

Janelle Reinelt

APPROACHING THE SIXTIES: BETWEEN NOSTALGIA AND CRITIQUE

No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.
—Samuel Beckett

On September 11, I was in the middle of trying to finish this essay. I woke up to National Public Radio informing me that the first plane had just hit the World Trade Center. As the day unfolded, I struggled, unsuccessfully, to keep focused on my work. Finally, I realized that the work itself had changed its character under the pressure of these terrible events. I discovered I was afraid to write this article. Not only did the whole enterprise of academic theatre suddenly seem trivial, it was also possible that my efforts might wind up wrong-headed, damaging a continued struggle for peace and justice that I intended to advocate.

This essay addresses theatre scholars who self-identify as baby boomers or, more precisely, those who link the years of their youth to the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, those who, in the vernacular of that time, were participants in or influenced by “the Movement.” Of course, the singular “Movement” was really a number of different movements or forms of activism, public performance, and revolutionary effort. The unselfconscious use of singular terms like “Movement” was one of the defining conundrums of the period itself, but I do not want to begin with a never-ending series of qualifications indicating I have passed beyond the thinking of those years. I prefer, rather, to start with a basic affirmation of participation in the rhetoric as well as the struggles of that time. Although my discussion addresses a limited age cohort within the field of

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theatre and performance studies, I am ultimately suggesting that scholarly, pedagogical, or even performative projects based upon a period that one has lived through need, at some level, to incorporate openly and consciously a critical self-reflection based on that experience.

The basic issue is both ethical and political: artists and intellectuals have a responsibility to acknowledge their lived experiences of historical matters in the context of their artistic and academic work. Implicitly or explicitly, teaching or performing a history through which one lived involves self-representation, self-examination, and critique, narratives that inevitably condition the version of history that is taught/performed, and generate an important slippage between pedagogy and performance. In the case of the period referred to as “the sixties” (highly theatricalized in itself), these issues of self-representation have become acute, in light of the strongly contested and shifting assessments of scholars, artists, and cultural critics. Anyone teaching the theatre of this era encounters its flashpoint. After examining some of the reasons why this situation exists, I will turn to a theatre company that has spanned the decades from 1959 to the present, to discover how these historical changes have been met and represented in one of their works. The San Francisco Mime Troupe’s *Spain/36*, produced in 1986, carries within it an implicit self-performance of the difficulties of sustaining a leftist political theatre company. While the specifics of the play are not tied to specifics of the company’s history, the production can be seen as self-referential by spectators familiar with the Mime Troupe. They criticize the values and practices the company itself has followed, while simultaneously reaffirming the worth of their pursuit. This is also the strategy I am advocating for the classroom: to give witness to our experience, to criticize, and yet to reaffirm what must be taken forward into the future.

THE MYTH OF THE 1960S

Within the past fifteen years, the 1960s as a concept of an era has undergone a devaluation in public commentary.¹ The political swing to the right during the Reagan and Bush years has succeeded in pushing the revolutionary aspirations of the period into the background. With the collapse of communism in Europe after 1989, political commentators and cultural critics alike tended to pronounce with authority on the bankruptcy of the New Left and the flower power of hippies. In addition, sufficient time had past that the 1960s were ripe for scholarly reevaluation. Unfortunately, the lead in this came from the Right. One of the most influential books of the late 1980s, Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*, serves as an example and a place-holder for the kind of extreme opinion that has become commonplace. In his chapter “The Sixties,” Bloom argues that the structure of rational inquiry was dismantled in the universities because professors had caved in to an authoritarian mob—just as the German universities had done in the thirties. “Whether it be Nuremberg or Woodstock, the principle is the same,” he writes at one point.² His book locates the cultural rot of the period, as he perceives it, precisely in the academy that attempted the educational reforms and political changes that he condemns:

The sixties were the period of dogmatic answers and trivial tracts. Not a single book of lasting importance was produced in or around the movement. . . . This was when the real conformism hit the universities, when opinions about everything from God to the movies became absolutely predictable. . . . [Students] were able to live as they pleased in the university, as *in loco parentis* responsibilities were abandoned; drugs became a regular part of life, with almost no interference from university authorities, while the civil authority was kept at bay by the university's alleged right to police its own precincts; all sexual restrictions imposed by rule or disapproval were overturned; academic requirements were relaxed in every imaginable way, and grade inflation made it difficult to flunk; avoidance of military service was a way of life and a principle.³

While not every student sitting in our classrooms has read Allan Bloom, this negative view has trickled down through the variety of media that consider artistic and cultural works of this period. Even though Bloom proffers an extreme (and, for me, totally unacceptable) viewpoint, few would deny that many aspects of those times turned from idealistic visions for a better future into fragments of bitter fruit. The early Civil Rights victories were followed by setbacks, state repression, and the Watts Riots. Drugs led some people to higher religious consciousness, but led others to an early grave. Sexual freedom came in with the Kinsey reports and *Masters and Johnson*, but sexual equality and respect did not. Protestors helped stop the Vietnam War, but the aftermath of national suffering and deep division remains to this day. In sum, historians Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin point out, "For better than three decades, the United States has been in the midst of an ongoing 'culture war,' fought over issues of political philosophy, race relations, gender roles, and personal morality left unresolved since the end of the 1960s."⁴

I was not a terribly radical student. I protested the Vietnam War, but was never arrested for it. I never joined a party or even participated in an extended sustained campaign. Marching was easy and I continued to make scholastic progress each term, although I did know other students who became so politically involved that they flunked or dropped out of school. Feminism was extremely important to me, but I needed the constant critique and revision brought forward by sisters of different races, classes, and sexualities.

