

Poetic Tension, Aesthetic Cruelty:  
Paul Goodman, Antonin Artaud and the Living Theatre  
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Abstract

Anarchism's renewal in the wake of World War II is the subject of this article, which focuses on New York's Living Theatre. Adopting pacifism as the only viable position for realizing anarchism's 'means-ends' ethics, the Living Theatre drew on Paul Goodman's concept of "natural" violence to develop an aesthetic amenable to their pacifist-anarchist stance. I track the development of this aesthetic in tandem with the Living Theatre's anti-commercialism into the early 1960s, when the troupe introduced a new, heightened realism to their performances, a realism informed by Goodman's critique of authoritarian violence and Antonin Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty."

Judith Malina (b. 1926) and Julian Beck's (1925-85) [Figure 1] "Living Theatre" (founded, 1947) is recognized as an outstanding example of political engagement in the history of experimental performance.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I discuss the couple's first period of activity in New York (late 1940s–1964). I explore how the development of a "poetic" theatre in tandem with pacifist-anarchist activism generated contradictions between their politics and their theatrical work that they sought to resolve by aestheticizing cruelty.

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Figure 1  
(Judith Malina and Julien Beck, 1959. Source: Mango, Lorenzo, and Giuseppe Morra, Eds. *Living Theatre: labirinti dell'immaginario*. Naples: Castel Sant'Elmo, 2003. Photo by Maris.)

Just before World War II, New York's anarchists were in a state of disarray. In 1938, a group of fifty leading activists had formed the "Libertarian Socialist League" and stopped using the term "anarchism." The next year, the city's only English-language journals, *Vanguard* and *Challenge*, were forced to fold, in part for want of funds and in part due to interpersonal conflicts: the advent of war precipitated further splits.<sup>2</sup> A time of crisis, however, can also be productive. Andrew Cornell points to the founding in 1942 of the New York-based journal, *Why?*, as the beginning of renewal. Edited in the main by co-founders Audrey Goodfriend and Dorothy Rodgers with Sally Grieg and Diva Agostinelli, *Why?* brought together activists promoting non-violent tactics (general strikes to end capitalism, for example) and insurrectionists seeking to overthrow State power through mass armed uprisings.<sup>3</sup> When the war ended and anarchist revolutions failed to materialize across liberated Europe, *Why?* changed its name to *Resistance* (in May, 1947) and

plans for mass mobilization gave way to a more concise goal: the collective would deepen its critique of the existing social order so as to inspire individuals to start living according to anarchist principles.<sup>4</sup> Other currents promoted similar politics. In June of 1947, the executive committee of the pacifist War Resisters League (WRL), which had hitherto restricted its activities to single-issue anti-war work, was taken over by former conscientious objector David Dellinger and other anarchists.<sup>5</sup> They rededicated the WRL to “the promotion of political, economic, and social revolution by non-violent means.”<sup>6</sup> The following year, in April, 1948, two hundred and fifty “militant pacifists” formed the “Peacemakers.” Advocating “the development of pacifist cells to promote communal life and personal ‘inner-transformation’” the group “extolled absolutism, moral responsibility, commitment, and civil disobedience.”<sup>7</sup> Peacemaker / WRL activists initiated a series of direct action campaigns during the 1950s and 60s, many of which were discussed in the WRL’s monthly magazine, *Liberation* (1956-1977). A third anarchist organization advocating non-violent social revolution through individual initiative was the Catholic Worker (CW) movement. Founded by Dorothy Day in the 1930s, the CW’s New York chapter published a newspaper, *Catholic Worker*, and ran a “House of Hospitality” at 39 Spring Street and later, 223 Chrystie Street (both located in the slum district of Manhattan’s Lower East Side) during the 1940s and 50s. The House was a place of “direct action” addressing the needs of the destitute, where activists served “a coffee line in the morning and a soup line at noon, and supper for those [homeless] living in the house.”<sup>8</sup> Civil disobedience was their weapon of choice in the political arena, where Christian imperatives were deemed to be above secular authority.<sup>9</sup> In short, individualist-oriented social activism was on the ascendance among New York’s anarchists, and this is where the founders of the Living Theatre found their affinity.

Initially Malina and Beck, who had been in a relationship for five years before marrying in October, 1948, were reluctant to commit themselves to the movement. Malina had been reading *Why?* and its successor *Resistance* for years, however, the 1<sup>st</sup> of July, 1948, entry in her diary reveals that she “hardly paid attention to the magazine [...] because I distrust militant politics. And though Kropotkin writes splendidly on the future society, I don’t know how to share his faith.”<sup>10</sup> According to Malina and Beck’s biographer,

John Tytell, anarchist social theorist Paul Goodman (who wrote for



*Figure 2*

(Judith Malina and Paul Goodman, Cafe San Remo, New York 1953-54. Source: Mango, Lorenzo, and Giuseppe Morra, eds. *Living Theatre: labirinti dell'immaginario*. Naples: Castel Sant'Elmo, 2003. Photo by WeeGee.)

