

THE STATE OF BRITISH THEATRE NOW:  
AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL BILLINGTON

Mireia Aragay  
*Universitat de Barcelona*  
aragay@ub.edu

Pilar Zozaya  
*Universitat de Barcelona*  
zozaya@ub.edu

Michael Billington has been drama critic for *The Guardian* since 1971. He has written *Alan Ayckbourn* (1984), *One Night Stands* (1994), and *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter* (2001), and edited *Stage and Screen Lives* (2002). He is currently working on a survey of post-war British theatre from 1945 to the present to be published by Faber and Faber. In June 2003, Billington was voted Britain's "most trustworthy" critic on the theatre website [www.whatsonstage.com](http://www.whatsonstage.com). The interview that follows was conducted in London on 30 June 2003.

*What do you think were the causes of the renaissance in new writing for the stage in the early 1990s? Why did it happen precisely then?*

One of the reasons was a clear reaction against the moral values of the 1980s. The writers who emerged in the 1990s had grown up in England in the 1980s, the period of Thatcherism, materialism, and the belief that profit was the ultimate test of anything's worth. So we have a whole generation who were brought up in that philosophy, and who mightily repudiated it when they came into their twenties and started writing about it. We see this in the work of Mark Ravenhill very specifically, and to some extent in Sarah Kane, Patrick Marber, and Joe Penhall too. They are very different writers, but they all share a dislike of 1980s materialism. There were pragmatic reasons too for this sudden outburst of activity. It was partly to do with the fact that Stephen Daldry took over the Royal Court as Artistic Director in 1993, and he decided that the best way forward was to do as many plays as possible. He says that looking at the Royal Court's history of the 1950s he discovered that George Devine's philosophy was always to put on as much new writing as possible, so he just tumbled us with new plays. He was also very skilful at raising sponsorship—for instance, the Jerwood Foundation put a lot of money into two seasons of plays, in 1993 and 1994, at the Royal Court Upstairs. The third factor, a very important one, was the National Theatre Studio creating a bank of plays. In other words, what they did was to offer writers the facilities to write—an office for about eight weeks, a typewriter and a bit of money. A lot of plays resulted from this, but the National Theatre couldn't present them all because they didn't even have the space. What they did was to farm them

out to other theatres—a lot of the plays put on by the Royal Court in the mid-1990s originated from the National Theatre Studio. So I would broadly say there was a mixture of reasons—political, philosophical and pragmatic—why there was an upsurge, but at the heart of it, it was a feeling that someone had to protest about the kind of Britain that we were living in, and the world that this young generation had inherited.

*Would you say that new writing continues to be strong today?*

As is well known, there was a hitch in the 1980s, and then an amazing resurgence from about 1993 onwards. It has more or less continued since then, which is very gratifying. Just right now, in 2003, we're going through a rather good period, for several reasons. One is the approach of the Artistic Directors running the theatres. For example, Nicholas Hytner, who has just taken over the National Theatre, says that he's going to use the Cottesloe for nothing but new writing. He's not going to do classic plays there, or even recent classics; it's going to be solely new work.<sup>1</sup> So far, they have put on *Scenes from the Big Picture* [2003]—a brilliant play by Owen McCafferty about a day in the life of Belfast, offering you snapshot images of how people live in this beleaguered city—and Kwame Kwei-Armah's *Elmina's Kitchen* [2003], a play about life in Hackney today. A third play is opening this week, Nick Dear's *Power*,<sup>2</sup> and there's a play by Michael Frayn coming up in September.<sup>3</sup> So the Cottesloe is doing nothing but new plays, and obviously the Royal Court continues to do precisely that. Hampstead Theatre, also a new writing theatre, has just opened a new building and has got a new director, Anthony Clark, coming in in a month's time. They've also been putting on work at a great rate. A lot of regional theatres are also doing new writing. For example, Ian Brown, who runs West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds, is very committed to new work. So there are, as there have been for some time, a lot of theatres in London doing new work, but also a lot of regional theatres investing in new work. Another reason why this is happening at the moment is that, although it is not brilliant, funding for the theatre has been improved over the last two years. Whatever the sins of the Labour government, one thing they have done is to increase funding for all theatres in the country, via the Arts Council. Theatres now have a three-year budget, which means they can plan their future seasons more easily than they used to. It also means they have more freedom to do new work. So theatres like West Yorkshire Playhouse, Sheffield Playhouse or Birmingham Rep—whose studio theatre, The Door, does almost entirely new work—are part of the buzz about new writing at the moment. This year, for some reason, has been particularly good. There seems to be an energy about the theatre at the moment, partly because, as I said a moment ago, a bunch of new directors have taken over the key institutions—Nicholas Hytner at the National Theatre, Michael Boyd at the RSC, Michael Grandage at the Donmar, Michael Attenborough at the Almeida, Anthony Clark at Hampstead, Ian Brown at West Yorkshire Playhouse, and Ruth Mackenzie, Steven Pimlott

