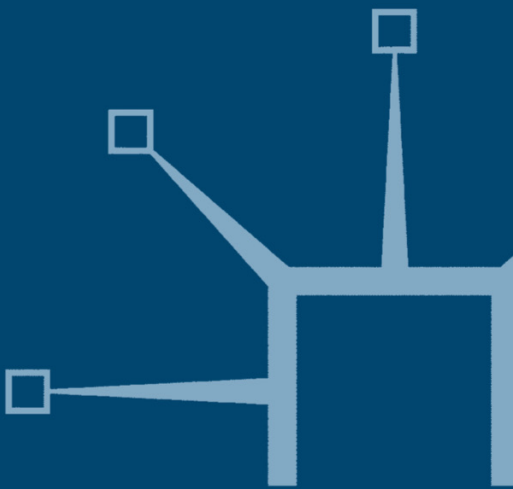
palgrave
macmillan

British Theatre of the 1990s

Interviews with Directors, Playwrights, Critics and Academics

Edited by
Mireia Aragay, Hildegard Klein,
Enric Monforte and Pilar Zozaya



British Theatre of the 1990s

British Theatre of the 1990s

Interviews with Directors, Playwrights, Critics and Academics

Edited by

Mireia Aragay
Hildegard Klein
Enric Monforte
Pilar Zozaya

palgrave
macmillan

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2007 978-0-230-00509-9

First published 2007 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010
Companies and representatives throughout the world

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN is the global academic imprint of the Palgrave Macmillan division of St. Martin's Press, LLC and of Palgrave Macmillan Ltd. Macmillan® is a registered trademark in the United States, United Kingdom and other countries. Palgrave is a registered trademark in the European Union and other countries.

ISBN 978-1-349-28189-3 ISBN 978-0-230-21073-8 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9780230210738

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07

Contents

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Neil Bartlett, Michael Billington, Martin Crimp, Stephen Daldry, Kevin Elyot, Nicholas de Jongh, Joe Penhall, Mark Ravenhill, Dan Rebellato, Ian Rickson, Graham Saunders, Aleks Sierz, Alan Sinfield and Max Stafford-Clark for their generosity and willingness to cooperate at all times during the preparation of this book. Elyse Dodgson kindly agreed to discuss her career at the Royal Court Theatre. Marieke Spencer and Polly Wines were instrumental in organizing the interviews with Stephen Daldry and Ian Rickson respectively. Earlier versions of the interviews with Michael Billington, Aleks Sierz and Max Stafford-Clark appeared in *Atlantis* 26, 1 (June 2004), *The European English Messenger* 13, 1 (Spring 2004) and *Anuari de Filologia* 25 (A), 12 (2003) respectively. Mònica Miravet has been an invaluable research assistant throughout the process and has also, with Clara Escoda, contributed to the burdensome but important task of compiling the index. María Comiche assisted in the transcription of some of the interviews. This book is the result of a research project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Education (BFF2002-00257).

Notes on Editors/Interviewers

Mireia Aragay is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the Universitat de Barcelona. She has published and lectured widely on Harold Pinter and other contemporary British and Irish playwrights, critical theory, film, and Shakespeare. She is editor of *Books in Motion: Adaptation, Intertextuality, Authorship* (2005).

Hildegard Klein is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the Universidad de Málaga. She has published and lectured widely on Edward Bond, Caryl Churchill, Sarah Daniels, Michael Frayn and other contemporary British playwrights, German playwrights of the First World War, feminist theories, modern adaptations of Greek myths, and Shakespeare.

Enric Monforte is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the Universitat de Barcelona. He specializes in Caryl Churchill and other contemporary British playwrights, contemporary British and American film, gender and sexuality, and Shakespeare. He is currently working on gay/lesbian/queer theatre.

Pilar Zozaya is Professor of English Literature at the Universitat de Barcelona. She has published and lectured widely on English and Irish literature, and has specialized in critical theory, film studies and in Elizabethan, Restoration and contemporary drama. She belongs to the editorial board of several journals and is general editor of *BELLS* (*Barcelona English Language and Literature Studies*). She is currently working on the plays of Martin Crimp.

Introduction

Although practitioners, critics and audiences do not always agree about the intensity and significance of what was happening in British theatre over the 1990s, a consensus does seem to emerge that *something* was indeed happening. The aim of this book is to explore the precise nature of the outburst of theatrical energy and creativity that took place over the 1990s through 14 interviews with leading directors, playwrights, critics and academics working in Britain.

It is never a straightforward matter to determine the point in time when a major cultural inflexion occurs, but across the book the mid-1990s moment around Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995) does tend to stand out as pivotal. The media uproar that greeted Kane's play focused attention on an emergent generation of playwrights who were writing what was perceived to be a new kind of raw, deeply disturbing play. However, cultural change seldom happens overnight and as many of the interviewees point out, confrontational work by playwrights such as Nick Grosso, Tracy Lett, Phyllis Nagy, Anthony Neilson, Rebecca Prichard, Philip Ridley or Judy Upton, and novels such as *Trainspotting* (1993) – which was turned into a stage version in 1994 and into a film in 1995 – had already displayed a new sensibility for which Aleks Sierz adopted and popularized the term 'in-yer-face' in his seminal study *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (2001). In the wake of *Blasted*, some of the writers mentioned above, as well as others such as Mark Ravenhill, David Eldridge or Martin McDonagh, continued to write within this sensibility, and thus to broaden the parameters of British drama in terms of both form and content.

'In-yer-face' theatre is certainly a major focus of this book. It is not, however, an uncontested concept. In several of the interviews, the label 'in-yer-face' is debated, in some cases alongside others such as 'blood-and-sperm' plays, 'new brutalism', 'Neo Jacobeanism', 'experiential' theatre, 'cool' theatre, or 'theatre of urban ennui'. As some of the interviewees argue, the label 'in-yer-face' foregrounds certain aspects, such as extreme violence, degrading sex or coarse language, while perhaps underrating the plays' exploration of, for example, a bleak universe inhabited by dispossessed, disaffected, inarticulate young characters who nevertheless occasionally manage to build moments of poetic

transcendence. On the other hand, 'in-yer-face' draws attention to a specific mode of confrontational audience address – a forceful reminder of the disturbing intimacy created in the small spaces in which most of these plays were first staged.

In addition, 'in-yer-face' was not the only kind of drama being written and produced over the 1990s. The panorama was far more heterogeneous – generationally, thematically, and in terms of audience address. Playwrights who had started their careers before the 1990s continued to be active, and this includes both those whose work stretches back to the 1960s and 1970s – Edward Bond, Caryl Churchill, David Edgar, David Hare or Harold Pinter, among many others – and those who had their first plays produced in the 1980s – Neil Bartlett, Martin Crimp and Kevin Elyot, among those interviewed in this book. Thematically, different permutations have taken place since the 1990s. Thus, while Bartlett, Crimp or Elyot have explored diverse forms of expression, an established playwright such as Churchill has written plays that partake of the 'in-yer-face' sensibility – *Far Away* (2000) would be a case in point. Moreover, only some of the 1990s new generation of playwrights and only some of their plays can properly be described as 'in-yer-face'. Thus, while Kane's *Blasted* does fit this description, her *Crave* (1998) reveals a different sensibility at work as well as a less confrontational mode of audience address. Similarly, playwrights such as Patrick Marber, Joe Penhall or Conor McPherson have written plays that are still emotionally harrowing but stop short of assaulting their audience in an experiential, 'in-yer-face' way.

In any case, interviewees agree that the 'in-yer-face' sensibility was fading out by the end of the 1990s as the scenario was being transformed by other forms of theatre, such as documentary drama, the rise of new playwrights and the arrival of new artistic directors – for example at the National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Almeida Theatre, the Hampstead Theatre, the Donmar Warehouse, the West Yorkshire Playhouse or Chichester Festival – many of whom claimed to be looking for new writing for big stages. In fact, some of the interviewees point out that the mid-1990s 'in-yer-face' moment was highly context-specific, the result of a complex conjunction of factors that would include globalization, the often-traumatic restructuring of Europe, the effects of Thatcherism, the rise of a consumer-oriented, post-ideological culture, the dissolution of the nuclear family as paradigmatic model, or the exploration of new sexual and gender roles. Indeed, when discussing the politics of 1990s theatre, many of the interviewees suggest

that even when not explicitly dealing with big public issues the plays still refract and reflect on contemporary realities. The mid-1990s moment also spawned Young British Art, which could equally be described as 'in-yer-face' and which was given great visibility in the controversial Sensation Exhibition held at the London Royal Academy of Arts in 1997. In the field of theatre, the outburst of creativity ultimately came about as a result of the synergy that was forged between the artistic directors of new writing venues such as the Bush Theatre, the National Theatre Studio, the Royal Court Theatre or the Edinburgh Traverse Theatre, and the emerging generation of playwrights.

This book begins by focusing on the longest-standing of the new writing venues, the Royal Court. Part I includes interviews with the Court's three Artistic Directors since the early 1990s – Max Stafford-Clark (1979–93), Stephen Daldry (1993–98) and Ian Rickson (1998 to December 2006). Playwrights are represented in Part II by a heterogeneous group formed by Neil Bartlett, Martin Crimp, Kevin Elyot, Joe Penhall and Mark Ravenhill. While this selection reflects the diversity of new writing for the stage in the 1990s, an important absence is that of women playwrights. Attempts to approach some of the women dramatists writing over the period proved fruitless; fortunately, several of them had already been interviewed by Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge in *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting* (1997). In Part III, a triad of critics, the *Guardian*'s Michael Billington, Nicholas de Jongh from the *Evening Standard* and freelancer Aleks Sierz, assess British drama and theatre since the early 1990s from different perspectives. Finally, Part IV turns to academics Dan Rebellato (Royal Holloway, University of London), Graham Saunders (University of Reading) and Alan Sinfield (University of Sussex), whose work undoubtedly qualifies them to contribute to the debate around contemporary British drama.

The interviews that follow are the edited, abridged and annotated transcripts of much longer conversations. Each interview has been conceived to be read independently. This means that some of the information included in the notes may be repeated, with slight variations and changes of emphasis as context dictates. Names of theatres are given in full the first time they appear in each interview and in the corresponding set of notes; subsequently the word 'Theatre' is omitted. Localities where theatres are based are given in parentheses after the theatre's name, except in the case of London theatres. Given the book's focus, opening

dates and director credits are provided only for plays after 1980, and only if the play in question or a specific production is explicitly mentioned by the interviewee. Debbie tucker green's name is rendered in lower case following the author's wishes.

Mireia Aragay, Enric Monforte and Pilar Zozaya
Barcelona, November 2006

Part I
Directors

Stephen Daldry

Mireia Aragay and Pilar Zozaya

Stephen Daldry became Artistic Director of the Royal Court Theatre in 1993, after working at the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield (1985–88) and at London's Gate Theatre (1989–92). He first came to international prominence in 1992, when he directed a revival of J. B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* at the National Theatre, a production which earned him numerous awards. In 1993, he directed an acclaimed revival of Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*, also at the National. While at the Royal Court, Daldry directed, among others, Arnold Wesker's *The Kitchen* (1994), Ron Hutchinson's *Rat in the Skull* (1995), Caryl Churchill's *This is a Chair* (1997) and David Hare's *Via Dolorosa* (1998). In 1997, he signed a deal with Working Title Films which eventually led to his feature film debut as director, *Billy Elliot* (2000), nominated for an Oscar for Best Director. His second feature film, *The Hours* (2002), was recognized with eight Oscar nominations, including one for Best Director, and won the Oscar for Best Actress (Nicole Kidman). Although he left the Royal Court in 1998, he returned to direct Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* in 2000 and her *A Number* in 2002. In 2005 he directed *Billy Elliot: The Musical* at the Victoria Palace Theatre in London, and the film *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. The interview that follows was conducted in London on 9 February 2004.

There seems to be a consensus that when you became Artistic Director at the Royal Court Theatre you greatly contributed to a renaissance in writing for the stage.

I suppose at heart I've always been an expansionist. It seemed to me that there were a number of challenges facing the Royal Court when

I joined it. The Court has always been interested in new writers, but we didn't really have the infrastructure, the production capacity, nor indeed the size of operation to allow more than a few new writers to emerge each year. So it seemed obvious that the first thing to do was to double the number of productions, and to try to change the culture of the theatre – its financial, managerial and organization management – to allow us a broader canvas. The aim was to create energy within the theatre, so that the Royal Court became a crucible and was not just at the forefront, but it was actually like a dynamo, whereby the critics would have to come once every ten days. I wanted the Court to be a hothouse of new work, so that it was not as dependent as it had been on four shows Downstairs and four shows Upstairs. I suppose that was a first decision. It was enabled and helped by bringing Graham Whybrow in as a literary manager.[1] It's a chicken and egg situation, but certainly it suddenly felt that there were a number of young playwrights who were beating the doors down. There was a sense that there was a generation which had been excluded; a perception that the culture of the Court was too specific or narrow, not inclusive enough. New writing at the National Theatre Studio felt cliquey and of course there had been a general collapse of new writing in the regional theatres over the 1980s. In short, it felt like a good time to allow something else to happen.

How did it work financially?

The first influx of new money was through the Skirball Foundation in the United States. Steve Kenis, who is an agent in London, put us in contact with his father, Charles Kenis, and his wife, Audrey Skirball-Kenis, who had started a process of giving money to theatre in Los Angeles.[2] For a number of complicated, bizarre reasons, they gave enough money at that time to the Royal Court to enable us to begin the process. That was the first kick-start of money; another came through our winning the 1995 Prudential Award for Theatre, which really helped. The culture of the Royal Court had always been very anti-sponsorship, arguing that the state should provide, but it was clear by that time the state was not going to provide, so I started raising money and therefore the number of productions could begin increasing. Once you start, money always attracts more money, and energy attracts more energy. The hardest thing was trying to change the cultural resistance to sponsorship.

This reached a critical point with the rebuilding of the theatre – the Jerwood issue – didn't it?[3]

Yes, that became a very hot political issue, but the roots were laid much earlier, when I started raising money for productions. I don't remember the statistics exactly, but certainly when I joined the Royal Court, the amount of revenue provided by the state was about 50 per cent and by the time I left it was under 30. So there had been a notable increase of self-generated income, which the organization was not geared towards and not sympathetic to, and this caused quite extreme management conflicts. This resulted in my not being able to direct a lot, and I became fascinated with how you could take this organization and try to change it.

The other big problem with the organization was that a lot of the people in the theatre had been there a long time. It seemed to me dangerous for the Royal Court to be the theatre where people working in the organization finished their careers. It should be a place where you were doing a second or a third job, not somewhere that you retire from. There were a number of key posts that needed change. Once the momentum had started, a lot of the staff couldn't believe that they were working so much harder. And of course one really felt the strain on the building itself; you could start seeing the problems of the building becoming more and more acute. It was too old, too rackety and too falling down to allow us that level of production; it was not sustainable on a number of levels. Quite soon into the whole process, it became apparent that we needed a sharp increase in funding from the government as well as more self-generating income.

Is that when the lottery money came up?

Exactly. It seemed to me the lottery was an opportunity on a number of different levels. First of all it was an opportunity to rebuild the physical fabric of the building and secure it for many more decades; secondly, it seemed an opportunity to expand the self-generating income potential of the theatre in the future, mostly through its catering facilities on the square. And the third opportunity, or rather an intuitive guess, was that once you had achieved that level of investment from the government, you were bound to get more funding. In Max [Stafford-Clark]'s time, the Arts Council wanted to shut the Court down for political reasons and Max really did save the theatre.[4] So with the lottery money our logic was that they would never want to shut down a theatre which they had shovelled so many millions into.

The lottery itself was an opportunity because nobody knew how to do it – certainly the Arts Council didn't. I felt that if we didn't get in on the first wave, life would become much more complicated. Indeed, in the end they gave us £19 million. They weren't intending to give us that much; originally they were only going to give us £13 million and then they went up to £19 million over the period of years that it took. The other great thing about the lottery, which subsequently was not allowed, was the audacity of the idea that, while we rebuilt, they should give us another huge sum of money while we expanded the organization even more. So instead of retracting while the rebuild happened, we continued to expand and took over not just one West End theatre but two, and broke one of them up into two spaces.[5] That meant we kept the level of energy that had been created in the old theatre, in the Theatre Upstairs particularly. Far from a period of retrenchment, the rebuild was actually a period of huge creative expansion.

There were incredibly bumpy rides along the way; to be frank, retrospectively I would say we could all have done it better. We had to learn as we went along – the complications of how to get the money, how to organize the money, how to organize the building and how to control the whole process. Indeed people talk about us going over budget, but in fact there were no real budgets to start with because they were done by me on the back of an envelope. The real budget only came in halfway through the project.

Do you think that the potential of the new building has been fully realized?

The legacy of the rebuild is that we now had a building which was much more expensive to run and an organization that was bigger. Ian Rickson feels nostalgic for the period before the rebuild happened, when he remembers himself in his twenties, working with a small community of people in little old offices. One won't really know whether that building, managerially and organizationally, has been successful for another few years. I don't think its potential has been quite unleashed, as yet – its financial potential, for instance. The money-earning potential of the public spaces has not been fully utilized. The bar should be generating a lot more money than it is generating.

The Royal Court has a long history of fostering new writing, but how was this policy specifically implemented during your time as Artistic Director?

A number of things happened. First of all, writers work within structures. So you must have the Young People's Theatre working in the correct

way and focusing on new writing, and a production level at a rate which supports the writers.[6] Once we got Sarah Kane and we were in the news pages and on TV and the plays were going round the world, this made a huge economic difference, because these kids were actually earning money now. So instead of, 'I could earn more money by doing a little thing for the BBC', they thought, 'If I've got twenty productions of my play around the world I'm earning money here'. Financially wise and news wise, it became sexy to be writing plays. Once that first wave had come, they kept on coming.

We put an awful lot of time, effort and money from the Barclays New Stages scheme to commission work in the area of performance art.[7] However, after a number of years of putting a huge effort into what we thought might be the new theatre, it became apparent that it was not.

The other policy decision was the idea of doing Royal Court classics like John Arden's *Live Like Pigs* or Arnold Wesker's *The Kitchen*, which we staged at the Court.[8] Then I managed to persuade West End producer Howard Panter to give us some money to do a Royal Court Classics Season at the Duke of York's Theatre. We did Ron Hutchinson's *Rat in the Skull*, Terry Johnson's *Hysteria*, and David Storey's *The Changing Room*.[9] I wish the Royal Court had kept up this policy. So many new plays, not just in the Royal Court but in other theatres as well, only ever have one outing. It is a disposable culture. What you really need is a public policy of second productions. The great danger with first productions is that if for whatever reason the director does not deliver, the play is thrown away and never seen again. I think that has happened quite a few times.

Another big area of expansion, work and investment, was of course in the International Department. I decided to relaunch the International Summer School so that people should not have to pay to go on it, and so that it would attract young theatre practitioners and expand out. I brought Elyse Dodgson in to be in charge of it. The Barclays project failed and second productions did not really ever take off, so the one policy that really did work and has flourished is the new international work and I am still fantastically proud of Elyse for keeping it going. I believe the International Department should be the heart of the theatre because there is an energy there that generates new work around the world. Indeed audiences are definitely clamouring for it now, so it has genuinely changed the culture. In sum, I think the international policy is the greatest single achievement of the Royal Court of the last ten years, as much as getting all the young playwrights to write plays.[10]

And we were helped by a wave of Irish writers. It is of course debatable whether Martin McDonagh may be considered a playwright within

the Irish tradition, but certainly we were helped by Conor McPherson, Sebastian Barry – whom Max very carefully nurtured – and Marina Carr turning up. Garry Hynes was also a very crucial ally, which is why I brought her in as an Associate Director. Garry is an extraordinary figure and obviously she played a major role at the Abbey Theatre. I really did need someone who could bring in that wave of Irish playwrights as they emerged, and having Garry was a huge bonus.[11]

Graham Whybrow was very crucial in breaking the mould of social realistic plays, broadening the parameters of what a new play was and encouraging playwrights without a predetermined political stand. In the 1990s, it seemed to us that we were looking at a period where you needed a chorus of dissent coming from many different places rather than a single, ideologically clearly-defined perspective.

How did Thatcherism shape the work of the new generation of playwrights emerging in the 1990s?

Only because it was the end of Thatcherism. This is very complicated; it would be the subject of a book in itself and people like David Edgar and David Hare are better qualified than myself to talk about this. It has been said that politics became more personal, which is true to a certain extent. I would argue that Sarah Kane's or Mark Ravenhill's plays were still political plays, but it is a different sort of politics from the typical 1970s or 1980s state-of-England play. Nowadays, people are desperate for politics again. They want big politics. Michael Billington has been arguing for this for some time; it is about to become a fashion – a fashion for big, strong political plays.[12] And people will write them, and it will become the sexiest thing to do again. For Sarah Kane to emerge now would be much more difficult than ten years ago. There is a *Zeitgeist*, which is where the energy is coming from at any given time, and you can always feel it. The energy in the 1990s was about giving voice to as many young playwrights as possible. But I think it will become more politically focused right now.

What are your views on the wave of 'in-yer-face' plays of the 1990s?[13]

They were just like a breath of fresh air, getting rid of that musty old smell of the kitchen sink. 'In-yer-face' was a historical moment, even if the label is often used pejoratively.

Can you rewind and tell us about the controversy surrounding 'in-yer-face' theatre and why you think it happened?

The controversy started with Sarah Kane's *Blasted*. However, the Royal Court had been putting on 'in-yer-face' plays before that. For example, in my first season we staged Anthony Neilson's *Penetrator* at the Theatre Upstairs.[14] But it did not cause an uproar; people weren't screaming yet. In that first season, we also put on Joe Penhall's *Some Voices* and Nick Grosso's *Peaches*, good strong plays by writers who obviously had enormous potential.[15] It was *Blasted*, really, that triggered the controversy.

We had two press nights for *Blasted*. I was there on the first press night and I came away with the impression that there was nothing that anyone could really get upset about legally. We were not doing anything particularly outrageous in terms of public decency. I went to New York for the day to raise some money and I missed the second press night. That was when the *Daily Mail*'s Jack Tinker saw the play. I remember coming back from New York overnight on the day after the second press night; the first paper I read was the *Guardian* and I realized that the review took up the whole of the back page.[16] Then I went into the other papers and I knew that we were in trouble. I literally went straight to the theatre and the BBC Radio van was already parked outside. And it did not stop for days and days. Once you really have to mount a decent piece of defence, then you just defend – fully. So you need to get Harold Pinter in as fast as possible, and Edward Bond in as fast as possible, and you need them in the newspapers making a case for Kane's play.[17] In fact, Michael Billington has been incredibly honest and retrospectively totally changed his mind about the play.[18]

Do you think the uproar had anything to do with the fact that Blasted *began naturalistically, so critics expected a standard Royal Court play, and then became something else?*

Maybe. A bit. But in the end it was just the catalogue of horrors and the lack of any clear psychological motivation. The lack of motivation is something audiences find very disturbing; they tend to get very angry about it. When there is an apparent motive, life becomes much easier. Otherwise the world feels chaotic, not understandable.

Which of the 1990s generation of playwrights, or which of their plays, do you see as particularly representative of the work done at the Court?

I think one always comes back to Sarah Kane. We loved Sarah; we had a very close relationship with her. And although things had been warming

up before *Blasted*, with plays like Anthony Neilson's *Penetrator*, Kevin Elyot's *My Night with Reg*, Caryl Churchill's *Thyestes*, Joe Penhall's *Some Voices* or Nick Grosso's *Peaches*, it was Sarah's play that put the Royal Court in the news.[19] If you are running a theatre, what you always want to do is to get out of the arts pages. If you do, even if it is a scandal, you win. You absolutely win.

The play that was most thoroughly created through the workshop process of the Royal Court was Ayub Khan-Din's *East is East*. At that point the writer in residence was David Lan, who now runs the Young Vic and is a genius at helping young playwrights. Without David Lan *East is East* would not exist, nor would the film based on it.[20] The same applies to the amount of work that Max put into *Shopping and Fucking*, in fact. And to a certain extent to Jez Butterworth's *Mojo*, which both David Lan and Ian Rickson helped to focus.[21]

Do you have any regrets about those heady days?

There were three big mistakes I made. The first one was Billy Roche's play *The Cavalcaders*, which I read, liked, but did not programme. When I went to see it, of course, I realized it was going to be a huge hit. We had to wait for the transfer.[22] The second mistake was putting on Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* in the Theatre Upstairs, while Garry Hynes suggested Downstairs. I realized my mistake when I went to see it in Galway in the new Town Hall Theatre in a coproduction with Garry Hynes's Druid Theatre Company and ourselves. I came away thinking how fast I could move the play Downstairs.[23] I made the same kind of mistake with Conor McPherson's *The Weir*.[24]

It is always incredibly hard to make those judgements. We made fantastic mistakes the other way round. For instance, when I read Nigel Williams's *Harry and Me*, I thought that was the funniest script I had ever read in my life. But nobody came; nobody was interested. It was a major disaster. There are other times when you have failures in a commercial sense but they are plays that you believe in – Phyllis Nagy's *The Strip*, for example.[25]

But what I most remember about those days is the excitement and the enormous fun we had. Doing things like having Harold Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes* and Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* in the same theatre on the same night was just fantastic. Staging plays like Martin Crimp's *Attempts on her Life* was a privilege.[26]

When you left in 1998, what did you feel had changed at the Court?

Managerially it was very different, and the spirit of the plays was much more aggressive. But the biggest thing that had changed was the culture of new writing, the old idea that new writing was something good for you. When I arrived audiences felt new writing was a bit like molasses or a pill you had to take. The big change was getting new writing out of 'it's good for you', out of the 'should' – 'you should go to the theatre', 'you should fund it' – and into being the life blood of British theatre – it is fantastically good, it is really on the button, it is new, it is right now. And you fund it because it is the most exciting thing that is going on. That was the most useful change.

Now my guess is that new writing is going back to the big, old state-of-the-nation play, because people are getting politically very angry. That is just beginning with the Iraq War, but people are going to become more and more furious, and theatres will go back to being social laboratories or social discussion chambers in which we talk about the world, the country and the politics. It will feel imperative again. It is my guess.

Notes

1. Graham Whybrow joined the Royal Court Theatre in 1994.
2. The Skirball Foundation is an independent charity created in 1959 by Jack H. Skirball and his wife Audrey Skirball; it is dedicated to medicine, education and the arts. Audrey Skirball married Charles Kenis after her first husband's death.
3. In 1998, the Jerwood Foundation supplied a grant amounting to £3 million which, added to the £19 million provided by the Arts Council and the £7 million the Royal Court had raised on its own, ensured that the refurbishment of the Sloane Square building could be completed. The deal involved renaming the Court's two theatres Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs and Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs. For an account of the controversy surrounding this issue, see P. Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 226–9.
4. For more information on this period, see Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage*, pp. 170–94. Stafford-Clark was Artistic Director of the Court from 1979 to 1993.
5. When the Sloane Square building closed for refurbishment in late August 1996, the Royal Court moved to the Duke of York's Theatre and the Ambassadors Theatre in the West End. It was the Ambassadors which was divided into two spaces. The Sloane Square venue reopened in February 2000.
6. The Young People's Theatre, established in 1976, is now the Young Writers' Programme. It is a department of the Royal Court committed to opening up theatre to a wide range of new voices.

7. The Barclays New Stages scheme operated from 1993 to 1996, and it led to four seasons of performance art being staged at the Royal Court. The last of these seasons, from 10 June to 6 July 1996, included Stephen Daldry's own show *Body Talk*.
8. Arden's *Live Like Pigs* opened at the Theatre Upstairs on 1 October 1993, directed by Katie Mitchell. Daldry's production of Wesker's *The Kitchen* was first performed at the Theatre Downstairs on 17 February 1994.
9. Hutchinson's *Rat in the Skull*, directed by Stephen Daldry, premiered on 5 October 1995. Johnson's *Hysteria* was directed by Phyllida Lloyd and opened on 23 November 1995. Storey's *The Changing Room*, directed by James Macdonald, premiered on 1 February 1996.
10. Elyse Dodgson is still in charge of the Royal Court International Department. In 1989 she started the International Summer School at the Court, which Daldry decided to turn into the springboard for the theatre's international work. By 1995, the size of operation had grown so much that the Court started the International Department. Elyse Dodgson kindly agreed to discuss her career at the Royal Court with Mireia Aragay and Pilar Zozaya on 3 July 2003.
11. Garry Hynes served as Artistic Director of the Druid Theatre Company, which she cofounded, between 1975 and 1990, and again since 1994. The Druid Theatre Company was the first professional company established in Ireland outside Dublin, in Galway. Since 1984, Hynes has been directing for the Abbey Theatre, where she was appointed Artistic Director in 1990. She has also directed for the Royal Shakespeare Company, Signature Theater (New York), the Gate Theatre (Dublin), as well as the Royal Court.
12. In 'Theatre of War' (*Guardian*, 17 February 2001), 'Modern Life is Rubbish' (*Guardian*, 18 December 2002) and 'Goodbye to All That' (*Guardian*, 9 January 2003), Billington lamented what he saw as the dearth of plays dealing with political issues. In contrast, in 'Drama out of a Crisis' (*Guardian*, 10 April 2003) and 'Hello Cruel World' (*Guardian*, 17 December 2003), he welcomed the, in his opinion, repoliticization of British theatre.
13. The label 'in-yer-face' theatre, although not uncontested, is often used to refer to avantgarde 1990s new writing, following Aleks Sierz's *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber, 2001).
14. *Blasted*, directed by James Macdonald, opened Upstairs on 12 January 1995. *Penetrator*, directed by Neilson himself, was first performed at the Traverse Theatre (Edinburgh) on 12 August 1993. It transferred to the Finborough Theatre later that year, and to the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 12 January 1994.
15. *Some Voices*, directed by Ian Rickson, opened Upstairs on 15 September 1994. *Peaches* premiered Upstairs on 10 November 1994, and it was directed by James Macdonald.
16. The second press night for *Blasted* took place on 18 January 1995. Jack Tinker's review, headlined 'This Disgusting Feast of Filth', appeared in the *Daily Mail* on the following day. Billington's review in the *Guardian*, 'The Good Fairies Desert the Court's Theatre of the Absurd', was published on 20 January 1995.
17. See Bond's 'A Blast at Our Smug Theatre' (*Guardian*, 28 January 1995). Five years later, in 'What Were You Looking At?' (*Guardian*, 16 December 2000),

Bond described *Blasted* as 'the only contemporary play I wish I'd written'. Pinter defended Kane's play in an interview about his own work, 'Life in the Old Dog Yet' (*Daily Telegraph*, 16 March 1995); he claimed that *Blasted* 'was facing something actual and true and ugly and painful'. Other playwrights also defended Kane's play, among them Martin Crimp, Paul Godfrey, Meredith Oakes and Gregory Motton (letter to the *Guardian*, 23 January 1995) and Caryl Churchill ('A Bold Imagination for Action', *Guardian*, 25 January 1995). A few of the critics did discern the value of Kane's play, in particular Louise Doughty (*Mail on Sunday*, 22 January and 29 January 1995), John Peter (*Sunday Times*, 29 January 1995) and Michael Coveney (*Observer*, 5 February 1995). For more information, see G. Saunders, *'Love me or Kill me': Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 24–5 and 53.

18. This may be seen, for example, in '*Blasted*' (*Guardian*, 5 April 2001), Billington's review of the Royal Court's 2001 revival, also directed by James Macdonald, and in his interview with Mireia Aragay and Pilar Zozaya in this volume. On the occasion of Thomas Ostermeier's production of *Blasted* (*Zerbombt*) at the Schaubühne (Berlin) in March 2005, Billington published 'The Best British Playwright You'll Never See' (*Guardian*, 23 March 2005), where he, again, refers to his 'myopic incomprehension' when Kane's play was premiered in 1995.
19. *My Night with Reg*, directed by Roger Michell, opened Upstairs on 31 March 1994. *Thyestes*, directed by James Macdonald, was premiered Upstairs on 7 June 1994.
20. *East is East* was directed by Christine Landon-Smith and premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs at the Ambassadors on 25 November 1996. It was transferred Downstairs at the Duke of York's on 26 March 1997, and turned into a film directed by Damien O'Donnell in 1999.
21. See Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, pp. 123–4 and D. Rebellato, 'Commentary', *Shopping and Fucking* (London: Methuen, 2005), pp. xxxix–xli, for an account of how Mark Ravenhill's first draft of *Shopping and Fucking* evolved through Max Stafford-Clark's workshop process. Ravenhill has said that *Shopping and Fucking* began when Stafford-Clark asked him whether he had a full-length play – 'I lied and said: "Yes." Then I had to write one' (quoted in Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p. 123). Butterworth's *Mojo* was directed by Ian Rickson and opened Downstairs on 14 July 1995
22. *The Cavalcaders*, directed by Robin Lefèvre, opened at the Peacock Theatre (Dublin) on 14 July 1993 and transferred to the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs on 6 January 1994.
23. *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, directed by Garry Hynes, was premiered at the Town Hall Theatre (Galway) on 1 February 1996. It opened Upstairs on 29 February 1996, and transferred to the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs at the Duke of York's on 29 November 1996, where it reopened on 17 July 1997 as part of McDonagh's Leenane Trilogy (*The Beauty Queen of Leenane, A Skull in Connemara* and *The Lonesome West*). Hynes received a Tony Award for Best Director in 1998 for McDonagh's play, the first woman ever to win a Tony for directing.
24. *The Weir* was directed by Ian Rickson and premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs at the Ambassadors on 4 July 1997. It transferred to the

Royal Court main stage at the Duke of York's on 18 February 1998. From 11 October 1998 onwards, it had a commercial revival at the same venue which closed on 27 May 2000. The play was also on tour in the United Kingdom and Ireland from 10 February to 1 May 1999, and later on from 1 May to 31 July 2001. It opened on Broadway at the Walter Kerr Theater on 1 April 1999.

25. *Harry and Me* was directed by James Macdonald and opened at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs on 21 March 1996. *The Strip*, directed by Steven Pimlott, was premiered Downstairs on 23 February 1995.
26. *Ashes to Ashes* and *Shopping and Fucking* were staged Upstairs at the Ambassadors. *Ashes to Ashes*, directed by Pinter himself, opened on 12 September 1996; *Shopping and Fucking* was directed by Max Stafford-Clark and first performed on 26 September 1996. *Attempts on her Life* was directed by Tim Albery and opened at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs at the Ambassadors on 7 March 1997.

Ian Rickson

Mireia Aragay and Pilar Zozaya

Ian Rickson has from the start specialized in directing new writing. After working as a freelance director in the late 1980s, he joined the Royal Court Theatre as Director of the Young Writers' Festival in 1991. He became Associate Director at the Court in 1994, and was responsible, over the 1990s, for landmark productions of Joe Penhall's *Some Voices* (1994), Jez Butterworth's *Mojo* (1995), and Conor McPherson's *The Weir* (1997), among others. Rickson was Artistic Director of the Royal Court from 1998 to 2006. Following the Court's three-year West End residency, he supervised the return to the refurbished Sloane Square premises in February 2000. In January 2007, he handed over the directorship of the Royal Court to Dominic Cooke. The interview that follows was conducted in London on 9 February 2004.

How would you describe the Royal Court Theatre's mission? What do you see as distinctive about it in relation to other new writing venues such as the Bush Theatre, the National Theatre Studio or the Hampstead Theatre?

The Royal Court is distinctive because it holds its mission very passionately and it is informed by history. The main logic of the mission, for me, lies in George Devine's vision of a hard-hitting theatre, whose aim was to produce work that is original, contemporary and challenging. That is a very proud heritage to have.[1] In a way it is a paradox that a contemporary theatre is also a historical theatre, going back to the early part of the twentieth century, with Granville Barker, first plays by Maeterlinck or Ibsen in this country, and the first uses of the repertoire system. Specifically, George Devine had in mind a theatre that was new and for writers. He argued that you must choose your theatre like you choose your church, and there is a whole value system underneath the Royal Court which has to do with trying to

make choices which embrace risk and are international. When I look at the other theatres in London, England, or in the world, I ask myself what the verb or the purpose of that theatre is. The Soho Theatre, for example, is perhaps a humanist theatre. It often creates feel-good plays which make you feel very pleased about the world. I would say that in the 1990s, the purpose of two of the most popular theatres in London, the Donmar Warehouse and the Almeida Theatre, was to charm or to seduce. In the case of the Hampstead, maybe there the purpose was to flatter. So they would do a play which would make the audience feel very good about say, political jokes, and they might leave feeling secure. The verb, often, at the Royal Court, which critics may not like, is to challenge. And that is all part of that group of things that makes the Royal Court's mission very specific and very deeply felt.

From the privileged vantage-point of having been here all through the 1990s, how would you assess the work produced at the Royal Court over the decade? What do you see as major turning points, if any?

In my hands I have an old heirloom, the Royal Court's programming book. The two theatres at the Court, Upstairs and Downstairs, are like airport runways. As Artistic Director, you see the runway ahead, in terms of time, and you see certain planes. Some you send to another airport, because maybe you do not want to do them in the end; others you think, 'I can land that now'; and others you think, 'just keep circling, I'll land you later'. You can see these runways here in the programming book. For example, tonight you would see Marcos Barbosa's *At the Table* and *Almost Nothing*, both in the Theatre Upstairs.[2] And we have just finished *Honeymoon Suite*, which was a visitor – in a way a plane from another airport. Then I have a play by Rebecca Gilman, *The Sweetest Swing in Baseball*, looming.[3] But I am not quite sure what play goes into the main house after that. I am showing you this to illustrate that the Royal Court in the 1990s was informed by many factors – economic, artistic, practical, spatial. When we go back to Max [Stafford-Clark]'s period, you can see that the Theatre Upstairs was occasionally dark. Downstairs was more successful, but Upstairs had shorter runs and often had visitors in. And at the end of the 1980s it was shut for a longer period. At that time, critics frequently wrote about the crisis in new writing, about the energy being with the *auteur* directors and with the classics, while traditionally in this country the writer is the primary artist and the director is interpretative.

Politically, this period was dominated by a very right-wing prime minister. Indeed, Max's era entirely matches the era of Margaret Thatcher. Stephen [Daldry]'s era entirely matches that of John Major.[4] And so far, my era entirely matches Tony Blair's. Anyway, my point is that with Thatcher arts funding was in crisis, and Max was a general in retreat. He squirrelled away money strategically, shut the Theatre Upstairs and made sure, when he passed the theatre on to Stephen, that it was very healthy financially. So we move on to Stephen's era. Early on he believed in collaborations with physical theatre companies such as DV8, or Neil Bartlett, with most of the energy Upstairs.[5] Then, Stephen drew down reserves that Max had squirrelled away for the Theatre Writing Fund or for building, and he put it all on stage. He was also a brilliant fund raiser; he raised money really well, particularly from America. All in all, he had a large amount of resources. Half a million pounds in a few years went into the programme and allowed the theatre to produce a range of dynamic plays. So we staged *Some Voices*, my first main show Upstairs, *Ashes and Sand, The Steward of Christendom* and *Blasted*.[6] It was a new era, which I felt very much part of. When there are only four shows in the Theatre Upstairs, every show had better be a success. When you have more plays to programme, you can be braver and one of those plays might unexpectedly come through. I see the 1990s as being a moment when a kind of plug or stopper was taken out, and all the new writing came through in a very invigorating way. Each year we would set ourselves new challenges: can we produce a first play in the main theatre? And, indeed, *Mojo* was that.[7] A series of writers, who formerly may have chosen to write music, poetry or television, suddenly turned to writing for the stage, not because it was fashionable, but because it was possible – 'I'll deliver my play, and within four months it might go on'. So a long answer to your question would be that the 1990s was a key transitional stage in the journey of playwrights in this country and a very exuberant phase, because the Royal Court, through enormous financial luck, empowered a whole series of young writers and created a new generation, which is fantastic.

What do you consider to be the defining plays and playwrights of the 1990s?

If you were to read Aleks Sierz's book, he would point to a series of 'in-yer-face' plays.[8] Abroad, for example in Die Baracke in East Berlin, they picked up what they called the 'blood-and-sperm' plays by dramatists like Mark Ravenhill, Sarah Kane or Anthony Neilson. But

the biggest-selling play of the 1990s was *The Weir*, which is a gentle, storytelling, redemptive piece.[9] Of course, the Court needs to embrace a whole series of voices, and what I am most proud of is the range and depth of our programme. However, one could point at certain moments, like John Peter writing in the *Sunday Times* that *Some Voices* was the most important debut since *Look Back in Anger*; the fact that it was followed by *Blasted*, which had such massive coverage, even if only a thousand or so people saw it; or *Mojo* being premiered on the main stage.[10] And then a whole series of plays taking the journey from the small Theatre Upstairs to Downstairs, like Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* or *East is East* by Ayub Khan-Din, whose new play, *Notes on Falling Leaves*, is appearing on the main stage this week.[11] It is very exciting to think about that time. In other cultures, of course, some of the really innovative work might not necessarily come from the writers, but from very gifted artistic directors. Sometimes, though, they find it hard to collaborate with a playwright on equal terms, because it might be easier for them to bend a classic into their aesthetic. For me, it is entirely creative to think my way into a writer's head or heart. I find it very releasing; directing *Mojo* would bring a part of me out, while directing *Dublin Carol* would appeal to a different side of me.[12] That is just really energizing and creative.

You have just mentioned the 'in-yer-face' label and 'in-yer-face' playwrights such as Jez Butterworth, Sarah Kane, Anthony Neilson or Mark Ravenhill, who caused a huge convulsion in new writing for the stage in the mid-1990s. Do you see any British writers emerging now who could make a comparable impact?

That is an interesting question. I think part of that moment is quite historically specific, because they were a generation in opposition to what had come before. You need to imagine 13 years of the same government, a very effective government that privatized many utilities like the rail network or the telephone network, but also to a certain extent, a government that very effectively privatized anger and protest. The unions were beaten and a whole series of young people grew up with their anger fractured inside, and it came out in jagged ways into plays like Kane's *Blasted* and Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking*.[13] The previous generation were much more collective and choral in their certainties. The writers of the 1970s and the 1980s, like David Edgar, David Hare or Howard Brenton, were on the left, and they had a chorally-held view about the world. But this new generation did not have the same faith in

those discourses and their anger often went into plays in more personal ways. While Michael Billington would argue that no big 'state-of-the-nation' plays were being written, I would claim that they were there, but impacted in perhaps more specific, naturalistic plays.[14]

As regards the equivalent playwrights that may be coming through now, one has to look at what the project of the Royal Court has been in the last four or five years, which is a less sexy project for people who do marketing, but equally important – my task has been to create a sustainable culture where the younger writers endure and mature. The first real season I programmed, 1999, included new plays like Rebecca Gilman's *The Glory of Living*, Richard Bean's *Toast*, Roy Williams's *Lift Off* or Gary Mitchell's *Trust*.[15] In the last year, each of those writers has been or will shortly be produced on the main stage.[16] As you know, being a playwright is notoriously difficult. You write one play with a lack of self-consciousness, and your play is then defined and diagnosed. Then you have to write again, and the second and third and fourth plays are very, very difficult to write. Moreover, critics love to play Columbus and discover playwrights, and then they like to knock them down on a second play. So my job has been to try to create a supportive culture to get these writers to mature and develop into main-stage writers. So much of culture is disposable, but writers cannot achieve excellence unless you create a system where they can support each other, and grow and develop in the theatre. The highlight for me last year was Roy Williams's *Fallout* on the main stage. It was a big play about race and class. There are also some very talented younger playwrights coming through. *The Sugar Syndrome*, by Lucy Prebble, was very fresh, contemporary, searching.[17] Some of the very young international playwrights are very exciting too.

We saw Fallout *last season, on a Monday night, and found it rather surprising, for a play dealing with race relations, that everyone in the audience was white.*

On Monday nights, more of the audience tended to be white because of the way those tickets are sold.[18] Every other night, it was much more mixed. What Roy Williams would say is, 'If I am writing about race and class, the white people need to see this work as much as the black people, because they need to think about liberalism and political correctness'. But absolutely, the aim has to be for the work to attract as rich and diverse an audience as possible.

Could you expand on your point about the contribution of international playwrights?

I would like to mention Rebecca Gilman first. When she sent us *The Glory of Living* in 1996, she was working as a secretary. Every other theatre in America had turned the play down, including her local theatre, the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, on the grounds that their audiences would not like to see those kind of trailer-trash people on the stage. We produced the play, she won the Evening Standard Award, and her popularity and renown went boom. I am extremely proud of that connection. And indeed, in two weeks' time, I am directing her new play, commissioned by us, *The Sweetest Swing in Baseball*, a brilliant play. I could also mention Christopher Shinn, who was never produced anywhere until here.[19] It was a dream of George Devine for the Royal Court to be a truly international theatre and to be originating work, not just cherry-picking fashionable plays from Paris, and this is very exciting to us.

The Royal Court's focus on naturalism rather than formal experimentation has sometimes been criticized.

That kind of criticism has often come from our international friends, who are practitioners, and I can understand it. A play by Caryl Churchill, Martin Crimp or Sarah Kane occupies the high road of formal experimentation. Those plays are done all over Europe – Luc Bondy is doing Martin Crimp, Peter Brook is doing Caryl Churchill, and Thomas Ostermeier is doing Sarah Kane.[20] But the Court also has to reflect what is out there, and those modernists or formalists are the minority. When you are reactive to the culture, many more plays will be less experimental in form. There are some really bad plays that are very experimental in form – some very bad sub-sub-Sarah Kane plays – while sometimes naturalism can be a very radical form. I share the longing for more formal experimentation and we try to find ways of encouraging that in the writers, but essentially you have to be reactive to what is out there. So, in comparison to some of the international criticism, at least at the Royal Court we are developing a culture of new work, which may or may not be formally interesting. The problem is when that hegemony of experimental form is dominant as essentially it is just doctrine and it means anatomizing classics. That makes it very hard for the new writer to get in. It is a complex issue to create a stage dynamic which is radical, progressive and at the same time fosters a new writing culture.

What do you look for as Artistic Director when you are planning a season? Does not knowing what you are going to put on in a few months' time force you to take decisions without having a clear line to follow?

I will never look for certain themes. In accordance with the Royal Court's mission, I will be looking to find work that is original, contemporary, or challenging, and where that is manifest in the subject matter and form. The simple answer to your question is, I look for a good play. I would like to be more strategic sometimes, but I have to console myself with the joy of the white-knuckle ride of 'A new play has come in! We can do it!' When you have that spirit, you do a play like *Mojo*.

Going back to what I was saying earlier about the joy of being a new writing director, I would emphasize the importance of surrendering your ego to the world of a play. Writers are seekers, and seers, and clairvoyants, and being a director you need to allow an interaction with the play to teach you about the world, and what it is to be human. This is far more interesting to me than directing *Hamlet*, because if you want to see *Hamlet*, you can see it anywhere. Doing a play like Penhall's *Some Voices* is a very invigorating journey. You do not quite know what you will end up with, but you know you are connecting with something very deep in the play. That has been my privilege here, to have directed plays by some of the great British, Irish and American writers. I guess I want to direct works that I feel have impact, plays that are trying to engage with the world in some way, that have some sort of soul and will create a very dynamic charge with an audience.

How would you describe your style as a director of new writing? What is your approach? How do you organize rehearsals?

