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# 1 Introduction

## What is Popular Theatre?

For many readers, the title *Modern Popular Theatre* likely conjures images of specific theatre productions, such as long-running commercial musical hits *Phantom of the Opera* or *Wicked*. This particular interpretation equates popular with audience viewing figures or longevity, making popular theatre an extension of popular culture like Hollywood movies or pop music. For something to be labelled popular, according to those ‘criteria’, it would have to be watched by a large number of people and be widely recognizable. While it is tempting to add ‘financially successful’ to these generic criteria, recent entertainment technologies like YouTube have shown us that this may not be the case. The comic antics of a house cat captured on a smartphone can now, through the Internet, be as widely viewed and subsequently recognizable as other forms of popular media, without significant expense to or financial gain for the house cat or her owner. Popularity is more connected to exposure than manufacture. It is about being widely consumed, shared and recognized. In theatrical terms, it could be argued that a commercial musical stands a greater chance of satisfying this than other forms of contemporary performance.

However, the definition of the field of popular theatre is not as straightforward as this. This is due largely to the slipperiness of the term popular and variations in how it can be applied to discussions about the theatre. For instance, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) lists around a dozen definitions for the word popular. As an adjective, it could be used to delineate ‘the people’, a general public or community as well as the beliefs or attitudes they hold; cultural artefacts or activities that are intended for ordinary or common people, or which are made appropriate for their consumption; cultivating favour with

or supporting common people; or, more familiarly, liked or admired by many. The word may also be used to distinguish taste. Popular, in this sense, would refer to the culturally un-refined; as the OED defines it – ‘vulgar, coarse, ill-bred’. In other contexts, you may find the word interchanged with the words *folk* or *mass*, as in folk or mass culture. Applying just a few of these definitions to performance would quickly generate a very extensive list.

It is understandable, therefore, why the field of popular theatre is a tricky one. The difficulty of defining it has meant that many of the available books on the topic are collections of essays that give isolated critical attention to specific practices, practitioners and forms as opposed to historical narratives of the field. This modern tradition of anthologizing the popular theatre began in the 1970s with David Mayer and Kenneth Richards’s now out-of-print *Western Popular Theatre* (1977), a collection of essays covering a diverse range of performances and performance forms, including Aristophanes’ *The Frogs*, Restoration pageants, and nineteenth-century American Wild West exhibitions. This was followed by a far more substantial collection edited by David Bradby, Louis James and Bernard Sharratt entitled *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama* (1980). Broken down into two thematic sections – nineteenth-century spectacle and twentieth-century political theatres – the book covers impressive territory, including melodrama, circus and equestrian performance, the work of Russian theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold, the international communist-oriented Workers’ Theatre Movement of the 1920s and 1930s, and German theatre director Erwin Piscator. The book’s continuing relevance stems in part from the editors’ deliberate choice to attempt to understand the popular on its own terms, giving consideration to the techniques and skills of the specialist popular performers as opposed to applying critical academic models of analysis borrowed from the study of theatrical texts. Bradby and his collaborators understood that such an approach contradicted the spirit of the popular, which, more often than not, had been deliberately excluded by the cultural authorities because it could not conform to the aesthetic criteria they set. The essays in Ros Merkin’s edited collection *Popular Theatres?* published over a decade later (1994), grapple with the popular theatre in more contemporary performative contexts, acknowledging its role in the avant-garde as well as its incorporation into certain experimental theatre practices of the twentieth century. The most recent collection of essays on popular theatre is Joel Schechter’s *Popular Theatre: A Sourcebook* (2003). Principally consisting of articles submitted to *The*

*Drama Review* since the 1960s, the book covers a range of periods, styles and practices, from *commedia dell'arte* to the work of contemporary American theatre director Julie Taymor. Like Bradby's text, it, too, groups practices and forms together in distinct thematic sections and offers rationalizations for these groupings in helpful introductions, giving a good sense of the linkages that can be found between popular theatre practices.

Combined, these collections usefully demonstrate the sheer variety of popular theatres and performance forms, as well as giving some sense of the character, skill, and politics that performing popular theatre involves in specific contexts. But, ultimately, they offer isolated snapshots of the popular from various historical and critical perspectives. Beyond very general thematic categories that serve to anchor particular essays together, little attempt is made within these collections to historicize or rationalize the field as a whole. While I acknowledge the complexity of such a task owing to the tremendous scope of the field – as those earlier studies demonstrate all too well – I have written this book in order to do that, albeit with a principal focus on twentieth-century popular theatre. What a survey of these earlier collections also reveals is a limited engagement with the immense body of popular culture theories developed throughout the twentieth century, such as the important work done by Pierre Bourdieu, John Fiske, Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams, among others. This book aims to remedy this as well.

## Definitions and Central Concerns

Popular theatre is often generically defined as theatre by and for the people. One of the principal methodological problems with studying popular theatre is determining who those people are at any particular point. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall, among others, has critiqued the ambiguity of the collective subject 'the people', which enables it to be all too easily co-opted by those who seek to realize their own agendas (2009, p. 518). There is a clear danger in believing in a social and historical category known as 'the people' that neutralizes individual differences to make room for sweeping generalizations and assumptions about distinct cultures. It also makes the field of popular culture, including popular theatres, exceedingly large and subsequently difficult to study. A short discussion of the lineage of the word popular and how it has been applied to 'the people' will help narrow the field.

### *The Popular versus Power*

The English word popular has its roots in the Latin word *populāris*, which, in ancient Rome, meant belonging to, supported or admired by ordinary people, and was opposed to *patrician*, or the upper classes. The term arrives in English from both Latin and French sources. Popular appears in English for the first time in the fifteenth century in a translation of French physician Guy de Chauliac's important medical treatise *Chirurgia Magna*, where he explains that to be '*populer*' is to be 'known to the common pepul (sic)' (OED). While 'common' in this context appears to imply a class division, Chauliac is referring to what might be understood now as *common knowledge*. In French, the word *populaire*, used to describe 'ordinary people', emerges sometime in the thirteenth century, while its extended use to describe the general public at large emerges in the early fourteenth. It is thus likely that a version of the word in English was already in circulation, borrowed from the French, by the time Chauliac's text was translated into English.

By the sixteenth century, the term appears to be more widely used in English and it possessed multiple meanings. The use of the word to designate the general public was cemented by the legal practice of *action popular*, which first began in England in the late fifteenth century. *Accions populers*, as they were known, enabled citizens to sue, for themselves or on behalf of the monarch, anyone found in breach of a penal statute. Writing about the practice in the late sixteenth century, Morag Shiach points out that they were 'not given to one man specifically but generally to any of the Queen's people' (1989, p. 22). A similar use of the term appears in the writings of William Thomas, a scholar and clerk of King Edward VI's Privy Council. In his essay 'Whether it be better for a Commonwealth that the power be in Nobility or in the Commonality', written for the young king in the early 1550s, Thomas categorizes everyone but the king and nobility as the 'commonality', or general public.

