That the aims of various agit prop theatre groups in Britain differ testifies to the fact that agit prop theatre is conjunctural and intervenes in a historical context, as elucidated in Chapter One. Just as ‘historical context’ or in other words, ‘politics’, is by nature dynamic, agit prop theatre too, is not enslaved to a particular political stance/view/message. This chapter intends to pursue the changing political situation in Britain from the sixties to the nineties and dwell upon the various alternate, especially agit prop theatre companies that sprung up at different times.

While the term post World War II would imply a time period beginning from after 1945, critics are unanimously agreed upon considering the sixties as the most ‘happening’ years.¹ This was not just in terms of evolving political events but also in terms of the development of a counter culture movement around the world including Britain. The counter culture movement did not cause the emancipatory and libertarian movements of the seventies and eighties (such as the women’s lib and feminist movements, the black consciousness movements, gay rights and community activist movements or movements that fought for the rights of the disabled, the old or other socially disadvantaged groups). Yet, this initial counter culture did provide a ‘model’ for oppositional action against hegemony on a grand scale...the British alternative theatre movement was only one, relatively small part of the counter cultural and emancipatory movements of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s...its chief tactic was allied to the emergence of the aesthetics of anti nuclear, anti war and civil rights demonstrations in Britain and the USA...a new mode of celebratory protest ...challenged dominant ideologies through the production of alternative pleasures...²

In terms of political activity, 1968 has been traditionally accepted as the most eventful of years: in her Introduction to Stages in the Revolution, Catherine Itzin has detailed the events such, that an attempt to describe that year would appear to be almost a rewriting of her work. At best one could summarise her informative chapter through the words of Bigsby who appropriately commented that the events in Vietnam, Ireland, France, Germany and even Czechoslovakia were responsible for
infusing a political component into public life and rhetoric which had never been present before. (Bigsby, 1981: 32)

The events that stand out in the political front of the year 1968 include the opening of peace talks between USA and North Vietnam at Paris; student unrest in France; liberalisation movement in Czechoslovakia; the occupation of entire Czechoslovakia on 21st August by the Warsaw Pact nations excluding Rumania; the establishment of a puppet regime at Prague; Britain’s announcement of her intention to withdraw from all her bases East of Suez by 1971 (with the exception of Hong Kong); the assassination of Martin Luther King on March 5; the beginning of war in Northern Ireland following the banning of a Civil Rights March in Derry.

Across the world, large scale revolutionary demands by students, workers and peasants were answered by massive and brutal repression ordered by governments of every political leaning—capitalist, communist or social-democratic...In 1968, as now, the world overflowed with milk and honey, yet the majority of its inhabitants were starving. Economically, the world’s unrivalled prosperity led to demands for the equal distribution of the world’s wealth. Ideologically, the possibility of material freedom was complemented by demands for cultural and creative freedom: one of the most significant calls from the barricades of Paris was for ‘power’ to the imagination. (Craig, 1980: 15).

Among those who responded to this ideological calling, it was the politically awakened radicalised student community that become socially the most identifiable of groups. This youthful student community, poised as it was between a world just beyond its grasp that promised all the affluence and advantages that society could offer and facing a real world that could give only struggle, pollution and Cold War imperialism responded not just with resentment but with anger. And this anger did not fizzle out but was channelised such that it

became a movement of the political left, appealing (however confusedly) to Marx as a symbol of the revolutionary transformation of society. All of this came to be reflected in the theatre. (Itzin, 1980: 3)
While the moment of 1968 is clearly perceptible in its contribution to the growing theatre revolution, it would be both unjust and misleading to ignore the earlier harbingers of this radical change. Of these precedents the two most notable were the Unity Theatre which grew out of the Workers Theatre Movement of the thirties and Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop at the Royal Stratford in East London. There was also the Centre 42 (named after the 1962 Trade Union Congress [TUC] resolution proposing support for the Arts) project of Arnold Wesker. All these theatre movements had ambitions that were similar to those of the alternative theatre companies of the late sixties and early seventies. In fact, as Itzin and Craig among others point out, the work of CAST, The General Will, the early Red Ladder, Broadside Mobile Workers Theatre and North West Spanner was an offshoot of the Unity in terms of form, content and political leaning. Centre 42’s dream of bridging the gap between performer and audience and providing a theatre that was accessible to the working class was converted into a reality by Companies like 7:84, Belt and Braces, Foco Novo and Monstrous Regiment. Ed Berman’s Inter Action and his contribution in the creation of the Ambiance Lunch Hour Theatre Club and the Almost Free Theatre—which aimed at proving that theatre was not only an evening leisure activity indulged by a small theatre going public or that a community was not one bound by topographical space but by shared interests—drew their inspiration from Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop.

The political/theatrical landmarks that impacted the dramatic developments in the theatrical front of 1968, do not end here. For there are other contexts that are equally significant in shaping the nature of British theatrical activity. Firstly, the abolition of the institution of theatre censorship, practised since the eighteenth century by the Lord Chamberlain. The most obviously irksome manifestation of censorship applied to sex (the writer Joe Orton suffering particularly and amusingly) but political censorship was also involved and the very bureaucracy of script approval (which took several weeks) effectively pre-empted topical or improvised work. (Edgar, 1988: 24-25)
Secondly, the gathering strength of the feminist movement as well as of the Gay Liberation Front. This was as a result of a climate of change in the organisation of family life and the liberalisation of laws on sexuality... the partial decriminalisation of male homosexuality in 1967. (Wandor, 1981:17)

Next, the repeated failure of the Labour government to bring about social change which bred feelings of disillusionment and discontent and naturally led to all kinds of, including theatrical, backlash at its ineffectiveness. (Itzin, 1980: 6). And finally, the direct and indirect influences of foreign theatre activities such as that of the Blue Blouses, Mayakovsky, Meyerhold, Piscator and above all Brecht and his Berliner Ensemble; (all of which has been discussed at length in the previous chapter) and the visits of many foreign theatre companies. 3

