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978-0-521-86986-7 - The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Theatre
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Chapter 1

Where it happens

This section is about buildings, spaces and their management; about the money that pays for them; and about the people who visit them. It begins with one particular project, the story of which touches on a number of issues in all that follows.

National theatre

The twentieth century saw the aspirations towards a national theatre turn into concrete.

The vision of a theatre which was 'national' had been alive since at least the middle of the preceding century. But on the journey towards its realisation in concrete and glass this vision went through a number of changes. At different points in time there was new thinking about location, design, costs and programming. More fundamentally there were shifts in the definition of what a 'national' theatre might be and do. These shifts were products of differing ideas about the relationship between theatre and nation.

When they began in the early twentieth century, debates about the national theatre were shaped by two dominant attitudes to the contemporary theatre. One of these was that the period from about 1880 to 1914 was 'the new great age of English drama' (Pinero in Whitworth 1951: 78). The other was that theatre was threatened to a greater extent than ever before by commercialisation.

If the story of the campaign for a national theatre involves definitions of what the nation is, it also involves declarations as to what good theatre is. In the account that follows we shall see how the changing arguments about theatre and nation position national theatre in relation to different allies and opponents.

A central theatre

In 1904 William Archer and Harley Granville Barker published *The National Theatre: A Scheme and Estimates*. This was a huge leap forward beyond the

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previous campaigns. The book presented a cogently argued case supported by detailed costings of the organisation and materials, together with suggestions about personnel and programming.

Archer and Barker proposed a theatre that would be 'the property of the nation' (Archer and Barker 1907: xviii). The model for this had been specified by their predecessor Matthew Arnold, who wanted to imitate the idea of the Comédie Française. More recently Edwin Sachs had noted 'there is a growing feeling, both in London and in many of our provincial theatres, that the presentation of plays merits the recognition and encouragement of the public authority … There is even some hope that the London County Council may soon seriously consider the advisability of officially supporting Opera and Drama' (Sachs 1898: 9). Sachs said this in the context of a general survey of European theatres, where a number were 'national'. These Archer and Barker saw as reflecting the power and dignity of the state. For them the building that housed the national theatre should naturally be in London, and its funding was to come from endowment. It was to be run by the Director, assisted by the Literary Manager, Business Manager, Solicitor and Reading Committee Man. The company would perform the classics of English-speaking theatre, major European works (such as *Pelleas and Melisande*) and some of the established modern drama (*Trelawny of the 'Wells'*, *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Countess Cathleen*). The site would be given by government or public authority, one major donor would provide the building, while the Guarantee Fund would come from a large number of private contributors.

Its selection of plays makes clear why the national theatre was necessary. Barker's preface to the book talks about the commercialisation of contemporary theatre. He calls it the 'American invasion', since, for him, much of the damage was being done by American, or American-influenced, entrepreneurs, interested only in theatre for profit. The opposite of commercialism was 'art'. The Archer–Barker national theatre would be 'ample', 'dignified' and 'liberal', but it would not be an 'advanced' or avant-garde theatre. It needed to remain in touch with the mainstream, yet at the same time avoid a 'democratisation' that amounted to 'standardisation'.

In being 'endowed' the national theatre would have public responsibilities for its repertoire, which would underwrite its artistic authority. This then would set a benchmark for imitators. In the Archer–Barker vision a string of provincial theatres would be modelled on the national theatre. They would all be organised on the 'repertory' model, which aimed at a programme in which, in any one week, no two performances were of the same play (see Repertory). On this model, the national theatre is at the centre of a network of similar theatres. And indeed that's how they refer to it: 'The Central – or National – Theatre'.

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That choice of word – 'Central' – indicates a particular attitude towards the culture Archer and Barker were living in. When they originally wrote their proposal for a National Theatre it was privately distributed. In published form (1907) it contained the names of a small group of highly influential supporters. This suggests a single network of people who are able to make things happen simply by taking action among themselves. They are thus culturally central, in two senses: they are the main driving force in theatrical activity and they don't need to seek a popular mandate for what they do. They are both forceful and select. This view of how culture and politics are done also shaped the economic scheme for the theatre. It was to be supported by 'private liberality' (Archer and Barker 1907: xviii, xix).

