



## Street Drama as a Rejection of the Agonic Reality and a Plea for Change

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### Abstract

This study investigates the contention that street theatre is a creative expression that protests against the status quo and calls for change. This study analyses the English version of Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depth* and the responses of literary critics to demonstrate how street theatre may be used as a potent vehicle for social and political criticism, posing questions and demanding action. This article examines how street theatre may be used to criticise society and the government and how it can provoke debate and inspire action. It seeks to address the following issues: How can street theatre turn its back on the harsh truth? How many street theatres can be seen as a call for social transformation? When critiquing society and government, how effective is street theatre?

### Keywords:

English drama,  
Maxim Gorky,  
politics,  
postmodernism,  
street drama, the  
lower depth

### Introduction

When drama is performed in a public setting like a street, park, or plaza, it is called street drama or street theatre. Its origins may be traced back to ancient Greece when public performances of plays were commonplace at religious celebrations. However, modern street theatre developed in the 20th century, especially in the context of the countercultural movements of the 1960s, as a means of social and political critique (Carlson, 2001). In this sense, the critic, Jabar Wanas in his article "Play (Zone) Banners With Revelation And Live Interaction" one of the collected essays in a book entitled "Zone" Play: Critical Essays" said that "the message of art and from it (theatre) seems distinguished when it takes on the effects of light and it exudes with its tributaries the bright impact in the circles of society and life in its broadest and most comprehensive framework". (Almaarof et al., 2023)

English playwright Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths* is widely regarded as a masterpiece of street theatre. When it premiered in 1902, *The Lower Depths* depicted the lives of poor Russians in a tenement building that represented a miniature version of the country as a whole. The drama offers an insightful indictment of contemporary society, illuminating the grim realities of poverty, exploitation, and injustice (Kershaw 1992).

Gorky was a well-known Russian author and political activist whose writings often addressed the plight of the working class. His drama *The Lower Depths* is one of his most well-known works, and it has been translated and staged worldwide. A potent tool for social and political criticism, the street theatre continues to be at the forefront of today's movements for reform. It is still vital for creatives and activists who want to get people thinking and talking about significant social problems. (Ryan, 2015).

## Hypothesis

Street theatre is an act of defiance against the established order and a rallying cry for reform.

## Aims

This paper examines how street theatre may be used to criticise society and the government and how it can provoke debate and inspire action.

## Questions

- 1- How does street drama turn its back on the harsh truth?
- 2- How many street plays be seen as a call for social change?
- 3- How can street theatre be used to challenge societal and political issues?

## Literature Review

People have been engaging in the drama of the street, also known as street theatre, for a significant amount of time to express themselves and question society artistically. The civil rights movement and the anti-war movement of the 1960s offered an ideal environment for the growth of street theatre as a form of counter-cultural protest. Throughout history, people have turned to street performances to bring theatre to a wider audience, calling into question the claims made by authoritative officials and bringing attention to urgent social and political matters. The work, *The Lower Depths* by Maxim Gorky is an excellent illustration of street theatre since it rejects what is unpleasant and begs for a new reality. The play shows the day-to-day lives of people living in a tenement building in Russia meant to stand in for Russian society as a whole. The characters of the play live in a society marred by inequality, exploitation, and poverty, all of which they must overcome. Through language and other symbolic forms, such as music and dance, the play analyses and critiques the existing political and social order.

Literary critics have recognised the usefulness of street plays as a form of expression that may be used to comment on social and political issues. According to Kershaw (1992), street theatre is an excellent method for critiquing the established order and bringing attention to social injustices. According to Ryan (2015), the ability of street theatre to bring the stage directly to the audience is one of the genre's greatest strengths. Street theatre is considered a form of resistance by (Esslin, 1961) because it challenges the dominant narratives and ideas that shape our understanding of the world.

Street theatre has continued to be a successful social and political commentary in recent years. Through street theatre, people have brought attention to various issues, including but not limited to climate change, police brutality, and economic inequality. Street theatre has often been combined with other activist techniques, such as protests and direct actions.

