Directing Plays

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Interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art... Real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content, and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, comformable.

Susan Sontag

Against Interpretation (Vintage)

Foreword

It is no longer possible to write a book about directing plays which concentrates solely on the practicalities of the craft. Theatre directors today have moved into the centre of the creative world, and are often considered as artists in their own right, independent of the playwrights of their age. So a director must know something of the history of the craft, if only to define his or her place in the tradition, and must also understand something of the philosophical and aesthetic arguments which underpin the day to day business of directing. Directors in the contemporary theatre work at the very centre of a series of intellectual disagreements which have split the creative and critical world, and questions of judgement and evaluation are crucial to the creative decisions they must take ten or twenty times every day. The practicalities, grouping, rehearsal technique, handling actors, talking to playwrights, are as important as they have always been, but directors now have to answer a question which would not have been asked in earlier centuries of people doing the work they do: why are you doing it, and why are you doing it that particular way?

No one today can become a good director without making some kind of answer to these subversive questions. So this book, while giving full value to the practicalities of direction technique, must seek to find some answer to these deeper questions, or at least, set out clearly what the questions are, so that each director can construct his or her own answer. There is no right answer. Directors are as various as people, and all directors will find solutions to suit the particular work they want to do. But the questions must be addressed. Only when they are satisfactorily answered for each individual, does it become possible to do decent work.

Author's Note

English lacks a third person personal pronoun without gender associations at a time when it is beginning to need one. *S/he* is unpronounceable, and the endless repetition of *he or she* is stylistically disastrous.

The theatre, on the other hand, is one of the few professions in which talent really does matter more than gender. Real talent is always in such short supply, that when it appears, no one cares whether *x* or *y* chromosomes are dominant. The Euro-American theatre is full of brilliant women writers and directors, and actresses have been at the very centre of theatre culture since 1660.

Being male, I have used the masculine form when referring to directors, writers and actors. If I had been female, I would as naturally have used the female form. So if any of my readers, of whatever gender, find all those *hes* oppressive, let me invite them to change them, in their mind – or in their copy too, if they wish.

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What is a Director?

Plays have been performed in public, within European culture at least, for about two-and-a-half thousand years. The first actor whose name we know, Thespis, was active in Athens in the mid sixth century BC, and the first surviving play, Aeschylus's *The Persians*, dates from 472.

Who the first director was is a matter open to some argument. If we assume that we are talking about a stage organiser and interpreter of plays who is a specialist in that field and earns his living from it, not principally an actor or playwright, then we must certainly look just before or just after World War I to find him. The masculine pronoun is precise. I know of no specialist female director recorded as working regularly before 1930. The first, in England at least, was probably Joan Littlewood, in the earliest days of Theatre Workshop during the 1940s.

So if we assume that the theatre is two-and-a-half thousand years old, and directors have been around for about seventy-five, the theatre has managed quite well without them for about two thousand four hundred and twenty-five years.

Like the appearance of human beings on the planet Earth, directors arrived very late in the day. They are a new-born child in the lifetime of the theatre, barely out of the womb. There are people still living who were born before there was any such profession.

So how did the theatre survive during the 97% of its existence when directors were not around?

The answer is that most of the tasks performed today by a director were performed by the playwright or the leading actor or the stage manager, and what we think of as the director's principal task, interpretation, was simply not an issue before the beginning of the twentieth century. There was little doubt about how plays should be done while the playwrights and actors were in charge. Early skirmishes of what was to become at times a large scale and bloody battle were heard as the nineteenth became the twentieth century, when Chekhov complained that his plays were meant to be comedies and were being

played too seriously. The man who was in charge of the production of Chekhov's plays was a leading actor, not a specialist director, but he was certainly one of the principal candidates for the title of father of the craft: Konstantin Stanislavski, of the Moscow Arts Theatre.

So how were plays staged before the craft of directing as a specialised discipline emerged?

