

André Breton & Diego Rivera:

MANIFESTO: TOWARDS A FREE REVOLUTIONARY ART

(Note: The following manifesto appeared in the New York "Partisan Review" for autumn 1938. André Breton has since revealed (in "La Clé des Champs", Paris; 1953) that the document was in fact drawn up in collaboration with Leon Trotsky during a visit which Breton made to him in 1938).

We can say without exaggeration that never has civilisation been menaced so seriously as today. The Vandals, with instruments which were barbarous and so comparatively ineffective, blotted out the culture of antiquity in one corner of Europe. But today we see world civilisation, united in its historic destiny, reeling under the blows of reactionary forces armed with the entire arsenal of modern technology. We are by no means thinking only of the world war that draws near. Even in times of "peace" the position of art and science has become absolutely intolerable.

Insofar as it originates with an individual, insofar as it brings into play subjective talents to create something which brings about an objective enriching of culture, any philosophical, sociological, scientific or artistic discovery seems to be the fruit of a precious chance -- that is to say, the manifestation, more or less spontaneous, of necessity. Such creations cannot be slighted, whether from the standpoint of general knowledge (which interprets the existing world) or of revolutionary knowledge (which, the better to change the world, requires an exact analysis of the laws which govern its movement). Specifically, we cannot remain indifferent to the intellectual conditions under which creative activity takes place, nor should we fail to pay all respect to those particular laws which govern intellectual creation.

In the contemporary world we must recognize the ever more widespread destruction of those conditions under which intellectual creation is possible. From this follows of necessity an increasingly manifest degradation not only of the work of art but also of the specifically "artistic" personality. The régime of Hitler, now that it has rid Germany of all those artists whose work expressed the slightest sympathy for liberty, however superficial, has reduced those who still consent to take up pen or brush to the status of domestic servants of the régime, whose task it is to glorify it to order, according to the worst possible aesthetic conventions. If reports may be believed it is the same in the Soviet Union, where Thermidorean reaction is now reaching its climax.

It goes without saying that we do not identify ourselves with the currently fashionable catchword: "Neither fascism nor communism!", a shibboleth which suits the temperament of the Philistine, conservative and frightened, clinging to the tattered remnants of the "democratic" past. True art, which is not content to play variations on ready-made models but rather insists on expressing the inner needs of man and of mankind in its time -- true art is unable not to be revolutionary, not to aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society. This it must do, were it only to deliver intellectual creation from the chains which bind it, and to allow all mankind to raise itself to those heights which only isolated geniuses have achieved in the past. We recognize that only the social revolution can sweep clean the path for a new culture. If, however, we reject all solidarity with the bureaucracy now in control of the Soviet Union, it is precisely because, in our eyes, it represents, not communism, but its most treacherous and dangerous enemy.

The totalitarian regime of the USSR, working through the so-called "cultural" organisation it controls in other countries, has spread over the entire world a deep twilight hostile to every sort of spiritual value. A twilight of filth and blood in which, disguised as intellectuals and artists, those men steep themselves who have made of servility a career, of lying for pay a custom, and of the palliation of crime a source of pleasure. The official art of Stalinism mirrors with a blatancy unexampled in history their efforts to put a good face on their mercenary profession.

The repugnance which this shameful negation of principles of art inspires in the artistic world -- a negation which even slave states have never dared to carry so far -- should give rise to an active, uncompromising condemnation. The opposition of writers and artists is one of the forces which can usefully contribute to the discrediting and overthrow of regimes which are destroying, along with the right of the proletariat to aspire to a better world, every sentiment of nobility and even of human dignity.

The communist revolution is not afraid of art. It realizes that the role of the artist in a decadent capitalist society is determined by the conflict between the individual and various social forms which are hostile to him. This fact alone, insofar as he is conscious of it, makes the artist the natural ally of revolution. The process of sublimation, which here comes into play and which psychoanalysis has analysed, tries to restore the broken equilibrium between the integral "ego" and the outside elements it rejects. This restoration works to the advantage of the "ideal of self", which marshals against the unbearable present reality all those powers of the interior world, of the "self", which are common to all men and which are constantly flowering and developing. The need for emancipation felt by the individual spirit has only to follow its natural course to be led to mingle its stream with this primeval necessity -- the need for the emancipation of man.

