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The Relationship Between Literature and
Counterculture: The Example of British and American
Counterculture of the 1950s and 1960s
(Smjer: književnost i kultura)

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the counterculture of the late 1950s and 1960s and literature has always been a close one. Whether it was the appropriation of works by the preceding Beat Generation or well-established writers such as Huxley or Hesse, the artistic and literary self-representation of the counterculture in the so-called “underground press”, the revival of the protest song and the poetics of rock and roll, the psycho-spiritual accounts of hallucinogenic experience in psychedelic literature, the anti-war manifestos and agit-prop pieces of the New Left or the anarchist experiments of avant-garde theatre, the counterculture of the 1950s and 1960s was as much about creating its own forms and rules of cultural production and consumption as it was about questioning and opposing the mainstream. The result was a vibrant mixture of varied cultural practices, some of them so diverse and different from each other that their loose relation to what is now broadly defined as the counterculture of the era is their single common denominator and, if it were not for the role they play in the overall mosaic of the aspirations and sentiments of the time, they would have hardly even been considered in the same context. Nevertheless, both academic and popular categorisation, for all their limitations and oversimplifications of a complex period of social, political and cultural change, have allowed us to see such a diverse spectrum of phenomena as being the innovative expression of a similar mentality of disillusionment with the espoused ideals of post-war life in a mass, techno-industrial society.

In other words, while, for example, Bob Dylan, Allen Ginsberg or the Living Theatre were all working in differing fields and traditions, they are all seen as sharing the dual sentiments of disillusionment with the existing state of relations and the drive to bring about change. More importantly, they could all be described as being the products of the specific social and cultural atmosphere of their time.

However, not all forms of artistic or literary expression were equally suited or, rather, an equally appropriate vessel for truly and successfully engaging the ideals of the counterculture, particularly in the realm of everyday, lived experience. Prose or poetry, while nonetheless immersed in their own critique of conformity, imperialism or various forms of injustice in western societies, could only produce the desired mobilising effect in a more indirect, latent fashion. While poststructuralist theory has highlighted the social aspects of text, whether as it is being read or as it is being written, the fact remains that, particularly if we consider the counterculture of the 50s and 60s in its explicitly political facets, the inherently social nature of performativity provided a more direct means of tackling the ideas and attitudes of the counterculture. While, for example, poetry could also utilise performativity to incite transformation, as evidenced by the 1955 reading of Ginsberg's *Howl* at the Six Gallery in San Francisco¹, now considered a seminal moment in the history of both the Beat Generation and American countercultural literature, the performativity and inherent social nature of theatre proved a more fertile ground for political and psychological experimentation. Countercultural poetry and prose could remain confined to the more intimate level of personal indulgence and required an act of public reading to directly engage their target audience with the ideals and promises of a society beyond what was known and lived at the time, i.e. to do so without any intermediary steps or delayed psychological processing.

¹ Todd Gitlin described the event in dramatic terms, claiming that “for the first time in the American twentieth century, poetry read aloud became a public act that changed lives“ (45). Ironically enough, there is no absolute scholarly consensus on whether Ginsberg had initially intended to write a performance poem. Jonah Raskin, for example, claims that the powerful echoes of the public readings gradually shaped *Howl* to become more and more of a performance piece (171). Gitlin's account confirms that the sheer power and impact of the public reading was what created the initial impetus for the rise of the late 50s beat culture, confirming that the social impact of a work can be accentuated by its adaptability to performance.

Theatre, on the other hand, could address the audience directly, elevate them from passive consumers to active participants and creators and, ultimately, create a space where the ideals of the counterculture could be lived and experienced first-hand. Furthermore, this could not pertain to the audience alone, but would have to include all the people traditionally involved in theatrical production and the myriad of roles they had to perform in the process – writers, actors, directors, choreographers, etc. Finally, it would have to include the community, both in the more narrow sense of “local community” and in the broad, global sense of “the people of the world”. All of this could not be achieved through other literary forms, or even most other artistic ones. Performativity and the collaborative social organisation of theatre were, in this sense, a guarantee of political mobilisation and consciousness-raising.

Of course, while a properly thorough study of how literature shaped and represented counterculture (and vice versa) would necessitate the inclusion of other forms of literary expression, the above-given reasoning serves to show that even a broader exploration of the theme would require us to assign a somewhat privileged status to theatrical performances.

In short, the aim of this paper is to examine the mutual relation between literature and counterculture in the context of how countercultural ideals were both lived and represented in experimental and avant-garde drama and theatre of the 1950s and 1960s. A revolution in the ways theatre was produced and consumed might have been brewing in the background since the inter-war years, if not before, but by the end of the 1960s, it had truly become a powerful and globally recognised phenomenon, with the most lively scenes working in what was later dubbed *fringe theatre* in the United Kingdom and *Off-Off-Broadway* in the United States. In order to understand why and how this could have occurred, the paper will address the key influences and respective origins of Off-Off-Broadway and fringe theatre. An overview of

representative authors, theatrical organisations, troupes and performances will provide the basis for the exploration of how contextual similarities and differences, along with moments of interaction, exchange and collaboration between the two scenes, ultimately shaped their development – both in the political and artistic sense. Finally, the paper will look at the legacy of countercultural theatre and attempt to provide an interpretation of the causes of its eventual decline.

DEFINING THE COUNTERCULTURE

The counterculture of the late 1950s and 1960s – with emphasis on the latter, particularly in its American incarnation – has been widely represented in popular culture both at the time of its heyday and beyond it. The caricatured images of the beret-wearing beatnik and the bearded hippie have evolved from defamatory images conceived in the mainstream media of the time to standalone tropes and symbols whose visual representations, attitudes and mannerisms have been disseminated throughout contemporary popular culture. Instantly recognisable, they have come to stand for traits ranging from pretentiousness and a distinctly forced “edginess”, the subcultural *Other* of conservative, middle-class normality, to the more benevolent, yet equally banal notion of delusional idealism in the form of the peace-loving “flower child”. In order to avoid falling into the dual traps of over-romanticisation and stereotyping, as well as for the purposes of relating all further analyses of countercultural literature and theatre back to a starting definition of the phenomenon, this section will attempt to provide a functional outline of the tenets, goals, ideals and basic features of the 1950s and 1960s counterculture.

Theodore Roszak’s *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* is certainly among the most influential non-fiction accounts of the counterculture. Originally published in 1969, the analysis appeared at a point perceived to be the peak of the countercultural phenomenon, both in the US, the location of Roszak’s immediate audience, and globally. As the mention of the “youthful opposition” in the work’s title would undoubtedly imply, Roszak framed his analysis primarily in the terms of an intergenerational conflict, the generational gap between what is often referred to as the Silent Generation in the US and their Baby-Boomer children. This tension between the youth

and their elders had as much to do with differing perspectives on life and society, as with the distribution of power, which allowed the older generations, or established elites, to enforce a particular view of the world on the youth, or the up-and-coming elites. However, faced with a broad and diverse group of people whose main, if not only, unifying characteristic seemed to be a vague sense of disillusionment and dissatisfaction, Roszak had to identify what exactly constituted the common source for these feelings of resistance, i.e. the common enemy for groups as diverse as anti-war protesters, college dropouts, revolutionary leftists, bohemian spiritualists, psychedelic enthusiasts and rock and roll rebels.

