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THE THEATRE OF ANTHONY NEILSON

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Trish Reid

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INTRODUCTION
NEILSON IN HIS CONTEXTS

It is late July 2008. While darkness falls Anthony Neilson takes to the stage as master of ceremonies in a tent in a field in Suffolk, as part of the Latitude Festival. The performance is titled *The Big Lie*. 'This is a presentation by the RSC', Neilson announces via a megaphone, 'obviously they are most known for Shakespeare. What you are going to see this evening is not Shakespeare. It's an example of the kind of contemporary classic that the RSC wants to present in the future' (Neilson 2008a). Two actors dressed entirely in black then sedately mount the platform stage accompanied by portentous music. Each is carrying a folder with the RSC logo clearly emblazoned on it. They proceed to read slowly, deliberately, and in very serious tones, a scene about a couple breaking up. Gradually – more gradually for some audience members than others, it must be said – it becomes clear that the scene is actually an old one from the BBC soap opera *Eastenders*. It is the famous scene in which the pub landlord 'dirty' Den Watts attempts to end his marriage to Angie only for her to feign terminal illness. The penny finally drops in the tent when one of the actors says, 'I want a clean break Ange, from this pub, from this square, from Walford'. Thereafter, the disjunction between the ponderous RSC style delivery of the lines and the cockney idiom in which they were originally written causes hilarity. About ten minutes in, the audience begins to hear screams from outside the tent. A little later, just at the moment when Angie is explaining her illness, what appears to be a zombie mounts the stage and attacks the actor playing Den, by biting him in the neck, in stereotypical zombie fashion. A security guard intervenes, Neilson rushes on stage to help, and after a struggle the zombie is removed. Moments later Neilson re-enters, 'I'm really incredibly sorry ladies and gentlemen', he explains, 'you may have heard we've been having some little problems with the living dead, recently, today. I don't know why they have singled out the RSC'.

Inside the tent Neilson continues to call for calm, making various statements about the fortitude of the RSC in the face of the forces of evil as the *Eastenders* drama collapses. Outside, however, confusion and mild panic set in as more and more zombies stagger out of the woods into the

unsuspecting crowd. Brian Logan describes the scene: 'Some people were yelping in alarm. Others couldn't seem to believe what they were seeing. I saw one punter being chased by a howling cadaver, and several toddlers who were bloody terrified. And I'm not surprised: these were really convincing zombies' (Logan 2008). Meanwhile, inside the tent Neilson is yelling 'Evacuate!' Finally, he leads a charge out of the tent and up the hill, flaming torch in hand, to drive the zombies back into the woods. Some members of the audience follow. Some are left behind bewildered.

The Big Lie was a one-off, free performance designed for a festival setting. In this sense it is hardly representative of Neilson's work as a whole. Nonetheless it displays a number of characteristics we find elsewhere in his theatre. It is iconoclastic in that it criticizes a cherished institution. It troubles the distinction between high and low art. It operates in a territory between fantasy and reality, taking aesthetic risks and being determinedly playful in the process. Perhaps most importantly, it places as much emphasis on affective as cognitive engagement. This last signature is a constant in Neilson's work across a reasonably long career. Finally, although *The Big Lie* was not widely reviewed, it managed to divide critics. This is something else that Neilson has been good at. Brian Logan, found the show 'brilliantly tailored to its environment' because it was sensitive to the fact 'there was a bigger audience outside than inside the theatre tent' (Logan 2008). In addition, its zombie subject matter was for Logan perfectly suited to the rural summertime setting. Lyn Gardner was far less impressed. For her *The Big Lie* failed 'to take into account the logistics of the space, so that most people were left entirely baffled' (Neilson 2008a). Such contradictory critical responses to Neilson's work are far from unusual.

