Text and Performance in Contemporary British Theatre

Catherine Love
TEXT AND PERFORMANCE IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH THEATRE

*Text and Performance in Contemporary British Theatre* interrogates the paradoxical nature of theatre texts, which have been understood both as separate literary objects in their own right and as material for performance.

Drawing on analysis of contemporary practitioners who are working creatively with text, the book re-examines the relationship between text and performance within the specific context of British theatre. The chapters discuss a wide range of theatre-makers creating work in the United Kingdom from the 1990s onwards, from playwrights like Tim Crouch and Jasmine Lee-Jones to companies including Action Hero and RashDash. In doing so, the book addresses issues such as theatrical authorship, artistic intention, and the apparent incompleteness of plays as both written and performed phenomena. *Text and Performance in Contemporary British Theatre* also explores the implications of changing technologies of page and stage, analysing the impact of recent developments in theatre-making, editing, and publishing on the status of the theatre text.

Written for scholars, students, and practitioners alike, *Text and Performance in Contemporary British Theatre* provides an original perspective on one of the most enduring problems to occupy theatre practice and scholarship.

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INTRODUCTION

At the Almeida Theatre in London, there’s much excitement about a new version of *The Oresteia*. Before seeing it for myself, I keep hearing about how radically director and adaptor Robert Icke has rewritten this classic. It’s one of three high-profile productions of *The Oresteia* in 2015, alongside Rory Mullarkey’s new translation at Shakespeare’s Globe and a revival of Ted Hughes’ version directed by Blanche McIntyre at HOME in Manchester. All three productions are versions of versions, each far removed from the ancient dramatic trilogy composed by Aeschylus, performed for an Athenian audience who ‘had no basis for conceptualizing the text as something separable from performance’ (Wiles 2000: 167), and preserved over the centuries via many different scribes, editors, and scholars. In this context, it seems obvious that there can be no such thing as a ‘faithful’ *Oresteia*. And yet reviews of Icke’s version of this cycle of plays frequently stress its departure from Aeschylus’ original.¹ His production is quickly absorbed into a familiar rhetoric of ‘radical’ versions of the classics, which are ultimately measured – whether admiringly or damningly – in terms of the perceived distance between the seemingly stable and historical dramatic work and the updated performance. Never mind that any English-language production of Greek tragedy is always using a translated script; productions like Icke’s are still frequently seen through the lens of fidelity to or transgression of the classic text.

In Made in China’s show *Tonight I’m Gonna Be the New Me*, performed in London later that same year, there’s an altogether different tension between text and performance. On stage, Jess Latowicki performs for us, while her fellow company member and real-life partner Tim Cowbury scripts her from the shadows. Or, at least, this is what appears to be going on. The reality is much more complicated, as the show constantly questions who has authorship and agency in this performance. That also extends to the audience. At one point, Latowicki asks a spectator ‘do you ever get the feeling that someone is putting words in your

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mouth?’ and quickly instructs them ‘say yes’ before they have an opportunity to answer. As theatre-maker and writer Andy Field puts it, Made in China’s work does not ‘so much synthesize text and performance as set them at war with one another’ (2020: 65). This confrontation between text and performance is at the root of the company’s existence, born as it was out of a meeting at Goldsmiths, University of London between one student on a playwriting course (Cowbury) and another studying performance (Latowicki). Their shows often prod at the power of author and text, while simultaneously undercutting this power with an emphasis on the unpredictability of live performance.

