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Peter Billingham

At the Sharp End

Uncovering
the work of
five leading
dramatists

David Edgar

Tim Etchells

David Greig

Tanika Gupta

Mark Ravenhill

BLOOMSBURY



AT THE SHARP END

UNCOVERING THE WORK OF FIVE
CONTEMPORARY DRAMATISTS

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'I do not ask the wounded person how he feels,
I myself become the wounded person.'
Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself'

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At the Sharp End

is dedicated to Millie and Joshua

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Peter Billingham
June 2007

1 POINTING AT SHARP ENDS – AN INTRODUCTION

Sharp ends hurt. Handle with care! Sharp ends aren't polite. The sharp end is the shouting end. Not the 'Sorry I'll go away and come back' end. Being at the sharp end is being where the action is. Getting involved. Making a point. Something serious is going on. You've got to make yourself heard. No looking on or shouting from the sidelines. At the sharp end is out there centre stage making a difference. 'Come on over here if you think you're sharp enough!' That's the shouted challenge from the mix, the scrum, the scuffle: the sharp end.

Talking about sharp ends, what's the *point* of contemporary British theatre? Does it have one apart from bums on seats, happy investors and the odd soundbite for the politician at election time? Think Cool Britannia, think froth. Think froth, think empty, think here and then gone. Is that all British theatre has become? What drives it, what are its principal concerns? What kinds of purpose does it have? Who's bothered enough to go and see it apart from the coachloads from Dudley, Tunbridge Wells and beyond, buying their overpriced ticket to consume interval ice creams watching roller skaters in cat costumes? Or perhaps Abba's back catalogue hung on a storyline so thin it must break? What value does theatre have in our current world in the first decade of the twenty-first century? Questions like these have fuelled the five conversations at the heart of this book. They've been equally provoked through the conversations themselves. 'To be or not to be?' It's a well-worn question that even Hamlet couldn't answer, yet it's one we might ask of British theatre today outside the West

End-dominated commercial mainstream. You need a compass on a journey entering new territory. In mapping the work of the five writers in this book I've needed to make my own compass in order to engage fully with and analyse their work. Some of the writing across the five writers has been new territory to me. Sometimes on my journey into new plays and their ideas I've needed to put down way markers like 'political', 'social relevance' and 'innovation'.

It really has been a great journey. No one had mentioned carbon footprints when I started. There are also the footmarks one's own discoveries make as one leaves the beaten tracks of what one knew before. Exciting! It's been an exhausting and exhaustive trip. It's a journey that's carried a sense of genuine privilege to meet with the five very diverse modern writers: David Edgar, David Greig, Mark Ravenhill, Tanika Gupta and Tim Etchells of Forced Entertainment. Their generosity of time and spirit was tangible in agreeing to be the subjects of *At the Sharp End*. Each of them contributed with enthusiasm, honesty, insight and sometimes humour, making our conversations stimulating, thought-provoking and enjoyable.

Sharpening Up: Reading and Using *At the Sharp End*

This book is structured to be as user-friendly as possible to you, the reader. It's based around the extended interviews or conversations that I had with each of the five writers. They are, in order of appearance in the following pages, David Edgar, David Greig, Mark Ravenhill, Tim Etchells (of Forced Entertainment) and Tanika Gupta. Each interview has been edited with valuable input and advice wherever possible from the writers themselves. In terms of the presentational format of the interviews, I've endeavoured to remain consistent across all five of them. Clearly, as they are not academic essays but the accurate, edited transcripts of actual conversations, there is a tempo and flow that

I've tried to retain. There are also sequences where the writer concerned was speaking in full flow. Rather than package those sentences into formal sentence structures I have made extensive use of dashes and sometimes parentheses to help catch and communicate the immediacy of the sudden insight or revealing aside. The dashes should therefore be read as conversational breaks and pauses, while the parenthesis signals the reflective aside or afterthought.

The transcript interview is followed by a critical essay about each of the dramatists. These essays can't, of course, discuss the entire output of these five writers. I've therefore focused upon individual plays that offer a chronological journey through their work to chart the development of the writer's dramatic voice. My other criteria in selecting the plays under discussion were that:

- they were plays that were discussed or significantly referred to in the interviews;
- they were plays whose themes are centrally important to each writer's work and also to issues facing contemporary British society and the wider world.

