

Aleks Sierz

Still In-Yer-Face? Towards a Critique and a Summation

The dramatic upsurge of contemporary new writing on British stages in the past decade, and the emergence of a fresh generation of playwrights led by such talents as Mark Ravenhill, Philip Ridley, Joe Penhall, Phyllis Nagy, Patrick Marber, and the late Sarah Kane, has been variously characterized as the 'New Brutalism' or even, in Germany, as the 'Blood and Sperm Generation'. Here, Aleks Sierz summarizes the argument for 'In-Yer-Face Theatre' as the most pertinent and inclusive description for the phenomenon, listing its salient characteristics and suggesting the areas in which it is most vulnerable to criticism. Aleks Sierz is theatre critic of *Tribune* and writes about theatre for several publications. He is the author of *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber, 2001) and teaches journalism at Goldsmiths College, University of London. An earlier version of this article was given as a paper at the *In-Yer-Face Theatre: Sarah Kane and the New British Dramaturgy* conference at Stendhal University 3, Grenoble, in May 2001.

DURING THE 'NINETIES, there was a revolution in new writing for British theatre. Although, at the end of the previous decade, it had been fashionable to proclaim the 'death of new plays', by the mid-'nineties theatre had become a central part of the much-hyped revival of cultural confidence labelled 'Cool Britannia' – indeed, theatre was 'listed along with pop, fashion, fine art, and food as the fifth leg of the new Swinging London'.¹ By 2001, the hype had fed through to the funding bodies, and new writing programmes found themselves in receipt of large sums to develop new talent, with special Arts Council subsidies bolstering the core funding of those theatres which specialized in developing young writers.

The materialist aspect of the recent history of British theatre is revealing: at the end of the 'eighties, Arts Council figures show that new plays formed less than 10 per cent of the repertoire. By 1994–96, new writing made up 20 per cent of staged work in subsidized theatres. One consequence of this was that more new plays were put on than productions of Shakespeare and the classics. Since then, there's been a slight dip to about 16–17 per cent, probably due to shortage of funding.

Even more important has been the box-office success of new writing. In the late

'eighties, it regularly attracted audiences of below 50 per cent; by 1994, this figure was 53 per cent; and by 1997 it was 57 per cent, which meant that new plays were now out-performing adaptations, post-war revivals, translations, classics, and even Shakespeare. By 2001, it was clear that

theatre-going, still the most popular cultural activity, just ahead of visiting museums and galleries, hit a high of 24 per cent [of the adult population in Britain] in 1994–95 [when the new wave of young writers arrived], but declined to 22 per cent four years later.

Interestingly enough, these changes happened at a time when subsidies were frozen or enjoying only slight increases.²

But as well as material changes, there was also a vital psychological change during this time. As a simple barometer of opinion, here are two quotations from Michael Billington, theatre critic of *The Guardian*. In 1991, he wrote: 'New drama no longer occupies the central position it has in British theatre over the past thirty-five years.' Five years later, in 1996, he'd changed his mind: 'I cannot recall a time when there were so many exciting dramatists in the twenty-something age-group: what is more, they are speaking to audiences of their own generation.'³

In other words, starting in about 1991 and 1992, there was a massive revival of New Writing in British theatre. A quick list of twenty new writers illustrates the variety and creativity of this era: Jez Butterworth, David Eldridge, David Greig, Nick Grosso, Zinnie Harris, David Harrower, Sarah Kane, Ayub Khan-Din, Martin McDonagh, Conor McPherson, Patrick Marber, Phyllis Nagy, Anthony Neilson, Joe Penhall, Rebecca Prichard, Mark Ravenhill, Philip Ridley, Shelagh Stephenson, Judy Upton, and Naomi Wallace. It would be equally easy to come up with another thirty names,⁴ and a total of a hundred new writers would not be too difficult. By any standards, these are impressive figures. One final statistic may be of interest: a single theatre, the Soho Theatre in London, works with two hundred writers every year. These kind of numbers give some indication of the size of the renaissance in new writing.

