Passionate Amateurs

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Published by University of Michigan Press

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Passionate Amateurs: Theatre, Communism, and Love.

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We are sitting in the theatre, and we are worrying about community. We are not alone; much work has already preceded us in thinking about the relationship between our attendance at the theatre and our participation in both the social and the political dimensions of community. In this chapter my aim is to move between the first of the three terms with which this book announces itself to be concerned— theatre — and the second— communism. Notwithstanding my own leap to a certain understanding of historical communism as part of the scope (or mythical content) of B.#03, the task of justifying communism, as such, as a central concern of this book will eventually come to depend upon a more familiar conjunction, that between theatre and community. For, as should be clear by now, this is not a book about a communist theatre. It seeks communism in a certain potentiality within theatrical practice rather than in any theatre that would name itself “communist” (even if the “Proletarian Children’s Theater” of chap. 3 might lead one to think otherwise). Communism here is not the given name of a party, nor, least of all, of any national political state under which theatre might be produced and presented. The communism in question here remains to be found, in relation to the practice of theatre, or rather, as a potential relation within the practice of theatre.

What is the experience of relation in the practice of theatre that might offer communist potential? It will need to be distinguished both from a more general feeling that those who gather in a theatre might share a sense of community, and also from what Jill Dolan has called “the utopian performative,” in which participation in a live performance event produces a public among whom a sense of human potential beyond the constraints of the present is fleetingly captured. Dolan’s is already a considerable refinement of the idea of theatre as community, which is often as free of specific content as claims that a theatrical event puts people in touch with their “feelings” or makes them “think.” It is grounded in specific and contemporary experiences of performance, often those in which social identities and subjectivities marginalized or excluded in a society in
which power, rights, and resources are unevenly distributed according to gender, race, and sexuality. In naming this potential “communist,” however, I am trying to understand it in rather different historical and political terms: in terms of a longer history of theatre in which opposition to capitalism as such—rather than to its specific contemporary oppressions and exclusions—is at stake. This will involve considerations of historical development, of the nature of theatrical time, and of the relation of both to the experience of work. The communist potential, then, has to do with an experience of work, under specific historical circumstances (industrial capitalism) and in a specific industry (theatre), where the “present” of theatrical time—the time of performance—is the product of a specific division of labor (as between actors and spectators, for example, or amateurs and professionals). The communist potential is to be found in theatre’s occasional capacity to trouble some quite fundamental assumptions about both work and time—about the work of time and the time of work—that have come to shape social and cultural life at least since the consolidation of industrial capitalism in Europe from around the end of the eighteenth century. This capacity, I will argue, arises largely from the participation of the theatres in question in what I have already called here “industry,” rather than from any position outside capitalism and its institutions. Or rather, the communist potential—the trouble it makes with work and time—is experienced as a fraught relationship with industry, with its institutions, and with capitalism itself, rather than as flight or freedom from them. The passionate amateur—who is the person, either knowingly or not, in pursuit of this communist potential—may be traced, historically, then, to one of the first moments of cultural and political resistance to the establishment of our now dominant understanding of the relations between work and time; traced, that is, to the moment at which industrial capitalism first started to assert its power. The passionate amateur of this book is a theatrical variant of a historical figure whom Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre have called the romantic anti-capitalist.2

Romantic anti-capitalism names a resistance to industrial capitalism, articulated on behalf of values, practices, and experiences, often those of a premodern, preindustrial, rural life, that industrial capitalism seemed determined to destroy. Because of its valorization of premodern conceptions of community and social relations, it has frequently been characterized—along with romanticism more broadly—as a conservative or politically retrograde tendency in critical thought. Many Marxists, in particular, especially those for whom a progressive model of historical development is a crucial dimension of their political analysis, have re-
garded the romantic anti-capitalist with great suspicion. Indeed, the first elaboration of the term “romantic anti-capitalist” is usually attributed to the Hungarian Marxist, György Lukács, for whom it described the sensibility or worldview of writers such as Dostoevsky, whose work contains an only partly articulated vision of community as a “world beyond estrangement” and which therefore falls short of an adequate materialist critique of capitalism.3 The term is intended as derogatory. In the 1931 article in which the term first appears, a text that Löwy and Sayre characterize as a “document of dogmatic frenzy,” Lukács writes that Dostoyevsky, a writer who had been a major source of positive inspiration for him in the early 1920s, had transformed “the problems of Romantic opposition to capitalism into internal spiritual problems” and that he had thereby made himself “the artistic representative of ‘a petit bourgeois Romantic anticapitalist intellectual opposition,’” a social phenomenon more likely to lead toward the reaction of the fascist right than it could to the revolutionary left.4 Löwy and Sayre’s project is to redeem figures of romantic anti-capitalism from the pervasive conviction that romantic notions of community tend inevitably in a dangerous rightward direction. This is done, first, by locating the origins of the “worldview” as a critique of a specific historical situation, and, second, by organizing the field in a kind of political taxonomy, in which romantic figures of the right (Georges Bernanos, Edmund Burke, Gottfried Benn, Carl Schmitt) are distinguished from liberal, leftist, and revolutionary figures. The aim of both strategies is to identify a “romantic” legacy deep within the intellectual tradition of Marxism itself, in which “romantic” aspects of Marx’s own thought and writing (largely in the earlier work) are understood as having been carried forward by figures such as Rosa Luxemburg, Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin (the clearest representative of this tradition included in the present book), Herbert Marcuse, and even, albeit in a profoundly contradictory way, Lukács himself.5

Among the key characteristics of romantic anti-capitalism are that its expressions of rebellion and its articulations of critique are directed against the damage wrought by industrial capitalism upon human individuals and communities from a perspective shaped by a deeply felt attachment to a mythical or imaginary precapitalist past: “Romanticism issues from a revolt against a concrete historical present…. What is rejected, in other words, is not the present in the abstract but a specifically capitalist present conceived in terms of its most important defining qualities.”6 The most important of capitalism’s “defining qualities” is its organization of all human life around wage labor, in which human activity and cre-
ative capacity are primarily valued for what they can contribute to the accumulation of capital, and in which life is measured out in units of productive time.

