"It's stock-taking time"

Political Theatre in the '80s

BY SY SYNA

Outside a tiny loft on downtown Church Street, a group of people are clustered, hoping for late ticket cancellations for the current production at The Theatre Exchange, a new Off-Off Broadway group whose space seats about fifty. The settings and, indeed, the very platform upon which the audience sits are ingeniously fashioned from scrap lumber found along Canal Street. The cast is young, but Alex Demetriev has directed them with such intensity that they successfully capture the spirit and savagery of post-W.W. I Germany.

On Broadway, Christopher Reeve, formerly of Superman fame, now plays a legless, homosexual Vietnam veteran in a comedy-drama that is part of a series of plays about the Talley family, written by Pulitzer Prize-winner Lanford Wilson. The production is supported by extensive publicity and a full ad campaign in the media.

At Joseph Papp's Public Theatre, a lobby display on the peaceful uses of atomic energy, complete with clicking Geiger counters, serves as a prelude to a peculiar theatre piece—a pastiche of fragments of *Faust* in the original German, a scatological nightclub routine, film clips from the Atomic Energy Commission, and several passages dealing with medieval alchemy.

In a church parish hall jointly leased by three theatre groups, a play unfolds about a Southern black man—a turpentine hauler who takes to train robbing because of the abuse he suffered at the hands of a bigoted sheriff. The story is interspersed with folk songs and blues played by an onstage group, and trenchant comment is provided by photographs of rural Southern life projected onto the rear wall, a format long in use by The Labor Theatre.

All of these are examples of Political Theatre, yet only The Labor Theatre is avowedly political in ideology. The Modern Times Theatre and The New York Street Theatre Caravan, with which it shares its church space, are the only political theatres left in New York, with a small scattering of others around the country.

DEFINITION AND HISTORY

What is Political Theatre if, as several critics have remarked, "*All* theatre is political"? Shakespeare called actors "the abstract and brief chronicles of the time." The theatre mirrors the life before it. That is Shakespeare's meaning and the meaning of those commentators who feel that the political embraces all realms of life. But Webster offers a more specific meaning for "political": It is "derived from government." Political Theatre, then, explores the impact of a government's policies on its people.

A distinction must be made between Political Theatre and Sociological Theatre, with which it is often confused. The latter deals with the interactions of people who represent different culture groups with different value systems. Thus *Abie's Irish Rose* is a quintessential sociological comedy. So is *Fashion*, written by Anna Cora Mowatt in 1845, which deals with a parvenue and her gauche attempts to make over herself and her family into high society figures. The thrust of both plays does not derive from any government policy but from personal values and foibles.

Political Theatre in America is older than the Republic. During the Revolution the British occupation forces on Long Island and Manhattan wrote and staged plays dealing with the current military situation for their own amusement and that of their Tory sympathizers. Troop entertainments were presented at Valley Forge to cheer Washington's dispirited soldiers. Even earlier, in what is now the American Southwest, a religious drama was performed by conquistadores to celebrate their victory over the Indians.

At the height of the Great Depression in 1935-36, some twenty-three overtly political plays opened on and Off Broadway (a term that critic Burns Mantle had coined only the year before). Now, midway through the 1980-81 season, an equal number of political shows have opened on, Off, and Off-Off Broadway, with many more announced and yet to come. Astonishingly the themes, and in some cases even the same plays, that animated the 1935-36 season generate the political current of this one: antiwar, civil rights, the American Dream, the domestic and foreign economic situations (with special emphasis on totalitarianism and communism).

WHY NOW?

We are not at war, yet at least seven antiwar plays have been mounted already, including Irwin Shaw's searing *Bury the Dead*, originally produced in 1935-36. According to F. Andrew Leslie, who handles the rights to the drama, Shaw refused to allow the play to be performed

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from 1950, the outbreak of the Korean War, until 1970. Mr. Shaw had said: "I'm afraid its plea for peace will be used with a certain cynicism by the Communists." Today a theatre group founded by Vietnam veterans has revived it.

We are not in the midst of a great depression. A new administration was swept into office promising an old rather than a New Deal—a return to conservative fiscal practices and economic stringencies. Why then has Arthur Miller offered us at this time *The American Clock*, a play that details the psychological ravages the Depression wrought on his family?

By now we know what Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Nathan Glazer pointed out in their sociological work, *Beyond the Melting Pot*—that the immigrant's dream of assimilation, and through it the enjoyment of the promise of America, has not been fulfilled. Yet four shows, each radically different in format, have asked: "What happened to the American Dream?"

