

Introduction

Jen Harvie and Dan Rebellato

In 2021, as work on this book neared completion, the global highest-grossing movie of the year was *Spider-Man: No Way Home*. Although very much a product of American popular culture – based on the 1960s Marvel comics, produced by Columbia Pictures and Marvel Studios, and directed by American Jon Watts – the film’s cast shows the significant impact of British theatre. Spider-Man/Peter Parker is played by Tom Holland, who got his first break in the British stage musical *Billy Elliot*. Spider-Man gets disastrous assistance from Dr Strange, played by Benedict Cumberbatch who first came to public notice with acclaimed performances at London’s Almeida, Royal Court, and National Theatres. Benedict Wong, as Dr Strange’s mentor, had his first job in a BBC radio play by British Chinese playwright Kevin Wong. One of Spider-Man’s associates is played by Alfred Molina, who has worked in British theatre throughout his career. American actor Tony Revolori appears in the film as Eugene ‘Flash’ Thompson; he got his breakthrough in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* alongside National Theatre (NT) and Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) alumnus Ralph Fiennes. Andrew Garfield plays an alternative Spider-Man in the movie; his first successes were at Manchester’s Royal Exchange Theatre. American actress Marisa Tomei, as Peter Parker’s aunt, burnished her career with a 2008 Broadway run in British playwright Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls*.

Spider-Man: No Way Home was nominated for Best Visual Effects at the 94th Academy Awards. Other nominees that year included, for Best Actress, Norwich-born Olivia Colman who trained at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School; for Best Supporting Actor, Belfast-born Ciarán Hinds, whose professional acting career began at the Glasgow Citizens’ Theatre; and, for Best Supporting Actress, British theatre royalty Dame Judi Dench. Sir Kenneth Branagh’s *Belfast* won Best Original Screenplay; like Hinds, Branagh comes from Belfast and trained at London’s Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA). Best Live Action Short Film was *The*

Long Goodbye by London-based director Aniel Karia and British-Pakistani multiple award-winning actor and rapper Riz Ahmed. Ahmed started acting on stage at school and, while at Oxford University, worked on productions of shows including *The Colour of Justice*, a verbatim play edited by Richard Norton-Taylor and first produced at London's Tricycle Theatre in 1999.¹

Pointing out these connections between *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, other 2022 Oscar nominees, and the British theatre is not to suggest these people could never have found another route to movie stardom. But it does demonstrate the important role of British theatre – in all its regions, nations, and communities² – in the global ecology of cultural production. Apart from numerous globally-acclaimed actors, British theatre has produced directors of Oscar-winning movies (such as Andrea Arnold, Danny Boyle, and Sam Mendes), acclaimed screenwriters (including Alice Birch, Michaela Coel, Martin McDonagh, Peter Morgan, and Phoebe Waller-Bridge), and internationally-celebrated designers (from working at London's Bush and National Theatres, Es Devlin has gone on to design sets for Beyoncé, U2, and Kanye West; British stage lighting designer Bruno Poet has lit concerts for Sigur Rós, Björk, and Billie Eilish).

These successes are cause for celebration in themselves, but they are also, in a sense, collateral benefits of British theatre's extraordinary strength; the amazing fertility of British theatre feeds performing arts training, experience, expertise, and excellence well beyond its own stages. Although this book covers only seventy-five years of British theatre, those are perhaps seventy-five of the most productive years in Britain's millennium-long history of theatre making. Indeed, until the UK's Covid lockdown that started in March 2020, the post-war years were a near-unbroken story of theatrical flourishing. It is tempting – and it has tempted some – to ascribe this success to 'Britain's native genius for theatre.'³ It is certainly true that creativity has flourished consistently in British theatre and that this creativity has often been globally recognised. But focusing on the art to the exclusion of the contexts in which it appears – and which produce it – tells only half the story. This book aims to tell the story of these crucial contexts of production.

