

## Democracy and Theatre

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*Abstract: This essay argues that contemporary democracy could become more inclusive, vibrant and healthy through integrating two sets of insights from the style and techniques of theatre. The first section argues for the notion that democracy has in a sense learnt too much from bad theatre. The second section then uses John McGrath's exploration of Athenian theatre to develop some key concepts and recommendations for how the practice of theatre can inform and enrich our current democratic system from above. Finally, the essay uses Ranciere's theory of the emancipated spectator to firstly argue that theatre and democracy are mutually constitutive of a political aesthetic, and secondly to demonstrate how the aesthetic experiences of things like theatre can become a roadmap to greater democratic politics from below in and of themselves. Ultimately, this essay believes that democracy should start learning the right things from good theatre, rather than the reverse.*

*Keywords: Democracy, theatre, Ranciere's theory, political aesthetic, democratic politics.*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The first thing to note is that theatre's instrumentalism, its use as a means of guiding our actions and changing the world, does not work—never did, never will'.<sup>[1]</sup> This is not to say that theatre and democracy have nothing to teach each other. Rather, it is to claim that theatre, when it is construed as a didactic instrument or vehicle for a given ideology or political alignment, will be of little practical use to goals which aim to enrich or enliven democracy. A much more fruitful line of enquiry would ask how the techniques and relationships found in the practice of theatre can enrich and inform democracy (and vice versa).

John McGrath scathingly notes: 'Throughout the twentieth century, democracy has been the universally acceptable, authenticating concept in the pursuit of public relations, and the most abused system in reality.'<sup>[2]</sup> Not only is it a system which has suffered many abuses, democracy—specifically “Western” liberal and representative democracy—has, since the 1970s, suffered from increasing disengagement and disillusionment from the public. Holly Ryan & Matthew Flinders note that this is not a straightforward narrative of political decline: alongside decreasing voter turnout and political party engagement, there has been an upswing in new, less traditional forms of political engagement such as direct action, occupations and so

on.[3] Nonetheless, the increasing disengagement of citizens from politics “proper” is a significant problem for 21st century Western democracy. We live in a society where a majority of people feel dislocated or separated from the world and actions of politicians and where their information on politics is shaped and contoured by mass media mechanisms which provide biased and partial accounts of what is going on in the world under the guise of “objectivity”. [4] Here is found the first point about the relationship between theatre and democracy: it can be argued that contemporary democracy has learnt or borrowed too much, or at least too much of the wrong kinds of practices, from theatre. The first point in favour of this argument is the way that democratic politics today is conceived as a spectacle from which the majority of people are locked out. Following the retrenchment of social mobility after the social democratic gains of 1945-1973 were “rolled back” by Thatcherite neoliberalism,[5] the role of the politician is increasingly professionalised. This has resulted in the creation of an exclusionary set of boundaries and requirements for becoming a political representative, from (redbrick) university education to the required financial, cultural and social capitals[6] to get one's “foot in the door” for a political career. Increasingly, politicians come to look like actors on a stage whose lives are entirely dislocated, and whose worlds are impenetrable, to the mass of ordinary people who are affected by their actions.

Secondly, digital media and communicative online cultures have aided the dramatization of politics. Media have an overdetermining role in constructing and shaping the messages and meanings of political events. As shown by the recent furore over the role of Facebook in creating politically polarised 'echo chambers' around the UK general election,[7] digital media has not necessarily democratised the informational flows and meanings imparted to citizens: it has worsened a situation where political events, scandals and gaffes, follow an unwritten but restrictive formula in which something goes wrong, there is a suitable amount of outrage from citizens and relevant interest groups or charities, and within a week (usually) the whole thing is forgotten about. Democratic politics thus becomes a dramatized spectacle, written by and starring mass media and politicians, intended to be passively consumed by the general citizenry whose only input is to pile in on momentary points of mass outrage via social networking platforms like Twitter.

Some commentators view the same events in a more positive light. John Keane believes that growth in digitally mediatized forms of political communication is enriching politics, leading to a 'monitory democracy' producing new mechanisms for citizens to express their political voice and influence their representatives.[8] Keane's observations are partly correct: the technologies available to us as citizens now do provide new opportunities for expanding communicative democracy. However, the fact remains that this is not what is happening. These technologies, rather than fostering a pluralism of new forms of communication and ways of doing politics, too often merely re-embed existing modes of democratic engagement which centre on ephemerality, outrage, and a degradation of cultural or collective memory.[9] Digital media changes politics by adding to the deleterious ways in which democracy mirrors theatre: amplifying the dramatization of political events, turning them into easily digestible, short-lived

images or texts to be consumed and then forgotten about. Baudrillard claims that it is the very form of mass media (and digital media especially) which renders politics as a spectacle whose meaning is defined by a narrative structure and script that is no longer determined by the general citizenry. Rather, meaning is now defined by an abstract interplay of symbols which are circulated by technological systems over which we have no control.[10] This constructs the citizens and subjects of democracy as passive audience members.

