ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

Post-War British Theatre

John Elsom

Routledge Revivals

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Since the Second World War, we have witnessed exciting, often confusing developments in the British theatre. This book, first published in 1976, presents an enlightening, objective history of the many facets of post-war British theatre and a fresh interpretation of theatre itself.

The remarkable and profound changes which have taken place during this period range from the style and content of plays, through methods of acting, to shapes of theatres and the organisational habits of managers. Two national theatres have been brought almost simultaneously into existence; while at the other end of the financial scale, the fringe and pub theatres have kicked their way into vigorous life.

The theatre in Britain has been one of the post-war success stories, to judge by its international renown and its mixture of experimental vitality and polished experience. In this book Elsom presents an approach to the problems of criticism and appreciation which range beyond those of literary analysis.

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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

A short history of post-war British theatre is almost impossible to write. It has to be very short or very long. There is an anecdote, concerning the late Pope John XXIII who was asked by a friend visiting Europe whether he could see Rome in a day. The Pope answered casually, 'Yes.' His friend then looked guilty, 'I'm sounding just like an ordinary tourist. Of course I can't see Rome in a day. I'll take a week.' At that, the Pope looked doubtful, 'You won't be able to see much of Rome in a week.' 'Then,' said his friend heroically, 'I'll cancel my business appointments, I'll send a telegram to my wife and I'll stay here for a whole month!' The Pope threw up his hands in horror, 'You can see nothing whatsoever of Rome in a month!'

The situation is similar if we pay a historical visit to the theatre of the past thirty years. We can summarise what has happened in a few phrases; or we can pursue accuracy down every theatrical by-way leading to an enormous and probably unreadable compendium of minutiae. Fortunately, such a tome is not really needed. This period, a fruitful one for British theatre, has been almost equally prolific in reference books, guides and substantial critical surveys. Lists of most professional productions can be found (firstly) in the *Stage Yearbooks* (from 1948 to 1969) and then in the *British Theatre Directories* (from 1972 to 1974); the gaps in these lists, of course, are irritating. Biographies of contemporary dramatists can be found in several reference works, notably *Mid-Century Authors* and *Twentieth Century Authors*, *Contemporary Dramatists* and the *Authors' and Writers' Who's Who*. *Who's Who in the Theatre* gives career summaries of actors, dramatists, directors. John Russell Taylor's three books, *Anger and After* (1962), *The Decline and Fall of the Well-Made Play* (1969) and *The Second Wave* (1971), manage to combine useful critical introductions to the work of major British dramatists from the mid-1950s onwards, together with a comprehensive, if necessarily brief, list of the minor ones. Bamber Gascoigne's *Twentieth Century Drama* describes some developments in the theatre until the end of the 1950s. Richard Findlater's *The Unholy Trade* and Ronald Hayman's *The Set-Up* provide good accounts of the different stages in the re-organisation of post-war British theatre, thus supplementing two other detailed

surveys on *Theatre Ownership in Britain* (1953, a report prepared for the Federation of Theatre Unions) and *The Theatre Today* (1970, published by the Arts Council). Michael Billington's *The Modern Actor* provides a description of the conditions facing actors today, together with some studies of individual performers, while Findlater's *The Player Kings*, with two volumes of interviews, *Great Acting* and *Acting in the Sixties* (1967 and 1970, published by the BBC), give illuminating accounts of the work of certain selected 'star' actors. For those who require short but surprisingly detailed general studies of the different phases in the development of drama since the war, there have been four chronicles published for the British Council: Speight's *Drama Since 1939*, Trewin's *Drama, 1945–50* and *Drama in Britain, 1951–64*, and Lambert's *Drama in Britain, 1964–1973*. There have been many studies of individual movements, such as Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* and *Brecht: A Choice of Evils*. Even fringe theatre is acquiring a bibliography. There is a quick guide to the origins of fringe theatre in the magazine, *Theatre Quarterly* (volume III, no. 12), compiled by Jonathan Hammond, while Peter Ansorge's *Disrupting the Spectacle* (1975) considers the five years of fringe theatre from 1968 onwards.

