To recall the outline of Red Ladder Theatre Company as described in Chapter Two, originally Red Ladder was simply called The Agit Prop Street Players—a name that clearly spelt out the aim/venue/methodology of the company—and it emerged when a group from a socialist information service performed a play at the Trafalgar Square Festival of 1968. Prior to A Woman’s Work is Never Done which was the first really full length play produced by Red Ladder, we learn from a 1972-73 leaflet that the earlier plays were actually small units that took

as their subjects vital issues such as unemployment, rents, the Industrial Relations Act...that are the immediate concern of the audiences involved. The plays are designed to lead into a discussion of the issues raised; they aim not just to provide a forum in which experienced Trade Unionists can air their views, but to provoke even the most reticent members of an audience into participating. [Under the heading ‘How do you use the Plays?’, the leaflet describes the plays as short, about 30 minutes each which].

‘can be shown together, separately, or in twos, depending on the time available. A typical ‘evening’ would consist of the Housing Play, followed by a discussion, followed by the Women’s Play...and another discussion...and so on.

It continues that though at that time there were only a limited range of plays to choose from (namely the ones on the pamphlet), future times would see plays on ‘Collective Bargaining’; Ireland; Apprenticeship and Racialism’. The leaflet also points at the kind of stage setting required when it informs that the plays could be performed in a hall or large room without a special stage or curtains, ‘only a floor 20x20 and a ceiling height of 15 ft.’ Apart from these indoor plays, the leaflet adds the availability of Outdoor plays ‘Designed—unlike the indoor plays—for specific performance outdoors—on demonstration, picket lines, factory gates, etc. As well as dealing with crucial issues, they add pageant and spectacle to outdoor events.’

Gradually the basis of the work broadened and plays that fed directly into particular struggles and issues developed such as The Big Con against the Industrial Relations Act and The Cake Play against productivity bargaining. By 1971 the name Red Ladder evolved after a much loved and used prop. There also evolved a policy of taking theatre to ‘working class’ audiences in places where working class people usually find
their entertainment which now included trade union clubs. By 1973 the commitment of the Company was recognized with an Arts Council grant of four thousand pounds and in 1976, the Company moved from London to Leeds, Yorkshire; and it is still located in the city although it continues to tour on a national basis.

Whilst early Red Ladder plays from 1968-73 fed directly into political disputes of the time, 1974 onwards, the work of the Company diversified as did its Artistic Policies. It would be convenient if one were to have a bird’s eye view of the 1970s production list of the Company. Between 1974-75, Red Ladder produced A Woman’s Work is Never Done (also known as Strike While the Iron is Hot), published by the Journeyman Press, which dealt with the role of women at work and home and their growing political awareness. It Makes You Sick by Frances McNeill was produced between 1975-76 and it was a club show about the National Health Service (NHS) written and devised in close collaboration with National Union Public Employees (NUPE). Steve Trafford’s Anybody Sweating followed in 1976-77, a club show about unemployment, highrise flats and Britain in 1976. It became known as ‘Would Jubilee it’ and was Red Ladder’s contribution to the celebrations in 1977. A watershed in Red Ladder’s Artistic development was the 1978 production of Taking Our Time by Steve Trafford and Glen Parkes published by Pluto Press; this created a more analytical approach to story telling as opposed to the simple solutions of Agit Prop. It was a play with music about the industrialization of the weaving industry in Yorkshire and the rise of Chartism. The play was massively successful and attracted a wide, popular audience throughout Yorkshire and the north, supported by the Union of Dyers and Bleachers. In 1979, Nerves of Steel by Steve Trafford and Chris Rawlence was produced which explored the impact that overtime and shift working had on family life. A reworking of the Faust legend around the subject of nuclear power and arms was Steve Trafford’s Power Mad which was produced in 1979-80.¹

The earliest play that the Red Ladder Theatre archives could yield turned out to be a worn out typed script with inked notes a May 1975 version of the Cake Play (the original was performed around 1968-69).² This short skeletal frame of a play is pure agit prop, condensing almost the entire history of the post-fifties crisis in Britain and incorporating actual political figures such as Harold Wilson (who became Labour leader

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in 1963), Edward Heath (the Conservative leader who propounded ‘new conservatism’) and Denis Healey (the then Chancellor of the Exchequer). Thus its contemporariness at the time of its performance could not have been made more abundantly clear. Clear too is the fact that the play functions palpably as a Ritual text for in critiquing social reality, engendering protest and urging collective action on the part of the audience (as the analysis will illustrate), the Cake Play could not have served as a more fitting example of a Ritual Text. In brief, the play deals with the growing defensive solidarity among the workers at the time when employers sought wage cuts due to poor trade and it also grapples with possible solutions provided by authoritarian figures as well as showing the loopholes in such solutions.

Indeed, the entire Cake Play reads like a Nebentext with the Haupttext being actual/lived/meta political reality existing in the here and now wherein the play was scripted; in fact, the point when the momentum breaks to discuss ‘The International Crisis’ spells out clearly that the play is only an agent to foreground the complex issues involved in the struggle between the interests of Labour and Capital. So at various moments, the text of the Cake Play seems to have accorded itself a certain hortatory function crystallized in particular rituals of empowerment by which it comes to give itself the power of social interrogation and regeneration. However, just as we begin to conclude that the text has not only appropriated the garb of but also internalized (the coerciveness of) a dominant order, it distances itself from such a conclusion. This it does by filling the social totality it has created with an alternative set of values, where power belongs to the people. How this happens will be the focus of analysis in subsequent sections.

When Marx wrote on a military escapade in Spain, he did not write ‘a history of Spain’ but he thought it necessary to think Spain historically. Politics, beside being seen as an aspect of the social whole obviously has a strong historical dimension. The knowledge acquired through studying this historical background helps one to think the ‘present crisis’ (in the context of the plays, ‘present’ refers to the early 70s) historically, helps one to quarry the pattern of development through time by using new concepts and asking different questions. The Cake Play literally begs for a reading of its historical background not merely to observe the machinations of various political leaders like Wilson and Heath but also to interpret the contemporary struggle of the British people. If
one examines the vocabulary of the Cake Play the key terms around which the play appears to revolve are ‘Inflation’, ‘Pay’, ‘Profit’, ‘Wages’, ‘Price Controls’, ‘Rent Freeze’, ‘Depression’, ‘Slump’, ‘Doom’, ‘Social Contract’, ‘IRA’, ‘Tax Concessions’, ‘Income Policy’ among others of a similar vein. Mapping history through these terms is no easy task. For it is difficult to shrink time, especially politically active time as one tends to overlook many of the complex twists and turns of politics which are all significant in their own way. One thing that these terms make transparent, however, is that the history of struggle in Britain from 1960 onwards was primarily a struggle between the interests of labour and capital. The political system was shaped by the needs of capital in its effort to constrain, deflect or absorb the political power of the working class. 

