Introduction

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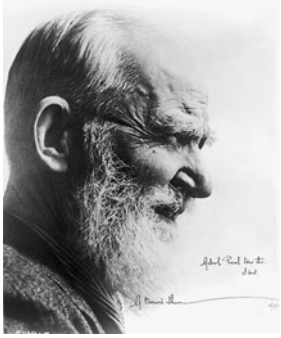
Britain's "New Drama"

The twentieth century and after, Christopher Innes proclaims, has been one of the "most vital and exciting periods in English drama, rivaling the Elizabethan theatre in thematic scope and stylistic ambition."[1] The reasons for this efflorescence, however, are not artistic in the narrow sense. The energizing of the British theatre has not depended, for example, on the happy appearance of several exceptionally talented generations of playwrights, though the last long century has certainly witnessed no shortage of talented authors, performers, and production artists of all kinds, as the different chapters in this volume amply illustrate. Innes identifies the underlying motor of this theatrical renaissance as the century's political, cultural, and social scene. In a Britain wracked by, among other catastrophes, two world wars and the loss of empire, a dizzying rate of change in values and lifestyles has in his view necessitated the kind of "national reappraisal" that the theatre, and the dramatists who felt called to write for it, were best qualified to provide.[2]

But why should the theatre connect itself to a project of such scope? Clearly, a central role has been played by the model of an engaged theatre pioneered by Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian dramatist whose controversial *Ghosts* was produced and performed only once, at the Royalty Theatre in London in 1891, where it was sponsored by the Independent Theatre Society, with attendance restricted to members in order to avoid censorship difficulties. The Lord Chamberlain's office could still cancel theatrical productions for a variety of reasons, including obscenity. Victorian society was fearful of ideas and themes that threatened the social order and consensus understandings of decency. This was an outlaw moment of sorts, because no other single performance has exerted more influence on a national theatre, setting an agenda that continues to be followed more than a hundred years later and marking a radical break from artistic



0.1 George Bernard Shaw.

traditions (melodrama and the "well-made play") that have become increasingly irrelevant, even if they have not disappeared entirely from the contemporary theatrical scene.

Along with other noted *literati* such as Henry James, playwright George Bernard Shaw Shaw (Illustration 0.1) was present at that singular performance of *Ghosts*, and he was quickly and passionately moved to produce a polemical meditation on what he took to be the playwright's views about social problems and how these might be resolved. "The Quintessence of Ibsenism" was first published that same year and was continually revised and reissued for the next twenty-five years and more as the ideas of both Ibsen (who remained active until his death in 1906) and Shaw evolved. As much devoted to social analysis as to the theatre *tout court*, this essay can claim with much justice to be the founding manifesto of modern British drama, even as it provides yet another instance of the global importance of Ibsen, an important figure as well in the establishment of the modern American theatre, as illustrated by the essays in the companion volume to this one, *Modern American Drama on Screen*. Shaw's call to arms vilified those he called Philistines (docile members of society who never question its founding values and fundamental practices) and Idealists (who uphold abstractions at the expense of the damage these do to individuals). The playwright championed so-called Realists, who move society ahead because they are relentlessly skeptical of accepted pieties.

The lesson Shaw drew from *Ghosts*, and from Ibsen's drama more generally, was that "progress must involve the repudiation of an established duty at every step," a development in which society's Realists were destined to play a central role – and to good effect if they involved themselves in the

theatre.[3] A necessary antiestablishmentarianism was most effectively promoted on the stage, where it could be enacted in a publicly accessible venue. It would thus be possible to communicate the various aspects of human struggle through the mimetic aspects of performance, which gave apparently living and individual form to vital questions (*Ghosts* concerns itself with the devastating effects on a family of the patriarch's adultery). At least insofar as Ibsen and Shaw imagined, the theatre was destined to motor the progressive arc of modernity, with its Enlightenment embodiment of natural rights. Shaw was an ardent Fabian, committed to a gradualist reformism that emphasized the promotion of social justice. His playwriting reflected that intense political engagement, as the Fabians soon morphed into the Labour Party, dedicating themselves to playing the game of electoral politics.

