

R. G. Davis

# A Director's Journey from Performance Art to Ecological Aesthetics

R.G. Davis founded the company that became the San Francisco Mime Troupe as an experimental project of the Actors' Workshop in 1959. He left the Troupe in 1970, formed the Epic West Center in Berkeley for the study of Bertolt Brecht and epic theatre, and became a pioneering director in the United States successively of the plays of Brecht and Dario Fo, on which he wrote in the original *Theatre Quarterly* 40 (Autumn–Winter 1981) and in *New Theatre Quarterly* 8 (November 1986). In this article he traces the course of his subsequent career in creating experimental storytelling events and, via an interlude garnering academic qualifications, into the field of ecological aesthetics, which he defines as 'a Brechtian aesthetic and ecological socialism interrogating each other within a scientific ecological conception of nature'. The present article is based on a lecture he gave in June 2013 at Stanford University.

*Key terms:* San Francisco Mime Troupe, Epic West, Bertolt Brecht, Dario Fo, storytelling, organic farming.

WHEN I LEFT the San Francisco Mime Troupe in 1970 and joined the rest of the world, I thought there must be more interesting theatrical innovations around. While writing about the Mime Troupe,<sup>1</sup> I realized that during my time there we had developed little or no theory of consequence to help us in difficult times. Yes, as cultural workers we had kicked over cans, bothered the citizen guardians of free speech, and disturbed the liberal reactionary public, yet by the end of the sixties the inevitable rollback and repression was surrounding us and exacerbating internal dissension. Identity politics mixed with Maoist rhetoric (Marxist-Leninist) and the Weather Underground was rattling brains. The crisis was about: what for, for whom, why, and with what?

In the search to answer these questions, I realized that a theory of political theatre and art for cultural workers was to be found in Brecht's work at the Berliner Ensemble. There were numerous examples of plays, poems, and essays that addressed most of the problems that had plagued the Mime Troupe, subjects and topics of dispute in any group. Focusing on all that material took another few years before I got round to serious study

of epic theory and practice. Meanwhile I was dipping into what was then called performance art, seen in the galleries.

This was actually a return to an area the R. G. Davis Mime Troupe had explored in the early sixties, the avant-garde of back then. There, I had found one impressive musically trained performer banging rhythms out on a table while using his voice in elaborate ways. A few others cracked eggs on their bodies or were up against a wall being shot at – not here but in the bigger marketplace. Some innovators showed up and I wrote articles about it, one in this journal.<sup>2</sup> After a year or two hunting around I ended up in an art gallery with a series of individual performances more like acts in a nightclub, with a stand-up comedian performing to a deadpan gallery audience as if it was different from the numerous comedy clubs in San Francisco.

I found the explorations wanting, while the dominant fashion in California became improvisational groups. Meanwhile I studied epic theatre, went to Germany, learned more from International Brecht Society conferences, visited the Berliner Ensemble, and in 1975 decided to open a Brecht Center in Berkeley. The first objective was to show what had

been done on stage in the DDR to counter the one-line, even one-word notion of epic theatre in the US – that is, alienation, *Verfremdungseffekt*.

I was able to speak to Barbara Brecht (daughter of Weigel and Brecht), who agreed to let me borrow twelve films of Ensemble productions to be shown at the Berkeley Pacific Film Archive, if I also invited Werner Hecht, lecturer and author of numerous books on the Ensemble. I agreed – anything to show all the films in order to counter the half-baked American notions of epic theatre. All the material was from the government-supported theatre in the DDR – on the other side of the Wall.

To house the Brecht Center in Berkeley, I invested in a beautiful abandoned church designed by architect Julia Morgan. The center was a step up from the rundown places we used to work in, but it came with a costly mortgage. Epic West, Center for the Study of Bertolt Brecht and Epic Theatre, was devoted to bringing the whole shebang about epic theatre to the US. The object was to see the actual productions of the Berliner Ensemble. We also did a few things of importance with Carl Weber, who had worked with Brecht, teaching and directing Brecht texts.<sup>3</sup>

### Social Politics at Epic West

The Center for New Social Policies moved into the building, with Marxist philosopher Richard Lichtman in charge, bringing together all sorts of younger rebels who were wandering around at the end of the Vietnam War – the ultra-left, the New Left, mostly independent Marxists and socialists looking for wisdom from Stanley Aronowitz, James O’Conner, Doug Dowd, Lichtman himself, and many others. There were a few lectures by Werner Hecht, and a memorable talk given by Herbert Marcuse.