The conception of the writer's function which the young Marx worked out is worth recalling. "The writer", he declared, "naturally must make money in order to live and write, but he should not under any circumstances live and write in order to make money. . . . The writer by no means looks on his work as a means. It is an end in itself and so little a means in the eyes of himself and of others that if necessary he sacrifices his existence to the existence of his work. . . . The first condition of the freedom of the press is that it is not a business activity". It is more than ever fitting to use this statement against those who would regiment intellectual activity in the direction of ends foreign to itself, and prescribe, in the guise of so-called "reasons of State", the themes of art. The free choice of these themes and the absence of all restrictions on the range of his exploitations -- these are possessions which the artist has a right to claim as inalienable. In the realm of artistic creation, the imagination must escape from all constraint and must under no pretext allow itself to be placed under bonds. To those who urge us, whether for today or for tomorrow, to consent that art should submit to a discipline which we hold to be radically incompatible with its nature, we give a flat refusal and we repeat our deliberate intention of standing by the formula complete freedom for art. We recognize, of course, that the revolutionary State has the right to defend itself against the counter-attack of the bourgeoisie, even when this drapes itself in the flag of science or art. But there is an abyss between these enforced and temporary measures of revolutionary self-defence and the pretension to lay commands on intellectual creation. If, for the better development of the forces of material production, the revolution must build a socialist regime with centralised control, to develop intellectual creation an anarchist regime of individual liberty should from the first be established. No authority, no dictatorship, not the least trace of orders from above! Only on a base of friendly cooperation, without constraint from outside, will it be possible for scholars and artists to carry out their tasks, which will be more far-reaching than ever before in history.

It should be clear by now that in defending freedom of thought we have no intention of justifying political indifference, and that it is far from our wish to revive a so-called "pure" art which generally serves the extremely impure ends of reaction. No, our conception of the role of art is too high to refuse it an influence on the fate of society. We believe that the supreme task of art in our epoch is to take part actively and consciously in the preparation of the revolution. But the artist cannot serve the struggle for freedom unless he subjectively assimilates its social content, unless he feels in his very nerves its meaning and drama and freely seeks to give his own inner world incarnation in his art.

In the present period of the death agony of capitalism, democratic as well as fascist, the artist sees himself threatened with the loss of his right to live and continue working. He sees all avenues of communication choked with the debris of capitalist collapse. Only naturally, he turns to the Stalinist organisations which hold out the possibility of escaping from his isolation. But if he is to avoid complete demoralisation, he cannot remain there, because of the impossibility of delivering his own message and the degrading servility which these organisations exact from him in exchange for certain material advantages. He must understand that his place is elsewhere, not among those who betray the cause of the revolution and mankind, but among those who with unshaken fidelity bear witness to the revolution, among those who, for this reason, are alone able to bring it to fruition, and along with it the ultimate free expression of all forms of human genius.

The aim of this appeal is to find a common ground on which may be reunited all revolutionary writers and artists, the better to serve the revolution by their art and to defend the liberty of that art itself against the usurpers of the revolution. We believe that aesthetic, philosophical and political tendencies of the most varied sort can find here a common ground. Marxists can march here hand in hand with anarchists, provided both parties uncompromisingly reject the reactionary police patrol spirit represented by Joseph Stalin and by his henchman Garcia Oliver.

We know very well that thousands on thousands of isolated thinkers and artists are today scattered throughout the world, their voices drowned out by the loud choruses of well-disciplined liars. Hundreds of small local magazines are trying to gather youthful forces about them, seeking new paths and not subsidies. Every progressive tendency in art is destroyed by fascism as "degenerate". Every free creation is called "fascist" by the Stalinists. Independent revolutionary art must now gather its forces for the struggle against reactionary persecution. It must proclaim aloud the right to exist. Such a union of forces is the aim of the International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art which we believe it is now necessary to form.