In the years after 1900, British industrial weakness led to crises that was social and political as well as economic: a crisis of defence strategy; a crisis of order in industrial relations; a challenge to the authority of the elected government by the right wing in the House of Lords, and in the officer corps of the army, over the issue of Home Rule for Ireland; and a challenge to its legitimacy by the direct-action wing of the suffragette movement. This accumulating crisis was suspended by the outbreak of war in 1914. The war and inter war years saw a series of adjustments and compromises which gave a new lease of life to the old system. But by 1960 when the rest of the world had altered radically, in Britain nothing essential seemed to have changed at all. In fact by the end of the 70s virtually all industrialised economies were experiencing reduced growth rates, rising unemployment and inflation. What distinguished the British experience however and underlined more clearly than anything else its endogenous nature was that in Britain the crisis had already begun in the 60s. The almost derisive fidelity with which history was repeating itself bespoke of something systemic, a kind of syndrome towards which the whole society was periodically driven by the pattern of forces at work within it. Hence, whether it was Labour leader Harold Wilson’s comprehensive reforms that were designed to modernize the structure of the state; or Conservative leader, Edward Heath’s dismantling of the apparatus of state economic intervention created during the Wilson’s years—no initiative whatsoever changed the situation in Britain. Thus appropriate
ingredients were available to Red ladder for the remaking of the Cake Play; when WI says about the ‘Boss’

We’ve had this bugger on our backs for the last 200 years, and its time we got him off

he is thus in effect spelling out this recurrent historical crisis riding on Britain’s back while also declaring that it was high time the cause (here, the Boss—a symbol of capitalist forces) was summarily dealt with.

At the time when this version of the Cake Play was scripted i.e. May 1975, Harold Wilson and Edward Heath (one an active and the other a passive, protagonist within the play) had both served their term in heading the government; Heath had been replaced as recently as February of the same year by Margaret Thatcher as leader of the Conservative party. Wilson had however retained his leadership of the Labour Party and had decided to use the ‘Social Contract’ to repair his image and strengthen his hold on the Party. What was this ‘Social Contract’ which the Cake Play too refers to as “the only hope that all of us have got” and as “Harold’s solution to the bosses problem”?

Responding to the industrial militancy of the rank and file of the party and unions, the 1971 Labour Party conference had adopted a more far-reaching programme than anything it had entertained since 1945, including a ‘socialist plan of production, based on public ownership, with minimum compensation, of the commanding heights of the economy’/(Leys, 1986: 84). At Wilson’s insistence this was later watered down by the National Executive, although the tone of party statements remained radical. The 1974 manifesto pledged ‘a fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people and their families’. (Leys, 1986: 84). When Wilson took office in February 1974, the government was a minority one with Liberal and nationalist Party support. It was also a government confronted with a catastrophic balance of payments deficit, inflation accelerating towards 20 per cent and the pent-up frustration of a labour movement more mobilized than ever before—but not, for the most part, any more committed than before to fundamental social and economic change. Wilson, for his part, was as committed as ever to the view that the only realistic goal for Labour was to find an agreed basis for reviving the ailing capitalist economy. He now made Labour’s
special ability to repair the governments’ relationship with the unions the cornerstone of his policy and of his electoral appeal.

The key phrase in this exercise was the ‘social contract’, adopted by the party and the TUC to denote the set of understandings between the state, capital and labour on the basis of which the state could look for the Trade Union cooperation with its policies, and which Heath was charged with having destroyed. Wilson undertook to repair the ‘social contract’ so that the voluntary support of the unions could then be obtained for a new incomes policy. This background serves to explain part of Wilson’s longish speech in the Cake Play when he attempts to pacify the workers:

‘Now I’ve got a perfectly ordinary flag here...(Puts flag over boot)
Here we are in times of trouble
Inflation soars and prices double
Heath’s policy of confrontation
Has made us a divided nation.
Now Britain’s riding stormy weather
We must all work hard and pull together.
...[illegible typescript] lets get busy...social contract. (boot again)
Yes we’ll remove all pay legislation.
If you’ll ask for wages in moderation.

By the end of 1974 however, the rate of inflation was 23 per cent, and over the twelve months from July 1974 to July 1975 it rose to more than 26 per cent. Over the same period earnings rose nearly 28 per cent. Meanwhile, the current balance of payments deficit for 1974 was no less than 3.6 billion pounds. The deficit was covered partly by the inflow of funds for investment by foreign companies in the North Sea oilfields, and partly by short-term foreign loans. (Leys, 1986: 86). So by May 1975, it was clear that a final crisis was not far off. Labour’s claim to be able to deliver union cooperation in stabilising the economy was now to be tested. Obviously, The Cake Play as we have it before us was well timed. The justifiable resentment at Wilson’s social contract and the inability of the Labour Party to deliver is voiced by the workers at the end of the play:

So that’s the social contract Harold’s solution
to the bosses problem. The promises are broken.
Prices soar, and still Harold and TUC tell us to
Cut our wage demands.
But we’ve got a right to a living wage.
We build the cake...But they own it.
We don’t need them up there, we’ve got the skills and strength to run things for ourselves. Until we do our wages will go on chasing their prices. If you want to get rid of inflation, you have to get Rid of the boss...we don’t just want more cake we want the bloody bakery.

By demonstrating to the audience a shared political reality (that it is shared is prominently clear when at one point the script includes the audiences’ apparently positive response to the rallying cry of the workers), the text proves that its effectiveness was contingent upon the agreement between spectator and performer at the principles being illustrated. The text does not stop here: it also urges the audience to appreciate their own ‘skills’ and capabilities; it initiates the audience into a recognition and an assertion of their rights to “own the bakery” by ejecting the bosses—“You have to get rid of the boss”; and it thus, thrusts the onus of collective action, of empowerment, upon the audience. Thus The Cake Play navigates its way through political factuality within its text to negotiate strategies of action with its audience. If, as has been discussed earlier, a Ritual text seeks to generate mass consciousness and direct it towards a concerted collective action, then The Cake Play surely functions as one, helped no doubt by the fact that it is entirely seeped in the historical reality that it critiques.

At the broad thematic level then it is easy enough to see how The Cake Play functions successfully as a Ritual Text—contemporary reality is held up as a backdrop and criticized so as to engender protest. The presence of personae such as Wilson and Healy (and that of the invisible but present Heath) and the language of the play ground it firmly in the current situation. But there are other agents that facilitate the realization of the purpose behind its performance. These include the use of meaningful symbols

Ritualisation entails the repetitive use of emotionally charged symbols in symbolically significant locations at symbolically appropriate times. New symbols need not be introduced in rites in order to get people to change their political beliefs. The American flag can be as valuable to the civil rights marchers as to the Ku Klux Klan in defining what is good for the community. The trick is to introduce dramatic variations on these powerful symbols, to change their meaning by changing their context. (Kertzer, 1998: 92)
That the play is named *The Cake Play* is in itself symbolic and within the text, the ritual creation of one tier upon another of cake augments the symbolism of the title. This symbolism is elementary. Situationally the ‘play’ is between workers and owners for a larger share of the ‘cake’ which is spatially, being ‘baked’ by the workers in a location metaphorically called a ‘bakery’; simply speaking, the cake refers to the output that will earn (a) profits for the owners and (b) wages for the workers while the bakery serves as a symbol of all the forces of production. The ‘play’ is for a just distribution of the cake.

