

A STUDY OF NONTRADITIONAL POPULAR THEATRES OF SOCIAL ACTION  
AS HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS TO THE SAN FRANCISCO MIME TROUPE

by

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B. A., Southwestern College, 1974

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A MASTER'S THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Speech

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1978

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1978

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### Acknowledgements

I wish to express my sincere thanks to all the members of my graduate committee for their guidance and suggestions concerning this work. I am especially grateful to Dr. Harold Nichols, my major professor, for his generous donation of time and his critical insights concerning the creation, revision, and editing of this work.

I also wish to acknowledge the immeasurable support given to me by my wife (and typist), Lori. Without her love and patience this work could not have been completed.

## Introduction

Since its founding in 1959 as the R.G. Davis Mime Troupe, the San Francisco Mime Troupe has been "the most consistently energetic and responsible element in the counterculture of the Bay Area."<sup>1</sup> Its birth and growth in the turbulent 1960s reflected the changing perceptions of society as envisioned by the "New Left" and championed by such radical theatre groups as The Bread and Puppet Theatre, El Teatro Campesino, and The Pageant Players. Its survival today when most of its contemporary radical counterparts have ceased to function, attests to its unique ability to transcend upheavals in its philosophy, organization, personnel, and methods.

The San Francisco Mime Troupe shared with most other radical theatres of the 1960s a three-fold objective: 1) to provide opposition and an alternative to the traditional political system and to its theatre; 2) to appeal to the "common man" (who is often excluded from that theatre); 3) to educate the common man so that he might change the traditional social and political system.

Separately, these objectives are not new ones in the history of theatre. Certainly, forbidden religious plays performed in private houses during the Renaissance provided opposition to the political system of their time and an alternative to the mainstream theatre of the period. The religious theatre of the Middle Ages was oriented toward the common man. And, even Aristophanes

realized the power of theatre as a tool for social change.<sup>2</sup>

However, as this report will attempt to show, only in the past century has a true synthesis of these objectives become visible, and only in the radical theatre of the past twenty years has that synthesis become a reality.

It is the purpose of this report to chart those theatres and events of the past one-hundred years which have contributed to the synthesis of radical theatre objectives as typified by the San Francisco Mime Troupe. I hope to demonstrate that the Mime Troupe is merely the latest in a series of antithetical theatres which have worked against the status quo for a new synthesis of theatre and society.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Robert Scheer, "Introduction," The San Francisco Mime Troupe, by R.G. Davis (Palo Alto: Ramparts Press, 1975), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Oscar G. Brockett, Perspectives on Contemporary Theatre (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), p. 108.

## The San Francisco Mime Troupe

### I. History of the Mime Troupe

Since 1959 the San Francisco Mime Troupe has passed through three distinct periods of development. The first period, extending roughly from 1959 to 1965, was founded on the use of mime (in the tradition of Chaplin, not Marceau) in "an attempt to restore the importance of movement which the realistic theatre had neglected."<sup>1</sup> While maintaining this focus on visual communication, the Troupe soon sought to expand its appeal by adding spoken words and commedia dell'arte techniques to its basic format.<sup>2</sup> When the decision was made in 1962 to take the work of the Mime Troupe outdoors to the parks and people of San Francisco, the Troupe found that their loosely adapted commedias not only held attention well, but were very competitive with the usual outdoor distractions encountered in working from a portable stage. The stereotyped masked characters and exaggerated movement and voice carried well, and possessed the flexibility to incorporate daily news events and impromptu actor responses to unplanned performance events.<sup>3</sup>

The Troupe adapted scripts from works by such authors as Moliere (Tartuffe and Scapin), Machiavelli (The Mandrake), Beolco (the Ruzzante plays), and Goldoni (L'Amant Militaire). And, while keeping with the traditional commedia characters and costuming,

each of the adaptations was "infused with the general political radicalism of the San Francisco hip scene in the mid 1960's."<sup>4</sup>

The second period, extending from 1965 to 1970, was characterized by a conscious "radicalization" of the Troupe (codified in "Guerilla Theatre: 1965" by R.G. Davis) to enable it to teach, direct toward change, and be an example of change.<sup>5</sup> Troupe member Sharon Lockwood recalls the shift:

In trying to do free shows for the people, they [the Troupe] realized that the park commission didn't want the parks to be for the people, and a whole court hassle ensued. Finally, the parks were liberated, and the Mime Troupe was able to get permits for this whole struggle; that's when it really started becoming a political theatre.<sup>6</sup>

In the mid-1960s the Mime Troupe took several national tours which were punctuated by a variety of legal entanglements ranging from arrests for begging to indictments for possession of marijuana. In 1967 Davis published a second guerilla theatre manifesto, this time reflecting the Troupe's affinity for the "New Left".<sup>7</sup> And, as the Mime Troupe moved into the final years of the decade, the Gorilla Band (a publicity and attention getter) and Gutter Puppets (used as the Troupe expanded into practical, didactic "lesson skits" and related pieces stimulated by particular political events) made their appearance as adjuncts to the Troupe's central purpose.<sup>8</sup>

The final, culminating event of the group's middle years was the departure of R.G. Davis from the Troupe. Robert Scheer in his introduction to The San Francisco Mime Troupe relates the situation:



Once he accepted a political and, indeed, Marxist criticism of the troupe's work, R.G. created the basis for his departure. He had helped the company to take seriously the ideas of Marx and the Chinese Cultural Revolution, while still seeking to maintain his individual prerogatives. It could not hold.<sup>9</sup>

By late 1969 the Mime Troupe's course toward a democratic collective became obvious. But the artistic individualism with which Davis led the Troupe through its early years ran counter to that philosophy. One side had to give. Thus, Davis separated temporarily from the Troupe in late 1969, and in January of 1970 his separation became permanent.

Following the departure of Davis, the Mime Troupe entered its third and present period when it was reorganized into a collective company. All philosophical, organizational, and artistic decisions of the group now reflect collective Troupe action.<sup>10</sup>

Generally, since 1970:

[E]ach of their plays has focused on a political issue selected by the group--the rights of women and blacks, the relationship of the CIA to the drug traffic in South Vietnam, assembly line speed-ups and lay-offs, political corruption behind urban renewal. . . ."<sup>11</sup>

American melodrama briefly replaced European commedia as a style before giving way to an even more eclectic blending of forms.<sup>12</sup> Finally, much of the Troupe's work shifted toward agitational-propaganda plays (agit-prop) as it found itself becoming ever more oriented toward specific, supportive audiences.<sup>13</sup> In sum:

[T]he company made the shift from intellectuals commenting on political issues through their art to political activists; from artists who had a proprietary attitude about their individual contributions [such as Davis], to

art workers with a common objective of bringing about social change.<sup>14</sup>

## II. Importance of the Mime Troupe

The San Francisco Mime Troupe is obviously a durable theatre. Its search for theatrical forms adaptable to its unique purpose has been extensive and creative.

It has spawned related theatrical enterprises, the most notable of which is El Teatro Campesino, founded by former Mime Troupe member Luis Valdez and members of the National Farm Workers Association to dramatize the issues of the Delano grape strike and to urge farm workers to join the union.<sup>15</sup> However, the Mime Troupe's greatest theatrical importance lies in the exemplary nature of its three periods of development. Each period uniquely characterizes a different variety of radical theatre.

The first period is "soft radical." It is more concerned with an alternative people's theatre than with radical change. The emphasis is on entertaining an unfocused audience.

The second period is that of "committed radical art." It features a well-thought-out philosophy and a search for clear, persuasive communication within an artistic medium. In it, entertainment and message come into rough balance as the audience becomes more focused.

The third period is "hard radical." It is more concerned with radical change than with art. The message is dominant, and the theatre usually plays to a strongly supportive audience.

The San Francisco Mime Troupe thus emerges as an extremely

useful tool in the study of non-traditional popular theatres of social action. It is unique in its stature among contemporary radical theatre troupes, and yet, in its three periods of development, it exhibits characteristics visible in many radical theatres.

### III. The Mime Troupe Synthesis

The San Francisco Mime Troupe is a theatre which seeks to provide opposition and an alternative to the American political system and its traditional theatre. Let us first examine the nature of its oppositional philosophy.

The Mime Troupe is Marxist in the tradition of the New Left. Davis has written:

For those of us who consider revolutionary culture neither a gimmick nor an extension of bourgeois careerism, but rather as a process of thought leading to the dissolution of imperialism's hegemony, dialectical materialism (yeah, Marx) has to become the source of our inspiration.<sup>16</sup>

To Davis and the Mime Troupe, imperialism meant the United States; and the United States meant a rotten society. This philosophy was supported by Marx, and by the New Left in the form of Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown.<sup>17</sup> The Mime Troupe collective of 1971 was more specific and final in its stance:

We consider ourselves Marxists; we believe that the American government is the most efficient and thorough form of Fascism the world has ever known, and that it constitutes a most clear and present danger to the human race.<sup>18</sup>

This view of society likewise informs the Mime Troupe's view

of contemporary theatre. The front line of opposition is that erected against traditional bourgeois realism. Theodore Shank in his article "Political Theatre as Popular Entertainment" says:

Some of the characteristics of bourgeois theatre were realism, psychological characters, an intellectualism that was seen as pretentious, a reliance on words that came to be considered the chief device of hypocrisy, and an estheticism that rejected political statement. Thus, in trying to distinguish themselves from the establishment, young political theatres attempted to find bases for theatre outside realism.<sup>19</sup>

This opposition to realism is evident in the Mime Troupe's emphasis on visual action (such as the slapstick of their commedia production of Scapin) which realism "had neglected." In a larger sense, moreover, realistic theatre falls within the realm of perceptual knowledge, i.e., raw data which cannot provide solutions to basic social problems. Its subtle "humanizing effect" may equip us for social action, but cannot generate that action.<sup>20</sup> Thus, what we would call traditional realism is antithetical to both the Mime Troupe's practical and philosophical point of view.