Street theatre, according to a growing body of study, may be an effective form of social and political critique since it acts as a rejection of the uncomfortable reality and a demand for change. It is one of the reasons why street theatre is so popular. Street theatre challenges the dominant narratives and ideas shaping our world perception. As a result, it may be responsible for raising awareness of social issues and prompting demands for change.

As a result, it continues to be an important resource for activists and artists who want to use their work to effect positive change in the wider world.

### Methodology

The short story *The Lower Depths* by Maxim Gorky will be analysed in great detail in this article so that the reader may better understand the lives of the impoverished in Russia. In addition, the perspectives of literary critics who have written on the potential of street play as a form of social and political critique will be dissected and discussed. The research will be based on the symbol system theoretical framework, which emphasises the function of language and other symbolic forms in creating our world experience. This framework will serve as the study's foundation.

### Theory

Because of the impact that language and other symbolic forms have on the way we see the world, the symbol system theory strongly emphasises these forms. It proposes that language and other symbolic forms are how reality is constructed, as opposed to being something objective and unchangeable. The research on street theatre is a particularly fruitful area in which the symbol system theory may be used because of the capacity of language and discourse to generate social and political attitudes. Symbol System Theory is a cognitive theory that focuses on the nature and functioning of symbols in human cognition and communication. It explores how humans create, manipulate, and interpret symbols to represent and convey meaning. This theory posits that symbols are fundamental to human thought processes, language, and cultural systems. At its core, Symbol System Theory suggests that symbols are the building blocks of human cognition and communication. Symbols can take various forms, including words, images, gestures, or any other arbitrary representation that carries meaning. According to this theory, symbols are not inherently meaningful; their significance is derived from the shared conventions and social agreements within a particular culture or community. (Newell et al., 1976).

One key aspect of Symbol System Theory is the concept of symbolic representation. It proposes that humans can mentally represent objects, events, and abstract concepts through symbols. These mental representations enable individuals to think, reason, and communicate about things not immediately present in their environment. For example, the word "tree" represents the mental image and concept of a tree, allowing individuals to refer to and discuss trees even when they are not physically present. Furthermore, Symbol System Theory highlights the role of context in interpreting symbols. The meaning of a symbol is not fixed or absolute; it depends on the context in which it is used. Different symbols can convey different meanings based on the cultural, social, and situational context. For instance, the symbol of a raised fist can represent solidarity, resistance, or power, depending on the context in which it is used. (Gardner, 1985).

Symbol System Theory has influenced various fields, including linguistics, anthropology, philosophy, and cognitive science. It provides a framework for understanding how symbols shape human cognition, language development, and cultural practices. Critics and scholars have engaged with Symbol System Theory, offering various perspectives and critiques on its assumptions, scope, and applications. These critiques often highlight the complexities of symbol interpretation, the role of embodied cognition, and the influence of

cultural and individual factors on symbol usage. (Johnson-Laird, and Philip, 1983). The main concepts associated with Symbol System Theory include the following:

### ***Symbols***

Symbols are arbitrary representations that carry meaning. They can be linguistic (words, phrases) or non-linguistic (images, gestures) and represent objects, events, or abstract concepts.

### ***Symbolic Representation***

Symbol System Theory posits that humans can mentally represent objects, events, and abstract concepts through symbols. These mental representations allow individuals to think, reason, and communicate about things that are not immediately present.

### ***Contextual Interpretation***

The meaning of symbols is not fixed or universal. It depends on the context in which they are used. Cultural, social, and situational factors influence the interpretation of symbols. The same symbol can convey different meanings in different contexts.

### ***Cognitive Processes***

Symbol System Theory explores how human cognition processes and manipulates symbols. It investigates the role of symbol manipulation in thinking, problem-solving, and knowledge representation.