Perhaps we could replace the differing but equally distorted views of Martin Esslin and Eric Bentley in the United States about Brecht as a fine poet yet poor playwright, or a didactic agitprop artist. Esslin, a Cold Warrior, rejected Brecht’s political views, while Bentley exaggerated them so that the US

reception of epic theatre became something of a beached whale.

Meanwhile in Europe epic theatre was revered as an advanced theatrical intervention. The Berliner Ensemble visited London twice with six different plays and made an enormous impression on British theatre. The Ensemble was not allowed into the freedom-loving USA, however, until after Germany reunited, and only then did we see a production of *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, Hitler’s rise to power transposed to Chicago. By that time anti-communism was no longer necessary, and who cared about fascism when the American Empire was under construction?

The Epic West project survived from 1975 to 1980. At times it was startling and innovative, but it was all too expensive to run out of the Julia Morgan church. It closed down with a sale that paid half the losses, while I knew the thirty-six plays and was on the way to becoming a Brecht scholar. I closed the shop, tried to abandon San Francisco, and flew off to New York City in search of a way to enter the big marketplace.

I had heard of Dario Fo and read a few of his plays, so I went to Milan to purchase the rights to one or two of them. In Italy within the Autonomia – the movement to the left of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) – Fo’s humour, satire, and exposures had blood running through them, and resonated with existing political conditions. In the United States the plays were being reduced to clever entertainments, regarded as *commedia dell’arte* events. All wrong.

Fo himself called his basic form *cantastoria* – storytelling, popular jongleur shows. Although he and his wife Franca Rame had been a popular entertainment team on Italian TV (like Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca in the fifties), they were eventually thrown off into the arms of the Autonomia. By the sixties Dario Fo was heading La Comune and busting the balls of the establishment.

I obtained a letter from them for the rights to *We Won’t Pay! We Won’t Pay!* and also *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. But it was of no use until it turned into a legal contract, and doing Dario Fo off Broadway with

limited funds and the rush-rush, push-push of commercial conditions was brutal.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, Carl Weber invited me to teach in NYU's Graduate School, where I learned more about directing and the conflict between directors and actors. The actors learned to emote, psycho method – break 'em down, build 'em up; but some were broken down and remained so. Meanwhile the training for directors was intellectually centred on meaningful scripts with critical interpretations. The actors were busy elsewhere.

Another flight got me away from the New York concrete and brought me back to San Francisco, where the chair of the San Francisco State University Theatre Department invited me to teach a class in *commedia dell'arte*. By 1985 I had done Brecht and Dario Fo and couldn't figure out how to teach a workshop in *commedia*, since I knew it took years to be able to play a masked character. In addition, the limitations of the *commedia* form began to show up: pre-capitalist fixed masks of seventeenth-century character types couldn't engage with industrial subjects of the twentieth century.

### Towards Environmental Activities

What I did, however, was to put on a spectacle à la Robert Wilson – images with a text and live narrators. I adapted the Soviet Socialist Ilya Ehrenburg's novel *The Life of the Automobile*, which was to be an imagistic epic narrative. The text was a sociological and historical exposition, with actual documents and invented stories, on the effects of the automobile in Western society. With a few microphones we were to hear the narration of the massive scenes, while the notions of speed, from the conveyor belt to the rush of cars on new roads, the dream of Henry Ford, the organization of industrial production at Citroen, the deadening of repetitive work, were all to be explained with enormous slide projections, descending photographs, and actor-performers imitating key figures.

The first chapter done with a class was successful, but the full text, addressing the subjects of rubber, oil, the stock exchange, and roads, overloaded the department's pro-

gramme and our time and financial constraints. The caveat was that the images, performance, and narration had to explain all the elements of the automobile and their effects on society. However, here was my first effort to address a non-human subject in a mixed-media event, a form which would turn up years later in the description of an ecological story of symbiosis.

Once more up and away, I was reading about environmental activity and wondering what it was about. I called ex-Mime Trouper and Digger Peter Berg, later with Planet Drum, who had claimed 'bioregionalism' as his own and pushed the idea of a cultural community event in a single bioregion (or geographic location). This was *not* 'biogeography', a blending of two sciences as taught in the academies; bioregionalism was a heady cultural construct, a consciousness event.

