Current problems in British Playwriting

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When I was three and three quarters, my parents first took me to the theatre. The play was *Beauty and the Beast* by Nicholas Stuart Gray, and at the first entrance of the masked and fearsome creature, I screamed the place down. Eventually, my behaviour became so disruptive that I had to be removed from the auditorium, and as, conveniently, my aunt was administrator of the theatre, I was escorted backstage to meet the now maskless beast in his dressing room, to shake his hand, to watch him put his mask on again, to shake his hand a second time, and to be taken back into the auditorium. Thus reassured, on his next entrance, I screamed the place down.

I have had good experiences in the theatre since, but none quite like that. A year later I went to the same playhouse to see the same author's *The Tinder Box* –a play full of sinister witches and huge dogs. But this time I was wise. I'd realised it was illusion. And I'd realised also that there was nothing in the world I wanted to do more than helping to make those illusions. From the day the magic died –or more accurately, the day I realised that it was magic– I wanted to be up there with the magicians.

Between the ages of 13 and 19, however, I found my ambitions somewhat narrowed. Following a disastrous school

performance as the governess Miss Prism in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* –personally I blame the shoes– my mother concluded «well, it's not going to be acting, is it, dear?». In subsequent years I realised –or was informed– that it was unlikely to be designing, directing nor stage management either. I came to writing, therefore, by process of elimination, it being –among other advantages, like being indoor work with no heavy lifting– the only theatrical craft which didn't involve daily interaction with other people.

There is a third defining date in my history. I was 20, and thus in my second year at university, in 1968. My experience of the world wide student revolt of the late 1960s, which was at its height that year, gave me a mission for my work and indeed my life which has continued, through various processes of revision, up to the present day. And when I left university, even more when I left a short career in journalism three years later, I decided that that mission was best pursued not just by writing, but by writing in the theatre.

I want to talk about why that was and, in my view, remains a good decision. Why –in other words– the great questions of British society have been more consistently, rigorously and durably confronted in theatre than anywhere else. Of course, there have been peaks and troughs, periods in which film or television drama or the novel appeared to speak more prominently for the times. There have been short periods when new theatre writing and its social and political mission seemed to be stalled, when the energy moved into productions of the classics or experimental work. But taken as a whole I think that, since the premiere of John Osborne's ground-breaking play *Look Back in Anger* at the Royal Court Theatre in 1956, in wave upon wave, new theatre writing has been (in Balzac's phrase) the most effective secretary of the times.

So, from 1956 to the mid 1960s, the first generation of Royal Court dramatists (Osborne himself, Arnold Wesker, the early plays of Edward Bond) defined both a new kind of play (the kitchen sink drama) and a new kind of writer (the Angry Young Man). In the 1970s the revolutionary generation which had come to adulthood in the late 60s charted the disillusionment and even collapse of postwar British society. In the 1980s another generation challenged the place of women in society, history and the family. While in the 90s the upsurge of so-called in-yer-face Theatre gave voice to a generation which had grown up under the triple threat of AIDS, drugs and Margaret Thatcher. Despite those who argued that text-based theatre was dead, the explosion of work by Mark Ravenhill, Sarah Kane and a dozen other new British playwrights not just on home ground but across the continent confirmed the continued vibrancy of new writing. Like any regular theatre traveller, I now know the words for 'shopping', 'fucking', 'blasted' and, indeed, 'psychosis' in most of the languages of the expanded EU.

Why is this so? There are some important institutional factors. New writing has been supported by artistic directors who could perfectly well have decided –as many continental intendants decided– to concentrate on the flashier business of directing the classics or dabbling in the avant-garde. In the 50s, George Devine could have devoted his tenure as director of the Royal Court to continental absurdism rather than to the plays of John Osborne, Arnold Wesker and John Arden. In the 70s, Peter Hall and Trevor Nunn didn't have to open up the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) to playwrights dedicated to the destruction of bourgeois institutions. Had Max Stafford-Clark followed his father into psychiatric medicine, he would not have launched and/or

sustained the careers of Howard Brenton, Caryl Churchill, Mark Ravenhill and dozens of others. Between them, these directors created an environment in which political new writing could flourish.

