A CULTURAL HISTORY OF THEATRE

IN THE MODERN AGE

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CHAPTER SIX

Interpretations

The Stakes of Audience Interpretation in Twentieth-Century Political Theatre

DASSIA N. POSNER

ATHLETES OF THE MIND

In the period between 1926 and 1933, Bertolt Brecht and his collaborators wrote their most innovative and most overtly Communist works. One of Brecht’s criticisms of the society of his day was that so many viewed labour as productivity free of pleasure – and theatre as pleasure free of productivity. He set out to address this through what he called ‘learning plays’. These ‘Lehrstücke’ aimed at inciting social transformation by effecting ‘a total abolition of the division between performance and audience’. (see also chapter two.) Actor-spectators would both perform a play and reflect on it. This simultaneous inside-outside perspective, what Brecht called being ‘both inside and above the stream’, was meant to reveal theatre as a place not of ‘unquestioning acceptance’ but of ‘critical intervention’ and society as ‘changeable and changing’.

One of these learning plays was The Yes-Sayer (Der Jasager, 1930), a ‘school opera’ performed by children, composed by Kurt Weill, and adapted by Brecht from Elizabeth Hauptmann’s translation of a Japanese Noh play. The opera relates the story of a young boy who consents to be left to die when his weakness threatens the expedition that will save his village. The work’s formal innovations, some loosely drawn from Noh (a poetic journey, use of symbolic objects), others from Brecht’s notes on epic theatre (‘montage’, ‘man as a process’), written that same year, are designed to incite critical thinking. As Katz reports, although
The Yes-Sayer’s Berlin premiere ‘provoked just the kind of heated debate its creators had hoped for’, some reviews misinterpreted it as promoting unquestioning compliance. Brecht’s response was to write a new version, The No-Sayer (Der Neinsager), in which the boy opposes uncritical adherence to tradition. In the spirit of the Marxist dialectics to which Brecht was so committed, these contrasting works were to be performed together, creating another dissonant simultaneity with which to grapple. The Lehrstücke did not teach a perspective, then; they were designed as a tool for learning to interpret the world, ‘physical exercises meant for the kind of athletes of the mind that good dialecticians should be’.

While, as Mueller notes, the Lehrstücke’s focus on audience reception, the insistence that the audience develop an altogether different attitude, is at the core of Brechtian theory, these works also illustrate a broader phenomenon. All the arts in the modern era have shown a fascination with perspective and reception. As Russian formalist writer Viktor Shklovsky famously wrote, ‘Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony . . . The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar”, . . . to increase the difficulty and length of perception’. In painting, cubism presented the world from multiple points of view simultaneously, while expressionism revealed a deeper subjectivity. Music was redefined through unprecedented dissonance and even silence, in works ranging from Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring to John Cage’s 4’33’. In the latter part of the twentieth century, postmodernism in all the arts effected startling new collisions of media, sound, image, geography, and time.

Although theatre has, of course, always sought to engage its audiences, a defining characteristic of theatre in the modern era has been its unprecedented attention to the spectator’s interpretive role and, therefore, to formal innovations that prompt audiences to become active co-creators of meaning. Many of the twentieth century’s examples of theatre for political and social change in particular respond to the audience-centred formal innovations of Brecht, Piscator, Eisenstein, Meyerhold, and their contemporaries. Joan Littlewood and Theatre Workshop undermined heroic mythologies about the First World War in Oh! What a Lovely War via a mix of Meyerholdian juxtaposition and Brechtian irony. Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed developed a more radical version of the learning play by turning spectators into actors (‘spect-actors’) who intervene in the actions they watch on stage, improvising new material as a ‘rehearsal for the revolution’. And at the turn of the twenty-first century, verbatim practices juxtaposed the real words and even vocal and gestural intonations of interview subjects with rigorously defined theatrical form to create performances that pondered local issues with larger ethical resonance (The Laramie Project, 2000; The Exonerated, 2003).
This chapter investigates this modern-era phenomenon of pairing audience co-creation in the theatre with a re-invention of the world outside it, focusing on productions that use juxtaposition and plural perspective to prompt audiences to mentally grapple with dissonance in both theatre and life. Though it exists in many variations, such ‘theatricalist’ theatre has several recurring traits. In response against fourth-wall, psychologically driven theatre, it overtly comments on life rather than being a mirror that reflects it; it assumes that actors and audiences cannot create together if they cannot interact; and it presents colliding perceptual planes and coexisting, contradictory truths for interpretation by the theatre’s ‘athletes of the mind’.

This chapter analyses two productions, one from early in the century, the other from the end, in which a re-imagining of society coincided with a revolution in the theatre. In each case, I provide cultural context before turning to a detailed discussion of the production’s relationship between formal innovation and audience interpretation. Vsevolod Meyerhold’s productions of Vladimir Mayakovsky’s Mystery-Bouffe (1918, 1921) marked the birth of modern political theatre, defined in this instance as performance that uses theatricalist devices to activate spectators as co-creators of meaning in conjunction with a proposed remaking of society. William Kentridge and Handspring Puppet Company’s production of Jane Taylor’s Ubu and the Truth Commission (1997, 2014) offered a different definition of political theatre, one that invited viewers to process the unresolvable dissonances of oppression and amnesty that South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission raised as part of the country’s post-apartheid journey towards reconciliation.

Both productions understood spectators not as receivers, but as makers of meaning. Both aimed to give voice to the voiceless by centring on long-oppressed populations. As their artists discovered, theatre that bares the process of its making and presents conflicting perspectives prompts audiences to engage in a process of polyphonic meaning-making. Via this redefinition of theatre’s structure and aims, audiences were not to be instructed in the value of a correct interpretation; they were to be awakened to the possibilities of generating new paradigms in life and art. Within the larger context of modern-era theatre, these productions reveal the stakes, difficulty, and distinct value of preserving nuance and coexisting interpretations – and, by extension, multiple truths – in opposition to theatre that is dogmatic or coercive or that passively reinforces, in Taylor’s words, fixed ‘habits of thought’.