Directing without directors

Any play can be directed by a group of actors among themselves, with or without the assistance of the playwright. In a simple or limited space, that solution is often as good as any. There is a great deal about presenting plays which actors learn through daily experience which no one else, not even the most talented or experienced director quite knows, and that knowledge of the craft from the inside can create powerful productions. But in a large or complex space, or with an unconventional play, it quickly becomes clear that an overall controlling imagination needs to be at work, and whether the choices such a space presents are resolved by the playwright, an actor, or some other person, they must be resolved.

There are many times and places during the history of western theatre when something which we would recognise as directing must have taken place. Classical Greek plays, with their dancing and singing choruses, and their spectacular effects – chariots descending from machines, and doors opening to reveal bodies on moving trucks – must have required a controlling intelligence. Tradition tells us that the playwrights themselves performed this function, writing the text and the music and organising every aspect of the production except for the actual training – and financing – of the chorus, even at times playing the leading parts themselves. Similarly, Purcell's semi-operas, with their moving scenery, incredibly spectacular machines descending from the flies or rising from under the stage, their singing choruses and grotesque dancers, must have been very precisely directed by Betterton, the great actor-manager, who ought perhaps to be called the first great English Director too.

At every stage in theatre history plays must have been directed by *somebody*, in a more or less sophisticated manner, but the fact is that we know very little about these processes before the twentieth century. We don't know how playwrights and actor managers spoke to their actors, how they moved them, whether character motivations were discussed at all, nor do we know much about how the design and dressing of plays was undertaken. Perhaps the key element in

modern directing is to have in the mind some overall vision of how the play will appear on the stage, but whether that happened, or whether the production of plays was a pragmatic business, built up in daily rehearsal, is also largely unknown. We guess that something like the imaginative directing process as we understand it must have taken place, but it is guesswork. For hard fact, we are almost completely in the dark.

There are some clues. There are a few scenes in plays from the past which show the process of play-direction taking place, there is the famous row between Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones about the purpose of dramatic representation, and there is the conscious recreation of the Restoration Theatre after the Civil War and Interregnum. All these moments give us some insight into the direction of plays as historical fact. It is no part of the purpose of this book to write a detailed history of directing or the emergence of the modern director. Students and interested readers will know where to consult books that will lead them to a deeper understanding of that process. But if we want to know where we are now, we have to have some idea where we have come from, and a brief examination of these primary sources from pre-twentieth century theatre is important to the understanding of a directors task at the present time.

Players and masquers

Paradoxically, we know even less about the staging of plays during the first great period of the English Theatre, from 1590-1640 than we know about the Greeks, whose theatres do at least survive physically. We know the names of the London theatres, the outdoor venues which attracted large popular audiences, The Globe, The Rose and The Red Bull, and the more sophisticated and refined first generation of indoor theatres, starting with the Blackfriars in 1608, and going on to include The Cockpit in Drury Lane, and Salisbury Court, between the eastern end of Fleet Street and the Thames. But we can't walk into one and have a look around.

It seems likely that plays during this golden age, were even less directed, in the modern sense, than the Greek plays had been, because the architecture of the theatre that had developed from the Inn-yard, and which still retained a good deal of the Inn-yard layout when the theatres moved indoors, was very much less capable of spectacular staging effects than the Greek amphitheatre was. Hamlet's scene with the players probably gives us as much insight as to how plays were directed in Shakespeare's company as we are likely to get. Hamlet himself, as the author of a speech to be inserted into a pre-