But it was not just a case of numerical expansion. In terms of controversy and media exposure, a writer such as the late Sarah Kane had a similar effect on British culture as John Osborne had in an earlier era. Her debut play, *Blasted*, had the same kind of impact as *Look Back in Anger*, although of course in social conditions where theatre is much less central to British culture. It might be worth pointing out that *Blasted* is a much more daring and experimental play, especially as regards its form, than Osborne's first.

An Explosion of Creativity

How do we make sense of this general renaissance in British new writing? What does this explosion of creativity mean? The first step in understanding the phenomenon is to name it. And, to do so, there's a choice of either imposing a label from above, or of selecting a label from those which were being used in reviews and newspaper articles, on the television and in public discussions, by the people – mainly critics, commentators and spectators – who were first-hand participants in the events. I prefer to select a label – it is more democratic – rather than to impose one. And, after looking at the various possibilities, the choice boils down to four:

- 1 Neo-Jacobeanism;
- 2 New Brutalism;
- 3 Theatre of Urban Ennui;
- 4 In-Yer-Face Theatre.

These were the labels that were in the air in Britain during the mid-'nineties. But the choice of the name you use is a political choice. For example, if you choose Neo-Jacobeanism, you are implicitly arguing that what matters most in contemporary theatre is its links with tradition and, indeed, in the work of Sarah Kane for instance, there are many references to Shakespeare.

If, on the other hand, you choose to call this phenomenon New Brutalism, you are emphasizing just one aspect of contemporary theatre: its brutality and violence. Since the work of a writer such as Sarah Kane is as much about tenderness and love, this label conveys entirely the wrong impression. A further drawback is that this label implicitly compares theatre with architecture – the National Theatre in London is a new brutalist building – and I don't think this comparison is at all fruitful or stimulating.

Likewise, Theatre of Urban Ennui misses the point – the youths shown on stage in the 'nineties are not bored, they are trying to get on with their lives. So, in rejecting these three labels, I would argue in favour of the name 'In-Yer-Face Theatre' for the following reasons:

- 1 It emphasizes the sense of rupture with the past, stressing what was new about the dramatic voices which were heard for the first time in the 'nineties. After all, the concept of new writing implies novelty rather than tradition.
- 2 It also suggests what is particular about the experience of going to the theatre and watching extreme plays – the feeling that your personal space is threatened. In other words, it powerfully suggests the relationship between play and audience.
- 3 Finally, the name is absolutely full of resonance of the *zeitgeist* of the 'nineties. It was often used about other cultural forms

and thus it links theatre to the wider culture of that decade.

Basically, my argument is that although new writing developed in the past ten years in a variety of ways, it was led by a small avant-garde group of 'in-yer-face' writers.⁵ Although cultural critics have announced the death of the avant-garde on more than one occasion in the past fifty years, in theatre its re-emergence took a classical form: innovation, scandal, and then retrenchment.

What is 'In-Yer-Face Theatre'?

The phrase 'in-your-face' is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1998) as something 'blatantly aggressive or provocative, impossible to ignore or avoid'. The *Collins English Dictionary* (1998) adds the adjective 'confrontational'. The phrase originated in American sports journalism during the mid-'seventies, when it was an exclamation of derision or contempt, and gradually seeped into more mainstream slang during the 'eighties and 'nineties as an adjective meaning 'aggressive, provocative, brash' – implying that you are forced to see something close up, and giving a sense of that violation of intimacy that some forms of extreme drama produce in the audience. It suggests the crossing of normal boundaries. In short, it describes perfectly the kind of theatre that puts audiences in just such a situation.

More specifically, in-yer-face theatre has certain clear characteristics:

1 It is a type of drama that uses explicit scenes of sex and violence to explore the extremes of human emotion. It is characterized by stage images that depict acts such as anal rape, child abuse, drug injection, cannibalism, and vomiting. It also has a rawness of tone, a sense of life being lived on the edge.

2 It usually involves the breaking of taboos, insistently using the most vulgar language, sometimes blasphemy, sometimes pornography, and it shows deeply private acts in public. These have the power to shock, and

constitute an anthropology of transgression and the testing of the boundaries of acceptability.

3 Its basic aesthetic is that of experiential theatre. At its cruel best, it can be so intense that audiences feel – emotionally if not literally – that they have lived through the events shown on stage. This is partly due to the fact that young writers often had their work put on in small studio theatres, where this intensity was easier to achieve. It is also due to the desire of writers to make a deeper impact than that of traditional drama, which Sarah Kane called 'purely speculative theatre'. Instead of debating issues, in-yer-face theatre imposes its point of view on the audience.