Often coupled with traditional theatre's realism are the capitalist goals of profit and popular (star system) success, a combination which usually results in what Peter Brook has termed the energetic and yet joyless "deadly theatre."<sup>21</sup> Because its profit motive restricts it to affluent middle-class patrons, it is thus part of the system's power structure and must be threatened and denied.<sup>22</sup> The Mime Troupe must therefore oppose such a theatre by returning theatre to all the people.<sup>23</sup> The San Francisco Mime Troupe thus functions "in contrast with the effete, lifeless, decadent theatre of those in power."<sup>24</sup>

Having examined the oppositional nature of the Mime Troupe's philosophy, we must next look at the alternatives to traditional society and theatre offered by the Mime Troupe.

By the early 1970s, the Mime Troupe found itself providing both an alternative to American society (through a collective group lifestyle), and to traditional bourgeois realism (through denial of the profit ethic, the addition of visual forms to language forms, the use of dialectical analysis in place of escapist synthesis, the use of rough energy in place of deadly complacency, and by taking its theatre to its audience).

As previously noted, it was only with the departure of R.G. Davis in late 1969 that the Mime Troupe found itself reorganized into a lifestyle reflecting the alternative nature of its theatre. The Davis years were characterized by late night study sessions of Mao's redbook or the Black Panthers,<sup>25</sup> and by Davis's analysis that in 1967 the Troupe on tour was an "'acting-as-lifestyle'" group (an unaided do-it-yourself tour group free from "government grants, foundations, and big city bookers").<sup>26</sup> However, it was still Davis and Sandy Archer who constantly provided the needed push and direction for Troupe projects.<sup>27</sup>

The 1970 collectivization of the company finally brought the group structure into line with its avowed goals, as lifestyle came to match philosophy. Organizationally, positions came to be assigned by consensus. Theatrically, this meant collective action in script production, rotating directing responsibilities, and rotating casting of parts.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, just as the individualistic orientation of Davis and Archer was denied in favor of group

action, so denial of Stanislavskian individualized acting techniques also grew.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the Troupe found itself offering an alternative lifestyle to traditional society, based on true democracy of the group and a strong denial of individualism.

Before examining the alternative nature of the Mime Troupe's actual productions, we must first acquaint ourselves with one of the major obstacles standing between the Troupe and the fulfillment of its goals. That obstacle is co-optation: the ability of a society "to integrate all radical opposition within the contours of legitimate dissent."<sup>30</sup> In more concrete terms:

Theatres that depended upon Ford Foundation subsidies for their existence would end up selling capitalism, or at best accepting its framework, no matter what promises company members made to each other.<sup>31</sup>

To oppose American imperialism without being co-opted by it, the Mime Troupe therefore found itself forced to operate outside established institutions. On the most basic level, this meant surviving on contributions taken following park performances and on money raised on self-organized winter college tours.<sup>32</sup> As Shank says: "The principal source of subsidy has been members of the Troupe, who give nearly all of their energy and time while receiving only subsistence salaries as low as 25 dollars per week."<sup>33</sup>

In actual productions the Mime Troupe has sought to provide an alternative to traditional realism through visually oriented dialectical analysis. Visual action is inherent in the commedia techniques not necessarily connected with action. These include the use of masks in the commedias (and in A Minstrel Show in which blacks and whites alike were in blackface--a form of mask), the

use of costumes appropriate to character types (the Pope's conical hat in L'Amant Militaire, 1966-67, and the costumes appropriate to the characters of "the general," "the soubrette," or "the tricky servant" in The Independent Female, 1970), and the use of signs and placards to denote place and time (False Promises, 1976).

Through dialectical analysis the Mime Troupe seeks to transcend perceptual knowledge and reach conceptual knowledge, i.e., knowledge which grows out of perceptual knowledge and which develops "an understanding of the basic forces and principles . . . for understanding and controlling reality." Unlike perceptual knowledge (such as that possessed by non-analytic realism), conceptual knowledge possesses the quality of immediate social understanding, and can lead the audience to take remedial action based on that understanding. As an alternative philosophy, it seeks an analysis of reality, rather than a heightening of it.<sup>34</sup>

The specific method of Mime Troupe analysis is dialectical opposition: the placing of different ideas in sharp contrast to each other in order to reach a synthesis of understanding and solution. Obviously, the word "analysis" used in describing the Mime Troupe should not be construed to mean "objective analysis." Exaggeration, incongruity, and contrast comprise the method of the Mime Troupe, but these techniques are firmly grounded in a New Left predisposition.

A Minstrel Show (c. 1965) is perhaps the Troupe's best example of its dialectical technique. Throughout the production the audience is led through a montage of traditional minstrel show gags interspersed with songs and contemporary racial situations. The

culmination of the performance occurs during the "Chick/Stud" scene in which one of the players (white or black) in blackface, picks up another player costumed as a white girl. He takes her home and makes love to her. Sharp contrasts in philosophy, stereotypes, traditional mores, and hidden prejudices appear. The dialectical oppositions are heightened as the audience finds itself constantly seeking to determine the true race of the performers under their "masks."<sup>35</sup>

As noted previously, the Mime Troupe has in many ways avoided the "deadly theatre" through its "free performance" policy. It offers a further alternative to that theatre through its tremendous vitality: a function of Brook's own alternative to the "deadly theatre" which he calls the "rough theatre."<sup>36</sup> It is a vitality which "comes in part from taking on the establishment" and is one of the most obvious characteristics of contemporary political theatre groups.<sup>37</sup> It emanates from the type of knockabout form that the Mime Troupe took to the parks,<sup>38</sup> and capitalizes on a sense of we (the actors and audience) versus they (the Establishment).<sup>39</sup>

The Mime Troupe not only offered its theatre as an alternative to the theatre of the affluent middle-class, it physically took its theatre to the "common man." The comedias first played the parks in 1962. And in 1966 the Gargoyle Carolers, "twelve people in Hieronymus Bosch and Breugel costumes . . ." singing "well-rehearsed Christmas carols with a few word changes" hit the streets of San Francisco.<sup>40</sup>

By the early 1970s the San Francisco Mime Troupe was offering



both an alternative lifestyle and an alternative theatre to the people of the Bay Area.

#### IV. Appeal to the Common Man

As already noted, the Mime Troupe elected early in its history to take its theatre to the common man by playing in the parks and on the streets for free. In doing so they faced two major obstacles to successful communication: 1) the purely physical obstacle of performing outdoors; and 2) the less tangible obstacle of playing to an unfocused, heterogeneous audience. Dealing with these two obstacles has helped to generate the Troupe's unique style.<sup>41</sup>

The success of the Mime Troupe's commedias in competing with distractions and communicating outdoors has already been mentioned. This use of visual action to convey character and verbal meaning was also consciously maintained through such later non-commedia productions as The Mother (1973) and False Promises (1976).<sup>42</sup> The realization of the necessity of large movements and gestures to the commedia form was vividly established at the Troupe's first outdoor performance in 1962 in Golden Gate State Park. Up to that time, the Troupe had worked inside a beer hall and a small theatre in which the validity of large visual action was not always evident. However, as Davis notes: "Once outside, theory and reality crashed together into a screaming joyous perception."<sup>43</sup>

Once secure in the concept of communication through visualization, the Mime Troupe next had to undertake the problem of

audience analysis: a task which is difficult for any political theatre. The easiest approach is to design works oriented toward specific audiences, locales, or occasions.<sup>44</sup> If such an audience is already supportive of the views to be expressed, the job is even easier. This approach is typical of the late period in Mime Troupe history when it focused on serving particular interests such as the Los Siete Defense Committee, the [Black] Panthers, and Women's Liberation.<sup>45</sup> Agit-prop theatre usually seeks to appeal to similarly supportive audiences.

The Davis years of the Mime Troupe, however, were too complex for such simplistic analysis. Its audience was unfocused. Consequently, its appeal had to be broad, free, and joyous. Thus, to accomplish its purpose, the Troupe incorporated elements from circus (jugglers as assembly line workers in Frozen Wages, 1972), minstrel shows, puppet shows ("Punch" in L'Amant Militaire), comic strips ("Terry and the Pirates" is parodied in The Dragon Lady's Revenge), popular band music (the Gorilla Band), carnival sideshows, vaudeville (The Vaudeville Show), and the movies. The emphasis became expansive and eclectic.<sup>46</sup> It should be remembered that the post-Davis Mime Troupe of the 1970s also embraced an eclecticism of technique. The difference is one of quality rather than quantity: The early Troupe had a wide focus while the later Troupe had a more specialized one. The former was more analytically oriented, while the latter focused more on propaganda.

The San Francisco Mime Troupe, in seeking to make contact with the common man alienated from traditional theatre, took its theatre to its audience, and appropriated a host of popular forms

and techniques in an effort to further its communication with that audience. Shank summarized the goal of the performance event as a whole:

While the performance may depict the evils of the Establishment, the system, the status quo, the event surrounding the performance creates a community between the performers and spectators, demonstrating the society that can exist and the means of bringing it about.<sup>47</sup>

## V. Changing the System

The Mime Troupe seeks to educate the common man so that he might change the traditional social and political system. On the most elemental level, this goal was realized by the Troupe's "lesson skits," which demonstrated how anyone could fight the system by making phone calls on "Big Business" telephone credit card numbers, or by using pop-top can tabs to feed parking meters and thus park free (and deprive any given city of working parking meters and their corresponding revenue).<sup>48</sup>

In many of the Troupe's longer plays its educational objectives are obvious (A Minstrel Show: racism; The Independent Female: Women's rights; The Dragon Lady's Revenge: Big Business, drugs, and government corruption) while change is implied as a consequence of education. As Davis says: "Radical theatre must bring people to the point of demanding change, through giving them knowledge of the processes of their condition."<sup>49</sup> Or, as Corallina says at the end of L'Amant Militaire: "You want something done? Well, then do it yourselves!"<sup>50</sup> The educational nature of the Mime Troupe finds support in Marxian thought tempered by the New Left, while concep-

tual dialectical analysis makes its implementation possible. (Agit-prop, of course, may be didactic without being dialectical or analytical).