On the surface, these two shows have little in common beyond the fact that I saw them both within the space of a few months in 2015. But what they reveal in different ways is the continued difficulty that haunts attempts to conceptualise the relationship between text and performance. The popular discourse surrounding Icke’s _Oresteia_ and other contemporary versions of the classics illustrates a belief in the text as something solid and enduring, even when it has been passed down in countless different forms over hundreds or even thousands of years. The text is viewed as the reliable document, as opposed to the fickle ephemerality of performance. A show like _Tonight I’m Gonna Be the New Me_, meanwhile, is characteristic of a generation of theatre-makers questioning the centrality of text and problematising the supposedly clean divide between ways of working centred around page and stage. Similarly to other contemporary companies including Action Hero, RashDash, and Sh!t Theatre, Made in China works with written text as one material among many in its process, eschewing the models of both the pre-written, solo-authored play, and the collectively devised performance. Both the company’s resistance to a perceived hierarchy of text over performance and the continued uncertainty that pervades the relationship between script and staging filter through in the form and content of its work. Its shows typically dramatise concerns around authorship and power, whether through the ‘scripting’ of Latowicki in _Tonight I’m Gonna Be the New Me_ or through the all-powerful voiceover that put competing performers through their paces in the company’s earlier show _Gym Party_ (2013).

These are just two moments of many I might have chosen from my experiences as an audience member in the second decade of the 21st century. During these years, in which I was frequently watching and writing about theatre across the United Kingdom in my roles as a reviewer and a scholar, I was regularly struck by the tricky dynamic between text and performance. Many British theatre-makers, institutions, and critics were at this time engaged in a specious battle between so-called ‘text-based’ and ‘non-text-based’ theatre, with the script occupying a central place in fraught distinctions between different theatre-making practices. Directorial experiments that I often found thrilling were regularly criticised by mainstream reviewers for disregarding the letter of the playtext and elevating the director to the maligned position of ‘auteur’. Yet all the while, increasing numbers of theatre-makers were teasing away at the role of text and authorship in their shows, staging fascinating power struggles between author and performer (who were sometimes one and the...
same person), or writing texts that challenged popular understandings of what a play could be. This was also a time of collaborations across the trenches, with more and more projects situating themselves in the no man’s land between the ‘text-based’ and ‘non-text-based’ camps. There are various, interconnected reasons for these antagonisms and experiments, including structures of funding, development, training, and criticism. But at their root, I suggest, is a persistent and profound uneasiness about the nature and role of the theatre text.

This book explores that uneasiness, with the aim of re-examining the relationship between text and performance. As I will discuss, dominant understandings of text and performance in mainstream British theatre have tended to see the script as the authoritative instigating force for theatrical production. I contend that this underestimates both texts and performances and simplifies the complex relationship that they share. I am interested in teasing out the nuances of this relationship and exploring the many questions that it raises. To what extent can a text ever determine performance? What can and cannot be specified on the page? What is the role of authorial intention in theatre-making processes? How far can a production ‘depart from the text’ while still being considered a version of that play? How do constantly evolving stage conventions relate to the changing technologies of the printed (and, more recently, digital) page?

In considering these questions and others, *Text and Performance in Contemporary British Theatre* documents and analyses creative work with text among British theatre companies and writers over the last three decades. It explores some of the many lives of the text in contemporary British theatre, from revivals of Shakespeare to devised performances to dramaturgically innovative new plays, drawing on the perspectives and practices of a range of theatre-makers and critics. Building upon the important work of other scholars, my analysis challenges many of the assumptions about text that have historically shaped British theatre practices, institutions, and discourses. I consider the peculiar duality of the playtext and contextualise this within changing conditions of production and publication, as well as accounting for the function of text in theatre-making processes that do not begin with words on the page. This project responds to both a proliferation of performance practices that are experimenting with text(s) and a growing critical interest in the relationship between text and performance during the period under investigation, which I outline below. The book extends this work by offering a sustained engagement with the relationship between text and performance in the specific context of contemporary British theatre-making practices.