It is characteristic of Edwardian culture that a relatively small group of committed theatre workers should feel that they could design a repertoire worthy of, and appropriate to, the whole nation and that such a scheme can only be initiated by private donors. The problem was that these private donors did not materialise in sufficient quantities to enable the scheme to progress. The flaw in the model of a 'Central' theatre is that it was dependent on individual willingness to support good causes. At a time when big money was being made out of the formation of chains of theatres doing variety and popular hits, the economic logic was more on the side of commercial theatre for undifferentiated customers rather than a central theatre for the 'nation'.

But this was not the only way in which the scheme came unstuck.

A racial theatre

When Archer and Barker designed their repertoire they were very clear as to what was, and was not, English drama. When the company from the Irish National Theatre Society visited London in 1903 they created a huge impact through the quality of their performing. But, although this company was given a home at the Abbey Theatre by the tea heiress Annie Horniman, and Ireland was still officially ruled by the English, to Archer and Barker this was work from Ireland. It was not the English national theatre.

One of the functions of such a theatre was to sustain Englishness. The reason for performing the classic works of the dramatic canon was to keep English drama alive. That intention had particular force in the early years of the century. For alongside the development of the scheme for a national theatre there was a separate movement to raise funds to build a memorial to Shakespeare. In the years following the Archer–Barker proposal in 1904, the two campaigns became entangled with one another. A scheme whereby the national theatre would itself be the Shakespeare memorial was overseen for

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a period by a joint – and much distracted – steering committee. But all were nominally united by 'common reverence for the great spiritual heirloom of our race' (Archer and Barker 1907: 89).

That race was, in the years prior to the First World War, stretched across the world, with London the centre of a British empire. As seen by a supporter of the scheme, speaking in the debate on the National Theatre in the House of Commons in 1913, it would preserve English standards – not just a national but an imperial theatre. Archer and Barker, however radical their liberalism, were caught up into this rhetoric. Their national theatre would have a role to play in strengthening the bonds between 'Anglo-Saxon peoples' (Archer and Barker 1907: xvii). But actually, whatever the rhetoric, by this period the Empire was past its glory days. London had not resisted the American invasion. A national theatre could not really function to sustain something in place. Instead it was more of a crusade, a focus for all those elements in society – or is that Society? – which recognised the role that could be played by a revitalised English drama.

Writing in 1910, P. P. Howe justified repertory theatre on the grounds that it was a form of 'racial self-expression' (Howe 1910: 69). But, as he realised, this conception of theatre was available to a wide diversity of races. The Irish drama seen in London was conspicuously Irish in its concerns. And even as the arguments for an English national theatre were being developed there emerged, some distance to the north, a concerted effort to express the race of the Scots.

That a national theatre was, temporarily, established in Scotland before England may have had something to do with the fact that the aspiration was connected with the formation of companies, whereas in England much of the energy was spent in planning for a building. The first step was the founding of Glasgow Repertory Theatre in 1909. This had as one of its aims 'the initiation and development of a purely Scottish Drama' (Howe 1910: 66). The other three aims were all to do with producing high-quality drama. It was apparently influenced by Barker's season at the Court, although it is also suggested that it followed on from Annie Horniman's company at the Gaiety (Bannister 1955). For Horniman in Manchester had similar consciousness of region, and her work led to the flourishing, and recognition, of a 'Manchester school' of playwrights (which included Brighouse and Houghton). These two potential influences mark the division at the heart of both the Rep and later enterprises, for the insistence on standard of work sometimes came into conflict with the emphasis on Scottishness.

The Rep folded in 1914. Its assets went to the St Andrew's Society, which, in 1920, sponsored the formation of the Scottish National Players Committee. This had as its aims:

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> To develop Scottish National Drama through the production by the SNP of plays of Scottish life and character; to encourage in Scotland a public taste for good drama of any type; to found a Scottish National Theatre.
> (McDonald 2004: 200)

In 1922 the Scottish National Theatre Society was formed. It was an amateur group. But it was the amateurs who, by Jan McDonald's account, sustained the ideal of native Scottish theatre in the inter-war period. The same can be said of Ulster, where the Ulster Literary Theatre was, in Guthrie's words, 'at that time [around 1926] outstandingly the most important group of its kind in the North of Ireland. After the Abbey it was the most important Irish company' (1961: 40–1). Some of that importance surfaces in the playfulness of the Ulster writer George Shiels, whose *Paul Twyning*, done at the Abbey in 1922, opens with a joke about the North being 'more democratic' and later pastiches quaint Irishness (Shiels 1945: 99, 133). Whether in Ireland or Scotland the tension was between race and standards. Tyrone Guthrie, who toured Scotland with the SNP from 1927, suggested that some of the board 'considered it their duty to press for plays by Scottish authors, and advocated the presentation of even feeble and amateurish scripts if they were written in sufficiently broad vernacular. Others were for good theatre' (Guthrie 1961: 45).

