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The State of British Theatre

To even a casual observer of the theatrical scene, it appears that, despite the presence of an economic crisis and of a government hostile towards intellectual and artistic activities, the performing arts (certainly in London) are currently enjoying something of a renaissance. Perhaps some facts at this point would be valuable. At the time of writing this article (early January 1995) *Time Out* lists over 150 venues as offering theatrical performances in three main categories: West End and Subsidised theatres; Off-West End; and Fringe houses. While over the last twenty years a number of West End theatres have closed, the plethora of fringe venues has more than doubled: the most surprising spaces — over pubs and cafes, one-time warehouses, converted schools and chapels — now regularly offer theatrical performances. Not all fringe companies playing in London will necessarily run to the expense of advertising in *Time Out*, but will rely on local circulation of flyers describing their shows, which may be directed strongly at a particular community; consequently the 150 listings are by no means a complete summary of performances actually available for viewing this week. Significantly of the 150 shows listed, 85 fall into the Off-West End or Fringe categories. The picture looks a particularly healthy one.

Let us pursue the statistics a little further and see how the numbers break down into types and genres of dramatic entertainment. We are of course still in the midst of the Christmas season, so there is a substantial number of pantomimes (14) which are popular with actors since they require large casts, are generally well-paid, play to enthusiastic family audiences and have longish runs (usually from mid-December till the end of January). Equally substantial is the number of long-running musicals (21), though this is exceeded by the wealth of new playwriting (10 plays in the West End; 28 in the other two categories). Of revivals of classic drama a total of 33 plays breaks down into the following sub-sections: 15 modern classics of which 3 happen to be Strindberg and 5 by British and American dramatists of the 1920-40 period; 12 revivals of plays by Shakespeare and his contemporaries; 3 Restoration comedies; 2 eighteenth-century comedies; and 1 Greek tragedy. Three further statistics are worth recording here in anticipation of developments in my later argument: 12 of the 150 performances are dramatisations of novels (of these by far the most popular author is Dickens); 11 are plays by black Caribbean, black African or farEastern dramatists and companies; and 4 are by gay writers and performers (two of these are West End successes). Some of the shows listed in *Time Out* are not easily grouped by genre and so have not been included in my sub-sectioning; several productions, however, fall comfortably into two sub-sections and have been counted in both (such as Lilian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, which has been recorded under the groupings "American" and "Modern Classics in Revival"; though, given its lesbian subject-matter, the play might also as easily have been placed in the "Gay" section, raising that last total to 5). The issue of *Time Out* from which I collected these statistics was also carrying advertisements for a number of productions, many by international artists, that are to be part of the annual London Festival of Mime and these were not included in the calculations. However, it is worth recording this fact to illustrate the range of theatrical fare on offer during this month, when Modern Dance enthusiasts also have access to a second festival, "Resolution! 1995" bringing a multitude of national and international small-scale experimental dance companies and performance artists to

the capital, usually for single performances and often in shared billings (two or even three separate companies performing as part of the same evening's programme and sharing costs). The picture is again a decidedly healthy one, though quality is not necessarily commensurate with quantity.

Londoners clearly do very well. Frustration is frequently felt at the amount of good work a dedicated theatregoer has to miss, because of the sheer volume of choice rather than a lack of it. But is the situation similar in provincial cities and communities? Here the picture varies considerably from geographical area to area. The Midlands are well catered for with the Royal Shakespeare Company's three theatres in Stratford that offer a range of work in; the form of new writing as well as revivals and there are good local repertory theatres nearby in Birmingham, Coventry, Leicester, Nottingham, Derby. There are state-Subsidised opera and ballet companies based in major cities that undertake a considerable programme of touring throughout local regions. Where there is cause for concern is in respect of the running of many of the local repertory theatres, where reductions in Arts Council funding and a failure on the part of some local town councils to make up the deficit has led to the closing by many such theatres of their experimental studios, where throughout the late sixties, seventies and early eighties new dramatists could be sure of finding space to stage their work and the funding to do so on a modest scale. The increasing lack of such spaces on a national scale may well account for the large number of new plays getting a first production in fringe venues in London.

