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Aspects of the Underground and Mainstream in British and Irish Cultural Production since 1979

Alternative Theatre in Britain in the Late 70s and in the 80s

Théâtre alternatif au Royaume-Uni à la fin des années 1970 et dans les années 1980

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Alternative Theatre in Britain in the Late 70s and in the 80s

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Introduction

- 1 The present author has a long-held interest in the divide or the split between the mainstream and the fringe, the margins, the peripheries. The term "*mainstream*" can be defined as describing a dominant majority composed of decision-makers and influencers, who have their hands on the reins of power, plus those who are subsequently led by these decisions and who widely follow the same practices and habits and activities – social, cultural and political – as their peers in the same social class or group of interest. The others, those who find themselves outside the mainstream, on the fringes or edges, are necessarily minorities who, by choice or by circumstance, have different centres of focus, other motivations and practices.
- 2 This paper is an attempt to consider this dichotomy as applied to theatre, and so with particular attention being paid to the world of non-mainstream theatre.
- 3 In the 1960s and 1970s in Britain, there was a growing number of small theatre groups with many different origins and affiliations. Politically motivated or linked to specific communities (neighbourhoods, ethnic groups,...), with a mission to educate or simply to entertain, they were all gathered under one heading as "underground theatre" by the London listings magazine *Time Out* first published in 1968. At the same time though, they were described by themselves and by critics and commentators as "fringe theatre" or "alternative theatre" while others opted for titles such as "experimental theatre" or "community theatre". "Popular" and "people's" theatre were descriptions that were also used. The common thread running through this confusion of names and this

shifting terminology was that these groups and their cultural production were in some way opposed to mainstream theatre and to dominant social and cultural values.

- 4 We are talking about a period when the Second World War was still very much a reference point, if not an actual memory for the population of Britain and the millennium was almost as far into the future. It was a time when digital mobility and media did not yet exist and when the performing arts and dramatic productions in theatre (as opposed to musical entertainments) could still lay some claim to being relevant, with something to say to their audiences. To summarise extremely briefly, theatre in the UK in the early part of the second half of the 20th century was composed of major national companies, like the National Theatre (NT) and the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), West End theatres and networks of provincial and repertory theatres, which were complemented by a number of "Little Theatres" or "arts theatres" in the provinces. However, in 1947, the prestigious Edinburgh International Festival was complemented by attractions on the sidelines which became known as the Edinburgh Fringe, and consisting of theatrical performances presented in unconventional venues. The next two decades saw some small stirrings in the world of non-mainstream, theatre, until that year of note, 1968, when Jim Haynes opened the London Drury Lane Arts Lab, a venue that was not smart, was inexpensive and where the originality and the radical nature of the performances that took place there earned it the reputation for being the real jumping-off point for the alternative theatre that would spring up over the next twenty years or so. By the mid-sixties then, there was enough non-mainstream cultural activity to warrant the appearance of *Time Out*, which saw itself as "a counter-culture publication [with] an alternative viewpoint on issues such as gay rights, racial equality, and [etc]."¹
- 5 The identification of the different kinds of companies listed under *Time Out*'s general category of "underground theatre" was linked to their content (purpose and values), as well as to their structures (organisational, financial) or in other words their economies. Who were they? What were they doing? And how did they manage to survive? This last question is the most important because income, whatever the source, was the heart of the matter since actors and administrators had to live, and rents and other expenses had to be paid. It is also the topic of this article.
- 6 The information contained in this paper is mostly drawn from my 1988 thesis, supervised by Pr Philippe Rouyer and entitled *Le théâtre alternatif en Grande-Bretagne et son économie, 1968-1988*. This has remained unexploited because of the confidential information it contained. However, after thirty years it is reasonable to assume that any confidences or information obtained at the time will not be betrayed now.