Turmoil abroad gave us Brecht's *Mother Courage* in 1935-36; it gives us Brecht's *Drums in the Night* in '80-81, a saga of a returning veteran who finds political unrest, labor troubles, and corruption everywhere. The early Soviet comedy *Squaring the Circle*, which lampooned the new socialist state, was matched this season by *The Suicide* [see Sy Syna's interview with director Jonas Jurasas in *Worldview*, December, 1980—*Eds.*]. *Bitter Stream*, a dramatization of Ignazio Silone's novel *Fontamara*, dealt with the impact of Mussolini's economic policies on small farmers. Dario Fo's contemporary comedy, *We Won't Pay! We Won't Pay!*, deals with the effects of the current Italian government's economic policies on factory workers and their families and at this writing is still packing them in at the Chelsea Theatre Center.

Racism too is still the stuff of much contemporary theatre. Not only in Athol Fugard's *A Lesson From Aloes*, which makes vivid the impact of South Africa's apartheid policies on two whites and a black, but in a congeries of domestic plays examining the ramifications of America's racism within the black community: violence, drugs, crime, and economic deprivation.

BECAUSE . . .

Though he was writing about Shakespeare, the late critic Harold Clurman said: "Ours is a political day."

"It's in the air," commented Steven Tesich, author of *Division Street*. "When something's really in the air, you find more than one person picking up on it." Lanford Wilson, who wrote *5th of July*, agrees. "It's stock-taking time. Blame it on the census. Maybe we're all at a stock-taking age. You're looking around and asking, 'What can I do about it?' "

Division Street is a knockabout farce; *5th of July* is densely written in a Chekhovian style. These two plays, together with *Tintypes*, a musical review, and Sam Shepard's allegorical *True West*, examine the American Dream. For Mr. Shepard the Dream has become a nightmare of possessiveness. Two brothers want what the other has: job, talent, clothes, even personal space. *True West* forms a triptych with his two other recent plays, *Curse of the Starving Class*, about waste in America, and *Buried Child*, which deals with our heritage of violence and won the Pulitzer Prize.

Tintypes, conceived by Mary Kyte and directed by Gary Pearle, her husband and collaborator, has a score made up of popular songs from the turn of the century. The revue juxtaposes such familiar characters as Teddy Roosevelt, socialist Emma Goldman, and entertainer Anna Held (Flo Ziegfeld's first wife), with an anonymous Chaplinesque immigrant and an equally anonymous black woman. Through newspaper stories, speeches, some pantomimes, but mostly the contexts of these popular songs, *Tintypes* presents a cross section of America's hopes, dreams, and values.

"If you put together the popular music of a particular time, what you find out is, these songs reflected the deep concerns of people," observes Richmond Crinkley, the show's producer.

"*Tintypes* is set in a time when we believed in our absolute rightness," says director Pearle. "People really felt this whole national experiment was the pinnacle of human progress; and, therefore, if we started something going on in this world that we felt was wrong, nobody knew it better than we did and nobody could fix it better than we could. In fact, it was our obligation to fix it. There's a naïveté in that, and certainly it went too far.

"In the Vietnam war we proved to ourselves, maybe a little too much, that we don't have the monopoly on morality. By making a bad moral mistake, we lost a lot of faith in our ability to judge moral issues anywhere."

It is Langford Wilson's intention to set each play in his Talley series around a particular war in American history. "That's where the changes occur, of course," he said. "During peace there's barely time to assimilate all of the things we've had to learn during the previous war before there's another war that requires a completely new technology and a completely new identity. So we have intermittent peace in order for the domestic front to catch up with everyone else."

It was the wartime technology of atomic energy, and the subsequent efforts by government and industry to harness it for peacetime use, that is the subject of Joanne Akalaitis's *Dead End Kids*, an often sardonic excursion whose theme is "Don't grab a tiger by the tail."

For Arthur Miller that loss of faith began earlier, during the Depression. In a *New York Times* interview he remarked: "These days I smile a lot. History is a big joke. God is a comedian. Those beliefs I once had so much faith in are long past. Today I do all I can to get people out of communistic and fascistic countries. Communist regimes are adaptations of feudalism using contemporary technology."

John Howard Lawson, one of the original blacklisted Hollywood 10, grasped the same insight in his *Success Story*, originally produced by The Group Theatre in the '30s but recently revived Off-Off Broadway by the Jewish Repertory. In this play, revolving around a young man from New York's Lower East Side, Lawson perceives that the same desire to wield power animates both the capitalist and the radical.

Former radicals are the main concern of *Division Street*. A hapless ex-hippie has to handle a hooker; an

ex-wife; his black Polish landlady; a hostile, gun-toting restauranteur; a freaked-out former buddy from his radical days; and newspapers hurled through his window. "We produced it," said Gerald Schoenfeld, who heads the Shubert Organization, "because its satire was in the manner of Voltaire. It's a comment on what happens to revolutionaries in any age."

