

1 Approaching 20th-century British drama

- How does 20th-century British drama relate to its social, cultural and historical context?
- What are the major theatrical movements and genres of the 20th century?
- How have individual playwrights developed and shaped their distinctive dramatic forms?

The Edwardian age

A conventional image of the years before the First World War is that of the ‘long Edwardian summer’, with ladies in elegant hats and dresses parading on the lawns of country houses. It is an England that belongs to the upper classes; an England of unruffled pace, secure in its sense of the rightfulness and permanence of its privileges. This image, popularised with romantic hindsight after the horrors of the war, concealed the reality of the situation.

When Queen Victoria died in 1901, Britain ruled the largest empire the world had ever seen. A quarter of the world’s population was under British rule and the British navy ruled the seas. The Industrial Revolution had put Britain ahead of its European rivals and allowed it to become the largest trading nation and banker to the world. It seemed to some that this golden summer could never end.

Social conflicts

However, there were underlying problems. Having led the world in many of the great inventions of the 19th century, Britain fell behind in the newer industries of the 20th. Industrial competitors had caught up fast, and many eyes turned to Germany with an admiration that quickly changed to fear.

In a society in which it was said that 1% of the population owned 70% of the wealth, the rigidity of the class system and its inequalities came under scrutiny from a Liberal government led by Asquith (1908–1914), from the growing number of socialists and from the unemployed. Many of the tensions of the time were focused on industry. In an increasingly competitive market, the relationship of the workers to employers came under strain. This was the context in which the Labour Party was born in 1900. Legislation was passed that made strike action near to impossible and, as a result of the ensuing outcry, was just as quickly repealed. Industrial relations deteriorated when prices went up, but wages stayed the same.

Between 1910 and 1912 there were strikes by dockers, miners and railwaymen. The organised and strengthened unions were now clearly a powerful force, and, when a Triple Alliance of the three largest unions was formed in 1914, it seemed that confrontation was inevitable. Rarely can a play have caught the spirit of the moment as accurately as John Galsworthy's *Strife* (1909) which centres on a strike in Trenartha Tin Plate works and the conflict between the starving miners and the Board of Directors.

It was not only conflict in industry that seemed to be reaching a crisis point: in Ireland, Nationalists were beginning to plan rebellion and Unionists were preparing for armed resistance; in England, the suffragette movement transformed a political protest into a campaign of violent action. No wonder then that the newly established **repertory theatre** and its advanced thinkers were full of ideas and questions about the ills of society and of capitalism. George Bernard Shaw's socialist ideas were shared by Granville Barker who exposed the corruption of the family business in *The Voysey Inheritance* (1905), and the whole world of the couture industry from retail drapery to high fashion in *The Madras House* (1910). The repertory theatre brought society's problems to the audience's attention and gave voice to the underclass.

'The woman question'

Women were arguably the largest underclass in the Edwardian era. Emmeline Pankhurst founded the Women's Social and Political Union in 1903. Under her influence what had begun as a campaign of direct action became more and more a campaign of violence. Theatrical in their protests, sometimes even wearing the arrowhead costume of convicts, the suffragettes used the resources of drama to the full. Sketches and playlets were performed in halls and schools throughout the country and provided a forerunner to the **agit-prop** theatre of the 1930s. The Actresses' Franchise League was formed and Elizabeth Robins' *Votes for Women* (1907) whose centrepiece is the realistic re-enactment of a suffragette rally in Trafalgar Square, was enthusiastically performed throughout the country. The violent death of Emily Davison, fatally injured under the feet of the king's racehorse in the 1913 Derby, drew dramatic attention to the issue, but the active role of women working as nurses and ambulance drivers in the First World War probably did more to change perceptions. The granting of votes to women in 1918 was a natural extension of their war effort, but even then they had to wait another ten years before achieving the vote on equal terms with men. The developing sense of women's rights and of their roles in society is a major theme of the 20th century and its drama.

- ▶ Think of a play that you have seen either in the theatre or on television that has

made you think about a particular issue, and perhaps made you reconsider your own position on it. How did it make its points and try to convince you?

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of using drama to promote a cause?