What thus emerges early in the history of the term is that popular implies a division between the people and those who control them. Understanding this, Hall came to see the popular as 'the people versus the power bloc' (2009, p. 517). It is thus the politics of the relationship between the general public and those in the 'power bloc' that is involved in establishing each category. That is, the popular is defined, in part, by its exclusion from power; and power is defined through its domination and oppression of popular classes. For this reason, many cultural theorists discuss popular culture (which would include the

theatre) as a cultural struggle, a process of negotiations, dominations and subordination that operate to establish the popular in relation to power in any given period.

While there is a tendency to view the power relationships bound up in the popular in terms of the class-consciousness and cultural struggles brought on by economic capitalism, it can be seen by how the term was used in the sixteenth century – 200 years before the Industrial Revolution and the onset of modern capitalism – that there was an awareness of power relations and a dominated social category known as the popular even then. Furthermore, if understanding of the term is limited only to social class, this overlooks other forms of subordination that produce similar, i.e. popular, cultural struggles. As historian David Mayer observes in his seminal essay ‘Towards a Definition of Popular Theatre’, while the popular theatre may well serve ‘the masses’, it has historically tended to emerge from the ‘lower’ in society: ‘lower per capita income, lower level of education and literacy, lower interest in or knowledge of aesthetic criteria, lower level of political influence’ (1977, p. 263). The term may thus be applied sweepingly to theatres intended for all subordinated peoples within a society, as in ‘the lower classes’, or marginalized social groups, like ethnic minorities or lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. Even with these qualifiers, the performative scope of the popular theatre is tremendous, from performances found entertaining by popular audiences, as the early nineteenth-century music hall was for the British working class, to those that openly address the issues and needs of specific communities. In this regard, the popular theatre might be viewed as a form of theatre that reflects the needs and tastes of subordinated peoples and the communities with which they identify.

### *Low and High Art*

So the word popular can be used not only to distinguish who has or does not have power in a society, but also to discuss the activities, behaviours and general culture of subordinated social groups. Part of the cultural struggle played out between the people and the power bloc is found in the establishment of low and high cultural categories. The art of the elite, or those in a position of dominance, is usually considered to be ‘high art’. High art is constructed according to specific aesthetic criteria and designed to appeal to those who have received the education required to understand or appreciate it. French

sociologist Pierre Bourdieu refers to this as the ‘pure gaze’, which he explains is a ‘historical invention [...] which imposes its own norms on both the production and consumption of [art]’ (1984, p. xxvi). Low art, by comparison, is defined against high: instead of emerging from specifically constructed aesthetic criteria, low or popular art emerges from the ordinary experiences of the people. In contrast to the pure gaze, Bourdieu explains that low art, which he refers to as the popular aesthetic, embraces human experiences and tends to construct artistic representations that are familiar to its audiences (*ibid.*, p. 24). The ‘pure’ aesthetic, on the other hand, rejects this familiarity, perceiving it to be common and ‘easy’ (*ibid.*). Bourdieu fundamentally believes that the dichotomy between high and low art has been constructed by the dominant classes ‘to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences’ (*ibid.*, p. xxx). The distinction between high and low art is thus one component of the cultural struggle between subordinate and dominant social groupings embedded in the term popular.

On one level, the low/high categories when applied would see the division of what are generally perceived as easy forms from more sophisticated ones; for instance, this might mean pitting the circus (low/popular) against the plays of Samuel Beckett (high/pure). However, if the popular is viewed as being applicable to a range of subordinated cultures, from the generic to the more specific, then such a straightforward application of Bourdieu’s distinctions is limiting. There are occasions when work developed for or on behalf of specific subordinated social groups may have more in common with high art aesthetic strategies than low, but it is the content of the work, its venue or its audience that prevents it from being accepted as ‘high art’. Work that openly champions LGBT communities, for instance, may have been historically discriminated against owing to its articulation of what dominant classes had established to be sexual taboos. Consequently, a performance that transgresses the ethical censors regardless of its aesthetic may be labelled as crude, vulgar or controversial and subsequently categorized as ‘low’ art.

### *Hegemony and Popular Prejudice*

While high and low artistic categories may imply a cultural break between the people and those in power, this does not mean that power is not interested in what subordinate groups consume. Those in power are often acutely aware of the influence popular theatre has with the

communities it controls and have subsequently sought to co-opt it for their own purposes. David Mayer has identified three principal ways in which this has occurred. Firstly, government officials might commission popular performances to appeal to the masses in order to impress ‘symbols and personalities of authority [...] upon [them]’ (Mayer, 1977, p. 263). The opening ceremonies for the Olympic Games are a modern example of this. For these, host nations *stage* their cultural and political achievements in a spectacular way to impress not only their own citizens but also a global televised audience. Power thus exploits an impressive popular mode – the spectacle – in order to demonstrate its strength and bolster its position in world politics. The second way power co-opts the popular is by commissioning popular entertainments for their own pleasures, thus *appropriating* the form and making it part of the dominant culture. The *commedia dell’arte*, the Italian form popular across Europe between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, is often given as an example of this kind of co-option. As Eugene van Erven has observed, ‘This type of improvisational farce originated as a theatre form for and by the people, but was later absorbed by the aristocracy’, principally through the act of patronization (1988, p. 6). Where this occurs with popular theatre, two things happen: firstly, the subversive potential of the form (that is, its ability to speak on behalf of the people) is neutered; and, secondly, the form is placed out of reach of its traditional popular audiences. On a much darker level, the co-opted form may be reintroduced in an amended form to popular audiences as a mouthpiece for the powerful. Hence, a form’s popularity becomes confused when co-opted by power. This is closely connected to Mayer’s third and final observation regarding power’s influence on the popular: if the form is seen as openly resistant to the will of those in power, it will be corrected, and if it cannot be, it will be outlawed (1977, pp. 263–264).

In contemporary popular culture studies the attempts by those in power to label (low/high) or co-opt popular forms are recognized to be strategies by which *hegemony* is established and maintained. Coined by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci in the early twentieth century, the term hegemony is used to signify the process by which the powerful seek to impose their own interests on those they dominate. By imposing and naturalizing their views as *the* views of society, the dominant classes marginalize those of subordinate groups, which results over time in the acceptance of the dominant views as if they were their own. Consent, Gramsci explains, is fundamentally achieved through a process of education and state coercion. At the social level, ‘organic intellectuals’, or class specialists, help social groups understand (and accept) their place

in society (Gramsci, 1971, p. 5). This includes educational institutions and ‘organisms to promote so-called “high-culture” in all fields of science and technology’ (ibid., p. 10). The State’s role is more disciplinary, offering corrective training through the laws created in the dominant group’s interests (ibid., p. 12). Readers familiar with philosopher Louis Althusser’s concept of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) will likely sense similarities between the two.<sup>1</sup> Althusser builds on Gramsci’s notion of hegemony to explain how the State achieves consent through ideological manipulation of the masses. An ISA can include religious and educational institutions, the family, culture, laws and forms of communication (like television or the Internet), which train people to think and behave as the dominant groups need them to in order to retain power.

