The New Theatre/ English Drama since the 1950s

When the Second World War ended in Europe in the summer of 1945, much of Britain was literally in ruins. This landscape of ruins must also be recognized as forming an integral part of much of the literature of the late 1940s and the early 1950s. It was a landscape which provided a metaphor for broken lives and spirits, and, in some remoter and less-defined sense, for the ruin of Great Britain itself. Drama of the post-war period shares, in some ways, the dominant spirit of the age present in novel and poetry from the 1950s onward. One thing that seems common to all the three is their concern with life at the elemental level—with life bare and bony, wholly demystified and demythologized, and with questions raised at the existential plane, and without any attempt to seek soothing escape or magic solution to the problems of existence.

The central stance in all the literary forms seems to be to face the stark realities of life, to take suffering as it comes, and to learn to accept the unheroic status man seems to have been assigned in the absurd universe in which he is condemned to live. Drama of the post-modern period brings a still sharper focus on all these aspects than do its counterpart forms of poetry and novel. And to do that, drama of this period has been more daring than the other two; it has been more innovative in technique, more shocking in defying social and moral conventions.

When John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*was opened at the Royal Court Theatre on May 8, 1956, it at once made an impression that a dramatic revolution was afoot in England. The play was published in 1957. The play shook the middle-class values of the “well-made play” founded by Ibsen and practiced in England by Shaw and Galsworthy. The audiences saw in Osborne’s play a new kind of drama which addressed “the issues of the day.” What was new about this drama was neither its politics, nor its technique so much as its alarm in rancour, language, and setting. The conventional theatrical illusion of neat and stratified society was replaced by dramatic scenes of untidy and antagonistic social groups. Other plays by Osborne include *Epitaph for George Dillon*, *The Entertainer*, *Luther, Inadmissible Evidence*, *A Party for Me*, *West of Suez*, *A Sense of Detachment*and *Watch It Come Down*. Osborne emerged as a rebel within Britain’s own established tradition. He responded to the native social and moral issues of his time, and without the burden of philosophy and symbolism. His *Look Back in Anger*came to be considered an epoch-making play. It became the launcher of the movement called “Angry Young Men.” He is a new type of protagonist, classless, aimless, restless, although placed in a conventional social context. Osborne’s *Luther*which too has for its title character an “angry young man,” who makes a strong assertion of his identity when he says, “Here I stand; God help me; I can do no more. Amen”.

Although considered a foreign influence (because *Waiting for Godot*reached England via France), Samuel Beckett was, in fact, the real pioneer of the New Theatre in Europe, including England. His much more radical drama than Osborne’s had been launched quite a few years earlier than Osborne’s. His *Waiting for Godot*was staged in Paris in 1953, and then in London  in 1955, and had created sensations all over Europe, which must have influenced the composition of Osborne’s play as well. Beckett was an Irish by birth, but from 1937 onward permanently resided in Paris, wrote his drama as well as fiction in French, only later to be translated in English. Beckett’s plays include, besides *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *Krapp’s Last Tape*, and *Happy days*. His *Come and Go*is a stark ‘dramaticale’ with three female characters and a text of 121 words. Then there is the even more minimal *Breath*a 30 second play consisting only of a pile of rubbish, a breath, and a cry. There is also a play called *Not I*, a brief, fragmented, disembodied monologue. All these plays are revolutionary in different ways. Beckett’s interest in the functioning and malfunctioning of the human mind, reflected by gaps, jumps, and lurches, remains at the centre of his fiction as well as drama. Beckett’s dialogue, for which his *Waiting for Godot*is especially remarkable, remains the most energetic. It is densely woven but equally supple. His settings are bare, just as his language is bald. Beckett’s concept of time in his plays is the most radical of his innovations. He presents the time present as broken, inconsistent and inconsequential. He also allows within that time present the intrusion of time past. It is, of course, never a flashback. Thus, Beckett remains the most radical among the Postmodernist playwrights in England, in fact, in the entire Europe.

The transformation of the English theatre in the late 1950s and early 1960s was both more gradual and more truly radical than can be explained by focusing on a single production or on the work of a single playwright. Before 1956 British drama, and the London stage in particular, had been far more open to new influences, both from home and abroad, than is often supposed. The work of two native playwrights, Christopher Fry and Terence Rattigan, belies the accusation of theatrical blandness with which some literary historians have damned the immediate post-war period. Fry’s attempt to revive the fortunes of poetic drama both derived from, and was contemporary with, T. S. Eliot’s later experiments in the same genre. He put his considerable international critical success in the early 1950s down to what he saw as a reaction against ‘surface realism’ in the theatre, with its ‘sparse, spare, cut-and-dried language’, and to a post-war world which longed again for a poetry of ‘richness and reaffirmation’. Nevertheless, the original commercial success of the comedies *A Phoenix too Frequent* , *The Lady’s Not For Burning* , and *Venus Observed*  and of the church pageant *A Sleep of Prisoners* cannot be put down solely to the excellence of their original casts.

