to the editorial board of its journal, but he described this honour as “a little nonsense, really”, as he could not practically take part in the work:

“I never received any material other than the published material, and I . . . never took part in any work of the editorial board because it was impossible . . . . But this international thing was very largely, well without a lot of, I was going to say, significance for us, so I felt all the time really that it was something that would probably be useful and helpful for the sort of advanced theatres, workers’ theatres like France, Czechoslovakia, Germany to say nothing of Russia, but . . . our situation was so different . . . . They were all backed by quite powerful parties, and we were a little group of people . . . quite on our own . . . . We were self-maintained, and we didn’t rely upon anybody for money, and we got no ideological or other assistance from our Communist Party. “[17] So, in spite of these international contacts, the British Workers’ Theatre Movement remained isolated. This isolation, though it was partly a result of simple geographic factors, was aggravated by the lack of interest shown by the British Communist Party, with its attitude of cultural conservatism and anti-intellectualism. This element is well expressed in a letter to a Party journal by a Party member, bemoaning the “political lifelessness” in the party local (i. e. the local branch):

“Life in the average local becomes an endless routine grind. Work is carried on in grooves and ruts. The relationship between comrades is not built on theoretical discussion and the mutual consciousness of the political aims of the task in hand. It is a personal relationship based on routine work and the allocation of funds. In this atmosphere personal friction is easily engendered in which politics do not enter . . . . When an attempt is made to raise a discussion on the politics of the task in hand this is discouraged on the grounds of lack of time, or that it is action that we need, not talk. The ‘practical’ chairman of the LPC [Local Party Committee-I. S. ] is intolerant of ‘talkers’. It smacks of intellectualism.

What are needed are workers . . . . The test of communist competence becomes chalking pavements and selling the party organ. “[18]

The founders of the Workers’ Theatre Movement were certainly eager to go beyond these limited aims, and thus were destined not only to lack support from their Party, but even to encounter some hostility in view of the competition that they represented. Nevertheless, the movement continued to expand.

#### British Developments, 1930-1931

At the beginning of 1930 the Communist Party attempted to put its propaganda effort on a new plane, with the launch of a new national daily newspaper, the Daily Worker. This was quite an achievement in view of the fact that the Party’s membership had been falling rapidly, after a surge immediately following the General Strike[19]. What the Party lacked in numbers, however, it made up for in enthusiasm, and a similar enthusiasm among the members of the Workers’ Theatre Movement made for a rapid expansion of activity and repertoire during the next two years. The movement was helped by the institution of the new paper, and Thomas soon started to contribute a Daily Worker column on Workers’ Theatre Movement developments. In the first of these contributions, in January 1930, Thomas explained that there were by then:

“probably a dozen or more W. T. M. groups at work in various parts, some completely out of touch with the Central Committee. It will be part of the function of this column to keep them in touch with one another and to build an organisation which will enable them to help each other. “[20] It was explained that the organisation had issued a leaflet on “How to Form a Group of the W. T. M. “, that the “London Committee” was being reorganised that weekend, and that Thomas would put anybody interested in contact with their nearest group. Thomas followed this up with articles on developments in Liverpool and South London, information about Dawn, the adaptation of the scene from Upton Sinclair’s Hell (see above, pages 103-4), which the Workers’ Theatre Movement was issuing in duplicated form, some reviews, and some words on the insidious nature of factory drama groups provided by bosses at workplaces. Thomas’s contributions to the Daily Worker concentrated on what was being done and what could reasonably be expected from the groups in existence. Thomas reported what was going on in a direct, matter-of-fact manner, and explained early on that he did not propose to elaborate at length on the precise form that groups should use:

“At our present stage of development the content of our plays is vitally more important than the manner of our putting them across. We simply cannot spare the time and energy to discuss specialist theories of production until a whole repertoire of workers’ plays has been written. In a word, the only art we are concerned with at the present is the art of getting the stuff across effectively. “[21] This was in marked contrast to the highly involved style that Huntly Carter, who by this time was no longer involved with the organisation, had adopted almost five years before[22].

In fact, though, Thomas did devote some time and energy to expounding theoretical ideas about the theatre. For instance, after berating the newly formed ILP organisation, the Masses Stage

Guild, for deciding to stage the “defeatist” *Singing Jailbirds*[23], Thomas reflected on the place of optimism in workers’ theatre:

“Does this mean, then, that we must depart from realism and always show the workers as victorious, supply a ‘happy ending’ in order to make our plays cheerful and optimistic? No, not at all. It means simply that we must apply a higher form of realism than a mere photographic view of things as they appear on the surface. “[24] Thomas defined this “higher” realism as “Dialectic Realism, the X-ray picture of society and social forces”[25]. Under the influence particularly of the German contacts which have already been noted, and in the light of the continuing debate over the new “revue” form which Thomas had used for *Strike Up*, Thomas tried to define and explain this “dialectic realism”. In part the form to be used was defined by the task to be undertaken, and the conference in May 1930 (see pages 128-9) reaffirmed the task, and again stressed the distinction between what the Workers’ Theatre Movement was trying to achieve, and the work of the “reformist” drama groups:

“It [the Workers’ Theatre Movement-I. S. ] rejects decisively the role of raising the cultural level of the workers through contact with great dramatic art which is the aim of the dramatic organisations of the Labour Party and the ILP . . . the task of the WTM is the conduct of mass working-class propaganda and agitation through the particular method of dramatic representation. “[26] The immediate aim was not the formation of a working class theatre movement, so much as the simple job of making propaganda and “getting it across” in an effective way, as an article in the *Daily Worker* made clear:

“The experiences of the WORKERS’ THEATRE MOVEMENT over the past year have shown that there are enormous possibilities for mass propaganda in the new form which is being developed (Revue, Cabaret or Concert Party - call it what you like), and our plans are now being laid for big developments during the coming season. This form is a means whereby direct and interesting propaganda can be got across, with a minimum of expense and setting. Consider the ordinary meeting. How difficult it is to get the workers to attend, and how difficult to keep them when it becomes dull and stereotyped, as many meetings do. But introduce one or two political - and humorous - skits, a couple of amusing parodies, get the troupe to teach the words to the audience, get them all singing together, and the meeting is transformed. They’ll come again and tell their pals to come. Effect of *Factory Sketch* And when it comes to getting in touch with workers in the factory the possibilities are, if anything, greater. Imagine the effect that a sketch dealing with the actual conditions in a factory would have on workers employed in that factory, or a parody of a popular song dealing with grievances, with hits at the boss’s toadies, and so on. And it can be done, given the information from inside the factory and the experience to write it up in a telling manner. “[27] The movement would also provide entertaining items for socials and dances, but these would be merely “a minor side of the work”. “Naturalist” plays were again eschewed, in favour of the “Cabaret style”, without footlights, scenery or curtains, but with a “distinctive troupe costume which is standard for all performances”. This last element had not been mentioned before, and was probably again an attempt to follow the example of the German and Russian groups which Thomas had seen on his travels. The organisation in London was to form a “model troupe” to experiment with new forms, and serve as an example to spur others into action. Thomas appealed for volunteers (particularly those with musical skills) to join this troupe. The “model troupe” did not appear, and the Hackney Group had to continue to fulfil this function, though still without the musical input which Thomas had been hoping for. However, the movement seems to have expanded somewhat throughout 1930, even if this did not immediately show results in terms of performances. Thomas continued to work as “organiser” of the movement, and scripts were distributed to interested parties around the country. The weekend school in Kent (see page 129) seems to have drawn in some new people, and to have encouraged more of a sense of a real movement at work. The Hackney Group continued to be active, and new

sketches in the “new style” were written[28]. In the autumn of 1930 the Hackney group held an open discussion meeting on policy[29], and at the end of October Thomas wrote of recent performances for Communist Party-allied organisations as “a definite stage in the development of working-class propaganda in this country”[30]. Though the new sketches presented had been staged indoors, “a similar show, without suffering in effectiveness, could just as well be given in the open air on a lorry”[31]. All the material obstacles to new groups being set up to perform these sketches in every working class area were now removed, according to Thomas. Groups had already been set up in South-East London, Manchester (where the group was attempting to assemble a complete revue) and Birmingham, and it was proposed that within the following two weeks new groups would be set up in Stepney and West London. The West London group was, indeed, set up soon after this, taking the name “Red Star Troupe”, and held its first rehearsal in early November[32]. A group was also formed in St. Pancras, and this group produced a sketch about the conditions of task work in Kenwood[33]. No separate Stepney group seems to have been started, but the Hackney group gained an influx of members from the East End, and seems to have shifted its base away from Hackney and towards Whitechapel some time during this period. Among the new material produced was a “Charter Song”, written to support the Communist Party’s campaign for a modern “workers’ charter” which the party hoped would become as important as the first Chartist movement in the nineteenth century. Thomas’s adaptation was set to the tune of a song from a current musical, the “Stein Song”, which was a useful tune for marching to, but it encountered some opposition on the grounds of its “bourgeois” origins. The song was performed by the South East London Group at a demonstration in October 1930[34], and on this or some other similar occasion, Thomas met Communist Party historian A. L. Morton, whom he knew vaguely through the Party. Morton expressed his displeasure at Thomas’s composition:

“I’ll always remember, he said; ‘They tell me, Tom, that you are responsible for this shocking parody that the people are singing. You’ve had copies printed or duplicated . . . I think it’s absolutely disgusting to use a tune like that on a workers’ demonstration!’ . And I was almost speechless, I think. ‘But they’re singing it!’, I said. “[35] Thomas also produced a sketch contrasting the lot of the Soviet workers, and the success of the five-year plan, with the situation for workers in Britain. This made use of an elaborate prop, and the problems this presented for the group are vividly illustrated in Mark Chaney’s recollections, rather giving the lie to Thomas’s repeated praise for the easy “portability” of the work he was producing:

“. . . to illustrate the achievements of the Russian workers he [Tom Thomas - I. S. ] designed a huge map with each town lighting up when switched on. This map about 10 feet square painted on plywood with rows of little switches and little bulbs dotted around, had to be carted from place to place by train, bus & tram, and one night I was left ‘holding the baby’ and after being refused onto a bus, sadly carried it back with a bunch of little devils following me and playing merry hell with the switches. That was the last time it was used, a new version being written which could be carried in our heads!”[36] A by-election in Whitechapel in December 1930 initiated more activity from the movement. Communist Party leader Harry Pollitt stood for election, and groups were encouraged to lend support to the campaign. To this end Thomas wrote a sketch based on the Gilbert and Sullivan song from *The Mikardo*, “Three Little Maids from School”. This became *Three Candidates of the Boss*, - the three candidates from the major parties sang to the Gilbert and Sullivan tune, while the capitalist puppet-master stood behind, holding strings attached to each of their wrists. Eventually the worker sees through Liberal, Labour and Tory candidates and instead chooses Pollitt, the workers’ candidate[37].

With the organisation beginning to expand, it was decided to set up a conference. In the event, the conference, held on December 21st 1930 at the Friar’s Hall in London, was to be a meeting of the London groups only, as, apart from the Manchester group, none of those outside London had

proved stable[38]. It has already been mentioned that this conference included a report back from the IWDU (see pages 130-131), but the real work of the conference was the sharing of the experiences of the different groups represented. As has been seen, the “cabaret” form was again strongly stressed, but the conference also introduced the idea of the “mass speaking sketch” basically a group declamation with fairly rudimentary gestures[39].

As usual, the work attracted criticism. A correspondent to the Daily Worker shortly after the conference attempted to put the movement on the right lines:

“Firstly, one group, St. Pancras I believe, seemed to think that it is sufficient to portray the workers as coarse mouthed, uneducated buffoons with the minimum of political education, overcoming the opposition by sheer force. Will the workers be able to do this without political education? Such a presentation is not likely to create in the audience a pride in being workers, and less likely to educate them as to the revolutionary role of the workers. Secondly, it is very noticeable that the British W. T. M., with one exception - West London - are basing their presentation on individual characterisation, i. e., the basis of the bourgeois stage, in which the heroes dominate, and this, in my opinion, is distracting to the audience. It has the minimum of force in driving the message home, as opposed to the mass acting which W. London demonstrated - which has the maximum of force. In my opinion the conference showed the overwhelming superiority of mass work, as demonstrated by the W. London Group in their ‘Strike Sketch,’ as opposed to the less effective individual propaganda of the ‘play’ type of sketch. I believe that this is the line that should be followed. “[40] The letter was signed by a “worker” from West London, so it is possible that he or she was a member of, or associated with, the West London group. No attempt was made to answer the “worker’s” criticism, so it may be assumed that the Workers’ Theatre Movement accepted the basic aim of dispensing with “individual characterisation” as a correct one. Thus it defined for itself another “no-go area” in its dramaturgy.

However, for all its difficulties, the Workers’ Theatre

Movement had made something of a leap forward during

1930. By the beginning of 1931 it was still very small - four active groups in London and one in Manchester[41] - but this was a significant advance on the previous year, when the Workers’ Theatre Movement actually consisted of only the Hackney Group. Despite its smallness, it had made some impact within the Communist Party. This impact was to be amplified in 1931. In 1930 the organisation was referred to in the Daily worker 47 times in copy and individual advertisements for social events and political meetings. In 1931 it was to receive 119 such references. By drawing in a few dozen more people it was able to operate along the democratic centralist lines of the Communist Party itself, and its “Central Committee” met fortnightly to discuss issues of policy and administration. Unfortunately, copies of only two sets of central committee minutes are available (those for February 10th. and February 24th. 1931) but these show that matters under discussion included finance and fund-raising for the movement, disputes within groups, group progress reports, relationships with other organisations and, of course, the dramatic forms to be used. However, this last topic did not take up a great deal of the committee’s time. According to the minutes for February 10th. the question was raised briefly by Comrade Freedman of the St. Pancras group, who reported that his troupe had decided that “‘Mass Speaking’ was not good, and favoured short plays with definite simple plot and propaganda”[42]. The committee as a whole did not endorse this view, but agreed that a meeting for all groups to discuss techniques and shows should be called. It also advised groups against giving “impromptu performances unnecessarily”. There was some concern with the quality of some of those joining groups, and the central committee asked that groups “carefully select” new members, and avoid recruiting very young comrades, as they could not act political matter convincingly. The committee also rejected a request from another organisation to give a show at a dance, as it was of the opinion that “no great value is derived from these performances”[43].

The Move Towards Street Performances. The increasing momentum in the growth of the Workers' Theatre Movement showed itself in the large number of performances throughout the year 1931, culminating in a tour of Scotland by a group calling itself the "Red Pioneers", and a great deal of activity leading up to the General Election at the end of October 1931[44]. Most of the documented performances were indoors, and it is likely that this reflected more or less the true balance of the work, but through the year the conviction began to grow within the organisation that the more worthwhile performances were those executed on the street, before crowds of "uncommitted" workers. It appears that the West London troupe, the "Red Stars" led the move on to the streets. At the Central Committee meeting on the 24th. February their representative reported that they had given a performance or performances of their "L. C. C. sketch" (presumably an agitational piece dealing with the London County Council elections which were then imminent) in the street, and were trying to give at least two or three performances every week. The group put an advertisement in the following Friday's Daily Worker announcing their intention to repeat the previous week's successful street performances. A little later, another short advertisement in the Daily Worker explained that the group had decided to make a virtue of necessity:

" 'STARS ON THE STREET' The Red Star Troupe of the Workers' Theatre Movement announces that being unable to get the Royal Oak, Glenthorne Road, Hammersmith, for their second performance on March 21 . . . they have decided to give a series of STREET PERFORMANCES throughout the district. They have already given 2 of these, and hope to make them a feature of Saturday afternoons. "[45] Other groups followed, possibly spurred on by the example of the Red Star Troupe. This was partly under the influence of the German groups which the delegation to Cologne had seen in April 1931, but also drew on an established left and Labour culture of street meetings. Another report makes clear that performances could be combined with street meetings, and stresses the importance which the Workers' Theatre Movement was now placing on street work:

" OPEN AIR THEATRE SHOWS The Red Blouse Troupe of the Workers' Theatre Movement (S. E. London) is at last getting down to its real task of going to the masses by giving open-air shows. On Saturday night a large crowd of 300 workers at Stockwell Street, Greenwich, was attracted by the sketch 'Defend the U. S. S. R. ' which received loud applause. A splendid meeting followed, addressed by Kath Duncan, during which the crowd stood solidly till 11 o'clock. The W. T. M. group is going into the back streets this week, for this is where the work lies, preparing for August 1. "[46] In February 1931 the Hackney Group of the Workers' Theatre Movement, in line with the fashion among other groups for short, snappy titles, changed its name to "Red Radio"[47]. The original plan appears to have been that the group would present a communist parody of the new and growing mass medium of radio, and would use the device of the radio programme to provide a framework for the sketches, which would be interrupted by weather reports, fat stock prices, and all the other familiar elements, and a huge model of a loudspeaker would provide a visual reminder of the metaphor. However, the loudspeaker was scrapped after only one performance as "its portability was largely theoretical"[48]. The group nevertheless stuck to the name, and introduced their performances with a "signature tune", designed to attract the attention of audiences on the streets:

"We are Red Radio, Workers' Red Radio, We show you how you're robbed and bled; The old world's crashing, Let's help to smash it And build a workers' world instead. "[49] The group established a "pitch" in Court Street, Whitechapel, opposite the London Hospital, where steps and a lamp-post provided a raised, illuminated stage, and, from some time in the summer of 1931, they performed there once a week, every week. In fact, Philip Poole, who became secretary of the national organisation, recalled that when he joined, some time around the beginning of the

thirties, most of the group's work was out of doors, and his recollection is supported by that of other group members, Sam Serter and Joe Sterne[50].

The St. Pancras Group, now named the "Charter Players", gave outdoor performances at Whitestone Pond, Hampstead (to an audience of 200, including three policemen) and on Parliament Hill Fields in June 1931[51]. Performances were given in Trafalgar Square and on pitches all over London in the first week in August as part of the Communist Party's effort to build its Charter campaign[52]. The typical development of a performance is sketched in an article in the Daily Worker "A small group of people in workers' dress on the corner of a busy street or market place. A song is sung with gusto. A large crowd soon gather to see what it is all about, and with a few words of introduction a street performance by a Workers' Theatre Troupe is begun. This has been going on all through the summer - so far as the weather would permit - in London. The performances have always created great interest, and at times very large crowds of 600 or more have gathered, with collections up to 10s. "[53] Nor did the outdoor work stop in the summer. Leading up to the October 1931 election, the groups were especially busy, with Red Radio giving ten performances in four evenings, most of them out of doors[54], and the specially formed troupe, the Red Pioneers, touring Scotland, giving 29 performances seen by 17,000 workers, including a crowd estimated at 5,000 on the Mound in Edinburgh[55]. The group was favoured with exceptionally good weather, which enabled them to give all but six of their performances in the open air[56]. The Communist Party did well in the 1931 elections in parts of Scotland where the Red Pioneers visited, and though these areas were certainly the Communist strongholds in any case, the possibility that the enthusiasm associated with the group's visit added to the result cannot be ruled out. The very large audiences for street performances testified to the vitality of the street life in working class areas before the advent of television, and the importance of street meetings in the political work of the left. Philip Poole remembers the weekly or twice-weekly street meetings of the Finsbury Labour Party, for which, as a fourteen year old Labour Party member in 1924, he was given the privilege of helping carry the platform from the Labour Party premises and back[57]. But in the East End of London, at least, there was also a regular contingent of street entertainers - escapologists, people eating glass, eccentric dancers and the like - and, according to Sam Serter, on at least some occasions the Workers' Theatre Movement groups took over the crowd which one of these performers had attracted[58]. Here again the Workers' Theatre Movement was, albeit unwittingly, plugging into elements of popular culture, though it undoubtedly considered its offerings far more worthy than those of the "lowbrow" entertainers with whom it shared its pitches. Nevertheless, street performance demanded an ability to engage directly with a lively, unpredictable and sometimes disrespectful audience, and the work it engendered was bound to reflect a closer relationship with the audience than was to be found in any part of the established theatre of the time.