The precapitalist past—the world before wage labor became the dominant work-relation—takes a number of forms and throws up a diversity of mythical antecedents as images of revolt or an alternative society. For many German, and indeed English participants in this tradition (like William Morris), heroic fantasies of a highly aestheticized medieval period proved especially appealing. For Bloch, the sixteenth-century radical Protestant leader Thomas Münzer became an exemplary figure. Others, including Lukács, Engels, and, at times, Marx himself, looked either to democratic Athens or to the “Homerice” era’s “primitive communism” for metaphorical and ideological resources—a preference that a number of theatre makers and scholars almost inevitably share. Michael Löwy, returning to the theme of romantic anti-capitalism in a recent study of Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Concept of History,” makes a crucial observation about the nature of this kind of use of the past. It does not involve a desire that history should go into reverse, but rather the idea that a genuinely revolutionary move might involve something that theatre does rather well—an interruption or substitution of the present with something of the past, something consciously and deliberately repeated:

One might define the Romantic Weltanschauung as a cultural critique of modern (capitalist) civilization in the name of pre-modern (pre-capitalist) values—a critique or protest that bears upon aspects which are felt to be unbearable and degrading: the quantification and mechanization of life, the reification of social relations, the dissolution of the community and the disenchantment of the world. Its nostalgia for the past does not mean it is necessarily retrograde: the Romantic view of the world may assume both reactionary and revolutionary forms. For revolutionary Romanticism the aim is not a return to the past, but a detour through the past on the way to a utopian future.7

I want to suggest that theatre can perform this “detour” in two ways. First, it can offer an image or enactment or repetition of some aspect of the past—or, indeed, any time that is not the time of the “present” that the time of theatrical “presence” replaces—in order to negate something of our present reality. Second, within the social and economic structure of industrial capitalism, it offers this negation of the present by way of an
experience that is not normally experienced as work, but as some kind of nonwork or “play.” Of course it is no such thing: it is work for those who make it, just as the nonpresent past or future summoned into the present by the act of theatre-making is also no such thing, but rather the present itself, experienced otherwise. The detour taken through the theatre leads through a past that is not past and is accomplished through work that looks like it is not work. This is why the theatre is a particularly good place for the passionate amateur or romantic anti-capitalist who wants to find some way of undoing, even if only for a moment, the time of her work and the work of time upon herself.  

The theatre is also a good (because perverse) place to go looking for communist potential—not, crucially, because it offers any kind of space beyond or outside capitalism, but precisely because it usually nestles so deeply inside it. Much romantic anti-capitalism looks to the past because it offers an image of an outside upon which a future utopia might be modeled. In the same gesture it also assumes that there exists some essential, whole, and unalienated humanity, from which capitalism has torn us and to which we may one day return through a restoration of past experiences and practices of community. This is the “romance of community” against which Miranda Joseph offers a powerful critique. For Joseph community is best understood, not as some alternative to capitalism in which human beings will realize themselves and their social relations most fully, but rather, as its supplement. It is a resource that lies within capitalism, and upon which capitalist projects and enterprises of many different kinds can draw in order to encourage the performance of subjectivities that will assist them in the production and realization of surplus value. It is not available, therefore, as an unproblematic source of alternative value and good feeling for left or liberal social and political projects. But nor is it merely an unattainable fantasy from which it would be better if everyone abstained. As Joseph writes, just once or twice, the true name of this “supplement” or “specter” is “communism”: a potential for the making of a life beyond the division of labor right where the division of labor rules. It was partly by accident that the personal experience that seems most richly to inform Joseph’s critique was that of working as a volunteer in a non-profit theatre in San Francisco. But it was a happy accident, not least for the present project, for which one of theatre’s most significant characteristics is that the division of labor is not just visible there, but, literally, on show, night after night, right where people go looking for something very different. It is in this apparent contradiction—and it is a contradiction that opens up only the very tightest of spaces—that the communist potential
of theatre might be found. If you can make it here, you can make it anywhere.

Others have also sought to locate this potential in aesthetic practice. Jean-Luc Nancy, for example, writing against a communism grounded in work, in class identity and the projected triumph of a revolutionary historical subject called the working class, proposes a “literary communism.” At first glance this might appear to be a kind of joke, echoing “champagne socialism” and suggesting, perhaps, that the “communism” in question is little more than a luxury pose, indulged mainly by members of a bourgeois élite who enjoy fine wine and good books. Indeed, the vulnerability of the idea to such ridicule is perhaps part of its meaning. Instead of a communism in which community might be the objective of a project, the work of work, as it were, in which the members or participants are fused together in an organic or organized union (a state that Nancy calls “immanence”), Nancy offers the fragile proposition of an articulation of exposures. Instead of seeking communion with others, one opens oneself to the experience of encounters with others as marking simultaneously the limit of one’s self, and the place where one’s self, such as it is, begins. That is to say, in a recognition that one’s self, as such, is constituted, not by its integrity and individuality, but precisely by its appearance in relation to others, a relation that Nancy will call, in later texts, “compearance.” The “literary” dimension of a “communism” based upon this conception of the self in relation, then, is to be found in the idea that writing marks space between things:

What is at stake is the articulation of community. “Articulation” means, in some way, “writing,” which is to say, the inscription of a meaning whose transcendence or presence is indefinitely and constitutively deferred.

This constitutive deferral is the “unworking” that Nancy opposes to the “work” that seeks to achieve community, and from which he derives the title of the publication in which he presented the idea of “literary communism”: Le communeauté désoeuvrée (translated, not without some difficulty, into English as The Inoperative Community). In the title essay Nancy outlines the extent to which a work-propelled teleology has dominated both political and philosophical conceptions of both communism and community. There is, he writes,

no form of communist opposition—or let us say rather “communitarian” opposition, in order to emphasize that the word should not
be restricted in this context to strictly political references—that has not been or is not still profoundly subjugated to the goal of a human community, that is to the goal of achieving a community of beings producing in essence their own essence as their work, and furthermore producing precisely this essence as community. An absolute immanence of man to man—a humanism—and of community to community—a communism—obstinately subtends, whatever be their merits or strengths, all forms of oppositional communism, all leftist and ultraleftist models, and all models based on the workers’ council.13

In my attempt to account for how a communist potential might manifest itself in the particularly “literary” space of the theatre, and, most specifically, in relation to my interest in identifying this with a resistance to work, these texts of Nancy’s have been particularly useful inasmuch as they suggest simultaneously the value of work that is not work and of a community which is not (yet) one. The theatre that possesses this potential, I will suggest, will first of all be a theatre in which work is somehow in question; in which the complementary relationship between work and leisure is not taken for granted, neither by unreflective professionalism nor by the conditioned amateurism of the recreational hobby. Second, it will be a theatre in which there is always some kind of distance; in which participants are always separated from one another rather than merged with one another in an achieved community of the event. Third, it may also be a theatre in which this distance is not just a spatial separation in the present, but also a temporal articulation, in which the apparent presentness of the present is complicated by the appearance within it of people, things, and feelings from other times. A “theatrical” communism, then, following Nancy, might involve the potential “compearance” of figures from both the past and the future.

