Partway down the San Francisco–based television station KQED’s list of scheduled broadcasts for the year 1969, an unusual item appears. Among works by dance, video, and visual artists to be aired as part of an ongoing project called the Dilexi Series, KQED reports broadcasting a segment entitled “Rite of Guerrilla Theater,” with Julian Beck and the Living Theatre listed as its creators. This twenty-five-minute program, which aired on May 28, 1969, depicted an “orientation of the audience,” performed by the avant-garde theater troupe in an auditorium at Mills College in Oakland, California. The Living Theatre would accomplish this in three steps: by first “infiltrating [the audience], then imparting some ‘60s wisdom, then requesting participation from the gathered hordes.”

The Rite of Guerilla Theatre was, even then, legendary. This sequence of events comprised the opening moments of Paradise Now, the Living Theatre’s late 1960s ritualistic spectacle, which was intended to launch a nonviolent, anarchist-pacifist revolution through the power of ecstatic audience participation. Mills College was one of dozens of universities, community institutions, and theaters to host the Living Theatre during their tour, and the audience of undergraduates and community members there was representative of the spectators who gathered to watch, cheer, join, scorn, and protest Paradise Now across the United States and Europe. What was different, here, was the medium. The Living Theatre would not only perform live for the audience at Mills College: their performance would be broadcast—and was shaped to be broadcast—for television spectators following along at home.

The Living Theatre’s choice to stage their Rite for broadcast is striking because it appeared, initially, to contradict many of Paradise Now’s central artistic principles, and to undermine the company’s expressed attitudes about the politics of media in general and of television in particular. In the early 1970s, Julian Beck objected strenuously to the mode of attention that he believed small screens inevitably encourage. “It always makes the people weak,” he wrote of television, adding, “It takes away their power, it always
makes them passive spectator [sic], it never takes them to another life, another perception, dots and all, cool aspects and all, it diminishes awareness.\textsuperscript{2} \textit{Paradise Now}, perhaps more than any other piece the Living Theatre had made, engaged the power of intensive live presence, close confrontation, and bodily contact between performers and spectators. How could the aims of the Rite of Guerilla Theatre—a scene designed particularly to heighten spectators’ awareness of unseen restrictions all around them—be communicated through the barrier of a television screen? How could the Rite summon and choreograph audience emotion, as it aimed to do, without the benefit of bodily presence? Would its dispersed audience be inspired to join the revolution, or simply to change the channel?

Yet the Living Theatre repeatedly engaged with television broadcasting as a medium for their work during these years. In May 1968, while \textit{Paradise Now} was in rehearsal, Judith Malina, Beck, and Carl Einhorn traveled to Paris with plans to film a television special for the French state television company ORTF. The program, Malina noted in her diary, would feature improvised outdoor performances: “it was being called street theatre, but among ourselves we referred to it as guerilla theatre,” she wrote. (The TV special was never filmed, in the end, due to the student and worker protests that engulfed Paris that month.)\textsuperscript{3} In 1969, the company filmed the “Plague” sequence from \textit{Mysteries and Smaller Pieces} for a California television broadcast. On the same day, they staged the Rite of Guerilla Theatre for producers Jim Newman and John Coney of the Dilexi Series, shaping a resolutely live creation into a half-hour piece for a television audience.

I open with this interlude from the Living Theatre’s famous tour, and analyze the KQED broadcast later in this chapter, as a way of entering a conversation about the Living Theatre’s philosophy of contagious art and its relationship to radical political action. Such philosophies were transformative, not only for the Living Theatre, but for radical performance and its audiences for decades to come. During the mid- and late 1960s—an era when radical social change through widespread participation seemed increasingly imminent in both the United States and many parts of Europe—the company offered a template for the mobilization of spectators, participants, and publics that generations of countercultural artists would revive and renegotiate. This model of contagious revolutionary performance took shape through the careful orchestration of audiences’ emotional and affective responses to radical theater, and such strategic engagements with spectators’ emotions emerged especially clearly in the Dilexi broadcast’s filmed staging. Mediation demanded that the artists clarify and condense their approach to working with live spectators. It also—like the use of stage fictions in \textit{Mysteries’ Plague} scene, as I will detail shortly—created productive distance between revolutionary performance and the real revolution: a gap that allowed spectators to inhabit roles as performers, and that allowed emotion to more readily circulate.
The Dilexi broadcast also brings into focus the Living Theatre’s role in this book. The company’s work represents the least overtly mediated approach to theatrical contagion of any artist, in any chapter. Yet the company also set the tone, in fundamental ways, for most of the case studies to come. In translating Artaud’s philosophies into stage action, they created a vision of theatrical contagion that was both emotional and bodily, but which defied, as Artaud did, easy equations between biological transmission and artistic dissemination. The company offers a reminder that even as viral performance has become more closely identified with the cultures of media and technology, the body has remained ever-present, in complex ways. So, too, does their exploration of viral emotion predict other artists’ experiments with contagious affect, in a variety of different emotional registers. For the Living Theatre, the emotions and affects onstage included ecstasy, rage, and confusion; for later artists discussed in later chapters, they included fear, anxiety, or joy. Finally, the broadcast, because it shows the Living Theatre teaching their spectators to perform—offering a lesson in viral acting—also registers viral dramaturgy’s propensity to influence other artists as much as, and sometimes more than, its spectators.

The Living Theatre sought to construct theatrical scenarios so irresistibly open to audience participation that spectators would not only join in the action but would also spread it outside the theater and into the public at large. Yet contagious performance, for the company, was never a matter of straightforward emotional transfer, of evoking the same emotions in spectators that the actors themselves were portraying. Rather, in pieces such as Mysteries (1964) and Paradise Now (1968) the company employed passions, affects, and emotions in strategically layered ways, summoning feelings in their audience members that captured, in condensed form, the larger emotional tensions of the era’s radical politics. Taken together, these two performance pieces, and the emotionally complex forms of audience participation they summoned, offer a road map, of sorts, to the emotional landscape of late-1960s revolutionary change.

The relationship of feeling and emotion to radical social change was being widely theorized during this period: by American artists and philosophers, and perhaps most directly by the writers and artists associated with French situationism. Situationist writings—which emerged before and during the period that saw both the Paris uprising of May 1968 and the creation of Paradise Now—explored the connections between the individual internal landscape and larger psychological geographies of power. In situationist philosophy, as well as in the overlapping, burgeoning field of the philosophy of everyday life, the literary scholar Rita Felski explains, “the everyday is seen to harbor inchoate impulses and unconscious desires that foreshadow an incandescent future of revolutionary upheaval.”4 Shifting, half-formed affective states can thus lead—not directly, but in associative and contradictory ways—to revolutionary action. In an unpublished collection of writings entitled “Messages,”
Beck and Malina likewise situated the impetus toward large-scale revolutionary change not in knowledge but in emotion. They wrote:

The Historic Process. Marx. That’s what we’re in. To find out where you’re at in the midst of the Historic Process. To observe it. Then to decide what to do about it . . . But Intellectual Awareness is not enough. It is necessary to decide what to do guided and impelled by feeling.\(^5\)

To be guided and impelled by feeling, Beck and Malina knew, was a theatrically and politically complicated matter, made more complicated by the shifting spectrum of sensations that comprise what we call “feeling” and “emotion,” and by the unstable relationship between onstage emotions and those felt by spectators.

Scholarship theorizing affect and emotion—by writers such as Philip Fisher, Raymond Williams, Sara Ahmed, and Sianne Ngai—thus provides useful context for understanding the Living Theatre’s theatrical project. In his 2002 study *The Vehement Passions*, Fisher describes the networks of vocabulary that are commonly marshaled to describe inner states, noting that each of these terms is politically and socially charged. “The feelings, the affections, the sentiments, and the passions are not alternative ways of talking about the same matters but language used in the service of quite distinct politics of the inner life,” he writes. These varying concepts, in different ways, “participate in the communal act of installing and defending one or another design within psychological life.”\(^6\) Both *Mysteries* and *Paradise Now* took part in such communal acts, staging and reflecting the emotional landscapes of radical political action in their moment. Each piece, in different ways, evoked the emotional pitfalls pockmarking the fields of radical action, circled the cul-de-sacs of emotional epiphany and affective confusion, and tested for emotional pathways toward political change.