existent play, probably stands in the position of the playwright, and perhaps gives us some indication how Shakespeare himself spoke to the actors when one of his plays was in preparation. He is concerned with the realism of the actors' presentation, the need *to hold the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature and scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure...* He asks the players to avoid over stagey gestures, in an age when a formal language of gesture was very much part of an actor's equipment, and he requests, with a recognisable sharp edge to his tone of voice, that the comedians should not improvise their own lines or play too many unscripted gags. Otherwise, he treats the actors with great respect, as masters of their art. Having given them a clear indication of how they should act, he defers in practice to their experience. It is significant that he says nothing at all about how his speech should be staged. He assumes that is the actors' business. When we look at Shakespeare's comic version of the same process, we see much the same thing. Peter Quince, the playwright, is entirely in charge, though he has to cope with a pretty monstrous ego in his leading actor, Bottom. He duly butters him up and flatters him, as directors have doubtless done since the year dot, and then gives his players the very simplest instructions as to where to make their entrances. Anything at all complicated or sophisticated, the simple stage-effects of the moon and the wall, is discussed between the whole group, and the views of the most dominant personality, Bottom, are adopted.

It seems to me that a number of things can be inferred from these two famous rehearsal scenes. The first is that the play was staged by an interaction between the playwright and the leading actor, with the playwright providing the intellectual insight, and the actor the charisma. No change there then, you might say. Certainly Shakespeare and his fellow playwrights were dealing with the first generation of great actors, the first men in the modern world who became famous for their acting. They, far more than the playwrights, were the public's darlings, and it seems likely that when the chips were down, the great actors, who were the principal sharers and managers of the theatres, and therefore the dominant financial interest, got their way. It takes no great insight to infer that Shakespeare probably had a difficult time with the popular comedian Will Kempe, and it is perhaps not too much to suggest that the portrait of the overbearing Bottom and the harassed Peter Quince, might represent a comic picture of Shakespeare's irritation with Burbage on a bad day. Certainly the scene contains many moments which any working director will ruefully recognise, from the actor rewriting the script to suit himself, to meaningless tantrums that have to be soothed by outrageous flattery, and ill-timed questions about beards.

But the clearest indications of the limited nature of direction in Shakespeare's day are given by the layout of the theatre itself, that exposed platform, playing in daylight and the open air, to four galleries and a raked pit, that had developed from the architecture of the Inn-yards within which the players had first set up their portable stages.

When you work on such a stage – and I worked on one not unlike the traditional shape, at the St George's Theatre in the mid 1970s – you are very conscious that this is a space that naturally favours the actors, and through them, the playwright. It is a simple platform for acting upon, with no permanent scenery, simple entrances, a plain and practical balcony and a curtained alcove that is very flexible in use, but provides no stimulus for the eye. The Elizabethan/Jacobean stage is an amazingly flexible theatrical instrument, as the plays of that great age, in their infinite variety of strategies for staging everything from bedroom scenes to battles, amply prove, but its drama is all in the imagination: the vivid words, the rhetorical acting, the accompanying music of lutes and recorders, the simple props, flags, swords and drums brought on stage and taken off again by the actors. There is very little opportunity for spectacle in any sense that we, or the Restoration, or the Greeks would have understood it. Pageantry, shields and flags and banners, works well in such a space, and the History plays are full of opportunities for its exploitation, but there is little further opportunity to stun the imagination of the eye rather than the mind. It is a platform whose infinite possibilities the actors must have got to know intimately, and learned how to exploit, so that any sensible playwright working with them, particularly one like Shakespeare who had been an actor himself, would have deferred to their experience again and again. It was, quite simply, an actors' kingdom. What was there for a director to do? To tell the actors where to stand, or how to group themselves? Playing the same theatre every afternoon, the actors knew the answers to those questions far better than anyone else did.

A playwright had plenty of other considerations to occupy his time. He had to be sure that his text was fully understood, and that it told its story as well as it could in the theatre space for which it had been written. He had to ensure that what had fired his imagination, burst into flame in the imaginative space of the theatre, and this might involve his participation in movement, in what costuming there was – not much, as all actors had their own acting suits which they wore in every play – and in effects such as battles and storms. Otherwise it was up to the actors. The balance of power between the two, playwright and actor, doubtless varied, depending upon the relative fame

of each. Shakespeare, Jonson and Fletcher probably had a good deal of say in what was done with their works within their own companies, at least as much as Prince Hamlet does. But Burbage and Alleyn and Will Kempe were out there in front of the public, and I suspect, as in modern theatre, in the last analysis the man on stage got his own way.

