

## BEYOND TIMIDITY? The State of British New Writing

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It's January 2005, ten years since Sarah Kane's *Blasted* opened at the tiny Theatre Upstairs studio at the Royal Court. Although this was not the first play of the 1990s to have a raw in-her-face sensibility, it quickly became the most notorious. Kane was soon patronizingly characterized as the "bad girl" of British new writing for the theatre, a reputation which her last two plays, *Crave* (1998) and *4.48 Psychosis* (2000), with their obviously experimental approach to theatrical form, did much to challenge. In the years since her suicide at the age of 28 in 1999, British new writing has expanded apace—but how does the scene look at the start of 2005?

The first paradox is that although Kane's work has been extensively staged in many different versions all over Europe and beyond—recently, she was more often produced in Germany than Schiller—her importance in British theatre has already faded. Although, in September 2000, a 15-year-old newcomer, Holly Baxter Baine (whose *Good-bye Roy* was part of the Royal Court's Exposure season of young writers) could convincingly say that her favorite playwrights were Brecht and Kane, the fact is that Kane was soon worshipped more in the academy than by practitioners. Since 1999, her work has practically never been performed in Britain, except for the Royal Court's season in April-June 2001. Even so, this theatre only staged three of her five plays, and only one, *Blasted*, was given a new production. (*Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* were revivals of the original productions, and her other two plays were only given rehearsed readings.) Apart from a couple of new versions by the Glasgow Citizens theatre, and a production of *Crave* by Matt Peover's Liquid Theatre company, there have been no other stagings. Perhaps for this reason, there remains a great deal of ignorance about her work—despite her legendary reputation. In their glossy book, *Changing Stages* (2000), for example, Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright wrongly summarize the plot of *Blasted* as "an abusive relationship between father and daughter."

One reason for the lack of Kane productions is British theatre's relentless search for novelty. The explosion of creativity in the new writing scene in the mid-1990s—which I have documented in my polemical account, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*—spurred theatres to look for the next new talent, with the result that very few new plays ever

get a revival. Nevertheless, by the end of the 1990s, there was more new writing in British theatre than ever in its history. Names such as Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, David Greig, Joe Penhall, Philip Ridley, Conor McPherson, Anthony Neilson, Martin McDonagh, Phyllis Nagy, Patrick Marber, Tanika Gupta, David Eldridge, Marina Carr, Rebecca Prichard, and Roy Williams became known outside the narrow ambit of new writing specialists. It's relatively easy to make a list of more than 150 new British playwrights who have made their debuts in the past ten years. It has also been calculated that between 500 and 700 writers of stage plays, radio plays, and television drama make their living from writing in Britain. These are really remarkable figures, and unique in Europe. All this is evidence of a buzz in the air: as new work attracted the attention of the general public, it also woke up the funding authorities. Across the country, there have been abundant crops of new writing programs, new writing competitions and new writing festivals. New writing is now better funded, more diverse and more widespread than ever.

At the same time, with the new millennium starting, signs of crisis also appeared. Sure, the emergence of even more new talent—such as Charlotte Jones, Simon Stephens, Zinnie Harris, Enda Walsh, Abi Morgan, Gary Owen, Debbie Tucker Green, Rebecca Lenkiewicz, Joanna Laurens—was heartening, but such a blossoming of new work couldn't conceal the fact that not all was rosy in the garden. In 2002, the Soho Theatre's biennial Verity Bargate award for the best play by a first-time writer was withheld because the judges (including myself) thought that none of the plays submitted was good enough to win. The previous year, the panel of London's prestigious *Evening Standard* awards thought the same and left the best new play category empty. Of course, there were plenty of good new plays, but most of them were written by American, Irish or Scottish writers: for example, Stephen Greenberg's *Take Me Out*, Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul*, or Stephen Adly Guirgis's *Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train*; Eugene O'Brien's *Eden*, Enda Walsh's *Bedbound*, or Owen McCafferty's *Scenes from the Big Picture*; Gregory Burke's *Gagarin Way*, David Greig's *Outlying Islands*, or Anthony Neilson's *Stitching*. However entertaining, most young English writers couldn't match the originality, vision or imaginative scope of these writers. The best English plays were by veterans such as Caryl Churchill or Terry Johnson or Michael Frayn. So if there was a crisis of new writing, it was a crisis of young writing.