Both Artaud and the Living Theatre relied, in their conceptions of contagious performance, on the prospect of eliciting profound emotional responses in their spectators through strategic acting choices, and on the possibility that those responses would propel spectators to action. “Communication”—the concept, and the word itself—recurs repeatedly in the writings of both. Yet, though both had viral visions, neither conceptualized emotional communication in performance as a simple or straightforward transfer. In this book’s introduction, I cite Sara Ahmed’s important observation that affective transmission is far more complex and multifarious than a linear or mimetic model of contagion would allow (though I persist in seeing contagion as an important term for understanding such circulation). For Ahmed, emotions, feelings, and affects mutate as they spread, calling up other emotions, feelings, and affects in those perceiving them. The same was true for the artists described in this chapter.
In the Living Theatre’s rehearsal rooms, particularly in the months when they were creating, and then touring and performing *Paradise Now*, they returned regularly to conversations about the particular types of emotional expression and affective response that would attend the mode of revolutionary action they sought. They parsed the significance and the efficacy of ecstasy, passion, and anger. They canvassed the repercussions of evoking in spectators smaller, less obviously transformative feelings like passivity and scorn. Drawing on Artaud, they returned repeatedly to the idea of pain—physical and emotional—as the source of the actor’s emotions onstage. Drawing on Marx, they envisioned themselves as caught in, and promoting, a particular kind of historical change through the performance and summoning of emotion. *Mysteries* forged connections between vehement passion and collective action, while *Paradise Now* staged the gulf between performances of revolutionary rage or ecstasy, and the materialization of real-world change. This disjunction is especially significant, both because it reveals the complexities of emotional contagion onstage, and because it is the source of many critiques of the Living Theatre, past and present—critiques that I rethink here.

Such emotional and artistic disjunctures were not the Living Theatre’s alone, but characterized the contradictions at the center of radical political performance. In the introduction to his 1971 edited collection *Guerrilla Street Theater*, Henry Lesnick critiqued the prevalence of performance acts that participated in the visual and emotional discourse of social change, without actually creating that change:

The politics of put on, of play, has an undeniable appeal for everyone whose primary experience of the contradictions of society is one of boredom and a sense of stultification. Their weakness is obvious. They have no strategy for effecting change (they were doomed once they failed to levitate the Pentagon), and consequently offer no program that addresses itself to the basic needs of the great majority of people. This weakness is behind the Cleaver faction of the Panthers’ recent split with the Yippies. Urinating on the Justice Department may be both gratifying and eloquent, but it doesn’t generate the kind of struggle necessary to obtain decent housing or jobs or to get rid of dope pushers.7

For Lesnick, the actions of groups like the Yippies, no matter how thrilling, were emblems, depictions, or portraits of revolutionary change. They were not the change itself. Even more so performances like *Mysteries* and *Paradise Now*, which took place in theaters, on stages, using actors in roles and testing, but not fully eliminating, the boundaries of stage fiction. This aspect of the pieces, particularly of *Paradise Now*, has frequently been disparaged as a theatrical misfire, a misunderstanding of the relationship between theatrical fiction and radical real-world action. I view it somewhat differently, seeing
the Living Theatre’s choices, rather, as a direct expression of the emotional problems inherently embedded in performing revolution, and as a strategic use of theatrical contagion as a form of acting.

Concepts of contagion did not emerge for the Living Theatre in a vacuum. Instead, in conceptualizing their performances of contagious revolution, the company drew on Artaud’s ideas about the transformative powers of theatrical action, and particularly his foundational essay about the theater and the plague. The Plague scene from Mysteries, as well as, more broadly, the Living Theatre’s approach to audience interaction in Paradise Now, remain in many ways some of the clearest and most direct attempts by any artist or artistic group to find theatrical form for Artaud’s writings about the contagious nature of performance. Aspects of the Living Theatre’s Artaudian project are known: that the company intended to stage the infamous plague; that they viewed it as a necessary means of provoking revolutionary action among their spectators; that, to them, Artaud’s radical voice aligned with, and served as endorsement for, nonviolent anarchist-pacifist revolution. Known, too, is how deeply the company’s attachment to Artaud was based on a misapprehension of the French writer’s own politics. In Artaud and His Doubles, Jannarone describes the Living Theatre as a particularly prominent example of the artistic impulse to appropriate Artaud’s ideas for non-Artaudian political and theatrical ends; the company, she also notes, long monopolized the conversation over Artaud’s artistic legacy in the United States. “They interpreted Artaud’s cosmic rage as a call to revolution against the coercive effects of government, repressive society, and personal inhibitions,” she writes. Jannarone’s study, in particular, is an important corrective to the temptation to take the Living Theatre at their word in their use of Artaud. Artaud and His Doubles powerfully demonstrates how wide the gulf really was between the anarchist-pacifist revolution that Beck and Malina sought to provoke, and the deeply violent, quasi-fascist ideology underlying Artaud’s writings.

Consciousness of this tension also propels, implicitly or overtly, many of the most prevalent critiques that were received by the Living Theatre during their tour of Paradise Now, and that have been aimed at them since. These critiques imply, frequently, that the company’s Artaud-inspired works were not really Artaudian—and also that they were too Artaudian, that by drawing on the French writer’s theatrical ideas they also inadvertently embodied his reactionary political beliefs. Robert Brustein, Jannarone notes, thought Paradise Now “overwhelmed the spectator in a manipulative, Wagnerian way,” and that the ‘freedom’ with which audiences sometimes responded represented repressive chaos and not the beautiful liberation the Living thought it did.” Such criticisms, familiar by now, argue that beneath the Living Theatre’s calls for freedom lay dictatorial coercion; that the language of beautiful nonviolent anarchism was fundamentally incompatible with the vocalizations of hostility and irrepressible wrath they sometimes offered onstage; that the plague was not what the Living Theatre imagined it to be.
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But audience members were not always overwhelmed, nor were they automatically manipulated. Rather, the Living Theatre’s contagious performances summoned a spectrum of audience emotion, resulting in a spectrum of audience behavior. What I aim to articulate here is how the plague manifested onstage: what it meant for actors, in stage directions, in a scripted play in a theater. Because, despite the rhetoric of *Paradise Now* as a “real” protest action, revolution, or historical-communal event—a description of the piece promoted by the company, a description both inaccurate and sincere—*Paradise Now* was, above all, a play. I view the company’s use of Artaud as a set of strategic acting choices, a way of theorizing the ensemble’s performance of revolutionary affect and emotion, and capturing, in the relationship between performer and spectator, the particular affective mode of their own revolutionary moment. Rather than parsing the “real-world” effects of *Paradise Now*—rather than seeking out the revolution that wasn’t, a term of measurement implicitly present in many critiques of the piece—I examine here the theatrical particularities of performing plague. I attempt to trace the company’s use of Artaud’s concept to find an acting vocabulary for staging revolution, and to create and recruit more actors who would do the same.

Viewing the Living Theatre’s works of the mid- to late 1960s explicitly as acting exercises—grounded in (counterintuitively enough) modes of theatrical

Performers and spectators during a performance of the Living Theatre’s *Paradise Now*. Photo courtesy of Thomas S. Walker, Living Theatre Archivist, and the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
realism, and bounded by forms of fictive cosmos—offers an alternate means of understanding the striking emotional and affective provocations that Mysteries and Paradise Now represented. Central to nearly every account of the Plague scene from Mysteries and the Rite of Guerilla Theatre from Paradise Now (the scenes on which I center my analysis) is the question of how and why these performances called up feelings in their spectators—and how and why they failed to. In the case of Mysteries, audiences reportedly empathized so deeply with the company’s enactment of Artaud’s plague that they joined in the action, dying in heaps alongside the performers. During the Rite of Guerilla Theatre, by contrast, spectators witnessed performances of revolutionary rage, but frequently experienced feelings of theatrical frustration.

Understanding the Living Theatre’s approach to contagion primarily in terms of an acting exercise removes the easy binary of failure and success from our historical understanding of them. It means that they were not “failures” for not having uncomplicatedly mobilized massive numbers of audience members to join their rituals onstage or to start the revolution offstage. It means, rather, that a significant part of the legacy of viral performance—like much avant-garde theater—includes works that are vastly ambitious in their quest for audience response, and whose primary influence is, ultimately, on other artists.

Although Artaud infused much of the Living Theatre’s practice from 1958 onwards, I focus here on two scenes from the company’s body of work: the Plague scene that ended Mysteries, and the Rite of Guerilla Theatre that began Paradise Now. These were the two scenes that, by most reports, lingered in audiences’ minds and inspired them to respond—in excitement, sympathy, irritation, and confusion—and that garnered the attention of critics and reporters. They were, among other sequences, the sections of the Living Theatre’s work that most made them targets for the police (in addition to the street procession concluding Paradise Now). Both scenes were deliberately intended to “communicate”—to spread charged action or emotion to spectators—and they represent twin poles of communication, the Plague scene regularly inspiring spectators to spontaneously join the action onstage, and the Rite of Guerilla Theatre instead provoking confusion, annoyance, and apathy. (In other words: one really was contagious, in an obvious sense, while the other was infamously not.)

There is also evidence suggesting that the company itself considered the two scenes paradigmatic of its larger revolutionary project, and separable from the works in which they first appeared, subject to reimagining and reuse. The Plague scene, after serving as the culminating action of Mysteries, reappeared on its own as a street theater protest piece. It surfaced in a May 1972 protest outside the ITT building in New York City, and as the first section of Six Public Acts, a prologue to the company’s epic Legacy of Cain cycle, performed throughout the mid-1970s. Like the Rite of Guerilla Theatre, the Plague scene was also chosen for broadcast: on March 8, 1969, the
same day they played the Rite for KQED, the company staged the Plague for another television broadcast in San Francisco. Later that year, performing outdoors for a crowd of thousands in Toulouse, France, the company chose to show just three sequences: the Rite of Guerilla Theatre; the Plague scene; and the Toulouse sequence, the section of *Paradise Now* that was rewritten to address specific conditions in the city where the piece was currently being performed.