At the start of the century, Mystery-Bouffe’s artists held the utopian belief that proletarian audiences would naturally embrace the socialist revolution, not realizing that the plural perspective that defined their theatre could be co-opted to indoctrinate rather than invigorate. At the century’s other end, Ubu’s creators came to view nuanced, flexible, open interpretation not only as something to be protected, but as a necessary ethical act.
THE FIRST SOVIET PLAY

Mayakovsky’s *Mystery-Bouffe* was ‘the first Soviet play’, that is, the first by a Soviet playwright to be dedicated thematically — and literally — to the 1917 October Revolution. Fevralsky calls it ‘probably the first play in world literature to express the age-old aspiration of the people . . . for the overthrow of the power of exploiters, for the liberation of human consciousness from the vestiges of slavery, and for the creation of a communist society comprised of workers’.14 Meyerhold staged the play twice, mounting the world premiere in 1918 to commemorate the first anniversary of October and directing a second production, which I analyse in more detail, in 1921. The discussion that follows traces *Mystery-Bouffe*’s cultural milieu, its audience-centred innovations, and interpretations of the productions in the context of debates over the function of theatre in Soviet society.

The Russian serfs were freed in 1861, two years before the slaves were emancipated in the United States, but, as in the US, freedom did not mean equality. The driving impulse behind the October Revolution fifty-six years later was to replace the inequitable class structure with a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, a society in which workers and peasants were to be ‘enlightened’ (the Russian word *prosveshenie* means both education and enlightenment) out of the backwardness to which they had been subject for centuries. In 1918 four-fifths of the Russian population remained illiterate; Lenin called Russia ‘an uncivilized country . . . in which the masses have been robbed of so much in the sense of education, enlightenment and knowledge’.15 The new Bolshevik government therefore placed immense value on practical and political education. Theatre, an oral and visual art form long understood in Russia as ‘a powerful instrument of education’, became uniquely valuable to this effort.16

In the wake of October, there was an explosion of national interest in theatre. The hundreds of amateur groups of Proletkult, a sprawling, state-funded proletarian cultural organization, provided newly egalitarian opportunities for all to make theatre. Soviet artists enthusiastically subverted the former imperial suspicion of large crowds by drawing audiences of thousands to massive outdoor spectacles on revolutionary holidays, the most famous being ‘The Storming of the Winter Palace’ (1920; see also chapter seven). Mobile troupes on ‘agit-trains’ performed *agitprop* (an amalgam of the Russian words for political agitation and propaganda) throughout the countryside. Beginning in autumn 1918, many theatre workers were drafted into Red Army ‘front-line theatre units’ that performed ‘a mixture of contemporary and classical plays and short propaganda pieces on topical issues (*agitki*)’ with pro-Bolshevik themes.17 Audience composition at established theatres also changed significantly. Post-revolutionary audiences of workers, peasants, and soldiers, many of whom previously had never attended the theatre, revelled in an artistic form that now was addressed to them. In
Rudnitsky’s words, ‘Time and again performances reached the pitch of mass meetings’.  

The emphasis the Bolsheviks placed on enlightenment through theatre is clear from their first actions after seizing power. Less than twenty-four hours after the Storming of the Winter Palace (25 October 1917; 7 November new style), Lenin became President of the Council of People’s Commissars – and Anatoly Lunacharsky was appointed Commissar of Enlightenment, a position with the massive charge of regulating all of Soviet education and the arts. The primary task of the Theatrical Division (TEO) of Narkompros (the Commissariat of Enlightenment) was ‘to create a new theatre connected with the rebuilding of the state and society on the principles of socialism’. How to do this was not immediately clear. Lunacharsky was steadfast in the belief that all perspectives on art must be allowed to develop – with the assumption that theatres eventually would embrace revolutionary content on their own. He often served as a shield between theatres and would-be repressors of artistic pluralism – Lenin, for instance, who preferred classics to the avant-garde and was eager to wield theatre as a Bolshevik hammer.

The battle over theatre in the RSFSR became a battle over who had the right to interpret; civil war raged on both political and artistic fronts. Established theatres were suspicious that Bolshevik control would, in the opinion of one Imperial Theatre worker, ‘destroy the theatre and permit it to be put to some use that was base . . .’. Many protested the Bolsheviks by refusing to review, act in, or relinquish stage space to revolutionary productions. Of those that supported the Revolution, most hoped the new order would provide creative freedom in a country that always before had had censorship; Stanislavsky wrote, for instance ‘it is impossible with impunity to transfer art into the other plane of politics or practical life, which is alien to it by nature’. Such was the position of much of the theatrical ‘right’ (within which there was much variation): that theatre must remain separate from politics to avoid being debased by it.

Those on the self-proclaimed ‘left’ applied the radical formal innovations of pre-Revolutionary artistic movements (cubism, futurism, suprematism) to productions with revolutionary content. For many leftist artists, simply infusing naturalistic plays with revolutionary themes was no better than, in Shterenberg’s words, ‘pouring new wine into old, tattered wine-skins’. Mayakovsky, one of the first artists to support the Bolsheviks, proclaimed, ‘Only the eruption of the Spirit of Revolution will rid us of the rags of antiquated art’. Mystery-Bouffe was his first major attempt to do just this.

