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Introduction

We all had our own style, our own songs, and we were all English. What's more, we spoke English. (Billy Rice in John Osborne's *The Entertainer*)

Recent English theatre, in brief

I propose to examine a few patterns in some hundred English plays that were first performed between 1956 and 1990. My title – *Retreats from Realism in Recent English Drama* – implies my belief that the main tradition of recent English drama is that of realism, but it does not imply that a retreat is an act of cowardice. Quite the contrary. The kind of retreat that interests me is aware of itself, at once playful and exploratory, perhaps better spelled as re-treat.

I understand realism as the mimetic representation of contemporary middle-class reality. Until the mid-twentieth century, the English proscenium usually framed a drawing-room, whose very name abbreviated withdrawing-room, with its acceptance of sexism and class privilege. Although Noel Coward, D. H. Lawrence, and George Bernard Shaw in their very different ways tried to freshen the air in the room on stage, the whole edifice trembled only after 1956. With increasing frequency, playwrights deviated from realism by relying on older English dramatic traditions. I hope to show how these traditional devices become instruments of exploration in some contemporary plays.

My examination is schizophrenic, first of all, because drama supposes and yet opposes theatre. That is to say, these dramas were written for performance, and yet the texts are printed, available to readers. Although inventive and/or rebellious young men (and a very few women) wrote these recent plays for performance, and although I have attended most of the performances, I comment mainly on published texts. A tension between text and performance is endemic

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to all investigations of drama, and the new concern with a so-called "performance text" exacerbates the problem. The tension is, however, different in a recent play and in a familiar classic. The latter yields the pleasure of nuance, but a new play should offer entrance into a new world, which is a lesser adventure on the page than on the stage. Reading new plays can nevertheless be savored if one has a taste for language or a vision of performance in the mind's eye. But the schizophrenia persists.

Other symptoms of my schizophrenia are more personal: an American casts her foreign eye on recent English drama; a woman responds to theatre conceived mainly by men; a middle-aged and middle-class person applauds new and sometimes radical plays; a liberal humanist steers a frail craft away from the shoals of critical theory; the life of performance congeals into type; too much of my prose delivers plot summary that imposes linearity on deliberately disjointed works. I am that middle-aged, middle-class, female American linear humanist, with its attendant limitations, but I am involved in a durable if moody love affair with London theatre. My first trip to London dates from 1950, and I have been commuting to its theatre ever since, riding its waves – verse drama, kitchen-sink sets, a spurt of the absurd, epic sweep, a raw-edged Court, the birth of the National and Royal Shakespeare Companies, alternative theatre shoots and offshoots.

The hardy perennial in this panoply is the English language. In an increasingly visual and performative culture, most English drama remains unrepentantly verbal; its wit and variety (if not its depth) in the second half of the twentieth century rival those of the Elizabethan period. Despite discourses adumbrated by theorists, despite forays into non-traditional venues, most recent English drama continues to thrive on characters colored by the charismatic presence of the actors who impersonate them and give them voice, the whole illuminated against designedly telling environments.

A century ago theatre realism loudly proclaimed its proximity to the real. The heir of melodrama and the well-made play, realism soon domesticated drama, muting its climaxes. The surface familiarity of realism was intended to convey contemporary reality, and since both words – reality and realism – are today under investigation (when not under Derridean erasure), I abide by Katharine Worth's broad embrace: "I am using [realism] in its widest possible sense, to take in at one end the meticulously 'accurate' slice of life play and at the other the play which only just keeps within the bounds of ordinary . . . probability" (*Revolutions*, pp. vii–viii).

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Mimetic at both ends, the realistic play is embedded in the contemporary scene. The heir of the well-made play, it too is well made in linking cause and effect within a plot. The characters behave with sociological and psychological credibility; members of the broadening middle class, they display the effects of its education and conventions. Often rooted in the stock types of melodrama – innocent ingenue, beleaguered hero, benign older man, eccentric older woman, and (modified) nefarious villain – the character can wind away from its roots, but will nevertheless remain psychologically coherent from first to last: Hedda Gabler will not settle down to hearth and home, Three Sisters will not go to Moscow, Major Barbara will not call down a plague on both her men. Even when the character's change is at the heart of the drama – Nora's declaration of independence – it is traced with credible gradualism that is expressed in a discursive dialogue.