British Theatre Historiography

To set the scene, we step back first to a more conventional narrative of post-war British theatre which tends to focus on a series of key events that quickly generated critical and scholarly attention and substantial

Introduction

3

consensus. This story goes something like this. The rise of the ‘angry young men’, signalled by the 1956 Royal Court premiere of John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*, was quickly acclaimed as a turning point in British theatre for its youthfulness, anti-establishment attitudes, and rejection of so many West End plays’ privileged milieu.⁴ The advent of the fringe a decade later was promptly hailed as a politically more revolutionary theatre, drawing on countercultural ideas, confronting audiences, and rejecting conventional theatre forms and spaces;⁵ several important books noted how the fringe’s radical politics infiltrated the major subsidised theatres in the 1970s in the form of ‘state of the nation’ plays, mixing agitprop and naturalism, history play and domestic drama.⁶ The dominance of generally male, socialist, and white writers was challenged by theatre companies and writers focused on race, gender, and sexuality in the late 1970s and 1980s.⁷ In the mid-1990s, what came to be known as ‘In Yer Face’ theatre rejected explicit politics, represented violence and sexuality with a new aggression, and brutally broke apart conventional play structures.⁸ In the 2000s, British drama fragmented into multiple tendencies, including a resurgent documentary drama in verbatim theatre,⁹ formally experimental play structures,¹⁰ immersive theatre,¹¹ and more prominent Black and Global Majority plays, actors, and stories on British stages.¹² In the third decade of the twenty-first century, changes forced on theatre by the Covid pandemic accelerated thinking about theatre’s digital possibilities and creative resilience.¹³

These moments dominate narratives of post-war British theatre. The first books on each era tend to fix the interpretation of events, carrying over into larger overviews of the period, which have distinctive emphases and interpretations, but significantly reproduce many of the same historical touchstones.¹⁴ This is not to say that this dominant history is entirely unreliable. If large numbers of people are inspired by particular theatrical moments, that is an important fact of theatrical history; the moments are significant. However, the precise meaning and value of these moments has been challenged by some theatre historians, drawing out and correcting some of the theatre’s institutional exclusions and biases. For instance, the structures of British theatre tend to favour London over the regions, ‘artistic’ over popular theatre, theatre for adults over theatre for children and young people, and professional over amateur. Important corrective critical work has been done to highlight areas of theatre practice that have sometimes escaped scholarly attention,¹⁵ but there remains work to do.

Even more fundamentally, the dominant history focuses intently on artistic innovations. It typically describes putative moments of renewal in

terms of new things happening on stage: new subject matter, types of character, structures, forms, design ideas, storytelling techniques, and acting styles. It might seem self-evident that a history of theatre would focus on what happens on stage, but as French philosopher Jacques Rancière reminds us, what appears self-evident may be the result of a set of discursive and material forces – what he calls a ‘distribution of the sensible’.¹⁶

Rather than focusing on plays and performances, great actors and directors, themes and styles – crudely speaking, theatre’s contents – this volume examines changes in the discursive structures of British theatre, and, especially, changes in its material structures – its contexts. Those material structures include: how work in theatre is organised and paid for, enabled and constrained; the historical events, issues, and structures theatre has responded to and intervened in; how its resources – and lack of them – have shaped the theatrical landscape. The discursive structures include: the things that *are* said, that can and cannot be said about theatre at any one time; the myths that arise around it; the intellectual debates in which theatre is produced and received. These discursive structures – the dominant narratives and myths about British theatre – are themselves enabled by such material structures as policy documents and literary, critical, and journalistic publications. Overall, these discursive and material features enable theatre to play a part in ‘civil society’, in the sense advocated by Antonio Gramsci¹⁷ – as a site where artists and audiences, politicians and activists, patrons and critics contest the meaning and value of the theatre and the world around it.

Material Theatre

Arguably at least as important as any theatrical premiere – and therefore at least as important in the history of British theatre and its success – is the immediate post-war transformation in Britain’s theatrical economy that laid the foundation for so much that followed. In the century preceding the Second World War,¹⁸ British theatre was almost exclusively commercial, relying largely on private investment, paid back through box office income. The great achievement of that mode of theatrical production was to build British theatre’s commercial infrastructure: much of what is now the West End was built in the 1870s and 1880s, and the first half of the twentieth century saw the prodigious expansion of regional repertory theatre on a similar basis. This mode of production’s dominance was challenged by the founding of the Arts Council in the mid-1940s, funded

Introduction

5

from central taxation and designed to broaden theatrical activities beyond the relatively narrow generic limits of the commercial theatre.

