

# It's time for Agit Prop Theatre! Reviving Political Theatre

Helen Sandercoe



*Bread and Puppet Theater performs during a protest in New York in June 1982. AP*

This article is an enhanced version of a workshop plan presented at Drama Australia's Conference in Newcastle, June, 2023. My recent research into Agit Prop Theatre is inspired by the young people who have recently marched over the issues of climate change. It seems to me that it is time to revive political theatre. In the 1960's and 70's, Agit Prop theatre had its hayday with the Vietnam protests. With so many issues from Climate Change to Black Lives Matter to Protests over Police Violence, the time is right to unpack the Agit Prop's past to see what is relevant to today's issues.

The practical workshop had two parts to it. The first part was a short, historical 'show and tell' of the origins of Agit Prop Theatre, which began in Russia in 1920's with the Blue Blouse Movement and including today's political theatres, such as the long running 'Bread and Puppet Theatre' in the USA and 'Red Ladder' in UK which both began in 1963.

The second part was designed for the group to create a piece of 'Agit Prop Theatre'. A simple structure will be shared and the group will decide on topic for protest for the theatre piece. The structure is suitable for Yr 9/10 Drama class and the work could form a unit of work.

I will also include short descriptions of what happened in the workshop.

## Short History of Agit Prop Theatre

### What is Agitprop Theatre?

Here is a concise description from Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism, Agitprop Theatre by Alan Filewood.

Now widely used as a catchall term to describe politically combative or oppositional art, "agitprop" originated from the early Soviet conjunction of propaganda (raising awareness of an issue) and agitation (exciting an emotional response to the issue), as theorised by Lenin in *What Is To Be Done* (1902) and institutionalised in the many departments and commissions of Agitation and Propaganda in the USSR and the Comintern after the Russian Revolution. The portmanteau term conveys the terse telegraphic efficiencies of Bolshevik bureaucratic rhetoric. Considered both as a mode of artistic production and a set of formal characteristics, agitprop had an immense impact on modernist cultural practice, particularly in graphic design, visual art, and theater.

In the theater, agitprop developed in Russia and Germany as a mobile form of exhortative revolutionary theater designed for quick outdoor performance. It was adaptive to location, audience, and cast, and suited the sightlines and acoustics of outdoor performance in found spaces. Short phrases, heavy cadence, and repetition allowed performance to project through noisy and unruly audiences. The form achieved widespread popularity in the brief period between the mid-1920s and the coalescence of the Popular Front in 1934, when artistic and political radicalisms aligned in a vision of an artistic practice mobilised by international proletarian modernity; in this, agitprop was theorised as the theatricalization of modernity.

## Agit Prop Techniques

The following techniques were sourced from an article, titled '*Techniques of agitprop theatre*' in *Champion Drama*.



## 1. Mass Recitation

Mass recitation is choral speaking, a theatrical technique that goes right back to the roots of western theatre in Ancient Greece. Agitprop actors would directly address the audience and call for social action. Mass recitation was often used as a morale booster, a call to action or a crowd warm up.

Emphasis could be added by dividing questions and answers between the group and the individual as this extract from *'Theatre – Our Weapon'* shows:

*Chorus:* Workers of the World Unite!

*1st:* What have we got to lose?

*Chorus:* Our chains!

*5th:* What have we got to win?

*Chorus:* The whole world!

In order to be effective this type of mass recitation requires variety in vocal delivery and simple but strong stage movements. No special costumes, setting or props are required.

If the questions represent private doubts and worries then the answers from the whole chorus represent strength and unity of the group. In this way mass recitation was a powerful metaphor for the collective power of the group in calling for social action.

