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Radical Theatre Mobility: Unity Theatre, UK, and the New Theatre, Australia

For two radical theatres formed in the 1930s, taking performances to their audiences was an important dimension of commitment to working-class politics and civic engagement. Separated by distance but joined ideologically, the New Theatre in Australia and Unity Theatre in the United Kingdom engaged in what they described as 'mobile work', as well as being 'stage curtain' companies. Based on archival research and drawing on the mobility literature, in this article Cathy Brigden and Lisa Milner examine the rationale for mobile work, the range of spaces that were used both indoor (workplaces, halls, private homes) and outdoor (parks, street corners beaches), and its decline. Emerging from this analysis are parallels between the two theatres' motivation for mobile work, their practice in these diverse performance spaces, and the factors leading to its decline. Cathy Brigden is an associate professor in the School of Management and Deputy Director, Centre for Sustainable Organisations and Work at RMIT University, Australia. Her current research interests include the historical experiences of women in trade unions, gender in performing arts industries, and union strategies and regulation. Lisa Milner is a lecturer in the School of Arts and Social Sciences at Southern Cross University, Coffs Harbour, Australia. Current research interests include a comparative study of workers' theatre, representations of workers and trade unions on screen, and labour biography.

Key terms:

THE 1930s saw the emergence of new radical theatres in Australia and the United Kingdom. The Australian New Theatre began life with inspiration from American and British radical theatre groups and evolved from the Workers' Arts Clubs (WAC), of which the Sydney WAC formed in 1931.¹ The Sydney New Theatre began in 1932, with other branches following: Townsville in 1933, Melbourne in 1935, and Brisbane, Perth, and Newcastle in 1936.

The New Theatre remains the best-known left cultural activist organization in Australia and is the country's oldest continuously performing theatre, although Sydney is the only remaining branch, with an unbroken record of performances from 1932, with the other branches closing by the 1970s. In the United Kingdom, Unity Theatre (hereafter, Unity) was established in March 1936, following the amalgamation of the Workers Theatre Movement (WTM), the Rebel Players, and other left theatre groups. It began with one branch in London, but soon expanded to

fifty branches, 10,000 members plus three million affiliated members in trade unions and other organizations. From 1936 until the late 1950s branches were active in many areas of London, as well as Glasgow, Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Cardiff, Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Birmingham, Oxford, Blackpool, Middlesbrough, Brighton, and elsewhere. The main London branch survived longest, giving its final performance in 1994.²

Both theatres were membership-based organizations that relied on volunteer labour, both front and backstage. Apart from a brief foray into professionalism by the London and Glasgow branches, they were determinedly amateur in structure. Their stylistic repertoires over the decades were wide, and included vaudeville, pantomime, pageant, musical, choral declamation, revue, sketch and 'agitprop' (agitation and propaganda, a style pioneered in post-revolutionary Russia), as well as more conventional dramatic forms such as the three-act play.

Mobile theatre represented a revival of the

highly politicized, semi-itinerant agitprop style. There were also film screenings, folk music, and dance concerts. One advance was the use of the 'Living Newspaper' form, a type of critical reportage that incorporated poetry, dance, film, and drama. This style, beginning its life on Soviet stages, was widely adopted in American workers theatre, and enthusiastically embraced by the New Theatre and Unity branches. The American New Theatre League was a major influence.

André van Gyseghem, the first President of Unity, wrote that at its establishment, 'We turned, of course, to the American playwrights for much of our material.'³ Clifford Odets' 1935 play, *Waiting for Lefty*, was an important early production for both: in Australia, it was first staged on 25 January 1936, while the first Unity production was in London on 17 April 1936. Performances of older plays by Aristophanes, Molière, Shakespeare, Jonson, and Gorky sat alongside new works by Sean O'Casey, Bertolt Brecht, Ernst Toller, George Bernard Shaw, and other contemporary writers, both domestic and foreign. Promotion of 'native' or indigenous drama was a notable feature of the New and Glasgow Unity. Female playwrights were particular contributors to this venture, including Glasgow Unity's Ena Lamont Stewart and the Australians Mona Brand, Oriel Gray, and Betty Roland.

It was always clear that broadly democratic or socialist organisational methods were at the heart of the theatres. Early publicity claimed that 'Unity believes in the group ideal. There are no stars in our theatre. There are teams. . . . Unity strives to bring together the creative abilities of many different kinds of artists.'⁴ While referring to Unity, Jon Clark's observations are equally relevant for the New Theatre: 'One of the most significant features of the work of Unity Theatre between 1936 and 1939 was the tremendous diversity of dramatic forms and techniques which were used and developed, according to what the group wanted to achieve, the audience they were speaking to, the texts available, the time allotted to them for performance, etc.'⁵

The theatres' declared objectives were

similar. The New Theatre's principles were:

1. To express through drama, based on the Australian tradition of freedom and democracy, the progressive aspirations of the Australian people.
2. To cultivate a theatre free from commercialism, capable of developing a native drama, and of educating all sections of the people to appreciate a high standard of contemporary and classical drama.
3. To secure the widest possible co-operation with all associations aiming at social justice.⁶

And those of Unity Theatre:

- a. To foster and further the art of the drama in accordance with the principle that true art, by effectively presenting and truthfully interpreting life as experienced by the majority of the people, can move the people to work for the betterment of society.
- b. To train and encourage actors, producers, and playwrights in accordance with the above ideals.
- c. To devise, import, and experiment with new forms of dramatic art.⁷

Political activism and artistic activism fed into each other through the Communist parties of both countries: the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) and the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). From its earliest times the CPA had attracted and encouraged the energies of creative people, and culture in its broadest sense was a topic that engendered much debate. Its vitality is evident in the ways that it supported a wide range of cultural activities. Similarly, Unity Theatre was nominally, and to greater and lesser degrees practically, under the responsibility of the CPGB's Cultural Committee, though it was not financed by the Party.

