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# The Living Theatre

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## Brief orientation

In a 1959 document entitled “A History of the Living Theatre”, the aforementioned American company underscored their importance within the New York theatrical landscape: “one of the oldest of the Off-Broadway companies in N.Y.C., The Living Theatre is considered one of the pioneers of the movement” (Living Theatre 1959). This early promotional assertion was prophetic as the troupe founded in 1947 by Judith Malina and Julian Beck has subsequently been acclaimed as one of the founding companies of the Off-Broadway scene which officially emerged in the 1950s. The couple created The Living Theatre as a reaction against mainstream theatre that they denounced as aesthetically and politically conservative. They established their daring creative enterprise as a non-conformist attempt to display “the living”, the external (social) and internal (intimate) complexities of life. They despised the realism, which dominated the American stage at this time, because they viewed it as a superficial rendering of life. Instead they devised pieces based on linguistic and physical experimentation to express the inexpressible. They deemed traditional theatre patriotic and declared a non-violent war on what they saw as its nationalist ideology. The *raison d’être* of the Living Theatre was to revolutionize theatre to, in turn, revolutionize society. For Julian Beck, “the theatre is a mirror of the world” and the troupe determinedly sought to “clean” that mirror (Living Theatre 1959): reforming theatre was conceived as a first step to reform society. Founded in the 1940s and still active today on Off-Off Broadway, the artistry of the Living Theatre culminated in the 1960s, a decade marked by the radicalization of the company’s formal innovations and political commitment. At that time, the group gained international recognition and became a major source of inspiration for experimental artists, especially in the USA and Europe. Even though the label “neo-avant-garde” has not yet been applied to American theater, it may be advanced that, after its departure for Europe, The Living Theatre marked a renewed engagement with the theatrical avant-garde and even a venture into neo-avant-gardism itself.

## Developments

The history of the Living Theatre is a real-life story with a narrative that has evolved since Judith Malina and Julian Beck’s inception as the theatre constantly adapts itself to both changing socio-political realities and the shifting motivations of the group itself. In doing so the Living Theatre has constantly redefined the contours of their theatrical endeavor through to the present day. The chronicles of the Living Theatre, from its foundation in 1947 to its heyday in the 1960s-70s, can be divided into three main chapters which also mark the increasing radicalization of the company. The first chapter opens in 1947 and corresponds to the first decade of the group, when they mainly experimented with language. The second period, which started

in 1959, can be seen as a time of transition: the Becks adopted a more activist approach and staged plays that denounced what they saw as the flaws of American society to trigger a response from the audience. Although text remained central, improvisations were introduced and the staging became more physical. The year 1963 marks a turning point in the history of the Living Theatre as it symbolizes the departure of the company for Europe where they collectively created plays that centered on the body and involved the audience to a greater extent.

When Beck and Malina founded The Living Theatre in 1947, the company was more of a dream than a reality. Indeed, the Becks did not have the money to open a venue and initially put on plays in their apartment. In 1951, in association with their friends, the dancer choreographer Merce Cunningham (who was at the forefront of American modern dance), and the composer John Cage (who was a pioneer of electroacoustic music and developed the concept of indeterminacy in approaching composition), the Becks managed to rent the Cherry Lane Theatre before eventually moving to The Studio. This first decade of creation was devoted to poetry as Julian Beck explained to Robert Brustein in 1968: "All of our early efforts were very much concerned with poetry of the theatre [...] at that time, however, we were also politicized, but the politics, the metaphysics, did not enter into the theatrical world in a clear way" (Brustein 1969: 21). The Becks' repertoires included pieces by Gertrude Stein, Garcia Lorca, Alfred Jarry, Paul Goodman, Bertolt Brecht, or John Ashbery, to name a few. They chose non-realist texts which went against the Aristotelian identification-based tradition and which solicited the spectators' active intellectual participation. The latter aspect demonstrates how in Beck's words, politics "entered in a subtle way, a nevertheless important way" in The Living Theatre's early productions (Beck, Brustein, "History Now" 21). The company's venues were closed down by the authorities. Officially this was for security reasons yet it was rumored that the group had been the victim of censorship as some of their works were deemed obscene because they dealt with homosexuality, in the case of John Ashbery's *The Heroes*, or used crude language as in Paul Goodman's *The Young Disciple*. Even though The Living Theatre did not directly attack the American government in this period – as it would do in the second chapter of its existence – through its early performances it directly challenged its audience and as such indirectly defied the American authorities by questioning conservative aesthetic and social traditions.