Upon initial inspection, the situation seemed to be outside of the grasp of any traditional theoretical framework. Roszak believed that familiar categories such as the left-right political dichotomy could not truly define the essence, let alone the full scope, of what the youth counterculture seemed to be fighting for or against (2). While the youthful rebels, particularly those in Europe, attempted to appeal to well-established allies – the working class, trade unions and leftist parties – their appeals for solidarity were ignored at best or, ironically, went on to produce the exact opposite effect at worst. Post-war consensus politics seemed to have co-opted the traditional revolutionaries, who had become a token feature of mainstream politics, while the *événements de mai* in France demonstrated that “even the factory workers who swelled the students’ ranks from thousands to millions during the early stages of the May 1968 General Strike seem to have decided that the essence of the revolution is a bulkier pay envelope” (Roszak 3). Furthermore, even though the vanguard of the new revolution was firmly rooted among the middle-class university students, the targets of their opposition, immediately personified in their bourgeois parents, were the exact same tokens of privilege the higher education system was designed to ensure them – a retention of upwards-aspiring status in the reproduction of elites, along with the associated material benefits and

socio-cultural capital. If their struggle could not be described in terms of the left-right political spectrum or traditional class politics, what was the social force that drove the transformation of “the age-old process of generational disaffiliation (...) from a peripheral experience in the life of the individual and the family into a major lever of social change” (Roszak 1)?

The answer, not entirely surprising in the context of 1960s high modernity, was – technocracy, “the social form in which an industrial society reaches the peak of its organizational integration” (Roszak 5). However, the technocracy is not merely a set of social relations that upholds the organisational structure, i.e. the political economy of modern industrial societies; it is also the driving ethos that shapes its cultural totality, “the ideal men usually have in mind when they speak of modernizing, up-dating, rationalizing, planning” (Roszak 5). It is the soul of the “new social organism whose health depends upon its capacity to keep the technological heart beating regularly” (Roszak 6). Taking inspiration from Jacques Ellul and Daniel Bell, the distinguished voices of an academic techno-scepticism that began emerging in the 1950s, Roszak delivers a vision of the all-encompassing technocratic mindset, forged in the fires of proto-industrial modernity to eventually become the ideology above all ideologies:

Drawing upon such unquestionable imperatives as the demand for efficiency, for social security, for large scale co-ordination of men and resources, for ever higher levels of affluence and even more impressive manifestations of collective human power, the technocracy works to knit together the anachronistic gaps and fissures of the industrial society. The meticulous systematization Adam Smith once celebrated in his well-known pin factory now extends to all areas of life, giving us human organization that matches the precision of our mechanistic organization. So we arrive

at the era of social engineering in which entrepreneurial talent broadens its province to orchestrate the total human context which surrounds the industrial complex. Politics, education, leisure, entertainment, culture as a whole, the unconscious drives, and even, as we shall see, protest against the technocracy itself: all these become the subjects of purely technical manipulation. (Roszak 6)

Seeing that the technocratic society and its opposition are both the legacy of the tumultuous developments of the 18th and 19th centuries, i.e. the “original sin” of modernity, the sentiment itself hardly comes as new. After all, our collective interpretations of “the shock of the new” always seem to oscillate between conquest and crisis. However, Roszak’s analysis points at a significant feature of the counterculture that gives it a somewhat specific status in the history of social phenomena and subversive communities – the counterculture “arose not out of misery, but out of plenty; its role was to explore a new range of issues raised by an unprecedented increase in the standard of living” (Roszak xii). They are the children of the technocratic society, but at the same time aspire to become its undoing – a seemingly paradoxical position reminiscent of the role Marx originally envisioned for the industrial proletariat in western societies, but which seemed to have become compromised by the increased level of co-optation and co-operation of the working class in preserving the mechanisms of capitalism. In the paragraph quoted above, Roszak reminds of the inherent danger of this position; namely, the fact that the influence of the technocratic mind-set is so pervasive that even the resistance itself can become the subject of “purely technical manipulation”.

Both of these points are also addressed in Herbert Marcuse’s seminal 1964 work *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, one of the

ideological leaders whose theories heavily influenced both the counterculture and the New Left of the 60s (*One-Dimensional Man* 22, 31, 102).

According to Marcuse, as both the real-socialist East and the capitalist West continue to succumb to increasing social control, whether in the form of consumerism or bureaucratisation, and the revolutionary potential of the traditional opposition in industrial societies rapidly wanes, the need arises for a new torch-bearer of this potential, as well as for new strategies of resistance. The vanguard of this new rebellion, among others, are university students and radicalised intellectuals, while the strategy of their rebellion derives from what Marcuse dubs “the Great Refusal“:

In proclaiming the 'permanent challenge' (*la contestation permanente*), the 'permanent education', the Great Refusal, they recognized the mark of social repression, even in the most sublime manifestations of traditional culture, even in the most spectacular manifestations of technical progress. They have again raised a spectre (and this time a spectre which haunts not only the bourgeoisie but all exploitative bureaucracies): the spectre of a revolution which subordinates the development of productive forces and higher standards of living to the requirements of creating solidarity for the human species, for abolishing poverty and misery beyond all national frontiers and spheres of interest, for the attainment of peace. (*Essay on Liberation* ix–x)

Merited to an extent by its status as a sociological and political *novum*, the post-war counterculture was obviously assigned a significant historical burden. However, as time went on to show, the Great Refusal turned out to be more of a polite rejection, if not reserved acceptance.

The cultural influence of the beat and hippie movements, along with that of their assorted satellites, extends far beyond their fringe origins. Simultaneously inciting and being indicative of a broader shift in the mores and attitudes of greater society, their lasting legacy in the most basic terms is a firm and undeniable stamp on both the mainstream and its alternatives, whether in the political, cultural or social sense. Nonetheless, the question remains if this constitutes the lofty revolutionary goals advocated by Marcuse or simply serves to prove the endless capacities for co-optation and integration of oppositional views by technocratic capitalism. The answer, seemingly dependant on whether the chosen perspective is that of an optimist or pessimist, is largely beside the point. On the one hand, claiming that all oppositional politics eventually drifts onto the path of co-optation would imply a uselessness that does little but accept the ultimate passivity of things; on the other, the fact remains that the kindles of countercultural resistance died out much sooner than the initial explosion would have suggested, with, in some cases, an almost straight line from hippie to yuppie.

At this point, it would help to approach the issue from a more traditional, stratification-based analysis and bring back to mind the largely middle-class structure of the western counterculture. As emphasised from Marx to Bourdieu, there is more to class than economics and the totality of one's class position depends not just on their material assets or role in production, but also on a shared set of learned values, ideals and assumptions about the world, i.e. the cultural capital of a particular class culture (Haralambos and Holborn 72, 836-838).