Anthony Neilson is among the most consistently entertaining, compelling and experimental playwrights of our time. A creator of innovative work since the early 1990s, he writes and directs compassionate plays that often draw on comic registers – deadpan, satire, farce, slapstick – to explore the exquisite embarrassment of personal secrets and sexual guilt. Neilson's working methods are highly unusual. For one thing, he directs his own work, but more importantly, rather than arriving on the first day of rehearsals with a finished play, or even a draft, Neilson begins with little more than an idea and a group of actors and designers with whom he then develops the show during the rehearsal period. This process, I argue throughout this book, invests Neilson's work with a peculiar kind of intensity partly because, when it works well, it allows actors to take an unusual degree of ownership of their roles. It also involves a high level of risk and is consequently one of

the key contexts in which his work should be understood, because it speaks of a commitment to rawness and immediacy that is central to Neilson's vision of what the theatre can do. It was this quality, in tandem with his dedication to innovation, that first attracted me to his work. Neilson is also a Scottish artist of my generation, and the distinctive cultural traditions of Scotland and Scottish theatre are another context in which his work can be usefully positioned.

Neilson was born in Edinburgh in 1967 the son of the actor Beth Robens and the actor/director Sandy Neilson. Thereafter, as Joyce McMillan has noted, he 'spent a backstage childhood following his parents around the theatres and rehearsal rooms of the country' (McMillan 2006). This early experience was formative for two reasons. First, it fostered in him a pragmatic attitude to life in the theatre. By his own account he witnessed first hand 'the effect of bad reviews or flop shows or "dry periods"', for instance, and understood early that theatre was a precarious and often unforgiving business (Neilson 2013a: x). Second, he was exposed to a good deal of extraordinary work while still at an impressionable age. The 1970s was a particularly lively decade in Scottish theatre. In 1973 John McGrath established the radical left-wing theatre company 7:84 Scotland whose inaugural production, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1973), was to become a landmark in Scottish and British alternative theatre. More particularly, *The Cheviot* came to exemplify a particular brand of political theatre that combined serious intent with an accessible, populist and eclectic theatrical style. This approach was to make a big impact on the young Neilson who has admitted to beginning his career with a pre-established 'template for theatre' explaining that it 'should be accessible, it should inspire feeling, and it should employ any and all performance skills in doing so' (Neilson 2013a: xi).

Neilson's commitment to a theatre of affect was concretized when he witnessed his parents' involvement in a number of key Scottish plays of the late 1970s that were notable for being highly emotionally charged. Writing in *The Guardian* in 1996 he recalled, for example, the impact of seeing his mother perform in Donald Campbell's *The Widows of Clyth* (1978), a play that focused on the impact of a shipwreck on a coastal community in Caithness in the late nineteenth century:

> At the end of the first half, the character played by my mother was told her husband had died. She let out a scream of pain that left me chilled. Obviously it was doubly relevant to me because she was my mum. In

> my work, I think I'm always trying to re-create the emotional shadow of that moment. I've always thought to put personal connections into my stuff, my life and the lives of the actors involved – and not shy away from difficult emotional subjects. It was in the Traverse that night, in the pitch of my mother's scream, that I suddenly realized what theatre was about.
>
> (Neilson 1996a)

Subsequently, the combining of an eclectic and populist approach, with a search for emotional intensity became a signature of Neilson's work. 'We must be accessible', he has written, 'yet still bold in form and content' (Neilson 2007b: n.p.). As Mark Brown argues in his short essay for this book ('Not so "In-Yer-Face": Neilson and the Renaissance in Scottish Theatre'), thinking about Neilson as somehow existing outside the traditions of Scottish theatre risks inhibiting a full appreciation of his work. In any case, the playwright's connection with Scottish theatre has been reinforced in the twenty-first century. In 2004 the Theatre Royal Plymouth agreed to co-produce *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* with the Tron theatre in Glasgow and the Edinburgh International Festival (EIF). In 2005 the newly constituted National Theatre of Scotland (NTS), for whom Neilson became an Artistic Associate, commissioned him to direct one of its inaugural projects, *Home Edinburgh* (2006), and to write and direct *Realism* (2006) in a co-production with EIF. *Home Edinburgh*, subtitled *Parliament*, was a departure for Neilson, in that it was a verbatim piece performed by adults but extracted from a series of interviews conducted with children about their attitudes to political governance. In 2007 NTS funded a revival and extensive tour of *Dissocia*, with the original cast and production team. From the outset, the NTS's enviably flexible structure enabled an impressively experimental output, and Neilson's involvement in the first season allowed him both to continue to work in his own inimitable style, and also to emerge as a more identifiably Scottish artist than had hitherto been the case (Brown 2007; Reid 2011; Scullion 2007).