Historians are deeply divided in their evaluations of this period. Beginning in the 1980s, a new series of books appeared offering revisions of and attacks on first-person accounts of the 1960s and historical studies written by those who had participated in its movements.⁵ In "Who Owns the Sixties?," *Lingua Franca's* Rick Perlstein pointed out that rather than falling along a strictly radical/conservative axis, the struggle among professional historians was a generational one. Dismissing Maurice Isserman as a "Sixties faithful," Perlstein offered accounts of younger historians, who were criticized for not experiencing their subject firsthand by older historians who had. He quotes

David Farber, author of *Chicago '68*, on the difficulty faced by these newer voices: "People in the academy are kidding themselves if they believe that a young scholar is not bucking the already long odds of finding and keeping a decent job if he or she challenges certain myths of the Sixties."⁶

Following the end of the cold war, many scholars have argued that there is a new opportunity to present value-free scholarship—a new objectivity not subject to the old pressures of Right and Left (indeed, this is one of the claims of some of the historians interviewed by Perlstein).⁷ The assumption of a new freedom from ideological pressure ignores the present advanced state of transnational capitalism (which produces its own ideological constraints) and accepts the strong—and, I would argue, simplistic—perception of the victory of capitalism over communism as a victory for "free" discourse. Instead, our present period has developed intolerance for rhetoric characterized as Left or liberal. As was clearly apparent in the 2000 presidential debates, a concern with social welfare appears as old-fashioned, an outmoded democratic politics belonging to a past that is "over." In other words, leftist concepts and positions are simply foreclosed from intelligibility by a hegemony that has eclipsed the legitimacy, history, and language of the Left.

The contradictions and sharply contested valuations of this period have made the 1960s a focal point for ideological struggle about the meanings of the past, in the context of a developing present and an as-yet undecided future. How we teach or perform the 1960s not only becomes an affirmation of a particular view of the past, it also constitutes an intervention into present and ongoing struggles about how to define the self, the citizen, and the nation. Thus, like it or not, we are engaged in a kind of politics when we teach or represent this era.

I want the good parts back again. I want the optimistic notion that things could change—that my generation could make the world a better place—to be the prevailing mood again. I want hope to spring eternal. If people believe there wasn't really a significant tide of change in the 1960s, how can we believe it will come again in the global conflagration threatening in the wake of September's events? People have been talking about how New Yorkers have rallied and come together as a community in the face of disaster. I want to say, "Yes, that was what it felt like then"—but I remember the violent demonstrations, the shoot-outs with the Black Panthers, my own fierce arguments with my father at the dinner table, and I have to make another internal correction to my memories. One of the things I dread about the unfolding events of the present is finding myself again in a place where I have to take a strong stand, with the possible consequence of extreme alienation from others, even friends and loved ones, and the sick feeling that comes from interminable arguments about my country.

Yet, the appropriate response cannot be to engage in a rear-guard action, merely insisting on the old language, history, and politics of a bygone time. Even Fredric Jameson, one of the American academy's most recalcitrant Marxists,

realizes that something called postmodernism has overthrown the old Hegelian dialectics of reason and history. His reluctance to give up class as a critical category of analysis notwithstanding, Jameson has called for a re-visioning of the future in order to invigorate the discourse of the present: “Utopian representations knew an extraordinary revival in the 1960s; if postmodernism is the substitute for the sixties and the compensation for their political failure, the question of Utopia would seem to be a crucial test of what is left of our capacity to imagine change at all.”⁸

Thus while the pedagogy and performance of the 1960s provides an opportunity to fight against a devaluation of its revolutionary energies, accomplishments, and utopian visions, such enterprises require an ongoing negotiation between past and present if anything like a new productive relationship to that past is to be forged in classrooms or on stages. In plain language, neither nostalgia for a failed past nor a comfortable deprecation and dissociation from its history responds to the challenge to teach about a period we’ve lived through. A balance between nostalgia and critique is necessary in order to insist on remembering the past, in order to apply its lessons to a future as yet undecided. How does one teach about or perform the failures of the past without simply reinforcing a negation of their projects for social change? How does one criticize and yet celebrate a period, a movement, an activism without romanticizing it?

Fear about writing this essay is fear about how it will intervene in public discourse now. A united nation that has been stirred to anger and to patriotism, and that has embarked on a military course of action, is not the best backdrop for a self-questioning and wishy-washy tract, originally intended to take the risk of seeming conservative in order to try to forge a new progressiveness. The recent events seem to heighten this risk, to increase the chances that what I say will be received in a spirit of retrenchment that I would abhor. Not to defend the 1960s right now—is it not a betrayal of my commitments?

METAPHORIC EQUIVALENCIES: *SPAIN/36* IN 1986 VIA 1966

By the mid-1960s, the San Francisco Mime Troupe was well known among the city’s residents for its summer performances in the parks and for its broad popular style, combining *commedia dell’arte* with clowning and Brechtian *gestus*. R. G. Davis had started the company in 1959, staging radical, improvisational, physical theatre, in productions ranging from adaptations of classics, such as *Tartuffe*, to original pieces, such as *A Minstrel Show; or, Civil Rights in a Cracker Barrel* (1965). Luis Valdez, who would later found El Teatro Campesino, was a member of the SFMT in 1965, and Bill Graham worked as their sometime producer. That year, the troupe was arrested for playing in the parks without a permit and, in 1966, the ACLU filed a civil suit against the city Parks and Recreation Commission to show cause why the San Francisco Mime Troupe should not be granted a permit to perform in the parks. (This suit

involved a free-speech issue because the Parks Commission had either asked for changes in the Troupe's shows or refused permits when the Commission thought the material too bawdy or too politically bold.) The Troupe was also engaged in associated political activities: in May (1966), Davis led the formation of the Artists Liberation Front; in June, the Troupe performed a cabaret play at a benefit for the Timothy Leary Defense Fund; and, in September, the Troupe's new production of *A Minstrel Show* resulted in arrests for obscenity. The San Francisco Mime Troupe shared space with the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and with the Diggers, who gave out free food in the Panhandle of Golden Gate Park, and (like their seventeenth-century English namesakes) wrote radical pamphlets. At this time, the San Francisco Mime Troupe often performed for free and paid its actors and staff about \$5.00 a performance.⁹

By 1986, the Troupe had changed considerably. R. G. Davis had left in 1970 over issues concerning his authoritarian leadership, company organization and procedures, and differences of artistic and political commitment. Feminism had arrived on the scene, and women within the company developed a critique of its practices and representations, which was part of the impetus for reorganization into a collective. As the 1970s gave way to the 1980s, with its reactionary political climate, the Mime Troupe moved from performing within the strong cultural presence of leftist politics and culture to maintaining a revolutionary posture in the face of a somewhat closed revolutionary opening. A series of plays attacked the ultra-right-wing establishment, using a comic wino figure called Factwino to discredit right-wing rhetoric. (When drunk, Factwino knew the facts, but could persuade no one. When sober, he became extraordinarily loquacious concerning fundamentalism, family values, economics, and power relations.) The SFMT also mounted shows dealing with U.S. imperialism, labor relations, and government cover-ups of the results of atomic testing.

