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Type	Book Section
URL	This version is available at: http://usir.salford.ac.uk/12133/
Published Date	2009

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Mediating the 1930s: Documentary and Politics in Theatre Union's *Last Edition* (1940)

Ben Harker

In March 1940, student and self-styled Aristotelian aesthete Anthony Burgess attended an amateur theatre production at the Round House hall, Ancoats, Manchester. *Last Edition: A Living Newspaper Dealing with Events from 1934-1940* was collectively researched by the cast, written by twenty-five-year-old Jimmie Miller (later known as Ewan MacColl), co-produced by Miller and his twenty-six-year-old wife, Joan Littlewood, and staged by Theatre Union, a Popular Front group whose key players were committed to combining communist politics and theatrical innovation. The accuracy with which Burgess could later recall the production was a measure of the impression it made. 'A ramp thrust out from the side of the proscenium,' Burgess wrote in his autobiography almost fifty years later:

> and on it paraded workers out of *Metropolis*, some of them pressed local unemployed and their wives, many of them with their false teeth out. The lighting plot was complex and oiled like machinery. Amplified gramophone records swelled in on split-second cues […] even the Ancoats streets were drawn into the message: one emerged into slums of squalor now rarely seen and wanted to tear them down with one's bare hands. (1987, p. 180, 181)

This chapter, which presents *Last Edition* as a significant but critically neglected intervention into the living newspaper genre, focuses on the production's documentary

aesthetics, political imperatives, and the irrepressible tensions that emerged between the two during the early months of the Second World War.

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Last Edition coincided with Littlewood and Miller's blacklisting from BBC North Region radio where both had worked as freelance scriptwriters and presenters since 1934: from the outset, the production was conceived as a subversive alternative to 'well trained voices on the Radio' who brought news of 'the well oiled movements of the Great' (Goorney and MacColl, 1986, p. 33).[1] It was also an alternative to formal theatre, and the company's amateur status paradoxically became a source of marginal cultural power: Theatre Union operated below the radar of the Lord Chamberlain's office; the ruse of performing only to 'private audiences of Theatre Union members' - tickets were sold in advance and receipted as membership subs - enabled the company to present a reading of contemporary history beyond the scope of censored theatre professionals.[2]

The living newspaper form presented the ideal vehicle for their radical revue. As a precocious veteran of the early 1930s Workers' Theatre Movement, Jimmie Miller was attuned to the genesis of the *zhivaya gazeta*, or living newspaper, in revolutionary Russia.[3] Now well-connected in the international circuits of a more coalitionist, anti-fascist Popular Front theatre scene, Littlewood and Miller were equally alert to the living newspaper's recent adaptation by Hallie Flanagan's Federal Theater Project in the New Deal United States, and also of the form's 1938 appropriation by Britain's Unity Theatre for *Living Newspaper No. 1: Busmen* (dealing with the 1937 Transport Workers' strike) and *Living Newspaper No. 2: Crisis* (Unity's swift response to the Munich Crisis). Not that *Last Edition* merely slotted recent news into an established living newspaper template: the

production was a characteristically experimental venture in a young and loosely defined genre. '[W]e hadn't seen any scripts' (MacColl, 1973, p. 66), he later recalled, 'we were being very eclectic - testing things out, seeing if they worked' (MacColl, 1985, p. 243). Part of an ongoing pursuit of a 'theatre of synthesis' and 'a Marxist aesthetic of theatre' (p. 242, 243), *Last Edition* was repeatedly revised and refined in the rehearsal room. It existed in multiple forms: individual scenes and sections were presented at political meetings including fundraisers for the beleaguered and soon-to-banned *Daily Worker*; here, the production dutifully contrasted the tranquillizing misinformation of the bourgeois press with the bracing veracity of the workers' own newspaper.[4] The full-length theatrical version, comprised of 20 scenes and which ran to over two hours, pursued bigger game, insisting that the complex ways of seeing unique to live theatre were themselves indispensable to a troubled present and a better future. 'We live in times of great social upheaval', stated one of Theatre Union's frequently updated manifestos, '[The] struggle for peace and progress manifests itself in many forms and not the least important of these is the drama.'[5]

