

Section 1: Research Digest

Performing Arts

Workers' Playtime

Theatre and the labour movement since 1970 [AU]

Alan Filewod & David Watt

Strawberry Hills, NSW 2001

Currency Press

ISBN 086819631-2; 286 pages; £19.50 [& £1.85 p&p]

Objectives

The aim of this study was to provide an account of contemporary theatre work that has engaged with the organised labour movements of Australia, Britain and Canada in the period since 1970.

Methodology

The research for this book is based on case studies of three theatre companies whose work has connected with the labour movements in their respective countries and of an Australian labour movement organisation which organises regular performance-based work each year. The research involved in-depth interviews with a range of individuals who have worked with and for these organisations, as well as desk research about the socio-historical contexts within which these organisations have all worked.

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Summary

The authors begin by drawing attention to the very changed circumstances in which theatre companies working with the labour movements in Australia, Britain and Canada are faced at the beginning of the twenty-first century, in comparison with the 1970s and early 1980s when this kind of work was relatively well supported by funding agencies and by trade union movements, and, indeed when trade unions themselves were considerably stronger. Political theatre companies have, as a result, had to transform themselves into what the authors call "strategic ventures", often working on a project-by-project basis rather than undertaking more permanent and continuous activities.

They trace the origins of recent political theatre in all three countries from the counter-cultural protests and student unrest of the late 1960s and 1970s and note how a number of companies emerging in this period came to recognise the need to make connections with the organised labour movements in their

respective countries, in order to reach more working-class audiences, develop touring circuits, expand the range of material for productions and generally be more effective and successful. In doing this many companies and individuals rediscovered earlier examples of political theatre in Europe and North America from the 1920s and 1930s.

The individual chapters on the three theatre companies describe their particular origins and the differences in both the historical contexts and development of their respective repertoires. In Britain Banner Theatre grew from a folk music revival and new left base, becoming established in Birmingham in 1973, with BBC broadcaster Charles Parker, who developed the "radio ballad" documentary, and folk musician Ewan MacColl as important early members and influences. Early productions were *Collier Laddie*, *The Saltley Gate Show* and *Steel*, all of which focused on working-class community and struggle. The authors distinguish Banner from other British companies involved in similar work because of their connections with the folk music revival and a tradition of "amateur" participation and the use of "actuality" - recorded interviews with working people - in their work.

In Australia, Melbourne Workers Theatre was founded in 1987 and had a close relationship with the railway industry and railway workers through being based at the Jolimont Train Maintenance Depot. The relationship with trade unions was not always easy but provided an early focus for work based on issues connected with engineering workplace trade union experience, such as *State of Defence*, and the contradictions and intrinsic difficulties contained within it. Over time, the company's work became affected by other issues - based, for example, on gender and cultural diversity - partly reflecting the need for more varied material to offer greater appeal to more diverse audiences, and in 1993 the company moved from its railway industry base to municipal-owned premises.

Ground Zero Productions of Edmonton in Canada is, the authors suggest, more of a strategic venture than a company and "has operated as a hybrid of fringe theatre and small business providing services to client groups and initiating its own artistic projects when arts council funding permits". The venture began in 1982 and has been run by its originator, Don Bouzek, since then, first in Toronto and Peterborough, before moving to Edmonton in 1997. Its first productions connected with the Canadian labour movement were in the later 1980s, with productions such as *Glow Boys*, about the Canadian nuclear power industry, *Where's the Care?* and *The Business of Health*, two union-specific productions from the early 1990s about the Canadian health service. Ground Zero has also produced issue-based videos and plays on labour history.

The fourth case study is of the Northern Territory Trades and Labour Council [NTTLC], which, since the mid-1980s, and initially using funding from the Australia Council's Art and Working Life Program, has employed community arts workers to

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revitalise the May Day celebrations in Darwin, a multicultural town with aboriginal, European and south-east Asian communities, by "re-theatricalising" the May Day march and involving hundreds of people as participants and thousands more as marchers or audiences. The NTTLC realised that to rejuvenate the event there had to be an appeal to children and families, and used a parade with a re-enactment of the Darwin Rebellion of 1918/19 using giant puppets.

In a concluding chapter the authors chart the changes in what they call the rise and fall of "working-class culture" and highlight the need for wider areas of support and interest in other contemporary issues connected with gender, cultural diversity and the environment to augment "working-class political theatre". They also note how changes in funding priorities have also compelled companies to work in new ways in order to sustain their activities.

Availability

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