

Article

Activist theatre and the agitprop legacy

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By Matthias Warstat

When it comes to the interpretation and evaluation of political theatre today, a turn is often made back to the avant-gardes of the 20th century. This referential orientation can be explained by the fact that complex questions already raised by the historical avant-garde a hundred years ago have again become relevant in a modified form: what are the opportunities and risks of instrumentalising theatre for political purposes? How can the political and aesthetic dimensions of theatre become interconnected? Can theatre compete with other media (especially mass media) when it comes to political relevance and clout? These enquiries already preoccupied Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, George Lukács and many others in the 1920s and 1930s; today they confront us anew in a radically different social context. It is understandable, then, that politically ambitious theatre-makers and performance groups of today deal with avant-garde positions, sometimes explicitly — in the context of re-enactments, for example. However, the social environment and political circumstances in which these positions existed cannot be so easily compared with today's milieu of political theatre. The conflicts in the early 20th century were different and altogether more polarised; the media environment gave theatre more space than it does today, but quick mobilisation and networking were not necessarily easier. And, of course, the political objectives differed.

In an essay titled 'On Art Activism' (2016), Boris Groys refers to the pre-revolutionary Russian avant-garde to contrast its resolute 'defunctionality' with contemporary forms of applied and activist art. The work of Kazimir Malevich, Alexi Kruchonych and others could be called revolutionary precisely in its refusal of concrete progress and paradigms of optimisation, instead relying on radically 'defunctionalising' the given circumstances:

Contemporary art puts our contemporaneity into the art museum because it does not believe in the stability of the present conditions of existence, to such a degree that contemporary art does not even try to improve these conditions. By defunctionalizing the status quo, art prefigures its coming revolutionary overthrow. Or a new global war. Or a new global catastrophe. In any case, an event that will make the whole contemporary culture, including all of its aspirations and projections, obsolete [...] (Groys 2016, p. 54)

These assessments, which Groys formulates with regard to the early Russian Suprematists, Futurists and Cosmists — especially in the context of visual art — cannot simply be transposed to the theatrical avant-garde (Cf. Groys 2018, pp. 12-31). There, for example in the field of life reform or agitprop theatre, one can find approaches that seem in part much more functional. However, this avant-garde also tended to make radical gestures of rejection of the prevailing conditions, and it developed, especially in Germany, a vital attachment to the idea of revolution. This was particularly evident in the years after the First World War, when politically committed theatre-makers had to position themselves in relation to the insurrectionary events in Russia and other European societies. The political theatre of the Weimar Republic, which, at least in its anti-bourgeois variants was directed against the traditional systems of art and theatre and could be termed 'avant-garde', would be inconceivable without the Revolution of 1918-1919.

Two elemental features of the German avant-garde can be directly linked back to the experience of the revolution. Firstly, ever since the mass movements after the First World War (failures,

ultimately, or at least not predominantly successful), political theatre in Germany has repeatedly been preoccupied with questions of collectivity and the relationship between the individual and the collective. Thus, the choral presence, be it in the form of voice, dance or gesture, moved back to the centre of theatre practice starting in the 1920s. Secondly, the avant-garde took up those tensions, conflicts and struggles that dominated the collective events on the streets in its forms and methods of staging. This correspondence became particularly clear in the turbulent late years of the Weimar Republic from 1929 onwards. During this period of street combat and mass marches, collectives were not communities at rest or democratic assemblies engaged in discussion. Rather, they were often agents of aggression and violence, frequently splitting to produce new, more radical groups that would consequently turn against each other. One can identify here a dissociative tendency of the political public sphere that was mirrored or even exacerbated in the theatre. At the same time, in the years around 1930, it was clearer than today that collectives in the world of theatre corresponded with collectives outside the context of performance, for example, on the street or in the factory. In these correspondences lie the potential of political mobilisation and certainly the opportunities for intervention.

In this essay, I will present some structural problems specific to agitprop theatre around 1930 that can be found *mutatis mutandis* in contemporary forms of activist theatre as well. Although quite a few theatre people who want to mobilise politically with their works are definitely interested in the avant-gardes, the history of agitprop theatre often remains unconsidered. But if one asks which topoi and models of the 1930s are once again part of cultural and political discourse today, the problems of agitprop are certainly among them. They partly return as challenges to an activist theatre practice.