Terrence Rattigan is a far more impressive dramatist. He was neither an innovator nor a particularly cerebral writer, but he was a profound sympathizer with the cause of the victims of what he saw as the tyrannous hypocrisies, the double standards, and the emotional coldness of ‘respectable’ British society. Although his first theatrical success, *French Without Tears*  made few real demands on either the emotions or the intellect, his equally ‘well-made’ post-war plays took up the themes of vulnerability and victimization. In *The Winslow Boy* (, a middleclass father determines to play by constitutional rules in battling against the oppressive weight of the British Establishment. In *The Deep Blue Sea* ,however, an equally middle-class character, the wife of a judge, determinedly breaks social rules by having a passionate affair with a bluff, down-at-heel RAF officer and by desperately attempting suicide.

John Arden was in many ways typical of a new generation of playwrights launched at the Royal Court: provocative, argumentative, brusque, and Anglo-Brechtian. Arden’s *Live Like Pigs* a play about the resettlement of gypsies in a housing-estate, explores anti-social behaviour. It leaves the firm impression that ‘respectability’ and its official guardians, the police, were ultimately far more damaging to society than the unconventional mores of the play’s gypsies. Arden’s most celebrated and punchy play, *Serjeant Musgrave’s Dance* addresses its anti-militaristic theme with a combination of Brechtian exposition and music-hall routines.

Arnold Wesker in his most substantial work, the so called ‘Trilogy’ (*Chicken Soup with Barley*, *Roots*, and *I’m Talking about Jerusalem*), manages to relate his intense respect for working-class community to a social, historical, and political perspective. In all three plays, Wesker conveys an acute sense of place by capturing distinctive ways of speaking and representing the distinctive rhythms of urban and rural domesticity. In 1958 he announced that he would like to write plays not simply ‘for the class of people who acknowledge plays to be a legitimate form of expression’, but also for ‘the bus driver, the housewife, the miner and the Teddy Boy.

By far the most original, flexible, and challenging of the new dramatists of the late 1950s, Harold Pinter was an actor by training and profession. All Pinter’s plays suggest a sure sense of the dramatic effect of pacing, pausing, and timing. Pinter’s early plays generally eschew direct political engagement and comment. They open up instead a world of seeming inconsequentiality, dislocated relationships, and undefined threats. Pinter’s first four plays — *The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Birthday Party* (all written in 1957), and *The Caretaker* (written in 1959) — indicate how positive was his response to the impact of *Waiting for Godot*; their distinctive air of menace, however, suggests the influence of Kafka and the patterning of their dialogue a debt to the poetry and early drama of Eliot. *The Homecoming*, marks something of a turning point in his career. Its most notable successors, *Old Times* , *No Man’s Land*, and *Betrayal*, all extend its calculated uncertainty and its hints of menace and ominousness. All of them are distinguished by their teasing play with unstable human relationships. As in *The Birthday Party*, language is seen as the means by which power can be exercised and as something that can be defined and manipulated to suit the ends of those who actually hold power.

Joe Orton has quite as refined a sense of the potential of the state, its institutions, and its human instruments to oppress the citizen as has Pinter. He had good reason to distrust the political system under which he lived, and, by extension, all systems of authority and control. The five major comedies that Orton completed before his untimely death — *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, *Loot*, *The Ruffian on the Stair, The Erpingham Camp* , and *What the Butler Saw*— were calculated to outrage which he had long defined himself. His comedy served not simply to expose the folly of the fool, the double standards of the hypocrite, or the unbalanced humours of everyman, but to disrupt the very status quo. Orton’s comedy is explosive, untidy, and unresolved. He does not simply exploit the traditional forms of comedy and farce, but also dangerously transforms them. He takes an anarchist’s delight in fostering disorder.

