**The Global and the Popular: the making and unmaking of popular performance forms**

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I am uncertain that a definition [of the popular] is possible because a definition must aim at limiting, fixing boundaries, at excluding apparent irrelevancies, whereas our […] experience with popular theatre emphasizes the contrary.

David Mayer, ‘Towards a Definition of the Popular’, 1977, p 257.

*Introduction*

Despite Mayer’s uncertainty, he and many others have diligently worked to try ground the popular with meaning, but its inherent slipperiness always seems to cause trouble. Take, for instance, matters of locality. Popular, as it pertains to theatre, is often defined, in part, by its relationship to the people in a specific community. As historian Arnold Hauser (1951) has explained: because it is the people who subsidise the work in some way, then the form and its artistic principles are worked out with them. The popular, this argument goes, is rarely interested in power, although given its relationship to the people, power is often interested in it. A very conservative reading of this definition would mean that popular forms are largely determined by their relationship to individual cultures; therefore, the forms potential ‘mass’ appeal does not determine its popular-ness. This view is echoed by Carlo Mazzone-Clementi and Jane Hill in their essay on acting and *commedia dell’arte*, an Italian popular form that emerged in the 16th century. They write:

There is only one audience to please at each performance […] The piece is shaped and coloured by the local audience, by the moods and responses … Mass appeal was unimportant. In fact, had television existed in the Renaissance, commedia might have died an early death. (Schechter 2003: 7).

I do not dispute Mazzone-Clementi’s or Hill’s expert knowledge of *commedia*, but their statement illuminates and masks a couple of important issues about the form. Firstly, *commedia dell’arte* was a business. Even its title, *commedia dell’arte*, which roughly translates to comedy of the artisan, signals a professional status (Rudlin 1993: 13). It sold performances to the public for a fee, although it is expected that this was most often made up of donations. Antonio Favo notes that ‘At its birth, Commedia is above all a practical idea: a theatrical spectacle fashioned to be sold to make a profit capable of sustaining the artist and financing further artistic projects’ (2007: xvi). The performers had to be experts in accommodating audiences, which meant developing a performance practice that could tour to practically any village or country and appear relevant and local. Thus, while locality was certainly important, it was most likely part of the business model. As contemporary rock stars and stand up comedians know, incorporating the local, e.g. ‘Hello London!’ is pretty easy to do.

Commedia thrived not just with ‘local’ Italian audiences, but went ‘global’, in a way, during the 17th and 18th centuries. There are records of companies successfully working in Poland, Germany, Spain, Austria, France and England. If emphasis had been placed purely on the local, then the work could not have been appreciated by the wider masses that Mazzone-Clementi and Hill suggest was unimportant to the form’s development. *Commedia* appears to have done more than simply attend to local tastes; it evolved alongside the tastes of its multicultural audiences – and appeared to do so with entrepreneurial motivations.

My argument here is that popular practices – from Ancient Greek mimes, to Roman rope dancers, Medieval minstrels, to 19th century medicine shows – have often been performed as businesses, designed to make its performers a living. While they may have emerged out of ‘folk’ traditions (although not all of them clearly did) and the relationship with their originating culture is certainly important in the early stages of its development, attending to the masses with the aim of surviving was fundamental. Unfortunately, this argument, perhaps because it is so obvious, is often neglected in research into popular theatre – because that would perhaps acknowledge that the forms that we often identify as popular have slowly, consciously, evolved into practices ready for capitalist cooperation.

What is clear, however, is that the problem with identifying popular practices stems from divergent interpretations of what it means to be popular. Looking at the popular as a synonym of ‘folk’, for instance, provides a very specific kind of reading. Looking at it as ‘low art’, another. The term people, from which the word popular emerges, also presents a particular kind of reading, conjuring, at least to me, the peoples’ theatre movements associated with the early 20th century. All of these applications, which are on the whole correct, make classifying this kind of work challenging. The most frequently deployed academic method seems to be to throw all of them together, which has generated many conflicted readings. This is how *commedia dell’arte* can be categorised alongside ritualistic rainmaking.

This paper sets out to explore the impact the various definitions and interpretations of the popular have had on the way we classify and de-classify forms of performance. Following a brief history of the English usage of the term, the paper will try and break apart and expose the contradictions found in the work of scholars who have endeavoured to define what constitutes a popular theatre. Its principle focus is on locality and appropriation, questioning the recontextualisation of popular forms and what happens once they are removed from their original cultural contexts. Does this process de-popularize the forms, or do their inherent malleability sanction such actions?

