Introduction

This book explores the organisational and institutional structures, sys-
tems and modes of practice which shaped the experience of theatre in
communities across the British Isles during the twentieth century. The
selection of historical data for explication and analysis is not primarily
driven by criteria of artistic innovation or value; rather the intention is to
construct an overview which demonstrates the interdependence of social
and economic factors in the creation and maintenance of theatre as cul-
tural practice. It is my contention that these factors impose structures
which might override other conceptual frameworks for historical analysis,
such as those based on notions of discrete national identity or formed
from binary oppositions of ideological and political allegiance or intellec-
tual and aesthetic preference.

The key questions which the book seeks to ask are: How and where
was theatre in the twentieth century organised, by whom and why?
What different models of theatre were created, or indeed retained, and
whose interests did those models serve? What different communities of
interest and agency can be identified? What difference did it make to
these diverse communities that theatre functioned within the political
construct of the British nation state, and what difference does it make to
the historical record if that diversity is more equitably represented? What
happens to the historical record if the experience of the greater majority
of the theatre-going or theatre-making population is examined, rather
than the minority experience memorialised through the dominant his-
torical discourse?

There are specifically British historical reasons derived from control-
ling monarchical/state strategies to restrict theatre outside London prior
to 1843, which led to the concentration of professional activity in the
capital.[1] However, any metropolis is inevitably associated with artisti-
cally high-status collective or individual achievement. Theatre historians
have been traditionally drawn to the dynamic 'events' and 'heroes' of

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their field of historical interest. London remains one of the most import-ant international centres of great theatre, and of course this can happen in a tiny, ramshackle venue in a London suburb, as well as in the pres-tigious endowed national institutions. Where, as in long historical sur-veys such as those provided in *The Revels History of Drama in English* or in Simon Trussler's *Illustrated History of British Theatre*, selected atten-tion was paid to regional or indeed other key component-nation devel-opments, it tended to foreground significant initiatives which have been associated with innovation or 'progress'. In *English Drama: A Cultural History*, Simon Shepherd and Peter Womack acknowledge that 'English drama' largely developed out of the London-centred theatrical system.[2] In general, regional or 'provincial' theatre has been subordinate to the metropolitan grand narrative and is thus effectively 'other'. The histor-ical flaw in this approach is that despite the huge population of London, the majority of the British people do not live there, although inevitably every aspect of their lives, including the theatre they are able to access, is affected by the power that emanates from the centre.

Until very recently the only substantive general history of regional thea-tre was George Rowell and Anthony Jackson's *The Repertory Movement: A History of Regional Theatre in Britain*, which was published in 1984.[3] This focused specifically on the development of a particular model of theatre which had its origins in the modernist campaigns at the beginning of the century. In 2010 Kate Dorney and Ros Merkin acknowledged the Rowell and Jackson book as a starting point for a collection of essays on English regional theatre[4] up until the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. The title *The Glory of the Garden* is taken from the controversial Arts Council of Great Britain strategy document, also published in 1984, which attempted to redress the metropolitan/regional imbalance through adjustments to state funding provision.[5] These new essays represent an important scholarly intervention which will hopefully pave the way for more extensive studies. The collection, however, focuses on theatre in England. Regional or *intra*national theatre in Britain is much more complex.

AN UNSELFCONSCIOUS PROVINCIALISM

Until comparatively recently writers of British theatre history have dis-played what Benedict Anderson, writing more broadly about national-ism, termed 'an unselfconscious provincialism'.[6] Anderson was targeting European scholars 'accustomed to the conceit that everything important

in the modern world originated in Europe'. I would argue that a similar unexamined prejudice has driven much British theatre history to skew the record towards the assumption that everything important in British theatre happened in London. In the British context, however, the consequences of the metropolitan bias have to be examined within both a macro and micro frame, intranationally as well as regionally.