I do a lot of preparation, maybe more before I was Artistic Director. Now I have to do my preparation in the margins of my job, and indeed, since I have become Artistic Director, sometimes I have not even directed for a year. My predecessor, Stephen, did not direct very much at all, whereas Max would direct often. The job is very consuming; it involves lots of fund raising and financial matters. It is lucky if you get into rehearsal. In any case, my approach would be to spend a lot of time with the playwright, doing a lot of preparation. I would begin by working in detail on the text, by really trusting it. I would then do some physical work to anchor the actors into their character; we would probably do some exercises to find ways of approaching the play. I would not necessarily block the play; I would let that evolve organically and do it later. I would try to create an ensemble, a

company, so that everyone felt very empowered in the room. Max has a very specific methodology, which he calls 'actioning'. He gets a play, divides each line up and writes above it with the actors what is called 'an action'. If your line is, 'I'm sorry', he would have an action above that which might be 'enlists' or 'softens' or 'delights', and so on. That is a very specific methodology. Stephen is much more spontaneous; he improvises more. Maybe I would be somewhere between the two in terms of trying to evolve a methodology that was specific to the group of people in the room and to the play.

Finally, could you tell us about the experience of running the Royal Court in the West End, at the Duke of York's Theatre and the Ambassadors Theatre, and the return to Sloane Square?[21]

When I took over, the Royal Court was in its second year in the West End, and the Government had provided subsidy for it to be in the Duke of York's and in the Ambassadors. It was called 'a closure award', that is, Sloane Square was closed, and they were given two years' funding to run in the West End. The first day of my job as Artistic Director, they took me into a room and told me that the building project was one year late and our closure award was running out. It was like being made Prime Minister and not having a country to govern. It was a very demanding time, during which we faced the problematic issue of raising money. It is fine to raise money if you are the Royal Shakespeare Company and your work is more palatable to everybody.[22] But if you are an oppositional theatre, to raise money is very complicated. We were very lucky to get a big grant from the Jerwood Foundation, but that was seen as quite provocative by certain playwrights, because it included renaming the theatre.[23] That was very hard for me just arriving, but I think we dealt with that very well. In addition, I directed 13 productions of *The Weir*. I just kept directing it to keep the theatre open. The money we made on *The Weir*, which began as a tiny little play in a 60-seat venue and ended up playing to a thousand seats on Broadway, kept the Court going until we moved back to Sloane Square, a year and a half late. Of course, having the joy of reopening the theatre, such a beautiful theatre, was a fantastic privilege. I find the job exciting, draining, exhilarating, but I have an enormous sense of pride and purpose about it, because I go to work feeling I am doing something important. And to be so closely associated with a theatre for writers that has such noble ambitions is a great thrill!

Notes

1. George Devine became the first Artistic Director of the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre in 1956. The Court soon became known as a playwrights' theatre. For more information on the early years of the Royal Court and on George Devine, see T. Browne, *Playwrights' Theatre: The English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre* (London: Pitman, 1975); R. Findlater (ed.), *At the Royal Court: 25 Years of the English Stage Company* (New York: Grove Press, 1981); P. Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre 1965–1972* (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986) and *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), and I. Wardle, *The Theatres of George Devine* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978).
2. Marcos Barbosa is a Brazilian playwright. *At the Table* and *Almost Nothing*, directed by Roxana Silbert, opened on 5 February 2004 as part of the Royal Court's International Playwrights Season.
3. *Honeymoon Suite*, written by Richard Bean and directed by Paul Miller, opened on 8 January and closed on 7 February 2004 at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs. It was an English Touring Theatre production. Rebecca Gilman's *The Sweetest Swing in Baseball*, directed by Ian Rickson, was premiered at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 25 March 2004.
4. Stafford-Clark was Artistic Director at the Royal Court from 1979 to 1993. Daldry joined him in 1993 and stayed until Rickson took over in 1998.
5. Daldry's first season as Artistic Director in 1993 included *MSM*, devised by DV8 and directed by Lloyd Newson, and *Night after Night*, written and directed by Neil Bartlett. DV8 (Dance and Video 8) Physical Theatre was formed in 1986 by an independent collective of dancers. The company has produced 15 dance pieces, which have toured internationally, and four award-winning films for television. Led by Lloyd Newson, the company aims to challenge the boundaries of both modern and classical dance. As regards Neil Bartlett, see his interview with Enric Monforte in this volume.
6. *Some Voices* by Joe Penhall and *Ashes and Sand* by Judy Upton, also directed by Rickson, were staged at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs. They had their premieres on 15 September 1994 and 1 December 1994 respectively. The 1995 season included, Downstairs, *The Steward of Christendom* by Sebastian Barry, which was directed by Max Stafford-Clark and opened on 2 September, and, Upstairs, Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, which was directed by James Macdonald and opened on 12 January.
7. *Mojo*, by Jez Butterworth, was directed by Ian Rickson and premiered Downstairs on 14 July 1995.
8. The label 'in-yer-face' theatre, although not uncontested, is often used to refer to avantgarde 1990s new writing, following Aleks Sierz's *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber, 2001).
9. Conor McPherson's *The Weir* was directed by Ian Rickson and it opened at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs at the Ambassadors on 4 July 1997. It transferred to the Royal Court's main stage at the Duke of York's Theatre on 18 February 1998. From 11 October 1998 onwards, it had a commercial revival in the same venue which closed on 27 May 2000. The play was also on tour in the United Kingdom and Ireland from 10 February to 1 May

1999, and later on from 1 May to 31 July 2001. It opened on Broadway at the Walter Kerr Theater on 1 April 1999.

10. 'This is the most thrilling playwriting debut in years' is the opening line of John Peter's review of *Some Voices* at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs (*Sunday Times*, 25 September 1994).
11. McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, directed by Garry Hynes, premiered at the Town Hall Theatre (Galway) on 1 February 1996. It opened at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 29 February 1996 and transferred Downstairs at the Duke of York's on 29 November 1996, where it reopened on 17 July 1997 as part of McDonagh's Leenane Trilogy (*The Beauty Queen of Leenane, A Skull in Connemara* and *The Lonesome West*). Ayub Khan-Din's *East is East*, directed by Christine Landon-Smith, premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs at the Ambassadors on 25 November 1996. It transferred Downstairs at the Duke of York's on 26 March 1997, and was turned into a film directed by Damien O'Donnell in 1999. Khan-Din's *Notes on Falling Leaves* was directed by Marianne Elliott and it opened at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 11 February 2004.
12. Conor McPherson's *Dublin Carol*, directed by Rickson, opened at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 17 February 2000, the first show Downstairs after the return from the West End. This production was premiered at the Old Vic Theatre on 15 January 2000.
13. *Shopping and Fucking* opened at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs at the Ambassadors on 26 September 1996, directed by Max Stafford-Clark.
14. See Billington's 'Theatre of War' (*Guardian*, 17 February 2001), 'Modern Life is Rubbish' (*Guardian*, 18 December 2002) and 'Goodbye to All That' (*Guardian*, 9 January 2003). However, later on in 2003, Billington welcomed 'theatre's reconnection with the wider world' ('Hello Cruel World', *Guardian*, 17 December 2003; see also 'Drama out of a Crisis', *Guardian*, 10 April 2003). As is well known, Billington has revised his initial reaction to Kane's *Blasted*, a play he now reads as informed by a political sensibility. This may be seen, for example, in '*Blasted*' (*Guardian*, 5 April 2001), his review of the Royal Court's 2001 revival, and in his interview with Mireia Aragay and Pilar Zozaya in this volume. On the occasion of Thomas Ostermeier's production of *Blasted* (*Zerbombt*) at the Schaubühne (Berlin) in March 2005, Billington published 'The Best British Playwright You'll Never See' (*Guardian*, 23 March 2005), where he, again, refers to his 'myopic incomprehension' when Kane's play was premiered in 1995.
15. Gilman's *The Glory of Living*, directed by Kathryn Hunter, opened on 14 January; Bean's *Toast*, directed by Richard Wilson, was premiered on 11 February; Williams's *Lift Off*, directed by Indhu Rubasingham, opened on 18 February; and Mitchell's *Trust*, directed by Mick Gordon, premiered on 11 March. All four plays were staged at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs at the Ambassadors.
16. Williams's *Fallout*, directed by Rickson, opened on 12 June 2003; Mitchell's *Loyal Women*, directed by Josie Rourke, was premiered on 5 November 2003.
17. Prebble's *The Sugar Syndrome* opened at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs on 16 October 2003, directed by Marianne Elliott.

18. Monday reductions were instituted by Max Stafford-Clark during his tenure as Artistic Director; they are supported by the leading global provider of business information and are known as Bloomberg Mondays. All seats now cost £10.00. These tickets are normally booked well in advance.
19. Shinn's *Four*, directed by Richard Wilson, opened at the Theatre Upstairs at the Ambassadors on 14 December 1998; his *Other People* was directed by Dominic Cooke and it premiered at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs on 17 March 2000; and *Where Do We Live*, directed by Richard Wilson, opened at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs on 17 May 2002.
20. Luc Bondy's production of Crimp's *The Country* (*Auf dem Land*) was premiered at the Zürich Schauspielhaus in 2001 and it opened at the Théâtre National de la Colline (Paris) as part of the Festival d'Automne, on 6 November 2002; he has also directed Crimp's *Cruel and Tender*, which opened at the Young Vic on 4 May 2004 and transferred to the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord (Paris) on 22 September 2004, also as part of the Festival d'Automne. In winter 2002, Peter Brook directed Churchill's *Far Away* at the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord (Paris), his first-ever show at the Bouffes by a contemporary British playwright. Thomas Ostermeier's productions of Kane's *Crave (Gier)* and *Blasted (Zerbombt)* were staged at the Schaubühne (Berlin) in April 2000 and March 2005 respectively. In March 2006, the Schaubühne's Fifth Festival for International New Drama (2005–6) presented all of Kane's five plays; two of them, *Zerbombt* and *Gier*, were directed by Ostermeier. Ostermeier's production of *Zerbombt* was shown at the Barbican in November 2006.
21. The Sloane Square theatre closed for refurbishment in late August 1996 and it reopened in February 2000.
22. The Royal Shakespeare Company has had its own share of funding problems. In May 2002, its then Artistic Director Adrian Noble decided to leave the Company's London base at the Barbican. When Michael Boyd took over as Artistic Director, the Company was burdened by a £2.8 million deficit. The Company's Arts Council grant (£14 million for 2005–6; the Royal Court's Arts Council grant for the same period is £2 million) is supposed to cover both Stratford and London, but in 2003 none of its plays were transferred to London owing both to its difficult financial position and to concentration on Boyd's first season at Stratford. This was the first time the Royal Shakespeare Company had not had a London season since it was founded in 1960, and the Arts Council announced that if they failed to find a London home by autumn 2004 it would review its funding arrangements. The Company returned to London in November 2004 for a six-month season at the Albery Theatre after it had cut its deficit and put its finances in order. In December 2005, the company was back in London, this time at the newly-named and refurbished Novello Theatre (previously the Strand Theatre) in the West End, after reaching an agreement with Sir Cameron Mackintosh that will allow the Royal Shakespeare Company to stage its annual London season either in the Novello, the Albery (taken over by Mackintosh in October 2005) or the Gielgud Theatre (taken over by Mackintosh in January 2006).
23. In 1998, the Jerwood Foundation supplied a grant amounting to £3 million which, added to the £19 million provided by the Arts Council and the

£7 million the Court had raised on its own, ensured that the refurbishment of the Sloane Square building could be completed. The deal involved renaming the Court's two theatres Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs and Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs. For an account of the controversy surrounding this issue, see Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage*, pp. 226–9.

Max Stafford-Clark

Mireia Aragay and Pilar Zozaya

Max Stafford-Clark has worked as a theatre director since he left Trinity College Dublin in 1966. In 1974, following his Artistic Directorship of the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh, he founded Joint Stock Theatre Company. Stafford-Clark is the longest-serving Royal Court Theatre Artistic Director (1979–93). In 1993, he formed the national and international touring theatre company Out of Joint, dedicated to the production of new writing. His work as a director has overwhelmingly been with new writing, and he has commissioned and directed first productions by many leading contemporary playwrights, including Sebastian Barry, Caryl Churchill, David Hare, Mark Ravenhill and Timberlake Wertenbaker. His most recent productions include *Hinterland* (2002) by Sebastian Barry, *Duck* (2003), a first-time play by Stella Feehily, and *The Permanent Way* (2003) by David Hare. After a national tour, his production of *Talking to Terrorists* by Robert Soans opened at the Royal Court Theatre in June 2005. In 2006, Stafford-Clark directed a second play by Stella Feehilly, *O Go My Man*, and J. T. Rogers's *The Overwhelming*, produced by the National Theatre in association with Out of Joint. In 2000, he was awarded an honorary doctorate from Oxford Brookes University. The interview that follows was conducted in London on 1 July 2003.

The Royal Court Theatre has a long history of fostering new writing. At a practical level, how is it done? What is, for instance, the role of resident dramatists and of the Young Writers' Festival?

The first thing is that the theatre has a reputation for new writing, so it gets sent plays, roughly between 3,000 and 3,500 scripts a year. And at any one time there are between 30 and 40 writers who are under commission. In other words, it generates a great deal of work. And although, as all theatres, the Royal Court prides itself on having professional standards of directing, design, and acting, the one area

in which it must remain amateur is the writing. You must be able to respond to a first play sent in by, for example, a Bradford schoolgirl who is simply writing about her own life and who has no experience of writing or of the theatre. Having said that, probably four-fifths of the work that the Royal Court produces is from writers it has already established a relationship with. If Caryl Churchill or David Hare write a new play and offer it to the Royal Court, then you respond to that. But in tandem with those writers you know, there has also got to be a system in place for filtering the unsolicited submissions that come in from writers you have never heard of. That is quite complicated. There is a readers' system, and also a weekly script meeting at which the directors, the dramaturge, the literary manager, and some of the other staff picked at random – it could be the electrician, or one of the secretaries – all come to discuss and debate six or seven plays that everybody has read that week.

Resident dramatists are often funded by the Arts Council, and they also come to the script meetings. But a commission system is very important, because it means that you have to pay writers sufficient for them to have time to write the play. At Out of Joint, we guarantee a writer £20,000 if we do their play; at the Royal Court it is rather less than that – but what matters is that you guarantee the writer a sum of money.

The Royal Court's Young Writers' Programme is specifically aimed at young people who have never written plays before. It seeks to empower them and give them the ability to write plays, inevitably about their own experience to begin with. Sometimes you get a lot of plays from young people who are never going to go on to be playwrights, but occasionally you get just one truly original play from somebody who will learn from it and will go on.

What kinds of plays are generally favoured by the Royal Court? Does it tend to favour naturalistic plays, or more aesthetically daring ones?

I was at the Court from 1979 to 1993, so the 1980s is the period I can really talk about with some conviction in that connection. I wouldn't say we favoured a particular kind of play, although the Royal Court has always tended towards naturalism. However, if you look at the early days of the Royal Court – John Arden, Ann Jellicoe – there were plays that were quite unconventional. A lot of writers, such as Caryl Churchill or Edward Bond, were influenced considerably by Ionesco and by the Theatre of the Absurd. But ultimately what determined the choice of plays was not so much the style as the subject matter.

The Royal Court has always been interested in less well-known areas of society. For instance, Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money* was about the futures exchange, the money market, Wall Street.[1] It's an example of the Court's deliberate attempt to cajole and push the writers into revealing areas of society about which we know very little and about which there have not been plays. The 'work play', in particular, has provided a link between the different generations of people who have worked for the Royal Court. *The Changing Room* by David Storey is set in a Rugby League changing room – again, it's people at work, even if the area of work is different. The play I am rehearsing at the moment, *Duck*, by Stella Feehily, has one scene that takes place in a bar, and the people are setting up for the evening – emptying the dishwasher, getting the change ready, the girl who runs the bar making sure she is made up – and you immediately recognize it as a Royal Court 'work play'.[2] The Royal Court has always set itself, rather than to pursue a particular style, to investigate and reveal areas of society that are often ignored and unwritten about.

Do you think it is possible to say that there is a Royal Court aesthetic or house style in terms of design and acting?

There is an aesthetic, but it comes from the play itself. In fact, what you are taught at the Royal Court is that the playwright and the play are the starting place. Nowadays, most young writers are influenced by television, so plays tend to be very fragmented – *Duck*, for example, has twenty scenes. Some take place in a bar, some in a bedroom, others in a bathroom, another scene takes place in a street. So you need a design that is able to encompass that flexibility, which means that, on the whole, you go for simplicity, for something that enables you to change very quickly from one scene to another. As far as acting is concerned, there used to be a saying that you stood much more chance of progress as an actor if you had a working-class accent than you did if you had a middle-class accent. The Royal Court is responsible for that. It is true that if you are doing a play about Scottish people, you want one actor in the company, at least, who is Scottish, so that it gives a level of authenticity as far as dialect and accent is concerned that the rest of the cast can copy. But more importantly, it is true that the Royal Court did lead the way in revealing the emotional lives of working-class people, so that it became very unusual by the 1960s and 1970s to see middle-class lives taken seriously on stage. While if you go back to, say, Agatha Christie, working-class characters are always comic. The Royal

Court reversed that, and it became impossible to have a middle-class character taken seriously. Maybe now there is a balance between the two.

How is a season put together? Does the Court set out to create some kind of balance between revivals, classic plays, modern classics and new plays?

We start with two or three plays we are passionate about doing. Whereas most theatres plan a year ahead, the Royal Court plans between three and six months ahead, which means that it is always able to respond to the new play that comes in and you find wonderful and want to put on. In other words, the first part of your programming is the two or three plays that you are passionate about doing, which the Artistic Director probably wants to direct himself or herself. Secondly, you may receive a play which does not quite appeal to you, but you believe may appeal to feminists, or perhaps it is a play by a black writer – a play about an area that you believe the Court should do something about. That is, there may be areas of aesthetic concern about the play, but they are supplemented by areas of social concern. We believe, for example, we should do a play about kids in a south London café, like Roy Williams's *Fallout*.[3] We think the play is six out of ten good, and maybe we can do a workshop or a reading and turn it seven out of ten good, and then we should certainly stage it, because it deals with an area of society that needs to be addressed. So those are the priorities – the Court sees itself as having a social function. There are other theatres where you respond very much to what actors want. If you are running the National Theatre and Michael Gambon says he is really keen to do *King Lear*, you respond to that immediately, whereas at the Royal Court you do not do so in nearly the same way. It is important, every so often, for the Royal Court to do a classic. Lindsay Anderson once said, famously, that the Royal Court does new plays like classics, and classics like new plays.[4] That is what you are challenged to do – if you do a classic, to reveal a side to it that it would not get if it was done at the National or the Royal Shakespeare Company. Finally, the modern classics, like Churchill or Pinter, are revived at the Court when they have not been seen by a whole generation of theatregoers.

What kind of audience does the Court generally attract?

Michael Billington always says that a very significant thing about a town or a city is whether it has a theatre that is entirely committed

to new work, such as the Royal Court in London. In Sydney, where I have just been working, there are two major theatres, both of which do new work, but neither of which is committed entirely to doing new work. What you get in a major metropolis like London or New York is an audience who want to see new work. So what the Royal Court gets is an audience who are up for seeing new work, and they know that is what they are going to get when they go there. Who are they? The audience is younger than in the National, because the seats are less expensive. If it is a play like Terry Johnson's *Hitchcock Blonde*, which has just transferred to the West End, it is a fashionable, bourgeois, young middle-class audience.[5] They are not working class; the Court does a lot of plays about working-class subjects, but it does not have a working-class audience. But, in a way, I do not mind that. You do not do a play like Robin Soans's *A State Affair*, about the Northern working class, which I directed, to play to that class; you do it to inform the middle class.[6] *A State Affair* was also about drug addicts and addiction, but you do not do it exclusively to perform to an audience of junkies; you do it for an audience of doctors, people who have money and people who are able to do something about legislation. In short, the fact that it does not play to a working-class audience does not diminish the impact of the work that the Royal Court does. In addition, the crucial question about audiences is what you charge them. Probably the most important thing I ever did at the Royal Court was to instigate Monday reductions, so that all Mondays were £5. That has now gone up to £7.50, but it is still very cheap. It means that on Monday nights there is no hierarchical seating. Everybody pays the same, and there is something liberating about that.[7]

In 1980, you said that 'the challenge which the Court provides is that it is the only organization whose main objective is mounting new work in a major proscenium stage'.[8] *Does this continue to be the case or are there other venues which also have the same aim?*

There are other new writing theatres, as there were at the time I wrote that – the Bush Theatre, the Hampstead Theatre, and certainly the National also puts on a proportion of new work at the Cottesloe and sometimes at the Lyttelton. But the point I was making is that the proscenium arch is quite a stern examination for a play. Most new work is seen in studio spaces. The studio gives you an intimacy and a proximity to the action that is often like a gas cooker; it makes you seem close and it makes the event seem exciting. The proscenium arch

is like a refrigerator; it is cooling and distancing, and you can examine the play more objectively. So it is a stern test for new plays. That is why the Royal Court is so important and what I wrote is as true today as it was when I wrote it. There is no more stern examination for new plays than a production Downstairs.

How does the relationship between the Theatre Upstairs and the Theatre Downstairs operate?

What you always hope is that your Upstairs writers are going to graduate Downstairs. Caryl Churchill started with plays Upstairs, and in 2002 *The People are Friendly*, by Michael Wynne – a writer who started off Upstairs – was on Downstairs.[9] So what you hope is that the Theatre Upstairs provides a protective environment that is going to enable you to mature writers, bring them Downstairs and put them to the rigorous test of the proscenium arch. Of course, there are writers whose work is immediately good enough to be put on Downstairs. Martin McDonagh was one.[10]

How about the relationship between the Court and the West End?

That is always a relationship that is going to be tentative. There are plays like *Hitchcock Blonde*, which are transferred to the West End, and plays like *Serious Money*, which ran for a year in the West End. The exploitation of work is crucial because it generates the money to keep the Royal Court going. So it is important that you do not despise success. I am afraid that did happen sometimes with me. But you do have a responsibility, if you are running the Royal Court, to generate the money to keep going. In fact, if you have a play that is pretty successful, you would make more money by running it for a further two months at the Royal Court than you would by transferring it to the West End for six, seven or eight months, because in the West End the person you make money for is the owner of the theatre, and the producer. It is actually an illusion that in the West End you make money for the theatre; you make money for the theatre owner.

What is the Court's policy regarding regional theatres?

I do not think the Royal Court has had a policy towards regional theatres. Indeed, one of the things I enjoy about Out of Joint is the fact that we are a touring company. For example, Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking*, which was an Out of Joint/Royal Court coproduction,

played to a much more cosmopolitan audience in Bury St Edmunds or Bristol than it did in London. In London it played exclusively to a young audience, and in its first revival in January 1997 exclusively to a gay audience, while in Bury St Edmunds it certainly played to the 15 gay couples who lived within a forty-mile radius, but also to regular theatregoers, students, and young people.[11] It was a broader cross-section. Of course, it's also true that the Royal Court has been very important and crucial in staging regional voices. A playwright like Jim Cartwright, who wrote *Road*, was unsuccessful in having that play produced in his local theatre in Bolton, or even in Manchester, thirty miles away.[12] The play had to be produced in London before it could be put on in Bolton, where it was eventually hugely successful. Once it had a London imprimatur, then the regional theatre was willing to reconsider it. So the Court has been of enormous importance in empowering regional voices. Its relationship with regional theatres, however, has often been, in my time as well as any other, quite snobbish – understandably, because you are so concerned with surviving yourself, that if the Edinburgh Traverse Theatre has done a brilliant play, that is *their* success and, in a competitive situation, you want *your* play to be a success. So sometimes the Court has not been as generous as it ought to be with plays produced in regional theatres.

Is there a playwright whom you consider to be the Court's archetypal figure through the years?

There has been for different generations, yes. John Osborne, obviously, to begin with. For the period William Gaskill was Artistic Director it was clearly Edward Bond, and for the period I was there, the 1980s, it was Caryl Churchill.[13] Martin Crimp, perhaps, is significant for the 1990s, and obviously Sarah Kane. Now possibly there is not one so clearly, which is rather a weakness for the theatre at the moment. There are a number of writers who could be in that position, but it's hard to put your finger on one predominant writer for this decade.

There are some critics who have claimed that the Royal Court is politically confused, that it is a muddle. Could you comment on that?

It is true that the Royal Court has never been a Marxist theatre and it has never had a clear political agenda. There are theatre groups like 7:84 which come into being because they have a particular political purpose; or like Gay Sweatshop, who have a particular sexual identity that they want to promote; or women's theatre groups.[14] It is true

that the Royal Court has never had any of those, although it has been sympathetic to all of them. But that is its strength, not its weakness. A 'muddle' or a mixture is a good description of what the Court should be, that is, not tied to any particular political platform. Its best work has a social concern, not a political concern. It looks at areas of society that other theatres tend to ignore. It is also true that, in my last year at the Royal Court, the *New York Times* said that it was Europe's most important theatre, while the *Sunday Times*, in England, claimed that it was a dump. I valued each statement; I think it should be a dump and I think it should be important. The aesthetic is the work that is on stage, and is examined by that proscenium arch; not the bar, the seats, the restaurant, or anything else. In my day it was a dump; it has since been refurbished and it is no longer a dump – but I would not mind if it was.

How do you assess the emergence of 'in-yer-face' theatre in the 1990s? What do you think were its causes?[15]

These are questions for academics to answer, not artistic directors. But in my view, the theatre is a very immediate art form, second only to journalism. It reflects society much quicker than television. Television and films take very long to generate and to get a green light. What has been called 'in-yer-face' theatre, Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking*, for example, shows a world in which young people have no job expectations, no religion, no moral guidance from their parents, no family, and where, in a way, at the beginning of the play, they are creating their own family. There is a flat with the father figure, Mark – who is the junkie – and the two younger ones, the boy and the girl, Robbie and Lulu. They are recreating a family structure in order to give themselves some structure at all. The dope dealer, Brian, also tries, at the end, to give them some structure. He says, 'You know, life is hard. On this planet. Intractable. I can tell you this because I feel it. Yes, like you I have felt this. We work, we struggle. And we find ourselves asking: what is this for? Is there meaning? I know you've . . . I can see this question in your eyes [. . .] We need something. A guide. A talisman. A set of rules. A compass to steer us through this everlasting night'.[16] That compass is usually given by family, by school, by religion, by your parents, whatever. But we are dealing with a world where all those authorities have been questioned, demolished and disempowered. Patrick Marber's *Closer* deals with a world where marriage is no longer a realistic possibility as a guide for relationships.[17] And in Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen*

of Leenane there is a family turning against each other. In other words, what these writers had in common was a perception that politics had turned personal; that they were dealing with a world in which morality and boundaries were shifting. But, of course, when you are doing it at the time, there is no awareness that you are part of a trend; you are just doing the next play. It is only in retrospect that you perceive you were part of a trend.

I can see there was a focus of energy on Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill. But there was very good work around in the late 1980s. It is in the interest of critics and academics to exaggerate these waves, because it gives you something to write about. But there are always interesting plays. It's the job of the critic at Christmas to write an annual review, and there is often nostalgia that the plays of your youth and the plays of last year were better than the ones you found difficult to assess this year. For example, Martin Crimp's *Attempts on her Life* was reviewed fairly dismissively at the time by most critics and did not really make much of an impact. It was then produced subsequently in Italy and in Germany, and people began to realize that it was a significant play. It has been revived by student groups and university groups, but has never had a major second professional production in Britain.[18] So everybody missed it – critics, academics, theatre people – we didn't realize how important it was. Only now are people beginning to recognize it was a major play.

The point has been made that 1990s 'in-yer-face' plays are politically confused.

In the 1980s, whether you were a Marxist like Bond, a left-wing feminist like Churchill, or a left-wing humanist like David Hare, everybody had something in common – we all hated Mrs Thatcher. That gave us all a unity of purpose. Once she resigned, in November 1990, people were lost; there was no common enemy any more, no clear political agenda. So a sudden regrouping took place in the early 1990s, and 'in-yer-face' playwrights were part of that. And now the Labour government that some of us fought so long to get declares war on Iraq. In other words, there is a period of disillusion with the objectives that we once all had. That means there is a muddle. But 'muddle' is not a bad word. A sense of striving to find out or a sense of confusion is often better than knowing exactly what is wrong and knowing exactly what you are going to find. The kind of play that knows everything is often quite tedious.

How do you, as a spectator, recall watching those new 1990s plays – Kane's Blasted, *Marber's* Closer, *Ravenhill's* Shopping and Fucking *or Butterworth's* Mojo, *for instance?*

I thought *Blasted* was very raw. I read it before I saw it, and I did not rate it very highly. When I saw it, I thought it was much better than I realized, but I still thought it was a raw play by a first-time writer that had a great deal of theatrical impact, but in the end wasn't very specific socially and was rather mixed up, so I underrated it.[19] Marber's *Closer* is the play any generation longs for, because it's sexy, it's about young people in their late twenties and early thirties, it's attractive, it's about relationships forming and disappearing. I always thought *Closer* was a very successful, commercial play, and indeed it went on to have a long run in the West End. I do not mean 'commercial' in any sense to diminish it; it just hit an area that people wanted to see. There are plays that have a very important role that have never been successful with the box office. *Blasted* would be one of those. It played for four or five weeks in the small Theatre Upstairs. It was revived in March 2001 Downstairs at the Royal Court, but it played to very small audiences.[20] So, like John Arden's *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*, there are plays which are hugely seminal which never get taken up by the public. The opinion of the academics and the critics is very different from the opinion of the public. *Shopping and Fucking* started as a small tour, and we had no great expectations of any commercial success for it. And it played at the Royal Court Upstairs, then located at the Ambassadors, a 60-seat theatre, to begin with. Its impact on the audience and the fact that it was a play that people wanted to see was totally unexpected and unanticipated. I never enjoyed *Mojo* much, but certainly the language was very intoxicating, and people responded to that.[21] Predicting theatre trends is only marginally more accurate than results in horse racing. That is why it is both invigorating and humiliating – you can never predict the winning horse. And academics have a wonderful job looking back in retrospect.

Some commentators claim that that explosion of 'in-yer-face' new writing has blown over. What is your own view? Do you see any new trends emerging?

Your job in the theatre is always to respond to the present. It is not to analyze the past or to predict the future – you just have to deal with the play on your desk. Stella Feehily's *Duck*, which I am working on at the moment, is a coming-of-age play about two young women who are on a cusp between childhood and womanhood. One of them has

terrible trouble with her boyfriend and goes back to her family, but realizes that life is unsustainable with her parents again, and leaves once more. In other words, there will always be plays about sex; there will always be plays about violence. They have existed from Jacobean times onward. It is not as if 'in-yer-face' theatre was something new; those trends happen continually and you cannot really recognize them until afterwards. There was also, in the mid-1990s, a spate of Irish plays by Sebastian Barry, Marina Carr, Martin McDonagh and Conor McPherson.[22] And I would say there has been a recent trend of plays that have not necessarily always been performed about how sensitive and how oppressed men are.

Can you tell us more about your experience directing new writing?

It is really what I have said: you never know. The play I did recently in Sydney was David Hare's *The Breath of Life*, which was a big success in the West End with Maggie Smith and Judi Dench.[23] I was doing it with two distinguished Australian actresses. So you know that the play has been a success somewhere; it's not an unknown quantity. Before that, I did Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, a major classic – again, you know that that is an aeroplane that flies.[24] But with a new play, particularly a new play by an unperformed playwright, you can anticipate the response, but you never really know. It is a jump into the unknown. In fact I prefer directing a new play like *Duck* – the fact that it is unknown and that it is a new voyage with a group of six, mostly young actors, is what interests me. I'd rather do that than I would a play with two distinguished actresses in Sydney.

What are your plans for the near future?

I have no future, only a present and a past. You hope you learn something and that you may get better. When you start as a young director, you clearly are ignorant. You learn from people who are older than you. But the difficulty, as you get older, is that you have to start learning from people younger than yourself. In a way, as a director of new work, you stand more chance of exposing yourself to the work of young people than you do if you stick to the classics. But the truth is, I don't know what my plans are. And I am very glad not to know, because I hope that tomorrow I will open the post and there will be a wonderful new play. You have to be responsive to what you find. But you cannot predict what you will find.

Notes

1. *Serious Money*, directed by Max Stafford-Clark, opened at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs on 21 March 1987.
2. *Duck*, set in Dublin, is the first full-length play by Stella Feehily. Feehily was born in London and grew up in Bundoran, Co. Donegal. She trained at the Gaiety School of Acting in Dublin. *Duck*, an Out of Joint/Royal Court coproduction, was premiered at the Theatre Royal (Bury St Edmunds) on 24 July 2003, and it opened at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs on 26 November 2003.
3. *Fallout*, directed by Ian Rickson, opened at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 12 June 2003.
4. Film and stage director Lindsay Anderson was Assistant Director at the Court from 1957, and joint Artistic Director, with William Gaskill and Anthony Page, from 1969 to 1972. Anderson died in 1994.
5. *Hitchcock Blonde* was premiered at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 27 March 2003, directed by Johnson himself. On 16 June 2003, it transferred to the Lyric Theatre.
6. *A State Affair*, directed by Max Stafford-Clark, opened at the Everyman Theatre (Liverpool) on 19 October 2000. It was staged as the second part of a double bill which included Andrea Dunbar's 1982 play *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*.
7. Monday reductions, supported by the leading global provider of business information, are now known as Bloomberg Mondays. Since the interview was conducted, the price has gone up to £10.00.
8. P. Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 173.
9. Michael Wynne took part in the Coming on Strong: Royal Court Young Writers' Festival that took place from 13 October to 5 November 1994. He contributed to the Festival with a play entitled *The Knocky*. His *The People are Friendly* opened at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs on 7 June 2002, directed by Dominic Cooke.
10. In fact, Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, directed by Garry Hynes, opened Upstairs on 29 February 1996, and transferred Downstairs at the Duke of York's on 29 November 1996, where it reopened on 17 July 1997 as part of McDonagh's Leenane Trilogy (*The Beauty Queen of Leenane, A Skull in Connemara* and *The Lonesome West*). In this connection, see Mireia Aragay's and Pilar Zozaya's interview with Stephen Daldry in this volume. *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* had had its premiere in the Town Hall Theatre (Galway) on 1 February 1996. Hynes received a Tony Award for Best Director in 1998 for McDonagh's play, the first woman ever to win a Tony for directing.
11. *Shopping and Fucking*, directed by Max Stafford-Clark, was premiered on 26 September 1996 at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs at the Ambassadors. Following an English regional tour, it was revived on 7 January 1997 at the same theatre. It then transferred to the Gielgud Theatre, where it opened on 24 June 1997. After another national and international tour, it was revived at the Queen's Theatre on 21 January 1998. The play was well received in Europe; Thomas Ostermeier's successful production was staged in January 1998 at Die Baracke (Berlin).

12. *Road*, directed by Simon Curtis, was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 26 March 1986.
13. In 1956, George Devine became the first Artistic Director of the English Stage Company at the Royal Court; William Gaskill was Artistic Director from 1965 to 1969, and joint Artistic Director, with Lindsay Anderson and Anthony Page, from 1969 to 1972. Stafford-Clark became the Court's Artistic Director in 1979. In the 1980s, the Royal Court staged three plays by Caryl Churchill. *Top Girls* premiered on 28 August 1982; *A Mouthful of Birds* was a transfer from the Birmingham Rep Theatre and opened at the Court on 27 November 1986; and *Serious Money* was first performed on 21 March 1987. Stafford-Clark directed both *Top Girls* and *Serious Money*.
14. 7:84 Theatre Company was founded by playwright John McGrath in 1971; the group's name refers to the fact that, at the time, 7 per cent of the population owned 84 per cent of the wealth. The independent theatre company Gay Sweatshop was founded in London in 1975. In 1976, the company opened its doors to female actors. In the context of the women's liberation movement, women's theatre companies such as Women's Theatre Group (1974) or Monstrous Regiment (1975) were formed.
15. The label 'in-yer-face' theatre, although contested, is often used to refer to avantgarde 1990s new writing, following Aleks Sierz's *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber, 2001).
16. M. Ravenhill, *Plays: 1 (Shopping and Fucking, Faust is Dead, Handbag, Some Explicit Polaroids)* (London: Methuen, 2001), p. 86.
17. *Closer*, directed by Marber himself, was first produced at the Cottesloe, National Theatre, on 22 May 1997. It transferred to the larger Lyttelton stage on 16 October 1997 and to the Lyric on 31 March 1998.
18. *Attempts on her Life* opened at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs at the Ambassadors on 7 March 1997, directed by Tim Albery. In March 1999, Katie Mitchell directed an Italian production of *Attempts on her Life* (*Tracce di Anne*) at the Piccolo Teatro (Milan). The play has been frequently performed in Germany as *Angriffe auf Anne*. *Attempts on her Life*, directed by Mitchell, was staged at the Lyttelton, National Theatre, in March 2007. See interview with the playwright in this volume.
19. *Blasted*, directed by James Macdonald, opened at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 12 January 1995.
20. The revival of *Blasted*, also directed by James Macdonald, opened at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 29 March 2001 during the Sarah Kane Season which the Court programmed two years after Kane's death on 20 February 1999. Besides *Blasted*, the season included revivals of the first productions of *Crave* (1998) and *4.48 Psychosis* (2000), and platform performances of *Phaedra's Love* (1996) and *Cleansed* (1998).
21. *Mojo* was first staged at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs on 14 July 1995, directed by Ian Rickson.
22. Among the most successful Irish plays of the mid-1990s are Barry's *The Steward of Christendom* (1995) and *Our Lady of Sligo* (1998), Carr's *Portia Coughlan* (1996) and *The Mai* (1997), McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of*

Leenane (1996) and *A Skull in Connemara* (1997), and McPherson's *This Lime Tree Bower* (1995) and *The Weir* (1997).

23. *The Breath of Life*, directed by Howard Davies, opened at the Theatre Royal on 15 October 2002.
24. Stafford-Clark's *She Stoops to Conquer* was first staged at the Lyttelton, National Theatre, on 17 December 2002.

Part II
Playwrights

Neil Bartlett

Enric Monforte

Neil Bartlett is a playwright, novelist, actor, performer, director and translator. In 1987 he cofounded Gloria, a touring music and theatre company. He was Artistic Director at the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre from 1994 to 2004, where he worked in collaboration with Robert Lepage, Théâtre de Complicité and Improbable Theatre, and directed pieces by a wide variety of authors. His work as a playwright includes *Dressing Up* (1983), *Pornography* (1984), *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep* (1986, 1989 and 1990), *Night after Night* (1993), *The Seven Sacraments of Nicolas Poussin* (1998), and *In Extremis* (2000). He has adapted Balzac, Dickens, Molière, Mozart, Rendell, Rhys, Stevenson and Wilde for the stage, and translated Genet, Kleist, Labiche, Marivaux and Racine. He has written the history *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (1988) and the novels *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* (1990) and *Mr. Clive and Mr. Page* (1996). His translations have been widely staged, including productions by the Royal Shakespeare Company, the National Theatre, the Goodman Theatre (Chicago) and the Arena Stage (Washington, DC). In 2006, his new translation of Genet's *The Maids* was aired on BBC Radio 3, and his production of *The Rake's Progress*, by Stravinsky and Auden, opened at the Aldeburgh Festival. His third novel, *Skin Lane*, appeared in March 2007. The following interview was carried out in London on 6 October 2005.

What is your opinion of the notion of gay/lesbian/queer theatre?

There isn't a short answer to that question because it's an extremely complicated one. There are many cultural traditions of gay theatre which interact in different ways, and it's always very important to talk about individual practitioners and individual pieces of work fitting

into or not fitting into those labels. As examples of that tradition, we have what was called the 'problem play', which around the turn of the nineteenth century began to include gay characters. One could say that *The Servant*, for instance, which I directed in 2001, is part of that particular tradition.[1] Apart from that, there's a whole tradition of working-class cross-dressed entertainment, whether that's expressed in popular light entertainment and pantomime drag or in a very specific tradition of countercultural drag. There's British ballet and British musical, both of which crucially included major gay practitioners. There's an incredibly strong thread of mainstream commercial theatre writers: Noël Coward, Joe Orton, Terence Rattigan, and Oscar Wilde. There's a tradition of specifically radical socialist/feminist work and alliances between lesbian work and gay men's – for instance Gay Sweatshop.[2] There's also the more recent body of work which is closer to performance than to theatre – the kind of work currently being staged by the Drill Hall, for instance.[3] And that's just off the top of my head. Therefore, there isn't one thing called 'gay theatre'. There are lots of different elements of gay practice: some theatre is made primarily by an author, some theatre is made primarily by directors, some by performers. If I'm not wrong, the first gay theatre as a *building* in Britain was the Glasgow Citizens'. For me, as an audience member, everything they did was rooted in the cultural traditions of gay men. It always felt like a gay space to me in a most amazing way.[4]

However, in recent years a split between gay and queer has appeared. Since then, what was called gay became suddenly perceived as old-fashioned and limited, whereas queer was seen as more related to the post-AIDS period and to radical activism. What is your view of this? Is there really a gap between gay and queer?

My view would be that nothing in cultural history is ever that simple. There was an enormous amount of work that was queer before the word was used. How would you categorize the work of Lindsay Kemp? You wouldn't say it was part of 'gay theatre', if by that you mean left-wing political activism, a gay liberation-based theatre. But Kemp of course knew all those people – Bette Bourne and Lindsay Kemp were both hanging around in Notting Hill in the early days, and there were lots of crossovers between those two worlds. For instance, you could describe the work of Bourne's troupe Bloolips as being equally 'gay' –

politically motivated – and 'queer' – theatrical, camp, self-referential, gorgeous, and so on.[5] Equally, I would say that a piece of work like Mark Ravenhill's *Mother Clap's Molly House*, which appears to be very much a product of the 'queer' 1990s, was absolutely influenced by the work of Gay Sweatshop in the late 1970s.[6] The source material for that show was the work of historians who were in the academic, socialist world, much in the same tradition as the early Gay Sweatshop shows, such as *As Time Goes By*, which used historical material as the basis of their polemic.[7] So I would say that *Mother Clap's Molly House* is Mark Ravenhill's Gay Sweatshop show. However, *Handbag*, which Ravenhill wrote in 1998, is a completely different story.[8] In other words, I don't think anything fits neatly into the gay/queer dichotomy. I mean, I wonder where you would put Derek Jarman, who is probably more important than the rest of us put together in some ways.[9] Where would you put him as an artist, considering that the late work he did was all about activism? At the same time, you could look at exactly the same pieces of work, and say that they are profoundly 'queer' explorations of a purely personal agenda. They can be seen as being only about desire and about personal identity. Therefore, apart from the most obvious, and for this reason probably rather limited pieces of work, it's very difficult to say that there's a gay period followed by a queer period. The marks of queer run all the way through history. Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*, for instance, has all the characteristics that we talk about when we talk about 'queer' theatre, and yet that's a hundred years before anyone was using that term. That's why, from my point of view – and I'm talking as a practitioner, not as an academic – I wouldn't say that the dichotomy is a particularly useful one. There's a parallel argument in community politics and cultural politics, where people say that in the old days it was all about gay liberation and now that we've achieved gay liberation we are free to talk about leading 'queer' lives. But you know, we could all easily be forced to become liberationists of the most diehard kind overnight, all over again. If the new Archbishop of York kicks up a fuss about partnership rights, we'll all become activists again.[10] In any case, it's a very fluid and complex situation which requires a long and convoluted answer. The general view tends to be that 'queer' was invented in 1990-something. In my opinion, that's absolute nonsense, historically and academically. Those who try to argue that position simply haven't done their homework about the cultural and aesthetic variety of gay men's practices going back to the sixteenth century.

How would you define yourself? As you said before, you are a practitioner.

If people ask me whether I'm a queer artist I always think it's a good idea to say yes. Am I a gay artist? I always think it's a good idea to say yes, because on balance it's still very important to declare oneself. That's my politics. My politics is to acknowledge the term queer. Having said that, I don't mind if you call me queer, or you call me gay. If the next question is whether being defined like that limits me as an artist – and it normally is – I would answer that the cultural traditions and the heritage I have to work with are huge and marvellous. I don't believe there's theatre on the one hand, and then there's gay theatre on the other, because if that's the answer then where would you put Christopher Marlowe? Artists were there when theatre was created in this country, that's fairly elementary. We've always been there, right in the middle and right out on the edges simultaneously.

In the light of what you are saying, critic Robert Wallace, drawing on Michel Foucault, argues that gay people have to create a gay life, that we have to 'become' gay, since there wasn't such a thing before us.[11] *Could we say that as a gay/queer performer you therefore 'become' in a number of ways in each artistic activity you are involved in, thus bringing together the domains of theatre and sexuality?*

Yes and no. Yes, insofar as I'm a constructivist as opposed to an essentialist. Gay people are still defined culturally as not being 'essential'; we either don't exist or we're not supposed to exist, therefore we have to create ourselves. That is a very important idea in gay culture and gay experience. In my first book, *Who Was That Man*?, I mention the idea that what gay people do isn't 'coming out', what we actually do is *go in*.[12] We arrive. I'm talking about British culture, obviously, and not about the situation in another country. But in Britain, when one enters this extraordinary culture – the first time that you walk into a gay bar, for instance – suddenly your whole life is there, all of your life choices, histories and sexual identities. And this gives you a great deal from which you can then construct yourself. So, yes, in its most rudimentary form I agree with the proposal that gay people have to create themselves. However, this is not an idea that was created by Foucault. Gay people have always been expert at creating their own cultural practices. As to the idea that to be gay is to perform oneself, we really have to question for whom that is not true. As soon as any cultural or social practice becomes self-conscious, then that's true. Most female artists would say exactly the same thing – that the dominant

tradition is male, and that they have had to create a different space for themselves, a space in which to perform themselves.

Your work shows a clear emphasis on theatricality, and this is an aspect that Brian Roberts relates to a queer conception of theatre.[13] *This can be seen, for example, in* A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep *or in* Night after Night.[14] *Could we establish a connection between the stress on the theatrical aspects of the performance used as a queer tool and the notion of theatre as a place for dissidence put forward by Alan Sinfield?*[15]

People are always saying my work is very theatrical. Every review of every show I've ever done stresses that, and I'm very happy about that. In a way, the answer to the question is very simple: excessive theatricality, a love for the grand gesture or the big frock, is a part of traditional British gay culture, which I'm proud to belong to. That's the simple answer. The complicated one is more difficult to pin down, but there is a quality of extreme theatricality where, because everything is slightly overdone, sometimes teetering on the edge of ridiculousness, this opens up a space in performance in which truly dangerous things can be said. That's a very difficult thing to describe or theorize, but it's something you can recognize when you see it on stage. The simplest form – and people often use this phrase to denigrate the performers – is when a performer goes over the top. Then you are often entering into a territory of danger and transgression, which for me is a very productive territory. As well as that being true of individual performances, it can also be true of the whole mise-en-scène for a whole piece. I've never been frightened of going just a little bit too far; in fact, I have an instinct that that's what theatre is for.

A characteristic element of your work is complete eclecticism. You do many different things: you write plays, you are an actor, a performer, a director, and a novelist. How do you find the time and the energy to do all this?

I get up early in the morning and I go to bed late at night. And I work with extremely talented people. Many people work hard in the theatre, it's nothing unusual. As far as I'm concerned, speaking from where I'm standing and looking at my early experience when I started making theatre – which was at the very beginning of the 1980s – theatre is always a collective collaboration. First I worked on the street as a clown with Simon McBurney, from Théâtre de Complicité; then as part of theatrical collectives in which all the artists shared the work of devising, directing, designing and performing the shows. I remember the first

time I worked in a conventional theatre, with all its strict hierarchies and divisions of labour. I didn't know anything about how to make theatre under those circumstances. The idea that the author was someone different from the actor or director is something I'm still basically uncomfortable with.