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1. Hytner (opening season April 2003) took over from Trevor Nunn.

2. *Power*, directed by Lindsay Posner, opened at the Cottesloe on 3 July 2003.

3. The play in question is *Democracy*, which was premiered at the Cottesloe on 9 September 2003, under the direction of Michael Blakemore. It was a huge hit and won the Evening Standard Play of the Year Award.

and Martin Duncan at Chichester—and they're all looking for new writing. There is a hunger at the moment for new work.

*Where would you say is finer work being done, in London or in the regions? In the big and strongly subsidised theatres or in the smaller houses?*

It's difficult to make a value judgement, London versus the regions. Obviously, London has a huge advantage because it's got so many theatres and new writing spaces. In the regions—in Leeds, Sheffield, or Birmingham—there is often one main theatre only, which therefore has to cater for a very wide audience. In the season it probably has to do a major Shakespeare, a few major classics, a musical. But as I've just said, what's encouraging is that they're doing new writing, and not only in the studio spaces. For a long time, the tendency was to put the new writing in the studio spaces, the "black boxes" that were created in the 1970s, and the popular work into the main house. The problem was that these studio pieces were playing to about a hundred and twenty people only. But now new work is edging its way back onto the bigger stages. This year, Sheffield has done four new plays, of which three in the studio and one in the main house. Last year, from 23 May to 22 June, they did a very good season of Peter Gill, a look back over his career, and again they did four plays in the studio—*Kick For Touch*, *Mean Tears*, *Small Change* and *Friendly Fire*—and a big new play on their vast main stage—*Original Sin*. The Birmingham studio, The Door, does new work, but they've revived David Hare's famous 1990s trilogy about the state of Britain in the main theatre.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, it was the only time I've ever seen the main theatre full in Birmingham. It was as if the audience was hungry for this kind of large-scale work. At the National Theatre, Nicholas Hytner says he can't wait to do a new play on the Olivier stage. Although he's going to do new work in the Cottesloe, he wants new writing for that main house as soon as something comes through the system. So it seems we are getting away from the minimalism that hampered British theatre for a long time, the assumption that new writing could never appeal to more than a tiny handful of people. Audiences are beginning to hunger for large statements. Only last week, it was made public that a new 500-seat theatre will be built in the heart of Shaftesbury Avenue in the West End by Cameron Mackintosh, to take exactly the kind of plays from theatres like Hampstead or the Almeida or the Donmar that need a wider audience.<sup>5</sup> It will be called the Sondheim Theatre, after Stephen Sondheim. It's going to do musicals as well, but it's a great leap forward in any case. If you have a successful new play in one of the smaller theatres, the problem has always been, where do you take it afterwards? If you put it in a big West End theatre, you often kill it. A medium-size West End venue that can do new work is wonderful news.

