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978-0-521-61557-0 - The Cambridge Companion to David Hare

Edited by Richard Boon

Excerpt

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Introduction

On 9 November 2006 previews of David Hare's new play, *The Vertical Hour*, began at the Music Box Theatre in New York.¹ Directed by Sam Mendes, it starred Julianne Moore, best known for her work as a Hollywood actress (which includes the 2002 film *The Hours*, for which Hare wrote the screenplay), and British actor Bill Nighy (whose association with Hare's work extends back over twenty-five years to the television film *Dreams of Leaving*). Although the show was the tenth of Hare's to play on Broadway (and at one point, in the late 1990s, he had three running concurrently), it was the first to première there and the only new play in the autumn season. Mendes, shortly before the first performance, recalled Neil Simon's remark that 'previewing in New York is like having a gynaecological examination in Times Square'; Hare himself admitted that 'Absolutely nobody opens a play cold on Broadway. Broadway's meant to be a place you reach, not a place you begin. It will be the most nerve-racking time of my life.'²

When the play officially opened on 30 November, the response of American critics was mixed. Whilst Nighy's performance met with unanimous acclaim, responses to Moore's were more equivocal. The influential Ben Brantley of the *New York Times* suggested that 'Much of *The Vertical Hour* feels like a musty throwback to the psychological puzzle plays of the 1950s',³ whilst *Variety* described it as 'messy and unresolved'.⁴ The *New York Post*, on the other hand, hailed it as 'one of the best plays Broadway has seen in years',⁵ and John Heilpern of the *New York Observer* recognised it as 'a political play for a Broadway wasteland of boulevard comedies and Stephen Sondheim revivals'.⁶ From a British perspective, Michael Billington of the *Guardian* took a line similar to Heilpern's – 'at a time when the bulk of Broadway theatre – and, to be honest, much of the West End too – is designed to offer sensation and escape, Hare's play engages the heart and mind' – and, placing Hare's play in the context of other recent British successes in New York such

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as Alan Bennett's *The History Boys* and Tom Stoppard's *The Coast of Utopia*, noted the 'delicious irony that Broadway, the ultimate temple of commerce, depends heavily on work subsidised by the British taxpayer'.⁷ Hare himself (who some years before had famously fallen out with New York critics in the shape of Frank Rich, the so-called 'Butcher of Broadway', over a vicious review of the 1989 Broadway production of *The Secret Rapture*) professed himself generally satisfied: 'savaged in the *New York Times*, but otherwise rather well received, and playing to really intelligent audiences'.⁸

The play had originated in the playwright's fascination with the political position of liberal figures – especially academics – who, 'for sound idealistic reasons',⁹ had supported the Iraq war. Its central figure is Nadia Bye, a former war correspondent with experience in Bosnia and Baghdad, now of the political science department at Yale, who accompanies her boyfriend on a visit to his estranged father, Oliver, a doctor living a secluded life in Shropshire. The form of the play is essentially a political and moral debate between the two. Pragmatic, frank and Right-leaning, she is 'pro' the West's intervention – though less, perhaps, from a position of cultural supremacism than from a more humane and moral American tradition of political 'can-do'. He, on the other hand, is fiercely opposed to the war. He is an idealistic liberal who hides the strength of his views behind a mask of cool ironic detachment, just as he hides from the world – and from the emotional wreckage of his private life – in his country retreat. As their confrontation develops, and notwithstanding the presence of the son, their relationship takes on increasingly erotic undertones as Nadia slowly falls in love with Oliver.