A permanent theatre space, existing as a 'stage curtain company', was something desired by both theatre families, though achieved by only a few branches. The

London branch was most successful, securing a theatre space (previously a Methodist chapel) in Goldington Street, Camden Town, from 1937, until a fire destroyed the building in 1975. Other Unity branches led more peripatetic lives, the most stable Australian branch being in Sydney, though it too faced tenancy uncertainty over the years.

For many of the New Theatre and Unity branches, taking performances to audiences, commonly described as 'mobile' work, was both a response to this lack of certainty about theatre space and a political tactic. It is this use of mobile work in the two theatre families that is the focus of this paper. We consider three questions: what motivated the mobile work; what forms did it take; and what were enabling and constraining factors?

The Mobility Turn in the Social Sciences

Informing our discussion is the mobility studies literature that has followed the 'mobility turn' in the social sciences. A number of concepts within mobility studies provide a lens for analyzing the mobile work undertaken by both the New Theatre and the Unity Theatre. We believe it is a particularly interesting and instructive transnational study, because of the close similarities in the mobility patterns of the performance practices of Unity and the New Theatre. Further, we argue that the use of the geographical tool of mobility studies can help us to understand this aspect of their work.

The comparatively recent 'mobility' turn in social sciences brings new ways of understanding the movement of people, objects, and ideas, and new ways of conceiving of place and space. In two journals, *Mobilities* and *Transfers*, and *The Handbook of Mobilities*, the interdisciplinary study of mobility and movement has brought together researchers in geography, sociology, anthropology, history, and archaeology among others, including theatre and performance studies.⁸ As Tim Cresswell explains,

Facts about the world . . . combine with ways of thinking and theorizing that foreground mobility (of people, of ideas, of things) as a geographical

fact that lies of the centre of constellations of power, the creation of identities and the micro-geographies of everyday life.⁹

Understood as 'an element in the play of power and meaning within social and cultural networks of signification', mobility also 'shapes the experiences and identities of participants'.¹⁰

Research employing mobility studies has itself been emergent only for a short while, and its use in the arts is in its infancy. With reference to the performing arts, Rogers has suggested that there is 'great potential to develop a geographical account of the relationship between performance, place/site, and mobility'.¹¹ One example is the transnational and comparative analysis of early modern drama by the research collaboration *Theatre without Borders*. Henke and Nicholson's collection of essays analyzes a range of European transnational and transcultural theatre practices from the fourteenth century.¹² Similarly, Fiona Wilkie explicitly draws on the mobility turn in her examination of site-specific performances.¹³

Unity and the New Theatre added this element to their production processes when they took their performances out of the traditional theatre space and put their theatre in motion, performing works far beyond their inner-city origins. For both theatre movements, while having dedicated theatre spaces was important, and while much of their work was performed in traditional theatrical spaces, so too was the capacity to take performances to audiences.

Here, we examine the existing metaphor of movement for these groups, with the term in the title of both organizations before they began their mobile work, as they then moved around Australia and the UK, and around the world. The movement of people and ideas to working-class communities and other places at a time when very few theatre companies did this, was one aspect of their political work.

For a couple of decades a number of groups within both these theatre families had active travelling theatre groups in which the desire for mobility was shaped in part by

their capacity to move. As well as having the political desire to undertake mobile work, the theatres needed to address the practical tasks of getting enough people willing to move around and then transporting the cast and crew to different sites. Having access to private transport enabled movement and its absence became an inhibitor. What follows is an overview of the theatres' mobile work.

The New Theatre's Mobile Work

The New Theatre's commitment to broadly socialist ideas extended to their performative style, and was extensive in its range of performance sites. Theatre members would perform at parks and beaches, next to dole queues, and, very often, on the back of flatbed trucks. One common place for Living Newspaper-type performances was the Sydney Domain, until these were banned during the early years of the war.¹⁴ Their presentations on street corners, union and trade halls, large factories and workplaces such as railway yards and wharves were remembered long after the applause died away, and feature in a number of CPA members' memoirs.

