

## **“A BIT OF BUSINESS”: NEW DEPARTURES IN ECONOMICS AND THEATRE IN SEAN O’CASEY’S *TIME TO GO* (1951)**

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Theatrical criticism of Sean O’Casey’s work continues to focus on the so-called “Dublin Trilogy”. But O’Casey wrote twenty-six other plays, including eight one-act dramas, which have received virtually no critical attention at all. Yet these one-act plays offer two areas of interest for O’Casey criticism. First, they indicate O’Casey’s sharp analysis of contemporary politics, and, secondly (and of particular interest to O’Casey scholars), they offer early insights into key ideas which are often developed at greater length in his subsequent three-act plays.

*Time to Go*,<sup>1</sup> his one-act play from 1951, for example, offers an analytical commentary on the arrival of a potentially new approach to the system of economic exchange and the departure of the tired business practices of a capitalist economy. Such a rethink of the local approach to trade is timely today, especially in the light of the global repercussions upon trade as a consequence of excess profit and greed in corporate banking systems: the ‘Occupy’ movement would surely be interested in this O’Casey work. In 1951, it was prescient indeed, but its theatrical unpopularity suggests that both in form and theme the concerns were too innovative to appeal to a post-war audience. This is partly because of the way O’Casey’s later work has been consistently misunderstood by his critics, and – partly as a result of this critical misunderstanding – because contemporary audiences did not know how to receive and interpret O’Casey’s original approach to theatre. Many critics and audiences alike thought O’Casey was still trying, and failing badly, to write realist drama.

*Time to Go* considers the consequence of a new kind of approach to economic exchange at an individual, national, and international level. The play looks beyond the straightforward dramatic presentation of the impact of daily economic hardship upon individuals to consider the origin of the economic system that produces such inequality and imbalance nationally. *Time to Go* examines the ideology behind Western capitalism theatrically, questioning the cultural reach of a system driven by the markets, underwritten by the language of accountancy and the tyranny of the bottom line. Using satire and myth, symbolism and theatrical experimentation, *Time to Go* suggests that the false logic of the market economy is destructive, not developmental, and offers an outright rejection of the business model of exchange for profit. The play demonstrates concern about the moral creep of economic ideology in a way which is

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1 *Time to Go* was written in 1949, largely in manuscript by December and completed by spring 1950. The play remained unperformed, but was published in 1951, when it was printed in Volume 4 of the Macmillan series of O’Casey’s *Collected Plays*.

far ahead of its time. In the reconsideration of the “medieval theory of the just price,” as Bernice Schrank sees it, the play is linked both to on-going socialist economic policies in both England and Ireland: “In the nineteen thirties and nineteen forties, some left-wing English scholars viewed the theory of the just price as a form of primitive socialism not too different from the social changes then being introduced by the British Labour Party” (Schrank 236). For Schrank the play is a response to De Valera’s vision of the rural idyll of Ireland: “*Time to Go* is O’Casey’s critique of De Valera’s policies and pieties: O’Casey’s Ireland is a parochial backwater, mean-spirited, narrow-minded, money-grubbing and self-defeating” (235). De Valera’s vision of Ireland, typified in his famous 1943 St Patrick’s Day address, sets the nation in opposition to commercial, urban England. But O’Casey’s play suggests that Ireland does not escape the capitalist ideology of profit and exchange as easily. O’Casey’s exploration of the reach of the damage of economic ideology is to point to the way this approach has begun to permeate interaction between individuals in their personal relationships and to sour social connections between communities and nations.

### Economic Setting

The setting of *Time to Go* does not immediately suggest a critique of international economic policy, since it is a fantasy set in a rural rather than an urban environment outside Dublin.<sup>2</sup> But arrivals and departures are used in this play to mark the appearance of a kind of speaking moral conscience, leading the audience to the consideration of an approach to economic policy, which, if adopted, would have repercussions upon the ethics of international trade.