The Edwardian theatre

Theatre in Edwardian times was essentially London-based and provided a sense of occasion for those who could afford it. Theatres offered the upper and middle classes an opportunity to see and be seen in splendid surroundings. Ladies and gentlemen, dressed formally in evening dress, sat in ornately decorated comfort in one of the grand theatres of the West End of London. They might see a Shakespearean comedy in which a naturalistic set of dazzling beauty earned a round of applause as the curtains opened; or the ‘Never-Never Land’ of J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan* (1904). There might be some thought-provoking moments, but the keynotes were entertainment and spectacle.

The actor-manager

At the centre of the performance was the star himself – perhaps the famous Henry Irving at the Lyceum, or Herbert Beerbohm Tree riding a snow-white horse at His Majesty’s. These were the great actor-managers of their day and the central figures of the theatrical system. Like the great magnates of industry, they controlled all aspects of their world. They paid the wages, rehearsed the cast, were responsible for the theatre itself – and, of course, took the leading roles in the plays they directed. Many consequences flowed from this structure. To maximise profits and to make full use of an elaborate set, a long run was eminently desirable. Plays that made too many demands on the audience or touched on difficult or uncomfortable subjects were unsuitable.

M’COMAS ... There is only one place in all England where your opinions would still pass as advanced.
 MRS CLANDON [*scornfully unconvinced*] The Church, perhaps?
 M’COMAS No: the theatre ...

This extract from Bernard Shaw’s play *You Never Can Tell* (1897) sums up the conservatism of the commercial theatre of Edwardian times. The theatre of H.A. Jones (1851–1929) and Arthur Wing Pinero (1855–1934) was not without ideas and sharpness, but it was confined within its social and artistic straitjacket. The judgement of a contemporary Italian visitor was that ‘The entire organisation of the theatre reflects that special and aristocratic conception of its status which is the

point of view of its patrons.’

- ▶ Look carefully at the listings for the London West End theatre published in any broadsheet newspaper. Try to find out what kinds of play they are, then put them into columns under the heading of their types. Suggested columns might be: classic drama; Shakespeare; modern drama; musicals.

What conclusions can you draw about today’s commercial theatre? How might the Edwardian theatre have differed?

The music hall

If the upper and middle classes enjoyed the West End, the working classes had a theatre of their own in the music hall, but its appeal was to so general an audience that it has been called the national theatre of its day. Music halls flourished in London and throughout the country. Their stars became national legends – Marie Lloyd, Dan Leno and Vesta Tilley – and their comedy, romance and slapstick fed straight into the silent films of Laurel and Hardy, and Charlie Chaplin. What the music hall offered was a closer reflection of the lives led by its audience, softened by romance and brightened by humour. Its pervasive influence was to be seen later in the 20th century in the work of television comedians such as Morecambe and Wise, whose training was in music hall; in the two desperate clowns of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1955); in the music hall format of *Oh, What a Lovely War!* (1963), and even in the ‘stand-up’ comedy of today.

The new theatre: the influence of Ibsen and Shaw

There was another kind of theatre developing whose relative lack of popularity at the time belied its significance. The Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen’s play, *Ghosts*, came to London in 1888, and scandalised critics and public alike.

The theme of the play – syphilis – struck at the heart of the revered institution of the family, and the brooding seriousness of the tone was at the opposite extreme to the ‘entertainment’ that conventional theatregoers expected. *A Doll’s House* (1879) put the central dilemmas of women’s freedom in a stifling and corrupt bourgeois setting. Ibsen’s plays represented the beginnings of modern European drama. His influence in establishing a serious drama based on moral and social issues hung over what has been called ‘the minority theatre’, represented by the playwrights who did not write for the audiences of popular West End theatres, but for the smaller playhouses, repertory theatres and clubs which were beginning to establish themselves in London and the provinces.

Ibsen’s champion in England was George Bernard Shaw, and it was through his plays that Ibsen’s influence on the British stage was most clearly felt. It is hard to overstate Shaw’s influence as writer, reviewer, critic and producer. His biting wit

and experience as a man of the theatre helped him to make the minority theatre a commercial and popular success.

The new drama demanded a new, simpler staging and a new kind of theatre. The Court Theatre, under the directorship of Harley Granville Barker (1877–1946) from 1904–1907, became the leading avant-garde theatre in London. (As the Royal Court, 50 years later in 1956, this theatre was to assume the same role with its production of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*.) Shaw, whose plays formed the basis of the programme, wrote with characteristic immodesty that the first Court season marked 'the most important event in the history of the British stage since Shakespeare and Burbage ran the Globe Theatre on Bankside'.