#### Developments in Organisation

Through 1931 the Workers' Theatre Movement grew not only in size, but also in confidence. The Communist Party leader, Harry Pollitt, gave the movement a rare boost in an enthusiastic piece in the Daily Worker, describing the "striking and dramatic" performance given by the movement at a May Day social[59]. But even Pollitt, though he acknowledged that the movement had made a marked advance, "got the impression that the comrades were apt to be concentrating on getting too much propaganda across of rather heavy character", and hoped that in future the sketches could include some more "humorous incidents". These criticisms notwithstanding, it was clear that the movement was gaining a much higher profile than it ever had before in its short life. The growing confidence and size of the movement during 1931 was reflected in some organisational innovations. It was assisted in this by the fact that at some time during this period, Tom Thomas became unemployed, and decided to devote himself full-time to the organisation. Thus he was able to deal with requests for material and ensure that the central committee met

regularly, as well as visiting new groups and nursing them through early difficulties[60]. In order to strengthen the work outside London, a Weekend School and social event was held in Castleton, Derbyshire, at Whitsun. @ This seems to have been initiated by the Manchester Group - the most successful of those outside London - since the contact name given in information about the event is that of James H. Miller. This was the young Jimmy Miller, later better known as Ewan MacColl. The programme for the school included rambles, indoor and outdoor shows, and sing-songs[61]. A large contingent from Manchester was present, along with delegates from eight other towns. Delegates discussed the aims and methods of the Workers' Theatre Movement, and were then given a demonstration of the material being used by the London comrades. About 40 comrades attended, and it was promised that as a result of the enthusiasm this event stimulated, there would soon be Workers' Theatre Movement groups in Sheffield, Doncaster, Derby, Nottingham, Burnley and Preston[62].

Also in 1931, the movement began staging its All-London Shows - showcases of work by all the London groups, open to the public at an admission price of sixpence. These served to stimulate discussion among the groups, disseminate new material, draw new people into the organisation, and raise much needed funds. The first of these, in June 1931, attracted a large and enthusiastic audience, and the Daily Worker reviewer linked the high standard with the influence from abroad, expressing the opinion that "The performance showed very clearly the fine progress made by individual groups since the Easter delegation to Germany"[63]. The second of the shows, in September 1931, was reviewed by Dave Bennett, the Daily Worker's film critic, who was generally very appreciative of the work, though he singled out onesketch - Crisis - as "shockingly muddle-headed", and claimed to have noticed "a good deal of individualistic self boosting"[64]. Bennett later clarified the last remark, explaining that he disapproved of the tendency in some sketches "to allow the stressing of individual qualities of acting, both in the type of material used and in the specific manner of presentation" which had left the door open to "too much individualistic expression". Bennett preferred the massspeaking sketches, and those using political types as mouthpieces, as these precluded such individualism[65]. Tom Thomas replied that while mass speaking was "one of the most effective weapons in our armoury", the development of individual acting and expression was still necessary[66]. Despite such occasional criticisms, the AllLondon Shows continued on a fairly regular basis until the summer of 1935. In November 1931, the movement gained another useful organisational tool, with the publication of the first edition of its national magazine, Red Stage. This managed to combine an attractive layout with, for the most part, well written articles, and provided contact between groups in different areas. The first edition contained reports from Manchester and Salford, from two "Red Front" Troupes, namesakes located in Streatham and Dundee, and from Red Radio. By the second issue, in January 1932, the somewhatlarger magazine was able to include reports from three London Groups, as well as groups in Manchester, Greenock, Edinburgh, Chelmsford, Glasgow, Dundee, Liverpool, Sheffield and Birmingham. The magazine also published songs, poems and short sketches, and carried a certain amount of debate, such as that over the question of "individualistic selfboosting", and further criticism of the use of American "Jazz" tunes[67]. With these developments, the Workers' Theatre Movement was set for continued growth and activity throughout the next three years, and such growth did, in fact, emerge. An essential element that was needed to sustain such growth was a rapid expansion of repertoire. Such an expansion did take place, and some attention should be devoted to the form, content, and purpose of this repertoire.

The Workers' Theatre Movement's growing repertoire towards a basis for assessment. In considering the plays and sketches produced by the Workers' Theatre Movement in the early 1930s, a number of points must be borne in mind. First, it is important to realise that the movement was very much a utilitarian one, with no thought for the continued value of its work as

literature, and no desire to retain scripts beyond the moment when their immediate value as a tool in the task to hand - that of communicating their political ideas to a defined audience - had been successfully realised. Thus the typescripts, carbons and duplicated copies that we have available, along with the few scripts that were published in periodicals, are the fortunate survivors of a process in which much of the work has been lost. Valuejudgements based on this evidence alone may give a distorted view of the work as a whole.

The very practical nature of the production of scripts brings forward another important consideration. The movement's repertoire was devoted to an attempt to achieve particular effects with a particular audience, and when it judged itself, it did so primarily with reference to the perceived impact which it had made on that audience. A secondary, but very important, consideration was the ideological framework which the movement developed concerning the nature of its work and the value of particular forms. When we look at the work of the movement, both of these considerations must be borne in mind, and if we impose other criteria upon the work, we should be careful to show the way in which such criteria are appropriate. Inevitably, the judgements we make will reflect our own artistic and political preferences, but if we put such preferences forward as prescriptive formulae for the development of a "correct" type of drama, we will not aid our understanding of what has been achieved. This last point is germane when considering the previous major academic study of the Workers' Theatre Movement, that contained in Leonard Jones's thesis[68]. Where Dr. Jones considers the repertoire of the Workers' Theatre Movement, he does so largely by close analysis of the texts available to him, though always bearing in mind the overall political situation facing the left during the period. However, Dr. Jones's analysis is informed by his conviction that, in turning towards "agit-prop" techniques, the Workers' Theatre Movement neglected to make use of the more appropriate form of the one-act play, which Dr. Jones characterises as "the dramatic genre of the 20th. century"[69], as well as ignoring full-length, naturalistic plays, which form "the major part of the whole world development of drama" and "the drama proper"[70]. Thus work which approximates closely to the one-act play format, with "close unity of character, language and plot"[71], is praised, while other work is denigrated for its schematism or crude exaggeration. There is little doubt that in many instances Dr. Jones's criticisms are justified, but in some cases they are highly subjective, though given a gloss of objectivity by the framework against which they are made. Thus the sketch *Gas*, which depicts a number of characters trapped in a defective gas-shelter in time of war, and the developing relations between these characters, is highly praised by Dr. Jones for its sustained development, and its depiction of rounded, believable characters. Dr. Jones's belief that the short play was written in 1929 leads him to use it to berate the Workers' Theatre Movement for not following the line of development which it had opened up with this piece, but abandoning it for agitprop presentations. Though Dr. Jones praises the play for its lack of exaggeration and skilful construction, this verdict is quite subjective, and not one in which all would concur. In some ways the play reads as a rather histrionic piece of conventional drama, with a fairly stock parade of typical characters. One of those who performed in it later described it as "a poor effort, I'm afraid"[72], and "a dreadful thing, it had no humour at all"[73]. The opinion of one of those present at a performance was that it "was merely an allegory with symbolical figures in it"[74]. Of course, these other opinions are just as subjective as that of Dr. Jones, but it does seem mistaken to charge the Workers' Theatre Movement with negligence for neglecting the outstanding qualities of such a piece. Moreover, it seems likely that the *Gas* that appears on the Workers' Theatre Movement's repertoire lists in the early thirties was a different play altogether - a sketch written by Tom Thomas, depicting a gas mask salesman who reveals that his firm also made the poison gas which the mask is proof against[75]. This, Thomas tells us, was particularly effective as an outdoor sketch, and was cited by the Red Pioneer troupe as one of their most popular offerings during the largely outdoor Scottish tour[76]. On the other hand, the

Gas which Dr. Jones writes about very definitely requires an indoor setting, and even a curtain to fall on its final tableau of desperation, and is first described in recognisable terms in a report of an All London Show in early 1934[77]. Thus in his effort to convince us that the Workers' Theatre Movement took a "wrong turn" at the beginning of the thirties, and that it rejected what he considered the work of a talented author, Dr. Jones has been led into what is probably a mistaken, and certainly an unlikely, account of events.

A similar mistake forms the basis for another of Dr. Jones's analyses, and this concerns a sketch entitled *It's A Free Country*. This uses a number of short, interlocking scenes to chart the progress of an elderly worker from unquestioning belief that Britain really is a "free country", to a more bitter and sarcastic understanding of the phrase, via the experiences of unemployment, wage cuts and police brutality which he undergoes. We may agree with Dr. Jones that this is an impressive piece of work, but the way in which he uses the sketch to buttress his argument is mistaken. Jones contends that it was a group called the Rebel Players that led the Workers' Theatre Movement away from over-simplistic agitprop techniques, and towards a more complex (and, in Jones's terms, worthy) sort of drama, and cites this sketch as evidence of how this group made the transition from the one form to the other, exploiting the brevity and immediacy of the agitprop form, and applying it to realistic drama. However, this analysis is based on the assumption that this piece was originated by the Rebel Players group, an assumption Jones makes because of a handwritten mark "H. Baron" on the available copy. In fact, Baron was a member of Rebel Players, and it is probable that the copy of *It's A Free Country* which Mark Chaney passed on to Dr. Jones was Baron's acting script. However, the piece was actually written by Tom Thomas, as Thomas stated quite definitely in his interview with Clive Barker[78], and as confirmed by a Workers' Theatre Movement catalogue of plays which Dr. Jones had available. Thus, this piece was actually written by one of the strongest advocates of the agitprop and open-air formats, suggesting that there was more widespread willingness to explore complex ideas than is given credit in Jones's schema.

These points serve to illustrate the problems which arise from attempting to analyse the development of a theatre movement primarily by carrying out a literary-critical examination of scripts and texts, when that movement was more committed to practical performance and effect, than to the literary quality of the work it produced. In Jones's analysis, as has been pointed out by Jon Clark, the aesthetic assumptions upon which such an analysis has been made "come near to being as rigid and one-sided as he claims agit-prop was"[79]. Even if this were not the case, however, there are dangers involved in trying to explain the whole of this movement on the basis of the thin documentation available, and then trying to fit the scripts into a structure of periodisation which arises from outside the movement itself.

It may be more helpful to look at the scripts as the basis for a theatrical experience which extended much further than the bare recitation of the words spoken would suggest. As has already been pointed out, the movement's street performances gained a certain resonance from the nature of street life, as well as the tradition of street meetings and, to at least some extent, the existence of other sorts of street entertainers. These are dimensions which can never be captured in the typescript or printed word, but which must have been a major part of the experience for those workers who stood in such large crowds to watch the performances. Nor can any analysis of scripts convey the excitement and group solidarity which Thomas described in looking back on the movement:

"One of the greatest thrills of my life has been to see a performance of one of our groups, for example in Whitechapel. A crowd of several hundred loving it - they'd never seen anything like it before, you know, and taking part in it. This sketch I wrote about the crisis, and the P. A. C. , you know, the Public Assistance Committee . . . . Playing that, and looking into the faces of those people, reflecting their own, their lives, this is a very great, wonderful experience. I remember one

old Scottie saying . . . “Just what happened to me!” . . . seeing his own experience reproduced in that way seemed to come as a blinding revelation to him. That it was almost more real than what he had experienced. It confirmed his own experience, so to speak. This is something that I’m quite sure could be still a very potent weapon. “[80] In this description, though it is clear that the content of the sketch was vital in determining the particular reaction, it can also be seen that the context - the street, the crowd, the physical closeness which made the crowd feel that they were “taking part in it” - was equally important.

Thomas also reveals here a purpose and value of the work of the Workers’ Theatre Movement which was not referred to in the organisation’s own policy statements and theoretical summaries, but which was important nevertheless. The ability to confirm working class experience in a public place, in a group gathering, was important for workers to get a sense of their own shared experience and interests. Theatre could bring about such an affirmation and confirmation in a way that was not possible with other forms of propaganda. It is tempting to view the process of theatre as merely an imparting of ideas and knowledge, a mechanical, one-way flow from performers to audience. Thus, even if the scripts that the Workers’ Theatre Movement used are analysed with regard to their propaganda value, rather than their literary qualities, if this is the only aspect to be examined a dimension has been ignored - the dimension which is at the heart of their existence as theatre - the “peculiar excitement” which the process of theatre arouses in its audience.

It should also be noticed that scripts could be interpreted in quite different ways by different groups. This can be seen in relation to the sketch Meerut. This short sketch, written in 1931, described the trial and imprisonment of Trades Unionists in British India, and did so in the form of a “mass-declamation” - a series of “heightened” speeches, given emphasis by being spoken at some times by all members of the group, at other times picked out by a single voice. But Meerut had the added dimension that each of the actors carried a stick, and at the beginning of the sketch these sticks were arranged in a symmetrical pattern between the players and the audience to give something of the impression of prison bars. At the end, an appeal to the audience to “smash the bars!” is accompanied by the sticks being flung smartly to one side. The piece demanded precision and intensity for effective presentation, as Charlie Mann emphasised in his article on how the sketch should be reproduced[81], and it is clear that the visual metaphor of the sticks, and the intensity conveyed by the rigid immobility of the physical framework, created a powerful impression.

Ewan MacColl, remembering his experiences as a member of the Workers’ Theatre Movement, described this sketch as “a very simple and economical piece . . . an ideal script for street performance”[82], and told Clive Barker that he saw it as the beginning of a move away from a verbal to a much more physical type of theatre[83]. Yet the report of the Scottish tour of the Red Pioneers gives a list of the most popular and effective of the sketches played, in which Meerut does not feature, and a note informs us that:

“Meerut’ would undoubtedly have been among the first four had our meetings all been indoors, but it was found to be unsuitable for open air work. “[84] It seems, then, that there was more than one way of looking at the script, and more than one way of performing it. Dr. Jones criticises the sketch in strong terms, particularly the “unpractical” nature of its appeal to “smash the bars”, and the fact that in expecting workers who were beset with appalling problems of poverty and unemployment to concern themselves with the plight of Indian trades unionists “it reveals a serious overestimation of the political maturity of the British workers”[85]. These criticisms are no doubt justified, but do not account for the great popularity of the piece with many groups and audiences. Only by ignoring the strong visual appeal, and the non-textual device of the sticks, can we agree with Dr. Jones’s other judgement that the piece is artistically primitive by virtue of its lack of action. In fact, whether this had been intended by the author or not, the very immobility of the players in such a striking tableau constitutes a very skilled and effective use of the available

resources. Ewan MacColl remembers it as “quite the most exciting bit of theatre I had ever seen and, looking back over the fifty years that have slipped by since then, I find it still has the power to move and excite me. “[86] This is not to say that all of the work produced by the Workers’ Theatre Movement was highly skilled, or even effective. There is no doubt that the movement was limited in the extent of its appeal by the sectarian line which it was obliged to incorporate into many of its sketches, and by the continued attacks which it made on the membership of reformist (“social-fascist”) parties. These attitudes ensured that the work of the Workers’ Theatre Movement would never be welcome within the mainstream of the trades union movement, or with the bulk of the Labour Party, though it does appear that some of the more left-wing of the ILP branches, and some Co-op guilds were willing to book Workers’ Theatre Movement groups on occasion[87]. So unusual was it for groups to establish contact with the Labour Party, that when the Red Front Troupe was approached at a performance by a Labour Party member wondering if they could come and “brighten up” a ward meeting, this was worthy of mention in the Daily Worker[88]. When groups performed for trades unions, they were the unions that had split from the T. U. C. and joined the Communist “Minority Movement”.

Formally, the devices exploited in Workers’ Theatre Movement sketches were usually simple. Sometimes such simplicity created a powerful effect, sometimes it seemed merely to oversimplify the issues dealt with. It is not easy to say where the line between strong simplification and inappropriate oversimplification can be drawn, on the basis of the bare scripts alone. For example, the sketch Three Candidates of the Boss, mentioned earlier (page 143), reads as a fairly uninspired parody, but Philip Poole remembers it as “a very effective piece of propaganda - no doubt about it”[89]. From Poole’s description of the performance, it seems that the movements of the actors were as simple and repetitive as were the words they sang, but together the elements formed a satisfying demonstration of the Communist Party’s line on electoral politics.

This study cannot pretend to be able to make a comprehensive survey of the repertoire of the Workers’ Theatre Movement. In the years 1930-1932 over 50 items were issued by the Central Committee, and others were originated by local groups without going through the central organisation[90]. However, some broad categories of the work produced in this period can be outlined, to give some idea of the techniques attempted and the issues raised. What follows is therefore an attempt to pick out some of the representatives of each of these categories, and look at the way in which these particular pieces worked in the context for which they were designed. Of course, categories overlap, and it will be seen that many sketches incorporate elements from different categories. It will also be noticed that much of the material under discussion is the work of Tom Thomas. Thomas was certainly the most prolific writer for the British Workers’ Theatre Movement, and his style dominated the repertoire of the organisation throughout its existence. This domination extended into the organisational and ideological orientation of the movement. His undoubted abilities were a measure of the strength of the organisation, but the fact that no other writers achieved any degree of prominence was a source of weakness.

The Range of forms in the repertoire of the Workers’ Theatre Movement.

The simplest of all forms used by the Workers’ Theatre Movement was the straightforward “mass declamation”, with the minimum of movement or theatrical device. One such sketch, the most basic which survives, is untitled, but begins with the date on which it was performed - “August the First 1931”. The performance took place on the plinth of Trafalgar Square, in support of the Communist Party Charter demonstration. No movement is indicated on the script, and the text is abstract enough to have served as a speech outlining the current situation, had the short contributions of each of the participants been strung together:

> ! l r “All: August the first 1931 -- August the first

1931. 4: The bankers and bosses in their ever-greedy scheming and mismanagement have brought upon the world a crisis. 5: They are no longer able to feed the millions of workers. Once again

only one way out is open: All: WAR! 1: At this very moment in every country where capitalism controls - trained chemists are preparing even more horrible poison gasses. 2: Pupils in military schools are being taught to kill - kill - kill. 3:

Death dealing aeroplanes of war are being constructed. 4: Tanks, bombs, machine guns and all the preparations for more terrible and bloody deaths are in hand . . . . “[91] Though some impact might have been gained by the juxtaposition of choral and individual speaking, the rhetoric of the piece is not very original or stimulating, and the appeal at the end, “Workers of the world UNITE” is disappointingly predictable. Little could have been expected of a piece such as this, except to attract the attention of the crowd, and prepare them for the speeches which were to follow.

However, the “August the First” sketch is an exception among the material available, in terms of the lack of theatrical innovation displayed. Most of the “Mass Speaking” sketches have some non-textual elements to add to the theatrical impact. The First of May, for instance, described as a “mass speaking scene”, is a far more ambitious item, calling for a large number of actors organised into different groups. It begins with groups of actors marching through the hall to the platform (clearly it was conceived as an indoor sketch), and incorporates songs, rhythmic marching, a large portrait of Lenin and the waving of red flags, with its narrative describing the situation for workers internationally in 1931[92]. Another of the “Mass Speaking” sketches, Do You Remember 1914?, which was also performed on the plinth of Trafalgar Square, according to a handwritten note on the typescript, is more sophisticated in form. This sketch begins in verse, with the contributions alternating between a “speaker” and the whole group:

> ! I r Speaker: (holding poster) (1914)

Do you remember 1914 when the troops marched out? Do you remember 1914 when they raised the shout? All: For God and for Democracy against the Kaiser’s Tyranny (singing)

Britons never, never, never shall be slaves. Speaker:

And from Scotland and Wales and from London Town The workers marched out to defend the crown All: (as before) Speaker:

And the landlords and bankers had tears in their eyes as they bade our boys farewell, They had to stay home and discuss the price at which to buy and sell All: (as before but laughingly, only the song very patriotic)”[93] This is fairly standard stuff, though it makes use of humour, which is more than most of the mass declamations attempted. The piece goes on to show the role of the press on both sides of the war in whipping up patriotic feeling, then contrasts the attitudes of Lenin and Labour leader Henderson to the war. Thus it moves away from the simple mass declamation, into a use of dialogue, set into the overall structure of abstraction. Where the sketch really takes off is in the depiction of the representatives of the British press, the “Daily Pail” and the “Daily Excess”, vieing with each other to find ways of turning good news from the Soviet Union into anti-Soviet propaganda, and capping each other’s absurd invention of atrocities:

> ! I r” Excess: O. K. I’ve got it. Russian Bishop murdered in Leningrad. Pail: That’s a good one:

Two Russian Bishops murdered in Leningrad. Pail: All Russian Bishops murdered in Leningrad.

Excess: All Bishops of Leningrad and surroundings murdered. Pail: New Soviet Horrors: Priests

made to work! Excess: Hands of Bishop cut off and then sent to Siberia to cut timber!”[94] Such passages show that the Workers’ Theatre Movement had not entirely lost its sense of humour, and however sectarian and simplified the central message of the text may have been, it had the capacity to work as a piece of entertainment.