Even before Nancy articulates the idea of “literary communism,” a historical point of departure for it may be detected in the approach he takes, along with his coauthor Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, to Romanticism, and, in particular, to the life and work of the Jena Romantics. This was a group of writers who came together in the university town of Jena at the very end of the eighteenth century—August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel, Caroline Schlegel-Schelling, Dorothea Mendelssohn-Veit, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Ludwig Tieck, Novalis and Friedrich Schelling. Between 1798 and 1800 their activities centered around the publication of a journal, the Athenaeum (their affiliation with Athens, avowed in this choice of title, includes them in the ranks of those who, as I will shortly discuss,
imagine themselves in some way to be “after Athens”). Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy describe this circle as “a sort of ‘cell,’ marginal (if not altogether clandestine), like the core of an organisation destined to develop into a ‘network’ and serve as the model for a new style of life” and also as a “form of community,” a kind of “secret society,” and “the first ‘avant-garde’ group in history.” Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy see the emergence of this kind of association as a response to a “triple crisis” in Germany: a social crisis facing a certain element within the bourgeoisie, who have aspirations of cultural leadership but are no longer able to find stable employment or exercise such leadership in either the church or the university; a political crisis brought about by the promise and threat of the French Revolution; and a philosophical crisis opened up by the critical philosophy of Kant. The Jena “cell” saw their literary project not merely as a response to a literary crisis, but rather as the “privileged locus of expression” for a radical repudiation of bourgeois life as they found it. To live together, in literature, is a way of living a critique of this life, the expression of their ambition for “an entirely new social function for the writer . . . and consequently for a different society.” Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy find this ambition expressed with particular precision in Mendelssohn-Veit’s statement that “since it is altogether contrary to bourgeois order and absolutely forbidden to introduce romantic poetry into life, then let life be brought into romantic poetry; no police force and no educational institution can prevent this.” In this call romanticism seems to be the realization, in the present, of a collective mode of life—secured against law, education, and, I would add, the centrality of work to bourgeois social order—as a kind of “communist” enclave. Just as it does for Löwy and Sayre, then, romanticism itself emerges, historically, as a critique of capitalism, and therefore as a crucial affective and intellectual resource for communism.

More recently John Roberts, introducing a special issue of Third Text titled “Art, Praxis and the Community to Come,” writes of contemporary manifestations of a similar conception of communism as an “enclave” practice. Roberts notes a leftward shift in art theory and practice, associated with “the increasing democratic dissolution of the professional boundaries of art production itself,” and suggests that a “new communism” developed from the 1980s by philosophers such as Nancy, Alain Badiou, and Antonio Negri has contributed to the resurgence of messianic or utopian communist thought in the present. There is a melancholic dimension to this resurgence, in that much of its thinking takes shape in response to precisely the sense of loss and defeat for communism
that I have located in my feelings as a spectator at B.#03, and that Nancy articulates in *The Inoperative Community*. As Roberts writes of this phenomenon in general, and of its tendency to locate itself in artistic practice:

In conditions of political retreat or “closure” the function of the communist imaginary is to keep open the ideal horizon of egalitarianism, equality and free exchange; and art, it is judged, is one of the primary spaces where this “holding operation” is best able to take place.\(^{20}\)

There is something about Jena, too, that suggests it may participate in a similar melancholy, *avant la lettre*, as if the “cell” based on bringing life into romantic poetry had formed itself in the knowledge that the “police order” had already defeated it in the so-called real world.

But Roberts also points to a much more optimistic articulation of this “cultural communism,” particularly in its role as a major intellectual resource for the curatorial practice and theoretical writing of Nicolas Bourriaud. Bourriaud’s idea of “relational aesthetics”—in which artists produce social relations rather than material objects—has been widely discussed in contemporary art theory, and, because of its interest in people doing things with one another, has also begun to be taken up in writing about theatre and performance.\(^{21}\) Bourriaud’s work has been subjected to the kind of critique that any discourse that achieves fashionable status in the contemporary art market must expect, and much of it is successful in pointing to the absence of a concrete politics and the risk that the curatorial and critical valorization of the art practices in question might end up subsuming whatever socially ameliorative potential they might possess to the logics of a mode of capitalism for which, as we shall have occasion to observe from time to time throughout this book, social creativity of this kind is a prized commodity.\(^{22}\) But Roberts suggests that the underlying affiliation of this discourse with “new” or “enclave” communism “cannot be dismissed simply as yet another outbreak of speculative artworld silliness and idealism.”\(^{23}\) Stewart Martin, however, in an earlier edition of *Third Text*, offers a persuasive critique of Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics*, in which he argues that Bourriaud’s idea, far from being original, is in fact a revival of aspects of Romanticism, and one that, in its “reversibility,” offers a “utopianism” that “echoes the commodified friendship of customer services.”\(^{24}\)

Elsewhere Martin also develops a critique of what he calls “artistic communism.” In his own contribution to the issue of *Third Text* intro-
duced by Roberts’s essay, Martin offers a “retrospective” writing of “artistic communism,” predicated upon “a conjunction or correspondence, in particular between the post-Kantian conception of absolute art and Marx’s early conception of communism.” This construction also begins, as do Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, with Jena at the end of the eighteenth century, and, in particular, with Schelling—whose “proposal of art as the summit of practical reason,” Martin writes, “exposes a general relation of art to activity and production that is common after Kant, and indicates a fundamental affinity with Marx and his conception of communism as a society of free producers.” Martin goes on to propose that this “artistic communism” has largely been “subverted” by “artistic capitalism”—the name he gives to “the creeping subsumption of life under capital” in the present historical moment at which, as Martin affirms, rewriting Sartre, “capitalism is now the unsurpassable horizon of our times.” Martin notes the contribution of Paolo Virno, for whom practices of “virtuosity” represent some potential for artlike activity currently subsumed by capital to become a site for a renewed politics—“the communism of capital.” He cautions, however, against “a certain subjective idealism” in this “autonomist” gesture toward the “general intellect”—that communicative capacity held in common that thinkers such as Negri and Virno identify as crucial to their hopes for a properly political resistance to capitalism.

I share Martin’s interest in this idea of “artistic communism” and share to a large degree his critical perspective. While I am also skeptical of the optimistic uses to which “autonomist” thought has often been put, part of my project here is, nonetheless, to see whether there is anything to be found within the practice of theatre that might actualize some of its political potential. Martin is particularly skeptical of its now quite pervasive use in mainstream contemporary art practices and discourses. Its pervasiveness in such circles might even be taken as an indication of the extent to which its political potential has been co-opted for broadly liberal and pro-capitalist rather than radical anti-capitalist ends. In turning to theatre, instead, I don’t wish to suggest that theatre is any more likely than contemporary art to offer refuge from such co-option. However, I am interested in exploring the possibility that, at least in some theatre practices of the twentieth century (and even of today), the subsumption of labor under capitalism might not be as complete as Martin’s account would suggest; that there may be some continued resistance on the part of “artistic communism” to the subversion wrought against it by “artistic capitalism.” My articulation of the idea of the “passionate amateur” is an attempt to describe at least one part of the spectrum of such theatre practices
(those that fall outside or undermine theatre’s status as a professional activity).

My gamble then is that there might yet be something in what “literary,” “cultural,” or “artistic communism” proposes, that it may be possible to actualize in collective or socially oriented artistic practices something that is elsewhere only an idea or a vision of the future (often based on a romantic nostalgia for a mythical past): production and pleasure beyond the division of labor. One of the propositions of this book, then, is that some of that potentiality, or, at the very least, evidence of a desire for it, is to be found in the activities of passionate amateurs of the theatre. These passionate amateurs are those who work together for the production of value for one another (for love, that is, rather than money) in ways that refuse—sometimes rather quietly and perhaps even ineffectually—the division of labor that obtains under capitalism as usual.