Your words bring to mind the multiplicity of voices present in your plays, which is a constant in your production and a postmodern trait indeed.

Absolutely. Even in something apparently very straightforward like *In Extremis*, which is a play for two people sitting on chairs, the text is a collage of quotations, of different historic voices.[16] I often play with the idea of theatre as ventriloquism, of a voice coming back from the dead, coming out of the offstage darkness and then being spoken by the actors. For me, history is always there in the air, in the wings of the theatre. This is also the case with *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep*, *Sarrasine* and *Night after Night* – my 'gay prehistory' trilogy, even though they weren't made as one.[17] By giving voice to history, I recuperate it.

This recuperation takes place by establishing a topography of gay London at different temporal levels, both in the past and in the 1980s, through the recurrence of place names like the Black Cap pub, or an address in Fitzroy Street which appears in both A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep *and* In Extremis. *At the same time, you also use specific people's names, like Quentin Crisp or Charles Laughton in* A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep.[18]

A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep is full of references. This is also the case of my novels, especially the first one, *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall*, and the intention in all cases is that of recuperating history.[19] I think I wanted to somehow counter the terrible effects of the AIDS epidemic and the upsurge of homophobic attacks that swept the country in the 1980s, to counter the feeling of annihilation, the fact that so many people were dying and so much history was being lost, erased. In the face of that, simply to say that a certain street, house, or man had existed and had represented gay history was a way to react against the attacks.

Could you talk about the evolution of A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep?[20]

First of all it was created as a site-specific piece at Battersea Arts Centre by myself as a performer, in a setting by Robin Whitmore. It was produced by Simon Mellor, who now runs the Lyric Hammersmith.

Then, the second version was another site-specific one in a derelict warehouse in East London. Robin Whitmore created an extraordinary installation full of images from Simeon Solomon's own work, but reconfigured by him. That was a solo version as well. At that time, Bermondsey was a part of London which had not yet been redeveloped. It was a frightening, derelict underworld. There was a DJ called Jeffrey Hinton we knew, who made a pre-show disco tape for us that we played very loud – it was the only way the audience could find where the building was and therefore attend the performance. In any case, after that we decided we wanted to develop it further and the third version was shown at the Drill Hall in London. Nicolas Bloomfield created a live score for it, and I decided to add the three queens, Regina Fong – a very great drag queen who's now dead – Bette Bourne, and Ivan Cartwright. The set was again by Robin Whitmore.

How did the three queens arrive? Why did you think about having Bette Bourne, Ivan Cartwright and Regina Fong in the play?

I had the desire to translate the piece from being an installation, a performance art piece, to a play in a theatre, with a pianist playing music at a grand piano. I never thought of doing it with actors; I wanted to evolve the piece with three performing queens. Ivan and I had done a piece called *Pornography* together in 1984.[21] He is a performer in his own right and had his own show at that time which was performed around drag clubs. And I knew Bette and Regina already. They were my heroines, my peers. They also brought a whole new audience to my work. Everyone in the audience knew that the stories they told in the show are all true, that was the whole point – they weren't acting, so much as acting out their true, personal selves. That's why no one has ever performed *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep* except us. It would be very difficult to do. Somebody else couldn't ever be Regina Fong or Bette Bourne. Regina Fong was also in *Night after Night*, and Bette Bourne played in *Sarrasine* and in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.[22]

Night after Night *is a reflection of the hidden gay history of theatre conveyed to us by a temporal juxtaposition of your father's experience in a West End show in 1958 and your own experience years later. How did you feel about staging the play precisely at the Royal Court, which, as Dan Rebellato has argued in a controversial new reading of the period, in the 1950s became the headquarters of the virile 'angry young men' reacting against the so-called 'gayness' of British theatre?*[23]

One of the engines driving *Night after Night* was the very simple idea that this was the very theatre, we were on the very stage where the great revolution of 1956 took place, and so much of that revolution was explicitly about getting rid of all that terrible old gay/camp nonsense and bringing in 'real' theatre, theatre that mattered – which implicitly had to be non-camp theatre, straight theatre, 'proper' theatre. Actually, in *Night after Night* I was trying to re-establish, in a delightful and creative way, the complexity of our history, not to reduce things to black and white. In a way, there was a lot of *Night after Night* which was our revenge. We were trying to redress the balance a little and say that that space, the famous stage of the Royal Court, actually is a space that we were entitled to and in fact we were there all the time, we never did go away. We do run like a thread through British theatre. Of course, my real revenge came immediately afterwards, when I was asked to run a theatre of my very own, the Lyric Hammersmith.

Something else A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep *and* Night after Night *have in common is that characters are named after the performers – Bette, Ivan, Neil and Regina in* A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep; *Neil, Nicolas, Paul, and so on in* Night after Night. *On the other hand, in the latter play there are also fictional characters, such as Vince the Barman. The fact that characters as such barely exist means that performers occupy a central position in the play. What is your intention behind that?*

That was because the performers were playing themselves. It's different in *Sarrasine* or other of my plays, where there are characters and they've got names, but in *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep*, much of the frisson of watching the show was that you knew people were telling the truth. Obviously in *Night after Night* there was the particular idea that I was 'playing' myself, Neil Bartlett, and also playing my father, Trevor Bartlett. Neither of those people is a 'character' – they are both real people. I was playing with the idea of what is 'real', in the particular sense of what makes a 'real man' on stage. The whole question of whether a straight man can be 'played', impersonated by a gay man is central to the piece.

One of the consequences of the fact that you write, adapt and translate is the inevitability of intertextual references, the constant borrowing from and pointing to other artistic sources. In A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep *and in* The Seven Sacraments of Nicolas Poussin *you allude to painting*, in Night after Night *to musical theatre, and in* In Extremis *to literature.*

We have discussed how history is a common underlying element to them all. Is intertextuality something you use in a conscious way? Don't you think it reflects the element of multiplicity we have mentioned before?

It's a never-ending process. When I make a piece, it's always made with an awareness of the tradition that I'm working in. I never think I'm working in a vacuum. Everything is always made up of quotations of everything else anyway. That's what theatre is. You're always quoting something because you're sharing a language with the audience. Something can only have meaning if the audience attributes the thing with a meaning, and that meaning comes from somewhere else outside the show. When you walk on stage, you're quoting something even through the way you look. You're wearing a costume by virtue of the fact that you're on stage, not in the street. It doesn't matter who you are, what you're doing, what you're portraying, your costume has necessarily been borrowed from someone. You make the audience aware that you are wearing it or you don't make the audience aware that you are wearing it, you play a game with what you are doing. That's absolutely essential to the way my imagination works. Everything comes from somewhere else and takes me into another direction towards something else. All of my works are littered with quotes from the other works, and not just words but gestures, pieces of music, pieces of staging and often costumes and props that I'm using again and again. But isn't that true of everyone?

Your play In Extremis *was commissioned by the National Theatre. In it, you continue tracing gay history through a reflection on one of its most significant figures, Oscar Wilde. However, if you compare it with other plays of yours, like* A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep *or* Night after Night, *it looks definitely more conventional. Why is that?*

That's because it was written for the National. My work is incredibly chameleon-like because I labour in very different contexts and I'm always very aware of them. People sometimes complain that I don't do site-specific work anymore, because the last piece I did was *The Seven Sacraments of Nicolas Poussin*.[24] But I always say that all my work is site-specific. *In Extremis* is absolutely site-specific, not just in terms of the visual architecture, but socially specific too. It was written to play to the audience that would go and see Corin Redgrave at the National – and that's why the other part in that play was written for Sheila Hancock, not for Ivan Cartwright or Regina Fong, whom I might have chosen to do it with if the show had been at the Royal

Court or the Drill Hall. And there had to be a play script that Trevor Nunn could take into the rehearsal room, whereas the other pieces that you are talking about, *Night after Night* or *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep*, weren't scripted, the script was written down after the project finished – in fact, they're not even scripts, they're transcripts. We taped the performance and then we played the tape and wrote the script.

Were you satisfied with the experience?

Yes, because I could write something for Sheila Hancock and Corin Redgrave. That was fantastic.

You have directed at the National and have played successfully at the Royal Court and at the Lyric Hammersmith, where you were Artistic Director. This is a long way from the Battersea Arts Centre or the Drill Hall. How do you feel about it?

I always expected to get caught very soon. I always thought that someone would come and tell me to get back where I belonged, that I was not allowed to do that anymore. Seriously, it's where I chose to be. I was at the Lyric because I loved the auditorium there, it's a wonderful space to work in. I wanted the degree of control because I had been on the road, touring for ten years, and I had worked everywhere. I also wanted the financial stability of being able to plan work in the future. I don't mean personal financial stability, but knowing that I would be making a show and that I could make another the following year, whereas before, every time I decided to set up a new piece, I always had to discover the space, the audience, the production crew, the lighting designer, and all of those things that the marketing department and the press office do. Every time you work with a new organization you have to invent all of these things, whereas being based in one theatre for ten years I became acquainted with all that, and I liked that stability for my work. But still, while I was at the Lyric, I kept on producing smaller-scale work as well – I wrote two site-specific performance pieces for Bette Bourne, for instance.[25] My cultural practice is still as much of a mess as it always was, running all over the place to different things as the projects arrive. People say that I'm mainstream now, but I feel my experience and my practice is as precarious as it ever was – if not more precarious. The Battersea Arts Centre is a very small world, in many ways a secure one, but putting on Rattigan's *Cause Célèbre*, Kleist's *The Prince of Homburg*, or Marivaux's *The Island of Slaves*, the big shows that I did at the Lyric, that was all incredibly

risky.[26] There was always a very real chance of having the whole thing blow up in my face.

As a conclusion, if one looks at your production since the 1990s, one discovers a strong presence of adaptations in addition to four original plays. Why such an interest in adapting other texts? What factors do you consider when deciding what to do next?

They all come about in different ways, but for the same reason: I love that piece of work and it inspires me to put it on stage. *Sarrasine* – the play based on Balzac's story that's part of a trilogy with *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep* and *Night after Night* – happened because Nicolas Bloomfield was obsessed with the story and persuaded me to do it.[27] Then he met François Testory, who was performing with Lindsay Kemp. He's got an amazing falsetto-soprano voice which the show needed. So the show was written. For each of those titles that you mention there is a very different reason, but it's usually one personal thing that triggers the process. In Molière's *The School for Wives*, the heroine, Agnes, writes a letter to her boyfriend, Horace; she ties it around a brick and throws it out of the window. It's a beautiful letter where she says that she wants to tell him that she loves him but she doesn't know how to do it. She's a teenager when she writes that. For me, the situation is simple; Agnes is me. I grew up in a small town. You live in a small town, and one day you see a man. You're a teenager and you see a man. And you want to tell him that you want him, but you don't know how to do it. And then Agnes says people tell her that it's wrong for her to think this, but she doesn't know why it is wrong for her to want to kiss him. It was very easy for me to translate that play.[28] There's always the most intimate reason for doing a show. I guess that's the answer. For me, the logic is that I'm an artist. I have an artist's logic. I don't *think* about what it would make sense to do next, I *feel* it.

Notes

1. Bartlett's adaptation of *The Servant*, originally written by Robin Maugham, opened at the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre on 13 March 2001.
2. Gay Sweatshop was a gay theatre company created in London in 1975, in the wake of the gay liberation movement in Britain. In 1976, the company opened its doors to female actors. The company's productions include *Mister X* (1975), *Any Woman Can* (1976), *Age of Consent* (1977), *As Time Goes By* (1977), *The Dear Love of Comrades* (1979), *Twice Over* (1988), and *Lust and Comfort* (1994–95, in collaboration with Split Britches).

3. The Drill Hall Theatre is a London fringe space which, under the direction of Julie Parker, has always been actively devoted to gay, lesbian and queer issues.
4. The Glasgow Citizens' Theatre gained strength in the 1970s, under the artistic directorship of Giles Havergal, Robert David MacDonald and Philip Prowse. Jeremy Raison took over as Artistic Director in November 2003, and Kenny Miller has been the new Associate Director since March 2004.
5. Lindsay Kemp and Bette Bourne are actors who have been long involved in the development of a gay/queer theatre practice. Kemp trained as a dancer and a mime and has devised a very personal artistic expression based on both facets. His productions include *Flowers* (1973), *Salomé* (1978), and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1979). Bourne created the drag troupe Bloolips in 1977, and was later joined by Paul Shaw. In their performances, they explore the potential of a radical use of camp and drag, with an emphasis on gender-bending. In his parallel career as an actor, Bourne has appeared in numerous productions, including Bartlett's *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep* (1990), *Sarrasine* (1990), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1994), *The Verger Queen* (2002) and *Does You Good* (2003).
6. *Mother Clap's Molly House*, directed by Nicholas Hytner, was first performed at the Lyttelton, National Theatre, on 24 August 2001.
7. *As Time Goes By*, written by Noël Greig and Drew Griffiths in 1977, shows gay existence in three different historical moments: England at the end of the nineteenth century, Berlin in the years 1929–34, and New York City in 1969.
8. *Handbag*, directed by Nick Philippou, opened at the Lyric Hammersmith Studio on 14 September 1998.
9. Derek Jarman was a British film director, artist, and activist. His films include *Sebastiane* (1975), *Caravaggio* (1986), *The Last of England* (1987), and *Edward II* (1991). He died of an AIDS-related illness on 19 February 1994.
10. Dr John Sentamu was appointed Archbishop of York in September 2005, the first black Archbishop in the Church of England. The London Partnerships Register was created in September 2001 as a first step to recognize the partnership status of both homosexual and heterosexual couples. Subsequently, other registration schemes were set up throughout the United Kingdom. Finally, a ground-breaking Civil Partnership Act became law on 18 November 2004 and came into effect on 5 December 2005. The Act took over the Partnerships Register as a means of providing same-sex couples with legal recognition to all effects.
11. R. Wallace, 'To Become: The Ideological Function of Gay Theatre', *Canadian Theatre Review*, 59 (Summer 1989), p. 7.
12. N. Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1988).
13. B. Roberts, 'Whatever Happened to Gay Theatre?', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 16, 62 (May 2000), pp. 183–4.
14. *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep* (Part Three) opened at the Drill Hall on 7 February 1990. *Night after Night* opened at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs on 26 November 1993. Both productions were directed by Bartlett.
15. A. Sinfield, *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 2 and *passim*.

16. *In Extremis*, directed by Trevor Nunn, opened at the Cottesloe, National Theatre, on 3 November 2000.
17. *Sarrasine* was both adapted from the story by Balzac and directed by Bartlett. It opened at the Traverse Theatre (Edinburgh) in August 1990 and transferred to the Drill Hall on 26 September of the same year.
18. Quentin Crisp (1908–1999) is an iconic figure in British gay history. A writer and actor, he lived his homosexuality openly from an early age and endured continuous attacks and arrests. The 1981 Thames Television film *The Naked Civil Servant*, directed by Jack Gold and starring John Hurt, was based on his life. In 1980, he left Britain for good and moved to New York. Charles Laughton (1899–1962) was a well-known British actor and director who was rumoured to be a homosexual. His most important films include *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933), *Night of the Hunter* (1955), and *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957).
19. *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* (1990) was published in London by Serpent's Tail.
20. *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep* is about the life of gay Victorian painter Simeon Solomon. It started as a solo show which Bartlett performed in 1986 and 1989, but in 1990 three drag artists, Bette Bourne, Ivan Cartwright and Regina Fong, joined him when the play opened at the Drill Hall.
21. *Pornography: A Spectacle*, directed by Bartlett, opened at the ICA on 12 September 1984.
22. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Bartlett's adaptation of Oscar Wilde's novel which he also directed, opened at the Lyric Hammersmith on 12 September 1994.
23. D. Rebellato, *1956 and All That: The Making of Modern British Drama* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 192–223.
24. *The Seven Sacraments of Nicolas Poussin*, devised and written by Bartlett, was first performed at Royal London Hospital on 1 July 1997.
25. The titles of the pieces are *The Verger Queen* (2002) and *Does You Good* (2003).
26. *Cause Célèbre*, adapted and directed by Bartlett, premiered at the Lyric Hammersmith on 2 May 1998. *The Prince of Homburg*, translated and directed by Bartlett (with David Bryer in the translation), opened at the Swan Theatre (Stratford-upon-Avon) on 24 January 2002. *The Island of Slaves*, translated, designed and directed by Bartlett, opened at the Lyric Hammersmith on 24 April 2002.
27. Nicolas Bloomfield is a London-born composer and founder member of the Gloria Theatre Company. He has worked with Bartlett on numerous occasions, including *Sarrasine* (1989), *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep* (1990) and *Night after Night* (1993).
28. *The School for Wives*, translated and adapted by Bartlett, and directed by Bartlett and Annie Castledine, opened at the Derby Playhouse on 3 July 1990.

Martin Crimp

Mireia Aragay and Pilar Zozaya

Martin Crimp became involved in theatre while reading English at Cambridge University in the late 1970s. In the early 1980s he began collaborating with the Orange Tree Theatre in Richmond, where his first plays were staged. In the early 1990s, Crimp began his association with the Royal Court Theatre, which staged *No One Sees the Video* (1990) and *Getting Attention* (1991). After a stay in New York as Writer-in-Residence with New Dramatists, Crimp wrote *The Treatment* (1993), which won the John Whiting Award and established him as a central figure on the new writing scene. In 1997 he was Writer-in-Residence at the Royal Court, which has since then staged his *Attempts on her Life* (1997), *The Country* (2000), *Face to the Wall* (2002), *Advice to Iraqi Women* (2003) and the triptych *Fewer Emergencies* (2005). He has recently completed a new play, *The City*. Crimp is also a prominent translator of French drama, from Molière and Marivaux to Genet, Ionesco and Koltès. In *Cruel and Tender* (2004) he adapted Sophocles's *The Women of Trachis*, placing it in a contemporary setting. Since the mid-1990s his reputation has become firmly established, and his work has been produced by leading directors both in Britain and in continental Europe. The interview that follows was held in Barcelona on 14 February 2005.

You began by writing fiction, a collection of short stories, An Anatomy, *and a novel*, Still Early Days.[1] *What led you to start writing for the theatre?*

Chance. Chance. I'd always been really interested in the theatre since I was at school. I used to be the kind of person who acted in plays, directed plays and did the lighting of plays. But it never really occurred to me that I would actually become a writer of plays. This happened quite by chance. I had written a play, and I got involved through it with

the theatre on my doorstep, the Orange Tree Theatre.[2] That again was also by chance, because it was geographical. There was a young director there called Anthony Clark, who now runs the Hampstead Theatre, and he decided to sort through all the unsolicited scripts he got according to which writers were close to the theatre, and I happened to be close to the theatre![3] A group of writers then were invited to share their work and, through this process, I was offered the possibility of having a piece of work put on at lunch time, a short play. That was my first lesson in actually producing a piece of work. The little play I wrote, *Living Remains*, went very well and the Orange Tree looked after me throughout the 1980s.[4]

So it was by chance. And you get addicted to plays, because there are certain circumstances about plays which are quite addictive – the process of engaging with actors and theatre itself, seeing your words actually occurring in a space, rather than just on the page, although sometimes I'd like them to be back on the page.

Could you tell us about the inspirations behind Dealing with Clair, The Treatment *and* Attempts on her Life.[5] *Were there any immediate influences?*

The influences behind these plays are all very different. As regards *Dealing with Clair*, I've always been influenced by Samuel Beckett. Of course you gradually realize that's a very bad thing. And *Dealing with Clair* was an attempt to escape from a symbolic world, a Beckett-like world, into a real world, into the observable world around me, because I realized I wasn't really entering into that world. That's where *Dealing with Clair* comes from.

In *The Treatment* you can perhaps see a dissatisfaction – I sound like an academic now – with that literal, observable world and an attempt to create a mythic world. That's what I'm trying to do in that play. But of course, that sounds very intellectual, and there are always other forces acting when you're writing, more banal forces. In this case, the Royal Court Theatre sent me to New York on a playwrights' exchange at New Dramatists, so I felt I owed them a play, and if I owed them a play, maybe it should be a play set in New York, even if it was going to be a New York of my imagination.[6] In other words, you have to be very careful when you analyze where a play comes from, because ultimately there are many forces acting on you.

Attempts on her Life comes from a very different place. If you look at it from the writer's point of view, *Attempts on her Life* comes from a

sense of extreme dissatisfaction and boredom with everything that was happening in the theatre. For quite a long time, I'd been writing little fragments which didn't seem like a normal play and I kept hiding them away, thinking this wasn't how I should be writing. Gradually, the urge to write in this way became very, very strong, and that made me finish writing *Attempts on her Life* in that way. It was also a provocation to the Royal Court, which saw itself as the home of avantgardism. But where was that kind of work? It didn't seem to be happening. So *Attempts on her Life* was a provocation on one level, but at the same time something I felt I had to write anyway. The play comes from two different places, and you can see that in its material. I hate saying what a play is about, but *Attempts on her Life* tries to describe a whole range of events which are happening in the world, but from one particular viewpoint which is that of the privileged Western European viewer. That is the situation I felt myself to be in. And I wanted to write in a different way; I was fed up with people coming in and saying hello to each other. And of course I've gone back to writing short plays without 'characters', *Face to the Wall* and *Fewer Emergencies*.[7]

In the Royal Court's 1999 Playwrights' Playwrights Season you chose to direct Harold Pinter's Old Times, *and then* The Country *opened at the Royal Court in May 2000. Michael Billington described* The Country *as a Pinteresque play in its 'use of language as a mask'*.[8] *Indeed, many of your plays reveal a concern with the Pinteresque theme of language as evasion, often underlined by your characteristic stage direction 'faint laugh'. Can you comment on this, and more generally on Pinter's imprint on contemporary British drama?*

The Pinter connection took me utterly by surprise. The fact that I'd chosen to direct his play maybe put that into people's heads. When I was a teenager staging plays at school, I was interested in the absurdists, Ionesco and Beckett. I lived in a sleepy little backwater in the north of England and I didn't really come across the work of Pinter.[9] So it's not a conscious influence. Of course I have a toolbox as a writer and I happen to use some of the tools that Pinter invented. They are just there. That's not the same as appropriating somebody else's imaginative or aesthetic world. I feel that mine is very different from that of Harold Pinter's, particularly in terms of sexual politics, and of the weight of masculinity in his work. That's for other people to judge, but, for example, a play like *The Country* has a strong female bias, whereas in Pinter's work you're always pulled towards the male pole.

Attempts on her Life *could be described as a postmodern play in view of the way Anne is constructed by a multiplicity of voices. Would you agree with that kind of reading of the play, or were you rather trying to satirize postmodernism, as in the line 'It's surely the point that a search for a point is pointless'?*[10] *What do you think about postmodernism?*

This is a huge question. I find the work of someone like Baudrillard totally fascinating to read and very, very seductive. But of course it is quite scary in the end because it appears to have no moral position. Now, the line you were quoting is a piece of satire. Satire implies a moral position; therefore you could argue that *Attempts on her Life* is not a postmodern piece, because there doesn't seem to be space in the postmodern project for satire. Obviously you don't set out to write a postmodern play – you set out to write a play. So that's not really a question I can answer, but it seems to me that the satirical elements of the play are a bit more old fashioned.

Do you see yourself as a satirist?

I do, actually. That's why a play like *The Country* is quite unusual for me. But that was a deliberate attempt to escape from my position as a satirist, because, if you want to develop as an artist, you have to break with your own habits. In the plastic arts there is often a fear of development in terms of style. An artist becomes known for doing one thing – for cutting animals in two, putting them in formaldehyde, or for making casts of objects – and it is sometimes quite hard for them to move on from that.[11]

So I'm wary of the trap of style. Sometimes in Pinter's work you feel that he's doing more Pinter. He's a brilliant, fantastic writer. Some of his late work is really impressive, like *Ashes to Ashes*.[12] But there's just a sense sometimes that he is copying or repeating himself. I want to avoid the trap of being just a satirist. I think that my work is characterized by diversity of output. There was a moment when that worried me slightly in terms of identity, but now I see that as being part of my identity. There is a danger of painting yourself into a corner with style. Samuel Beckett painted himself into a corner, but the harder he looked in it, the more he found. However there is always a danger that if you go into that corner, you'll stop looking, and you won't have anything to show, to report back. Being open is very important. That's why the last play I wrote, *Cruel and Tender*, was a rewriting of Sophocles's *The Women of Trachis*.[13] I'd always thought I wouldn't do things like that, but then I realized it would enable me to express things that I really wanted to say.

Irony seems to play a central role in your writing, from your titles – Dealing with Clair, Getting Attention, Attempts on her Life, The Country – *through the stage direction in* Attempts on her Life *instructing each scenario to have a design which 'best exposes irony', to* Advice to Iraqi Women.[14]

I remember reading one of Koltès's little notes stating that all dialogue is ironic.[15] I'm still trying to work out exactly what that means. Perhaps what he means is that seeing anything framed in the context of the theatre implies that you have a distance from it. Irony goes hand in hand with satire.

And with postmodernism . . .

Now you're trying to trap me. Irony is just me. Scepticism is another important value within our culture. And it's not the same as postmodernism, because postmodernism, it seems to me, is an embrace of the strange contradictions and even injustices which are so deeply part of our culture, both locally and globally, whereas scepticism is quite different because it does imply a moral position – not an ideological position, but a position of what you might think is right or wrong. That's what my irony is about.

It's also about provoking the spectator?

It is about provoking yourself, not about provoking the audience. You want to do things to yourself; you want to enjoy what you're doing. You enjoy what you're doing by trying to push against your own barriers and inhibitions.

Cruel and Tender, *which you've just mentioned, is a political play which evokes the current 'War on Terror' and the issue of individual responsibility for crimes against humanity. What do you think is the role of political theatre nowadays?*

A difficult one, because as soon as theatre takes sides, you're closing down the options. Obviously *Cruel and Tender* needed the war in Iraq to make it happen. But I hope there's more in it than a polemic. What made the play work for me was that it made me go inside and empathize with kinds of people I wouldn't normally empathize with, like a soldier's wife, for example, who has very strong feelings about mindless leftists who are just happy that a soldier or a banker is blown up. I quite enjoyed taking that particular position, getting involved in someone's mind like that. I was also interested in seeing the soldier as

a victim of politicians. This is not a postmodern approach, but a more universal position about war, focusing on women, who are victims of war by being left and abandoned; men, who are victims of war in being the tools of politicians; or soldiers who are accused of acts of cruelty which seem in fact to have been endorsed by the management higher up – they are not going to get any medals, even if that was what they were asked to do.

Like the general in Cruel and Tender, *who keeps saying 'I have only ever done what I was instructed to do'*.[16]

Yes, of course. I'm not justifying what he's done. I'm just trying to say that this is how a man might behave in these circumstances. This is the excuse he might look for.

In Attempts on her Life, *the lines of dialogue are not ascribed to any specific character, so it is up to the director and the actors to decide who speaks which lines. Moreover, with your very subtle kind of irony, depending on how a play is directed it might become something entirely different. How much do you get involved in the rehearsal process of your plays generally? How much freedom do you give your directors?*

In the middle of the 1990s I saw a production of Beckett's *Footfalls* by Deborah Warner. She set the first half of the play in the upper part of an Italian theatre, and the second half in the lower part. The Beckett Estate forbade her to tour the play because it had broken Beckett's rules.[17] I think this is not in the spirit of theatre, because the whole point about a theatre text is that it should continue to live and change and not be fixed in an absolute way. Obviously Beckett created some wonderful images, but he also created some really naff ones. Katie Mitchell did a wonderful production of some of the short plays, one of which was *Not I*.[18] Of course Beckett intended, when he wrote *Not I*, shock in the proscenium theatre. I love Beckett's play because it has a curtain, and yet it is extremely modernist. So when the curtain rises, you don't see what you expect, but just the mouth and also a man raising his arms. Katie produced the play in a very small space, like a piece of performance art. The mouth worked really well; the man didn't. He looked really stupid in the pointed hat, waving his arms. That made me think one should be allowed to find another way of staging the piece. That's why I made *Attempts on her Life* completely open partly as a reaction against all this. But having said that, the normal experience with directors is that they tell me they thought they could do anything with this play, but they

find they can't. So I don't know what it is, but there is something about the text which is very directive.

As regards my involvement in rehearsals, the situation in Britain is that a writer is normally invited to be very involved with the first production. That was certainly the case with *Attempts on her Life*. After that, you let go, because you want things to change, you want to be surprised. I've seen a production of *Waiting for Godot* whose mise-en-scène is supposed to be by the person who assisted Beckett's own production of the play. It's like museum theatre. It's very competent, but there is no surprise at all.

Have you ever thought about directing your own plays?

I might be interested in directing somebody else's work, because I do believe in the alchemy of a director and a writer. It can be really good when it works. Obviously, a play like *Attempts* is very dangerous, because if it goes to a mediocre director you get a very mediocre play.

How do you account for the success of your plays in Europe?

Who can explain what gives texts that particular thickness and texture without which they can't be transposed into other cultures? If you look at Chekhov's plays they are all very specifically about people in Russia at a particular time, and yet – I don't want to use the word 'universal'; it's a very bad word to use – but it seems that a lot of people in different places understand them. My own plays are always experimental in form; they are always an experiment for me. Yet they seem to work well in other cultures. But you have to be very careful not to see that as some big, official stamp for your plays being very good. McDonalds also transposes into other cultures, so crossing cultural boundaries is not necessarily a guarantee of good work. Moreover, someone anywhere can write a play which is culturally closed. It just means that it doesn't have the texture to come out of its own environment. Of course, there are many complications to this; there are certain poetic uses of language which stop texts coming out of their own environment because they are very hard to translate. It is true that as a teenager, I was drawn to writers like Ionesco and Beckett, and I didn't read Pinter, who is a very English playwright. A lot of the books I read are from other European cultures. So maybe that gives my plays a particular texture.

Has your work as a translator influenced your own writing?

I invented myself as a translator. There came a point round about my fortieth birthday when I had the feeling that bits of my brain were not being used enough. That's when I did the adaptation of *Le Misanthrope* which was basically a bluff because the last time I had studied French was at school.[19] But people started to ask me to do other translations. I panicked, because I thought my French was not good enough. So I started to read and reread and invented myself as a translator.

As to whether that has had an influence on my own writing, it's really hard to say. I can tell you there's one concrete influence, and that was between submitting *The Country* to the Royal Court and the play being actually produced. In that interval, I translated *The Maids* by Jean Genet for Katie Mitchell.[20] I knew that there was something wrong about the last act of *The Country*; it hadn't quite gone far enough. Consciously or unconsciously, I stole the shoes from *The Maids* and I made a present with the shoes. It's a very concrete feeling, nothing to do with style or language; it was just sheerly about the theatrical possibility of dressing up, which is so much part of that play.

In 1990 you began your association with the Royal Court and in 1997 you became Writer-in-Residence there. Was this association in any way a watershed in your writing career?

Yes, it was. It was very important for me. As I was saying, the Orange Tree had been fantastic, and it's only now that I realize how fantastic it was. Any play that I wrote, they would produce, which gave me a very steep learning curve. But there came a point when the relationship became a bit stale. *Getting Attention* made the Royal Court interested in me and that's when a new relationship started which continued during the 1990s.[21] The great thing about the Royal Court is that it receives a great deal of national and international attention, so that was very good for me.

What did you learn at the Royal Court?

What I've learnt over the years, not specifically at the Royal Court, is that every time you write a play it is equally hard. I always think a play will be a building block with the next one on top, but unfortunately it never works like that. What I did learn at the Royal Court were some very practical things. I learned how the size of the space affects the way a play is perceived – big space equals 'big' play, small space equals

'small' play. I also learned that perception of a play's 'size' changes from country to country. My play *The Country* felt like an intense chamber play in the Royal Court's original production. Yet through, for example, Luc Bondy's production of the same text, I learned it could fill much larger spaces.[22] What you realize is that you have to keep on climbing up the ladder so you can see greater distances. Any institution that you have a relationship with has a ceiling. You have to keep trying to work out what that ceiling is and get beyond it, but I'm not sure that's got to do with the writing, but with institutions.

The Royal Court staged the premiere of Attempts on her Life *in 1997.*

Yes, it was a really exciting time. And again I come back to the point about spaces, because at that time the Royal Court had moved out of Sloane Square and taken over two West End commercial theatres, the Ambassadors and the Duke of York's Theatre. *Attempts on her Life* was put on in a very special space at the Ambassadors. The upper part of the balcony, the 'circle' at the top of the theatre, was filled in. So what happened was you didn't have much height, but the stage was really deep. It was a very special space to play *Attempts* – a kind of amphitheatre; an Italian theatre which was not an Italian theatre. And after the first scene, which was played in a quite shallow end, it opened up the depth, which was quite exciting. There was another space in the Ambassadors, where they played *Lift Off* by Roy Williams.[23] That was also a wonderful space, because it was a very tall rectangular building, taller than it was wide. And the audience was very close to the stage, looking up at it, so again there was a lot of excitement about the space itself. Stephen Daldry also enjoyed reconfiguring the space in the Duke of York's. During that regime I made my translation of *The Chairs* by Ionesco, which again had a very exciting physical expression, both in the acting and in the décor. It was directed by Simon McBurney, and his designers, the brothers Quay, created an extraordinary set of doors opening on many levels, where chairs would come through.[24]

Do you see yourself as part of that mid-1990s moment which is often considered as signalling a renaissance in new writing for the stage with the Royal Court as one of its main dynamos?

The answer is no. In time, I was part of that moment and it was very strange for me, because I found myself being published in collections in other countries together with playwrights like Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, and other younger writers. Because, of course, I'm much

older than them. I am what the Royal Court politely called the lost generation. They have a theory that there are people like me, born in the mid-1950s, who started to develop work in the 1980s and then they all just died away. I appear to be the survivor. Of course a play like *Attempts on her Life* made me look younger than I am, which is another good reason for writing plays.

Is it the case that you tried to write a sequel to Attempts on her Life, *entitled* Attempts on his Life?

Yes, I naïvely thought there was a formula, so I could try it with men. *Face to the Wall* is as far as I got. For a long time I thought *Face to the Wall* was the beginning of something, and then I realized that it just was something. There is something very special about *Face to the Wall* for me, and that has to do with Beckett's *Not I* which was the first piece of professional theatre I ever saw, while I was still living in the north of England. In 1975, I made a trip to London and saw it at the Royal Court – it was fantastic. Ever since then I'd always wanted to write a short play, and have it done at the Royal Court. So there was a very personal thing about *Face to the Wall*. Motivation is always a very complicated issue.

You seem to have a particular concern with representing women on stage.

Yes, that's something I feel strongly about. I'm really aware now that I had a very steep learning curve about that. I now find a play like *The Treatment* or *Dealing with Clair* quite difficult from that point of view. There is a certain objectification of women in those plays; the woman is the victim and I don't really get away from that. But I would say that *Attempts on her Life* is actually an escape from that. The woman is still seen as an object, but in a very different way, because the irony of it is much more extreme and it is precisely about how women are viewed within our culture. And of course, *The Country* is a play which goes too hard the other way. It's a play in which a man is punished by two very strong women.

Sharon in Getting Attention *is both a victim and a perpetrator of violence.*

Yes. That's interesting, actually, because there are lots of structural problems with that play. The relationship between the couple is quite good; it's quite honest in that she is not just the miserable victim of the typical 'Royal Court scenario'. She's not merely representative of a social issue;

she quite likes lying in the garden, sunbathing, telling her child what to do. But that was a play I found particularly difficult.

So far, simply to mention your most recent plays, you have written Attempts on her Life – *a play with no characters, almost no plot, and centring on a relentlessly elusive 'truth'* – The Country – *a pastoral myth with a twist* – Face to the Wall *and* Fewer Emergencies – *two disturbing pieces of theatrical minimalism – and* Cruel and Tender – *a political, dystopian adaptation. Where do you go from there?*

That's a very good question! I was hoping you could tell me, because I have no idea. As I was saying, plays are not building blocks in some strange, insane way. But, at a practical level, I want to write a third play to go with the two short plays, because a lot of people have said to me that they don't last long enough.[25] Also Katie Mitchell will be directing *Attempts on her Life* in the Lyttelton, so I'll get into the big spaces.[26] This will be a big test. Otherwise, I have absolutely no idea.

Notes

1. Neither has been published.
2. The Orange Tree Theatre was founded in 1971 by Sam Walters in a room above the Orange Tree Pub in Richmond. During the 1980s it became clear that the Orange Tree was outgrowing that space. After years of planning and fundraising, a new theatre was opened in 1991 behind the façade of a Victorian school. It was the first purpose-built theatre-in-the-round in London.
3. Anthony Clark replaced Jenny Topper as Artistic Director of the Hampstead Theatre in July 2003. He started his career as Assistant Director at the Orange Tree in 1982. From 1984 to 1990 he was Artistic Director of Contact Theatre in Manchester. He joined Birmingham Rep as Associate Director in 1990 and from 1997 to 2001 he was Associate Artistic Director there, with full responsibility for the launch and programming of their studio, The Door, dedicated exclusively to new writing. He has also freelanced extensively.
4. *Living Remains* was directed by Anthony Clark in 1982. Over the 1980s, the Orange Tree also staged Crimp's *Four Attempted Acts* (1984), *A Variety of Death-Defying Acts* (1985), *Definitely the Bahamas* (1987), *Dealing with Clair* (1988) and *Play with Repeats* (1989).
5. *Dealing with Clair* was premiered at the Orange Tree on 14 October 1988, directed by Sam Walters. *The Treatment* was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs on 15 April 1993, directed by Lindsay Posner. *Attempts on her Life* opened at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs at the Ambassadors on 7 March 1997, directed by Tim Albery.

6. New Dramatists, founded in 1949, is a non-profit organization based in New York and devoted to the development of new writing.
7. *Face to the Wall* opened at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 12 March 2002, directed by Katie Mitchell. *Fewer Emergencies* was first staged in French at the Théâtre National de Chaillot (Paris) on 13 January 2004, directed by Marc Paquien.
8. Billington's review, 'Off the Beaten Track', was published in the *Guardian* on 18 May 2000. *The Country*, directed by Katie Mitchell, was premiered at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 11 May 2000.
9. Crimp was born on 14 February 1956 in Dartford, Kent; the family moved to Yorkshire when his father, employed by British Rail, was transferred there.
10. M. Crimp, *Attempts on her Life* (London: Faber, 1997), p. 46.
11. The controversial Sensation Exhibition held at the Royal Academy of Arts in September–December 1997 featured work by 42 so-called Young British Artists (YBAs), including Damien Hirst and Rachel Whiteread. Whiteread, who makes casts in plaster, resin, rubber and other materials of the insides and undersides of objects, contributed five pieces to Sensation, perhaps most strikingly 'Ghost', the cast of the inside of a Victorian room. Hirst's contribution to Sensation consisted in two paintings and six 'constructions' or 'installations' involving the (cut-up) bodies of animals, often (but not always) preserved in formaldehyde, through which he aims at provoking the public into questioning what they think they know – life, love, death, sex. Hirst has from the start been at the forefront of the Young British Art movement. In 1988, while still a student at Goldsmiths College, he organized and promoted the exhibition 'Freeze', widely believed to have been the starting point for YBA. The method used by Young British Artists, which might be described as 'shocking defamiliarization', together with the 1990s context where they emerged and the debate regarding the ethics and politics of their work, clearly link them to the 'in-yer-face' playwrights of the same generation.
12. *Ashes to Ashes*, directed by Pinter himself, premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs at the Ambassadors on 12 September 1996.
13. *Cruel and Tender* opened at the Young Vic on 4 May 2004, directed by Luc Bondy. It was transferred to the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord (Paris) on 22 September 2004, as part of the Festival d'Automne.
14. From 7 to 12 April 2003, in response to the war in Iraq, the Royal Court organized a series of events under the heading 'War Correspondence'. It featured a response from Caryl Churchill, 'Iraqdoc', and three other pieces – Crimp's *Advice to Iraqi Women, Delirium* by Rebecca Prichard and *Voices from Within* devised by April de Angelis, Elyse Dodgson and Indhu Rubasingham. It also included poems by Tony Harrison, and talks by journalists and academics.
15. In 1997, Crimp translated Bernard-Marie Koltès's *Roberto Zucco* for the Royal Shakespeare Company. It was directed by James Macdonald and opened at The Other Place (Stratford-upon-Avon) on 26 November 1998.
16. M. Crimp, *Cruel and Tender* (London: Faber, 2004), pp. 60 and 67.
17. Warner's controversial production of *Footfalls* opened at the Garrick Theatre on 14 March 1994.

18. Mitchell's *Beckett Shorts*, including *Not I*, was produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company at The Other Place (Stratford-upon-Avon) in November 1997.
19. Crimp's version of Molière's *Le Misanthrope (The Misanthrope)* directed by Lindsay Posner, opened at the Young Vic on 8 February 1996.
20. *The Maids (Les Bonnes)* opened at the Young Vic on 1 July 1999.
21. *Getting Attention* was premiered at the West Yorkshire Playhouse (Leeds) on 6 March 1991, directed by Jude Kelly. It opened at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 16 May 1991. In 1990, the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs had already staged Crimp's *No One Sees the Video*, which opened on 22 November and was directed by Lindsay Posner.
22. Luc Bondy directed *The Country (Auf dem Land)* at the Zürich Schauspielhaus in 2001; the same production opened at the Théâtre National de la Colline (Paris) on 6 November 2002 as part of the Festival d'Automne.
23. Williams's *Lift Off* opened at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs at the Ambassadors on 18 February 1999, directed by Indhu Rubasingham.
24. Crimp's version of *The Chairs (Les Chaises)* opened at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs at the Duke of York's on 19 November 1997. It was a coproduction between the Royal Court and Théâtre de Complicité. Simon McBurney is the Artistic Director of Complicité, founded in 1983 by Annabel Arden, Marcello Magni and McBurney himself. Complicité's work, ranging from entirely devised productions to theatrical adaptations and revivals of classic texts, seeks to integrate text, music, image and action into groundbreaking, surprising theatre. The design of *The Chairs* by Stephen and Timothy Quay received the Drama Desk Award for Best Design in 1998.
25. The third short play in question, *Whole Blue Sky*, was given a reading at the Sala Beckett in Barcelona in February 2005 as part of a cycle on Crimp. With *Face to the Wall* and *Fewer Emergencies*, it is part of a triptych entitled *Fewer Emergencies*. Its premiere in this form took place at the Royal Court on 8 September 2005, directed by James Macdonald.
26. Katie Mitchell's production of *Attempts on her Life* was staged at the Lyttelton, National Theatre, in March 2007. Mitchell directed an Italian production of *Attempts on her Life* (*Tracce di Anne*) at the Piccolo Teatro (Milan) in March 1999.

Kevin Elyot

Mireia Aragay and Pilar Zozaya

Kevin Elyot won the Samuel Beckett Award for his first play, *Coming Clean* (1982), and the Writers' Guild Award for *Killing Time* (1990), his first television play. In 1991, the Hampstead Theatre commissioned *My Night with Reg*, which finally premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in 1994 and was turned into a film in 1996. Elyot is the author of three other stage plays, *The Day I Stood Still* (1998), *Mouth to Mouth* (2001) and *Forty Winks* (2004) and, since the mid-1990s, has written television dramatizations of *The Moonstone* (1996), *No Night is Too Long* (2002), *Twenty Thousand Streets under the Sky* (2005), and Agatha Christie's *Five Little Pigs* (2003), *Death on the Nile* (2004), *The Body in the Library* (2004) and *The Moving Finger* (2006). His version of Christie's *And Then There Were None* was staged in the West End in 2005. Most recently he has written the film *Riot at the Rite* for the BBC and *The Moving Finger* for Granada. The interview that follows was conducted in London on 26 November 2004.

What compels you to write? What do you want to write about?

That's possibly the most difficult question you could ask a writer. Writing is just something that I feel I can and wish to do and it's what I'm happiest doing. I feel most fulfilled when I'm doing it. But I also find it very difficult. I'm not very prolific and I never really know what I want to write about until I'm writing. There's a school of thought at the moment that theatre should be more grounded in politics, which Michael Billington is very much a supporter of.[1] I'm not quite sure about this agenda, because it seems to me that writers will write what they want to write about. You can't force them to write about a particular thing. Maybe rather than questioning what a play is about, one should ask whether it is any good. And if it's a very intimate play

about the place of the heart, or a huge epic play about the state of the nation, so be it – but I don't think you can keep using the criteria of political theatre. It just doesn't get you anywhere. Writing good stuff is incredibly difficult and you have to trust the muse to a degree. You can't just say you're going to write about a national matter, because it might be rubbish unless you felt it. You've got to connect somewhere with a core of feeling. Some people write very easily about political issues and others write other plays. There should be room for all kinds of plays. I never really sit down and think what I 'must' write about. I tend to arrive at a subject. It's a little random, really.

What would you say constitutes the basis of your plays?

Experience.

Your own personal experience?

Up to a point. But I don't lead a life full enough to be able to write several plays about. I don't do that much, and my daily routine is pretty boring, so I can't be writing about that. It would be very dull to sit in a theatre watching it unfold. The key is to try and enter the world of the imagination, and that's extremely difficult – to find the space, to find the time, to find the mood. That's what writers always strive for. It's a much more complex and transcendent process than just sitting down and saying, 'I'm going to write about subject A or subject B'.

Illness and death, deception and betrayal, memory and guilt, love and friendship are recurring themes in your plays.

Yes, they are. I couldn't disagree with any of those. But again, I don't necessarily intend to make those themes the purpose of writing. I just find the same themes coming up. I'm beginning to believe now that you just end up writing different versions of the same play. I don't think there's anything bad in that. It's just that you become obsessive about one particular area. Of course, there are massive exceptions to this, like Shakespeare and some other playwrights who embrace everything. But with a lot of writers, like Chekhov for example, you can see the stereotypes and themes recurring in different ways, all part of the same world. I suppose it's the same with me. I never really set out to do it; it's simply what happens.

In your latest play to date, Forty Winks, *there is perhaps a greater emphasis than in any previous one on the isolation of the characters from each other and*

a disturbing apparent absence of a moral standpoint on the central character, Don, and his dangerous obsession.[2] *Would you agree with both of these perceptions?*

Yes, I would. The protagonists in my earlier plays have been easier to identify with. With Don I wanted to get the audience on his side, and then reveal the truth about him. But I'm in no way passing a moral judgement; that's not my job. In fact I find him an immensely sympathetic character, battling with a hopeless love in a cold climate. He's an outsider, restless, always on the move. His attempt to connect with family life disturbs an uneasy equilibrium. The past hangs like a millstone, whilst the present is hard to grasp, forever shifting perspective. It's no accident that part of the action takes place in an anonymous hotel room on the North Circular.

Your plays reveal a very effective handling of structure, in the way you gradually disclose crucial information and shift between different time frames. What importance do you attach to the construction of dramatic shape in your work?

Enormous; it is enormously important. There has been a slight tendency to produce some writing for the stage that is almost like television writing, which is very linear. In theatre you've got to find another dimension to it. I tend to use the word 'transcendent' – you have to try and find some way of expressing the story and unveiling the facts you're dealing with as poetically as possible. In my view, that's terribly important.

Music, in that relation, plays a very important role in your plays in terms of both content and form. You seem to choreograph your characters and scenes as if they were movements in a musical composition.

Music is very important to me. I was taught piano as a child, and was also a chorister. Music is a very fine discipline and I suppose it does help in playwriting, in some strange way. But I don't know about choreographing my plays.