As a great metropolis London was at the centre of world-wide imperial power right up until the middle of the twentieth century, and post-empire the legacy still has global significance. London has remained, however, the metropolis of the formerly colonised nations, whose populations inhabit the large and small islands of the British archipelago, or what the Welsh historian Kenneth O. Morgan not quite accurately called 'two partitioned poly-cultural islands'.[7] The fact that by the end of the twentieth century, there had been a small but growing number of discrete historical studies of theatre in the British nations outside England was a sign both of the devolutionary forces at work in the wider political sphere, and also of indigenous theatre practice, which had developed greater confidence along with more autonomous means of development.[8]

When Baz Kershaw came to edit the third volume of *The Cambridge History of British Theatre*, separate invitations were issued to Scottish and Welsh historians to write parallel accounts of theatre in Scotland and Wales, which would complement the survey of the English/metropolitan experience, which notwithstanding remained the dominant narrative.[9] There was, however, a significant omission in that the 'Province' of Northern Ireland, the remaining and much contested geo-political segment of the second largest island, which controversially remained British after the rest of Ireland shook off British colonial control in 1922, was not accorded a space to record its theatre. Such are the sensitivities around competing claims of national allegiance, this absence is not untypical,[10] but such occlusion of the record misses an opportunity to explore some of the more extreme effects of the legacy of colonial appropriation. Jen Harvie's *Staging the UK* is unusual in that it includes a Northern Irish case study alongside her other nations-wide examples of contemporary practice.[11]

Harvie applies Benedict Anderson's celebrated concept of nations as 'imagined communities' to the way British national identities are expressed through theatre. While she does not as she puts it 'wilfully' argue against the importance of politically engineered structures of national formation, her 'founding principle' is that national identities are neither biologically nor territorially given; rather they are 'creatively produced or staged'

through a sense of shared cultural practice.[12] My focus on multiple communities of experience means that I am in complete agreement that national identity is not a biological or territorial given. But my analysis is far more grounded in the material conditions which are the product of the economic and legislative framework of the nation state. I argue that economic interests whether exploited, contested, disregarded or even willingly sacrificed have been key to the fluctuating fortunes of all models of theatre practice.

Furthermore, it is essential in my view to acknowledge the historical impact of the British nation state's imperial project and the shifting economic outcomes which for good or ill drove the working lives of the population. The empire looms large in this book. First, because the industrial prosperity, which had been one of the principle benefits of British global dominance, directly influenced the way theatre functioned as an industry at the beginning of the century and how and where its products were disseminated. Secondly, the decline of imperial power, and with it industrial decline and change, brought changing social formations and demographic patterns which could be seen in different patterns of theatre-making and theatre-going. Finally, by the end of the century, the human legacy of empire, what the historian Robert Winder dubbed 'colonisation in reverse',[13] could be seen in the rapidly expanding multi-cultural character of UK communities. The face of British theatre was literally changing, while any unified concept of what it means to be culturally British was coming under even greater challenge.

A CONTRAPUNTAL READING

My narrative attempts to weave together the theatres of four nations to demonstrate how theatre-makers in common with other communities of interest constantly cross national boundaries and respond to imperatives that may have little to do with allegiance to notions of national identity. Indeed, the cultural products of the imagined nation will always be the result of individual imaginations, often self-selected as representative of the collective and formed from many extra-national influences. In his discussion of the contradictions of the historic Anglo-Scottish Union after 1945, James Mitchell points to the confused nature of state nationalism as embodied in the United Kingdom. Arguing that the UK is a *union* rather than a *unitary* state (his emphasis), he points to the survival of some 'pre-union rights and institutional infrastructures which preserve some degree of regional autonomy'. Mitchell also quotes from James Kellas's study of

nationalism and the benefits of 'psychic income', 'those things which sat-
isfy the mental and spiritual needs of human beings' and material inter-
ests: 'those things which are readily quantifiable in cash terms, such as
incomes and jobs'. Nationalisms may 'offer either or both'.[14] Throughout
the twentieth century the multiple negotiations among the native inhab-
itants of nations, nation state and empire within the United Kingdom
have provided both, but especially the incomes and jobs which in theatre
are also inextricably linked at a very basic level to the fulfilment of mental
and spiritual needs.

