

Introduction: Ibsen and after

The future is with naturalism. The formula will be found; it will be proved that there is more poetry in the little apartment of a bourgeois than in all the empty, worm-eaten palaces of history; in the end we will see that everything meets in the real. – Émile Zola¹

Naturalism in the Theatre, from which this famous quotation is taken, originally appeared in 1881 as the first of a two-volume collection of Zola's theatre reviews.² Like Shaw, writing for the *Saturday Review* in the 1890s, Zola, by his negative notices of the standard stage fare of his time, was clearing a space for his own avant-garde practice. Or rather, he cast himself as a voice crying in the wilderness, preparing the way for the messiah of naturalism to come. The book opens with a spectacle of expectation constantly disappointed:

Each winter at the beginning of the theatre season, I fall prey to the same thoughts. A hope springs up in me, and I tell myself that before the first warmth of summer empties the playhouses, a dramatist of genius will have been discovered. [. . .] I picture this creator scorning the tricks of the clever hack, smashing the imposed patterns, remaking the stage until it is continuous with the auditorium, giving a shiver of life to the painted trees, letting in through the backcloth the great, free air of reality. Unfortunately, this dream I have every October has not yet been fulfilled, and it is not likely to be for some time. I wait in vain.³

Of course, unknown to Zola, the wait was over; the dramatist of genius had already arrived, but in Scandinavia, not in France – 1881 was the year of the publication of *Ghosts*. Two years before, *A Doll's House* had been produced.

The target of Zola's attack in *Naturalism in the Theatre* was the still canonised neoclassical drama and the romantic forms of Victor Hugo and Alfred de Musset that had partially replaced it in the French theatre: hence the scornful reference to 'the empty, worm-eaten palaces of history'. The new drama of naturalism was to be contemporary, but it was also to be

staged in the ordinary living space of the bourgeois. There was nothing revolutionary in itself about the idea of a domestic middle-class drama; it had been theorised long before by Diderot in the eighteenth century. The stage means necessary for naturalism were already available. The box set constructing a solid illusionist interior, as an alternative to the traditional painted backcloth and side wings, had been introduced in the London theatre in the 1830s, making possible the concept of the 'fourth wall', another notion anticipated by Diderot.⁴ Even in the highly stylised French theatre, real items of furniture had begun to appear by the 1850s.⁵ What is radical in Zola's programme for a naturalist drama of the interior is its claims to significance and aesthetic value. The familiar space of ordinary middle-class life, 'the little apartment of bourgeois', is to be valued with the dignity and meaning accorded in the past only to tragedy. 'Poetry is everywhere', Zola claims, 'in everything, even more in the present and the real than in the past and the abstract.'⁶

In this drama of middle-class life, the setting itself is of resonant significance, not merely a backdrop to the action as in the traditional well-made play. 'In high naturalism', as Raymond Williams puts it, 'the lives of the characters have soaked into their environment. [...] The relations between men and things are at a deep level interactive, because what is there physically, as a space of a means for living, is a whole shaped and shaping social history.'⁷ *A Doll's House* carries in its very title the issue of how the marital home is to be viewed and evaluated. Ibsen's revenants in *Ghosts* walk not on the battlements of a castle, where you might expect them, but in Mrs Alving's well-appointed conservatory. The attic in *The Wild Duck* and the inner room in *Hedda Gabler* bespeak the psychological condition of those who occupy them. The naturalistic home on the stage, as conceived by Zola and realised by Ibsen, figures both the outer world that surrounds it and the interiority of the private lives it houses. Insofar as the stage is made 'continuous with the auditorium', it implies a mirroring identity between the experience of the characters represented and that of the contemporary audience that watches them, the audience that stands in for a wider society beyond. At the same time, the intimacy to which the removed fourth wall gives access takes us into the recesses of hearts and minds.