The luxury of engaging in activities as exciting as revolutionary politics, alternative arts, spiritualist retreats or psychedelic exploration is largely reserved for those who have a safety net of relative affluence to fall back into if their excursion into the forbidden (or at least frowned upon) turns out to be a failure. Politics of the western working classes, on the other hand, had changed since the days of pre-war militancy to accommodate the fact that the proletariat, who had nothing to lose but its chains, would now have to risk losing the family car, the new TV set or the house in the suburbs – a point also made by Marcuse in discussing his theory of false needs under capitalism (*One-Dimensional Man* 15-16). Of course, this improvement in living standards under the welfare regimes of the 1950s and 60s did not necessarily extend to all members of the working class, many of which continued to face the traps of poverty, but did instigate enough of a shift in the tradition of working class radicalism to be noticed by keen observers. Stephen Brooke quotes Ferdynand Zweig, the Polish-born sociologist and economist who had immigrated to the United Kingdom and went on to study its working class: “working class life finds itself on the move towards new middle-class values and middle class existence... the change can only be described as a deep transformation of values, as the development of new ways of thinking and feeling, a new ethos, new aspirations and cravings.” (773).

With the radical working class politics of the mass organisations and trade unions of the 1920s and 1930s on the wane and with a tendency for middle-class youth to assume the revolutionary mantle, the political ideals of the counterculture could be summarised as a combination of elements directly borrowed from the old revolutionary socialist tradition and an individualist drive towards freedom from the totalitarian dominance of the technocracy, metaphorically represented as “the System”. However, the fact that their espoused ideals hark back to Marx or Bakunin (or seek inspiration from contemporaries such as Che Guevara or

Mao) could not entirely conceal the pervasive influence of their own class culture, i.e. the political baggage brought along from their suburban middle-class homes that the counterculture so vehemently wanted to shed and oppose. This is not to say that the result was a mere repetition of “daddy’s politics” – if for nothing else then for the dialectics of history – but helps remind that middle-class esotericism, particularly in the case of politicised countercultural art, can nominally be painted as being “for the people” and at the same time remain entirely disconnected from the realities of anything but middle-class life. This idea will be further elaborated in the following sections, where different approaches in British and American countercultural theatre to resolving the tension between the ideals of the Great Refusal and the material realities behind the process of theatrical production will be discussed (including the discrepancy between high-brow theoretical foundations, experimental and avant-garde sensibilities and popular, revolutionary aspirations towards political mobilisation).

THE ORIGINS OF COUNTERCULTURAL THEATRE

While the exact circumstances in which British and American theatre had found itself at the onset of the 1950s varied to reflect historical and contextual differences, it could be argued that a similar feeling of dissatisfaction had slowly begun to brew both within the theatrical mainstream and on its fringes (Pattie 68-70; Nicholson 29-31). Towards the end of the decade, the revolt against the stifling constraints of theatrical conventions, whether thematic, formal or infrastructural, had grown into a loose, yet recognisable movement, attaining broader public visibility and stirring a wave of associated reactions, both positive and negative (Nicholson 54-58). Although their origins were somewhat shared, particularly in the American case, the turn of the decade would also mark the point at which the nascent counterculture would begin to openly embrace alternative theatre, and vice versa, as one of its modes of cultural and political expression.

In the United States, the 1950s had ushered in an era of unprecedented economic prosperity, initially marred only by the political turmoil of the early Cold War period. In the United Kingdom, on the other hand, the atmosphere of wartime austerity was still strongly felt in the early years of the decade, with certain elements of the food rationing system, for example, still in place as late as 1954. However, in as little as three years, British society had embarked on its own adventure in post-war growth, leading conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan to famously exclaim that “most of our people have never had it so good” (Pattie 10). High employment rates and growing wages, coupled with the rise of consumerism and household technology, reflected themselves in a distinct feeling of optimism, both the “official” one, as represented by proclamations from governmental figures such as Macmillan, and the optimism of the common man, i.e. the myth of “the golden age” most vividly

preserved in the form of retro-nostalgia. However, correlated or not, the booming 1950s are also often associated with a pronounced conservatism and an over-bearing pressure to conform to what was deemed the standard of normality – a theme that would become central in the subversive works of the time.

In the United Kingdom, the first signs of dissent (or, at least, the first that significantly caught the public eye) would appear with the rise to prominence of the so-called Angry Young Men and their own brand of “kitchen sink drama”. Represented by the likes of Bernard Kops, Allan Sillitoe, John Wain, Arnold Wesker and, most notably, John Osborne, their works expressed a disdain for the self-serving traditionalism and rigid elitism of the British class system, as well as the frustrations and false promises of the welfare state (Pattie 146-150). In theatre, their rise mainly came about as a reaction to the formal and thematic constraints of the well-made play, the 19th century genre that had still enjoyed considerable popularity among British theatrical circles (*Post-War British Theatre* 50-51, 75). Usually set in a stereotypical drawing room environment, well-made plays were firmly embedded in the idealised world of middle-class values and life, as would have been both familiar and acceptable to their target audiences. This, in turn, stimulated the box office mentality of major stakeholders in the world of commercial, primarily West End, theatre and helped create a system weary of any form of artistic risk, with pre-conditioned audiences and a well-greased “star system” of actors such as Laurence Olivier and Noël Coward bringing in the profits as they jumped from one “proper” role in a “proper” play to another (*Post-War British Theatre* 30-31). In such conditions, the gritty realism and working class anti-hero of John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*, now seen as a turning point in post-war British drama, signalled more than just a simple change in tastes. The extent to which this influenced the countercultural and avant-garde theatre of the 1960s is up for debate, but it most certainly expanded horizons and

prepared the theatre-going public for a broader questioning of what constitutes the concerns of theatre.

If, however, a precise moment of origin for the rise of British fringe and countercultural theatre had to be defined, it would almost certainly have to be the staging of the Royal Shakespeare Company's Theatre of Cruelty Season in 1964. The events, consisting mainly of workshops, improvisational pieces, experimental and work-in-progress performances, attracted a significant amount of public attention, with reactions ranging from enthusiastic approval to outright shock and disgust (Nicholson 54, 57). For the RSC, which had been working on its own attempts to successfully "brand" itself, this was a mixed blessing, but for those eager to engage in theatrical experimentation the season heralded the arrival of a new and exciting period of change, akin to what had already begun to unfold in the greater society around them. For Charles Marowitz and Peter Brook, *les enfants terribles* behind the season and two among the most influential, key figures in British alternative theatre, this was also a significant personal breakthrough.

It should be noted, however, that the Theatre of Cruelty Season merely signalled the start of a coming explosion in fringe theatre, rather than a firmly established moment of conception. Elements of what has now come to be defined as the fringe theatre of the 1960s had existed long before and the scene would later routinely borrow from, for example, the pre-war music hall tradition and various forms of amateur or popular theatre, which were often performed in improvised, non-theatrical spaces such as the back rooms of pubs (*Post-War British Theatre* 152, 156). After all, the term "fringe" itself comes from the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, the unofficial alternative to the main programme of the Edinburgh

International Festival that had been organised annually since the late 1940s² (*Post-War British Theatre* 141). The Traverse Theatre of James Haynes, the American-born hero of the British cultural underground, had also been founded prior to the Theatre of Cruelty Season, in 1963. As far as countercultural literature in a broader sense is concerned, the influence of the Beat Generation and beatnik subculture had also begun to spill over to Britain's shores from the United States in the late 1950s, with Michael Horovitz as one of the most recognised representatives of "the British Beat" (Grace and Skerl 145). Nonetheless, the impact of such movements, while certainly vital, mostly pales in comparison to the resounding shockwave sent out by the Theatre of Cruelty Season.