The popular is one of the major battlegrounds on which hegemonic wars have been fought. As well as the strategies already exposed by Bourdieu and Mayer, there were other ways in which those in power have historically discredited the popular. Central to this was the way the popular became defined by dominant prejudices. It is not difficult to find examples dating back to the sixteenth century of subordinated people being discussed as ignorant, ill-behaved and prone to violence. In Thomas’s essay mentioned earlier, for instance, he explains that ‘[N]one is to be compared to the frenzy of the people’ (Thomas, 1721 [1550], p. 374). While he acknowledges the oppression of common people at the hands of the nobility and concedes that such tyranny is unfortunate, he ultimately believes that the people are too ignorant and irritable to rule. The Italian variant *popolaccio*, meaning ‘the grosse, vile, common people’, was also in circulation at the time (Skeat, 1911, p. 402). This definition not only characterized the people, but also was extended beyond social categories to define their ‘low’ behaviours and culture. For instance, in John Florio’s Tudor translation of *The Essays of Montaigne*, an extensive collection of essays written by Michel de Montaigne of France in the latter part of the sixteenth century, there is a reference to the behaviour of popular men:

it is a custome of popular or base men to call for minstrels or singers at feasts [...] and pleasing entertainment, wherewith men of conceit and understanding know how to enterfeast and entertain themselves (sic). (Montaigne, 1967, p. 380)

Montaigne makes a crucial distinction here regarding class and behaviour. The conflation of popular and base suggests that Montaigne is intending to be disparaging about the behaviours of those from the

lower classes. A related derogatory use of the term can be found in the writings of Gabriel Harvey. Writing about a series of uninspiring debates he attended in 1573, he lamented their ‘popular and plausible themes’ (quoted in Shiach, 1989, p. 27). In this sense, popular is used to describe anything perceived to be naïve, simple or uncomplicated. Combining all of these definitions, a fairly unsavoury profile emerges. To be popular is to be ignorant, irrationally violent, crude, uncouth and to be easily amused by vulgar and mindless things.

### *The Working Class*

These particular prejudices intensified with the onset of economic capitalism in the West in the late eighteenth century. During this period of dramatic social change, the working class emerges for the first time as a coherent social body. This was the consequence of a number of factors, chief among them the processes of industrialization – the catalyst for the new economic system – and the workforce required to run and maintain new manufacturing technologies. E.P. Thompson observes that during the latter part of the eighteenth century and the first part of the nineteenth many ‘English working people came to feel an identity of interests between themselves and against their rulers and employers’ (2009, p. 43). While the working class was in effect forming, the dominant classes were being radically restructured. The new middle class, or bourgeoisie, was struggling to win recognition of its power from other historically dominant groups, like the aristocracy. John Storey observes that this resulted in the dominant classes losing, for a short period, ‘the means to control the culture of the subordinate classes’ (2006, p. 13). Once this was regained in the nineteenth century, the new working class came to be regarded as the popular ‘masses’ and a new term, ‘popular culture’, began to be used to describe or qualify their culture (OED).<sup>2</sup> The scorn once reserved for generic popular social categories was subsequently transferred to the working class and to discussions of their popular culture. An example of this can be found in Matthew Arnold’s book *Culture and Anarchy*, published in 1869. He wrote:

Every time that we snatch up a vehement opinion in ignorance and passion, every time that we long to crush an adversary by sheer violence, [...] every time that we are brutal, [...] every time that we trample savagely on the fallen, – he has found in his own bosom the eternal spirit of the masses. (2009 [1869], p. 9)

Arnold's principal concern in *Culture and Anarchy* was over the preservation of high culture. For him, culture was the study of perfection: 'the best knowledge and thoughts of the time', which he believed only a small minority of trained individuals fully understood (ibid., p. 7). The presence and power of the working class suggested to Arnold that this was in danger of being lost, either because of a levelling down of culture so that the working classes could grasp it or through the imposition of the workers' popular culture from below. Arnold's proposed solution to this problem was the development of a strong centralized State that would educate the working class into submission. In contrast, he believed that the State should provide middle-class children with an education that would prepare them to assume power.

Arnold was not alone in his fears of the working class's newly found power. Many of the discourses around culture that emerged in the nineteenth century pitted the 'barbaric' and immoral popular culture of the workers against the 'refined' and moral high culture of the bourgeoisie. Texts like Arnold's might thus be seen as a kind of cultural propaganda against popular culture, certainly intended to help curtail its spread and influence. The press, literature, theatre and other forums where ideas were rehearsed or exchanged offered the means by which these disciplinary discourses could be inserted and circulated through society. An example that John Fiske gives in *Understanding Popular Culture* (1989) is cockfighting. In the nineteenth century, cockfighting was a popular activity among working-class men. However, many in the upper classes regarded cockfighting as vulgar. Consequently, a public discourse soon emerged making it responsible for high crime rates and moral corruption in rural areas (Fiske, 1989, p. 71). Often, Fiske points out, the social threats identified by the middle classes focused on the unruly worker's body: 'the pleasures and excesses of the body – drunkenness, sexuality, idleness, rowdiness – were seen as threats to social order' (ibid., p. 75). It should come as no surprise then that Britain's popular music halls, which invited all of these excesses in various ways, also became a prime target for legislation.

In terms of defining the popular theatre, the cultural struggles that characterize working class and bourgeois relations in the nineteenth century are especially important. From the point at which the working class becomes politically and socially visible, the popular theatre is seen as accommodating their interests and pleasures. In addition, due to the intense political battles fought between the working classes and the bourgeois in the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, the popular theatre acquires a distinctly political reputation. Even now

the popular theatre is often regarded as a radical, politically progressive form of theatre that is hostile to mainstream and/or commercial forms of theatre.

### *Folk, Mass and Popular Culture*

As well as popular culture, folk and mass culture also began to be used in the nineteenth century to signify non-elite cultural activities and forms. While these terms have been used interchangeably in certain critical and historical contexts, contemporary cultural theorists tend to frown on such laxity. This is because, technically, each term refers to quite specific *processes* by which culture is produced.

Of the three terms, *folk* and *popular* share the greatest similarities. Folk stems from the German *das volk*, meaning the people. Thus, folk culture refers to, as popular culture does, a people's culture. The distinction, however, is that folk cultures are typically considered to be pre-industrial and non-commercial, formed by communities or tribes outside of the direct influence of power. For this reason, Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel have defined folk cultures as being 'created by the people from below' (1964, p. 59). This is congruent with Fiske's definition, although he clarifies that it is a 'social culture [that] [...] is typically produced and reproduced communally' (1989, p. 173). Examples of this would include the folk songs of the Appalachian region of the United States, or the powwows or other cultural practices of Native American tribal communities. Unlike a popular form, such as the British music hall, these forms developed as expressions of the values, faiths or other beliefs of their originating communities/cultures without a concern for wider systems of power or for the commercial potential of the materials produced. By contrast, the popular performances associated with nineteenth-century British music halls were not constructed as expressions of the everyday practices of working people, but by others (sometimes from the same class, sometimes not) in order to amuse and delight them. Still, it was in the financial interest of music hall owners to accommodate its spectators' tastes and, therefore, the acts they programmed would be constructed as a 'negotiation' of sorts, taking into consideration what the intended audiences may appreciate and the resources and talent at their disposal. So while *folk* and *popular* may be used to label the culture of 'the people', current thinking suggests they refer to different cultural formations and to the distinct processes they undergo to construct their cultural resources.