The reason for the crisis was not that young playwrights had nothing to say, but that they chose to say it in conservative and untheatrical ways. This was not a new problem: as long ago as 1968, Peter Brook had written in *The Empty Space* that "in theory few men [*sic*] are as free as a playwright. He can bring the whole world on to his stage. But in fact he is strangely timid." About thirty-five years later, most new British plays remained linear social-realist accounts of the experience of "me and my mates." They were timid plays and their timidity was expressed in small casts, small theatrical ambition, and an insular small-mindedness. They were small plays about small subjects put on in small spaces. In the ghetto of the studio theatre, countless poorly-developed plays played to coterie audiences of less than 100, and most were never heard of again. Some writers, having chosen an aesthetic derived from TV and

soap operas, were accused of using theatre as a calling card for more lucrative film work. More seriously, the whole in-ye-face sensibility, which had been so provocative in the mid-1990s, began to show signs of rapid aging. For example, depictions of anal sex, which had once been a powerful stage image of the “crisis of masculinity,” soon became as mannered as cigarette-holders were fifty years ago. And too few young playwrights could shrug off the dead hand of English culture, in which traditional notions of authenticity tend to privilege “dirty realism,” gritty naturalistic plays with working-class or underclass characters. The typical “me and my mates” play was usually set on a “sarf” London estate, complete with bad language and limited theatrical horizons. The paradox was that often the writers were middle-class and their visits to the lower depths smacked of cultural tourism, making art out of other people’s misery.

But, if social realism remained the bread and butter of much English new writing, there were also some signs of a different sensibility. The new millennium seemed to encourage a few writers to dip into the dimension of the imagination, drawing on older, more Continental, traditions of surrealism and absurdism. Good examples of this new magic realism from 2002 include Royal Court plays such as Jez Butterworth’s *Night Heron* and Nick Grosso’s *Kosher Harry*, as well as Caryl Churchill’s *A Number*. (In this, as in her other recent work, Churchill has demonstrated that age is no barrier to innovation, calling into question the habit of awarding the title of best living British playwright exclusively to men such as Harold Pinter or Edward Bond.) Unusually, innovative plays such as hers also did good box-office. In the Royal Court’s 2004 Young Writers Season, two plays—Clare Pollard’s *The Weather* and Robin French’s *Bear Hug*—expanded on tawdry sensibilities by going beyond council-estate naturalism and using boldly theatrical devices such as an on-stage poltergeist and a teenager turned into a bear. Even in the West End, there was room for a more poetic sensibility, with revivals of Moira Buffini’s *Dinner* (2003) and Marina Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats* (2004). At the same time, the continued success of new(ish) physical theatre or live art companies such as Frantic Assembly, as well as veterans such as Complicite and Forced Entertainment, showed that a fusion of text, dance and music was still one of the best ways of avoiding the banality of suffocating dramas set in sitting rooms dominated by center-stage sofas.

There was also evidence that young(ish) playwrights were not content to let things stay as they were. Enter the Monsterists, a group of writers determined to change the landscape of new writing. Their origins lie in Trevor Nunn’s valedictory *Transformation* season at the National Theatre in 2002. Whatever the limitations of that season (an aesthetic ragbag of every kind of new writing designed to bring in the young audiences rather than to explore new kinds of theatricality) it certainly stimulated the ambitions of practitioners such as Richard Bean, Moira Buffini, David Eldridge, Colin Teevan, and Sarah Woods. Having met at that theatre’s studio, they determined to do something about the poverty of new drama.