Berg told me to read Arne Naess, the Norwegian deep ecologist. A good start, and I did. Curious, I went to the library to look up other material on ecology and found a single magazine filled with scientific articles that I couldn't understand. This wasn't an environmental call to arms; rather it was rooted in ecological biology, geography, geology, hydrology, and meteorology – not disciplines I had studied in high school. I realized I needed a teacher for these subjects.

In the late eighties I visited Arcata in Northern California to learn about the Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary, supposedly a replacement system for industrial waste water treatment. I interviewed around two dozen people and found the project wasn't exactly as touted. It was a natural oxidation system, but the state required chlorination of the treated water before it was allowed into the Humboldt Bay.

Searching for a way to understand the sciences before proceeding to another project, I discovered that Humboldt University had a paragraph in its catalogue that read: 'Over-Sixties Program, for Three Dollars'. I called and asked, was that real? Yes. 'Can I take any course I want?' Yes. I applied to the theatre departments graduate division with the intention of going to those science classes

that I didn't know much about while keeping away from the theatre courses where I knew trouble would loom.

Thus began a long trek gathering a bunch of diplomas though seven educational institutions: Humboldt State,<sup>5</sup> San Francisco State,<sup>6</sup> Hayward State, University of California Santa Cruz, University of California Berkeley, a few courses at San Francisco City College (just to keep going on field trips), and finally a PhD at University of California Davis from the Performance Studies Department.<sup>7</sup>

At seventy-six years old, now Dr Davis: 'Take two aspirins and go to bed.'

### Performance Studies to Organic Farming

The important break happened when in 1999 I applied to UC Berkeley as a theatre graduate student and slipped in during a breakdown when the University was moving to eliminate the department. However, a knowledgeable African-American woman was able to cobble together professors from different disciplines and put it in a holding pattern before leaving for higher things in Washington DC.

Her administration chose older folk as graduate students – they were less trouble, since they were likely to finish their PhD projects. One year in, the chair changed and the department turned into black uniforms – black socks, black hair, black shirts. It was introducing work based on Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* from 1959, and I countered with Henri Lefebvre's *Critique de la vie quotidienne* from 1981. Goffman saw everyday life as psychologically based and the presentation of the individual self as the role you 'played' every day; whereas Lefebvre was concerned with the sociological, ideological, and cultural formations of urban life and job functions within capitalist social codes.

A member of the the Marxist French Communist Party, Lefebvre was on no one's reading list but mine. However, the performance art section relied on many authors, including Raymond Williams, who had written about the concept of superstructure and substructure,<sup>8</sup> arguing that the arts in the super-

structure were ideological tools of capitalism while to separate out and emphasize only economic activities was reductive Marxism. According to Williams, ignoring the big ideological blitz on social structures (structures of feeling), culture, and the rest of life was faulty. Bingo!

The performance study people apparently hadn't read Williams's earlier writing about English socialists and only used his work in cultural studies. Stuart Hall's views were also referred to, yet another English Socialist, who had written about Antonio Gramsci's focus on the role of intellectuals in a bourgeois hegemonic state. These works led me to believe there was a subversive element in this new field called performance studies in the United States. It had just enough spillover to make room for a splash of Marxist Brecht.

The painter Ariel Parkinson had asked me to go to Italy to work on an environmental subject. I suggested we discuss an ecological project. I had already done experiments at Humboldt on storytelling using Peter Schumann's 'cranky' scroll device, so if we added a dose of Dario Fo we could roll. A musician-composer friend, Joyce Todd, suggested the subject and we devised a Schumann-style cranky, with a moving mural and two storytellers to explore a complex science topic based on Lynn Margulis's study of symbiosis.<sup>9</sup>

UC Berkeley gave me a bit of money for the project, which none of the professors saw. Ariel designed a four-foot by thirty-foot scroll, and we fixed the text after we worked out some of the kinks. This project served as a science-and-art breakthrough, making it possible to demonstrate some of the ideas of ecological aesthetics.

While trying to settle in with the black clothing crowd, I had been studying a few more non-theatre subjects in the university – notably folklore with Alan Dundes, hydrology with Matt Kondolf, and an extraordinary course in biogeography with Roger Byrne. I proposed a dissertation topic that couldn't be understood, and though I revised it according to directions from the then Chair, Bill Worthen, it was subsequently rejected. Worthen asked: 'Why did you study folklore

with Allan Dundes?’ I replied: ‘I thought it was the basis of theatre.’

