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Staging International Communism: British and Australian Radical Theatre Connections

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Encouraged by Communist parties and left-wing trade unions, radical, or working-class, theatre groups of the twentieth century were crucial in the development of a long-lasting left-wing cultural activist impulse in a number of nations. The branches of the Unity Theatre in UK and the New Theatre in Australia had a highly conscious democratic and explicit working-class orientation, and presented various combinations of mainstream and radical dramatic genres and plays. Both theatres were established in the early 1930s, and while the British movement declined in activity after 1960 and the New Theatre by the 1990s, each has a remaining branch providing an unbroken history of performance and organisation.

Drawing on oral histories and archival research, this paper explores the politics of popular culture by focusing on the degrees of mobility of ideas, dramatic texts and people and politics between the two theatres. The emergent mobility patterns across these elements demonstrated the effect of ‘tyranny of distance’ to invoke Blainey’s phrase1 and the socio-cultural mores of ‘Empire’ on those transnational flows. Whether it was the mobility of ideas, texts or people, a more complex picture emerged than simple exchange or reciprocal influence. Informing our discussion is the mobility studies literature, following the ‘mobility turn’ in the social sciences. A number of concepts within mobility studies provide a lens for analysing the movement of ideas, scripts and people between Unity and the New Theatre.
phrase and the sociocultural mores of ‘Empire’ on those transnational flows. Whether it was the mobility of ideas, texts or people, a more complex picture emerged than simple exchange or reciprocal influence.

Informing our discussion is the mobility studies literature, following the ‘mobility turn’ in the social sciences. A number of concepts within mobility studies provide a lens for analysing the movement of ideas, scripts and people between Unity and the New Theatre. We believe it is a particularly interesting and instructive transnational study, because of the close similarities in the philosophies and practices of Unity and the New Theatre. Further, we argue that the use of the geographical tool of mobility studies can help to understand transnational flows such as the ones under consideration here.

We begin with introducing our two focus theatres, noting their conditions of establishment and the characteristics they share. Next, mobility studies are canvassed as it can apply to popular culture, and particularly to theatre work. The two theatres’ practices are then interrogated across four themes: mobility of ideas, genres, play scripts and people between and around them.

**Unity theatre and the new theatre**

A membership-based organisation, the Unity Theatre (henceforth Unity) began with one branch in London formed by the Workers Theatre Movement, the Rebel Players, and other left theatre organisations coming together in 1936. At its height, 50 branches had 10,000 members and 3 million affiliated members (in trade unions and other organisations), including in the late 1930s until the late 1940s, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Cardiff, Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle, Leeds, Birmingham, Oxford, Middlesbrough, Brighton, and Blackpool. The main London branch lasted until 1975, when a fire destroyed their Goldington Street premises, while the Liverpool branch is the only one still performing. The UT aims were as follows:

(a) to present plays which, by truthfully interpreting life as experienced by the majority of the people, can move the people to work for the betterment of society.

(b) to train and encourage actors, producers and playwrights in accordance with the above principles.

(c) to devise, import and experiment with new forms of drama.

Like Unity, the New Theatre (the New) evolved from an earlier theatre, the Workers’ Arts Club (WAC), which had been inspired by American and Soviet influences in the early 1930s. The WACs in Australia are seen as ‘the first indication in Australia of radical artists and writers modelling their activities on international socialist cultural practices’. The Sydney WAC’s first production was an adaptation of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist*, and Lenin’s ‘art is a weapon’ was the motto over the stage.

In 1936, the New Theatre branches in Sydney and Melbourne adopted the American New Theatre name. These two branches were followed by Townsville, Brisbane, Perth, Newcastle and Adelaide. Here too, only one branch survived past the 1990s: Sydney is the only remaining operating theatre. The New Theatre’s founding objectives were:
(a) To express through drama, based on the Australian tradition of freedom and democracy, the progressive aspirations of the Australian people.

(b) To cultivate a theatre free from commercialism, capable of developing a native drama, and of educating all sections of the people to appreciate a high standard of contemporary and classical drama.