With folk, that culture is people-led; with popular, it is what the people make of the resources available in the social system in which they are dominated.

While I fundamentally agree with the definitions offered by Hall, Whannel and Fiske, it is also important to recognize folk culture as a nineteenth-century invention that forms part of the disciplinary discourses levelled at the working class discussed earlier (i.e. Arnold). As Georgina Boyes helpfully clarifies in her book *The Imagined Village*, folk culture emerged in Britain both as a discipline of study and a cultural movement at a point where people were beginning to sense the cultural impact of industrialization and urbanization – in particular, it was discovered that people's non-literary cultural traditions, especially songs and dances, were being forgotten. Once again, the working class was blamed for failing to maintain its own culture. Boyes writes:

The Folk, it was authoritatively maintained, had imperilled the existence of their own culture. When they moved into towns during the Industrial Revolution, they abandoned their priceless heritage of folk traditions – songs, dances, customs, and stories all ceased to be performed. [...] Folk culture hadn't simply proved incapable of transference into a new urban context, an irreplaceable loss had almost occurred because the Folk had been wilfully derelict in their duty towards their culture. (2010, p. 63)

Folk culture was framed by leaders of the British Folk Revival as a heroic, organic culture of the people.<sup>3</sup> It was argued that this stood in sharp contrast to the vulgar popular culture the nineteenth-century worker showed a preference for. Instead of seeing the popular culture as evolving with the people who make it, the folk revivalists had an invested interest in highlighting the distinction between the pre- and post-industrial 'people'. The folk revivalist argument was that prior to the onset of the Industrial Revolution, the people happily accepted their place in society and went about singing songs and devising dances as expressions of their everyday experiences for their own amusement. After they left the country to find work in industrial cities, so the argument goes, they became politically restless mobs with an appetite for vulgar popular forms. This clearly rewrites history, as the discussion of the term popular earlier demonstrates.

So folk culture, as a concept, was a nineteenth-century invention used to distinguish between the popular cultures of the pre-industrial period from the popular culture of the newly formed working class. This is why theorists, including Hall and Fiske, mark the historical

distinction between folk and popular culture as falling at the point of the Industrial Revolution. Another reason this periodization has been applied is due to the emergence of an industry producing cultural commodities targeted at the ‘masses’. These commodities are usually referred to as *mass culture*. Unlike folk culture, which apparently comes from the people without coercion or influence from power, mass culture is produced by the dominant and imposed onto the subordinate classes. Popular culture, therefore, stands as the middle point between the two. A list of mass cultural products at the present time would include, among other things, pop music, Hollywood films, and magazines concerned with fashion or celebrities. Most commercial productions, like Broadway musicals, can also be classified as forms of mass culture because they are mass-produced, branded commercial ‘products’. For this reason, this book treads carefully around blockbuster musicals and other commercial theatre productions because they resist straightforward classification under the term popular.

While scholars like Dwight Macdonald saw mass culture as revolutionary and democratic, ‘breaking down the old barriers of class, tradition, taste and dissolving all cultural distinctions’ (1953, p. 5), others saw it as diluting high culture and imposing dominant views on the indiscriminating masses. In the latter category there is the literary critic F.R. Leavis and his wife, Queenie, who were particularly influential in developing thinking about mass culture in the early twentieth century. In *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (1933) Leavis extends Arnold’s argument regarding the erosion of culture to the tastes of the working classes. Like Arnold, Leavis believed that culture had historically been the concern of ‘a very small minority’ who were ‘capable of unprompted, first-hand judgement’ on aesthetic matters, and that it should continue to be so (2006 [1933], p. 12). He believed industrialization and a consumer culture were working to erode the role of these cultural gatekeepers, as people were led to choose cultural products through the popular press, the radio and advertising. The Leavises also believed that some of the new cultural modes were addictive, distracting and promoted a dangerous form of passivity. They saw the cinema, for instance, as involving ‘complete surrender’ and fostering a kind of ‘hypnotic receptivity’ (Storey, 2006, p. 18), while the radio was putting an end to critical thought (*ibid.*, p. 19).

Members of the Frankfurt School, the affiliation of Marxist critical theorists that emerged in the 1920s, shared some of the Leavises’ views. Chief among these were Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, whose seminal text *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) offers an incisive

critique of the ‘culture industry’, which they believed was responsible for reducing cultural products to a series of formulaic, easily reproducible, hypnotic pleasures that functioned to pacify the masses into subordination. Just like the mass-produced cultural commodities consumed by the public, Adorno and Horkheimer believed ‘The culture industry as a whole [had] molded men as a type unfailingly reproduced in every product’ (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997 [1944], p. 127). Their complaint was not so much about the taste of the working classes – although, it is clear that they found much of what was consumed by the working class ‘popular’ in the worst sense of the word – but, instead, that popular amusements had been co-opted by those in power, repackaged and returned to the people in a much more dangerous form.

There are two principal concerns informing Adorno and Horkheimer’s argument – and both are connected to Gramsci’s concept of hegemony discussed earlier. Firstly, in light of the Second World War, both writers (who were Jewish) were seeking to understand how the German people could have allowed something as colossally horrible as the holocaust to happen. Complacency brought about by the manipulation of the culture industry was just one explanation. Secondly, as fellow Frankfurt School theorist Herbert Marcuse would later argue in *One Dimensional Man* (1964), the democratization of culture that the culture industry had imposed was ‘historically premature; it established cultural equality while preserving domination’ (1968, p. 64). In other words, the equality one might perceive through a culture of choice is illusory in a society in which domination still exists. Most worryingly, it fixes those inequalities by depoliticizing the subordinated classes by means of manipulative cultural products.

