

IN DEFIANCE OF CENSORSHIP: AN EXPLORATION OF DISSIDENT THEATRE IN
COLD WAR POLAND, CZECHOSLOVAKIA, AND THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC
REPUBLIC

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores dissident theatre in East Central Europe during the second half of the Cold War (1964-1989). Contextualised within the discussion of individual theatrical and performance cultures and practices in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and The German Democratic Republic, it examines how theatre was used to subvert the dominant ideologies and dissent from the status quos in these countries. It establishes a framework that addresses the divergences between Anglo-American political theatre and Eastern Bloc dissident theatre, and discusses the necessity of considering the work of subcultural and subversive artists when analysing work of this kind. The core chapters discuss the theatrical and dramatic techniques, and the intention of the artists with regards to the work itself and to audience interpretation and response in the plays and performances of Václav Havel (Czechoslovakia), Theatre of the Eighth Day (Poland) and Autoperforationsartisten (East Germany). Further, these chapters demonstrate the significant differences in the ways dissident theatre and performance was conceptualised and staged. This thesis also analyses similarities in the theoretical and philosophical motivations for the work of the artists, and the development of ‘second’ or ‘parallel’ societies as a result of the performances.

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INTRODUCTION

Scope and Reasoning

In a monopolized system [...] everything becomes political. If you make any gesture different from what the authorities want, that gesture immediately carries political weight. So the term 'political' results from the distortion and unnaturalness of social life here.¹

This statement, made by founding member and former artistic director Lech Raczak of Theatre of the Eighth Day, highlights one of the foundational elements of this thesis: that there was a fundamental difference between what was considered political in democratic societies, like those in Britain, some of the Western European countries, and the United States, and that which was political in authoritarian societies, such as the countries of the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War. In the countries that made up the Bloc even what would elsewhere be considered somewhat minor infractions, such as writings and performances that could be interpreted as critical of the political regime, could result in censorship, delayed and cancelled openings and refusals of publication by the official press. More significant or repeated political actions could result in lifetime restrictions on writing and publication, criminalisation of self, family, friends, and collaborators, the stripping of rights and identity, imprisonment, exile, and in extreme cases, a death sentence. These repercussions and retributions would be all but inconceivable in countries where the governments' laws of

¹ Kathleen Cioffi, Andrzej Ceynowa, & Lech Raczak, 'An Interview with Director Lech Raczak', *The Drama Review: TDR* 30 (1986) 81-90 (90).

free speech and free expression protected the right to speak critically, in performance or print, about injustices, inequalities and infractions of most types.

Theatre and performance artists who wrote and produced work in Eastern Bloc countries would have been constantly aware that their work could provoke a negative response from the authorities as closures and censoring was common, as a number of recent works document.² Even those who worked within the mainstream theatres and attempted to align their work with the known restrictions could be accused of making veiled, politically critical statements resulting in censorship and other negative repercussions. Continually shifting and vague definitions of what was and was not prohibited only furthered the possibility of violating a dictate. Owing to these notable differences in the restrictions and repercussions for artists working in these countries, it is crucial to consider the specific challenges they faced. This thesis aims to acknowledge the differences in the Eastern and Western experiences, explore key terms so that they can account for these differences, identify decisive historical events and discuss artistic intent. In doing so, a framework will be

² Laura Bradley, *Cooperation and Conflict: GDR theatre censorship, 1961-1989*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).; Barrie Baker, 'From Page to Stage: The state and the theatre in the German Democratic Republic in the 1980s' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Reading, 2005).; Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz, *The silenced theatre: Czech playwrights without a stage* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979).; Daniel Jones, 'Censorship in Poland' in *Censorship: A World Encyclopedia*, ed. by Daniel Jones, (London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2000).

constructed within which the plays and performances of those artists who, through their work, critiqued the controlling regimes under which they lived can be analysed.

After establishing this framework, this thesis will examine the plays and performances of select dissident artists with in-depth discussion of Václav Havel in Czechoslovakia, Theatre of the Eighth Day in Poland, and Autoperforationsartisten³ in the German Democratic Republic. It will discuss the ways in which their works challenged the constraints on political, social and cultural freedoms, and questioned the propaganda and realities of daily life under Soviet-style communist governments. Analysis of these plays and performances will address two of the questions central to this thesis: how did the shifting levels of censorship, control, and criminalisation by the communist apparatus impact the ways that these artists conceptualised and developed their performances; and how were their experiences reflected in their works? The explorations of these artists - as individual case studies - will contextualise them within their own environments, and locate their works within specific theatrical styles while identifying similarities in the themes, motifs and intentions. This can then be used to address the third central question: how can these commonalities be used to conduct a comparative analysis of the dissident plays and performance produced in the Eastern Bloc during the second two decades of the Cold War?

³ Translated into English this becomes 'self-perforation artists'. A full discussion of the motivations that led to the group naming themselves as such is provided in chapter 4.

The scope of this thesis will serve to significantly broaden existing Cold War discourses by exploring the actions, writings and productions of artists who, though claiming to be anti-political⁴, denying the intention of creating works that made political or anti-government statements, subverted the tenets and structures of the Soviet-style governments in their countries. This will deepen the understanding of Eastern Bloc anti-political dissidence by expanding the definition to include works of theatre and performance that challenged the dominant ideology without making direct statements of opposition. It will do so by approaching the subject from a new and distinct perspective and focusing on elements absent from current existing theatrical and cultural histories of this time period. It will address the limited understanding of non-mainstream, and unsanctioned theatre and performance in the Soviet satellite states. The thesis will address these issues by focusing on a discussion of dissenting, 'alternative' and 'subversive' artists in the Eastern Bloc; that is, artists whose work was heavily censored or prohibited outright, those who were politicised by virtue of their relationship to the censors, and those whose work used themes, style and motifs that could not be presented on mainstream stages.

One of the significant gaps that exists in the current Cold War scholarship is the comparatively minimal amount of work that focuses on the theatrical and cultural events,

⁴ This term, drawn from Havel's writings, refers to the idea that engaging directly with politics in Eastern Bloc countries was both useless, as the structure of authority did not recognise anyone who did not hold a high position in the Party, and dangerous. This idea is further discussed in Chapter 1.

productions and publications in Eastern and Central Europe. Despite the opening of numerous archives in the 1990s and early 2000s, including those in former Eastern Bloc countries, a significant majority of the English-language historical and theatrical texts dealing with the Cold War focus almost exclusively on the United States and Russia. These works centre around the use of cultural events as assertions of dominance, the manner in which these events were used to express propaganda and the regulations and attacks on the arts in these countries. For example in *The Culture of the Cold War*, Stephen Whitfield dissects how literature, art, film and television were used to consistently reiterate the dangers of the ‘enemy within’, elevate the ideas of American freedoms, and justify informing on family and friends in order to destroy the ‘communist menace’.⁵ Walter Hixson discusses the ways in which radio stations such as Voice of America, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberation were used to transmit the ideals of American capitalism in the Eastern Bloc and Soviet Union and Moscow’s anti-American propaganda response.⁶ Gilbert and Kuznick’s edited volume, *Rethinking Cold War Culture* discusses the use of films, popular and material culture to construct national, gender and racial identities in Cold War America⁷ and Bruce McConachie discusses what audiences wanted and perceived in American films, musicals,

⁵ Stephen Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

⁶ Walter Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture and the Cold War 1945-1961* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).

⁷ *Rethinking Cold War Culture*, ed. by Peter Kuznick and James Gilbert (Washington DC: Smithsonian Books, 2001).

radio and dance.⁸ Further texts such as those by Richmond,⁹ and Caute,¹⁰ discuss the cultural exchanges between the Soviet Union and the United States, and Saunders¹¹ contrasts the experiences of American and Soviet writers and artists. Discussion of Central and Eastern European countries within these texts serve primarily to illustrate the impact of the American and Russian cultural conflict. To address this gap in scholarship this thesis will examine the cultural life, (specifically theatrical) from the perspective of those within Poland, Czechoslovakia and the GDR. It will take into consideration aspects of the individual histories of each of these countries, how each government responded to and instituted the policies being issued from Moscow, and the ways in which the populations responded to the restrictions on their freedoms. It will consider each of the chosen Eastern Bloc countries as its own entity rather than simply as an extension of the battle between the ‘super-powers’ of the United States and Russia.

The scholarship that does focus on the cultural events and publications in Central and Eastern Europe such as *Cold War Cultures: Perspectives on Eastern and Western*

⁸ Bruce McConachie, *American Theater in the Culture of the Cold War: Producing & Contesting Containment, 1947-1962* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003).

⁹ Yale Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War: Raising the Iron Curtain* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2003).

¹⁰ David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy During the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹¹ Frances Stoner-Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta Books, 2000).

Societies,¹² *Across the Blocs: Cold War Cultural and Social History*,¹³ and *Youth and Rock in the Soviet Bloc: Youth Cultures, Music and the State in Russia and Eastern Europe*¹⁴ exposes a second significant gap in the existing literature. These volumes (each a collection of individual essays), are far more expansive in their discussions of culture in the Eastern Bloc countries, focus primarily on print, media and consumer cultures. They discuss film and television, radio, literature and poetry, and music, with the intention of providing a broader view of the cultural and social societies in these countries, however there is proportionally little discussion of drama and theatre. As in many cultural histories, theatre and performance are afforded minimal consideration and are often discounted as significant reflectors of the opinions, experiences, and reactions to the period. This study will address this by examining the role that theatrical and performance artists played in reflecting and responding to the experiences of life under Soviet-style communism. It will contextualise theatre and performance within the specific cultural environments of post-Stalinist Poland, Czechoslovakia and the GDR and demonstrate how, in a similar way to film, television, radio and literature, theatre and performance could and did critique the contemporary experiences of populations in these countries.

¹² *Cold War Cultures: Perspectives on Eastern and Western Societies*, ed. by Annette Vowinckel, Marcus Payk, and Thomas Lindenberger (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012).

¹³ *Across the Blocs: Cold War Cultural and Social History*, ed. by Rana Mitter and Patrick Major (London: Frank Cass and Company, 2004).

¹⁴ *Youth and Rock in the Soviet Bloc: Youth Cultures, Music and the State in Russia and Eastern Europe*, ed. by William Jay Risch (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015).

Moving beyond the cultural histories to those sources that do specifically discuss theatre and performance does not eliminate all of the issues of perspective and focus in current Cold War scholarship. Rather it exposes two further existing gaps in the literature. The first of these gaps is owing to the fact that much of the source material discusses Western performances that comment on the Cold War environment in the Eastern Bloc or the performance of Western plays in Eastern Bloc countries. For example, British playwrights, Caryl Churchill and Tom Stoppard, write two of the best-known plays written about Eastern Europe during this period – *Mad Forest* (1990) and *Cahoots Macbeth* (1978).¹⁵ These plays, while dealing with the situations in Romania just prior to and following the fall of communism and an illegal production of *Macbeth* in Czechoslovakia during Normalisation respectively, cannot reflect the experience of living under communism in the same way as the work by artists who lived within those environments can. Other sources, such as John Elsom's *Cold War Theatre*,¹⁶ Alfred Thomas' *Shakespeare, Dissent and the Cold War*,¹⁷ and Zdenek Stríbrny's *Shakespeare and Eastern Europe*¹⁸ examine the re-stagings and adaptations of Western classical playwrights such as Shakespeare or discuss the reception of modern, toured productions of Western plays, such as when *Waiting for Godot* was staged in Poland. Sources that discuss the productions of plays written or conceptualised in the Eastern Bloc

¹⁵ I acknowledge that Tom Stoppard was born in Czechoslovakia, however his departure as a small child and his resettlement, education and work history in England following the Second World War allows for the classification of him as a British playwright.

¹⁶ John Elsom, *Cold War Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

¹⁷ Alfred Thomas, *Shakespeare, Dissent and the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

¹⁸ Zdenek Stríbrny, *Shakespeare and Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

are limited, and those that do exist rarely discuss subcultural, subversive, or dissident performance.

The majority of Eastern Bloc theatrical histories written in English¹⁹ centre their discussion on mainstream theatre and officially sanctioned experimental theatre, its productions, the manner and degree to which it was allowed to function and the censorship it was subject to. Additionally, they discuss the ways in which financial subsidy and specific freedoms were used, in addition to systems of surveillance and monitoring, to control what appeared on stage.²⁰ Within these texts the plays and performances that are discussed are those created by artists who worked primarily in mainstream theatres and officially sanctioned 'alternative' theatres, such as Bertolt Brecht, Heiner Müller, Andrzej Wajda and Alfred Radok, and those artists, such as Grotowski, and Mrożek whose international reputation or emigration brought focus to their work. There is significantly less discussion of those artists who could not produce their work openly without fear of severe punitive measures being taken against them and those whose work existed so far beyond the regulations of state-sanctioned art forms that they could not perform publicly.

¹⁹ This includes work by Western Scholars as well as many scholars of the former Eastern Bloc countries.

²⁰ Laura Bradley, 'GDR Theatre Censorship: A System in Denial', 151-162.; Kazimierz Braun, *A History of Polish Theatre 1939-1989: Spheres of Captivity and Freedom* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996).; Christoph Funke, 'The Activist Legacy of Theatre in the German Democratic Republic' *Contemporary Theatre Review* 4. 2 (1995) 7-11.

With the exceptions of Kathleen Cioffi's book on alternative theatre in Poland,²¹ Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz's book on silenced Czech theatre,²² Carol Rocomora's book on the theatrical life of Václav Havel,²³ and select journal articles,²⁴ the work of these artists is rarely thoroughly examined within current scholarly texts. In order to address these two gaps in the discourse of theatre in the Eastern Bloc, this thesis will make use of autobiographical texts, interviews and correspondences to broaden the discussion of artists in the selected countries. It will examine, to the greatest extent possible, the writing and performance of work that was created by dissident Central and Eastern European artists while they lived under Soviet-style communist governments. It will discuss the systems of control and censorship that prevented certain artists from producing their work and the repercussions they faced when defying these statutes.

Further to the goal of broadening the existing literature and discourses of cultural - specifically dissident theatrical - events, this thesis will deviate from current Cold War theatrical and cultural histories by comparatively analysing the work of the artists. While there are important and influential works of Cold War cultural and theatrical history including

²¹ Kathleen Cioffi, *Alternative Theatre in Poland 1954-1989* (New York: Psychology Press, 1996).

²² Goetz-Stankiewicz, *The Silenced Theatre*.

²³ Carol Rocomora, *Acts of Courage: Vaclav Havel's Life in the Theatre* (Hanover: Smith and Kraus, 2005).

²⁴ Juliusz Tyzka, 'Student theatre in Poland: Vehicles of Revolt, 1954-57 and 1968-71' *New Theatre Quarterly*, 26. 2 (2010) 161-172.; Marc Robinson, 'We Won, Therefore We Exist', *The Drama Review* (1986) 73-80.; Tony Howard, "'A Piece of Our Life": The Theatre of the Eighth Day' *New Theatre Quarterly* 9. 35 (1993) 291-305.

Jonathan Bolton's *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, the Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture Under Communism*,²⁵ Dennis Barnett and Arthur Skelton's *Theatre and Performance in Eastern Europe: The Changing Scene*,²⁶ Laura Bradley's *Cooperation and conflict: GDR theatre censorship, 1961-1989*,²⁷ and Claudia Mesch's *Modern Art at the Berlin Wall: Demarcating Culture in the Cold War Germanys*,²⁸ few attempt to make any comparisons between dissident theatrical activities in different countries. These works, amongst many others, provide significant insight into many different aspects of theatre, performance and media cultures and are therefore indispensable in contributing to the context of this study. However, they rarely address larger theoretical and comparative aspects of dissidence.

It is the aim of this thesis to engage with the types of sources discussed here, in order to build an interdisciplinary, contextual base, as well as comparatively analyse the works of these artists by identifying and addressing commonalities in theme, motif, identity and the methods employed to voice opposition. It will move beyond the discussion of individual artists within the three countries to discuss the similarities and intersections of intent and technique,

²⁵ Jonathan Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, the Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture Under Communism* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2012).

²⁶ *Theatre and Performance in Eastern Europe: The Changing Scene*, ed. by Dennis Barnett and Arthur Skelton (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2008).

²⁷ Bradley, *Cooperation and Conflict*.

²⁸ Claudia Mesch, *Modern Art at the Berlin Wall: Demarcating Culture in the Cold War Germany* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009).

comparatively analysing the works while acknowledging and maintaining the heterogeneity of the artists and their countries. Making these comparisons will expand the dialogues surrounding theatre and performance in the Eastern Bloc, and open up new avenues of discourse from which a number of different perspectives can be taken to further explore theatrical works in these countries both during and after the Cold War period.

Selection of Material

The decision to focus on Poland and Czechoslovakia was made for several reasons, the first being geopolitical and socio-economic in nature. The Soviet Satellite States, or 'Eastern Bloc' as the Eastern and Central European countries whose governments were controlled (to varying degrees) by Moscow were designated, as a whole had less in common than is often assumed. Due to the significant movements of the Red Army in the months leading up to and following the end of World War II, countries in Central and Eastern Europe that did not necessarily share language, culture, or history became, occupied and collectivised into a single entity. Viewing these separate countries and cultures from this perspective, however, dismisses the fact that, despite some common roots in language and historical occupations, prior to the twentieth century, these countries had little, if any, contact or cultural exchange. An exception to this, however, was Poland and Czechoslovakia; who had commonalities in their historical experiences and the influences of the Habsburg Empire. Despite repeated

invasions, occupations and absorptions into empires, the cultures of Poland and Czechoslovakia drew far more heavily from the cultural, artistic, and societal traditions, as well as from the technological advancements of Western Europe. They were valued as significant in the development of nineteenth and twentieth century philosophical and artistic movements in Europe. Kundera comments:

With the work of Kafka and Hašek, Prague created the great counterpart in the novel to the work of the Viennese Musil and Broch. The cultural dynamism of the non-German speaking countries was intensified even more after 1918, when Prague offered the world the innovations of structuralism and the Prague Linguistic Circle. And in Poland the great trinity of Witold Gombrowicz, Bruno Schulz, and Stanisław Witkiewicz anticipated the European modernism of the 1950s...²⁹

These countries had strong cultural heritages and roots in Roman Catholicism, built from their inclusion in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which aligned with some of their Western European counterparts. This was in contrast to countries such as Albania, Bulgaria and Romania whose cultures and religions reflected their more Eastern roots in the Ottoman Empire. Additionally, their economies were more industrial and less agricultural than Albania, Bulgaria and Romania, which changed the ways that knowledge and culture were built, maintained and disseminated. Due to these intersections of history and culture, it is possible to examine the dissident theatre and performances in Poland and Czechoslovakia from a framework that shares Western European influences.

²⁹ Milan Kundera, 'The Tragedy of Central Europe' *New York Review of Books* 31.7 (1984), 33-38 (35).

The inclusion of the German Democratic Republic in and the exclusion of Hungary from this thesis were two significant decisions, each with their own specific reasoning. The inclusion of the GDR in this comparative analysis, despite its geographical history as separate from Central Europe, is based in the social and cultural similarities it shares with Poland and Czechoslovakia. Resulting from reforms made by Habsburg Emperor Joseph II (who also had rights in the German states as Holy Roman Emperor) during the eighteenth century, intersections of language and culture between Germany and Central Europe became more pronounced. For example, the philosophies of Hegel and Marx were topics of discussion in the universities of Prague and Warsaw and the music of Dvořák became popular throughout Western Europe.³⁰ Therefore, in order to discuss the GDR as part of the 'Eastern Bloc' it is necessary to discuss it as part of East Central Europe as it shares less in common historically and culturally to the more Eastern countries, but has logical intersections with Polish and Czech culture.

The exclusion of Hungary as a case study from this thesis relied not on wider, irreconcilable cultural differences, as it shares many historical and cultural intersections with Czechoslovakia and Poland, but on the significant differences from these countries during

³⁰ More information on Joseph II's reforms and the intersections of nineteenth century Western and Central European culture see: John Clapham, *Antonín Dvořák, Musician and Craftsman* (London: Newton Abbot).; Lloyd Kramer, *European Thought and Culture in the nineteenth Century* (Chantilly: The Teaching Company, 2002).; Hannu Salmi, *Nineteenth Century Europe: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008).; Derek Beales, *Joseph II: Against the World 1780-1790* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

the Cold War period. Unlike the other Central European countries that had several fluctuations in the levels of control that the government and police forces placed on their people, Hungary, following the 1956 revolution became one of the most liberal countries in the Eastern Bloc. In the wake of the revolution, János Kádár established a significantly more relaxed government that had little involvement with Moscow. In his Hungary, travel was permitted, consumer goods increased, and there was moderate tolerance for private enterprise; conformity was economically rather than forcefully administered. Artists in Hungary were comparatively afforded many freedoms; they could create and produce without having to adjust their work to the harsh censorship policies that prevented Czech and Polish artists from publication and production. Miklós Haraszti deemed it a 'velvet prison'.³¹ Owing to the differences in the experiences of the Hungarian artists, and the limitations of space in this thesis, it became impossible to include them in the comparative analysis with Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the GDR. In the future work that will evolve from this study and can further broaden these discourses, analyses of Hungarian dissident artists will be included.

Additional parameters set when deciding the specific content and focus of this thesis included the decision not to discuss Yugoslavia, as it represents a 'third way' in the structures and developments of communist governments in Cold War Europe. Resulting from the

³¹ Miklós Haraszti, *The Velvet Prison: Artists Under State Socialism* (London: I.B. Taurus, 1988).

disagreements between Josip Broz Tito and Josef Stalin in the late 1940s, which centred around Tito's consolidation of the Balkans and his interpretations of the Marxist-Leninist ideals, Yugoslavia diverged from the Soviet 'model' and in 1948 was officially expelled from the Cominform (Communist Information Bureau), the central symbol of Stalin's control over Eastern Europe.³² As a result of the political, and structural differences, Yugoslavia's cultural development differed from that of East Central Europe and therefore was not chosen for comparison with Poland, Czechoslovakia and the GDR in this thesis.

Once the decision had been made regarding the countries to be analysed it was necessary to identify the specific decades within the forty-five year period of the Cold War that would be addressed in this work. While the selection of the time period was determined primarily by identifying the dissident artists that were best suited to the discussion in this thesis, the historical context, and the shifts in censorship and control were also considered. As such, it was decided that this thesis would begin its examination of dissident theatre and performance in the mid-1960s with the development of the Prague Spring and then carry its discussion through Normalisation, Solidarity, the institution of Martial Law, and the actions that led to the fall of the Iron Curtain. Except where contextually necessary, neither the Stalinist (Cold

³² For more information regarding the Tito-Stalin split see: Hamilton Armstrong, *Tito and Goliath*, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1955).; Phyllis Auty, 'Yugoslavia and the Cominform: Realignment of Foreign Policy,' in Wayne S. Vucinich, ed., *At the Brink of War and Peace: The Tito Stalin Split in a Historic Perspective*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).; *Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union 1939-1973*, ed. by Stephan Clissold (London: Oxford University Press, 1975).; and Barry R. Farrell, *Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union 1948-1956*, (Yale: Shoe String Press, 1956).

War) era (1945-1953) restrictions and tyrannies, nor the Khrushchev era (1955-1964) reforms are specifically addressed, as these were not directly involved in the development of dissident theatre and performance in the latter half of the Cold War. This thesis addresses the work of artists from the Brezhnev era through the Gorbachev one (1964-1989).

Structure of the Thesis

To better facilitate the examinations and analyses that occur within the thesis - such that each of the individual dissident playwrights and performance groups can be discussed within their own contexts prior to being compared - the overall structure places the representative case study within single, country-based chapters. While the use of specific case studies can be seen as limiting to the scope of the discussion, as there are many dissident artists and works that are not afforded discussion in this structure, it was necessary to the exploration of different forms of dissidence and the comparisons of the works to work in this way. These case-study chapters take into consideration the historical and cultural contexts of the artist or group, discussing the ways in which the events and policies in their countries motivated the works they were producing. They examine the influences of various different avant-garde theatrical genres on the artists, as well as comparing them – as dissident artists - to the artists who were permitted to produce legally. Additionally, these case-study chapters establish a

larger theoretical and structural framework, which contributes to the comparative analysis that makes up the last content chapter of this thesis.

Prior to the discussion of the artists within their environments, the first chapter will address the contextual, historical and critical intersections of dissident artists within the selected Central European countries. Through briefly examining the manner in which communist governments were formed and maintained, and the ways in which resistance to these governments developed and was suppressed - i.e. The Polish October, the 1968 Polish student riots, the Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact Invasion - a socio-historical context will evolve. This context will allow for discussion of the differing and varying levels of freedoms given to the people of Poland, Czechoslovakia and the GDR during the latter half of the Cold War, as well as contributing to the examination of how these countries viewed and treated their artists and intellectuals. Additionally, the establishment of this socio-historical context will facilitate an examination of the experience of the artist, especially with regard to the tenets of the socialist-realist style, the presence of and fluctuations in censorship, and the repercussions of publishing or performing work that violated either of those sets of controls. The chapter will also establish a working vocabulary of dissidence by locating it within an East Central European context and by contrasting it against Anglo-American political theatre. In conjunction with the use of other relevant theories of power and control,

these definitions will serve to create a framework from which to develop the comparisons of dissident work in these countries.

Chapter two begins the examinations of specific case studies with a close analysis of a full-length play and a trilogy of one-act plays by Václav Havel. *The Garden Party* offers a satirically critical vision of government bureaucracy and *The Vaněk Plays - Audience, Unveiling, and Protest* - address the challenges faced by an honest man in post-Normalisation Czechoslovakia. The discussion of these plays as well as the references to several of his other works demonstrate the ways in which Havel was influenced by and adapted elements of absurdist thought and theory. It argues that Havel repeatedly made use of this genre in his plays to comment on the presence of the absurd in the daily life of Czechoslovakians, both during the Prague Spring, when moderate freedoms allowed for somewhat open criticism of the mechanisms of society, and after Normalisation when these freedoms had been violently rescinded. The structure of the chapter, which integrates Havel's biography into the discussion of his plays, allows for parallels to be drawn between the influences of family, society and politics on his ways of thinking and his writing. This discussion demonstrates the evolution of his dissenting ideas, the styles and techniques he used to express his opinions, and the punitive measures he faced for defying the dominant ideology in Czechoslovakia. Additionally, discussion of specific elements of his non-theatrical texts

is used to further express the depth of his opposition to the restrictions of rights faced by himself, his fellow artists and the majority of the Czechoslovakian population as a whole.

Chapter three examines the performance group Theatre of the Eighth Day, in Poland. It explores the origins of the theatre company, from their beginnings as part of the student 'alternative' theatrical movement that developed in Polish universities during the 'thaw' of the Polish October, through their training with members of Grotowski's acting company, and into the development of their own aesthetic; one which integrated elements of Poor Theatre with dramatic poetry, and social commentary. It discusses how their shift away from Grotowskian self-focus and ritual into performances that confronted their audiences with stylised representations of their daily lives and questions regarding the martyrdom complex woven into 'Polish' identity, made them dissident in the eyes of the Polish government. The chapter demonstrates how the student protests of 1968 served as an impetus for the ensemble to evolve from their norm of a 'student alternative theatre', and how they continued to dissent from the dominant ideologies and expectations of theatre in Poland throughout the Cold War. This chapter conducts in-depth analyses of two performances. The first, *In One Breath*, initially produced in 1971 - their first production after making the purpose of their work to blend aesthetics with politics - makes comments on the suppression of the 1970 shipyard strike in Gdańsk and the manipulation of the Polish people via the state-controlled media. It demonstrates the ensemble's developing awareness

of the networks of control present in Poland. The second play, *Report from a Besieged City*, initially produced in 1984, depicts the fear and precariousness of Polish society after the institution of martial law. It challenges their audiences with the image of their own complicity while asking them not to lose hope for a possible better future. The chapter shows the development of the ensemble's work through the first twenty years of their existence, and demonstrates the evolution of Theatre of the Eighth Day into a company that continuously defied attempts made by the government to silence them.

Chapter four scrutinises the performance art of the East German group Autoperforationsartisten. Structured slightly differently than those previously as a result of the extensive contextualisation necessary, this chapter examines the 'generations' of artists from the inception of the GDR to its demise. In doing so it establishes the types of work both mainstream and 'alternative' theatre were producing such that a contrast with the development of performance art can be made. A further contrast between the performance art in the GDR and the performance art in the Anglo-American context is also made. Once contextualised, the chapter then explores the Dresden based group of three (sometimes four) who found moderate space to explore alternate types of performance in the stage design program at the Academy of Fine Arts. It examines how, during their short tenure (1986-1990) working as a group, they blended surreal symbolism with a visceral violence in order to confront their audiences with work that aimed to shock, disturb and force a reaction. It

discusses how they, using easily obtained materials such as old meat and blood, insects and vegetables, commented on the pervasive surveillance, and the day-to-day expectations of the East German people. The chapter critically analyses their diploma performance *Herz Horn Haut Schrein* (*Heart, Horn, Skin, Shrine*) and examines the themes, motifs and techniques employed by the group to challenge what they perceived as a sickened, rotting, bankrupt, nearly static society in which the population was imprisoned. It discusses why the creation of such work was an affront to the dominant ideology of the GDR.

This thesis will conclude with an extended discussion of the similarities in dissident performance highlighted in the first chapter and demonstrated throughout the case studies. In this way it will show that a conducting a comparative analysis of dissident artists in East Central Europe during the Cold War offers a viable structure for examining lesser known Eastern Bloc artists both within their own individual cultural contexts and within a larger framework of dissident theatre and performance in the Eastern Bloc.

Contributions to the Field

Through focusing on specific artists in individual cases studies, as well as creating a comparative matrix that can be used to discuss other dissident artists, this thesis will expand existing Cold War cultural and historical scholarship. It will contribute valuable elements

to the discourses on popular and every-day culture in the Eastern Bloc by discussing work that, due to its ephemerality, had an ability to reflect an authenticity of experience that is often unattainable in a more permanent medium, such as film, television or literature. It will broaden the scope of theatrical discourses by including fully dissident and 'alternative' artists into the analyses, allowing for further research to occur into those artists who could not perform or be produced on mainstream stages. It will also help to develop cultural histories of Eastern Bloc countries by drawing intersections between the currently existing scholarship on media, film and print cultures with theatrical discourses on dissidence. Furthermore, it will also work to expand both cultural and dramatic histories of the Cold War by significantly adding to the discussions made by Kathleen Cioffi, Carol Rocamora, Jarkan Burian and Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz of theatre and performance created and performed by contemporary artists in Eastern Bloc countries.

CHAPTER 1

CONTEXT AND HISTORY

Introduction

Returning to Raczak's assertion that within 'monopolised' societies, anything, even a simple gesture, can be interpreted by the authorities as political, a fundamental difference between the culture of the Eastern Bloc and that of democratic societies becomes apparent.¹ Whereas as artists producing political theatre in a democratic society had significant choice and freedom regarding statement, techniques, and aesthetic, Eastern Bloc artists were significantly more limited. Their work was under constant scrutiny by censors, in societies where violations of content, style, and theme could result in serious restrictions and repercussions. As such, the work produced and the experience of the artists in these 'monopolised' societies differs significantly from that of artists in more democratic 'free' societies. Therefore, it is crucial to begin this examination of dissident theatre and performance in this thesis with a discussion of these divergences.

In the Anglo-American context, modern definitions of political theatre most often arise from the role that playwrights, theatre companies and artists played in drawing attention to and making statements regarding feminism, civil rights, disenfranchisement of minorities and the

¹ Cioffi, Ceynowa, & Raczak, 'An Interview with Director Lech Raczak'.

working classes, environmental issues and the anti- Vietnam War movement in the post-World War II decades. The plays and performances produced by theatrical companies such as Red Ladder, San Francisco Mime Troupe, Black Revolutionary Theatre, Bread and Puppet Theatre, Gay Sweatshop Theatre Company and 7:84, the plays of Edward Bond, David Hare, John Arden, Howard Brenton and Howard Barker, as well as the theatre work of Joan Littlewood, critiqued issues of equality, analysed and criticised the changing expectations of the post-war world, and sought the deconstruction of antiquated social structures. These artists produced work from their observations and experiences of consumer driven, capitalist, democratic societies in the mid to late twentieth century. Theoretical discourses surrounding theatre of this type centre around the political possibilities inherent in theatre due to its, 'liveness and sociality, the simple fact that it happens now and that it gathers people [...] around issues of disagreement but also of common concern'² and the potentiality of affecting change through the building of 'communities of interest'.³ Rooted within much of this dialogue are references to Erwin Piscator's valuation of socio-political commentary over the aesthetic, his creation of utilitarian and workers' theatre and his theories of political theatre⁴, and to the purposes, theories, and practices of Brecht's Epic theatre.⁵

² Joe Kelleher, *Theatre and Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 10.

³ Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London: Routledge, 2002) 30.

⁴ Erwin Piscator, *The Political Theatre* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980).

⁵ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

From these dialogues it is possible to identify a broad definition of political theatre in the Anglo-American context in the mid to late twentieth century; one that can account for a great number of the variances in defining characteristics and methods of representation. The first portion of this chapter discusses certain elements of Anglo-American political theatre, in an attempt to show that this is a broad umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of political choices, and highlights a small selection of plays and performances that demonstrate the spectrum of political theatre in this context.

The chapter then explores the effects the application of mechanisms of control, specifically censorship, had on the writing and productions of theatre that desired to critique and challenge the existing social structures of the in the Eastern Bloc. In doing so it aims to develop a framework for a discussion of dissident theatre that can account for differences in history, culture, and experience that will be used in the discussion of theatrical and performance case histories of Poland, Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic. This portion of the chapter provides a brief historical overview of the creation of the Soviet Satellite states in East-Central Europe in the post-war years, highlights some of the Stalinist policies put into place, and briefly discusses the ways interwar avant-garde styles were adopted, adapted, and used by Eastern Bloc artists to challenge the dictates restricting the arts in their countries. This chapter also highlights some of the theoretical and practical differences that existed between Anglo-American political theatre and Eastern Bloc dissident theatre, resulting from the artists experiences in democratic and non-democratic societies.

This chapter concludes with a discussion of some of the similarities present in the works of Havel, *Theatre of the Eighth Day* and *Autoperforationsartisten*.

Anglo-American Political Theatre

Political Theatre in the 20th century Anglo-American context is a broad umbrella term that encompasses theatre written and produced with wide variances in themes, in the intentions of the artists, and the political choices made in the styles and techniques employed in performance. It has been repeatedly suggested by Anglo-American scholars, journalists and artists themselves that all theatre is or can be made to be or interpreted as political. As discussed by theorists such as Joe Kelleher and Baz Kershaw, all theatre, owing to its ability to juxtapose striking or contradictory images, and to providing the audience with the freedom to direct their gaze as they may (unlike other forms of media such as television or film), has a potential political interpretation.⁶

In terms of content, some plays are clearly more determinedly political than others, but it should be equally clear that it is impossible to parade characters interacting socially in front of a public assembled to witness these relationships without there being some political content. Thus even the silliest farce or most innocuous musical will reflect some ideology, usually that of the Establishment. In this sense all theatre is indeed political.⁷

⁶ See: Kelleher, *Theatre and Politics*; Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance*; and Michael Patterson, *Strategies of Political Theatre: Post-War British Playwrights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 2-3.

⁷ Patterson, *Strategies of Political Theatre*, 3.

Despite this view, however, a more specific and focused meaning is ascribed by some to the term. For example, Michael Kirby discusses how the claim that all theatre is political confuses the term 'political' with those of 'social' and 'economic', and that definitions of 'political' stress an active engagement with the state or with politics. He states that political theatre must be intentionally concerned with the actions of the government (although he does concede that intentionality is a difficult thing to quantify), and hold a specific position or view. Further, he states that political theatre subjugates all of its element to this purpose,

Political theatre is intellectual theatre. It deals with political ideas and concepts, usually in an attempt to attack or support a particular political position. It is literary theatre, not because it necessarily involves words and/or a script but because all production elements are subservient to, support, and reinforce the symbolic meanings.⁸

Patterson furthermore defines it as theatre that 'not only depicts social interaction and political events but implies the possibility of radical change on socialist lines: the removal of injustice and autocracy and their replacement by the fairer distribution of wealth and more democratic systems.'⁹

It is with consideration of these discussions that this section will begin its exploration of Anglo-American political theatre. It will consider theatre that questions, critiques or challenges recognisable elements of modern societies; theatre that presents an argument in

⁸ Michael Kirby, 'On Political Theatre' *The Drama Review* 19 (2) (1975) 129-135 (130).

⁹ Patterson, *Strategies of Political Theatre*, 3-4.

favour of or opposition to the actions of governments or individuals, and theatre that speaks to the imagining or creation of a better, more just future. Prior to this exploration, however, it is necessary, to briefly examine the work of Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht. This is so, owing to the impact of their theoretical and practical work on the development of inter-war and post-war political theatre, the elements of these theories that appear – despite the claims of being anti-political - in the works of the Eastern Bloc artists, and the contextual framework that these theories help construct that can be used to further the comparison between theatre in democratic and authoritarian societies.

Piscator and Brecht

It was Piscator's experiences in the First World War and the successes of the 1919 Russian Revolutions that inspired him to create an explicitly political theatre. Feeling that theatre in the twentieth century needed to serve a new purpose, express a different perspective and be accessible to those who were responsible for building and re-building a new Europe, he decided the way to create this new form of theatre that would give a voice to the common man was to politicise it. He formed the Proletarisches Theatre and with it structured and defined the new concept of theatre that he had been working to produce. This was to be a political, revolutionary, proletariat theatre that broke from, what he viewed as, the traditional, capitalist fuelled, bourgeois theatre of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and created a theatre of equal footing, common interest, and a collective will to work. It was to

be a theatre that unified the actors, management, production teams, and audiences.¹⁰ The manifesto of the theatre included many statements about the nature of theatre and its necessary function in society. Statements such as, ‘Subordination of all artistic aims to revolutionary goal: conscious emphasis on and cultivation of the idea of the class struggle’ and ‘The second task facing the Proletarisches Theatre is to make an educative, propagandistic impact on those members of the masses who are as yet politically undecided, or indifferent, or have not yet understood that a proletarian state cannot adopt bourgeois art and the bourgeois mode of “enjoying” art.’¹¹ Piscator saw the adaptation of the contemporary (bourgeois) theatrical and productions, such that it reflected the experience of the common man, as an impossibility and the continued monopolisation of theatre by those who were creating ‘art for art’s sake’ as incompatible with the growing strength of the socialist and communist movements in the interwar period. He strived to make accessible theatre that directly addressed the political and social changes of the world in which he lived

The early developments of Brecht’s Epic Theatre drew from many of the concepts of Piscator’s theories and practices of political theatre. He embraced the idea that theatre could (and likely should) be used to address the political and social realities of the contemporary world. Like Piscator, Brecht strived, in the creation of his theories and practices, to produce theatre that engaged his audiences intellectually as well as emotionally, and criticised theatre

¹⁰ Piscator, *The Political Theatre*, 45-46.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

that allowed the audience to be mentally disengaged from what they were seeing, to ‘hand the cloakroom attendant his brain along with his coat’¹² Further, he agreed with Piscator that naturalism (along with other existing theatrical forms) was an inadequate theatrical form to represent the contemporary world, as it encouraged the audience to receive the productions in a passive manner, offering only the negativity of reality rather than suggesting solutions or possible positive outcomes.¹³ Where Brecht differed from Piscator was in his development of a new dramatic and theatrical style. In addition to using staging techniques similar to those of Piscator, such as the use of modern stage technologies, film, music, and non-linear forms of storytelling, Brecht created a theatrical style that carried distinct, accessible statements regarding social and political structure while simultaneously embracing a unique aesthetic that allowed for a relatable world to be created on stage. He developed theories and practices of acting, and staging that forced actor and spectator alike to remain critically and politically engaged with the work. He also created theatre that would depict society as in constant flux and therefore adaptable. ‘By replacing the “*Vortäuschung der Harmonie*” (Feigned Harmony) of bourgeois aesthetics with the Hegelian clash of thesis and antithesis, he sought to confront his spectators with real alternatives and show that their decisions would shape the future.’¹⁴ Using the techniques he developed out of his collaborations with Piscator, and his

¹² Bertolt Brecht quoted in Laura Bradley, *Brecht and Political Theatre: The Mother on Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 3.

¹³ Bradley, *Brecht and Political Theatre*, 3-4.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 4.

own evolving theatrical theories and practices Brecht created a politically minded theatre that offered both commentary and transcendence.

The impacts made by Piscator and Brecht on the development of British and American political theatre in the twentieth century cannot be underestimated. Their theories and practices revolutionised the ways that theatre was conceptualised, devised and performed. They were integral to developing many of the concepts on which the spectrum for the discussion of political theatre in the post-war era, discussed in the next section of this thesis, can be based.

A Spectrum of Anglo-American Political Theatre

In order to compare Anglo-American political theatre created in the post-war era with Eastern Bloc dissident theatre, as well as considering the umbrella term as including works that have specific political intent and those that have a transcendental or transformative nature, it is useful to include a discussion of the methods and styles employed in the creation of these works, and the intent of the artists for both the work itself and for the audience viewing it. A useful method for viewing various types of political theatre with these considerations it to

use a spectrum of analysis, such as the one Patterson has created in his examination of political plays and performance in post-war Britain.¹⁵

This spectrum sets out two extremes that allow for work to be placed within the categorisations at the extremes or anywhere within the space between. At one end of this spectrum, Patterson places plays that he defines as ‘reflectionist’. Reflectionist works stress that theatre’s purpose is to ‘hold a mirror up to reality and reflect it as accurately as possible.’¹⁶ These works embrace realism, offer a reflection of reality that is recognisable, are set in the present, and tell a complete, linear, sequential tale. In these plays human nature is unalterable, the actions are derived from the characters and characters are limited to everyday behaviours and language. Additionally, the interactions and conflicts are interpersonal and psychological in nature, and change is urged by considering the world as it exists. At the other end of the spectrum is what Patterson terms as ‘interventionist’ dramas. This work asserts the opinion that even if it were possible to accurately reflect reality that this is a futile endeavour as the job of the artist and dramatist is to interpret reality and challenge our perspectives of it.¹⁷ These works are analytical and subjective, embracing modernism. They exist in autonomous worlds, are often set in the past, make use of fragmented, open-ended stories, and engage with a montage or ‘epic’ structure. The characters in plays of this type are changeable, they develop in response to the decisions they

¹⁵ Patterson, *Strategies of Political Theatre*, 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

make and the circumstances they find themselves in. They are not circumscribed beings but rather, contradictory, alterable beings. The conflict is most often external, coming from a social force, and change is urged by conceptualising alternatives to the current state of affairs or events.¹⁸

Some examples of how this spectrum can be applied to post-war Anglo-American political dramas include works such as John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956), Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (1958) and Arnold Wesker's *Roots* (1958) which can be placed on the reflectionist end of the spectrum. These plays, often termed 'kitchen sink realism' emphasised the issues related to the challenges faced by working-class people in the contemporary world, including wealth divide, and gender roles and expectations. These plays used formal and (forward-progressing) act structures, developed rounded characters, used realistic sounding dialogue and were set in recognisable representations of their environments. Using Patterson's spectrum, other plays such as Terrance McNally's *Bringing it All Back Home* (1969), a domestic satire that highlights issues surrounding drug use, gender roles and the meaninglessness of the Vietnam War, and James Baldwin's *Blues for Mr Charlie* (1964) which deals with issues of race, equality and fear, can be included near the reflectionist end of the spectrum.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibid, 24.

¹⁹ This is my classification based on Patterson's framework. These plays are by American playwrights and therefore not discussed by Patterson himself.

Shifting toward the interventionist end of the spectrum the contextualisation of plays becomes more complex. Distanced from the boundaries of realism the plays in this area of the spectrum significantly increase in number, address a broad variety of issues, and can be further refined by the styles and techniques they use to communicate the issues that are central to their development. Some examples of the plays and playwrights that could be viewed as interventionist include Carol Churchill who often employs non-traditional, non-realistic styles of performance, and embraces non-linear and historical elements in her work²⁰, Howard Barker, whose satire is often interpreted to make biting political commentary²¹, and Howard Brenton, whose *Romans in Britain* (1980) addresses British imperialism by juxtaposing the Roman invasion of Celtic Britain with the conflict between Britain and Northern Ireland in the twentieth century.²² Some of the later works of Edward Bond (those written in the 1970s and 80s) including *The Bundle*, *The Woman*, *Restoration* and *Summer* can be placed here as well. Making use of imaginary representations of moments and locations in history (i.e. medieval Japan. Athens after the Trojan War and Restoration England), he addresses issues regarding the illusions of power, the wealth divide and working class support for Thatcher's Conservative Britain. Other works that can be considered here include some of the early works by Judith Malina and Julian Beck at the Living Theatre, such as their 1964 production of Kenneth Brown's *The Brig*, which addressed the dehumanisations

²⁰ Ibid, 154-56.

²¹ Charles Lamb, *The Theatre of Howard Barker*, (London: Routledge, 2005).

²² Meenakshi Ponnuswami, 'Celts and Celticists in Howard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain*' *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, (1998) 69-88.

of military justice and many of the works of Maria Irene Fornes who often addresses issues of gender and poverty in her work.

In addition to plays such as those by Churchill, Bond, Barker, Brenton, and other political playwrights such as John Arden, and David Hare, who attempt to engage their audience in critical thought, and political readings of their works, and whose works are most often scripted, structured, and are generally performed in recognised theatrical spaces, there are those artists who share elements with that of interventionist end of the spectrum but whose work takes a different approach. Amongst these artists are those who engage in ‘radical’, agitprop and street theatre. This type of theatre created by groups such as 7:84, Red Ladder, North West Spanner, Belts and Braces, San Francisco Mime Troupe, Black Liberation Theatre, Bread and Puppet Theatre, and El Campesino strives to make itself widely known and hard to ignore. Performance by these groups are direct and specific in their identification of the issues they are addressing, and are often intend to deliver a perspective rather than inspire a political reading. As Richard Walsh commented, ‘In these groups aesthetics followed from politics, rather than vice versa: but their political stance also evoked through this reciprocity between ideological and strictly theatrical considerations.’²³ These works are intended to engage with the audience in confrontational ways, appealing to their sense of outrage instead of their intellect. They are often staged outside of common theatrical

²³ Richard Walsh, ‘Radical Theatre in the Sixties and Seventies’ *British Association for American Studies* (2012) <<http://www.baas.ac.uk/richard-walsh-radical-theatre-in-the-sixties-and-seventies/>> [accessed 22 October, 2012].

environments such as in the streets, in parks, or as part of larger protest actions. They also engage in community activities in order to draw the widest and most diverse audiences to the performances. Some performance art can also embrace this direct, political method of communication.

Commonalities in Anglo-American Political Theatre

As mentioned at the beginning of the section, Anglo-American political theatre is a broad term that can be used to discuss a wide spectrum of theatre and performance that has been written and performed in the last seventy years. Even narrowed to work that makes recognisable political statements or challenges specific inequalities or injustices in the period between the end of the Second World War and the end of the Cold War, its scope includes work which varies widely in themes, styles and techniques employed, and artistic intentions. Despite this, however, there are commonalities that can be identified and discussed.²⁴

One of the most prominent (for the purposes of this comparative framework) commonalities is the idea that much of this work was conceived with a view toward the future, to addressing,

²⁴ It is important to note that the discourses surrounding the political theatre of the 1960s and 1970s written following the Cold War (especially those written since 2000) are often quite critical of the motivations and efficacy of these theatre groups. Especially with regard to groups and performances described as ‘agitprop’ there has been much discussion if this method of theatre ever truly achieved what it set out to do.

questioning and challenging the contemporary (to the plays and performances) environment with the intention of creating ‘better world’. Through their work many playwrights and performers of political theatre strived to point towards the possibility of a world that transformed or transcended the oppressions of the modern world and identify a future that was more egalitarian, and safer; one where the divides of wealth, gender, class and race had been eliminated. Aidan Ricketts discusses, ‘In its broadest sense, political theatre is the act of conveying this imagined better world to the everyday onlooker.’²⁵ Daniel Yates comments, ‘It presents a vision of cultures we might wish to inhabit, to project life into a richer world.’²⁶ These shared assertions of Ricketts and Yates align with Kershaw’s views on the transgressive nature of ‘radical performance’,

the freedom that “radical performance” invokes in not just a freedom from oppression, repression, exploitation [...] but also freedom to reach beyond existing systems of formalised power, freedom to create currently unimaginable forms of association and action [...]²⁷

They concur that within political theatre, one of the key goals is to present a re-imagined future where the discussion and (hopeful) resolution of the issue at hand has contributed to broader understanding, freer expression, and a more just and harmonious world. This

²⁵ Aidan Ricketts, ‘Theatre of Protest: The Magnifying Effects of Theatre in Direct Action’ *Journal of Australian Studies*, 30 (2006) 75-87 (75).

²⁶ Daniel Yates, ‘Theatre of Protest’ (8 October, 2012) <http://www.culturewars.org.uk/index.php/site/article/the_theatre_of_protest/> [accessed 10 December, 2012].

²⁷ Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* (London: Routledge, 1999) 18.

concept of re-imagining the world in a more positive light, especially when used in conjunction with the exposure of abuses of power or rights, allows for the audience to both become aware of certain issues in their communities and the world at large as well as providing them with the hope that change is possible. As Rebecca Hillman comments, ‘Some practitioners reflect that their work was driven to make changes to the world around them. North West Spanner, for example, describe how “the main thing was that we held our belief that the play could change audience’ lives”’.²⁸

A second, significant commonality between the different plays and performances that can be considered Anglo-American political theatre is that with limited exceptions, those writing and producing within this context had the freedom to do so. Within Western democratic societies such as Britain and the United States, the freedoms of expression granted to the population allowed artists to comment on and critique their environments, to criticise the state, the government and the authorities, and to openly question inequalities in their societies.²⁹ These artists could mostly produce their works without fear of recrimination,

²⁸ Rebecca Hillman, ‘(Re)constructing Political Theatre: Discursive and Practical Frameworks for Theatre as an Agent for Change’ (University of Exeter, 2015) <<https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/bitstream/handle/10871/20201/DiscursiveandPracticalFrameworkforTheatreasanAgentforChange.pdf>> [accessed 12 July 2016]

²⁹ Discussion of censorship on the British stage in itself is, of course, quite a complex issue. Artists had, on a rare occasion, incurred legal troubles for what they had written and staged; more commonly the censors rejected plays with objectionable material before they could ever be seen. However, by the time period that I am discussing, from 1964-1989, while there were some plays that were censored for having obscene, libelous or blasphemous material – though even these plays were rarely banned outright - the artists were not marginalised, criminalised, or risked endangering themselves or their family by making challenging statements. For more information on British stage censorship see: Dawn Sova, *Banned Plays: Censorship Histories of 125 Stage Dramas* (New York: facts on File Inc.,

marginalisation, or criminalisation. They could employ a wide variety of styles and techniques, had the ability to produce in theatres or in a number of other public and private spaces, and could choose to directly (didactically or confrontationally) or indirectly communicate with their audiences. Statements and messages could be made openly, and reliance on subtext, allusion or coded language was an aesthetic choice made by playwright or performer. Even with censorship laws in place in Britain until 1968, artists rarely incurred significant penalties and were almost never prosecuted for making statements that challenged the state or the government in their work.

A further commonality that can be identified within Anglo-American political theatre is the necessity of establishing a relationship between the actor and the audience. Tracing back to Piscator and Brecht's theories and practices that strived for intellectually and emotionally involved audiences, Anglo-American theatre practitioners have continued to attempt to engage with their audiences through a variety of means and methods, such that the themes, and ideas are more successfully communicated. Through their work they have attempted to build communities, inspire thought and discussion, and, in some occasions attempt to inspire actions.³⁰

2004).; and Steve Nicholson, *The Censorship of British Drama 1900-1968*, vol. 2 (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2005).

³⁰ Discussions of audiences and the relationships between actor and audience (especially in political and community-oriented theatre) are broad and complex. Therefore, it would be impossible to fully explore this topic in this thesis. For more on many of the ideas surrounding audiences see: David Bradby and John McCormick, *People's Theatre* (London: Croom Helm Publishers, 1978).; Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (New York:

Between Eastern Bloc and Anglo-American Theatre

Having established a contextual framework and identifying some of the methods used to discuss political theatre in the Anglo-American context during the Cold War era, it is possible to locate intersections in the work that was being produced by artists in Western democratic societies and that which was being produced in the Eastern Bloc. For example, both of these theatres analyse their own environments, criticising governmental policies and social conditions that oppress or subjugate their populations. The intent behind many of these productions is to raise awareness, inspire dialogues amongst their audiences, and highlight the inadequacies or inequalities in the status quo. They share an agreement as to the importance of the actor/audience relationship, as well as the relationships between the members of the audience³¹.

Despite these similarities, the artists' personal and public environments, the experience of writing and producing work under censorship and the marginalisation they faced in the Eastern Bloc differed significantly from their contemporaries in Western democratic nations. These differences affected the development of their theatrical styles, the performance techniques employed, the expectation or desire for the audience members, and the over-all intention for the work. In short, it is essential to examine the impact that censorship - here

Routledge, 1992).; Kelleher, *Political Theatre*; Helen Freshwater, *Theatre and Audience* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).; and Patterson, *Strategies of Political Theatre*.