Given all these ingredients essential for a truly charged theatre, it is no surprise then that a number of alternative theatre groups sprung up at this time. Foremost among them was CAST (Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre). CAST was originally formed in 1965 by two dropouts of Unity Theatre, Claire and Roland Muldoon, who were disillusioned by the Communist Party agenda which the Unity stuck to insistently. CAST sought, literally, to cast the working class population and its method was striking in that it veered between agit prop and agit pop. In other words it definitely attempted to agitate its captive audience (found initially in pubs) but instead of adopting a solemn tone, they employed what Muldoon himself described as ‘rock and roll theatre’. (Itzin, 1980:14). The central character of their shows was a Muggins (appearing in different plays with a different first name)- a character who represented the ‘mugging’ or slogging working class. It was however, the play written by John Arden and Margaretta D’Arcy called Harold Muggins Is a Martyr which they performed in 1968 with CAST (quite a disaster as performances go from all accounts) which was a breakthrough in that it led to a kind of cultural confluence of politically awakened theatre activists.
Emerging head above shoulders over the ventures that were an outcome of this confluence was the Agit Prop Street Players (later renamed as Red Ladder), the name itself summing up its approach—which grew out of requests from tenants for 15 minute pieces dramatising rent strikes. (Davies, 1987:164)

This company while seeking to bring about greater class-consciousness steered clear of words like ‘capitalism’, ‘communism’ or ‘socialism in favour of more concrete and direct images. (Davies, 1987:165)

The characteristic that distinguished the theatre of the Agit Prop Street Players from other theatre was that there would always be a discussion after the play with the audience—a very deliberate agitprop feature.

Another company that formed at this time was the Portable comprising of university educated writers such as David Hare and Howard Brenton. The work of the Portable which was inspired by the counter cultural ideologies of the late sixties (such as that of the French Situationists) was ‘violent, anarchic and destructive.’ (Edgar, 1988, p26). Their political stance unlike that of the Agit Prop Street Players who believed deep down in a workers revolution was seen as being much less about the organisation of the working class at the point of production, and much more about the description of bourgeois ideology at the point of consumption. The center of the revolution had shifted from the factory floor to the supermarket. (Edgar, 1988: 26)

A little more must be said about the contribution of Ed Berman’s Inter Action. His aim behind the creation of the Ambiance Lunch Hour Theatre Club and the Almost Free Theatre has been already mentioned in the previous pages. Inter Action actually mothered a number of smaller theatrical enterprises that had a vast range of objectives and target audiences. For example, there was a children’s theatre company called Dogg’s Troupe that involved the local community of the housing estates through Game Plays; the Fun Art Bus aimed at generating environment consciousness
by performing plays and using video screens on the boarding deck of a bus to the bus queues

and TOC (The Other Company) which, under Naftali Yavin, examined sociological theories of role-playing and game theory in an attempt to break through the artificial barriers which exist not only between people but also between stage and audience. (Craig, 1980: 23)

Another new theatrical venture whose aims were similar to Inter Action (i.e. the betterment of the community) was the Brighton Combination which presented playlets that dealt with localized community problems and 'fulfilled in a manner—which few later political groups have done—the central function of agit prop: agitate, educate and organise.' (Craig, 1980: 23)

Thus in that turbulent year of 1968 it was only natural that theatre responded to the politically high-wire situation and in the decade that followed, this theatrical drift towards politics became further entrenched. 1969, the year that Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, saw a rightist coup in Cambodia with an escalation of conflict in Laos and South Vietnam; the secret visit of Dr. Kissinger to China in 1971 which paved the way for a summit between President Nixon and Mao Tse Tung in Peking (which Nixon visited in 1972). 1972 was more eventful in that there was the Stockholm Conference to prevent pollution; President Nixon visited the Soviet Union and signed the agreement on Strategic Arms Limitation Talks; and England entered the European Common Market. The next year saw Britain, Ireland and Denmark joining the European Economic Community; US withdrawal of troops from Vietnam and the signing of the peace settlement at Paris; military coup in Chile with the overthrow of the Marxist President, Salvador Allende; and the October War where the Arab States attacked Israel and ceasefire was imposed after 5-weeks of fighting. 1974 brought in the resignation of President Nixon after the Watergate scandal. A year later, there were communist victories in Cambodia and the end of the Vietnam War with South Vietnam surrendering to North Vietnam; and a 3-day Helsinki
Summit of 35 nations. 1976 was again, a packed year what with race riots erupting in South Africa; Angola becoming the new center of power rivalry; Palestinian right to independent Statehood being voted by USA; Khmer Rouge taking control of Cambodia; America celebrating the bicentenary of its independence and electing Jimmy Carter as President; and the death of Mao Tse Tung. In 1978 there were border clashes between Vietnam and Cambodia; and the USA agreed to diplomatic relations with China and severing its ties with Taiwan.

This was the general political scenario at the International front; perhaps it is more necessary to have a closer look at the British political scene from 1968 to 1978. It has been mentioned in the previous paragraph that Britain entered the European Common Market but part of the entry fee was an inevitable rise in food prices. An Industrial Relations Act in 1971 was bitterly resented and resisted by the Labour Party and the Unions. As unemployment and prices rose, Edward Heath (the Conservative leader whose successful negotiations had made Britain’s entry into the Common Market possible) fell back on a statutory Prices and Incomes Policy (Phase I, 1972; Phase II, 1973). By late 1973, industrial unrest had reached a new peak. In response to stoppages and overtime bans by electricity supply workers, train drivers and miners, Heath announced a state of Emergency and eventually a 3 day working week in all offices, shops and factories. This was to conserve fuel, which was in unusually short supply because of the Arab-Israeli War of 1973 and the OPEC decision to double the price of crude oil. In 1974, the General Election concluded with the resignation of Heath and the formation of a Labour Party government headed by Wilson who stayed in power till 1976 to be followed by Callaghan till 1979.