Many attempts to articulate what this potentiality might be, arising as they do, most often, in the name of that community with which many theatre-makers and scholars have associated the theatre, will frequently find themselves “after” Athens. That is to say that they will dwell upon theatre and thought that simultaneously follow an idea of theatre taken to have been born in Athens and seek better to understand what this “Athens” might be that is so readily produced as the ground for the association of theatre with community. I will follow in these footsteps, then, but in being “after” Athens, I aim not merely to be in pursuit of this distant idea; I also seek to be on its case. In particular, I seek to take account of the critique offered by Salvatore Settis of the dominant uses to which the concept of the “classical” is often put. In *The Future of the “Classical”* Settis shows how what Novalis calls the “summoning” of an “antiquity” that “has not come down to us by itself” has enabled successive generations of Europeans to treat as given and preideological any set of contemporary values capable of being legitimized by reference to their origins in Graeco-Roman antiquity. Settis does not offer any extended consideration of theatre, focusing instead on approaches to the “classical” by way of the plastic arts (Vasari, Winckelmann, and Warburg are key figures in his narrative, the last for his disruption of the Eurocentric interpretations favored by his predecessors). However, he does note that the “classical” is deployed in political thought too, such as in the writing of Hannah Arendt, who shares what Settis calls “a widespread belief that the Greeks sowed the seed that would blossom much later into events and values that today we identify with,” when she claims, for instance, “that neither the American nor the French Revolution could have occurred without the
example provided by ‘classical’ antiquity.”\textsuperscript{30} Arendt’s thought is of particular significance for this project for two principal reasons, beyond its engagement with “classical” Greek thought and practice: first, because it constitutes an attempt to rethink conventional Marxist conceptions of politics as grounded in work and production; second, because it turns to the theatre as a way to understand or explain the concept of action, which, as opposed to labor (the necessary task of subsistence or reproduction) and work (the labor of production, or poesis, a making that includes “art”), is for her both the form and the content of politics.\textsuperscript{31}

In \textit{The Human Condition} Arendt offers an account of the \textit{polis} that, in its transitory constitution from the exchange of human speech and action, seems to suggest a theatrical event—a temporary coming together that is both part of and yet somehow to one side of the run of the social and political everyday, and that, perhaps crucially for the present project, depends upon its participants’ freedom from the demands of labor. This might be taken to suggest, I think, that the \textit{polis} might itself be constituted in the action that is the making of theatre: theatre being one of those places where people appear to one another and participate in action, and being also the one very specific place in which such action is reenacted, so that it may be collectively reflected upon:

the specific revelatory quality of action and speech, the implicit manifestation of the agent and speaker, is so indissolubly tied to the living flux of acting and speaking that it can be represented and “reified” only through a kind of repetition, the imitation or mimesis, which according to Aristotle prevails in all arts but is actually appropriate only to the drama, whose very name (from the Greek verb \textit{dran}, “to act”) indicates that playacting actually is an imitation of acting.\textsuperscript{32}

Clearly, if the \textit{polis} is to be thought of as theatrical in this way, it must not be a theatre of consumption alone, but one of participation. If the \textit{polis} is, as Arendt claims, “not the city-state in its physical location,”\textsuperscript{33} but rather “the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together,”\textsuperscript{34} and if she is right that “its true space lies between people living together for this purpose,”\textsuperscript{35} then one might want to imagine not simply that the constitution of an audience in front of a theatrical event is a kind of political potentiality, but that the act of dedicating oneself to acting and speaking together, the act, that is, of forming some kind of collective theatrical organization, is, in and of itself, a political act. I shall hope
to show how this might be the case, for both producers and consumers, actors and spectators, in the chapters that follow.

To be more precise, such an act might be political when and as long as it is not work, as long as it is *praxis* (a processual action) rather than *poesis* (the making of something).36 In the four chapters that comprise the core of this book—chapters 2–5—theatre within the specific social and economic circumstances of (mainly) European capitalism in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries will be examined so as to highlight moments in which a movement or uncertainty between praxis and poesis makes itself known. These are moments where a politics might break out, not so much because of an absence of work or labor (which might have to be the case in an Arendtian perspective), but rather because the terms upon which the theatre is made, in these four chosen examples, unsettle our capacity to distinguish between work and nonwork, poesis and praxis, the professional and the amateur. The relation of such “moments” of theatre to community, when community is thought of in relation to communism, will always therefore have something to do with a critique of the division of labor within capitalism. In going “after” Athens, in the footsteps of Arendt, I am also following Paolo Virno, who, in an inversion of Arendt’s thought, observes that the distinctive characteristic of work in “post-Fordist” capitalism is precisely its folding into itself of those capacities for communication that were for Arendt, purely political, rather than concurring with Arendt’s account of modern life in which work has reduced almost to nothing the space of politics:

So then, I maintain that things have gone in the opposite direction from what Arendt seems to believe: it is not that politics has conformed to labor; it is rather that labor has acquired the traditional features of political action. My reasoning is opposite and symmetrical with respect to that of Arendt. I maintain that it is in the world of contemporary labor that we find the “being in the presence of others,” the relationship with the presence of others, the beginning of new processes, and the constitutive familiarity with contingency, the unforeseen and the possible. I maintain that post-Fordist labor, the productive labor of surplus, subordinate labor, brings into play the talents and the qualifications which, according to a secular tradition, had more to do with political action.37

I will also be “after” Athens with Jacques Rancière, like Arendt, a student of praxis, whose thought aims consistently at detaching identity
from work (suggesting, perhaps, that “the human condition” is to be found elsewhere) and who sees this redistribution of the sensible (in which one is no longer perceived and “identified” by one’s place in the organization of labor) as an act of politics.\(^{38}\) For Rancière, this undoing of the terms by which identity is conferred upon a subject by the work that they do is the undoing of a political philosophy inaugurated in Athens by theatre’s ever-faithful antagonist, Plato. Theatre, for Rancière, offers at least an image, and sometimes even the reality, of social relations between people who cannot be defined by the work they do. If they are actors, they are doing a job in which, as Plato complains of artists in general, they know nothing about what it is they are supposed to be doing, because they are pretending to know how to be someone they are not. But precisely because they are pretending to know how to be someone they are not, they are also demonstrating that they do know how to do something. They know how to pretend to be someone else. The point is, precisely, that the situation is confused, and that the confusion is about how people might be defined in terms of what they do. And even if they are spectators rather than actors, they are participating in a field of the social that is unusually hospitable to temporary identity reassignments, in which they may reach both above and beneath their stations.\(^{39}\)

However, Rancière wishes to understand the relationship between theatre and community as a “presupposition” rather than as something that theatre might actually produce. This means that, on the one hand, he affirms the significance and historical persistence of the idea that theatre is an especially communitarian practice:

Since German Romanticism thinking about theatre has been associated with this idea of the living community. Theatre emerged as a form of aesthetic constitution—sensible constitution—of the community. By that I mean the community as a way of occupying a place and a time, as the body in action as opposed to a mere apparatus of laws; a set of perceptions, gestures, and attitudes that pre-cede and pre-form laws and political institutions. More than any other art, theatre has been associated with the Romantic idea of an aesthetic revolution, changing not the mechanics of the state and laws, but the sensible forms of human experience. Hence reform of the theatre meant the restoration of its character as assembly or ceremony of the community.\(^{40}\)

But on the other hand, he insists that “it is high time we examine this idea that the theatre is, in and of itself, a community site.”\(^{41}\) Rancière notes that
the fact of living bodies addressing other living bodies in the same physical space seems to lead to an assumption that theatre has “a communitarian essence” (not altogether removed, I would suggest, from the “ontology of performance” similarly derived from assumptions about the primacy of liveness). Accepting this assumption means, he asserts, that the question of exactly what is going on between spectators and performers, and, indeed, between spectators themselves, is avoided.