In the largest dialectical sense, the Mime Troupe's alternative theatre is the antithesis placed against the bourgeois profiteering and imperialism of the status quo thesis. The hoped for synthesis is change.

Related to the Mime Troupe's function as an educator for change, and to this paper's discussion of the Troupe's historical antecedents, is a clarification between social action and theatre of social action.

Richard Schechner set forth in 1968 six axioms concerning the nature of environmental theatre. In his first axiom:

Schechner declares that events may be placed on a continuum with 'Pure'/'Art' at one end and 'Impure'/'Life' at the other, and extending from traditional theatre at one pole through environmental theatre to happenings and ending with public events and demonstrations at the other pole.<sup>51</sup>

Schechner himself includes within the category "guerrilla theatre" such events as demonstrations, political rallies, religious festivals, celebrations of daily life, and the processional pageants of the middle ages.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, in his article "Guerrilla Theatre: May 1970," Schechner relates theatrical "actions" he helped to organize which confronted Broadway audiences with the realities of the Kent State shootings. The implication is that these, too, are guerrilla theatre.<sup>53</sup> According to Schechner's own continuum a conflict therefore arises concerning whether these events are closer

to theatre, or to demonstrations. R.G. Davis is clear about where the Mime Troupe orientation has been for at least the majority of its existence:

. . . for a theatre group, whether it be guerrilla, agit-prop, or simply hysterical, the presentation is the meat of the action. . . The action in view is what we learn from. When we actually cross the picket line, punch the cop, throw the real firebomb, tear down the fence, sit in front of a truck, we are not doing theatre.<sup>54</sup>

The Mime Troupe may claim that it is "committed to change, not to Art,"<sup>55</sup> and this may perhaps occasionally apply to its final collective period. However, during most of its life, and particularly the years dominated by R.G. Davis, theatre as art was an active, if subconscious, influence.

## VI. Summary

The San Francisco Mime Troupe has been shown to be a theatre providing opposition and an alternative to the traditional political system and to its theatre. It is Marxist and anti-realistic in its opposition; it has reached an alternative collective lifestyle and has produced an alternative theatre based on financial independence and dialectical analysis applied from outside the traditional system.

The Troupe seeks to appeal to the common man. It has taken its theatre to the people, and has sought to communicate with the common man through a visually oriented eclecticism of techniques.

The Mime Troupe seeks to educate the common man for change.

Its function is that of leader and teacher. It is committed to a theatre of social action and makes the distinction between theatre and action.

Historical antecedents to the San Francisco Mime Troupe will tend to echo and parallel the Mime Troupe in one or more of these areas of purpose, and in one or more of the Mime Troupe's three periods of development.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Theodore Shank, "The San Francisco Mime Troupe's Production of False Promises," Theatre Quarterly, 7, No. 27 (1977), p. 41; hereafter cited as False Promises.

<sup>2</sup> Shank, False Promises, p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> Theodore Shank, "Political Theatres as Popular Entertainment," The Drama Review, 18, No. 1 (1974), p. 112; hereafter cited as "Political Theatres."

<sup>4</sup> Shank, "Political Theatres," p. 112.

<sup>5</sup> R.G. Davis, The San Francisco Mime Troupe (Palo Alto: Ramparts Press, 1975), p. 149.

<sup>6</sup> J. Dennis Rich, "San Francisco Mime Troupe," Players, 46, No. 2 (1971), p. 55.

<sup>7</sup> Davis, pp. 154-55.

<sup>8</sup> Davis, p. 112.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Scheer, "Introduction," The San Francisco Mime Troupe, by R.G. Davis (Palo Alto: Ramparts Press, 1975), p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Rich, p. 55.

<sup>11</sup> Shank, False Promises, p. 41.

<sup>12</sup> Shank, "Political Theatres," pp. 113-14.

<sup>13</sup> Davis, p. 169.

<sup>14</sup> Shank, False Promises, p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> Davis, p. 201.

- 16 Davis, p. 172.
- 17 Davis, p. 154.
- 18 Rich, p. 56.
- 19 Shank, "Political Theatres," p. 110.
- 20 Henry Lesnick, ed., Guerilla Street Theatre (New York: Avon, 1973), pp. 23-23.
- 21 Peter Brook, The Empty Space (New York: Avon, 1968), p. 17, 37.
- 22 Davis, p. 10.
- 23 Oscar G. Brockett, Perspectives on Contemporary Theatre (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), p. 19.
- 24 Shank, "Political Theatres," p. 111.
- 25 Scheer, p. 11.
- 26 Davis, p. 87.
- 27 Davis, pp. 125-26.
- 28 Shank, False Promises, p. 46.
- 29 Rich, p. 56.
- 30 Charles Brover, "Some Notes in Defense of Combative Theater," Guerilla Street Theatre, ed. Henry Lesnick (New York: Avon, 1973), p. 30.
- 31 Scheer, p. 30
- 32 Rich, p. 59.
- 33 Shank, False Promises, p. 52.
- 34 Lesnick, pp. 23-24.
- 35 Davis, p. 57.
- 36 Brook, pp. 59-88.
- 37 Shank, "Political Theatres," p. 111.



- 38 Davis, p. 65.
- 39 Shank, "Political Theatres," p. 111.
- 40 Davis, p. 71.
- 41 Shank, False Promises, p. 41.
- 42 Shank, False Promises, p. 42.
- 43 Davis, p. 35.
- 44 Shank, "Political Theatres," p. 112.
- 45 Rich, p. 55.
- 46 Shank, "Political Theatres," pp. 111-12.
- 47 Shank, "Political Theatres," p. 112.
- 48 Shank, "Political Theatres," pp. 115-16.
- 49 Davis, p. 171.
- 50 Davis, p. 86.
- 51 Oscar G. Brockett and Robert R. Findlay, Century of Innovation (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973), pp. 769-70.
- 52 John Lahr, Up Against The Fourth Wall (New York: Grove Press, 1970), p. 247.
- 53 Richard Schechner, "Guerrilla Theatre: May 1970," The Drama Review, 14, No. 3 (1970), p. 164.
- 54 Davis, p. 171.
- 55 Brockett and Findlay, p. 728.

## HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS

### I. Summary of Mime Troupe Characteristics

Many historical antecedents to the San Francisco Mime Troupe anticipated more than one of its radical purposes or periods of development. Not one, however, completely prefigured the philosophy and methods of the Mime Troupe. Separated by the McCarthy hearings of the 1950s from any continuous leftist theatrical tradition, the Mime Troupe stands without direct historical connection to its antecedents. Nevertheless, characteristics can be analyzed and parallels can be drawn. To aid this analysis, let us first rearrange the characteristics of the Mime Troupe into the categories of 1) philosophy and goals; and 2) methods.

1. The Mime Troupe is Marxist (Socialist) in nature. It sees capitalism as a social evil which must be opposed from outside the system. Through an appeal to the common man (the proletariat -- usually comprised of the lower and lower-middle class) change of the society can occur.

2. The Mime Troupe advocates an alternative anti-realistic theatre based on dialectical analysis and vibrant visual energy. It is expansive and eclectic.

Let us now turn to an analysis of the Troupe's historical antecedents.

## II. Historical Limits of Mime Troupe Antecedents

Robert Brustein in his book The Theatre of Revolt writes that:

The social rebel can trace his heritage back to Lillo, Steele, Diderot, Beaumarchais, Lessing, and Hebbel, though he differs from these bourgeois dramatists in his satiric animus and his hatred for middle-class life.<sup>1</sup>

It is precisely that difference which establishes the limits of this analysis, and which brings us to the historical context of the beginning of this study.

The industrial revolution may be traced to the invention of such devices as the steam engine (1769), the power loom (1785), the steamboat (1807), and the locomotive (1812). The well-known consequences of these inventions were industrialization and the social problems of urbanization. Revolution appeared in much of Europe in 1830 and again between 1845 and 1850. Most revolts were put down, but it became obvious that a number of social, and consequently, political problems were in need of solution.

During this same period the writings of three men hold special importance. The first, Auguste Comte, in his Positive Polity (1851-54) and Positive Philosophy (1830-42) "had begun to apply the methods of objective observation and experiment to political and social problems."<sup>2</sup> Darwin's Origin of the Species (1859) reinforced the notion of man as a product of his environment and heredity, and contributed to the reduction of the importance of divine power in modern thought, to the removal of man from a

position unique in the world order, and to the idea of the inevitability of progress.<sup>3</sup> Finally, with the publication in 1867 of Karl Marx's Das Kapital and its exposition of the belief that "social and political institutions are the products of economic forces and that they are subject to change through man's knowledge and his control over those forces," we find scientific method combined with materialistic philosophy. The result seemed to open a "new and promising path to a better world."<sup>4</sup>

The Marxist orientation and analytical method of the San Francisco Mime Troupe makes this period in history a logical starting point for a study of the Troupe's historical antecedents. As Brockett and Findlay note in Century of Innovation:

It was no doubt this recognition [of social problems and needed political reforms] that led dramatists in the late nineteenth century for the first time to treat the problems of the lower classes with the seriousness formerly reserved for the middle and upper classes.<sup>5</sup>

The potential for a philosophy and method parallel to the Mime Troupe simply did not exist prior to the mid-1800s.

