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# LETTERS

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## Letter from England: Pol/perf/agit notes

Tangles and conflicts over which audience to aim at, among the underground amateur groups anyway. A number of the lively provincial reps are doing shows meant to attract a working-class audience, but these are mainly nostalgic, based on old music hall songs and old strikes. They don't aim to create militants and apparently don't succeed in getting the audience they want. Radical plays are presented in the West End, especially at Aldwych and Royal Court, but audience is respectable.

*Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre* started by making a play as a protest against the Vietnam war, *John D. Muggins is Dead*, which showed the way American capitalism destroys its children and turns them into killers to go and die in Vietnam without knowing why—also showing how commercialism alienates, provides ideal models through advertising and mass media that can't be lived up to. This was followed by *Mr. Oligarchy's Circus*, which took the British situation—with Mr. Oligarchy (capitalism) as a showman controlling everything (consumers, voters, politicians), packaging everything, using everything (holidays, disasters like Aberfan, television, food)—and showed the Labour Government's sell-out. It communicated well but they've dropped it as the material became dated. They started performing at folkclubs and flat-floor places, and soon they were being invited to perform on a developing college and university circuit and at "trendy-lefty" political meetings. Perhaps in reaction to this, the next play, *The Trials of Horatio Muggins*, was an attack on the Left and its leaders for their failure to make any sort of contact with the worker

so central to their dogmas. Performing to a Young Communist conference, CAST found the young rank-and-file workers understanding and enjoying the play while their leaders apologized for them (not realizing that they—the leaders—were the target of the piece). Frustration at the failure of political action then produced *Muggins Awakening*, a frenetic La Mama-ish montage about the Third World, American commercialism and imperialism, and violence everywhere. Coming at the time of the Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King assassinations, violent demos and riots, this play did communicate a message of the need for violence against the violence of capitalism. But CAST is still invited to universities as "entertainment." They've seldom performed for workers. They humored the Ardens, with *Harold Muggins Is a Martyr* at Unity Theatre [see pp. 181-191], in their attempts to get local people to come see the play (quite the wrong play for this), but the audience was old Left and young Left. The play was a failure (right subjects, badly analyzed in the script, overwritten—unfortunately, CAST and Roland Muldoon were not strong enough to throw large parts of the script out and remake it their own way) but the discussions after each performance produced some valuable conflicts.

In the middle of last year, some of the CAST actors and hangers-on started to form a pop group. A play with their music is now going well. The aim is 90 minutes (previous plays had been 20-40 minutes) marketable for records or pop-type concert outlets to mass audiences of young teenagers. Under negotiation is a full scale commercial film with Muldoon directing, set up by Andrew Loog Oldham (ex-manager of the Rolling Stones, The Cream, etc.).

*AGITPROP* was a radical booking agency, information exchange, and publicity service for the Left (CAST was instrumental in its inception, but has dropped out, feeling it was becoming too bureaucratic). *AGITPROP* took on a big job before being properly organized—mounting an entertainment in Trafalgar Square on July 20, 1968, the day before a big anti-Vietnam War demo. Despite chaos, it worked—pop groups, poets, mime, improvisations, folksingers, free rice, inflatables, slide show, street theatre (in the Square and in the streets throughout the West End), street processions of giant hot-dog stuffed with dead bodies, Coca-Cola bottles with helmets


## LETTERS

on, leafletting. The whole thing free. Not much politicization but great enjoyment. Police looked stupid by being there in force with nothing to oppose. Art students used AGITPROP contacts for a similar event two months later. For this, some AGITPROP members developed a Storyboard Show: a narrator tells a simple story about a young artist who wants to be allowed to paint pretty pictures but is stopped by society dominated by the monster capitalism and sees that he must smash capitalism. Important stages in the story are illustrated by giant "cartoons" on large cards held by six people and flipped at cue points.

A small group of AGITPROP members have formed a street theatre group. Several were active in Poster Workshop, which had recently been set up to provide free posters for left-wing causes. They made a short rent play for GLC tenants in their fight against rent increases, in which audiences chant the campaign slogan "Not a Penny on the Rent." The piece has been much used at tenants' meetings. Another play is being developed, for street presentation, pointing out the connection between empty office blocks, rising land values, lack of housing in London, and rising rents. This fit into a campaign on the housing issue which AGITPROP was acting as catalyst for, providing publicity material to active groups.

