If in the beginning was the word, theatre showed how the word could be used meaningfully. It showed how a community can be formed through the force of emotions generated by an acting unit in close communion with a receiving unit through a mode of fiction represented within a certain space and time. What has just been said is a known fact as will be the case with what follows in the subsequent paragraphs of this first chapter. However, though one strives to avoid clichés, it is easier to begin by surveying known territory and then proceeding towards the not-so-known.

Much research has gone into the word ‘play’ both as noun and verb form. Of the many synonyms of this word, what is of significance to this study is ‘recreation’, i.e. if interpreted in one sense: we create ourselves anew through ‘playing’. ‘Theatre is by its very nature play, for the audience as well as its creators; in fact the audience are creators, players in the game’ (Goodman and Gay, 2000: Chapter 20). For art to be fully appreciated and realized or for effective ‘recreation’ to take place, it is obvious that the spectator cannot remain merely a passive observer. The spectator must necessarily be involved in the play at least at an emotional level. The linguistic equation between ‘acting’ and ‘playing’ holds good with both, actors and audience: both ‘act’ while ‘playing’ their role. It is the interactive relationship between actor and audience, the engagement in a communal activity that demarcates theatre from all other art forms. As with any form, artistic or otherwise, that helps create a social group, it is this interactive and communal nature of the theatrical experience that makes it a forceful political agency. In this study, ‘The theatres explored…are those that self consciously attempt to transform consciousness and initiate active struggle’ (Goodman and Gay, 2000: ‘Introduction to Part Seven’ by Phillip B. Zarilli) to which we give the name ‘agit prop theatre.’

If theatrical space is the ‘qualitative ensemble’ whose different dimensions signify various ideological ways of perceiving possible societal relations (Suvin, 1984: 5), ‘agit prop theatre’ and for that matter, similarly named theatre like ‘political theatre’, ‘theatre of crisis’, theatre for ‘social change’—declare their own intent. This is the creation of a radical and progressive politics of theatre in/as action. Following Phillip B. Zarilli’s lead, what I mean by such theatre is not only in the narrow sense of those dramas whose subject matter deals with the staging of a social crisis or a revolution; but the entire
spectrum of publicly enacted events such as rallies, meetings, marches, protests and the like that often take place during, and/or inspired by periods of social and political crisis and/or revolution. Such ‘theatres’ not only reflect or mirror contemporary social and political turbulence but are ‘instantiated in the potential to effect a process of change in the individual and/or social consciousness’ (Zarilli; Goodman and Gay, 2000).

In this context it would be pertinent to remember that theatre in itself doesn’t cause revolutions. But it allows like-minded people to gather together and through a recognition of the theatrical event as well as of each other’s and their own presence, reinforce their beliefs. It may also provoke the consciousness of ‘others’ to think along hitherto not-so-acceptable lines. Even a casual glance at world events is enough to confirm the dramatic role played by agit prop theatre in almost every continent/country. To mention a few—the tremendous power of street theatre in the overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines; the resistance theatre in South Korea (especially against the Japanese invasion) called Madang which is the South Korean version of agitational street theatre based on traditional folk drama and western agit prop:

... The word agitational should be taken quite literally in this context: many Madang performances succeed in getting the audience in such a state of ecstatic frenzy that they are spontaneously transformed from spectators into slogan chanting political demonstrators. Many mass demonstrations were initiated or animated by Madang performances... (Van Erven, 1988:158)

Hwang Sok Yong’s Sweet Potato or Kim Chitta’s The Funeral Ceremony of National Democracy performed in 1965 at Seoul University would serve as good examples of Madang Theatre. Again, the activities of the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia found agit prop theatre a useful tool in mobilising the people into action. In Australia, street performances in the mid-seventies with a strongly political content that usually voiced the despair of tribal cultures found an emotionally charged audience. Agit prop has remained a consistent part of the Chinese government’s education programme in rural areas. The techniques of agit prop groups were emulated by the Teatro Campesino, the first of the Chicano Theatres in the United States, which was founded in California as part of the farmworker’s union campaign for recognition in the mid-1960s. Black Theatre in Africa and America (as for example Matsemala Manaka’s group, Soyi Kwa’s
performance of Pula) relies largely on agit prop means in theatre to arouse the sympathy of the spectators.\textsuperscript{8} Agit prop troupes have been used by the North Vietnamese during the Vietnam War.\textsuperscript{9} All over India street theatre using agit prop techniques is hugely popular and such theatre exponents as Badal Sircar and Safdar Hashmi are almost household names in the north. In England, in fact, agit prop theatre can be traced back to as early as the tenth century when the church in the form of simple narrative plays designed to bring to life the basic legends of Christianity; they were in fact political propaganda on behalf of an organization in hot pursuit of temporal as well as spiritual power (Lambert, 1977).

\textSuperscript{8} In spite of this evidence of the obvious impact of agit prop theatre however, it does not always conjure up a positive response. When one talks about such theatre as it has been happening in recent times, what immediately comes to mind are masses of people indulging in an exercise of violent lung power, generally in a public arena, armed with many pamphlets sticks and stones and vicious slogans, and inciting spectators to behave in like manner. This vision of agit prop theatre is not untrue.\textsuperscript{10} Nor are the accusations that often follow such performances: that they are usually cliché ridden with rehashed plots, weak story lines and unskilled acting. Of course, one could argue that this nature of the agit prop plays is intentional; recalling Erwin Piscator's dictum would be relevant here:

\begin{quote}
\ldots \text{theatre must be run on these lines:} \\
\text{simplicity of expression and construction, with a clear and unambiguous impact on the emotions of the} \ldots \text{audience; any artistic intention must be subordinated to the revolutionary purpose of the whole} \ldots \text{(Quoted by Lambert, 1977).}
\end{quote}

But a major reason for discrediting such theatre arises from the term 'propaganda' itself.

