

“Feminism in John McGrath’s *Yobbo Nowt*”

By:

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John McGrath’s *Yobbo Nowt* was a fringe production performed by 7:84 England Theatre company on tour in 1975. The tour took the play to England, Scotland, Wales, and Holland for nearly a year, 1975-1976.¹ Afterwards, the play was produced under a new title, *Mum’s the Word*², at the Liverpool Everyman Theatre by the Everyman Company. It received its London production in 1976 under the original title, which was changed to *Left Out Lady* when the play was performed in New York in 1981.

In 7:84’s production of *Yobbo Nowt*, a cast of eight actors and actresses play the roles of twenty characters, and there is a minimum use of sets, for purposes of economy, both of which are prime characteristics of 7:84s and fringe companies’ productions. The setting of the play is, as in *Fish in the Sea*, Liverpool³ at the present time, 1975.⁴

John McGrath’s *Yobbo Nowt* is cast into what appears to be like a musical comedy form, a decision the playwright took after discussions with the entire 7:84 England Company, in an attempt to produce a more personal story in contrast with the earlier McGrath play, ‘Lay Off’,⁵ which the company had toured earlier in 1975. The result, however, is not precisely a musical comedy, despite the fact that *Yobbo Nowt* is both ‘musical, and a comedy’⁶. The elements of music and comedy are two features which this play shares with the earlier *Fish in the Sea*, both of which characteristics are prerequisites in McGrath’s popular theatre to provide entertainment value to the audience. The purpose of the music and song technique is to ‘ [relate] music to speech and story-telling: the sung narrative, straightforward character- and situation- songs, plus scenes in which the characters cut from speech to song, and scenes completely set to music’⁷. Thus, the playwright integrates the elements of song, music, dialogue, and narration (or story-telling) in the fabric of the play, on a wider scale and in a more extensive fashion than their

employment in *Fish in the Sea*. In addition to the use of songs, which are given titles, and music for entertainment, and as devices central to the content of the play, in terms of story development, commenting on the action and characterization, they are attempts to explore the skills and artistic possibilities of the 7:84 Company,⁸ whose members combine the multiple skills of action, singing, playing music as well as dancing. This is relevant to McGrath's definition of a play as a "show" offering various types of popular entertainment,⁹ as opposed to the bourgeois theatre's concept of it as a "drama".

McGrath's *Yobbo Nowt*, about a working-class woman's political consciousness, has its sources in Gorky's novel *The Mother* and Brecht's adaptation of it under the same title.¹⁰ Though the story of the play bears a resemblance to these two literary sources, McGrath's version is gravely dissimilar to the Gorky/ Brecht model.

Brecht's dramatization of Gorky's *The Mother*, written in 1930-1931 and performed several times in London and elsewhere in England in the early 1970s, is a play about a working-class woman, named Vlassova, who develops into a politically conscious and militant person in Russia between 1905-1917. The story had a particular attraction to McGrath, by virtue of its relevance to the British scene in the 1970s: ' We had all met on our travels many women who were going through a similar process.'¹¹

However, a major significant difference between the source and McGrath's play resides in the fact that in the political atmosphere of present day England, McGrath 'could not show Marie's learning experiences as including the vital strength of a coherent mass ... movement.'¹²

Another prime dissimilarity is that *Yobbo Nowt* is concerned with the personal and political development of its heroine, Marie, whereas Brecht's *The mother*¹³ charts the progress of the mother Vlassova from being a backward individual, who depicts her hostility to politics and her ignorance, to a mature political person, thus concentrating solely on the

woman's political development. Michelene Wandor detects an ironic and a reverse effect on the audience resulting from the destruction of the mother's femaleness in Brecht's *The Mother*: 'The mother remains a token isolated woman in a world of men, with no choice but to accept their terms. The terms of the 'rational' class struggle of men at the expense of the 'irrational' private world of women'.¹⁴

The balance between the personal and the political is achieved, however. In McGrath's *Yobbo Nowt*,¹⁵ and Red Ladder's *Strike While the Iron Is Hot*,¹⁶ later entitled *A Woman's Work Is Never Done* and toured in 1974-1976. In both plays, the ordinary wife and mother becomes a militant socialist as a consequence of her personal struggles at home regarding housework and sexual oppression. Additionally, she acquires socio-political consciousness by virtue of her employment and involvement in the social and political life outside the home, thus achieving an equal personal and political partnership with the men instead of following their model. Thus, the case of the mother in *Yobbo Nowt* and *Strike While the Iron Is Hot* is dissimilar to that of the heroine in Brecht's play.

A predominant theme in McGrath's plays is the relationship of the individual to society and, ultimately, to history.¹⁷ Politics plays a central role, too, in the work of 7:84, because of its relevance to the reality of present-day life.¹⁸

The individual's relationship to other individuals, men and women, at home and at the workplace, to the economic social structure based on class, to religious patterns, and to the political system, is the subject of *Yobbo Nowt*.

The play dramatizes a working-class woman named Marie, who embarks on a journey leading to self-discovery and the nature of the social and political system in which she lives. Her rejection of a marital relationship in which she is stifled, subjected, and repressed paves the way for an investigation into the capitalist system, which she conducts on

her own, and which leads her to political maturity and activism, thus progressing from a mother and housewife to a committed and active socialist.¹⁹ At the beginning of the play, the heroine is portrayed 'in the oppressed, passive state of many women. She is then shown in the process of self-assertion, self-realization, active participation in life, and articulate, positive militancy'²⁰. Her progress from a state of repressed domesticity to a militant socialist worker provides the action of the play itself.