(c) To secure the widest possible co-operation with all associations aiming at social justice.⁴

The New Theatre and Unity shared many characteristics. For both, local circumstances were woven into mainstream theatre practice and communist politics. They performed and wrote plays about local as well as global issues, about local strikes and injustices as well as the worldwide threats of fascism and the greed of untrammelled capitalism. Both movements saw the establishment of many branches that had their own characteristics, and came together in short-lived national federations. They were membership-based, avoiding censorship laws generally; and held events other than performances and rehearsals, such as classes, film screenings, and summer schools.⁵

The programmes, ideas and approaches of both Unity and the New were part of a global flow and network of culture, not a wholly conventional one, and not a wholly radical one, as seen later by the script choices. They drew from both mainstream and alternative areas for this flow between, and around, the two theatre families.

**Mobility studies**

Informing our discussion is the now established zone of mobility studies. The ‘mobility turn’⁶ in social sciences brought new ways of understanding the movement of people, objects, and ideas, and new ways of conceiving of place and space. With two journals, *Mobilities* and *Transfers*, and a Handbook, the interdisciplinary study of mobility and movement has brought together researchers in geography, sociology, anthropology, history, archaeology among others, including theatre and performance studies.⁷ Cresswell explains how ‘facts about the world … combine with ways of thinking and theorizing that foreground mobility (of people, of ideas, of things) as a geographical fact that lies of the centre of constellations of power, the creation of identities and the micro-geographies of everyday life.’⁸ Understood as ‘an element in the play of power and meaning within social and cultural networks of signification’, mobility also ‘shapes the experiences and identities of participants’.⁹

When considering mobility between the UK and Australia, broader reflections on the legacy of colonial relationships and Empire need to be acknowledged. Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey’s 1966 book, *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia’s History* introduced the term into common parlance with his analysis of how Australian history and identity have been shaped by geographical remoteness, especially from the UK. For example, in the post-war years, the dominant travel mode was sea travel taking weeks. The patterns of cultural mobility has been regarded as one-way, with the Australian cultural scene for many years described as having a ‘cultural cringe’, privileging a British over a distinctive national culture. This lingered into the 1970s as demonstrated by the Australian expatriates such as Clive James and Germaine Greer.¹⁰
Whilst research employing mobility studies has been in existence for a decade, its use in the arts remains in its infancy. The mobility of transnational theatre is just beginning to be explored. Fiona Wilkie has examined site-specific performances, while Amanda Rogers has suggested there is ‘great potential to develop a geographical account of the relationship between performance, place/site, and mobility’.11

This chapter now moves to understand how the mobility of ideas, genres, dramatic texts, and people, made for different outcomes in Anglophone left-wing theatres. The activities of each theatre were part of a global flow, a network of culture, not a wholly conventional one, and not a wholly radical one. And the connections between them were based on both the earlier imperial-colonial network and the newer network of international communism.

**Mobility of ideas**

We now examine two dimensions of the mobility of ideas. First is the transnational mobility of political ideas through the geographic and philosophical networks of international communism. As ‘space and place constrain and enable (and are constrained and enabled by) contentious politics’, our study included investigations of how the consciously internationalism of communism shaped our two theatre families’ practices.12 Second, theatrical ideas, in particular performance mode and audience, are canvassed, with similarities identified in both.

**Political ideas**

Although the New Theatre and Unity Theatre were never openly associations of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) and the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), respectively, both nominally came under the responsibility of their Communist Party’s cultural committee. As a consequence, many people, both within and outside the theatres, considered both Unity and the New as ‘Popular Front’ organisations for their Communist parties. However, there was no direct funding from the Party to the theatres, and theatre members were not automatically required to join the Party. Most members, in both countries, did not see the theatres as merely a subcommittee of the Party. Rather than not top–down solidarity, they were built from below. Party members, along with many ‘fellow travellers’ as well as the politically unaligned, worked side-by-side. As Raphael Samuel reminds us, history is made ‘of a thousand different hands’.13

Unity’s forerunner, the Workers Theatre Movement, was affiliated with the CPGB but did not receive any material support.14 As Colin Chambers claimed in his history of the ‘Communist oriented’ Unity15: ‘whatever the theatre’s record, it is Communists who bear the burden both of its successes across nearly half the century and of its ultimate failure to renew itself’.16 Unity’s establishment was generally motivated by ideas and interests of the wider labour movement as well as the CPGB. One early Unity history of notes that at its 9 February 1936 meeting, the CPGB’s goal to ‘establish an amateur workers’ theatre with guidance from members of the professional theatre who were in sympathy with the cause was realised’.17