The performing arts in 1979

- 7 We firstly need to examine the state of affairs in the theatre and the performing arts in 1979, before we see how things developed afterwards.
- 8 While it may not be possible to refer to the late 1970s as post-war Britain, it is true that wartime restrictions and cultural shutdown were accompanied by centralised, government-led initiatives to organise entertainment and this shaped the subsequent structuring of the funding of culture. Three leading wartime organisations ENSA (Entertainments National Service Association); the civilian Drama Section of CEMA (Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts); and the Play Unit of ABCA

(Army Bureau of Current Affairs) eventually led to the setting up of the RSC in 1961 and the NT in 1963. The commercially managed West End theatre in London picked up again after the war as did some local and regional theatres which hosted not for profit and touring repertory companies, but there was not really any space or place for other kinds of theatre. In 1946 CEMA was renamed the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB), and the first chairman was crucially not an arts practitioner but an economist, John Maynard Keynes. The Arts Council's founding charter clearly set out its function 'to increase the accessibility of the arts to the public throughout Great Britain'. Yet, as far as the arts were concerned, the idea underpinning post-war reconstruction of "*the best for the most*", was interpreted quite narrowly and the bulk of Arts Council funding catered for the expanding middle classes and their growing interest in opera, classical theatre, contemporary art and poetry. As a funding body it was supposed to function on the "*arm's length principle*" and not directly as an agency of government. By 1967, when the ACGB was granted a royal charter, its aims had been clarified: 'to develop and improve the knowledge, understanding and practice of the arts; to increase the accessibility of the arts to the public throughout Great Britain'. However, it was nevertheless a symbol of deeply entrenched establishment attitudes.² The ACGB was supplemented in 1971 by twelve Regional Arts Associations (RAA) which channelled ACGB funding and these became Regional Arts boards (RAB) in 1990. These eventually closed as did the Arts Council itself in 1994 and today the four home nations each have separate arts councils, which are all government funded bodies, with some income coming from the national lottery. Funding for the arts in the 70s was also channelled through the Association for Business Sponsorship of the Arts, started in 1976 and now named Arts and Business. Some subsidies also came from local councils but being recognised by the Arts Council as eligible for funding was a kind of mark of approval and therefore a coveted status. Mention must also be made of some of the milestones in the development of post-war society in the United Kingdom and in theatre in particular. These include the appointment of Jenny Lee as the first ever Minister for the Arts in 1964, when Labour returned to power after thirteen years of Tory government. The Wilson governments of the mid and late 60s also ended censorship in the theatre (1968) as well as passing other liberal legislation covering abortion (1967), homosexuality (1967), divorce (1969) and the abolition of the death penalty (1965). As the baby boom generation grew into maturity their musical and cultural tastes developed and expanded and alternative theatre, in its multiple forms, also began to develop, during a decade marked by political and social instabilities, from the early miners' strikes of 1972-73 through to the 'Winter of Discontent' of 1978-79.

Alternative theatre companies

- 9 In 1979, who were these "underground" or "alternative" theatre companies and troupes and what was it about them that made them feel they belonged under such headings? And how could companies which originally set themselves up as radical and alternative, catering for groups and audiences on the fringes and margins of society, square this with taking money from the ACGB, the most mainstream of organisations?
- 10 In 1976-77, the *Alternative Theatre Handbook* (ATH) contained 133 listings; by 1980 its successor the *British Alternative Theatre Directory*³ (BATD) listed 224 companies and 181 venues. In its 1981 edition its major categories roughly match those to be found in *Time*

Out: itinerant companies, theatre-based companies, theatre in education, young people's theatre and community theatre. That year, these headings and the number of companies listed were as follows: small-scale touring companies: 90, middle-scale touring companies: 8, producing venues: 13, community theatre: 45, performance art: 12, dance: 16, mime: 7. Young people's theatre is divided thus – children's theatre: 15, theatre in education: 18, young people's theatre schemes: 6, puppet theatre: 61. The directory is completed by listings of arts centres, playwrights and directors. Some years the BATD included lists of festivals and maps of locations in London.