Hare sees *The Vertical Hour* as a companion piece to his earlier Iraq play, *Stuff Happens* (National Theatre, 2004). But it is very different in form and scale. Where *Stuff Happens* is a large-cast, epic play which imagines the lead-up to the attack on Iraq through both verbatim re-creations of real speeches, meetings and press conferences and fictionalised versions of private meetings between members of the American and British governments and other key international figures, *The Vertical Hour* is an intimate piece. Essentially, it is a love story, set after the key events with which it is concerned (the title of the play is a military term, referring to the amount of time available to bring viable medical help after a catastrophic event), and contemplative in tone. According to Gaby Wood, Mendes suggests that

there are two strands to Hare's work – what might loosely be called the Brechtian strand, which are the public plays about the railways, the judicial system, the church; *Stuff Happens* would be among these. The other is the Chekhovian strand, which would include *Skylight*, *The Secret Rapture* and *The Vertical Hour*.¹⁰

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This is by no means an inaccurate nor an unfair distinction, and one which Hare himself, as an adapter of both Brecht and Chekhov, would surely recognise:

Whereas one's the public story of what actually happened, this one – for me – is about: in what way are our lives different than five years ago, and in what perspective do we need now to see our lives? Western life is like a painting: our colour has been changed by another colour being painted on the top – we're looking at ourselves very differently from the perspective of what our so-called enemies believe about us. It's led to a rich period of self-examination.¹¹

It would be wrong, however, to see Hare as a playwright of two different and separate voices. *The Vertical Hour* is as much about the large questions of public life as is *Stuff Happens*: questions of the nature of patriotism and heroism, of the self's responsibility to the self and, crucially, of the rights and wrongs of intervention, be it the intervention of one sovereign state into the affairs of another, of a college professor into the lives of her students, or of a father into his son's romantic relationships. When Michael Billington applauds the play for 'the force of [its] central argument: that you cannot separate public actions from private lives and that flight from reality is ultimately a sin',¹² then he might equally be offering a summative statement of Hare's key concerns as a political dramatist fast approaching the fortieth year of his career. The public and the political, the private and the behavioural, exist on one continuum, and whether the critical lens of Hare's theatre is fixed on the grand scale or on the intimate, then its focus is the same: the scrutiny and analysis of the very values by which we live our lives.

The Vertical Hour – its particular nature as a political play, the apparent paradox of its staging on Broadway and the critical response it provoked – is paradigmatic of the body of Hare's work as a whole, but only to a limited extent. One of the most striking features of the Chronology of Hare's work produced for this book (see pxiii) is what it reveals about the sheer variety of output he has produced since he began writing in the late 1960s.

Of the fifty-five performed pieces, very nearly half are original stage plays of his sole authorship. Of the remainder, there are five theatrical collaborations (including two – *Brassneck* in 1973 and *Pravda* in 1985 – with Howard Brenton), ten stage adaptations from dramatic or non-dramatic sources (the former including English versions of plays by Brecht, Chekhov, Lorca, Pirandello – two versions of *The Rules of the Game*, in 1971 and 1992 – and Gorky), five television plays and seven feature films. Of these last, he wrote and directed three and provided screenplay adaptations for four more, of

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which two were of his own stage plays. There is also the libretto for one opera.

