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Carol Homden
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Introduction: a statement of departure

David Hare's production of *King Lear* opened in the Olivier Theatre on 14 December 1986 just two weeks after the end of the run of *Pravda*, and while *The Bay at Nice* and *Wrecked Eggs* continued on the Cottesloe stage. In the autumn of 1993, Hare's trilogy on British institutions was scheduled to be performed on a single day. Such domination of the National Theatre is unparalleled in its history, and has no equivalent by a contemporary writer at the Royal Shakespeare Company; it amounts to much more than a residency of the kind Hare had at the Royal Court (1969–71) or Nottingham (1973) and assigns to him a privileged position within British theatre.

Such status is particularly rare for a dramatist of his generation writing from a 'socialist' perspective and yet, in contrast to many of his contemporaries, Hare's work stands without any comprehensive study. The omission is partly explained by Hare's own deliberately enigmatic position, but he is also a troublesome and often troubled writer who uses his work as a way of resolving internal tensions, making systematic analysis particularly difficult. Any attempt to provide such a survey of a living and still fertile writer will inevitably be superseded, but Hare will continue to raise two eternal literary and historical problems. How do you find a critical distance on a writer whose existing plays are part of an evolving and uncompleted body of work? And since those works are themselves an examination of the flux of contemporary experience, how do you find a distance on your own life and times?

The answer to the first question has traditionally lain in comparison, by looking at Hare in relation to his peer group, and it is this approach which is taken by most existing critical work. In 1968,

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David Hare established Portable Theatre with Tony Bicât. For five years they toured the country with productions of their own early work and work by Howard Brenton and Snoo Wilson. Because of this, and his later role in establishing the Joint Stock Theatre Company, Hare came to be seen as a seminal figure in the alternative theatre movement, striving to widen the performance base of theatre.

In the early days after the abolition of the theatre censor, the university educated generation created shocking and overtly aggressive pieces. Portable Theatre revelled in violence, criminality, neurosis and decay, and expressed the shared view that British society in general and the West End in particular were in terminal decline in the hands of sold-out right-wing literati. Since Howard Brenton was influenced by the activities of the French Situationists and the student unrest in Paris in 1968, the Portable playwrights as a group were seen by their early chronicler, Peter Ansorge, to be concentrating an anti-establishment anger in disrupting the spectacle of contemporary life.¹ Increasingly, however, Portable Theatre (and its later subsidiary, Shoot) turned to large-scale collaborative works – *Lay By* and *England's Ireland*. These projects included not just Hare's subsequent collaborator Howard Brenton, but the writers Trevor Griffiths and David Edgar, who, having worked with companies committed to intervention in a class struggle, had a background in a different part of the alternative theatre movement.

The work of David Hare has continued to be placed alongside that of Brenton, Edgar and Griffiths – by John Bull, for example, in *New British Political Dramatists*² – within forward-looking chronological analysis, which posits a consistent political project: to achieve socialist change. 'At the time my sole interest was the content of a play', Hare confirmed. While working at the Royal Court Theatre, 'I thought the political and social crisis in England in 1969 so grave that I had no patience for the question of how well written a play was. I was only concerned with how urgent its subject matter was, how it related to the world outside.'³ The chapters on *Brassneck* and *Fanshen* consider Hare's work against the European inheritance of political theatre – the documentary theatre of Erwin Piscator and the epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht.

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In 1973, Portable and its subsidiary, Shoot, went bankrupt. As the fringe movement dissipated, Hare (and Brenton) stepped into the mainstream with the production of *Brassneck* at the Nottingham Playhouse. Here David Hare put aside the contemporary parody which had preoccupied him in *Slag*, *The Great Exhibition* and *Knuckle*, and turned to the past in search of an historical explanation of the present. Inspired by Angus Calder's *The People's War*,⁴ Hare began, as he was to continue to do throughout the seventies, to examine the effects of a war on two fronts – the class war and the Second World War – in his history plays. Hare shared both the idea of reassessing the childhood inheritance of the war and the particular catalyst of Angus Calder's book with other writers of his generation. The answer to the second question posed above of how to find a distance on your own life and times lies in *Brassneck*. Within the flux of contemporary experience there stands a clearly identifiable moment, and it is this moment that this book takes as its starting-point.