The mobile work of the Sydney New Theatre branch expanded greatly through their work with the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA). The establishment of CEMA (later renamed the Arts Council of Australia) in 1943 was modelled on the British organization of the same name. Its objectives were 'to take the arts to the people – the country people – to encourage amateur groups [and] to provide a field in which artists could support themselves by their art.'¹⁵ With CEMA's support, New Theatre's mobile work began in earnest: it took works

and produced them in military campus often under the most primitive conditions. They assisted in War Loan rallies and sent scripts and advice to soldiers in advanced areas to help maintain morale, the essential for victory.¹⁶

In Melbourne, the New Theatre developed a concert party group which toured produc-

tions to army camps around Victoria. This mobile group was also active after the war, taking productions to factory gates and street meetings.¹⁷

Fortified by the success of its wartime work, the Sydney New Theatre purchased a truck in the late 1940s in order 'to extend their agitprop work to new locations'.¹⁸ This enabled them to tour towns in regional NSW, to 'connect with the experiences and hopes of new, non-working class audiences'.¹⁹ During the 1949 coal strike, for instance, a concert party travelled to the Newcastle coalmining area north of Sydney to entertain the strikebound workers and their families. At the end of that strike, ten members of the Sydney New Theatre toured the coalfields to the north and south of Sydney, to audiences ranging from 100 to 2000. They 'were given enthusiastic receptions as they presented plays and sketches dealing with the miners' struggle and the Arbitration Court'.²⁰

Reedy River (1952), the most successful of all the New Theatre's plays, was performed in halls, factories, and outdoor venues all over Australia. In Wollongong, for instance, the Port Kembla Workers' Federation Delegates Committee organized a performance to raise money for the Pensioners' Christmas Dinner Fund.²¹ The Melbourne branch presented *Reedy River* at the Melbourne Repatriation Hospital in 1955. They also had special performances of this popular play with proceeds going to striking meat workers of the Butchers Union. Requests came from factories, rural and regional localities, and country towns.²² In one memorable performance, it was staged as 'drive-in' theatre when the Emerald Progress Association 'built a stage at the end of a football field and the audience drove their cars on to the oval'.²³

Reinforcing the diversity of performance spaces, the Sydney branch performed for striking miners inside a coal mine at Glen Davis, west of Sydney in 1952. *The Candy Store*, an American play about the owner of a Bronx store, had been playing to packed audiences in Sydney. The Menzies government had decided to close down the shale mine at Glen Davis and the miners had been

striking underground for two weeks when the Miners' Federation invited the New Theatre to take *The Candy Store* out to the mine.

This was literally an underground performance. The Glen Davis shale miners had begun the first sit-in strike in a NSW colliery, and the Miners' Federation invited New Theatre to perform the play down the mine. The New Theatre chartered a bus and the entire cast of the play travelled up to Glen Davis. They made their way to the tiny town of 3,000. 'Smuggled into the mine, the actors improvised a stage with a hessian curtain at the junction of five shafts with small, inadequate lamps set on a rickety table.'²⁴

The miners used their headlamps to provide the lighting for the play. It was the first time ninety-five per cent of the miners had seen a stage play, and, it was reported, they 'wanted more'.²⁵ After the performance, theatre members helped the stay-in miners to record taped messages to their families on the surface, as well as the song that the miners had composed about their strike. After a second performance in the town to the wives and children, the theatre members returned to Sydney the next day, 'tired but convinced we had found the real meaning of art belonging to the people'.²⁶ 'That's a hard one to beat', said Marie Armstrong, one of the players down the mine.²⁷

Also in 1952, the theatre performed Len Fox's *Stay Down Miner* to another audience of striking miners inside the Hunter Valley's Great Greta coalmine.²⁸ Fox wrote that 'it was an inspiring experience to stand there in the dark, dimly-lit mine, and hear the miners applauding singing of Henry Lawson's "Freedom on the Wallaby"'.²⁹

Part of the reason that the New Theatre, in all its branches, has a long-lasting place in Australian cultural history is their members' enthusiasm for performing almost everywhere they were asked – most pronounced in the labour communities of the cities. Taking Newcastle as an example, they performed off-site from as early as 1937. The New Theatre team had a ten-by-six trailer for when they went on the road, taking their shows out from Newcastle to towns

including Toronto, Stockton, Kurri Kurri, and Cessnock.³⁰ Well-known Newcastle actor Vic Rooney reflected on the early days of his acting career when he took culture with New Theatre 'right out to the backblocks of Warner's Bay'.³¹

In 1956 the Sydney New Theatre staged a performance of *Under the Coolibah Tree* for Katoomba audiences in the Russell Hawke Park as part of a three-day festival welcoming foreign journalists to the Blue Mountains. It was reported that the presentation 'was an original and commendable way for the [Katoomba] Chamber of Commerce to seek tourists; and, judging by the audience's reaction, an effective one'.³²

As early as 1939 the Brisbane branch of the New Theatre took their shows on the road, when they toured *Till the Day I Die* to mine-workers at the Booval coal mine on 25 April.³³ The Booval miners proved to be very receptive to New Theatre productions, as seen in the response to Jim Crawford's play *Miner's Right* during the 1948 coal strike. Following the presentation to 500 miners and their families, Vic Arnold wrote that 'although *Miner's Right* received a hostile reception from critics on Southern dailies, it was enthusiastically received by miners and their families in Queensland and Victoria', including at Booval.³⁴

In 1954 and in subsequent years, members of the Brisbane New Theatre toured their production of the popular *Reedy River* to the rural towns of Maleny and Ipswich.³⁵ The Maleny performance was attended by members of the Nambour Amateur Theatrical Society, and 'from that performance came the idea that the Nambour people themselves should stage *Reedy River*', which they did a year later to great acclaim.³⁶ Brisbane New Theatre also performed short works and excerpts to visiting Soviet and Chinese trade union delegations, at the Brisbane Trade Hall on 12 May 1956.