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4. Hare's trilogy consists of *Racing Demon* (1990), *Murmuring Judges* (1991) and *The Absence of War* (1993). The premieres of the three plays were directed by Richard Eyre and opened at the Royal National Theatre.

5. Cameron Mackintosh has produced some of the most successful musicals ever—*Evita*, *Cats*, *Les misérables*, or *The Phantom of the Opera* to mention only a few. He currently owns seven London theatres. In 1996, Mackintosh was awarded a knighthood for his services to British theatre.

*How do you assess the role of Scotland and Ireland in the new writing scene?*

Obviously there has been a lot of energy and activity in Scotland, with writers like David Greig and David Harrower. What is interesting is that these plays are now coming south of the border, to London or other theatres in England. There was a time when they never moved beyond Scotland. They were considered parochial and local, and often incomprehensible. But now any play by either Harrower or Greig will automatically get a London showing.

Ireland is a separate case, obviously. There was a time when it seemed as if all plays in London were Irish. Marie Jones's *Stones in His Pockets*, which was premiered in Belfast [West Belfast Festival, Whiterock Buildings] in 1996, is now in the third year of its West End run. Conor McPherson and Martin McDonagh have been very prolific, even if they're a bit silent at the moment—Conor McPherson has gone into making films and Martin McDonagh hasn't got a new play since *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* [The Other Place, Stratford-upon-Avon, 2001].<sup>6</sup> But they're both there and so is Brian Friel, obviously; and many others. So one gets the impression that Ireland is very active. The country is going through an extraordinary period of transition, and new writing always seems to me to stem from something in the society. In Ireland, the transition from an agrarian economy to a very urban economy, the growth of the computing industry and the media business, the fact that the country is part of the EU and part of the euro, and the decline of the Catholic Church—all those things make for a very volatile society, which makes for interesting writing.

*Isn't there a danger of just overflowing the stage with new plays by new playwrights?*

I understand the argument, but I don't agree with it, because it seems to me it's very important to have a constant turnover of new work. For example, for their "Transformation" season last year, the National Theatre created a studio space on top of the Lyttelton, which they called the Loft, and they did about six plays in about fourteen weeks.<sup>7</sup> Some of the plays were very good, some were less good, but it gave writers the chance to see their work. Roy Williams is also a very good example. He started in 1996, having a play, *The No-Boys Cricket Club*, staged at the Theatre Royal Stratford East. He then moved on to the Royal Court, and got a very good play put on by the National Theatre in their "Transformation" season, *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads* [Lyttelton Loft, 2000], which was about football and racism, and racism within football; and now he's got *Fallout* [2003] at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs. In other words, he's a good example of how writers have been encouraged to keep writing by an ongoing flow of commissions. It's a highly competitive market, but I don't think there should be special privileges attached to older writers. They have to compete with the next generation coming up below them—it's healthy if there's always the sense of another generation knocking at the door, waiting, seeking permission. The only qualification I would make is that it isn't always easy

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6. A new play by Martin McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, opened at the Cottesloe on 13 November 2003. It was directed by John Crowley.

7. See <http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/?lid=2323>.

for established writers to get their work done, particularly not in the West End. Peter Hall told me recently that he's got a new play by Simon Gray, with the cast lined up, including John Wood and Colin Redgrave—four big names. But they can't get the play on in the West End, because they have no big American TV or film stars. That's a sign of the times. There was a moment when you'd assume a Simon Gray play with Peter Hall directing would be automatically thought to be commercial. But now, unless you've got someone from a TV sitcom or a film, the climate in the West End is very difficult for new work. But in the subsidised theatres the climate is very healthy.

