1 Introduction
Political commitment and performative practice

> Anybody who used to call themselves a Marxist now has fairly intense
> self-definitional problems.
>
> David Edgar (1994)[1]

> He is an optimist who has been around.
>
> John Peter (1994)[2]

Of the distinctive voices in the contemporary British theatre, David
Edgar's provides the most comprehensive articulation of major politi-
cal questions. His career spans more than four eventful and politically
complex decades, and encompasses every variety of writing for per-
formance, including agitprop and touring pieces; community plays;
radio, film and television plays; and large-scale plays produced in
major national venues such as the Royal Shakespeare Company and
the National Theatre.[3] In addition, Edgar has maintained a high profile
as a public intellectual, engaging in depth with a wide variety of
political issues through newspaper opinion pages, journal essays, and
book reviews, as well as via frequent public speaking engagements
before a variety of organizations, including the Commission on
Racial Equality; the Royal Society of Arts, Manufacturing and
Commerce; the Fabian Society; and the annual Marxism conference.
Thus, well beyond his own creative work, Edgar has been a central
figure in British public life, particularly with regard to the relationships
among the arts, government, and society.[4]

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Edgar has been politically on the Left since he was a young man at university, attracted by the idea of Marxist revolution.[5] What it means to be on the Left, however, has changed dramatically over the years – for Edgar as for most others. Maintaining a sceptical attachment to Trotskyism during the 1970s, Edgar joined the Labour Party in 1981,[6] and two years later wrote a kaleidoscopic critique of the history of the Left (*Maydays*, 1983), which explained in part why he had turned from revolutionary socialism to social democratic parliamentary politics, but which also anatomized certain left-wing defectors who had moved all the way to the reactionary Right. It was already characteristic of Edgar to stage the contradictions through which he and his generation were currently living; and he has continued to forge a theatre that embodies the social predicaments of modernity as they have developed from the Second World War to the new millennium.

All of Edgar's writings, plays as well as other forms, address the most basic questions of how humans organize and govern themselves in modern societies; in this regard he is a consummate political writer. His *oeuvre* stands as a kind of illustrative compendium of the leading conceptual puzzles of political theory. In studying the politics of his work here, we have concentrated on twelve of his most important plays and organized our discussion thematically, linking the plays to their overarching problematics. For example, we discuss the two plays that make up his diptych *Continental Divide* (2003) alongside *Maydays* (1983) because together these plays attempt to track the decline of the Left (and the rise of neo-conservatism) through a sweep of history, and at the same time confront situated moments in recent party politics in the United States (*Continental Divide*) and British seventies radical left politics (*Maydays*). Thus seemingly different plays, separated by twenty years, are joined by their representation of the failure of ideological visions as well as by the impact of blighted history on idealistic activism. The twelve plays explored here address issues such as the relationship between politics, government, and the state, as well as difficulties of democratic practice and conflict over definitions of public interest. Each play, however, creates a different encounter for spectators with the fictionalized reality of these conundrums and the human beings who live and work within them. As we move through the volume, a

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cumulative notion of Edgar's political architecture, his convictions, insights, and blind spots will emerge along with an examination of his success and challenges in placing these before his audiences in different theatrical productions. The plays selected for detailed examination include *Destiny* (1976), *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* (1978), *Mary Barnes* (1978), *Maydays* (1983), *The Shape of the Table* (1990), *Pentecost* (1994), *Albert Speer* (2000), *The Prisoner's Dilemma* (2001), *Continental Divide* (*Mothers Against* and *Daughters of the Revolution*) (2003), *Playing with Fire* (2005), and *Testing the Echo* (2008).

The decisions about which plays to focus on and which to treat only indirectly reflect our judgments and interests, but also the necessity of choosing from among a large number of works which would require several volumes to survey adequately. We focus on theatre works rather than Edgar's substantial body of television and radio plays, paying most attention to his plays from the 1990s onwards, which serve as a means of thinking through our recent history and daily sociality.