In the many discussions of stage realism (or naturalism which sometimes serves as its synonym), dialogue has received only glancing attention – perhaps because the familiar living-room muffles the particular phrases, perhaps because most of us hear or read the masterpieces of realism in translation. Yet the coherence of realistic dialogue parallels that of plot and character. Ibsen's people speak grammatically in complete sentences. O'Casey's tenement dwellers connect one sentence logically to another; they answer pointed questions, and they swear meaningful oaths. Despite a French Theatre of Silence, English stage dialogue waited for Pinter and Beckett (who is not English; in his words, "Au contraire") to admit hesitation, disjunction, repetition, and great gaps (Kane, *The Language of Silence*, *passim*). Beckett's drama defies all the tenets of realism, but Pinter usually adheres to its strictures in everything but language.

Today, stage realism may be recognized as a code of conventions – picture-frame proscenium bounding a room furnished with three-dimensional objects and peopled with characters who behave predictably according to their heredity and environment, and who speak in clear sentences and concepts. Today, the realistic frame may be more flexible; the setting has moved out of the middle-class home; indeed the English stage garden has virtually displaced the drawing-room. Token objects may suffice to convey the milieu, and atmospheric lighting colors the mood. On the one hand, criticism sports adjectives for such realism – poetic, heightened, symbolic – and on the other hand, some critics confuse the words "realism" and "reality," and some – including Zola – do not discriminate between "realism" and "naturalism." Although I do not wish to quibble about terminology, I

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think it is useful to recognize in realism, however heightened or however witty, the series of conventions that I have summarized: sociological, psychological, and linguistic fidelity to the surface of contemporary middle-class reality. For the sake of simplicity but not, I hope, oversimplification, I shall assume that naturalism also follows these conventions, but since the characters are born into lower ranks of the social hierarchy, fate constricts them inexorably, depriving them of scope. At their best, realistic plays offer audiences the very texture of experience; at their most habitual, realistic plays offer entertainment. The weekly program of London theatres makes no distinction between realism and non-realism, but it does distinguish between "comedy" and "play;" far more often than not, both groupings are faithful to familiar surfaces.

Yet some modern English playwrights have chafed against such fidelity, resorting to specific non-realistic devices to probe dramatically into what they view as reality, and the subject of this book is drama embracing these devices, which were available in the long tradition of English drama. The devices are staging the nation, Shakespeare adaptation, verse dialogue, theatre in the theatre, mental fragmentation, and costume drama (sometimes with a Brechtian infusion). A few plays blend several of these techniques, in a determined assault on realism. With some hundred examples of non-realistic dramas, I may seem to contradict my claim that realism remains the *dominant* theatre mode, but many of these plays are exceptional in the corpus of the playwright's work, and, more significantly, the most impressive playwrights tend to be non-realistic. About the others I say nothing.

The following introductory pages are not to be construed as a thumbnail history of modern English theatre. Rather, they glance at playwrights who, departing from realism in one or more of the patterns I have enumerated, will figure in later chapters. By now it is traditional to date the new English theatre from May 8, 1956, the premiere of *Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne (b. 1929) at the Royal Court Theatre on Sloane Square, several tube stops west of the so-called West End of London, and, with less than 500 seats, somewhat smaller than West End theatres. The theatre critic in David Mercer's *After Haggerty* (1970) sums it up neatly: "The crucial development in our theatre in 1956 was, as has been repeated and analysed ad nauseam: Osborne's LOOK BACK IN ANGER. (*Refers to notes card in his hand.*) At the Royal Court Theatre in London an entire generation seemed to

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have found its own vehement, articulate expression in the character of Jimmy Porter."

Referring to my own note cards, I see that the impact of that realistic *Anger* was less like an explosion than an avalanche that only gradually acquired momentum. George Devine, the first artistic director of the newly-founded English Stage Company, had leased the venerable Royal Court Theatre in order to lure writers to the stage. The company's opening production was a play by the novelist Angus Wilson, *The Mulberry Bush*. The second production was an American import – Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, three years after its lukewarm New York premiere. The third production – and the first in which Devine had a voice in the choice – was John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, which took pride of place over hundreds of other scripts that were mailed to the Court after an advertisement in *Stage*.