- 11 Our original doctoral research was focussed on the first four categories listed above (small and middle scale touring companies, producing venues and community theatres) as their political, social and artistic motivations seemed to conform more closely to the idea of being alternative, parallel and different.
- 12 The appearance of the ATH and then the BATD seems to indicate that theatre practitioners were realising how many of them there were and collaboration seemed sensible, either for political reasons (negotiations with institutions such as the ACGB) or social reasons (dealings with Equity, the actors' union). Thus, the Independent Theatre Council was formally established as a pressure group in 1976. Similarly, the Pub Theatre Network appeared in 1987. Regarding the legal existence of these groups and troupes, they had several options: they could opt to be an unincorporated association or a partnership, or a company limited by guarantee, or an industrial and provident society. Many called themselves cooperatives but this naming does not have a legal status in England and Wales, although this name may represent the working structure. The final option was to constitute the body as a charity, which in fact required another legal structure such as a company limited by guarantee but having charitable status brought advantages regarding exoneration from paying income tax, business tax, capital gains and capital transfer taxes. Charities can receive gifts and donations (which also represent a fiscal advantage for the donor). However, there were disadvantages for theatre companies which were set up as charities since the directors of the troupe could not be paid by the charity/company, so it had to be managed by outsiders, who would not be paid. But the biggest drawback was that the theatre groups were not allowed, as charities, to carry on any political activities. And as this was often the very reason for their existence, they could not opt for charity status.
- 13 The working structures of the theatre companies, by which we mean the management process, can be summarized in two major forms or hierarchies.⁴

- 14 This kind of structure was exemplified by The Phantom Captain, a small-scale touring company. *"Influenced by interests in psychology, surrealism and zen. [...] experiences in which 'performed' and 'non-performed' reality are seamlessly enacted and interacted"*.⁵
- 15 The other structure is the cooperative:

- 16 The cooperative structure is exemplified by Monstrous Regiment, a MSTC which "*deals with issues of concern to those seeking a feminist interpretation of social reality [...]*" (ibid, p 56) and Action Space, a producing venue which "*aims to take new developments in the arts to a wide public through the use of unusual venues and direct contact with communities*" (ibid, p 59).
- 17 But, just as with theatrical content and company size, the hierarchies and the working structures overlapped, were fuzzy, not that easy to categorise and something of a nightmare for a taxonomist. Nevertheless, despite shifting definitions, the problems of some companies being long lasting while others were more ephemeral, our 1968-88 survey studied twelve companies in detail, their personnel granted long interviews and the administrators opened up their accounts and their files for scrutiny. Five were structured hierarchically and seven were organised as a cooperative. The number of people employed varied from seven to 34, most of whom worked full-time. The oldest was founded in 1972 and the newest in 1982, they were not all based in London and their centres of interest were very diverse.
- 18 They were: Avon Touring Company (SSTC, new writing, community around Bristol, national touring); Black Theatre Cooperative (SSTC, new writing, ethnic communities, national touring); Alternative Theatre Company (producing venue, new writing, national and international premières); London Bubble (MSTC, existing work, young people, regional touring); Trestle Theatre Company (SSTC, mime/visual, any public, deaf people, national touring); Monstrous Regiment (MSTC, new writing, feminist, national touring); Cheek by Jowl (MSTC, classical and traditional drama, national and international touring); I.O.U. (MSTC, visual, multi-media, original works, national touring); Paines Plough (SSTC, new writing, adults, national touring); ReSisters (SSTC, new writing, feminist regional touring); British Asian Theatre (SSTC, new writing, ethnic, regional and national touring); Bedside Manners (SSTC, entertainment, music, old audiences and handicapped).
- 19 The post of administrator was key to every one of these companies, and City University in London in fact offered courses in arts administration giving training for such positions. Their role was particularly focussed on company finances, getting money in and making payments. It fell to administrators (and so, no longer on the shoulders of actors or technicians) to negotiate with financing bodies like the ACGB or ABSA; to draw up and complete the documents required by these bodies, to make budgets, to rent venues, pay bills, etc.

"Money always prevails"

- 20 In interviews with administrators, emphasis was placed on the importance of money since companies could not survive otherwise and this was reflected in books and articles published at the time. Steve Gooch, a playwright reflected on this: "*Art always*

comes last".⁶ "In Britain if there is a choice to be made between art and money, money always prevails".⁷