Closely reading these elements of *Mysteries* and *Paradise Now*, before returning to the 1969 Dilexi broadcast, helps to frame the Living Theatre’s vision for politically radical emotion in performance, and suggests the ways they imagined that emotion spreading. The transformation of Artaud’s plague into revolutionary contagion was not so much a radical expectation layered on top of acting, directing, scenography, and audience participation. Rather, it was materially constructed out of those things. Beck and Malina not only aspired to staging Artaud’s plague—they did stage the plague, beginning in the early 1960s and continuing in different forms for a decade or more.

**The (Living) Theatre and the Plague: Mysteries’ Audiences**

Artaud was famously transformative for Malina and Beck, who first encountered his ideas in 1958, when Mary Caroline Richards was completing the first English translation of the essay collection *The Theater and Its Double*. Malina, when I interviewed her in person many decades after the fact, remembered experiencing an epiphany upon reading Artaud: “The moment we read it,” she said of *The Theater and Its Double*, “we were overwhelmed with the reality that Artaud showed us, that theater is about the relationship of cruelty to art, of art to cruelty, of our political position and our dramatic position being equivalent.” Artaud’s insistence that unraveling the modern human psyche was a prerequisite to reinventing society echoed in the Living Theatre’s efforts to influence its audiences’ spiritual lives, even as they evinced far more interest than he did in engaging with the realities of political struggle. To the Living Theatre, the theories of Artaud and the politics of anarchist revolution were unmistakably intertwined: “Artaud is political and who masks his politics misrepresents his theory,” concluded Beck.

The Living Theatre first staged Artaud’s plague in the collaboratively created performance piece *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces*, rehearsed and performed during the early months of the company’s multiyear European tour. *Mysteries* was a theatrical collage, sampling memorable scenes and images from the company’s previous productions—*The Brig’s* harsh military choreography made several appearances—and combining them with new movement sequences and performances of poetry and ritual. (Some of these, in turn, became the seeds of sequences in *Paradise Now*.) But by far the most iconic scene from *Mysteries* was its final scene, inspired by the plague Artaud
had envisioned thirty years earlier. In *Mysteries*, the plague unfolded as violent choreography. Members of the company dispersed themselves through the auditorium, then pretended to gruesomely expire in close proximity to the audience: writhing, suffering paroxysms, and collapsing, sometimes in spectators’ laps. When all “life” among the acting company had been extinguished, two performers moved through the crowd, picking up the stiff bodies and stacking them in a pyramid onstage.

The Plague scene directly followed a sequence entitled “Sound and Movement, Called Lee’s Piece,” a movement exercise that would now be recognizable as a common rehearsal game. (It was not inspired by Artaud: Joseph Chaikin is credited with its creation, Lee Worley with teaching it to the company.) Sound and Movement did not take place within the framework of an overtly contagious model of acting, or within any fictive cosmos. Yet it too modeled a version of transfer, of communicability, of transmission of sound, gesture, and affect in performance that offers an instructive contrast with the Plague scene. Sound and Movement was an exercise in gestural and vocal free-association: a performer gestured, then “sent” that gesture to another performer in the room, who would transform the movement and send it to a third. Repeating this sequence, performers added sounds as instinct and inclination dictated, and altered their positions in the room according to the same principles. “The piece is about communication,” the description of this scene concludes. “It unifies the community.”

It is difficult to know how effectively the Sound and Movement piece “unified the community,” because accounts of *Mysteries* in performance focus almost exclusively on audience response to the scene that followed, which was also about communication: about the communication of deadly disease as a metaphor for the contagious circulation of communal pain. In the latter scene, though—the Plague scene—the Living Theatre actors inhabited a fictive cosmos, a world in which Artaud’s plague manifests as a highly specific biological reality:


Following these instructions, the stage directions enjoin, “Each performer chooses his/her role and acts it out.” Such insistence on the specificity of acting choices suggests that fictional, interiorized acting was not just compatible, but in some ways was necessary for achieving the form of frenzied contagion the Living Theatre aspired to create. Straightforward transmission of sound and gesture was not contagious; highly specific, internally driven acting, based on fictional scenarios, was. And the Plague scene was perhaps the
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most straightforwardly contagious scene of any the Living Theatre created. Across Europe, as the company toured *Mysteries* to theaters, universities, community centers, and other public spaces, spectators were enthusiastically “infected” with the company’s plague. Audiences performed illness, dying alongside the performers and joining them in the growing body pile onstage.

Saul Gottlieb, a friend and follower of the Living Theatre, recounted a succession of infectious responses to the scene as *Mysteries* toured Europe:

The plague scene has had a most violent effect on audiences. Most people get out of their seats, mill about, laugh, cry, shout, touch the bodies of the actors, pull and push them, and even sometimes beat them. Some people die with the actors, and permit themselves to be put in the body-pile—in Brussels, fifty people took part in the scene. In Trieste the show was banned after one performance, which included the nude appearance of one actor for three seconds during the tableaux vivants, as well as the audience’s refusal to leave the theatre on the orders of police while the plague-deaths were going on. It was also banned after the first performance in Vienna’s elegant old Theater An Der Wien, when the fire department rang down the curtain in the middle of the scene because twenty Viennese student-actors had gone on stage to join the dying. In Rome, a fist-fight and general pandemonium broke out during the scene. Most recently, police in Venice had to stop a brawl between pro- and anti-*Mysteries* people in the audience.¹⁹

Judith Malina’s diaries report vivid responses to the Plague scene in cities across Europe. During a 1969 performance of *Mysteries* in Besançon, France, spectators threw eggs and fruit at the performers as they lay in their “body pile,” making the experience of playing dead, Malina wrote, very difficult, an endurance test involving “waiting for the crash and the splash and the pain.”²⁰ (One actor, she noted, chose to smear his body with the raw egg, later receiving a charge of indecency from the French police.) Spectators thus did not always participate in the ways the Living Theatre hoped they would—they protested, scorned, threw things and tried to drown out the actors as often as they joined in with them—but they almost always participated.

The Plague scene’s appeal was, likely, partially because of the scene’s metaphorical availability and deliberate ambiguity. Though less explicitly tied to a vision for social change than the scenes of contagion that the company would develop for *Paradise Now*, the images of helpless corpses heaped onstage, and silent spectators looking on, suggested all sorts of political allegories. “In Europe,” Malina told Richard Schechner, in a 1969 *TDR* interview, “it is always assumed to be Auschwitz or Hiroshima. Except in Vienna, where, of course, they thought it was a sex orgy.”²¹ “Here,” Schechner replied, “nobody died with you because Americans don’t really like to think of death.” (Rather
than joining the body pile onstage, he remarked, American audiences tended
to spring up and attempt to comfort the “dying” performers—likewise creat-
ing a scene of mass participation, if less violently than European audiences
did.) American spectators, too, saw a broad social commentary in the scene.
In his essay on the Living Theatre’s late 1960s tour, in which the company
presented Mysteries alongside Frankenstein, Antigone, and Paradise Now,
Richard Gilman pointed to the social implications of Mysteries’ concluding
gesture:

The last piece of action, a long mimesis of our social despair and the
horrors of our impersonality, in which members of the group “die”
in agony at various points in the theater and are carried stiff and
strangely remote by others in the company to be piled in a pyramid
on stage, was solemn and affecting, and, what’s more, a true theatri-
cal action, a new one.  

Part of the scene’s participatory ethos, then—part of what made it irresist-
ibly catching—was that it could be Hiroshima in Brussels, the Holocaust in
France, and the alienating angst of American politics in New York.

Philip Fisher’s observations about the literary and philosophical signifi-
cance of the passions—as distinct from affects, feelings, or emotions—are
helpful in illuminating what was particular about the Plague scene. “Unlike
the feelings, the affections, or the emotions, the passions are best described
as thorough,” Fisher writes. “They do not make up one part of a state of
mind or a situation. Impassioned states seem to drive out every other form
of attention or state of being.” Following this line of thought, and citing
the philosophy of Stanley Cavell, Fisher further points out that the passions,
perhaps alone among the various models of interior states, hold the power
to radically disrupt the everyday states of being that contribute to social and
political inertia: “it is in the moment of repudiating the hold of the ordinary
and the everyday,” argues Fisher, “that an impassioned state begins.” Impas-
sioned states are states in which radical change becomes possible.