**MYSTERY-BOUFFE, 1918, 1921**

*Mystery-Bouffe* is a reinterpretation of the Biblical story of Noah’s flood. Here, though, it is the red flood of Revolution that is sweeping the world. The sole
survivors are seven pairs of ‘the Unclean’ – representatives of the noble proletariat – and seven pairs of ‘the Clean’ – base aristocrats of international origin. Two by two they find the only remaining dry land: the North Pole. The Clean, who refuse to work, persuade the Unclean to build an ark. Once they set sail, the Unclean throw overboard first their new tsar (a reference to the February Revolution), then the Clean (a nod to the October Revolution). The Unclean journey through both Hell and a dissatisfying Heaven, finally returning to inherit the Earth: a self-made paradise in which work grows sweet when aided by ‘Comrade Things’. Many scenes ‘tilt’ episodes from medieval mystery (Corpus Christi) plays and the Bible; examples include the Harrowing of Hell and irreverent rewritings of the Sermon on the Mount. The play also captured the jubilant energy and rapid change of the times. Mayakovsky described its dissonant forms and impressions:

*Mystery-Bouffe* . . . is our great revolution condensed into poetry and theatrical action. The mystery is what is great in the revolution, the bouffe is what is comical in it. The poetry of *Mystery-Bouffe* is the slogans of rallies, shouts from the streets, the language of newspapers. The action of *Mystery-Bouffe* is the movement of crowds, the clashes between classes, the struggle of ideas – the world in miniature within the walls of the circus.28

*Mystery-Bouffe*, co-directed by Meyerhold and Mayakovsky and designed by Kazimir Malevich, played at the Petrograd Musical Drama Theatre (to that theatre’s undiscguised dismay) on 7 and 8 November 1918. The production’s greatest virtue, developed as it was with little time, few resources, and considerable controversy, was that it embraced the audience as a co-creator. For over a decade, Meyerhold’s pre-Revolutionary theatrical experiments had centred on developing new forms that mentally ignited the spectator. It was a short step to broaden his artistic revolution to include the political one. If the October Revolution was a freeing of the oppressed classes, Meyerhold’s theatrical revolution was intended to free the oppressed imagination – the right to subjective interpretation. He mined popular entertainments for audience engagement techniques. Before the Revolution, like many theatrical modernists, he drew from temporally or geographically distant forms: commedia dell’arte, kabuki, fairground performance. Beginning with *Mystery-Bouffe*, he used contemporary, working-class forms: circus, film, variety theatre. In the production’s most beloved circus act, Mayakovsky as ‘Simply Man’ entered by soaring through the air on a cable.29

Most reviewers of the 1918 production protested it loudly with utter silence. Only two articles framed it for a reading public. In an essay published before the premiere, Lunacharsky called the play ‘original, strong, and beautiful’, but cautioned of the production,
Futurism has one wonderful quality: it is a young and brave movement. And since its best representatives are in accord with the communist revolution, they can more easily than others become the virtuoso drummers of our Red culture. But at the same time they are a product of the well-known aesthetic excesses of the old world.\(^{30}\)

In the only review, Levinson questioned the aims of this new theatre, writing ‘The very claim of Futurism – to become the official art of the awakening masses – seems to me coercive’.\(^{31}\) In hindsight, he glimpsed something Mayakovsky and Meyerhold did not yet recognize: that once theatre offered itself up as a ‘virtuoso drummer’ of ‘Red culture’, it was all too easily co-opted for political aims, especially in a society that had already begun to view mental pluralism with suspicion.

Meyerhold took his audience activation experiments further in the second *Mystery-Bouffe*, which opened – despite myriad obstacles – at his new Theatre RSFSR 1 on 1 May 1921. As Aksenov recalls, ‘A prolonged and cutthroat campaign preceded this production’.\(^{32}\) Many were outraged ‘that a man with the reputation of Mayakovsky dared touch on so tender and fragile a thing as the proletarian revolution’.\(^{33}\) Ironically, given later Soviet anti-religious campaigns, the censor banned the play for being sacrilegious (May Day, the international workers’ holiday, fell that year on Russian Orthodox Easter). Mayakovsky made some hasty rewrites – the Unclean no longer smashed up Heaven or chased out God – and the play was passed.\(^{34}\)

Prior to these enforced changes, Mayakovsky had already significantly rewritten the play, adding topical content and a new act in the ‘land of wreckage’ (a reference to post-Civil War reconstruction). Just before the premiere, he penned a new prologue that introduced the production’s audience-centred conventions.\(^{35}\) The Moscow Art Theatre, the ‘House of Chekhov’, became a specific target:

> For other theatres | how the show is presented is not important: | for them | the stage is | a keyhole. | Sit, be quiet, pay attention . . . | and look at a piece of someone else’s life. | Look and you will see- | droning at each other on the sofa, | Aunt Manyas | and Uncle Vanyas . . . | We will show you real life, too, | but | transformed by the theatre into spectacle most extraordinary.\(^{36}\)

The prologue’s invitation to engage with life (rather than to simply watch it) was the production’s leitmotif. Before spectators took their seats, the playbill informed them they could ‘enter the auditorium even during the show. Expressions of approval (applause) and protest (whistles) are permitted. Actors respond to [curtain] calls both after each scene and throughout the course of the performance’.\(^{37}\) Upon entering the theatre, audiences encountered a set that
was as much a manifesto as the prologue. Rather than representing life, it spilled into life. There were no footlights, curtain, or masking. The front rows of seats were removed to accommodate ‘an enormous semi-sphere’, of marked ‘earth’, that jutted into the audience. The final act’s ‘Comrade Things’ occupied several audience boxes. The stage floor was level with the auditorium floor, erasing divisions between stage and spectator. ‘Meyerhold turned the entire theatre into a stage’, a critic later wrote, ‘... he is even able to convince the Russian spectators, who are not particularly theatrical by nature, to participate in the performance’.41

Meyerhold also cultivated active interpretation by presenting spectators with multiple perspectives. He viewed audience co-creation as a complex cognitive process to be stimulated via the ‘grotesque’: collisions of incongruous elements and styles. In his theatre, self-aware spectators make and unmake meaning as they encounter conflicting or incomplete images and ideas, using the imagination to mentally ’finish drawing what a given scene hints at’.42 Mystery-Bouffe provoked this by presenting simultaneous perspectives in the scenic design and contrasting styles in the costumes and acting (see Figure 6.1). Inspired by medieval simultaneous settings and Russian folk forms, Lavinsky

and Khrakovskiy’s set presented all the places of action at once: heaven, earth, and the ‘land of wreckage’ appeared in a single vertical structure that suggested an ark.