One jolly, unrehearsed item was an impromptu joint rendering of *Sovietland* by the three Soviet unionists and theatre members Val Mald, Jim Petersen, Syd Davis, and others. Everyone enjoyed it immensely, especially the Soviet blokes. Val's Russian proved equal to the occasion.³⁷

From its beginnings the Adelaide branch of the New Theatre had been active in mobile work. It was reported that 'everywhere that workers congregate – in the Labor ring at the Botanic Park, at trade union meetings, at social and political gatherings', the group 'presents sketches and short plays on present-day problems'.³⁸ Rosemary Smith declared that the intention of the group would be to 'bring drama to works and factories . . . with emergency stages and a minimum of equipment'.³⁹ Similarly, Perth New Theatre was formed with an aim to write sketches and 'take these presentations to factories, union meetings, workers' functions'.⁴⁰ They performed *Five Poor Families*, a work by local Perth author and New Theatre member Benjamin Kidd, at factories during 1955, in support of the 'No' vote for Campaign for Powers Referendum, along with collecting signatures for that campaign.⁴¹

By the late 1950s, however, the support for mobile work and the numbers of those prepared to undertake it were waning. A combination of factors underpinned this decline: loss of transport, community shifts in popular entertainment (in particular the arrival of television), fewer members, and increasing divisions within the Communist Party (soon to result in a split). Some members did sustain a desire for mobile work, however, as expressed at the second National Conference in 1959, when attracting bigger audiences was a major talking point for members from all branches: 'The fundamental solution, it was thought, was to take the theatre out to the people, by means of tours [and] contact shows'.⁴² And in the late 1970s the Sydney New Theatre (by then the only branch in operation) revived the mobile unit: 'Already there is a revival of the old NT practice of taking parts of shows out to the people – to the waterfront and other jobs, workers' clubs, etc. Younger members are responding to this'.⁴³ But this too proved unsustainable.

Unity Theatre's Mobile Work

The strong influence of the WTM and other earlier existing radical theatre groups in the

UK meant that Unity Theatre and its members were aware of the need to take theatre to the people, as well as attracting people to a physical theatre building.

For a large number of Unity branches performance locations included parks, schools, outside factory gates and docks, at May Day rallies and public and political meetings (including Communist Party and Labour Party conferences), trade union and Communist Party congresses, bus depots and mines, and even Hyde Park and the plinth of Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square. For instance, in 1953 Surbiton Unity performed Gadfan Morris's play *Homer's Nod* at a garden fete organized by the local Labour Party, 'where it was seen and appreciated by a large and enthusiastic audience'.⁴⁴

For London Unity (as well as many other branches) claiming space occurred alongside making space: once it gained its own place at Goldington Street, from the late 1930s the mobile work was run in tandem with traditional 'stage curtain company' productions. Originally called the Outside Show Group, the sub-committee's name changed to the Mobile Group. Securing their own transport broadened their range. With old taxis bought for fifty shillings each in 1936 (its first year of operation), a lorry in 1937, and a coach donated by the trade unions in 1938, the London group were equipped to work outside traditional theatres and stages, taking their work to the people.

They undertook three pre-war regional tours to the North East, playing at miners' halls and the Newcastle People's Theatre.⁴⁵ The members of the Mobile Group were interchangeable with other Unity groups in that branch 'so that, in time, everybody takes a turn at theatre performances and mobile work'.⁴⁶ During the war, Unity's Mobile Group – which included not only play production but orchestras and choirs, 'shop window' productions and other Unity 'extra-mural' performance activities – played a key role:

the outside work became intermittent but continued and throughout the war Unity presented more than 1000 such performances, providing a

bridge from pre-war Unity, as well as continuity through the 1940s, and playing a crucial role in helping Unity to survive.⁴⁷

Odets' *Waiting for Lefty* was a huge success for Unity, both on stages and out on the streets, but 'it is generally agreed that the finest performance of the 400 times Unity played it were the eleven given in various bus garages during the great bus strike of 1937'.⁴⁸ Throughout the five years of what has been described as 'Britain's most protracted industrial dispute' involving 27,000 transport workers, Unity's performances of the play were notable for its impact.⁴⁹

One consequence was the writing of *Busmen*, a Living Newspaper that came out of the experience of the Unity members performing in the garages and depots during the strike, connecting with the day-to-day experiences of the busmen at work and on strike. It contributed to what Colin Chambers describes as 'a unique contribution to British drama – an original Living Newspaper on an indigenous dispute written collectively with the help of those who had led the fight and presented in the most challenging theatrical styles of the day'.⁵⁰