The two sides i.e. owners and workers are marked by their characteristic attitudes: on the one side there is every effort, mostly foul, to ensure that the profits remain within the ambit of the minority class and on the other, the sheer resentment at the underhand means of the opposing faction generates fierce resistance. As each layer of cake gets erected, so does the distance between the labourers and the capitalists—symptomatic of the class struggle in the class hierarchy. Thus the ‘play’ (also a synonym for ‘performance’) is for the benefit of an audience that has obviously allied itself with the working class and aims to usher in far reaching changes through joint effort. Hence this is not idle play or pastime but a deliberate activity that hopes to be consequential. In fact the two instances within the text which indicate the liminality of the performance site are (a) when the Nebentext says ‘At this point the International crisis should be dealt with’ and (b) when the audience response is evoked during the performance. This deliberate breaking of spatial boundaries demarcating actors from audience only reaffirms the propagandist nature of the play.

The text includes other ‘paraphernalia of ritual’ as Blumer terms it by which he means such vehicles as slogans, songs, cheers, expressive gestures and uniforms, which within a ritual activity ‘acquires a sentimental significance symbolizing the common feelings about the movement, their use serves as a constant reliving and re-enforcement of these mutual feelings’ (Kertzer, 1988: 72). In *The Cake Play* the Profit bag and the flag hat worn by the Boss (who sits symbolically on the shoulders of the worker—also the narrator—WL) and the coat worn by the workers mark out the different modes of dressing typical to a class/profession. At one point a worker is shown to desire the hat which obviously earmarks a higher social structure or a successful material condition and as he reaches for the hat, he significantly sheds his working coat. Thus attire infuses a
sense of self importance and provides one of the means by which people see themselves as playing certain roles. It also makes an individual semiotically identifiable.

The use of the megaphone and press card by 'MM' records the role of the National Press in aiding and abetting the capitalist classes. The megaphone through which MM speaks is redolent of sensational headlines; the same MM corrects the Boss when the latter wails:

O my God!! What am I going to do? I can't pay them any more. It's bad for my cake.

MM is quick to alert him: 'Don’t be silly. It’s bad for the national cake.' What could be a more telling example of the way the Press manipulates language to suit its own purpose, to serve its own assumed ideological stance and to befuddle the common man?

But the working class too is equipped—with drums and cymbals—that are resonant of a militant position and that reverberate through the atmosphere to drown down the sound of the megaphone. In one instance this militancy is augmented by the song—only one line of which is available in the play but which is enough to declare the purport and message behind it: ‘Let’s all pull together’ is obviously a rousing song to enlist support and build cohesiveness amongst the workers.

The working class also uses a down to earth prosaic language while speaking and this is far more effective compared to the frequent use of rhyme by the Boss and his coterie. This is unlike earlier literary paradigms where the nobility spoke in verse form, their poetic language adding to their grand stature. Here, the verse form is mere scurrilous rhyming which points out that, under the surface of their authoritative images, those in power are not nobility but rogues who have no compunctions in using the most devious underhand means to retain their power. Their language reads almost like a spoof of the heroic verse form. Underlining the agitprop mode of the play and reinforcing the theme of class struggle are the use of the red ladder, the flag, and signboards with significant words like ‘Inflation’, ‘Profit’, etc that are propped up at apt moments. The colour red for the ladder (and of the song ‘red flag’ played by WI on the trumpet) is obviously a symbolic vehicle bearing an alternative understanding of political reality, an alternative basis of social solidarity—i.e., a communist ideal. That the expropriation of symbols can undermine strength (a strength that grows through time) is seen by the way in which all
kinds of schemers find shelter under the national flag; traditionally a flag is not simply a
decorated cloth but the embodiment of the idea of a nation. It arouses feelings of pride
and fervour. In _The Cake Play_ this aspect is satirised, for the national flag is literally
treated like a coloured cloth (umbrella like) that will protect or cloak all kinds of
corruption—representing then, a nation gone to the dogs.

In evolving into a complex ritual complete with attempts at generating mass
participation, in deploying complex symbolism including iconism, the text presents itself
as a viable option to the metatextual. This empowerment occurs because all these facets
of rituals form an alternative matrix of potent conventions/signifiers. To repeat an earlier
comment, the text however does not accord itself the status of the dominant order—it
seeks, through its alternative signifiers, to suggest that power belongs to the people as a
whole. Again, to reiterate, it seeks to erase the spatial boundaries of the performance area,
thus

demystifying the gap between performer and audience and making
the political consciousness raising which followed a performance
something which was also shared, thus helping to politicise the
theatre-going process itself.4

Red Ladder's _Strike While the Iron is Hot_ alternatively called _A Woman’s Work
is Never Done_ first performed on March 11, 1974 begins with that most vital element of
agit prop, a song. Entitled ‘Don’t Get married, Girls’, this incredibly tongue-in-cheek
song by Leon Rosselson only too honestly describes the different ways in which women
allow themselves to be trapped into playing the myriad roles that their male counterparts
expect of them. It is a simple song but it succinctly describes the unresisting construction
of female identity and suggests a contestation of this formation. Though the tone of the
song is half mocking, its very subversiveness makes it effective. This is not the only
meaningful song in the play. Songs dominate the play and are a potent means of engaging
the audience emotionally. Victor Turner describes how in ritual, ‘the dominant symbol
brings the ethical and jural norms of society into close contact with emotional stimuli’. He says:

_In the action situation of ritual, with its social excitement and
direct physiological stimuli, such as music, singing, dancing,
alcohol, incense, and bizarre modes of dress, the ritual
symbol...effects an interchange of qualities between its poles of_
meaning. Norms and values, on the one hand become saturated with emotion, while the gross and basic emotions become ennobled through contact with social values. (Kertzer, 1988: 40)

Thus the songs precisely because they are simply writ, are also a strong means of uniting symbols of social reality with the emotions that the performance intends to stir; the songs do not lull one into an atmosphere of stability but aid in exciting angst at a male dominated, gendered world. The use of placards with slogans, subversive wit and humour as the tone of the play and limited, functional props on stage are the other typical agit prop characteristics that the play endorses.

The process of scripting this play, indeed its very conception, evolution and reception by different audiences has been outlined by Red Ladder actor-member Chris Lawrence in the Note to the play to this edition. It makes for a telling reading for several reasons. One reason is that it reveals the schism between the ideals of a 'collective' and what actually happens. Working as a collective “implies a challenge to authoritarianism and the rigid division of labour which help perpetuate oppressive relations, and stifle creativity and contributions from performers” (Introduction: 9). Chris Rawlence’s account of the functioning of Red Ladder as a collective while drafting Strike While the Iron is Hot reveals that beneath the umbrella of ‘collective’ writing, there exist not only different ratios of involvement with a particular theme but also conflicting opinions amongst the members. Strike While the Iron is Hot brings out engrained male chauvinism in the process of cultural production and therefore the continued non-posteriorization of, for and by women in this process. The story as Chris Rawlence tells it goes thus that at first it was decided that the play would be one of many units i.e. theatre pieces that dealt with subjects as wide ranging as technology, housing, Ireland, racism, etc. Depending on the need of the target audience, a relevant theatre piece would be performed but along with it, the women’s play (as Strike While the Iron is Hot is addressed) could also be enacted to widen the scope for discussion, post performance. Hence, Chris Lawrence says:

Predictably we couldn’t keep the unit length down to fifteen minutes. The first two—on the Housing Finance Act and the implications of new technology for white collar workers—ran to thirty and forty minutes respectively and were only ever twice
performed in the same evening. The third of these new units was the Women's Play. That it should have been relegated to third place was pointed to by the women in Red Ladder as symptomatic of its priority by Red Ladder men. (Note: 17)

Not just in terms of prioritising the theme, but even in terms of ideological commitments, varying perspectives emerged. Chris Lawrence speaks of the two factions: one, under the banner of Marx, Lenin and dialectical materialism, felt that women's oppression could end by ending exploitation of the working classes by the bourgeoisie; the other, influenced by such like Shulamith Firestone, believed that the patriarchal stranglehold upon women was of greater importance than the class struggle.

