

Stage Freight: Labour and the Representability of Capitalism in Gerhart Hauptmann's *The Weavers*

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The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.

– Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

INTRODUCTION

In May 2010, the Department of Theatre at Dhaka University of Bangladesh presented Gerhart Hauptmann's *The Weavers* (1892) to call attention to the plight of local textile workers (Mahmud). This proved prophetic, as the production took place just three years before the tragic collapse of Rana Plaza, an eight-story garment factory in Savar of the Greater Dhaka Area, now considered the deadliest textile factory accident in history. Although considered a masterpiece of German naturalism, Hauptmann's social drama about the 1844 spontaneous uprising of Silesian weavers is a play rarely staged. It is tempting to believe that the rarity of its performances is indicative of the play's outdatedness, now that labour conditions have allegedly improved. Yet the global persistence of sweatshop labour, as well as the recent strikes in the United States over the minimum wage and the exploitation of unpaid interns in Canada and the United States, evince the play's relevancy (see Bacon; Greenhouse; Buckley). Perhaps the play is not staged more often because, as Madame Critic of *The New York Dramatic Mirror* put it, in 1915, "for those who had read it the play seemed best qualified for library use only." *The Weavers*, however, was not written as a closet drama, in the manner of Goethe's *Faust*. In fact, despite her initial scepticism,

Madame Critic would wax lyrical about Hauptmann's play, after seeing it performed at New York's Garden Theatre. As Hauptmann's precise stage directions reveal, he composed *The Weavers* with the intention of seeing it staged and was dismayed when authorities tried to ban performances. The fact is that *The Weavers* has always been a difficult work to put on and to produce because it strains and stretches the limits of theatrical representation in its use – and display – of human labour. A dark drama about death, starvation, and labour exploitation, *The Weavers* paradoxically involves costly logistics and a cast of over forty speaking roles, not including “a large crowd of young and old weavers and weaver women” (6).¹ In other words, the text of *The Weavers* contains the challenge of its staging, and the arduous relationship between text and production is central to the play's exploration of human labour.

From its very first performance by the Berlin's Freie Bühne [Free Stage], in 1893, *The Weavers* proved to be a play that was difficult to put onstage and keep there. Its riotous energy has a nasty habit of spilling out of the theatre. The production history of *The Weavers* includes episodes of socialist and anarchist rallies, bans on performance (as recent as the legal battles surrounding the 2004 free adaptation by Volker Lösch and Stefan Schnabel for the Staatsschauspiel Dresden), and a rebellion of actors who took salary matters into their own hands, in the first English-language production for the American stage, in 1915. To be sure, the conflict between the play's supposedly socialist slant and censorship can explain these events. Yet they also point to the relationship between the theatrical text and its production, between theory and practice that *The Weavers* dramatizes in its exploration of labour, including theatrical labour. The originality of *The Weavers* does not lie solely in its naturalist elements or would-be socialist message, but also in the study of labour and the problem of its artistic representation. In other words, the representation of labour in *The Weavers* is not simply undertaken for the sake of the precise, scientific inventory of gritty and seamy material that attracted German naturalist writers. In any case, it should be stressed that, although *The Weavers* is often called the pinnacle of German naturalism, it is also an exception among the dramatic works of the period, including Hauptmann's own plays. As John Osborne notes, in his invaluable *Gerhart Hauptmann and the Naturalist Drama*, whereas most naturalist plays of the time “tend to treat social or ethical problems from a bourgeois intellectual standpoint and in a bourgeois setting,” *The Weavers* is “a genuine working-class drama” (137). That is, while most German naturalist plays, particularly those written under the influence of Ibsen, stage a central dramatic conflict between an exceptional individual and the community, Hauptmann's *The Weavers* radically puts the community at the centre of the dramatic action. Moreover, limiting the discussion of *The Weavers* to its status as a work of naturalism tends to focus on what

Kirk Williams identifies as the play's "anti-theatrical bias" (293), expressed in naturalism's "explicit objective . . . to completely remove the barrier separating theatre from life, to create an illusion so powerful that it would render the theatrical medium absolutely transparent" (285). Yet, as we will soon see, far from attempting to render the theatrical medium transparent, Hauptmann's drama often openly acknowledges its reliance on the potentials of the theatre (an institution that heavily depends on the management and organization of human labour) to represent labour in its temporal and social aspects.

Looking closely at the relationship between Hauptmann's text and its staging, throughout the play's production history, the present article argues that *The Weavers* can be read as a dramatic work that examines the problem of representing labour in the theatre and reveals the signs of labour that capitalist culture often seeks to hide and repress. When it comes to displaying labour, Hauptmann's stage directions are as abundant as they are meticulous. Hauptmann tells us exactly what each character is doing onstage (whether sitting at the loom, reeling yarn, or ironing) and describes the various signs of labour to be represented onstage, from the ticking of clocks and the buzzing noise of looms to the traces of labour left on the bodies of the weavers. In fact, most characters onstage are described as constantly engaged in a work activity. *The Weavers* not only portrays the weavers' wretched living conditions and their revolutionary struggle but also attempts to lay bare, onstage, modern labour conditions, such as the exploitation of wage labour, the ideology of the work ethic, and the fundamental conflict between labour and capital.