The Goldington Street mobile unit played to small and large audiences, as many as one thousand in its time.⁵¹ A member of this unit, Zelda Curtis, recalls that 'we performed anything, anywhere we were wanted: sometimes cabaret, sometimes one-act plays or musicals that we devised, or often we just performed individually'.⁵² The mobile groups entertained people further afield, with their contributions to the British local authorities' 'Holidays at Home' campaigns, in 1943 alone supplying fifty two-hour programmes for parks and halls in Surrey, Essex, Middlesex, and Greater London.⁵³

Going to the people even included following them underground, as seen in the performances given in tube stations used as shelters during the bombing of London in the Second World War.⁵⁴ Needing to adapt their repertoire to a different type of audience, being entertained by dint of their presence rather than by choice, the Outside Show Group also had to deal with cramped

and noisy space:

Ten minutes at one end of the platform, and finally a show at each end on the lift shafts. Even when these items [sketches, solos, songs, and jokes] had to be done sideways on, with occasional trains roaring through, they went over big, and the crowd was almost as pleased as we were.⁵⁵

Other locations included St Pancras Hospital, the Royal Mint, and homeless camps, 'rest centres in civil defence depots, in parks, barracks and canteens, at Second Front rallies, Aid for Russia meetings, Royal Ordnance hostels for munitions workers, and at the National Fire-fighting Service stations'.⁵⁶

The Communist Party had been organizing Shelter Committees, and, through Unity, were the first to arrange entertainments in the shelters, and 'mobile groups went to different shelters to sing songs and perform their lighter sketches'.⁵⁷ The Unity mobile group also performed in the Tilbury Shelter in Stepney, one of the largest shelters, which eventually held 10,000 East Enders.⁵⁸ Visits to factories now working around the clock were also organized to provide performances on all shifts, including the night shift. They took plays 'direct to the workers on the job. Here artists may present half-an-hour's performance during a midnight break and remain until morning – usually sleeping on the firewatchers' bunks! Or a midday canteen show'.⁵⁹

The move to a national society and the establishment of the professional company shifted emphasis away from the mobile group for a time. It was re-established in 1946 as the 'propaganda arm' of Unity's amateur company. This followed a show at a mass squat organized by the Communist Party at the Duchess of Bedford House, an empty block of luxury flats in Kensington, 'which marked a return to making links with the audience and with current social and political struggles'.⁶⁰

The mobile group now had a particular Labour Movement focus, performing plays that were based on industrial disputes, such as *Six Men of Dorset*, which was performed at the annual celebration of the Tolpuddle Martyrs, billed as the 'Working Class Event

of 1949'.⁶¹ During the 'Hands Off Russia' campaign, the Mobile Group took *Jolly George*, a Ted Willis play about the 1920 refusal of London stevedores to load arms and ammunition on to a Russia-bound ship, to the East End docks. In Harrow, 'we had to put on the house lights to stop the applause and stamping following the final curtain'.⁶²

Throughout 1950 *The Docker's Tanner* played at town halls, the Derbyshire Miners Welfare Holiday Camp, and at the local baths for the Southwark Trades Council.⁶³ Prior to taking *The Match Girls* (about the 1888 Bryant and May strike) on the road, the play had a successful local run-through at Garibaldi's Restaurant (a CPGB watering-hole in Theobalds Road, Holborn) in front of an audience of trade union leaders, Unity management committee leaders, and fellow Unity members.⁶⁴

The Unity Theatre Federation's Annual Report for 1949 notes one of their main tasks was to 'encourage mobile work' in the areas that were served by Unity branches. The Chingford group was especially keen on mobile work, and moved a resolution that the London Group Committee should meet to discuss the co-ordination of mobile work, noting that 'mobile work of the highest standard being of the utmost political importance, it is necessary to have a centrally controlled mobile theatre service for the whole of London'. Accordingly, a National Committee was formed on the 'special subject' of mobile work, with delegates from the Goldington Street and Chingford branches in London, alongside Merseyside, Birmingham, Aberdeen, Manchester, and Cardiff representatives; at Federation meetings this was a popular topic of discussion.⁶⁵

Despite these successes, questions over the future of the mobile unit continued in the 1950s. In his support of mobile work, Bill Wardman referred to tensions over its role:

The work that our Mobile Unit is doing cannot in any way be separated from the main tasks of the theatre. We must be absolutely clear about this. If there still remains amongst our Active Membership the idea that the Mobile Unit is an expensive toy to be taken up or discard[ed] as our bank balance rises or falls, let them think again. The

facts are that at least half of every Mobile audience has never seen a Unity production before.⁶⁶

Interventions from Unity's General Manager George Leeson led to the dissolution of the Mobile Unit.⁶⁷ However, the CPGB and the Labour Movement sought to revive it, as the Federation's 1954 conference's breakaway Mobile Conference indicates. This was

a healthy affair with discussions that made it very obvious that labour organizations, affiliated or not, definitely want us to continue with mobile work, both musical and straight. The demand is certainly there, only we have fallen down in not being prepared for it, in having to withdraw our forces when we should be expanding.⁶⁸

Ongoing access to transport proved a key factor in the reduction of activity. When the coach could no longer be repaired or replaced by the end of 1954, the activities of the mobile group were curtailed considerably: from 1955, bookings for the group were restricted 'to places which can be reached by London Transport'.⁶⁹ Apart from a brief revival in the late 1950s 'performing music hall, folk, and skiffle . . . it had an intermittent life thereafter'.⁷⁰