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'The form of the living newspaper is a dramatic document utilising all the approaches to theatre', claimed a report written for a Theatre Union meeting held on 6 November 1939, and active verbs were used to describe the new production's objectives: *Last Edition* intended 'to *expose* the demagoguery of the war mongers', 'to *show* the real fascist nature of the National Government' and 'to *show* the state of affairs in the British colonies' (my italics).[6] The implication of the term 'living newspaper' was that the official print media was either inert, moribund or already dead: like contemporary attempts to

expose and contest the economics, tone and content of the newsreels shown in British cinemas (Cunningham, 1988, p. 289, Hogenkamp, 1986, p. 93, 97), *Last Edition* was committed to challenging the dominant media's construction of the real. Re-working a joke from Robert Tressell's pioneering working-class protest novel *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (1914) - a novel that situates its own discourse in opposition to the false consciousness pedalled by the *Daily Obscurer* newspaper - *Last Edition* includes a newspaper reporter who introduces himself, 'I represent the Press, Suppress, Oppress and Depress' (p. 54). The production relentlessly cites and samples establishment newspapers and shows privileged characters having their perceptions augmented by their press. In one scene, two 'fashionable women' find themselves uncomfortably close to the House of Commons during the explosive culmination of the 1934 Hunger March. They read a newspaper to avert their eyes from the chanting marches, commenting 'Oh my dear, these rough men. Whatever is the country coming to?' (p. 16). The women 'see' the hunger marches though the prism of the dominant press: *Last Edition* insists that the hidden mediations of the establishment press play an important role in the constitution of 'the real' and the creation of an untroubled public consciousness.

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In his 1934 essay, 'The Author as Producer', Walter Benjamin described the form of the contemporary newspaper as 'an arena of …literary confusion' that revealed the splintering of bourgeois thought into 'insoluble antinomies' (1998, p. 89). *Last Edition* likewise reads the newspaper as a site of atomised facts and narrative confusion symptomatic of the declining ruling class's estrangement from the historical plot it had scripted as an ascendant, dynamic, revolutionary force. What Benjamin called the

newspaper's 'unselective assimilation of facts' (p. 90), *Last Edition* presents as the ruling class's inability to grasp social totality, to feel the rhythm of history, or to make connections between disparate phenomena. In one episode, the wife of an unemployed cotton-spinner is shown to be dependent upon this plotless view of the world: she reads the newspaper silently while the narrator - a part shared by Miller and Littlewood - frames the tableau with a soft voiceover:

> Narrator: Anything good in the papers tonight … anything there with an offer of hope. Anything that might be a possible way out of your misery. (Pause). No, only the news that's always there:-
>
> The Loch Ness monster seen again.
> An actress suing for divorce.
> The Worthing Pier destroyed by fire.
> Salford man's assault on child. (p. 7)

Here, one mode of authoritative discourse - the radio voiceover - is hijacked to empty out another - newsprint reportage. The apparently 'objective' form of the newspaper is shown to reflect and reproduce a dominant crisis in perspective in which history is available neither to meaningful analysis nor to coherent narration, but instead is reified into discrete, sealed episodes. The trivial and momentous become interchangeable and *Last Edition*'s critique of the reified media is dramatically reinforced by the recurrent figure of a chanting and dancing newspaper vendor, a visual symbol of news as commodity suitable only for passive consumption. Revived from the earlier Miller and Littlewood dramatic production of V. J. Jerome's poem *Newsboy* (1934), this pirouetting figure weaves his way through the

production, his sing-song double rhymes comically underscoring the historically generated crisis in meaning:

> All the latest - last edition!
> Mr. Eden's German mission
> Paris riots, food shops looted,
> Van der Lubbe executed.
> Loch Ness Monster seen again
> Sentence passed on Ludwig Renn,
> News an' Chron. - Last Edition,
> Last Edition - Last Edition. (p. 16)

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Observing the emergence of collective media on Soviet agricultural communes in the late 1920s, Walter Benjamin wrote: 'the decline of literature in the bourgeois press is proving to be the formula for its regeneration in the Soviet press … the place where the words is [*sic*] most debased - that is to say, the newspaper - becomes the very place where a rescue operation can be mounted' (1998, p. 90). *Last Edition* represented a similar response to British print media, regarded as both the site of reification and a treasure trove of archival fragments awaiting critical and creative transformation into a coherent teleological story. 'The task of the proletariat', wrote poet and critic Christopher Caudwell in *Illusion and Reality* (1937), 'is just as much to integrate this ideological confusion and raise it to a new

level of consciousness, as it is to integrate the economic confusion and raise it to a new level of production' (1973, p. 317).