Non-London theatregoers miss out on new playwriting for another reason. Many of the fringe companies included in the statistical tables above will be operating on what has come to be known as a "profit-share" basis. This means that the actors involved and sometimes the director, designer and technicians are not directly paid even the Equity minimum wage (that is the figure set as a base for salary negotiations for actors by their, union, Equity). Instead they give their services over a rehearsal period and for a set number of performances free, but on the understanding that, if the production makes any kind of profit, the monies involved will be shared equally between all the personnel engaged on the production. Actors, young directors and designers will often agree to these terms, because it is WORK; and working even on such terms is preferable to "resting", which today means being "on the dole" and in receipt of social security payments; instead actors are allowed to be in receipt of such payments while to all intents and purposes working for nothing, because in the eyes of the relevant state bureaucrats they are undertaking necessary training to remain skilled for future employment. The attraction is that, because such projects are always London-based, the actors' agents can take casting directors from theatre, television and film along to see them in performance, which could well lead to more profitable roles in the longer term. Also the casual set up of projects like this are such that actors feel free, when occasion demands, to take off a day or two from rehearsals to do a minor role in a television or radio show or quickly film a commercial advertisement, which helps pay for their involvement with what (in creative terms) may be the more rewarding fringe production. Needless to say this is not a situation that is wholly free of abuses of various kinds; and it does mean that most innovative work (even from major dramatists who wish to try out a new vein of writing which established venues are reluctant at first to handle till it has "proved itself") is staged in London. Only a very dedicated provincial theatregoer will be prepared to meet the expense of a journey to the metropolis to view such work.

Far too few local repertory theatres are prepared to take risks with their programming than a decade ago; or, if they do attempt something rather out of the ordinary, they minimise the risk by inviting "star" names, usually from popular television series, to play the leading roles and the resulting productions tend to be lacking in invention and devoid of those qualities of committed ensemble acting that a successful revival properly demands. There have been notable exceptions, but this is a noticeable trend resulting from Mrs. Thatcher's government's rather drastic treatment of the Arts, which succeeding governments have not seen fit to rectify. Though such governments' stated aim has been devolution to encourage district and borough councils to take a greater pride in their local theatres sufficient to offer substantial increases in their

funding, in practice the effect of these changes has led to a greater focusing of dramatic activity on the capital. What this means is that most new playwriting and revivals of less popular classic drama are increasingly to be found on the London fringe. Such companies as do venture on a provincial tour with a classic revival (and it is a risky financial business setting up such a tour initially, unless a company has some reserves to fall back on to cover the period till box-office receipts begin to flow in) find that they are likely to play to near-capacity houses, so great is the thirst in such provincial venues for that kind of work, whereas if they then bring the same production for a short run to a fringe London venue, they are likely to play to very small audiences — however "rare" the play being revived — simply because London theatregoers are sated for choice. It is a saddening situation, again compounded by a questionable Arts Council policy of offering support funding to a small company attempting a provincial tour only when they have proved they can attract provincial audiences by successfully completing at least two such tours on their own (unaided) initiative.

Though these governmental-inspired changes in funding have been described by their perpetrators as in the interests of rationalisation, there is scant common sense or vision to be detected in their devising when one views the consequences. There has been much Tory lauding of the proposal to devote to the Arts a fraction of the income evolving from the new National Lottery. As it currently stands the intention is to devote 28p of every £1 lottery ticket to be divided between the arts, sports, charities, the National Heritage and the Millennium Funds. While theatre is likely to take the largest portion of the slice pushed in the direction of the Arts (particularly when opera is included in the calculation), it is not in fact the magnificent fortune that Tory ministers are wont to try and conjure up before the public's imagination. The main difficulty lies in the terms that accompany such apparent "munificence", namely that the monies are to be devoted by the Arts Council to deserving "capital projects", which effectively means the building of new venues for the arts. The new funding is neither to be used to help companies meet the escalating costs of running existing venues so that seat-prices can be kept at a viable level nor to sponsor actual creative work. Theatre generally does not need glossy new venues; the greatest practitioners of the last few decades (Brook, Grotowski, Boal, to name but three) have shown just the opposite, as have the many fringe companies that nightly in seemingly untheatrical spaces create excellent experiences of theatre by working inventively with their audience's imaginations. But the government has remained impervious to such arguments, that funding for theatre should mean assisting the financial security and productivity of practitioners. They have not learned the lesson proffered by the new British Library project: an unwanted, elephantine building that has far exceeded its original estimated costs, which has repeatedly had its opening delayed to the point where there is considerable doubt about its ever proving functional. The original and current housing of the British Library in the British Museum is aesthetically far more pleasing and conducive to the kinds of activity that ought properly to go on there than the edifice near St. Pancras station will be. The new British Library is a monument devised by Mrs. Thatcher's government to stop the then world of the arts from "whingeing" about the lack of governmental interest in their concerns. The sickening factor behind the British Library project and the new Lottery monies is that they are both overly preoccupied with ostentation: they have each been designed to meet the government's need to be SEEN to be doing something for the arts. What is really wanted is the financial means to enhance the morale of theatre personnel by increasing subsidy in ways that will firstly improve the quality of performances and foster experiment of a kind that will ensure a lively future for theatre as an art-form and secondly help reduce the overheads (mainly the results of overt and hidden taxes) involved in running a company and a theatre building so that ticket prices can be kept at a rate that makes it viable for a keen playgoer to sustain a regular programme of theatre visits. Actors merit incomes and they merit audiences prepared to experiment with the unusual and the innovative at a cost that is not prohibitive; and ideally this should be possible without artistic directors or theatre managers having to spend valuable time going cap-in-hand to the business world for private subsidy.