*Billstickers Theatre Group* is a group of Americans with some connection to the San Francisco Mime Troupe, under the auspices of the Stop-It Committee. They (along with the visit of the Bread & Puppet Theatre) were primarily responsible for the development of street theatre interest here. They did short scenes on Vietnam and the Americanization of England on busy street corners and on the underground trains. I think they folded with the demise of the Stop-It Committee, and some of them have joined the AGITPROP group.

*Unity Theatre* has a problem: should it be a place workers can go just for entertainment with a light spice of politics or should it aim to activate the most vocal group (students and young Left) by doing more aggressive plays, or should it stick to the "protest" plays so salving to the liberal conscience? *Harold Muggins* tried to be aggressive and won audiences because of its publicity, but it was a struggle to persuade Unity to let it happen




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at all. The theatre seems to realize the dilemma but can't decide what to do. (When Unity started, the working class was militant and was the Left—political pantomime, living newspapers, revamped versions of the classics and premieres of plays by Brecht, Sartre, etc., all worked to encourage militancy and solidarity. There was a chain of Unity theatres throughout the country.)

Nearest to the Unity network is the Arts Lab movement which could at least provide meeting places. The Brighton Combination seems the most advanced and seems to be moving rapidly leftward. There is some talk of street theatre among the students but little action so far. Albert Hunt in Bradford used his students to restage the Russian Revolution in the streets, and more recently to invent a new religion to which they are trying to win converts. Hunt works with John Fox and art students in giant puppet tableaux at focal points of the city. Somewhat dilettante.

*Angry Arts Film Society* was another adjunct of the Stop-It Committee which AGITPROP has taken over. Founded as a way of getting and showing films for an Angry Arts Week (a seminal event for much Left activity), this survived to present monthly programs of information not normally available through mass media—e.g., news from the Third World, the Communist countries, what the Left is doing in the U.S., the Black Power Movement, revolutions everywhere. It is mainly documentaries plus maybe a political cartoon and a section of a Chinese feature film. AAFS acts as distributor for Newsreel in Europe and includes their films in programs. A moderate success at “filling the information gap.”

*Open Film Festival* was an attempt to provide free films for the workers with shows in the streets or in donated halls. Perhaps wrongly launched as a counterblast to the in-group London Film Festival, it functioned reasonably well but got audiences of working class youngsters rather than the workers it wanted. The desire to keep shows from being a “trendy-lefty” occasion made organizers restrict information about the shows, which reduced potential sympathy and assistance.

*Pop Groups:* Despite the Stones' “Street Fighting Man” and the Beatles' nanny-ish “Revolution,” the only consistently “political” group is The Who, whose stuff concentrates on hammering commercialism, advertising, mass-communication techniques. I