The crisis of agitprop theatre 1930 – 1933

Around 1930, there were around 300 agitprop theatre groups in Germany that belonged to the organisational spectrum of the Communist Party of Germany [*Kommunistische Partei Deutschland* or KPD]. As a rule, they consisted of single professional theatre-makers (actors like Wolfgang Langhoff, authors such as Friedrich Wolf, directors like Maxim Vallentin) and an overwhelming majority of younger people from the working-class milieu, most of whom were unemployed and could therefore place themselves entirely at the service of agitational theatre work. The interventions of these theatre troupes took the form of “number programmes” consisting of satirical short scenes, political songs and didactic chants. These performance pieces addressed the current political situation, often also functioning as part of a political campaign of the KPD or one of its subordinate organisations. The troupes went into working-class districts with these programmes, but also sometimes to petty-bourgeois residential neighbourhoods and, over weekends, to the rural surroundings of large cities. When the agitprop groups performed on the back of their trucks, in courtyards or taverns, they met an audience whose problems and issues they wanted to address directly, and whose attitudes they aimed to influence.

The groups were apparently most successful when operating in a milieu to which the performers themselves belonged. However, they developed their own lifestyle with their work, which distinguished them from large parts of even the communist working-class environment: troupe members usually spent many hours of the day together, often forming residential communities; in these flats they designed the costumes, props and texts for their performances. It was a communitarian life in the form of a production cooperative, and moreover, one that was prepared to put itself at the service of centrally managed campaigns. Agitation goals were defined,

and in the process, political constellations and circumstances of conflict were described, situations into which the troupes intended to intervene with their own theatrical work. The success of such interventions could be extrapolated by the actors themselves from simple parameters: for example, whether donations were collected for the families of imprisoned comrades, subscriptions were arranged for a union magazine or new members were recruited for the so-called “Red Federations” of the Revolutionary Trade Union Opposition. Achievement in this sense was simple and within reach, but it occurred with less and less frequency after 1930.

It is also worth noting that the interventionist agitprop theatre of the KPD was already in crisis long before the National Socialists came to power. Certainly, the KPD press repeatedly reported in an almost hymnal fashion on the brilliant performances by the troupes, and attributed to them impressive public resonance. But the contemporaneous, intensive discussions held by theorists and practitioners of this theatrical form on political, aesthetic and technical dimensions suggest some scepticism. Especially from 1931, this discourse increasingly articulated a crisis whose symptoms were identifiable on various levels. At a conference of the *Arbeiter-Theater-Bundes Deutschland* [Worker’s Theatre Federation of Germany] in April 1931, a so-called “programme crisis” was discussed in detail for the first time.¹ Representatives of agitprop troupes from different regions of the Reich admitted that their scenic repertoire had been exhausted after the densely packed campaigns ran parallel to the election and the previous year’s political activity.² If a troupe was on stage almost every evening — as was often the case during election campaigns — it hardly had the opportunity to update its repertoire and rehearse new numbers. In this way, the claim to respond to the audience’s problems of the day was insidiously undermined. While the troupe representatives mainly blamed a lack of time for this “programme crisis”, critics and functionaries sought deeper causes in more profound theoretical deficits: many troupes, they complained, were only vaguely familiar with Marxist positions.

On an aesthetic level, criticism of the agitprop troupes was directed against an increasing “schematism” in the choice of forms of presentation. Many observers condemned the fact that the political revue, as well as the choral collective lecture, had congealed into “templates” that were ‘slapped onto the respective political material from the outside’ (Schliesser 1931, p. 284, cf. Schliesser 1930, p. 297). There was a fatal discrepancy between form and content when, for example, ‘the history of the German workers’ movement since 1917 [is dealt with] in a short scene’ or ‘the horrors of war are imitated with children’s trumpets’ (Moos 1931, p. 295). In the magazine *Das Rote Sprachrohr* [*The Red Megaphone*], published by a troupe of the same name and considerably the most important organ of the agitprop movement, the troupe’s tendency to use stereotypical allegories and abstractions was criticised as follows:

And here we come to the essential deficiency of our previous working method. We have portrayed: the capitalist (usually with a bloated belly and a bag of money hung around it), the bigwig, the judiciary, etc. — abstractions, concepts that also were not the starting point of a thought-process in our minds, but rather a final result; we have not portrayed our thought-process on stage and thereby developed the concept within the spectator in

1) Speeches and other material from this conference, see Hoffmann and Hoffmann-Ostwald (ed.). 1972, pp. 279 - 299.