Of course these oppositions within the "collective" were resolved eventually. The Women's Play was drafted into a single unit entitled Strike While the Iron is Hot by Autumn 1973 thus allowing the theme to come into its own. And ideological differences too were sorted at by the use of "two banners which appeared simultaneously at the end of the play. They read 'women will never be free while workers are in chains' and 'workers will never be free while women are in chains'". (Note: 18)

However this collective experience of writing Strike While the Iron is Hot was a learning experience for the three women and one man who undertook to write the play. Collating the material from different sources led to a closer look at the multifaceted nature of the theme. It also instilled a desire to be politically correct in viewing women—thus one of the scenes in an early draft of the play included a stylized History of the Family which attempted to show the changing nature of the family from prehistoric times to the present day. Though dropped for its didacticism, the very conception of this scene showed a deeper understanding of and a growing familiarity with women's issues on the Company's part. Nonetheless, the interweaving of the class struggle with that of the women illustrates that 'Red Ladder's political base line was a socialist approach which was then influenced by feminism'. (Introduction: 10). In a nutshell, the play centers around a young married couple, Helen and Dave, both of whom are part of their unions in their work place. While collectively the women in the union at Helen's workplace learn to fight for their rights, Helen simultaneously introduces changes in the division of labour at her homefront. Initially Dave resists but with Helen's changing situation, his consciousness as a man and a husband undergoes changes as well. 'Although the main
emphasis in the play is on the women's self activity, the end suggests the possibility of an alliance between men and women, in which the divide and rule ideology of bourgeois social relations has been exposed.' (Introduction: 13)

This synopsis of the play suggests a kind of processual structuring which fits neatly into the phases into which Victor Turner groups the public action constituting social drama. The first of these phases is:

'breach of regular norm governed social relations made publicly visible by the infraction of a rule ordinarily held to be binding, and which is itself a symbol of the maintenance of some major relationships between persons, statuses, or subgroups held to be a key link in the integrality of the widest community recognized to be a cultural envelope of solidary sentiments. (Turner, 1986: 34)

Scene One of the play depicts a traditional wedding with the usual revelry, clichetic speeches full of nostalgia and attempts at witticism, and the elation of the bride, the groom and their respective mothers. The optimism about the marriage stems from all kinds of conventional reasons—the bride is sure about her choice and appears to be delighted that she is close to attaining her hearts' desires, i.e. marrying Dave and bearing his children; the groom is satisfied with Helen because she qualifies not just in terms of looks and intelligence to be his wife but also because of her submissiveness; and the mothers of each are so happy about the ceremony and the gifts that any qualms they have about Helen being able to manage a home are forgotten. An aspect worth noting in the first section of this scene is the advice doled out by the mothers: both proffer advice that ensure the groom's contentment; obviously they represent a generation not impacted by feminist ideals, a generation that corroborated with and furthered patriarchal norms and conditions. The placards with the slogans 'And they lived happily ever after' and 'The End' are ironically meant to imply the kind of 'end' that the performance would like to give to the farcical, stereotypical familial relations that exist in society. Thus these slogans are immediately offset by the song of the chorus that lists out all the tedious chores that Helen needs to complete. It is this choric song that strikes a note of discord in what should have been an idyllic post-marital set up; it thus serves to create a 'breach' in what is presumed to lead to a well ordered life.
For we see that Helen does not take her restrictive life style, the stifling drudgery of routine domesticity too well. Though she masks her discontentment in Dave's presence, things do not augur well for him because Helen has started showing the first signs of not being the meek housewife he would like her to be; she has started grumbling. Scene Two carries over Helen's resentment which now spills over in her resolution to pick up a job in order to break her desultory existence and her financial dependence. The second stage following the 'breach' in domesticity, has been reached. This stage, Turner calls 'crisis'

when people take sides, or rather, are in the process of being induced, seduced, cajoled, nudged, or threatened to take sides by those who confront one another across the revealed breach as prime antagonists. As Durkheim and Rene Girard have argued and my observations confirm: crisis is contagious. When antagonisms become overt, ancient rancours, rivalries, and unresolved vendettas are revived. Non-rational considerations prevail: temperamental dislikes, unconscious desires and aggressions, reanimated infantile anxieties, as well as the conscious envies and jealousies which break loose when a major normative knot is cut. (Turner, 1986: 34)

Thus Dave, fed up with Helen's taunts about the way he spends his leisure time and money, challenges her to work in a factory like himself. By doing this, however, he opens the door to new avenues for Helen little realising the advantage that is now on her side and the price he would have to pay if Helen is to take him on. Which, of course, she does.

Since the play moves across two spaces—domestic and the workplace—similar structures appear in both.

Deconstruction, which I rely on...for my critique of community, shows that a desire for unity or wholeness in discourse generates borders, dichotomies and exclusions. I suggest that the desire for mutual identification in social relations generates exclusions in a similar way. A woman in a feminist group that seeks to affirm mutual identification will feel and be doubly excluded if by virtue of her being different in race, class, culture, or sexuality she does not identify with the others nor they with her.5

In 'The Sweatshop' where Helen works as seamstress, the 'breach' occurs due to the attitude of the manageress (which filters down to the foreman who acts as per her
orders). Due to her higher class status and her role as an owner rather than a worker of production, the manageress stands outside the feminist community that Helen and her colleagues build up; in fact the construction of the feminist collective is a direct consequence of the intolerant stance adopted by the manageress. When Sheila, a co-worker, returns after a few days leave (her absence was because she stayed home to nurse her youngest child suffering from chicken pox), instead of sympathising with her or appreciating her effort in making suitable arrangements for her son’s care, thus allowing her to resume work—the Foreman orders her to quit. Thinking that the manageress, because ‘Well, she’s a woman, she should understand’ (Act I, sc.3a, p.31), Helen decides to take up the cudgels on Sheila’s behalf. But, as noted earlier, the manageress stands at a different social level in terms of her class position and not only does she completely rebuff Helen, she is outraged by Helen’s audacity in questioning her. It is the realisation that the boss may be a woman, but is also the boss, and an unrelenting one at that, and the fact that her job depended on the whims of this boss that makes Helen recall the Union at her husband’s workplace which worked towards preventing injustice to employees. Ironically, earlier it is this same Union that Helen had suspected as being responsible for Dave’s absence from home during evenings. In the alternative scene written for the NUPE on Tyneside, the workplace is represented by a school kitchen (NUPE organize school meal workers). Here matters come to a head when under the garb of a bonus scheme, the workers while slaving for a bit of extra money, are faced with the most inclement of work conditions; so much so that Helen first slips on the cramped floor and then cuts her finger while peeling potatoes. Mrs Edward, the school meals manageress and quite like the Sweatshop manageress insists that Helen’s cut be unattended and work go on. At this, Doris, Helen’s colleague immediately calls for a meeting of the ‘Union’ and their joint efforts not only result in Helen receiving first aid at once but also acquiring an extra hand at work, thus easing overall work pressure. Helen, who for long, has been sceptical about the functionality of a Union is converted into believing in its efficacy. The manageresses, in both instances, refuse to stand up for the cause of the sex to which they belong. They allow the mantle of their class positioning to war with their gender role. This breach of confidence or, in other words, betrayal of same gender concern is what initiates the development of a feminist collective.
The formation of this collective is an uneven one. For not everyone joins it without hesitation. Helen’s own initial misgivings aside, noticeable dissent/abstinence comes from young Chrissie who is unsure about joining the strike that the Union decides to stage. And her reasons are gender-typical: she is afraid of losing her boyfriend whose male ego cannot tolerate the idea of her earning more than him in case of the women’s strike succeeding. She doesn’t know whether she will gain more by being on the side of the Women’s Union or on the side of her boyfriend. Of course, the other women, with a knowledge born from age and experience do their best to persuade her to join the Union; Helen’s comment at Chrissie’s dependence upon her boyfriend’s decision is

