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TERRY HODGSON

Contemporary Drama

English Drama since 1980

A survey of the 1970s (see Itzin, 1980) could justifiably focus on a vigorous 'fringe' movement which produced much new drama and proved a fine training ground for young actors, directors and writers. Since 1980, a great deal of the talent which developed within it has moved on, to the bigger theatres, to the large subsidised national companies and some to TV and cinema. As the fringe has waned and subsidies have shrunk it seems best in an article on the 1980s and 90s to focus on important achievements on the national and London scene, with some reference to what Dennis Potter calls the 'Variety Theatre in the corner of the living room.'

Lack of space will exclude much that is still vital in the regions and touring companies, though some comment will be made on current economic strains. Nor is it appropriate to examine recent developments in academic theatre studies and the pioneering work of, say, T. Kowzan (1968, *Diogenes* 61, pp. 52-80), Keir Elam (Elam, 1980) or Patrice Pavis (Pavis, 1992). It will be time to do so when such work affects practice in the pragmatic British theatre.

I prefer to begin more humbly by pointing to traditional forms of comedy and popular fooling such as were dear to Samuel Beckett (1906-89), who blended his learning in European philosophy and Greek tragedy with farce and music hall double act, shunning the sin of solemnity to which scholarship is prone. He notoriously refused to explicate his plays, recommending seekers of enlightenment to take aspirin among the overtones. Seriousness easily becomes solemnity (the enemy of drama and the target of much farce) so we may well begin by raising a bowler hat to popular comedy and Beckett's recently concluded endgame even if, in the late fragments such as *Not I* and the poignant *Ghost Trio* his characters no longer joke in the face of time.

Beckett's views, of course, can be discerned in, but not detached from, the dramatic works themselves, for he writes in a tradition of 'self-reflexive' drama which has existed at least since Hamlet gave instruction to the Players. Plays about playing are numerous in the comic tradition and in the present century Pirandello and Beckett have given the genre new twists. An important recent example is Trevor Griffiths's (1935-) *Comedians* (1975), which convincingly embodies and analyses different forms of stand-up comedy – those which flatter and those which subvert the prejudices and needs of private individuals and social groups. Griffiths illustrates the function of jokes about race, sex and religion, then writes a climactic scene, in which the threat of violence kills the laughter.

Much eighties social drama in the 'alternative' theatre recalls that pow-

erful scene. Liberalism is disparaged and a sardonic, often grim intensity takes over, as in, say, the *7 Lears* (1989) of Howard Barker (1946-), which has limited popular (and arguably dramatic) appeal.

Comic forms mingle with the serious and sombre in the 1980s. Brecht's comic epic and the Shavian discussion play are prominent influences. Stanislavskian naturalism is still standard in comedy live and screened – as in the poignant *Talking Heads* of Alan Bennett (1934-). And the performances of Marceau (1923-) and Lecocq's school of mime have powerfully affected the work and writing of Steven Berkoff and such companies as *Théâtre de Complicité*.

For most spectators/viewers of the last decade, however, drama means the soap and the staple consumer comedy of the sitcom. That such entertainment fails to fulfil important dramatic functions would certainly be the view of the abrasive (but courteous) Griffiths, who has recently found it difficult to have his work accepted for television, while writers, directors, producers and actors who do not share or cannot afford his view of the functions of drama, provide audiences with a visual pabulum which aims to pacify rather than disturb. Andy Medhurst recently defined the anodyne comedy serial *Last of the Summer Wine*, which has run since 1972, as "a pastoral nostalgia fantasy with an almost bravura disdain for the complications of contemporary life. It can be kept going forever because it was never set in the present in the first place" (Medhurst, 1993).

This serial, he suggests, is for the elderly who want a momentary escape from living. A kind of pastoral myth-making, or perhaps one should call it lying, remains the professional business of many talented actors, directors and writers who accept or compromise with institutional supply and public demand.

Moralism may lay a trap for us here since the laughter produced by such facile drama may arise from the audience's awareness of the discrepancy between the pastoral lie and the known truth. Salvation may be found in laughter. Only where the myths are taken seriously, as a projected fantasy involving full identification, and tied in with some neurotic search for absolute purity, do they threaten to become poisonous.