2) See the statements on the “programme crisis” by the troupes *Links ran* (Hanover), *Kölner Blaue Blusen* and *Rote Schmiede* (Halle) in the context of a survey published by the journal *Arbeiterbühne und Film* 18 (1931), issues 4 and 5; reprinted in Hoffmann and Hoffmann-Ostwald (ed.). 1972, pp. 301 - 303.

the same way as in our own minds, but we have, roughly speaking, beaten the spectator over the head with final results, fixed concepts. (Schliesser 1931, p. 285)

The playwright Friedrich Wolf used similar arguments after 1931 for a fundamental departure from the format of the number programme and instead pleaded for full-length plays: more complex political contexts, Wolf argued, could not be conveyed in such short scenes (Wolf 1933, p. 24f). The actors' performances were also found wanting in the professional discourse. In a resolution from May 1932, the federal parliament of the *Arbeiter-Theater-Bund* called on the troupes to contact unemployed professional actors in order to develop their theatrical skills (Diezel (ed.) 1993, p. 328f). It was feared in this moment that the dramaturgical and aesthetic deficits of the agitprop troupes would have an adverse effect on the social and political impact of their performances. Sure enough, in the discourse around agitprop, the assessment prevailed that the efficacy of these troupes was not in any way remarkable. Many of them, according to the critical tenor after 1931, simply disseminated a sense of tedium, overloaded their presentations with facts and figures and indeed failed before the task of addressing their audience not only intellectually but also emotionally.³ Especially outside the traditional KPD milieus, in performances given to small farmers, employees and middle-class workers, the troupes apparently found little resonance. Friedrich Wolf analysed this issue in a 1933 review of his work with the *Spieltrupp Süd-West*:

Certainly, they shouted at the public: 'Left, left, left, Proletarian!' But this only made the small farmer and the clerk nervous. Was he perhaps a 'proletarian', a member of the working class? In slogans and assertions, things were anticipated which actually had to be proven to the declassed white-collar worker, the exhausted small farmer... A momentous error which, for a long time, hampered our work on the questions of the 'united front' (Wolf 1933, p. 24f).

Many troupes lacked the ability to flexibly adapt to the needs of their respective audiences, and contact with the public was too fleeting and sporadic to create a lasting bond. Many audience members were not prepared to make longer-term commitments — such as subscribing to a magazine or joining an association — on the basis of a one-off performance; troupes would probably have had to work in individual neighbourhoods and villages on a more regular basis. Instead, it was usually the case of a one-time contact with a milieu, which, in addition, was also inadequately prepared to contextualise the performances.

When viewed as a whole, the various complexes of issues mentioned above condense into a comprehensive diagnosis of crisis. The interventions of agitprop theatre obviously did not function properly — or had ceased to function *at a certain point*. The appeals of these performances had a disparate or even contradictory effect on the audience: On the one hand, the troupes referred to the ideal of proletarian solidarity and strove for close contact and communal understanding with those witnessing the performed numbers. On the other hand, they often in fact produced divisions and separations — therein lies the aforementioned dissociative aspect of this form of theatre. The agitprop productions were confrontational, often even on the level of staging: performers would

3) In this tenor: 'Kritische Durchsicht der eingegangenen Manuskripte', in: *Das Rote Sprachrohr* 2 (1930), issue 10; reprinted in Diezel (ed.) 1993, pp. 297f, Durus (i.e. Alfréd Kemény), 1931: 'Schlusswort', in Hoffmann and Hoffmann-Ostwald (ed.). 1972, p. 304f, Cf. also Durus' report on the 1931 ATBD Reich Troops Conference, 'Agitproptruppen spielen'.

line up in front of the audience and face them with chorally delivered teachings and demands. The troupes saw themselves as an avant-garde in the Leninist sense, believing they could lead the way for the audience. But being ideologically one step ahead of this audience also meant distancing themselves from the public — confronting more than associating with the spectator. The troupes were concerned with organisation, association and the formation of revolutionary communities, but this was countered by dissociative impulses, especially when working in social milieus that were not necessarily their own.