Such consciousness-raising was central to *Last Edition*'s purpose: shaped chronologically around the contours of recent history as related through the press, it strove systematically to illuminate, defamilarise and re-animate this history in the context of revolutionary vision and live theatre. One of the production's basic and most frequently repeated moves was to inscribe the callous and flattening 'neutrality' of news media with the 'real' human content to which the media alluded but ultimately suppressed. *Last Edition*'s opening scene mentions five unemployed workers who took their own lives in the course of 1934. One of these, William Castle of Leeds, then becomes the subject of the second scene, which reaches behind Castle's brief mention in the press - 'suicide whilst of unsound mind' (p. 14) - to dramatise the brutalities of contemporary capitalism through this story of a worker rendered redundant by overproduction and then demeaned by the Means Test. The emotional charge of carefully rendered realism - sharpened in the rehearsal room through the improvisational exercises based on Constantin Stanislavsky's recently translated *An Actor Prepares* (1937) - presents the intimate lives of rounded characters through naturalistic acting and dialogue. But this emotive moment of quiet domestic despair is then jarringly interrupted by the ideal consequence of the anger provoked by such scenes: the combination of individuals into the historical force of an organised working class, in this case the National Unemployed Workers' Movement and the 1934 Hunger March, dramatically figured through stylised megaphonic voices, choreographed marching and mass singing. Intuitively in synch with Benjamin's definition of epic theatre which 'proposes to treat elements of reality as if they were elements of an experimental set up' (1998, p. 99), Theatre Union was engaged in the creation of a didactic theatre whose

subject was what Brecht called 'the world as it changes (and also how it may be changed)' (1936, p. 507).

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The Gresford disaster of 24 September 1934 - in which 265 pit-workers were killed - quickly became synonymous with a distinctively 1930s radical documentary aesthetic.[7] The 1930s journal *FACT*, which sought to develop theoretically-informed documentary modes intent on 'reproducing reality as soberly and authentically as possible, while at the same time "baring its own devices" in an anti-illusionist manner' (Williams, 1997, p. 165), reprinted the government report on the Gresford disaster. Like novelist Walter Greenwood - who worked up the Gresford disaster in *The Secret Kingdom* (1938) - Theatre Union was drawn to a key 1930s news moment when usually invisible labour irrupted into public view.

'We were using a whole lot of different techniques inside […] the framework of a straightforward presentation of facts,' MacColl later recalled, and Theatre Union's version of Gresford maximised *Last Edition*'s bold re-fashioning of theatrical space.[8] Working in halls rather than theatres enabled Theatre Union to flank the audience with the additional performance platforms later remembered by Anthony Burgess; this in turn facilitated the contrapuntal and montage styles through which they at once reproduced and exceeded the realist representational modes variously associated with theatrical naturalism, the monologic print media, and apparently 'objective' documentary approaches (those which passed themselves off as granting unmediated access to the real).

Last Edition's first Gresford scene was a realistic dramatisation of the pithead action during the doomed rescue operation; in the second, the narrator frames events from

the side of the stage, filling in the details and personnel of the Board of Trade enquiry and dispassionately imparting the full facts of the tragedy. The scale of the traumatic events depicted in the previous scene is now spelt out: it is made clear that the handful of women whose bereavements were dramatised in the preceding scene were amongst a larger total. The stage direction runs:

> At the beginning of the foregoing passage the light slowly begins to come up to reveal a group of miners' wives moving along 'A' platform towards the stage. Simultaneously a group of miners enter down right and stand together. During the trial scene those representing company interests must be on a higher plane than those who speak for the workers - these, later, must be linked with the group of watching miners. [Sir Stafford] Cripps must be between the two groups. (p. 24)