With the single exception of David Edgar, whose output reflects a career that spans over three decades, there is a principal focus upon the most recent work of the writers, though not exclusively so. In this sense I was very fortunate that each of the writers had new work (or new revivals of work) produced during my research and writing period, which I was able to see in live performance. Therefore my discussion, for example, of Mark Ravenhill's *The Cut*, *Product* and *Citizenship* is among the first, if not *the* first, 'academic' appreciation and analysis of those plays.

Famous Five

Each of the five dramatists discussed in this book is chosen according to the following criteria:

- *Timescale* It's important that the works of more contemporary writers such as Mark Ravenhill, David Greig, Tanika Gupta and Tim Etchells are placed in the longer-term developments of modern British theatre. David Edgar represents those writers of a previous generation who were committed to a theatre that served a function of social and political enquiry and commentary. *At the Sharp End* explores and discusses plays from 1976 – David Edgar's *Destiny* – through to 2006: Tanika Gupta's *Sugar Mummies*, Mark Ravenhill's *The Cut*, *Product* and *Pool (No Water)*, and revivals of David Greig's *The American Pilot*, Tim Etchells and Forced Entertainment's *Bloody Mess* and *Dirty Work*, Mark Ravenhill's *Citizenship* and David Edgar's *Nicholas Nickleby*.
- *Issues* All of the five writers and their work relate directly to key issues facing contemporary British theatre and society. As an important dimension of *At the Sharp End* is to map out the territory of modern British theatre, the themes and concerns in the plays are as important as the undoubted creative skills and talents of the five dramatists. I've no wish to package up the writers in this consideration but the following summary should prove helpful to the reader:
 - *Alternative sexuality and gender* – Mark Ravenhill and Tanika Gupta.
 - *Racial and multicultural perspectives* – David Edgar and Tanika Gupta.
 - *Left and postmodern, post-Marxist political perspectives* – David Edgar, Mark Ravenhill, David Greig and Tim Etchells.
 - *The emergence of new national identities* – David Greig and David Edgar.
 - *New aesthetics and genre* – Tim Etchells and Forced Entertainment.

Short Cuts

These are short, helpful summaries of each writer's main themes and major stage plays. Please note that they don't include all plays

by each writer but are representative indicative lists of significant plays. It's my expectation that readers will pursue their own further examinations and explorations of other plays by the five authors. These summaries precede each of the interviews. They also incorporate:

Downloads

A Download section is provided for each writer at the end of the chapter. The Download is an easy way of making contacts with other writers, plays, companies or even films, which connects as an influence or comparison with that writer. These are only indicative and my hope is that readers will follow these connections through and begin to make their own discoveries of relevant related material.

Time Zones

Time Zones identify some of the key plays and social and political events from the 1950s through to the present first decade of the new millennium. Key years are highlighted in the historical period covering the work of the five writers and the plays discussed in *At the Sharp End*. They will help you to identify all the writers and their work in the context of other important events.

There is also a list of Recommended Further Reading and Websites at the end of the book.

1956: Look Back in Nostalgia?

All journeys happen in a context and a significant context of my journey of research and writing was that 2006, the year this book began, was the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre, Sloane Square, London. This was under the inspired and visionary artistic leadership of the Royal Court's founding Artistic Director, George Devine. Of course, in reality, single productions and single dates of

opening nights don't literally define time or history. There's more than just journalistic convenience nevertheless in the date of 8 May 1956 as the defining moment of a new wave in British playwriting, a modern renaissance driven in its first and second phases principally, though not exclusively, by new writers.

The date of 8 May 1956 was the opening night of John Osborne's iconic, ground-breaking play *Look Back in Anger*, first produced at the Royal Court and directed by Tony Richardson. The debate surrounding this play, its meanings and significance has been well and often rehearsed in the ensuing fifty years. It met with mixed critical reaction initially. Its anti-hero Jimmy Porter was a prototype of the post-war anti-hero. He was the confrontational, provocative embodiment of the 'anger' of the play's title. He looked back with problematic nostalgia at a lost past of just causes to fight for and human values that made life worth living. He looked back in order to look around him at a Britain moving like a sleepwalker through the decade of the 1950s. 'Wake up!' Porter shouted at his wife, his best friend and a world of sterile, empty moral hypocrisy and political indifference. He looked back to help him look forward to see if and how British society could be revolutionised, though not in terms of conventional politics.