³¹ Discussion of audiences in relation to Eastern Bloc theatre will occur at the end of chapter 1.

defined broadly to encompass not only the direct censoring of text and performance but all of the regulations covering style, themes, techniques, and locations as regulated by cultural ministries in these countries – had on the creation of political theatre in East Central Europe.

Taking into consideration that these regulations made every violation an act of dissent, and that Havel and many other artists often described their works as ‘anti-political’³², it is therefore necessary to discuss the theatre and performance created that challenged the status quo in these countries as dissident in order to respect the lexicon of the artists working in these conditions. In beginning this discussion it is also important to note that while dissident theatre is not exclusive to the Eastern Bloc, it has and does exist in the Anglo-American context (as well as in both other ‘free’ and other ‘monopolised’ societies throughout history), it is vital to understand that dissidence in a democratic society is a choice, whereas it is often the only method available to voice criticism or challenge the status quo in an authoritarian environment.

³² The specifics of this term and what is meant by it within the context of the eastern bloc will be further discussed in the next section of this thesis.

Dissident Theatre

In order to develop the concept of the theatre of dissent in the Eastern Bloc countries, it is necessary to first understand the differences in the ruling government bodies, the restrictions of censorship law, and the impact this had on the theatrical artists, playwrights, directors and actors as they worked under state socialism. The ways in which the artists viewed and defined their own works within a censored environment and their intents for their audiences; intents that in the context of the daily lived experience of life under Soviet-style communism should also be taken into account. It is this unique set of challenges that in many ways make the face of dissident theatre distinct from political theatre within free societies, and indicates why a separate framework is required for discussions of political theatre under censorship.

Historical Context

When Winston Churchill stated in his famous 1946 speech ‘From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent.’³³ he not only expressed how, despite its proactive role in ending the Second World War, the Soviet Union was now an opposing ideological force, but he (possibly unknowingly) referred to the new status of Eastern European countries with an old theatrical term.³⁴ The iron curtain, present

³³ Winston Churchill, ‘Sinews of Peace’, *National Churchill Museum* (5 March 1946) available online at <<https://www.nationalchurchillmuseum.org/sinews-of-peace-iron-curtain-speech.html>> [accessed 8 January 2013].

³⁴ Patrick Wright, *Iron Curtain: From Stage to Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

in most proscenium theatres would, in the event of a fire, fall to the stage creating a nearly impenetrable barrier between audience and stage. When the metaphorical ‘iron curtain’ crashed down across Europe it effectively cut off and isolated the societies of Central and Eastern Europe.

This isolation began as the Red Army pushed their way into Central and Eastern Europe in the last months of the Second World War, serving to liberate but not to free these countries from foreign rule. As the German army was defeated and countries freed from Nazi control, the Stalinist state began to spread, setting up Soviet-style governments either through ideology-fuelled coercion or by force. Political machinations and vague alliances elevated communist parties (who had been relatively small prior to the post-war era) into place in Poland and Czechoslovakia, and the GDR was created as a Soviet-style communist state with the slow withdrawal of Red Army forces.³⁵ The manner in which the Eastern Bloc was formed from the individual countries of East and East Central Europe and the infrastructures put in place during these post-war years were vital to Stalin’s goal to create a unified super-power to rival that of the United States; to compete culturally as well as economically and politically.

³⁵ More information on the creation of the Eastern Bloc nations, the political elections and coups, and the methods used to gain and maintain power can be found in: Geoffrey Swain and Nigel Swain, *Eastern Europe Since 1945* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).; Anne Applebaum, *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013).; George Schopflin, *Politics in Eastern Europe 1945-1992* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993).; and Mark Pittaway, *Eastern Europe 1939-2000* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004).

The countries were subject to the policies made and handed down from Moscow, industry and agriculture was collectivised, and the media and arts were strictly regulated. Understanding that even the strongest of countries or group of countries could be undermined by dissidence rooted in free speech and anti-government ideas, Stalin (and others) instituted a series of draconian policies that severely limited what could be spoken publicly, printed, or performed. These were policies of intense censorship and sanctioning, with purges of artists and intellectuals who threatened the ideals of the Stalinist state. These restrictions and purges took place throughout the Eastern Bloc as communist parties came into controlling power of the governments of Central and Eastern Europe, and the mid-1940s to 1950s, were characterised by show trials, imprisonment, transportation; many of the accused were exiled or executed as well.³⁶ There was a continuous fear of being accused of being disloyal to the communist party and Stalinist state.³⁷ These years are often considered by historians to be some of the darkest for both Russian and Eastern European artists and theatre practitioners.³⁸

In addition to the Stalinist tactics of show trials and purges, employed during the first decade of the Cold War, artists in the Eastern Bloc were also subject to the requirements and

³⁶ These show trials, in many ways, mimicked the famous Stalinist show trials in Moscow during the 1930s.

³⁷ Isaiah Berlin, 'The Arts in Russia Under Stalin' *New York Review of Books* 47.16 (2000) 54-62.; Richard Crampton, *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth-Century and Afterwards* (New York: Routledge, 2002).; Hans Renner and Evelien Hurst-Buist, *A History of Czechoslovakia Since 1945* (London: Routledge, 1989).; George Schopflin, *Politics in Eastern Europe 1945-1990.*; Swain and Swain, *Eastern Europe Since 1945.*

³⁸ Berlin, 'The Arts in Russia Under Stalin'.; Braun, *The History of Polish Theatre 1939-1989.*; Rocamora, *Acts of Courage.*

restrictions of the socialist realist artistic style. Meant to show the benefit of and fully support party politics, it served to demonstrate the happiness and benefits of living in a socialist society as a contrast to the wickedness, greed and unhappiness that were inevitable under capitalism. The style was governed by four main elements that when combined depicted positive, socialist revisions of history as well as visions of the future. The first of these elements *narodnost* (national principle), required that writing, painting or composition in question must be immediately recognisable and intelligible to the people of the nation. This meant that modernism, the abstract, and anything that did not depict the ordinary experiences of the people was forbidden. *Ideinost* (ideology), the second dictate, mandated that all art forms reflected the dominant ideology by reflecting the progressive developments of social societies and a socialist view of history. *Partiinost* (party membership) required that the work supported the Communist Party and *tipichnost* (typicality) meant the depiction of a typical yet promising future. A future in which each man or woman was the ideal socialist worker; this was usually achieved through the positive hero or heroine being opposed by the negative forces of Western, capitalist evils only to eventually triumph by nature of his or her socialist virtues.³⁹

The socialist realist style forbade the expression of any dissatisfaction with the government or government ordinances; comments on the absurdities, fear, disregard for human rights,

³⁹ Nick Worrall, 'Socialist Realism' in *Oxford Encyclopaedia of Theatre and Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

and the suppressions of thought and action present under communist rule were strictly prohibited. Stalinist policies on art left no space in which to express any dissenting ideas or criticisms on life in communist countries. The socialist realist style was the only acceptable way in which to produce. This policy aimed to eliminate the ability of artists under Stalinist governments to create art for its own sake, or in any style other than socialist realism. Any attempts to create work in any other style were considered to be subversive acts, working to undermine or destabilise the strength of the dominant ideologies and ruling communist party, and were therefore acts of dissent. Those artists who chose to produce dissident work were forbidden from showing it, – denied access to performance spaces – prevented from publishing the work, and were often penalised for it. The production of art considered dissident also often led to expulsion from artists' unions and the Communist Party resulting in the criminalisation of the artist, and intense scrutiny of his or her family, friends and associates.

Following the death of Stalin in 1953, the Soviet state opened to some forms of reform, more was allowed in the arts as a whole, and an emphasis was placed on demonstrating the dominance of the Soviet Union to the Western world by displaying its arts and culture on a global scale. Under Stalin, Russia and the entirety of the Soviet Union had been tightly closed to the West. However, when Khrushchev came to power in 1955 he was determined to dispel some of the negative attitude and morale that had infiltrated and obliterated Russia and the Eastern Bloc since the end of the Second World War. In condemning Stalin's 'cult

of personality' and engaging in a de-Stalinisation process, Khrushchev strove to prove to the world that the Soviet Union valued the freedoms of its people, and was as rich culturally as it was powerful politically. One manner in which this was shown was through the establishment of cultural exchanges in which artists and performers (musicians and dancers as well as theatrical performers) travelled to Western Europe and the United States in order to demonstrate their talent, skill and training. These exchanges focused mainly on Russian artists as the Western powers, specifically the United States, had the aim of transforming the Soviet Union from the inside⁴⁰, however it did offer some opportunities for artists and performers from the Eastern Bloc countries to travel to and perform in the West. The governments of the Eastern Bloc countries quickly agreed to these exchanges as they tried to demonstrate both their esteem and respect for the arts and a vision of their culture and heritage.⁴¹

Occurring simultaneously with the exchanges, Khrushchev's *On the Personality Cult and its Consequences* speech⁴², and the continued processes of de-Stalinisation, was the rise of economic and political turmoil in Poland. Discontent with the mandate that the Soviet

⁴⁰ One of the goals (as claimed by the US State Department) of the cultural exchanges was to sow dissent within Soviet society by demonstrating the dominance and opulence of the West to the Soviet students and artists who were part of the initial exchanges. Encouragement to defect was also made to select prominent Soviet visitors. See: Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War*.

⁴¹ For more specific discussion on the details of the cultural exchanges in the 1950s see: Caute, *The Dancer Defects.*; and Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War*.

⁴² Full text of Khrushchev's speech can be found at <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/khrushchev/1956/02/24.htm>>.

political model must be followed in every detail, alongside severe shortages of food and consumer goods, a decline in real income, reduced trade with the Soviet Union, and poor management of the economy, reached a critical point in 1956 when workers rioted in protest. As a result of these riots and other destabilising factors, Władysław Gomułka was made First Secretary of the Party, reforms were negotiated with Moscow and moderate liberalisations and selective autonomies were afforded to the Polish people.

Subsequently, gaps emerged in the cultural policies of the Eastern Bloc countries - although they varied in the amount of freedoms granted to artists, and the year the lessening of control occurred. Poland experienced a significant broadening of what was allowable on stage and in print during what became known as the Polish 'Thaw' period (1956-1963). The early 1960s saw Heiner Müller, Volker Braun, and Christoph Hein bring plays to the stage in the GDR that criticised what they saw as the negative results of mismanaged socialism. However, the restrictions in Czechoslovakian policies did not shift until later in the decade. With these 'thaws' in the policies of the Cold War, the absolute mandate of the socialist realist style lessened (though never disappeared entirely) which allowed for the development of an 'alternative' theatre at the youth and student level in Poland, the revival and development of avant-garde styles on Czech stages, and the presence of widened theatrical aesthetics in the GDR.

Despite the initial reforms of the Khrushchev era and the continued participation of the Soviet Union in cultural exchanges, the conditions under which artists and performers worked in Russia and the Eastern Bloc became constricted. After Brezhnev took control of the Soviet Union in 1964 many of the rights and freedoms that had been given during 'the thaw' of the arts in Russia and the Eastern Bloc were rescinded. The years 1965-1968 saw an increasing pressure by communist governments to control their populaces in many countries, an escalation in censorship and systems of control, and the suppression of protests and movements through police and military involvement. Protests that began after the forced closing of *Forefather's Eve*, a nationalist Polish play, and continued throughout 1968 were interrupted by police; those involved were beaten, imprisoned, expelled from university positions (student and faculty) and forced to serve terms in the military forces. The suppressions throughout these countries culminated in the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia. This action, which involved several days of Soviet military presence in Prague and other cities in August of 1968, ended a period of significant liberalisations known as the Prague Spring. The result of this action reverberated throughout the Eastern Bloc countries, as it demonstrated that revisionist politics, reforms and autonomously functioning governments would not be tolerated. As Václav Havel commented:

August 1968 was not the usual exchange of a slightly more liberal regime for a slightly more conservative regime, it was something more. It was the end of an era, a disintegration of a particular spiritual and social climate, a profound mental break.

The whole existing world had collapsed, the world in which we knew so well how to behave [...] Ominously, a new world appeared, ruthless, gloomy, Asiatic and hard.⁴³

Eastern Bloc communist governments contracted, hard-line First Secretaries of the Party were installed, and the people experienced significant losses of social and cultural freedoms. As the ‘frosts’ descended many artists became direct targets of government control once more and were forced to find alternate ways to express their disapproval of and protest against the system.⁴⁴

In view of the movements of the Red Army in the months leading up to the end of World War II and the establishment of the Soviet satellite states (Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic, Hungary, Poland, Yugoslavia, and Romania) it is apparent that Stalin's intention for the expansion of the Soviet Union across Eastern and Central Europe was to establish an empire with a central governing body and transparency in all related systems. Metaphorically then, his intention was to create a panoptic society with Moscow placed as the central tower and the Eastern Bloc as the surrounding areas. He meant

⁴³ Havel quoted in Jan Culík, ‘There was No Censorship in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and 1980s’. A lecture, presented at University College, London, on 25th April, 2008 (Unpublished). Available online at <<http://blisty.cz/video/Slavonic/Censorship.htm>> accessed [20 July 2012].

⁴⁴ Further discussions of the thaw period, the impact it had on the arts in each of the countries, and the rescinding of freedoms following these periods are discussed in detail in the case study chapters. For additional source material on these events see: Barbara Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2003).; Braun, *A History of Polish Theater, 1939-1989*.; Swain and Swain, *Eastern Europe Since 1945*.; Kevin McDermott, and Matthew Stibbe, *Revolution and Resistance in Eastern Europe: Challenges to Communist Rule* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2006).

for his authority to reach into all political, social and cultural systems, exemplifying Foucault's description of an omnipresent and invasive system of governing and control, that a Panopticon is '...polyvalent in its applications; it serves to reform prisoners, but also to treat patients, to instruct schoolchildren, to confine the insane, to supervise workers, to put beggars and idlers to work.'⁴⁵ Within this panoptic society all art forms that would be created, shown, printed or performed legally, were monitored, censored – both from above and through self-censoring – and used to bolster Stalinist ideologies. Plays and productions that did not support this set of ideals would be banned and those producing them would be criminalised.

It was only Stalin's death in 1953 and Khrushchev's subsequent efforts to reverse some of most damaging Stalinist policies that interrupted this attempt to place absolute Soviet leadership at the centre of all governance in Central and Eastern Europe. Following Stalin's death, no Soviet leader was able to re-establish the level of control the central Moscow governance had held in the first decade of the Cold War, and Stalin's goal of establishing a panoptic society did not come to fruition. Despite this, however, the idea of the panoptic system did not leave the countries of the Eastern Bloc. In the years following the Warsaw Pact Invasion, the governments of Poland, Czechoslovakia and the GDR (at varying times) established their own individual panoptic systems, mirroring elements of Foucault's theory

⁴⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Random House, 1977) 205.

in their policies and practices, and, in conjunction with the systems of censorship, surveillance, and punitive actions, controlled their populaces until 1989. These individual panoptic systems will be examined in the following three chapters as the environmental context in which the chosen artists will be discussed.

The creation and development of the 'Eastern Bloc', the imposition of and then remnants of the Socialist Realist style, and the fluctuations in the levels of authoritarian control significantly impacted the social, cultural and political policies in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the GDR. Artists in these countries (as well as other Soviet states) could not openly express themselves, or directly challenge the political, social, and cultural policies without the distinct possibility of being marginalised or criminalised. Owing to enforcement of these restrictions, any work written or produced that questioned or critiqued the environment of control was dissident. Therefore, for the artists discussed in this thesis, those who chose to comment on the experience of 'real' communism, the only viable form of theatre was dissident theatre.

Avant-garde Influences

In addition to considering the ways in which the changing political landscape of the Eastern Bloc impacted the work of artists it is also necessary to highlight some of influential pre-war and interwar artistic and theatrical movements that contributed to the development of their

unique styles and techniques. Avant-garde styles made no attempt to reflect the world realistically, and thus facilitated the ability to comment on and criticise contemporary issues without definitively stating them. Through the use of abstraction and obfuscation - obscuring the political, social and cultural critique by burying it in mythology, allegory and symbolism - it could reflect the troublesome realities of the modern era and reflect disappointments, frustrations and dissociations from the modern world. Avant-garde art disrupted the customs of production, distribution, and reception of cultural artefacts. It advocated rupture and destruction of the status quo, and criticised the function of art, means of expression, and the role of the artist in bourgeois societies. Therefore, exploration of the 'historical' avant-garde is fundamental to the discussion of the development of the dissident artists' plays and performances as they embraced the styles and forms in order to veil their critiques of the policies and restrictions in place in their countries. They used these styles to obscure their meanings and their challenges, making it more difficult for censors to specifically identify nationalist, anti-government, or pro-freedom elements in these works.

These movements deviated from the traditional European theatrical forms and significantly altered theatrical style. Beginning just prior to the start of the twentieth century artistic, literary and theatrical movements that rejected the representation of the 'real' world on stage began to emerge, with Berlin, Paris and Moscow quickly becoming epicentres of these developments. Throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, due to increased ease of travel and expanded artistic networks of communication, many of these newly developed

forms were shown and discussed in theatres throughout Europe and Russia, and artists from across the continent were influenced by what they were seeing.

The artists discounted aesthetic forms that could only offer escapism from the ugliness and deformities of reality and destroyed the illusion of organic perfection, inner harmony and beauty.⁴⁶ The avant-garde was tasked with, as Marinetti related in some of his early essays, purging the body politic of toxins and leaving a pure and healthy culture in its wake.⁴⁷ As Berghaus comments:

Whether functioning like a bomb or a cleanser, avant-garde was in the first instance conceived as an oppositional force, whose critical, subversive role could take three forms:

- (a) Analysis—the artist holds a critical mirror to society;
- (b) Engagement—the artist promotes active intervention and change;
- (c) Forward vision—the artist projects an image of an emancipated society.⁴⁸

The artists of the historical avant-garde saw these new styles as acts of revolution that by shocking their audiences out of the known, they could encourage them to examine their

⁴⁶ Günter Berghaus, *Theatre, Performance, and the Historical Avant-garde* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

⁴⁷ Günter Berghaus, *Italian Futurist Theatre 1909-1944* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 53.

⁴⁸ Berghaus, *Theatre, Performance, and the Historical Avant-garde*, 38.

existences, question their roles within their worlds and develop a new perspective which could, ultimately, shift modern progression.

This system of analysis and, to some extent, engagement became one adopted by the dissident artists of the Eastern Bloc. These dissidents drew from, and built on, the techniques of obscuring criticism through abstraction. The manipulation of style and language providing the artists with tools and mechanisms to comment on their experiences and critique their environments without making the kind of direct or demonstrative statement that could result in marginalisation or criminalisation. Using styles of the historical avant-garde they challenged the views of and restrictions on art in the Eastern Bloc and created work that they felt expressed the realities of their contemporary situations. Amongst the European 'historical' avant-garde styles that are most commonly identifiable in the work of the Eastern Bloc dissident artists are Expressionism, Dada, Surrealism, and Theatre of Cruelty.

German Expressionism developed in the decade leading up to the First World War, although expressionist drama evolved primarily during and after the war. The style, like that of Surrealism and Dada, rejected both the Naturalist focus on visual reality and social issues, and the Symbolist aesthetic reverence and dream of 'otherworldly paradises'.⁴⁹ Expressionism favoured subjectivity over objectivity, abstraction and distortion of both text

⁴⁹ Marvin Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey, from the Greeks to the Present* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1993), 346.

and action, and lyricism of movement. It rejected the Futurist fascination with speed, machines and industrial society, instead viewing these modernisations as a force that robbed people of their humanity. In the wake of the First World War, Expressionism provided German artists with a method for addressing and communicating the anxieties of a country emerging from revolution, war and a destroyed monarchy. Expressionist drama desired to break free from the bourgeois tenets of convention, and rediscover the essence of humanity. ‘They believed that salvation of mankind was only possible when the incrustations of bourgeois society could be cracked open and the human soul set free.’⁵⁰

In order to achieve this salvation they abandoned the formalised rules of production and performance present in traditional declamatory styles and realist styles. Actors were meant to use their whole body - voice, movement, and gesture - to examine their own souls and wage war with their darkest fears and dreams. The technique was highly physical, at times to the point of exhaustion, the body and face meant to express the deepest anguishes of the human experience.

Every part of his physique had to reflect and project an inner emotional state. The result was a jerky and convulsive style of acting, with jolting movements, quivering gestures, and sudden thrusts of the head. Rage or despair was expressed through grotesque poses, bulging eyes and bared teeth [...] ⁵¹

⁵⁰ Berghaus, *Theatre, Performance, and the Historical Avant-garde*, 59.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 63.

These works depicted man in a state of confusion, one lost in the nightmarish reality of his life, desperate to free himself by communicating an inner truth. Stage sets supported the emotion created by the actors. They were subjective and atmospheric, abandoning recognisable physical realities. Shapes were distorted and deformed, such that they were evocative and reflected the inner state of man, rather than the outer state of the modern world.

Expressionism became one of the central avant-garde theatrical styles being developed in Berlin during the pre-war and interwar period. Produced by artists such as Georg Kaiser, and Ernst Toller, it later influenced the work of Piscator and Brecht. Elements of the expressionist style can also be seen in the plays of Czech playwrights Karel and Joseph Čapek, and in the writings of Franz Kafka, who will be discussed in relation to Havel in the next chapter. Furthermore many expressionistic tendencies can be seen in the early works of Jerzy Grotowski.⁵² Through the influence of the artists within their own country, and the reading and viewing of banned and smuggled films and literature, many of the dissident Eastern Bloc artists adopted and adapted movement styles drawn from expressionism. They embraced deeply emotive, symbolic actions that communicated their reactions to being marginalised, criminalised, harassed, and imprisoned within their own countries. They expressed their anger, frustrations, and confusion at living within a country whose governments were (to varying degrees) puppets to Moscow. They rejected the remnants of socialist realist style

⁵² David Kuhns, *German Expressionist Theatre: The Actor and the Stage* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997) 247-248.

and highlighted a subjective view of humanity, in which neither the actors nor the audience members could distance themselves from their role in their own subjugations.⁵³

A second historical avant-garde movement that influenced the development of techniques used within dissident Eastern Bloc theatre was Dada. Dada emerged as an artistic style during the 1920s. Drawing theoretical influence from the Italian Futurists, Dadaists believed that avant-garde art and theatre could act a caustic purgative that could rid the world of the 'illness' and the 'constipation' of mind and body that was common to the modern world. Stylistically, the Dadaists drew influence from the Futurists in the form of 'bruitism' or 'noise music'.

Despite being influenced by the Futurists in these ways the Dadaist differed significantly in their views on mechanism, technology and the modern world. The (Italian) Futurists viewed the mechanical developments of the modern world with a favourable eye, espousing the positivity of steam, speed, and the modern machine. By contrast the Dadaists, who came into existence in the ending years of the First World War, viewed the world as destruction and chaos as a result of the same technologies that the Futurists praised.

An epoch is collapsing. A culture that has lasted for a thousand years is collapsing. There are no longer pillars and buttresses and no foundations that have not been blasted to smithereens... The principles of logic, centrality, unity, and rationality have

⁵³ Ibid, 58-65.

been recognized as postulations of a domineering theology...Chaos unfolded. Turmoil unfolded. The world revealed itself as a blind flux of colliding and entangled forces.⁵⁴

As a result of their experiences of the war and their opinions on modern, bourgeois society Dada strove to rebel against the ‘mechanical paralysis’⁵⁵ of the modern world and protest against the physical, emotional and ideological losses of the war. They wanted to express their scepticism, cynicism and uncertainty of the world that emerged in the wake of the war.

Dadaism was an expression of confusion, of lost values in a time of decay, but it was also more than that. Dadaism became a symbol of nihilism for all those spirited humans who had recognized the chaotic situation...underneath the surface of convention...It signified the aggressiveness, rage, grief and mental condition of a small circle of human beings who did not want to identify with the general collapse of Europe.⁵⁶

Dadaism responded to these losses with an absolute rejection of all structure and form of art and drama. Tristan Tzara discussed when questioned about the destruction and iconoclastic nature of Dada, how the Dadaists devalued and rejected all previous forms, as they desired to make a clean break from all previously established configurations of art, drama and literature. They wanted to leave rationality, logic and intelligibility behind; to see with new eyes and create completely new experiences.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Hugo Ball quoted in Berghaus, *Theatre, Performance, and the Historical Avant-garde*, 137.

⁵⁵ Richard Huelsenbeck quoted in Berghaus, *Theatre, Performance, and the Historical Avant-garde*, 137.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 138.

⁵⁷ Berghaus, *Theatre, Performance, and the Historical Avant-garde*, 166-168.

This rejection of structure was embraced throughout portions of Central and Eastern Europe – primarily in literature - in a variety of forms including Czech Poeticism, Serbian Surrealism, Latvian Activism, and Croatian Zenitism.⁵⁸ Endre Bojtár comments, ‘In Central and Eastern Europe, as in Western Europe, the great value of Dadaism was that it utterly destroyed the image art had had of itself, the world and man. [...]’ Writers and artists used the Dadaist style to bring or return semblances of freedom and optimism to their works, using its mockery of the structures and values of the modern world. ‘It brought the liberation of life and art from all rigidity, it authorized the gaiety and merriment of “it’s all the same,” the jest, the masquerade, the self-irony, the grotesque vision.’⁵⁹

During the Cold War Eastern Bloc dissident performances drew influence from Dadaist performance by rejecting the modern mechanisation that had resulted in the creation of a world filled with bureaucracy, vaguely defined, changeable but stringent methods of control, and the feeling that an individual was little more than a cog in the governmental machine. The view that art could break entirely from the traditional or dictated structures and styles, and create entirely new experiences for both artist and spectator can be seen in the evolution of ‘performance’ (as separate from theatre) in several of the Eastern Bloc countries such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and the GDR. Here artists such as Petr Štembera, Ewa Partum, Orshi Drozdik, Gabriel Stötzer, and the members of Clara Mosch,

⁵⁸Endre Bojtár, ‘The Avant-Garde in Central and Eastern European Literature’ *The Art Journal*, 49.1, (1990) 56-62 (57).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

and Autoperforationsartisten used this deconstructed form of art to develop new forms of body art, land art, and other types of performance. Furthermore, the Dadaist styles of poetry recitations in their performances likely influenced the adaptations to poetry theatre in Poland during the thaw period.

A further element present in much of dissident Eastern Bloc theatre is that of the desire to create total works of art in the performances. Building from the tenets of Theatre of Cruelty these works strive to create environments in which both artists and audience are consumed by the work and the experience. The result of which is a confrontational style, in which no individual element can be singled out. This idea of total theatre and the influences that lead to the theories and practices of Theatre of Cruelty are rooted in Antonin Artaud's participation in the Surrealist movement in the 1920s.

Surrealism, a phrase first coined in Guillaume Apollinaire's preface to the 1917 ballet *Parade* and furthered in the notes for his own 1917 play *Les mamelles de Tirésias* (*The breasts of Tiresias*), was a primarily interwar French avant-garde movement that called for the synthesis of art forms - painting, dance, mime, music, drama and satire - into a whole or total art form. Drawing from this idea of a synthesised form, writer Andre Breton broadened the definition to define surrealism as 'the transmutation of two seemingly contradictory states,

dream and reality, into a state of absolute reality.'⁶⁰ Divorcing himself from the destructive attitudes of the Dadaists, Breton believed in the healing potential of the subconscious mind; declaring the subconscious to be the 'real repository of truth'.⁶¹ Throughout the 1920s and 30s Breton, Louis Aragon, Roger Vitrac, and Antonin Artaud attempted to liberate themselves from dramatic, artistic and literary structures, abandoning order, and rationality for the 'spontaneity, originality, and anarchic humour of disjointed, dreamlike (and sometimes nightmarish) episodes which attempted to capture a different kind of truth.'⁶² The style abandoned any kind of dramatic structure or progression, moving in disjointed, loosely related scenes; making use of the element of surprise, non-sequitur and unusual juxtapositions.

In addition to the significance that this movement had on the development of Artaud's theories, Surrealism (in addition to Dada) was deeply influential on Czech artists Jiri Voskovec and Jan Werich. Inspired by Apollinaire, resulting from three years spent studying in Paris, Voskovec along with Werich embraced the synthesis of art forms, and the ability to juxtapose music, drama, mime, and commedia dell'arte style clowning and create work with an experimental theatre group called the Liberated Theatre.⁶³ 'V&W [Voskovec and Werich]

⁶⁰ Andre Breton quoted in Bert Cardullo, *Theories of the Avant-garde Theatre: A Casebook from Kleist to Camus* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013) 118.

⁶¹ Jerome Crabbe, 'Surrealism in Theatre' Theatre Database, (2006) <<http://www.theatredatabase.com/twentiethcentury/surrealism.html>> [accessed 12 February 2015].

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Jarka Burian, 'The Liberated Theatre of Voskovec and Werich' *Educational Theatre Journal* 29.2 (1977) 153-177 (155)

questioned the traditional theatre conventions in a ludic way: by mocking well-known texts, events, and figures, and using linguistic games and situation comedy complemented by jazz and modern dance.⁶⁴ They would perform in clown make-up and masks, interspersing jazz music with written and improvised text and action, adapting their work to embrace, comment and challenge their environments. Their work with this theatre became central to the development of the avant-garde and experimental theatre in Prague during the interwar period, later influencing the small theatre movement which developed in the late 1950s and 60s⁶⁵.

Returning to Artaud and the impact his theories would have on Eastern Bloc dissident theatre. Theatre of Cruelty began its evolution when, after viewing a 1931 performance of a Balinese theatre company in Paris, Antonin Artaud became discontent with simply depicting the dreams and visions of the unconscious. Following this experience, Artaud began to theorise that it was not enough to give expression to the unconscious; that it was necessary to recognise the metaphysical behind the psychological. He felt that theatre had lost the very essence of what it had originally been intended to do, lost the violence and immediacy it had once possessed. He desired to reignite in theatre what had been lost in the previous generations:

⁶⁴ Veronika Ambros, 'Prague's Experimental Stage: Laboratory of Theatre and Semiotics' *Semiotica* 168 (2008) 45-65 (50-51).

⁶⁵ The small theatre movement allowed for the development of the Theatre on the Balustrade and was therefore influential on the development of Havel's works. This will be further discussed in chapter 2.

Our long familiarity with theatre as a form of distraction has led us to forget the idea of serious theatre, a theatre that will shove aside our representations, and breathe into us the burning magnetism of images and finally will act upon us in such a way that there will take place within us a therapy of the soul whose effects will not be forgotten.⁶⁶

These explorations lead to the development of his concept of ‘cruelty’ and his separation from the Surrealists. The conceptualisation and meaning of ‘cruelty’ from Artaud’s perspective, despite discussion of slaughter, torture and bloodshed, was not one where violence dominated actions on the stage. Instead, it referenced the violence inherent in the creation of the world and of nature, a violence that, once acknowledged, could lead the audience to a caustic purgation of the soul. Additionally, it is the hunger for life and experience that governs all forms of life.⁶⁷

He chose theatre as the medium through which to develop his theories, due to its carnality and corporeality, and its ability to bring together the most diverse elements of gesture, language, movement and static objects.⁶⁸ In a similar way to other avant-garde movements, he sought to create a total art form using voice, gesture, dance, costume, furniture, bodies and music, with the intent of creating a vital art form that would reflect many of the essences of life. Where he differed, however was in his desire to not only depict or displays these

⁶⁶ Antonin Artaud, ‘Theatre and Cruelty’ *Tulane Drama Review* (1958) 75-77 (75).

⁶⁷ Günter Ahrends and Hans-Jürgen Diller, *Chapters from the History of Stage Cruelty* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1994) 119.

⁶⁸ Susan Sontag, ‘Approaching Artaud’ in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (London: Picador, 1980) 30-77 (32).

forces to his audience but to create an authentic experience for his audiences, forcing them to fully engage and respond to the work, no matter how painful that experience might be. As

Ahrends comments:

By confronting the audience with the primeval, anarchic, and cruel components of their lives, it inevitably sets free the elemental, uncheckable, and uncontrollable manifestations of vitality, which have been entombed in the curse of Western civilization.⁶⁹

Artaud theorised that through direct confrontation with the audience, by eliminating any barrier between actor and audience -manifested by the removal of defined 'stage' space – and by showing the 'magic freedom of daydreams'⁷⁰ against the backdrop of terror and cruelty, that the audiences would authentically experience the vitality of existence. Theatre of Cruelty was steeped in myth and ritual. Performances blended forms, reduced language to groans and shouts and assaulted the audience with action from all sides, bright lighting and excessive sound. Artaud desired to create a theatre that not only divorced itself from theatrical convention but from law, order, family, society and religion, which he saw as obsolete in the modern world. He assaulted the nerves and senses of his audiences, hoping that under the bewilderment and enchantment of the violent images and experiences that his audiences' instincts and passions would be released.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Ahrends and Diller, *Chapters from the History of Stage Cruelty*, 119.

⁷⁰ Antonin Artaud quoted in Ahrends and Diller, *Chapters from the History of Stage Cruelty*, 119.

⁷¹ Ahrends and Diller, *Chapters from the History of Stage Cruelty*, 120.

Artaud's theories and practices were a significant influence on many of the dissident Eastern Bloc artists, including Theatre of the Eighth Day and Autoperforationsartistan in a number of ways, as will be evidenced in the discussion in subsequent chapters. They embraced both his theory and his practices striving to create total works of art, incorporating a wide variety of theatrical and artistic elements into their work. They abandoned theatrical and artistic conventions and created work that was confrontational, vital, cathartic, and all-encompassing for both artists and audience members. Furthermore the dissident artists embraced the idea that this style of theatre could create an authentic experience of existence, and it was this striving for authenticity in their work that, in many cases, made their work dissident due to its divergence from the dictates of regulated arts in these countries.

The avant-garde styles (those mentioned as well as Futurism and Constructivism) continued to develop throughout the 1920s and 1930s, their creators and practitioners determined to leave the artistic and dramatic traditions of 'Old Europe' behind. They continued to evolve, accounting for the advancements in politics, philosophies and mainstream artistic forms. Theatre of Cruelty developed out of Surrealism and Dada, German Cabaret experienced a revival and expansion during the later years of the Weimar Republic as a result of the removal of the authoritarian cultural restrictions of Wilhelm II and the influx of American tourists who came to Berlin and other German cities to engage in the decadence of the inter-war era. The avant-garde movements gained in popularity and spread through Europe, influencing

developments in society and culture in the newly independent countries of Poland and Czechoslovakia.

The rise of Nazism and the subsequent engagement in the Second World War all but halted the progression of avant-garde movements. The Nazis viewed avant-garde theatre as 'degenerate' (*Entartete Kunst*) claiming that it, along with other modern forms, was un-German, Jewish or communist, and banned it from being written, performed or published. What had been movements that pushed past the boundaries of tradition and convention in an attempt to remove societal boundaries between art, theatre, language, consciousness and experience was declared dangerous to the progression of Nazi power and domination. By 1937, Nazi control of Germany (including the cultural ministries) had deemed it necessary that theatre be transparently nationalistic, in many cases to the point of being propagandistic. They decided that theatre's purpose was to espouse a Germanic hero and mythic right to German dominance. With the Nazi occupations of Czechoslovakia and Poland in 1939 and France in 1940, what had remained of the previous decades' avant-garde theatre had been driven into dormancy.⁷²

⁷² Specific discussion of the Nazi policies on art and theatre can be found in *The Arts in Nazi Germany: Continuity, Conformity, Change*, ed. by Jonathan Huener, and Francis Nicosia (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006).; and *Theatre Under the Nazis*, ed. by John London (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).

Despite the following decades of war, annexation and occupation, and the attempt to destroy and eradicate avant-garde styles from the collective memory, neither Hitler nor Stalin, nor various subsequent leaders of the Eastern Bloc countries could do so. Elements of avant-garde theatre had rooted in various countries in numerous different ways, re-emerging when periods of reduced censorship occurred or gaps in surveillance or oversights could be found, and contributing to the development of unsanctioned genres and performance styles.

Artists used aspects of avant-garde styles to express dissatisfaction with the status quo and the limitations on theatre and performances in their own countries. Havel, Theatre of the Eighth Day and Autoperforationsartisten adopted these styles, in various forms through the filter of such artists as Kafka, Čapek, Voskovec and Werich, Stanisław Witkiewicz, Witold Gombrowicz, and (later) Tadeusz Kantor and Jerzy Grotowski. The styles of the avant-garde providing these and other dissident artists the ability to directly make indirect statements that expressed their own anger, frustration, confusion and disappointment in their worlds. The avant-garde provided them with the opportunities to create work that expressed an experience that contradicted the dictated world of the dominant ideologies. The theories and practices of Expressionism, Dada, Surrealism and Theatre of Cruelty were fundamentally influential on the development of the works by Havel, Theatre of the Eighth Day and Autoperforationsartisten. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse the theatrical dissidence of the artists discussed in the next chapters as juxtapositions of their political and social environments and their historical avant-garde inspired plays and performances.

The discussion held in this section demonstrates the impact that the development and spread of the pre-war and inter-war avant-garde movements had on the work created by dissident artists in Poland, Czechoslovakia and the GDR during the Cold War. It shows how these styles were embraced and adapted by these artists such that they could comment and critique their environments without directly making a statement or openly challenging the political, social and cultural policies in their countries, an act that would likely result in severely negative repercussions. Additionally, it further emphasises a key difference between Anglo-American theatre, who freely experimented with new styles of theatre to enhance and reflect their views on the modern world, and Eastern Bloc theatre who used the styles to undermine the status quo and subvert the censorship policies that will be discussed in the next section

Censorship, Systems of Control, and Methods of Subversion

Key to the establishment, development and maintenance of communist governments in the Eastern Bloc countries were the systems of control and censorship that allowed the governance to sustain authority over their people. Despite claims by the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, (The Socialist Unity Party of Germany known as the SED) the ruling communist party in the GDR, that censorship did not take place within the country and the brief repeal of censorship in Czechoslovakia during the Prague Spring, systems of control including the censoring of text and performance were consistently in place throughout the Cold War. These systems varied significantly from country to country and time period to

time period, thus the expressions of dissidence also differed. However, in order to provide context for the discussions of the individual demonstrations of dissidence that will be examined in this thesis, a more general discussions of censorship will follow.

Censorship was an omnipresent aspect of life in the Eastern Bloc, affecting everything from media, broadcast, film, literature and theatre to the signage that could be hung in shop windows. Repressions were numerous and subtle. In terms of theatre this could manifest in the form of modifications to the text, the refusal of themes or phrasing in the text, refusal of publication, and alterations or removal of any scenery, props or costumes that it was felt made or criticised the political climate or supported nationalist ideas. Further limitation could be inflicted after censors had approved the text; productions could be cancelled without warning if it was felt they did not support the dominant ideology. Censorship could extend beyond a specific play or production and in some situations a playwright's entire body of work could be banned from publication and repertoire.⁷³ Repeated violations of censorship policies could result in increased monitoring, searches of property and the seizure of all materials or resources – writings, unsanctioned of Western literature, typewriters, mimeograph machines – that were considered suspect, the removal of rights, the filing of criminal charges and in extreme cases the stripping of identity and exile.⁷⁴ Owing to these systems of control and the limitations on expression that resulted, it became necessary for

⁷³ Justyne Balasinski, 'Staging Resistance in Poland' *Peace Review* 15.2 (2003) 141-148.

⁷⁴ Pavel Kahout, playwright and novelist, along with his wife was forcibly evicted from his Prague apartment in 1977, and stripped of his Czechoslovakian identity and exiled to Austria in 1977. Similar events occurred to other artists including some members of Theatre of the Eighth Day in the 1980s.

artists to find alternative ways in which to comment on the system without making an overt (or public) criticism of the state. This was done in a variety of ways, differed greatly from country to country and often displayed the disparate manner in which governments reacted to the violations of their censorship laws by artists.

One particular way that subversion of censorship laws occurred was by the creation and use of allegorical stories, coded styles of narrative and of the development of a kind of meta-language that could relate the true ideas and perspectives of the artists without making a blatant anti-government statement. Leo Strauss commented,

Persecution, then, gives rise to a peculiar technique of writing, and therewith to a peculiar type of literature, in which the truth about all crucial things is presented exclusively between the lines. That literature is addressed, not to all readers, but to trustworthy and intelligent readers only. It has all the advantages of private communication without having its greatest disadvantage – that it reaches only the writers’ acquaintances. It has all the advantages of public communication without having its greatest disadvantage – capital punishment for the author.⁷⁵

John Elsom, speaking specifically of the techniques used in theatrical performance in the Eastern Bloc states,

There was a wave of concealed attacks on communism, buried in fantasies, fairy tales and interpretations of the classics. It spread through Eastern Europe, to Budapest, Prague and Warsaw, where writers could be subtle, angry and speak in foreign tongues.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Leo Strauss quoted in Robert Horvath, *The Legacy of Soviet Dissent: Dissidents, Democratisation and Radical Nationalism in Russia* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2005) 4.

⁷⁶ Elsom, *Cold War Theatre*, 76.

Plays were threaded through with distinctly romantic or nationalist ideas that would appear in the form of added song and poetry. They made use of para-textual elements, such as silences, breath and intonation as well as gestures, attitudes and movement to emphasise or dismiss parts of the text, and, in doing so, dissented from the regulations of censorship.⁷⁷ These became theatres of allusion, in which the plots, characters, actions, language and design choices all carried subtext; where everything had a secondary meaning to be interpreted by the participatory spectator. In creating theatre of this sort those involved could resist the policies and stricture without exceeding the small allowances for artistic license.

In addition to language, acting technique and allusion to nationalistic and romantic themes, artists choosing to deviate from sanctioned styles and themes made use of non-verbal protest and employed various visual elements that made their opinions evident. For example, knowing that the cultural authorities could not prevent productions of Shakespeare's plays as, despite being 'Western', his work had been adopted into many cultural heritages and stood as one of the pillars of high culture. Banning it would undermine any claims of cultural supremacy made by the Soviet world. As a result, the artists produced it in such a way that it reflected and commented on current affairs. As Elsom comments:

They could not ban Shakespeare without appearing philistine. They could try to vet directors, more difficult than it sounds, for directors were not always in control of

⁷⁷ Balasinski, 'Staging Resistance in Poland', 146.

their actors and a detail, such as an Uncle Joe moustache on Richard III spoke volumes.⁷⁸

The placement of Stalin's distinctive moustache on Richard III and various other villains was only one example of these non-verbal protests. A further example is when in a 1968 revival production of Jan Drda's *Games with the Devil (Hrátky s čertem)* director Ivan Weiss chose to make a significant visual allusion. The play, which already could be interpreted as dissident due to the implication that the main character's battle against dark forces paralleled the hostile forces threatening the Czechs, also made a direct and recognisable visual connection between the devil Belzebub, and Brezhnev. As Peschel states:

[...] there could no longer any doubt regarding Belzebub's identity: Weiss had given the actor Leonid Brezhnev's heavy eyebrows. The "sleepy" and "senile" Hácha-like character had been replaced by a caricature "in the telling of the costume of the burly super sovereign and alcohol befuddled prince of hell" playing not only on Brezhnev's physical appearance but on the Czech stereotypes of Russian party members as chronic drunks.⁷⁹

Other methods used by dissident theatre artists included the use of private, street, or rural performance spaces, and the publication of *Samizdat* plays. The movement of performances to private spaces, such as apartments and churches (in Poland) made it possible to produce work that had either been banned outright, or that had not submitted to the censors for

⁷⁸ Elsom, *Cold War Theatre*, 78.

⁷⁹ Lisa Peschel, 'The Devil and Brezhnev's Eyebrows: Czech 'Anti-fascist' Theatre After the Warsaw Pact Invasion' in *Theatre and Performance in Eastern Europe: The Changing Scene*, ed. by, Dennis Barnett and Arthur Skelton (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 104.

approval. Removing productions from urban and town areas and taking them to rural community spaces made it less likely that censors would attend the performances, and made it possible to perform texts that had been restored to their original forms after they had been altered by censors. This resulted in less closures as well as the inclusion of populations not likely to travel into towns and cities for performances. The use of alternative spaces did not, however, remove the risks associated with producing uncensored works. Apartments and churches were monitored, listening devices were planted inside, and records were kept on both those performing and those attending. Members of the secret police and security forces often covertly attended (using assumed identities and disguise) collecting enough information to justify raids on the properties. Additionally, after gaining intelligence of proposed productions in rural areas the artists were often beset by roadblocks, written tickets for various automotive infractions and arrested or chased away from their cars.⁸⁰

Samizdat, a term meaning 'I-self -publish', etymologically attributed to the Soviet poet Nikolai Glazkov includes the politically and ideologically dissident essays, novels, plays and poetry produced in the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc during the Cold War. Produced primarily during the Stalinist regime and after the return to harsher authoritarian regimes between the Khrushchev and Gorbachev eras, this system included multiple interrelated

⁸⁰ For more discussion on the methods used by the officials to infiltrate artist groups and interfere in or disrupt performances see: Cioffi, *Alternative Theatre in Poland*.; *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage*, ed. by Carol Martin (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 164-194. Rocamora, *Acts of Courage*.; Mesch, *Modern Art at the Berlin Wall*.; and Roland Bleiker, *Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 262-270.

networks of circulating dissident material between the intellectual classes in the Eastern Bloc, and between East and West. These systems were often complex, using multiple, sympathetic people from all sectors of the community (not just intellectuals) to collect, type, transport and deliver works all over the Eastern Bloc and abroad. These works, were not always politically or ideologically challenging, as many writers, artists and musicians used *samizdat* to simply express their creative talents outside of the sanctions of state controlled media and presses. However, especially in the years following the Warsaw Pact Invasion, this method was often used to disseminate information on the human rights violations occurring behind the Iron Curtain.

The uses of meta-language, costume, acting technique, and visual and thematic allusions gave theatre and performance artists small pockets of freedom from within which they could express discontent and dissidence. These spaces provided the ability to undermine or subvert the demands of the state-sanctioned art forms. The removal of dissident performances to private or rural locations did similarly. And the network of *Samizdat* publication and transportation allowed for some of the works of these artists to be shared with like-minded communities both inside and outside of the Eastern Bloc.

Despite the successes, however, these efforts to physically and metaphorically create space in which to express themselves and challenge aspects of the dominant ideologies in their countries defined them as dissident and no artist that stepped over, around or ducked under

the line was assured safety in doing so. The pervasive regulations and enforcements of censorship in the Eastern Bloc prevented artists from being able to freely and legally express their criticisms of the government, the authorities or the social and cultural policies that kept the population under control. Censorship forced artists who desired to critique their environments or challenge the status quo to develop alternative methods for communicating their dissatisfaction, confusion and risk their livelihoods, freedoms, families and lives, to express themselves fully. It made this work dissident, and dissident theatre the only option for these artists.

Key Differences between Anglo-American Political and Eastern Bloc Dissident Theatre

As mentioned previously, while some of the dissident theatre and performance in the Eastern Bloc can be aligned with certain examples of Anglo-American political theatre, there are distinct, identifiable differences between Eastern Bloc dissident theatre and Anglo-American political theatre that result from the lack of freedoms and the omnipresence of censorship policies. For example, compared with the range of styles and techniques employed in Anglo-American political theatre, Eastern Bloc dissident theatre was limited in how it could be created or produced. It cannot align with the reflectionist end of the spectrum (Patterson's term discussed previously) nor with the radical, agit-prop aspects, as producing work that was obviously and overtly critical of the political and social environment was a dangerous endeavour that almost certainly would result in severe negative repercussions. Rather,

dissident theatre revolved around veiling critiques and challenges in language, metaphor and allusion such that it could pass the censors and plausible deniability could be established. Further, the critiques in dissident theatre often tended to have a broader scope than those in Anglo-American political theatre. Rather than highlighting a specific issue or injustice, they highlighted societal and cultural structures that they perceived as problematic. They questioned the policies that kept the people subjugated and the compliance of the populations in their own subjugations.

Another significant difference resulting from the authoritarian restrictions on expression, censorship, and the development of societies under Soviet-style communist governments, is that the dissident theatre rarely embraced the idea of transcendence or the transformational ideal that is common element in Anglo-American political theatre. Rather it focuses on the current time and working to make the immediate, rather than the distant, future a better place. In the essay, *An Anatomy of Reticence* Václav Havel, in an explanation of the divergences between the Central European dissidents and those involved in the Western peace movement, highlights how the experience of authoritarianism prevents the common Eastern Bloc citizen from harbouring utopian visions of the future. He speaks of how the imbalances in power and the fear of the expression of that power contributes to a divisive ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality.

This citizen [the average Czechoslovak], for instance, knows ‘they’ can do anything they want – take away his passport, have him fired from his job, order him to move, send him to collect signatures against the Pershings, bar him from higher education, take away his driver’s license...prescribe what he must read before all else, what he must demonstrate for, what he must sign, how many square feet his apartment may

have, whom he may meet and whom he must avoid. The citizen picks his way through life in constant fear of 'them' knowing full well that even an opportunity to work for the public good is a privilege 'they' have bestowed upon him, conditionally.⁸¹

Havel then discusses how this mentality contributes to an intense scepticism of any type of utopian imaginings and how, as a result, the perspectives held by dissidents does not imagine a transformation of society, but rather addresses the issues of the contemporary environment.

The dissident is more likely to describe and analyse the present than to project a future. He is far more the one who criticizes what is wrong here and now than the one who plans something better which is to be. He sees his mission more in defending man against the pressures of the system than in imagining better systems.⁸²

Havel sees the dissident as one who is in a constant, on-going struggle against the rules and regulations that prevent freedom of expression, movement, and thought. From his perspective dissidence was a continuous active response to the restrictions and limitations on expression, thought and movement. Therefore it had no views towards an imagined future, as that would require engaging in the current system.

This scepticism of utopian expectations or desires connects to many of the productions of dissident theatre in Czechoslovakia, Poland and the GDR. These plays and performances

⁸¹ Vaclav Havel, *The Anatomy of Reticence*, <http://www.vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=eseje&val=4_aj_eseje.html&typ=HTML> [accessed 20 July, 2016].

⁸² Ibid. [accessed 6 March 2015].

engage with and comment on the contemporary experience of living under ‘real’ communism, but rarely, if ever present a vision of a different world, sometimes to extent of staging the end of a play or performance in a nearly mirror image to the beginning scenes in order to emphasise the absurd repetitions and cyclical nature of life under Soviet-style communist rule.⁸³ Heavily influenced and inundated by the pervasive nature of the controls and oppressions, both artist and audience might struggle with utopian visions of a more democratic future, as it might - especially to those who had lived their entire lives under communist governments - be difficult to form a concrete vision of how East Central European country would appear without the spectre of authoritarianism. Furthermore, it was often not ‘Western’ - especially American – democracy that the dissidents desired, rather they wanted an un-specified third option, a free society, but one of moral-driven politics not dominated by capitalism.

A further difference between the political theatre produced in the Anglo-American context and the dissident theatre produced in the Eastern Bloc was the presence of the idea of ‘anti-politics’. The term ‘anti-politics’, coined in the Eastern Bloc dissident context by Havel in Czechoslovakia and György Konrád in Hungary, was inspired by the theories and discourse of Jacek Kuron, and spoken about as ‘new evolutionism’ by Adam Michnik in Poland. The concept was built from the perspective that engaging in the political process in an attempt to challenge or change the apparatuses of control, in addition to being dangerous, was also

⁸³ This tactic is especially present in Havel’s work and will be discussed further in chapter 2.

impossible. Politics were fixed in favour of those who held all of the power, and held no concern for the benefits or lives of the population. As Elżbieta Cizweska-Martyńska comments, paraphrasing Konrád's views 'Politics means fraud, bureaucracy, unnecessary regulations, war, and the absence of democracy. Politics is what happens in a nation-state. Politics inevitably invokes ideology, which means living with a lie.'⁸⁴ Havel, Konrád and Kuron believed that the system could not be successfully reformed (especially after the Warsaw Pact Invasion), that those who were part of the political apparatus were disinterested or unwilling to upset the system, and therefore, if change were ever going to occur in their countries it was not going to be as a result of the benevolence of those in power or out of concern for the common man, but through the recognition of that of his state of being and through his engagement with his society. 'Anti-politics entailed involvement in pre-political activity. That, in turn, meant personal responsibility and the interpenetration of independent, underground society with the official society of that time.'⁸⁵

This idea of anti-politics is vital to the understanding of Eastern Bloc dissident theatre as many dissident artists, including Havel, Theatre of the Eighth Day and Autoperforationsartisten claimed that their works were not political. They understood that making obvious or blatant anti-government commentary in their works was highly

⁸⁴ Elżbieta Cizweska-Martyńska, 'The Meaning of the 1980s Anti-Politics' Legacy Within the Contemporary East-Central European Civil Societies' *Intersections East European Journal of Society and Politics* 1.3, 37-58 (48).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 47.

dangerous, did not result in change and was rarely well received, as spectators of work considered 'political' could be persecuted along with the creators. As such they chose to create works that were 'anti-political'; works that they felt did not engage directly with politics, but rather commented on the daily behaviours and experiences of people, and questioned the ways in which they responded to and complied with their contemporary environments. In doing so they hoped to inspire their audiences to a higher level of self-awareness and a more engaged and critical attitude towards their environments.