Rancière’s preliminary answer to this question is to propose that the “presupposition” of a community is the only thing that makes the gathering in the theatre different from people all watching the same television show at the same time in different locations. This community, however, is linked neither by their interaction (as some advocates of a more participatory theatre frequently hope) nor by membership in any kind of “collective body” of the kind that might once, in Castellucci’s terms, have offered “foundations . . . for the invention of tragedy,” but simply by a shared sense of one another’s equal intellectual capacity: “It is the capacity of anonymous people, the capacity that makes everyone equal to everyone else.” Anonymous (and perhaps not even identifying with their work), equal, “separate from one another”:42 such is the condition of spectators, according to Rancière. It is hard to find, in The Emancipated Spectator, much that would account for the particular pleasures of this condition, and it is for this reason that my concluding chapter, entitled “Solitude in Relation,” seeks in the affective experience of spectatorship a more extended understanding of what might be at stake here, in what sounds like it might be an emancipation from, rather than in or through, community. For the time being, however, I want to develop Rancière’s suggestion that theatre is about community to the extent that it contains a “presupposition” of community, by looking at two ways this presupposition is frequently articulated in discussions of theatre today: theatre and community—that’s “classical”—and theatre and community—that’s “good”! Both of these articulations may be understood as myths. The aim here is not just to show that these are myths, but also to explore what these two myths might still have to offer, for any attempt to develop a new line in “critical romantic anti-capitalism.”

1. THEATRE, COMMUNITY, AND THE “CLASSICAL”

The first myth is, precisely, that which makes Athens the model “after” which an understanding of the association between theatre and community is to be crafted. The act of making Athens a model may sometimes be
a matter of choice, and, at others, a process of manufacture. Only rarely is it a case of wholly unexamined assumptions and myths of origin; most myth-makers know what it is they are making, after all, even if, as Settis notes, the “less explicitly” the legitimization of ideological material by way of the “classical” is done, the “more effective it is.”

Theatre and performance scholarship—at least in English—has for some considerable time now taken its lead in matters of the tragic theatre of the Athenian city-state from the conjuncture of two propositions: that the theatre in Athens was an institution in which the relations of citizens to one another were represented and interrogated, and that social and political life in Athens was constituted by participatory practices—of which the theatre was just one—such that it might usefully be understood as a “performance culture.” This lead may well have been given most decisively by the work of Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal Naquet; taken up, influentially, in the field of classical studies by Simon Goldhill; and carried on in work on Greek theatre and theatre more generally in numerous locations up to and including David Wiles’s recent *Theatre and Citizenship*, the opening chapter of which, in a symptomatic move, is devoted to “Athens.”

I clearly exhibit similar symptoms, in beginning, however apologetically, in the same place (even if, as so often, it appears first in the guise of Berlin). The predominance of this general view of the social and political function of theatre in Athens is not problematic in itself. However it should be understood, at least in some cases, as evidence either of a preference or predisposition toward a communitarian understanding of theatre (with which I am far from unsympathetic) or of a desire to ground an analysis of contemporary political experiences in Greek categories. Classicists and historians of antiquity are usually more circumspect than either political theorists (like Arendt) or theatre and performance scholars when it comes to suggesting continuities between the present and any specific past.

One succinct articulation of the association between theatre and community in Athens is Oddone Longo’s:

> It may not be amiss to insist from the beginning on the collective or communitarian character of the Athenian theater public in the classical period: a public which is quite unparalleled in the history of drama in that it coincided—in principle and to a great extent in fact—with the civic community, that is the community of citizens.

What Longo insists upon is that the “theater public” is the “community.” This insistence is qualified, crucially, by the observation that this coinci-
dence is “unparalleled.” Even if—and this remains an open question—the “Athenian theater public” may rightly be considered to coincide with “the community of citizens,” and whether or not this would allow an analysis of the theatre as an institution or practice of the kind of community a contemporary theorist or activist might wish to promote (with all its notorious exclusions), the key point here is that this coincidence has never been repeated. The situation in Athens cannot, then, be evoked to describe any subsequent real relationship between theatre and community. It may yet, however, point to a future horizon at which such a coincidence might reappear. And it is made to do so, in Longo’s text, in a familiar maneuver by summoning the image of a prior “community” from which the tragic theatre is supposed to have developed. In insisting “from the beginning” upon the “communitarian,” Longo seems to allude to the idea that, even if the theatre, as it is actually practiced, is not fully or uncomplicatedly “communitarian,” it still carries with it some trace of an earlier, perhaps unknowable “community.”

For Longo, theatre in classical Athens involved the precipitation of two communities—actors and spectators—out of a single community that had, in “the earliest performances,” been “the collective which acted the ‘drama.’” So, although his account does not posit tragic drama as the origin of anything contemporary, Longo does locate it in relation to a precedent “origin,” in which community seems to stand for a way of life without social division. Longo seeks to avoid what he cautions might become “a too simplistic interpretation of tragedy as a directly communitarian ritual, or to a reading of Attic drama as somehow expressive of a completely collective situation.” In order to do so he notes that the theatre’s development from a predominantly choral form toward one dominated by the discursive interplay of the actors representing individual characters “might be seen as the progressive integration of the drama into the more pluralistic system of the polis, where division of labor, social stratification, and class struggle reduce precisely the area of unanimity in the community.” Theatrical drama, then, is not the expression of a nonexistent “solid collectivity free from contradictions and class conflict,” but rather, theatre is constituted as an institution for encouraging social cohesion in the midst of everyday conflict, so that “the dramatic enactment brings into being a ‘theatrical community,’ which in a certain sense is the passing hypostasis of the actual polis, but without its inevitable conflicts and cleavages.” In this respect, this “communitarian theatre” does indeed look forward, in its production of an ideal polis toward which its public (or at least some of them), and subsequent readers, spectators, activists, and scholars, might be imagined to aspire. And it looks forward by
gesturing backward to an imaginary community out of which the real divided society of the *polis* supposedly emerged. What is elided here is that the participants in “the earliest performances,” however much they may appear to embody more fully “the community” than do the “actors” and “spectators” divided from one another in the theatrical auditorium, cannot themselves be understood fully to “coincide” with any kind of “solid collectivity.” This is for two reasons, one historical, the other rhetorical: historical, in that, despite romantic constructions in which Greek prehistory contains a phase of “primitive communism,” preceding societies were themselves characterized by clear social hierarchies and other divisions; rhetorical, in that, as Longo himself has already noted, the “coincidence” of public and community he observes in Athenian theatre is “unparalleled.” If the participants in “the earliest performances” did indeed constitute a community of some kind, it will have been one that was identical only with itself: that is to say it was almost certainly formed on the basis of—and may even have helped constitute—some kind of class division. The image of a fully collective and participatory theatrical and political community therefore lies both before and after the moment of classical tragedy—in a mythic past and an imagined future. The peculiar coincidence of public and community that Longo identifies in the “Athenian theater public” turns out not to be located in that “unparalleled” moment, after all, but rather in two nonexistent moments: in “the beginning” of “the earliest performances” and in the intimation of a possible future that the “passing hypostasis” induces in that fleeting collectivity he calls ‘a “theatrical community.”’ But neither of these can “parallel” the “Athenian” moment itself, even as that very moment turns out no longer and not yet to be itself. This is both a romantic and a theatrical conceptualization of time, as I hope future chapters will show: romantic in its appeal to an idealized past as a resource for constructing a better future in response to a painful and alienating present; theatrical in its confusion of multiple temporalities in the moment of performance.