Jimmy's anger embodied the bitter disappointment, frustration and alienation felt by a new, emerging hybrid of left-wing working-class and liberal-bourgeois men and women in their twenties and early thirties. Britain might have won the war but the intervening decade had been characterised by the economic austerity of a 'Ration Book Culture'. These 'Angry Young Men' reacted collectively against the parochial Britain of the 1950s.

You may wonder where the young women were. Ironing perhaps, like Jimmy's wife, Alison? If they were, it wasn't out of choice, but facing powerful societal and government pressures to return them to domesticated roles after their temporary economic and social liberation of the war years. Following the unexpected landslide victory of the Labour Party in the General Election of 1945 there were major advances in progressive social engineering.

These included the establishing of the Welfare State, the National Health Service and increased educational opportunities for the working class (1944 Education Act). The stage looked set for a new kind of Britain. The short-lived Labour government and the re-election of a Conservative government in 1951 led instead to a social and cultural inertia with dominant moral values that owed more to Victoria than Elizabeth, who became queen in 1953. This was, after all, a society in which divorce laws were restrictive and biased against women, and where homosexuality was a criminal offence, punishable by prison.

Why am I, like Jimmy Porter, looking back, in a book that's about contemporary British playwriting and asking by implication whether contemporary theatre is at the sharp end or sedated and irrelevant? While avoiding the temptation of 'Looking Back in Nostalgia' like Jimmy, it's none the less important to recognise the achievements of that first generation of new British playwrights such as Osborne, Edward Bond, Arnold Wesker, Shelagh Delaney, John Arden and others. British theatre needed a revolution and, in an important sense, got one from those writers. Might it be that British theatre today needs a radical change but doesn't realise it? Would it again be playwrights who led the charge? I might be in danger of making my own misguided stumble down Memory Lane through an idealised, selective view of a privileged period in the reawakening of British theatre and society. Living now at the sharp end of increasingly dangerous and worrying times, it's essential to ask some hard, challenging questions about where contemporary British theatre and playwriting is. What, if anything, does it have to say to contemporary society?

Aleks Sierz coined the memorable phrase 'In-Yer-Face Theatre' in his seminal book of the same name (Faber, 2001) to define and describe some of the young, emerging playwrights of the 1990s. One of them, Mark Ravenhill, was one of the leading young dramatists of that decade. So was the late lamented Sarah Kane, who would undoubtedly have been close to the heart of this book

had suicide not terminated her potential genius. While David Edgar's playwriting career spans nearly forty years and was thus exempted from Sierz's discussion of new writers, it's interesting that Tim Etchells, Tanika Gupta and David Greig were not included in his analysis of innovative, ground-breaking writers. Greig is mentioned, albeit only on five occasions and then as one of a number of 'footnotes' to that decade.

What is clear without prejudice is that the work done by the English Stage Company in the decades following on from Osborne's first night, and also by Joan Littlewood and Theatre Workshop at the Theatre Royal Stratford East, meant that there were opportunities for new writers to have their work staged in a way that's never been surpassed since. Their innovative plays were often produced by a generation of younger emerging directors such as Bill Gaskill, John Dexter, Tony Richardson and Lindsay Anderson.

Furthermore there was an audience hungry for new plays reflecting the radically changing world of the period. It wasn't only that there was this floodtide of new writers and directors crashing like Atlantic breakers against the old barriers of British theatre and society. It was that people like Devine and Littlewood were prepared to privilege the challenging, radical dramatist's vision over financial and commercial considerations alone. It is unimaginable, for example, that either John Arden with plays such as *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* (1958), Edward Bond with *Saved* (1965) or Shelagh Delaney with *A Taste of Honey* (1958) would have been produced without the vision and commitment of Devine and Littlewood towards theatre's power and right to be innovative, provocative and controversial. Do we have the equivalents of those tough visionaries in our theatres today? Can the radical voice be allowed to speak above the clamour of self-interested focus groups, funding priorities and the search for the next theatrical fashion?