The origins of this word as it has been in use in recent centuries, is traced to the title and work of a group of Roman Catholic Cardinals called \textit{Congregatio de Propaganda Fide} (Congregation for the Propagation of Faith) instituted in 1622 to carry on missionary work. For many Roman Catholics then, this word may have at least in ecclesiastical terms, a highly respectable connotation. To a vast majority however, the term is usually a pejorative one tending to connote such (mis)deeds as the atrocity stories and deceptively stated war aims of World Wars I and II, the operations of the Nazi's Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda and the broken campaign promises of
a thousand politicians. Also, it is reminiscent of countless instances of false and misleading advertising (especially in countries using Latin languages in which 'propaganda commerciale' or some equivalent is a common term for commercial advertising).

If we trace the history of the theory of propaganda we find that it has ancient but firm roots. In the East, towards 400 BC in India, Kautilya, a Brahmin believed to have been the chief advisor to the Emperor Chandragupta Maurya reputedly wrote the Arthasastra (Principles of Politics), a book of advice for rulers that has often been compared with Plato's The Prince. Kautilya discussed in some detail, psychological warfare, both overt and clandestine to disrupt an enemy's army and capture his capital. Overtly, he said, the propagandists of a king should proclaim that he can do magic, that God and the wisest men are on his side, that all who support his war aims will reap benefits. Covertly, his agents should infiltrate his enemies' and potential enemies' kingdoms, spreading defeatism and misleading news among their people, especially in capital cities, among leaders, and among the armed forces.

In the west the theory of propaganda began in Athens, in about 500 BC as the study of rhetoric (in Gk. 'the technique of orators'). Teachers such as Isocrates, Plato and Aristotle compiled rules of rhetoric to (i) make their own arguments and those of their students more persuasive (ii) design counterpropaganda against opponents and also (iii) teach their students how to detect the logical fallacies and emotional appeals of demagogues. These measures proved so successful that they were further developed in Rome by such figures as Cicero and Quintilian.

In the early twentieth century, the word propaganda had a new term conjugated to it to give it further substance—this was the word 'agitation'. The two terms were first employed by the Marxist theorist Georgy Plekhanov and later elaborated upon in doctrine form by Vladimir I. Lenin in a pamphlet entitled What is to be done? (1902). This doctrine aimed at achieving political victory by blending the strategies of: 'agitation', defined by him as the use of political slogans, parables and half truths to exploit the grievances of the largely uneducated masses and thereby mobilize public support; 'propaganda' or the indoctrination of the educated and enlightened sections of the populace through a reasoned use of historical and scientific arguments.
Immediately after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, this agit prop methodology was put into practice and various arts were enlisted to further the propagandist aims of the Bolsheviks. Be it posters or poets reading from their own work, a number of communicative devices were used to deck ships and trains crisscrossing the country. Since few in the country could actually read the newspapers, actors acted cited out news stories in a Living Newspaper. In 1921, a group of actors from Moscow formed the Blue Blouses Company drawing its name from the blue workers overalls that its members wore as their basic costume. This company inspired the birth of other professional and amateur factory groups throughout the Soviet Union. The work and techniques of these groups, in turn, set the stage for political theatre groups in other countries between 1921 and 1939.

The montages of the Blue Blouses were brief—not more than an hour and a half long—and comprised of dramatic monologues, sketches, dialogues, mass declamations and movements derived from dance and gymnastics. Since the aim of the company and others of its kind was to be able to perform anywhere, staging demands were extremely simple. The performances invariably began with a parade in which the actors presented themselves to the audience. Music, be it instrumental or folk/popular songs especially those with satiric lyrics featured prominently in the presentations. Animated posters (similar to photographer’s dummy boards with cut out faces) were frequently made use of for rapid cartoon characterisation. Though the use of film was a rarity, the Blue Blouses specialised in the art of using flickering light on slowly moving actors to create the illusion of a silent film. Of the many devices used by the company the seemingly conventional and politically neutral dance and gymnastic routines were in reality their most positive strengths; the actors could, in the process of moving scenic pieces, acrobatically combine to compose pictures, diagrams and structures.

Though the method of juxtaposing overtly political pieces with the more entertaining ones was not new as it had been used for many years by music hall and variety theatres; what was new was the ideological purpose behind the combining of these skills which sought more than the applause of the audience. Part of the ideological aim of the Blue Blouses was to attack the inequities that followed the Revolution and the survival of pre-revolutionary thought and class distinctions through satire which the
company saw as a legitimate part of their repertoire. In 1928, however, such a programme was considered counterproductive by the Stalin government that suppressed the movement and replaced it with Socialist Realism, a derivative of Naturalism, where state intervention converted the typical figures in a typical landscape into idealised figures in an idealised landscape.

However, just before disbanding, the Blue Blouses made a tour of Germany in 1927 to celebrate ten years of the Revolution. Coincidentally a communist backed Congress of Representatives from many other countries was present in Germany at that time. The performances of the Blue Blouses consequently inspired an international movement of workers’ theatre groups performing with varying degrees of skill, agit prop in the Blue Blouse mode.