However, the public theatres were not the only place where theatrical entertainments were staged. From his accession in 1603, James I, encouraged by his Queen, Anne of Denmark, who at her brother's court had met the young architect Inigo Jones, had delighted in the presentation of masques, courtly entertainments in which royalty and nobility themselves participated, and which were staged with incredible expense and splendour. Initially stimulated by the Florentine Intermedii of 1589, these spectacular events united poetry and action with music, singing and dancing, together with the most sumptuous and imaginative staging. Painted scenery, lighting effects, machines that raised whole mountains, with ridges big enough for actors to stand upon, from beneath a stage that appeared to be too small to contain them, chariots coming down from the heavens, sea-battles enacted – nothing could have been further from the poetic intensity and theatrical simplicity of what was being staged in the public theatres than these intellectually flimsy and sycophantic spectacles, conspicuous theatrical consumption for a Court that did not share the tastes of the majority of its subjects, and whose alienation from them would lead, forty years later, to Civil War.

There was no doubt how the Court regarded these entertainments, and the participation in them of the architectural and theatrical genius, Inigo Jones. Samuel Daniel remarked of them, *the art and invention of the Architect gives the greatest grace, and is of the most importance.* But Ben Jonson, brought in to work with Jones as the poet for the venture, had other ideas. For him the *show* furnished by the architect, however elaborate, was only *the bodily part*, which the poet's invention had to animate.

The two men were powerful personalities, both supreme artists in their fields, Jonson, fiercely proud of the depth of his hard-earned Classical learning (as working-class boys usually are), Jones fresh from Italy, and fired by his studies of Palladio. They were chalk and cheese, and wanted to achieve quite different things in their masques. Jonson aspired to give moral and poetic depth to what was essentially a flimsy and unserious form. Jones wished to create ever more stunning and imaginative spectacles to amaze the eye. Jonson was at a disadvantage from the start, not only because the Masque form was probably too flimsy to bear the structure of ideas and poetry he wished to build upon it, but also because the Queen and the Court much

preferred looking at Jones's pictures to hearing, and thinking about, Jonson's verses.

The row between them was of titanic proportions, and went on for the best part of twenty years. Finally, in 1631, when Jonson insisted his name came before Jones's in the publication of the current masque, it became an irreparable breach. Jonson, old and ill, was cast out from the Court, and younger and more amenable poets, Aurelian Townshend and William Davenant, who would do what Jones told them, were brought in in his place.

The story represents a crucial moment in the history of the emergence of the director. The poet, who up to that time had expected to be the one who principally directed how the performance should go, found himself in competition with, and eventually defeated by, the designer. It is the first evidence we have of a fundamental disagreement among working professionals about what their production should be.

The sumptuous masques, performed to an invited aristocratic audience only, had little lasting effect upon the public theatres. As news of what was going on at Whitehall gradually filtered out, playwrights quickly borrowed those aspects of the masque they could use in their own plays, the mythological formality and some of the music, singing and dancing, but little of the conspicuous expense. The playwrights and actors made sure they stayed in control. There was little, anyway, that could be done to follow up Jones's experiments on the open platform stage. His new forms of staging depended upon degrees of illusion, not on the simplicity allied to imagination of the traditional Elizabethan Theatre. They needed a new kind of theatre, and were eventually to find one. In the long run Jones was to have a far greater influence on the history of the theatre than Jonson, but not until after the Civil War, when both men were dead.