The necessity of Eastern Bloc dissident artist engaging in an 'anti-political' style in order to communicate their anger, frustration and dissatisfaction with living under 'real' communism is an important distinction to make between them and Anglo-American political theatre practitioners. It helps to clarify the complexities of viewing Eastern Bloc dissident theatre through a Western lens, one in which dissident theatre appears political. This then once more highlights the differences in the freedoms of expression available to artists in democratic environments versus those in authoritarian ones. Anglo-American political theatre creators and performers, while certainly often striving to inspire self-awareness and engagement within their audiences, could choose to be as obviously and blatantly political as they liked without fear of repercussion. They could engage directly with issues of political, social and cultural policy could make direct criticisms or challenges to the existing status quo, or chose a less directive, subtler approach. By contrast Eastern Bloc dissident artists had to be more covert in their expressions or risk any number of negative repercussions.

Commonalities in Eastern Bloc Theatre

In spite of the limitations and restrictions placed on artists in Eastern Bloc countries throughout the Cold War, the developments in the styles, techniques and themes in dissident theatre were broad, complex, and heavily influenced by the levels of censorship in each artist's country. The work produced in each country reflected the artists' experiences of living under specific Soviet-style communist governments, challenged the distinct elements of control and responded to the policies and oppressions in their own environments. Exploration of the dissident plays and performances in Poland, Czechoslovakia and the GDR demonstrates the need to analyse the works of these artists from their own individual contexts in order to fully understand how the effects of varying levels of censorship and other mechanisms of authoritarian control effected the people of these countries and the artists that reflected this in their work.

Despite the need to view these work through their own cultural contexts and the artists' personal experiences of communism, there are identifiable similarities in the themes present in dissident plays and performances in the East-Central Europe reflecting parallels in the prevailing issues faced by those living under restrictive societies. Amongst these similarities are: the critiques and commentary the works make on the effects of Soviet-style communist governments on individual agency and identity; the desires and intent on the part of these artists to live their lives truthfully and create work that was, from their perspective, genuine;

and the necessity of engaging with their audiences in such a way that it was impossible for the spectators to disengage from the critique of actions or behaviours, distance themselves from the themes and experience, or ignore their own part in the creation or perpetuation of what they were seeing.

The following discussion will introduce and provide a contextual base for these similarities. It will also introduce the idea of ‘second or parallel societies’ which were often unintentionally created as a result of the plays and performances. As mentioned previously, the introductions of these ideas are a vital contribution to this thesis and to both the cultural and dramatic histories of the Cold War as they highlight previously unconsidered intersections in theme and intent and broaden existing discourses.⁸⁶

The Individual in Communist Society

Primary to the discussion of similarities in the commentary and critiques made by Havel, Theatre of the Eighth Day and Autoperforationsartisten, that will be discussed in the forthcoming case study chapters, is the consideration of the roles and responsibilities of the individual in a supposedly collectivist, communist society. Their works interrogate the

⁸⁶ Further discussions and demonstrations of these similarities will occur throughout the rest of this thesis.

differences between the expectations of the ideal, socialist man, and the reality of people living under real socialism, and highlights issues surrounding individuality and autonomy. Using constructed characters, allegorical situations and physical expressions of discontent, the artists raise questions regarding the nature of humanity and existence. Questions such as: what makes a person? How does this integrate or conflict with the communist classification? What tactics are used by the governmental mechanism to remove individuality? How are ideas of nationalism manipulated to inculcate further the collectivist attitude in society? And how does a man who sees the truth of these manipulations claim back his autonomy? The artists all challenge the idea that a man can simultaneously be himself and part of the system, that he can accept the restrictions on his physical and mental presence and still maintain a sense of individual identity. They denounce the idea that freedom of thought or action can coexist with a system that removes any sense of individual autonomy from its population.

In order to contextualise this aspect of the work, it is necessary to briefly discuss the idea of the ideal socialist man and how that was transmuted into the expectations of the individual in the Eastern Bloc countries. This ideal, which drew from Trotsky's views of man in the new communist world, was continuously adapted throughout the beginning of the twentieth century developing into the idea of the 'new Soviet man'. This man was meant to be a man of the future; one who had mastery over his feelings, and a heightened, transparent consciousness, and could thereby elevate himself to a new plane, becoming superhuman. He

was supposed to be devoted to spreading the socialist revolution, rejecting both innate personality and the unconscious, and have sacrificed any nationalist sentiments to become fully Soviet. His individuality was not his alone, and did not come from a sense of self or autonomy. Rather it evolved from a process of blending together and melding the elements through which he might set himself apart as different, ‘Individuality is a welding together of tribal, national, class, temporary and institutional elements and, in fact, it is in the uniqueness of this welding together, in the proportions of this psycho-chemical mixture, that individuality is expressed.’⁸⁷ Furthermore, the Soviet man believed in a selfless collectivism, and was willing to sacrifice himself for a good cause.⁸⁸ Parallel to the idea of the ‘New Soviet Man’ was the idea of the ‘New Soviet Woman’. She, like her male counterpart, was meant to devote herself to the development and maintenance of the state; to sacrifice individual autonomy or identity to the role that the state dictated. In her case, this role was that of a ‘superwoman’ who balanced being a communist citizen, full-time worker, wife and mother.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ L.D. Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 60.

⁸⁸ For more information on the ‘new Soviet man’ see Sergei Khodorovich, ‘1917-1987: Unsuccessful and Tragic Attempt to Create a “New Man”’ trans. by Larissa Vilenskaya and Jim Reister, <<http://www.roca.org/OA/76-77/76f.htm>> [accessed 23 June, 2015]; Leon Trotsky, ‘Revolutionary and Socialist Art’ in Trotsky Internet Archive <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit_revo/ch08.htm> [accessed 23 June, 2015]; Bernard Bykhovskiy, *The New Man in the Making* (Moscow: Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, 1974).

⁸⁹ For more information of the ‘new Soviet woman’ see Barbara Evans Clements, *Daughters of the Revolution: A History of Women in the U.S.S.R.* (Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1994).; Barbara Alpern Engel, *Women in Russia: 1700-2000* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 150 - 153.; Gail Warshofsky Lapidus, *Women in Soviet Society: Equality, Development, and Social Change* (University of California Press, 1978).; Lynne Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Woman* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999).

However, before these new Soviet people could even partially come into existence, the ideal transitioned once more into the ideal man and woman as viewed from the Stalinist perspective. Having taken control of a country that was struggling to modernise and compete with an increasingly international economic climate, Stalin felt that the only way to compete with the advances of the United States and Western Europe was to force rapid and extreme industrialisation of his country. His initial plans included a two hundred and fifty percent increase in industrial development, mainly in heavy industry and complete collectivisation of all agriculture. In order to achieve this massive increase Stalin's views and policies emphasised a strictly collectivist view of people as cogs in a machine; the work of their hands essential while the work of their minds was less so.

With the conveyance of industry as a large, rhythmic, and pure technological machine to run the economic sector of society, they could correlate the values of the new machinery into the psychological processes of society, ultimately molding "disorganized human individuals into a gigantic collective machine"⁹⁰

The Stalinist views on man abandoned the Marxist and Leninist ideas that the ideal man was as much a sum of his intellect and moral code as he was a contributing force to a collectivist, industrialising society.⁹¹ The Stalinist view of women deviated from the Marxist-Leninist

⁹⁰ John Savage, 'Re-creating Mankind: The Philosophy and Actualization of the "New Soviet Man"' <<http://eaglefeather.honors.unt.edu/2011/article/36#.Vm7G6UqLSUk>> [accessed 14 December 2015].

⁹¹ For more information regarding Stalin's policies for modernisation see, Richard Overy, *The Dictators: Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia* (New York: Penguin, 2005); 'Collectivization and

ideals of gender equality through active participation in society, literacy, and a collective attitude towards family.⁹² Concerned by a declining population rate, Stalin de-emphasised equality, the progression of women and the collectivisation of domestic tasks, in favour of propaganda that aligned the size and strength of the family with that of the state.⁹³ As a result of this adaptation to the view of people, much of the rhetoric regarding the rights and responsibilities of the individual that became part of the doctrine of the controlling communist governments in the Eastern Bloc was deeply Stalinist in nature. Despite this rhetoric being adapted in various ways, depending on the country and leadership in question, the governments and populations of the Eastern Bloc were meant to be loyal to Moscow before their own countries; they were expected to accept Stalinist dictates, fully collectivise, and abandon all national and individual identity. They were meant to devote their time and energy to supporting the development of the ideal 'socialist', i.e. Stalinist state and become the ideal members of that environment.

The manner in which these expectations manifested and developed throughout the following years differed from country to country in the Eastern Bloc. Despite this, however, the commonality of the ideal member of each of these societies reflected the dictates of the dominant ideology. In line with this ideology, people were supposed to be completely committed to the making and maintaining of the industrial, bureaucratic, and domestic

Industrialization' in Revelations from the Russian Archive, <<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/coll.html>> [accessed 1, July 2015].

⁹² Vladimir Lenin, *On the Emancipation of Women* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974).

⁹³ Lapidus, *Women in Soviet Society*, 112-115.

systems that kept the system running; sacrificing themselves, their time, focus and energy on making the system as strong as it should be. They were supposed to believe, without question, that the system was equally beneficial to all, providing everything that was needed to live well in the modern climate. They were to be devoted to the strength of the Soviet Union, and that was to be reflected in the health of mind and body. Loyalty was to be to the Union first, then to country and only then to a person's own community, family and self.

This ideal became normalised into the expectations of the people in these societies; state controlled media and press regularly showed examples of the 'ideal person', propaganda campaigns stressed the importance of the worker and worker-mother to the strength and stability of the Soviet Union, and highly publicised show-trials criminalised dissidents and demonstrated how anti-Soviet actions undermined the whole system. It was, however, a practically impossible goal to achieve considering the reality of the often harsh conditions (i.e. food, housing and goods shortages, omnipresent surveillance or the threat of surveillance, and regularly changing levels of censorship and control) under which many people lived. Despite the impossibility however, those who did not attempt to strive for these were viewed as dissident and were marginalised.⁹⁴ The artists discussed in this thesis all

⁹⁴ A significant number of the show trials and Stalinist purges, as well as the purges, and dismissals from employment, and barring from education or activities that occurred in the wake of the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia and the declaration of Martial Law in Poland marginalised persons who did not ascribe to the current expectations of the 'ideal Soviet', and those who refused to swear the loyalty oaths. For more information on show trials and the criminalisation of those who did not physically or verbally follow the expectations of the regime see: Melissa Feinberg, 'Establishing a

chose to question this normalised ideal, they challenged the idea that this type of man or woman could exist, and in doing so, demonstrated how the raising of such questions returned some autonomy to the individual.

‘Living in Truth’

The second commonality that can be identified in the work of the dissident artists discussed in this thesis is the goal they had to create plays and performances that communicated what they perceived to be the ‘truth’ of the experience of living under authoritarian regimes. The idea of ‘living in truth’, a key phrase in any discussion of dissent in East-Central Europe, was first coined as a phrase in Václav Havel’s *Power of the Powerless* (1978). This idea had, however, originated far earlier, both in his plays and in the works of other dissident artists throughout several of the Eastern Bloc countries.⁹⁵

New World: Show Trials and the Production of a Cold War Reality in Eastern Europe, 1948-1954’ in *The Politics of Fear in the Cold War*, Bernd Stöver and Dierk Walter, eds., (Hamburg: Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, 2009); George Hodos, *Show Trials: Stalinist Purges in Eastern Europe 1948-1954* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1987); Barbara Day, *The Velvet Philosophers* (London: Claridge Press, 1999).

⁹⁵ This is not a suggestion that all of these dissident artists were specifically familiar with Havel’s text, only that the ideas contained within his discussion apply broadly to many of the theories and motivations behind the creation of dissident plays and performances across the Eastern Bloc.

Havel's discussion in *Power of the Powerless* highlights what he and many other dissidents identified as being one of the major hindrances towards free thought and expression; the compliance of significant portions of the population to the dictates and regulations of a restrictive government out of fear of repercussions for themselves and their families. Using the metaphor of a greengrocer who, out of fear rather than acquiescence to the ideology, hangs a sign declaring 'Workers of the world unite!' in his shop window,⁹⁶ Havel expresses his view that it is this fear, and the belief that not drawing direct attention - going about one's business, and behaving in a way that is seen to be loyal and beyond reproach such that they will be left to live life in relative safety and security - that significantly contributes to the continuation of a restrictive post-totalitarian society. By conforming to the mould that the government has dictated, and in doing so sacrificing any right to autonomy of thought or action, they have chosen to live a lie.

In contrast to this, Havel encouraged people to challenge the dominant ideology and their own participation in the day-to-day expression of this ideology. He advocated for the idea for the individual to behave in accordance to his or her own moral code, to be 'truthful' in their thoughts and actions, and to risk exposure by expressing their own opinions of their existences. It was through behaving in this manner, and in the questioning of governmental and societal expectations that an individual could 'live in truth'. The discussions of Havel,

⁹⁶ Václav Havel and Paul Wilson, 'The Power of the Powerless', 13.

Theatre of the Eighth Day and Autoperforationsartisten in the upcoming chapters will highlight how this idea of ‘living in truth’ is reflected in the motivations for and methods of creating the plays and performances that they did. They will demonstrate how these artists chose to deviate from the official expectations of their work in order to create plays and performances that showed (as they saw it) the ‘truth’ of life under communism in their countries.

Audience Role and Response

The desire and motivation to expose the untruths and manipulations of communist policies, and create plays and performances that expressed ‘truth’ on the part of the text or performer links directly into a third similarity between the work of Havel, Theatre of the Eighth Day and Autoperforationsartisten; that of their perception of the role of the audience and desired audience response. From the perspective of the artists being discussed, audience engagement with the work on both an emotional and intellectual level was essential to the success of a performance that was attempting to provide a ‘truthful’ experience. In a similar manner to Kershaw’s concept of ideological transaction, the dissident artists strived to

actively engage their audiences in the construction of meaning throughout the play and to challenge their community identity in order to inspire a response.⁹⁷

In a similar way to many of the artists who created ‘political theatre’ in the Anglo-American context,⁹⁸ Havel, Theatre of the Eighth Day and Autoperforationsartisten strove to create work that would challenge their audiences to critically analyse what they were viewing, to acknowledge and identify with the questions that were being raised, to think autonomously, and to recognise aspects of themselves and their own environments in the characters, situations or performers. They desired to create work that disallowed a ‘fourth wall’ or barrier between actor and audience, and refused to allow their audiences to disengage from what they were seeing or experiencing. Unlike, Brecht, Piscator and some of the Anglo-American artists who can be placed at the extreme end of Paterson’s political theatre spectrum (i.e. 7:84, Belts and Braces and Red Ladder) however, the artists discussed in this thesis did not wish for their performances to be directly ideological or didactic in nature. They were neither trying to educate nor steer their audiences to particular perspectives or interpretations, but rather to present the truth of the situation as they saw it, and challenge their audiences to engage as they could. As Lech Raczak commented when speaking of Theatre of the Eighth Day in the 1980s, the group was attempting to ‘remind people that

⁹⁷ Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance*, 257

⁹⁸ As discussed in the first section of this chapter, especially with regard to Piscator and Brecht.

behind the everyday world, or hidden somewhere in its drabness, are certain higher values.’⁹⁹

The artists discussed in this thesis employed numerous techniques, from thinly veiling the current issues and events of their countries in metaphor and symbolism, to creating symbolic or ‘everyman’ characters who could easily be interpreted, in order engage and communicate with their audiences. They desired the audience members to recognise themselves within the characters and within the situations such that they could not deny their complicity in the subjugation of themselves and their countries. Furthermore, the artists challenged many of the deeply held personal, social, and cultural beliefs of the audiences; for example the Polish tendency to revere the ‘heroes’ of the 19th century revolutions, or the East German (as supported by the communist doctrine) preoccupation with the strength and health of the body.¹⁰⁰ This was done in order to inspire discomfort, anger and disgust in the audience members such that their responses were ‘truthful’ rather than being tempered, that the audience members might recognise that many of these beliefs were learned rather than held, and that they might (temporarily) feel freed from the expectations of behaviour, society and history, such that they could think for themselves and dialogue honestly with other members of the audience.

⁹⁹ Raczak quoted in Jones, *Censorship: A World Encyclopaedia*, 412.

¹⁰⁰ Both of these ideas will be further discussed in chapters 3 and 4 respectively.

The desire to connect with and challenge their audiences was key to the development of the work created by Havel, Theatre of the Eighth Day and Autoperforationsartisten. Similar to many of the Anglo-American political theatre artists, they understood that the reciprocal nature of the actor/audience was vital to the process of communicating their ideas and perspectives surrounding the experiences of living under Soviet-style communist governments, and to opening a ‘truthful’ conversation in which the restrictions on thought and expression were temporarily removed. The case studies in the following chapters will demonstrate the individual methods used by the artists in order to connect with their audiences.

‘Second’ Societies

The dissent in the thoughts and actions of the artists created a further similarity; the creation of alternate or variance of a civil society. These societies, known in different countries as ‘the social self-organization of society’ (Poland), ‘parallel or independent’ (Czechoslovakia) and ‘second’ (Hungary), came into existence separately, and often without a system or structure of central leadership. There was little direct connection between different organisations, especially between countries; each focusing on the specific issues facing their own environments. Despite the limited nature of interactions between the groups, however, most shared similar goals of non-confrontational opposition. They did not intend to be outwardly political, to stage acts of ubiquitous protest, or to directly engage with the

authorities.¹⁰¹ Instead they strove to open channels for discussion and planning regarding issues such as the violation of human-rights, ecological destruction, censorship and the increasing threat of nuclear war. They were not attempting to create a movement that would overthrow or displace the communist government, but to create a society that operated differently; one that functioned on policies of plurality, tolerance, and the rejection of ideological thinking and violence.¹⁰²

The essential characteristics of the ‘independent society’ are kindness, tolerance, respect for the opinions of others, the acceptance of different human beings with love. Any vertical organization – hierarchization – of the ‘independent society; would at the same time bring about its demise. [...] ‘independent society’ does not compete for power. Its aim is not to replace the powers that be with power of another kind, but rather under this power – or beside it – to create a structure that respects other laws and in which the voice of the ruling power is heard only as an insignificant echo [...].¹⁰³

Engagement in these societies was considered dissident, and members were often the targets of surveillance, marginalisation and criminalisation. Despite this, however, these societies drew from significant cross-sections of the populations of the countries, including everyone from workers and farmers to the intelligentsia to ex-party members and functionaries, their commonality lying in a dissatisfaction with the neo-Stalinist normalisation policies, the economic crises, and the ever increasing sense of stagnation in society. As Jirous states,

¹⁰¹ This ties directly into the theories of ‘anti-politics’ as discussed previously.

¹⁰² Benda, Šimečka, Jirous, Dienstbier, Havel, Hejránek, and Šimsa, ‘Parallel Polis, or An Independent Society in Central and Easter Europe’.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 227.

‘Those who take part are active people who can no longer look passively at the general decay, marasmus, rigidity, bureaucracy, and suffocation of every living idea or sign of movement in the official sphere.’¹⁰⁴

Those who theorised on the development of these parallel or second societies in the 1970s and 1980s - Havel, Patočka, Benda, Michnik, amongst others, acknowledged two distinct but important elements about the origins of these groups. Firstly, that they were not a new invention. These types of society had a long history of developing as ‘underground’ movements, as spaces of expression and preservation during restrictive regimes throughout history. With variances on how visible they could be, these societies created places for those who could not openly speak out to discuss, organise, and educate. They worked to preserve the language and culture of invaded and occupied populations.¹⁰⁵ Secondly these theorists recognised that these types of parallel societies most often began in alternative cultural institutions, such as *samizdat* literature, underground music, and private or ‘living room’ theatre, and as a result it was acknowledged that if a ‘Parallel Polis’ or fully independent

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 228.

¹⁰⁵ For example the Floating Universities were established in Poland in the nineteenth century during periods of intense Russification in order to continue to educate those who had been excluded from the universities and to allow for study in Polish history and language. The creation and distribution of Samizdat publications preserved both historically important and new works of literature, poetry, philosophy and political writings. Additional examples include the ways in which churches and theatres strived to create places where people could speak and hear their native language and maintain a sense of national identity.

alternative society, that included education, economics and political policy, was to come about that it would need to take its cues from the cultural sector.

It was within these cultural sectors in the creation of unofficial, unsanctioned, and underground plays and performance that Havel, Theatre of the Eighth Day and Autoperforationsartisten contributed to the development of these secondary, parallel and independent societies. Their work, especially that which was produced after the institution of policies and restrictions of normalisation and martial law, further limited the content and locations of their performances, challenged the expectations of being and actions. It raised questions of why the population allowed itself to believe the official rhetoric despite personal experiences that stood in direct conflict with it. Additionally, it engaged audiences in such a way that they could not ignore or distance themselves from what they were viewing. The creation of work that did these things, and removed the distances between audience members and between audience and actor, all contributed to the creation of both a metaphoric and physical space in which, for the duration of the performance, an environment of relative freedom emerged. This space, where groups of possibly disparate people came together to experience, react, and discuss, a 'community of interest'¹⁰⁶ in Kershaw's definition, became one that was both parallel to but completely independent from the official ideology and

¹⁰⁶ Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance*, 30.

doctrine. It provided a space where dissident attitudes could be expressed, and populations could be addressed with specific issue regarding their own experiences and existences.

Conclusion

The framework developed in this chapter, built from the discussion of key elements of Anglo-American political theatre and Eastern Bloc dissident theatre, and the introduction of similarities between the works of dissident artists, has demonstrated that there is a definite need to discuss these works, and the works of other subversive and underground artists in the Eastern Bloc, as acts of dissidence, separate from the forms of political (and dissident) theatre created in comparatively democratic societies. The continuance of analysis of dissident works must take into account the differences in the experiences of censorship, control, marginalisation and criminalisation faced by the artists creating and producing in the Eastern Bloc, while also acknowledging similarities in the desire of these artist to use their work to subvert the status quo. The work itself and the analysis of said work must be allowed to be examined from its own cultural contexts and environments. The discussions in the upcoming chapters will demonstrate some of the many approaches used by dissident artists to critique and challenge political, social and cultural policies, showing that their works were products of their specific environments and experiences of living under soviet-style communist governments. These chapters will also demonstrate what was introduced in the previous section on the similarities and intersections in the work of different dissident artists. This will

further contribute to the development of the cultural and dramatic histories of the Cold War period.

CHAPTER 2 CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Havel: An Introduction

In the bitterly cold weeks leading up to Christmas 1989, hundreds of thousands of people, weary of shortages of food and energy, restrictions on travel, speech, and writing, and a governmental machine that had drained the country of resources and freedoms, gathered in Wenceslas Square in Prague to voice their opposition to the regime that they saw as having held Czechoslovakian society under its control for too long. In the wake of the dismantling of the Communist governments in Poland, and Hungary, and the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Czechoslovakians gathered to demand the end of communist control in their own country. Accounts describe crowds filling the square, making a cacophonous sound of clanking of jangling keys, rattling change, and loud chants of ‘*Havel na hrad*’ ‘Havel to the Castle’. The events of those weeks, which would come to be known as the Velvet Revolution, named so for the non-violent methods of the protesters, had begun after a government sanctioned march to commemorate Jan Opletal (a student who had stood against Nazi occupiers and had become a symbol of Czech resistance) turned into an anti-communist protest. After finishing their remembrances, the students involved in the protest continued to march toward the centre of the city where they were met by riot police who barred their passage to *Národní* (National) Street. The student protesters, who carried signs that stated ‘*we don’t want any violence*’¹

¹ Falk, *Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 104.

and chanting ‘*our hands are empty*’² meaning they were unarmed, halted their movements, and sat on the pavement with their candles; some were photographed handing flowers to the police. Despite this, the police moved forward and beat many of the students.

Many were seriously injured, and a rumor spread like wildfire throughout the city that one student had been killed. It was later proved to be incorrect, but it no longer mattered. The children of Prague had been viciously beaten. It was the beginning of the end.³

Incensed by the violent reaction to a peaceful protest, subsequent marches and demonstrations occurred. Václav Havel, along with other members of Charter 77, and other dissident groups, formed the *Obcanske* (Civic) Forum, to coordinate and organise activism, resistance, strikes and demonstrations, and lead the group talks with the government in early December. These actions resulted in the resignation of the Czechoslovakian communist leader, the transition into a democratic government, and the election by unanimous vote on December 29th 1989 of Havel to the presidency.⁴

² ‘Europe Remembering the Velvet Revolution’, *Pushing Back the Curtain*, BBC Radio 4, 17 November 1999.

³ Falk, *Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 104.

⁴ For detailed discussions of the progression of political events during the Velvet Revolution see: Lester Kurtz, ‘Czechoslovakia’s Velvet Revolution’ published online by the International Centre on Non-violent Conflict < <http://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/> > [accessed 9 April 2015].; John Keane, *Václav Havel: A Political Tragedy in Six Acts* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).; Victor Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989: The Fall of the Soviet Empire* (London: Hachette UK, 2009).; Bernard Wheaton and Zdenek Kavan, *Velvet Revolution: Czechoslovakia, 1988-1991* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992).

Prior to these weeks, and his elevation to political power, Havel's name was known, throughout the country, as a defender of human rights, and a dissident set apart by his commitment to change. He was known for more than a dozen plays banned from publication and performance because of their content and implications, as well as letters and several essays. He was also recognised for his participation in the drafting, signing and delivery of *Charter 77*, a document which addressed violations by the Czechoslovakian government to the human rights section of the Helsinki Accords, which guaranteed freedom of public expression, the right to an education, the right of free religious expression, the right to form trade unions, the right to leave and re-enter the country, the right to criticize society through the media, and the right to privacy.⁵ In his essay, *Power of the Powerless*,⁶ first published in 1978, Havel openly challenged what he described as the lie that citizens must live, in order to exist within the structures and restrictions of the post-totalitarian system. He beseeched them to rebel against the fear-enforced conformity and to 'live in truth'; this term he defines as any activity that questions or confronts the status quo of the society:

When I speak of living within the truth, I naturally do not have in mind only products of conceptual thought, such as protest or a letter written by a group of intellectuals. It can be any means by which a person or group revolts against manipulation: anything from a letter by intellectuals to a worker's strike, from a rock concert to a student demonstration, from refusing to vote in the farcical elections to making an open speech at some official congress, or even a hunger strike, for instance.⁷

⁵'Helsinki Accords' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/260615/Helsinki-Accords> [accessed 27 January 2014]; and Rocamora, *Acts of Courage*, 166.

⁶ Václav Havel and Paul Wilson, 'The Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central-Eastern Europe', *International Journal of Politics*, (1985), 23-96.

⁷ *Ibid*, 43.

Through Havel's participation in *Charter 77* and his writings, in addition to his involvement in and support of the Prague Spring, his name became directly associated with dissent, and with criticism of the neo-Stalinist post-normalisation regime. He became known to the wider Czechoslovakian society (outside of the intellectual and dissident circles) as a prominent voice in the struggle against a 'normalised' society. Additionally, he became a direct target of the government, who proceeded to subject him to surveillance, interrogate, imprison and propagandise against him until the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia. This chapter will explore and discuss the development of Václav Havel as a dissident writer and political critic through examination of his early life, the development and evolution of his theatrical style and through thematic and stylistic analysis of *The Garden Party*⁸ and the 'Vanek' plays.⁹

It was not with normalisation, unlike Pavel Kohout – a playwright and contemporary of Havel's - and many other writers and intellectuals who had supported the communist state in the 1950s and 1960s, that Havel's dissident activities began. Havel and his family had never aligned themselves with the communist party. Keane discusses how Havel was born into privilege, his grandfather and father were both architects and builders of some of the most fashionable and beautiful buildings in Prague and his uncle, Miloš Havel was an important contributor to Czech cinema¹⁰ Havel was raised in affluence at his family's country home, far from the realities of Nazi-occupied Prague. Encouraged by his mother who, as the

⁸ Václav Havel, *The Garden Party and Other Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 3-51.

⁹ *Ibid*, 185-266.

¹⁰ Keane, *Václav Havel*, 6-33.

daughter of a prominent Silesian journalist, author and diplomat, understood how powerful words could be, Havel developed keen interests in a variety of intellectual subjects, and his love of literature grew due to the wealth of books in the family's private library.

...ten-year-old Václav sat indoors, blissfully reading through the family library. He devoured volumes of poetry, literature and philosophy. He read works of Karel Čapek, the Czech playwright, and Tomáš Masaryk, the father of Czech democracy.¹¹

It was from this reading that a young Havel was introduced to the philosophical and satirical explorations of greed, complacency, and the relativities of human values and motivations present in Čapek's plays and novels, such as *Rossum's Universal Robots* (1920), *The Insect Play* (1921) *The Absolute at Large* (1922), *An Atomic Phantasy* (1931) and *A War With the Newts* (1936). These themes would help develop his writing style and support his exploration into the absurd. Havel was also significantly influenced by the writings of Tomáš Masaryk, who as a humanist philosopher and statesman (he was a philosophy professor prior to becoming president of Czechoslovakia between 1918-1935) believed that a democratic state could not be formed or maintained without an emphasis on ethics and morals. He believed in a democratic society that focused on the good of the people, placing the needs of the community over power or modernisation.¹² These ideas would inspire the development of Havel's dissidence as they were, in his view, in direct opposition to the values expounded by

¹¹ Rocamora, *Acts of Courage*, 9.

¹² Ondřej Ditrych, Vladimír Handl, Nik Hynek and Vít Střecký, 'Understanding Havel?' *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 46 (2013), 407-417 (408).

the Soviet-style communist government that led Czechoslovakia. He would also adopt and adapt these beliefs into his own political and theatrical writings as well as his own presidential philosophies after his election.

In the years just prior to the Communist coup in 1948, Havel attended a private boarding school that catered for many of the children of affluent Czechs. In many ways, despite the Second World War and following years of post-war struggle, Havel's childhood was comparatively idyllic, isolated deep within the Moravian forests. It was not until the Communist coup that life for young Václav Havel began to change.

The Czechoslovakian coup d'état, known in communist historiography as 'Victorious February' occurred in the winter of 1947-48. It was bloodless and appeared to carry the support of a significant portion of the country. This was due to a generalised public view, of the Red Army as the liberators of the country from Nazism, as well as the holding of a moderately pro-Soviet perspective, following the withdrawal of Western funds after the Czechoslovakian government refused to support the possible political rehabilitation and rearmament of Germany. The Czechoslovakian communist party, which already had significant presence in the country during the interwar years, including the support of many artists, writers, poets and other cultural figures, continued to grow their size and influence by consolidating the country's other left-wing parties, as well as appealing to the public to support and join the party. The party spoke of support for cooperation and friendship with

the USSR, and appealed to a post-war belief that socialism could lead to a better environment for the Czechoslovaks. ‘The communist generation [...] were endowed with faith that a new and better community would be built. Utopian idealism was matched with a sense of optimism and social solidarity.’¹³ For these reasons the coup came about with relative ease when compared to the establishment of controlling communist governments in other Central European countries. The party had successfully gained control by masking its Stalinist core; however following the shift in power, their actions began to reflect the Moscow party line, using tactics of terror and oppression. A series of purges were carried out, targeting those who were opposed politically, socially or culturally to the new regime. Show trials were staged to further criminalise oppositional persons, and imprisonment, exile and executions resulted from the establishment of a system that was nearly impervious to active resistance.

The bloodless Communist takeover was immediately followed by the violent Sovietization of the whole country. [...] Numerous labor and penal camps existed, and the legal system was transformed into a tool of oppression. Show trials were held with 233 political death sentences, 250,000 political prisoners, [...] and 500,000-750,000 victims of religious discrimination. In total, two million people were politically persecuted or discriminated against during the Stalinist period. During this ‘catch up’ phase in Sovietization, Czechoslovakia experienced the most intense repression per head in all of Eastern Europe. The existing structures of civil society were eliminated and the potential of democratic resistance crushed.¹⁴

¹³ Falk, *Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 60.

¹⁴ Jan Pauer, in *1968 in Europe: A History of Protest and Activism*, ed. by Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 164-165.

The changes to Havel's life came swiftly after the coup. His family was targeted as being of the 'bourgeoisie', which in the Czechoslovakian Stalinist context meant anyone who had benefited financially from the capitalist interwar period. Their problems increased due to their refusal to join the Communist party. By 1950, Havel had been forced from the boarding school as the secret police began to weed out the 'privileged', and he was subsequently expelled from the state school in Prague where he had attempted to continue his compulsory education as a result of his class status. Additionally, during 1952, Havel's father was removed from his job and placed in a menial state job, and the building that had been built by his grandfather and had been the family's home, was seized by the state. The family was forced to move to a small apartment on the top floor of the building. By the end of the 1950s, all of the wealth and property that had been held on both sides of Havel's family was gone.

The rapid shift in Havel's domestic life and prospects for the future impacted him deeply. He began rebelling against communist rule; reading banned literature and supporting the cause of banned poets and other writers. He also began to use his burgeoning talent as a writer to speak out against what he saw as injustices at a writer's conference in 1956. Reportedly, standing fearless in the front of a room filled with famous writers, all who were members of the Writer's Union and the Communist Party, he delivered an impassioned and shocking speech that criticised the current trends in literature, and the disenfranchisement of certain Czechoslovakian writers.

Dressed soberly in a suit and tie, [...] this twenty-year-old unknown shocked the establishment with a daring speech challenging the status quo and its belief that art must be faithful to Socialist Realism. He also confronted the issue of official and suppressed literature head on. Why did the editors not recognize the writers of Group 42 and the esteemed Czech dramatist Karel Čapek? Did the editors secretly believe that modern art was bourgeois? Or were the editors silent because deep down they could no longer agree about Socialist Realism's hold over art and were simply too afraid to say so?¹⁵

The reactions to this speech were wide and varied, some praising him for his bravery and others dismissing him as a 'bourgeois hippy'; his entrance into the world of writers was cemented. Following this debut, still marginalised and denied access to higher education, Havel served a two-year term in the army before returning to Prague and securing employment at the ABC theatre, followed the next year by his move to the Theatre on the Balustrade (*Divadlo na zábradlí*). This was where his evolution from stagehand and amateur dramatist to a playwright known in both Eastern Bloc and the Western World, and a dangerous dissident in the eyes of the authorities began.

The Balustrade Theatre was founded in 1958, by Jiří Suchý, and Ivan Vyskočil, the team who had opened the jazz and performance cabaret Reduta, as a venue that would focus on more conventionally theatrical forms such as text-based performances. The formation of this theatre came out of an unofficial movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s in Prague during which a number of small theatres developed. The movement was designed to create

¹⁵ Rocamora, *Acts of Courage*, 17.

spaces separate from the monumental architecture, inflexible operations and elaborate administrative machinery of theatres like The National Theatre and the Vinohrady Theatre. It wanted to break from the system of theatre production that required specific numbers of premieres and reprises each season, the inadequate rehearsal schedules and limited repertoire. They sought to develop theatre that brought together small groups of committed, like-minded individuals to work on innovative pieces that the artists were fully committed to, and perform for audiences interested specifically in the work rather than regular theatre goers.¹⁶ The Balustrade was central to this movement and became, from Burian's perspective one of the four most significant of these theatres in Prague during the 1960s.¹⁷

At the Balustrade Havel found what he had been looking for; a theatre that was intimate and charming, but more significantly a place where the company was young - having been formed only two years prior - and was interested in exploring new ideas and forms of theatre rather than recreating or reviving works from the past. Here was a place where Havel felt that he could make a contribution. These formative years at the Balustrade began with Havel working with Ivan Vyskočil, collaboratively writing *Hitchhiking*, his first experiment with the absurd, and ended with him working with Jan Grossman (who took over running the

¹⁶ For more on the motivations and developments of the 'small theatre movement' in Prague see: Jarka Burian, *Modern Czech Theatre: Reflector and Conscience of a Nation*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 115-116.; Jarka Burian, 'Art and Relevance: The Small Theatres of Prague, 1958-1970' *Educational Theatre Journal* 23.3 (1971), 229-257.; Adam Grunzke, 'Models of Aesthetic Subversion: Ideas, Spaces, and Objects in Czech Theatre and Drama of the 1950s and 1960s' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Toronto, 2001), 11-21.

¹⁷ Burian, *Modern Czech Theatre*, 116.

theatre in 1962) an eminent Czech theatre critic, dramaturg and director. With Grossman as his close colleague and collaborator, Havel was inspired and encouraged to write his first full-length play for production as part of the 1963-1964 season.

On the night of December 3rd 1963, an audience made primarily of Prague's intellectuals, writers, and artists packed into the tiny auditorium at Theatre on the Balustrade and waited to see the first full-length play by a young, aspiring playwright, Havel. What neither the playwright nor the audience could anticipate was that the play they were about to see, *The Garden Party (Zahradni Slavnost)* was going to change the face of Czechoslovakian Theatre, and by extension, the life of the playwright, permanently. Through his use of intense satire he would expose and confront the absurd nature of life under communism, as he perceived it. Utilising philosophical theories, as well as literary and dramatic techniques attained through his admiration and study of Albert Camus, Karel Čapek and Franz Kafka (amongst others), Havel would create a theatrical style that was expressionist and absurd, political and satirical, hopeful and despairing. All done with the intent of creating an awareness for the audience of the world in which they lived and in an attempt to 'live in truth'.

Influences and the Development of a Style

In order to discuss the way in which Havel developed and made use of this theatrical aesthetic, it is necessary to explore his perspective on Czechoslovakian society under communism, and the ways in which his childhood experiences and influences contributed to

the evolution of his playwriting. A discussion of Havel's perceptions of the absurd nature of life under communism, and the resulting development of his theatrical aesthetic, must include three distinct, though deeply interconnected, ideas. The first element essential to this discussion is an evaluation of how the marginalisation he endured as young person contributed to the development of his interest in works of philosophy, literature, political biographies and theatre. These subjects would play an instrumental role in the evolution of his style, as well as allowing him to view the communist state from a dissident perspective, initially possessed by few, which led to his perception of the totalitarian state as a mechanised juggernaut. The second necessary element of this discussion is an examination of the ways that Havel's playwriting style both mirrors and differs from the absurdism of the Western playwrights. The final element is an analysis of the ways that he used absurd techniques and language in order to express his opinions and dissenting attitudes. The intersections of these elements contributed to the development of Havel's unique style and established him as playwright unafraid to speak out and challenge the communist system.

After the 1948 communist takeover, as a child from a 'bourgeois' family, Havel was ostracised and marginalised by the Party government. The school that he had attended, the College of King George of Poděbrady, which had been peopled mainly by the children of the 'privileged' class, was closed in 1950. From this point, Havel was denied places in comprehensive and (later) higher education. The communists struck out at the children of

the bourgeoisie, placing blame on them for the situation of their births and seeking to rehabilitate them,

[...] visiting the inequity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation. The only way for the sons to redeem themselves was by purification through the salutary effects of manual labour and total immersion in the lifestyle and values of the working class.¹⁸

As a result of these policies Havel took a job as a chemical lab assistant at the Prague School of Chemical Technology while attempting to finish his secondary education taking evening classes after his work day had ended. Reflecting on his early childhood in *Disturbing the Peace* (1986), Havel spoke of how important this marginalisation became to the development of his ways of thinking and writing, providing him with the ability to view Czechoslovakian society in a way that was uncommon, to see what he regarded as absurd:

My childhood feelings of exclusion, or of the instability of my place in the world...could not but have influence on the way I viewed the world – a view which is in fact a key to my plays. It is a view “from below,” a view from the “outside,” a view that has grown from the experience of absurdity. What else but a profound feeling of being excluded can enable a person better to see the absurdity of the world and his own existence or, to put it more soberly, the absurd dimensions of the world and his own existence?¹⁹

¹⁸ Michael Zantovsky, *Havel: A Life* (New York: Grove Press, 2014), 33.

¹⁹ Václav Havel and Karel Hvížala, *Disturbing the Peace* (New York: Knopf New York, 1990).

This view 'from below' from 'outside', although challenging to a young Havel, provided him with the opportunity to see the mechanisms of the communist machine from a different perspective than many others. He could see the ways in which the propaganda, the system of punishment and rewards, and the memory of the Stalinist terror was used to control the population: the way that the insidiousness of the communist ideal infiltrated every aspect of life until the thought of another way of living was all but annihilated.²⁰ Despite these hardships, as Rocamora discusses, Havel's mother was devoted to the education of her sons, encouraging them both to read extensively including books of philosophy, literature and drama which had been banned as decadent, western and not in style or support of socialist realism. Additionally, his mother encouraged him to interact with other intellectual youths who had been marginalised by the communist government. This resulted in the development of the '36ers'.²¹

The '36ers' was a group of young people who would, in the future, become philosophers, musicians, writers and essayists, their name drawn from their common year of birth. Many were marginalised by the communist government, much in the way Havel was, their parents subjected to financial ruin and imprisonment, their own futures impacted by denial of formal education. From the autumn of 1952 until 1954, during what was considered by many to be the darkest and most repressive days of the Stalinist purges and show trials, threatening the

²⁰ See Keane, *Václav Havel: A Political Tragedy in Six Acts.*; Rocamora, *Acts of Courage.*; and Havel and Hvižala, *Disturbing the Peace.*

²¹ Rocamora, *Acts of Courage*, 7-17.

freedoms and lives of their parents, the 36ers met every Saturday at the Café Slavia at the corner of Národní Street in the centre of Prague. It was within this group that many of these young writers and artists found inspiration and like-minded individuals who shared their love of knowledge, here that they studied and discussed banned works of literature, philosophy and political theory that had been discovered in second-hand shops and smuggled into the country to be circulated:

They debated philosophy and poetry; they poured over forbidden books such as Kafka's *The Castle*; they discussed theatre, they read Masaryk and the memoirs of Eduard Beneš, the Czech leader overthrown by the Communists in 1948; they discussed Nietzsche and Marx's *Das Kapital*.²²

It was also here, Rocamora maintains, that Havel's explorations of philosophical works such as Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus*, and literary works such as Kafka's *The Trial*, *The Castle*, and *The Metamorphosis* would have flourished. Additionally, it was within this group where Havel would first be exposed to new, Western playwrights like Samuel Beckett and those who wrote for Western audiences such as Eugène Ionesco. This period, Havel's association with the members of this group, and the literature he discovered here was essential to his development as a playwright and essayist. From each of these works he drew inspiration that blended with his own perceptions of his environment, and led to the development of his own unique style.

²² Ibid, 12.

Expressionism

A highly influential genre in the development of Havel's writing style was German expressionism. As Carlson discusses, expressionism, one of the most significant avant-garde artistic and theatrical movements that grew out of and in response to the rapid industrialisation, and changing views on science, religion, art and technology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, often presented distorted and nightmarish visions of a future in which mechanisation of both society and people had occurred. Despite sharing the characteristics of 'fidelity to surface reality and interest in social questions...' ²³ with Italian futurism, expressionism did not idolise the rapid technological developments of the early twentieth century:

The futurists' fascination with modern machinery and the products of industrial society was by no means shared by the majority of expressionists; on the contrary, they tended to feel that the spirit of the individual was being crushed by these developments. ²⁴

These visions were further intensified by World War One, during which many witnessed extensive atrocities both on and off of the battlefields, due in part to the inclusion of the new machinery of war: planes, aerial bombs, tanks, and machine guns. These machines of war allowed for huge numbers of casualties to be inflicted without close combat, resulting in an incognisance of the individual humans who were being destroyed. From the perspective of

²³ Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre*, 346.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

the expressionists, the distance that could now be placed between the individual and the destruction he inflicts resulted in a loss of empathy, individual judgement of situations and common sense, which ultimately dehumanised society. The expressionists were adversaries of the depersonalising nature of social systems, favouring subjectivity, distortion and abstraction, which they felt could better show the truth of existence; additionally, they feared and rejected what the modern machinery of the industrializing society was doing to society.²⁵

Much of this movement is reflected in the work of Karel Čapek, a Czech writer of the interwar period; one whose work had significant impact on Havel. Čapek's most famous work *R.U.R.* (*Rossum's Universal Robots*) depicts a futuristic world in which humanoid robots, originally designed and built to serve the human population, rebel and overthrow their creators, who have lost the strength and ability to fight back, ultimately resulting in the annihilation of the human race. Other writings by Čapek express similar themes of the loss of human society through increased reliance on science, machinery, and later government order.²⁶

These writings were quite significant to the development of Havel's style in that they depict a world in which human beings have deliberately offered up their free will to machines in the expectation that this will improve society, and consequently lose everything. This theme

²⁵ See Carlson, *Theories of Theatre*, 345-347.; Cardullo, *Theories of the Avant-garde Theatre*.; Berghaus, *Theatre, Performance and the Historical Avant-Garde*, 26-45.

²⁶ Karel Čapek, *Čapek: Four Plays*, trans. by Peter Majer and Cathy Porter (London: Methuen, 1999).

regularly appears in Havel's writings. For example, Hugo, the main character in *The Garden Party*, rapidly rises through governmental positions, and in doing so sacrifices his identity to the bureaucracy, the supporting characters of *The Memorandum* have fully accepted the use of the new and 'efficient' language of Pitydepe without question, and a machine is brought to the home of Dr Huml in *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* to define the characteristics of human personality. Close analysis of his plays and political writings demonstrate that Havel views the communist government as a kind of machine that, despite being created to help and further society and the human race, has developed a kind of sentience and, as a result, has consumed the human race, mechanising them, almost to the point of obliteration.

In his 1978 essay *Power of the Powerless*, Havel discussed the characteristics and functioning of Czechoslovakia in the wake of normalisation, the Neo-Stalinist system of government put in place after the Warsaw Pact Invasion of 1968 (which Havel refers to as the 'post-totalitarian system'). While this particular statement was not published until later in Havel's career and refers to 'normalised' Czechoslovakia, this perspective of the communist society as a machine is present in many of the plays he wrote throughout his career. In this discussion, he highlights the idea of society as a kind of machine, a machine whose function is not to create but to consume. This is a society that, much in the manner of a panoptic one, is built and functions through the seamless integration of every aspect society including that of the population. Though it is unclear if Havel, at this point, was familiar with Foucault's

Discipline and Punish (1975), or the work of Jeremy Bentham (from who Foucault developed the theory of panopticism) his critiques of the post-totalitarian system reflects the invasiveness of mechanised systems based around a single point of control, and recognises the dehumanising nature of constant surveillance and control. He states:

Part of the essence of the post-totalitarian system is that it draws everyone into its sphere of power, not so they may realize themselves as human beings, but so they may surrender their human identity in favor of the identity of the system, that is, so they may become agents of the system's general automatism and servants of its self-determined goals, so they may participate in the common responsibility for it, so they may be pulled into and ensnared by it... so they may learn to be comfortable with their involvement, to identify with it as though it were something natural and inevitable and, ultimately, so they may - with no external urging - come to treat any non-involvement as an abnormality, as arrogance, as an attack on themselves, as a form of dropping out of society.²⁷

The essay continues to discuss how this process of mechanising society relies on the total subjugation of both systems and people to the government, turning people into nothing more than cogs, and in doing so, annihilates individual personality and any aspect that makes people essentially human.²⁸ As a result, themes of identity, free will, and the struggle to maintain humanity in the face of this all-consuming societal system are central to Havel's work, where he continuously explores the consequences of both becoming part of and resisting the machine.

²⁷ Havel and Hvižala, *Disturbing the Peace*, 52.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

In spite of similarities between the tenets of expressionism and with Čapek's themes Havel's work cannot be viewed as entirely expressionistic, as most of the settings for his plays reflect a realistic world. His plays are set in recognisable, middle-class Czechoslovakian homes as in *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*) and bureaucratic offices as in *The Memorandum*. His characters are meant to be Czechoslovakian 'everymen', as Hugo is in *The Garden Party* - rather than abstracted ones.²⁹ Furthermore, Havel's plays do not end in a spiritual awakening or redemption, a common trait of expressionist plays, such as the Oskar Kokoschka's *Murderer Hope of Women* and Lothar Schreyer's *Sturmbühne*.³⁰ Instead his plays are often open-ended with little actual resolution as in the 'Vanek' plays. Alternately they end where they began with only minor differences as in *The Memorandum*; where the only change is that one artificial language has been replaced by another.

Absurdism

Amongst other significant and influential writers, philosophers, poets and leaders who had an impact on Havel's developing style was Albert Camus, who brought the concept of absurdism into his frame of reference. Camus is especially important to the discussion of the absurd, as it is his philosophy of the concept, rather than the theatrical adaptation of the term, made by Martin Esslin in his work *Theatre of the Absurd* (1960), that forms the base of

²⁹ Rocamora, *Acts of Courage*, 55-67.

³⁰ Berghaus, *Theatre, Performance and the Historical Avant-Garde*, 64-70.

Havel's earliest plays. It is important to note, prior to discussing the impact Camus had on Havel, that Camus' philosophies related to the existential predicament of human beings in the modern world, rather than individuals³¹ living under a particular governmental structure or regime as it relates to Havel's work. Camus' philosophy is of the presence of the absurd in daily life, as discussed in the *Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), is reliant on two main ideas, that of alienation, and that of the attempted reconciliation or juxtaposition of fundamentally conflicting concepts. The alienation he speaks of rises out of the loss of the familiar places, either physical or psychological; it is the separation of individuals from that which grounds them in a recognisable world:

A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.³²

It is a person adrift in a world that is fundamentally unfamiliar that leads to the search or into the conflict that is the second key element of Camus' philosophy. The second key element, the conflict of irreconcilable concepts, as Camus discussed, evolves from the individual's search for concrete explanation or meaning in an essentially ephemeral universe in which

³¹ The discussion of the 'individual' in this section is less about a specific sense of individual identity and more about the experience of a person (any person, regardless of gender) in the post-war world. Here it is used as an alternate for 'man' 'woman' or 'one'.

³² Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. by Justin O'Brian (New York: Knopf Publishing, 1969), 13.

there is no absolute; absurdity arises from this conflict. The presence of this absurdity in the world leads to hopelessness, rejection, and despair if the individual chooses to reject it. However, Camus expresses his belief that there is a way in which to be happy in an absurd world. In order to do so one must be aware of the absurd and yet strive to coexist with it, 'So it is with the absurd: it is a question of breathing with it, of recognizing its lessons and recovering their flesh. In this regard the absurd joy [*par excellence*] is creation.'³³

Camus' philosophy of the absurd is vital to understanding Havel's plays as it speaks to several major themes he employs in his work. One of the most significant of these themes that presents itself in most of Havel's plays, especially those often described as absurdist, *The Garden Party* (1963), *The Memorandum* (1965) and *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* (1968), (those written and produced prior to normalisation) is the conflict between the individual and their environment. In these plays Havel very clearly expresses his opinion that there is no way to reconcile the individual, with the communist machine. One cannot have both a personal identity and be a cog in the government machine; these are irreconcilable states of being. Each of the three plays listed above directly address the conflict between individual and society, each has a character that either struggles against or is consumed by the system. As a result of this essential conflict, absurd situations and existences arise for the characters, including the creations of new, essentially meaningless

³³ Ibid, 86.

languages, the complete loss of personality to the point where the character's own parents don't recognise him, and the development of sentient emotions in a computer.

As mentioned previously, due to the specific focus of each of the writers, differences do exist in the way that the absurd is perceived of and expressed. Havel's view on the absurd differs from Camus', in that he [Havel] rejects the idea that one can achieve happiness through awareness and acceptance of the absurdity. Within Havel's work there is no happy medium, nor is there a way to coexist with the absurdity. It was impossible, in Havel's frame of reference, to be aware of the absurdity and accept it, as acceptance of the absurdity resulted in a loss of individuality and the ability to think critically.

In order to highlight a further important difference that existed between absurdist theatre as it was created in Czechoslovakia and how it was created in the democratic nations of Western Europe and the United States it is necessary to once more examine the dissimilarities in the daily experiences of people living in different political and social worlds.³⁴ In the post-war world of the democratic Western nations where, as Michael Bennett discusses, there was a 'displacement of the hope for utopia with the hope for heterotopia,'³⁵ artists were confronted

³⁴ For the purposes of clarity in this section, references to absurdism, and theatre of the absurd in 'Western Europe', the discussion being had refers to nations with democratic governments in place. This discussion also includes The United States, as a democratic nation in which absurdism is discussed as both a philosophy and a genre.

³⁵ Michael Bennett, *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet and Pinter* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 14-15

with the challenge of reimagining or visualising a world that had been significantly and permanently altered. Resulting from a loss in faith in the big, pre-existing political, religious, and philosophical systems, questions emerged regarding the roles and goals of people within this transformed landscape, and thus emerging or reemerging theatrical styles responded to this change.³⁶ Within these post-war ‘absurd’ plays the conflicts that resulted in absurdity were conflicts of a more personal and philosophical nature. Characters sought explanation and meaning for their own existence, desired a better understanding of the universe and their place in it. Conflict arose when this answer was not forthcoming; when, as Nagel states, ‘In ordinary life a situation is absurd when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy, between pretention or aspiration and reality [...]’.³⁷ Faced with this paradox the character(s) attempt to escape to a situation where they once more feels in control of the physical or mental environment. To do this they can attempt to instil meaning into the world through repetitive actions, such as Winnie’s ritual of brushing her teeth and combing her hair in Beckett’s *Happy Days* or Clov’s opening and peering out the windows in *End Game*, or accept a situation that disrupts or contradicts a mundane existence, as Ruth does in Harold Pinter’s *The Homecoming*.

³⁶ While the specific idea of ‘theatre of the absurd’ was not discussed as its own genre until the post-war era, precursors of the style can be seen in the works of earlier writers such as Alfred Jarry, Witold Gombrowicz and others.