Certainly the Court established some of the approaches which were to influence theatre in the 20th century. The convention of the long run was replaced by a repertory system. This allowed a much more daring approach, as a play that failed could be deleted from the repertoire without major difficulty or financial loss. The role of the actor-manager was replaced by the novel idea of the director who had overall control of the production. This development was pushed to its logical conclusion in the work of Gordon Craig (1872–1966). The idea of the central role of the director is one that is almost taken for granted in today's theatre.

The importance of Shaw

Shaw's theatrical career and influence spanned the centuries. In the late 1890s and the first years of the 20th century, he wrote a series of comedies that were to challenge, amuse and shock his audiences. From the social dramas of the 1890s, *Widowers' Houses* (1892) and *Mrs Warren's Profession* (published 1898 and first performed 1902), to the Edwardian plays such as *Major Barbara* (1905) and *Pygmalion* (1914), to post-war masterpieces such as *Saint Joan* (1924), Shaw's output was as prolific as it was varied. His account of Ibsen's dramatic strategy is as much an account of his own: 'Ibsen substituted a terrible art of sharp-shooting at the audience, trapping them, fencing with them, aiming always at the sorest spot in their consciences.' It was partly for this reason that Shaw called his first collection *Plays Unpleasant* (1898). Their subject matter, too, was 'unpleasant' – prostitution, profiteering and philandering.

Shaw was a man of ideas and his view of the theatre was that it had a serious purpose: to make people think. If that sounds commonplace today, it was much less so in Edwardian Britain. But, if the serious were the only side to Shaw, his work would be little performed and quickly forgotten. Shaw was also an entertainer, who invented a cast of comic characters as varied as those of Dickens. The German playwright, Bertolt Brecht, saw clearly the distinctive quality of Shaw's drama when he wrote in 1926:

It will have been observed that Shaw is a terrorist. Shaw's brand of terror is an extraordinary one, and he uses an extraordinary weapon, that of humour ... Shaw's terrorism consists in this: that he claims a right for every man to act in all circumstances with decency, logic and humour.

(*Brecht on Theatre*, 1964)

In other words, Shaw's wit is not decorative, but essential to his purpose.

Unlike Brecht, Shaw had no radical or original approach to staging or to plot. He used the familiar forms of romance, historical chronicle and melodrama. What he did achieve, however, was to give each of the familiar plots his own twist, to surprise an audience and to frustrate their expectations. Surprises and reversals are embedded in Shaw's plots, and in the verbal wit for which his plays are known.

Pygmalion

Pygmalion (1914) is the story of a flower girl metamorphosed into a society lady by Professor Higgins, who teaches her phonetics so effectively that she is mistaken for a duchess. Shaw's point about the superficiality of class distinctions is well made, but Eliza's change from mechanical speaking doll to a live woman who is on equal terms with her creator leads an audience to expect the 'fairy tale' ending of the princess marrying the crusty bachelor and reforming him by showing him a humanity he lacked. From the time the first actor played Higgins and threw red roses at Eliza between the end of the play and the final curtain, to the film adaptation in *My Fair Lady*, Shaw's ending has been altered or seen as unsatisfactory. Shaw deliberately set up and then rejected the romantic ending as sentimental. By denying the conventional ending, Shaw left Eliza's future open and made the audience revise its expectations.

Shaw's plays of ideas

Just as his endings teased and surprised, so Shaw constantly challenged expectations of character. **Melodrama**, **farce** and the **well-made play** all tend to rely on the hero and villain. The audience's moral bearings are made clear in a simplified world. Shaw would have none of this and repudiated the idea of the villain, using the touchstone of what is true to life – a standard that he invoked against all forms of falsity and the artificial:

The average man is covetous, lazy, selfish; but he is not malevolent, nor capable of saying to himself, 'Evil: be thou my good'. He only does wrong as a means to an end, which he always represents to himself as a right end. The case is exactly reversed with a villain ...

