

Vanguard Aesthetics in Working Class Theatre

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A significant but largely unexamined problem in the history of the avant-garde theatre culture in the 20th century is the rupture that sundered vanguard aesthetics and left political radicalism. This rupture can be seen as an ongoing historical condition, produced by numerous determinants (including the alliance of Futurists and fascism in the 1920s), but its deciding moment may have been the repudiation of the avant-garde by the Communist International's embrace of national cultural traditions in the years of the Popular Front. Subsequently, although there were numerous projects that brought artistic and political radicalism together, there emerged a deep-seated and popular prejudice against avant-garde formalism in left culture, particularly in the English-speaking world.

This prejudice against formalism in left discourse sought to identify and naturalize artistic methods as historical and essential practices of working class culture, against which the claims of the avant-garde were perceived to be symptoms of cultural decay (a perception that mirrored the teleology of modernism). In many cases, this was marked by an adherence to the canonical methods of theatrical realism and conventional narrative genres. Yet practices identified as expressions of working class culture often drew on "experimental" artistic vocabularies, methods and techniques, and were innervated by the artistic discoveries of the avant-garde. The left's mistrust of formalist artistic innovation was in this sense a problem of cultural production rather than practice.

In this paper I want to gesture to an over-arching argument, and trace one particular historical grounding of the prejudice against avant-garde discourse in radical working class cultural activism. The sundering of avant-garde aesthetics and radical political organization in the era of the Popular Front (which Brecht anticipated and critiqued in the hyper-formalism of *The Measures Taken*) left a legacy of prejudice against formalist artistic experiment in the radical left. This prejudice was not levied against artistic methods but rather against the cultural genealogies of the avant-garde, considered as a reflexive system of reception in cultural industries. A discussion of the mixed-media, cross-genre performances produced by the ongoing trans-Atlantic collaboration of two radical theatre groups explores the operation of aesthetic procedures made familiar by, and claimed as properties of vanguard artistic practice: phenomenal bodies, multi-media performance, decentered textualities, reclaimed spaces and reconstituted audiences.

Most historical accounts of the 20th century avant-garde reference an affinity with political radicalism, with the suggestion that the avant-garde artist *engagé* is a figure of political as well as artistic revolution. The boundary mechanisms of avant-garde discourse tend to elide the contradiction in this proposal: that while the avant-gardist may have presented as politically radical, the revolutionary political mass movements of 20th century modernism were fundamentally hostile to cultural radicalism. The complicity of self-identified avant-gardists in the mass political movements, and their subsequent submission to institutional authority has taken on the patina of cliché over the past century. The iconic moment is of course the reciprocal affinity of Futurism and Fascism, which saw the autonomous singularity of the avant-garde transformed into a mass-produced sign in Bertelli's infamous sculpture of

Mussolini as panoptical, romanesque hero, artillery shell and phallus:

The point of critical rupture, which sundered the vanguard discourses of the avant-garde and revolutionary modernism can be seen in the account of Mayakovsky's last public reading shortly before his suicide in 1930, during which (as recounted by his Polish biographer), he met overt hostility and was shouted off the stage by militant students:

“Comrades! Workers do not understand Mayakovsky, because of the Mayakovsky manner of splitting the verses.”

On the platform, the poet replies, “In fifteen or twenty years’ time the cultural level of the working masses will be higher and all my poems will be intelligible to everybody.” (Woroszycki 516)

The mutual suspicion in this moment prefigured the purging of radical cultural practice as the progressivist tradition was increasingly contained by the procedures of socialist realism. So widespread however had the techniques of theatrical modernism become that they had to be divorced in left theoretical discourse from their avant-gardist sources, and reconsidered not as expressions of artistic experimentation but rather as technical discoveries of cultural production. Following Lunacharsky, who saw in Mayakovsky's modernist poetry a tension between “productive” innovation --“Mayakovsky's rhythm is the rhythm of arguments, the rhythm of an orator's appeal, the rhythm of industrial sounds...”(194) -- and a morbid, bourgeois preoccupation with interiority, leftist theorists positioned the avant-garde as a fundamentally moral stance that marked the artist's distance from working class culture engagement. Another critical point of rupture came in 1933 when Piscator received an invitation from Goebbels,

conveyed through Gordon Craig, to apply his modernist epic theatre techniques to the new Nazi regime. The communist director, firm in his belief that his actuality-based, interventionist political theatre manifested a necessarily Marxist understanding of the world and its representation, was appalled that the Nazis simply saw it as effective theatrical propaganda. Goebbels saw -- as Brecht saw --- that the techniques of modernist theatre practice had become so widely circulated that they had lost positionality. The avant-garde was not reducible to an archive of forms, procedures or practices, but was a cultural space in a domain of reception.