One of the major problems that Britain was faced with was the reappearance of the ‘Irish Question’ with the renewed activities of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in the late 1950s. In 1969, Wilson sent British troops to Northern Ireland to enforce law and order. The Royal Ulster Constabulary (R.U.C) was disarmed, the B specials were disbanded and the Catholics welcomed what they initially viewed as impartial protection. By 1971, distrust and violence had escalated again and in
January 1972: British soldiers shot thirteen people in a Catholic demonstration in London Derry. In 1973 a ‘power sharing’ executive of moderate Catholics and Protestants was formed in the Sunningdale Agreement of December 1973 and it seemed that a liberal solution acceptable to Westminster, Dublin and Belfast had been found. However the General Election of 1974 where 11 out 12 anti Sunningdale candidates were successful and the all out strike by the Protestant Ulster Workers Union in May destroyed whatever hope there was for this ‘power sharing’ executive. A new Constitutional Convention in 1975-76 failed to hammer out an acceptable political formula. The subsequent political violence was so intense that it led to a Peace Movement initiated by two Belfast women, Betty Williams (a Protestant) and Mairead Corrigan (a Catholic) to restore political sanity and trust between members of different religions sects. Though they were given the Nobel Peace Prize in 1977, the Catholic extremists were not stirred enough by their message. In 1978 and 1979, Provisional IRA prisoners seeking special political (as opposed to criminal) status in gaol devised the ‘dirty’ protest where they refused to use any of the clothing, washing and lavatory facilities of the prison but remained in stinking squalor for months. Whatever sympathy this action may have won for them was more than destroyed by the cold blooded murder of Lord Mountbatten and two of his family in August 1979 and in a separate incident on the same day, the murder by remote controlled explosions of 18 British soldiers at Warren Point.

Apart from these governmental machinations, a movement that had started gathering momentum in the late sixties and became loudly public in the early seventies was the feminist movement. The first major public statement was made in 1970 during the twentieth Miss World Contest where suddenly a group of women interrupted the spectacle in full media viewing with

flour, smoke and stink bombs, blew whistles, waved rattles and distributed leaflets to members of the audience, protesting against the objectification of women in beauty contest ...The women were arrested, Bob Hope cracked a few defensive jokes and the show continued. (Wandor, 1981: 36)
It was perhaps this movement that attempted to negate gender biases that inspired the formation of professional theatre companies such as the Women’s Theatre Group (1974), Monstrous Regiment (1975-76) and Gay Sweatshop (1976). Initially the feminist theatre groups (with which the Gay theatre movement invariably joined hands) worked collectively and their plays used overtly agit prop and music hall elements. By the mid seventies however, though this tendency continued, the convoluted nature of feminist/gay issues began to be taken up and plays by individuals rather than groups began to find their way on stage. It was not just the specifically feminists/gay theatre companies alone that dealt with these ‘gender bender’ subjects but also other agit prop theatre companies like the Agit Prop Street Players (Red Ladder) whose Strike While the Iron is Hot (1974) later re-titled as A Woman’s work is never done (the title is self explanatory) remained effective for more than two years. Among other alternative theatre companies who took up gender issues were the Theatre-in-Education (TIE) Companies (such as the Bolton Octagon TIE Company’s Sweetie Pie in 1972) where students and teachers lent their sense of heightened gender consciousness into the making of feminist plays.

But the larger political tensions also provided ample scope to theatre companies who were prompt in their theatrical response:

Older groups received new life, new ones were formed such as the General Will in Bradford and the Broadside Company put together by two former members of Red Ladder. Their Sketches retained the simplicity and bluntness of agit prop...Unlike the Workers Theatre Movement or Unity, these groups were not identified with any single political organisation. (Davies, 1987: 166)

In July 1971, John McGrath formed 7:84 as a popular political touring company which two years later separated to form the English and Scottish branches. In her article ‘Good Nights Out: Activating the Audience with 7:84 (England)’ Nadine Holdsworth described the origins of this Company such:
7:84 emerged from a period of national and international socio-political and counter-cultural events which initiated the politicisation of a new generation of theatre workers, and heralded a burgeoning enclave of left wing political theatre, which included Red Ladder, Foco Novo and General Will. (Holdsworth, 1997: 29)

In the same article, Holdsworth continues that 7:84 (England) had open connections with the Labour Movement. Sometimes the relationship would entail financial backing, as with the Six Men of Dorset production in 1984. At other times individual performances were organized through a trade Union, local Labour Party or Trades Council.

This alliance functioned as both a rhetorical and authenticating convention through which audiences were initially attracted and could subsequently read the performance event. (Holdsworth, 1997: 31-32)

North West Spanner, a small scale touring Company based at Manchester since 1971 specialised in creating shows with immediate relevance to a working class audience and taking them out to non-theatrical venues like factory canteens and trade union clubs. In its early days it was part of Inroads, a community arts project aimed at children and based in York, where Inroads was dedicated to education through play and used a Pied Piper form of street theatre to recruit their customers. By 1979 North St Spanner was a shop floor theatre company—performing at building sites, dry docks, workers canteens and factory gates as well as in evenings to audiences attracted from the workplace. Most of their early plays had generic titles, for example The Rents Play of 1972 or the Nurses Play of 1973. Commenting on Spanner’s play Partisans, Richard Drain says:

What distinguishes Partisans from other shows attempting his kind of subject is its readiness to credit its characters with an imaginative life alongside their working life—an imaginative life so uninhibited that it can turn inside out the realistic format in which the play is cast...It takes Spanner to show that serious political intentions can leave room for zaniness...The group
that Spanner came closest to is the Combination... (Drain, 1979: 4)

Yet another company that sprung up in 1973 and sought to entertain with material and forms that were articulate, progressive and created from the viewpoint of working and oppressed people was the Belt and Braces Road show. A significant characteristic of this Company was its use of rock music and its incorporation of productions of socialist theatre companies on the mainland of Europe; especially well known has been their production of Dario Fos’ Accidental Death of an Anarchist.