But it wasn't just directors. New generations of actors learnt their craft, not by playing small parts in drawing room comedies and whodunnits in local repertory theatres, but in radical theatre companies doing new plays anatomising the collapse of capitalism. Furthermore, they insisted that the processes they had learnt there be applied to those great theatrical institutions they moved on to join. Similarly, young theatre writers in particular sought to overcome their traditional isolation by developing all kinds of collective methods and institutions to fight for their interests and, indeed, to develop their work: from group writing to the creation of small-scale theatre companies, sometimes led by writers, almost all of which had systems of play-making which involved actors, directors and designers collaborating in research and development. (One notable example being Max Stafford-Clark's 1970s company Joint Stock). Meanwhile, young writers working for companies like Joint Stock, and increasingly the RSC and the National Theatre formed a Theatre Writers' Union in 1975, which brought together playwrights not just to negotiate agreements but to debate the aims and purposes of their craft. These writers transmitted these ideas to a new generation through self-help groups like North West Playwrights in Manchester, Northern Playwrights Society in the north-east and Stagecoach in the West Midlands. The techniques developed in these self-help groups formed the basis for a huge expansion in playwriting studies in universities, with which I was involved as the founder of the first postgraduate playwriting course, at the University of Birmingham, in 1989.

Taken together, the commitment of directors and their companies, and the efforts of writers themselves, created an environment in which playwrights could sustain careers in the theatre. But, of course, the creation of such an environment was a necessary but not sufficient condition for the flowering of new writing which began in the late 50s and which has continued –for much longer than any other wave of new theatre writing in the British Isles– up to the present day. The real reason why new writing has defied all the predictions of its demise –or the total take over of theatre of classical productions, hit musicals or site-specific experimental theatre events devised by actors– is that new theatre writing has a subject that has spoken to audiences who couldn't find discussion of those subjects anywhere else.

Or rather, it has had subjects. As is the way with generational change, each new wave sought both to renew and to overthrow what had gone before. For the first wave, Osborne, Wesker and in his way Pinter, the enemy was the theatre that immediately preceeded them, a theatre which articulated a general urge in British society to withdraw from the upheavals of the 40s and return to the rose-tinted certainties of the interwar years.

The big subject that these writers addressed was this: what would be the ultimate effect on British culture of the democratisation that had taken both the writers and their audiences out of the working and lower-middle-class and into the new intelligentsia. My generation, the one that followed, was enabled by three new factors to take a much more radical view of the theatre experience. The first was the abolition of stage censorship, which had been instituted in the early 18th century to stop the political satires of Henry Fielding, and which prevented, among other things, British playwrights

from showing two men in bed together, mentioning venereal disease, criticising the Royal Family, insulting friendly foreign powers, or representing God. The government's powers over theatre were abolished in August 1968 –literally, as the Democrats gathered for their notorious convention in Chicago and Russian tanks rolled into Prague– enabling work of an overt sexual (and political) character, but also work that was topical or indeed improvised. The second factor was the great expansion of state subsidy to small-scale theatre in the late 60s, which enabled the third factor, the explosion of alternative theatre spaces and forms soon to be called the Fringe. For in a way, the defining characteristic of our generation, at least at the beginning, was that it sought a new audience outside theatre buildings –indeed, sometimes out of buildings altogether– often in collaboration with an alternative, non-literary, avant-garde theatre form then called performance art, in collective advocacy and celebration of the revolutionary spirit of the age.

The spirit of that period was brought home to me most vividly by a particular event. I lived in the late 60s and early 70s in the Yorkshire textile town of Bradford, then the north of England centre of the late 60s hippy counterculture, which played host to a veritable garden of exotic theatrical flowers during the two immensely successful Bradford Festivals of 1970 and 1971. (So successful were they, by the by, with so many people having such an obviously wonderful time, that the City authorities refused to finance a third, on the grounds that giving so many people so much unambiguous pleasure was clearly a gross abuse of public funds). Here, you would find performance artists careering around the city on pink bicycles ridden in aeronautic display formation; there, my friend Howard Brenton's play*Scott of the Antarctic* was being performed in the ice rink, with myself essaying the small but nonetheless significant role of the Almighty; while, somewhere else, Portable Theatre were presenting an early play by David Hare or Snoo Wilson, as like as not involving loud bangs and dead dogs, the Welfare State troupe was enacting a pagan child's naming ceremony –with fire-eaters and real goats– in the Wool Exchange, and Albert Hunt's Art College Group were staging a full-scale mockup of an American presidential election, with live elephant, in the streets of the city. And, somewhere else again, in clubs and pubs, agitprop groups with names like Red Ladder and the General Will were relating contemporary labour history, and joining, in their own way, the general and universal call for the overthrow of all fixed things. And I have to say that I believe that almost everything that has been good about British theatre in the years that followed –its boldness, its imagination, its commitment, its collective methods, its populism and accessibility– was exemplified in those festivals.

