

Introduction: Current Debates and British Drama since 2000

Kerstin Frank and Caroline Lusin

Compared to other, more recent media, the traditional theatrical setup seems curiously outdated, almost quaint: both actors and audience are actually physically present in one room, the audience is (for the most part) silent, passive, and receptive, and the actors perform something previously written, re-written, studied, and rehearsed over a considerable period of time. How does this time-honoured layout fit into a fast-moving, globalised world, in which people's need for interactive social self-construction is manifested in Facebook identities, and in which Twitter satisfies a predilection for quick, short, snappy, fast-travelling responses to events? How can theatre keep pace with social debates that can unfold and spread within seconds of a single event or just in a casual tweet? How can it continue to be a relevant site of collective self-reflection in Britain?

Because, curiously, it is still relevant, and very much so. The original and creative contributions to the stage by new talents as well as by more experienced writers bear witness to the "rude health of current playwriting" (Sierz, "Introduction", xvii). The theatre is still a vital part of British culture. In fact, Andrew Haydon even testifies to "something of a qualified 'golden age' [of British theatre] in the 2000s, both artistically and economically" (40).¹ Media attention to first nights and theatre awards remains extensive, and provocative performances continue to spark heated debates. Reviewing a number of such contentious responses, Aleks Sierz concludes: "In each of these cases, the controversy proved that theatre could be a powerful way of showing us who we are, and that disagreement about such depictions were arguments about our national identity." (*Rewriting*, 144) Theatre, in other words, remains a significant diagnostic tool in tackling the challenges Britain faces in the new millennium.² It has proven particularly apt to negotiate the topic of national and cultural identity or the ever-contested concept of 'Britishness'. The editors of *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights* hence argue that "British playwriting

1 Of course, a changing policy in state subsidies inspired by the Boyden Report from 2000 played a role in this boom (cf. Middeke/Schnierer/Sierz ix and Haydon 70 f.).

2 As Andrew Haydon puts it rather poetically: "[T]heatre, like a nation's press, is the sound of a culture talking to itself" (41).

has historically had a close affinity [...] with the structures of British society, and especially with a more general discussion of economic, social and political issues” (Middeke/Schnierer/Sierz vii). This affinity certainly continues into the 21st century, and the essays contained in this collection propose to explore what drama can specifically contribute to this discussion.

This collection of essays considers drama as a site of social debate, focusing on the unique ways in which plays participate in public discourses about the most pressing concerns of the new millennium. We believe that the dramatic form is singularly equipped to bridge the ever-widening gaps between different other sites of discourse, such as highly specialised, academic institutions and those sites open to a wider field of contributors, such as the social media. Referring to recent black British plays, Lynette Goddard makes a similar point:

These plays raise debates that would otherwise mainly be accessible through long government policy tomes and/or in ethnographic and sociological research studies. Staging these issues through playwriting renders them accessible and open to scrutiny from those who might not otherwise gain access to the complexities of these issues. (16–7)

In other fields, such as science, finance, and politics, playwrights can also distil their ideas and research into dramatic forms that are more easily intelligible but still knowledgeable and well-balanced. While plays cannot react as directly and spontaneously to events as other media, they create more serious and sustainable links between their audience and specialised discourses, without constraining the complexity and accuracy of these.

And then, of course, there is the creative and aesthetic factor, or the question of form. Lynette Goddard slightly overshoots the mark by suggesting “that we can [...] look at these plays as quasi-sociological treatises of our times” (16). While plays can certainly mediate information from sociology and other fields to their audience, they will always add something more to it. Plays transform abstract issues into particular situations and plotlines and map them onto dramatic space and characters that allow or demand sympathy or some other form of emotional engagement. They present national or global matters in the light of their consequences for individual people, and they may foreground the ambivalence of moral choices. Beyond the basic, traditional dramatic ‘ingredients’ of characters, stage, and language, contemporary playwrights have incorporated various media, new types of venues, and different forms of engaging with the audience in order to shape and convey their topics in ways that are both emotionally and cognitively relevant to the individual observer. Indeed all traditional features of drama mentioned above have been challenged by introducing

experimental alternatives.³ In the words of David Lane, many playwrights “are breaking through the staid and restrictive image of being simply autonomous providers of a list of lines” (1) for the benefit of “moving closer towards what we might refer to as ‘performance writing’: a space where writers explore and develop their work in a direct and active relationship with other practitioners and spaces” (ibid.). Among the plethora of different forms, verbatim theatre stands out as a particularly productive subgenre at present, but playwrights take their inspiration and techniques from a variety of different genres (cf. Adishesiah/LePage 3).