Look, love, when I first got married I used to let my husband make all the decisions. After a while you begin to feel like half a person. You’ve got to start making up your own mind. (Act I, sc.8: 55)

It is the presence of differences between the women themselves that prevents the easy formation of a Women’s Union;

The ideal of community presumes subjects can understand one another as they understand themselves. It thus denies the difference between subjects. (Nicholson, ed., 1990: 302)

In order to bridge this difference and enlist more members into the Women’s Union, the line adopted by its stalwarts is that joining the union would promote the development of each woman’s individuality.

This problematic taking of sides or the stage of ‘crisis’ in Turner’s phraseology is discernible more obviously in the case of the men supporting the women. In Scene Five which is ushered in by the placard ‘The Disputed Pint’ it is again the ‘difference’ between equal parity and equal pay between men and women that is cause for dispute. The men want equal pay amongst them for equivalent work; the women’s cause merits little concern on their part for though not averse to the idea of the women getting a raise, the possibility of this raise being equal to their payscales does not even occur to them. The basic premise operating here is that men consider women’s work inherently lower than theirs. The women naturally consider this a fallacious perception and their demand is for equal parity between men and women as well as equal pay for the same kind of labour. In this scene Mary, the wife of Helen’s colleague, George, lists out the vast
quantity of unpaid labour that she undertakes everyday. Her husband laughs it off by saying that she is repaid in the form of his 'undying love and affection' for her. However, this skirting of a justifiable issue of angst amongst women is symptomatic of

...a gender based division of human activities and hence the existence of socially constructed sets of gender arrangements and the (peculiar and in need of explanation) salience of gender itself.  

Thus activities like childrearing and in Scene Four, the abortion scene, even decisions related to bearing a child (or not) are left entirely to women as things of their domain.

'The third phase that Victor Turner demarcates in the action of social drama is the application of redressive or remedial procedures. These range from personal advice and informal mediation or arbitration to formal jural and legal machinery and, to resolve certain kinds of crises or legitimate other modes of conflict-resolution, to the performance of public ritual. This phase is perhaps the most reflexive of the social drama. The community, acting through its representatives, bends, even throws itself back upon itself, to measure what some of its members have done, and how they have conducted themselves with reference to its own standards. Sometimes this phase too is initially violent...But the violence is here conceptualised as being an instrument of a value-bearing group's solidarity and continuity, not as serving sectional or personal needs. (Turner, 1986: 35)

This phase is followed by the fourth phase and 'consists either of the reintegration of the disturbed social group or of the recognition and legitimation of irreparable schism between the contending parties.' (Turner, 1986: 35). This fourth phase seems to mark a kind of closure or end of the social drama, of the 'action'. But in actuality, since each human being has

his/her 'individual cognitive, evaluative, and affective mappings of the structure of events and classes of events', 'a culture has its distributive existence as the set of personalities of the members of a population' thus allowing for negotiation and dispute over what should be authoritative or legitimate in that culture, in other words, for social dramatic action. (Turner, 1986: 36)
So, the completion of the four phases in the development of action in social drama demands shared understandings and experiences in the lives of members of the same sociocultural field.

In terms of the class struggle (i.e. between labour versus employers) Scene Six of Strike While the Iron is Hot seems to herald the start of remedial measures in that the parity issue between the men (equal pay for equal parity) seems finally to be reaching a climax. This occurs when the Director directs the Management representative, Johnson, to settle the issue and end the five weeks long strike. He is however, also firm that the answer to the women's demand for equal pay is to 'on no account give way to that. It will set a precedent for the whole corporation and cost us a fortune.' (Act I, sc.6: 43) The only step he is willing to make is that 'If the worst comes to the worst we'll offer them a job evaluation and try to get round it that way.' (Act I, sc.6: 43) The remaining scene captures the farcical nature of the repressive measures employed. While the men (John and George) argue with Johnson about settling their claim regarding parity between employees of the male sex, and finally agree to his proposal that parity would come about but only in stages i.e., only in late 1975; the issue about parity with women and equal pay for them as well is completely sidelined. George in fact, initially even forgets to mention their case to Johnson and needs to be reminded by John to do so. This, considering that the women on whose behalf they are to speak are their own colleagues, is a comment on the gendered nature of the class struggle. The accord between the men, whether of the management or of the work force is visible when it comes to their getting together and cracking jokes at the expense of the women. At this moment disparity of any kind between the men seems to be non-existent and their bonding makes a mockery of the seriousness of the women's demands. This aspect is evidenced further when the so called Time and Motion Man or Job Evaluator comes along to evaluate the nature of the jobs undertaken by the women and decide whether their pay scale be equal to that of the men. Obviously, aware of the instructions of the Director, the Job Evaluator brazenly cheats the women by placing them a grade below the men. Thinking that the antagonism of the women can be easily contained by deterring them with the threat of shutting down the whole place, the Director appears to be completely unconcerned with the women work force and their needs.
The play does not end with Scene Six however and, so, if the womens’ Question is shown to be neglected thus far, the subsequent scenes illustrate that evasion cannot remain unnoticed. In Scene Eight when the women display aggression (a form of the Violence that Turner speaks of, as quoted earlier) the remedial measures seem finally closer to being achieved. The placard heralding the scene ironically says ‘The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach’ and as usual the scene following the placard, plays out its subversive nature. Using a subject of much ‘joking’, i.e. the means to capture a man’s heart, the women actually turn the tables on the men to prove that it is no laughing matter. For when the Canteen is shut down and it is clear that the women have no intention of being subordinated to the needs of the men, their power in terms of the dependability of the men upon them is clear. The helplessness of the men is revealed by their almost childish rage and protest at this insubordination of the women, at this movement away from their gender role. When it is obvious that the women are unwilling to budge an inch until their demands for equal parity and pay with men are fully supported by the men; when all the assertions of the men are met with rejoinder after counter rejoinder, the men are left groping for a way out. Trapped, they submit to the demands of the women and thus ironically prove the strength of the slogan to their own detriment. This strategic manipulation is what Judith Butler emphasises:

... The critical task for feminism is not to establish a point of view outside of constructed identities; that conceit is the construction of an epistemological model that would disavow its own cultural location and, hence, promote itself as a global subject, a position that deploys precisely the imperialist strategies that feminism ought to criticize. The critical task is, rather, to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them. (My emphasis) (Butler, 1990: 147)

Hence the redressive measures lead to a breaking down of gender roles which serves as a kind of compromise binding these contesting factions. It also implies that it is this integration that creates a collective workforce which is now equipped with enough power to contend with the dictates of the management. True that the drama is incomplete in that the play does not progress to actually show whether this collective workforce
succeeds in beating the management at their own game. But there is definitely a plausible contention in depicting that it is not impossible to create a union of working men and women capable of confronting the owners of production. That in itself is no easy task as the play showcases all along.

