

A Background of Slog: Work and the British Theatre, 1950-1999

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Abstract

This essay proposes that work should be more widely used as an analytical framework within theatre studies, with attention paid both to its historically specific and material social conditions, and its crucial function as a site of political contestation. It argues that the second half of the twentieth century saw the processes whereby British theatre was made subsumed to capital accumulation in numerous ways. These included rentierism, and the creation (partly through state subsidy) of a co-ordinated theatre sector, whose managerialist tendencies were accelerated by the shift, in the late 1970s, to neoliberal capitalism. The essay charts various consequences of these modes of subsumption for British theatre and its workers, including the gendering of work and the proletarianization of theatre workers (their subjection to regimes of waged labour) with the consequence that their work was widely deskilled and their labour devalued. It also proposes that the organisation of work functioned as a means of racializing theatre production and thereby maintaining white supremacy in cultural production, initially by excluding racially minoritized workers, and later by offering them forms of conditional inclusion in a theatre that remained structurally racialized.

This essay focuses on the history of work in the British theatre between 1950 and 1999. In this period, there were profound changes in the economic models, organisational structures and working conditions that shape theatre production.¹ I have borrowed the phrase ‘background of slog’ from Jim Hiley to encapsulate this subject for two reasons (1981, p. xi). Firstly, discourses of theatre production commonly disavow work along with any acknowledgement of the constraints of political economy, while emphasising allegedly innate and immaterial motivations

such as passion and creativity – there’s no business like show business! This tendency enables theatres to present expectations of productivity as though they were a collective commitment to fulfil artistic promise – the show must go on! Against this discursive backgrounding of labour and its relations, I propose that work is, in fact, theatre’s real and constant background: the foundation of its aesthetic function. Turning to theatre studies, the small but growing literature on the subject offers, broadly speaking, two reasons to approach theatre history from the standpoint of work (McAuley 2012; Borsuk, Simari & Young 2020; McKinnie 2021). The first is ethnographic or sociological: treating theatre as work enables a more complete understanding of the social processes by which it is constituted. The second is political: if we understand how work is organised in the theatre industry, we will be able to analyse the operations of power within it, and thereby identify the interests that the art form serves. I’ll briefly consider both of these approaches before outlining my own, which seeks to combine the two.

Jim Hiley’s book *Theatre at Work*, an ethnographic account of the National Theatre’s (NT) 1980 production of Brecht’s *Galileo*, is an early and unusually detailed attempt to shift performance analysis off the stage. Like many such accounts, it emphasizes the crucial function of stage technologies for theatrical representation and emphasises not only the work of designers, but the widely under-appreciated roles of carpenters and other fabricators, electricians and sound engineers, costume-makers and dressers, stage-managers and their crews, sound and lighting operators, and many others in the construction, skilled manipulation and ongoing management and maintenance of theatre’s technological assemblages. Hiley’s book finds its ideal leading actor in Michael Gambon as Galileo. A gruffly unassuming former toolmaker, not yet a star and constitutively resistant to celebrity, he is wittily self-deprecating with Hiley and generously dismissive of his colleagues’ admiration. He is the model craftsman-actor, from whose on-stage figure the making of theatre can be traced back to the workshops that are the true centre of Hiley’s account. Here we encounter a host of specialist trades, such as painters, prop-makers,

‘metal beauticians’ and carpenters, including Doug and Alan Sutton, a father and son team, who typify Hiley’s descriptions of these workers in their eschewal of ‘short cuts’ and commitment to the uniqueness of each job (pp. 74-6). These highly-trained craftspeople are contrasted, in Hiley’s account, with the theatre’s newly-appointed workshops manager, John Malone, who had previously run a ‘commercial scenery construction business’ for Trident Television. His appointment embodied a tension in the NT’s operation between the theatre’s technical administrator, Bill Bundy, who hired him for his capacity to work ‘on the scale of a factory’ and his staff, who felt he ‘ran things too much like a factory’ (pp. 71-2). In a telling detail, the Suttons told Hiley that they ‘found most TV scenery so imperfect as to make viewing painful’ (p. 72).