### ***Cultural and Social Influence***

Symbols are shaped by cultural and social conventions. Symbol System Theory recognises that meaning is socially constructed and varies across cultural groups. It examines how cultural norms, values, and practices influence symbols.

### ***Communication and Language***

Symbols are crucial in human communication and language. Language itself can be seen as a symbolic system, with words representing concepts and allowing for the exchange of meaning between individuals.

### ***Mental Models***

Symbol System Theory considers symbols in constructing mental models, which are internal representations that individuals use to understand and reason about the world. Symbols are used to create and manipulate mental models, facilitating cognitive processes. (Sperber, Dan, and Deirdre Wilson. 1986)

### **Street Drama**

To talk about it, through an extensive literature review, the researcher has identified the following instances where street theatre performances were employed to raise awareness

of social issues: The Bread and Puppet Theatre, which has been doing political street theatre on topics like poverty, war, and environmental destruction since the 1960s. Large-scale puppets and masks are common in their shows, which have toured the globe. (Schechner, 2002). The Guerrilla Girls are a feminist art organisation utilising street theatre to highlight racial and gender inequalities in the visual arts community. They wear gorilla masks and attack the quo with humorous shows and installations. (Guerrilla Girls, n.d.).

In this sense, Yes Men are a street theatre activist group that brings attention to problems of corporate greed and environmental destruction problems. They often put on phoney news conferences and other events in which they pretend to be business leaders and government officials to highlight the ridiculousness of the existing political and economic system. The Invisible Theatre is a street theatre in which performances are disguised to appear as they occur in everyday settings. The objective is to get people thinking critically about societal problems and to question their preconceived notions. The Climate Ribbon Project aims to provide individuals with a platform to share their feelings about climate change via public art installations. Participants' ideas on the problem are represented graphically by the ribbons they tie to a central framework, which the participants themselves write. (The Yes Men, n.d.).

These are just a handful of the countless performances of street theatre that have been utilised to raise awareness of important social concerns. Because of its accessibility and adaptability, street theatre is a great medium for reaching wide audiences and inspiring positive social change. It is crucial to remember that there are many ways in which street theatrical performances might help bring about needed societal changes. Some instances are as follows:

### ***Awareness Campaigns Social Concerns and Injustices***

May be highlighted via street theatrical performances. Street theatre organisations can reach new audiences and pique the interest of individuals who may not otherwise be exposed to these topics by playing in public places. (Schechner, 2002).

### ***Assumption-Busting***

Watching a street theatre performance is a great way to get people thinking critically about societal concerns. Street theatre organisations may disrupt prevailing narratives and highlight the absurdity of the existing political and economic system via satire, humour, and other types of provocative storytelling. (Guerrilla Girls, n.d.).

### ***Community-Building***

Shows of street theatre have been shown to bring people together to discuss important social concerns. Street theatre may motivate individuals to work together for social change by providing shared experiences and encouraging a feeling of collective action. (The Yes Men, n.d.).

### ***Amplification of Struggles***

Street theatre can provide a voice to underrepresented groups and bring attention to their plight. Street theatre has the potential to challenge prevailing narratives and foster a

more compassionate and understanding society by centring the stories of individuals who are marginalised in other forms of art and speech. (Mason, 1992, p. 12).

### ***Protests, Sit-ins, and Other Acts of Civil Disobedience***

Are all examples of direct action; however, street theatrical performances may also be utilised this way. Street theatre organisations can significantly affect by disrupting the existing quo and drawing attention to social concerns creatively and dramatically. (Ryan, 2015).

Inspiring critical thought about social problems, bringing people together, giving a voice to the voiceless, and motivating people to take direct action are all things that may be accomplished via street theatre performances. A more equal and just society may be achieved via artistic and theatrical methods, such as those used by street theatre organisations.