It is necessary to appreciate this unjust situation promoted by the current government (unjust to actors and other theatre personnel, to audiences, and above all else to the theatreworld of the provinces) as the context within which to take a second look at the statistics I began by outlining. If the situation in London is to be described as healthy, then it is at the expense of theatregoers in the country at large and it relies on the good will of a great many unpaid (or pathetically remunerated) theatre personnel whose creativity will find a means of expression at whatever personal cost, despite the very subtle efforts of the government to restrain them. That theatre flourishes in London (and to a lesser but significant extent in the Midlands and one or two other major cities) is not because of any truly generous disposition, genuine insight or vision on the part of the Tories in power.

But the fact is: theatre flourishes in some form; and circumstances seem to promise a favourable future. This last remark needs some explanation. Drama since Renaissance times has been seen by educational theorists as a valuable mode of instruction in the ways it may be used to teach and heighten a pupil's powers of expression, self-confidence, projection (as well as in previous centuries a means of learning the skills of oratory and rhetoric). Where once it may have helped a pupil discover the finer points of Latin and of the native tongue as a spoken language, it has in this century been increasingly deployed as a means of encouraging pupils to explore different perspectives on to situations of some moral, emotional, social and even political complexity. Drama has been used to heighten skills in reasoning and intellectual flexibility by inspiring participants to debate about the characters and situations that they are being required to present theatrically. The infamous Schools' Curriculum propounded by Tory Ministers of Education saw fit to virtually expunge drama studies from the educational agenda. This political move coincided ironically with the creation of the possibility of studying drama and theatre first at A-level (the advanced examinations taken by eighteen-year-olds) and then at GCSE level (for sixteen-year-olds). These courses are undoubtedly popular, as are courses in theatre studies offered by the university sector, where applicants currently out-number available places by a ratio of roughly 5:1. Inevitably the students successful in gaining admission to these advanced courses and also to Acting Schools have a high intellectual calibre; these are the people now turning as graduates to theatre for a career; and they in large measure account for the increase in theatre venues around central London and the significant change in the types of performance offered on the fringe. Back in the sixties and early seventies, the fringe was where one looked for rather way-out, experimental work inspired by the sudden interest in Artaud's theories, Grotowskian concepts of actor-training, new forms of physicalised theatre inspired by the likes of Julian Beck, and the kind of performance that was not at a great remove from the "happening". There are remarkably few of those original fringe companies in existence today; many of their techniques and modes of rehearsal have now been absorbed into mainstream theatre practice. The fringe is now the place to look for the work of new playwrights; drama celebrating the cultural differences of ethnic minorities; gay and lesbian plays; and increasingly new revivals of "difficult" plays from the dramatic heritage (such as Marston's *Antonio's Revenge*; a comedy by the Restoration woman dramatist, Catherine Trotter; or, as at present, re-stagings of works by Giraudoux, Anouilh, Sartre). The increase in new writing on the fringe is doubtless a reaction to the fact that the National Theatre and the RSC stage fewer new plays than they used to do in their smaller auditoria and, though the Royal Court continues its policy of chiefly staging new work, that work in the main house tends increasingly to be the most recent offerings of established dramatists, unknown writers having first to prove themselves in the far smaller Theatre Upstairs and show that they can make the grade.