In this over-arching argument, a significant point of entry can be found in the crisis over modernist theatricality in the revolutionary theatre movement in the 1930s. The retreat from “class against class” struggle and the brokering of broad alliances in the Popular Front saw a repudiation of the radical modernism that had advocated the “flashlight” dramaturgy and “machine-gun” technique of the mobile agitprop as the revolutionary aesthetics of the working class. In one direction, this repudiation produced an aesthetic fundamentalism that renounced all innovation as formalism, arguing typically that “Worker players are not able to express, and worker audiences are not able to understand, complicated structures of ideas and refined intellectual language ” (Bonn). This would lead to the aesthetically sterile argument that socialist realism was the most creative form of modernism -- the position taken by the workers theatre troupes that survived into the 1950s as the performative wing of the persecuted Communist parties in Canada and the United States.

This fundamentalist attitude that worker audiences need simple, familiar forms, has been continually rediscovered. It was instrumental in the theatre criticisms that launched the Cultural Revolution in China, it had wide currency in the community-based theatre movements in Canada and Australia in the 1980s, it was inherent in John McGrath’s valorization of “good

night out” working-class culture in the UK, it was evident in the San Francisco Mime Troupe, and it establishes a critical sub-structure in Boal’s typification of the “bourgeois artist-high priest”(109). My own favourite expression of this attitude came from the Canadian left-wing playwright George Ryga, who, once denounced Grotowski’s work as “mystical quasi-medieval fascism” (Ryga).

Nevertheless the practices of theatrical modernism continued to innervate left political theatre. (In fact, the distinction between politically revolutionary and avant-garde experimentalism frequently evaporated, as it did when the Living Theatre returned to New York after its exile and quickly became instrumental in the emergent radical cultural art market.) There are many tracings that can be followed from these moments of rupture in the 1930s to present practice, and all of them chart the recurring crises of interventionist artists as they sought to explore aesthetic possibilities while securing a cultural location in the popular. The example that I would like to trace is the hybrid, multi-media performance collaboration of two political interventionist theatre groups, Ground Zero Productions in Edmonton, Alberta, and Banner Theatre in Birmingham. In this collaboration genealogies merge and reterritorialize: Ground Zero is a product of the Canadian tradition of postcolonial community-based agitprop, which is related historically and bodily to the theatre for development movements in Africa and the Caribbean; Banner Theatre is the direct continuation of the Ewan MacColl/ Charles Parker Radio Ballads, and as such is a direct link to the workers theatres of the 1930s.

In our research into labour activist theatre, David Watt and I have suggested that the work we examined could best be understood as strategies rather than structures. Two of the examples we discussed, Banner and Ground Zero, have worked under the radar of critical reception for decades and have managed to turn the precariousness of project-based work to

their advantage, working as what we called “strategic ventures” rather than theatre “companies,” able to shift between a number of constituencies and work in a broad range of artistic modes, some of which seem to violate the unspoken rules of theatre. Brought into contact in the research collaboration, Banner and Ground Zero began working together on a series of joint projects that have in effect established a transnational theatre operation.

Since 1982, Ground Zero has operated as a hybrid of fringe theatre and small business providing services to client groups, and initiating its own artistic projects when arts council funding permits. In its theatre work, Ground Zero has focused on inexpensive, mobile performances developed in consultation with client and target groups, mainly labour unions and activist coalitions. Its theatrical idioms include site installations, processional events at demonstrations, puppet work and agitprop. All of it is grounded in the popular theatre model, in which radical performance enacts the political networks that have been activated in the process of production.

Banner is an even older venture than Ground Zero, having emerged in 1974 following the success of what accidentally became their first production, *Collier Laddie*, a stage adaptation of Charles Parker, Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger’s ‘radio ballad’, *The Big Hewer*, pulled together by Parker, Rhoma Bowdler and an amateur group from the Grey Cock Folk Club in Birmingham for a one-night stand to fill a gap in the folk club program. The ten Radio Ballads produced by Parker for the BBC between 1958 and 1964 were made out of audiotaped interviews with particular subject communities. These tapes were edited and spliced into songs, occasionally traditional but mostly written in the folk idiom by MacColl and Seeger, to create documentary collages. Their influence at the time was immense, most notably on the pioneering documentary theatre work of Peter Cheeseman at Stoke-on-Trent, but also, as Derek

Paget has pointed out, on the emergence of what he has called “verbatim theatre” in the 1970s and 80s, and that influence has spread to Canada and Australia as well. As David Watt has described at length, Parker was sufficiently taken with the possibilities of the form to set about a series of experiments in multi-media documentary theatre with amateur groups in Birmingham (Watt). It is out of this work that Banner emerged.

In the fall of 1997, Bouzek traveled to England and met Dave Rogers, Banner’s director, and began a series of conversations that culminated when Rogers spent time in Edmonton workshopping a show on Alberta labour history and the Canadian end of the joint *Migrant Voices* project (2002-2003), focusing on Iranian and Kurdish refugees in Britain. The collaboration continued with Bouzek working as a director on Banner’s miner’s strike anniversary show, *Burning Issues* (2004), commissioned by the National Union of Mineworkers, and the latest chapter of its ongoing “Local Stories/Global Times” project, a video ballad on migrant workers in the globalized economy entitled *Wild Geese* (2005), which brought Banner performers to Canada. In their cultural exchange, Ground Zero brings to Banner a social process of cultural communication. This is theatre as a social application of network-building, and it builds on the Canadian experience of negotiating cultural difference in one of the world’s most multicultural and plural societies.