In-yer-face theatre is experiential theatre, and it works because it exploits two of the special characteristics of the medium: first, because it's a live experience, anything can happen. The paradox is that while the audience is watching in perfect safety, it feels as if it is in danger. Second, theatre in Britain is technically uncensored, so everything is allowed. You can stage things that would be impossible to show on television or in the cinema – this gives writers the chance to explore the darkest sides of the human psyche without compromise.

Storm and Stress

It's worth emphasizing that the in-yer-face approach is a matter of sensibility rather than of showing any specific acts. It's crucial that while such plays might contain shocking scenes, the really disturbing thing about them is the bleakness, nihilism, or despair of the emotions of their characters. In-yer-face theatre is about emotions, not about shock tactics.

It is also worth pointing out the maturity of craft of many of the new writers of the 'nineties. This can be summed up by the phrase 'the avoidance of closure'. Thus, in rebellion against the classic well-made play, and against more recent literary traditions, most 'nineties writers preferred to write work which doesn't finish with a climax in

the 'right' place, doesn't have a clear message, and doesn't obey the dictates of naturalism. Time and again, young writers told me that they are interested in exploring the possibilities of theatrical form. Whether in the refusal of Mark Ravenhill to give easy answers to the urgent questions he poses, or the deliberate avoidance of climax in the work of David Eldridge or Nick Grosso, or the ceaseless experiments of David Greig or Sarah Kane, the conclusion is the same: these writers both use naturalism and aim to go beyond its confines.

To summarize: what the best young writers of the past ten years did was to transform the language of theatre, making it more direct, raw, and explicit. They not only introduced a new dramatic vocabulary, they also pushed theatre into being more experiential, more aggressively aimed at making audiences feel and respond. What characterized cutting-edge theatre in the 'nineties was its intensity, its deliberate relentlessness, and its ruthless commitment to extremes. To be so uncompromising, dangerous, and confrontational became praiseworthy.

Also, it is worth pointing out that in the fierceness of its attack on free-market economics, in-*yer-face* theatre was a reaction against the attitudes symbolized by the Thatcherite dictum that 'there is no such thing as society'. With its images of violent men and rude girls, it stemmed from two decades of growing feminist sensibility; in its ready acceptance of street slang and exuberant bad language, it reflected the importance of 'yoof' culture; in its obsession with laddish behaviour, it mirrored the crisis of masculinity; and in turning its back on the state-of-the-nation and the issue play, it suggested a crisis of the liberal imagination.

The metaphors typical of 'nineties drama – summed up by stage images of abuse, anal rape, and addiction – could be criticized for being literal images of horror, but their power to shock came from the fact that their authors saw the world in a more complex light than their more ideological predecessors. The best plays of the decade were most provocative when they represented terrible acts as psychological states, usually characterized by complicity and collusion. Instead

of a simple division between perpetrators and victims, 'nineties theatre saw human beings as capable of becoming both.

Although in-*yer-face* drama has a relentless energy, its motives were not to titillate but to spread the knowledge of what human beings are capable of. It aimed to wake up audiences and imprint on them indelible images of human suffering, often in order to immunize them to those events in real life. As Sarah Kane once said, 'It is important to commit to memory events which have never happened – so that they never happen. I'd rather risk overdose in the theatre than in life.'⁶ In view of her suicide, it is a telling and deeply ironic statement.

The Bigger Picture

But what is the wider significance of in-*yer-face* theatre?

1 In-*yer-face* theatre saved British theatre. Perhaps my most contentious argument is this one: if it had not been for a small avant-garde of young writers in the 'nineties, I can imagine that new writing in Britain would be in a state of terminal decline. Theatre would have stagnated in a swamp of dull revivals of the classics and of Shakespeare; of adaptations of novels for the stage; of director's theatre and physical theatre – usually pale and cheap imitations of what continental theatre is so good at. If it had not been for a small group of daring artistic directors and an equally small group of in-*yer-face* antagonists, the great British tradition of new writing – which puts the writer at the centre of the theatrical process – would have collapsed into a moribund state.

