

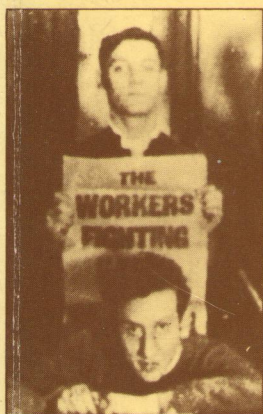
History Workshop Series

THEATRES OF THE LEFT

1880-1935

**WORKERS' THEATRE MOVEMENTS
IN BRITAIN AND AMERICA**

Raphael Samuel, Ewan MacColl
and Stuart Cosgrove



Theatres of the Left, 1880-1935

Workers' Theatre Movements in Britain and America

Drama can play a number of different roles in a political movement. It can serve as a way of teaching ethics, like the 'Kinderspiel' in the Socialist Sunday Schools of the 1900s. It can project a propagandist message, like the one-act plays of the Actresses' Franchise League. It can heighten feelings of fellowship. It can also serve as a legitimised form of fantasy, offering theatrical resolutions to difficulties which in real life are altogether more intractable. The Theatres of the Left discussed in this volume were, in intention at least, activist, perceiving art as a weapon of struggle and enlightenment, and participation and performance as emancipatory acts. But they were first and foremost - like the medieval morality plays - ritual expressions of faith. *Theatres of the Left* discusses the conditions of existence of this drama, in relation to the politics and aesthetics of its time. It sees the Workers' Theatre Movement of the 1920s both as an Anglo-American expression of 'Proletkult' - the revolutionary aesthetic of world communism - and as an outcome of a more indigenous tradition, going back to the Band of Hope and temperance dramas of nineteenth-century Nonconformism.

An introductory study by Raphael Samuel relates theatre groupings - Co-op, Clarion and Labour as well as Communist - to the cultural politics of British socialism in the years 1880-1935. Ewan MacColl, in a narrative which holds as much of interest for the student of the folk-song revival as for that of avant-garde theatre, presents a detailed account of his theatrical and agitational apprenticeship. Tom Thomas, the founder of the Workers' Theatre Movement (1928-1935), traces its progress from simple realism to the more innovative techniques of Agit-Prop, then in the most brilliant phase of its Russian and German development. Stuart Cosgrove studies some of the parallel movements in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s. The book also reprints a number of crucial texts, some of them for the first time, as well as stage notes and glimpses of the dramaturgical controversies which accompanied them.



Routledge & Kegan Paul

ISBN 0-7100-0901-1

Contents

First published in 1985
by Routledge & Kegan Paul plc

14 Leicester Square, London WC2H 7PH

9 Park Street, Boston, Mass. 02108, USA

464 St Kilda Road, Melbourne,
Victoria 3004, Australia and

Broadway House, Newtown Road,
Henley-on-Thames, Oxon RG9 1EN, England

Set in Bembo 11 on 12 pt
by Input Typesetting Ltd, London
and printed in Great Britain
by The Thetford Press Ltd
Thetford, Norfolk

This collection © History Workshop Journal 1985
© Part 5 Ewan MacColl 1985
© Part 6 Stuart Cosgrove 1985

No part of this book may be reproduced in
any form without permission from the publisher,
except for the quotation of brief passages
in criticism

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Samuel, Raphael

Theatre of the left, 1880–1935
(History workshop series)

Includes index

1. Workers' theatre. 2. Political plays. I. MacColl,
Ewan. II. Cosgrove, Stuart. III. Title. IV. Series.
PN3305.S35 1985 792'.09'043 84-4909

ISBN 0-7100-0901-1

Preface ix

Acknowledgments xii

Introduction: theatre and politics
Raphael Samuel xiii

Part 1 Theatre and socialism in Britain (1880–1935) –
Raphael Samuel 3

Part 2 The Workers' Theatre Movement (1926–1935)

Narrative 77
 A propertyless theatre for the propertyless class
 – Tom Thomas (1977) 77
Documents 99
 The basis and development of the WTM (1932) 99
 How to produce *Meerut* (1933) 106
 Solidarity appeal from Japan (1932) 109
Scripts 112
 The Market Quack in Hackney (1930?) 112
 Meerut (1933) 114
 War (1932) 118
 The Rail Revolt (1932) 125
 The First of May (1932) 131
 Their Theatre and Ours (1932) 138

Part 3 The Yiddish-speaking WTM

Narrative	149
Memories of Proltet – <i>Ray Waterman</i> (1977)	149
Documents	156
Proltet: reply to critics (1933)	156
The debated question of Yiddish (1933)	160
Do we overcrowd our sketches? (1934)	161

Part 4 The debate on naturalism

Documents	167
A look at the Workers' Theatre Movement (1933)	167
The New Stage Group (1933)	171
The London Show (1934)	174
Agit-Prop or naturalism – which? (1934)	178

Part 5 Proletkult: a view from the Plebs League

Document	185
The Workers' Theatre – <i>Ness Edwards</i> (1930)	185

Part 6 Some origins of Theatre Workshop

Narrative	205
Theatre of action, Manchester – <i>Ewan MacColl</i>	205

Part 7 The political stage in the United States

History	259
From Shock Troupe to Group Theatre – <i>Stuart Cosgrove</i>	259
Documents	280
First National Workers' Theatre Conference (1932)	280
Terms for the National Workers' Theatre Spartakiade (1932)	286
<i>Newsboy</i> : from script to performance (1934)	289
Workers' art in summer camp (1934)	297
The mill workers produce a play (1930)	299

Scripts	301
<i>Art is a Weapon</i> (1934)	301
<i>15-Minute Red Revue</i> (1932)	306
<i>Newsboy</i> (1934)	316
<i>Waiting for Lefty</i> (1935)	323
Index	353