



The Cartoon Mode Provides a Stage: Understanding Comics through Performance

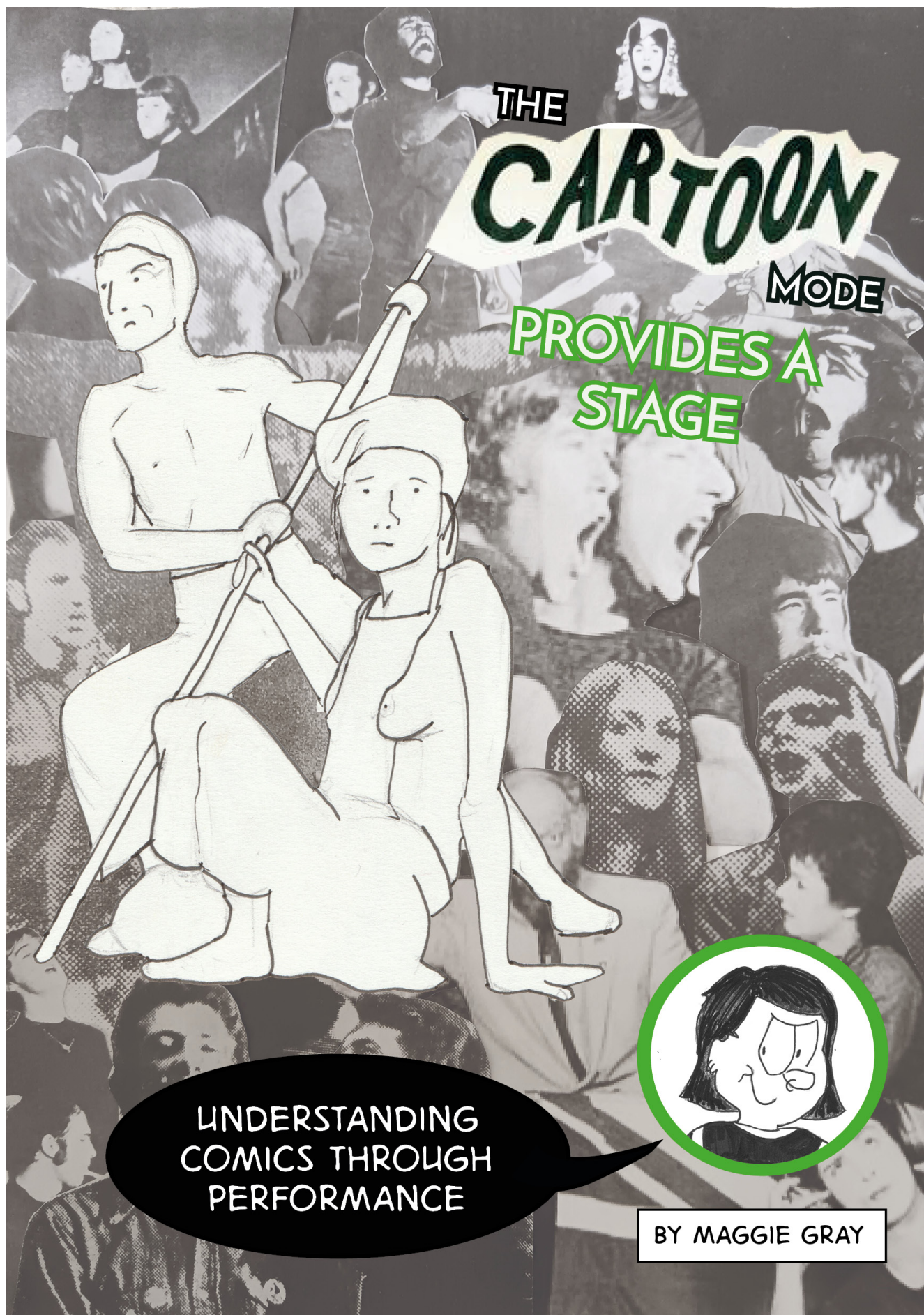
Maggie Gray, Kingston University, UK, dr.maggie.gray@gmail.com

This article examines the phenomenon of cartoon theatre, an approach to performance that emerged in the alternative theatre movement of the mid-1960s to early 1990s which drew on cartooning as a visual mode and the structure and iconography of comics, as part of a wider subversion of theatre practice. Analysing the case study of socialist theatre group CAST (Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre), it asks what looking at the adoption of cartooning by experimental theatre groups tells us about it as a mode, its aesthetics, and particularly its political affordances.

Grounded in archival research, I use the form of collage comics to visualise the process of engaging with and synthesising archival sources, the materiality of archival records, and the acts of imagining involved, particularly when trying to conjure theatrical performances from fragmented documentary traces. As illustrator Esther McManus attests, comics can foreground the complexity, multiplicity, and ellipses of archives, and animate them in a way that enables the past to reach into the future.

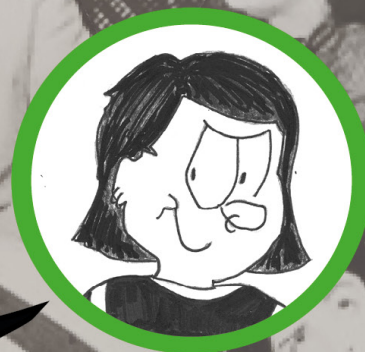
Reading CAST's work against Joseph Witek's breakdown of 'the cartoon mode' in comics, I argue that cartooning, in its carnivalesque anti-naturalism and with its roots in popular performance traditions, is inherently argumentative, lending itself to agonism.





THE
CARTOON
MODE
PROVIDES A
STAGE

UNDERSTANDING
COMICS THROUGH
PERFORMANCE



BY MAGGIE GRAY

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

STRONG THREADS LINK COMICS AND PERFORMANCE.

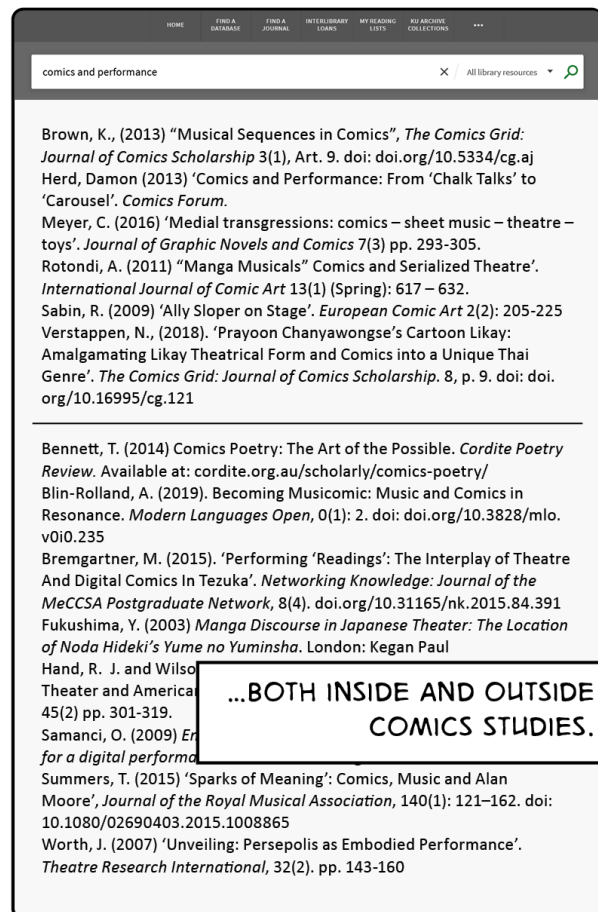
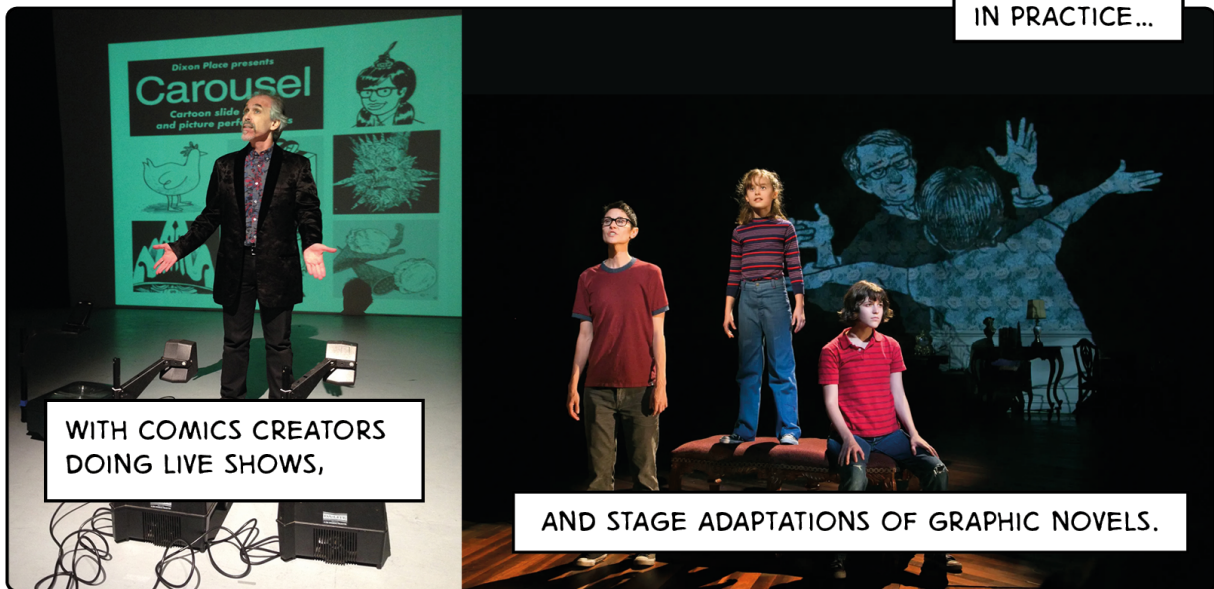
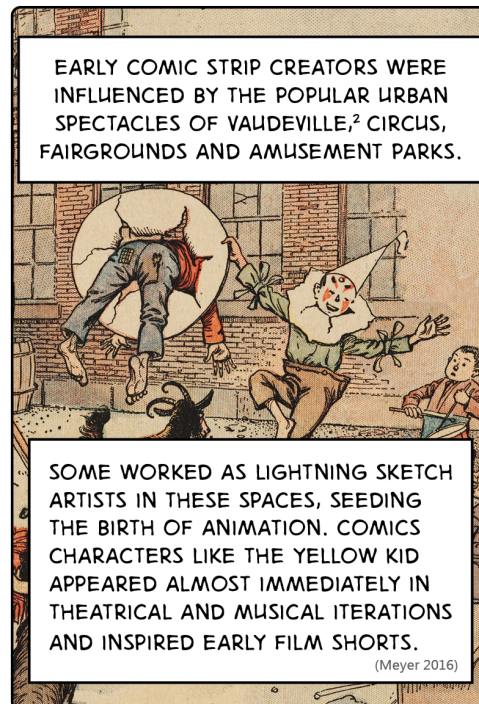
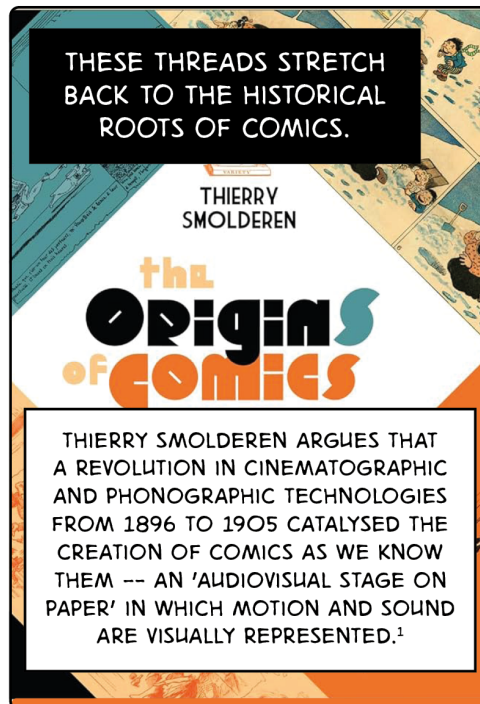


Image References:

panel 1: R. Sikoryak's *Carousel*. Available at: carouselsideshow.com/about/ Photos © Andrea Tsurumi and John Beaman / *A scene from Fun Home*. Available at: www.nytimes.com/2013/11/21/theater/bringing-fun-home-to-the-stage.html © Sara Krulwich / *The New York Times*.

panel 2: cover D'Arcy, G. 2020 *Mise en scène, Acting, and Space in Comics*. Cham: Palgrave. [image by Geraint D'Arcy].



Notes:

1. For Smolderen, comics have always developed in dialogue with other media - the influence of performance stretching back to William Hogarth's experience of fairground acts on which he based 'a new mode of reading', inviting 'a variable zigzagging circulation of the reader's gaze' (2014: 4-5). But it was c. 1900 that modern comics emerged, consumed through a more 'fluid, quasi-automatic reading' (2014: 158, 8). On the influence of audiovisual technologies and the new ways of seeing they invoked, see also Exner 2018, and Gardner 2012.
2. Vaudeville was a form of variety theatre first developed France that became popular in North America in the 1880s. Shows would feature a mix of acts by singers, dancers, comedians, acrobats, magicians, jugglers, trained animals and incorporated blackface minstrelsy.
3. Sloper was created by Charles Ross, a music hall critic and one-time manager who later performed in music hall acts as Sloper. Sloper also appeared in pantomimes, magic lantern shows, ventriloquist puppetry acts, early film shorts, lightning sketches, circus and amateur street theatre (Sabin 2009).

Image References:

panel 1: cover Smolderen, T. 2014 *The Origins of Comics: From William Hogarth to Winsor McCay*. Trans. B. Beaty and N. Nguyen. Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi.

panel 2: R.F. Outcault 1895 At the Circus in Hogan's Alley. *New York World*, 5 May. From M. Wood *The Yellow Kid on the Paper Stage*. Available at: roads.virginia.edu/~MA04/wood/ykid/origins_vaudeville.htm#_edn2

panel 3: Marie Duval 1874 Recent Theatrical Events. *Judy*, 12 August. Available at: www.fulltable.com/vts/aoi/d/duval/md.htm

panel 4: Chanyawongse, P. 1950. *Pim'Thai*. In: Verstappen, N. 2018. Prayoon Chanyawongse's Cartoon Likay: Amalgamating Likay Theatrical Form and Comics into a Unique Thai Genre. *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship*, 8(9). doi.org/10.16995/cg.121 © Prayoon Chanyawongse Foundation.