Disregarding censorship regulations that proscribed 'the representation of public personalities either living or implied by voice' (Watson, 1981, p. 348), Theatre Union presented a verbatim reconstruction of the inquiry courtroom in which left-wing King's Counsel and Labour MP Stafford Cripps (who had represented the Gresford miners free of charge) cross-examined the Colliery manager about the pit's health and safety record. Cripps' eloquence and punitive prosecution is given cathartic full-reign through realistic conventions. At the same time, Theatre Union complicates the picture, drawing attention to the limitations of these familiar conventions of representation (legal, political and cultural). The stage directions make it clear that class relations are to be given magnified spatial form: the dramatised courtroom is made vividly to reproduce those hierarchies in power and privilege concealed by the ideological work of real courtrooms. Theatrical space is used to spell out visually that Cripps, though sympathetically presented as a highly acute

and articulate lawyer, has a mediating role between capital and labour: the implication is that he is a radical representative who functions to contain the class anger to which he gives voice. The scene not only spatialises this political critique of the real but imaginatively corrects it by overlaying the courtroom scenario with the outlines of a fantasy space in which the limited type of 'representation' offered by Cripps is surpassed. Theatre Union overloads the reality effect by unrealistically bringing into the courtroom scene those excluded (the absent working-class families only represented by Cripps). Bereaved women form a chorus on one side of the stage; further defying realism, the ghosts of dead men killed in the accident form a second chorus on the other. The names of the dead are recited, an act of collective memory that speaks back to the legalese and inscribes individual identities into the anonymous death-count. The chorus interjects testimony at key moments, notably in the courtroom debate about victimised trade union militants. The scene creates a forum in which reality is re-constructed, critiqued and improved: the silenced get to speak; even the dead, whose stories are forever repressed, return to testify; the voices of those represented by Cripps are imaginatively brought into tension with their representative. The multiple interruptions of the carefully documented real are generated by those very utopian impulses the production hopes to engender in its audience.

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Throughout *Last Edition*, Theatre Union addresses an anxiety widely shared on the 1930s cultural left that artistic endeavour was an intellectual, superstructural indulgence cut off from real working-class labour and secondary to the more measurable political work of industrial organisation.[9] The production repeatedly punctuates its illusion to insist that cultural work - assembling and presenting from the scattered shards of the media a reading

of history, facilitating informed and critical consciousness - is a valuable intervention integral to imagining and creating a different future. ‘And now I speak not as a character in a play,’ says a member of the cast during one of many scripted interruptions, ‘but as an actor to the public, as one who sees in Theatre Union an opportunity of learning how to ACT without abandoning the simple laws of truth or letting my life become divorced from other people’s lives’ (p. 43). The usual circuits of non-political theatre, the words imply, involve a separation from working-class life; Theatre Union, by contrast, remains organically connected to its audience - a point underscored by the emphasis on craft. ‘[An actor] must learn his trade just as an engineer or a miner or a cotton weaver must learn their trade’ (p. 80), states another interjection, establishing common ground between the skilled manual work of theatre and more conventional working class labour.

To develop this idea of theatre as socially necessary labour, the production revisits and deepens the formula of inset ‘acted-out’ scenes common in early 1930s Workers’ Theatre Movement agitprop sketches.[10] One scene in *Last Edition* shows class-conscious workers buying newspapers, reading out excerpts about the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935, and supplying critical commentary (pp. 36-42). These characters are reading between the lines of official discourse, making connections, looking for and creating a better, more living newspaper: they are at once *Last Edition*’s characters, creators and ideal audience. Their critical reading develops into their acting out two scenes, one about Hitler’s repression of communists, another dealing with industrial action amongst Trinidadian oil workers. On one level, the segue serves to interrupt the illusion and underscore the agency of the working class and the provisional nature of the real; it also emphasises how the *act* of making theatre arises from and reinforces political consciousness - the radical actor-workers undergo further political education in the process

of getting under the skins of political adversaries and imagining fully the historical forces and micro-motivations behind events.