In spite of the decline of the Blue Blouse movement, until recent events in Russia, every unit of a communist party used to have an agit prop section. Though reorganized several times, this section continued its functions of deciding the content of all official information; supervising political education in party schools and in the regular school system; overseeing all forms of mass communication and mobilizing public support for party programmes. Therefore, a standard Soviet manual for teachers of social sciences was entitled ‘Propagandist Politekonomi’ (For the Propagandist of Political Economy) and a pocket sized booklet which used to be issued weekly to suggest timely slogans and brief arguments to be used in speeches and conversations among the masses was called ‘Bloknat Agitatora.’ (The Agitators’ Notebook) 11

This overview of the history of agit prop allows one to venture on a preliminary definition of agit prop as the more or less systematic effort to deliberately manipulate people’s beliefs, attitudes and especially actions by means of symbols—words, gestures, banners, movements, music, insignia, hairstyles and so on. Theatre is one of the vehicles of the agit prop. Three aspects clearly emerge at the outset, that agit prop theatre is in essence (a) an interventionist theatre (b) a historical phenomenon (i.e., it emerges in conjunction with certain historical situations and events) and (c) it is generally Communist-backed since its origins and continuing ideology and techniques seek primarily to grant power to workers or other underprivileged sections of society.
To proceed a step further, while actual political or other events directly spark off agit prop theatre, a more significant contribution towards the active growth of such theatre is provided by a suitable intellectual or cultural climate. This is prepared by theatre theoreticians who are invariably also theatre practitioners and who at every juncture in theatrical experimentation attempt to formulate certain ground rules according to which the new theatre may run. In the case of agit prop theatre, no such canon of theatre theoreticians has ever been formalized. However, among those who played a more visible role in the development of such theatre are Bertolt Brecht, Jerzy Grotowski, Erwin Piscator, Vsevolod Yemilyevich Meyerhold, Vladimir Vladimirovich Mayakovsky, Richard Schechner, Romain Rolland and Augusto Boal. While it is tempting to include in the ensuing discussion such theatre practitioners as Badal Sircar, it must be remembered that this thesis aims at reviewing ‘British’ agitprop theatre which is largely informed by the ideas of ‘Western’ theatre practitioners. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged at this point that Eastern/Oriental theatre (especially Indian and Japanese) forms and practices are a subject of tremendous theatre research not just in Britain but in the entire western world. To include these theatre activists, though justifiable, would then stretch the boundaries of this study considerably; hence it is only possible to mention their importance perfunctorily.

In an interview with Duncan Wu, Howard Brenton on being asked how influential Brecht had been to his work, answered that he too, like Brecht believed “in people in action, that human nature is very difficult to find out. He doesn’t have the Ibsen like view that the human soul is an onion which you can peel; he thinks that in some ways we have to make our own lives, so he’s a story teller” (Wu, 2000: 40). Statements such as this only testify to the fact that Brecht’s theories of stage presentation exerted more influence on the course of mid-century theatre in the West than did those of any other individual. This was primarily because he proposed the major alternative to the Stanislavsky oriented realism that dominated acting and the “well-made play” construction that dominated playwriting.12

That Brecht absorbed (and in turn perpetuated) many influences in the modern theatre can be seen through his essay “On Experimental Theatre” (1940) in which he reviewed the work of Vakhtangov, Meyerhold, Antoine Reinhardt Okhlopkov,
Stanislavsky, Jessner and other Expressionists. Brecht traced through the modern theatre the two lines running from Naturalism and Expressionism. Naturalism he saw as the "assimilation of art to science" which he felt gave great social influence to Naturalistic theatre, but at the expense of its ability to arouse aesthetic pleasure. Expressionism (and by implication the other anti-illusionist theatres) he confessed had "vastly enriched the theatre's means of expression and brought aesthetic gains that still remain to be exploited." Though heavily influenced by German Expressionism, it was however Brecht's preoccupation with Marxism and the idea that man and society could be intellectually analysed that led him to develop his theory of "epic theatre".

Brecht believed that theatre should appeal not to the spectator's feelings but to his reason. While still providing entertainment, it should be strongly didactic and capable of provoking social change. In the Realistic Theatre of illusion, he argued, the spectator tended to identify with the characters on stage and become emotionally involved with them rather than being stirred to think about his own life. Brecht proposed an alternative direction for the theatre where it could project a picture of the world by artistic means as well as offer models of life that could help the spectators to understand their social environment and master it both rationally and emotionally. The main concept of Brecht's program was that of Verfremdungseffekt ("alienation effect"), i.e. the use of anti-illusionary techniques to remind spectators that they were in a theatre watching an enactment of reality instead of reality itself; thus dispensing with the empathetic involvement with the stage that the illusionary theatre sought to induce. Such techniques included flooding the stage with harsh white lights, regardless of where the action was taking place, leaving the stage lamps in full view of the audience; making use of minimal props and "indicative scenery"; intentionally interrupting the action at key junctures with songs in order to drive home an important point or message; and projecting explanatory captions onto a screen or employing placards. When it came to actors and acting, Brecht acknowledged in his work the need for the actor to undergo a process of identification with the part and he paid tribute to Stanislavsky as the first person to produce a systematic account of the actor's technique. But Brecht demanded of his own actors a going beyond Stanislavsky; he wanted them to incorporate a social attitude or judgement into their portrayal—to become in a sense, objective or detached observers.
Generally, the Verfremdungseffekt has been understood as a deadening coldness in the productions but such an interpretation proceeds from a general ignorance of Brecht's own writings on the subject. Rather, he insisted, as Appia, Craig and the symbolists did before him, that the audience must be reminded that it is watching a play. Brecht’s idea can be approached through the image presented by the theatre he chose to work in on his return to East Germany in 1947. The auditorium of the Theater am Schiffbacinerdamm was lavish to the point of fantasy, decorated with ornate plastic figures. The stage by complete contrast was a vast mechanized scenic space in which everything was clearly exposed to view as theatrical and man made. In the contrast between the comfort of the auditorium and the science of the stage, lay the condition of Brecht’s theatre. The audience was there to be entertained but also to think scientifically.

Many of the techniques of Brecht’s staging were developments of earlier work. The use of 3-dimensional set pieces in a large volume of space clearly derived from Jessner. His delight in the use of machinery and in particular the revolving stage came from Piscator. The insistence on the actors’ demonstrating through the physical disposition of the body, their gestus (“attitude”) toward what is happening derived from Meyerhold, though with Brecht the gestus was always socially based. The clearest of his alienation devices, the projection of captions preceding the scene so that the audience knows in advance what will happen and, therefore, can concentrate on how it happens derived from Piscator’s jutter scenes and film captions.