*Resistance*) was the key influence “guiding” them toward anarchism [Figure 2].<sup>11</sup> In her diary, Malina approvingly singled him out from other anarchists because he had an “ordered” home life with a wife and children.<sup>12</sup> At the same time he was ‘out’ homosexually, and, in keeping with his belief that anarchists should follow their inclinations, pursuing numerous relationships. Since Beck was also bisexual and he and Malina had agreed to an ‘open’ marriage, it seems likely that Goodman’s lifestyle was a factor in swaying them towards his position.<sup>13</sup> Most importantly, Goodman’s anarchism was grounded in an individualist ethos – “drawing the line” on moral grounds and refusing to submit to the demands of any oppressive or destructive authority – that applied to the idea of violent all-encompassing revolution as to everything else.<sup>14</sup> To this end he was a pacifist who believed anarchism “must” be established gradually by the spread of self-sufficient “fraternal” collectives which would “progressively incorporate more and more [...] social functions” into

the emerging “free society.”<sup>15</sup>

Malina and Beck shared Paul Goodman’s position, as evidenced by Malina’s critique of other anarchists in her diary entry for the 24<sup>th</sup> of April, 1950. Following a meeting at the Sociedad Internacional Anarquista hall (the *Resistance* group organized talks and discussions at this venue, which was rented by a group of Spanish-speaking anarchists) she observed that “the concept of nonviolence is not clear to these people. They regard pacifism only as a form of resistance to the state and its wars; they seem to have no fundamental objection to killing.”<sup>16</sup> Clearly, nonviolence was the line she and Beck were drawing when it came to political activism. However this isn’t to say all violence was objectionable, at least for Goodman. In *Art and Social Nature* (1946), which Malina and Beck were reading in 1948, he distinguishes between violence in a “natural society” founded in freedom and “unnatural society’s” marshaling of violence to enforce hierarchical systems of power over others.<sup>17</sup> “Natural violence” had a psychological function, namely “the destruction of habits or second natures in the interests of rediscovering the primary experiences of birth, infantile anxiety, grief and mourning of death, simple sexuality, etc..”<sup>18</sup> “Unnatural violence,” on the other hand, served authoritarian social and political ends. Its primary tool was subtle and not-so-subtle coercion (legal, economic, and social) to perpetuate conditions of inequality and exploitation, however humanity’s deepest psychological needs (the realm of the natural) could also be co-opted to serve its ends.<sup>19</sup> Goodman speculated that the psychological appeal of wars, for example, lay in the false promise that the violence might “liberate natural associations and release social inventiveness.”<sup>20</sup> However since war’s violence was “unnatural,” it resulted in nothing of the sort.<sup>21</sup> This introduces an important qualification. Malina’s diary entry for the 8<sup>th</sup> of February, 1950, records a discussion with Beck and Goodman on the topic “How to stop the wars?” Goodman’s answer, “remove burdens,” seemed “saint”-like and impractical to Malina, who adds: “Paul says people need violence, but he really means passionate expression. The tenets of life annul petty concerns and express ardent rebellion against confining circumstances. Paul doesn’t make the distinction between ardor and violence.”<sup>22</sup> At this juncture, Malina (and presumably Beck) endorsed Goodman’s idea that a natural way of being may, from time to time, entail

fundamental social (and psychological) reordering, but the engine of this process, they believed, was “ardor” – passion, love, desire, but without violence.

Goodman argued “love and fraternity” were the natural forces binding us into social groups and that, within “the creative unanimity and rivalry” of a “revolutionary fraternity,” individuals could catch “fire from each other,” achieving “what none of them had it in him to do alone.”<sup>23</sup> How, then, should anarchists ‘fired’ by such passions proceed politically, as activists? In the “mixed society of coercion and nature” in which we live, Goodman argued, the most effective tactic was to “act so as to avoid the isolation of a particular issue and the freezing of the coercive structure.”<sup>24</sup> Prefiguring the values of a natural society founded on freedom, anarchists would “submit the [contested] issue to the dynamism of the common natural powers that nobody disputes” by appealing to principles humanity holds in common (“freedom, justice, and nature”).<sup>25</sup> For example, “exercising civil rights within the framework of the State” “trapped” activists within the existing system, but asserting that the court was “our court,” as were the “civil powers that were liberated by our own great men” (i.e., America’s revolutionary founders), escaped that trap.<sup>26</sup> Operating in this way, anarchists could demonstrate to the general populace that “we are not alienated from society [...] on the contrary, Society is alienated from itself.”<sup>27</sup>

Writing on contemporary activism, Leela Gandhi observes that anarchists build movements out of “communities of trust” that respect difference within shared affinities and, in so doing, undermine “the compartmentalization of causes and specializations of interests so characteristic of the anti-relational style of global or corporate governance, a style determined by the culture of ‘branding’ and its devastating mediative modality.”<sup>28</sup> As we shall see, Malina and Beck engaged in just such an endeavor during the 1950s and early 1960s, as they sought (in accord with Goodman and their pacifist convictions) to disrupt the fictive consensus cloaking institutionalized oppression. Disobeying the strictures of governance, they enacted a politics of “ardor” intent on triggering affective responses amongst the general populace, wakening individuals up to the oppressive unnaturalness of the entire social system and their own alienation from its values.

“Last night Julian read to me from the *Times* about the hydrogen bomb. H-bomb, Hell bomb, and all night I dream of war.”<sup>29</sup> Malina’s dairy entry for the 30<sup>th</sup> of January, 1950, poignantly encapsulates the desperation propelling the couple’s politics. Convinced of the need stop a “planetary forest fire,” they pondered strategies. “Julian suggests a peace pledge to rouse everyone’s conscience,” Malina notes, but nothing came of it.<sup>30</sup> In July, as the Korean war (25 June 1950 – 27 July 1953) intensified, they signed an international petition calling for peace and produced (with the assistance of Dachine Rainer and Holly Cantine, editors of the *Retort* journal) thousands of stickers – “Answer War Gandhi’s Way.”; “Don’t Let Politics Lead You to War.”; “War is Hell. Resist It.”; “All Politicians Make War. Don’t Vote.” – to post “on lampposts, houses, mailboxes, subways, where we can put them.”<sup>31</sup> In August, searching “for some kind of action” they organized a letter writing campaign.<sup>32</sup> Throughout this period Malina and Beck were attending *Resistance* meetings and mulling over the efficacy of their efforts. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of January, 1951, they also participated in a Peacemakers meeting at a communal house in Harlem. “The hope of the world,” Malina wrote, “is in such handfuls of good people – a ‘cell’, they call themselves.”<sup>33</sup>