Such plays do not invite analysis of their own processes. Others, more worthy of respect, do. Beckett knew the solace of play and Brecht and Piscator knew the mass hypnotism which promoted myths of race superiority at the theatrical Nuremberg Rallies. Thomas Mann found something just as sinister at the heart of music (Mann, 1947). Other dramatists have contemplated similar dangers in popular drama. The 'self-reflexive' TV serials of Dennis Potter (1935-) investigate relations between the popular media and processes of mythmaking by transforming anodyne popular songs into a source of caustic irony:

"You always hurt . . .
The one you love . . ."

His three TV-series *Pennies from Heaven* (1978), *The Singing Detective* (1986) and *Lipstick on your Collar* (1993) deal successively with the ethos of the 1930s, 40s and 50s and examine the human appropriation of falsifying media myths and the threatening truths which lie beneath.

Within the live theatre, the most successful English practitioner, a writer, director and administrator, both in the provinces and in London, who is translated and performed throughout the world and has had as many as five commercial hits running simultaneously in the West End, is predictably a writer of farce and comedy. Alan Ayckbourn's plays have been condescendingly dismissed as 'entertainment' but they have, like Potter's plays, a potent darkness at the centre, which mainly derives in his case from their obsessive concern with marital breakdown and forms of myth-making which invite disaster.

Marital farce has been said to flourish where hypocrisy is apparent but the institution of marriage remains strong enough to shrug off attacks. Popular bourgeois farce in 19th century Paris may be cited. It may not be a coincidence that as myths disperse around royal couples and sacred marriage vows, Ayckbourn's popular hits have become less frequent and progressively darker. Character drama has grown out of his earlier plays, which mock the obsessions and fixations of standard types as depicted in Bergson's classic study of farce (Bergson, 1989).

Ayckbourn presents us with a case. The elements at which he is so adept – the plot-construction and collisions of couples of different recognizable and hilarious kinds – ride uncomfortably with the more sombre and possibly more memorable elements which work against the laughter. One may cite *Woman in Mind* (1985), which ends with the flashing light of an ambulance come to carry away a central character who can no longer separate neurotic fantasy from fact. In *Henceforward* (1987) a composer fights a musician's block behind steel shutters in a violent neighbourhood, and *Man of the Moment* (1988) shows the ugly difference between a man and the 'living legend' which the media make of his life and death. Ayckbourn has changed in the 1980s. His comedies, like those of Feydeau, will continue to be performed and it is unlikely that the more sombre recent plays will be revived as often as the lighter ones. But that may be a comment on audiences and theatre institutions rather than on the quality of the plays themselves.

Ayckbourn has been writing plays for over thirty years now (his first play, *The Square Cat*, was performed at Scarborough in 1959) and many of the best plays of the eighties have been written by his near contemporaries, especially those, I suggest, who make strong use of humour. One of these is certainly Tom Stoppard (1937-) who recently reworked his first hit, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966) into a prize-winning film, and who has also just won an Evening Standard 'Play of the Year' Award with *Arcadia* (1993). His writing became less prolific during the 1980s and such productions as *The Real Thing* (1982) and *Hapgood* (1988) (a very com-

plex play about doubles and dualities) were less popular, partly because less hilarious than *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Jumpers* (1972) and *Travesties* (1974). *Arcadia*, however, fuses deeply serious concerns with exuberant comic flair and crowns what has become a major body of work.

As with Ayckbourn, there has not been general agreement about Stoppard's stature as playwright. He has not appeared sufficiently 'serious' or politically concerned for some critics to rate him alongside, say, Edward Bond. But his most recent play demands the serious consideration which Stoppard has sometimes modestly disclaimed (Trussler, 1981). It is therefore worth making a big claim on his behalf.

Arcadia sets a number of scholars among members of the landed gentry in a stately home. This may well make the play seem unrepresentative of contemporary problems, especially since half the action takes place in the early 19th century. But other problems than the social and political are 'relevant' and this play examines them with a quality of aphoristic wit and word-play which challenges comparison with Wilde. The desired relevance resides in its psychological acuity and fascination with the cosmic laws under which we operate and within which we strive for freedom. Its humorous appeal arises from the way his characters jump to conclusions on insufficient evidence; use their reason to make connections; reinforce their self-image and attempt to dominate their human situation. He shows how other forms of response, 'gut reaction', intuition, call them what you will, either blind individuals or lead them to truth before reason can reach it. He shows how reason twists and turns in an attempt to make insufficient information suffice.