Although the craftspeople most prominent in Hiley’s book are not all men, there lurks unmistakably behind his account an unacknowledged commitment to certain tenets of masculinity, not least its connection to industrial work. When Hiley records the downstage movement of a scenery truck perfectly executed (after many attempts) and spots behind it ‘two burly, shirtless men strenuously heaving the winch handle helping to effect an apparently effortless transformation’, we briefly glimpse that commitment directly (p. 188). Because the objective of Hiley’s book is not critical but descriptive, this reverence for an unmistakably masculine conception of labour has the unfortunate effect of naturalising rather than questioning both gendered divisions within this production and the broader hierarchical ordering that they serve. Women working in the theatre in this period were overwhelmingly to be found in roles such as wardrobe, stage management, administration, casting, and voice and movement training (all of these tasks are fulfilled by women in the NT that Hiley records). Notably, these roles are all characterised by their focus on the maintenance of resources (both material and human), and an absence of executive function. The often private, repetitive and interpersonal tasks they involve also downgrade them in Hiley’s account by comparison to the more prominent (male)

work of construction and moments of decision by (male) leaders that dramatically shaped the narrative of the production's development.

Doubtless some women found ways to use these functions influentially, and even graduated from them to roles traditionally gendered male, but even *Galileo's* designer, Jocelyn Herbert, whose interventions were unquestionably crucial to the production's success, is positioned by Hiley primarily as an enabler of the vision of its director (John Dexter). It's important to note that, if Hiley's account is accurate in its representation of Herbert's position, it does not follow that she was not influential, but that she had to find ways to exercise influence indirectly, within a patriarchal structure. That experience would have been familiar to her from her training (under designer Margaret 'Percy' Harris) at the Old Vic Theatre School, where she recalled it was the practice of director Michel Saint-Denis to draw up 'the most detailed ground plan' for a production and impose it upon his designers, who had to work within its strictures (Jump 2016, p. 92). Hiley's account can therefore be read both as a gendered narrative in itself and as tacit evidence that the NT of 1980 was (like the Old Vic thirty years earlier) a deeply gendered organisation, with male roles characterised by 'abstract and conceptual' concerns, and 'the exercise and distribution of power', and women's work 'more likely to involve knowledge and ongoing maintenance of either the body or material objects, or both' (Cornford 2020, p. 118).

The wider significance of this observation for the study of theatre work is that – as social reproduction feminists have long argued – discourses of labour and value cannot be disentangled from the logics of other discursive formations, such as gender. Hiley cannot write about 'theatre at work', without also writing about gender at work – in both senses. The reason for this is simple: work, at least since the advent of capitalist social relations in the 17th century, has been a crucial site of political contestation. In a capitalist system, the dynamics of the workplace, and of work as a social experience, are produced by the attempts of groups with irreconcilable material

interests to control the operation of power. Under capitalism, such conflicts all originate in – but are not reducible to – conflicts between the capitalist class (who generate profit through their ownership of the means of production) and the proletariat (who must sell their labour for an income). Strikingly but unsurprisingly, Hiley only mentions once that the NT became the site of just such a conflict in August 1976, when an industrial dispute broke out between the theatre’s management and the NATTKKE union (p. 2). That dispute was finally halted in March 1979 through the intervention of the new general administrator, Michael Elliott, formerly of Kimberly-Clark. He told non-striking staff that ‘the stagehands have a calculating, money-grabbing agenda, despite, in some cases, already earning more than coalminers’ (*The Times* July 29, 2019), and threatening to ‘suspend [...] employment’ of any member of staff refusing to cross picket lines (Rosenthal 2018, p. 158). As a result, Elliott was successful in shifting the balance of power at the NT towards management, whose role is always to organise work in the interests of capital. We can assume with some confidence that this conflict represented a crucial political context for the tension Hiley observes between the theatre’s craftspeople and their managers.

Such political dynamics of work under capitalism cannot be understood without drawing on the analytical concepts developed first by Karl Marx in the mid-nineteenth century. He differentiated, for example, between ‘work’ and ‘labour’, the former referring to a wide range of activities in which energy is directed purposively. ‘Labour’, by contrast, is an abstract category that describes the energy derived from the activities of work. It appeared historically with the emergence of capitalism, which Marx analyses as a production process in which ‘value’ must always be kept ‘in motion’ (Harvey 2017, p. 4). Capitalists achieve this, according to Marx, by producing commodities by combining raw materials and technology with what he calls ‘labour-power’ (the commodified form of the harnessed energy of a given number of workers for a given time) (1976, p. 128). Commodities are sold for a profit, meaning that the production

process has produced 'value', which is then reinvested in production (p. 270). Uniquely among the three factors that are combined in the production process, labour is able to generate value because its price can be kept lower than the value added by it to the price for which the commodity can be sold, which is the basis of capitalist exploitation. The price of labour can be suppressed in this way because it depends upon the cost of the goods and services required to reproduce the labourer: the food, shelter, care and commodities they require to turn up to work capable of working. As Marx observes, this calculation contains a 'historical and moral element': the number of calories, acceptable living conditions, and leisure and care requirements of each worker are a product not merely of what is required to keep them alive, but what is considered an acceptable standard of life (p. 275). This standard reflects historical and cultural conditions that are always subject to change, and Elliott's reference to 'money-grabbing [...] coalminers' was therefore an attempt to argue that these conditions were too favourable to workers, and thus to alter them in favour of management. Although it is true that the subsidised theatre is not a profit-making enterprise, the NT's industrial dispute demonstrates the extent to which it was nonetheless run along capitalist lines, and thus in the wider interests of the capitalist class.

