Strategies of Political Theatre
Post-War British Playwrights

This volume provides a theoretical framework for some of the most important playwriting in Britain in the second half of the twentieth century. Examining representative plays by Arnold Wesker, John Arden, Trevor Griffiths, Howard Barker, Howard Brenton, Edward Bond, David Hare, John McGrath and Caryl Churchill, the author analyses their respective strategies for persuading audiences of the need for a radical restructuring of society. The book begins with a discussion of the way that theatre has been used to convey a political message. Each chapter is then devoted to an exploration of the engagement with left-wing political theatre of an individual playwright, including a detailed analysis of one of their major plays. Despite political change since the 1980s, political playwriting continues to be a significant element in contemporary playwriting, but in a very changed form.

Michael Patterson is Professor of Theatre at De Montfort University, Leicester. He is a major British authority on German theatre, especially twentieth-century political theatre in Germany. He is author of German Theatre Today; The Revolution in German Theatre 1900–1933; Peter Stein; The First German Theatre; and German Theatre: A Bibliography, and is editor of Georg Büchner: Collected Plays. He has published numerous articles on German Naturalist theatre, Reinhardt, Pirandello, Brecht, concentration camp theatre, Kroetz and East German theatre.
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Strategies of Political Theatre
Post-War British Playwrights

Michael Patterson
For Kerry, Jamie and Gráinne
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**Brief chronology, 1953–1989**

1953  
Joan Littlewood opens Theatre Workshop at Stratford East

1954  
English Stage Company founded by Ronald Duncan and Neville Blond. Brendan Behan’s first play, *The Quare Fellow*, staged by Joan Littlewood at Stratford East

1955  
Anthony Eden replaces Winston Churchill as Prime Minister  
Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1952) performed at Arts Theatre, London

1956  
The Suez crisis. Soviet troops enter Hungary  
First season of English Stage Company (now with George Devine) at Royal Court Theatre includes premiere of John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*. Visit to London of Berliner Ensemble with Bertolt Brecht’s *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *Mother Courage*. Death of Brecht. Peter Brook directs Paul Scofield in *Hamlet*

1957  
Harold Macmillan replaces Anthony Eden as Prime Minister  
John Osborne’s *The Entertainer* staged at Royal Court, directed by Tony Richardson. Samuel Beckett: *Endgame*

1958  
Founding of European Common Market. First march by Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament to Aldermaston  
Harold Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* flops after one week. Brendan Behan’s *The Hostage* performed at Stratford East before transferring to the West End
Brief chronology, 1953–1989

John Arden: *Live Like Pigs* staged at Royal Court
Shelagh Delaney: *A Taste of Honey*
Arnold Wesker: *Chicken Soup with Barley* staged at Royal Court

1959 The Mermaid Theatre opens
John Arden: *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*, directed by Lindsay Anderson
Arnold Wesker: *Roots*, directed by John Dexter
Arnold Wesker: *The Kitchen*

1960 John F. Kennedy elected US President
Centre 42 founded. Harold Pinter: *The Caretaker*
John Arden: *The Happy Haven*, directed by William Gaskill
Arnold Wesker: *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*, directed by John Dexter at the Royal Court

1961 US invasion of Cuba (Bay of Pigs). Berlin Wall erected
Peter Hall as artistic director of the Stratford Memorial Theatre, leases Aldwych and founds the Royal Shakespeare Company. John Osborne: *Luther*

1962 Cuban missile crisis. First success of the Beatles
Peter Brook's Theatre of Cruelty season. Edward Albee: *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*
Edward Bond: *The Pope's Wedding*
Arnold Wesker: *Chips with Everything*, directed by John Dexter at the Royal Court

1963 President Kennedy assassinated. Alec Douglas-Home replaces Macmillan as Prime Minister
The National Theatre opens at the Old Vic
John Arden: *The Workhouse Donkey*
Joan Littlewood: *Oh What A Lovely War*
**Brief chronology, 1953–1989**

**1964**  
Harold Wilson becomes first Labour Prime Minister since 1951. Lyndon B. Johnson elected US President.  
Peter Brook’s productions of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and Peter Weiss’s *Marat/Sade*. John Osborne: *Inadmissible Evidence*.  
John Arden: *Armstrong’s Last Goodnight* premiered at the Glasgow Citizens’ Theatre.