Now that the problem has been staked out, it is worth interrogating the different ways in which our current democracy, having borrowed bad techniques from (arguably “bad”) theatre, could find theatrical techniques which will attend to its current malaise.

The first lessons from theatre that can be learned are found in the participatory and deliberative democracy embodied by Ancient Greek democracy and theatre. As Peter Burian notes, existing evidence suggests that Athenian democracy was born out of Greek theatre.[11] It was the coming together of people in a public space, where ideas of rights, honour, power and ownership were debated through art, that created a blueprint for the Athenian demos. John McGrath believes that Athenian theatre, and the theatricality of Athenian democracy, provides us with a set of concepts and principles that can enrich our current representative democratic systems. First is the deliberative principle that 'every citizen is part of the decision making process'.[12] This is not a recommendation that we do away with representatives altogether—rather, McGrath believes that this principle entails the 'dissemination of accurate, unbiased, and full information to all citizens'.[13] Secondly is the concept of isegoria, which McGrath identifies as having helped to form, through theatre, the structure of Athenian democracy. Isegoria is the principle of the equality of freedom of speech, meaning that any citizen who wished to could speak with equal time and on an equal platform to discuss the affairs of the city-state. Third is the concept of philotimia, which denotes a love of honour. However, rather than being conceived in terms of ego or pride, philotimia is conceived as the individual honour essential for the good of the community: the pride of athletes winning honours for their country, or the pride of international recognition for individual achievements of all kinds, be they scientific, literary, cinematic, academic, artistic.[14] Finally, there is the most theatrical of the concepts: hubris. It is through a recognition, critique and exploration of hubris, meaning 'the overbearing attitude of man both towards the gods and his fellow men'[15], which allows for greater political humility in democratic systems. These values are all arguably well suited to addressing contemporary democratic problems: if political systems were more concerned with involving everyone, or at least as many people as they could, in as many decisions as possible, then this would likely increase both political engagement and the vibrancy of democratic life for many. Moreover, if the speech of citizens were valued at a similar, if not equal, level to that of politicians through isegoria, this would create more robust debates and display a greater range of opinion, opening up new ideas to a greater number of people. Philotimia could arguably produce a greater sense of civic pride and community—something which is too often lost to crude jingoism and superficial patriotism.

Finally, a notion of hubris, and a public exploration of when it is enacted by ourselves and our rulers, will engender greater humility amongst the democratic community.

McGrath thus sketches out a set of concepts derived from the Greek polity and theatre which he believes are lost in our current system of representative democracy. Drawing from the ancient practices found in Athenian theatre, McGrath believes, will also help to contribute to the development of a more robust 'social imagination,' defined not as fiction, but in the creative generation of new social forms. It is this social imagination which is lost in modern representative democracy, which, as explored above, borrows too heavily from theatricality centred on the stale repetition of pre-given scripts into which citizens are unable to insert their own meaning. The participatory model advocated by McGrath is an antidote to this, as it repositions democracy not as what happens in the halls of power, but as a thing of dynamism to which all can contribute. In the words of Cornelius Castoriadis & David Ames Curtis:

'In its genuine signification, democracy consists in this... that society does not halt before a conception, given once and for all, of what is just, equal, or free, but rather institutes itself in such a way that the question of freedom, of justice, of equity, and of equality might always be posed anew within the framework of the 'normal' functioning of society'.[16]

McGrath's recommendations can be taken both as a set of policy prescriptions, in that he advocates increased deliberative and participatory democracy, but also, importantly, as a set of stylistic recommendations. That democracy can learn from the style or techniques of Athenian theatre is important, as while participatory and deliberative democracy is a laudable aim, it becomes considerably difficult to enact and institutionalise in societies and economies of scale such as our own. Indeed, as Russel Hardin notes, 'in increasing the scale from several thousand to several million or even several hundreds of million citizens, it is inconceivable that we can make the society work as though it were face-to-face'[17] It may be the case that our modern representative democracy should be taking measures to incorporate more deliberative and participatory aspects into its framework, but this then becomes an issue of technology and practicality. Robert Wolff notes that participatory democracy is not definitively impossible in societies of scale: rather, there have been few attempts or investments in technologies which would make it a possibility.[18] As there has been no such investment or research, the main ways in which modern democracy can be said to immediately learn from McGrath's prescriptions is to become more participatory and more deliberative rather than enact a complete shift away from representative democracy. This could be as simple as increased public forums, or as complex as creating platforms and means of mass dissemination of the opinions of ordinary citizens which are not carefully curated media spectacles, as in televised news media, or ephemeral deluges of information that move so fast as to be worthless, as with platforms such as Twitter.