In *Yobbo Nowt*, Marie, wife and mother, takes centre stage. Her process of socio-political consciousness-raising is the focus of the play, and this is dramatized stage by stage, with the aid of song, music, and story-telling. Moreover, Marie undergoes a parallel process of personal emancipation. She is the focal point of the play, which offers a portrayal of her development from a passive, docile, and repressed housewife and mother, to a worker gaining personal and economic independence as well as political maturity. In this respect, the play presents a positive statement in the portrayal of working-class women.

Structurally, *Yobbo Nowt* falls into two Acts, the first depicting Marie's personal emancipation, and the second emphasizing her politicization outside the domestic sphere, by investigating the British capitalist system.

As in *Fish in the Sea*, the songs and the story-telling are used as devices to divide each Act into short sections or scenes, thus indicating the change in location as well as the development of the action, as scenery in the usual sense is not used.

The setting of the first scene of the play is a kitchen, representing Marie's domain, the home, as well as referring to her status as a housewife, toiling all day. Marie is married to Jack, a working-class person, and has two adolescent children, Valerie and Stephen. Thus, she has the added responsibility of motherhood.

The play begins with a song referring to Marie's situation. The mood is conveyed by the verse 'And life's all grey and brown' (p.1). The Song tells Marie's story: that of a 'normal mother' married to a 'normal man' (p.1) who have two children. There is an obvious irony in the use of the word *normal* here. Mari's domestic situation is contrasted with that of her husband and children who, instead of being confined to the home, experience the liberating world outside: they go 'To work, to school, to life' (p.1), leaving her filled with a sense of void and futility experienced by "normal" working-class wives like her. She is termed 'yobbo nowt' (p.1), which gives a title to the play. So, Mari's territory, the house, contrasts with that of the other members of the family, which is the world outside.

Marie's coldness of feeling and lack of warmth in her life are symbolized by the cold tea which 'got no warmth left in it', by 'the fire [which] wouldn't light', and the bacon [which is] all froze together' (p.2). She is dissatisfied with her enforced domesticity, her role as a wife and mother, and expresses her desire to experience the world at the workplace, as a worker herself. She sees her husband as progressing from a boilerman to an electrical fitter in a plastics factory after taking night-classes, envying him his manual job. In contrast to Marie, her husband Jack is cheerful. Jack, however, it is revealed later, is involved with a teenage girl, who is his daughter's schoolgirl friend.

Thus, the first scene establishes Marie as a representative working-class mother, who undergoes a dull daily routine, the monotonous nature of which is reflected by the repetitions in the songs. It is also noticeable that Marie, the protagonist, addresses the audience directly, thus creating a relationship with them and involving them in the action taking place on stage, as is the case in the earlier *Fish in the Sea*, a trait characteristic of most of McGrath's work, especially those plays presented by 7:84 Theatre Companies for a working-class audience.

Apart from the songs being entitled, McGrath also follows the Brechtian practice in giving titles or headings to the short scenes within each Act, giving a summary of the main idea of each. In the second scene, 'Never Be the Same', Marie blames herself for her feeling of discontent with her life and her sense of lethargy. (p.3) So, she embarks on a search for the cause of lethargy, apathy, and mental exhaustion, by trying to locate an inner cause, thinking it might be due to her early experience of life as a young girl. She moves swiftly from narration to singing in her attempt to reminisce about her past.

Marie became a wife and mother at the early age of seventeen. Apparently, her married life has not been a happy one from the beginning: she was burdened with housework and rearing two young children, confined to the home, whilst her husband went out every evening. (p.4) Being innocent and naïve, she does not suspect that her husband led a double life, but assumes that 'he *could* have been out with the lads', concluding that a man has to live with a certain amount of freedom (p.4), whilst denying herself his share of freedom. She then tries to see the cause of her unhappy marriage in the birth of the second child, which added to her responsibility, but left her husband with discontent. (p.4) She feels sympathy for her husband's hard work (p.4), thus holding herself responsible for all the domestic problems arising, and looks down on herself in relation to her husband, defining her role as that of providing comfort for him, doing all the house chores, and looking after her children, i.e. in terms of her functions as a wife and mother and not as a person equal to her husband.

This is followed by a scene which provides a dramatization of the souring relationship between Marie and Jack in the past, making a transition or a flashback to the year 1961. The husband is seen drunk, brutal, and insensitive. There is a reference here, in Jack's drunkenness, to the social problem of alcoholism. McGrath later dramatized this problem in a Scottish working-class setting in his play, 'Out of Our

Heads', performed in Edinburgh in 1976. Jack's behaviour here is also seen as typical of some of the negative qualities of working-class male behaviour, in the same manner that Marie's reaction to his aggressiveness represents the unenviable aspects of working-class women's behaviour in its portrayal of women as passive, submissive, ridden with guilt for other people's mistakes, unconfident, and docile:

Jack: Get out of my way.

Marie: No, Jack, no, I'm sorry__don't go off like that.

Jack: Well shut up then.

Marie: Oh Jack__don't talk to me like that ...

Jack: Well what's the matter with you?

Marie: Come on to bed. (p.5)

Thus, she is willing to fulfil his whims of 'Adventure', 'Excitement', and 'fulfilment' (p.5), but hindered by her exhaustion from performing her daily household duties.