It might be expected from this picture of the state of things that the contemporary British stage would be powerfully engaged politically. Resistance is certainly manifest in the very proliferation of companies and playing spaces outlined above, the indefatigable staunchness has a decided political motivation. But the new drama is not political in as central a manner as in previous decades. Only David Hare has continued to face up to the demands of epic-scale theatre with his recent trilogy on British institutions (the

Church in *Racing Demon*; the legal system in *Murmuring Judges*; and governmental politics in *The Absence of War*) but the last was disappointing, as Hare seemed to get side-tracked into analysing why the Labour party had failed to win at the last election and the extent to which this could be attributed to the public persona of Neil Kinnock (thinly disguised as George Jones). We were confronted by issues to do with personalities, not by a thoroughgoing examination of the processes of politics in action. At least Hare was attempting a large-scale vision with the trilogy. None of his contemporaries have attempted works requiring spaces of the size of the Olivier or Barbican theatres. Brenton, Hare's one-time collaborator, has been virtually silent of late. David Edgar with *The Shape of the Table* and his more recent play for the RSC, *Pentecost*, has been investigating events in former communist-block countries, but these are essentially chamber works, lacking the breadth of scope demanded by his fascination with patterns of historical consequence that made *Destiny* and *May Days* such thrilling experiences in performance. The older generation of political writers have all but disappeared from our stages except for the occasional revival. *Roots* and *The Kitchen* clearly have proved they can withstand the test of time, but there has been no new work from Wesker beyond a massively meandering autobiography; Osborne died in relative seclusion on Christmas Eve last; Arden languishes impoverished in Ireland; Bond has not even been dignified with any revival; and Pinter after exploring disturbingly political territory in *Party Time*, reverted to his more lyrical style with *Moonlight*, exploring a consciousness hovering perilously close to dying but resisting all promptings to redeem the past.

Younger dramatists, such as Doug Lucy and Howard Barker, seem preoccupied with the loss of morale that individuals have suffered through the years of Thatcherite rule; the focus is on styles of personal moral anguish, its several possible causes (social and selfinduced), the likelihood of the individual effecting a cure, rather than on a statement about the condition of the country. Such drama is political in the way it records how a prevailing sense of cynicism has induced people to retreat from direct forms of political engagement and attack, but the plays that result risk becoming character-studies in solipsism. Barker confronts his perception of the dominance of political apathy within society with startling attempts to jolt his characters (and, through them, his audiences) into awareness of the need for an alert attentiveness to their social predicament; but all too frequently the baroque convolutions of his plot-structures threaten to undermine the clarity of his theme and his moral argument. The method suggests he is writing political allegory, but the intricate terms of that allegory elude precise and illuminating definition. If the most trenchant political writing is coming from what are conventionally termed "marginalised" groups (blacks, gays, feminists) that may be a reflection of the fact that there are now a number of London fringe or Off West-End venues that have a conscious artistic policy of setting out to foster such work and that having these established outlets for their work has given writers representing such groups a welcome security. The newly constructed Tricycle Theatre at Kilburn under the artistic directorship of Nicholas Kent offers a repertory almost exclusively of Irish and Caribbean writing that is directed at the local community and its concerns. Not only does the Tricycle cater for new playwriting from either Ireland and the Caribbean or from British dramatists of Irish or Caribbean descent but also regularly hosts companies from Ireland and the Caribbean. This is decidedly a community theatre and attracting West-Enders is not essential to the Tricycle's well-being. Much the same is true of the Battersea Arts Centre, south of the river, and the Watermans Arts Centre in West London, where the mix of interests attended to is perhaps more wide-ranging, involving gay and feminist companies, Asian and black troupes (many groups actually move from a week's booking at one venue to a week at the other) since the likely appeal is to a local and therefore select audience (though not 'select' in the sense of an elite). Lesbian and gay artists have for a good while now been the staple of the repertory at the Drill Hall in Chenies Street, which being situated a short walk north of Oxford Street, is virtually in central London, compared with the three venues just mentioned. This venue attracts a metropolitan audience, as does the ICA theatre in the Mall (right in the heart of what, politically, might be termed 'establishment' territory in being only a metaphorical stone's throw away from both

Downing Street and Buckingham Palace) which also offers in its small experimental theatre a platform for innovative gay, lesbian and feminist performance groups. There is a regular influx of companies from America to this venue, especially from San Francisco; but they also showcase native English talents from London and the provinces. Though this is a healthy situation in many ways and is certainly productive of vital, committed work, there is always the risk that the siting of such companies and artists in what are fast becoming recognised as *specialist* theatres is ghettoising their work, when such voices ought to be heard within the full spectrum of London theatre, playing to a more variously constituted audience than is perhaps currently the case.