**Contemporary experiments with text**

As I go on to discuss in greater detail in Chapter 1, British theatre at the turn of the 21st century was often characterised according to the presence or absence of a solo-authored, pre-written playtext. At this time, industry rhetoric tended to divide theatre-makers into one of two categories: ‘text-based’ and ‘non-text-based’. The reality, however, is much more complicated. Over the three decades that
form the focus of this book, the relationship between text and performance has itself been a site of frequent experimentation. Writers and other theatre-makers have collaborated in a number of different ways; playwrights have used various tactics to undermine their assumed authority within their own texts; directors have tested how far it is possible to intervene creatively in a play; immersive and interactive theatre-makers have extended elements of authorship to audience-participants; and playwrights, theatre companies and solo performers alike have played with the layout of the published playtext. Numerous examples of such experiments, and others, will be explored in later chapters of the book. In this context of creative innovation and investigation, many theatrical orthodoxies – including the sharp separation of text from performance and the implicit hierarchy of the former over the latter – have come under pressure.

Existing scholarship, meanwhile, has both perpetuated and contested the division of British theatre-making practices on the basis of their perceived relationship to text. Mirroring the schism in the industry, many early 21st-century analyses of contemporary British theatre fall into one of two camps: studies of playwrights and plays, such as Vicky Angelaki’s edited collection *Contemporary British Theatre: Breaking New Ground* (2013), the Methuen Drama *Modern British Playwriting* series (2012–2013), and Martin Middeke, Peter Paul Schnierer, and Aleks Sierz’s *The Methuen Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights* (2011); and studies of devising and ensemble practices, prominent examples including *Devising Performance: A Critical History* (2006) by Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling, *Making Contemporary Theatre* (2010) by Jen Harvie and Andy Lavender, *Devising in Process* (2010) by Alex Mermikides and Jackie Smart, and *Making a Performance: Devising Histories and Contemporary Practices* (2007) by Emma Govan, Helen Nicholson, and Katie Normington. While several of these books acknowledge the porosity between so-called ‘text-based’ and ‘non-text-based’ practices, they nonetheless direct critical attention towards one category or the other, thus reinforcing the notion of a binarised British theatre sector.

Alongside these studies, though, there have been a number of challenges to the ‘text-based’/‘non-text-based’ divide in contemporary British theatre. Among the most influential of these is Duška Radosavljević’s use of the term ‘theatre-making’ in her book of the same name. This term, which Radosavljević defines as ‘a deprofessionalized, collaborative activity that takes an active and integrated intellectual and embodied approach to the notion of theatre authorship (whether or not it is based on text)’ (2013a: ix), helpfully dissolves any idea of hierarchy between text and performance or any division between ‘text-based’ and ‘non-text-based’ practices. Throughout her book, the broad umbrella term of ‘theatre-making’ is applied to developments in several seemingly distinct theatrical processes – the staging of classic texts, devising and adaptation, new writing, verbatim theatre, and what Radosavljević dubs ‘relational works’ – in order to demonstrate an increasing dispersal of theatrical authorship in the 21st century. For Radosavljević, ‘theatre-making anticipates an all-inclusive collaborative process’ (23) which challenges previous divisions of theatrical labour and also includes the audience as co-creators.
Theatre-Making is one of the few existing volumes that brings together the work of playwrights and of theatre-makers working with text in a range of different ways, with an eclecticism of case studies that this book seeks to emulate. I also share Radosavljević’s desire to move beyond binaries of text-based versus devised theatre and theatre versus performance, and I often use the helpful vocabulary of ‘theatre-making’ and ‘theatre-makers’ as inclusive, catch-all terms. But whereas Radosavljević offers a fascinating and expansive consideration of different European and Anglo-American theatrical genealogies, breaking down old divisions between East and West, I am interested in taking a more detailed look at British theatre culture and its specific attitudes towards text and performance. Moreover, while Radosavljević’s book similarly re-examines the relationship between text and performance, she suggests that there has been a ‘major overhaul’ (90) of this relationship in the 21st century, largely driven by ensemble ways of working. Although I agree that this period has seen a lively and intensified concern with texts and performances, I am arguing that recent developments are underpinned by a set of misconceptions about the theatre text that stretch back much further, and that contemporary experiments have exposed rather than radically transformed the ways in which texts and performances interact.