In the annals of physically and emotionally contagious performances, the
Plague scene from Mysteries ranks among the most clearly and theatrically
infectious. I propose that this is not only because of the scene’s flexible stage
fiction, but also because it was physically—to use Fisher’s term—thorough.
The scene asked performers and audience members to imagine a set of
symptoms that were first and foremost physical, and through inhabiting
such extreme physical states, to find a route to the most extreme emotional
states, the passions. In exploring what he calls the “vehement passions,”
Fisher cites debates among philosophers on which of the classically recog-
nized passions—for instance, terror and rage—were the most thorough, the
most all-consuming. He quotes Lucretius’s description of fear, which reads,
in part:
When the mind is excited by some more vehement apprehension, we see the whole soul feel in unison through all the limbs, sweats and paleness spread over the whole body, the tongue falter, the voice die away, a mist cover the eyes, the ears ring, the limbs sink under one; in short we often see men drop down from terror of mind . . .

For my argument about the Living Theatre’s work, it matters less whether terror or rage is the more vehement or all-encompassing passion, the passion that most completely takes possession of the one feeling it, forcing other forms of thought and sensation from consciousness. What matters is that such an account of fear, which roots the emotion in specific physical symptoms—in the weakening of the limbs and the misting of the eyes, in paleness and perspiration—closely resembles Artaud’s description of the plague, which the Living Theatre drew upon as stage directions for the final scene of *Mysteries*. Fisher’s study offers a reminder that the passions are forces of extremity, beyond everyday affect or emotion. “Only terror and other vehement states saturate the body as a whole and the soul or psyche as a whole,” Fisher observes.

The Plague scene was catching because it was grounded in physical saturation, in fictive but obsessively specific vehemence—which was to lead in turn to highly specific performances on the part of both actors and their audiences. Indeed, it wasn’t only an exterior physical commitment to reenacting Artaud’s plague that the Living Theatre looked for; they were seeking, in their company and in their spectators, emotional dedication as well. Describing the company’s initial development of this scene, Malina and Beck explicated an approach to performing plague that sounds surprisingly reminiscent of Stanislavsky (or, in fact, the acting approaches of the American Method teachers Stella Adler and Lee Strasberg, who were among the faculty at the New School where Malina had studied):

**Beck:** We keep talking about the plague, for instance, as an exercise in locating the pain and watching the pain travel around the body, feeling it . . .

**Malina:** The first time we did it, it was just as intense [as in later public performances]. There were some people who didn’t do it well and we worked with them . . . Mostly they were not finding specific enough pain or not taking it out far enough.

In conclusion, Malina adds, the Living Theatre, which was then attracting a steady stream of would-be company members, sought only to recruit “a certain kind of person; that kind of person can do this dying.” In fact, as *Mysteries* toured, Beck, Malina, and their collaborators began to employ the scene as a barometer of sorts, measuring the readiness of the Living Theatre’s audiences to join corporeally and emotionally in the stage action. “We have
a test for them,” Malina told Schechner. “We pick them up by the neck and ankles. If they’re stiff, they get carried up [to the stage]; if they fold, then we put them down.”30

Only those spectators who not only sympathized with the Living Theatre’s broad theatrical and political goals, but also possessed the physical stamina and the rigorous emotional presence to enact the Living Theatre’s scene on a moment’s notice, were allowed to join in the action, as the pile of stiff “corpses” onstage grew and grew. In other words: philosophies of rigorous emotional and physical acting, inflected by, among other sources, Malina’s training at the New School, lay beneath the apparent spontaneity of Mysteries’ Plague scene. Acting theory fueled the company’s performances and contributed to the Living Theatre’s thinking about what performing the plague meant for them. The plague was not so much an uncontrollable force emanating from the company’s commitment to revolutionary upheaval as it was a repeatedly rehearsed and carefully calibrated acting technique rooted in the physicality of the passions.

The plague not only predated Paradise Now, but also outlived it. Two instances from the Plague scene’s later life suggest the continuing significance of the scene, and the theatrical principles on which it operated. On May 10, 1972, the Living Theatre took part in a public protest outside the International Telephone & Telegraph (ITT) building on Park Avenue in Manhattan, voicing outraged American actions: recently, President Nixon’s escalation of the war in Vietnam, and more particularly, the role of ITT in abetting CIA action internationally. In her diaries, Malina noted that she was drawn to the protest particularly because it was organized with an eye to multiple layers of performance: “it is not a rally with speakers, but a ‘die-in,’” she wrote, “a theatrical action in which both civil disobedience and dramatic action accompany the rallying and picketing.”31 Amid multiple forms of protest and street theater, including a play linking the production of Wonder Bread to the production of bombs, and the tape-recorded sound effects of shells and screaming, the Living Theatre performed the plague. This choice to perform an acting exercise, with an internalized fiction, registers, once again, the Living Theatre’s prioritization of layered theatrical communication over straightforward political action. Meditating on the many forms of protest that erupted across the country that spring, Malina noted: “I don’t ask, ‘What does this mean.’ It’s perfectly clear to me what it means—what’s not certain enough yet is what it communicates.” She added: “This communication must get/is getting clearer and clearer.”32

The Plague scene resurfaced again in 1975, this time as the first section of the company’s piece Six Public Acts, a prologue to the company’s larger work The Legacy of Cain. Six Public Acts premiered in Pittsburgh, as part of the company’s multiyear exploration of the situation of workers, and was performed in numerous site-specific locations in other American cities as well as in multiple European countries, including Germany and Italy. The piece
consisted of a preamble and six acts or “Houses,” structured thematically around objects of protest—Money, War, Property, the State—and building toward the final “House of Love,” in which, following a series of dialogues on the ways money, tradition, the state, and other external forces work to stifle love, the performers tied each other up with rope and waited for spectators to set them free.

By the time they staged Six Public Acts, the Living Theatre had weathered a significant identity shift, splitting into smaller collectives and dispersing internationally to pursue multiple, distinct goals—some of them artistic and others spiritual or political. And yet, even after such fundamental change, the Plague scene still figured as a central element of the company’s theatrical approach to the performance of politics, spectatorship, and social change. During the piece’s first section, titled the “House of Death,” the company performed a reinvented version of the Plague scene. Performers and spectators gathered in front of a building chosen for its significance in promoting destructions of various kinds: the selected site could be “any company with heavy investments in the death culture (armaments, pollution, 3rd world exploitation, worker enslavement).” At the University of Michigan, for instance, the performers selected the Engineering Building because “research is done here which has led to the development of Napalm and the electronic battlefield.” Once the company arrived at its location, while two designated “Shamans” described the building as a center of “death culture,” the performers began enacting the plague. This was a formalized and carefully rehearsed procedure: as the script explains, “the people begin to dissolve from their procession tableau positions into a rapid (3 minute) plague death. When all are dead the six doctor-shamans rise and begin the building of the body pile.”

Even as the scene from Mysteries surfaced, in Six Public Acts, as part of a formalized, outdoor processional performance, accompanied by painted signs and timed to the ringing of gongs, the tug toward realistic acting of the plague itself persisted. In a series of rehearsal notes on the scene, from November 28, 1976, the directors remind the company to locate and play the pain with attention to physical and emotional detail. “Everybody,” the notes read, “please try to make sure your plague scene is based on a real awareness of your body and its death—don’t play for effect—the risk of melodrama is that it’s funny.” Street theater here was still compatible with an internalized vision of the plague. In fact, street theater required it.

While the Plague scene opened Six Public Acts, the piece concluded with a complementary sequence that likewise included participation and required performers to submit to collective physical restraint. This time, rather than stacking their bodies, as in the Plague scene, performers bound each other with ropes, continuing until the only remaining performer requested that a spectator take over and restrain him or her. Once tied up, the performers simply waited for spectators to take action and free them. “The liberation will
begin," asserts the script with confidence, “eventually it will happen.” So important was it that the performers refrain from initiating any act toward their freedom that a separate typewritten reminder, signed by Julian Beck, asserts:

The Act of Untying—at the end of the House of Love—is to be done by the public. It should NEVER be initiated by a member of the collective. It is for the public to do. It may mean that the actors/actresses wait 20 minutes or an hour+: but eventually THE PEOPLE will make the revolutionary choice—action—and they will do this without being led, without being shown how—the action, the discovery, the rush, belongs to them; and the whole play was made for that moment.39

In his study *The Theater Is in the Street*, Bradford Martin suggests that this final sequence in *Six Public Acts*—the House of Love—constituted the true culmination of the company’s quest for spontaneous audience participation. “The Living Theatre’s 1970s productions, such as *The Money Tower* and *Six Public Acts*, synthesized the company’s long-standing aims to involve the audience, revitalize the form of theatrical events, and express political ideas through theater,” he argues. Below a photo of *Six Public Acts*, he writes: “Fulfilling Paradise’s promise.”41

Such an approach does much-needed service to the long history of the Living Theatre’s quest to catalyze radical social change through audience participation, removing *Paradise Now* from historical isolation as both the high-water mark and death knell of the radical avant-garde. But it also operates within the same bounded terms of artistic efficacy as any of the indictments of the Living Theatre’s approach to audience participation. Martin’s logic suggests that the sheer fact of audience-initiated action—outside of an explicit fictional scenario, and without explicit instructions from performers—represents a greater degree of theatrical radicalism than the more explicit “acting” of *Mysteries* or the heightened confusion and alienation of *Paradise Now*. It implies that stage action operates as a direct microcosm for a larger political landscape, and that spectators’ participation in the theatrical event is a means of reflecting or even provoking their participation in any form of radical social change.