Tom Stoppard’s play’s are implosive, symmetrical, and logical. Stoppard seems to take a deep intellectual pleasure in parallels, coincidences, and convergences that extends beyond a purely theatrical relish. At their most brilliant, his plays are carefully plotted, logical mystery tours which systematically find their ends in their beginnings. His *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, which opened at the National Theatre in April 1967 is *Hamlet* playfully reread according to Einsteinian laws, Eliotic negatives, and Beckettian principles. Everything is rendered relative. The perspective is changed, time is fragmented, the Prince is marginalized, and two coin-spinning attendant lords are obliged to take on the weight of a tragedy which they neither understand nor dignify. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* de-heroizes, but, despite its frantically comic surfaces, it never expels the impending sense of death implied in its title.

The work of Edward Bond has always rigorously cultivated plainness in both expression and design. Bond shows violence as the inescapable consequence of the brutalization of the working class in an uncaring, stratified, industrial society. In *Narrow Road to the Deep North* , *Lear*, *Bingo*, and *The Fool*  anger and violence are seen not merely as the only means of self expression open to the socially deprived but also as the engine of social change, both for good and for ill. These plays are concerned with power and the corruptions of power, and are all equally concerned with the stance of the artist who is faced with the evidence of such corruptions. In the most emotionally challenging of Bond’s plays, *Lear*, he not only drastically revises the King Lear story but also re-engages with Shakespeare’s themes of blindness, madness, and the exercise of power. There is little room for what might conventionally or comfortingly be seen as ‘poetry’ or ‘tragedy’. Bond’s version is remarkable for its brutally stilted language, for its extravagant and unremitting representation of violence, and for its messy, clinical dissection of human nastiness.

The new, radical drama of the 1970s and 1980s, with which Howard Brenton, Trevor Griffiths, David Hare , and David Edgar were prominently associated, was essentially the product of the assimilated political and cultural lessons of the Parisian *événements* of May 1968. Much of the political drama of the 1970s and 1980s was founded on the assumptions that rotten capitalist society was on the brink of collapse and that there was a widening division between ‘them’ and ‘us’. Generally, the political drama of the period worked from a basis of Marxist theory informed by the example of 1968, but it rarely addressed problems beyond those of the local difficulties which beset post-imperial little-England.

Caryl Churchill's work has been equally rooted in opposition to a social system based on exploitation. Unlike her male counterparts, however, Churchill has recognized an equation between the traditional power exercised by capitalists and the universal subjection of women. Her woman characters emerge as the victims of a culture which has regarded them merely as commodities or which has conditioned them to submit to masculine social rules. Her plays have systematically thrown down challenges either by reversing conventional representations of male and female behaviour as in the *Owners*  or by drawing disconcerting parallels between colonial and sexual oppression as in *Cloud Nine* with its ostensibly farcical shifts of gender and racial roles. In the multilayered *Top Girls* Churchill explores the superficial ‘liberation’ of women in the Thatcherite 1980s.

The most distinctive and sharp-witted new woman playwright to emerge in the 1990s is Shelagh Stephenson. In addition to a good number of inventive and original radio plays, she wrote her first stage play *The Memory of Water* which is a remarkable achievement.

Probably the most intelligent, challenging, and humane of the political playwrights who established a reputation in the 1970s and 1980s is the most senior, Brian Friel an Irishman who has written almost exclusively about and for Ireland. His plays are *Philadelphia, Here I Come, The Freedom of the City, Making History, Translations* and *Dancing at Lughnasa.*

Probably no one playwright discussed so far has been able to match the popular success and the prolific output of Alan Ayckbourn. Ayckbourn’s success has been based not simply on his sure ear for ordinary conversation or on his sharp observation of the whims, vices, irrationalities, and snobberies of precisely the kind of people who come to see his plays, but on his ability to amuse and provoke without giving offence. Despite Ayckbourn’s prominence on both professional and amateur stages, his work, like that of many other living

and dead dramatists, has reached a mass audience only through the medium of television.

As a patron of new drama that British television has performed an invaluable service to working writers and to their prospective audiences. Television’s most solid contribution to artistic innovation has been through the evolution of a specific kind of drama shaped by the special resources of the medium. This innovation has been especially associated with Alan Bennett and Dennis Potter. Bennett has also maintained an active involvement with the theatre. His noteworthy television plays are *An Englishman Abroad* and *Talking Heads.*

Potter is far more exclusively associated with television. Some of his earlier works are *Alice*, a version of Lewis Carroll’s stories, *Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton* and *Stand Up for Nigel Barton*. Potter’s later works — notably the six-part drama *Pennies from Heaven*, *Blue Remembered Hills* and the supremely ingenious intermixture of music, fantasy, sex,

crime, and physical disease, *The Singing Detective*— suggest how profoundly television has been able to contribute to a still developing dramatic literature.

Source: Sanders, Andrew: *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* (New York, 2003)