As a young adult Neilson retained an interest in theatre. In 1986 he enrolled on the acting course at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama in Cardiff but quite quickly found himself temperamentally unsuited to institutional life and left after the first year. Returning to Edinburgh at a loose end, he wrote his first radio play, *The Colours of the King's Rose* which in early 1988 he entered for the inaugural BBC Radio Young Writers Festival. He won, which was obviously a promising sign, but really began establishing

his reputation as a playwright in 1991 with *Normal* which, after a successful run at the Edinburgh Fringe transferred to London. This leads us to another key context for Neilson's work. He was one of a group of young British dramatists whose work was retrospectively gathered under one heading by Aleks Sierz in his influential study, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (Sierz 2001). In his book, Sierz identifies Neilson as a progenitor of 'in-yer-face' because he sees *Normal* and *Penetrator* (1993) as early examples of the turn towards dark subject matter that was to dominate London stages in the mid-1990s, reaching its apotheosis with Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995) and Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* (1996). 'Long before Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill hit the headlines in the mid-nineties', writes Sierz, 'Neilson was exploring the darker side of the human psyche' (Sierz 2001: 68). Neilson's reputation as a provocateur was cemented with *The Censor* (1997) and *Stitching* (2002), both plays that dealt unflinchingly with the more disturbing aspects of male and female sexuality. Neilson's association with the Royal Court and the Traverse early in his career also worked to reinforce this identification with the perceived resurgence in 'new writing' that took place in the mid-1990s. Consequently, his work in this decade remains closely associated in criticism with the phenomenon variously described as the 'Theatre of Blood and Sperm' (Broich 2001), 'New Brutalism' (Nikčević 2005), and of course most famously, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* (Sierz 2001). As the new millennium dawned, critics viewing his work through the prism of in-yer-face began to look forward to a new Neilson piece in the expectation of something reliably controversial and sexually explicit. It was at this point that Neilson changed direction.

In his review of Neilson's 2002 play *Stitching*, Robert Dawson Scott of *The Times* observes with some degree of irony, after 'a decade establishing himself as a leading member of the brutalist school, Anthony Neilson has gone romantic' (Dawson Scott 2002). *Stitching* is a play the central image of which is of a bereaved woman sewing up her own vagina, and thus hardly conforms to most people's expectations of romance in the theatre, but Dawson Scott's comment serves as an early example of the periodization that commonly occurs in discussions of Neilson's work. If his work in the 1990s remains associated with the group of young dramatists whose aggressive and confrontational style 'saved British playwriting from a slow decline that had been taking place since the 1980s', by contrast, Neilson's work in the new century, especially *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* (2004), *Realism* (2006), *Narrative* (2013) and *Unreachable* (2016), appears more formally experimental, playful even (Saunders 2008: 1). By his own account

Neilson has moved beyond the naturalist dramaturgy that underpinned earlier plays like *Penetrator* and *The Censor* – although as we will see he has never been a realist playwright in the strictest sense – towards expressionistic and absurdist strategies, intended to 'theatrically represent the internal landscape' (Neilson 2007b).

From the outset, much of the fantasy in Neilson's theatre has been a way of depicting the force and validity of subjective experience. If this focus on dramatizing the intensely personal is a defining feature of his plays, it is also one of the reasons his work does not often strike critics as resonant with the politics of its day, or indeed with politics in any explicit sense. Discussions about manifestations of political theatre, and the political in theatre, provide another context for Neilson's work because 'the assumed borders of the political can have a decisive impact' on the critical reception of new writing, especially in relation to its seriousness (Kielawski 2013: 97). Readings of the political in 1990s drama are complicated by debates surrounding the in-yer-face phenomenon, which for a number of critics emerged precisely from, and was therefore a symptom of, the political apathy of the 1990s. Amelia Howe-Kritzer, for instance, is doubtful about the political efficacy of Kane and her generation of young playwrights. She identifies a tension at the heart of new writing in the mid-1990s, namely that it dramatizes the 'mood of disengagement' at the heart of post-Thatcher British politics, but fails to do more than challenge 'apathy and cynical detachment' (Howe-Kritzer 2008: 218). Unlike the political theatre of the 1970s and 1980s, in-yer-face offers no alternative vision. Neilson's major plays of this period are certainly marked by an intensified consciousness of ethical dilemmas, but these are figured as acutely personal. Moreover, Neilson's attitude to the 'topicality' of his own work enhances the impression that he is not a political artist.