*At the end of 2002, you complained that there was a dearth of political plays, plays about public issues, about what it is like to live in England today (Billington 2002). A recurrent criticism made against "in-yer-face" theatre concerns its political shortcomings. What is the state of political theatre today?*

"In-yer-face" theatre generally seems to me to start with a moral disgust, which it embodies in an aggressive, violent, highly sexual form of theatre.<sup>8</sup> You could extend the word "political" to include a lot of these plays. Sarah Kane seems to me a palpably political writer, in that she thought the society we lived in was inherently corrupt, and its values were false, and we lived a lie, basically. *Blasted* [Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, 1995], which we all got wrong when we first saw it, is a political play which denounces the indifference we have cultivated to what's going on in the rest of the world. Kane was arguing that if only we experienced some of the things that were happening at that moment in Serbia, we would come to our senses. She wasn't wishing them upon us, but she was saying that we ignore the reality of other people's tragedies and live an insulated existence, and she wanted to shock us into awareness. I would call that a political gesture. It all comes down to how you define the word "political." Mark Ravenhill's *Some Explicit Polaroids* [Theatre Royal, Bury St Edmunds, 1999] is also about the fact that we live hypocritical lives, and we don't face up to the truth about our own nature. Ravenhill's first play, *Shopping and Fucking* [Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, 1996], is directly political. In my view, it's in the John Osborne tradition of denouncing that we all live corrupt and false lives and we elevate money into a God. So "in-yer-face" writers are not necessarily apolitical or non-political; some are, some aren't.

Secondly, what is extraordinary is how quickly situations change. At the end of 2002, I was lamenting the retreat from socio-political themes, but then, because of the Iraq War, we got on the fringe four or five plays all dealing with exactly what was happening at the moment. And I wrote another piece about the theatre's ability to respond very quickly to current events, much more so than television and cinema (Billington 2003). In other words, what may be true in December 2002 suddenly becomes untrue in April 2003. As a journalist, one has a duty to goad people, and keep reminding them that half of the theatre's function is to deal with current reality—British theatre has been founded on that for the last fifty years. At the moment, there are a number of plays on in London that do deal with current issues. Again, Roy Williams's *Fallout* is a good example: it's about race

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8. The label "in-yer-face" theatre is widely used to refer to avantgarde 1990s new writing, following Aleks Sierz's influential *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (2001).

and violence on the streets, and it's also about the racism of a black policeman, interestingly enough. Or Owen McCafferty's *Scenes from the Big Picture*, a wonderful picture of what is like to live in a city like Belfast with all that pressure around you. And *Elmina's Kitchen*, an absolutely vivid picture of Hackney life. These plays seem to me to be in touch with what's going on in the world. And there's one other play which has survived incredibly until now, *The Madness of George Dubya*, a satire on Bush, Blair and the Iraq War that is so popular that it's still running six months after the premiere.<sup>9</sup> That was actually the play that sparked off my second article, saying that theatre is reacting to current events. So I'm less pessimistic than I was in December 2002.

*What other forms is political drama currently adopting?*

There's one big area, documentary drama, which has made something of a return. As well as the more obviously political playwrights—some of whom are of an older generation; one mustn't forget that David Hare and David Edgar are still writing—there has been a movement lately, in the last five or six years, towards a documentary approach to theatre. It's come mostly from the Tricycle Theatre in north London, run by Nicholas Kent, who is highly politically motivated. In 1999 they put on a play called *The Colour of Justice*, which was based on the sad case of Stephen Lawrence, a young black boy who was killed at a bus stop by a gang of white youths.<sup>10</sup> The police never arrested or pinned the crime on these white youths, although they certainly knew they did it. It was a story of police incompetence and possibly corruption; they simply assumed if it had been violence between black and white, it must be the blacks doing violence to the whites, not vice versa. The case became a scandal, and there was a public inquiry into what happened, the McPherson Inquiry. The Tricycle edited this inquiry and put it on the stage, and it was as gripping as any interesting play. You saw the layers of truth slowly being revealed and slowly getting to the heart of the racism within the British police force. The Tricycle have also done powerful documentary shows on Srebrenica, on how previous British governments allowed arms to be sent to Iraq, and so on. Recently, the Royal Court staged a series of early evening forums on the Iraq War, and it was very interesting to see how every writer took a different line. Martin Crimp did a wonderful satire called *Advice to Iraqi Mothers* [2003]. Caryl Churchill did a purely factual piece, *Iraqdoc*, based on exchanges between Iraqis and Americans on a website chatroom. In other words, there are lots of strands to political theatre. The old strand, creating a big fictional play in the style of David Hare or Trevor Griffiths, is now complemented by other approaches that can be equally powerful, such as the documentary approach. David Hare raised that question in *Via Dolorosa* [1998], when he said that confronted by the magnitude of the crisis in Israel today, any fiction would be irrelevant. The only way to do it was by reporting the facts. Having said that, the Tricycle recently did stage a play set in Jerusalem, *Crossing Jerusalem* [2003], by Julia Pascal, a young Jewish writer who lived in England and France for a long time. It's a very interesting play about family life in Jerusalem and the lack of understand-