The ideas of the Frankfurt School make several problematic assumptions about the working classes and consumer habits that have provoked criticism. Among the earliest critics to counter these views was Raymond Williams, who pointed out that equating mass culture and the working class is unfair because mass culture is produced by the ‘commercial bourgeoisie, so that their use became, and has remained, characteristically capitalist in its methods of production and distribution’ (Williams, 1957, p. 30). The attack here is mainly directed at those, like the Leavises, who fail to grasp that it is their class, the bourgeoisie, that manufactures the culture they are taking issue with. Equally critical of this viewpoint were Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel. In their book *The Popular Arts* (1964) they make the point that artefacts that may become popular culture are not simply mass-produced products of the culture industries, but are instead artefacts which are

able to reinstate the relationships familiar from folk culture: 'Such art has in common with folk art the genuine contact between audience and performer: but it differentiates from folk art in that is an individualized art, the art of the known performer' (Hall & Whannel, 1964, p. 66). This sees mass culture as not simply one-directional (imposed from above), but influenced significantly from the folk cultures from below. While Hall concedes that mass culture can be manipulative – as a capitalist creation it needed to be so in order to survive – it never operates without the consent of the people (2009, p. 508). Fiske concurs:

A homogenous, externally produced culture cannot be sold ready-made to the masses: culture simply does not work like that. Nor do the people behave or live like the masses, an aggregation of alienated, one-dimensional persons whose only consciousness is false, whose only relationship to the system that enslaves them is one of unwitting (if not willing) dupes. (1989, p. 23)

While it is true that banal, mindless or even manipulative cultural commodities do become part of the popular culture, many are outright rejected. Others, still, are edited by the people before becoming part of their culture. Fundamentally, the people will recognize a popular text as being relevant to their personal circumstances. As Fiske observes, the popular text will 'contain both the forces of domination and the opportunities to speak against them' (*ibid.*, p. 25). The whole of a society's popular culture will often bear the scars (hypocrisies, tensions, contradictions, etc.) of the struggles that made it, with power, complacency and dissent usually constituting parts of its very fabric. It is also important to recognize that this is a constantly changing process. It is wrong to assume that once something has become part of the popular culture, a performance or other cultural artefact will not later be rejected and replaced by something else. This is what the folk revivalists failed to understand. Popular culture changes with the needs and tastes of the people. Popular theatre is thus culturally subjective and evolving, and popular theatre forms are especially prone to changes and mutations.

Recognizing the differences between folk, mass and popular culture is important in understanding what popular theatre is. My suggestion here, and one that has proved a guiding principal in selecting the theatre practices discussed in this book, is that popular theatres are of interest to or operate on behalf of subordinate social groups. They are produced out of a collection of cultural resources available to the people in developed societies – which may very well include 'folk'

traditions of the past and ‘mass’ culture of the present – and so are a complex expression of the will, knowledge and interests of peoples and those who dominate them. Hall describes this as ‘the double movement of containment and resistance’, which is found in all popular culture (2009, p. 509). The popular forms of performance discussed in this book all carry this double movement, although this may not always be equally distributed through a practice. Inevitably this means that some popular theatres may seem simple, naïve or spectacularly vulgar and thus appear to satisfy the historical popular stereotypes developed by the culturally elite. Others, however, will openly seek to dismantle those stereotypes and the dominant positions that developed them by placing greater emphasis on the forms’ potential for resistance. Regardless of where this emphasis rests, it must be remembered that in each case the performance is designed to appeal to the interests or needs of a specific target audience. I shall make no value judgements about which strategy is better, more interesting or politically meaningful. In this book, the focus is on recording popular practices, not contributing to historical prejudices about what constitutes good or bad art. But any book which seeks to give an account of the popular theatre will need to grapple with those prejudices on some level as they form part of the critical dominant discourses which have given shape to many, particularly resistant, popular forms.

## People’s Theatres: Theories and Early Practice

While the subject of this book is explicitly that of the modern popular theatre, the question of what might constitute a meaningful modern people’s theatre dates back to the eighteenth century. One of the first major calls appears in the writings of Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), who was largely dissatisfied with the theatrical offerings of his time. In fact, in his *Letter to M. D’Alembert on the Theatre* (1758), his most important text on theatre, he advocates censoring it. His reasons were political. Dramas about former ‘tyrants or heroes’, he claimed, ‘give us vain admiration for power and greatness’ (Rousseau, 1960 [1758], p. 116), while comedies which seek to provoke laughter through satire or caricature ‘serve as an instrument for factions, parties, and private vengeance’ (ibid., p. 121). In a democratic republic, which Rousseau advocated for in place of autocratic governance, it would be disastrous if immoral behaviour or radical political ideas, like those often implicitly promoted through drama,

were allowed to take hold in a portion of a society in which everyone has input into how it is managed. Doing so, he believed, would jeopardize its success. The most appropriate performances for republican audiences would be able to both educate the audience and promote positive social values. While some plays might do this, like ‘those of the Greeks, from the past misfortunes of the country or the present failings of the people’ (ibid., p. 120), Rousseau saw the most potential in public festivals. He regarded these to be unifying, educational and entertaining, thus promoting a more harmonious, unified society.

Alongside Rousseau, French philosopher and critic Denis Diderot (1713–1784) was also interested in people’s theatre, although he saw potential in something more akin to that of the ancient Greeks. This can be seen in his ‘*Deuxieme entretien sur le Fils naturel*’ (‘Second Interview on Natural Son’) (1757), where he writes of the ‘power’ to be found in the ‘great assemblage’ of ancient Greek audiences, and the impact such gatherings were to have on the population (Diderot, 2011 [1757]).<sup>4</sup> Rousseau’s disciple Louis-Sébastien Mercier (1740–1814) also contributed to the debate, more or less unifying Diderot’s and Rousseau’s thoughts into a proposal for a theatre ‘inspired by and intended for the people’ (Rolland, 1918, p. 67). Mercier did not call for a theatre as restricted in content or form, as Rousseau’s had been; rather, he conceived of it as being ‘as broad as the universe’, allowing for multiple perspectives and interests to be taken into account (ibid.). And yet the outcome of such a theatre would be to produce a ‘moral spectacle’ capable of ‘mould[ing] the morals and manners of the citizens’, and would thus still be Rousseauian in its functionality (ibid.).

The immediate impact of these ideas can be seen in the republican performances given around the time of the French Revolution (1789–1799), most especially Rousseau’s with the revolutionary *fêtes*, which were public festivals and celebrations. These were used frequently during and after the French Revolution to celebrate victories, commemorate the dead and to bolster support for the war. Many of the Parisian *fêtes* took place on the Champs de Mars, the large esplanade to the north of the *École Militaire*, which was then used for military drills and public gatherings. The spectacle of a *fête* could consist of many features: military parades, mock battles, the singing of patriotic songs and anthems, the staging of military plays, firework displays, the burning of effigies, and other pageantry. For Maximilien Robespierre’s ‘Festival of the Supreme Being’ in June 1794, designed by artist Jacques-Louis David, a mountain was built in the centre of the Champs de Mars on and around which grand parades, speeches and music were set. It was

considered one's patriotic duty to attend, which meant that usually thousands of people were in attendance. As this suggests, the *fêtes* produced during this period were large-scale public performances designed to communicate, in essence, the ambitions and pride of the new republic, while simultaneously legitimizing its power and mobilizing support from citizens.

Another kind of people's theatre that emerged during the French Revolution is represented by Sylvain Maréchal's *The Last Judgement of Kings*, a revolutionary drama first performed in October 1793 at the Théâtre de la République in Paris.<sup>5</sup> The play mixed spectacle, audience participation and blatant anti-monarchist politics, and was made and performed for *sans-culottes* audiences.<sup>6</sup> *The Last Judgement of Kings* tells the story of a Robinson Crusoe-like figure, known simply as Old Man, who has been living on a semi-deserted volcanic island, having been banished there by the French monarchy after he protested the rape of his daughter at the hands of the aristocracy. One day, a ship of *sans-culottes* arrives on the island, seeking a place to deposit all the monarchs of Europe who had been overthrown in a collective uprising by the people of all European nations. The Old Man welcomes the news and invites the *sans-culottes* to deposit the former rulers on his island. The rulers, which include the Pope and Russia's Catherine II, are presented as comic caricatures that bicker and fight with one another for small scraps of food. The island quickly descends into chaos, made worse by the eruption of the island's volcano. In the play's final moments, the ground opens up and consumes the former rulers while the *sans-culottes* safely sail back to their new republican nations with the Old Man.