At the familial level too, Scene Seven 'Parity begins at Home' and Scene Nine 'Strike While the Iron is Hot' (incidentally, this entitling of each scene underlines the implied 'message' of the play) posit the gradual gender role interchanges. In Scene Seven, Helen, exhausted after a days hard work both at her workplace and at home, cannot respond to Dave's sexual overtures thus irking him no end. She responds to his wrath not by weakly surrendering but by drawing his attention to his comparatively easier life i.e., one bereft of domestic responsibilities for example, as against her own, burdened with 'two—one in the factory and one here.' His suggestion that she give up her job, is unacceptable to her because

I'm not going back to asking you every time I want a bob or two for something. Oh, look, Dave. Work's not that marvelous, but for the first time I've got a life of my own outside these four walls. I've got friends of my own at work. And with this closure threat, we’ve got a real fight on our hands.

She concludes with the directive

So, you're just going to have to start helping at home. You can—start with the ironing. (Act I, sc. 7: 51)

The scene ends with the song 'The Maintenance Engineer' which is a biting attack upon the slavish existence of a housewife. What is significant about the song is that the apparent guilt of the men and their desire to fight for women's rights is curiously slapped down by the working wife. It is suspected that such support is motivated by a desire to keep the woman in a restricted and restrictive place. The woman would rather be helped out in such a way that if 'you did your share at home, then I might have some time to fight some battles of my own' (Act I, sc. 7: 52-53)

The liminal space wherein the man is forced to enter by the woman in this scene is resolved into a virtual reality in Scene Nine where Dave is actually involved in completing domestic chores while Helen is out. But is this enough? Not for Helen who
dreams of more, of 'a world where women really are men's equals, not just with equal pay—that's just equal exploitation—but a world with no exploitation. This means big changes and only you and I can make them. But if they're needed, can you say we're asking too much?' (Act I, sc.9: 62). Marvin Carlson writes that in performance:

The audience's expected 'role' changes from a passive hermeneutic process of decoding the performer's articulation, embodiment, or challenge of particular cultural material, to becoming something much more active, entering into a praxis, a context in which meanings are not so much communicated as created, questioned, or negotiated. The 'audience' is invited and expected to operate as a co-creator of whatever meanings and experience the event generates. (Striff, ed., 2003: 8)

In questioning the audience, in a pointed conjoining of the 'you' with the 'I' and thus making the audience a party to the intended action behind the performance, Strike While the Iron is Hot ceases to be merely a play to be watched. Instead it becomes a ritual text that has served its purpose in mediating between the performers and the audience to demonstrate that it is not always clear where a performance begins and ends: If drama is all about, etymologically speaking, 'doing', then the conversion of an audience into 'doers' is a sure measure of ensuring the longevity of the dramatic text.6

It has been seen that The Cake Play was seeped in contemporary history; Taking Our Time7 performed by Red Ladder first in 1978 was

... based on past events in the West Riding ... with the intention of reconnecting our audiences with that past ... the period we chose needed to have specific resonances with the contemporary experience of our audiences if it was to be of more than passing interest to them ...

... Putting the year 1842 in the spotlight, we hoped to identify what 'qualities of life' were lost in this transition with a view to suggesting what parts of it might be regained in a socialist future. (pix of the Text)

Located within the mid-nineteenth century Chartist Movement in the industrial north of Britain, Taking Our Time showcased the split between the old handloom weavers and the new generation of mill workers through the experiences of a single family. Red Ladder aimed to make the audience question themselves that if in an earlier era, a mass movement like the Chartist Movement that was 'determined in its actions to bring about a
people’s parliament and a democratically controlled economy and at times it looked as though they might achieve it’ (p.xii of the Text), could be generated; then why the apathy in terms of reviving the socio-eco-politico structures in the current scenario?

While the collective drafting of Strike While The Iron is Hot revealed differences of opinion among the individuals that put it together, the ‘collective’ writing of Taking Our Time resulted in a further development. This was the inclusion of credits, something that Red Ladder had been avoiding but the necessity for which arose because ‘some company members felt they wanted individual credit as a form of reference, should the need arise to seek work elsewhere’ (Note preceding play). Already then, though still functioning as a collective, we observe that a subtle change had taken place: there was more ‘professionalism’ in the attitude towards the production. This does not imply that the commitment to the ideology of the collective had diminished but the consciousness of individual scope in a larger world, one beyond Red Ladder; the consciousness that social activism was but one dimension of a larger relationship with theatre, had increased. However unlike the usual crediting system that one is accustomed to where ‘It is all too common to find directors, writers and stars in bold print and at top of lists; whereas wardrobe, technicians and administrators are relegated to the bottom, in small print, if indeed they appear at all’ (Note preceding play), Red Ladder reversed the order with Costume Design and Costume Production leading the Credit List. This may appear to be a small change but it is resonant of Red Ladder’s persistent efforts to foreground the marginalized in every possible sphere of activity.

The analyses of the two plays taken up earlier were significant in terms of their themes: The Cake Play in questioning socialist solutions to contemporary problems; Strike While The Iron is Hot as a strong social drama that transformed, in a strategically structured manner, a passive female community into a socially committed active collective. Though the plays were thematically linked in that both propagated the concept of equality between classes and between genders (to an extent, all the plays are correlated as they, in different ways, further the Company’s ideology) the difference was visible in the stylistic devices involved in presenting the theme/s. While The Cake Play was undiluted agit prop with an apology of a plot, Strike While The Iron is Hot evolved a more well knit form using polarities such as home versus workplace, working men versus
working women, as the base upon which to build a super-narrative. With Taking Our
Time one finds a tightening in the plot construction and a subtler, but not less powerful
weaving in of ritual agit prop devices.

The depiction of an unavailable, existing historicity which formed the Haupttext
or Metatext of the Cake Play was an all engulfing principle of the play; in Taking Our
Time the metatext becomes not just the presentation of a historically turbulent period of
time but also the modus operandi of Red Ladder (as representative of all agit prop)
Theatre Company. In other words one sees an intersection of two discourses within the
play (a) a discourse on ideology and (b) a discourse on theatre modes. The Nebentext
right at the beginning of the play elucidates this aspect at once:

Sunday, eight August, eighteen forty-two. An ale house in Halifax.
Woolcombers and weavers of calderdale gathered for a social.
There is a banner in the ale house reading: ‘WITHOUT VOTES
WE ARE SLAVES. GIVE US THE CHARTER.’ Most are
Chartists. As audience enter, a medley of traditional songs is being
sung, some political, some of love. The auditorium becomes the
ale house. Some songs sung communally. Blackout. (Act I, sc.1: 1)

In effect, this Nebentext (1) spells out the political message of the play (and therefore the
aspirations and leanings of the Theatre Company) through such specifications as the date,
the kind of people gathered, the slogan on the banner and the political songs being sung;
(2) by extending its boundaries (‘The auditorium becomes the ale house’), converts the
theatre site into a performative space—thus engaging the presumably like-minded
audience almost immediately (like minded for else how can ‘some songs [be] sung
communally’?)