I take the opposite approach: not seeing the Plague scene (or the Act of Untying, for that matter) as training for revolution, but seeing both, rather, as training for actors, training that drew on the complexities of fictional, physically specific emotional states to create contagious action. Viewing the company’s use of Artaudian contagion as a matter of rigorous training and rehearsal—not only for company members but also for spectators—assists in removing the false expectation of spontaneous radical action from the Living Theatre’s work. The Living Theatre’s staging of Artaud’s plague
demonstrates how radical contagious performance was not only compatible with the mediating layers of fiction, but flourished because of those layers, which offered a route into the performance of vehement emotions. “Fulfilling Paradise’s promise,” to borrow Martin’s phrase, was less a matter of getting audience members to participate—and more a matter of getting them to perform.

Five Hundred People a Night: *Paradise Now* and the Emotions of Radical Change

Three and a half years after premiering *Mysteries*, the Living Theatre gathered in an off-season tourist resort in Cefalù, Sicily, to begin conceiving and rehearsing the piece that would become *Paradise Now*. This development period, in the spring of 1968, coincided with a high point in radical protest action, culminating in, among other events, the general strike and related protests of May 1968 in Paris, in which Malina and Beck took part. Performance’s power to spark widespread radical action was more important to the company than ever, and as the collective debated dramatic structure, acting technique, and theatrical subject matter, their attention was ever-focused on the recruitment and engagement of audience members.

By the time the Living Theatre created *Paradise Now*, the language of Artaud had thoroughly permeated the company’s artistic and political consciousness. The paradigm of plague as a model for performance, as well as the prospect of a link between the physical and the metaphysical, manifested frequently in the company’s thinking from this time period and suggest that Artaud’s ideas about infectiousness—both in the theater and in the wider world of performative politics—lay beneath the surface of many of their performance strategies and artistic philosophies. Beck’s *The Life of the Theatre*, comprising meditations on the company’s work from the early 1960s to the early 1970s, is littered with discussions of trance states and ritual, plague and alchemy. Recalling Artaud’s essay “The Alchemical Theater” as well as “The Theater and the Plague,” Beck described *Paradise Now* as “the search for alchemical formulae”: “those mysterious changes, metabolic, electrochemical, flow of blood, glandular, neurological.” Such phrases might as well have come directly from *The Theater and Its Double*. Indeed, in “The Alchemical Theater,” Artaud parses the relationship between theater and alchemy through the lens of transformative efficacy—the transmutation of lead into gold, but also of theatrical action into the real world. And Beck was not the only one drawing on Artaudian ideas of infectiousness and plague during the rehearsals of *Paradise Now*. On March 12, 1968, for instance, company member Echnaton asked whether someone in the group could “do a lecture on effective [sic] athleticism.” Later that month, Malina remarked, “We would have to signal thru/ the existing flames.” “Signaling through the
flames” maintained a consistent presence on the list of actions the company planned to do during their new piece.

I invoke the consistent, insistent, detailed presence of Artaud in the conversations surrounding *Paradise Now* as a way of suggesting the significance his ideas held for the Living Theatre—not only as generalized inspiration but as specific, granular performance strategy. The company’s new piece may have diverged from Artaud’s politics, but it was deeply inflected by his ideas about theater. “We want to find something that will change 500 people a night,” announced the actor Rufus Collins to his collaborators in February 1968. In another rehearsal, Collins declared: “I want them [the audience] to be trapped into it,” adding that “I think that in 6 minutes the audience will be in a point of hysteria.” William Shari, another performer, agreed that the actors’ primary objective in *Paradise Now* was to “infect the people nearest you to do something.” When performer and company member Jenny Hecht announced that she hoped the new piece would move beyond the format of *Mysteries*, another actor, Henry Howard, proposed that it could do so by striving “not just to be/ but to communicate/ to make it catching like the plague.” It strikes me as significant that for these creators, the hope was that *Paradise Now* would be even more “catching” than *Mysteries*, a piece that already explicitly and literally staged Artaud’s plague, and that asked audience members to rise up and do the same.

Even more striking is Howard’s comment that he hopes the piece will “communicate.” Both the concept of communication and the word itself recur frequently in the Living Theatre’s rehearsal discourse, in Malina’s and Beck’s diaries and notes, and particularly in their theories of acting. In a January 1969 conversation about the problems involved in integrating audience members into *Paradise Now*, Collins suggests: “In *Paradise Now* there is a time when there is a large conglomeration of people on the stage and we get them to come off the stage and get the people in the audience.” Here, Beck interjects: “and find ways to communicate with each other.” These terms invoked not only the discourse of bodily contagion, but also contagion’s dual relationship to bodily presence and to media technology. In February 1969, in a short essay extolling the uses of the tape recorder for both political and artistic purposes, Beck linked the company’s consistent emphasis on acting as “communication” with his new thinking on the politics of media:

> We are no longer interested in winning, but in communication. Communication is winning. This is why media are, McLuhan told us, the controlling influence of our behavior. Seize the media. Communicate.

Beck’s decision to invoke McLuhan, the powers of recording, and technology’s significance as a means of transmitting ideas, reveals the complexity that the concept of “communication” held for the company at this time. Here, communication meant seizing the apparatus of information transfer.
In rehearsal, communication meant speaking and listening. And in performance, communication meant infectiously transmitting revolutionary ideas and revolutionary feelings.

The concept of communication also drives Beck’s writing on acting during this time period, when he wrestled repeatedly with the legacy of Stanislavskian theory, and with the Living Theatre’s departure from what he referred to as the “theater of fictions.” Beck’s diary from January to July 1969 provides a running commentary on the differences between the type of acting commonly practiced in studios and on stages across the United States, and the type of acting he envisioned for his own company. In a brief essay titled “How to Act,” he instructed:

Acting is earnest communication of everything you are with the people who have earnestly assembled to be guided through the mysteries. Whatever you know of the mysteries must now be transmitted. The actor, whatever school he derives of, must be engaged in this, no? In communicating what he has learned and his experiences during his psychic voyages into the recess of space and time, his physical voyages into the anatomy of life and space, his voyages into the unknown. Your life depends on communication.

To call for theater that “communicates” is to invoke both physical and emotional transfer, to suggest the double implication of communicable disease and communicable ideas.

Whether intentionally or not, the statement is also a citation of Artaud, who asserts in his famous essay: “First of all we must recognize that the theater, like the plague, is a delirium and is communicative.” Curiously, though, this statement does not appear “first of all,” or even close to the beginning of “The Theater and the Plague,” but instead near the end, in one of the many contradictory passages describing the mode of contagion in which his theatrical plague would participate. I return here, briefly, to Artaud’s description of how the plague would spread—and how it would not spread (addressed in my introduction)—as a means of better understanding the Living Theatre’s own vision for theatrical communication. Among several counterintuitive swerves in “The Theater and the Plague” is the assertion that for all the qualities that the theater and the plague may share, contagion is not actually one of them. “If the essential theater is like the plague, it is not because it is contagious,” insists Artaud. Elsewhere, he states, “it is too easy and explains nothing to limit the communication of such a disease to contagion by simple contact.” Too easy—despite Artaud’s assertion, elsewhere in the essay, that theatrical catastrophes should “discharge themselves into the sensibility of an audience with all the force of an epidemic.” These tensions within Artaud’s own conception of the plague recur, in different form, in the Living Theatre’s version of theatrical contagion—where, too, performance discharges itself
into the sensibility of an audience, but, likewise, in far more mediated ways than “contagion by simple contact” could account for.

Jane Goodall’s assertion, quoted in full in my introduction, helps to illuminate the plague’s manifestation in the Living Theatre’s performances. Arguing that the plague is less a direct physical contagion than a psychic transfer, Goodall recalls the reader to Artaud’s description of the plague’s eruption among those in whom the “seeds” for such infection had already been planted. For the Living Theatre, these people were primarily other actors—whether those who already identified as such or those who became actors in order to join in the Rite of Guerrilla Theatre or to join the company as a whole. For audience members who engaged with Paradise Now as spectators, the piece frequently disappointed, presenting an emotionally charged, quasi-fictional portrait of contagious revolution rather than a truly infectious spectacle. But for audience members who took up Living Theatre’s invitation to perform—not as political revolutionaries but as stage actors—the plague frequently called up something theatrically potent.