## 2. Agitprop Sketch

This is a short play that could use a variety of techniques in order to get the message across simply and effectively. Don't forget that audiences were often working class people unused to theatre; the locations were varied and sometimes, as on marches and demonstrations, there might be a time constriction. So keeping it simple and clear was vital. Some methods used in agitprop sketches were:

- Stereo types and caricatures – for instance the evil capitalist and the honest worker. Characters were sometimes named after a concept or group of people, for instance 'Capitalism', 'Boss', or 'Farmer.
- A simple costume worn by each actor (one agitprop group: *The Blue Blouses* even took their name from their costume) was enhanced by the addition of skirts, scarves, hats or masks in order to portray the different characters
- Simple props such as boxes, tables and chairs would serve a *variety* of purposes.
- Performing outdoors and to large public audiences meant that performances had to be larger than life
- Content would be about a social or political issue and call on the audience to take action.

## Workshop Outline

### Physical and Vocal Warm-Up

#### 1. Follow the Leader

One person leads the group with any movement that travel through the space. As soon as the group have the movement, then change the leader. This is a very quick way to warm-up and work as a group.

#### 2. Vocal Warm-Up

Zen Hoeing (from Frankie Armstrong, Singing and Voice Teacher for Natural Voice)

Using nonsense or gibberish sounds, the leader makes a Call and the rest of the group Repeats the phrase. This happens around a circle as everyone 'Zen Hoes', which has one foot in front, stepping on the spot from one foot to the other and the hands make a large infinity sign. Change feet when tired.

#### 3. Image Making

Using Ten Second Constructions drama game, make in groups very quick, instant images that express some of the following slogans. (This is a list for adult participants. For students, the list may need to adjusted).

- Some well known slogans are, such as 'Male Chauvinist Pig', 'Reds Under the bed', Climate Change Denier', 'NIMBY', (Not In my Back Yard').
- Eat the Rich – A leftist slogan originally traced back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who is reputed to have said, "When the people shall have nothing more to eat, they will *eat the rich*."
- Drill, baby, drill – slogan used by the U.S. Republican Party to call for increasing domestic oil and gas production.
- For the many, not the few – Jeremy Corbyn's famous slogan for the Labour Party (UK) in the UK 2017.
- It's Time – Used by the Australian Labor Party in 1972; they had been out of government since 1949.
- Keep the Bastards Honest – slogan used by the Australian Democrats since the 1980 Australian federal election.
- Make love, not war – anti-war slogan began during the War in Vietnam.
- Stop the boats – Tony Abbott, during his time as Leader of the Liberal Party.



- Slavery is a social, moral, and political wrong – Used by Abraham Lincoln and the Republican Party during the 1860 presidential election.
- Workers of the world, unite! – one of the most famous rallying cries of the socialist, communist and labor movements.
- Here are a couple of sources for topical, political slogans.
  - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_political\\_slogans](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_political_slogans)
  - <https://www.dw.com/en/climate-crisis-slogans-with-punch/g-49373576>

#### **4. Practice the Mass Recitation**

See above.

#### **5. Brainstorm and Plan the Theatre Piece**

The group decide on topic for Agit Prop Theatre.

Brainstorm images, slogans, use of story, montage of short scenes, such as a political version of 'Three Little Pigs'.

Other possibilities are rewriting songs like the 'Saints come marching in', make posters, digital or physical, use of masks, and rewrite Mass Recitation.

#### **6. Performances**

Participants perform their pieces.

The four groups chose the topics of 'The Housing Crisis', 'The Effects of AI', 'Lack of Arts Funding' and 'The War in the Ukraine'. The groups used posters, banners, short scenes and slogans. Each represented the chosen theme very powerfully.

Personally, it was fantastic to see this work come to life. Agitprop Theatre definitely has a place now and the future.

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### **About the author**

**Helen Sandercoe** has been a Drama teacher much of her life. She has taught in a diverse range of schools, here in Melbourne and in England. She now teaches Primary and Secondary Pre-Service teachers the art and craft of Drama teaching. For her, there is nothing more exciting than when a whole class is involved in the creative process. She also enjoys very much researching and gaining a deeper understanding of an aspect of the art form of Drama and Performance making.

## References

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*List of political slogans* from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_political\\_slogans](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_political_slogans)

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## Further References for more detailed information

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## Image reference

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