Close in form to the simple mass declamation, but again using movement in a stylised and effective way, were such pieces as Speed-Up! Speed-Up!, which was an adaptation of the American sketch, Tempo! Tempo!, from the repertoire of the German speaking group, Prolet-Buehne[95]. This sketch is written entirely in rhyming couplets, with a constant underlying rhythm to which the actions had to harmonise. Six or more actors enter to begin with, one of them

wearing a top hat to symbolise the capitalist. While the “workers” march in strict time at the back, the capitalist dictates the pace with his speech:

> ! l r “Cap. : Speed-up, speed-up! Watch your step.

Hold on tight and show some pep. Move your hands and bend your body Without end and not so shoddy. Faster, faster, shake it up, No one idles in this shop. Time is money, money’s power, Profits come in every hour. Can’t stop profits for your sake Speed-up, speed-up, keep awake.

The workers have now taken up positions and are doing simultaneous actions representing industry. Worker: We are humans, not machines. Cap. : You don’t like this fast routine?

Get your pay and get out quick, You  
speak like a Bolshevik. “[96]

Another worker, a woman, is dismissed when she falls ill, and the capitalist dons another hat to become a policeman, who harasses the workers. After further work in the factory, the workers unite and strike against the inhuman routine. Soldiers are called in, but they are persuaded to turn their guns on the capitalist, and the scene ends in “a tableau representative of workers’ control and ownership of industry, with the Red Army on guard. Alternatively the sketch can be carried on to explain the workers’ state under workers’ control”.

Dr. Jones describes this sketch as “perhaps the best - or worst - example available of the colossal crudity and absurdity, both artistic and political, to which the agit. prop. style could be driven”[97], and Richard Stourac criticises it because it “depicts the exploitation and oppression of the workers by employers and police, but it does not explain the underlying causes”[98]. Some of the rhymes are certainly a little forced, probably as a result of the translator following too closely the structure of the German original. The conversion of the soldiers to the socialist cause at the end is particularly swift and unrealistic, and it is true, as Richard Stourac says, that *Speed Up! Speed Up!* is “not a sketch likely to convert an unsympathetic audience”[99].

However, it was this sketch that was singled out for praise from the reviewer of the June 1932 All-London Show[100]. Charles Mann, who produced *Speed-Up! Speed-Up!* for the South London Red Players, recalled that the sketch was effective, and “always brought the audience in at the end, it had a hypnotic effect”[101]. This is, in fact, the real strength of the sketch. The highly stylised movement, combined with an unrelenting, very simple rhyming structure, produces a visual and theatrical metaphor for the inhuman capitalist system which has a resonance beyond the simple actions depicted. Thus it can succeed as a piece of entertainment for any receptive audience, whereas the idea that a determinedly unsympathetic audience might be “converted” in the course of a six or seven minute sketch, no matter how thoroughly it depicts the underlying causes of oppression, is unrealistically optimistic. The sketch was, apparently, performed outdoors to non-Communist audiences, and went over well, suggesting that audiences could appreciate its power and integrity, even if it did not change the whole of their outlook on the world.

In fact, the structure of *Speed-up! Speed-Up!* was used again in a sketch entitled *Enter Rationalization*, which follows closely the development of the earlier sketch, except that a Robot is introduced into the factory, symbolising the capitalist conception of rationalization. After the workers have struck and won over the army, they introduce their own conception of “rationalization”, which consists of higher wages, shorter hours and better conditions.

Unfortunately we have no copy of the script of this sketch, so it is not clear whether the rhyming effect is retained, but the synopsis in *Red Stage* describes the mass group effect and “robot” scenes as “an interesting technique of stage symbolism”[102].

Other Workers’ Theatre Movement sketches were less symbolic, and more concrete. *The Spirit of Invergordon* dealt with the incident in the Atlantic Fleet at Invergordon, when sailors refused duty in protest at cuts in their pay, forcing the newly formed National Government to back down. One

of the leaders of this “sailor’s strike”, Len Wincott, subsequently joined the Communist Party, and assisted members of the Workers’ Theatre Movement in writing the sketch, as well as speaking at a number of meetings where it was performed[103]. Means Test Murder set two tight, realistic scenes within the framework of a coroner’s court. The jury have returned a verdict of suicide whilst of unsound mind on a worker who has killed himself after failing to qualify for assistance under the “means test”. The flashback scenes show the officials from the Public Assistance Committee expressing their disgust with the worker for asking for assistance when he still hasn’t sold his crystal radio set (which is, in any case, obsolete), his wife’s wedding ring, and his oak bedstead. The officials accuse him of robbery, in trying to get money out of the government, and go. Later, unable to sell the wireless, he contemplates really going out to rob, but is dissuaded by his wife. Finally, suicide presents itself to him as the only solution, but his wife has learnt another lesson:

> ! I r “Woman: . . . He took that way out . . . because he didn’t know there was another way. Neither did I then. But I do now! The Hunger Marchers came to London with that knowledge. THEY came to fight and smash the Means Test. Other workers enter and form group. Woman: Their work is not yet finished. We must continue to intensify the fight. “[104] The other workers join in with a series of slogans, and a note explains that the final reference to the Hunger Marchers should be adapted to suit local conditions. This sketch approaches nearer to naturalism than any other of the Workers’ Theatre Movement sketches which are available, and its domestic scenes read well. It seems unlikely, however, that it could have been effective out of doors. The same theme was taken up in a different manner in the comic sketch, Two Pictures and Three Frames, (also known as The Frame-Up). Here, the three members of the Public Assistance Committee interrogate John Price, an unemployed engineer, to establish whether he has anything worth selling. A twist on the usual depiction of the heartless official comes in the opening lines, where the three complain about their job:

> ! I r “First: I don’t like it. Second: I simply hate it. Third: Lord, what a job. All: But what can you do!

First: I am a Labour man myself. Second: I know it’s hard on them. Third: I pity the poor devils. All: But what can we do?

First: After all, we must economise. Second:  
Because there is over production. Third: That’s  
a bit of a contradiction. All: But what can we  
do?”[105]

Despite these qualms, the officials are shocked to discover that although he has no house, car, wireless set or extra blanket, the unemployed worker does possess the luxury of two pictures and three frames. They want him to sell the useless items, but he explains that they have great value for him, as the pictures are of himself in former times. In a couple of short scenes set into the interview, the officials take the other parts as the worker re-enacts the circumstances under which the photographs were taken. The first picture shows him in uniform, as a hero in the war, and has been taken by a society newspaper. But as the photographers are urging him to look more heroic for the benefit of the upper classes, he realises that the Germans in the trenches were workers like him. The second picture has been taken by a Trade Union newspaper, as the worker has swallowed the line of the trade union leaders and gone along with the industrial speed up, believing that this will bring about the prosperity to create jobs for his colleagues who were sacked. Of course, this is not the outcome of his labours, and in his frenzy of overproduction he finds that he has worked himself out of a job. The officials are satisfied with his explanation of the two pictures, but declare that he can have no use for the empty frame. But the worker explains that the picture for this frame is on its way: > ! I r “Worker: No, I’ve got no picture for the third frame, but I’ll get it, a nice photo, with a big subtitle, in big letters. John, the engineer, John, the

man from the trench, John, the skilled worker, John, the son of the working class, John, John, leading a demonstration fighting against the means test standard and his mates are with him. Those who got the sack and those who are still in, John and his mates are marching - fighting - working, and for the first time in [sic. ] fighting for something that's worth fighting for; . . . fighting against the system that wants to starve us. "

The sketch ends with the customary series of slogans, but in the music-hall cross-talk of the officials, and the clever intercuts between scenes it has achieved a great deal. The politics of the piece are nothing new or unusual, but its great strength is that in devising an intriguing central theatrical question for the audience (why has this worker got these two pictures and three frames?) the author is able to introduce the inevitable conversion of the worker to socialism in a way that is both unexpected and satisfying. There is some evidence that this sketch was something of a favourite among members of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement[106]. The neat structure of *Two Pictures and Three Frames* is rivalled in Tom Thomas's *Something For Nothing*[107]. In this very short sketch on innovation in industry, a worker's bright idea to speed production, described in appealing gobbledegook - ". . . we could save a lot of time on this job if we rigged up a gimble sprocket driven off this cam-shaft, and connected it up with the jig" - is passed up the line through chargehand, foreman, works manager and Managing Director, with each dismissing the idea for one reason or another, then passing it off to his superior as his own. The keystone in the scene is a speech by the Company Chairman, informing the shareholders that the "Managing Director's" brilliantly simple discovery has cut costs by 50%. For this, the M. D. receives a payment of £10,000, and a £5,000 annual increase. The M. D. rewards the works manager with a rise of £500, the foreman gets an extra £1 a week, and the chargehand's reward for passing on the idea is that he's spared the sack, as the new device has brought a cut in staff. But the worker who dreamed up the idea is not so lucky - he gets his cards. In a speech to the audience, he points up the moral of the sketch:

"Isn't it all a swindle. The products of the worker's brains and the worker's hands are turned against him under the present system. Only when the workers rule will they be able to use science and inventions to improve their conditions, instead of driving them to unemployment and starvation. "[108] This is another very skilful piece of work. It gives opportunities for interesting patterns of movement, as the characters change places, and alternate between being the superior and inferior partner in the exchange being shown. The outcome may be guessed before it is reached, but there is interest to be had in how the situation is to be explained differently by each of the characters. The way in which the characters are made to change their attitude to the invention, and change their whole manner of speaking, when approaching their superiors, is very funny. However, Dr. Jones believed that the lack of any portrayal of the struggle against the system which allows this situation, or of an alternative system, made the sketch less than useful. In fact, the editors of the American magazine in which the sketch was published seemed to share this view, as they announced that:

"Although the point is clearly brought home, nevertheless the Editors suggest the following: A second scene showing the same worker going through a similar experience in the Soviet Union which would result in a powerful contrast between the methods in the two systems of society. "[109] They announced a competition to write such a scene, showing how the worker is rewarded in the Soviet Union, and "how the benefits of constructive ideas are utilized for the good of all the workers.

"[110]

However, the sketch actually stands well enough on its own, and any such laborious drawing out of the moral would be superfluous. The audience are allowed to observe the illogicality of the way things are arranged in this system, and work out for themselves that things could be run differently. Though there is nothing intrinsically wrong with showing an alternative system

(though such “positive” depictions are extremely difficult to maintain as theatrically interesting), to expect that such an ending should be obligatory seems to be falling into a schematism which would ultimately reduce all the work to a “correct” formula. Judged on what the sketch does, rather than what anyone thinks it should be doing, it succeeds remarkably well. Something For Nothing is similar in structure to It’s A Free Country, the sketch which Dr. Jones was so enthusiastic about, having taken it to be the work of H. Baron (see pages 157-8). The series of short scenes build on one another, and lead the central character, the worker, to an understanding of his own situation. Meanwhile the spectators are led through a similar process of examination. These two sketches show that economy of form could be used to illustrate a complex situation within the limitations of time and place with which the Workers’ Theatre Movement groups had to cope. A different format is exploited for the sketch Love in Industry[111], which is basically a series of parodies of music-hall and American film songs, strung together to give a dream-fantasy of how the boss would like the workers to cooperate with him in his unrelenting drive to exploit them. Eventually, the workers agree happily to work a 24hour day, but then disappear leaving the boss to wake up, realising sadly that “it’s only a beautiful picture, / in a beautiful golden frame”. Again, the political analysis is not profound, but the sketch affords an opportunity for some honest and enjoyable high spirits. Perhaps the most accomplished of all the Workers’ Theatre Movement scripts which remain is Tom Thomas’s Their Theatre and Ours[112], which was written to drum up enthusiasm for the British contribution to the Moscow Theatre Olympiad in 1933 (see below, page 195), and to raise funds for the British delegation to visit Moscow. This intercuts scenes in very different styles to contrast the depiction of reality found in the media with both the conditions of life for the mass of workers, and the representations to be found in the work of the Workers’ Theatre Movement. This sketch incorporates elements of “mass declamation”, parody of music-hall and film techniques, and more realistic scenes. Gaps are left in the text for illustrative examples from Workers’ Theatre Movement scripts to be inserted, to contrast with the spoof thriller films and newsreels which they interrupt. The different styles juxtaposed against one another create a kaleidoscopic effect, and the parodies are extremely funny. In fact, one of the dangers of the script is that the spoof film scenes may come over as more interesting and enjoyable than the excerpts from the other Workers’ Theatre Movement sketches with which they are contrasted. This contradiction in itself adds an interest to the sketch, and enhances the complexity of the statement about culture which it embodies. This survey of repertoire has so far concentrated primarily on work that was produced in London, as the existing scripts are mostly those that have survived through the existence of the London-based organisation. However, there was clearly a body of work which was originated outside London, and this work had different salient characteristics. Ewan MacColl has written graphically of how the London scripts received by the Manchester “Red Megaphones” troupe, which MacColl founded, were an invaluable springboard and starting point for the group’s work, but were eventually found inadequate for a number of reasons:

“We had a strong feeling that we were being written down to. Furthermore, we felt that the London groups were a bit out of touch with the problems that confronted us in the industrial North. We’d met one or two of them and they struck us as being somewhat middle class. The real fact of the matter was that we were beginning to doubt the efficacy of the endless sloganizing. “[113]”The sketches appeared to have been written to a formula which called for loud voices rather than acting ability on the part of the performers. In almost all of them there were some good lines and occasional flashes of real wit. The satire was sometimes crude but it was often very effective indeed though sometimes embedded in stodgy journalese or obscured by horseplay. “[114]”The songs of the WTM sketches were too difficult to catch on, they were too clever, they were like Gilbert and Sullivan pieces in a way. We sang them as part of the sketches, but we always felt uncomfortable because they seemed to be written from the outside. Saying things like

'the workers', but we were the workers. "[115] Where the London groups were stumbling with some difficulty towards popular theatre forms largely through the secondhand experience they had gained from the German troupes, MacColl was more familiar with popular culture at first hand. His acquaintance with conventional theatre was slight, and almost wholly negative. He remembered being taken as a child to see a production of *Monsieur Beaucaire*:

"... a dreary play by Booth Tarkington and Mrs. E. G. Sutherland. I saw it, along with three or four hundred other schoolchildren, when I was eight or nine years of age. I can still remember the tremendous thrill of sitting in that theatre and waiting for the play to begin. I can remember, too, the boredom which enveloped me like a thick, stultifying fog as the play progressed. The antipathy I feel for a great deal of formal theatre was, I think, born at that moment. "[116] MacColl had grown up in a household where a very large number of traditional songs were known and sung, and had been taken as a child to performances at the Salford Hippodrome, where the variety theatre had made a profound impression on him. He had also lived in a district where the culture of street performance was very much alive, with:

"... regular performances of street-singers, jugglers, bones-players, fiddlers, trumpeters, step-dancers, escapologists, barrel-organ grinders and Punch-and-Judy men. During the summer months in particular there was a constant procession of these street-entertainers. Their contribution to my theatre background was considerable.

"[117]

The combination of this experience and the agitprop forms produced what seems to have been a more vibrant movement in Manchester than in London, and these qualities eventually fed into the innovative work of the Theatre of Action, and Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop[118]. MacColl's Red Megaphones troupe took a direct part in the agitation against the imposition of the eight-loom system in the cotton industry, writing four or five different sketches directed at different sections of workers in the industry, with the help of the workers concerned. At the height of the "Eight-Looms" strike the Red Megaphones performed on top of a pantechicon in Burnley, holding the attention of a crowd that they numbered in tens of thousands[119]. Unfortunately, none of these sketches have survived. The sketches dealt with in this section represent only a sample of the repertoire developed during this period. Nevertheless, they illustrate that the agitprop forms which the Workers' Theatre Movement pioneered in this country were diverse and often successful in performance, even if their quality as literature, or indeed, as acute political analysis, was not always particularly high. It is not fanciful to recognise the work of the British Workers' Theatre Movement, though perhaps in duller reflection, in Brecht's description of the work of the German agitprop troupes:

"When they themselves [i. e. the proletariat - I. S. ] took to writing and acting they were compellingly original. What was known as 'agit-prop' art, which a number of second rate noses were turned up at, was a mine of novel artistic techniques and ways of expression. Magnificent and longforgotten elements from periods of truly popular art cropped up there, boldly adapted to the new social ends. Daring cuts and compositions, beautiful simplifications (alongside misconceived ones): in all this there was often an astonishing economy and elegance and a fearless eye for complexity. A lot of it may have been primitive, but it was never primitive with the kind of primitivity that affected the supposedly varied psychological portrayals of bourgeois art. It is very wrong to make a few

misconceived stylizations a pretext for rejecting a style of presentation which attempts (so often successfully) to bring out the essential and to encourage abstraction. “[120]

The period 1930-1932 saw the growth of a movement in Britain which was attempting, for the first time since the early nineteenth century, to make theatre once again a truly popular cockpit of ideas and philosophy. Given the obstacles which they faced, the practitioners of this theatre did remarkably well. ☺

>fo -Page %- Chapter Five. Development of Ideology and Organisation 1932-3. The beginning of 1932 saw the Workers' Theatre Movement at the height of its activity, and it would be impossible within the scope of this thesis to document this activity in detail. Some idea of the extent of the work can be gained by referring to the appendix, which gives a chronological account of all performances documented in sources consulted. However, some features of the practical work should be noted. Though it is clear that the Workers' Theatre Movement very much wanted to take its work onto the streets, it can be seen from what records we have that a great deal of the work in which it was engaged took place indoors, in halls and meeting places of the left. Of the 149 performances by Workers' Theatre Movement groups in 1932 which are recorded in the Daily Worker and other sources, only 36 were, or may have been, outdoor performances. Of course, this cannot be taken as an accurate reflection of the balance between outdoor and indoor performance, as the performances mentioned - most of the ads being placed by the host organisations, rather than the Workers' Theatre Movement troupes themselves - were likely to have been a minority of those given by the groups. Moreover, it is far less likely that groups would bother to advertise their outdoor performances in the left press, as they took place on a regular basis, and were intended to attract whoever was around. Nevertheless, the fact that so many performances were given indoors seems to suggest that this work comprised a substantial amount, if not the bulk, of the troupes' performances. Veterans of the Workers' Theatre Movement have given varying estimates of the balance between indoor and outdoor work, often recalling that the majority of performances in this period were out of doors. This might be the case, or it may just be that the performances which have stuck in the memory for fifty or so years have been those which were most extraordinary and exciting for the participants - i. e. those given on street corners, for an unfamiliar and lively audience. The impression that most performances throughout the year were outdoors is contradicted by reports in the Workers' Theatre Movement's Monthly Bulletins, which show that some of the London Groups, including Red Radio, were performing exclusively indoors during the months of November and December 1932[1].

Early in 1932, the movement tried to repeat the success it had achieved with the Scottish tour the previous October, with members of the London groups Red Front and Red Radio combining forces to take sketches to a mining area in South Wales. However, this tour proved only partially successful, as the troupe had difficulties with its van breaking down, a police ban on a Sunday performance, and incomprehension or indifference from some audiences[2]. The picture of the movement as a whole which emerges in the period from 1932 to 1933 is of a number of scattered groups, with varying cohesion, forming and re-forming throughout the country at a fairly rapid rate. Activity was heightened for particular campaigns or events, such as the agitation in the cotton industry mentioned earlier (see above, page 178), and also May Day demonstrations, tenants' campaigns, demonstrations of the unemployed, and industrial action, but there was a tendency for participants to get drawn into other political work. Groups in London seemed more stable than those outside, though Manchester was an exception in this regard. Repertoire was largely based on the scripts distributed by the London Central Committee, with a few local

variations. In order to keep control of the repertoire, the Central Committee set up a reading group to vet scripts, but this was more concerned with the overall lack of repertoire than with the quality or political correctness of scripts which it received, and was often willing to “let things pass” rather than appear overly critical of an initiative[3].