Though the Brechtian principle of critical observation instead of emotional identification has not been successfully achieved by modern dramatists, nonetheless the Marxian ideology behind the Verfremdungseffekt which Brecht outlined in Kleines Organon für das Theater (1949; “A Little Organum for the Theatre”) is one of the major aims of agit prop theatre groups. The essence of Brechtian drama is the idea that a truly Marxist drama must avoid the Aristotelian premise that the audience should be made to believe that what they are witnessing is happening here and now. For he saw that if the audience really felt that the emotions of heroes of the Oedipus, or Lear or Hamlet could equally have been their own reactions, then the Marxist idea that human nature is not constant but a result of changing historical conditions would automatically be invalidated. Though agit prop plays generally do away with the aspect of no empathetic involvement
on the part of the spectators, they do remain true to Brecht’s Marxian beliefs and his theory that the spectators must be reminded that they are being presented with a demonstration of human behaviour in scientific spirit. As has been mentioned earlier, Brecht adopted and advanced many of the ideas and methods of his precursors and towering above them was the work of Piscator.¹⁴

Piscator began his dramatic career as a volunteer at the Hoft Theatre after studying at the Konig School of Dramatic Art and the University; he became in turn an actor and director, working in Berlin during the Weimar Republic. Piscator clearly used the theatre to convey radical political instruction; though not a communist, he sympathized with the German working class parties. His first efforts at establishing a theatre brought him into association with the Dadaists.

Dada began as an oppositional movement in Zurich and the Dadaists took on from where Alfred Jarry had left: whereas Jarry had assaulted the audience through an unusual play, the Dadaists began the disintegration of form entirely. Dada’s contribution lay in destroying all accepted notions of what the stage should be and should express and in attacking the cultural values of the audience in particular and society in general. This set a precedent for many anti-establishment groups and artists after 1968 whose objectives have been described as “offending the audience” or “disrupting the spectacle”. One of the art forms that the Dada engendered was that of photomontage in which graphics and edited photographic images were combined to convey propagandist images. The principle of montage became important in Piscator’s work. Piscator felt that though a step ahead, Dada was not enough; a more overtly political and direct form of theatre was required, one that was allied to the political struggle of the proletariat. The proletarian theatre, consisting of both, amateurs and professionals, played in workers’ halls and established the principle of free admission for the unemployed, which freed the theatre from its bourgeois status as an economic commodity.

Piscator further eroded traditional relationships with numerous innovations in staging as for example in the Rob Rummel Revue (“Red Riot Review”, 1924) produced for the German Communist Party, Piscator began the action with a fight in the auditorium. The protagonists came out of the audience to argue their points of view and commented on the action of the various scenes. In Tai Yang Erwacht ("Tai Yang

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Awakes”, 1931) the setting designed by John Heartfield extended from the stage along the walls of the auditorium. A conspicuous feature of Piscator’s propagandist production was the climatic singing of “L’ Internationale”, the socialist and communist anthem by both, actors and audience.

To establish the political relevance of his work, Piscator devised a number of ways. In a revolutionary production of Schiller’s Die Rauber (The Robbers) performed at Jessner’s Staats theater in Berlin, Piscator costumed and made up the minor character Spielberg, a noble character driven by society to crime, to resemble Trotsky. Then, in his production of Sturm uber Gottland (“Storm over Gothland”, 1927) set in the fourteenth century, a filmed prologue showed that as the major characters moved towards the camera, they metamorphosed from historically costumed characters to representations of modern historical figures; the protagonist, for example, turned into Lenin. Theatre the world over, especially German theatre has since tended to interpret classic plays in a contemporary light. Another play Paragraph 218 (1929), dealing with abortion reforms, was toured such that the performances were used to initiate discussions. Such associated discussions have since that time become a strong part of women’s theatre and other political forms.

In several productions, Piscator dramatized or inserted verbatim political documents, news reports or direct quotations from public figures. Direct comment of this kind was used frequently by Joan Littlewood and the Theatre Workshop Company in Britain in the 1950s and 60s to comment on political actions and to establish common cause with the audience. Piscator also used the projected film to lend an added authenticity to the documentary material presented in front of it and to establish a principle, which has been built on by other political and documentary playwrights and directors, that one function of the political stage should be to make manifest what is concealed in politics.

Piscator established three distinct uses of film in his productions. The ‘didactic’ film as he called it provided the spectator with objective information about the subject through both, historical as well as up to the minute facts. The dramatic film saved time in the play by illuminating a situation with a few quick shots, thus it contributed to the development of the action. Addressing the audience in much the same way as a chorus,
film commentary that accompanied the action drew attention to important developments, leveled criticism, made accusations and provided important facts. Piscator should also be credited with the innovation of the jotter scene, a small auxiliary screen onto which facts, figures, titles, dates and other bits of information can be projected.

There are two other innovations that Piscator added to the repertoire of staging devices. He conceived that the postwar world was too complex in its political and economic operations for any one playwright to comprehend it totally. He took the concept of the dramaturgic collective from Reinhardt and extended it to make it the basis of his production method. Writers, dramaturges, economists, politicos and statisticians worked together to produce a script. Existing playscripts were subjected to analysis and restructuring by the collective. The second invention was the “stage of destiny”. A great deal of Piscator’s life was spent trying to realise a project for staging Tolstoy’s novel ‘War and Peace’. When he finally accomplished this ambition, the judgements of history were incorporated into the narrative.

The style of theatre that Piscator propounded using montage and juxtaposition of short independent scenes to create dialectical and often contradictory effects and to which he gave the name ‘epic theatre’, opened new theatre vistas not just for his best known follower, Brecht, but political playwrights and theatre companies the world over.

