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In this book Brian Crow and Chris Banfield provide an introduction to post-colonial theatre by concentrating on the work of major dramatists from the Third World and subordinated cultures in the First World. Crow and Banfield consider the plays of such writers as Wole Soyinka and Athol Fugard and his collaborators from Africa; Derek Walcott from the West Indies; August Wilson and Jack Davis, who write from and about the experience of black communities in the USA and Australia respectively; and Badal Sircar and Girish Karnad from India. Although these dramatists reflect diverse cultures and histories, they share the common condition of cultural subjection or oppression, which has shaped their theatres. Each chapter contains an informative list of primary source material and further reading about the dramatist.

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For Margaret and Bill Crow
and for Vayu Naidu

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Preface

A characteristic feature of the development of Western art forms during the twentieth century has been the frequent and highly fruitful exploitation by artistic practitioners of all kinds of materials drawn from non-Western cultures. This is as true of the theatre as it is of music, painting and sculpture. For example, a profound influence on Artaud's formulation of the Theatre of Cruelty was, famously, his discovery of Balinese dance-drama at the Paris Colonial Exhibition of 1931. Brecht seems to have discovered what epic acting could be only after he watched the Chinese actors of Mei Lan-fang's company in Moscow in 1935. More recently, two of the most influential figures in contemporary theatre, Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook, have drawn much of their inspiration from their encounters with the theatre of non-Western cultures – Grotowski mainly from Indian classical dance-drama, Brook from a variety of Oriental and African sources.

Creatively stimulating though these non-Western influences on European and American theatre have evidently been, one can ask legitimate questions about the extent to which Western practitioners have considered, understood or even much cared about the nature and significance of their borrowings in relation to their original cultural contexts. In this respect, as Rustom Bharucha and others have shown, the stylistic exploitation of, say, Indian forms of theatre has been largely opportunistic and culturally unequal, determined by the perceived needs of Western practitioners and audiences rather than by a genuine effort to confront Indian realities as they are refracted through its rich theatrical culture. This is not to say that the last few years have not witnessed an encouraging growth of appreciation, in an increasingly multicultural context, of non-Western performance

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complementing the rise of 'world music' and of non-European fine arts. But it is to suggest that audiences and readers in the West have still much to discover about both the traditional and contemporary drama and theatre of what we have come to know as the Third World.

This book seeks to make a contribution to that process by introducing the work of some of the leading dramatists of that world. An initial word of explanation is required here, however; for though playwrights such as Wole Soyinka, Derek Walcott, Badal Sircar and Girish Karnad all come from and write about what we normally think of as Third World societies (Nigeria, the West Indies and India, respectively), this is not true of some of the other practitioners we consider: Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona from South Africa, Jack Davis from Australia or August Wilson from the USA. Each of these countries, of course, has a colonial history, which profoundly affected its subsequent social, political and cultural development. Even the USA, which is more usually thought of as itself the major neocolonial power of the twentieth century, has a literature and drama that emerged from the distinctive experiences and tensions of colonization. As the authors of a recent influential book on post-colonial literary theory observe, America's 'relationship with the metropolitan centre as it evolved over the last two centuries has been paradigmatic for post-colonial literatures everywhere'.¹ Nevertheless these are countries whose white populations and cultures, at least, are very much of the 'First' World, as are their 'mainstream' theatre and other arts. How, then, can dramatists from them be regarded as other than First World writers, or meaningfully grouped with dramatists from, for example, Nigeria or India?

The crucial point here is that as former colonies of white settlement these countries have indigenous or imported slave populations whose historically oppressed and relatively impoverished lives may appropriately be described as the Third World within the First. The condition common to all the dramatists considered here is in fact that of cultural subjection or subordination. (Fugard is

¹ Bill Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, London: Routledge, 1989, p. 2.

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exceptional in that, though he belongs by race to the dominators, in his artistic practice and his dissenting politics he has consistently taken the side of the oppressed.) Central to their experience of life – and thus to their art – is the knowledge that their people and culture have not been permitted a ‘natural’ historical development, but have been disrupted and dominated by others.

This is, of course, only one of several possible ways of offering an introduction to post-colonial drama and theatre. But inasmuch as the condition of cultural domination and oppression has been one of the most widespread and defining of modern experiences, and is a central component of post-colonialism, it seems a legitimate and fruitful one. But it should be stressed that, given the range of cultures from which our chosen dramatists come, it is not surprising that there is great diversity – as well as some common factors – in the historical processes of political and economic subjugation and in their cultural implications. The introductory chapter therefore explores some of these issues in more detail, to create a context for the particular responses to felt cultural oppression in the work of the dramatists discussed.

Though we have tried to place our playwrights in their cultural and artistic contexts, this is neither a comprehensive survey of drama and theatre in the Third or ‘oppressed’ World, nor even of the particular cultures to which they belong. A select bibliography offers guidance to where discussions not attempted here may be found – though much, it should be said, remains to be done. If what follows helps engender interest in and enthusiasm for the writers discussed, and stimulates thinking about drama’s relation to the experiences of oppression and subjugation, it will have served its purpose.

The chapters on Badal Sircar and Girish Karnad were written by Chris Banfield; the rest of the book was written by Brian Crow.

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