With these and other lists, why do we need a short history of post-war British theatre at all? What should be the scope of this book? I am attempting two main tasks: first, to provide a general introduction to post-war theatre which deliberately does not concentrate on any one aspect (such as the dramatists concerned or the directors) but which tries to relate the many different facets; the second aim is to consider the evolution of the theatre, particularly in such matters as critical standards. Our current standards, while not necessarily 'better' than those of the past, do seem to have evolved from them in a distinct progression. Thus, I do mean 'evolution' and not just 'change'. To consider (and possibly evaluate) such developments, however, requires a certain critical stance of one's own. It would be misleading to pretend that my standards are the same as other people's, or even generally accepted. This history therefore begins in a personal, subjective way, so that the reader can guess at my predilections and (during the course of the book) modify his consideration of my judgments accordingly.

This book is dedicated to my many friends at the City Literary Institute, Marylebone Institute and the Kensington and Chelsea Institute, who heroically sat through some very long lectures.

Chapter 1

Language and money

W. H. Auden once remarked that the prime duty of a poet was 'to maintain the purity of the language'. My instinct (hunch or prejudice—as you will) tells me that a similar duty rests on the shoulders of those who belong, even indirectly, like critics, to the theatrical profession. Their first task is to maintain the purity of the theatrical language.

Auden was not suggesting that languages should be racially or ethnically 'pure', that British poets should only be permitted to use good British words. Nor was he implying that words should be kept in convent isolation until they can be properly mated with a true Master of Language. He did mean that the words chosen by poets should be pure in the sense of 'authentic', a term much employed by the German philosopher, Karl Jaspers, whose brand of existentialism greatly influenced Auden.

Language evolves from the human need to discover effective symbols which can correspond to and communicate experiences. They should reflect a vital response to life, not as a mirror flashes off the sun but as a token, given in love, reflects the feelings of the lover. These symbols, these tokens, contain a core of meaning which does not, or ought not to, fluctuate too wildly from individual to individual. Totally accurate communication is, of course, impossible. We experience life as individuals and our impressions are neither identical nor interchangeable. To one person, the taste of salt may be nauseating; to another invigorating. But when we use the word salt, we don't mean pepper or the army. To that extent, communication is possible, and by using words with as much accuracy as we can muster, we are maintaining the purity of the language.

Languages can easily become defiled. Clichés are phrases which have lost some authenticity by being used too often and too carelessly. Jargon is language which buries its mean-

ing under a pile of other intentions, such as the desire to impress, seduce or otherwise falsely to persuade. Sometimes, languages are simply incapable of expressing certain experiences, perhaps because their vocabularies are limited in one direction or another. The quest for pure language also implies overcoming the deficiencies of an inherited language by borrowing, resurrecting or inventing words to convey experiences which would otherwise have been hard or impossible to express.

This is also the poet's task, one which is often fraught with social and political implications, for societies, governments, ruling and non-ruling classes can restrict their languages deliberately in order to prevent people from thinking and communicating in inexpedient ways. George Orwell's nightmare of governmentally restricted language, in his novel *1984*, has never been too far from daylight reality. The Edwardian dramatist, Edward Garnett, had to use a French word, 'enceinte', to explain in 1909 that the heroine of his play, *The Breaking Point*, was pregnant, because the English word was considered vulgar and likely to inflame lascivious thoughts. The unofficial and sometimes unconscious restrictions can be worse than the official ones, expressed (say) through censorship. Class and racial loyalties, political and religious beliefs, can have the effect of outlawing those words (and through them those experiences) which do not seem to belong within their schemes of commitments. The poet who knowingly allows the language to be restricted like this has perpetrated the worst literary crime of all, 'the treason of the clerks', but avoiding this treachery can require moral, mental and sometimes physical courage of a high order.