If politics is not a dominant issue in contemporary playwriting, what are then the preferred thematic tendencies? Not surprisingly given the prevailing political climate, nostalgia features markedly, though it is not necessarily treated without criticism. Nostalgia is a strange emotion concerning the relationship of the present with the past and the motives that underlie the creating of such a relationship within a given consciousness. The most intricate examination of the subject is to be found in Stoppard's *Arcadia*, which — as the title implies — is preoccupied with the impulse to locate within the past a conception of life as in some way idyllic. The play juxtaposes contemporary late twentieth-century experience alongside an evocation of early nineteenth-century life in a stately home where the grounds, formerly laid out according first to Italianate principles and next to the naturalistic school of landscape gardening championed by Capability Brown, are about to be rusticated and gothicised, rendered sentimental and awesome after the tenets of a new fashion promoted by Repton. The gardens become in many ways a metaphor for our potential to re-vision the past; this serves as a kind of groundbase throughout the action against which various other themes are sounded and developed to illuminate the range of possible responses that might be contained within the term 'nostalgia': the brashly crude and sensational way of looking back to unearth examples of human folly and duplicity; and the more sensitive imaginative ways of engaging with minds from former ages with a view to understanding their modes of endeavour and creativity (the play explores both scientific and artistic engagement). The one mode ultimately focuses on human banality, the other celebrates human achievement. It is a rich and rewarding play that has sustained four changes of cast to date and long runs at the National Theatre and the Haymarket as well as a national tour.

Another remarkable work to explore the positive and the dark sides of nostalgia is Terry Johnson' s *Dead Funny*, which has recently ended a long run at the Vaudeville to which it transferred from Hampstead Theatre Club (from Off-West-End to West End proper). In many ways this play is a companion piece to Trevor Griffiths's *Comedians* from the 1970s since it too is concerned with the art of the stand-up comedian and how and why audiences take pleasure in particular styles of humour. The characters of the piece form a club to preserve the memory of certain great artists of the music hall and television who are now deceased (the action is situated in time between the death of Benny Hill and that a few days later of Frankie Howard); the club know their favourite comedians' routines, the silly songs, the gags and the timing of the pratfalls by heart and happily recall them for each other's amusement. The 'turns' the now defunct comedians popularised are seen steadily to be genial (rather than cruelly satirical) portrayals of human inadequacies, absurdity, quixotic mannerisms and personality-defects. The members of the club are themselves as steadily exposed as impotent, withdrawn, desperate and despairing individuals, for whom such a style of comedy offers a measure of reconcilement with temperaments they fundamentally despise. Nostalgia alone saves them from admitting that their lives are loveless and pathetic. This analysis of why the art of the comedian serves a necessary function in society is at a far remove from Griffiths's near-Aristotelian defence of that art as inviting in audiences moral and emotional catharsis: a yearning for self-acceptance which Johnson argues is all that such comedy satisfies falls markedly short of Griffiths's belief that comedy, when scrupulously handled, effects complex forms of personal growth by confronting and easing tensions in the depths of the psyche. Johnson sees comedy as confirming and endorsing inadequacy. not as offering a means of transcending human weakness. *Dead Funny* is a decidedly

black comedy, in which nostalgia is ruthlessly dissected.

Several recent plays have examined nostalgia in the context of the processes of ageing and death. Pinter's *Moonlight* has already been discussed in this context, but Albee's *Three Tall Women* is also exemplary of this trend. In Act One an elderly woman rages against the dying of the light as she recognises that there is no way of going "gently" into her particular "good night" as senility remorselessly invades her consciousness despite her every effort to halt its advance. In Act Two that woman's younger self is watched over by two predatory manifestations of herself from her late-middle and from her old age. Nostalgia here offers few consolations and little ease of conscience, only a sharp recognition of the need to accept a past which can in no way be redeemed, compensated for, or erased.