We by no means insist on every idea put forward in this manifesto, which we ourselves consider only a first step in the new direction. We urge every friend and defender of art, who cannot but realize the necessity for this appeal, to make himself heard at once. We address the same appeal to all those publications of the left wing which are ready to participate in the creation of the International Federation and to consider its task and its methods of action.

When a preliminary international contact has been established through the press and by correspondence, we will proceed to the organisation of local and national congresses on a modest scale. The final step will be the assembly of a world congress which will officially mark the foundation of the International Federation.

Our aims:

The independence of art -- for the revolution.

The revolution -- for the complete liberation of art!

W. B. Bland:

TOWARDS A PROGRESSIVE ART

It has been proposed that the Writers' Workshop of the Half Moon Theatre should adopt the manifesto "Towards a Revolutionary Art".

I should like to analyse certain features of this document in order to demonstrate why I believe this proposal should be rejected.

The Authors

Let us look first at the named authors of the manifesto.

André Breton, the French poet, was for most of life -- both before and after he signed this manifesto -- the chief spokesman of surrealism, which he himself defines as

"Pure psychic automatism, by which it is intended to express . . . the real process of thought, in the absence of all control exercised by the reason and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupation".

(A. Breton, cited in article "Surrealism", in: J. R. Taylor: "The Penguin Dictionary of the Theatre"; Harmondsworth; 1970; p. 269).

Can it be the aim of the writers united in the Writers' Workshop to create plays without using their conscious minds, without any concern for aesthetic or moral considerations? The question answers itself.

The Mexican painter Diego Rivera is in a different category, for there is undoubtedly much in his work which progressive artists can admire and from which they can learn. Despite this, Rivera's "revolutionary" ardour was little more than skin deep: it was, for example, only a few months after this manifesto had appeared that Rivera endorsed the candidature of the right-wing General Almazan, who stood for the post of President of Mexico on a programme of smashing the trade unions!

It is, therefore, not surprising that the "International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art" proposed by such individuals should have failed to materialise. Indeed, the manifesto itself had been largely forgotten until Breton claimed in 1953 that it had been drawn up in collaboration with Trotsky.

Let us look now at the content of the document.

"Stalinism Negates Art"

One point which is made several times in the manifesto is that "Stalinism" brings about a

"... shameful negation of principles of art" (p. 2)

As my own level of political understanding is, unfortunately, not very high, I have studied the literature of a number of organisations which declare themselves to be supporters of the ideas of Trotsky. From these I find that the term "Stalinist" embraces a wide political spectrum stretching from Vyacheslav Molotov, (who was indeed Stalin's close associate) through Nikita Khrushchov (who denounced Stalin as a "bloodthirsty dictator") to members of the various Fourth Internationals other than that to which a particular writer belongs. As a result of studying this literature and the manifesto I am now convinced that I am a Stalinist. I am, of course, duly grateful to Mr. Colville for having brought about this elevation of my political consciousness.

While I need little convincing that the Writers' Workshop would be much improved by my being thrown out, I fail to see that the fact that I have discovered I am a Stalinist should be relevant to this, should make it impossible for me to contribute in the slightest to the cause of progressive drama. One can hardly believe that the Workers' Revolutionary Party, the Communist Party and the Labour Party are all capable of successfully leading the British working class to socialist revolution. Clearly, therefore, sincere socialists who belong to at least some of these parties must be in error. But if they are sincere socialists, are they not capable of creating progressive plays?

There is, of course, nothing to prevent a particular political party having its own theatre, just as it has its own publications. But I am convinced that the Half Moon Theatre and its Writers' Workshop need to be wider than this. In my view any writer -- actual or aspiring -- should be welcomed into the Workshop if he/she is prepared to cooperate in the creation of progressive theatre.