London Unity, like other branches, held meetings of the ‘fraction committees’, theatre members who were also CPGB members.18 For the New Theatre, formal and informal
ties to the Party, considerable input from CPA members, led to it operating, albeit loosely and intermittently, as a communist ‘Front Organisation’. ‘Fraction’ meetings of CPA members met regularly within New Theatre branches, and New Theatre delegates were normally present at Party conferences with reports. By the 1950s, Ray Clarke, a CPA Cultural Committee member, characterised the New as ‘the party’s main and foremost enterprise in that area of cultural activity’. However, because it was motivated by aesthetic principles as much as by ideological imperatives, it was more than simply a propaganda arm of the CPA. Clarke said that ‘every three or four years we went to these meetings there’d be a time set aside—fifteen or twenty minutes—of a report from the Literature and Arts Committee on what they were doing, and how they were doing it, and so on’. The committee, to which the New Theatre regularly sent delegates, hosted many discussions and arguments about the role of culture and the arts within a progressive movement; for communist Edgar Ross, whose membership of the Committee was ‘one of the most traumatic periods’ in his party life, the committee was a ‘disarmingly innocent-sounding name covering incredible complications and potential for divisiveness’. Ross discusses the committee’s main problems arising through ‘basic differences of viewpoint on the role of the artist’. The CPA also subjected the work of the Theatre to closer examination during this time.

The CPA and CPGB were part of an international communist movement, being international in focus and organisation. Traditional theatre practices combined with intentional political aims of communism. This internationalism was deliberate and purposeful, in no way random or by chance. As part of a global diaspora of the transnational network of communist parties, the two theatre groups acted through networks of correspondence connecting movements and struggles in geographically and temporarily distinct places. The imagined space of communism was reconfigured into the Australian and British theatre spaces, which enacted similar manifestations of a transnational, or global, art form.

However not all influences were directly from the tenets of international communism: the old habits of British colonialism took time to die, even in communist circles. In 1922, two years after its establishment, the CPA was officially affiliated with the Communist International of Moscow through the colonial department of the British section, rather than directly in its own right. Even when this changed to the Anglo-American Secretariat by 1928, the relationship still reflected an organisational manifestation of a British colonial context.

Although American cultural creep was a concern, idea flows were also seen as opportunities, as two views illustrate. Ray Clarke recalled that the New Theatre ‘was set up very largely to save Australian culture … [to save it from being taken over] from American culture’. In Communist Review, the CPA’s theoretical publication, in 1943: ‘We in Australia have very few cultural traditions; those we have are of very new vintage, and it would be stupid to try to force their growth, but we must guard previously those we have, and we are at liberty to borrow, beg or steal those humanistic qualities developed by national groups around us. The importation of progressive art culture from abroad is for us more important’.

Mobility of ideas to radical theatres flowed from Soviet Comintern organisations. In particular, the Workers International Relief (WIR) a loose transnational alliance, from which emerged the Workers’ Theatre Movement, as part of an international project to conjoin
radical theatres during the period of Stalin’s ‘Third Period’ militant class struggle. The trigger for the Australian workers’ theatre movement lay with Jean Devanny. After joining the Sydney chapter, Devanny was asked by WIR founder Willi Munzenberg to attend the 1932 8th WIR International Congress in Berlin. Also travelling to Moscow and Berlin, she was inspired by reports on German and Soviet Workers’ Theatre associations, reporting back to Australia that ‘throughout the proceedings one could see many ways in which our cultural work could develop along lines specially [sic] suited to Australian conditions’.27

**Theatrical ideas**

Like other workers’ theatre groups around the world (for instance the American New Theatre League), Australian and British workers’ theatre developed from the dual impulses of providing a theatre for a working-class audience, and of presenting progressive, radical ideas to that audience. They both took influence from the Russian avant-garde and revolutionary agitprop theatre, as well as staging classical plays. Social realism, or socialist realism, was another major theme shared across the world.

The establishment of the Unity Theatre movement, out of a number of workers’ theatre groups in Britain, is underpinned by many of the British members travelling to Moscow during the late 1920s and early 1930s. One of the stalwarts of Unity, Bert Marshall lived in Moscow from 1930 to 1937, had a scholarship to study theatre and film in Moscow under Eisenstein, and was the head of the Anglo-American section of the International Union of Revolutionary Theatres. His work with Unity in the 1930s until the 1960s helped to cement a tight association between Unity and Soviet theatre, with British productions of 17 Soviet plays, beginning with Aristocrats in 1937 (which the New Theatre staged in Sydney the following year).