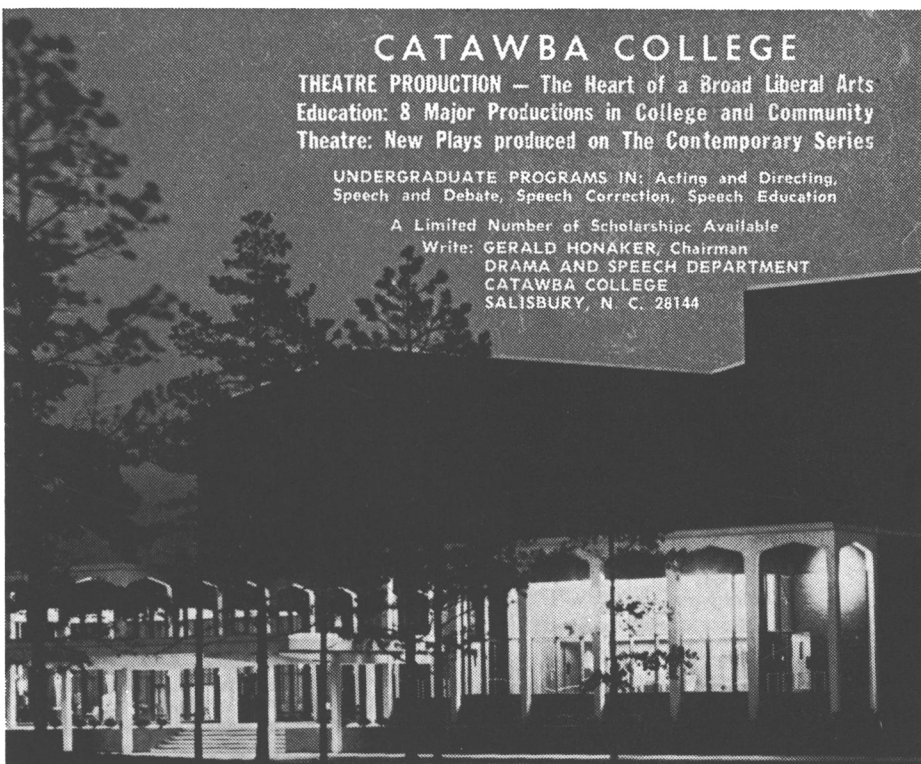
haven't met them personally, so I don't know if they're really "political." England has no Country Joe and the Fish. (The Nice were frightened by the attention to their version of "America" and dropped it.)

*The Critics Group* started as a group of folk-singers performing with Ewan McColl and Peggy Seeger in the Singers Club, which meets over a pub on Saturdays. McColl provided Joan Littlewood with several of her plays in the early touring days of Theatre Workshop. "Festivals of Fools" are revue-looks at the past year, month by month, with songs and sketches. The Critics Group has intense loyalty and discipline and has improved immensely. Their communication level is more direct than most of the other political theatre around—saying "this is how they make mugs of you, mate," very clearly—but they have no provision for taking their shows out to the workers.

*Guerrilla* is now a group of poets, performing in pub rooms and on the streets but also in the Arts Lab, etc. Not terribly political stuff, though, despite title. They seem to have narrowed to a group of poets eager to get an audience for their own poems.

*Poetry in Motion* is a booking agency for a selection of poets (young but known) of varying political emphases. This includes the most Left-wing, Adrian Mitchell, who really works on an audience when reading his poems.

*Television:* The Wednesday Play put out to a mass audience plays like *Cathy Come Home*, *Up the Junction*, *The Lump*, and *The Portsmouth Defence* (anti-legal profession). People like Tony Garnett, Ken Loach, Roger Smith. Television coverage of, say, Cuba and the African guerrilla movements is more sympathetic than it might be but never dares to point to the capitalist causes of oppressive situations. The size and violence of recent demos have increased the newsworthiness of the Left and so documentaries have at last shown viewers that there are more groups on the extreme Left than the CP. The BBC films of *Cathy Come Home* and *The War Game* have provided Left groups with useful tools for attracting the general public to meetings. *Cathy Come Home* aroused enough indignation to establish SHELTER, a charity for raising money to provide homes for the homeless. (Still, the number of home-



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less has increased enormously since the film was made, from 3,000 to 4,000.) It also perhaps sparked the Squatters movement, which is much more radical, drawing attention to the empty accommodations in London and trying to put families into them.

There's much more to be said, of course, but I hope this gives you some idea of what's going on.

Roger Hudson  
London  
January, 1969

## THE EDITORS:

May I take this opportunity to compliment you on Brooks McNamara's interesting article on scene design, 1875-1965 [pp. 77-91, T42]. It is fascinating to see how our concept of theatre design has evolved during the last 90 years.

I do, however, find it extremely odd that an article dealing specifically with the design of scenery can omit the names of the designers whose work is being presented.

I would consider it a professional courtesy if not requirement to include such a credit. As one of the designers presented, I deeply regret the omission. I can only presume that the other living, working designers included feel similarly.

John H. Döepp  
New York City

*I was unable to discover the name of the designer for several of the oldest sets. So, in the interest of consistency, I omitted all. Mr. Döepp's work is pictured on page 89 of T42. My apologies to other living, working designers.—Brooks McNamara*

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