Post War British Theatre

by James Hansford

English Association Bookmarks
No. 11
Three Post-War British Plays

by

James Hansford

BOOKS TO READ
Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (Faber, 1956)
Edward Bond, *Save* (Methuen, 1965)
Caryl Churchill, *Top Girls* (Methuen, 1982)

NOTES
Conventional studies of the period begin by noting two important productions of the mid-1950s, Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*. Osborne’s drama (see also *The Entertainer* and *Inadmissible Evidence*), notwithstanding its monodramatic tendency, is essentially naturalistic, suppressing stage artifice and articulating a social consciousness which Arnold Wesker (*Roots, Chips with Everything*), Brendan Behan (*The Hostage, The Quare Fellow*) and John Arden (*Serjeant Musgrave’s Dance, Armstrong’s Last Goodnight*) have done much to refine and expand. By contrast Beckett’s work is ritualistic and meta-theatrical, an exploration of ‘inner space’ (see also *Endgame, Happy Days, Play and Not*) owing more to continental expressionism than to conventional representation, in whatever way it is ‘staged’.

Samuel Beckett: *Waiting for Godot*
Written in French and originally entitled *Attendant, Waiting for Godot* features two deracinated but sharply differentiated figures on a ‘country road’ awaiting, for an unspecified purpose, the arrival of a Mr Godot. By the end of the first act he has failed to appear and at the end of the play’s second and concluding act, Vladimir and Estragon are informed, by proxy once again, that Mr Godot will not be arriving on this, the succeeding day, but will surely come ‘tomorrow’. Clearly, the arrival of Godot is pictured as a panacea for the perils and purposelessness of existence, and this anxiety is featured most strongly in the relationship of attachment and hostility between Vladimir and Estragon and between Pozzo and Lucky (master and slave, blind man and dumb man) who feature in both acts but who—unlike so much else in a play dominated by the fugitive nature of time—are greatly changed upon their second appearance. The play is one in which, as one commentator has remarked, ‘nothing happens twice’ but in which the checks and balances between facets of existence, stripped of much naturalistic clutter, are movingly and often hilariously rendered.

Quick-fire banter and often farcical dramatic circumstance (both reminiscent of music hall routine) are interspersed with fragments of philosophical speculation to confound purposeful thought, communication and activity. In this extract from Act II, the blind Pozzo who is accompanied by the mute Lucky—both deprived of motion—cries out for assistance:

VLADIMIR: We are waiting for Godot to come—
ESTRAGON: Ah!
POZZO: Help!
VLADIMIR: Or for night to fall. (*Pause*) We have kept our appointment and that’s an end to that. We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment. How many people can boast as much?
Estragon: Billions.

Vladimir: You think so?

Estragon: I don't know.

Vladimir: You may be right.

Pozzo: Help!

Vladimir: What's certain is that the hours are long, under these conditions, and constrain us to beguile them with proceedings which, how shall I say, which may at first sight seem reasonable until they become a habit. You may say it is to prevent our reason from foundering. No doubt. But has it not long been straying in the night without end of the abyssal depths? That's what I sometimes wonder. You follow my reasoning?

Estragon: (aphoristic) We all are born mad. Some remain so.

Pozzo: Help! I'll pay you!

Estragon: How much?

Pozzo: Two shillings!

Estragon: It's not enough.

Vladimir: I wouldn't go so far as that.

Estragon: You think it's enough?

Vladimir: No, I mean so far as to assert that I was weak in the head when I came into the world. But that is not the question.

Pozzo: Five shillings!

Vladimir: We wait. We are bored. (He throws up his hand) No, don't protest, we are bored to death, there's no denying it. Good, a diversion comes along and what do we do? We let it go to waste. Come, let's get to work! (He advances towards the heap, stops in his stride) In an instant all will vanish and we'll be alone again, in the midst of nothingness! (He broods.)

Pozzo: Five shillings!

Vladimir: We're coming! (He tries to pull Pozzo to his feet, fails, tries again, stumbles, falls, tries to get up, fails.)

Estragon: What's the matter with you all?