A language is, of course, more than the sum of its words. It is also the organisation of these words, the formation of sentences and paragraphs, the general technique whereby one idea or impression is related to the next. The same test of authenticity can be applied here. Some syntactical rules are mere pedantry, providing contorted sentences if rigidly observed and more of an obstacle than a help to thought and expression. Other rules contain the origins of all logic. Without them we would have difficulty in thinking rationally at all, or at least through the medium of words.

Not all verbal organisation is so cerebral. The poet who chooses to write in verse organises the natural stresses and sounds of language into metrical patterns, thus in a sense dancing with words. Pattern can have many purposes. It may simply be a way of holding together many impressions in the mind: when the pattern is broken, an impression has been lost or deliberately dropped. Pattern can be useful in this way, or decorative, or establish musical rhythms with definite beats and pitches, or even mimic life after a fashion. When the Narrator in Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* (1954), a radio play afterwards staged, describes Llaregyb harbour at night, he talks about the 'sloeblack, slow, black, crow-black, fishing-boat-bobbing sea', a phrase which captures the sound of the lapping waves.

Patterns which shape entire works and may include subsidiary patterns change their characteristics. The actual meaning of a poem may be lost without that consecutiveness and order which an overall pattern can provide. We require another word, form. A leaf which is seen as part of a tree has pattern: the tree itself has form. If we examine the leaf by itself, plucked from the tree and placed on a sheet of white paper, then its overall shape is its form, whereas an intricate vein from this leaf has pattern. In literature, patterns can be closely linked with overall forms, as in French neo-classical drama; or, as in Jacobean drama, the relationship between the patterns and the forms can be a tenuous one. The form can be like a travelling bag into which all kinds of different objects, each with its own pattern, can be quickly, if not carelessly, thrown.

Vocabulary, syntax, pattern and form: these are the main attributes of language and the poet's job is to maintain their authenticity. His work is life-enhancing in two respects. He is trying to maintain the close contact between the symbol and the experience, so that his transitory experience can be retained in symbolic shape and contemplated. He is thus affirming the value of his impressions of life by his efforts to hold on to them. By his choice of public rather than private symbols, he is also insisting that such experiences can and should be passed on to others, thus affirming the value of human relationships.

The theatre can be said both to *have* and to *be* a language.

It obviously has a language in that ordinary words are used for dialogue. But it is also a language in itself, by providing a vocabulary of symbols which need not be verbal at all. The rising of a curtain tells us that the action is about to begin. The lowering of lights may indicate that a scene (but not an act) has ended. In theatres with open stages and no curtains, some other action may take place (a fanfare, the dimming of house lights) to tell us that something is about to happen, while the director who chooses not to provide us with such a signal, may be indicating that the theatrical action has no beginning, but springs from the infinite origins of life.

Traditional genres provide their own symbols. If the curtain rises on a box set, a living room with a couch and cocktail cabinet, the audience will probably guess that the play will be a 'middle-class' comedy or drama, 'well-made' and 'naturalistic'. If we see an open stage with a prop or two instead of a set, we anticipate a play with a looser structure, perhaps a documentary or an 'epic', with many changes of locale and not 'naturalistic'.

The vocabulary of the theatre is, on one level, exceptionally precise and, on another, vast and cumbersome. A glance between two good actors on stage tells us more about their (fictional) relationship than a page of verbal description in a book. But there are almost too many ways in which information can be theatrically conveyed. The medium extends in all directions. A tune can be a theatrical symbol, as in Tennessee Williamss' *The Glass Menagerie* (1944). The visual appearance of the stage can be symbolic, not only in such matters as sets and props but in the structure of the stage itself, the presence or otherwise of a proscenium arch, or a forestage, whether the audience looks up or down to the playing area, whether the stage is circled by seats, or half-circled, or kept separate from the audience by an orchestra pit. The nature of the theatre itself may be symbolic. We expect a different type of production from a basement fringe theatre than we do from the West End. A theatre may be, in Yeats's phrase, just 'a rug at the end of a room', or it might be a Palace or an Alhambra. Before the curtain goes up on a first night, we have probably guessed something about the type of production we are going to see, except that we haven't exactly *guessed*: we have been given information

through a variety of conscious and unconscious symbols, from the atmosphere of the theatre to the style of the programmes.