For example, My Night with Reg *is like a musical piece where situations repeat, with variations. Gradually the spectator discovers that John, Benny and even his seemingly faithful companion Bernie have all spent a night with Reg.*

That's more associated with dramatic shape rather than choreographing. And you have to be careful not to be tricksy about it. I have to say that with *Mouth to Mouth*, there was definitely a conscious attempt to

create a certain shape. I wanted to write something that began with two people – Frank and Laura. Then in the next scene there are two again – Frank and Gompertz. Then, there are four – Frank, Laura, Dennis and Phillip. Then, six – Frank, Laura, Dennis, Phillip, Roger and Cornelia. Then, four – Frank, Laura, Dennis and Phillip – and two again – Frank and Gompertz. And finally three – Frank, Laura and Roger. In *The Day I Stood Still*, I wanted to have all the older characters gradually giving way to the younger ones. By the end of the play you just have the stage full of youngsters.

In this connection, what role do those younger characters – Eric in My Night with Reg, *Jimi in* The Day I Stood Still *and Phillip in* Mouth to Mouth – *play in relation to the older ones? As members of a new generation do they embody new attitudes, or do they simply repeat inherited patterns of behaviour?*

They probably repeat inherited patterns of behaviour, because patterns are set very early on in life and you find that at the end of your life they are still being repeated. So a certain part of that is a 'yes'. I've always seen Eric as the most overbearing character in *My Night with Reg*. He first starts off on the outside and, by the end of the play, he is more or less taking over. So that's his job. Jimi plays a different role. Jimi and Phillip, and in a way Eric too, are objects of desire; they are catalysts. But Jimi and Phillip are positive catalysts in a way that Eric isn't. But of course, it's always nice to have young characters around because it just opens it up.

In Forty Winks *the young characters are girls, Hermia and Celia. Would you say that they are also catalysts or rather victims?*

Both.

In this play, music, which we were talking about earlier, also plays an important role. The play opens with Joni Mitchell's 'A Case of You'; the second scene closes with the tableau when Don obsessively watches the sleeping Hermia to the sound of Rossini's 'The Thieving Magpie' overture; and as the play ends Vivaldi's 'Al Santo Sepolcro' is heard. Could you comment on each of these three moments?

The Joni Mitchell song is on the album 'Blue' that Don made a tape of for Diana at school – and it struck me as particularly apposite: 'You're in my blood like holy wine, You taste so bitter and so sweet.' The Rossini is a wry comment on Don, who indulged in a little light shoplifting as a

boy and who is also about to 'thieve', in a sense, the sleeping daughter of his life-long love. It also effectively juxtaposes the action as it drifts across the heath, a rather jolly counterpoint to the electric stillness onstage. 'Al Santo Sepolcro' is a most haunting piece. I wouldn't wish to put into words all that it means, but I find the moment immensely moving when we start to hear it: this man, carrying his mother's ashes around in a carrier-bag, year in, year out, unable to part with them, and trapped by an obsession that is about to overcome him yet again.

At the start of Mouth to Mouth *you quote Marcel Proust – 'The whole art of living is to make use of the individuals through whom we suffer'.*[3] *Is there an affinity between yourself and the French writer?*

Such a comparison would be immensely presumptuous, but I find the idea of memory being sparked off by the sensation of a moment very powerful.

You seem to combine comedy and tragedy, understatement and revelation, with great skill, always stopping short of a full-frontal emotional assault on your audience. Would you care to comment on the reasons for that?

Probably because I'm English.

Yet so-called 'in-yer-face' theatre by writers such as Sarah Kane or Mark Ravenhill is very different from your far more restrained plays.

I always feel undercutting the situation may be more enlightening than just banging it out. If you have a character confessing something or revealing awareness of emotion, my instinct is for the next character to completely pull the rug from under that because that makes the audience sit up and think. They are thrown back on themselves and have to work out what is actually going on there. Pinter is a fantastic writer in that respect. You're never quite sure what's going on in his plays, but somehow you do know what's going on. It's brilliant to achieve that. And his influence is massive on all of us, whether we like it or not, or know it or not. Even as far as dialogue is concerned, he reinvented dramatic language for a whole generation. Then again, Joe Orton is also massively influential and he is completely the opposite – he pulls the language in a different way; he's much more exotic. But in fact, if you spoke to both of them, you might find they have the same influences – Webster, Congreve, Beckett, who knows?

Do you see yourself as a part of the 1990s renaissance in new writing?

I get very irritated about labels and I absolutely don't see myself as part of anything. It's true that my work came to the fore in the 1990s, but that was purely by chance. There's no coterie of writers all getting together and deciding to start writing. And I don't think 'in-yer-face' theatre applies to me at all. I see myself as being out on a limb, and I'm very happy to be there.

Another frequently used label is that of gay/queer theatre. What is your view on this issue? What would you say to your plays being described as gay or queer?

People can – and do – describe my plays as they like. I would hope a few describe them as good.

Can you tell us about your experience working with Ian Rickson, who directed the premieres of The Day I Stood Still *and* Mouth to Mouth? *How much did you yourself become involved?*[4]

Both of them were very good experiences; I enjoyed them enormously. Ian is a terrifically good director. He's very sensitive to the writer, to the script, he's very good at casting, and he creates a very good atmosphere in rehearsals. Both the National, where *The Day I Stood Still* was done, and the Royal Court Theatre were very friendly places to work in, very supportive, and I was very involved in those productions from start to finish.

Would you care to comment on your experiences as an actor?

I enjoyed it from time to time, but for some reason I never felt I achieved what I wanted to achieve. Gradually the writer took over and then ten years ago it took over completely, which I'm very happy about. It's been a natural gradual transition.[5]

How did the success of My Night with Reg *transform your career as a playwright? Are you still identified as the author of* My Night with Reg*?*[6]

Yes, I think I'm sometimes still identified with that play, but less so as the years roll by. Actually an author is quite likely to have a particular piece that people recognize you for. But it doesn't worry me at all; on the contrary, it opens doors for you – it's weird, you wouldn't think of *My Night with Reg* eventually leading to Agatha Christie.

You have written several adaptations for television, from Wilkie Collins's The Moonstone, *Ruth Rendell's* No Night is too Long, and *Patrick Hamilton's* Twenty Thousand Streets under the Sky, *to a couple of Agatha Christies. How do you go about adapting another writer's work for the screen? And how about adapting your own work, as you did with* My Night with Reg?[7]

I very much enjoy working on other people's material and, quite soon into the process, you find yourself tackling the same problems as when you're writing original pieces – basically, you're trying to create as good a drama as possible. I didn't greatly enjoy working on the screenplay of *My Night with Reg*. I didn't feel as free about adapting it as I feel I should have done.

How do you account for the success of Agatha Christie adaptations today?

One could devote a whole interview to this. Suffice to say that her appeal transcends the seeming insularity of the world she creates, not only because of the enduring fascination of her plotting, but perhaps more importantly because order always prevails.[8]

Finally, what is your view of the current state of British theatre?

I'm not quite convinced about the golden renaissance in writing that some have talked of. It goes in waves. There's much encouragement of new writing, but I'm not sure it's resulting in that many good new writers. Maybe a little more care and selectivity is required and I'm not sure how helpful some critics are in this respect. Fashion and style often confuse the issue. They take to certain writers because they feel they are cutting edge, but a dash of scepticism might not come amiss as the quality of work is not always that great.

Notes

1. In 'Theatre of War' (*Guardian*, 17 February 2001), 'Modern Life is Rubbish' (*Guardian*, 18 December 2002) and 'Goodbye to All That' (*Guardian*, 9 January 2003), Billington lamented what he saw as the dearth of plays dealing with political issues. In contrast, in 'Drama out of a Crisis' (*Guardian*, 10 April 2003) and 'Hello Cruel World' (*Guardian*, 17 December 2003), he welcomed the, in his opinion, repoliticization of British theatre.
2. *Forty Winks*, directed by Katie Mitchell, opened at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 28 October 2004.
3. K. Elyot, *Mouth to Mouth* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2001), p. 5.

4. *The Day I Stood Still* was first performed at the Cottesloe, National Theatre, on 22 January 1998; *Mouth to Mouth* opened at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 1 February 2001.
5. Some of Elyot's later appearances as an actor were in *The School for Scandal*, which opened at the Royal Exchange Theatre (Manchester) on 10 May 1990, directed by Phyllida Lloyd; in James Maxwell's production of *The Doctor's Dilemma* at the Royal Exchange (Manchester), opening on 16 May 1991; and in Martin Sherman's *When She Danced* at the Globe Theatre, directed by Robert Allan Ackerman and opening on 6 August 1991.
6. *My Night with Reg* premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 31 March 1994, directed by Roger Michell. It became the first play ever to transfer from the Theatre Upstairs straight to the West End, first at the Criterion Theatre (opening on 15 November 1994) and subsequently at the Playhouse Theatre (opening on 27 June 1995). In 1994 the play won the Evening Standard Award for Best Comedy and the Writers' Guild Award for Best Fringe Play, and in 1995 the Olivier Award for Best Comedy and the Critics' Circle Award for Most Promising Newcomer. In 1996, it was turned into a film by the BBC, scripted by Elyot himself and with the same director and cast as the Royal Court production.
7. *The Moonstone* was directed by Robert Bierman for the BBC in 1996. *No Night is too Long* was directed by Tom Shankland for the BBC/Alliance Atlantis in 2002. *Twenty Thousand Streets under the Sky* was directed by Simon Curtis for the BBC in 2005. Elyot has adapted Christie's *Five Little Pigs*, which was directed by Paul Unwin for Granada in 2003, *Death on the Nile* and *The Body in the Library*, which were both directed by Andy Wilson for Granada in 2004, and *The Moving Finger*, directed by Tom Shankland for Granada in 2006.
8. In addition to having adapted four of Christie's novels for the screen, Elyot's stage version of her *And Then There Were None* opened at the Gielgud Theatre on 14 October 2005, directed by Steven Pimlott. For the playwright's views on Agatha Christie's contemporary appeal, see 'Christie Strikes an Alarming Chord in Our Own Times' (*Independent*, 19 September 2005).

Joe Penhall

Hildegard Klein

Joe Penhall's first play, *Wild Turkey*, was performed at the Old Red Lion Theatre as part of the 1993 London New Play Festival. *Some Voices* (1994) won Penhall a Thames Television Bursary and the John Whiting Award in 1995. He has also written *Pale Horse* (1995), *Love and Understanding* (1997) and *The Bullet* (1998). *Blue/Orange* (2000) won the Evening Standard Best Play of the Year (2000), the Critics' Circle Theatre Award for Best New Play (2000) and the Olivier Award for Best New Play (2001). His latest plays are *Dumb Show* (2004) and *Landscape with Weapon*, which opened at the National Theatre in April 2007. Penhall has also written the scripts for several films – among others, *Enduring Love* (2004) and *The Long Firm* (2004) – and has written and directed *The Undertaker* screened on BBC2 in 2005. The following interview took place in London on 31 January 2005.

How would you assess the role played by the Royal Court Theatre in your career as a playwright?

Critical. I wouldn't be a playwright if it weren't for the Royal Court. After showing them some writings, I was invited to join the Royal Court Young People's Theatre. I had access to great teachers, like Hanif Kureishi, April de Angelis and Caryl Churchill. When I wrote my first full-length play, *Some Voices*, they put it on.[1] This is something unique; it doesn't happen anywhere else. The Royal Court is one of the best professional theatres, one of the most nurturing and educational. So, to me, their role was crucial.

You have called Some Voices *a 'London crisis drama', and schizophrenia is a potent symbol of urban alienation, loneliness, and poverty.*[2] *Can you comment on this?*

I suppose for me the revelation was realizing that those people you see – the homeless, drunks, or dull kids in the subway – all started life

as ordinary decent citizens. You see a lot of them in London, especially around Shepherd's Bush. Sometimes it is an organic mental illness, schizophrenia or depression, that has driven them down a disastrous path to where they find themselves living rough. Yet, prior to that revelation, I think there was an assumption that the people you see begging on the streets, wandering around drunk, were just doing it as a lifestyle choice.

Some Voices is about showing how, because of a simple physiological illness, a perfectly ordinary nice man has wound up a ranting lunatic on a wasteland with people beating him up or giving him a wide berth. You might get a cold tomorrow, or the flu, whereas somebody else will get a different illness, which is far more devastating. It is significant that 75 per cent of homeless people all started with a mental illness. That is why they are there, not because they like begging, but because they are coping with a terrible condition, which makes it almost impossible to keep a job, a relationship, or a house.

In Some Voices *the symbol of the huge window is very powerful, an opening onto the world which dominated the Theatre Upstairs with its ray of light, as opposed to the bleakness of the institution, with its dismal painted walls. At the beginning Ray is standing there, and at the end of the play he is again close to a window. Does this represent some hope of escape, of liberation?*

Yes, he is always looking for escape. Even when he is apparently safe at the end he's not really, because he is still in a hostel. All of my plays are about the impulse towards freedom, people wanting to get out of their immediate environments, to escape the job, or relationships, or the mental condition that they are in. But they are also about the dangers of escape and liberation. Ray comes unstuck and has all sorts of terrible adventures in the course of liberating himself. Rachel and Neal in *Love and Understanding* end up very bruised by their liberation. There is no doubt that Christopher in *Blue/Orange* will get out of the mental hospital, but it won't be the best solution for him.[3] So it is always about the warring instincts between liberation and security.

The title of Pale Horse *is taken from the Book of Revelation, and you have stated that the play was conceived in your Shepherd's Bush studio during a particularly dark night of the soul, when it occurred to you that only the truly religious could deal with death.*[4] *Having been brought up as an agnostic, did this revelation change your conception of life and death?*

No, but it struck me as an intriguing premise, a paradoxical way of thinking about the world. As a child it never occurred to me that being agnostic meant missing out on something. Suddenly, on that night, it struck me that being agnostic or atheist you were depriving yourself of a degree of comfort and reassurance that religious people have. I suppose it was the beginning of my realization that people who are part of institutions – whether religious, government or fashion – are always happier and more self-assured than people on the outside.

All of my plays are about the individual versus the institution. *Love and Understanding* is about the institution of marriage. *The Bullet* is about the individual versus the corporation he works for, and *Blue/Orange* challenges the medical institution. *Dumb Show* is about the individual versus the press, the media and fashion.[5] There is good drama in questioning the established status quo.

Charles, the agnostic protagonist of Pale Horse, *is unable to cope after the death of his wife. In his existential dilemma he turns to the church and to medical science for comfort. I suppose you wanted to show that neither one nor the other could provide any satisfactory answers to forestall his disintegration.*

Yes. I suppose it is really about how in the midst of bereavement you are alienated from everybody and everything, particularly if you don't have any kind of religious beliefs. Charles finds that there is no solace in any of the belief systems you are brought up with, nor amongst his friends and associates. It's like that wonderful soliloquy in *Hamlet* – everything is stale and pointless. It was as much an investigation of the nature of death, as it was of our society, one in which religion, science and the law are becoming increasingly meaningless.

Could you comment on the institution of the law in connection with the bleak ending of Pale Horse*?*

What is crucial there is not that he is being arrested and that justice will be observed, but that he is at his wife's grave, praying for forgiveness and when the policewoman arrives he thinks she looks like his wife. The only import the police have is in relation to his particular existential, spiritual crisis. So it is just about a lawless, godless, loveless, self-regarding, solipsistic community. But that is not to say the world in general is like that. It was the beginning of me confronting the alienation I was feeling after several people close to me died quite violently. I was thinking about this in *Some Voices* as well. If you are ill or bereaved or disadvantaged or unemployed, then you are invisible,

there is no one that can offer you any kind of help. If you are not perceived to be normal, with a nice job and a nice wife, family and place in society, then you can fall through the cracks and life becomes impossible.

What role would you say the Bush Theatre played in your professional development?

The Bush came along at a time when I had written *Love and Understanding*, which the Court weren't particularly interested in. All those plays the Court did in the 1990s were angst-ridden, dark and questioning. *Love and Understanding*, though still haunted and angst-ridden, wasn't quite *that* angst-ridden. The part the Bush played was to give me an open remit. They widened the parameters. From *Love and Understanding* I got the idea to write *Blue/Orange*, to write about doctors and people who are supposed to be good. The characters in *Love and Understanding* are believed to be good, but they learn that it is actually sexier to be bad, and I got interested in that.

In the introductory page of Love and Understanding, *you state that, together with Caleb Fawcett, you composed the original jazz music played between the scenes.*[6] *Was this exceptional or do you compose music in addition to writing plays?*

Yes, I used to play the guitar in bands. I was trained in classical guitar, so I studied all the classical Spanish guitar composers like Fernando Sor. I am always playing music and writing songs. I've just written some songs with a friend of mine, Charles Jenkins, who is a brilliant singer and songwriter in Australia. Last year I worked on a musical with Pete Townshend from The Who, but it never came to fruition. So I do some composing now and again. Luckily it is not my job and I can do it just for fun.

In Love and Understanding, *we witness Neal's dramatic change of life, which appears to be a positive evolution towards the achievement of personal freedom. But there seems to be a sense of loss about Rachel, a regret about their separation.*

I think everybody accepts that those two characters grow. When they separate they've probably faced the reality that they have started to bore each other. But it's not necessarily a wonderfully liberating experience. Being liberated from somebody or something is not always a joyous

thing, and this is why the stock Hollywood response to relationships is so weird, so distorted. It's ambiguous whether Richie coming into their lives has been a good or a bad thing in their relationship. In a sense it's been good because they've had to face the reality that they bore each other. But it's a bad thing because they were really happy. Previously they contemplated their problems together. Now they have to do so alone – finding work, friends, dealing with their own consciousness. That's why the last thing Rachel says is, 'Do you want another drink?'.[7] She doesn't want to be alone. It doesn't necessarily mean that they can get back together or be married, but that they would rather be at the same table together than be completely alone. I suppose the play is about the impossibility of being in relationships that last for ever, whether with friends or lovers. We like things that we shouldn't. So when we get rid of the things or people that we should get rid of, we miss them.

There is an open ending in Love and Understanding *with Neal's strange dream about the nest of maggots on Rachel's breast. Would you comment on this dream?*

There was a real dream that I had. When Neal sees the nest of maggots, he suddenly sees Rachel in a new light. As infidelity is made revolting to him, he decides that he can't possibly ever love her again. Then she laughs and explains that it is perfectly innocent – it's rice pudding – and he realizes that, of course, he was wrong about her. The whole play is about assumptions. Neal goes through three phases in the play. He starts out as Rachel's partner. Then he turns against her and hates her because she's slept with Richie. Finally, he reaches the third phase of realizing that she is the person he's always loved, but that they are wrong for each other.

You have stated that Love and Understanding *is about postures. You compare Richie's manipulative articulacy to that of 'the slick, worded-up spokesman of the Thatcher era – and latterly the Blair era'.*[8] *Don't you see any difference between the two eras?*

What I said was that Richie had a talent for manipulating the truth, a talent for spin. Spin is something that began in the Thatcher era and was adopted wholeheartedly by Blair. A brilliant talent for manipulating words, and making dangerous things sound innocuous. What characterized the Labour government in England prior to Blair was that they were not especially manipulative or big on advertising campaigns, twisting the truth, whereas the Conservative government were. Thatcher

was a powerful propagandist, but Labour weren't into propaganda. This changed in the 1990s when they decided they had better become brilliant at public relations and adept propagandists. In other words, more manipulative. At first it seemed a good thing. But subsequently it disintegrated, started to become propaganda, to become untruthful.

Love and Understanding is about communication and manipulation. Because Richie is witty, we like him, they like him. I think that's a very political thing. Take George Bush – his entire administration is founded on his ability to be personable, on well-timed public assurances, on the gung-ho attitude and the famous political charisma.

You have explained that you grew up in a 'wonderful, joyful, affectionate seventies nuclear family'.[9] The Bullet *seems to be based on biographical facts. It is about another nuclear family, a married couple with two sons, who have to face the recession. I suppose when writing the play your family situation in the 1970s was on your mind, especially the end of the idyll and the suffering caused by injustice?*

Yes, *The Bullet* is biographical. My family was like that and it was lots of fun. Then in the 1980s and 1990s it got harder because my dad was made redundant a couple of times and it impacted on us in a pretty disastrous way. Although *The Bullet* doesn't really say anything especially interesting about redundancy, it relates to my other plays in that it is again about the way that events impact on relationships and the individual's sanity. My main characters always find it very hard to stay on the straight and narrow and retain their sanity. There is always something that drives them crazy.

In The Bullet *there is also quite a harsh critique of globalization, multinationals, technology, competition, money and success. You don't seem very much in favour of the way our world is evolving?*

No, technology freaks me out. On a deep subconscious level I mistrust it; I don't understand it. And on a simple human level it does mean that lots of people have been replaced by machines, which isn't really good for anybody. This is not to say that I have a huge beef, but it is true that I am a technophobe. I would be just as happy on a farm, with a few chickens and an old cow, as I would be in the city with a big widescreen TV, an iPod, a heater and three remote controls for the stereo. I hate the fact that we are becoming slaves of technology, which is continually being updated.

The Bullet *is also a play about love and understanding, loss and failure, lack of communication. Yet the ending suggests a new rapport between Robbie and his father, once they are both abandoned by their female companions.*

Yes, Robbie realizes that he is going to be just like his dad. Whether he likes it or not, he can't escape the genetic legacy. He's spent a long time posturing as a professional citizen of the world, travelling around, having a very modern sexy young girlfriend, but at the end of the day, he is like his dad – a grumpy, difficult, self-obsessed loser. His behaviour is bleak and not especially original, but it's a fundamental of human existence, and I got pretty obsessed with it for a while.

Several critics have pointed out the similarities between The Bullet *and two lacerating American family dramas of the 1950s, Arthur Miller's* Death of a Salesman *and Eugene O'Neill's* Long Day's Journey into Night. *Like the aging, demented Willy Loman in Miller's play, Charles retreats to a dream world of the past when he still had a future. Both have long-suffering, loyal wives and two sons. Do you agree with these possible influences when conceiving the play? Did you also have Harold Pinter's* The Homecoming *in mind?*

I know O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* is a classic, but I have to confess I haven't read or seen it. Pinter's *The Homecoming* and Miller's *Death of a Salesman* are two of my favourite plays and they probably encapsulate two of my biggest themes. In a way, *Love and Understanding* is a homecoming in reverse. The mad, bad, dangerous-to-know Richie comes home to his very square old friends, as opposed to the square characters of Teddy and Ruth in *The Homecoming* coming back to their place. When I wrote *The Bullet* I was ready to be a bit more personal. I was completely influenced by *The Homecoming* and *Death of a Salesman*. I realized they were very stylish, very powerful but ultimately extremely personal plays. I love those two plays so much, and I thought I've got my own version of this somewhere. Let's see what happens if I write it – which is always what you do with your favourite plays. I've spent my entire writing career wanting to write a play like Pinter's *The Homecoming* or *The Caretaker*, Sam Shephard's *Buried Child*, David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* or Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*.

You have written about your 'favourite influences', like Beckett, and the imprint of Büchner's Woyzeck *in the writing of* Some Voices *and* Pale Horse. *You also refer to Chekhov and Raymond Carver's short stories.*[10] *Could you explain more fully the extent of these influences on your work?*

They've written unashamedly about very personal, subjective, existentialist dilemmas, situations and alienated characters. So much of the mainstream theatre, literature and film is about people who are not at all alienated or disenfranchised. They are about nice, happy, healthy, usually well-off people. I didn't know anybody like that at that time. I love Carver because he wrote about people who were doing crummy jobs and battling through difficult low-income existences. I love Beckett because he wrote about people who were intellectually very intense, but not especially articulate. To all intents and purposes, they could be tramps or hermits locked in rooms. They were not presenting any kind of respectable public face. They were lost in the world, but they were obviously very intellectually lucid and thoughtful. Miller and Pinter write about lost people. It's fascinating. A writer like David Hare tends to write about politicians, judges and the establishment, whereas I am not interested in the establishment. They are on TV every night – and who cares? They run everything; they own us. It seems to be my job to write about the individuals that most people don't even know exist, like Christopher in *Blue/Orange*, who thinks his dad is Idi Amin. There are lots of people like that, with delusions and problems, but people are unaware of them.

You were appointed Writer-in-Residence at the National Theatre in 1995, and your play Blue/Orange *was performed at the Cottesloe in 2000. Can you comment on your experience at the National?*

We have a great culture in this country whereby producing theatres tend to feel it their duty to nurture young writers. I had a tiny amount of money for *Some Voices*, which was a very successful play and quite hard to follow up – suddenly you're a professional playwright. I had just gone back to my bedsit and the dole, trying to figure out what to do next, when the National stepped in and made it very easy. They gave me a room, a typewriter, and paid me a weekly wage to come up with something. They got me a writer's tutor, Stephen Jeffries, one of my favourite writers, who came every week to see whether I needed any help. Then, when the play was written, they hired actors and put it on its feet. It was like a dream come true. So there is no doubt that time at the National was critical in my development.

Blue/Orange *is an indictment of the country's mental institutions, where the medical profession administers horse tranquillizers to keep the mentally ill sedated. Would you like to comment further on this?*

You can't generalize. The play is really about status and how the medical profession is like any other. It was just saying that in this country we pay too much attention to the well-spoken, well-educated individual. Once in a while, we should listen to people who, to all intents and purposes, appear to be raving mad – people who don't have the opportunities that doctors have, and may well be saying something crucial. The doctors in the play have certain cultural assumptions because they are white, middle-class, middle-aged men and, because of their positions and qualifications, those assumptions hold. In fact, it turns out that they are quite wrong, or certainly the older doctor is. It is not a criticism of the psychiatric profession. Every profession – the dental, the acting, the legal probably more than any other – has its cowboys and charlatans. Like Bernard Shaw's *The Doctor's Dilemma, Blue/Orange* is about the conspiracy of the professions against the laity, the educated establishment against those who have no status at all.

Intellectually and emotionally, Blue/Orange *is an outstanding play. The dialogue is absolutely brilliant and so is the play's dialectic. At times you ask yourself who is insane, the black bewildered patient or the two irrational doctors. In this play you criticize not only power struggles and ambition within the profession, but also the doctors' apparent racism.*

I don't ask who is insane. Robert asks that, and he's being whimsical, capricious, and rhetorical. He says it to throw up a smokescreen, to confuse the issue. The idea that the mad are sane and the sane are mad is a cliché. No, they are not! The mad are mad! And they need to be understood. What this play suggests is that because Christopher has a cultural background different from that of the middle-class, white, Anglo-Saxon doctors, they find his behaviour bizarre, perhaps mad, and so he is diagnosed as schizophrenic. This is happening more and more – people from a culture a little different from the doctors' are often diagnosed as mentally ill, when in fact they are just a little different. So Christopher is vulnerable because he's black and also because he's poor, ill-educated and all alone. Society is rather hopeless at looking after the vulnerable. They are only too easy to ignore – that's what I'm saying in the play.

The dialogue in Blue/Orange *reminds me of the Theatre of the Absurd and of Caryl Churchill's writing, especially in* Blue Heart. *Besides, there is also a deconstruction of language.*

I have always been fascinated by the writing of Beckett, Ionesco and similar writers. They probably have more effect on me than I realize. If you listen to the way people talk, language *is* absurd. When I was a journalist I would occasionally be given transcripts of police interviews of suspects. If you read a transcript of a conversation, it is like the dialogue in *Blue/Orange*, full of nonsequiturs, half sentences, half words. Speech is very demotic and rough. If you transcribe, word for word, what somebody says, it sounds fairly demented. I like the surrealism of it. I've always been fascinated by that, which is probably why I write plays and not novels. I was very influenced by Churchill. She is able to nail that beautifully – people interrupting each other, repeating things and uttering banalities. The theatre is about nothing else but words. It is about dialogue and speech, and it is a great opportunity to do all that. In a film or in a novel you have to clean up your language so much. Novels don't tend to have great dialogue.

In your plays several characters talk about their dreams. In Pale Horse *Charles has nightmares about murder, robbery, and morbid sex; in* Love and Understanding, *there is Richie's dream about the sea urchins, and Neal's dream about the maggots. Robbie's dream, in* The Bullet, *is clearly Freudian in the sense that he dreams about murdering his father, being unable to save him. Did you consciously think about a possible psychoanalytic interpretation of these dreams?*

I'd be fascinated to know what it is, and I've been thinking lately about writing a play just about dreams. I wrote those dreams in my plays because in the past I *had* those dreams, and they seemed to me to be particularly rich and meaningful, and therefore useful. I bunged them in without that much analysis. Now, years later, I still have those kinds of dreams. They seem to be crucial to all of my work and, even when there are no dreams, there is a reality that mimics dreams. Christopher in *Blue/Orange* sees these characters hanging about his house. He thinks they look like zombies or the undead, and they have long, pointy heads. That is not a dream, yet there is a dream-like quality to them.

Your plays seem to be written by somebody sympathetic to the feminist cause. Women are depicted as the bruised victims of male power and violent male abuse. Would you care to comment on this?

In *Dumb Show* the woman isn't the victim of anything. She is probably the most powerful figure in the play. What is common to all the women

in my plays is that, to a certain extent, they are always potentially the saviours of the men. Rachel in *Love and Understanding* could possibly save Richie or Neal; they both love her company, and she has a soothing effect on them. In *The Bullet*, Carla and Billie are like that; they can soothe the men's existential madness. Laura in *Some Voices* has that effect on Ray. So it's not so much that they are abused or beaten up, but that they are dealing with confused, screwed up men. And with that comes a degree of baggage that led to the abuse. The interesting question is why these women are so soothing for men. I guess it is because in my family the women were always like that. I believe strongly in that kind of loyal family unit. You're going to be fine if you have a good family, and a good girlfriend. It's very simple.

As has been said, your plays are concerned with present-day British society and its problems, such as materialism, unemployment, domestic violence, mental illness, drug addiction, suicide and loneliness in soulless cities. Do you consider the theatre an appropriate medium to convey this misery and to provoke a response from the audience, or even to initiate some change in society?

Yes, it is an appropriate medium, perhaps the best medium, because film tends to have more commercial concerns, in the sense that it finds these subjects a little difficult to digest, whereas the theatre loves them and eats them up. My subjects are all to do with the way people behave and the way they interact. The theatre is about watching characters behaving and interacting. And by watching these interactions on a stage, we learn something about our own behaviour. As for trying to generate any kind of change, I don't know that it does in the short term. In the long term, theatre, like film, music and all the art forms, does have a very slow, gradual effect on our society. There has definitely been a change in attitude, an acceptance and understanding of people with mental illnesses and existential crises. It's become legitimate to write about people in various stages of purgatory, whereas in the early 1980s, those issues were not thought about that much, and they weren't fashionable enough to be on stage or on film. People see films or theatre and hear music, and they do start to think about it, and the status quo begins to change. It doesn't change the whole of society, only a very small minority that goes to the theatre. But it does change those people and maybe, when talking about it, they change other people.

A recurrent criticism against the theatre of the 1990s concerns its political shortcomings, yet your plays are politically outspoken. Would you consider yourself a political playwright?

This is a problem I've been wrestling with. Critics such as Michael Billington seem to expect plays to be overtly, didactically political – that is, plays about politicians.[11] My plays are implicitly political. They are about the coruscating impact of redundancy on a family in an age of globalization. What's not political about that? *Some Voices* is about the corrosive effect of care in the community legislation. *Love and Understanding* is about the flaws in the middle-class dream of the job and mortgage, relationships and responsibility, that we find almost impossible to subscribe to. *Blue/Orange* is quite obviously about government legislation that hasn't worked. So they are inherently political, though on a very personal, subjective level. It's tricky, because now we are in a climate of overtly, expressly political plays about the government, the Dr Kelly inquiry or Guantanamo, so if you're not writing something that's expressly political, you're perceived to be apolitical.[12] I think Sarah Kane's plays were very political. My plays are also very political, in that they attack a set of assumptions on which society is founded. What could be more political than the individual versus the institution? It's as old as time. Albert Camus wrote about it in *The Plague* – of course, the politics overshadow the disease, but it's still called *The Plague*. It's not called 'The Health Minister and His Complex Legislative Concerns'. We want a good story; the politics of the piece are implicit.

My plays are about how the political impacts on the personal. Charles in *The Bullet* is the victim of politics and takeover and how they impact on his personal life disastrously; Ray in *Some Voices* is the victim of legislation that insists he can no longer stay in hospital. *Dumb Show* is inherently about spin and manipulation of the truth, yet it's not perceived as political. It's weird that critics like Billington go on and on about plays lacking political heft these days. People who say that the playwrights of the 1990s were self-obsessed and self-regarding are missing the point.

The 1990s are generally seen as an exciting time in British theatre. Finally, what is your opinion of British theatre at the moment? Is it still exciting, or has the so-called 'revolution' already outlived its time?

To be honest, I don't think it's very exciting at the moment. Lots of people would say that it is, but I'm not particularly interested in factual or verbatim plays. I'd rather watch the news. Being a former journalist

myself I can't imagine that these plays are any more informative than what is out there already. It's pretentious to take the truth and imagine you can be theatrical and inventive with it. Nobody in the theatre is ever going to have a better handle on the facts than a half-decent journalist – a good foreign correspondent. The theatre is best when it deals with make-believe. These writers like doing factual plays because it makes them feel serious, as if they're edifying the world when, in fact, they're boring it.

So I don't think it's a particularly interesting time at the moment. People say the war has made theatre really interesting again. If you are the kind of person who needs information to be fed through a £45 theatre ticket, then you are a dull person, and you deserve the dull theatre we now have in this country. I'd much rather read the paper – in fact, I'd rather read toilet paper. There is nobody with a really interesting, distinctive voice, like Pinter, Beckett or Büchner. That's why we are getting all these plays that are written about interview subjects, based on documentation which is in the public domain anyway. We get enough of them on the news, we don't want to see them in the theatre. It's so definitely dull.

Notes

1. *Some Voices* was first staged at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 15 September 1994, directed by Ian Rickson.
2. In A. Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber, 2001), p. 210.
3. *Love and Understanding* opened at the Bush Theatre on 30 April 1997, directed by Mike Bradwell. *Blue/Orange* was first performed at the Cottesloe, National Theatre, on 7 April 2000, directed by Roger Michell.
4. See J. Penhall, *Plays: 1 (Some Voices, Pale Horse, Love and Understanding, The Bullet)* (London: Methuen, 1998), p. 91 and x. *Pale Horse* was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 12 October 1995, directed by Ian Rickson.
5. *The Bullet* premiered at the Donmar Warehouse on 2 April 1998, directed by Dominic Cooke; and *Dumb Show* was first performed at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 2 September 2004, directed by Terry Johnson.
6. Penhall, *Plays: 1*, p. 166.
7. Ibid., p. 253.
8. Ibid., p. xiii.
9. Ibid., p. xiii.
10. Ibid., p. xi.
11. In 'Theatre of War' (*Guardian*, 17 February 2001), 'Modern Life is Rubbish' (*Guardian*, 18 December 2002) and 'Goodbye to All That' (*Guardian*,

9 January 2003) Billington lamented what he saw as the dearth of plays dealing with political issues. In contrast, in 'Drama out of a Crisis' (*Guardian*, 10 April 2003) and 'Hello Cruel World' (*Guardian*, 17 December 2003), he welcomed the, in his opinion, repoliticization of British theatre.

12. The play about the inquiry into the death of defence expert Dr Kelly is *Justifying War: Scenes from the Hutton Inquiry*. It was edited by Richard Norton-Taylor and opened on 4 November 2003 at the Tricycle Theatre, directed by Artistic Director Nicolas Kent. The play *Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom* was written by Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo and first performed at the Tricycle on 20 May 2004; it was directed by Nicolas Kent and Sacha Wares. The interviews for the play with five British detainees – who had been released in late February – were conducted in late March/early April 2004. The authors attempted to canvass the viewpoint of members of the government, but no one was prepared to be interviewed.

Mark Ravenhill

Enric Monforte

Mark Ravenhill took the London scene by storm with his controversial *Shopping and Fucking* (1996), staged only one year after Sarah Kane's seminal *Blasted* (1995) and following in its wake. *Faust is Dead* (1997), *Handbag* (1998), *Some Explicit Polaroids* (1999), and *Mother Clap's Molly House* (2001) have decisively contributed to the opening up of new ground in British drama, shaping the 1990s trend known as 'in-yer-face' theatre. Ravenhill's latest work includes *Totally over You* (2003), *Moscow* (2004), *Product* (2005, his acting debut), *Citizenship* (2005), and *The Cut* (2006). The following interview took place in London on 12 December 2003.

You have mentioned that you see yourself as a queer playwright. You have even stated your preference for the use of the word 'post-gay'.[1] *Is there a gay/lesbian/queer theatre?*

I don't remember ever saying that I was a queer playwright. I have certainly never wanted to be involved in any kind of theatre that's directed towards a specific gay/lesbian audience. There's a strand of theatre in London, a fringe theatre, that aims specifically to attract gay/lesbian audiences and that never interested me.[2] To speak to a particular constituency and offer a confirmation of an identity doesn't seem to me to be very challenging. My plays have included gay and lesbian characters because writing about those characters always comes easily to me, especially in the case of gay male characters. As a reflection of who I am I include gay characters in the plays. However, I haven't particularly thought about or tried to write within any kind of gay aesthetic, but maybe there is one – I don't know the answer to that. There are probably three forms of gay/lesbian theatre: theatre for specific audiences, which I'm definitely not interested in; theatre

which has gay characters and represents gay narratives, and there have been elements of that in my writing; and a theatre which has got fundamentally a different aesthetic, which is gay. If there are elements of that in my writing I haven't got a clue.

Your plays are quite positively political. Would you justify a gay/lesbian/queer approach from a political perspective?

Any specific politics of representing gay identity and narratives had been done before I came along. There wasn't really any need to tell gay stories – if anything there were too many of them in soap operas and so on. There are plenty of gay narratives around, because in many ways the gay condition is something that all of society aspires to. There's a hedonistic, materialistic, selfish disposition in contemporary gay culture that all of contemporary Britain desires. Therefore, in many ways, the gay narrative is the narrative that everybody wants. That's why gay characters and contemporary gay men's lives could be useful to write about, because they're the ultimate definition of a hedonistic, materialistic society. They are metaphors for a wider society, but I'm not interested in writing plays that affirm that gay people exist and that their narratives exist. That's everywhere; we have reached saturation point. There's a very good article about that today in the *Guardian*.[3] It's about how homosexuality has become even more than accepted, engraved in British culture. Just because gay men have spending power they're accepted into the mainstream of culture. In Britain today, how much you spend defines your identity. Having spending power makes you mainstream, not marginalized. It's the poor people who are marginalized rather than gay men.

Alan Sinfield talks about the notion of 'subculture' as a term to replace the use of 'community', because community is related to identity politics and therefore more homogeneous, whereas subculture can perhaps integrate the diversity existing in gay life.[4] *What is your view of this?*

They're all substitutes for and ways to avoid the idea of society. Since the sense of society and the social collapsed in Britain in the mid-1980s and everybody was encouraged to think of separate communities, everything became a community: the gay and lesbian community, the wheelchair users' community, even the crochet community, or the needlework community. This replaced any sense of society. Creating a sense of subcultures is just another evasion of the notion of a society and of the attempt to try and create one, a communication, a sense of constructing

our living with all sorts of different people. Subcultures are valid for teenagers, but it's not an adult form of existence. Being a social being, being part of a society, is the only truly adult form of existence.

Your words point to Shopping and Fucking *and* Some Explicit Polaroids, *in the sense that they deal with the disappearance of the notion of society in the heyday of Margaret Thatcher's era*.[5] *In both plays you deal with the effect of extreme capitalism on individuals, especially on the dispossessed. In* Shopping and Fucking, *this is exemplified through the young characters – Lulu, Robbie, Mark and Gary – and in* Some Explicit Polaroids *through Tim, Nadia, Victor, Nick and Helen. However, at the same time, in these plays one can see a reaching towards a notion of society, or a rebuilding of a society that has been destroyed, together with the creation of alternative families. Would you agree with this view?*

Yes, that seems to come out of the plays. Certainly in *Shopping and Fucking* the young characters are in a world that's without politics, without religion, without family, without any kind of history, without structures or narratives, and as a consequence they have to build up their own structures. They start forming those family units, playing roles within them, and the need to tell stories socializes them. They seem to have an instinct towards being socialized, even if everything else has been taken away from them. Because the only outsider in that world is Brian, the play is really defined by those younger characters, which gives it quite a postmodern feel, since they are cut off from any sense of history. *Some Explicit Polaroids* is defined as much by the older characters, by Helen and Nick, as it is by the younger ones. Helen and Nick remember history, remember politics, have experienced both and still have some sense of them. And because they define the world of the play as much as the younger characters, the play has less of a texture of postmodernism about it. The existence of Helen, Nick and Jonathan has quite a different feel to the younger characters, Victor, Nadia and Tim, who don't have a sense of history or cultural politics. That means there are two divergent forms of dialogue in the play, which makes it quite different from *Shopping and Fucking*. But again there's always a need in *Some Explicit Polaroids* for one character to look after somebody, to be looked after, or to form a relationship. The characters can't help it and keep on wanting to form their own units. That's the optimism in the plays, showing how human beings can never be completely isolated – they will always try to form groups, to socialize themselves.

This is something that also appears in Handbag *and in* Mother Clap's Molly House.

Yes, in those two plays it's more consciously about families and having babies. The characters who appear in *Handbag* have a greater ideal about what it would be like to have a family, but the actual conditions of their existence and the other characters' existence makes that more or less impossible. However, they want to do it. Similarly, in *Mother Clap's Molly House* – which is probably the most gay of all of those plays – all that the characters fancy is to form some kind of family. Probably something relevant here is that one of the things that was attacked in Britain in Clause 28 – that anti-gay legislation that was enforced in 1988 and later repealed in 2003 – was that schoolchildren shouldn't be introduced to any material which presented gay relationships as a 'pretend' family relationship.[6] Therefore, the idea of writing about gay characters in a 'pretend' family unit became quite political. The joke with *Mother Clap's Molly House* is that some of the characters have a huge fantasy about notions of fake family bonds, and therefore they want to create the molly house as if every possible family relationship can exist. Family is important in all my plays and is certainly at the foreground in *Handbag* and *Mother Clap's Molly House*.

Can we go back to Some Explicit Polaroids? *Your treatment of Nick and Helen, the middle-aged characters, is very sympathetic. However, this attitude seems to be missing in the case of the young characters, Tim, Nadia and Victor, whose fate is much bleaker. As you said, Nick and Helen had a history, and they have managed to survive it. Besides, at the end of the play there is the necessity for rage to appear, which adds powerfully to the political content of the play*.

Yes, Nick and Helen, at the end, acknowledge their need to be angry. They had a history at the beginning of the play and they seem to be starting a new possibility of a different narrative at the end, whereas the other characters don't have any real sense of their own narrative, of their own history. The young characters are very different. On stage, when the play is actually performed, they are just as sympathetic – if not more sympathetic – than the older characters. However, their sense of past and future is very different from Nick and Helen's. One can imagine Nick and Helen's life continuing as characters, but one can't do that for the younger characters. They finish as the play finishes, just as they began as the play began. They are trapped within the world of the play, whereas we could imagine Nick having his own existence

outside of the room. They are very different types of characters and as I was writing I felt that they were from completely different worlds.

Why this bleakness in connection with the younger characters? At the end of Shopping and Fucking, *there is an emphasis on the creation of a different family unit and on caring for each other, but there are disturbing elements which seem to contradict this – Mark seems to have some blood on his face, and there is the implication that they have become dealers. The end of* Some Explicit Polaroids *is even darker, with Tim's death, Victor continuing his self-destructive escape to Tokyo, and Nadia being left on her own.*

The actual image of them feeding each other and looking after each other in *Shopping and Fucking* is quite optimistic. Nadia, Tim and Victor, in *Some Explicit Polaroids*, don't have narratives or beliefs, they don't have a map of the world or anything to live for, there's no reason to be, and that's bleak. They haven't managed to construct a sense of the world, and nobody has inspired them, taught them or provided it for them. That's a dismal existence and that's where that generation find themselves, certainly in Britain, and I suspect that in much of the rest of Europe as well. Life is completely meaningless and that's gloomy.

Did the change from Conservative rule to New Labour influence Some Explicit Polaroids *and your dramatic production generally after* Shopping and Fucking*?*

Inevitably it must have done. There were massive changes happening in Britain all the way during my education at university, with the country moving from being a society with a mixed economy and an anachronistic consensus about politics – a consensus about a form of state capitalism – to a free market economy. It was the first country in Europe to do that so aggressively and to do it very quickly. The whole fabric of the country was transformed, and that had a huge effect on everybody. Those kids in *Shopping and Fucking* are at the very tail end of that experience in terms of what that wild free market, that radical western capitalism does, and Helen and Nick, in *Some Explicit Polaroids*, just belong to the old left. *Shopping and Fucking* and *Some Explicit Polaroids* probably couldn't have been written until there was a change of government, until the Labour Party came to power. Helen is probably standing as a councillor in a kind of Tony Blair New Labour ticket and Nick very much belongs to the old Labour Party. *Some Explicit Polaroids* is in some way a response to that change of government that happened in Britain in 1997, and that's one of the reasons why I thought it's

such a peculiarly British play when I first wrote it. Then I was quite surprised to find out that it has received probably as many productions and translations as *Shopping and Fucking* and that people seem to find it applies to their country in quite a strong way as well, which I hadn't anticipated. I could see that some of *Shopping and Fucking* might be a parable about the free market that many countries could respond to, but I feared that maybe some of the content of *Some Explicit Polaroids* was very specifically British. However, this hasn't been the case. It seems to be a European-wide phenomenon – or even a wider one. There exists a generation of older radicals, some of whom will try to reinvent themselves in order to fit in, and then there's the younger people.

In the gap between 1996 and 1999 you also wrote Faust is Dead *and* Handbag. *Where does* Faust is Dead *come from*?[7] *Why such a radical change after* Shopping and Fucking*?*

I was asked to do it. It was the director's idea. Nick Philippou said that he wanted a contemporary *Faust* to be based on the life of Michel Foucault, so I read various versions of *Faust* and a couple of biographies of Foucault. Up until *Shopping and Fucking* I had always been working and doing quite pragmatic things and I hadn't had a chance to read any contemporary philosophy or anything like that – I hadn't read any Foucault. Then I read about him, and through him I came to Jean Baudrillard, whom I found a more resonant writer than Foucault. I felt more affinity with Baudrillard. The *Faust* project was useful to me in that respect, because it made me read philosophy. The reason why I became interested in *Faust* was actually the responsibility – or irresponsibility – of the philosopher who creates – even fetishizes – a sense of nihilism and pointlessness in the way that Baudrillard can do. To him, it's amusing to play with the idea of the end, the death of man, people living on a day-to-day basis and trying to construct their existence. That's almost pornographic. There's a difference between a philosopher sitting in a room and playing with the idea of the end, and putting the philosopher into the world – which is what the Faust legend is in a way. He stops living with his books and goes on a live journey. That's the aspect of the legend that interested me, rather than the sense of dealing with the devil and in the end being punished for it. The sense of the philosopher whose ideas are tested in the world is one essential aspect of the Faust legend. It was quite a small project in a way. I wrote it in a few months and it was written specifically for one director and a couple of actors.

Did you read Marlowe's and Goethe's texts?