Concurrently, however, the Mime Troupe became less central to a disappearing culture of resistance. They embodied a familiar and somewhat predictable "institution."¹⁰ In her study of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, Claudia Orenstein describes this development in terms both of its artistic practices and mode of production. Acknowledging that the Troupe could be seen as preaching to the converted, Orenstein simultaneously insists that the "efficacy of any theatrical work ultimately depends on the political climate in which it is performed," and she cites a statement by Joan Holden (the troupe's main playwright)—"We're still Marxists, but the models aren't clear anymore"—as an indication of the Troupe's awareness of the changing topography of political thinking.¹¹ To be sure, the company had also lessened the difference between themselves and other kinds of professional theatre companies. Although they were still a collective, seniority and artistic roles had created a *de facto* leadership consisting of Joan Holden as principal writer, Dan Chumley as principal director, and Bruce Barthol as company composer. Although, in the 1970s, everyone in the collective divided their time among artistic, office, and "housekeeping"

work, by the mid-1980s, the San Francisco Mime Troupe had professionalized its office staff. Actors' names appeared on programs in connection with roles, rather than in alphabetical order, in order to help them get other work. After years of operating without government funding, the company accepted an "Ongoing Ensemble Award" from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1984. Joan Holden commented: "We have definitely changed our position about grants, at least about public money. We have realized that we cannot survive without subsidy. It was a bitter pill for a while because for many years it was our ambition to be entirely independent, supported by the audience."¹²

An especially bitter moment came in 1985 when the Mime Troupe found itself temporarily on the boycott list of the AFL–CIO, when (for *Factwino, The Opera*) they proposed to pay two guest artists the usual wage of the rest of the company, \$190 a week. Eventually, a permanent contract with the Actors' Equity Association was negotiated, but it meant that guest artists would be paid at \$300 a week, making the notion of a collective unintelligible within the management–worker terms of the association's mode of operation.


With the 1986 production of *Spain/36* (Fig. 1), the Troupe began to examine how movements fail, how external material forces and internal dissension hamper revolutionary ideas of collectivism and radical change. Several productions over the next few years returned to these topics—*Ripped Van Winkle* (1988) and *Back to Normal* (1991), for example, dealt with the loss of 1960s culture and the contemporary situation facing former activists. It is *Spain/36*, however, that poses a model for how to confront the historical failures of the past without either whitewashing or capitulating to them. It is a play that also powerfully (though indirectly) engaged the SFMT in an analysis of its own self-referentiality.¹³

Or perhaps it is a capitulation, and I'm just kidding myself. If you lose ground to the extent of not being able to maintain collective economic or administrative structures, what does it mean to assert collectively? Isn't this just engaging in nostalgia for a Mime Troupe ideal that simply was not a workable reality? This play was not even one of their most successful; should that be telling me something? I cannot will it into a more profound significance.

Spain/36 must be seen in the contexts of the Contras' U.S.-supported attack on the Nicaraguan Revolution and the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Spanish Republic, indications the Mime Troupe had certainly not given up on activist politics. The metaphoric equivalency suggested between 1936 and 1986 provided a critical chronotope for the play's reception, which included 1966 (or at least the mid-sixties) as its third point of reference. "Chronotope," taken from Bakhtin, refers to a time–space, the interconnection of the spatial and the temporal, typical of all performances. Yet, the specificity of time and space changes depending on context and, for *Spain/36*, the time–space of the subject

Los Angeles Theatre Center
Bill Bushnell, Artistic Producing Director
& The San Francisco Mime Troupe
present on the California Mart Stage
the World Premiere of

Theatre 3



by The San Francisco Mime Troupe
Script by Joan Holden*
Directed by Daniel Churnley*
Theatre Center Producer Diane White
Music & Lyrics by Bruce Berthol* & Edward Barnes
Musical Direction by Edward Barnes
Choreography by Kimi Okada
Mime & Mask Movement by Leonard Pitt
Set, Lighting & Costume Design by Timian Alsaker
Mask Design by Nicole Morin
Sound Design by Jon Gottlieb
Dramaturg Adam Leipzig
Stage Manager Lee Alan Byron
Production Manager Stacie Powers*

The Performers: Wilma Bonet*, Charles Degelman, Arthur Holden*, Gustave Johnson* **, Jerry Kerrigan, Ed Levey* **, Kate Lindsey, Sharon Lockwood* **, Barrett A. Nelson, Muziki Duane

Standbys (Standbys never substitute for listed players unless a specific announcement is made at performance time): Actor/Dancer: Paul David Bryant; Women's roles: Sigrid Wurdachmidt**

"Emilienne's Song": Music — Muziki Duane Roberson & Andrea Snow, Lyrics — Andrea Snow
Historical Research & Headlines: Patricia Silver
Artwork: Photography/Slides — Jay Moss; Slide Graphics — Kathy Edwards
Pre-production: Musical Consultant — Bill Young

Production Staff: Assistant Director: Shannon Edwards; Production Assistants: Maria Schmidt, Leonard L. Thomas; Light Board Operator: Rick B. Yatman; Sound Operator: Brent Stevens; Dresser: Gina Lucas.