- 21 What then were the sources of finance for alternative theatre? The ACGB, itself in receipt of a block grant from the government, was definitely the most important source of income for the performing arts. It published four reports *Theatre Today in England and Wales*, 1970; *The Glory of the Garden*, 1984; *Theatre IS for All*, 1986 and *Partnership: Making Money Work*, 1980 as well as nine reference sheets between 1981 and 1987, all outlining the need for better and more funding for theatre and giving guidance to theatre companies on how to apply for subsidies. Basically, underground or alternative theatre companies had five revenue lines: box office takings, the ACGB, RAAs, local authorities and private or business sponsorship. For 11 companies in our survey public funding accounted for between 52.9% and 85.4% of income. One company, exceptionally, only relied on subsidy for 13.4% of its income. For the 11 companies, private sources varied between 0.5% and 12% and box-office receipts accounted for between 5.4% and 44.7% of income. The exceptional company, just mentioned, got 85% of its income as takings. This company is still in existence so we shall not name it. Other sources of revenue included trusts and charities, the British Council, commerce and industry, trade unions TV companies, universities, foreign sources, the English Tourist Board, UNESCO, the Equal Opportunities Commission
- 22 As regards the expenses of theatre companies, the "cost disease" theory of Baumol and Bowen⁸ covers the situation in cultural industries and in the performing arts, where there is an intensity or density of manpower. Productivity does not increase over time but the real costs of production (wages, rent, lighting...) do. And this is particularly the case during periods of inflation, which was the case in the United Kingdom in the late 70s and into the very early 80s. In alternative theatre companies by far the biggest expense was salaries (no distinction between categories of workers, technical or artistic). In our 12 companies the average spending on wages was 61.3%. In comparison it is interesting to note that for the RSC this figure is around 27% for artists' wages and at the NT artists' salaries were around 16% and technicians' wages 17% of expenses. So, this is about half the proportion of expenditure that alternative companies were being obliged to pay out.

The theatre-product

- 23 The organisation, legal and structural, of the theatre companies and the discussion of income and expenditure of these entities is of course an economic and commercial analysis. The inevitable conclusion is that cultural activity is being regarded as a product, a perishable commodity rather than a consumer durable because of its ephemeral nature. As Jérôme Savary put it on numerous occasions: "*Le théâtre est le seul art biodégradable*".⁹ For the audience are consumers, and does theatre exist without an audience? "*I can take an empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst **someone else is watching him** and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.*"¹⁰ (my emphasis). The use of marketing techniques in the world of the performing arts is nothing new but in theatre, supply and demand, sale and promotion of the product pose specific economic and commercial constraints and there are two major factors to consider. Firstly, in a market economy, there is the importance of initial financing in order to create and then launch the product; and the very nature of

the product conditions the demand. This is true for all kinds of theatre, mainstream or alternative, except that in the first case investment in a production is made as speculation. With independent theatre companies the producer is not a speculator and financial profit is not the aim or motivation of artists, administrators or technicians. The aim is rather solvability than profit. The theatre groups which set themselves up as cooperatives or collectives attempted to combat the commercial system just described. Emphasis was placed on the fundamental importance of creativity and the search for artistic democratisation. Levels of confidence and cohesion or solidarity were at a level unknown in West End theatre or in repertory theatre. However, some companies structured as a hierarchy did function in a classic commercial manner. These practices are in fact well-established in British theatre: the "combination system" dates from the 19th century and was designed as a system to promote stars, thereby making acting a precarious career for all other actors; in the "stock system", which already existed in Elizabethan times (Shakespeare belonged to The King's Men for most of his career), company composition remains stable. As regards producing venues or building-based companies, they also varied, with some keeping permanent companies, like the Albany Empire in Brighton, while others such as the Orange Tree in Richmond put together fresh teams for each new production. The marketing of the theatre product requires the search for or even the creation of an audience. According to the economic theory of Jean-Baptiste Say (1767-1832), Say's law of markets states that the offer of a product creates a demand for it. Say would have recognised alternative theatre companies as examples of applied entrepreneurship, which would seem, strangely, to fit with the change in economic policy from 1979 on, but in fact there was a paradoxical effect on alternative theatre.