This dialogue is followed by a song outlining her need for love, care, gentleness, and passion, all of which are left unrequited, and met by lack of tenderness, selfishness, and misunderstanding. The song explains the absence of any positive aspects in Marie's marital life: even her personal relationship with her husband is characterized by dissatisfaction and lack of real affection or tender feelings.

Discontented with her domestic status, Marie tries to seek fulfillment outside the home, voicing her intentions to seek employment.

Her wishes are rejected by her husband, who conceives of the role of women as that of mothers in the home: 'He says it wouldn't be a home, without a mother in it.' (p.7) This is rather ironic, for it simultaneously criticizes his role of being an incompetent and irresponsible father, as well as referring to the theme of the play by foreshadowing future events: the paternal presence may, as in Jack's case, be an irrelevance in the creation of a home, as evidenced by Marie's economic independence, which results in her taking over the role of the missing father by offering

advice and guidance to her growing teenage children, especially her daughter.

An example of the actress stepping aside from her role is noticeable in Marie's attempt to create a personal contact on the human level with the audience, by asking them direct questions: 'Do you want to know what I'm going to do? (p.7), thus arousing their interest in her story, then satisfying their curiosity by providing answers to her rhetorical questions. This is a device to keep the audience's interest in the general questions awake. A similar effect is achieved by the use of humour and jokes in Marie's narration: thus, there is a notable irony in her comment on her daily routine:

I'm on my feet__must take advantage of that burst of energy ... It's really exciting. I'm going to make the beds, tidy the bathroom, Hoover the landing, dust and Hoover the stairs, Hoover the hall, flick around the front room with a duster for five minutes, polish the door-knocker, sweep the doorstep, sweep the backyard. Some days I get really carried away and change the sheets. Then I can go shopping. That's all right. There's nice people in this part of town they're friendly ... You'd think there was a friendliness competition. (p.7)

The scene shifts from Marie's domestic domain to the exterior world inhabited by her husband, where he is seen involved with a seventeen-year-old girl, his daughter's school friend, Alma, who is waiting for him under a hedge.

Alma may be said to present an extreme version of the playful Sandra in *Fish in the Sea*, both depicting a mentality which McGrath views as objectionable. Alma is the prototype of the younger generation of teenage working-class women, whose mentality is formed by glossy adolescent magazines reinforcing "female" traits. Valerie's judgement on

the negative character of Alma as well as the playwright's judgement, are intended for his audience.

The play alternates between indoor and outdoor scenes to refer to Marie's private world, the home. As opposed to the public world occupied by the rest of the family. Her sexual oppression is evident in the scene where her husband and daughter return home to find out that their dinner is still unprepared. Marie is the accused here, treated like a guilty person by both characters, for thinking instead of performing her unappreciated housework.

It is worth noting that most of McGrath's working-class young daughters convey a closer link with the father against the mother and the son, who form an opposing relationship. This may depict an Oedipal factor in McGrath's characters. In this play, however, a similar pattern of relationship is revealed between Jack and his daughter, Valerie, who, for the most part, forms an alliance with her father in opposition to that established by the mother, Marie, and her son, Stephen.

Marie reiterates her intention to seek an occupation, an idea utterly rejected by her husband, who has fixed notions on the role of women in the family. Marie sees the difference between paid employment, whose advantages are reaped by her husband, and unpaid employment like hers, i.e. her domestic duties, which are executed gratuitously. Her husband retorts: 'you get kept. And clothed. And a roof over your head. And satisfaction__seein' your kids grow up.' (p.11) However, Marie sees her motherly role as unsatisfactory and uninteresting, and seems determined, despite her husband's protestations, to earn a living and gain economic independence. Jack views her decision 'to get a job' (p.11) like him 'unnatural', and decides, on his part, to 'to get a pie in the boozier' (p.11), whereupon Marie decides to join him. He refuses, stressing that her role is to cook for her children who, she sees, are old enough to look after themselves. She warns her husband against returning to the house if he is determined to go to the pub unaccompanied. Jack seems to be brutal in

his treatment of both his wife and children. (p.15) Turned down by Marie, a new development found unpalatable to Jack, he overturns the situation to change the balance of power in his favour: 'Now, when I come back, I expect them kids fed, this place cleaned up, and you back to your senses. Or you'll get your cards', upon which Marie confirms: 'You've just had yours.'(p.11) It is evident, in this respect, that strong swear words are common amongst McGrath's working-class characters: even Valerie shows here disrespect for her mother, for turning her father out, thus indicating her lack of sympathetic understanding of her mother's repressed condition.

Jack reveals his involvement with another woman, known to the audience__Alma, and reminds Marie of the need for a husband and a father in the family. Marie, on the contrary, sees his role as subsidiary. (p.12) However, Marie's curiosity about the identity of her husband's mistress is satisfied; but to her husband's broken dignity, she finds his involvement with a young girl of his daughter's age a cause for laughter.

Unlike Valerie, Stephen seems unconcerned with his father's permanent departure. One of the major roles played by the character Stephen is that of providing comic relief. The humorous element he introduces into the play is associated with his enthusiasm about sport in all its manifestations, which gradually leads to disastrous consequences, as he appears to have a new, physically harmful accident each time he appears on the scene, resulting from the practice of some form of sport. This may also be intended as a critical commentary on the part of the playwright to invalidate the sexual repression of women, based on men's belief in their physical prowess, a belief clearly undermined here as having false premises.

The song ending the scene foreshadows Marie's difficulties in comparison with middle-class women deciding to live independently of their husbands, for Marie is in a precarious position economically. Thus, the play adds another dimension to the personal one typified by Marie's

relationship with her husband, namely the economic struggle for independence, the focus of the forthcoming scenes.