In his introduction to *Plays 1* (1998), Neilson urges anyone thinking of producing one of the plays to alter it 'as you see fit in whatever time and place you are' (Neilson 1998: x). Similarly, he notes that the text of *Narrative* (2013) 'may require some adaptation, depending on when and where' it is being staged (Neilson 2013a: 221). Even more explicitly, in *Realism* (2006), an exchange between the protagonist and his mother that might appear critical of Israeli military aggression is qualified with a textual note: '[*At the time of writing, in 2006, Israel had invaded Lebanon. Substitute a more topical/timeless reference if necessary*]' (Neilson 2008d: 297). References to current events or popular culture can be amended as production teams see fit, then, providing that such changes 'remain conceptually true to the spirit and themes of the play' (Neilson 2014: 221). Of course, we can put pressure

on this appearance of political disinterest by following Augusto Boal in observing that 'all theater is necessarily political because all the activities of man are political and theater is one of them' (Boal 1979: ix). Consequently, in this book I argue that while we should take seriously Neilson assertions that he is not an *explicitly* political artist, where we find them, we can and should read his plays for their implicit political biases. These are as likely to manifest in formal experimentation as in choice of subject matter.

Like a number of contemporary playwrights Neilson offers representations of intense human experience, but he regularly does so with a formal inventiveness that tacitly poses a challenge to the pre-existing structures of power in which theatrical realism plays a part. For much of his career Neilson has worked in opposition to the theatrical style provocatively described by the Scottish playwright David Greig as 'English realism' in which playwrights are lauded for 'showing the nation to itself', bringing forth 'issues for the public gaze' and debating them 'rather like columnists in the broadsheets' (Greig 2003). 'Distrustful of metaphor' Greig argues, this is a style of 'theatre founded on mimicry' (Greig 2003). 'In English realism', he concludes, 'the real world is brought in to the theatre and plonked on the stage like a familiar old sofa' (Greig 2003). Part of the work of this book is to explore how, by creating play worlds that resist obvious resonance with the real world outside the theatre, and by exceeding the limits of realism, Neilson is able to generate alternative, if often ambiguous, political perspectives. Dramaturgically and thematically, his work has addressed important questions about authenticity and reliability in experience, while avoiding easy or simplistic solutions.

This book focuses almost entirely on Neilson's work for adult audiences. Two exceptions are *The Séance* (2009), which was written for young people as part of the National Theatre's Connections project, and *Get Santa!* (2010), created for the Royal Court as a family Christmas show. My focus on original work that has been written and directed by Neilson himself, stems from my belief that it is through such a focus that his contribution to extending the vocabulary of contemporary theatre might be best assessed. This does not mean that he has not done other things, of course. Playwriting is not a lucrative career and writers tend to diversify. So, although I do not include a detailed account in the book, it is worth noting that Neilson has occasionally worked as a director of other people's work, for example. Neilson directed the UK premiere of John Adams' controversial opera *The Death of Klinghoffer* (2005) for Scottish Opera and the EIF, for instance, which won a Herald Angel award but also 'became the target of undeserved pre-opening charges