Goethe's. And what we found as well was an early German romantic poet, Nikolaus Lenau, who wrote a version of *Faust* which has got some dialogue in it, but it's essentially a long narrative poem which has not reached the stage. I read that and I found that what was striking was that, rather than starting with Faust reading books, he starts with Faust dissecting bodies. Faust thinks that if he can fully dissect a human body then he will ultimately make sense of what man is. That's when the devil appears to him. That suddenly seemed like a very contemporary fascination, the body and knowledge of the body. This poem was written in 1836, but it was that image that got me. And once there was that image of Faust dissecting bodies, rather than reading books, that seemed to be something that I could work from. It's not all there in the play, but it's more tangible in a way, a more striking image.

The connection with Baudrillard can also be seen in the notion of the copies and the simulacrum, which is very much present in the play. The use of video also points in that direction.

That's tested in the play rather than just replicated. The characters discover there are quite a few experiences that are too raw and too painful to exist in a virtual sense, that not everything has gone into that level of the virtual. There are some things that do take place, they are real and they hurt, and it's a philosophical indulgence to pretend that they don't. That's what happens in the play.

After Faust is Dead, *you wrote* Handbag, *which again is a completely different play*.[8]

Yes, that one was my idea. I wanted to do that play.

You have mentioned that the origin of the play came to you with the image of the bag and the book. Why the intertextual reference to Wilde and his The Importance of Being Earnest? *Does it have to do with the fact that Wilde's play has become part of the British imaginary?*

Yes. It's a very famous play. The quintessential English play. We probably read bits of it at school. It's always on, all the time, everywhere, in film, in amateur theatre productions, school theatre productions and professional theatre productions. It's quite hard not to know at least scenes from it. I was fascinated by the images of the baby, the book and the handbag, and with the reason why you would put the

baby in the handbag and the book in the pram. It was a funny and a rather frightening image as well. I just started with that, but I didn't particularly think about Wilde himself, about his sexuality or about a gay aesthetic. As I worked on the play I thought more about Wilde and read Richard Ellmann's biography and other material, but it wasn't a conscious decision of rewriting or responding to something written by a gay playwright.[9] I just started from that image and began to write the play spinning off that one picture.

In Handbag, *you show how the exertion of power in society takes place irrespective of gender and sexuality, since the two affluent gay couples – Mauretta and Suzanne, David and Tom – end up exercising a definite oppression over the two dispossessed characters, Phil and Lorraine. Could this be seen as a rather strong critique of the gay bourgeoisie?*

There are definitely two sets of two couples. In some ways, I wanted that to reflect *The Importance of Being Earnest*, with these sets of perfect couples – Jack and Gwendolen, Algernon and Cecily – and two outsider characters – Miss Prism and Reverend Chasuble – who haven't quite experienced the world in the same way. The two couples exist in a world where there's such a gap between them and the dispossessed, underclass characters, that they will always have to be quite wary of their power and very protective of their wealth. Their child is going to become a possession and will have to be protected, and ultimately that's going to be quite destructive for them and for the child. As I was writing, I considered that ultimately it's going to be impossible to bring up a child and be in a society which has such strong divisions between a middle class, who inevitably has to wall itself up and monitor everything with security cameras to keep out an underclass, and that very underclass. This is very much the case in Britain. In any case, there's certainly no difference between a successful gay couple and a successful heterosexual couple. The main difference is between the rich and the poor.

Something else that is present in the play is the pointlessness of trying to reproduce structures such as the nuclear family or parenting. Some of the characters in Handbag *have a burning desire to become parents, but the play offers quite a devastating portrayal of the effects of following a mainstream, gay bourgeois lifestyle.*

In my opinion, the play doesn't have a clear idea about whether it's good for them to create partnerships and families in the way that their

parents did. I don't think the play quite decides either way. That's not necessarily what I set out to write, but it might be there in the play, without me wanting it to be. I was more interested in the rich and the poor divide, but one of the reviewers said that there was no better argument against gay parenting than *Handbag*.[10]

Could we say that your next play, Mother Clap's Molly House, *takes over from* Handbag?[11]

Yes, it is quite similar, in a way.

There's also a clear connection with Michel Foucault's thought. The parallelism you establish between the eighteenth and the twenty-first centuries brings to mind Foucault's theorizing of sexuality, and specifically of the notion of homosexuality. There's also the issue of parallelism, of repetition, which links the play to postmodernism and to Faust is Dead.

Yes, once I started reading about the molly houses I found it exciting to read about a period in history where sexuality hadn't quite yet been defined, but was very active. There were many molly houses in London, probably about forty of them at their height. There was also great inventiveness, a kind of freedom for these men, giving themselves female names, wearing female clothes, having mock babies, mock marriages, and sexual orgies. And I found it striking that most people didn't know what was happening 300 years ago. At the same time, these men hadn't yet defined themselves into a very strict label of what they were; there was just a great openness. So I was interested in the turning point from which that became hardened into a culture or a subculture, and in the way it became assimilated into the marketplace; that is, when they start to pay for pleasure, as the molly house becomes successful. It is the process that happens in the play. First, the world the play depicts is one where work is the most important thing and pleasure isn't given any value at all. Then, they start to discover pleasure, but quite quickly the market gets in and finds out that these people can be charged for it, so it becomes assimilated to the market. It's quite a quick transition from discovering pleasure to paying for it, and then losing their sense of it as it becomes a commodity. That happens quite rapidly in the eighteenth-century scenes. Then I wanted to leap forward and just see what the ultimate extension of that was – the bourgeois contemporary gay characters, who have absolute sexual liberty but no sense of pleasure or of relationships whatsoever. And it is because they are all bourgeois characters that those scenes came

out as a bourgeois comedy, even though they are slightly more bitter than in a Terrence McNally play.[12] I haven't written quite so much in that bourgeois comedy style, but I like how those contemporary scenes play in the theatre. I was just trying to see where you would end up if you followed through the process that starts in the molly house in the eighteenth century, and my feeling is that you would end up with those men at the party in 2001.

Politics are here again, in the critique of gay bourgeois lifestyles trying to replicate mainstream schemes. Eventually the play – especially at the end of the eighteenth-century part – is once more about the creation of different societies, of alternative families, and about the resistance to power structures.

And it is slightly ironic. At the very end of the play, Mrs Tull, as Mother Clap, is going to head off for a kind of pastoral existence, and Princess Seraphina is going to go in his dress. He's going to sew and cook; Mrs Tull's going to work in the fields; they are going to take Martin and create an alternative family unit, with the husband wearing a dress, the wife working and the boy. They create a bizarre family. Then we have the others, the people who can only think about the molly house, which is now going to be run by Amelia – the woman who ran the brothel before – and it's going to be purely about money. They haven't got the flexibility or the openness that the characters who manage to escape to a pastoral existence have. They are trapped in a rather fixed idea of themselves; they are not prepared to reinvent themselves or to be open. That's why in Nicholas Hytner's production, in the final image, they flash forward to the future. They start a molly house dance, but then gradually the music builds into what is more likely house music. Then it's 2001, they have their shirts off, there are laser lights, and the audience has a sense that they are just going to carry on dancing for 300 years and forever. They are just trapped in a rather hedonistic existence.

And in the money-making machine, once again.

Yes. Amy goes with Mother Clap to the countryside because she's prepared. Those characters who are polymorphous are the ones who are prepared to go and have a pastoral existence at the end. In the case of Amy, she could move through boy and girl. She'd like to go to the country and look after them all in case there's any trouble, and Mother Clap accepts her because she is strong. Apart from that, the play is also about town and country issues, the standard theme of English

Restoration drama – about who ends up in the town and who ends up in the country. *Mother Clap's Molly House* plays with that as well, but in a slightly ironic way.

What about gay relationships in the play? Both ends are dark. The eighteenth-century gay couple is finally broken as Martin goes to the country with Mrs Tull and the others, whereas Orme stays in town. However, the twenty-first century characters are left in an even bleaker position. This is shown through Josh and Will, the couple who organize the sex party, or through Tom's view of contemporary gay life. The eighteenth-century end, in this sense, is more comforting than the twenty-first century one.

That's true. There's quite a lot of hype at the end of the eighteenth century, since they are going to have a fancy existence. I had in mind something like Voltaire's *Candide*, where they end up tending the garden. I started thinking about that – you go on a journey through the world and then finally end up looking after the garden. But there isn't much hope for anybody in the twenty-first century. Characters are all damned and doomed. In *Mother Clap's Molly House* I used gay characters as a metaphor or as a representation of the wider selfishness and hedonism of the society. However, I'm a bit fed up with writing about gay characters. I have written a play for teenagers to perform at the National Theatre, and that's quite nice because it means I've written a heterosexual love story essentially.[13] I'm writing another play now with no gay characters in it. Maybe this is because *Mother Clap's Molly House* was so iconically gay, in a way, in that it's about gay history, has got gay characters, a camp aesthetic, and had mostly a gay audience – that's really a very gay play.

You have become a well-known playwright. Shopping and Fucking *transferred successfully to the West End, and your plays have opened in prestigious theatres such as the Lyric Hammersmith, the National or the Royal Court. However, it would appear that some audiences tend to concentrate on the most trendy and shallow postmodern elements in the plays – the music, the drugs, the sex, the focus on youth – and they tend to miss the darker aspects or the political components. Would you agree with this view?*

Yes. I think they do. That happened particularly with *Shopping and Fucking*, because it opened not long after *Trainspotting*, or various other manifestations like Quentin Tarantino films.[14] The audience tends to watch them all in the same way, with an ironic sensibility and a desire to be shocked and thrilled, something that's slightly shocking

itself. Many of the first responses to the play and its first popularity with a young audience were because of that. People who read it now reevaluate it, and it seems quite different from that initial response, which was about young kids who wore trendy clothes, were taking drugs, and having wild sex. That was the first image people had of the play, something fashionable.

The treatment of AIDS in your plays is quite devoid of sentimentality and therefore very different from the one found in American drama, in plays such as Larry Kramer's The Normal Heart, *or in McNally's plays.*[15] *Why is that?*

AIDS, like many aspects of gay experience, is colonized by America. It was new territory. American writers rode their wagons in and made sure that they were there first to write about various aspects of gay life, and particularly AIDS. I was amazed to find how difficult it was to write about AIDS, because all the parameters, all the vocabulary, all the images that we possess have been created by American writers. It was very hard to find a way to write about it truthfully. I thought I knew about it, and believed I could write about it, but I kept on hitting against all those images from America. It's strange, you can just hear American voices and see American pictures when you start to write about AIDS, which is terrible because the incidence in the rest of the world is bigger than in America now. But this has been a problem for a lot of gay writing and gay culture, not just AIDS writing. The terms of the discourse have been defined by an American sensibility and this is why, on the whole, it is a rather sentimental, definitely identity politics writing. Therefore, writing about any gay subject in a different way makes quite a challenge.

Finally, do you feel particularly indebted to the Brechtian tradition in the theatre, or do you acknowledge an influence of other movements or practitioners?

I probably just pick up a little bit of everything. I have always liked Brecht very much, his plays and the theoretical writings, even though that's not true of many British people. I do reread Brecht's plays often as well as the theory, the letters, the diaries, and the poems. I have never consciously intended to follow any particular models, but somewhere in my blood stream there's some Brecht. I like a writing that's dialectical because it's more dramatic, and I like it when a character or situation always contains the seeds of being aggressive, or of being entirely passive, or that a line is always just on the verge of being one thing or the other

thing, of being funny or being tragic. You never know exactly what's going to happen, and that's what I find exciting when I'm writing, that things always have that tension, and that no line, moment, or scene is aiming towards any one emotional state or effect. There's an overall political sense to my plays, but at the same time there's also a dialectics, not necessarily a dialectic argument, but a dialectic emotion or mood, dialectic in the sense of contradiction. And there's always that sense in the best of Brecht's writings as well – irony and yet passion at the same time, a certain contradiction that's always there in his writing. One has a sense of a man who was probably intensely passionate, but who had to suppress it with a sense of irony and calmness in order not to explode. There is a tension in Brecht that when it is translated, when it is played – which in Britain is not very often – is absolutely gripping to watch. I think it's theatrical.[16]

Notes

1. A. Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber, 2001), p. 151.
2. London theatres such as the Arcola, the Bush, the Drill Hall, the Finborough, the King's Head or the Soho often stage productions dealing with gay and lesbian issues.
3. L. Brooks, 'Without Prejudice', *Guardian*, 12 December 2003.
4. A. Sinfield, *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 346–7.
5. *Shopping and Fucking* opened at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs at the Ambassadors on 26 September 1996. *Some Explicit Polaroids* was premiered at the Theatre Royal (Bury St Edmunds) on 30 September 1999. Both plays were directed by Max Stafford-Clark.
6. Section 28 of the Local Government Act was developed by the Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher. It prohibited local authorities in England and Wales from spreading information about homosexuality in places such as theatres and libraries. It first appeared as Clause 28 of the Local Government Bill on 7 December 1987, then changed its name into Section 28 when it became law on 24 May 1988. It was finally repealed by the House of Commons on 10 March 2003 and by the House of Lords on 10 July 2003, even though it had never been applied in its entirety. Scotland had its own version of Section 28, which was abolished in 2000.
7. *Faust is Dead*, directed by Nick Philippou, opened at the Lyric Hammersmith Studio on 26 February 1997.
8. *Handbag*, directed by Nick Philippou, opened at the Lyric Hammersmith Studio on 14 September 1998.
9. R. Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987).
10. In his review of *Handbag*, Alastair Macaulay suggested that Ravenhill's purpose seemed to be 'to expose the perils for child-rearing implicit both

in Victorian values and in the liberal values of modern homosexual society' (*Financial Times*, 16 September 1998).

11. *Mother Clap's Molly House*, directed by Nicholas Hytner, was first performed at the Lyttelton, National Theatre, on 24 August 2001.
12. Terrence McNally is an acclaimed American playwright whose plays deal often with middle-class gay issues. His work includes *The Ritz* (1974), *The Lisbon Traviata* (1985), *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* (1987), *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* (1991), *Love! Valour! Compassion*! (1994), *Master Class* (1995) and *Corpus Christi* (1997).
13. *Totally over You* was shown at the Cottesloe, National Theatre, on 15 July 2003, directed by Peter Hussey, and then at the Olivier on 22 July 2003, directed by Isabel Favell. The play was part of Shell Connections, a programme led by the National and devoted to promoting theatre among young people. In 2003, Ravenhill and other playwrights were specially commissioned to write plays which were then produced in schools and theatres around Britain and finally shown at the National. This edition of the festival took place from 15 to 22 July 2003.
14. Irvine Welsh's 1993 cult novel *Trainspotting* was turned into a stage play by Harry Gibson in 1994 and then into a film directed by Danny Boyle in 1995. Gibson's stage version, directed by Ian Brown, opened on 4 May 1994 at the Citizens' Theatre (Glasgow). Quentin Tarantino became famous for a particular use of violence in his films *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994).
15. Larry Kramer is an American playwright, novelist and AIDS activist. His play *The Normal Heart*, one of the first to tackle the issue of AIDS on the stage, opened at the Public Theater (New York) on 2 April 1985, directed by Michael Lindsay-Hogg. In Britain, it premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs on 25 March 1986 and was directed by David Hayman. Terrence McNally also dealt with the issue in *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* (1991) and *Love! Valour! Compassion*! (1994).
16. Ravenhill directed a rehearsed reading of Brecht's *The Mother* at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 16 June 2004, as part of the Playwrights' Playwrights Season.

Part III
Critics

Michael Billington

Mireia Aragay and Pilar Zozaya

Michael Billington began reviewing films, plays and television programmes for the *Times* in 1965. In 1968, he became film critic for the *Birmingham Post* and the *Illustrated London News*. Billington has been drama critic for the *Guardian* since 1971. He has written *Alan Ayckbourn* (1984), *Stoppard: The Playwright* (1987), *One Night Stands: A Critic's View of Modern British Theatre* (1994, reissued in 2001 to mark his thirtieth year as a drama critic), and *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter* (2001). He has also edited *Stage and Screen Lives* (2002). He is currently working on a survey of postwar British theatre from 1945 to the present, entitled *State of the Nation*. In June 2003, Billington was voted Britain's 'most trustworthy' critic on the theatre website 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 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 Theatre 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. 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 Studio. So 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, says that he's going to use the Cottesloe for nothing but new writing. So far, they have put on *Scenes from the Big Picture* – 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*, a play about life in Hackney today. A third play is opening this week, Nick Dear's *Power*, and there's a play by Michael Frayn coming up in September.[1] So the Cottesloe is doing nothing but new plays, and obviously the Royal Court continues to do precisely that. The 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.[2]

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. There seems to be an energy about the theatre at the moment, partly because, as I just said, a bunch of new directors have taken over the key institutions – Nicholas Hytner at the National, Michael Boyd at the Royal Shakespeare Company, Michael Attenborough at the Almeida Theatre, Anthony Clark at Hampstead, Michael Grandage at the Donmar, Ian Brown at West Yorkshire Playhouse, and Ruth Mackenzie, Steven Pimlott and Martin Duncan at Chichester – and they're all looking for new writing.[3] 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 subsidized 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 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. 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, the Sheffield Crucible Theatre has done four new plays, of which three in the studio and one in the main house. Last year, they did a very good season of Peter Gill, a look back over his career; they did four plays in the studio and a big new play on their vast main stage.[4] The Birmingham Rep 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.[5] 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, 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 Sir Cameron Mackintosh, to take exactly the kind of plays from theatres like the Hampstead, the Almeida or the Donmar that need a wider audience. 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. A medium-size West End venue that can do new work is wonderful news.[6]

How do you assess the role played by 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.

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* 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*.[7] But they're both there, and so is Brian Friel, obviously, and many others. Ireland 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 European Union 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 created a studio space on top of the Lyttelton, which they called the Loft, and they did about six plays in about fourteen weeks. 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; got a very good play put on in the National's Transformation Season, *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads*, which was about racism within football; and now he's got *Fallout* at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs.[8] 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. The only qualification I would make is that it isn't always easy 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 Corin 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.

At the end of 2002, you complained that there was a dearth of political plays about public issues, about what it is like to live in England today. A recurrent criticism made against 'in-yer-face' theatre concerns its political shortcomings.[9] *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. 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* is a political play which denounces the indifference we have cultivated to what's going on in the rest of the world.[10] 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 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* 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*, is directly political.[11] 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 sociopolitical 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.[12] 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 50 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 and violence on the streets, and it's also about the racism of a black policeman, interestingly enough. Or the two plays I mentioned earlier, Owen McCafferty's *Scenes from the Big Picture*, a wonderful picture of what is like to live in a city like Belfast, and *Elmina's Kitchen*, an absolutely vivid picture of Hackney life. 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.[13] 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 Nicolas 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, the young black boy who was killed at a bus stop by a gang of white youths.[14] The police never arrested or pinned the crime on these white youth. 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. 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 Women*. Caryl Churchill did a purely factual piece, 'Iraqdoc', based on exchanges between Iraqis and Americans on a website chatroom.[15] 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*, when he said that confronted by the magnitude of the crisis in Israel today any fiction would be irrelevant.[16] Having said that, the Tricycle recently did stage a play set in Jerusalem, *Crossing Jerusalem*, by Julia Pascal, a young Jewish writer who lived in England and France for a long time.[17] It's a very interesting play about family life in Jerusalem and the lack of understanding 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.[18] 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. 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.[19]

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.[20]

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. You can write wonderfully poetic plays that are urgently political. The classic example is Harold Pinter, whose *One for the Road* – a case in point, as it's been revived on more than one occasion lately – seems as topical now as when it was first done in the 1980s.[21] It's about torture, brutality and violence, and yet it's distilled and economical, like a dramatized poem. In other words, I would dispute the premise behind Ravenhill's point. In fact, I can't think of any play Ravenhill has written that isn't about now. *Mother Clap's Molly House* is a good example.[22] 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 forebears. *Shopping and Fucking, Some Explicit Polaroids* and *Mother Clap's Molly House* all seem to me in that sense social plays. In short, Ravenhill's work disproves his own thesis.

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*, which is very short and apocalyptic, reminded me in some ways of Sarah Kane.[23] The play had the same visceral impact that younger writers were now achieving. It was as if she was becoming a coopted 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. They are a vital strand in the new writing scene. The Hampstead 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 the Hampstead that did *Feelgood* in 2001, which was actually the one really biting satire that has so far been on 'Blairism'. It was very funny, very successful and it transferred to the West End.[24] 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 rereads 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 more conservative in terms of political outlook, sexual politics and modes of production than has been traditionally proposed.*[25] *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 16 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 Ann Jellicoe. She was doing what Caryl Churchill did later, constantly trying to redefine the structure of plays. *The Sport of my Mad Mother* 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* is technically a very conservative play, but then he wrote *The Entertainer* 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*, he puts the whole choreography of the restaurant onto the stage. In *Chips With Everything* 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 politeness. You went to the Royal Court to hear a different language. I would add that the Royal Court, through its designers, was looking for 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.[26] 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 short, I would dispute almost all of 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 1998.[27] 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, and 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 and 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 there. You go to the 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 mythologize the 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 50 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, by doing the work he wanted to do and then seeing how to 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 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 hyperactivity, 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*. 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.[28] 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.[29] 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.

Notes

1. *Scenes from the Big Picture*, directed by Peter Gill, opened on 10 April 2003. *Elmina's Kitchen* was first staged on 30 May 2003; it was directed by Angus Jackson. *Power*, directed by Lindsay Posner, opened on 3 July 2003. Frayn's play, *Democracy*, was premiered on 9 September 2003, under the direction of Michael Blakemore. All these plays premiered at the Cottesloe, National Theatre.
2. Anthony Clark replaced Jenny Topper as Artistic Director of the Hampstead in July 2003. Jenny Topper became the Hampstead's first woman Artistic Director in Autumn 1998; she left after leading the building of the new £16 million theatre on Eton Avenue, which opened in February 2003. Ian Brown was Artistic Director at the Traverse Theatre (Edinburgh) from 1988 to 1996, where he led a policy of promoting new Scottish work and importing the best international new writing. He worked as a freelance director until 2001, when he became Associate Artistic Director at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in York. In 2002, he took over from Jude Kelly as the theatre's Artistic Director.
3. Hytner (opening season April 2003) replaced Trevor Nunn, Boyd (opening season January 2003) took over from Adrian Noble, Attenborough (opening season May 2003) from Ian McDiarmid and Jonathan Kent, Grandage (opening season December 2002) from Sam Mendes, and Mackenzie, Pimlott and Duncan (opening season September 2002) from Andrew Welch.

4. From 23 May to 22 June 2002, the Sheffield Crucible's Peter Gill Season staged *Kick for Touch, Mean Tears, Small Change* and *Friendly Fire* in the studio and *Original Sin* in the main house. In 2003, the Sheffield First Season of New Writing included Steve Waters's *World Music*, directed by Josie Rourke, which opened on 2 June, and Jeff Noon's *The Modernists*, directed by Robert Delamare, which premiered on 11 June. Both these plays were staged at the Crucible.
5. Hare's trilogy consists of *Racing Demon*, which opened on 1 February 1990 at the Cottesloe, National Theatre; *Murmuring Judges*, which premiered on 4 October 1991 at the Olivier, National Theatre; and *The Absence of War*, which was first staged on 23 September 1993 also at the Olivier. The three plays were directed by Richard Eyre.
6. Sir 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 several London theatres. At the date of this book's going to press there have been no developments concerning the building of the Sondheim Theatre.
7. Jones's *Stones in His Pockets*, directed by Ian McElhinney, was first performed at the Lyric Theatre (Belfast) on 3 June 1999. It was staged at the Tricycle Theatre in August 1999, and it opened at the New Ambassadors Theatre on 24 May 2000. McPherson's film, *The Actors*, written and directed by himself, was released in 2003; he also played a minor role in Damien O'Donnell's film *Inside I'm Dancing* (2004). *Shining City* opened at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 23 September 2004, directed by the author himself. McPherson made his National Theatre debut as both author and director with *The Seafarer*, which opened at the Cottesloe on 28 September 2006. McDonagh's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, directed by Wilson Milam, opened at The Other Place (Stratford-upon-Avon) on 18 April 2001. His latest play, *The Pillowman*, directed by John Crowley, opened at the Cottesloe, National Theatre, on 13 November 2003.
8. *The No Boys Cricket Club*, directed by Indhu Rubasingham, premiered on 29 May 1996. *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads*, directed by Paul Miller, opened at the Lyttelton Loft, National Theatre, on 2 May 2002. *Fallout*, directed by Ian Rickson, was first staged on 12 June 2003.
9. For Billington's complaint, see his 'Modern Life is Rubbish', *Guardian*, 18 December 2002. The label 'in-yer-face' theatre, although contested, is often used to refer to avantgarde 1990s new writing, following Aleks Sierz's *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber, 2001).
10. *Blasted*, directed by James Macdonald, was first staged at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 12 January 1995.
11. *Some Explicit Polaroids* was premiered at the Theatre Royal (Bury St Edmunds) on 30 September 1999. *Shopping and Fucking* was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs at the Ambassadors on 26 September 1996. Both plays were directed by Max Stafford-Clark.
12. M. Billington, 'Drama Out of a Crisis', *Guardian*, 10 April 2003. In his summary for 2003, 'Hello Cruel World', Billington similarly claimed that 'British theatre suddenly woke up to the big issues' and that 'the heartening thing about 2003 has been theatre's reconnection with the wider world' (*Guardian*, 17 December 2003).
13. Written and directed by Justin Butcher, the play was premiered at the Theatro Technis on 14 January 2003.

14. The play was edited by Richard Norton-Taylor and directed by Nicolas Kent; it opened on 6 February 1999.
15. From 7 to 12 April 2003, in response to the war in Iraq, the Royal Court organized a series of events under the heading 'War Correspondence'. Besides Crimp's *Advice to Iraqi Women* and Churchill's 'Iraqdoc', it featured *Delirium* by Rebecca Prichard and *Voices from Within* devised by April de Angelis, Elyse Dodgson and Indhu Rubasingham. It also included poems by Tony Harrison, and talks by journalists and academics.
16. *Via Dolorosa*, directed by Stephen Daldry and acted by Hare himself, was first staged at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs at the Duke of York's on 8 September 1998.
17. *Crossing Jerusalem*, directed by Jack Gold, was premiered on 13 March 2003.
18. *Terrorism*, directed by Ramin Gray, opened at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs on 10 March 2003. This production used Sasha Dugdale's translation.
19. Two documentary plays opened soon after the interview was conducted. *Justifying War: Scenes from the Hutton Inquiry*, about the death of defence expert Dr Kelly, edited by Richard Norton-Taylor, premiered at the Tricycle on 4 November 2003, directed by the theatre's Artistic Director Nicolas Kent. David Hare's *The Permanent Way*, about railway privatization, was first performed at the Theatre Royal (York) on 13 November 2003. It was directed by Max Stafford-Clark. The trend has continued in plays such as Victoria Brittain's and Gillian Slovo's *Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom*, which opened on 20 May 2004 at the Tricycle, directed by Nicolas Kent and Sacha Wares. The interviews for the play with five British detainees – who had been released in late February – were conducted in late March/early April 2004. The authors attempted to canvas the viewpoints of members of the government, but no one was prepared to be interviewed. David Hare's *Stuff Happens*, about the process leading up to the invasion of Iraq, was directed by Nicholas Hytner and premiered at the Olivier, National Theatre, on 1 September 2004. Another documentary play was *Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry*, edited by Richard Norton-Taylor and directed by Nicolas Kent and Charlotte Westenra, which premiered on 7 April 2005, also at the Tricycle. It dramatizes the tragic events that took place on Easter Sunday 1972 in Derry.
20. M. Ravenhill, 'A Touch of Evil', *Guardian*, 22 March 2003. Ravenhill's piece forms part of a series of 13 essays on political theatre published in the *Guardian* from January to May 2003. The series included articles by, among others, Michael Billington (9 January), Arnold Wesker (15 March), Naomi Wallace (29 March), Gregory Burke (12 April), David Edgar (19 April), Pam Gems (17 May) and David Hare (24 May).
21. *One for the Road*, directed by Pinter himself, was premiered at the Lyric Hammersmith Studio on 13 March 1984. The play had a major revival in 2001 in a production directed by Robin Lefèvre, with Pinter playing Nicolas, which opened at the New Ambassadors on 3 July and transferred to the Lincoln Center Festival (New York) on 16 July. Most recently the play opened at the Battersea Arts Centre on 18 July 2003, directed by Bijan Sheibani.
22. *Mother Clap's Molly House*, was first performed at the Lyttelton, National Theatre, on 24 August 2001, directed by Nicholas Hytner.

23. *Far Away*, directed by Stephen Daldry, was premiered at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs on 23 November 2000.
24. The play was written by Alistair Beaton and directed by Max Stafford-Clark; it opened on 31 January 2001 and transferred to the Garrick Theatre on 26 April 2001.
25. D. Rebellato, *1956 and All That: The Making of Modern British Drama* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).
26. Stage designer Jocelyn Herbert joined the English Stage Company at the Royal Court in 1956; she died on 6 May 2003. Film and stage director Lindsay Anderson was Assistant Director at the Court from 1957. William Gaskill was Artistic Director from 1965 to 1969. Anderson and Gaskill were joint Artistic Directors, with Anthony Page, from 1969 to 1972.
27. 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.
28. S. Kane, *Complete Plays: Blasted, Phaedra's Love, Cleansed, Crave, 4.48 Psychosis, Skin* (London: Methuen, 2001), p. 61.
29. Some did recognize the value of Kane's play, among them Martin Crimp, Paul Godfrey, Meredith Oakes and Gregory Motton (letter to the *Guardian*, 23 January 1995), Caryl Churchill ('A Bold Imagination for Action', *Guardian*, 25 January 1995), or Edward Bond ('A Blast at Our Smug Theatre', *Guardian*, 28 January 1995). Pinter defended Kane's play in an interview about his own work, 'Life in the Old Dog Yet' (*Daily Telegraph*, 16 March 1995); he claimed that *Blasted* 'was facing something actual and true and ugly and painful'. Critics Louise Doughty (*Mail on Sunday*, 22 January and 29 January 1995), John Peter (*Sunday Times*, 29 January 1995) and Michael Coveney (*Observer*, 5 February 1995) also discerned the significance of Kane's play. For more information, see G. Saunders, *'Love me or Kill me': Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 23-5 and 53.

Nicholas de Jongh

Enric Monforte

Nicholas de Jongh is theatre critic for the *Evening Standard* and a writer. He is the author of *Not in Front of the Audience: Homosexuality on Stage* (1992) and *Politics, Prudery and Perversions: The Censoring of the English Stage 1901–1968* (2000). He has also contributed to *Approaching the Millennium: Essays on* Angels in America (1997), and to other studies on contemporary British and American drama. In 2006, he participated in the celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of the Royal Court Theatre by assessing the effects of censorship on the British stage. The following interview took place in London on 29 May 2005.

Is it still possible to talk about gay/lesbian/queer drama in the 2000s? Are these labels still useful?

It's easy to be misleading and to make it sound as if there is a single theatrical construct which we can place under the banner of gay, lesbian, or queer theatre. It's more valuable to appreciate how many different forms of gay theatre have come into existence thanks to the legal, social and cultural changes of the last two decades. What was an outlaw, dissident, censored drama has become a commonplace theatrical form. This form ranges from plays or performances speaking to informed gay constituencies with awareness, experience and knowledge which an average theatre audience lacks, to plays by gay writers which contend with the ignorance, prejudices and assumptions of general, traditional heterosexually-minded audiences. Yet this definition strikes me as too limited and limiting. The term 'gay theatre' ought also be applied to the work of adaptors, directors and performers who seek to discover and redramatize concealed or ignored aspects and tendencies of classic plays regarded as heterosexual in their assumptions. If you accept the range of these

varied perspectives, then gay theatre – a phrase that seems imbued with a sense of interioricity, of speaking to an audience of sexual insiders – becomes possessed of renewed potential. Queer revisionist readings of classic or familiar texts will in the future surely illuminate what playwrights have had to conceal and disguise. That is what interests me. I can envisage *Hamlet* legitimately interpreted as gay drama, revived and at last expressed as gay theatre. Hamlet can be interpreted as a queer prince who loves his mother in the wrong way, whose relationship with his father failed, who cannot fall in love with Ophelia and is captivated in some sense by Laertes and Fortinbras. How I long to see such a reading. An all-male *The Importance of Being Earnest*, with a couple of gay heroes obliged to attempt marriages of inconvenience might work illuminatingly. Of course, British theatre is far too sexually hidebound to consider such a thing. Even gay directors would balk at the idea.

In the last 15 years, British theatre directors have begun to unscramble the coded gay drama of earlier times and let audiences realize what was happening beneath the surface heterosexuality required by the Lord Chamberlain. You could call this a theatre of gay archaeology. In the early 1990s, Sean Mathias's production of Noël Coward's *Design for Living* at the Donmar Warehouse helped define this genre.[1] His production was interesting in the sense that it exposed what was concealed – the predominantly queer drive of the two male heroes. In the past, actors had largely ignored the gay aspects of the two male, mildly bisexual characters, the sense in which they were more in love with each other than the heroine. Mathias's production was applauded for its daring, enjoyed a commercial subsequent life in the West End, and became involved in a row about whether there were too many gay plays in the London theatre. I wrote a piece in the newspaper where I am the theatre critic, the *Evening Standard*, mocking the assertion that gay plays had invaded London and arguing that directors, writers and actors were taking advantage of a new liberality to deal with sexual behaviours, lives and experiences that had not been properly represented on stage. My predecessor, who was known for the extremity and intensity of his homophobic views, also wrote an article whose headline was 'Stop the Plague of Pink Plays'.[2] That revival struck me as true to one of my definitions of gay theatre. But the point is that I don't think that you could call *Design for Living*, even as revived by Sean Mathias with a quite obvious sexual gay content on stage, a queer play. I think that this point still holds, because there are a number of plays in which there are gay

incidents and gay themes, but I would not call them queer theatre or lesbian theatre.

On the other hand, writers like Mark Ravenhill – or even, looking back, Joe Orton – are informed by a queer sensibility. Joe Orton was a queer writer in a time of gay theatre, whereas Mark Ravenhill strikes me as perhaps the first true English queer playwright. If you take a play like *Mother Clap's Molly House*, you find there clear evidence of a queer sensibility permeating the action.[3] The audience for which it is written is not necessarily at all a gay one, but you perceive right the way through that the play and the issues it deals with are mediated through the personality of a man who sees life in queer terms, who sees queer solutions and – most important of all – subscribes to a queer morality, a queer way of thinking and being. Morality is a defining aspect of queer theatre. It is interesting here in Britain to observe the reactions of some critics who are heterosexual and were amazed and critical of the multisexual connections at the gay sex party. In the early scenes they didn't appreciate the significance of the attempt to create a gay, queer, or an outsider community within a totally heterosexual world which regarded homosexuality as sin and crime, as that which could not be spoken or discussed. Queer theatre can only be produced by queer people. If you do not know what it is like to be and to feel a total outsider within a heterosexual context you will find it hard to respond to Ravenhill's first act in the molly house. Queer theatre, unlike gay theatre, fulfills a propagandizing, demonstrating, asserting function. It attempts to justify ways of living and being in a fashion scorned by gay writers who are trying to appeal to the traditional, heterosexual audience.

Take *Breaking the Code*, the play by heterosexual Hugh Whitemore about Alan Turing, the very famous creator of computers, who finally committed suicide after being arrested for gay sex, imprisoned and forced to take a drug cure that caused his breasts to swell.[4] It was a highly interesting play, but there was far too little sense of outrage and Whitemore did not sufficiently relate his hero to the gay witch-hunting world in which Turing lived.

Let's approach specific instances of British drama of the 1990s. In the light of the gay/queer dichotomy, and however elusive categories may be, how would you describe Kevin Elyot's plays?

I think Elyot's first play, *Coming Clean*, was his best – a beautiful example of gay obsession, desire and frustration subsumed within a

particular place, with its peculiar codes, conventions and desires. Queer theatre you could say.[5] Then Elyot looked to more traditional audiences. *My Night with Reg* drew rave reviews and a transfer to the West End from the Royal Court Upstairs. You could experience the play as the bourgeois drawing-room comedy into which intruded the minatory spectre of this terrible disease. Here were nice, middle- and lower-middle-class, well-heeled men reacting from their position of relative social ease to catastrophe. This is ostensibly traditional theatre. But Elyot exploits the format, subverts the convention, homosexualizes it. AIDS drives its terrible, destructive way through the play. For heterosexuals it allowed a direct experience of a ghastly phenomenon that they otherwise would normally experience as outsiders, unless one of their sons or brothers contracted the virus. A historic gay play, not queer theatre.

The character of Horace in Elyot's *The Day I Stood Still* probably has a correlative in theatrical tradition in the figure of the shy spinster who cannot get her man in a 1930s theatrical weepie.[6] *Mouth to Mouth*, again, strikes me as very much a personal issue play, in which homosexuality and HIV erupt with the melodramatic intensity of Christopher Hampton's *When Did You Last See My Mother?*, where a fatal road accident serves a similar dramatic function as in Kevin Elyot's play. I didn't entirely believe in either of them. I certainly didn't believe in *Mouth to Mouth*, which struck me as almost a 1950s play in its sense of gay shame and guilt.[7] As for his latest work, *Forty Winks*, it was the most disappointing of Elyot's plays. It was repetitive. It harked back to an old Elyot theme, that of a gay man – in this case Charlie – pining for an unobtainable object of desire. This was a variation on a theme which he had already dealt with in *My Night with Reg*, in *The Day I Stood Still*, or in *Mouth to Mouth*.[8]

My Night with Reg *opened less than a year later than Jonathan Harvey's* Beautiful Thing. *It was precisely the huge success of these plays and their transfer to the West End – particularly Harvey's – that triggered a certain anxiety in a sector of the critical establishment. Harvey's play also acquired an immediate cult status and became a gay icon.*

Harvey is a gay icon in aspic. He is defined by a single play and a period of theatrical gay awakening. *Beautiful Thing* was a work of high-daring gay theatre of revolt and disturbance: how would middle-aged or pre-middle-aged parents react to a scenario that made a drama of what might be a parental nightmare. You see two teenage youths falling in love and lust. Nothing is shirked. Here, as in that terrible, mimed scene in *Angels*

in America, where an antihero tries to get himself infected with the virus by having unprotected sex, a new explicitness is achieved – verbally and visually. Traditional audiences were enraptured by these two teenagers managing to surmount the internal and external difficulties of falling in love. *Beautiful Thing* was revolutionary. It did away with a theatrical tradition in which gay men were usually depicted as middle-class, arty, adult, well-dressed and neurotic. It did away with the traditional old assumption that homosexuality starts in the aristocracy, creeps down to the middle classes and only infects and affects the working classes when they are corrupted.

Where would you classify the play in the gay/queer axis?

It loiters in both camps rather than swings on an axis. If we compare it with *My Night with Reg* we realize how Harvey's play enjoys far more shock appeal. Elyot's characters could have walked out of a smart magazine advertisement for gay life – very much pre-Mark Ravenhill.

In the academia, queer is more related to poststructuralism and to a questioning of the existence of a stable subject, which would actually collide with one of the main tenets of gay theatre, the stress on gay identity politics. Do you think queer has a stronger questioning element than gay?

Very much so. But I regret the fact that we have very little true queer theatre. It's very easy to get bourgeois gay theatre. In fact, we might even say we have succumbed to the death of queer. If I were to go back and ripple my way through all the stuff I've reviewed in the last ten years I might be able to find the odd one, but there's no playwright who leaps out of me. Who would you identify as a playwright in the queer genre of Mark Ravenhill writing in England today?

Would you consider Sarah Kane a queer playwright?

No, definitely not. Sarah Kane struck me as being driven by a sense of angry dread of a world possessed by destructive violence. She was writing as though she had been personally invaded by violence. Her plays realize nightmares of male cruelty. They are infested with gruesome images of torture that the Jacobeans would have appreciated. But I don't really discover governing elements of queerness.

What about Neil Bartlett?

The nature of his queer sensibility is unusual. You could term him a queer theatre archaeologist, a historian of gay sensibilities who looks back from our own, knowing, relatively liberated times to discover and render in terms of theatrical performance the hidden codes, conventions and life-dilemmas of gay men when homosexuality was anathematized as disease and crime. But I don't think you can call him a playwright in the way the term works for Ravenhill. His adaptation of Robin Maugham's novel *The Servant* belongs neatly in this genre.[9] Bartlett has a sharp eye and ear for those signifiers and strategies of innuendo, equivocation and ambivalence. I find in contemporary theatre in Britain very little sign of anyone, apart from him, trying to rediscover our past. He is the prime best example, and obviously the Ravenhill of *Shopping and Fucking* and *Mother Clap's Molly House*.

Would you have any comments on Bartlett's production in the 1990s?

You discern Bartlett's peculiar talents in his superlative production of Terence Rattigan's *Cause Célèbre*, a play whose worth and modern theatrical technique was scarcely appreciated until then, and in his work as the astute adaptor/director of *The Servant*.[10] Neither of these productions are articulate about gay sexuality. The characters are drawn and withdrawn in the closed ranks of Anglo-Saxon closetry. Their sexual identities are doubtful because they doubt themselves. I refer to the master and his factotum in *The Servant* and the two teenage boys attracted to each other in *Cause Célèbre*. They cling to ambiguity, and Bartlett revels, if that is not too flamboyant a word for the discretion and reticence of his direction, in this theatre of veils and façades. His productions are often though not always austere and puritan in their staging – rather in the style of the Royal Court in the 1960s and early 1970s. His translations are burnished with a fine, neutral eloquence. They are never ostentatious in use of contemporary diction and language. He's wonderfully alert to that form of partially vanished Englishness, where everything, when we get down to the crucial facts of life, is expressed in polite evasiveness. He appreciates and understands the cloacal quality of the Anglo-Saxon, middle-class personality. He observes it with all the rigour of a highly intelligent spy, prospecting in a foreign country.

The use of memory to effect a rediscovery of the past from a queer perspective is intrinsic to Bartlett's production but, as you say, there's a scarcity of voices

engaged in a recuperation of that queer past through a queer theatrical production.

Yes, definitely. Mark Ravenhill tried, in my opinion not altogether successfully in dramatic terms, to make comparisons between eighteenth- and twentieth-century notions of queerness in *Mother Clap's Molly House*. The play did have sociopolitical aspirations in the framework of what looked like some charming notions of different forms of gay sexual domesticity back in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. Just as it investigated what Alan Bray had discovered about the existence of these communities and of these closed worlds, so in another sense Bartlett, to take *The Servant* example, went back to the 1950s and 1960s to show what was going on and off underneath the surface of contemporary bourgeois existence.[11]

Then there's Matthew Bourne's work in the worlds of dance and theatre: *Swan Lake*, his bisexual *The Car Man*, and *Play without Words*.[12] His *Swan Lake* strikes me hard as a classic example of queer theatre. It's never had its due recognition because the dance world, dance critics, perhaps even Bourne himself, colluded in the notion that the prince was bisexual, a crazy, mixed-up young man. The gayness was denied, overlooked, avoided. They wanted it to be a 'pretend' family show – family in the sense of mother, father and particularly daughters aged anything from seven to 15. The swans, of course, had to be female in Tchaikovsky's time. You only have to listen to the presuicidal Sixth Symphony, with those tragic, coded epigraphs to each movement, to be aware of how oppressed by despair, desire and depression he was in late nineteenth-century Russia. *Swan Lake* deals with nothing much – and I mean no criticism – except a young man possessed by a longing for love that can never be realized. By changing the swans' sex from female to male Bourne unlocked Tchaikovsky's clear and simple code. The transposition worked wonders. The tragic impetus of that music, with its desperate gaiety – I use the word in its old, literal sense – sounded loud and clear for the first time. It was Tchaikovsky's queer music released from the dance of its hetero swans. The big gay themes from that long-lost time – rejection, frustration, longing, hopelessness, brief, doomed contact – are born again. In *Play without Words*, reexamining a text based on *The Servant*, the Joseph Losey film, Bourne was working at one remove from Bartlett, who, as I said, adapted Robin Maugham's novel of the same name, from which the film was taken.[13] It's significant that both men are interested in the 1960s, when you detect

fresh, more open-minded attempts to bring homosexuality out into the open.

Among the rare, recent examples of queer theatre there was the Royal Court's *Crazyblackmuthaf***in'self*, which was about a closeted black actor who had a second life as a rentboy. It was defiantly sentimental and overloaded with romanticism, but it did invite middle-class white theatre audiences into the little understood world of black gay sexuality. We learned something about a sense of cultural difference and distinction, being black and gay in black communities where gayness outrages cultural and religious ideas of what men must be and appear.[14]

You have introduced the issue of race. Does queer theatre necessarily have to be political?

Queer theatre doesn't necessarily have to be political but we still need its agitating, pioneering vitality. I'm talking to you at a time when in five years the entire landscape of queerness and gayness has been transformed by this government. We're about to see the legalization and formalization of gay relationships; we have seen the repeal of all sexual offences which are specifically gay or homosexual. We have witnessed transformations of an incredible social and sexual sort. But legalization only gives a lead.[15] The process of de-demonizing gay/queer life has come on amazingly in this period, but you might ask then what the function and point of queer theatre in political terms is. I would argue that there is still a huge need and potential for queer theatre. Despite this legislation, it doesn't mean the world has been transformed. Queer theatre in the past decade and in this one too must seek to show younger generations the coercive strictures and repressive structures by which gay men and women lived, acted and existed in the last centuries. It also has to be a contemporary theatre, dealing with gay men and lesbians living in societies where barbaric religious fundamentalism seizes hearts, minds and violent bodies of some Christians and Muslims. The best contemporary business of queer theatre is necessarily political.

This takes us back to Mark Ravenhill. You have mentioned him as the quintessential queer British playwright. What is your view of his critique of certain gay stereotypes in Handbag *and in* Mother Clap's Molly House?

Handbag is the best play he's written, not simply because of its magnificent pastiche of Wildean epigram, truism, and wit. Ravenhill recognizes, as Wilde might have said, that a façade shows you far more about someone than a heart worn on the sleeve.[16] He does, though, suggest

that the outward show of a stereotypical queen belies the seriousness, toughness and individuality of what lies beneath. He cracks open the framework of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and discovers a sensational world of sexual difference. His suave, shallow, conventional young men are stripped of their familiar period decorum. Neil McKenna, in *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde*, broke the Wildean codes and helped us appreciate what the secret society of inverts watching *The Importance of Being Earnest* would have realized about the characters and we could not.[17] *Handbag* is an interesting example of how the imaginative dramatist – Ravenhill – anticipated what the historian – McKenna – discovered through his researches. That was my prime, first feeling about Ravenhill's play. Obviously, *Shopping and Fucking* caught the 1990s imagination in the sense that it related three forms of pleasure-getting in this new market capitalism: shopping, drugs and sex. Sex here becomes a ruthless acquisitive gay mode of experience, but it could as well have been heterosexual. The play enjoyed universal appeal, in the sense that it captured the dynamics of the new market capitalism and new entrepreneurialism that have led to the so-called 'end of history', with selfish self-satisfaction as the single mode of existence.[18]

What is your opinion of British drama of the 1990s, and particularly of the 'in-yer-face' plays which appeared in the wake of Sarah Kane's Blasted? *What is your experience of that moment as a theatre critic?*[19]

The whole notion of 'in-yer-face' theatre, having broken out as a form of cathartic epidemic in the 1990s, seems to me to be preposterous. Let us cast our minds back to 1965, to a young man called Edward Bond, and his plays *Saved* and *Early Morning*. Now consider the outrage, the scandal, the explosion of interest, excitement and vituperation that greeted them in an age of censorship, and compare it with the week-long furore over *Blasted*. You will at once gather that if you call the theatre of Kane and her followers 'in-yer-face' theatre – and I don't mean that in a thematic sense – you might as well then call Bond's theatre in the 1960s 'in-your-bollocks' theatre, to suggest how much more powerful, shocking, and confronting his plays were. You might retort that Kane was dealing with her revulsion in the face of a destructive capitalism, or rather a destructive war spirit permeating the globe, but that was captured far more powerfully in Bond's *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, and also in his *Lear*, with depiction of cruelties that I detested. Bond dealt shockingly with sex, taboos, war barbarities and cruelty on stage 30 years before Kane. 'In-yer-face' theatre is a wonderful

marketing idea in the same sense that the press officer at the Royal Court devised that wonderful slogan, the 'angry young man'. One could gather a collection of totally unrelated artists with this designation and create the illusion of a movement. Similarly, one could do this with 'in-yer-face' theatre, but its subversive force and potency is absurdly exaggerated.