Another response to the changed political climate was simply: so what? Some groups such as Broadside continued to produce plays which covered topics in a direct manner: its The Lump was written together with the building workers themselves who formed its subject. And if there was not enough suitable material to hand then ‘history’ was to be raided for examples of ‘socialist revivalism’. Foco Novo for instance produced the Arthur Horner Show about the Welsh miners’ leader and also The Nine Days and Saltely Gates which linked the General strike of 1926 with the miners’ striker of 1972. (Davies, 1987: 168)

The Foco Novo Theatre Company was essentially the brainchild of one determined individual called Roland Rees who along with David Aukin and Bernard Pomerance co-founded the Company in 1972. In keeping with the meaning of the name which in Portugese reads as ‘a new focus or starting point’ it supported new writing not just by established playwrights but also by new dramatists such as Mustapha Matura and Tunde Ikoli. The main characteristic of Foco Novo’s work ‘stylistically has been what might be described as a form of heightened realism.’ (Hay, 1985)

Choosing to produce plays that veered between ‘socialist inclined ‘art’ theatre and that of a localized community theatre with distinctively populist leanings was the Half Moon Theatre Company.’ (Craig, 1980: 41). Their production of George Davies
is. Innocent OK contributed largely to the successful campaign to free George Davies from his wrongful arrest and thus proved the powerful impact of theatre on society.

It is perhaps pertinent to mention the fact that the seventies also saw the growth of Asian, Black, Polish, Cypriot and other ‘ethnic’ and ‘community’ theatre. While this thesis aims at analysing ‘English’ theatre companies specifically, it is important to note the immigrant and ‘minority’ voice gradually asserting its presence through a cultural/artistic medium.6

If the decade starting 1968 saw agit prop theatre in Britain flourishing, the election of Margaret Thatcher as the first woman Prime Minister and thus the return of the Conservative Party to power in 1979 dramatically changed the theatre environment in Britain.

In 1981 Ronald Reagan became the President of the USA while in France, the Socialist Party Chief Francois Mitterand was elected President (co-incidentally Thatcher, Reagan and Mitterand all came in for a second term starting ‘83, ‘84 and ‘88 respectively); the House of Commons passed Britain’s controversial new Nationality Bill. After four centuries, Britain and the Vatican resumed full diplomatic relations in 1982 and in the same year, Argentina surrendered to Britain in the Falklands; the Soviet President Brezhnev died and Yuri Andropov succeeded him; a new constitution for Canada came into force and Switzerland decided to join the UN. 1983 saw the Caribbean’s Island of St Kitts and Nevis becoming the world’s newest nation. The year that Indira Gandhi was assassinated i.e. 1984, had North and South Koreans opening borders for the first time since 1945; China and Britain signed an agreement to transfer Hong Kong to China in 1997; the Soviet President Yuri Andropov died and Konstantin Chernekov became the new Soviet Communist Party Chief. A year later Chernekov died and Mikhail Gorbachev was elected the General Secretary of the Communist Party while Andrei Gromyko was elected the President of the Soviet Union; Reagan and Gorbachev met at Geneva, the first superpower summit in six years.
In 1986, Queen Elizabeth II gave her formal assent to the Australian Act, abolishing all remaining legislative, judicial and executive links of the country with Britain; Gorbachev was reelected General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party for 5 years and Reagan and Gorbachev met at Reykjavik for their second summit. Margaret Thatcher made history in 1987 when she won the third term in the elections; more history was made that year when Reagan and Gorbachev signed a treaty in Washington to scrap intermediate nuclear weapons; China witnessed campus demonstrations for greater democracy and the Chinese Communist Party General Secretary, Hu Yaobang resigned, succeeded by Prime Minister Zhao Aiyang. Whilst Salman Rushdie's controversial novel *The Satanic Verses* was making waves and awarded the Whitbred Prize for fiction, 1988 also saw the signing of the Geneva accord for Afghan peace; the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan; the opening of the five day Kremlin Summit by Gorbachev and Reagan; the dropping of President Gromyko and four other top figures from the Kremlin leadership so that Gorbachev emerged as the most powerful; the election of George Bush as President of the US; and the celebration of 40 years of unanimous adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The next year Margaret Thatcher completed ten years as British Prime Minister; tens of thousands of Chinese students in Beijing demonstrated for democratic rights so that martial law was imposed resulting in soldiers storming Tianamen Square and crushing the month old students' pro democracy campaign killing hundreds and injuring many more; France celebrated two hundred years of the French Revolution, Hungary became a democratic republic putting an end to the era of communism; the Berlin Wall, a symbol of animosity between East and West Germany was broken up at various places; East Germany appointed its first non-communist Head of State—Manfred Gerlach; in Czechoslovakia, the first government without a communist majority in 41 years headed by a Communist Prime Minister Marian Calfa and President Vaclav Havel was sworn in.
1990 finally saw the end of the Thatcherite era when Thatcher faced a crisis as Geoffrey Howe resigned over differences with her approach to European Economic and Monetary Union—she later announced her decision to step down as also her intention not to run for the second round in the leadership election; in the election, John Major who was the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Thatcher cabinet took over as the Prime Minister; the South African leader Nelson Mandela was freed after twenty eight years in prison; Gorbachev took oath as the first Soviet Executive President; East Germans voted for the unification of both Germanys; non communists won the Hungary election; Boris Yeltsin was elected President of Russian Federation; US President George Bush and USSR President Mikhail Gorbachev agreed on ending the Cold War; the Soviet Parliament passed a key law giving private business the same legal status as state enterprise; the Soviet Union granted freedom of the press and journalist rights, abandoned censorship and allowed anyone who so desired, to publish a newspaper (all steps towards the dissolution of the USSR and the formation of the CIS).