**1965**  
Intensification of the Vietnam War. Anti-war demonstrations in USA. Race riots in Los Angeles.  
Edward Bond: *Saved*.  
David Mercer: *Ride a Cock Horse*.  

**1966**  
Wilson announces ‘standstill’ in wages and prices.  
Mao Tse-tung: *Quotations of Chairman Mao*.  
Peter Brook’s *US* at Aldwych. Raymond Williams: *Modern Tragedy*.  
John McGrath: *Events while Guarding the Bofors Gun*.  
Arnold Wesker: *Their Very Own* and *Golden City*.  

**1967**  
Pound devalued. 50,000 demonstrate against Vietnam War in Washington. Six-Day War between Israel and Arab nations.  
Joe Orton murdered. Alan Ayckbourn’s first success with *Relatively Speaking*. Peter Nichols: *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*.  

**1968**  
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John Arden: The Hero Rises Up
Peter Barnes: The Ruling Class
Edward Bond: Early Morning
Edward Bond: Narrow Road to the Deep North
John McGrath: Bakke’s Night of Fame
Alan Plater: Close the Coalhouse Door

1969

Nixon becomes US President. British troops sent into Northern Ireland in response to sectarian violence
Trevor Nunn takes over Royal Shakespeare Company from Peter Hall

Howard Brenton: Christie in Love
Howard Brenton: Gum and Goo
Peter Nichols: The National Health
John Spurling: Macrune’s Guevara

1970

Conservative government returned to power, led by Edward Heath. First time 18-year-olds able to vote. US National Guard shoots four student protesters against Vietnam War. Marxist President elected in Chile. Women’s Liberation Group and Gay Liberation Front founded

Peter Brook directs A Midsummer Night’s Dream. David Storey: Home
Trevor Griffiths: Occupations
David Hare: Slag
John McGrath: Random Happenings in the Hebrides
David Mercer: After Haggerty
Arnold Wesker: The Friends
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1971  Fighting in Vietnam spills over into Laos and Cambodia. Introduction of internment in Northern Ireland, violence escalates
       Founding of 7:84 and General Will. Harold Pinter's Old Times
       Edward Bond: Lear
       Howard Brenton: Scott of the Antarctic
       David Edgar: The National Interest
       David Edgar: Tedderella
       Trevor Griffiths: Thermidor
       Portable Theatre: Lay-By

1972  Beginning of the Watergate affair. Britain imposes direct rule on Northern Ireland
       John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy: The Island of the Mighty
       John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy: The Ballygombeen Bequest
       Howard Barker: Alpha Alpha
       Howard Brenton: Hitler Dances
       Howard Brenton, David Edgar and David Hare: England's Ireland performed in Amsterdam
       Caryl Churchill: Owners
       Trevor Griffiths: Sam, Sam
       David Hare: The Great Exhibition
       John McGrath: Serjeant Musgrave Dances On
       Arnold Wesker: The Old Ones

1973  Britain joins the Common Market. Arab oil embargo, fuel crisis. Chilean president overthrown by military coup
       Peter Hall takes over National Theatre from Laurence Olivier
       Edward Bond: The Sea
       Edward Bond: Bingo
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Howard Brenton: Magnificence
Howard Brenton and David Hare: Brassneck
David Edgar and Howard Brenton: A Fart for Europe
Trevor Griffiths: The Party
John McGrath: The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil

1974

Worldwide inflation. Wilson replaces Heath, after Heath had failed to rally the nation against the miners in the so-called ‘Winter of Discontent’. Violence in Northern Ireland spreads to Britain: terrorist bomb in Houses of Parliament. Nixon forced to resign over Watergate, replaced by Gerald Ford
Joint Stock and Women's Theatre Group founded
Howard Brenton: The Churchill Play
David Edgar: Dick Deterred
David Hare: Knuckle
John McGrath: The Imperial Policeman
Arnold Wesker: The Wedding Feast performed in Stockholm