### III. Thesis Plays and Naturalism

The theatrical result of the scientific and philosophical upheavals of the middle nineteenth century was the appearance of two forms related in purpose, if not in method, to the Mime Troupe. The first of these has come to be called thesis drama and was primarily the work of Alexandre Dumas fils (1824-95) and Émile

Augier (1820-99) in France. As Dumas films noted in a letter to "M. Sarcey":

[I]f . . . I can exercise some influence over society; if, instead of treating effects I can treat causes; if, for example, while I satirize and describe and dramatize adultery I can find means to force people to discuss the problem, and the lawmaker to revise the law, I shall have done more than my part as a dramatist, I shall have done my duty as a man.<sup>6</sup>

Both Dumas films and Augier were didactic as they sought "the serious treatment of contemporary social issues," though Dumas tended to be moralistic, while Augier tended to be more balanced in his view of problems. They prefigured the Mime Troupe in their desire for social change, but run counter to it in their adoption of realistic techniques.<sup>7</sup>

The second form found a title, "Naturalism," and a method in the critical works of Émile Zola (1840-1902). Basic to its approach to art was the application of scientific observation and analysis to social ills in order that they might be revealed and corrected. Like the thesis playwrights and the Mime Troupe, Naturalism sought improvement of society. The change was to come through an altered environment, however, not through an enlightened common man, for he was the victim of forces beyond his control.<sup>8</sup> Like The Mime Troupe, the naturalists approached their topics through analysis, though, as Brockett says:

[T]hey did not, for the most part, suggest what action should be taken. Rather, they were convinced that it was their duty to remain as objective as possible in their treatments of existing problems. They assumed that when the problem was

clear the necessary remedies would be discovered and applied.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, Naturalism in practice "tended to emphasize the more degraded aspects of lower class life."<sup>10</sup> It did deal with the Mime Troupe's "common man," but, as previously noted, was oriented more toward analysis of problems than the solution of them.

It should be noted that naturalistic influences on the Mime Troupe have made themselves felt largely in the form of a social purpose and its related theory. Ibsen's social problem plays such as Ghosts and A Doll's House are likewise related to the Mime Troupe in their desire for social reform and in their analysis of social problems, but diverge from the Mime Troupe in their tightly-structured realism. Like Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw in England also sought change, specifically to socialism. Like the Mime Troupe he sought to shake prejudices and convictions, and to arouse skepticism. However, Shaw's Fabian Socialism supported the belief that the superior individual must lead lesser ones, and rejected the idea that majority opinion should serve as the basis for action.<sup>11</sup> He thus negated the importance of the proletariat to social and political change.

The thesis playwrights, naturalists, and realists produced little that the Mime Troupe could physically put to use a century later; they did, however, initiate social and political awareness within the theatre (particularly where it intersected lower-class life) and provided an example of social criticism through objective analysis.

#### IV. The Independent Theatres and The Volksbühnen

The "independent theatre" movement, dated from the opening of Andre Antoine's Théâtre Libre in 1887, is important to this study primarily because of its alternative nature and the impetus it gave to later related theatres. The Théâtre Libre is largely remembered for the hearing it gave to new drama and playwrights of its time, and for its use of new staging techniques, particularly those associated with Realism and Naturalism.<sup>12</sup> Much of this new drama presented the "dark, pathological violent side of the social situation,"<sup>13</sup> drama which had been denied commercial production because it was considered offensive and immoral.<sup>14</sup> The Théâtre Libre and its subsequent descendants circumvented this difficulty by offering their plays on a subscription basis, thus, in effect, becoming private theatres. While they were more devoted to art than to social change and tended to embrace realism, the independent theatres (like the Mime Troupe) offered an alternative to the traditional theatre of the day, staged plays concerning the lower classes, and operated on the edge of the status quo.

Descendants of the Théâtre Libre included London's Independent Theatre, founded by J.T. Grein in 1891. Grein's theatre followed the subscription policies of its fellow independents and introduced the work of George Bernard Shaw to London. However, it was really in Germany, where the independent theatre found wide support and transformation, that a form of theatre arose which more closely prefigured the Mime Troupe than any previous organi-

zation.

Otto Brahm's Freie Bühne, founded in Berlin in 1889, was in the tradition of earlier independent theatres. It worked from a subscription basis and helped to introduce new playwrights to the German commercial theatre. However, Brahm seemed even more interested in eventual commercialization than his precursors. As Macgowan and Melnitz note in Golden Ages of the Theatre:

Just as Brahm had hoped, the example of the Freie Bühne improved the level of the commercial theatre. It improved the level so much that within a couple of years there seemed to be no reason for Brahm to continue production.<sup>15</sup>

The Freie Bühne included professionals in its leadership<sup>16</sup> and in its actors<sup>17</sup> (the theatres of Antoine and Grein were largely amateur). Finally, while Brahm's subscriptions were too high for working people, his productions provoked public discussions and increased the desire of workers for influence in the theatre.<sup>18</sup> Thus, while Brahm's theatre may have been consciously co-opted by the traditional theatrical system, it did offer a temporary alternative to practices of the day. Most importantly, it gave impetus to the growth of the Volksbühnen, or people's theatres, organized in the 1890s.<sup>19</sup>

The first of the German people's theatres was the Freie Volksbühne, organized in 1890 by Bruno Wille, Julius Turk, and Wilhelm Bolsche, all members of the Socialist-Democratic party. Its double aim was to advance the political party and to serve the dictates of true dramatic art. Specifically, it would produce



plays which offered "a social criticism of life."<sup>20</sup> Its membership started with six hundred people and by 1908 had reached twelve thousand.<sup>21</sup> The Neue Freie Volksbühne was founded in 1892 by Wille after a conflict with members of the original organization. By 1914 the two Volksbühnen had amalgamated and had a combined membership of fifty thousand.<sup>22</sup>

The Volksbühnen prefigured the San Francisco Mime Troupe in many respects. They were, as the name implies, people's theatres. Ticket prices started within the affordable range of the average worker's income. Performances were given on Sunday because workers were free on that day. Tickets were assigned by lottery (again on a subscription basis).<sup>23</sup> The Volksbühnen were also socialist in nature. Their concern was with the proletariat and the social situation, even if there was occasional internal conflict among the membership concerning the theatre's final purpose:

Wille and the Intellectuals argued for education of the individual, and saw the Volksbühne as an institution to lead the proletariat to a taste for truly great art-- 'Theatre for All.' Türk and the Workers saw the Volksbühne as a political instrument in preparation for the coming takeover of power-- 'Worker's Theatre.'<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the Volksbühne also possessed the purpose of educating the common man, and through him, changing the social and political system. And, although the actual method of the Volksbühnen was founded in Realism, the influence of their philosophy on other alternative theatres is immeasurable. They continue today as the world's oldest and largest theatre audience organization.<sup>25</sup>

## V. Expressionism

The social and political consciousness which informed much of the work of the Volksbühnen, gave rise during the years surrounding World War I to Expressionism, a form strongly in opposition to the realistic tradition. Expressionism was largely a product of Germany and Austria as people of both those nations felt the oppression of strong emperors and middle-class materialism.<sup>26</sup> It reflected the new, twentieth century perceptions of the world as envisioned by such men as Freud, Jung, and Einstein. In contrast to Scientism's objective reality, Freud and Jung endorsed the view of a reality beneath surface appearances. The repository of truth was the Freudian unconscious mind. Likewise, the clear-cut process of cause-and-effect fell under the assault of Einstein's Theory of Relativity which, to the less scientific minds of the period, placed all perception within the realm of the subjective. Facts were seen as only relevant in terms of the individual human mind.<sup>28</sup> Thus, Naturalism's objective, scientific analysis gave way to Expressionism's subjective relativity of truth emanating from a personal vision of reality.<sup>29</sup>

Expressionism as a form was not limited to a specific theatre.<sup>25</sup> However, probably because its views catered to the workingman, Expressionism found much support in the Volksbühnen.<sup>30</sup> As Brockett and Findlay note, Expressionism was:

. . . opposed to realism and naturalism because those movements glorified science, which the expressionists associated with technology and industrialism, major

tools of the materialistic society they deplored. . . . On the other hand, the expressionists were equally contemptuous of neoromanticism [the Wagner, symbolist tradition] because of its flight from contemporary social problems.<sup>31</sup>

In a larger sense, the Expressionists sought a world without war, hypocrisy, or hate, without artistic constraints, and without materialistic urges; but possessing social justice, love, and humanism.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the Expressionists share with the Mime Troupe oppositional attitudes toward both the theatre and society of their time, and the desire to offer an alternative to that theatre and society. Further parallels are visible in a comparison of production techniques.

The Mime Troupe's dialectical opposition of elements is apparent in many Expressionistic works, typified by Toller's Masses and Man in which the conflict between socialist non-violence and personal violent action, between "the physical mass of the mob" and the "single voice of the individual" is made graphically clear.<sup>33</sup> Second, there was a conscious attempt to reduce scenic elements to essentials.<sup>34</sup> This included a return to the platform stage (not unlike the Mime Troupe's makeshift commedia stage for park performances),<sup>35</sup> the use of make-up (or mask) and costume to reflect social roles or psychological states, and the use of character types or caricature (similar to "Mr. Big," the bloated, capitalistic Pantalone of The Dragon Lady's Revenge, or such other commedia types as Dottore in The Dowry, and Brighella and Capitano in L'Amant Militaire). Additionally, the use of large gestures and anti-realistic acting was encouraged (like the

Mime Troupe's emphasis on visual action).<sup>36</sup> Finally, like the Mime Troupe, Expressionism was "full of energy, and full of rebellion against propriety and common sense."<sup>37</sup>

For all these parallels, it must be remembered that Expressionism departed from the Mime Troupe in its emphasis on truth through the mind, rather than through materialistic analysis (even though the latter may have been used as a technique). In Expressionism the individual came first, the group second. As Ludwig Rubiner wrote in 1917:

We want to arouse by means of heartshaking assaults, terrors, threats, the individual's awareness of his responsibility in the community . . . Progress does not exist for us . . . We believe in miracles.<sup>38</sup>

When the rebellion of German workers in 1918 brought about the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm and the end of war, it seemed that the Expressionists were on the verge of realizing their new world "free from war, hypocrisy, and hate." However, the optimism of 1918 faded into pessimism by 1925 as the end of war brought political and economic upheaval to Germany. Runaway inflation and civil problems prompted a call for attention to smaller, immediate problems and a postponement of the Expressionists' "world salvation." By the mid-1920s stability had replaced revolution and the Expressionist urge was at a standstill.<sup>39</sup>

## VI. Russian Workers' Theatres and the Theatre of Meyerhold

The Thesis playwrights, Naturalists, and Expressionists shared the generalized vision of theatre as a forum for social

awareness and change, and found expression in the alternative nature of the independent theatres and the Volksbühnen. Their response to the oppression of their respective ruling political systems was one of opposition. However, it was with the support of the dominant political system of its time that the most important precursor to the Mime Troupe found expression: "It made its appearance on the stages of Soviet Russia. It proclaimed in so many words that theatre is a weapon, and the stage is the battleground of class war."<sup>40</sup> It was the theatre of revolutionary Russia and of Meyerhold.