The ‘earth’ globe concealed a hell mouth; when rotated, it revealed a trap door for the entrances of devils from underneath the stage. The lights remained up on the audience throughout the performance, prompting spectators to remain aware of their reality as well as that of the onstage fiction.

The production also collided performance styles. In Rudnitsky’s words, ‘The devices of the carnival barker . . . join forces here with the devices of circus clowns and the language of mass meetings’. The Unclean wore identical blue work shirts and performed with ‘heroic emotion and plastic monumentality’. These characters were a development of Meyerhold’s pre-revolutionary experiments with identically clad ‘forestage servants’ who served as interlocutors between audience and stage. Conversely, satirical characters were individualized and highly entertaining. The Clean, Devils, and Saints wore cubist costumes in Picasso’s manner. Igor Ilinsky played the ‘Compromiser’, a Menshevik new to the second version, as a traditional Russian ‘red-headed’ clown. These differing approaches to character reinforced three perceptual planes: the spectators’ real world, that of the Unclean – allegorical versions of the proletariat audience – and that of the satirical characters whose world was being overthrown.

Meyerhold believed the audience’s process of interpreting these contrasting styles and planes should be ‘coactive’ and joyful. Multiple accounts confirm that the premiere ‘swept over’ the audience like ‘a wave of joy’. Following a collective singing of the Internationale, Fevralsky recalls,

The spectators rushed the stage . . . and literally pulled the author, directors, actors, and even the stage crew out from backstage . . . For the over half century that has passed since, it is difficult to recall another production that has gripped the audience with such enthusiasm.

Similar excitement persisted in subsequent performances: ‘This effect was primarily an outgrowth of something then still entirely unaccustomed: experiences and words that were poetically transformed and transferred from the life of a revolutionary country to the stage’.

More than any other director of his day, Meyerhold attempted to document his spectators’ responses to his productions. Following Mystery-Bouffe performances, paper surveys (see Figure 6.2) queried age, sex, education, social class and profession, and sought opinions of the play, the production, the artistic elements, the RSFSR 1, and the building. Mikhail Zagorsky, who headed this process, discovered from the nearly 200 surveys he analysed that although opinions varied, spectators fell roughly into
two categories. In the first were educated individuals who were so preoccupied by ‘general indignation against the revolution’ that their hastily scribbled comments showed ‘a decrease in consciousness and in ability to analyze, and an increase in emotion, vented in crude and angry outcries directed at the author and actors’. Of one such survey Zagorsky noted, ‘there is no mark of any kind of analysis – it is an unremitting reproachful outcry’.

While some became wholly unable to interpret the production, others felt free to do so for the first time. Many workers, peasants, and Red Army soldiers expressed excitement that the production represented an end to class exploitation; one peasant wrote, ‘I liked it because it enlightened our in-the-dark class about how . . . we were deceived’. Another common response was that the production captured working-class life: a train worker declared, ‘Give this play to the working masses and they will tell you, this is our theatre, this is our play’. It was ‘our play’, not because it mirrored life, however. Realism is close to life in one specific way: it resembles life as it is already known. Mystery-Bouffe spectators meant this differently: the production responded to their lives and actively solicited their critical engagement. It drew form and inspiration from their entertainments, and its frequently updated topical insertions (largely absent from the published edition) celebrated proletarian concerns.

Reviews of the production were few: most critics boycotted it. The few that were published present contrasting visions of revolutionary theatre. Beskin’s review radiated excitement for the production’s formal innovations: ‘There is no stage and no auditorium. There is a monumental platform pushed into the audience. One feels that these walls are too constraining for it. It needs a public square, a street . . . It needs a mass’. He concluded that Mystery-Bouffe, which ‘does not copy life with its swaying curtains and idyllic crickets . . . is the first powerful, green shoot of a proletarian theatre culture, the first artistic seedling of revolutionary art’. Blium’s review defended the production by criticizing those unable to see beyond Mayakovsky’s youthful futurist days, when the latter had issued incendiary manifestos and shouted poetry in the streets. Yet Blium, who was to become the head theatre censor in 1923, to accuse Meyerhold of ‘formalism’ in 1926, and to condemn all satire in 1929, was, to some degree, already unable to see beyond how the production should align with party dogma; he suggested, for instance, that the Compromiser should be depicted more ‘correctly’.

THE TRUTH OF OUR EXISTENCE

In 1925, one of Meyerhold’s close associates wrote a book about the director’s first post-revolutionary productions. Although it was denied publication for being too ‘subjective, biased, and unacceptably frank’, Meyerhold lauded the book as ‘the truth of our existence [bytie]’.
Two Russian words, *byt* and *bytie*, sound similar, but mean very different things: *byt* refers to everyday life and *bytie* to ‘existence’. Meyerhold and Mayakovsky rejected theatrical explorations of *byt* – commonplace, daily routine – and instead explored *bytie* – asking who we are as human beings and how we make sense of our existence. *Mystery-Bouffe* captured the existence of a society in revolution, with all its chaos, dissonance, and hope. Certainly the production had propagandistic elements. It was, after all, a manifesto for a changed world. Yet it was designed to be exhilaratingly freeing by making audiences creators of this new world, of their own truth, of their own existence.