Nevertheless, the Workers’ Theatre Movement felt obliged to develop a theory of what it was doing, even if the theory did not always reflect accurately what was being achieved in practice. It will therefore be useful to look at how this theory was developed in 1932, and how it was affected the work that was carried out. The most developed outline of the Workers’ Theatre Movement’s artistic policy is to be found in the statement approved by the so-called “First National Conference of the Workers’ Theatre Movement”, which took place on June 25th. 26th. 1932[4]. The organisation had already held conferences in May and December 1930, but for the event in June 1932 an effort was made to draw in the groups from outside London, of which there were now a respectable number. Accordingly, a preliminary conference for the groups in the Lancashire and Yorkshire was held in Manchester a week before the London gathering, and the special problems of the northern groups - particularly with reference to the struggles in the cotton industry were discussed[5]. London members also contributed to the train fares of their Northern comrades travelling down for the meeting[6]. By this effort, the Workers’ Theatre Movement managed to attract representatives from eighteen groups, nine from London (including a representative from the newly formed W. T. M. choir) and nine from the provinces[7]. The conference statement, headed “The Basis and Development of the Workers’ Theatre Movement”, was issued to all groups before the conference, and was approved by the 38 delegates who attended. The document bears the stamp of Tom Thomas’s writing, and covers both political and artistic questions. It begins by outlining the development of the Workers’ Theatre Movement over the six years of its existence, which it divides into “four years of patient laying of foundations” followed by two years of rapid expansion. It then attempts a survey of other theatre work. In this, the heading “The Capitalist Theatre” deals with both theatre (without any mention of variety or Music-Hall) and cinema, putting forward the line that both theatre and cinema, under the control of the capitalists “serve to blind the workers to the existence of the class struggle”, and “attempt to cover up their bankruptcy of ideas by means of extravagant display”. Clearly, as far as the writer of this treatise is concerned, nothing is to be learned from these institutions.

The “little” and repertory theatres are dealt with under a separate heading - “The Left Wing Theatres” - and are recognised as representing a revolt by the intellectuals against the triviality of the large-scale capitalist theatre. However, this revolt, though it is technically ingenious, is seen as sterile, in as much as it fails to recognise the cause of such triviality as the capitalist basis of the theatre. Under another heading, the dramatic sections of other political organisations - the Labour Party, I. L. P. and the Co-op - are said to consist of two main tendencies. The first sees its mission as an educative one, bringing the workers into contact with “great” art, which is identified by the document as synonymous with capitalist art. The second tendency is said to produce plays which “may deal with the misery of workers, may even deal with the class struggle, but which show no way out, and which therefore spread a feeling of defeat and despair. “ So far, the analysis is similar to that which could be discerned from the writings of Huntly Carter in the Sunday Worker in 1926.

The position of the Workers’ Theatre Movement, along with the workers’ theatre organisations of Germany, Japan and the Soviet Union, is counterposed to all of this, with the crucial distinction of the organisation being that it does not see itself as above the struggle, but strives consciously to be a weapon of the workers’ revolution. To bring about this end, naturalism, the “curtained stage”, and the traditional style of acting are eschewed, though these techniques are acknowledged to have formed the basis of the movement’s development up until 1930. The

naturalistic method is dealt with in a section of its own, which maintains that naturalism is “suitable for showing things as they appear on the surface, but does not lend itself to disclosing the reality which lies beneath”. The depiction of the class struggle, the document states, is greatly hindered if dramatic form is constrained by the unities of space and time. The experience of the Workers’ Theatre Movement had also suggested that the audience reached by plays of the naturalistic kind, which demanded a well equipped stage, was “insignificant” in comparison to the mass of workers who could not be brought to the theatre or hall. The document praises the agitprop style for its flexibility, mobility and closeness to the audience, and asserts that this style is both easier for worker-players to master, and more convincing for worker audiences than “the studied effects of the professional actor”. While there is a cautious acknowledgement that “it may be that the naturalistic method should not be entirely ruled out from the workers’ theatre”, the new style is clearly seen as the basis of all future repertoire. The approach is summed up in the phrase “the propertyless class is developing a ‘property’-less theatre. “

The present weaknesses of the Workers’ Theatre Movement groups are then dealt with.

Performances are said not to have touched one hundredth of the potential which the new technique offers, and this is to be remedied by strict selfcriticism, and the encouragement of criticism from the audience. As well as performance technique, it is held that the level of political consciousness needs to be raised in order to make sketches more effective. The great expansion in repertoire and the success of the new sketches is noted, but the common faults of assuming a revolutionary attitude among spectators, and sectarianism in choice of subject are also pointed out. The occasional tendency to “revert” to the plays of the “‘Left’ bourgeois” theatre, out of desire to produce a naturalistic play, is also condemned.

In order to widen the repertoire, and to develop new writers within the movement, groups are encouraged to engage in collective writing sessions, with some members assembling facts on a chosen subject and the whole group discussing and deciding upon the line of sketches. The actual writing, however, can “if necessary” be left to one or two members. The need to recruit new members is also emphasised, and groups are encouraged to make “friendly contact” with workers in other dramatic organisations particularly those of the other left parties - to win them over to the Workers’ Theatre Movement.

A number of points must be noted about this document. First, it is clear from the survey of conventional theatre that its author saw this as consisting of only two sections: the “capitalist” theatre, which seems to denote the West End theatre, and the more intellectual “little” and repertory theatres. Here we see that the movement had cut itself off not only from the “legitimate” theatre, the existence of which is at least acknowledged, but also from all previous traditions of British popular and variety theatre, which had seemingly become invisible to the movement, or were subsumed under the same heading as the West End theatre which catered primarily for the middle and upper classes. Thus the movement’s inability to find any British theatrical tradition or culture on which to build led it to look to workers’ theatres from abroad for inspiration. While the document concedes that techniques learnt from abroad must be adapted to the particular political and social conditions in which the British working class finds itself, there is no recognition that particular cultural conditions may also be worthy of attention when approaching workers. It was this question which had underpinned the debate initiated by the “Clydebank Riveter” in the *Sunday Worker* six years before, but no satisfactory answer to the question had been found. It could be argued that it is this dimension, as much as the political sectarianism of the Communist Party, or the rejection of complex theatrical forms, which impeded the progress of the Workers’ Theatre Movement. While it was true that the troupes were getting onto the streets, and finding ways of approaching audiences which had the vitality of popular theatre - a vitality which both West End and the art theatres lacked - they were still locked into an understanding of theatre which was predominantly “highbrow”, and which was therefore derived largely from the genres

which they rejected. Thus, without any accessible precedent for what they were attempting, they often fell back on either undigested political statement crammed into a mechanically contrived agitprop format, or dialogue which was as middle-class as that to be found in the West End. It was these two qualities which Ewan MacColl noticed as inadequacy in the scripts received by the Manchester Red Megaphones, and they are to be traced back as much to the structure of British theatre, and the relationship of the leaders of this workers' cultural movement to that structure, as to the overt political attitudes of the Workers' Theatre Movement.

The explicit analysis of form in the document is also interesting. While "naturalism" is contrasted with "agitprop", the definitions of these two categories are not related so much to the style of the plays, as to the function which they are seen to perform. Thus the plays of Capek and Rice, which were actually works steeped in expressionism, are lumped into the same category as plays which demand a naturalistic method. The underlying point is that a form must be found which can be taken out of the theatres, onto the streets, and, it is hoped, into factories, Labour exchanges, and other scenes of class confrontation.

The most memorable phrase in the document was the one which was to cause the movement most trouble: "the propertyless class is developing the 'property'-less theatre". One would think that this piece of rhetoric could not have been meant literally, as almost all of the sketches used some prop or another: a red flag, a boss's top hat, the six sticks in Meerut, cardboard swords labelled "wage cuts" as well as placards. Despite this fact, the phrase came to be interpreted literally in some instances, and this caused some resentment among members. In fact, it is worthy of note that Tom Thomas was later to deny the importance of the phrase for the Workers' Theatre Movement, as this exchange during his interview with Clive Barker illustrates:

"I'll tell a story against myself. I drew up the thesis for discussion, and I thought - and this rather illustrates, I suppose, my over-emphasis on the bare stage, or the nonstage, and the minimum of props - I hit out a slogan, which afterwards I retracted before it got public, but 'The propertyless class should have a propertyless theatre' [laughs]. And I was indebted to a friend of mine, a very good Marxist . . . Clive Barker [interrupts]: Are you sure that got retracted? Tom Thomas: Yes.

C. B. : I'd like to bet that went out! I've read it. T. T. : You've read it somewhere, have you?

. . . . .  
I asked him to have a look at this, see what he thought. And we had a terrific argument. And then I decided that basically he was right, and that I was overstating the case . . . . That it was a temporary situation in which we found ourselves, that given the need to go outside our small group, tiny group of full sympathisers, that we would have to have the smallest amount of props and no lighting . . . this was the situation in which we found ourselves at the present time, but that circumstances would develop, as they did, where this . . .  
. . . would no longer be . . . true. "[8]

The phrase certainly did "get out", and was quoted by Philip Poole as a quite serious strand of the movement's philosophy, incurring penalties for those who disagreed, such as the group Proltet, who performed exclusively indoors and in Yiddish. At a "very tense, angry, dramatic meeting on the subject", members of this group were castigated by Tom Thomas in "a long, vigorous speech" for their use of a wig to aid the impersonation of a judge[9]. If Thomas was convinced of the incorrectness of the slogan by his friend, it must have been at a much later date. As Ray Waterman, a member of Proltet, observed, the pithy slogan "hardened into a dogmatic principle"[10], despite the rather selective way in which it was applied - judges' wigs may have been proscribed, but the top hat was still the accepted symbol of the boss.

Overall, the document identifies real faults in the work of the Workers' Theatre Movement, but its proposals to remedy these faults are vague and abstract. While it was very likely true that standards of performance were low, it was not useful to appeal merely for "strict self criticism and criticism from the audience", or raising of "political consciousness". Such pursuits would not in

themselves give workers the ability to produce worthwhile theatre. What was really needed was some sort of positive example from which the groups could learn, even if they would have to adapt what they learnt drastically to suit their purpose. But since the theoretical structure which the Workers' Theatre Movement had built up over the past six years had systematically excluded all the elements of British theatre, the only positive and concrete example that could be put forward was the work of the German agitprop groups - work which most members of the British troupes were not particularly familiar with.

It was also wishful thinking to hope that groups would be able to make "friendly contact" on any scale with members of other dramatic organisations, particularly those on the Labour left, when the work of such organisations was being derided by the Workers' Theatre Movement, and the political party to which these dramatic groups owed their allegiance was being savagely attacked by the Communist Party.

Nevertheless, there appears not to have been any dissent when the document was presented at the 1932 conference, and a plan of work was drawn up based on it. The actual writing of the plan was left to a "commission" assembled at the conference, and the final document was issued some time afterwards, having been approved by the Central Committee. From it we learn that "regular sustained and disciplined work" on the basis outlined in the conference statement was what the delegates considered was needed, with the priority being to take sketches to the places where struggles were occurring - "factory gates, strike meetings, Labour Exchanges, evictions, rent disputes, etc. ", as well as Trade Union branch meetings, co-ops and other working class organisations[11]. The plan noted a tendency for groups to fall to pieces at the very time when they could be of greatest service to the workers' movement, that is when strikes, elections and other important struggles were taking place. Presumably this was because comrades in the groups were required by their party branches to carry out other forms of propaganda and activity at these times. However, this attitude is condemned, as "W. T. M. work is a responsible workingclass activity of the greatest importance which must take precedence over all other activities on the nights arranged for rehearsal. "[12] The plan of work revolves around the word "discipline". "Without discipline NOTHING can be done - with discipline ANYTHING"[13], it states. All groups are urged to appoint one or more of their number as producers, and it is proposed that weekend schools be held in all districts to discuss the question of writing and production, at which the Central Committee would provide comrades to lead the discussion. Groups are also directed to raise their "political level" by "regular and systematic discussion". The plan was no doubt a well intentioned attempt to raise standards, but its tone is regrettable, in that the whole business of theatre comes across as a rather forbidding and earnest project, with little fun or enjoyment to be had by those engaged in it, and short shrift given to those who are too individualistic to submit to collective discipline. It would have been better for the Central Committee to have looked at the reasons why group members were lacking in discipline, and if this might partly be explained by the fact that they were being asked to work in a way which was unfamiliar, and which therefore felt uncomfortable. In any case, the imposition of group discipline within such groups was difficult, as one ex-member recalled:

"Harry Davies didn't turn up for a show, and we decided to have a disciplinary meeting, so three people turned up: the Goldman sisters . . . and me . . . . And they voted for his expulsion, and I voted against his expulsion. So, by two votes to one, poor Harry was expelled. But it wasn't really very final, because the next week Harry was in the show that we did . . . I think it was called It's Your Country, Fight For It, and Harry had one of the leading roles. So the expulsion was purely cosmetic. "[14] In its eagerness to get its members to work harder and more effectively, the Workers' Theatre Movement Central Committee was in danger of forgetting that the activity was in any case an essentially voluntary one, and in order to sustain itself, there had to be some inherent reward in the work.

The Central Committee's determination to take a tough line on group discipline, and to raise the standards of the movement can be seen in its reaction to the All-London Show which was held in December 1932. For the first time, the Committee produced an overwhelmingly critical report, complaining that "this performance did not mark the usual step forward, but rather was a great deal poorer than previous shows. "[15] Groups were reminded that the situation in the All-London Shows was not the normal one for groups performing, and that they should not judge their efforts on the reactions of the friends and sympathisers who attend, but on the basis of "the effectiveness in the class struggle"[16]. The Castleford group was taken to task particularly for its humorous depiction of a policeman:

"The laughs got by presenting the police in a humorous way destroys the value of our propaganda. The 'comic policeman' tradition of the music-halls must have no place in the Workers' Theatre. "[17] Other sketches were criticised for "over-repetition of slogans", excessive wordiness, absence of production values, failure to find appropriate gestures and movements to fit with declamations, and political mistakes. Though some sketches and groups were praised, (Proltet, for example, put in an "extremely effective performance", and Red Players offered an "excellent performance" of the sketch R. I. P. , and the "usual effective performance" of Meerut) none escaped without a word of criticism, and the movement as a whole was said to be faltering. "A great falling off" in the number of performances in comparison to the same time the previous year was reported, despite the fact that the Communist Party as a whole was active[18].

One of the ways in which it was hoped to revive the vitality of the movement, was by a drive to create interest in a forthcoming International event. The June 1932 conference had discussed the International Workers' Theatre Olympiad, which had been announced to take place in Moscow the following November, though the event didn't finally happen until May 1933. It was decided that the British section would endeavour to send twelve delegate players to this gathering, and would devote much of its work during the coming months to raising money to fund the trip. It was agreed that a special sketch would be issued "to evoke the interest of the broad masses in the ideas of the Olympiad"[19] and this decision was carried through with the issue of Tom Thomas's *Their Theatre - And Ours* (see above, page 176). A national competition was arranged, with groups being awarded points on the basis of activity undertaken, as demonstrated in shows given for other organisations, new sketches written, songbooks sold, cash collected, and new groups set up. In addition, there would be district contests in which groups would be judged on their performance abilities, but these would form only a minor part of the criteria on which groups would be judged, and it was made clear that groups that concentrated only on acting ability and production, to the exclusion of other activities that would help to build the organisation, would not be considered fit to represent the British Workers' Theatre Movement in Moscow[20]. In the event, the group that won the overall contest, the South London Red Players group, was also the winner of the London performance contest. However, Proltet, which came second in the London contest, gained fewer overall points than Red Radio, which came third in terms of performance. The Scottish and Lancashire contests didn't happen, and the Yorkshire contest appears to have been badly attended. The final delegation, of twenty members rather than the twelve originally planned, consisted of four members of the Red Players, three from Red Radio, and the remainder chosen from among Workers' Theatre Movement members throughout the country[21]. These twenty were split into two performing groups: "Red Players", made up from the nucleus of the London group of that name, with others from Scotland and the provinces joining them, and "Red Front", a group made up entirely from scratch only two days before setting off for the Soviet Union[22]. It was upon the experiences and actions of these twenty members of the Workers' Theatre Movement that the future development of the organisation was to turn, so it would be useful to look closely at the role played by the Olympiad. *The Moscow Olympiad and After*. The British Workers' Theatre Movement delegation met up with the delegations from France and

Holland, who were also sailing from London Bridge, and embarked for Leningrad, from where they would travel on to Moscow[23]. There was little time available, and rehearsals took place on the boat trip, with instruction taking the form of mechanical drilling of the actors rather than any more subtle approach[24]. The fact that many of the players had never even met before the trip added to the difficulties which the delegates faced in trying to work up a presentable performance, and the fact that many had been chosen not on the basis of their performance skills, but simply because their group had been active in other areas made it unlikely that this group would be able to come up with work which even approached the best of what was already a weak section of the international workers' theatre organisation. On arrival, the group was surprised at the scale of the Moscow theatres, and confused by the fact that forms which they had considered "bourgeois", such as ballet, had been retained in the workers' state, and were proudly displayed as part of the Russian cultural heritage. Moreover, the experimental theatres which they attended were unlike anything they had seen in Britain, with unconventionally shaped stages and unheard of stage machinery, adding further to their confusion, especially if they tried to reconcile what they were seeing in the capital of Communism with their own understanding that as a propertyless class they should have a propertyless theatre.

Nevertheless, the groups got on with presenting their pieces, but were rather overawed by the setting in which they had to perform. They found that their small-scale agitational sketches were to be performed on the vast stage of the Moscow Music Hall, setting for the Moscow State Circus, and were afraid that in this unaccustomed environment, their contribution would appear "insignificant"[25]. The report of one of their performances in the English-language Moscow Daily News was politely encouraging, but one can sense from it the embarrassment that must have led the British delegates to their apologetic explanation:

"The English workers' play proved to be a little agitational piece, which as one of the members explained later, is not intended for the theater at all, but is used for propaganda purposes, at street meetings in working class districts. A brief, rapid 'agitka', it deals with the revolt of the British navy, exposing the hypocrisy of the British press and the bourgeoisie, and calling the workers to solidarity. Its chief emphasis was on brevity and clarity of the idea. Primarily of a declamatory character, with a minimum of variety in costuming, it was nevertheless rich in class cartooning. "[26]

This was the Invergordon sketch described earlier (see page 169), and apart from any consideration of the technical merits or failings of the sketch, it is unlikely that the Moscow audience, which was not familiar with the particular event depicted, would have got a lot out of it. Invergordon was one of four sketches which the delegation included in their programme. The others were Social Service, presented, like Invergordon, by the "Red Front" troupe of the delegates, Class Against Class, and Capitalist Rationalisation. These last two sketches were presented by the "Red Players", the nucleus of which consisted of four members of the South London Red Players. Class Against Class showed the Police, Parliament, Army and Judiciary as weapons for exploiting the masses weapons which find their final expression in Fascism. Capitalist Rationalisation showed how "capitalist rationalisation leads towards imperialist wars which the proletariat should turn into civil wars"[27]. Unfortunately, only one of these four scripts has survived, the one entitled Social Service. This deals with the institution of social service centres for the unemployed, which had been provided by the government with the support of the well-to-do, ostensibly to help the unemployed find work and to provide opportunities for training and recreation. The sketch explains how these centres are at best a cosmetic farce, and at worst a regime to drive down the wages of the unemployed, and prepare workers for the roles of scab or cannon-fodder in the capitalist drive to war. The sketch begins contemporarily in such a centre, and moves on to project how such centres could be used in the future. The social service centres become "Labour colonies", a source of compulsory cheap labour, and finally a vehicle for

compulsory mass conscription. Most of the sketch uses a very straightforward, naturalistic technique, with the arguments being carried in the dialogue, rather than in any visual images. A scene in which the top-hatted capitalists dance for joy at the success of their plan interrupts the realism, and the building of a hut is demonstrated in mime, though this happens as realistic dialogue is being spoken, so no element of stylisation is to be assumed. The last page of the available script is missing, but it is probably a continuation of the slogans begun on the previous page, outlining the possible alternative for the workers under socialism. Much of the dialogue is predictable and contrived, and the quality of the work as theatre, especially for a largely non-English speaking audience, is low.

If this was typical of the work that the British groups produced in Moscow, it is understandable that observers were critical:

“... the English, CzechoSlovakian and the Swiss groups presented samples of agit-prop work which showed that the cliché and artistic poverty of the agit-prop theatre has not been eliminated everywhere. Even if the players of these groups spoke or recited their lines quite effectively they did not advance the agit-prop style much beyond its crude initial stage. “[28] Herbert Marshall, who was a student of film and theatre in Moscow at the time, recalled his impression of the performances, and the reaction of the International Union of Revolutionary Theatres, thus:

“The English . . . were so poor! Oh God, I was so ashamed! It was terrible. So we had meetings . . . and the first programme was: a) that these people were left wing deviationists because they were only on the Proletcult line, which had been sort of battled against in the Soviet Union. As you know, RAPP [Russian Association of Proletarian Writers - I. S.] and Proletcult, of which Eisenstein was of course a leading member, and so on, was eventually thrown out for the . . . Moscow Art Theatre. In other words the revolutionaries who'd been fighting the naturalistic and bourgeois theatre were eventually thrown out and the bourgeois theatre won and became Socialist Realism . . . . And it was realised that here in England, the Workers' Theatre Movement, like the Blue Jeans [i. e. the Russian Blue Blouse groups - I. S.] was in workers' overalls, megaphones, you know, no bourgeois make-up, no bourgeois theatre, no bourgeois this . . .