Even within the body of solo-authored, original stage work, there is a great diversity of scale, form and subject matter, ranging from a short, 'one-off' sketch such as *The Madman Theory of Deterrence* (1983) to the epic grandeur of the National Theatre Trilogy (*Racing Demon*, *Murmuring Judges* and *The Absence of War*, 1990–3) by way of smaller-scale, more intimate pieces such as *My Zinc Bed* (2000), *The Breath of Life* (2002) – and, of course, *The Vertical Hour* (2007) – and one monologue, *Via Dolorosa*, which he performed himself for the first time in 1998. The work has found homes on the subsidised and commercial stages, in village halls, arts labs, provincial repertories and the West End, as well as in the National Theatre and on Broadway. Moreover, within and beyond the Brechtian and Chekhovian strands to the work identified by Mendes, we may also see a wide diversity of experimentation with style and genre ranging from the violent Artaudian aggression of his earliest pieces to satire, documentary and verbatim theatre, pastiche, a (more-or-less) Shavian theatre of ideas and what Hare himself has identified as 'stage poetry'. I stress 'experimentation', because the writer himself has always been distrustful of notions of 'pure' genre or 'pure' style, and one consistent theme of his career has been the way in which the plays have, whatever their particular subject and intent, also interrogated their own nature and that of theatre generally. I think in particular of the self-consciously performative behaviour of characters in early plays such as *Slag* (1970) and *The Great Exhibition* (1972), and in later plays like *The Absence of War* (1993);¹³ of the testing to its limits of genre in *Knuckle* (1974); of the epic, Brechtian theatricality of *Fanshen* (1975); of the amalgamation of detailed naturalism and live rock-gig in *Teeth 'n' Smiles* (1975); of the film-of-the-novel-within-a-play-Chinese-box structure of *A Map of the World* (1982); and of *Amy's View* (1997), another assault on the straitjacket of genre, where a 'country-house' light comedy is shockingly torpedoed by the tragic death of a central character. In *Amy's View*, as in Osborne's *The Entertainer*, the world of the theatre becomes a metaphor for wider social reality, and indeed we may see the totality of Hare's career-long experimentation with genre, style and form as representing nothing less than a continuing interrogation of the relationship between the performative and the real, whether it be inside or outside theatre buildings.

Running parallel to Hare's work as a stage and screen dramatist are what in effect are two secondary careers. It is worth remembering that his ambition as a young artist was not to write, but to direct, and indeed he has done so consistently throughout his career, and on both stage and screen. He has directed not only his own work (including the seminal *Plenty* in 1978),

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but also the work of other contemporary dramatists (including Howard Brenton's *Weapons of Happiness* in 1976) and work by Vanbrugh, Shaw and Shakespeare. As I write, his current project is the direction of Joan Didion's stage adaptation of her own book, *The Year of Magical Thinking*,¹⁴ for a Broadway première at the Booth Theatre in March 2007.¹⁵ And, in addition, he is a stimulating public speaker and lecturer, and has published three books and numerous articles related to his own work and to the theatre, politics, society and culture generally; indeed, what we may loosely define as Hare's journalism – his cultural criticism – is a small but respectable body of work in its own right.

This book sets out – as a 'Companion' should – to give as wide-ranging and diverse an account of the work of one of our most important modern playwrights as it can. But that does not (cannot) mean that it is either comprehensive or exhaustive. If only for reasons of space, there have to be omissions. The absence of focused treatments of Hare's work as an adapter, and of the reception of his plays overseas (especially in the United States) are a matter of particular regret to your editor: the interplay between Hare's own work and his versions of Chekhov, Brecht, Pirandello and the rest would be a fascinating site of critical interrogation, whilst analysis of responses to his work when it is displaced into different cultural contexts would raise equally fascinating questions about a dramatist frequently (and, to some extent at least, misleadingly) viewed as quintessentially 'English'. But the issue of 'coverage' is in any case a vexed one. 'Grand narratives', of whatever kind, are always problematic, and can offer only partial perspectives; indeed, the grander the narrative, the more partial the perspective.

On what should such narratives be based? On the life of their subject?¹⁶ But that is surely a matter for the critical biographer, and of only limited relevance to a book such as this. Even if one restricts oneself to Hare's *professional* life – his career – it is difficult to produce an entirely and compellingly comprehensive account. The bare bones are clear enough: he emerged as a playwright in the late 1960s as one of a whole generation of radical, left-wing political dramatists who developed their craft in the hot-house of the revolutionary Fringe movement, and led that generation, and its political and stylistic concerns, on to the stages of mainstream theatrical culture in the 1970s, when the epic 'State of the Nation' play in many ways set the agenda of theatrical innovation. Like others of that generation, Hare found the 1980s a difficult time, as Thatcherism both stole the ideological ground from the Left and, more pragmatically, assaulted the culture of public subsidy which had done so much to enable and support its artistic expression. Unlike some of his fellow political dramatists, however, he adapted and survived, and went on from the 1990s onward to produce not only what

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is arguably the ultimate ‘State of the Nation’ project – the National Theatre trilogy – but the development of a new form of political drama; what he himself has termed ‘stage poetry’, a kind of smaller-scale, ‘submerged epic’.