An equally searching exploration of the perils of nostalgia was offered by Neil Bartlett in his adaptation of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* for the Lyric Theatre Hammersmith. This production provoked ire in some audiences because it was not a straightforward dramatisation of the novel; instead Bartlett supposes a gathering of several of Wilde's more intimate friends (Ada Leverson, his revered "sphinx"; Reggie Turner, Robert Ross and Sidney Mavor, one of the young men accused with Wilde at his trials) on the anniversary of his being transported to Reading Goal; they meet in Wilde's favourite suite at the Savoy Hotel, where they intend to read the novel together in its author's memory. Reading repeatedly turns into enactment as the tale at various moments grips the imagination of a particular reader. All these one-time friends of Wilde are now facing old age and they have met to remember the occasion when social disgrace precipitated him towards a premature death. The story is a fantasy about humankind's perennial desire for eternal youth, a wish that is fulfilled in this instance in a form that brings an unexpected retribution with it: the wish is granted at a cruel price. Clearly the Wilde that his friends remember so vividly was a man whose charm and wit could relieve his coterie for a while of any sense of the pressure of time; he could enable them to transcend the moment and the reality of themselves. The novel is a record of that charm and that wit, qualities which still have a power to transform the group momentarily; but the ensuing return to social and personal reality is for them all cruelly painful. One was reminded in watching a performance of some lines by the Irish poet, W. B. Yeats: Wilde clearly possessed the power to feed the hearts of his friends with fantasies; and those hearts have grown not "brutal" (Yeats's term) but intensely fragile on such fare. Thirty years on in time the friends are still in thrall to the spell of Wilde's genius, the mesmeric brilliance of his ideas. What begins in the play as a seeming act of piety in remembrance of a dead companion is shown by the conclusion to be a very different matter: the reading is informed by a nostalgia which is a mode of psychological entrapment, the pursuit of a moment of transcendence brings no spiritual grace, only a haunting sense of delusion. Nostalgia here is deconstructed with an exacting attention to the levels of irony that make up its emotional texture.

Bartlett is an enterprising and highly original dramatist, perhaps the foremost English playwright that one might describe as post-modern in technique and sensibility. While there have been numerous adaptations of novels on the London stage in recent weeks (*The Mill on the Floss*; *Great Expectations*; *A Tale of Two Cities*; *A Christmas Carol*; *Out of a House Walked a Man...* (based on the fictional writings of Danil Kharms) ; *The Woman in Black*; *Oliver!* ; *The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol*; *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* – to list but a few) not many of these progress beyond mere adaptation to become, like Bartlett's *Dorian Gray*, works of dramatic artistry in their own independent right. Most seem determined to confine invention to the demands made by the narrative of the source, the focus is on telling the story as imaginatively and as economically as possible (this was a fashion created by the company, Shared Experience, when it was directed till some years ago by Mike Alfreds). Theatre de Complicite bring a brilliant array of miming skills to their work with novels which undeniably excite certain aesthetic pleasures at the way, for example, that animate bodies can be deployed to define inanimate objects, or physical groupings of persons within the stagespace can powerfully and instantaneously evoke a precise dramatic atmosphere; but it is arguable whether these skills enable them

to transcend a dominant need to realise the plot of the work of fiction they are dramatising. Bartlett by contrast deconstructs his source so as to defamiliarise a familiar storyline and render it *strange*; he situates Wilde's novel in a specific but complex historical continuum so that the work can be read both as a period piece and from other temporal perspectives; in consequence the play becomes a commentary on the novel, illuminating and debating its central themes and posing for the audience searching questions about their reasons for granting it an enduring popularity. The play interrogates the fictional text to see if it will in itself explain why the plotline had such a fascination for the author and what the moral tenor is of the hold which that narrative exerts over a reader. The particular plot acts here as a springboard into an investigation into the nature of the art of fiction, the motive both for writing and for reading narratives. It might be argued that this was very text-based theatre (indeed *texts* of Wilde's *Dorian Gray* were actually carried by the actors for most of the performance); yet in its power to transcend the limits of the printed text, to highlight by dramatic means the nature of the imaginative act of reading, Bartlett's stage-play and its performance-technique came remarkably close to the work of such established practitioners as Brook or Grotowski, for whom the inherited text is also a springboard into areas of personal (almost meditational) enquiry that extends well beyond the narratives or themes of their various sources. Brook's dramatic rendering of Oliver Sacks's *The Man Who*, which came to the Cottesloe Theatre earlier in the year, similarly released the mind into a complex of issues by the most austere of theatrical means that were wholly directed at focusing our attention on the art of the actor. Bartlett's achievement in *Dorian Gray* does not suffer by the comparison.