Like Piscator, Meyerhold too experimented with the use of film, projected images and graphic in his productions and there has been a lot of irrelevant controversy as to who copied whom. Meyerhold is, however, best known for developing an anti-realistic system of dramatic production in the USSR in the 1920s called biomechanics. The actor, whose role was subordinate until he was a mere instrument of the director’s will, was supposed to eliminate all emotion from his highly stylised portrayal. Coached as gymnasts and acrobats and emphasising pantomime rather than words, the actors threw themselves about in puppet like attitudes at the director’s discretion. For these productions the stage was exposed to the back wall and was then furnished with sets consisting of scaffolding, ladders and ramps that the actor used with every strut and bolt displayed to view. The aggressive functionalism of this type of setting was regarded as having considerable propaganda value when the Soviets were being taught to reverse the machine as part of their training to become a great industrial nation.
Meyerhold’s system drew on a variety of influences including commedia dell’arte, Kabuki theatre, the ideas of Craig and Ivan Petrovich Pavlov, the psychologist. He constructed a set of sixteen etudes as the basis of biomechanics; these were sequences of precise muscular movements intended to evoke particular emotions in the performer. This process attempted to systematize the kinesthetic relationship between outer movement and inner feeling, to enable actors to experience this relationship, and to train them to control it. Even after so short a time, it is not easy to reconstruct Meyerhold’s biomechanics from remaining evidences because of his fall from favour under Stalin. But, if the exact form of biomechanics has not survived, many of the underlying principles of Meyerhold’s studies have, and the example of his training programme is embodied in the work of many of the present day advanced theatre groups. Less well known is the work of Vakhtangov, which is important because of the ways in which he combined the inner techniques of Stanislavsky with the external expressive techniques of Meyerhold. An investigation of the work of Jerzy Grotowski shows the continuation of this process and many of the specific techniques.

Against the prevailing approach of Stanislavsky, epitomized in the “building” of a character, Meyerhold instituted a holistic approach whereby the actors did not “mark” the actions but gave prototypical performances in rehearsal. Each rehearsal then produced a more complex prototype, and the process continued into the public performances. According to Meyerhold such a process underlined the “unindividuality” of man whereby he felt that the principles of propagandist theatre conformed with those of Marxism. It is Meyerhold’s refusal to submit to the constraints of artistic uniformity and his defence of the artist’s right to experiment that led to his arrest, imprisonment and rejection by the Stalin regime but it also made him one of the spiritual gurus of modern political theatre. However, more than Meyerhold’s impact has been that of Mayakovsky, the leading Russian poet of the Russian Revolution and of the early Soviet period. Influenced by Marinetti’s Futurism and as part of the first group of artists to identify wholeheartedly with the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, Mayakovsky sought with others of his ilk to create the new proletarian art. The key lay in “depoetising” poetry by adopting the crude language of the man in the street, using the most daring technical innovations and being
declamatory for mass audiences to which he gave readings on streets, at cafés and at meetings.

Tracing Mayakovsky's artistic career can itself reveal both, his ideological as well as methodological principles that assumed larger proportions in subsequent agit prop movements, especially theatre. At the age of fifteen, he joined the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party and was repeatedly jailed for subversive activity. He started to write poetry during solitary confinement in 1909. On his release he attended the Moscow Art School and joined, with David Burlyuk and a few others, the Russian Futurist group and soon became its leading spokesman. In 1912 the group published a manifesto, Poschochina Obshchestvenomukusu ("A Slap in the Face of Public Taste") and Mayakovsky's poetry became conspicuously self-assertive and defiant in form and content: the manifesto advocated the abandonment of Pushkin, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy and of course, bringing the language poetry down to that of the streets. Mayakovsky's first poetic monodrama Vladimir Mayakovsky was performed in St Petersburg in 1913.

Between 1914 and 1916, Mayakovsky completed two major poems "Oblakovshıınakh" (1915; “A Cloud in Trousers”) and “Fleytapozvonochnik” (written 1915; published 1916; “The Backbone Flute”). Both record a tragedy of unrequited love and express the author's discontent with the world in which he lived. When the Russian Revolution broke out, Mayakovsky was wholeheartedly for the Bolsheviks. Such poems as “Oda Revolutse” (1918; “Ode to Revolution”) and “Levy Marsh” (1919; “Left March”) became very popular as did his Misteriya Buff (first performed 1921; “Mystery-Bouffe”), a drama representing a universal flood and the subsequent joyful triumph of the "Unclean" (the proletarians) over the "Clean" (the bourgeoisie).

As a vigorous spokesperson for the Communist Party, Mayakovsky expressed himself in many ways. From 1919 to 1921, he worked in the Russian Telegraph Agency as a painter of posters and cartoons, which he provided with apt rhymes and slogans. He poured out topical poems of propaganda (agit poetry) and wrote didactic booklets for children, while lecturing and reciting all over Russia. In 1942 he composed a 3,000-line elegy on the death of Lenin. After 1925 he travelled in Europe, in the US, Mexico and Cuba, recording his impressions in poems and in a booklet of caustic sketches Moye Otkrytie Ameriki (1926; “My Discovery of America”). He also found time to write
scripts for motion pictures, in some of which he acted. In his last three years he completed two satirical plays Klop (performed 1929; The Bedbug, 1960) lampooning the kind of philistine that emerged with the New Economic policy in the Soviet Union, and Banya (performed in Leningrad on January 30, 1930; “The Bathhouse”), a bantering tale of bureaucratic stupidity and opportunism under Stalin.

Though it is true that much of Mayakovsky’s utilitarian and topical poetry is now out of date, he was in his lifetime one of the most dynamic figures of the Soviet literary scene. It is evident from this largely biographical note how Mayakovsky has become almost an icon for the true agit prop activist.