Of all this *Miss Julie* (1888) is paradigmatic, and Strindberg, then at the height of his zeal for naturalism, is its most articulate exponent in the preface to the play.⁸ The single set, the below-stairs kitchen where the servants Jean and Kristin live and work and to which Miss Julie descends, provides a topography for the play's class dynamics. Strindberg reveals a

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significant source for his scenic concept: ‘As for the scenery, I have borrowed the asymmetry and cropped framing of impressionist painting, and believe that I have thereby succeeded in strengthening the illusion.’⁹ As the impressionists with their cut-off perspectives challenged conventional principles of composition, Strindberg gives a more authentic sense of lived space by its fragmentation. A glimpse of Jean’s arm as he changes in his bedroom next door, the count’s boots that wait so menacingly for his valet’s attention, vividly realise the offstage spaces and all that they signify. Julie and Jean as mistress and man are created as ‘characters’ in the very special sense Strindberg gives to that term in the preface. He scornfully dismisses theatrical ‘characters’, the one-note stereotypes of traditional dramaturgy. Instead, he says, ‘My souls (characters) are conglomerates of past and present stages of culture, bits out of books and newspapers, scraps of humanity, torn shreds of once fine clothing now turned to rags, exactly as the human soul is patched together.’¹⁰ This is a characteristic statement in its naturalist’s irony at the idea of the God-given disembodied soul, its challenge to the Romantic cult of the unique individual. Such stage figures are not only products but patchwork quilts of their environment.

The dramaturgical revolution that put the middle-class home and the occupants’ inner lives at the centre of drama reflected the social reality of the time, as the historian Michelle Perrot makes clear:

The nineteenth century was the golden age of private life, a time when the vocabulary and reality of private life took shape. Privacy as an idea was elaborated with great sophistication. Civil society, private life, intimate relations, and the life of the individual, though conceptualised as concentric circles, actually overlapped.¹¹

This development is variously explained and dated. Catherine Hall, for example, looking at the case of England, sees the rise of the domestic ideal of the family as a feature of the early nineteenth century resulting from the growth of Evangelicalism, with its emphasis on the godly life based on individual conviction, at the same time as the development of separate spheres of public and private life for men and women, with middle-class men working exclusively in marketplace and factory, while women were confined to managing the household.¹² She points to the fact that the British census of 1851 introduced the category of ‘housewife’ for the first time and in the introduction to its report stated: ‘The possession of an entire house is strongly desired by every Englishman; for it throws a sharp well-defined circle round his family and hearth – the shrine of his sorrows, joys and meditations.’¹³ Writing just a few years later, the American

preacher Henry Ward Beecher elaborated on that viewpoint: ‘A house is the shape which a man’s thoughts take when he imagines how he should like to live. Its interior is the measure of his social and domestic nature; its exterior, of his esthetic and artistic nature. It interprets, in material form, his ideas of home, of friendship, and of comfort.’¹⁴

In ‘Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century’, Walter Benjamin declared that ‘under Louis Philippe, the private citizen makes his entrance on the stage of history’. Benjamin went on to evoke the concept of the ‘interior’ that resulted:

For the private individual, the place of dwelling is for the first time opposed to the place of work. The former constitutes itself as the interior. Its complement is the office. The private individual, who in the office has to deal with reality, needs the domestic interior to sustain him in his illusions. [...] From this arise the phantasmagorias of the interior – which, for the private man, represents the universe.¹⁵

Benjamin argued that this illusory bourgeois privacy was a specific historic phenomenon of the nineteenth century, in which the soft furnishings of the interior with its plethora of collected objects represented an attempted resistance to the alienation of the modern city: ‘Against the armature of glass and iron, upholstery offers resistance with its textiles.’ Charles Rice, who quotes this aphorism of Benjamin, follows him also in seeing the ‘short historical life of the bourgeois domestic interior’ as coming to an end with the modernism of the early twentieth century.¹⁶

Late nineteenth-century naturalism offered a critical representation of that bourgeois domestic interior, and for most theatre historians, it had an equally short life. As impressionism in the visual arts was rapidly succeeded by postimpressionism, then by Cubism and surrealism, so in drama naturalism was overtaken by expressionism, epic theatre and the theatre of the absurd. This view was fostered by theatre practitioners themselves, who inveighed against the naturalistic style as yesterday’s fashion. ‘We have endured too much from the banality of surfaces’, declared Eugene O’Neill in 1924, in celebration of *The Ghost Sonata*, one of what he called Strindberg’s ‘behind-life’ plays.¹⁷ Brecht relentlessly attacked the bourgeois theatre of illusionism as the antithesis of his forms of alienated political engagement. In *Our Town*, Thornton Wilder lightly mocks the audience who expect a conventional set when he has his Stage Manager remark as two trellises are pushed out from the proscenium pillars: ‘There’s some scenery for those who think they have to have scenery.’¹⁸ Antonin Artaud in his theory and practice represented the most vehement opponent of

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representational drama and as such was to become the standard-bearer for much postwar European avant-garde theatre. It is easy to see why it should have been so. The realistically rendered family interior in the twentieth century was to become the standard model not only for conventional theatre but also for most film and television drama. Its *reductio ad absurdum* is reality television, where the camera does not just take the audience through one 'fourth wall' but follows its victims into all the rooms in the house.