In this there is comedy and a more serious tradition one can trace back to the Oedipus (or Lear) who struggles to use reason to avoid truth, only to find thereby a truth which destroys all hubris. The tradition includes the suspect uses of reason in *Hamlet* and the whole tradition of farce in which an audience laughs at characters who reason on a false or fragmentary basis. *Arcadia* employs the means of comedy, advocating life, ending in a dance, but pointing forward, pianissimo like Chekhov, to poignant offstage tragedies.

The opening scene of Stoppard's play shows the historical situation which the modern world must reconstruct from the fragments it leaves behind. This evidence takes the form of three letters and a drawing which are placed in a book and a large folio tied by ribbons never undone since the time of Lord Byron. In the second scene a scholar visits the country house in search of documents which will illustrate a scandalous episode in Byron's life. Simultaneously another scholar is seeking to write a book about a hermit/madman who lived in at gothic hermitage in the grounds. A third scholar works to discover algebraic formulae which will demonstrate laws of nature. For him research into personalities is 'trivial' (an important word in the play). What matters is truth: the law of entropy; the world run-

ning down; apparently conflicting cosmic laws; the behaviour of the infinitely large, the infinitely small and the ordinary. Abstract theory makes heavy demands on concentration but Stoppard does not lose his audience. He even manages to communicate a sense of what algorithms are.

In *Arcadia* the audience watches fallible and gifted human beings create myths and espy truths. Contemporary research performs a momentary poignant dance as it struggles inside cosmic processes. Out of the collision between these and the apparently trivial a sense of the passage of time, the smallness and astonishing giftedness of individual people emerges. The language is rapid, subtle and witty. The situations show one brilliantly intelligent seeker jumping to hilarious conclusions in his desire for personal credit. A second scholar and the mathematician benefit from and at the same time curb the demonic enthusiasm of the brilliant egoist. If this is a discussion play it is not one which belongs to a minor genre. Stoppard may need another five years to write a play of such brilliance. Meanwhile we may wait and applaud his lesser offerings.

Stoppard's work derives from many sources, including Beckett, Shakespeare, Shaw and Wilde. His work, like that of other writers who emerged in the 1960s, mixes the genres: naturalism, absurdism, farce, tragedy. The work of his contemporaries more usually mixes traditional naturalism with the epic theatre of Brecht (and Shakespeare) and it is this which is more strongly felt in the 1980s. The influence of Artaud, which operated especially on Peter Brook in productions such as the *Marat Sade* (1964) and *US* (1966) has faded. But the more particularly Brechtian writers, who gave impetus to the 'Fringe' theatre movement post-1968, have remained influential. These have been Edward Bond (1935-), David Edgar (1948-), Howard Brenton (1942-), Howard Barker (1946-), Caryl Churchill (1938-) and David Hare (1947-).

Of the 'absurdist' Beckett has gone. Pinter writes an occasional play, the latest being *Moonlight* (1993), and he is currently directing David Mamet's controversial two-hander, *Oleanna*, which divides audiences and arouses anger against either the male or the female character, each in different ways unsympathetic. Brook has gone to Paris but remains an influence and his *L'Homme qui* (1993) arrives at the Cottesloe in May 1994. Brook's focus shifts and changes. Currently it centres on neurological disorder, a concern which lies close to the work of Pinter and Ayckbourn and is at the centre of Denis Potter's *The Singing Detective* (1986), which deserves, with its portrayal of the relations between neurosis and art, its masterly direction and performance, to stand among the major achievements of the decade. The older Marxist writers Griffiths and Bond, not necessarily through failure or quality, have suffered a loss of 'exposure' as their uncompromising abrasiveness has caused the commercial theatre and television to shun them. It is not wise to attempt, as Griffiths did, to rearrange the public image of national heroes such as Scott of the Antarctic and it is comforting

that despite the high cost of TV drama and the assumption that anodyne material is essential to preserve audience ratings and advertising revenue, good work has continued to appear on the small screen.