I was away the week *Blasted* opened, I didn't review it. I saw it about two weeks later and I found it was a very strong and terrible play, in terms of its nightmare depiction of a world sunk in cruelty and depravity. However, Philip Ridley's more recent play, *Mercury Fur*, was far more shocking to me than Kane's play.[20] It depicts a futuristic, anarchic, broken-down London with no laws at all and hallucinogenic butterflies which people eat to get stoned. Two gay young men organize a snuff party in which an Asian boy is to be tortured and killed for the delectation of a man who is giving the party. I felt that captured in more terrible terms than Kane's *Blasted* the depravity of some imagined London future. Ridley's use of the filming of a snuff movie struck me as peculiarly horrific. Kane's play, by contrast, did not so much invite us to sup full with horrors as subject us to an evening of force-feeding from a cuisine of refined depravities.

What's your opinion about Sarah Kane's work after Blasted?

I'm not a huge admirer of Kane's. I find her lyrical despair derivative, and her poetry conventional and unexciting. I wouldn't rate her in the same breadth as Ridley or Martin McDonagh.

When thinking of the 1990s, the names that seem to be staying are those of Martin Crimp, Sarah Kane, Martin McDonagh, Phyllis Nagy, Rebecca Prichard, Mark Ravenhill, or Philip Ridley, to name a heterogeneous few. Aleks Sierz also mentions Patrick Marber, but again his plays feel quite different.

Entirely different. Marber's plays are more a nudge in the elbow than 'in-yer-face'. It's unwise to include him. He wrote *Closer*, an interesting play about sexual jealousy, and *Dealer's Choice*, about gambling, which you can see as a deeply 1990s play because of its frenzied hustle for money. At the same time, it had a typical English context, the search for the lost or failed father figure, but I wouldn't go beyond that.[21] Ridley is the quintessence of 'in-yer-face'. So too is McDonagh. Where Kane was appalled and oppressed by the savagery of the world to the extent that it often becomes the governing force in her plays, McDonagh, in as much

as you sense the author's own feelings from the plays that he writes, piles violence on violence till the frontiers of absurdity are reached. He views atrocity and cruelty as black comedy elements in a world he prefers to laugh darkly at. He revels in bad taste and violence. His characters tend to be murderous, violent, cruel and sentimental. They betray a rollicking cynicism and flippancy, a psychopathic refusal to think any further than the ends of their own desires. McDonagh's characters, whether sentimental psychopaths or practising fanatics, are supposed to be sources of our amusement. They are terrible and risible, but his humour seems to me emotionally retarded. His play *The Pillowman*, though, is different, fresh and magnificent. Set in a totalitarian state, whose legal and political processes are as awful as the crimes it investigates, the play struck me as a very powerful illumination of the process by which the abused child becomes another abuser and continues the ghastly process through generations, causing havoc all around. *The Pillowman* was made more dynamic by the fact that it is placed in a fascistic society where the possibility of a fair trial is nonexistent. The play widens out into a dystopian vision of society rooted in primitive, violent, dangerous instincts.[22]

Critics have established a comparison between the impact of the 'angry young men' in the 1950s and the 'in-yer-face' generation of the 1990s. However, instead of the 1950s you have mentioned the 1960s – Edward Bond – as a landmark. Were the 1960s more innovative as a decade, then?

Comparisons are odious and unhelpful. Bond's *Saved* and *Early Morning* or Osborne's *A Patriot for Me*, key English – and note the word English – plays of the 1960s could not have happened if the ground had not been laid in the 1950s. Indeed, a kind of revolutionary trail was blazed in the 1950s. The founding of the Royal Court in 1956 as a theatre for a postwar generation of young writers, and clashes with the Lord Chamberlain over what could be said and depicted in plays, made the decade momentous. The discovery and importation of the work of Brecht, the flourishing of the Arts Theatre and Joan Littlewood's Stratford East Theatre challenged the Anglo-centric, ruling-class conservatism of theatre in Britain. The 1950s rates as an inspirational and historic theatrical decade, the greatest of the century.[23] Then, in the 1960s, the Royal Court went into battle over theatre censorship. Thanks to the daring of the Court and Home Secretaries Roy Jenkins and Jim Callaghan, censorship by the Lord Chamberlain was abolished.[24]

Was there, though, a theatre revolution, launched with the snarl of John Osborne's clarion-call in *Look Back in Anger*? In form, character and even in its sympathies, *Look Back in Anger* now seems a startlingly traditional sort of play. Its significance lay in that it joined in a class war and a battle of the generations, between ruling-class elderly Conservatives and a postwar lower-middle-class generation of have-nots. At the same time, the force of Osborne's criticism of English mores and manners was vitiated by his nostalgic portrayal of the elderly Colonel Redfern. His anger though was not, when it came to politics, precisely targeted. By comparison, Arnold Wesker's *I'm Talking about Jerusalem* or *Roots* deal with sociopolitical aspirations and problems in a far more searching fashion than Osborne. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, though set in a world which might as well be the 1930s as the 1950s, were of course revolutionary in form when set in comparison with Osborne. Beckett was, though, a late flower in the wasteland of the ancient Theatre of the Absurd, which rooted in the late nineteenth century and Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*. Osborne and Beckett alike came up against the Lord Chamberlain's censorship. People have forgotten or do not know that Beckett's *Endgame* was banned in the 1950s because the Lord Chamberlain could not stomach the reference to God as 'The bastard! He doesn't exist!'.[25] It took time and tactical games before the play was produced in English on the stage. The shock of *Endgame*, with its characters immured in dustbins and a sense of a post-nuclear landscape, seems to me far more terrible than anything conceived by Kane in *Blasted*.

To go back to the question, in the 1950s there was a revolution in form and style, obviously pioneered by Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*, which departed from the narrative realistic tradition of theatre. Harold Pinter's plays do not all belong in the world of realism. So in the 1950s there was a radical move away from the drawing-room, class-bound, upper-middle-class theatre, a move associated with the Royal Court particularly, but which began to influence and change the character of the commercial West End stage. The 1990s 'in-yer-face' theatre, for all the uproar it has generated, has effected no such profound changes.

What is your opinion of the views propounded by Dan Rebellato that question the big change accomplished in the 1950s and consequently the subversive power of the 'angry young men' plays?[26]

It's a book of astonishing scope and range. I admire the way it refuses to see theatre in isolation from politics, philosophy, history, literature, the Arts Council – the entire apparatus of life. I was excited and impressed by his thesis, though I do not altogether succumb to it. His attitude to Osborne, as the supposed fount of honest, open emotion, while Terence Rattigan represents a coded, guarded theatre of reticence and concealment, is most persuasive. But I don't think what he says detracts from the fact that the theatre of the London 1950s transformed the stage.

You appear to be arguing that it is as if British theatre of the 1990s had lost track of its past – you even made a reference earlier to Fukuyama's 'end of history'. Bearing this in mind, what direction would you say the theatre of the 2000s will take? Will playwrights perhaps start looking for a new beginning of history?

I've been struck in the last years about if not a politicizing of our theatre, at least of playwrights beginning again to discover a sense of urgency and anger about the sociopolitical circumstances in which we live. I'm not alone in saying that the great discovery of our present theatrical age is the dramatized documentary. I would instance plays like David Hare's *The Permanent Way*, about the privatization of the railways, and *Stuff Happens*, about war in Iraq.[27] There have also been series of documentary productions dealing with such issues as the Hutton inquiry, Guantanamo, or the Bloody Sunday catastrophe.[28] All these have given us a sense that the theatre can concentrate in a freshly illuminating fashion upon the drives, motives and contexts of war and crucial battles for justice. However, it's interesting that apart from David Edgar and David Hare – obviously, very different writers – there is not a social, political, historical, questioning concern on the part of young playwrights. As far as I can see, there is no interest in using the theatre to examine our past, to discover how we came to be ourselves now. A spirit of historical, social, and cultural inquiry that looks back – as opposed to looking into the present – scarcely exists. It is this form of theatre that we need and we lack. British drama should look to its roots and its history, to help us understand the state and condition in which we now exist.

Notes

1. *Design for Living* opened at the Donmar Warehouse on 6 September 1994. It transferred to the Gielgud Theatre on 20 February 1995.

2. De Jongh is alluding to the hostility on the part of certain British newspapers in the mid-1990s to what some critics considered to be the invasion of plays with a gay component, such as Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, Harvey's *Beautiful Thing* and *Babies*, Elyot's *My Night with Reg*, or Noël Coward's *Design for Living*. *Angels in America Part One: Millennium Approaches* and *Angels in America Part Two: Perestroika* were hugely successful when they were staged at the Cottesloe, National Theatre, where they opened on 17 January 1992 and 12 November 1993 respectively, both directed by Declan Donnellan. Harvey's *Beautiful Thing* and Elyot's *My Night with Reg* also had sell-out runs. *Beautiful Thing*, directed by Hettie Macdonald, was a major hit at the Bush Theatre, where it opened on 28 July 1993. The play was revived and toured in 1994, ending with a run at the Donmar Warehouse, where it opened on 30 March. Subsequently, it opened at the Duke of York's Theatre on 26 September of the same year. In 1995, the play was made into a film by the same director. *My Night with Reg*, directed by Roger Michell, opened at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 31 March 1994. It became the first play ever to transfer from the Theatre Upstairs straight to the West End, where it started an extremely successful run, first at the Criterion Theatre, where it opened on 15 November 1994, and subsequently at the Playhouse Theatre, where it premiered on 27 June 1995. In 1996, it was turned into a film by the BBC, scripted by Elyot himself and with the same director and cast as the Royal Court production. Harvey's *Babies*, directed by Polly Teale, opened at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs on 5 September 1994. It was the impending transfer of *Beautiful Thing* to the West End's Duke of York's Theatre which triggered the above-mentioned polemic. Charles Spencer, from the *Daily Telegraph*, published 'He Dares to Be Popular' on 21 September 1994, and Milton Shulman's 'Stop the Plague of Pink Plays' appeared in the *Evening Standard* on 30 September of the same year. Nicholas de Jongh's contribution to the polemic was 'The Love that is Shouting its Name', published in the *Evening Standard* on 29 September.
3. *Mother Clap's Molly House*, directed by Nicholas Hytner, was first performed at the Lyttelton, National Theatre, on 24 August 2001.
4. *Breaking the Code*, directed by Clifford Williams, opened at the Haymarket Theatre on 21 October 1986.
5. *Coming Clean*, directed by David Hayman, opened at the Bush Theatre on 25 November 1982.
6. *The Day I Stood Still*, directed by Ian Rickson, opened at the Cottesloe, National Theatre, on 22 January 1998.
7. *Mouth to Mouth*, directed by Ian Rickson, opened at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 1 February 2001. In the final part of the play, a motorbike crash takes place which, according to de Jongh, is reminiscent of a similar situation in Hampton's *When Did You Last See My Mother?*
8. *Forty Winks*, directed by Katie Mitchell, opened at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 28 October 2004.
9. *The Servant*, directed by Bartlett, opened at the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre on 13 March 2001.
10. *Cause Célèbre*, adapted and directed by Bartlett, opened at the Lyric Hammersmith on 2 May 1998.

11. Alan Bray has unearthed same-sex desire in books such as *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1982) and *The Friend* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
12. *Swan Lake* first opened at the Sadler's Wells Theatre on 9 November 1995. *The Car Man* premiered at the Old Vic Theatre on 13 September 2000. *Play without Words: The Housewarming* opened at the Lyttelton, National Theatre, on 23 August 2002. The three shows were directed and choreographed by Bourne.
13. *Play without Words* is based on the film version of *The Servant*, directed by Joseph Losey in 1963.
14. *Crazyblackmuthaf***in'self*, by DeObia Oparei, directed by Josie Rourke, opened at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs on 29 November 2002.
15. The London Partnerships Register was created in September 2001 as a first step to recognize the partnership status of both homosexual and heterosexual couples. Subsequently, other registration schemes were set up throughout the United Kingdom. Finally, a ground-breaking Civil Partnership Act became law on 18 November 2004 and came into effect on 5 December 2005. The Act took over the Partnerships Register as a means of providing same-sex couples with legal recognition to all effects. The Sexual Offences Act 2003 came into force on 1 May 2004. It repealed previous legislation according to which homosexual acts were considered to be sexual offences and labelled as 'gross indecency' or 'buggery'. The Act also established that such terms were to be deleted from the statutes.
16. *Handbag*, directed by Nick Philippou, opened at the Lyric Hammersmith Studio on 14 September 1998.
17. N. McKenna, *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde* (London: Century, 2003).
18. *Shopping and Fucking*, directed by Max Stafford-Clark, opened at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs at the Ambassadors on 26 September 1996. Francis Fukuyama developed his notion of the 'end of history' in *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992). Fukuyama's thesis hinges on the defence of capitalism and Western liberal democracy as the most valid economic and sociopolitical systems of government.
19. *Blasted*, directed by James Macdonald, opened at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 12 January 1995. Aleks Sierz uses the label 'in-yer-face' to describe the experiential, provocative kind of theatre written by Kane and other playwrights in his book *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber, 2001). See Mireia Aragay's and Pilar Zozaya's interview with Sierz in this volume.
20. *Mercury Fur*, directed by John Tiffany, opened at The Menier Chocolate Factory on 1 March 2005.
21. *Dealer's Choice* opened on 9 February 1995 and *Closer* on 22 May 1997. Both plays were staged at the Cottesloe, National Theatre, and were directed by Marber himself.
22. *The Pillowman*, directed by John Crowley, opened at the Cottesloe, National Theatre, on 13 November 2003.
23. Brecht's work was discovered in Britain in the mid-1950s. At the 1955 Taw and Torridge Festival, Joan Littlewood directed and played the lead role in *Mother Courage*; in its first season, the English Stage Company at the Royal Court staged *The Good Woman of Szechwan*; the Berliner Ensemble first visited

London in Summer 1956; and a production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* was staged at RADA in July 1956. The Arts Theatre was a club theatre with a European repertoire and a focus on staging plays that dared to raise the taboo subject of homosexuality. Joan Littlewood's Stratford East Theatre, founded in 1953, addressed social issues and sought to appeal to a working-class audience.

24. Stage censorship was abolished in Britain in 1968. For more information on the role played by the Royal Court in the struggle to put an end to censorship, see P. Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), especially pp. 105–28.
25. S. Beckett, *Endgame* (London: Faber, 1964 (1958)), p. 38.
26. D. Rebellato, *1956 and All That: The Making of Modern British Drama* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).
27. *The Permanent Way*, directed by Max Stafford-Clark, was staged at the Theatre Royal (York) on 13 November 2003. *Stuff Happens*, directed by Nicholas Hytner, premiered at the Olivier, National Theatre, on 10 September 2004.
28. *Justifying War: Scenes from the Hutton Inquiry*, about the death of defence expert Dr Kelly, was edited by Richard Norton-Taylor and directed by Nicolas Kent. It opened on 4 November 2003. *Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom* was written by Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo, and directed by Nicolas Kent and Sacha Wares. The play opened on 20 May 2004. The interviews for the play with five British detainees – who had been released in late February – were conducted in late March/early April 2004. The authors attempted to canvass the viewpoint of members of the government, but no one was prepared to be interviewed. *Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry*, edited by Richard Norton-Taylor and directed by Nicolas Kent and Charlotte Westenra, was premiered on 7 April 2005. It dramatizes the tragic events that took place on Easter Sunday 1972 in Derry. The three plays were staged at the Tricycle Theatre.

Aleks Sierz

Mireia Aragay and Pilar Zozaya

Aleks Sierz is a freelance writer, journalist, critic and broadcaster. He is author of *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (2001), *The Theatre of Martin Crimp* (2006) and a regular contributor to *New Theatre Quarterly*. His website at http://www.inyerface-theatre.com contains a mine of information about new writing in British theatre since the early 1990s. The interview that follows was conducted in London on 2 July 2003.

In In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today, *you state that 'The story of nineties theatre begins with a crisis in new writing'.*[1] *Would you care to comment on this?*

Paradox is a good place to start. The irony of my book is that when I was a student I wanted to deconstruct the myths of other writers, but I ended up creating a myth of my own, the myth of 'in-yer-face' theatre. When I was writing my MA thesis at City University in the early 1990s, I deconstructed the myth of *Look Back in Anger* in a similar, if much more superficial, way to that of Dan Rebellato.[2] My hero has always been Roland Barthes.

To answer your question, I wanted to create a narrative, a story, and for that story to be dramatic I had to have various phases and various contrasts, so the idea of a crisis appealed to me because a crisis is essentially a dramatic moment. Also, I wanted to argue a case: the most significant sentence in my book is the first one, which says it's 'a personal and polemical history'.[3] In order to argue in favour of the creative outburst of the mid-1990s, I had to play down the significance of theatre at the end of the 1980s. But there is also a fair amount of objective evidence that there was a crisis in new writing at that time. Mainly, after ten

years of Conservative government, there was a feeling in the arts that theatre was under siege. Subsidies were going down, there were lots of cuts, and sometimes theatres would actually close. The response to that attack, a real attack by a very philistine government, left deep psychological scars. People became more timid, especially with new writing. The writers became less interested in developing fantasy or pushing out the boundaries; they accepted that new writing would be confined to little studios; they wrote small plays, which were easy to stage because they were very cheap. And there's other evidence that this *was* a real crisis. For example, if you look at Arts Council statistics, in subsidized theatres at the end of the 1980s new writing was about 10 per cent of work staged; seven years later, in the mid-1990s, it was 20 per cent. So there is also a material basis for the idea of an explosion of creativity in the mid-1990s.

You've mentioned Look Back in Anger *and Dan Rebellato. Parallels are often drawn between the 1950s New Wave headed by John Osborne's play and the 1990s renaissance in new writing, yet at the same time the history of postwar British drama is being reread. What are your views on the subject?*

The central narrative, even when it is mythologized, is always having breakfast with the truth. The story that puts *Look Back in Anger* centre stage in British postwar theatre history is the correct one. There are, however, revisionists who don't agree. For example, Dominic Shellard has attacked the myth of *Look Back in Anger* and the Royal Court Theatre, and suggested that the really revolutionary plays of the 1950s were Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey*.[4] I can understand why he says this, but I reject it completely. In Delaney's case, he's saying it because Delaney is a woman, and the play has one gay and one black character, so in our New Labour, politically-correct age, it is a much more sensitive play than *Look Back in Anger*, which is quite misogynistic in places. The reason I dislike this revisionist attempt to shift the focus from John Osborne and the Royal Court is because it distracts attention from the *main* narrative of British theatre, in which the Royal Court is central to discovering and developing new writers. Shelagh Delaney's play has many virtues, but she only wrote one, or two, and then disappeared: she went into film and television.[5] She wasn't actually a career playwright in the way that John Osborne, John Arden or Edward Bond obviously were. They make up the central strand in postwar British playwriting.

If we compare the 1950s and the 1990s, we can say that they were both moments in which there was an explosion of creativity and an upsurge in new writing. 'In-yer-face' theatre is a subset of new writing; the central concept is 'new writing'. It's a term they don't have in the United States, for example. They just have 'new' plays or 'old' plays. So, what does 'new writing' mean? Partly it's an advertising slogan. It's a bit like 'New Labour'. 'New' means modern and virtuous. And, obviously, the 'writing' bit is a political statement, in the sense that it implies that it is the writer who is central to the theatre experience, not the director, not the actors, not the design. 'New writing' is different from the European tradition; it defines the Britishness of British theatre. But I have to add that in the 1990s, a lot more new writers emerged than even in the late 1950s. If you look at the actual plays that the Royal Court produced in the 1950s, there are not that many new ones until the early 1960s. For about four or five years, they produced five a year maximum. In the 1990s, the amount produced was much greater. Today, in Britain, between 500 and 700 writers earn a living from theatre, radio, television and film. That's a massive number, because obviously behind them there's another thousand or more who write but do not earn a living from writing. What is really significant about the 1990s is the enormous expansion of new writing and, of course, its recognition by the funding authorities, such as the Arts Council. There are more resources to develop writers and to put their plays on, even if Britain is very much behind the United States, for example, in terms of training for writers.

Regarding the renaissance in new writing for the stage since the early 1990s, you have just said that you needed a narrative structure for your book. Would you care to comment on this 'beginning' in the early 1990s? Why did it happen precisely then?

Reality is chaos. Writers write the plays they want to, sometimes in one style, sometimes in another – it's chaos. No one is in control. But I also think that it's impossible to learn the lessons of history by saying that life is chaotic; you have to have a story. True, journalists and academics invent the story, but there is a difference between a story that is true and one that is completely untrue. The idea that there was a renaissance of new writing in the early 1990s is clearly true. As regards my ideas about what happened next, so far, nobody has told a better story – although they may well do so in the future.

Why was there an upsurge in the 1990s? That's a difficult question. I can understand why there was a new sensibility. By sensibility, I mean a mixture of emotion and ideas, of feeling and, if you like, ideology. The signal given to young people at the end of the 1980s, especially with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and, on a more parochial level, with Margaret Thatcher's dismissal from power, was that change was possible and because in film, radio, or television opportunities were constricted, many young people decided to write for theatre. So you have a situation in the 1990s where there are people that are being pushed towards theatre, and the message they are getting from politics is that there are imaginative and political possibilities available. This mixture creates a new sensibility. For example, both women and men were liberated from writing feminist plays. By this I mean not that they were anti-feminist, but that, as young people, they were more sceptical of feminism. The same thing applies to politics. Young people instinctively wanted to change the world, but they didn't have the idea, like Brecht had, that you have to lecture your audience. Instead, they had a new sensibility, and I call the avantgarde aspect of that 'in-yer-face' theatre.

Could you comment on some of the labels that have been proposed for 1990s drama? You've mentioned 'a new sensibility', 'avantgarde' and 'in-yer-face' theatre; others are 'new brutalism', '"experiential" theatre', '"cool" theatre', 'Neo Jacobeanism'.

This is something I passionately believe in, so I'm happy to argue as strongly as possible that the label that I finally chose, 'in-yer-face' theatre, is the correct label and the only one that makes sense. Firstly, it's not an invention of mine. When these new plays were being produced, what happened is that critics and commentators tried lots of different ways of describing the new sensibility. People called it 'Neo Jacobean', 'new brutalism', 'in-yer-face' theatre, and 'theatre of urban ennui'; those were the four main labels. In Germany, they called it the 'blood-and-sperm generation', and sometimes 'cool' theatre.

Now, I reject each one of these labels. If you label a phenomenon you're making a political choice; if you call new theatre 'Neo Jacobean', you're underlining continuity. If we look just at the work of Sarah Kane, it's obvious that there is a continuity between, for example, *King Lear* and *Blasted*, and Greek tragedy and *Phaedra's Love*.[6] The reason I reject 'Neo Jacobean' is because what is interesting for me is not continuity but change and rupture. I reject 'new brutalism' because it focuses only on the content of some of the plays we are talking about. It tends to

assume that the writer wants to brutalize the audience, and I think that that is completely wrong. Sarah Kane did not want to brutalize the audience; her plays are as much about love and tenderness as about explicit sex and violence. Secondly, 'new brutalism' already refers to an architectural style in Britain; for example, the National Theatre is a 'new brutalist' building, and since the National had one of the worst records for promoting new writing in the 1990s, the idea that you name the sensibility after that would be, to me, completely inappropriate. I also immediately reject 'theatre of urban ennui'; it sounds like something from Oscar Wilde. Also, it completely misses the point; the young people in 1990s drama were not bored, they were just getting on, living their lives. 'Blood and sperm generation' is quite good in that it mentions the generation gap but, once again, 'blood and sperm' just means sex and violence, which is a very narrow view of the content of 1990s drama. 'Cool' theatre, I think, comes from 'Cool Britannia'; unfortunately, I feel a bit responsible for that silly label because I once wrote an article with 'Cool Britannia' in its title.[7] It also gives a completely false impression, in the sense that these young people may have been personally 'cool' – Mark Ravenhill, for example, is very 'cool' – but the work they wrote is not 'cool' in the sense of detached, cynical, or even postmodern. It is, if anything, 'hot' because it expresses engaged personal beliefs, and it was put on in small studios, places which were physically hot. It was also 'hot' in the sense of 'fashionable'.

Why do I insist on 'in-yer-face' theatre? Because it goes beyond a mere description of content, and describes the relationship between the stage and the audience, between the writer and society. What is central about 1990s theatre is that a group of young writers pioneered a new way of relating to the audience, and if you label it 'in-yer-face' theatre you are stressing that relationship. The relationship arises primarily because in the 1990s many new writers were put into studio spaces, with 100 people at most in the audience, and often just 60; the action was very close. In a way, the 1990s writers turned weakness into strength and used what is significant about studio spaces – their greater intimacy, sense of cohesion, and openness to shock. Basically, these writers inverted what could have been seen as a failure into a success. Sarah Kane called the method they used 'experiential' theatre, and if there is a distinctive aesthetic innovation in 1990s theatre, it is surely that.[8] It is also a new term, and one which could be theorized further. It's all about waking up the audience. In conclusion, out of all those labels, I would passionately advocate 'in-yer-face' theatre as being the one that is truly distinctive of the 1990s. It's not the only style that writers used; it's not a movement – it is a

sensibility. Mark Ravenhill, even with a main stage play such as *Mother Clap's Molly House*, still exudes that sensibility.[9] Other playwrights write one play like that, and others in a different style. The best metaphor for 'in-yer-face' theatre is not that of a movement but that of an arena that you enter or leave, or you stay in or camp in, or whatever. It's not so much a club as a network.

What would you say are the main characteristics of 'in-yer-face' drama? What playwrights would you include under this label?

It would be pointless to repeat what I say in my book, but I would add that there are some playwrights in the 1990s, such as Jonathan Harvey, who wrote *Beautiful Thing*, Kevin Elyot, who wrote *My Night with Reg*, or Diane Samuels, who wrote *Kindertransport*, who do not fit comfortably into this 'in-yer-face' sensibility.[10] David Eldridge and David Greig are good examples of writers who tend to draw on other sensibilities. That's clearer now than when I was first working on my book. During the process of writing I was trying to describe something for myself as much as for other people, and perhaps I overstated the most superficial aspects of the new sensibility – bad language and explicit acts of sex or violence. What I would like to stress now is that the most important element is the drama's emotional core – whether it has some difficult material, such as humiliation, suffering, or some 'abnormal' emotional force that puts it into the arena I have been describing. Nowadays, I talk more about sensibility and emotion than about sex and violence.

1990s new writing is very extreme indeed in its representation of sexuality and violence. Doesn't it run the dual risk of making such brutality look 'normal', that is, of making it lose its 'real' meaning by presenting it so insistently, and of encouraging a voyeuristic fascination with it?

When 'experiential' theatre is successful, then you have no doubt that it's telling you some bad news. You do feel like leaving – it can be profoundly sickening. Richard Zajdlic's *Dogs Barking*, Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, or Anthony Neilson's *Stitching*, these are all very uncomfortable experiences to watch, even if you are prepared for it.[11] They are powerful, visceral reminders that humiliation and violence are wrong. The plays are morally alive – you don't feel that the writers are doing it just for fun, or to encourage people. Kane and Neilson are very serious writers who have thought long and hard about these issues. Their aim has clearly been to make violence as horrible, and as inescapable, as possible. But they are doing this not in order to titillate, or to make

powerless audiences feel powerful and fascistic, in the way Hollywood films do, but in order to shock them out of their complacency.

Now, is there a danger of voyeurism? I suppose that inevitably there is. But most theatres have been very responsible. If theatres kept reviving these plays, then you could accuse them of trying to exploit them. But mostly they don't. There were a number of copycat plays after *Blasted*, but most theatres rejected that kind of spiritless imitation. If they had been cynical, they would have just put on more plays which featured nudity, mutilation and humiliation.

In my book I compare *Blasted* and Tracy Lett's *Killer Joe*, two plays in which there is an older man and a younger woman, and I can understand the psychological manipulation by the older man of the younger woman very well.[12] I admire the way the writers depicted it, especially Kane, who was 22 when she wrote the play: it was very intelligent and perceptive of her. They're both very uncomfortable plays to watch. But it's interesting that the critics attacked Kane because of the difficult structure of her play, whereas they were less worried about *Killer Joe*, which is structured like a thriller, like a film by the Coen brothers. So the more experimental the form, the less acceptable the play.

Is there a playwright whom you consider to be the archetypal figure of the 1990s?

There are three – Sarah Kane, Anthony Neilson and Mark Ravenhill. They are the core, the big three; people who wrote in a similar way were all part of what I would call an avantgarde. They wrote in a way that wasn't populist. Their job really was to kick down the door, and after them came an enormous crowd of other talent. These include Asian writers, black writers – many of whom aren't particularly 'in-yer-face' – and writers who are more interested in different imaginative worlds. In the last couple of years, numerous writers have been exploring a more magic realist kind of sensibility.

I would also add that I regret not writing more about Martin Crimp in *In-Yer-Face Theatre*. He was one of a number of writers who started in the 1980s, and one of the constraints I set myself was that the book would look mostly at writers who had made their debuts in the 1990s, but that's a pity because in some senses he's a quintessentially 1990s writer. His journey as a writer is similar to that which Kane took after him. He starts off relatively naturalistically and becomes more and more abstract, and then he reaches a highpoint with *Attempts on her Life*, which is the model for Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*. But *Attempts* is a climax in terms of

innovation, and then he has to return, because he can't go any further. So he writes *The Country*.[13]

What other 1990s women playwrights, besides Sarah Kane, would you highlight?

Definitely Phyllis Nagy, Rebecca Prichard, Judy Upton and Naomi Wallace. They are very different but their sensibility is exactly that of the 1990s. And you could include the work of older playwrights who succeed in reinventing themselves, such as Caryl Churchill. There are numerous women playwrights that have emerged recently. It used to be a feminist cliché that women playwrights were undervalued; it's certainly not true in the past five to eight years. For example, last year the Soho Theatre company produced only women, not because of a policy, but just because those were the best plays they had. One new playwright who emerged this year, debbie tucker green, has a lot of the characteristics of that 1990s sensibility and especially its emotional force. She started as a stage manager at the Royal Court, and after five or six years, she began writing.[14] There are numerous other women playwrights, but it is true that in the mid-1990s, one of the classic genres was the 'laddish' or 'new lad' play. Partly that was a response to the crisis of masculinity, and partly a reaction against the feminist writers of the 1980s.

A recurrent criticism made against 'in-yer-face' theatre concerns its political shortcomings.

Yes, it's such a cliché, and one that I still sometimes fall back on. Quite often I say that these writers were less interested in big public events and more interested in private ones, and that if we understand the personal as being political, then they are political playwrights. The problem with saying that is, of course, that if the personal really is political, then everything is political, so nothing is political. So I'm frankly in two minds about it. Sometimes I can sympathize when young writers say they are not interested in big issues, in telling people what to think, in debate, in an objective, BBC-type journalism. Surely, we've had enough of plays like that. On the other hand, sometimes I do feel that there is a lack of plays where people express political ideas, and theories about life, in the way that Trevor Griffiths, David Hare or David Edgar do. So I'm ambivalent. But there's definitely a slide away from explicit political material, and definitely a refusal to offer people solutions. Since 9/11, of course, all that is changing.

You point out in your book that one of the things 'in-yer-face' plays do is to question 'what is normal, what it means to be human, what is natural or what is real', what we take for granted, generally.[15] *Do they also suggest possible answers, possible alternatives?*

Young writers and young playwrights are on a journey of discovery. Kane, as you know, famously said, 'I'd rather risk overdose in the theatre than in life', which in view of how she ended her life is profoundly ironic.[16] Writers are interested in questioning those boundaries, and in how far their own exploration will take them. It's quite significant that most of the writers I spoke to, or have spoken to since writing the book, really do not want to offer solutions, and quite often they genuinely do not know the answers. For me, that attitude is always a bit strange, because 30 years ago when I was a student, I thought I could create a new world, with a little help from Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud or Wilhelm Reich. So that's a big generational difference. Quite often, young writers today refuse to offer solutions. Is that a negation of artistic responsibility? Perhaps. After all, writers such as Mark Ravenhill, who seem to be funky young people, actually have a very traditional leftwing morality. Brecht, for example, is one of his favourite writers. But he says he doesn't want to use his plays to preach. Fair enough, but I really like it when writers such as David Greig say that if the play gives the suggestion that change is possible, it has a certain radical edge. But most writers do not think like that. For example, Gregory Burke's *Gagarin Way*, a fantastically exciting play, especially the first half-hour, is really circular. The final message is that it's pointless to be radical, to be political, because you cannot change anything. Harry Gibson's *Trainspotting* is also completely circular – there's no way out, addiction equals death, and that's it.[17] It can be profoundly depressing if you enjoy a play while you're conscious all the time that it's in some sense reactionary, or leaves everything unquestioned.

In this connection, Mark Ravenhill has recently suggested that British theatre has traditionally felt the need to write social and political plays. He argues that now is the time to move towards what he calls the metaphysical and the mysterious. On the other hand, Naomi Wallace claims that playwrights should not exempt themselves from dealing with the pressing politics of the time.[18]

As you point out, there is an ongoing debate between the playwrights, and a lot of interest in discussing these issues, but there isn't at the moment, as far as I can see, a firm resolution. Clearly, one of the effects of 9/11 is an upsurge of political plays, mainly rather lurid satires. But,

at the same time, many people are fed up with literal or journalistic accounts of our times, and long for something different. Whether for more metaphysics or more mystery, I'm not sure. And, perhaps more troublingly, there isn't much evidence at the moment of new writing that is actually good enough for big stages. I can name two or three recent plays that sit comfortably on a big stage, in other words, for 1,000 people, or even for 600. Ravenhill's *Mother Clap's Molly House* is one of them. But most new plays are still too small even to be put on at the Cottesloe, which sits 350. Most Royal Court plays struggle to fit on its main stage.

Even Blasted *has only had very small audiences in Britain.*

That's true. The Royal Court was split down the middle about *Blasted*. In the script meeting, half the people didn't want to put it on. But when it was staged in the Theatre Upstairs, it sold out completely because of the media hysteria it provoked, so it vindicated its defenders by being a box-office success. But it was only on for about four weeks. Then, in 2001, it was revived on the Royal Court's main stage, and it sold out there as well, on the basis of its reputation. In Scotland it was revived about a year ago in a small space and also sold out.[19] As far as I know, in terms of professional productions, that's it; it's never ever been put on again in Britain. That's because of the British new play culture – it's rare for theatres in Britain to revive a new play. And, to be frank, in Britain audiences are not knocking on the door demanding to see Sarah Kane's work. In terms of new writing and of theatre people, she is already fading a bit into the past. The people who worship at the shrine of 'saint Sarah' are academics and students. But she is less important in the world of theatre than she was five years ago.[20]

Can you expand on how you personally recall the explosion of new writing? Watching plays like Neilson's Penetrator, *Kane's* Blasted, *Ravenhill's* Shopping and Fucking, *what were the emotions?*[21]

Looking back, what you remember is the faint sound of distant commotions, and then the sudden shock of discovery. For example, with the work of Philip Ridley, I knew when I was watching it that this was something new and exciting. Then Anthony Neilson's work came down from Scotland, and I knew that something interesting was happening. And then the tempo began to accelerate. But, to be perfectly honest, I think it was impossible to tell on the press night of Kane's *Blasted* whether she was a genius or whether she was just showing off. I would always argue

that a breakthrough in sensibility must necessarily be unfamiliar and misunderstood, and I would avoid calling critics idiots just because they don't recognize a new talent. For example, if you went to see *Waiting for Godot* in Paris in 1953, I'm sure it would have been unclear whether it was a masterpiece or just a piece of rubbish. When something is written in a new style, when something has a new structure – and *Blasted* and *Waiting for Godot* have both – it is so difficult to tell whether it's the real thing. It's partly luck. With Kane's *Blasted*, it was immediately clear that she had a thorough understanding of the emotional and psychological relationship between an older man and a much younger woman, but it was not clear whether the second half was neo-Beckettian or just trying to outrage people. Remember, we had no idea of her background, that she had a first-class honours degree in drama; we didn't know that she would write another four plays, so it was very uncertain.

I always emphasize contingency in drama history. If, for example, at that script meeting at the Royal Court, they'd decided not to put on *Blasted*, history would have been different. When Mark Ravenhill sent Max Stafford-Clark *Shopping and Fucking*, Max didn't instantly like it. It's only because Mark kept sending him new drafts that finally Max agreed to try it. It's all very contingent. Very uncertain. I do not think that there is one reason, or even five reasons, why Sarah Kane's *Blasted* created the enormous fuss that it did. In a sense, it's a mystery. All I can say is that, objectively, it was written with a new sensibility, and that the play's shock value became amplified when the media started talking about it. The Royal Court were amazed; they had not publicized the play at all. It was all a total surprise to them.

Was it a very different experience watching the first production of Blasted *at the Royal Court Upstairs, as opposed to seeing the second production Downstairs, with a proscenium arch?*

That's a very interesting question. In a small studio space, *Blasted* felt very intense and unpleasant. There was a real problem with the first production which nobody talks about; it's almost a secret. It was done on very little money, and the set actually looked less like a hotel room, and more like a shabby bedsit. If you have a very expensive hotel room, as the stage directions ask for, the first line from Ian, 'I've shat in better places than this', is obviously funny, and you immediately have an element of wry comedy.[22] If the set looks like a bedsit, however, it seems as if the piece is going to be a council-estate drama, a depressing, dirty play. Part of the impact of the original production, and of popular

misconceptions about it, was a result of the poor set. Then, obviously, if you put something on the main stage, behind a proscenium arch, with a lavish set, you have a greater distance and you have greater comedy. The second production had a very good set; and it was much funnier. But it was still shocking. When I saw it, to my surprise, somebody fainted in the front row and had to be dragged out. On a big stage, the play's meaning also became broader. It now seemed to be more of a state-of-Europe play. In a way, the proscenium ennobled the play; the main stage gave it greater depth and weight.

How do you assess the role played by the Royal Court since the early 1990s in relation to other new writing venues in London, such as the Bush Theatre, the Soho Theatre, the Hampstead Theatre, or indeed the National?

The Royal Court has continuity. It's the oldest new writing venue, so for that reason alone, it is, and will always be, significant and central. It clearly has been the market leader in new writing, and like all market leaders it has attracted a fair deal of criticism. Moreover, in recent years it's started to return more to its original mission of not only developing young British writers, but also writers from abroad. But in the history of the 1990s, it's clear that people like Dominic Dromgoole at the Bush were in a sense in advance of the Royal Court, partly because the Court was embattled at the end of the 1980s – too busy fighting cuts to their funding.[23] What they did in the 1990s when Stephen Daldry and Graham Whybrow started, as Artistic Director and Literary Manager, was actually relatively inexpensive.[24] They had all these writers, they had the stages, and they staged the plays for a short time and very fast. They didn't really lead, the Bush and the Edinburgh Traverse Theatre under Ian Brown led before they did.[25] But once Stephen Daldry got the hang of things, and that first season in 1994–95 was so successful and was given such press coverage, the Royal Court took the lead again.

For me, in the 1990s, the big three were always the Royal Court, the Traverse and the Bush. The Soho was quite significant, but because they never had a good space until they opened the new building in Dean Street, their problem was finding a home. Now they've got a home, their problem is finding a style. They do lots of plays, but there's a mismatch between the plays they create and the plays they invite in, which are often very middle-of-the-road.[26] On the other side of town, the Hampstead under Jenny Topper, who was there for 15 years, always promoted quite middle-class, well-made plays. A good example would be Terry Johnson's *Dead Funny*, which is subversive and has a strong

emotional punch, but is very traditional in some respects.[27] As for the National, there are two National Theatres. There's the National that you see, whose new writing record in the mid-1990s wasn't very good. Then there's the National that you don't see, the Studio, which has developed many of the writers that we've talked about. They were then put on at the Royal Court, the Bush, or the Soho, and this meant that people thought that they were *their* writers. So the National has not been its own best advocate. They found Patrick Marber, but new writing is quite a specialized activity, and unless you have a theatre that is devoted to it as its top priority, it will never be that successful.[28]

Sometimes it feels as if 'in-yer-face' plays are 'used' and then 'disposed of'. In, let's say, 20 years' time, which 1990s plays will remain and still be put on stage?

That's a really good question, and I have no intention of answering it. Making predictions is usually suicidal. Still, it's clear to me that the work of people like Martin Crimp, Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill will repay revisiting, in the same way that Caryl Churchill's work does. In a sense, Churchill is a quintessentially 1990s writer because her plays have become very innovative in terms of structure and very imaginative in terms of content; she's still developing different techniques that really challenge directors and actors.

There seems to be a general consensus that the 'in-yer-face' sensibility has come to an end. Do you see any new trends emerging?

Yes, you're right. I would say that moments of heightened cultural creativity usually last about five years. In 1990s theatre, *The Pitchfork Disney* by Philip Ridley is a kind of pre-echo and then 'in-yer-face' theatre arrives on the crest of the enormous publicity provoked by *Blasted*, and soon not a month passes without a new playwright emerging.[29] That lasts for about four or five years. I always say that the death of Sarah Kane in February 1999 is a convenient end point. That was also the year when Conor McPherson's *The Weir* opened, which – despite that unpleasant episode about paedophiles in one of the ghost stories and the emotionally fraught aspect of the final story about losing your child – has got a very redemptive feel which most 'in-yer-face' plays don't have.[30] After 1999, you still get individual plays that have that sensibility, but it's no longer the norm. I'd say that the past three or four years have been like an aftershock, when the wave recedes down the beach back into the sea. Various new strands have emerged; one of

them is a greater interest in theatricality and imagination. For example, Zinnie Harris's *Further Than the Furthest Thing*, Enda Walsh's *Bedbound*, even Jez Butterworth's *The Night Heron*, are plays where the imaginative side is much more developed, and perhaps that's one way of pushing the story forward.[31] Another way would be fusion theatre. Frantic Assembly, for example, take a superb writer, such as Abi Morgan, plus dance music, plus physical movement, and the resulting fusion tells the play's story in a refreshing way.

All I can say is that now new writing is more diverse than it has ever been. But the bad news is that this year new writing is the most unexciting it's been in a long time. The most interesting aspects of British theatre at the moment are the new Artistic Directors – Nick Hytner at the National, Michael Boyd at the Royal Shakespeare Company, Michael Attenborough at the Almeida Theatre, and Michael Grandage at the Donmar Warehouse.[32] The energy is with directors and companies.

Still on what the future might have in store, when winding up your report on last September's 'In-Yer-Face' Bristol Conference, you suggested that 'the future of new writing depended on exploring four areas': magic realism, fusion theatre, writing for bigger stages and reinventing a radically alternative fringe theatre.[33] *You've already mentioned the first two; could you comment on the other pair?*

As regards the bigger stages, there's a group called the Monsterists that includes National Studio writers, such as Richard Bean, Tanika Gupta, David Eldridge, Moira Buffini and Colin Teevan. They got together to produce a manifesto last year, called the Monsterists' Manifesto. 'Monster' meaning 'big', but also a rather laboured pun on the French word 'to show', 'montrer'. Their idea is that they want more resources for living writers and less for dead writers. So they want their plays to be put on the major stages. And I love the ambition of that. Mark Ravenhill's *Mother Clap's Molly House* is the only play I can think of that has been put on at the Lyttelton stage in the past ten years by a new writer. As well as issuing a manifesto, the Monsterists have also tried some stunts: they applied as a group for all the vacant artistic director jobs, arguing that there is no reason why the head of an institution has to be a director and not a writer. You have John Godber in Hull, and Alan Ayckbourn in Scarborough, but the rest are directors. So they thought they would apply as a joke, and as a way of popularizing their ideas.[34]

The Monsterists raise an important issue. Young people are not writing any more for big stages, where you have 900 people in front of you,

where you feel you're talking to a whole society. And the irony, of course, is that many of the young writers who want to be on big stages are not writing the plays that are big enough, because to get all those 900 people to come, you have to offer them some much more populist fare. Young writers want two incompatible things; they want to question populist form, and they want a popular audience. My challenge to them is: write the big plays. And that's what artistic directors are saying too.

As regards the fringe, what has happened after 20 years of Margaret Thatcher's influence is that British theatre has become commercial from top to bottom. At the top, you have the major subsidized institutions and the major commercial houses, then in the middle there's the regional and reasonably well-subsidized off-West End theatres, and at the bottom there is what used to be the fringe, which now just means they don't have any subsidy. In other words, there is no such thing as 'alternative' theatre. What used to be a rebellious teenager is now an impecunious old uncle. People go and work on the fringe when they haven't got any money and when they're starting their careers, but the minute they do anything that's any good, they just move up the ladder. So can the fringe be reinvented? It's certainly time it was. For example, the fringe in London arose because people in the early 1970s realized that pubs had upstairs rooms that were rarely used and landlords were happy to rent them as theatre spaces. Nowadays, however, they are in crisis, because landlords want them to be successful so they can sell more beer, which means there's very little experimentation, very little that is alternative. Where can something new come from? Tom Morris, who used to be Artistic Director at the Battersea Arts Centre and is now an Associate at the National, says that there are lots of empty properties all around London. When the rave scene started, young people used to squat buildings to hold illegal parties. Why not squat these kinds of spaces and create a new theatre just for themselves? That would be an illegal alternative to what we have at the moment. Perhaps, but it is certainly not happening yet. In other parts of Europe, in Portugal for example, there have been various examples of squats in Lisbon that put on shows. But I really don't know what the future of British new writing is. More money than ever is now available, but if theatre doesn't discover a new Sarah Kane or a new Mark Ravenhill, will that funding be cut back? Who knows? The future is where it should be – both in our hands, and out of our control.