THE REPRESENTABILITY OF CAPITALISM

The rich and wide-ranging scholarship devoted to *The Weavers* tends to focus on its naturalist elements and revolutionary ethos. John Osborne, for example, traces how closely Hauptmann had followed the historical accounts of the spontaneous weavers' revolt provided by Alfred Zimmermann and Wilhelm Wolff (139), and situates Hauptmann's oeuvre in the context of the development of naturalism in Germany (137). In "Anti-Theatricality and the Limits of Naturalism," Kirk Williams discusses the weavers' physical environment as "necessarily overdetermined, cluttered with small and seemingly gratuitous objects," "which is typical of Naturalist drama" and "obviously represents an effort to grasp the contingent, material reality of a situation" (292). It is also, however, possible to look at the same objects, which, in the play, are often materials and working tools, not so much as gratuitous but as carefully staged signs of labour. What often gets overlooked, in the otherwise careful readings that treat *The Weavers* primarily as a naturalist drama, is the way in which the play exhibits and denaturalizes

human labour, particularly its rapport to capital. This rapport comes to the fore precisely when we examine how the play's stage directions describe and choreograph the bodies onstage. In other words, because the staging of *The Weavers* involves managing and conducting a large cast of actors who are to represent labour onstage, it grapples with what Fredric Jameson has called, in *Brecht and Method*, "the representability of capitalism" (149). It is not surprising that Hauptmann would show interest in representing the operations of capitalism onstage. The late nineteenth century witnessed the institutionalization of the modern social sciences, including economics – through the work of Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Georg Simmel, and Max Weber – which increased awareness of capitalism as a system of production. Hauptmann read and studied Darwin, Saint-Simon, and Marx (Lewisohn xiv).

While not metatheatrical in an obvious way, *The Weavers* does display a self-awareness as a dramatic work that pushes against the limits of theatrical labour. In Act Five, just before a crowd of dirty, dusty rioters rushes into the tenant house where Old Hilse lives with his family, rag picker Hornig exclaims, "*Gelt, das is amal aso a Theater? So was sieht man nich alle Tage*" [That's quite a theatre as well! That's what you don't see every day] (64). Such metatheatricality highlights the sheer labour and artistry that goes into producing the large swarm scenes in *The Weavers*. Hornig, who has just come into the house from the outside, uses a theatre metaphor to describe the crowd of weavers that he had seen in the streets; that is, offstage. Before the rebellious weavers enter, the stage directions indicate that we hear the "Weavers' Song," "*a dull, monotonous wail*," sung by "*hundreds of voices*" nearby (64). Moreover, characters onstage comment on what they see from the windows: "There they come swarming like ants. – Where can so many weavers be from?" (64). Hauptmann's strategy for representing such a multitude of weavers is simple and clever. While the cast list does not specify the number of weavers to be included in the "*large crowd of young and old weavers and weaver women*" (6), the stage directions do suggest how to give an illusion of such a swarm. We get a sense of the riotous crowd not only through sound, but also through an ingenious setting, which exploits the interplay between foreground and background. The stage directions for Act Five indicate that the main action of the scene takes places in the "*very narrow, low, and flat room*" of Old Hilse (56). There is a door in the back wall of this narrow room that opens up into a larger space ("*Hause*"), essentially an entry-way to the house, where other tenants live. Put simply, we see Old Hilse and his family, in the foreground, and part of the entry-way, in the background. It is from this entry-way that Hornig speaks of the crowd as a theatre, and it is in this entry-way that the crowd of dirty, dusty rioters stands, before dispersing throughout the house. Standing huddled in the distance, these rioters indeed give the illusion of a multitude. Only a few weavers actually enter Old Hilse's living quarters – that is, the foreground.

Thus, Hornig's comparing the riot to theatre has a dual metatheatrical meaning. On the one hand, it is not every day that the audience gets to see a show like *The Weavers*, which employs a large reserve army of labour to comment on labour. On the other hand, Hornig's remark also suggests that the real showdown between labour and capital happens offstage, outside the theatre. In short, there are limits to what naturalism can represent on-stage and other creative techniques must be sought.

Indeed, the play's stage directions reveal the ways in which *The Weavers* goes beyond naturalism's strategies for representing capitalism, particularly the strategies of the naturalist novel. As Jameson notes, in *Brecht and Method*, the movement of money and labour in the capitalist system has always posed a challenge to artistic representation. According to Jameson, the novel often depicts either the lack of money, such as Dickensian poverty, or the "effects" of its "incorporeal value" once it becomes capital (150). The greenbacks of Theodor Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), for example, become valuable substances in themselves and cease to be tokens of exchange (150). In other words, when there is too little money (poverty) or too much (hoarding of capital), the moment of capitalist exchange, when money changes into capital and capital changes into money (what Marx famously describes in chapter four of *Capital* as M-C-M), becomes difficult to capture. Thus, naturalist novelists, from Émile Zola to Frank Norris and Upton Sinclair, reverted to two kinds of representation: "on the one hand the 'Schicksalschläge' ('blows of fate') of the very poor, who migrate in family units from one big city to another; on the other, the 'malefactors of great wealth,' whose rise and fall, fortunes and downfall, also register the 'fists of destiny'" (150–51). Given the difficulty of representing capitalist exchange, Hauptmann's *The Weavers* particularly stands out, as it opens with an attempt to represent nothing less than wage labour.

Moreover, the activity of work itself poses a challenge to artistic representation. In *Resisting Representation* (1994), Elaine Scarry identifies the major problems involved in the representation of work in the nineteenth-century novel. The first difficulty that Scarry points out is that "work is action rather than a discrete action: it has no identifiable beginning or end"; thus work is "perpetual, repetitive, habitual" (65). The second issue is that "work is social, hence not easily located within the boundaries of the 'individual,' hence not wholly compatible with the nature of 'character' as it is conceived and developed in the novel" (Page 87 footnote 24). For example, Zola's *Germinal* (1885), a naturalist novel about a coal miners' strike in the north of France to which *The Weavers* is often compared, solves the first problem – the fact that work is habitual – by subdividing the activity of work into smaller tasks throughout the novel (Scarry 65). As a dramatic work, written to be performed onstage, *The Weavers* attempts to solve both issues of representation. The repetitiveness and habitual nature of work is

expressed through the nearly continual movements of the actors, who are engaged in manual work before the eyes of the audience. The social aspect of work is rendered through the sheer collective effort that is required to mount a production like *The Weavers*.