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9. Written and produced by Justin Butcher, the play was premiered at the Theatro Technis in London, in January 2003.

10. The play was written by Richard Norton-Taylor and directed by Nicholas Kent.

ing between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Or, to take another example, there was a wonderful Russian play at the Royal Court a few months ago, *Terrorism* by the Presnyakov brothers.<sup>11</sup> Although the title seemed to imply you were going to see a naked and direct treatment of the subject, it was actually a very oblique and very funny denunciation of the extent to which the whole of Russian life now is corroded by terrorism. So that was another example of the satirical, comic approach to some things. In short, different writers are using different methods and, while we used to think political theatre meant public plays on public issues, there are many different approaches to it at the moment.<sup>12</sup>

*Mark Ravenhill has recently claimed that “the great bind of English playwrights is that they feel compelled to write about ‘times like this,’” that is, to produce naturalistic social or political plays. And he was arguing that maybe it’s time “to cut loose from the social, the material, the political . . . to embrace the mysterious, the ambiguous,” the metaphysical (Ravenhill 2003).*

Plays obviously have to reflect the temperaments of the writers. I’m not insisting that every play has to be about something in the news. But I would argue Ravenhill is erecting a false antithesis there—either plays are social, political and naturalistic, or they are symbolic, mysterious and poetic. I don’t see that as a necessary binary opposition. You can write wonderfully poetic plays that are urgently political. The classic example is Harold Pinter, whose *One for the Road* [Lyric Theatre Studio, 1984]—a good example, as it’s been revived on more than one occasion lately—seems as topical now as when it was first done in the 1980s. It’s about torture, brutality and violence, and yet it’s so distilled and economical, like a dramatised poem. But you couldn’t say it’s not related to the world we inhabit. In other words, I would dispute the premise behind Ravenhill’s point. I would welcome plays that are mysterious and ambivalent as well, but they don’t therefore have to be unrelated to what’s going on. In fact, I can’t think of any play Ravenhill has written that isn’t about now. His most recent piece, *Mother Clap’s Molly House* [National Theatre Lyttelton, 2001], is a case in point. On one level, it’s a big historical extravaganza about life in the London molly houses in the eighteenth century. It is also very much a political and contemporary play, which argues that the gay movement has now become so self-conscious that it’s lost a sense of spontaneity and joy. In other words, he was using the past as a critique of the present. Its form is that of a Haendelian baroque opera, but it is actually a social criticism about where we are now—indeed the action takes place in the same house, then and now, so that you see how gay people today seem curiously joyless, in comparison with their eighteenth-century forbears. *Shopping and Fucking*, *Some Explicit Polaroids* and *Mother Clap’s Molly House* all seem to me in that sense social plays. In short, it seems to me Ravenhill’s work disproves his own thesis.

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11. The Royal Court production used Sasha Dugdale’s translation.