Certainly there was a preferred view of what constituted Scottishness – it had to do with glens and hills, not politics and mines. When Joe Corrie submitted *In Time o' Strife* (1927) it was rejected. So he went on to tour the play with his own company, scoring a huge success with it and thereby extending the range of what theatrical Scottishness might be. Indeed when Glasgow Unity was founded in 1941 its successes included McLeish's *Gorbals Story* (1946) and Stewart's *Men Should Weep* (1947), about a woman with seven children and an unemployed husband living in a Gorbals tenement. But Unity, emerging from a gathering of leftist amateur groups in the city, had as precedent London Unity and shared its conception of its role and target audience. If its theatre work aimed to be natively Scottish, it was in a much more pronounced fashion also for the 'people', conceived, here, as 'working' people.

Unity folded in 1951. By that time there was in existence a theatre that has often been regarded as Scotland's real, if unofficial, national theatre. While Unity pitched itself at working people, the management board of the Citizens' Theatre consisted of Glasgow's artistic and corporate notables. Founded in 1943 by the dramatist James Bridie its aims, as McDonald says, were 'to present plays of didactic and artistic merit; secondly, to establish a stage for Scottish dramatists and actors; and third, to found a Scottish drama school' (McDonald 2004: 207). For its founding the Citizens' received money from the

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London-based Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA). Its emphasis on standards and education, alongside a generalised Scottishness, enabled it to be subsumed, without any rough-edged nationalism, into what was by then a British set of values.

But, back in the 1920s, what the developments in Scotland suggest is that, if the national theatre is, in part, a 'racial' theatre, this compromises its role as a central theatre. For when the Scots got close to establishing their own national theatre, it was as if something on the rim of one wheel started to become a hub of another. So, in reviewing those early years of the campaign for a national theatre from the distance of 1930, Barker came up with a rather different model for it. He suggested that a national theatre can be likened to a public corporation such as the BBC.

A people's theatre

The concept of the BBC was that it was public and British. This is not the language of 'private liberality' and 'Anglo-Saxon peoples'. The world had changed since then.

The major event that had intervened between Barker's first call for a national theatre in 1904 and his return to the topic in 1930 was the world war of 1914–18. The war was hugely destructive and traumatised many people. While it did not substantially change the basic economic organisation of the country, at its end a different language was being spoken about social and cultural issues. In 1904 the campaigners for a national theatre envisaged an institution which was ample, dignified and liberal … but not necessarily 'popular'.

That word was associated with an already existing theatre, the Old Vic on the south of the Thames, near Waterloo station, 'a People's Theatre in the broadest sense' (Marshall 1947: 136). The theatre had a moral mission in relation to the socially and economically deprived area around it. It specialised in playing grand opera and Shakespeare, but with low ticket prices the shows were done on the cheap. When the campaign for the national theatre began in earnest there were those who suggested that the Old Vic itself could be such a theatre, but their opponents noted that the work was not of high enough quality. There was perhaps too much emphasis on the diversity of the audience and not enough on the standards of the shows. While it was all too popular, there was not, it seems, enough art.

That said, the Vic was clearly different from the commercial managements, both in its social mission and its commitment to the classics. It was far from being the enemy envisaged by the national theatre campaign; indeed it was a potential ally. But the fact that the Edwardian campaigners didn't feel it was

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quite right as a national theatre indicates in itself the social and cultural bias which governed their thinking. At the end of the war, in 1918–19, this social bias had altered. From the late 1930s onwards the Vic company moved closer to being seen as a national company. Its work was backed by CEMA and then the Arts Council through the 1940s in an explicit attempt to sustain it as a company which did the classics, and possibly prepare it for National status. From 1963 onwards the theatre was the home of the formally established National Theatre company.