Even a casual glance at the long narration of selective events in the Western World is indicative of a definite movement away from Communism as the ideal form of the political being of a state. While this does not therefore imply that it was necessarily to be replaced by extreme right wing politics, it surely spells out that communism was an unattainable ideal and thus the socialist ground was shaky indeed:

The fall of communist governments and the embracing of a free market economy by much admired people such as Vaclav Havel was more than most idealism could withstand. (Shank, 1994: 15)

According to playwright David Edgar, ‘Conservatism was not planned by a conservative woman Prime Minister in a blue dress. It was an ideological movement...There was disillusionment throughout the world with ideals of egalitarianism and collective emancipation.’ (Lustig, 1991: 10)
In Britain under Thatcher, the pervasive right wing ideology meant a climate of sheer repression. As Nadine Holdsworth says that those theatre companies that had evolved from a world which had to do with class consciousness, ideological resistance and the recognition of a plurality of cultural activity, had virtually disappeared, displaced by the promotion of individualism initiated by Thatcherism, contained under Majorism, and embraced by New Labour. (Holdsworth, 1997: 38)

All through the eighties, the Right Wing government concerned itself with smashing individuals and groups that attempted to dismantle hierarchical structures. Whether in economics terms where traditional working class communities were shattered by their disempowerment due to the decline of traditional industry and the suppression of trade union activity; or in the cultural sphere where, for example, theatre companies that had based their activities on the belief that the class struggle must be fought and will be won, there was no room for a resistant ideology. As McGrath admitted: “So there was I, basing my whole artistic practice on the concept of ‘class consciousness’, and there was the leader of my country telling me it didn’t exist.” (Holdworth, 1997: 38)

Any registration of protest that critiqued the high handedness of the State by theatre companies was as severely dealt with as was the miner’s strike of 1984-95 that voiced the economic and social strife of the people.7 State intervention in the cultural domain took the tangible form of withdrawal of state subsidy, using the Arts Council as its agent. Thus a number of oppositional theatre companies in the mid eighties such as CAST, Joint Stock, Monstrous Regiment and Foco Novo found their funding cut off. Consequently, agit prop theatre companies had to now find other sponsors so that their business activity began to take precedence over their theatrical progress. This also involved a lot of change/compromise for some companies who had to either shift their aims/subject matter or their target audiences; as with Red Ladder who from
1985 increasingly began distancing themselves from the radical theatre movement and performed primarily for college going youth.

Broadly speaking the oppressive Thatcherite era saw four trends emerging at the theatrical front. In the first place, theatre practitioners learnt to speak what Jenny Topper, Artistic Director of the Hampstead Theatre in 1991 called ‘shitespeak’ i.e. the language used in the courting of sponsors. As David Edgar commented on the increased commodification of theatre:

You’ll have noticed how British Rail now imitates the airlines, with their chief steward’s announcements and their ‘situated towards the rear of the train.’ The same thing has happened in the theatre. Its begun to take on the language of the cinema with words like ‘package’ and ‘product’ and with the rise of the producer. It is ironic that at a time of restricted finding the theatre should use the language of commercial production. (Lustig, 1991: 12)

Continuing on the same subject Edgar believed that

‘corporate sponsorship has redefined the theatrical experience. It’s like going to a right club. It has created a two-tier experience with special bars for sponsors and made the whole thing into a passive experience. (Lustig, 1991: 12)

Art sponsorship accelerated under Thatcher but ironically it must be noted, the Association for Business Sponsorship of the Arts (ABSA) was founded in 1976 under a Labour government.8

The second significant aspect was the sense of unease that theatre activists had in dealing with the ideology of the time. Even bold playwrights like David Hare and Howard Brenton revealed an uncertainty as to how to respond to Thatcherism in an atmosphere where political protest of any nature was choked (for example, Tumbledown, the Falkland Faction directed by Richard Eyre for television caused a furore in high places).9 One way of responding to Thatcherism was to do it obliquely as David Edgar’s key play about Thatcherism, Maydays did; it was about how important defection was and how important people were who came to the New
Conservatism from the Left. An inevitable outcome of the almost obsessive concern with and perception of Margaret Thatcher was that she was often accorded a quasi mythic status in stage representations, becoming almost an icon for both, her admirers and her detractors; she invaded even the classics.

Perhaps it could be argued that attacking Thatcher head on, impersonating either her or her most oppressed victims on stage is an action of those who wish to prove their radical credentials while the Davids and Howards of the playwriting community felt no need to do this. (Lustig, 1991: 13)

Another way of responding to Thatcherism was the building up of nostalgia or the ‘heritage industry’ as David Edgar has called it where images of ‘Merrie England’ and tradition were deified; where, with the exception of the expansion into Europe, the repertoire was narrowed such that popular Shakespeares and Chekovs were staged interminably.  

Coming to the third and really grave aspect for theatre development was the fact that Thatcherism worked its own ideological terms very well. It ensured that it was difficult to put the collective idea across. Political energy became colossally fragmented, both in the theatre and in politics; the women’s theatre movement and the ethnic theatre movement for example, were politically and culturally important. But they lacked the force and motivation to come together in a wider common purpose and thus failed to bring about unifying action. Younger theatre groups immediately started off thinking about individual sponsorship using contemporary machinery and language rather than actually addressing themselves to what they were trying to say and to whom.

Thus, the fourth emergent trend by the nineties was that though some of the agit prop theatre companies that were rooted in the socially committed tradition continued to exist, their work was on a smaller scale and under constant threat. Performance practice in the nineties thus saw aesthetic experimentation attaining greater significance as against the importance of the audience. Though the new
theatre companies did provide unconventional and dynamic ways of intervention and interpretation of social, political and personal identities they appeared to be distanced from the larger political structures. And certainly did not attempt to directly activate the audience. Perhaps it would be relevant to observe what kind of agenda this ‘new generation of ‘Thatcher’s children” has been developing as their ‘responses to contemporary society’ for ‘the cultural impetus faced by companies like 7:84 (England) has been consigned to history.’ (Holdworth, 1997: 40)

The term ‘Thatcher’s children’ has been used for these companies not because they were born in the Thatchter years but rather because, at a time when the drastic cuts in arts funding resulted in the demise of numerous fringe companies, the innovative work of companies like The People Show, The Welfare State Company, Lumiere and Son, Hesitate and Demonstrate, Forced Entertainment, Alternative Cabaret, Dogs in Honey, DVB Physical Theatre and Station House Opera, continued to flourish.

