

General introduction

This volume charts the development of theatrical presentation from the middle of the nineteenth century to the end of the First World War. These were times of great cultural, social and political upheaval; for today's theatre practitioner, historian and theoretician in the European theatrical tradition, they represent by far the most important period in the evolution of our art.

The mid-nineteenth century witnessed the start of a new kind of self-awareness and self-reflection among theatre artists. Putting on plays was no longer an end in itself: the creation of imaginary worlds had to be justified on ethical, sociological, political and aesthetic grounds. The first great debate, which goes on unabated to this day, in television as well as in the theatre, concerned the notion of realism/naturalism. The debate grew more fascinating still when artists, towards the end of the century, rebelled against the tyranny of 'materialistic truth' in the name of poetry and of a higher idea of what constitutes ultimate reality, before rejecting all conventions in an assertion of the total freedom of the creative mind. Our documents follow the growth of naturalism throughout Europe and its gradual (and almost contemporaneous) rejection and replacement by symbolism and expressionism.

For the first time in European theatre history, the training of actors mobilized the energies of the best practitioners. The documents show how in France, Germany, Russia and Scandinavia, directors, playwrights and theorists searched for more professional ways of staging plays with actors who had undergone a thorough technical training and acquired some intellectual and aesthetic culture. The growing importance of scenography (i.e. of integrated set designs) is also illustrated, alongside the new technologies (for example, electric lighting).

Then, as now, the majority of actors were struggling to eke out a living and we reproduce some eye-opening contracts that were forced on would-be performers who were treated, in some cases, as slave labourers. This was also the time when theatre became 'show-biz': while some idealistic men and women strove to give their art a spiritual and aesthetic grandeur rarely achieved in the past, others were only motivated by financial considerations.

But beyond all these contradictory pulls an earnest debate on the nature of

theatre was beginning. That debate was not conducted on the level of abstract ideas, but pursued concretely in the very act of creating the theatrical event. That debate continues and will go on for as long as we are drawn to the creation of fictional lives to try to make sense of our own lives.

THE *METTEUR EN SCÈNE*

The rich creativity that was unleashed in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century on the European stage was made possible by the assertion of a number of far-sighted men of their 'directorial' prerogatives within the organization of the theatrical event. The notion of *mise en scène* (for which there is no adequate translation in English: the meanings of 'production', 'staging', 'direction' are not as all-encompassing as the French term) was only really developed in the 1880s, when the 'director' (*le metteur en scène*) asserted his 'dictatorial' authority over the minutest aspect of the theatrical creation, including his 'reading' of the playwright's text. Whereas in the past the author, the leading actor or a 'stage manager' were vaguely responsible for blocking a show, the modern 'director' came to proclaim the theatrical specificity of the theatrical creation. A play produced on the stage was no longer to be considered as the mere physical illustration of a literary text that happened to be a play, but the production (the play in space and time) was to be seen as a work of art in its own right and had to be conceived as such, not only by its creators but also by the spectators.

It so happens, and it is no coincidence, that the rise of the director came about at the time when, in literature and in painting, artists were striving for ever greater realism – a striving inspired by positivist philosophy and encouraged by an unshakeable faith in scientific progress. The faithful and perfectly exact reproduction of social, psychological and material reality, as advocated by the avant-garde of the 1880s and 1890s, called for the emergence of a controlling authority, and, therefore, the rise of the director was a development that had to happen. The first modern director was Ludwig Chronégk (1837–91) who worked at the Meiningen Court Theatre and who influenced the conceptions of André Antoine in Paris and Konstantin Stanislavsky in Moscow. But, in many ways, the real father of our modern stage was not a man of the theatre at all, but a cantankerous critic and a failed playwright: the French novelist Emile Zola (1840–1902). From 1865 until 1880, Zola, also a theatre critic and an influential political journalist, was not so much writing reviews of the shows he saw professionally night after night as he was building, more and more impatiently, the theory of the 'new theatre'. In 1880 he collected together his most important texts and published them in book form under the title, *Le Naturalisme au théâtre*. Zola's ideas were often misconstrued at

the time, and are still too often presented in a caricatured fashion; nonetheless their impact cannot be overstressed.

Rejecting centuries of obsolete conventions, Zola called for truth and reality in the creation of the theatrical event. Life itself – and not ‘eternal’ rules of dramatic construction – was to be the inspiration of writers, directors, designers and actors. Everyday life, everyday situations, ordinary people, colloquial speech, real environments, truthful feelings: this, for Zola, is the stuff of true theatre.