Attractive to the Court's directors, *Anger* garnered mixed reviews. The playwright David Edgar selectively summarizes them: "liked by the *Sunday Times*, loved by the *Observer*, and rubbished by Milton Shulman in the *Standard*" (*Second Time as Farce*, p. 137). Even when the dynamic prose of the *Observer*'s critic, Kenneth Tynan, converted *Anger* into a cause and theatre into a banner, the Court was only half full. When a scene of Osborne's play was shown on television, however, the avalanche gathered force. The drama appealed to a generation of English graduates of red-brick universities who looked in mounting anger at their heritage, their present, their prospects. Or, as the radical dramatist John McGrath notes acerbically: "What Osborne and his clever director Tony Richardson had achieved was a method of translating some areas of non-middle-class life in Britain into a form of entertainment that could be sold to the middle classes" (McGrath, *A Good Night Out*, pp. 9–10). Perhaps *Anger*'s familiar realistic form is one of its selling-points.

John Osborne, who described his *Anger* as a "formal, rather old-fashioned" play, later sought several kinds of escape from its old-fashioned form of realism.[1] He experimented with the music-hall turns of *The Entertainer* (Royal Court, 1957), the epic sprawl of *Luther* (Nottingham, 1961), the delirious distortions of *Under Plain Cover* (Royal Court, 1962) and *Inadmissible Evidence* (Royal Court, 1964), a play about a play in *A Sense of Detachment* (Royal Court, 1972), and an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* into *A Place Calling Itself Rome* (no known production, 1973). What these and Osborne's more

1 Robert Egan argues persuasively for the histrionic quality of Jimmy Porter, but I do not agree that the whole play is therefore "presentational."

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realistic plays share is a protagonist of startling articulacy who rails against his world. The *Times* critic Irving Wardle realized: "Osborne may have brought the tirade back into theatrical currency, but it was the content of the tirades that mattered" (*Theatres of George Devine*, p. 181). Jimmy Porter's content brimmed with scorn for genteel old England. David Edgar, who admits his debt to Osborne, pithily summarizes his teaching: "the proper function of playwrights [is] to 'piss in the audience's eyeballs' (the phrase is Howard Brenton's), and that exercise has defined the higher calling of the craft ever since John Osborne first opened his fly at the Royal Court Theatre on 8 May 1956" (*Second Time as Farce*, p. 141).

John Arden (b. 1930), another Royal Court playwright, engages in such micturation in his essays rather than his plays, which revel in the artifice of theatre. Dedicated to a strong (not always clear) story line, rebellious protagonists, inventive staging, and colorful language, Arden grounds many of his non-realistic dramas in British history. Although he occasionally collaborated with his wife Margaretta D'Arcy before 1972, joint authorship should be credited to most of his post-Court plays. (Only four actually opened at the Court.) Progressively disenchanted with English theatre and English politics, the Ardens in the 1970s moved to Western Ireland, spurning the blandishments of London theatre, where his early works are occasionally revived but where his new plays are not presented. From *The Waters of Babylon* (1957) to the epic radio series *Whose is the Kingdom?* (1988), Arden has blended history, humor, verse and song, and a partisan stance into his own distinctively vigorous voice, almost never muffled into the three walls of stage realism.

In the early years of the Royal Court, Edward Bond (b. 1934) was the warrior-playwright during that theatre's battle with the censoring Lord Chamberlain. His shocking realistic play *Saved* (1965) fell prey to the censor's scissors, but when his *Early Morning* (Royal Court, 1968, for two performances) was banned in entirety, a dormant Theatres Bill was revived in the House of Commons, and theatre censorship officially ended in Britain. *Early Morning* is a pseudo-historical, deadly serious farce, with cannibalistic scenes in an afterlife. After this fantasy, Bond continued to spurn realism through his own versions of Shakespearean and Greek tragedies in *Lear* (Royal Court, 1972) and *The Woman* (National, Olivier, 1978). Although he dislikes baroque devices, Bond has injected a brief play within his play *The Sea* (Royal Court, 1973). Like his colleagues Christopher Hampton and Tom Stoppard, Bond stages writers in plays more or less based on their biographies – Shakespeare in *Bingo* (Exeter, 1973), John Clare in *The*

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Fool (Royal Court, 1975), Basho in *Narrow Road to the Deep North* (Coventry, 1968) and *The Bundle* (RSC Warehouse, 1978). Bond immerses his writers in the spiritual desert of their respective social environments. Like Brecht, Bond dramatizes social and spiritual poverty through parables based on legend or history, and he returns only rarely to the realism that first gained him attention at the Court.