*What does popular mean?* *Who does it refer to?*

The term popular was introduced into the English language sometime in the 15th Century. The *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* notes that the first known instance of the word pertains ‘to the mass of people’. Our usage of the word was likely drawn from the Medieval French word *populace*. Morag Shiach notes in her study *Discourse on Popular Culture* (1989) that one of the earliest recorded incidents of the word popular being written is found in legal documents, often in the context of an ‘action popular’, which was ‘an action not given to one man specifically but generally to any of the Queen’s people[…]’ (1989: 22). An example of an action popular given by the author J Rastell in 1579 concerns a corrupt jury member, who may be sued by ‘everyman that will’ within one year of his offense (33). This usage aligns the interest of the people with the state, clearly establishing everyone but the Queen as a single social unit. A similar application of the term can be seen in William Thomas’s essay ‘Whether it be better for a Commonwealth that the power be in Nobility or in the Commonality’ of 1721. In it, the wealthy are separated from ‘the people’ and are made responsible for the latter’s suffering. Such suffering, he observes, can only be bad for the state (Ibid.) He thus calls for greater interdependence between ‘prince, nobility and people’ (Ibid.). Here, further clarification is made: the people do not include nobility or the crown.

Later on in Thomas’ essay, however, he switches to a new definition of the popular; that which stems from the 16th century Italian word *popalaccio* or *popolazzo*, which Walter Skeat in his 1911 *Etymological Dictionary* tells us translates to ‘the grosse, vile, common people’. In considering the possibility of an interconnected government more seriously, Thomas decides that ‘the general ignorance of the people’ would prevent such a state from functioning properly; ‘none is to be compared to the frenzy of the people’ (24) he explains. While the undertones are similar to Rastell’s ‘action popular’ in that the interests of the state are involved, here a distinction between classes is articulated more clearly, with ‘the people’ being neither nobility or the crown, but ‘ignorant’ and potentially dangerous.

Another definition of the popular that emerges in the 17th century is ‘favoured with the people’ (Oxford 1960). This can mean two things: the first refers to general or public opinion. This is closely aligned with Rastell’s definition, as it includes everyone that makes up the abstract body we refer to as the public. The second definition is that which is offered by Henry Cocherham’s *English Dictionarie* of 1623, which defines popular as being ‘in great favour with the common people’ (29). In specifying ‘the common people’ the flavour of the term changes: it marks out their tastes as being in some way different to those of other classes. Critic Gabriel Harvey, writing in 1573, gives us a sense of what might characterise that which is favoured by popular audiences when discussing his frustration over a series of recent debates he had observed, lamenting that they had turned to ‘popular and plausible themes’ (qtd. in Morag 27). Here we have one of the earliest recorded instances of the popular being defined, in part, by its perceived easiness, valuing it as less significant than the cultural artefacts developed and consumed by those who thought of themselves as outside of the popular. This use of popular persists to the present time.

Not all critics, however, necessarily saw the popular in such derogatory ways. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for instance, in his *Lettre a M. d’Alembert* (1758) writes:

One cannot speak of public amusements as good or bad in themselves, since man is so modified by religion, government, laws, customs, predispositions and climate that one cannot ask what is good for men in general, but only what is good in any particular time and country (in Carlson 1984: 151)

Rousseau, unlike some of his critical colleagues, sees society as a complex body formed and modified by institutions and ‘predispositions’, and that whether it is good or bad must be considered on an individual basis. Although he did hold concerns about the business of theatre, which echo those of Christian moralists, he supports the idea of a people’s theatre, which is the first known use of the term. His people’s theatre would consist of ‘open-air spectacles with dancing, gymnastics and innocent celebration by the whole nation’ (1984: 152). This theatre would serve everyone, not just one particular class. His disciple, Louis-Sebastien Mercier (1740-1840), shared a similar goal, although his plan was far more radical. He would call for an end to the ‘foolish’ neoclassical rules that characterised 17th and 18th century French theatre practice and theory and to develop a whole new theatre that could reflect society as it ‘really exists’. These dramas would help ‘mould the manners and morals of the people’ (Schechter 2003: 4), ‘unit[ing] the classes in ‘patriotic ferver’ (Carlson 1984: 158). The same spirit can be found in the works of critic Adam Müller; Hermann Hettner (1821-1882), Romain Rolland (1866-1944), among others.

What this whistlestop tour of definitions, theories and assumptions demonstrate is that the popular has, since its first use in the 16th century, rarely had a stable definition. What does seem clear, however, is that the peoples’ relationship to power in part defines what it means to be popular. Of course, who the people are is never particularly clear.

Trying, then, to determine what might qualify as a popular theatre form is not as straightforward as one might imagine. Based on their understanding of the terms ‘people’ and ‘popular’, scholars have so far offered the following range of definitions for popular theatre:

(1) It exists outside the conventional bourgeois and or commercial theatres/markets. (Price 2008)

(2) It will reflect the culture from which it emerged and thus it is validated through its connection to a community (Schechter 2003)

(3) It will appeal to a broad range of audiences (Mayer 1977).