12. Two recent documentary plays are: Richard Norton-Taylor’s *Justifying War* (about the Hutton Enquiry into the death of defence expert David Kelly), which opened at the Tricycle on 4 November 2003, directed by the theatre’s Artistic Director Nicholas Kent; and David Hare’s *The Permanent Way* (about railway privatisation), premiered at the York Theatre Royal on 13 November 2003, and on a nationwide tour until May 2004. Hare’s play, an Out of Joint/National Theatre co-production directed by Max Stafford-Clark, caused a huge stir.

*You have just mentioned Harold Pinter—could you comment on his influence on the younger generation of playwrights?*

Sarah Kane was very much in awe of Pinter and influenced by him. She knew him quite well and admired his poetic drama very much. Pinter is now 73, and he still gets his plays done and is still writing, so he becomes a good role model for playwrights today. But his style doesn't seem to exert the influence it did in the 1960s, when everyone was writing "Pinterish" plays. Patrick Marber does seem to be influenced by Pinter's style; he writes that kind of economical dialogue. But overall it's a generalized, pervasive influence, rather than a specific one. A playwright who certainly has an influence on younger writers is Caryl Churchill, particularly in the case of women dramatists. Caryl Churchill showed the limitless possibilities of theatre. But the interesting point is how influences work both ways. The older generation influences the younger generation, and then the younger generation has an influence back. Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* [Albery Theatre, 2001], which is very short and apocalyptic, reminded me in some ways of Sarah Kane. The play had the same visceral impact that younger writers were now achieving. It was as if she was becoming a co-opted member of the "in-yer-face" generation.

*You have referred to what the Royal Court and the Tricycle have done to promote new writing. What are the hallmarks of other new writing venues in London?*

All these theatres have their different philosophy, depending partly on who runs them. The Royal Court has always had a social-political thread running through its work. The Bush Theatre, probably because of its scale, tends to do plays that are a little more domestic than public. But having said that, their plays are not without social resonance. They've done some very good plays recently, and their particular talent is for discovering writers early on in their careers, when they are seedlings, before they become big flowers, as it were. They are a vital strand in the new writing scene. Hampstead Theatre tends towards the domestic-naturalistic. They tend to put on middle-class plays, because there's a middle-class Hampstead audience. Having said which, it was Hampstead Theatre that did *Feelgood* in 2001, which was actually the one really biting satire that has so far been on "Blairism."<sup>13</sup> It was very funny, very successful and it transferred to the West End. The Soho Theatre is still looking for its identity. It's not quite clear what it stands for; it does all sorts of plays. It has not yet done very much that's been really bold. The Tricycle is hugely political and also dominated by the fact that it's in Kilburn, which has large Irish and black communities. They do a lot of Irish plays—Marie Jones's *Stones in his Pockets* was first shown in London at the Tricycle and then moved around. They also do a lot of plays by black writers. Theatre Royal Stratford East is in the middle of a black community and does a lot of black musicals. So each theatre is partly defined geographically, by which part of London it is in, and partly by the temperament of the artistic director.

*In 1956 and All That, Dan Rebellato re-reads the role played by the Royal Court in the 1950s, arguing that the theatrical revolution headed by Osborne and Look Back in Anger was far*

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13. The play was written by Alistair Beaton and directed by Max Stafford-Clark.

*more conservative in terms of political outlook, sexual politics and modes of production than has been traditionally proposed (Rebellato 1999). What is your own view on this question?*