(quoted in Eric Bentley *Bernard Shaw*, 1975)

Just as the villain may be a dramatic fiction, so may the hero: in fact heroism, like idealism, was always likely to be debunked in Shaw's drama. Apparent villains like Mrs Warren, in *Mrs Warren's Profession* (1902), who organises prostitutes, or Andrew Undershaft, the capitalist arms manufacturer in *Major Barbara* (1905), are allowed to make their cases forcefully. Undershaft himself is seen as a model employer and a hater of the true evil of poverty. Indeed, as Shaw wrote in discussing the plays of Ibsen (*Major Critical Essays*, 1986), this moral uncertainty was exactly what distinguished the new drama:

In the new plays, the drama arises through a conflict of unsettled ideals ... [and] is not between clear right and wrong ... the question that makes the play interesting is which is the villain and which the hero.

In place of the traditional resolution of a knotty plot, Shaw wrote discussions, refining and clarifying the issues. Discussion is thus of key importance in Shaw's drama. All his heroes and heroines are, in a sense, polished debaters, but the wit they show is not the epigrammatic wit of Oscar Wilde, but rather the best expression of their convictions.

Shaw's early plays revealed the hypocrisies of society, and his later ones drew attention to its complexities and dilemmas. His alteration of the traditional **genres**, and the simplified characterisation which these genres implied, was ultimately a rejection of the simplified and false view of the world they represented. His achievement was that he opened up the stage for serious debate and proved that it could be invigorating. It was not until the 1960s that the challenge of Shaw's political and moral theatre was taken up once more.

- ▶ How important are ideas in the theatre? What is the difference between a dramatised debate and a play of ideas? Read the extract from *Our Country's Good* (Part 3, pages 92–94). Note down your impressions of how Timberlake Wertenbaker contrasts the characters and their views. Look closely at the language of each character and the way characters interact. Which is the key speech in this extract? Does the dramatist successfully convey her main arguments to you?

The growth of the new theatre

The repertory movement became unstoppable and was closely linked with regional and provincial theatre. Most notable was the founding of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, but throughout the country, repertory theatres were established as fast as Theatre Royals had been in Victorian times. The repertory movement came to Glasgow in 1909 and Liverpool in 1910; in 1913 the Birmingham Repertory

Theatre opened. This was the first theatre specifically built for a repertory company.

Perhaps the most influential of the companies was that founded at the Gaiety Theatre, Manchester, by Miss Horniman in 1908. Here a strong local tradition found its voice in the plays of the industrial north of Allan Monkhouse, Stanley Houghton and Harold Brighouse – the so-called Manchester School – which represented working class life with a sympathy and a humour born of close observation. Clayton Holmes, an American critic, wrote in 1917 that the ‘two greatest theatres in the British Isles are the Abbey Theatre in Dublin and the Gaiety in Manchester’.

Arthur Wing Pinero outlined the future of the theatre under the influence of Ibsen. He looked forward to ‘a drama based wholly on observation and experience, which lays aside the worn-out puppets and proverbs of the theatre and illustrates faithfully modern social life’. However, he was not the playwright who expressed these aims in the theatre: it was left to Shaw, Harley Granville Barker and John Galsworthy (1867–1933) in London, the Abbey Theatre in Dublin and the Manchester School to develop a drama to meet the challenge of the times.

- ▶ Find out as much as you can about your local theatre. When was it built? How has it changed? Can you define the kind of audience it attracts? What sort of plays does it put on? How has its role in the community changed since it was built?

A theatre of ideas and of social comment risked dryness and dullness. It was to the credit of many of the Edwardian dramatists that their characters lived on stage to such an extent that the audience did not feel they had been buttonholed to listen to a dramatic lecture or sermon. Or perhaps the intensity of the issues and conflicts that the drama embodied carried its own charge of dramatic energy.

The drama very often centred on a family and explored the conflicts between the younger generation and the older. The older generation was typically represented by an unyielding patriarchal figure whose values, but not necessarily conduct, were Victorian. The struggle between the generations often involved the rights and freedoms of a young woman who found herself in conflict because she did not want to marry her lover (Stanley Houghton’s *Hindle Wakes*, 1912); wanted to divorce (Granville Barker’s *The Voysey Inheritance*); or to have an abortion (*Waste*, 1906–1907). The plays were set firmly in the world of work and of business: Galsworthy’s *Strife* starts six months into a strike by workers in the Trenartha Tin Plate Works; *The Voysey Inheritance* is based on a lawyer’s practice, and even the lighter comedy of *Hobson’s Choice* (1915) by Harold Brighouse is an entirely believable picture of work in a northern cobbler’s. These firmly established settings allowed the dramatists to give force to their analyses of class and the financial bases of power relationships.