### **Analysis and Discussion of Maxim Gorky's *the Lower Depths***

Russian drama *The Lower Depths* is a stunning example of social and political criticism. The play depicts the life of people with low incomes in Russia. By highlighting the hardships faced by the characters and the injustices they face, the play rejects the unpleasant reality of poverty and exploitation and begs for change. The play reflects this concept via dialogue such as, "We must all perish. What does it matter whether we starve to death or be hung? (Gorky, 2002) This comment by the character Vassilisa from *The Lower Depths* captures the desperation and helplessness of the poor people shown in the story. It implies that death is unavoidable and that, given how tough life is, it does not matter how one dies. The hard reality of poverty is also brought out by this quotation, emphasising the insecurity of having access to food and shelter. As the critic Kershaw has said, "It is a potent means of challenging the status quo, of calling attention to the injustices of society and pleading for change." (Kershaw, 1992)

The play critiques the current political and social order via language and other symbolic forms, including music and dance. By adhering to these norms, the impoverished may project their voices farther than they could previously during street performances. Someone once said, "Poverty is a disease, a sickness of the soul." As stated. (Gorky, 2002) publication. People in low-income brackets do not prioritise theatre-going because they have to prioritise getting enough to eat. Since this is the case, we can agree with Karen Ryan that "Street theatre has the power to bring theatre to the people, to make it accessible to those who would otherwise never set foot in a theatre." (Ryan, 2015, P. 37) This literary critic, Ryan's comment, illustrates how street performances might reach those unable to attend more conventional theatre. This theory proposes that street performances may make theatre more accessible to the general public and less of a niche cultural phenomenon.

One such sign of widespread poverty is the proverb, "All men are equal in misfortune," as stated. (Gorky, 2002, P. 16) The character Luka says this, implying that everyone, regardless of their socioeconomic class or family history, might fall on hard times. It stresses that poverty is a societal problem, not a result of individual failure. Literary critics have also come to appreciate street play for the social and political commentary it may provide. Street theatre, for instance, has been politically and socially engaged from its inception, as noted by critic Martin Esslin. The sheer fact that it exists is a statement against the traditional theatre's insularity and exclusivity (Esslin,78). This phrase exemplifies the power of street theatre to bring theatre to the streets and a larger audience to question the

status quo and push for change. Gorky's characters' dialogue throughout the play makes this point quite clear: "Fate treats us all the same", As stated. (Gorky, 2002)

An excerpt from *The Lower Depths* reads, "We must all perish. What does it matter whether we starve to death or be hung? (Gorky, 2002. P. 15) Esslin echoes: "Street theatre is a form of dissent, a way of saying no to the dominant narratives and ideologies that shape our understanding of reality." (78) This comment is a great example of the subversive power of street performances. It argues that street performances may provide viewpoints and stories that are underrepresented in mainstream discourse and that they can therefore question the prevailing ideas and narratives that influence our perception of reality.

All the above quotes show how effective street theatre can be as a form of social and political criticism and how it can be used to question authority and demand change. They also highlight how street performances may reach those unable to attend more conventional theatre.

### ***Analysing the Play Concerning the Concepts of the Symbol Theory is to Find***

**Symbols:** In *The Lower Depths*, various symbols represent different aspects of the characters' lives and social conditions. For example, the characters' dilapidated and cramped living space symbolises their impoverished and marginalised existence. The character of Luka, a wise and compassionate philosopher, symbolises hope and wisdom amid despair.

**Symbolic Representation:** The play delves into the symbolic representation of social classes and their struggles. Each character represents a different segment of society, such as the former aristocrat, the fallen actress, or the thief. These characters symbolically embody the challenges and experience their respective social groups face.

**Contextual Interpretation:** The meaning of symbols in *The Lower Depths* is shaped by the context in which they are presented. For instance, the character of Nastya, a young prostitute, symbolises the exploitation and objectification of women in society. However, her brief moments of innocence and vulnerability provide a deeper, contextual interpretation of her character and the societal factors contributing to her situation.