Denis Potter, despite his astringency and earlier political phase (as represented, say, by *Vote for Vote for Nigel Barton* (1965) has produced many TV-plays besides his serial dramas, notably *Those Blue Remembered Hills* (1979), in which adults act as children and play dangerous games. Potter's continuing success may well derive from his shift away from politics towards deeper psychological concerns. He also retains a sardonic, comic tone, especially in his use of popular song which has its own immediate appeal and together with Potter's astonishing formal originality may well ease his acceptance by an institution whose productions come under closer scrutiny by the apparatus of power than the smaller audiences of the live theatres.

Work of social and political import still finds a way through the maze of indirect censorship which persuades a TV channel to shun such writing as Griffith's and Barker's because it may raise objections from 'above'. Serial TV drama is an important art form with a range and breadth unavailable to the one hour slot, or even the two-hour traffic of the stage. Alan Bleasdale's *Boys from the Blackstuff* (1982) and *GBH* (1991) can be cited as powerful exceptions which stand out from the blandness of general provision.

If TV drama has become blander the progressive starvation of the fringe and the running down and closure of provincial theatres has restricted opportunities in the live theatre for production and writing. This may well damage the quality of drama in the next decades. At present we still benefit from the two generations of writers, born in the 1930s and 40s, who grew up with the Royal Court and/or led the Fringe movement.

Other benefits to British theatre accrue in the form of work by major non-British writers, such as Arthur Miller (1915-), Athol Fugard (1932-) and Brian Friel (1929-) witness Friel's subtle variations on the conventions of naturalism in, say, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990). European and French Canadian incursions on the London, Edinburgh and provincial scene are also notable. Robert Lepage has made a strong recent mark with his production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1992) and Ariane Mnouchkine has brought to Edinburgh and Bradford her work for the *Théâtre du Soleil* in Vincennes. Her demonstration of brilliant choral techniques in the version of the *Oresteia*, corrects any insidious British reluctance to take lessons from abroad.

Fringe agitprop theatre often targeted local problems and the early Hare and Edgar cheerfully consigned it to the dustbin as it lost immediate relevance. Agitprop has declined with the decline of subsidised fringe and regional theatres but political theatre concerned with general national issues has made a recent strong appearance in the subsidised national scene. This especially includes the work of Caryl Churchill and David Hare. Hare has

made films and his play *Plenty* (1978) was subsequently filmed with Meryl Streep in the main role. At the National Theatre *Pravda* (1985), by Hare and Brenton, had Anthony Hopkins playing a South African newspaper tycoon, reminiscent of press barons living and recently dead. It is one of the striking achievements of the 80s, both for the authors' and actor's capacity to create a powerful human character and for its analysis of the political and social scene.

The National Theatre performed Brenton's notorious and less impressive *Romans in Britain* (1980), which featured a scene of attempted homosexual rape. (*The Guardian* ran a cartoon showing an actor in the wings protesting: "I'll be b..... if I go on there.") The Royal Shakespeare Company performed David Edgar's impressive *Maydays* (1983) and Edward Bond's *Lear* (1971) was given a powerful revival at the Pit alongside Shakespeare's *King Lear* a decade ago. But the largest recent contribution of a national theatre to new political writing has been the performance of David Hare's trilogy: *Racing Demon* (1990), *Murmuring Judges* (1991) and *The Absence of War* (1993). It is an ambitious attempt to define questions of personal morality, public justice and the achievement of power within current British institutions (church, police, judiciary, public media and government). Hare chooses to set these plays in the present rather than, as Brecht would have done, in an allegorical past. The third play, bearing on the failure of the Labour Party to win the 1992 General Election and based in part upon Hare's experience of accompanying Neil Kinnock and entourage around the hustings, takes the risk of exploring recent events and it has been condescendingly criticized (by Roy Hattersley) for misrepresentation. Hare, however, has been wise to fictionalise his plays and it is likely that as election details fade from memory the play will be revived and seen as a painful picture of the general forces at work within a political party and outside it – the ambition of underlings; a leader's need to work through the media; to establish a personal myth or image; to protect himself with a supportive group of followers; the dangers of this; the operation of subtle, carefully selective bias in visual and print media; the weaknesses of democratic procedures which must not be voiced for fear of accusations of being undemocratic (and losing votes). The play displays the dangers of revealing necessary but harsh policies; the importance of lying, or at least suppressing truth in order to gain power; the dangers of exhibiting personal feelings; the ways an appearance of frailty can be created and manipulated to advantage; the sense of moral needs and the pressures of money. In short Hare deals with the time-honoured problems of means and ends that have given rise to powerful theatre from the time of Sophocles's *Antigone* to the work of Sartre and Brecht.