After January the couple was increasingly absorbed with preparing for the Living Theatre’s public debut at the Cherry Lane Playhouse (38 Commerce Street) in Greenwich Village. Its first manifestation was short-lived (August 1951 – August 1952), as a Fire Department inspector closed the venue after declaring the company’s costumes and sets a fire hazard.<sup>34</sup> Beck had sunk a six thousand dollar inheritance into the project, but the enterprise still bled money.<sup>35</sup> The Living Theatre’s next home was a loft on 100th Street (March 1954 – November 1955). The couple sustained that operation with funds donated at the door until New York’s Building Department shut it down. The theatre’s third incarnation (January 1959 – October 1964) was in a refurbished building on the corner of Fourteenth Street and Sixth Avenue.<sup>36</sup>

Reflecting on the Living Theatre’s early years, Beck notes Cheery Lane-era plays “stressed the sacredness of life.”<sup>37</sup> The “sacredness of life” is pacifism’s core ethic and in this regard, Goodman’s play *Faustina* (staged January 13-27, 1952), is particularly relevant. *Faustina* concerned the bloody intrigues of a sadistic gladiator during

the reign of Emperor Marcus Aurelius.<sup>38</sup> The performance culminated with the ritual sacrifice of the gladiator, after which the “formal walled architecture” symbolizing Roman civilization disappeared, leaving an empty stage set. ‘Faustina, Empress of Rome’ (in this case, Malina) then turned to the audience, stated her real name and challenged them concerning their inaction (Goodman specified the exact wording of this challenge was up to the actor). Malina declaimed: “We have enacted a brutal scene, the ritual murder of a young and handsome man. I have bathed in his blood, and if you were a worthy audience, you’d have leaped on the stage and stopped the action.”<sup>39</sup> The programme for the Living Theatre’s inaugural play at Cheery Lane (*Doctor Faustus Turns Out the Lights*, December 2-16, 1951) includes a short essay by Goodman, “Vanguard and Theatre,” which throws light on Malina’s call to action. The essay concerns the radicalizing role of “vanguard” playwrights and performers who turn “away from the usual language and usual assumptions” to “affect a character-change in the audience, more than all the manifestos can accomplish.”<sup>40</sup> This vanguard is “alienated” from present-day society, but audiences are also alienated. They simply “don’t recognize it” until they encounter the work of the theatrical vanguard.<sup>41</sup> “We stubbornly belong to your community,” Goodman insists, “tho [sic] you often seem not to like that. But now, in the theatre, we suddenly find that we have a community indeed. [...] And in our days, when people seem so very ‘alienated’ from one another, so lacking in ‘community’ (tho [sic] there is the devil’s plenty of uniformity), my chief aim as an artist is – that we suddenly meet – in this theatre – to our mutual surprise.”<sup>42</sup> Potentially, then, a vanguard performance could break this multi-tiered alienation.<sup>43</sup> However *Faustina* failed to induce the public to identify with Malina’s heartfelt pacifist-anarchist point of view.<sup>44</sup> “The audience,” writes Beck, “was insulted and went away annoyed, riled.”<sup>45</sup>

The Living Theatre’s next incarnation was resolutely non-commercial. “We wanted to be free of money,” Beck wrote, “so we decided on the loft [on 100<sup>th</sup> Street], where we would not advertise, would not invite critics, would not charge admission.”<sup>46</sup> The concept of an economy not dependent on monetary exchange had been one of the factors that convinced Malina of anarchism’s practicality,<sup>47</sup> and it also figures in an essay by anarchist Harold Norse for the programme of Kenneth Rexroth’s *Beyond the Mountains*, first



produced at Cheery Lane.<sup>48</sup> Malina's diary entry for the 20<sup>th</sup> of October, 1949, includes snippets of a discussion with Norse and others about "a cooperative, moneyless, self-determining society" and how to realize it.<sup>49</sup> Norse's essay, "The Poetic Theatre," expanded on this idea, presenting the Living Theatre as an anti-capitalist force within existing society by virtue of its "poetic" commitment.<sup>50</sup> Poetry's concern was the "life of the imagination," which is "no less real than the world in which people make business deals."<sup>51</sup> The Living Theatre may have gone bust for lack of money at Cheery Lane, but money-making was not the point of the Living Theatre and at 100<sup>th</sup> Street "the life of the imagination" reigned supreme. That said, there was no escaping the necessity of holding down day jobs to make ends meet, and the performers' ability to devote themselves wholly to their artistry suffered.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, decoupling their theatre from commercialism was a small step towards nurturing cultural anarchism's corrosive relationship to the capitalist economy.<sup>53</sup>