In addition, this scene functions as a theatrical meditation on the genesis of the living newspaper form: we see the form arising out of the workers' class-consciousness and their lively, critical reading of the dead press. This micro-loop is then magnified into a fully self-reflexive movement in which Theatre Union worker-actors dramatise the processes of researching, editing, writing and rehearsing *Last Edition* (pp. 81-5). Here, the production recognises that the realistic, apparently un-mediated representational strategies common in the culture, and strategically deployed in *Last Edition*, always run the danger of becoming transparent, naturalized, and even repressive in eliding distinctions between discourse and the real. *Last Edition* de-naturalizes its own procedures and assumptions, bares the device behind its own mediations, and presents itself as a process rather than product - the site of collective, social labour that is celebrated rather than concealed. The assumption here is that, in the words of Derek Paget, 'facts and information can never come value-free, and that the responsible film/theatre piece will make that clear', thus belonging to 'a radical/revolutionary *reporting*' tradition which 'allows the citizen access to the makers' own place in the mode of production (on the assumption that s/he will be able to cope with the notion of mediation)' (1990, pp. 39-40). The political education involved in making theatre is presented as analogous to and inseparable from the political education of watching it. Like the collective social ethos of the organisation Theatre Union, in which audience members were recruited for future productions, these devices strive to confront and overcome divisive distinctions between intellectual work and working-class work, the production and its historical referent (working-class history), and the company and its audience.

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Last Edition shared with a range of leftist texts produced in the Popular Front period - from the radical historiography of A. L. Morton's *A People's History of England* (1938) to the Marxist pageants staged by Communist activists - a commitment to resist crisis amnesia, what C. Day Lewis's poem 'Newsreel' (1938) called 'leaving [...] your history at the door' (p. 794).[11] Subtitled 'the story of the deception and betrayal of a nation', *Last Edition* was in part a pageant of the last six years designed to reactivate memories of vertiginous history by calling into question the motives of the British ruling class whose overriding political agenda was, according to Theatre Union's analysis, consistent only in being anti-working class and anti-Soviet Union. Scenes illustrating the prevarications and appeasements of the British ruling class were carefully balanced with those chronicling working-class traditions of resistance and solidarity (the Hunger Marches, the International Brigadiers in Spain), and they drew liberally on contemporary cultural forms and technologies.

Last Edition regarded the cultural sphere - whether the apparently unmediated mediations of the press, theatrical conventions dominated by naturalism, or the energies of popular culture seldom tapped by theatre - as sites of political struggle. The whole production was designed to resemble and radicalise the fast-moving variety show format enjoyed by Miller and Littlewood. 'In accordance with our policy of giving you as much variety as possible,' punned one lead-in, 'what follows is in the style of an American gangster film' (p. 73). The 1938 Munich Crisis was then recast in the controversial conventions of a 1930s gangster movie - Hitler, Chamberlain and Mussolini were incarnated as unscrupulous mobsters, a device that jettisoned realism to capture cutthroat power politics. The production also drew upon the 1930s BBC radio feature in its use of

microphone voices and sound clips; the use of the radio-style narrator provided context, created distance, and called into question the apparently unmediated and unproblematic relationship between radio voiceover and the real world on which it reported. One scene from the Spain section worked with innovations in radio communication to re-imagine time and space: a modern telephone dialling board and a rapid medley of microphone voices were used to represent events in different places simultaneously, creating onstage the breaking news of a country in the grip of civil war (pp. 45-7). Other scenes were interrupted and re-focussed by songs including Jimmie Miller's bluesy 'Young Man of Our Time', which gave radical accents to a familiar musical form (p. 94); elsewhere, 'bourgeois' cultural hierarchies were overturned when the production sampled a poem from Hugh MacDiarmid celebrating 'the illimitable/ Creative power of the people' (p. 48).[12] In their attempt to create a theatre in step with the tempo of modern life, Theatre Union also drew upon techniques from cinematic montage, rapidly intercutting individual episodes to generate a multi-perspectival account of recent history. 'I am a kino eye, I am a mechanical eye,' wrote Dziga Vertov, whose films formed a significant influence on Miller, 'I put together any given points in the universe […] My path leads to the creation of a fresh perception of the world' (qtd in MacDonald and Cousins, 1996, pp. 55-6).[13] Like the cinema of Vertov, *Last Edition* repeatedly used disjunctive methods in an effort to uncover the grammar of commodity and class relations that governed, but were obscured by, the apparently artless weave of everyday reality.