The first scene of *The Weavers* opens, not with a dialogue between individual characters, but with a detailed staging, in which the weavers take turns exhibiting the finished products of their labour – linen samples – for inspection by their manager Pfeifer. Hauptmann's directions indicate "*a glass door through which weavers, men, women, and children continuously come and go*" and list a series of gestures and actions that Pfeifer repeats with each weaver (7). The manager inspects and evaluates the cloths proffered by the workers, after which he tells the cashier the payments to be made. There is a clock onstage, and it points to twelve. Significantly, the first spoken words of the play are numbers denoting earned payments. Cashier Neumann counts out money to a weaver woman and says out loud, "Comes to sixteen silver groschen and ten pfennings" (8). What we witness, here, is nothing less than an exchange between the labourer and the manager, both employed by the mill owner Dreissiger. As the play progresses, we see what the weavers can buy with their wages (very little) and what the capitalists do with the linen produced (expand and accumulate their capital by selling these products). We learn that the weavers need their wages to survive and that they do not receive enough to cover all their life expenses, as many of them ask Pfeifer for advance payments. In other words, we witness, onstage, a dramatization of labour as Karl Marx understands it in "Wage Labor and Capital" (1849):

He [the labourer] works in order to live. He does not even reckon labor as part of his life; it is rather a sacrifice of his life. It is a commodity, which he has made over to another. Hence, also, the product of his activity is not the object of his activity. (204–5)

In fact, every act of *The Weavers*, except Act Four – which takes place in the luxurious home of capitalist Dreissiger – opens with a display of signs of labour by means of props, actors' gestures, and sound design. Act Two is set in Wilhelm Ansong's house and opens with the characters steady at work. Mother Baumert sits at her spooling wheel, while her two daughters, Emma and Bertha, sit at the looms. August Baumert, her son, is reeling yarn. Ansong is mending a basket. When the characters speak, they do so while toiling away. When Luise Hilse addresses her husband, Gottlieb, she does so "*from the washtub*" (57). The weavers onstage are constantly engaged in work; so much so, that Hauptmann has to indicate when they should stop. When Jäger begins to read to Ansong the lyrics of the song "Bloody Justice," which the weavers have been singing under Dreissiger's windows, Ansong

"without continuing to work, sits slumped in deep emotion" (28). Even when Hauptmann gives us minute descriptions of the weavers' bodies, such details are not merely signs of malady, malnutrition, or exhaustion, but are also noted as being traces of hard labour. Thus, Hauptmann calls the weavers "*Geschöpfe des Webstuhls*" [creatures of the looms] "whose knees are bent with much sitting" (7) and their "*sunken eyes [are] reddened and watery from wool dust, smoke, and work by lamplight*" (18). Old Hilse is described as "*worn with age, work, sickness, and strain,*" and as having "*deep-set, sore eyes characteristic of the weavers*" (56). Such meticulous descriptions of the characters' physical appearances, however, pose a certain challenge to staging (making the bodies of actors who haven't suffered years of toil resemble those of the weavers) and suggest, as Jameson argues in relation to film, that "labor . . . is [not] accessible in any unmediated way" (Brecht 163n17).

Hauptmann's stage directions also indicate the sound design necessary to convey the weavers' unceasing toil. The background noise during Act Two is described as follows:

The roar of the looms, the rhythmic thud of the lathe, which shakes the ground and walls, and the click and rattle of the shuttles passing back and forth fill the room. Into all this blends the deep, steady whirr of the spooling wheels, resembling the hum of gigantic bumblebees. (18)

Here, in the use of sound produced by work, Hauptmann anticipates expressionist playwrights, who also would find inspiration in the noises of factories, machines, and clocks. Indeed, Frank Castorf's 1997 production for the Berlin's Volksbühne made use of an expressionist set, where a constantly rattling loom dominated the centre of the action. It is surprising, however, how rarely productions take note of Hauptmann's directions for an almost incessant background of work-related noise. His stage directions in *The Weavers* include, for example, the ticking of clocks.

Act Three takes place in a Bar Parlour that also resembles a workspace rather than a space for recreation. With all the listed "*barrels and brewing utensils,*" the bar is a setting seen from the eyes of a working bartender rather than a customer at leisure (30). An old grandfather's clock is ticking. Hauptmann again makes sure to note the kind of work that each member of the staff performs. The Innkeeper Welzel is drawing beer into a glass from a barrel behind the counter. Mrs. Welzel is ironing at the stove. Anna Welzel, their daughter, is embroidering. Similarly, the stage directions at the beginning of Act Five describe the household of Old Hilse by enumerating the many work instruments lying around: "*A winding-wheel with bobbins stands between table and loom. Old spinning, weaving, and winding implements are housed on the bronzed deck beams; long hanks of yarn are hanging down. There is much useless lumber everywhere around in the*

room" (56). The old, discarded spinning instruments signal the changes taking place in the means of production with the invention of the power loom. Old Hilse's weaving craft is becoming a thing of the past. Hauptmann portrays the weavers at a moment of transition. Not all weavers yet work in factories with power looms. But those who do not are on the verge of losing their jobs. *The Weavers* thus tells a version of the weavers' story that Marx tells in "The Grundrisse":

The way in which money transforms itself into capital often shows itself quite tangibly in history; e.g. when the merchant induces a number of weavers and spinners, who until then wove and spun as a rural, secondary occupation, to work for him, making their secondary into their chief occupation; but then has them in his power and has brought them under his command as wage labourers. (273)

When weaving was a secondary occupation that villagers undertook to satisfy their needs and those of their immediate rural community, they created what Marx calls, in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), "use-value," the usefulness of a commodity that is inextricably tied to "the physical properties of the commodity" and the human needs that it actually fulfils (27–28). Yet, as soon as the villagers make weaving their primary occupation and begin to work for wages, they create exchange values. The product of their labour – linen – acquires exchange value, the exchange equivalent by which it can be compared to other objects on the market, including the weavers' own labour, which, in turn, becomes a commodity.