A great deal of work has been devoted to theatrical space in the last thirty years in the context of the new discipline of performance studies. Most of this has taken the form of semiotic theory that looks at the whole phenomenon of theatre rather than any one particular period. Anne Ubersfeld offered nothing less than a comprehensive methodology for 'reading theatre'.¹⁹ Gay McAuley provided a taxonomy of different stage spaces, including the auditoria where performances take place, as well as discriminating between the 'presentational space' involving the arrangement of the set, actors' positioning, entrances and exits and the 'fictional space' of places represented on- and offstage.²⁰ Within such overarching treatments of the subject of theatre space, there could be little room for something as restricted as the realistic representation of domestic spaces in modern drama. Indeed, in David Wiles's history of Western performance space, the emphasis is not primarily on conventional mimetic theatre at all, but on alternative staging venues.²¹

The dominance of poststructuralism and postmodernism in academic scholarship has also influenced the way the story of modern drama is told. So, for instance, Una Chaudhuri in *Staging Place* links her study of modern drama to a 'postmodern critical geography' that draws upon the work of Edward Soja, Michel Foucault and Henri Lefèbvre.²² It is not surprising, therefore, that her book, after an initial analysis of the realistic drama of Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov, should be largely concerned with anti-illusionist avant-garde theatre. She speaks of a 'hidden discourse of home and belonging that runs through modern drama from the nineteenth century onward'.²³ I would argue, in fact, that the representation of home in modern drama is by no means hidden; it is everywhere apparent, just overlooked and unexamined by theatre historians whose interests are elsewhere. It is the aim of this book to consider the persistent afterlife of the naturalistic home on the stage through the twentieth century. It is not only that the plays of Ibsen, Chekhov and Strindberg themselves have gone on being revived as part of the modern repertoire; the image of the family interior has continued to be adapted, reconceived or parodied right

through into the contemporary period. What I want to investigate is why and how the form has proved so flexible, adaptable and tenacious.

Class, community, nation

Bert O. States identifies the characteristic mode of naturalist drama as metonymy: ‘Metonymy and synecdoche, as we find them in the realistic style, are devices for reducing states, or qualities or attributes, or whole entities, like societies, to visible things in which they somehow inhere.’²⁴ The representative standing of the visible things the audience watches depends on them being individually specific and yet completely familiar. The Helmers’ apartment expresses their own unique situation but is immediately recognisable as the type of any other middle-class professional home. It is designed to be so recognisable by virtue of its contemporaneity and its implied kinship with the comparable homes of its original audiences. That model of middle-class naturalism alters when the status of the home represented is changed and when the audience is distanced in class or social background from the characters.

It is different already in Chekhov’s country houses, with their extended families including a wider class span from servants to landowners. The actions of the plays take place in the present, but one that is situated within a historical continuum. States observes that in Chekhov, furniture is ‘visible history’.²⁵ *The Cherry Orchard* (1904) as a study in shifting patterns of ownership of the house and estate, looking before and after its own moment of modernisation, becomes a state of the nation play unlike the state of society plays of Ibsen or Strindberg. The bourgeois naturalist home, though individually realised, was representative in its ordinariness. In *Heartbreak House* (written in 1916–17, published in 1919), Shaw’s very un-Chekhovian experiment in the style of Chekhov, we are confronted with an extraordinary living space, a house shaped like a ship. This necessarily moves the mode towards allegory and, in the context of the war crisis in which it was written, we are invited to see the houseful of cultured middle-class characters as embarked on a ship of state perilously out of control.

In the naturalistic drama, audiences are drawn into the observation of people more or less like themselves. This is not the case with Gorky’s down-and-outs in the basement doss house of *The Lower Depths* (1902), nor yet with the peasants of Lorca’s rural trilogy. At first glance, Lorca’s work is stylistically remote from naturalism. *Blood Wedding* (1933) uses an elaborate colour coding for each of its scenes and personified figures of the

Moon and Death in its climactic third act. Its dramatic high points are expressed in verse arias and duets. However, this poetic dramaturgy is naturalised by its rural setting. Drama is built up from the traditional folk forms of lullabies and wedding songs, marriage rituals and wakes. The nature imagery of a heightened lyrical style is rendered plausible by the proximity of the natural world. In Lorca's most austere last play, *The House of Bernarda Alba* (1936), written almost all in prose, we are forced to endure the stifling clausturation of the daughters within the house but are therefore all the more aware of the irrepressible powers of animal vitality that Bernarda seeks vainly to exclude. The play's subtitle, 'A Drama about Women in the Villages of Spain', suggests the quasi-ethnographic status of this study of the rural domestic interior.