Notes

1. A. Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber, 2001), p. 233.
2. D. Rebellato, *1956 and All That: The Making of Modern British Drama* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999). See also A. Sierz, 'John Osborne and the Myth of Anger', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 12, 46 (May 1996), pp. 136–46.
3. Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p. xi.
4. See D. Shellard, *British Theatre since the War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) and *Kenneth Tynan: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). Shellard is also the editor of *British Theatre in the 1950s* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).
5. In addition to *A Taste of Honey* (1958), Delaney wrote *The Lion in Love* (1960). Since then, she has written a collection of short stories, *Sweetly Sings the Donkey* (1963), several television and radio plays, and film scripts such as *Dance with a Stranger* (1985).
6. *Blasted*, directed by James Macdonald, opened at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 12 January 1995. *Phaedra's Love* was first performed at the Gate Theatre on 15 May 1996, directed by Kane herself.
7. A. Sierz, 'Cool Britannia? "In-Yer-Face" Writing in the British Theatre Today', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 14, 56 (November 1998), pp. 324–33.
8. Kane used the label 'experiential' to describe Jeremy Weller's *Mad* at the Edinburgh Festival in 1992, a play performed by both professional and non-professional actors who all had some experience of mental illness. She claimed that was the kind of theatre she wanted to write, and argued that the critics' outrage at *Blasted* was due to the play's experiential rather than speculative nature. See Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, pp. 92 and 98.
9. *Mother Clap's Molly House*, directed by Nicholas Hytner, was first performed at the Lyttelton, National Theatre, on 24 August 2001.
10. *Beautiful Thing* was first performed at the Bush Theatre on 28 July 1993, directed by Hettie Macdonald. *My Night with Reg*, directed by Roger Michell, was premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 31 March 1994. *Kindertransport*, directed by Abigail Morris, was first produced by the Soho Theatre Company at the Cockpit Theatre on 13 April 1993.
11. *Dogs Barking* premiered at the Bush on 5 May 1999, directed by Mike Bradwell. *Stitching*, directed by Neilson himself, premiered at the Traverse Theatre (Edinburgh) on 1 August 2002.
12. *Killer Joe*, directed by Wilson Milam, was staged at the Next Theater (Chicago) in 1993. Milam also directed the first British production of the play which premiered on 11 July 1994 at the Traverse (Edinburgh).
13. *Attempts on her Life* premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs at the Ambassadors on 7 March 1997, directed by Tim Albery. *The Country*, directed by Katie Mitchell, was first performed at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 11 May 2000. Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* opened posthumously at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs on 23 June 2000, directed by James Macdonald.
14. tucker green's first play, *Dirty Butterfly*, was premiered at the Soho Theatre on 26 February 2003, directed by Rufus Norris; *Born Bad* was directed by Kathy Burke and it opened at the Hampstead Theatre on 29 April 2003.

Her *Trade*, directed by Sacha Wares, was first presented as a development project at the Royal Shakespeare Company's first New Work Festival in October 2004. Following a transfer to the Soho in March 2005, it opened at the Swan Theatre (Stratford-upon-Avon) on 25 October 2005 as part of the Royal Shakespeare Company's second New Work Festival. tucker green's *Stoning Mary* was first performed at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 1 April 2005, directed by Marianne Elliott. Her latest play, *Generations*, opened at the Young Vic Theatre on 27 February 2007, directed by Sacha Wares.

15. Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p. 5.
16. Kane made this statement in her interview with Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge in their *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting* (London: Methuen, 1997), p. 133.
17. *Gagarin Way*, directed by John Tiffany, premiered at the Traverse (Edinburgh) on 1 August 2001. Irvine Welsh's 1993 cult novel *Trainspotting* was turned into a stage play by Harry Gibson in 1994 and then into a film directed by Danny Boyle in 1995. Gibson's stage version, directed by Ian Brown, opened on 4 May 1994 at the Citizens' Theatre (Glasgow).
18. Mark Ravenhill, 'A Touch of Evil' (*Guardian*, 22 March 2003) and Naomi Wallace, 'Strange Times' (*Guardian*, 29 March 2003). Ravenhill's and Wallace's articles form part of a series of 13 essays on political theatre published in the *Guardian* from January to May 2003. The series included articles by, among others, Michael Billington (9 January), Arnold Wesker (15 March), Gregory Burke (12 April), David Edgar (19 April), Pam Gems (17 May) and David Hare (24 May).
19. Like the 1995 premiere, the Royal Court revival of *Blasted* was directed by James Macdonald, and opened at the Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 29 March 2001 during the Sarah Kane Season which the Court programmed two years after Kane's death on 20 February 1999. In addition to *Blasted*, the season included revivals of the first productions of *Crave* (1998) and *4.48 Psychosis* (2000), and platform performances of *Phaedra's Love* (1996) and *Cleansed* (1998). Kenny Miller directed the Scottish revival of the play at the Citizens' (Glasgow); it premiered on 7 March 2002.
20. Two professional productions of Kane's *Phaedra's Love* and *Cleansed* opened in Autumn 2005. *Phaedra's Love*, directed by Anne Tipton, was first performed at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre on 24 October and transferred to the Barbican Pit on 16 November. *Cleansed*, directed by Sean Holmes, premiered at the Arcola Theatre on 2 November. In Spring 2006, Graeae Theatre Company produced a national tour of Kane's *Blasted*. Graeae's *Blasted* opened in London at the Soho on 16 January 2007.
21. *Penetrator*, directed by Neilson himself, was first performed at the Traverse (Edinburgh) on 12 August 1993. It transferred to the Finborough Theatre later that year, and to the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 12 January 1994. *Shopping and Fucking* premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs at the Ambassadors on 26 September 1996, directed by Max Stafford-Clark.
22. S. Kane, *Complete Plays: Blasted, Phaedra's Love, Cleansed, Crave, 4.48 Psychosis, Skin* (London: Methuen, 2001), p. 3.
23. Dominic Dromgoole was Artistic Director at the Bush from 1990 to 1996, where he led an active policy of promoting new writing. His successor Mike Bradwell edited *The Bush Theatre Book* (London: Methuen, 1997), a

celebration of 25 years of new writing at the Bush. Dromgoole's own *The Full Room: An A-Z of Contemporary Playwriting* (London: Methuen, 2000) is a highly personal overview of new writing. He subsequently became New Plays Director at the Old Vic Theatre for a short time, and went on to run the Oxford Stage Company for seven years. In May 2005, his appointment as the second Artistic Director of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre was announced.

24. Stephen Daldry became the Royal Court's Artistic Director in 1993; Graham Whybrow joined the Court in 1994.
25. Ian Brown was Artistic Director at the Traverse from 1988 to 1996. During his tenure he led a policy of promoting new Scottish work and importing the best international new writing. He worked as a freelance director until 2001, when he was appointed Associate Artistic Director at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in York. In 2002, he became Artistic Director at the same theatre.
26. The Soho's new home at 21 Dean Street opened on 14 March 2000.
27. *Dead Funny* premiered at the Hampstead on 2 February 1994, directed by the author himself. Jenny Topper became the Hampstead's first woman Artistic Director in Autumn 1988. She left in July 2003, after leading the building of the new £16 million theatre on Eton Avenue, which opened in February 2003. Topper was succeeded by Anthony Clark.
28. Marber's first play, *Dealer's Choice*, was developed at the National Theatre Studio from November 1993 to December 1994. The play, directed by Marber himself, opened at the Cottesloe, National Theatre, on 9 February 1995. *Closer*, Marber's second play, opened at the Cottesloe on 22 May 1997, directed by the author himself. It transferred to the larger Lyttelton stage at the National on 16 October 1997 and to the Lyric Theatre on 31 March 1998.
29. *The Pitchfork Disney* premiered at the Bush on 2 January 1991, directed by Matthew Lloyd.
30. McPherson's *The Weir*, directed by Ian Rickson, premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs at the Ambassadors on 4 July 1997 and transferred to the Royal Court's main stage at the Duke of York's Theatre on 18 February 1998.
31. *Further Than the Furthest Thing*, directed by Irina Brown, premiered at the Traverse (Edinburgh) on 6 August 2000. *Bedbound* was first performed at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs on 10 January 2002, directed by the author himself. *The Night Heron*, directed by Ian Rickson, opened at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 11 April 2002.
32. Hytner (opening season April 2003) replaced Trevor Nunn, while Boyd (opening season January 2003) took over from Adrian Noble, Attenborough (opening season May 2003) from Ian McDiarmid and Jonathan Kent, and Grandage (opening season December 2002) from Sam Mendes.
33. A. Sierz, '"In-Yer-Face" in Bristol', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 19, 1 (February 2003), pp. 90–1. The Conference was held at the University of the West of England, Bristol, 6–7 September 2002.
34. John Godber has been Artistic Director of Hull Truck Theatre Company since 1994. Alan Ayckbourn became Artistic Director of the Stephen Joseph Theatre-in-the-Round in Scarborough in 1971. For more information on the Monsterists, and to read their Manifesto, see http://www.monsterists.com.

Part IV
Academics

Dan Rebellato

Mireia Aragay and Pilar Zozaya

Dan Rebellato is Professor of Contemporary Theatre at Royal Holloway, University of London. He is the author of *1956 and All That: The Making of Modern British Drama* (1999), which challenges the dominant conception of the role played by 1950s drama in twentieth-century British theatre history. He has published widely on contemporary British playwrights, and is currently completing a book on British drama since the late 1970s, *British Drama and Globalization*. His next major research project will be a new book on naturalist theatre. Rebellato is also a playwright and his work has been performed in Berlin and London, fringe and West End, at the National Theatre, Soho Theatre, Young Vic Theatre, and on BBC Radio. The interview that follows was conducted in London on 3 July 2003.

Constantly a parallelism is made between the 1950s New Wave headed by John Osborne's Look Back in Anger *and the 1990s renaissance in new writing. Do you think the parallelism holds?*

Yes and no. The moment around *Blasted* and *Shopping and Fucking* is considered to be a big renaissance in British theatre writing, and that's like the *Look Back in Anger* moment in the sense that because people talked about *Blasted* and *Shopping and Fucking* and the plays that came after, there was a shadow thrown over the previous ten years, so people have stopped being interested at all in what happened in the 1980s and early 1990s.[1] There are a few very interesting playwrights from the pre-Sarah Kane period, such as Philip Ridley, Robert Holman or Chris Hannan, who are now totally obscure because the attention is so much on what Aleks Sierz calls 'in-yer-face' theatre.[2] However, you can't understand Osborne, Pinter, or quite a few of those playwrights at all

if you don't understand their links with the theatre before the 1950s. I think the same applies to the 1990s.

In 1956 and All That, *when writing about the politics of Anger, you argue that many of the plays written in the 1950s, in the context of the climate of disenchantment with the Labour Party, 'pour scorn on the potentiality of collective action in favour of a retreat into the self'.*[3] *Would you make a similar point as regards the politics of 1990s drama?*

That's an extraordinarily interesting question and very difficult to answer. After 1979, when Thatcher was first elected, the Left in Britain was decimated in ten years. Socialism is not a word in Britain any more. In the 1970s, there was a whole wave of very clearly revolutionary socialist playwrights, such as Howard Brenton and Trevor Griffiths. They had faith in the future and they wrote socialist plays based on the idea that there was going to be a revolution. What has actually happened is a right-wing revolution, and those playwrights have changed radically. Howard Brenton now writes for television; David Hare has moved into bourgeois theatre territory; Trevor Griffiths stopped writing; Edward Bond turned utterly apocalyptic. Compared to the situation in the 1980s, the 1950s playwrights were very pro collective action. In the 1980s, the collapse of the Soviet Union was perceived – in my view, wrongly perceived – as the final destruction of Marxism. The unions also collapsed, and added to that, we had a culture that by diminishing the state sector, by opening everything up to competition, by opening up the borders to international financial movements, fostered a very consumerist society. So we move from the 1970s, when people had a very clear sense of being producers, of being workers, which is a very collective activity, through the 1980s to a consumer identity that affects everything – contracts, working conditions, the way people think about themselves, the rise of popular psychology, therapy culture, and self-help books, the hugely popular idea that everything that's wrong in your life is your own fault. All that creates a massively individualistic culture where the possibility of collective action is out of fashion and the idea of having a different kind of society is also enormously distant. That obviously cuts the ground away from the tradition of left-wing theatre. To actually understand how playwrights have responded to this, you have to face that fact and recognize that the meaning of politics has changed.

My argument is that you certainly have a utopian trend in the plays of the 1990s. I'm referring to moments such as that in *Shopping and*

Fucking when Robbie has given away all the ecstasy tablets, has taken some himself, and he imagines himself lifting up above, looking down. He says, 'Fuck Money. Fuck it. This selling. This buying. This system. Fuck the bitching world and let's be . . . beautiful. Beautiful. And happy'.[4] That would be a good example of the language of utopia – let's get rid of this world, let's create another. There are a lot of those motifs in the plays of the 1990s, which on their own would just be foolish, but what you also find is a move back to a conception of aesthetic experience. The plays, particularly Sarah Kane's, David Greig's, or Martin Crimp's, are very interested in giving people intensely aesthetic experiences that overwhelm their realistic structures. My feeling is these writers have an intuition that aesthetic experience is perhaps the last remaining ground of collective universal sensations.

Mark Ravenhill has recently argued 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. He feels that maybe it is time to 'cut loose from the social, the material, the political . . . to embrace the mysterious, the ambiguous', the metaphysical.[5] *How do you feel about this view?*

I'm sure he's right. I'd connect that with my argument about the aesthetic. Theodor Adorno, whose work has been very unfashionable for quite a long time and now is suddenly rather interesting again, always said that naturalism or realism underpin the structures of the world, whereas formal experimentation, mystery and fragmentation shatter the world and allow you to see through the gaps.[6] That's what I would say is most interesting in the playwrights and plays of the last ten years, whereas Roy Williams's *Fallout*, which is now on at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs, undoubtedly deals with an important issue, race relations in inner London, but it does not necessarily move me, in the sense that I thought exactly the same things when I went in as when I came out.[7] The most interesting moments in Ravenhill's plays are those that really start you thinking, and they are often not realistic. It's tiny things, like the naming of the young male characters in *Shopping and Fucking* – Robbie, Mark and Gary – after members of the Manchester band Take That. That's just one detail, but when you notice it, you realize it's no longer sheerly realistic. Or the lifting up episode I mentioned earlier, which just bursts out of the play and takes you to a different kind of world. And then there's the moment in *Some Explicit Polaroids* where Nick, the ex-kidnapper, and Jonathan, the George Soros figure, the head of the foundation, meet and they have, totally against

conventional expectations, a conversation about class war, which just takes you to a different dimension.[8] To say it lifts you up is a way of describing that feeling of aesthetic experience, when you're lifted above yourself. If we could name it properly, it's the feature that explains why the plays are *not* celebrations of the lifestyle of the characters. Most of the critics completely missed those beautiful moments that give you a sense of the limitations of the characters' lives.

Wouldn't you say that this is a form of escapism – that our reality is so horrible that we need to invent this kind of utopia?

Yes, but that's not necessarily a bad or apolitical thing. Escapism is a whisk to something from something. Bad escapism doesn't acknowledge what you're escaping from; you just have a nice world, but there is no sense of why it would be desirable compared to our world. Ravenhill shows this awful world and then gives you moments of escape. They are utopian rather than revolutionary; revolution, which is utopian itself, seems distant, impossible and, probably, not desirable. But Ravenhill's utopian moments confirm a desire for a perfect or a better world.

We would like to continue exploring connections between the 1950s and the 1990s by asking you about the representation of homosexuality and sexuality generally. You argue in 1956 and All That *that in the mid-1950s, there was a bid to represent homosexuality openly and honestly, but only in order to create 'a limited economy in which homosexuality was drained of much of its subversiveness, of its queerness, in fact, of its theatricality'.*[9] *Could you comment on the politics of the representation of homosexuality, or sexuality generally, in 1990s drama?*

There's a certain amount of that still going on. A playwright like Jonathan Harvey, who did *Beautiful Thing*, writes feel-good plays.[10] You go in, you see an adorable comedy, and come out feeling warm. Which is fine; and he's very good at that. In contrast, Kevin Elyot's plays tend to be just a little bit darker. He's not as afraid of the emotional pain of the characters, and death is always there. Having said that, *My Night with Reg* became very cosy; it went to the West End, it had a fairly starry cast and it ended up seeming like a light comedy, even if undoubtedly it's formally very interesting.[11]

The key to the difference between the 1950s and the 1990s lies, I believe, in the Sexual Offences Act of 1967, the act that decriminalized homosexuality between consenting adults over the age of 21, and that, as I say in the book, actually led to a rise in arrests because it clarified

the law and made public displays of homosexual behaviour illegal.[12] I might also add, there is a new Sexual Offences Bill passing through Parliament right now and they are having exactly the same problems of dividing the private from the public.[13] The gay community that emerged partly as a result of legalization has always been very split. There's a political side that sees homosexuality as not just complementary to heterosexuality, but actually as radically different and opposed. Then you have a very conservative side, which sees economics as the means to sexual liberation, that the market will empower gay couples; they talk about 'dinkies' – Double the Income No Kids. These people very often are quite anti-political. In terms of theatre, a playwright like Jonathan Harvey writes plays which are very much about acceptance, about the view that homosexuals are just like everyone else. They are commercial plays. Whereas Mark Ravenhill's plays, or those of other writers, are in many ways very anti-gay. If you call the acceptance model 'gay', and the political model 'queer', Ravenhill's plays are very much against the commercialization of sex, against a very conservative culture that's based purely around sexual pleasure and excludes any kind of political concern. They are not homophobic, but they're very much opposed to a certain kind of mainstream view within the gay community. I would describe them as 'queer', and I think he would as well.

As regards the second part of the question, the point is that sexuality never gets a good press in British theatre. David Greig, who went to see *Peribanez*, by Lope de Vega, which was done at the Young Vic recently, was saying that it was extraordinary, that he hadn't seen for years love and erotic affection treated as happily and movingly as that.[14] In England, if it is sex, it has to be rape, degradation, money, power. I don't know why, but undoubtedly the forces behind it go back centuries rather than just decades. Nonetheless, it's got worse since the 1990s; 'in-yer-face' theatre went along with that, rather than challenging it.

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

I'm not quite sure. It's been argued that the new generation of playwrights were 'Thatcher's children', that they were reacting against the context in which they were brought up. The reason why I don't find that explanation very plausible is that people were reacting against Thatcher throughout the 1980s. In my view, you have to explain why it took that form rather than necessarily why there was a renaissance as such. There are many partially unsatisfactory explanations. The experience of

growing up under Thatcher – I suppose I'm the same age as most of these playwrights – was deeply depressing. I was eleven in 1979, so in a sense Thatcher is almost my first political memory. I spent my entire teenage years under Thatcher. She kept being reelected, and decimating industry all around the country, while she remained extraordinarily popular in the meantime. I think a lot of people my age can vividly remember the moment when she stepped down. She was replaced by John Major, whose government was extremely incompetent. Every day they did something really stupid, so there was a sense of liberation, of cracks in the armour. Although he got reelected in April 1992, six months later there was the crisis in the Exchange Rate Mechanism that was tying European currencies together, prior to the full adoption of the euro – elsewhere in Europe, I should say. Britain fell out of that, and instantly the Conservatives' reputation for being good with the economy just went. They never recovered from that day; they've never even done well in the polls. They struggled for five years, and there was always a sense that change was clearly possible. So that was one thing.

The other factor is the beginning of anti-globalization protest; the beginning of thinking that some kind of oppositional, maybe left-wing movement might be possible. The anti-globalization movement does offer an image of collective action. Mark Ravenhill, even though maybe he didn't know at the time of *Shopping and Fucking*, was looking for where the left was; that's what *Some Explicit Polaroids* is obviously about, where has the left gone? And the third cause, which is probably one of the most important, is the Yugoslavia civil war. It was a very jarring ethical appeal. In my view, the philosophical counterpart to what the 1980s were socially is postmodernism – the concept that we have no necessary connections with each other, that there is no absolute truth, and so on. And then you have genocide happening an hour-and-a-half plane ride away, which made a lot of people realize you couldn't any longer say you didn't know what was happening. You hit the bottom politically, and you need to make some kind of commitment. That got people thinking about ethics, about the bottom line of what is right or wrong. That's what *Blasted* is about. So there are the three factors; I don't think that we may adopt one single explanation.

There is also a generational component. The 1970s playwrights were succeeded by a new generation of writers who did not have the same single focus – as identity politics splintered into various factions, each with its own playwriting agenda, it seemed more difficult to identify clear patterns. I should say, this is not a bad thing, but it did mean that

other forms of performance, like live art, started getting more attention. Playwrights, for a while, seemed not to be interesting.

What role did the new writing venues in London – the Royal Court, the Bush Theatre, the Soho Theatre, the National Theatre Studio or the Hampstead Theatre – play in the 1990s?

Huge! That's where it happened. The Royal Court, obviously, with Stephen Daldry and Ian Rickson, championed many of the new playwrights.[15] The Bush picked up Joe Penhall after the Royal Court lost interest in him, and they also supported Sarah Kane, who worked there as a script reader. The Bush has a profile of being quite cosy and naturalistic, not exactly issue-based, but rather domestic and small scale. Yet they are very good. The Soho was closed for quite a time while the new building in Dean Street was being refurbished.[16] At the moment, I don't get much the sense that they have a particular kind of approach. Hampstead are trying something new. They used to be a bit irrelevant to the new writing scene; it was as if they always hoped that their plays would go on in the West End. But now, in the wonderful new building, they're trying something new. They've had a rocky start but it's interesting work.[17] debbie tucker green, a new playwright to watch, has written two stage plays so far – the second one, *Born Bad*, was put on at the Hampstead in April 2003.[18] She writes like Sarah Kane, but with Caribbean speech rhythms; her plays are very fragmented, very poetic, with that undercurrent of pain you find in Kane's work. It's the kind of play you'd never have expected to see at the Hampstead before they opened the new building. The National Studio played a massive role; they supported most of these playwrights in some way. Most of Patrick Marber's plays opened there; Joe Penhall worked there; David Greig had commissions from them. The National itself has put on interesting plays, such as Patrick Marber's *Closer* and Joe Penhall's *Blue/Orange*, though it has a very broad spread of work.[19] Now the National, like many other London theatres, has a new Artistic Director, Nicholas Hytner. He is wonderful; he has already made a big impact. He says he is looking for 'big plays'. If he is telling the truth about what he wants, and there are writers who can do that, that may make a big difference.[20]

Aleks Sierz has repeatedly claimed that writing and the writer are central to the theatrical process. In that connection, what would you say the trend has been at the Royal Court since the early 1990s? Is the dramatist's point of view still central or has that changed?

It's still central. Stephen Daldry brought in people who weren't writers. Both the physical theatre company DV8 and Neil Bartlett did work at the Court in the mid-1990s. And they used to have performance art seasons sponsored by Barclays Bank.[21] But that faded, and now it's centred on writers again. My feeling is that the Royal Court seems to be in a real flop at the moment. I don't know anyone who's been excited by the Royal Court for a couple of years – there seems to be no vision, so that the building is drifting at the moment.

You claim in your book that in the 1950s, the Royal Court and the New Wave were tremendously insular, systematically excluding French drama and any kind of poetic, symbolic, non-naturalistic plays. Would you describe the Royal Court's policy as regards new writing in the 1990s in similar terms?

Yes, probably. The Royal Court is a big institution, it's got quite a lot of people working for it, and so different things happen all the time. Under Stephen Daldry it became much more open. As I was saying, they were very interested in physical theatre; they changed the architecture of the stage space quite a lot. Under their international programme, they did a Spanish season in 1997; a German season in 1999; a Russian season in 2001 and again in 2002, and so on. And they do occasionally, very rarely, put on a foreign play – for example, Jon Fosse's *Nightsongs* opened in February 2002.[22] But that's a rarity. Particularly over the last couple of years their scope has narrowed dramatically. It's not even just England, it's very small areas of London that they're interested in. Of course, there are exceptions; Caryl Churchill is a case in point, but Caryl Churchill is just Caryl Churchill. If she wants to have a play at the Royal Court, she can have it; I don't think that policy has anything to do with it. That's where it gets complicated. Martin Crimp is supported by the Royal Court, but he looks very odd there, as the policy is so much about disaffected, unemployed, drug-using young people in inner cities. That describes almost every play for the last few years. I think that's fairly insular.

Playwrights like Greig, Kane or Crimp are very influenced by certain French dramatists. Mark Ravenhill translated *Une envie de tuer sur le bout de la langue* by the French playwright Durringer;[23] Sarah Kane's plays were deeply influenced by Howard Barker, who is a very European sort of playwright – he hardly ever gets done here at all. David Greig, who has just translated *Caligula* by Camus, wrote an article in the *Guardian* about why British drama should be more French.[24] Sarah Kane was strongly supported by the Court; David Greig was never really supported by the

Court. Overall, I'd say that the Court tends to favour a British kind of naturalism.

Is there a playwright, one in particular, that you would consider to be the Court's archetypal figure for the 1990s?

That's difficult. I would say Sarah Kane, as *Blasted* had something close to the *Look Back in Anger* effect, but actually nobody else, except debbie tucker green now, really writes like that. At the Royal Court there's not much work like that; it's rather accidental. In fact, *Blasted* was almost accidental. Half of the Artistic Committee at the Royal Court didn't want *Blasted* on. One of the reasons why it created that commotion was that it was put on in January, which is a quiet month for London theatre, so that a few theatre critics made a really big splash out of it and caused a sensation. Mark Ravenhill is more typical of the Royal Court; I mean no disrespect to him by saying that. Also, the 1990s covers quite a range, and the work the Court were doing in the first five years of the decade is very different from the work they were doing in the last five years. Martin Crimp has done work for the Court for the last ten years so, in a sense, he would be an ideal candidate, but he is not typical. Caryl Churchill is also very much on her own. Roy Williams, on the other hand, is very typical of the majority of the work they do now. So ultimately I'd probably say, Mark Ravenhill.

Could you comment on the way the Royal Court's Sloane Square building has been refurbished?[25]

Before the conversion, the Royal Court was very shabby and cramped. They deliberately redesigned it in a way that wouldn't rub out the history. So, for instance, the brick walls in the bar downstairs were exposed. As regards the auditorium, it looks very different from a place such as the Cottesloe. That has to do with different fashions in British theatre making. The Cottesloe emerged in the mid-1970s, when the ideal sort of theatre was supposed to be a black box; the idea was that you start with a blank canvas and everything is new. Since then, there's been a move towards thinking there's never such a thing as a blank canvas; there's always history and it's much better to be honest about that. For example, in the Almeida Theatre the signature is that brick wall that you can always see at the back of the theatre. Or what they call 'found spaces', places that used to be an engine room, or a tram shed – like the Tramway in Glasgow, where Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* was put on.[26] It's actually much more than fashion; it's about admitting the history.

How do you, as a critic, recall the explosion of new writing in the 1990s? Watching plays like Kane's Blasted, *Ravenhill's* Shopping and Fucking, *Penhall's* Some Voices *and Butterworth's* Mojo*?*

That's a very interesting question. I saw *Blasted* about two weeks into the run. I hadn't booked actually, which is very weird; it had those huge, flamboyant front pages in some newspapers about it, but I just turned up one matinee, on a Saturday, and got a ticket. I went because everyone was talking about it, so I thought I ought to see it. I was stunned! It was totally different; it was very clear I was not watching the same thing most critics were watching. First of all, it was extraordinarily accomplished. Kane was somebody who understood what it means when somebody knocks on a door, crosses a room, whether they are standing or sitting, how important theatrically that is. It's a lesson going back to Harold Pinter, the guru, which she just used there. The centre of the stage is a kind of a battlefield. I don't just mean that literally in terms of the play, but rather the way she very clearly choreographs the conflict between the characters in terms of space, which is extremely theatrical. Something else nobody talked about at the time was that we really laughed quite a lot. For instance, at the very end of the play, appalling things happen to Ian – he's been raped and humiliated, he eats a baby, he buries himself under the floor, in the dark. But when the roof starts leaking and he goes 'Shit', the actor, Pip Donaghy, rolled his eyes back and there was this huge laugh.[27] Kane knew we don't like seeing scenes like this, so she gives us a ridiculous episode, a shout of laughter at the end of all that. I came out thinking she was somebody who clearly understood the theatre.

Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* was interesting because I took a class of students and they all sat there refusing to be shocked by it; they were being sophisticated. But there is a point when Gary is being sodomized by Mark, and he starts having a fantasy about Mark being his father – he says, 'Are you my dad? . . . Yes. You're my dad'.[28] Still my students were unshocked. Mark gets angry and smashes Gary's head on the table. Max Stafford-Clark directed that moment rather brilliantly, through misdirection. That brought a huge gasp of shock from everyone, including my unshockable students. Again, I'd seen the reviews beforehand and they all said it was a play about trendy young people; but what interested me were the running motifs and the way they were brought together through a metaphorical structure. I thought I was in the middle of quite a rich, sophisticated piece. Joe Penhall's *Some Voices* was the play that launched him, but *Pale Horse* is, in my view, a much more

interesting play.[29] It's also much bleaker. It's a play about the nature of our ethical commitments – can we really face the idea that there is no God? I found that a very exciting, haunting experience. I didn't see Butterworth's *Mojo* in the first run; I saw it when it was revived in the Royal Court's West End home.[30] I recognized the language and the motifs; it's a very funny, witty play, but to me it was too Tarantino-like. But that's probably unusual; I know lots of people who went on the first night and they always say they had a real sense that something very special was happening.

Finally, could you comment on some of the labels that have been used to refer to 1990s drama – 'in-yer-face', 'new brutalism', 'experiential' theatre, 'Neo Jacobeanism'?

'Neo Jacobeanism' has been around much longer; it was first used to describe the 1970s playwrights – Howard Brenton, for example. None of the other labels has actually caught on except 'in-yer-face'. This is the one people talk about because of Aleks Sierz's book. What I feel about it is that it tends to stress one aspect of those playwrights to the exclusion of the others. To some extent that's helpful, because it gives people a sense that this is a body of work that should be looked at together. However, it detracts from the gentler, the poetic, the metaphysical, the aesthetic, the ethical dimensions of these playwrights' work and it focuses attention excessively on the sex and the violence, on the immediacy of it. But Sierz's book is a really valuable mine of information. As he knows, he's going to be attacked for his book for twenty or thirty years; it has become a classic. It's actually very similar to what happened with John Russell Taylor's *Anger and After*.[31] Like Sierz's book, *Anger and After* has got interviews, gossip, anecdotes, lots of analysis, and nobody thinks it is the last word on the plays of the 1950s – probably the same applies to *In-Yer-Face Theatre*.

Notes

1. *Blasted*, directed by James Macdonald, opened on 12 January 1995 at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs. *Shopping and Fucking* was directed by Max Stafford-Clark and opened on 26 September 1996 at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs at the Ambassadors.
2. The label 'in-yer-face' theatre, although contested, is often used to refer to avantgarde 1990s new writing, following Aleks Sierz's *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber, 2001).

3. D. Rebellato, *1956 and All That: The Making of Modern British Drama* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 16.
4. M. Ravenhill, *Plays: 1 (Shopping and Fucking, Faust is Dead, Handbag, Some Explicit Polaroids)* (London: Methuen, 2001), p. 39.
5. M. Ravenhill, 'A Touch of Evil', *Guardian*, 22 March 2003. Ravenhill's piece forms part of a series of 13 essays on political theatre published in the *Guardian* from January to May 2003. The series included articles by, among others, Michael Billington (9 January), Arnold Wesker (15 March), Naomi Wallace (29 March), Gregory Burke (12 April), David Edgar (19 April), Pam Gems (17 May) and David Hare (24 May).
6. See Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990 (1966)) and *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996 (1970)).
7. *Fallout*, directed by Ian Rickson, opened on 12 June 2003.
8. *Some Explicit Polaroids*, directed by Max Stafford-Clark, opened at the Theatre Royal (Bury St Edmunds) on 30 September 1999.
9. Rebellato, *1956 and All That*, pp. 222–3.
10. *Beautiful Thing*, directed by Hettie Macdonald, opened at the Bush Theatre on 28 July 1993.
11. *My Night with Reg* premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 31 March 1994 directed by Roger Michell. It became the first play ever to transfer from the Theatre Upstairs straight to the West End, first at the Criterion Theatre (opening on 15 November 1994) and subsequently at the Playhouse Theatre (opening on 27 June 1995). In 1996, it was turned into a film by the BBC, scripted by Elyot himself and with the same director and cast as the Royal Court production.
12. Rebellato, *1956 and All That*, pp. 200–8.
13. The Sexual Offences Act 2003 came into force on 1 May 2004. It repealed previous legislation according to which homosexual acts were considered to be sexual offences and labelled as 'gross indecency' or 'buggery'. The Act also established that such terms were to be deleted from the statutes.
14. *Peribanez*, translated by Tanya Ronder and directed by Rufus Norris, opened at the Young Vic Theatre on 2 May 2003.
15. Stephen Daldry became the Court's Artistic Director in 1993; Ian Rickson took over in 1998.
16. The Soho Theatre's new home at 21 Dean Street opened on 14 March 2000.
17. The new Hampstead Theatre on Eton Avenue is the first new stand-alone producing theatre to be built in London since the National Theatre opened in 1976. It officially opened its doors on 13 February 2003. The Hampstead's Artistic Director Jenny Topper left in July 2003, after leading the building of the new £16 million theatre, and was succeeded by Anthony Clark.
18. tucker green's first play, *Dirty Butterfly*, directed by Rufus Norris, premiered at the Soho on 26 February 2003. Her second play, *Born Bad*, was directed by Kathy Burke and it opened on 29 April 2003. Her *Trade*, directed by Sacha Wares, was first presented as a development project at the Royal Shakespeare Company's first New Work Festival in October 2004. Following a transfer to the Soho in March 2005, it opened at the Swan Theatre (Stratford-upon-Avon) on 25 October 2005 as part of the Royal Shakespeare Company's second New Work Festival. tucker green's *Stoning Mary* was first

Performed at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 1 April 2005, directed by Marianne Elliott. Her latest play, *Generations*, opened at the Young Vic Theatre on 27 February 2007, directed by Sacha Wares.

19. *Closer*, directed by Marber himself, was first performed on 22 May 1997. *Blue/Orange*, directed by Roger Michell, was first performed on 7 April 2000. Both plays were staged at the Cottesloe, National Theatre.
20. Hytner (opening season April 2003) took over from Trevor Nunn.
21. Daldry's first season as Artistic Director in 1993 included *MSM*, devised by DV8 and directed by Lloyd Newson, and *Night after Night*, written and directed by Neil Bartlett. DV8 (Dance and Video 8) Physical Theatre was formed in 1986 by an independent collective of dancers. The company has produced 15 dance pieces, which have toured internationally, and four award-winning films for television. Led by Lloyd Newson, the company aims to challenge the boundaries of both modern and classical dance. As regards Neil Bartlett, see his interview with Enric Monforte in this volume. The Barclays New Stages scheme operated from 1993 to 1996, and it led to four seasons of performance art being staged at the Royal Court.
22. Jon Fosse is a Norwegian poet, novelist and playwright. *Nightsongs* was directed by Katie Mitchell and first staged at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 21 February 2002. In addition, a rehearsed reading of Fosse's *The Name* took place at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs as part of the season International Playwrights: New Plays from the Nordic Countries in December 2002.
23. Xavier Durringer writes for theatre and cinema. He directs the company La Lézarde. Ravenhill translated Durringer's play as *A Desire to Kill on the Tip of the Tongue*. The translation is available in D. Bradby (ed.), *New French Plays: Frontline Drama 6* (London: Methuen, 2000).
24. D. Greig, 'A Tyrant for All Time', *Guardian*, 28 April 2003.
25. The Royal Court's Sloane Square building closed in late August 1996 for refurbishment, and did not reopen until February 2000. During this period the Theatre Downstairs was housed in the Duke of York's Theatre, while the Theatre Upstairs went to the Ambassadors Theatre, which was divided into two spaces.
26. Tramway opened in 1988 as a result of the search for a venue to house the only performance of Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* in Britain.
27. S. Kane, *Complete Plays: Blasted, Phaedra's Love, Cleansed, Crave, 4.48 Psychosis, Skin* (London: Methuen, 2001), p. 60.
28. Ravenhill, *Plays: 1*, p. 83.
29. *Some Voices* opened on 15 September 1994. *Pale Horse* was first performed on 12 October 1995. Both plays were directed by Ian Rickson and staged at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs.
30. *Mojo* was first staged at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs on 14 July 1995, under the direction of Ian Rickson. It was the Royal Court's first production at the Duke of York's, where it opened on 10 October 1996, also directed by Rickson.
31. J. R. Taylor, *Anger and After: A Guide to the New British Drama* (London: Methuen, 1962).

Graham Saunders

Hildegard Klein

Graham Saunders lectures in Theatre Studies at the University of Reading. He is the author of *'Love me or Kill me': Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (2002). He has written widely on contemporary British and Irish drama for *Contemporary Theatre Review, New Theatre Quarterly, Studies in Theatre and Performance, The Journal of Beckett Studies* and *Theatre Research International*. Saunders has coedited a collection of articles entitled *'Cool Britannia?' Political Theatre in 1990s British Drama* (2007). He is also writing a new volume on the work of Sarah Kane for the Faber series 'About . . . Playwrights and their Work' and another volume on Patrick Marber's *Closer* for Continuum's Modern Theatre Guides. The following interview took place in London on 30 January 2005.

Often a parallelism is made between the so-called 1990s renaissance in theatre writing and the 'revolution' that occurred in the 1950s, launched in 1956 by John Osborne's Look Back in Anger. *Do you share this view?*

Yes and no. One major difference between the series of plays that came out of *Look Back in Anger* and the mid-1990s plays, both pre- and post-*Blasted*, was that the plays of the 1950s, alongside the novel, engaged in an unsparing look at the state of England after the war. Their scope was more ambitious than many of the 1990s plays, set in small areas of London, such as Simon Bent's *Goldhawk Road* or Jez Butterworth's *Mojo*.[1] Others focused on particular issues such as schizophrenia in Joe Penhall's *Some Voices* and *Blue/Orange*, whereas earlier writers such as Arnold Wesker and Edward Bond were concerned with looking at history.[2] Wesker examined English political history from the 1930s in *Chicken Soup with Barley*, while Bond looked for the first time at an underclass that was emerging from the traditional working class that existed before the Second World War.

However, this parochial attitude of the young playwrights in the 1990s masked something that Aleks Sierz talks about in his book, namely the drama being a reaction to what it was to be British/English in the 1990s, and Britain's relationship to what had happened after the ideological apparatus of communism and socialism had crumbled away.[3] They were attempting an exercise that can be likened to raking amongst the embers by concentrating on the personal rather than engaging with history. Compare the younger generation's production with an older playwright such as David Edgar, who from the start of the decade with *The Shape of the Table* and *Pentecost* concerned himself with the state of Europe, both its recent present as well as past events that created its present.[4]

Commentators have pointed out the dearth of new writing for the stage at the beginning of the 1990s. This situation changed radically with the premiere of Sarah Kane's Blasted *in 1995.*[5] *What do you think were the causes of the renaissance in theatre?*

There were several. Possibly one of the things that links the group of playwrights in the 1990s is their attendance at university and the beginnings of new writing programmes in university drama departments, such as the Birmingham University MA run by David Edgar. There was also the change of Artistic Director at the Royal Court Theatre with Stephen Daldry coming in, and at the Bush Theatre with Dominic Dromgoole taking over. This manifested itself in new writers' seasons staged at the Royal Court and the Bush.[6] One of the other reasons is that new writing in television was becoming increasingly difficult with the decline of primetime slots such as 'Play for Today' and 'The Wednesday Play' on the BBC. It was easier to get work put on in the theatre.

You've pointed out that some critics, such as Richard Morrison, saw a connection between Look Back in Anger *and* Blasted.[7] *Is this connection well founded?*

I'm as guilty as anyone here. When I began writing I was looking for a way to introduce Kane's work and there was almost an element of serendipity about it. Osborne dies on Christmas Eve 1994 and *Blasted* makes its debut in January 1995. However, I don't think the plays are similar. Perhaps the only similarity between them is that the Royal Court didn't know that *Look Back in Anger* was going to be such an explosive play, nor did they anticipate the effect of *Blasted*.

However, *Blasted* is far more radical than *Look Back in Anger* in terms of its scope and themes. Although it may sound clichéd, I would stick

my neck out and say *Blasted* can claim to have universal qualities and a long-term reputation. Yet it didn't enter the national *Zeitgeist* in the way *Look Back in Anger* did. Claims have also been made that Sarah Kane and Judy Upton represented a new breed of 'angry young women' of the 1990s, a claim I'm dubious about. Granted, *Blasted* is an angry play: it begins with male rage directed at Cate and Ian's ex-wife, at his son and nationalities such as 'wogs' and 'Pakis', who are seen as England's enemies. Later, the play looks at another sort of anger – British neglect of distant conflicts. The strongest link between *Blasted* and *Look Back in Anger* is the fact that both belong to the pantheon of classic Royal Court plays born of controversy. *Blasted* reenergized the theatre in the 1990s when it had gone through a lean patch. Philip Roberts's book on the Royal Court charts very convincingly the problems of the late 1980s and early 1990s in finding a role and direction.[8]

How would you assess the part played by the Royal Court in the promotion of new writing in the 1990s, in comparison with other theatres such as the Bush, the Soho Theatre, and the National Theatre Studio?

The Soho has actually started to rival the Royal Court in finding new voices. However, we must not forget places such as the Birmingham Rep Studio Theatre, The Door, which has produced interesting, controversial work, including Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's *Behzti*.[9] The National Theatre was not so crucial during the 1990s, although its Studio space is starting to bear fruit.

The 'revolution' initiated by Osborne was followed by an explosion of new writing, referred to by John Russell Taylor as the 'two waves' of socialist playwrights.[10] *This tradition of left-wing theatre of the 1960s and 1970s seems to have been abandoned. What reasons account for this change?*

To my mind postmodernism has caused a third wave, one that is breaking on many disparate shores. But we can't think in terms of 'wave theory' anymore, and that causes a lot of problems to theatre historians who are looking for cohesive patterns. Sierz's contention that the events of 1989 in former communist states, the Civil War in Yugoslavia and the effects of Thatcherism played a dominant role in producing the rash of 'in-yer-face' plays is absolutely true. This questioning of received ideology is still key to understanding current British playwriting. Sierz attempts to produce a *group* of dramatists, and he catches the *Zeitgeist* of mid- to late 1990s drama brilliantly. Yet if we look at that book now,

we realize that these dramatists are more disparate than he argues, and that they are going off on their own journeys.

Do you think that Sierz's focus on 1990s 'in-yer-face' theatre might have contributed to obscuring the work written over the 1980s?

Probably, but I don't think it is Sierz's fault. However, by concentrating exclusively on the young writers from the mid-1990s onwards the work of some of the older dramatists has been overlooked – Harold Pinter's *Moonlight* and *One for the Road*, and arguably Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*.[11] So theatre history from 1985 to 1995 is seen as redundant, which is not the case!

Apart from 'in-yer-face', other designations have been used to refer to the scenes of sex and violence in 1990s drama, such as 'Neo brutalism', 'Neo Jacobeanism' or, in Germany, 'blood-and-sperm' plays. Which label would you say is the most appropriate, and which playwrights fit these labels?

In terms of labels, I always think about Martin Esslin after he'd written *The Theatre of the Absurd*, in that he found it to be an increasingly irritating and unsatisfactory term, to the point where he compared it to a brand of washing-powder.[12] 'In-yer-face' is as good a term as any, but it doesn't suit all of the dramatists that Sierz talks about. For example, Phyllis Nagy doesn't really follow any prescribed 'rules' or features of the genre. Many writers – for example, David Eldridge and his latest play *Festen* – are difficult to label.[13] Probably 'in-yer-face' is a good term for many of the plays of that period that deliberately provoke and bait their audience. Anthony Neilson's plays would come under the category. Early Sarah Kane, such as *Blasted* and *Phaedra's Love*, are 'in-yer-face' plays, though *Cleansed, Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* aren't so much.[14] I don't see Penhall as an 'in-yer-face' dramatist; he is more Mamet/Pinteresque in his interest in structures of language. In the same way that the Theatre of the Absurd linked a group of dramatists at the time – Adamov, Genet, and Beckett – so the term 'in-yer-face' suited the moment at which it was coined. Sierz's book offered people a convincing way of contextualizing what was going on during that period.

Epithets other than the aforementioned have been applied to the generation of young writers that emerged in the 1990s, such as 'the Britpack', 'the theatre of urban ennui', 'Cool Britannia' or 'smack-and-sodomy' plays.[15] *How would you refer to the writers who do not meet the features of 'in-yer-face' theatre?*

'Cool Britannia' is a useful phrase, though few critics have linked the plays to what was going on in wider British culture. Many of the 'in-yer-face' plays came out at the same time when there was a reemergence in British art with the Sensation Exhibition.[16] Such events had more of an important influence on new theatre writing than they had previously been given credit for. There was also Britpop, with groups such as Oasis and Blur. The new playwrights were all in their twenties and early thirties, so they were bound to be touched by wider things that were going on, probably more than by party politics. Perhaps that's an area we need to look at.

In the plays of the 1990s, sexuality is represented quite frequently as rape, degradation, and male power. What do you think is the reason for presenting love and eroticism in this way?

I don't know why love is shown to be so brutal in these plays. It reminds me of what Jacques Derrida talks about, with love being almost another word for deconstruction, which is actually the search for love. Those plays came out at a time when the so-called therapy culture started to link wider cultural issues with previously hidden psychic maladies, such as anorexia and body mutilation. It is difficult to ascertain whether there actually was a sense of nihilism as we approached the end of the decade and the new millennium. However, there is also the sense that physical violence through rape and mutilation was a way of trying to articulate love. That preoccupies Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking*, where characters have lost sight of the difference between abuse and love, or where love becomes a way of claiming someone.[17] I suspect that's another aspect of postmodernism – love and sex become commodified through the internet and television. I remember Hanif Kureishi talking about the increasing voyeurism of British television, with shows about young people on holiday abroad behaving badly. He observed that it is almost as if their bodies become fetishized for an older voyeuristic television audience who are enjoying their degradation. The key play that looks at this is Patrick Marber's *Closer*.[18] There is very little physical violence in that play, though in some respects it's a far more brutal and pessimistic play than *Blasted* or *Shopping and Fucking*.

The plays of the 1990s depict a bleak, aggressive world, and a desire to escape this inferno can be detected. However, there is generally no indication of any revolutionary method to effect any change. Would you care to comment on this?

That's interesting. Perhaps it shows a refreshing sense of realism and enlightenment on the part of these dramatists in that they realize there are no ready answers, against an older generation of politically-motivated dramatists who were selling their audiences short. However, the endings produced by the 'in-yer-face' dramatists were just as unsatisfactory. For example, Marber's *Closer* uses a strange, almost nineteenth-century form borrowed from the novel, in that the death of Alice Ayres frees the rest of the characters she has sacrificed herself for. The end of *Blasted* is more Beckett than Bond. Characters sharing food in Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* is perhaps trying to institute a sense of solutions through the personal, rather than the political. One could argue this is the same as the so-called 'hopeless optimism' with which Bond concludes *Saved*.

Possibly the new dramatists of the 1990s are more honest and offer a greater variety of solutions. Their plays are warnings about the direction British culture is taking. For example, Ravenhill's *Faust is Dead* is not going to offer us a solution because that would be patronizing us as an audience, but it seems to be arguing that if this is where postmodernism, hyperreality and Baudrillard send us, perhaps this is not where we want to be.[19] Kane probably argues that the search for 'the other' can lead to all sorts of problems. Even Penhall has that wonderful ending in *Blue/Orange*, where the younger doctor turns the tables and says, 'I'd like to lodge a Complaint with the Authority'.[20] He is either arguing that power relations are labyrinthine and will continue, or standing up against the patriarch, the older psychiatrist. So these playwrights offer no easy solutions, but through the fact that their endings are problematic they are arguably hopeful.

Do you share the general critical assessment of the new playwrights of the 1990s regarding the lack of political commitment in their plays?