While this may not have been exactly what Mercier had in mind when he theorized a people's theatre, it was certainly 'inspired by and intended for' a targeted, subordinate audience (i.e. the *sans-culottes*). It also deliberately broke with the neo-classical style characteristic of other French theatre of the period, in favour of a bluntly political and spectacular approach more in keeping with the cultural and political views of its spectators. Scholar Erica Joy Mannucci has pointed out that in drawing on archetypal imagery, like the deserted island, primitivist ritualism and the old wizened man, Maréchal also 'set out to involve them on an emotional level' and in a more 'immediate way' than other performances did at the time (Mannucci, 2004, p. 242). Interestingly, *The Last Judgement of Kings* also had the support of the new government, which ensured there was sufficient gunpowder for the performance's spectacular volcanic finale – a rather remarkable fact considering the country was engaged in counter-revolutionary battles

with Austria, Britain and the Dutch Republic. That a performance such as this was recognized as important enough to justify the use of valuable gunpowder during a time of warfare is no doubt indicative of how fragile the political conditions were in France at the time, and how vital it was to keep the revolutionary audience on the side of the new republican government.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century the theory and practice of Naturalism emerged as a theatrical form that sought to represent the lives of ordinary people. Influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution and developments in photography, naturalists sought to make theatre within four walls relevant to society once more by depicting everyday life through objective imitation. This meant that social concerns, such as the contrast between the rich and poor, gender inequality and even sexual taboos, among other issues not traditionally explored on stage, were chosen and represented in near photographic detail. Spectators who chose to go to these productions were being asked to consume more explicit material than they had previously encountered on the stage. The movement's leader, Émile Zola (1840–1902), was motivated by the belief that human behaviour was directly linked to heredity and social environment, and argued in 'Naturalism in the Theatre' (1881) that the theatre needed to be able to show this connection and its material consequences. Zola's ideas were ideologically and politically congruent with those of many socialists, who saw opportunities for representing the plight of the industrial working class. Naturalism's recognized appeal to socialists, paired with what some believed to be inappropriate subject matter, made it doubly problematic with the authorities. Consequently, many naturalist plays were banned from being given public performances throughout Europe.

Many wished to see the possibilities of this theatre and sought ways to bypass the censor and get new plays produced. While censors could ban a play from being given a public performance, they had little jurisdiction over what was performed inside private theatres. Consequently, many early naturalist dramas received their premieres in exclusive members-only theatres. These included André Antoine's Théâtre Libre in Paris, Otto Brahm's Freie Bühne in Berlin, and J.P. Green's Independent Theatre in London. Each of these venues produced similar repertoires of plays, including works by Henrik Ibsen, Gerhart Hauptmann and Leo Tolstoy. Although some may have acknowledged that the work they produced had socialist undertones, many were not deliberately presenting it for political reasons. Their motivations, instead, were largely aesthetic. And while some of the

material performed might be loosely defined as ‘popular’ in the sense that it dealt with issues affecting the working classes at the time, the clubs’ memberships, consisting primarily of the literary and cultural intelligentsia, could hardly be defined as such. Even had workers wished to join the Théâtre Libre, the Freie Bühne or the Independent Theatre to experience the new naturalist drama, the subscription fees would have prevented many from doing so. Due to their financial and intellectual exclusivity, then, one might see these organizations as distinctly *un-popular*.

It was in part the frustration arising from the conflict between the inaccessibility of these venues and the recognized social value of the new works they produced that led to one of the most significant people’s theatres in history: the Freie Volksbühne (Free People’s Theatre). The Freie Volksbühne was established in Berlin in 1890 by Bruno Wille, Wilhelm Bölsche and Julius Türk with the intention of staging contemporary, socially relevant plays, and informative talks about them, for working-class audiences. Like the other independent theatres mentioned, the Freie Volksbühne was a members-only organization, but the subscription fees were set at prices workers could afford to pay. While subscriptions fluctuated significantly throughout the first season, which included productions of Ibsen’s *Pillars of Society* and Hauptmann’s *Before Sunrise* – plays already staged by the other independent theatres – upward of around 4000 people are thought to have seen a production in the theatre’s inaugural year.

By the start of the second season, divisions developed within the organization about its political commitment. Some members argued for a more openly socialist programme that could give the workers a political education. Others, notably Wille, insisted that to align their work with a specific political system or party would make the association less appealing to some members of the public. Art’s role, in his view, was not to indoctrinate but to aesthetically enrich.<sup>7</sup> The issue would eventually split the organization. At the end of the second season, Wille left and formed the Neue Freie Volksbühne, which would remain a politically neutral organization. Despite their different attitudes towards the function of their theatres, John Willett points out that the programmes for both organizations were remarkably similar (1988, pp. 21–22). Perhaps the most significant of the early productions was Gerhart Hauptmann’s *The Weavers*, which was produced by all three of the Freie theatres before 1895. The play depicts the events leading up to the Silesian weavers’ rebellion of 1844, which was predicated on the use of new, machine technologies in the weaving industry

that made weaving fabric by hand a nearly obsolete occupation. This resulted in widespread poverty, starvation and anger among weaving communities. In the play, the character of Dreissiger, a bourgeois manufacturer who purchases fabric from the weavers, is equally troubled by the rapid changes taking place to his industry, and the impact this was having on his business and the weaver community. Despite poor business, he tries to create opportunities for the weavers, even purchasing their cloth when he knows it is unlikely he will be able to sell it on. Nonetheless, anger among the weavers spreads, resulting in a rebellion in which Dreissiger's home is destroyed. In the final moments of the play, the rebellion is forcibly quashed by the Prussian military.

*The Weavers* proved to be a hit with working-class audiences. With a cast of over fifty performers and five distinct realistic settings needed for the play's five acts, it was not just its politics that pleased audiences, it was also the spectacle, especially that of the full-blown weavers rebellion that results in the destruction of Dreissiger's house. In Davies's account of the Freie Volksbühne production, the cheers and applause were so extensive following that scene that the police apparently did not believe it would ever end (2000, p. 52). Perhaps ironically, while some audiences regarded the play as championing the cause of the working class, and therefore politically progressive, through its depiction of mob-like behaviour it also reinforces the prejudices about workers articulated by critics such as Arnold in his *Culture and Anarchy*, discussed earlier. As a text, its politics are decidedly confused, which is perhaps why it could so easily serve both an aesthetic elite, as a model of Naturalism, as well as the developing socialist movements.