of encouraging terrorism' (Blewitt 2005). He also directed a production of Nina Raine's translation of Mikhail and Vyacheslav Durnenkov's *The Drunks* for the RSC in 2009, and the following year the ill-fated NTS premiere of Alistair Beaton's *Caledonia* (2010), which was by any standards a critical failure. The following year as part of the fiftieth anniversary celebrations at the RSC, Neilson directed a revival of Peter Weiss's *Marat Sade* (2011), which provoked nightly walk-outs, as indeed, had Peter Brook's original UK production in the 1960s. For his part, Michael Boyd, then artistic director of the RSC defended Neilson's production. 'It's a controversial play', he reminded critics, 'because the subjects it explores – insanity, individuality, sexuality, the abuse of power, freedom versus control – are just as sensitive today as they were in the 1960s' (Boyd cited in Trueman 2011). Elsewhere, Neilson has written for television, including for the BBC espionage series *Spooks*, and his debut feature film *The Debt Collector* (1999) – which he wrote and directed – won the Fipresci International Critic's Award. In late 2015 his adaptation of Shirley Jackson's 1959 novel *The Haunting of Hill House* opened to universally positive reviews at the Everyman Theatre in Liverpool, and his adaptation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* for the Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh met with a similarly positive response over Christmas 2016.

Neilson's work is varied and eclectic, and imposing any kind of meaningful pattern on it is consequently difficult. His interests often shift and overlap. If we take 2002 as one example we find *Stitching*, an intense two-hander about love, loss and sexual trauma, *Edward Gant's Amazing Feats of Loneliness!*, a mock Victorian entertainment about the solitude of the human condition, and *The Lying Kind*, a farce written for Christmas at the Royal Court. As with the contexts for interpreting his work that I have already sketched, Neilson's interests, both formal and thematic, are diverse and they inter-animate each other in unusual ways. For this reason, I have chosen to reject a strictly chronological structure for this book and opted instead for looser thematic clusters. In Chapter 1, I begin by considering more fully Neilson's connection with the in-yer-face moment, using this rather vexed connection as a starting point for teasing out what is really distinctive and unusual about his work in the 1990s and indeed in the 2000s, where it concerns questions of psychological pain and trauma. The chapter deals with *Penetrator* (1993), *The Censor* (1997) and *Stitching* (2002), plays that focus closely on intense interpersonal, sexual relationships. Because the 1990s was a period marked by an anti-feminist backlash, and the re-emergence of a distinctively masculine cultural politics, I also spend some time considering masculinity

and its discontents, particularly in *Penetrator*, which is a very masculine play, before considering the perennial problem of heterosexual desire as it is figured in *The Censor* and *Stitching*. All three plays tell dark and intimate love stories that shift between extremes of brutality and tenderness to startling effect, employing humour in the process. Chapter 2 considers Neilson's preoccupation with violence and horror across a group of plays that span a fifteen-year period. The chapter considers closely the way *Normal* (1991), *Hooverbag* (1996) and *Relocated* (2008) interrogate our cultural fascination with criminality and its representations. The first deals with a young lawyer's enthralment in the psyche of a notorious serial killer and the second with widespread public revulsion at the BSE scandal and the light it shone on our vexed relationship with excessive consumption. The third concerns the disturbing subject of violence against children and adult responses to it. My discussion focuses on the way Neilson draws on contemporary discourses of violence, horror and the grotesque, to destabilize the ground on which moral certainties are constructed.

After these opening chapters the focus of the book turns towards Neilson's work in the new century and a group of plays that signal an expansion of his dramaturgical scope including his most critically acclaimed to date, the multi-award winning *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* (2004). Although it struck many critics at the time as a significant departure for Neilson, *Dissocia* did not in fact come out of the blue. Neilson's work has never really been rooted in a realist aesthetic and the earlier play *Edward Gant's Amazing Feats of Loneliness!* (2002) – which consists in one long flight of melancholic fancy – had already pointed towards a sea change in his approach. In its blurring of the lines between fantasy and reality, its rejection of cause-and-effect narrative, and its combining of humour and seriousness, *Edward Gant* paves the way for the larger-scale works that are to follow, and which are explored later in the chapter. In *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* (2004) and *Realism* (2006), Neilson utilizes some of the methods employed in *Edward Gant* to wrestle productively with the problem of dramatizing internal landscapes and in so doing examines the experiences of belonging and alienation that define our lives. Throughout the chapter, I draw on Neilson's refiguring of the absurd as an aesthetic tool for the twenty-first-century playwright.