After their eviction from The Studio, it took the Becks four years to find a new home. It was not until 1959 that they reopened a theatre on 14th Street. In the meantime, the couple's pacifist and anarchist positions were reinforced and they became dedicated anti-imperialist activists. This dedication was infused into their creations which increasingly involved the audience in order to challenge the ascendancy of actors over spectators. They also started to explicitly attack the American government. The two emblematic productions at 14th Street were *The Connection* by Jack Gelber and *The Brig* by Kenneth H. Brown. First staged in 1959, *The Connection* revolved around junkies waiting for "the connection" to arrive and sell them drugs. The play represented the emptiness of contemporary life. "[*The Connection*] shows something of the essence of our lives today because it is about nothing", film director John Mekas declared (Mekas 1962). No stage had been set for the play and the actors mingled with the members of the public who also waited for the drug-dealer to come: the fourth wall was thus broken and actors and spectators were one. The cast of fictional junkies was composed of white actors and black jazz musicians who improvised pieces during the show. The play received glowing reviews and several awards: The Living Theatre became seen as a major Off-Broadway company. This recognition grew outside of the US when in 1961 the troupe was invited by Le Théâtre des Nations to play at Le Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier in Paris. In 1963, the Becks who had organized a Worldwide General Strike for Peace a year before, staged Brown's antimilitary play, *The Brig*. The work, featuring a day in a US Marine Corps military prison, exposed the violence of the American military system. To represent that violence, the Becks imagined a claustrophobic set and had their actors externalize that social brutality by shouting or incessantly repeating the same maddening movements. The acting became more physical and the actors were pushed to the limits. *The Brig* had been on the bill for five months when the International Revenue Service (I.R.S.) expelled The Living Theatre from their 14th Street venue as they had failed to pay some of their taxes. Again, it was argued that this official accusation was used as cover for the government's more general dissatisfaction with their antimilitary production at a time when the USA was fiercely involved in the Vietnam War. The company

refused to leave the theatre and the Becks were accused by the Federal Grand Jury of impeding I.R.S. agents from doing their jobs. The Becks were tried and sentenced to prison. As a consequence of this event, the Becks decided to leave the USA where they felt that they were no longer free and to head off to Europe where The Living Theatre would reinvent itself.

In Europe, The Living Theatre reconfigured itself as a nomadic community that created plays collectively. In line with their anarchist ideals, the Becks relinquished their power as directors of the group. Turning their backs on capitalism, they did not invest in a venue, but moved from country to country, going wherever they were invited to perform. With the exception of *The Maids* by Jean Genet and *Antigone* by Bertolt Brecht, the troupe created pieces like *Frankenstein* or *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces* from improvisations. The actors' bodies became the focus and spectators were invited to fully take part in the creative process. Audience participation reached its zenith with *Paradise Now*, a play created for the 1968 Avignon Festival directed by Jean Vilar. In the piece, the spectators were meant to become actors in order to create a community of equal beings. *Paradise Now* marked a shift from what they called a "theatre of questions" to a "theatre of responses", that is from plays which exposed injustices like their previous works, to a play which offered direct means to improve society. The Avignon creation was conceived as a journey to Paradise: the participants would go through a series of experiences to expel the ills of a violent capitalist society before reaching a state of bliss. At the end of the performance, the actors-spectators would be transformed into Primordial Men (in the image of the Adam Kadmon in the esoteric Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah) who would spread love and change society. Due to its performative nature, *Paradise Now* provided an alternative to what The Living Theatre saw as a corrupted society. This desire to change society, however, encountered hostility from the conservative fringe of the Avignon population. The play, which became a symbol of the 1968 riot, shocked some inhabitants and, following complaints to the Mayor, the performance was censored for being too obscene. When they went back home during the 1969 tour, the company was welcomed by the US police as local authorities were similarly afraid that the play could cause misbehavior and some performances were again censored. The fact that the Living Theatre did not manage to counteract censorship has often been interpreted as evidence of the failure of their revolutionary endeavor. Yet, even if the play failed to carry out the peaceful revolution the Becks wished for, it still transformed the company, which split into two groups. The group under the guidance of the Becks decided to pursue what they had launched with *Paradise Now* and went to Brazil to play in the streets for the needy in *favelas*. Activism became the essence of The Living Theatre.