In the USA, on the other hand, the theatrical revolution and the rise of the Off-Off-Broadway scene, the American counterpart to the British fringe, was already in full swing by 1964³. Not entirely unlike Britain, the American scene also found its intellectual predecessors in the literary mavericks of the previous generation, figures like Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Gertrude Stein, playwrights who had established themselves by walking the fine line between mainstream popularity and critical artistic sensibilities (Sainer 10). As champions of social commentary and pioneers of an American brand of domestic realism, they were embraced by the up-and-coming directors and playwrights of Off-Off-Broadway, with performances of Williams's plays, for example, staged at both Caffe Cino and Ellen

² The term was also associated with the comedic stage revue *Beyond the Fringe*, which had premiered in 1960 and is now often seen as the start of a parallel shift in tastes in British satirical comedy.

³ Surprisingly, the other global centre of new experimental theatre was none other than Poland, where Jerzy Grotowski and his Theatre of 13 Rows (later the Teatr Laboratorium) were attempting to develop a unique approach to both performance and actor training inspired by, among others, Oriental theatrical forms and the psychology of Karl Jung. Peter Brook and Charles Marowitz were among of the key proponents of Grotowski's work and theories in the West (*Post-War British Theatre* 142).

Stewart's La MaMa (O'Connor 28). However, as the 1960s rolled in and the need arose for new and original works, their status was increasingly being questioned. This was probably merited to an extent by the pronounced celebrity status and integration into the Hollywood fame machine both Miller and Williams had experienced in the 1950s, but also by the perceived commercialism of their then-current works (Berkowitz 122). However, another important factor, and once again a parallel to British developments, was the re-discovery of Brecht and Artaud, as well as the growing popularity among the American literary and theatrical fringe of European dramatists such as Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Jean Genet (Berkowitz 121; Sainer 12).

The influence of Brecht and Artaud on both the British and American scenes can hardly be overstated. The revolutionary philosophy and political aesthetics of Brechtian theatre were more than suitable for alternative theatre's own ventures into political theatre as a tool for mobilisation. While seemingly incompatible with Brechtian Marxist rationalism, Artaud's sensory, post-verbal mysticism and ceremonialist approach to the theatre as a ritual-like practice, on the other hand, presented a convenient link with both eastern philosophy and the counterculture's anti-materialist and anti-alienation ethos (Puchner 327). Its use of shock as a means of inciting sensations beyond the scope of conventional theatre was also seen as contributing to the overall goal of "waking up" the spectator – something that would not necessarily be at odds with the intentions of the critical detachment advocated by Brecht (Munk 43). The comment by made Peter Brook on Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade*, the work that Brook helped bring to British audiences with great success, first as a stage play and then as a feature film, illustrates well how the Artaudian and Brechtian approaches were not necessarily seen as mutually exclusive by the new generation of dramatists:

Everything about his [Weiss's] play is designed to crack the spectator on the jaw, then douse him with ice-cold water, then force him intelligently to assess what has happened to him, then give him a kick in the balls, then bring him to his senses again. (*Post-War British Theatre Criticism* 150)

The marriage of Artaud's emotional shock-tactics and Brecht's detached rationalism provided an ample theoretical foundation for radical theatre, as well as a convenient way to unite the political aspirations of the counterculture with the ongoing revolt against conventional theatre. When semi-nude actors scream revolutionary and anti-war slogans as they descend into the audience from an exposed stage with no typical stage scenery (if any at all), as they do in productions of the Living Theatre's *Paradise Now*, the intent is to simultaneously challenge both social and artistic conventions (Munk 46-47). Of course, the contentious and provocative nature of radical theatre was not met with uniform approval, particularly among those whose oppressive views and hypocrisy it deliberately sought to call out. This was especially pronounced in the United Kingdom, where theatrical productions were subject to governmental censorship both through direct control from the Lord Chamberlain's Office⁴ and indirect pressures, inherent in the work through established institutions and the public funding system for the arts (*Post-War British Theatre* 159).

⁴ Theatre censorship was formalised in the form of the legal requirement to obtain a licence from the Lord Chamberlain's Office prior to the start of production. Although this was only abolished by the Theatres Act of 1968, legal loopholes, such as the fact that theatre clubs were not subject to the law, possibly coupled with a fear of bad publicity amid changing public tastes and opinions on censorship, allowed certain "suspect" pieces to slip by the censor even prior to its abolition (Nicholson 94).

In the United States, however, where the overall involvement of the government in the funding of the arts was more limited⁵ and based on a largely uncoordinated patchwork of local grants and acts of philanthropy, there was more space for the growth of a relatively self-sufficient DIY culture of underground theatre (Bottoms 279). While this arguably encouraged experimentation within the scene⁶ and allowed its development to take a more organic course, it also set up budgetary constraints, hindered the creation of the necessary infrastructure for the sustainment of such a theatrical community and limited the exposure of experimental theatrical productions (Bottoms 103). Unlike the commercial theatre of 1950s Broadway, which catered to familiar tastes and had a firm grip on its audiences, the avant-garde scene was not only required to work without a proper backing to rely on, but was also forced by necessity to essentially “create” its target audience.

When comparing the British and American cases, it becomes evident that the avant-garde, non-commercial and confrontational by nature, presents a distinct set of problems, both when it is integrated into institutional culture and when it is left to its own devices. If forced to scramble for public grants, even if this does not imply outright censorship, it runs the risk of becoming reliant on its source of financial resources and thus numbing its radical edge so that it would not offend either the moral tastes of the abstract “public” or the governmental representatives allocating funds in its name. Similarly, its lack, or sometimes overt rejection, of mainstream commercial appeal makes its survival difficult amid the conformity and

⁵ With the exception of organisations established under the FDR-era Works Progress Administration, namely the Federal Writers' Project and the Federal Arts Project, a national-level funding programme for the arts was largely non-existent in the USA until the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts in 1965.

⁶ Coincidentally or not, the modest, minimalist aesthetics of post-war avant-garde dramatists appear to have been a convenient workaround for the limited funds with which alternative theatres in the United States had to operate.

predictability of the commodified cultural market. In order to be self-sufficient without succumbing to commercialism, alternative theatre has to attract a wider audience, but reconciling avant-garde sensibilities and artistic integrity with mass appeal is not always an easy task. However, if one thing can be said with relative certainty, the backing of the publicly funded RSC certainly provided the necessary legitimacy for the Theatre of Cruelty Season to achieve such a resounding impact – one that would not have been possible without the associated public infrastructure and, by extension, without which the following explosion of alternative theatre in the United Kingdom would not have occurred.

THE POLITICS OF PERFORMANCE

By the end of the decade, many American and British theatres and groups had found themselves increasingly dependent on institutional support, which, as illustrated in the preceding section, often came with a price (Bottoms 269; Elsom 179). While a step up from the precariousness of their previous situation and a signal of the increasing respect and legitimacy the scene had managed to garner from the cultural establishment, these trends also had a latent effect on the essence of the theatres themselves. This was particularly true with regards to the activist aspect of radical theatre, which was by definition at odds with the existing political system. The following section will explore, based on prominent examples from the British and American scenes, how different groups attempted to resolve the uneasy tension between their changing status and countercultural activist aspirations.