2006: Looking Forward – in Expectation?

Two articles from the *Guardian*, the first in 2004 and the second in 2006, offer cause for concern and debate about the state of contemporary British theatre. What are the opportunities for major, innovative and challenging new writing, and also what is the relationship between the New Labour government and its attitude towards and funding of the arts?

In an article entitled ‘Where have all the playwrights gone?’ (*Guardian*, 7 October 2004), the journalist Maddy Costa articulated a question in her title that other established critics and commentators such as Michael Billington had been asking in the preceding years. Her article opened with:

At a press conference in the spring, Nicholas Hytner, artistic director of the National Theatre, threw up a challenge. As journalists clamoured for more details of David Hare’s *Stuff Happens*, he said: ‘The question you should be asking is where is the new generation of playwrights to write this play?’

Even considering whether Hare’s play represented ‘new writing’ in the strict sense of the term or whether its conventional format should be presented as an inspiration to a new generation of playwrights, the deeper question nevertheless remained. The article went on to discuss the commitment by the two major state-subsidised theatres not only to recruit new writers but also writers who could write for their main stages. Costa continued:

We are, it seems, witnessing a shift in the theatre culture, an explosion of energy not witnessed since the emergence of Joe Penhall, Mark Ravenhill, Sarah Kane, Conor McPherson et al through the Royal Court a decade ago. That energy has, however, long since dissipated. As Penhall says, ‘It’s not in the air now, as it was eight years ago, that new writers are bankable and exciting.’ Instead, the pervading feeling is that theatres have been suffering from the virtual ghettoisation of new writing into smaller spaces.

Remembering that George Devine supported *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* in the context of audiences at a suicidal average of between seventeen and twenty-eight per cent capacity, Penhall's observation about new writing being perceived as 'bankable' illustrates one of the major problems facing British theatre. That is the dominance of concerns of commercial profit and viability resulting too often in an embracing of mainstream writing. Clearly business is business and building-based theatres in particular have staff needing to be paid. Nevertheless, the continued appearance of revivals of commercial favourites or of established, 'bankable' writers is counter-productive and depressing. It seriously undermines any real, sustained chance of either artistic innovation or a scheduling policy taking risks outside a guaranteed, homogenous, Home Counties audience. Terence Rattigan's fictional Aunt Edna seems, like a zombie in a twin set and pearls, to have risen from the grave and to be occupying at least the front stalls. Can you imagine the accountants at the time of Bond's *Saved* calculating the financial cost of losing a large part of the audience walking out in the infamous Scene Six when a baby is stoned to death in a park? Calculators clutched in their hands, would they have gambled on the lucrative sponsorship deal from pram makers and quarry owners to offset those box-office losses?

In the second article entitled 'The gulf between the arts and New Labour is growing wider' by Martin Kettle (*Guardian*, 20 May 2006), he opened by identifying that overall spending on the arts from government in the Blair decade (1997–2007) had actually risen around eighty per cent. He then went on to discuss and consider what he perceived as a widening gap between the government and the arts, and especially theatre:

The fissure between the arts and politics is increasingly obvious and may be growing deeper. Few people in the arts speak about the government with anything resembling goodwill any longer . . . Surprisingly few people in the government are prepared to value the arts publicly, in the way they value football, even though far

more people attend arts events . . . It is as though the arts and politics now inhabit increasingly different worlds – two cultures you might say.

Kettle goes on to argue that there has been a significant change in the attitude of the political Left and certainly the New Labour centre-right, to the value and function of the arts. He recalls an earlier post-war period when ‘arts for all’ as a slogan had its roots in something more than a political soundbite. While writers such as Osborne were never in any formal sense politically of the Left, it’s true that many of the major writers from 1956 to the beginning of the Thatcher period in 1979 were, in one sense or another, political.