However, as the 70s developed this fragile unity between political theatre and performance art, between the verbal and the visual, the university and the art college, the theatre of thought and the theatre of imagination, began to splinter, as (first of all) the performance artists split off from political theatre makers to form their own performance circuits with their own devotees. Then there was the division within the political theatre movement, as some theatre-makers remained committed to seeking a working-class audience outside theatre buildings, while others sought to make a career in the mainstream theatre, moving away from the streets and on to the stages of the great institutional theatres in London: the Royal Court, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre. Those who made this move justified it on the grounds

of gaining a wider audience; those who didn't, suspected more opportunistic, careerist motives. There is truth on both sides.

The political plays that arose out of this process –written by such as David Hare, Trevor Griffiths, Howard Brenton, Howard Barker and myself– shared a number of characteristics, of which the most important were a hostility to domestic and family settings, a determination to write plays set in present-day England, and a shared model of what had made that England what it was.

In essence, Hare's *Plenty*, Brenton's *The Churchill Play* and my *Destiny* pursued elements of a single grand narrative which very roughly went like this: Britain had been on the right side in the war against Hitler, but had squandered its moral capital afterwards. There'd been a chance after the war to create a genuine egalitarian, emancipatory socialism, but it was implemented too half-heartedly by the 1945-51 Labour government and the opporturnity was lost. The country then held a kind of party in the 5øs and 6øs, squandering its post-imperial riches, and in the 7øs had gone into free-fall and economic, political, cultural and moral decline, at the end of which, it was assumed, final collapse would occur and something called 'true socialism' would emerge phoenix-like from the ashes.

And of course, something new did indeed emerge in Britain at the end of the 7øs, but it sure as hell wasn't true socialism, but the resurgent conservatism of Margaret Thatcher. More profound than our embarrassment, however, was a sense that had been growing through the late 7øs that the emergent social issues were not to be constrained within the iron certainties of class politics, but were to be found within the crevices of the much more fragile, porous but intriguing geology of difference. So the third wave of new playwrights –those who emerged in the early to mid 8øs– didn't answer to names like David, John and Howard but to Charlotte, Sharman, Bryony and Clare. In 1979, there were two currently-writing, nationally-known women writers in Britain (Pam Gems and Caryl Churchill). A decade later there were two dozen. Incidentally, the explosion of women's theatre writing in the 8øs was a dramatic example of the importance of self-generated structures; it took off when major theatre companies like the Royal Court dramatically increased the number of plays by women they presented; but it wouldn't have happened without pressure from young women playwrights trying to break into the profession in the late 7øs, working through the Theatre Writers' Union and the self-help groups, forming and transforming their own organisations, and demanding that the patrician institutions open their doors.

The emergence of this major new force in British theatre writing once again involved an intergenerational battle, with young feminist writers attacking the socialist playwrights of the 7øs, not only on the gender balances of our casts of characters but on the very location of our plays. And women writers were a central part of a self-conscious reassertion of a theatre of the regions and nations of the United Kingdom which emerged in the 8øs.

On this reading, one could structure a kind of three-act drama which reflected (as indeed it would) the political debate that surrounded it. So, act one asked how the working class would use its new found wealth and power; act two proposed a drastic answer to that question; and act three articulated a radical politics based not on class but on race, gender and sexuality.

But even with class on the back burner, what all three shared was an assumption that the basic fault line continued to be between a belief in cultural and political emancipation on the one hand, and a descent into disillusioned and cynical traditionalism on the other. Increasingly, however, political and cultural conservatism reemerged not as a last refuge but as a first port of call. What happened with Mrs Thatcher's election in 1979, in culture as in all spheres of life, was a power-shift from the producer to the consumer. Margaret Thatcher's great political insight was that she could use the market-place to achieve essentially political objectives –in culture as much as in industrial relations she sought to disarm the left by letting the market rip.

Hence, the paradoxical fact that while the commercial was aestheticised (in every area of life from interior decoration via advertising, fashion and graphic design to food), the arts under Mrs Thatcher were commercialised. So, like passengers, patients and parents, playgoers became 'customers', who as we know are always right. The first effect of this was on the high avant-garde –people were no longer prepared to accept that if they didn't understand something it was their fault. Then, dominated by market demand for more of what the audience liked last time, theatre repertoires became increasingly homogenised. There was, for a kick-off, a nationwide epidemic of stage adaptations of novels (up from 6% of repertoire in the 70s to 20% in the late 80s), suggesting that theatre had lost confidence in itself, and was turning to other media for validation.