(4) It will be publicly supported, and consequently ‘not flattering to wealth or power’ (Hauser 1951; van Erven 1988)

(5) It is passed down for generations (Schechter 2003)

(6) It is frequently ‘refurbished’ by material from a wide range of sources, as thus can be seen as evolving. (Mayer 1977)

(7) It no longer exists (van Erven, 1988)

(8) It exists in abundance, in live and mediatised forms (Schechter 2003).

(9) It exists as a working-class theatre ‘to reveal the capitalists’ cause of the working man’s misery’ (van Erven 1988)

(10) It is commercial theatre.

(11) It is a theatre which works with communities to engender social change (Prentki and Selman 2000)

(12) It exists only in geographically isolated regions untouched by capitalism.

(13) It is an instrument of power which participates in an economic system that consistently disadvantages particular regions of the planet (van Erven 1988)

Shiach (1989) places blame on the abstract notions of ‘the people’ and ‘popular’ for leading to such contradictory field. This range qualifies and disqualifies pretty much every form of theatre as being popular at one point or another. This ‘ahistorical’ approach, as Shiach calls it, can be seen at work in Eugene van Erven’s argument in *Radical People’s Theatre*, in which he explains that what in part defines the popular is a historical shift in playwriting. Playwrights, he explains, eventually grew to understand there was money to be made by writing for the higher classes and thus they abandoned ‘the people’. Here, he seems to echo Romain Rolland’s opinion of Classical French drama, when he claims that the ‘death’ of the people’s theatre came during the Renaissance when playwrights adopted Ancient Greek and Roman models that were “[…] intellectually beyond the education of the masses […]” (Erven 1988: 6). In his argument, van Erven considers how the *commedia dell’arte* evolved into a mainstream practice in France in the seventeenth century:

This type of improvisational farce originated as a theatre for and by the

people, but was later absorbed by the aristocracy […] The tendency of

theatre (and art in general) to cater to the ruling classes became even

more evident when the bourgeoisie took over the social and political

hegemony and capitalism made art into a commodity (ibid).

But who the ‘people’ were in the case of *commedia* is questionable. In Antonio Fava’s history of the form, he explains that the earliest commedia performances were call *zannata*, which were sketches about ‘impoverished yokels’ who crowded into cosmopolitan areas at the beginning of the 16th century. These workers ‘spoke a ridiculous language, their mountain dialect, which sounded ‘wild’ to the ears of the citizens of the city. They moved awkwardly, they were simpleminded and laughable’ (2007: 9). The reality appears to be that the *commedia* form was not the archetypal workers theatre that van Erven imagines it to be. Rather, it was an oppressive comic form designed to ridicule a particular social type.

The concern over appropriation also appears in Schechter’s introduction to *Popular Theatres: a sourcebook* (2003) noting that at times in their history, ‘indigenous popular forms are copied by *outsiders* who *remove* the work from its original context or creator’s circuit and sell it for profit in unadulterated form’ (2003: 6). His example is melodrama, which became the staple diet of Hollywood film studios.

Schechter’s and van Erven’s concern seems to stem from the idea that once removed from their culture and placed into the market, its cultural value is replaced by a monetary one. Through the process of commodification, the object becomes an instrument of ‘power’ – that force that popular theatres apparently never flattered. This flattering, for them, begins in the Renaissance, so most things before this can be read as popular. In this flat packed theatre history, then, we would include performances of dithyrambs, ancient mimes, all the Ancient Greek and Roman plays, the liturgical dramas of the medieval period, Sanskrit drama, mummers and minstrels, among hundreds of other forms. Would the fact that some of these, e.g. mimes, minstrels and mummers, performed for money alter this definition? Or how about the claims that Richard III and Henry VII are both said to have employed minstrels to perform for them regularly? Or, how about that women were routinely excluded from these practices? Oddly, in this case, it is those forms that we would probably routinely characterise as *popular* without giving it much thought that jeopardizes this definition from holding together.