What do I mean by political? Well, for most of those thirty-odd years (1956–79) and indeed into the early-to-mid years of the Thatcher government (1979–90) it was fair to assert that ‘political’ carried with it a sense of the oppositional and interventionist. Theatre should be in a position where it could critically question and constructively oppose the social, cultural and political mainstream. Much, though of course not all, theatre of the period existed to ask difficult and challenging questions. It was at the sharp end. Plays like Wesker’s *Roots*, Delaney’s *A Taste of Honey* and Bond’s early play *The Pope’s Wedding*, though very different stylistically, were by writers focused upon a historically marginalised working class. Those plays were about the possibilities of radical political and social change, though never in some naïve or Utopian sense. They grappled with previously taboo issues of teenage pregnancy, mixed-race relationships, homosexuality and violence as a symptom of economic and social deprivation.

Later, diverse plays such as Bond’s *Lear*, Martin Sherman’s *Bent*, David Edgar’s *Destiny*, Howard Brenton’s *Weapons of Happiness*, Trevor Griffiths’s *Comedians* through to Caryl Churchill’s *Cloud Nine* and *Top Girls* had continued that tradition of sharp-edged writing and theatre.

Tony Marchant’s powerful play *Welcome Home* (1983), about

traumatised British soldiers returning home from the Falklands war to bury a comrade and consequently revealing their own traumatised psychological wounds, potently captured the mood of that period. It was a war that was fought in part to help keep Margaret Thatcher's government in power when economic failure and increasing unemployment might have suggested otherwise. Its twenty-fifth anniversary was being commemorated at the time of writing (June 2007).

Edward Bond's savagely provocative musical-political satire *Restoration* (1981) critiqued the seemingly endemic deference within the British working class that could be exploited by Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* to secure the Conservatives' victory: the equivalent of turkeys voting unanimously for Christmas. Interestingly, *Restoration* was 'restored' in the autumn of 2006 and, on a short regional tour into London, played to large houses and widespread critical acclaim. These writers and their plays were therefore engaged to one extent or another in the conviction that theatre could and should intervene in and respond to the various problems and issues within society. Kettle continued:

Through most of my lifetime the arts have always been overwhelmingly well disposed towards Labour. Partly this was Margaret Thatcher's doing, but it ran deeper, drawing on a shared vision of the role of the arts in a good society. But the Blair years have marked a divide, perhaps a parting of the ways. Ministers say this is mainly due to Iraq, and undoubtedly there's truth there. If there is a growing disillusionment in the country with Labour, it's no surprise to see it reflected in the arts.

One of the ways in which contemporary theatre has sought to rediscover its role as an oppositional and interventionist voice is through what has become known as 'verbatim' theatre. This has been most completely identified with and produced by Nick Kent and his Tricycle Theatre in Kilburn, north London. Verbatim theatre might also be called 'transcript' theatre. It works on the basis of the written transcribing of spoken testimony and accounts

of real-life people. Inevitably and invariably those people have been involved as perpetrators, victims or onlooker-participants in events and decisions relating to issues of injustice or the repression of justice and truth. It has emerged in circumstances where the mainstream media reporting of such issues has either been censored or incomplete. Tanika Gupta's recent *Gladiator Games* (2006) is one good example of such a play, although it is not formally verbatim theatre. It does, though, incorporate a very large proportion of real-life testimony and eyewitness account relating to the murder in custody of a young British Asian man, Zaheed Mubarek. He was savagely beaten to death by his psychotic white racist cell-mate while both were imprisoned in the same cell at HMI Feltham. This is a notoriously overcrowded young offenders' prison in south London. Plays like *Gladiator Games* (a co-production between Sheffield Crucible Theatre and the Theatre Royal Stratford East) along with earlier landmark verbatim plays such as Richard Norton's *The Colour of Justice* and *Guantanamo* (both Tricycle Theatre productions) are essentially drama documentaries. Their existence was necessitated by the failure of the political authorities and law enforcement agencies in cases of clear institutional injustice and failures within the judiciary. *The Colour of Justice* dealt with the circumstances surrounding the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence, a black teenager. *Guantanamo*, as its title indicates, was concerned with the prisoners held at the detention camp of the same name by the US authorities.