So far, so uncontentious. But the career of any creative artist is inevitably more complicated – even, more mysterious – than that. A closer analysis of the trajectory of Hare’s career inevitably problematises so crude a narrative, and fails to do justice to its rich complexity. Nor is Hare himself always an entirely helpful guide. He delights in confounding expectation with his plays and films, and, as I have pointed out elsewhere, his publicly stated views about his work and career

may sometimes seem contradictory and paradoxical: see, for example, how his mind changes, and changes back, about documentary theatre, or the value of making adaptations, or working in television. Similarly, he is often ambivalent about subjects where one might expect certainty, such as the important roles played in his career by the Royal Court and National Theatres. This apparent contrariness to some extent begs the question as to how possible it is to ‘trace his evolution as a dramatist’ . . . ‘Evolution’ may imply a kind of purposeful, linear progression, a clear and coherent sense of development. It may even suggest that later work must by definition be ‘better’ than earlier work. There is, of course, some truth in this: playwrights, like any other committed professional workers, have a sense of the direction of their own careers, and learn their craft, gain experience, and become more confident as they grow older: but there is a neatness to the idea that is misleading . . . It is part of the academic’s job, and the critic’s job, to find pattern and discern order, but it is not necessarily a pattern or an order intended or even felt by the playwright [himself].¹⁷

With that warning in mind, then, what kind of ‘pattern or order’ is to be found in this book?

The first point to make is that I have deliberately opted for an approach which combines the practical and professional with the academic and theoretical, and my choice of contributors reflects that. They fall roughly into three main categories: those who are themselves or have been theatre practitioners and industry professionals (Tony Bicât, Peter Anson and Richard Eyre); academics (myself, Lib Taylor, Duncan Wu, John Bull, Cathy Turner, Steve Nicholson, Janelle Reinelt and Chris Megson) and what we may term ‘academic-practitioners’ (Les Wade, Michael Mangan and Dan Rebellato all have additional careers as playwrights, whilst Bella Merlin works as a professional actress and also lectures at Exeter University). Even these categories are oversimplified: both Anson and Eyre have published as theatre historians, whilst few theatre academics nowadays do not regard the practical investigation of theatre and performance inside and outside the

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classroom as anything other than a central element of their job descriptions. Some of my contributors have written, with great authority, about the playwright before; for others, this is their first foray into Hare studies. Four of them – Bicat, Eyre, Ansorge and Merlin – have worked closely with Hare in various professional roles, as co-writer, director, television producer or actor. Hare himself, though initially hesitant about appearing in a book of which he is the subject, discusses (in Chapter 11) his film career, in an interview which he feels offers the most comprehensive account he has yet given of his feelings about that work.

Aside from an insistence on the practical dimension, I hope my contributors feel I have imposed as little as possible upon them. There is no overarching theoretical approach (another ‘grand narrative’): the reader will find here a variety of critical voices, ranging from the historiographical to the cultural materialist (my own approximate and maybe slightly old-fashioned stance) via, amongst others, the feminist (and gender studies) and the deconstructionist. Views may at times conflict, but also find unexpected and enlightening synergies – the better, I hope, to stimulate interest, and the desire to explore further, on the part of our readers.

