

Book Reviews

Modern British Playwriting: The 1990s by Aleks Sierz

London: Methuen Drama, 2012, 277 pp. (softback)

By Louise LePage

1990s British playwriting is best characterised as ‘in-yer-face’: so suggested Aleks Sierz in his 2001 book, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, which identified the decade’s theatre as aiming to shock or provoke audiences via the depiction of extremes in a form that was experiential and typified by the work of Philip Ridley, Sarah Kane, Anthony Neilson and Mark Ravenhill. In the intervening years, Sierz’s narrative has met with sustained critique and alternative accounts have manifested – most notably Ken Urban’s ‘Cruel Britannia’. However, the association of 1990s new writing with in-yer-face theatrical sensibility has proved tenacious, and it is in response to Sierz’s own previous story that his new book positions itself.

Modern British Playwriting: The 1990s attempts to open the door to new frames by which to view the decade’s writing in this penultimate volume in Methuen’s series, which engages, decade by decade, with British playwriting from the 1950s to the 2000s. The series editors, Richard Boon and Philip Roberts, write that each volume ‘focuses on key works’ of its decade from the perspective of today while engaging, in detail, with ‘the theatrical, social, political and cultural climate of the era’ (vii).

Structurally, the book is something of a patchwork: a miscellany of academic scholarship, assorted documents (a monologue, interviews, a lecture) and 1990s history. It opens by offering a lively introductory survey of the decade’s context – its education, media, culture, science, technology, industry, economics, funding, politics and so on – in a style that is entertaining, evocative and provocative. Sierz’s first chapter goes on to describe 1990s theatre as responding to specific events, modes and structures of funding, working, thinking and living, all peculiar to the times. For all readers interested in the historical context and significant features of 1990s British theatre, this book provides vivid and comprehensive snapshots of the period and a concise introduction to its playwrights, theatre companies, theatres, funding bodies and preoccupations.

Chapter Two, 'Playwrights and Plays', offers four 'new, original, and often surprising perspectives' on four of the 'representative dramatists' and their 'key works' (viii): Sierz writes about Ridley, Catherine Rees about Kane, Trish Reid about Neilson and Graham Saunders about Ravenhill. Remarkably, of course, it is precisely Sierz's in-*yer-face* account of 1990s new writing that these perspectives work to go beyond, interrupt or oppose. On one level, choosing to focus the reassessments of the decade's new writing on the works of these writers, Sierz takes to task his earlier book. However, on another level, his choice of 'representative' dramatists – Ridley, Kane, Neilson and Ravenhill, the self-same protagonists of his *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* – means that, although Sierz's new book may indeed offer some alternative perspectives, these ultimately remain bound to the grand organising narrative of in-*yer-face*.

This volume is perhaps as much a reiteration, then, as it is a reassessment of 1990s new writing, although it does work hard to examine the plays of these purportedly in-*yer-face* dramatists through different optics. Sierz opens Chapter Two with an analysis of Ridley's early plays, identifying his play *The Pitchfork Disney* (1991) as 'an agenda-setting work: the era of in-*yer-face* theatre in London began with this play' (89), before going on to examine the plays by recourse to 'the gothic, the grotesque and the apocalyptic' (91).

About Kane's work, Rees asserts: '[i]t is time to reassess Kane's role as 'in-*yer-face* playwright' (113). For Rees, some 'other ways of theorising [Kane's] work' are 'the concepts of postdramatic theatre, trauma theory and theories of bodies, power, violence and institutions' (113). In this section of Chapter 2, Rees also looks to trouble Kane's position as a female playwright and questions how her suicide has affected readings of her plays (113). As a discussion that raises some of the key issues surrounding Kane's work in theatre criticism and scholarship, Rees's piece is useful, particularly, perhaps, for the student who is newly approaching Kane's work. Also, Rees's analysis is frequently insightful. However, her call for 'reassessment' in relation to Kane is, by 2013, a little redundant because the playwright, along with her work, has been assessed outside the frames of in-*yer-face* theatre and her suicide for a good number of years and articles approaching her plays with an interest in the postdramatic, trauma, bodies, power and violence already proliferate.