In their fervent iconoclasm, Meyerhold and Mayakovsky did not anticipate the ruthlessness with which the new nation’s leaders would co-opt theatre for politically conformist aims. Lenin and, to a much greater degree, Stalin interpreted theatre as a tool with which to convince peasants to relinquish grain or to build Socialism. Theirs was a theatre of *byt*, of productions with fixed doctrines and utopian visions. As the USSR reverted to authoritarianism, Stalin quashed theatre of interpretation in favour of Socialist Realism, a heroico-realistic style, mandated in 1934, that adopted a corrective and regulatory function with respect to audiences. Mayakovsky’s poetic outpouring of hope was supplanted by arrests, show trials, and other repressions of individual thought. In 1930, Mayakovsky committed suicide. A decade later, Meyerhold was arrested, shot, declared ‘an enemy of the people’, and erased from the historical record. Stalin designated Mayakovsky a national poet, effecting other lasting distortions born of politically motivated canonization.

In the wake of early twentieth-century innovations such as this, theatre in the modern era has become inherently politicized: it reasserts a status quo or seeks to change it (on a spectrum rather than in a binary), dulls an audience’s interpretive freedom or activates it. How, then, does theatre cultivate interpretation rather than imposing it? How does it resist being co-opted to serve as a vehicle for meaning, and instead become a maker of meaning? ‘Exquisitely pathbreaking art can serve totalitarian, conservative, fascist, or reactionary ideals’, notes Kimberly Jannarone, ‘and left-wing performance can easily be co-opted by such regimes, even if it started as a subversive, anti-hegemonic act’. Even well intentioned activist theatre is at risk of using the coercive tactics of regimes it opposes when it mistakes conformity for unity.

**INTELLECTUAL ANARCHY**

In 1996, in the wake of the fall of apartheid in South Africa, director Malcolm Purkey asked similar questions of South African theatre, writing, ‘As apartheid gives way to a new form of government, can theatre makers protect and increase their hard-won relative autonomy, allowing theatre to maintain its responsive and critical role . . . or will theatre be expected to be subservient to the new
order of things? His questions were a reaction to *Tooth and Nail*, a 1989 production that, like *Mystery-Bouffe*, was about a flood – and premiered in a country on the brink of revolution. A racially integrated collaboration between Handspring Puppet Company and Junction Avenue Theatre Company, of which Purkey was a founding member, *Tooth and Nail* responded to the near-civil-war conditions of the late apartheid era. In it a character laments, ‘Everywhere there are floods of blood . . . Noah built himself a survival craft that sailed him into the future . . . We need to build an unsinkable survival craft’. Mayakovsky’s play had overflowed with utopian hope. *Tooth and Nail* feared South Africa would drown.

In *Tooth and Nail*, a photographer, played simultaneously by a puppet and puppeteer (see Figure 6.3), examines ‘photographs of [six revolutionary] artists who have died in various regimes’ in order to try to comprehend their suppression. Significantly, two of the six are Meyerhold and Mayakovsky. The same year *Tooth and Nail* premiered, the Berlin Wall fell; unsuccessful protests in China’s Tiananmen Square galvanized worldwide activists against political oppression; and Poland declared independence from Soviet rule. Over a dozen countries followed, and the Soviet Union fell in 1991. Orkin explains that the end of communism in so many places offered ‘a sober challenge to . . . some members of the resistance movement within South Africa, who, over the years, had committed

![Production still of Saul, performed simultaneously by puppet and puppeteer (Basil Jones), in *Tooth and Nail*, created by Junction Avenue Theatre Company and Handspring Puppet Company (1989). Photo © Ruphin Coudyzer FPPSA.](image-url)
themselves to Marxist, socialist, or communist modes of interpreting history’. Many South African artists became preoccupied with how new theatrical forms could interpret a new South Africa. *Tooth and Nail* illuminates a vital strain of late- and post-apartheid theatre that was suspicious of glib solutions to complex problems. Above all, it recognizes the stakes of preserving ‘intellectual anarchy’ – freedom for thought to travel in many directions – in the face of ‘the dangers that anyone involved in the documentation, reportage or interpretation of history may face within climates insisting on political conformity’. This investigation of what truth is, how it is made, and how its complexity can be preserved contextualizes the work of Handspring Puppet Company over the following decade, particularly in *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (1997), written by Jane Taylor and directed by William Kentridge. This was a production that generated new modes of ethically engaged audience interpretation in response to South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

**TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION**

F.W. de Klerk became South Africa’s president in 1989. Shortly after, he announced that he was committed to negotiations that would effect a transition to a non-racial (racially integrated) democracy, thus ending 300 years of white-minority domination. One of his first actions was to meet with Nelson Mandela in prison; Mandela was released (after twenty-seven years) a few months later. In 1994, Mandela was elected South Africa’s first black president in the country’s first non-racial elections. He embarked immediately on the complex task of building a unified South Africa. A critical part of this process was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC, 1996–2003).

The TRC was a product of negotiations between the outgoing Nationalist Party, which established apartheid in 1948, and the incoming African National Congress (ANC). It was the seventeenth truth commission in history, but the first of its kind in structure and the first to hold public hearings; these began in 1996 with Archbishop Desmond Tutu presiding. Three committees implemented two processes: in the Human Rights Violations Committee hearings, victims (the TRC’s term) recounted the violence enacted upon them and family members; remuneration was then available (though inefficiently) from the Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee. The Amnesty Committee, a separate entity, allowed perpetrators of politically motivated crimes to apply for amnesty in exchange for full disclosure of truth.

The TRC hearings – held across South Africa, translated into each of the nation’s eleven official languages, and broadcast nationwide on television and radio – became, for millions, a collective experience of grief. Given the horrific nature of the thousands of crimes committed, it became incomprehensible that such violent oppressors should escape punishment. In Kentridge’s words,
‘Therein lies the central irony of the Commission. As people give more and more evidence of the things they have done they get closer and closer to amnesty and it gets more and more intolerable that [they] should be given amnesty’.75

It was this unresolvable dissonance that made the wildly incompatible subjects of Alfred Jarry’s 1896 play *Ubu Roi* and the TRC apposite partners. Disparate perceptual planes and the friction between them formed the basis for the aesthetic and political language of Handspring’s *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, which premiered as South Africans were still inundated daily by media accounts of the atrocities the TRC revealed. ‘Artists deal with death, suffering and loss’, Taylor said. ‘I felt that the arts could probe difficult terrain that the commission couldn’t afford to take on while maintaining its legal brief’.76 If the TRC’s role was to document apartheid abuses, interpret culpability and victimhood, and promote reconciliation, *Ubu’s* was to provide a reflective space for interpreting the meanings of ‘truth’ and ‘reconciliation’ in the commission’s wake.