Classic agitprop problems

Some of the recurring points of criticism from the debates around agitprop theatre during the early 1930s are encountered yet again, in modified form, throughout today's discussions on political theatre. Roughly speaking, the issue at hand is still the communicability of aesthetic and activist demands. Behind the "programme crisis" was the accusation that the short scenes, songs and chants were too strident, brutish and simplistic to seriously convince an audience. In fact, the scenes were built according to a simple black-and-white schema: it was always made obvious to the audience how the forces of good and evil were distributed. There were exploitative capitalists and brave workers, unscrupulous landlords and helpless tenants, stupid Nazis and clever communists. Even today, many forms of activist theatre are often thought to necessarily work with heavy-handed exaggerations. Behind this assumption can often lay the interpassive posture of "We know better, of course"⁴ — i.e., "To us theatre-makers, the representation is hamfisted, but there are other spectators, other target groups, who appreciate such simplifications, or in fact depend on them for better understanding". As early as the crisis period after 1930, individual agents in the theatre world began to realise that such a viewpoint was based on an arrogant or at the very least unflattering assessment of their own audience.

Today, creators of activist theatre often struggle with questioning whether one can call this practice art, or why this practice is not universally accepted as art. In agitprop theatre, those involved tended to take the more casual stance of Piscator or Brecht, who did not attach great importance to the concept of art as such, and did not believe that political theatre needed such a label. Nevertheless, the aesthetic dimension of the programmes was a constant concern of the troupes. The form of their performances, the chosen gestures of address and the designs of communication between stage and seating were critically questioned again and again, as doubts always remained. This constant reassessment was also connected to a debate about professionalisation: how promising was it to make political theatre with people who were committed to the cause, but had no real theatrical training? Was it more important to extensively involve amateurs from the movement, or should more accomplished professionals be foregrounded because they could connect more effectively with the audience?

At the root of such concerns is the notion that even activist or agitational theatre ends up being subjected to aesthetic judgement by the audience. This occurs completely independently of the intention of the creators and is not a privilege of particularly educated or cultured spectators. Regardless of the audience's pedigree, questions arise such as: is the performance successful? Are the actors convincing? Is the action on stage interesting, exciting, touching? The resulting assessments

4) On the concept of interpassivity, see Pfaller 2008. The term refers to relationships in which one delegates not only actions, but also experiences and pleasures to others in order not to have to perform or experience them oneself. It can also be delegated to objects, for example, when texts are copied by a machine instead of actually being read.

are not necessarily related to the political content or messaging of the performance, no matter how agitational its intentions. That is to say, the orientation of these judgements is not necessarily conducive to the performance's political effect or impact.

Aesthetic judgement, of course, also unfolds its own social dynamics. Kant already pointed out the urge to share judgements of taste with others:

[...] But when a someone pronounces something beautiful, he expects others to have the same pleasure: he judges not only for himself, but for everyone, and then speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things. He says, therefore, that the thing is beautiful; and does not, for instance, count on other people's agreement with his judgement of pleasure because he has several times found them in agreement with his own, but *demands* it of them (Kant 2018, p. 126, emphasis in original).

In her essays on the contemporary aesthetic attributes of 'cute', 'interesting' and 'zany' (*Our Aesthetic Categories*, 2012), Sianne Ngai also emphasises the social significance of our need to discuss aesthetic judgements and include others in our reactions. Assessments of this kind, she writes, bear far-reaching social effects:

To judge something or someone "cute" is to simultaneously eroticize and infantilize that object/person. While interesting art is serial or ongoing and comparative and dialogic [...], to performatively call something "interesting" (often with an implicit ellipsis, "interesting ...") is to highlight and extend the period of an ongoing conversation. The judgment of the object as "interesting," with all its glaring conceptual indeterminacy, almost seems designed to facilitate the subject's formation of ties with another subject: the "you" whose subsequent demand for concept-based explanation might be read as the feeling-based judgment's secret goal. (Ngai 2012, p. 233f).