Sometimes grouped with Osborne, Arden, and Bond, Arnold Wesker (b. 1932) was first produced at the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry, but it is at the Royal Court that he became known in London. Of the first Court wave, he has adhered most faithfully to realism, but his sets displace the traditional drawing-room with humbler shelters. Wesker's plays were dismissed as kitchen-sink drama, and several of his plays are indeed set in the kitchen, the literal living-room of working-class people. In *Roots* (Coventry, 1959), perhaps his most searching play, the Norfolk kitchen lacks the luxury of a sink with running water, but *The Kitchen* of that same year is set in the well-equipped kitchen of a restaurant. Other Wesker plays take place in the bunk-room of a class-corroded army, and in the offices of a modern newspaper. In mercilessly realistic environments Wesker's characters are often seen *at work* – an unusual activity on the modern English stage. In this book about non-realistic plays Wesker appears by virtue of a rebuttal of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*.

Harold Pinter (b. 1930) was early paired with Wesker as a kitchen-sink dramatist, but the artifice of his dialogue soon distinguished his plays as deviants from realism. Pinter himself has said (somewhat reluctantly): "I'm convinced that what happens in my plays could happen anywhere, at any time, in any place, although the events may seem unfamiliar at first glance. If you press me for a definition, I'd say that what goes on in my plays is realistic, but what I'm doing is not realism" (*Complete Works*, II, p. 11). Perhaps that is why his drama found no home at the Court, where Osborne's *Anger* had set the ambience of social specificity, rather than "anywhere, at any time, in any place." Ignored by reviewers and audiences, Pinter might have continued his acting career while his drama languished stillborn, were it not for the admiration of Harold Hobson of the *Sunday Times*, who, however, did not grasp that Pinter's characters jockey with an infra-language lying below the telling rhythms that we hear. At first mistakenly admired for a tape-recorder ear, Pinter is now recognized as a master stylist, whose stripped dialogue has seeded the contemporary English comedy of manners, a genre that adheres to realistic tenets. With few exceptions, Pinter's plays present a realistic surface,

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for all the mystery at their core. His non-realism does not, however, fall into any of the patterns I examine, so he does not enter this study.

In the same generation of mid-century playwrights, Robert Bolt (b. 1924) and Peter Shaffer (b. 1926) are even further than Pinter from the Court. Fortunate enough to leap from children's plays on radio to a vehicle for Ralph Richardson – *Flowering Cherry* (Oxford Playhouse, 1957; with Richardson at the Haymarket), Robert Bolt has zigzagged between stage and screen (after overcoming aphasia). Best known for his *A Man for All Seasons* (Globe, 1960), he has acknowledged the influence upon his work of Brecht, and yet that influence is one of surface alone. Similarly, Peter Shaffer has combed the surface of Artaud – after arriving on the West End's Shaftesbury Avenue in 1958, with a well-made drawing-room play, *Five-Finger Exercise*. Shaffer turned away from realism with *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* (Chichester, 1964), the first new play to be produced by the new National Theatre. Not unlike Osborne in centering his dramas on a tormented and articulate hero, Shaffer surrounds his quasi-historical Pizarro with spectacular visual effects, which adorn his obsessive theme of reason versus passion.

Shaffer's contemporary, James Saunders (b. 1925), has had a contrasting career. Beginning with absurdist rather than realistic plays, he has always paid close attention to the nuances of language, eschewing the visual lavishness of Shaffer as well as the seductions of the irrational. Although Saunders has had several small West End productions, he has not been wooed by the subsidized companies. Nevertheless, he has survived for three decades by varying his media – radio and television, as well as the stage – and by limiting himself to small casts and inexpensive sets. Two little theatres have been especially hospitable to his work: the Questors in Ealing and the Orange Tree in Richmond. Deft with dialogue, he sometimes sets his plays in the theatre – *Next Time I'll Sing to You* (Questors, 1962), *Games*, and *After Liverpool* (both Questors, 1971).

Another highly verbal playwright of that generation was never produced at the Court – David Mercer (1926–80). Like some Court writers, Mercer was an auto-didact from a working-class family, and his first plays – produced on television – reflect "where the difference begins" (the title of his first play) between an older generation and the children they educated through self-sacrifice. "A whole generation of working-class parents pushed their sons and daughters across what turned out to be a chasm that would stand between them for the rest of their lives" (Don Taylor, *Days of Vision*, p. 50). When Mercer's first play was rejected by several theatres, the television

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director Don Taylor helped him rewrite it for that medium, to which Mercer subsequently contributed twenty-five scripts, but between 1965 and 1980 he also wrote nine stage plays, and in both media he often exploded the frame of realism. Not only did Mercer reach out from his native Yorkshire to all of Europe, but in both media he made free with time and space; he fragmented the narrative line while honing and concentrating verbal repartee. In Don Taylor's summary: "The . . . dramatic tension between art and life informs a good many of [Mercer's] best plays. They are all to some degree autobiographical. They are none of them autobiographies" (p. 110).

