Introduction

This book is about a curious phenomenon. It examines the work of nine talented and innovative British playwrights who shared a laudable but strange conviction: that by writing plays and having them performed, they might help to change the way society is structured.

It is not a new conviction. Over two millennia ago Aristotle's theory of *catharsis*, that by watching a tragedy we may be purged of unhealthy emotions, ascribed a direct social benefit to drama. The Christian Church, while often distrustful of theatre, was willing to use drama as one of the means of propagating faith, giving us our modern word 'propaganda'. Eighteenth-century utilitarianism frequently justified drama in terms of its social usefulness, the German playwright Friedrich Schiller typically entitling his seminal essay of 1784, 'The theatre regarded as a moral institution'.

In the twentieth century, theatre with an intention to convert to a new way of thinking, or at least to challenge old modes of thought, became more overtly political, questioning not so much social morality as the fundamental organization of society, with the emphasis on economics rather than on ethics. Usually informed by Marx's analysis of capitalism, a number of directors and playwrights, most notably Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht, sought to use the stage to propose socialist alternatives to the injustices of the world about them. In so doing they helped to define what we have now come to term 'political theatre', the actual title of Piscator's 1929 book on his work in the theatre.

All theatre is political. Indeed, it is the most political of all art forms. Most obviously, it is presented in a much more public forum than any other art. A novel may be read by more people than see a

particular play; buildings and statues in public places may well be seen by many people who would never dream of setting foot inside a theatre; television daily reaches many times more viewers than the biggest theatre could accommodate in a decade. But the novel is read in private; passersby, if they notice a statue, respond individually; the television, even if watched by a group of people, is still a part of the domestic environment. As David Edgar argues: 'The inherent problem with television as an agent of radical ideas is that its massive audience is not confronted en masse. It is confronted in the atomised arena of the family living room, the place where most people are at their least critical.'[1]

The performing arts enjoy the unique distinction of bringing people together in a public place to respond communally to an artistic experience, whether to watch dance, listen to a symphony or to attend a play. And because the theatre uses words, its communication can be particularly specific and challenging. In the theatre, live actors speak out loud in front of, and sometimes even directly to, an audience, and so ideas and feelings are expressed at the same instant to a community of onlookers. Even cinema, which perhaps comes closest to live theatre in terms of its reception, offers a much more private, interior experience (one has only to consider how inappropriate it would be to heckle a film, or to compare the excited analysis of even quite mediocre plays by theatre-goers during the interval with the dulled atmosphere in a cinema intermission).

Just as the audience in the theatre cannot avoid assuming a certain communal role, so too the process of artistic creation in the theatre is a shared one. A novel, poem or painting are complete by the time they leave the creator's hands, and the accidents of publication or display will have a minimal effect on their quality. But the playwright's script is only the first stage in a complex process that will be contributed to by designers, directors, actors, wardrobe-mistresses and so on, all bringing their own creativity (or otherwise) to the final achievement, quite properly referred to as a 'production'.

Moreover, theatre depends on transcendence. On the one hand, the actors must transcend their own individuality in order to assume the role of a stranger. On the other, the audience must escape from

their own self-centred preoccupations in order to become involved with the events on stage. And this process, which occurs both in the empathetic playing of realism and in the social emphases of Brechtian theatre, is an inherently political act, for the origin of political thought is in the willingness to identify with others, to share their problems, to experience transcendence.

A further important quality of theatre is its facility for juxtaposition. Most other art forms are obliged to pursue a certain linearity. Literature can only offer one line of print after another, and while the memory retains images and matches them against what is being read at that moment, words of themselves cannot actually juxtapose images. Similarly, much can be achieved in the cinema by montage, but one image still follows another, except in the rare experimental use, say, of the triptych screen. However, the theatre can place striking images side by side and offer contradictory information to stimulate our response. An actor may speak of love, and gesture to indicate hatred; a well-fed character may talk of charity, while ignoring a starving beggar at his feet. The total picture of the stage can communicate in ways that are not easily possible with the cinematic close-up.

In another sense, too, theatre is potentially a more genuinely political art form than the supposedly more democratic media of cinema and television. In both these forms, the camera dictates to us what we are to see. While naturally attempting to achieve some focus, the good stage director allows us the freedom to choose what we watch, and indeed we may see different things at each performance. Theatre invites us to look; it does not prescribe.

In terms of content, some plays are clearly more determinedly political than others, but it should be equally clear that it is impossible to parade characters interacting socially in front of a public assembled to witness these relationships without there being some political content. Thus even the silliest farce or most innocuous musical will reflect some ideology, usually that of the Establishment. In this sense, all theatre is indeed political.