Thus Edgar's most successful box office hit, *Nicholas Nickleby* (1980), is not extensively discussed here because we have limited our focus to plays whose subject matter is the contemporary world. We acknowledge, however, *Nickleby's* importance within Edgar's career and within British theatre history.[7] Representing a significantly large investment of resources and artistic talent by the Royal Shakespeare Company, Edgar's adaptation of Charles Dickens's novel featured over one hundred characters and originally played over two (long) nights. It proved hugely successful in London and on Broadway, winning the 1980 Best Play Award from the Society of West End Theatres and the Lawrence Olivier Award, and in 1982 the Tony Award for Best Play.[8]

To illuminate the twelve plays that are our central concern, our collaboration on this book brings together the disciplines of political philosophy and theatre studies to approach Edgar primarily as a political writer and a public social critic. We believe he merits serious critical attention that combines a complex analysis of the socio-political context of the plays in relation to a sustained discussion of the formal political problems figured in the texts and in his related body of public writing. In addition, his dramaturgy and theatrical stylistics are both integral to the subjects he explores and

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independently valuable in their own right as a subject for aesthetic investigation and judgment.

The detailed material situations and characters of Edgar's dramaturgy embody and configure a key political concern that has grown increasingly present during modernity: the gap between wide-ranging, sometimes utopian visions of political theory and the always more limited actual human practice, often not even coming close to the desired good. Indeed, in some ways Edgar is an elegiac writer because he most often stages such failures to achieve satisfactory human social arrangements. Yet Edgar's purpose in exploring so many ways of falling short becomes clear in the demonstration of his will to persist, reinvent, begin again. Thus, it is no surprise that most of his plays end in simultaneous disillusionment with a given project and recommitment to social purpose, and have as their major dramatic actions the negotiation and retrieval central to the playwright's vision of polity. In this volume, we have attempted to foreground the nature and quality of *negotiation* as a method of political praxis and *retrieval* as the appropriate response to failure. Edgar, taking his cue from the great modernist writers (Brecht's 'long anger' and Beckett's injunction to 'fail better'), is supremely committed to celebrating quotidian human gestures of re-engagement with polities and failed political initiatives.

Edgar's work has been important to us (and of course to many others) not only because it humanizes the large abstractions of political theory, but also because it confronts the specific pressing issues of contemporary life in Britain and the West: the rise and threat of fascism in the moment of pre-Thatcher reaction (*Destiny*, 1976); the impossibility of sustaining 1960s-style utopian collectives (*Mary Barnes*, 1979); the emergence of 'Fortress Europe' and the predicament of refugees after the fall of the Wall (*Pentecost*, 1994 and *The Prisoner's Dilemma*, 2001); race relations and community relations at the end of New Labour and in the aftermath of 9/11 and 7/7 (*Playing with Fire*, 2005). These and other extremely topical and specific socio-political problems are taken up to be embodied, imagined, and worked through in dramatic form. Edgar uses theatre as a powerful tool of public discourse, an aesthetic modality for engaging with and thinking/feeling through the most pressing social issues of the day.[9]

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In this, he is also unrepentently rationalist: he deploys character, plot, language to explore ideas, make certain kinds of discursive cases, model hypothetical alternatives. He is, in this sense, a rhetorical playwright: he lives for engagement with spectators who will not necessarily agree with him, but who will use his theatrical figures to think through their own understandings of the dilemmas he stages. An audience deep in political argument on its way out of the theatre is his highest mark of a successful play.

From the perspective of British theatre trends in the second decade of the twenty-first century, Edgar can sometimes be perceived as being 'out of fashion'.[10] His theatrical style is mostly based on language and rhetoric rather than the now ascendant 'physical theatre' or in Hans-Thies Lehmann's term, 'post-dramatic theatre'. Actually, Edgar's plays offer a robust reminder of the values of narrative, discursive exploration of character and situation, and above all capacious thinking about social reality. By investigating his work in depth, we hope here to argue for a reconsideration of some of these recently undervalued concepts. In addition, as we argue concerning competing definitions of political theatre in the following pages, a pluralistic set of aesthetic modes and styles is a sign of a healthy theatre, and there is room for many overlapping and complementary forms. As Edgar moves into the fifth decade of his writing career, he continues to transform his vision and his dramaturgy to suit the changing times. We see him as a major contributor to a polyvocal theatre scene in the UK and beyond, where a variety of dramaturgical strategies successfully coexist to form a vibrant theatrical panoply of performances about our lives in common, and our attempts to improve them.