RESEARCH QUESTION



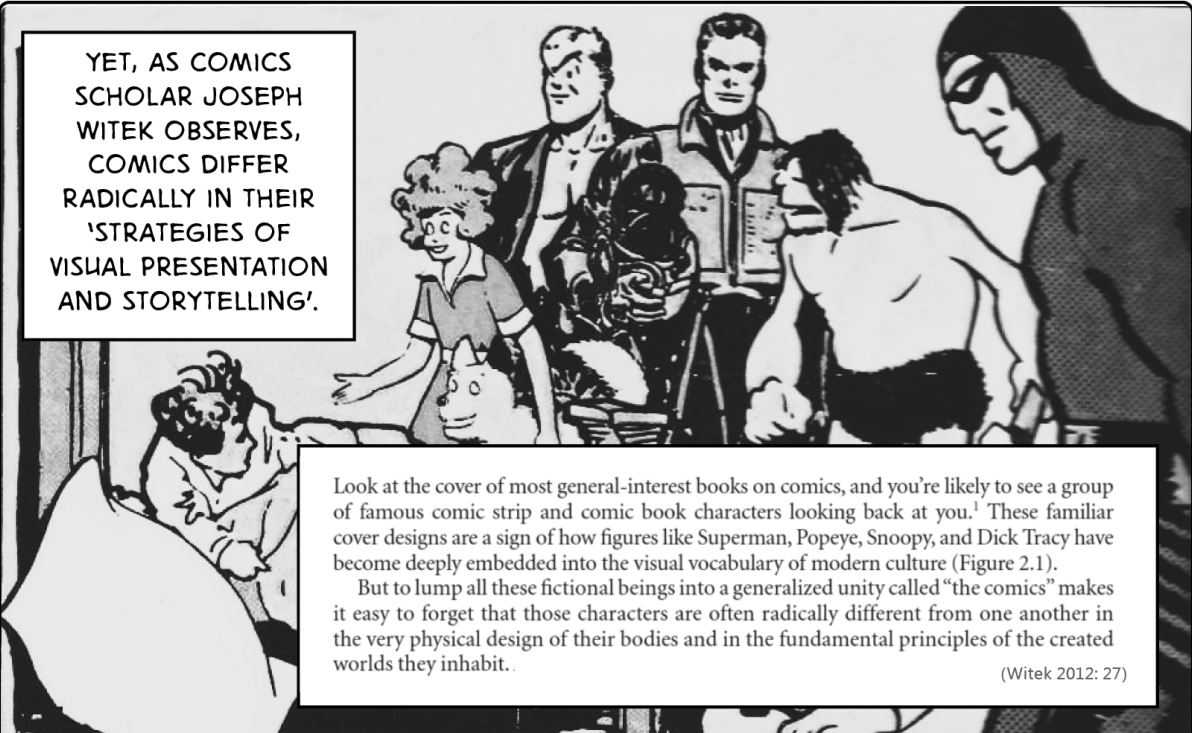
WHAT CAN THIS RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMICS AND PERFORMANCE TELL US ABOUT CARTOONING?

I'M INTERESTED IN CARTOONING IN PARTICULAR, AS A GRAPHIC MODE HABITUALLY USED IN COMICS, BUT WHICH TRAVERSES OTHER MEDIA INCLUDING ANIMATION AND GAMES.



CARTOONING IS USED SO OFTEN IN COMICS, THE TWO GET TREATED AS ALMOST SYNONYMOUS.

YET, AS COMICS SCHOLAR JOSEPH WITEK OBSERVES, COMICS DIFFER RADICALLY IN THEIR 'STRATEGIES OF VISUAL PRESENTATION AND STORYTELLING'.



Look at the cover of most general-interest books on comics, and you're likely to see a group of famous comic strip and comic book characters looking back at you.¹ These familiar cover designs are a sign of how figures like Superman, Popeye, Snoopy, and Dick Tracy have become deeply embedded into the visual vocabulary of modern culture (Figure 2.1).

But to lump all these fictional beings into a generalized unity called "the comics" makes it easy to forget that those characters are often radically different from one another in the very physical design of their bodies and in the fundamental principles of the created worlds they inhabit.

(Witek 2012: 27)

BOTH THE THORNY ISSUE OF VISUAL STYLE IN GENERAL, AND THE SPECIFIC MODALITY OF CARTOONING, REMAIN UNDER-EXAMINED IN COMICS STUDIES.

Image References:

panel 1: Winsor McCay 1905 *Little Nemo in Slumberland*. *New York Herald*, 15 October. Available at: www.welt.de/kultur/gallery109832667/Comicfigur-Little-Nemo-wird-107-Jahre-alt.html / Winsor McCay 1911 *Little Nemo* [film still]. Available at: drgrobsanimationreview.com/2010/06/19/little-nemo/little-nemo-winsor-mccay/

Pie for Breakfast Studios 2022 *Little Nemo and the Nightmare Fiends*. Available at: www.pfbstudios.com/games/little-nemo/

panel 2: cover Jerry Robinson (1974) *The Comics* © The Newspaper Council.

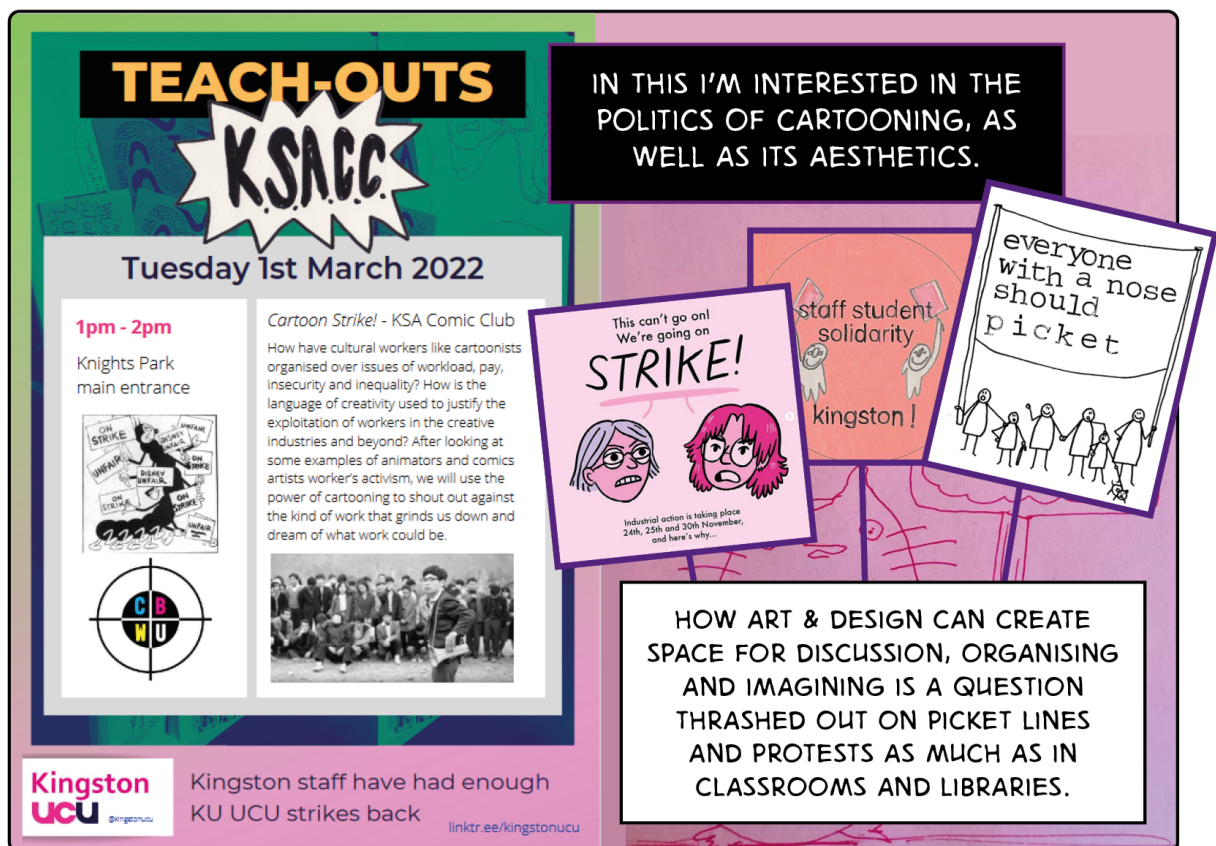
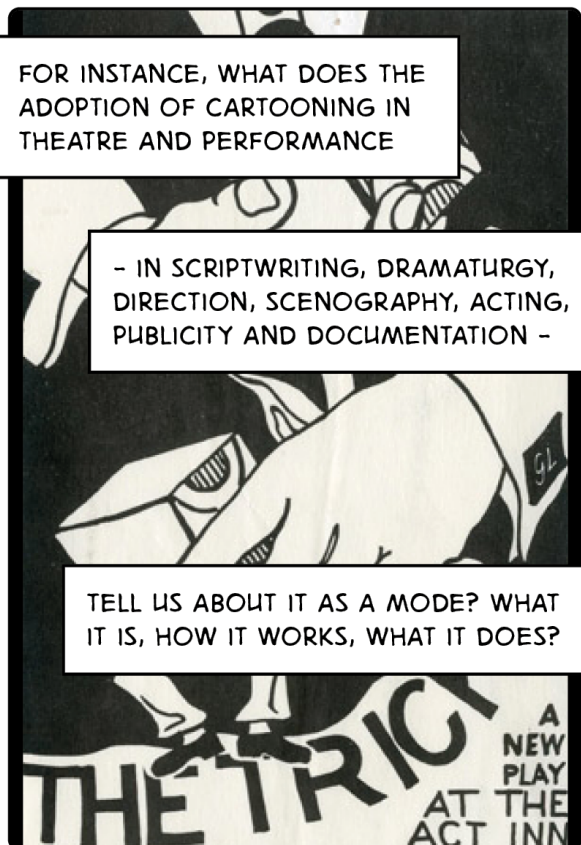


Image References:

panel 1: cover Horton, I. and Gray, M. 2022 *Art History for Comics: Past, Present and Potential Futures*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. [cover image © Bruce Mutard].

panel 2: Recreation Ground 1973 *The Trick* [poster]. Available at: unfinishedhistories.com/history/companies/recreation-ground/

panel 3: KSACC 2022 *Cartoon Strike* [teach-out poster] / Lippett, S. and Stoian, M. 2022 *Lippett and Stoian Strike comic*. Available at: www.ucu.org.uk/article/12620/Your-ucuRISING-resources/ / Student Staff Solidarity Network Kingston [logo] Available at: www.instagram.com/ssn_kingston/ / Wysocki, L. *Strike comics* 2019, 2020, 2022. Available at: appliedcomicsetc.com/portfolio/strikecomics/

METHODOLOGY

TO PURSUE THIS, I'M FOCUSING ON ONE HISTORICAL INSTANCE – THE APPROACH DUBBED **CARTOON THEATRE** OR **COMIC STRIP THEATRE** PRACTICED IN THE U.K. ALTERNATIVE THEATRE MOVEMENT OF THE LATE 1960S TO EARLY 1990S.

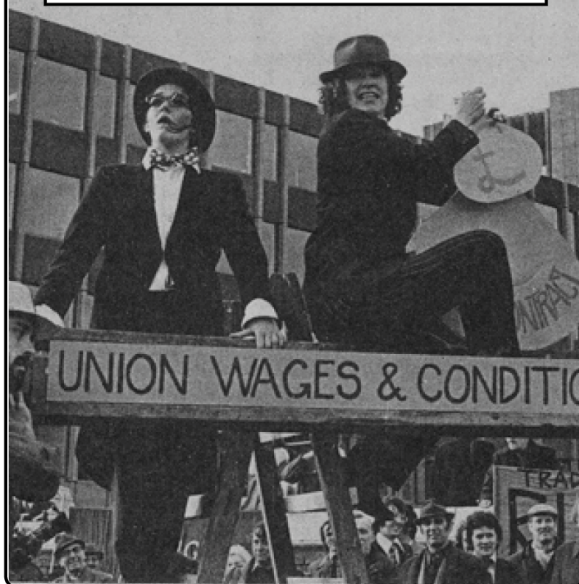


Image References:

Beryl and the Perils 1981 *Is Dennis the Real Menace?* [programme] © Nicola Lane / Red Ladder Theatre Co. In: *Socialist Worker* 1977 Playing in the streets 2 [Press cutting]. In: HE/CAST/SHO/1/7, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London / Broadside Mobile Workers' Theatre 1983 *Cinderella and the World of Work*. Available at: unfinishedhistories.com/history/companies/broadside-mobile-workers-theatre/

Forkbeard Fantasy, the Fairybreath Sisters. Available at: [www.forkbeardfantasy.co.uk/archive74-76\(01\).php/](http://www.forkbeardfantasy.co.uk/archive74-76(01).php/) Gay Sweatshop 1976 *Jingle Ball*. Available at: unfinishedhistories.com/history/companies/gay-sweatshop/jingleball/ / The Combination at The Albany 1977 *Heroes*. Available at: unfinishedhistories.com/interviews/interviewees-f-k/noel-greig/ / Pip Simmon's Theatre Group *Superman* from Come Together, Royal Court [programme]. In: HE/CAST/SHO/1/6. Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

THE ALTERNATIVE THEATRE MOVEMENT INCLUDED STRANDS OF SOCIALIST, GAY & LESBIAN, BLACK, FEMINIST, DISABILITY, COMMUNITY AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S THEATRE EMBEDDED IN POLITICAL ACTIVISM.



IT TOOK THEATRE TO SPACES LIKE PUBS, CLUBS, STUDENTS' UNIONS, COMMUNITY HALLS, TRADE UNION RALLIES AND PROTESTS TO CONNECT IT TO POLITICAL STRUGGLES AND EVERYDAY LIFE.

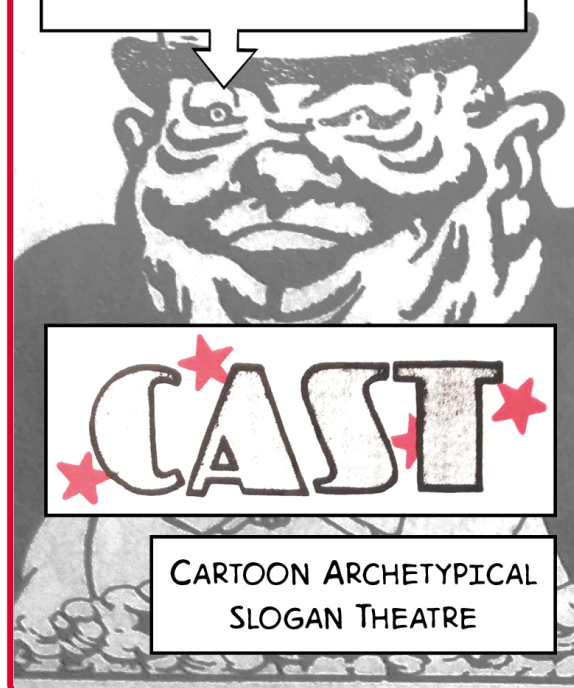
IN THIS, IT TURNED TO VARIOUS POPULAR FORMS, EXPERIMENTING WITH 'PHYSICAL AND VISUAL VOCABULARIES, CREATING HYBRIDS DRAWING ON CLOWNING, MIME, DANCE, OPERA, DRAG ACTS'...

(Croft 2013: 18)



...AND COMIC STRIPS AND CARTOONING.