**PERMANENT PARABASIS AND THE PUPPET**

By the beginning of the *Ubu* collaboration, Handspring Puppet Company had a lengthy history of probing such ‘difficult terrain’. Founders Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler believed that they must ‘respond to the South Africa around them’,77 that theatre that bares its process of creation is more honest than illusionistic theatre, and that, for audiences, navigating multiple perceptual planes can spark new interpretations of the world. In Bread and Puppet Theater founder Peter Schumann’s words, ‘Alienation is automatic with puppets’.78 For example, one simultaneously sees the puppet’s life and how that life is created. Handspring foregrounds this duality in various ways, ranging from undisguised chisel marks on a puppet’s wooden face to fully visible puppeteers. They embrace puppetry as inherently an instance of ‘permanent parabasis’, a term first used by Frederich Schlegel to describe theatre that comments on its own making not through sporadic asides and interruptions, but constantly.79

Kentridge discovered in his first collaboration with Handspring, *Woyzeck on the Highveld* (1992), that permanent parabasis allows the audience to ‘sustain . . . belief in agency’.80 ‘We are . . . given multiple contradictory fragments from which we will construct the world’, says Kentridge. ‘The bedrock of puppetry is a demonstration of how we make sense of the world’.81 He ‘promotes “trust in the contingent, the inauthentic, the whim, the practical, as strategies for finding meaning” rather than receiving it’.82 This, of course, has political reverberations: truth is not a fixed and stable thing; it, too, can be ‘made and remade’.83

Handspring prompts meaning finding for spectators by establishing multiple perceptual planes for them to negotiate. The company discovered early that audiences watch the puppet, but also watch the puppeteer watching the puppet. In Kentridge’s analysis,
the audience has to look at the manipulator, but then follows the manipulator’s gaze . . . to the puppet and back as they become aware of themselves watching the puppet. So there’s a triangulation of the process with a fourth step . . . being that every now and then you find yourself sitting in the row behind yourself, watching yourself being fooled, and enjoying that.84

‘It is very much about impure viewing’ he adds. ‘You are always watching things on different planes’.85 Constructing and deconstructing separate planes has allowed Handspring to contest apartheid’s boundaries by revealing their artificiality; they challenged the racial divisions on which the apartheid system relied, for instance, by refusing to separate puppets from live actors, a common artificial division in the theatre.

UBU AND THE TRUTH COMMISSION, 1997

The collision of constructed realities imbues every aspect of Ubu and the Truth Commission.86 ‘The director was consciously experimenting’, notes Coetzee, ‘with how many of these realities could exist alongside each other in the minds of the audience, and how quickly the switches could be made from one reality to another’.87 A crocodile becomes a paper shredder, a handbag, and a repository for incriminating evidence. Three dog heads share one body but many metaphorical meanings. A single location becomes, through different uses, geographically split. Boundaries of race are troubled; actress Busi Zokufa appears at times as Ma Ubu without makeup, at times in whiteface, and at times as a puppeteer, puppet, voice, or translator.

Taylor’s play is a ‘productive misreading’88 of Jarry’s Ubu Roi, itself an impudent refraction of Macbeth. Jarry’s Pa Ubu (Figure 6.4) embarks on a remorseless killing spree recounted through the devices of farce (Ubu Roi infamously begins with a mispronunciation of the French word for shit). In Ubu and the Truth Commission, Pa is an agent of the apartheid state who comes home late each night and washes off the blood of his victims. Ma Ubu fears his absences are due to infidelity until she discovers that he was (to her relief) ‘hard at work, protecting me from the Swart Gevaar [black threat]’.89 His fear of being found out and her public airing of his actions drive him to testify before the Amnesty Committee, a process from which he emerges unscathed. This story is punctuated with deeply moving scenes featuring TRC witnesses, who recount verbatim testimony from the Human Rights Violations Committee hearings.

Taylor’s play responds to the fact that Jarry’s Ubu ‘apparently has no measurable effect upon those who inhabit the farcical world which he creates around himself’.90 Taylor describes the ‘disjuncture[s]’ of the TRC hearings, in which it was ‘chilling to note the frequency with which an act of astonishing cruelty has been undertaken, as it were, negligently, with no sense of the impact
of such actions on other human lives’. Her goal, then, was ‘to take the Ubu-character out of the burlesque context, and place him within a domain in which actions do have consequences’.\(^91\) She and her Ubu collaborators structured the piece around the interplay between ‘Cause’ (the world of the Ubuses) and ‘Effect’ (the world of the TRC witnesses).\(^92\) This duality prompts audiences to re-perceive the violence of apartheid’s ‘separate but conflicting worlds’,\(^93\) to bear witness to the testimony of apartheid victims, and to engage in interpretation as an ethical act of working out meaning.

Ubu establishes performance conventions that at first ask spectators to believe that the Ubuses, played by actors, and the TRC witnesses, played by puppets, inhabit separate worlds established through the inability of characters in one world to ‘see’ those in the other. Yet from the start, the separateness of these worlds is troubled. As the lights first rise, a puppet is making soup. Pa’s first action is to destroy her peaceful domestic setting ‘with no evident sense of what he has done’.\(^94\) In the next act, a puppet sets up a faraway shop at the centre of the Ubuses’ dining room table; again, they cannot see one another – yet the Ubuses help themselves to the dismayed shopkeeper’s goods. In Jones and Kohler’s description: ‘This division between the human clowns and the puppets, mirrors the era of trauma the play describes’.\(^95\)

Over the course of the production, the puppet characters grow increasingly impossible for Pa to ignore. In the last of several witness scenes, he and a life-sized version of Jarry’s Ubu form a tableau, while two witness puppets use this tableau as the floor upon which they stand to recount their testimony. As the physical proximity between these characters is erased, the audience’s effort to maintain belief in the face of such obviously constructed separateness is overstrained. Spectators must reject the artistic and political conventions in which they were asked to believe just a half hour before.