Shaw's embrace of Ibsen's then-radical vision for the theatre established not only the politics, but also the aesthetic that would thereafter be dominant on the national stage. This "New Drama" would embrace a naturalism that was, like all forms of realism, true to life. But it differed from other traditions in which verism of different kinds was prominent through its emphasis on the rational exchange of opinion about pressing social issues, particularly those aspects of "duty," broadly considered, that formed the basis of socially acceptable behavior for the middle-class audiences who were the theatre's most reliable and numerous patrons. As Innes points out, Shaw thus "defined modernism in a way that became standard for mainstream British theatre."[4] The British theatre has never embraced, except occasionally, the contrasting anti-realisms of continental movements such as expressionism or surrealism because these very different forms of theatrical experience focus on the inner life, especially with the intent of liberating the imagination in a manner that a Shavian rationalism would not approve.

And yet British writers and directors, not to mention the playgoing public, have tellingly found congenial the anti-Aristotelianism of Bertolt Brecht. Brecht rejected such Ibsenian conventions as missing-fourth-wall sets that staged the dramatic action in domestic interiors – preferring instead to demystify the conventional illusionism of the stage. At the same time, however, Brecht's disregard for fostering audience emotion in favor of anatomizing intellectual themes, and his emphasis on the connections between character and social values, could be more easily accommodated within Shavian Ibsenism, pushing to the margins other forms such as T. S. Eliot's poetic drama, the fantasy of J. M. Barrie, and more *outré* trends such as director Peter Brook's Artaudian Theatre of Cruelty. It is revealing that Brook, one of the leading lights of postwar theatrical culture, felt he should decamp to Paris in order to pursue his own artistic vision, despite having

achieved signal (if quite controversial) successes with, among others, his London production of Strauss's *Salome* (1949 at the Royal Opera House, with sets by Salvador Dali) and Weiss's *Marat/Sade* (1963 for the Royal Shakespeare Company; Brook also directed the acclaimed 1967 film version).

The broadly accessible seriousness of the Shavian approach was essentially an innovation as much a rejection of existing conventions (especially the notion of the well-made play, with its conventional dramatic turn toward the re-establishment of consensus social values). For Shaw, such *faux* seriousness was best exemplified in productions such as Arthur Pinero's *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* (initial production 1893) that focused on social issues as eminently solvable "problems." In this drama a marital mismatch violates class and moral boundaries and leads inevitably toward a series of tragic outcomes. By the end of the nineteenth century, the British stage had assumed for the most part a less ambitious cultural role as an important, and quite profitable, element of the rapidly expanding entertainment industry. It constituted part of a continuum of performance-based forms that most notably included the music hall, which was also based in theatres in London's West End. The most important figure of the pre-Shaw theatre was likely Pinero, who enjoyed a substantial success as an actor, director, and especially playwright, composing no fewer than fifty-nine plays, several of which have evidenced a popularity that continued into the twentieth century, as did Pinero's career (he died in 1934). In 1945, for example, Hollywood produced a well-received and profitable screen version of Pinero's *The Enchanted Cottage* (an exercise in heartwarming moralism about inner beauty first produced in London in 1923), while at the time of this writing, a production of his *The Magistrate*, featuring John Lithgow, is enjoying a successful run at the National Theatre.

Audiences, however, are not encouraged to take *au grand sérieux* that play's dramatization of the trials and tribulations of an official who barely avoids being ruined by scandal. It is the Shavian tradition that has proven able to help the theatre regain what Innes terms "its position as a forum for public debate,"[5] though audiences in Britain are still attracted to the less provocative entertainments provided by Pinero and similarly minded dramatists, who have their contemporary counterparts. Most prominent among these, perhaps, is Alan Ayckbourn, who in a remarkable career has written and produced some seventy plays, a number of which, especially *Absurd Person Singular* (1972), a witty meditation on contemporary marriage, have been widely popular. Similar plays from the early decades of the twentieth century remain attractive for revival. At the time of writing, there is, for example, a current, and favorably reviewed, production by the English

Touring Theatre of W. Somerset Maugham's *The Sacred Flame*, first produced in 1928. A well-crafted melodrama built around a whodunit murder plot, Maugham's play reflects the continuing popular appeal of pre-Shavian drama, with its dependence on suspense and surprise, key elements in the well-made play tradition.