The Weavers, however, is not a mere dramatization of Marx's theories. As a dramatic work that puts the relationship between text and production to the fore through its arduous staging, *The Weavers* also probes the relationship between theory and practice. One simply has to compare Hauptmann's drama to Marx's analysis of the weavers' uprising to see the difference. In "Critical Marginal Notes on the Article 'The King of Prussia and Social Reform,'" Marx argues that the weavers' revolt was not in vain because "*not one of the French and English workers' uprisings had such a theoretical and conscious character as the uprising of the Silesian weavers*" (128). Marx identifies the song of the weavers – "Das Blutgericht" [Bloody Justice] – which also features prominently in Hauptmann's drama, as a significant moment when the weavers proclaim their "opposition to the society of private property" and thus acquire "the consciousness of the nature of the proletariat" (129). To be sure, as many critics have noted, Hauptmann treats the class of Silesian weavers, in whose dialect he wrote the play, as the main protagonist of *The Weavers* (see Clark; Schildberg-Schroth). Yet, unlike Marx, Hauptmann refuses to give us a united and homogenous class of weavers. Nor does the playwright offer us a justification for the human

tragedy. Marx, on the other hand, justifies the uprising by the sheer volume of discussion that it generated among the German bourgeoisie:

Finally, it is *untrue, actually untrue*, that the German bourgeoisie totally fails to understand the general significance of the Silesian uprising. In several towns the masters are trying to act jointly with the apprentices. All the *liberal* German newspapers, the organs of the liberal bourgeoisie, teem with articles about the organization of labour, the reform of society, criticism of monopolies and competition, etc. All this is the result of the movement among the workers. (128)

In other words, the practice of Silesian weavers finds in Marx a *theoretical* validation – the revolt engendered discussion among the educated and learned. By contrast, Hauptmann's play refuses to give the weavers' violence coherent meaning or value. Instead, *The Weavers* leaves us with questions pertaining to practice. What else could the workers do beyond wreaking havoc? The audience, for one, has the advantage over the weavers in that it can observe the entire social structure of labour in their community throughout the different acts. The weavers themselves do not have such luxury and never gain any true Marxist insight into their labour. Their outbreak is spontaneous, disorganized, and reckless. One could argue, of course, as Georg Lukács would, in his 1923 *History and Class Consciousness*, that "proletarian thought is practical thought and as such strongly pragmatic" (198). According to Lukács's seminal argument, "proletariat is both the object of history," the living commodity "created by capitalism," and "the subject of history, as it is its labour that shapes the world." Therefore, "knowledge of itself is also, necessarily, knowledge of the reality and of the totality of the historical process" ("Class"). In contrast to the bourgeois intellectual, whose work is concealed "behind the façade of 'mental labor,' of 'responsibility'" and who is thus "reified in the only faculties that might enable him to rebel against reification," the proletariat experiences his work as "the naked and abstract form of the commodity" (172). And it is this work situation of the proletariat that leads to a revolutionary consciousness. *The Weavers* resists, however, portraying the proletarian class consciousness of being united by a common struggle and does so precisely through the weavers' divergent attitudes toward their work. A few individual characters stand out from the very beginning, such as the bold and rebellious Bäcker and reserve soldier Moritz Jäger, whose military service has rendered him worldlier than his poor folk. These two stir the young weavers to destroy the new power looms and the mill owners' houses, "hack[ing] on at the beautiful furniture as if they were working for wages" (59). Bäcker and Jäger are no leaders, however, as they do not know where or how to lead the revolt beyond mere wreckage. Characters that refuse to join the riot, such as Old Hilse, further undermine the idea of the weavers'

being a homogenous community. And the play's ending unveils the ideological grip of the work ethic that, in its turn, reifies, in the weavers, "*the only faculties that might enable [them] to rebel against reification*" (172). In this manner, Hauptmann anticipates what would become the most recurrent criticism of *History and Class Consciousness* – the treatment of the proletariat as a unified class with shared economic interests.

IDEOLOGY OF THE WORK ETHIC

The weavers' differences and disorganization become particularly evident toward the close of the play. The tumultuous crowd of rioters arrives at Old Hilse's living quarters and orders all the weavers to come out. Seeing Old Hilse still working at the loom, Bäcker tells him that he no longer needs to work (65). But Old Hilse, a one-armed veteran, tells the rebellious weavers that nothing will change and that they have no chance against the soldiers: "They'll show you where the force lies" (68). More striking still slumped is Old Hilse's religious fervour in relation to his own labour and his unrelenting belief in the work ethic. Throughout the scene of commotion, he keeps trying to get back to his work, despite his age and disability. When the soldiers' guns are heard, his family warns him to get away from the window where his loom stands. But he adamantly refuses. His last words, delivered right before he begins to weave are: "Not I! Even if you all go completely mad! My heavenly Father has placed me here [. . .] Here we'll sit and do our duty, though the snow may burn" (71). The pious old weaver chooses to remain at the loom in the middle of the unrest and violence. The moment Old Hilse resumes weaving, a stray bullet mortally wounds him. He falls dead over his loom, as we hear the riotous weavers shout "Hurrah!" offstage. His grand-daughter, six-year-old Mielchen, runs in to tell the news that the weavers have attacked Dittrich's house and are driving the soldiers out of town. But the directions indicate that the weavers' hurrahs become more and more distant. The play ends with Mother Hilse's approaching the body of Old Hilse, slumped over his instrument of work. "Come now, Father – say a word! You're scaring me!" says Mother Hilse before the curtain falls (71).

Hauptmann's ending is enigmatic, for a few reasons. First, *The Weavers* does not show us the violent crushing of the revolt, well documented in historical sources, but instead gives the weavers the last word of "Hurrah!" Or rather, the waning sound of the hurrahs hints at the crushing of the revolt to come. Second, instead of imagining the future, the play looks back: Old Hilse is dead, just as his craft and work instruments have become obsolete with the new means of production. Osborne argues that Old Hilse's reactionary attitude "cannot be fully explained in Marxist terms by environment," but is rather an example of "Silesian pietism"; that is, of Hilse's "strong psychological need for religion" (144). Yet Hilse's work ethic and religion are intimately