In the rest of this chapter, we tackle the key questions that must be answered in any sustained investigation of Edgar's work, especially those that cluster around the central concern: what is political theatre today? This term is often used in common parlance, as if everyone is agreed on its meaning, but we think consensus is far afield. Recent theatre scholarship has challenged the term 'political theatre' and also the discourses around politics (especially democracy), changing previously familiar sources and formulations. Much of this work is extremely valuable and provocative, and contributes to a renewal of

our scholarship appropriate to widespread changes in the wake of neo-liberalism, globalization, the 'war on terror', and the breakdown of confidence in fiscal and parliamentary institutions. We will discuss it here with both sympathy and critique in equal measure, and explain how we see Edgar participating in the changing spectrum of theatrical performances with political valences.

What is political theatre?

> I sometimes think I've spent my life sitting on the same panel in the same black box theatre above the same pub, debating whether British political theatre has a future. The fact that I have spent so long addressing the question implies the answer.
>
> David Edgar (2010)[11]

There is a persistent and perhaps escalating attempt to uncouple or bracket off the term 'political' from theatre, especially within the academy. Critiques of the concept come from several different quarters, and have serious and compelling analyses to offer as to why this might be desirable. We oppose this tendency, which is frequently simplified in the press and other journalism, but even to state this opposition is to presuppose a stable, unified concept around which to wrangle with others. Therefore, first, we need to know what the concept entails.

Political theatre is often discussed without any real delineation of the meaning of the term 'political'. Newspaper critics label this or that performance 'political' readily enough, but scholars also often assume we all know (and agree on) what the term means. Edgar's witty polemic quoted above points to the perennial recurrence of the claim that political theatre is in eclipse. What inevitably happens, however, is that several critics and scholars point out that the terms of engagement have changed under the pressure of contemporary events, and that we need to understand what it means to be political in a new and revised way. Then we can designate as 'political' performances that stage the new conjuncture or interrogate the new uncertainty.

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The 'in-yer-facers' of the 1990s are a specific case in point.[12] Graham Saunders, in introducing an excellent collection of essays on the period, *Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s*, takes up the critical assessment of Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, Nick Grosso, Jez Butterworth and others who came into their ascendancy towards the end of the eighteen years of Conservative rule (1979–97). Arguing that by the mid nineties 'there appeared to be a disengagement and dismantlement from recognizable forms of political engagement', Saunders then carefully rehabilitates key plays of these writers. He suggests that critics such as Aleks Sierz, scholars such as Patrice Pavis, and the dramatists themselves (quoting Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* [1996] and David Eldridge) recognized that the new playwrights were reacting to shifts in the British political scene but also 'to the impact of globalization, technology, and theories posited by postmodernist thinkers such as Baudrillard and Lyotard, who questioned the nature and veracity of "reality" – and with it the viability of eliciting social or political change'.[13] Quoting Pavis in a pronouncement that Ravenhill's *Some Explicit Polaroids* differs from the past because it is a '"problem play" rather than a "thesis play"', Saunders advances a careful judgment that what was familiar as political theatre had changed as new forms and new content appeared, appropriate to a transformed situation. In the same breath, however, Saunders still marked the 'naive sentimentality' of many of the plays, as well as noting that some were superficial, self-absorbed, and fetishized violence and shock value.[14] He also pointed out that in the new millennium new forms of explicitly political theatre reappeared, especially verbatim, as the global situation changed dramatically once again.

A recent and very sophisticated version of this argument has been made by Dan Rebellato. It will be considered further below on other grounds, but here we wish to highlight the tendency to redefine 'political' in order to retain its meaning in relation to theatre. In an essay that delineates a shift from politics understood through 'state-of-the-nation' plays to politics understood through the staging of globalization's effects, Rebellato writes:

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> I want to argue that the political context in which the state-of-
> the-nation play was developed has changed, and as a consequence
> political theatre has changed. I want to suggest that British
> playwriting continues to respond to its political surroundings
> with remarkable imaginative power and that the critics, with
> their outdated dramaturgical models, are looking for political
> theatre in all the wrong places.[15]

The problem with these otherwise useful and complex discussions of
changing times and theatre styles is that they assume that while
'politics' may be different in any historical moment, there can be
only one corresponding theatrical style to suit the times. Thus for
Saunders, the new writers of the nineties were forging a style that
was in some cases, but not all, political; and for Rebellato, the state-
of-the-nation play no longer suits the political state of affairs under
globalization. This is also the problem with journalism that periodi-
cally asserts that political theatre is dead – it privileges only one con-
ception of political theatre. In order to propose a different way of
configuring the relation between politics and theatre, we would sug-
gest separating politics and theatre, only to rejoin them again by ana-
lysing their relationship as a third term as mobile and processual as
both of the others.[16]

A definition of politics or the political must be general enough
and flexible enough to serve as a theoretical platform for analysis of a
range of human interactions from parliamentary participation to gen-
der behaviour. Politics configures human relations through structures
of social meaning and organization, and these structures are ubiquitous
and always present, although they are also chimerical and fluid.
Referencing precisely these structures keeps them visible and prevents
them from going unremarked, naturalized as ideology. (As examples,
'identity politics' is in disfavour now in part because it has become
ideological, and likewise the popular charge that politics has become
too corrupt and unseemly is also dangerously close to becoming natu-
ralized as an unexamined judgment.)