From our perspective, this row between two powerful geniuses, is full of pregnant implications for the gradual birth of the specialist theatre director. The masque was a collaboration between many aspects of theatre art, words, actions, music, dancing and visual spectacle, in a way the plays in the public theatre were not. All those different disciplines follow different agendas and have different priorities, and if a form of theatre were to arise which was as collaborative as masques were, then the question of who had overall control was bound to become significant. The idea of a director hadn't been conceived yet, and it would be centuries before the conception would be brought to birth. But the necessity for his eventual existence was, in a shadowy way, implied by the twenty-year quarrel between Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones.

Sir William Davenant

The extraordinary figure of Sir William Davenant is an even louder pre-echo and sharper foreshadowing of the modern director, occupying, as he did in the 1660s, very much the position the Director of the Royal National Theatre or the RSC holds today.

As plain William Davenant, son of an Oxford vintner – and even, according to local gossip, the bastard son of Shakespeare, who stayed regularly at his father's Inn on his journeys to and from Stratford – he had made his mark very early in London as a young playwright and poet. His first play was staged when he was only twenty-one, and though it wasn't enormously successful, it was to the taste of the Court, and he soon found himself in that circle of poets, musicians and painters clustered round Charles I and his French wife. The fashionable young poet and playwright soon became the principal provider of texts for the Court masques, by then being staged in a specially constructed masquing house, just to the south of Inigo Jones's Banqueting house at Whitehall, which was no longer in use because it was thought the smoke from the candles required for Jones's lighting effects was damaging the Reubens paintings on the ceiling.

Davenant worked for about five years with Jones, his principal works being the two propaganda pieces, *Britannia Triumphans* (1638) and *Salmacida Spolia* (1640). These are worthless as theatre poetry, and rare examples in English literary culture of a poet slavishly serving the political needs of a Royal patron. *Britannia Triumphans* is principally a justification of the King's ship-money policy, one of the main causes of the Civil War, and contains crude caricatures of wicked Puritans, which must have pleased the Court as much as they alienated the London populace, who already loathed the King's masques for their conspicuous expense, and the fact that they played on Sundays.

The Civil War brought an end to masques and masquing. The poets, musicians and artists of Charles's court scattered, and survived as best they could, or died, as William Lawes did at the battle of Chester. Davenant himself fought for three years as a gunnery officer, was knighted in the field for his services, acted as a diplomat, was imprisoned by the Commonwealth, and narrowly escaped execution, and finally married a French widow with money, and settled in London. There he made his peace with the Cromwellian regime, became one of a group of unofficial court poets that included Marvell, Dryden and Waller, and almost certainly engaged in a little elegant spying on behalf of Oliver's Government. There is an extant note, in which he offers his services – unspecified – to Thurloe, Cromwell's spy-master,

and people only offered their services to that ominous figure for one reason. He managed to set up a theatre in his own house in 1656, staged the first English Opera, *The Siege of Rhodes*, in his dining room, and survived from hand to mouth, as all theatre artists did, during the Protectorate.

But with the Restoration of Charles II in 1660 everything changed. The theatres were reopened, the King was known to love plays and dislike operas, and it was clear that English theatrical culture would be very swiftly reborn. The crucial question was how.

Davenant himself was in a difficult position. In order to make theatrical entertainments of any kind, he had been required to make himself *persona grata* in Cromwell's circle at Hampton Court. That fact alone made him to some degree *persona* ***non*** *grata* among the newly returned Cavaliers. He was also fifty-four, and too old for the society of dissolute young sparks gathered about the pleasure-loving King. He had only two things in his favour. He was still, though unpaid for years, and destined never to be paid again, the Poet Laureate, appointed by the new King's martyred father. He also held, granted by the Royal Martyr's sacred hand in 1639 but never used, a patent to open, even to build, a new theatre.