³⁷ Thomas Nagel, ‘The Absurd’, *The Journal of Philosophy* 68. 20, (1971), 716-727 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2024942>> [accessed 27 March 2015] (718)

Essentially Western absurdist theatre focused on more abstract or philosophical questions, those that addressed the ways in which we make meaning in a world where the systems that had previously provided the securities of faith, nationalism, and controlling societal norms had broken down. The characters in these plays struggle to identify a goal (and related action) that will result in a noticeable change in their on-going attempts to understand their purpose in their given environments.

By virtue of the differences in governmental and social systems, absurdism in the East could not rely on the abstract philosophical themes that were central to absurdism in the West. This was primarily due to the official doctrine that socialist society was collectivist. This view held to the belief that everyone had the same goal in life, that of becoming the ideal Soviet man or woman. Through fully committing oneself to their role of worker, party member, and (in the case of women) mother, and sublimating any personal desire or goal in order to benefit the state, all of one's questions regarding their place in the universe were answered.

38

The Western Theatre of the Absurd highlighted man's fundamental bewilderment and confusion, stemming from the fact that man has no answers to the basic existential questions: why we are alive, why we have to die, why there is injustice and suffering. East European Soviet-type socialism proudly proclaimed that it had answers to all

³⁸ This idea was further discussed in chapter 1

these questions and, moreover, that it was capable of eliminating suffering and setting all injustices right. To doubt this was subversive.³⁹

Resulting from this perspective, despite the dissident opposition to this type of theoretical collectively, the absurd theatre produced in the Eastern Bloc presented the struggles faced by the characters in the plays as primarily external rather than internal. The characters still struggled against the confinements they felt they suffered in their current environments, however, it wasn't conflict with existential questions that made them feel confined, it was the imposition of Soviet-style socialism on every aspect of their life that did. Ralph Yarrow, in his discussion of the Absurd in the Eastern European Experience comments,

The Absurd, as I define it here, is also a performance – an ecological response to the oppression exercised by these systems [...] of political and social control which determine the mobility or rather lack of mobility of the oppressed, and deny them the access to, or the right of thinking, feeling and behaving in ways other than those prescribed. In the case of Eastern Europe [...] this nexus of control is directly experienced in terms of incarceration or construction by an 'external' system, which operates physically through the denial or restriction of living space, through prohibition of relational activities and compulsion or control of the forms of motion or position that bodies and persons could adopt.⁴⁰

Robert Skloot, in spite of his description of Pinter's plays as 'non-ideological' which can be argued, highlights how this difference of perspectives impacted the works of Pinter and Havel. 'Pinter, who writes in a democracy, is interested in existential freedom and is non-

³⁹Jan Culík, 'The Theatre of the Absurd: The West and the East' (2000) <<http://www2.arts.gla.ac.uk/Slavonic/Absurd.htm>> [accessed 10 January 2014].

⁴⁰Ralph Yarrow, 'Mutant Bodies: The Absurd in the Eastern European Experience' in *Rethinking the Theatre of the Absurd: Ecology, the Environment and the Greening of the Modern Stage*, ed. by Carl Lavery and Clare Finburgh (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) 108.

ideological; confinement is a condition of life, not of politics.’⁴¹ Whereas ‘Havel, who wrote his plays under tyranny, is deeply ideological in both attitude and experience.’⁴² Skloot continues to develop this argument by commenting on the internal nature of Pinter’s oppressors versus the external nature of Havel’s, ‘For Pinter, the threatening “Other” is whoever happens to be the annihilating force of the moment; for Havel, the “Other” is always the state [...]’⁴³

Resulting from this difference in perspective, the internal versus external struggles of the characters with their environments, many of the Western absurdist plays in Eastern Europe were read as having distinct, direct political meanings. Despite blatant political statement not necessarily being the intention of the playwrights,⁴⁴ the presentation of characters whose conflict and alienation from his or her world occur due to questions of identity and purpose, could be viewed as a deeply subversive, and therefore political, act in the Eastern Bloc as it challenged the idea that these questions had been resolved in the development of the Soviet-socialist state. This impacted the ways that audiences experienced and interacted with absurdist plays based on their own environments and contexts. Goetz-Stankiewicz states,

⁴¹ Robert Skloot, ‘Václav Havel: The Once and Future Playwright’ *The Kenyon Review* 15.2 (1993) 223-231 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4336855>> [accessed 10 April 2015], 224

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Martin Esslin has historically defined theatre of the Absurd as apolitical in nature (using Brechtian structures to discuss political theatre). This, however, has been repeatedly challenged and more contemporary scholarship such as that of Bennett and Lavey suggest that while making political statements may not have been the most prominent intention of the absurdist playwrights, defining them as apolitical dismisses many of the undercurrents of the texts.

Plays, which no longer talk *about* the absurdity of man's existence but illustrate it with concrete examples, seem to change their nature with the social climate of an audience in another country and yield multiple meanings which the author might not have foreseen. They become something like fables – though without a moral structure – applicable to a variety of basic situations.⁴⁵

The differences in styles and themes resulting from the context in which the plays were written was deeply influential on Havel's development. His reading of Beckett and Ionesco during his time with the '36ers' served as some of the education he would use to help him develop his own absurdist style which he would employ in his plays produced at the Balustrade. Further he embraced the idea of the ability in the absurdist style to simultaneously engage and disengage with politics.

Essentially, the differences of interpretation and impact between the Eastern and Anglo-American experiences of the absurd are rooted in the divergences in living in democratic versus communist societies. Differences such as the view of the individual versus the collective, the search for metaphysical truths versus the experiences of daily existence, and the comparative freedoms of democracy versus the restrictions of totalitarianism.

The main difference between the West European and the East European plays is that while the West European plays deal with a predicament of an individual or a group of individuals in a situation stripped to the bare, and often fairly abstract and metaphysical essentials, the East European plays mostly show an individual trapped within the cogwheels of a social system. The social context of the West European absurd plays is usually subdued and theoretical: in the East European plays it is

⁴⁵ Goetz-Stankiewicz, *The Silenced Theatre*, 29-30.

concrete, menacing and fairly realistic: it is usually covered by very transparent metaphors.⁴⁶

These differences, however, while significant, do not create a complete divergence in the ways that Eastern and Western European absurdism was written and experienced; a number of similarities existed both in theme, style, and practice.

One of the most prominent thematic similarities in absurdist plays is the question of identity. Both Eastern and Western European absurdist plays ask questions of who we are, how we exist in our own environments, and how our identities are shaped by the world in which we live and our association with others. Characters of the absurd, such as Solange and Claire in Jean Genet's *The Maids*, or Huml in *The Intense Difficulty of Concentration*, are presented as people who are unsure about their role and purpose in life. They are lost, searching, or presenting themselves as someone who has all of the answers despite, realistically, having very few. Many of the characters in both Western and Eastern European absurdist theatre are 'destroyed by a thuggish, malevolent society or "birthed" into a culture which may not be as corrupt as it is pragmatically brutal.'⁴⁷ These characters are impacted by their environments, and the environments they are in direct contact with control them, rather than the characters controlling and manipulating their own worlds to their desires. The outcomes of the characters are directly related to the results of these interactions. This theme is further

⁴⁶ Jan Culík, 'The Theatre of the Absurd: The West and the East'.

⁴⁷ Skloot, 'Václav Havel: Once and Future Playwright', 224.

developed in these plays by making statements about the dangers of not having definitive answers to these questions. The most significant of the statements made, presents the idea that the lack of a strong sense of our own individual identities, and knowledge or concept of our purposes within our environments we risk losing our identity, and as a result metamorphosing into something, or someone, completely unrecognisable.

The metamorphosis, which many characters of the absurd undergo, draws its origins (directly and indirectly) from the Franz Kafka's absurd novella *The Metamorphosis* (*Die Verwandlung*) in which the main character, Gregor Samsa, awakes one morning to find that he has transformed into a large insect. This physical metamorphosis is followed by a psychological metamorphosis (which ultimately is the more significant in the story) during which Gregor struggles with the conflicting and ultimately irreconcilable idea of external comfort versus internal comfort. It is here that the question of identity is most prevalent; should he attempt to maintain his human identity by clinging to material possessions, familial love-based relationships, and human interests, therefore maintaining emotional comfort, or should he sacrifice his humanity, fully embrace the insect identity, and as a result, be physically comfortable?⁴⁸

⁴⁸ See Kevin Sweeney, "Competing Theories of Identity in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*." *Franz Kafka. The Metamorphosis* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), 63-76.; Rocamora, *Acts of Courage*, 44 & 76.

This novella, along with *The Castle (Das Schloss)*, *The Trial (Der Prozess)* and other works by Kafka, all which address issues of individual identity in inhospitable worlds, played a significant role in the development of Havel's style; struggles with and the results of the loss of identity regularly reoccurring as a central theme. The characters in Havel's plays continuously face choices and conflicts of identity.⁴⁹ They must decide whether they will fight to maintain their individual identities in environments where there are intense governmental and personal (in the form of friends and family) pressure to conform, or whether they will sacrifice their opinions, beliefs and convictions for comfort, security and financial gain. In raising these issues of identity, Havel makes clearly recognisable parallels to the challenges that the people of Czechoslovakia faced under communism. He depicts the struggle and resulting absurdity of trying to reconcile an individual existence with a state sanctioned one, and in doing so, continues his criticism of the system he felt had consumed the vast majority of his countrymen.

Another prominent similarity between Eastern and Western European absurdist theatre is the question of language, how it is used, and what goal it has within the interactions between characters. Traditionally, in Western text-based dramatic theatre, language was used as a means to communicate the thoughts and emotions of the character, relate and discuss the plot and actions of the play, and ultimately display the ways in which the character uses and

⁴⁹ This idea of metamorphosis, identity and the conflict of internal vs. external comfort will be further discussed in upcoming sections with specific reference to Hugo in *The Garden Party* and Ferdinand Vanek in *Audience*, *Vernissage*, and *Protest*.

controls his environment.⁵⁰ Language in the absurd, however, is very rarely used to advance the plot or character development or to express the central conflict of the play. Due to this, Esslin claimed that absurdist plays devalue language to the point where it becomes meaningless and nonsensical. This, however, is a misnomer, as language does not lose its value but instead becomes re-evaluated in the purposes that it serves, and the ways in which it is presented. Words no longer carry meaning simply by existing; instead they are used semiotically as well as linguistically. As Jean Vannier commented, theatre of the absurd was ‘a theatre of language where man’s words are held up to us as a spectacle.’⁵¹ Language in the absurd does not lose its value; quite contrarily it can be argued that it increases in value, as it is no longer used primarily in support of the other aspects of the play. In embracing nonsensical patterns and intonations it can demonstrate some of the fallibilities of language and the possibilities of manipulating situations and meanings. It can challenge the ideas of words carrying inherent or unalterable meanings.

In many ways the language of the absurdist plays becomes a focus of its own, the structure, tone, rhythm, and repetition of which becomes as much if not more central to the play as the plot and characters themselves.

⁵⁰ Interpretation based on Aristotle’s discussions of language in the *Poetics* and the development of the Western dramatic language common to narrative based plays.

⁵¹ Jean Vannier quoted in Paul Trenskey, ‘Václav Havel and the Language of the Absurd’ *The Slavic and East European Journal* 13. 1 (1969), 42-65 < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/306622.pdf?acceptTC=true> > [Accessed 20 January 2014], 44.

In traditional [Western, plotted, text-based] theatre the role of language was largely secondary. It served merely as a vehicle for expressing the ideas and emotions of the characters, for the elaboration of theme and conflict, and as a necessary link between the stage and the audience. In a theatre which accredits to the character no inner life, however, words cannot be used just as projections to the outer world. Language not only ceases to serve character development, but the opposite becomes the fact, characters being made the vehicle of language. Words form people by filling their inner void until human speech stops functioning as a means of communication and become a form of social behavior.⁵²

The language of the absurd removes the assumption that words carry an immutable meaning, they no longer mean only what we define them to mean. These meanings are variable, easily manipulated, misrepresented or stripped of their meaning altogether. Thomas Kavanagh, in his analysis of the semiotics of the absurd discusses the idea that a word, or ‘given enunciation’ cannot and does not exist without a specific code, and it is only once that code has been significantly used that it can establish its own semantic axes. He furthers his discussion by commenting on how the speaker becomes part of his world in the learning and manipulating of these codes, ‘I am of my world to the extent that I know and can manipulate its codes.’⁵³ Additionally, in absurdist plays words are often stripped of any implied inherent meaning and are used for their musical quality, their repetition used to establish, maintain or change the rhythmic quality of the scene, ‘...the sound is much more important than the sense. [...] Changes in tempo, retardation, gradation, etc., with a minimal density of content are essential devices for carrying the movement of the drama.’⁵⁴

⁵² Trensky, ‘Václav Havel and the Language of the Absurd’, 54.

⁵³ Thomas Kavanagh, ‘Kafka’s “The Trial” and the Semiotics of the Absurd’ *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 5.3 (1972), 242-253 < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1345282> > [Accessed 20 January, 2014], 244.

⁵⁴ Trensky, ‘Václav Havel and the Language of the Absurd’, 54.

Havel's work is a cross section between the theories and practices of the absurd of Eastern and Western Europe; fed by his own experiences of life as an outsider, his passion for philosophy, literature and drama and his perspective of the world around him. His work draws from Camus, Kafka, Čapek, Beckett, Ionesco, and many others and yet is uniquely his, adapting the styles, techniques and themes of absurdist theatre into work that speaks to and of the Czechoslovakian experience of Soviet-style communism. His work continuously addresses the conflict between man's individuality of thought and expression against the insidious and all-encompassing nature of the communist system, it exposes and challenges the ways in which language and logic are used as a means of control and manipulation and it reveals the consequences of becoming part of the social system.

The Garden Party

His first full-length play, *The Garden Party (Zahradni Slavnost)* fully embraced and displayed these themes and established Havel both as a significant name in the Czechoslovakian theatrical context and as a conscientious objector to the regime. Written and revised over the course of the spring and summer of 1963, *The Garden Party* was published in *Divadlo (Theatre)* magazine prior to opening just in case the censors refused the theatre permission to perform the play. The play was approved for production, however, under somewhat ironic circumstances, which included the belief that the world was on the verge of annihilation as N. S. Khrushchev had just confirmed that there were Russian

missiles stationed in Cuba.⁵⁵ According to Havel, that day the censors approved every manuscript they had in the office including *The Garden Party*, which had been there for several months. *The Garden Party*, like many other absurdist plays, does not have a plotted, progressive storyline or character development. It has no central conflict, no heroes and no villains. What it does have is a deeply complex system of language and logic, which is systematically and grammatically correct and yet says practically nothing. It has characters that are so caught within their own systems of proverbs, doublespeak and misinterpretations that they have lost any sense of individuality, and become little more than vaguely adaptable automatons who cannot communicate on a level other than one of mechanised logical correctness. In discussing Havel's absurdist plays, Goetz-Stankiewicz states, 'The real hero of his plays is the mechanistic phrase, uttered from habit, repeated with parrot-like readiness, which decides people's actions, composes events, and creates its own absurd reality.'⁵⁶ *The Garden Party* presents, discusses and satirises the state of society by pointing out the absurdities resulting from the clash between individual and the state.

The play begins in the middle-class home of Mr and Mrs Pludek, where Hugo, one of the sons, sits playing chess with himself and responding monosyllabically to his parent's inquiries as to his progress in the game and his general state of being. The other son, Peter who is regarded as an bourgeois intellectual, and therefore is the 'black sheep' of the family

⁵⁵Rocamora, *Acts of Courage*, 42.

⁵⁶Goetz-Stankiewicz, *The Silenced Theatre*, 41.

plays a minor role and does not appear until later in the play. Mr and Mrs Pludek are very much products of a society where authentic or critical conversation is limited; they have nothing to say that is not a pleasantry, or an idle and circular conversation, a condemnation of the bourgeoisie, or a pseudo-intellectual statement that is crafted from the mixing of clichéd sayings and proverbs. These mixed cliché-proverbs are highly important to the plot, not because they reveal any wisdom but because they establish the language of discussion between Mr and Mrs Pludek as mechanical, lacking in substance and easily adapted to the whims of the person they are speaking to. These statements, such as ‘He would rather dance with the she-goat than give a penny.’⁵⁷ comically draw attention to the fact that syntactic correctness and semantic correctness are not mutually exclusive, that a phrase can be perfectly structured, satisfying all rules, principles and processes that govern language and yet have no actual meaning. As such they reflect the way that language, especially that which is often considered to be deeply meaningful, like a proverb or conventional wisdom can be easily distorted into a nonsensical statement.

Proverbs are considered the deepest emanation of popular wisdom. Concentrated in their phrasing, vivid in their imagination, and compelling in logic, they are among the most distinguished verbal accomplishments of man. If their use becomes automatic, however, the speaker often ceases to perceive their content and easily distorts them.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Václav Havel, *The Garden Party*, I. 1.

⁵⁸ Trenskey, ‘Václav Havel and the Language of the Absurd’, 46.

As the scene closes, Mr Pludek, exasperated by his son's inertia and lack of response to his proverbial advice, and dedicated to having his son make something of his life, uses his contacts to get Hugo a job at government agency known as the Liquidation Office. Hugo then, in order to meet his father's contact, is to attend a garden party. Prior to leaving, however, Hugo makes a statement, quoting one of his father's proverbs, 'you probably wanted to say that if we don't realize in time the historical role of the middle classes, the Japs, who don't need the middle classes, will come, remove them from history, and send them to Japan.'⁵⁹ In doing so he demonstrates that he has learned his father's mechanised proverbial techniques, and that he has an emerging talent for crafting syntactically correct statements that are void of any real meaning; the kind of crafted statements which will serve him extremely well as a government employee. In this moment Havel highlights his criticism of the language of communist bureaucracies. Establishing the theme that this kind of language is easily manipulated, made from completely arbitrary progressions of words and phrases which can be structured correctly yet still not hold meaning. He is commenting on the fact that the communist bureaucracies have mastered the grammatical structure of language but not the logic, and therefore is ultimately meaningless and insufficient for authentic communication. As Goetz-Stankiewicz comments:

Grammatically the statement is correct: the conditional if-clause is duly followed by the main clause, the relative clause describing the antecedent subject is in place, and the predicate consists of three verbs, one of them intransitive, the other two transitive,

⁵⁹ Havel, *The Garden Party*, I. 1.

following each other properly according to the chronological order of events. Hugo's statement gets an A plus for grammar, but in logic it gets an F for Failed.⁶⁰

In doing so, Havel is highlighting the highly mechanised automated language and world of the 'everyman' and draws focus to Hugo as a product of his environment.

The subsequent scene develops Havel's critique on a mechanised society and presents the absurdity of the institutionalisation of the socialist system by creating a system of organisation for the party that is so complex in structure that it loses logical legitimacy. Upon his arrival at the party Hugo is met by a secretary and a clerk who, in their description of the different areas, events and permissions at the party (that only represents one small facet of the government as a whole), generate a picture of the highly complex, intensely compartmentalised nature of the government:

SECRETARY. You are now at the main entrance B13. You can buy here a general ticket which entitles you to move freely throughout the whole area of the garden and visit almost all the events organized within the framework of the Liquidation Office Garden Party

CLERK. There is, for example, an informal chat with the Head of the Development Department about new liquidation methods, taking place in the area around the Little Pond –

SECRETARY. An entertaining Quiz Programme on the history of the Liquidation Office, taking place in Summerhouse No. 3

⁶⁰ Goetz-Stankiewicz, *The Silenced Theatre*, 46-47.

CLERK. Or the program of humorous stories from the liquidation practice of Section 5 which have been written down and will be narrated by the Head of section 5.⁶¹

This description of the events, which, at first, seems relatively logical, if complex, quickly devolves into demonstration of the absurdity that the attempt to structure, bureaucratise and control everything down to the most minute of details has caused.

SECRETARY. And in which you yourself can participate, provided you have sent the exact text of your story together with a health certificate and a permit from the Head of your section to the Secretariat of Humour and to the Ideological Regulation Commission at least two months before the date of this party.

CLERK. Provided you can obtain a permit from the Organizing Committee, you may even dance – i.e. in the area of the Large Dance Floor A – between 11:30 and 12p.m. [...]

SECRETARY. If you are interested in making use of Aid to Amusement, such as paper hats, gay papier-mâché noses, etc. , you may pick them up via the Head of your Section in the Sectional Warehouse and then you may go and amuse yourself with them in the area of Small Dance Floor C.

CLERK. Of course you'll have to have to respect the queue which has been forming outside the Small Dance Floor C since early afternoon and which, I'm sorry to say, inevitable in view of the relatively large interest in Self-Entertainment with Aids to Amusement, and the limited accommodation within the space of Small Dance Floor C.⁶²

⁶¹ *The Garden Party*, I. 2.

⁶² *Ibid.*

As the conversation continues throughout the rest of the scene, it becomes increasingly clear that any attempt to simplify the structure or apply logic to the situation, as Hugo does at first, ‘Excuse me, but Small Dance Floor C is clearly smaller than Large Dance Floor A. Why not move Self-Entertainment with Aids to Amusement to Large Dance Floor A and the dance of Sections to the Small Dance Floor C?’⁶³ will be met with contempt and discarded. It will be denied by breaking it [the logical suggestion] down into erroneous assumptions and pointing out that to use logic would undermine the decisions of a high ranking member of the Organizing Committee of the Liquidation Office. Responding to this denial of rationality, as well as desiring to fit in and make a good impression, Hugo begins to craft his speech in such a way that it reflects the illogical, meaningless, justifications and opinions of the others attending the party. The scene becomes even more absurd with the introduction of Falk, who instructs the secretary and the clerk to relax and have a ‘natural’ conversation, which results in a dizzying circular discussion rife with ridiculous, nonsensical statements and analyses. This failed attempt to have an unscripted conversation, where the responses are not prescribed and cannot be anticipated, reflects Havel’s view that once indoctrinated into this way of thought and this speech pattern it is impossible to do otherwise successfully. These characters are examples of the emotional and intellectual degradation that results from living in a mechanised, conformist world. They have become so inculcated with the governmental system that they have lost the ability to have the kind of spontaneous emotional response

⁶³ Ibid.

required to respond to a personal question, experience a genuine emotion or truthfully express themselves.

By the beginning of act two, Hugo has been extremely successful in his (and his parents') aspiration to become a productive member of the bureaucratic world. He has discovered that the key to this system is effectively to say nothing while using a great number of words; essentially that it is not facts but words that pave the pathway to success. Realising this, he has mastered the kind of double-speak and circular language that sets him out as a man of distinction and power in this world and, as a result, has had a meteoric rise through the ranks to a position of authority with the Liquidation Department. When it is decided that the Inauguration Service should be liquidated, the absurdities escalate rapidly due primarily to the inescapable requirement that a qualified inauguration officer must inaugurate any liquidation, and yet if it is the Inauguration Service is being liquidated then there are no inauguration officers:

DIRECTOR. Well, who's going to inaugurate it?

HUGO. Who? Well – surely – the responsible inaugurator!

DIRECTOR. The responsible inaugurator? But the inaugurators cannot inaugurate when they are being liquidated, can they?

HUGO. Right. That's why it ought to be inaugurated by the responsible liquidation officer!

DIRECTOR. The responsible liquidation officer? But the job of a responsible liquidation officer is to liquidate, not to inaugurate! ⁶⁴

What becomes increasingly obvious as this exchange of dialogue occurs is that this perfectly oiled bureaucratic machine has ground to a screeching halt as a result of the dictate of absolute roles and responsibility. This system where everyone knows his or her place and purpose is stymied by this conundrum. It is only when Hugo devises a plan in which a new training that blends the roles and responsibilities of the Liquidation Office with the Inauguration Service is created that the situation can be resolved.

HUGO. Another training will have to be organized. Inaugurationally trained liquidation officers training liquidationally trained inaugurators, and liquidationally trained inaugurators training inaugurationally trained liquidation offers.⁶⁵

This solution seems to dissolve the impasse such that the government can return to its smooth, mechanical functioning and yet in the invention of this answer Hugo has stepped past the boundary between making use of the language and becoming part of it. Up until this point in the play there was the sense that Hugo could see the larger picture of what the government was; how to use the institutional jargon to his benefit, how to make the correct moves and play the game. After this point Hugo adapts completely, losing all autonomy from the government machine and becoming yet another cog, in doing so his individuality is lost:

⁶⁴ *The Garden Party*, II. 1.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Like his Kafkan predecessor, Gregor Samsa, Hugo undergoes a metamorphosis; only in his case, instead of turning into an insect, Hugo becomes the quintessential bureaucrat (an insect of another kind), adapting to the impersonal world around him. Hugo succeeds in this world by learning to become all things to all people. As a result, he loses his identity.⁶⁶

This scene definitively reiterates Havel's commentary on the mechanisation of the government. The scene reflecting his belief that the government can only function in the way that it was designed, leaving no flexibility or space for free thinking, and therefore crisis ensues when the system needs to adapt or evolve. Without Hugo's suggestion of creating new trainings, it is implied that the government might cease to function all together. Additionally, this scene and the scene that follows emphasise the insidious nature of this mechanisation by highlighting the ways in which Hugo's continued effort to manipulate the situation, in order to prove his professional worth, backfire. He intends to control the system and instead it ends up controlling him by stripping him of his identity.

The end of the play returns the audience to the Pludek home where little has changed with Mr and Mrs Pludek or other members of their household. Mr Pludek is still speaking in clichéd proverbs, Peter is still being condemned as a bourgeois intellectual, and Amanda (the maid) is still reading out confused telegrams from Kalabis, the colleague who never arrives. Mr. and Mrs. Pludek eagerly await Hugo's return, having received telegrams that report his

⁶⁶ Rocamora, *Acts of Courage*, 44.

meteoric rise to power, and yet when he does arrive, the transformation he has undergone, from indolent person to bureaucrat, has made him unrecognisable to his parents. Additionally, it has made him unrecognisable to himself; he speaks about himself entirely in the third person referring to himself as ‘one’. When questioned by Mr Pludek as to his identity he responds with an intensely vague, ranting diatribe that despite the length and passion with which it is delivered essentially says absolutely nothing at all:

HUGO. Me! You mean who I am? Now look here, I don't like this one-sided way of putting questions, I really don't! You think you can ask in this simplified way? No matter how one answers this sort of question, one can never encompass the whole truth, but only one of its limited parts. [...] Today the time of static and unchangeable categories is past, the time when A was only A, and B was only B is gone; today we all know very well that A may be often B as well as A; that B may just as well be A; that B may be B, but equally it may be A and C; [...]⁶⁷

Any and all aspects of individual thought have disappeared; Hugo not only has learned the language of bureaucracy, but has been completely subsumed by it. He has become a cog in the government machine, unrecognisable by all who knew him previously. The metamorphosis in this act is deeply satirical and ironic; it is Havel's condemnation of a system that seduces, manipulates and ultimately destroys its population. Paul Trenskey comments:

The third act (the second act in the translation used) is a bitter satire on bureaucracy in general and on that of socialist institutions in particular. Centralization gave rise

⁶⁷ *The Garden Party*, II. 2.

to a monstrous proliferation of rules and regulations whose dynamism became a threat to their creators. They finally acquired an abstract existence of their own, and man's preoccupation with them signifies his progressive alienation from reality. They also created their own language, whose use is not a means of communication, but a ritual for an incomprehensible, almost mystical system.⁶⁸

Havel's statements concerning his perceptions of the socialist institution as a construct that, through the distortion of language, can misrepresent and misconstrue meaning to the extent that it ceases to be able to be tied to anything concrete, are made definitively in *The Garden Party*. His humorous depiction of characters, who have no true understanding of the role that they played in the larger environment, and his portrayal of an environment where coexisting with the government required a complete sacrifice of individual identity, critical voice, personal interests, were immediately recognised by the audience.

Prague's intellectual elite, who were able to recognise themselves, their neighbours, their government and their society in the characters and situations on stage, met the play with shock, laughter and recognition.⁶⁹ They understood the relevance and the message: 'This is the life we lead [...] and language is the weapon of the totalitarian system, a weapon that is denying us our identity, making us unrecognizable. We no longer know ourselves.'⁷⁰ The statement was bold, ground-breaking and dangerous. Less than a decade removed from the terror of the Stalinist purges, Havel was definitively, if satirically, attacking a system that

⁶⁸ Trenskey, 'Václav Havel and the Language of the Absurd', 52.

⁶⁹ Rocamora, *Acts of Courage*, 46-47.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 46.

was known for criminalising those who expressed criticism. Miloš Forman, Havel's friend and former 36er commented, '*The Garden Party* was a surprise to us. It was a brilliant analysis of the social and political issues of the times, and at the same time it was avant-garde.'⁷¹ The critics, who had been reviewing Socialist Realism for a decade, found themselves astounded and intrigued by the originality and biting satire of the absurdist play, and wrote about it with great praise. "The first Czech antidrama," "*The Garden Party* is the first satire that deserves to be called satire...It is the strongest play about 'us' that we've ever seen" "Different, original...*The Garden Party* shines with humanism. ""⁷²

As a result of this successful opening the play and the continued approval of audiences and critics, *The Garden Party* played in repertoire for the next eighteen months alongside Havel's next absurdist play *The Memorandum* (1965) which once again addressed the language of the absurd; satirising the ways that language can be used to control the population and ultimately destroy those who resist that control. Additionally the theatrical season following the debut of *The Garden Party* included significant absurdist works from the West including Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Alfred Jarry's nineteenth century precursor to absurdism, *Ubu Roi*. Havel's third and final absurdist play at the Balustrade prior to the Warsaw Pact Invasion was *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* (1968). This play continued where *The Garden Party* and *The Memorandum* had left off,

⁷¹ Forman quoted in Rocamora, *Acts of Courage*, 46.

⁷² Rocamora, *Acts of Courage*, 47-48.

taking on a darker tone to the comedy and the language, examining the how combinations of science and psychology were being added to the bureaucracy in order to further dehumanise man.⁷³

Changes in Perception: The Warsaw Pact and Impact of Normalisation

It is important to note in a discussion concerning Havel's absurd plays, and the years he spent at the Balustrade Theatre – where he stayed until 1968 – that the comparatively large amount of freedom he had to write and produce plays of this sort was only possible in the 1960s. Czechoslovakia in the 1960s enjoyed a brief respite from the intense repression of Stalinism as Antonin Novotný's hold on the control of the country began to slip. In the wake of social and cultural thaws occurring in the Soviet Union and several of her Bloc countries, the Czechoslovakian ruler, who had attempted to keep his country a hermetically sealed totalitarian state, was met with challenges to his authority that eventually led to some freedoms being returned to the Czechoslovakian people. Cracks in the Iron Curtain allowed new cultural ideas and influences, including philosophy, rock music, modern art and popular culture to come in from the West. The abuses of the Stalinist period were revealed and discussed publicly, and a new wave movement of music, film, visual art and poetry appeared on the scene.⁷⁴

⁷³ Ibid, 74-78.

⁷⁴ For specific discussions concerning the political, social, and social changes that occurred during the Prague Spring see Falk, *Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 70-77.; McDermott and Stibbe, *Revolution and Resistance in Eastern Europe*.; Hans Renner, *A History of Czechoslovakia since 1945*, 55-68.; Kieran

The middle and late 1960s also witnessed a return of inventive, frequently harsh and powerful satire as playwrights vented frustrations and resentments of increasing numbers of the society. Another, less definable set of dramas also emerged at this time - more poetic, even visionary, employing a broad canvas for the development of their action, often turning to the past to comment indirectly on contemporary issues. The outright satires usually employed grotesque, absurd models or parables of social actualities to underline the abuses of post-Stalinist Czechoslovakia, though their inventiveness and carry them beyond immediate time and place.⁷⁵

Following the resignation of Novotný reform came almost immediately and effortlessly, ‘there was no bloodshed, no sacrifice, no hard action, no strike.’⁷⁶ Alexander Dubček became president of the country, addressing issues of economic reform, systems of management which would raise the standards of living and the renewal of constitutional rights.⁷⁷ The freedom seemed to return just as easily as it had disappeared twenty years before, without any notable resistance from the population. ‘...Czechoslovak society as a whole shone with optimism [...] With kettledrums and trumpets they sang the praises of “socialism with a human face” as something very special to the world.’⁷⁸ With the suspension of censorship there was an explosion of information, circulation of papers quadrupled; journals functioned freely, publishing the works of prominent intellectuals and well-known writers. Additionally, radio and television broadcast freely and theatrical performance that had been banned since the 1948 communist takeover could once more be performed. These freedoms

Williams, *The Prague Spring and its Aftermath: Czechoslovak Politics, 1968-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 3-29.

⁷⁵ Burian, *Modern Czech Theatre*, 102.

⁷⁶ Renner, *A History of Czechoslovakia since 1945*, 60.

⁷⁷ Falk, *Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 72.

⁷⁸ Renner, *A History of Czechoslovakia since 1945*, 64.

and the optimism that accompanied them reached their pinnacle in eight months from January to August of 1968, a period dubbed 'The Prague Spring'.

Despite the popularity and support for Dubček's reforms and the thriving state of the Czechoslovakian society and economy, the freedoms could not last. From inception of the reforms, the leaders of the USSR, Poland and East Germany were deeply concerned, fearing the 'liberal contagion' would undermine the leading role of the party throughout the Soviet satellite states; believing that communism would not be able to survive free elections, and if they were allowed in Czechoslovakia then they would have a domino effect through the Eastern Bloc. 'The Soviet-style systems depended for their survival of the Party's absolute, monopolistic control of the state machine, the media and the economy.'⁷⁹ From March through July, the 'Group of Five' leaders, Walter Ulbricht from the GDR, Władysław Gomułka from Poland, János Kádár of Hungary, Todor Zhivkov from Bulgaria, and Leonid Brezhnev met several times to discuss the situation in Prague. Tensions continued to rise as it became obvious that Prague was not going to be bent back into lock step by the issuing of warnings and threats. Following a last, failed attempt at brokering a compromise between Czechoslovakia and the other Warsaw Pact countries, known as the Bratislava Declaration, the mobilisation of the largest Soviet military manoeuvre since the end of the World War II, crossed the northern, southern and eastern borders of Czechoslovakia. By the time the people of Prague woke on the 21st of August 1968, more than two thousand tanks

⁷⁹ David Caute, *Sixty-Eight: The Year of Barricades* (London: Hamilton, 1988), 179.

and nearly quarter of a million troops had invaded Czechoslovakia. Dubček and his cabinet had been removed and were being prepared to be flown to Moscow, where after days of incarceration and interrogation, he would sign the *Moscow Protocol* (*Moskevský protokol*) which sanctioned the continued Soviet occupation of the country until the threat to the 'socialist community' had passed.⁸⁰

Following the passage of the 'Protocol' and in spite of several days of fierce, civil resistance from the Czechoslovakian people who continued to report on and broadcast what was occurring, in an attempt to inform and incite action from the West, Gustáv Husák took control of the country, all liberal progress was stopped and normalisation began. The borders were closed, exit permits to the West were declared invalid, and those living abroad were summoned to return back to Czechoslovakia within 15 days or risk a prison sentence. Purges were conducted, more than a fifth of the Communists in the military were expelled from the party, and the universities, political and military academies, radio, airlines and certain departments in the Academy of Science were decimated. It became mandatory to pass a loyalty test keep a job. These tests not only examined actions and political affiliations but forced people to list anyone they knew who expressed anti-Soviet opinions. Those expelled

⁸⁰ See Falk, *Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 75-80.; Williams, *The Prague Spring and its Aftermath*, 39-59.; Caute, 'Sixty-Eight: The Year of Barricades', 180-181.; Pauer, in *1968 in Europe*, 163-166.

from the party or those that failed the loyalty tests were stripped of their jobs and were barred from their professions.⁸¹

The new, neo-Stalinist, leading Communists were well aware of the role that the writers had played in instituting and furthering the Prague Spring. The authorities realised that if they were going to gain control back over the country during the normalisation process that they had to stem the flow of writing, both creative and journalistic and heavily censor all text that was to make it to press. As Petr Oslzlý discusses:

The communists realized the power of the written word. They realized the threat posed to their shallow and idiotic conception of power by a pen wielded by an artist. They decided that the only way to prevent any further attempt to undermine their supremacy was to vigilantly monitor every word written, particularly if conceived by a creative writer. They decided that the solution lay in placing authors under surveillance, persecuting them, and banning them. All intellectuals – artists, scholars, scientists, politicians – who had been at the forefront of the process of revival in 1968 became taboo, but the heaviest blow was directed against Czech writers.⁸²

Amongst those writers most closely targeted were playwrights who were the most visible, outspoken and performed during the Prague Spring, such as Václav Havel, Josef Topol, Pavel Kohout, and Ivan Klíma. Additionally, actors such as Pavel Landovský, Vlasta Chramostová, Jan Tříska and directors Jan Grossman and Alfréd Radok were fired. Despite

⁸¹ Falk, *Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 75-83.; Williams, *The Prague Spring and its Aftermath*, 39-59.; Pauer, in *1968 in Europe*, ed. by Klimke and Scharloth, 163-166.

⁸² Petr Oslzlý, 'On Stage with the Velvet Revolution' *TDR* 34.3 (1990) 97-108 (98).

these efforts, however, the communist authorities were never able to completely silence these artists, who proceeded to engage in creating *samizdat* literature and producing illicit productions in private homes.

The ‘Vanek’ Plays

As for other popular writers and playwrights, the 1970s were a turbulent time for Havel. The popularity of his plays, as well as his outspoken opinions on many of the issues facing the intellectual and artistic communities in Czechoslovakia were well known with the authorities and they made it impossible for Havel to publish officially (some of his plays were printed and distributed through *samizdat* presses) or produce his work in the country. The restrictions on Havel became especially stringent when, in 1975, he wrote an open letter to President Gustáv Husák that openly challenged Husák’s normalisation policies. He saw these policies as acts of intimidation, coercing the population into submission through insidious methods of restriction and fear-mongering, as well as condemning culture to stagnation by removing the ability of writers – through censorship and self-censorship - to express themselves ‘truthfully’.⁸³ Havel had been kept under surveillance since the end of the 1960s, his work fully banned since 1969, but it was after this letter that he was directly targeted by the government as an outspoken dissident, and imminent threat to the stability of the normalisation process. As a result, the authorities felt the need to control and silence him. Between 1976 and 1980, Havel was repeatedly arrested, interrogated, ‘informally’ held for

⁸³ Havel, *Living in Truth*.

months at a time while awaiting trial, and was convicted of dissident activity; the first time serving five months, the second serving four years. While he was not imprisoned, he was constantly and openly kept under surveillance, and followed by police. His apartment was searched multiple times (often to the point of destruction of property), his car was tampered with and vandalised, and the government created a very public smear campaign to discredit him.

After normalisation began and Havel could no longer work in any capacity in any theatre he spent most of his time outside of Prague, retreating to his cottage in Hrádeček. It was here where, after being required to take a job in a brewery in order to avoid being in violation of the ‘anti-parasite law’, which stated that if you did not work you could be jailed, he began to write three one-act plays, *Audience*, *Vernissage* (translated as *Unveiling* or *Private View*) and *Protest*. Collectively these would become known as the ‘Vanek’ plays, after the name of the reoccurring main character.

Written quickly, as an amusement for his friends at a periodic gathering of writers at Hrádeček, *Audience* begins the story of Ferdinand Vanek, a character that is as much Havel himself as a fictional creation; semi-autobiographical, there are many physical and ideological similarities between Havel and Vanek. The character of Vanek, like Havel, is a playwright who, after being forbidden from writing or producing work as a result of his dissident views and activities, has taken a job in a brewery. He is married but has no children,

a topic which is further discussed in *Vernissage*. Ideologically speaking, Vanek is a character driven by his idealism and his moral constancy. He sees the world for what it is, and refuses to compromise his beliefs, even if it means having a better, more successful life, less scrutinised by outsiders. Havel uses Vanek to express many of his criticisms of post-normalisation Czechoslovakia, and to highlight the conflict that a man committed to his moral and ethical convictions faces in confrontation with a world that has sacrificed its integrity for comfort. Ultimately, he became a mouthpiece which Havel, and other playwrights such as Pavel Kohout, Pavel Landovsky, and Jiri Dienstbier, who wrote 'Vanek' plays after Havel's imprisonment, used to dramatize the changes and restrictions that continuously impacted their lives.

The 'Vanek' plays demonstrate an evolution of Havel's style and theme from the absurdist style of the 1960s. Despite being realistic in character, setting and situation, and rarely being classified as 'absurdist plays', the 'Vanek' plays make use of Havel's specific 'absurdist' style that he cultivated at the Balustrade in the 1960s. Thematically, each of these plays addresses the irreconcilable differences between man and his environment, depicting a man whose fundamental beliefs are at odds with the situation in which he lives. Vanek, as a man of unwavering commitment to his belief that what has occurred in Czechoslovakia, both on the part of the government and on the part of the majority of the population, is wrong. Unlike his new employer or former friends, he refuses to sacrifice his beliefs in the right to live, write and speak freely (as a semi-autobiographical character these values are aligned with

those Havel spoke and wrote about in his essays) despite the financial, physical or material benefits of doing so. The plays depict the struggle between ideals and possessions, ethical contentment and material happiness.

In each of the plays, this theme manifests as a request for Vanek's help or a change to the way he lives his life. Throughout the plays he is confronted by characters that have abandoned their own moral convictions in order to live lives of comfort, or hold positions of power. As such, they are threatened by Vanek's commitment to his morals, feeling that his convictions and ethical stance are dangerous; that they are being judged for their shortcomings, and that it is necessary for their own sakes, and for the sake of the country as a whole to get him to comply. In order to get Vanek to comply to their wishes, compromise his ethical convictions, and concede to help, they display their wealth and power, discuss the ways in which living to the status quo has resulted in good, happy lives filled with possessions and luxuries, as well as engaging in emotional manipulation, using the expectations of friendship. The situations set up in these plays mirror comments Havel makes in *Power of the Powerless* regarding the need for every person to outwardly hold the same beliefs and values, and act in the same fashion in order for post-normalisation society to function efficiently. Any dissent from the status quo disrupts the working order of the governmental machine as it is dependent on every cog functioning at its optimum state.

Examples of these themes are present in each of the three one-acts. In *Audience* (1975) Vanek is invited to converse with his boss, the Foreman of the brewery. During this meeting Vanek is repeatedly asked by the Foreman if they are friends, if the Foreman may call him by his given name (Ferdinand), if he is happy with his current position, and whether he (Vanek) would arrange a meeting with a famous actress. After this nearly one-sided conversation – Vanek’s answers are short and simple – the Foreman comes to the purpose of the conversation. He wishes Vanek to inform on himself, feeding information via him (the Foreman) to his secret police contact. As a reward for Vanek informing on himself, and thus making the Foreman’s job easier, by eliminating his need to find information for his contact, he promises to move Vanek from his job rolling barrels in the cellars to a warehouse job. Additionally, throughout this dialogue, at moments where the Foreman feels that he may not be most convincing he implies that failure to comply to this request might result in trouble for Vanek in the form of the loss of the job, or in the communication of fabricated information to the police contact:

FOREMAN. It’s all up to you now, Ferdinand. If only you do your bit, everything’s going to turn up trumps. You help me, I help him, he’ll do me a good turn and I’ll do you one – we’ll all benefit. Hang it all, we’re not going to make life difficult for one another, are we now?⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Havel, ‘Audience’ in *The Garden Party and other Plays*, 207.

Despite being tempted by a better position, Vanek maintains his moral and ethical convictions and refuses to do so, regardless of the situation or the reward, stating that he is not able to participate ‘In something I have always found repugnant’.⁸⁵

This enrages the Foreman. He accuses Vanek of being the one in a position of power, of being selfish, not willing to consider anyone else’s needs or life. He claims that it is he who is the one who is oppressed by society, forgotten and side-lined as someone not important enough to warrant interest by the government. He cannot believe that Vanek, having accepted praise, expressed camaraderie and asserted his interest in working in the warehouse, would not yield to the request.

The situation in *Vernissage* (1975) shares many similarities with *Audience* and yet exists in a domestic rather than occupational sphere, raising questions of loyalty and friendship, and the expectations of obligation in those relationships. This one-act begins with Vanek visiting Michael and Vera, a couple who were apparently close to Vanek and his wife in years past, but now view them with sympathy and derision. This is due to the fact that they (Michael and Vera) have bought into the status quo, their concept of value has become based on material possession and luxury, and as a result, have a home full of possessions, have ‘culture’ and a ‘happy’ life:

⁸⁵ Ibid, 208.

MICHAEL. One really shouldn't be indifferent to what one eats, one shouldn't be indifferent to what one eats on, what one dries oneself with, what one wears, what one takes a bath in, what one sleeps on. [...] what else can it mean but that you're upgrading your life to another, higher level of culture – and that you raise yourself to a kind of higher harmony...⁸⁶

From the moment of his arrival, Vanek is offered high-quality alcohol and gourmet food, he is shown all of the *objets d'art*, and pleasantries are exchanged. Shortly after he sits down, however, it becomes clear that Michael and Vera have a negative view of Vanek's life. They begin to comment on Vanek's life, making it clear that they feel he is not living up to their expectation as a friend. His job in the brewery, lack of interest in material things, commitment to his dissident friends and to his wife, who they feel does not live up to the wifely ideal (as Vera does), and his indifference and resistance to living in a way that they see fit are source of disapproval and disdain. They feel that he is using his moral convictions as an excuse not to live life, and are certain that he would be much better if only he would value what they do and become like them:

MICHAEL. Don't be offended, Ferdinand, but I think that the times are just another excuse for you, just like the job at the brewery, and that the real problem is inside you and nowhere else...

VERA. Michael is right, Ferdinand. Somehow you should finally pull yourself together –

MICHAEL. Take care of problems at home – with Eva –

⁸⁶ Havel, 'Vernissage' in *The Garden Party and other Plays*, 219.

VERA. Start a family -

MICHAEL. Give your place some character –

VERA. Learn how to budget your time –

MICHAEL. Stop carousing –

VERA. Start going to the sauna again –

MICHAEL. Simply begin to live a decent, healthy, rational life – ⁸⁷

Vanek's refusal to concede that they are right results in their anger and when he goes to leave Vera accuses him of being 'selfish! A disgusting, unfeeling, inhuman egoist! An ungrateful, ignorant traitor!'⁸⁸

Both of these plays, along with *Protest* (1978) in which Vanek is asked by Stanek, a former friend, to produce a petition in protest of the arrest of the man who had impregnated his daughter, present situations in which Vanek is expected to comply with the wishes of the other characters due to the obligations of friendship or, when that strategy inevitably fails, the positional power they hold over him by virtue of their accepted places in society. This reoccurring theme likely speaks to the situation that Havel and many other dissidents found

⁸⁷ Ibid, 233.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 237.

themselves in during the 1970s. During this period he faced those who, during the comparatively free times of the 1960s had been friends and colleagues, in post-normalisation Czechoslovakia expected him to compromise his morals and beliefs; to do favours, behave in a certain way, place himself in the face of public and authoritative disdain and danger, such that the friend or colleague could continue to live the safe, financially stable, anonymous lifestyle that they were enjoying.

It is likely that the Foreman, Michael and Vera and Stanek represented Havel's view of those in the Czechoslovakian population who had abandoned their convictions and moral code in the mid-1970s. As he discusses in *Power of the Powerless*, these people allowed themselves to be taken in, and taken over by post-normalisation policies. Out of fear for the loss of freedoms, the withdraw of the ability to travel (within the Eastern Bloc), and their ability to send their children to school, the people allowed themselves to be bought, bribed, and converted into supporters of the dominant ideology; they had been complicit in their own metaphorical imprisonment.⁸⁹ As Peschel discusses:

Normalisation could no longer be portrayed unambiguously as something forced upon the Czechs when a slowly growing proportion of the population, in response to threats, out of desire for personal gain, or out of sheer hopelessness, was becoming either actively or passively complicit in the process.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Václav Havel and Paul Wilson, 'The Power of the Powerless'.

⁹⁰ Peschel, 'The Devil and Brezhnev's Eyebrows' 104.

The situation in Czechoslovakia had transitioned from one of invasion, and top-down dominance to one of functional compliance. In response to this situation Havel created Vanek to stand out as a character in contrast to this tendency, a character that, despite the benefits to choosing the practical over the ideal, would not sacrifice his moral and ethical code to do so. As Rocamora discusses:

Havel is writing about a man in the system, where values, morals and ethics are forsaken and in its stead a balance of power is created. Everyone is part of it, everyone is involved, everyone profits together or goes down together. Never mind that everyone is corrupted in return, that everyone lives a lie rather than the truth.⁹¹

The 'Vanek' plays provided Havel with the opportunity to speak out against the phenomenon of people being bought and sold by the government with security and material goods. They provided him with the opportunity to develop the absurdist element of man in an irreconcilable conflict with his environment. Vanek is Havel's voice speaking out in praise of maintaining ideals and a moral code regardless of the possible rewards of compliance. He is a fictionalised version of Havel himself who strived to 'live in truth'⁹² rather than living the common lie.

⁹¹ Rocamora, *Acts of Courage*, 152-153.

⁹² Havel, *Living in Truth*.

Charter 77 and Imprisonment

Throughout the 1970s, Havel's participation in theatrical, journalistic, and organisational dissent continued to grow. *Audience* and *Vernissage* were printed by Expedition Press, a *samizdat* publisher established by Havel and his wife Olga, and, with the help of Klaus Junker (Havel's West German literary agent) the plays were smuggled out of the country, and performed throughout Western Europe. Through the Press Havel met Ivan Jirous, who, in addition to being a poet, managed the underground rock band Plastic People of the Universe. The band, who were known for their anti-establishment style, long hair and dissident lyrics, had lost their permit to perform under normalisation, and had therefore taken to performing at private parties and in remote countryside villages. As a result, they were often harassed, beaten and arrested. Havel became fascinated by underground musical culture, recognising the desperate need for expression and 'experience of metaphysical sorrow and a longing for salvation',⁹³ seeing in it a reflection of his own ideals of authenticity and truth. As a result of his conceptual interest in the band and culture as a whole (he never attended a concert), Havel was furious when, in March of 1976, the band and some of their followers were arrested. He began a campaign, arranging interviews with the musicians through Radio Free Europe, sending messages to embassies, artists and writers from other countries, and organising petitions and protests to support the band at trial. From these actions a group of people from different circles, from 'long-haired youths to former Communist Party

⁹³ Rocamora, *Acts of Courage*, 164.

functionaries⁹⁴ gathered in the hall outside of the court room. Havel, who was with them commented on how the gathering had a sense of ‘equality, solidarity, conviviality, togetherness and willingness to help each other, an atmosphere evoked by a common cause and a common threat.’⁹⁵ It was this group who would form the core of the Charter 77 group.⁹⁶

The development of the group and the document that followed marked another key moment in Havel's dissident activities. With the help of playwright Pavel Kohout, journalist Petr Uhl, politician Jiří Hájek, former general secretary of the communist party (under Dubček) Zdeněk Mlynář, and Ludvík Vaculík, the founder of Edice Petlice, Charter 77 was drafted. The document, which drew attention to the fact that the Czechoslovakian people were being denied the human rights and freedoms due to them as citizens of a country that had signed the Helsinki accords, was intended not to stand alone as an expression of protest, but as a permanent statement meant to unite those dissident artists, philosophers, writers, and intellectuals with the western- inspired hippie movement. It was an ‘alliance with representation across the spectrum, from Marxists to Anti-Marxists, from Catholics to agnostics, from intellectuals to artists.’⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Ibid, 165.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 163-165.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 167.

By January of 1977, the document had been completed and signed by 243 people, and was being prepared to be disseminated via mail to various government officials. It was during this process that Havel and Landovsky were arrested, detained, interrogated overnight and had their apartments thoroughly searched. Havel was held without charge between January and May when he was charged with subversion for his letter to Husák, and for being the chief organiser of Charter 77. He was sentenced to a term of 14 months in prison.⁹⁸ Following this imprisonment, Havel once more vigorously engaged in dissent activities, including the writing and *samizdat* publications of the last Vanek play and the essay *Power of the Powerless*. He was under constant surveillance, being regularly searched, arrested, and interrogated.

In October of 1979 Havel, and six other signers of the Charter 77 document were tried and found guilty of ‘subversion against the state’ for ‘assembling, copying, distributing, both on the territory of the Czechoslovak State Republic and abroad, written material which the senate considered indictable.’⁹⁹ He was sentenced to four and a half years and was imprisoned from May 1979 to February 1983; released early due to poor health. During this period he endured the indignities of life in prison: having his head shaved; sharing tiny spaces with (sometimes violent) strangers; longing for the comforts of friendship, food, open spaces, and cigarettes; suffering from physical pain and mental anguish. Despite this, he engaged

⁹⁸ Ibid, 165-167.

⁹⁹ Paul Wilson, ‘Introduction’, in *Letters to Olga*, by. Vaclav Havel (New York: Knopf, 1988), 5.

with those around him, serving as court, confessor, teacher and counsellor to his fellow inmates.¹⁰⁰ His experiences further clarified his view of the purposes and tactics of the post-normalisation government in Czechoslovakia:

[...] for several years I was forced to live in an environment where every effort was made to break people, systematically to get them to inform on others and to act selfishly; in an atmosphere of fear and intrigue, of mindless discipline and arbitrary bullying, degradation and deliberate insult, being at the same time deprived of even the simplest positive emotional, sensual or spiritual experience [...]. Again and again I became aware that prison was not intended merely to deprive a man of a few years of his life and make him suffer for that length of time: it was rather intended to mark him for life, destroy his personality, score his heart in such a way that it would never heal completely.¹⁰¹

However, the experience also reinforced his conviction that it was necessary to speak, to communicate and live in truth and to fight to regain control over their own existences. Throughout the 1980s, Havel continued to write plays, *Mistake* (1983), *Largo Desolato* (1984), and *Temptation* (1985), as well as collecting documents related to Charter 77, writing essays and giving interviews. Despite suffering from an ongoing anxiety that the police would arrive and revoke the suspension of his prison sentence, he continued to engage in dissident activity, involving himself in the widening gap between officially sanctioned writings and actions, and illegal ones.