There had previously been small pockets of state support for the arts (through the BBC licence fee and certain tax exemptions) but arts subsidy on this scale – with a significant expansion in the 1960s – made possible whole new areas of theatre practice. A 2016 report on theatre funded by Arts Council England (ACE) observed, ‘public funding often provides an opportunity for the creation of new and/or riskier work that would not happen otherwise’.¹⁹ For eminent British theatre critic Lyn Gardner, the belief ‘that subsidy is a non-negotiable necessity for UK theatre and its success, and the well-being of its artists, is a hill I am willing to die on’.²⁰

Nevertheless, because the theatre has huge audiences, both domestic and visiting, box office revenue remains the largest source of income in British theatre. This is materially shaped by and shapes theatre practice. In 2019, around 15 million people attended one of London’s theatres.²¹ In 2014, total UK theatre attendance was over 33 million: the 274 venues that make up the Society of London Theatre (SOLT) and UK Theatre presented almost 60,000 performances of over 5,000 separate shows, bringing in over £1.03 billion at the box office.²² In 2018, SOLT and UK Theatre ticket revenue was £1.28 billion.²³ According to ACE’s 2016 report, ‘86% of finance “*at work in the theatre industry*” stems from the private sector’.²⁴

After the post-war advent of the Arts Council of Great Britain, subsidised theatre in various forms quickly rivalled commercial theatre for critical reputation and international attention. There are sometimes tensions between the subsidised and commercial sectors, though frequently they support each other; successful work that begins in subsidised theatre often makes its way to the West End (e.g. *Les Misérables* [RSC, 1983], *Shopping and Fucking* [Royal Court/Out of Joint, 1996], and *War Horse* [NT, 2007]), supplying material to the commercial sector which returns profits to the show’s subsidised originator. Equally, most actors, directors, writers, and designers move between these sectors across their careers. The barriers between the sectors are also permeable, since no theatre in Britain is entirely subsidised; all theatres rely to a greater or lesser extent on box office and other commercial income for their survival. Only 16 per cent of the National Theatre’s income in 2018–19, for example, came from its ACE Revenue Grant, while around 54 per cent came from box office income (from its London home, West End transfers, and national and international touring).²⁵

Another important ‘material force’ in British theatre is its built infrastructure. One fringe directory lists well over 300 fringe theatre venues in

London alone.²⁶ Nationally, the Theatres Trust charity estimates there are 1,100 active theatres in 2022;²⁷ for comparison, this is less than 1 per cent fewer than the number of cinemas in the UK (1,110).²⁸ Despite the Theatre Trust adding ten new venues to its Theatres at Risk Register in 2022 – ‘far more than in any recent years’ because of the Covid pandemic²⁹ – new theatres simultaneously emerge. Since the 2010s, new venues include, in London, the Bridge Theatre, the Park Theatre, and Sadler’s Wells East, scheduled to open in 2023, and beyond the metropolis, the Reading Rep and the Shakespeare North Playhouse near Liverpool. In July 2022, commercial producer Nica Burns announced plans for the first new West End theatre to be built in fifty years.³⁰

Beyond venues, Britain’s theatre infrastructure includes opportunities for training: the Federation of Drama Schools has nineteen partner schools, including RADA, the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, and the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama;³¹ the university admissions portal UCAS lists 139 providers of BA programmes in Drama for admission in 2022.³² The theatre has embraced some technological advances, for example with NT Live which was launched in 2009 to stream live theatre to cinemas across the world. By 2013–14, it was screening eight performances in thirty-five countries ‘to an audience of 1.49 million, about 40% of whom were outside the UK’.³³ Within two months of the launch of National Theatre at Home in the first Covid lockdown in the UK in 2020, the online screenings it offered had been viewed more than 10 million times.³⁴

These material forces – the mixed economy, infrastructural landscape, training, and technological framework – contribute to a distinctive mode of theatrical production in Britain. That state subsidy is given – in theory at least – at ‘arm’s length’ from government mitigates direct state control over the theatre and has encouraged sharp social criticism on British stages. The requirement of *all* theatres to generate box office income is perhaps reflected in a mixture of art-theatre experimentalism and narrative storytelling, which is a mode of British theatre that unites shows as otherwise contrasting as *Oh, What a Lovely War!*, *Blasted*, and *Matilda the Musical*. What all the chapters in this book share is a concern for tracing the material and discursive developments that have made British theatre not only possible but expansive, generative, and powerful.

Organisation of the Book

This *Companion* is divided into four sections, each exploring a different aspect of British theatre’s artistic, institutional, economic, and civic

Introduction

7

organisation. Part I focuses on three key types of theatre worker – playwrights, directors, and actors – tracing the history and dynamic of their institutional positions. Part II turns to three of British theatre’s main economic sectors, the West End and commercial theatre, the subsidised sector, and the fringe. Part III, examines theatre’s civic function, looking at changing attitudes to and of audiences, and the emergence and development of both Black British and queer theatre makers, shows, and infrastructures. Finally, Part IV explores theatre’s relationship to the state: government policy, theatre’s physical infrastructure, and theatre in the regions and nations.