The production’s TRC scenes invited audiences to bear empathetic witness to the atrocities of apartheid through layers of artistic mediation. As Kentridge explains, the decision to have puppets play witnesses grew from a wish to transmit rather than impersonate:

There seemed to be an awkwardness in getting an actor to play the witnesses – the audience being caught halfway between having to believe in the actor for the sake of the story and also not believe in the actor for the sake of the actual witness . . . There is no attempt made to make the audience think the wooden puppet or its manipulator is the actual witness. The puppet becomes a medium through which the testimony can be heard . . . It is trying to make sense of the memory rather than be the memory.\(^96\)

The TRC scenes acknowledged the structure of the hearings without duplicating them. Two puppeteers (who recalled the professional ‘comforters’ real witnesses
had available as they gave testimony\(^97\)) operated each puppet, one also providing the voice. A simultaneous interpreter stood in a booth – Pa’s shower stall – and translated the testimony into English in ‘affectless’ tones.\(^98\) The staging of each scene marked the individual testimony as unique, preventing one account from blending into another. Puppeteers cycled through different roles, now serving as the voice, now as a translator, now as a comforter, thus watching and allowing the audience to watch scenes from different perspectives. At one point, even divisions between puppet and puppeteer were blurred. When a puppet witness, voiced by Louis Seboko, described his dead children, Seboko suddenly transformed into the witness, showing the audience the puppet that was now his murdered child, before resuming the role of puppeteer (Figure 6.5). The production thus ‘circumnavigated the dangers of merely replicating testimony through verbatim theatre’, Davids notes, ‘allowing for gaps in testimony, for fragmentation, for silence. In this, [it] invited audiences to participate in co-authoring the un-scriptable’.\(^99\)

These two ways of activating interpretation – foregrounding theatre’s constructedness to reveal apartheid’s constructedness and using artistic mediation to bear witness to real violence – merge poignantly in the final scene of *Ubu and the Truth Commission*. During Pa Ubu’s testimony before the Amnesty...
Committee, he stands alone onstage behind two microphones. As he attempts to deny wrongdoing, the microphones unexpectedly recoil, reluctant to amplify his voice. When his denials grow more vehement, they protest more violently, attacking him on a long arm like a mechanical boxing glove. Though Pa and the witness puppets never interact directly, here things themselves rise up in defence of humanity. If even the material world is compelled to behave ethically, this scene seems to ask, can we humans claim we lack agency to make change?

Pa’s desperate response is to appeal to the TRC’s Christian values with a hymn about the mercy of Jesus: ‘Send a flood, send a flood/ Send your blood like a flood over me’, he sings. His voice is drowned out by a wave of celebration, though, as ‘the fullbodied voice of a massed chorus singing “Nkosi”100 swells and fills the auditorium’101 and the audience watches documentary footage of South Africans celebrating the lifting of the ban on the ANC. Yet this surge of joy is tempered by a final contrasting image: Pa and Ma escape into a cartoon sunset having faced no consequences. The production ends on this note of profound emotional dissonance: audiences encounter unavoidable ethical considerations, but no concrete answers.

CONCLUSION: INTERPRETIVE REVERBERATIONS

While Meyerhold and Mayakovsky’s Mystery-Bouffe audiences were defined by specific limiting factors – class, geographical location, political milieu – Ubu’s viewers span over a dozen countries and nearly two decades. The production was revived in 2014 to mark twenty years of democracy in South Africa and, as of the writing of this chapter, is still being performed internationally. Taylor notes that the first South African audiences included largely middle-class spectators, ‘black commissioners, as well as artists and extended families of the performers, black and white’, adding that ‘In the 1990s, [it] provoked some strong emotions, particularly because Pa and Ma Ubu are seen to “get away with it” at the end of the play’.102 South African audiences in 2014 absorbed the revival differently:

Many audience members now were not born until the end of the Apartheid era – so this provides something of a memory project, an affective archive of a defining and deforming history. It also cultivates a sense of awe across generations, of what one generation endured on behalf of their inheritors.103

Ubu’s resonance extends far beyond South Africa’s borders, however, not only because it premiered in Germany or because Handspring’s audience base is ‘diverse, large and global’, especially since the creation of War Horse.104 Ubu’s creators tell numerous stories of international spectators commenting on local resonance, evidence that the work’s interpretive frameworks prompt the
creation of local knowledge wherever it tours.\textsuperscript{105} ‘This is not just a South African story’, Taylor wrote in a 1997 programme note. ‘Ours is an era of singular attention to questions of war crimes, reparations, global “peace-keeping”. We are, it seems, increasingly aware of the obligation to hear testimony, while we are yet defining ways of acting upon what we have heard’.

‘\textit{Ubu} is one of those rarities’, one reviewer mused in 1998, ‘a piece of political theater that transcends politics’.\textsuperscript{106} It provided a very different interpretive framework than the one Meyerhold pioneered in Soviet Russia at the beginning of the century. \textit{Ubu} redefined political theatre by making room for, in Kentridge’s words, ‘ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures and uncertain endings’, for ‘an art (and a politics) in which optimism is kept in check and nihilism at bay’.\textsuperscript{107} It allowed truth to be self-defined through empathetic witnessing in a world in which countering ‘percepticide’ – deliberate self-blinding – has become an urgent ethical necessity.\textsuperscript{108} In \textit{Mystery-Bouffe}, Meyerhold and Mayakovsky fostered audience engagement for specific political aims: to give proletarian spectators creative agency to remake society and theatre together. A century later, \textit{Ubu and the Truth Commission} understood interpretation itself as political, as an active, ethical choice – and as something that can easily fall under threat.