But cooperation, if it is to be effective, requires tacit agreement on the part of members of the Workshop to refrain from trying to get the Workshop to take up positions which would be, on principle, unacceptable to some members. It is clear from discussion, for example, that a number of members -- distinguished by their beauty, kindness to animals and literary dexterity -- regard themselves as disciples of Trotsky; it would, therefore, be divisive, disruptive and wrong were a Stalinist like myself to lock WRP members in the toilet and smuggle in Lawrence and Wishart in the disguise of writers in order to secure the passage of a manifesto which declared that "Trotskyism negates art".

But similarly the adoption of a manifesto which declared that "Stalinism negates art" would be equally divisive, disruptive and wrong, since it would force from the Workshop writers who, although genuinely in support of the broad aim of creating progressive drama, found this formula unacceptable on principle.

#### "Complete Freedom for Art"

Perhaps, however, the formula "Stalinism negates art" could be deleted from the manifesto, leaving principles which would be acceptable to all writers who are prepared to take a progressive stand.

The key concept of the manifesto, however, is that a workers' state should base itself upon

"... complete freedom for art . . .

To develop intellectual creation an anarchist régime of individual liberty should from the first be established. No authority, no dictation, not the least trace of orders from above!" (p. 2).

At first glance the slogan "complete freedom for art" sounds estimable, for who is prepared to say he is "opposed to freedom"? I suggest, however, that it needs to be examined more closely.

"Complete freedom for art" can only mean that there must be no censorship whatever by the workers' state. Again, at first glance this sounds admirable, since in our society state censorship is often used to prevent the dissemination of progressive ideas. But, in the complete absence of state censorship, a writer would be free to portray, if he wished, black people as gorillas, Jews as slaving, big-nosed bloodsuckers. Here in capitalist Britain such racist filth is at least nominally illegal, and it is significant that the National Front, in defending itself against the anti-fascist movement, utilises above all the slogan of "freedom of speech"!

In fact, some freedoms are good, other freedoms are bad; and some freedoms are, in fact, mutually contradictory. The freedom for racial minorities to live their lives without insults, discrimination and persecution is a good freedom, and it is in direct conflict with the freedom of fascists to indulge in racist propaganda, which is a bad freedom. A rational human being cannot, therefore, support both freedoms; he cannot support all freedoms; he cannot support freedom in the absolute.

Thus, in contrast to the manifesto's demand for "complete freedom for art", Lenin wrote:

"This absolute freedom is a bourgeois or an anarchist phrase (since, as a world outlook, anarchism is bourgeois philosophy turned inside out)".

(V. I. Lenin: "Party Organisation and Party Literature", in: "On Literature and Art"; Moscow; 1967; p. 26);

and

"Unless freedom promotes the emancipation of labour from the yoke of capital, it is a deception".

(V. I. Lenin: "Deception of the People with Slogans of Freedom and Equality", in: "Collected Works", Volume 29; Moscow; 1974; p. 352).

#### Bring on Merlyn Rees!

It is true that the manifesto states:

"We recognise, of course, that the revolutionary State has the right to defend itself against the counter-attack of the bourgeoisie, even when this drapes itself in the flag of science or art" (p. 2).

At first glance this might seem to be saying that the revolutionary state has the right to prohibit scientific theories and forms of art which it regards as attacks upon itself. But this would involve the state setting up an organ of censorship to decide what scientific theories and what forms of art do not constitute an attack upon it and so are permissible, and what do constitute an attack upon it and so are to be prohibited. Clearly, such measures would be in total contradiction with the basic demand of the manifesto for "complete freedom" for science and art, and they are in fact explicitly disavowed when the manifesto goes on to say:

"There is an abyss between these enforced and temporary measures of revolutionary self-defence and the pretension to lay commands on intellectual creation" (p. 2).

This can only mean that the "temporary measures of revolutionary self-defence" which the manifesto is prepared to allow the workers' state to adopt amount to no more than "an official reply". In the "workers' state" envisaged by the manifesto, writers and artists will be quite free to indulge in the most pernicious racist propaganda, despite the fact that such racism can only weaken the unity of the working class and so the strength of the workers' state; all the "revolutionary state" can do is to put up, from time to time, someone like Merlyn Rees to "deplore" it!