Two characters, the Widda Machree and Kelly, return to a small town the day after the local annual Fair, trying to find one another. As they search they meet some of the town’s occupants, who we see represent the economy of the town at a local level – Flagonson, the innkeeper, and Farrell, owner of the General Store, as well as a group of businessmen and farmers going about their usual trade. Flagonson and Farrell’s dialogue opens the play – they discuss the loss of the town’s energy and dynamism now that the Fair is over. The event was their annual opportunity to attract crowds and make significant profit. This possibility of net gain over, their tone is elegiac. As prominent tradesmen both would have a significant responsibility toward the community and, instead of a conversation celebrating the social value of the Fair for communal well-being and as a means of enhancing social contact between people of

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2 It may seem odd that O’Casey did not allude to George Russell’s (AE) comments on rural economies which would show some sympathy with O’Casey’s theme in this play. However, despite AE’s early amicable support for Jim Larkin’s Women and Children’s Relief Fund during the 1913 Lockout (which O’Casey set up and ran), O’Casey rapidly turned against AE when he initially refused to publish the correspondence with Yeats over *The Silver Tassie* (AE agreed with Yeats’s assessment of the play at first). O’Casey probably satirised AE’s metaphysical beliefs via the character of Bentham in *The Plough and the Stars*; see Murray 204-205.

the town, the men comment only on economic loss and decay: for them, the loss of the potential for profit has outweighed any other effects of the Fair on the community. Flagonson comments, for example, that the flags put out for the Fair are now “woebegone,” and Farrell bemoans: “[...] with [...] the shoutin’ of buyin’ and the sellin’ [...] gone with th’ crowd [...] it’s a bit lonely like” (O’Casey, *Time to Go* 262).

This first verbal exchange of the play is thus about the economic loss brought by the Fair, rather than the social significance or value of the event. The men are more interested in whether the minimum effort they made to decorate their businesses – “a *tiny string*” (262) of bunting hangs over the door of each – was worth their economic outlay, rather than the aesthetic impact of the decorations. Farrell is so focused on the subject of profit that he dismisses the flags and decorations outside Flagonson’s tavern as a “waste of time; waste of money” (262) and argues that his own zero expenditure on decoration has achieved just as good a financial result. The men are not concerned with the creation of a genuinely celebratory ethos through the decoration of their premises and thus potentially a good profit from happy customers, but only with its impact on their profit margin.

This opening one-upmanship of the two businessmen raises a series of questions for the audience about the value of money in aesthetic terms, questions that economists such as Michael Sandel, in his recent book *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*, continue to raise as pertinent to the markets today. What is it that money can and does buy? What function and value does money have in a community? And perhaps the most important consideration – what is the impact of money on the way men and women think about themselves and their society? As Sandel comments:

Economists often assume that markets are inert and do not affect the goods they exchange. But this is untrue. Markets leave their mark. Sometimes market values crowd out nonmarket values worth caring about.<sup>3</sup>

Sandel is alert to the gradual erosion of community values and social responsibility effected by the increasing reliance on capitalist models of exchange and thought. The ‘goods’ are not only material here, but psychological. If, as Sandel claims, “markets leave their mark,” we will all be affected by the way we do business. Perhaps unconsciously at first, we develop an attitude towards trading practice which can encourage a monetary outlook on every aspect of our existence. O’Casey, however, is not primarily concerned to engage in a strictly economic discussion with contempora-

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3 Sandel, Introduction to *What Money Can't Buy*. See also Chapter 1, where Sandel considers the problematic nature of some market practices, for example, paying children to read. Sandel questions whether this creates the ‘right’ attitude to education for the future generation or whether we are presenting education as another commodity. Similarly Sandel considers the American practice of “scalping” – where the low-paid or homeless are paid to queue for free theatre tickets for those who are monetarily rich but time-poor – and asks whether this is a sensible use of market economics, since some members of society can and do put a higher price on their time. Sandel also looks at the ethically fraught implications of the ‘market’ in body parts: “Consider kidneys,” as he puts it; see Chapter 3.

ry intellectuals on such questions, but to raise the issue theatrically as a means of encouraging wider critical debate about the impact of economic practice on the political, social, and psychological outlook of a nation-state.