I disagree with almost every single statement in the book. It's a well-researched book by a young man, but he wasn't there at the time. I was only sixteen when the Royal Court got under the way, but it's clear to me that it didn't feel like that at the time. It is true that technically and structurally a lot of the plays of the 1950s were not all that experimental, but against that you'd have to put a playwright like Anne Jellicoe. I'm re-reading a lot of the plays of that period for the book I'm currently writing, and she was doing what Caryl Churchill did later, constantly trying to redefine the structure of plays. *The Sport of my Mad Mother* [Royal Court, 1958] is an extraordinary play—fifty years ahead of its time, it seems to me, because it suggests that there is a vibrancy in street language and street poetry, and a violence in street culture, that the stage has never represented. It was a terrible flop, but still it was a remarkable play. It's true that Osborne inherited most of the conventions of the previous generation; I wouldn't deny that for a moment. But even he then started to experiment with possibilities. *Look Back in Anger* [Royal Court, 1956] is technically a very conservative play in its structure, but then he wrote *The Entertainer* [Royal Court, 1957], which is a very radical play structurally, because it tries to embrace the musical and domestic life and integrate them, almost. In other words, I don't think the Royal Court in the 1950s was that aesthetically conservative. What you have is a lot of writers who were all discovering their own voice and seeing what could be done in the theatre. Take Arnold Wesker, for example—he asks, why can't we put life onto the stage? So in his first play, *The Kitchen* [Royal Court, 1959], he puts the whole choreography of the restaurant onto the stage, and people were knocked backwards. In *Chips With Everything* [Royal Court, 1962] he puts on stage a whole RAF parade. As a young person going to the Royal Court in the 1950s, you always went with the expectation of something new. And I promise you it was very different from what was happening in the West End, where the conventions were much the same as they always had been—a certain sedateness and a certain politeness. You went to the Royal Court to hear a different language. I would add that the Royal Court, through its designers, was looking not for naturalism, but a purified naturalism. This has always been underestimated. The work they did wasn't representational; it was much more economical and suggestive. Their great designer, Jocelyn Herbert—who died recently—and directors such as Lindsay Anderson or William Gaskill helped to define the aesthetic of the Royal Court—a slightly Spartan aesthetic, in which you didn't put on stage anything that wasn't strictly necessary. It was a puritan aesthetic, simply, which seems to me to continue right up to the present day. It's really the defining quality of the Royal Court, radically different from the scenery and visual conventions of West End theatre. You could tell a Royal Court production immediately by looking at production photographs. In other words, I would dispute almost all of Dan Rebellato's thesis.

*What about the role played by the Royal Court in the 1990s? Seen with a bit of hindsight, would you say that the kind of plays favoured by the Court were not as socially or politically subversive as they may have seemed at the time because of their “in-yer-face” aesthetics?*

The Royal Court underwent change over the 1990s. Max Stafford-Clark was running it first, then it was him and Stephen Daldry jointly, then Daldry on his own, and finally

Ian Rickson came in in 1998.<sup>14</sup> But if we look back, “eclectic” is probably the word that comes honestly to mind to describe the Royal Court in the 1990s. In other words, there has not been a single thread of work, but an eclectic mix which has ranged from quite specifically “in-yer-face” work to Irish writing, new black voices—an extraordinary mixture. I would still suggest that underneath that eclecticism there has been a strong thread of social awareness, of looking at all kinds of different issues—from care in the community to race, to the humiliation of the unemployed, and so on. The one thing the Royal Court never does is pure escapism; that’s the only thing you would not expect to see at the Royal Court. You go to the Royal Court with an expectation that a play will deal rather obliquely with the culture that we inhabit. The methods used are often widely different from play to play. There’s been a slightly greater emphasis in the last two or three years, not really in the 1990s, on comedy, on a sudden lightness, which did not use to be a strong element in the Royal Court work. But I think we mythologise the Royal Court. We assume that everything that they’ve ever presented has always been subversive and designed to get people to barricade. It’s not true; the Royal Court has presented a huge, diverse range of writing over the last fifty years and it continues to do so at the moment. In the 1990s it had to survive, and it survived, I would argue, by being eclectic.

*Is there a playwright whom you would consider to be the Court’s archetypal playwright for the 1990s?*

It would probably have to be Sarah Kane, simply because of her international impact. She’s the one who has survived, partly because of the cryptic nature of her career; the one around whom myths are starting to assemble; the one whose plays get performed everywhere; the one who is always talked about at conferences. So she has to be the dominant figure.