Elliott's intervention in the dispute also linked the NT strikes directly to the wider field of contemporary political struggle. Not a month later, Margaret Thatcher gave a speech appropriating socialist commitments to 'raise the living standards of the people', while denouncing Labour's 'officious, jargon-filled, intolerant socialism [...] which has been strapped like a harness on our people, and our country, turning worker against worker, society against itself' (1979). Elliott's use of this emergent ideology to justify his hard-line approach to the NT's industrial dispute is typical of the Thatcherite project, which functioned, in relation to work, at two levels simultaneously. It operated, first, on what Marxists have referred to as the material 'base' (the relations of production), by shifting power substantially towards capitalists seeking to extract the maximum value from the labour of their workforce. Those workers' capacity to

maximise returns from their labour was also drastically curtailed by the introduction of legislation to curb the power of unions. This programme of deregulating the economy was justified, however, at the level of the 'superstructure' (where cultural and ideological forces can be found) by Thatcher's insistence that the state must return power to individual workers, by enabling them 'to earn more and keep more of what they earn' (1979). Under this new ideology, work was no longer a site of collective but individual struggle to maximise income. Workers were therefore addressed not as a class, but as units of what neoclassical economists termed 'human capital'. As such, they were exhorted to operate as individual speculators, as in Secretary of State for Employment Norman Tebbit's now notorious evocation of his father's search for work in the 1930s: 'He did not riot. He got on his bike and looked for work' (*Daily Telegraph* October 16, 1981).

In spite of their apparent contradiction, these interventions at the levels of base and superstructure cannot be thought of as discrete, or even as two sides of the same coin. They are more like a mobius strip, whose sides are continuously flowing into each other: assaults on organised labour were justified, in part, by reframing work as speculation on individual capital, which in turn altered attitudes to and practices of work, and so on. Treating theatre as work, therefore, enables us to analyse its formation as a set of cultural practices and attitudes at different levels simultaneously. To do so, we must remain attentive to work both as a set of historically specific and material social conditions that are subject to change, and as an arena of political contestations that arise from the contingency of these conditions and their relations to material interests. In what follows, I take this approach to analysing three key trends in theatre work during our period: its subsumption to capital accumulation, its function as a means of proletarianization, and its role in maintaining white supremacy through the exclusion and conditional inclusion of racially minoritized subjects.

Subsuming Performance: Theatre Production, Capital Accumulation and Managerialism

Marx teaches us that capitalism fundamentally reshaped understandings of human activities by regulating and reshaping them to the end of maximising capital accumulation. He called this process 'subsumption' and offered two theoretical models for its operation, which he termed 'real' and 'formal' (Blackwell-Pal et al. 2021, pp. 35-6). By real subsumption, Marx means that all aspects of a production process are determined by the requirements of capital accumulation. The highly regulated and intensive world of large-scale commercial musicals is an obvious example: processes of casting, set and costume construction, rehearsal, and performance are all reshaped to maximise profit. Theatre producers have more commonly, however, operated a version of what Marx calls 'formal subsumption', under which direct control of the labour process remains with workers, but capitalists own the means of production (which they may expand) and thus gain the right to sell its products and keep any profits. This process has always been essential to the sustainability of the subsidised sector, whose theatres commonly partner with commercial producers. A prominent early example would be the relationship between the impresarios Oscar Lewenstein and Donald Albery and Theatre Workshop, whose precarious tenure of the Theatre Royal Stratford East in the 1950s and early 1960s was propped up by commercial revenue from west-end transfers of its productions. This example also illustrates that – in practice – subsumption rarely fits neatly into the categories of 'formal' and 'real'. Theatre Workshop's labour process was substantially by the fact that, between 1959 and 1964, it had to sustain almost continuous west-end runs alongside a full programme of new productions in Stratford. In fact, the entire approach that the company had developed during its itinerant phase (1945-1953) was transformed by its subsumption to capital – initially through its tenancy of the Theatre Royal and then by its partnerships with commercial producers (Cornford 2020, pp. 221-6). These changes required multiple companies in different locations each performing a single production in a continuous run. This meant actors on short contracts cast in specific roles and formalised

production schedules, preventing the company from functioning as an ensemble with a gradually evolving repertory whose members took on multiple roles on and off-stage. That arrangement had produced a complex web of creative entanglements that created some of the most intensely imaginative theatre of its time, but it was foreclosed by the process of subsumption.