1975

Margaret Thatcher succeeds Heath as leader of Conservatives.
Fall of Saigon
Opening of the Riverside Studios, Hammersmith. Harold Pinter's No Man's Land. Stephen Poliakoff: City Sugar
John Arden and Margareta D'Arcy: The Non-Stop Connolly Show
Howard Barker: Claw
Howard Barker: Stripwell
Edward Bond: The Fool
Caryl Churchill: Objections to Sex and Violence
Trevor Griffiths: Comedians
David Hare: Fanshen
David Hare: Teeth 'n' Smiles
Brief chronology, 1953–1989

John McGrath: *Little Red Hen*
Arnold Wesker: *The Journalists* published

1976
First nuclear treaty between USA and USSR. James Callaghan replaces Wilson as Prime Minister. Blacks riot in South Africa. Jimmy Carter elected US President
The National Theatre opens on the South Bank. Gay Sweatshop founded
Howard Brenton: *Weapons of Happiness*
Caryl Churchill: *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*
Caryl Churchill: *Vinegar Tom*
David Edgar: *Destiny*
Arnold Wesker: *The Merchant* performed in Stockholm

1977
US protests about harassment of Czech dissidents
Robert Bolt: *State of Revolution*
Caryl Churchill: *Traps*
David Edgar: *Wreckers*

1978
Marxist guerrillas seize power in Nicaragua
Harold Pinter: *Betrayal*
Howard Barker: *The Hang of the Gaol*
Edward Bond: *The Bundle*
Edward Bond: *The Woman*
Howard Brenton, David Hare and Trevor Griffiths: *Deeds*
David Edgar: *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs*
David Hare: *Plenty*
David Mercer: *Cousin Vladimir*

1979
Margaret Thatcher wins general election, pursues monetarist policies
Edward Bond: *The Worlds*
Caryl Churchill: *Cloud Nine*
Brief chronology, 1953–1989

1980
Reagan elected US President. Start of Iran–Iraq War
Death of David Mercer
Howard Brenton: *The Romans in Britain*
David Edgar: *Nicholas Nickleby* (adaptation)

1981
Greenham Common Peace Camp starts
John McGrath publishes *A Good Night Out*. Samuel Beckett: *Catastrophe*
Howard Barker: *No End of Blame*

1982
Falklands conflict
The Royal Shakespeare Company moves to the Barbican
Caryl Churchill: *Top Girls*
Trevor Griffiths: *Oi! for England*
David Hare: *A Map of the World* performed in Adelaide

1983
Thatcher re-elected with landslide victory
Caryl Churchill: *Fen*
Sarah Daniels: *Masterpieces*
David Edgar: *Maydays*

1984
Reagan re-elected. Thatcher confronts unions, especially in the long-lasting miners’ strike
Arts Council ‘Glory of the Garden’ policy
Caryl Churchill: *Softcops*
John McGrath: *Imperial Policeman*
Harold Pinter: *One for the Road*
Stephen Poliakoff: *Breaking the Silence*

1985
Gorbachev becomes Soviet leader, initiates *perestroika*, a liberalization of the USSR
Edward Bond: *War Plays*
David Hare and Howard Brenton: *Pravda*
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1986 David Rudkin: The Saxon Shore

1987 Thatcher re-elected for third term
Caryl Churchill: Serious Money
David Edgar: Entertaining Strangers performed at the National Theatre

1988 Passing of so-called Clause 28, banning the promotion of homosexuality in schools. End of conflict between Iraq and Iran
Howard Barker: The Bite of the Night
Howard Brenton: Greenland
David Hare: The Secret Rapture
Harold Pinter: Mountain Language
Timberlake Wertenbaker: Our Country’s Good

Caryl Churchill: Icecream