It is noticeable that 'Marie's Ballad' which opens the play, and is repeated at regular intervals throughout, gains increasing irony by referring to Marie as a 'yobbo nowt' or a 'a nobody' an interpretation emphasized by the singer's 'mock-tragic pose' (p.12) in the stage instruction.

Marie is next seen searching for employment. There is social criticism implied by the Labour Exchange man, David, presenting Marie as in a disadvantageous position, due to her gender, and the fact that she is a married woman with children. This makes reference to the exploitation faced by working-class women whose hardships are twofold, since they battle against discrimination based against their gender as well as social class.

Marie expresses her desire to be employed in a manual occupation__which McGrath himself experienced in his youth__ characteristic of working-class people, who usually manifest their dislike of intellectual professions because of their intangible or abstract "products". (p.14)

Marie is offered opportunities of work specially reserved for women which are at the bottom of the social scale and the least profitable: laundry and serving school meals, which involve cooking and washing dishes, both of which suggestions are utterly rejected by Marie, who sees in them reminders of her housework toil, and perhaps of her former self.

Marie initially refuses Social Security money, preferring to earn a lower-paid living. However, her endeavours to seek employment prove to be failures, due, in her speculation, to her age and social class: 'You're a middle-aged', though she is only thirty-three, 'working-class woman. Go away.' (p.16)

It is noticeable that Marie shows no sympathy for middle-class employers, regardless of their gender, seeing them as her enemies, as they deprive her of the occupation she urgently needs. Thus, she holds the same hostile attitude towards the Labour Exchange official, David, and the chain store's female interviewer, viewing them both as agents working for the capitalist state against the working class.

A marked development in the use of music in this play is that, occasionally, it replaces dialogue; thus, the exchanges between Marie and David are sung. This is a feature of musicals, which the play borrows.

Marie's personal attempts to find a paid occupation prove futile, but she learns, in the process, about the nature of the capitalist system, as revealed by its agent David. This lesson about the working of capitalism is intended not solely for the politically ignorant Marie, but is also addressed to the audience to raise their political consciousness. The gist of David's words is that capitalism exploits the majority for the privileges of the minority. Unemployed people are aided by Social Security to prevent them from changing the system, giving them barely enough for survival. To this explanation, Marie's reaction is that of necessary change to the system: 'it ought to be changed, I've got no money, and my kids won't have anything to eat come tomorrow night, and the rent's not been paid for a fortnight__it's not on, your capitalist system, how do you go about changing it?' (p. 16).

David's character is obviously a caricature. He is not individualized as a person, but represents his function in the plot, which is determined by his occupation. It may be relevant to note, in this connection, that the majority of McGrath's late plays portray types of human beings rather than psychologically motivated creations, in order to convey his political message to the audience, instead of allowing them to identify themselves with personalities on stage.

It may appear unrealistic or dramatically unbelievable that David gives voice to beliefs adverse to capitalism. McGrath's paramount

concern is not the credibility or realistic portrayal of the subsidiary characters, whose presence mainly serves as an educational tool in the process of politicizing the working-class audience. Hence, the direct and blunt political statements made by the agents of the capitalist state in this play, be they upper-class or middle-class.

In an unpublished article by John McGrath²¹ on the methods of characterization in plays, he use of caricature to open a dialogue with the audience concerning their real experience and the interpretation of that experience by the media, for, to him, all characters are, in the final analysis, emblems, more generalizations in the minds of the audience, without being static, but revealing their own reality, which is defined by their opposition to other characters, and without reduction in their humanity:

The very ‘deformation’ of the reality present in the caricature will indicate very clearly the *attitude* of the people who created it. And this will set in motion an argument within the mind of the person watching about the validity of the attitude, about the *truth* of the deformation... the ‘attitude’ to the character is, in a normal theatre situation, being offered not only to each individual, but also to the audience as a social entity. Their collective social validation of the attitude (or disapproval of the attitude) will be in the air, and will colour the individual’s response: it will be formed in the light of awareness of a more general social response.²²

It may be worth noting here that allegorical characters in morality plays have often been recalled in later centuries, and even in Shakespeare’s *Richard III* describing himself.

Marie decides to accept Social Security benefits, which she now considers to be charity. The pride of the unemployed and working-class

people is conveyed by her comment: 'it [charity] can't do your pride much good. My dad said he'd rather beg than ask for charity.' (p.17) The song that follows makes an obvious connection between the past and present in terms of the basically unchanged and continuous exploitation of the working class throughout history, though in varying guises.

Marie's interview with Mrs. Harrison, the Social Security officer, establishes the former's determination to maintain her personal and economic independence of her husband, seen as threatened by her financial need. There is an apparent criticism of the Welfare State, whose agents devise every means to humiliate those at the receiving end, like Marie, by interfering with people's personal lives (p.18), presenting people as greedy (p.18), and representing the epitome of bureaucracy. (p.18)

The hostile tone of the Social Security officer is interpreted by Marie as denoting animosity. Mrs. Harrison reveals her humanity (p.19), which seems to be overshadowed by the nature of her occupation. Marie, however, gradually develops from the submissive and passive housewife we met earlier in the family scenes, into an articulate, more confident, and defiant woman; thus, she protests against the lack of respect with which Mrs. Harrison treats her and people in a similar position, who are dependent on state aid: 'you'll insult me, humiliate me, pry into my laundry basket and end up giving me just enough to keep me off the streets__how's that then?' (p.19). Mrs. Harrison explains how the Welfare system works: Social Security is given to the poor to prevent their starvation and rage reaching such a degree as to plan the overthrow of the system.