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Figure 1.
From the program for *Spain/36*.

matter is linked to both the moment of its production and to the decade of the 1960s that haunts the story of unsuccessful revolution.¹⁴

The play dramatizes the possibility for a radical new democracy in Spain in 1936, when the Popular Front was elected to lead the Republic and unify the nation. It also dramatizes the internal difficulty the revolution had to sustain its ideal of collectivism among its Spanish anarchist, republican, communist,

socialist, peasant, and urban components, and its International Brigades of volunteers. Of course, the role of outside intervention—or, more precisely, the lack of it on behalf of England, the United States, and France—is also clearly staged in the context of Fascist and Nazi support for Franco from Mussolini and Hitler. Both a critique of external intervention and internal dissension are, thus, opened for representation. The play intervened in the present (1986) through its analogies to the Nicaraguan Revolution, and “intervened” in the past through its analogies to the sixties revolution and the struggle of leftist artists to survive.¹⁵ Although the San Francisco Mime Troupe has sometimes been described as making agit-prop theatre, *Spain/36* cannot be regarded in this light. While, as we shall see, it can be construed as urging resistance to U.S. support for the Contras, it is reflexive rather than didactic in its critical examination of the dilemmas of organizing on the Left and maintaining political efficacy.

Joan Holden’s script for *Spain/36* tackles two significant problems inherent in her topic: her audiences’ relative ignorance about the course and details of the Spanish Civil War and the need to condense a vast amount of complex material into a theatrical form that would not oversimplify the perspectives she was seeking to dramatize. Holden chose a style that allowed both political satire and more nuanced analysis, and attempted to organize the play around the twin perennial problems of individuality versus collectivity and compromise versus idealism. She developed main characters who presented the different constituencies of the Left as embodied commitments: Buenaventura Durruti, perhaps the most famous Spanish anarchist, a member of the Federación Anarquista Ibérica and head of a militia of 20,000 volunteers, who was killed in Madrid in 1936,¹⁶ and Juan Negrín, prime minister of Spain from May 1937 until the defeat of March 1939, who acted out a middle-class intellectual’s belief in victory through strengthening and unifying the Republican state.¹⁷ As secondary figures, Mijail Koltsov, a *Pravda* journalist, represented Soviet influence and attitudes, while fictional characters named Bill and Jenny represented American artists and intellectuals who decide to become involved in the war effort (Jenny is an actress).¹⁸ Questions of these characters’ motives and actions are addressed in scenes of epic realism, peopled with workers, revolutionaries, and students, who are also depicted realistically.

In contrast to these scenes, the world leaders and antagonists (Franco, Hitler, a Catholic bishop, Churchill, FDR, and Stalin) were portrayed as exaggerated, often comic, characters in half-masks. Not only did this mixed style (achieved in production by director and Mime Troupe member Daniel Chumley) establish a way to combine broad strokes with fairly detailed portraits, it also put the main focus of the play on the unresolved, often ambiguous, ethical dilemmas of the main characters, setting the stage for a critical interrogation of the unfolding events. Both Durruti and Negrín admit their doubts about their courses of action, Negrín concluding, “There must have been something I could have changed” (57).¹⁹ The shorthand of the exaggerated scenes established

certain facts (such as the Non-Intervention Committee's unwillingness to discuss German and Italian support to the rebels) in compact, immediately comprehensible scenes, whereas longer scenes developed more complex material. The overall epic structure of the play ensured that the theatrical construction of history was self-conscious and acknowledged.

New scholarship, appearing after Franco's death and the end of the cold war, has broken away in several respects from previous tendencies to view the Spanish Civil War largely in terms of the international situation on the brink of World War II.²⁰ The best-known arguments among liberal and leftist historians have been centered on the role played by the Communist Party (CPE), with its Stalinist links, in destroying the POUM (a revolutionary Marxist-socialist party in Spain that was anti-Stalinist).²¹ George Orwell and others wrote eloquently and passionately in defense of the POUM, condemning Soviet encouragement of repressive measures by Negrín's Republican government and its illegal activities, arrests, and assassinations of POUM members.²² Anticommunist American historians, such as Burnett Bolloten, extensively discuss the role of the Soviet government in policy manipulation, infiltrating government ministries, and influencing both Negrín and the Spanish CPE.²³ In these accounts, revolutionary anarchosindicalists, socialists, and various ultra-Left libertarian groups, such as the *grupos de afinidad* (small anarchist groups made up of ten or fewer members), serve as revolutionary heroes squelched by the communist menace. In this view, the idealistic, bright possibilities for collectivization and rule by the people were crushed as much by Soviet interference as by Nationalist victory.²⁴

Holden reformulates these debates in *Spain/36* in favor of an attempt to portray the difficult situation of both Republicans and revolutionaries in the course of the war.²⁵ Rather than focusing on the communists per se, Holden sets up the tension between a republican government, which must establish a certain centrality and state legitimacy in order to mount a war effort, and the deeply held beliefs of revolutionaries who, like Durruti, opposed the idea of the state in favor of a localized direct rule by the people. Negrín and Durruti provide the antagonistic leadership that represents, on the one hand, the attempt to forge a unified central policy and command structure in order to win the war (Negrín), and, on the other, the attempt to achieve a truly radical spontaneous uprising that would evolve its own forms, born of the strongly libertarian anarchist legacy that was part of Spain's past (Durruti).

In place of grinding the old (romantic) axe about evil Stalinism and idealistic revolutionaries, Holden develops a dramaturgy that confronts the clash between the need for sufficient structure and authority to govern and the individualistic anarchist impulse toward local autonomy and zero hierarchy. This conflict lies at the heart of any attempt to actualize radical democratic ideas, a conflict that could be said to have domesticated and even undermined the Nicaraguan Revolution. Certainly, there was a continual struggle within

many groups in the 1960s—from the SDS to SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee)—between authority and autonomy. In the theatre, the conflict is captured in R. G. Davis’s contemptuous description of The Living Theatre “spew[ing] out their pseudo-religious, guilt-ridden, despicable, metaphysical, anarchistic, elitist rap.”²⁶ The Left has torn itself apart time and again due to the tension between order and freedom, and there is clearly a need to acknowledge and reformulate it in order to move on.