In turn, Banner has provided Ground Zero with a working method that resystematizes its performance vocabularies and reterritorializes aesthetics. As described by David Watt, Banner’s technique involves

music and audiotaped ‘actuality’, spliced together with song contextualizing, expanding and extending the recorded voices of real people talking about their lives. ‘Actuality’, in the early days, was often given to actors, but increasingly, once the technology allowed

such precise splicing and control over volume, left as taped voices. This was always further embellished, and complexified, with projected images, usually stills but with the possibilities of DVD technology now incorporates moving images, including videotaped interviews, as well. (Filewod & Watt 2004, 6).

In Banner's music-based documentary, idioms range from "gypsy fiddle to Ivorian zouglou, traditional folk to dub" (Rogers 180), video projections include documentary footage, interviews and animation. The culturally diverse ensemble present as a troupe, monitoring their performance, maintaining disciplined focused theatrical personae.

Banner's history in the ballad form provided Ground Zero with a new set of artistic protocols that have repositioned the aesthetic traditions of Canadian popular theatre, and which have provided new avenues of release from the disciplinary frame of the theatre profession. As a director, Bouzek has always been most interested in the performative relationship of human actors and artifacts: puppets, objects, screens, cameras, etc, reflecting his early interest in the Wooster Group's dislocation of the body in performance. With the video ballads, Bouzek produced a hybrid form that blends these formalist influences with Canadian storytelling, early 20th century Chautauqua and working class concert, reconsidered in terms of Banner's experience in adapting the radio ballad form to digital video.

An example of the Video Ballad dramaturgy can be extracted from the script of *Troublemakers*, a show about working class history in Alberta, produced by Ground Zero with songs written and performed by Edmonton singer-songwriter Maria Dunn. In performance, Maria and her fiddler accompanist stand before and to the side of a projection screen that dominates the stage, close to the audience. Although it seems like a concert, her

performance has none of the adlibs and asides that respond to the concert audience. It is austere and rehearsed, so that her songs establish a dialogue with the digital images and voiceovers.

TITLE: 1922

NEWS ITEM (*voice-over*): Coal Miners in the Drumheller Valley yesterday walked off their jobs in defiance of their own union. They claim the union betrayed them by negotiating a contract which reduced their rate of pay. The miners voted to instruct their representative Arthur Evans to use their dues money as strike pay.

Slim Evans (*voice-over*): The United Mine Workers accused me of stealing their dues money. I was arrested for 'fraudulently converting' union funds to feed the starving, instead of sending it to a bunch of business agents in Indianapolis. I was brought up for trial in Calgary. They sentenced me to three years in the Prince Albert penitentiary.

Song:

Drumheller Valley in 1922

And still it's hard, hard times

'Cause that Yankee union chokes off our dues

And leaves us to struggle in the mines

They say One Big Union was one big mistake

We never should have made that choice

But when it comes to righting a wrong

We'll still be raising one big voice.

A capella

Yes I know Slim Evans

Friend of the working miner

And yes I'll sign my name to petition his release

It's the least that I can do for

The man who put the money

Where our hungry mouths were and damn their union fees. (Dunn)

The narrative technique appears to be conventional to the community documentary form that was so widespread in Canada and Australia in the last decades of the 20th century, but the performance method derives as much as from high formalism as it does from popular culture. The basic theatrical vocabulary at work here is not unlike – and in some ways is related to – the typifying formalism of the New York avant-garde: actor-musicians, digital video projection and audio recordings creating a montage of recorded actuality and performed commentary. The mix of live music, digital video, documentary collage and news item voiceovers disrupts normative patterns of theatrical reception. It isn't theatre, but neither is it video, or concert. It is the performance of hybridity, as forms migrate and reterritorialize, across disciplinary, cultural and national borders. The collaboration with Banner has relegitimized Ground Zero's cultural hybridity, by offering another set of protocols and a genealogical structure of reception and critical discourse.

Banner and Ground Zero have legitimized each other in a history of common form that in each case was delegitimized as theatre work – but now together have produced a new historical procedure: their collaboration is also a merger of histories and the implementation of new genealogies that are independent of the theatre estate.

The introduction of digital media in live performance, which Berghaus proposes as formative of a "Second Modernity" may signal an end to the anti-formalist prejudice in left-wing theatre (236). Video technology, which now enables kids to make movies with cell phones, and places

the repertoire of visual techniques that defined modernism one click away in Photoshop, no longer disrupts the liveness of theatrical performance, and it is difficult to argue that a mediatized working class is unequipped or unable to “get” formalist innovation in art. The corollary to this is that the concept of the avant-garde itself, already stressed by interrogations of the complicity of its discourse with imperialism and colonialism, may only exist now as a domain of reception and patronage in cultural industries.

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