My analysis of Paradise Now focuses on the first few minutes of the piece, the Rite of Guerrilla Theatre: the section that came to paradigmatically stand in for the problems of the piece as a whole, for the contradictions faced and embodied by the company more broadly, and for the challenges attending radical theater in the late 1960s. I choose this not only because it was the most famous, the most frequently attacked, and one of the most provocative sections of Paradise Now, but also because, like the Plague scene from Mysteries, the Living Theatre viewed it as a performance piece in its own right, separable from the rest of the four- to five-hour show. During the Rite, performers approached audience members, gazed into their eyes, and made a series of increasingly frantic declarations: “I am not allowed to travel without a passport”; “I don’t know how to stop the wars”; “You can’t live if you don’t have money”; “I’m not allowed to smoke marijuana.” When spectators responded (if they did), performers ignored them, spoke over them, screamed louder, and ranted harder. The scene typically culminated not in dialogue between performers and spectators, but in one of many moments titled “Flashout” in the published text (which was compiled and edited after the company had been touring Paradise Now for some time, with authorship attributed to the collective). Flashouts, the company specified, were moments when “the actor by the force of his art approaches a transcendent moment in which he is released from all the hangups of the present situation.”

Critiques of this enraging, seemingly counterproductive, confused and confusing scene abounded, and still do. “With all their devotion and righteousness, The Living Theatre is a community theater which pretends interest in dialogue but tolerates only dogma; pretends interest in art but creates events; pretends participation but exercises punishment,” complained a 1969 review of Paradise Now at Yale University. Erika Munk, in an essay on the
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Living Theatre and its audiences, summarized the infuriating effect of the piece’s first few minutes:

The opening “Rite of Guerrilla Theater” . . . became every critic’s paradigmatic, usually enraging, Living Theatre moment . . . Reading the description, one can easily imagine a true communication of the impossibility of communication. What occurred instead, not only the three times I saw it but from all reports at most performances, was a psychodrama of scorn and hostility.60

Though he did not cite the Rite of Guerilla Theatre by name, Richard Gilman’s assessment of this element of Paradise Now objected, in similar terms, to the disjunction between the performers’ rhetoric about participation and the actual dynamic that spectators experienced in the auditorium. He balked at what he referred to as the company’s “pompous, self-righteous, clichéd talk,” which he described as

talk that separates and kills as effectively among leftists and radicals as among the “enemy,” the talk that reinforces complacency at the very moment it’s trying to unsettle and prod, that brings the darkness closer through its utter blindness to the political and social realities, that says what we already know, what we’ve found useless as talk.61

The range of scholarly and critical responses includes many more such critiques. “The actor’s relation to audience response is entirely one-sided: no matter what the audience does, the actor will use the audience to produce a predetermined emotion,” writes Marianne DeKoven in her 2004 analysis of Paradise Now, adding that “the production must move forward, oblivious to the nature of audience response.”62

Stefan Brecht, in his report on the Living Theatre’s American tour, in which they played Frankenstein, Antigone, Mysteries, and Paradise Now in repertory, offered a detailed and revealing description of the Rite’s effects on spectators:

For example, though the rite of Guerrilla Theater in Paradise consists of a theatrically acted crescendo of horrified plaints as to what the members of the Company (I, we) are not allowed to do, each of which the first time around is delivered as sincere intimacy to a spectator (who mostly responds by one of 2 or 3 shitarse cracks), the performers with absolute rigidity refuse response even to “sincere” rejoinders, continuing their routine as rite. When at other times they do engage in dialogue with spectators—with evident disinterest in the interlocutor & responding to his points only with the concern
to make the ideology prevail—their design is to make the dialogue 
an act which will appropriately move third parties, the surrounding 
audience.\textsuperscript{63}

The key word here—for Brecht and for me—is “acted.” If critiques of the 
Rite align in any way with the company’s own explicit vision for the scene, 
it is precisely in this agreement that the performers were playing rehearsed, 
scripted material, that their confrontations with audience members were 
never intended to be dialogues, that the scene comes closer to establishing a 
fictive cosmos than to tearing one down. “If the spectator addresses him, he 
listens to the spectator but repeats only this phrase,” state the published stage 
directions, referring to whichever of the five selected phrases a performer is 
voicing at the moment. “He is obsessed with the meaning of the prohibition 
and by the ramifications of the prohibition. He cannot travel freely, he cannot 
move about at will, he is separated from his fellow man, his boundaries are 
official: the Gates of Paradise are closed to him.”\textsuperscript{64}

As if to underscore that the Rite’s emotional charge was rehearsed, the 
stage directions included in the published text include overtly Stanislavskian 
terminology. “At all points in the performance the actor’s superobjective is to 
further radical action demonstrating the futility of violence and the joyous 
quality of non-violent revolutionary action,” the text enjoins. “At all points 
the superobjective is to work for the changes that diminish violence both in 
the individual and in the exterior forms of society.”\textsuperscript{65} Since the company had 
been performing \textit{Paradise Now} for some time before creating the final perfor-
mance text, the stage directions are likely some combination of observations 
made in rehearsal and performance, and aspirations as to actors’ behavior 
during this section of the piece. Such recourse to Stanislavskian structures is, 
I argue, not an accident but a reflection of the ways the company constructed 
the piece from the beginning: as a play with a fictive cosmos, characters, and 
its own internal, shifting reality. (It is also, of course, a reflection of Malina’s 
New School training, which deeply influenced the company’s acting work.) 
The concepts of “further[ing] radical action” and “work[ing] for the changes 
that diminish violence” only appear ludicrously out of step with the concept 
of the superobjective if we hold \textit{Paradise Now} to a different standard of real-
ism than any other fictional play. The language of superobjectives testifies to 
the specificity of acting technique, and thinking about acting technique, that 
was at work in the Rite and in \textit{Paradise Now} more broadly.

Stanislavsky—and his legacy, broadly considered—remained the para-
digm against which Malina and Beck conceived their approach to acting. 
His name, his theory, and his way of understanding the actor’s work surface 
again and again in the pair’s writings. A short passage from their “Messages” 
series announces: “When an actor asks a question there are always 2 (two) 
answers: 1. Specific details as to immediate action and motivation. 2. A dis-
cussion of ‘what is the meaning of this play.’ ” Malina and Beck then inquire,
“How is this different from Stanislavsky’s beats and super-objectives?” and assert: “Not at all.”66 The Living Theatre’s commitment to dismantling what they repeatedly called the “theater of fictions” did not, for them, preclude the use of realist acting models as a means of summoning and channeling emotion in performance. Rather, the Rite of Guerilla Theatre (and the company’s acting work more broadly in the mid- to late 1960s) constituted an attempt to merge Stanislavsky with Artaud.

Mingling with Stanislavskian superobjectives, throughout the company’s writings on acting, were observations about the centrality of pain to the actor’s work. Pain was, of course, the primary sensation at play in the Plague scene, and the performance of pain was the primary indicator of whether an actor was ready to become part of the company. In Beck’s notebook, he asserted that “whatever the actor does, whether he is playing a character in the theatre of fiction or whether he is playing life in the theatre of life, always has to be expressing the pain.”67 “Messages,” too, contains multiple meditations on the subject, including one entitled “The Theatre of Pain,” which notes that “when the spectator begins to feel the pain, then the actor begins to accomplish a vivid purpose: to heighten awareness.”68 The Theatre of Pain was Artaudian, but Stanislavsky fueled its performance onstage.

The company’s acting choices were provocative at the time, not only for the emotions they summoned in their spectators, but also for contemporary thinking about acting itself. In his 1972 essay “On Acting and Not Acting,” Michael Kirby invokes Paradise Now as a new midpoint on a spectrum running from “not-acting” to “acting.” The company’s approach, for Kirby, represented a form of “emotional” acting that did not involve playing fictional characters but nevertheless was distinct from any straightforward presumption of spontaneity or reality. His analysis is so revealing that it is worth quoting in full:

At times in “real life” we meet a person that we feel is acting. This does not mean that he is lying, dishonest, living in an unreal world, or that he is necessarily giving a false impression of his character and personality. It means that he seems to be aware of an audience—to be “on stage”—and that he reacts to this situation by energetically projecting ideas, emotions and elements of his personality for the sake of the audience. That is what the performers in Paradise Now were doing. They were acting their own emotions and beliefs.69

It is notable, first, that Kirby singled out the performers in Paradise Now as representative of an unfamiliar, highly particular form of acting. For Kirby, the Living Theatre’s actors occupied a position between familiar forms of acting—stable characters inhabiting a stable fictive cosmos—and ordinary behavior or “non-acting.” The idea that they were “acting their own emotions and beliefs” (rather than those of a fictive character) still implies an interior
mode of performance, driven by internal emotions and objectives rather than by spontaneous interaction with spectators. As realist actors would do, the performers in *Paradise Now* sought to give the impression that their carefully rehearsed speech was driven by spontaneous, sincerely felt emotion.

If the performers did not, in Munk’s words, create a “true communication of the impossibility of communication” during this section of the piece—if that was never the intention anyway—the feelings they did communicate, by most accounts, were frustration, skepticism, confusion, and annoyance. Such sensations are what Sianne Ngai might categorize among the “ugly feelings” she describes in her study of that name, where she analyzes envy, irritation, and paranoia, distinguishing such “weak” emotions from their more celebrated counterparts: passions like rage and ecstasy. Drawing on the writings of Brian Massumi and Lawrence Grossberg, Ngai also describes the distinction between affect and emotion, citing the oft-presented idea that while emotions typically have subjects, affects do not—and, perhaps more significantly, that affective states, unlike emotions, are “neither structured narratively nor organized in response to our interpretations of situations.”