While a number of new directorial talents have been proving themselves over the last few years (Deborah Warner, Katie Mitchell, Phyllida Lloyd, Stephen Daldry most notably), Barlett alone shows a career with the potential to measure up to some of the international practitioners who have over recent decades shaped our conception of theatre. He has translated plays extensively from the French repertoire (Racine, Moliere, Marivaux) with considerable elan; he is a playwright-director with a profound sense of the value to current theatre practice of continental schools of aesthetic theory, though his work never becomes merely cerebral; he has his own company that specialises in exploring new kinds of stylisation in performance deploying music and movement in inventive ways; he is himself a gifted performer; he has published novels, criticism and historical research; and he has within the last six months been appointed as artistic director of the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith where he is fast proving himself a masterly organiser of a wide-ranging, nonpredictable repertoire. What impresses about his work is his absolute dedication to a purposeful theatricality: plays like his *Sarrasine*, while owing a debt to Barthes' analysis of Balzac's story, exploit the arts of the theatre not merely to deconstruct the fictional source but also to deconstruct traditional concepts of gender (the play is conceived for actress and orchestra; and a soprano opera singer, an ageing male transvestite and a young, gay, androgynous man who all three at various moments impersonate Sarrasine). As in *Dorian Gray*, the source material is at once dramatised, deconstructed and made the subject of a commentary that engages an audience imaginatively and emotionally in an exploration of their attitudes to dissident manifestations of what constitutes the masculine and the feminine. Few contemporary theatre practitioners in England are creating such complex works that challenge performers and audiences, conveying them effortlessly beyond traditional boundaries relating to genres, dramatic forms, conventionalised ways of thinking and feeling, and their attitudes to sexuality and gender, all of which Bartlett contrives to achieve with remarkable economy and simplicity of expression. It is this wonderful richness of implication coupled with a marked austerity of presentation that makes it possible to refer to Neil Bartlett as an English heir to the mantle of Brook and Grotowski.

And there is no hyperbole in this claim: like them he frequently uses a known text as a stimulus to creativity, but rapidly the created drama moves beyond the limitations of the known to become a performance-work of considerable intricacy and originality. Over the last two decades much new playwriting was preoccupied with "revisiting", "re-

visioning" or "interrogating" the classic repertoire and especially the works of Shakespeare. This questioning of the cultural heritage has not been such a prominent impulse to creativity of late (though there was last year a brilliant staging of Sheridan's *The Rivals* in modern dress with an all-male cast that used the eighteenth-century text without significant alteration as the basis of an investigation into contemporary gay relationships and the ways they choose to find expression in society). Bartlett's work can be seen to be a part of that tradition of cultural interrogation, but it has been carried into areas of experience and intellectual enquiry that are far less insular in appeal or in method of analysis than was previously the case; and the impulse to interrogate, to deconstruct in order to re-vision is both more scrupulously structured and more searching. There is no loss of political incisiveness in Bartlett's technique, but the focus has changed significantly to the sphere of gay and gender politics. To write that Neil Bartlett is one of the few contemporary British director-dramatists that one can link with continental developments in theatre practice might suggest that the theatre in England is currently very insular. In terms of current playwriting and staging methods, this is arguably the case. But that would be to ignore the achievement of the Gate Theatre in Notting Hill, which has consistently over the last seven years built up a repertoire of foreign plays in translation. There has been a link with theatre personnel in Valencia, out of which has grown a project to stage a range of Spanish "golden age" plays by Lopez de Vega, Tirso de Molina and Calderon. But these works have been interspersed with revivals of rarely performed plays by Strindberg and Goldoni, contemporary Austrian and German drama, eighteenth-century comedies by women dramatists and less popular Greek tragedies the like of Euripides' *Hecuba*. One very enterprising small publishing company, Absolute Classics, has worked in tandem with the Gate, making available copies of all the translations that are staged in their seasons. This record far exceeds that for either the National Theatre or the Royal Shakespeare Company in terms of staging non-British theatre. The National Theatre does regularly invite foreign companies for short seasons (including Strehler's Piccolo Teatro during the last twelve months); and both the NT and the RSC have hosted productions by Ninagawa's company from Japan (*The Tempest*, *Macbeth*, *Medea*, *Peer Gynt*). Both theatres nowadays employ the good offices of Thelma Holt (previously best known as the leading actress and co-director with Charles Marowitz of the Open Space Theatre) as an Associate Director with responsibility for organising such visits.