With the insight of genius, he saw two crucial things, which were to have a permanent effect on the future of the theatre. The first was that the audience had changed during the war years, and that London would no longer sustain the six or seven theatres that had co-existed simultaneously during the great years of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre. The second, was that if he were to offer the public theatre what he had learned from Jones in the King's masquing house, he would need to build a completely different kind of theatre building. These two insights, political and artistic, were to change the English theatre for ever, and they still cast shadows right down to our present time.

His first task was to make the production of plays financially viable. Even before the King had set foot back in England, three ad-hoc companies had formed from those actors who had survived the lean years of the Republic. Mohun and Hart, stalwarts of the pre-war Blackfriars troupe, set up a company at the Red Bull, the bookseller Rhodes set up a new company of young actors at The Cockpit, and William Beeston's men began to play at Salisbury Court.

Davenant set up nothing at once, but went into negotiations with Sir Thomas Killigrew, a minor playwright and universal fixer close to the centre of the Court, to acquire monopoly rights in theatre performance. Davenant's old patent and Killigrew's political clout had the desired effect, and by August 1660, the two men had been granted the sole rights to present plays in London. There followed a three month

struggle with the actors' companies, which was overwhelmingly won by Davenant and Killigrew, who, by October 1660, had set up a united company, employing all the best actors from the three pre-existing companies. Any actors who were not working for them, were forbidden to act at all, on pain of jail. This totalitarian coup by Davenant and Killigrew at least ensured that one theatre kept open and solvent, and was based on the clear-eyed view that the audience for the new theatre was no more than two or three thousand people at the most, largely the Court and its hangers on. The old unified audience, which had ranged from the nobility to the groundlings, and covered all classes in between, and which had kept the Globe, the Blackfriars, The Red Bull, The Cockpit and Salisbury Court, prosperous for thirty years, was gone for ever, destroyed by the war, and the political ideologies that had arisen from it.

Within six weeks of their coup, Killigrew and Davenant had split into two separate companies, Killigrew having all the best-known actors working for him, and most of the money and court favour on his side, Davenant having a new idea of what theatre might become and a twenty-five year old novice called Thomas Betterton leading his company. Killigrew set up his company at Gibbons's Tennis Court in Drury Lane, calling it the Theatre Royal, but the theatre structure he erected in the old Tennis court was very much the same that had served since the first indoor theatre opened at Blackfriars in 1608, a thrust stage, curtained alcove and balcony, and no scenic effects.

Davenant had bought Lisle's Tennis Court in Lincoln's Inn fields several months earlier, and here Jones's ideas were to be brought to the public theatre. Davenant planned to built an Italianate proscenium arch, and to have a deep inner stage behind it as well as a twenty-foot platform stage in front. There were to be doors either side of the proscenium, and flats either side of the inner stage, which moved in slots so that they could be instantaneously reversed, thus changing the scene in full view of the audience in a matter of seconds. The back of the stage operated an ingenious system of shutters, so that the back-cloth, itself a new invention, could be changed as quickly as the flats, and there were large trapdoors and flying-systems, so that whole islands, mountains or grottoes could arise from under the stage, or chariots, gods in clouds, or airborne countries could descend from the heavens. The art of the scene painter, and the costume designer were to enter the theatre for the first time in England, and there was to be a theatre orchestra on a more or less permanent basis. In effect, at Lisle's Tennis Court Davenant created every feature of the Restoration theatre as we know it, and that theatre has been, with modifications, the basis of theatre down to the present time. The only feature in

which Killigrew out-thought him was in the positioning of the theatre orchestra. In the Lincoln's Inn Fields theatre it was on stage, though we don't know precisely where; at the Theatre Royal a few years later, Killigrew introduced the orchestra pit, across the front of the stage, and beneath stage height.