Aesthetic communities can emerge in this way, but just as likely to come about are strong aversions against those who cannot or will not share our judgements. In reflecting on political aesthetics, this dissociative dynamic should not be underestimated. The fact that the performance practice of an agitprop troupe, an activist street theatre group or a politically committed performance collective always must undergo *aesthetic* judgement is momentous for this practice. For in this process of assessment, new social bonds and distances are created, and existing feelings of belonging and division are reinforced.

It was no coincidence that the performances of agitprop troupes around 1930 were most effective for audiences who shared not only political convictions but also leisure habits and aesthetic preferences — i.e., revues given in the clubrooms and meetings of their own political party, trade union or cultural organisation. Clearly, the troupes had to give up the hope of being successful with confrontational performances delivered to an audience in the countryside who, by the beginning of the 1930s, were largely unfamiliar with the actors. In general, direct political mobilisation within the party through theatre proved difficult. If the programmes were too didactic, the choral recitations too long-winded, then sparks did not fly amongst the audience; if, on the other hand, one attempted a comical and entertaining approach, it was quickly accused of superficiality or tastelessness. The theatrical, and thus indirect communication with an often randomly assembled audience, was more risky than, for example, the performances of trained orators who could flexibly

adapt their agitational speeches to varying audience reactions. Actors without professional training, a demographic making up the majority of the agitprop troupes, were often unable to make such spontaneous adjustments to their standardised programmes. Unlike the travelling campaign speakers, they also found it difficult to identify sceptical members of the audience and address them directly, through eye contact, for instance.

Political activism carried out through theatre still struggles with the pitfalls of aesthetic aversion and preferences of taste. A much-discussed German example of this dynamic is the Berlin performance collective *Zentrum für Politische Schönheit* [Centre for Political Beauty], which has an aesthetic category already embedded in its name. Although or precisely because one shares the group's political goals, an uneasy feeling can often arise when seeing their actions for the first time, and each time thereafter: live tigers in a cage placed before a theatre and a speech from refugees who beg to be thrown in (*Flüchtlinge fressen – Not und Spiele*, 2016); a staged Islamic-burial-as-art-action in a Berlin cemetery (*Die Toten kommen*, 2015); a steel column with (alleged) ashes of victims of National Socialism as an installation in front of the Reichstag building (*Sucht nach uns*, 2019) – such gestures can be perceived not only as ethically ambivalent and politically dubious, but also easily distasteful: too many coffin dummies, too many dramatic statements, leaping too quickly between themes and sensations. Aesthetic doubts triggered by the brutal scenic images affect the political and ethical assessment of the action in question: if one judges a performance as forced, clumsy or even just technically unsuccessful, it becomes difficult to examine the political demands articulated in that performance sympathetically or at least impartially. For a theatre group, the *Zentrum für Politische Schönheit* achieves impressive publicity, but whether this publicity actually advances the group's political concerns is questionable. Reactive rejection can arise from aesthetic aversion — and this dissociative effect can have such a strong impact that the solidarity at stake remains weak or even fails to materialise in the slightest.

Outreach and limits

Activist theatre was already confronted during the 1930s with the now widespread objection — in a slightly modified form — that its performances systematically missed the social groups that most urgently needed to be reached: the tiresome accusation of *preaching to the converted*. What was the point of celebrating successes in working-class neighbourhoods where the KPD had long since set the tone anyway? What was the point of friendly applause at party meetings in which no one had to be convinced of the communist cause? Such questions similarly arise today when activist theatre is assumed to always reach the same people who could be attributed to a so-called “theatre milieu” — educated, alternative, open-minded people with the same attitudes that theatre practitioners cherish, the same values on which they base their artistic practice.