## Avant-Garde Strategies

The art of The Living Theatre can be defined as "revolutionary" in that the company revolutionized the theatrical form by inaugurating what would later be named "post-dramatic theatre" and because the objective of the Becks was to use theatre as a pacifist weapon with which to conduct a social and political revolution.

The Living Theatre was a pioneer of post-dramatic theatre, a theatrical form which, according to its theorist Hans-Thies Lehmann developed at the end of the 1960s. At the beginning of their careers, the Becks staged texts which departed from conventional mimetic, narrative drama (Stein, Brecht, Ashbery...) and slowly put aside text to create pieces directly from improvisations. The progressive desacralization of the text shifted the focus of their performances to the bodies of the actors themselves. As Lehmann writes, "the changed use of theatre signs leads to a blurred boundary between theatre and forms of practice such as Performance Art, forms which strive for an experience of the real" (Postdramatic theatre 2006: 134). The bodies became the locus of experience: the actors from The Living Theatre developed different techniques inspired by Joe Chaikin's organic method, yoga techniques, and also Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. The Artaudian trance was inspirational to the Becks who believed that practitioners and spectators needed to feel pain in order to purge themselves from their traumas. While serving a prison sentence for an assault

on an I.R.S. agent, Julian Beck even called for a “theatre that did not numb us with the ideas for the intellect but stirred us to feeling by stirring up pain” as he believed, after the French artist, that by feeling pain “we might turn toward becoming men again instead of turning more and more into callous automata” (“Thoughts on Theatre from Jail” 1965). This negative experience was doubled by a positive one in their “theatre of response” as, after having felt pain, the company led the participants to a blissful communion. According to the Becks themselves, this organic “experience of the real” stood in opposition to the shallow imitations of life that characterized realist acting, particularly the American Method devised by Lee Strasberg (“Thoughts on Theatre from Jail” 1965). The Living Theatre’s productions from this later period were highly performative and aimed to transform the experience of both actors and spectators who were invited to actively take part in the creative process. The traditional fourth wall was therefore broken and the frontier between fiction and reality no longer existed. As Judith Malina put it, the group was looking for “paradisiac spectators” who responded positively to the actor’s invitation for revolution, whether formal or political, to take place (qtd. in Biner 1968: 93). Not all spectators were willing to participate and the audience’s involvement remained an ideal. When The Living Theatre left for Europe, they adopted a collective approach to creation, another characteristic of post-dramatic companies, for which the Becks’ became the prototype. In *The Life of the Theatre*, Julian Beck defined collective creation as “an example of Anarcho-Communist Autogestive Process which is of more value to the people than a play”. He concluded by stating that “collective creation [was] a secret weapon of the people” (Beck 1991: 46). With their productions, The Living Theatre had the utopian ambition to create a community based on a horizontal system with no hierarchy amongst the artists nor any distinction between the actors and the spectators. This community was in the image of their ideal anarchist society which theatre, they hoped, would help build.

Politics had always been on the theatrical agenda of the Becks. Judith Malina had been a student of Erwin Piscator at the New York School for Social Research and she and her husband had been admirers of Bertolt Brecht. Like the German masters, the couple viewed theatre as a “political forum” and they borrowed some of their techniques to stir a revolt against capitalism (Malina qtd. in Vendeville 2008: 35). From Piscator, Malina explained that they were notably inspired by his desire to enter into a dialogue with the spectators (Malina qtd. in Vendeville 2008: 35): progressively, The Living Theatre broke the fourth wall to initiate this conversation. From Brecht, the Becks borrowed some elements of the epic approach and mostly retained his mistrust of realism. Contrary to Brecht, however, the Becks did not believe in the fragmentation on which epic acting was based: the actors did not distance themselves from their parts but instead sought to embody them. In that respect it could be said that The Living Theatre’s theatre was Piscatorian and Brechtian in conscience and Artaudian in experience since actors and spectators were invited to go on an organic journey in order to transform themselves into pacifist soldiers of the anarchist revolution. As such, the performative nature of their later productions surpassed the German artists’ political conception of theatre. The Living Theatre went further than simply creating works which would raise the audience’s political awareness but sought to actively create a revolution