2 In-*yer-face* theatre is the drama of new laddism. By this I mean that each historical era usually throws up a characteristic theme which sums up the essence of the *zeitgeist*. For the new wave sparked off by *Look Back in Anger* in 1956, the theme was a celebration and criticism of the Welfare State; by the time the generation of 1968 arrived, the theme became one of left-wing revolution and an urgent examination of its failure; by the

'eighties, it was the turn of feminism and the discovery of marginal voices through gay and black drama.⁷

Ten years on, young writers were looking for an equally urgent preoccupation, an equally symbolic theme. They found it in the crisis of masculinity. In the 'nineties, for complex social reasons, it became impossible to avoid the idea that traditional ideas about maleness were in trouble. Writers obsessively and probably unconsciously returned time and time again to stories which are not about the family, but about boys. And, in contradistinction from the feminist plays of the 'eighties, artistic directors chose plays that had a laddish nature: all-male casts became common and the theme of violent and homo-erotic male relationships unavoidable. Examples are numerous, but Jez Butterworth's *Mojo* is a classic case. And it is worth noting that Sarah Kane's *Blasted* is about, among other things, a crisis in masculinity.

3 In-yer-face theatre is a new sensibility. In-yer-face theatre is not a movement: you can't buy a membership card – it's an aesthetic style. Some writers write lots of in-yer-face plays; some use elements of this sensibility; others just write one in-yer-face play and then move on. But is it new? In some senses, no: think of Edward Bond's *Saved*, Steven Berkoff's *East*, or Howard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain*. But in the past such plays were an exception, now they have become the norm.

What is also new is the relentless quality of much 'nineties writing, its overwhelming sense of a dark netherscape, the sheer insistence of its use of four-letter words. What's also new is the style in which these plays were written. As opposed to the literary feel of much previous drama, with long wordy speeches, the dialogue in most 'nineties plays is much shorter, more telegraphic and direct, more filmic even – and much, much faster. A good example is Sarah Kane's *Blasted* – all the emotion of the play is packed into short and spare exchanges. In the 'nineties, British new writing threw off the dead hand of literature, and created a distinctively theatrical language.

4 In-yer-face theatre is drama's response to the fall of the Berlin Wall. One of the hardest questions is: why did this kind of drama emerge when it did? This is a very complex subject, but – to simplify – what happened was that changes in the wider world of politics and society (the end of the Cold War, a decline in left-wing militancy, the petering out of doctrinaire feminism) all tended to free up theatrical imaginations. I'm not completely happy with the idea of Thatcher's Children, but there is an element of truth in the idea that a whole generation grew up in a context where no change seemed to be possible – to which the only response, if you are critical of social conditions, is to do it yourself, to create something out of nothing.

In a sense, then, in-yer-face theatre is do-it-yourself theatre. By the 'nineties, a handful of key people – such as artistic directors Stephen Daldry at the Royal Court, Dominic Dromgoole at the Bush, and Ian Brown at the Traverse – realized that the only way to get things done was to use the resources they already had. So they gave young writers permission to journey to hell and report on what they found there – without ideological preconceptions. Dominic Dromgoole once told me:

In the 'eighties, most theatres wanted well-meaning, well-reasoned, victim-based plays. (What Anthony Minghella once called 'mumble plays'.) But in the 'nineties, theatres gave young writers freedom – no ideologies, no rules, no taste.

As theatre shook off the style-police, young writers embraced the opportunities offered to explore a new aesthetic. In this way, theatre became part of a general, autonomous do-it-yourself movement, in which its artists no longer waited for state subsidy but created their work independently of subvention.

5 In-yer-face theatre is 'nineties guerrilla art. Watching plays such as Philip Ridley's *Ghost from a Perfect Place*, in which an old gangster is tortured by teenage girls stubbing cigars in his face, or Anthony Neilson's *Penetrator*, which features pornography as well as a vicious knife fight, I was reminded of the wider culture of shock: the Royal

Academy's 1997 *Sensation* exhibition of Young British Artists, Benetton adverts, the films of Quentin Tarantino and John Woo, the fashion industry's 'heroin chic', television's *The Word* and *The Jerry Springer Show*.