Methods of acting also contain symbols. To signify anger in Balinese dance drama, the actor must flicker his lower eyelids. European acting contains many styles, often jumbled together but still recognisable. They range from improvisation to 'naturalism' to 'alienation' to the shock tactics of Artaud and his school. Acting styles can be added to the theatrical vocabulary, together with directorial and writing styles. All these different symbolic ways of conveying impressions, thoughts and the logic connecting them would add up to a monstrous dictionary, if one could be compiled. But, of course, it can't, despite John Russell Taylor's brave attempt with the *Penguin Dictionary of the Theatre*. This is perhaps the first weakness of the theatrical language. Whilst the symbols exist, with their surrounding syntaxes, patterns and forms, many survive as remnants of long-lost traditions which have been built into the very processes of theatre-going. Some retain their original relevance, many do not. The theatre has a vast vocabulary and a wide range of organisational methods; but it has always lacked that continual, rigorous and patient assessment of aims and usages which characterises verbal (and often less complete) languages. There have been plenty of theatrical poets and demagogues, but very few grammarians and philologists. This was why Brecht, when formulating his own theories, felt the need to attack Aristotle first, which is rather like a twentieth-century astronomer having first to debunk Ptolemy.

These telling absences can be explained to some extent historically. For centuries the theatre was regarded either as a popular art or as a courtly indulgence, and as thus beyond the concern of academics—just as before Dr Johnson appeared, the vulgar English tongue was not considered worthy of a formal dictionary. Most people knew what the words meant and so why bother? 'A play either works or doesn't work', one director said to me. 'Why waste time on considering the structure of its language?' The answer to this rhetorical question is that without some academic discipline, the theatrical language has a tendency to spread, to become so loose and floppy that it is virtually unusable; at which point

some theatrical fashion comes along which imposes a very rough discipline indeed, cutting out many effects which might otherwise seem naturally to belong to the theatre.

This pendulum swing, 'anything goes' followed by 'only that is allowed', has characterised the development of the theatre and it derives partly from the lack of study of the theatre as a language. The past thirty years have offered a classic illustration. In the early 1950s the theatre was afflicted by all kinds of inhibitions. There was an unhealthy concentration of theatrical power in the hands of a few impresarios, whose influence (though not necessarily philistine) helped to prevent other ideas from being expressed. The writing of plays was constricted by an unthinking dependence upon the 'naturalistic well-made play' formulae, popularised by Ibsen, Shaw, Rattigan and others. It could also be argued that these formalised techniques were directed towards a particular class outlook on the part of the audiences. The shapes of theatre buildings were constricting, the picture-frame stages, the rows of seats stretching backwards and upwards into the cavernous recesses of Edwardian auditoria, the too rigid endings to acts with quick or slow 'curtains', the gulf of the orchestra pits, the rows of formal lighting which never quite prevented unwelcome shadows, the fixed entrances and exits from the wings.

By the mid-1960s, much of this had changed, in that few people at all knowledgeable of the theatre assumed that theatres had to be built like *this* or plays written like *that*—or even that impresarios were necessarily fat men with cigars. A play could be a Happening, or a sensory experience along the lines of the Living Theatre or the Liquid Theatre, or a sustained Marxist polemic, or whatever. Although the majority of plays in the West End could still have been characterised as farces, comedies, musicals or Society Dramas, we could justifiably feel that the West End no longer dictated the standards to the theatre as a whole. A much greater variety of theatrical experiences had replaced the old uniformity.