In terms of furthering the actor’s techniques, the Polish director Jerzy Grotowski stands as one of the key figures of the twentieth century. He made the most thorough effort to rediscover the elements of the actors’ art. Though he acknowledged Stanislavsky’s contribution in this sphere, he was not satisfied either with the way Stanislavsky allowed natural impulses to dominate or with Brecht’s over concern with the construction of the role. To Grotowski, the actor is a man who works through the medium of his body, offering it publicly. Hence the actor must undergo physical, plastic and vocal training to guide him toward the right kind of construction, to commit himself totally and to achieve a state of “trance”. The actors concentrate on the search for “signs” which express through sound and movement those impulses that waver on the borderline between drama and reality. By means of such signs, the actor’s own psychoanalytic language of sounds and gestures is constructed. Though the actors of Grotowski’s troupe are excellently trained physically and vocally and commit themselves to their task with tremendous energy, they have been accused of conveying too little human emotion. More than his Laboratory Theatre group, what Grotowski is significantly known for is his theoretical pronouncements in Towards a Poor Theatre (1968).

The ‘Poor Theatre’ recalls Copeau’s idea of the “greatest possible effect from the least possible means” and its name is derived from the simple circumstances in which it takes place. Rejecting the paraphernalia of the “rich theatre”, Grotowski stripped away all nonessential scenery, costumes and props to shift the focus only on the unadorned actor. Sharing with Artaud the concept of the performer as a ‘holy actor’ and the theatre as a ‘secular religion’. Grotowski felt that theatre must go beyond mere entertainment or
illustration: it must be an intense confrontation with the audience.\textsuperscript{18} Though Grotowski preferred a limited audience of not more than sixty people (from 1976 in fact he excluded the audience altogether) whereas political theatre addresses huge audiences, it is easy to see why agit prop theatre companies turned to poor theatre especially in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The spirit of poor theatre has been most theatrically conveyed by Peter Brooks, famous for such vivid productions as \textit{Ubu Roi} (1977), a scaled down version of Georges Bizel's opera \textit{Carmen} (1982) and \textit{Le Mahabharata} (1985), a nine-hour revision of the epic \textit{Mahabharata}. Again, a pupil of Grotowski, Erujenio Barba of Odin Theatre in Holstebro, Denmark, has formulated the ideological position of these theatres under the term ‘third theatre’. In his book \textit{The Floating Islands} (1979), he examines a theatre existing independently that creates from whatever material resources are at hand. Barba has sought to return to theatre as a way of life seeing this pattern in the origins of the commedia dell’arte, the wandering players and in Moliere’s Company. The third theatre groups give performances, but they insist that the relationships engendered by their work, inside and outside the company, are the criteria by which they judge it. The members of the Odin Theatre have established a form of bartering in which they exchange their work for some cultural offering from the people of the regions they visit. Because the third theatre is a way of life, the actors’ work is a fulltime activity. Actors have their own daily training regimen and their work is enriched by the acquisition of other skills especially the techniques of Oriental theatre.

Grotowski’s use of psychological conditioning exercises for actors, the collaging of texts and the shaping of theatrical space were inherited by Richard Schechner in his theatrical experiments.\textsuperscript{19} Schechner is best known for his development of environmental theatre, a branch of the new theatre movement of the 1960s whose aim is to heighten audience awareness of theatre by eliminating the distinction between the audiences and the actors’ space.

Believing in the principle that “Text, action and environment must develop together”, Schechner and the Performance Group (founded 1968) shaped the theatre to conform to each play, constructing different audience frameworks for each production (Schechner, 1983: 77). The sets were usually based on multilevel platforms, balconies,
ramps and scaffolds surrounding a stage that encroached on the audiences’ territory, providing a wider range of space for the actors and a greater flexibility of interaction between the audience and performers. Schechner felt "...Spaces ought to open to each other so that spectators can see each other and move from one place to another. The overall feel of a theatre ought to be of a place where choices can be made. The feel I get from a successful environment is that of a global space, a microcosm, with flow, contact and interaction." (Schechner, 1983: 79)

The audience of the environment theatre was invited, even expected, to participate. The minimum involvement for the production of Commune, for example, was the audience’s removal of its shoes upon entering the garage. Schechner wrote that theatre was an “unliterary art” and saw its finest expressions as “immediate gestural, involved, inclusive, participatory.” To enhance the immediacy of experience, the multiple-focus theatre replaced the traditional single focus allowing more than one scene to be staged at the same time. This was because Schechner was sure that though “chased from Plato’s republic as non-rational and subversive, but existing always, sometimes marginally, theatre is now showing itself everywhere: in social dramas, personal experience, public displays, political and economic interaction, art.” (Schechner, 1983: 121)

It must be obvious by now that no chronological order has been followed in this ongoing discussion on theatre theoreticians and practitioners; the prioritising has been done only according to the strength of the impact (direct or indirect) that the aforesaid have had upon agit prop theatre. Romain Rolland’s efforts at democratizing theatre in France occurred as early as the 1890s but his influence on agit prop theatre per se is not really palpable. Thus this section will be brief.

With both ideological aims and theatrical tastes in mind, members of the German middle class theatre audience formed an organisation called the Freie Volksbuhne in 1890 for the purpose of buying blocks of tickets and commissioning performances and even productions for its membership which included a large working class element. Early in its history the organisation split between the Freie Volksbuhne, who were attempting to make theatre available to a wider audience and the Neue Freie Volksbuhne, who had specific socialist attachments and policies. Eventually the two arms recombined and were able not only to subsidise socialist performance but also to build their own theatre and
mount their own productions. During the 1890s in France, a similar programme of democratisation was attempted. One of the prime movers in this was Rolland whose book *The Peoples Theatre* (*Le Theatre du Peuple*, 1903) inspired similar movements in other countries.