HERE I LOOK AT ONE PARTICULAR COMPANY AS A CASE STUDY:



CAST

CARTOON ARCHETYPICAL SLOGAN THEATRE

Image References:

panel 1: Broadside Mobile Workers' Theatre 1975 *The Big Lump*. Available at: asai.co.za/artist/patricia-de-villiers

panel 2: Women's Street Theatre Group & London Women's Film Group 1974 *The Amazing Equal Pay Show*

panel 3: The Dogg's Troupe in Covent Garden. Photo by Peter Harrop. Available at: unfinishedhistories.com/interviews/interviewees-a-ed-berman

panel 4: CAST from Come Together, Royal Court [programme]. In: HE/CAST/SO. Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

UNFINISHED HISTORIES

Recording The History Of Alternative Theatre

RESEARCHING CAST MEANT DIVING INTO THEIR ARCHIVE – PART OF THE HACKNEY EMPIRE ARCHIVE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON, AS WELL AS THE ARTS COUNCIL ARCHIVE AT THE V&A, AND THE INTERVIEWS RECORDED AS PART OF THE INVALUABLE *UNFINISHED HISTORIES* PROJECT.

ARCHIVAL RESEARCH IS ALWAYS A PROCESS OF ANIMATING FRAGMENTS (LETTERS, MEMOS, SCRIPTS, SKETCHES, NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS, PHOTOS)...

...BUT CONJURING PERFORMANCES, TRANSITORY BY NATURE, FROM THESE TRACES IS PARTICULARLY CHALLENGING.⁴

ORAL HISTORY IS 'AN ESPECIALLY APT FORM FOR DOCUMENTING AND RESEARCHING THE PERFORMING ARTS', AND ONE WHICH ALLOWS US TO HEAR 'HIGHLY PARTICULAR AND HISTORICALLY LOCATED VOICES WHICH MAY OTHERWISE REMAIN MARGINALIZED'.

(Neilsen 2009: 164)



IN THIS CASE, AN INESCAPABLE VOICE IS THAT OF ROLAND MULDOON, CAST'S RINGMASTER, MOUTHPIECE AND CREATIVE LODESTONE – A SHARP, COMPELLING AND RIOTOUS NARRATOR OF THEIR STORY.⁵



Notes:

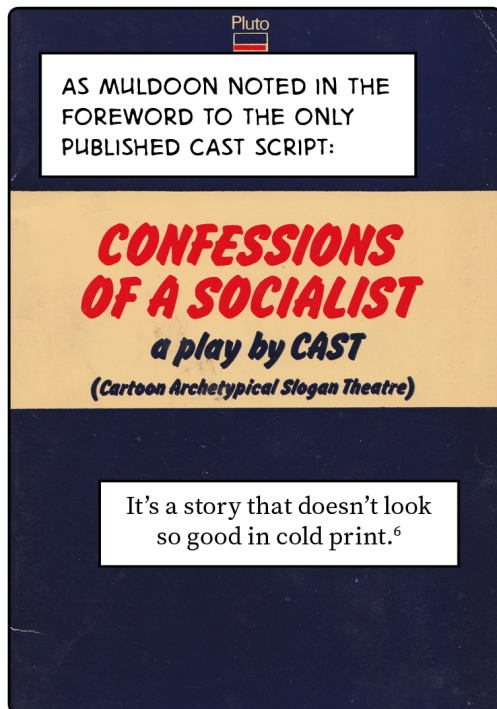
- The word 'conjure' comes from illustration researchers Stephanie Black and Louise Vormittag, who take it from historian Carolyn Steedman to describe the acts of imagination and storytelling involved in archival research. In the issue of their co-edited journal *Colouring In: The Past* (2022) they highlight what illustrators can bring to this process, particularly in terms of 'reconstructing forgotten or otherwise absent histories'.
- Working through the archival material, I increasingly felt like I was having a conversation with Muldoon (who persistently reminded me of a close friend's dad), and that he was narrating the story of CAST, verbally and visually, in a cartoon manner.

Image References:

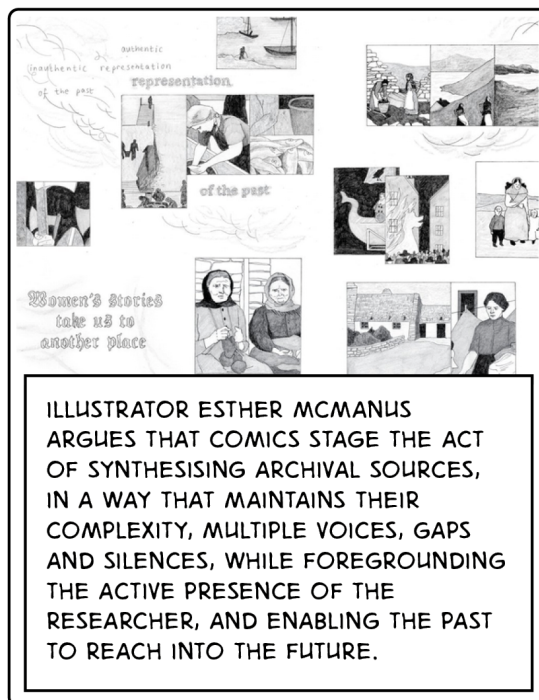
panel 1: Unfinished Histories [website banner]. Available at: unfinishedhistories.com/ Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London photograph by author / ACBG.1.3283 [selection of flyers for CAST plays] Arts Council of Great Britain Archive, V&A Theatre and Performance Archives. photograph by author.

panel 2: Roland Muldoon oral history interview screen grab from unfinishedhistories.com/interviews/interviewees-l-q/roland-muldoon

panel 3: images from CAST 1981 *Sedition '81* [flyer] Available at: unfinishedhistories.com/history/companies/cast



A GROWING BODY OF PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH CONSIDERS HOW ILLUSTRATION CAN ENGAGE WITH THE MATERIALITY OF ARCHIVAL RECORDS, UNCOVERING AND ANIMATING HIDDEN HISTORIES, AND ACTIVATING ARCHIVES FOR WIDER AUDIENCES.



Notes:

- In the foreword of *Confessions of a Socialist*, the only published CAST script, Muldoon noted it failed to capture the style of performance and how it changed depending on both performers and audience 'on the night' (in CAST 1979).
- This was also motivated by the growing number and prominence of research comics, and in particular Aaron Kashtan's *Materiality Comics* (2015). Other inspiration includes the use of collage in comics by Borin van Loon and Kate Charlesworth. The drawings included I made from photographs, brochures, newspaper reviews and press releases in the archives at UEL and the V&A.

Image References:

panel 1: cover CAST 1979 *Confessions of a Socialist*. London: Pluto Press.
panel 2: Folder of material from Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London photograph by author.

panel 3: Esther McManus 2021 *We Axe For What We Want*, Up Helly Aa For Aa archive, Gaada [exhibition]. Available at: www.gaada.org/news/esther-mcmanus-we-axe-for-what-we-want

panel 4: Sketchbook drawings from archival material at Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London by author.



Notes:

8. GLC stood for Greater London Council. In the early 1980s it was run by the Labour Party led by left-winger Ken Livingstone and was known for supporting grassroots cultural and community groups.
9. The Hackney Empire was built in 1901, designed by Frank Matcham as a music hall. In the early 1980s it was being run as a bingo hall but faced the threat of demolition before CAST acquired it on the basis of a return to its former use. See Muldoon's book *Taking on the Empire* (2013).

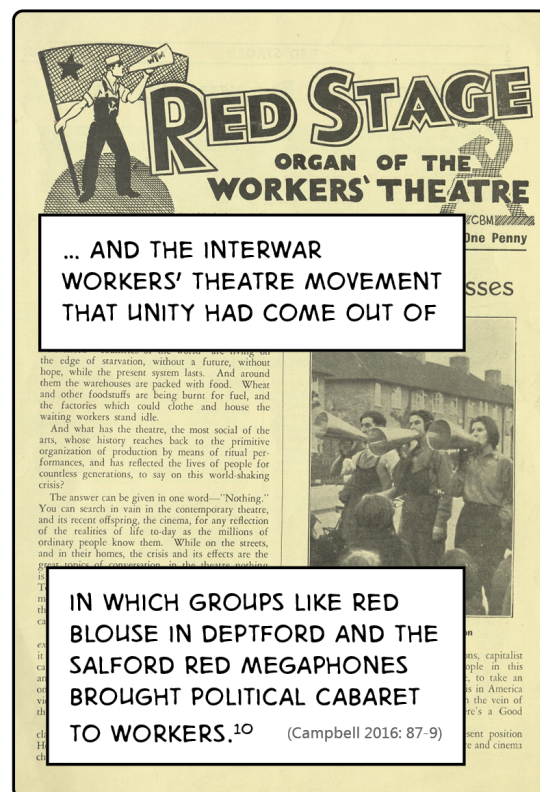
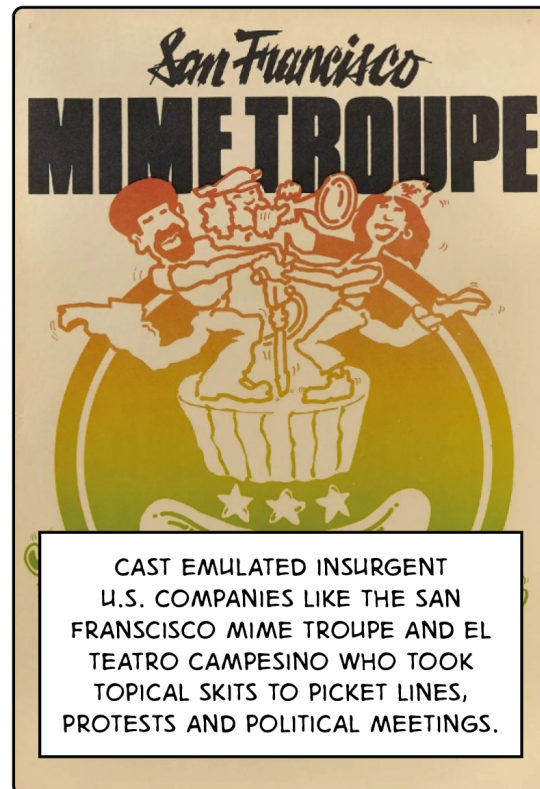
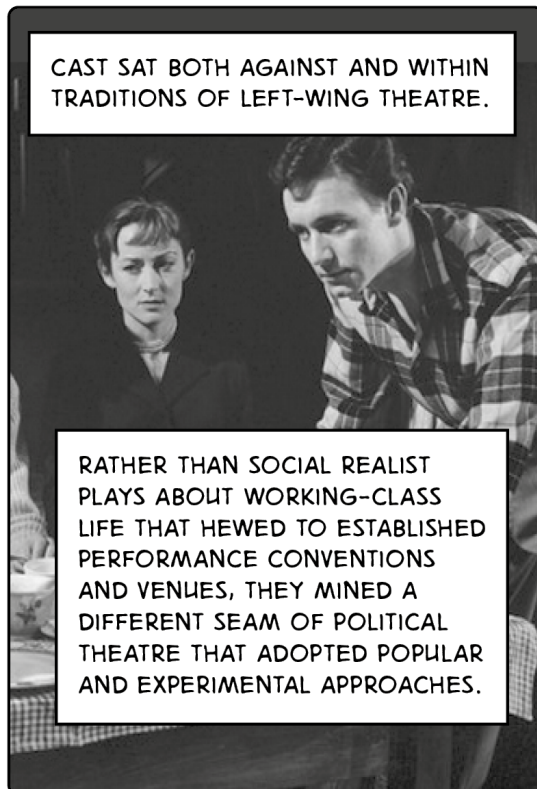
Image References:

panel 1: Unity Theatre 1938 [poster] Available at: www.peoplescollection.wales/items/24163.

panel 2: cover Camden Working Men's College 1965 *The Journal*, 502 October. In: HE/CAST/EY/3, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

panel 3: CAST *What Happens Next?* [tickets] HE/CAST/SHO/2/7 photograph by author.

panel 4: CAST 1982 *New Variety* in Wood Green at the Trade Union and Community Centre [poster] Available at: unfinishedhistories.com/history/companies/cast/ cover Roland Muldoon 2013 *Taking on the Empire*. Dorset: Just Press.



Notes:

10. Colin Chambers views CAST as 'the original New Wave political theatre group' who broke with Unity's old Left 'narrowness', but who, in consciously rejecting the Unity approach of the 1960s equally returned to the aesthetic of Unity plays of the 1930s (2011: 338).

Image References:

panel 1: Peter Osbourne 1956 *Look Back in Anger* at the Royal Court. Available at: screenplaystv.wordpress.com/2013/06/30/from-the-50s-look-back-in-anger-bbc-and-itv-1956

panel 2: San Francisco Mime Troupe poster 1970s. Available at: www.betweenthecovers.com/pages/books/397069/eight-san-francisco-mime-troupe-posters

panel 3: Theatre Workshop 1963 *Oh, What a Lovely War!* Available at: www.stratfordeast.com/about-us/history/1953-1979

panel 4: *Red Stage* 1932 issue 2. Available at: warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/studying/docs/theatre



in theory

AS WORKING-CLASS ARTISTS, CAST WANTED THEATRE TO SPEAK TO ORDINARY PEOPLE 'ABOUT THEMSELVES, THEIR WORLD, AND HOW THEY FIT IN IT'.

In the medium of theatre, we wish to create plays which ordinary people can watch and enjoy; plays which tell people about themselves, their world, and how they fit in it, tell them our point of view, and present it as comedy, as clowning, as music hall melodrama.

The group must entertain first and foremost, or ~~remain~~ become extinct. The people we play to don't go to the theatre, so our plays must be taken to them. We perform wherever

BUT WITH THEATRE BEING MADE BY THE MIDDLE CLASS FOR THE MIDDLE CLASS, THIS MEANT THEY WOULD HAVE TO TAKE THEIR PLAYS TO THEIR AUDIENCE RATHER THAN VICE-VERSA.

Commercial theatre is controlled by the the laws of supply and demand as much as anything else. Thus the cultural product it markets must be tailored to the consumer group it aims at; it must supply culture constructed on a middle-class basis, to the middle class type of audience.

sitting in a hired pub room in Camden Town, dreaming of changing the world and theatre along with it... It slowly dawned on us that the rooms in which we held our exploratory exercises were, on other nights, where our potential audiences sat.



(in Itzin 1980: 12)

Image References:

CAST 1967-8 [manifesto]. In: HE/CAST/MF/1, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London

CAST wants to work for you

We can enlighten, entertain, focus an issue. Relieve monotony, renew vigour. Illustrate an argument or money back guarantee.

(If claimed in person on Christmas day).

About CAST

CAST PERFORMED AT PUBS, FOLK CLUBS, WORKING MEN'S CLUBS, STUDENT UNIONS, POLITICAL MEETINGS, TRADE UNION RALLIES, HIPPIE FESTIVALS, CAMPAIGN EVENTS AND FUNDRAISERS.

should feel comfortable and able to watch in peace. They should be able to get their drinks in before we go in, then maybe the Bar can be closed, it's hard to work if they're too drunk. Our plays can work almost anywhere if you are prepared to work for them.

CAST performs best

in nice Pub rooms, comfortable canteens, audible meeting rooms, spacious lecture theatres.