¹⁰⁰ Rocamora, *Acts of Courage*, 199.

¹⁰¹ Antoine Spire, 'I Take the Side of Truth: Interview with Vaclav Havel' *Index on Censorship* December 1983, 4.

Conclusion

From early in his formative years communist control over Czechoslovakia played a significant role in Havel's evolution as a dissident playwright, essayist, and activist. The marginalised position he was placed in as a child inspired the development of a view of his environment in which he questioned the governmental and societal mechanisms that kept so many people from expressing themselves truthfully. His early work critiqued the inauthentic manners of speech and actions that characterised the bureaucratic functionaries of those who strived to meet the status quo in their environment. His later works more directly set men (and women) who refused to sacrifice their moral convictions against those who had complied in their subjugation to the state. Throughout the Cold War period Havel repeatedly refused to comply, refused to be silenced, and refused to be bribed or purchased. He dissented from the cultural, governmental, and societal expectations that would have prevented much of the harassment he suffered. Havel remained a dissident figure throughout the Cold War and dismantling of communism in Czechoslovakia until he was unanimously elected president of the newly created Czechoslovak Republic on December 29, 1989.

CHAPTER 3 POLAND

Introduction

In 2009 on the occasion of the ensemble's forty-fifth anniversary, company member and current artistic director Ewa Wójciak said of Teatr Ósmego Dnia (The Theatre of the Eighth Day)¹:

We belong to the tradition of artists who were inspired by the modern world, and who felt the need to co-create it, to evaluate it and to improve it. We belong to the tradition of artists who were interested in the position of human beings in this world, and who spoke out for people handicapped, rejected or hurt by this world.²

She continued by commenting on how the group also took great issue with the world as they saw it and chose to argue against it regardless of the outcome. Her comments, along with the assessment of journalist, former KOR³ leader and dissident Adam Michnik, who stated that they were a theatre of 'freedom and truth, rebellion and defiance, seriousness and self-irony; [...] a theatre with a mission, a theatre of sober enthusiasts and a theatre of contestation for romantic dreamers who combined cold calculations with wild strivings.'⁴ suggest the role

¹ Hereafter the theatre company will be referred to by the English translation of its name.

² *Teatr Ósmego Dnia: 1964-2009*, ed. by Paulina Skorupska and others, (Warsaw: Ośrodek Karta 2009), 219.

³ *Komitet Obrony Robotników* -- Worker's Defense Committee.

⁴ Skorupska, *Teatr Ósmego Dnia: 1964-2009*, 15.

that Theatre of the Eighth Day played in the development of dissident voice and action in Cold War Poland.

Originating in 1964, the group made the decision during their formative years to deviate from the re-stagings of Polish classics, Shakespearian dramas and the production of new poetic and philosophical work that typified Polish theatre of the time, and challenge the governmental dictates on the arts that prevented them from making politically or socially critical statements in their work.⁵ They produced work that was both personal and socially relevant; work that questioned the policies, institutions and propaganda that resulted in the control of the population, and that which mirrored contemporary situations to their audiences; refusing to allow them distance, disinterest or complacency. In doing so they rejected the genres, performance techniques, and expectations of the mainstream audience, as well as those of the experimental stages,⁶ establishing themselves as dissident. As a result they were repeatedly investigated, monitored, censored, denied permits to travel, harassed, tried and punished harshly for minor infractions. Despite this they continuously produced work that challenged governmental and social ideologies, as well as addressing issues of Polish identity and complacency. Grzegorz Kostrzewa-Zorbas wrote 'The theatre addresses

⁵ Throughout most of the 1960s, as a result of the 'thaw' period in Poland (discussed later in this chapter), the genres allowed on the Polish stage diversified to include plays from many different periods and countries. Despite this there were still significant restrictions on and rejections of any play that, either openly or covertly, challenge the dominant (communist) ideologies.

⁶ Stages considered experimental during this time period included Jerzy Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre and Tadeusz Kantor's Cricot 2 Theatre.

the de-humanised, shameful and violent history of the modern ages, over decades and years, directly and always with ruthlessness equal to the most accurate report, the fiercest article or the most bitter satire.⁷

This chapter will examine the origins, development and continued presence of Theatre of the Eighth Day throughout the second half of the Cold War and into the post-communist era. It will demonstrate how the ensemble approached and reflected their questions and criticisms of their societal and cultural environments, as well as displacing the sense of martyrdom that resulted from Poland's history as a nation that had been near constantly occupied for two hundred years, and questioning the Polish people's reliance on the glorification of the past, that had become entwined with their national identity. It will analyse the motivations behind their work, and the desired intent with regards to their audiences. Through a discussion of their theatrical theories and practices, as well as an in-depth examination of the structure and staging of two of their plays, *Jednym tchem* (*In One Breath*, 1971) and *Raport z obleżonego miasta* (*Report from a City Under Siege*, 1983),⁸ this chapter will interrogate the dissident nature of the theatre company and the ways in which their work challenged both history and dominant ideologies in late Cold War Poland.

⁷ Monika Mokrzycka-Pokora, 'Teatr Ósmego Dnia' in Cultur.PL <<http://culture.pl/en/artist/teatr-osmego-dnia>> [accessed 19 March 2013].

⁸ Hereafter plays will be referred to with their translated titles

Prior to examining the specific practices and productions of Theatre of the Eighth Day however, it is necessary to establish the theatrical history of Poland such that the dissident actions and statements of the ensemble can be contextualised within their own cultural framework. The evolution of Polish theatre throughout the Cold War, the ways in which it existed within and fought against the restrictions of censorship, and the experience of the Polish theatre artist differs significantly from other former Eastern Bloc countries for several reasons. These include a continuous shift in the level and severity of the restrictions being placed on theatre throughout the Cold War period, as well as a direct connection with and reflection of a fierce independent nationalism developed as a resistance against continuous attacks on their country and their culture. Additionally, a deeply rooted, prevalent Catholicism ties directly into the history of the country and the identity of the Polish people, and had significant impact on the themes and content that appeared on the Polish stage. As Brian Porter states in his discussion of Poland and its history as related to the Catholic Church, 'the rituals of the church have punctuated the calendar of the Polish peasantry for centuries...and Catholic iconography has always provided and aesthetic vocabulary for art, music and popular culture.'⁹ As a result of the mixing of these elements: the national and religious identity, shifting levels of censorship and control as well as unique cultural and social norms, the theatre produced in Poland during the Cold War had a different face from that of theatre in the Anglo-American context or theatre in its Eastern Bloc neighbours.

⁹ Brian Porter, 'The Catholic nation: Religion, identity, and the narratives of Polish history', *Slavic and East European Journal*, (2001) 289-299.

Elsewhere, theatre is often no more than an accessory to life, separable and thus expendable. In Poland, history made theatre inescapably political. The theatre smuggled forbidden thoughts and championed moral fortitude. It refused to draw categorical boundaries between drama and public debate, advocacy and art.¹⁰

From the first partition of the country in February of 1772 through the Cold War and into the present day, theatre in Poland has been intertwined with the country's political, social and cultural identities. It has been used repeatedly to reinforce national identity, and has played a significant role in the resistance to foreign powers.

Pre- Cold War Polish Theatrical History

Any discussion or analysis of Polish theatre during the Cold War must include a consideration of the evolution of the Polish nation dating back to the mid part of the eighteenth century. While this may seem extensive in establishing a historical root for the theatrical trends of the late twentieth century, there are elements of this period that are vital to understanding the character of the Polish people, and the ways in which they used theatre in a demonstrative, societally influential manner. From the latter half of the eighteenth century the Polish king, Stanislaw August Poniatowski (the last king before the first partition) attempted to combat the social and political myth of Sarmatism; the belief that Polish nobles were directly descend from an ancient warrior tribe which had allowed them to reduce the

¹⁰ Halina Filipowicz, 'Polish Theatre after Solidarity: A Challenging Test' *Theatre and Drama Review*, 36 [1] (1992) 70-89.

King to a figurehead, deny representation to the towns, and keep the peasants at the level of serfs.¹¹ The reforms that the king sought to implement were supported by Polish theatre artists who satirised the nobles claiming to be Sarmatian, depicting them as ‘boorish, backward, unbearably prolix and quarrelsome’ while presenting a new depiction of the hero, one who is ‘well-educated, polite, and, most importantly, has a strong sense of his civic duty.’¹² These satires, along with the exploration of new dramatic forms, themes, and the representation of new Polish types supported the idea that a radical re-envisioning of the identity of the Polish people needed to occur; one that venerated Poles who were both patriots and members of the peasant class.¹³

Following this re-envisioning of the Polish identity it became increasingly important that Polish people claimed and maintained this identity (though there have been changes to this identity during the post-soviet era) as, from the end of the eighteenth century with the first partition of the country until the end of the Cold War in 1989 (with the exception of the inter-war years 1918-1939), Poland was continuously occupied by a foreign force. For nearly 200 years Poland was denied a sovereign government or the ability to make laws regarding or benefitting their own people. As part of these partition and the occupation there were

¹¹ Natalya Baldyga, 'Performing a Poland Beyond Partitions: Legitimizing the Cultural Imaginary in Eighteenth-Century Central Europe', (conference paper, Oxford University, St. Anthony's College, May 24-26 2002), 1-6.

¹² *Ibid*, 2.

¹³ For more on the role theatre played in altering the 18th century Polish society see Edward Csato, *The Polish Theatre* (Warsaw: Polonia Publishing House, 1963), 16-20.

continuous attempts by the invaders to assimilate the Polish people into Russian, Prussian and Austrian/Austro-Hungarian cultures; a process which required an eradication of the Polish language, strict censorship of all print and production, and the destruction of their traditions and cultures. Despite these assimilation efforts the occupying nations were never able to strip the Poles of their identity; the Polish people refused to give up their culture and traditions. They carried on speaking their native language in churches and theatres (the only two places where it was legal to do so), devised ways to privately engage in their customs, and developed a fierce nationalism that superseded other identifying characteristics that might serve to separate them into groups.¹⁴ Theatre continued to play a vital role in the continual development and maintenance of the Polish national identity; significant dramatic works by émigré playwrights such as Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki and Zygmunt Krasiński were written and smuggled across the borders, and unsanctioned theatre performances, usually staged in the private country homes of the aristocracy, included the recitation of poetry and prose, as well as the performance of national anthems, and Polish music. Kazimierz Braun comments:

On all Polish lands, in the absence of political freedom, culture and art assumed a fundamental significance, as instruments for the preservation of the nation's tradition,

¹⁴ Further discussion of the changes in and restriction on Polish culture during the partitions can be found in John Neubauer, *History of the Literary Cultures of East Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, ed. by Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2004) 241-290.; and Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland 1795 to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 166-176.

identity, and language, as well as its moral and spiritual values. Theatre performed educational, political, patriotic and civic functions.¹⁵

The nationalism and the attitude that Poland must protect its culture from those who would seek to destroy it helped the Poles to maintain their national identity and culture throughout the end of the eighteenth, nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. By the time Poland was established as an independent nation following World War I, the commitment to the preservation of their distinct Polish culture and the practice of using theatre to dissent against invading and occupying forces was ingrained in the populace.¹⁶ This attitude once again became necessary when, in the autumn of 1939, they were invaded by Nazi forces. The invasion resulted in Poland being partitioned between Nazi and Soviet forces, both of whom attempted to fully assimilate the country.

Under the Nazi occupation, the Polish identity was severely threatened. The Nazis endeavoured to eradicate Polish culture through whatever means necessary in order to fulfil their intention of exterminating the Polish nation entirely. Part of the effort made towards the achievement of this goal was to degrade the culture of the Poles to the point where the people would be minimally educated and culturally devoid, and consequently they would display absolute obedience to the German authorities, not protesting against complete

¹⁵ Braun, *A History of Polish Theatre*, 5.

¹⁶ Neubauer, *History of the Literary Cultures of East Central Europe.*; Harold Segal, 'Culture in Poland During World War I' in *European Culture in the Great War: The Arts Entertainment and Propaganda 1914-1918*, ed. by Aviel Roshwald, and Richard Stites (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 58-90.

assimilation into a Nazi dominated world. This degradation included severe limitations on how much schooling the Polish people could receive as well as the closing of most cultural institutions, the dissolution of drama schools and the designation of the professional actors union as an illegal organisation. Strict mandates were made, regulating the themes and content allowable on the Polish stage 'performances could not have an artistic character or touch on any serious philosophical, moral, or historical themes.'¹⁷ Productions had to be approved by the Nazi Ministry of Propaganda and support the propaganda that devalued Polish identity and culture. They could not contain serious dramatic content, revive classics, or be in support of Polish identity or any other ideology. Mandates of this sort furthered the Nazi goal to attack high culture, to remove themes that might display or inspire any sort of Polish pride or national identity, and in doing so, reduce the Polish people to the state of base creatures or animals not capable of creating or enjoying entertainment that required complex thought or interpretation. Additionally, many actors, directors, theatrical teachers and trainers, and playwrights were personally targeted; many were removed from jobs and forbidden from seeking work resulting in death from starvation and illness, some were forced to emigrate and others suffered deportation to labour and death camps.¹⁸

Despite the persecutions and mandates of the Nazi force, the restrictions served to re-ignite the dissident aspects of the Polish theatrical community rather than destroying it. The Polish

¹⁷ Ibid, 14.

¹⁸ Csato, *The Polish Theatre*, 54-55.; Braun, *History of Polish Theater*, 13-14.

people refused to have their national identity eradicated by the mandates and strict limitations placed on them by the Nazis. They found ways in which to continue to educate themselves, publish newspapers, journals, academic works and literature, engage in cultural activities and maintain the morals and philosophies that made them Polish. Theatre artists rejected the mandates that required them to officially register with the German work office, making them an official part of the Nazi propaganda machine, preferring to spend the war doing menial jobs rather than support the regime.¹⁹ In doing so they ‘unequivocally rejected the occupation of Poland and joined the resistance...and maintained the Polish theatre’s dignity throughout the war.’²⁰ Their refusal to join the Nazi propaganda machine, and the resulting ban on public performance did not, however, eliminate Polish drama. Illegal artists engaged in clandestine, underground, theatrical activities including performance of Polish Romantic and classical dramas, and plays based on old Polish poetry and songs. Additionally actor training in voice, movement, make-up, and the history of theatre and drama was carried out in private homes. Theatrical criticism, interviews with authors and theoretical essays were published and new Polish translations of non-German, forbidden plays, such as Jean Giraudoux’ *Electra* and Shakespeare’s *As You Like I*, were made.²¹

¹⁹ ‘Spiritual Resistance in the Ghettos’, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum < <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005416>> [accessed February 4 2016].

²⁰ Braun, *History of Polish Theater*, 17.

²¹ Csato, *The Polish Theatre*, 60.

Despite the great personal risk, knowing that discovery of their actions could result in imprisonment, deportation to concentration camps and death, the Polish theatrical community resisted the Nazi attempt to destroy culture and annihilate their identity. Ultimately, the war, in many ways helped to clarify and re-define the revolutionary spirit of Poland's theatrical artists. They performed under exceedingly harsh situations and threats to family, freedom and life; they performed without expectation of profit, fame or engaging in a purely artistic experience. They continued to perform to prove to themselves, and to their audiences, that it was possible to sustain life, meaning and culture even in the direst situations:

The conviction has been deeply ingrained in the national consciousness that theater entreats, exposes and creates in the human being what is truly humane and valuable...that theatre can exist at all times and in every place. It can be materially poor and artistically modest, but still full of meaning and spiritually rich.²²

As the war drew to a close and the Nazi forces began to be defeated and forced to retreat, there was a brief hope that the end of the war would bring liberation and freedom - as in the interwar years - to the Poles. This hope, however, was quickly quashed with the continuous forward momentum of the Red Army, and the absorption of Poland into the Soviet Union. The war had left Poland in ruins, politically, structurally and artistically. There were practically no industrial, commercial, or communication systems. The infrastructures of the

²² Braun, *History of Polish Theater*, 19.

cities had been practically destroyed, including most of the theatres, and the majority of the population struggled to find enough to eat and fuel to heat their homes. Despite this, the Poles rebuilt. Populations seemed to unify in order to reopen schools, factories, businesses, and rebuild roads and infrastructures. Likewise, between 1945 and 1948 there was an intense push to get the theatres in Poland back up and running; theatre buildings were rebuilt, companies re-established and performances held. Witold Filler comments,

Barely a week after the proclamation of the July Manifesto the first performance was held in liberated Lublin [...] In the war-ravaged country artistic life began to develop with incredible strength; by 9 May 1945, as many as 16 professional theatres operated in the country accompanied by a veritable explosion of amateur groups.²³

In these years immediately following the end of World War II theatre became even more important than it had before the war; relatively inexpensive - a standard ticket cost less than a packet of cigarettes - it brought a sense of normality back to Poland. The production of theatre in post-war Poland had returned many of the freedoms of the interwar period to the stage; once again plays that expressed the nature and character of the Polish people could be performed. Performances of the Polish classics by Mickiewicz, Żeromski, and Słowacki were produced alongside productions of pre-war plays by Witkiewicz and new plays by Szaniawski. Despite the return of these freedoms, many themes could still not be spoken about openly. Anything considered to espouse the idea of Poland's place in a democratic culture or express criticism of the continuously strengthening communist party often faced

²³ Witold Filler, *Contemporary Polish Theatre* (Warsaw: Interpress Publishers, 1977), 32.

intense criticism by the critics and party activists, and regularly led to cancellation of the play. This led to the development of a meta-language, a language based on the creation of well crafted, complex allusions and metaphors. This language provided a system with which to critique and challenge the political, social, and cultural policies that prevented the artists from freely expressing their experiences or thoughts on the current state of the country. It allowed for commentary to be made under the shifting levels of censorship, and continued to develop throughout the Cold War period.²⁴

Stalinist Policies and the Polish October

For a short time, in the years immediately following the end of the war it had seemed that Poland, despite the Soviet presence, might rebuild into a country that resembled the one it was in the years prior to the 1939 invasion. However as the *Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza*²⁵ grew in strength, and a fraudulent election (1947) gave the Communists controlling power in the legislature, as well as control over the military and police, the country became steadily totalitarian. Agriculture and industry was collectivised, the Catholic Church was attacked, and political, social and cultural dissidents were targeted, put on trial, and exiled, imprisoned or executed.²⁶

[The country...] developed the full range of Stalinist features then obligatory within the Soviet European empire: ideological regimentation, the police state, strict

²⁴ Elsom, *Cold War Theatre*, 81.

²⁵ Polish United Workers Party, hereafter referred to as the PZPR

²⁶ Schopflin, *Politics in Eastern Europe 1945-1990.*; Swain and Swain, *Eastern Europe Since 1945.*

subordination to the Soviet Union, a rigid command economy, persecution of the Roman Catholic Church, and a blatant distortion of history [...] Stringent censorship stifled artistic and intellectual creativity or drove its exponents into exile.²⁷

The intellectual and artistic communities were specifically targeted, considered dangerous due to their ability to communicate dissident ideas such as nationalism and Polish identity, and their access to the population through print and performance. Those who wouldn't collaborate with the regime (many did out of fear or pragmatism), were removed from their positions, and replaced with loyal Party members. These dissenters were subject to intensive and invasive monitoring both personally and professionally, and were forbidden to produce.

Under this controlled state, theatre became nationalised, and was used to transmit an ideological message praising the Soviet Union. By 1948, significant changes had been made to Polish theatre. The communist ideology became the only acceptable view to hold, all productions were required to reflect this ideology, and be produced in the socialist realist style. As Cioffi states, 'Starting in 1949, only plays which depicted "Socialist reality" positively, were allowed. No ambiguities were permitted: capitalists had to be portrayed as evil, factory workers as all good.'²⁸ All forms of theatre that did not fulfil the tenets of socialist realism, either through theme or genre, were considered anti-socialist.

²⁷ Glenn Eldon Curtis, 'Poland: A country study'. (Federal Research Division Library of Congress, 1994) <<http://countrystudies.us/poland/17.htm>> [accessed 26 February 2014].

²⁸ Kathleen Cioffi, *Alternative Theatre in Poland*, 21.

During this period it became nearly impossible to reconcile the ‘binding interpretive model [of socialist realism] with the poetic mainstream of the national classics. In those years this resulted in the Polish theatre neglecting Mickiewicz and Wyspiański, while of Słowacki’s plays only the melodramatic *Mazepa* would be staged.’²⁹ Nearly all of the Polish national classics were banned for not providing ‘accurate’ depictions of working-class people, as well as being ‘wildly unrealistic’, and staging the work of artists from outside of the Soviet Bloc or those contemporaries who did not support the regime was considered a punishable offense.

Playwrights had to write in a realistic style, and express a sufficiently positive depiction of the state. In addition, most of the theatre management had been removed and replaced with party members or favourites. Every aspect of theatre was being controlled. Performances were censored, and regularly closed for expressing ideas that supported an independent or democratic Poland or produced in a non-sociorealist styles. Membership to professional organizations was restricted to party members of good standing, and critics and theatre journals were carefully monitored for anything that could be perceived to be anti-party or anti-Soviet. Stalinism was a period of stagnation in Polish theatre, artistic freedoms were practically eliminated, and decrees and decisions made by the government were enforced. Theatre was subjugated to the ideals and ideologies of Stalinist Russia, and was forced to display aspects of this rule:

²⁹ Filler, *Contemporary Polish Theatre*, 35-36.

Theatre was not treated as an independent branch of art but as a medium to be twice subjugated: first to literature, and then to propaganda. Productions had to be simple transmissions of dramas, and dramas themselves became lectures on propaganda topics. Considered an important tool for indoctrination of the masses, theatre was degraded artistically yet elevated economically.³⁰

The institution of the socialist realist style as the only legitimate form for theatre removed any autonomy from theatres to produce innovative or challenging works. Theatre artists were subject to both internal and external pressures from censors and critics, ideologues and bureaucrats.

Following the death of Stalin, the condemnation of his 'cult of personality' and the moderate reforms instituted by Khrushchev in Russia, a brief period of reduced censorship and opening of society and culture occurred in Poland. The period, which came to be known as the 'Polish October', resulted from the growing unrest regarding reformist policies within the PZPR, questions regarding the responsibility for Stalinist crimes, and issues in Soviet-Polish relations. These issues culminated in the June 1956 when workers in Poznań, who were protesting food and consumer goods shortages, mismanagement of the economy and the lack of suitable housing staged a strike and uprising. During the plenum meeting in October, reformer Władysław Gomułka was nominated for First Secretary of the Party, and subsequent reforms were made. Unfortunately, these freedoms were short-lived, and by the

³⁰ Braun, *History of Polish Theatre*, 42.

early 1960s censorship law had once more intensified, although they did not return to the level held during Stalinism. Instead a dangerous and insidious 'grey area' of censorship was set up in which it was difficult to know the boundaries and often artists did not realise they had stepped past these boundaries until they were persecuted for doing so. Despite the briefness of this period and the almost immediate rescinding of freedoms, theatre flourished, taking advantage of the little freedoms allowed to it, broadening repertoires and aesthetic styles.

The 'Theatrical October'

Falling approximately between the years of 1956 and 1960, the 'theatrical October' draws its roots from the 1952 visit of Bertolt Brecht and the 1954 visit of French communist actor/director Jean Vilar to Poland. The work performed during these visits challenged the dictates of socialist realism by returning alternate thematic and stylistic techniques to the mainstream stages. When Brecht brought his cycle of plays, including *Mother Courage and her Children* to Poland it was with the expectation by the East German government that the Polish critics would reject his epic, formalistic, non-realistic style which would help the orthodox East German censors pronounce a sentence on him. This tactic failed however, as the majority of Polish critics, as well as the Polish people, responded favourably to the productions, and instead of castigation, Brecht's work became popular and regularly performed in Poland. Vilar's visit became another denouncement of the socialist realist style as his productions of Corneille's *The Cid* and Hugo's *Ruy Blas* were highly stylized,

declamatory and used highly emotive acting and choreographed movement.³¹ These visits, along with the subsequent interaction with French theatre, brought the works of absurdist playwrights such as Beckett and Ionesco into the Polish repertoire.

This, along with the re-introduction of previously banned Polish pre-war avant-garde writers like Bruno Jasiński, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz and Witold Gombrowicz radically altered the style of Polish plays. Polish theatre artists became extremely interested in the avant-garde and absurdism, as many viewed the lives Poles were being forced to live, the censorship, double speak and the dance of favour being performed by party members, as absurd. French absurdist plays were gathered and translated en-mass, and became a favourite style of the Polish theatrical community. Work by Western artists such Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Arthur Adamov, Christopher Fry, Arthur Miller, Harold Pinter, Edward Albee and Tennessee Williams was produced throughout Poland. New Polish playwrights explored dramatic, poetic and avant-garde styles that had been forbidden since the Second World War, developing them into plays that challenged all aspects of socialist realism and addressed innovative thematic ideas.³² Tymoteusz Karpowicz emerged as a significant new writer of poetic dialogue that ‘merged realism in human behaviour and speech with poetic visions and dreams.’³³ Tadeusz Różewicz wrote plays that forcefully addressed the psychological

³¹ Ibid, 52-53.

³² Daniel Gerould, ‘Representations of Social and Political Reality in Modern Polish Drama and Theatre’ *The Polish Review* 30.4 (1985), 365-372 (369-370).

³³ Braun, *History of Polish Theatre*, 60.

devastation of the war, and the disfigurement and disillusion of the youth who had survived.³⁴ Sławomir Mrożek, became an important member of the Polish avant-garde theatrical community; his satirically comic plays presenting the absurdity of every-day life, the manipulations of freedoms, and the conflicts between nostalgia and ideology. *The Police*, *Turkey*, *The Party* and his most famous play *Tango*, address different aspects of the Polish post-war attitudes, including the loss of hope for the future, the myth of romanticism, and a pervasive apathy.³⁵

During this time period, a fissure appears in Polish theatre and splits into two distinct but equally important groups: professional theatre and student theatre. This is a vital distinction to make in the discussion of the Polish 'thaw' and 'theatrical October' as professional theatres experienced this time period differently than student theatres, as they were subject to far more scrutiny and censorship. While they did benefit from the addition of some artistic freedoms, were permitted to perform new and previously banned work, and were allowed a return to independent creation, it is necessary to remember that these theatres were still primarily run by party members and favourites, and had strict censorship rules that dictated what they were allowed to perform. Despite the moderate levels of artistic freedoms that existed during this post-Stalinist "thaw" Poland was still an occupied country, subject to the whims and controls of the Soviet-state. Professional theatres were still state controlled, the ministry of culture

³⁴ Ibid, 57-60.

³⁵ Krystyna Dąbrowska, trans. by Tadeusz Z. Wolański, *Sławomir Mrożek* <<http://culture.pl/en/artist/slawomir-mrozek>> [accessed 08 March 2015]

had the final say on all material, censors had unlimited power, critics could silence any artist, and management was appointed due to their adherence to the ideologies of the party. As a result the Polish theatre artists developed a variety of complex, multi-layered techniques in order to maintain any semblance of artistic freedom:

[...] the theatre was forced to develop a cryptic stage language, comprised of allusions, symbols, allegories and metaphors in order to communicate with the public. Theatre people played a constant game of wits with the censors and Party bureaucrats. The limitations imposed on the theatre deprived it of many options but, at the same time, these strengthened and endowed the theatre with explosive creative energy.³⁶

The creation of the first experimental ‘student’ theatres - which were not necessarily associated with any educational facility, often simply collectives of young actors - followed the visits of Brecht and Vilar, and began to incorporate satire, the grotesque, symbolism, and song and poetry into their performances; furthering the attack on socialist realism. These experimental student theatres were allowed significantly more freedoms to perform in these styles and explore a variety of absurd and avant-garde techniques by virtue of their classification as ‘ancillary cultural institutions’ as discussed by Kathleen Cioffi. She notes that this classification which had them supported and supervised by the *Zrzeszenie Studentów Polskich*³⁷ differed from professional theatres who were under the direct control of the cultural ministry, and therefore were subject to much stricter censorship. ‘Because Polish student theatre was an ancillary cultural institution, controlled only by an officially apolitical

³⁶ Braun, *History of Polish Theatre*, 58.

³⁷ Polish Student Organisation - hereafter referred to as the ZSP

organization, it was able to develop in a more autonomous manner than primary institutions such as professional theatres would have been allowed to.³⁸

Student theatre began to appear as an important form of theatre in 1954. Prior to this student theatre did exist; however, it had either been in the form of locally sponsored performance designed for entertainment in the immediate post-war years or the agit-prop style of performances under Stalinism. It was not until 1954, that the gradual loosening of censorship and control allowed for students to openly discuss and criticise political and societal structures in their performances. Students made statements through their work that even the year before would have been forbidden, statements that still could not be made on a professional stage in Poland. The voice and commentary of youth became an integral part of the theatre, expressing opinions that had been essentially ignored to this point.

The first wave of these student theatres most often produced collections of short satiric skits that attacked the absurdities of university life under Stalinism, and as the post-Stalinist era began to transition, they also commented on the political and social aspects of day-to-day life. These plays were less about art and more about politics; there was little attempt made to disguise their topic, and they often did not tie together with a unifying theme or concept. The years of student theatre between 1954-1958 later became known as the 'heroic period'

³⁸ Cioffi, *Alternative Theatre in Poland*, 13.

during which the students saw themselves as revolutionaries striving to break through the remaining tenets and oppressions of Stalinism, 'where Stalinism had distorted language, they would now speak the truth; where Stalinism had enforced cheer they would now feel free to be ironic.'³⁹ The students embraced all of the freedoms of style and technique that had become available, and spoke against both university and social policies that limited their education and their future prospects.

By the end of the 1950s, however, these freedoms that had been readily embraced, and had allowed the development of innovative new works of theatre in both university and professional theatres were rapidly rescinded. Following Gomułka's election to the office of First Secretary of the Party, the Communist Party had begun to restructure, consolidate and regain the power that it had lost in the wake of the 1956 riots. By 1960 the policy of show trials to intimidate the populace into obedience was reinstated, and in 1961 the parliament passed laws that restricted the movements of people both within and outside of the country. Bolstered by the GDR's demonstration of the strength and isolation from the West through the building of the Berlin Wall, the Polish Communist Party revoked the majority of allowances that had been made during the previous five years.

³⁹ Ibid, 22-25.

As a result of these policies, the 1960s saw many intellectuals and students begin to fight back against the betrayal of promises, the marginalisation of social and political concerns, and the dismissals of those who opposed from universities and public posts. Professional theatres returned to and continued to develop intense systems of allusion, metaphor and meta-language that allowed them to stage material that would otherwise be forbidden. Student theatre began to shift the focus from the satiric skits of the 1950s into alternate styles of theatre that did not make direct political statements. The resurgence of theatrical styles such as dramatic theatre, that relied on the performance of a dramatic text, and poetic theatre, which relied on the recitation and adaptation of poems into dramatic performance, characterised the period. Additionally, visual, pantomime, and puppet theatres that favoured visual spectacle over written text emerged as a major style during this time period. The emergence or resurgence of these styles vastly expanded the scope and possibility of student theatre. It could now appeal to a wider public, speak more clearly and yet more subtly about the political and social issues it wanted to discuss, and separate itself from the styles of the professional theatre. Furthermore, the development of student theatre during the 'thaw' period and the 1960s led to the development of the underground and dissident theatrical movements of the 1970s and 1980s. The work undertaken and produced by these student or "alternative" theatres changed the face of Polish theatre, allowing for the evolution of Grotowski and Kantor, as well as lesser known but equally important groups such as the

Student Satirist Theatre (STS), Bim-Bom, Theatre 77 and Teatr Ósmego Dnia (Theatre of the Eighth Day) in later years.⁴⁰

Theatre of the Eighth Day: Influences and Development

Following in the wake of the re-institution of strict controls on student theatre, Theatre of the Eighth Day was formed by a small group of students in 1964 in the Department of Polish Language and Literature at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. It could not be known then that this company would produce throughout the Cold War, consistently challenging political, social and cultural control of the population, and whose work would continue to address issues of injustice and oppression in the post-Communist era in Poland. The ensemble of actors including Stanisław Barańczak and Lech Raczak was initially directed by Tomasz Szymański. During its infancy the group took the name, The Student Theatre of the Poetry of the Eighth Day, a name which referenced the writings of Polish poet Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński who wrote ‘on the seventh day God rested, and on the eighth He created theatre.’⁴¹ The name was later shortened to Theatre of the Eighth Day which carried with it an additional meaning; that of a day beyond the standard calendar on which freedom became a reality.⁴² During the first few years of the theatre’s existence they

⁴⁰ Ibid, 53-80.

⁴¹ Mokrzycka-Pokora, 'Teatr Ósmego Dnia' in Cultur.PL .

⁴² ‘Theatre of the Eighth Day’ Polish Cultural Institute, <<http://www.polishculture-nyc.org/?itemcategory=30817&personDetailId=549>> [accessed 26th March 2013].

were not exceptionally different from many of the other student groups that were formed throughout Poland during the early 1960s. Making use of the limited residual freedoms still in place after the ‘Polish October’, the influence of absurdism, and the resurgence of the poetic and dramatic theatrical aesthetic, they produced work devised from the poetry of Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak, and Thomas Eliot. They also produced classic and modern plays by both Polish and Western writers, for example Peter Weiss’ *Marat-Sade*, Stanisław Wyspiański’s *The Varsovian Anthem* and Christopher Marlow’s *Edward II*. Additionally they, like many of the student groups, drew stylistic inspiration and techniques from the work of Jerzy Grotowski.

Training in ‘Poor Theatre’

During the late 1950s and early 1960s the work of Jerzy Grotowski at his Theatre of the Thirteen Rows and Laboratory Theatre became renowned throughout Poland, the Eastern Bloc and several Western countries. His actor training, stylistic techniques and the development of his theories on Poor Theatre became staples of actor training in the alternative student theatre movement. Theatre of the Eighth Day began their experiments in producing work using the techniques of Grotowski in 1967 under the guidance of Zbigniew Osiński, an assistant professor at the university, and continued with the instruction of Teo Szychalski, an actor with the Laboratory Theatre. This instruction included their exploration of the essentials of Poor Theatre. The group was strongly influenced by this

training, much of it informing their developing style, and being adapted into their future acting and production technique.

One essential element of their training in these techniques that significantly impacted the development of the ensemble's style was the idea of a physical theatre, also known as 'poor theatre', that is, theatre that rejects anything that would draw focus from the actor and the work being performed. Elaborate costumes, props, and scenery all fell into this category, as did the concept that theatrical performance was primarily developed from the script. According to the tenets of Poor Theatre performance can, and should, exist beyond the confines of text; it can make use poetic language as sound and music, but emphasis should be placed on characters and themes rather than on a structured narrative. Ludwik Flaszen, co-founder and literary director of the Theatre of the Thirteen Rows stated, 'To create theatre we must go beyond literature; theatre starts where the word ceases. The fact that a theatrical language cannot be a language of words, but its own language, constructed from its own substance.'⁴³ This idea inspired Theatre of the Eighth Day to begin to abandon pre-scripted works and develop performances based around ideas, or issues; to deeply explore the themes of their work and only then add the text they felt necessary to support the actions and the characters.

⁴³ Ludwik Flaszen quoted in Jennifer Kumiega, *The Theatre of Grotowski* (London: Methuen Books, 1987), 12.

Another essential element of Poor Theatre that proved vital to the development of the group was the idea that with training, the actor could learn to break through preconceived conceptions of the self and the environment, becoming more real, and more truthful. The actor could learn to remove the mask placed on his face by society and in doing so could help others remove theirs:

[...] learn to break down the barriers which surround us and to free ourselves from the brakes which hold us back, from the lies about ourselves which we manufacture daily for ourselves and for others; to destroy the limitations caused by our ignorance and lack of courage;... We fight then to discover, to experience the truth about ourselves; to tear away the masks behind which we hide daily. We see theatre - especially in its palpable, carnal aspect - as a place of provocation, a challenge the actor sets himself and also, indirectly, other people.⁴⁴

This concept was instrumental in the development of the group. Through exploration of themselves, their own motivations, barriers and disguises, they became increasingly aware of the layers of governmental, social, and personal controls that impacted the ways that they as individuals, as an ensemble, and as a community perceived their work and their lives. The techniques of Poor Theatre taught them to strip away at the preconceived notions that they had taken for truths, and to ask questions of themselves and their audiences. Additionally, Theatre of the Eighth Day drew heavily from their exposure to the Grotowskian methods of intense, expressive physicality, emotional exploration of the self, and improvisational building of scenes.

⁴⁴ Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (London: Methuen Books, 1975), 256.

During the latter part of the 1960s the style of the theatre evolved and expanded significantly drawing heavily from the work they did with Teo Spychalski. Using the techniques of 'Poor Theatre' to inform the way they viewed their work, viewed themselves and created performances, Lech Raczak, who became the director of the theatre in 1968, discussed in an interview, 'In that first period our methods of artistic research aped Grotowski. Actually, we sometimes copied and imitated the Laboratory, but we were searching for a direction of our own.'⁴⁵ This direction came as a result of the student riots and protests of 1968.

1968: Evolution of a New Style

Throughout the latter half of the 1960s while Theatre of the Eighth Day was developing its style using Grotowskian training, the Party continued to tighten its controls on the country, censoring heavily, restricting travel, and persecuting members of the press, arts and intelligentsia who spoke, wrote or performed outside of the re-established dictates. Garsztecki comments,

[...] the restrictive cultural course of the PZPR, the dissolution of the discussion clubs and journals, and the limitation of academic autonomy, tensions grew in the mid-1960s that led Leftist intellectuals to enter a new stage in their confrontation with oppressive regimes.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Howard, 'A Piece of Our Life', 291.

⁴⁶ Stefan Garsztecki, 'Poland' in *1968 in Europe*, 181.

Students and university staff were especially harshly targeted, reprimanded, expelled and fired from teaching and administrative positions as a result of perceived offenses to the Party line or, in some cases, racist scapegoating; anti-Semitism was at a level not seen since the Second World War.

Tensions continued to rise as actions against students, writers and other members of the intelligentsia increased, culminating on the night of January 30th, 1968 with the closing of Adam Mickiewicz's play *Dziady (Forefather's Eve)*. The play, a nineteenth-century Romantic piece which invoked an individualist, nationalistic pride, and a messianic ideal had opened in the previous November, and had been met with overwhelming approval by the audience who saw a parallel between the anti-tsarist message of the text and the current state of Poland. The reaction by the audience was a source of embarrassment for the authorities and resulted in the banning of the play. On January 30th, after the final performance before the ban was put into effect, the cast was met by nearly a half hour of applause and cheers and the audience sang the national anthem. The students then led a march to the Mickiewicz monument in the centre of Warsaw where the police met them. The demonstration, as described by Eisler, started from the theatre, where more than three-hundred people marched together towards the monument shouting 'free play' and 'free theatre', and singing Polish songs. They then decorated the monument in the national colours of red and white. The

demonstration continued until the police arrived, breaking up the group, detaining and heavily fining those who appeared to be the leaders and anyone who resisted.⁴⁷

From this point there was a near constant standoff between the ‘supporters’ of *Forefather’s Eve*, students, artists and members of the intelligentsia, and the ‘patriots’ who were members of the Ministry of Interior propaganda department. These stand-offs included a March 8th demonstration at Warsaw University during which the police brutally beat and arrested students. Throughout the following weeks further student demonstrations were held in Warsaw as well as in Wrocław, Gdańsk, Kraków, Poznań, and other cities. Those involved constantly clashed with the *Zmotoryzowane Odwody Milicji Obywatelskiej* (Motorised Reserves of the Citizen’s Militia)⁴⁸ resulting in severe beatings, and other injuries from the use of water cannons and tear gas. The regime responded to these protests and demonstrations by expelling, arresting and drafting students into military service. University staff and other intellectual sympathisers were targeted in the press accused of being ‘agents of Zionism, revisionism, German revanchism, and American imperialism.’⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Jerzy Eisler, ‘March 1968 in Poland’ in *1968: The World Transformed*, ed. by Carole Fink, Philipp Gassert, and Detlef Junker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 244-245

⁴⁸ A para-military police force – hereafter referred to as ZOMO

⁴⁹ Grzegorz Ekiert, and Jan Kubik, *Rebellious Civil Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 33.

In the following months trials and purges were held throughout the country; more than 2500 people were arrested, and 300 were imprisoned. Gomułka personally condemned Zionism; he encouraged Polish Jews to emigrate and 15,000 did so. Additionally, hundreds of people were removed from government and party positions, academia, the military and the press.⁵⁰ Following a spring of protests, summer saw the number of demonstrations and marches decrease and it seemed the situation was beginning to stabilise. This was until the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia on the 20-21 of August, and subsequent end of the Prague Spring re-ignited the anger of the students and intellectuals, as they had held great hope that the liberalisation of socialism in Czechoslovakia would trigger a similar movement in Poland. Additionally, they were infuriated with Gomułka for complying with the Soviet army, making the Polish people complicit in the suppression of a movement many of them had supported and sympathised with. The events of the spring and summer of 1968 left both physical and ideological scars on the populace. Many of those who had been injured or criminalised, as a result of their participation in or support for reform, lost their faith that communism could be revised to benefit rather than oppress the people. The refusal of the government to change policies, lessen censorship or democratise in any way galvanised a new generation of oppositionists who would be instrumental in bringing the trade union turned resistance movement, Solidarity, into existence.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Andrezej Friske, in *1968 in Europe*, 183.

⁵¹ The origins, development and actions of the Solidarity movement will be discussed later in this chapter.

The government reaction to the student protests and riots in which several members of Theatre of the Eighth Day took part in, as well as the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia, served as the inspirations the ensemble needed to begin distancing themselves from the work of the Laboratory Theatre, and develop an innovative and socially influential theatre company. Skorupska comments, 'The artists began to focus on human life in a given time and social context. They began to understand theatre not only as a space of artistic experiment, but primarily as a locus of reaction to the external world.'⁵² Their experiences of the riots and subsequent responses increased their awareness of the limitations they faced as students and artists under a communist regime, altering their perceptions on the purpose of theatre and the responsibilities of the artist.

As a result they changed the themes they chose to address, the techniques they chose to employ and the manner in which they would relate to their audiences. Raczak discussed this shift in purpose and style saying,

Our theatre really begins after March 1968. At that time we realized that it is necessary to deal not only with what's going on in the arts but also with what is happening in society. We wanted to make theatre relevant to people living here and now, a theatre that would deal with everyday problems, with the simple facts of political and social reality.⁵³

⁵² Skorupska, *Teatr Ósmego Dnia: 1964-2009*, 220.

⁵³ Cioffi and Ceynowa, 'An Interview with Director Lech Raczak', 82.

Following the events of 1968, the company began to closely examine the focus of the Grotowskian style and determined that there were fundamental differences in the way that they viewed theatre, its goal in society and the role of the actor in achieving that goal. Ewa Wójciak describes the fundamental variance between the direction that Grotowski's techniques led and the direction that Theatre of the Eighth Day chose to go,

We saw human beings, including actors, as responsible members of their societies, as servants of other people. For Grotowski, a human being was primarily occupied with herself, with self-analysis. We saw this difference as an essential contradiction.⁵⁴

This contradiction led the ensemble to shift their focus from Grotowskian Poor Theatre and self-analysis, to theatre with a wider purpose, one that would allow them the opportunity to explore the lives and stories of contemporary Poland.

From 1968 into the beginning of the next decade the Theatre of the Eighth Day underwent an extensive evolution of style and technique. They began their departure from the poetic/dramatic style that they had performed in during the early years of their existence, and, while still maintaining the lessons in style and techniques they had learned in their Grotowskian practice, began blending their artistic and aesthetic principles with political and social commentary. Raczak comments, 'We felt it was indispensable to

⁵⁴ Wójciak quoted in Skorupska, *Teatr Ósmego Dnia: 1964-2009*, 220.

continue the work inspired by Grotowski on the Self, but a new desire was born – a kind of duty – to cut ourselves free from those mythical concerns and move towards contemporary problems.⁵⁵ They began to draw the core of their material from their own experiences and happenings, the situations they witnessed in public, and incidents reported in the press. They built their work from the real lives and struggles of the people of Poland, making a point to comment on the current events, and the effects they had on the country.

Despite this movement towards using contemporary issues to inform, inspire and provide the themes for their productions the group never defined itself as strictly political. They felt that such categorisation would limit the scope of their work to a documentary and didactic style as well as dismissing the range of themes and issues they addressed in their work. Additionally, referencing Raczak's quote from the introduction, 'In a monopolized system [...] everything becomes political. [...] 'political' results from the distortion and unnaturalness of social life here.'⁵⁶ the ensemble realised that their work could be considered political simply by deviating from the approved form. Raczak and the other members of The Theatre of the Eighth Day did not have any desire to engage in a theatre that was nothing more than an anti-communist message presented onstage, instead they sought to create something that could communicate a message, address the issues faced in the everyday lives of the Polish

⁵⁵ Lech Raczak quoted in Howard, 'A Piece of Our Life', 292.

⁵⁶ Cioffi, Ceynowa & Raczak, 'An Interview with Director Lech Raczak', 90.

people and expose the reality of contemporary situations to their audiences. In discussing the goal of the theatre Raczak states:

We never intended to be an unambiguously political theatre, like a public meeting. This isn't what we're interested in: we're always seeking something specifically theatrical, and we wanted to find and show in the theatre what is irreconcilable with all those political and commonplace modes of communication.⁵⁷

The ensemble strove to create theatre that integrated the political with the aesthetic. As journalist and critic Janusz Majcherek comments,

Political issues were present in the performances of 'The Eights', but never by themselves, never as an issue of prime importance, and when so, they were not presented in an inflamed manner to carry a simplistic anti-communist message. 'The Eights' were and are an artistic theatre rooted in rebellion, which the originators understood and lived as their way of life, their ethos.⁵⁸

They strove to communicate the harsh realities of contemporary Poland, question the reliance on the heroic, romantic, and religious that is ingrained within Polish national identity. In order to do so, the theatre company employed techniques that drew influence from the historic avant-garde movements of the pre and inter-world-war periods; specifically Theatre of Cruelty. Accessing Artaud's theories through their training in Grotowskian techniques, which drew heavily from Theatre of Cruelty's practices of surrounding and confronting the audience, the integrations of gesture, language, movement and static objects, and the inclusion of the mythological and ritual,⁵⁹ Theatre of the Eighth Day created a

⁵⁷ Lech Raczak quoted in Howard, 'A Piece of Our Life', 292

⁵⁸ Majcherek in Skorupska, *Teatr Ósmego Dnia: 1964-2009*, 11.

⁵⁹ Sontag, 'Approaching Artaud', 32.

confrontational, integrated style that allowed them to achieve their goals. Despite their separation from Grotowski's methods, and their rejection of the ritual aspects of theatre, they continued to develop a performance style that confronted their audiences with the elemental, cruel and anarchic aspects of their daily lives.⁶⁰ Furthermore, their work regularly relied on the use of strong and disturbing images, bright lighting, and loud music with the intent of forcing their audiences to connect and respond to what they were witnessing.

The development of the Theatre's style after 1968 reflected their desire to create a theatre that did more than express a political message, educate or alter the opinions of their audiences. Drawing their material from their contemporary environment they built their work from the real lives and struggles of the people of Poland. They began asking questions of society; commenting on, and challenging both the governmental policies and methods of control. They interrogated the elements of Polish national identity and culture that had prevented the general population from rejecting the dictates that removed their freedoms and kept them subjugated under a single-party system. Their work throughout the 1970s pushed the boundaries of theme, content, and style, resulting in legal and professional difficulties for the members. Despite this, they continued to develop this new and challenging work in an attempt to authentically reflect their experiences of life under communism and in order to inspire their audiences to respond to current events, and the effects they had on the country.

⁶⁰ Ahrends and Diller, *Chapters from the History of Stage Cruelty*, 119.

Plays and Experiences of the 1970s

Following the 1968 events the gap between professional theatre and student theatre grew once more. The 1970s saw the professional stage, according to Tymicki, begin their 'love affair with communism'.⁶¹ This comment referring to the fact that during the 1970s the professional theatre seemed to lose its desire to be oppositional and instead align itself closer to the dictates established by the cultural ministry in exchange for rewards. During this time period it became advantageous for theatre artists to cooperate or at the very least silently oppose, and appear cooperative with the regime. As a reward for this compliance they were offered social and economic benefits as well as freedom to travel. The party had their favourites and 'distributed positions, awards, medals, cars, houses, money and other graces to artists.'⁶² Those theatres that outwardly acquiesced to the cultural rules and regulations were well funded and were allotted a measure of leeway and artistic freedom that allowed for the expansion of the aesthetic on stage. This acquiescence resulted in a decline in explorations into the avant-garde and allegorical styles, the focus shifting to a neo-realistic style that, due to the restrictions of censorship spawned few works of any real significance.

Gerould comments,

By the 1970s there was a decline in the allegorical mode, and the theatre of allusion and metaphor gave way to an attempt to deal more concretely with everyday life through social satire and depiction of 'real' milieus. [...] Because of the restrictions of censorship and the inhibitions of cultural tradition, Polish neo-realism in the 1970s

⁶¹ Jerzy Tymicki and Andrzej Niezgodna, 'New Dignity: Polish Theatre 1970-1985', *The Drama Review*, 30 (1986), 13-46 (13).

⁶² *Ibid*, 14.

was unable to deal with many important subjects and remained timid and for the most part non-innovative in its approach.⁶³

Cioffi further discusses how, as absurdism declined as a dominant style in mainstream theatre it was replaced with neorealism, resulting in playwrights being less successful in the creation of innovative works than they had been when they relied on allusion and metaphor, '[...] largely because of the restrictions imposed by the censor's office, Polish neorealism was unable to deal with many important subjects. No new, young neorealist dramatists of the calibre of a Sam Shepard or a David Mamet emerged in Poland.'⁶⁴ Most of the text used in professional performances of the time was either from romantic or classic plays, or plays which made use of cut portions of text incorporated into spectacle, for example the use of motorcycles in Adam Hanuszkiewicz's *Balladyna*, a nineteenth century romantic play. Despite the decline in innovative new play texts, this time period was one of extensive experimentation in terms of directing and design. This became the era of the director and the designer - at times the same person, as many of the new directors came from and made use of visual arts backgrounds. The sets and spectacles that appeared on stage were lush, often cinematic in their use of colour, shape and form and directors such as Grotowski, Kantor, Wajda and Grzegorzewski as well as lesser known but innovative directors like Adam Hanuszkiewicz used music, movement gesture and voice to create highly imaginative, innovative performances.

⁶³ Gerould, 'Social and Political Reality in Modern Polish Drama', 370

⁶⁴ Cioffi, *Alternative Theatre in Poland*, 101.

In contrast to the ways professional theatre functioned at the time, student theatre continued, as they had in the 1950s, to incorporate the political into their work. They saw it as their duty to introduce a contemporaneity to the stage and revitalise Polish art and culture. They felt an obligation to create theatre that reflected and spoke about every-day life in contemporary Poland and as Poland was politicised, they had to make political theatre.⁶⁵ Raczak stated:

The decisive fact is [...] that young people are speaking here to other young people in their own language, but [...] above all that they speak about their own affairs, and these are common to many. And so the theatre is no longer afraid of direct action, an innate function of this most ephemeral of arts... After all, politics should not only be treated as a complex of current problems but also a complex of universal moral, philosophical and historical questions.⁶⁶

This revelation and engagement with ‘moral, philosophical and historical questions’ varied from group to group and performance to performance, however there was a common sense of obligation to tell the emotional and experiential reality of the individual and the community; to take responsibility for their role in building their own social reality. Many of these students believed that not only could they change society but that it was their duty to so. Theatre of the Eighth Day embraced the ideals of the revived student theatre movement, incorporating many of their techniques and ideals into their new, developing style.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 106.

⁶⁶ Raczak in Cioffi, *Alternative Theatre in Poland*, 106.

In One Breath

The first production performed by Theatre of the Eighth Day that actively addressed issues happening in Poland was *Jednym tchem (In One Breath)* first produced in 1971. The play drew its title, as well as its text, from poems about the 1968 protests by Stanisław Barańczak, and references the suppression of the workers' strikes of December 1970. The strikes began on December 13th as a result of the government making sweeping price increases on consumer goods - including beef, pork, flour, jam and coffee – an action which was seen as particularly harsh as it was made in the weeks leading up to the Christmas holiday. In several coastal cities including Gdańsk, Gdynia, Elbląg and Szczecin, workers gathered, held mass meetings, drew up lists of demands and organised marches to local party headquarters. After initial clashes between protesters and police in Gdańsk, Gomułka responded by backing police forces with militia members and additional security police. Revolts continued throughout the following week, strikes occurred in hundreds of factories throughout the region with protesters attacking symbols of power, such as party offices, police cars and armoured personnel carriers. Police responded forcefully, shooting into crowds and beating protesters.⁶⁷ Ekiert, and Kubik give a detailed account including the official reports of the week which report forty-five people killed, one thousand one hundred and sixty-five wounded and three thousand one hundred and sixty one arrested.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Ekiert and Kubik, *Rebellious Civil Society*, 35; Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 27-28.