First, they penned a Monsterist manifesto “to promote new writing of large-scale work in the British theatre.” Playing with the similarity between the words

“monster” (as in large) and “*montrer*” (as in to show), the Monsterists not only aimed to put on big plays (though not necessarily with large casts) on main stages, but also had definite aesthetic designs. Their manifesto advocated “large concept” work, which shows rather than tells, implies meaning by action and not by lecture, and which is inspirational but not sensationalist. Desiring to liberate new writing “from the ghetto of the studio black box to the main stage,” they also demanded “equal access to financial resources for a play being produced by a living writer,” meaning equal to the resources lavished on dead writers. In short, they wanted “equal access to the means of theatre production.” In pursuit of this, they met new artistic directors—such as Nick Hytner at the National and Anthony Clark at London’s Hampstead Theatre—to discuss the possibility of producing large plays on large stages. They also used stunts, such as applying in a group for vacant artistic director posts, in order to question the received wisdom that buildings should be run by directors not writers. They have also joked about kidnapping a broadsheet critic for an evening: Would their newspaper ransom them?

However agreeable their intentions, there is a risk that such playwrights have drunk too deep of complacency. All of them rely on state subsidy, and few have yet addressed practically the issue of writing populist drama for large stages. Although they are able to write sophisticated plays in terms of structure and cutting-edge sensibility, it is uncertain whether huge audiences would be immediately attracted to these experiments. Finally, their tendency to blame critics for plays that flop seems like an easy alibi—surely it’s up to writers to deliver good stories well told? Besides, if the big institutions won’t put on their plays, what’s to stop young writers squatting in empty buildings and creating new spaces? After all, punk music and the rave scene both began when people decided to do it themselves. On the other hand, with the appointment of Nick Hytner, and of Michael Boyd to head the RSC, the chances of new writing leaving the Siberia of studio spaces and grabbing main stages are better than they have been for a generation.

Elsewhere, the events of the past two or three years have encouraged critics and commentators to applaud a revival of political drama, usually seen as theatre’s response to 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror. For the first time in ages, the Edinburgh Festival fringe has engaged with the wider world beyond flatshare dramas and council estate swear-fests, while all over Britain theatres have been putting on anti-war plays. Often hyped as a rediscovery of radicalism, this trend is, however, still being held back by the dead hand of naturalism and by the popular notion that docu-drama is the best way of staging ideas.

In autumn 2003, for example, the Tricycle Theatre put on *Justifying War: Scenes from the Hutton Inquiry*. Written by journalist Richard Norton-Taylor and director Nicolas Kent, the play was an edited version of the public enquiry into the death of weapons expert David Kelly, widely seen as a casualty of the Blair government’s desire to go to war in Iraq despite there being no immediate threat to Britain from Saddam Hussein. But although it was good to see theatre respond so quickly to

events, in this case the docu-drama was self-defeating. It strongly implied that the government had done wrong but the actual conclusion of the Hutton Inquiry, which was delivered after the play was staged, came to the opposite verdict, and exonerated Blair. In terms of aesthetics, the trend towards verbatim theatre, where most or all of what is spoken on stage is based on true statements, also seems to put the imagination on the back burner. Political plays such as David Hare's *The Permanent Way* (2003) and *Stuff Happens* (2004) or Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo's *Guantanamo: "Honor Bound To Defend Freedom"* (2004) come across as powerful public forums, but they can't be said to stretch drama's aesthetic boundaries, or even suggest ways of changing the world. Like Reality TV, they simply tell us what we already know.

Only when playwrights mix imaginative populism with radical ideas does political theatre really get a shot in the arm. After all, there's nothing quite as subversive as blending the joy of good ideas with a real sense of fun. In 2003, the trend-setters were two Scottish writers, Gregory Burke and Henry Adam. Burke's *The Straits* (Paines Plough) was set in Gibraltar during the 1982 Falklands War, when the kids of British servicemen fought with local "spics" and proudly declared that "War's what we do, innit. What we do best." Their bellicose assertion of national identity against an imaginary enemy felt uncomfortable in the light of the war on Iraq. Similarly, Adam's *The People Next Door* (Traverse Theatre), a sizzling farce about druggy dropout Nigel whose estranged brother Karim is suspected of being a Muslim terrorist, blended wild hilarity with serious ideas about our paranoia in the face of terrorism. Both writers questioned Britain's readiness to take on internal and external enemies. And, although hardly innovative in terms of form, plays such as these mark a welcome break from the *Trainspotting* tradition of the 1990s, when many playwrights simply described the plight of the dispossessed without questioning the reasons for their dispossession. The whole point of political theatre is that life is about much more than what happens on the domestic front. Since audiences nowadays would run a mile rather than sit through the worthy, wordy, and often woolly "state of the nation" plays that mercifully went out of fashion soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall, how do you write big plays about big subjects? One common cop-out is to say that all plays are political. This rip-off of the old feminist slogan that the personal is political is, however, totally self-defeating. If all plays, no matter how domestic, are political, then no plays are political. A better way of defining a political play might be to insist that it should offer both explicit political ideas and some hope of change. By this definition, the problem with verbatim theatre is that it merely reflects reality, when the point, surely, is to change it.