TO DESIGN A NEW FORM OF POPULAR THEATRE, THEY LOOKED TO HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS LIKE MUSIC HALL, BURLESQUE, PANTOMIME AND PUNCH AND JUDY PUPPET SHOWS, AS BOTH 'REFLECTIVE AND RELEVANT' TO THEIR TIME AND 'INDISPUTABLY ENTERTAINING'.

SOCIALS

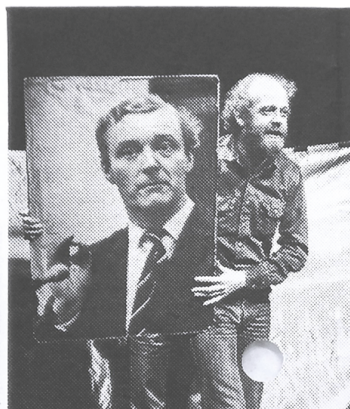
MEETINGS

RALLIES

HALLS

CONFERENCES

OCCUPATIONS



It would be reasonable to suppose that the greater majority of College members are not followers of theatre, because, in the past, it was not economically possible for them to be so. Why then should the world of theatre expect people, who have no tradition of this art, to suddenly acquire this tradition. What we are suggesting is that theatre should go towards people, and not people towards theatre.

There have been times in the past when a form of theatre — and usually a spontaneous form — has enjoyed a large support from the unsophisticated classes. However, social changes, commercialism, cinema and television, sophisticated and destroyed these movements, so much so that they are now just sentimental memories. We are talking, of course, of the Music Hall, Burlesque, Pantomime and farther back still, the Mediaeval Guild play. But analyse their success, study their techniques, consider their comment, and you will find pungent direct social commentary — plus artistry, so pure and honest, based on a good sense of the social archetype; thus giving a direct relationship and meaning to the audience. Therefore, it became reflective and relevant to its time and, at the same time, indisputably entertaining.

From these arguments we are bound — if we are to be in any way constructive — to attempt to formulate a type of theatre which is relevant to *our* Society. Therefore, We, the Drama Group, hope in the next year, to present in our work a series of presentations which will reflect the argument put forward in this article. We shall try to perform both traditional and spontaneous theatre in a style which is directed at the College. Your participation is both welcome and essential.

R. W. MULDOON

Image References:

Use CAST [promotional leaflet]. In: ACBG.1.3283, Arts Council of Great Britain Archive, V&A Theatre and Performance Archives.

Muldoon, R. 1965 New Drama Outlook at the College. Camden Working Men's College *The Journal*, 502 October. In: HE/CAST/EY/3, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

WHILE AIMING TO MAKE THEATRE FOR A WORKING-CLASS AUDIENCE, CAST REFUSED THE TAG 'COMMUNITY THEATRE'. THEY WANTED TO CREATE POPULAR **POLITICAL THEATRE** OF AND FOR THE LEFT.

CAST
Presentations Ltd
PO Box 294 London NW1 5BH
Tel. 01-250 1789 office

FROM ONE STRIKE TO ANOTHER

As the effects of the Employment Act are really seen to bite, CAST puts the spotlight on an industrial dispute where strikers are really against the Law.

THEIR PLAYS DEALT WITH ISSUES LIKE THE EROSION OF TRADE UNION RIGHTS, PUBLIC SPENDING CUTS, UNEMPLOYMENT...

to another. The telling of the Smellnice story can best be summed up in the words of one of the strikers who said recently: "I thought going on a strike was a bit of a joke but it soon became a full-scale bloody pantomime".

FROM ONE STRIKE TO ANOTHER is true to CAST's tradition of presenting politically contentious shows in a distinctive, eye-opening but humorous style. Once again, we invite you to share a CAST experience.

CHILE SOUTH AFRICA ARGENTINA
and now GREAT BRITAIN
CAST Presents

THE OTHER WAY ROUND

half-hour play on the implications of the

PREVENTION OF TERRORISM ACT

As militant members of the Irish working class in this country are held without trial or charge. The lesson for us all must be sounded out loud and clear; The Irish have become a 'natural' target, Des Warren was held in prison to the end. Police and troops have been used against strikers. Racial minorities daily experience the weight of the Law. It is time to ask WHO SHOULD WE REALLY FEAR??.

"The Other Way Round" moves fast, it's lesson is clear to all - Where can we afford to draw the line? A vital question for trade unionists.

The Play has received approval from the NCCL, T.O.M.TU Committee against the P.T.A.

...THE RISE OF THE FAR RIGHT, AND ANTI-TERRORIST LEGISLATION AND INTERNMENT IN NORTHERN IRELAND.

THEY SAW THEMSELVES AS 'GUERRILLA THEATRE' SUPPORTING THE STRUGGLE FOR SOCIALISM BY OFFERING A REVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVE.

The position of CAST is revolutionary in culture and communication. We are conducting guerilla warfare in the only way open to us, to make change possible in the future. We are



(in Craig 1977: 19)

The purpose of theatre is to raise the analysis.
To put meat on the bones of socialism.

[We're] not the vanguard... we have to alert people to the problems of our society and hint and suggest the socialist process.

Image References:

CAST 1980 *From One Strike to Another* [press release] In: ACBG.34.34, Arts Council of Great Britain Archive, V&A Theatre and Performance Archives

CAST 1976 *The Other Way Around* [press release] ACBG.1.3283, Arts Council of Great Britain Archive, V&A Theatre and Performance Archives.
CAST 1967-8 [manifesto]. In: HE/CAST/MF/1, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.



THIS MEANT BEING CRITICAL OF THE LEFT ITSELF, INTERROGATING ITS FLAWS, FAILURES AND OVERSIGHTS.

CAST TOOK THE PISS OUT OF EVERYONE - HIPPIES, MIDDLE CLASS FEMINISTS, TRADE UNION BUREAUCRATS, STUDENT RADICALS, THEMSELVES INCLUDED:

THE TRIALS OF HORATIO MUGGINS MOCKED SANCTIMONIOUS ACTIVISTS WHO BERATED ITS WORKING-CLASS PROTAGONIST FOR LIKING WASHING MACHINES AND COLOUR TELEVISION. IT OPENED WITH PERFORMERS ADVANCING DOWNSTAGE IN TIGHT UNISON, INTONING AS A ROBOTIC CHORUS:

WE / ARE / THE / CARTOON / ARCHETYPICAL / SLOGAN / THEATRE / AND / WE / DEMAND / REVOLUTION / NOW !

IT DIDN'T ALWAYS GO DOWN SO WELL...

We were told off by Ewan MacColl¹¹ for being too counter-culture... he said "You know you're great what you do, but it's terrible because you take the piss out of capitalism, and then in the same play you also take the piss out of Ho Chi Min, Fidel Castro, and Mao Zedong. And Karl Marx. In the same way you took the piss out of everyone else. There's no definition for the working class". ...we said "Yeah that's us".

(in McDonnell 2022: 21)



The great turn on to us was to make the audience laugh against themselves, laugh at their own restrictions and beliefs. (in Craig 1977: 19)

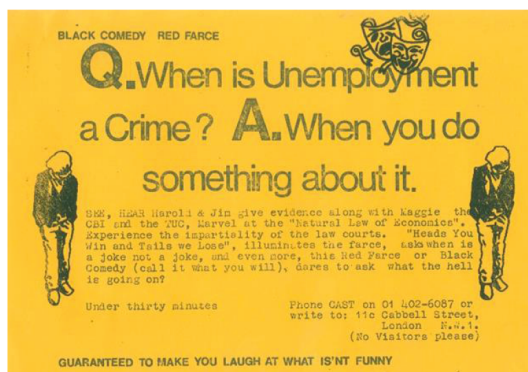
Notes:

11. Ewan MacColl was a well-known left-wing folk singer and activist. He was involved with socialist theatre groups the Clarion Players, the Red Megaphones and the Theatre of Action in the 1930s, and with his wife Joan Littlewood founded the Theatre Union in the 1940s, which became the Theatre Workshop. Littlewood went on to take charge of the Theatre Royal Stratford.

Image References:

CAST *The Trials of Horatio Muggins* [photograph] Available at: unfinishedhistories.com/history/companies/cast

CAST PLAYS POSED QUESTIONS TO THE LEFT...



C-A-S-T isn't the Answer
To Society
To the need for the workers' culture
To the need for the workers culture
C-A-S-T DOES NOT ANSWER
And to those who ask "Why not?"
C-A-S-T replies in its plays by "asking"
Why?

Why can't we all see?
Because.

Because of this, that, and everything.

C-A-S-T is a theatre.

C-A-S-T is political.

C-A-S-T attempts to serve the socialist revolution.

C-A-S-T is a failure.

C-A-S-T wants to succeed.

C-A-S-T is our expression.

AND IF WE REFLECT YOUR FRUSTRATION AND POINT
TO REASONS WHY
THEN WE HAVE STARTED

...WITHOUT OFFERING ANSWERS.



WHAT HAPPENS NEXT? DEALT WITH THE FAILINGS OF THE LABOUR MOVEMENT ON ANTI-RACISM AND STEMMING THE GROWTH OF THE NATIONAL FRONT.¹² IT ENDED WITH ITS SHOP-STEWARD PROTAGONIST RALPH MUGGINS' HOUSE BEING FIREBOMBED BY THE NEO-NAZIS.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT? is set in the darkest hours of 1976 and concerns the involvement of Ralph, a loner, in a fight against the rise of Nazism in his town. He comes unstuck and miscalculates his thankless task. At work, at home and in the pub the irony of his new found crusade becomes apparent to him, and yet, the seeds of resistance begin to show themselves in unexpected ways.... The play has a black, dry wit - if things weren't so awful we might even laugh (in spite of ourselves). In the conclusion the audience will be able to contrast Ralph's views of what's going to happen next to actually what is in fact happening - to date.

A BLACKOUT IS HELD. WHEN IT LIFTS THE PERFORMERS RECAP THE EVENTS OF THE PLAY AND ASK THE AUDIENCE: "WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?", HANDING IT OVER TO THEM TO CONSIDER THE INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND CLASS AND HOW TO CONFRONT CONTEMPORARY FASCISM.

the play of
Claire Muldoon

Notes:

12. The National Front were a fascist party associated with racist street violence who grew in popularity in the 1970s, gaining a significant vote share in local and national elections. Red Saunders and Pete Bruno, CAST members who left to form Cartoon Klowns, helped set up Rock Against Racism, a grass-roots anti-fascist movement organising gigs, marches and carnivals, initially in response to a racist outburst by Eric Clapton.

Image References:

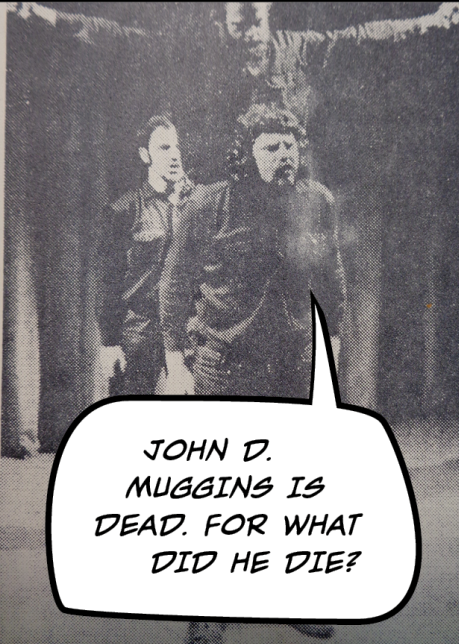
CAST 1976 *Heads You Win - Tails You Lose*. [flyer] ACBG.1.3283, Arts Council of Great Britain Archive, V&A Theatre and Performance Archives.

CAST 1969 [manifesto published] In: HE/CAST/MF/1, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

CAST 1978 *What Happens Next?* [poster]. In: ACBG.34.34, Arts Council of Great Britain Archive, V&A Theatre and Performance Archives.

CAST 1978 *What Happens Next?* [press release]. In: HE/CAST/SHO/2/7, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

CAST TARGETED THEIR QUESTIONS TO THEIR SPECIFIC AUDIENCES.



JOHN D. MUGGINS IS DEAD. FOR WHAT DID HE DIE?

IN THE CASE OF *JOHN D. MUGGINS IS DEAD*, THIS WAS HIPPIES, PEACE ACTIVISTS AND STUDENTS AT VIETNAM SOLIDARITY EVENTS.

John D. Muggins is an ^{all} American boy whose short life ends viciously in Vietnam. Around him are drawn all the influences which prepare him to enlist as a marine and die for his country. Babe in arms with advertising slogans ringing in his mother's ears, star pupil at school, religiously placing his faith and loyalty with his country, accepting burn jobs, failing in the common adolescent hopes of pop star, poet, folk singer, unable to take on the right symbols in the status race for girls, seeking manhood in comic strip dreams of square-jawed soldiery. He lived unknowingly and died ^{overly} for his myth. The audience is left with a question 'For what reason did he die?'

POSING IMPERIALISM AND CAPITALISM AS INDIVISIBLE, THEY CHALLENGED 'THE COMFORTABLE NOTION OF THE LIBERAL LEFT THAT THE WAR WAS AN ABERRATION'.

(McDonnell 2022: 16)

THIS PLACES CAST IN THE TRADITION OF AGIT-PROP THEATRE,

belt of the West End, Our plays are based loosely on the style of "Agit-prop" (or, as we term it, "Agit-pop") - agitational propaganda - which presents a situation as we see it & provokes the audience to sift the ideas and information we give and answer their own questions.

BUT THEY RESISTED THAT TERM.

AGIT-PROP COULD BE PATRONISING AND DIDACTIC, TALKING DOWN TO ITS AUDIENCE, GIVING GLIB ANSWERS INSTEAD OF OPENING COMPLEX SITUATIONS UP TO SCRUTINY.

it was very, very important that ... you aren't preachy

(in Breed 2017: 94)

The audience know better than us. They know the score. (in Socialist Worker 1977)



Image References:

CAST 1967 *John D. Muggins is Dead* [press cutting]. In: HE/CAST/SHO/1/2, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

CAST 1967-8 [manifesto]. In: HE/CAST/MF/1, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

CAST 1968 [manifesto]. In: HE/CAST/MF/1, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

CAST AIMED TO ENTERTAIN NOT EDUCATE...

...SO THEY CALLED THEIR APPROACH

**AGIT-
POP**

SEEING POP MUSIC AS SITE OF 'A GENERAL RENEWAL OF CULTURAL / POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS', THEY FOUND IN ROCK 'N' ROLL SOMETHING MORE COMPELLING, MORE IN TOUCH WITH EVERYDAY LIFE.

In England the socialist movement has successfully maintained an almost complete boycott on the culture of the people. When CAST started it hoped to provide a bridge over the gulf between politics and culture by treating political topics in the form of an entertainment which employed popular rather than bourgeois traditions. Slapstick, music-hall, Punch and Judy, rather than middle-class cults. It is difficult to estimate how far this aim has succeeded — in the last few years there has been a general renewal of cultural/political consciousness among the youth, and this has found expression in many ways which fall outside the rigid category of "political" activity, pop music being the most striking example. It might be simpler to see CAST as part of a movement rather than an originator of it, yet many observers would point to its stimulating function in the growth of a new social sub-culture in England, a culture which has summed up domestic and international capitalism and attacks it with wit, and humour, and contempt, and good information.