Caryl Churchill's work cannot pass without mention. The growing strength of women in the theatre has been notable. They are no longer confined to the roles of costume designer or assistant stage manager, though

actresses still mainly perform in plays written by men which offer a wider range of masculine roles. But the fringe has offered new opportunities to women directors, feminist companies and women writers. Among these is Ann Jellicoe who was a member of the influential Theatre Writers' Group at the Royal Court (1958-60). More recently Pam Gems made her mark with *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* (1977) and *Piaf* (1979). Michelene Wandor is also well known as a feminist writer (Wandor, 1981) and as a well-known member of the Women's Theatre Group (Keysaar, 1984).

Caryl Churchill, however, is the most prominent. She acquired sudden fame with *Cloud Nine* (1979) and *Top Girls* (1982), plays which emerged from company work with Joint Stock, using Stanislavskian techniques whereby actors improvise creatively around situations mainly devised by the 'writer.' Mike Leigh (1943-) has worked in a similar way but after the huge success of *Abigail's Party* (1977) he has moved towards TV drama and then mainstream cinema with the powerful *Naked* (1993). Churchill's methods resemble Leigh's in generating a heightened almost caricatural naturalism but she is formally more experimental, employing orchestrated overlapping dialogue, doubling techniques, cross-dressing (in the case of *Cloud Nine*), and highly original variations of time sequence in a kind of Brechtian montage of scenes which carefully contrast a variety of attacks on human and female freedom. Her new play, *The Skriker*, fuses theatre with dance and music. It opened at The National Theatre in February 1994.

Top Girls is set in an employment agency, a clever setting for the study of professional attitudes and the way language equates with social power. Problems of ends and means are explored through a variety of characters competing for jobs but also through an objective comparison of two sisters, one domestic, unfulfilled and trapped, the other a supporter of the right who sets career before family. The contemporary social situation is generalised and deepened in an opening act which juxtaposes successful women of different epochs with the minor successes and failures played by the same actresses in the contemporary scenes which follow. Of her more recent plays Churchill's *Serious Money* (1987) challenges comparison. One awaits a little anxiously to see how her talent, and her relations with theatre companies, survive the present economic climate and philistine holders of purse strings.

Major theatre is always in some way subversive and there is ever a danger that personal and commercial success will blunt an abrasive political edge. David Hare has compromised little. Success has provided opportunities to write large cast plays with a wider social range than the economical two or three hander on bare boards which impoverished companies are often forced to make do with. It is interesting to compare him with Athol Fugard who has made a virtue of early necessity in such three handers as *Master Harold and the Boys* (1983) and *Road to Mecca* (1985). Fugard's concern with racism, race prejudice and the needs of the human imagina-

tion, treated with great linguistic and dramatic skill, succeeds within a somewhat conventional naturalistic frame because the depth of human concern emerges through the interrelation of vivid characters. Hare's social montage, large casts and wide range go no deeper.

A subversive who has made something of a success of subversion is Steven Berkoff. Although his work is so personal and his emotional range dominated by his talent for the grotesque, his mimetic, directorial and physical skills leave images in the mind which few productions can rival. A 'monster' is what he calls himself, a man who chooses to portray himself in the part rather than the part, as Stanislavsky would prefer it, in himself. The effect, as in *Decadence* (1988), is savage and disturbing. Berkoff is a brilliant phenomenon who reminds us of the physicality of acting and the importance of the visual image. His *Hamlet* (toured 1979-82) – the production more than his own performance – and his earlier *Agamemnon* and *Metamorphosis* remain theatrical landmarks in the long mime tradition.