I. S. : A propertyless theatre for the propertyless class. H. M. : That's it . . . all that. And we said this is childish sickness of . . . leftism and so on (according to Lenin, of course) and that you had got to mobilise professional people. You've got to find out sympathetic people . . . . We then had a research set up to find such people. “[29] The findings of the International Jury which adjudicated the event were also highly critical of the techniques and abilities of the British groups:

“... the artistic-political presentation of the themes has very important mistakes. Of primary importance is the absence of any definite character, type image, which means that people and events reach the eye and ear of the audience only schematically and superficially. The better and truer our types are pictured, the more easily they are understood by the audience, the deeper will be the impression upon them and the better will every individual worker be able to draw a comparison between the image he sees on the stage and the people and types whom he meets at home, at work, and in his personal life. The same is true for the action. The plays are only sketches of real or invented happenings presented on the stage. At the same time political slogans relating to them are thrown directly into the audience. This method of work is neither artistic nor convincing. All events must be presented in their political-sociological connection. Only after we have convinced the audience of the existence of connections between a sociological fact and its political significance shall we be able to prove the correctness of the conclusions and of the political resolutions drawn up on this or that question. The Performance. Taking into consideration their conditions of work and political tasks, the groups decided to choose the lively and more adapting [sic.] methods of the agit-prop groups. This speaks for the political earnestness with which the troupes approach their tasks, and which can be considered as a very

positive element of their performances as well. But this political earnestness finds its expression in the English groups in a certain political puritanism. The artistic possibilities and tasks of the workers' theatre are underestimated and neglected. The producers are not well acquainted with the means and technique of stage expression and the actors themselves are neither schooled nor do they have the slightest technical training. The political energy undoubtedly existing in the groups has not been trained or sufficiently directed so that it does not have the required effect on the audience. The tempos of the performances do not correspond to the contents of it. The movement of individuals as well as the group as a whole is very schematic and with very little variation. The actors make an impression of marionettes [sic] but without the exactness of good marionettes. "[30] The jury recommended a four point programme to raise the level of the English groups' work. This would consist of: "systematic political studies"; the provision of courses for the political training of writers, directors and actors; schools to raise the technical level of the actors; and most crucially, drawing professional theatre workers into the movement.

While the opinion that the British groups' performances in Moscow were poor cannot be disputed, it must be asked whether it was fully justifiable to generalise from these performances in unfamiliar and artificial circumstances, and to decide so confidently that this represented the overall state of the British workers' theatre. In fact, the formulations of the jury that "all events must be presented in their political-sociological connection" and that by such means theatre can "prove the correctness of our conclusions" have a rather mechanistic ring to them, and would seem to encourage the very schematism which the jury condemns. The jury's direction to the groups to depict characters and types in a "better and truer" way is not explained very clearly, and could as much be an appeal for either "fully rounded characters" in the Stanislavsky tradition, or sharper "expressionistic" types. The recommendation to make contact with professional theatre workers had in part been carried out, as the jury pointed out in the preamble to its judgement: "Attempts made recently to draw into the Workers' Theatre Movement professionals, were rather successful. The troupe 'Red Radio' got in touch with a professional stage director who established connections with other professionals of the theatre. "[31] This is probably a reference to André Van Gyseghem, who contacted the Workers' Theatre Movement central committee some time in 1933 (seemingly after the visit to Moscow) possibly prompted by an approach from members of Red Radio or Rebel Players, who seem to have overlapped to some extent in membership. Van Gyseghem accompanied the Workers' Theatre Movement members on their trip to the Olympiad, having been invited individually on the basis of his credentials as a producer of left-wing plays at the Embassy Theatre in Hampstead. At least one member of the delegation remembers him acting almost as a father-figure (though he was only 27) to the younger worker-players[32]. The experience of the Olympiad and the jury's pronouncements caused confusion in the Workers' Theatre Movement. At first, it was difficult for other members to get an impression of what had actually happened. A "welcome home" event for the delegates was judged to be "about the worst affair we have ever organised", with "very poor" reports from the delegates[33]. Tom Thomas was particularly annoyed that delegates seemed to be bringing back the message that a return to naturalism was called for, without giving adequate reasons why:

"In the first discussions which took place on the return from the Olympiad delegation, one fact soon became exceedingly clear: that there was no clearness whatever about the delegation as to the future work of the WTM and how the lessons of the Olympiad should be applied. The only idea expressed was that the line of the WTM had to be changed, but why or how did not seem to be generally known. Those comrades who permitted themselves to be a little more explicit spoke of changing the open-platform [i. e. agitprop - I. S. ] work which had been carried on for three years, and of the movement reverting to the stage dramatic group. This was all the more surprising in view of the fact that those performances at the Olympiad of which a coherent report was given " and most of the reports at the London discussion meeting were anything but

coherent, though some were excellent ” these performances were open platform performances of an extremely high level of effectiveness. These excellent shows were not, however, to be taken as our aim, but, on the contrary, the naturalistic play as typified only by the very poor Norwegian group, and, of course, by the Soviet theatres with all the advantages which the Revolution has won for them. “[34] Thomas maintained that the criticisms of “schematism” which had been levelled against agitprop groups were not meant as a criticism of the form itself, but merely of the way in which it had been handled. This argument did not convince all members of the Workers’ Theatre Movement, particularly the relatively new London East End group, the Rebel Players. Rebel Players had been formed in January 1932, and had announced its inauguration as the Stepney Group of the Workers’ Theatre Movement in an ad. in the Daily Worker[35]. However, it was almost immediately beset with personnel problems[36]. It gave its first performance in March 1932[37], and performed both indoors and outdoors[38]. The group does not appear to have been very active, as no mention of it appeared in any of the many articles and advertisements relating to the Workers’ Theatre Movement in the Daily Worker over the next few months, and it was not represented at the National Conference in June 1932, though it is possible that it took part in the All London Show that took place on the evening of the first day of the conference[39]. Rebel Players appears to have suffered a number of setbacks during the latter part of 1932. In September members were summoned by the unusual expedient of an advertisement in the Daily Worker to a “special meeting”[40], and a little while later the group was “reformed after a good deal of trouble with their producer, who refused to work in harmony with WTM principles”[41]. By the time of the Moscow Olympiad it had absorbed not only members of a short-lived “Hackney group”[42], but also at least one former member of Red Radio - Mark Chaney, whose name appeared under the title “organiser” on the group’s headed notepaper. It may be that the professional actor and producer mentioned earlier, André Van Gyseghem, played some part in the volatile progress of Rebel Players during this period, though his account of his involvement is not clear on the question of whether he worked with the Rebel Players before the Moscow Olympiad[43]. In any case, his involvement was to become crucial to the development of the Workers’ Theatre Movement. At some time in 1933 he approached the Workers’ Theatre Movement central committee, who were suspicious of his motives at first, as Philip Poole’s account makes clear:

“ . . . he wrote to us, a short letter simply saying that he wanted to help the Workers’ Theatre Movement. Apparently he had been on a trip to Moscow and seen the theatre there. We didn’t know anything about this, and in the committee we had a discussion as to whether we should see this person at all, because he was, we regarded him as a representative of the bourgeois theatre, because he was a professional director, and actually the letter he wrote to us was on Embassy Theatre notepaper . . . . Anyway, we decided that no harm could come by meeting him, and I was told to write and invite him to our next committee meeting. “[44] Van Gyseghem arrived at 8 o’clock, the scheduled time for the meeting, and caused some embarrassment to the committee by demanding an explanation for the fact that the meeting didn’t actually start until nine. Van Gyseghem confounded the committee’s expectations of how the “bourgeois theatre” behaved, and they eventually decided that they would have to allow him to work with them, but in a setting where he could do least damage:

“We then had a discussion with him, and we were all rather at a loss about how to deal with him, because he was obviously very earnestly desirous of helping the Workers’ Theatre Movement. And at that time we had a group in the East End called Rebel Players, who were quite a troublesome group as far as we were concerned, because they didn’t seem to be able to follow our policy. And we thought the best thing to do would be to send him down to work with this group. “[45] If Van Gyseghem’s approach to the central committee was after the Moscow Olympiad, then he had already met at least one member of Rebel Players in Moscow - Mark Chaney. It seems

likely that the meetings that Marshall mentioned had formulated a plan by which Van Gyseghem would attempt to bolster the work of the Rebel Players, in order to steer the organisation as a whole away from what was believed to be a misconceived policy. Whether according to plan or not, this is in fact what happened. The London groups passed a resolution, the curious wording of which seemed at first to support the status quo in the Workers' Theatre Movement, but which allowed for developments which ran directly counter to the statement put out by the 1932 conference:

Resolution -- 2nd July, 1933. 1. In accordance with our conference decisions and the decisions of the 1st Congress of IURT, [International Union of Revolutionary Theatres - I. S. ] we reiterate our conviction that the chief work of the WTM in Britain must be the development of groups of worker-players who will perform to the workers wherever the workers may be, and will use for this purpose the most effective method, the open-platform method. We realise that this method has been handled in many instances very badly indeed, and undertake to improve the quality of the sketches and the standard of performance to make them equal to their task of winning the working masses to the support of the revolutionary line. 2. The plan for developing the work within the professional theatre must be carried out, drawing those elements who are won to the revolutionary line into the work of assisting the workerplayers with their technical experience. We aim at developing a "left" play-producing society which will be of great value, and an important step on the road of building a mass revolutionary permanent theatre when the time is ripe for such a step. 3. In order to utilise the service of workers who will not take part in "open-platform" work, to win workers from other dramatic organisations and in some cases the organisations themselves, and as a further step in the development of a revolutionary theatre, it is necessary, when the possibility arises (in the opinion of the Central Committee) to develop groups of workers performing plays written for the curtained stage. These groups will play an important part in solving the financial problem of the WTM and in the development of a repertoire to win other dramatic groups to the revolutionary line. "[46] A note from André Van Gyseghem to Mark Chaney which seems to date from this period demonstrates that there was some opposition to the last paragraph of this resolution, and suggests that Van Gyseghem's involvement was central to the strategy of the new group:

"Comrade Chaney -Having achieved the last paragraph of that resolution we must go ahead quickly I think. Will you -(1) Get out a list of possible members of the new group, drawn from any sources you think fit -(2) Will you let me have your idea of the existing repertoire of plays that we could do with this group. I think it is diplomatic to work on old material first until we find the people to write the new stuff. (3) Could you come down to my shack in Essex on Sunday to discuss it? Or, come Saturday night, we can put you up"[47].

The "new" group was formed around the existing membership of Rebel Players, which was "reorganised" at the end of August 1933[48]. Although the resolution of the London groups had paid lip-service to the centrality of "openplatform" or agitprop work for the movement, the special and prestigious nature of the new group was bound to shift the movement in a new direction. Again, the movement was influenced in this by other forces and processes bearing upon it from outside.

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Chapter Six 1933 - 1935. The End of the Workers' Theatre Movement In the period following the return of the British delegates from Moscow, theatrical activity on the streets continued alongside the moves towards the "curtain-stage", but the emphasis and orientation of the Workers' Theatre Movement began to change in significant ways. The wider political situation made itself felt upon the movement, as the Communist Party swung around once again in its relations with other groups on the left, and embraced a policy of endeavouring to form a united front against fascism. The rise of Nazism in Germany in 1933 also had other repercussions for the Workers' Theatre

Movement, as the German agitprop groups which the movement had taken as its model were no longer active, and its representatives were either in exile or in grave danger. Furthermore, the centre of the international revolutionary theatre movement was now firmly fixed in Moscow, where moves against the “laboratory experiments” of the avant-garde theatre directors were edging towards the acceptance of the norms of “socialist realism” for all revolutionary art. Rebel Players announced the fruits of their “reorganisation” in a longish article which formed the basis of the report from the British Workers’ Theatre Movement in the magazine *International Theatre*[1]. The group had had an influx of new members, and described itself now as “non-party in character”, demonstrating the new desire of the Communist Party to play down its role within left organisations. It was setting out to produce plays “with simple curtain effects and costume”, and had secured the services of a professional producer in order to bring this about. Its repertoire committee had been set the task of finding or writing the new plays, and did so as “a working example of the united front in Great Britain”, since it consisted of members of the Communist Party, ILP and Labour Party.

The debate between proponents of “open-platform” and “curtain-stage” methods of presentation, which had begun even before the trip to Moscow, continued in the pages of the Workers’ Theatre Movement’s *Monthly Bulletin*, with one correspondent, who had herself been part of the delegation to the Olympiad, calling for the virtual abolition of the agitprop method:

“Agitprop may have been alright in Russia a few years ago when certain elements of the working class were still sceptical about Socialism being their only emancipation. Here I think it is only suitable and useful during election campaigns or any important political meetings. But to suggest that agitprop is art, would only show that we ourselves do not know what it is. “[2] The fact that such a call was printed indicates that the writer’s views had a fair degree of support within the organisation. The central committee responded by asserting that there was no conflict between the “open-platform” and “curtain-stage” methods, but that both were necessary to the continuation of the movement. The 1932 conference statement was further contradicted in the assertion that the open platform method was not necessarily associated with outdoor work, but could be used in halls and meeting places. But a stern warning was issued to those agitating for exclusive concentration on the “curtain-stage”, or naturalistic techniques:

“Let those who seek to destroy the open-platform method understand that they are working against the interests of the movement: the open-platform method must be developed not destroyed. “[3] The debate over naturalism spilled over into other areas. Ray Waterman, of the Yiddish-speaking Prolet group criticised the tendency to try “to crowd the whole policy of the COMINTERN into each sketch”[4], and suggested that the movement would do better to set itself less ambitious aims with each item. Other writers stressed the need for more humour in the work of the Workers’ Theatre Movement. But the two polarities which had been defined in internal debate - agitprop versus naturalism and indoor versus outdoor work - clearly cut through the movement, and absorbed some of the creative energy of its members.

Rebel Players was not the only group that reorganised itself after the Olympiad. Red Radio[5], Red Players[6] and Red Front[7] troupes all made efforts to overhaul their procedures and draw in new members. The street work continued, but seems to have attracted more of the attention of the police than hitherto. In Castleford two Workers’ Theatre Movement members were charged with obstruction[8], and in London five members of Red Radio and two onlookers (one of whom was Nat Cohen, who went on to organise the International Brigade in Spain) were arrested in Court Street while performing an anti-Nazi sketch to a crowd of about 200. The five were “wearing old kakhi tunics and imitation helmets, and apparently imitating Nazi Storm Troops”[9]. The following Sunday a torchlit demonstration in support of those arrested was held in east London, but the Magistrate, Mr. Barrington Ward, was in any case satisfied that the defendants were “doing what they were quite entitled to do”, and discharged them - though with a caution. Nat

Cohen was charged with assault, and bound over for 12 months. A few months later the Stepney International Labour Defence organisation held a conference on recent restrictions on free speech, and the banning of street meetings, to which the Workers' Theatre Movement sent delegates[10]. In fact, it seems that Red Radio's clashes with the police (they were also prevented from performing the following year outside the London Hospital[11]) were mild in comparison to the experiences of the Manchester group, who seem to have experienced almost constant harassment[12]. Such experiences were certainly a factor in moving people away from enthusiasm for outdoor work.

The link-up with the professional stage was strengthened, though of course this did not extend to any part of the variety stage. Tom Thomas wrote an enthusiastic review of André Van Gyseghem's adaptation of the American play, 1931, retitled *Age of Plenty* at the Embassy Theatre, though he could not avoid levelling the criticism that the depiction of revolutionary action on the part of the workers was too spontaneous, without "evidence of organisation"[13]. The All-London Show at Bermondsey in November 1933 attracted "several fairly prominent theatrical people", and it was reported that the South London Red Front troupe was working with a professional producer[14]. Thomas and the Workers' Theatre Movement central committee supported the establishment of "Left Theatre", the professional left production group started by Barbara Nixon and André Van Gyseghem in December 1933, and Thomas joined Left Theatre's Executive Committee, though he was at pains to point out that this organisation had a quite different role from that of the Workers' Theatre Movement[15]. Also in December 1933, the regular "Theatre Notes" which reported on the activities of the Workers' Theatre Movement in the *Daily Worker* were taken over by a new reporter who wrote under the signature "A. A. ". "A. A. " devoted much of his column, which continued until 1939, to the West End stage, and developments within Equity, clearly from an insider's point of view[16]. Thomas's new attitude to the professional theatre was certainly something of a sea-change from the attitudes expressed in the 1932 conference statement, though it appears to have been sincerely held. An article published in *International Theatre* magazine outlined his ideas, and attempted a survey of the state of contemporary theatre[17]. Again, the commercial theatre was denigrated, and the "'Continuous Variety' in which vaudeville turns perform unceasingly from noon till almost midnight"[18] was treated with even greater scorn.

Thomas stated quite clearly a distinctive problem facing the British Workers' Theatre Movement, which differed from similar organisations in other countries in that its growth had been sporadic, and it had not been linked to any mass cultural organisation:

"The W. T. M. has been built, not by winning over to the class front already existing organizations, but by attracting individuals to its ranks and forming them into groups. In this history is different from the Workers' Theatre organizations of other countries such as Germany, America and France, where the process has been that of winning a single organization to a revolutionary line or that of federating a number of existing organizations. "[19] The strengths and weaknesses of such a situation were easy to see. While it ensured that those who joined the Workers' Theatre Movement did so because they were convinced of the correctness of its political approach, their level of experience in theatre was likely to be low. To counteract this, Thomas argued that the movement now had to draw in:

"... new elements ... who may not be completely agreed with us either politically or on our 'open-platform' line of work, but whom we may hope to win in both directions as their experience teaches them"[20] These "new elements" would include members of co-op and ILP drama groups, and professional actors. The lack of a revolutionary, or even a social-democratic theatre movement such as existed in Germany ruled out a formal linking-up with the professional theatre. But the Workers' Theatre Movement:

"... must set [sympathetic actors] the task of trying to organize a group of unemployed actors

who will travel about the country playing a repertoire of revolutionary material in the workers' clubs and institutes, which exist in all areas, as well as at meetings. Such a group on the lines of some of the German professional 'collectives' would be a tremendous achievement. Anything on a more grandiose scale is foredoomed to failure. "[21] The professional "Left Theatre" did become such a group, though it did not tour to any great extent, and its productions were on such a scale that when they were performed in working class areas (and all such performances were in London) they had to make use of large venues such as Town Halls. Moreover, none of the plays staged by Left Theatre were performed more than half a dozen times, and a permanent commitment to the organisation could not be expected from actors who were constantly looking for work in the professional theatre[22].

The changing political climate seems to have brought other changes. The expansion of groups following their reorganisation in 1933-4 must be partly attributable to the general expansion of political activity, as the anti fascist movement grew in strength, particularly in the East End of London. Agitation connected with the Hunger marches of 1934 brought more people into active politics, and a proportion of these into the Workers' Theatre Movement. But as the Rebel Players moved into the leading position within the movement, the general perspective changed.

In one sense, the change was associated with the move "indoors" which Rebel Players had initiated. In the earlier phase the movement had almost defined itself by its willingness to perform outside, and it was in outside performances that it found the special quality which other theatre organisations could not offer. The move towards indoor performance raised two questions on which the movement was far from united. The first was: how could the movement retain its distinctive nature, and avoid becoming a mere replication of other amateur drama organisations, if it concentrated on indoor performance? The second went back to the statement imbedded in the motion passed by the Workers' Theatre Movement after the Olympiad. This had talked of establishing "a mass revolutionary permanent theatre when the time is ripe for such a step". Who was to decide when this time had come was not clear, but some members of Rebel Players clearly began to feel that this was the next goal to be worked for.