Seen from the point of view of collectivity, however, such constellations also reveal how political theatre can succeed in creating convergence and community. With their diverse choral forms of performance, the chants and performance songs, the synchronised gestures and coordinated costuming, the agitprop troupes staged themselves as unified, powerful collectives. The audience in the urban, party-affiliated working-class milieu had the best chance of identifying with such self-contained stage collectives, because they were already familiar with typical gestures signalling KPD unanimity, as well as denoting one's separation from supporters of bourgeois, nationalist and social democracy parties. The theatrical situation of agitprop, with its declamations, appeals and songs did not differ greatly from the performative patterns of other party rallies — thus were actors and spectators similarly connected to each other in a spirit of mutual affirmation.

A dissociative and far less affirmative dynamic emerged, however, when the agitprop troupes left their familiar urban environment. The basis of their collectivity was theatrical, and thus did not necessarily fit into the social terrain of the performance event, or it simply had no immediate counterpart in the everyday reality of the audience. A classic example of this disconnection was the land agitation. During the weekends, members of the agitprop troupes would get in a van and drive to nearby villages and small towns. The concerns of people in the countryside and rural areas were known only as hearsay to the urban demographic; of course, one could assume that exploitation was suffered just as much in both contexts, but the problems of a day labourer in the countryside were elementally different from those of an unemployed worker living in a city. *From the outside*, the theatre-makers entered a microcosm that was largely unfamiliar to them, arriving with straightforward messages and firmly developed theatrical forms that were not substantially adapted to or altered for a performance in this other cultural terrain.⁵ Such performances may have been received as interventions made *from the outside world*, entries into a different context that almost necessarily led to distancing and conflicts. The audience noticed that, on the one hand, they were being approached and addressed, but on the other hand, they were being offered solutions or instructions for action that were imported, and thus imposed. Such interventions made across social and geographical distances are also widespread in political art today. The gesture of coming in from outside has something confrontational to it, something separative as well — simply placing something into an environment for the short duration of the performance, inserting something “in-between” that did not belong to this place before. In this way, there is something interruptive in the gesture of intervention as well as it demands the environment be reconfigured.

It is here that activist theatre must face the same criticism that all interventionist practices in politics and society have to reckon with: is interference in other milieus, environments and conflict areas even necessary, or is it to be evaluated as a paternalistic, even colonising act of encroachment? Can this interference deliver what it promises in terms of impact, or does it run the risk of simply poking around an unknown context with unsuitable means of communication, entering an environment whose pitfalls and struggles it cannot sufficiently understand? Such critical questions are undoubtedly justified, and they reflect the failures of activist theatre groups, which often achieved the least impact when they ventured especially far from their own milieu. On the other hand, the solution cannot be a blanket recommendation that theatre-makers just remain in their (supposedly) own, familiar social environments.

In the tradition of agitprop, activist theatre subtly plays with not only the performed theatre piece, but the very theatrical demarcations between stage and auditorium, actors and audience. This partly has to do with the fact that this theatrical form actively distances itself from the concept of art, and also often from artistic institutions. One could even extend this dynamic to a distancing from institutional contexts in which theatre takes place — for example, the organisational world of the KPD around 1930. These environments were entirely riddled with internal hierarchies, which arranged in their assembly practices distinctive boundaries between podium and auditorium. Collectives placed onstage under such conditions can reflect or counteract social groupings of the milieu in question; they are also capable of including or excluding, attracting or repelling an audience gathered either by chance or through planning. Looking from today's standpoint at the political struggles of theatre around 1930, we see problems of address that appear quite familiar:

5) On the problems of the agitprop troupes with rural audiences and other concrete problems of effect of theatrical agitation practice around 1930, see in more detail Warstat 2005, pp. 357 - 361.

how can those who are not yet convinced of one's cause be reached? How can political demands be articulated on a stage without appearing as a delivered lecture, or simply the repetition of a party programme, an agenda of a trade union or NGO? How can one support political campaigns and still retain a certain autonomy? The agitprop theatre of the years around 1930 does not offer ready-made solutions to these questions, but rather posed them and grappled with their challenge in earnest.

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