

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 developed 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 economic 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 issues were added, these presentations grew into "living newspapers." Agit-prop reached out to its audiences, playing where ordinary people gathered, in workers' cafes and community halls, expressing important information in a short, simple, explicit, and entertaining way.

Agit-prop became a model for political theatre in many countries. German troupes, such as the Red Megaphone incorporated group declamatory speeches and cabaret-style skits into their performances. During the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), players used agit-prop to inspire the people to fight against fascism. The Federal Theatre Project, organized to provide jobs for unemployed theatre artists during the Great Depression in the United States, performed *Living Newspapers* from 1934 to 1939. These used documentary material to inform the American public of pressing 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 Vietnam 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 director 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 audience 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.