Furthermore, by the time Albery produced *Oh What A Lovely War* with the company, he was able to intervene subtly but directly in the show's content to make it more palatable to a middle-class audience (Cornford 2020, p. 229). Thus, although Theatre Workshop never ceded direct control of their labour process to capital, the company's work was fundamentally altered by its subsumption.

Albery's relationship with Theatre Workshop is also crucial for demonstrating that work does not always function as a direct source of value for capital. Albery and other west-end managers functioned primarily as rentiers, who profit from 'income derived from the ownership, possession or control of scarce assets under conditions of limited or no competition', namely west-end theatres (Christophers 2020, p. 25). A combination of rentierism (such as Prince Littler letting the Aldwych Theatre to the RSC from 1960-1982) and formal subsumption (such as the RSC and Cameron Mackintosh's 1985 co-production of *Les Misérables*) provided, in this period, crucial links between subsidised and fully commercial operations, offering commercial producers tested productions whose development they did not have to finance alone, and subsidised companies commercial incomes from outside their own premises to supplement their other revenue. Other forms of rentierism shaped the sector too, including the practice (during the boom in civic theatre building between the late 1950s and early 1970s) of local governments offering substantial premises for theatres. This secured them both influence in shaping cultural amenities through board memberships, and a financial return in the form of rent paid from the theatres' subsidy and operating income (Cochrane 2011, pp. 181-2).

Although it would be true to say that, for many theatre workers, over-arching structures of political economy such as these did not impinge directly on their work, they did fundamentally reshape both the conditions of work and the balance between different kinds of work that were done in theatres across this period, by altering what the French neo-Marxist regulation theorists called ‘regimes of accumulation’. These are periods of relatively stable relations between profit and consumption, suggesting that a balance has been struck between the state, capitalists and workers to maintain equilibrium between the rate of capital accumulation and the price of labour. This balance is achieved through a complex structure of rules and social processes known as a mode of regulation. Post-war commitments to investing in the infrastructure of a new, post-imperial national economy generated a new mode of regulation that fully took hold in the theatre with Harold Wilson’s Labour government’s introduction of the country’s first bill for the arts in 1965. This turned what had functioned more as a form of state patronage into state funding, enabling the consolidation of a theatre industry with an increasingly formalised infrastructure. This was managed by members of what sociologists Barbara and John Ehrenreich would later call the ‘professional-managerial class’, middle-class technocrats who did not own or control the means of production, but sustained capitalist reproduction by administrative and managerial mediation between capitalists proper and their workers (Ehrenreich 1977). The project of increased managerialism that produced this social group was necessitated by the conversion under capitalism of people’s work into a labour process, which – as David Harvey notes – ‘locates much of the knowledge, decisions as to technique, as well as disciplinary apparatus, outside the control of the person who actually does the work’ (1992, p. 123). Simon Shepherd has argued that this trend found its theatrical equivalent in the rise of the director in the first half of the twentieth century (2012, p. 84), but post-war growth in state funding and the apparatus of theatre production offers a broader example: ever-expanding theatre administrations.

When Laurence Olivier took on the directorship of the NT in 1963, he led a company of actors and technical staff supported by a small administration, working in the rented Old Vic Theatre and some temporary buildings on the South Bank. Similar repertory companies included the Glasgow Citizens' Theatre (founded in 1943 and taken over as a repertory theatre in 1969), the Liverpool Everyman (1964), and the Victoria Theatre in Stoke-on-Trent (1962), alongside surviving Edwardian repertory theatres such as the Liverpool Playhouse (1911) and Birmingham Rep (1913). When Peter Hall took over the NT in 1973, it was no longer a single, evolving ensemble with a repertory of productions, but an entire apparatus that had to be sustained and maintained: he recalled 'wondering how on earth we could continuously fill, with plays and with people, not one theatre but three' (Rosenthal 2018, p. 213). This problem was not unique to the NT, but shared by the directors of new theatres from the Birmingham Rep (opened 1971) to the Bolton Octagon (1967) to the Manchester Royal Exchange (1976) and the Leeds Playhouse (though it occupied loaned premises until its new building opened in 1990).