The move indoors was not confined to Rebel Players, nor to the London groups. In Manchester, the Red Megaphones had also rehearsed an indoor programme which consisted of a number of short pieces centred around the American poetic dance-drama, Newsboy. The programme also included songs by Brecht and Eisler, and sketches and declamations. The group was joined for this production by another professional who had been trained at R. A. D. A., Joan Littlewood[23]. In Manchester, this move indoors had partly been prompted by the harassment from police, which had drained much of the group's energy and resources, but also arose from a desire to attempt more challenging work. However, the Manchester players, who had now re-named themselves "Theatre of Action", were not impressed with the developments they saw when they visited London some time during this period:

"In the summer of 1934 we attended a Workers' Theatre Movement conference in London where in the course of a speech by a rising West End actor and producer we were advised to abandon the agit-prop technique and 'embrace the techniques of the established theatre'. This advice had already been taken to heart by two of the London groups, and that evening we sat through one of their productions, a mediocre piece called Hammer. It was a typical example of the well-made play; typical in the sense that that the dialogue was artificial, the plot mechanical and the characters a series of stereotypes. The production was straight, uninspired 'rep' stuff and the acting a typical copy of fashionable west-end posturing. We were appalled and left London raging against the producer and those who had allowed him to 'capture the left theatre'. "[24]"We were bitterly disappointed. It struck us as the worst kind of amateur theatre; there was a painted backdrop of a battleship. They'd gone inside with a vengeance. 'Gone inside' was the phrase we used to describe the transition from street theatre to curtain theatre. In the process of moving on

towards a better theatre they had, it seemed to us, abandoned completely everything they'd learned in the AgitProp theatre. The acting style of the new thing was amateur acting that was a shoddy imitation of the West End. We came back from London very disillusioned. I remember very clearly the sense of outrage we felt at the way our attempts to engage in discussion were ignored. We felt we had been sold a pup. “[25] The Manchester group later broke off contact with London, and continued to explore ideas on their own. In fact, the repertoire which they found was similar in some respects to that developed in London. Newsboy was also produced very successfully by Rebel Players, and MacColl went on to adapt the play which he called Hammer into a version called John Bullion[26]. According to Ewan MacColl's account, Manchester Theatre of Action also produced Clifford Odets's Waiting for Lefty before its controversial production by Rebel Players. But the Manchester group seems to have come into contact with a much greater range of ideas about theatre than did the London groups. Whereas in London the complete theory of theatre came to be associated with Stanislavsky (especially after the movement's transition into Unity Theatre), in Manchester a range of ideas were explored, including those of Appia, Meyerhold, Coquelin, Moussinac and Vakhtangov[27]. It was this diversity of forms and ideas, coupled with an understanding and appreciation of British popular theatre, which fed into the strength of Theatre Workshop, which grew out of the collaboration of Littlewood and MacColl in the Manchester Theatre of Action.

Rebel Players continued to perform sketches in the agitprop mould, such as Thomas's It's A Free Country (discussed earlier, pages 157-8), and The Fall of the House of Slusher, an adaptation of Love In Industry (see page 175) but the group also began to incorporate one-act plays in a more naturalistic form. Both of Thomas's early naturalistic plays, Women of Kirbinsk[28] and The Fight Goes On were revived, and a revival of Corrie's In Time O' Strife was considered[29]. A plan to produce Thomas's The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists was dropped because it was decided that the play was too long to present at the All London Show[30]. The group also co-operated with other groups to produce a naturalistic play about the Hunger Marchers. Other short, realistic sketches were produced, including Gas (see pages 155-157), and a number of pieces implicitly or explicitly contrasting the details of life in the Soviet Union with conditions in Britain. Into this category fell Dr Krupps, dealing with Soviet agriculture, and The People's Court by Hubert Griffith and Twenty Minutes by Cheharkov, both dealing with Soviet justice. By the early months of 1935, to judge from reports in the Daily Worker, the two strongest groups in the Workers' Theatre Movement were Rebel Players and the Manchester Theatre of Action. Reports from other groups were infrequent, though new groups were apparently set up early in 1935 in Preston and Glasgow[31]. Some new ideas emerged, but a certain lack of momentum seems to have overtaken the Central Committee of the Workers' Theatre Movement. An interesting plan to produce propaganda puppet plays, using puppets made by the Artists' International organisation was not carried through[32]. However, the links with the professional stage continued, and Left Theatre attracted large audiences to its performances. The Manchester Group co-operated with Rusholme Rep, where Joan Littlewood was working, in a production of Toller's Draw The Fires supervised by the exiled author himself, though the worker actors' dealings with the professional actors were far from cordial[33].

On the political left, the shift to the politics of the united front was accelerating, and it seems that the Workers' Theatre Movement was looking for ways to accommodate itself to that shift. A London meeting was arranged in April 1935[34], to discuss organisation, and a Lancashire conference was planned for May 1935, “to broaden the aims of the existing bodies, and to extend the scope of all societies interested in presenting plays of social significance”[35]. The Lancashire conference was postponed[36]and appears never to have taken place, but the London meeting seems to have come up with a plan to create a new structure, which would act as an umbrella organisation for all progressive theatre organisations, with the Workers' Theatre Movement as the

“basic unit”[37] This had been influenced by reports received from France, where such a scheme was successfully in operation. British Workers’ Theatre Movement members attended a conference in France some time before August 1935, and it was decided that the movement should be reorganised along the lines of the French Workers’ Theatre Movement in most particulars[38]. In Manchester the Theatre of Action issued a questionnaire to scores of actors, critics and authors, to try to form a policy for progressive theatre. According to the Manchester group:

“For the first time a united front in the theatre is on the verge of formation, and all the members should derive benefit from the fresh contacts they are now making. “[39] While all this reorganising was being planned, performances seem to have fallen off sharply. Only the performances of the Rebel Players were reported consistently in the Daily Worker, and the group’s dominant position within the movement can be inferred from the fact that the All-London Show in June 1935 was billed as the “Rebelcade”. It was promised that this show would include more humorous items than usual, and a musical comedy item, entitled Press Gang was among the innovations. This was part of a tentative and short-lived move towards variety forms, which included performances by the actress Anita Sharpe Bolster, who performed a turn as a comedienne at a number of Daily Worker dances and socials late in 1935.

The general lack of activity, and the sense of frustration that this brought with it may have prompted a desire to find a scapegoat. Whether or not this was the case, the move to the policy of United Front led some to seek to purge the “class against class” politics of the earlier period from the movement. Tom Thomas was, of course, the most prominent representative of that period, and it is clear that he was considered by some to have outlived his usefulness in the movement. Particularly, some members of Rebel Players were irritated by Thomas’s insistence that the street work was central to the continuation of the Workers’ Theatre Movement, and wished to place more emphasis on polished indoor performance. The conflict seems to have become quite personal and heated, and some of the controversies surrounding the question of theatrical form appear to have been only the surface manifestations of antagonisms which went much deeper. Thomas later maintained that there had been no violent controversy over the question of the “return to the curtain stage”, but that his preference had always been for the street work, and that he was at pains to ensure that it continued:

“ . . . my view always was that the two things could exist side by side and within the same organisation . . . . Why I didn’t follow them into the same sort of activity with another group was probably because I felt this was a step back in a political way, though possibly and very probably an advance in a theatrical way. But . . . the idea of going back to performing to a select audience to whom you sell tickets and they largely being people who are already convinced, seemed to me to be a step back, and could result ultimately in people deciding well, we are a purely theatre group, without any political purpose whatsoever. “[40] However, Rebel Players was looking for a new role for the movement, and the question of establishing permanent premises for a socialist theatre had emerged, though it was not thought that this was within the means of the group early in 1935[41]. But the group was to clash with Thomas later in 1935 over an uncharacteristic issue. Rebel Players had sought permission from Clifford Odets’ agents to stage the play which was to become a classic of the socialist theatre, *Waiting for Lefty*, in its London première (as has been mentioned, the play had already been performed by the Manchester group, apparently without permission). This was to be the centrepiece of a programme which would also include *Slickers Ltd.*, *Twenty Minutes* and *A Man and A Woman*, a recitation about the death of Karl Leibknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, written by Ernst Toller. A few days before the performance, which had been scheduled for October 12th. , permission had still not been received by the group, and Thomas wrote to Rebel Players explaining that to stage *Waiting for Lefty* without permission would be a breach of “professional etiquette” which could put the movement’s relationship with

the professional theatre in jeopardy. Rebel Players did not accept this argument, and went ahead with the play, though they omitted its title from the programme. After the evening had turned out a great success, with none of the problems anticipated by Thomas arising, Rebel Players felt justified in moving a vote of censure against the central organisation, and Tom Thomas in particular. Developments moved rapidly over the next few weeks, with Rebel Players taking the initiative in a way which may have been planned for some time. The argument over *Waiting for Lefty* opened up a deep resentment about the way the organisation was being run. Clearly, members of Rebel Players not only felt that the Central Committee was failing to support them, but were convinced that the attitudes it represented were a positive hindrance to the way in which they wished to develop. They saw the efforts to reform the organisation which had been announced earlier in the year as too half-hearted, and had seen no progress on practical implementation of any of these plans. So they decided on drastic measures. Seemingly with the support of the International Union of Revolutionary Theatres, they took the organisation in hand. Rather than propose any further reforms, they decided that the movement would have to be dissolved. The strength of Rebel Players, and the weakness of the Central Committee in the wake of the Olympiad judgement, was such that they met with little opposition. A series of meetings effectively wound up the Workers' Theatre Movement by the end of October. The "New Theatre League" which had been proposed at the London meeting in April, and which had been instituted in name but not in practice, was formally constituted as an umbrella organisation for progressive amateur dramatic organisations. A provisional committee for the New Theatre League which did not include Tom Thomas was proposed by Rebel Players[42]. In the event, Thomas remained on the committee of the New Theatre League[43], but the brief of the organisation was so vague and wide ranging that it failed to make any impact. An announcement in the *Daily Worker* declared that "the W. T. M. has been liquidated and the New Theatre League is in process of formation[44]. A little more than nine years after it began, the Workers' Theatre Movement had ceased to be[45].

The decision that Thomas had no further part to play as organiser of the Workers' Theatre Movement was taken by Rebel Players in his absence, and the shock and confusion that this caused is evident in his reply 33 years later to Clive Barker's question about how he left the workers' theatre:

"Well, this always puzzled me, but I was told that the fraction [i. e. the Communist Party grouping] had decided we had a - Oh, I don't know, I don't know if I was told . . . I remember walking home feeling a bit sick. I was told - up to that time I had been the man who was, sort of, party leader in the organisation . . . and suddenly, well I found I wasn't the - I didn't have the confidence of the members any more. . . . But at this particular meeting I was sort of deprived of all functions, not by the wish of the meeting - not by a vote of that meeting, but by a decision of a fraction - a Communist Party fraction. "[46] Thomas did not recall the argument over *Waiting for Lefty*, and this is not surprising, as this pretext was not really the root of the antagonism. Some members of Rebel Players saw Thomas as a "reactionary" from the start, because of his failure to endorse what they saw as the proper future development of the movement into polished indoor performance. They recalled that he had been opposed to the setting up of a "curtain stage" group from the beginning[47]. Thomas himself assumed that he had been too closely identified with the attacks on the Labour Party and ILP to be effective in the new circumstances of the united front. In his interview with Clive Barker, Thomas put this forward as mere conjecture, but in later accounts Thomas recalled that this point had been put to him at the time. Rebel Players, very much under the influence of André Van Gyseghem and other professionals who had joined, now pushed on the plan to institute a permanent working class theatre, in its own premises. By January 2nd. 1936, the secretary of Rebel Players, Celia Block, was able to send out a circular letter explaining to all interested parties that the group was now "able to take a big step forward and

establish the First Workers' Theatre in London!"[48]. A hall had been obtained with "splendid facilities for the presentation of our plays", and this would become the headquarters of the group. At a meeting at Circle House the following Sunday, the plan put forward by the Rebel Players committee was overwhelmingly endorsed, and what was later to become Unity Theatre was instituted. The New Theatre League lingered on for a year or so, but without any defined role. Thomas recalled that "from that point onwards, the street theatre, the agitprop theatre just died, I think. There was no evidence that it was being carried on at all"[49]. In fact, this is only half true. It is certainly the case that the street theatre work ground to a halt, and the organisation which was eventually built up around Unity Theatre was not committed to reaching the transient and undefined audience which the Workers' Theatre Movement had aimed at. But the theatrical forms of agitprop lived on in the repertoire of Unity, and some of the plays and sketches straddled the two organisations. Unity was committed to working for the Labour movement, and continued to provide shows and sketches at meetings and demonstrations, though this sometimes led to tensions between the "outside groups" and those working in the theatre. Unity formed a working relationship with professionals in the theatre which put it at the leading edge of experimental theatre in Britain for some time. But with the death of the Workers' Theatre Movement, something was also lost to British theatre. The relationship between players and audience in the bare arena of the street could not be found in other settings, even, or perhaps especially, if the new worker-actors of Unity had the Stanislavsky system to back them up. But Unity found other ways to reach its audience which are the subject of another story[50].

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Notes to Chapter One

1. For an account of these movements see Samuel, R., "Theatre and Socialism in Britain (1880-1935)", in *Theatres of the Left, 1880-1935*, ed. Raphael Samuel, Ewan MacColl and Stuart Cosgrove, 1985, pages 13-16.

2. Quoted in Jones, L.A., "The Workers' Theatre Movement in the Twenties", *Zeitschrift Fur Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 1966, page 259.

3. Harrison, 1974, page 189.

4. According to the Party's own figures, the membership for 1925 was just 5,000. (See Dewar, H., Communist Politics in Britain, 1976, page 48).

5. Sunday Worker 15th. March 1925, page 4.

6. see Macfarlane 1966, page 143.

7. Hutt, A., The Post-War History of the British Working

Class, 1937, page 106.

8. Sunday Worker, 15.3.1925, page 6.

9. Hurd, M., Immortal Hour, 1962.

10. Workers Weekly, 12.1.1926.

11. Morris, W., Art, Labour and Socialism, Quoted in Marxism and Art, ed Maynard Solomon, 1979, page 87.

12. Thompson, E.P., William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary, 1976, page 666.

13. Sunday Worker, 15.3.1925, page 6.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

16. Sunday Worker, 15.3.1925, page 6.

17. see Lansbury's Labour Weekly, 18.4.1925, page 3; The Plebs, Aug.1932, page 302; Sunday Worker,28.3.1926, page 8; Sunday Worker 26.2.1928, page 8.

18. Sunday Worker 10.1.1926, page 8.

19. The Plebs, Jan. 1925, page 55.

20. Sunday Worker, 25.4.1926, page 6.

21. Sunday Worker, 13.12.1925, page 9.

22. Sunday Worker, 27.12.1925, page 6.

23. The Plebs, 16□, pages 334-337, 406-8.

24. The Plebs, August 1926, page 303.

25. The Plebs, No. 16, 1924, pages 254-5.

26. The Plebs, Jan.1925 , page 55; Dove, R., "The Place of Ernst Toller in English Socialist Theatre 1924-1929", German Life and Letters, Jan. 1985, pages 125-129.

27. Sunday Worker 19.4.1925, page 7.

28. Hurd, M., Immortal Hour, 1962.

29. R. Boughton to Shaw, 24.4.21. Quoted in Hurd, M., Immortal Hour, 1962, page 77.

30. see for example Sunday Worker 2.5.1926, page 16.

31. Thomas, T., Interview with Clive Barker, 1968.

32. I.L.P. Conference Report 1926, pages 25-26.

33. Malleson, Miles, The I.L.P. Arts Guilds: The I.L.P. and its dramatic societies. What they are and might become, 1926.

34. By the following year the National Activities Committee reported that there were "over 100 affiliated dramatic groups and many of them are doing work of distinct merit", I.L.P. Conference Report 1926, page 25.

35. Malleson, M., *op. cit.*, page 5.

36. Marshall, N., The Other Theatre, 1947, page 11.

37. Malleson, *op. cit.* page 8.

38. The Times 15.9.1927, page 14.

39. Bouchier, Arthur, Art and Culture in Relation to Socialism, 1926.

40. MacFarlane, 1966, page 143.

41. Carter, H., The New Spirit in the European Theatre, 1925, page 276.

42. Carter, H., "Workers and the Theatre", Sunday Worker, 10.5.1925, page 10.

43. Carter, H., "Workers and the Theatre", Sunday Worker, 22.3.1925, page 10.

44. Carter, H., "Collaring Propaganda Machinery", Sunday Worker, 26.4.1925, page 10.

45. Carter, H., "What Plays Feed Us?", Sunday Worker 29.3.1925, page 6.

46. Carter, H., "Prehistoric Plays", Sunday Worker 7.6.1925, page 10.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*

49. Carter, H., "Workers and the Theatre", Sunday Worker 31.5.1925, page 10.

50. Carter, H., "Plot Me No Plots", Sunday Worker 21.6.1925, page 10.

51. Carter, H., "The Workers' Theatre and Futurism", Sunday Worker 25.10.1925, page 8.

52. Carter, H., "What's the use of Scenery?", Sunday Worker 18.4.1926, page 8.

53. Carter, H., "The Workers Theatre, Made-While-You-Act Plays", Sunday Worker, page 8.

54. Carter, H., "Plays for the Workers' Theatre", Sunday Worker 22.8.1926, page 8.

55. *Ibid.*

56. Carter, H., "Dramatising the Engineer", Sunday Worker 7.3.1926, page 5.

57. *Ibid.*

58. Carter, H., "Dramatise the Blacksmith", Sunday Worker 7.2.1926, page 8.

59. Carter, H., "Staging the Miner", Sunday Worker 28.2.1926, page 8.

60. Carter, H., "The Workers' Vintage in 1925", Sunday Worker 10.1.1926, page 8.

61. *Ibid.*

62. The Woolwich project does seem to have gone ahead, although its exact nature is not clear. Carter mentioned it in the year's review previously referred to as part of the "Centre-Left" section of the workers' theatre, and said that it had been "assisted by the L.C.C. [London County Council - I.S.]". Yet a separate announcement on the same page tells of the proposed formation of a workers' theatre in Woolwich supported by the Trades and

Labour Council. *Ibid.*

63. Carter, H., *New Spirit in the Cinema*, 1924, page 34.

64. M.E. [Monica Ewer?] "A Study of Dramatic Art in the Workers' Republic", Labour Monthly Vol. 7 No. 4, April 1925, pages 249-250.

65. F. & I. C., "Between the Mill-Stones", Labour Monthly Vol. 8 No.3, March 1926, pages 188-190.

66. *Ibid.*, page 189.

67. R. P. D. [R. Palme Dutt], "The Workers' Theatre", Labour Monthly Vol. 8 No.8, August 1926, page 503.

68. *Ibid.*, page 506.

69. Clydebank Riveter, "Is Working Class Art Mere 'Bunk'?", Sunday Worker, 26.9.1926, page 6.

70. *Ibid.*

71. Thompson, B., "Workers Must Make Their Own Art", Sunday Worker, 26.9.1926, page 6.

72. "The Workers and Art; Some Practical Suggestions", Sunday Worker 17.10.1926, p. 6.

73. Flanagan, J. M., "What Workers Think - And Don't Think", Sunday Worker 24.10.1926, page 6.

74. *Ibid.*

75. ILP Conference Report, 1926. page 25.

76. Carter, H., The New Spirit in the European Theatre, 1925, page 274.

77. For instance, in 1926, Liverpool Labour Party Dramatic Society presented Miles Malleon's Conflict (Labour's Merseyside Voice, May 1927), Bradford ILP produced Galsworthy's Strife (Daily Herald, 22.4.1926, page 10), and Golders Green ILP, as well as the Hampstead Players, performed Shaw's The Shewing up of Blanco Posnet (Daily Herald, 29.4.1926, page 9; Sunday Worker, 18.4.1926, page 8.).