*As a critic, how do you recall the experience of watching plays like *Blasted* or *Shopping and Fucking* for the first time?*

What I remember vividly is the sudden explosion of energy, because of the quantity of first nights. We were going to the Royal Court about every three weeks to see writers of whom we had never hitherto heard. Stephen Daldry’s great achievement was to find the funding to make this possible. I’m a great believer in the idea of creating an excitement in a theatre, for example by the sheer quantity of your openings. Stafford-Clark rather more cautiously tried to balance the books and not do work he couldn’t afford. Daldry started the other way around: “Let’s do the work we want to do and then see how we can finance it.” There was a sense of ceaseless activity—Sarah Kane, Joe Penhall, Nick Grosso, all these writers we had never heard of were suddenly here with these plays. We were there every Monday night, every third week, for a period of about three months. It was tremendous and it did make a big impact. Similarly, when the National did the “Transformation” season, there was a sense of a new play every fortnight. In my view, it’s important sometimes for theatres

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14. Stafford-Clark was Artistic Director of the Royal Court from 1979 to 1993; Daldry joined him in 1993 and stayed until Rickson took over in 1998.

to throw work at you. Not because there will be a dozen masterpieces, but because it gives writers a sense of exposure, and the theatre a sense of hyper activity, which I find healthy and good. Out of these writers, the good ones will emerge and write their second or third play. As has happened.

*How do you recall the emotional impact?*

*Blasted*, as is well known, gave rise to revulsion initially, on the part of most critics. It's crucial to remember, in this connection, that it was put on Upstairs, a very intimate space, which meant there were these terrifying things happening six feet away from you. I still think it is aesthetically difficult to judge a play when such things are happening so viscerally in front of you. Aleks Sierz may deny this, but I would claim that "in-yer-face" can rebound on you. In fact, very interestingly, critics wrote much more intelligently about *Blasted* when it was revived in 2001 in the main theatre Downstairs—after Sarah Kane's death, admittedly. It was the same production by James MacDonald, but it seemed distanced and framed, so that it became possible to understand it without being offended or shocked by it. The events were still horrific, obviously, but we were able to aesthetically embrace them because they were not happening under our nose. Some things in the theatre are so powerful that you want to be separated by the proscenium arch from them. Emotionally, I was shocked by the play when I first saw it. The second time I was struck by how beautiful and moving a play it was, and how very like Edward Bond's *Saved* [Royal Court, 1965]. There's only one line spoken in the last scene in *Saved*, when Len is mending the chair, and it's as if the whole play has moved towards a moment of possibility for this young man. In the last scene of *Blasted*, after they have lived through all the terrifying violence and horror, Cate feeds Ian some sausage and bread and pours some gin down his throat. The last line in the play is Ian's "Thank you," which is simply an acknowledgement of the other person, Cate, as a person, as a human being, rather than as an object. It's as if communication has at last been established on a humane level. So the play, far from seeming a squalid spectacle of horror, seemed to me a humanist statement about the possibilities that lie ahead of us. But I couldn't see that the first time; no one could. It became much clearer when the play was framed. In short, the emotions of the 1990s were volatile, from excitement to shock to delight; all sorts of things.<sup>15</sup>

#### Works Cited

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15. This is one in a series of interviews conducted by Mireia Aragay and Pilar Zozaya with leading figures in contemporary British theatre, including so far critic Aleks Sierz, directors Stephen Daldry, Ian Rickson and Max Stafford-Clark, playwright Kevin Elyot, academic and playwright Dan Rebellato, and the Royal Court's Associate Director International Elyse Dodgson. The interviews are part of a larger research project, "Contemporary British Drama in London since 1995," sponsored by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Technology (project number BFF2002-00257).

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Billington is moved by the strength of a singular vision and considers in depth the writers whose impact still reverberates, such as Samuel Beckett and Joe Orton. One of several surprising contentions is that British theatre's real tipping point was 1960's *Beyond The Fringe* revue. Even if the dissections of productions you never saw starts to pall, Billington's insightful arguments can only enhance your next trip to the theatre. Advertisement. Advertisement.