⁶⁸ Ekiert and Kubik, *Rebellious Civil Society*, 39-41.

The performance of *In One Breath* was not a direct representation or documentary exhibition of the events, however. Instead, it was a ‘quotation’, an indirect statement, commentary and outcry, using the central ideas of the strikes and the poems to create a stylised and highly symbolic performance representative of the events. In the program notes for the performance the ensemble expressed its vision for its work,

Our program is straightforward: to be distrustful in relation to everything that is in us and that is outside of us and to awaken this lack of trust in others [...] Theatre ought to [...] unmask the falsity that we have all gathered within ourselves, tear off the mask of appearances, show our faces and the sense of that which hides behind elevated words, beautiful sounding slogans, and worn out gestures, executed out of habit, lethargy, or fear.⁶⁹

This production marked the beginning of the ensemble’s evolution into openly dissident, socially critical work that they would continue to perform through the further eighteen years of the Cold War, and beyond the re-unification of Europe. It demonstrates the integration of early Grotowskian acting techniques with harsh confrontations reminiscent of Theatre of Cruelty, and the political and social commentary that would set the company apart from other professional and student companies during the 1970s.

The opening scenes of the play show the exterior of a blood donor centre where a journalist and television crew have arrived in order to make a flattering documentary about the virtues

⁶⁹ Program notes for *In One Breath*

of giving blood, and the virtuous nature of those who do so. The intention of the documentary is to highlight the selfless way that individual members of the community give of themselves to support the good of the whole; an obvious reference to the communist ideal of the individual giving of himself to support society as a whole. However, what becomes clear during the course of making this documentary is that each of the donors has a very specific and personal reason for giving blood; whether it is for money, or to benefit a relative so that they can have an operation. Each person who donates has a personal motivation for doing so. As this becomes increasingly obvious to the journalist, he, realising that he still must make the documentary, begins to lie in front of the camera about the donors' motives, and forces others to lie as well. At one point news is passed that there is something occurring outside, and the blood donors rush out only to return carrying a dead body, a direct allusion to the events at Gdańsk.

The play was staged with Grotowskian simplicity. The set was sparse, 'On stage there are a few wooden pedestals, three spotlights, and in the background – banners with tripe [sic] slogans such as "Smoking kills" [...]'⁷⁰. The costumes were simple, and the props were common places items that represented different things throughout the performance. The simplicity of the set and the multipurpose nature of the props served to create a world that was as realistic as it was metaphoric and symbolic. It used white hospital robes as symbols of purity, rubber hoses as veins and arteries, a gallows rope, the thongs of a whip, the ropes

⁷⁰ Tadeusz Nyczeck in Skorupska, *Teatr Ósmego Dnia: 1964-2009*, 209.

that surround a boxing ring, a blood collection container that is an old gasoline can, and a painted Red Cross as a costume piece that helps an actor to mimic the Passion of Christ.

Kathleen Cioffi comments:

The action has a dreamlike symbolism and logic to it, freely moving back and forth between realistic actions such as blood donation and making a television documentary and symbolic actions such as Christ's Passion, a boxing match between the Journalist and blood donor (the Young Man), the washing of hands by Pontius Pilate (the Journalist), and all the actors smearing their faces with blood (red paint).⁷¹

The symbols and metaphors represented in the design aspects of the production intersected with a highly stylised, non-naturalistic, physical acting technique to communicate a complex statement of social and political criticism. The play comments on how easily the media, even that which is meant to be an accurate depiction of life, can be altered and manipulated in order to transmit a desired message. It draws attention to the deceptions perpetrated by both society and self, masking true intentions. Additionally, it comments on the alterations to history made to enforce the Polish people's romantic ideal of their own past, and the tendency of the government to use nationalism as a sedative to keep the populace believing that they are content with their lives. Nyczeck remarks 'Human beings are pumped up, literally by rubber hoses which are some of the few props in the performance, pumped with national pride, forced complacency, and belief that everything is fine, and cannot be better.'⁷² Using the text of Barańczak's poem, 'in one breath, before you choke/on a gag of air thickened

⁷¹ Cioffi, *Alternative Theatre in Poland*, 123-124.

⁷² Tadeusz Nyczeck in Skorupska, *Teatr Ósmego Dnia: 1964-2009*, 209.

from/the last breath of the executed the breathing of hot/barrels and blood streaming on concrete,⁷³ the play makes reference to violent suppression of the workers' strikes of the previous December.

In creating this production the Theatre of the Eighth Day demonstrated the new direction that they had chosen for themselves in the wake of the 1968 revolts, producing a play that blended the politically and socially relevant with a highly developed aesthetic sense. It presented Theatre of the Eighth Day as something new in the scope of Polish theatre, as a group who inextricably wove political and social statements into the artistic fabric of their productions. They created a work that made use of strong literary imagery as well as visuals that were intended to disconcert and confront their audiences with the cruelty that is inherent in their societies. One that challenged audiences to acknowledge the ways that they were allowing themselves to be manipulated, and their complacency regarding their own lives, which allowed the events in Gdańsk to occur.

In One Breath...clarified the lies we, contemporary Poles, tell about ourselves, while we are living among deeply entrenched falsehoods, among illusionary truths and hidden lies, among words that belie our gestures, belie our words. It is an attempt to break us free from...a network of illusions, a maddened dance... - us, for whom shooting of people in December 1970 was a bitter lesson of modern history.⁷⁴

⁷³ Stanisław Barańczak, 'In One Breath' in Cioffi, *Alternative Theatre in Poland*, 123.

⁷⁴ Tadeusz Nyczeck in Skorupska, *Teatr Ósmego Dnia: 1964-2009*, 209.

From the end of the first production of *In One Breath*, many audience members connected with the group; they understood the statements that were being made and found themselves within the characters of the play. The response to the play, from the perspective of the spectators, was overwhelmingly positive, though deeply introspective, in that they were thoroughly affected by what they had just witnessed. Other artists commented on the power and significance of the play. Agnieszka Osiecka, a radical singer, spoke about the raw power of the performance, the ways in which it revealed dirty truths about the society they lived in, and the bravery of the group to produce a piece of work like this,

This performance by the Poznan students puts us all, artists and essayists, to shame in that we should have done it and not them...It is not a performance, it is an outcry against lies, repression, and the myth of mediocrity...The performance is an asset of seemingly unrelated events. Those who, allegorically, give their blood are surrounded by dirty sheets and hospital equipment. Sometimes they resort to the leech...tied together with hospital tubing like a twentieth-century Laocöon group, and they run. They run in desperation. And as they come to terms with reality, they breathe together. They touch one another, trying to form one mutual flowing stream of blood.⁷⁵

Other artists, writers, and intellectuals spoke about the forceful potency of the play, and the experience of being confronted with the gritty, painful truths of their existence, referring to it as a ‘scream against lies, against passivity, against the terrible notion of “the grey common

⁷⁵ Agnieszka Osiecka in Howard, ‘A Piece of Our Life’, 293.; Osiecka’s comment regarding Laocöon refers to the myth of a Trojan priest of Poseidon who along with his two sons is killed by sea serpents. The reference here likely parallels the constriction, restraint and agony felt by Laocöon and his sons with those in the play who are being bound and bled by the mechanisms of control in Poland.

man”⁷⁶ and commenting that ‘[The play...] is presented with such care, with such political and patriotic engagement, that no spectator could remain indifferent.’⁷⁷ Following the performance, many of the audience members were so deeply affected by the performance that they contacted the theatre to inquire about training with them. As a result, Raczak and other members of the original company established programs for these students. In establishing these training programs Raczak brought new talent to the theatre including Ewa Wójciak, Tadeusz Janiszewski, Marcin Kęszycki, and Adam Borowski who continue to work with the ensemble to the present day. Janiszewski comments, ‘[...] from that moment I belonged to the company. It was an absolute discovery for me. I went to the theatre, saw the play, and got stuck.’⁷⁸

The ensemble performed the play throughout Poland and abroad, winning several prizes for the performance including a prize for best spectacle at the International Student Festival in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, a prize from the Ministry of Culture and Art, and the critics’ award at the Eighth Łódź Theatre Meetings. This reception of the play led the theatre to produce the show again in 1973 that was then toured to the Netherlands and Great Britain. It was with this second tour of the play that the difficulties the ensemble would continuously have with local and national authorities throughout the rest of the communist era began. The authorities took notice of the group during the performances of this second version as they felt that the

⁷⁶ Agnieszka Osiecka in Skorupska, *Teatr Ósmego Dnia: 1964-2009*, 209.

⁷⁷ Trybuna Ludu in Howard, ‘A Piece of Our Life’, 293.

⁷⁸ Tadeusz Janiszewski in Howard, ‘A Piece of Our Life’, 293.

comments it made, and references it drew upon could not be explained away or blamed on the previous party leaders - Gierek had replaced Gomułka after the Gdansk strikes. It could not be ignored that the ensemble was not strictly making references to past events but were commenting on the state of contemporary Poland.

The implicit references to the responsibility of an earlier government for the tragedy of 1970 meant that the performance could be seen as evidence of radical change in the cultural climate and the authorities' behaviour. *8th Day* undermined these cosy assumptions on the part of their official patrons by staging a second part, confirming that nothing had changed under Gierek.⁷⁹

As a result, following their return from their tour of the Netherlands and Great Britain, the Provincial Committee (the regional governing bodies of non-central cities, such as Poznan) officially banned the theatre from any future performances of the play and the members of the company were put under close surveillance.

Other Plays of the 1970s

Despite the ban on *In One Breath*, the increased surveillance the ensemble found themselves under, and the issues they faced in getting permission to perform, the theatre was not deterred from their goal of creating a new form of theatre. Instead, these challenges spurred them forward and made them more eager to continue their work. The mid to late 1970s and

⁷⁹ John Michael Bates, 'Theatre of the Eighth Day', in *Censorship: A World Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, ed. by Derek Jones (London, Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001).

beginning of the 1980s was a period of continuous expansion for the group, presenting them with a constant stream of events and experiences from which they built their shows. They repeatedly created performances that explored complex, controversial themes, challenged the systems of society, government and personal moralities, as well as addressing the issues of accepting the state of the country as an absolute.

One such production was *Przecena dla wszystkich* – (*Discounts for Everybody*, 1977). This play marked another change in the theatre's style, in that it was built from the actor's own words. 'With *Discounts* the 8th Day found its own voice; grotesque, ironic, musical, non-realistic, yet firmly grounded in political and social reality.'⁸⁰ The play had less of a defined plot line than the ensemble's earlier works, but continued to reflect their experiences, their perceptions of their environments, and the purpose of theatre therein.

Discounts, in comparison to all the earlier spectacles, was unusually chaotic; at its foundation it was a continuation of our discussion about the social and political function of theatre, since we always showed what we thought of the world in which we live, which was crumbling more and more, escaping somewhere into the darkness. We weren't saying that the plaster was falling off houses, but – metaphorically – that plaster was falling off people, off brains, and in its place other plaster was being layered.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Cioffi, *Alternative Theatre in Poland*, 157-158.

⁸¹ Raczak quoted in Cioffi, *Alternative Theatre in Poland*, 158.

It expressed their criticisms and disdain for the ways that dissidents and workers, who had participated in the riots of 1968, 1970, and 1976, had been marginalised and criminalised, depicted as ‘anarchists, terrorists, rioters, [and] crazy mentally-ill hypersensitives’.⁸² It depicted the idea of artifice and substitutions as being better than authentic items, common in the propaganda of the 1970s, ‘margarine is better than butter (there is no cholesterol and so many synthetic vitamins), artificial flowers don’t wilt, vinyl gets less dirty than leather, and brass shines more than gold.’⁸³ In doing so, it made comments on how the official lies and everyday compromises were corrupting the Polish people. It was a ‘grotesque and expressionistic metaphor of Poland; it was filled with pictures of degraded life and futile efforts.’⁸⁴

Further examples of the work the ensemble produced during this period that examined the intersections between politics, philosophy, and history are *Ach, jakże godnie żyliśmy* (*Oh Have We Lived in Dignity*, 1979) and *Więcej niż jedno życie* (*More Than One Life*, 1981). *Oh Have We Lived in Dignity* was a ‘dark cabaret’ laying out the stage in levels designating heaven, earth and hell. The characters included a ‘harlot muse’ who sings of slitting throats, the young man who admires her, and a drunken philosopher who questions the existence of God and questions the audience about their reluctance to resist pain and oppression, ‘we

⁸² Play text quoted in Cioffi, *Alternative Theatre in Poland*, 158.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Grzegorz Kostrzewa-Zorbas, ‘Teatr Ósmego Dnia – 1981’, *The Theatre in Poland* (281) (France, 1982), 13.

come from the same father. We are oppressed by the same shoe. But we have the right to speak and you have the right to listen. We all have the right to disagree, with this.⁸⁵ At different points during the play heroes and heroines of the revolutions strode out to the rhythms of Mozart's *Dies Irae*, representing the eternal, futile march of self-sacrifice, and to a chorus of 'Sanctus', Nemesis, the goddess of material destiny, was hoisted into the air on a hook, like a side of meat, where she 'gave birth' to pink, plastic piglets that those on the floor then scrambled to possess. On earth a continuous stream of toy cars were produced on an endless assembly line, and in hell the inhabitants played a game of cards where Afghanistan and the nations of Africa and Latin America were the stakes. The play produced a stark image of a world possessed by greed, complacent in its own subjugation, reliant on religion and nationalism for its own identity, and at ease with abandoning its values when reward is offered.⁸⁶

Więcej niż jedno życie (More Than One Life, 1981) is a meditation on history, culture, and humanity. Interspersing scenes that depict major historical events with the story of Jan M., a schoolboy whose relentless torment at the hands of a teacher pushes him to commit suicide, the play addresses the way that history and nationalism is used to manipulate the population and how it hangs like a burden on many.

⁸⁵ English Program Notes for *Oh Have We Lived in Dignity*, written and performed by Theatre of the Eighth Day at the London International Festival of Theatre, August 1981.

⁸⁶ English Program Notes for *Oh Have We Lived in Dignity*.

More Than One Life is a story of Jan M. and his exit from careless childhood – into the threatening and destructive reality of adults [...] having said his goodbyes with his family, goes to boarding school. From now on, he is to be guided by a book and a holy medallion. Teachers will help him with that, although they only sow confusion in people's hearts. It is not without a reason that the history teacher is immediately brought to the foreground, because history is brutally entering Jan M.'s life, not only by subjecting him to its short-term machinery, but also imposing on him the figures of predecessors, mythic heroes and convicts, rebels and revolutionaries, with whom he suddenly must identify, and whose fate, from now on, will always be resting on his shoulders.⁸⁷

Through this play the ensemble challenged their audiences to analyse themselves and what they were being taught; to question whether their histories and culture, and as a result, their identities were being manipulated such that the population could be controlled. '*More than One Life* explored the historical dialectic of defeat and apotheosis, dignity and ridicule [...]'⁸⁸. It was an expansive production incorporating sung poetry; the actors played multiple roles and the staging was equal parts seriousness and frivolity. Kostrzewa-Zorbas commented, 'the production is as turbulent as its subject (history). At times it resembles a popular festivity [...] full of music and joy; at times an epos or fervent prayer. [...] solemnity is mixed with laughter and despair is combined with mockery.'⁸⁹

In creating these performances, and exploring these themes, Theatre of the Eighth Day remained politically, societally and socially relevant in a way that many of the student

⁸⁷ Józef Ratajczak quoted in Skorupska, *Teatr Ósmego Dnia: 1964-2009*, 163.

⁸⁸ Howard, 'A Piece of Our Life', 299.

⁸⁹ Kostrzewa-Zorbas, 'Teatr Ósmego Dnia – 1981', 13.

theatres did not. Producing through periods of heightened and lessened censorship and control, they maintained their stance and their voice in a society where many other companies had sacrificed theirs by altering their styles or themes such that they closer aligned to sanctioned and allowable works. Even when the ensemble was officially ‘professionalised’ they refused to abandon what they perceived as their moral and ethical obligation to themselves and their audiences. The critic Elzbieta Morawiec commented on how the work of the Theatre of the Eighth Day differed from other radical theatres of the time in that it was ‘the most distinctly ethical in its concerns. It speaks of the responsibility of each and every individual for the truth and lies of collective history.’⁹⁰

In response to this continued effort the theatre made to maintain its original goals of challenging the Polish people to view their world as it was, and not as the government instructed, the ensemble faced continuous and increasing restriction and persecution by the authorities. They were repeatedly harassed; their material was severely censored or rejected altogether. In order to counter some of the interference, the group would prepare two versions of the productions, the first, which would be submitted to the censor, with the contentious material removed, the second for performance that had all of the material restored. Invariably, this brought more repression down on the group and they were often subject to 48 hour detentions without charge, searches of their homes, restriction or rejection of travel, confiscation of their props and sound systems, and invented or highly exaggerated

⁹⁰ Elzbieta Morawiec quoted in Howard, ‘A Piece of Our Life’, 297.

charges. Secret police files, which were declassified and sent to members of the ensemble in 2006, revealed that the monitoring of the group and the attempts to break them up were more extensive than originally thought. The files show that the members of the group were not only externally monitored, through searches of their homes, interception of their mail, listening in on their phone conversations and monitoring their performances but that dozens of attempts were made to place informers within the group, many times by creating complex operations complete with multiple operatives and extensive chains of associations. They also revealed that, despite the absurd intricacy of many of these infiltration attempts, these planted agents and informers were neither able to fully integrate into the tight-knit group of artists nor discover the absolute damning evidence that would allow the Polish government in the 1970s to eliminate the group and arrest the members.⁹¹ As such, the government was forced to employ other methods of criminalisation. For example, in an intercepted memo from the KOR committee for Social Self-Protection it states,

On April 26, 1978 five members of the company travelling to Lublin [...] did not have time to buy tickets for the bus [...]. Despite the fact that they were prepared to pay the requisite fine, the ticket inspector summoned the police, who severely beat two of the actors, and subjected them to vulgar abuse. In the courtyard of the City of Warsaw Police Headquarters [...] all the actors were assaulted by plain-clothes police officers and were kicked, punched and beaten with batons. All five were held for 30 hours.⁹²

⁹¹ 'Theatre of the Eighth Day: The Files' in *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage*, 166 - 196.

⁹² *Ibid*, 186.

Additionally during the years 1976-1979 there was a full media blackout on the group during which it was illegal for any mainstream paper, or news outlet to report on the group. ‘Absolutely no information about this theatre was allowed to appear publically. We were not allowed to go abroad – or perform in some Polish cities, especially Warsaw.’⁹³

Throughout the 1970s it was made acutely evident that the authorities viewed the theatre as a significant threat to the communist ideal, and the control they had over the artistic sectors. In addition to the harassment, searches, and the media blackout, the authorities raised criminal charges against the group and began an absurd trial. The details of the trials claimed and accused the group of a variety of different offences, however, as there was no evidence of these crimes, the trials stretched on as a series of talking points for years. The intent was to keep the group from working, destroy their reputation, and divide the members, such that they could not keep the group together. This attempt failed however. Despite having the charges brought against them, having members handed fines and even prison sentences, they were unable to keep the group from continuing to perform both during and after the trial. If anything the experience of these trials fuelled the theatre’s creativity, and provided with them with an abundance of material from which to build new performances. Tadeusz Janiszewski commented:

⁹³ Tadeusz Janiszewski in Howard, ‘A Piece of Our Life’, 296.

Almost one hundred days on trial, five hours a day, and we have never worked as regularly as at that time. There was another trial in Warsaw: this time the accusation was that we travelled on a tram without tickets and beat up policemen. The result was jail sentences for Tomasz Stachowski and Roman Radomski, but we appealed and some protests were made by important people.⁹⁴

Furthermore, in 1979, in an attempt to control the ensemble and stem the influence they had on the younger groups (as a 'student theatre' Theatre of the Eighth Day was extremely influential in the development of new student theatres and their methods and techniques were often copied), their status was changed from a 'student theatre' and therefore under the auspices of the SZSP (Polish Student Association) to a 'professional theatre' under the control of State Entertainment Agency 'Estrada Poznańska'. In doing this the government expected that they could now control the work the theatre produced due to the fact that, under control of Estrada, the theatre now had to ascribe to the censorship restrictions established and enforced by the Ministry of Culture; therefore intensifying the limitations already in place. Additionally, it was believed that the ensemble would be less likely to produce material that would jeopardise the subsidy that they had been granted.

As the 1970s came to a close, it became increasingly obvious that nothing beyond an absolute ban on the theatre itself was going to keep the ensemble from creating and performing confrontational, dissident work. They were an integral part of the alternative theatre movement in Poland, and one of the few who consistently refused attempts to be controlled,

⁹⁴ Ibid.

bought or separated. Their situation markedly improved for the sixteen months that Solidarity legally existed, and the Theatre experienced a sense of freedom that they had not experienced at any other point during their existence.

Solidarity and Martial Law

Solidarność (Solidarity) as a movement began officially in 1980, although its origins began in 1976, when a series of strikes and riots, resulting from changes to the Polish constitution that institutionalised the bond between Poland and the Soviet Union, increased prices on several basic food staples, especially sausage, dairy products and sugar by 50-100%.⁹⁵ These strikes, while short-lived, and eventually ended due to government modifications to the language of the constitution and the withdrawal of price increases, led to the formation of the Komitet Obrony Robotników.⁹⁶ The KOR, an alliance of intellectuals and workers opposed to the authoritarian communist regime, was originally formed to assist, legally and financially, those who had been dismissed from their jobs or arrested as a result of their participation in the riots. However, in the years between 1976 and 1980, they expanded their oppositional counter-culture to include laying the groundwork for underground publishing, fundraising to support workers and their families, and calling for the expansions of basic freedoms. They called upon the Polish people to attempt to foster democracy by supporting education reforms, creating and supporting workers' unions, cooperatives for peasants and

⁹⁵ Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 34.

⁹⁶ Committee for the Defence of Workers, hereafter referred to as the KOR

artisans, and by offering their support to resist further attempts at repression.⁹⁷ Throughout the late- 1970s the KOR became expansive, encompassing large portions of communities, and drawing support from the Catholic Church. The involvement of the Church, and the election of Polish Cardinal Karol Wojtyła, a long-time challenger of the regime, as pope in 1978 (John Paul II) broadened the KOR's reach even further. John Paul II's visit to his homeland in 1979 became instrumental in broadening the impact of the oppositional groups as it served as a galvanising force to give the Polish people hope in the future, and in the role that Poland could play in the wider world.⁹⁸

Solidarity was officially brought into existence following strikes during the summer of 1980, its numbers quickly growing to more than ten million before being driven underground with the institution of Martial Law. Within weeks, the Gierek government recognised Solidarity as a legitimate trade union organization and engaged in negotiations that resulted in wage increases, recognition of independent trade unions and the unconditional release of political prisoners.⁹⁹ Throughout the sixteen months of its legal existence Solidarity was significantly more than a trade union, tackling issues of press censorship, human rights violations and governmental corruption in addition to those directly affecting the trade workers,

⁹⁷ Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 35-40.

⁹⁸ Kenneth Zagacki, 'Pope John Paul II and the Crusade Against Communism: A Case Study in Secular and Sacred Time,' *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 4:4 (2001), 689-710.; 'Pope John Paul's Crusade against Communism', CNN. <<http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/9801/21/papal.politics/index.html>> 21 Jan. 1998. [accessed 17 April 2015].

⁹⁹ Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 46-47.

Several aspects of Solidarity particularly set it apart from traditional social movements. These included Solidarity's emphasis on non-violence, its connection with the Catholic Church and religious values, its concern with self-management at all levels and its arresting combination of the values of democratic participation, justice, equality, human dignity and socialism.¹⁰⁰

Solidarity addressed and attended to numerous issues faced by the Polish people, it was a 'total social movement aiming to change all aspects of public life'¹⁰¹ that drew support from many different groups of people including workers, and intellectuals, as well as the creative sector including theatre artists. Support from theatres and theatre artists was both artistic and ideological.

Performances in professional theatre during the 1980-1981 took on a far more political and social awareness in their productions, beginning with a well-attended, though unsanctioned, performance of a production in tribute to defected dissident poet Czesław Miłosz, who on October 9th 1980 won the Nobel Prize for literature. Following the positive reception of this work by the public - though not by the authorities who threatened the producing theatre with sanctions and fines - multiple performances of Miłosz's work were mounted throughout the country. Work by other dissidents such as Stanisław Barańczak, Zbigniew Herbert, Tadeusz Konwicki, Marek Nowakowski, as well as defected playwright Sławomir Mrożek,

¹⁰⁰ David Mason, 'Solidarity as a New Social Movement', *Political Science Quarterly*, 104 (1989) 41-58 (56).

¹⁰¹ Alain Touraine, *Solidarity: Poland 1980-1981* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 2.

many of whose plays had been previously banned, became popular during the 80-81 theatrical season.

The ideology of theatre artists and theatres changed under the influence of Solidarity. Many of the theatres had Solidarity groups present within the theatre, which inspired the silent majority. Actors, directors, and technical and administrative personal, which had mainly remained silent under the Party control dictated by artistic directors and managers, began to voice their criticisms, and went as far as renouncing their obedience to the communist party and the tearing up of their membership cards. Theatre artists also supported Solidarity by taking their performances to alternate locations to entertain and educate. They joined non-actors and participated in the performance of plays and poetry, political docu-dramas, and historical stagings:

This theatre happened during strikes, demonstrations and meetings. It was performed in the streets and squares of cities, in factories, on the premises of the authorities that were occupied by protesters, and in conference rooms where government commissions negotiated with Solidarity delegations of workers, farmers, students, artists and scholars.¹⁰²

Former student theatre groups such as Teatr STU, Kalambur, Teatr 77 and Theatre of the Eighth Day, who had been forced from under the auspices of the SZSP into semi-professional status, and as a result had suffered increased surveillance and censorship, made use of the

¹⁰² Braun, *A History of Polish Theatre*, 96.

expanded freedoms, and supported the movement. Solidarity forced the authorities to behave more agreeably towards the former student groups, limiting the marginalisation and criminalisation they faced. As a result, Theatre of the Eighth Day was granted passports to travel to theatre festivals in Western Europe and Mexico. In return for Solidarity's assistance in securing these documents, the Theatre performed in factories, and at student strikes, as well as participating in the ceremonial unveiling of a monument that commemorated the workers killed in the 1956 Poznań riots.

Solidarity was a time of great hope for many Poles. One they felt might end or, at very least, significantly reduce the absolute power that the PZPR held over the country. For the first time since the inter-war period they were being granted freedoms of movement, press, assembly and self-governance that did not have to be paid for with obedience to the ruling party. However, the hopes of these 16 months were summarily and violently nullified on the night of December 12, 1981. The following morning, General Wojciech Jaruzelski, leader of the Military Council for National Salvation, appeared on Polish television, declared himself head of the Polish government, claiming that he was supported by the Soviet government.¹⁰³ In this speech he addressed the current plight of Poland, which saw as

¹⁰³ To date it remains unclear whether Jaruzelski's actions were supported by Moscow. Until his death in 2014 he continued to claim that he declared Martial Law in order to prevent a Warsaw Pact type invasion of Poland, however this cannot be evidenced. Contrarily, declassified NATO documents claim that the Soviet Union was planning no such invasion when Jaruzelski claimed leadership of Poland.

demoralised, catastrophic, and teetering on the edge of destruction as a result of the oppositional actions of Solidarity,

Our homeland is at the edge of an abyss. The achievements of many generations and the Polish home that has been built up from the dust are about to turn into ruins. State structures are ceasing to function. Each day delivers new blows to the waning economy... The atmosphere of conflicts, misunderstanding, hatred causes moral degradation, surpasses the limits of toleration. Strikes, the readiness to strike, actions of protest have become a norm of life. Even school youth are being drawn into this... The cases of terror, threats and moral vendetta, of even direct violence are on the rise... Chaos and demoralization have reached the magnitude of a catastrophe. People have reached the limit of psychological toleration. Many people are struck by despair. Not only days, but hours as well are bringing forth the all-national disaster...¹⁰⁴

The institution of martial law was immediate and pervasive, its goal to dismantle Solidarity leadership, and reinstate strict totalitarian rule. Jaruzelski strived, much in the way Husak did in ‘normalising’ Czechoslovakia, to return Poland to a panoptic state in which the central tenets of Stalin-like control were once more present. He desired power to be re-centralised, reforms to be rescinded, and opposition to be crushed. In his Poland the government was invasive, restrictive and absolute. Upon the institution of martial law all independent and trade unions were suspended; Lech Wałęsa and other leading members of Solidarity were arrested and incarcerated without trial. The borders were sealed, airports were closed, and road access to main cities was restricted. All travel between cities required permission, and

¹⁰⁴ Wojciech Jaruzelski, Speech given on Polish Television December 13, 1981. Available online: ‘Excerpts from Prime Minister Wojciech Jaruzelski’s speech declaring martial law. ’, *United Press International* <upi. com/4118288> [accessed 20 February 2013]

a curfew was put into effect from 10pm to 6am further restricting movement. There was a complete media blackout with all television and radio transmissions, with the exception of one government station, and all mail was subject to censorship. Public administration, health services, power generation stations, coalmines, seaports, train stations, and most of the key factories were placed under military management.¹⁰⁵

All public meetings and gatherings, including religious services, were banned. It became illegal to resist; demonstrating or taking part in any activity that was not directly sanctioned were punishable offenses. Classes in schools and at universities were suspended and student theatre was forbidden. Several members of student and ex-student theatres were interned or imprisoned for their participation in the Solidarity movement, and professional directors who staged material critical of Jaruzelski's regime were often dismissed from their theatres and could not be hired in other professional theatres by dictate of the government.

Despite this, the Polish people did resist, mounting strikes and demonstrations - these were quickly and violently ended by the military police - engaging in clandestine protest activities and boycotts of the militarised government. Theatre, once again, became a method of national resistance, once again it became a way for the Polish people to maintain their identity

¹⁰⁵ For more regarding the institution of martial, its policies and the progression of its implementation see: Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 51-52.; Braun, *A History of Polish Theatre*, 97-99.; Andrew Michta, *Red Eagle: The Army in Polish Politics 1944-1988* (Stanford: Hoover Press, 1990), 131-132.

and their national pride in the face of a deeply controlling adversary. Theatre played an important, if measured, role in the resistance against the attempts to reinstate a strict totalitarian government. Theatre artists boycotted appearances on mass media, stood in defence of the professional actor's union, engaged in and produced underground theatre and opposed productions in state theatres.

In the days following the initial declaration of martial law, while television service was suspended, members of the professional actors union declared a complete boycott of the mass media, which they had often worked with to supplement their income from theatre work. Actors, directors, and writers refused to engage in the government propaganda that dominated all television and radio once the media blackout was lifted.¹⁰⁶

All agreed not to play, direct, write or give interviews for television, radio or the press; they would also stop making films. Their major motives for the boycott were to protest the imposition of martial law, to refuse to participate in manipulative propaganda and public lies, to demonstrate solidarity with Solidarity and to stress the priority of moral, patriotic, and human principles over professional, aesthetic, and economic values.¹⁰⁷

Following the initial weeks of oppression, martial law was officially lifted, and after being granted a permit, many theatres were allowed to reopen. They did so, however, under restrictions of 'double censorship' – a system by which theatres had to first cancel any

¹⁰⁶ Tymicki, 'New Dignity: Polish Theatre 1970-1985', 32-33.

¹⁰⁷ Braun, *A History of Polish Theatre*, 102.

material that they deemed unsuitable for the new political situation, then submit the remaining material for authorisation by military censors, including material that had been censored prior to the institution of martial law.¹⁰⁸ The limitations that this intensified censorship placed on what could be produced as well as the fact that many actors, directors and theatre companies, including Theatre of the Eighth Day, who had taken a large role in Solidarity activities, were not initially granted permits to reopen or perform led to the development of an intensified ‘underground’ theatre movement.

This underground theatre became a performance venue for actors from professional theatre, as well as the professionalised, avant-garde, ex-student theatre and took two distinct forms: private theatre produced completely clandestinely in homes and overt, public theatre produced in churches. Here there were distinct differences between the two types of performance, Home theatre was, ‘[...] technically, practically and fully “underground” – that is to say, strictly secret, with small audiences, although its activities were known to many people.’¹⁰⁹ These performances were performed in private homes and apartments, played for as many people as could fit within the living room of an apartment, and very often were followed by discussion of the work and of the situation being faced in Poland. Programs for performances in home theatre varied widely and included: full productions of new and

¹⁰⁸ John Bates, ‘From State Monopoly to a Free Market of Ideas? Censorship in Poland 1976-1989’ in *Censorship and Cultural Regulation in the Modern World*, ed.by. Beate Müller (Amsterdam: Brill Rodopi, 2004), 141-168.;

¹⁰⁹ Braun, *A History of Polish Theatre*, 105.

banned work from Poland, plays that were being smuggled into the country such as work by Václav Havel and Pavel Kohout, sections and scenes of banned works recreated from memory by actors who had performed them prior to martial law, and readings of poetry, prose and journalism from the underground press.

Church theatre by contrast was ‘[...] public, attracted thousands of spectators, and influenced masses.’¹¹⁰ It was announced in advance from the pulpit whereas Home theatre had a strictly word-of-mouth dissemination of time and location. At the beginning Church theatre served to create a space to share literary and scholarly work, mostly in the form of lectures, which were not published or popularised by the state controlled media and were prohibited from being taught at university. Soon after, however, music concerts, fine arts exhibitions, and theatrical productions became common occurrences. Church theatre drew in hundreds of actors and huge crowds of spectators, and although it was overt it still qualified as underground theatre due to its uncensored, and therefore unlawful, content, and its connection to the political opposition. These productions were always scrutinised but never directly interfered with due to the semi-official, partial autonomy that the church held by virtue of its integral role in Polish identity and nationalism. As a result of the relative space allowed to churches, they became vital to the opposition to martial law by actors, directors and writers. The activities in churches prevailed, and soon there were more than 100

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

churches throughout the country producing regularly, some serving as semi-permanent performance spaces.

Throughout the early and mid-part of the 1980s underground theatre served as a way for theatre artists, as well as spectators to reject and protest the oppression and restrictions placed on them by the institution of martial law. It provided a space in which to voice opposition to the 'normalised' law that was put into effect before martial law was officially lifted. As a result of engaging in these activities, all of those involved in this type of theatre risked their freedom, their livelihoods, their privacy and their safety. There was no direct interference with the performances held in churches but this did not mean that those engaged in underground theatre were not persecuted for opposing the government; quite the contrary. The government did not take kindly to being subverted by theatre artists and struck out at them in a variety of different ways, making their lives as well as work extremely difficult. They incurred large fines, had their homes and cars searched, were subject to arrest and untried detention, and had their phones tapped and associates scrutinised. Additionally, the priests who allowed these activities and productions to occur in their churches were targeted, interrogated, fined and even threatened with death. In 1984, a priest, Father Popieluszko, was murdered for his support of theatre in his church and the threats became very real.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 51-52.; Tymicki, 'New Dignity: Polish Theatre 1970-1985', 40-44.

Theatre of the Eighth Day's continued thematic and performative dissent, despite the semi-professional status under Estrada Entertainment, the subsidy, and performance space allotted to them, set them out as oppositional. Their participation in Solidarity activities served to make them even more visible in the view of the government. From the day martial law went into effect the theatre was banned from performing, and remained so until June 1982. The members were repeatedly harassed, forbidden from travelling and subject to arrest:

On 13 February 1982, during a demonstration in which the entire company participated, under the memorial of the June '56 protests in Poznań, Roman Radomski was apprehended and sentenced to imprisonment for a month. In autumn of the same year Marcin Kęszycki was drafted for military service. The company was once again unable to travel abroad; its performances in the country, outside of Poznań, were also banned.¹¹²

Despite the renewed state oppression, the threat of intervention and arrest, and the periodic absence of company members who had been imprisoned or drafted into military service, the Theatre involved itself with the underground activities of Solidarity, especially underground press publications, and produced several plays. *Przypowieść (The Fable 1982)* based on Faulkner's story emphasised 'the beauty of ordinary life in the name of which the struggle is undertaken.'¹¹³ *Wzlot (Ascent 1982)* drew story and verse from Osip Mandelstam, the

¹¹² Juliusz Tyszka, 'Characters, Connections, Constructing an Action: Forty Years of Theatre of the Eighth Day' *New Theatre Quarterly*, 23(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 403-426 (414).

¹¹³ Wójcik in Cioffi, *Alternative Theatre in Poland*, 161.

Russian (though he was of Polish descent) poet and essayist who died in a Soviet gulag during Stalinism, having written poetry overtly critical of the regime.

Following the changes that converted many of the martial law mandates into permanent laws, and the subsequent increase in surveillance and interference the ensemble faced, the ensemble sought new methods of production that would not be as closely monitored as those that were produced in their theatre space. Finding this method in 1983, they began to produce work that took place in outdoor public spaces, as unauthorised, impromptu performance, and as part of outdoor and street theatre festivals. It relied on mobile staging, and the limited freedoms that were allowed to religious and cultural festivals. The innovations developed during this period further influenced the development of their style. They began to create large-scale, mobile (parade-like), outdoor or site-specific productions; a method that has become a major part of Theatre of the Eighth Day's repertoire to the current day.

Report from a Besieged City

The ensemble's first outdoor performance, *Raport z obleżonego miasta* (*Report from a Besieged City*) was based on the poem of the same name by Zbigniew Herbert and was presented at the International Street Theatre Festival in Jelenia Góra. The festival, organised by Alina Obidniak in 1984, was an impressive feat given the current state of the government, and the meagre rights being allotted to any arts, let alone theatre. The festival blended works

from professional, semi-professional, and student performers from Poland, the other Eastern Bloc countries, and from the West. While still subject to the strict censoring policies of the cultural ministry, the festival gathered artists from both the approved and underground groups, and presented works of surprising freedom. Knowing that their material would be very strictly censored and monitored if submitted to the authorities, Theatre of the Eighth Day devised a way in which to circumvent the censorship. They invited more than thirty foreign performers to participate in the play (mostly in minor roles), as regulations did not require pre-approval of texts presented by foreign theatre-groups. This strategy worked, and the ensemble was able to perform a piece that spoke directly to the ways that life had changed in Poland since the institution of martial law.

The poem that gave its title, theme, and text to the play speaks of a city that is besieged; surrounded on all sides by enemies that seek to find a weakness in the defences, to break through the line, kill anyone who stands in the way, and raze the city to the ground. The speaker is an old man, who, being too old to fight has been given the job of recording the last days of a city that is about to fall to its enemies. Throughout the poem the speaker relates the murders of the leaders, the hunger, sickness and fear that plague those who remain within the city walls and the expectation that any day could be their last. In the end, the implication is that the city is indeed in danger of falling, with fewer and fewer defenders left alive. Despite this, however, hope is still possible, presented in the idea that if even one person survives and carries the idea of the city within, that the city will continue to exist, 'cemeteries

grow larger the number of defenders is smaller/ yet the defence continues it will continue to the end / and if the City falls but a single man escapes/ he will carry the City within himself on the roads of exile / he will be the City'¹¹⁴

The play, constructed from this text, metaphorically reflected the situation faced by the Polish people under martial law, both externally and internally; the 'besieged city' representing Polish society, as a whole as well as the damaged sense of self-identity that resulted from the restriction of the regime.

Every generation in Poland [...] and each person as an individual at some point lives through his or her own apocalypse. [...] *Report from a Besieged City* is a vision of the apocalypse of our generation, which connected its hopes with the Solidarity movement.¹¹⁵

The play began at daybreak, some of the actors parading through the streets on stilts, other staging scenes in various locations throughout the city, 'First thing at 6 a.m., Tadeusz Janiszewski sets off [...]. The "common man" is wandering through the city, pulling a tramp's trolley with all his possessions.'¹¹⁶ In the afternoon, in the arcade of City Hall, the 'death monger' Roman Radomski assembles his stall. 'An obituary-signboard says "Bright

¹¹⁴ Zbigniew Herbert, *Report from a Besieged City*, 1982 trans. by John Carpenter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹¹⁵ Lech Raczak, *Madness and Method: Texts About Theatre*, trans. by Rose Whyman (Poznan: Miejskie Posnania 2013) 80

¹¹⁶ Skorupska, *Teatr Ósmego Dnia: 1964-2009*, 145.

Future, R.I.P.” But even before this cabinet of a new Dr. Caligari opens, new characters enter the square [...] a group of mourners who move like somnambulist sleepers.’¹¹⁷ Raczak reflected, ‘In several sequences we show the unrest of the city threatened with invasion, the entry of an extermination camp, the horrid court proceedings, and verdict on the city.’¹¹⁸ Tyszka commented, ‘The production evoked the threats of siege, oppression and extreme horror, concentrating on the moral choices of city dwellers whose defences the enemy may imminently breach.’¹¹⁹ The play culminated at nightfall, and was staged in a crumbling, disused courtyard in the centre of the city. The final sequence of the play made use of familiar symbols and allegories, blended religious imagery with cultural and historical symbols, and presented the violence and uncompromising element of the authorities. The audience saw stilted figures that had first presented elements of the Polish past become the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. They saw a helmeted creature representative of the riot police, and they saw themselves, shown as people attempting to tender favour in a variety of ways, being put down by the authorities despite their efforts, strewn about like victims of the gallows. In the end the city burned, the people were destroyed and destruction fell,

Report from a Besieged City ended with four figures clustered in an open square, surrounded by spectators. In the dark, candles in jars acted as footlights. To thundering music from Carmina Burana, tired stilt-people loped into the square, some holding banners, one with a gigantic walking stick. Resembling aristocrats, peasants, a Bolshevik student, or a soldier, they seemed to drag themselves to a confrontation with the present. At their feet, a hesitant woman risked a wave. A man clutching

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Raczak, *Madness and Method: Texts About Theatre*, 80.

¹¹⁹ Juliusz Tyszka, ‘Characters, Connections, Constructing an Action’, 414.

precious, scarce shoes sidled up to denounce the rest as “democrats”. A bridegroom offered gifts, to derisive laughter, and a figure in a tattered greatcoat ran. He was trapped and the traitor was forced to thrash his face with a flag. A frozen line of young men fell. The stilt-people seized torches and, as they strode through a central fire, the group broke, ran, and tried to clamber up the wooden scaffolding of the surrounding buildings. And at that point a helmeted creature in riot gear efficiently hosed them down with foam till bodies slumped and hung high over the square. The skeleton of a pram burned, music played, the poetry of opposition rang out, and a girl slowly extinguished or threw aside the long lines of footlights, which now evoked the candles Polish children burn for the dead on Forefather’s Eve.¹²⁰

In spite of this scene, the play ended on a darkly hopeful note. A single person survives, the end of Herbert’s poem was spoken asserting that as long as one person survived who remembered what the city had been, then it too would survive. Ewa Wójciak sang ‘Jerusalem’ in a deep, slow voice. The play closing in this way reinforces the idea that in spite of the trials and oppressions that happened to Poland, that there is always hope for a better future and that the people carry the key to freedom within themselves.

The play was an intense confrontation that never let the audience rest from the onslaught of themes and images that created a brutal picture of what their lives had become since December 1981. It was “a stream of images, subjective but shared and meaningful photographic plates of our time”, coupled with the very intense emotions and responses of the actors themselves.¹²¹ The play, once again, held a metaphorical mirror up to the audience, and presented them with the preposterousness of the situation that they lived

¹²⁰ Howard, ‘A Piece of Our Life’, 301.

¹²¹ Elzbieta Moraweic in Howard, ‘A Piece of Our Life’, 301; Howard, ‘A Piece of Our Life’, 301

within. It, without making a definitive political statement, presented a stark vision of what, in their perspective, Poland had become. It challenged the rhetoric of the dominant ideology, which wanted the people to believe that their worlds had become better places since the institution of Martial law. The essential goal of the piece was to make the audience to recognise the level of oppression that had become normalised into their day-to-day existences, while encouraging them to believe that things can always change, but only if they [the people] are willing to choose to stand for their own rights, and not become victims of the regime. ‘*Report from the Besieged City* expressed a keen sense of human dignity – of an idea of our worth as dignified moral agents rather than helpless victims. It conveyed, in short, the triumph of the individual conscious over a regime of force.’¹²²

Further Restriction and Exile

Following the Theatre’s successful expansion into street theatre they returned to the festival the following year and produced *Cuds i mięso (Miracles and Meat)*, a performance that aligned the idea of standing in a queue for hours awaiting scraps with waiting in irrational anticipation of the miracle that would free the Poles from their plight. This performance, although well received by the audiences, and reported on in the West by way of foreign participants in the festival, further antagonised the authorities resulting in the intensification of oppression for the Theatre throughout the 1980s. Even once martial law had officially

¹²² Filipowicz , ‘Polish Theatre after Solidarity’, 76.

been lifted, they very often found themselves on the outside of the law. ‘Starting in 1983 there were progressively more and more restrictions on where they could perform: they were refused permission to present plays at several Warsaw venues, in Kraków, in Szczecin, and in Toruń.’¹²³ In the spring of 1984 the Theatre was given an official space in Poznań, relieving them from the need of renting or borrowing performance spaces as they had since their inception. However, the granting of this space, was not given to them in order to support or further the work of the ensemble. Instead it was granted in order to provide grounds to the accusation that the Theatre did not attract residents from the surrounding neighbourhood; a situation that was near impossible given that the area was mostly devoted to trade and restaurants, and did not have a high population of permanent residents. The theatre, therefore, failed to fulfil its ‘social mission’ of being an ‘institution for the popularization of culture’ which meant that Estrada could break their contract with the Theatre, which they did. This final termination of their official sponsorship officially consigned them to a state of non-existence:

Theatre of the Eighth Day found itself outside of every kind of organizational structure of the Communist state. Officially it was a ‘collection’ of completely private people, not employed anywhere (and therefore automatically falling into the category of ‘asocial elements’) and who, in addition, regularly undertook ‘anti-state’ activities through the illegal performance of spectacles not authorized by any accepted institution.¹²⁴

¹²³ Cioffi, *Alternative Theatre in Poland*, 164.

¹²⁴ Juliusz Tyszka, ‘Characters, Connections, Constructing an Action’, 415

As a result, they were denied access to even the most basic rights that citizens of the Polish People's Republic were afforded, such as state medical care. They were also subject to the most serious of repressions reserved for those in political opposition. The oppressions could include (and were experienced by members of the ensemble) forty-eight-hour arrests and confiscation of typewriters, Western and other banned literature and notes referring to a performance. Further possible oppressions those subject on this level could experience included the damaging of a car, poisoning of a pet, severe beatings by 'unknown assailants' and murder.¹²⁵

The de-legitimisation of the group made it impossible for them to perform anywhere in an official capacity. They could no longer rent or borrow a theatre space, or be seen to be creating theatre publically. As such the Theatre became completely 'underground', and began to perform in churches, as these were the one public space that were not regulated by the authorities. Their performances in churches were received with mixed reviews, especially in those churches outside the city centres. They found themselves playing to audiences who would not ordinarily view theatre, in an environment in which there was an expectation that the performances would hold some religious elements, or messages. Marcin Keszycki, a member of the ensemble, spoke about the new experiences that performing in churches gave the group; he spoke about how the dynamic of the performance was completely different from what they were used to. How the people would come to the

¹²⁵ Ibid.

performance with no knowledge of the play, the form or the politics. They would come completely on the suggestion of the priest. They would be shocked at finding the altar covered with a black curtain, and would pray in front of the scenography.¹²⁶

Despite the mixed reactions of the audiences, and the strangeness of the situation to the actors, however, the Theatre found a valuable ally in the church; they were allowed to perform without interference from the authorities. Additionally, they had the somewhat unique opportunity to reach out to a completely new audience:

We play for absolutely new people. Before we were functioning in student circles – so our audiences were recruited from students, intellectuals and intelligentsia. During Solidarity we played in factories – in Gdansk we played in the shipyards. Now we play for people who come to the theatre for the first time. In my opinion these people are the most interesting. They are like Kaspar Hauser: they see what they see. They laugh if something is funny, they cry when they are sad.¹²⁷

Playing before this new audience, unconditioned in theatre behaviour, the ensemble was able to further their goals of communicating with the audience. They were able to establish and develop a dialogue with a portion of the population that they had, until that point, been unlikely to reach. This discourse allowed the Theatre to communicate more fully with the audience, and therefore further the community of like-minded individuals. As Marc Robinson commented, ‘These conversations serve to establish and then strengthen the bonds

¹²⁶ Keszycki quoted in Robinson, ‘We Won, Therefore We Exist’, 78.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

between actors and spectators, building a strong community of like-minded individuals around a core of theatrical work.’¹²⁸

The end of 1985 found Theatre of the Eighth Day on the brink of a decision that would change the group forever. Following the authorities’ interference with a performance of *Piolun (Wormwood)*, where Adam Mickiewicz University was forced to cancel the premiere of the play, and many of the would-be spectators were prevented from making it to the performance space, the ensemble decided to travel abroad. This was problematic for several reasons, the largest of which was that only half of the members of the group had permission to travel to the West. The communist government, in their continued attempts to destroy the group through separation, had only granted part of the group passports, believing that those who had received permission would break away and go, creating an irreversible division in the ensemble. Furthermore, it would ensure this continued division by not allowing those who travelled back into Poland.

The members of the group who could leave the country did, however, the division did not have the effect that the authorities had expected. The Theatre prepared and produced two different, but linked performances based on the work of Tadeusz Konwicki. The actors in the West performed a piece entitled *Auto-da-fé* in multiple cities throughout Europe, and

¹²⁸ Robinson, ‘We Won, Therefore We Exist’, 77.

those still in Poland performed *Mala Apokalipsę (A Minor Apocalypse)* in churches. *Auto-da-fé* won a 'Fringe First' award at Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 1985.

By the beginning of 1986 the final stages of emigration had begun as Lech Raczak left Poland for Western Europe. Over the next two years the rest of the ensemble, with the exception of Roman Radomski who ultimately left the group, left Poland for Western Europe, in some cases forfeiting their passports and becoming people without a country to do so. From June of 1986 Theatre of the Eighth Day performed only in Western Europe until they returned to Poland in 1990.

Conclusion

Throughout their history Theatre of the Eighth Day has repeatedly demonstrated how theatre can reflect and critique the cultural and social policies as well as the history and traditions used to restrict and repress populations. They have shown that theatre that questions and challenges the status quo can impact audiences, as well as wider communities of like-minded individuals. They stood as a unified ensemble against the authorities who repeatedly attempted to control and separate them. They sacrificed comforts, subsidies and freedoms in order to create theatre that exposed the apparatuses of oppression and control; the dominant political and social ideology, religion, nationalism, and force. They strove to unmask their

audiences, and hold a metaphorical mirror to their faces; to encourage them to take responsibility for their own world, recognise their own moral and ethical duties, and to not become complacent in the lies that resulted in subjugation. They were dissidents, conscientious objectors, and social activists in their own right. They devised methods of blending the political with the aesthetic, and, in doing so, created theatre that commented on politics, morals, and ethics. Since their return to Poland in 1990, they have produced numerous productions both indoors and outdoors. They continue to create work that critically assesses the contemporary world, and identifies propaganda and oppression. In the twenty-five years since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reshaping of Europe, Theatre of the Eighth Day has continued to interrogate and criticise political and social dictates that isolate, exile, criminalise and oppress. Their work addresses issues of ethnicity and immigration, the un-crossable gap that separates the rich from the poor, and the faith that we put in our leaders, our media, and our celebrities. They have voiced their opposition to the progressions of law, war, immigration, and modernisation that serve to deprive people of their identities, their countries and their lives, and have challenged their audiences to remove and see past the masks that prevent them from seeing many of the harsh realities of daily life.

CHAPTER 4

THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

Introduction

By the mid-1980s, due to a number of political, economic and power shifts, including the reassignment of the burdens of monitoring and regulating artists from the central government to the regional governments and their local Stasi offices, a moderate level of artistic freedom became increasingly common in the GDR. Plays and performances that would have been denied permission by a central authority, now had the possibility of being approved by some regional censorship offices. Despite these freedoms not being specifically granted, nor in anyway absolute, as the artists were still being consistently monitored, and censorship of text or performance, harassment and arrest could still occur at any time, the space they provided allowed for an increase of semi-legal subcultural performances. That is, the performance of unapproved material in spaces not specifically sanctioned for theatre, such as art galleries, church halls, and privately owned spaces. Groups, who to this point had had to remain in the shadows of the 'underground scene', began to create performances in semi-public spaces.