There are differences between these cultural forms, however. In-yer-face theatre differs from phenomena such as Brit art in that, with a few exceptions, it sets its face against postmodernism. Rather, it is modernist and avant-garde. It prefers old-fashioned ideas about political commitment and cultural provocation to new and trendy notions of irony, self-reflexivity, and cynicism.

6 In-yer-face theatre is political theatre. In the past ten years, the death of political theatre has been prematurely announced on many occasions. Although it is true that the big state-of-the-nation play is almost extinct, the work of new writers is surely political even if their chosen form is plays about private passions. They explore personal pain rather than public politics, but it's worth stressing that most of them are passionately interested in staging critiques of modern social conditions, focusing on the problem of violence, the horror of abuse, the questioning of traditional notions of masculinity, the myth of post-feminism and the futility and injustice of consumerism. In a sense, these writers are firmly in the great tradition of romantic, sentimental, and utopian rebels.

Towards a Critique of In-Yer-Face Theatre

A few questions, which could serve as the beginnings of a thorough critique of in-yer-face theatre, are also worth asking:

1 Is in-yer-face theatre just a case of cultural tourism? Harry Gibson, whose stage version of Irvine Welsh's iconic *Trainspotting* was a massive success, sees in-yer-face theatre as a symptom of a modern malaise. He says, 'The excess of the wild folk becomes a spectacle for the tame folk', a form of cultural tourism by which the privileged classes visit hellish ghettos in the safety of the theatre.⁸

2 Is in-yer-face theatre a fashionable style, a new mannerism? I remember playwright David Edgar once saying that: 'The bad side of the current boom in new work is the element of fashion – this leads some people to think that last year the in-thing was smack, and this year is sodomy. This can lead to dangerous complacency.'⁹

3 Are the shock tactics of in-yer-face theatre counter-productive? In 1998, in an article in the *Spectator* magazine, Harry Eyres regretted how 'sensation and nihilism stalk the stages', strutting their stuff in imitation of director Quentin Tarantino and artist Jeff Koons. 'Sensationalism is predicated on insensitivity. The idea is that dulled audience response must be jerked into life by whatever violent means are necessary.' But, he argued, 'sensation merely entrenches the insensitivity it is supposed to challenge.'¹⁰

4 Do in-yer-face plays lack heart? It is paradoxical that an era which flattered itself as being 'the caring decade' – as opposed to the 'greed is good' of the Thatcher years – produced a drama that often lacked compassion. If you look closely at Jez Butterworth's *Mojo*, Patrick Marber's *Closer*, or Martin McDonagh's *Leenane Trilogy*, surely these plays are vulnerable to this criticism.

5 Are in-yer-face plays any good? Peter Anson, an early critic of the recent new wave, argues that its plays do not constitute a new golden age because they are not as good as the first new wave of 1956.¹¹ Although it is easy to dismiss this point of view as hopelessly nostalgic, it does raise the question of how you judge plays which deliberately defy the naturalistic aesthetic which is traditionally the means of rating new plays. Certainly, many 'nineties playwrights explicitly question naturalism and their work is often experimental in form – but are their plays of any lasting value?

6 Are in-yer-face plays too introverted? Adrienne Scullion argues that while many Scottish playwrights tackle the big issues, and are 'vital in debating and describing our

new social and cultural responsibilities', they have a 'very different agenda to the fashion-victim, nihilistic "shopping and fucking" introspection of London'. Certainly, there is evidence of a distinct regional divide, which mirrors political and cultural divisions, in British theatre.¹²

7 Is the new drama reactionary? Political plays, as writer David Greig once pointed out, must embrace a possibility of change. In a sense, they have to inspire audiences. But in 1998 Michael Billington argued that even

the most visceral, popular plays of today imply that there is little hope of change: in Patrick Marber's *Closer* the characters end up acknowledging their inviolable solitude, in Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* the 'money is civilization' ethos murkily prevails, in Phyllis Nagy's *Never Land* the hero is quite clearly the victim of fate.

In Britain, Billington concluded, 'We are living in an aggressively post-ideological age' and theatre offers only glimmers of hope.¹³ It would be ironic indeed if new writers, however radical their subjective feelings, are only able to create a drama which runs around in circles.