The continuing cultural and political prominence of the modern British theatre is surely in some sense a surprising development, in large measure because of the omnipresence in Britain, as in the developed world more generally, of film and television, whose reach in the public sphere is continually expanding through the ongoing proliferation of delivery platforms that transcend, even as they personalize and privatize, both the home-based "set" and also the corner cinema. From this point of view, the theatre, firmly rooted in public performance for an audience that is both live and present, seems a throwback. And yet it continues to offer what the other performance-based media cannot, what Innes terms "direct contact with the spectator"; the commercial vitality of the British stage, especially in the greater London area, offers proof of this assertion. Intermediality has dimmed neither the cultural luster of stage performance nor its appeal, especially to the younger, well-educated, and affluent urbanites who constitute a significant sector of the theatre-going public in what is now by common consent one of the world's most cosmopolitan cities – and arguably the global center of commercial theatre, outstripping in number of venues and variety of offerings all its closest competitors, including and especially New York City, whose theatre district, despite the continuing vitality of some Off-Broadway and Off-Off Broadway venues, has undeniably shrunk since its commercial peak in the 1920s.[6]

Innes is not alone, however, in pointing out that the abolition of theatrical censorship in 1968 has been crucial to this theatrical renewal, enabling a freer expression of modernist themes than was previously possible. Importantly, the leadership provided by John Trevelyan in the late fifties and sixties at the British Board of Film Censors made sure that the national cinema underwent analogous changes, enabling the production of reasonably authentic adaptations of key plays from the last four decades.[7] And the founding of the (Royal) National Theatre in 1963 was a signal moment, reflecting a concern with the preservation and promotion of the national patrimony that goes back at least as far as Matthew Arnold. As Innes observes, this push for a public-sponsored presence raised "awareness of the theatre's potential for influencing audiences" and fueled debate about "the function of drama, the nature of its reception, and the relationship between form and content."[8] Perhaps such an enshrining of serious

theatrical traditions as the construction of the National Theatre's current impressive facilities on the South Bank of the Thames (significantly, after fifteen years of productions at the nearby Old Vic, with its long history of Shakespeare productions) does indeed confirm, as critic Loren Kruger suggests, that there are in Britain likely "no prospects for a national *popular* theatre" (emphasis hers), nothing on the analogy of France's *Théâtre du peuple*.[9]

Despite its openness to other kinds of dramatic production (among other productions, the current run of *The Magistrate* bespeaks an earnest attempt at cultural inclusiveness), the National Theatre emphasizes the Shavian tradition, broadly construed. This impressive institution reflects, if it does not exclusively feature, southern sensibilities and traditions, as well as upper-middle-class values and tastes, providing an important, subvented venue for serious productions that might not gain commercial backers in the West End. In keeping with a longstanding concern about the preservation of the national patrimony, the National Theatre does embrace the theatrical past (which would hardly please Shaw), manifesting something like what he dismissed as "Bardolatry," a preoccupation with Shakespeare that might prevent the stage from committing itself, in the Ibsen manner, to the problems and concerns of the living, those who would profit from the theatre's function as "a forum for public debate."

Screening the national stage

If the American film industry began with entrepreneurs (notably Thomas Edison), entertainers, and exhibitors producing an attractive curiosity, it quickly morphed into the provider of narrative entertainment, whose increasing dramatic complexity inevitably led filmmakers to draw on the resources of the theatre. This was one of the reasons why the center of film production soon became New York City, where the commercial theatre had long since made its home, with Edison in 1902 building a new glass-topped studio in the city and moving from his West Orange, New Jersey laboratory; and with other companies, notably Biograph, building facilities in the city. Many who worked in the theatre could thus easily sustain a second career in filmmaking, as some producers, notably Adolph Zukor of what would become Paramount Pictures, planned the theatricalizing of the new medium in anticipation of attracting middle-class theatregoers. In partnership with powerful Broadway impresarios (the Frohman brothers), Zukor was eager to promote "Famous Players in Famous Plays," a cinematic initiative that would take full advantage of the resources, both human and

literary, of which the New York theatre scene disposed. Expensive and elaborate Biograph studio facilities on 14th Street started operations in 1912, and yet, for a variety of irresistible commercial reasons, within five years the film industry had decamped to Los Angeles. More than 3,000 miles of the country had been put between the geographical locations of the two media, making it much more difficult for the kind of inter-arts cooperation envisaged by Zukor to establish itself and prosper.