With the final shedding of empire, Britain joined the European Economic Community in January 1973 and there was a mood of workers' militancy unseen since before the war. The primary question in an analysis of a political theatre then becomes – as it does for Catherine Itzin in *Stages in the Revolution*⁵ – whether the move from fringe to main stages was a process of 'strategic penetration' by the writers or one of defection, whether the fruits of revolution are always conservative or whether Brenton and Hare are simply at ease in a bright red tie.

To address this question one must ask whether the use of the National Theatre stage for *Plenty* and *Pravda* constituted a strategic penetration, and whether turning to television in *Licking Hitler* and *Saigon: Year of the Cat* was indeed an attempt to infiltrate an alternative history. If analysis suggests that it was not, then there is an urgent need to reassess the theatrical inheritance presumed for David Hare. Is anger always political, or might Hare's railing instead be a form of revenge for a supposed class alienation – the complaint at the disinheritance of a generation really a disguised nostalgia? Certainly, Hare has been determined to avoid giving the audience or the critic easy handles with which to pigeonhole him, and all too frequently those plays or aspects of plays which failed to

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fit into the critic's analysis of David Hare as a political playwright have been ignored.

In fact, five years after *Brassneck*, Hare explicitly disowned the methods of the theatre of the Left, asking how there could be faith in a history which confronted the writer only with stasis and questioning the audibility of his own medium in the modern age. As the seventies ended, Hare started – in films as much as on the stage – to use women protagonists as a way of gaining a perspective from which to judge which itself raises questions about his own attitude towards them.

As a period of extended Conservatism began, Hare, wracked with doubt and with *Dreams of Leaving*, sought more literal distance on England and his own disaffection. He began to redraw his *Map of the World*. A decade after Anson identified the war on two fronts within Hare's work as the world war and the class war, those fronts became rather a world war and an eternal, psychological war in *Wetherby*. As Hare, in his despair, seemed to turn his attention towards questions of identity and civilisation and away from those of class and society, he felt the lure of the absurd and argued with himself about the role of art culminating in *The Bay at Nice*. As the body of work has broadened, Hare's position as a major dramatist has been consolidated. Despite this, his work of the 1980s stands almost entirely unassimilated.

By the age of 40, David Hare was pitting his own talents against those of Shakespeare and of tragedy. It was Peter Brook's production of *King Lear* in 1962 which made Hare want to enter the theatre and his production of the play in 1986 therefore stands as a statement of arrival in the theatrical establishment. The invitation to be viewed in relation not to history but to tragedy casts light across the whole body of Hare's work and lays out the line which he was to follow in *The Bay at Nice*, *The Secret Rapture*, *Paris By Night* and *Strapless*. In dealing with the relationship between history and metaphor, his work up to this point becomes intelligible as a gradual move towards classicism and back to Aristotle. Perhaps he was, in some sense, *Heading Home*. Just as Aristotle explored how epic poetry, tragedy and comedy differed from each other by differences in means, in objects and in manner, so it needs to be explored how Hare's plays of the eighties differed from those of

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the seventies, how investigation of betrayal, revolution, propaganda and corruption gave way to romantic love, to death, to faith and to art itself.

As the work of a contemporary writer develops, the apparent project of the intentions and interventions of youth form a dialogue with later work and maturity. This book therefore rejects a strictly linear chronological approach: a chapter-by-chapter analysis of plays and films published since 1973 is presented in overlapping strands. The thesis of a political genesis is opposed by the antithesis which has its roots as early as 1975. Consideration of *Teeth 'n' Smiles*, which comprises chapter 1, reveals not only history – the world war and the class war – but the birth of tragedy, not only political models but psychological and linguistic ones.