Hall sustained his three theatres with the support of administrative managers Michael Elliott and his former Head of Press and PR from the RSC, John Goodwin. That these men (such roles would not commonly be held by women until the next century) are rarely discussed in theatre studies should not diminish their significance: Goodwin had implemented the 1965 'Goodwin Plan' to significantly reduce the company's output and make it more efficient. At the NT, he became Head of Press and Publications, with a substantial administrative staff focused on marketing, and again supporting the implementation of efficiency measures. Richard Eyre's diaries from his tenure during the 1990s likewise recount endless 'meetings about the budget and how we can balance it', and – later – about the need 'to raise money for the redevelopment', without which 'the theatre would crumble in ten years' (2004, pp. 133, 131). A few weeks after Eyre's discussion of the NT's redevelopment in late January 1996, Stephen Daldry's Royal Court Theatre closed for a Lottery-funded redevelopment, reopening in 2000 and initiating a pattern of

artistic directors whose tenure was marked by substantial capital projects to maximise the value of the physical asset of their building. That trend would not take hold fully until the twentieth century was over, but it followed in the wake of the collapse of repertory companies with workers on long contracts. The subsidised system had initially supported a few such theatres (including the Citizens Theatre, the Liverpool Everyman and Stoke's Victoria Theatre), but by the end of the 1970s they could no longer operate this model. Thereafter, the core function of subsidised companies became the administration and management of buildings and their associated business plans, budgets, marketing and maintenance.

Subsidy didn't only create theatre buildings. It also produced an increasingly co-ordinated and professionalised theatre *sector*, as a result of collaborative arrangements such as touring and co-production, the requirement to manage new technologies and buildings, and the movement of workers between organisations. These factors produced increasingly homogenous practices, developed and shared by organisations like the Association of British Theatre Technicians (founded 1961). As a result, *repertory* theatres – a descriptor rooted in their working practices – became *regional* theatres – a descriptor that positioned them in relation to the sector of which they were an increasingly integrated part (Jackson 2010, p. 22). All of this produced ever more managerialism. Claire Cochrane is right to assert, however, that although the techniques of managerialism were applied 'more overtly and systematically' after the 1980s, generating 'heavy constraints on creative capacity', they had, in fact, been 'an accepted part of day-to-day [theatre] management since the earliest days of subsidy' (2011, p. 171). Indeed, Roberta Barker and I have argued that a commitment to managerialism – in the form of a plan for the management of the Old Vic Theatre, drawn up in 1944 by Tyrone Guthrie in discussion with its funders – functioned as a precondition for subsidy (2018, pp. 136-7). What changed after the 1980s was not theatres' managerialism, then, but the intensity, scope and visibility of its application. Those changes emerged as a result of the shift – from the late 1970s – to what David Harvey termed

‘flexible accumulation’, one characteristic of what Stuart Hall called the ‘neoliberal revolution’ (Harvey 1992, p. 147; Hall 2017, p. 317). Harvey shows that the mode of regulation that enabled this dramatic reshaping of socio-economic norms and practices was characterised by greater wage restraint, increased sub-contracting and outsourcing, and more casualisation and self-employment (1992, pp. 150-1). In the theatre, this meant that specialist functions such as set and costume construction were increasingly outsourced or subcontracted, equipment was commonly hired to save the costs of maintenance and storage, and self-employed creative workers were contracted on minimal fees, limiting their available time on any given project. At the same time, the Arts Council found itself under intensified pressure from government to justify and maximise the return on subsidies, meaning that – as Giles Havergal remarked in 1993 – ‘just as government funding on the arts is retracting, the paperwork and bureaucracy have been increased’ (1993, p. 631).

We can exemplify the effect of managerialism on theatre work by briefly considering two kinds of ‘managers’ in this period: deputy stage managers and literary managers. The British system of deputy stage management functions to centralise power in the production process. The DSM (another role commonly gendered female) usually sits alongside the director in rehearsals, recording instructions and blocking in a prompt script. Later in the production process, sound, lighting and other technical cues are added to this script and then given by the DSM during performances using headset relays or cue-lights. By contrast, although the German repertory system requires detailed production records to be maintained for shows to be replicated sometimes over many years, centralized cuing is unnecessary because theatres’ workers are employees, meaning much lower turnover, so technicians learn productions themselves and take their own cues. In the British theatre, however, the centralisation of control via the DSM enables a relatively high degree of replicability of productions with more casualised technical staff and self-employed creative teams who are invariably absent after a production’s opening night.