The People Show was created in 1966 by sculptor and Jazz pianist Jeff Nuttall who brought together a group of visual artists to stage a ‘happening’ in the basement of Better Books at Charing Cross Road. This involved motor bikes, fishing nets and very fat women in Nothing Hill Gate, London. The goal of the People Show was not to preach any particular political or theatrical ideology but to explore situations that allowed the creative spirit to reign supremely free. In their early days, The People Show attempted to stage performances which ‘involved found spaces and objects subtly transformed into anarchic compositions which challenged the members of the audience to devise their own interpretation of the images.’ (Shank, 1994: 92). Gradually however, by the mid-seventies, the ‘happenings’ style was dropped by the group who then took to a kind of Dadaist style creating images that were dreamlike and irreverent. The Company never appoints a director but works as a collective, taking up each participating individual’s current preoccupation be it an idea, an object of interest, a desirable action, an obsession, interesting art work or themes worth studying. Though the narration is loose, an aesthetic unity develops from the
intertwining of both imagistic and ideological themes. Images such as the bacon sandwiches consumed by The People Show participants and the glittering ball are supposed to represent the lower lasses; while the upper classes are symbolized by such images as people on the top of a scaffolding or a gentleman sitting in the throne room and playing with a model of the set. Of late the company has introduced more text and such skills as acrobatics into their shows.

The Welfare State Company was founded in 1968 by John Fox and Sue Gill and based in Ulverston South Cumbria, (though their network spreads throughout Britain as also some parts of Europe and Canada). The company was also known as Engineers of the Imagination, Civil Magicians and Guardians of the Unpredictable. The Company’s use of visual images whether for miniature or gigantic pieces is an attempt to recreate Britain as it might have been in the Dark Ages. For this, they use costumes, props, lanterns, masks, giant puppets, ice sculptures, fireworks and all the other devices employed by the mummers or music hall or carnival traditions. Thus, an almost festive spirit invades the productions and the interactive nature of the performers invariably concludes with performance and participants dancing together.

Lumiere and Son began in 1973 under the artistic leadership of director Hilary Westlake and writer David Gale. The company inquires into abnormalities of the human mind be they obsessions, fixations, illness, habits, rituals, jokes and exaggerations and thus their images are akin to dream and myth rather than ‘documentary reality’. The humour in their productions therefore is a black humour. The distinctive feature about Lumiere and Son’s productions is that the text and the visual score operate as separate but equal entities with each conveying its own independent meaning; the emphasis is on discovering new stylistic solutions to the subconscious workings of the human psyche. According to Gale:

Our work is not about a gothic inclination of an artist to dignify the ‘backwaters’ of his or her psyche, but to try to find points of contact between these ‘backwaters’ and those of the audience. We aim to challenge people’s complacency and
expose the complicated motivations for the things we do.  
(Shank, 1994: 99)

Quite similar to the ‘happenings’ format followed by The People Show as that of the ‘events’ performed in public spaces by Hesitate and Demonstrate, a Company founded in 1975 by Geraldine Pilgrim and Janet Goddard (which functioned till 1986 when it closed due to financial reasons). The ‘event’ lasted for a brief while in a public place even while the normal routine of the chosen site continued as always. The name of the company arose from a principle of movement where, influenced by Edward Muybridge’s photographs of human movement, the performers would hesitate a little before carrying out a movement as if deliberately demonstrating it to the audience. The use of sound tapes with not just classical and popular music but also various sound effects was as striking an aspect as the origins of the Company’s name; these sound tapes were often self sufficient narratives in themselves. The productions focused on a surrealist sequence of events which though not in linear order, concluded with a theatrical climax.

Alternative Cabaret developed from the fringe theatre of the seventies as a collective with half of comedians and half of musicians who performed regularly at the Comedy Store at Soho. The idea behind its formation by Toni Allen, Alexei Sayle as well as Jim Barclay, Andy de la Tour and Maggie Steed was to provide theatre to not just coterie audiences but to a

real cross section of seedy show biz people who come out of the strip club below, real reactionaries who don’t know what they are going to see.12

Their shows were actually stand up comedies where the audience decided how much they’d had of a certain comedian. Though most of the members of Alternative Cabaret came from Left backgrounds, their shows did not have a singled out politically motivated approach. Rather they attempted to show people the humorous
side of the Left and thus challenged Left Wing prejudices as much as other types. Instead of theorizing their personal politics and arriving at common ground, they preferred to individually tackle their audience in their different ways; whether it was a conscious undermining or support of Left Wing ideas or straight political satire about current affairs. As Andy de la Tour put it:

Alternative Cabaret is not just a comedy version of a fringe theatre company. In fact it's the difference that makes Alternative Cabaret such a good thing. In fringe theatre there's all the hassle of grants, then justifying the grant-doing the gigs and the tours. Alternative Cabaret is just a group of people who vaguely agree on general things about entertainment and politics. We're loose organizationally and it's a big plus that we're not a company.\(^{13}\)

Experimenting with the physical in theatre are such companies as DV8 Physical Theatre, Forced Entertainment, Dogs in Honey and Station House Opera, all formed in the eighties. Of these DV8 is an extremely well known and widely traveled company centering its attention upon physical movement, both harsh as well as gentle. The objective of this Company is:

'taking risk, breaking down the barriers between dance, theatre and personal politics and above all, about communicating new ideas directly, clearly and unpretentiously. Dancers struggle with an unknown force to gain control of their bodies; one falls, another seeks to fly. Each player struggles to find a voice so as to be heard but their words remain soundless'. (Shank, 1994: 9)

The works of Forced Entertainment, Dogs in Honey and Station House Opera draw their inspiration from TV culture where each fragment or episode (as in a serial) becomes 'a unit of informational exchange.' (Shank, 1994: 111). The notion of a linear narrative is replaced by disconnected images and scenes and film is referred to at some level be it image, design, lighting, sound track source or stage set. Somewhere is the underlying principle that our own psyche and lives are actually a
series of fragments put together in some sort of order rather than being an unbroken experience.