One of these such groups, Autoperforationsartisten Gruppe, its members, Else Gabriel, Volker (Via) Lewandowsky, Micha Brendel and Rainer Görß, performed in various locations in Dresden and other cities throughout the GDR. In June of 1989 they used the broadened

freedoms as an opportunity to present their work at the Galerie Weißer Elefant in Berlin. Using video footage, photographs, interviews with the artists, and audience accounts, Zdenka Badovinac, curator of *Body and the East* - a performance exhibit, at the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana in 1998, which displayed performance art from the former Eastern Bloc - reconstructs and describes this performance:

Ulf Wrede throws gumdrops in the shape of teddy bears into the room and minces them through a meat grinder. The sticky mass is melted on a burner. He sits down at a concert piano, under which Else Gabriel is tied with ropes. He starts faulting. Else listens to a Dictaphone and talks into a microphone, saying what she thinks she hears. Then she releases herself from the ropes and approaches a bucket into which Wrede has poured the melted gumdrops. She plunges her head, with her hair tied at the front like a proboscis, into the bucket, which is filled with 48-hour-old pig blood.¹

Following the submersion of her head in the blood Gabriel released hundreds of flies, which had been confined in a glass aquarium, into the room so that they could crawl over her body now covered in blood and melted sugar. Badovinac continues to discuss the performance with her description of Lewandowsky:

The performer, bare-chested, was wearing a slightly faded ballet skirt, a tutu of uncertain age, and a sort of cap to hold his brains in. [...] [He] was trembling as he sent out the long, winding groans of someone hospitalised. Every so often he would play his trumpet. In front of him was a bundle hanging from a tangle of elastic, consisting of protuberant bowel fragments and full to bursting (...) He cut the taunt skin with scissors. Mushy, greenish excrement started to pour from bloodless

¹ Zdenka Badovinac, *Body and the East: From the 1960s to the Present* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999) 121.

wounds. (...) Then he sent the covered bundle swinging vertically, so that it splashed evenly on the rubber-coated table top with a wet thud.²

This performance continued with Lewandowsky, alternating between groans and screams, before ringing a large gong with his forehead; an action that resulted in a viscous, yellowish liquid to run from under the cap emulating brain matter. Following this portion of the performance Micha Brendel arrived to stage his portion of the performance:

A Trabant stops in front of the gallery. Blinded by a facemask I let a child take me inside. I peel myself out of a heavy fur coat and take two sharp instruments out of my briefcase. With these two instruments I carve and cut into my body. Through a crust of egg and asphalt, blood emerges in certain places. I stick the knives all the way to the hilt into the openings for the eyes and the mouth of the facemask; with surgical pliers I take out clots of bloody meat. Finally able to see and speak, I sit down at my *Schlag-Erzeug* – a handcrafted percussion instrument, [of] my own invention – and, ecstatically and unctuously, I begin to chant Diter Rot's *Mein Auge ist ein Mund* (*My eye is a mouth*).³

After finishing the chant Brendel drew a one-meter square upon the wall and proceeded to spread the mixture of meat, blood and egg within it until the interior of the square was covered.

Throughout these performances fans blew, spreading the stench of rotten meat, blood and other materials around the room. Following Gabriele's performance, the flies remained in

² Ibid, 123.

³ Ibid, 124.

the room, landing on the audience. These performances shocked, horrified and sickened audiences; several people became faint or nauseated.⁴ This was not the first time, however, that members of this group created performances that confronted the audience with violent, visceral imagery that openly challenged the proscriptions of art of the GDR. From their initial performances at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts at the beginning of the 1980s to their performances in the months leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the subsequent reunification of Germany, they strived to create work that was both instinctive and off-putting, that was shockingly realistic in its evocation and demonstration, and confronted their audiences with performances so visceral that their responses were involuntary. They blended text, music, and poetry with deeply symbolic action, ritualistic violence, spectacle and costumes intent on creating performances unlike anything that had been seen previously in the GDR.

Prior to discussing *Autoperforationsartisten*, and the ways that their work embraced and emphasised the growing subcultural, subversive and dissident attitudes that had been evolving in the GDR since the end of the 1970s, it is necessary to contextualise the group within the mainstream theatrical environment of late Cold War East Germany. It is also necessary to discuss them against the tenets and theories of performance art, as it emerged in Western Europe and the United States (due to the lack of critical dialogue concerning performance art in Eastern Europe). The discussion of dissidence and theatre in the GDR is

⁴ Ibid.

necessary, due to the complexities of the country's origins, the structures of governments that were set, adapted and maintained, as well as the ever-constant presence of the Stasi. The Ministry of State Security (Stasi) functioned much like the central tower in Foucault's panopticon, seeing into every aspect of personal, and professional life, keeping records of the movements, conversations and associations of millions of people. Its constant presence, or the anticipation and expectation of their presence, significantly impacted what was said and acted on openly, and what defiance or opposition was planned. They were an omnipresent force who, at their height, had more surveillance operatives than any other country in the Soviet Bloc including Russia.

At the end, the Stasi had 97,000 employees - more than enough to oversee a country of seventeen million people. But it also had over 173,000 informers among the population. In Hitler's Third Reich it is estimated that there was one Gestapo agent for every 2000 citizens, and in Stalin's USSR there was one KGB agent for every 5830 people. In the GDR, there was one Stasi officer or informant for every sixty-three people. If part-timer informers are included, some estimates have the ratio as high as one informer for every 6.5 citizens.⁵

The idea that anyone could be a Stasi agent or informer, the subject of an investigation (at times both could be concurrently true) must therefore be taken into as much account in the discussion of the development of dissident art forms in the GDR as the unique way in which the country came into existence in the wake of World War Two, the spectre of its Nazi past, and the ways that the lack of

⁵ Anna Funder, *Stasiland: Stories from Behind the Berlin Wall* (London: Granta Publications, 2003), 57.

any significant (large) dissenting event after the Workers' Uprising of 1953⁶ impacted this development. The GDR, unlike Poland and Czechoslovakia, did not experience significant changes in freedoms or censorship during the 1950s and 1960s. There were no happenings like the Prague Spring or the Polish October that allowed for significant increases in freedoms. First Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) Walter Ulbricht, despite the death of Stalin and Khrushchev's 'thaw' held the GDR to a fairly constant level of control and censorship. Furthermore, it must be considered how the building and presence of the Berlin Wall kept the country nearly hermetically sealed away from both the West and from many other places in the Eastern Bloc.

Due to these considerations the discussion of dissent necessitates the broadening of the theatrical context beyond what was occurring on the mainstream stages and in the few alternative theatres. It must include performances that were more symbolic than they were representational; those that did not make use of pre-defined characters or recognisable environments. It must include work that relied far more heavily on movement, physical expressions, and body art than on either pre-scripted or improvised text. Further, it must

⁶ The Worker's uprisings were largely localised, unplanned protests made by construction and factory workers (although there was some involvement from the middle classes and agricultural sectors) resulting from significant increases production quotas and economic dissatisfaction, which then took on a political element. See Gareth Dale, *Popular Protest in East Germany 1945-1989* (New York: Routledge, 2005).; Gary Bruce, *Resistance with the People: Repression and Resistance in Eastern Germany 1945-1955* (London: Rowman and Littlefield Ltd, 2003).; and Rosie Shelmerdine, 'The East German Uprising of 1953: Western Provocation, Workers' Protest or Attempted Revolution?' in *The View East: Central and Eastern Europe Past and Present* < <https://thevieweast.wordpress.com/2011/07/13/the-east-german-uprising-of-june-1953-western-provocation-workers-protest-or-attempted-revolution/>> [accessed 20 May 2015].

include works that were more stylistically blended than the vision of traditional theatre allowed for. It necessitates the inclusion of performance art into its genres and styles and the discussion of how the development of these ideas, genres and styles are related to the strictures of dramatic theatre in the GDR. This chapter will explore the unique way that the convolution of events and policies that formed and maintained the GDR impacted the development of theatre and performance, within both the mainstream and subcultural [subversive] environments. It will intensively interrogate the ways in which the 'underground scene' evolved throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, and using the framework of Western performance art, elements of Theatre of Cruelty and the idea of abjection it will discuss the development of performance art in the GDR, focusing specifically on the performances of the Autoperforationsartisten Gruppe.

Mainstream Dramatic Theatre and Subcultural Performance in the GDR

The First and Second Generation on the Mainstream Stage

The end of World War II saw Germany in ruins; the majority of big cities had suffered significant, if not catastrophic damage, and millions of casualties resulting from deportations, the destruction of the cities, battlefield operations, as well as the expulsion of Germans from lands returned to Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary following the Potsdam Agreement left the population decimated by nearly 20%. Divided into four zones of occupation it became the work of France, Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union to extract

reparations, establish functional governments and attempt to rebuild Germany's social and cultural structures. As the post-war era continued and the wartime alliances between the United States and the Soviet Union faded, culminating with Stalin's refusal to allow the Soviet Zone of Germany to accept Marshall Plan funds, the gaps between Eastern and Western portions of Germany widened, and the establishment of a communist state was imminent.

As the Soviet Zone transitioned into the creation of the German Democratic Republic, an intensive rhetoric of de-Nazification and collectivisation of the state came into existence, and Stalinist policies of censorship, restriction, and industrial reconstruction were put into place. Centralisation of all aspects of both politics and culture occurred. Counter to the cultural policies of the Federal Republic of Germany, which allowed for the rebuilding and establishment of regional theatres, the GDR drew control of the arts to its core, establishing a complex system of ensembles and theatrical training. This centralisation was seen as necessary as theatre was viewed as a vital force in the establishment and teaching of the demands, concepts and norms of the new communist ideology. Drawing from the German Enlightenment ideal of a national theatre and echoing Friedrich Schiller's view that 'theatre held a vital civic role to play alongside the law', law serving to set and police certain forms of behaviour and theatre serving to inspire the population and 'promote social and national

cohesion.⁷ The newly formed SED, its General Secretary, Walter Ulbricht⁸, and the Ministers of Culture wanted theatre to play a positive role in shaping the identity of the new state and its citizens. Contemporary plays were given the task of reflecting society's progress towards socialism, helping to create socialist citizens, and even increasing industrial productivity:

Walter Ulbricht and the GDR functionaries continued to look to culture as a key element in re-configuring the GDR, and Kulturpolitik or cultural policy was critical in this process. Ulbricht's Kulturpolitik in the early 1950s concentrated on the idea that art was very important for the development and re-education of the people. Through a humanistic revival, a 'spiritual and cultural regeneration' of Germans could occur. East German cultural policy directed writers and artists to create useful art in which clear positions on socialism and the social process of working class people's lives prevailed.⁹

A centralised system of theatre was established and supported by the return of prominent socialist writers, directors and dramaturges such as Wolfgang Langhoff, who directed mostly classical plays at the Deutsches Theater Berlin, Erich Engel a producer and director who worked closely with Bertolt Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble, and Fritz Wisten, who directed at Deutsches Theater Berlin and Theater am Schiffbauerdamm. All of these artists had been persecuted, imprisoned, or deported by the Nazis, or had been forced to emigrate. Along with Brecht, these writers, directors and dramaturges initially supported the ideology

⁷ Schiller qtd. in Bradley, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 2.

⁸ Ulbricht would become First Secretary of the party in 1950.

⁹ Beret Norman, 'Bricolage as Resistance: The Lyrical, Visual and Performance Art of Gabriele Stotzer' (doctoral thesis: University of Massachusetts, 2004), 4.

of *Kulturpolitik*, and were deeply committed to the idea that theatre could indeed contribute to the creation of a better world:

They were all united in the fundamental conception that it was theatre's job to make a contribution to world peace, democratic renewal and social justice, regardless of what theatrical tradition its members came from or what artistic theories they held. In this sense they identified themselves with the fundamental aims of the GDR, when it was founded in 1949, and were prepared to contribute their talents to building its intellectual and cultural foundations.¹⁰

As a result of this commitment and the financial benefits offered to the theatres and the members of the ensembles, design and administrative staff, the GDR passed its first decade with limited resistance from mainstream theatre to its doctrine. In contrast to the theatre being produced in Poland and Czechoslovakia during this time, upon which the socialist-realist style was made a non-negotiable obligation, most mainstream theatres in the GDR accepted the demands that productions create and support an accessible system of ideological reinforcement for the citizens of the GDR, as well as present the West with an image of a country that had, under communist ideology, risen from the ruins of fascism and war, to be a paragon of culture.

The expectation of the didactic and ideological nature of the production allowed for little room to explore forms of theatre that deviated from the socialist realist style, or incorporate

¹⁰ *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre: Europe*, ed. by Don Rubin, Peter Nagy and Phillipe Rouyer, (Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 2001), 348.

any emerging Western techniques or themes. By the mid-1950s GDR theatre had become a blend of German classics, primarily those written between 1787-1830, and socialist realism. For example plays by Johann Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, Heinrich von Kleist, Maxim Gorki, Johannes Becher, and Erwin Strittmatter, were often performed.¹¹ Furthermore, Brecht's popularity had spread internationally, to the extent of his name becoming synonymous with East German theatre. Within the country his plays, production styles and methods of actor training became a standard that was repeatedly recreated and became the base of theatre curriculum in state-run training institutions, defining what was acceptable to produce on East German stages even further.

Throughout the 1950s, as this system of theatre continued to develop it became increasingly restrictive. Adhering to the socialist realist style, plays had to, in an immediately recognisable style provide 'socialist heroes' and contribute to the dominant ideologies of the strength and health of socialist societies and histories. Prior to production they had to be submitted to censors for approval based on style and content. Theatre artists who did not ascribe to these policies and restrictions could find themselves subject to dismissal from their positions, under surveillance and investigation, especially after the creation of the Stasi in 1950. In the case of writers (including playwrights), they could find themselves expelled from the unions, which provided many of the connections needed to survive in the profession. As Alan Nothnagle discusses, cultural life in the GDR was fully in the hands of the SED, the

¹¹ Ibid, 366.

Cultural Union and the Free German Youth; neither large-scale productions nor any other cultural activity could occur without the SED's approval and control.¹² For those who disagreed with the elevation of ideology over aesthetic, or objected to the continuous narrowing of plays acceptable to produce, as well as those who wished to explore and engage with Western techniques, plays or themes, emigration to the West was an option.

At this point emigration was comparatively easy due to the fact that the border between East and West Berlin was quite porous. Many people moved across the border on a daily basis for work and leisure activities. While not without risk, emigrating across the border prior to 1961 was a comparatively simple matter; – travel to West Berlin could be achieved relatively easily where resettlement there or transportation to other parts of West Germany or Western European countries could occur. Nearly three million people did this.

This ability to move freely changed overnight. On the night between the 12th and 13th of August 1961 roads that lead from the eastern to the western side of Berlin were dug up, concrete posts were placed in the ground, and spools of barbed wire were strung between them. Within a few months a concrete block wall topped with barbed wire not only divided Berlin but also wrapped entirely around the western section, effectively cutting off West Berlin from the Eastern sector. Ulbricht justified the building of what would become the

¹² Alan Nothnagle, *Building the East German Myth: Historical Mythology and Youth Propaganda in the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1989* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 53.

most recognisable symbol of the Cold War by reviving the anti-fascist rhetoric that had been provided as the reasoning for the show trials, imprisonment and exile of those considered to be politically dissident during the early 1950s. He called the Berlin Wall an ‘Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart’, claiming that West Berlin had not been fully de-Nazified, and that he was protecting the GDR from the growing wave of neo-Nazi sympathisers. The reality behind the reasoning for the building of the Wall was (in part) to stem the exodus of people – especially those who were young and well educated or trained - from the GDR into the West by way of Berlin.

The impact of the Berlin Wall on theatre in the GDR took multiple forms. There were a number of very prominent artists, especially those of the first generation of GDR, Bertolt Brecht, Heiner Müller and Helene Weigel amongst them, who, prior to the 1968 invasion of Prague by Soviet troops, publically supported the building of the Wall.¹³ They believed that it would protect East Germany, insulate them from the negative capitalist influences of the West, and allow the country to deal with their internal issues rather than focusing the drain on the intellectual community caused by the exodus of artists over the last decade. They felt that the presence of the Wall could contribute to the continued development of a fully functioning, progressive, socialist state. Counter to these supporters there were the dissenters who saw the Wall as, at best, a disruption to their lives as they could no longer regularly

¹³ Laura Bradley, ‘A Different Political Forum: East German Theatre and the Construction of the Berlin Wall’ *Journal of European Studies* 36 (2006), 151-153.

travel between east and west Berlin, and at worst, as a means of imprisoning them within a strictly controlled, censored and monitored society. However the voices of these artists were silenced through omission, threats and removal.¹⁴

In the first years after the building of the Wall many of these dissenting theatre practitioners emigrated or escaped to the West, using the help of their theatre colleagues in West Berlin to arrange official invitations to produce, direct, or act in a performance, allowing them to obtain temporary travel papers; having arrived in the West, they chose to remain. This however, involved leaving family, friends, and possessions behind, as it would have been dangerous to those still in the East to communicate with someone who had escaped, and the homes and studios of escapees were placed under surveillance to make certain the person did not attempt to return for their possessions.¹⁵ In the following years the GDR continued to close itself off from democratic countries. It became increasingly difficult to obtain travel documents to West Germany; requests to leave the GDR were most often met with refusals, subsequent surveillance and government retribution in the form of limitations placed on the ability to travel within the Eastern Bloc - i.e. holiday visas for Hungary - and blocks preventing their children from attending university, as well as arrests, and possible imprisonment.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid, 148-153.

¹⁵ Matthias Bauer, personal interview, 10 September 2014, Berlin.

¹⁶ Information Placards, GDR Museum, Berlin [accessed September 2014].

Funder¹⁷, Richter¹⁸ and Bauer¹⁹ all discuss the period between the building of the Berlin Wall and the months leading up to November 1989 as a time of intense and forced isolation. They commented on how tightly confined the East German people were, contrasting the experience of the day-to-day existence in the GDR to that of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary,

They locked us in tight, had us surrounded. They were afraid we might be in contact with the West because we spoke the same language. It was not like Czechoslovakia where you could protest or in Poland where, before the 1980s, you could get Western clothes and records... it was illegal, but you could get them.²⁰

Throughout the 1960s and '70s the severity of the social, economic and political challenges of the country became more and more apparent. It was within this climate that a new generation of playwrights emerged into the theatres, and their commentary of these issues that brought aspects of dissent to the mainstream theatre.

These new playwrights, Heiner Müller, Volker Braun and Peter Hacks, amongst others began to extensively test the barriers of what would and would not be allowable on stage. They wrote and submitted plays to the censors, understanding the distinct possibility of having them rejected for content, style or questioning the dominant ideology of the country.

¹⁷ Funder, *Stasiland*.

¹⁸ Angelika Richter, 'Body Actions: Performative Tendencies in East Germany' online audio recording 13 December 2008 <http://www.reactfeminism.org/nr1/konferenz_en.html> [accessed 16 June 2014].

¹⁹ Bauer, personal interview.

²⁰ Ibid.

Once approved they produced this work aware that at any moment, or for any reason, the censors and other officials could demand changes to the performance or cancel it altogether. Despite these possibilities Müller, Braun, and Hacks continued to write and produce work throughout the rest of the Cold War. Using their individual styles and techniques, which included the restaging of classics, such that they made statements about the current state of affairs in the country, as well as producing new work that commented on the reality of day-to-day socialism in the GDR, using theatre to critically examine the existing social conditions in the country.

Müller, Braun, Hein, Stolper played a decisive role in the turnabout of GDR theatre: they attacked naïve beliefs about the inevitability of human progress, the capacity of a socialist revolution to solve every problem and the validity of the Communist Party's pronouncements.²¹

Their work raised questions regarding, food and consumer goods shortages, poor working conditions, abuses of power and alcoholism, as well as addressing the possibilities of nuclear war. However, this commentary was not without repercussion. The state system of theatre was well structured and fortified by both funding and the placement of informers; attempts to change the intent or structure too much were met with a nearly impenetrable resistance. 'Every time the theatres made a hard-won gain in freedom, the Party struck back with new dogmatic restrictions and pressured people to leave the country – particularly gifted ones

²¹ Funke, 'The Activist Legacy of Theatre in the German Democratic Republic', 9.

who were unwilling to conform.²² Müller, Braun, Hein, and Hacks saw as many of their plays be rejected outright, closed during preproduction, or cancelled after few performances as they saw produced with a significant run. Additionally, they were subject to a kind of repressive patronage, as they were elected to the Academy of Arts with the intentions that their memberships could be used as a way to influence, observe and further control them.²³

In spite of the government's attempts to control this generation of playwrights, and the repercussions they faced by pushing beyond the allowable boundaries, their criticisms and commentaries on the state of the government and the ideals and habits of the country did not, however, challenge the basis of the political ideology. They were still committed to the idea of a successful socialist state, much in the way that those playwrights and directors of the initial years of the GDR had been, believing that the socialism in the GDR could be refined and rebuilt such that it supported the people, had space within it for critical thought and individual identity. Meech discusses how these artists strived to create, "Jasagendes Theater", a positive theatre committed to the socialist system in the GDR.²⁴ He goes on to comment,

This does not mean that their theatre is a passive theatre of acquiescence in the system. Their criticism can be outspoken and directed against corruption, misguided

²² Ibid, 10.

²³ Bradley, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 36-74.

²⁴ Anthony Meech, 'A New Definition of Eingreifendes Theatre - Some Recent Productions in the GDR' in *A Radical Stage: Theatre in Germany in the 1970s and 1980s*, ed. by W.G. Sebald (Oxford: Berg Publishing, 1988), 110-125 (113).

or abused authority, or against romantic, muddle-headed views of revolutions, but the basis from which they launch their attacks is one in fundamental support of the system. Their aim, via their theatre work, is to try to improve the system in which they believe, by producing theatre which is essentially relevant to the society which they seek to serve.²⁵

Hilton continues this discussion by stating:

Braun's plays address 4 major themes: the crisis of unthinking and uncaring manifestations of socialism; the failure of the collective to accommodate individual aspiration; the necessity of personal and social change in pursuit of true socialism; and the need for an aesthetic redefinition of the present in positive, socialist terms.²⁶

This commitment was challenged multiple times, most significantly by the GDR's role in the suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968, and by the forced expatriation of singer and songwriter Wolf Biermann in 1976. Both responses reiterated to the East German people that an agenda of reformed socialism or reduced censorship would not be tolerated, and that criticism of the ideologies or practices of the state would not be permitted. Despite the implications of these actions and the possible repercussions of doing so, these playwrights continued to produce their work and remained constant in their beliefs that a more positive, purer form of socialism could be achieved. This attitude and belief, however, was not carried into what could be classed as the third generation of writers and artists that emerged in the GDR.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Julian Hilton, 'Back to the Future: Volker Braun and the German Theatrical Tradition in the GDR' in *A Radical Stage: Theatre in Germany in the 1970s and 1980s*, ed. by W. G. Sebald (Oxford: Berg Publishing, 1988), 124-144 (127).

The Third Generation and the Birth of the New Avant-Garde

This third generation of writers and artists collected in small groups throughout the country, in areas such as the Prenzlauerberg area of Berlin, as well as in Dresden, Leipzig and Erfurt. They were poets, novelists, painters, musicians, sculptors, filmmakers and performers, many working in multiple fields at once,

They write, paint, make music, produce new ideas, new music and visual art. Fiedler, Palma and Bozenhard are musicians, but they also write, Cornelia Schleime is a painter who writes and makes films, Anderson paints and plays in bands [...]'²⁷

These writers and artists created intertextual and inter-genre works, rejected official sponsorship by the unions, publishers, galleries and theatres, and collaborated, performed and published unofficially and illegally. They radically rejected the idea that socialism in the GDR could be reformed into a system that allowed for freedoms of thought, discussion or publishing. Despite this, however, they did not necessarily see capitalism (of an Anglo-American type) as an answer to the environment of surveillance and control in the GDR. They sought a new system, one of their own creation, which would provide the freedoms of expression, movement and privacy while maintaining a more collective and collaborative environment.²⁸

²⁷ Elke Erb, qtd. in Philip Brady 'Wir hausen in Prenzlauer Berg: On the Very Last Generation of GDR Poets' in *German Unification and the Change of Literary Discourse*, ed. by Walter Pape (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1993), 278- 300 (287).

²⁸ Many of these artists disliked the consumerist and individualist attitudes common in Western societies during the 1970s but desired the freedoms that citizens enjoyed there.

They differed from their predecessors in several significant ways that deeply impacted their views of and reactions to their environment. They were, more than either of the previous two generations, truly products of the GDR. That is, this generation is primarily characterised by the fact that they were born after 1949, many of the younger artists born after 1961. They were a generation that had never lived in a country other than the GDR. They had not, despite the haunting spectre that remained in places, experienced the horrors of war. They had not been personally threatened, had not witnessed the loss of family members to battle, bombings or wartime persecutions. Nor had they experienced the devastation, shortages and violence in the immediate post-war era. As such their perceptions and experiences of the country were not fed by the fervent hope that the ideology would create a great nation rebuilt from the ashes of National Socialism. They did not see a fledgling country struggling to survive, relying on its artists to restore culture to a population that had been alienated, persecuted, and broken by war. Rather they saw a government that kept its population under nearly endless and constant surveillance, as Else Gabriel commented,

You couldn't avoid that you were monitored; you knew that there was always someone, if you had a group if you have a party or whatever; someone was there who was working for the security. You didn't know who but you knew there was someone.²⁹

²⁹ Else Gabriel, personal interview, 22 April 2014, Berlin.

They saw a government that criminalised people for infractions of thought, discussion and action alike, including: ‘Doubt about the correctness of the policies of our party or government, discussions and approval of hostile arguments, outlooks and theories, or scorn of the policies and measures taken by our party and government’³⁰ Additionally the ‘reading and exchanging of ideologically corrosive literature,’³¹ the ‘dissemination of hostile-negative outlooks, e.g. in the form of political-negative jokes, sketches, mottos, chants’³² or the ‘building of groups, whose character is shaped by hostile-negative outlook.’³³ A government who further criminalised the country’s youth for:

Refusal to enter the FDJ (Free German Youth), taking on western moral outlooks and ways of life, e. g. that of punk, rocker, pop culture enthusiast, hitchhiker, etc.; provoking adults with boorish behaviour “modern” haircuts and clothing; exclusive orientation towards cheap entertainment, in particular listening to western radio stations; half-hearted fulfilment of school and work expectations...³⁴

They were a generation who, from the time of their birth had been brought up on the ideal of a model socialist state in which they were expected, as citizens, to become perfect socialist workers and further the ideologies. They attended socialist crèche, kindergartens and schools, their parents were expected to raise them to have ‘a socialist attitude toward learning and work, to regard working people, to follow the rules of socialist co-existence, towards

³⁰ Information Placards, Stasi Museum Berlin, 4 September 2014.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

solidarity, socialist patriotism and internationalism'³⁵ and they were meant to 'develop their capabilities and talents optimally for the good of socialist society [...] to fight for and espouse socialism [and] to orient themselves towards the great humanistic ideas of communism [...]'³⁶ In many cases, however, despite the ever-present rhetoric of an ideal socialist state, and the expectation that they would be the ones to create it, this generation saw the metaphoric cracks in the system, the ways in which the reality was quite different from the ideology.

Unlike Brecht, Müller or the other members of the first and second generations of artists in the GDR, what the third generation experienced was a country mostly formed, one that provided for its population with one hand and stole from it with the other, one where the environment was being completely decimated for the sake of industry, and one where, despite the claims of equality, divisions of class and gender were still very much a part of life. This GDR was one where the dream that the system was working, supporting all of its citizens and running smoothly was countered by the reality of restrictive regimentations of politics and culture, extensive shortages, a failing economy and increasing animosity from the West. Due to this collision between illusion and reality much of this generation believed that there was something fundamentally broken within the country, that the system of surveillance and

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

control that they lived within could not be restructured or refined into a functional socialism, and that critical commentary was not enough to effect the change they wished to see.

Contrary to the first and second generations of GDR writers – those who helped found the country and those who helped shape its first decades respectively, these young members of the *hineingeboren* generation did not necessarily believe in the goals of socialism as they were being espoused by the SED Party nor did they want to improve upon the Party's socialism.³⁷

Or as Heiner Müller commented in his often quoted statement regarding the writers and artists of the late 1970s and 1980s,

Today's generation of thirty-year-olds in the GDR did not experience socialism as the hope for something else but rather as a distorted reality. Not the drama of the Second World War but rather the farce of the proxy war (against jazz and lyrics, hair and beards, jeans and beat, striped socks and Guevara posters, Brecht and dialectic). Not the real life class struggle but rather their pathos increasingly undermined by the constraints of a performance society. Not the great literature of socialism but the grimace of its cultural policies.³⁸

These comments by both Norman and Müller, as well as a letter written by Uwe Kolbe, poet and part of the Prenzlauerberg scene who discussed how he felt his generation had missed

³⁷ Norman, 'Bricolage as Resistance', 29.

³⁸ My translation, aided by Eleftheria Ioannidou . Original German quote in Norman, 'Bricolage', 32. 'Die Generation der huete Dreißigjährigen in der DDR hat den Sozialismus nicht als Hoffnung auf das *Andere* erfahren, sondern als deformierte Realität. Nicht das Drama des Zweiten Weltkriegs, sondern die Farce der *Stellvertreterkriege* (gegen Jazz und Lyrik, Haare und Bärte, Jeans und Beat, Ringelsocken und Guevara-Poster, Brecht und Dialektik). Nicht die wirklichen Klassenkämpfe, sondern ihr Pathos, durch die Zwänge der Leistungsgesellschaft zunehmend ausgehöhlt. Nicht die große Literatur des Sozialismus, sondern die Grimasse seiner Kulturpolitik.'

out on the defining moments of GDR, such as the building of the Berlin Wall and the significance of the 1968 events in the rest of the Eastern Bloc, having matured in the period between Honecker's rise to power and Biermann's expatriation³⁹ highlights how this generation lacked a concrete connection with the establishment and maintenance of the GDR, and therefore felt lost amongst seemingly arbitrary restrictions of society and culture. They saw the strictures confining the creation of art and theatre in the country as impossibly restrictive and the near complete lack of any allowance for the avant-garde as incompatible with their lives and their desires to create. As a result many of the works created embraced new avant-garde tendencies and radicalism that expressed the anger, fear, discomfort, and disgust at the restrictions on their ability to travel, to speak freely and to have any sense of privacy. Many of these works took the form of performance art.

Performance Art

Prior to discussing specific artists within this generation who did create performance art, it is necessary to frame this concept within its own specific context. This, however, proves significantly challenging as this genre was not officially recognised or sanctioned in the East

³⁹ My translation, aided by Eleftheria Ioannidou. Original German quote in Norman, 'Bricolage', 31.

'meine Generation läßt sich übrigens durch drie Daten eingrenzen: wenig oder kaum Bewußtsein der Zeit vor dem 13. August 1961; zu jung, 1968 eine Meinung zu haben: gereift in der letzten Tauwetterperiode der DDR also zwischen Honecker's Machtantritt und, etwa, Biermann's Ausbürgerung 1976. "

German cultural context. Performance, neither as a term, nor as a concept was something that the majority of East German artists would have been aware of prior to the mid-1970s.

Officially, as a concept for the creation of work, performance did not exist. It fell outside of the constructs and restrictions that had been put in place to regulate drama and fine art, and as such, there were no specific guidelines with which to control it. This created a situation that was often embraced and exploited by emerging artists in the GDR but also one that could prove significantly dangerous as it forced the Stasi to find alternate ways to criminalise the work of such artists. The repercussions of violating the strictures of art and theatre were most often the closing of a production or exhibit, challenges or inabilities to get published, an increase in surveillance, and possibly the loss of a job. For example, Gabriele Stötzer, a writer and performance artist in Erfurt, had her space the 'gallery in the hallway' banned by the Stasi who then significantly increased the surveillance on her and her performance group, and Cornelia Schleime, painter, live art and body actionist, had her 'Exhibition of Doors' closed, prohibited from being shown, and the surveillance on her increased, which resulted in her seeking (and eventually gaining) a visa to West Germany.⁴⁰ However, due to the fact that there were no specific rules governing performance art, it could be interpreted as 'anti-state' activity, a criminal offense resulting in interrogation and a possible prison sentence.

⁴⁰ Angela Richter, personal interview, 10, September 2014.

Performance art was not acknowledged, discussed or taught within the official art and theatre environments resulting in limited discourses on the subject. Despite this, it is possible to begin a discussion of performance art in the GDR by using the definitions and classifications conceptualised and discussed since the genre began to emerge in the United States, as long as specific considerations are given to the distinctly different contexts, environments and conditions faced by the artists. This, however, does not necessarily simplify the discussion, as placing a static definition on a concept such as performance art is challenging even without the comparison. Even within the Anglo-American context the term has significant variations, often dependent on the perspective of the person delineating the classification. Performance art is, as Beret Norman states, a 'bricolage'⁴¹, a 'construction or creation from a diverse range of materials or sources.'⁴² It can incorporate numerous different styles, techniques and materials, and be continuously adapted to suit the artist, the space and the location. As an art form that blends various forms of the fine arts with theatre, dance, live and recorded music, and visual media (in the form of film and projection) the definition of performance art is often adapted to fit whichever elements are being most strongly represented, or what is being expressed in the work of the specific artist under examination.

Performance Art, as a genre and a term evolved primarily in the United States in the mid-to-late 1960s and early 1970s after a series of 'happenings' were staged by artists such as Allan

⁴¹ Norman, 'Bricolage as Resistance'.

⁴² <www.oed.com/view/entry/bricolage> [accessed 10 October 2014]. It is interesting to note that this term draws its roots from the French where it is defined as a DIY project and or the person that does so, implying a kind of homemade, non-professional and creative solution, all which can be applied to the performers and practices of performance art.

Kaprow, John Cage, and Merce Cunningham in the 1950s. These events abandoned the traditional boundaries between the art forms, by creating multidisciplinary, non-narrative, and often interactive (between performer and audience) experiences. Drawing from a variety of historical avant-garde movements including Italian Futurism, Dada, and Surrealist Automatism, as well as Theatre of Cruelty, artists strived to conceptualise and perform work that divested of any preconceived notions of what 'art' was meant to be, what it was meant to say, or how it was meant to function in society.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s performance art continued to develop. Performances varied from those that were more firmly rooted within visual arts, such as those by Yves Klein, to those that drew primarily from theatrical performance, such as those by Carolee Schneeman. Furthermore, networks of artists such as those who worked as part of Fluxus evolved, incorporating performance, Neo-Dada noise music, and visual art, as well as architecture, urban planning and literature, into their 'happenings' or 'actions'. Through this time the term continued to broaden until it encompassed any gathering, presentation, or performance in which the artist was creating live. It is for this reason that it is notoriously difficult to definitively define the term or conclusively classify any work as 'performance art'. As Goldberg comments, 'No other artistic form of expression has such a boundless manifesto,

since each performer makes his or her own definition in the very process and manner of execution.⁴³

Further difficulty in the defining of the term comes when applying it to the performances being created in the Eastern Bloc during the latter half of the Cold War. Here the environment of control and surveillance, as well as the expectations of art and theatre (the legacy of Socialist Realism) must be taken into consideration. The works of Eastern Bloc artists were not only restricted to the material itself -to the themes, language, techniques and styles - but, as was discussed in chapter one, the act of creating and performing a piece of non-conformist art in an unsanctioned space was an illegal act subject to various types of punishment.⁴⁴

However, despite the complexities of creating a definition for performance art in the Eastern Bloc, and especially in the GDR, where it did not officially exist, there are marked similarities in the basic tenets that govern the creation of performance art in Britain and the United States, in the relatively more permissive countries of the Eastern Bloc such as Yugoslavia, Poland and Hungary, and in the GDR. One such similarity was the desire of performance artists to critically alter, if not altogether abandon, the notion of theatre as a place of construct. They rejected the idea of specifically theatrical spaces, performing in the open air, in art galleries,

⁴³ Rose Lee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 9.

⁴⁴ See 71-78 in the present thesis.

in private apartments, and in a variety of other spaces selected for availability or suitability to the specific performance. It is, however, important to note that the motivation for this alteration and abandonment further highlights a key difference between the Anglo-American political and Eastern Bloc dissident theatre; the search for new space in the West was a choice made by the artists who desired to escape what they saw as the institutional, authorised home of art and to seek a new audience, whereas in the Eastern Bloc seeking new space was a necessity if they were going to attempt to free themselves from the authoritarian strictures that controlled their creations.

These artists also sought to abandon the idea of the creation of set characters, with associated, character-specific, dialogue, as Else Gabriel, part of the performance group Autoperforationsartisten commented: '[We had] the urge to do something differently than the normal GDR art forms [...] We wanted to play ourselves, so we as persons wanted to play with our own texts, with our own [...] and do something new.'⁴⁵ Furthermore these performance artists most often abandoned plot and narrative in favour of theme and statement, be it artistic, political or thematic. These performance artists strove for a realness that went beyond either realism or naturalism on the stage, and while embracing certain aspects of earlier avant-garde theatrical genres, they continued to remove the barriers

⁴⁵ Else Gabriel, personal interview, 22 April 2014, Berlin.

between the real and the construct, choosing actions that were not falsified for the sake of spectacle; where the discomfort, violence, blood, pain, and revulsion was real.⁴⁶

Other similarities lay in Goldberg's definition of performance art as 'a permissive, open-ended medium with endless variables, executed by artists impatient with the limitations of more established art forms and determined to take their art directly to the public'.⁴⁷ Or as the authors of *Performance: Texts and Contexts*⁴⁸ assert, much performance art shares a number of common, basic, conceptual and structural characteristics; elements that, with specific classification, can be extended to a discussion of Eastern Bloc and GDR performance art. For example, performance art takes an 'anti-establishment, provocative, unconventional, often assaultive interventionist or performance stance'.⁴⁹ It expresses an 'opposition to culture's commodification of art',⁵⁰ which, while in the context of the text, this statement refers to the Western performance artists' dislike of the ownership and display of artworks (in private collections or museums) as a means of cultural currency, it can be argued that this

⁴⁶ Each of these similarities also serves to highlight a difference, as each is a choice in the Western context and a necessity in the Eastern one. In the Anglo-American political context artists chose these techniques in order to stand out and confront their audiences, in the Eastern Bloc dissident context adopting these techniques was one of the only ways to challenge the required tenets of art in the country.

Definitions, classifications and summaries of performance art have been formed from exploration of Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1996).; Goldberg, *Performance Art*; Kerstin May, *Art and Obscenity* (London: Ib Tauris Publishers, 2006).; Randy Martin, *Performance as Political Act: The Embodied Self* (New York: Bergin and Garvey Publishers, 1990).

⁴⁷ Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 9.

⁴⁸ Carol Simpson Stern and Bruce Henderson, *Performance: Texts and Contexts* (London: Longman Publishing Group, 1993).

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 382-383.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*.

point is still valid in relation to the GDR. The SED controlled and used art as a representation of its cultural dominance and social control. Performance art in both the West and the Eastern Bloc continuously crosses the boundaries between artistic genres and makes use of,

multimedia texture, drawing for its materials not only upon the live bodies of the performers but upon images, television monitors, projected images, visual images, film, poetry, autobiographical material, narrative, dance, architecture and music; [it has] an interest in the principles of collage, assemblage, and simultaneity [and] an interest in using “found” as well as “made” materials [Additionally it has a] heavy reliance upon unusual juxtapositions of incongruous, seemingly unrelated images⁵¹

As such, performance art in both an Anglo-American and an Eastern Bloc context can be said to defy specific classification as any singular genre, not making continuous use of a particular set of styles or techniques. It confronts traditional theatrical, as well as visual artistic forms and formats, often expressing raw emotion, and striving to create authentic, visceral experiences for their audiences.

Similarities also existed in the use of the body as the central element to the performance. In contrast to the traditional forms of theatre in which the body is used as a tool - making use of gesture, posture and movement to bring the character to life on stage - performance artists used their bodies to create authenticity, activeness and liveness. As Philip Auslander comments, in his discussion of Elinor Fuchs’s essay on characters in postmodern drama

⁵¹ Ibid.

(where Auslander categorises performance art), '[there is a significant] de-emphasis of the modern concept of psychologically consistent dramatic characters in favor of fragmented, flowing, and uncertain identities whose exact locations and boundaries cannot be pinpointed.'⁵² Performance art abandons the idea of playing a character that has been created with a specific identity to serve a specific purpose in the piece. The artists most often presents themselves as the subject of the piece or show themselves as a representation of common or universal themes, ideas, or experiences - for example being part of a cultural or gendered group. They do so by using and presenting their bodies as integral to the creation of the piece rather than as a vehicle for the presentation of a constructed character.

Furthermore, in performance art the body is often used to break through the boundaries that exist between performer and spectator, creating a method of dialogue between the artist and the audience, relying on the transmission of the shared experience of pain, fear, joy, excitement or humour, to drive it forward. 'These performances can hardly be "observed" in a distanced manner; they challenge the audience to respond physically by the arousal of some comparable pain, disgust, or embarrassment.'⁵³ Or as Stiles comments,

Actions such as these, wherever they take place, represent vital communication between artists and the individuals who witnessed them. Actions announce

⁵² Philip Auslander, 'Post Modernism and Performance' in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. by Steven Connor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 97-115 (103).

⁵³ Falk Heinrich, 'Flesh as Communication: Body Art and Body Theory' *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 10(2012) <<http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=633>> [accessed 17 October 2014].

intersubjectivity – that hyphen – an interstice that requires engagement, drawing spectators into a dialogue that may threaten, repulse, dismay or seduce; even as they educate and illuminate.⁵⁴

The body in performance art aspires to break free from the political and social confines placed on it by ideological expectation, and to engage in authentic communication in a way that is impossible in traditional theatrical forms that base themselves in the creation of written character.

If a collective statement can be made about the motivations, intentions and executions of performance art, it is that it fundamentally challenged mainstream art forms, questioning, commenting on, critiquing and criticising the manner that art, theatre and dance had continued to evolve throughout the twentieth century despite early-century avant-garde experimentations. It interrogated the ways art was used, what it could represent and the methods used to create it. Furthermore, performance art responded to the demands and restrictions placed on art by those who attempted to control it, challenging consumerism in the Anglo-American context and state ideology in the Eastern Bloc. It objected to the concept of what was considered to be ‘normal’ in each cultural context, of the status quo that they were expected to accept without resistance. Performance artists in both the Western and Eastern Bloc context, including the third generation of artists in the GDR, struggled against

⁵⁴ Kristine Stiles, ‘Inside/Outside: Balancing Between a Dusthole and Eternity’ in *Body and the East: From 1960s to the Present*, ed. by Zdenka Badovinac (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999) 19-30 (28).

the elements of control - societal, cultural and governmental – that were present within the environments of the established artistic and theatrical worlds. They saw the rules that dictated the established forms as barriers to statement and free expressions. They desired to create a new art form that made use of multiple techniques, styles, and physical materials and expressed real emotion.

Despite similarities in style, technique, theme, and intention, it would be fallible to draw direct parallels between the works of Anglo-American performance artists of the period, – Chris Burden, Gene Youngblood, Laurie Anderson, and Eric Bogosian - performance events such as Kaprow's Happenings, and French Situationist events - and that which was being produced in much of the Eastern Bloc. It must be taken into consideration that in the Eastern Bloc countries, the free expressions created in pieces of performance held additional levels of subversion to the mainstream arts; as these expressions severely bent, if not fully broke, the rules for art and theatre set in place by the government. As discussed previously, official art within these countries served specific purposes and was expected to abide by a strict set of dictates, such that it was accessible to the common man, that it contributed to the idea of a collective society, and that it did not criticise the dominant ideological tenets of the state.

As part of these restrictions was the idea that the body was meant to be a machine by which a person was a worker, a loyal party member and, in the case of women, a wife and mother. The body, like the mind was not an individual entity but a piece of the collective, one that,

according to the official doctrine, should always be used to create a stronger, more cohesive socialist state.⁵⁵ As such using the body in a sexualised, confined, harmful or unhealthy manner was a deeply subversive act. However, despite the expectations of the dominant ideology, performance artists embraced the subversion and used their bodies to express pain, sacrifice, fear, uncertainty, unhappiness and numerous other emotions that gave the body individual agency simply by the fact that it exists, moves, bleeds, and expresses what cannot be said.

[...] in the communist countries of Central Europe, instead of an art market, there existed varying degrees of state control over official art and exhibition spaces. Unlike in the West, rather than a critique of art institutions, the use of performance in the East was often a way of reclaiming one's body, and the space around it, from the state. Instead of operation as an extension of painting, it often functioned as a free zone in which to experiment, as a new art form that offered seemingly limitless possibilities.⁵⁶

Further considerations must be made when discussing performance art in the GDR specifically. Isolated behind the Berlin Wall and the German border the performance artists in the GDR had little, if any, exposure to the evolving genre of performance art either in the Anglo-American context or in the work that was beginning to be produced in Hungary,

⁵⁵ This directly relates to the discussion of the 'ideal socialist' and the issues of individuality in the Soviet states, as highlighted in chapter 1.

⁵⁶ Amy Bryzgel, 'Continuity and Change: Performance Art in Eastern Europe Since the 1960s' *IDEA Artă + Societate* 45(2014) < <http://idea.ro/revista/?q=en/node/41&articol=835> > [accessed 24 May 2015].

Poland or Yugoslavia in the 1970s; such as that by Marina Abramović or Orshi Drozdik.

Angelika Richter comments:

The cultural and political climate in the GDR has been extremely claustrophobic due to the fact that it has been the buffer zone between the Western Bloc and the Eastern Bloc, so it was kind of hermetically sealed, it was a vacuum tightness, the state socialism there constructed a climate of deep mistrust, and it was all about the ideologisation of art and life. So you can't compare it with any other Eastern Bloc country... we didn't have any exchange with, or hardly any exchange with Western contemporary artists, or encounters, so this was, it was a tightness, a vacuum, in terms of exchange and information flow.⁵⁷

The hold of the cultural policies in conjunction with the intense and pervasive scrutiny of the Stasi prevented the East German artists from travelling, at times even within the other Eastern Bloc countries, and significantly limited the access they had to viewing or reading about Western performance. Volker (Via) Lewandowsky of Autoperforationsartisten commented, '[...] when we got the weekly magazine, like *Der Spiegel* from West Germany it was handed over from one person to another, probably came to you after two months'.⁵⁸ This limitation and the lack of specific context from which to analyse what was being presented in the material contained within these smuggled publications was often interpreted far differently by young artists in the GDR. They saw within it something completely foreign, exotic and exciting,

⁵⁷ Richter, 'Body Actions: Performative Tendencies in East Germany'

⁵⁸ Via Lewandowsky, personal interview, 22 September 2014, Berlin.

I didn't get the idea of these things...I did] not have the social background to understand, or the education or the information I needed [but] it was fantastic, it was beautiful, [as] if you would look into part of a jungle...you look into things that seem to be exotic, fascinating; partly you know it, partly you associate things, but in general you misunderstand a lot of things.⁵⁹

These young GDR artists could not learn about, or experience contemporary performance from either Western or other Eastern Bloc countries in any kind of an open forum, and as a result, the primary pre-established influences for the performances created in the GDR often drew from films, literature, and philosophy, as well as the artistic and theatrical forms that predated World War II. Amongst these influences were psychotherapist Sigmund Freud and writer Elias Canetti, both officially banned, but favoured for their discussions of the actions and motivations of the individual in different societies. They drew stylistically from films by Andrei Tarkovsky and Luis Buñuel which abandoned traditional dramatic structures, relied on spiritual, symbolically religious and metaphysical themes, as well as on the use of images meant to startle and shock their audiences. The influences of inter-war avant-garde artistic and theatrical movements are also evident in many of the performance pieces in the GDR. The disjointed, symbolic, multi-media textures - that include poetry, dance, assemblage, and live spontaneous art creations - are reminiscent of Futurism and Dada. The confrontational, visceral, 'total art' style of much of the work satisfying many of Artuad's classifications for Theatre of Cruelty. Further influence can be seen in expressionist paintings. Additionally much of the performance developed in the GDR reflected the

⁵⁹ Ibid.

personal experience of surveillance, harassment, the removal of opportunities, the inability to leave the country, and other issues specific to East Germany.

Performance art in the GDR began to appear in the late 1970s – following the expatriation of Wolf Biermann, and the subsequent emigrations by many well established artists. It was a cross-section of art forms embracing theatre, painting, sculpture and dance, as well as embracing body art, land art, and environmental art known as 'plein airs'; a term deriving from the French Impressionist painters who felt it necessary to paint outdoors and here refers to performance in natural spaces, out of doors and out of the cities. It embraced physicality as a form of expression, reflected a surreal perspective of life that some of the artists held, and developed from spontaneous actions and responses. Rehberg comments,

Performance and performance arts are based on the immediacy of physical presence. This makes them unpredictable, quasi-interminable and binds them to a spatio-temporal intersection of reality. The connection of latency and spontaneity, of enactment and unpredictability makes them exciting and fragile'⁶⁰

It grew out of the increasing numbers of artists of all forms - the university trained, artistic labourers, and entirely untrained – who had lost faith (or did not have faith in the first place) that socialism could be reformed into a beneficially, functioning system of government and

⁶⁰ Karl- Siegbert Rehberg, 'Verkörperung – Konkurrenzen: Aktionskunst in der DDR zwischen Revolte und Kristallisation' in *Performance und Bild* ed. by. Christian Janecke (Berlin: Reihe Fundus, 2004) trans. by. Martin Posegga. 115.

society. Visual, as well as theatrical and dance artists deviated from their training and previous working styles to explore performance, and engage in the creation of work that was not as heavily and specifically regulated. Many also crossed over into musical performance as well, taking part in the growing underground punk rock scene that evolved after records by British and (to a lesser degree) American punk artists such as The Sex Pistols, The Buzzcocks, The Clash, and The Dead Kennedys were smuggled into the country from West Berlin and Hungary.⁶¹ They embraced whatever freedoms performance art allowed them, risking the possible repercussions of working outside of the established and regulated artistic fields, and proceeded to work on the fringes of official culture.

Many of these artists already existed on the fringes of society due to actions of their own. Gabrielle Stötzer was thrown out of teaching college for anti-communist sentiments, was imprisoned for signing a petition against Biermann's expatriation, and after her release, established an illegal art gallery in her flat. Others had been prevented from pursuing education due to the views and roles of their parents. Verena Kyselka was denied entrance to university because her father had been arrested for helping people escape to West Berlin

⁶¹ Punk appealed to many of these artists as it was (in the East German context) revolutionary and anti-ideological, subverting dictates of music but also of style, dress, and attitude. It existed in the periphery of the artistic world and often spoke of a restructured or dismantled society. Additionally, punk concerts often embraced multi-textural, collage and theatrical elements that were common in other forms of performance. For more information on the punk rock scenes in the GDR see Kate Gerard 'Punk and the State of Youth in the GDR' in *Youth and Rock in the Soviet Bloc: Youth Culture, Music and the State in Russia and Eastern Europe*, ed. by William Jay Risch (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 153-177.; Patricia Simpson, 'Germany and Its Discontents: Die Skeptiker's Punk Corrective' *The Journal of Popular Culture* 34[3] (2000), 129-140.

during the 1950s and '60s. Even when working within a recognised artistic area, many did not claim official status as artists; that required membership with a professional organisation, which inevitably came with restrictions dictated by the dominant ideology.

[...] as a freelance artist in the GDR, you had to be a member a professional association in order to get a taxpayer identification-code. If this was not the case, one was regarded as anti-social, which could lead to imprisonment. The underground artists mostly worked in unskilled jobs in order to be registered somewhere officially. Exhibitions and readings were organized in private flats, and punk concerts in churches. A variety of hand-produced art newspapers, and books with poetic texts, were illegally published, and super-8 film festivals were organized.⁶²

Performance art evolved in the GDR as a mechanism of creating both physical and metaphoric – albeit illegal – space, both within and peripherally to the designated styles and forms. It became a way artists could create more freely within the proscriptions of art and theatre under the ever-present surveillance of the Stasi.

... [It] could evolve in all contexts, it seemed an ideal medium for many artists in the totalitarian surveillance state of the GDR. In improvised and spontaneous test arrangements they could appear in different locations such as homes, studios or the few producer galleries and quickly disappear again together with the audience before the verdict of the ban hit their actions.⁶³

⁶² Verena Kyselka, 'Pigs like Pigment' lecture transcript 2008 [obtained 15 September 2015].

⁶³ Angelika Richter, '*Self Directing: Women Artists from the GDR and the Expansion of their Art in Performance and Actions*' trans. by Rett Rossi, available online <<http://www.obieg.pl/artmix/19873>> [accessed 13 March 2012].

It critiqued and commented on what was perceived as a society that had stagnated politically, socially and culturally, confined in a stasis from which there was rarely an escape. However, though it could be quite critical, it rarely made direct anti-government statements owing to the fact that making political statements or commentary was an almost certain way to find your life, family, acquaintances and work interfered with. It did, however, very often address taboo issues such as gender inequality and disparities in wealth and class - despite these things having been claimed to be entirely eradicated by the government.⁶⁴

It also addressed limitations on the ability to travel, the restriction of artistic freedoms, and the destruction of the natural environment. Additionally, these performances often commented on the decay of government, culture and society that these artists observed in the GDR. In many ways performance art became a parallel for the social movements such as *Frauen für Frieden* (Women for Peace), *Gesellschaft für Natur und Umwelt* (Society for Nature and Environment) and certain organisations under the protections of the Lutheran Church. Movements and organisations that expressed the increasing dissatisfaction with the policies and restrictions of the SED, the continual economic downturn in the country – which

⁶⁴ For more information on gender, class and citizenship issues faced in the GDR see the following texts. Barbra Einhorn, *Cinderella goes to Market: Citizenship, Gender and Women's Movements in Central Europe* (London: Verso Publishing, 1993).; Donna Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic: Women, the Family and Communism in the German Democratic Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).; and Susanne Kranz, 'Women's Role in The German Democratic Republic and the State's Policy Toward Women' *Journal of International Women's Studies* 7 (2013), 69-83.

resulted in the ‘selling’ of political prisoners to the West - and the continued and intensive destruction of natural environments.⁶⁵

Although there is no consensus as to which artist or group can be credited with the first performance or with inspiring the genre within the GDR, amongst the first artists that experimented with performance was a small group that went by the name of Clara Mosch; the nomenclature deriving from the surnames of the four male members of the group.⁶⁶ The founding members of the group met at the art academy in Leipzig and then moved to Karl-Marx-Stadt (now Chemnitz) to work with Georg Brühl who controlled a ‘progressive’ gallery which featured jazz concerts and showed work by independent artists. The group began to perform during the ‘plein air’ art events, which grew out of festival or carnival-like gatherings of artists, in Leussow (1977), Gallenthin (1981) and Tabarz (1983). Their performances tended to be environmentally based, metaphorically addressing ideas of fragility and destruction:

⁶⁵ In response to the oil price shocks of the mid-1970s the ‘GDR leadership turned back to soft coal as its main source of energy and supplemented it by building nuclear reactors from old Soviet technology. In an attempt to increase production and secure the economy efforts to upgrade environmentally destructive plants and farming/mining techniques were halted, ‘ [a] poorly maintained chemical industry continued to discharge toxics into the air and water [...] Pollutions, smog, and damage to forests were especially severe [...] and] Waste disposal problems were also serious.’ See William Markham, *Environmental Organisations in Modern Germany: Hardy Survivors in the Twentieth Century and Beyond* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013), 133-134.