Powerful and necessary as these dramatic reconstructions are, they're essentially documentary rather than dramatic in form. Is the emergence of verbatim theatre not only a comment upon serious structural inadequacies in the administration of British justice? Might it also reflect an absence or failure of British theatre to provide opportunities for single-authored plays on such issues to be produced? David Greig's *The American Pilot* is quite clearly a political play in that broader tradition of oppositional and interventionist theatre. Mark Ravenhill's *The Cut* explores issues of

state-authorised political violence and its moral implications. His one-man show *Product* deals with the volatile territory of how our perception of both Islam and Islamic terrorists helps perpetuate prejudice, injustice and mutual misunderstanding. Ravenhill's *Citizenship* is political in that it deals with the politics of sexual identity and the help or otherwise that the liberal rhetoric of political correctness brings to that territory. Tim Etchells of Forced Entertainment famously asserted, 'We're not interested in rousing plays for the barricades.' However, their phenomenal output over twenty years is concerned with raiding the 'dressing-up box' of consumer capitalism's mass-mediated propaganda project. Etchells and the company try to re-dress some of the devastating impact of mass globalisation upon our contemporary world. It's as if this writer and these performers are cutting up those old ideological costumes to refashion them anew, provoking our own renewed, radicalised perspectives.

Does it matter? What, you might ask, is my point in all of this? Do art and theatre have to be political? Should they be? Am I guilty of a glassy-eyed, dated optimism in revisiting and reviewing (through rose-tinted spectacles?) a lost period when theatre dared to matter and get engaged? Returning to Maddy Costa's article about the scarcity of new playwrights, she quotes Dominic Cooke (then newly appointed Artistic Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company) in relation to this debate about political theatre:

Cooke says people are deeply suspicious of politics. 'In the 1970s and 80s when people were writing big public plays, their role model was Brecht. But when the iron curtain came down the ideology that supported the Brechtian model was brought into crisis. Playwrights now have a much harder job because the critique of government and capitalism is a more complex task than the 1970s theatre forms reflect.'

Since that interview took place, Dominic Cooke has gone on to become the new Artistic Director of the Royal Court. While Cooke's central points are fair and correct, there are some

underlying assumptions within his analysis that are open to question.

Is it completely accurate to view one of the great plays of the post-war period such as Bond's *Lear* (1971) or an important 1970s play such as Brenton's *Weapons of Happiness* (1976) as anything less than 'complex'? David Edgar's *Maydays* (1983) also offered a most searching and complex analysis of post-war revolutionary Left politics and their demise. These three plays and a significant number of others from the period were profoundly self-questioning. Without resorting to narrow polemic or a simplistic, reductive, outdated Marxism, they engaged with the nature of political authority, state-sanctioned and 'terrorist' violence, and the crisis facing the historical trajectory of the Left political project. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent disintegration of the former Soviet Union were, of course, major global events with equally major consequences. Disaffection and disillusionment with the Soviet Union as a global political alternative to capitalism had already begun back in 1956 with the Soviet invasion of Hungary followed by their mirror-effect invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

It's inescapable and probably inevitable that interest in not only politics but the wider field of social and moral debate has changed over the last twenty years. This is a period in which Margaret Thatcher proclaimed, 'There is no such thing as society,' followed by John Major who assured us that class had also ceased to exist. Finally Tony Blair as Prime Minister made it clear that ideology and class conflict had joined the other corpses in the cemetery of redundant concepts. Without any need for society, the disappearance of class and the absence of ideology, it's a wonder that contemporary British society doesn't feel more completely like a neo-liberal, democratic, twenty-first-century Eden. If there is no society, no class and effectively no debate, what could there be left to write plays about, except possibly 'reality TV' shows, home and garden 'make-over' programmes and Oprah-style confessional 'sofa TV'?

As plays like Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* and *Some Explicit Polaroids*, David Greig's *The Architect* and *Europe*, David Edgar's *Maydays*, *Pentecost* and *Playing with Fire*, Tanika Gupta's *Fragile Land* and *Gladiator Games* and Forced Entertainment's *Bloody Mess* illustrate, we are living in a Britain and a wider world where the 'big issues' that have informed theatre are now subject to critical revisiting and questioning. As you engage with these five writers in *At the Sharp End* you'll see a new landscape slowly emerging.