Opponents to naturalism, then and now, have repeated with nauseating monotony that Zola’s aesthetics in theatrical matters was nothing but the translation into predictable images of the hegemonic materialist bourgeois ideology. In this context, much is made of Zola’s fascination with photography. That Zola was a keen and superlative photographer is a well-known fact: how could it have been otherwise since the writer was excited by every new technology and new idea, and his life and art were devoted to observing the reality around him? What is wrong (wilfully wrong) is to equate photography with passivity, boredom and meaningless reproduction of a superficially beheld reality. With naturalism the essentialist vision of the world, and of man’s position in the world, gives way to an analytical and critical perception of Darwinian man in an ever-changing environment. Antoine and Zola were not so naïve as to think that the task of the director, actor and designer was to put reality on the stage, but to *represent* reality as honestly and as truthfully as possible.¹ This, obviously, entailed a three-dimensional construction of sets resembling as closely as possible real locations, filled with real objects, and for flesh-and-blood characters to behave in these re-created spaces as naturally as possible. In his preface to *Miss Julie* (1888), Strindberg expresses most fully and succinctly the ‘illusionistic’ programme of the entire naturalist movement in the theatre. But what cannot be stressed enough is that Chronégk, Antoine, Strindberg, Stanislavsky, Brahm, Grein, all these men who created ‘free theatres’ (i.e. theatres free from stultifying conventions) were not thoughtless children unaware of the meaning of their actions, but artists trying, at a given time and in a given place, to realize for their publics what theatre people have always tried to do, namely to animate a reliable picture of *man in the world*. Their ideal was to achieve the most consummate ‘*effet de réel*’.² What Barthes named the *effet de réel*, i.e. the ‘artistically created impression of reality’, must not be confused, as it too often is, with reality itself. Everyone in the theatre, the actor on the stage and the spectator in the auditorium, knows that some fiction is being performed: the actor *may* in a

¹ Anachronistically Zola/Antoine/Stanslavsky et al. are accused, implicitly, of having ignored Brecht, or are berated for not having been Brecht. It is doubtful whether, without their example, even Brecht could have become Brecht.

² Expression coined by Roland Barthes in *Communication*, 11 (1968). See Patrice Pavis, *Dictionnaire du théâtre* (Paris: Messidor, 1987).

Cambridge University Press

0521230144 - Naturalism and Symbolism in European Theatre 1850-1918

Edited by Claude Schumacher

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4 General introduction

paroxysm of emotion 'lose' himself for a fleeting moment; the spectator *may* feel, equally fleetingly, that a real event is 'being enacted' – but, fundamentally, no one is duped, unless it be narrow-minded academics who choose to deny any intelligence to the theatrical creators of the late nineteenth century and to their spectators.

'The impression of reality' was most passionately sought in the art of the actor – and, ironically, that quest of total identification between actor and role, that desire to affect emotionally each spectator in the deepest recesses of his being, will be most exacerbated in those twentieth-century directors, actors and theorists who most vehemently reject the lessons of naturalism, from Artaud to Grotowski to performance artists. One example must here suffice. To hostile critics – in all the countries represented in this volume – Ibsen was the epitome of everything that was bad in naturalism, the quintessence of decadence, of bad taste, of immorality. It goes without saying that all those who undertook to perform the Norwegian's plays were worse than the man himself, since they should have had the good sense not to touch his distasteful creations. When Antoine came to stage *Ghosts* (30 May 1890) he lavished all his naturalist know-how on the *mise en scène*: the set was fully constructed and, on their first entrance at the opening of the play, the characters coming from outside the house were dripping with rain (and what could be more boring, naturalistic, meaningless, i.e. 'photographic', than water sprinkled on actors?). Yet, according to those critics who were not systematically hostile to the Théâtre Libre, the play produced a profound and lasting effect. George Moore, an English writer residing in Paris, wrote that he had 'lived through a year's emotion' during Oswald's confession of his need for Regina (*Ghosts*, Act III), and he concludes: 'Antoine, identifying himself with the simple truth sought by Ibsen, by voice and gesture, casts upon the scene so terrible a light, so strange an air of truth, that the drama seemed to be passing not before our eyes but *deep down in our hearts in a way we had never felt before*.'³ It is the measure of the greatest acting that it can achieve such a powerful effect on a knowledgeable spectator.