Two other theorists and theatre-makers who would theoretically and practically advance the notion of a people's theatre in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century were Romain Rolland (1866–1944) and Maurice Pottecher (1867–1960). Rolland's book *The People's Theatre* (1918) offered both a critical evaluation and an overview of people's theatres throughout history. The first part of his study interrogated existing theatrical models for their suitability in a modern people's theatre, including the comedies of Molière, the classic French tragedies of Racine and Corneille and the Romantic plays of Dumas. His assessment was that the outlook was not good. In relation to comedy, he concluded that while Molière's works were pleasurable, contemporary audiences '[got] nothing from [him] but the low comedy' (Rolland, 1918, pp. 13–14). Classical tragedies, meanwhile, lacked pleasure for popular audiences and tended to better serve the aristocracy, who could appreciate their form and poetic language (*ibid.*, pp. 23–24). He was

equally dismissive of melodrama and Romantic drama – the latter of which he considered to be ‘a lion’s skin thrown over a bit of trifling nonsense’ (ibid., p. 28). By Rolland’s assessment, none of the theatres of the past were appropriate for popular audiences. Drawing on the lessons of performances the working classes seemed to enjoy, such as melodrama and popular entertainments, Rolland offered in the second part of his study a series of proposals for the establishment of a modern people’s theatre. He believed such a theatre would need to include:

- (1) *Varied emotions* – because, he noted, ‘people come to the theatre to feel, not to learn’.
- (2) *True realism* – for one of the reasons why melodrama has remained so successful, he argued, was because of ‘the exactitude with which such and such a well-known place is reproduced’.
- (3) *Simple morality* – which meant ensuring that plots showed that ‘good will eventually triumph over evil’.
- (4) A *square deal*, or an efficient cultural experience, for audiences – a call to dramatists and playhouse managers not to rob the public of their time by making dramas too long or by scheduling lengthy programmes. (ibid., p. 121)

Rolland believed Maurice Pottecher’s Théâtre du Peuple, established in 1895, met his criteria for a people’s theatre. Like Rousseau, Pottecher’s principal goal was to promote social unity through the arts. This was reflected in his theatre’s motto, ‘Through art for humanity’, which was written across the stage’s proscenium (Bradby & McCormick, 1978, p. 32). This belief was also realized through the way Pottecher ran his theatre, which appears to have had an inclusive policy of hiring local people as performers, builders and stagehands.

Located in the small village of Bussang in north-eastern France, Théâtre du Peuple was built in a field up against the side of a mountain. Each summer, between the months of August and September, Pottecher would stage two productions, usually of his own authorship, with a team of local people. According to Rolland, one of the productions would be a revival of a play produced the previous year, which was offered free to the public. The other would be a new play, which audiences had to pay a small entry fee to see (1918, pp. 83–84). Pottecher’s plays varied greatly in content and style, from the historical epic *The Mystery of Judas Iscariot* (1911) to more didactic works about the evils of alcohol, e.g. *The Merchant Devil Drop* (1897). The aim, of course, was to write plays that would resonate

with local people, to entertain and educate them in some way, and therefore Pottecher's understanding of the preferences and concerns of local people would have shaped their content and style. The Théâtre du Peuple in Bussang still exists today and continues to programme summer seasons, which now consist of concerts, new plays, shorter performances, and community events and activities.

## **Plan of the Book**

As this whistle-stop tour demonstrates, since the eighteenth century there have been two predominant forms of people's theatre that have been fundamental in shaping our understanding of modern popular theatre. The first, following Rousseau's model, sought to unite all people together, regardless of class, through communal performances and festivals. The second, best exemplified by the Freie Volksbühne, had its origins in conventional theatre spaces and spoke to the concerns of 'the people', in particular the lower classes. As consciousness of working-class issues became more pronounced in the early twentieth century, this particular strand of popular theatre would become more politically radical – and, as the century progressed, it would evolve into a mouthpiece for subordinated peoples to speak against power in many cultural contexts. In the process, it would take on many forms, informed by the needs, tastes and influences of the people making or receiving it: from didactic political theatre to abstract performances made from deconstructed or reconfigured popular modes. It is this form of popular theatre – the political variety – that is the primary focus of this book. A third form of popular theatre, not discussed in the previous section, is popular entertainment, which would include pantomimes, circuses and music halls. While popular entertainments such as these did not play a major role in the theorizing or defining of people's theatres in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they were undeniably popular with members of the public. Recognizing the appeal of these forms, makers of politically committed popular theatre repeatedly turned to them throughout the twentieth century in order to make their political messages more attractive to audiences. Consequently, entertainment forms do appear in this book, but they are primarily discussed as aesthetic resources drawn upon by twentieth and twenty-first century theatre-makers seeking to do much more than entertain spectators. Popular entertainments are subsequently not given extensive isolated attention here. What readers can expect,

however, is a discussion of the ways in which some of these forms have been appropriated, reworked or revised by theatre-makers over the last century.

To be explicit, this book offers an investigation into the evolving concept of the popular in modern and postmodern theatre. It traces manifestations of the popular in the theatre chronologically across two major parts, covering the pre- and post-war periods up to the present time. In Part I, entitled 'The Revolutionary Impetus', I establish the political tone of the study by looking at theatres that emerged in conjunction with the rise of socialist political theory and practice. In Chapter 2, I trace a history of revolutionary popular theatre starting from the October Revolution and the rise of the Soviet Union, where theatre-makers including Vsevolod Meyerhold and Vladimir Mayakovsky put their creative talents, and popular entertainment forms like *commedia dell'arte* and the circus, into the service of the Bolsheviks. As well as professional theatre-makers, the chapter looks at the role of the worker-amateur and the various attempts that were made to fashion a Soviet proletarian cultural identity. The amateur element is also considered in relation to propaganda and education with the development of the enormously successful Blue Blouses, which were companies of workers that performed Living Newspapers and agitational one-act plays and sketches in order to spread news and Bolshevik propaganda to the masses. Chapter 3 looks at the revolutionary theatre in the Weimar Republic in the corresponding period. In that chapter, I introduce the ways in which the avant-garde movements Expressionism and Dada sought to engage with proletarian issues after the First World War and how this affected the work of key theatre-makers, including Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht. As well as the avant-garde, the chapter considers the ways in which these theatre-makers were influenced by popular forms, including cabaret, clowning and variety theatre. Combined, the two chapters show how theatres with similar political positions work in fundamentally different ways. In the Soviet context, 'the people' may have engineered a particular brand of revolutionary popular theatre, but they did so under the watchful and controlling eye of an increasingly authoritarian government. In the Weimar Republic, where communism was not the dominant political force, the revolutionary popular theatres worked to liberate the working classes from an oppressive capitalist system. Consequently, it is argued that in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, certain forms of popular theatre may be seen as hegemonic and manipulative, whereas in the Weimar Republic roughly similar forms were considered to be marginal

and radical. Thus, the chapters demonstrate a problem I referred to earlier in this chapter about the popular's relationship to power. While all popular theatres will be people-focused in some way, the people may not always be fully in control of those theatres.