For example, look at two dramas by black writers which wowed audiences in 2003: Kwame Kwei-Armah's *Elmina's Kitchen* (National) and Roy Williams's *Fallout* (Royal Court) both tackled the subject of violence and the black community with wit and insight, but the depressing thing is that neither suggested any way of changing this reality. However powerful, both plays were more a cry of anger and despair than a call for change. A similar malaise afflicts the National's hit show, *Jerry Springer: the*

*Opera*, which transferred to the West End in the same year and remains a big crowd-pleaser. Okay, it is exciting to see a new musical that mixes filthy talk with classical baroque-style music. But, in terms of its politics, this one-joke evening only affirms, rather than challenges, Britain's obsession with American "trailer-trash culture." Just as Blair is often seen as Bush's poodle, so British popular culture seems to slavishly imitate the worst American models.

What new writing in British theatre needs most of all is to shake off its habitual timidity and to explore the world's more dangerous shores. Isn't it odd that there have been no British plays about global warming? Or corporate manslaughter? Or mixed-race identity? Who, apart from a couple of greyhairs, ever questions the liberal consensus in the British theatre system? Another way of defining political theatre is not only by its capacity to suggest change, but also by its ability to expand the imaginative horizons of its audiences, contesting the closing down of the imagination by the commercial mass media. At a one-day symposium, held at the RSC's Stratford-upon-Avon base, in October 2004, playwright Sarah Woods asked: "Why have a pool, if you only use it as a foot-spa?" It's a striking metaphor, and one that urges writers to expand their artistic canvas. In this sense, what matters is vision. I remember the press night of Leo Butler's *Redundant* at the Royal Court, this time on its main stage. Okay, it was a classic dirty realist play set on a council estate, a familiar howl of rage. But it did also have a visionary moment: at one point, the old granny turns on the rest of the cast and harangues them, "Someone should bomb this bloody country. That'd wake us up a bit. Saddam Hussein or someone. IRA, bleedin' whatsisface? Bin Laden. He could do it. Drop a few tons of anthrax. Teach us what it really means to suffer." On the press night, the line mentioning Bin Laden was cut—well, you can understand why: the date was September 12, 2001. But the speech does show how writers can connect with global events when they let their imaginations off the leash. Even more profoundly, a playwright such as Mark Ravenhill can justifiably argue that one of the most theatrical and thrilling responses to 9/11 was Churchill's *Far Away*, and that was first staged in November 2000, almost a year before the event.

Likewise, some of the most thought-provoking plays about the War on Terror are not the lurid satires that preach to the already converted, but reworkings of ancient Greek tragedies. For example, Martin Crimp's *Cruel and Tender* (2004), a free adaptation of Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, says more about the spirit of the age than most recent heavy-handed caricatures of Blair and Bush. And the same writer's short text, *Advice to Iraqi Women*, is a perfect example of how resonance is achieved by indirection and metaphor. In a similar vein, director Dominic Dromgoole pointed out recently, "When Shakespeare wrote his great historical plays, he chucked everything in: nonsense about witchcraft, battle scenes, father-son stuff, pageants, philosophical introspection. History, the record of facts, was a release for the great heap of images inside him—not a clamp on his imagination."

In 2005, perhaps the best antidote to timidity in British new writing is the irrepressible, untamed quality of the imagination—and perhaps the best mission for a theatre of the future is no less than the project to create a new idea of the human.

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