A similar combination of theatre-based and mobile work operated within the Glasgow branch. When the Workers Theatre Group joined with four other Labour theatrical societies to become the Glasgow Unity Theatre in 1940, a touring group or 'outside show group', initially separate from the 'indoors' company, staged short pieces of a wide variety throughout the Scottish coalfield towns. It also performed at 'trade union events, at hospitals, to troops, and at rallies of all kinds'.⁷¹

A very large pageant, the *Masque of Spain*, produced in support of the Spanish Aid Committee, took place in Glasgow's Scotstoun showground in August 1939, with over 500 performers.⁷² Glasgow's 1946 tours were booked for coalfield towns, the Ayr Butlin's Camp, and the Saltcoats Beach Pavilion, alongside performances in more conventional theatres and halls.⁷³ Like the London group, Glasgow Unity had purchased a number of vehicles for their touring group,

but their work in this area was curtailed earlier than in London. By 1948 'in view of the excessive expenditure on motor vehicles during the year the Buick car be sold to avoid incurring any further expense'.⁷⁴

In contrast, Manchester Unity Theatre was largely a mobile-based branch, and suffered from the lack of a permanent venue. While many productions were staged in hired halls and other buildings, outside work was a feature of this branch. They provided performances in the parks of the city in summertime over a number of years; interestingly, these were paid for by the City Council.⁷⁵ 'Unity in the Parks' also played at large parks outside Manchester, Boggart Hole Clough, and Platt Fields.⁷⁶ *The Engineers' Pound* was performed on a flat-back lorry in Platt Fields in November 1951, before an audience of two thousand engineers.⁷⁷ With this script, the players 'went out and took the play to the audience – a vast, enthusiastic audience' who provided, 'conclusively, if proof were ever needed, the usefulness of a workers' theatre'.⁷⁸

By end of 1954 the theatre members turned their reliance on mobile work to their advantage, assessing that 'the old argument of mobile plays or full-length plays has . . . been solved by making all our productions mobile'.⁷⁹ However, lack of rehearsal space, declining trade union support, fewer requests for performances, loss of key players, and declining audiences combined to reduce first the mobile work and the theatre's viability by the mid-1960s.⁸⁰

The parallel experiences of the two theatre families exhibit the ways in which mobility played both political and practical roles in their work. Physical movement of people was accompanied by the movement of ideas. This section returns to our three questions about the two theatre movement's use of their mobile work.

What Motivated the Mobile Work?

Zabala has contended that 'one of the key innovations of the New Theatre was its redefinition of performance space. For the workers' theatres took their productions to

the streets, literally.⁸¹ While the mobile performances were notable feature of the New Theatre work, this claim neglects the continuity of such practices. They had found inspiration in the work of

the mobile agitprop companies, founded on the model of the German Red Rockets and exemplified by the Prolet Buehne and the Shock Brigade (or Shock Troupe) of the Workers Laboratory Theatre [WLT] in New York, and Red Megaphone and the self-named Workers' Theatre Movement in the United Kingdom.⁸²

A 'propertyless theatre for a propertyless class', the WTM presented 'its distinctive revolutionary messages on what it called "open platform" stages – carts, lorries, steps, on street corners, in parks, at factory gates'.⁸³ The Rebel Players similarly produced

agitprop plays in the open air from the backs of lorries, taking them to the factory gates when where was a strike, or taking part in demonstrations. Here was a whole new audience, a new kind of actor, expressing a new set of ideas in a new form.⁸⁴

The use of outdoor performances in Manchester had begun very early in the 1920s, with the Clarion Players, later called the Red Megaphones, one of the precursors of Unity. A Salford-based group who only performed outdoors, the majority of their work comprised songs and short sketches.⁸⁵ Drawing upon this rich history as well as the already existing, centuries-old practices of travelling theatre troupes, Unity and the New Theatre did not limit their works to theatre buildings and halls.

Much of the motivation for the work was in educating the working class and enthusing them to action. Joe MacColum was a theatre worker and director of the Left Theatre in Ireland, who went on to work at the London Unity Theatre and later in Australian stage and screen works. He was the director of the Goldington Street branch's mobile unit for a number of years. In 1949, he stated that

at the present time, with the effects of devaluation, the coming election and the need for peace,

Unity's task was limited to helping the workers to face and tackle their problems and he took it for granted the other groups agreed that mobile units, working-class in content and playing to working-class audiences, was the way to do this.

He went on to discuss how audiences had responded to mobile performances of *Six Men of Dorset* and 'how the trade unions had used it to stimulate union organization'.⁸⁶

Similar motivations can be found in the Australian mobile work. In 1952, one of the leading Brisbane members wrote that he believed a New Theatre member could use mobile work

as a propagandist, using his [*sic*] art to encourage his fellows to take a definite action towards a better life. . . . pointing the way to greater strength. A Mobile Group at a factory gate is doing this too. . . . The suggestion has been made that, in order to relate mobile work more closely to the building of theatre audiences, five or six factories be chosen and visited regularly by the Mobile Group.