Writing elsewhere I have quoted Edward Said in *Culture and
Imperialism* where he suggests that we 'reread' the cultural archive 'not
univocally but *contrapuntally*, with a simultaneous awareness both of the
metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against
which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts'.[15] The
key point here is that not all 'other' histories are constructed in direct
opposition to the dominant discourse, some actually co-operate with it.
A rereading process which maintains that simultaneous awareness will
inevitably uncover contradictions. If a univocal reading predicated on
the dominating discourse is to be rejected, so it should be avoided in the
reading of others.[16]

As an English-born woman of British nationality from a family whose
genetic inheritance derives from all four of the UK nations, a theatre-
goer whose experience of life in Britain lies outside London, and who is,
moreover, the historian of a regional theatre, I seek to re-orientate the
reader's perspective in order to explore the dynamic relations between the
metropolis and the regions, and to present a more integrated narrative of
theatre. This book stresses the plural nature of British theatres and their
audiences.

THE LEGITIMATE THEATRE

First of all it is necessary to define the theatre which is to be explored in
the book. Very broadly the focus will be on the kind of theatre which
used to be known as 'legitimate'. This strategy may seem a little odd for a
history of twentieth-century practice but it opens up access to less ideo-
logically constrained categories. For over a hundred years, and prior to
the 1843 Theatres Act, the term 'legitimate' was applied to theatre which
could present the strictly controlled drama of the spoken word, as it
was distinguished from the much more freely available 'popular' thea-
tre of music, dance, circus, comic sketches, short melodramas, etc. Thus,

legitimate product included the plays of the British or European classical dramatic canon and new plays. Following the removal of the designation 'legitimate' in the strictly legal sense, the term still had (and continues to have) currency in the theatrical profession to differentiate the theatre of 'straight' plays from variety theatre. An actor could go 'legit' for example, and the term could carry connotations of intellectual or artistic aspiration however minimal.

The modernist intervention in theatre which began to gather momentum from the 1880s onwards, upped the ante on legitimate theatre by insisting on a drama that could be used as 'a weapon of social betterment' as Harley Granville Barker put it,[17] and that was intellectually and/or aesthetically avant-garde. Thus the 'new' drama and stagecraft emerged in the early 1900s, and by and large most historians of twentieth-century theatre have tended to track the subsequent development of performance practice predicated on modernist ideals. A by-product of this was the political campaign to urge the state to take responsibility for the financial support of the arts, including the 'exemplary' theatre. The result was that the principle of 'not-for-profit' professional practice, either in aspiration pre-1939 or in actuality, after the advent of state subsidy, dictated the data for historical enquiry. The problem about this approach is that it has led to the marginalisation or actual exclusion of the kind of 'for profit' theatre that had its roots in pre-modernist traditions and that a substantial proportion of the UK population had access to especially in the first half of the century. Not only does this skew the narrative away from the experience of community audiences, but it also fails to acknowledge the material circumstances that control the lives of the majority of jobbing theatre-workers and artists.

THE ECONOMIC IMPERATIVE

This book is not an economic history of British theatre as such. Its scope is wider. But it does discuss business structures and models of company organisation in both commercial and not-for-profit sectors and attempts to show how boundaries between the two have rarely been completely separate. My preoccupation with the economic has been much influenced by the seminal work of Tracy Davis, best known in her *The Economics of the British Stage 1800–1914*, published in 2000. As she trenchantly remarks:

Pretending that representation is not in league with markets, promoters, and technologies – the usual purview of business and economic history – and that capital is not behind them all, is to clash the cymbals, throw a handful of fairy

dust, and expect Clio to clap like a child at its first pantomime. It is not so much that aesthetic concerns should be pushed away in favour of social science approaches to performance, for culture forms out of business activity, and vice versa. But just as managerial decisions are reactions to the environment as much as actions upon it, they take into account signals from the outside world.[18]