With this diversity, however, there came a certain loss of precision. There was a time in the late 1960s and early 1970s when it seemed that anything could happen in the theatre, but nothing seemed quite right. Individual productions were

marvellous, but they did not lead to a fruitful genre. There were many interesting new plays, at least in typescript, but few seemed actually to work in the theatre. Dramatists got bored with their incapacities to write satisfying plays consistently and drifted off in other directions. The re-organisation of the theatre as a profession had led to a strong repertory movement, a much weaker touring network, a mixed economy of subsidised and commercial theatre with the balance tilting year by year in favour of the subsidised, an active and sometimes positively anarchic fringe, a more forceful Equity (the actors' trade union) and some very tentative managements, so frightened of getting their fingers burnt that they wouldn't warm them by the fire.

If we consider both the constricted theatre of the 1950s and the fruitful, diverse, but eventually dissatisfying, theatre of the late 1960s, we are confronted by one main question: how can we combine an exact use of the theatrical language with that wonderful comprehensiveness which is that language's greatest asset?

This approach, however, may seem pedantic. It is all very well to talk idealistically about 'maintaining the purity of the language' but this is not much comfort to the actor or dramatist speaking this language superlatively well who cannot get a job. The theatre is an industry, as well as a language, and how the industry is run, who employs whom and why, occupies much of that money-grabbing time which nearly everyone in the Profession would prefer to be dedicated to Higher Matters.

After the Second World War, the theatre industry, notoriously unstable at best, was in a state of approaching chaos. About a fifth of the theatres in London had been destroyed or badly damaged by bombing; others were battered or just neglected. There was inevitably a shortage of actors, some still in the forces, others on ENSA tours. Comparatively wealthy pre-war managements had gone out of business. In 1942, the entire Stoll Theatres Corporation, which owned six London theatres, four regional ones, a music hall and a film company, was sold for only £140,000. Unlike the situation during the First World War, when soldiers returning on leave and families re-uniting kept the theatres thriving, the Second World War dealt a body blow

to the theatre which (many feared) could have been followed by a total knock-out.

Even without the war, the theatre would have faced harsh problems. It had been confronted for thirty years by the challenge of the mass media. Many theatres had been converted into cinemas. Of seventeen live theatres owned by the Abrahams Group before the war, only four were functioning as theatres by 1949. Films were the challenge in the 1940s; radio indirectly helped the theatre by publicising its stars. The greatest challenge, however, was yet to come, that of television. The spectre of widespread television haunted everyone in the theatre, from impresarios to small-time rep managements alike, because it was assumed that post-war television (like the pre-war variety) would be run by the BBC, a national corporation. In the 1920s, theatre managements had protected themselves against the growing film industry by taking shares in film companies. They were not able, until commercial television was established in 1956, to hedge their bets similarly against the possibility of the small-screen taking over the drama industry.

The aftermath of war and the mass media, together with Entertainments Tax at 10 percent of gross receipts, provided a packaged nightmare to post-war theatre companies. They would chase the future down one blind alley, only to backtrack and run along another. They could have coped more successfully if the industry had been in a better shape initially. Since the 1920s, however, the theatre had undergone a tortuous transition from the many small, competing, independent managements of Edwardian theatre to a supposedly more streamlined industry, in which groups of companies controlled chains of theatres.

This 'streamlining' had half taken place when the war struck, so that sections of the theatre industry were in the hands of business combines, while other sections were still struggling along in the old ways. There had emerged an 'absentee' landlord class in British theatre, men who had bought a theatrical chain, then let individual theatres to managements who ran them and who in turn sub-let to producing managements. Through this process of letting and sub-letting, the costs of hiring West End theatres steeply escalated. Richard Findlater, in *The Unholy Trade* (1952), calculated that

in the years which separated the heyday of the actor-managers (c. 1880) from 1949, theatre rents had increased by up to 1000 percent, production costs by 600 percent, while admission prices had risen by only 50 percent.