If the view, arising out of New Historicist interpretations of Elizabethan theatre, that the geophysical location of theatre is reflective of its position within the broader structures of society was applied to post-war alternative theatre, the very terms *Off-Off-Broadway* and *fringe* would suggest a marginal position, a place off the beaten track both physically and conceptually. As with the Elizabethan “liberties”, the shabby cafes and abandoned buildings that had been repurposed as bohemian hangouts and later became hubs of countercultural activity, offered more than simply unconventional surroundings. These spaces and neighbourhoods were often associated with a certain “seediness” and seen as the shady gathering places of young beatniks at best or prostitutes, junkies, petty criminals and other “deviants” at worst (Stone 33-37).

These spaces were hardly constructed with theatrical activities in mind and could not be easily converted for such a purpose: there was often no stage in the traditional sense so the layout of the performance area and the arrangement of the *mise-en-scène* had to be adapted accordingly (Sainer 41). Furthermore, the action and the audience were hardly separated, particularly when the need arose to fit in as many spectators and seats as possible. However, the rudimentary surroundings within which the Off-Off-Broadway and fringe scenes prepared their first performances ultimately had a positive effect – the most obvious change, stemming from a combination of creative minimalist solutions and the need to adapt to the spatial constraints of non-theatrical venues, was the elimination of *ex cathedra* performance (Sainer 44). Rather than arranging the space with performers on one end and spectators on the other, the audience would often encircle the performance or the action could be spread out across various places in the room. Similarly, one could hardly speak of a typical “stage”, as there was seldom any sort of physical boundary that would delineate where the performance area begins. This was taken, mostly unintentionally, to the extreme in Caffè Cino, where normal bar activities would continue in parallel or even intertwine with the performance. Although primarily a bohemian hangout, another unforeseen bonus was that the informality of the caffè’s atmosphere allowed for a mixing of social classes, unprivileged groups and eccentric personalities in a very organic way – a goal to which the agit-prop groups of the latter half of the decade aspired, but only rarely managed to achieve (Stone 187).

The deconstruction of the traditional performer-spectator relationship ultimately had an underlying political implication. The lack of a separate stage or clearly defined proscenium, as well as the omission of a concealed backstage area that would help hide the technical aspects of the performance and maintain the illusion of realism, helped create the *Verfremdungseffekt*. However, the political connotations went even further if the traditional

relationship between the actors and audience is interpreted as a hierarchical one – a single emitter (the cast) relaying the message to a multitude of receivers (members of the audience). As the line between the two becomes blurry, the audience can both take a more critical stance to the performance, but also actively engage in it. Finally, with the audience as an active participant and contributor to the performance, the stage was set for the overturning and questioning of traditional notions of authorship.

The “happening” movement in performance art and experimental musical pieces such as John Cage’s *4’33”* had already begun to question the role of the spectator in the creation of the final work. By being included as an active participant, the audience effectively helps create and shape what is perceived as the end-product. In other words, contributions from the audience affect the work in such a way that their omission would consequently detract from the overall experience of the performance. While, in theatre, the choice of whether to (how to and to what extent) include the audience ultimately lies with the director, writer or other figure credited with authorial authority, the actual lines or actions, often improvised, have to be conceived and performed or uttered by the participating members of the audience themselves. In this regard, the merits of their participation make them no different from other actors, but also elevate them to some degree of authorial status. By extension, the credited cast, seeing that they also play an irreplaceable role in the creation and realisation of the work, would also have to be given proper acknowledgement and, to reflect this, included at an earlier point in the process.

After all, it is not just the director or playwright who puts their stamp on a work – actors, set, sound lighting and costume designers, choreographers, all manners of pre-production and production staff and, as the above goes to show, even the audience itself all

leave their mark on what becomes the end-result. The Bread and Puppet Theatre was among the first theatrical companies to embrace and highlight the social aspects of creative work – the Living Theatre, although the oldest Off-Off-Broadway group only later embraced collaborative ensemble work, as an extension of its anarchist political philosophy (Sainer 17, 27).

Today, one of the lasting images representative of the spirit of the 1960s counterculture is that of the commune. From agrarian hippie havens inspired by back-to-the-land philosophies, meditational spiritual retreats, revolutionary leftist collectives and resurgent worker cooperatives to the Manson Family, the idea of communal life appealed to the counterculture as an effective alternative to the alienation and dehumanisation of urbanised industrial society, as well as the rigidity and hypocrisy of middle-class family life (Roszak 66). In this sense, the establishment of countercultural communes was simultaneously, as a living example of the future society, a political tool with which to fight against the System and an attempt to escape its confines and pervasive intrusions into personal life. Many of these communal experiments attempted to introduce elements of direct or consensual democracy and thus abolish the typical hierarchical relations and structures which ruled external society (Roszak 150). In radical theatre, this meant the loosening of the traditional division of work and the democratisation of the creative process. By replicating the mechanisms of communal life, radical theatre companies directly embodied the ideals of the counterculture, and did so not just at the level of content, but also in the manner their work was produced and the structure of their internal organisation. Some of these endeavours, such as James Haynes's Arts Lab in London's Drury Lane, to which he moved his activities several years after leaving the Traverse Theatre, grew to become actual living communities, rather than just artistic ones, with members establishing permanent residence (*Post-War British*

Theatre 142). The consequences of blurring or removing the line between living and creating together were obvious, encouraging a level of connection and trust, both artistic and personal, which could not be easily replicated in more conventional settings.

The immediate effect of the democratisation and communalisation of the creative process was the deconstruction of the supremacy of the dramatic text, embodied in the hierarchical relation which gives the greatest amount of control over the work to the playwright or director (Sainer 12). Instead of assigning exclusive rights or authority over the dramatic text to a single person, radical theatres experimented with collective writing, improvisational work and organic creation. While the play might begin as a rough draft or a set of loosely defined ideas in the mind of an individual writer, the text and performance would then be continuously revised and added to in collective brainstorming sessions or experimental exercises. This would often extend beyond the first public performances, as the heavy reliance on improvisation and audience input would ultimately shed light on problematic parts or suggest new directions and themes to explore. Groups such as the Open Theatre, primarily due to Joseph Chaikin's impassioned attempts to overcome the individualism of the Stanislavsky Method, successfully created whole works solely out of free-form collaborative exercises and improvisational sessions (Sainer 109-111).

While artistically exciting in its own right, improvisational theatre and collective creation was not without its problems. Sometimes, the loose and unstructured approach to writing a play or preparing a performance would drag out for unnecessarily long periods of time or run into creative dead-ends, as it became difficult to isolate a unifying idea or theme around which to structure the end-result (Sainer 14-16). This was, logically, something to which audiences, used to more conventional, narrative-based theatrical performances, also

had to grow accustomed to – a problem which became more pronounced when the inclusion of audience participation did not produce the desired results. After all, audience members, for the most part, had neither the actors' training nor the writer's artistic sensibilities and would often rely on clichés or stereotypes, i.e. giving the conventionalised responses and answers which they believed to be expected of them, rather than channelling the “authentic” emotional experience the artists wanted to incite (Sainer 210-215). Furthermore, the outward elimination of traditionally credited authorship and the production of works exclusively under the moniker of the ensemble did not necessarily mean that everyone believed their contributions to be equal to those of others. As the radical spirit of the preceding decade began to wane in the 70s and many companies began to fall apart, the question of authorship began to rear its ugly head, provoking debates, e.g. in the case of the Teatro Campesino or the Living Theatre, on whether certain figures profited from the seemingly anonymous work of the ensemble or received undue credit for what were in fact collective creations (Harding and Rosenthal, 12).