Paul Goodman's *The Young Disciple* (1955) was, in Beck's estimation, the loft theatre's high point.<sup>54</sup> Directed by Beck and performed "half in verse, half in prose,"<sup>55</sup> it pit natural impulses against the dictates of an inflexible society. The pseudo-biblical plot of *The Young Disciple* revolves around a "miraculous event" which is never directly addressed.<sup>56</sup> Instead, the "community" "strives to interpret it, to blot it out, to mythologize it, so that life can go on as ordinary."<sup>57</sup> The resulting stress becomes the index of blocked creativity, as people's natural impetus to adjust to a new reality comes into conflict with already existing social beliefs. In fact, this "martyr-play" (Goodman's term) encapsulates anarchist psychological tenets codified in his co-authored study, *Gestalt Therapy* (1951).<sup>58</sup> Michael Fisher summarizes: "His [Goodman's] approach to psychoanalysis centered on what he called the principle of organismic-self-regulation [...] [which] happened best in small-S society, where relationships based on autonomous individual initiative were the main shaping force in people's lives."<sup>59</sup> *The Young Disciple* depicts the strife of blocked psychological development, but nonetheless freedom does manifest itself, not as scripted narrative, but as a reality-based encounter involving playwright, actors and audience. Emotional outbursts, heavy breathing, dancing, trembling and so forth, on the part of performers, were Goodman's means of enabling their personhood

to break free from obedience to “some preconceived notion or formula” (the scripted dictates of the playwright).<sup>60</sup> “I work to free the slaves,” Goodman proclaimed, from an alienating situation he likened to “a factory or army where one person has fallen under another’s influence.”<sup>61</sup> Those in attendance were also liberated, after a fashion, from the role of disinterested spectator. “They [the audience] were disgusted, affronted, annoyed, terrified, awed, and excited,” recalled Beck, as actors vomited or crept about “on all fours in total darkness making night noises, strange husky grating and chirping sounds.”<sup>62</sup>

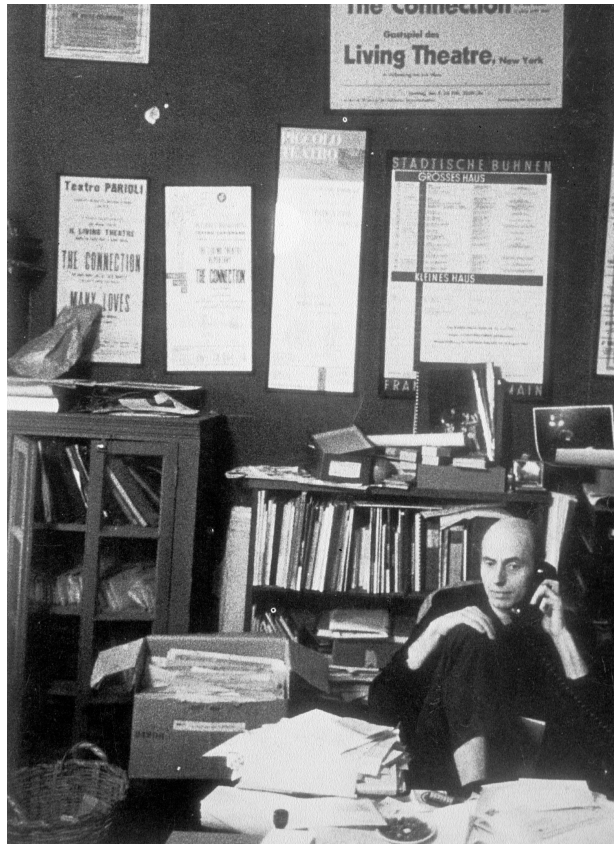
Aesthetic politics aside, content seems to have been the authorities’ main concern. Malina’s diary entry for the 10<sup>th</sup> of October, 1955, records the police “interviewing cast members” while *The Young Disciple* was in rehearsal, intimating it was obscene.<sup>63</sup> By the 14<sup>th</sup> of October, harassment was intensifying: “they stop actors on the street and ask ‘you doing a dirty play up there?’”<sup>64</sup> Alarmed and exasperated, Malina and Beck took Goodman’s script to the local precinct so they could determine what might be illegal under the obscenity statutes. The desk sergeant was uncooperative – “if we raid you[,] we raid you.”<sup>65</sup> The play opened on the 16<sup>th</sup> of October with no more incidents. Activism likely piqued the authorities’ sudden interest in the Living Theatre. In 1955, the federal government was ramping up its domestic “cold war” campaign against the Soviet Union by instituting “civil defense” drills. “Operation Alert,” staged annually in New York until 1962, was initiated on the 15<sup>th</sup> of June, 1955, and involved fifty five cities (thirteen of which had no advance knowledge).<sup>66</sup> Sirens wailing, civilians were herded into bomb shelters to wait for the ‘all-clear.’<sup>67</sup> New York’s WRL and Peacemakers chapters, working with the Quakers’ Fellowship of Reconciliation, disobeyed this drill on the grounds that it conditioned the public “to accept and expect war, instead of demanding peace and working for it.”<sup>68</sup> Malina resolved to participate and converged with others at City Hall Park to deliver a protest letter to the mayor’s office.<sup>69</sup> They were arrested as soon as the drill began.<sup>70</sup> In court, a hostile judge, annoyed by Malina’s attitude, committed her to the Criminal Psychiatric Observation Ward of Bellevue Hospital.<sup>71</sup> Goodman put Beck in touch with a staff doctor who declared her sane and Malina was released on bail the morning of the 17<sup>th</sup> of July.<sup>72</sup> The experience galvanized the couple, who marked the tenth anniversary of the bombing of

Hiroshima (9 August, 1955) by joining WRL and CW activists handing out protest leaflets in front of New York's Japanese consulate. Malina also took part in a fast "for the sin of the A-bomb" and picketed the Internal Revenue Agency holding a sign declaring "Love & Life, Not Death & Taxes."<sup>73</sup> On 28 September, she and six other arrestees pled guilty to violating the New York Emergency Act under which participation in the drills was mandatory (Malina was given a suspended sentence)<sup>74</sup> and police harassment of the Living Theatre commenced a week later. Ironically, the theatre was closed in November by a WRL activist working as a "licensing inspector" for New York City's Building Department.<sup>75</sup>