But the concern with theatre's relationship with the 'ordinary' people of the nation went well beyond the Vic. During the 1914–18 war, while commercial theatres cultivated audience taste for 'light' entertainment, others went out to meet the troops. Lena Ashwell, actress and theatre manager, organised expeditions to mainland Europe, taking to the troops repertoires that included Shakespeare and other classics. This was the model for the later Entertainments National Service Association, overseen by the producer Basil Dean, in the Second World War, though by then it was, symptomatically, state sponsored.

Ashwell's motivation came from a firm ideological commitment to keeping theatre art dignified, for the sake of preserving the Empire. Back in London in 1919 her 'Once A Week Players' did tours of the town halls of the London boroughs, offering art theatre to 'ordinary' people. For these 'ordinary' people seemed to be hungry for serious theatre. In his book on the campaign for a national theatre Geoffrey Whitworth tells a story of lecturing to the troops and then staying on to hear 'The Crayford Reading Circle' read a short play by Stanley Houghton. For Whitworth this experience crystallised his thoughts about what a national theatre might do. It would be something that had the spirit of the Crayford Reading Circle – and all such groups – at its heart. A national theatre would be 'a Community Theatre writ large'.

Whitworth on 'The Crayford Reading Circle'

… here were no actors in the proper sense of the word. They were not dressed for their parts. They had not even memorized them. With books in their hands, and with a minimum of action, they did not do much more than read the words of the play, pointing them with a few gestures. And yet, through the emotional sincerity of their interpretations, the characters came to life, and as I watched and listened, I felt that I was coming close to the fundamental quality of dramatic art in a way that I had never understood it before. Here was the art of theatre reduced to its simplest terms, yet in this very reduction triumphant. Devoid of grace, and of the simplest gadgets of stage appointment, the agonists on the platform found the right echo in the hearts of the audience. And they were in no way expressing *themselves*. They were denuding themselves of all

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> the normal attributes of their selfhood, depending for the effect they made almost wholly on a microscopic rendering of the playwright's thought, achieving at the same time that unity between reader and audience whereby both reverberate in unison as a couple of tuning forks when one is struck. Thus they vindicated the existence of that common soul in which we live and move and have our being. And at Crayford this vindication was achieved for its own sake alone. Not for private gain, not even in the cause of charity, these players were simply following their own instincts, satisfying their own need. That was all they knew and all they needed to know. But in so doing they were satisfying also the need of the community. Givers and receivers were one. (Whitworth 1951: 148–9)

Instead of throwing himself into a renewed campaign for a national theatre, Whitworth stepped sideways. In December 1918 he founded, as a private venture, what was to become known as the British Drama League (BDL). This was formally launched at a public meeting in June 1919, where Whitworth described its origin and argued that 'as this was a time when the art of theatre was moribund, the contrast between that deadness and the promise of vitality outside suggested a scheme whereby a theatrical revival on democratic lines might be stimulated'. Note the opposition to moribund – and commercialised – theatre now comes not from a 'centre' of leading people of the theatre but from a revival on 'democratic' lines. The scheme of the BDL was that it should 'include representatives of every interest involved – not artists only and not social workers only' (Whitworth 1951: 150).

The first conference of the BDL in August 1919 was, claims Whitworth, the first occasion at which were assembled amateur and professional theatre people, educationists, social workers and members of the public. The aim was to do something bigger than create a national theatre. The BDL wanted to reach into 'the small community, the village and the home'. Its first conference established two main objectives: 'A National Theatre policy adequate to the needs of the people'; 'A faculty of the Theatre at the Universities of the country, with the necessary colleges' (Whitworth 1951: 153, 156).

Recalling the history of the campaign, Whitworth listed the various names given to it: National Theatre, Exemplary Theatre, Ideal Theatre. To these he adds a new phrase – the 'amateur theatre' will provide the audience for a National Theatre. Here, now, we are no longer looking at the model of a centre and its ring of imitators. The centre is dependent on, and committed to, a wide amateur drama movement dispersed through the communities of *Britain* (see Amateurs).