The early history of the cinema in Britain closely reflects developments in the US. London quickly established itself as the national production center, as British film producers, like Zukor, also sought out closer connections with the theatre, whose cultural capital, so they thought, could be co-opted, lending cinema-going a cultural sheen that would attract middle-class viewers, around whom, as in the US, the profitability of the exhibition sector could be most securely built. The picture palaces that sprung up in both countries, now called theatres because of their deliberate architectural similarity to established theatrical venues, continue to testify to the melding of the two media, which was not inevitable as the cinema established itself, but likely.[10] Only in the UK the film business never re-established itself in some location far from the country's cultural, commercial, and financial center. The two arts have developed together, with many of the century's most notable performers, writers, and directors pursuing careers in both. Particularly since the beginnings of the sound era in the late 1920s, the British cinema has been heavily populated, if not dominated, by directors, writers, actors, and other creative personnel who remained loyal to careers pursued primarily in the theatre. The continuing financial crises faced by British film production since the 1920s have promoted such an approach to working in the performance arts, as finding secure employment in the cinema has always proved problematic.

Central to the development of the National Theatre was Laurence Olivier, its first artistic director and the public figure most responsible for the success of an initiative that had been envisaged, and pursued with varying energies, by many since the late nineteenth century, including theatrical notables such as Granville Barker. Olivier was one of the UK's most respected and prominent stage actors (a professional standing achieved in large measure through his Shakespeare performances and productions, in which he functioned as something like an actor/manager, following in a nineteenth-century tradition established by Philip Kemble and others). But Olivier also became an internationally acclaimed film star after his appearance in the wildly successful Hollywood adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* (1939). For the remainder of his career, he continued to act in films, both

British and American, hardly disdaining the more popular forms of cinema. Consider, among other projects, his roles in the thrillers *Marathon Man* (1976), where he incarnated a thinly disguised version of one of history's most evil characters, Dr. Josef Mengele, and *The Boys from Brazil* (1978), where, interestingly enough, he plays Mengele's Jewish pursuer. At least until the development of transcontinental air service, such a career was no longer possible in the US after the move of the industry to the West Coast. And even now, as respected figures such as Mike Nichols and Dustin Hoffman move easily from Broadway to Hollywood, no figure comparable to Olivier has ever emerged in the US, whose national theatre, located in Washington DC rather than in New York City, would hardly serve in any case as a cultural platform comparable to its British version. In the UK, by way of contrast, the actor/manager tradition is alive and well in the career of Kenneth Branagh, formerly of the Royal Shakespeare Company, who in 1986 founded the Renaissance Theatre Company, devoted particularly, but not exclusively, to Shakespearean production. Branagh has also followed Olivier in extending the actor/manager model to film production, especially in a series of noteworthy Shakespeare adaptations beginning with *Henry V* (1989). Like Olivier, Branagh has established and maintained a career in popular filmmaking as well; at the time of writing, post-production work on Branagh's mounting of the Tom Clancy novel *Jack Ryan* is just being completed, and it will not be his first foray into action cinema (Branagh will play the megalomaniacal villain, once again following in Olivier's footsteps). Contemporary Hollywood can boast of no figure comparable to Branagh, who exemplifies the intersection between theatrical and cinematic performance/production encouraged by the peculiar traditions and culture of the UK.

Theatre and film are performance media invested in the design and production (in the largest sense of that term) of live action, even if this action is transformed by photography into a different form of artistic material. Because of the elemental homology of the two arts, actors and other creative workers (such as directors and art designers) can easily work in both. Moreover, techniques and traditions, such as acting styles, could usually be readily shared. And the two institutions were not true competitors in the marketplace, though both were angling for their share of the entertainment dollar. Addressing different, but overlapping clienteles, the British national theatre and cinema were disposed toward a symbiosis that made for constant, mutually profitable exchange, in part because film, utilizing photography and thus "capturing" performance (which could then be infinitely duplicated) could overcome the necessary existential and

logistical difficulties of readily nationalizing its offerings and reaching the proverbial mass public. A filmed drama could be everywhere at once, and its "performances" were not limited in time, but always capable of being revived. Screen versioning provided a stage production with a reach and influence unthinkable for the theatre, whose clientele was geographically limited and whose patrons, because of the continuing costs of live production, were customarily relatively well-off urbanites who could afford ticket prices that were much higher than the commercial cinema, benefiting from huge economies of scale, could afford to charge.