"Some of the people who are realizing what I'm saying now," comments playwright Tesich, "are the people who have been affected very deeply by the '60s and affected in a very positive way. Let's say that they didn't carry things to such an extreme that they burned out. They were not in the nucleus of the radical group, but flowed along with it in such a way that they were affected by the possibilities that emerged in that decade. If you came out of that decade, when everything was being tested, intact, then I feel you are there for the long haul. There are millions of people in the same position; and these people, who are now in their thirties and early forties, will be the backbone of the country."

For Italian playwright Dario Fo the backbone of his country are the industrial workers, who are receiving a diminishing portion of the pie. He remounted *We Won't Pay! We Won't Pay!* when Fiat laid off an initial fifteen thousand workers. Fo was denied a visa to attend the New York opening because of his alleged affiliation with the Red Brigade. Ronnie Davis, the founder of the famed San Francisco Mime Troupe, staged the Fo play in New York. In a *Village Voice* interview he remarked: "Reagan's taking away all aid to cities with rent control, he's taking away CETA and welfare, and we're all about six inches away from being in the situation of the characters in the play."

The contemporary English playwrights express their greatest concern for the young people. Stephen Poliakoff, in his *American Days*, is typical. He sets up an allegory in which three youngsters, each eager to get a recording contract, are manipulated by a capricious and whimsical executive. The radical guitarist has energy, but terrible songs; the punk rocker has only her fad going for her; and the pale, washed-out girl who finally gets the contract—obviously the hope of England—wants only to make enough money to emigrate to America. The picture is bleak.

THEN AND NOW

Though the subject matter of some contemporary political plays is grim, a comparison between them and their '30s counterparts reveals a startling difference in tone. Almost every contemporary play is either a comedy or has strong comedic elements. Even the revivals are heavily played for their comedy or given a sardonic interpretation. It is as though no modern producer could risk a straightforward, serious political drama. Indeed, as Bob Lucsier, co-producer of *5th of July*, shrewdly commented about the casting of Christopher Reeve: "There was talk of putting Bill Hurt in it, but without a name in it, it would not have addressed a large enough audience....A lot of people may walk in not giving a damn about the American Dream but will come out thinking about it."

The other key difference between then and now is the arena in which political theatre is presented. The 1930s had more ideological and overtly political theatre groups than we have now. Because of lower production costs and the fact that the Off Broadway movement was a fledgling, it was easier to move political plays onto Broadway for limited runs. That's no longer feasible economically, with musicals running over a million dollars and straight drama close behind. As a result, more and more of the action has shifted to the nonprofit Off and Off-Off Broadway houses. Only seven political plays have opened on Broadway proper, as contrasted with some twenty in 1935.

Today few political dramas can afford Broadway.

Off-Off Broadway is not a good gauge of audience response, since runs are limited by Equity fiat to twelve or fifteen performances. Nor are Off Broadway houses with heavy subscription lists an accurate measure; both the Hudson Guild and the Manhattan Theatre Club seem to sell out for every type of show.

The Broadway arena is the best index, but here production and promotion factors are most significant. Both *Tintypes* and *5th of July* continue to do well. *Division Street* closed after seventeen performances, primarily because of its heavy-handed farce, which overbore the political context. *The Suicide* lasted only a while longer despite a dazzling production and a Herculean acting job by Derek Jacobi. Here the fault was plainly the thinness of the script—a complaint that, Stalin wrote in 1931, his colleagues made to *him*.

A Lesson From Aloes, an otherwise powerful and compassionate play, was figuratively strangled in its cradle by its own father. Athol Fugard directed it himself. Though no less an authority than Peter Brook claims Fugard a superb actor, he is clearly no director.

Arthur Miller's *The American Clock* suffered from schizophrenia. It was never sure whether it was the simple saga of a family suffering through the Depression or a thinly veiled allegory of America, much as *The Crucible*. It fell between two stools and lay there.

Each of these playwrights, with their many differing perceptions, offer the same prescription for the '80s: work and reliance on the individual. "The era of the charismatic leaders—of men who will appear on the horizon and lead us all—is over," Steven Tesich declares. "We, as citizens, are going to have to go to this next decade carrying the load ourselves. It's getting back to each individual rather than somehow relying on somebody else to provide the answers. My feeling is that not only is it good for us to have to do that, but in the end we will be better for it and we will triumph once more."

Lanford Wilson agrees. "I was thinking of the title *5th of July* as 'The celebration is over. Back to work.'" WV