Without entering too deeply and prematurely into the kinks of this kind of time—whose time will come in later chapters—it is perhaps simply worth observing here that implicit in Longo’s understanding of the political value of tragedy is the idea that it offers its participants resources for making community, rather than an image of what community should be. In this respect it corresponds with an understanding of mimesis as the action of making rather than copying, in which mimesis doubles the process of creation rather than producing copies of what has already been created. A similar perspective may be identified in Goldhill’s account too,
where the City Dionysia is understood as being “in the full sense of the expression a civic occasion” because it places the principles of the polis “at risk” by putting them into dramatic relation with values with which they are in tension.\textsuperscript{51} It is the enactment of this tension that might be said to offer community-making resources. David Wiles reaches a very similar conclusion, in which he offers an analysis of “fifth century tragedy as a performance practice that built community, with shared pleasure in discussion comprising but one aspect of communal polis life.”\textsuperscript{52}

More ambitious in its attempt to claim continuity between practices of theatre about two thousand years apart from one another is a volume entitled \textit{Dionysus since 69}, which takes its title from the Performance Group’s celebrated production of \textit{Dionysus in 69}, directed by Richard Schechner, which is now widely regarded as a definitive example of the uses to which “classical” material was adapted by experimental theatre practitioners of the 1960s.\textsuperscript{53} In her introduction to the collection, Edith Hall explains that the book responds to what its editors see as a resurgent interest in the production and adaptation of Greek tragedy since the 1960s, an interest that, they suggest, can now, “retrospectively” be understood as “a virtually inevitable consequence of this potent cultural coincidence of the hippie challenge to the traditional notion of theatre, the Performative Turn, and the exploration of non-western theatre conventions.”\textsuperscript{54} Hall is suggesting here, I think, that the myth-making as regards the origins of performance studies—in the conjuncture of anthropology with experimental theatre practice in the context of the counterculture of the 1960s—is intimately bound up with a desire to return to and remake the myths of origins for which the “classical” had already proved such a rich resource. However, attention to the role of “fabrication” in this process is somewhat occluded by the enthusiasm with which something that sounds very much like export-led globalization is introduced:

Recently Dionysus, the theatre-god of the ancient Greeks, has transcended nearly all boundaries created by time, space, and cultural tradition, for staging Greek tragedy is now emphatically an international, even worldwide phenomenon. This seminal art-form, born two and a half thousand years ago in democratic Athens, rediscovered in the Renaissance as prestigious pan-European cultural property, has evolved in recent decades into a global medium.\textsuperscript{55} One of the difficulties here is the proposition that an “art-form” was “born” in Athens. Whatever was “born” there, it only became an art
form much later, as a crucial element in a process in which, as Dipesh Chakrabarty writes, “an entity called ‘the European intellectual tradition’ stretching back to the ancient Greeks is a fabrication of relatively recent European history.” A second difficulty arises because it is precisely the fact that theatre in Athens was just one element in a broader “performance culture” that lends itself to the kind of revival and reappropriation by Schechner and others in the name of “community.” That is to say that it is the specific historical relationship between theatre and other social practices in the Athenian polis that constitutes the “unparalleled” character of the theatre in question. To abstract just the remaining plays from that situation and to suggest, on the basis of their proliferation in recent years, that these apparent parallels point to a continuity is a very different project even to Schechner’s. Within the pages of Dionysus since 69 additional perspectives point as much to interruption as they do to continuity: Lorna Hardwick writes of African and Caribbean adaptations of plays through which, she argues, Greek drama “has itself been decolonised,” while Erika Fischer-Lichte, writing about productions by Klaus Michael Grüber and Peter Stein at the Schaubühne in Berlin in the 1970s, proposes that these works demonstrate the extent to which, whether it is desirable or not, the continuity affirmed by Hall is simply not possible:

Our distance from the past of Greek tragedy and Greek culture, cannot, in principle, be bridged—at least not by theatre and its performances of ancient Greek plays. Thus the purpose of staging Greek—and other classical—texts is to remind us of this distance and to enable us to find ways of coping with it individually and perhaps to insert fragments of such texts into the context of our contemporary reflections, life and culture. It cannot accomplish a return to the origins—whatever they may have been. They are gone and lost forever.

Thus in the very historical moment at which the idea of the “classical legacy” is under acute artistic and intellectual pressure—a postcolonial moment, above all—it is also returned into play as a potentially universalizing resource by artists and intellectuals who align themselves with postcolonial political pluralisms. While Schechner’s adaptation of what Hall calls “non-western theatre conventions” has given rise to accusations that he is also complicit with aspects of globalization, Schechner’s activity might, if it is to be seen in this light, be understood as import rather than
export led. Whatever trade flows are carried by such traffic between cultural and historical location, and however “fabricated” or contested the idea of the “classical ideal” might be, the temptation to evoke it, either “explicitly” or not, remains powerful. Such evocation may best be understood as performative: it functions, as Novalis writes, as a summons. The idea that theatre might be community, or, more precisely, that it can make community, is a powerful mythic resource, but it doesn’t transcend boundaries of space and time of its own accord; it must be appropriated in order to do its work. The most powerful of its appropriations, at least for present purposes, are those that seek to assert a particular and privileged relationship between theatre and community, and that make of that relationship a potential agent for revolutionary social and political change, what I call in the section that follows “the good.” Darko Suvin, for example, writing in 1972 about “political drama,” offers Aeschylus’s Oresteia in evidence to claim that

it would not be exaggerating to state that theatre and drama, as communal arts, are ontologically political, if politics means the health or sickness of the community which determines all human relations in it.\(^\text{58}\)