Holden tried to work through this knot in her scenes about Durruti, to acknowledge his appeal while insisting on his liabilities, and, thus, to straddle the line of this age-old argument. In the first of his scenes, Durruti is just about to be released from jail (along with other anarchists and communists) when the Popular Front is first elected. Luis Companys, president of Catalonia, comes to release them and to ask for support for the new coalition government. Durruti declines, saying that his people want “everything to change.” In a later scene, Durruti debates his political ideas with the Soviet journalist and ideologue Koltsov, in the clearest rehearsal of the communist–anarchist opposition in the play:

DURRUTI: To you anarchy equals loss of control. Chaos, disorder. Why should freedom imply disorder? Humans crave order, crave harmony. That’s what anarchy means: the order and harmony the people create. You see our fighters inventing our army.

KOLTSOV: Which set out to take Saragossa. This would link Barcelona with the North. You sit outside Saragossa more than two weeks.

DURRUTI: Because the arms we need to take Saragossa are sitting in boxcars the other side of the French border! Write that.

KOLTSOV: Do you use this time for military training?

DURRUTI: We don’t teach anybody to salute or to goosestep. Thousands of people are learning to think.

KOLTSOV: More practical to teach them to take orders.

DURRUTI: For you. If what you mean by revolution is to kill the Czar and replace him with the Party. Set up a more efficient *system* for taking people’s labor and doling out bread. What have you changed—the uniforms on the police?

KOLTSOV: The future. The purpose of the state.

DURRUTI: We’re fighting to eliminate the state. (19)²⁷

The Republicans, of course, are committed to the state, at least temporarily, and in order to fight the war, both a strong central organization and a disciplined army are needed. In this exchange, Holden sets revolutionary vision against a practical imperative.

Although Durruti is treated sympathetically in this scene, he is gradually forced to change his position. He reluctantly agrees to bring his men to Madrid to participate alongside the International Brigades and the units of the PCE (Spanish Communist Party), in the coordinated effort of the government. Ironically, he dies (at the hand of a young anarchist comrade) for giving up on his commitments: “You’re not an Anarchist anymore. The revolution is over.”

His death symbolizes the splintering of the anarchist movement and its loss of effective leadership. Durruti became a mythic leader after his death, as Malcolm X did after his assassination in 1965. As teachers and artists, we must find ways to honor and respect these figures, while challenging some of their policies and ideas.

Negrín was not a heroic figure. Holden portrays him as a mild-mannered intellectual who believed the Western powers would come to the aid of the Republic, hence strengthening the army and unifying the country under a state apparatus seemed to him the only way to win the war. Rather than representing his crackdown on independent organizations as Soviet-inspired and directed, Holden shows Negrín caught between the need for financial aid (provided only by the USSR) and the Soviet-inspired purges conducted in some parts of Spain. In a showdown with his cabinet, the socialist, Republican, and Basque ministers charge that, with the disappearance of POUM leaders, there is “tragic evidence of the fact that Communist policy in Spain is not controlled by the Minister and her comrades, but by the Kremlin.” Negrín responds that these are only rumors, while the reality is that a Soviet shipment of bombers, fighter planes, and tanks has arrived in Barcelona, headed for Madrid, where the capital is under heavy attack. He concludes, “Since the facts about the alleged disappearances in Barcelona seem to be unknown, I move we adjourn that discussion until more information is available. All in favor?” (44). And, in fact, they all are.

In addition to this scene about the necessity for war materials trumping concerns about sectarian repression, Holden provides scenes that focus on the ways the anarchists themselves sometime sabotaged the war effort. In Barcelona, a scene at the telephone exchange shows an anarchist operator engaged in a rhetorical duel with government officials, refusing to connect the Ministry of the Interior:

What’s it to me, the Ministry of the Interior? You’re speaking to a militant of the Telephone Exchange. Know that here, we’ve abolished the Government. Should I connect you with the People’s Defense Committee? Comrade, you are using language that lacks all respect. . . . The same to your mother! (39)

This comic, even lighthearted, incident results in a confrontation with a Republican official who accuses the Exchange of operating “contrary to the interests of the Republic.” The anarchist operator replies that he “defends the interests of the Revolution.” He is arrested when he shouts, “I piss on the Republic,” echoing Durruti in an earlier scene (39–40), and offering the audience a version of the actual “May Days” of 1937, when government moves to centralize and consolidate its authority were perceived as a challenge to the revolution by the CNT (anarchosindicalist trade union),²⁸ which had controlled the Barcelona telephone exchange since the beginning of the war. Historian Harry Browne describes the state of affairs:

The government take over began on 3 May. By the evening of that day most of Barcelona was on strike, with the POUM militia preparing to fight and CNT forces looking for a compromise. The dispute, in which 500 people died, ended on 6 May. By then, several militants were found to have “disappeared,” or to have been executed, events which supported the widely held conviction that under the smokescreen of the May Days the Russian secret police had used this opportunity to deal with the local “trotskyists,” the POUM.²⁹

Browne’s discussion of the Barcelona May Days allows us to see Holden’s representational strategies more clearly by defining what is at stake in how these events are portrayed. The portrayal of the undesirable and incompatible choices facing the government links the two scenes, offering both an explanation and a defense for strong centralized action, and showing how difficult it was/is to develop an effective alliance without strong authority. The scenes create an appreciation for revolutionary anarchism while simultaneously criticizing it and, by implication, the historians and memoir writers who idealized it as romantic. Holden, standing well within a Left perspective, rejects the myth that a heroic revolution in Spain was crushed by bourgeois statism.

Brecht tackled this in-house discussion of individual freedom and party discipline in his communist tragedy *The Measures Taken*. Though sympathetically staging the contradictions between the Young Comrade’s good intentions and the effects of his actions, Brecht sides with discipline even while wanting his audience to comprehend the appealing Young Comrade. Holden neither constructs a simple cold-war tale of Soviet repression of the revolutionary spirit, nor does she clearly side with the Negrín government. The seriousness of the Republic’s need for armaments and training, on the one hand, and the exuberant and passionate commitment to revolutionary struggle on the part of libertarians, on the other, underscore the difficulty of maintaining a Popular Front that could effectively embrace a variety of groups and positions and still mount a unified war campaign. This was a tragedy, and it needs to be acknowledged and understood as an abiding structural dilemma in revolutionary practice.