In an earlier scene, Stephen dislocates his shoulder. At this point of the action, he appears with a black eye, thus providing a moment of humour for the audience. Marie's family scenes with her children indicate a continuation between her personal life as a mother of two adolescent

children and her economic and political struggles outside the domestic sphere.

The elder sister Valerie is manifestly immature and lacks an understanding of the overall domestic situation. She over-reacts to the economic crisis in the family, whines about the lack of food, and despaired, summarizing the situation in gloomy terms: 'We're finished. Bankrupt. Begging for charity.' (p.20) Stephen, on the other hand, resorts to stealing bread from school, a revelation which Marie finds saddening. Valerie holds her mother responsible for the absence of her father from the family scene, to which she attributes their declining fortunes. Marie, however, has an optimistic outlook, finding her personal independence and political development challenging and increasingly rewarding:

If your dad [c]ame back through the door right now__
I wouldn't want him. I wouldn't want to go back to
four walls and a dishcloth. There's a big world out
there, love, I want to be part of it. I want to see
what's wrong with it, and what's right with it, and
I'm finding out already. (p.21)

So, Marie looks back with satisfaction on her recently gained personal liberation from her brutal, insensitive, and disloyal husband, and tries to build a new life with her children, without dependence on men for emotional or economic support. She also finds the search for the essence of capitalism an intriguing and enlightening process. At this point, she begins to educate her children in the political sphere by explaining to them, and to the working-class audience, that Social Security and unemployment benefits are not charity, but given to the needy in order not to meddle with the basic structure of the system.

Marie's husband leaves on a merchant navy ship bound for the Pacific for two years. Valerie is attached to her father, but because of his neglect of his paternal role, she voices her determination to oppose his former wishes by seeking employment instead of pursuing her higher

studies at a university. Marie establishes her authority over the children by insisting that they must complete their school education. Moreover, she is seen as sharing the housework with son Stephen, a factor enabling her to educate the male audience about male repression. In contrast with this scene recording the growth of Marie's personality, the following scene features her husband's remorse for his past deeds by deserting his wife and children: 'You were right, I've broke-en every rule' (p.22), he addresses the audience, thus passing a moral judgement on himself, in the same fashion that his daughter judges her friend Alma, with whom he was involved, in a previous scene.

In her efforts to relieve the financial crisis confronting the family, Valerie seeks employment from Seymour, the prototype of the young capitalist as perceived by McGrath, described as 'spoilt, affected' (p.23), apparently playful, and interested in taking advantage of Valerie. Seymour, presented in negative terms, is the son of a capitalist owning a firm, for which Valerie hopes to work. She outline her upwardly-mobile mentality. (p.24)

Marie's personal emancipation does not conflict with her maternal concerns regarding the welfare of her daughter Valerie (whose consistent absence from the home is a source of worry for her) and the well-being of her younger son Stephen, who appears with a broken arm, as a result of a faulty pole-vault exercise. However, she comments on her strong relationship with the latter, finding him 'a real comfort' (p.25).

Marie receives employment in an electronics firm, where she will be trained for two months, after which period she will be on piece-work. She indicates her political naively in her interview with Mr Pugh, the assistant personnel manager, as she affirms his judgement: 'You'll work till you're dropping and cause no trouble' (p.26), which is ironically proved untrue by the sequence of events.

The scene shifts to a domestic one, where Valerie reveals the nature of her occupation in promotion, where she will be dressed as a

rabbit, attracting clients to join a new social club associated with the media, as represented by 'Radio Valium' (p.28), indicating McGrath's critical view of the hypnotic role played by the media in a capitalist society. Unlike her gradually progressive mother, Valerie's choice of this type of employment is seen by the playwright as enforcing women's stereotypical image by alluding to their sexual exploitation.

Stephen appears with a broken leg, providing a humorous element in the play. He joins his mother's and sister's celebration on the occasion of their acquiring employment, and when he expresses his view that he, as 'the man of the house...should be supporting [them]' his mother protests: 'Well, you can forget that idea, just for a start, we've had a man of the house.' (p.28) This is a clear indication that the balance of power in the household is overturned, with the women playing a more dominant role, in contrast with the situation in the early scenes, where the husband holds the reins of power. The song ending the Act foreshadows Marie's future efforts to 'shake that town' and 'turn it upside down' (p.29), by embarking on her 'hobby' to investigate the capitalist system. It is the same song that begins the first Act, thus giving it a whole circular entity, but with added comic implications embodied in 'yobbo nowt' (p.29).

The first section of Act II of *Yobbo Nowt*, introduces us to two more working-class women, Josey and Frances, factory workers at Marie's workplace. It is noticeable that there is a great gap between employer and employed, indicated by Josey's and Frances' use of the respectful term of address 'Mr Pugh', and the latter's reference to them by the intimidating 'girls' and 'these two' (p.31) when introducing Marie to them.