Ngai invokes such categorical distinctions partially in order to dismantle them: the “intentionally weak” feelings she analyzes challenge such categorization. So do the responses that audience members reportedly felt while watching the Rite of Guerilla Theatre. They did not feel rage or fear, emotions that Ngai categorizes as “grander passions,” nor did they feel empathy or catharsis, emotional responses on which theatrical relationships between audiences and performers are built. Spectators at *Paradise Now*, I argue, arrived open to feeling emotions—open to the ecstasy of revolt, to the joy of radical communion—but frequently experienced affect instead. They were waiting for the exultant rage of the revolutionary, but instead experienced the maddening confusion of the needled audience member. Expecting big feelings, they experienced an overwhelming series of small ones.

Such disjunctures between expected or anticipated emotion, and actually felt affective state; and between molecular personal change and sweeping societal restructuring, are, I argue, representative of the emotional state of the aspiring revolutionary in this late 1960s moment. Henry Lesnick, in the critique of guerrilla theater cited at the beginning of this chapter, suggested that displays of extreme rebelliousness, though thrilling, did little to promote actual political change, arguing that the “politics of put on, of play, has an undeniable appeal for everyone whose primary experience of the contradictions of society is one of boredom and a sense of stultification.” In identifying the sensations of “boredom” and “stultification” as the affective enemies that radical guerrilla performance sought to vanquish, Lesnick captured the Rite’s tendency to veer vertiginously between global, high-stakes targets of protest and those that risk appearing more trivial. “I don’t know how to stop the wars” competes, in this section of *Paradise Now*, with “I’m not allowed to smoke marijuana.” Despite the company’s assertion that such
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destructive societal forces are inextricably linked, it’s not only the difference in significance and scale, but also the ease with which the second complaint is satisfied—and the impossibility of altering the first—that causes political vertigo.

Lesnick’s analysis also reflected the gap between spectators’ anticipated emotions and the ones they reportedly really felt during the Living Theatre’s opening Rite. It’s not that boredom was the only affective expression driving the Rite of Guerilla Theatre. To the contrary: the emotions portrayed by the Living Theatre’s actors during this section of the piece included rage, panic, and desperation. But small feelings—boredom, annoyance, confusion—were commonly the affective expressions it produced. To me, this effect represents neither a deliberate attempt to exasperate spectators, nor evidence of theatrical failure. Rather, the gap between immense passions and small feelings is indicative of a larger emotional gap that pervaded the performances of revolutionary and radical theater during these years—an emotional gap that can be revealingly understood as an instance of what Raymond Williams called “structures of feeling.” In his essay in Marxism and Literature (a collection that emerged out of the social and political upheaval of the 1960s), Williams describes the ways that fixed social forms, such as educational paradigms and verbal habits of argument, frequently fail to encompass or account for all of the communal experiences, conversational tenors, or shared emotions in a given historical moment. He writes:

There is frequent tension between the received interpretation and practical experience. Where this tension can be made direct and explicit, or where some alternative interpretation is available, we are still within a dimension of relatively fixed forms. But the tension is as often an unease, a stress, a displacement, a latency: the moment of conscious comparison not yet come, often not even coming.71

For Williams, what distinguishes a structure of feeling from other possible descriptions of a given period’s style, cultural practices, or social relationships is its location in the present tense. Structures of feeling cease to be so when they are fixed, codified, or even precisely named. He chooses the word “feeling” over “experience” for his new term specifically because of the risk that “experience” implies events that have already taken place.

For spectators present at the Rite of Guerilla Theatre, the dual eruption of boundless passion embracing vast historical change, and of confusion, boredom, and irritation in the moment of performance, constitutes such a tension between emotion as articulated and emotion as felt. That numerous spectators shared the second category of affective responses suggests its public and communal nature; that it could not be framed within a politically revolutionary context—that it, in fact, contradicted such a context—suggests it as a “structure of feeling.” This tension operated not only at the level of emotion
in the Rite of Guerilla Theatre sequence, but in a larger sense throughout the performance as a whole: in the tension between opening space for audience participation and moving the performance inexorably along; in the tension between the symbolic depiction of revolution and the real-world, practical embodiment of it; and in the tension between the images that merged onstage and the feelings that refused to coalesce in the audience.

The Rite of Guerilla Theatre, I argue, manifested a structure of feeling particular to the late 1960s radical movement: a tension between depicting the revolution and living it. Such feelings were importantly at stake for radical artists throughout this period. In an essay titled “Some Notes in Defense of Combative Theater,” Charles Brover observed, “In every crucial area of personal life—love, friendship, work, family, language, and even dream—there was demanded a thoroughgoing transformation. The process of personal change was so rapid that one could not simply trust oneself. The struggle for a liberated future became temporarily a struggle against unconscious subversion.” Lesser emotions, even unconscious or unnameable feelings, were thus crucial to the revolution, forces that could undermine sweeping social change or be marshaled into its service.

The company’s rehearsal notes and writings suggest that a central aspect of *Paradise Now* was an attempt to evaluate the specific passions, emotions, and affects that should accompany their particular political moment. A brief meditation in the “Messages” text, titled “Passion, Anger, Sadness, Weeping,” observes: “When the actors cry out against the pain, our detractors say: ‘They are filled with hate.’ Imagine! They can’t tell the difference between passion and anger.” Other conversations suggested that neither passion nor anger would be effective in performance. In a February 1968 conversation during *Paradise Now* rehearsals, Malina argued against revolutionary rage, not just as a mode that was inappropriate to their performance, but also as a mode that was unproductive for their historical moment. “I do not think this is the play to arouse people to anger,” she said. “In fact historically I don’t think this is the time to arouse people to anger. The Revolutionary Act has to be so cool. I’m a radical Revolutionary, I want to get to the hot act. But this is the time for the cool.” It is no accident, then, that they repeatedly included television—the paradigmatic “cool” medium according to both Beck and McLuhan himself—in their repertoire of revolutionary performance during this period.

The company’s thinking about emotion infused many of *Paradise Now*’s scenes, but especially the Rite of Guerilla Theatre. An early draft of the performance text contains a typewritten script of the Rite, in which copious instructions and ideas about emotion, absent from the typescript, are instead handwritten in the margins. For instance: in typewritten text following the actor’s instruction to announce, “I am not allowed to travel without a passport,” the stage directions instruct the actor that “if a spectator addresses him, he listens to the spectator but repeats only this phrase.” Following
this injunction, a handwritten insertion adds: “The spectator may be passive, sympathetic, superficial, witty, profound, cynical, hostile. The actor uses this response to increase his expression of the frustration of the taboos and inhibitions imposed on him by the structure of the world around him.”

Such handwritten insertions are scattered through the margins of this page, and nearly every insertion adds detailed emotional information to stage directions and dialogue. Another explains that the actor “experiences the spectators’ growing frustration at the sense of a lack of communication.” In the updated third draft incorporating corrections, these emotional additions are integrated into the text.

However this means the text was created—whether these stage directions carefully choreographing emotions were conceived separately; were always present but simply overlooked in the first typescript; or were observations made in performance and then deemed important enough to include in the final text—the copious insertion of emotional information into the draft, and its inclusion in subsequent versions of the scene, testifies to the overwhelming significance of emotion here. What’s more, the specific affective states attributed to audience members in the early draft’s marginalia—passivity, Wittiness, hostility, superficiality—align closely with the (to use Ngai’s phrasing) “weak feelings” spectators really reported experiencing during the scene.

The disjuncture between major passions and minor affects remained a constant for both performers and spectators. After performing Paradise Now for about eight months, Malina recorded in her diary one of the frequent responses the Rite elicited from spectators.

There’s this dumb-bunny selfishness, that means to change the world with a specious argument.

i.e.:
— “I’ve found a way, I can travel without a passport.”
— “Therefore you can do likewise.”
— “Therefore I am allowed to travel without a passport.”

As if the good example of a few smart-ass radical beauties could work the wonders for the war-torn and the starving and the jailed and the wage-slaves. That the scene is about Revolutionary Outcry escapes them in their feelingless notion that “we are beyond that.”

For Malina, this moment in the performance was not about the logistics of traveling without a passport, but about something larger and more symbolic. It isn’t that the Living Theatre didn’t want to create real revolution, with all of its attendant practical concerns; to the contrary, their seriousness about large-scale political change emerges continuously through Paradise Now. Spectators were invited to form revolutionary cells, to liberate the prisoners in local jails, to exchange phone numbers in order to continue political action once the company left town. But Paradise Now was at its most Artaudian, its
most fascinatingly contagious, not as a direct embodiment of political action but as a layered study in revolutionary feeling (indeed, she critiques the confused spectators as “feelingless”). Malina’s response to her audiences suggests that the scene was never so much about literal action as it was about locating and embodying—in other words, performing—the emotional landscape of radical change.