Workers' and peasants' theatrical clubs had existed in Russia even prior to the revolution of 1905. In that year an estimated 5,000 clubs were in existence in village clubs and meeting rooms, in factories and trade union centers.<sup>41</sup> Many of the clubs were members of Proletcult, the local and national Proletarian Cultural Educational Organization. Proletcult reached its peak in 1920, having established a number of theatres in its ideal of theatre by and for the workers. It advocated the use of popular forms in the theatre such as circus and variety acts.<sup>42</sup>

Regardless of whether they were associated with Proletcult or not, the workers' and peasants' theatres during the revolution and succeeding years of war were host to a theatre which had come to include direct agitation among its functions:

With satire, caricature, and a fierce morality, workers' amateur, cooperative, agitational groups attempted to dispose of the mystifications of ancient power. Improvised scenes bringing 'living newspapers' of the revolutionary war and poster-style plays providing diagrams

and statistics of political and military progress showed contemporary events in vivid, personalized theatrical forms. Agitational plays used symbols of militarism, piety, greed, to advertise the substitution of comradeship and solidarity for selfishness and individualism.<sup>43</sup>

Brockett and Findlay also note the treatment of immediate problems in such peasant, soldier, and factory worker skits as The Fight Against Typhus, The Intrigues of Finance Capital, and The Plots of the Counter Revolution. And, opposing points of view were often expressed through dramatic "reports" which featured pantomime, song, dramatic skits, and choruses.<sup>44</sup>

A final offshoot of the workers' and peasants' theatres was the movement known as the Blue Blouse groups. While the peoples' theatre agit-prop performances were dominant in the years roughly extending from 1917 to 1921, the Blue Blouse groups carried on and extended the "living newspaper" form and variety show production techniques through the bulk of the 1920s.<sup>45</sup> By 1928 the movement probably involved more than 100,000 people. The 484 professional and 8,000 amateur Blue Blouse companies which existed in the Soviet Union in 1928 were united in similar production techniques by their own bi-weekly magazine.<sup>46</sup> Thus, their influence was probably similar throughout the Soviet Union.

The techniques and form of the Blue Blouses were eclectic. They included a parade by the whole company to open the show followed by a montage of ten to fifteen different numbers. The numbers themselves included comic sketches with domestic and international themes; acrobatics and physical dance (often accompanied by jazz music); the animated poster (a large poster

with cutouts for the heads, arms, and legs of the actors); popular folksongs, often with topical satire; and occasional bits of film. The performance concluded with a final parade in which the company summarized the performance and commented upon the political message, themselves, and on the Blue Blouses in general.<sup>47</sup>

Essential to the Blue Blouse movement was the relationship of "synthesis and antithesis between items which progressively established a major ideological point."<sup>48</sup> The assemblage of the diverse items or "attractions" of the productions owed much to the work of Sergei Eisenstein who defined the concept of "attraction" (within the theatre) as:

. . . any aggressive moment of theatre, that is any element of it which subjects the spectator to emotional or psychological experience proved in practice and mathematically calculated to produce in him a definite emotional shock, which in turn and in its entirety is aimed solely at making it possible for the spectator to grasp the show's idea content - its final ideological conclusion.<sup>49</sup>

Eisenstein provides us with both a summation of the philosophy behind the agit-prop / Blue Blouse techniques of the period, and with a tie to his teacher, Meyerhold (whose theatre will be examined later in this report).

The parallels which may be drawn between the aforementioned peoples' theatres of revolutionary Russia and the San Francisco Mime Troupe are almost too numerous to mention. Obviously, the Russian theatres not only sought, but became, theatres by and for the common man. They were not alternatives to the established political system (new though it may have been) for their Marxist

philosophy was a given circumstance. However, social evil was depicted: that of the Czars, of militarism, greed, individualism, and selfishness. The Mime Troupe in the 1960s and 1970s assailed similar evils with such works as L'Amant Militaire (an assault on militarism) and The Dragon Lady's Revenge (an attack on government corruption and capitalism); with its own affirmation of the group over individualism (i.e., Stanislavski - see pp. 10-11); and with generosity over selfishness (giving its shows away in the parks).

The parallels to specific techniques are even greater. The Mime Troupe's use of circus techniques in Frozen Wages consisted of juggling by six actors as a symbol of the assembly line. Production was stepped up by removing one juggler at a time until only one man was left to juggle the "work" of six. The Mime Troupe usually opens its plays with a parade of the cast (and the Gorilla Band), and closes with a commentary on their political message and on the Troupe as a whole. The Troupe's use of sketches with domestic and international themes is especially evident in their productions of False Promises (the Panama Canal and Mexican-Americans) and once again, The Dragon Lady's Revenge (the South-east Asian drug trade).

Just as agit-prop skits of the workers portrayed such immediate problems as typhus and the dangers of capital finance, so the Mime Troupe presented its lesson skits to help its audience with its immediate problems. Satirical songs were the domain of the Gargoyle Carolers.

The parallel between Mime Troupe analysis and the Blue Blouse



concept of synthesis and antithesis should be obvious. Furthermore, Eisenstein's theory of the assemblage of diverse items or "attractions" has found graphic illustration in the variety nature of the Troupe's A Minstrel Show (with its black/white confusion calculated to produce a specific emotional shock).

It should be noted that a majority of the techniques of the Russian people's theatres are of the agit-prop type, and find their clearest parallel in the later work of the Mime Troupe-- that period most strongly oriented toward the specific needs and audiences of "the Movement," and most strongly oriented to eclectic, agit-prop style entertainment. The art of the workers' theatres was subservient to its message. It was in the theatre of Meyerhold that art balanced and even surpassed message, and within which a tie to the earlier Mime Troupe years becomes obvious.

Vsevolod Meyerhold is usually best remembered today for his theories concerning constructivism and biomechanics, and for the examples he set for later practitioners in the use of theatricalism. Of these three, theatricalism and biomechanics are the most important for the purposes of this paper.

The theatricalism of Meyerhold emanated in large part from his reaction to the realistic techniques he encountered during his study with Stanislavski at the Moscow Art Theatre. Whereas Stanislavski worked to separate actors from the audience by means of an imaginary fourth wall, Meyerhold sought to reunite actors and audience -- so that he might seize the audience's attention, rather than alienate them.<sup>50</sup>

Meyerhold's early theatricalist experiments, roughly from 1905 to 1918, were largely carried out for artistic, or "formal," reasons. In Andreyev's The Life of Man (1906) he experimented with mask-like make-up. His production of Balaganchik (1908) used Japanese style screens in place of scenery. And for Moliere's Don Juan (1910), he removed the proscenium and front curtain of the stage. Later, in Blok's The Unknown (1914), he used jugglers, and Chinese boys who threw oranges into the audience. As Mordecai Gorelik observes:

By the outbreak of the Soviet revolution he had introduced gymnastic training for actors, resurrected the pantomime tradition of the Commedia dell'Arte, tried out improvisation in performance.<sup>51</sup>

The coming of the revolution brought from Meyerhold (who was an ardent supporter of the revolution even though he later voiced his opposition to the bureaucracy of the party) the cry to "Put the October Revolution into the Theatre."<sup>52</sup> He wished to transform the theatre into an instrument for "expressing the ideas and the spirit of the Revolution."<sup>53</sup> He put to use many of his previous techniques and formulated new ones in order to achieve that goal.

The decade of the 1920s encompasses the majority of Meyerhold's work pertinent to this study. In contrast to the Expressionists, who viewed the machine as an object of evil, Meyerhold sought to transfer many of the machine's qualities to his actors through bio-mechanics. The goal was "an actor whose body was as efficient as a machine in carrying out the orders of its operator."<sup>54</sup> Important to us is the fact that much of the system is the result of his study of the comedians of the Commedia dell'Arte period.<sup>55</sup> His

theory was put to work in The Magnificent Cuckold (1922). Much of the production relied on visual action and set gestures, while the stage itself was reduced to a usable, constructivist, performing machine.<sup>56</sup>

Later Meyerhold productions included such theatrical techniques as: the addition of captions projected on a screen (The Earth in Turmoil, 1923); the attempt to create instant character recognition through wigs, costumes, and "social" masks (not real physical ones)--The Forest (1924); the breaking up and rearranging of scripts with the insertion of pantomimes into the action (The Inspector General, 1926); and the stereotyping of characters through the use of costuming and action (The Bath House, 1930).<sup>57</sup> In addition, eastern (Chinese) influence was obvious in his production of Roar, China! (1926),<sup>58</sup> while daily news events were incorporated in the anti-militarist and anti-imperialist production of Dawn (1920).<sup>59</sup> Katherine Eaton has summarized some of Meyerhold's most important contributions to the theatre as:

[T]he transformation of the traditional stage into a socially active organizer of the masses, of the audience from a chance gathering into a 'firmly established collective,' which interacts with the play, the transfer of attention from the purely narrative aspects of the play to the methods of its construction, the invention of the best methods for the organization of a group into a co-operating collective.<sup>60</sup>

Again, the parallels with the San Francisco Mime Troupe are at once extensive and obvious. Meyerhold was not in opposition to

the revolution. He was, however, in opposition to the realistic tradition of the Moscow Art Theatre and sought to offer an alternative to that theatre. He sought to make contact with an audience which he saw as alienated by traditional realism. It should be remembered, however, that his formalistic experiments may, at times, have "gone beyond" the common man. He sought change of the traditional theatre, and later, of the bureaucratic nature of the party.