Marie's colleagues alert her to the exploitation facing all the factory workers. Marie is to be paid low wages for two months' training period, whereas the actual training requires only ten minutes to complete; thus, she will be exploited economically by being paid less than the

average worker for performing the same task. Most women in her position, i.e. newcomers, are expelled after the official training period. If she survives, then she will join Josey, Frances and all the female work force by moving to piece-work, thus continuing the chain of exploitation by her employers by depriving them of 'a guaranteed wage and bonus system' (p.32). Marie faces Mr. Pugh, asking to alter her agreement, a request found objectionable by him. Unlike the other two women workers, Marie intends to change the status quo. (p.33)

The revelations made by Josey and Frances help further in politicizing Marie, who announces her intention to launch an investigation into the capitalist system, which 'need[s] scrapping' (p.33), as a consequence of her realization that she is its victim. (p.33) Thus, Marie plans to 'transform things' (p.33). Her political enthusiasm is in sharp contrast to her colleagues' dreams about 'fellers that are big and strong', who turn out to be 'vain', 'pretty thick', and 'mental' instead of being 'gentle' (p.33). Here is an indication of a critical comment passed on working-class men as lacking in sensitivity and gentle manners, as typified by Marie's husband, Jack. Josey's and Frances's negative attitudes to men are also established here, as in the opening song of the scene.

Frances is the shop-steward and hopes to start a union shop to protect the workers from being exploited by the training scheme and piece-work practice. Marie, however, is still not entirely knowledgeable in political matters, conveying a view of trade unions usually presented by the media, as being responsible for the economic crisis of the country, and ruled by a group of 'extremists' (p.34).

Potshot is a university student, who works in the factory during the holidays. He is politically conscious and well-versed in the socialist theory, playing a role similar to that of Yorry in *Fish in the Sea*, by educating Marie and, indirectly, the audience, in political theory. Marie expresses her willingness to learn, unlike Josey and Frances, who harass

Potshot (pp.34,35). The gist of Potshot's long speech, or lecture, in response to Marie's query whether she should join the trade union, is that the trade unions are the only organizations formed to defend the interests of the workers and the sole 'weapon to overthrow the entire capitalist system' (p.35). This is a recurrent theme in most of McGrath's work, especially highlighted by his university-educated men, as evidenced by Jimmy in *Random Happenings*, Yorry in *Fish in the Sea*, and Potshot in *Yobbo Nowt*.

Marie's growing articulateness and activism at the workplace do not blur her maternal instincts, especially manifested in her concern over Valerie's work and involvement with the 'right marry clown' (p.36) Seymour, a view of him shared by Stephen. She is in control of the household, where her sports-fanatic son is made to participate in the house duties by laying the table and cooking.

Marie's character contrasts with that of her daughter, who earns her living by working as 'a sugar-plum fairy to titillate men's fantasies' (p.39), thus depicting her lack of political consciousness.

Marie develops her 'hobby' of investigating how the capitalist system works. For this purpose, she contacts Lady Spike, wife of Sir Jules Spike, chairman and managing director of the factory in which she works. Marie betrays an apparent scene of humour; in response to Lady Spike's suggestion to go on a package holiday to the Costa Brava, she says: 'The Costa Brava might be cheap; it's the Costa Living I can't afford.' (p.43) However, Lady Spike, like the other figures Marie contacts to explain the capitalist system, bears a name which reveals the true nature of the character, as is the case in Ben Jonson's²³ and Restoration comedies. These capitalist figures also affirm their exploitation of Marie and the working class. Thus, Lady Spike: '[M]y husband has to make millions and be ruthless and drive you and your kind into misery' (p.44).

Mr. Cleghorn, Stephen's history teacher and Labour candidate, represents another establishment character seen as collaborating with the

system. The creation of this character provides McGrath with an opportunity to level an attack on the left and the reformist policies of the Labour Party, which keep the basic capitalist structure of the country intact. When asked why the people do not force the Party to change, Cleghorn comments on the apathy and confusion enhanced by the media.(p.47)

Marie criticizes the press baron, Lord Lever broom, by contacting his assistant, Miss Williams, who is symbolically chained to her desk as an indication of her slavery and lack of freedom, thus undermining the Free Press notion. Marie's criticism focuses on the gradual accumulation of untruths manufactured by the press, which creates a climate of political apathy and hostility among the working class towards their representative trade unions. Like the other agents of capitalism, Miss Williams reveals the true nature of the media to Marie and the audience.(p.49)

The character of the curate, Chris Plum, conveys McGrath's critical view of the role of the Church. Plum adds to the comic dimension in the play. He is a caricature and a contradictory character. (pp.50,51,52)

Marie's quest about capitalism, leading to her political maturity, coincides with her personal growth as a mother of teenage children undergoing a critical age. Marie summarizes the outcome of her quest and involves the audience in it, by urging them to take action. (p.54)

George, the union representative, is presented as sexist__Marie protests on seeing his behaviour with Josey and Frances (p.56) and a compromiser with the factory management. Marie defies his inaction and she plans to organize a strike and occupy the factory with the women workers until their demands of having their wages increased, bonuses reviewed, and piece-work removed, are fully met. It is the working-class woman Marie who confronts her male union representative by pointing out his inadequacies and collaboration with the system. George, feeling defenceless, sees her and other women's activism as a threat to his position in the movement and to his male chauvinism. (p.57)

Marie recognizes that her 'one-woman uprising' (p.58) may be ineffectual in the long term, and expresses the need to join an organization working on behalf of the British working class. For this purpose, she asks Potshot for advice. He charts the different forms of socialism and socialist organizations, criticizing some, whilst asserting her need to 'choose, and join, and work, or you will remain confused and apathetic' (p.58). Marie decides to call all the workers to a meeting, including the men, thus showing her class solidarity.