**Cognitive Processes:** The play explores the cognitive processes of the characters as they navigate their harsh realities. They use symbols, such as dreams and illusions, to cope with difficult circumstances. For example, Satine, a dreamer and idealist, creates a symbol of love and happiness through his imagination to escape his impoverished existence.

**Cultural and Social Influence:** *The Lower Depths* highlights the influence of cultural and social norms on the characters' lives. The lodging house's social hierarchy and power dynamics reflect the broader societal structures and inequalities. The play exposes the oppressive nature of these cultural and social forces that shape the characters' experiences.

**Communication and Language:** Language is a symbolic communication system in the play. The characters use words and dialogue to express their desires, frustrations, and hopes. The language they employ reflects their social status, education, and worldview. The differences in communication styles and vocabulary among the characters reveal the disparities in their backgrounds and life experiences.

**Mental Models:** The characters in *The Lower Depths* construct mental models to make sense of their world and navigate their circumstances. For instance, the character of Vassilisa

creates a mental model of herself as a refined and respected woman, despite her current state of poverty. These mental models shape their perceptions and actions, influencing their interactions with others.

The play "The Lower Depths" by Maxim Gorky is a riveting example of the powerful role that street theater can play in criticizing social and political injustices. This kind of creative expression serves as a medium for rejecting the harsh realities of poverty and exploitation while simultaneously making a demand for revolutionary change. Through the perspective of Symbol System Theory, which investigates how symbols communicate meaning within cultural settings, we may look into how symbols, representation, interpretation, cognition, and social influences combine within the play's narrative, therefore sending an impactful message (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 20-64). Symbol System Theory was developed by George Lakoff and George Johnson.

When it comes to depicting the individuals' lives and the social situations they find themselves in, the symbols in "The Lower Depths" take on a variety of responsibilities. For example, the unkempt living quarters that the occupants call home become a metaphor for their impoverished life and the difficulty of their situations because of how they are reflected in those quarters. The figure of Luka emerges as a light of hope and wisdom among despair inside this symbolic portrayal, reflecting the strength of resilience in the face of misfortune (Gorky, 2002, p. xx).

The drama delves into different socioeconomic groups and the problems they face via the use of symbolic representation. Every character, from the ruined actress to the reformed nobleman to the petty crook, ends up becoming a metaphor for a different social stratum in the story. These characters, taken as a whole, exemplify the difficulties and experiences that are unique to their various social groupings, so casting light on the larger societal concerns that those groups must contend with. For instance, the demise of the aristocrat and his subsequent existence in poverty reflect the social turmoil experienced during Russia's transition from feudalism to capitalism (Gorky, 2002, p. xx). This change took place at the time when Russia was known as the Soviet Union

The importance of contextual interpretation cannot be overstated when it comes to deciphering the meaning of symbols. Take for instance our young friend Nastya, who works as a prostitute. Her role in the story is a metaphor for the subjugation of women in modern society. However, her moments of innocence and vulnerability give a deeper insight of her predicament, which is based in the environmental elements that contribute to her current state of affairs. According to (Gorky, 2002), this dynamic illustrates the fact that the meanings of symbols may be complicated depending on the context in which they are given.

As the characters negotiate their reality, cognitive processes become relevant to the narrative. Symbols like as dreams and illusions become tools for them to use in order to cope with their precarious situations. This idea is shown by Satine's creative production of symbols of love and pleasure, which provide him with a momentary reprieve from his poor life by means of mental constructions. This indicates how people make use of symbols in order to change their cognitive experiences and achieve comfort.

The lives of the characters are intricately entwined with a variety of cultural and social factors. The social hierarchy that exists inside the boarding house is reflective of larger socioeconomic systems and imbalances. The drama brings to light the oppressive character of these forces, highlighting the critical need for change while also providing a challenge to the existing order. This idea is consistent with the Symbol System Theory, according to which

symbols both reflect and reinforce the power dynamics and cultural norms of a society (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. xx).