Ravenhill's work is reassessed by Graham Saunders, who offers, perhaps, the most original reassessment of arguably the most exemplary of the in-yer-face playwrights. Saunders recognises Ravenhill as 'creating a new type of political theatre' (164), which, though it may be, in some senses, as conventionally 'secretarial' as state-of-the-nation plays, also ushers in the new by its novel treatment of gay sexuality (164). Trish Reid, meanwhile, offers an engaging reassessment of Neilson's work, arguing that he demonstrates 'a consistent, almost demented, preoccupation with subjectivity' (142) and 'privileges an identity politics that transcends narrow or fixed definitions' (162). Reid connects this focus significantly to Neilson's Scottishness and, specifically, 'the imperative to "understand ourselves"' which attached to 'the referendum on devolution in 1997' (141).

The most intriguing and original part of the book is Sierz's 'Afterword', where he proposes some 'different optic[s]' (231) by which to consider 1990s theatre. Here, Sierz contemplates, for example, an alternative frame to in-yer-face as 'euro-modernism', and with it an alternative tradition deriving from continental modernism as opposed to British naturalism and 'dirty realism', taking in the work of Churchill, Barker, Crimp, Greig, Ravenhill, Phyllis Nagy, and David Harrower (232). Another suggested optic is 'older and darker, not younger' (233) and a shift from the cult of youth to one of age and experience, for, writes Sierz, 'in reality the most influential playwrights of the 1990s were older hands: Harold Pinter, Edward Bond, Churchill, Steven Berkoff and Crimp' (233). Perhaps the most provocative of Sierz's proposals concerns the '*unpredictable real-life tragedy*' (233) of Jamie Bulger, the murdered toddler whose story is recounted by Ravenhill in the 'Documents' section of this book and considered by Sierz to constitute a determining factor of a certain form of drama in the 1990s. Of the Bulger case, Sierz writes:

When in November 1993 the judge in the trial of the perpetrators explained the murder by speculating that the boys had been exposed to a violent video, *Child's Play 3*, this created a media storm which is the cultural context for British arts in the crucial time of the mid-1990s. The Bulger murder resulted

in calls for [...] censorship [...]. So it's possible to conclude that without this killing, [...] the theatre history of the 1990s might have been very different. (234)

This is a fascinating and compelling proposition. Of course, ironically, Sierz hereby brings us back via a circuitous path to a defense of in-yer-face theatre with its impulse to shock and provoke. However, en route, readers will have negotiated a volume that is built upon wide-ranging knowledge and excellent research, is full of original ideas, and enthusiastically engages with Britain's theatre history and culture through the 1990s and in so doing comprises an important introduction to 1990s theatre history and criticism.

***Modern British Playwriting: The 1970s* by Chris Megson**

London: Methuen Drama, 2012, 299 pp. (softback)

By Christopher O'Shaughnessy

Chris Megson's *Modern British Playwriting: The 1970s* is a compelling addition to the growing volume of books surveying and examining late twentieth-century British playwriting. Unlike some more general previous accounts (Innes, *Modern British Drama 1890-1990*; Billington, *State of the Nation*; Lane, *Contemporary British Drama*) this sharply focused yet panoramic reassessment takes its place among those studies (Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution*; Bull, *New British Political Dramatists*; Wandor, *Carry On, Understudies*) which concentrate on a chosen decade. The book is part of a series of six volumes seeking to 'characterise the nature of modern British playwriting from the 1950s to the end of the first decade of this new century' (ix).