British literary managers are likewise distinct from continental dramaturgs because the role (which was first created by Kenneth Tynan in Olivier's NT) does not have its roots in creative but in managerial practices. Whereas dramaturgs commonly work closely with directors, writers, and others on productions and serve as the public voice of the institutions whose work they help to curate, British literary managers make much more limited direct contributions to creative processes. They also operate almost exclusively *within* their organisations, supporting artistic directors, and managing commissions, script submissions, and relationships with writers.

I've argued in this section that the historical development of the subsumption of theatre production between 1950 and 1999 created a theatre sector in which work was shaped by increasing managerialism. But what were the wider consequences of this process for theatre workers? How did it shape the realities of their working lives? These questions are addressed in the next two sections, first in relation to those people who found themselves frequently in work, and then those who were often out of it.

Professionalizing Work, Proletarianizing Workers

Although there had been drama schools since the early twentieth century, the scale and remit of professional training for the theatre expanded considerably after the war, with the opening of the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School (1946), the Glasgow College of Dramatic Art (1950), Mountview Theatre School (1945), and Rose Bruford College (1950). At the vanguard of this trend was the short-lived Old Vic Theatre School (part of the Old Vic Theatre Centre, 1947-52), whose central focus was acting, but which included courses in design and directing under the central influence of Michel Saint-Denis (Cornford 2020, pp. 87-91). Increased government support for further education and the development of a professionalised arts sector, as well as growing engagement

with creative methods developed in the theatre during the first half of the twentieth century (which had been synthesised by Saint-Denis) fuelled the further expansion of professional training, in particular during the 1960s, which saw the founding of the Drama Centre (1963), Drama Studio London (1966), East 15 Acting School (1961), and the Manchester School of Theatre (1970). This period also saw the remit of training widen, with courses in, for example, stage management and design becoming more common, a pattern that was extended again by the expansion of higher education following the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992. As a result, theatres increasingly expected their workers to be professionally trained.

The combined dynamics that characterised this shift to professionalisation are encapsulated in the career of John Blatchley, who graduated from RADA before the war and became a tutor at the Old Vic School after it. Following the School's closure, Blatchley went on to work under all of the Old Vic Centre's directors: Glen Byam Shaw at Sadler's Wells, George Devine at the Royal Court, and Michel Saint-Denis at the RSC. He also taught at the Central School of Speech and Drama (whose curriculum was substantially shaped by Saint-Denis' influence) and became a prominent opera director. In 1963, Blatchley also became one of the three directors of the Drama Centre, formed with a breakaway group of students from Central, following the sacking of Yat Malmgren, whose Laban-based training had been rejected by Central, but formed the basis of the Drama Centre's approach until his retirement in 2001 (Fettes 2002). Blatchley's simultaneous work as director, teacher and joint principal of Drama Centre, and the route he took to establish himself in the industry, exemplify the combined development of a professional sector and professional training in this period. They also demonstrate the ways in which the new theatre sector was swiftly captured by the homosocial networks of upper middle-class white men, trading both on their contacts and the aesthetic currency in post-war British culture of the modernist approaches they advocated.

As well as being professionalized during this period, however, theatre workers also found themselves subjected increasingly to what director Peter Gill called ‘discontinuous working situations’, with serious consequences for their capacity to develop their skills in the medium to long term (Hail 2007, p. 18). Whereas actors who had entered the profession between the wars were less likely to have received formal training, they had also benefitted from much higher levels of work and thus the investment of time required to develop what Michael Polanyi called ‘tacit knowledge’ (Polanyi 2009, p. 22). By contrast, actors who were professionally trained after the war developed far greater explicit knowledge, but suffered a chronic lack of experience. When Gill attempted to bring these generations together in a 1986 project at the NT Studio, by asking the younger actors to interview their older colleagues, it became immediately clear that the knowledge Gill sought to reveal was ‘unknown even by those who most surely possess it’ (Cornford 2015, p. 90). The older interviewees, in other words, had gained their knowledge through the embodied and sedimentary acquisition of skill, and this experience proved deeply resistant to explicit communication. Therefore, instead of the interviews proving an effective means of reversing the loss of skill, their ultimate effect was to reinforce the intractability of the process whereby working conditions shape the capacities of workers. The irony, then, of the gradual professionalisation of theatre workers during this period was that it produced a new form of worker whose tacit knowledge was deeply constrained by two factors: reduced access to work, and a managerial elite who could only effectively oversee their work by prioritising explicit forms of knowledge that could be abstracted from the activities of working. In the field of acting, this irony was amplified by the fact that actors who were increasingly well trained in the explicit knowledge of their craft found that their capacity to transform themselves (as did, for example, Olivier) became increasingly redundant as it was outsourced to casting directors who were called upon to find actors to fit particular roles.