Holden also represents the challenge of governing by consensus and decision-making among divided constituencies. The parallels to a leftist theatre collective are clear. Holden provides two scenes, one realistic and one farcical and broadly comic. In the first, Durruti’s militia at the Aragon Front meet and try to work out their new, local, peoples’ government. Holden comments “some are practiced meeting-goers, others novices, unused to speaking” (16). The first issue raised is that some of the militia who come from rural regions are vegetarians and have asked for a separate kitchen. While the link between vegetarianism and modern practices is deliberate, it is also accurate for some of the Spanish revolutionaries of that time. Holden links this issue to their anarchist history in the following speech: “Some city comrades don’t understand this question. But many of us come from villages where our fathers and

grandfathers were anarchists. Even if we can't read, we study ideas. We respect our bodies. We've asked for a separate kitchen, you keep ignoring us. We are proud to be fighting for the revolution, but we shouldn't have to give up our principles!" (16).

The scene develops around a serious discussion of who has the right to order executions—the Assembly, the General Delegate (elected leader), or the village committees. Charges of “individualism” are brought against the General Delegate because he acted unilaterally. Francisco explains: “The old ways are still in us. The old habit is, let the leaders decide. The General Delegate is a leader chosen by the people. He was right to stop the execution so there could be discussion. But to give the Mayor to the village committee—that was a decision of principle, that we should vote on democratically, in the Assembly” (18). The group resolves the issue by voting to remind the General Delegate that questions of principle are always to be decided by the Assembly. The meeting breaks up, of course, without returning to the discussion about meat.

The scene works by showing that what is very important to some is unimportant to, ignored by, or neglected by others in the press of a more urgent discussion. The collective process is also shown to be difficult because some people have trouble expressing themselves clearly and others become impatient too quickly, and building a consensus means inventing protocol as one goes along. While clarifying who should have authority to order an execution is critical to developing local self-governance, it is achieved in the play only in a messy, confusing fashion. Here, the San Francisco Mime Troupe holds out for the value of consensus-building and of the painstaking work necessary to give people the voice and skills that lead to self-empowerment. The Troupe's plays in the parks over the years have been part of this populist impulse, and the literacy campaign in the early years of the Nicaraguan Revolution was inspired by the same faith. Even so, there is no ideal world in which everyone has a voice and expression leads to the best possible outcome. Whether the subject is the demise of feminist collectives, of theatrical collectives, or of the SDS, such processible populism can only be affirmed in tandem with a frank assessment of its liabilities in terms of efficiency, timeliness, and comprehensiveness.

In contrast to this early scene depicting a realistic struggle to create a revolutionary democratic process, Holden later portrays a meeting of the Spanish government's Committee of Transport and Supply on the eve of Franco's 1936 major offensive against Madrid. Holden specifies, “This scene should be played at the edge of physical comedy, so fast that the audience doesn't try to follow the substance of the argument” (30). In the first part of the scene, sectarian rhetoric produces accusations on all sides, for example, of “authoritarianism” against the socialist union or “obstructionism” against the CNT. A new committee member, representing the Ministry of War, insists that Madrid is facing imminent attack. What plans have the Committee made for supplies in reply to repeated urgent requests? It turns out the Committee has been fighting over the constitution of its

own membership and has never met to address the question of plans. The scene is funny in execution, but tragic in implications. It is familiar to New and Old Left veterans alike. It humorously sends up the inefficiency of participatory democracy, and illustrates how a focus on local wrangling can literally lose a war. As a dramatic strategy, these two scenes ridicule the failures and shortsightedness of collectivity, yet hold onto and affirm the values supporting these all-too-human failures. The conclusion cannot be to give up on nurturing participatory democracy but, rather, to get better at it.

Lack of a successful governmental infrastructure, deeply divided perspectives of revolutionaries and Republicans, the dilemma of centralization versus localized resistance, and the difficulty of creating efficacious revolutionary structures dominate the realistic scenes of Holden's dramaturgy (and the farcical meeting scene as well). The play prevents the easy conclusion that the Spanish Civil War was lost because Western democracies remained unaligned. *Spain/36* forces an examination of internal failures, while broadly played scenes in caricature and half-mask keep international factors in view. In the end, it is more important to examine these internal failures than to dwell on external ones, even if decisive. The "lessons" from history cannot only be that evil Western governments let down the fledgling Spanish Republic. What is learned must include the portrayal of the failure of the revolution to cohere. If we teach this play, we can also discuss the problems the San Francisco Mime Troupe had with collective leadership, union wages, and government grants. These discussions clarify the site of study and struggle for those who do not want to repeat the mistakes of the past.

The American couple, Bill and Jenny, particularizes this play for U.S. audiences. Early scenes show them reading newspaper coverage of the preliminary stages of the war. Bill is already a committed leftist—perhaps a Communist Party member—whereas Jenny vacillates about what she believes and feels obligated to do. They work for a Spanish Republican Aid Committee in New York, which, Jenny implies, is a secret Communist Party organization. She complains: "I hate acting like I don't know it's another god-damn Party front. I hate feeling like I'm being used. I hate those friendly, busy, busy people who don't say what they are. I hate the way they don't put their name on things" (24). Eventually Bill volunteers to join an International Brigade and is killed in a battle near Brunete.

The American perspective in the play recognizes the history of and reconstitutes the American Left, even while criticizing the tactics of the American Communist Party. In the 1960s, every peace organization or dissident group was accused of being a communist front. While this was often unfounded, it seems more important now to recognize that the American Communist Party did provide organizational structure for dissident actions. Sometimes, the Left has erred by trying to portray itself as completely "untainted" by orthodox communism. It seems better to make the argument of *Spain/36*: that in spite of

the sometimes clandestine presence of the American Communist Party, many unaligned people came together to oppose government policies without being “duped” or even recruited to join it. Though not part of *Spain/36*, critiques of the American CP in the 1960s have found it conservative in its goals and procedures, and less revolutionary than many of the ultra-Left groups of that decade. Similar arguments took place about the Nicaraguan Revolution, which was discredited because it was socialist. The distinction between a homegrown socialism and a Soviet-style communism was never convincingly articulated to the American people. Holden’s play decenters this binary, yet still confronts it, in the scenes involving her American characters and through her treatment of the tensions between the Republic and its more militant revolutionaries.