Both theatres organised branches across the country, where each had their own performances, venues, and styles of organisation, and both came together in (short-lived) national federations. Unity and the New organised many events outside the performances and rehearsals, such as classes, summer schools and social occasions. Affiliations were very important. Both Unity and the New were affiliated to the British Drama League, in another small outcome of Empire. Oscar Lewenstein, Unity’s General Secretary in 1947, noted the importance of Unity’s ‘affiliations with the mass labour organisations—particularly the Trades Councils and Cooperative Societies Education Departments in every town where we have a branch’.28 In Australia, from the outset, the New Theatre emphasised its labour movement connections. Speaking in Lismore to people interested in settling up a branch, Victor Arnold, the Sydney secretary, articulated: ‘The New Theatre was essentially a part of the Labour movement and accordingly deserves the assistance of the trades union movement and Labor supporters’.29

**Performance mobility**

Common performance modes permeated both theatres. In addition to stage-based productions, performance locations were never restricted to traditional spaces. Partly this arose from lack of access to permanent space, but more importantly from commitment to taking performances to an audience, or creating an audience on a public place. These self-described ‘mobile’ and ‘contact’ activities enacted the commitment to broadly socialist ideas, extending their methods of reaching out to new audiences. For most Unity branches,
they included parks, schools, outside factory gates and docks, at May Day rallies and public and political meetings, trade union and Communist Party congresses, and even Hyde Park and the plinth of Nelson’s Column in Trafalgar Square. In World War Two, performances went underground, given in tube stations used as shelters during the Blitz: ‘ten minutes at one end of the platform, and finally a show at each end on the lift shafts. Even when these items [sketches, solos, songs and jokes] had to be done sideways on, with occasional trains roaring through, they went over big, and the crowd was almost as pleased as we were.’ Unity war-time shows also travelled to homeless camps, ‘rest centres in civil defence depots, in parks, barracks and canteens, at Second Front rallies, Aid for Russia meetings, Royal Ordnance hostels for munitions workers, the National Fire-fighting Service stations. Similarly, the New performed at parks and beaches, next to dole queues, from trucks, street corners on Friday nights, union halls, large factories and workplaces like railway yards and wharves. During the 1949 coal strike, for instance, a concert party travelled from the Sydney New Theatre to the Newcastle area to entertain the strikebound workers and their families. And in 1952 two plays went underground, performed to striking miners inside coal mines at Glen Davis and Great Greta, west of Sydney. Requests came from rural and regional localities and country towns.

Mobility of genres

Anglophone workers’ theatre developed from the dual impulses of providing a theatre for a working-class audience, and of presenting progressive, radical ideas to that audience. We find transnational continuities: both Unity and the New drew their inspiration from 1920s and 1930s communist-inspired theatre in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and the USA, and went on to stage their plays. Writing about Unity, Jon Clark could also have been referring to the New when he commented:

one of the most significant features of the work of Unity Theatre between 1936 and 1939 was the tremendous diversity of dramatic forms and techniques which were used and developed, according to what the group wanted to achieve, the audience they were speaking to, the texts available, the time allotted to them for performance.

Three genres featured—classical theatre, agit prop and realist—but to different degrees. Older, classic plays by Aristophanes, Molière, Chekhov and Shakespeare were performed in both countries. They also staged contemporary plays by well-known left-wing playwrights such as Clifford Odets, Eugene O’Neill, Maxim Gorky, Sean O’Casey, Bertolt Brecht, George Bernard Shaw and Ernst Toller.

Both theatre groups were interested in the ‘Living Newspaper’ type of performance. Begun in the Soviet Union, it was most popular in the American workers’ theatres. A type of critical reportage that could include poetry, dance and film as well as drama, Living Newspapers were factual. An American theatre journal advised that ‘the script differs from a conventional play in that it is not “written” as a play is written; it is reported. The reporters of the Living Newspaper are not permitted to invent anything, or to arrange. They cannot choose a climax or a moral. They take the news exactly as it is and prepare it for the stage’. Unity branches took this on more strongly than in Australia, spurred on by the invited visit of Arthur Arendt, the main writer of American Living Newspaper works.
Although for a few short years ‘Living Newspapers’ were included in the New’s repertoire, another form dominated. The New’s dramatisation of real-life events was found much more strongly as a theme through the genre of agitational propaganda, known as ‘agitprop’. The adoption, and adaptation, of the agitprop genre from German and Russian models, was, to Anglophone left theatres at the least, evidence of a transnational proletarian art form, a method of spreading solidarity. In the UK, it began in the very late 1920s and early 1930s with the Red Megaphone and similar groups, flowing through to Unity. In Australia, the WAC and then the New Theatre staged agitprop from the beginning. Agitprop, Filewod notes, ‘had been put forward as a transnational form, a class practice that modelled the historical process of revolutionary change in industrial society’.36 However, there were differences between original versions of agitprop and its worldwide variants, as shown by Lyn Mally’s research on the diverse re-uses of non-Soviet agitprop shows.37 British communist leader Tom Thomas was very keen for British radical theatre groups to adopt agitprop: ‘experience has shown that this flexible, vigorous, inexpensive form is the one best adapted to Workers’ Theatres in capitalist countries, if they wish to do their part in the class struggle, and to be more than working class dilettantes (curse the breed!).’38