However, if one was to judge the overall legacy and effect on theatre in general, collective creation certainly had its merits and was definitely a long-awaited acknowledgement of theatre's inherently social character. As has been mentioned above, the corollary of introducing collective improvisational creation was the deprivileging of the dramatic text, an idea which, echoing Artaud, paved the way for a wide array of future developments in avant-garde theatre. If theatre is not obliged to conform to the authority of the dramatic text, then the void it leaves behind can be filled by anything from improvisation or audience participation, both discussed in the previous paragraphs, to audio-visual media, expressive choreography and ambient effects. In the United Kingdom, a whole section of the fringe scene, as defined by John Elsom, was devoted to multimedia performances and rock'n'roll spectacles (*Post-War British Theatre* 153-154). In the US, Richard Schechner

began work on what he would later dub “environmental theatre” – a type of theatre deeply focused on the use of ambient space and the way the audience and the performers interact with their immediate physical surroundings (Sainer 19-20).

By introducing collective collaboration and non-hierarchical ensembles, the radical theatres of the 1960s set out to reform both theatre and everyday life according to the ideals of the counterculture. The inclusion of the audience and the everyday public, however, was also a deeply political act. By reaching out to the broader, non-theatrical community, radical theatres worked to spread the word of the countercultural revolution. Whether it was anti-war activism or an exploration of racism, police brutality or free love, the point was not simply to agitate for a cause, but to encourage the public to actively experience the fact of resistance and life beyond the status quo. In other words, radical theatre aspired to create a living sense of countercultural community, both at the level of internal organisation and with their audience (and even to the point of eliminating the division between the two) – one which would use the transformative power of performance to illuminate the true potential, spiritual, political or otherwise, hidden inside individual people and, by extension, society at large.

Although more easily described as loosely spiritual rather than explicitly religious, alternative theatres of the 1960s often looked towards organised religion as a source of familiar tropes, rituals and symbols that could be used to (re-)create the spectacle of communality inherent in, for example, Christian mass, Jewish temple service or ancient funeral rites (Sainer 31-39). Whether it was the borrowing of ritualistic elements such as prayer and chanting or a complete reimagining of religious ceremonies, the radical theatre movement sought to tap into both the performative potential and the communitarian aspect of religious activities.

For the American Bread and Puppet Theatre, this sense of community was embedded in the collective symbolism of the ritual of breaking bread, with the customary sharing of fresh bread, baked by members of the theatre themselves, included in their performances (Sainer 116). An added layer of interpretation sought to convey to the audience the idea that art, like bread, provides sustenance and is essential to human existence as much as food. Inspiration taken from religious rituals was also employed by the Living Theatre, with Richard Schechner describing one of the productions of *Paradise Now* as being conducted “like the Yom Kippur service”, to which Julian Beck and Judith Malina responded by saying that the play was structured like “any good ritual” (Schiele 155). In the UK, Peter Brook, for example, utilised ritual chanting and gestures for their power of communicating ideas non-verbally, thus creating mutual understating without the need to recourse to a common verbal language (Schiele 141-142).

To summarise, the appropriation of familiar religious rituals was, in this sense, an ideal vehicle for establishing communality and trust in the context of theatrical space. However, it also served to remind those involved that the same collectivist spirit, feelings of unity and authentic experiences had always been and in many ways still were important aspects of everyday life, i.e. that they both could and should be recreated even when the performance was over and the audience returned home, to places outside of either a religious or theatrical context.

Similar ideas, although with less of a religious tint, inspired the groups designated as “agit-prop theatre” in John Elsom’s categorisation of the British fringe scene, with the distinction being that their left-wing commitments and Marxist or anarchist philosophies

formed the *raison d'être* of their work, normally at the expense of formal experimentation (*Post-War British Theatre* 151). While many of the groups in both the fringe and the Off-Off-Broadway scene did not shy away from being overtly political and subscribed to some variation of left political ideology, thus making the agit-prop categorisation somewhat ambiguous⁷, it is true that one could differentiate with relative ease between a production by, for example, Nancy Meckler's Freehold company and one by the Red Ladder – the first being classified as environmental theatre and the latter as agit-prop by Elsom (*Post-War British Theatre* 148, 150). Although his categorisation primarily refers to the British scene, one could use a similar logic to separate the works of, to use a similar example, the Living Theatre from those of the San Francisco Mime Troupe in the USA.

In the UK, groups such as the Red Ladder, the Join Stock, the Welfare State and the highly influential 7.84 toured community halls and council estates to present plays on topical issues such as housing problems, English imperialism, exploitation and industrial action (*Post-War British Theatre* 151). Offering a combination of Marxist critique and populist aesthetics, the idea behind their approach was to use theatre to raise awareness among the exploited peoples and classes of the oppressive nature of the capitalist system, particularly in the way it affects their immediate community, and, consequentially, inspire them to organise and fight back against it. Although inspired by Brechtian songs and the tradition of the music hall, the populist character of their art is often misinterpreted or described in derogatory

⁷ Elsom himself highlights the fact that the four categories he outlines – environmental theatre, agit-prop, multimedia groups and neo-dadaism – were “really fringe styles, alternatives which many different companies adopted sometimes for a few months or a year, sometimes as house styles” (*Post-War British Theatre* 156).

terms, with accusations highlighting a supposed lack of sophistication when compared to the politicised work of the American companies:

The populism of the British agit-prop companies provided a marked contrast with the intensity of some Off-Off-Broadway companies, whose minds and political outlooks were filled by the Vietnam war and its surrounding doubts about the American Way of Life. The visits of the La MaMa company in 1967, of Chaikin's Open Theatre in 1967 and the Bread and Puppet Company in 1969 showed London audiences a forceful theatre launching general attacks against a range of American phenomena (its ad-mass outlooks, its neo-colonialism), beside which British fringe companies seemed somewhat parochial. They tended to be folksier, better-humoured (though not so funny) and more inclined towards documentary naturalism. (*Post-War British Theatre* 152)

The problem with this assessment of British agit-prop theatre lies with the fact that the "populist" and "folksy" elements of their work, while not necessarily a grand innovation in an artistic sense, nonetheless contributed to their greater political aims. After all, one opposite of populism is elitism, and the high-brow aspirations and convoluted aesthetics of some of the cited American groups simply would not have worked with, for example, an account of corrupt property developers and faulty housing policies with clear propagandistic intent and an outlined political direction. This is not to say that all plays by agit-prop groups, despite the name, were simplified propaganda. Elsom isolates Joint Stock and 7.84 as examples of groups whose writers could have easily worked for one of the major companies, but chose not to due to their political beliefs (*Post-War British Theatre* 151). Furthermore, sceptics could point to the Living Theatre's excursion in Brazil, where the ensemble's artists worked together with

people from local towns and villages, as an example of daring artistic experiments successfully meeting and expressing the immediate needs and problems of a local community in a politically potent manner. Without questioning the validity of either of these arguments, the fact does remain, however, that the political language of propaganda and the political language of art, while not fundamentally exclusive, do not necessarily mix well, particularly if the desired activist outcome comes at odds with the potential dangers of succumbing to the biased tastes of an idealised middle-class arts culture.