The book is divided into four parts. (Even this proved not unproblematic: is *Fanshen* (1975) best placed as a collaboration or an adaptation? Is *Saigon: Year of the Cat* (1983) a television *play*, a television *film* or a cinematic film . . . ?) The first – ‘Text and Context’ – offers a chronological treatment of Hare’s career to date, placing the work in the context of social, political and theatre history. It begins with Tony Bicat’s memoir of the career of Portable Theatre, which he co-founded with Hare in 1968. It is, I believe, unique in offering so thorough a personal account of that enormously influential group, and succeeds admirably in giving an almost visceral sense of the spirit of the work and its time, as well as giving us keen insights into Hare at the very start of his career. Chapters then proceed on a (roughly) decade-by-decade basis. My own provides a more formal account of the Portable work before offering an analysis of how Hare’s work developed through the 1970s, with particular regard to his negotiation of the move on to mainstream stages. Lib Taylor continues the story into the 1980s, discussing Hare’s response to the onslaught of Thatcherism, and comparing his use of female protagonists – one of the key features of his writing throughout his career – with the contemporary explosion of theatre writing by women (one of the few positive theatrical developments of that benighted decade). Les Wade addresses what for many remains Hare’s crowning achievement, the National Theatre trilogy of the early 1990s, and in doing so intellectually rescues Hare from that critical view which has portrayed him as a tired and compromised liberal, even a reactionary, who sold out to the establishment years ago. Duncan Wu

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tackles the textual and visual ‘stage poetry’ of the small-scale, more private plays of the decade, and does so on the level of close textual analysis, finding parallels with Shakespeare and raising the kinds of issues of spirituality and faith which have come increasingly to preoccupy the dramatist. The section concludes with a chapter by Peter Ansoorge, who uses his discussion of *Stuff Happens* (2004) as an imaginative opportunity to look back over Hare’s career as a political dramatist of a very particular kind.

Part II, ‘Working with Hare’, speaks to the importance of collaboration in the playwright’s career. He has collaborated with other writers – most notably Howard Brenton – on a number of occasions, but Cathy Turner extends the discussion to ponder a wider sense of the collaborative, considering the kinds of dialogue into which Hare has entered not only with other writers, but with the ‘real’ people who have been the subjects of ‘verbatim’ pieces such as *The Permanent Way*, and with audiences, as well as with the other theatre makers who have shared in the production of his work. One issue raised by Turner is the ethical dimension to collaboration, and this is further addressed in the following chapter, Bella Merlin’s ‘Acting Hare’, a tightly focused account and analysis from the ‘inside’ of the processes of the making of *The Permanent Way*. Merlin is both participant in and observer of the relationship between writer, director and actor (or in this case, ‘actor-researcher’) in one particular project; Richard Eyre, on the other hand, is uniquely placed to offer a career overview of working with Hare, having directed no fewer than six of his plays. In ‘Directing Hare’, his focus is in significant part on the relationship between writer, director and designer, reminding us that, however distinctive the voice of any particular writer might be (and he describes Hare as having ‘the pen of a polemicist but the soul of a romantic’), theatre remains the most collaborative of all the arts.

‘Hare on Screen’, the third part of the book, comprises two chapters. In the first, John Bull unpicks the complex relationship between Hare’s television and film work, wrestling with difficulties of definition and characterisation. His work on Hare’s first play for television, *Man Above Men* (1973), recovers, through the courtesy of the BBC Records Office at Caversham, what had effectively become a ‘lost’ work. Just as my own account of *Portable* differs widely in approach and tone from Bicat’s, so Bull’s scholarly agonising over what was television and what was film stands in marked contrast to Hare’s own attitude in my interview with him, which forms the following chapter. Taking the differences between the two media largely as read, Hare’s comments slide unproblematically between the ‘fabulous’ nature of *Strapless* (1988; cinema) and *Dreams of Leaving* (1980; television). Nonetheless, his

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work in each medium is significant in its own right; it is to be hoped that the indication he gives that he regards his career as a film maker (rather than as a screenwriter) as over proves premature.