Sometimes nearly half the gross receipts from a West End production would disappear in rents, rates and taxation, before an independent impresario could start to pay off his production costs and, of course, his actors. Under these circumstances, the independents were naturally cautious: most would only risk cheap, 'sure-fire' productions, of mystery plays, light comedies and revues. Some paid for a limited theatrical ambitiousness through exceptionally careful housekeeping. Henry Sherek balanced the profits from intimate revues staged at the Dorchester Hotel and elsewhere against the risks entailed in launching the plays of T. S. Eliot. But the days of great personal gambles, such as those which distinguished Sir Charles Cochran's career, were almost over. Cochran died in 1951, the end of an era indeed.

One method of cutting down the risks was to try out a play in one of the many 'little theatres' around London, or with a play-producing society (such as the Repertory Players, who staged Sunday night productions in West End theatres), or in a small rep in the regions. Norman Marshall, in his book *The Other Theatre* (1947), has described the honourable history of the 'little theatres' in the years between the wars, when they pioneered the work of new playwrights (such as Pirandello, Cocteau and even Coward), introduced new theatre genres (such as documentary drama and expressionism) and unfamiliar methods of acting and directing. Komisarjevsky brought the methods of Stanislavski to Britain via a cramped cinema stage in Barnes, while Terence Gray at Cambridge anticipated the sort of production ideas (slow-motion fights, open stages with props, actors on stilts) now inevitably associated with the Royal Shakespeare Company. 'I seek', stated Gray in 1931, 'the unexpected reaction, the unanticipated pleasure, the irresponsible wrath, the readjustment of values.' Such remarks remind one irresistibly of Peter Brook, who was then too young (at six) even to be an *enfant terrible*.

Most little theatres after the war were self-financed (thus avoiding high rents) and operated as clubs (thus avoiding direct censorship). The leading ones in London included the

Arts, Boltons, Lindsay, Mercury, Players and the Unity: less noted were the Chepstow, Gateway, Irving, Torch, Twentieth Century and Watergate. At Swiss Cottage, there was the Embassy, while in the suburbs were the Alex, Stoke Newington, the 'Q', Kew Bridge, the Intimate, Palmers Green and the Granville, Waltham Green. These clubs had different reputations. The Boltons and the Lindsay were known for intimate revues, written by (say) Peter Myers or Eleanor Farjeon; the Unity was the leading left-wing theatre club, while the Alex was linked with a Jewish company, the New Yiddish Theatre. The most prestigious club of all was the Arts, run after the war by Alec Clunes, whose seasons would now be compared to the best provided by the leading subsidised reps. The 1950 season included a rare Chekhov (*Ivanov*), Chiarelli's *The Mask and the Face*, *Lady Precious Stream* and *Mrs Warren's Profession*. Clunes staged Fry's first major success, *The Lady's not for Burning* (1948), which transferred in a full Tennent Production to the West End, with John Gielgud, Richard Burton, Claire Bloom and Pamela Brown. Among his casts were Alec McCowen and Michael Hordern: his directors included John Fernald.

The atmosphere at the lesser clubs, however, was often depressing, a mixture of wan hopefulness and despairing energy. The club members took advantage of the bar, eyeing warily those eager directors and writers who had hired the theatre, painted the scenery and were now expecting them to drift into the auditorium, glasses in hand, to witness the triumphant débâcle of another first night. Burrowing through the lists of now-forgotten productions, the archivist must be impressed, however, by the familiar names whose early careers were interred there. Brook, fresh from Oxford, directed *Dr Faustus* at the Torch (1943) and Cocteau's *The Infernal Machine* at the Chanticleer (1945). In one year, 1950, Frank Marcus's first play, *Minuet for Stuffed Birds*, was produced at the Torch, Giles Cooper's first two plays were produced at the Torch and the Lindsay, while Paul Scofield and Donald Sinden appeared at the Twentieth Century. If our fringe theatres nowadays can produce such a crop from such seeds, they will not have struggled in vain.