connected. *The Weavers* anticipates Weber's treatise *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), which would posit the Protestant work ethic as a significant force in promoting "one's duty in a calling," which became "what is most characteristic of the social ethic of capitalistic culture" (19). Indeed, throughout the play, Pastor Kittelhaus promotes the work ethic as a religious value in itself. It is not by accident that the first time we meet Pastor Kittelhaus and his wife they are at Dreissiger's house, playing a game of whist, and not among the weavers. Kittelhaus denies any direct interest in money, however. When Jäger insinuates that the church is mainly interested in collecting money from the poor, the pastor immediately retorts: "Money, money . . . Do you perhaps imagine the vile, wretched money . . . I'd much prefer you keep your money. Such utter nonsense! Behave, be a Christian! Think of what you praised. Follow God's commandments. Be good and pious. Money, money. . . !" (49). In this scene, the main role of the church lies not so much in collecting money as in encouraging values like the work ethic that help preserve the status quo. Institutional religion along with the work ethic perpetuates the social inequality in Hauptmann's labour drama. The pastor's promotion of the work ethic in *The Weavers* echoes the operations of Salvation Army in Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara* (1905) that, through its good will inadvertently buttresses the economic empire of Andrew Undershaft, the powerful arms industrialist of Europe. As Undershaft notes, sober and honest workers, with "their thoughts on heavenly things" and "indifferent to their own interests," are "an invaluable safeguard against revolution" (253).

While the face of capitalism has changed since Hauptmann's time, modern drama's fascination with people at work has persisted, particularly in plays, where, as Bill Naismith puts it, "the entire workplace, and much of the workforce, is reconstructed on stage," such as Georg Kaiser's *Gas* trilogy (1917–20), Ernst Toller's *The Machine Wreckers* (1922), Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* (1922), Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* (1923), Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* (1928), Arnold Wesker's *The Kitchen* (1957) and *The Journalists* (1972), Peter Nichols's *The National Health* (1969), Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money* (1987), and David Mamet's *Glengarry Glenn Ross* (1992), among many others (xiii). To appreciate what made Hauptmann's display of labour innovative in 1892, it is helpful to recall the ambivalent attitude toward work in nineteenth-century capitalist culture. On the one hand, the ideology of the work ethic was promoted and celebrated. Neither unscrupulousness, nor the pursuit of selfish interests, but rather work "performed as if it were an absolute end in itself, a calling" motivated and bolstered the capitalistic enterprise (Weber 25). On the other hand, another cultural imperative of the nineteenth century was a certain cover-up of signs of labour, especially of hard manual labour. Such concealment of signs of labour was carried out, paradoxically, for the very purpose of promoting the

work ethic. Citing the study of labour historian Daniel Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850–1920*, Cindy Weinstein explains that the aesthetic phenomenon of “the erasure of labour” (14) resulted from changes in production during rapid industrialization, which created new work conditions – “specialized, repetitious, machine-paced, and, often, deadeningly simple” (Rodgers; qtd in Weinstein 20). In short, inhumane work conditions “destabilized” and threatened the ideology of the work ethic. The new tasks, requiring no skill, that became the norm, as the craft guilds dissolved and the division of labour characteristic of an industrialized economy came to the fore, were difficult to promote as anyone’s calling and so had to be hidden, if the work ethic were still to be encouraged.

EXPRESSIONISTIC STRATEGY OF MODERNISM

Repression of signs of labour not only facilitates the ideology of the work ethic, but also encourages guilt-free consumption, including that of art. According to Jameson’s seminal argument in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), modernism is “an ideological expression of capitalism, and in particular, of the latter’s reification of daily life,” that largely operates through the repression of signs of labour beneath its formalized surface (225). Thus, the impressionistic strategy of classical modernism is to “derealize the content and make it available for consumption on some purely aesthetic level” (202). The famous example that Jameson gives of this impressionistic strategy is Joseph Conrad’s description of the ship and sea in *Lord Jim* (1900):

Above the mass of sleepers, a faint and patient sigh at times floated, the exhalation of a troubled dream; and short metallic clangs bursting out suddenly in the depths of the ship, the harsh scrape of a shovel, the violent slam of a furnace-door, exploded brutally, as if the men handling the mysterious things below had their breasts full of fierce anger: while the slim high hull of the steamer went on evenly ahead, without a sway of her bare masts, cleaving continuously the great calm of the waters under the inaccessible serenity of the sky. (qtd. in Jameson 202)

The waters might be calm, the sky serene, and the passengers asleep, but “the brief clang from the boiler room . . . mark[s] the presence beneath ideology and appearance of that labour which produces and reproduces the world itself” (202). Jameson identifies this impressionistic strategy as the “dominant one” but not the only one “structurally available to the modernists.” The other one that he names but does not go into is the “much rarer expressionism” (213–14).

While expressionism may not have played a dominant role in the modernist novel, it significantly permeated early-twentieth-century German and American modern drama. It is in this expressionist theatre that the boiler

room of the ship would be entered and exhibited. In Georg Kaiser's *The Coral* (1917), the first play of the *Gas* trilogy, the Millionaire's Son tells his father about his descent into their yacht's engine room. Witnessing the exploitation of stokers inspires the Son to champion the cause of the proletariat. Eugene O'Neill stages a parody of this moment in *The Hairy Ape* (1922), which opens inside the boiler room of a Transatlantic Ocean Liner. Mildred, the spoiled daughter of the owner of Nazareth Steel, descends into the belly of the ship only to faint at the sight of Yank, a brutish-looking stoker. Instead of repressing signs of labour, expressionist plays such as Kaiser's *Gas* trilogy, Toller's *The Machine Wreckers*, O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, Rice's *Adding Machine*, and Treadwell's *Machinal* display labour onstage, but not for any good-feeling resolutions. Instead of being a strategy of displacement or symbolic resolution, as the impressionistic strategy is, the expressionistic strategy exhibits and even flaunts the artist's neuroses, doubts, and a general feeling of malaise. In a way, this acknowledgement and flaunting of malaise became a self-justifying tactic for playwrights who were well aware that they came from higher social strata than the working class that they sought to represent. In the way it exhibits labour and a general malaise, Hauptmann's *The Weavers* can be said to employ the expressionistic, rather than the impressionistic, strategy of modernism.