After the loft was shut down, Malina and Beck determined they needed a building they could renovate to code. Anarchist composer John Cage and his partner, Merce Cunningham (dancer and director of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company), agreed to establish a dance studio at the future location and Paul Williams (anarchist, architect, and husband of *Resistance* contributing artist Vera Williams) offered to refurbish it.<sup>76</sup> On the 21<sup>st</sup> of June, 1957, Cage and Cunningham drove Malina, Beck and Williams to an abandoned department store at 530 Sixth Avenue / Fourteenth Street which Williams declared workable.<sup>77</sup> This was the Living Theatre's last venue before Malina and Beck departed New York for an extended period of "voluntary exile" in Europe [Figure 3]. Four weeks to the day, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of July, the couple were arrested and sentenced to "thirty days in the workhouse" for defying an air raid drill.<sup>78</sup> A coauthored article, "All the World's a Prison," published not long after their release in the *Village Voice* (7 September, 1957) presents their political analysis of the experience.<sup>79</sup> Malina and Beck contrast a social system "without forgiveness" with the spirit of those it incarcerates. "Realizing that they are all suffering" behind bars, prisoners embrace the "freedom to love" and "share in communal life."<sup>80</sup> In other words, subject to intense persecution by the State, the prisoners forge a natural community fired by ardor (cf. Malina's diary entry for the 8<sup>th</sup> of February, 1950) within the unnatural social order that oppresses them, a community analogous to that of a Peacekeepers pacifist cell or a CW House of Hospitality, albeit without the political consciousness. A place of suffering is where the prisoner begins breaking down interpersonal alienations permeating society. However, once freed from jail, he "walks into a world in which

prisons exist as a threat to [everyone's] freedom."<sup>81</sup> Bereft of "the neighborly love that made prison bearable" in a "hostile and competitive community bound by innumerable laws," the prisoner remains "tied forever to the prison he has left"<sup>82</sup> just like those who, having adapted to the capitalist State's norms and values, shackle themselves to their own self-alienation. Echoing Goodman's analysis in "Vanguard and Theatre" and *Art and Social Nature*, Malina and Beck conclude: "The whole world is a prison. Having been to prison you know this and are never again free; and even if you have not been to prison, and even if you have obeyed the laws and have hidden in fear when the sirens sounded, are you free?"<sup>83</sup>

On 13 January, 1959, the Living Theatre launched their new location with "Many Loves," by American poet William Carlos Williams. The play showcases three love stories directed by a young idealist who wants to stage performances whose "poetry" resides in "the audience itself."<sup>84</sup> Its crowning moment is when the seasoned financier who has backed the director dismisses his vision on the grounds that theatre audiences are composed exclusively of bored middle-class entertainment seekers who can afford to buy tickets.<sup>85</sup> Harkening back to Norse's argument in "The Poetic Theatre," the Living Theatre's dedication to awakening the "poetic" in its audiences was again pitted against the deadening forces of cultural commercialism.<sup>86</sup> The programme included a statement, "Drama and Theatre," by cultural theorist Martin Buber (who was deeply influenced by anarchism) reprinted from his recently published collection, *Pointing the Way* (1957).<sup>87</sup> Poetic drama, wrote Buber, intensifies the creative "tension" of communication, "namely that two men will never mean the same thing by the words that they use; that therefore there is no pure reply; that at each point of the conversation, therefore, understanding and misunderstanding are interwoven; from which comes then [...] the interplay of openness and closedness [sic], expression and reserve."<sup>88</sup> This marks it as a "natural" form of communication originating "in the elemental impulse to leap through transformation over the abyss between I and Thou that is bridged through speech."<sup>89</sup> Galvanized by "the word [...] that convulses through the whole body of the speaker"<sup>90</sup> poetic drama is more than mere "entertainment"; emulating the gravitas of ancient mystery plays, it constitutes a "sacred reality" addressing vital social and psychological aspects of our being, "penetrating his [the spectator's] life" and the life of the performers as well.<sup>91</sup>



*Figure 3*

(Offices of the Living Theater, 1962-63. Source: Mango, Lorenzo, and Giuseppe Morra, eds. *Living Theatre: labirinti dell'immaginario*. Naples: Castel Sant'Elmo, 2003. Photo by Lochwood.)

It is fair to say that by 1959 Malina and Beck had realized their project in non-commercial terms and radicalized theatre on the level of affect: but they had yet to introduce substantive political issues directly pertinent to the lives of their audiences. This changed with “The Connection,” a play written by a hitherto unknown playwright, Jack Gelber.<sup>92</sup> Before arriving in New York and introducing himself to the Becks, Gelber had lived in San Francisco, where he and his wife, Carol Westenberg, moved in anarchist circles that mixed poetry, jazz, and drugs: he befriended Kenneth Rexroth (who gave poetry readings to the accompaniment of jazz musicians) as well as poet and heroin user Philip Lamantia, co-editor, with Saunders Russell, of the anarchist journal *The Ark* (1947).<sup>93</sup> In an interview

for the *Village Voice*, Gelber relates that he showed the third draft of his play to Malina and Beck “around March 1958,” and that they worked together to craft the final version (Gelber and Westenberg also assisted with selecting the cast).<sup>94</sup> Malina directed “The Connection,” which premiered in July.<sup>95</sup> Condemned, praised, and performed for packed audiences through 1959-1962, the play was a sensation.