The independent impresarios searched for their next productions among the little theatres: they also went talent-spot-

ting among the reps, where there was a similar gap in prestige between the leading ones (at Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Liverpool, Sheffield and, in Scotland, Glasgow) and the 250 lesser ones, tactfully described in the 1949 Stage Year Book as the 'nursery of dramatic art'. The lesser reps were often barely professional, hopelessly overworked with sometimes two separate productions a week and two performances a night. Established actors regarded them with a horror normally reserved for Devil's Island. The prestigious reps, however, carried with them a reputation for high-minded seriousness and lofty anti-commercialism. Birmingham Rep, under Sir Barry Jackson, was one of the most adventurous theatres in the country, renowned for discovering new actors (among them, in generation order, Felix Aylmer, Laurence Olivier, Greer Garson and Albert Finney), new playwrights and directors. The Bristol Old Vic, with its glorious Georgian auditorium, can be regarded perhaps as the first major success of state subsidies, since it was partly financed and encouraged by CEMA (the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts) during the war. In 1948, Basil Dean (who founded the Liverpool Playhouse in 1911) staged a season of productions from regional reps at the St James's, astonishing London critics by their high quality.

Among the independent impresarios were the last of a venerable breed, the actor-managers. It was still regarded as the peak of a successful actor's ambition to run and star in his own company. Sir Donald Wolfit was one, who had run an independent company throughout the war, still toured the regions and occasionally took over large theatres on the fringes of London's main theatre areas to present mammoth seasons. In 1949, he took over the Bedford (Camden Town) to present a repertoire which included *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Twelfth Night*, *Much Ado*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Master Builder*. Sir Laurence Olivier became an actor-manager in 1950, presenting two seasons at the St James's which included the première of Fry's *Venus Observed*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra*. Sir John Gielgud ran two seasons as an actor-manager, at the Queen's Theatre in 1937–38 and at the Haymarket in 1944–55. Jack Buchanan went into partnership with Bernard Delfont to manage and run the Garrick Theatre, a régime which was

distinguished by his appreciation of the needs of other independent impresarios.

From what were these impresarios 'independent'? What would be meant by a 'dependent' impresario? They were mainly independent from a consortium of business/theatrical interests, popularly known as The Group. After the Second World War, many feared that the concentration of large sections of the theatre industry into a few people's hands was approaching the proportions of an outright monopoly. The best example of this tendency towards monopoly was the growth of Prince Littler's theatrical interests. In 1940, he was the Chairman or Managing Director (or both) for a wide range of companies, including six theatre chains, a catering firm, a theatre insurance company and a property company. During the war, with so many theatre firms becoming bankrupt, his Prince Littler Consolidated Trust bought up theatres at rock-bottom prices, including the Stoll Theatres Corporation, Moss Empires and the General Theatre Corporation, and Littler became the Chairman of Howard and Wyndham Ltd, which had a majority holding in H. M. Tennent Ltd, the leading play-producing management in London. By the late 1940s, the Prince Littler Consolidated Trust directly owned with its affiliated companies 18 out of the 42 functioning West End theatres and 57 (70 per cent) of the main out-of-London touring theatres. If we consider simply the Number 1 touring circuit, which then consisted of 53 theatres, 34 were owned by The Group. Indirectly, The Group's influence was also great, for members of Prince Littler's board also sat on the boards of other supposedly independent companies. I have mentioned Jack Buchanan's régime at the Garrick where he held a sublease from the Abrahams company who owned the theatre. The Abrahams company with its chain of theatres was not considered to be part of The Group, but Charles Gulliver, a member of Prince Littler's Board, also sat on the board of the Abrahams company.

There was an obvious danger of a 'horizontal' monopoly emerging, in which most London and regional theatres would be controlled by The Group. Of equal danger was the possibility of 'vertical' monopoly, in which every facet of the entertainments industry, from real estate, actors' agencies,

sheet music and records to play production and wardrobe design, would be controlled by The Group: and at the centre of this patchwork empire sat Prince Littler.