This genre was enthusiastically staged in many countries for decades, with plays based upon local industrial protests or issues, usually performed by mobile groups. With ideas and genre mobility, many similarities are therefore apparent. With the next two dimensions of transnational mobility, however, of scripts and of people, we see two very uneven circumstances, with one-way flows: of texts from Unity to the New, and people from the New to Unity.

**Mobility of scripts**

The transnational circulation of play scripts constituted an ongoing interchange between countries. London Unity supplied a large number of scripts to Australia from their Play Service, which collected and reproduced plays from many nations for distribution to the various Unity branches throughout the UK. Through this Play Service, as well as through other avenues, a number of plays, both British and American, were shared by Unity and the New. They are as follows: *Private Hicks* (Albert Maltz, 1935), *Bury the Dead* (Irwin Shaw, 1936), *Plant In The Sun* (Ben Bengal, 1936), *The Secret* (Ramon Sender, 1936), *Where’s That Bomb?* (Roger Cullan and Buckley Roberts, 1936), *Cannibal Carnival* (Herbert Hodge, 1936), *Colony* Geoffrey Trease, 1939), and *The Match Girls* (Robert Mitchell, 1940).39 Particularly welcome at Australian stages were scripts by Unity’s Ted Willis. After Sydney success in of *Sabotage*! in 1942, the New produced his works *All Change Here* (1944), *God Bless The Guv’nor* (1945), *The Bells Are Ringing* (1946) and *What Happens To Love?* (1947). One of the biggest box office successes for the New was Sean O’Casey’s *The Star Turns Red*, which he had written for Unity Theatre.40 On its opening in London in 1940, the UK Lord Chamberlain banned it from public performance—he considered the play ‘subversive’ and banned it to prevent ‘anything of this nature in dangerous times’, and O’Casey’s American publishers refused to publish it.41 In Australia, no such problems arose, with even the mainstream media praising the New’s production as ‘passionate, anguished, magnificent theatre’.42
As indicated, the American New Theatre League was a major influence on both theatres. A great many plays staged by Unity and the New came straight from the American left-wing theatre movement more broadly, with a wealth of material. André van Gysseghem, Unity’s first President, wrote that at its establishment, ‘we turned, of course, to the American playwrights for much of our material’.\(^\text{43}\) One of these plays was American writer Clifford Odets’ *Waiting for Lefty*, written in 1935. First performed by both Sydney and Melbourne branches in January 1936, it was one of the most important early productions of the New Theatre family in Australia, becoming an instant hit. Unity staged it in in London just three months later. After that, *Waiting for Lefty* was staged hundreds of times in both countries, and the New would perform numerous Odets plays.

Another example is American writer Howard Fast’s work *Thirty Pieces of Silver*. Howard Fast wrote:

> I received a letter from the New Theatre, in Melbourne, saying that they were looking for scripts about the modern scene, and did I have anything they could possibly use? Possibly because Australia was sufficiently distant for me to plunge again, and possibly because the fascination of the theatre is something no writer truly shakes loose from, I rooted out the MS of *Thirty Pieces of Silver*, shook the dust from it, read it through, made some changes, and sent it off to Australia.\(^\text{44}\)

With its world premiere in Melbourne in 1951, the Sydney branch season then began. After these successful runs, Fast did a complete rewrite, basing his new version on criticisms from Australia, whereupon it became very popular in Europe. At one point during 1952, productions were running simultaneously in Berlin, Vienna, Budapest, Warsaw, Pilsen and Moscow.

### Indigenous plays

One of the most valuable contributions the Unity family made to British drama was the encouragement, commissioning and performance of original British writing. All of the Unity branches, but particularly the larger London, Glasgow and Liverpool branches, were committed to the encouragement and support of local writers.