O'Casey's play shows just how pernicious a change in our philosophical approach to economics can be for a local community and leaves the audience to make the link between this kind of local attitude and similar approaches towards the national and international economic markets. Farrell is happy, for example, to display his own decorations because "they cost me nothin'." As the stage directions point out, Farrell "*gloatingly*" (263) states that the Papal flag now displayed above his shop was stolen from a child – the goodwill the decoration brings is an unequal bargain, because it is achieved even without the balance of spending money to attain it. Because Farrell's only nod towards decoration afforded him no financial outlay, he can enjoy it all the more – only potential gain at no cost gives him real pleasure. And it is the narrowness of the relation between decorative display and money exchange that strips bare the economic relations at play here. It is this mean enjoyment of something for nothing that suggests a moral deficiency – arguably it is an ideological disposition that the play presents as morally pernicious and destructive, and it demonstrates at a very early stage the kind of spiteful, individualist, and self-serving attitude towards money that Sandel remains anxious about in attitudes towards the markets today. O'Casey was already suggesting in the 1950s that similar attitudes prevailed in Ireland and, internationally, wherever capitalism took hold of the economy.

### Economics Through Myth

It is at this point of mean-spiritedness in the play, as if in mythical<sup>4</sup> response to the realities of such iniquitous trading practices, that the Widda Machree first arrives at the Tavern seeking Kelly. The audience listens to her reason for returning to the town: she announces that she is compelled to travel the road like a marooned soul "because of a sin, gentlemen; an ugly, mortal sin an' a mean one too [...] I'm but a wandherin' cloud o' conscience" (269). This female Ancient Mariner confesses to Flagonson and Farrell that her sin is one of economics – her "thransaction" with Kelly for the sale of her cow is the source of her error: "I thought I could rise above the temptation but I sank below it" (269). This temptation is another unequal bargain, paying Kelly too little for the animal that was worth far more.

The Widda characterises her fall from grace in sacred terms as a moral and a mortal sin. She presents her temptation into financial gain for profit in the same linguistic terms as a sexual temptation in moral terms, linking capitalism to a kind of moral pro-

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4 I am using 'mythical' both in the sense of O'Casey's re-cycling of some aspects of an Irish myth in the creation of Kelly (a version of the Celtic God Manannán mac Lir; see Murray 329) and as the creation of characters with a sense of the hyper-real in both the Widda and Kelly.

stitution. Yet though the Widda is repentant, she remains 'matter of fact' about her sin "yous musta shot a gay lot o' rogueries into th' world in your time" (270). She addresses the businessmen about her moment of madness as if she was talking to men who would understand, since it must be within Flagonson's and Farrell's usual daily economic business to choose such a betrayal of the self.

As the Widda watches a couple leave Flagonson's Tavern complaining of "daylight robbery" (271) for their meal, O'Casey structures a very specific moment of "short silence" (272), which functions as a silent tableau to draw the attention of the audience to such daily inequities. The silence is golden in the most satiric way, for the audience does hear one sound during this moment of quiet, which O'Casey has specifically chosen for its ironic potential. The stage directions make clear: "During the silence the sound of coins jingling together is heard coming from the Tavern and the General Stores" (272). This pseudo stage silence, punctuated only by the chime of the coins, allows the audience a moment's pause to reflect on what they have seen and heard. Stopping the action like this is a particularly important dramatic decision in a one-act play. The pause not only interrupts the fast tempo of a one-act piece (and would be recognisable today as a moment of reflection and irony in contemporary physical theatre or a postmodern dance show), but is unusual in a piece which, until this moment, might have been considered a traditionally realist play. The moment offers a change of style for the audience and jars them into a specific moment of attention and focus – as if a large red arrow had descended and was moving up and down to point to a moment of significant meaning in the work. This sound-stop also provides a proleptic aural link to the repeated sound of coins jangling later in the play, when the audience are invited to think back to this incident of "daylight robbery" and reflect upon other kinds of economic robbery being practised in wider national and international economic contexts as well. O'Casey's approach is one we might now associate most strongly with Brecht, but O'Casey's style is more subtle and arguably more theatrical.