In this book Rolland speaks of the three requisites of the Peoples Theatre: the first being that it must be a recreation, i.e., he felt that the task of the playwright was to provide pleasure and joy to the audience rather than to burden them with sadness and tragedy. The second requisite according to Rolland was that theatre ought to be an energising agency; he wished that the audience treated dramatist as a congenial fellow traveler. "It is the duty of this companion to take the people straight to their destination—without of course neglecting to teach them to observe along the road."22 The third requisite that Rolland stated as fundamental was that theatre should provide an "incentive to thought." He felt that since the working man did not as a rule think while his body worked, it was necessary for theatre to provoke him to exercise his brain. This would not only afford him pleasure but would also help him to see and judge 'things' as well as his own 'self'. Rolland also cautioned against the two excesses of moral pedagogy and mere impersonal dilettantism. He believed that the existence of a permanent theatre where emotions were shared would create a bond of brotherhood and that people were more ignorant than bad; thus theatre ought to dispel ignorance. In his beliefs, Rolland was not alone and he acknowledged the debt he owed to the ideas of Rousseau, Diderot and Mercier.

While Rolland had his precursors, he had followers too. His assumption that theatre was an effective arena of action and that people could be manipulated by theatre is a formative principle of all politically viable theatre.

Nearer our times, the Brazilian director and political activist turned politician, Augusto Boal raised the stage/spectator contradiction to an ideological level, of one between authority and people.21 Believing that since all activities of man are political and that, therefore, theatre too is political, he showed how theatre in the West had been used by the dominant class to project their own norms and values, their ideology. To counter this enterprise, Boal developed the Theatre of the Oppressed, a system which not only surmounted the stage/spectator contradictions but through the conquest of the means of
theatrical production was intended to serve the triple function of entertainment, education and consciousness raising.

In his book *Games for Actors and non Actors* (1992), Boal devised a series of theatrical strategies in the form of games and exercises to effect change in the lives of individuals in all fronts, personal, social and political. As Boal puts it, his aim was that the “spectator is freed from his chains, finally acts, and becomes a protagonist.”24 Thus he was interested in forms of ‘rehearsal theatre’ the kind of theatre practised by the proletariat and oppressed classes versus the bourgeois which presents a closed ‘spectacle’ theatre. A brief look at some of the theatrical games would suffice in showing how theatre can intervene in almost every walk of life: newspaper theatre, for example, involves transformation of daily news items and any other non-dramatic material into theatrical performance. Again, in ‘Invisible Theatre’ a scene is presented in a non-theatre environment by actors who do not reveal their profession throughout the performance to spectators, in such a manner that the spectators are clueless about the fact that they are spectators. During rehearsal every possible intervention from the spectators is included so that these possibilities form a kind of optional text. Thus the ‘theatre’ element is ‘invisible’, the spectators act freely as though in a real situation, and the effects last long after the skit is ended. Yet again, in the use of Rituals and Masks, Boal shows that if the ritual is retained but the social masks of those involved in the ritual keep changing, then countless variants throwing up endless options are made visible to spectators.

As Member of Parliament of Rio de Janiero’s Workers Party (PT), Boal developed his most recent theatre form—the legislative theatre. The purpose of this form was to allow communities to propose laws which they wished the Council (Chambre de Vereadores) to formalize by using theatrical strategies. It is evident then that Boal’s work aims at providing an ‘alternative means of training and of restoring theatre to a meaningful role in society outside theatres; a democratic forum for potential change in peoples lives.”25

Perhaps such an overview of theoretical standpoints of theatre practitioners might mislead one into actually seeking exact imprints in British agit prop theatre. But such has not been my aim. This section intends to isolate possible ways to read, view and interpret British agit prop theatres (their texts and their practices) from around certain techniques
articulated by those I have mentioned. There are surely many other theoretical nuances that have been overlooked here and may crop up in the course of this thesis, but at this juncture we have at least a broad framework with which we can approach British agit prop theatre and appreciate its changing shapes.

From Brecht to Boal, from conscious Verfremdung to the conscious entry of theatre into every arena of life, is a vast discourse to have chalked out showing that political theatre has indeed come a long way. It may seem that Brechtian techniques are now passé but there can be no denying that much of political drama since Brecht’s death has been written with his formidable theoretical example in view; even those dramatists who have refused Brecht’s political aesthetic have done so in the wake of its radical reconfigurations of theatre art. Those dramatists who draw upon Brechtian theory have participated in the broader reinterpretation of this theory in terms of evolving political, cultural and theatrical milieux. “We should begin with Brecht”, Edward Bond has remarked, but we shouldn’t end there.” In Heiner Miller’s words, “To use Brecht without criticizing him is to betray him.” (in Garner, Jr, 1990: 146)

Thus while retaining the fundamental Marxian ideology believed in by Brecht as also his views that theatre must engender a spirit of social criticism, agit prop theatres have sought methods other than the Alienation Effect. Discussions with the audience during or after the ‘act’, singing rousing songs or an instigating poetry, staging mobile plays in unconventional theatre sites ranging from the street, shopping malls to workers’ halls, lampooning public figures, using actual facts or quotations of contemporary power holders, creating a script through team effort, using the ‘unpoetic’ language of the common man or proletariat, breaking through the constraints of artistic uniformity, using lec-dem formats, making spectators participate and, therefore, realize that action in the theatre is only a beginning and not a conclusion, resisting political censorship—all these post-Brechtian features and more which have not just been theorized upon but also practiced by the theoreticians dealt with in this chapter, are characteristic of British as well as global agit prop theatre. Because it embraces aspects of Dadaism, Futurism, Poor Theatre, Laboratory Theatre, Biomechanics, Environmental Theatre, Feminist Theatre and is successful, effective and here to stay, agit prop theatre is possibly the most open ended theatre in our times and makes for a challenging study.
Anuradha Kapur puts it rather well in her article ‘Notions of the Authentic’ in the Journal of Arts and Ideas, Nos 20-21, March 1991; “All theatres create their spectators into communities one way or another; the point is to consider what sort of community we should create today. Neither voyeuristic as is done in some forms of naturalism; nor one in the likeness of what we imagine traditional theatres make in their own contexts; but one that queries ourselves, displaying to us the ways in which our past and our future may be conjoined. But not without placing that wedge of contemporary perception that over and again relocates the parts that would be too easy to congeal into a false organicity.”