As the nineties began, Hare was, in his own words, still *Writing Left Handed*. Having concluded the existential/artistic debate of the previous decade, he was moving back to examination of the great estates of the English establishment and even to a version of Brecht's *Galileo*. In dissecting the current state of the Church of England, *Racing Demon* marked the beginning of a trilogy on public institutions, the second part of which committed the crime against the judiciary of *Murmuring Judges*. As the writing of this book was being concluded, the final play *The Absence of War* was premiered. Even in its opening image of the annual ceremonial tribute to the war dead at the cenotaph, the play again addressed the historical agenda set by *Brassneck* some twenty years before, but at its heart was a Labour leader whose defeat is presented as tragic. The wheel is come full circle.

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I The sixties revolution

A war of attrition?

Teeth 'n' Smiles begins with a call to destructive action. The play seems to declare itself as a piece of aggressive confrontation where it is right to smash things up and in which the audience is invoked as 'us'. The 'them' under attack is, however, not immediately clear. As at the opening of *Knuckle*, there is a deliberate refusal to identify the place for what it is. Cambridge and the May Ball of 9 June 1969 remain unnamed until after the members of a minor cult band have been lived with. For the band on the road it might as well be Canterbury, but Cambridge is to education what Canterbury is to the church and in some sense it is an oppositional subculture which is at centre stage.

With the dropped aitches, expletives and loose syntax of working-class accents, with their clear aggression to Snead, the college porter, and dislike of Anson, the fumbling medical student, who represent the university on stage, the band is apparently engaged in a class-based aggression. The length and romanticism of Anson's verbal seduction of the lead singer Maggie contrasts with the pithiness of her highly contemporary description of the act as 'for thirty minutes it is like trying to push a marshmallow into a coinbox' (p. 49). In parodying Lady Capulet's speech on Paris in *Romeo and Juliet* (Act One Scene Four), Anson belongs to the same literary world of 'high' quotation as Arthur the songwriter who, sitting alone on stage at the beginning of Act Two, quotes verse. In contrast, the band paraphrases from 'low' culture figures like the chauffeur to Keith Moon, 'he drummer with The Who. Throughout Scene One, an electric plug remains unconnected on the stage. From

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across the class divide, apparently, Arthur and Anson cannot touch it. In his lyric to *Bastards*, Arthur makes it clear that ‘I come from the rulers and you come from the ruled’ (p. 66).

It is not until the final scene, however, that Saraffian, the manager of the band, explicitly invokes this idea of the class war by comparing the band with those looting the dead after the bombing of the Café de Paris on 9 March 1941. He concludes the longest speech in the play by saying, ‘There is a war going on. All the time. A war of attrition’ (p. 84). As it was to be for Archie MacLean in *Licking Hitler*, so it is for Saraffian that the Second World War was also a class war.

In *Licking Hitler* the country house was a microcosm of that war, in *Teeth 'n' Smiles* it is a different but equally poignant setting of affluent society. The Café de Paris was a replica of the ballroom on the Titanic and, just as the Titanic was believed immune from natural disaster, so – we are invited to believe – the upper classes thought they could avoid the blitz. In the final words of the play, Maggie’s song tells us that this is the time of the ‘Last orders on the Titanic’ (p. 91). The May Ball revellers of Cambridge are ‘people dressed up and performing a complete parody of life that was over many, many years ago...’¹ As the Titanic sank, the orchestra carried on playing; as the upper deck of Cambridge burns, Maggie goes on singing. The ship might be different, but ‘the music remains the same’ (p. 92).

The metaphor in *Teeth 'n' Smiles* fails to convince, however, because neither the band nor Cambridge has the appropriate class solidarity or political motivation. The band talks neither of political parties nor of political aims, and the anti-Vietnam marches of the sixties, for example, are notable only by their absence. Inch does not take part in the verbal games and, unlike the other men in the band, he cannot get a blow-job because he is the roadie.

If the aim of *Teeth 'n' Smiles* were – according to Marxist analysis – to affirm the ascendant proletariat, Snead (as a porter) would need be part of it, while Arthur and Anson (as the privileged middle classes) would be excluded; instead, Snead’s most frequent word – ‘Sir’ – embodies, with eloquent economy, the ambivalence of his position within hierarchical, male and elitist Cambridge, and Anson and Arthur are in uneasy alliance with Inch and the band.

Anson might want to get his degree first, but after that he just wants to 'groove'. He barely finishes a sentence precisely because he is aware it sounds so dreary and second-hand.