78. Carter, H., The New Spirit in the European Theatre, 1925.

79. Monica Ewer, "The Play's The Thing", Daily Herald, 15.4.1926, page 9.
80. "The Insect Play", Sunday Worker, 17.10.1926, page 6.
81. Clarion, 29.10.1926, page 1. This announcement also reveals that the Federation's secretary was H. C. Morrison, the post-war architect of the "municipal socialism" structure.
82. Morris, M., The General Strike, 1976, pages 180 - 182.
83. Ashleigh, C., Sunday Worker, 13.12.1925, page 9.
84. The Plebs, August 1925, page 327.
85. Loveman, J., "Workers' Theatre: Personal Recollections of political theatre in Greenwich during the 1920s and 1930s", Red Letters, No. 13, Spring 1982, pages 41-2.
86. Corrie, J., "The Village Players", Daily Herald, 5.4.1926, page 4.
87. Jeffery, W., entry on Joe Corrie in Hartnoll, P. (ed.), The Oxford Companion to the Theatre, 1967, pages 208-9.
88. Daily Herald, 3.4.1926, page 2.
89. F. & I. C., "The Living Newspaper", Sunday Worker, 14.3.1926, page 9.
90. Labour's Merseyside Voice, May 1957.
91. Daily Herald, 15.4.1926, 22.4.1926, 29.4.1926.
92. Carter, H., "The Strike and the Workers' Theatre", Sunday Worker, 6.6.1926, page 8.
93. Barker, C., Interview with Tom Thomas, 1968.
94. Walshe, C., Sunday Worker, 27.9.1925, page 8.
95. Sunday Worker, 4.10.1925, page 8.
96. Walshe, C., "The Council for Proletarian Art", The Woman Worker, July 1926, page 2.
97. Walshe, C., "Workers' Theatre Group", Sunday Worker,

25.7.1926, page 8.

98. Walshe, C., "The Workers' Theatre Movement", The Woman Worker, August 1926, page 2.

99. This account of the foundation of the Council for Proletarian Art and the Workers' Theatre Movement is pieced together from the sources quoted above. It is, in some respects, substantially different from the account given by Dr. Jones, (Jones, L. A., "The British Workers' Theatre Movement in the Twenties", Zeitschrift fUr Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1966, pages 261-262.), for which, unfortunately, Dr. Jones gives no source references.

100. "Class Theatres for Workers", Sunday Worker, 12.9.1926, page 5.

101. Ashleigh, C., "Plays Needed - Now Is The Time", Sunday Worker, 11.7.1926, page 8.

102. Sunday Worker, 19.9.1926, page 6.

103. Sunday Worker, 17.10.1926, page 6.

104. "What the Workers' Theatre Movement Stands For", Sunday Worker, 3.10.1926, page 6.

105. *Ibid.*

106. Barker, C., Interview with Tom Thomas, 1968.

107. "Workers Theatre Notes", The Young Worker, 23.10.1926, page 3; Sunday Worker, 25.7.1926, page 8.

108. Sunday Worker, 10.10.1926, page 5. The exact composition of this group is not apparent. It is clear, however, that it was not connected with or formed by the Hackney Labour Dramatic Group, as Dr. Jones asserts in his 1964 thesis, since this contention is denied by Tom Thomas in his interview with Clive Barker in 1968, and is not supported by any other source.

109. Workers' Weekly, 12.11.1926, page 6; Sunday Worker, 14.11.1926, page 6□

110. Daily Herald, 9.12.1926, page 9.

111. "Plays for the People", The Plebs, Feb. 1926, pages 72-3.

112. Walshe, C., "The Tragedy of Bill Porter", Sunday Worker, 5.12.1926, page 8.

113. "Art is a Weapon", The Young Worker, 9.10.1926, page 4.

114. "Workers' Theatre Notes", The Young Worker, 23.10.1926, page 3.

#### Notes to Chapter Two

1. Thomas, Tom, "A Propertyless Theatre for the Propertyless Class", History Workshop Journal No. 4, Autumn 1977.

2. *Ibid.*, page 113.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, page 114.

5. Thomas, Tom, interview with Clive Barker, 1968.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Thomas, Tom, "A Propertyless Theatre for the Propertyless Class", 1977, page 115. These performances do not seem to have been advertised in the left press, perhaps because they were assured of a regular audience in any event. Presumably they took place during the winter of 1925 - 1926, since Thomas recalls that attendance at socials was popular partly as a way of escaping a cold home for a warm hall.

8. *Ibid.*, page 116.

9. Thomas, Tom, interview with Clive Barker, 1968.

10. Ewer, M., "The Play's The Thing", Daily Herald, 22.4.1926, page 10.

11. In place of the Sutro play, Dr. L. A. Jones in his 1966 thesis (page 262) follows the reminiscences of Mark Chaney from 1938, and cites a "duologue on unemployment by C. K. Munro". Chaney, however, joined the group some time after this production, and both the Daily Herald cited above, and Thomas's own recollections, mention the Sutro play. Since neither Dr. Jones nor I have been able to trace such a play by Munro, and since the Sutro play is, in fact, a duologue on unemployment, it seems safe to assume that Chaney was mistaken in his recollections.

12. Shaw, Collected Plays, 1972, Vol. 5, page 227.

13. Holledge, J., Innocent Flowers 1980, pages 98-99.

14. Glaspell, 1926.

15. Hannington, W., A Short History of the Unemployed, 1938, page 45.
16. Jones, L. A. *op.cit.*, 1966, page 262.
17. Thomas, Tom, "A Propertyless Theatre for the Propertyless Class", 1977, page 116.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Thomas maintained in his 1968 interview with Clive Barker that he had only "vague intimations" of, and no contact with the work of the Workers' Theatre Movement. This article, however, shows that he knew of the existence of the movement from a very early stage. The fact that at this stage he had no contact with the movement illustrates its isolation from local developments.
20. Thomas, H. B., "The Hackney Dramatic Group", Sunday Worker, 8.8.1926, page 8.
21. Thomas, Tom, interview with Clive Barker, 1968.
22. The other play on the list was Lord Dunsany's A Night at the Inn, a rather empty, if popular, supernatural mystery without even a modicum of "social significance". By 1968 Thomas was convinced not only that the play had never been performed by the group, but also that it had never formed part of their planned programme. He did, however, concede that it may have been on a list of plays issued as a guide for other groups just starting and lacking any basic acting experience. See Thomas, interview with Clive Barker, 1968.
23. Thomas, Tom, interview with Clive Barker, 1968.
24. Lansbury's Labour Weekly, 6.11.1926, page 15.
25. Thomas, Tom, interview with Clive Barker, 1968.
26. Daily Herald, 26.1.1926, page 9.
27. Thomas, Tom, "A Propertyless Theatre for the Propertyless Class", 1977, page 116.
28. Daily Herald, 9.3.1927, page 9.
29. Sunday Worker, 14.3.1926, page 9.
30. Thomas, Tom, interview with Clive Barker, 1968; Daily Herald, 26.1.1926, page 9.
31. Thomas, Tom, interview with Clive Barker, 1968.
32. Thomas, Tom, "A Propertyless Theatre for the Propertyless Class", 1977, page 116. This play must have had a short life, since by April 1927 Chiang Kai Shek had shown his true reactionary colours in a bloody coup and massacre of workers' organisations. Thomas recalled a play about the daughter of a jailed militant after the General Strike, which he wrote for the Hackney Young Pioneers, as dating from this period. However, a description of this play in the

WTM's Red Stage April - May 1932 seems to imply that it had only just been written for the children's organisation.

33. Sunday Worker, 20.3.1927, page 8. In his "Reflections of an Old Stager" Mark Chaney recalled seeing the WTM perform Passaic and Stanley Baldwin's Pipe Dream at the Workers Circle (i.e. Alie Street, Stepney) in 1926. since Christina Walshe was appealing for new members to perform Passaic in January and February 1927 (see Sunday Worker, 30.1.1927, page 8; 20.2.1927, page 5), it seems that Chaney was mistaken about the dates. However, it seems less likely that he would have mistaken the venue, and improbable that he would have travelled from the East End to Camberwell to see the plays. It seems, therefore, that part of the above programme was also performed at the Workers' Circle.

34. Sunday Worker, 20.3.1927, page 8.

35. Sunday Worker, 27.3.1927, page 8.

36. These were a programme of four plays, including an American anti-religious play by Paul Peters, Mr. God is Not In in Kentish Town (see Sunday Worker 24.4.1927, page 8), and a May Eve concert with Cedar Paul in the Kingsway Hall (Sunday Worker, 17.4.1927, page 8). The Peters Play had been printed in the American magazine, New Masses in December 1926.

37. "B.R.", Sunday Worker, 3.4.1927, page 8. The writer also mentioned attempts by the Gate Theatre, the Playroom Six, and the Arts Theatre Group to find alternatives to the existing theatre structures, but dismissed these as "disgruntled elements in the middle class."

38. This again seems at variance with Thomas's professed lack of contact with the WTM until 1928, unless, as seems unlikely, there was another Workers' Theatre group in Hackney.

39. A photograph of this production appeared in the Sunday Worker, 2.10.1927, page 7.

40. Sunday Worker, 16.10.1927, page 8.

41. Sunday Worker, 4.12.1927, page 8.

42. The exact programme is not clear. The advertised programme consisted of four plays; The Forge by Edwin Lewis, The Judge of All the Earth by Stephen Schofield, Light the Candles, Please by an unnamed author, and The Cat Burglar - almost certainly an adaptation of Upton Sinclair's play The Second-Storey Man. Of these four, only The Forge and The Cat Burglar are mentioned by the reviewer, J.M.F., though he also mentions another play, Schofield's The Bruiser's Election. Tom Thomas, in an interview with Stourac (Revolutionary Workers' Theatre in the Soviet Union, Germany and Britain, [1918-1936], 1978, page 335) also described a play about a couple fighting over a crust of bread, which he claimed formed part of this programme. This would appear to be The Last Bread by H. E. Bates, published in the same series ("Plays for the People", Labour Publishing Co.) as the Schofield and Lewis Plays. I have not been able to trace Light the Candles, Please.

43. Thomas, Tom, interview with Clive Barker, 1968.

44. Stourac, R., Revolutionary Workers' Theatre in the Soviet Union, Germany and Britain,

[1918-1936], 1978, page 335.

45. This was suggested by a multi-level constructivist style set, designed by Christina Walshe, in the first production of the play at Ruskin College, Oxford. This design forms the frontispiece of the published text.

46. Schofield, S., The Judge of All the Earth, Labour Publishing Co., 1927□

47. Sunday Worker, 8.1.1928, page 8.

48. *Ibid.*

49. *Ibid.*

50. *Ibid.*

51. Sunday Worker, 15.1.1928, page 10.

52. *Ibid.*

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*

57. Sunday Worker, 8.1.1928, page 8.

58. Sunday Worker, 22.1.1928, page 4.

59. *Ibid.*

60. Sunday Worker, 29.1.1928, page 8.

61. Dr. Jones (*op.cit.*, 1966, page 266) quotes a letter from Corrie in which he explains that a little while after this the group was spotted by a theatrical impresario, who arranged a number of bookings in the Scottish Music Halls, and even performances across the border in the Newcastle Empire. This continued until the talking pictures hastened the decline of the Music Halls (around 1930), and members of the group were back on the dole. Corrie himself continued to make his living by writing, and turned out a large and impressive canon of work. A critical examination of this work is long overdue.

62. Thomas, Tom, interview with Clive Barker, 1968.

63. *Ibid.*

64. *Ibid.*

65. Thomas, Tom, "A Propertyless Theatre for the Propertyless Class", 1977, page 119.
66. Daily Herald, 22.2.1928, page 7.
67. Daily Herald, 20.9.1928, page 9.
68. Thomas, Tom, "A Propertyless Theatre for the Propertyless Class", 1977, page 114.
69. *Ibid.*, page 117.
70. *Ibid.*
71. Thomas, Tom, interview with Clive Barker, 1968.
72. Thomas, Tom, "A Propertyless Theatre for the Propertyless Class", 1977, page 117.
73. Thomas, Tom, The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists, 1936, page 86.
74. *Ibid.*, page 89.
75. Tressell, The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists, 1965, page 501.
76. Thomas, Tom, "A Propertyless Theatre for the Propertyless Class", 1977, page 117.
77. Unfortunately it is not possible to be more precise about the date and place of the first performance, since sources give apparently contradictory information. The first advertised performance I can find is that on February 5th. 1928 (mentioned in Sunday Worker, 22.1.1928, page 4; The Young Worker, 4.2.1928, page 4; and Workers' Life, 3.2.1928, page 3) in the Ladies' Tailors' Hall. Since Thomas mentioned in his interview with Clive Barker that the first performance was in the Ladies' Tailors' Hall, it might be assumed that this benefit for the International Class War Prisoners' Aid organisation was the première. However, Thomas wrote later (*op. cit.*, 1977, page 117) that The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists was "produced" in 1927, and Mark Chaney wrote that the play was "First produced in November 1927 in just over 3 weeks" (Chaney, *op.cit.*, 1938, page 3). Chaney's date seems unlikely, though, since he also wrote that he only joined the group *after* the Caxton Hall show described above, which undoubtedly took place on January 3rd 1928. To complicate things further, the Sunday Worker of 4th. December 1927 carried an advertisement for a performance by two WTM groups at the Ladies' Tailors' Hall on December 11th. 1928, but gave no further information. An article in the Daily Herald on October 4th. 1928 says that the play had been performed 14 times in the previous nine months, which implies a first performance in January 1928.
78. Thomas, Tom, interview with Clive Barker, 1968.
79. Mark Chaney wrote that "instead of sitting back on our haunches, as the peoples players had been content to do, we went out of our way to 'sell' this first real workers' play to organisations." (Chaney, *op. cit.*, 1938, page 3). But Tom Thomas, in his interview with Clive Barker, took issue with this account, pointing out that Chaney only joined the group while The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists was in preparation, and therefore had no experience of the

earlier work, which had been necessary in order to impart basic skills and build up a group. Far from sitting on their haunches, the group had been preparing themselves for production of a new repertoire.

80. Club Life, 3.3.1928, page 9.

81. Club Life, 26.5.1928, page 9.

82. Thomas, Tom, *op. cit.*, 1977, page 117. An earlier account, probably by Thomas ("A History of the W.T.M.", New Red Stage, No.7, September 1932, page 8.) is slightly different: "...by 10 o'clock only one single worker had left the audience, and he had left it too late to get a drink."

83. Club Life, 9.6.1928, page 17.

84. Daily Herald, 4.10.1928, page 9.

85. Thomas, Tom, interview with Clive Barker, 1968; Thomas, Tom, *op. cit.*, 1977, page 118.

86. Chaney, *op. cit.*, 1938, page 2.

87. One of the most notable performances, best recalled, perhaps, because it seems to have been the last, took place on February 19th 1929, to greet the first Hunger Marchers arriving from the north. The performance, at the Manor Hall, Hackney, was interrupted during the first scene by the arrival of marchers complete with drum and fife band. The performers "cheered with the rest of the audience and started the show over again for their benefit" (Chaney, *op. cit.*, 1938, page 3; see also Thomas, *op. cit.*, 1977, page 118; Sunday Worker, 3.3.1929, page 2). The group performed the four on-act plays which were by then also in their repertoire, at a farewell concert for the marchers the following week (Sunday Worker, 3.3.1929, page 2).

88. "E.W.D.", "An Epistle Damnatory", Socialist Review, August 1928, page 54.

89. Thomas, Tom, "The Workers' Theatre in Britain", International Theatre, 1934 No.1, page 23; Sunday Worker, 16.9.1928, page 9.

### Notes to Chapter Three

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1. Club Life, 3.3.1928, page 9.

2. Pearce, B., (under pseudonym J. Redman), The Communist Party and the Labour Left, 1965.

3. Communist Party of Great Britain, Class Against Class, 1929, pages 9-10□

4. For a summary from the Communist Party's perspective, see Matthews, G., All For the Cause, 1980, page 8. See also Pelling, H., The British Communist Party, 1958.

- 5.Saville, J.,Introduction to B. Pearce, The Communist Party and the Labour Left, 1965, page 6.
- 6."A History of the W.T.M.", New Red Stage No. 7, September 1932, page 9.
- 7.Thomas, Tom, Interview with Clive Barker, 1968.
- 8."The National Organiser" (Tom Thomas), "The Technique of the Workers' Theatre Movement", Workers' Theatre Movement Monthly Bulletin No.2, January 1933, page 14.
- 9.Thomas, Tom, Interview with Clive Barker, 1968.
- 10.Sunday Worker, 23.12.1928, page 1.
11. *Ibid.*
- 12.The Plebs, February 1929, page 46.
- 13.Sinclair, U., Hell, 1923□
- 14."F.B.W.", "A Play About The Lock-out", Sunday Worker, 1.12.1929, page 7.
- 15.Ewer, M., "Money Turned Away", Daily Herald, 17.12.1928, page 5.
- 16.Raymond, D., "Worker Actor's Fine Performance", Sunday Worker, 23.12.1928, page 6.
- 17.Thomas, Tom, interview with Clive Barker, 1968.
- 18.*Ibid.*
19. "Workers' Theatre Movement Going Ahead", Sunday Worker, 22.7.1928, page 10: "The Workers' Theatre", Sunday Worker, 9.12.1928, page 7.
- 20.One was on January 13th. 1929, at the same hall as the first performance ("Workers Plays Success", Sunday Worker, 6.1.1929, page 5; Workers' Life, 4.1.1929, page 4), another was on March 3rd. 1929, again at the Ladies' Tailors Hall (Sunday Worker, 3.3.1929, page 5), as a farewell concert for the Hunger Marchers who had arrived in London the previous week. A performance of two one-act plays by the Workers' Theatre Movement was also given under the auspices of the National Minority Movement in New Cross on March 1st. 1929 (Sunday Worker, 24.2.1929, page 3), but it is not possible to say whether this was a performance of part of this programme by the Hackney Group, or a completely different programme by one of the less prominent groups.
- 21."A History of the W.T.M.", New Red Stage, No. 7, September 1932, page 9.
- 22.See Sunday Worker 14.4.1929, page 7; Workers' Life, 12.4.1929, page 3.
- 23.Thomas, Tom, interview with Clive Barker, 1968.
- 24.Thomas, Tom, Malice in Plunderland, page 5. Typescript in collection of Clive Barker,

Warwick University. This copy has a handwritten note "WTM 1928" at the top of page one, but all other evidence suggests that this was added some time after the play was produced, and the play actually should be dated 1929.

25. Jones, L., *op. cit.*, 1966, page 279.

26. Thomas, Tom, interview with Clive Barker, 1968.

27. The Educational Worker, September 1929, page 16.

28. "A History of the W.T.M.", New Red Stage, No. 7, September 1932, page 9.

29. Thomas, Tom, interview with Clive Barker, 1968.

30. Sinclair, U., Singing Jailbirds, 1924, page 25.

31. "A Play For Workers", Educational Worker, March 1929, page 11. Jones, in his 1964 thesis, states that the Hackney Group performed In Time o' Strife, but Thomas was insistent in his interview with Clive Barker that his group had never performed the play. Jones was probably referring to this performance by the West London Group. It is unfortunate that Colin Chambers, in his recent book, The Story of Unity Theatre (page 25) repeats this error.

32. "Bill Painter", Sunday Worker, 23.6.1929, page 4.

33. "J.P.", "Audience As Players", Sunday Worker, 26.2.1928, page 8.

34. Robertson, B., "Manchester's Worker Players", Sunday Worker, 11.3.1926, page 8.

35. See The Educational Worker February 1930, page 8. The story is "The Miracle" by Mikhail Volkov (translated by J.J. Robbins), published in Stories of New Russia, edited by Joshua Kunitz, 1929. A copy of the adaptation (by Mary Paul) is among the papers of the late Jerry Dawson, of Liverpool.

36. Sunday Worker, 27.10.1929. The "List of Plays To Perform" is among the papers from Mark Chaney which Leonard Jones deposited with Clive Barker at Warwick University.

37. Thomas, Tom, "Workers' Drama That Can Be", Sunday Worker, 1.12.1929, page 5.

38. Thomas, Tom, interview with Clive Barker, 1968.

39. Stourac, *op. cit.*, page 341; Daily Worker, 12.2.1930, page 8.

40. Thomas, Tom, "A Propertyless Theatre for the Propertyless Class", History Workshop Journal No. 4, Autumn 1977, page 120. The monologue, "The Market Quack in Hackney" can be found in the same issue, pages 128-9. It may be that this was not part of the revue, but in any case there certainly was an impersonation of some sort of market trader or coster. The female dancing chorus was incorporated into the sketch about Parliament, according to Philip Poole, who was involved in the production, in an interview with myself (2nd. February 1982).