The binarised theatre landscape to which Radosavljević and I are both responding is compellingly outlined by Jacqueline Bolton in her PhD thesis Demarcating Dramaturgy. While Bolton’s principal focus is the role of the dramaturg in English and German theatre cultures, she also persuasively identifies what she calls a ‘two cultures’ divide in English theatre between ‘text-based’ and ‘non-text-based’ practices, which can be seen across arts subsidy, cultural policy, and the development of new work. My work touches on, and in some cases develops, these areas of investigation. In Chapter 1, for example, I examine in more detail some of the ways in which Arts Council funding has contributed to a dichotomised approach to different theatre-making practices. Text and Performance in Contemporary British Theatre also builds upon Bolton’s arguments for ‘more inclusive notions of “text”’ and ‘more nuanced approaches to authorship’ (2011: 91), which I agree are necessary to move past a reductive ‘text-based’/’non-text-based’ binary. Bolton proposes dramaturgy as a ‘bridge’ between text and performance that might illuminate connections between the ‘two cultures’ of English – and, I would suggest more broadly, British – theatre-making. While I find this suggestion promising, my focus is not on any one role or set of practices within the theatre-making process. Instead, my investigation continues to pursue Bolton’s and Radosavljević’s interrogations of theatrical authorship through an extended engagement with ideas of authoring and intention in Chapter 2. I also advance the idea of a more inclusive definition of the theatre text within the under-explored contexts of editing and publishing in Chapter 4.

One of the factors that Bolton identifies as underpinning the division of ‘text-based’ from ‘non-text-based’ work is the critical discourse of poststructuralism. The poststructuralist shift of authority away from the author (which I explore
further in Chapter 2) has often been taken rather literally and used to reject the playwright as author-god, while critiques of representation have been directed at the mimetic fictional worlds of dramatic texts. Liz Tomlin has interrogated this line of thinking in *Acts and Apparitions*, in which she rejects a binary between the ‘radical, oppositional narrative of deconstruction’ typically associated with ‘non-text-based’ practices and the ‘reactionary, traditional narrative of logocentrism’ that has been applied to the dramatic playtext (2013: 8). Tomlin breaks down this simplistic alignment of form and ideology by rigorously revisiting the post-structuralist theory on which it is based, arguing that no theatre can fully escape the bind of representation. She proposes instead that ‘the poststructuralist challenge to logocentrism might best be identified in practice that explores ways of exposing and acknowledging its own representational structures and narratives’ (76) – regardless of whether that practice involves a pre-written playtext. I similarly believe that it is important to move beyond this division, which serves to obscure both the genuine potential for ideological critique contained within individual pieces of theatre and the actual ways in which text and performance interrelate in any given work. Working from this foundation, my concern is less with the political analysis of performance that interests Tomlin – though there are moments in the book where I briefly address the political implications of particular pieces – and more with other ways in which understandings of the relationship between text and performance might be expanded and nuanced.