If there is a class war, Anson is one of three contradictory intermediaries, agreeing with Arthur that Cambridge is 'still the same shithole' (p. 58). Like Arthur and Laura, he is concerned about the time which, for the band, 'is a sophisticated detail' (p. 21). As a former student-cum-songwriter, however, it is Arthur who becomes the key figure in the complex oppositional structure of *Teeth 'n' Smiles*. Standing both inside and outside Cambridge, he is uniquely placed to comment upon its 'airless, lightless, dayless, nightless time-lock', and the 'rich complacent self-loving self-regarding self-righteous phoney half-baked politically immature neurotic evil-minded little shits' (pp. 21-2) who inhabit it. Arthur uses the language of Cambridge (a well-constructed complex metaphor) to criticise Cambridge with ironic humour. He is sitting on the paradox of the radical middle class, which must either condemn itself or be held to be lying and which cannot (and does not) affirm a class-based revolution.

When Saraffian offers – at excessive length – his idea of the history of class struggle in explanation for Maggie's act of arson and the restoration of faith in the young, it is heralded with an obvious lead-in line and dismissed as an outmoded and impotent form of comfort. Scene Eight is a coda which exists both to posit and refute the protective belief of the class war. The action of the play moves logically without this coda progressing from Maggie and Arthur's delayed explanation of their relationship to a mirror-image of the opening (Arthur alone with Snead as he had been with Inch). Like the music, 'It all comes round again' (p. 52). The revolutions Hare perceives in *Teeth 'n' Smiles* are not Marxist but Yeatsian, an example of 'The Gyres' from which Arthur quotes.

The final line of dialogue is Arthur's unanswered question, 'Why is everyone frightened?'. It has a multiple-choice answer, contained in the placards, in Arthur's song and in Maggie's song, with no political imperative. As Arthur says at the beginning, 'It's absurd' (p. 24) that the plug lies unconnected, rather than a political imperative. The word 'absurd' occurs again in *Dreams of Leaving* and becomes the keynote of *A Map of the World*, but in *Teeth 'n'*

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Smiles it invites consideration of the two separate spheres of expression within the play in terms other than class.

What unites Arthur/Hare, as well as Laura and Anson, with the band is not class or political intent, but age. All the characters save Sned, Saraffian and Randolph are aged 26 or under. In September 1975 David Hare was, like Arthur, aged 26. In June 1969 Hare had been, like Maggie and the band, on the road with Portable Theatre, equally exhausted and equally substituting neurotic intensity for public meaning and audiences. Like Arthur, he was a product of the system he would condemn, educated to degree level and then dropping out. *Teeth 'n' Smiles* is, then, autobiographical, an examination of Hare's own youth. Hare was duly photographed for *Time Out* wearing Arthur's top hat.

David Hare went to Cambridge to be taught by the Marxist Raymond Williams, but claims that they spent all their time arguing and that Williams did not shape his opinions. Certainly Hare was not, as Brenton was, politicised by the events of 1968. Hare wore his CND badge at school and describes, as the 'only political experience I had', his disillusion with the Labour government of 1964.² It stimulated not *Teeth 'n' Smiles* but *The Great Exhibition*.

Similarly, as Howard Brenton explained, 'Part of the energy behind Portable was simply: the bastards won't do our plays, we'll do them ourselves. That was a good reason at the time, but there was nothing more behind it than that. It was against the bastards, it was boiling for a fight against the established values in the theatre.'³ During a time of almost perpetual unease at the Royal Court in 1969-71 Hare – in contrast to socialist writers like Wesker and Bond – had only one play, *Slag*, presented on the main stage. The new generation of writers had no home.

Arthur's explicit condemnation of the university he attended expresses Hare's own much-quoted view, but it is worn brazenly on the sleeve of the first scene. The audience is not expected to discover the character of Cambridge, which is immediately juxtaposed with Wilson's contribution to the game of Pope's balls. Arthur's criticism is as 'boring' as the life expectancy of a deck chair. As he says to Saraffian at the moment he is about to criticise Saraffian's Al Capone approach, 'It's not worth saying. Nothing's worth saying. It's all so obvious' (p. 61).