Davenant's crucial position in the history of the theatre is fully documented, but the sense in which he is the first director-figure has not been so widely noted. He was, of course, a playwright-director, as many were before and after him, but he was also the proprietor and principal shareholder, so that he had complete power in the running of the whole enterprise. Shakespeare had had no such power, and, while other actors wrote plays and ran companies, none had quite such a degree of control over all aspects of the production as Davenant had. Most of his time, in a theatre culture where a play rarely ran longer than four days, must have been spent in keeping the theatre afloat and seeing his own and other people's plays, old and new, onto the stage. From 1660 till his death in 1668 he ran his company, The Duke's Theatre, very much as a modern artistic director runs a large company today, except that he had no subsidy.

Of course, Davenant has taken a great deal of stick for his rewriting of Shakespeare, particularly for what he did to *Measure For Measure* and *Much Ado about Nothing* – he used the plot of the latter as a sub plot for the former – and in his substantial rewrite of *The Tempest.* In absolute terms these are disastrous works, unerringly substituting bad writing for good, and imposing formal structures on the plotting that remove them from any sort of reality. Miranda, for instance, the woman who has never seen a man, has to be balanced in Davenant's version by Hippolito, the man who has never seen a woman. But that grotesque invention gives us the clue. Davenant knew his clientèle, far better than we do. He knew that the semi-literate Cavaliers and Court butterflies, and their brawling, drunken sons, who made up his audience, would hardly understand genuine Shakespeare, in a language that was already seeming archaic and removed from common speech. He also sensed crucial and deep-seated cultural changes, the classical age of rationality and balance which had already dawned in educated men's consciousness, and which he had recognised and incorporated into his own work very early. Like modern concept directors, he re-interpreted theatre works to suit the preconceptions of his own age. Being created to please a particular audience, those works do not survive into our age, and now seem as grotesque as the products of some of today's concept directors will doubtless seem in the future. Davenant loved Shakespeare's works deeply, and lived in an age which by no means considered Shake-

speare an undisputed master. What he did seemed to him the best way to keep Shakespeare's plays alive in his own culture, and that attitude, among his many gifts to the modern theatre, is vividly current in our own day. Consideration of some of its implications will be one of the prime concerns of this book, as they are close to the very centre of what a modern director is and does.

Without doubt, the balance of power between playwrights and leading actors continued to shift, according to the relative status of each. By the end of the seventeenth century, Betterton, as actor-manager, was clearly in charge of what went on in the companies he led, and Garrick, in an age of minor playwrights and great actors – himself, Peg Woffington, Charles Kemble and Sarah Siddons – was the creative force in all his companies. Nor can one imagine the nineteenth-century giants, Kean or Macready, taking much notice of anything mere playwrights said – Shaw's experience with Irving at the end of the century confirms the point. So the overall situation remained the same, fixed and largely unquestioned, for two hundred years. There was no need for directors in the modern sense of the word. Playwrights explained what they wanted, and actors decided whether it suited them to take any notice or not.

Sheridan and Pinero

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century ideas began to ferment within the theatre, reflecting disturbances in the wider artistic and intellectual world, that would eventually create a need for specialist directors to come into existence. But before we go on to consider that period of extraordinary turmoil, whose volcanic eruptions have not yet ceased, and whose tremors have shaken the whole world of twentieth-century art, it is worth while considering two further rehearsal scenes, which reveal a great deal more about the manner of directing in their respective ages than any amount of anecdotage or riffling through old theatre archives. These two primary sources are Sheridan's *The Critic* and Pinero's *Trelawney of the Wells.*

Both are plays which purport to give a picture of the normal conditions of theatre rehearsal, the former satirical in intention, the latter attempting to express in a mildly sentimental way the great love most theatre people feel for their profession.

In both plays the playwright is clearly in charge of rehearsals, and his second in command is the stage manager – but there the similarity ceases. In *The Critic*, the officious Puff interferes at every level of the rehearsal, but the joke is that he is always overridden or ignored by the actors, who do what they have always done, whether he likes it

or not. To begin with, they have cut his play to pieces, quite without his knowledge or permission, so that the play no longer makes sense as a story.