⁶⁶ Original member were Cal Friedrich Claus (CLA), Thomas Ranft (RA), Michael Mrogner (MO) and Gregor-Torten Schade (SCH). The fifth member of the group, a woman named Dagmar Schinke joined later and was therefore not represented in the name of the group.

In areas that had been cleared after lightning had struck, the sometimes naked Clara Mosch members climbed denuded trees or their own fragile scaffold structures, enacting a relation between their own bodies and the dying substance of trees as a means of establishing a kind of corrective control of the space.⁶⁷

The group continued to perform together until 1983 when a planted Stasi agent began an affair with one of the members, and evidence was planted on another of the members with the intention of creating such discord and tension that the group would dissolve.⁶⁸

The early 1980s gave rise to other artists and groups who drew from their own experiences, influences and backgrounds to create performances that addressed the social and cultural confines on their lives and work. Amongst these was Cornelia Schleime whose performance *Unter weißen Tüchern (Under White Cloth)* showed a woman completely tied to a door, immobilised such that only her eyes can move. The door is constantly opened and closed. The piece is an allegorical, surrealist, metaphor for how she and her fellow artists felt locked inside of the GDR.⁶⁹ Heike Stephan in her performance of *Niobe am Sipylos (Niobe on Sipylos)* used silk straps to 'allegorically represent paralysis and suffocation'⁷⁰, and Christine

⁶⁷ Mesch, *Modern Art at the Berlin Wall*, 196.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 196-197. This tactic of planting an informant or undercover agent within a perceived subversive group in order to collect information and splinter the group was quite common across the Eastern Bloc countries. Agents posed as (and sometimes were) writers and artists to infiltrate and cause strife amongst the group. Secret Police and Stasi files declassified after the Cold War document these operations. This is discussed in reference to Theatre of the Eighth Day in chapter 3 of this thesis.

⁶⁹ Performance archive available online at <<http://www.reactfeminism.org/entry.php?l=lb&id=145&wid=128&e=a&v=&a=Cornelia%20Schleime&t=>> [accessed 12 June 2015].

⁷⁰ Richter, <<http://www.obieg.pl/artmix/19873>>.

Schlegel created pieces that were combinations of film, painting and music, as well as collaborating extensively with dancer Fine Kwiatkowski.

Furthermore, Gabriele Stötzer formed a group of female artists in Erfurt who called themselves at various times throughout their existence, Avantfemme, Erfurt Frauengruppe and eventually Exterra XX. The work created by this group addressed issues female identity and the challenges faced by women in the GDR. They commented on issues regarding gender roles, questioning why, if gender equality had been achieved (as was claimed by the government) were women expected to shoulder the vast majority of domestic and childrearing duties while also working full time and why were women still paid less and kept from positions of management.⁷¹ Additionally their work commented on the near invisibility of women artists in the GDR.⁷²

These performance artists sought to broaden the definition of art in the GDR, and used every method available to them to do so. They made use of common, easily accessed day-to-day materials such as fabric scraps, vegetables, used packaging⁷³, and household and

⁷¹ This image of women is reminiscent of the idea of the 'New Soviet Woman' as generated during the 1920s. This idea is further discussed in chapter 5.

⁷² Norman, *Bricolage as Resistance*.; Richter, 'Body Actions: Performative Tendencies in East Germany'; Verena Kyselka, personal interview, 12 September 2014, Berlin.

⁷³ Costumes for some of Exterra XX's performance-object-art shows were made from yoghurt containers, egg cartons and the like. For more specific discussion on Exterra XX's performances and styles see Norman, *Bricolage as Resistance*.

environmental products⁷⁴ to both comment on different aspects of society and because of the limited availability and high cost of traditional materials such as paints, specific fabrics and large canvases. They performed in a variety of accepting spaces including churches, apartments, select art galleries that were willing to risk repercussions to their spaces and lives, and private art clubs - though the latter often cost the artists to use. They used the moderate amounts of space surrounding performance resulting from the lack of specific government strictures, and the limited freedoms allotted to festivals and certain university programs, as well as the space which they were able to create by continuously pushing at the boundaries and accepting the repercussions. The result of which was the creation of small communities of subcultural performance artists in Berlin, Dresden and Leipzig, cities that had arts academies, and in the regional cities of Erfurt, and Karl-Marx-Stadt. It was from the community that ran through and around the arts academy in Dresden that Autoperforationsartisten emerged as an innovative group of student artists who embraced performance in order to create in the way that they wanted.

⁷⁴ For examples on how materials such as shower curtains and the foil sheeting used to cover strawberry fields were used in performances, especially underground fashion shows see the film *Ein Traum in Erdbeerfolie*, dir. by Marco Wilms (Polyband Films, 2008) [on DVD].

Autoperforationsartisten

History

The group that was to become Autoperforationsartisten was formed in 1984, however it was not until 1986 that the group named itself. The name, when it did come, was an attempt to define themselves, what they intended to do and their views on art, all with a single term or within a single idea. They sought to create a name for the group that reflected the irreconcilable concepts, techniques, and styles they embraced in their performances; one that supported their search for form but simultaneously showed their disdain for interpretation. Eventually they chose the name Autoperforationsartisten, which was intended to express the way in which the group members perforated or opened themselves up in order to both embrace and expel their environments, and to express freely, unconfined by the strictures that held the decay of the country in place. It spoke to embracing the mental illness that the artists must, in the eyes of the government, be suffering from, as they saw something rotten in the GDR. Of turning this illness into something artistic then using it as a weapon against the authorities. As Else Gabriel comments:

The performance of the Autoperforationsartisten, auto-self, perforations - we ourselves, punish ourselves, we take this kind of mental illness state into an artistic form, into something you do on purpose, to yourself and drive people crazy with that. [...] we worked with ourselves, with our bodies, so it drove them crazy, because we played crazy but we weren't!⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Gabriel, interview, 2014.

The group initially formed during their first year of study at the Dresden Academy of Fine Art. Else Gabriel, Micha Brendel and Volker (Via) Lewandowsky discovered almost immediately that although each one of them came from very different backgrounds, training, and artistic interests, that each one of them felt trapped within a system of arts that did not allow for independent expression, or the development of experimental techniques. Lewandowsky was a painter, Brendel a sculptor and Gabriel a photographer and writer. However, none of them wished to pursue university diplomas in these fields as they felt that the curriculum in these subjects was too prescriptive and restrictive. Despite the slight broadening that had occurred in what was acceptable in art as a result of Honecker's cultural policies, the curriculum at arts academies remained significantly tied to the tenets of the socialist realist style. Students in painting and sculpture would spend extensive amounts of time studying traditional, figurative styles and techniques; painters working exclusively from observation, and sculptors made casts and prepared stones. Additionally, policies were in place to not only dictate how many artists could exist within a certain field, but what was expected of them after they graduated. The expectation for those in university for stage design, as the Autoperforationists were, was to present a proposal to the theatres and television stations, then accept whichever position they had been chosen for, accepting the limitations on style and content that had been predetermined. Even those who claimed to be free-lance were not free to create as they liked due to the stipend of 400 GDR marks they received for the three years following graduation, and the expectation that the free-lancer would then join the *Vorbandtbildkunst* (a kind of artists' union). Everything was organised,

sanctioned, and controlled by the state. Gabriel comments, ‘[...] it was [a] very official structure, very, very organised [...] so the artist, once you made it into the arts academy everything was ruled until you died.’⁷⁶

Gabriel, Brendel, and Lewandowsky wanting to be at an arts academy but not wanting to be forced into rigorously defined and controlled programs chose to study stage design. Studying stage design allowed them more freedoms than the painting or sculpture programs at the arts academy as it was considered a secondary program, a field that real artists would not be interested in pursuing, and as a result suffered less oversight and stricture of curriculum. ‘Dresden was another breeding ground for performance since bureaucrats and their institutions there effectively ignored work of any medium outside of painting.’⁷⁷

Further freedoms came from the direction of their lead academy professor Günther Hornig. Hornig, a painter, sculptor and stage designer had never embraced the concept of socialist realism or the *Bitterfelder Weg* - a system of art (painting) that strived to bring together art and life, through collaborative efforts of professionally trained artists and ordinary workers, to create close-to-life depictions of the working world as per the party’s ideals.⁷⁸ His work

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Mesch, *Modern Art at the Berlin Wall*, 169.

⁷⁸ Definition of *Bitterfelder Weg* summarised from: Sophie Gerlach, ‘From Shamed to Famed: The Transition of a Former East German Arts Academy to the Talent Hotbed of a Contemporary Painters’ School’ in *Art and Theory After Socialism* ed. by Melanie Jordon and Malcom Miles (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2008), 11.

was bold, abstract, and both embraced and questioned constructivism, deconstructivism, expressionism, impressionism, cubism and futurism reflecting his ‘restless, but concentrated, conceptual search for freedom.’⁷⁹ This search for freedom became an aspect of his teaching, allowing his students to experiment with various forms, styles and techniques. As Richter comments '[he] was himself very open-minded and created a free space for them so they could widen their space and open up their ideas of performance and role play.'⁸⁰ Additionally, an illness forced Hornig to take significant amount of time away from the academy during the second and third year of Brendel, Gabriel, and Lewandowsky's education, and as the academy did not appoint a substitute, a vacuum of oversight and authority was created; one that the students were quite happy to fill. They began to stage performances, occupying the spaces that had been allocated for stage design, at one point even moving in to live in one of these spaces for a short time.

From its inception the work that the group produced together challenged the very definition of what was and was not art, breaking through any barrier or restriction put in their path, and infiltrating any event or gathering they attended. Lewandowsky commented on this, relating the story of an event near the beginning of their association where they used a student night, during which the new students were introduced, to stage an impromptu performance, taking

⁷⁹ Ingeborg Ruthe, ‘Chaos is only an Incomprehensible Order’ *Berliner Zeitung*, (17th March 2007 <<http://www.berliner-zeitung.de/archiv/galerie-laekemaeker--guenther-hornig-zum-siebzigsten-chaos-ist-nur-unverstaendlicheordnung,10810590,10463724.html>> [accessed 16 June 2015].

⁸⁰ Angelika Richter, interview, 2015

everyone by surprise and setting themselves apart from those who were going to take the study of stage design seriously. He goes on to discuss how their ideas surrounding the purposes and uses of art, and the rejection of the GDR tenets of art and theatre brought them together. As a result the group became insular, excluding other students, and providing each other with the artistic and psychological support they needed.⁸¹ Durs Grünbein comments:

Sentimental elements were intermingled with an urge for wayward exhibitionism, one's own body as the last resort, the biographical element prevailing, the very own trademark of the herd was thoroughly investigated and so it is little wonder that there was soon talk of a *second family*.⁸²

Christoph Tannert describes them as an 'emergency community (*Notgemeinschaft*)'⁸³. The exception to this self-imposed isolation of the group was the inclusion of Ranier Görß, a younger student at the academy who joined the group for several of their later performances.

Themes, Motifs and Performance

The group began producing together beginning in 1985 with *Langsam nassen (To Wet Slowly)* during which a naked Lewandowsky wearing only foil that was printed with roses

⁸¹ Lewandowsky, interview, 2014

⁸² Durs Grünbein, 'Protestant Rituals in the Work of Autoperforationsartisten' in *Body and the East: From 1960s to the Present*, 117.

⁸³ Christopher Tannert quoted in Grünbein, 'Protestant Rituals in the Work of Autoperforationsartisten', 118.

crawled towards a wall, Brendel climbed a parapet, and Gabriel composed a title in sugar cubes then lit it on fire. The performance made no direct political or artistic statement, instead it established them as a group that was going to rely on mixed media, movement and actions to shock and disturb their audiences forcing them to widen and alter their view of art. It was at their second performance, during the academy carnival in 1986, held during Lent, that they began to work with meat, relying on both the visual discomfort it caused in their audiences, as well as the smell (as the meat was rarely fresh) to 'shock and to deliver a visceral scent of disgust'.⁸⁴ *Spitze des Fleischbergs (Tip of Meat Mountain)*, as the performance was called, had each member of the group performing mostly individually on a makeshift stage; Gabriel, wore Bavarian-style outfit, and with an animal lung hung from around her neck, blow-dried a dead chicken. Brendel, disguised as an animal, naked and covered in spots excreted a greenish goo as he stamped around inside of a net, and Lewandowsky dressed in drag, sang in the style of a chanteuse, using a cow throat as a microphone before he tore a head of cabbage to shreds in slow motion. At the end of these actions the three members met on stage and marched in unison around a cooler bag.⁸⁵ The performance was shocking to the audiences; it combined a series of individual actions that embraced humour, raw physicality, the grotesque, and those emotions and reactions that the artists felt could not be expressed in words or in any other art form. It was an act of radical free expression that surreptitiously

⁸⁴ Mesch, *Modern Art at the Berlin Wall*, 203.

⁸⁵ Amy Bryzgel, 'Micha Brendel' in *Performing the East* < <http://performingtheeast.com/micha-brendel/> > [accessed 05 October 2014].; Grünbein, 'Protestant Rituals in the Work of Autoperforationsartisten', 115.; Mesch, *Modern Art at the Berlin Wall*, 203.

communicated a frustration and anger at the confining nature of the GDR. Bryzgel comments,

[...] the artists created these actions as a way of expressing their own private, individual situations – which could not really be expressed in art otherwise, and certainly not adequately enough in painting – through theatrical forms. The performances were confusing, challenging *mélanges* of imagery and activity [...] they aimed to have two different points: the first was the expression of these difficult things – emotions and sentiments, both individually and in a greater socio-political sense – which the audience could understand on a visceral level. [...] the] second element was perhaps more difficult for the audience to understand, but the point was not clear, direct communication with the audience. Rather, it was about completely pure and free expression.⁸⁶

As they continued to develop performances the tendency to stage separate actions, which then culminated in a large group action at the end of the performance, became common. This tendency to work in loosely joined separate actions allowed each artist the freedom to explore the techniques and styles, as well as the themes that they felt most connected with. 'Even though the four differ in their comments about their activity, it is difficult to deny the existence of fixed ideas, some kind of common labyrinth in which each of them moves in a different way.'⁸⁷ Lewandowsky who had several family members in medical professions - his mother was a nurse and several uncles were doctors - as well as having suffered a childhood injury which left him blind in one eye - had an intense fascination with the functions of the body and the mind. As a result his independent portions of the performances

⁸⁶ Bryzgel, 'Micha Brendel', < <http://performingtheeast.com/micha-brendel/>>.

⁸⁷ Grünbein, 'Protestant Rituals in the Work of Autoperforationsartisten', 115.

very often focused on highlighting broken, confined, and pained bodies and minds. He often used bandages, orthopaedic aids and other medical equipment in his work. Gabriel who since childhood had wanted to leave the GDR, 'when I turned twelve I told my mother that I wanted to get rid of the GDR, I wanted to move out, I wanted to leave this stuff and this system'⁸⁸ focused much of her work on the confinement and captivity she felt living in the GDR, and her frustrations of not being able to travel to the West. Her work as well as Brendel's also focused on the everyday realities and invasiveness of living in the GDR. Each of their works embraced the elemental ideas of life, identity and the creation and destruction of the self:

Rainer Görß's rational search for orientation through signs and bits of information is set against Micha Brendel and Via Lewandowsky's intuitive sadomasochistic trips into the animal, childhood and sexual worlds. Else Gabriel, however, steadfastly reigns over the positive pole of the ritual, associated with nutrition, birth, family, language and religion.⁸⁹

Their performances explored their thoughts on what it meant to be a human being that is in many ways being reduced to being a caged animal through the restrictions of the country. They made use of staged, symbolic violence and pain to shock and engage their audiences, and present an image of what it meant to be alive.

...the group tried out the tension of suffering and euphoria, the mixture of fear and pain; the ritual moment that always is connected to it was theatricalised in a certain way. Thereby the disgust played a leading role, for that it is art already to ;feel the

⁸⁸ Gabriel, interview, 2014.

⁸⁹ Grünbein, 'Protestant Rituals in the Work of Autoperforationsartisten', 115.

pains, to see the blood flow, to smell the emptying of the intestines, to hear the brains bursting'⁹⁰

The motifs they chose clearly, but indirectly, commented on what their country had become, and who they had become within it.

The idea of the physical and mental health of people as tied to the idea of the health of the GDR as whole, that the perfect system had been created for the entire population and those who felt that the GDR was not a perfect system were suffering from a mental illness, became a reoccurring motif in the work of the group. Gabriel commented, 'it was supposed to be a better world [...] everything is absolutely fine, and who is feeling it is not fine has a mental problem. Whether you get to prison or just in hospital because something is wrong with you if you don't match with the system.'⁹¹ She goes on to discuss how they adopted this idea into their work; knowing that it was the system that was the flawed and broken, not them. 'We take this kind of mental illness state into an artistic form, into something you do on purpose, to yourself and drive people crazy with that.'⁹² They made use of the idea of insanity and the sickened body - minds and bodies that were deformed, deranged, broken and rotting - to comment without commenting. They used the motif to avoid making any political statements that could be used against them, used it to openly clash against the Socialist ideal of the

⁹⁰ Rehberg, 'Verkörperungs – Konkurrenzen: Aktionskunst in der DDR zwischen Revolte und Kristallisation' 135.

⁹¹ Gabriel, interview, 2014.

⁹² Ibid.

perfect, healthy body and mind. In doing so they challenged the official view of what the population and art was supposed to be.

A second motif repeatedly used by the group was that of meat, vegetables, animal carcasses, insects and blood. Brendel, Lewandowsky and Gabriel each discuss the use of these materials as both practical and symbolic. Practically the use of these materials directly related to the significant shortages that plagued the GDR in the 1980s. Due to the fact that the country, by its own policies, was cut off from trade with the West, there were a great number of items that were extremely difficult and expensive to obtain. Either the GDR did not, or could not, produce or import these items, or if they were produced within the country, they were sold to the West rather than to their own populations as they would fetch a greater price. Additionally, common items such as flour, cabbages, and potatoes were not only readily available but were subsidised, and while meat tended to be expensive and often hard to come by, the meat, bones, carcasses and blood the group were using in their work was the remains of the animal after what was sellable had been removed. The materials they used in their performances in many ways centred on what could be found, repurposed or obtained cheaply. From a symbolic perspective the use of these materials often represented the life cycle, with particular focus on reproduction, death, destruction and decay. Gabriel discussed her work with bread dough and its constant growth which she felt was a type of reproduction. She also commented on the flowing nature of the blood, and her use of flies as a creature that fed on dead and decaying things but lived and grew from it, '[I wanted to use] ...material

with a clear sense of its own life, the dough as well as the pig's blood and the insects had kind of their own life.⁹³

Other examples of the use of these materials as expressions of life, death, and decay are the use of egg mixed with chopped meat to simulate brain matter, the two-day old pig blood, the flies and the blended rotten meat and vegetables that resembled excrement that were used in the *Galerie Weißer Elefant*. Additionally, severed cows' feet were used in *Menetekel* (*Warning Sign*). Without having a direct awareness of the theory, or specifically identifying her as an influence, Brendel, Gabriel, and Lewandowsky's performances drew on what Julia Kristeva discusses as the 'abject'; the natural revulsion that most humans have for that which is violent, filthy, rotten, fetid, defiled or dead.⁹⁴

The corpse [...] it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. [...] No, as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live.⁹⁵

The groups' use of rotten meat, blood and vegetables, as well as the destruction of various items throughout their performances, confronted their audiences with their own revulsions and rejection with the intent of disrupting their sense of normality, forcing them to respond

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1-6.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 3.

viscerally to the assault. Furthermore, the group's use of medical equipment and restraints as well as the use of animal carcasses, rotting meat and blood as well as flies 'attacked Socialist Realism's optimistic view of the socialist body, as well as the notions of hygiene that had infiltrated aspects of domestic life in the GDR.'⁹⁶ Without making any direct political or cultural statements the group repeatedly commented on the state of the GDR in the 1980s. With their subversion of both theme and style they pushed against the boundaries put into place with the regulations that governed both fine art and theatre. They made statements about the rottenness and decay of society, the failing of the ideologues to create the socialist paradise that had been promised upon the creation of the nation, the lack of goods and materials, and the inability to travel abroad.

After working together for two and a half years, nearly abandoning their studies in stage design after they were informed that they could not adapt the curriculum to incorporate their performance work into the program, and setting themselves out as students who would not be confined by the academy rules and structures, Lewandowsky, Brendel and Gabriel began to work on their diploma project. It was while in preparation of this project that the three artists chose the name Autoperforationsartisten. Adopting this name as theirs, it first appeared on the invitation to their diploma project, a performance titled *Herz Horn Haut Schrein* (*Heart Horn Skin Shrine*).

⁹⁶ Mesch, *Modern Art at the Berlin Wall*, 203-204.

Herz Horn Haut Schrein

The now named Autoperforationsartisten spent the year between 1986-87 planning the action that would become *Herz Horn Haut Schrein*. They were given the leave by their professors to create this performance as their diploma piece rather than engaging in the ordinary diploma project - consisting of a theoretical section which would involve writing a thesis on a select theatrical problem and a practical aspect that would involve the building of a set model. Despite this, however, the performance was failed as the adjudicators did not have a system of assessment with which to judge the validity of the work. In spite of the failure, the staging of this performance resulted in a broadening of the scope of the diploma projects in the department and two years later the performance Rainer Görß created for his final project was passed with high marks. Ultimately Brendel, Lewandowsky and Gabriel were granted diplomas based on other projects they had completed as part of the program.

The performance was a culmination of the kind of works the group had been creating since their inception, focusing on elements of the life cycle, embracing pseudo-ritualistic actions, and indirectly commenting on the blindness and captivity of living in the GDR. The performance, which lasted ninety minutes, once again demonstrated the disdain the group members felt for being confined and restricted inside a system that infiltrated and dictated every action, and kept them from freedom to travel, to move and to create as they wished. The creation of the project was an intensive process that involved significant planning, long discussions and extended time spent together. The performance was a far more coordinated,

cooperative piece than their previous works, involving significantly more interactive moments than was common to the group.

Herz Horn Haut Schrein was performed on July 3, 1987 in a basement at the Art Academy of Dresden. For the performance each member of the group had assumed a different role, and created their costume to suit the part. Gabriel, the heart, wore a loose, billowy outfit in a brilliant shade of red, Lewandowsky, the horn, wore a costume resembling a hospital patient, and Brendel, the skin, had made himself a suit from passport photos that resembled scales. The shrine was an igloo like structure built from cardboard tubes that sat towards the edge of the performance space.

The performance began with a sheet covered figure and a typewriter sitting on the floor of the space. Hands emerged from under the fabric and began to mime typing; pausing intermittently to make gestures that can be interpreted as those which indicate thinking, including the scratching of the space where a head might be. When the figure emerges it is Gabriel with her hair twisted and bound over her eyes, effectively blinding her. Elsewhere on stage Lewandowsky began to climb down from the top of a pillar in the centre of the room, as though he is a monkey descending from the trees. The progress is slow and pained but eventually he comes into being. Brendel, who has added a leather bondage hood to his costume, begins to flog himself. Having completed his descent or evolution into existence, Lewandowsky begins to 'sow his seed' by removing small, paper trees from a pouch that is

hung around his waist and dropping them around the stage. An absurd kind of dance and vocalisation follows that expresses both agony and ecstasy. Lewandowsky then approaches Brendel, drags him into the shrine for several minutes then emerges wiping blood from a sword leaving Brendel 'bleeding'. A mock battle then begins between the two men, Gabriel, her face painted as a 'tribal' warrior and one breast bared stands, emerging from the igloo, and pours liquid - either wine or blood- from a chalice over the blade of a sword. The three then enter the igloo where a ritual bathing occurs. In the ending scene of the performance each of the three approaches a specially made metal wall-stands where they are suspended by their feet and proceed to make music with small instruments within reach of the base of the structure.⁹⁷

The performance is one of contradictions and odd juxtapositions, repeatedly alternating between acts that imply frustration, bloodlust and agony, and those that express joy, ecstasy and a sense of play. The basement environment of the performance has a cold, desolate, and isolated feel; a cold alienation that creates a feeling of being set apart from the world. It makes both overt and covert expressions regarding sex and reproduction, Lewandowsky and Brendel's disappearance into the igloo, an act he (Lewandowsky) describes as penetration and Gabriel's subsequent emergence from it which can be interpreted as an egg or womb as

⁹⁷ This description of the performance is my own derived from viewing a dvd of the performance (converted from the original super 8 recording of the performance) included with the text *Ordnung Durch Störung: Autoperforations-Artistik* (Dresden: Oktogon, 2006)

well as expressing pain, punishment and ritual cleansing.⁹⁸ There are dream-like elements and ones of extreme narcissism highlighted by Brendel who at one point pours photographic developer over himself and walks haughtily through the space quoting multi-media artist Diter Roth. The performance also makes oblique references to the work of Joseph Beuys when the three performers toss their heads and chant 'Nein nein nein nein'⁹⁹

Conclusion

Following the performance and the subsequent graduation of Brendel, Lewandowsky and Gabriel from the Arts Academy the frequency with which they worked together decreased. Each of the three found themselves once more working in the mediums that they had mostly set aside upon their entry into the university as well as creating Super 8 films. Their post-academy performances began to drift into new directions, often further exploring the themes and ideas that they had individually found most interesting during the course of their group performances. They continued to push the boundaries of art and performance in the GDR, further challenging the restrictions placed on their lives and on their work. They persisted in developing their performance through further expanding the interdisciplinary aspects of their work, and they proceeded in creating work that shocked, disturbed, and sickened their audiences with the intention of inspiring authentic reactions. They worked together occasionally, on performances such as *Panem et Circenses* (*Bread and Circuses* 1988) and

⁹⁸ Bryzgel, 'Micha Brendel', < <http://performingtheeast.com/micha-brendel/>>.

⁹⁹ Grünbein, 'Protestant Rituals in the Work of Autoperforationsartisten', 115.

Vom Ebben Und Fluten (*From the Ebbs and Flows* 1988), often in pairs, with the inclusion of Ranier Görß or at times, with the exclusion of another member.

The previously discussed performances at the Galerie Weißer Elefant, were the last that Brendel, Lewandowsky, Gabriel, and Görß made together prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent reunification of Germany. Following this performance, Lewandowsky, ignorant (as most of the population of the GDR was) of the impending end of the Cold War and the disillusion of the 'Eastern Bloc', attempted to relocate himself and his family to West Berlin, only to have his wife and small daughter held in a refugee camp just over the Hungarian border.¹⁰⁰ Gabriel, like many other 'subcultural', 'alternative', and 'subversive' artists took part in resistance and protest actions, and spent the initial days of the Wende imprisoned.¹⁰¹ Following reunification, the group officially disbanded and the members pursued their own individual artistic careers. All four artists still live and work in Germany.

The work of the members of Autoperforationsartisten demonstrate one of the methods by which performance art evolved in the GDR and was used by dissident artists to subvert the status quo in the country. Through the use of discarded materials, animal parts, and other easily accessible materials they expressed their anger, frustration, impatience at being

¹⁰⁰ Lewandowsky, interview, 2014.

¹⁰¹ Gabriel, interview, 2014.

confined in a country which they saw has having no sustainable future, and few opportunities to travel or express oneself. They, along with other dissident artists in the country embraced the multi-media aspects of performance art to question, criticise and challenge the tenets of a system that kept them from creating and performing as they liked.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

Theatre in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the GDR during the Cold War was shaped by policies that prohibited challenges to and critiques of the political, social and cultural environments in these countries. Confined by censorship and the regulations of living under Soviet-style communist governments, artists were prevented from criticising the government or society in their plays and performances. Those who chose to subvert the censors and produce work that thematically or stylistically challenged the official dictates of art and culture were considered dissident; a label that often resulted in marginalisation and criminalisation.

Despite the possibility of negative repercussions for their actions, many of these artists created works that questioned the status quo, challenged official policy, and attempted to demonstrate the world, as they perceived it. Exploring the works of these dissident artists, and the ways in which they responded to their environments reveals several similarities and creates the basis for a comparative framework. Amongst these similarities is the challenge to the concept of the 'ideal' Soviet man or woman; a person they felt was an impossibility, one completely incompatible with the individual. The desire they had to demonstrate their perceptions of the 'truth' of man and of the experience of living under 'real' communism,

and their intent to prevent their audiences from disengaging, to recognise themselves within the work and respond emotionally rather than within the expectations of the state. These ideas, introduced within chapter one and developed throughout the case studies, are drawn together in the following discussion demonstrating the comparative nature of this study and the contribution to existing knowledge.

The Individual in Communist Society

Evidenced within the case study chapters, Václav Havel, *Theatre of the Eighth Day* and *Autoperforationsartisten* repeatedly created characters and situations that expressed their disbelief in the concept of a self-less, strong, fully conscious individual who maintained an autonomous identity while supporting the regime, who willingly sacrificed comfort and freedom for the good of the nation.¹ In devising the character of Hugo in *The Garden Party*, Havel expressed his perspective on the impossibility of maintaining any semblance of individuality or autonomy while functioning within the system. He challenged the idea that thinking and acting in a way that is conducive with working in a bureaucratic position in this environment is natural, and highlighted the rapidity with which any sense of self is lost when one becomes part of this system.

¹ This definition of the ‘ideal’ Soviet man or woman summarises the characteristics of this person as discussed in chapter one on pages 86-90.

Havel further examined the relationship between the individual and the bureaucratic mechanism in *The Memorandum*. In this play the creation of the impenetrable languages, the rigid structures of employment and the draconian punishments for breaking these bureaucratic boundaries would, to a contemporary Czech audience, be both farcical and terrifyingly close to home. In these works, he critiqued the systems, which attempted to control the use and development of natural language, including the ability to adapt to human situations and environments, in an attempt to highlight the complete unnatural and therefore unliveable conditions under the communist government. Popescu comments, ‘The plays revolve around the clash between social, political, and personal roles and the difficulty of stepping in and out of these roles, especially in the context of modern institutional bureaucracy. The necessity to dissimulate, to transgress the boundaries of authentic self, leads to a crisis of human identity.’²

Theatre of the Eighth Day’s works challenged the image of the ideal Soviet man by questioning the beliefs and motivations that this ideal individual must have. This was especially demonstrated in *In One Breath*.³ This play highlighted idea that, despite the ideology, most people maintained their own motivations, and that selfless acts of sacrifice on

² Delia Popescu, *Political Action in Václav Havel's Thought: The Responsibility of Resistance* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012) 60.

³ For a full discussion of the play see chapter 3.

the part of the individual for the good of the many are rare. In *Oh! Have We Lived in Dignity* the ensemble went further than a sense of self-interest to demonstrate the materialistic propaganda and resulting greed of the Gierek years. The play commented on the lengths that people go to in order to claim the most of whatever is placed in front of them, and the desperate search to possess something that will bring meaning back into their lives. Both *In One Breath* and *Oh! Have We Lived in Dignity* critique the idea that man is both capable and willing to act selflessly. The individual in this society does not perceive this world as equal, does not see himself having what he needs and has been promised by the doctrine of the country and in doing so challenges the notion that communist leadership in Poland has created an environment where the ideal Communist man can exist. Although this appears to conflict with Havel's fragile but earnest characters, which appear to show a hopeful slant to humanity, it is also clear that both artists focus on the corrupting influence of the Soviet regime and the mistruths it tells to its population.

Autoperforationsartisten chose to address the issue of individuality by challenging the expectation of what the man is rather than what he does. In their work Lewandowsky, Gabriel, Brendel and Görß challenged the idea that the body of the individual was a reflection of the body of the nation and must, therefore, be presented as healthy, whole, strong, and in complete control of its actions. They accomplished this through the presentation of their bodies in such a way that the impression is of sickness, brokenness, pain, and decay. This

presentation challenged the idea that the country functioned strongly and healthily, and used the parallel between the ideal Soviet body and a strong, functioning country to express their view that the country was as injured, ill and decaying. In presenting the body as broken, diseased or mentally ill, the artists returned a kind of autonomy to the individual in society as he (or she) no longer represented that which the dominant ideology wanted to lay claim to. ‘...it jolted the GDR citizen back into an almost primal notion of their own body as individuality.’⁴ Though stylistically different from *Theatre of the Eighth Day*, striking similarities exist in the evocation of distaste and disgust at the human condition, and the fight for autonomy, even if it is greedy, ugly and self-serving, in the face of a sanitised and constricting Soviet ideal.

All of the artists discussed here strived to draw attention to the impossibility and fallibility of the ideal notion of man that had become enshrined and normalised in their individual countries. They challenged the communist doctrine that defined man by these standards, that stripped the individual of personal autonomy of thought or action, and that criminalised any person who would not or could not strive for these standards. Identifying different specific aspects of the ideology, they critiqued and commented on the ‘disconnect’ between the expectation of the ideology and the reality of man within societies that claimed to be far more egalitarian, and committed to the welfare of their people than they actually were. In creating

⁴ Mesch, *Modern Art at the Berlin Wall*, 203-204.

their works, the artists demonstrated their scepticism of and objection to a system of government and social policy that enforced an unattainable ideal and viewed those who did not conform as dissident. They expressed their dissatisfaction with living and working confined within an ideology and doctrine that forced the population to conceal or lie outright about their own experiences and opinions, and rejected dictates regarding what they could and could not create. Instead they chose to ‘live in truth’, (a phrase coined by Havel) to express themselves in 'honest and direct communication, not muddied by ideologically laden and ritualized obfuscation [and] live one's life or pursue one's profession authentically [...]’⁵ ‘defending life and its genuine aims against the system and its automatic aims’⁶. It is this idea of ‘living in truth’ as Havel states, and the ‘truth’ of action and performance about which members of Theatre of the Eighth Day and Autoperforationsartisten speak that forms the next point of comparison between the artists to be discussed here.

Living in Truth

The idea of ‘living in truth’ is most blatantly demonstrated in the plays that Havel wrote following his four-year imprisonment for his dissident activities and participation in the writing and distribution of the Charter 77 document. The characters in these plays, such as Nettles in *Largo Desolato*, are presented with situations with definitive binary outcomes;

⁵ Falk, *Dilemmas of Dissidence*, 205.

⁶ Aviezer Tucker, *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence: From Patočka to Havel* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 117.

renounce any acts or thoughts of dissent and behave in the manner designated by the government or risk losing everything. However, this concept is present in much of Havel's earlier works as well, even those produced in the relatively less restrictive years prior to the Warsaw Pact invasion. 'Living in truth' is represented through the characters of Gross in *The Memorandum* and Hummel in *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, who both, somewhat inadvertently, challenge the status quo by questioning why certain changes had been made to the daily order of things and who seek to make sense out of a nonsensical system. The idea continued to develop and became increasingly more apparent in Havel's post-normalisation work such as the Vanek one-acts; where the character of Ferdinand Vanek lives in truth by refusing to compromise his morals to support the dominant system or its agents.

In a similar way to Havel, Theatre of the Eighth Day's work following the suppression of the 1968 student riots and the rippled effects of the Warsaw Pact invasion on Poland reflected a mistrust of the mechanisms of society and government. While the party-controlled media had justified the responses of the police and military against the students and other protesters as protective measures to eliminate the destructive influences of Zionism, revisionism and American imperialism from socialist Poland, the ensemble saw the actions as unjust and excessive force with the intention of suppressing free

expression and reiteration of the party-positive propaganda. Raczak, in a discussion of the ensemble's early years together, commented

This was taking place in an era in which we felt the pain of a universal life of lies: the domination of public life by propaganda, the censorship of literature, the reduction of philosophy into some kind of religion of dialectical materialism. In those days, the simple words 'tell the truth' sounded like a risky or provocative challenge.⁷

In response to this 'universal life of lies'⁸ the group transitioned from a drama/poetry theatre to one based far more in improvisation resulting in (from their perspective) a more truthful exploration and experience of their own lives. In doing so, they created a space of freedom in which they could then communicate with their audiences.

While working on their productions, this group of young people learned that in this lie-laden and repressive world of 'real socialism' the theatre could serve not only as a place to search for one's own individual truth (whose public revelation may be a catharsis) but also a place of freedom: creative freedom for the group and a kind of short-term spiritual asylum for the spectators.⁹

Theatre of the Eighth Day's 1971 production of *In One Breath* challenged the ways in which media was manipulated such that it spoke positively about the regime. Further productions such as *Oh! Have We Lived in Dignity* and *Sale for Everyone* addressed the reiteration of political, cultural and historical falsities that had become doctrinal due to their constant

⁷ Raczak, 'Madness and Method: Improvisation in the Theatre of the Eighth Day', (67).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

repetition. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the company used theatre to question the ways in which falsities were manipulated and used by those in power to control the population, and demonstrated to their audiences, using their own stylistic and thematic methods, that life was not always what it seemed. Both Havel and Theatre of the Eighth Day's work physically highlights moments where the Soviet government lies or misleads its people, which is a strong commonality in itself. Furthermore, both artists' work hinge on the concept of depicting a 'truthful' vision (from their perspectives) of life under communism.

The creation of performances that represented the reality of experiences under state socialism rather than the propagandistic version was the core intention of the members of Autoperforationsartisten. From the first time the group worked together when they were first year students at the Dresden Art Academy their goal was to create work in which they presented their own personalities – their perspectives, fears, hopes and the things that angered and confused them about their day-to-day existence in the GDR - rather than creating characters. They sought to perform authentic humanity rather than predetermined or crafted representations of people. They sought to create work that displayed the visceral experience of life in 1980s East Germany; the despair of being shut-in, imprisoned, isolated and unable to escape, disgust at living in a country they saw as sick and decaying, frustration with a system that touted the image of prosperity, health and equality but did not offer the possibility of it, and the anger at knowing that the desire to create a life beyond or outside of

the status quo would inevitably lead to surveillance and harassment. In this way they raised questions of the cultural and societal norms that kept the population from recognising that they were being manipulated into believing the propaganda of a healthy, free and prosperous GDR. These themes are again very similar to Havel and Theatre of the Eighth Day, in that they attempt to demonstrate that there is far more, much of which is dirty, selfish, pained, and broken, than what is being forced on the population as part of the propaganda.

What is clear is that Havel and the members of Theatre of the Eighth Day and Autoperforationsartisten all felt fundamentally disconnected from the political, social and cultural climates in which they were meant to have faith. They felt that they were being fed unfounded propaganda and there was an ingrained untruth around which the system was built; one that when examined carefully made the structure of the whole system of society and government fall apart. They, unlike many artists (especially those in the mainstream world), did not believe that the current system could be adjusted or reformed and therefore sought to expose this untruth for what it was. They questioned and challenged the mechanisms of government, society, culture, media and press, and created work that employed themes, techniques, styles and motifs that allowed them to express themselves with levels of truth that could not be found in within the general population or with artists who produced within party dictates.

Audience Roles and Responses

Introduced within chapter one and discussed throughout the case study chapters the dissident artists in this thesis strived to engage their audiences with the ‘truths’ of their environments as they, (the artists) perceived them. The artists understood that a continuous negotiation with the audience during the performance was necessary in order to challenge their community identity (one built from nationalist ideals and propaganda) and communicate the meanings and purposes of the work.¹⁰ They therefore strived, using the styles and techniques most available to them, to confront the audience with their perspectives in an attempt to get them to question their own complicity.

With Havel's strengths and focus primarily in language, he attempted to engage his audiences through carefully crafted dialogue that, while clever and humorous, expressed his criticism of the mechanisms of the communist government in Czechoslovakia. In *The Garden Party*, for example, Havel establishes the language of discussion between characters as a repetitive cycle of parables, allegorical associations and illogical systems of logical reasoning; dialogue which uses an extensive number of words but ultimately expresses practically nothing. In *The Memorandum*, language also becomes the central force of confusion and conflict. In both plays Havel used complex linguistic situations to highlight the ways in which language,

¹⁰ This idea of negotiation with the audience and challenging their community identity draws its roots in Baz Kershaw's concept of ideological transaction.

even intricate, refined language, can lack definitive meaning. Each play displayed what Havel saw as the reality of the communist mechanism; a series of meaningless expressions that only served to perpetuate the functioning of the government. He utilised the absurd cyclicity and humour in these plays to encourage his audiences to recognise the ways that language was being used to confuse and obscure content in their daily lives, and understand that language was being used against them, “I simply wanted to write about people” commented Havel, “about the mechanism which crush people and how people let themselves be crushed.”¹¹ Many of his audience members understood Havel’s intent and responded with the 'laughter of shock and recognition', they saw themselves and their own experiences in his work.¹² In Havel's later works, - those he wrote after Normalisation policies removed his ability to produce work publically - his desire for his audiences to engage with the plays was even more pronounced.

Theatre of the Eighth Day similarly had a goal of challenging audiences to look beyond the propaganda and nationalism to the reality of the situation, and to take responsibility for their own role in creating the environment. In contrast to Havel's use of language and humour to highlight the problems with 'real socialism', however, the ensemble took a much more confrontational approach. The ensemble used intense movement, haunting and

¹¹ Popescu, *Political Action in Václav Havel's Thought*, 61.

¹² Rocamora, *Acts of Courage*, 46. Further discussion of audience and critic response can also be found in this volume on 46-48 and 65-66.

powerful music, portions of poetry, and unusual prop and costume elements to create performances that highlighted particular events, and behaviours that they saw as deeply disturbing and damaging to the way that Poles lived their lives. In *Oh! Have We Lived in Dignity*, the ensemble questioned the lack of empathy, the continued over-veneration of romantic heroes, and the intense push towards personal gain and possessions challenged their audience to acknowledge the reality of their situations, and the complacency that led to the current environment. In *More Than One Life*, the ensemble struck out against the notion of glorified histories, and the impact that has on the psyche of the people. Much in the style of Theatre of Cruelty they attempted to confront and engage several of their audience's senses at once, making it extremely difficult to disconnect from the experience. The staging style coupled with the stylised blatancy of the themes served to create invasive, confrontational pieces of work that allowed the ensemble to attack apathy and inspire a genuine emotional reaction in their audiences. Despite the significant differences in style both Havel and Theatre of the Eighth Day challenged their audiences to think about the 'truth' of their environments and the manipulated versions of history and current events that were being used to normalise the oppression and propaganda in their countries.

Autoperforationsartisten's approach to audiences differed from both Havel and Theatre of the Eighth Day. Their work rarely strove to engage their audiences through the use of any significant amount of dialogue, and the dialogue that was present did not make a critique of specific aspects of the environment. Their techniques also often pushed beyond the thematic

and stylistic confrontations in the work of Theatre of the Eighth Day, and attempted to force a reaction from their spectators through the use of disturbing sensory experiences. Despite this, however, the intention to create and engage with a community of spectators, - to get them to question the world that they lived in, and to recognise their own role in the creation of such a world - was central to the artists' work. Through the use of staged, but very real looking, violent actions, the use of blood, animal organs and carcasses, the presence of insects and the deeply unpleasant smells of rotting meat, the artists worked to create an environment in their performances where shock, discomfort and disgust were common reactions. In *Spitze des Fleischbergs* for example, the artists confronted their audience, with a series of scenes which included the blow-drying of a dead chicken and the use of cow organs, the lungs and throat, as costume and amplifier respectively. In *Herz Horn Haut Schrein* the audience witnessed a ritualised flogging, a metaphoric insemination, rebirth and baptism, and the self-imposed, inverted incarceration of the artists on metal frames. Further performances saw the artists caged like animals, performing for their audience from behind bars, and one in which they lived in a studio at the art academy relying on their audience members to bring them the essentials of life. 'We wanted to show life,' commented Gabriel, 'but not the life they told us it was, the dark one, the bitter one...and we wanted them (the audience) to feel it.'¹³ Additionally, through the variances in the scope of the performances, which prevented the audiences from becoming desensitised or complacent in what they were seeing, and the

¹³ Gabriel, personal interview, September 2014.

reliance on elements which continuously unsettled their audiences, the artists attempted to elicit genuine rather than tailored reactions.

Despite significant differences in the specific writing and performance styles, all of the artists used their works to open a dialogue, raising questions not only of why certain events and suppressions were occurring or why policies that further limited the rights and freedoms of the people were consistently being put into place, but of what role each individual in the country played in the institution and maintenance of restrictive ideologies. The works undermined the status quo in society through drawing attention to unsanctioned perspectives and critiques of the ways that the government operated, what it expected, and how it dealt with those who refused to obey the tenants and dictates of the state. They challenged their audiences to critically view their community (national) identity and attempt to see through the propaganda. They limited or entirely eliminated the metaphorical distance between actor and audience, such that the spectators were forced to directly engage with the ideas being placed before them. Audiences could no longer deny that, while the policies were made and enforced by the government and police forces, their compliance played a significant role in the continued subjugation and further removals of freedoms.¹⁴ In creating work of this kind all of the artists discussed here were refusing the 'ritualistic ideological automatism of the

¹⁴ For specific discussion of audience and critics' responses to the work of Havel, Theatre of the Eighth Day, and Autoperforationsartisten see; Rocamora, *Acts of Courage*, 46-47, 66, 77-78; Marc Robinson, 'We Won, Therefore We Exist' 76-78. ; Mesch, *Modern Art at the Berlin Wall*, 203-204. ; Howard, 'A Piece of Our Life' 293, 299-300. ; Badovinac, *Body and the East*, 121-124.

system'¹⁵ and expressing, as Havel believed any act of dissidence should, 'an existential attitude of people who act as they believe they must.'¹⁶

The comparative analysis of these intersecting points demonstrates that it is possible to draw and discuss similarities between dissident artists in separate countries. While it is necessary to first consider these artists and their works from the perspective of their own histories, cultures, experiences and influences, and to understand that within societies that experience control like those in the Eastern Bloc, assumption of knowledge of techniques, theories, or the work of others cannot be made, intersections in theme, intent and impact can be identified. Setting the case studies within the established framework, and viewing them as distinctly different, yet intersecting interpretations and reactions to societies that had similar systems of control, allows for comparisons to be made between theatre and performance in the Eastern Bloc. Through the analysis of the commonalities that have been identified in the works of the artists in this study, a set of overarching themes, perspectives, and desires regarding the intent for their performances has emerged. These speak to elements of dissident theatre in restrictive societies, in contrast to political theatre in comparatively free societies, and argue for the development of and altered narrative, which requires further research.

¹⁵ Tucker, *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence*, 116.

¹⁶ Ibid.

The process of conducting this study and reaching the conclusions discussed above were not without their limitations. The most significant limitation to this study was the necessity to narrow the study such that it only included three intensive case studies. Due to the fact that in order to conduct this study it was essential to create the framework for comparison, and owing to the limited amount of information that addressed any type of cross-comparison between dissident artists in separate countries, it was necessary to choose three specific artists/performing groups on whom to base this study. Though taking a more expansive view of the various artists that produced throughout the latter half of the Cold War may have led to a broader understanding of the variance in experiences of Soviet-style communist systems, in order to establish the framework for the comparison of dissidence it was necessary to conduct a comprehensive study that explored the development and evolution of a small number of select artists.

A secondary limitation to the study was the need to set boundaries to the framework that defined dissidence, and by extension, dissident theatre as anti-political, non-transformational, non-transcendent, and that which strived to create genuine expression and un-ignorable experiences for the audiences of these works. Though necessary to maintain the focus of discussion in this thesis the imposition of these boundaries likely limited the inclusion of works of theatre and performance that were more openly political in their commentary, more speculative in their imaging of a better worlds, or those works that were stylistically, though not thematically, dissident. This framework also excluded works by artists whose focus and

style shifted from accepted to dissident throughout the course of the Cold War era. While the inclusion of these artists and elements may have led to an altered definition of dissidence and could therefore be seen as a major limitation to the breadth of this study, it can be argued that, as a significantly under-researched area, the focus of this thesis needed to establish a framework, set some initial parameters, and instigate a discussion of dissident theatre. Considerations and analyses of the missing elements or limitations in this study will be addressed in future work.

Despite the limitations to the study, as the intersections between the larger theoretical and philosophical themes, and the critiques and deviations from the dominant ideologies can be identified and discussed, the future impact and implications of this research are significant. The ability to establish a framework for comparison, as well as further conclusions made while completing this thesis regarding the marginalisation of artists based on gender, ethnicity, political or social beliefs, and sexual orientation (amongst others) raises the possibility of examining the work of dissident and subversive artists in various countries and time periods. It allows for the broadening of theatrical and cultural histories of the former Eastern Bloc countries while also establishing the possibility of making comparisons between other authoritarian or communist structures. For example, using this structure it would be possible to conduct a study that compares the work of playwrights in post-Normalisation Czechoslovakia to those such as Griselda Gambaro and Susana Torres Molina who wrote under the authoritarian dictatorship in 1980s Argentina.

Additional impact from this study includes the furthering of the inclusion of theatre into cultural histories. Through the discussion of theatre and performance as acts of dissidence, and the analysis of it based on its reflection of and role in society, this thesis once more demonstrates that due to its unique blend of liveness, ephemerality, symbolism, and visual aspects, theatre has the ability to question and criticise its environment differently from film, television, or literature. A 'truth' can emerge from a performance in a manner that it cannot from other genres. Therefore, as dissident theatre and censorship have an arguably symbiotic relationship – speaking the truth is a most often a dissident act in heavily censored societies - studies such as this can contribute a great deal to understanding the cultural history of specific environments, especially those where the arts were heavily regulated.

Future possible studies can include the broadening of the scope of the established project to discuss other subcultural dissident artists in East Central Europe during the Cold War. For example, comparing the differences between the experiences and responses of artists in a country like Hungary, unique for its comparatively liberal government following the 1956 rebellion, or Yugoslavia, which differed due to its separation from the Stalinist control in 1948. Further exploration could examine the theatre and performance in other Soviet satellite states such as Romania and Bulgaria or make comparisons in the dissident theatre and performance in the former Soviet Union and satellite states in the post-socialist era, for example an analysis of the current works of Theatre of the Eighth Day with the work of Belarus Free Theatre.

Other projects that could develop from this thesis use the frameworks and discussions of dissidence and ‘alternative’ or ‘second’ societies to draw parallels between the artists’ critiques and dissident responses in the former Eastern Bloc countries and other countries through the world. This can include comparisons with other countries with authoritarian governments and countries where the control was more economic than political. Such a project could examine subcultural, subversive works by theatre and performance artists during the late 20th century in Poland, East Germany, Hungary, Yugoslavia, The United States, and Britain. Using the theories and practices surrounding dissidence, the comparative framework for dissident theatre and performance established in this thesis, and the discussion of the development of parallel societies, work of this sort could examine both chosen and necessary dissidence and identify other sources of marginalisation such as gendered roles and behaviours, socio-economic class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity addressed by artists. It could interrogate and analyse the potency of economics and consumerism in the United States in contrast with policies set by Cultural Ministries in the Eastern Bloc countries, as a means of social and artistic control. It could focus on theatre and performance artists responding to gender inequality and dissenting against the expectations of beauty, female social and sexual behaviours and womanhood, addressing issues in using terms such as ‘feminism’ in the Eastern Bloc as this was seen as unnecessary due to the (falsely held) belief that gender equality had already been achieved. The work could also examine the concept of repression or erasure due to sexual orientation, nationality or ethnicity, interrogating artists’ responses to the idea that the lives of minorities were worth significantly less. This study could make a significant contribution towards cultural historical representations of the

Cold War and post-Cold War era, as it would highlight the similarities of the systems of repression towards artists in both communist and capitalist states, and the comparisons that can be drawn in their responses to it.

Through the construction of a new framework that identified and discussed the differences between Anglo-American political theatre and dissident theatre in East-Central Europe, and through the intensive study of Vacláv Havel, *Theatre of the Eighth Day* and *Autoperforationsartisten* this thesis broadened the existing discourses on Eastern Bloc dissident artists. It considered the individual cultural and historical environments, the effects this had on the development of theatre practices in the Eastern Bloc, as well as the effects the experience of these environments had on the artists who worked within them. It demonstrated the role that this type of theatre and performance can play in the reflection of and commentary on restrictive regimes, and works towards filling a gap in the theatrical and cultural histories of Poland, Czechoslovakia and the GDR. Furthermore, this thesis successfully compared artists from different countries, analysed the similarities in the philosophical, theoretical, and thematic elements of their work while maintaining the individuality of their experiences and works.

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