Although the title has three sub-headings – *Voices, Documents, New Interpretations* – the book falls thematically into two sections: a detailed and evocative overview of life and theatre during the chosen period together with a critical engagement of the work of four representative authors (Caryl Churchill, David Hare, Howard Brenton and David Edgar) and a section documenting interviews with and responses from theatre practitioners. This second section amounts to a book in itself and is reminiscent,

in style, of Delgado and Heritage's *In Contact with the Gods: Directors Talk Theatre*.

Megson situates the phenomenon of playwriting within the ethos of the period and shows how the authorial voices in the plays interact with or are provoked by that ethos into dynamic creative activity for the stage. Looking at the period 'from the perspective of the twenty-first century' (ix), a declared aim of the series, facilitates interesting and unusual evaluations and, indeed, new interpretations of what has come to be seen as seminal work. The seventies is evoked as a decade of 'transformations [...] that bestowed an egalitarian legacy' (84) in the theatre and not merely an interim period of stasis and recovery from the exuberant sixties, or what Francis Wheen calls 'a long Sunday evening in winter' (84). It was a decade 'when British theatre artists sought to actualise, through the struggle of making and presenting new kinds of performance, a more equitable way of doing life' (84). The seventies is seen to overflow back into the sixties (178) and forward into the eighties (84), with repercussions which we can still observe and acknowledge today (see Youde, 'Politics is Making a Comeback').

The book, like Dan Rebellato's *1956 and All That*, offers a critique and mapping of the shifting political perspectives at work in the theatre of the period – and the ongoing reframing of those perspectives through a developing critical consciousness. The account, like other previous studies, is suffused with a transparent liberal leftist perspective, emphasising the radical politicisation of theatre.

This transparency is observable in the four essays on the selected playwrights: Caryl Churchill by Paola Botham, David Hare by Chris Megson, Howard Brenton by Richard Boon and David Edgar by Janelle Reinelt (99-203). These essays form a substantial part of the first section of the book (104 out of 203 pages) and are possibly what many theatre students will scour the book for.

Paola Botham, in reclaiming Caryl Churchill as a socialist-feminist playwright whose seventies work still resonates with us today, shows, surprisingly, a non-critical acceptance of Judith Butler's 'anti-essentialist' theory of gender in making her (persuasive) case (117-18). Paradoxically, in her study of *Owners, Vinegar Tom and Cloud Nine*, Botham reveals Churchill's own ongoing and unafraid critical awareness of 'received' feminist and socialist assumptions (122).

Chris Megson's admiration for David Hare's work seeps into his analysis of *Slag*, *Fanshen* and *Plenty*, 'arguably the quintessential "state of the nation" play of the 1970s' (144). He carefully maps how Hare's work evolved from 'crudity to style' (145) and, illuminatingly, demonstrates how a contingent critical consciousness of socialist attitudes informed the writing of the plays.

Richard Boon, to some extent rehabilitating Howard Brenton as a source of academic interest, in his discursive, chatty essay, negotiates the plays through an interrogation of contemporary theatre reviews and, writing 'as a friend', points out how Brenton's multi-faceted talent survived eighties rejection only to be reclaimed now as prefiguring nineties 'in-yer-face theatre' with 'its rawness, its violence and its visceral, often disturbing, theatricality' (177).

Janelle Reinelt focuses on three pivotal plays of David Edgar: *Destiny*, *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* and *Mary Barnes*, responses to what Edgar perceived as the coalescing 'racism, xenophobia and fascism' of the period (182). In showing how Edgar's playwriting reflects the mercurial nature of seventies ethos, an underlying theme emerges of how the playwriting voice shape-shifts or adapts in rapid-response to quicksilver social change.

The four essays share the view that, throughout the decade, the playwrights' visions were constantly remade and reframed, sometimes with a clairvoyant aspect as in the case of Howard Brenton's prefiguring of nineties' dramaturgy.

The fascinating interviews in the *Documents* section (205-60) flesh-out as personal-witness accounts themes such as the experience of working in physical theatre and the challenge made to 'the content and formal conventions of established theatre' (84).