Interpretation is a word with an array of definitions, ranging from ‘proper explanation’ to ‘the action of translating’. Many of its definitions imply a simple transfer of meaning. This chapter’s case studies have instead explored the thorniness of working out meaning at the modern theatre, and the freeing of subjectivity implicit in a different definition of interpretation: ‘To give a \textit{particular explanation of’}.\textsuperscript{109} As the modern era has revealed, theatre that embraces audiences as potential ‘athletes of the mind’\textsuperscript{110} has the potential to foster ethical thinking by developing nuance. Such theatre becomes a maker of meaning rather than a transmitter of it, thus providing a critical space in which to grapple with uncertainty. As Oliver Sayler wrote in the years between the two \textit{Mystery-Bouffes}, ‘theatre is . . . a concentration and an explanation of life. If life cannot be explained at least its inexplicability can be faced.’\textsuperscript{111}
67. See Riggs 1961, 156.
68. This refers to the final battle between the Osage and the Cherokee. When the Cherokee were forcibly relocated to the traditional territories of other nations, competition for shrinking resources became violent. Here and elsewhere Riggs is preoccupied with the violence that Indigenous people perpetrate on one another as learned behaviour imposed by the agents of colonization.
70. Ibid., 163.
71. Ibid., 167.
72. Ibid., 165.

Chapter Six: Interpretations: The Stakes of Audience Interpretation in Twentieth-Century Political Theatre

* Translations from Russian are my own unless cited from secondary sources in English. Russian transliterations are based on common spellings in the text and on a simplified Library of Congress system for references cited in the endnotes.
2. Ibid., 105.
5. Willett 1964, 37.
8. Ibid., 102.
12. The 2014 revival was directed by Janni Younge.
22. Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.
29. Fevral’skii 1971, 73. His books reproduce primary sources, many of them unpublished, from his personal archive. My analysis of the Mystery-Bouffe productions is based primarily on his books and these sources.
32. Aksenov [1926], in Fel’dman and Panfilova 2014, 30.
33. Ibid., 35.
34. Ibid., 35–6.
35. Fevral’skii 1976, 57.
37. Rudnitsky 1988, 64.
40. Ibid., 61–2.
41. Erenburg 1922, 14, in Fel’dman and Panfilova 2014, 140.
44. Rudnitsky 1988, 42.
47. Sometimes translated as ‘proscenium servants’.
50. Senelick and Ostrovsky 2014, 119.
51. Fel’dman 2014, 248.
52. Fevral’skii 1976, 64.
54. Zagorskii 1922, 111–12.
55. Ibid., 107–8.
56. Ibid., 109.
57. Ibid., 108.
60. Ibid., 19–20.
62. This book was first published (in a journal) only in the 1990s and again, recently, in Fel’dman and Panfilova 2014.
63. Meyerhold was shot as an ‘enemy of the people’ on 2 February 1940. He was entirely erased from books, photographs, and mentions in daily life. His sentence was not overturned until 26 November 1955. Braun 2002, 159.
65. Purkey 1996, 155–6. Sincere thanks to Malcolm Purkey for generously discussing this production with me.
67. Ibid., 279.
69. Purkey 2015.
71. Cole 2010, xii.
72. Ibid., 5.
73. Lee 2001. Of the roughly 7,000 applicants, about 10 percent were granted amnesty.
75. Taylor 2010, viii.
77. Kohler 2009b, 58.
78. Brown et al. 1968, 70.
81. Ibid., 198.
82. Jamal 2003, 56.
83. Ibid., 55.
85. Ibid., 197.
86. The production premiered at the Kunstfest Weimar, Germany, on 17 June 1997 after a workshop production at Johannesburg’s Market Theatre. It returned to the Market for a month-long run that August before embarking on an international tour. My analysis is based on Taylor 2010, the playbill, and a filmed performance from the 1997 Market run, plus photographs, reviews, articles, and interviews.
89. Taylor 2010, 45.
90. Ibid., iii.
91. Ibid., iv.
94. Ibid., 1.
102. Taylor 2015.
103. Ibid.
104. Davids 2014, 22.
105. Taylor 2010, xv.
NOTES

111. Sayler 1920, 7–8.

Chapter Seven: Communities of Production: A Materialist Reading with an Offstage View

2. Von Geldern 1993, 199.
4. For this reason, we deliberately discuss consumption in this chapter alongside more ‘traditional’ analyses of production.
6. For more on the AEA strike see Glenn 2000 and Holmes 2013.
7. Holmes 2013, 73.
9. Stuitt uses the term ‘chorus girl collective’ to describe the collective nature of chorus girl performance, onstage, in dressing rooms, and in boarding houses (2011).
10. Quoted in Glenn 2000, 207. See also Holmes 2013, 71, 74.
15. Sysoyeva 2013, 49, and Worrall 1996, 21. According to Worrall, Stanislavsky stayed nearby on his parents’ country estate and arrived to rehearsal every morning on horseback (42). He and Vsevolod Meyerhold used the same property in 1905 as a retreat to form a new company, the Theatre-Studio, which never opened.
19. Ibid., 51.
20. White (2014) addresses this neglect in the US commercial industry.
21. Carter and Cole 1992, 45; the wives’ names are unknown.
23. For more on Lucile’s designs for the Follies see Schweitzer 2009, especially chapter 5. For more on Urban’s Follies settings, see Essin 2013, chapter 4.
26. ‘One Day in Grand Street’ 1926, 2.
27. For more details on designer Aline Bernstein’s contributions to the Neighborhood Playhouse, see Essin 2013, chapter 3.
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