Having extended the limits of the original performance area, let us call it P1,
outwards into a large arena, say P2, as the Nebentext in effect informs, we find the
Haupttext now entering a different zone with the setting up of another play within the
larger text i.e., Taking Our Time, entitled ‘St George and the Dragon.’ This process of
first enlisting and then distancing i.e., a combination of the Alienation and mise-en-
abyme techniques is a tactical move to initiate a co-operative audience into recognising
that their presence as spectators is only a phase in preparing to become actors in a drama
beyond the bounds of the auditorium. The play itself, ‘St George and the Dragon’ is more
along the lines of a Morality play, its outstanding features being its use of verse and
symbolically named characters: so, ‘Hard Working’ is a mill worker; ‘Machinio’ is the
dragon of the title; 'Mill Grind' is the mill owner and the 'St George' who in the kernel story slays the dragon, is a Chartist. The action follows a cyclical pattern of order-disorder-presumed reorder. Hardworking and Machinio work together harmoniously until one day, with an eye on profit, Millgrind steals Machinio away and monopolises its services, reducing Hardworking to penury. When Hardworking expresses distress, Millgrind is willing to allow Hardworking to tend to Machinio's needs, but only for a pittance. Hence Millgrind is out to eke the maximum profit from both, Machinio and Hardworking. Then along comes St George, the Chartist who points out that only by wresting Machinio out of Millgrind's control could fairplay become possible—but for this Hardworking would have to contribute her own bit by joining the strike. The play ends not by revealing whether the action plan succeeds or not but on the note that 'the answer to the problem is up to me and you.' (Act I, sc.1: 4) After the play is over, Peter, who has been one of its narrators makes a little speech where he calls upon those acting as spectators in PI to actively participate in the election of the delegate representing the Calderwike and District Chartist Society for the National Convention in Manchester. In a few words, Peter charts out the Chartist vision of securing a People's Parliament in the years to come.

In a nutshell, 'St George and the Dragon' serves as a discourse on the procedures of agit prop theatre because it functions like one:

Discourses structure both our sense of reality and our notion of our own identity ... enables us to consider ways in which subjects can come to a position of disidentification, whereby we not only locate and isolate the ways in which we as subjects have been constructed and subjected, but we also map out for ourselves new terrains in which we can construct different and potentially more liberating ways in which we can exist. (Mills, 1997: 15)

Consequently, though choosing to stage a play within a play may well have been due to the contingencies of the plot, it has a dual role as it also succeeds in reminding the (non alehouse) larger audience that spectacles ought to catalyse a series of actions in much the same way as 'St George and the Dragon' intended to achieve with its own particular audience.
That the play ‘St George and the Dragon’ as discourse does not ‘exist in a vacuum’ but is ‘in conflict with other discourses and social practices which inform them over questions of truth and authority’ is what the rest of the Haupttext of *Taking Our Time* unfolds. What then are these different and differing discourses? The Chartist discourse which the play ‘St George and the Dragon’ projects is undertaken outside it (i.e., within P1) by the majority of the cast including John, Mary, Jenny and Elsie. The key principles underlying this discourse are: (1) a Right to a People’s Parliament (i.e., the right to vote); (2) a Right to the implementation of the Charter; (3) a Right to shorter, more convenient working hours (and not the regimented timings of the mill) and (4) an equal distribution of profits. [These last two rights for which the Chartist movement fought were actually an attempt to regain the freedom of lifestyle which the mills and machines had robbed the people off]. In total opposition to the Chartist ideology is the dissenting voice of William who is completely appropriated into the mill owner Akroyd’s discourse on the power of Machines and a bright future for the Mills. This pro-machine/mill discourse is not the only anti-Chartist discourse: the orthodox Methodist preacher uses religion to malign Chartism and the revolutionary zeal of the Chartists. Torn between these discourses is Sarah who would like to be persuaded into William’s ways of thinking but here, it would be relevant to note that William also uses the discourse of love in eliciting Sarah’s support. While both, William and the preacher practice an anti-Chartist discourse it must be observed that their reasons vary. William genuinely believes that ‘steam power has come for good. You can’t stand in the way of progress’, that ‘machines’ll make the future’ (Act I, sc.1: 5) and that ‘Akroyd brought work to this valley, and new power looms’ll mean even more.’ (Act I, sc. 1: 6) He sees the machine age thus as heralding a promising future for youth like himself. The Preacher’s concerns however are with the spirit of Chartism; he regards their fervour as an ominous sign of rebelliousness against leading a disciplined life and thus against the strict, rigid rules of government that Methodism believed each individual ought to adhere to.

Using these divergent discourses the plot is constructed such as to show which will emerge the most effective and successful. When John, Mary and Peter under the guidance of Tom Tinker, the clown, manage to steal the lead (needed to repair John’s
pan) from the church roof right under the Preacher’s nose, they use the language of religious discourse subversively and by fooling the Preacher reveal the inherent weakness of such discourse. Thus the Preacher stands on shaky ground indeed in using religion as the backbone of his anti-Chartist discourse. It is interesting to note that, at one level, his discourse and that of John’s meet—this is with regard to their views on morality: John regards the Mill as an evil place where immorality reigns and women cultivate bad habits; the Preacher considers the alehouses, which is where the Chartists generally meet to discuss their course of action as a ‘contagion’ and sees ‘death in these honeyed pots of pleasure.’ (Act I, sc.1: 7) Morality then, is the underbelly of their argument and that they are both privy to partly fallacious and partly correct logic is proved, in John’s case, by Jenny’s song. In this song, Jenny while acknowledging the preponderance of sexual overtures made to her in the Mill, also speaks of the contingencies that have driven her to work in the Mill, her dodging of the physical passes made at her and the secret dreams she cherishes (of freedom?). By her repugnance for the advances of the men in the mill and by underlining that it was financial necessity and not desire for illicit sexual relations that drove her to work, Jenny, if she can be seen as spokesperson for numerous other young women like her working in the Mills, puts John’s views to test. As for the Preacher, his harangues on morality are consistently debunked by the Clown’s sarcastically witty rejoinders; his excessively religious rhetoric is pompous and patronising and results in his becoming a laughing stock.

Amidst these discourses, is that of the Clown. The construction of a character like Tom Tinker, the clown, is in itself part of the political agenda of the play, as the Introduction admits:

We wanted to show when and why the destruction of this popular culture took place; and we used the conflict between the preacher and the clown to describe it. Tom Tinker is based on traveling tinkers of the time who used clowning to ply their trade; a clown called Old Crafty is recorded as being active at fairs around Slaithwaite in those years. Tom embodies the dying of a popular culture. For the orthodox Methodist preacher he is the devil incarnate. Because Tom encourages fun and enjoyment: a fullness of life that is anathema to both the stoic requirements of Methodism and the disciplinary requirements of Akroyd’s new mills. Tom is not the only cultural target of church and employer.
Our play within a play ... and such goings on come under heavy attack as well. (px)

Apart from illustrating this objective of Red Ladder, the Clown as narrator cum commentator cum actor (a choric figure, in fact) is extremely important in that he shows the flip side of everything. His words before the knocker upper song indicate that it is his task to awaken the people. He therefore reinforces the ideological perspectives of Red Ladder and can be viewed as the voice of Red Ladder’s political discourse in the play.