One way to describe agit-prop theatre would be to say that their primary focus was the message, rather than the medium, in the sense that what distinguished their work was a hard-hitting realist approach that questioned the conventions of society and not so much the conventions of theatre. However, it was precisely the politically-minded street theatres that offered a uniquely innovative and powerful answer to the questions raised by the radical theatre revolution – from that of theatrical space to that of audience interaction – by taking performance out of the theatres and into the streets. As cultural history has repeatedly shown, the most interesting developments often arise not out of radical newness, but out of re-inventing a familiar and proven concept. Street theatre, both as a quasi-profession and a form of popular art, was hardly new, but was given new life in the 1960s, with groups such as the San Francisco Mime Troupe, the Pageant Players and the Bread and Puppet Theatre taking inspiration from sources as diverse as guerrilla and revolutionary street theatre, carnival processions, *commedia dell'arte*, busking and the happening movement (Sainer 47-52).

The street is a unique socio-political space characterised by organic and immediate interaction which cannot be replicated in a space designated as theatrical, regardless of whether such a space would be a conventional theatrical venue or an improvised one.

Furthermore, the very act of designating a physical location as performance space – again, regardless of whether this would imply a traditional *ex cathedra* layout or an open and flexible one, where the audience and the action are not separated, etc. – brings with it a series of shared assumptions. Among these are the arbitrary boundaries which separate the theatrical space (normally the actual, physical walls of the building) from the external world. More importantly, however, this includes a shared set of conventionalised ideas of how one behaves in such circumstances as a spectator. The radical theatre movement might have begun to question these ideas and assumptions with various notions of audience participation and experimental use of space, but there was still a relative safety in performing before a well-behaved public which, while not sure what to expect, still had an interiorised knowledge of how to behave. Thus, the power to question, overturn, subvert and eventually break down these predetermined assumptions was more or less firmly vested into the hands of the performers, who could then use this shared knowledge to guide the audience through unfamiliar theatrical experiences without bringing either of them into danger.

Street theatre, on the other hand, could rely on this safety net of conventions to a much lesser extent. Compared to even the most improvised theatrical venue, the street was much more unpredictable – the performers were no longer on familiar terrain and the boundaries of convention could be broken in unexpected ways, without them being prepared and knowing how to react. It was not the performance itself that was threatened by, for example, improvised reactions running into a dead end or steering off into undesirable directions, but the very lives of the performers. Police could be called in to break up the assembled crowd or arrest the actors, hecklers could disrupt the play or a physical confrontation could break out, etc. Michael Brown of the Paegant Players related his account of how the unique problems, dangers and limitations of street theatre ultimately shaped their art:

A lot of what we did was forced on us by the limitations of the streets, parks, rooms, and non-theatres we performed in. For example, you can't use too much dialogue and there's no lighting. We had to keep in mind relevance, clarity, being seen and heard, the fact that people hadn't come prepared to stay for a long play but had been caught doing something else. Could props be moved in and out? Cops, right-wingers, hostility. If you're out in the heat all day, props and costumes have to be highly mobile, flexible, even collapsible. All our street-play props could be carried by half the cast... (Sainer 172)

The mobility of street theatre allowed some elements of the performances, or even entire plays, to effectively be used as organising tools during the campus strikes, political protests and anti-war interventions of the 60s. The intricate, larger-than-life puppets of the Bread and Puppet Theatre, for example, were a feature of protest marches as much as theatrical performances. The Pageant Players used their performances to help boost morale and organise picketers during a strike at Columbia University, with an actual strike organiser stepping in at a certain point and listing the places where additional people were needed. Prior to the strike, the group helped advocate against the presence of the Institute for Defense Analysis at Columbia by performing short agitprop plays around campus (Sainer 171-172). In similar fashion, El Teatro Campesino, the radical theatre company formally founded as the cultural wing of the United Farm Workers labour union, worked directly with the strikers involved in the five-year-long Delano Grape Strike, encouraging the strikers to use performance as a way of narrating their own experiences from the picket line and spreading the news of the strike (Harding 213).

THE DECLINE OF COUNTERCULTURAL THEATRE

While influential in its own right, the legacy of groups such as El Teatro Campesino, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, The Paegant Players or the British agit-prop theatres seems to have been overshadowed by the academically more potent work of companies like the Living Theatre, the Open Theatre or the Performance Group, i.e. the ones included in John Elsom's category of "environmental theatre" (*Post-War British Theatre* 147-150). This is particularly true of the political aspect of their work, namely their grassroots activist approach to politicised performance – one that was not intellectually or artistically sophisticated as the works of Peter Brook or formally experimental as that of Julian and Judith Beck or Richard Schechner, but that nonetheless helped bring a new vision of both theatre and politics to the people who would not have normally been exposed to such ideas, yet who could successfully utilise them for their own struggles and causes.

However, the issue of legacy ultimately has a more ambiguous side to it. The question of why certain groups are remembered and studied extensively – indeed, why certain groups managed to survive and still exist today, while others dissolve and fade into obscurity – goes back to the ideological tensions present since their inception in the 50s and early 60s.

Along with more basic political disagreements over ideological lines on topical issues of the day or personal disagreements between key members, an ever-present problem in the counterculture, from radical arts to radical politics, is that of co-optation. In theatre, this meant the uneasy line one had to walk between being accepted by the establishment and remaining authentic, particularly if mainstream acknowledgement implied a rise in status and, most importantly, access to greater financial assets. The notion of authenticity, remaining true

to one's convictions and so on, might seem vague and dependent on individual perspectives – and most likely is – but the traps of institutionalised culture, particularly for a self-proclaimed outsiders, are all very real.

Although true of the American scene as well, this was especially evident in the UK, where the fringe scene was always much closely related to official institutions and the state-sponsored system of arts funding. As the 60s progressed, a lot of the early fringe work had become dependent on public grants and other forms of financial or organisational backing (Banham 129). The positive sides of this were obviously an increase in the level of production, financial stability for both the companies and their key employees, greater visibility and public acknowledgement. However, the negative sides caused ruptures both within and outside the scene. Public funding of controversial productions gave political and social conservatives considerable leverage in debates on the merits of experimental or radical art, but also on the purpose of the whole system of public arts funding. By extension, it would seem that public funding would imply that the artist has some sort of responsibility to the taxpayer – not just in the transparency or accountability of how they spend the allocated funds, but also in the content that is produced, which should supposedly avoid offending the imaginary average citizen. Within the fringe scene, reliance on public grants brought accusation of selling out, while simultaneously creating a problematic dependence which would only become tragically evident as the austerity politics of the 70s economic crisis and the conservative cuts of the Thatcher government decreased the availability of state-sponsored funding (*Post-War British Theatre* 159). Coincidentally or not, as the companies became increasingly integrated into institutional culture, the themes and content began to change, shifting from the overtly political works of the 60s to more personal explorations of subjective experiences, intimate histories and the role of the body (Cohen-Cruz 95).