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Last Edition was a revue of post-1934 history; it was also a digest of Joan Littlewood and Jimmie Miller's theatrical collaborations (they had met in 1934 and worked

together ever since). The six-year period had marked a transition from the energetic, cartoon-like agitprop Workers' Theatre Movement sketches of the early 1930s - the preferred medium to act out the 'class against class' hyper militancy of the Communist Party's ideological line - towards a more discursive and nuanced theatrical mode true to agitprop's anti-naturalistic energy but capable of more sustained effects.[14] 'We felt that just as we were becoming mature politically,' MacColl later recalled, 'we needed a theatre which was sufficiently flexible to reflect the constantly changing twentieth-century political scene' (1985, p. 241). To express the widening political horizons of the Popular Front period, Littlewood and Miller had undertaken a period of intense theatrical experimentation that ranged through the balletic elegance of *Newsboy* (1935), through the disorienting constructivist and Meyerhold-inspired frenzy of *John Bullion* (1935), up to the formation of their most recent company, Theatre Union, and a 1939 British première of Lope de Vega's *The Sheepwell* (nicely judged to allegorize the brutalities of Spanish fascism) quickly followed by a version of the groundbreaking 1927 Brecht/Piscator adaptation of Jaroslav Hašek's novel, *The Good Soldier Švejk* (1939). Seventeen of *Last Edition*'s twenty scenes retrospectively reviewed the Popular Front years through the interrogative, eclectic, multi-perspectival theatrical aesthetic that Miller and Littlewood had been formulating through that period. The full resources of their theatrical experience were used to articulate an anti-fascist, anti-National Government political line that combined swingeing critique with an affirmation of 'the people's' political and cultural resourcefulness.

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Last Edition was not itself, however, a product of the Popular Front. The Nazi-Soviet pact signed on 23 August 1939 had required a volte-face on the part of British communists. Through the latter half of the 1930s, Communist Party General Secretary Harry Pollitt had consistently presented the Soviet Union as 'the principal guardian for maintaining peace in the world' with 'an army ready to throw its full, dynamic weight into the scales against German, Italian and Japanese fascists' (qtd in Morgan, 1993, p. 107). Unable to reconcile himself to a new line that made truck with fascism and presented the war as an imperialistic venture inimical to working-class interests, Pollitt was removed from his post: 'To stand aside from this conflict,' he warned, 'to contribute only revolutionary sounding phrases while the fascist beast rides roughshod over the Europe would be a betrayal of everything our forebears have achieved' (p. 108).

Unlike Pollitt, Theatre Union accepted the re-orientation. Though the theatrical exuberance of *Last Edition*'s coverage of 1934-1939 arguably betrayed an un-stated political preference for the Popular Front line, the production was conceived, researched, rehearsed and performed in the wake of the pact, and history catches up with *Last Edition* in the show's last half hour, which deals with events post-1939. With historical hindsight, MacColl would later find the post-pact, anti-war section of the play 'deeply disturbing'.[15] The pressure to make sense of recent events through the buckled lens of the party line manifests itself in theatrical diminuendo as multi-perspectival montage makes way for one-eyed, plodding linearity. A production remorseless in exposing the motivations of the powerful has nothing to say about Stalin, conspicuous only in his absence from the scene. One long scene dutifully offers a justification for Soviet aggression during the Russo-Finnish war (pp. 86-92); though assiduous in exposing the double standards of the British government, the scene's refusal to mention the Nazi-Soviet pact that brought Finland under the Soviet Union's 'sphere of influence' renders the political argument incoherent. The

chicanery of international *realpolitik* is finally shored up by a call for proletarian solidarity against the war; the retreat from historical and political complexity significantly finds theatrical form in a regression to the agitprop formula of the 'class against class' period. The final scene resounds with the 'revolutionary sounding' slogans of which Pollitt warned, and attributes the current crisis to 'the men who make millions out of wars', contrasting a villainous capitalist - symbolised by his top-hat - with a massed chorus of workers chanting 'The war against the people. STOP THE WAR' (p. 96).