Though the plot concludes with Akroyd’s victory through using the police force (the clown’s comment on the semantics of the ‘police force’ is a pertinent diversion about the ironies of linguistic usage), the final song ‘Great Expectations’ suggests that such a conclusion to social action can be avoided. It depended upon the arousal of the spectators from their apathy and an active involvement in reconstructing socio-eco-politico-culturo structures to bring about a different end.

Since the mid-nineteenth century a country’s music has become a political ideology by stressing national characteristics, appearing as a representative of the nation, and everywhere confirming the national principle ... Yet music, more than any other artistic medium, expresses the national principle’s antinomies as well. (T.W. Adorno) 9

Within Performance Studies it is important to remember that a written text is not always a superior form of communication; to that extent, songs (i.e., music) can be used as an effective weapon, to assert or to overthrow or to protect authority. Taking Our Time is full of songs and they do all of these as well as provide us with knowledge about the characters, the situations and the ideological intent of both, and to a great length urge us to either perceive hitherto unperceived things or perceive them differently. The immense emotional power of music in a ritual act/text is an acknowledged fact and it is not difficult then, to comprehend agit prop theatre’s use of it for its own ends.

The play in fact, as has been discussed earlier, begins with songs, initially sung by actors and later, after the audience enters, communally. This instantaneous bonding between the actors and the audience through songs is a ritual device of initiation used by agit prop theatre to create a feeling of unity. Soon after is the Clown’s song where he lists out his duties, and the key lines of his song

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I see a new world that's hidden from view and if you look hard enough you'll see it, too. I turn the world upside down. I am your traveling clown. (Act I, sc. 1: 7)

are meaningful not just for the reasons cited earlier, i.e., in terms of voicing Red Ladder's ideology; the fact that he is a 'travelling' clown, in other words the whole idea of mobility (physical as well as a mental) of unrestricted movement, as being the source of his keener understanding is a noteworthy notion. If we extend the category of mobility further, we observe in the concluding sections of the play, the mass movement of the working populace from different parts of Britain to emerge as a strong and threatening force to contend with. Also relevant at this point are William's comments on the construction of the Railway track in Act II scene 10 where he sees this as making the world smaller and opening new opportunities for all. The anti-technology stance of the Chartists, then, though justifiable must be balanced by looking at the positive side of technological advance—conquering topographical boundaries is after all only the first step in ushering bigger changes. Thus the mobility of the traveling clown can be studied as a trope for a larger mobility that is required of the people if they are to achieve freedom from the oppressive Mill and machine forces. Prior to the knocker upper song, the Clown's words

But most people never wake up. They sleep with their eyes open.  
All their lives, fast asleep. My job is to wake them up.  
Before they get knocked up. (Act I, sc.4: 13)

are consistent with his sustained efforts at arousing people from their blindness to a deteriorating situation. In fact his efforts are unflagging right till the end, i.e. even after his 'death', with the 'Great Expectations' song which concludes the play with the words:

They'll say that you're a clown, a fool to try  
But take your time and live before you die.  
Wake up from the dream  
Wake up from the dream.  
Great expectations  
Your time is here.  
Great expectations  
Before the time of your life disappears. (Act II, sc.13: 51-52)
In stark contrast to the kind and motivating words of the Clown’s songs is the knocker upper song which is cruel in its mocking of people’s dreams and reminding people that ‘the man with the big stick’s gonna knock you up’ This song and Akroyd’s song entitled ‘The Song of the Self made Man’ are similar in that they belong to a discourse that would deny any humane considerations and look only towards material gain. But contesting this discourse are such songs as the ‘St. Monday Song’ (sung during the Fair) and the title ‘Taking Our Time’ song sung by John and Mary both of which express a desire for regaining traditional values and a past world that had all the freedom of which people were now bereft. The opposing themes of the songs, then, augment the contrasting discourses within the play.

The two other songs in the play, ‘Jenny’s song’ and ‘Sarah’s grief song’ are different from the rest of the songs in that they express personal angst (of course Jenny’s song also describes the appalling conditions that young girls face in the factories) and are both poignant. Jenny’s nurturing of secret desires, which her song expresses, makes her death in the factory she abhors a greater tragedy. Sarah’s grief song lamenting the loss of her sister Jenny marks that crisis in her life where she makes a leap of faith; in wanting to avenge Jenny’s death, Sarah’s song inadvertently joins the discourse of that very camp that she has been rebelling against. Hence her song of grief is also an indication of her conversion to Chartism, and a change in her identity.

Apart from the discursive structures that the songs outline, the power of officialese or official discourse and of agitational rhetoric are also clearly spelt out in the play. The first is evidenced by the Coroner’s report read out by the Clown where the official language of the report is a complete distortion of the truth behind the accident leading to Jenny’s death; the officiousness is the disguise with which responsibility is avoided by the powers that be. Inverting the potency of official discourse is the agitational rhetoric employed by John and Mary who are passionate in their goal to achieve the Charter and are prepared to use violent means, if the need arises, as Mary so forcibly puts it just before the march to Akroyd’s Mill:

... There could be trouble. Don’t be provoked. They’ve had troops saddled and ready in Leeds for two weeks now. But I say we have been saddled by the masters and their lapdog parliament
all our lives and it is time for us to throw them off.
We will have the Charter, peaceably if we may, but
forcibly if we must. (Act II, sc.13: 47)

If, following a Focaullian frame of reference,

literature, as well as being the means whereby
a sense of national culture is established, is also
the means whereby a shared culture can be contested. (Mills,
1997: 20)

then the ensemble of conflicting discourses within the text of Taking Our Time does
precisely the latter. In the final analysis it is through the power generated by its discourse
that the meaning as well as the success of a Ritual text can be decided. Taking Our Time
can hence in this light be seen as a sample of the discourse used by agit prop theatre.

From the Cake Play to Taking Our Time, marks a decade of practicing agit prop theatre and already one observes that a major paradigm of this theatre, the subordination
of form to content/ideology, was undergoing a subtle but steady change. There is a
tightening of the plot structure and the development of a linear story line; the feminist
perspective was gaining ground, even with Taking Our Time, set in 1842, the gender
issue was given prominence; and hints of the changes that were to happen with Red
Ladder as a collective, can be sensed with the introduction of accreditation. However
such changes only augured well for the future of Red Ladder Theatre Company as this
thesis will further elucidate.
Notes and References

1 Information from the Red Ladder archives.

2 Unpublished typed script sent by Red Ladder; the pages are unnumbered, hence the quotations too cannot be numbered.

3 Leys, 1986 provides an excellent political background.


6 Though Strike While The Iron is Hot was first performed in 1974, since the version analysed in this section is a 1980 edition, it has been examined after The Cake Play.


8 Mise-en-abyme is the narrative technique of setting up of a mirror within a mirror or reflexive mirrors where a hierarchy of reflections/refractions are set up. [Alienation or Verfremdung, a Brechtian notion has been discussed in Chapter I].