Gelber’s plot concerns a producer and writer who are presenting a play about a quartet of jazz musicians and other “junkies” (heroin addicts) waiting in a slum apartment for another junky, “Cowboy,” to return with heroin (“junk”) so they can inject it (“shoot up”). Reality and performance co-mingle from the start as the “producer” (“Jim”) and the play’s “writer” (“Jaybird”) introduce themselves between banter with various members of the “cast.” Jaybird’s task is to coax the junkies through a loose rendition of his script while two documentary cameramen film everything. Throughout, the addicts parlay with each other, the writer, producer and cameramen while trying to cope with waiting for their next “fix” (the heroin). The musicians improvise jazz tunes and a few periodically slip into a state of semi-consciousness (this is written into the script, but the heroin-induced reasons are unexplained). On stage, they weren’t acting. The Living Theatre hired performers who had lost their licenses to work at the musicians’ union rate due to heroin-related convictions, and during the play, many were actually high.<sup>96</sup> In fact, the line between reality and performance continuously blurs in “The Connection.” As Bradford Martin notes, the play unfolds in real time and is punctuated by tediously long passages during which nothing much happens.<sup>97</sup> Theatre’s imaginary ‘fourth wall’ is also non-existent. For example, just before the end of act one, Jaybird cautions the audience about his actors panhandling during intermission. He assures them that no matter what the junkies may say to con money, they are getting paid for their work with a “scientifically accurate amount of heroin” which will be administered in the course of the play.<sup>98</sup> Theatrically framed as artifice, hard-bitten capitalism sutures the producer / writer-junkie / actor-audience relationship by corrupting the only anti-capitalist gesture of good will (charity) available, which turns out to be an off-stage scam by junkies to exploit their exploiters (a number of them panhandle anyway).<sup>99</sup> Real-life hypocrisy is targeted. One junky argues all sorts of addictions permeate society to which a second replies “You happen

to have a vice that's illegal."<sup>100</sup> They discuss when heroin became criminalized and who benefits from the situation.<sup>101</sup> Pointing out that the authorities justify "the [atomic] bomb" because it is needed to "protect us from themselves" (though the Japanese "disagree"), Cowboy concludes "everything that's illegal is illegal because it makes more money for more people that way."<sup>102</sup>

During the second act the junkies anxiously retreat, one by one, into a bathroom with Cowboy to shoot up. Matters come to a head when an older junkie "Leach," who has been using so long one shot does not get him high, insists that he needs more. After warning him of the danger, Cowboy relents and gives him another "hit," which Leach "cooks" (heroin is prepared for injection by being mixed with water, heated up in a spoon, and drawn into a syringe) and injects in full view of the audience [see Cover of this issue]. He overdoses and most of the other junkies drift off, not wanting to get caught up in a situation that could involve the police. Cowboy and another junkie care about Leach: they remain behind with Jaybird (who is panicking) and Jim to revive him. While the audience confronts this traumatizing spectacle, conversation meanders through other present-day horrors: the hydrogen bomb, doctors administering prefrontal lobotomies and electroshock therapy. Jaybird concludes that reality and theatre "all fits together" and continues:

We wouldn't all be on stage if it didn't fit. That's what I had in mind in the first place. I didn't learn anything [from the play]. I knew it. Find a horror. Then you try to tell people it isn't a horror. And then I have the gall to be horrified. Well, if it wasn't junk, I would have been involved with something else.<sup>103</sup>

"The Connection" ends with a knock on the door. An old man carrying a portable record player enters the room, plugs it in, plays a jazz record, packs up and leaves.

Reviews repeatedly commented on the addicts' suffering and the audience's (and reviewer's) discomfort. *New York Post* theatre critic Francis Herridge, for example, paraphrases one of the junkies angrily snapping at the audience - "Why are you here? You stupid - you want to watch people suffer?" and responds,

“Man, which one of us is suffering?”<sup>104</sup> *Village Voice* journalist Jerry Tallmer refers to the “crackling skin of anyone who watches, and cares” as “electrical ripples of tension and latent violence” course through the cast “waiting in agony” for a fix.<sup>105</sup> Lee Pomex, writing for *Show Business*, characterizes the play as “depressing,” “incisive,” “shocking,” filled with “unspoken tensions.”<sup>106</sup> *Nation* reviewer Harold Clurman remarks that “spectators eager for ‘art’ or ‘entertainment’” will find neither in an “unpleasant” performance charged with “genuine pathos” which verges on a “wretched sort of heroism.”<sup>107</sup> And *The New Republic’s* Robert Brustein describes in vivid detail how, bereft of theatre’s “imaginary fourth wall,” the audience discovered its presence heightening the “distress” of the junkies on stage in “a performance of frightening integrity” whose only “false note” is “your own conventional expectation, conditioned by years of phony drama and sociological indoctrination.”<sup>108</sup>

The agitating power of anarchist poetics had finally found its activist touchstone: the grotesqueness of Goodman’s unnatural society. While Malina and Beck were rehearsing Gelber’s play, Mary Catherine Richards (contributor to *Resistance*) introduced them to French theorist Antonin Artaud’s collected essays, *The Theatre and Its Double* (1938).<sup>109</sup> Artaud’s analysis enthralled them, and they reprinted his preface, “The Theatre and Culture,” in the programme for “The Connection.”<sup>110</sup> Artaud discusses his desire for a “savage” theatre that makes use “of everything – gestures, sounds, words, screams, light, darkness” so as to “compel us to return to nature, i.e. to rediscover life.”<sup>111</sup> In so doing, theatre would become “culture-in-action” communicating with the intensity of “victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames.”<sup>112</sup> *The Theatre and Its Double* included a series of manifestos and statements conceptualizing a “theatre of cruelty” that could become “believable reality.”<sup>113</sup> Such theatre would pulverize the separation of stage and auditorium in order to “attack the spectator’s sensibility on all sides.”<sup>114</sup> Man’s “interior” life, his “taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras, his utopian sense of life and matter, even his cannibalism” were all fodder for Artaud’s extravagant vision of a theatre of “perpetual conflict, a spasm in which life is continually lacerated, in which everything in creation rises up and exerts itself.”<sup>115</sup> Qualifying his use of the