From its beginnings, British (and occasionally American) filmmakers could and did extend the reach of the national theatre, in the process profiting notably by drawing on its considerable cultural capital. With its business model dependent on frequently changing programs and hence a constant flow of product to be exhibited, the commercial film industry in the early studio period had a constant need for new material that was suitable for feature film production. Plays, of course, present few of the problems involved in adapting literary fiction for the screen, and, already produced, come with a vision for their effective mounting that is readily available should the filmmakers desire to make use of it, as often happens. Of proven popularity, hit shows from the world's capital of theatrical production have thus been routinely adapted for the screen in something resembling (and often derived from) their stage form, a phenomenon that accelerated for obvious reasons with the coming of sound cinema at the close of the 1920s. Drama accorded both popular and critical acclaim has provided an attractive sector of filmmaking and exhibition whose vitality shows no signs of diminishing, despite significant changes in both Hollywood and Broadway. In fact, it has been unusual since the 1930s for a successful West End play not to be adapted as a film; and this same principle has held true for National Theatre productions with broad appeal such as Alan Bennett's *The Madness of George III* (which premiered at the Lyttelton Theatre in 1991, directed by Nicholas Hytner). With television providing yet another exhibition outlet for full-length features since the postwar era, the screen versioning of plays has only become even more common.

Many years ago, film theorist André Bazin observed that the fully developed modern cinema will "give back to the theater unstintingly what it took from her," a generosity dependent on the principle that "there are no plays that cannot be brought to the screen, whatever their style, provided one can visualize a reconversion of stage space in accordance with the data."[11] It is this reconversion of stage space that is always at the center of the cinematic adaptation of theatrical properties, and it makes possible a

truly artistic approach that avoids the numerous pitfalls of "canned theatre." If the film business can extend the reach of the national theatre, offering playwrights a mass audience for their work that is theoretically unlimited in time and space, then the film medium possesses the ability to deepen the sense in which dramatic presentation depends on the interaction of characters with a world we can recognize fully as our own. Conceived for a different audience, making use of resources unavailable to the playwright or stage producer, and limited by institutions or traditions that have no purchase on the theatre, screen adaptations of plays make a very strong case for consideration on their own merits and not as necessarily inferior versions of the honored properties on which they are based.

Modern British drama has developed as a literary and performance tradition of great authors (and of these there are not many) rather than genres or cycles, and that is hardly surprising, given its origins and the dominating presence of Bernard Shaw. The thirteen essays that constitute this volume address the work of all the major figures who have attained a significant presence on film since the beginning of the sound era, but some of these (such as Shaw himself, Rattigan, and Coward) are better known than others (Russell, Hare, and Jellicoe). Each chapter centers on what editors and authors decided was the most representative or otherwise significant play/film, with a view toward making it possible for this book to serve as the basis for a semester's examination of the subject.

Notes

1. Christopher Innes, *Modern British Drama in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2002): 1.
2. Innes, *Modern British Drama*: 1.
3. George Bernard Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891; New York: Brentano's, 1917): 8.
4. Innes, *Modern British Drama*: 5.
5. Innes, *Modern British Drama*: 1.
6. See Brooks Atkinson, *Broadway* (New York: Limelight, 1985), for an interesting discussion of these developments.
7. For a useful history of British theatrical censorship, see Anthony Aldgate and James C. Robertson, *Censorship in Theatre and Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2005). Aldgate examines the key role played by Trevelyan, and the multifarious connections between a "modernizing" stage and screen, in his *Censorship and the Permissive Society* (Oxford University Press, 1995).
8. Innes, *Modern British Drama*: 1.
9. Loren Kruger, *The National Stage: Theater and Cultural Legitimation in England, France, and America* (University of Chicago Press, 1992): 84. For France's *Théâtre*