What happened in the theatre in the early years of this century was an outburst of dramatic energy. In many ways the Edwardian stage acted as a prologue to the themes of the century: the division between the commercial theatre and the smaller, poorer, but ultimately much more important theatre that we associate with the repertory movement and the ‘little theatres’; the sense of theatre mediating to a wider audience the crucial issues of the moment, rather than being an exclusive entertainment for the upper and middle classes; the movement away from London’s West End to the provinces; the presentation of working class people on stage. All these would find echoes and restatements throughout the century.

- ▶ What do you think were the two or three main issues that were most important to Edwardian playwrights? What are the three major issues that seem most important to dramatists today? Note down the main similarities and differences.
- ▶ Read carefully the extracts from *Hindle Wakes* and *Hobson’s Choice* (Part 3, pages 72–76). How far and in what ways do they reflect the social and political issues discussed above?

The Great War and after

The Great War, as those who lived through the First World War called it, killed more than half a million British soldiers. Enormously popular to begin with, the ‘war to end all wars’ was expected to be over by Christmas 1914. Young men hurried to join up and Britain, unlike other combatant nations, did not need to introduce conscription until 1916. The experience of the war, which was the first war to be fought using tanks, aeroplanes and the technology of mass destruction, was to mark a generation of young men and their families. The picture we have today is coloured by the art, poetry and prose that came from the soldiers in the trenches. Siegfried Sassoon’s accounts of the life of an infantry officer, Wilfred Owen’s immediately powerful poetry, and Paul Nash’s pictures of a barren and shell-blasted landscape are just a few examples from a war which produced so many artistic witnesses and commentators – but surprisingly little drama.

The state of the nation

Immediately after the Armistice in 1918, Lloyd George, the Prime Minister in the last years of the war, called an election to gain the peace vote and was re-elected. His post-war programme was one of reconstruction with an emphasis on increased welfare provision. He famously promised ‘a land fit for heroes’ to the returning soldiers, but to many it seemed that little had changed despite all the wartime sacrifices. The economic and social problems that were to blight the inter-war years soon became apparent. The cotton mills of Manchester, the dockyards of the Clyde,

the Tyne and the Wear, and the mining industry of South Wales, were some of the areas where the promises of Lloyd George must have sounded exceptionally hollow. It was in exactly these regions that workers' theatre grew.

The General Strike of 1926

When worsening economic conditions led the coal owners to demand a reduction in miners' wages, the miners went on strike. They were supported by the Trades Union Congress and the Labour Party. Nearly four million strikers came out in support of the miners. When middle class university students drove trams and buses in defiance of the strike and 5000 strikers were arrested, the country was divided. The General Strike was all over in nine days once the TUC decided to end their support, and all but the miners gave in. The resulting divisions in society were deep rooted. These divisions were expressed in the play *In Time o' Strife* by a Scottish miner, Joe Corrie, that premiered in Glasgow in 1927.

'The Gay Twenties'

Against this background of hardship there was another side to the 1920s. In America, Scott Fitzgerald named it the Jazz Age and, in England, the *Daily Mail* coined the phrase 'the bright Young Things'. Both referred to that post-war phenomenon of the young casting aside their parents' values and living their lives in new and daring ways. It would be wrong to exaggerate a social change that affected the rich more than the poor, but the publicity that the new fashions, music and styles attracted made sure that all were aware of this glittering new world of style and money.

'The Twenties were at least as gay as the Thirties would be over cast' wrote the theatre critic and historian J.C. Trewin. 'Few thought seriously of another war; the world in recovery was expanding ... naturally the theatre reflected this age of relaxed conventions, of fervid good cheer and questing experiment.' Trewin concluded that it was a decade which could be best summed up in a popular tune of the time:

On New Year's Eve, 1929 ... a sour wind sighed round the once heedless theatre of amusement, but the song that beat up against the tears still had the rhythm of the Gay Twenties:

I want to be happy,
But I won't be happy
Till I've made *you* happy too.