CHAPTER 6

Conclusion: Political Theatre as Political Practice

Shaw, Brecht, Sartre, and Ionesco were all involved in a common project, though they did not see it that way. The differences that divided them were emphasized much more than their commonalities. Neither their critics, nor their political enemies, nor they themselves considered them to be allies in either art or politics. Brecht once said that he never laughed as hard in his life as “when I heard Shaw is a socialist.” For Brecht, the elitism of the Fabian worldview was irreconcilable with the populism of Marxism. Ionesco conceived of both Brecht and Sartre as ideologues, shoving communist conformity down the throats of independent artists such as himself. This conception was incredibly ironic in the case of Brecht, who had been condemned by Lukács and the Soviet establishment for his formalism, and who was bombarded by critics of all stripes for his own refusal to align himself with a particular party or creed. Ionesco’s critique of Sartre was more justified, as Sartre condemned Ionesco in a manner reminiscent of Lukács’s dismissal of Brecht:

Ionesco’s whole work is the proverbial society of union among men, but seen in reverse. And these writers’ [the absurdists] problem is the problem of integration—in this respect they are the only dramatists of our time (they shatter the bourgeois theatre in which this integration is taken for granted beforehand)—but the problem of integration as such, of any integration at all, of their integration
with any sort of society; while they are nonpolitical in this sense, they are also reactionary.”

Sartre’s use of the word “reactionary” here points to his attempts to fit in with the authoritarian cultural politics of the Soviet Union, which decreed all antirealists to be politically dangerous. Interestingly, Sartre reportedly had much respect for Brecht, though he felt that the epic theatre could not speak to the postwar French audience, “a public so lacking in backbone” that it would neither understand nor appreciate Brecht’s political engagement. Indeed, the unique modes of theatre advanced by these four playwrights reflected conflicting political commitments and often opposing views of what theatre could and should achieve.

Yet despite their differences, these playwrights shared some remarkable similarities. All four were united in their understanding of totalitarianism as the major threat to European civilization; all championed the freedom of the individual against the will of those in power; and, while they differed in terms of their beliefs about the Enlightenment notion of progress—with Shaw’s Lamarkianism and Ionesco’s pessimism reflecting opposing polarities of opinion—they all shared a belief that, even if a better world wasn’t inevitable, it was at least worth fighting for.

They had all grown up in a context of world war, totalitarianism, and devastation and had seen their civilized world become swallowed up by man-made disaster. This common experience—the experience of life in the twentieth century—is described by their contemporary, Albert Camus, in this way:

We were born at the beginning of the First World War. As adolescents we had the crisis of 1929; at twenty, Hitler. Then came the Ethiopian War, the Civil War in Spain, and Munich. These were the foundations of our education. Next came the Second World War, the defeat, and Hitler in our homes and cities. Born and bred in such a world, what did we believe in? Nothing. Nothing except the obstinate negation in which we were forced to close ourselves from the very beginning. The world in which we were called to exist was an absurd world, and there was no other in which we could take refuge… If the problem had been the bankruptcy of a