A title like *Modern British Playwriting: The 1970s* precludes an evaluation of the many revivals in the seventies of earlier British playwrights like Noel Coward (*Private Lives* (1972), Queens Theatre), Somerset Maugham (*For Services Rendered* (1979), Royal National Theatre) and Bernard Shaw (*The Millionairess* (1978), Haymarket) and a consequent concomitant estimation of how these revivals may have characterised or reflected the political values and searchings of contemporary work. As David Edgar observed and is quoted by Megson in the book: there evolved a 'subtle privatisation of concern [...] as the "we" decade turned into the "me" decade' (84).

The emphasis here is on original home-grown writing which evolved during the period and not on revivals of earlier work which might have channelled such an observation.

Chris Megson's *Modern British Playwriting: The 1970s* is an outstanding example of its genre, giving an account of a remarkably self-critiquing period in British theatre history and which, with its own searching dynamic, offers with intellectual honesty a clear and thought-provoking interrogation of those times. The end Notes, Select Bibliography and the Index are a model of their kind.

Works Cited

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***An Introduction to Theatre Design* by Stephen Di Benedetto**

Abingdon: Routledge, 2012, 222 pp. (softback)

By Mark Swetz

The intended audience for *An Introduction to Theatre Design* by Stephen Di Benedetto is an undergraduate or someone wanting a general introduction to the topic. Although there are many books on the individual aspects of stage design, there are few that survey scenery, lighting, costume and sound under one cover (see below for examples). Di Benedetto's book is handsome. Its pages are filled with a diversity of images covering a broad range of stage design. The book includes history, context, numerous examples and quotes from a wide range of practitioners.

The case studies, which punctuate every chapter, include introductory excerpts of script analysis or other contextual detail framing design choices. For example, the story of King Admète is outlined before discussing Robert Wilson's use of horizontal and vertical lines in *Alceste* (65). The challenge of a loud ventilation system for sound design is explained in the example of *Wicked* (174). Di Benedetto succeeds in highlighting the complexity of designer's analysis and considerations and invites readers to be reflective, critical and inquisitive about the elements they may see or hear in the theatre. In each chapter, there is a discussion of how the designers in each discipline collaborate with their peers and then a final chapter on 'The Collaborative Process' that summarises these dynamics and examples.

While the photos and images are excellent and frequently illustrate points that are made in the text, there are some omissions, particularly in the early chapters. Examples of productions are prominently cited in the text that might have benefited from corresponding illustration (acknowledging spatial limitations) and there are a few times where the author arguably presumes too much knowledge from a neophyte readership; references to Brook's *Midsummer Night's Dream* (20) or how a traditional Mielziner set would be inappropriate for an arena stage (15) expect a level of familiarity that would be unusual from someone new to theatre or design studies. There are also names referred to throughout the text that would benefit from a little more context. Appia and Craig are mentioned significantly on page five, but there is no explanation of

who they are until page thirty-six. Citations prominently featured in brown text throughout the book may have been better accompanied with dates; dates would help identify if the person is living and in which period they worked. It would also help to identify the profession or contextual perspective of these speakers, many of whom were unfamiliar to this reader. While these names can be found in the index, props or properties receive no index citation (or consideration as a separate design area), nor does opera, make-up, hair, wigs or CAD; while these areas are mentioned in passing within the text, it would have been valuable to see them explored with some focus and clearly indicated in the index.

