

NTQ Reports and Announcements

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'In Yer Face' in Bristol

Report on the 'In-Yer-Face? British Drama in the 1990s' conference at the University of the West of England, Bristol, 6–7 September 2002

SOMETIMES the best way of looking at the future requires a backward glance. At the start of this conference, reference was made to 'About Now', the Eighth Birmingham Theatre Conference (1997), of which I gave an account in NTQ 51. If that was very much an interim report on the recent renaissance of new writing in British theatre, the publication of books such as my *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (Faber, 2001) and Dominic Dromgoole's *The Full Room: an A–Z of Contemporary Playwriting* (Methuen, 2002) has proved that the subject remains both exciting and controversial.

Now that new writing in British theatre is more diverse, more widespread, and has bigger audiences and better funding than ever, it might be salutary to remember that merely a decade ago critics and commentators were regularly bemoaning the 'crisis in new writing'. Then, in January 1995, came Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, and within a couple of years in-yer-face writers such as Mark Ravenhill, Anthony Neilson, Martin McDonagh, and Jez Butterworth had transformed the theatrical landscape.

Organized by Rebecca D'Monté and Graham Saunders – whose *Love Me or Kill Me: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (MUP, 2002) is the first book to examine all Kane's plays – the conference offered a chance to assess the significance of new writing. Playwright David Eldridge kicked off the event with a personal account of the 'nineties, in which he found himself unwillingly cast in the role of 'the writer as bloke', and pressurized by the expectations aroused by the early success of *Serving It Up*, which he described as 'two-fingers to some of my more PC student friends'. But while he was unhappy at being part of a 'banal in-yer-face gang', he was clear that in the past decade young writers have discovered a renewed sense of purpose.

In a paper titled 'Long Shadows and Elective Affinities', playwright Steve Waters reminded us that as well as marking a radical rupture with the past, the new writers of the 'nineties actively engaged with a rich tradition of British playwriting. Some of the best new work has been a rewriting of theatre traditions. After he suggested that the history of post-war British theatre could be recon-

figured with Edward Bond's *Saved* as the turning point rather than John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, the discussion broadened out to consider whether politics, in Mary Luckhurst's phrase, 'had become unfashionable'. Although the topic of race was notable by its absence, the question of what is political drama today constantly recurred.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority of papers were about the work of Sarah Kane. They included Julie Waddington's account of apathy and passion in *Phaedra's Love*, Steve Barfield's reading of *4.48 Psychosis* through a Lacanian perspective, Andy Smith's comparison of Kane and Howard Barker, Angela Stock's look at the links between Kane's violent stage images and those of Jacobean drama, and Valerie Martin-Pérez's analysis of cruelty in Artaud and Kane. Josephine Machon and Paul Woodward explored the experiential quality of her work by reference to Woodward's November 2001 production of *4.48 Psychosis*.

As well as Kane, the plays of Mark Ravenhill were examined by academics such as Sarah-Jane Dickenson and Helen Iball, who pointed out how echoes of Oscar Wilde and Tennessee Williams can be found not only in his *Handbag* but also in Phyllis Nagy's *Weldon Rising*; and Christine Quay, who examined the role of religion and metaphysics in Ravenhill's and Kane's plays. Among the most disturbing aspects of such work are the stage images of mutilation, and Dan Rebellato delivered a stimulating and original paper on the subject, suggesting that dismemberment and other atrocities express a desire for bodily wholeness in an age when globalization 'breaks up the body both literally and metaphorically'.

On the level of practice, director Anthony Shrubbsall explained how he tackled problems of characterization in *Mojo* and *Shopping and Fucking*, two plays which have an 'amoral void of emotional experience' at their centre. Similarly, Philip Roberts gave a glimpse into Max Stafford-Clark's rehearsal techniques by reading from his diaries of the Out of Joint production of Ravenhill's *Some Explicit Polaroids*. (Roberts is currently editing Stafford-Clark's diaries for publication.)

