Political Theatre

in the early twentieth century, a different kind
of political theatre aimed at activating audiences for social change in the real world took
root. Such political theatre places special demands on its audience, as its goal is to spur
them to real action. Practitioners experiment with strategies for audience activation
adapted to specific circumstances and political goals.

Agit-Prop: Activating the Audience

Agit-prop (from agitation and propaganda) was an early form of political theatre develop-
ed during the 1920s in Russia and later adopted abroad. Born in the Marxist fervor of
the Russian Revolution, it supported the workers’ struggle for political, social, and eco-
nomic justice. In the spirit of the ancient town criers, agit-prop brought the day’s news
to illiterate peasants and factory workers to enlist their support for the massive economic
and social changes in the aftermath of the revolution. As songs and skits on relevant is-
 sues were added, these presentations grew into “living newspapers.” Agit-prop reached
out to its audiences, playing where ordinary people gathered, in workers’ cafes and com-
 munity halls, expressing important information in a short, simple, explicit, and enthralling
way.

Agit-prop became a model for political theatre in many countries. German groups, such as the Red Megaphone incorporated group declamatory speech and street-style
skits into their performances. During the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), players used
agit-prop to inspire the people to fight against Franco. The Federal Theatre Project, or-
ganized to provide jobs for unemployed theatre artists during the Great Depression in
the United States, performed Workers’ News and Newspapers from 1938 to 1939. These used docu-
mentary materials from the American public to address social concerns. In the
1960s, groups such as the San Francisco Mime Troupe and El Teatro Campesino used
agit-prop techniques to fight for civil rights, for immigrants’ rights, and against the Viet-
 nam War. The Mime Troupe mixed the didacticism of agit-prop with popular American
and European theatrical forms like vaudeville, commedia dell’arte, and circus clowning
to create extended outdoor plays that brought home a political message and urged the
audience to adopt a position. Teatro Campesino, a Chicano group founded by Luis Valdez
(b. 1940), brought theatre to immigrant farmworkers.

Bertolt Brecht: Challenging the Audience

Throughout the world, theatre artists look to the work of the German playwright and di-
rector Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) for a model of how to engage the audience. Brecht
wanted to turn his audience members into critical viewers who, like fans at a sporting
event, would think about what they were seeing, take sides, comment on the action, and
come up with alternative courses of action. Brecht hoped to achieve what he called the
verfremdungseffekt, translated as distancing or alienation effect, a separation of the au-
dience emotionally from the dramatic action. The audience is thus an observer, able to
decide the best course of action to resolve social ills. As politically motivated theatre
practitioners around the world adopted Brecht’s methods, these devices became a part of
our theatrical vocabulary and no longer have the same startling effect on audiences;
artists therefore continue to look for new techniques and strategies.

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