“It would not be exaggerating”; “It may not be amiss”: these disavowals in the midst of the most forceful assertion capture rather well the ambivalent character of the “classical” as a resource for a politics of community in the theatre. Something is “amiss,” but it has been “summoned” anyway, again, in an act that has to insist that it is not “exaggerating” when it affirms, in language very similar to Arendt’s, the political ontology of theatre: “the political art par excellence.”\(^\text{59}\)

2. THEATRE, COMMUNITY, AND THE “GOOD”

The idea that theatre might be a resource for making community, and that this is “good,” is the second of the two myths about theatre and community. Its adherents include practitioners and advocates of the diverse field variously named as applied, socially engaged, political, activist, and, of course, community theatre, as well as many theorists and practitioners of performance and liberatory and countercultural action. As Eugene van Erven writes, concluding a collection of essays on practices of “community theatre” in a range of different national and cultural situations:
All of the community theatre projects discussed in this book, I suspect, would subscribe to the central aim of providing the members of socially, culturally, ethnically, economically, sexually, culturally, or otherwise peripheral “communities” with the artistic means to collectively and democratically express their concerns and passions in their own, albeit aesthetically mediated, voices.60

Such projects are based on practices and political perspectives whose substantive origins van Erven locates firmly in the latter part of the twentieth century. There are more or less the same set of circumstances as those to which Hall attributes the resurgence of interest in Greek drama, even if van Erven gestures briefly to the possibility that a differently oriented scholarship might still wish to insist on “classical” origins too:

Although the usual anthropological arguments could be dusted off to place the origins of community theatre, as indeed of all theatrical expression, back in pre-colonial and Graeco-Roman times, its more immediate antecedents lie buried in the various forms of counter-cultural, radical, anti- and post-colonial, educational and liberational theatres of the 1960s and 1970s.61

However, one of the most influential practitioners in this field—Augusto Boal—grounds his theoretical account of the “theatre of the oppressed” in a fierce polemic against what he sees as the “coercive” anti-communitarianism of tragic theatre as described in Aristotle’s Poetics.62 In the second English edition of Theatre of the Oppressed (published in 2000) Boal introduces his account of the “coercive system of tragedy” with a consciously imaginary or mythologizing account of the imposition of the theatre’s “hypocrisy” upon the “creative anarchy” of the workers’ Dionysiac song and dance. Boal’s “myth” is in three parts. In the first, he describes how the spontaneous postwork celebrations of Greek farm laborers had to be brought under the control of the landowning aristocracy, and how the dramatic poet and the choreographer were deployed as the agents of this curtailment of an otherwise dangerous and anarchic freedom and produced the choric order of the Dithyramb. In the second, more extended narrative, he tells of how the improvisations of Thespis spoke truth in the face of the normative expressions of the dithyrambic chorus, thus producing the protagonist, who, from behind his mask, could speak the truth and disavow it at the same time. The third story tells of how Aristotle, calmly deflecting Plato’s rage against the hypocrisy of the ac-
tor’s being two things at once, devised a system of theatre in which whatever subversive truth the actor might speak could be repurposed as the error from which the obedient spectator-citizen could learn to free himself. Boal’s view of theatre’s relation to community seems very similar to the romantic idealization of prepolitical harmony to be found in accounts of “primitive communism,” in which, for good or ill, we must always return to the Athenian moment, even if primarily to understand it as a moment in which the establishment of the state concludes a process in which an earlier “communal” order has disintegrated through the gradual establishment of private property and the division of labor.

“Primitive communism,” or, as it may be more accurately named, “communalism,” refers primarily to the idea that human societies initially held property in common. Marx includes this proposition in the section of Grundrisse entitled “Forms which Precede Capitalist Production.”63 The tripartite developmental schema outlined here, in which an “Asiatic” mode of production is succeeded by a transitional “ancient” (Graeco-Roman) mode on the way to a feudal mode, is now challenged by subsequent research and archaeological discoveries. However, aspects of the theory of primitive communalism continue to exert an influence on the shape of subsequent thought, including Boal’s. Three in particular are worth mentioning here.

The first is that primitive communalism is hierarchical rather than egalitarian. This is presumably why Ellen Meiksins Wood prefers this term rather than “communism,” which suggests too strongly that any communism that might come will be a return to an Edenic state. As Wood notes of the early societies sketched by Marx, all featured “communal property embodied in a higher authority, typically a despotic state.”64 Boal’s myth of the development of theatre in Greek societies before the emergence of the Athenian city-state does not, it is worth recalling, begin in an egalitarian moment, but rather a moment in which workers seek respite from the labor imposed upon them in an inegalitarian or perhaps even despotic state, ruled by a landowning aristocracy.

The second is that the category of “worker” is not strictly applicable in such societies. As Marx argues in Grundrisse:

individuals relate not as workers but as proprietors—and members of a community, who at the same time work. The aim of this work is not the creation of value—although they may do surplus labour in order to obtain alien, i.e. surplus products in exchange—rather, its aim is sustenance of the individual proprietor and of his
family, as well as of the total community. The positing of the individual as a worker, in this nakedness, is itself a product of history.\textsuperscript{65}

The idea that to be a “worker” is not a fixed identity but the alterable result of historical circumstances is central to this project, as it is for Rancière’s work. As we shall see, it is the assumed or “naturalized” identity between a person and her work that gives rise to the figure of “the worker,” while it is the capacity of the theatre to disrupt this assumption, which forms the basis for much of Rancière’s interest in theatrical activities. It is my ambition for the figure of the “passionate amateur” that it should perform at least some modest disruption of identitarian categories. Boal’s “workers,” then, are workers only for as long as they work. When they are doing something else they are dancers or drinkers, or they are not defined at all in relation to what they do, and it is their freedom to remain undefined that is under threat as their celebratory performance is organized into theatre.

The third is that all these early forms of landed property possess as a “presupposition” that there already exists a spontaneous or “natural” community, which, Marx writes, “appears not as a result of, but as a presupposition for the communal appropriation (temporary) and utilization of the land.”\textsuperscript{66} This “presupposition” seems to return in Rancière’s account of the theatre public’s self-understanding as community. If, as Sartre wrote of the twentieth century, “communism is the unsurpassable horizon of our time,” might one dare say here that community has a tendency to appear, at least in the theatre, as an unsurpassable presupposition? If not that, then perhaps at least this: the experience of being with others in the theatre seems to offer participants in a capitalist society an intimation of their own presuppositions about a mode of collective existence in which the division of labor has not yet turned some of us into workers and others into proprietors, designated some of us professionals and others amateurs, or, to return to Boal’s terms, made of some us actors and of others spectators.