After being pursued by the local police the Widda and Kelly do meet again and their reunion is heartfelt and sincere. Though this might appear to offer a return to verisimilitude, their language of communication remains at a heightened level and their exchanges of dialogue thus retain the link with the complex moment of spiritual reflection just created for the audience. A complex exchange then inflects the business principle of profit and expansion they promote. The play suggests that the moral gains from their approach to business transactions will bring them more than either could begin to comprehend. The Widda and Kelly are depicted as united through a spiritual union, a connection which is beyond the confines of ordinary human relationships and which, it seems, connects them on a pseudo-divine level. As the Widda sees Kelly she exclaims, "My brother!," while Kelly replies in kind, "My sister!" Their conversation then develops beyond the principle of exchange for profit. Kelly, significantly, offers the Widda a purse, with this request: "Take all I kept from you; and take th' cow back, too, for I gave less than I should when I was buying" (288).

The Widda echoes his physical gesture and his replies, also offering him a purse in return, with the comment: "Take back all you gave, an' keep th' cow, for I asked more than I should when I was sellin'" (288). As the stage directions instruct, they utter the word "Forgive!" together and as "*They enter each other's arms*" they comment to one another, "More than a sister! /More than a brother!" (288). As they have entered into non-selfish economic exchange, they have enhanced the physical and spiritual connection between themselves. Their closeness cannot be approximated in meaningful words, so they simply have to add expansions to conventional terms of sibling relationships. Capitalism, it seems, while it states its terms, does not give us the linguistic terms to undermine its own existence. Their 'profit' here is to be a greater than human relationship; their loss is only of financial gain.

But this new kind of spiritual connection is seen as unable to be tolerated by the state. As soon as the Widda and Kelly have plighted their new moral economic troth in this way, the forces of the state – here represented by the police – arrive to physically remove them both from the town. As the police try to arrest them, the Widda and Kelly decide of their own accord that it is time to depart. They can see that the police, as representatives of the state, are working to collude in the maintenance of the capitalist system. The reviewer in *The Daily Worker*, writing about the only known production of *Time to Go* in 1953, also places the police on the side of the capitalists:

[...] they must capture and silence the people to whom money means nothing and less than nothing: the people who will ask too little for the goods they have to sell and who refuse to pay too much for the goods they buy [...] The man and woman who represent this un-commercial ideal are, indeed, captured and taken away in handcuffs. (Donald)

The play shows how the forces of the state will always work in such ways as to maintain the capitalist approach as one which is reasonable and right, while those who question and undermine the economic system of exchange must be removed, since they pose a danger to the way that society can continue to operate.

The closing song of the Widda and Kelly, in which they share two lines each, helps to remove them from the realm of the human and even supernatural to an idealised place not yet recognised by human conscience, in which their new approach of non-competitive, non-profit-seeking exchange of goods and services will thrive and bring them an intense human connection, combining sibling and romantic love. As *The Daily Worker* review concludes, the spirit of defiance in the play is strong:

But the end is joyous for the heretics escape. And across the persistent noise of jingling gold comes the free call of the men and women who can never be silenced; the men and women to whom honour and truth and the joy of life are the real standards. (Donald)

The escape of the Widda and Kelly cannot be explained in rational terms. Their escape is a spiritual one of overcoming the limitations of the ideology that governs the society they have visited and decided to leave. As the Widda and Kelly depart, they begin to sing – always a clue in O'Casey for a moment of transmutation or connection with a world other than the real. They say goodbye to one another first as brother

and sister and then as lovers – “fair sweetheart” and “my love” (289) – emphasising that their spiritual connection can now best be described as a combination of sibling and beloved. Their shared refrain shows that they are completely removed from the specifics of the normal human constraints on co-operation and detaches them from all divisiveness and human alienation that the business ethic has caused.

*Time to Go* thus offers not only a comment on De Valera's politics of conservative isolationism (Schrank 236), but also a critique of the specific capitalist economic principles of profit, growth, and development. The play's alternative to the capitalist ethic posits a model of a culture of exchange, or even “degrowth,” that would not be out of place in the work of political philosophers such as Serge Latouche or André Gorz. As Latouche points out:

[...] degrowth can only mean the contraction of accumulation, capitalism, exploitation and predation. The point is not just to slow accumulation down but to challenge the process of accumulation itself so as to reverse the destructive process. (Latouche 90)

*Time to Go* presents just such a “challenge” to capitalist economics, not as a tract of propaganda or a peroration in the style of *Das Kapital*, but as a moment of theatrical fantasy. The vision of an economic exchange between the Widda and Kelly is not predicated on expansive capitalism, but, instead, challenges the notion of “accumulation” through the rejection of the principle of monetary profit in the way that Latouche's approach suggests.