A similar shift in tones and themes occurred on the other side of the Atlantic. In the United States, however, the most significant blow to countercultural theatre came with the decline of the counterculture itself, rather than simply being a result of governmental interventions into arts funding policies. This is not to say that changing attitudes to public arts funding did not play a part in shaping the new tastes and concerns of Off-Off-Broadway, but what ultimately decided the course of these developments was the way status, audience and context had been transformed by the mid-1970s. The economic turmoil caused by the 1973 OPEC oil embargo signalled a shift in the dynamics of global politics, while the end of the Vietnam War, the rallying point and driving force for much of the counterculture's political activities, effectively suspended the motivating forces of opposition which had helped create a mass movement in the preceding decade. On the other hand, the status of Off-Off-Broadway itself had by that time been elevated to a level more palpable to the mainstream, with Off-Off-Broadway plays becoming eligible for the Drama Desk Awards in 1974, indicating a shift, long underway, from the gritty bohemia of the 50s to the more commercialised arts scene known today.

With the loss of a common enemy, the internal ruptures of an unlikely alliance of diverse resistance movements began to show. Some of these were present, although less visible, even before discouraging developments began to hint at the end of an era. The Open Theatre was formed after Joseph Chaikin left the Living Theatre due to feeling that their work placed too great an emphasis on its political message, the San Francisco Mime Troupe witnessed a period of intense internal disagreements which resulted with its Marxist-leaning members leaving, while similar degrees of in-fighting troubled the Free Southern Theatre, an integrated radical theatre group associated with the civil rights movement, when Gil Moses

and Denise Nicholas attempted to transform the theatre into an all-black company (Harding and Rosenthal 13).

The 1973 play *The Spring Offensive* by Arthur Sainer and the Bridge Collective is particularly emblematic of the widespread internal struggle between ideological commitment and dogmatism which affected the politicised elements of the counterculture for the greater part of its existence.⁸ The play brings home a message that goes beyond simple moralising on the merits of nonviolence. In a fundamentally violent and immoral system, there are no innocents. No matter the purity of one's intentions, a flawed system tends to produce flawed offspring and to look into the abyss in opposition often comes with the cost of realising that one has become a veiled reproduction of the very things they once vowed to fight against. Ironically, as its ideals and icons become commodities and its art becomes a cultural status symbol for would-be intellectuals and artistic trendsetters, one cannot help but wonder if this is precisely what has happened to the once radical counterculture.

⁸ Focusing on a short period in the lives of young radicals organised in a Weathermen-esque revolutionary cell, the play examines the complex, and often uneasy, relationship between the evils the group claims to be fighting against, undeniably real and undeniably atrocious, and their own internal struggles, tainted with hypocrisy, petty egoism and dogmatic rigidity (Sainer 221-245).

CONCLUSION

Today, the legacy of the counterculture is undeniable. In the world of theatre, the many types of formal and thematic experimentation championed by the pioneers of the 60s still excite and inspire daring artists around the globe. Despite all of their shortcomings, the counterculture and its art had a profound and transformative influence on both society and the conventions of artistic expression and spectator experience.

However, the tragedy of the counterculture lies precisely in the fact of legacy. Many of the influential groups of the alternative theatre scenes folded as early as the mid-1970s, with others to follow in the 80s – Edinburgh's 7.84 dissolved as recently as 2008. The ones that do remain, the groups assembled around the Performance Garage and LaMaMa in New York, the now-legendary groups like the Living Theatre, the Bread and Puppet or the Red Ladder, still working on new productions – all of these cannot help but feel somewhat anachronistic. The conflict between their proclaimed ideals, inherited from a by-gone age when their oppositional position carried a specific sense of relevance, and their contemporary status as cultural landmarks, as problematic as it is, is more illustrative of the inherent issues of politicised art and the counterculture than of some personal or professional failure of said companies or their leaders. With established tastes and audiences, mainstream recognition and funding (albeit often limited and insufficient), the work of the radical theatre companies has in many ways become a fashionable commodity, neatly packaged and designed for the conspicuous consumption of cultural and intellectual elites. What might have been dangerous or provocative in the streets has now become sterile and passive on the pages of academic journals and in the exhibition spaces of galleries and museums.

It seems that any assessment of either the counterculture or its art will carry with it a certain sense of ambivalence. On the one hand, as proven by the myriad of contemporary groups who find inspiration in the works of the Off-Off-Broadway and fringe pioneers, the theatrical revolution of the 60s did help pave the way for future developments. On the other, the radical theatre movement itself, much like the counterculture, seems to have succumbed to the pressures of middle-class sensibilities in the theatrical marketplace. From the fire of the barricades to the complacency of downtown galleries, what aspired to become an expression of popular discontent is now almost completely detached from any reality other than its own.

Nonetheless, there is something to be learned from the history of countercultural theatre.

The work of groups like the early El Teatro Campesino, the British agit-prop groups or the Pageant Players, ensembles that measured the value of their work by “getting their hands dirty”, by the extent of how closely they could come to sincerely expressing the concerns of their grassroots audience and how strongly they could motivate their spectators for political action, remains to be examined (and replicated) in greater detail, both for its political and artistic merits. As for the contemporary relevance of their approach, there is some truth, however, in the fact that a radical movement requires a radical context, which is to say that no revolution can emerge out of a vacuum.

In the words of John O’Neal of the Free Southern Theatre, “it is not the motion of the ship that makes the waves – it’s the motion of the ocean” (Cohen-Cruz 95).

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ABSTRACT

Along with being a frequent feature and theme in various forms of creative expression, the British and American counterculture of the late 1950s and 1960s has produced a significant body of its own cultural artefacts. Reflective of the aspirations and ideals championed by the diverse set of groups and movements partaking in the countercultural explosion, its cultural production sought to challenge conventions and explore new ways of both producing and experiencing art. In no field of artistic and literary work was this more true than in the world of countercultural drama and theatre. Examples from the American Off-Off-Broadway scene and British fringe theatre will be used to illustrate how radical theatres combined experimental art with political resistance, simultaneously devising a tool for political agitation, revolutionising and overturning traditional approaches and conceptions about theatre and, most interestingly, creating a microcosm of what the counterculture believed was the image of future society. Combining sociological insight and theatre studies, the analysis will rely heavily on theoretical explorations of the counterculture by Theodore Roszak and Herbert Marcuse, contemporaries of the tumultuous events of the 1960s. Beginning with a historical overview of the origins and early years of post-war experimental theatre on both sides of the Atlantic, the paper will examine the literary influences and social developments which helped set the stage for the subsequent rise of both the counterculture and radical theatre. The analysis will place special focus on the political aspects of performance in the fringe and Off-Off-Broadway scenes. Finally, after a brief account of the reasons which brought about the counterculture's decline, as well as those which ultimately affected the very essence of radical theatre and re-shaped its image in the mid-70s, the contemporary legacy and impact of the radical theatre movement of the 1960s will be assessed.

KEY WORDS: counterculture, Off-Off-Broadway, fringe theatre, radical theatre, political art