Conclusion

Has the new wave of the 'nineties broken? The signs suggest that it has: the death of Sarah Kane in February 1999; the huge West End success of Conor McPherson's rather gentle and redemptive play, *The Weir*; the failure of Irvine Welsh's shock-fest, *You'll Have Had Your Hole* – all were signs that the phenomenon that attracted so much public attention in the mid-'nineties was rapidly losing its energy. But one of the reasons for this slump is that in-yer-face theatre had done its job – it kicked down the door of complacency in the theatre, and, because it was an avant-garde, where it led others have inevitably followed. In-yer-face writers gave theatre the oxygen of publicity, and helped inspire the diverse new writing culture that has since emerged.

Not all the effects of the recent new wave have been happy. In September 2001, when

director Nicholas Hytner was appointed to succeed Trevor Nunn as head of the National Theatre, he stressed his interest in developing new writing. But he also acknowledged the paradox that, while in the past ten years the National Studio had helped develop many new plays, these were mainly such small-scale affairs that even the National's smallest space, the 300-seat Cottesloe, was too big for them, and they have been staged in 100-seat studio theatres such as the Royal Court Upstairs, the Bush, and the Soho Theatre. The challenge for Hytner, exemplified in his production of Mark Ravenhill's *Mother Clap's Molly House* (Lyttelton, 2001), is to find new writers bold enough to tackle the National's two main stages.¹⁴

If British new writing is now sexy, the crucial question for the future is: can it remain creative? More polemically, although new writing got to a position of astonishing creativity during a decade of unprecedented freezes in subsidy, will it be able to retain its freshness and energy during an era of improved funding? And, with the fringe no longer the locus of excitement, can new writers flourish in a theatre economy which is increasingly centralized around the main new writing houses, such as the Royal Court, Traverse, Bush, and Soho theatres? Much depends on the next five years.

Notes and References

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2. David Edgar, 'The Canon, the Contemporary and the New', in Bernhard Reitz and Heiko Stahl, ed., *What Revels Are in Hand? Contemporary Drama in English*, 8 (Trier: Wissenschaftler Verlag Trier, 2001), p. 31. See also Arts Council of England: *Annual 'Cork' Analysis* (London: Arts Council of England, 2000), and Maev Kennedy, 'Arts Audiences Dwindle Despite "Extra" Cash', *The Guardian*, 25 July 2001, p. 8.

3. Michael Billington, *One Night Stands: a Critic's View of Modern British Theatre* (London: Nick Hern, 1993), p. 360, and 'Fabulous Five', *The Guardian*, 13 March 1996.

4. For example, Henry Adam, Samuel Adamson, Parv Bancel, Biyi Bandele, Simon Bent, Helen Blakeman, Simon Block, Simon Burke, Mike Cullen, Kate Dean, Hilary Fannin, David Farr, William Gaminara, Stephen Greenhorn, Karen Hope, Alex Jones, Charlotte Jones, Nicola McCartney, Linda McLean, Gary Mitchell, Abi Morgan, Tamsin Oglesby, Michael Punter, Diane Samuels,

Ed Thomas, Paul Tucker, Che Walker, Irvine Welsh, Sarah Woods, and Michael Wynne. Most of these writers made their debuts in the 'nineties, and the list does not include Irish and American writers who put on their first plays in the United Kingdom.

5. See Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber, 2001).

6. Quoted in Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge, *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting* (London: Methuen, 1997), p. 133.

7. See David Edgar, 'Provocative Acts'.

8. Harry Gibson, letter to author, 9 April 1999.

9. Personal interview with the author, March 1997; see also Aleks Sierz, 'The Write Stuff', *The Independent*, 9 April 1997.

10. Harry Eyres, 'Sensation Stalks the Stage', *The Spectator*, 9 May 1998.

11. See Peter Ansorge, *From Liverpool to Los Angeles: on Writing for Theatre, Film, and Television* (London: Faber, 1997).

12. Adrienne Scullion, 'Contemporary Scottish Women Playwrights', in Elaine Aston and Janelle Reinelt, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 114–15.

13. Michael Billington, 'The Other Marx Brother', *The Guardian*, 10 February 1998.

14. Nicholas Hytner, personal interview with the author, 1 October 2001.

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