In addition to the works discussed above, there is a growing body of literature that offers an expanded view of the writer’s role within theatre-making practices. Sarah Sigal’s *Writing in Collaborative Theatre-Making* (2017), for example, investigates the previously under-explored role of the writer and the text in collaborative processes, recognising how playwriting has functioned within practices too often misleadingly labelled ‘non-text-based’. Relatedly, Mark Smith’s PhD thesis *Processes and Rhetorics of Writing in Contemporary British Devising* (2013) examines the intersection of writing and devising in the practices of Frantic Assembly and Forced Entertainment, while Helen Freshwater (2007) brings similar critical attention to bear on text, authorship, and authority in the work of Complicite. The intention to bring theatre texts into dialogue with devising and physical theatre practices likewise informs Dymphna Callery’s *The Active Text* (2015), which offers a practical handbook for applying physical theatre techniques to playtexts. Processes of creating text for performance that extend beyond conventional playwriting frameworks, meanwhile, have been explored at length by John Freeman in *New Performance/New Writing* (2007; 2016), which examines practices such as immersive theatre, body art, autoethnography and applied drama – though Freeman continues to distinguish these practices in contrast to dramatic plays, thereby retaining aspects of the ‘text-based’/‘non-text-based’ binary in a different guise. Furthermore, the critical discussion that has developed around theatre-makers such as Tim Crouch – whose work I discuss in Chapters 2 and 4 – has complicated any distinction between playwrights and devisers. Crouch’s shows exist as published playtexts that bear his name as the author, yet these pieces are created in close collaboration with other
theatre-makers and usually feature Crouch as performer and co-director, as well as frequently leaving gaps for audience involvement. All these interventions usefully complicate the idea that playwriting and devising practices are cleanly divorced from one another, beginning to build a more complex picture of the various ways in which British theatre-makers work with text. The following chapters extend this work and build more connections between practices that have often been examined separately, bringing collaborative experiments with text into dialogue with innovations in solo-authored playtexts.

Finally, in response to some of the experiments with text discussed above, there have been important attempts to widen and nuance the conversation about text and performance within academic and professional institutions. Two efforts worth mentioning here are Cathy Turner’s ‘Writing Space’ research project and Stephen Bottoms’ ‘Performing Literatures’ conference and special journal edition. ‘Writing Space’ intended to ‘nurture theatre and performance writing across an expanded field’ (Turner 2008: 1) by bringing together practitioners from a range of different artistic backgrounds – including playwriting, live art, and physical theatre – to self-reflexively consider their writing practices outside the usual structures of writer development. This project offered a model for developing texts and writers without the assumption of a solo-authored dramatic playtext as the central outcome of the writing process and the authoritative instigating document for performance, with implications for both development processes within the theatre industry and approaches to training in the academy. Meanwhile, ‘Performing Literatures’ responded to the disciplinary separation of theatre and performance from literature and the simultaneous persistence of text in various theatre-making practices, inviting a reconsideration of the role of text in relation to performance. As Bottoms reflects in his introduction to the journal edition that emerged from the conference (2009a), the responses to his call for papers were skewed away from playtexts, suggesting an anti-text bias within the discipline (to which I return in Chapter 1). Both the conference and the resulting journal articles propose a rethink of how theatre scholars define texts and understand their relationship to performance – an ongoing project in which this book is firmly situated.

Responding to these various contexts, Text and Performance in Contemporary British Theatre further explores the porous boundaries between creative practices that have previously been siloed by both critics and theatre institutions. The book brings together various examples of British theatre-making from over the last three decades that have playfully expanded understandings of the theatre text, regardless of whether these experiments have been instigated by playwrights, directors, performance artists, or collectives. I build upon important work that has analysed and begun to break down the ‘text-based’/’non-text-based’ binary, focusing specifically on the particularities of the contemporary British theatre landscape. My analysis answers calls from other scholars for renewed understandings of the theatre text and theatrical authorship, extending this into previously neglected areas such as the physical object of the printed playtext and its routes to publication.
Since the early 21st century, many of the experiments mentioned above have been analysed under the rubric of postdramatic theatre. Discussing the sorts of dramaturgically innovative plays that I explore in later chapters, David Barnett asserts that since the 1990s ‘texts written for the theatre have been displaying qualities that have made their association with “drama” increasingly difficult to sustain’ (2008: 14), an observation that is also made by Karen Jürs-Munby (2006) and Małgorzata Sugiera (2004). These apparent challenges to dramatic principles across a wide range of contemporary theatre-making have led such scholars to align this work with what Hans-Thies Lehmann has dubbed postdramatic theatre: a theatre after or beyond drama. While I have some scepticism about the postdramatic as a category, which I expand upon below, Lehmann’s framework has proved hugely influential and occupies an important place in contemporary critical discourse around text and performance. Tomlin (2013), for example, observes how Lehmann’s widely known terminology has resulted in a tendency to define theatre practice as either dramatic or postdramatic, mapping onto the existing binary between ‘text-based’ and ‘non-text-based’, while Bottoms (2009a) notes the significance of Lehmann as a frame of reference for many of the papers given at the ‘Performing Literatures’ conference. Here, then, I want to address this intellectual context and situate my own critical interventions in relation to it.

