THEATRE AND GOVERNANCE IN BRITAIN,
1500–1900

This book begins with a simple observation – that just as the theatre resurfaced during the late Renaissance, so too government as we understand it today also began to appear. Their mutually entwining history was to have a profound influence on the development of the modern British stage. This volume proposes a new reading of theatre’s complex and shifting relation to the state, society and the public sphere. Employing a series of historical case studies drawn from the London theatre, Tony Fisher shows why the stage was of such great concern to government by offering close readings of well-known religious, moral, political, economic and legal disputes over the role, purpose and function of the stage in the ‘well-ordered society’. In framing these disputes in relation to what Michel Foucault called the emerging ‘art of government’, this book draws out – for the first time – a comprehensive genealogy of the governmental ‘discourse on the theatre’.

TONY FISHER is a Reader in Theatre and Philosophy at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London, where he is Associate Director of Research (Research Degrees). He has published a number of journal articles in both theatre and philosophy, and he is the co-editor of Performing Antagonism: Theatre, Performance and Radical Democracy (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
THEATRE AND
GOVERNANCE IN BRITAIN,
1500–1900

Democracy, Disorder and the State

TONY FISHER
Royal Central School of Speech and Drama
For Jean Fisher – in loving memory
Contents

Acknowledgements  page viii

Introduction: The Discourses of Theatre and Governance  1

PART I ORIGINS OF THE DISCOURSE ON THEATRE  27
1 The Theatre of the Multitude  29
2 Revolts of Conduct on the Restoration Stage  66

PART II THEATRE AND ITS PUBLICS  101
3 Theatrocracy and the Public Sphere  103
4 The Beggar’s Opera and the Criminal ‘Picturesque’  140
5 The Deontic Stage in the Eighteenth Century: George Lillo’s The London Merchant  167

PART III THEATRE IN THE AGE OF REFORM  199
6 The Governmentalisation of the Stage  201
7 The Theatre Dispositif of the Late Nineteenth Century  237

Works Consulted  266
Index  277
Acknowledgements

It is almost a decade since I first started work on this study. To be sure, its origin owed more to the vagaries of chance encounters – to the contingencies and serendipities of research – than to any consistent plan on my part at its outset. Indeed, what guided my first foray into the subject was anything but a firm sense of direction, merely a vague hunch that there was something worth pursuing in the development of the theatre and the problem it posed to government. It was only when I broke cover and first exposed what I was working on to colleagues and friends that the project began to take on a coherent shape; and, in truth, without their criticism, guidance and encouragement, I doubt that this book would ever have seen the light of day. Whether that would have been a good thing or not is ultimately for the reader to decide. Suffice it to say, no book can truly succeed without the help of the number of individuals who contribute to it, sometimes without even knowing they have done so; at the same time, in each case it is its author who must bear sole responsibility for its failings – and my book is certainly no exception to this general rule.

In particular, I have benefitted from the scholarly insights and suggestions of Simon Shepherd, Gilli Bush-Bailey and Jacky Bratton, each of whom not only read and responded with great generosity to drafts of chapters, but in the process led me to appreciate the nuances of British theatre history. My gratitude also goes to Robin Nelson for his support during his time at Central. I am especially appreciative of Maria Delgado for her invaluable advice on framing the book’s introduction, her astute practical guidance in negotiating the world of academic publishing and her unwavering personal support. Equally, I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers at Cambridge University Press who provided helpful criticism at a crucial juncture, since it was due to their counsel that I was brought back from the morass of sprawling ambition to a more focused discussion of the topic. The expertise and generosity of several close friends were also essential to the writing of the book. Louise Owen very kindly read and
commented on Chapter 3, Zachary Dunbar gave useful feedback on Chapter 4, and Joshua Edelman, whose exceptional largesse and candour I hope one day to repay, acted over a number of years as an excellent sounding board. Going above and beyond the call of duty, he provided me not only with perceptive criticisms of several chapters, but also many hours of lively discussions that were both intellectually challenging and great fun. Hing Tsang bears some responsibility for this book, too, since it was during one of our many wrangles over philosophy, that the idea behind this project first lodged itself in my mind.

I have presented papers on the subject of this book at several conferences and research events, and have gained much helpful feedback on those occasions. In particular, I am grateful to colleagues in the Performance Philosophy network and TaPRA’s Theatre, Performance and Philosophy working group whose members have engaged with my work over the past few years – Eve Katsouraki, Kélina Gotman, Jim Hamilton, James Corby and Laura Cull have each left their mark on the way the project evolved. I presented a version of Chapter 1 at a research event in Aberystwyth, where Karoline Gritzner and Alison Forsyth encouraged me to continue with their positive responses to the paper; a version of Chapter 2 was presented at Quorum, Queen Mary, thanks to Lynne McCarthy, who from early on was a particularly enthusiastic supporter and friend to the project. The postgraduate research students at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama have endured several presentations on my research over the years, for which I am grateful. I owe a debt of gratitude also to Kate Brett and her team at Cambridge University Press, who could not have been more helpful and supportive throughout the publication process.

On a more personal note, the profoundest thanks of all must go to my family – to Beatrice and Matilda for their joyful disregard of every attempt I have made to impose order on them – long may it continue! but, above all, to my partner in crime, Amanda Stuart Fisher. Without her unflinching support, love and boundless patience – and, truth be told, cajoling – there would simply be nothing here to read.