...the great problem theatre had. It would never reach my council estate in Weybridge because it was not dynamic. It could not walk up to someone on the estate and say: 'Bang! Wallop! Watch This! Don't watch telly'. Rock'n'roll can do that, telly can, cinema can,... theatre...must be popular culture and have the attraction of rock'n'roll.

(in Rees 1992: 70)

LESS STAIID AND SEDATE THAN THEATRE, IT WAS PIONEERED BY WORKING CLASS PERFORMERS.



our influences were working class entertainers... Chuck Berry and Little Richard... they were really present on stage and they influenced our acting style more than any avant-garde experiment. ...Theatre was all about sitting down and standing up and walking out the French windows. We were the first rock'n'roll theatre group.

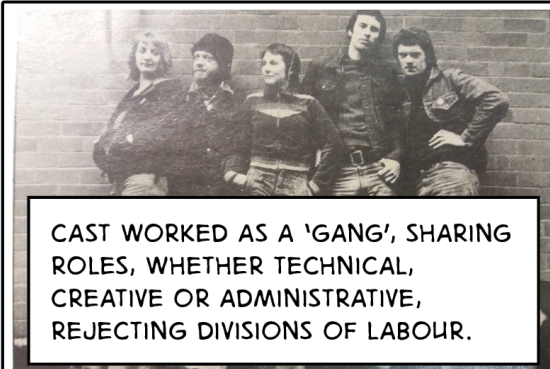
(in Itzin 1980: 14)

Image References:

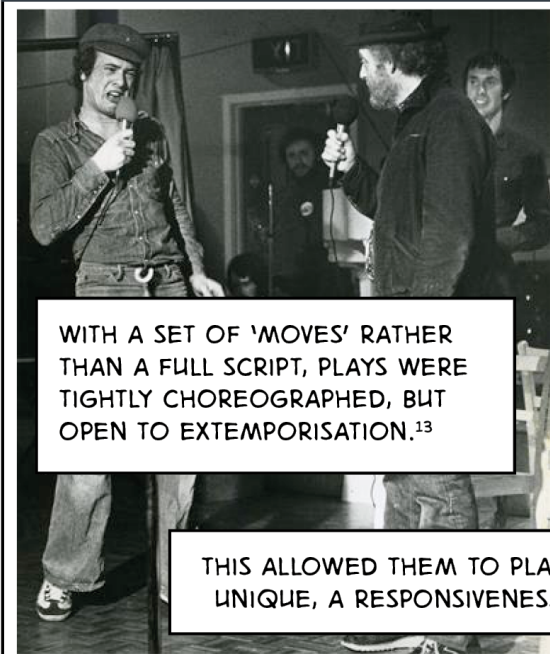
CAST 1969 [manifesto published] In: HE/CAST/MF/1, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.



in practice



CAST WORKED AS A 'GANG', SHARING ROLES, WHETHER TECHNICAL, CREATIVE OR ADMINISTRATIVE, REJECTING DIVISIONS OF LABOUR.



WITH A SET OF 'MOVES' RATHER THAN A FULL SCRIPT, PLAYS WERE TIGHTLY CHOREOGRAPHED, BUT OPEN TO EXTEMPORISATION.¹³

THIS ALLOWED THEM TO PLAY OFF THE AUDIENCE, EACH PERFORMANCE UNIQUE, A RESPONSIVENESS AND FLUIDITY THAT FELT MORE LIKE JAZZ.

CAST produces all its own material. The method which achieves this is the group approach. The most important factor about CAST is that it is a group. It is through the group that the plays are evolved, and by the group that they are presented. CAST has no equivalent of the writer-director-actor situation. There is never a prepared script to start from. Each play is an organic growth to which all participants contribute. Ideas are discussed in common; their presentation is worked out through experiment and experience by

THEIR PLAYS EVOLVED THROUGH WORKSHOPPING IN REHEARSALS, BUILT UP LIKE A PATCHWORK BY IMPROVISING ON ROUGHLY SKETCHED SCENARIOS.



THEIR STYLE WAS ALSO ATTUNED TO THE SPACES THEY PERFORMED IN...

What we learnt in pub rooms was... people would say: "Here comes the theatre group" and everyone would run to the bar. Nobody wanted to know. ...And we'd come on with a very fast, hard-hitting style which held them mid-track, mid-half pint of bitter, mid-empty glass. They'd stop and watch. (in Craig 1977: 18)



THEY NAMED THIS STYLE **CARTOON**.

Notes:

13. It's worth noting that until 1968 and the repeal of the 1843 Theatres Act, play scripts were supposed to be submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's Office for approval, making this improvisational approach legally dubious.

Image References:

panel 1: CAST 1979 [press cutting] In: HE/CAST/SO/2/8, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

panel 2: CAST 1969 [manifesto published] In: HE/CAST/MF/1, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

panel 3: CAST 1979 *Confessions of a Socialist* [photograph] Available at: unfinishedhistories.com/interviews/interviewees-l-q/roland-muldoon/

panel 4: CAST 1969 [manifesto published] In: HE/CAST/MF/1, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

FOR CAST, CARTOONING MEANT AN ACCELERATED FORM OF STORYTELLING.

Cartoon is our stream of short, self-explanatory, linked scenes and

THEIR PLAYS WERE SHORT,

- | | | |
|--------|---|--------------|
| 1975/6 | <u>THREE FOR THE ROAD</u>
1. CUTS (about Government cuts in public spending)
2. HEADS I WIN - TAILS YOU LOSE (farce about unemployment)
3. THE OTHER WAY ROUND (PTA.-Ireland) | each 30 mins |
| 1977 | <u>GOODBYE UNION JACK</u>
a pun on the retiring Union Leader Jack Jones, about the Social Contract | 45 mins |
| 1978 | <u>CONFESSIONS OF A SOCIALIST</u>
Black Comedy - day in the life. (published by Pluto Press, Cassette tapes available) | 35 mins |

AND THEY WERE FAST.

Roland Muldoon's legendary smash-and-grab theatre company, the Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre, or CAST, came on the scene in 1965, an offshoot of the communist Unity Theatre. The company's characteristic playing style, sometimes called "agitpop," employed devices common to many political companies—exaggerated characterizations, broad humor—but its chief hallmark was speed, the sheer velocity of its presentation. Initially, this was simply a practical measure, as the group was only allowed to perform during the interval break at workers' clubs.

(Anderson 1991: 44)

JUXTAPOSING SNAPSHOTS OF EPISODIC ACTION, INTERRUPTED VARIETY-STYLE BY SONGS OR AD-LIBBED GAGS, THEY WERE DELIVERED AT A MACHINE-GUN PACE LIKE AN ANIMATED FLIPBOOK:



(in Rees
1992: 70)

Twenty, twenty-five minutes long, totally compressed, totally dynamic, cut, cut, cut, speed. So much so that we would move faster than you could think, like flicking a page, we used to say - you flicked so fast, you told a story.

Image References:

CAST 1967-8 [manifesto]. In: HE/CAST/MF/1, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

CAST 1984 CAST's Work. In: HE/CAST/MF/1, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

THIS FRAGMENTED STRUCTURE ALLOWED FOR PLAYS THAT COMPRESSED TIME, DESCRIBED AS 'CARTOON' HISTORIES.

SAM THE MAN

Samuel Keir Hardie Muggins, Labour MP.

A Cartoon history of the Labour Party since 1945 to date

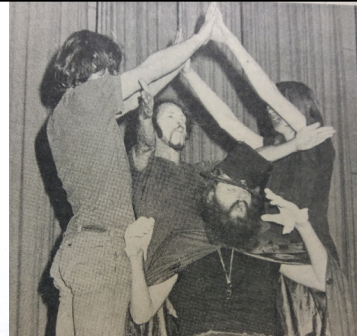
1 hr

QUICKFIRE CUTS MEANT SCENES HAD TO BE IMMEDIATELY GRASPABLE, OFTEN BY FARCICALLY EXAGGERATING FAMILIAR SITUATIONS AND COUNTERPOSING PANTOMIME ADVERSARIES.

II Mr. Oligarchy's Circus

Synopsis

1. Introduction - Mr. Oligarchy presents his clowns.
2. Television Show - "What Do You Want Most in Life ?"
3. Selection of Marriage partner.
4. An Old Memory (the accident in the coal-mining town of Aberfan in South Wales).
5. Work and the Relaxicator.
6. The Clowns escape - bingo, films, football, holidays.
7. Mr. Oligarchy regains control - patriotism.
8. Freedom of speech.
9. Final Act.



MR OLIGARCHY'S CIRCUS SAW THE WORKERS - THREE CLOWNS, HILDA, HUMPHREY AND HERBERT MUGGINS, CAJOLED AND COWED BY CAPITALISM - RINGMASTER MR. OLIGARCHY IN A SERIES OF GUISES: BIG BUSINESS, THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY, THE MEDIA, THE LABOUR PARTY.

BUT AS MUCH AS CAST DREW ON EXPECTATIONS ABOUT FAMILIAR TYPES AND PREDICTABLE SCENARIOS, THEY ALSO DISRUPTED THEM, OFTEN REVERSING THE SET UP.

IN THE TRIALS OF HORATIO MUGGINS HE FLIPS THE SCRIPT, REBUKING HIS ULTRA-LEFT STUDENT ACCUSERS FOR THEIR INANE SLOGANS AND ABSURD FACTIONALISM.



He turns it around...
"You must talk to me
in a language I can
understand"... He gave the
students a lecture about
their own political absurdity
in a comic way.



(in Itzin
1980: 15-16)

Image References:

CAST 1984 CAST's Work. In: HE/CAST/MF/1, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

CAST 1969 Mr Oligarchy's Circus Synopsis. In: HE/CAST/SHO/1/5, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

CAST Mr Oligarchy's Circus [press cutting] . In: HE/CAST/SHO/1/7, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

CAST The Trials of Horatio Muggins [photograph] Available at: unfinishedhistories.com/history/companies/cast

CAST'S 'ARCHETYPICAL' CHARACTER DESIGN WAS CLOSELY TIED TO THIS UNDERSTANDING OF CARTOONING AS CONDENSED STORYTELLING.

Archetypal is bound up with the ideology of the group; we deal with society not individuals. Our characterisation is ^{not} that of a recognizable individual, but all the characteristics of all the individuals that form a 'type'. If a king is portrayed he is the most typical, most obvious

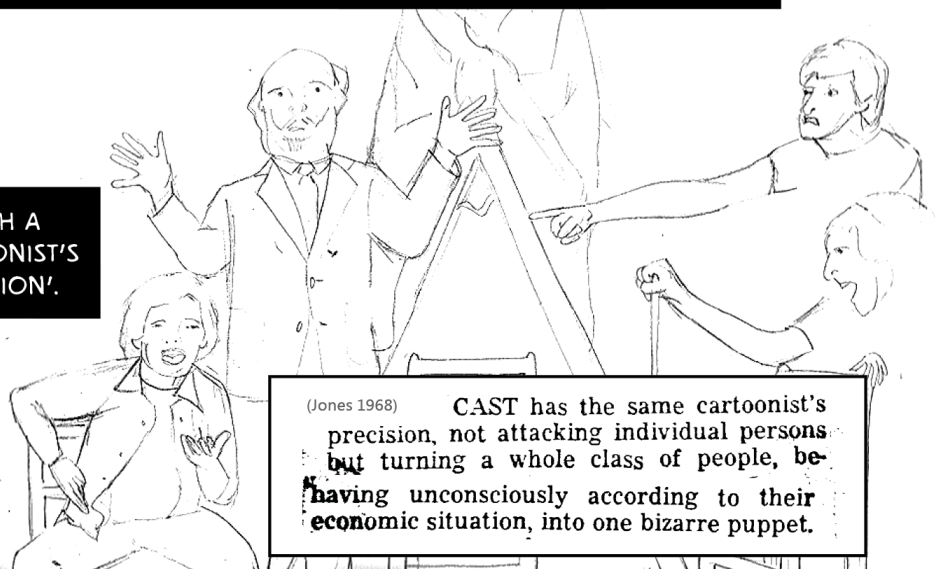
USING GENERALISED ARCHETYPES FELT MORE APPROPRIATE FOR PLAYS THAT ANALYSED SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND POLITICAL SITUATIONS, RATHER THAN PROBING INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGICAL DEPTH.

Characterization is fashioned only into archetypes; thus a fat man in our theatre is an impersonation and reflection of the superabundant essence of fatness, and the words and actions of such a "character" a simplified reduction



THESE ARCHETYPES WERE CONVEYED THROUGH SIMPLIFIED AND EXAGGERATED ACTIONS, LANGUAGE, EXPRESSION AND GESTURE...

...WITH A
'CARTOONIST'S
PRECISION'.



(Jones 1968)

CAST has the same cartoonist's precision, not attacking individual persons but turning a whole class of people, behaving unconsciously according to their economic situation, into one bizarre puppet.

Image References:

CAST 1967-8 [manifesto]. In: HE/CAST/MF/1, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

CAST 1968 [manifesto]. In: HE/CAST/MF/1, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

CAST 1977 *Goodbye Union Jack* drawing by author - from photograph in HE/CAST/SHO/1/2, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

CAST PRODUCTIONS FEATURED THEIR RECURRING ANTI-HERO PROTAGONIST, MUGGINS:¹⁴

Muggins is the English archetype of the bloke who does everything and gets no reward. Charlie Chaplin, if you like. An Everyman. Except in each show he or she has a different Christian name -- Harold Muggins, Hilda Muggins, Horatio Muggins, Maud Muggins. There's a part of everyone in Muggins, and a Muggins in part of everyone. Muggins represents the working class -- the people who are mugged!



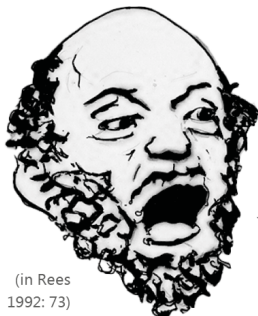
(in Itzin
1980: 14)

HAROLD
MUGGINS
IS A
MARTYR

MUGGINS

John D. Muggins is Dead.
Mr. Oligarchy's Circus.
The Trials of Horatio Muggins.
Muggins Awakening.

AS THE FULCRUM OF EACH PLAY,
THOUGH ARCHETYPICAL, MUGGINS
WAS NOT A STEREOTYPE:



(in Rees
1992: 73)

Our plays were not based on myth. Our heroes had long hair when it was fashionable, smoked dope, and still went down the mines... We did not have heroic workers in our shows.

Notes:

14. The name Muggins came from the music hall song 'Billy Muggins', as well as its use in common phrases like "what kind of muggins do you take me for?", meaning someone being treated like a fool (Unfinished Histories).