It's characterised by a new postmodern politics of sexuality and the environment as well as the new and problematic nationalisms of a post-Soviet Eastern Europe and a gradually devolving Britain. It's a world in which the ideology of Islamic fundamentalism and United States neo-conservatism has taken over the territory previously held by the old Cold War politics of capitalism versus Soviet Communism. How can we have cross-cultural dialogue in a mass-mediated world post-9/11 and -7/7? What are the challenges and opportunities presented by living within contemporary multicultural Britain? This is where the sharp end of our times is. This is where the five writers are fighting to engage. Are they on the losing side of a battle too big to be won?

Playwrights, after all, can't stop the tanks or prevent the bricks thrown through a Pakistani corner shop window in Oldham or Whitechapel. They *can* and should ask questions about who sold the armaments to which regimes, who cast the first stone and why human beings seem terminally addicted to violence and discrimination.

The answers will be complex, if they can be found at all. Better to make that journey than to stay in the supposed safe harbour of lack of interest or ignorance.

Revisiting My Route

That the venues for my London-based conversations were both the Royal Court and also their offices generously provided by

Paines Plough felt both symbolic and auspicious. Alongside the journeys around England and Scotland, I also visited a diverse range of theatre venues. This entailed travelling from the main house of the Chichester Festival Theatre with its predominantly older, white, neo-conservative, upper-middle-class audience through to the main stage of the Theatre Royal Stratford East. There, remarkably, I gave heartfelt thanks for being one of a relatively small number of middle-aged white faces in a high-energy-field audience of young black British and British Asian theatregoers. My travels also took me to the Soho Theatre, like Paines Plough, a leading light in new writing, and also to the privileged metropolitan audience of a Press Night at the Donmar Warehouse. I'd also travelled literally with Forced Entertainment on a piece (*Nights in This City*, 1995) performed on a coach tour through Sheffield, walking at the end through a derelict bus depot that they had magically re-created as a sacred space for atheists and agnostics.

This résumé of my geographical journey of interview locations and venues reflects, I hope, the diverse and eclectic nature of the five writers and their work. It would take an encyclopaedia of a book even to begin to try to map 'where British theatre and playwriting is now'. It would also require a misguided arrogance of purpose and critical judgement. Not guilty.

'Now' like 'contemporary' is a shifting space and concept. It is prey to the vagaries of fashion and the socio-cultural ephemera of what is viewed variously as 'relevant', 'accessible', 'hip', 'exotic' and 'cool'. Beyond such transient and superficial markers on my map lies the exciting potential for innovation and the redefining of what does or should concern or celebrate us in this new millennium. Each of the five writers under discussion can lay legitimate and serious claim to be a significant reference point at the sharp end of this challenge.

Theatre can play an essential role in helping to sustain and build a more human-centred, human-valued society in which what it means to be human can be provisionally articulated. Theatre can

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never afford to be simply the decorative icing on the cake, however sweet tasting and delicious. Writers, directors, performers and designers, and everyone involved in making theatre, need instead to be right down in the rough centre of the mix – at the sharp end.

Time Zones

The following *Time Zones* are intended to help locate the five writers and the plays discussed in the critical essays into a chronological context. The zones represent each of the six decades from and including 1956 to the present. The zones also list some but not all of the principal plays of that decade, along with a selection of the key indicative political/social events. This will help to give you a historical overview of the post-war period from the 1950s onwards.

Plays by the five writers are indicated in bold beneath the year in which they premièred. The *Time Zones* cannot of course be comprehensive but will, it is hoped, help you to map your own journeys of the five writers and their work against a wider social, cultural and political background within the post-war period.

1950s

- The first space satellite sent into outer space by the Soviet Union.
- The Suez Crisis.
- The Soviet invasion of Hungary.
- The formation of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND).
- The Royal Court and the Theatre Royal Stratford East open.
- John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* and *The Entertainer*.
- Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*.
- John Arden's *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*.
- Arnold Wesker's *Chicken Soup with Barley*.
- Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey*.

1960s

- Labour government 1964–70: Capital punishment and theatre censorship abolished, homosexuality partially decriminalised, abortion legalised.
- Left-wing political riots in Paris (1968) especially, but also in