#### Neutrality in Relation to Artistic Form?

Perhaps we might accept the phrase "freedom for art" in a more restricted manner than that put forward in the manifesto: to permit the workers' state the right to prohibit artistic content which it regards as counter-revolutionary or socially harmful in principle, but make it adopt a completely neutral position with regard to artistic form?

In a society which is in decay, which has outlived its usefulness to the mass of the people, an artist may take essentially one of three possible courses:

Firstly, he may use his art to serve the Establishment of that decaying society. To do so he must falsify both the society and the Establishment, and art which falsifies reality can only be bad art, no matter how skilled the techniques with which it is executed. Further, if the artist is to serve the Establishment effectively, he must use artistic forms by which these falsehoods can be readily communicated to the mass of the people.

Secondly, he may ally himself consciously with the interests of the mass of the people and, therefore, use his art as a weapon to help in progressive social change. To constitute such a weapon his art needs to present a faithful and in depth reflection of reality -- for in a society in decay the truth itself is revolutionary. Further, if the artist is to serve the interests of the mass of the people

effectively, he must use artistic forms by which these truths can be readily communicated to the mass of the people. As a result of this, there is a superficial similarity between the works of art produced by artists who have adopted the first and second courses -- a superficial similarity which is based on the need of both to communicate their content readily to the mass of the people. The basic difference between the works of art produced by artists who have taken the first and second courses respectively lies in content.

Thirdly, the artist may reject the use of his art to serve the interests of the mass of the people, but yet be unable to place it at the disposal of an Establishment he cannot but despise. He can take this third course only by eliminating all content, true or false, from his work, so that his poems become sounds without meaning, his paintings abstract shapes and colours, his plays a "Theatre of the Absurd". Over the last fifty years, the overwhelming majority of artists in the capitalist world have taken this third course.

Can we therefore approve an amendment of the manifesto which would permit the state to prohibit the work of artists who have chosen to follow the first course, the course of overt reaction and counter-revolution, but demand that it takes a position of complete neutrality between the work of artists who have chosen to follow the second or third courses?

Certainly it would be possible -- and, in my view desirable -- for the workers' state to permit the creation of works of art by artists who have chosen to follow either the second or the third courses outlined above. But this is not the same thing as adopting a position of neutrality, which in practice is impossible.

It is impossible for the workers' state to adopt a position of neutrality on the question of artistic form; because artists need an income with which to buy the food, clothing, etc., they need in order to live; because in a workers' state the publishing houses, theatres, etc. are state-owned; because publishing houses, theatres, etc. cannot publish, produce, etc. every work submitted to them, but have to select. This necessity of selection makes it necessary for the workers' state to draw up criteria by which this selection should be made.

In the early years after the October Revolution in Russia, the state and the Communist Party attempted to maintain a neutral position on artistic questions. The concept that this policy was altered because Stalin woke up one morning and decided he disliked purple (a concept implicit in the manifesto) has no relation whatever to historical truth. Incontrovertible evidence makes it abundantly clear that this policy of artistic neutrality was thrown overboard because of vociferous and determined complaints from the working class:

"Why, in the twentieth century, should my daughter be taught at school that the earth is flat and the theory of evolution a blasphemous invention?"

The official reply:

"Because her teacher believes it to be true, and the Party and state do not interfere in scientific questions",

simply failed to satisfy, just as did the similar official reply to the worker who wrote to "Pravda" saying:

"Why should our tractor plant be disfigured by a hideous mural which looks like a cow's udder floating in crimson mince pies?"