The international Workers' Theatre Movement, which is the subject of Chapters 4 and 5, grew out of the revolutionary theatres of the Soviet Union and Germany. From 1926 until around 1935, communist parties across Europe and the United States began developing theatre troupes in order to conjure support for revolution, teach workers about the importance of unionizing, and to recruit members to the party. Remarkably, volunteer communist activists with limited experience of theatre mostly staffed these theatres. Workers' theatres, as they were known, typically worked as collectives and shared responsibilities for devising, directing and performing material. In Chapter 4, I look at the starting points for the international movement, focusing on early forms of socialist drama in Britain and the United States. I then consider workers' theatres in Germany in the latter part of the 1920s, which became one of the strongest arms of the movement. This discussion is carried over into Chapter 5, which concentrates on the development of the Workers' Theatre Movement in Britain and the United States. The practice of agitprop as it evolved and changed under different cultural conditions is explored throughout both chapters, as is the ongoing, and sometimes troubled, relationship between the amateur groups and the Soviet Union, who endeavoured to maintain, through various means, aesthetic and political consistency across the international movement. In the 1930s, the Soviet Union's attitude towards the theatre began to change and it denounced the agitprop method that it had made popular internationally. This, and the rising threat of fascism in Europe, would eventually put an end to the movement. During its peak in the early 1930s, there were thousands of amateur workers' troupes spread around the world, but by the start of the Second World War, hardly any remained. Chapter 5 ends with a discussion about the end of the Workers' Theatre Movement and considers its wider legacy.

Following Part I, readers will find an 'intermezzo' entitled 'The Popular and the Avant-Garde', which offers a brief, supplemental history to that discussed in the first part. In it, I rewind back to the late nineteenth century to consider the popular theatre's role in the shaping of avant-garde practices. Although there are some political similarities between the avant-garde artists and the revolutionary workers' theatres, the aims and aesthetic strategies of the avant-garde artists seemed to me sufficiently different to warrant isolated attention – hence the

separation of this history from Part I. In Chapter 6, I draw on the ideas of Peter Bürger, who has suggested that the avant-garde's use of popular forms was in part intended as an attack on the 'status of art in bourgeois society' (as well as an attack on modernism more generally), in order to consider the ways in which early cabaret artists, Meyerhold, Futurists, and the Bauhaus incorporated popular performance forms into their art, as well as their objectives for doing so (1984, p. 49). While the aesthetic strategies are fundamentally very different to those discussed in Part I, as the chapter demonstrates, many avant-garde artists were just as politically motivated as the revolutionary theatres of Soviet Russia or the international Workers' Theatre Movement. But rather than indoctrinate the masses or recruit for a political party, many in the avant-garde sought to shock, provoke critical thinking or encourage new modes of looking at the world with their art. While the aesthetics of these artists are distinctly *unpopular*, I argue that an investigation of the avant-garde's appropriation of the popular is fundamental to understanding modern popular theatre history, as well as to improving our understanding of the malleability of popular forms altogether.

Part II, entitled 'Contemporary Resistance', looks at popular theatre in the post-war period and its evolution up until the present time. After the Second World War, several key developments, including the onset of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the West, a growing suspicion of Soviet-style communism, and rapid technological and economic developments, radically reconfigured the political left and, consequently, the popular theatres that developed from it. While the effects of economic capitalism were still a fundamental concern, in the 1960s politics expanded to include gender politics, sexual politics and racial politics. The New Left, a revisionist Marxist movement that sought to revive radicalism, established itself as the theoretical and ideological anchor to unite the new, more diverse political scene. In Chapter 7, I introduce readers to the New Left and some of the theatre groups, like the Bread and Puppet Theatre, Gay Sweatshop, and 7:84, that emerged out of it. The chapter concludes with a discussion of this work today and how it has been affected by further changes to left-wing politics.

Chapter 8 focuses on popular theatre in the postmodern era. Borrowing from Susan Sontag, the chapter looks at the 'new sensibility' of post-war culture – a consequence, she argues, of the abundance and speed of new technologies and commodities in the mid-twentieth century – which has destabilized traditional high and low art categories. This has meant greater slippages between popular and high art, leading to the development of performances that fuse forms from across the

aesthetic spectrum. The chapter is subsequently divided into two sections. The first looks at theatre-makers and other artists which, owing to the ideas informing their work, the venues in which they perform, or the audiences they target, would have historically been classified as 'high art'. But having consciously appropriated and re-presented popular performance forms in their practices, their work operates between the two aesthetic binaries. Artists and theatre-makers discussed in this section include: Forced Entertainment, Richard DeDomenici, and Tristan Meecham. In the second part of the chapter, I reverse this strategy and look at the ways in which high art practices now routinely inform the popular – in particular, I highlight contemporary puppetry and the circus, and consider work developed by Blind Summit Theatre, Cirque du Soleil and Camille Boitel, among others. This is the only instance in the book where I give isolated attention to forms of what would have historically been seen as popular entertainments. This may seem to some readers like a lapse in the book's focus, but the chapter's primary argument relies on demonstrating the reciprocal and cross-pollinating effects of postmodernism and the way this transforms and changes popular culture. Thus, in my view, a brief discussion of popular entertainment under postmodernism is necessary. Throughout both sections, my interest is in demonstrating the interconnectedness between art forms in the contemporary period and the ways in which they can be critically resistive of hegemonic systems. In the conclusion, I summarize and offer some observations on what I believe can be gained from looking at the modern history of popular theatre. I also offer some provocations about its future.

I shall end this chapter with a polite disclaimer. While my principal aim is to record and document popular theatre practices, I construct my accounts with the recognition that the performances I discuss are only a few of the many intellectual and imaginative outputs of the cultures from which they emerge. In acknowledging this here, and where it is appropriate to do so throughout the text, I aim to avoid the problem of making the few performances I describe stand in for all the members of a social group and their views. While the popular theatre may very well aim to work for or on behalf of a community, it cannot speak to or for everyone. I am conscious of these issues and have no wish to misrepresent. Yet, the focus of the book is, of course, the theatre, and so the contexts I include are designed to aid readers better understand the practices. The book is not intended to be a peoples' history or a critical overview of popular cultures.

It is also plainly not possible to provide a detailed account of all the theatre practices that have been identified as being popular or that have incorporated popular elements, so I have had to be selective. Readers familiar with the field will feel the absence of extended discussions on many important practitioners, including Dario Fo and Franca Rame, El Teatro Campesino and Augusto Boal. There are hundreds of examples like these – artists who clearly fit the scope of the book but receive little or no attention in the coming pages. As exhaustive and detailed as I would have liked to be, space limitations necessarily dictated that I be selective in choosing which artists to write about. Additionally, my personal approach has been to privilege the argument and the construction of a coherent historical arch over exhaustive detail, which I very much hope has resulted in a more useful text. Another scholar would have inevitably made different choices. While the work cannot be exhaustive, it aims to be thorough and critical. It is designed to be introductory, but not elementary. I can only hope I have got the balance right.

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