Her other potentially more inflammatory statement is that 'except in a few notable cases, theatre practitioners operated in their own self-interest, and not for the greater glory of dramatic literature, theatre aesthetics, or proletarian culture'.[19] They (we?) function as *homo economicus* – the rational being who will always act in his/her best interests.[20]

If this gauntlet is picked up and accepted then it becomes imperative to reach an understanding of the economic structures and market forces which underpin the success or failure of theatre as industrial practice. It also enables a re-examination of the circumstances out of which artistic innovation or celebrity arose, especially if that historical event has been disproportionately valorised by scholars from a variety of aesthetically-formed critical perspectives. If, as the Victorian neoclassical economist Alfred Marshall stated, economics is 'the study of mankind in the ordinary business of life',[21] then the study of the ordinary business of *theatre* life through its economic interests offers the possibility of entering more deeply into the *mentalité* of a cultural community. Furthermore, the area of enquiry naturally widens to encompass practice and practitioners who have been excluded from the dominant narrative.

The challenge for the historian of twentieth-century theatre, however, lies in the modernist intervention and in particular that aspect of modernism which was a conscious rejection of *modernity*, i.e. the innovations generated by industrial capitalism. As Tracy Davis implies, scholarly focus on theatre practice that satisfies critical criteria of literary or aesthetic excellence, or ideological orientation, has excluded extensive areas of historical enquiry. But no historian of pre-twentieth-century theatre would ignore practice *because* it functioned solely in the arena of free enterprise, which of course was the only option available. The same cannot be said for twentieth-century theatre where historians have been distinctly queasy about the profit motive. Also it has to be conceded that a not inconsiderable number of twentieth-century practitioners *were* primarily concerned with 'the greater glory of dramatic literature, theatre aesthetics', etc., etc. and at least in theory have consciously eschewed their own self-interest.

But artists have to live, and, as Davis insists, markets, promoters and technologies backed by capital (however it is accessed) remain essential to the performance project. The laissez-faire capitalism of 1900 which

evolved into welfare capitalism after 1945 which was wrenched back to a more aggressive model of market capitalism after 1979 formed what Jim McGuigan dubbed the 'civilisational frame of capitalism'[22] within which all cultural practice was enacted during the twentieth century. To explore theatre as an industry is to uncover continuities of practice between the past and the present, indeed between nineteenth- and twentieth-century experience, which permits a different perspective on the modernist intervention. It demystifies and brings within the economic realm the working basis of even the most idealised of artistic experiment.

The economist Thomas G. Rawski argues that 'historians who neglect economics can lose sight of factors that affect every historical theory'. Economic theory he explains 'is built around the logical analysis of profit-seeking behaviour by large numbers of well-informed, independent individuals in competitive markets governed by legal systems that enforce contracts and ensure the rights of private owners'.[23] It is acknowledged that the behaviour of well-informed, independent individuals may, for a number of reasons, defy logical analysis. Profit-seeking may take unexpected forms. The notion of independence is endlessly contingent. A competitive market exists even in (especially in) the most heavily-subsidised of not-for-profit environments. All *professional* artists function within legal systems that enforce contracts. That almost talismanic organism in twentieth-century-theatre terms, 'the company' is not only an artistic ensemble, it is a financial and legal entity. The theatre/performance space as physical plant, no matter which sector it trades in, and of whatever size, capacity and fabric, is a mass of interrelated economic concerns. On the ground, whatever the rhetoric, it is difficult to maintain the orthodox binaries of profit and not-for-profit.