Critics of the theatre system blamed The Group for all kinds of post-war theatre evils. Actors not employed by The Group complained that they were being victimised: actors who were objected that they were paying for this privilege through agency fees. Many felt that the theatrical tastes of their generation were being moulded by a not particularly enlightened élite. Inevitably, left-wing critics drew telling political morals. Under a dog-eat-dog capitalistic system, powerful companies increased in strength, weaker ones went to the wall, until finally a small group of owners dominated the profession, controlling the people, the places and the expressivity of the medium alike. Who in 1950 was unsuccessfully directing a season of Victorian melodramas at the Bedford, Camden Town? That 'romantic Marxist', Kenneth Tynan. Who was struggling to establish a people's theatre, first in Manchester, then at Stratford-atte-Bowe? The Mother Courage of community theatre, Joan Littlewood. If (as has been suggested) a substantial section of the Profession wheeled politically to the left in the late 1950s, the origins of this movement can perhaps be traced to the trials and frustrations of the early 1950s which were blamed on The Group.

The Group was not without its problems, however, nor its advocates. It was generally agreed that the industry needed streamlining and whatever else The Group had or had not done, it was certainly prepared to 'streamline'. It also required courage, not to mention patriotism and a readiness to gamble, to buy London theatres in 1942, when everyone else was scrambling to sell. Their assets may have been extensive, but their commitments were equally so. One of the most telling criticisms of The Group was that directed against it by other business men, that it was simply over-extended. The Group could not afford to renovate the properties it had acquired, and the burden of post-war theatre reconstruction fell on its shoulders. In the mid-1950s, The Group faced the challenge of television and tried to sell off its assets, diverting the capital raised into record companies and television. Unprofitable touring theatres on valuable property sites

were sold; others were run as dance halls and (later) bingo parlours. The touring circuits shrank from 150 theatres to about 30 within fifteen years. In Leicester, there were three theatres during the early 1950s, two of them belonging to The Group; by 1956, all had closed.

If we glance through the programmes at London theatres connected with The Group during one year, 1949, the impression is not that of an all-pervading philistinism. Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, directed by Laurence Olivier and starring Vivien Leigh, was playing at the Aldwych; Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* was at the Phoenix; the year at St James's included Rattigan's *Adventure Story* and Paul Scofield in *The Seagull*; Tolstoy's *Power of Darkness* was produced at the Lyric, and John Clements and Kay Hammond appeared in *The Beaux Stratagem* at the Phoenix. Sid Field was in Mary Chase's *Harvey* at the Prince of Wales, while the musicals included *Annie Get Your Gun* at the Coliseum and *Brigadoon* at His Majesty's. A better farce of the period, John Dighton's *The Happiest Days of Your Life*, was at the Apollo. Other shows aimed at the popular market included Novello's *King's Rhapsody*, *Song of Norway* and an intimate revue, *Sauce Tartare*, with Ronald Frankau and Claude Hulbert. Cicely Courtneidge starred in a new, though rather faded, British musical, *Her Excellency* at the Hippodrome. By glancing through this selection, and those of the surrounding years, we can begin to understand the theatrical, as opposed to commercial, strengths of The Group.

Through H. M. Tennent Ltd, and its subsidiary 'non-profit distributing' company, Tennent Productions Ltd, The Group encouraged classical revivals and some plays by new dramatists. H. B. Beaumont, the managing director of Tennent Productions Ltd, was an austere, self-contained man, a literary purist and confident of his judgments. On his board sat Sir John Gielgud, Sir Ralph Richardson and George Rylands, the Cambridge don, an expert on verse-speaking, who through the Marlowe Society trained several generations of students, among them Peter Hall, John Barton and Trevor Nunn. Beaumont was prepared to champion new writers, although by the end of the 1950s his standards came under attack for being too narrowly literary, too 'middle-class' and concerned with the behaviour of the genteelly rich. He