Image References:

Roland Muldoon 1980 *Full Confessions of a Socialist* drawing by author from photograph available at: unfinishedhistories.com/interviews/interviewees-l-q/roland-muldoon/

CAST 1968 *Harold Muggins is a Martyr* [poster] In: HE/CAST/SHO/1/4, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

CAST PERFORMANCES DEPLOYED A STRIPPED BACK, SIMPLE MISE-EN-SCENE AND OFTEN UNFOLDED THROUGH A PLAY OF VISUAL CONTRASTS.



IN SOME CASES, THIS INCLUDED THE ACTUAL PROJECTION OF IMAGES ON STAGE. MORE OFTEN, IT INVOLVED ACTORS FORMING A SUCCESSION OF BRIEFLY HELD AND QUICKLY DISSOLVED TABLEAUS.

SOMETIMES IT MEANT OPPOSING MUGGINS AND A CHORUS OF OTHER CHARACTERS. IN *THE TRIALS OF HORATIO MUGGINS*, THE STUDENTS IN CHALK-WHITE MAKE-UP AND DARK CLOTHING MOVE AS A RIGIDLY SYNCHRONISED UNIT, DELIVERING THEIR SLOGANS IN 'HARD, IMPERSONAL, AND METRONOMIC' VOICES.

(McDonnell 2022: 19)

BY CONTRAST, MUGGINS IS DRESSED IN ORDINARY CLOTHES WITH NO MAKE-UP. HE IGNORES THEM, TURNS TO THE AUDIENCE AND SAYS...



What the fuck
do you lot want,
eh, waking me up
like that!

CAST DESIGNED THEIR PLAYS TO BE ORIENTED TOWARDS THE AUDIENCE THIS WAY, PERFORMED FRONT-ON, WITH CHARACTERS DIRECTLY ADDRESSING THE AUDIENCE MORE OFTEN THAN EACH OTHER.

Image References:

The Trials of Horatio Muggins drawing by author from photograph in CAST 1969 [manifesto published] In: HE/CAST/MF/1, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

STAGING WAS NO-FRILLS,
WITH MINIMAL PROPS AND
COSTUMES, SIMPLE LIGHTING
AND A BASIC SOUND SYSTEM.

MR. OLIGARCHY'S CIRCUS

Red's TOP HAT
CLOAK
WHITE GLOVES
BLOWERS

Jane's TOP HAT
GOLD CAPE
GOLD SHOES
COSTUME
NET STOCKINGS

Small DRUM and stick

MAKE-UP- Red-White-Blue
4 chairs

TRIALS OF HORATIO MUGGINS

CIGARS (4 wooden)
CIGAR (real)
BOWLER HAT (bashed in)
RED FLAG
SINGING BOARD
WHITE MAKE-UP

5 chairs

MUGGINS AWAKENING

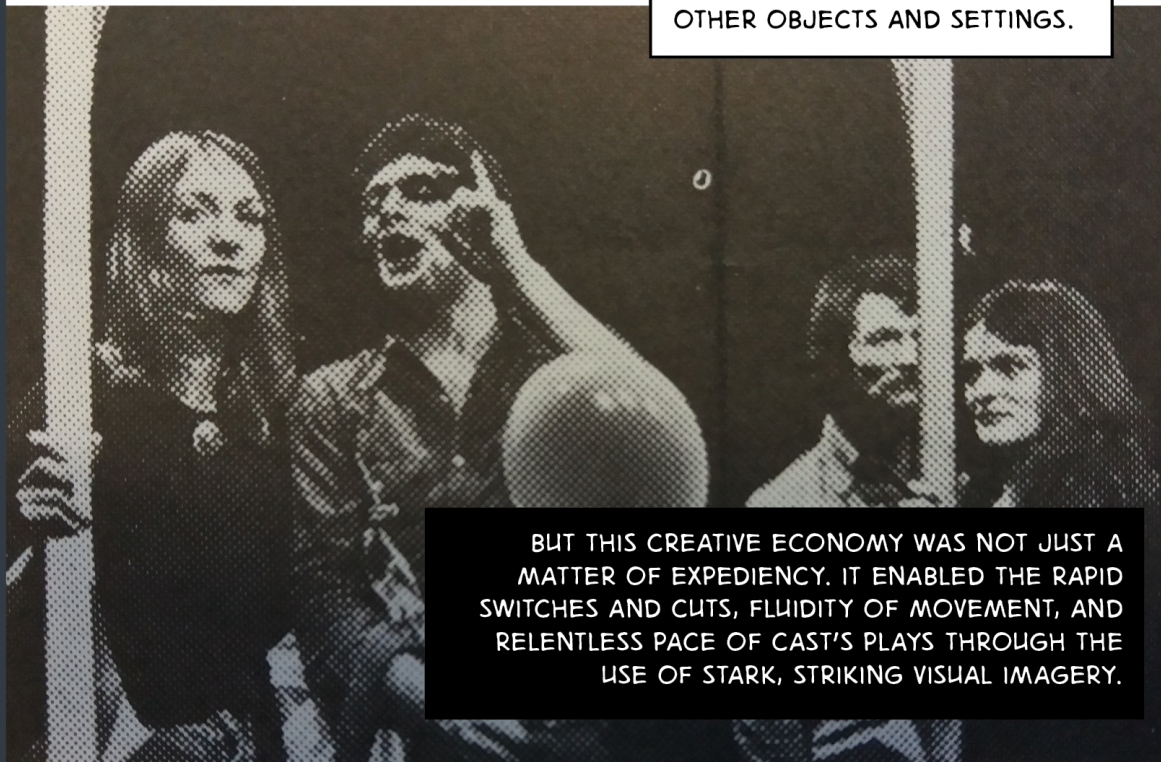
RADIO
GARLAND
WATER PISTOLS (at least 6)
BLOOD CAPSULES (Ray's respons-
CLAPPER BOARD ibility)
LADDER
TABLE
TRIANGLE
BONGO DRUMS
GUITAR & AMP.
KUSTOW HAT
CLOAK

and MATCHES for Red.

4 chairs

EQUIPMENT HAD TO BE
INEXPENSIVE, PORTABLE, EASY TO
SET UP AND TAKE DOWN, AND
ADAPTABLE TO DIFFERENT VENUES.

PROP LISTS OFTEN INCLUDED
LITTLE MORE THAN FOUR OR
FIVE CHAIRS, USED TO MIMIC
OTHER OBJECTS AND SETTINGS.



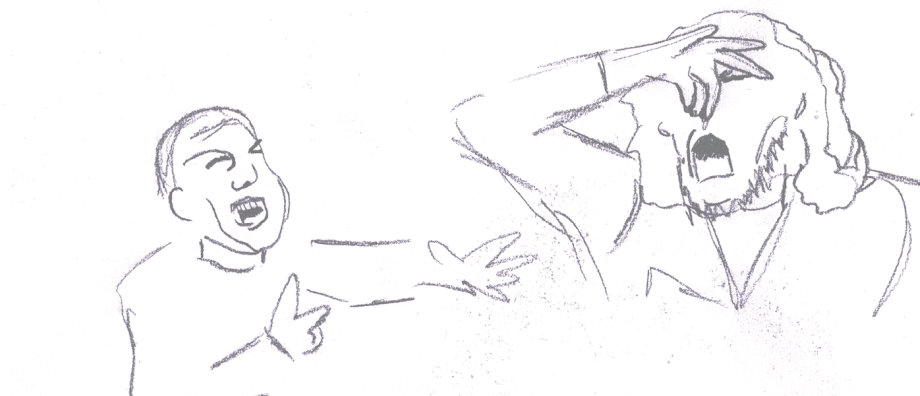
BUT THIS CREATIVE ECONOMY WAS NOT JUST A
MATTER OF EXPEDIENCY. IT ENABLED THE RAPID
SWITCHES AND CUTS, FLUIDITY OF MOVEMENT, AND
RELENTLESS PACE OF CAST'S PLAYS THROUGH THE
USE OF STARK, STRIKING VISUAL IMAGERY.

Image References:

CAST Prop List In: HE/CAST/ SHO/1/5, Hackney Empire Archive,
University of East London.

Use CAST [promotional leaflet]. In: ACBG.1.3283, Arts Council of Great
Britain Archive, V&A Theatre and Performance Archives

BEING SO VISUALLY DRIVEN, WITH BARE-BONES SCENOGRAPHY, PUT A LOT OF EMPHASIS ON THE PHYSICAL ASPECTS OF ACTING.



AS THEATRE SCHOLAR AND FORMER CAST MEMBER BILL MCDONNELL OBSERVES, LIKE THE PARED-BACK STYLE OF JERZY GROTOWSKI'S POOR THEATRE,¹⁵ THIS APPROACH MEANT 'TOTAL RELIANCE ON THE ACTOR, BODY AND VOICE'. (McDonnell 2022: 142)



CAST PERFORMANCES WERE VISCERAL AND KINETIC.

Throughout, the production is constantly stimulating. The actors, whether in unison or independently, are always in motion, riveting the audience's attention to the stage

THEY MADE EXTENSIVE USE OF MIME, PARTICULARLY WHEN PERFORMERS 'PLAYED THE SCENERY', ENACTING OBJECTS AND ENVIRONMENTS. BUT MULDOON ALSO COMPARED THEIR STRENUOUS, RHYTHMIC USE OF THE BODY TO DANCE.

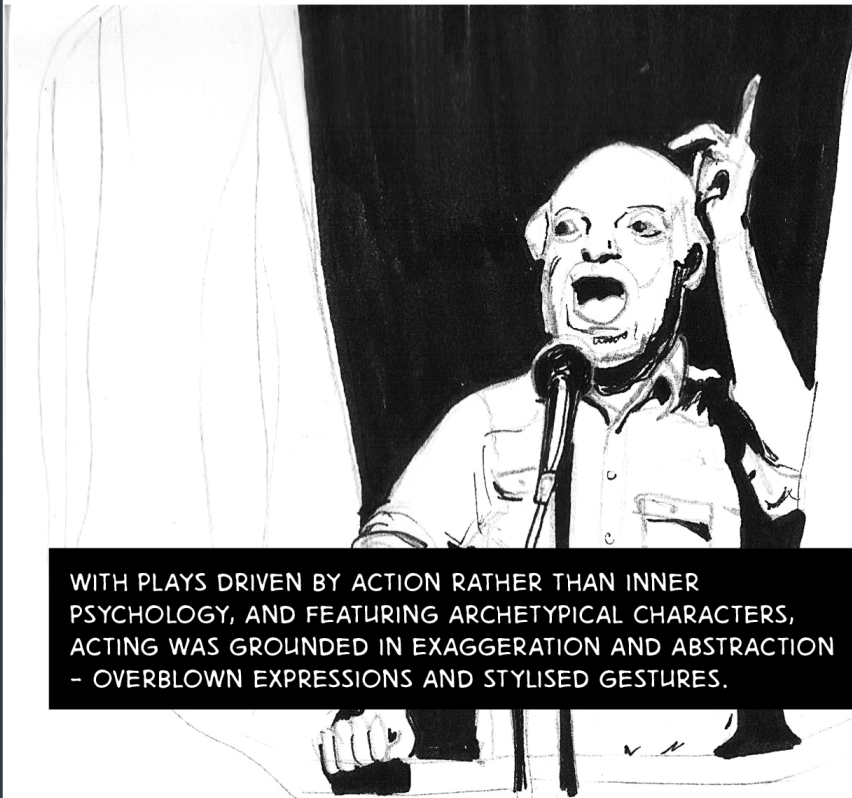
Despite the exhilarating verbal content of the Muggins plays performed around the country by the Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre, they are also so neatly graceful, in physical terms, that they ought to be reviewed by dance critics. (Jones 1968)

Notes:

15. Grotowski was a Polish director involved with the Theatre of the Thirteen Rows, later the Laboratory Theatre, in the 1950s and 60s. His *Towards a Poor Theatre*, published in English in 1968, influenced experimental approaches in alternative theatre. He advocated stripping away all unnecessary elements, rather than trying to compete with the 'richness' of mass media forms. This included scenography but extended to acting techniques (Milling and Ley 2001: 117-41).

Image References:

drawings by author from photographs in CAST 1969 [manifesto published] In: HE/CAST/MF/1, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.



WITH PLAYS DRIVEN BY ACTION RATHER THAN INNER PSYCHOLOGY, AND FEATURING ARCHETYPICAL CHARACTERS, ACTING WAS GROUNDED IN EXAGGERATION AND ABSTRACTION - OVERBLOWN EXPRESSIONS AND STYLISTED GESTURES.

Cartoon is our "stream of short", self-explanatory, linked scenes and the stylised, anti-naturalist, acting form.

the idea of audience-directed acting. The most important premiss upon which we work is that the audience is a forcefully present and integral part of a performance. Anything being staged must always be consciously directed by the actors towards the audience, and must be simple and obvious to

THIS FOCUS ON THE MATERIALITY AND MOVEMENTS OF THE ACTOR'S BODY ALSO EMPHASISED THAT WATCHING PLAYS IS A SENSUOUS, **EMBODIED** ACT. CAST'S FRONT-ON PRESENTATION, WAS BASED ON THE RECOGNITION THAT 'THE AUDIENCE IS A FORCEFULLY PRESENT AND INTEGRAL PART OF A PERFORMANCE'.

Image References:

Roland Muldoon 1980 *Full Confessions of a Socialist*, drawing by author from photograph available at: unfinishedhistories.com/interviews/interviewees-l-g/roland-muldoon/

CAST 1967-8 [manifesto]. In: HE/CAST/MF/1, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

CAST 1968 [manifesto]. In: HE/CAST/MF/1, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

FINDINGS



WHAT DOES THIS
TELL US ABOUT CARTOONING AND
HOW IT WORKS?

CAST'S UNDERSTANDING OF CARTOONING CORRELATES CLOSELY TO JOSEPH WITEK'S BREAKDOWN OF 'THE CARTOON MODE' OF VISUAL DESIGN IN COMICS, AS OPPOSED TO WHAT HE CALLS 'THE NATURALISTIC MODE'.

COMICS MODES

Caricature and Illustration in the Crumb Family's Dirty Laundry
Joseph Witek

ARCHETYPICAL
CHARACTERS,
SKETCHED THROUGH
SIMPLIFICATION AND
CARICATURE.

THE CARTOON MODE

The cartoon mode accounts for many of the greatest achievements in the history of comics, from George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* to Walt Kelly's *Pogo*, the Donald Duck and Uncle Scrooge comics of Carl Barks, and John Stanley's *Little Lulu*. Visually, the cartoon mode is marked by simplified and exaggerated characters which are created primarily by line and contour. Panel backgrounds and physical settings are often minimally represented. Little attempt is made to create a sustained illusion of three-dimensional space by such means as shading or the use of linear perspective.

STRIPPED BACK MISE-EN-SCENE.

Panel arrangements in the cartoon mode are often based on a regular grid, with few major variations in page layout or panel shapes. The characters tend to be seen as roughly the same size from panel to panel, with their bodies viewed frontally or in three-quarter view and visible at full length (a long shot in cinema terms) or from the waist up (medium shot), with few close-ups, extreme long shots, or abrupt shifts in visual perspective. These compositional strategies lend themselves to the use of large or small groups of characters, and the tendency to set up a scene or short passage of action tends to move from left to right across a single shallow plane.