The reception of Sarah Kane in Germany, especially in productions at the Schaubühne, was the subject of Elahe Hashemi Yekani's paper, while Svetlana Klimenko looked at the 'special Danish enthusiasm' for Kane, and Mark Berninger 'went historical' by looking at Ravenhill's *Mother Clap's Molly House*, which he found 'more revelling than rebelling'. And Michal Lachman analyzed two Polish versions of Kane's plays and the way they split critical opinion.

As in 'About Now', women led the critical assault on clichéd approaches to new writing. A

feminist critique of the laddism and exclusiveness of in-yer-face theatre came from Carina Bartleet, who explored the links between today's women writers and the feminist theatre of the 'seventies and 'eighties. Elaine Aston spoke about Caryl Churchill's recent works, such as *Blue Heart* and *Far Away*, pointing out that critics have often failed to see that her power to disturb and discomfort was as strong as ever. Bill Boles argued that playwright Judy Upton was the previous decade's 'most accurate chronicler of gender wars'.

Scottish theatre and Irish drama were the subject of some controversial interventions. Jean-Pierre Simard looked at plays such as Simon Donald's *The Life of Stuff*, Irvine Welsh's *Headstate* and Suspect Culture's *Casanova*; David Pattie related plays by Chris Hannan, Stephen Greenhorn, and David Greig to ideas about national identity; while Donna Soto-Moretini read Grae Cleugh's *Fucking Games* through the lens of Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason*. In another session, Nadine Holdsworth gave an excellent account of Gary Mitchell's work while Mary Luckhurst attacked the radical pretensions of Martin McDonagh's *Lieutenant of Inishmore*.

The highpoint of the conference was not the celebrity interview with actor Kate Ashfield, who'd been in the original productions of *Blasted* and *Shopping and Fucking*, but David Greig's keynote talk on political theatre, in which he expanded on his idea that a political theatre must 'posit the possibility of change'. Criticizing plays such as Gregory Burke's *Gagarin Way* for ending on a 'implied statement of hopelessness', Greig suggested that true political drama must in some way expand the imaginative horizons of its audiences, contesting the closing down of the imagination by the commercial mass media. Drawing on his experiences in Portugal and Palestine, he revived the idea of a rough theatre, 'liberatory,

dangerous, poetic, intuitive, cheap, fast, enchanting, and surprising'. 'Rough theatre', as he said, 'comes from resisting the management of the imagination by global capitalism.'

Similarly wide-ranging was Ken Urban's stylish and provocative paper on 'Cruel Britannia', in which he argued that the in-yer-face writers of the 'nineties explored the ethics of an active nihilism at a time when being 'cool' has become an imperative – and British culture's chief export. In the ensuing discussion, the political shortcomings of much in-yer-face theatre were criticized, although the work of Kane and Ravenhill withstood left-wing scrutiny better than most. Other discussions that broadened the conference theme included Gordon Ramsay's Theatre of the Fantastic manifesto, Kate Katafiasz's look at the influence of postmodernism, and Juliet Rufford's examination of the Royal Court's new architectural style.

Winding up the conference, which was well attended and good humoured, I expanded on the theoretical and political implications of in-yer-face theatre, before arguing that, despite recent successes such as Anthony Neilson's *Stitching*, the first phase of in-yer-face sensibility in British theatre was now over, and that the future of new writing depended on exploring four areas: other styles such as magic realism; new fusions of writing, music, dance, and physical theatre; writing for bigger stages; and, perhaps, reinventing a radically alternative fringe theatre whose practitioners could squat empty properties and put on shows outside the official and highly commercialized theatre system. But, in view of the volatile international situation, the words that had the greatest impact were not mine but those of Bertolt Brecht: 'Does not everything indicate that the night is falling and nothing that a new age is beginning? Should we not adopt an attitude appropriate to the people going into the night?'