What Boal’s myth seems to suggest is that theatre is one of the places where this presupposition persists as intimation, or by way of an experience of intimacy in public, or, as I shall call it in the final chapter of the book, solitude in relation. Boal implies that theatre, in spite of its division of labor, retains affective traces of a communal practice in which labor is set aside and hierarchy temporarily resisted, and that the task of his own theatre is to reactivate those traces in the name of a contemporary political challenge to oppression grounded in a desire for community. As Eugene
van Erven writes, seeking to draw some conclusions from the diverse practices represented in his collection of essays on community theatre:

While it can never restore pre-modern communal harmony, which probably never existed in the first place, community theatre can be an effective medium to negotiate internal differences and represent these in artistic forms, in the creation of which local cohesion is enhanced and respect for “otherness” increased.\(^6^7\)

Although there is no way back to the mythical past, even for Boal, the origins of theatre itself are nonetheless posited as drawing on energies that come from outside the realm of work and whose expression takes place in the interruption or suspension of work. This “outside” of work is of course constituted by the necessity of work, and by the regulation of time and association in the “teamwork” of the farm or construction worker.\(^6^8\) It is an outside that is already an inside, and whose occupants are desperate to get out; to express themselves, become emancipated, together in the collective action of song, dance, and drinking. If there is a community presupposed in this performance, it is one that work interrupts, and that is, itself, an interruption of work. This is why the amateur—someone who interrupts his or her work in order to make theatre, rather than making theatre his or her work—may be a crucial figure for understanding the appearances of romantic anti-capitalism in theatre. Even if romantic anti-capitalism might long to locate its “good community” beyond capitalism itself, and to seek relief from alienation in an exit from its logics, it is almost always obliged to make do with what it can make within them. Something of this predicament is captured in the word *amateur*. On the one hand, the amateur acts out of love, in what Marx calls “the realm of freedom,” making an unconditional commitment that affirms its own autonomy. On the other hand, the amateur also acts in relation to “the realm of necessity,” her activity constantly defined in opposition either to the work of the “professional” who makes her living from theatre, or to the work she herself does to make her own living. This is because, to follow the logic of Marx’s thought, the realm of freedom is always ultimately contingent upon the realm of necessity.\(^6^9\)

Amateur theatre in its most familiar sense (as a leisure activity for those who earn their livings by other means) is not, however, the topic of this book. Amateur theatre is of course a huge field of activity of which there is probably much of interest to be written.\(^7^0\) But for the purposes of the present work, it accedes too readily to the distinction between work
and leisure that I wish to unravel here. The same may also be said of what in the United Kingdom is often called community theatre (a term that, in the United States, is more usually applied to what in the United Kingdom is normally called amateur theatre). Taken as a whole, community theatre in the United Kingdom—which often takes the form of performance events produced by specialist professionals in collaboration with nonprofessional participants—also tends to leave the work/nonwork distinction largely untroubled. Nonetheless, many of the affects, contradictions, resistances, and pleasures that I will try to account for in the discussion that follows may also be found in community theatre (in its UK sense), and I will end this introductory chapter by briefly indicating two of them that seem particularly significant. The first is that there seems to be something in the quality of the nonprofessional and often untrained theatrical performer that allows them to be experienced as the bearers of the values of community presupposed in the event. The second is the peculiar, and related effect, most notable in the kind of historically based community plays first developed in the United Kingdom by Ann Jellicoe and the Colway Theatre Trust and widely adopted elsewhere, in which the untrained performer, experienced as bearer of values associated with community, does so in the role of a figure from what is imagined to have been that community’s past (by appearing as character from a well-known local history, for example). Both of these effects are usually reported as indices of a kind of pre- or anti-capitalist authenticity wherein the social and political value of such projects inheres. Jon Oram, who succeeded Ann Jellicoe as director of the Colway Theatre Trust (now called Claque), writes in a brief article on what he calls “the social actor”:

There are conditions about the amateur actors from the community that make the audience’s transition from mere spectator to involved performer almost seamless. Whilst we might be in awe of professional celebrity, there’s a feeling of equality and intimacy when the cast and the audience come from the same community. Amateurs especially non-actors are closer to natural social behaviour as opposed to heightened performance. I build on these conditions by ensuring that the subject of the play is about the history of everyone in the room, and that they all share the same space. To put it succinctly there is a sense of community ownership about the play.71

Ann Jellicoe, in the preface to her Community Plays: How to Put Them On, cites extensively from observations made by Baz Kershaw about the Coly-
ford community play (Colyford Matters, by Dennis Warner, produced in 1983):

The stylistic focus is possible because the unity of the event derives from a simple shift of focus, away from theatre, towards community. Hence, the typical situations presented provoke a historical awareness that rests on a curious identification between the live actors and the dead people they play. They come from the same community and so it seems, in performance, as if they are the same people. The result is a powerful sense of the mysterious—set within an active celebration of shared meanings. So the explicitly presented development of community in the past is implicitly animated in the present. The artistic unity consequently derives from the fact that the fundamental event is not the play itself, but the opportunity the play provides for the continuing evolution of Colyford as a community. In other words, community plays are a community-forming process. Thus theatre is created through community.72

Both of these observations would ordinarily tend to support a strongly romantic conception of community, grounded in “nature,” “authenticity,” “identification,” and “unity.” These are precisely the terms against which critics of community as such, including Miranda Joseph and Jean-Luc Nancy, direct their analysis. All the same, as Joseph notes, seeking to distance herself somewhat from Nancy’s sense of the impossibility of community, some critical perspectives fail to account for the passion that attends such experiences.73 What Oram and Kershaw capture are sources for such passion—the appearance of the “natural social” and the reappearance of “community in the past”—and perhaps even foundations for the kind of “utopian performative” sought by Jill Dolan. Where I hope to develop a further understanding of such experiences is in a consideration of how these feelings might make meaning in more obviously compromised situations, or, rather, in theatrical circumstances where the “presupposition of community” is not as powerfully present. Is it possible to experience such (intimate, public, political) feelings even where they are not explicitly summoned up in the name of a supposedly natural or authentic “community”? I am most interested, therefore, in what happens when such passions are set in motion in ways that seem unnatural or inauthentic (theatrical, even) or where the appearance of figures from another time is experienced as a disruption rather than an affirmation of
historical continuity. This is because, in seeking to develop a critical romantic anti-capitalism, I cannot depend upon straightforward distinctions between the natural, the authentic, and a continuous historical experience, on the one hand, and the artificial, the constructed, and the discontinuous on the other. I will look for such experiences in just a few selected locations in the chapters that follow. The search begins in Moscow at the start of the twentieth century, where Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya* stages feelings about work at the dawn of theatre’s industrialization, and then moves on to Berlin in 1928, where Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis imagine a proletarian children’s theatre that might perform a kind of deindustrialization of the soul. This discontinuous history of passionate amateurs resumes in Paris in 1967, with Jean-Luc Godard’s film, *La chinoise*, in which a group of students play at being revolutionaries the summer before the real “events” of 1968. It ends in the present, more or less, wondering, first, about the nature of theatrical labor in an economy that has found ever more ingenious ways of commodifying such things as “community,” by way of an account of the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma’s *No Dice*, and then, in a final sequence, speculating on the extent to which a professional spectator such as myself might have any business writing about passionate amateurs.