Marie's husband's return is not welcomed by his son Stephen, in contrast with Valerie's reaction. It is obvious that Jack has not changed: when Stephen announces that the meal he has cooked is ready, his father comments: 'Soon get this place in order' (p.61); and, when rejected by Marie, he protests: 'But I have nowhere to say. No one to cook my food, look after me.' (p.61) Unlike Valerie, Stephen asks his father to leave: 'Go away and come back when you're a human being.' (p.61) It is an opinion shared by Marie, who finds his return unacceptable at present: 'It's just__things have changed__attitudes, ways of looking at things....there might come a time when I'm prepared to take you on. I hope there will. But just now__I can't.' (p.61) He recognizes the transformation from 'the girl I married' to 'a hard, bitter, unnatural__I almost said woman', which Marie confirms: 'Come back when you're prepared to find out who I am now. Not before.' (p.62)

Valerie announces her readiness to learn from her mother's experience and listen to her advice, thus indicating a notable shift in character.

The theme song ends the play, inconclusively, like *Fish in the Sea* and the majority of McGrath's plays, by inviting the audience to provide an end for the story. It is to be noted that the theme song 'Marie's Ballad', appearing at the beginning and end of Act I, and at the end of the play, has variations, and is sung at different stages in Marie's development from a passive, repressed person at the beginning of the

play, to an articulate, emancipated woman ready to participate in the outside world and take her place as a factory worker at the end of Act I, to a person, who is both personally and politically mature and shows signs of ability to lead the workers to a better future at the end of Act II. Hence, the ironic implication of the phrase 'yobbo nowt' in the second and third occurrence of the song, and, ultimately, in the title of the play.

In *Little Red Hen* (1975) and *Yobbo Nowt*, McGrath combines individual characterization with collective consciousness, i.e. he emphasizes the personality of the working-class woman as leader in her attempt to overthrow the capitalist system and blends it with his presentation of the working class as a community out of which political consciousness arises²⁴. In both plays, the working-class heroine undergoes a process of consciousness-raising and political education, and is taken as a model of her class and an example of an alternative working-class culture, representing her class consciousness and attacking middle-class ideology²⁵.

Yobbo Nowt is an account of the growing authority of the proletariat, who 'have...started on their long journey from being the objects of history to becoming its subjects'²⁶. The play aims to educate, politicize, raise the consciousness of the working-class, and make them aware of the dangers of capitalism. Like the earlier *Fish in the Sea*, it shows the need to diverge from the reformist and compromising policies of the Labour Party²⁷, and create a mass movement²⁸ led by the working class. As McGrath states: 'The most urgent need now is for a stronger, more mature, working-class structured society.... This makes me want to work the way I'm working, with the people, with and for them'²⁹.

In *Fish in the Sea* and *Yobbo Nowt*, most working-class characters are criticized, but presented, despite their foibles, with humanity and passion:

[T]he characters he [McGrath] presents are so honestly described and he possesses such an emotional

interest in their welfare that it is easy to forgive the technical failings and his political and Liverpoolian obsessions. His writing has passion.³⁰

Moreover, the politicization process of the masses is presented as a facet of human experience, instead of being confined to the realm of vapid propaganda³¹. *Yobbo Nowt* 'has less overt political content' than *Fish in the Sea* and is 'aimed at making increased contact with a wider base'³².

Micheline Wandor criticizes what she sees as the limitations of *Yobbo Nowt*:

Through her hobby she [Marie] finds out all about the State, class exploitation, Trade unionism, but noting about sexism, feminism or sexuality....Her journey to self-determination includes tussling through her relationship with her children....Marie doesn't join anything, nor does she produce a correct class line__but she still acts as a tabula rasa on which can be inscribed lessons about politics, as defined by men. The play is full of vigour and wit __McGrath acknowledges the 'personal' insofar as Marie decides to live independently without her husband__but in the didactic scenes, where Marie is 'learning' about politics, sexual oppression is subsumed under a pre-existing definition of class exploitation, rather than bringing its own analysis with it to add to the traditional class analysis.³³

This seems to me less than fair to McGrath. It may appear that Marie's self-discovery and consciousness-raising process is subsidiary to her political conversion, on the basis that the scenes involving her confrontations with her husband are less in number__due to his two-year absence, on board a merchant navy ship, away from home__than the public scenes in which she gradually develop politically. But, I tend to

regard the dramatization of her personal development in her private world, i.e. the home, as being parallel to that of her political maturity in the struggle against capitalism. The domestic scenes constitute nearly half the play, and Marie tries to fight sexism in the home as well as at the workplace.

Marie's feminism and fight against sexism and for women's equality with men are carried out both in the domestic sphere and the public world, concerns which are more dramatized instead of, as is the case of feminist drama by women, being reported and explicitly stated.

There is a notable change and ambivalence in Marie's position in response to Jack's return. She offers him the alternative of changing his character, especially his stereotypical image of women, in order to be rendered acceptable amidst the family. Even Valerie reflects this ambivalent attitude by rejecting her initial decision of accompanying her father as the turns, rather abruptly, to her mother for guidance, despite the fact that throughout the play she manifests a closer relationship with her father than with her mother³⁴.

Unlike her static husband, Marie is a developing, highly-individualized character, who progresses personally and socio-politically. Her change in character is seen to influence those surrounding her in the domestic sphere__she successfully teaches her son equality between the sexes on all levels, starting with housework; she also, thought indirectly, points the way for her daughter to abandon her stereotypical thoughts, which the latter shows her willingness to give up.

Though Marie is an individualized character, social and political forces are at play in the formation of her consciousness, factors which McGrath sees as paramount in his characterization:

The dramatist is concerned with consciousness as something related to ongoing historical events and as something that comes and goes in relation to many conjectures³⁵.