FRONT-ON
PRESENTATION.

VISUAL SHORTHAND OF STRIKING IMAGERY

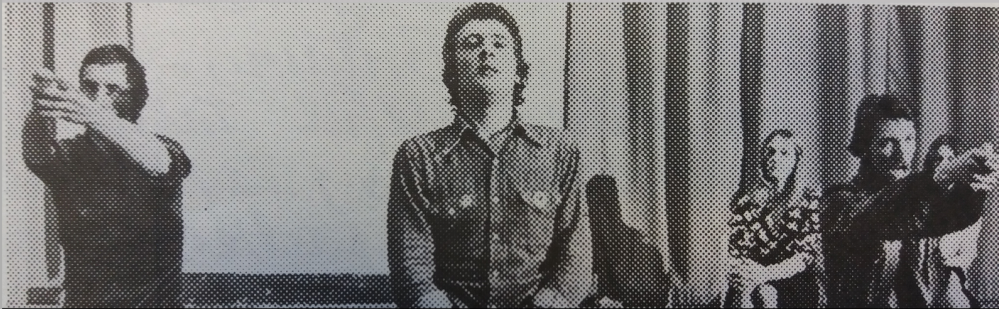
EXAGGERATED
BODY LANGUAGE
AND STYLISTED
GESTURES

ACCELERATED AND COMPRESSED STORYTELLING

Typical conventions in the cartoon mode include the extensive use of the icons called "emanata," such as the sweat beads, dust clouds, speed lines, and many other symbols that have become closely associated with traditional humor cartooning.⁵ The cartoon mode encompasses conventional gestural tropes such as the "fallout take," where a character delivers the punch line of a gag by falling backwards out of the panel, leaving only his lower legs visible. In longer form they tend toward episodic narratives which string together an often loosely connected series of gags or physical adventures. In particular, the affinity of the cartoon mode for physical meta-

(Witek
2012:
29-30)

THERE IS ALSO A BROADER CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN WHAT CAST CALLED THEIR 'PHILOSOPHY OF STYLE' AND WHAT WITEK TERMS THE 'NARRATIVE ETHOS' OF CARTOONING THAT, TOGETHER WITH VISUAL STYLE, MAKES UP A MODE.



CAST'S CARTOON STYLE WAS FUNDAMENTALLY ROOTED IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERFORMERS AND AUDIENCE THEY CALLED **PRESENTATIONISM**.

C A S T - The Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre -
was started about half a year ago. It is by

The most important thing CAST did in the history of political theatre was turn to the audience. At the time, we actually invented looking straight in the audience's face and telling them what we were talking about.



(in Itzin 1980: 14)

to their... responses. This means that the audience is no longer in the position of a sneaky Peeping Tom, observing through the invisible walls of traditional theatre a situation being played out amongst the performers working as though they are what they are portraying. The actors know all the time that they are only actors.

THIS PROJECTION OF PLAYS AT THE AUDIENCE BROKE THE FOURTH WALL, DRAWING ATTENTION TO THE PERFORMANCE AS A PERFORMANCE, A STAGING OF A STORY.

FOR MEDIA THEORIST AND PERFORMING ARTS SCHOLAR RAYMOND CAMPBELL, THIS MADE CAST A ROCK 'N' ROLL VERSION OF BRECHTIAN EPIC THEATRE.¹⁶

(2016: 164)

IT WAS A DISTINCTLY **ANTI-NATURALIST** PHILOSOPHY OF STYLE.¹⁷

Notes:

16. Brechtian epic theatre aimed 'to create a theatrical practice in which oppositional political ideas could be expressed and explored in ways that challenged the capitalist status quo' (Gray 2017: 11). A key element was the use of *Verfremdung* effects, techniques of alienation or estrangement that create a critical distance between the audience and what is represented on stage. This meant negating theatrical naturalism (see note 17 below) by calling attention to the fact that play is a fabrication, a performance. Brecht advocated a radical separation of elements in theatre, whereby acting, scenography and narrative don't cohere but play off and against each other and audiences have to make sense out of contradictory pieces.
17. Naturalism was a style of theatre develop in the late nineteenth century aiming to objectively portray reality via conventions that suggested the stage was a real room at which the audience peeped, unseen by the people within, through an invisible fourth wall. Anti-naturalistic approaches intentionally break this illusion, often by emphasising their own artifice. Some comics scholars have argued that, as lines on paper, all comics are anti-naturalistic – with drawing calling attention to its own process of making (Gardner 2011), the face that lines are purely conceptual (they don't exist in reality), and the way everything in comics sits on the same visual plane emphasising their flatness and drawing attention to the surface of the page (Kashtan 2015).

Image References:

CAST 1976 The Other Way Around photograph from Use CAST [promotional leaflet]. In: ACBG.1.3283, Arts Council of Great Britain Archive, V&A Theatre and Performance Archives.

CAST 1968 [manifesto]. In: HE/CAST/MF/1, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

THIS SUPPORTS WITEK'S ARGUMENT THAT THE
CARTOON MODE HINGES ON ANTI-NATURALISM.

(Witek 2012: 30)

In general, stories in the cartoon mode often assume a fundamentally unstable and infinitely mutable physical reality, where characters and even objects can move and be transformed according to an associative or emotive logic rather than the laws of physics.

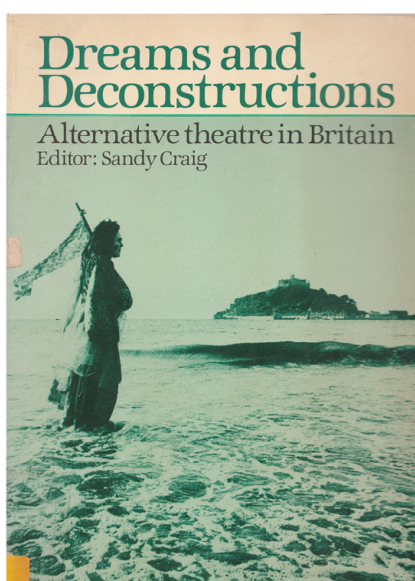
IF ALL MODES CARRY AN ORIENTATION TOWARDS THEIR SUBJECT, OR NARRATIVE
ETHOS, THIS INCLUDES AN IDEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OR WORLDVIEW.

UNLIKE NATURALISTIC MODES THAT MYSTIFY AND CALCIFY THE WORLD AS IT IS,
CARTOONING **ARGUES**. IT ATTESTS THAT THE WAY THINGS ARE OR APPEAR IS
VOLATILE, CONDITIONAL, A SITE OF STRUGGLE, ABLE TO BE REIMAGINED,

REFLECTING ITS ROOTS IN CARICATURE:

The art form of caricature, on the other hand, specifically disavows any attempt to render the surface appearances of the physical world and makes a very different claim to a very different kind of truth. That is, by stripping away the inessential elements of a human face and exaggerating its defining features, caricature purports to reveal an essential truth about its subject that lies hidden beneath the world of appearances. When structuring caricatures in sequence, the cartoon mode treats the comic's page not only as a loose representation of physical existence, but also as a textual field for the immediate enactment of overtly symbolic meaning. (Witek 2012: 32)

THE REFLEXIVE WAY CARTOONING HIGHLIGHTS ITS OWN CONSTRUCTION -
ITS ARTFUL PERFORMATIVITY - SITS AT THE HEART OF HOW IT WORKS.



FOR THEATRE CRITIC SANDY CRAIG, IT WAS THIS
REFLEXIVE, DISRUPTIVE ANTI-NATURALISM THAT
ATTRACTED ALTERNATIVE THEATRE GROUPS:

Unlike the naturalism of a Constable painting, that invites 'an attitude of reflection and contemplation', cartoons 'emphasize the movement contained within them and the breaks between them. Similarly alternative theatre emphasises action and the breaks, or commentary between the action', engaging the audience 'at the twin levels of signifier and signified, at the level of what is being said and the way it is being said'.

This 'deconstructive' theatre is critical but life-enhancing, a theatre which 'dismantles the world in order to demonstrate the possibility of creative change'.

(Craig 1980:28-29)

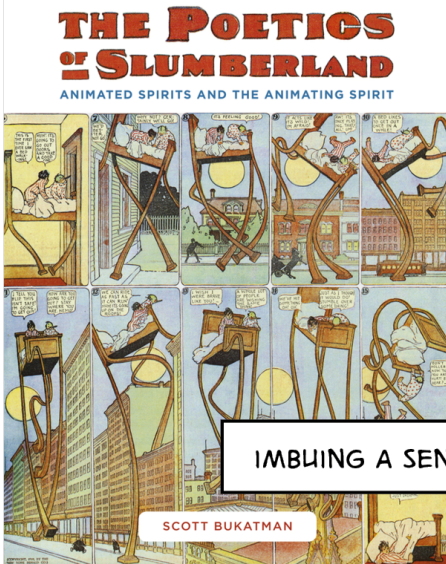
Image References:

cover Craig, S. 1980 *Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain*. Derbyshire: Amber Lane Press.

UNDERSTANDING CARTOONING AND ITS AFFECTS AND AFFORDANCES AS FOUNDED ON ANTI-NATURALISM ALIGNS WITH STUDIES EXAMINING ITS USE ACROSS MEDIA.



CARTOON ANIMATION SIMILARLY PRESENTS REALITY AS MUTABLE AND CONTINGENT, SQUASHABLE AND STRETCHABLE.



(Bukatman 2012: 114, 2, 14)

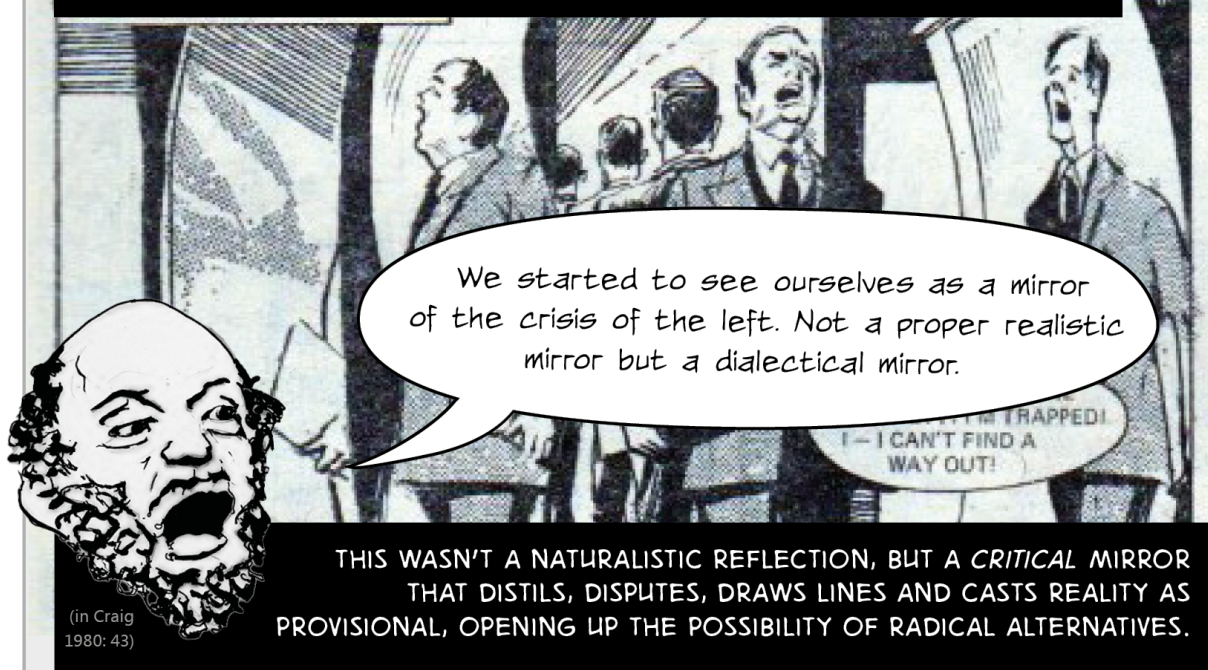
ACCORDING TO CULTURAL THEORIST SCOTT BUKATMAN, THIS REVOLT AGAINST THE GIVEN, REFUSING THE RATIONALISATION OF SPACE, BODY AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS, DEFINES THE POETICS OF CARTOONING:

‘Cartoons represent... “a unique protest against the metaphysical immobility of the once-and-forever given” ... nothing is fixed; nothing is final... Everything misbehaves; the very object and substance of the world become disobedient.’

IMBUING A SENSE OF AGENCY AND THE POSSIBILITY OF FREEDOM

‘a renewal of perception through... estrangement ... we reconnect to a self that was willing to believe in a world that operated by a different set of rules.’

FOR CAST, THE CARTOON MODE ALLOWED THEIR WORK TO ACT AS A MIRROR.



THIS WASN'T A NATURALISTIC REFLECTION, BUT A *CRITICAL MIRROR* THAT DISTILLS, DISPUTES, DRAWS LINES AND CASTS REALITY AS PROVISIONAL, OPENING UP THE POSSIBILITY OF RADICAL ALTERNATIVES.

Image References:

panel 1: cover Bukatman, S. 2012 *The Poetics of Slumberland Animated Spirits and the Animating Spirit*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press. Image from Winsor McCay 1908 Little Nemo in Slumberland. *New York Herald*. 26 July.

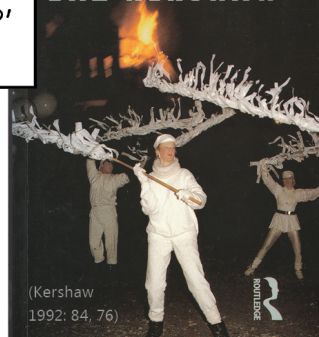
panel 2: panel from Diane Gabbot 1976 *A Fairground of Fear. Tammy*, 14 February to 24 April. Available at: jintycomic.wordpress.com/2018/06/07/the-fairground-of-fear-1976/

CAST'S MIRROR OPERATED THROUGH LAUGHTER, WITH IMPORTANT TIES TO THE CARNIVALESQUE.¹⁸

THEATRE SCHOLAR BAZ KERSHAW DESCRIBED THE 'CARTOON STYLISTICS' OF ALTERNATIVE THEATRE AS 'CARNIVAL AGIT PROP' AND CAST IN PARTICULAR AS 'POLITICAL CARNIVALESQUE'.

THEIR CARNIVAL USE OF RAUCOUS HUMOUR, UNRULY BODIES, DISRUPTIONS AND INVERSIONS, EMPHASISES THE ROOTS OF THEIR APPROACH – AND CARTOONING AS A WHOLE – IN POPULAR PERFORMANCE TRADITIONS.