Christmas, with its sentimental associations of family, home and hearth, might seem like odd subject matter for Neilson but as Chapter 4 of this book demonstrates, he has returned to it with enough regularity to make a Christmas themed section a viable inclusion in this book. As early as *The Year of the Family* (1994), and again in *The Night Before Christmas* (1995),

The Lying Kind (2002), *God in Ruins* (2007) and *Get Santa!* (2011), Neilson has turned to Christmas as a source of setting and theme. No doubt this is partly a matter of circumstance. Few contemporary playwrights can afford to refuse a commission, and few shows made around Christmas ignore the festival completely, but as Neilson confesses in his interview for this book: 'I do think it's a really nice time of the year to do a show. There's an element of all theatre that's like Christmas in the sense that it contains the possibility of magic. Entering a theatre is like going into Santa's Grotto. There's the expectation that we will be transported' (Neilson, this volume, page 154). One purpose of the chapter then, is to explore Neilson's evolving relationship with the magical potential of theatre. Christmas is a time of celebration but also one that puts additional stresses on family life and in so doing alienates those who cannot or do not conform to societal norms. In these plays Neilson explores family breakdown through the prism of Christmas's call to happiness, and also touches on associated questions of belief and wish fulfilment. Following in this vein, Chapter 5 explores Neilson's most recent full-length plays *Narrative* (2013) and *Unreachable* (2016). These plays typify both Neilson's career-long fascination with the mechanics of storytelling in the theatre and also his interest in liveness and spontaneity, or at least theatre's potential to generate a kind of presentism that distinguishes it from other art forms. In this sense they are also concerned with theatre's magical potential. This last focus suggests a thread, in fact, that leads back all the way to *Normal* and the strategies Neilson employs in that play to bring the audience into awareness of itself as present at the theatrical event. If a single concern can be said to characterize Neilson's work it is this abiding commitment to the theatre as a lived and primarily felt experience.

Chapter 6 is given over to different perspectives. Throughout the process of researching and writing this book, Anthony Neilson has been open to discussing his work and has kindly provided typescripts for those plays discussed here that have never been published. Given the unusual nature of his process, this amounts to a significant number of plays, and the important insights I have gained from reading them has enhanced the scope of the book immeasurably. Their inclusion is entirely down to his generosity. The interview included here provides many insights into his views on theatre as an art form, as well as his unique process, not least in the creation of *Unreachable*, his most recent main stage work. Also included in this last chapter is Gary Cassidy's essay on Neilson's rehearsal period for *Narrative*, which offers unique insight into the playwright's process. Cassidy's arguments are grounded in his own experience of observing narrative

rehearsals over a period of several weeks, and are augmented by thorough scholarship in the area of rehearsal methodologies and collaborative practice, and a series of interviews with members of the *Narrative* company. Anna Harpin's essay by contrast is more concerned with the effects of *Realism* on its intended audience. For Harpin, by focusing imaginatively on one uneventful day in the life of an unremarkable subject, *Realism* deconstructs the fiction of everyday reality and by doing so, allows space for the intrusion of different ways of thinking about lived experience. Drawing on insight borrowed from social psychology, Harpin constructs a convincing argument for the ethical value of Neilson's theatrical experiments in the mid-noughties – we can include *Dissocia* here – especially insofar as they attack the normative codes of behaviour and perception that make people miserable. The last word in this chapter goes to the Scottish journalist and critic Mark Brown whose short polemical essay seeks to reclaim Neilson as a Scottish artist drawing on Scottish theatrical traditions. All three of these contributions enrich our understanding of and appreciation of Neilson's by now considerable body of work.

This book argues Neilson's place as a major contemporary playwright and a theatrical innovator of sustained distinction. Although his later work has not attracted the same controversy as his earlier plays, he continues to push the boundaries of what is possible in theatre and what theatre makes possible. His is a distinctive theatrical voice that will no doubt continue to delight and challenge audiences for some time to come.