Overshadowing all of this, in sheer scale, was the theatrical form that symbolised the eighties most profoundly. Whatever you think of them, it is now clear that, in box office terms, the through-composed hi-tech musical can claim not only to be the most successful new stage form of the 1980s, but perhaps the most successful of all time. There is no precedent for the longevity of so large a number of stage shows. On 19 June 1997, *Cats* became the longest running musical ever on Broadway, a record overtaken by *The Phantom of the Opera* in January 2006. By converting playgoers from regular attendance to the occasional slambang treat, the big musicals have transformed the theatre going experience; by exposing major classical directors, designers and actors to the commercial market they have transformed the culture of the rehearsal rooms to which these artists returned.

And although initially new, their increasing familiarity, and the copper-bottomed assurance of a great night out that they appeared to provide, contributed in the late 80s to a growing fear of new work of a more modest and perhaps less predictable kind. And all of this was justified by a growing belief among directors in particular that new work had run out of steam. Meanwhile, in the small scale, those new work companies which survived were not engaging writers, but devising plays themselves.

So for all the energy of the theatre of difference in the 1980s, the peak had clearly passed by the end of the decade and the playwrights of identity and difference had joined the Angry Young Man and the Revolutionary Playwrights of the Seventies among things of the past. The future –if theatre had a future– lay in experimental productions of not always unjustly neglected classics, big musicals, or shows constructed by performance groups, without any written text at all.

Of course this was all wrong.

This explosion of new writing in the mid 90s –the movement which came to be known, variously, as the Brat Pack, in-yer-face theatre, smack and spunk theatre, the New

Brutalism, Neo-Jacobinism and, on this side of the English channel, New European Drama– had a transformative effect on British theatre. By the mid 90s, five years on from all the obituaries, British theatre found itself listed along with pop, fashion, fine art and food as the fifth leg of the new Cool Britannia, and not for revivals of Lope de Vega and deconstructions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The work of Mark Ravenhill, Sarah Kane, Enda Walsh, Nick Grosso, Rebecca Prichard and others was characterised by being about young people, having a cool and sheeny style, and containing explicit sex, drug use and violence. They also shared a subject. Although I understand why writers resist the notion of being part of a movement, it seems to be unanswerable that, both within and beyond the work of these writers, the mid-to-late 90s theatre addressed masculinity and its discontents as demonstrably as the plays of the early 60s addressed class and those of the 70s the failures of social democracy. The decline of the dominant role of men –in the workplace and in the family– is probably the biggest single domestic story of the last 30 years in western countries. Insofar as masculinity touches on economic, cultural and social issues –most particularly violence and militarism– it is a political subject. Certainly, Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, in which a coercive relationship between an older man and a younger woman is transformed –metaphorically and literally– into a Balkan warzone is one example of how in-yer-face drama recharts the relationship between the personal and the political.

In-yer-face drama was political in another way. Because Mark Ravenhill writes about a generation which can't see beyond next Tuesday or back past last weekend, it doesn't mean he likes it. *Shopping and Fucking* is an elegy for lost political certainties. In Ravenhill's underestimated *Some Explicit Polaroids*, an AIDS victim who is refusing to take the medication which will save his life, admits: «I want Communism and apartheid. I want the finger on the nuclear trigger. I want the gay plague. I want to know where I am». Similarly, a subsequent Brat Pack play to take Europe by storm, Gregory Burke's *Gagarin Way*, is about a group of articulate but incompetent antiglobalisation protesters whose hamfisted and finally disastrous capture of a company boss is consciously evocative of the bold political activism of an earlier era. Far from celebrating the death of the class struggle, it seems to me that one of the great subjects of in-yer-face theatre is mourning its loss.

Critics of this reading pointed to what has happened to in-yer-face theatre since the symbolic moment of Sarah Kane's tragic suicide in February 1999. Yes, Ravenhill, sure, Burke (these critics said), but look at the rest. The continued dominance of plays about young people shouting at each other in south London flats led to the suspicion that a theatre that sought to diagnose the crisis of masculinity was now merely a symptom of it; that a drama which sought to mourn the end of politics had biodegraded into a drama which demonstrated it.