Survival and adaptation

- ²⁴ The election of a Conservative government in 1979 led to changes on all fronts, and Christopher Bradley offers an excellent overview and analysis of Conservative cultural policy within the turbulent context of the 1980s.¹¹ The shift towards a market economy in every domain had its effect on the world of underground / alternative theatre and all were affected, not just the companies with an overtly political manifesto. But according to *The Guardian's* theatre critic Michael Billington, they were all "[...] *honest people; hard-working people, badly-paid and idealistic people*"¹² whose commitment to long hours and low pay for love of their craft led to them almost subsidizing their employers. Nevertheless, monetarism and market-oriented policies from 1979 onwards meant that "alternative theatre" was being sucked into the increasingly commercial practices of all other kinds of British theatre and they began to seem less like part of a counter-culture movement opposed to mainstream policies and practices. Yet, this was a period of paradoxes. While there seemed to be less space for radicalism in theatre the energy which had led to the setting up of such groups in the first place in fact settled quite well into the new competitive environment. This then may explain why during the early 1980s the number of new theatre groups grew steadily and after having peaked at around 300 by mid-decade, this number dropped slightly to about 270 by the end of the 80s.¹³ Most of the fringe companies at this time did not in fact take a critical or political stand but were interested in theatre for theatre's sake, pioneering new writing or using mixed media in performances or re-presenting classical plays and entertainments. But the most prominent left-wing companies had been forced to close

because of cuts in grants and subsidies (including John Arden's 7:84 (England) and Joint Stock) and traditional political theatre virtually vanished. However, the strongest opposition to Thatcherism came from the growing number of companies that were issue-based (community, feminist, gay, black ...). Fringe theatre also played its part in holding up a mirror to a society that was becoming increasingly divided (north/south, un/employed, rich /poor...), but all companies were affected by withdrawal of funding and cuts made in subsidies to the performing arts, though the NT, the RSC, the Royal Opera House etc. did not suffer in the same way. This is not to say that theatre died, but it certainly withered. Another paradox of this period is the fact that in 1981 the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT) was started and this continues to flourish successfully, providing a showcase for new theatre of all kinds from all over the world. However, the playwright David Edgar did not view the cultural policies of the Thatcher governments kindly:

"Mrs Thatcher and her ideologues could and did present her economic policy as emancipatory [...] and her political attack on the left as libertarian [...]. Her *cultural* policies admit of no such interpretation. They are essentially, inherently and inescapably reactionary, restrictive and indeed censorious. Far from opening up options and choices she is seeking to close them down."¹⁴

- 25 It is easy to understand the resentment felt by many at the fact that the world of culture and certainly a large section of the performing arts sector were being forced into a situation where finance became the primary concern when an artistic venture was being undertaken, and when "self-reliance" and "independence" became the watchwords of the day in the 1980s
- 26 But use of the word "independent" cuts many ways. It chimes with the 1980s ethos of not relying on handouts and state support, work, of being self-reliant and practising self-help, yet it also reflects the spirit of the kind of theatre we have been discussing, and the aptly-named Independent Theatre Council already existed. Founded in 1974 its original function was as an association of theatre managers. Its remit expanded to include support, development and protection of different kinds for its members and by 1987 it had 210 members. In 2020 it has become a highly organised community of over 400 companies.¹⁵

Conclusion

- 27 As a conclusion we can return to some of the questions posed in this publication regarding the "underground" which in this article we have taken to mean "alternative" and "fringe". Did this naming indicate then that the theatre companies that interest us had "managed to partially break free from market forces"? The answer must be affirmative, since there always was the dichotomy of "mainstream" theatre" and "alternative" theatre, used by practitioners themselves but also by the listings magazines such as *Time Out* and *City Limits*. However, other theatre listings services in the "mainstream" press, such as *The Times* or *The Financial Times* or the *London Evening Standard* did not respect this division and their entertainment listings lumped them all together, at least as far as the producing venues were concerned. The Bush Theatre would be listed (and indeed still is) between the Ambassadors and the Cambridge.
- 28 A second point to be answered is the question: "Can you be "underground" and rely on money grants from public bodies?" Here the response has to be mitigated by according