CHAPTER 1
DRAMATURGIES OF LOVE: RELATIONSHIP PLAYS

In 2007 Neilson reflected, with characteristic playfulness, on the reception of his early work:

> I was part of a theatrical movement once. As with most movements, no one who was a part of it noticed anything moving at the time . . . As far as I can tell, In-Yer-Face was all about being horrid and writing about shit and buggery. I thought I was writing love stories.
>
> (Neilson 2007a: 23)

Neilson is right, of course, to note that his work in the 1990s is usually read as typical, or even prototypical, of the confrontational theatrical style mapped by Sierz in his influential study, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (Sierz 2001). Not only is a significant section of Sierz's book given over to discussion of Neilson's early work but many subsequent references have served to concretize this connection. If, as Chris Megson has observed, 'the first performance of Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, at the Royal Court Theatre in January 1995, has taken its place in the glittering pantheon of premieres that help constitute post-war theatre historiography', then Neilson's place in this historiography has been secured substantially by association with this moment (Megson 2006: 529). In numerous accounts of British drama in the 1990s, Neilson's name is mentioned, often in passing, in the same sentence as Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, Jez Butterworth and Philip Ridley (Baraniecka 2013: 7; Morrison 2010: 63; Rabey 2015: 16; Sierz 2013: 57; Walsh 2010: 5). This repetition, at least as much as the work itself, helped establish Neilson's reputation as a playwright 'at the fore-front of shock-fest theatre' (Bull 2011: 345). In the 1990s, it is repeatedly implied, Neilson specialized in the art of subversion by means of provocation, in a manner similar if not identical to his contemporaries Kane, Ravenhill and Ridley. Adrienne Scullion is simply confirming this already widely shared understanding when she identifies *Penetrator* (1993) and *The Censor* (1997) as part of 'the core repertoire of in-yer-face theatre' (Scullion 2010: 81).

That Neilson's reputation was established via this association is evident in readings of his later work, which have often been coloured as a consequence. For instance, in his review of *Narrative* (2013), Patrick Marmion begins by insisting that we 'can always count on Anthony Neilson to pull the pin out of a theatrical grenade and roll it on stage' although there is nothing in his subsequent review that makes us think the production was particularly explosive (Marmion 2013). The work of this chapter, and indeed this book, is partly aimed at extricating Neilson from the morass of in-yer-face generalization, which begins with Sierz himself. For Sierz, it might be remembered, the in-yer-face label could be applied to 'any drama that takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes until it gets the message' (Sierz 2001: 4). Such a broad description is a necessary underpinning for his thesis, of course, because Sierz needs to account for the enormous diversity of the work he includes in *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, which includes sections on Sarah Kane, Martin McDonagh, Nick Grosso, Jez Butterworth and Phyllis Nagy. Sierz also explains this variety by conceiving of in-yer-face as a new theatrical 'sensibility, and a fistful of theatre techniques' rather than a movement (Sierz 2008: 30). This seems a sensible enough approach, of course, as far as it goes. Nonetheless, Sierz does appear to argue that some plays and playwrights are more in-yer-face than others. As Ken Urban notes, the works Sierz 'finds to be best described as "in- yer-face" portray victims as complicit in their own oppression . . . obsess about the crisis of masculinity, shun clear political statements, and reject any notion of political correctness' (Urban 2004: 354).

As it happens, the plays discussed in this chapter, *Penetrator* (1993), *The Censor* (1997) and *Stitching* (2002) fit Urban's definition rather neatly. Each takes as its subject matter unusually intense and dysfunctional personal relationships involving troubled men; utilizes misogynistic language and violent and pornographic imagery; fails to make its politics explicit or manifest; and troubles progressive assumptions about gender relations. Neilson's tight focus on the emotional life of a small number of characters also supports the notion that in-yer-face plays tell little stories about individuals – private, personal, erotic, violent – as opposed to big stories about ideologies and politics. Indeed, much of what Sierz says about *The Censor* in *In-Yer-Face Theatre* remains pertinent and insightful and his account of *Penetrator* is detailed and nuanced enough to make it a useful starting point for any discussion of the play. He notes for example that the play 'amounts to a satire on men', and that its central image, a 'paranoid fantasy of being violated, seems to sum up some of the worse fears of the