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When the founders of The Living Theatre met in 1943, Judith Malina was seventeen years old and Julian Beck was nineteen. Their backgrounds had shaped their personal ideologies. Beck was born to a conventional Jewish well-to-do family: his father was a businessman and nurtured high ambitions for his son. Yet the young man, who dreamed of becoming a painter, rejected societal norms and mistrusted capitalist domination. Malina was of more modest origins. She used to say that she became a pacifist at about ten years old when, after having seen the movie *Nurse Edith Cavell*, she told her father, who was a rabbi “working to wake up the American people to what was happening to the [Jews] in Germany”, that they “must not hate the Nazis” (Malina 1989). The couple defined themselves as pacifist-anarchist from an early age and became engaged in activism in 1950, at the outbreak of the Korean War.

The Becks' belief in the anti-capitalist "peaceful revolution" had been fashioned by following the precepts in Henry D. Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* (1849). Malina and Beck were keen readers of works *by* Thoreau and *on* Thoreau. Like their predecessor, the Becks served a prison sentence for having failed to pay taxes. In his press conference entitled "How to Close a Theatre", Beck urged people to "destroy the strictures of money" (Beck 1967: 180) and he denounced a capitalist system that condemned artists to seek success in order to survive while impoverishing their very arts in the process: "we could no longer experiment freely and we became increasingly dependent on success" (182-83). "You realize", stated Beck, "that the only thing standing between you and the work you want to do is the money system" (Beck 1967: 180). This line of attack is reminiscent of a *Life Without Principle* (1863) in which Thoreau described the corruption of the economic system: "the ways by which you may get money almost without exception lead downward". According to the philosopher, in this money-ridden society, the artist is doomed: "if you would get money as a writer or lecturer, you must be popular, which is to go down perpendicularly" (Thoreau 1863). To ensure the survival of their art, of their soul, if not of their venue, the founders of the company "became" in 1959 "delinquent in [their tax] payments". "[W]hy didn't we pay our taxes?" asked Beck, "we didn't pay our taxes because the money to pay them with never existed" since they needed it to pay the actors and to run the productions: "the primary obligation is after all to the creative spirit, who when he whispers in your ear is to be obeyed. God or Mammon" (Beck 1964: 186-87). In choosing God over taxes, The Living Theatre founders, like the philosopher, "quietly declared war with the State" (Thoreau 1849).

Civil Disobedience was a strategy advocated by Dorothy Day, leader of the Catholic Worker movement. Even though they did not share the same religious beliefs, Day was a great influence on the Becks. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Day broke with traditional Catholic doctrine over the concept of "just war" and became a fierce anti-military activist. In the 1950s, she protested against the concept of civil defense and the atomic bomb. Malina became involved with Day and the two of them were arrested in 1955 for refusing to take cover during a public air raid drill as an act of "civil disobedience" against the war and H-bomb testing (Malina 1971: 375). The pacifism of the Becks was also informed by Martin Buber's approach to Hasidism. The Zionist philosopher reinterpreted the Jewish religious movement of Hasidism and introduced it to Western audiences. As an acquaintance of the Malinas and because of his interest in theatre, Buber became a close friend of the Becks, who responded to what was known as his "philosophy of dialogue": he advocated dialogue as a means to establish peace and come to terms with conflicts. Artistically, The Living Theatre incorporated this principle of dialogues to create a community amongst the participants, especially in *Paradise Now*.

Loving one another was a necessary condition upon which to build a community and the Becks were fervent advocates of free love, which, for them, was a vector of both individual fulfillment and collective bliss. The sexual revolution was seen as a preliminary step to the anarchist revolution: "the Beautiful Non-Violent Anarchist Revolution will only take place after The Sexual Revolution" (Malina and Beck 1971:80). Their stance on sexuality was inspired by Wilhelm Reich's theories. The psychoanalyst coined the concept of the "orgone" which was defined as a "life energy" connecting human beings to the universe. The orgone was supposedly located in the sexual organs and was diffused throughout the body during sexual activities which were essential to ensure psychological balance and health. Conventions that hindered the expression of sexual instinct were the origins of frustrations which turned into violence. Sexual activities were therefore essential to ensure peace and sexual taboos were to be lifted in the name of communal harmony. The Becks believed in the power of sex and love to create a better society, freed from the norms that curtailed the freedom of men and women alike.