### Form and Transformation

At the end of the play, as the sound of the “Jingle Coins” returns, the refrain grows louder and is accompanied by a trumpet; we return to the sight of the two trees, glimpsed barren at the beginning of the play. The stage directions instruct that after the Widda and Kelly have departed from the town, “*The two barren trees in the background suddenly flush with blossom, foliage, and illuminated fruit*” (291). The men all fall down in surprise and the businessman Cousins declares of the Widda and Kelly, “They musta been saints!” (291). Whether Beckett ever read this O'Casey play is a moot point, but we can read the flowering tree as an opportunity for change immediately lost. Mrs Flagonson appears to remind her husband to come back into the tavern “an help me tot up th takin's” (292). The stage directions note that the “*glowing trees begin to fade as soon as Mrs Flagonson prods her husband in the back with her forefinger.*” Her gesture ironically echoes the pointed forefinger of Kelly, as he literally stopped the businessman Conroy in his tracks with the same gesture earlier in the play. Kelly asks Conroy how he can square his weekly attendance at Mass with the inequitable business deals he makes each week, and as Conroy moves to hit Kelly in response, he is inexplicably frozen to the spot on stage. Together these two uses of the gesture offer moments of questioning and reflection for the audience, and here the potential for change that is lost is further emphasised. Mrs Flagonson's prod in her husband's back is destructive to the moment of realisation that the departing fig-

ures offered a new means of human engagement through the arrival of their fresh approach to trade, but her pointing finger is not only prodding her husband, it is figuratively prodding the audience as well. In the final moments, the men return to their previous economic practices, Flagonson to count his money, Conroy to settle his inequitable deal for cattle, and Farrell to refuse a neighbour in penury any phosphates for his land on account. The jabbing finger, though not directly prodding at the audience (O'Casey does not want to lecture his audience, as Shaw might have done), nevertheless raises questions. What would you do? Would you take the opportunity to change your approach trading for profit? Would you recognise the value of such an approach to human interaction, even if you saw a tree bloom in front of you, just as this town did?

Properly staged, with the full length of the pause and the moment of expectation, this moment of the blooming trees showing the sense of paradise lost could create a theatrical epiphany. This potential moment of change, thwarted through self-interest and greed, is a perfect theatrical representation of the destructive power of capitalist individualism. Who knows what a moment of magical revelation a contemporary physical theatre company such as Knee High, Propeller, or Shared Experience might be able to conjure with the events that O'Casey constructed for this scene? Current physical theatre practice would understand O'Casey's approach to drama far more than his contemporary audience could. Writing to the American theatre critic George Jean Nathan about his latest work, O'Casey explains that he thought *Time to Go* "is good, though I am not sure. It is, again, realism touched with fancy,"<sup>5</sup> and it is this blend of theatre styles that physical theatre now understands so well.

### Arriving at a New Form

The play thus offers an examination of a new approach to capitalism through a new form of theatre or, rather, a departure from O'Casey's most usual form of the three-act play in favour of a one-act play. Secondly, it blends a range of styles, structures, and techniques to jolt the audience out of a complacent reaction and to wake them up to the newness of the ideas contained in the innovative form: shifts in time, dancing, ironic songs – a mash-up if you like of traditional and familiar tunes –, characters in freeze-frame, those who arrive and depart without explanation, extravagantly costumed in ways far beyond their realist reach. Today's theatregoers, used to fractured narratives of postmodernism and familiar with devised work featuring diverse styles throughout a performance, would now find O'Casey's innovative theatre completely comprehensible. But O'Casey's use of the theatrical possibilities of a compressed time-frame of the one-act play may not have been popular with his 1950s audience. *The Times* review of the triple bill of O'Casey's one-act plays, when *Time to Go* was first staged, suggests there was more work to be done to persuade audiences to rec-

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5 O'Casey to George Jean Nathan, 1 Mar 1950 (*Letters* 2: 684).



ognise the one-act play as a worthwhile evening at the theatre: "If every triple bill could be depended on to be as lively we might eventually see the great playgoing public at large abandoning its prejudice in favour of the full-length play" (Anon.). As Robert Lepage, whose own theatrical style offers a blend of narrative, symbolism, projections, experiments in lighting, music, and dance comments:

In Western theatre the success of a play is often seen to rely on how seamless the whole thing appears. For the Japanese, the overall style and individual performance don't have to match; richness is found in diversity, in the meeting and shock of styles [...]. For a Western audience, it's difficult to be confronted with so many different codes. (Lepage 46)

It is such a desire for richness in diversity that O'Casey was keen to attain and is particularly evident in his later plays. The arrival of this "shock of styles" that he often used in his later work, including *Time to Go*, was an opportunity to alert his audience to the radical ideas and approaches to social change and development in his plays through the medium of form. If Lepage is correct and Western audiences of physical theatre even just over a decade ago had difficulty accommodating differences of approach in the same piece of theatre, then O'Casey's blend of stylistic innovations may have been less enjoyable for his contemporary audience to watch. O'Casey's view of theatre is that its primary function is to allow the audience to enjoy the process of watching the production. Theatre "should be full of colour and excitement and gaiety. That's what it is *there* for! To bring colour into people's lives!"<sup>6</sup> Contemporary audiences have learnt through the work of Lepage, Complicité, Cirque du Soleil, and contemporary physical theatre companies to enjoy such dramatic 'colour' and to feel energised by Barthes' "blend and clash" of theatrical genres and styles: satire, realism, symbolism, and myth used alongside one another, as in *Time to Go*, may no longer seem so odd or inexplicable. Now that we have been educated as an audience in how to read O'Casey's later work, we can re-visit and examine the imperatives behind his insistence on stylistic innovations as a theatrical means of highlighting the immorality of capitalist economics.

## Conclusion

The play closes with the opportunity for change lost; the tree fruits and is plentiful, the sense of a lush fecund paradise is offered and dissolved at the moment the woman, the re-imagined figure of Eve, chooses the sin of returning to the ways of the capitalist world. The woman has lost the potential paradise seen briefly as the colourful and figuratively rich alternative to the barren landscape. We can begin to imagine the visual spectacle of this scene in the hands of a contemporary physical theatre company such as Complicité – perhaps a use of stylised projections, music and lighting to suggest the idyllic potential of the potential vista dissolving in front of the audience. Certainly, Simon McBurney shares O'Casey's discomfort about the power of the

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6 Sean O'Casey to David Plethean (qtd. in Murray 418).

capitalist system, openly declaring that his theatre was formed out of a “resistance to ‘the blind almost fundamentalist adherence to a consumer capitalist society’” (Costa). Both McBurney and O’Casey share a strong idealism, and O’Casey’s drama uses physical motifs to suggest the potential benefits of a radical economic rethink via lyrical moments of fantasy. The potential “profit” to the audience would be the “loss” of adherence to capitalist ethics and potentially a moment for re-growth, just as the tree seemed to offer, not decline and retrenchment as the town had experienced to date. O’Casey has offered an alternative to an international economic system. His play might be overly idealistic, but there is a sense that O’Casey himself recognises this. He is not using his drama in a self-righteous or self-indulgent manner to put the world right. Rather than that he is offering his audience alternative possibilities, different aspirations, and new ideas. As Lionel Pilkington points out,

theatrical performance is not just the enactment of a literary script but also a playful public intervention, a testimony to the resilience of alternative ways of thinking, remembering and imagining action, and wholesale stretching out of what a society thinks might be possible. (Pilkington 10)

*Time to Go* offers a sense of what “might be possible” if the international economic system could be re-imagined in a way that concentrated on fairness and equality rather than exchange for profit. It is not an economic tableau, but it is an imaginatively expressed dramatisation of possibilities. As Barney, the landowner, comments to Cousins about the fruiting tree in the closing speech of the play, “If I seen anything, an’if you seen anything, what was seen was only an halleelucination!” (292). The apparition was fleeting, it may even have simply been imagined. The play shows the possibility of an alternative approach to financial responsibility, much as Sandel’s work shows today, but without any conviction that such change can actually happen. The play suggests that it is time for the departure of capitalism, but recognises that only the actions of the audience in the space outside the theatre can make that ideal vision a reality.

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