In the preface to *The Weavers*, Hauptmann betrays doubts about the power of his own creative work. He dedicated *The Weavers* to his father Robert Hauptmann, whose own father struggled as a Silesian weaver before finding the means to become a waiter. In his dedication, Hauptmann addresses his father and admits that, as an author, he cannot judge whether "the germ" of his drama "possesses vitality or is rotten at the core," revealing the angst that would be common to many German Expressionist playwrights writing in his wake (5). They, too, would question the ability of the artist or intellectual to relate to the working class from a position of privilege, expressing public anxieties over the utility of mental work and the very term "bourgeois." The ambiguous and tense relationship between an extraordinary individual (the intellectual, the artist, or Nietzsche-inspired "New Man") and the mass of labourers would become the centre of dramatic conflict in the early plays of Kaiser and Toller. In particular, Toller's *The Machine Wreckers*, inspired by the Luddite Rebellion (1811–13), can be taken as an artistic response to *The Weavers*. Instead of a spontaneous revolt spurred on by a few rowdy individuals, Toller shows how an enlightened individual, a one-time worker by the name of Jimmy, tries to educate a mob of weavers in socialism and lead an uprising against the capitalist order. If Jimmy fails to reason with the weavers, it is because they are not yet ready, not yet patient enough to wait for the realization of his socialist program, the details of which remain rather vague and incoherent in the play.

WORKING THE AUDIENCE

Given that Hauptmann's drama lays bare, onstage, the ideological constructs inherent to the capitalist mode of production (e.g., commodities, wages, and the work ethic), it should come as no surprise that the play's potential for revolutionary impact, especially on the workers themselves, has been contested ground ever since its first performance. After the play's premiere at Otto Brahm's Freie Bühne, in 1893, (which was resurrected specifically for the purpose of staging *The Weavers*), socialist Franz Mehring pummelled reviewer Julius Hart for suggesting that *The Weavers* was not so much "the revolutionary utterance of a party politician, but simply the manifestation of universal humanitarianism" (184). Mehring, whose book *The Lessing Legend* (1893) is regarded as one of the first attempts at Marxist literary criticism, believed that associating Hauptmann's play with the myth of humanitarianism meant obscuring the "steam and vapor of [its] political partisanship" (185). As proof, Mehring listed the many instances in *The Weavers* where Hauptmann closely follows his sources: the historical accounts of Wilhelm Wolff and Alfred Zimmermann. Wilhelm Wolff was the "bold, true, and noble champion of the proletariat" (Mehring 185) to whom Karl Marx dedicated volume one of *Capital*. According to Mehring, Hauptmann seems to have lifted the destitution of the weavers, their insurgent song, and even Dreissiger's remark that "the weavers could eat grass if they were hungry" (59), straight out of Wolff's *Deutsches Bürgerbuch für 1845*. But even Mehring had doubts about the efficacy of the play's revolutionary spirit, when he remarked that the "ovation it received from the public at the Freie Bühne proved nothing" (188), because its public came "exclusively from the bourgeoisie": "press and stock-exchange" (188). Mehring's comment raises a simple question, but one that is difficult to gauge: did labourers see the play and, if so, what was their reaction? While the weavers, in the play, do not acquire any Marxist insight into the alienation of their labour, could *The Weavers* spur real workers to action, through pedagogy and/or emotional impact? After all, the year of 1890 saw the development of the Freie Volksbühne ["People's Theatre"], under the leadership of Bruno Wille, whose goal was to bring theatre to a working-class public that, until then, had essentially been barred from commercial theatre because of the high cost of tickets. The response of the working class to this mission was significant: by the end of its first year, the Freie Volksbühne boasted a membership of 1,873 (Osborne 66).

In 1892, a split in the Freie Volksbühne led to the new leadership of Franz Mehring and closer ties to the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). Resisting the dogmas of SPD, Bruno Wille and his supporters left to found the Neue Freie Volksbühne [New People's Theatre] (Osborne 72). While Mehring's Freie Volksbühne unapologetically promoted the political

agenda of the SPD, the predominant aim of Wille's Neue Freie Volksbühne was to educate the proletariat about the art of theatre, including the difference between role and actor. In Wille's opinion, the working class could not educate itself and had a conservative taste in theatre (Davies 50). A census of members from the 1893–94 season shows that the association was primarily working class and was particularly popular with skilled workmen (Davies 45). Both Mehring and Wille were great fans of Hauptmann's *The Weavers*. When the play finally had its public performance at the Deutsches Theater on 25 September 1894, the Kaiser cancelled his box; authorities continued to try to prevent performances of *The Weavers* until the turn of the century. In the meantime, the play was put on three times by Wille's Neue Freie Volksbühne and seven by Mehring's Freie Volksbühne (Osborne 136). While it is difficult to assess how effective Mehring and Wille's programs were at galvanizing the working class, these were two of the earliest attempts at subsidizing tickets and bringing theatre art to the masses. Wille claimed that *The Weavers* "made a more powerful impact on the working class than any other social drama" that he had known (Osborne 136). Yet there is also evidence that the play "drew some inappropriate laughter" from the working-class crowds (Davies 50).

Across the Atlantic, *The Weavers* also earned a notoriety during the 1890s, when the German-language theatres of the United States attempted to stage it. The play appealed to labour unions as a potential piece of political agitation and to anarchists as an occasion to stir up mayhem (Blankenagel 335). The mayor of Newark even issued an edict forbidding the play's performance because the city had a large German labouring population (337; also Heiss 368). Hauptmann's drama also appealed to actors who thought of themselves as labourers. In 1909, *The Weavers* was performed at the New Deutsches Theater in New York, specifically to raise funds for German actors who needed money to reach their homes, as the company was soon to be dissolved ("Hauptmann's Grim").