They certainly don't look for moments of revolution as Hare, Brenton and Edgar do. They don't look at party politics in the same issue-led way as Edgar in, for example, *Destiny*, approaches that moment in British culture when the rise of the right looked as if it was a very real threat. The younger dramatists are mainly interested in personal relationships and the individual seeking escape. Sierz calls plays such as Judy Upton's *Confidence* and Nick Grosso's *Peaches* 'me-and-my-mates' plays.[21]

Ravenhill, in particular, looks at the politics of contentment – the phenomenon of young people's lack of political awareness and where that leads us. When Tim, one of the characters in *Some Explicit Polaroids*,

says 'This is the happy world', where does that actually take us if it is a culture based on consumerism, consumption and pleasure?[22] Sexual politics *is* explored in the early 1990s in plays about AIDS. It is interesting that there were far fewer British plays about AIDS than there were from American dramatists, such as Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*.[23] British dramatists generally were not engaging with AIDS, although one can argue that *My Night with Reg* by Kevin Elyot does.[24] As Sierz points out, many of the English plays of the 1990s were looking at sexual politics through various forms of masculinity.[25]

My disappointment is that younger dramatists are not interested in writing about events such as 9/11. There has been work on television, but those big plays have not yet come from younger dramatists. There are few plays by young British dramatists that have looked at history. Even such a play as Eldridge's recent *M.A.D.* is based around a boy growing up who sees his warring parents as the personification of nuclear war.[26] There is an interest in exploring the domestic and the personal. But one could argue that this is the same with the contemporary British novel. Even Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* is very focused on London.

Could you comment on the emotional impact caused by plays such as Blasted, Shopping and Fucking, Dogs Barking, Penetrator, *or* Ashes and Sand*?*

Sierz's point that these plays work in small places is interesting. My own feeling is that the authors of the 1990s were attempting to show off. Many of the plays were saying, in perhaps a youthful way, 'look at me', to bring the audience to a sense of shock, and also of self-realization. For example, the shocking images Ravenhill and Kane use have an accompanying neo-Brechtian analysis behind them.

In this connection, could you comment on the critical response to the two productions of Blasted *at the Royal Court, staged Upstairs and Downstairs respectively? Many found the play almost unbearable to watch when it was put on in the small space. Did the distance from the same events on the main stage have a different effect on one's feelings?*[27]

We can almost say with certainty that in the time between the first and second productions the director gained a deeper understanding of the play. The acts of violence on the large stage, for example, assumed an almost Brechtian perspective. It was easier for the audience to look at the images and to understand them. The images had more in common with a 'big' play such as Bond's *The Woman*. Suddenly the use of gesture and

action in the second production brought about a different awareness in the audience, who were better able to realize what Kane wanted to do. The collapse of the hotel room became a formal way into the second part of the play. It actually turned into an epic event in both senses of the word. As a result, the play became more political, while in the first production the domestic issues were more to the fore. The second production allowed us to understand *why* things occurred, such as the entry of the soldier and that the hotel had become part of the war zone. *Blasted* belongs on a larger stage. It is one of the few plays of that period which breaks out of the domestic mould.

Rickson's decision to stage *Cleansed* in a large space was a good one. Kane writes on a larger canvas than many of her contemporaries, although Ravenhill's plays have increasingly become 'bigger'. His latest play *Citizenship* has a large cast, as has *Mother Clap's Molly House*.[28] Butterworth's *Mojo* also benefited from being staged at the Theatre Downstairs. In fact, some playwrights from that period were attempting to break out of the small studio system that confined them.

As author of a book on Sarah Kane, would you consider her the representative figure of the 1990s, or do you think there are other playwrights who might be considered archetypical? Can we talk about a writer-led movement in the 1990s?

It certainly was writer-led. One problem is that the concentration on certain dramatists has meant the neglect of others. David Greig is someone who was writing very important work and tended to get sidelined, as was David Harrower. Kane has been said to be representative, but Ravenhill catches more effectively the *Zeitgeist* of the 1990s. Mel Kenyon's point about Kane increasingly becoming the subject of her own work would displace it from being representative.[29] At the same time, we must not forget that older writers were also producing outstanding work in the 1990s.

Critics tend to point out similarities between Sarah Kane and young playwrights such as Joanna Laurens and debbie tucker green. Do you think she has created a school?

Arguably, she has not created a school of similar dramatists. Laurens is not like Kane in any respects. tucker green displays elements of Kane's late work in the sense of its focus on language and the personal. Her plays are about small groups of people, such as the family and its secrets in *Born Bad*. It's interesting to compare *Born Bad* to Eldridge's stage

adaptation of *Festen*, which, again, is about family secrets, or to her first play, *Dirty Butterfly*, about domestic abuse. She uses very poetic language to look at the domestic. It'll be interesting to see what her next play at the Royal Court is going to be about.[30] There isn't a Kane school, just as there isn't a Ravenhill school. But where there certainly is an ongoing influence with Kane is in the interest her work holds for students.

There seem to be hardly any professional revivals of Kane's plays. Is her popularity confined to the academic world?

Her plays are often performed abroad. These foreign productions may yield more insights. For example, there have been a number of recent productions in America, such as the touring production of the Royal Court's *4.48 Psychosis*. In Britain it is ten years since *Blasted* came out. However, apart from the Glasgow Citizens' production of *Blasted* a few years back, Kane's work has never been produced by a major regional theatre. Nor has there been another professional production of *Cleansed* or *Phaedra's Love*, though the Bristol Old Vic Theatre plan to do *Phaedra's Love* in late 2005. There has always been an emphasis on *Blasted*, *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis*. In some respects they are easier plays to stage than *Phaedra's Love* and *Cleansed*.[31] In the academic community we are still assessing Kane's importance and more work has to be done.

You expressed the pessimistic hypothesis that Kane's work and reputation might 'fall into neglect in years to come', but that 'Blasted will still be remembered as . . . a landmark in theatre history'.[32] *How do you envisage the scenario today?*

Blasted will be remembered because of its universalism. For example, the relationship it draws between domestic abuse and the effects of war, as evidenced in Iraq, makes it a play that will always have a currency. Her other plays may become universal as plays of despair, as the late poetry of Sylvia Plath or Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Kane's plays will be performed far longer than Ravenhill's earlier work, because he is more interested in commenting on what it is to live *now*.

Kane modelled several of her plays on classical tragedy. According to Ravenhill, the fact that she was 'a contemporary writer with a classical sensibility' lies behind her often tempestuous relationship with the British theatre establishment.[33] *Would you like to comment on this?*

Yes, her models were drawn not only from classical sources, but also from European drama. This is why a play like *Cleansed* was problematic for British audiences. Eldridge, in his adaptation of *Festen*, looks successfully to European theatre and translates something very gripping onto the stage, but he is aware that British audiences are watching it. There aren't many other dramatists, with the exception of Martin McDonagh, Joanna Laurens, and Marina Carr, who actually work on older forms of drama. Possibly dramatists are more interested in exploring what it is to live in a postmodern age than drawing towards a classic sensibility. Kane was arguably quite unique in that respect.

In 1996, Robert Hewison referred to 'a renewed sense of creative vigour and excitement' at the end of the millennium. He claimed that 'we are on the threshold of either a decadent fin de siècle *or the breakthrough that characterizes Vienna in 1900, when artists, playwrights, poets and composers launched twentieth century modernism'.*[34] *Can we already judge which of the two views has proved right?*

Neither. In actual fact, there is a sort of conservatism. The telling moment was Charles Saatchi moving back to painting, rather than continuing to collect conceptual art. If you look at the West End at the moment, Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* goes back to W. B. Yeats's self-conscious use of myth.[35] The early momentum of the 1990s playwrights has become muted, and there has been a retrenchment. We were never on the verge of a new golden age in 1999. That explosion of new writing has died down, although many playwrights from that period are writing better than ever.

In 'Love me or Kill me', you refer to Benedict Nightingale's prediction that a renewed interest in the classics will take place.[36] *What do you think future trends will be?*

That's an interesting question. I certainly don't think that interest in the classics has actually come about, although Carr and Laurens both work with mythical structures. Elements of magic realism are starting to appear, such as McDonagh's *The Pillowman*, set somewhere in a communist country, which also incorporates fairytale elements.[37]

British theatre is still stimulating and innovative. As mentioned, the dramatists of the 1990s are constantly maturing. Eldridge, Ravenhill and Penhall are writing excellent material. Their best work is probably ahead of them, which is exciting. *Blue/Orange* was one of the most significant plays of the new decade. The work of McDonagh is potentially exciting

through its very theatricality. And we mustn't neglect the experimental nontext writer companies, like Théâtre de Complicité. Their work with Shakespeare is opening up classical work in all sorts of new directions.[38] tucker green is producing powerful work. British playwriting is in a very healthy state.

We should also remember that older dramatists are still producing innovative and provocative work. Edgar is now writing his best work. Churchill is still way ahead of many of the younger writers in terms of formal experimentation. Pinter is writing some excellent work. In the mid-1990s, Bond was entering a new phase of writing. *Coffee* is one of the great neglected plays of that period.[39] Perhaps we put too much emphasis on *new* writers and we neglect the great writers that we have.

Notes

1. Bent's *Goldhawk Road* was first performed at the Bush Theatre on 5 January 1996, directed by Paul Miller. Butterworth's *Mojo*, directed by Ian Rickson, was premiered on the main stage of the Royal Court Theatre on 14 July 1995.
2. *Some Voices* was first staged at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 15 September 1994, directed by Ian Rickson; *Blue/Orange* was first performed at the Cottesloe, National Theatre, on 7 April 2000, directed by Roger Michell.
3. A. Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber, 2001).
4. *The Shape of the Table* premiered at the Cottesloe, National Theatre, on 8 November 1990, the first anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. It was directed by Jenny Killick. The title refers to the Vietnam War, when the American and Vietnamese delegations spent months literally discussing the shape of the negotiating table. *Pentecost* was first performed at The Other Place (Stratford-upon-Avon) on 26 October 1994, directed by Michael Attenborough. It is set in an abandoned church in an unnamed Eastern European country.
5. *Blasted* was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 12 January 1995, directed by James Macdonald.
6. Stephen Daldry joined the Royal Court in 1993 as Artistic Director. From Autumn 1994, he doubled the number of new productions at the Theatre Upstairs that focused on young unknown writers. See Mireia Aragay's and Pilar Zozaya's interview with Daldry in this volume. Dominic Dromgoole was Artistic Director at the Bush from 1990 to 1996, where he led an active policy of promoting new writing. His successor Mike Bradwell edited *The Bush Theatre Book* (London: Methuen, 1997), a survey of 25 years of new writing at the Bush. Dromgoole's own *The Full Room: An A–Z of Contemporary Playwriting* (London: Methuen, 2000) is a highly personal overview of new writing. He subsequently became New Plays Director at the Old Vic Theatre for a short time, and went on to run

the Oxford Stage Company for seven years. In May 2005, his appointment as the second Artistic Director of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre was announced.

7. G. Saunders, *'Love me or Kill me': Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 2.
8. P. Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
9. *Behzti (Dishonour)* depicts murder and sex abuse in a Sikh temple. The play upset the Sikh community in Birmingham, though many younger Sikhs saw it as inoffensive. *Behzti* opened at The Door (Birmingham) on 9 December 2004, directed by Janet Steel, but the production was cancelled when Sikh demonstrators threw stones and clashed with the police.
10. J. R. Taylor wrote a book on each of the 'two waves', *Anger and After: A Guide to the New British Drama* (London: Methuen, 1962) and *The Second Wave: British Drama for the Seventies* (London: Methuen, 1971).
11. *Moonlight* opened at the Almeida Theatre on 7 September 1993, directed by David Leveaux. *One for the Road* premiered at the Lyric Hammersmith Studio on 13 March 1984, directed by Pinter himself. Stoppard's *Arcadia* opened at the Lyttelton, National Theatre, on 13 April 1993, directed by Trevor Nunn.
12. Esslin's classic *The Theatre of the Absurd* was first published in the United States (New York: Anchor Books, 1961) and subsequently in Britain (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1962).
13. *Festen* is David Eldridge's stage adaptation of the Dogme film and play by Thomas Vinterberg, Mogens Rukov and Bo hr. Hansen. The first performance of *Festen* was at the Almeida on 18 March 2004. It was directed by Rufus Norris.
14. Kane's *Phaedra's Love* was first performed at the Gate Theatre on 15 May 1996, directed by the author herself. *Cleansed* premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs at the Duke of York's on 30 April 1998, directed by James Macdonald. *Crave* opened at the Traverse Theatre (Edinburgh) on 13 August 1998, directed by Vicky Featherstone. *4.48 Psychosis* premiered a year after Kane's death at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs on 23 June 2000, directed by James Macdonald.
15. Saunders, *'Love me or Kill me'*, pp. 4–8.
16. The controversial Sensation Exhibition held at the Royal Academy of Arts in September–December 1997 featured work by 42 so-called Young British Artists (YBAs), including Tracey Emin, Marcus Harvey, Damien Hirst, Ron Mueck and Rachel Whiteread. The method used by Young British Artists, which might be described as 'shocking defamiliarization', together with the 1990s context where they emerged and the debate regarding the ethics and politics of their work, clearly link them to the 'in-yer-face' playwrights of the same generation.
17. *Shopping and Fucking* was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs at the Ambassadors on 26 September 1996, directed by Max Stafford-Clark.
18. *Closer* opened at the Cottesloe, National Theatre, on 22 May 1997, directed by Marber himself.
19. *Faust is Dead* opened at the Lyric Hammersmith Studio on 26 February 1997, directed by Nick Philippou.
20. J. Penhall, *Blue/Orange* (London: Methuen, 2001), p. 111.

21. *Confidence* was first performed at The Door (Birmingham) on 23 September 1998, directed by Anthony Clark. *Peaches* opened at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 10 November 1994, directed by James Macdonald.
22. *Some Explicit Polaroids* premiered at the Theatre Royal (Bury St Edmunds) on 30 September 1999, directed by Max Stafford-Clark. Tim's line appears in *Plays: 1 (Shopping and Fucking, Faust is Dead, Handbag, Some Explicit Polaroids)* (London: Methuen, 2001), p. 268.
23. *The Normal Heart*, considered to be the first important AIDS play, was first performed at the Public Theater (New York) on 2 April 1985, directed by Michael Lindsay-Hogg. In Britain, it premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs on 25 March 1986, directed by David Hayman. The first part of Kushner's famous AIDS play, *Angels in America Part One: Millennium Approaches*, received its world premiere at the Eureka Theatre (San Francisco) in May 1991, directed by David Esbjornson. Its British premiere was staged at the Cottesloe, National Theatre, on 23 January 1992, directed by Declan Donnellan. The world premiere of *Angels in America Part Two: Perestroika* took place at the Mark Taper Forum (Los Angeles) in November 1991, directed by Oskar Eustis and Tony Taccone. It opened at the Cottesloe, National Theatre, on 12 November 1993, also directed by Declan Donnellan. Terrence McNally's *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* (1991) and *Love! Valour! Compassion*! (1994) also tackle AIDS.
24. *My Night with Reg* was premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 31 March 1994, directed by Roger Michell.
25. Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, pp. 153–77 and *passim*.
26. *M.A.D.* opened at the Bush on 21 April 2004, directed by Hettie Macdonald. Set in 1984, the title stands for the policy of 'Mutually Assured Destruction'.
27. The revival of *Blasted*, directed by James Macdonald, opened at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 29 March 2001 during the Sarah Kane Season which the Court programmed two years after Kane's death on 20 February 1999. In addition to *Blasted*, the season included revivals of the first productions of *Crave* (1998) and *4.48 Psychosis* (2000), and platform performances of *Phaedra's Love* (1996) and *Cleansed* (1998).
28. Ravenhill's *Citizenship* was shown on 6 July 2005 at the Cottesloe, National Theatre, directed by Margaret Tully, and then at the Olivier on 12 July 2005, directed by John Hoggarth. It was written specifically for Shell Connections, a programme led by the National and devoted to promoting theatre among young people. In 2005, Ravenhill and other playwrights were specially commissioned to write plays which were then produced in schools and theatres around Britain and finally shown at the National. This edition of the festival took place from 6 to 12 July 2005. *Mother Clap's Molly House* was first performed at the Lyttelton, National Theatre, on 24 August 2001, directed by Nicholas Hytner.
29. Kenyon is a literary manager and Sarah Kane's agent. See 'Conversation with Mel Kenyon' in Saunders's *'Love me or Kill me'*, pp. 143–53.
30. tucker green's first play, *Dirty Butterfly*, was premiered at the Soho Theatre on 26 February 2003, directed by Rufus Norris; *Born Bad* was directed by Kathy Burke and it opened at the Hampstead Theatre on 29 April 2003. Her *Trade*, directed by Sacha Wares, was first presented as a development project at the Royal Shakespeare Company's first New Work Festival in

October 2004. Following a transfer to the Soho in March 2005, it opened at the Swan Theatre (Stratford-upon-Avon) on 25 October 2005 as part of the Royal Shakespeare Company's second New Work Festival. tucker green's play *Stoning Mary* was first performed at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs on 1 April 2005, directed by Marianne Elliott. Her latest play, *Generations*, opened at the Young Vic Theatre on 27 February 2007, directed by Sacha Wares.

31. The Royal Court's touring production of *4.48 Psychosis* opened at St Ann's Warehouse (Brooklyn) on 7 October 2004. Kane's plays are frequently staged in the United States and on Continental Europe, particularly Germany. The Glasgow Citizens' production of *Blasted* opened on 7 March 2002, directed by Kenny Miller. Two professional productions of Kane's *Phaedra's Love* and *Cleansed* opened in Autumn 2005. *Phaedra's Love*, directed by Anne Tipton, was first performed at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre on 24 October and transferred to the Barbican Pit on 16 November. *Cleansed*, directed by Sean Holmes, premiered at the Arcola Theatre on 2 November. In Spring 2006, Graeae Theatre Company produced a national tour of Kane's *Blasted*. Graeae's *Blasted* opened in London at the Soho on 16 January 2007.
32. Saunders, '*Love me or Kill me*', p. 117.
33. M. Ravenhill, 'Obituary', *Independent*, 23 February 1999.
34. R. Hewison, 'Rebirth of a Nation', *Times*, 19 May 1996, quoted in Saunders, *'Love me or Kill me'*, p. 6.
35. *By the Bog of Cats* is based on Euripides's *Medea*. It was first performed on 7 October 1998 at the Abbey Theatre (Dublin) as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival; it was directed by Patrick Mason. A production directed by Dominic Cooke opened at the Wyndham's Theatre on 1 December 2004.
36. See Saunders, *'Love me or Kill me'*, p. 18, where he refers to Nightingale's *The Future of Theatre* (London: Phoenix 1998).
37. *The Pillowman* opened at the Cottesloe, National Theatre, on 13 November 2003, directed by John Crowley.
38. Simon McBurney is the Artistic Director of Théâtre de Complicité, founded in 1983 by Annabel Arden, Marcello Magni and McBurney himself. Complicité's work, ranging from entirely devised productions to theatrical adaptations and revivals of classic texts, seeks to integrate text, music, image and action into groundbreaking, surprising theatre.
39. *Coffee: 'A Tragedy'* has received, as yet, no professional performance in Britain. A production by The Rational Theatre Company premiered at Chapter Art Centre (Cardiff) on 27 November 1996, directed by Dan Baron Cohen. This production opened at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs at the Ambassadors on 3 May 1997. As most of Bond's latest plays, *Coffee* was produced in France at the Théâtre National de la Colline (Paris) on 12 May 2000, directed by Alain Françon.

Alan Sinfield

Enric Monforte

Alan Sinfield is Professor of English at the University of Sussex, where he helped to create an MA in Sexual Dissidence and Cultural Change, the only one of its kind in a British university. He has published extensively in the field of English literature and theatre and has been active in developing gay, lesbian and queer studies in the academia. He is the author of *Cultural Politics – Queer Reading* (1994), *Gay and After* (1998), and *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (1999), amongst many other works. The following interview was carried out in Brighton on 21 July 2005.

Bearing in mind your seminal work in the field, I would like to begin with a general question on the very notion of gay/lesbian/queer theatre. Does it exist any more?

Gay theatre affords an opportunity for people to exchange images and representations, to dialogue about who we are. Whether there's such a thing at the present time, I don't know. There has been at certain times. One could say there was a kind of gay theatre around the time of Noël Coward and Terence Rattigan; also around Gay Sweatshop.[1] However, whether there is one at the present time is another matter, and there may exist again at some other time in the future.

Should gay/lesbian/queer theatre explore relevant political issues such as Section 28, the age of consent, and the like?[2]

Yes. It's interesting. With the age of consent there were quite important plays, such as *Beautiful Thing* and *What's Wrong with Angry*?, which could have helped to effect opinion, whereas with Section 28 it

was much more difficult to make drama.[3] Actually, at the moment there aren't any plays about Section 28 as such, though the whole project of gay theatre, which Gay Sweatshop was representing in the early 1990s, was one of confrontation, therefore challenging Section 28 and other similar issues. Maybe this is old-fashioned, but I like the idea of a political theatre which takes up issues. It's not the only kind of theatre that should be, of course, but it is very desirable.

Can we talk about gay/lesbian/queer theatre in the same way as we talk about feminist drama or postcolonial drama? Do you think the parallelism is plausible?

Generally, there's a poststructuralist queer suspicion of identity, but identity is a misleading sort of word. It sounds as if everyone is the same, whereas before queer, when the word 'gay' was used, everybody wasn't the same at all. Using 'gay' doesn't mean that you can't have a political identity and identify with other people, either in an intuitive recognition or in a purposeful coalition. Feminists were doing that and feminist drama in the 1970s was very formative for gay and lesbian theatre. Obviously, there was much lesbian theatre anyway, and the model was very important for gay people generally. Postcolonial theatre has been less effective in Britain. There have been several companies at different times, but I don't think they have been innovating in terms of concept in cases that I'm aware of.[4]

Gay theatre has been said to be related to the post-Stonewall period, whereas queer theatre has been linked with the post-AIDS era. The former is identified with a period where stable definitions of identity are very important, and therefore it stresses their necessity. Following John M. Clum, the latter has been said to be more questioning, precisely in that it defies a normative notion of identity, is politically radical, stresses 'performativity over stable essence', celebrates 'marginality', is anti-assimilationist, and defines sexual identity as fluid and unstable.[5] *Would you agree with such a view? How do you see the split between gay and queer theatre nowadays?*

The way you put it is very good, and something like that has been happening indeed. Whether it's really true that gay was as limited as people setting up the term 'queer' found, or whether queer is as independent of identity and stability as the theory suggests it should be, I don't know. The categories are not as different as people expect them to be. Queer might imply a new kind of identity, rather than no identity.

I have a wariness in general about the notion of queer, according to which people might genuinely not wish to be associated to other people in any enduring way, and might want to have an endlessly contingent relation with people, spaces, dwelling places, work, and so on. If queer means no consistency in relation to any of those things, like getting out of bed a different person each morning, that would be a very crazy, insane way to be. I don't think I could be at all comfortable with it. It's how queer evolves in aspiration – not to have structures – that's utopian and romantic. It would be better to reject structures which are exploitative and oppressive, but develop others which are rewarding.

You told me at a certain point that you saw queer as related to the tradition of the absurd. Would you like to comment on that?

I suppose that's right, though I don't remember saying it. Queer is a kind of poststructuralism. Structuralism shows how things do hang together. Poststructuralism shows how they might hang together, but that in fact they're sliding away. In the case of Beckett, for example, the extent to which his plays are indeterminate is quite overstated, and some of them at least do actually seem to have some kind of opening and closure. In *Play*, for example, if one listens to the play carefully, there does seem to be a story which emerges and which makes more and more sense as you get toward the end of the play – the characters are dead and were involved in an affair together. The play is not open to any kind of meaning.

Robert Wallace follows Michel Foucault in arguing that gay people have to create a gay life, that we have to 'become'. Bearing this in mind, a parallelism with theatre might be established, in the sense that if gay has given way to queer, we need to learn how to become queer so that a queer theatre can be created.[6]

The idea of 'becoming' is very helpful, but we don't do this in conditions of our own choosing, and many things have been established for us already. Therefore, it's not 'becoming' in front of a blank sheet of paper, it's an ongoing development which other people will have done, including of course Foucault. One of the facts that will help me to 'become' is gay history. But the question was to do with new kinds of 'becoming' in the context of queer and how this might develop through theatre. The fact that queer has something to do with poststructuralism means that queer theatre becomes quite accessible to all sorts of theatre

audiences who might have been thrown by avantgarde strategies in the past. Avantgarde theatre is not really much more complicated than the advertisements on television or in the cinema, which are made of juxtapositions and expectations, and where the spectator has to pick up little clues. There is a space for queer theatre there. The difficulty, however, has not to do with the concept of queer or the concept of theatre, but with who is going to run this theatre, where they are going to get the money from, where they are going to do it and what institution is going to be in charge. And right at the moment I'm not aware that we have such an institution. We have some theatre directors who are prepared to do lesbian and gay work, but I don't sense much commitment to this in the theatre world.

What about mainstream gay audiences? Does gay/lesbian/queer drama have to be necessarily dissident?

No. I'm not sure about the question because it could be dissident for a mainstream audience or it could be dissident for a mainstream gay audience. Mainstream gay audiences shouldn't be despised and may well enjoy being challenged. But gay/lesbian drama doesn't have to be necessarily dissident. Some of it isn't. I don't think Kevin Elyot's *My Night with Reg* is dissident. It was very successful in its original run, it's been done in Brighton by a semi-professional company at least once in recent years, and of course there's the film, so it makes the play prominent.[7]

Why do you think My Night with Reg *was so successful, first at the Royal Court Theatre and later in the West End?*

I don't know. I would like to address that by searching up the initial reviews, and studying how they were presenting the play to different readers. People do rely a lot on reviews. They don't necessarily believe them but they use them to negotiate the range of options. But obviously you could argue that the play is successful because it's harmless. It doesn't really do anything that you haven't got in Chekhov, so it's not going to stretch anybody very much. I don't know what the other extreme is, possibly *Shopping and Fucking*, which was also successful, but not to the same degree perhaps.[8] However, I remember Ravenhill's play much more than I actually remember *My Night with Reg*. *Shopping and Fucking* was successful for slightly different reasons. There obviously is and has been ever since *Look Back in Anger* a split in London theatre

between West End plays and works that have been successful in the subsidized sector but not further than that.

Stuart Young points out the absence of a theatrical practice which is 'radical or "queer" '.[9] *On the other hand, Brian Roberts claims that present-day gay theatre stands 'in a critically defining role to mainstream theatre culture'. According to him, this is so in two senses: on the one hand, through a 'political conscientizing of "queer" and theatricality'; on the other, through an active 'opposition to an assimiliationist gay subculture' – in other words, an opposition to creating a ghetto, since he defends the idea that the existence of ghettoes leads to gay people becoming unidentifiable.*[10] *What would your position be in this respect?*

These two opinions are quite interesting. Theatre always works in this little flurry of something that seems to be happening: here's some angry young men, here's a play about Vietnam, and there's gay theatre taking over everything. I'm referring here to the controversy in the 1990s, when there was a sudden alarm at the presence of plays dealing with gay issues – but if you came to look at it there were only three or four plays and they were about to close their runs anyway.[11] I don't sense that gay theatre is going to be a beacon of any kind, or a particular challenge. This is all to do with the conditions of theatre itself, which still appears to be demoralized from the underfunding of the public sector and has got itself into this notion that only an expensive musical is going to make any money. What used to be the great advantage of theatre is that it was quite cheap to put on compared with film or other media. If one wrote a play, one could still find the space to perform it in, get one's friends to act in it and do that within four of five weeks. In a room at university it wouldn't be expensive or elaborate. That's the great advantage of theatre, that capacity to respond very quickly and to put people's visions into some kind of activity, in a narrative way. But those opportunities don't seem to be influencing London theatre which, as I said, seems to be spectacular, operatic, musical. This isn't out of choice, I fear, since many tourist audiences don't have English as their first language and so they naturally prefer something spectacular to something which not all of them are in a position to understand.

Young also says that nowadays 'there is no formal innovation comparable to that pioneered by such feminist companies and playwrights as Monstrous Regiment, the Women's Theatre Group and Caryl Churchill'.[12] *Would you*

agree with him? Does this type of theatre necessarily have to be innovative all the time?

There's a virtue in theatre which is reinforcing and confirming and helps you to feel better about yourself when you understand your position in the world, and in as far as gay theatre might do that, it seems to me a good thing. I'm not at all against reassurance. At the same time, to experience something which is formally challenging as well as thematically challenging is very exciting and does happen from time to time. It did happen in the 1960s, and around feminist theatre in the 1970s. I'm not aware of comparable kinds of innovation at the present time but I'm not keeping up with pub theatre and those venues where you might expect such experimentation to take place. I wouldn't like to say that there aren't any. I'm sure that people are working very hard to produce them while other people are writing safely and not risking.

In your text Cultural Politics – Queer Reading *you put forward the notion of 'subculture' as an alternative to 'community', implying that the former is more heterogeneous than the latter, which is related with a homogeneous, stable gay identity. Similarly, in* Out on Stage *you stress the importance of a 'subcultural address' that would tackle issues such as 'class . . . racial . . . exploitation . . . misogyny . . . HIV and AIDS', among others. At the same time, in* Gay and After *you advocate the use of the term 'post-gay' as a more questioning way to approach and analyse the situation of gay struggle nowadays, defining it as 'a period when it will not seem so necessary to define, and hence to limit, our sexualities'.*[13] *I wonder if you could comment on these ideas.*

The problem with 'community' is that it isn't a neutral term. In a community, everybody is being nice to everybody else. However, when gay people go to a club they may very well stand by the wall for two hours with nobody speaking to them. There doesn't seem to be any such thing as a community. That's the principal reason why the term is unhelpful. But they still constitute a subculture. Community may be an aspiration.

The term 'post-gay' was something which was in the air when it became increasingly clear that the term 'gay' didn't really account for a good deal of what was going on. We tried to amend it by saying 'gay and lesbian', then we tried to amend it some more by saying 'gay, lesbian and bisexual', and then we added 'transgender' and 'transsexual'. This is all an attempt to recognize that there is an important sexual dissidence

which isn't really covered by the term 'gay'. The term 'gay' seemed very convenient in the 1970s and 1980s and was found really useful by everybody, by mainstream as well as by gay people, but soon it just became apparent that different situations were taking place, including men who were having what might be called a 'gay experience' but who didn't really consider themselves to be 'gay'. Those men would marry or have families of their own. That posed a problem, because they found it difficult to reach the HIV and AIDS campaigns since they didn't go to gay places, where they might have had information or reinforcement. So the term 'gay' was breaking up. Now, at the same time, I also wanted to say that a sense of subcultural identity and political purpose is necessary in order to gain political objectives. I believe that has to be maintained, even while recognizing that the borders and the boundaries of 'gay' are permeable, and rightly so. It's a matter of looking forward together to get the best of both worlds: the advantage of an organization along with the advantage of not trying to gather people into being someone who perhaps they didn't really feel themselves to be.

Young also talks about negotiating with the dominant culture as a 'trade-off between transgression and assimilation', what he calls 'the intriguing and problematic relationship between sub- and dominant cultures'. According to him, 'any accommodation with the dominant culture . . . enables straight culture to hijack gay culture and so neutralize any challenge it poses'.[14] *How do you feel about this?*

There isn't a right answer to that. Gay culture is often appropriative in the first place, and makes use of material from all over the spectrum, from all over the world. If you want, you can turn anything gay without effort. There's always a pushing and shoving between dominant and subordinate cultures, and the outcome of this isn't necessarily welcome one or the other way. That's to say, if the mainstream becomes interested in the gay phenomenon, that may remove all the challenge or it may not, depending on the particular conditions and circumstances. There isn't one necessary outcome to that encounter; it depends on the effective forces at the time. If gay people start saying we want to have families of our own – alternative families, families that we choose – that's an attempt to take the word 'family' from its mainstream, often right-wing use. This might very well be followed by further movement, in which the state would allow us to register our partnerships, as has indeed been the case.[15] In other words, one can turn one's family back into the kind of family that mainstream society has

already. The term may be more open than had been supposed to be, and might have a progressive impact; not necessarily assimilation and neutralization.

Roberts has emphasized how theatricality can be seen as a component of a more challenging type of theatre, signalling how queer theatrical practices make use of it for their own purposes. This could be seen, for example, in the 'learned performativity of gay identity through camp', bringing together in this way the issue of performativity with that of gender. The outcome would be 'an awareness of play, parody, [and] irony'.[16] *Would you agree with him?*

This might in practice be happening, but in principle I'm always suspicious of the wish to get formal properties lined up with political impetus. This would include the work of Antonin Artaud or of Bertolt Brecht, for instance, and their idea that if you did theatre in a particular way then the audience would go out with a specific political awareness. Imagine a play with a drag queen as protagonist. A reading of a play of this kind might emphasize issues of gender and sexuality. However, I don't think any of these aspects can be guaranteed to work. Any performance depends on elements of shock and abandonment. It's always going to be different when you see it the third or the fourth time, when you already know what's going to happen. I take that as a very simple instance of the way that what may be intended as a challenge may turn out to be something quite different if you repeat it. Therefore, the idea that flamboyance in the theatre is by definition going to be queer is attractive but dodgy. This could be linked with the gay/queer opposition, because plainly there was a camp flamboyance and drag before queer was thought of, and at that time it would be more associated with gay. But camp or drag in particular are in fact evidently, from what we see in audiences, quite appealing to straight people. Those forms are about the boundaries of gender and sexuality, and everybody is drawn to that – straight people are as fascinated with where their feminine side begins as gay people may be. So it's up to us, in a certain way, to interpret which show on the stage may be flamboyant, whether it would work, or whether it may have to do with the venue where the play is performed.

The issue of drag is more complicated if approached from a feminist perspective, since it puts forward very specific images of women which many times are extremely conventional, old-fashioned, and sexist – if not downright misogynist.

And again that's not resolved, is it? Besides, if queer practitioners are arguing how these images are presented as representations, and therefore as provisional and performative, then who is to know which audience is going to have which response?

Going back to Roberts, he establishes a link between the metaphor of theatre and sexual and/or gender identity. In this view, theatre could be seen as 'a metaphor of performed identity'.[17] *Do you think this would be useful for a gay/queer practice of theatre?*

One of the components is always performativity, a concept which was developed by Judith Butler, who hadn't got much immediate thought about theatre as such in her mind when she wrote *Gender Trouble*.[18] She was thinking of the philosophical concept of 'becoming', rather than having a prior being. According to her, one makes a continuous ongoing 'becoming'. This was called 'performativity' at the same time that something called 'performance theatre' was getting going, which was partly queer and partly not. Performance theatre is not especially a queer or gay mode, though it can be that. Some theatre theorists have suggested a link between Butler's theories and the work of performance groups such as Split Britches.[19] In some ways, that's quite a good idea and quite productive as well, but on the whole, even though they have a certain impact on an audience, I don't think the outcome can be relied upon. Nevertheless, the idea has been suggested in many interesting works about Split Britches, and the incorporation of the Bloolips from the British theatrical world has produced further work.[20] Split Britches, Bette Bourne and the Bloolips were together in *Belle Reprieve*, which combines a very American feminist and lesbian theatre coming out of New York, and a cabaret act coming out of the pantomime tradition.[21] What Neil Bartlett has been doing could be related to this as well.[22]

In Out on Stage *you state that theatre, as 'a place for both disclosure and subterfuge', has been 'a particular site for the formation of dissident sexual identities'.*[23] *This particularity makes it a good weapon to be used against sexism and homophobia, as well as in exposing the faultlines existing in the construction of sexuality and in the workings of ideology. Do you think that this should still be one of the main functions of theatre?*

That's like 'Are you against God?' It sounds fine, doesn't it? It also sounds a bit academic. It's the sort of thing to which a theatre person would reply, 'Yes, that's all very well, but I've got a problem. We tried

to start rehearsals and the leading actor hasn't arrived yet'. That's really what theatre is about, getting it to work on the night. But yes, that's the aspiration.

Also in Out on Stage *you establish a connection between 'Brechtian theory' – in spite of your previously mentioned qualms – and the 'Foucauldian principle' alluded to above according to which 'sexualities are constructed rather than essential'.*[24] *Would this be a way forward, using Brecht and Foucault, and developing their theories towards a construction of a gay/lesbian/queer theatre for the future?*

It looks like it should be. Brecht's point is that he allows you to see characters from a historical perspective, coming to be the people that they are through acting in the story, and that sounds very constructionist. Brechtian devices, like announcing the subject of the upcoming scene, for instance, seem to have – at first sight at least – some kind of potential for a drama which is about developing identities and sexuality in general, in as far as we're taking constructionism as Foucauldian. I can't think of how this would play out in a particular Brechtian text, though. In *The Good Person of Szechwan*, one can find a case of an indeterminate gender. Chinese Shen Te and Shui Ta are different persons according to their gender identity in different parts of the play. However, nobody ever thought of that as a transsexual and transgender play until very recently.[25] It seemed to be about something else, and the change in gender was seen as incidental, but of course the play is as much about gender identity as, say, *Twelfth Night* or *As You Like It*, about which there was also the thought that gender was still conventional and uninteresting until recently.[26]

What's your opinion on the current situation of British drama?

I'm anxious talking about this because I haven't seen very many things. Probably I haven't seen them because they didn't sound very interesting, but I know that's not really good enough. London Pride Festival in 2005 offered a season with twenty titles, scattered through eight small theatres, and a competition. There was a new play by Mark Ravenhill, *Citizenship*, a performance of *The Laramie Project* – the acclaimed American play about Matthew Shepard – and a play I saw and enjoyed very much, Matthew Todd's *Blowing Whistles* – about addiction to computer dating.[27]

Any concluding comments on gay/lesbian/queer drama in the 1990s? Has it actually become radicalized? Do you notice a definite change from previous times?

My main sense is that there hasn't been much more going on than was previously the case, in the years in which Gay Sweatshop existed. In a sense, nothing has replaced that and nothing could. They encapsulated all the problems and dealt with all the issues: addressing a subcultural audience, relations with the mainstream, relations of men to women, whether you wanted straight people in the company or not, and so on. All of those questions were intensely thought through and remain unresolved. There's no substitute for a dedicated company of that kind, and it's a pity that we don't have it. At the same time, the counterweight is that gay-themed plays are now not surprising. There have been numbers of very interesting texts, and several authors establishing themselves with gay plays, which is splendid. They are going to reach slightly different people, probably more people than Gay Sweatshop reached; some of the same questions will reappear and others will seem old-fashioned and will be overtaken by time. So there are some losses and some gains.

But what I should add, and this was a quality of my time, is that there has been much less going on for lesbians than for gay men. It's not clear what's going to happen about that. I don't see where the push for significant lesbian theatre is going to come from. It's partly because of course lesbians go to the theatre like everybody else, but the notion that they should do so isn't part of the idea of theatre in quite the way that it is for gay men. There is a good book by Sandra Freeman, *Putting Your Daughters on the Stage*.[28] Maybe one of the solutions here would be the consideration that there's drama other than the drama in the theatre – there's drama on television, there's drama in the cinema, and some of the things that once were being done in theatre are now being done on screen.

Notes

1. Gay Sweatshop was a gay theatre company created in London in 1975, in the wake of the gay liberation movement in Britain. In 1976, the company opened its doors to female actors. The company's productions include *Mister X* (1975), *Any Woman Can* (1976), *Age of Consent* (1977), *As Time Goes By* (1977), *The Dear Love of Comrades* (1979), *Twice Over* (1988), and *Lust and Comfort* (1994–95, in collaboration with Split Britches).
2. Section 28 of the Local Government Act was developed by the Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher. It prohibited local authorities in England

and Wales from spreading information about homosexuality in places such as theatres and libraries. It first appeared as Clause 28 of the Local Government Bill on 7 December 1987, then changed its name into Section 28 when it became law on 24 May 1988. It was finally repealed by the House of Commons on 10 March 2003 and by the House of Lords on 10 July 2003, even though it had never been applied in its entirety. Scotland had its own version of Section 28, which was abolished in 2000. The age of consent refers to the age at which sexual relations are considered legal in Britain. After a long struggle demanding equality with the heterosexual population, in January 2001 the age of consent for homosexual acts was lowered to 16 in England, Wales and Scotland, and to 17 in Northern Ireland.

3. Both *Beautiful Thing*, by Jonathan Harvey, and *What's Wrong with Angry?*, by Patrick Wilde, deal with homosexuality in adolescence. Harvey's play, directed by Hettie Macdonald, was a major hit at the Bush Theatre, where it opened on 28 July 1993. The play was revived and toured in 1994, ending with a run at the Donmar Warehouse, where it opened on 30 March. Subsequently, it opened at the Duke of York's Theatre on 26 September of the same year. In 1995, the play was made into a film by the same director. Wilde's play, directed by the playwright himself, opened at the Lost Theatre in 1993. It became an award-winning feature film, *Get Real!*, directed in 1998 by Simon Shore.
4. Amongst the most important feminist theatre groups in the 1970s one could mention the Women's Theatre Group, created in 1974, and Monstrous Regiment, founded in 1975. Companies such as Gay Sweatshop: Women's Company and Siren Theatre Company, created in 1979, were active in promoting lesbian theatre. Some of the companies that have been involved with a postcolonial approach to theatre are Tara Arts, established in 1976, Black Theatre Co-operative, created in 1979, and Talawa Theatre Company, founded in 1985.
5. J. M. Clum, *Still Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000 (1992)), pp. 263–4.
6. R. Wallace, 'To Become: The Ideological Function of Gay Theatre', *Canadian Theatre Review*, 59 (Summer 1989), p. 7.
7. *My Night with Reg*, directed by Roger Michell, opened at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 31 March 1994. It became the first play ever to transfer from the Theatre Upstairs straight to the West End, where it started an extremely successful run, first at the Criterion Theatre, where it opened on 15 November 1994, and subsequently at the Playhouse Theatre, where it premiered on 27 June 1995. In 1996, it was turned into a film by the BBC, scripted by Elyot himself and with the same director and cast as the Royal Court production.
8. *Shopping and Fucking*, written by Mark Ravenhill and directed by Max Stafford-Clark, opened at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs at the Ambassadors on 26 September 1996. Following an English regional tour, it was revived on 7 January 1997 at the same theatre. It then transferred to the Gielgud Theatre, where it opened on 24 June 1997. After another national and international tour, it was revived at the Queen's Theatre on 21 January 1998. The play signalled the beginning of Ravenhill's successful career.

9. S. Young, 'Sleeping with the Mainstream: Gay Drama and Theatre in Britain Moves in from the Margins', *Australasian Drama Studies*, 31 (October 1997), p. 75.
10. B. Roberts, 'Whatever Happened to Gay Theatre?', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 16, 62 (May 2000), p. 175.
11. Sinfield is alluding to the hostility on the part of certain British newspapers in the mid-1990s to what some critics considered to be the invasion of plays with a gay component, such as Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, Harvey's *Beautiful Thing* and *Babies*, Elyot's *My Night with Reg*, or Noël Coward's *Design for Living*. *Angels in America Part One: Millennium Approaches* and *Angels in America Part Two: Perestroika* were hugely successful when they were staged at the Cottesloe, National Theatre, where they opened on 17 January 1992 and 12 November 1993 respectively, both directed by Declan Donnellan. As has been mentioned, Harvey's *Beautiful Thing* and Elyot's *My Night with Reg* also had sell-out runs. Harvey's *Babies*, directed by Polly Teale, opened at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs on 5 September 1994. Coward's play opened at the Donmar Warehouse on 22 September 1994, in a production directed by Sean Mathias which transferred to the Gielgud Theatre on 20 February 1995. But it was the impending transfer of *Beautiful Thing* to the West End's Duke of York's Theatre which triggered the above-mentioned polemic. Charles Spencer, from the *Daily Telegraph*, published 'He Dares to Be Popular' on 21 September 1994, and Milton Shulman's 'Stop the Plague of Pink Plays' appeared in the *Evening Standard* on 30 September of the same year; in contrast, Nicholas de Jongh's 'The Love that is Shouting its Name', published in the *Evening Standard* on 29 September, voiced a positive analysis of the issue in question. In this connection, see Enric Monforte's interview with de Jongh in this volume.
12. Young, 'Sleeping with the Mainstream', p. 75.
13. A. Sinfield, *Cultural Politics – Queer Reading* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 65–72; *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 350; *Gay and After* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998), p. 14.
14. Young, 'Sleeping with the Mainstream', pp. 78 and 75.
15. In fact, the London Partnerships Register was created in September 2001 as a first step to recognize the partnership status of both homosexual and heterosexual couples. Subsequently, other registration schemes were set up throughout the United Kingdom. Finally, a ground-breaking Civil Partnership Act became law on 18 November 2004 and came into effect on 5 December 2005. The Act took over the Partnerships Register as a means of providing same-sex couples with legal recognition to all effects.
16. Roberts, 'Whatever Happened to Gay Theatre?', p. 184.
17. Ibid.
18. J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).
19. Split Britches is a US lesbian/feminist theatre company founded by Deborah Margolin, Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver in 1980. They carry out what they call 'gender-bending performances'. Some of their shows are *Split Britches* (1980), *Dress Suits to Hire* (1987), *Belle Reprieve* (1991), *Lesbians Who Kill* (1992), and *Lust and Comfort* (1995, with Gay Sweatshop).

20. Bloolips is the name of a British drag troupe established in 1977 by Bette Bourne, who was later on joined by Paul Shaw. In their performances, they explore the potential of a radical use of camp and drag, with an emphasis on gender-bending. On a theoretical analysis of the work of Split Britches and lesbian performance art see, for example, S. E. Case (ed.), *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/Feminist Performance* (London: Routledge, 1996); K. Davy, 'Reading Past the Heterosexual Imperative!', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 33 (1989), pp. 153–70; J. Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor and London: UMI Research Press, 1988); L. Hart and P. Phelan (eds), *Acting Out* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993); and T. de Lauretis, 'Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation', in H. Abelove, A. Barale and D. M. Halperin (eds), *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 141–58. On the collaboration between Split Britches and Bloolips see, for instance, S. Maddison, *Fags, Hags and Queer Sisters* (London: Macmillan, 2000).
21. *Belle Reprieve* (1991), a joint venture of Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver with the Bloolips, was loosely adapted from Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. It earned the cast a Village Voice Obie Award for ensemble acting in 1993.
22. See Enric Monforte's interview with Neil Bartlett in this volume.
23. Sinfield, *Out on Stage*, pp. 4 and 1.
24. Ibid., p. 332.
25. The characters of Shen Te and Shui Ta, a female and a male respectively, are played by the same actor and could be seen as two sides of the same person. On new readings of Brecht's play from the perspective of gender and sexuality see, for example, A. Solomon, *Re-Dressing the Canon* (London: Routledge, 1997).
26. This was indeed the case until Cheek by Jowl, founded in 1981 by Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, started investigating the implications of gender issues in their productions of Shakespearean and other plays. This can be seen, for instance, in their version of *Twelfth Night* (1986), and in their all-male *As You Like It* (1991), directed by Donnellan and designed by Ormerod.
27. *Citizenship*, directed by Daniel Clarke, was shown at the Jermyn Street Theatre on 28 June 2005, as part of the London Pride Festival. The play was also shown on 6 July 2005 at the Cottesloe, National Theatre, directed by Margaret Tully, and then at the Olivier on 12 July 2005, directed by John Hoggarth. It was written specifically for Shell Connections, a programme led by the National and devoted to promoting theatre among young people. In 2005, Ravenhill and other playwrights were specially commissioned to write plays which were then produced in schools and theatres around Britain and finally shown at the National. This edition of the festival took place from 6 to 12 July 2005. Moisés Kaufman's *The Laramie Project*, directed by Ruth Carney, was premiered at the Sound Theatre on 17 June 2005. Matthew Todd's *Blowing Whistles*, directed by Phil Wilmot, opened at the Warehouse Theatre (Croydon) on 27 May 2005.
28. S. Freeman, *Putting Your Daughters on the Stage: Lesbian Theatre from the 1970s to the 1990s* (London: Cassell, 1997).

Index

Note: The pages for the fourteen interviews are given in boldface after the interviewees' names. Some of the information included in the notes is repeated across different interviews, but in the Index the reader is addressed to the same information only once.