Unity wrote of their plays:

> Our repertoire is an arsenal—yes, but an arsenal that consists of many different kinds of shot and shall. Unity puts on plays that deal with the topics of the day; it also puts on plays that have significance for our times no matter when they were written. And we interpret this broadly, for we believe that every great play (it is the touchstone in fact, of a great play) contains an insight into the true nature of things, an insight into that which is significant in the world … Unity Theatre Society regards as one of its main functions the stimulating of new plays and the production of great ones.\(^\text{45}\)

As well as presenting theatre based on world events such as the crisis of capitalism of the Depression, the rise of fascism and the threats of nuclear war, both Unity and the New encouraged and supported work, written locally, on local events. However, the outcomes were quite different. An early example of the strength of localisation was the success of the Living Newspaper piece *Busmen*, staged by London Unity in 1938. A collectively written work based on the Coronation bus strike of 1937, like similar Australian works, striking workers and their union leaders contributed to the script.
With an original musical score and dance included, the technically ambitious and innovative work was performed at public meetings supporting the striking workers.46

Travelling north to Scotland, however, a different and deliberate call for an indigenous theatre was to distinguish the English and Glasgow Unity branches. Glasgow Unity’s quest for a distinctively Scottish theatre paralleled the New’s striving for national culture: aimed ‘at a theatre indigenous to the people of Glasgow in particular, and Scotland in general … what we try to create is a native theatre, something which is essentially reflecting the lives of the ordinary people of Scotland,’ exemplified by The Gorbals Story.47 Written by Glasgow local Robert McLeish and staged in 1946, the realities of Glasgow working-class life were portrayed on stage for the first time in such a popular manner.48 Adrienne Scullion writes of Glasgow Unity’s distinctively national approach, a theatre group of ‘tangible political purpose and significant cultural distinctiveness’.49 In Glasgow Unity’s journal Scots Theatre, it was portrayed as ‘by policy a native theatre, deliberately rejecting the accent of the London West End stage and searching for an independent technique which, far from trying to root out and replace the local speech and characteristics of its artists, seeks to present them on the stage as effectively as possible, and in so doing evolves a new, distinct, truly Scottish dramatic medium’.50 Just as the New was doing, notwithstanding ‘significant successes in reviving and producing European and American left drama’, Glasgow committed to new Scottish writing with plays written for it by Robert MacLeish, James Barke, Ena Lamont Stewart, and Benedick Scott.51

Right from the start, the New saw the need for locally written material. The Australian left-wing journal Masses highlighted the need for local contextualising:

There are a great number of proletarian plays being written in Russia, America, England etc. The majority of these have a specific interest in the geographical locality where they originate … it is necessary for our purposes to rewrite such plays to suit local conditions. Failing this, and in the absence of native worker-playwrights, it is necessary to create one’s own plays.52

It is in this area of indigenous plays that transnational exchange is particularly asymmetrical. In contrast to the New Theatre’s common staging of Unity writers’ works, far fewer plays by New Theatre writers, or by any Australian writers at all, were performed in the UK. Of the six plays performed by London Unity, three were by Jack Lindsay, who was then living in England: Who Are The English? and the wildly popular On Guard For Spain, in 1936, and Robin of England in 1945. Lindsay later observed ‘On Guard was even more successful than Who Are The English? … in the following years was continually done all over English by Unity Theatre or groups connected with the Left Book Club’.53

In 1952, Unity performed two Australian plays focusing on international conflicts: Nance MacMillan’s Christmas Bridge on the Korean War, and Mona Brand’s Strangers in the Land on the Malayan Emergency.54 Macmillan and Brand’s plays point to two very different profiles of female playwrights. The Unity Theatre movement staged very few works written by local women: no plays by any women at all were staged by any of the London branches from their beginning in 1936 until 1952. While it was those two Australian women’s plays broke that tradition, little changed with just two more plays penned by women produced after that.55 This was in marked contrast to the New Theatre’s inclusion of women in all areas of theatre work, including as scriptwriters, from their very establishment.56
The other export was Dick Diamond’s musical *Reedy River*, set in the aftermath of the 1891 shearsers’ strike. Redolent with Australian radical nationalist themes, folk music was performed by the Bushwhackers Band. A post-war nationalist urge propelled the New Theatre into a vibrant assertion of cultural distinctiveness. Along with explorations of Australian pioneer traditions in drama, literature and the visual arts, the stature of folk music grew in the Ewan MacColl championed British folk music and protest songs, bringing them to a newly appreciative audience, as were Pete Seeger and his friends in the United States, in Australia, ‘it was a period when everyone seemed to be singing, far and wide’.57