Such a description of theatre companies that grew in the Thatcher years, even if superficial, points out clearly that pure agit prop could not and would not work, for socialism as a political ideology was surely only a concept and not a reachable ideal. However, there can be no denying that the drive to create new forms and structures which is a secondary aim of agit prop theatre performances has perhaps opened the doors for novel ways of understanding the individual in a community and intervening meaningfully in society. How successful they may be in creating a new version of agit prop theatre remains to be seen.

This chapter would remain incomplete without the inclusion of playwrights like Trevor Griffiths, David Edgar, Howard Barker, Howard Brenton, David Edgar, David Hare, Snoo Wilson and Heathcote Williams (apart from John Arden and John McGrath who have featured in the course of events discussed so far). The contribution of these playwrights to the cause of agit prop theatre has been immense and most of them have been associated with one or the other agit prop theatre companies. Trevor Griffiths for instance has written for 7:84 and amongst his well known plays, Occupations (1970), a 'quasi-documentary account of 1920s revolutionary politics in Italy', The Party (1973), Sam, Sam (1971), Comedians (1975) and Through the Night (1975) stand out. The distinctive quality of Griffith's work is his linking of personal and political lives, the everyday with the illusory... There is a genuine sense...that new alignments are taking place in contemporary British politics, that a traditional commitment to the Labour party's view of cultural change has proved inadequate. (Ansorge, 1975: 66)

Comedians for example, is about a conflict regarding the comedians role with two competing views of comedy offered to the students. The external examiner, Bert Challenor, believes that comedy should exploit, but not challenge established values; the teacher
of the class, Eddie Waters, believes that comedy should steadily subvert those same values. (Zeifman and Zimmerman, 1993: 248)

David Edgar’s plays have found a platform in The General Will Company.

His work with the General Will showed him to be an effective lampoonist, a talent most perfectly attuned to his 1969 mock pantomime Tedderella in which Mr. Heath takes the country to the Common Market ball. (Ansorge, 1975: 58)

A reporter initially by profession, Edgar’s keen desire to strip a subject off its mysteries and reveal clear evidence can be seen in a play like Excuses Excuses (1971) which deals with the motives of a factory arsonist. Destiny (written originally in 1973; produced in 1976) is a landmark in Edgar’s playwriting career; for rather than being rabidly leftist, this complex play shows the attraction of right wing politics. Thus it is a sensitive handling of the issue of political choices made by people. It also “represents an important development in contemporary theatre insofar as it marks the ‘promotion’ of radical theatre to suitably large and prestigious settings.” (Craig, 1980: 138)

Howard Barker ‘is in many ways the Peter Pan of his generation. While other writers have toned down their early sense of moral outrage and class hatred, Barker’s plays continue to carry an intense, emotional impact and a deep and often unfocused series of political and sexual antagonism.’ (Craig, 1980: 139). His better known plays are Cheek (1970), Alpha Alpha, Claw, Stripwell (1975), That Good Between Us (1977), The Hang of the Gaol (1978), Fair Slaughter (1978) and The Love of a Good Man (1980).

Howard Brenton and David Hare, like Trevor Griffiths and David Edgar learned almost their entire craft from the fringe theatre of the 60s—on stages in colleges, art centers and village halls – and till about 1973, made fervent claims for the fringe as a weapon in a repressive society. However with time, Brenton and Hare moved from the Portable to more established and mainstream theatre revealing their
fears about the future of the fringe. But their plays did not diminish in terms of political content. While not necessarily containing a strident Marxist note, their plays deal with the fears and hopes of their contemporaries and the call for mercy and strength in crisis. Thus they have all the potential for bringing about social change.

Brenton’s Magnificence (1973) and The Saliva Milkshake (1975) deal with urban terrorism. Weapons of Happiness (1976) ‘juxtaposes the sufferings of a former Czech Communist leader, Joseph Frank, imprisoned, tortured and tried in the 1952 Slansky show trials (and in reality hanged) with the fumblings and sometimes ludicrous groupings towards political awareness of a group of South London factory workers.’ (Craig, 1980: 120). An earlier play, Hitler Dances (1972) is antiwar propaganda which Brenton addresses by showing the various ways in which we identify with and participate in war. The Churchill Play (1974) dares to portray Churchill as an eccentric and is a bleak vision of the future, set as it is in an internment camp in 1984, headed by a coalition government and supported by the military.

Brenton was and remains the figurehead of his generation. It was he who initiated the most immediate response to Margaret Thatcher’s first election victory in 1979 by collaborating with Tony Howard on A Short Sharp Shock! A savagely satirical attack the original title of which, “Ditch the Bitch,” neatly summarises its aims. (Zeifman and Zimmerman, 1993: 327)


In a lecture delivered at King’s College, Cambridge in 1978, David Hare said that theatre had drifted to politics because it was in a position to reveal an age in which men’s ideals and men’s practice bear no relation to each other; in which the public profession of, for example, socialism has often been reduced by the passage of history to wearing personal fetish, or even chronic personality disorder. The theatre is the best way of showing the gap between what it said and what is seen to be done, and that is why, ragged and gaptoothed as it
is, it has still a far healthier potential than some of the other, poorer, abandoned arts. (Bigsby, 1981: 41)

He himself writes:

about politics because the challenge of communism, in however debased and ugly a form, is to ask whether the criteria by which we have [been] brought up are right, whether what each of us experiences uniquely really is what makes us valuable. (Bigsby, 1981: 42)