Vladimir: Help!
of such as Arden in developing a theatre which has clear agit-prop potential.

**Edward Bond: Saved**

In its concern with environmental determination and its rhetoric of linguistic authenticity, *Saved* has roots in naturalism, but its bare stage and Bond’s declared aim to teach ‘moral scepticism and analysis, and not faith’ make the play decisively post-Brechtian. The drama of *Saved* concerns a young working-class couple, Pam and Len, Pam’s parents, Harry and Mary, and young Fred who fathers Pam’s child and who, with a gang of youths, stones the child to death in its pram, a scene which occasioned considerable controversy at the play’s first production. The background of the last war and present social etiolation make impoverished and threatening human relationships an historical circumstance. Len’s curiosity and his ability to generate a degree of vitalism in others (notably Harry) is a suggested way out of the impasse (albeit largely at the expense of women), although the play’s title remains a problematic one.

The bleakness of Bond’s settings is a matter of economic, rather than, as in Beckett, existential circumstance, though the cold is as ubiquitous as Godot’s absence; the dialogue—blunt, rather than playful—has a powerful social inflection while character is articulated through family and group commitments and pressures:

A long silence. LEN picks up the baby.

See!

LEN: Can’t give it a cold just because we’re rowin’. *(He goes towards the door. He stops.)* ’E said ’e’d look in.

PAM: *(she turns round)* When? *(She turns back to the wall.)* What did ’e say?

LEN: I said yer wanted to see ’im. ’E goes ’e’s up to ’s eyes in it. So I said I got a couple of tickets for Crystal Palace. ’E’s knockin’ off early.

PAM: Saturday?

LEN: T’night.

PAM: *(turns)* Yer got ’im downstairs!

LEN: No.

PAM: *(calls)* Mum - is Fred there? Fred? - ’E might be early.

LEN: There’s a good ’alf ’our yet.

PAM: *(excited)* I ’ope ’is lot wins.

LEN: ’E might be late.

PAM: Not for football. Yer can say she’s upstairs if yer wan’ a go. Put it like that.

LEN: *(looks at child)* ’E’s well away.

PAM: I ain’ cut me nails all the time I bin in bed.

MARY: *(off)* Lennie!

LEN: Shall I get the scissors?

PAM: She won’t shut up till yer go down. I got me own.

MARY: *(off)* Leonard! I keep callin’ yer. *(Outside the door)* ’Ow many more times. *(She comes in.)* I bin callin’ the last ’alf ’our. Dinner won’t be fit t’eat.

LEN: Juss puttin’ the nipper back.
MAR: That’s the last time I cook a ‘ot meal in this ‘ouse. I mean it this time. (To PAM) Yer can make yer own bed t’morra, you. (To LEN) I ain’ sweatin’ over a ‘ot stove. No one offer t’buy me a new one. (To PAM) I can’t afford t’keep yer on yer national ‘ealth no longer. I’m the one ‘oo ought to be in bed.

MARY goes out.

PAM: I got all patches under me eyes.

LEN: No.

PAM: I feel awful.

LEN: Yer look nice.

PAM: I’ll ‘ave t’ ‘ave a wash.

LEN: Yeh.

Alongside these two developing strands throughout the 1960s (and in the case of political drama especially, into the 70s and 80s) has emerged in British drama a theatre of myth, ritual and image which might be termed ‘non-rational’ or ‘non-dialectical’. The European influence here is that of Antonin Artaud, relocated in the directorial work of Peter Brook and Charles Marowitz. The re-definition of theatre space, the Artaudian emphasis on the relation between language and the body, the use of symbol and image to facilitate a non-rational enquiry into human identity is as much a rejection of naturalism as is Beckett’s theatre; and it aims less to defamiliarise the social world than to refamiliarise the spectator with psychic and physical potential in performance. Mention should be made here of David Rudkin (Afore Night Comes, Sons of Light), Heathcote Williams (AC/DC), Steven Berkoff (East, West) and the later work of Howard Barker (The Castle, The Bite of the Night).