The Forms of Mobile Work

As illustrated above, the two theatre movements used a large range of types of places for their mobile work. Many of these had previously been employed for theatrical action; for instance the street had long been used as a place of theatre, and as protest. Strikes, street marches, May Day and labour parades in much of the world have long traditions of incorporating theatre, and the mobile work of the New Theatre and Unity were no different.

Some of the theatre sites were private (workplaces, factories, mines), but most were public (streets, parks, hospitals). In particular the use of traditional 'speakers' corners', including London's Hyde Park and the Domain in Sydney, were radical reclamations of public space. Consequently, this work took political and theatrical ideas out of the private theatre halls into the public domain as well as to novel private places.

Movement was not restricted to domestic travel. Unity groups regularly travelled to Soviet and European arts festivals to stage performances and enter drama competitions, often winning awards, while the Sydney

New Theatre performed *Reedy River* at the World Youth Festival in Warsaw in 1955.⁸⁸ Particularly for the Australian thespians, such overseas trips were combined with the 'study trips' to the Soviet bloc and China that were given almost as awards to worthy CPA members.

This work, this movement, saw the active transformation of places like mines, parks, and factory gates into relatable spaces of theatrical performance and political disruption. The older concept of places as stable and settled was disrupted by the activity of the two theatre movements. They disrupted not only a previous tradition, but in some cases like the Sydney Domain (where mobile work was banned at one time), authority, in order to do different things – to protest against working conditions or censorship, for instance.

The street corner or the footpath was no longer marked out as a place of transport; the performances invoked different meanings in those spaces, facilitated a new kind of social interaction, and, temporarily, transformed the relations of power. The travelling body of the street-users, the footpath-users, the park strollers, was transformed into a stationary, thinking, receiving body. The factory gate, traditionally coded in the management's image as a space of movement, was recoded with the performances. Creativity, performativity, play, political ideas: all became parts of that re-coding adventure.

The mobile units' use and reorganization of those places, in physically, bodily engaging with the place, and in employing theatrical communication techniques, brought a new way of existence to the place – turning it into a space such as Doreen Massey describes: 'a product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions' and 'always under construction'. The two theatre movements constructed new spaces out of existing places.⁸⁹

In seeing these novel performance sites as spaces of cultural performance, the mobile groups challenge the exclusivity of those sites – the exclusivity of the street corner as a site of individual pedestrian transport, the exclusivity of the factory as a site of pro-

duction. The results of this mobile work included the creation of theatrical space out of previously non-theatrical places, and in many instances turned non-social places into social spaces. Mobility studies understand space as inherently social. Tim Cresswell understands mobility as 'socially produced motion'.⁹⁰ And theatre is socially produced, of course, and is never an unbiased, neutral communication or representation.

Another outcome of this mobile work was the creation of politically conscious space out of previously non-politically conscious place. The spaces are reconfigured; and now they can be seen as micro political spaces. Space, as Boudreau reminds us, is 'both the site and object of contentious politics'.⁹¹ In his discussion of the geopolitics of social movements, Paul Routledge outlines his concept of 'terrains of resistance', which refers to the 'sites of contestation', 'not just a physical space but also a physical expression, which not only reflects a movement's tactical ingenuity, but also endows space with an amalgam of meanings – be they symbolic, spiritual, ideological, cultural, or political'.⁹²

This describes the mobile units' performance spaces. Routledge further argues that place 'is important to sites of resistance, the creation of alternative knowledges, and the interplay between local and global practices'.⁹³ The mobile groups mediated and restructured those places in innovative ways, changing their meaning, albeit temporarily, creating spaces in which politics and culture unfolded. They made new political and cultural spaces, disrupting the earlier naturalized meanings and behaviours of those locations.

The mobile work was designed to reach out to spaces and audiences that were otherwise inaccessible to a place-bound theatre troupe. They were inaccessible for many reasons. By taking the unit to where people were, such as in the Blitz, where ironically people were sheltering in the Underground – a place of movement rendered immobile by the bombing – a 'captive' audience had to be won over by the troupe. There had been no travelling to see the performance but the performance both came to the people and

moved through the space – up and down the platform – to enable the performances to be experienced by the greatest number of people. 'Going to' the people was constructed in different ways – the performance for the sit-in strikers at Glen Davis was another example of a 'captive' audience but one where the performance was requested. Performing in workplaces during shifts – by invitation – was another example of positive audience 'captivity'.

Enabling and Constraining Factors

Mobility studies place great importance on the transformation of many types of mobility on the coming of the car. A key enabling factor was access to motor transport. The purchase or donation of private vehicles opened up the ability for the groups to travel to working-class communities. Access to transport was critical in enabling the theatres to access communities outside metropolitan areas.

The theatres' purchase of cars and trucks indicated the importance of being able to travel across distances, and enabled greater distances to be travelled. The loss of transport had an effect on the capacity of the theatres to sustain the mobile work. When the London Unity van/truck could no longer be repaired, this had a direct effect on the capacity of the mobile unit to sustain its programme and contributed to the curtailing of its work. While other factors were involved, the issue of transport was significant in determining where the unit could perform and to whom. Far-flung audiences simply became out of range.