What, then, do we think politics actually is?[17] The best articu-
lation of politics we know comes (ironically) from a conservative

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political theorist, Michael Oakeshott, who nonetheless offers a mobile, nitty-gritty definition inviting deep engagement and not a little reflexivity:

> Politics is the activity of attending to the general arrangements of a collection of people who, in respect of their common recognition of their manner of attending to its arrangements, compose a single community . . . This activity, then, springs neither from instant desires, nor from general principles, but from the existing traditions of behaviour themselves. And the form it takes, because it can take no other, is the amendment of existing arrangements by exploring and pursuing what is intimated in them.[18]

What is especially valuable here is the recognition that people find themselves in certain relations with others *in media res*, and then attempt to rearrange, transform, or in some cases strengthen the existing arrangements, and this effort is always a negotiation with sociality, even if it might be violent or unilateral. It can describe a high-level legislative deliberation in a democratic state, or it can describe a dispute over a back fence or a tower block or a blog with an opponent one does not know, who speaks a different language half way across the world. Looking at these arrangements as arrangements that proceed through both micro and macro practices, one finds small adjustments and occasionally huge seismic shifts in the ways these politics work. We seek to map this notion of politics on to theatre and performance.

Looking at theatre as its own separate practice, what can we say about its apparatus of self-reflexivity and 'ontological queasiness'?[19] Following from Oakeshott's definition of politics, theatre is a micropolitical practice in that it invites its spectators to pay close attention to a number of relations between the performers and spectators, and among all the humans participating in the event. To quote Nicholas Ridout's description of the politics of theatre, 'Theatre's failure, when theatre fails, is not anomalous, but somehow, perhaps constitutive . . . It is precisely in theatre's failure, our discomfort with it, its embeddedness in capitalist leisure, its status as a bourgeois pastime that its political value is to be found'.[20] The failure he has in mind is theatre's

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inevitable failure to evade or transcend capital, as well as more pedestrian but ubiquitous failures that follow from such theatrical imperfections as 'corpsing' (uncontrollable laughter), stage fright, or children's and animals' tendency to rupture the expectations of performance conditions. All of these things can be made sense of if Oakeshott's is the model for what constitutes the political; it is more difficult if the model is Machiavelli's or Marx's.

Our line of thinking argues for a connection between the presence of political relations in the apparatus of the theatrical machine itself as well as its ability to stimulate awareness of the fundamental political situations developing elsewhere. Theatre attends to the amendment of existing arrangements by exploring and pursuing what is intimated in them, both reflexively on a metatheatrical level and with reference to other 'arrangements', through metaphor, allegory, modelling, or mimesis. In the fluctuation of history, both politics and theatre change significantly, and the third term, 'political theatre', changes its meanings and form as well. If any one of these terms is taken to be fixed, the result is inaccurate and unsatisfying.

Of course, what Machiavelli and Marx add to the equation are the distinctions of value, power, and justice. Oakeshott's formulation is value-neutral – as is theatre's political process. Politics is attending to those arrangements in the name of some values over others – struggling as much as attending in most cases. For example, 'equality' understood as the demand for equal treatment under the law is different from the demand for equal respect in the workplace, or equality in a primary classroom, where teachers may achieve equality by treating students differentially according to each one's particular combination of intellectual and personal attributes. Joe Kelleher, in his short, thoughtful book *Theatre and Politics* turns to Stefan Collini to define politics as 'the important, inescapable, and difficult attempt to determine relations of power in a given space'.[21] This version is also value-neutral, but it does underline, as Kelleher points, out that 'shaping and determining these questions is not straightforward and is likely to be contested', and also that Collini's 'inescapable' insists 'that whatever this or that image or this or that theatre is capable of provoking, and however we are capable of responding as spectators and as participants,

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