Susan Mason connected the past to the present implicit in *Spain/36* in an extended review of the premiere of the play at the Los Angeles Theatre Center:

Two weeks after Franco and his fascist army began dancing across the stage of the Los Angeles Theater Center in the world premiere of the San Francisco Mime Troupe’s wonderful musical *Spain/36*, two world events gave the play a bitter-sweet immediacy: the Socialist victory in the June 22 Spanish parliamentary elections and the June 25 vote in the U.S. House of Representatives to give \$100 million in aid to the anti-Sandinista rebels in Nicaragua. Although *Spain/36* focuses on the Spanish Civil War and the defeat of the democratically elected leftist government of Spain . . . [t]he parallel with President Reagan’s collusion with the Somocistas in opposition to the legitimate leftist government of Nicaragua is striking.³⁰

Mason viewed the play twelve times during its run, and became increasingly inspired by its combination of hope deferred, yet activism reaffirmed, in the face of a staggering historical defeat. In addition to the fledgling socialist government in Madrid, Mason seemed to take heart from the resilience of the San Francisco Mime Troupe itself. Toward the end of her essay, she writes,

Spain/36 is also about the struggle to survive as a collective. The Spanish Republic might be the twenty-seven-year old San Francisco Mime Troupe, a collective since 1970, enduring in spite of sub-poverty level salaries. . . . In Act I when the young anarchist explains collectivism to his parents, this isn’t idealistic speculation but the first-hand experience of the actor saying the lines and the company behind the production. That is what makes the Mime Troupe artistically and politically potent.”³¹

Mason stresses the upbeat and affirmative sense of renewed commitment she took from the play, but I would stress that the thoughtful self-reflective attempt to face failure and limitation is politically necessary, and ultimately healing.

But this is also where I’m frightened. Have I given up too much here? One reading of what I have written says that revolutions are always

doomed to fail due to their inherent contradictions, that Soviet-style communists really were infiltrating liberal organizations, that struggling to make a Spanish Republic, a Nicaraguan Revolution, a 1960s peaceful world is an impossible Quixotian dream. This reading reinforces defeatism and will not inspire my students to envision a different world. Yet I believe that without confronting these things, we cannot invent anything better.

PERFORMING HISTORY

In one respect, *Spain/36* is a disheartening show. Its narrative trajectory is one of failure, the failure of human beings to surmount the obstacles, external and internal, to the construction and maintenance of a revolutionary society. The twentieth century is often read as a chronicle of human failure. Perhaps we should argue that such failures are appropriate subjects for theatrical performance because coming to understand what went wrong and how it might have been otherwise are surely the first essential steps toward collective renewal, toward trying again. In his recent book, *Performing History*, Freddie Rokem claims that theatre enters into the dialectic of history's failure and the future's possibility:

What may be seen as specific to the theatre in dealing directly with the historical past is its ability to create an awareness of the complex interaction between the destructiveness and the failures of history, on the one hand, and the efforts to create a viable and meaningful work of art, trying to confront these painful failures, on the other.³²

Rokem argues that the effort and energy of theatrical creation demonstrates, in its totality, a certain kind of working through of history, that theatre is an interpretive, affirmative act, even when its content is angry or negative.

Teachers who exhibit their own ongoing efforts to come to terms both with the problems and the positive aspects of a history they helped shape offer students a model for grappling with human successes and human failures. In effect, they demonstrate a way of doing scholarship that is ethically responsible. The major difference between scholarship and artistry is the collective creation that makes theatre performance a social project. Scholarship's collectivity is dispersed and difficult to define. Through our footnotes and citations, our positioning of ideas among like-minded others, scholars and teachers evoke community, but without the efficacy of concrete theatrical performances. Scholarship, however, is the place for reflecting upon and re-examining previous scholarly discourse, a court for the weighing of judgments. In the absence of great social movements in this present time, it is perhaps at the individual, ethical level that a reconstruction of social awareness, even activism, may reside.

Yale theatre editor Erica Munk recently published "Rethinking Our Field: A Forum," a colloquium in which I, among other theatre scholars, was invited to

respond to David Savran's provoking reflections on changes in the fields of theatre and performance studies (e.g., performance studies suffers from an "undertheorization of the social"; its "aestheticism represents a sublimation of the most revolutionary impulses of the 1960s.")³³ Yet, it was to Savran's insistence upon implicating himself in his critique that I was most drawn:

I shall try, Odysseus-like, to sail the seas of personal narrative while steering clear of the Scylla of triviality and the Charybdis of narcissism, attempting to historicize my own experiences. . . . I believe this historicization to be a worthwhile effort to the extent that my experiences are emblematic of those of a generation of baby-boomer theater scholars who passed through graduate school in the 1970s and early 1980s.³⁴

I was reading Wendy Hesford's *Framing Identities* at the time that I began to prepare my response to Savran's essay. Her call for "a pedagogy that distinguishes among multiple registers of spectatorship and that interrogates the ways that teachers and students have been disciplined and stylized to produce certain narratives of the self" was most suggestive.³⁵ Narratives of the self, she argues, are always a part of teaching, and become part of the power relations of the classroom.³⁶ If the students can clearly tell, from visual markers of age, that their teacher must have been a young person during the 1960s, an absence of comment about personal history makes its own, quite strong, statement. One remedy for that absence is to expose, rather than to deny or cover up, the ongoing negotiation of identity formation involved in teaching. This is what Savran tried to do by including himself in his history and critique of changes in theatre studies. This is what the Mime Troupe did in mid-1980s performances such as *Spain/36*, *Ripped Van Winkle*, and *Back to Normal*.