In Postdramatic Theatre, Lehmann makes the case that a range of late-20th-century Western theatre has moved beyond the dramatic paradigm and is therefore better described as ‘postdramatic’. Dramatic theatre, according to Lehmann, is defined by its reference to a whole, coherent world; dramatic theatre ‘proclaims wholeness as the model of the real’ (2006: 22). In postdramatic theatre, by contrast, this wholeness is abandoned in favour instead of multiple, clashing theatrical signs, to which spectators are free to react in idiosyncratic ways. Before going on to unpack some of Lehmann’s ideas, it’s important to note that his observations of what he refers to as the ‘new theatre’ of the late 20th century are based upon his specific perspective as a German theatregoer. Most of his examples are drawn from central European theatre practice, alongside a few prominent North American theatre-makers whose work has toured internationally, such as Robert Wilson, and fleeting mentions of a handful of British practitioners. Therefore, although the term ‘postdramatic theatre’ has gone on to have considerable currency in the British context, it’s worth questioning how far Lehmann’s theory speaks to theatre culture in the United Kingdom specifically. A similar note of caution has been sounded by Peter M. Boenisch, who argues that the ‘ossified antagonism of supposedly innovative experiments with bodies and images on the one hand, and text-based theatre on the other’ (2010: 162) is unique to British theatre and that Lehmann’s definition of the postdramatic cannot simply be aligned with one side of this binary. This should be borne in mind throughout the following discussion.

Nonetheless, I would suggest that the distinction between dramatic and postdramatic theatre is troubled by text, towards which Lehmann has a somewhat
ambivalent attitude. As Edith Cassiers, Timmy De Laet, and Luk Van den Dries note, ‘text seems to constitute the turning point where dramatic and postdramatic theatre are at once most closely related and most different’ (2019: 33). Lehmann sees dramatic theatre as ‘subordinated to the primacy of the text’ (2006: 21), whereas staged text is ‘merely a component’ (46) in postdramatic theatre, in which emphasis is placed on ‘disruption’ or ‘conflict’ between page and stage. For Lehmann, ‘the step to postdramatic theatre is taken only when the theatrical means beyond language are positioned equally alongside the text and are systematically thinkable without it’ (55, my emphasis). This provides a useful framework for conceiving of the text as just one among many theatrical elements, in contrast to a text-led orthodoxy which sees the written play as authoritative over all other aspects of the production. However, by insisting upon a theatre in which ‘theatrical means beyond language’ are ‘systematically thinkable’ without the text, Lehmann denies the palimpsestuous supplementarity of performance. Postdramatic theatre, according to Lehmann, ‘wants the stage to be a beginning and a point of departure, not a site of transcription-copying’ (32). This, though, ignores the essentially double nature of theatrical performance. As I discuss in Chapter 1, both plays and performances are at once complete and incomplete, continually gesturing towards one another – an ontological paradox that has proved problematic for many generations of thinkers.