The inevitability that an attempt to maintain a position of neutrality on artistic questions would be abandoned under pressure from below is well illustrated by the recent history of the Writers' Workshop itself. Mr. Colville, the representative of the Theatre in the Workshop, originally put forward the theory of "complete freedom for art" in the form of the principle that all plays submitted to the Workshop by a writer who had attached himself to it should be read. It was following the reading of a farce which the Chairman

of the Management Committee of the Theatre described as "crap", that the members of the Workshop objected en masse to the waste of time and money involved in the reading of this play, and demanded that in futures plays submitted for reading (at a cost averaging £50-60) be vetted to ensure that they satisfied certain criteria. It was Mr. Colville who volunteered to undertake this task of vetting scripts, and he will no doubt perform it competently and conscientiously. Nevertheless, I find it ironical, if not farcical, that the "aesthetic dictator" of the Writers' Workshop should now propose that the Workshop adopt a manifesto calling for "complete freedom for art", for the "absence of all restrictions" on an artist's work, and for the ending of all "constraints" and "bonds" on a writer's creative work!

#### An Alternative Basis for a Manifesto

Having opposed the adoption by the Writers' Workshop of the manifesto "Towards a Free Revolutionary Art", it is only fair to propose the basis for an alternative. In my view this should be along the following lines:

#### Manifesto of the Writers' Workshop of the Half Moon Theatre

1. The Writers' Workshop of the Half Moon Theatre believes that the Theatre should have as a prime aim the winning back of working people into that organic connection with the theatre that has barely existed since the Middle Ages.
2. It believes that an important way of achieving this aim is for the Theatre to create and present dramatic works which portray, in as vivid and moving a manner as possible, the social problems of the working people, and particularly those of the East End of London in which area the Theatre is situated.
3. The Writers' Workshop of the Half Moon Theatre takes its stand on the creation of a progressive drama, that is, on a drama which is a weapon for progressive social change. It believes that social progress in the era in which we live stems from the working class and working people, so that progressive drama must have a content sympathetic to the working people, favourable to their unity and advancement.
4. It believes that progressive drama should have the widest variety of artistic forms, provided only that these are able effectively to communicate the content of the drama to an audience of working people.
5. The Writers' Workshop recognises that its members are not perfected or divinely inspired playwrights, so that one of its important aims is to assist in the development of its writer members by the study of dramatic theory, by the reading and constructive criticism of plays written by its members, and in all other ways that may be considered useful.
6. Membership of the Writers' Workshop shall be open to all existing or aspiring playwrights who accept the above aims.

WRITERS' WORKSHOP  
HALF MOON THEATRE

SYLLABUS OF COURSE ON

"THE AESTHETICS OF DRAMA"

Introduction: Art, Drama and Aesthetics.

The Ideas on the Aesthetics of Drama of:

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.)  
Horace (65-8 B.C.)  
Longinus (220-273)  
Thomas More (1478-1535)  
Julius Scaliger (1484-1558)  
Lodovico Castelvetro (1505-1571)  
Philip Sidney (1554-1586)  
John Dryden (1631-1700)  
Jeremy Collier (1650-1726)  
Denis Diderot (1713-1784)  
Edmund Burke (1729-1797)  
Pierre-Augustin Beaumarchais (1732-1799)  
Eugène Scribe (1791-1861)  
Victor Hugo (1802-1885)  
George Henry Lewes (1817-1878)  
George Meredith (1828-1909)  
Émile Zola (1840-1902)  
Vincent Brunetiere (1849-1906)  
George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950)  
William Archer (1856-1924)  
Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko (1859-1943)  
Adolphe Appia (1862-1928)  
Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938)  
Maxim Gorky (1868-1936)  
Gordon Craig (1872-1966)  
Alfred Jarry (1873-1907)  
Max Reinhardt (1873-1943)  
Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940)  
Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875-1933)  
Harley Granville-Barker (1877-1946)  
Leon Trotsky (1877-1940)  
Jacques Copeau (1879-1949)  
Jean-Jacques Bernard (b. 1888)  
Erwin Piscator (1893-1966)  
Antonin Artaud (1896-1948)  
Andrei Zhdanov (1896-1948)  
Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956)  
Lee Strasberg (b. 1901)

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Each lecture will include a factual summary of the principal ideas relating to the aesthetics of drama propounded by one or more of the figures listed above, followed by a discussion on the validity or otherwise of these views in relation to the problems of the contemporary progressive theatre.

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