Acknowledging ambivalence, or hindsight, is neither a pedagogical nor a performative weakness, nor is trying to salvage some of the values and narratives of a previous age for a new generation. Rick Perlstein identifies the generational, professional struggle over the right to write about the 1960s, but he missed the ethical dimension of the responsibility of those who lived through those years to continue to speak, write, perform, and teach about them—an obligation just as pressing as that of younger scholars to bring fresh perspectives to the blind spots of their elders. If baby boomers have an additional obligation not to misrepresent facts willfully or silence dissident junior voices, that is precisely the function of a responsible pedagogy for anybody who "professes." Intellectuals, as well as artists, are public individuals who live within a series of larger social groups. Living through time means that, eventually, one lives to tell about it.

My fears remain. The days of our present time are plagued with uncertainty and danger. I only know that my doubts and fears must be part of what I show my students. We will work out the future together, even if, as Joan Holden says, the models aren't clear any more.

ENDNOTES

1. For a sample of the popular press see Margot Hornblower, "Great Xpectations," *Time* 149.23 (9 June 1997): 59; James S. Kunen, "It Ain't Us, Babe," *Time* 150.9 (1 September 1997): 66–67; and Henry Kissinger, "The Long Shadow of Vietnam," *Newsweek* 135.18 (1 May 2000): 47–49.
2. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 314.
3. *Ibid.*, 322, 328.
4. Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960's* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 4.
5. For example, books by Doug Rossinow, Ken Heineman, Alice Echols, and Mary Brennan, discussed in the *Lingua Franca* article cited in the following endnote.
6. Rick Perlstein, "Who Owns the Sixties?," *Lingua Franca* 6.4 (May–June 1996): 32.
7. This is no less true for scholarship specifically about the Spanish Civil War: "The period following Franco's death in 1975 and continuing up through the last stages of the Cold War has also seen a dramatic change in the political and intellectual climate, not only in Spain but throughout the West." George Esenwein and Adrian Shubert, *Spain at War: The Spanish Civil War in Context, 1931–1939* (London: Longman, 1995), 3.
8. Introduction to *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), xvi.
9. For R. G. Davis's account of those years, see his *The San Francisco Mime Troupe: The First Ten Years* (Palo Alto, CA: Ramparts Press, 1975).
10. One of the most troubling assessments of the S.F.M.T. was Joel Schechter's, precisely because he was/is a leftist critic: "It may well be that the Mime Troupe's style was better suited to the sixties than it is to the present." *Durov's Pig: Clowns, Politics, and Theatre* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985), 173.
11. Claudia Orenstein, *Festive Revolutions: The Politics of Popular Theater and the San Francisco Mime Troupe* (Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 1998), 6. Originally quoted in William Kleb, "The San Francisco Mime Troupe a Quarter of a Century Later: An Interview with Joan Holden," *Theater* 16.2 (Spring 1985): 60.
12. Kleb, 59.
13. Orenstein offers critiques of *Ripped Van Winkle*, for being overly optimistic and merely advocating bringing back the revolutionary spirit of the past, and of *Back to Normal*, for conceding too much and undermining the S.F.M.T.'s own politics as well as those of their main character (see 151–61).
14. For a useful application of Bakhtin's notion of a chronotope to epic theatre, see Sarah Bryant-Bertail, *Space and Time in Epic Theater* (Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2000), 7–25.
15. To be more precise about the analogous aspects: in both the Spanish Civil War and the Nicaraguan Revolution, U.S. intervention (or lack of it) played a part in the defeat of the democratically elected leftist government. In both of those cases, and also in the various movements of the sixties, the internal problems of collectivism and participatory democracy contributed to their demise.
16. For a background discussion of Spanish anarchism, its history, and Durruti's place within it, see Chris Ealham, "'From the Summit to the Abyss': The Contradictions of Individualism and Collectivism in Spanish Anarchism," in *The Republic Besieged: Civil War in Spain 1936–1939*, ed. Paul Preston and Ann L. Mackenzie (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 135–62.
17. For an account of Negrín's role as prime minister and a discussion of his background, see Helen Graham, "War, Modernity and Reform: The Premiership of Juan Negrín," in Preston and Mackenzie, 163–196.
18. As it turned out, Bill and Jenny did not appear in the actual production, but their role in the script is crucial enough that I discuss it here.
19. All quotations are taken from the unpublished manuscript of the play. Page numbers appear in parentheses.
20. Contemporary scholarship has stressed the aspects of the Spanish Civil War that

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were structural issues, present from much earlier decades. A deep sense of regional and local identification often superseded any strong identification with a centralized state. See, for example, Harry Browne, *Spain's Civil War*, 2d ed. (London and New York: Longman, 1996), 8–32, and Esenwein and Shubert, 7–32.

21. Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista.

22. George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (London: Penguin, 1962).

23. Burnett Bolloten, *The Spanish Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

24. It has been suggested that the CIA supported some of this scholarship. See, for example, James Whiston, “‘The Grand Camouflage,’ Julián Gorkin, Burnett Bolloten and the Spanish Civil War,” in Preston and Mackenzie, 241–60.

25. In this, she can be seen as following the trend toward focusing on conditions internal to the Spanish situation as well as acknowledging the international dimension.

26. Davis, 134.

27. In performance (but not called for in the script), Durrutti came into the audience and asked, “What does anarchism mean to you?” involving audience members for some minutes in a discussion about their responses.

28. Confederación Nacional del Trabajo.

29. Browne, 59.

30. Susan Mason, “The San Francisco Mime Troupe’s *Spain/36*,” *Theatre* 18. 1 (Fall–Winter, 1986–1987): 94.

31. *Ibid.*, 96.

32. Freddie Rokem, *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 3.

33. David Savran, “Choices Made and Unmade,” *Theater* 31.2 (Summer, 2001): 89.

34. *Ibid.*

35. Wendy Hesford, *Framing Identities: Autobiography and the Politics of Pedagogy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 35.

36. Abuse of the classroom through narrative self-fashioning was illustrated in the case of Joseph Ellis, whose counterfeit service record in Vietnam became public in June 2001.