ENCOUNTERING THE POPULAR: PRIORITIES AND PREJUDICE

Blurring the boundaries between enlightened not-for-profit and the frankly commercial takes the enquiry into the territory of popular culture. A great deal of legitimate theatre was produced or promoted by business enterprises predicated on the profitability of a variety of entertainment genres. Conversely, in the exemplary sector in the age of public subsidy, controversy was caused by attempts to sustain financial viability by introducing more 'populist' product into the repertoire. Mass or even large audiences were a problem for the radical avant-garde at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the debate about what Richard

Schechner conceptualised as 'the efficacy-entertainment braid' has continued into the twenty-first.[24] Of course pursuit of modernist ideals has seen the avant-garde embrace popular genres for both aesthetic and political reasons and thus the 'illegitimate' has become legitimate as it were. Any history of the material circumstances of theatre production and reception in the twentieth century must take account of this in analysis of working practices across the industry. However, it is important to recognise that the highly selective appropriation of aspects of popular culture for ideological purposes has again led to the historical marginalisation of communal experience.

The historian of an art-form, it seems to me, has a responsibility to the experience of the past which should override personal aesthetic or political preference. As I have argued elsewhere, a good deal of the theatre enjoyed by large numbers of the British population throughout the twentieth century would be scarcely tolerable for the average theatre historian nurtured in the taste judgements of the academy. Pierre Bourdieu has led us to see that the hierarchy of cultural preference is a way of legitimating social differences, marginalisation and exclusion.[25] To explore theatre via the social as well as the economic is to become aware not just of other patterns of provision, participation and exploitation, but also other kinds of cultural 'need'[26] and imperatives. Statistically more members of the population experienced theatre in the twentieth century either as audiences for, or participants in, amateur theatre. My account of the amateur phenomenon in the interwar years especially outside England demonstrates significant reasons why it was difficult to sustain professional theatre of any kind, let alone the exemplary theatre of Barker et al. The fact is that the legitimate products of professional theatre were also enjoyed by the amateur and not so professionally competent.

Because of necessary limits on the length of this book I have been unable to include further extended discussion of independent amateur and community theatre in the latter part of the century. However, much of the polemical writing critiquing public funding policy produced compelling statistical evidence of the continuing strength of the amateur sector.[27] In 1985, John Pick, who became one of the fiercest critics of the Arts Council, stated that 'In Britain there are (excluding schools, colleges and universities) about 8,500 amateur drama societies, in contrast with the 350 or so professional production companies that may be said to be independently active in the course of any one year'.[28] In relation specifically to non-professional theatre outside England recent works by David Grant on Northern Ireland, Greg Giesekam on Scotland and Ruth Shade

on Wales[29] have provided excellent accounts of a creatively important
sector.

THE IMPACT OF THE MASS MEDIA

My intention to stay within the safe haven of legitimacy, even with blurred
boundaries, cannot ignore radio, film and television. This is a history of
live performance, but the importation of artistic product and human
resources drawn from the theatre into the mass media had a profound
effect on the working lives of practitioners and the social and economic
systems within which they maintained their livelihoods. In the early years
of broadcasting, radio not only employed professional actors but also
(most notably in the nations outside England) was dependent on pools
of local amateur actors. 'Live' television drama in the 1950s and early 60s
required the skills of theatre-trained actors accustomed to the pressures
of live performance. At the same time a number of future theatre direct-
ors cut their directorial teeth in television and/or benefited from training
schemes financed by independent television providers. As I argue in my
analysis of the changing demographic of performance, the representation,
through television in particular, to mass audiences of other lives lived in
other places and embodying different categories of social and cultural
difference, assisted in a profound shift in the way the plural communities
of the British Isles were experienced and understood.

The growing economic influence of television, in the last three decades
of the twentieth century especially, tended to shift the balance of power
between London and the regions still further towards the capital. Many
actors were professionally compelled to locate themselves in or near the
metropolitan sources and networks of employment and were reluctant to
disadvantage themselves in the regions. Other actors were only able to
indulge in the 'luxury' of theatre performance because their livelihoods
were largely sustained by work in television.

THE PAST AND PERIODISATION

This account of British theatre invites the reader to encounter the twen-
tieth century as the past and not as a still incomplete temporal sequence
leading to a still unfolding present. In Simon Shepherd's recent introduc-
tion to *modern* theatre, the modern is defined as 'everything after 1900'.
He continues: 'It is an introduction not a history, so it aims to explain
the sorts of activity and thinking that seem characteristic of the modern