to what date is put on the question. Certainly, at the end of the 70s, many radical, anti-Establishment groups continued to receive subsidies from the ACGB although these were being reduced, while others such as Belt & Braces Roadshow for example were removed from the list of recipients altogether. Belt & Braces' policy, as outlined in the BATD handbook 1980, was "*to present entertainment that is articulate and socialist, [...] created from the viewpoint of working and progressive people who look for socialist culture of all kinds.*"¹⁶ Since the end of World War Two there had been the dream of a socialist theatre (Arnold Wesker and Centre 42, Joan Littlewood and the Theatre Workshop) but the lack of money was a permanent problem and the blacklisting of companies pointed the way to the future as noted in the editorial of the 1980 BATD, "*the writing was clearly on the wall, and the future of alternative theatre in the eighties was obviously in the balance with regard to subsidy.*"¹⁷ "*As subsidy had been crucial to the growth of political theatre, so it would be instrumental in its decline.*"¹⁸ But for many others, whose work continued, perhaps preferring a change of a label to "independent", the flow of subsidies never dried up.

- 29 Concerning "the interactions between underground and mainstream", in theatre the channels have always been open. Working in small companies was for many actors, writers, directors and technicians, a means to an end, a springboard into "proper" theatre. Others have worked in theatre of whatever kind with no regard for labels and one example out of many might be Simon Callow who began his acting career at the Edinburgh Festival in 1973 and who has moved between different media for acting ever since: radio, television, the NT and the Royal Court working at the Bush and the Albery, at Watford theatre in repertory and in numerous films. His early autobiography is groundbreaking: "*I don't know of any other attempt by an actor of my generation to describe the theatre in which we work.*"¹⁹
- 30 The final point addresses the query asking "can cultural production be neither underground nor mainstream?" and it seems that the answer must be "yes". The benefit of hindsight being a marvellous thing, looking back at the 70s and 80s in underground /alternative/ experimental/
- 31 Fringe /independent theatre many of the troupes and companies of the period were not driven by subversive ideas or radical policies. It is true that political motivation and issues-based agendas did drive many forward, but a general overview would seem to suggest that most practitioners wanted to be involved in theatre for the sake of performance and for the desire to entertain. Maybe this was just a desire for contact and communication and the pleasure to be found in that, for those who created it and the audience who turned out to be with them.
- 32 We have been discussing a very fluid world, in which there have been so many companies, practitioners, venues and so on that it has not been possible for any commentator or observer to grasp the whole story and lay it down. Not a great deal has been published and not many archives have been set up or conserved. Nevertheless, the *Cambridge History of the Theatre*, available online, has some information. The Independent Theatre Council still exists and the history of alternative theatre has its own website.²⁰

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ABSTRACTS

In the 1960s and 1970s in Britain there was a growing number of small theatre groups with many different origins and affiliations and were all gathered under one heading as "underground theatre" by the London listings magazine *Time Out*, though they called themselves by other titles such as fringe /alternative /experimental or community theatre. These groups and their cultural production were in some way opposed to the dominant social and cultural values of the mainstream. " The election of a neo-liberal government in 1979, promoting monetarism and market forces, caused increasing economic pressure on these groups which were almost all struggling financially. This article examines what made these theatre companies different, not just in terms of content but also in the economies of these groups. What were their incomes and expenditures?. How did they survive? The paper addresses several of the key questions raised in the call for papers, the most crucial concerning the relation between those who were opposed to the mainstream but depended on mainstream institutions for the means to survive. The information is drawn mainly from an unpublished thesis.

Dans les années 60 et 70, un nombre grandissant de petites troupes de théâtres se faisait connaître dans les colonnes de l'hebdomadaire londonien *Time Out*, qui les regroupait sous la rubrique de « underground theatre ». Ces compagnies théâtrales étaient indépendantes et différentes, non seulement dans leurs motivations et leurs productions artistiques mais aussi dans leur fonctionnement. Elles se distinguaient donc clairement des institutions « mainstream ». Mais l'argent est le nerf de la guerre et le besoin de financement et surtout de subvention se fit durement sentir à la fin des années 70 et durant les années 80, après l'élection d'un gouvernement conservateur et une modification radicale de la politique culturelle. Fondé sur des travaux doctoraux menés dans les années 80, cet article examine l'économie du théâtre

alternatif, ses revenus et ses pôles de dépenses, ainsi que les effets paradoxaux de la restructuration de la subvention aux arts vivants.

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Keywords: theatre, alternative, fringe, economy, subsidy

Mots-clés: théâtre, alternatif économie, subvention

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