In the first chapter of Part I, ‘Playwrights: Collectivity and Collaboration’, Dan Rebellato disputes claims that the playwright reigns supreme within British theatre and that playwriting is an intrinsically literary or individualistic activity contrary to the theatre’s otherwise collaborative spirit. British playwriting’s post-war history, he argues, is one of collective endeavour in which playwrights are theatre makers, their plays theatrical and collaborative. Focusing on British playwrights’ institutional and industrial conditions of work, Rebellato examines the important rise of British playtext publishing; the formation of theatre writers’ unions which helped to secure pivotal trade agreements; and the gradual establishment of play development structures and training. Rebellato makes the case that if the playwright enjoys a relatively secure status now, it has been earned through collective organisation and action.

Despite the longstanding emphasis on the playwright across British theatre scholarship, practice, and reviewing, Tom Six’s chapter, ‘Directors: Organisation, Authorship, and Social Production’, argues for the importance of the director, specifically the artistic director. Through examples ranging from Peter Hall to Emma Rice, Yvonne Brewster, and Michael Buffong, Six illustrates the multiple roles the artistic director plays, conceiving and staging productions, but also managing institutions, finances, policies, and corporate identities. Six shows that through shaping social interactions, the director is a social producer with the power to reinforce hegemonic conditions (note the enduring dominance of white, Oxbridge-educated men in British directing) but also to enact new cultural possibilities, as in the work of Jenny Sealey at Graeae and Lois Weaver at Gay Sweatshop.

In Chapter 3, ‘Actors: A History of Service’, Aoife Monks explores the status of the actor. For Monks, the actor has consistently been called on to play a service role in culture, serving the playwright or director’s vision, some higher truth the play represents, a sense of national duty, or the

‘authentic voice’ of a community. Monks suggests this service comes at a cost to actors, the cost of sublimating their own skill and artistry (in a culture that mocks them as ‘luvvies’) and of mystifying the fact that acting is often exploited labour (as evidenced when #MeToo showed the acting industries’ acute power imbalances allowing powerful men to exploit and abuse others). However, as the activist example of #MeToo demonstrates, post-war actors have not simply submitted to service, but have also challenged it.

In Part II, Rachel Clements’s ‘West End and Commercial Theatre: Crisis, Change, and Continuity’ uses the Apollo Theatre on Shaftesbury Avenue as a ‘typical’ West End theatre to examine this sector’s resistance to change, despite alterations in urban layout, transformed patterns of theatre ownership and management, new legislation, new transfers from the subsidised theatre, and the rise of global franchise shows like *Cats* and *The Lion King*. Clements argues that the West End has instead continued to focus on financial success, with deleterious effects on the fabric of its buildings and on its commitments to heritage, artistry, and basic issues of diversity and accessibility. This last point is evidenced by the 775-seat Apollo still only accommodating two wheelchairs in the early 2020s, and housing Natasha Gordon’s *Nine Night* – the first ever West End show written by a Black British woman playwright – as late as 2018.

In ‘Subsidised Theatre: Strength, Elitism, Metropolitanism, Racism’, Jen Harvie presents a history of national-level state funding for theatre since 1945, analysing its benefits and problems. Harvie shows the importance of subsidy in promoting theatre as a civic right, expanding theatre infrastructure, improving conditions for makers and audiences, and extending provision, especially geographically. However, she also explores how funding has been underpinned by conservative attitudes which favour elite arts for privileged audiences. Despite repeated Arts Council commitments to extend arts provision, funding decisions have tended to reproduce longstanding metropolitan privilege and to neglect ‘outliers’ like Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop as well as arts made by and for Black and Global Majority communities. While acknowledging theatre subsidy’s many achievements, Harvie advocates for practices that distribute subsidy more equitably, to support a wider range of theatre forms for broader audiences.

By contrast, ‘The Fringe: The Rise and Fall of Radical Alternative Theatre’, by Dan Rebellato with Jen Harvie, focuses on the 1960s–1980s to present a story of a sector that changed radically. The fringe erupted in the 1960s countercultural moment that challenged hierarchies

Introduction

9

of culture, class, gender, and race and generated new theatre methods and forms, including early immersive, verbatim, street, and agitprop theatre. Focusing on Portable Theatre, the Pip Simmons Group, and Monstrous Regiment, this chapter explores these companies' innovations and the pressures to which they ultimately succumbed: the lure of the mainstream, the challenges of collectivity, and the mixed benefits of funding. Though the chapter begins in radical hope, it concludes in decline and ambiguity. For some, the fringe is dead; for others, it persists, its creativity and progressive politics now part of the mainstream.