term “cruelty,” Artaud redefined it, “from the point of view of the mind,” as signifying “rigor, implacable intention and decision, irreversible and absolute determination, a kind of higher determinism to which the executioner-tormentor himself is subjected and to which he must be determined to endure when the time comes. Cruelty is above all lucid, a kind of rigid control and submission to necessity.”<sup>116</sup> Marshaling these forces, Artaud predicted “a bleeding spurt of images in the poet’s head and the spectator’s as well” would cleanse us of our will to violence: “I defy that spectator to give himself up, once outside the theatre, to ideas of war, riot, and blatant murder.”<sup>117</sup>

Given the trajectory I have outlined, it’s understandable that Malina and Beck found common cause with Artaud’s concept of “culture-in-action,” his call for a theatre synonymous with “life” and the “poetic” (cf. Norse & Buber) value of a “theatre of cruelty” that could bring us face-to-face with our deep-seated destructive impulses, but not his believe that, in essence, “each stronger life tramples down the others, consuming them in a massacre which is a transfiguration and a bliss. In the manifested world, metaphysically speaking, evil is the permanent law and what is good is an effort and already one more cruelty added to the other.”<sup>118</sup> The Living Theatre’s adaptation of the “theatre of cruelty” was a means of drawing audiences into a critical frame of mind amenable to their pacifist-anarchist outlook, not Artaud’s darkly truncated world-view.

Certainly the spectacle of self-inflicted cruelty when Leach jabs his arm with a hypodermic needle and then spasms in an overdose-induced coma and the audience’s reaction to it (some fainted)<sup>119</sup> is testimony to the power of Artaud’s concept. Similarly, the audience’s discomfort (a kind of suffering) with their “theatrical” role as cruelty’s consumers goes some way towards an Artaudian effect. At the same time, the play also advances anarchist politics. Faced with the criminalization of their desire for drug induced euphoria (not the acquisition of property or power over others), the addicts critique their condition repeatedly, pointing out the user is on the bottom rung of an exploitative series of power relationships structured by the law. Furthermore, there is compassion and mutual aid among the addicts, who team up to buy drugs (this increases

affordability), share a space where they can get high, feed each other, and even prevent a death. Much like Malina and Beck's community of the incarcerated, "The Connection's" junkies are subordinated by an unnatural community whose State-sanctioned horrors (notably "the bomb") far outstrip their own criminality, and their humanity endures as the 'natural' compliment to an awakening critical consciousness. In this way, theatrical politics merged with politics in the street and when Malina dedicated "The Connection" to former cell-mate Thelma Jackson (who had died of an overdose) "and to all other junkies, dead or alive, in the Women's House of Detention,"<sup>120</sup> she served notice of that fact.<sup>121</sup>

"The Connection" may have brought recognition, but the Living Theatre was also mired in debt, behind with the rent and facing legal action for failure to report taxes.<sup>122</sup> At the same time, the world situation was worsening. In 1961 the Soviet Union announced it was ending a self-imposed moratorium on atomic bomb testing, a development that led the US administration to consider more atmospheric tests of its own.<sup>123</sup> Malina and Beck responded by organizing a "General Strike for Peace" intended to unite war resisters around the globe. During 1962-1963 they threw themselves into the mobilization effort, which included three New York-based "general strikes" involving hundreds of people who picketed, marched, paraded, engaged in sit-down demonstrations, and got themselves repeatedly arrested.<sup>124</sup> In January, 1963, they also began work on what would prove to be the Living Theatre's last performance at 530 Sixth Avenue: a play called "The Brig."<sup>125</sup> The playwright was a former marine, Kenneth Brown, who had been incarcerated in a military brig for thirty days while stationed in Japan.<sup>126</sup> In the brig, prisoners followed a strict sequence of routines, day in and day out, for the length of their incarceration. The goal was to strip them of their identity and instill unquestioning obedience. Each inmate was given a number and forced to answer to it. Punishment was to study the *Guide for Marines* to the letter while obeying rigid protocols of behavior within a tightly confined space sectioned off by lines that could not be crossed without permission or an order to do so. Prisoners were screamed at, punched and subjected to constant humiliation by the guards, who enforced a strict code of silence between inmates. Brown's play presents a

day in this brig, with all its attendant brutality [Figure 5].<sup>127</sup>



*Figure 4*

(The Living Theater performing *The Brig*, 1964. Photo by Jonas Mekas.)