The fourth and final part of the book is 'Overviews of Hare'. Here, contributors were given a freer hand to offer particular perspectives on Hare's career, seen as a totality. Unsurprisingly – given that the writer himself has described it as his subject – two chose to write about history. Steve Nicholson offers a wide-ranging analysis, problematising the notion of playwright-as-historian by drawing attention to the complex relationships between reality and the processes of writing history (especially recent history) and fiction; in doing so, he also contributes to the debate initiated by Turner and Merlin with regard to documentary and verbatim forms. His key point, that Hare's fundamental interest in dramatising history resides in his passionate belief that we must learn from the past, not least in the sense of understanding that things *need not have been so*, is surely the right one. By contrast, Janelle Reinelt's treatment of the same subject attends in close detail to just two plays: *Plenty* (1978) and *A Map of the World* (1982). Noting that she was born in the same year as Hare, she charts her own intellectual and emotional journey in parallel to Hare's, judging the plays, as a good historiographer should, in terms of the contemporary cultural context of the time of their making – particularly, the emergent post-colonial and second wave feminist discourses of the decade. In doing so, like Wade she revitalises what was in danger of becoming a sterile debate concerning the politics of Hare's portrayal of women. As with history, gender questions sit near the heart of Hare's project, and Michael Mangan's chapter develops the debate by relocating it into the wider arena of gender politics generally. He writes about Hare's characterisations of *men*, and especially about the recurrence across a number of plays of the dominant 'alpha male', often perched on the top of a triangle of complex relationships involving sons, daughters and lovers – or figures occupying equivalent roles. It is a theme Hare returns to in *The Vertical Hour*, though Mangan did not know it at the time of writing. The final chapter of Part IV, and indeed of the book, is Chris Megson and Dan Rebellato's jointly written examination of the relationship between Hare's theatrical output and his other public utterances, including his journalism; this is a theme touched on variously by other contributors (see Ansorge, for example, and Nicholson). Their primary focus is on his lectures. In what is perhaps the most critically ambivalent piece in the volume, they argue that 'Hare's long-standing commitment to the pure, transparent and direct communication of subject matter in performance' has led to an increasing unease with theatre, pointing to his monologue *Via Dolorosa* (1998) as a

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site of competition between the instincts of a playwright and those of a lecturer.

Hare himself has said of *Via Dolorosa* that ‘one of the effects of one-man shows is that you feel that at the end of the play you know the person on stage terribly well’.

And there wasn’t a night where there weren’t lots of people waiting for me at the stage door.

At first this alarmed me because I’m not used to that as a playwright. The playwright’s an anonymous figure. But the reason they were waiting for me was they felt they knew me because they’d spent an hour and a half or more in my company.¹⁸

These well-intentioned ‘stage-door johnnies’ had been entertained, enlivened and politically engaged by Hare’s play, but they did not, of course, know David Hare. They knew ‘David Hare’, the particular version of himself he had constructed in the writing and performance of his play. Likewise, this book can only be about a ‘David Hare’, the particular version of the dramatist which its contributors – including myself – have themselves constructed. Indeed, one of the advantages of a book such as this is that it allows – positively encourages – a multiplicity of perspectives to be opened, and a variety of voices to be heard. (For other versions of ‘David Hare’, I refer the reader to the Bibliography that appears towards the back of the volume.) Hare’s voice, too, is multifarious, but it is nonetheless a single voice, and, as his long-time friend and collaborator Richard Eyre suggests, one which is both distinctive and historically significant:

It’s beyond argument that he’s been one of [the British theatre’s] leading voices: eloquent, passionate, forceful, romantic, politicised . . . it’s something that is unique, and he has solidly pursued an often difficult furrow of writing about public life and ideas of how people should live, through a variety of distinctive milieux. And, of course, there is his constant proselytisation about the medium of theatre, and a demonstrated passion that it’s worth caring about this medium. So it seems to me that there is no way of representing David’s contribution as anything less than central.¹⁹

NOTES

1. David Hare, *The Vertical Hour: A Play* (London: Faber, 2007). At the time of writing, the play awaits its British première.
2. ‘Can David Hare Take Manhattan?’, *Observer*, 12 November 2006, <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/features/story/0,,1945835,00.html> (accessed 26 February 2007).