The term 'naturalism' is used in the title of this volume because the 'naturalist movement' is deeply ingrained in the history of Western theatre, but the contributors to the various sections would be deeply disappointed if readers were to get the impression that the notion of naturalism is a closed notion. For theatre artists, then and now, there is no such thing as 'naturalist fundamentalism': even the preface to *Miss Julie* insists on a set which represents only the corner of a room, leading the eyes of the spectators 'into unknown perspectives' and thus haunting their imagination. In October 1888, for instance, André Antoine staged a one-act

³ George Moore (1852–1933), *Impressions and Opinions* (London, 1913), pp. 162–7; quoted in Jean Chothia, *André Antoine* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 51. Emphasis added.

play, *Les Bouchers* (The Butchers), by Fernand Ices (1856–88) who had recently died of consumption. The play, and its production, are often cited to deride the entire naturalistic endeavour: imagine, Antoine hung a carcass of beef on the stage!⁴ What nonsense, what bad taste! What is generally overlooked is that the play is written in impassioned verse and that Antoine, far from re-creating the neat and clinical aspect of a village butcher's shop, had strewn the stage with offal: offal everywhere, even on the ground. There is a term to describe such heightened theatrical imagery, and that term is 'expressionism'. Emile Faguet, a particularly astute critic, wrote as early as December 1888 that the Théâtre Libre was a very eclectic institution, open to a rich variety of experiences where there is something for all tastes: 'The Théâtre Libre is the free tribune of the theatre . . . They are accused of being monopolized by a very closed, imperious and intolerant school . . . I am pleased to see it is nothing of the kind.'⁵ Antoine himself insisted, again and again, that he was not the prisoner of one school of thought, the slave of one exclusive aesthetics, and that the door of his theatre was as wide open to symbolism or any innovation in theatrical writing or style of presentation as to naturalism. With *Les Bouchers*, its supercharged acting and its gory set, Antoine behaved like a distant forerunner of the theatre of cruelty, assaulting mercilessly his spectators' senses and peace of mind.

A similar open, ecumenical attitude was to be found in the actions of all leading practitioners of the time: in Paris, the 'naturalist' Antoine welcomed and trained the 'symbolist' Lugné-Poe; in Berlin, Brahm called Reinhardt to his side; in Moscow Meyerhold learned his craft under Stanislavsky, who invited the 'avant-gardist' Craig to direct Shakespeare in his theatre, and so on. For the sake of convenience, the careers of the greatest playwrights writing in the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries are divided into 'periods', and even more conveniently Strindberg had the kindness to follow a perfect trajectory from naturalism to expressionism through symbolism. But such a superficial approach to the work of the writers, directors and actors of the time is dangerously reductive. For example, Strindberg's *The Father* (1887) was presented to Zola by the author himself as a 'naturalist tragedy' and it is cited, again and again, as a masterpiece of the naturalist school and of Strindberg's naturalist period. Yet for the Intimate Theatre in 1908 Strindberg wanted an expressionist production, with the wife acted 'like a fury from hell'. And indeed the text of the play is redolent of symbolism, the well-observed claustrophobic set is a symbol in itself, many actions (like the final swaddling of the Captain into a strait-jacket) are more symbolic than factually correct, and, here and there, especially with the

⁴ The beef was in reality mutton, and its use was highly symbolic as Francis Pruner so eloquently describes it in his *Les Luttes d'Antoine – Au Théâtre Libre*, Tome 1 (Paris: Minard, Bibliothèque des Lettres modernes, 1964), pp. 250ff. ⁵ Cited in Chothia, *André Antoine*, p. 87.

throwing of a burning oil lamp, the heightened atmosphere of expressionism is achieved. The same wealth of meanings can be observed, to a greater or lesser extent, in the entire *œuvre* of playwrights like Ibsen, Strindberg or Chekhov, and their best interpreters at the time rose perfectly to the challenge.

THE SYMBOLIST REACTION

Why such a subtitle if I am arguing that the division into separate schools is largely artificial? Because a fundamental shift occurred 'away from naturalism' at the very time naturalism was establishing itself and promoting a new approach to the art of the theatre. The Meiningen, Antoine, Stanislavsky, all had faith in the materiality of the stage (the set, the props, the actors) as they had a positivist certainty of the *pérennité* (durability) of the world. Coupled with a strong humanism, such an optimistic certainty guided them towards the establishment of a solid theatrical craft which still is – and the statement bears repetition – the foundation of today's performance culture in the Western world.