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Last Edition opened at the Round House on 14 March 1940, amidst the so-called 'Great Bore War' of black-outs, boredom and relative military inactivity. On the weekend of 21 and 22 April, Theatre Union took the show to Hyde Socialist Church where the local constabulary received reports of 'thinly veiled communist propaganda' greatly enjoyed by 'the younger generation.'[16] *Last Edition* toured widely that spring before returning for a second Manchester run at the Milton Hall, Deansgate, from 6 May.[17] Hitler's forces were now sweeping through Denmark and Norway; with the war dangerously close, new defence regulations were implemented to combat disaffection on the Home Front.[18] On the show's second night - which coincided with the House of Commons debate on the Norway crisis - *Last Edition* was raided. Miller and Littlewood were arrested and summoned to appear at Manchester City Police Court, where they were found guilty of giving an unlicensed public performance and bound over.[19] Their company was thrown into disarray.

Theatre Union would stage one more production before the war finally put an end to their activities, but *Last Edition* was their true finale to 1930s theatrical innovation, and would seep into the future. The variety-show style structure, the device-baring and

interruptions, the montage effects, the songs and carefully choreographed movement - all would re-surface in the more familiar story of the post-war Theatre Workshop, from Ewan MacColl's atom bomb ballet opera *Uranium 235* (1946) to the radical populism of *Oh What a Lovely War!* (1963), which brought a version of didactic theatre to the centre-stage of British cultural life, and reminded Anthony Burgess of the play he'd seen twenty three years earlier.

Endnotes

[1] Extracts from *Last Edition* are published in Goorney and MacColl, 1986, pp. 21-34. The full unpublished manuscript is held in the Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger Archive, Ruskin College, Oxford. Subsequent references are to the unpublished manuscript; page numbers are indicated in parentheses.

[2] 'Where the censorship of the period makes it impossible for such productions to be open to the general public,' pledged one of Theatre Union's manifestos, 'they will be given for private audiences of Theatre Union members.' This version of the Theatre Union manifesto was published under the heading 'Necessity and Aims of Theatre Union' in the programme to the company's production of *The Good Soldier Schweik* (1939). Original in the People's History Museum, Manchester.

[3] For MacColl's background in the Workers' Theatre Movement, see Harker, 2007, pp. 14-35; 'Theatre of Action, Manchester' in Samuel *et al*, 1985, pp. 206-55, and 'The evolution of a revolutionary style' in Goorney and MacColl, 1986, pp. ix-xlvii.

[4] For the multiple versions and stagings of *Last Edition*, see Harker, 2007, Chapters 3 and 4.

[5] 'Necessity and Aims of Theatre Union'.

[6] 'Report on Living Newspaper', 6 November 1939. Pre-1953 box, Theatre Royal Archive, Stratford East, London.

[7] A photograph of the scene was included in NUWM leader Wal Hannington's Left Book Club title, *The Problem of the Distressed Areas*. See Hannington, 1937, plate 26.

[8] The comment is taken from an unpublished interview with Ewan MacColl by Howard Goorney from the late 1970s.

[9] Joan Littlewood recalls the prevalence of these concerns in her autobiography. See Littlewood, 1994, p. 100.

[10] See Goorney and MacColl, 1986, p. xlvi; Stourac and McCreery, 1986, pp. 201-42.

[11] For communist re-fashioning of historical pageant, see M. Wallis, 1998, pp. 48-68.

[12] MacDiarmid made available work in progress dealing with the Spanish Civil War. The poem was later published as *The Battle Continues* (see MacDiarmid, 1957).

[13] For Vertov's influence on MacColl, see Goorney and MacColl, 1986, p. xvi.

[14] For an overview of this period, and the place of the Workers' Theatre Movement in it, see Worley, 2002, pp. 204-8.

[15] Ewan MacColl to John Banks (14 December 1983). General Correspondence file, Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger Archive.

[16] W. H. Smith to Major General Kull (26 April 1940). Ewan MacColl MI5 file, National Archives KV/2/2175.

[17] The company planned to take the production to Liverpool and London, and despite being a 'private' performance, *Last Edition* received good notices in the *Manchester Guardian*, the *Daily Dispatch*, the *News Chronicle* and the *Daily Express*. See the *Last Edition* promotional handbill, People's History Museum, Manchester.

[18] *Daily Worker* (24, 25, 27, 29 May 1940).

[19] *Daily Worker* (3 June 1940).