Another achievement must be mentioned of the 1980s. This we owe to the establishment of the National Theatre (1976): the poetic work of Tony Harrison, dramatist, translator and director. Adaptations of the *Mystery Plays* (1984), of the *Oresteia* (1981), and of Sophocles's incomplete satyr play *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* (1988) have been acclaimed and although his own play *Square Rounds* (1992) disappointingly suffered from a lack of narrative drive, one should welcome the return of vigorous vernacular and rhymed verse in current theatre practice.

A different way of briefly defining the spectrum of modern British drama would have been to dwell on dominant themes. This would have meant devoting space to the 'new plague.' AIDS has prompted major American theatre by Larry Kramer *The Normal Heart* (1985), and Tony Kushner *Angels in America* (1989). The impact of the latter, and of Kramer's new play *The Destiny of Me*, on British theatre will become apparent as the so far incurable sickness raises the urgent questions about the value of life which tragedy has traditionally formulated.

The sense of tragedy, strong in the so-called 'absurdist' theatre, was opposed by the energetic political work of the 1960s. But a sombre tone increasingly invades the current scene, very dark again in Howard Barker's *Europeans* (1990). It is prompted by social disillusion, economic recession, aids, and latterly the predictable problems posed by the power vacuum in Eastern Europe since 1989, after the euphoria which followed the collapse of the Berlin wall. Hare might extend his ambitions to a rendering of the reasons why a great ideal crumbled into a succession of corrupt tyrannies whose demise is complacently cited as justification of the values of the society we live within. There is satire and tragedy enough in that for one to say with confidence what drama might attempt in the coming years. Perhaps we have, since 1980 or so, been preparing ourselves for it with the resurgence of revivals of Greek tragedy and epic from Peter Hall's *Oresteia*

(1981) to Ariane Mnouchkine's *Agamemnon* (1990), Derek Walcott's *The Odyssey* (1993) and Diana Rigg's performance in *Medea* (1993).

British national companies have played an important part in many of these revivals as they have in fostering new drama. The National Theatre, much maligned by politicised theatre critics in the 1970s (Itzin, 1980), has built upon the growth in theatre writing in the 1970s and the quality of performance, direction and production is remarkable. Whether this quality can be sustained and extended is the immediate problem. In the current climate the diversion of creative energy into money-making ventures which transfer to the West End and Broadway is a temptation, even a necessity.

The provinces are in a worse case. Twenty-one provincial theatres have been demolished or given over to other uses in the last five years. The government is proposing a £5 million cut to the Arts Council grant and the Council in its turn is proposing to cut the grant to theatre by 2% which together with further cuts by rate-capped authorities and the erosion of inflation means almost 5% in real terms according to Lyn Gardner (Gardner, 1993). Ten theatres have been selected as "sacrificial victims" (Eyre, 1993). More theatres will go; casts will be reduced; new plays will be seen as risky because they require more rehearsal time; studio space will be cut and contact with writers will be lost. Lyn Gardner quotes John Stalker of Birmingham Rep. as saying: "A few years ago we would have commissioned 12 new plays a year. Now it's only six and we can't afford a literary manager. That means there are 50% fewer opportunities for writers."

At the moment the British theatre is still flourishing on the basis of writers who learned their skills in times when the value of a culture was less assessed in terms of efficient management or GNP. The work of Stoppard, Hare, Churchill and others will still be around when the world has forgotten cabinet members and governors and directors of the BBC, but one contribution our public servants could make to the quality of living is to help reverse the tendency which Raymond Williams described just before he died:

We now spend £20 million annually on all our libraries, museums, galleries, orchestras, on the Arts Council and on all forms of adult education. At the same time we spend £365 million annually on advertising. When these figures are reversed we can claim some sense of proportion and value.

(Williams, 1989)

David Hare, who spoke at Williams's memorial service, might well call our attention in *The Absence of War* to the grip on our daily lives of media dependent on advertising revenue.

Drama has always dealt with questions of power and freedom. The collision between the practice of power and the current preaching of a solemn public moralism arouses satirical laughter, anger and despair. If, as I have suggested, a new sombreness of treatment is making itself apparent in recent drama, it is as well that in a play like Stoppard's *Arcadia* a spirit of

comic exuberance continues to leaven the serious issues which it handles. Comedy, too, can be an appeal for freedom.

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