With the *Tale of Symbiosis* hot in my mind, I was on my way out of the arts into the field. I applied to become an apprentice at UC Santa Cruz in their Farm and Garden program. Accepted, I spent six months living in a tent, learning about advanced gardening and organic farming. Hurrah! I had broken out of the theatre!

Organic farming using Alan Chadwick’s ‘French Intensive’ method (double digging and all) was a delight on the Farm and Garden program. I had studied a variety of methodologies prior to tenting, including permaculture, Rudolph Steiner, Masanobu Fukuoka’s *One Straw Revolution*, agroecology, John Jeavons, and others, making the particular approach at Santa Cruz but one of many. However, it was good enough for a beginner and a willing worker, although the knees by that time were weakening.

### Finding Cultural Connections

Despite the pleasure of the soil work, learning gardening and visiting different farms in the Corallites area of mid-California, I became curious about the cultural connection. Every time we piled into the vans to visit another farm, with the music bang-bang, we’d pile out for two hours to watch and listen to an organic farmer show and tell us how they irrigated, what crops were intertwined, about non-toxic pest control, when to harvest and market, and the elaborate planning and work growing organic food. All told by hot-shots, good scientists, perky marketeers. And then we’d pile back into the vans with bang-bang music on the return.

I wondered what was the music of organic farming? Was it country and western, square dancing stuff, cowboy whoops? Really? Was it trailer-truck drivers’ music? Urban bluegrass? Really? Why not Brecht’s composers – Weill, Eisler, Dessau – or California composers such as Morton Sobotnick, Pauline Oliveros, Terry Riley, or Ramon Sender’s Tape Music Center? Wouldn’t a more complex music signify that organic farming was a sophisticated realm? (Oliveros had written

music for two of my Mime Troupe shows, and even Steve Reich had composed for some.) Then there were older composers – what about Aaron Copeland’s *Appalachian Spring* and the California Mavericks? Would they be appropriate? No, not one was ever heard in the organic Farm and Garden program, or in the annual Eco Farm Conference at Asilomar. What then was the music, the cultural form for the scientific agricultural process that imitated nature? Bird songs? How about trees squeaking in the wind? Wolf howls? Uh-oh, whale sounds?

The rhythm and pace of organic farming was a measured, slow process, a collection of folkways (local growth and weather patterns), modern methods like permaculture, biodynamics (the oldest modern method), French Intensive, agro-ecology. None were created to plunder the soil or use toxic chemicals, all agreed that the primary principle was to *imitate nature*. There was also insistence by the best farmers on verifying the suppositions, customs, and folklore with scientific proof and experiments. Organic food producers were also interested in yields and crop protection, but without the toxic chemicals used in monocultural industrial farming. One biker farmer innovator told us: ‘Read all the scientific literature about organic production, but don’t follow their conclusions.’

The folk element in organic farming suggested the use of folk tales and storytelling as devices for artistic projects. Storytelling conferences became popular in the Bay Area, and I heard an older white woman from Georgia tell a tent full of people ghost stories. Everyone, including me, was attentive to the end – all at midday. I had seen Japanese storytellers, and knew Dario Fo and the Sicilian ballad singer Ciccio Busacca were in a line from the jongleurs and travelling players. That was a start, and the younger organic farmers were folklorist researchers as well. If smart, they would seek out older farmers and ask them:

‘What did you do before pesticides?’

‘Ah, we don’t do that any more.’

‘Sure, well, just tell me what you did?’

‘Yah see, we planted walnut trees along the lane to the farm – ’

'Ten years later you had a profitable crop.'  
'Ahh so . . . ' Et cetera.

In addition to these questions about production, organic farmers needed to know the political economics of the area. I found the analytical tools through James O'Connor's ecological socialist construction in the journal *Capitalism Nature Socialism*. Here was a materialist tool that embraced an interrogation of socialism by ecology and an ecological interrogation of socialism.<sup>10</sup>

### Constituents of an Ecological Art Form

Given the complexity of the processes of science within ecology, how were we to deliver facts, data, percentages, and essential formulae through this peculiar art form? I had taken lots of courses where the professors used blackboards, whiteboards, and boring PowerPoint projections to illustrate chemical and physical reactions; the numbers had to be seen to be understood. In a physics class the boards were empty at the beginning of the class; by the end they were filled up with formulae. I remember one biology teacher in one college I attended writing out the entire photosynthesis formula. It ran from the left-hand wall across the green boards to the right-hand wall. It was like a mural in a medieval church telling a biblical tale. Or it could have been a Japanese scroll painting.