Although the book uses excellent up-to-date examples and is handsomely illustrated with contemporary shows like *Red*, *Shrek* and *Warhorse*, the overall approach to the subject seems conventional. The tone is set in the first chapter, when the author outlines a 'hierarchy of designers' (5) from set design at the top, followed by costumes, lights and sound. Di Benedetto makes the point that this is the order in which elements are usually added or considered in production, but it would have been valuable to see this hierarchy of designers questioned. In this reader's experience as a practitioner, every performance project brings different design priorities that challenge the idea of a formulaic order. From a book on design in 2012, I also expected more about the evolution of theatre technology and was surprised to find only passing references to design software, moving lights and projections. For example, projection design is starting to be taught as a distinct subject in training programmes and is becoming a much more frequent feature of theatrical design. In this book, it is mentioned anecdotally and it would have been useful to see some more analysis of this emerging art form. Sound is also framed, by implication, as a poor cousin to the other design elements in this book. The chapter on sound is an excellent technical overview of the designer's process and tools, but there is no discussion on the affective qualities of sound, which is surprising given Di Benedetto's background in sensorial studies and the earlier chapter in this book on 'Visual Thinking'.

Di Benedetto's most recent competitors in introductory theatre design are J. Michael Gillette's *Theatrical Design and Production* (seventh edition, 2012) and Karen Brewster and Melissa Shafer's *Fundamentals of Theatrical Design* (2011). Gillette's

offering is much more comprehensive, but also an expensive and heavy (640 pages, hardback only) textbook perhaps best suited to libraries or bookshelves, rather than a student's rucksack. Brewster and Shafer's book does not include consideration of theatre sound (a major omission) and is more US-centric. Having said this, the structure and content of Brewster and Shafer's book is easier to navigate and, for my tastes, more logical and more practical. For someone looking towards design as a profession, they include a chapter on a design career and some very useful appendices – résumés, cover letters, union information and various design tools. It is a comparable size and price, so it should be seriously considered against Di Benedetto's text.

Overall, *An Introduction to Theatre Design* is a generously illustrated text that covers a large territory in just over two hundred pages. Its strength is in explaining the process and considerations of set, costume, lighting and sound design to a reader encountering these areas for the first time. The case studies, photos, quotes and thorough glossary all contribute to supporting the material and encouraging the reader to engage with these topics more critically.

Works Cited

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***Good Luck Everybody: Lone Twin – Journeys, Performances, Conversations* by David Williams and Carl Lavery**

Aberystwyth: Performance Research Books, 2011, 363 pp. (softback)
By Anna Sereni

Good Luck Everybody is as unifying, collaborative and hopeful as its title suggests (1). David Williams and Carl Lavery produce an impressive accretion on the performance genius of Lone Twin: Greg Whelan and Gary Winters. From the outset the book contextualises the duo's work in the field of Theatre and

Performance as relational, societal and in line with current research that focuses on the affective potentials of performance making.

The collection aims, as the introduction states, to 'engage creatively and critically with Lone Twin's evolving concerns and diverse modes of practice, conceiving a range of theoretical and interdisciplinary perspectives' (5). Calling on a rich vista of sources including scholars, artists, photographs, video frames of objects and notebooks, the book tells the reader a story. A story is the mediation for the 'telling' of an event. To tell is a complex paradox because it is both central and peripheral, as well as absent and present in the consciousness of a story.

It is through this diverse mediation that we understand the text's aim: to reveal the affective potentials of the everyday through language, images and encounters that exist in Lone Twin's performances and journeys. In her polemic, 'Crisis of the Republic', Hannah Arendt concludes that 'action is of course the very stuff politics are made of' (6). Arendt's suggestion that interaction between individuals leads to debate and creates interest and activity is posited at the heart of Lone Twin and the text succeeds in amplifying this with a variety of examples, whether it be extracts from the performance text of *Nine Years* (2006), conversations with Whelan and Winters, or the analysis of grammar and modes of public address in *On Everest* (1997).

The book begins with a conversation where Lone Twin are championed as the bastions of relationality with a claim by Alan Read. He argues that in contemporary culture and performance there is no longer a desire or 'language to express kindness anymore' (11). In spite of this, according to Read, Lone Twin have found a way. For Read, the concept of relationality, or 'kindness', makes any thing possible (7). Furthermore, the work of Lone Twin captures this kindness through their exploration of storytelling, language, traces, speech and their encounters of everyday life. *Good Luck Everybody* appraises these categories both individually and collectively in order to demonstrate the importance of affective possibilities in everyday life (1).