The English-language premiere of *The Weavers* in the United States in 1915 inadvertently played a role in the labour movement of actors. In fact, the actors involved in the production quoted lines from *The Weavers* to support their struggle for the recognition of their rights as workers in the theatre. This curious chapter in American theatre history began in October 1914, when Emanuel Reicher, an eminent German actor and one of the founders of Berlin's Freie Bühne, arrived in the United States, with the ambitious goal of regenerating American drama (Smith). For this purpose, Reicher attempted to found an independent stage in New York, under the name of the Modern Stage, that would be akin to André Antoine's Théâtre Libre in Paris and Otto Brahm's Freie Bühne in Berlin. After a few hits and misses, the Modern Stage put on Hauptmann's *The Weavers*, as its second play of the 1915–16 theatrical season. It would prove to be the Modern

Stage's most successful production. It would also be its demise. Upon first glance, the choice of *The Weavers*, with its expensive logistics and large cast might strike one as an odd and risky choice for Reicher, whose company, at the time, already faced financial troubles. Yet there were also reasons for hoping that *The Weavers* could be a hit. Gerhart Hauptmann had received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1912, Ludwig Lewisohn had begun publishing the translated and edited volumes of the author's work, and Barrett H. Clark had written glowingly about *The Weavers* in *The Continental Drama of Today*. Moreover, Reicher had played the part of Old Ansong in the premiere of *The Weavers*, at the Freie Bühne, in 1893, and thus had extensive experience with the text. He reprised the role in his English production.

The Weavers earned almost unanimous critical acclaim when Reicher directed its English translation, by Mary Morison, on 14 December 1915, at the Garden Theatre in New York. It would see eighty-seven performances, not a spectacular number (the original production at the Freie Bühne boasted two hundred performances), but still a respectable number, given that year's generally abysmal theatrical season (Bauland 21). The production also briefly went on tour to Chicago's Princess Theatre. Critic Heywood Brown wrote that "no other performance in New York [that] season ha[d] elbowed perfection so closely" and that "possibly December 14, 1915 will be of some significance in the theatrical history of New York." The *New York Dramatic Mirror* stated that the remarkable performance of *The Weavers* was "very likely to give an impetus to the movement which [would] have the same tendency to jar local playgoers out of their complacency regarding the merit of plays and productions that the Theater Antoine had in Paris and the Freie Buhne in Berlin" ("The First Nighter"). The *New York Times* praised Reicher's performance as wretched weaver Ansong as well as his intelligent directing of the large cast ("Reicher Presents"). Because Reicher knew that the English translation lost the particularity of the Silesian dialect, he attempted to "solv[e] the problem by permitting every one [of his actors] to use his [or her] favourite lingo – the result being . . . a strange mix of Irish, cockney, low German, and plain Yankee" ("*The Weavers* Is a Griping Drama"). While praising Reicher's version, the *Evening Mail* expressed doubts about the play's appeal to the broader audience: "Our American public is inclined toward the marshmallow of comedy or the jeweled poison vial of individualistic tragedy. But the taste of *The Weavers* is the taste of hunger, and that America has never liked." As Madame Critic, of the *New York Dramatic Mirror*, was to point out, the audience of the opening night was comprised almost entirely of critics or subscribers to the Modern Stage, and it required "a pronounced love for the theatre in general, and for Hauptmann in particular" to trek all the way to the Garden Theatre on a cold, disagreeable Tuesday night in December. Despite the critical accolades, the production did not attract more theatregoers or sponsors to the

Modern Stage Society. As Charles Collins, of *The Chicago Post*, put it, Hauptmann's "doggerel of despair," no matter how expertly directed, did not "belong to the pleasure-seeking game of the American Stage." In 2007, writing for the *Arts Fuse Review* about the "once-in-a-life-time chance to see" *The Weavers* on the American stage, in a production by the Boston University College of Fine Arts, Bill Marx echoed the early critics, when he noted that Hauptmann's "poetics of paucity" would not sit well with audiences in "the land of the plenty." To put it crudely, a production as grim and unsettling as *The Weavers* might not generate enough box-office profits to make it worth staging a play that cost so much to produce. It should come as no surprise, then, that university programs are more able to find the necessary supply of theatrical labour than professional companies, bound by the laws of Actors' Equity. Yet even the Boston University College of Fine Arts had to do with just twenty-nine bodies for its production. In fact, most contemporary stagings of *The Weavers* opt for a smaller cast than the one indicated by Hauptmann's original text. For example, Michael Thalheimer's 2011 production, at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin, rotated twenty actors for the entire show. Reicher's version, however, employed over forty actors, in addition to the theatre staff, and ran into problems of labour and employment.

Events took a turn for the revolutionary, when Reicher tried to close *The Weavers*. A lack of funds and the need to move on with the rest of his Modern Stage subscription series motivated his decision. His actors, however, wanted the show to go on, and so they rebelled. The *Brooklyn Eagle*, which covered the real-life drama of Reicher's actors ran a headline that read: "How the Actors in *The Weavers* Put Its Teachings into Practice." Reicher did not take into account that striking the show would mean "throwing forty actors and actresses, as well as the theatre crew out of employment in the middle of a terrible theatrical season" ("How the Actors"). And since, as *Harper's Bazaar* reported, Reicher had "conscripted even the married men and children to fill Hauptmann's wholesale order for actors," he would be throwing families out onto the street.

Like the riot of weavers, the actors' revolt was spontaneous, as they began to quote lines from the play to support their idea for a commonwealth plan. Augustin Duncan, actor and stage director, "suggested they appoint an executive committee to take charge of the management" ("How the Actors"). Duncan was immediately appointed chairman. The following plan was executed:

A minimum equal salary was agreed upon to be paid after the running expenses of the theater and advertising were met, then from all money over the expenses and minimum salaries, the balance was to be divided in proportion to the contract salary of each member of the organization. ("How the Actors")

Duncan reached out to the Industrial Relations Committee in hopes that it would sponsor the New York run of *The Weavers* as well as its tour to spread information on labour conditions of the United States. In the end, while the Industrial Relations Committee agreed that Hauptmann's play was relevant to the situation of American labourers, it was not as generous as Duncan had hoped ("*The Weavers* Used to Arouse Public Interest").

In early February 1916, Duncan invited the Actors' Equity Association (AEA) to finance the failing show. "On February 26, 1916, more than a thousand AEA members turned out to see an Equity-sponsored performance of Hauptmann's play" (Holmes 44). Between the third and fourth acts, the AEA founder Frank Gillmore delivered a speech where he compared the exploitative practices of theatre employers to those of Hauptmann's mill owner (Holmes 44). Having used the play as a springboard for discussion, the AEA left the sinking production, in the wake of growing anti-German sentiment. In April 1917, the United States entered World War I and discussions about German drama became unpopular.