Part III begins with Helen Freshwater's 'Audiences: Ownership, Interaction, Agency', which asks who British theatre's audiences are, and how much the changes in post-war culture have been reflected in them. Freshwater charts many efforts made to try to reach 'the people', from the bureaucratic (the Arts Council's early investment in regional offices), to the artistic (successive efforts to diversify the Council's funding portfolio and the personnel of major theatres), to the technological (innovations like immersive theatre and the integration of social media). However, despite some marginal shifts in audience demographics, Freshwater concludes that most British theatre audiences remain comparatively privileged, leaving lingering questions about who British theatre should be addressing, and how it can more properly do so.

Vanessa Damilola Macaulay's chapter 'Black British Theatre: Blackouts and Spotlights' examines a crux of political progress, namely, the need to redress anti-Black racism in British culture and theatre. Macaulay's chapter is structured around three generations of Black British migratory experience since the 1948 arrival of the *Empire Windrush*, and corresponding patterns of Black British theatrical work which challenged racist stereotypes, offered stories from Black people's perspectives, and improved opportunities for Black artists and audiences. Playwriting from the 1940s to 1960s is illustrated by writers including Errol John and Wole Soyinka. Talawa, Temba, and the Theatre of Black Women are examples of theatre companies of the 1970s and 1980s. Finally, Macaulay discusses recent events such as Kwame Kwei-Armah's appointment as Young Vic Artistic Director in 2018 and the launch of the Black Ticket Project the same year. Macaulay argues that not only has Black British theatre survived, despite enduring racism, it has significantly contributed to expanding British theatre and, by extension, British culture.

Sarah Jane Mullan's 'Queer Theatre: Reclaiming Histories, Historicising, and Hope' focuses on theatre since the 1990s and on queer as a critique of fixed identity, demonstrating the importance of queer

theatre sites, from companies like Gay Sweatshop, through festivals like Queer Up North, to international events like the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow. Mullan explores queer theatre's formal experiments – including in cabaret, solo, and verbatim performance – and its interventions in hegemonic sites such as art galleries. She demonstrates how queer theatre has critically engaged with histories of homophobia, highlighted archival absences, and responded to legislation including the Sexual Offences Act 1967. Illustrated by examples of work by artists from Emma Frankland to Mojisola Adebayo, Mullan's chapter participates in collective cultural work to recover queer pasts, challenge homophobia and transphobia, and imagine hopeful presents and futures.

In Part IV, Louise Owen's chapter 'Government, Policy, and Censorship in Post-war British Theatre' explores the parallel but divergent histories of theatre's state subsidy and state censorship. Although the Lord Chamberlain's role as theatre censor ended in 1968, Owen suggests that government policy, particularly financial, has had a 'chilling', quasi-censorious effect. While theatre censorship declined, the influence of state subsidy has put pressure on the arts to be economically independent, under Thatcher, and, under New Labour, to play a social welfare role. Owen's chapter concludes with a reappraisal of *I'm Not Running*, a 2018 play by one of Britain's best-known political playwrights, David Hare, arguing that, rather than addressing politics, it constitutes a (particularly narrow) idea of what contemporary politics is.

In 'Buildings and the Political Economy of Theatre Financing in Britain', Michael McKinnie asks who should fund theatre buildings: the state, the market, or both. McKinnie argues that the post-war state has been ambivalent about funding the arts, recognising funding as necessary for spread and quality, but wishing the free market would pay more. McKinnie shows how this ambivalence plays out especially in funding theatre buildings (as distinct from shows). Noting the state's persistent reluctance to get involved in theatre building, with only Housing the Arts and the National Lottery providing serious funds, McKinnie diagnoses the problem in the complex economic position of a theatre building as an industrial asset. He concludes with an illustrative case study of the Battersea Arts Centre (BAC) in south London, renovated after a 2015 fire.

In 'Regions and Nations: The Myth of Levelling Up', Trish Reid returns to focus on a core issue that has been raised repeatedly across this collection: British theatre culture's metropolitan bias. She focuses on three manifestations of this bias: the disproportionate patterns of subsidy to the