In the realm of theatrical techniques, direct echoes of Meyerhold appear in the Mime Troupe's use of Commedia (its masks and physical action); its reduction of the stage to an efficient acting area; its use of oriental influences (such as Chinese Opera for Brecht's Congress of Whitewashers (1969); its audience contact and destruction of the fourth wall (after exiting, Mime Troupe commedia characters would often join the audience to watch the rest of the show); and its use of captions through the use of "crankies" (continuous cartoons on paper cranked scroll-like from one roller onto another). Likewise, other parallels appear in the Mime Troupe's technique of breaking up, rearranging, and reorienting established scripts (Congress of Whitewashers was rearranged and its context given a Chinese orientation); its stereotyping of characters (Mr. Smellybucks, "The Capitalist," in San Fran Scandals of '73; and its ability to incorporate daily news events into a play's action (as described by Shank in "Political Theatre as Popular Entertainment").<sup>61</sup>

R.G. Davis noted the importance of having actors both esthetically and artistically trained,<sup>62</sup> reminiscent of Meyerhold's "socially active organizer of the masses." And, the desire of the

Mime Troupe to forge its audience into a "co-operating collective" is implicit in its philosophy of change through the common man.

There is no credit given to any part of the revolutionary era Russian theatre by the Mime Troupe for any of its techniques. Meyerhold's student, Eisenstein, the work of Brecht in Germany, and American protest of the 1930s comprise the only continuations of that theatre in any recognizable form. Indeed, the strength of Meyerhold's individual vision, opposed as it is to the concept of the group and the collective, coupled with his obvious desire for artistic synthesis rather than dialectical analysis, tends to set him apart from oppositional theatre in the form of the San Francisco Mime Troupe. However, as the evidence clearly shows, the place of Meyerhold's theatre as an antecedent to the Mime Troupe is solidly established.

## VII. The Epic Theatre: Piscator and Brecht

The final two "theatres" to be analyzed in this report are those of Piscator and Brecht in post-World War I Germany, and of America in the 1930s. However, because so much of their influence is largely a variation on the groundwork laid by the Russian revolutionary era theatre, their analysis will be less extensive.

With the deterioration of Expressionism in the mid-1920s, the political theatre impetus in Germany became the property of Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht. The intense political and social awareness of the period which had produced the workers' theatres and the theatre of Meyerhold in Russia was also felt in

Germany. The German Worker's Theatre League established in 1919, was similar to the amateur agit-prop troupes which performed during the same period in Russia.<sup>63</sup> And by 1933 there were more than 300 Volksbühnen in Germany alone.<sup>64</sup> However, it was only with the arrival of Piscator and Brecht that German political theatre received an organized philosophy for its operation.

Comparison is often made between Piscator and Meyerhold, and between Piscator's "manifesto" for the proletarian theatre (published in 1920) and the Proletcult movement in Russia. Both Piscator and Meyerhold were autocratic as directors, they re-worked texts to suit their own uses, they placed importance on technical production elements, and they both sought to influence the attitudes and behavior of their audience.<sup>65</sup> Piscator's "manifesto" revealed a philosophy not unlike that of the Proletcult. It included the following points: 1) Drama should be subordinated to revolutionary ends; 2) Production style should be simple and direct so that meaning remains clear; 3) New techniques should be added only if they aid meaning; 4) Productions should be a collective effort of all workers; and 5) Actors should be recruited from the working class, rather than being separate professionals.<sup>66</sup> Thus, for Piscator, Meyerhold, and the people's theatres, a similar sense of social and political awareness produced similar concepts of political theatre. For Piscator these concepts laid the groundwork for "Epic" theatre.

Essential to Piscator's concept of Epic theatre is a reliance on demonstration and explanation rather than representation. Piscator sought, therefore, to present a synthesis of

Naturalism's concern for social problems, the Expressionists' desire to transform society, and the Volksbühnen's concern with the proletariat within a framework of documentary materials.<sup>67</sup> Unlike Meyerhold, he sought to provide the audience with information which, through dialectical analysis, would actuate that audience to undertake social and political reform.<sup>68</sup> His emphasis was on a "broad canvas of events" within which technical elements must be selected and arranged for the most effective teaching.<sup>69</sup> He thus prepared the way for Brecht's later expansion of Epic theatre.

Within this cursory analysis of Piscator's influence several points must be kept in mind. First, though he desired, in theory, to make the audience an objective judge of the documented events he presented, Piscator usually only succeeded in drawing his audience to the events emotionally and aesthetically. He failed to promote the esthetic distance which Brecht believed was so important to judgement.<sup>70</sup> Piscator's technology became extremely complex (as in The Good Soldier Schweik with two treadmills) and thus excluded itself from those theatres which, though sincere in purpose, were simply too poor to bear the cost of such technology. Finally, because of his novel approach, his audience tended to be largely composed of the intelligentsia rather than the working class.<sup>71</sup> We thus move on to Brecht acknowledging that many of the parallels between the Mime Troupe and Meyerhold can also be extended to the theories of Piscator, while realizing that Piscator's theatre is one of transition to Brecht.<sup>72</sup>

Bertolt Brecht needs little introduction. He stands as the

prime exponent of that theatre which asks the spectator to think, reach decisions, leave the theatre, and change society. He differs from Wagner and his desire to transport the audience outside itself, and from Artaud and his desire to purge the audience morally and spiritually.<sup>73</sup>

Brecht's oppositional nature is clear. He was a product of the same stresses and desires for social change that motivated the Expressionists and Piscator. He was in revolt against the Wagnerian "dramatic" theatre. However, he was also a man in two parts: half theorist, half dramatist and producer. A.D. White in his article "Brecht's Quest for a Democratic Theatre" notes the split: "It is my view that Brecht . . . never came close to realizing the kind of theatre which is adumbrated in his theory . . ."<sup>74</sup>

While the Mime Troupe has produced three Brecht scripts (The Exception and The Rule, The Mother, and The Congress of Whitewashers), it should be noted that the scripts they selected are apart from what we usually consider the mainstream of Brecht's "typical" works. They are variants within the larger scope of the Brecht canon. Thus, the tie between the Mime Troupe and Brecht as a playwright is a tenuous one. However, R.G. Davis has affirmed the debt owed by the Mime Troupe to the theoretical work of Brecht concerning Epic theatre.<sup>75</sup> Therefore, to avoid falling into the trap of ambiguity between Brechtian plays and Brechtian theory, I will approach his influence on the San Francisco Mime Troupe only in terms of his theoretical work. Let us then examine Epic theatre and its related ideas of alienation



and historification as they apply to the Mime Troupe.

Perhaps the easiest way to approach Brecht's view of Epic Theatre is to reproduce here his list of changes of emphasis between the dramatic and the Epic theatre which he set forth in his essay "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre":

Dramatic Theatre	Epic Theatre
plot	narrative
implicates the spectator in a stage situation	turns the spectator into an observer, but
wears down his capacity for action	arouses his capacity for action
provides him with sensations experience	forces him to take decisions picture of the world
the spectator is involved in something	he is made to face something
suggestion	argument
instinctive feelings are preserved	brought to the point of recognition
the spectator is in the thick of it; shares the experience	the spectator stands outside; studies
the human being is taken for granted	the human being is the object of the inquiry
he is unalterable	he is alterable and able to alter
eyes on the finish	eyes on the course
one scene makes another	each scene for itself
growth	montage
linear development	in curves
evolutionary determinism	jumps
man as a fixed point	man as a process
thought determines being	social being determines thought
feeling	reason

76

The alienation effects or "Verfremdungseffekte" as they are more properly called possess a three-fold nature. For the actor, they consist of distancing oneself from the role to heighten critical judgement and promote focus on the character's most important social attitude or Gestus. For the physical stage they are re-

flected in such devices as purely functional scenery, costumes which help to clarify character, and lighting strictly for illumination. In the action itself they are reflected in the use of narration, episodic structure, the addition of songs and speeches, the use of placards, signs, and announcements to introduce scenes, and acting which seeks to expound on people rather than relating their inner emotional life.<sup>77</sup>

Related to Verfremdung is Brecht's concept of historicification. In it, the "pastness" of events is emphasized so that the audience can objectively judge them, but can also receive assurance that since things have changed, the present can be altered as well.<sup>78</sup>

The hoped for final product of all of Brecht's Epic theatre was dialectical analysis. His style "consists entirely of dialectical contradictions with regard to which the audience is challenged to take up a position."<sup>79</sup> In practice, this consisted of involving the spectator in the action emotionally, and then jarring him out of his empathic response so that he can judge the stage events. Thus, Verfremdung is not continuous, but exists in its own dialectic with empathy.<sup>80</sup> Let us now examine the parallels between Brechtian theory and the San Francisco Mime Troupe.

Brecht's Marxism, opposition to capitalism, and desire to appeal to the common man for the purpose of bringing about social and political change should be clear. His theatre was strongly anti-realistic, and was likewise based on dialectical analysis.

A closer look at the parallels between Epic theatre and the

Mime Troupe reveals the following: The Epic theatre used narrative--not unlike the Mime Troupe's running puppet commentary on L'Amant Militaire. In A Minstrel Show the spectator is made to examine his prejudices, to face the Black/White stereotypes of our culture. As in Epic theatre he must face something he may not desire to, he must study it, and he must come to the conclusion that he himself is alterable and able to alter his social milieu. A Minstrel Show is a montage of scenes, each for itself, and yet united to the whole through thought.