Hauptmann's play would not be performed again in New York until the revolutionary year of 1989, when the newly-formed East Village Theater Company chose it for its debut and produced it, at RAPP Arts Center, to lukewarm reviews. In her review for the *Village Voice*, Alisa Solomon found fault with Linda Shirey's "flaccid direction" of her thirty actors and the play's "hockey language and sentimental treatment of the downtrodden." Yet, what struck the critic as the weakest link in the production was the missed opportunity to dramatize the tensions of the local neighbourhood – Alphabet City of the late eighties – where the play was performed. As Solomon noted, "the walk to the RAPP Arts Center (at 4th Street between A and B)," where the shabby reality of the homeless co-exists with overpriced amenities, "sets you up for its lessons in living Marxism" (99).

While Shirey's 1989 production of *The Weavers* was criticized for not engaging, in a more daring fashion, with the politics of its day, the 2004 free adaptation by Volker Lösch and Stefan Schnabel, for the Staatsschauspiel Dresden, came under fire for contemporizing Hauptmann's play and for injecting it with unemployment issues of the day. Dresden's political version caused a scandal and contrasted starkly with the farcical deconstruction of the play that Frank Castorf staged at the Berlin's Volksbühne in 1997. Instead of trying to stir a passive audience, the Dresden production essentially treated the audience as a co-author. Director Lösch and playwright Schnabel added "a chorus of the unemployed," comprised of thirty-three amateurs who vented frustration and raged in the face of growing unemployment and unpopular welfare reforms (the Federal Government's Hartz IV). To come up with the text for this chorus, Lösch and Schnabel interviewed the citizens of Dresden about their experiences with labour and unemployment. Specifically, what sparked the controversy in the media

was one line, where a member of the chorus voiced the desire to shoot the television journalist, Sabine Christiansen.² The latter vehemently protested the text. The publishing house Felix Bloch Erben, along with the playwright's granddaughter Anja Hauptmann, sought to stop performances, arguing that the added material amounted to hate speech (which also included neo-Nazi remarks) and contradicted the spirit of Hauptmann's original play. Lösch attempted to justify his creative decision by mentioning that the alleged hate speeches were precisely the kinds of things said out loud by people at the end of their rope at unemployment offices. He also noted that the audience did not get upset at these passages, but applauded. The production had hit a nerve. When the Berlin Regional Court issued a temporary injunction banning the version that included new texts, the Dresden media cast the court's decision as a conspiracy against East Germany. Conspiracy questions aside, the legal case essentially pitted the copyright of the publishing house against the law of artistic freedom of expression. Lösch and Schnabel eventually got around the injunction by creating a new production, under the title *Die Dresden Weber: Eine Hommage an Gerhart Hauptmann* [*The Dresden Weavers: A Tribute to Gerhart Hauptmann*], "that was completely free of text by Hauptmann, but in the spirit of his work [and that] retained the controversial choral passages" (Dössel). This version went up in February 2005. When the Berlin Higher Regional Court overruled the decision of the Regional Court in May 2005, the first version was once again put on in Dresden (Dössel). Evidently, productions of *The Weavers* have the power to make actors and spectators, alike, examine their roles as labourers.

CONCLUSION

When *The Weavers* was banned for the first time, in 1893, and labelled "socialist," Hauptmann insisted that his play was "indeed social, but not socialist" (Osborne 135). Hauptmann's remark can be dismissed as an attempt to evade censorship, but it can also be taken at face value. What could Hauptmann have meant by "social"? Unlike the socialist theories of his time, with which Hauptmann was no doubt familiar, *The Weavers* does not convey an identifiable message in regard to restructuring the social order. As we have seen, in our excursion through the production history of *The Weavers*, it is difficult to gauge the effect of its socialist message, if there is one. Indeed, many critics have highlighted Hauptmann's "professed inability to come down firmly on either side in social and political conflicts" (Osborne 75). Yet, what can be said with certainty is that Hauptmann's treatment of human work – in the material traces that it leaves on the human body and in the ideological beliefs that it imprints on the human mind – resonated with his audience and still does today. Hauptmann dramatizes, on the stage, the *social* magnitude of work, without necessarily treating the

community as a homogenous mass. There is an optimistic note in Hauptmann's representation of work, in that collective effort might be able, one day, to construct something new (as one does with a theatre production), instead of merely wreaking havoc. *The Weavers* inaugurates a lineage of plays that would pervade modern drama – plays where issues of labour, work, and professionalization would come to the fore not only through discussion but also through methods of staging. Hauptmann's social drama does not merely talk about the plight of the weavers but stages their labour, making the theatre audience witness the signs of labour that lie hidden on the underside of the social fabric of capitalist culture.

NOTES

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, translations from the original German are my own.
- 2 For German media coverage of the scandal surrounding the Dresden 2004 production of *The Weavers*, please see A. Hauptmann; Broder; "Theaterstreit"; Schönfeld; Dössel.

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ABSTRACT: This article discusses Gerhart Hauptmann's *The Weavers* and the play's representation – and management – of labour. A dark drama about starvation and labour exploitation, Hauptmann's play paradoxically involves costly logistics and an excessively large cast. The text of *The Weavers* creates the challenge of its staging, and the arduous relationship between text and production is central to Hauptmann's exploration of human labour. *The Weavers* dramatizes the exploitation of wage labour, the ideology of

the work ethic, and the conflict between labour and capital. In doing so, Hauptmann's labour drama grapples with what Fredric Jameson has called "the representability of capitalism." Looking closely at the relationship between Hauptmann's text and its staging, throughout its production history, this article argues that *The Weavers* explores the problem of representing labour in the theatre and reveals the signs of labour that capitalist culture seeks to conceal.

KEYWORDS: Hauptmann, Marx, Jameson, *The Weavers*, labour, capitalism

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