While vividly depicting the personalities of his characters, David Hare also showcases the socio-politico-cultural environment that is responsible for their personality traits. He began his career in 1968 with the comedy How Brophy was made moving to contemporary theatre in right earnest with Knuckle in 1974 in which he expresses his feeling that English society at that time

the society of property millionaires and political accommodation—was morally corrosive, the more so because it was wilful. (Bigsby, 1981: 44)

Fanshen (1975) is about a Chinese village in the aftermath of revolution. Plays like Slag (1970) The Great Exhibition (1972) and Teeth ‘n’ Smiles (1975) are all about the gradual crumbling of relationships/organisations/institutions. Licking Hitler (1978), Plenty (1978) and Dreams of Leaving (1980) again, deal with the shattering of those myths that bind a society—with no attempt at retrieving those myths. And the 1974 collaboration between Hare and Brenton, Brassneck ‘spans the years between 1945 and 1973, covering the history of three grafting generations of a Midlands commercial dynasty’ and is ‘inspired by the revelations of corruption in the early 1970s.’ (Craig, 1980: 126-127)

Stephen Poliakov and Barrie Keefe are two other playwrights whose plays expose a world of unrealised dreams and hopes similar to Hare’s; but there is no truly Marxist perspective in spite of the revelations made about the nature of Capitalism. Poliakov’s Hitting Town (1975), American Days (1979), Bloody Kids (1980) and
Keefe's *Gimme Shelter* (1975-77) and *Frozen Assets* (1978) adequately exemplify this aspect.

Preferring to write plays that are akin to those produced by Lumiere and Son and The People Show is Snoo Wilson who is the youngest of the Portable trio. His vision incorporates the bizarre in the mundane and thus he is able to write on a vast range of themes be it Feminism, Irish republicanism (for example *A Greenish Man*, 1978), ecology, apartheid or confronting the Anti Christ. This last theme can be found in his *The Glad Hand* (1978). *Soul of the White Ant* (1975), *Pignight, Blowjob, Vampire, The Beast* and *The Pleasure Principle* are some of his other plays which are filled with diverse images and ideas.

Bearing a striking resemblance to Snoo Wilson is Heathcote Williams who however is known best for his play *AC/DC* in 1969 which ‘embodies both in its form and content many of the neuroses, terrors, joys and fashions of the acid age.’ (Craig, 1980: 131)

Theatre, like any other art form, evolves. Agit prop theatre too has grown in its dimensions as this history of its birth and maturity in England proves. And though most critics consider it deceased, I would like to regard this as just another stage in its evolution. For the volcanic potential of agit prop theatre still exists albeit in a changed mode—and perhaps, the very fact that it has changed is evidence enough of its progressiveness.
Notes and References

1 Almost all the critics referred to be it Itzin, Craig, Bigsby, Peter Ansorge, Nadine Holdsworth, Davies, Lynn Sobieski, David Edgar etc, in this Chapter, have at some point outlined all the events that declare the significance of 1968.


3 ‘The Living Theatre, La Mama, Bread and Puppet, the San Francisco Mime Troupe... Luis Valdez’s El Teatro Campesino, Joseph Chaikin’s Open Theatre, Jerome Savary’s Grand Magic Circus, Ariane Mnouchkine’s Theatre du Soleil, Grotowskis’ Theatre Laboratory. (Itzin, 1980: 6)

4 The book A Dictionary of Dates and Events ed Dr A N Kapoor and V P Gupta, Ambe Book, Delhi, 1995 has been of immense help to this Chapter.

5 The book A History of the Modern World by Richard Poulton, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1981 was among the many books consulted and gave a clear, concise picture of Britain and the rest of the world till the eighties.

6 Chapter Four entitled ‘The Public-going Theatre Community and Ethnic Theatre’ by Naseem Khan in Sandy Craig, 1980 is a good starting point on this subject

7 Pam Brighton in an NTQ symposium entitled ‘Theatre in Thatcher’s Britain: Organizing the Opposition’ says acidly “Thatcher is firing on all bloody guns; one has a working class that’s entirely bloody vulnerable, and becoming daily more vulnerable as every piece of legislation that’s passed further erodes its freedoms, its possibilities, and its ability to eat; and one talks about Serious Money being a political play. What politics are we talking about?” in NTQ New Theatre Quarterly Vol. V, No. 18, May 1989, p.121.

8 While discussing the problems faced by theatre companies in the Thatcher years, Rob Ritchie says, “I think you have to talk about the economic because its obsessed a lot of people working in the theatre in the last eight or nine years. That’s to say, much of their time has gone into devising clever ways to ensure they can raise the funds to keep going. Because of that there’s been a silence about discussing the work and the kind of practices that companies are operating.” NTQ, New Theatre Quarterly, Vol.V, No.18, May 1989, p.113.

9 To quote Pam Brighton again who dwells on this aspect:
"...There is a plan for ideologically dense and very difficult plays; people always scoff at playing to the converted, but the converted want entertainment and stimulation as much as anybody else. One's other brief is what it's always been: to find the audience which will never enter the institutions which have been redundant since they were created. The critical question is not just one of theatre and Thatcher, but of one's own politics under Thatcher." p.114 and further on

"...you have to site a political theatre company where it's actually going to do ideological battle with Thatcherism, because those glimpses of political change are going to occur less and less: and when they do occur, they will be more ruthlessly repressed." NTQ New Theatre Quarterly, Vol. V, No. 18, May 1989, p.119.

10 Pam Brighton is vitriolic about this aspect when she says "...we are taking about a country that is in a state of political crisis, where interpreting the bloody Tempest three times a season is a complete irrelevance" NTQ Vol. V, No. 18, May 1989, p121.

11 Andrew Davies discusses this aspect in some detail in Chap 11, especially pp. 183-184 in Davies, 1987.


13 Ibid, p.3.