In L'Amant Militaire, the audience can, with the application of reason, relate the play's story to Vietnam and to the audience's own pacifism. The play ends with an already noted advocacy for change outside the theatre: "What you think this was, a fairy tale? Listen, my friends, you want something done? Well, then do it yourselves!"<sup>81</sup>

In The Dragon Lady's Revenge, the social attitude or Gestus of Mr. Big, the U.S. Ambassador, is a blend of commedia's Pantolone and the capitalist boss of the Independent Female, John Heartright.<sup>82</sup>

The large gestures which characterize the acting of the Mime Troupe not only express character, but are also the actors' comments on their characters.<sup>83</sup> The functionalism of the Mime Troupe's staging and costuming has been mentioned. And, of course, daylight is pure, unadulterated illumination.

The 1976 production of False Promises was interspersed with songs. Its sets featured placards which reported the place and

date of the ensuing action. It was the theatricalism of Verfremdung being put to work.

Historification is common to nearly all of the Mime Troupe's work outside its lesson skits and later agit-prop pieces. Their Commedia were not transferred to the contemporary period. As was pointed out concerning L'Amant Militaire, the tie to the present can be made through the use of objective reason.

A Minstrel Show is a prime example of the Troupe's use of dialectical contradictions to force the audience to judge what it sees (particularly during the Chick/Stud scene). Finally, the conscious didacticism of the Mime Troupe is best typified by its parking meter and telephone credit card lesson skits.

It is apparent that much of Brecht's theory has found practical expression in the work of the San Francisco Mime Troupe. In his own time it was not until Brecht returned to Berlin after World War II and devoted his efforts to the Berliner Ensemble that his ideas began to be realized in practice.<sup>84</sup> However, it should be noted that the final result of Brecht's work was his own co-optation by the system in which he worked.

The Berliner Ensemble was not an alternative theatre. During the 1950s especially, it was a major cultural showpiece in East Germany and operated under large government subsidy.<sup>85</sup> Ernest Bornemann relates Brecht's ultimate paradox:

The tragedy of Brecht's life boils down to this simple fact: he gained the admiration and respect of those whom he professed to despise--the poets

and intellectuals, the West; and he failed to gain the one audience in the world for whom he claimed to write: the working class, the Party, the East.<sup>86</sup>

When compared, Meyerhold and Brecht shared influence from the same revolutionary milieu and also shared innovations oriented toward non-illusionistic art which serves the people.<sup>87</sup> However, in the final analysis, we see that while Meyerhold sought to bring about change within a system whose basic principles he agreed with, Brecht was co-opted by his system and became culturally accepted and famous. The Mime Troupe would undoubtedly side with Meyerhold's continuous revolution. Likewise, within a continuous desire for the improvement of society, the Mime Troupe has maintained its emphasis on the common man. Brecht, like Piscator, attracted the intelligentsia. Thus, while the theory of Brecht found fulfillment in the work of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, the practice of Brecht succumbed to co-optation and thus failed to provide a suitable, practical example for the Mime Troupe. As R.G. Davis concluded: "Epic Theatre cannot merely be replanted in the land of TV, Hollywood movies and newspaper headlines; it must be re-pruned."<sup>88</sup>

#### VIII. American Social Theatre of the 1930s

For our final area of analysis, let us examine the social and political theatre of depression America in the 1930s. Barnard Hewitt in his History of the Theatre from 1800 to the Present writes that the ten year vogue of American social theatre

between the wars (roughly 1929 to 1939) was largely stimulated by the economic depression and the international disorders which preceded Hitler's invasion of Poland, and was influenced by similar theatrical developments in Russia and Germany.<sup>89</sup>

The dominant mode of thought for correcting the ills of the depression was Marxist. Karen Malpede Taylor in People's Theatre in Amerika notes:

Its [the depression's] first significant theatrical consequence--as unemployment . . . peaked at thirteen million in 1933--was to justify in the public imagination the existence of voices that offered alternatives to catastrophic capitalism. In the twenties most people thought of the Bolshevik Revolution as a disreputable and godless threat. Now there was widespread interest in the Marxism that inspired it.<sup>90</sup>

It seems largely a result of these Marxist leanings that much of the American social theatre of the 1930s found its own historical antecedents in the theatres of post-World War I Russia and Germany. In addition to Marxism, the American social theatres shared with the European movements an opposition to the social and political milieu in which they found themselves, the desire to change that milieu, and in many cases a strong orientation toward the common man. Likewise, many of their techniques were mere Americanizations of European movements and practices. It should therefore be sufficient to point out these American imitations and their European counterparts, having already established the relationship of the Mime Troupe to the European theatres.

The New Playwrights Theatre existed in New York from 1927 until 1930, and produced plays dealing with pressing social and economic problems. It is important to this study, however, because

of one of its members, John Howard Lawson. His first major work, Processional (1925) combined Expressionistic devices, vaudeville techniques, and jazz, with serious, comic and burlesque episodes. Except for the protagonist, the characters are treated as caricatures.<sup>91</sup> In 1926 Lawson helped to found the Worker's Drama League, and in 1927, the first year for the New Playwrights Theatre, he presented Loud Speaker. Loud Speaker adopted many of Meyerhold's constructivist and bio-mechanical devices, and used clownlike caricatures for such people as the journalist, the politician, and the flapper.<sup>92</sup>

By the late 1920s workers theatre groups in America (spawned in imitation of their Russian and German counterparts) were experiencing growth and expansion:

Most of these groups were foreign language speaking. They had all been inspired by the agitational theatres of the Soviet Union which they knew were disseminating revolutionary axioms in factories and fields, and by the agitation-propaganda theatres of the workers movement in Germany.<sup>93</sup>

The performers in these troupes were for the most part amateurs. They played for free. Their organizations reflected a collective group consciousness. They were mobile troupes which traveled to their audience and which did not rely upon sets. They sought to clarify each character through immediate symbols in the nature of Brecht's Gestus.<sup>94</sup> Premier among these diverse groups were the Workers Laboratory Theatre,<sup>95</sup> the German speaking Prolet-Bühne, Artef (a Yiddish language group),<sup>96</sup> and the Theatre Union (organized in 1933 to attract a working class audience through lower

ticket prices).<sup>97</sup> While not always successful in performance, at least two of these groups, Artef and the Theatre Union, were able to generate a type of audience organization not unlike that of the German Volksbühnen: a literal reservoir of patrons eager to view the theatres' works.<sup>98</sup>

In 1937 the Theatre Union was disbanded, and by 1940 most of its related workers' theatres were also gone. They fell victim to leftist disillusionment with the Soviet purges of the period, to the recovery of the American economy (thus eliminating much of their purpose for being), to better productions of similar plays by such groups as the Federal Theatre and the Group Theatre (i.e. Odets's agit-prop Waiting for Lefty - 1935), and (as they became professional troupes) to the capitalist policies which they had rebelled against as amateurs.<sup>99</sup>

One final theatre which must be included is the Federal Theatre Project. Begun in 1935 as part of the Works Project Administration, it sought to provide jobs for the unemployed in the entertainment professions. The Federal Theatre is particularly remembered for its "Living Newspaper" productions, through which it sought to explore major social, economic, or political problems. Their techniques were the non-psychological, declamatory ones of agit-prop.<sup>100</sup> Dialogue was taken from public documents; dramatic scenes were interspersed with film clips, projections of statistics, and related devices. It was truly in the tradition of Piscator and Meyerhold, but never challenged the position established by the Roosevelt administration.<sup>101</sup>

As already noted, the parallels which may be drawn between



the international forms Americanized during the 1930s and the San Francisco Mime Troupe should be obvious. The reasons for the decline of the workers' theatre movement at the start of World War II are applicable to all the leftist oriented theatres of the period. Following the war, McCarthyism managed to prevent the re-entry of a Marxist line into theatre or film until the late 1950s. It was at that point that the San Francisco Mime Troupe established itself at the end of a long line of descendants.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Theatre of Revolt (Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown and Co., 1962), p. 25.
- <sup>2</sup> Barnard Hewitt, History of the Theatre from 1800 to the Present (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 54.
- <sup>3</sup> Oscar G. Brockett and Robert R. Findlay, Century of Innovation (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 5.
- <sup>4</sup> Hewitt, p. 54.
- <sup>5</sup> Brockett and Findlay, p. 3.
- <sup>6</sup> Alexandre Dumas films, as quoted in Barrett H. Clark, European Theories of the Drama (New York: Crown Publishers, 1947), p. 382.
- <sup>7</sup> Brockett and Findlay, pp. 15-17.
- <sup>8</sup> Brockett and Findlay, pp. 68-69.
- <sup>9</sup> Oscar G. Brockett, Perspectives on Contemporary Theatre (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), pp. 123-24.
- <sup>10</sup> Oscar G. Brockett, The Theatre: an introduction (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1965), p. 275; hereafter cited as The Theatre.
- <sup>11</sup> Brockett and Findlay, p. 112.
- <sup>12</sup> Brockett, The Theatre, p. 279.
- <sup>13</sup> Cesare Molinari, Theatre Through the Ages, trans. Colin Hamer, (London: Cassell and Co., 1975), p. 283.

- 14 Brockett and Findlay, p. 86.
- 15 Kenneth Macgowan and William Melnitz, Golden Ages Of The Theater (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1959), p. 127.
- 16 Kenneth Macgowan, "Little Theatre Backgrounds," in Theatre: Essays on the Arts of the Theatre, ed. Edith Isaacs (1927; rpt. Freeport, N.Y. : Books For Libraries Press, 1968), p. 280.
- 17 Macgowan and Melnitz, p. 127.
- 18 Cecil W. Davies, "The Volksbühne: A Descriptive Chronology," Theatre Quarterly, 2, No. 5 (1972), p. 58.
- 19 Brockett and Findlay, p. 106.
- 20 Anna Irene Miller, The Independent Theatre in Europe (1931; rpt. New York: Benjamin Blom, 1966), p. 130.
- 21 Miller, p. 131.
- 22 Brockett and Findlay, p. 106.
- 23 Davies, p. 58.
- 24 Davies, p. 58.
- 25 Davies, p. 57.
- 26 Hewitt, p. 103.
- 27 Brockett and Findlay, pp. 265-67.
- 28 Brockett and Findlay, pp. 267-68.
- 29 Brockett, The Theatre, p. 298.
- 30 Brockett and Findlay, p. 285.
- 31 Brockett and Findlay, p. 270.
- 32 Brockett and Findlay, pp. 271-72.
- 33 Nicholas Hern, "The Theatre of Ernest Toller," Theatre Quarterly, 2, No. 5 (1972), pp. 76-77.