Synge was evidently one of Lorca's models; the grieving Mother in *Blood Wedding* mourns in all but the same words as Maurya in *Riders to the Sea* (1904). For Synge, as for Lorca, the life of a peasant community remote from urban culture justified a highly wrought poetic speech and a dramatic action shaped by the traditions of folklore. In Synge's case, however, the context of a decolonising national culture complicated the plays' reception. The rural Irish country cottage, in which most of his plays were set, was an icon in the nationalist imaginary, the unspoiled antithesis of the Anglicised and modernised life of the city. As such, it stood as an ideal image of the nation, and Synge's plays were suspiciously scrutinised for un-Irish activities. Ibsen's Nora in *A Doll's House* shocked its original audiences by walking out on her sacred duties to husband and children. Synge's Nora, unhappily married to a pathologically jealous older man in *The Shadow of the Glen* (1903), scandalised its critics by leaving the marital cottage in the company of a tramp. Such an action was not only immoral; it disgraced the name of Irish women.²⁶

Staged domestic spaces as images of the national life have had a remarkably prolonged life in Irish theatre for a century after Synge. The tenement dwellings of Sean O'Casey's Dublin plays (1923–26), in their very proximity to the urban violence of rebellion and civil war, challenged the rhetoric that animated those conflicts. Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* (1958) had a Republican safe house cum brothel as an ironic metaphor for postrevolutionary Ireland. Brian Friel's trademark setting of Ballybeg, literally 'small town', has been a prism for seeing the condition of the country, whether in the then-contemporary present of *Philadelphia Here I Come!* (1964) or in the retrospective memory play *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990). Martin McDonagh's Leenane in the *Leenane Trilogy* (1996–97) is a savagely satiric version of the Connemara village imagined as Irish idyll.

The ultimate metadramatic parody of this form comes in Enda Walsh's *The Walworth Farce* (2006), in which a crazed father, locked up in a London flat, forces his two sons daily to enact a play of Irish exile. By this point in time, the Irish domestic space as an image of the nation has taken on its own intertextual life, reflecting more its theatrical predecessors than any social actuality. But what made this tradition possible is the social and/or geographical gap between the middle-class urban audiences who watch these plays, whether in Dublin or London, and the stage spaces of their peasant or proletarian characters.

Radical realism

Benjamin maintains that the cherished bourgeois home of the nineteenth century is an attempt to cordon off private space from the anonymising modern city beyond. As such, according to Henri Lefebvre, it was bound to failure because such divisions of private and public spheres are ultimately illusory:

Visible boundaries, such as walls or enclosures in general, give rise [. . .] to an appearance of separation between spaces where in fact what exists is an ambiguous continuity. The space of a room, bedroom, house or garden may be cut off in a sense from social space by barriers and walls, by all the signs of private property, yet still remain fundamentally part of that space.²⁷

A number of plays in the mid-twentieth century found ways of rendering that 'ambiguous continuity'. With the stage design of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), it proved possible to represent simultaneously the constricted living quarters of the Kowalskis' one-bedroom flat and the New Orleans streetscape outside. What is more, Williams borrowed techniques from expressionism to convey inner psychological states within the framework of domestic realism. The 'station drama' had been the characteristic form of expressionism, tracing the emotional trajectory of the individual travelling through often nightmarish, distorted scenes of urban life, as in Georg Kaiser's *From Morning to Midnight* (1917). In *Streetcar*, such projections of Blanche's disturbed state are dramatised within the realistically rendered living space. This is, of course, the outstanding characteristic of *Death of a Salesman* (1949) also, which Miller first thought of calling *The Inside of His Head*.²⁸ This is a double drama of the interior, of the house and of the mind – the fluid space of the home, which dissolves into Willy's flashback scenarios, backed by the high-rise apartment blocks of the city looming beyond.