The term 'political theatre' is, however, usually given a much more specific meaning, one that is used in this volume. This is defined as a kind of theatre that not only depicts social interaction and

political events but implies the possibility of radical change on socialist lines: the removal of injustice and autocracy and their replacement by the fairer distribution of wealth and more democratic systems.

There are different elements discernible in the process of writing for the political theatre. To begin with, there is the political credo of the individual playwright. There is not entire consistency in the views of the nine playwrights under consideration: Arnold Wesker, John Arden, Trevor Griffiths, Howard Barker, Howard Brenton, John McGrath, David Hare, Edward Bond and Caryl Churchill. It is almost certain that they would all subscribe to Churchill's summary of her aspiration: 'what kind of society I would like: decentralized, nonauthoritarian, communist, nonsexist – a society in which people can be in touch with their feelings, and in control of their lives'.[2] However, their views on how this ideal state may be achieved range from the liberal pacifism of the young Arden to the committed Marxism of Griffiths and McGrath. Individual playwrights also change their political views over the years: Arden became a Marxist, Churchill became gradually more politicized, all of them have had to reassess their thinking after the popular success of Margaret Thatcher and the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe.

There is more consistency in the backgrounds of these writers: six are middle-class, and all are university-educated, with the exception of Wesker and Bond, who openly distrusts the academic world. Moreover, six of them went to Oxford or Cambridge, proving that supposed relics of privilege can be breeding grounds for revolutionary thinking. There is also diversity in the views of what they believed their writing for the theatre could achieve. None is naïve enough to believe that watching a play would drive the members of the audience out on to the barricades, as famously happened at the start of the Belgian uprising of 1830, when on 25 August the audience attended Auber's *La muette de Portici*, an opera celebrating the rebellion of Naples against the Spanish. It perhaps would not even affect the way they vote at the next election. As David Hare wrote, admittedly in 1991, a decade after the decline in political playwriting: 'The first mistake is to imagine that British writers . . . wish to have any greater influence on the affairs of the nation than they have already. In my

experience, they do not wish more than any other citizens to bring about the fall of governments, or to force laws onto the statute book.'[3] Richard Seyd of the socialist theatre group Red Ladder said, 'If people don't think that capitalism is an absurd and damaging way of organising society, then very little that one does is going to change their minds.'[4] John Arden, in 1966, was similarly modest in his claims for the effectiveness of his theatre:

> Protest is a sort of futile activity in the theatre. It's highly unlikely, for instance that supposing President Johnson and Mr McNamara came to see this play [*Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*], they would say, 'Oh dear, we've got to pull out of Vietnam.' . . . The only thing you can do is to keep on saying what you don't like about the society in which you live.[5]

That said, it is clear that even the least radical of this group of writers would hope that an audience, after seeing one of their plays, will leave the theatre in some way changed, their political awareness heightened. As Simon Trussler wrote in 1975: 'Most people now involved in alternative theatre probably hope that their work, however tenuously or indirectly, will contribute to an awareness of the need for social change, whether gradual and piecemeal or radical and profound.'[6] Two centuries earlier Lessing had argued in his *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, with reference to Molière's comedies, that these plays might not cure the sick but they would at least confirm the healthy in their health.[7]

The aim of this volume is to examine how different writers have used the stage to create political theatre, making special reference in each case to a significant example of their political playwriting. The nine named playwrights have been selected because they offer a wide spectrum of writing for theatre which is clearly identified with a left-wing viewpoint. This volume lays no claim to being a comprehensive survey of all such writing. The following significant British writers of the period have been omitted, although each of them may be regarded as a political playwright, at least in some of their plays: Peter Barnes, Robert Bolt, David Edgar, Barrie Keeffe, David Mercer, Peter Nichols, Harold Pinter, Alan Plater, Stephen Poliakoff, David Rudkin, Tom Stoppard, Peter Terson, Charles Wood. It also

means that this study exclusively examines examples taken from the early work of the nine named political writers. Although they all (with the exception of the late McGrath) still write for the theatre, some with continuing success, their revolutionary aspirations have had to be considerably modified in response to political developments of the last two decades. The type of political theatre that this book examines had lost its impetus by the Thatcher era of the mid-1980s, and it is the preceding period of less than thirty years that is our specific concern here. Writers like Wesker and Barker may despair that – yet again – it is one of their early plays that is analysed here, but this does not purport to be a book about their whole careers. Indeed, where a dramatist's *œuvre* has already been frequently subjected to critical examination (e.g. Wesker, Arden, Bond), I have spent less time discussing their other plays than in the case of those writers who have attracted less critical attention (e.g. Griffiths, McGrath).