Across this period, theatre workers gradually discovered that, in spite of the apparent status that it conferred on them, professionalization was always a part of the broader process of proletarianization, a ‘dynamic’, which – as Jodi Dean observes – ‘produces, uses up and discards [...] workers’ (2012, p. 75). The theatre industry became, as director Nicholas Hytner described himself in 2009, a ‘consumer’ of drama school graduates (Kapsali 2014, p. 225). Although precariously employed young actors are an obvious example of this pattern, it can be generalized far beyond them. Those who employed them found that the relative security offered by membership of the professional-managerial class had always been temporary and contingent, as that class fraction was gradually decomposed by casualisation and competition for scarce employment (casting directors, after all, are also self-employed). In the theatre as elsewhere, it became clear that the extraction of value from labour that the professional-managerial class facilitated would inevitably be applied to them too. Thus, the professionalization of the sector that was facilitated by this class fraction ultimately drove its middle-class workers in the same direction they had sent the trades- and craftspeople they managed: deskilling their work and devaluing their labour as a result of their increasingly precarious employment or self-employment.

Out of Work

The critique advanced above has an important blind-spot. Namely, it fails to consider those people who found themselves, for much of this period, excluded from work in the theatre. In the late 1940s, the British Guyanese actor Robert Adams reflected that parts were ‘few and far between’ and constantly required him to embody racialized stereotypes. As a result, he developed a plan ‘of owning a theatre and having a Dramatic School’, but observed that ‘the task is such a big one and is meeting with such opposition that it is breaking my heart’ (Bourne 2001, pp. 88-9). In the mid-1950s, the Jamaican-British director Yvonne Brewster was told, at Rose Bruford

College, that although they would train her, she ‘would never work’ (Brewster 2004, p. 45). In May 1975, *The Guardian* newspaper’s ‘London Letter’ column reported that it was the policy at Central for black students to study for only seven of the acting course’s nine terms because ‘there weren’t enough parts for blacks in the prestige productions mounted in the last two terms’ (White 1975a). Although the Principal, John Allen, was reportedly initially ‘prepared to defend’ this policy, three weeks later it had been abandoned with the excuse that the School had previously ‘overestimated the difficulties’ of inclusion (White 1975b). Thus, the exclusion of racially minoritized people like Adams, Brewster and the two Central students who had contacted *The Guardian*, which had been naturalized within the theatre, was exposed as systemically constructed. These anecdotes exemplify the argument of this section: that analysing access to and conditions of employment demonstrates that, during this period, the British theatre was a white theatre not by default, but by design.

One consequence of the structural exclusion of Black and other racially minoritized people from theatre work was that activist-artists of colour established what was in effect a parallel sector, with systems to support and generate employment that mirrored the industry from which they were functionally excluded. In 1956, Edric and Pearl Connor founded the Edric Connor Agency (later the Afro-Asian Caribbean Agency) to give representation to Black performers. One of their clients was Carmen Munroe, who co-founded Talawa Theatre Company in 1986 with Brewster, Mona Hammond, and Inigo Espejel, following in the wake of initiatives such as Tara Arts (1977) and the Black Theatre Seasons (established by Anton Phillips at the Arts Theatre in 1983). Kene Igweonu points out that the Arts Council’s 1986 Arts and Ethnic Minorities Action Plan ‘attempted to further isolate [Black-led companies] from the mainstream’, but Brewster’s experience working for the Arts Council enabled Talawa to anticipate ‘ever-changing funding priorities’ and grow against the odds (Igweonu 2015, pp. 240, 242). From 1991-95, it secured a central London home by leasing the Cochrane Theatre, enabling the company dramatically to

expand the ambition of its programming and the scale of its work. Other theatres (most obviously the Tricycle in Kilburn), although not Black-led, became crucial in offering a home to Black plays and performers, and to Black off-stage workers such as stage managers and producers, who were usually excluded from the informal networks of the industry. At the same time, Black actors of the future such as Marianne Jean-Baptiste and Daniel Kaluuya were receiving their initial training at the Weekend Arts College in London (founded 1978).