While this volume of essays focuses on the connection between current public concerns and drama, its central question of what and how contemporary plays contribute to the current debates inevitably includes the aspects of dramatic form and genre. Because the fusion of a topic with a dramatic subgenre in one particular work is always unique and complex, each essay in this volume analyses only one play in depth. This volume does not attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of all forms and themes of British theatre since the year 2000;⁴ its aim is to present comprehensive analyses of selected key topics, each within one particular play, in a selection that is representative of theatre’s ongoing and creative engagement with matters of public interest. We believe that it is precisely the aptness of playwriting to explore the complexity, contradictions, and aporias of its topics which distinguishes the dramatic treatment of social concerns from other media.

What, then, are the most pressing and dominant public concerns in post-millennial Britain? While perceptions and priorities may vary, the incisive moments of 9/11 and the London bombings of 2005 as well as the credit crunch of 2007–08 and the recession of 2009 loom large in the short history of the new millennium, entailing political consequences and decisions that continue to fuel public controversies. Scientific developments such as the Human Genome Project (2000–03), which unravelled the structure of human genes, and the increasing “confidence – some say overconfidence” of neuroscience (Rebellato 25) also inspire hopes and fears and encourage debates about the benefits and dangers of science. Technological progress in the field of computers, tablets, smartphones,

3 The conventional structures of dramatic space are challenged for instance in productions which send the audience on walks and journeys (cf. Wilkie 95f.). Actors are dispensed with when audience members read out a script to one another (cf. Haydon 51). Playwrights experiment with different forms of involving the audience, work without scripts altogether (cf. Haydon on ‘New Work’, 61) or create and transform them in various types of collaboration (cf. Lane ch. 3).

4 For studies and collections of essays that present a wider scope, cf. Lane; Middeke/Schnierer/Sierz (eds.); Sierz, *Rewriting*; Tönnies (ed.); Rebellato (ed.); Adishesiah/LePage (eds.).

and the internet has not only sparked controversies but also changed the very nature of public debates, providing new platforms for disseminating (and shaping) information, for exchanging views, and for interacting socially in a virtual space. Besides these issues, debates about social structures and social (in)justice in Britain, and particularly about immigration and the integration of different cultural identities, are also close to the heart of the British public and played a central role in the 'Brexit' decision in 2016 (cf. Travis). These are the wider contexts for the topics and plays discussed in the present volume.

The essays in this collection are grouped into four main sections: '**Politics**', '**Finance and Austerity**', '**Science and Technology**', and '**Cultural Identity**'. All of them focus on plays that originated in the British literary scene and were first performed in Britain, but not necessarily written by authors of British nationality. Under the rubric of '**Politics**', Merle Tönnies discusses Mike Bartlett's *13* (2011), demonstrating how its blending of dystopian elements with the Theatre of the Absurd raises questions about political power in a way that denies any clear answers, emphasising instead the ambiguities and complexities in modern machinations of power as well as the importance of personal responsibility. Peter Paul Schnierer shows that Richard Bean's *England People Very Nice* (2009) offers an intriguing *tour de force* through the history of immigration in the tradition of farce, including shocking, excessive forms of humour and jarring discrepancies, but ultimately presenting immigration as a natural and beneficial process. In her essay on Mark Ravenhill's cycle of plays *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (2007), Ariane de Waal analyses how its broad scope, Brechtian elements and complex use of intertextuality, condensation, and displacement present the topic of terrorism in combination with a critique of neoliberal values and rhetoric, pitting the 'hypernormality' of Western reality and consumer culture against the realities of war, terror, and torture, and challenging the simplifying binary opposition of 'them' against 'us'.

The section of '**Finance and Austerity**' begins with Caroline Lusin's analysis of Nicholas Pierpan's *You Can Still Make a Killing* (2012). This essay investigates Pierpan's representation of the financial crisis and the more overarching process of the increasing financialisation of different spheres of life; in the world depicted in the play, this process goes hand in hand with a strong focus on competitiveness and a striking lack of ethics and responsibility. Returning to some of these issues, Annika Gonnermann takes a closer look at corporate culture in her reading of April De Angelis' *Wild East* (2005) to illustrate how the play dissects the Hobbesian ethics of '*homo homini lupus*' at work in corporate environments today. Closely linking the central arguments of *Wild East* to Hobbes' theses, Gonnermann shows how De Angelis uses his notion of a 'perpetual state of war' as a sounding board to criticise the way in which the ruthless agents of

21st-century capitalist culture are bent solely on economic gain. Dorothee Birke then engages with the flipside of the financial system and its crisis, the social problems of poverty and homelessness and the debate about 'Broken Britain' as presented in *Home* (2013) by Nadia Fall, analysing how the form of verbatim theatre, combined with aspects of engaged theatre and a specific use of music, serves to give a voice and individual stories to the marginalised, who are often summarily dismissed as the 'underclass' in public discourse.