- 34 Brockett and Findlay, p. 284.
- 35 Mordecai Gorelik, New Theatres For Old (New York: Samuel French, 1940), p. 248.
- 36 Brockett and Findlay, p. 285.
- 37 Hewitt, p. 104.
- 38 Quoted in Brockett and Findlay, p. 271.
- 39 Brockett and Findlay, pp. 397-402.
- 40 Gorelik, p. 311.
- 41 František Déak, "Blue Blouse," The Drama Review, 17, No. 1 (1973), p. 43.
- 42 Roger Howard, "Propaganda in the Early Soviet and Contemporary Chinese Theatre," Theatre Quarterly, 7, No. 27 (1977), p. 55.
- 43 Howard, pp. 54-55. For additional information see: František Déak, "The AgitProp and Circus Plays of Vladimir Mayakovsky," The Drama Review, 17, No. 1 (1973).
- 44 Brockett and Findlay, p. 316.
- 45 Howard, p. 55.
- 46 Deak, pp. 44-45.
- 47 Deak, pp. 37-38.
- 48 Howard, p. 55.
- 49 Marjorie L. Hoover, Meyerhold: The Art of Conscious Theatre (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974), pp. 273-74.
- 50 Gorelik, pp. 318-19.
- 51 Gorelik, pp. 304-05.
- 52 Hoover, p. 279.
- 53 Hewitt, p. 121.
- 54 Brockett, The Theatre, p. 310.

- 55 Gorelik, p. 345.
- 56 Brockett and Findlay, p. 324.
- 57 Brockett and Findlay, p. 324-27.
- 58 Katherine Eaton, "Brecht's Contacts With the Theatre of Meyerhold," Comparative Drama 11, No. 1 (1977), p. 11.
- 59 Hewitt, p. 121.
- 60 Eaton, p. 15.
- 61 Theodore Shank, "Political Theatres as Popular Entertainment," The Drama Review, 18, No. 1 (1974), p. 112.
- 62 R.G. Davis, The San Francisco Mime Troupe (Palo Alto: Ramparts Press, 1975), p. 95.
- 63 Brockett and Findlay, p. 406.
- 64 Brockett and Findlay, p. 397.
- 65 Brockett and Findlay, p. 412.
- 66 Brockett and Findlay, p. 407.
- 67 Brockett and Findlay, pp. 407-09.
- 68 Molinari, pp. 304-05.
- 69 Hewitt, p. 146.
- 70 Gregory Mason, "Documentary Drama from the Revue to the Tribunal," Modern Drama, 20, No. 3 (1977), p. 207.
- 71 Brockett and Findlay, pp. 412-13.
- 72 The question concerning the relationship and actual contact among Meyerhold, Piscator, and Brecht is open to much controversy. However, Katherine Eaton in her article "Brecht's Contacts With the Theatre of Meyerhold," and Edward Czerwinski in his work "Dialog and the Socialist World," Comparative Drama, 2, No. 1 (1968), advance much support for the influence of Meyerhold upon Brecht's work.
- Piscator and Brecht, of course, did work together, and as Molinari points out, an attempt to establish priority in their ideas would be absurd. For the purposes of this report, however, the establishment of both Meyerhold and Piscator as antecedents

to Brecht seems justified.

It should also be noted that at least some of the Piscator tradition has been transmitted to the 1960s and 1970s through the work of one of Piscator's students, Judith Malina of The Living Theatre.

73 Brockett, p. 100.

74 A.D. White, "Brecht's Quest for a Democratic Theatre," Theatre Quarterly, 2, No. 5 (1972), p. 66.

75 Davis, p. 123.

76 Bertolt Brecht, "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre," in Brecht on Theatre, trans. John Willett (1957; trans. London: Methuen, 1964), p. 37.

77 Hewitt, p. 150.

78 Brockett and Findlay, p. 419.

79 Molinari, p. 308.

80 Brockett and Findlay, p. 419.

81 Davis, p. 86.

82 Shank, "Political Theatres," p. 115.

83 Theodore Shank, "The San Francisco Mime Troupe's Production of False Promises," Theatre Quarterly, 7, No. 27 (1977), p. 46; hereafter cited as False Promises.

84 James Roose-Evans, Experimental Theatre from Stanislavski to Today (New York: Universe Books, 1973), p. 54.

85 Brockett and Findlay, p. 550.

86 Ernest Bornemann as quoted in James Roose-Evans, Experimental Theatre from Stanislavski to Today, p. 53.

87 Eaton, p. 3.

88 Davis, p. 123.

89 Hewitt, p. 154.

- 90 People's Theatre in Amerika (New York: Drama Book Specialists/Publishers, 1972), p. 30.
- 91 Brockett and Findlay, pp. 526-27.
- 92 Brockett and Findlay, p. 527
- 93 Taylor, p. 31.
- 94 Taylor, p. 37.
- 95 See Laurence J. Tretler, "Players of Commitment: The Agit-prop Troupe," Players, 49, No. 5 (1974).
- 96 Taylor, p. 51.
- 97 Taylor, p. 70.
- 98 Jay Williams, Stage Left (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), p. 116; and Taylor, pp. 142-43.
- 99 Brockett and Findlay, p. 508.
- 100 Heinz Bernard, "A Theatre for Lefty: USA in the 1930s," Theatre Quarterly, 1, No. 4 (1971), p. 55.
- 101 Brockett and Findlay, p. 503.

## Conclusions

It has been the aim of this report to chart those theatres and events of the past century which have contributed to the synthesis of radical theatre objectives as typified by the San Francisco Mime Troupe. It would be impossible to include every theatre which has displayed some historical precedent to the Troupe's oppositional nature, its alternative impetus, its appeal to the common man, or its desire for change through the common man.

The general development is clear: social awareness coupled with scientism gave rise to the analytical theatre of the Naturalists and the Thesis playwrights. The independent theatres provided a space and techniques for these new, alternative theatres. Expressionism, supported by new theories of psychology, sought to remove the emphasis from change of the society and to place it on change of the human mind.

In Russia, the workers created their own theatre, and Meyerhold laid the major groundwork of philosophy and technique for later anti-realistic theatres of social action. In Germany, Piscator embraced the Marxist doctrine and produced the theory and the theatre which came to full flower under Brecht. And in America the worldwide awareness of social and political evils found its expression in similarly international techniques.



However, it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that a true synthesis of all these movements was realized in the work of the San Francisco Mime Troupe. The Thesis playwrights, the Naturalists, the independent theatres, and the early Volksbühnen shared with the Mime Troupe an oppositional attitude, but became part of the status quo as their realistic methods became a co-opted part of traditional theatre. The Expressionists and later Volksbühnen shared a similar oppositional nature, but failed to provide a theatre based on any type of analytical process. The Russian workers' theatres and the theatre of Meyerhold shared with the Mime Troupe many practical, non-realistic techniques, but promoted a theatre which was, for the most part, in support of a status quo. The German political theatre of Piscator and Brecht paralleled the Mime Troupe in theory, but in practice became estranged from the common man. The American social theatre of the 1930s as an American imitation of largely European innovations, found much of its work co-opted by New Deal politics and defused by the nationalism of World War II. The San Francisco Mime Troupe has been able to offer both a synthesis of these movements, and of its three-fold objective: 1) to provide opposition and an alternative to the traditional political system and to its theatre; 2) to appeal to the "common man" (who is often excluded from that theatre); 3) to educate the common man so that he might change the traditional social and political system.

The Mime Troupe is the latest in a series of antithetical theatres which have worked against the status quo for a new synthesis of theatre and society. As Shaw said: "[A] drama with a

social question for the motive cannot outlive the solution of that question."<sup>1</sup> Or, to rephrase: "If the Mime Troupe finally succeeds in all its goals, it will put itself out of a job." In the meantime, the work of the Mime Troupe may delight us or alienate us; it may entertain us or prod us into action; it may produce "good" theatre or "bad" theatre. But, whichever it does, the chances are that it certainly won't be boring; its theatrical heritage is simply too exciting.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> George Bernard Shaw, "The Problem Play - A Symposium,"  
in Shaw on Theatre, ed. E.J. West (New York: Hill And Wang,  
1958), pp. 59-60.

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A STUDY OF NONTRADITIONAL POPULAR THEATRES OF SOCIAL ACTION  
AS HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS TO THE SAN FRANCISCO MIME TROUPE

by

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B. A., Southwestern College, 1974

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Speech

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1978



Since its founding in 1959, the San Francisco Mime Troupe has been a consistently energetic and responsible element in the counterculture of the Bay Area. Its existence has been characterized by three distinct stages of development as it has sought to realize a three-fold objective: 1) to provide opposition and an alternative to the traditional political system and to its theatre; 2) to appeal to the "common man,"; 3) to educate the common man so that he might change the traditional social and political system.

This study charts those theatres and events of the past one-hundred years which have contributed to the Mime Troupe's synthesis of these radical theatre objectives. In a comparison of philosophy and techniques, it traces historical parallels to the Mime Troupe as typified by such antecedents as the Thesis playwrights of the mid-1800s, Naturalism, the independent theatres, the Volksbühnen, Expressionism, the Russian workers' theatres of the early twentieth century, the theatre of Meyerhold, the theatre of Piscator and Brecht, and the American social theatre of the 1930s.

While these antecedents contributed elements of philosophy and technique to the Mime Troupe, it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that a true synthesis of all these movements was realized in the work of the Mime Troupe. The San Francisco Mime Troupe is the latest in a series of antithetical theatres which have worked against the status quo for a new synthesis of theatre and society.