By the early 1990s, however, the white theatre had realised that the time for exclusion was up. In 1991, Mustapha Matura's *The Coup* was staged at the NT, the first work by a writer of Caribbean heritage to be programmed there, following Jatinder Verma becoming the NT's first director of colour with his 1990 production of Molière's *Tartuffe*. This shift towards integration was, of course, overdetermined, but certain causal factors are clear. The success of Black-led companies made their artists impossible to ignore. The emergence of a Black middle class concentrated mainly in urban centres where theatres were to be found created the possibility of more racially diverse audiences. More generally, the social pull of what Stuart Hall termed 'multicultural drift', whereby white hegemony was being gradually eroded, was shifting the terrain of all cultural production (Hall 1999, p. 188). Needless to say, racism shifted too, from a project of exclusion to one of conditional inclusion. Although Paulette Randall directed Winsome Pinnock's *Leave Taking* for the NT's education department in 1995, *The Coup*'s all-white creative team (led by director Roger Michell) was the norm for Black plays on mainstream stages well into the twenty-first century. A company of Black actors often meant there would be a Black stage manager, but the decisions that shaped their working conditions and the aesthetic choices that framed their representation on stage were taken overwhelmingly by and for white people. The consequences of this racialized division of labour were memorably criticised in 2003 by Darcus Howe, who wrote that Roy Williams' *Fallout* (directed by Ian Rickson and designed by Ultz at the Royal Court) staged Black pain for 'the delectation of whites' (quoted in Goddard 2015, p. 34).

Thus, white supremacy was maintained during the 1990s in a sector that could not remain so overtly racist. The assumed liberal progressivism of that decade should not, therefore, be overstated. Its racial politics were guided just as much by a longstanding disavowal of race, in which work played an important role. Paul Gilroy wrote of a 1983 Conservative election campaign poster (depicting a suited, Black man above the slogan ‘LABOUR SAYS HE’S BLACK. TORIES SAY HE’S BRITISH.’) that ‘the slightly too large suit worn by the young man, with its unfashionable cut and connotations of a job interview [...] conveys what is being asked of the black readers as the price of admission to the colour-blind form of citizenship promised by the text’ (2013, p. 65). Gilroy explicitly notes that this man is expected to forsake any signifiers of cultural difference (just as Howe noted the tacit requirement for *Fallout* to present Blackness in the terms of white supremacy), but his associative reading of the image uncovers another layer of the poster’s tacit demand: the man must turn up ready for – and ready *to compete for* – work.

Maurizio Lazzarato has noted that the disciplining effect of employment – and particularly precarious employment – is fundamental to the neoliberal conception of markets as spaces of competition rather than trade, which are therefore characterised by inequality (Lazzarato 2017, p. 7). That inequality takes numerous forms, but can be seen, for example, in what Lazzarato terms ‘a disjunction between work and employment’, because ‘periods of employment only compensate partially’ for the costs of sustaining oneself as a worker (p. 1). The costs associated with this disjunctive condition not only favour those with structural advantages, they also work to enforce the norms of cultural and ideological self-regulation represented by the interview suit. The obvious structural ableism of this situation clearly also merits further analysis, but for our purposes here, the key point is that the managerial structuring and precarious conditions of theatre work in the late twentieth-century mainstream theatre produced an enforceable bargain

with the ideology of whiteness, which it offered to racially minoritized workers. Access to employment was widely conditional upon acceptance of structural assimilation. This is not, of course, to argue that such workers had no agency. They did find work, and sometimes – like Pinnock at the NT – they even managed to critique whiteness from within its institutions. Nonetheless, theatres like the Tricycle, the Theatre Royal Stratford East or the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs that offered a foothold to racially minoritized workers remained on the sector's margins, and where racially minoritized workers rejected the bargains offered by whiteness, the choice was often simple: they created their own work-spaces or they remained out of work.

The ways in which work was used as a means of assimilating – both including and disciplining – racially minoritized theatre workers during the 1990s exemplifies the wider argument of this essay: that theatre studies should attend more closely to work as an analytical framework. As the examples here demonstrate, work is a heuristic that can combine ethnographic and sociological commitments to engage the detail of social processes and their lived experience with a political commitment to understand their function as conduits for power. Studying work, in other words, can both avow its importance and subject it to critique. Beginning with work also ensures that we do not slip into explanations for historical patterns that are either simplifying or mystifying. Mystifying explanations may assert that particular trends are the product of generalised ideological conditions, and simplifying explanations will draw direct connections between, for example, shifts in cultural policy and particular cultural commodities. Using work as an analytical framework, however, requires that we consider the interweaving dynamics – socio-economic, discursive, interpersonal – that shape the activities by which culture is produced. Theatre scholars have a particular contribution to make in this enterprise, because those interweaving dynamics are also the material stuff of performance; if theatre is work, then work is theatre.

Asserting the importance of analysing theatre work, then, is not an argument for reducing theatre studies to a peripheral strand of cultural sociology. It is a call for a politically and sociologically informed performance analysis of theatre production.

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