Puff: What the plague! What a cut is here! What has become of the description of her first meeting with Don Whiskerandos, his gallant behaviour in the sea fight, and the simile of the canary bird?

Tilburina: Indeed sir, you will find they will not be missed...

Puff: Here has been such a cutting and slashing, I don't know where they've got to myself!

Tilburina: Indeed sir, you will find it will connect very well.

Mr Puff is, of course, a terrible playwright, and a hopeless director, but for satire to have its point, it must have some connection with reality. Sheridan, the long-time theatre manager, must have met some incompetent playwright-directors in his time, and he doubtless remembered them all when he began to write.

The Critic is principally a critique of bad playwriting. Crude, ill-motivated expositions, ludicrous plots, dreary passages of rhetoric and overdone metaphors are defined with wicked accuracy, but there are in addition some interesting passages which throw a similarly satirical light on what direction the actors of the time were likely to receive, or tolerate. *Pray sir, don't interrupt us here, you'll ruin our feelings*, says the leading actress, playing Tilburina, when Puff makes a comment at the height of her sentimental farewell to her lover. Throughout the rehearsal, the actors do exactly what they like, and barely tolerate Puff's interjections. When they do ask him for some help, he is less than useful. At the end of his first scene, he has five noble lords kneeling in prayer, presumably downstage centre, as the scene ends. The actor playing Leicester makes a reasonable enough request:

Leicester: But sir, you haven't settled how we are to get off here?

Puff: You couldn't go off kneeling, could you?

Raleigh: No sir, quite impossible!

Puff: It would have a good effect, i'faith, if you could. Exeunt praying! And would vary the established mode of springing off with a glance at the pit.... Very well, repeat the last line standing, and go off the old way.

The exchange is very funny, both to read and in performance, and a rapier thrust into the vitals of playwright-directors who don't have the first grasp of stage technique, but it also shows how formal a style of acting the eighteenth century employed. Actors knew what they were doing and how they customarily did things, and it probably took a very experienced and widely-respected playwright to have any real effect on them at all. The whole business of staging seems to have been a question of established formalities with the actors sorting out for themselves what they would do. When, at the end of their sentimental parting, Tilburina and Whiskerandos go off, Puff cries out in despair:

> **Puff**: Sir, Madam, if you go out without the parting look, you might as well dance out!

How we would love to know what that parting look was like, and, come to that, the established mode of springing off with a glance at the pit! But Sheridan's joke isn't quite finished. Tilburina has been accompanied throughout by a Confidante, who has said nothing, but imitated her mistress's every move. *Pray sir*, she asks, as Tilburina prepares to exit, *how am I to get off here? What the devil signifies how you get off*, Mr Puff replies, somewhat ungallantly *Edge away at the top, or how you will!*

Perhaps the richest irony of a play which makes a wry comment in almost every line, is that when Mr Puff does give positive direction to his actors, telling Tilburina to use her handkerchief to dab her eye on a certain line, and to start more dramatically when she hears her lover's voice offstage, it is to insert two thunderous acting clichés.

Of course, *The Critic* is an outrageous, over-the-top joke at the expense of a whole variety of bad theatre practices, the modern equivalents of which are still to be criticised in our own age. But reading between the funny lines, it does give us a remarkable insight into the theatre of Sheridan's day. The playwrights were expected to do a great deal of production, from setting the scenes to arranging the spectacular effects – Mr Puff is wholly responsible for the spectacular (and disastrous) sea-fight on stage which, accompanied by Handel and Purcell, ends his play – but they seem to have had no real power. The playwrights' theatre of the seventeenth century, had become an actors' theatre in the late eighteenth and that process intensified in the nineteenth. Nowhere in any material concerning playwrights staging their plays is there anything to suggest that there were playwrights who had sufficient understanding of the techniques of staging and acting plays to compete with and criticise their actors on equal terms. Most actors surely felt they knew a great deal more about such things than any playwright did, and they were probably right. They were