Radical realism

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The realist dramatists of this mid-century period were fighting the battles of naturalism all over again. In the famous debate with Kenneth Tynan, Miller felt obliged to rebut the charge that you could not have a tragedy centred on a mere salesman like Willy Loman. He later responded sarcastically to the play's critics:

[T]he academy's charge that Willy lacked the 'stature' for the tragic hero seemed incredible to me. I had not understood that these matters are measured by Greco-Elizabethan paragraphs which hold no mention of insurance payments, front porches, refrigerator fan belts, steering knuckles, Chevrolets, and visions seen not through the portals of Delphi but in the blue flame of the hot-water heater.²⁹

We are back with Zola's declaration that 'there is more poetry in the little apartment of a bourgeois than in all the empty, worm-eaten palaces of history'. Once again, the democratising spirit of the realist drama protests against the hegemony of canonised forms of the past, claiming truth, depth and dignity for the ordinariness of modern private life.

The 1950s saw a series of plays that used naturalistic domestic drama as one form of the 'theatre of revolt'.³⁰ John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956) is always cited as a landmark in British postwar theatre. Its setting in an attic bedsit at the top of a Victorian house in a Midland town inaugurated the style of 'kitchen sink' realism. Osborne was reacting against the formulaic theatre of playwrights such as Somerset Maugham, then hugely popular. *Look Back in Anger*, Michael Billington says, 'was a riposte to the mechanical glibness of the Maugham school but also to the technical artifice of the post-war verse drama of Christopher Fry and Ronald Duncan'.³¹ Even more striking was the case of Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (1958). The nineteen-year-old author supposedly wrote the play after seeing Terence Rattigan's *Variations on a Theme* in Manchester.

To her, the polite drawing-room comedy, which was still at this time the staple diet available to the theatre-goer, was unrealistic – it 'depicts safe, sheltered, cultured lives in charming surroundings, not life as the majority of ordinary people knew it'.³²

The result was the drama of the adolescent daughter of a 'semi-whore' mother, pregnant after a fleeting encounter with a black sailor, being cared for in a 'comfortless flat in Manchester' by a gay art student.³³

Still more striking was another first play by a young woman playwright, Lorraine Hansbury's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). Most naturalistic domestic dramas from *A Doll's House* on feature more or less dysfunctional families. By contrast, Hansbury's Younger family, for all the stresses and friction

between them, with mother, son, daughter, daughter-in-law and grandson all sharing the one two-bedroom apartment, are in the end a model of love and solidarity. Their only problems come from the fact that they are poor working-class African Americans living on the south side of Chicago. The plot turns on how the \$10,000 insurance money received on the death of the father will be spent, whether on the college fees of Beneatha, the daughter who wants to be a doctor, or on the partnership in a liquor store that is the long-cherished dream of the son Walter. In the event, the mother Lena puts the down payment on a house in a white Chicago suburb, a move the family eventually decide to make in spite of the active discouragement of other residents and the possibility of fire-bombing. The play is completely conventional in its realistic representation of the home and the family, radical only in its claim by an African American underclass to the nineteenth-century bourgeois dignity of private space.

Reluctant returns to the home

In postwar Britain and America, it was possible to write challenging new plays in the realist mode. In France, the absurdists aggressively attacked the principle of representation in general and the bourgeois home in particular. In *Eleutheria* (written in 1947), Beckett's first standard-issue avant-garde play, the *comme il faut* home of the Krap family literally slides off the side of the stage as, from act to act, the space comes to be wholly occupied by the sordid apartment of their refusenik son Victor. In *The Bald Prima Donna* (1950), Ionesco reduces middle-class family life to the learned by rote exchanges of a language primer. But the iconic home on the stage remained a powerful part of the theatrical vocabulary of this sort of theatre. *Endgame* (1957), with its enclosed room in which Hamm sits with his aged parents in bins while the pseudo-son/servant Clov waits in his kitchen to be called, is a parody of the traditional residence of the nuclear family. Pinter in *The Homecoming* (1965) puts upon the stage the completely realistic ground floor of a North London house; it is only the dialogue and actions of its occupants that are bizarre. Pinter's destabilising version of realist representation was caught in John Bury's design for the premiere of *Old Times* (1971). The set beautifully reproduced the modernised farmhouse in which Deeley and Kate live, down to the discreet central heating pipes running along the walls. Its only oddity was that the room was tilted at a slight angle to the proscenium arch.

A surprising number of adventurously experimental modern playwrights have returned more or less reluctantly to the family home on the stage. The