A contemporary of the first wave of new English playwrights, Pam Gems (b. 1925) did not begin to write till the 1970s, when she and her family moved to London. A mother of four, she started with children's sketches but soon shifted to women-centered plays in various fringe venues. Her *Queen Christina*, written in 1974, was rejected by the Royal Court as "too sprawly, too expensive . . . and appeal[ing] more to women" (Wandor, *Carry On Understudies*, p. 161). It became the first play by a woman to be produced at the RSC's Other Place in Stratford in 1977. Her most successful play *Piaf* (1978) also opened there, but moved on to praise in London and New York. Although Gems has done several adaptations of older plays, most of her work adheres to the conventions of realism, with emphasis on women's problems.

As suggested by Gems' career, the 1970s saw the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre competing with the Royal Court for new writers. Although the Court from its inception announced itself as a writers' theatre, some writers were more welcome than others. "1969 was the year when a quite coherent generation of playwrights began appearing, including David Hare, Howard Brenton, and Snoo Wilson, and they were being staunchly resisted by the establishment of the Royal Court" (Doty and Harbin, *Inside the Royal Court Theatre*, p. 100). In 1969 the Artistic Director of the Court, William Gaskill, opened the Theatre Upstairs for more experimental work, the first alternative stage in a major English theatre. Whether in the West End, the subsidized theatres, or the still upstart Court, the new drama was grounded in humanism. Overtly or covertly, the plays appealed to audience sympathy, but this changed in the 1970s, when audiences rushed to the London theatre to be assaulted.

Their forerunner was Joe Orton (1933–67), who inaugurated the shocking comedy of manners at the Court. In the three years between his first production *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* and his brutal death in

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1967, Orton's acid pen etched caricatures of blackmailers, murderers, and rapists of insatiable sexuality, to the delight of presumably respectable audiences. Something of a culture hero in the amoral 1980s, Orton has been the subject of a film *Prick Up Your Ears* (Orton's title). Orton has sharpened traditional forms of English comedy through the disparity between formal prose and heinous deed, but he rarely strays from the surface of realism in the form of the well-made farce. *The Erpingham Camp* (1966 for television, but adapted for the stage) is an exception, modeled as it is on *The Bacchae*.

Far less flamboyant than Orton, David Storey (b. 1933) may have more staying power. Son of a Yorkshire miner, Storey attended art school, played professional rugby, and taught school before committing himself to writing. Fiction was his first genre, but he turned in discouragement to drama: "I think *Sporting Life* was about the eighth novel I'd written and I got so tired of trying to get them published that after *Sporting Life* had been turned down about eight times, I thought 'Well I've got nothing left here, perhaps I'm really a dramatist'" (Hayman, *Playback*, p. 8). Nine productions at the Royal Court render the "perhaps" less nebulous. Storey's own categorization of his plays is often quoted: (1) the poetic naturalism of *The Contractor* (1969) and *The Changing Room* (1971); (2) the traditional literary drama of *In Celebration* (1969) and *The Farm* (1973); and (3) the overt stylization of *Home* (1970) and *Cromwell* (1973). In the lineage of J. B. Priestley and D. H. Lawrence are Storey's realistic studies of alienation in the spiritual poverty of the north of England. *The Contractor* sidesteps a dramatic plot, however, to dramatize the raising and lowering of a gigantic tent that usurps the stage space and hints at extra-spatial symbolism. Most subsequent Storey plays devalue the plot in order to stage metaphors for the decline of contemporary England – irreligious, crazily familial, but untethered to an ethic. What Storey said of *Mother's Day* (Royal Court, 1976) applies to most of his plays: "They are a family who intrinsically invert every decent value. But I think they're genuinely a microcosm of English life with their delusions, illusions and fantasies, and their inveterate capacity to live in the past" (Kerensky, *New British Drama*, pp. 16–17).

If the Royal Court Theatre of George Devine had done no more than house that first generation of playwrights, its place in theatre history would be assured. John McGrath, who spent a brief period at the Court, writes sourly: "Many another young writer has followed Osborne into the Royal Court or the Aldwych or the National Theatre. They have been served by an array of ex-working-class directors and actors whose ranks are ever growing . . . More important,

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