By far the greatest influx of world theatre, however, comes to London biennially with the LIFT Festival (London International Festival of Theatre). Not since the famous World Theatre Seasons promoted by the late Peter Daubeny at the Aldwych Theatre throughout the Sixties and early Seventies, has London had the opportunity to see so much of the best of theatrical innovation from abroad. Interestingly the most popular performances are those from so-called Third-World countries, especially from South America, the Caribbean and Africa. Newspaper reviewers tend to demonstrate a marked chauvinist response to work seen during the Festival, but their attitude is not shared by audiences or by British theatre practitioners; and evidence of sharing of techniques, learning by experience, and direct influence is to be detected, especially on the Fringe, in the months following the LIFT seasons. This is partly because most of the companies are encouraged where possible to conduct workshops for both amateurs and professionals while resident in London. (A similar pattern of workshops related to performance techniques also occurs in respect of the annual London Festival of Mime referred to above.) If the LIFT seasons differ appreciably from the Daubeny seasons of the past, it is in respect of the kinds of companies invited: where Daubeny tended to foster links with well-established companies from abroad, the LIFT organisers seem to prefer to invite smaller, new and innovatory performers that challenge our expectations of particular national theatrical trends. What has proved fascinating to study is the way innovation is achieved within different cultural circumstances and traditions by these companies without the resulting work declining into a nebulous kind of internationalism (inspired by the likes of Grotowski, Barba or Boal) that quite loses all marks that distinguish a national individuality.

This sense of sharing and discovery evident as the legacy of the LIFT festivals makes one conscious of a particular and major loss that has afflicted British theatre practice of late. Many fringe groups work on a corporate and collaborative basis (in part a consequence of the "profit-share" nature of their projects discussed previously); but the exciting possibilities to be learned from wholesale collaboration in the process of creating a performance that were provoked by the work of groups such as Joint Stock seem an experience now decidedly of the past. Collaborative work certainly goes on in the National Theatre's Studio and the RSC regularly invites groups from overseas to train alongside their actors, but none of this work gets to be seen by the general theatregoing public and much of it remains definitely an inhouse event. What repercussions these endeavours have on the quality of the performances and productions mounted by either Subsidised company is largely a matter for speculation. Joint Stock ceased to function nearly a decade ago and the RSC no longer pursues a policy of inviting an established but young dramatist to workshop a series of ideas with a group of actors and compose a play out of the resulting explorations in the fashion that produced both Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale* and Frank McGuinness's *Mary and Lizzie*. Caryl Churchill was arguably the one dramatist to work with Joint Stock whose subsequent output showed a direct influence from their style of collaborative improvisation in works like *Cloud Nine* and Fen. She seems to have wished to go on pursing that mode of shared creativity, but has turned her attention now towards breaking down the boundaries that exist between forms of theatrical expression. Her new collaborators are from the world of music, opera and dance in works like *The Lives of the Great Poisoners* and *The Skriker*, where her focus has shifted to a preoccupation with metaphysical concerns about the nature of evil or the way folk-myth found a means of articulating a sense of other worlds beyond our social comprehension hovering however at the edges of our consciousness and subtly influencing our modes of perception. With her recent adaptation of Seneca's *Thyestes* she explored a collaboration in terms of design with an artist interested in small-circuit television. Collaboration in these instances is less to do with sharing skills in improvisation than with pursuing some modern conception of the *gesamtkunstwerk*. The effect has consistently been of work in progress, as if the gestation of a wholly new art-work or dramatic structure is imminent and slowly seeking definition.

But this is all a far cry from the politically motivated collaborations of the Seventies, which were seeking to break down the hierarchies within the process of theatrical production, subverting the primacy and privilege of both the director and the dramatist as shapers of the performance-text. This change would in itself appear to be a reflection of the current political crisis: a further manifestation of a pervasive refusal to make a confident artistic statement which might be interpreted as an expression of left-wing sympathies and principles. Thatcherism has left an indelible mark on the practice of British theatre. Innovation has clearly not been wholly stifled; but it has had to adopt tactical strategies in relation to the prevailing political *status quo*. Whether the current theatrical scene is to be interpreted as unreservedly healthy depends on one's political perspective. To ask whether that scene can be described as *politically* healthy is a question that most assuredly cannot be answered in 1995 with an affirmative.