The dominant pathway in British Drama since the 1970s has unquestionably been that of political theatre and the political redefinition of theatre space, together the result of the coming into theatrical consciousness of a generation emerging in the late 1960s. Edward Bond’s work in this regard, as well as Barker’s early dramas (Claw, Hang of the Gaol) can be viewed alongside that of David Edgar (Destiny, Maydays), Howard Brenton (The Churchill Play, Romans in Britain), Trevor Griffiths (The Comedians, The Party) and David Hare (Plenty, The Secret Rapture); these are all writers of a socialist persuasion, anxious to articulate and activate a response to contemporary England, often by displacing work into earlier or other historical contexts. Stephen Poliakoff (Hitting Town, Breaking the Silence) registers a complementary, if not overtly political anxiety, whilst Barrie Keeffe (Gimme Shelter) has energised working-class consciousness in the theatre in a manner parallel to Osborne giving a voice to the ‘Angry Young Men’ of the 1950s.

Caryl Churchill’s broadly comparable political concerns are focused particularly upon feminist debates (Top Girls, Cloud Nine) and the increased notice of women playwrights - Sarah Daniels (Masterpieces), Louise Page (Golden Girls), Timberlake Wertenbaker (Our Country’s Good) - together with Gay theatre (Harvey Fierstein, Michael Wilcox) is an index of how far contemporary drama has been able to articulate gender as well as the more public political concerns of the age. The most striking political arena in the recent past has been Northern Ireland; drama, as well as poetry, has reflected the private, cultural and political concerns of a land whose relation to mainland Britain has been brought increasingly into question. Brian Friel (Translations, Aristocrats) chooses a broadly naturalistic dramaturgy; Frank McGuinness (Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme, Carthaginians) does not. Other figures in the Irish ‘renaissance’ are Ron Hutchinson (Rat in the Skull), Bill Morrison (Flying Blind), Anne Devlin (Ourselves Alone), Stewart Parker (Spokesong, Northern Star), Thomas Kilroy (Talbot’s Box) and Graham Reid (‘Billy’ plays, Remembrance).
Caryl Churchill  *Top Girls*

*Top Girls* is a decidedly feminist drama, exploring the social and emotional complexes surrounding Marlene's business success as an employment agency executive (this giving the play its title), counterpointed by the very different and difficult circumstances attendant upon her sister Joyce, mindful of familial traps and responsibilities, has remained in their native environment and cared for Marlene's daughter Angie. It is Angie in her exchanges with her natural and adoptive parents and with the younger playmate Kit who focuses for us some of the especially female dilemmas with which the play deals and which are further illustrated in the work of the agency itself and in the problem facing Mr Win (articulated by his wife) ousted from his executive position by Marlene. Most striking is the far from naturalistic opening scene of the play in which Marlene entertains female figures from the past - proto-feminists, courtesans and obedient spouses--whose example throws into relief and perspective the social, political, familial and personal problems contemporary feminine consciousness addresses.

NIJO: There was nothing in my life, nothing, without the Emperor's favour. The Empress had always been my enemy, Marlene, she said I had no right to wear three-layered gowns. But I was the adopted daughter of my grandfather the Prime Minister. I had been publicly granted permission to wear thin silk.

JOAN: There was nothing in my life except my studies. I was obsessed with pursuit of the truth. I taught at the Greek School in Rome, which St Augustine had made famous. I was poor, I worked hard. I spoke apparently brilliantly, I was still very young, I was a stranger; suddenly I was quite famous, I was everyone's favourite. Huge crowds came to hear me. The day after they made me cardinal I fell ill and lay two weeks without speaking, full of terror and regret. But then I got up.

MARLENE: Yes, success is very ...

JOAN: determined to go on. I was seized again / with a desperate longing for the absolute.

ISABELLA: Yes, yes to go on. I sat in Tobermory among Hennie's flowers and sewed a complete outfit in Jaeger flannel. / I was fifty-six years old.

NIJO: Out of favour but I didn't die. I left on foot, nobody saw me go. For the next twenty years I walked through Japan.

GRET: Walking is good. (*The WAITRESS enters.*)

JOAN: Pope Leo died and I was chosen. All right then. I would be Pope. I would know God. I would know everything.