Critical to the ongoing success of New Theatre branches, *Reedy River*’s first runs lasted for well over a year, plus ongoing revivals.58 Travelling to the UK, Unity enthusiastically took on *Reedy River*, initially by the Camden branch59 and then London Unity. Described as ‘the working man’s *Oklahoma*’, the musical ran for five months in 1955.60

*Reedy River* presents a difference between the two theatre movements: the importance, after the end of World War II, of nationalism in the Australian theatre, as part of a general left reaction to the mainstream adoption of American culture, which was resisted far less in England. At the same time the New Theatre were happy to use American left-wing plays, however, they railed against the increasing US imperialism attacking what they saw as ‘authentic Australian culture’.

Our findings here tally with those of Robin Gollan, who claims that ‘Communists were internationalists but this was held in tension with an Australian nationalism which grew out of opposition to imperialism but settled into a nationalism which took its colour equally from specifically Australian experience and Russian chauvinism’.61 This contradictory dialogue is reflected in one of the CPA’s aims in 1951, which was to ‘take steps to develop our own specific Australian culture, while at the same time accepting all that is best in world culture’.62

In 1951 CPA leader Jack Blake wrote ‘Folk Culture and the People’s Movement’, where he discussed the use of art as a weapon:

if we examine our position in Australia with regard to this matter we are forced to the conclusion that the situation prevailing among our people in this important sphere of ideology is a dangerous one. Even a cursory glance compels us to admit that the use of art as an ideological weapon in our country is at present in the hands of the imperialists and, above all, in the hands of the American imperialists … we must drive the one out and replace it with our own Australian democratic culture expressed by our cultural workers in stories, in poems, in songs, dances, sketches, plays, painting, films and so on.63

Following on from Blake’s article, Vic Williams contributed ‘Art can be a Front Line Weapon’, in which he commented directly on a few of the indigenous plays that the Sydney New Theatre had recently staged.64 As we see, then, there was a conflicted position on the role of indigenous material in the use as ‘art as a weapon’ in Australia.

**Mobility of people**

Mobility studies examine how movement of ideas is created and disrupted by the acts of individual people, and by ‘unexpected, unplanned, entirely contingent encounters’.65
Again, mobility of individual theatre members was one-sided, with many more Australians travelling to the UK and Europe than Unity people travelling to Australia. Here the tyranny of actual distance with Empire intersected with lingering colonial attitudes. For Australians of all political persuasions, going [back] to the ‘mother country’ was a desire of many, while a cultural rite of passage was London. Lacking was a similar impetus for British people to visit one of the former colonies.

After each theatre’s establishment, it proved to be personal mobility and individual connections that made the transnational network strong, and not any formal organisational links. The Australian New Theatre family acknowledged its sister organisation in Britain much more than the converse. We see this most clearly in labour newspapers and journal coverage of theatre activities. The New Theatre’s Spotlight journal, as well as the New Theatre Review, would publish reviews and information about British Unity productions, as would the CPA’s paper Weekly Worker,66,67

In 1946 New Theatre sent food parcels to Unity Theatre members, to ease the ongoing effects of rationing. London Unity’s Ted Willis wrote to thank them: ‘It really is a wonderful thought on the part of our friends in Australia, and it is pretty wonderful to know that we have so many friends and comrades so many miles away. You ask about any particular food. Our members reply, fruit and jam, if you can possibly spare it’.68 On the New’s thirtieth anniversary, Unity’s chairman Manny Goldstein congratulated his Australian friends: ‘you are four years older than our theatre and have therefore the distinction of giving us the lead in this organisation of progressive theatres—one up to Australia’.69

Whenever New Theatre members visited Unity branches, subsequent reports would be published, often in Spotlight or other journals. Melbourne New Theatre’s Jim Young praised the efforts of the Glasgow players:

Last week in Edinburgh I met the Glasgow Unity Players who have been doing a six-week theatre season over there. They come over to Edinburgh from Glasgow by bus every day after work (46 miles) and then go back after the show each night. If any Melbourne New Theatre ham has complaints about overwork, you might pass on this information to him. 92 miles per day after a hard day’s work for a season of six weeks. Whew!70