To further complicate matters, the text has not entirely receded into the background of Lehmann’s ‘panorama of postdramatic theatre’, but appears in the form of the new, ‘no longer dramatic’ text, or as the traditional dramatic text which is ‘de-dramatized’ in its theatrical presentation. Lehmann stresses that his careful choice of the term ‘theatre’ – rather than, say, performance – signals a ‘continuing association and exchange between theatre and text’, but that in postdramatic theatre the text is no longer ‘master’ of the theatrical event (2006: 17). One of the more useful aspects of Lehmann’s intervention is this challenge to the perceived authority of the playtext, which Lehmann relocates as just one of the manifold components of live performance. This might seem to imply that any text may be staged in either a dramatic or a postdramatic way; it is what theatre-makers do with the text that determines its status in performance. However, the notion of the ‘no longer dramatic’ text suggests that the postdramatic impulse can be found not just in performance, but also in the written material of some plays. In her introduction to the English translation, Karen Jürs-Munby reinforces the idea that certain playwrights produce radically incomplete texts that move beyond the dramatic paradigm, suggesting that ‘a “turn to performance” can be observed’ in the work of writers such as Elfriede Jelinek, Martin Crimp, and Sarah Kane, whose plays involve the audience as ‘active co-writers of the (performance) text’ by eliminating elements such as dramatic plot, conventional character, and speech prefixes (2006: 6). Likewise, Barnett identifies a ‘no longer dramatic’ text that ‘suggests itself as a relativized element for performance from the outset and points to its own indeterminacy and status as uninterpreted material’ (2008: 16), aligning these texts with the characteristics of postdramatic theatre. Barnett’s key argument
is that playwrights such as Crimp and Kane actively disrupt meaning from within their texts, thus refusing a cohesive dramatic model and ‘leav[ing] all possible readings open’ (21). He concludes that ‘postdramatic texts configure themselves in such a way that they openly invite creative approaches’, but that this invitation ‘is not and cannot be binding’ (23, my emphasis). This would seem to dissolve the differences previously identified between texts, none of which can be binding in their invitation to interpreters and all of which are open to multiple readings. It is not that the playtexts examined by Barnett and others are not doing something interesting and experimental on the page – indeed, I give considerable attention to such experiments in later chapters – but these texts, like any other texts, cannot determine their realisation as either ‘dramatic’ or ‘postdramatic’ performances. This is at the root of my problem with the category of the postdramatic when applied to theatre texts.

One reason why the postdramatic or ‘no longer dramatic’ text has been the focus of many responses to Postdramatic Theatre, particularly in a British context, is that this has been understood as a way of continuing to ally certain theatrical texts with radical experimentation. In her persuasive breakdown of this development, Tomlin suggests that what has happened as a result is ‘an ever-widening of the postdramatic boundaries to ensure that all potentially radical work can be encompassed within its ever-broadening remit, and a corresponding narrowing of the boundaries of the dramatic’ (2013: 52). While understandable on the part of artists and scholars keen to stake out their claim to experimentalism, there’s a danger that such categories become distractions from the actual work of ideological interrogation in which such art purports to be engaged. There is something useful in thinking about how certain texts or performances might move beyond drama, when drama is defined as a specific representational model with its foundations in Aristotelian aesthetics. What is less productive is either a simplistic conflation of drama and text that deepens the divide between so-called ‘text-based’ and ‘non-text-based’ theatre-making, or an ambivalent approach to texts that leads to an ideological project of dividing ‘radical’ postdramatic texts from ‘regressive’ dramatic ones, without necessarily reflecting how truly radical (or not) these texts are.

As well as suggesting the possibility of ‘no longer dramatic’ texts, Lehmann insists that postdramatic theatre-making includes ‘directors who may stage traditional dramatic texts but do so by employing theatrical means in such a way that a de-dramatization occurs’ (2006: 74, original emphasis). This de-dramatization renders the dramatic plot of the text secondary to the other theatrical elements of its staging. Many of the examples that Lehmann discusses throughout his book could be classified under this heading of ‘de-dramatization’, as they take classic playtexts (often Shakespeare plays or Greek tragedies) as their point of departure. There are connections that can be drawn between these practices and the seemingly ‘radical’ revivals of classics by British directors that I discuss in Chapter 3 – many of which are influenced by the practitioners whom Lehmann cites. However, the possibility of such de-dramatization would seem to make the distinction between ‘dramatic’ and