Televising Paradise Now: The Dilexi Broadcast

This landscape emerges finally, fully, in the televised portions of Paradise Now, in the Dilexi broadcast, where the contagion of Artaud and the contagion of broadcast media merged, and where the company’s approach to choreographing audience emotion and transmuting it into acting becomes clear. Viewing Artaud and the Living Theatre as companions in making mediated performance is itself somewhat counterintuitive: the accepted lines of influence connecting Artaud with his heirs at the Living Theatre do not usually run through the terrain of broadcast media, and his major experiment with broadcast, To Have Done with the Judgment of God, appears, at first, unrelated to Paradise Now. Yet, placed side by side, Artaud’s radio play offers resonances with the Living Theatre’s utopian vision. Both plays connect the granular dynamics of everyday living to the largest questions of human society, spirituality, and seismic historical change. Both contain eschatological historical visions: Artaud’s desperately dystopian, the Living Theatre’s, anarchically utopian. Both offer worldviews deeply informed by the apparently unending nature of global warfare, and both assume the mantle of indigenous groups’ spiritualities. The scale of vision, the fascination with diagnosing global geopolitical orders, and the availability of impending and totalizing new forms of being obliquely echo each other.

For Artaud, broadcasting offered a possible means of expanding his theater of cruelty with more immediacy, more visceral power, and more universal reach than could ever be achieved by gathering spectators together in a theatrical space. For the Living Theatre, it offered a means of incorporating audience members by teaching them, step by step, how to perform the company’s infamous Rite—and demonstrating, too, to all of the potential performers following along at home. It is in this concentrated effort to shape the Rite of Guerilla Theatre for television that the company’s approach to contagious performance—to performing Artaud’s plague, to launching revolution—is at its clearest and most direct.

The Dilexi Series was itself a pioneering exploration of the medium of television, devised by the San Francisco gallerist Jim Newman as an opportunity for experimental artists in a variety of media to work with the relatively young format of the television broadcast. Yvonne Rainer contributed a video entitled Dance Fractions for the West Coast, aired in June 1969, in which a
group of thirty dancers performed mass choreography followed by, among other things, a discussion by Rainer on “the virtues and problems of snot.” Andy Warhol offered for broadcast the Paul Swan Film, a thirty-minute portrait of 83-year-old dancer Paul Swan, who danced and recited poems on camera. Both of these, and many of the other contributions to the series, explicitly explored the properties of film and video. Rainer’s piece contained “electronic effects” that were “keyed over the basic imagery”; Warhol’s consisted of a single take that was “painful,” “more for Swan than the viewer.”

A performance broadcast in late June, by the artists Kenneth Dewey, Don Harper, and Marie Zazzi, claimed to explicitly build on “Marshall McLuhan’s idea that television is the new family hearth” by staging a conversation with a group of Happenings artists around a real campfire, into which a television eventually intrudes.

The Living Theatre staged its Rites of Guerrilla Theater, as the broadcast was titled, at Mills College on March 8, 1969. In The Living Theatre: Art, Exile, and Outrage, John Tytell mentions the broadcast event in passing, noting that the company members staged the Rite for TV only because they needed “extra money, afraid now that escrow funds for the return trip to Europe did not exist.” Yet a glimpse at Malina’s diary from that day suggests that the decision to film the Rite was not so casual as all that. Her diary reflects that it was not so much the broadcast that was motivated purely by a need for funds, but rather the number of events the company scheduled into a single performance day, which included not only the Mills College staging, but also a staging of the Plague scene from Mysteries for a different television station, as well as a regular performance of Paradise Now.

It’s no accident that although the Rite is listed in the singular in the published text of Paradise Now, the Dilexi broadcast is titled Rites, in the plural. The Living Theatre stages, at Mills College, a three-part sequence that repeats the Rite multiple times: First, the company performs the Rite for its spectators; the actors then hold an informal seminar of sorts to discuss its strategies and intended effects; and finally, the Living Theatre restages the Rite using audience members as the primary performers. In other words, the performance piece created for Dilexi is a how-to guide, a training session, a rehearsal, not of the Living Theatre, but of their audiences.

The performance of the Rite itself takes less than a third of the twenty-five-minute video. Spectators fill the rows of a college auditorium, murmuring quietly in anticipation. Some appear young—students from the Mills campus—while others are, perhaps, faculty or community members there to see the already legendary company perform. Actors enter from multiple doors and begin addressing audience members, quietly at first, murmuring the now-familiar plaints: “I’m not allowed to travel without a passport”; “You can’t live if you don’t have money”; “I’m not allowed to smoke marijuana.” As in most performances of the Rite, these incantations proceed from quiet observations to desperate, terrified cries. Soon, Malina is wailing, “I
don’t know how to stop the wars!” She clutches her temples and leans into a spectator in the second row, who smiles sympathetically, knowingly, but does not speak. Throughout, the performers treat the cameras as if they were live spectators too, sometimes speaking directly to the broadcast audience and, at other times, giving us a sidelong glance or part of an angry phrase en route to delivery somewhere else.  

Then, as if by mutual agreement, the actors stop, quietly holding their ground throughout the auditorium. Julian Beck hoists himself onto the edge of the stage and perches there, a cool professor leading a class. “The purpose of the Rite of Guerilla Theatre,” he says, “is to assault the culture, to assault you, to assault ourselves, and to establish the facts and the feeling of where we are right now. And so, like obsessed nuts, maniacs, because in fact we are obsessed nuts and maniacs, all of us, we move around among you, repeating five of perhaps a hundred phrases . . . which define the prohibitions, five of the prohibitions of this prohibitionary society . . . in which we live.” He talks his audience through the five statements that comprise the Rite and fields questions from spectators about the company’s intentions in performing them.
Performing Plague

Then—and here is where the broadcast gets especially compelling—the Living Theatre asks their audience to take a turn performing. “Let us be aware that what is happening here today is a high seminar in brain damage repair,” announces performer Steve Ben Israel, shirtless, wild-haired, close to the camera, turning to look at the spectators in their seats. After Beck explains that the company would like their audience members to act the Rite of Guerilla Theatre, performers give specific directions to spectators. Ben Israel instructs them:

We shall start out low, and we shall build to the point where we shall scream, but let us try to scream all at the same time, by listening to each other as we rise individually and collectively, let us begin to say the first line, which is “I am not allowed to travel without a passport,” and you can stand out of your seats and begin to move, and say this for two minutes and then scream.

Such clear physical and emotional instructions offer the spectators an entry point into the Rite that audience members at the “regular” performances of Paradise Now didn’t have. Spectators mill around the auditorium, confronting other, seated spectators, at first timidly and then with increasing fervor. One spectator-performer carries a baby in her arms, shyly declaring, “I am not allowed to travel without a passport.” Someone giggles hysterically in the background. “I am not allowed to travel without a passport,” bellows a spectacled man, moving through the crowd. “I am not allowed to smoke marijuana,” bellows a spectacled man, moving through the crowd. “I am not allowed to smoke marijuana!” insist two young women, confronting a man in sunglasses who exhorts them, “Yes, you can! You can!” The paradigmatic objection to Paradise Now, the obsessively derided tactic of shouting in audience members’ faces—and then ignoring them when they attempt to shout back—is transformed in this moment, when the Rite becomes the acting exercise it always was.

“The Living Theatre’s greatest transformative effect occurred among the numerous individuals who joined the company after first experiencing it as audience members,” writes Bradford Martin in The Theater Is in the Street. DeKoven echoes this idea in her analysis of Paradise Now, arguing that the performance piece, ostensibly open and inclusive to its audience, in reality included only those audience members who transformed themselves into actors:

Later in the performance, near the end, the audience is much more actively and directly included, but by that time they have become honorary or temporary members of The Living Theatre and are expected to do more or less what the rest of the actors are doing. They are included only insofar as they have achieved the prescribed state of consciousness.
Observations like these suggest that the company’s “transformative effect” was small, and that such transformations were ultimately failures—that true revolutionary theater would turn its audiences into revolutionaries, not into actors.

But transformation was always a matter of acting, revolutionary feelings always a matter of performance technique. Malina’s brief, but revealing, notes on the Mills College performance underscore such an interpretation. “It went well,” she wrote, “with the eager-eyed girls doing a good thing when it came their turn to play the Rite of Guerrilla Theater. And some good outbursts—all getting more and more positive in response to the need.” The students here are evaluated primarily as actors playing a scene: a scene for which they have been trained and prepared over the course of the preceding twenty minutes. At the end of the students’ performance, Malina recalls, “a tiptoed exit by the actors leaves them to their own devices.” The Living Theatre thus taught its audience how to perform the scene, and then disappeared so that the new “company” could continue: not continue making revolution—not immediately, anyway—but, rather, continue acting. For the Living Theatre, working in the wake of Artaud, revolutionary performance was at its most contagious when channeled through rigorous acting technique, emotional complexity, and rehearsed choreography. Neither fiction nor mediation disrupted the performance of revolution, or inhibited its infectious spread. Rather, stage fiction and viral performance worked hand in hand to point actors—and spectators who became actors—toward a distant vision of the revolution itself.