For Australian playwright Mona Brand, a mixed reception awaited her in London. With a letter of introduction from the New Theatre, she took her script for Here Under Heaven to Ted Willis. Staged in Australia to very good reviews, Here dealt with the experiences of a Chinese woman in a rural Australian community, and the reactions of its white and indigenous citizens. Brand’s British comrades were discouraging, deciding, as she recalled, that ‘no British audience would have the slightest interest in anything from Australia’, and they asked her if she could set the play in America and turn its Aborigines into Negroes. She refused, and later mused that ‘perhaps part of the trouble was that I was Australian, and in those days even some Communists in Britain were inclined to regard those of us from “down under” as colonials’.71 Even in the left-wing Unity Theatre, one of the audience thought it was ‘not bad for a woman’.

Visits like Jim’s and Mona’s were rarely reciprocated with Unity members visiting their antipodean comrades. Unity and the New Theatre members more commonly met in Europe when their theatres sent them as delegates to international theatre festivals and competitions.
Conclusions

Unity and the New Theatre pursued universal as well as local truths, in their work in their presentation of proletarian mobile theatre that offered a particular type of transnational citizenship. Over many decades their members worked, not just to stage plays locally, but to create and build international solidarity, co-operation and exchange. They were transnational spaces that connected in slightly different ways to global political and dramatic ideas. Of course, the primary relationship between these two organisations was an example of transnational solidarity within, and built upon, international communism. However, the authentically local was always at play with the universal: locally or nationally contingent circumstances always mediated and adapted external influences.

The two theatre movements created their own ways of presenting theatre to suit their own situation. However, the tyranny of distance and the sociocultural mores of empire made for some distinctive differences in what their methods and outcomes. These two theatre families—amongst others in the world—brought unique theatre experiences to their audiences in early examples of transnational cultural activity.

This paper has demonstrated how the movement of a global or international communist theme to UK and Australia manifested slightly differently. There was not just a transnational flow from the heart of communism outwards, or even from the imperial British metropolitan ‘core’ to the colonial Australian periphery; it was more complex than that. Whilst the whole project of international communism was a protest against imperialism and colonialism, the example of the radical theatre network proves that not all practical barriers had been dismantled, at least in the first half of the twentieth century.

Looking at the connections and comparisons between these two groups, there is both the tyranny of distance before the era of jetliners and shared online spaces, and a colonial sensibility, contributing to their differences. Geographical mobility, then, was constrained by transport options available at the time.

Notes

2. “Unity Theatre Aims.”
7. Adey et al., *The Handbook of Mobilities*.
10. Britain, Once an Australian.
18. See the discussion of the Fraction Committee for December 1937. Unity Theatre. ‘Suggestions for Discussion at Unity Theatre Club’. December 1937, p. 2. Unity Theatre Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum, THM 9/1/3/1. A handwritten comment on this typescript notes that ‘CP leads from behind!’.
19. Interview with Lisa Milner and Cathy Brigden. 9 October 2015.
21. Ibid.
22. Ross, Of Storm and Struggle, 120.
26. A.M.C., “Communists and Culture.”
31. See Brigden and Milner, “Radical Theatre Mobility.”
34. Arrow. Upstaged, 134.
35. ‘Editing the Living Newspaper’, Federal Theatre 1, no. 5 (April 1936): 16.
36. Filewod, Committing Theatre, 103.
37. Mally, “Exporting Soviet Culture.”
38. Thomas, “World Congress.”
40. O’Casey was a member of Unity’s general council.
42. “New Theatre League”.
44. Fast, Introduction.
46. See Watson, “Busmen.”
52. “Workers Art Club.”
53. Lindsay, Life Rarely Tells, 774.
54. Strangers in the Land was banned from public performance by the UK Lord Chamberlain, because of its supposed attack on British colonial interests in Malaya. As members-only clubs, Unity branches avoided the ban as performances were not ‘public’.
55. Marjorie Shaw’s play Mind the Baby, staged in 1957, and in 1959, Ruth Messinger’s Call Me Not Naomi.
56. Milner and Brigden, No More Handmaidens.
57. Fox, Australians on the Left, 101.
58. Reedy River has also been produced in Montreal, Canada, and broadcast in Polish on radio Warsaw and in Russian on Moscow Radio.
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“Unity Theatre Aims.” *Scottish Theatre Archive*, Glasgow University Library. GB 247 STA Fm 8/33.