This view became increasingly prominent in continental Europe, where the New European Drama was accused of being the brand name of an essentially commercial phenomenon. Its critics argued that for all its shock value, in-yer-face theatre was as cold and arid as the classical work it sought to supplant. These critics pointed to a falling audience for British in-yer-face and its followings, a decline in quality in the work of European writers influenced by them, and a reversion to the kind of high-concept classical reworkings for which postwar German theatre is famed.

However, challenging the blandness of much narrative storytelling, pushing the boundaries of representation, addressing the major social phenomenon of its time, I think in-yer-face theatre can stand with previous waves of new theatre writing, as a site in which the nation addresses and debates itself. And once again, the death of new theatre writing has been much exaggerated.

It's too early to look back on the new writing of the last decade with the analytical confidence that we look back on the earlier waves of new writing. But it's clear that 9/11 gave new writing a new subject. It's also clear that there is a particular form –fact-based theatre– that has emerged from the need to address the questions raised by the wars on terror and Iraq.

Several explanations have been put forward for this phenomenon. The first is that theatre-as-journalism is literally that: in plays like –in particular– David Hare's play about railway privatisation, *The Permanent Way*, theatre is doing the kind of investigative, analytical job on the contemporary world that conventional journalism is failing to do.

The second explanation is that fact-based drama is merely the form of a current renewal of political theatre, that, in essence, puts us back in the 1970s. One good way of mapping post 9/11 political drama is to place it on a spectrum, calibrated according to its strict fidelity to fact. On the one end, there is strict verbatim theatre, like the series of edited dramatizations of politically significant trials and tribunals at the Tricycle Theatre in north London, including several about Britain's vexed relationship with Iraq. Then there were factual plays like Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo's Tricycle play *Guantanamo: 'Honour Bound to Defend Freedom'*, based on edited interviews with prisoners, their relatives and lawyers, and the public record of statements by politicians. Other interview-based plays include Robin Soans' *The Arab-Israeli Cookbook*, presented at the Gate and the Tricycle, the same author's *Talking to Terrorists* (at the Royal Court and on tour), and indeed Hare's *The Permanent Way*. Further along the spectrum lies *Stuff Happens*, also by David Hare, which joined up the dots of the events from the 9/11 attacks through and beyond the Iraq invasion. Further out again are the satirical plays of Alistair Beaton, presenting loosely fictionalised versions of public figures in satirical treatments of subjects like spin doctoring and royal marriages.

Many of these plays have had considerable, and proper impact. Campaigns have been mounted against them by *The Times*. The Tricycle Theatre's edited version of the MacPherson inquiry into the metropolitan police's failure to catch the white killers of a young black man, Stephen Lawrence, contributed to a sea change in public opinion, and the acceptance of the concept of institutional racism.

But although powerful journalistically, verbatim drama is, theatrically, strangely bloodless. In trying to explain why, it's worth remembering that we have been here before. In the 50s and early 60s, the international Theatre of Fact movement built plays out of documents, particularly trial transcripts. The best known products of this school were Heinar Kipphardt's *In the matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, a dramatisation of the atom bomb scientist's arraignment for supposed communist sympathies, and Peter Weiss' *The Investigation*, about the postwar trials of the Auschwitz guards. However, the theory behind these works was precisely not to explain the phenomena they described. The strategy of using documents as opposed to dramatic invention was a conscious abdication: playwrights were saying that, after the enormities of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, the old concepts of cause and effect no longer apply. All the playwright can do is present the documents,

naked and unadorned, for the audience to make of them what it will. In this sense, Theatre of Fact is the other side of the coin of 50s and 60s absurdism. Both forms sought to display phenomena they could no longer explain.

Certainly, fact-based theatre calls attention to, and thus questions, the validity and credibility of the evidence on which we base our view of the world. By its nature, verbatim constantly reminds you that it is based on the evidence of inevitably partial individuals. Unlike naturalistic drama, which invites us to suspend disbelief, verbatim drama wears its sources on its sleeve. Unlike journalism, testimony theatre can be simultaneously reliant on and suspicious of its raw materials. But by being so, you could argue that the deliberate antitheatricality of the Tricycle tribunals, and the self-conscious minimalism of the interview-based play, allow their makers off the hook. The point about writing fiction (even about the great issues of the day) is that you can present a thesis unencumbered by factual specifics. One advantage of verbatim theatre is that you can present factual specifics unencumbered by a thesis. As so many of these plays have the conflict between the West and Islam at their core, maybe some of them are expressing the confusions and agonies that most progressive people feel as they face down the choice between neo-liberal adventurism and Islamic fundamentalism.