These suggestions, ultimately, show the difficulty in exploring how democracy can learn from theatre as laid out by McGrath, as adopting an increased sensitivity to concepts like hubris and philotimia is arguably something that it is hard to lay out concrete prescriptions for. This is shown in the example of the work and practices of Augusto Boal, who was both a theatre

director and a representative for the Brazilian Worker's Party in Rio de Janeiro. Boal attempted to politicise his theatre by taking his theatre company to the streets and asking the public directly what they thought their representatives should do; likewise, he attempted to theatricalise parliament by promising mass resistance if the government did not bend to the people's will. Unfortunately, soon after making these announcements, Boal lost his seat in government—this again demonstrates the problem of scalability in practically getting democratic structures to learn from theatre.[19] Such structures, mired in tradition as they are, are inimical to such attempts at increased transparency and change. However, this does not mean that the point that democracy should borrow these radical participatory elements from theatre is any less forceful.

So far, the discussion has been primarily centred on how to use theatre for altering democratic structures from above. Democracy could benefit, becoming more pluralistic and transparent, through adopting the participatory and open style of Greek theatre. How can theatre enrich the democratic practices of the masses or alter democracy from below? The most pertinent theorist for exploring theatre in this way is Jacques Rancière, who believes that politics and democracy are a type of aesthetic activity.[20] As noted above, one of the key problems in democratic politics today is the way in which it can be said to borrow from bad theatre in reifying its audience or public, casting them as passive consumers of its messages. Good theatre (or rather, good theories of theatre), as noted by Rancière, troubles the distinction between audience and actor, or at the very least provides a space where the spectator can become an active participant. This activeness is achieved not through joining in but in the way their consumption of or engagement with the theatre medium allows them to reconstitute their own identity.[21] Under a Rancièrean model of theatre, there is no straightforward relationship between the meanings intended by the playwright or actors and the message which is received by the spectator, using their experience of watching to create new associations and disassociations without reference to predetermined scripts. This ultimately boils down to Rancière's notion that the aesthetic is political, as it allows those taking part in aesthetic performance—whether audience or actor—to 'dis-identify'[22] from their existing identities and sense of self. As Jeremy Spencer notes: the worker's seizure or appropriation of a uniquely aesthetic experience separate from her labour represents the non- or dis-identification with expected mode of being or condition. Thus Rancière recasts the critique of the passive and ignorant spectator: workers who become spectators disturb the given distribution of the sensible to which they are fitted.[23]

Here is found a more direct link between theatre and politics than in the recommendations of McGrath. For Rancière, it is not only that theatre should inform democracy, but rather that theatre (executed and spectated in a certain way) is a form of radical politics or democracy. Moreover, the dislocations engendered by Rancière's model of the emancipated spectator point to a way of doing politics from below which will reinvigorate democracy by producing politically disruptive subjects who refuse to passively accept the meanings of the messages conveyed by their rulers. Rather than, as is too often the case today, politics being a spectacle of pre-packaged, predetermined meanings relayed by mediated and digitized technologies, the

logic of emancipated spectatorship shows a way for the masses to reinvent both democracy and themselves by using aesthetics, and aesthetic experience, to overcome the limitations imposed on them by restrictive identity categories such as that of 'the worker'. Also, as has been noted above, if enacting more participatory or deliberative democracy will not be feasible when attempted from above, perhaps Ranciere's model of theatricalising politics to engender greater resistance from below is the best way in which to enact the attractive recommendations outlined by McGrath.

In conclusion, this essay has claimed that contemporary democracy has learnt too much from bad theatre, meaning that modern democratic forms are exclusionary and over-professionalised. Jacques Ranciere's theory of the emancipated spectator has been used to claim that democratic politics can borrow a call to arms for the audience and "spectators" of modern politics to use aesthetic expression and consumption to redefine themselves along the lines suggested by McGrath. Values like isegoria philotimia and hubris can aid democratic practice by recentering the public in democratic discourse, enshrining their right to be equally heard while at the same time promoting political humility amongst those with power. Furthermore, it has been argued that theatre can inform a concept of democracy which is dynamic, constantly interrogating itself and re-assessing old, worn concepts, opening up new paths of political resistance, and perhaps new democratic forms.

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