While the BDL started its work, the formal campaign for a national theatre during the 1920s put pressure on various governments, seeking bequests of

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land on which to build. When a Labour government was elected in 1924 there was a concerted attempt to restart the campaign. In yet another parliamentary debate the Opposition asked whether anyone really cared about a national theatre, and whether it meant anything to those who were not an elite. Putting it in those terms was to recall the Edwardian situation – in a Britain where the divisions between poverty and wealth were still clearly marked. But outside Parliament, and indeed outside the national theatre campaign, the theatre activity of the nation was galvanised by new energy. For a young theatre worker at the time, Norman Marshall, the commercial theatre of London had been reduced to 'a dead level of mediocrity' by the 'timidity' of the theatre managers and the 'tyranny' of the Censor. The struggle against it led to exciting experimentation which, says Marshall, was at its height in 1925–6 (Marshall 1947: 13). It was this range of activity which anticipated the next major development.

A nationalised theatre

Charles Landstone, of the Arts Council, tells how in 1943 Robert Digby and friends from Colchester Repertory Company approached the Arts Council's predecessor, CEMA, with plans for a new building: 'it was one of those magnificent plans for a new England cherished all over the country at that time by people of all interests and in every walk of life' (Landstone 1953: 103). The request chimed with the BDL's proposal to the Prime Minister in 1942 for a 'Civic Theatre Scheme'. This argued that, in order for high-quality drama 'to be preserved for the benefit of all classes, and fairly distributed', the theatre should be supported by state aid (Whitworth 1951: 231–2). For, as the Minister of Labour, Ernest Bevin, said, theatre was a national institution which expressed the character of the 'ordinary' British people.

> In this mechanical age we look to the theatrical world to preserve the characteristics of our people – not merely national characteristics but (and this is what most appeals to me) local characteristics. In the British people there exist great divergencies of character which are endangered by the current tendency to uniformity, and I look forward, at the end of this great struggle, to the living theatre not only coming into its own as a means of livelihood, but to its becoming one of our great national institutions to convey to the peoples of the world the real character of the ordinary British people. (Ernest Bevin, at the inaugural meeting of the Provincial Theatre Council, in Whitworth 1951: 232–3)

The plans for a new England came somewhere nearer to reality when, at the end of the Second World War, the Labour Party was elected, by a landslide, to

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government. This was the most left-wing of any Labour government, indeed in parts actually socialist, and its plans for a new England envisaged nationalisation of various industries. As Landstone says, there was a craze for nationalisation. This craze extended, among those on the left, to the theatre. In the spring 1947 issue of *New Theatre* its editor, Ted Willis, argued that 'a great national art like the British theatre is being cheapened and may be ruined for years to come, because its resources have been cornered by private interests'. Or, as the director André van Gyseghem put it later that year, in Britain 'theatre has become a place of speculation every bit as profitable as the stock exchange', with a consequence that there is little experimentation with dramatic form (van Gyseghem 1947: 13). Willis's solution was government intervention either directly or through the Arts Council in order to stop very long runs and prohibitive prices in theatres; to give powers to local authorities to build theatres; to convene a national conference of local authorities; and to convene a meeting of theatre organisations, which would include the Trades Union Congress (Willis 1947a: 2).

The campaign against private monopoly in the theatre moved fast in 1947. Beatrix Lehmann, president of the actors' union Equity, proposed state control to guarantee the right to work of all 'genuine' members of the profession and to raise 'artistic and economic standards' (Lehmann in Willis 1947b). J. B. Priestley and Basil Dean put their names to a scheme for a National Theatre Authority which would replace the Arts Council, form four national companies similar to that at the Vic and encourage the building of civic repertory theatres, 'as part of the public amenities and not as anybody's private property' (Priestley and Dean 1947: 12). From this followed the great British theatre conference in 1948, the 'Parliament of the British Theatre', which proposed abolition of censorship, establishment of Chairs of Drama in universities, better qualifications for teachers of drama, drama education for adults, state aid for students of theatre and the founding of an experimental children's theatre centre. The same year the Local Government Bill empowered local authorities to provide theatre.

Through all this there was debate as to the nature and function of theatre as art. The proposition was that it is the job of theatre to take sides in politics, that 'always the best theatre has been a weapon' (D'Usseau 1947: 12), that art can never be neutral (Hamilton 1947: 2). That concept of theatre as political weapon reaches into the mid-1920s, when Miles Malleson argued that the dramatic societies of the Independent Labour Party had a mission to do 'propaganda' in order to show the 'facts' of society to those living in misery. This ILP initiative would create the break with a theatre that 'up to now … has been entirely capitalist run' (Malleson 1925: 4, 12). With the title 'The Theatre is

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