If, ultimately, fact-based drama implies a kind of abdication of the writer's role to inhabit and to explain, it's no surprise, perhaps, that much verbatim drama became decadently metatextual, less about the subjects it dealt with than about the business of assembling the evidence. Increasingly, verbatim theatre became not just sourced from interviews but about interviews. And the Tricycle tribunals have been as much about the contrast between the coolness of the inquisitive form and the heat of the events they seek to explicate as about reportage. The last Tricycle tribunal play –the 2007 *Called to Account*– dramatised a fake trial of Tony Blair for war crimes. In Gregory Burke's feted play about the Scottish regiment *The Black Watch*, he himself appears as a character, interviewing former soldiers, disappointed that he's a male playwright rather than the female researcher they expected. In David Hare's *The Permanent Way*, the author is an occasional off-stage presence; in his play about the financial crisis, *The Power of Yes*, he's the central character. Dennis Kelly's *Taking Care of Baby*, co-produced by Birmingham and Hampstead in 2007, fooled audiences into thinking that a fictional play about a woman accused of murdering her baby was a real documentary drama.

But what has taken over from verbatim theatre is not –as some commentators gleefully anticipated– the final victory of non-text based, site-specific, performance theatre devised by actors. The 2007-2011 Arts Council theatre policy statement drops new writing from its production priorities in favour of giving 'particular emphasis to experimental practice and interdisciplinary practice, circus and street arts'. However, recent arts council-commissioned research indicates that the 00s saw a spectacular expansion in new writing in British subsidized theatre (from under 20% to over 40% of the total repertoire), and new writing breaking out of small, studio theatres on to main stages. Much of that new writing consists of plays by young writers –many of them Asian or Afro-Caribbean, many of them women– set in semi-fictional or entirely fictional worlds. In that, they follow the most resonant political writing of the last 50 years.

Some of this work is loosely based on reality. Much of it is factional, set in worlds adjacent to the real, like Laura Wade's

recognisable but fictionalised picture of the current Conservative Party leadership when it was at Oxford University (in *Posh* at the Royal Court). There's been a whole raft of plays set in partially-recognisable African states, like Matt Charman's *The Observer* and J. T. Rogers' *The Overwhelming*; Lydia Adetunji's *Fixer* places fictional characters along a disputed oil pipeline in an identified Nigeria. Then there are issue-based plays, in which writers like Bola Agbaje and Lucy Kirkwood imagine fictional situations in order to explore the human costs of immigration control and sex-trafficking. In *Stovepipe* and *Roaring Trade*, Adam Brace and Steve Thompson, respectively, invent fictional participants in the real Iraq war and banking crisis; like Ravenhill's *Some Explicit Polaroids*, Alexi Kaye Campbell's *Apologia* and Stella Feehily's *Dreams of Violence* challenge the radicalism of earlier generations.

On the basis of previous waves, post-9/11 political theatre was due for a dip. In actual fact, it is being invigorated and remade by young writers from widely diverse backgrounds who are enriching their treatment of contemporary events by returning to the complexity and depth which only invented characters can provide. This new generation joins the Angry Young Men of the 50s, the post-'68 revolutionaries of the 70s, the women playwrights of the 80s, the in-yer-face, Brat Pack in the 90s and the fact-based dramatists of the 00s, finding new audiences and addressing issues that were immediate and important to them, and which were best confronted in the shared, safe space of dramatic fiction.

Over a decade ago, the National presented Keith Dewhurst's blistering adaptation of Mikhail Bulgakhov's satirical novel *Black Snow*, which contains a scene in which a young Russian playwright visits the great director Stanislavksi to discuss his script. The elderly maestro is joined by his even more elderly aunt who proceeds to inquire as to the purpose of the meeting. «Leonti Sergeyevich has brought me a play», the director announces. «Whose play?» enquires the aunt. «Leonti Sergeyevich has written the play himself» says the director. «But why? » demands the aunt. «Aren't there enough plays already? There are so many good plays in the world, it would take 20 years to act them all. Why put yourself to all the trouble of writing a new one? ». «Ah», says the Director, «but Leonti Sergeyevich has written a modern play». To which his aunt responds: «But we have nothing against the government».

The Pantheon of British playwrights contains conservatives and radicals, monarchists and republicans, Christians and atheists, patriarchs and feminists. But all of them have in common that when they wrote them their plays were new, modern, and had something against the government. Long may it so remain.

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