## Conclusion

Although no analyses to date have been conducted on the existence of a neo-avant-gardist approach to the American stage, it may be asserted that the productions of The Living Theatre after they left New York

in 1963 fell within the realm of neo-avant-gardism. When it comes to theatre, the chronologies of the avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde in Europe and the US differ. The American theatrical avant-garde is a post-WWII phenomenon: scholars, like Arnold Aronson, consider that American avant-garde theatre “emerged in the 50s” before dying out in the 70s (Aronson 2000: 4). This death of the historical avant-garde was due to the absorption of experimental artists by the institution, which, in Peter Bürger’s view, is the origins of the neo-avant-garde (Bürger 2016: 58). The “institution” refers here to Broadway, against which The Living Theatre reacted. Because of their rejections of the norm, whether aesthetics (realism) or economics (capitalism), Julian Beck defined his troupe as “avant-gardist” in a paper entitled “Why Vanguard? Value of the Experimental Theatre Discussed.” In this article published in *The New York Times* in March 1959, the co-founder of The Living Theatre paid tribute to his European avant-gardist ancestors (“Ibsen, Gordon Craig, Stanislavsky, Strindberg, and a few others at the prow”) and deplored the “mistrust” towards “the avant-garde theatre” of his times on account of its potential disruptive power (Beck 1959). In Beck’s words, avant-garde theatre was meant to “upset the status quo” and he called for a theatrical revolution: “if we want to revolutionize the theatre it is because we have faith in a modest mystical awareness we have of things that could happen in the theatre, things no one has yet imagined, things that could happen in the theatre and in life as well” (Beck 1959). Off-Broadway became the locus of an avant-gardist revolution which intensified when The Living Theatre left for Europe.

In Europe, The Living Theatre was solicited by non-commercial artistic institutions throughout the 1960s. The company’s alliance with European institutions can be interpreted as a shift to neo-avant-gardism. For example, the company performed at the Palazzo Carignano-Unione Culturale of Turin in Italy or at the Akademie der Künste of Berlin in Germany; in France, The Living Theatre was notably invited by the Théâtre de Chaillot, the Odéon, or The Avignon Festival, venues which were supported either by national or local entities like the State or the Avignon City Hall. French public institutions continued to offer a home to this group, even as it became increasingly radical both in form and content. This seeming paradox calls for a reinterpretation of Bürger’s negative vision of the neo-avant-garde. The neo-avant-garde has been viewed as a movement which, in the wake of the historical avant-garde, undermined genre distinctions by celebrating generic hybridity and blurring the frontier between art and non-art. The radical European post-dramatic experimentations of The Living Theatre, which blended verbal innovations and physical performances to create unique compositions, and in which actors and spectators became one dismantling the distinction between art and life, met this definition of the concept. Ironically, The Living Theatre’s contracts with French public institutions and later, during their 1969 US Tour, with American universities, was a way to ensure their autonomy. For these Americans who fled the United-States in 1963, Broadway was seen as the evil mercantile institution from which they hoped to escape. The French artistic public system was not seeking to make profits and therefore getting paid by the State or local institutions, it may be argued, was a way to survive without submitting to Broadway. During 1969, The Living Theatre performed at American universities, which was another way to play and earn a living without making a deal with the devilish theatrical industry. This alliance with institutions did not play down their political radicalism since, as we have seen, the troupe wanted to make a revolution with their art itself. The censorship in Avignon and police arrests during or after the representations of *Paradise Now* in their homeland proved that The Living Theatre did not compromise their ideological principles. What could be called the “neo-avant-gardism” of The Living Theatre in the 1960s puts into question Bürger’s pejorative assertion. The Living Theatre demonstrates how the concept of the “neo-avant-garde” can allow for the development of alternative radical art forms within the institution which is, in turn, challenged by the artists themselves who manage to not simply be recuperated by “the system”. The example of The Living Theatre is an invitation, first to consider the creators’ ability to pursue experimentation within the institution but also to distinguish the types of institutions artists work with and question the difference between private and public bodies. The Living Theatre did not surrender to mass culture but rather continued to innovate. In doing so they did not betray the spirit of the historical avant-garde but redefined it.

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