It would be useful to quote Diana Taylor here, who in her article ‘Theatre and terrorism: Griselda Gambaro’s Information for Foreigners’ in Theatre Journal, Vol. 42, No. 2, May 1990, says: “Watching potentially empowering when it forms a part of a broader network, can be extremely disempowering when reduced to the spectator’s passive ‘just watching’. She continues: “In order to be empowered by seeing, to be able to look back at the monstrous gargoyles without turning into lifeless stones, we must see beyond the theatrical frame and decode the fictions about violence, about torturers, about ourselves as audience, about the role of theatre in this ‘pathetic drama’”, p. 178.

As Michael Huxley and Noel Witts quote Augusto Boal in their edition of The Twentieth Century Performance Reader, Routledge, London and New York, 1996, “Perhaps the theatre is not revolutionary in itself; but have no doubts, it is a rehearsal of revolution”, p. 97.

See Drama Review, Nos 125-128, 1990, section entitled ‘On Stage with the Velvet Revolution’.


Ibid.


To quote an example: Nathaniel Buchwald, the director of the Yiddish Artef Group, reviewed the winning entry, John Bonn’s Red Revue in Worker’s Theatre. His criticism is applicable to most of the work of the period. “In general the work of Prolet Buehne, though outstanding in the field of Agit Prop theatre, leans too heavily on direction and delivery of lines and too little on the dramaturgical shaping of its plays. The Prolet
Buehne players speak their lines with a ringing galvanic forcefulness, and the director marshals them up on the stage in perfect rhythm and in a variety of group patterns, with changing tempo building up to a spectacular climax. But the plays themselves are frequently devoid of effective theatrical form and the vocabulary leans to the conventional propagandist jargon." From Stuart Cosgrove’s ‘Prolet Buehne: agit prop in America’ in David Bradby, Louis James and Bernard Sharratt, eds., 1980: 209-210.

11 The New Encyclopedia Britannia, Macropedia, Vol. 1, p. 149 and Vol. 28, p. 591 were useful sources of information.

12 Eugen Berthold Friedrich Brecht (b. February 10, 1898, Augsburg, Germany; d. August 14, 1956, East Berlin), German poet, playwright and theatrical reformer whose epic theatre departed from the conventions of theatrical illusion and who developed the drama as a social and ideological form for leftist causes. His notable plays include Baal (produced 1923), Dreigroschenoper (1928; The Three Penny Opera), Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder (1941; Mother Courage and her Children), Leben des Galilei (1943; The Life of Galileo); Der Gute Mensch Von Sezuan (1943; The Good Woman of Setzuan), Der Aufhaltsame Aufstieg des Arturo Ui (1947; The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui), Herr Puntila und Sein Knecht Matti (1948; Herr Puntila and His Man Matti), The Caucasian Chalk Circle (first produced in English, 1948; Der Kaukasische Kriide Kreis, 1949). His most important work is Kleines Organon Furdas Theatre (1949; A Little Organum for the Theatre).


14 Erwin Piscator (b. December 17, 1893, Alm, Germany; d. March 30, 1966, Starnberg, West Germany), theatrical producer and director famed for his ingenious Expressionistic staging techniques; the originator of the epic theatre style, later developed by Brecht.

15 Vsevolod Yemilyevich Meyerhold (b. February 9 [January 28, old style], 1874, Penza, Russia; d. February 2, 1940, Moscow), Russian theatrical producer, director and actor whose provocative experiments in nonrealistic theatre made him one of the seminal forces in modern theatre.

16 Vladimir Vladimirovich Mayakovsky (b. July 19 [July 7 old style], 1893, Bagdadi, Georgia, Russian Empire; d. April 14, 1930, Moscow), the leading Russian poet of the Russian revolution and of the early Soviet period.

17 Jerzy Grotowski (b. August 11, 1933, Rzeszow, Poland), international leader of the Experimental theatre, who became famous in the 1960s as the director of productions staged by the Polish Laboratory Theatre of Wroclaw.
Antonin Artaud (b. 1896; d. 1948), outstanding writer and actor of the French theatrical avant-garde. He was vehemently hostile towards Realism and Naturalism. He believed that theatre could through the power wielded by its immediacy create such a total upheaval in all senses in the population that it would broaden perceptions to a revolutionary level. According to him theatre does away with a rationale that is constricting. Based on his understanding that everything that acted was cruelty and that theatre ought to rebuild itself on a concept of this drastic action pushed to the limit, he developed his idea of the theatre of cruelty. Such a theatre, he felt, contained the scope to test ‘our entire vitality, confronting us with all our potential.’

Richard Schechner (b. 1934) is director, writer, theorist and the founder of the Performance Group (1967-1980). His environmental productions including Dionysius in 69, Makbeth and Commune were performed in his performing garage on off-Broadway in New York City.


Romain Rolland (b. January 29, 1866, Clamency, France; d. December 30, 1944, Vezelay), novelist, dramatist, essayist and one of the great mystics of the twentieth century French literature. He was, in his life and writings, deeply involved in the major social, political and spiritual events of his age; the “Dreyfus Affair” which exposed anti-Semitism in the French army; pacifism; communism; the fight against Fascism, and the search for world peace.


Augusto Boal (b. 1934), Brazilian director, political activist and Member of Parliament of Rio de Janeiro’s Workers’ Party; evolved a system known as Theatre of the Oppressed which makes use of games and exercises; image theatre; invisible theatre and is currently developing legislative theatre. His theoretical standpoint is clear from his Games for Actors and non-Actors (1992) and The Rainbow of Desire (1995).


Ibid, p. 98.