In scientific ecological discourse there were too many complications just to spew data out by mouth. If the numbers, formulae, and interactions were to be understood they needed to be visualized. Once on a scroll the storyteller could explain their function. Edward R. Tufte insists on 'less ink' for data illustrations – but that was only half the problem.<sup>11</sup> In our presentations the data had to be graphically articulate and visible at a distance while also explaining itself. If it was carefully done in an imagistic pattern, it was likely to be memorable just as in music. If the song was epic, as by Brecht composers Eisler and Weill, its *gestus* has a way of seeping into your cortex

The images on the scroll also had to be more than cartoon diagrams, and not overlaid with arty paintings. They had to contri-

bute to increased comprehension, a concept that illustrative artists understand. I met a medical illustrator on a trip to Cuba and asked him what his work was about. He said a photograph flattened out the musculature, whereas the depth and shape of veins, muscles, and tendons was best shown to surgeons by shaded or highlighted drawings. His work was an example of artisanry at the functional level.

These storytelling devices were used to achieve understanding of Lynn Margulis's research-and-discovery symbiosis as a complex mutation and evolution. The mutation two and a half billion years ago from a single-celled prokaryote to a nucleated-cell eukaryote produced the beginning of our lives. This needed high-quality text and images to be understood. The artist Ariel Parkinson brought in a calligrapher to set the words used on the scroll to clarify her painted images. When it came to the actual figures around the atmosphere of the planet (we started with Lovelock's Gaia principles) the artists got lost and so did the storytellers.

However, that kind of difficulty illuminated the peculiar form we had constructed. It required a relearning by all the participants – not the usual art, or the usual acting, or the usual music challenges. Joyce Todd played Schoenberg to the movement of the scroll as one way to reread and review the whole story. We told that story in four different ways: by narrative-illustration, poetic song, mime, and puppet chatter. What had become clear to us could be understood by others. Brecht's *Lehrstück*, teaching-learning, also formed part of the model.

We had created a lesson that could be learned – almost a lecture, but with music, storytellers, and an artful presentation. Joyce Todd and I followed up with a shorter piece: 'The Workings of Organic Farming in Twelve Minutes'. I had learned about the subject in Santa Cruz, and found a painter who had taken a class on organic gardening. I explained the process used in organic farming, she did more than I could with the images, and I added a dialogue with two characters. We focused on details of producing organic food: from composting, seed propagation,

planting, intercropping, pest management, harvesting, and marketing. If consumers understood the structural production of organic food and its role in nature, wouldn't it become an ecological event and so more than a gourmet event?

This was the supposition and theory of 'showing the workings of nature' from an ecological view. This is expressed in a wonderful statement by Slavoj Žižek:

There is probably nothing more scientific than the growing of 'organic food': it takes high science to be able to subtract the harmful effects of industrial agriculture. 'Organic agriculture' is thus a kind of Hegelian 'negation of the negation', the third link in the triad whose first two lines are pre-industrial 'natural' agriculture and its negation/mediation, industrialized agriculture: it is a return to nature, to an organic way of doing things; but this very return is 'mediated' by science.<sup>12</sup>

Ecological aesthetics could thus be defined as a combination of a Brechtian aesthetic and ecological socialism, where ecology and socialism are interrogating each other within a scientific ecological conception of nature. Ecological aesthetics in this sense is based on the arguments and intriguing strategies of survival as understood *not* by journalists but by scientists such as S. J. Gould, Richard Lewontin, James Hansen, James Lovelock, and Lynn Margulis.

We subsequently advocated direct interaction with nature, researching and practising the science, learning, and teaching, with no preaching, about the mysteries of nature and preserving these for future generations. Bourgeois art with its distance from nature would be replaced both by descriptions of the workings of ecology and direct experience of nature, as we become not consumers but producers, researchers, and students of numerous subjects.

The objective of this approach is to make ecology (the science of nature's nutrient exchanges) part of one's life and thereby find the beautiful in the varied strategies and functions of numerous species. Once on the other side – producers, no longer consumers – human beings will find it necessary to work with and protect the Other.

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Thanks to Gordon Rogoff for shuttling this along.

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