While others do not openly qualify ‘all’ theatre before the sixteenth century as being popular, the effects of capitalism on the popular, and its appropriation and commodification by the market starting in the nineteenth century, is frequently cited as a troubling moment for popular theatres. One example of this is FR Leavis’ oft cited *Mass Civilisation and Minority* (1933) where he laments the means of mass production and standardisation for ‘levelling-down’ aesthetic standards. Films are particularly guilty of this, he claims, because ‘they involve surrender, under conditions of hypnotic receptivity, to the cheapest emotional appeals, appeals the more insidious because they are associated with a compelling vivid illusion of actual life’(Leavis, 2009, 14). Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s *Dialect of Enlightenment* (1944) is largely in agreement with Leavis. They argue that popular culture is ‘no more than the achievement of standardisation and mass production’ (in Docker, 1994: 38). In order to be mass produced, they claim, everything has to be stereotyped, including reception. ‘Differences, say, between A or B movies, or magazines with different prices, are simply ways of classifying, organizing and labelling consumers’ (Ibid.). As a consequence, the individual becomes subservient to the ‘absolute power’ of capitalism, which conditions us to respond ‘automatically’ to various media, ‘moulding men as a type unfailingly reproduced in every product’ (38-9). They even theorise closing down ‘this bloated pleasure apparatus’ (43).

But while capitalism is criticised for transforming popular forms of performance into commodities of light or mindless entertainment, it simultaneously facilitated the development of resistant cultural forms which sometimes borrowed from the same repertoire of popular traditions, such as the case with the Workers’ Theatre Movement of the 1920s and ‘30s, or the revolutionary works that emerged in the 1960s and ‘70s by groups like San Francisco Mime Troupe, Welfare State International, 7:84, the Bread and Puppet Theatre, and Red Ladder.

This workers’ theatre interpretation of the popular is rarely contested. It seems to me that this is because it emerged in sympathy with those who could be identified as members of the working class. And unlike the constantly shifting perimeters surrounding the term popular, discussed earlier, a ‘worker’ had been defined quite specifically by Marx. In this sense, the people as it relates to workers’ theatres or peoples’ theatres is far more stable than any of the other popular categories we’ve explored. Regardless, we must accept that this is still appropriation – here, by an intellectual elite who assume they have the workers’ best interests at heart. This is the spirit of Rousseau’s, Mercier’s and Rolland’s theories, and most of the agitprop performances of the WTM. And it is the same spirit that prompts Adorno and Horkheimer to flirt with the idea of censoring mass media in *Dialect of Enlightenment*.This, to me, seems as alarming, ethically, as the appropriation of forms by ‘outsiders’ who endeavour to sell the work in an ‘unadulterated form’. I am reminded here of Mayer’s discussion of power in his essay ‘Towards a Definition of the Popular’ (1977). Due its popularity and close relationship to audiences, he notes, people in positions of power have always been interested in the popular theatre and have appropriated it, when needed, to achieve particular ends. They would do this, he claims, by (1) ordering public rites to impress symbols and personalities of authority upon them; (2) creating propaganda; (3) censoring the forms and placing limitations on them (1977: 263). This could be used to describe performances on both sides of this divide.

*Conclusions*

As our earlier discussion of definitions shows, what is popular seems to be largely determined by its relationships with power. Throughout most of its history, to be popular is to be Other. Even now, when I hide my copy of Harry Potter on the bus so as to not be perceived in a particular way, I acknowledge that to be popular is not always a nice thing. Prejudices still persist and we, as academics, are often the ones guilty of perpetuating the distinction between what is good, e.g. smart, and what is bad, e.g. mindless, e.g. popular.

To discredit a form from being popular because it is marketed and sold outside its original culture seems to be a contradictory exercise, although I will admit I am guilty of doing this, too. One of the common characteristics of many popular theatre forms is their malleability, which John Fiske has noted, enables forms to ‘open themselves to a variety of social relevences’ (1989: 122). Our scholarship often glorifies this flexibility in non-capitalist contexts, but vilifies it in them. This won’t do. If we are happy to accept that Marxist intellectuals and political activists can co-opt whatever forms they like and use them for political and educational purposes, we also have to accept that a form can appear in many guises, including those that may not always appear to be in the people’s best interests.

Articulating a definition or even a stable set of characteristics for a popular theatre is indeed a challenge. But as Mayer suggested earlier, limiting and fixing definitions seems to contradict the spirit of what we understand the popular to be. As Professor Fiske reminds us: ‘the people, the popular, the popular forces, are a shifting set of allegiances that cross all social categories; various individuals belong to different popular formations at different times, often moving between them quite fluidly’ (1989: 24). Believing in a social category called the popular has enabled us to make broad assumptions about the tastes of different social groups in a range of historical periods, flattening the complexities of these cultures and, like the aesthetic dicta and legal documents that has in part defined what the popular is, we have reified their values and tastes in the aesthetic cultural forms they practiced or consumed. Unpicking the many boundaries that have thus been imposed on these cultures and their practices, and the assumptions we make about what does and doesn’t constitute a popular form seems like the first step in opening up new discourses on what it means to be popular and the individual’s relationship to their culture’s aesthetic practices.

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