ISABELLA: I determined to leave my grief behind and set off for Tibet.

MARLENE: Magnificent all of you. We need some more wine, please, two bottles I think. Griselda isn't even here yet, and I want to drink a toast to you all.

ISABELLA: To yourself surely. / we're here to celebrate your success.

NIJO: Yes, Marlene.

JOAN: Yes, what is it exactly, Marlene?

MARLENE: Well it's not Pope but it is managing director.*

JOAN: And you find work for people.

MARLENE: Yes, an employment agency.

NIJO: *Over all the women you work with. And the men.

ISABELLA: And very well deserved too. I'm sure it's just the beginning of something extraordinary.

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MARLENE: Well it's worth a party.
ISABELLA: To Marlene.*
MARLENE: And all of us.
JOAN: *Marlene.
NIJO: Marlene.
GRET: Marlene.
MARLENE: We've all come a long way. To our courage and the way we changed our lives and our extraordinary achievements.
(They laugh and drink a toast.)

The opening antiphonal intercutting (‘There was nothing in my life ..., and overlapping (marked by / and *) together with Marlene's ingratiating interruptions create on the one hand a sense of competing monologues and on the other a counterpointing of time sequences which fuse at the close: ‘We've all come a long way.’

Within such a conspectus, television drama can claim a place: over four decades television has come more and more to occupy centre stage, as it were, as a cultural as well as information medium available, as stage drama cannot be, to a mass audience. A number of the stage playwrights already mentioned have worked in television drama - Trevor Griffiths (Country), David Hare (Licking Hitler), Stephen Poliakoff (Strangers on a Train) - and a number of distinguished writers have worked almost exclusively as dramatists for television - David Mercer (The Parachute, Shooting the Chandelier), Dennis Potter (Blue Remembered Hills, The Singing Detective), Mike Leigh (Meantime, Four Days in July) and Alan Bleasdale (Boys from the Black Stuff). As the history of cinema amply demonstrates, the struggle both with and against naturalism is acute in a medium which has every opportunity to subvert and every incentive to reinforce the conventions of representation. A brief survey should include mention of comic writers for the stage in the post-war years, writers such as Joe Orton (Loot, What the Butler Saw) and Peter Barnes (The Ruling Class, Red Noses, Black Death); it is appropriate to mention also, serious, popular dramatists whose provenance, direction and lasting strengths are difficult of description: Peter Nichols (A Day in the Death of Joe Egg), Peter Shaffer (Equus, Amadeus), Alan Ayckbourn (The Norman Conquests), Alan Bennett (Forty Years On, Secret Spies), Simon Gray (Butley) and Christopher Hampton (The Philanthropist, Treats). To record alongside such figures the wealth of alternative and fringe theatre embracing a range of social, political and aesthetic concerns which have emerged over the past thirty years is to testify to both the health of and, it might be said, the crisis within culture and community in Britain since the 1950s.

Further Reading and Criticism

Note: Faber & Faber and Methuen (the series Methuen Modern Plays and Methuen’s New Theatrescripts published in association with the Royal Court Theatre) together publish the majority of the works cited. Howard Barker’s work is published by John Calder. All three publishing houses are gathering individual plays into ‘Collected’ volumes, under authors.

Useful introductory surveys of the drama can be found in:
John Russell Brown, A Short Guide to Modern British Drama (Heinemann, 1982)
Ronald Hayman, British Theatre Since 1955 (Oxford University Press, 1979)
Sandy Craig (ed.), Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain (Amber Lane Press, 1980)
David Ian Rabey, British and Irish Political Drama in the Twentieth Century (MacMillan, 1986)
The Grove Press Modern Dramatists volumes include:
John Bull, New British Political Dramatists

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Michael Billington, *Alan Ayckbourn*  
Maurice Charney, *Joe Orton*  
Bernard Dukore, *Harold Pinter*  
Frances Gray, *John Arden*  
Helene Keyssar, *Feminist Theatre*  
Charles Lyons, *Samuel Beckett*  
Thomas Whitaker, *Tom Stoppard*

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