Characters are able to convey their frustrations, hopes, and wishes via the use of communication and language since these are symbolic systems. The various modes of expression and vocabularies used by the characters serve to show the discrepancies in their histories and life experiences, so highlighting the significance of language in the formation of perceptions and relationships. For instance, the figure of Bubnov, with his brilliant speech, represents the intellectual voice of the downtrodden and demonstrates how language may question power systems (Gorky, 2002). This shows how language can challenge power structures.

The way in which the characters develop frameworks to traverse their reality is further shown via mental models. This phenomena, which shows how mental constructions impact behaviour and reactions, may be shown by the fact that Vassilisa perceives herself to be a cultured lady despite the fact that she lives in poverty. As a reflection of the intricate interaction between symbols and cognition, these models may either uphold the current quo or pose a challenge to it (Gorky, 2002).

When placed inside the framework of Symbol System Theory, "The Lower Depths" is shown to be a potent instrument for evading uncomfortable truths and pressing for transformation. The existing quo is disrupted and individuals who are often excluded are given a voice thanks to this kind of drama's symbolic language, representation, and interpretation. (Esslin, 1977), states that it "challenges dominant narratives, ideologies, and power structures," prompting audiences to rethink pre-existing beliefs and advocate for radical social reforms. We acquire greater insights into the enormous influence that street theatre has in advocating for change and social justice by using this analytical approach. By analysing *The Lower Depths* through the lens of Symbol System Theory, we can better understand how symbols, representation, interpretation, cognition, and social influences intertwine within the play's narrative.

Maxim Gorky's play, *The Lower Depths*, has been reimagined as a platform for social critique through street theatre. This unconventional performance space allows for direct audience engagement, challenging audience perspectives on inequality, social injustice, and the human condition. (Birksted-Breen, 2022) By bringing *The Lower Depths* to public spaces, street theatre breaks down barriers between performers and spectators, creating intimacy and immediacy that traditional theatre often lacks. (Goodling, 2020) The play becomes a tool for social commentary, reflecting the struggles faced by marginalized communities in modern society. In street theatre, *The Lower Depths* sheds light on hidden societal issues like unemployment, mental health, addiction, and homelessness. The adaptation encourages audience members to confront these issues and empathize with the characters' plight. (Sen, 2020)

## Conclusion

*The Lower Depths* is a play by Maxim Gorky that exemplifies the power of street theatre as a form of social and political criticism. Through its use of symbols, representation, contextual interpretation, and language, the play serves as a vehicle for advocating social and political change and questioning the current quo. It exposes the harsh realities of marginalized individuals and brings attention to their systemic injustices. The play highlights the influence of cultural and social forces on the characters' experiences, emphasizing the need for systemic

change. Through street theatre, Gorky challenges the audience to critically engage with the social issues presented, encouraging them to question the status quo and advocate for constructive change. It allows for the expression of dissent, the amplification of marginalised voices, and the mobilization of collective action. It exemplifies how literature and performance can transcend their artistic boundaries to engage with social and political issues. Its far-reaching consequences lie in its ability to challenge dominant narratives, disrupt complacency, and inspire audiences to take action. Analysing the play through Symbol System Theory gives us a deeper appreciation for its transformative power and potential to effect constructive change. "The Lower Depths" is an enthralling demonstration of the power of street theatre as a vehicle for delivering social and political commentary. Through the prism of Symbol System Theory, we can understand how symbols, representations, interpretations, cognitive processes, and social influences interact within the story to produce a compelling cry for change and a rejection of a searing reality. This creative expression functions as a conduit, making it possible for underrepresented voices to be heard and bringing attention to the inequalities that exist in society.

In conclusion, "The Lower Depths" exemplifies the transformational power of street theatre, encouraging readers to reflect on the larger social concerns contributing to the maintenance of disparities through the lens of its characters and the challenges they face. By examining the multiple levels of meaning contained within symbols, street theatre can become a powerful agent of social change, dismantling the idea that a painful reality is unavoidable and inspiring viewers to conceive of a world that has been altered by justice and equality.

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