The Living Theatre regarded their performance of “The Brig” as a political statement and an audience-activating experience keyed to Artaud’s “theatre of cruelty.” This is clear from Malina’s director’s notes, published in 1964, in which she interprets the play as a transformative critique of society’s authoritarian structures: “Whether that structure calls itself a prison or a school or a factory or a family or a government, that structure asks each man what he can do for it, not what it can do for him, and for those who do not do for it, there is the pain of death or imprisonment, or social degradation, or the loss of animal rights.”<sup>128</sup> Outlining her techniques for staging the marine brig’s “structure” of psychological and physical cruelty, she cites Artaud’s challenge to his audience – “I defy that spectator to give himself up, once outside the theatre, to ideas of war, riot, and blatant murder”<sup>129</sup> – to underline her ambition is to radicalize people through the play. She also interprets the play’s message as anarchist, referencing Goodman’s pamphlet, *Drawing the*

*Line* (1945), reprinted in *Art and Social Nature*. *The Brig's* brutalized marines and their guard-persecutors are united by the choice, at some juncture, to submit. Each soldier has decided to "draw the line at that line" and this is "*the symbolic key of his repressed powers*" [Malina's emphasis] and his suffering.<sup>130</sup> In a free society no such line need ever be drawn by any individual.<sup>131</sup> What inner force could free us to usher in such a society? "Love, the saving grace in everything human," was the Living Theatre's answer.<sup>132</sup> In *The Brig*, Malina reveals, they "called on pity last, on basic human kinship first" so that their audience may "know violence in the clear light of the kinship of our physical empathy."<sup>133</sup> When humanity grasps the truth of violence, she predicted, we will "confront the dimensions of the Structure, find its keystone, learn on what foundations it stands, and locate its doors. Then we will penetrate its locks and open the doors of all the jails."<sup>134</sup>

*The Brig* opened on the 15<sup>th</sup> of May, 1963, shortly after the third and last "General Strike" actions. By that time, Tytell notes, the example of Malina and Beck's activism, combined with rehearsing Brown's highly charged play, had politicized the entire troupe.<sup>135</sup> Opening reviews were hostile, but the play attracted an audience and began to prove financially successful. However on the 17<sup>th</sup> of October, the Living Theatre was served with a notice of eviction for rent owing and the next day agents of the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) declared the contents of the theatre "government property in lieu of \$28,435 in back taxes."<sup>136</sup> Malina, Beck and members of the cast refused to leave: protestors rallied to their cause, while police set up barricades. On Saturday, the 19<sup>th</sup> of October, Malina announced that the Living Theatre would perform "The Brig." That evening, supporters accessed the building through a roof-top fire door and opened second story windows. After the performance, twenty-five members of the cast and audience were arrested and charged with a range of offenses.<sup>137</sup> Malina and Beck turned their trial into a protest event, asserting their right to defend "beleaguered beauty and art" against "the anonymous instruments of oppression of the military-industrial complex."<sup>138</sup> The couple were found guilty on seven counts, ordered to pay back-taxes with penalties, fined and sentenced for contempt of court (Malina got thirty days, Beck, sixty) plus probation for five

years.<sup>139</sup> Since The Living Theatre had engagements in Europe they were released on bail in July, pending an appeal (never pursued). The couple returned to the US in late 1964 to serve their sentences and departed for Europe to rejoin their troupe immediately afterwards.<sup>140</sup>

## Conclusion

The Living Theatre was dedicated (paraphrasing Goodman) to ‘unfreezing’ the ‘coercive structures’ (psychological and social) that alienate us from ourselves and perpetuate authoritarian cultural, economic, and political institutions. And to this end, Artaud’s “theatre of cruelty” offered a means of galvanizing poetic affect so as to radicalize the audience’s political outlook in the deepest emotional sense. The efficacy of such poetics, for Malina and Beck, arose from their pacifist conviction that an anarchist society had to be based on love, not violence: if people could come to understand the true nature of violence as the root of self-alienation (Artaud’s promise), they would perforce renounce it. However, what if aestheticizing cruelty fell short of this goal? What, then, were the criteria by which to access the worth of their aesthetics? Shortly after “The Brig” opened, Jackson Mac Low (poet, pacifist-anarchist, and frequent collaborator) wrote a letter (19 July, 1963) raising this issue:

I’m still puzzled as to the “aesthetics” of ‘The Brig.’ As a work of production & direction & acting, it seem well-nigh perfect [...] from a craftsman’s point of view. But whether something that produces only nausea, disgust, revulsion & other painful feelings (as it is *meant* to) but which in no way brings these feelings to a Katharsis [sic] – even one of the hope of a possible change – is an aesthetic in any sense except that of craft (the only possible *pleasure* [except for perversities] is one’s admiration at its being ‘done’ so well – at the fact that such horror is portrayed so perfectly), is a question I still *cannot* resolve. Maybe it is not important. Then, however, the work *must* have real social effects – it must be an effective work of *rhetoric* & cause not only temporary changes in its viewers / auditors, but a real change in the Marine Corps’ imprisonment system (at the very least) &, if pos-

sible, in the whole system of violence – of military establishments and prisons. Have you had any *evidence* that it has begun to bring about any definite changes (at least in the ‘defense’ depart.)? Please let me know if you hear of any.<sup>141</sup>

Mac Low’s desire for an anarchist-infused aesthetic, as opposed to cruelty-inflected “craft,” is challenging, but it can be resolved if we take into account the radicalization of the actors who performed in “The Brig,” many of whom followed Malina and Beck to Europe, where the troupe became a nomadic anarchist collective (a “horde” in Malina’s words).<sup>142</sup> As for “The Brig’s” impact on its audience, the willingness of protesters to rally to Malina and Beck’s defense when their theatre was shut down suggests it did have a “real social effect,” however modest (but meaningful for the individuals involved) it may have been. In sum, the Living Theatre’s aesthetic was anarchist, and, as such, antithetical to the social institutions of violence. Attend to Beck’s comments on “The Brig,” written in July 1964. “Artaud’s mistake,” he observed, “was that he imagined you could create a horror out of the fantastic. Brown’s gleaming discovery is that horror is not in what we imagine but is in what is real.”<sup>143</sup> The Living Theatre formulated an aesthetic of tension within the “real” which was as self-actualizing and transformative as direct action in the streets. This was Malina and Beck’s gift to the post-WWII renewal of anarchism.

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- 71 Ibid., 369-70.
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