The division of '**Science and Technology**' starts with a contribution by Christine Schwanecke on Jules Horne's *Gorgeous Avatar* (2006), which deals with the effects of data streams and virtual realities on (post)human lives. Exploring the ways in which the proliferation of multiple realities in the information age impinges on human interaction and identity, Schwanecke reads Horne's play as a critical appraisal of the virtues and drawbacks of the digital. The next contribution by Maurus Roller resumes the discussion of identity in the 21st century by tackling the problem of human cloning as Caryl Churchill represents it in *A Number* (2002). Inscripting herself into the critical literary discourse about science, Churchill examines the effects of modern science and technology to critically appreciate the role of individuality in leading a meaningful life. Adding to this assessment of the limits and possibilities of modern science, Stefan Glomb then investigates the stance which Nick Payne's *Incognito* (2014) adopts on science, and on neuroscience in particular. Enlarging on the philosophical as well as the scientific debate on the conflict between freedom and determinism, Glomb provides a detailed analysis of Payne's meticulous exploration of the 'brain' versus 'mind' dichotomy, which particularly highlights the complex connections of selfhood, consciousness, and freedom.

In the concluding section on '**Cultural Identity**', Lisa Schwander begins by exploring how Tanika Gupta functionalises reminiscences of the Victorian British Empire in *The Empress* (2013) to shed light on contemporary debates about multiculturalism. Focussing on different forms of cross-cultural relationships, the play advocates a re-engagement with (imperial) history as an important step in arriving at a more inclusive notion of what it means to be British. Continuing this debate on cross-cultural identities from a different point of view, Kerstin Frank's reading of *Gone Too Far!* (2007) by Bola Agbaje analyses how the genre of social comedy helps to confront and playfully destabilise existing stereotypes concerning young immigrants' lives in urban estates both in the real world and in so-called 'ghetto plays', challenging artificially constructed choices between cultural identities. In the concluding essay, Abir Al-Laham examines the complex treatment of religious belief in Hassan Abdulrazzak's *Love, Bombs and Apples* (2016), the most recent play discussed in this book. She shows how Abdulrazzak employs the form of stand-up comedy to explore the diverse and

ambivalent roles of the Islamic faith in relation to other concerns, such as sexuality, family, consumerism, and politics.

The essays and plays discussed in this volume thus not only present a variety of topics but also a number of different dramatic genres that significantly shape the treatment of the topics, ranging from verbatim theatre (*Home*) over dystopian elements (*13* and *Wild East*) to social comedy (*Gone Too Far!*), history play (*The Empress*), and farce (*England People Very Nice*). In their in-depth analyses, the authors of the essays reveal how the playwrights employ and creatively modify specific genre traditions in order to shed light on different aspects and inherent paradoxes of the respective topic.

However, despite the thematic and formal variety of the plays, the analyses reveal that questions of identity – national, cultural, or personal – play a significant role in all of them. Of course, this has to do with the specific strategies of theatre to address topics by transferring them onto characters and character constellations. All the plays discussed here present characters whose sense of self and belonging is challenged, be it by the pressure of corporate workplaces on the employer, religious deliberations or cultural clashes. But to our mind, the persistent undercurrent of identity in all these texts also encapsulates a general post-millennial trend in British society and culture: an almost obsessive engagement with the self that continues the way in which the 20th century questioned the very concept of identity (cf. Bruder; Hall 1–17), further exacerbated by the various social, political, and technological challenges of the new century. Most recently, a range of further crucial events tested our conception of what this world is like – the ‘Brexit’ referendum, the election victory of Donald Trump in the U.S., the 2017 terrorist attacks in London and Manchester, and the setback for Theresa May in the 2017 election will all have consequences that are now hard to foresee, but they will certainly be addressed and subjected to rigorous critical analysis on the British stage.

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The British Library is the national library of the United Kingdom and one of the world's greatest libraries. We hold over 13 million books, 920,000 journal and newspaper titles, 57 million patents and 3 million sound recordings. This is a portrait of Aphra Behn, the first British woman to earn a living from writing. View images from this item (1). Usage terms Public Domain Held by Yale Center for British Art. She now works as a freelance editor specialising in seventeenth and eighteenth century drama. Her editions for the Oxford Student Texts series include Aphra Behn's *The Rover*, William Congreve's *The Way of the World*, George Farquhar's *The Beaux Stratagem*, Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* and Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Rivals*. Although drama had not been a major art form in the 19th century, no type of writing was more experimental than a new drama that arose in rebellion against the glib commercial stage. In the early years of the 20th century, Americans traveling. The Very Short Introductions series (or VSI series) is a book series published by the Oxford University Press publishing house since 1995. Books in the series offer concise introductions to particular... This introduction to the classics begins with a visit to the British Museum to view the frieze which once decorated the Apollo Temple at Bassae. Through these sculptures John Henderson and Mary Beard prompt us to consider the significance of the study of Classics as a means of discovery and enquiry, its value in terms of literature, philosophy, and culture, its source of imagery, and the reasons for the continuation of these images into and beyond the twentieth century.