But there were those who doubted, and questioned in the most fundamental manner, the very existence of the material world. Contemporaneously with Antoine's work at the Théâtre Libre, the most innovatory French symbolist poet, Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–98), was refining a theatrical 'anti-theatricalist' theory. For Mallarmé, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* represents not only the highest peak of theatrical art but also the highest achievement of human artistic creativity (which, for him, was the only creativity worth considering). *Hamlet* is a unique masterpiece because the tragedy is a *monodrama*: *Hamlet*, says Mallarmé, is a play consisting of a single 'soliloquizing' character surrounded by inconsistent shadows. For Mallarmé the fascination of the play lies in Hamlet's interior monologue, the innermost encounter of a man with himself, the confrontation of a human being with the ultimate metaphysical questions. What, for the ordinary spectator, creates the excitement of a theatrical performance – namely the action, the unfolding of a plot in time, expectation and suspense, the reversal of the main character's fortune, the confrontation of an actor with his character – Mallarmé rejects as inessential and vulgar materiality. Indeed, a performance can only destroy the perfection of the writer's creation. For Mallarmé and his disciples, a theatrical performance could, at best, take the form of a public reading, if it is given the solemnity of High Mass: 'The ultimate Work of Art [*l'Œuvre totale*] is a book, read and commented by Mallarmé in front of a chosen public, according to a sophisticated ritual in order to transmit a certain metaphysical teaching which would take the place of existing religions.'⁶ Mallarmé was dreaming of a theatre

⁶ Jacques Scherer, *Le 'Livre' de Mallarmé* (Paris: Gallimard, revised edition, 1977), p. 37.

which would be pure music, pure colour, pure song and pure dance: a theatre of dreams dreamt by and for disembodied souls.

Needless to say, such an extremist attitude is the very rejection of theatre and no man of the theatre could follow such a programme, since it signifies, purely and simply, the abolition of theatre. But less extreme symbolists were disheartened by the naturalists' insistence on the corporeality of the stage and they saw in the material presence of sets and actors a denial of the spiritual dimensions of art and of human life. Such creators were anxious that the spiritual dimension and the dream element should never be forgotten.⁷

The *Zeitgeist*, as usual, has a lot to do with changing attitudes. On the one hand, older writers (again: Ibsen, Zola, Strindberg . . .) who had not only followed the principles of naturalism as an aesthetic path to theatrical creation, but had firmly believed in the notion of progress inscribed in the positivist philosophy of their youth, became disillusioned by the lack of results and by the appropriation of their techniques by second-rate playwrights and theatre-makers who applied their methods mechanically and, thereby, debased naturalism by producing shows that were nothing but a collection of trite clichés. On the other hand, the young generation, for whom naturalism appeared to be the only approach their predecessors had ever known, and who judged the failure of the 'scientific age' with a harshness bordering on rage, made the rejection of materialism a question of dogma. Their search for spiritual values, their desire to express the inexpressible, became highly polemical. Poets of the theatre such as Maeterlinck, Jarry or Quillard, Wedekind or Hofmannsthal, Blok or Andreev, Synge or Yeats, wanted to effect a total break with the dominant artistic trend and, therefore, their rejection of naturalism was total and the discredit they cast upon it knew no bounds. It is they who first dismissed naturalism as mere surface photography – the gibe which lazy critics have repeated ever since. Now that a full century has passed, now that we can cast a more informed and dispassionate eye on the history of our art, it becomes obvious that naturalism and symbolism are as indissociable as the fingers on one's hand, and these age-old traditions (renewed by generation after generation) enrich each other in every successful work of art.

THE ADVENT OF THE 'SAVAGE GOD'

After the first night of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu roi* (Paris, 9 December 1896) Yeats wrote

⁷ The list of post-naturalist, symbolist or even spiritualist writers and playwrights is inexhaustible, and should begin with Zola himself who, at the time of his death, was working on a messianic novel (*Vérité*, Truth, published posthumously, 1903). As stated earlier, naturalist playwrights like Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov can easily be classified among symbolists, and most directors (Antoine included) should be mentioned as symbolist as well as naturalist creators, even if their personal inclinations led them more readily towards one rather than the other direction.