The POLITICS of PERFORMANCE
Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention
BAZ KERSHAW

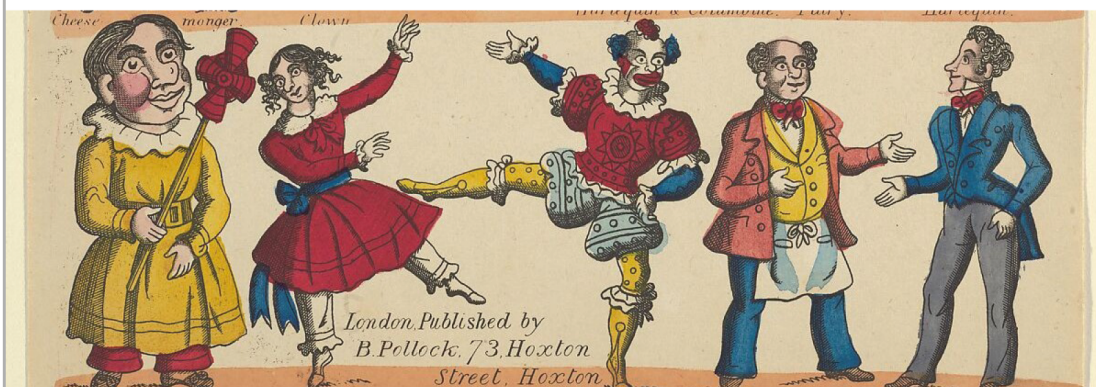


(Kershaw 1992: 84, 76)



DESCRIPTIONS OF CAST'S WORK AROUND WITH REFERENCES TO MUSIC HALL, PANTOMIME, CLOWNING, PUPPETRY AND COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE. ONCE MORE THIS SUPPORTS WITEK'S ANALYSIS, WHICH NOTES THAT SUCH FORMS OF POPULAR PERFORMANCE WERE A KEY SOURCE OF THE PRESENTATIONAL STRATEGIES FOUND IN COMICS THAT USE THE CARTOON MODE:

On the other hand, the narrative conventions of humor comics derive from the legacy of theatrical and literary comedy, with various elements coming from farce, *commedia dell'arte*, nonsense literature, and vaudeville slapstick. The punch line or pratfall takes precedence over probability, linear plotting, and psychological verisimilitude. (Witek 2012: 32)



THESE TOO WERE ANTI-NATURALISTIC, THEIR VISUAL LANGUAGE ROOTED IN THE BODY, USING PHYSICAL EXAGGERATION AND STOCK CHARACTERS RECOGNISABLE BY DISTINCT GESTURES, COSTUMES AND PROPS, MAKE-UP OR MASKS. THEY ALSO IMPROVISED, ADAPTING TO LOCAL AUDIENCES, OFTEN FOR SATIRICAL PURPOSES.

Notes:

18. The features of carnival were described by philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) as involving upending and inversion of social hierarchies and transgression of behavioural norms, particularly through celebrating the unruly materiality of the body, bringing the exalted down to earth through obscenity and the grotesque.

Image References:

cover Kershaw, B. 1992 *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention*. London & New York: Routledge.

Antonie de Winternaar after Jacques Callot 1668 – 1707 *Mestolino, Cap. Grillo en Guastetto*. 2/6 Rijksmuseum P-1903-A-24054BX. Available at: www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/collectie/RP-P-1903-A-24054BX

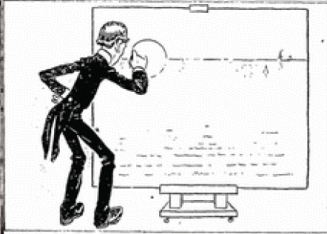
Benjamin Pollock 1870-90 Characters from *Jack and the Giant Killer* Plate 7 for a Toy Theater [lithograph] In: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 52.541.1(7). Available at: www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/682991

OF ALL THESE POPULAR TRADITIONS, MUSIC HALL HAD THE DEEPEST IMPACT ON CAST'S APPROACH TO PERFORMANCE.

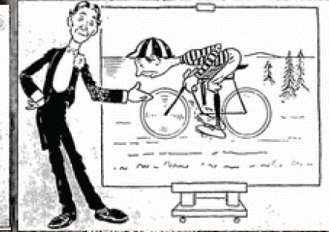
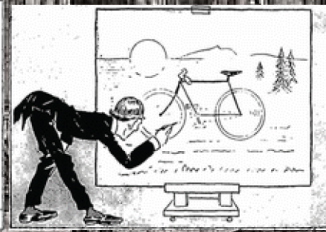
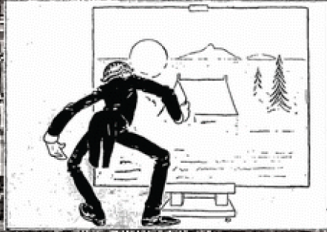
THE WAY THEY PROJECTED A RAPID SUCCESSION OF IMAGES AT THE AUDIENCE RECALLS THE MUSIC HALL LIGHTNING SKETCHES AND CHALK TALKS THAT INFLUENCED NEWSPAPER COMICS AND EARLY ANIMATION



MUCH OF THE HUMOUR AND ENTERTAINMENT OF CAST PRODUCTIONS CAME FROM UPENDING OR REVERSING EXPECTATIONS, THE TWIST ON THE ESTABLISHED SET UP.



AS ANIMATION THEORIST MALCOLM COOK DISCUSSES, MUSIC HALL LIGHTNING CARTOONISTS USED SPEED TO ENGAGE SPECTATORS IN A 'GUESSING GAME' THAT INVERTED ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES. (Cook 2013)



MULDOON LIKEWISE DESCRIBED CAST PLAYS AS INVITING THE AUDIENCE INTO A NARRATIVE OF SPECULATION AND DISRUPTION, SIMILAR TO A CON TRICK:

It's like a *three-card trick*. Once you get them watching, the magic starts. You start telling them a story, cut fast, distract them from what they thought was going on.

(in Itzin 1980: 14)

Image References:

The Oxford Music Hall 1875. London Theatre Museum collection. Available at: commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1875_Oxford_Music_Hall.jpg

As a Lightning Sketch Artist 1900. From *Chums: An Illustrated Paper for Boys*, 17 October. Reproduced in Cook, M. 2013. The lightning cartoon: Animation from music hall to cinema. *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 11(3): 237–254

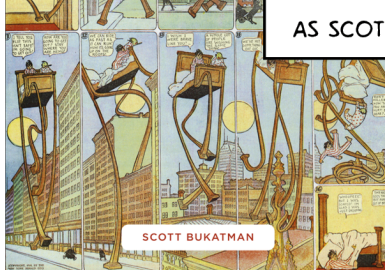
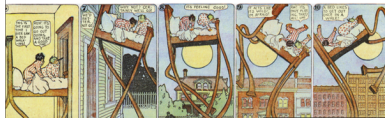
THE CARTOON MODE PROVIDES A STAGE

NARRATIVES IN COMICS DON'T HAVE THE SAME OPPORTUNITY FOR LIVE IMPROVISATION IN RESPONSE TO AUDIENCES – ALTHOUGH MORE FREQUENTLY PUBLISHED FORMATS LIKE NEWSPAPER STRIPS ALLOW FOR TOPICAL SATIRE.



THE POETICS OF SLUMBERLAND

ANIMATED SPIRITS AND THE ANIMATING SPIRIT



AS SCOTT BUKATMAN ARGUES:

‘Comics and cartoons... nearly from their inception, set about overturning established orders and hierarchies.’

FOR WITEK, THE CARTOON MODE IS ‘FUNDAMENTALLY A MEDIUM OF IDEAS’:

Its images often stand in for concepts rather than for physical bodies, and its narrative strategies are deployed not simply to replicate action in space but to embody conceptual relationships. Even though for much of the history of comics the cartoon mode has been associated with juvenile humor and formulaic fantasy, its roots in political satire suggest that the cartoon mode is fundamentally a medium of ideas. (Witek 2012: 32-4)

ITS OVERT SYMBOLISM¹⁹ AND REFLEXIVE ANTI-NATURALISM, WHEREBY AUDIENCES KNOW IT ISN'T AN ILLUSION OF LIFE BUT AN ARGUMENT ABOUT ACTUALITY, ENABLES CARTOONING TO POSE QUESTIONS, CHALLENGE ASSUMPTIONS, TO THEORISE AND ACT OUT POSSIBILITIES AND ALTERNATIVES.

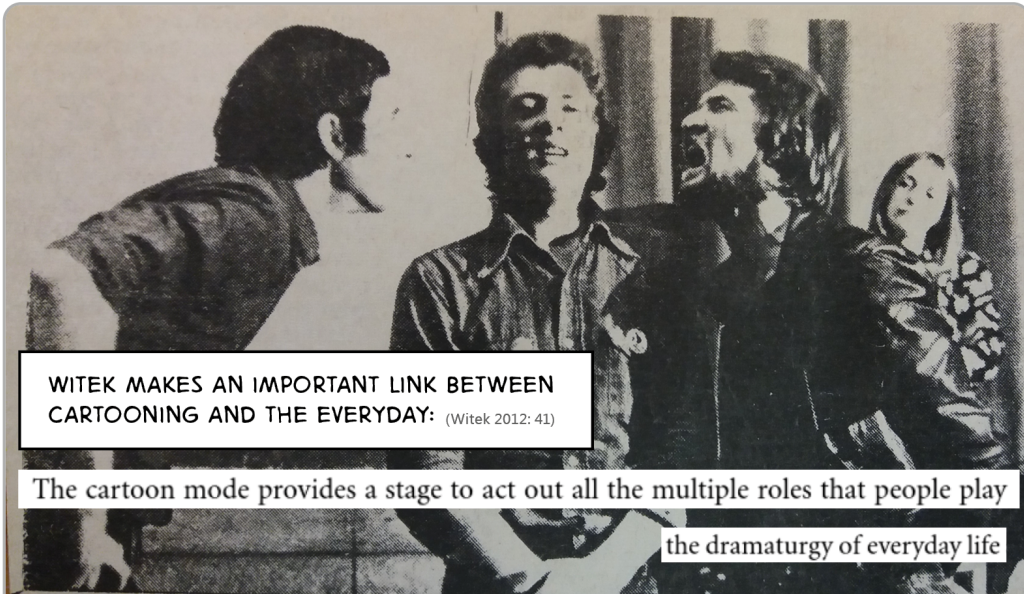
‘Comics and animated cartoons... constitute fields of playful disobedience. ...They offer up little utopias of disorder, provisional sites of temporary resistance... they act out a tension between regulation and resistance’ (Bukatman 2012: 2-3)

Notes:

19. Symbolism here is used not in relation to the Symbolist movement in theatre and other arts, but in relation to the way that cartooning for Witek ‘disavows any attempt to render the surface appearances of the physical world’ treating the comics page instead as ‘a textual field for the immediate enactment of overtly symbolic meanings’ (Witek 2012: 32). This can be related to the symbol in C. S. Peirce’s triadic typology of signs, denoting its referent through convention rather than iconic resemblance or indexical connection, apt for representing abstract ideas.

Image References:

cover Bukatman, S. 2012. *The Poetics of Slumberland Animated Spirits and the Animating Spirit*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press. Image from Winsor McCay. 1908. Little Nemo in Slumberland. *New York Herald*. 26 July.



WITEK MAKES AN IMPORTANT LINK BETWEEN
CARTOONING AND THE EVERYDAY: (Witek 2012: 41)

The cartoon mode provides a stage to act out all the multiple roles that people play
the dramaturgy of everyday life

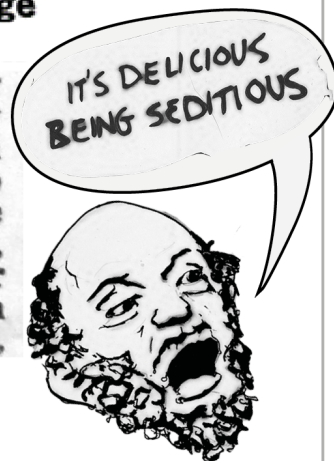
FOR CAST, CARTOONING ALLOWED THEM TO EXTRAPOLATE FROM FAMILIAR
SCENARIOS AND CHARACTERS IN ORDER TO REPRESENT AND INTERROGATE
THE BROADER STRUCTURAL RELATIONSHIPS THAT PATTERN OUR DAILY LIVES.²⁰

IN THIS SENSE OF ARGUING AND EXTRAPOLATING,
CARTOONING LENDS ITSELF TO THE **AGONISTIC**.²¹

IT CAN DRAW LINES AND COMPEL YOU TO PICK A SIDE.

**I believe this highly charged, savage
charade is theatrical dynamite.**

There is love here, but twisted by fear
and disillusion into the funny-ugly
laughter of a Punch and Judy show, with
its black and white standards and no
subtle intrusions of grey. This is the
raw war of Right and Wrong, basic,
grotesque, readily understood and hair
raising. The company performed with
blazing energy, parade ground discipline,
richly creative economy. (Gilmore 1966)



Notes:

20. Importantly, this means they were anti-naturalist but realist. Brecht saw realism as a stance not a style, and CAST similarly used experimental defamiliarising strategies to pre-sent actual social contradictions and tensions.
21. This reflects political philosopher Chantal Mouffe's claim that politics is agonistic, conflict crucial to democracy. For Mouffe, a 'critical art is art that foments dissensus' but also that constructs new subjectivities (2008: 13). Cartooning does both, through what Michael Cohen calls the 'collectivity borne of a shared laugh' (2007: 36).

Image References:

CAST (1976) The Other Way Around [press cutting] In: HE/CAST/
SHO/2/4, Hackney Empire Archive, University of East London.

FURTHER WORK

CARTOONING AFFORDS A RADICAL WAY OF SEEING.
BUT THAT DOESN'T MAKE IT INHERENTLY LEFT-WING.

TO DEVELOP THIS, I HOPE TO LOOK AT CARTOON THEATRE BY FEMINIST, BLACK AND QUEER ALTERNATIVE THEATRE GROUPS, AND HOW THEY NAVIGATED CARTOONING'S HISTORICAL USE TO ENFORCE RATHER THAN UPSET SOCIAL INEQUITIES,



EXAMINING LINKS TO CAMP, BURLESQUE, MASQUERADE, MIMING AND MINSTRELSY

AND TIES TO SECOND-WAVE FEMINISM, BLACK POWER AND GAY LIBERATION.



TO DO THIS, IT'S NECESSARY TO GRASP MORE DEEPLY THE ALTERNATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE SHARED BY ARTISTS AND ACTIVISTS, CORE ELEMENTS OF WHICH WERE THE ALTERNATIVE PRESS AND PRINTSHOP NETWORK.

THE WAY THEY ENABLED EXCHANGES BETWEEN ALTERNATIVE THEATRE AND COMICS, AND CONTRIBUTED TO THE ADOPTION OF CARTOONING AS A VISUAL MODE, NEEDS CLOSER INVESTIGATION.

Image References:

Black Arts Theatre Group [poster] Available at: www.posterworkshop.co.uk/all/page_19.html, Beryl and the Perils 1979 Nuts. [poster] © Nicola Lane Available at: unfinishedhistories.com/history/companies/beryl-and-the-perils/ / Gay Sweatshop Theatre Company 1979-80 Who Knows? [poster]

Red Rag. 1973. 3. Available at: www.bl.uk/collection-items/red-rag-magazine-issue-3 / Camden Poster Workshop [photograph] Available at: www.posterworkshop.co.uk/all/page_77.html

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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