The main intention of this book is not primarily to analyse the political philosophies of the nine playwrights, nor to undertake the ultimately impossible task of evaluating how effective their work has been in changing public opinion. By examining important examples of their work, we shall not only discover a wide range of strategies of political theatre and offer a theoretical context for their evaluation; we shall also discuss some of the best writing for the British theatre in the latter half of the twentieth century.

It is curious, given the quality of the playwriting and the fact that this was the last time in the development of British drama that a discernible group of like-minded writers can be identified, that there have been so few attempts to consider their work collectively. There have been many excellent studies of British theatre of this period, most recently by Dominic Shellard, as the extensive bibliography testifies. There have also been valuable monographs on single dramatists, and many insightful articles on the British political theatre of the 1970s. However, comprehensive surveys of specifically political theatre are comparatively rare. Catherine Itzin's *Stages in the Revolution* charted the development of political playwriting and political theatre groups up to 1978, and John Bull's *New British Political Dramatists* of 1984 offered interesting studies of the work of Brenton, Hare, Griffiths and

Edgar. The present volume will attempt to build on much of this earlier critical enquiry, with the advantage that it draws together the major British political playwrights of the period and is in a position to discuss their considerable achievements with the advantage of hindsight.

The writers under review represent much of what is best in British theatre since the Second World War, although of course one says this because this is the theatre one knows. Particularly in the theatre, there is a disturbing amount of randomness in the long path from the writing of a script to its acceptance in the theatre by critics and public. One knows of the early failures of writers like Beckett and Pinter, who struggled on to become major influences in contemporary theatre. One can never know of all those who were discouraged by critical abuse and empty theatres to cease writing altogether. I am familiar with the work of John Mackendrick, who ended a promising career by suicide, partly in response to the unsympathetic response to his writing. But I do not and cannot know of all the others who have abandoned attempts to establish themselves as playwrights. As Irving Wardle wrote in his Introduction to *Theatre at Work* of 1967:

> If a play gets on it will not be through the operation of the *Zeitgeist* but because some director is drawn to it as a creative challenge. If it is foreign to his temperament, or if the challenge it presents is one he has already met and has no wish to repeat, then the play, through no fault of its own, is liable to be ignored . . . Staff directors . . . are free to follow any eccentrically private course without fear of reprisal; if anyone is blamed it will be the playwright. As it happens no glaring recent examples of unjustly ignored writers have come to light.[8]

Wardle's final assertion is questionable: if they are 'ignored', then of course they will not 'have come to light'. This concern is particularly important when one considers the predominance of male writers in this survey. Again, the fact that Caryl Churchill is the only woman playwright to have a chapter devoted to her no doubt says more about the male prejudice which affects the means of production of a theatre

piece than about the intrinsic potential of women as writers for the theatre. There will also be little discussion of plays dealing with the situation of ethnic groups in modern Britain, and, perhaps less disturbingly, nothing on right-wing political playwriting.

This survey then debates those writers who would form the standard choices for an anthology of political theatre in post-war Britain. It will be a predominantly male, white, left-wing group, and this may not sound very adventurous. But perhaps a fresh look at their strengths and weaknesses will make a small contribution towards providing a critical framework within which future work for the theatre may be discussed. Perhaps, as a result, the randomness with which plays at present achieve acclaim will be fractionally diminished.

Part 1: Theory

1 Strategies of political theatre: a theoretical overview

It is the late 1960s in Britain. The heroism and suffering of the Second World War are now more than two decades away. Although victorious, the nation has had to endure severe austerity to recover from the cost of the war. It is now returning to prosperity: between 1951 and 1964 industrial production increased by 40 per cent, there were four times as many cars on the roads and thirteen times more television sets in the home. Earnings increased by 110 per cent, and the average standard of living by 30 per cent[1]. By the end of the fifties Prime Minister Harold Macmillan could justifiably claim: 'Most of our people have never had it so good.'

Benefiting from this new-found wealth, the youth of Britain, who had not lived through a time of war, began to assert themselves. Britain, which had always been regarded by America and Continental Europe as the home of tradition and conservative values, now became the home of the outrageous mini-skirted fashion of Mary Quant and Carnaby Street and of the deafening rock music of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. The ending of conscription in 1960 meant that young men had greater freedom and more disposable income than ever before, the widespread availability of the contraceptive pill encouraged sexual experimentation, and the common acceptability of hallucinogenic drugs allowed the young to explore different states of consciousness.

Surprisingly, though, this did not lead to a society of mindless pleasure-seekers. The so-called 'hippy' youth, while unproductive in economic terms, were highly idealistic. Despite shocking their elders with their outlandish appearance of long hair and flowing clothes, and with their indulgence in sex and drugs, they adopted a high moral stance, particularly in their steadfast opposition to violence