in his diary: 'After us, the Savage God!'⁸ The Irish poet saw (rightly, as it happens) in Jarry's monstrous character the harbinger of genocidal times. *Ubu*'s two performances both caused a stir among the Parisian literati and exploded all theatrical conventions (naturalist as well as symbolist): in *Ubu* Jarry rejects all notions of character, time, coherence, causality, plot, decorum or literary composition. The play is a firebrand thrown into twenty-five centuries of Western theatrical tradition. Its first reluctant director, Lugné-Poe, disowned the production the day after its première, only to reclaim it many years later when realizing its seminal importance. Jarry's example was to be followed in Italy by the futurists who proclaimed in 1909, through Marinetti's 'Manifesto of Destructive Incendiary Violence': 'Poetry must be a violent onslaught. There is no masterpiece without aggressiveness . . .'.⁹ A little later, in 1916, in Switzerland, Germany, France (and the United States), the anarchist and nihilist Dada, through manifestos, anti-establishment exhibitions and wild cabaret performances,¹⁰ announced the end of art and civilization. As Glynne Wickham so aptly writes: 'for if the war had done nothing else for art, it had revealed all too clearly how feeble modern man actually was, and *how frail was his continuing hold on civilized life*.'¹¹ In Russia a somehow less pessimistic reaction against naturalism made itself felt in Meyerhold's and Evreinov's insistence on the theatrical nature of theatre: the art of the performer is not to pretend that what he is doing is an ordinary everyday action, but 'to proudly exhibit' his histrionic skills for all to admire. Their actors were to be the ultimate performance artists – tragedian-comedian-impersonator-dancer-singer-clown-tumbler-juggler, whose aim was to affect the mood of the spectator, to work directly and physically on his emotions, to thrill and to enthral by their virtuosity. Before the October Revolution (and that is the only period that interests us here), the question of conveying a message, of instructing the audience, of having any moral impact on the spectator was mostly rejected as irrelevant by such theatricalists who excelled in parody and experimented in all possible theatrical forms.

Although Aristotle is still being studied in universities (and more and more practitioners gain a university training before launching their careers), the idea that there are dramaturgical rules that must be followed for a play to be a play has lost its currency. Today's creators do not have to resort to youthful anarchistic revolt in order to be able to express themselves: they express themselves in total

⁸ Cited in Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France from 1885 to World War I* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969; first published 1955), p. 209.

⁹ F. T. Marinetti (1876–1944), 'The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism', *Le Figaro*, Paris, 20 February 1909.

¹⁰ Most memorably at the Cabaret Voltaire, in Zürich (1916–17), inspired by Jean Arp (1887–1966) and Tristan Tzara (1896–1963).

¹¹ Glynne Wickham, *A History of the Theatre* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1985), p. 223. Emphasis added.

freedom. They are free to create form and content as they go along, and they have the avant-garde of a hundred years ago to thank for that hard-won freedom. The activities of the likes of Jarry, Blok, Wedekind, Marinetti or even Strindberg (marginal, shunned and dismissed at the time by the 'Pillars of Establishment Art') have laid the foundation of the best of twentieth-century theatre, in playwriting, directing and design. A roll-call of post-Second World War artists directly inspired by the iconoclastic visionaries of the late 1890s and the early years of our century would fill a volume, from Edward Albee to Leonid Zorin, through Arrabal, Artaud, Beckett, Bergman, Brecht, Brook, Dürrenmatt, Fo, Frisch, Grotowski, Handke, Ionesco, Littlewood, Mnouchkine, Pinter, Planchon, Rame, Ronconi, Stein, Strehler, Svoboda, Weiss, Bob Wilson, Zadek, and so on and so forth. To which we should add the names of designers, theatre architects, theorists and theatre companies – all of whom found and continue to find their inspiration in the work of their forefathers of the turn of the century.

THE VOLUME'S ORGANIZATION

A volume dealing with a European overview of theatrical activity from 1850 to 1918 calls, quite obviously, for a division in national entities. The second half of the nineteenth century was the time of the nation-state *par excellence*: not only were European nations strongly affirming their individual identities, but they were also (politically and economically) affirming their singularity as never before, with the disastrous consequences that were to follow. It is natural, in a compilation like this, to give the reader a strong picture of how each nation chose to organize its theatrical activity. We are, therefore, presenting the documents in chronological order within each section, and each national entry has been divided into subsections which best represent the main emphases of the theatrical development in these countries.

But another, thematic, option could also have been adopted. If, on the political level, nation-states were asserting their individuality, theatre artists were constantly criss-crossing the continent ignoring the strict boundaries enforced by politicians. In that sense, it was tempting to devote a section to, say, the Théâtre Libre and another to Stanislavsky; one to *mise en scène* and another to financial considerations; yet another to international touring, and so on. It is, however, impossible to find a satisfactory solution to the complexity of the task as the majority of documents could be listed under many different headings.

To allow our readers to find a path through the whole volume and to encourage a 'thematic' reading, 'subject' entries have been included in the traditional name index.

Cambridge University Press

0521230144 - Naturalism and Symbolism in European Theatre 1850-1918

Edited by Claude Schumacher

Excerpt

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France, 1851–1919

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