41. "B.B.", Daily Worker, 10.2.1930, page 10.
42. Daily Worker, 12.2.1930, page 8.
43. Daily Worker, 15.2.1930, page 5.
44. "H.F.", Daily Worker, 17.3.1930, page 12.
45. Daily Worker, 2.5.1930, page 3.
46. Thomas, Tom, interview with Clive Barker, 1968.
47. For an analysis of the Communist Party's "counter-culture" in this period, see Howkins, A., "Class Against Class: The Political Culture of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1930-35", in Class, Culture and Social Change: A New View of the 1930s, Ed. Frank Gloversmith, 1980, pages 240-257.
48. Stourac, R., *op.cit.*, page 343, quoting interview by Stourac with Philip Poole.
49. Dobb, M., "Dope Distributors. II:- The Theatres", The Plebs, Vol.XXI No.1, January 1929, pages 53-55.
50. Dutt, R. P., "The Workers' Theatre", Labour Monthly, Vol. 8, No. 8, page 504 (Quoted in Dobb, *op. cit.*, page 54.)
51. *Ibid.*, page 55.
52. Thomas, Tom, interview with Clive Barker, 1968.
53. *Ibid.*
54. *Ibid.*
55. Stourac, *op.cit.*, 1978, pages 461-7.
56. Thomas, Tom, interview with Clive Barker, 1968.

#### Notes to Chapter Four

1. Trade Union Propaganda and Cultural Work Bulletin of the Agit Prop Department of the RILU, No. 4, April 1929, page 7. This can be identified as the performance of Corrie's In Time o' Strife by the newly formed West London Group of the Workers' Theatre Movement mentioned on page 113 (see The Educational Worker, March 1929, page 11).
2. Trade Union Propaganda and Cultural Work Bulletin of the Agit Prop Department of the RILU, No. 9, September 1929, page 12.
3. Jones, L.A., The British Workers' Theatre, 1917-1934, 1964, page 203.

4.Thomas, T., Interview with Clive Barker, 1968. Glebov's play, *Inga*, dealing with the role of women in the new Soviet system, was produced in Moscow by the Theatre of Revolution (formerly the theatre of Meyerhold and Mayakovsky) in 1930 (see Marshall, H., The Pictorial History of the Russian Theatre, New York, 1977, page 146).

5."T.T.", [Tom Thomas], Daily Worker, 10.5.1930, page 5.

6."Sketch for August First Campaign", Daily Worker, 11.6.1930, page 5.

7.Thomas, T., Interview with Clive Barker, 1968.

8.Thomas, T., "The New Theatre in the Soviet Union", The Labour Monthly, vol. 12, no. 10, October 1930, page 624.

9.Jones, 1964, page 67.

10.*Ibid.*, pages 66-69.

11.Thomas, T., Interview with Clive Barker, 1968.

12."Workers' Theatre Conference", Daily Worker, 29.12.1930, page 4.

13."T.T.", Daily Worker, 17.1.31, page 4.

14.Thomas, T., "A Propertyless Theatre for the Propertyless Class", 1977, page 121.

15.Thomas, T., Interview with Clive Barker, 1968.

16.For a full account of Toller's influence on the Labour Movement, see Dove, R., "The Place of Ernst Toller in English Socialist Theatre", German Life and Letters, vol.38., no.2, January 1985, pages 125-137.

17.Thomas, T., Interview with Clive Barker, 1968.

18.From The Communist, December 1928, quoted in Dewar, H., Communist Politics in Britain, 1976, page 90.

19.See Communist Review, August 1932, page 4.

20."Trudnik" [Tom Thomas], "Workers' Drama - A Weapon in the Class Struggle", Sunday Worker, 11.1.1930, page 10.

21.Thomas, T., Daily Worker, 1.2.1930, page 11.

22.By September 1930 Carter himself was thoroughly disenchanted with the Workers' Theatre movement. In an article in The Plebs magazine that month (Vol. XXII No. 9, pages 206-209) Carter outlined his objections. The promoters of the Workers' Theatre Movement had, he believed, "wrongly assumed that the Soviet theatrical policy could be transplanted, and the revolutionary or class-war theme would continue to appeal to the workers for ever." But now

things had changed, and the revolutionary impulse had ebbed. The new thinking was in terms of building an "economic utopia" through the institution of "money reform, banking reform, cheap or free credit" and other such measures. The "Labour theatre", as Carter characterised it, should "enable the workers to play at building a working model of their economic utopia according to the Labour concept and plan". The obstacles to this included "Labour's awe and fear of the traditional theatre", the fact that workers were wasting their money on the cinema, a "bastard entertainment" owned by Americans, and the British workers' lack of imagination, which Carter ascribed to "the stunting effect of the industrial revolution." As a solution, Carter proposed the formation of a commission appointed by the Labour Government, including representatives of the Government, Labour Party, TUC, ILP, and Co-operative movement. This would hear evidence from interested parties, and then set up a Committee to institute a Labour theatre. No role was envisaged for the existing Workers' Theatre Movement, or indeed for the Communist Party. By the following year Carter was openly hostile towards the Workers' Theatre Movement, and its offshoot the London Workers' Film Society. In a letter replying to a criticism from Ralph Bond he poured scorn on the two organisations, and, in an extraordinary anti-semitic passage, noted the concentration of "East End Jews" at a film showing put on by the L.W.F.S., and the "thin sprinkling of genuine labour-class folk" ("Labour and the Cinema", The Plebs, Vol. XXIII, No.10, page 238). The extent of Carter's identification with the right-wing Labour Government (later the National Government) can be seen by the fact that he was awarded a Civil List pension in 1931, "in recognition of his services to literature" (see obituary in The Times, 31.3.1942, page 6).

23. This production was directed by Edith Craig, and staged at the Apollo Theatre on 9th. February 1930. For a review see The Socialist Review, March 1930, pages 276-7. A copy of the programme is in the Merseyside Left/Unity Theatre archive (the late Jerry Dawson's collection) in the Museum of Labour History, Liverpool.

24. Daily Worker, 8.2.1930, page 11.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Thomas, T., memorandum of resolutions dated July 1930. Quoted in Raphael Samuel's "Editorial Introduction to Documents and Texts from the Workers' Theatre Movement", History Workshop Journal, No. 4, Nov. 1977, page 106. In fact there was no conference in July 1930, so it is to be assumed that this was dated later, but refers to a resolution passed at the May 1930 conference.

27. Thomas, T., "For A Workers' Theatre; How We Can 'Get It Across'", Daily Worker, 20.8.1930, page 4.

28. It cannot be said which, if any, of the surviving sketches dates from this precise period, but the fact that new work was undertaken can be seen in the advertisements in the Daily Worker which announce "New sketches, original songs" (Daily Worker, 18.7.1930, page 3) and "an entirely new sketch" (Daily Worker, 4.10.1930, page 2). The task of originating material was attempted in a novel way in July 1930, when a special Workers' Theatre Movement ramble was organised, at which all comrades were asked to turn out "for the purpose of collectively writing material for shows". (The Workers' Theatre Movement rambles were to remain a feature of the social life of the organisation throughout its existence, but it does not seem that they were in general an effective way of writing sketches.) The one sketch for which there is evidence of having been written in 1930 is Tom Thomas's knockabout satire on MacDonald's right-wing solutions to

the country's ills, Doctor Mac. The evidence is a pencil note "1930" on the available typescript (from Mark Chaney's collection). On this basis, Dr. Jones, in his thesis, devotes some attention to the sketch, considering it an example of the mistaken policy of the Workers' Theatre Movement which had been fostered by the movement's contact with Germany. Dr. Jones rests this analysis partly on the assumption that it was written *after* the revue, Strike Up, about which Dr. Jones is in general positive. However, since Strike Up was actually first staged in February 1930, rather than November 1929 as Dr. Jones, following Chaney's mistaken recollection, assumed, it is just as likely that Doctor Mac was actually one of the sketches of which Strike Up was partly comprised.

29.Daily Worker, 11.10.1930, page 2.

30.Thomas, T., "The Workers' Theatre", Daily Worker, 25.10.1930, page 4.

31.*Ibid.*

32.Daily Worker, 8.11.1930, pages 5-6.

33.*Ibid.*, page 5; 13.12.1930, page 4.

34.Daily Worker, 8.11.1930, page 5.

35.Thomas, Tom, Interview with Clive Barker, 1968.

36.Chaney, "Reflections of an Old Stager. No. 7", unpublished typescript, 1938. See also Daily Worker, 22.11.1930, page 4, where the same prop is described with enthusiasm. Chaney gives the title of this sketch as It's Your Country, but no title is given in the Daily Worker article.

37.This item was mentioned in connection with the 1930 Pollitt campaign in the Daily Worker, 6.12.1930, page 4. Also, Thomas mentions in his interview with Barker that he wrote it for a campaign in Whitechapel. However, the script which remains (from Mark Chaney's collection), as well as the recollections of Phil Poole, in interviews with myself and others, makes mention of Mosley's New Party, and MacDonald's National Government. Since neither Mosley's New Party nor the National Government came into being until 1931, it must be assumed that the sketch was up-dated for the 1931 election.

38.Thomas, T., "Workers' Theatre Notes, A Word To The Provinces", Daily Worker, 13.12.1930, page 4.

39.See Jones, *op. cit.*, 1964, page 73.

40."Conference Criticisms", Daily Worker, 3.1.31, page 4.

41.Thomas, T., "One Year's Activity: 'Cabaret' Method", Daily Worker, 3.1.1931, page 4.

42.Minutes of Central Committee. W.T.M., 10th. February 1931, page 2. (In Mark Chaney material, deposited with Clive Barker, Warwick University.)

43.*Ibid.*, 24.2.1931, page 2. The request was from the W.I.R. (Workers' International Relief) organisation. In fact, the W.I.R. advertised Workers' Theatre Movement participation in its dance

at Friars Hall on February 28th., so it may be that a local group over-ruled this decision of the central committee (see Daily Worker, 26.2.1931, 27.2.1931, 28.2.1931). Despite the opinion of the Central Committee on this occasion, the Workers' Theatre Movement gave a good many performances at dances put on by other Communist Party dominated organisations.

44. For a full list of Workers' Theatre Movement performances documented in periodicals and sources consulted, see appendix.

45. Daily Worker, 17.3.1931, page 3.

46. Daily Worker, 18.7.1931, page 4. August 1st. was the date of the next large Communist Party-organised demonstration.

47. Previous researchers have not been clear about the date of this change, and nor have ex-members of the group when interviewed. However, of the two Central Committee minutes available, for February 10th. and 24th. 1931, the first refers to a report from the "Hackney Group", and the second refers to the group as "Red Radio". The first mention of the name "Red Radio" in the Daily Worker comes in an advertisement for a performance at Poplar Town Hall on February 15th. 1931 (Daily Worker, 14.2.1931, page 6.)

48. Chaney, "Reflections of an Old Stager. No. 7", unpublished typescript, 1938. Chaney recalls this change of name occurring *before* Thomas wrote the sketch It's Your Country but this is contradicted by the documentary evidence.

49. "The Workers' Theatre Movement; an interview with Philip Poole by Jon Clark and David Margolies", Red Letters No. 10, July 1980, page 5.

50. Philip Poole, interview with Ian Saville, 2.2.1982; Sam Serter, interview with Ian Saville, 19.3.1981; Joe Sterne, Interview with Ian Saville, 29.11.1982. Poole couldn't recall the exact location of Red Radio's pitch, and Serter remembered it as Black Lion Yard, but Sterne remembered it as Court street, and an advertisement for a performance in aid of the Stepney friends of the Soviet Union at this location is to be found in the Daily Worker, 15.7.1931, page 2. The later arrest of some members of the Workers' Theatre Movement was also reported as taking place in Court Street (Daily Worker, 9.10.1933, page 1).

51. Daily Worker, 12.6.1931, page 4.

52. Daily Worker, 1.8.1931, page 3.

53. "Workers' Theatre To Tour In Scotland", Daily Worker, 25.9.1931, page 4.

54. Daily Worker, 31.10.1931, page 6.

55. Daily Worker, 26.10.1931, page 6.

56. Red Stage, No. 1, November 1931, page 3.

57. Philip Poole, letter to Ian Saville, January 1981.

58. Sam Serter, interview with Ian Saville, March 1981.

59. Pollitt, H., "Good Show By The Workers' Theatre", Daily Worker, 5.5.1931, page 4.
60. Thomas, Tom, Interview with Clive Barker, 1968.
61. "W.T.M. Weekend School", Daily Worker, 18.5.1931, page 4.
62. "Workers' Theatre Is Developing In The North And Midlands", Daily Worker, 29.5.1931, page 4. It should be pointed out in passing that, contrary to the assertion in Dr. Jones's Thesis (page 72), which originates in the reminiscences of Mark Chaney, this weekend school was not attended by representatives of the Manchester Theatre of Action, which was not formed until 1933.
63. "J.F.", Daily Worker, 23.6.1931, page 4.
64. "D.B.", Daily Worker, 14.9.1931, page 4.
65. Bennett, D., "Individualistic Self-Boosting?", Red Stage, No. 1, November 1931, page 3.
66. "T.T.", Letter to Editor, Red Stage, No. 1, November 1931, page 3.
67. "What Readers Say", Red Stage, No. 2, January 1932, page 6.
68. Jones, L.A., "The British Workers' Theatre, 1917-1935", Karl Marx University, Leipzig, 1964.
59. *Ibid.*, page 63.
70. *Ibid.*, pages 68-69.
71. *Ibid.*, pages 63-64.
72. Bootman, Bram, letter to Ian Saville, 25.1.1982.
73. Interview with Bram Bootman by Richard Stourac, quoted in Stourac., *op. cit.*, page 388.
74. Clark, F., "The London Show (A View From The Audience)", Workers' Theatre Movement Monthly Bulletin, April/May 1934, page 13.
75. Thomas. T., Interview with Clive Barker, 1968.
76. Red Stage, No. 1, November 1931.
77. "A.A.", "Theatre Notes", Daily Worker, 20.2.1934, page 4.
78. Thomas, Tom, Interview with Clive Barker, 1968.
79. Clark, J., "Agitprop and Unity Theatre: Socialist Theatre in the Thirties", Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties, ed Jon Clark and others, 1979, page 221.
80. Thomas, Tom, Interview with Clive Barker, 1968.

81.Mann, C., "How to Produce 'Meerut'", Workers' Theatre Movement Monthly Bulletin, No. 3., February 1933, pages 16 - 18.

82.MacColl, E., "Theatre of Action, Manchester", in Samuel, *et. al.*, Theatres of the Left 1880-1935, 1985, page 230.

83.Clive Barker quotes this opinion in his interview with Tom Thomas, (1968), and in a verbal communication with myself.

84.Red Stage, No. 1, November 1931, page 3.

85.Jones, L.A., "The British Workers' Theatre, 1917-1935", Karl Marx University, Leipzig, 1964.

86.MacColl, E., Introduction to Agit-Prop to Theatre Workshop, Political Playscripts 1930-1950, Ed. H. Goorney and E. MacColl, 1986, page xxiii.

87.For instance, the Red Players, South London, reported (in Red Stage No. 5, April - May 1932, page 10) that they had given shows for the ILP, and an article on page 2 of Red Stage No.2, January 1932, informs those starting new groups that "co-op guilds ... are usually willing to pay a small fee". The Red Front group reported a performance of a sketch entitled Co-operate Against the Boss to the Royal Arsenal Co'operative Society guild, in which guild members "thoroughly entered into the spirit of the sketch and supplied remarks from the audience" (Daily Worker, 7.5.1932, page 6). However, Richard Stourac's guess that the "Croydon I.L.D." which appears on a February 1932 list of organisations performed to by the South London Red Players is probably a misprint for "I.L.P." is itself mistaken, as "I.L.D." was the abbreviation for the Communist Party solidarity organisation International Labour Defence (Stourac, *op. cit.*, 1978, page 358).

88."Labour Party Wants Workers' Theatre", Daily Worker, 19.2.1932, page 6. No report of the response of the Red Front Troupe is given, but the implication is that it was not encouraging.

89.Philip Poole, interview with Ian Saville, 2.2.1982.

90."The Basis and Development of the Workers' Theatre Movement" (1932 conference statement), History Workshop Journal No. 4, Autumn 1977, page 132.

91.Script in the possession of Clive Barker, Warwick University.

92.Script in the possession of Clive Barker, Warwick University. Another version, adapted slightly for 1932 rather than 1931 and with the addition of some notes on production, is reprinted in Samuel *et al.*, Theatres of the Left 1880-1935, 1986, pages 131 - 136. The notes here tell us that "the scene can be made thrilling and dramatic, holding the interest of the audience at every turn".

93.Script in the possession of Clive Barker, Warwick University.

94.*Ibid.*

95.Cosgrove, S., "From Shock Troupe to Group Theatre", in Samuel *et al.*, Theatres of the Left

1880-1935, 1986, page 277; Goldstein, M., The Political Stage, 1974, page 160.

96.New Red Stage, No. 7, September 1932, page 7.

97.Jones, L.A., "The British Workers' Theatre, 1917-1935", Karl Marx University, Leipzig, 1964, page 107.

98.Stourac, R., *op. cit.*, page 354.

99.*Ibid.*, page 354.

100.Daily Worker, 28.6.1932, page 6.

101.Stourac, R., *op. cit.*, page 352, Richard Stourac interview with Charles Mann.

102.Red Stage, No. 3, February 1932, page 6.

103.*Ibid.*: Also interview with Philip Poole, February 1982.

104.J.P.M., "Means Test Murder", Storm, Vol. 1, No. 2, April 1933, page 30.

105.Script in the possession of Clive Barker, Warwick University. This sketch, like Do You Remember 1914, was written by Peter Adams, a member of the Workers' Theatre Movement whose central European origins, and unexplained movements convinced other members of the central committee that he was a spy, sent to infiltrate the organisation and the Communist Party. Mark Chaney asserted that he had "unmasked" Adams in Moscow, and discovered that his true identity was George Mirsky, and that he was a member of a White Russian organisation. Dr. Jones, in his thesis, says that correspondence between Hans Knÿöbnick, Chris Walshe and John Morgan confirms this charge. However, no hard evidence is supplied, merely a reiteration of the opinions of those who knew Adams, and the question of whether he was or was not a spy cannot be said to have been proved. Adams was eventually thrown out of the movement, but Tom Thomas said in retrospect (in his interview with Clive Barker) that he never subscribed to the view which had got around that Adams was a spy. Thomas thought Adams was a victim of the general climate of suspicion - "... he was a mystery man ... and in those days we were terribly suspicious of mystery men."

106.An article in the Workers' Theatre Movement Monthly Bulletin, March 1934, pages 12-13, tells how members of Red Radio managed to infiltrate a drama group providing entertainment in a government Social Service centre. After providing some feeble conventional entertainment, the Red Radio players then launched into Workers' Theatre Movement sketches. These were received warmly, and "a roar went up for 'Three Frames and Two Pictures' showing that the NUWM'ers present had not forgotten the WTM."

107.Printed in Red Stage, No. 5, April-May 1932, page 4; and in a slightly adapted version in Workers Theatre (USA), Vol. 2, No. 5, pages 21-22. A report in The Plebs, (Vol. XXVI, Sept. 1934, page 200) informs us that the sketch (under the title Gimble Sprockets) was performed at Brookwood College, USA, during 1933.

108.This is in the British version. The American version of this speech is more concrete, and

therefore superior.

109. Workers Theatre (USA), Vol. 2, No. 5, page 22.

110. *Ibid.*

111. Red Stage, No. 5, April-May 1932, pages 9-10.

112. Reprinted in Samuel, *et. al.*, Theatres of the Left 1880-1935, 1985, pages 138 - 146.

113. MacColl, E., "Theatre of Action, Manchester", in Samuel, *et. al.*, Theatres of the Left 1880-1935, 1985, page 231.

114. MacColl, E., Introduction to Agit-Prop to Theatre Workshop, Political Playscripts 1930-1950, Ed. H. Goorney and E. MacColl, 1986, page xxix.

115. MacColl, E., "Theatre of Action, Manchester", in Samuel, *et. al.*, Theatres of the Left 1880-1935, 1985, page 240.

116. MacColl, E., Introduction to Agit-Prop to Theatre Workshop, Political Playscripts 1930-1950, Ed. H. Goorney and E. MacColl, 1986, pages xiv-xv.

117. *Ibid.*, page xv.

118. See Goorney, H., The Theatre Workshop Story, London, 1981.

119. MacColl, E., "Theatre of Action, Manchester", in Samuel, *et. al.*, Theatres of the Left 1880-1935, 1985, pages 233-238; Introduction to Agit-Prop to Theatre Workshop, Political Playscripts 1930-1950, Ed. H. Goorney and E. MacColl, 1986, page xxviii.

120. Brecht, B., "The Popular and the Realistic", in Brecht on Theatre edited and translated by John Willett, London 1973, page 111.