In some circumstances the mobile work was a tactic which the two theatres employed to help to alleviate the problems they had in securing traditional theatrical space. This was the case when the Melbourne New Theatre had difficulties finding a location for *Till the Day I Die*.⁹⁴ But generally they refused more conventional spatial boundaries of theatre by choice. The mobile work was consciously intended to serve a political and a social function – to get ideas (as a priority) and performances (secondary) in front of

people who might not go to a traditional theatre. But as Fiona Wilkie reminds us, it can also be 'symbolic: inviting us to loosen the fixity that might be associated with site, belonging, community, and home'.⁹⁵ This loss of fixity opened up spaces of new possibilities.

The topics and themes of the plays and other performances frequently had power relations and dynamics at their centre, given the radical political philosophy underpinning the theatres' objectives and vision. As such, the travelling to working class communities and audiences was part of the political agenda espoused by the theatres – not just what was performed, but where it was performed and to whom. That is not to say that the theatres did not eschew permanent performing space in a traditional theatre setting: this was important in terms of having an identifiable place, but it was not essential.

The transience of performing space was not an inhibitor in the communication of the theatres' messages. This was politics on the move, the use of mobility as a deliberate political strategy. The mobile actions examined are examples of theatre companies breaking out of the fairly conventional spaces of theatre performance to produce, through mobility, new spaces of entertainment, artistic reception and political debate.

Certainly, both theatre groups were conscious of the importance of the ability for them to tour their works, as a promotional tactic for their world view. Urry reminds us that

mobility in general is central to glueing social networks together, while physical travel is especially important in facilitating those face-to-face co-present conversations, to the making of links and social connections, albeit unequal, that endure over time.⁹⁶

The mobile work would have certainly expanded the theatres' social/cultural/political networks. In taking their militant work to these new spaces, they consciously mobilized ideas and emotions and feelings of resistance, struggle, militancy, and political activism.

There were both practical and philoso-

phical constraining factors. Mobility was not uncontested and the branches' mobile work ebbed and flowed and then ceased by the late 1950s. Limited resources, both financial and human, meant that priorities had to be established. Movement became harder when vehicles were no longer available. Analysis of the Unity Theatre Federation minutes from the early 1950s reveals that, outside the London Goldington Street Mobile Unit's work, a lack of suitable material for mobile work was one of the reasons for the demise of the units in most branches of Unity in the UK.

For instance, it was reported in 1952 that Eric Paice's script *Focus on Germany* and 'the mobile version of *Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* [were] the only other new script[s] used by the Goldington Street Mobile Unit. This [last script] was available but the large male cast did not make it very useful to smaller groups.'⁹⁷ Another issue was the lack of requests for mobile work from unions and other organizations. At the same time there was the desire amongst many branches to stage more complex plays requiring more elaborate staging, costumes, and props. Thus the vast majority of Unity mobile work ceased in the mid-1950s.

There was also the issue of the introduction of television and the changing leisure patterns of working-class Britons: London Unity's General Manager Heinz Bernard complained that 'a large proportion of their once regular audience now apparently preferred to stay at home and twiddle knobs on their television sets'.⁹⁸

Conclusion

Cresswell argues for an approach that is alert to the 'historical conditions that produce specific forms of movement, which are radically different'.⁹⁹ For our project, this also means thinking about why the mobile work started in the first place, and why it stopped – not only because of the coming of television, but also because of the waning power of the union movement and of working-class solidarity; and the anti-communism of the Cold War years.

Earlier place-based communities like some of the coalmining cultures Unity and the New Theatre toured to had earlier stressed solidarity at a community level, and this was on the wane by the 1950s. With the post-war economic boom came higher levels of social and geographical mobility for the workers as well, so they were less likely to stick around for a performance.

We understand, through the insights that labour history has brought to the discussions of locality, that locality can be identified as 'an important site of class conflict, negotiation, and accommodation'.¹⁰⁰ This examination of the mobile practices of Unity and the New Theatre demonstrates their active approach to class mobilization. These two theatre families co-ordinated their resources and actions to take their work to the people. They configured this part of their work to being physically mutable – not fixed, but fluid and migratory – and their organizational strategies were characterized by a distinctive and flexible spatiality.

Among motivations for mobilizing theatre were strengthening civic engagement and persuading adherents to their causes. The theatres expanded the practice and potential for culture and politics – in some cases contentious politics – taking their works to places generally excluded from mainstream political discourse. Examination of the innovative spaces and places to which the mobile theatres were taken demonstrates how these could 'signal different socio-political and philosophical assumptions' made by Unity and the New Theatre.¹⁰¹

For the New Theatre and Unity, the use of the mobile work occurred to transform the places of mobile theatre from place to space, not as a theory, but as a series of lived experiences, as a set of spatial practices, 'as process and in process' (original emphases).¹⁰² They employed mobile work as another form of political and cultural activity, not discrete but as part of the broader aims of the theatre. This work helped the theatre groups to achieve a wider geographic circulation of their plays and political messages and a more interventionist approach, and helped to develop a wider shared political identity

than otherwise would have been the case. Unity and the New Theatre pursued universal as well as local truths in their work in a presentation of proletarian mobile theatre that offered a particular type of transnational citizenship.

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