The book is organized into five themed categories that explore the 'intellectual, aesthetic and social contexts' (14) that underpin the duo's commitment to participatory art. In conjunction with scholars and artists, conversations with Whelan and Winters

follow each section allowing the reader a rollercoaster type adventure through its pages.

Part two, 'Travel Logs: Places, Journeys, Walking' offers a rousing exploration of the relationship between journeys, narratives and traces in Lone Twin's work, in particular *Totem* (1998) and *Spiral* (2007). Here, Esther Pilkington describes Lone Twin's excursions as odyssean journeys, because they bring back stories that recount their experiences and their encounters along the way. These encounters are turned into narratives and they then tell their stories. However, they also tell other people's stories because 'Other people's stories are Lone Twin's travel stories; their travel stories are other peoples' stories' (68). Taking influence from Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero, who recognises the relationality of storytelling, Lone Twin are presented as negotiators between 'event, memory, documentation, and narration' (67). Emma Brodzinski discusses how Lone Twin's journeys have a distinct relationship to place. She reminds the reader that walking is storytelling: as the traveler is moving from one place to another, 'making room for a void', he is both central in the current place he occupies and peripheral to the one he is about to move into. It is here that encounters can occur and this begins to reveal the relationship between storytelling, place and narration.

Part three, 'Labours of Love: How One thing Becomes Another', concentrates on places and people, starting with Augusto Corrier who provides a critical reflection on his experience of performing Lone Twin's *Ghost Dance* (2005). Corrier explains the engagement required in performing a piece 'that [although it] goes nowhere', produces unexpected encounters that work on banality and not spectacle (146). For him, this causes the spectator to join in, making a 'joyful and hopeful achievement' and affirming the affective potential the text seeks to claim (147).

Categories collapse in part four, 'Language, Writing, Reading, Speeching', where John Hall closely examines the performative function of these elements in Lone Twin's work. Words and their sociality are continuously reappraised through the script of *Sledge Hammer Songs* (2003). Hall employs complex diagrams to help endorse Whelan and Winters' inherent commitment to sociality through their use of both private and public language.

Part five sees a continuation of this topic, but brings us

back to the book's primary concern of storytelling and the ethics surrounding it. The idea of affective potential that is at the core of the book's message is fully realised through a story because, as Richard Kearney's *On Stories* (2002) attests, 'narrative is an open-ended invitation to ethical and political responsiveness' (156).

The range and scope of Lavery and Williams' book is impressive. Its approach to the topic is also deliberately affective imploring readers to navigate its pages as they see fit, highlighting the varying potentials with such freedom. However, such a structure does, at times, conflate the information the text tries to compartmentalise.

Each section convincingly sets out how the affective potentials in Lone Twin's work are realised. Dense, critical discussions of place, language, space, storytelling and encounters offer strong academic insight into the role of applied theatre in performance studies. Although it is surprising not to see reference to the theories of affective performance and relational art from scholars such as James Thompson and Claire Bishop, this is merely a point of alignment for an otherwise abundance of critical and theoretical analysis. Lavery and Williams' attention to details resonates loudly with Thompson's *Performance Affects*, doing precisely what Thompson calls out for. It does not focus solely on effects, social outcomes, messages or impacts; instead it captures the essence of Lone Twin: the 'radical potential of the freedom to enjoy beautiful radiant things' (Thompson 6). This is something the text recognises and emphasises throughout, but it could be celebrated more. It communicates Lone Twin's work as a successful disruption between the visible, the sayable and the thinkable. Recognising the power of affect in this disruption in bodily responses, sensations and aesthetic pleasures, *Good Luck Everybody* defends the chance in encounters and the potentials at stake in our everyday lives. It kills us with kindness, however uncomfortable that may be.

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