To conclude, the working-class heroine Marie is at centre stage, dominating the action throughout its duration. The play charts her development, individually and politically. Her progression leads to a dialectical quest of the essence of capitalism—one of McGrath's recurrent themes—which provides her with the experience and political maturity to assume a position of leadership in organizing the working class³⁶. Her political struggle, however, is not seen as conflicting with, but enriching her personality as a woman, who attains personal freedom and gains economic independence, as well as a responsible mother not devoid of maternal instincts. In fact, it is her personal liberation which progressively leads to her political and social awareness. Marie shares many similarities with Mary of *Fish in the Sea*—both are working-class women who attain individual, economic, and political independence, with the major difference that Marie will *lead*, instead of merely joining or following (as is the case with Mary), the political liberation of her class.

Notes

- 1- John McGrath, 'Appendix', in *A Good Night Out__Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form*, London: Eyre Methuen, 1981, p.124.
- 2- This title is mentioned by Mary Maconochie, in John McGrath's *Fish in the Sea*, London: Pluto, 1977, p.40, in her critical comment on the sexual oppression of women, especially housewives, by men.
- 3- Mentioned in Jack's song, in John McGrath, *Yobbo Nowt*, London: Pluto, 1978, p.22. All subsequent references to the text are from this edition.
- 4- The year is stated by Marie, in *ibid.*, p.10.
- 5- See McGrath, 'Preface', in *Yobbo Nowt*.
- 6- *Ibid.* Cf. McGrath, 'Appendix', p.123, where he states that *Yobbo Nowt* is 'a "musical comedy".'
- 7- McGrath, 'Preface', in *Yobbo Nowt*.
- 8- See Michael Anderson, 'Edinburgh 72', *Play and Players*, Vol. 20, No.2, November 1972, p.51. See also, Jonathan Hammond, 'Fringe', *Play and Players*, Vol. 20, No.2, 1972, p.62.
- 9- See Michael Billington, 'The Wrath of John McGrath', an interview with John McGrath, *The Guardian*, 1 April 1986, p.12, where McGrath states: 'I've always believed passionately... that you can do complex issues in a popular form...I've never belived in simple-minded messages and I agree that people want to be pushed much harder than they are in the average agitprop show'.
- 10- See McGrath, 'Preface', in *Yobbo Nowt*.
- 11- *Ibid.*
- 12- *Ibid.*
- 13- On this play, see Michelence Wandor, *Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics*, London: Methuen, 1981, pp. 79-80.
- 14- *Ibid.*

- 15- Cf. *ibid.*, p.83.
- 16- See *ibid.*, p.80.
- 17- See Paul Lawley, 'John McGrath', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, edited by James Vinson, London: Macmillan, 3rd edn, 1982, p.537.
- 18- '7:84 Theatre Company England's Programme of Claire Luckham's *Trafford Tanzi*', unpagued.
- 19- See, on this point, McGrath, 'Appendix', pp. 123-124; Catherine Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968*, London: Eyre Methuen, 1980, p.124; and Sandy Craig, 'Unmasking the Lie: Political Theatre', in *Dreams and Deconstructions*, edited by Sandy Craig, Amber Lane Press, 1980, p. 46.
- 20- John McGrath, 'Letter to *Time Out*', *Time Out*, 29 April 1977, p.3.
- 21- John McGrath, 'Some Uses of Caricature', an unpublished article made available to me by kind permission of the author.
- 22- *Ibid.*, p.9.
- 23- John McGrath's 'All the Fun of the Fair', performed at the Half Moon, London, in April 1986, borrows structurally from Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*.
- 24- See Christian W. Thomsen, 'Three Socialist Playwrights: John McGrath, Caryl Churchill, Trevor Griffith's', in *Contemporary English Drama*, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies: 19, London: Edward Arnold, 1981, p. 158.
- 25- See *Ibid.*; and C.W.E. Bigsby, 'The Politics of Anxiety: Contemporary Socialist Theatre in England', *Modern Drama*, Vol. XXIV, No.4, December 1981, p.396.
- 26- Günther Klotz, 'Alternatives in Recent British Drama', *Zeitschrift für Anglistik and Amerikanistik*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 1977, p. 154.
- 27- See Peter Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle*, London: pitman, 1975, p.66.
- 28- See McGrath, 'Preface', in *Yobbo Nowt*.

- 29- Anne McFerran, '7:84 Six Years On', an interview with John McGrath, *Time Out*, No.367, 8-14 April 1977, p.13. In 'Letter to *Time Out*,' *Time Out*, 29 April 1977, p.3, John McGrath comments on this interview: 'I ... was appalled when I read it. It in no way represents the true position of either 7:84 company, nor does it express my own considered views. I hereby renounce it as a whole and in many details.'
- 30- Eric Shorter, 'Regions', *Drama*, No. 108, Spring 1973, p. 36 See on this point, Ronald Hayman, *British Theatre Since 1955: A Reassessment*, Oxford University Press, 1979, p.92.
- 31- See Anderson, 'Ebinburgh 72', p.51.
- 32- Ann McFerran, Steve Peak, and Mandy Merck, 'Agitprop Theatre', *The Leveller*, February 1976, p.23.
- 33- Wandor, *Understudies*, p.80.
- 34- This is similar to the end of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, although it is the wife who leaves the home in Ibsen's play.
- 35- John McGrath, 'Power to the Imagination', *Scottish International*, October 1971, p.15.