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**British Contemporary Stage. Innovation and Experiment after 1945**

**Doctoral thesis**

**Summary**

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**Keywords:** british theatre, contemporary dramaturgy, in-yer-face, immersive theatre, verbatim theatre, tribunal-play, physical theatre, experimental, fringe

### **Summary of the key parts of the work**

The paper begins with examining the first two decades after 1945, the cultural, social and political background, to identify the factors that influenced and set off the important reform that occurred in British theatre. Overall, until the mid 50s the British world is characterized by stability and conservatism, by strengthening the middle class, the emergence of the consumer society and a lifestyle that is inspired by the American one. The most important event in the history of post-war Britain is the Suez crisis, generating the conflict with Egypt in 1956. The military victory is then transformed into an humiliating diplomatic defeat and marks a turning point, „a fracture of hegemony and the myth of British coherence”<sup>1</sup>, which generates the accelerated decline of the empire and brings to the surface the tensions in society, the divergence of views on the role and the direction that the country should take on.

In the first decade after war, the theatre remains tributary to the values and practices of the previous period, in a pronounced stagnation and isolation, being quasi-monopolized by commercial productions. The trends in drama remain those established over the 30s, there are written and played many comedies, farces, mystery drama and drawing room drama, being preferred classical and French writers. From the institutional point of view the most important

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<sup>1</sup> Rabey, D. I., *English Drama Since 1940*, Pearson Education Limited, Londra, 2003, p. 29.

reform is the creation of Arts Council in 1946, as part of the post-war reconstruction program. It's for the first time in the history of Great Britain when the state gets directly involved in the arts sector, through an institution and through the funds assigned to it.

The isolation of British stage starts to crack only in 1955, when, in a tiny independent theatre in central London, there take place two opening nights, where the audience cannot find the usual conventions of the „well-made plays”: *The Lesson* by Eugène Ionesco, and *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett. The press reactions are extremely hostile, calling the lack of clarity of the dramatic discourse, the formalism, the lack of narrative, and meanwhile catalyses the idea of a necessary renewal in British theatre. A much important influence will have the production of Berliner Ensemble company, arrived in London, in august 1956, only two weeks after the death of Brecht. The three performances impressed by the anti-naturalistic style of acting, the primacy of social issues to the detriment of individual psychology, the unity of the group and the absence of star-actors, the simplicity of settings and costumes, in contrast with the glamour of the shows in the mainstream British theatres. Brechtian aesthetic assimilation into theatrical practice was made sequentially, firstly the major impact was in terms of visual and physical aspects of production, less than in the thematic content. British playwrights are firstly seduced by the form, abandoning the principles of Aristotelian drama, for using sequential, epic structures and, as Michael Billington states, they prefer to use the brechtian model rather than the ibsenean one.<sup>2</sup>

By the mid 50s is set up The English Stage Company whose core mission was and is the same up to now, encouraging and producing new writing, as George Devine, the first artistic director of the institution states, in a statement that will make history: „Ours is not to be a producer's theatre, nor an actor's theatre, it is to be a writer's theatre.”<sup>3</sup>. One of the first productions at Royal Court, the theatre where the company runs, will be *Look Back in Anger*, John Osborne's play, an anonymous playwright at that moment. Initially, the audience showed a low interest for the performance and only six months later, when BBC broadcasted a fragment from the show, people became to be interested in it, and later it became a huge unique phenomenon in the history of British theatre, making place for a generation of playwrights who bring on stage the contemporary world realities and tensions. The landmark of this new direction

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<sup>2</sup> Billington, M., *State of the Nation. British Theatre Since 1945*, Faber and Faber, London, 2007, p. 145.

<sup>3</sup> *Apud* Pattie D. (ed.), *Modern British Playwriting: The 1950s: Voices, Documents, New Interpretations*, Methuen Drama, London, 2012, p. 59.

is rebellion, challenging myths and the *establishment*. *Look Back in Anger* is up to now one of the most controversial plays, its importance and merits being always analysed and interpreted, even though it is almost unanimous that the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 1956, the premiere date, is the moment that separates two eras in British theatre.

In order to encourage the new writing, Devine sets up *The Writers' Group*, a „school” for young writers and runs a programme through which their plays are put on stage with minimal expenses „in a simple way, without décor”<sup>4</sup>, having the chance to get to the audience, to be tested and possibly transferred to the theatre repertory. One of the playwrights educated at Royal Court is Edward Bond, whose play, *Saved*, was forbidden by the censorship in 1965 and generated an intense campaign in mass-media and also in parliament, whose result was the theatres' law in 1968, law through which British theatre gain its freedom.

The effects of this liberalisation are seen very soon through a significant multiplication of theatrical initiatives, also stimulated by the more consistent funding provided by the Arts Council. There come many groups and companies, some with their own spaces, others focused on tournaments, performers dedicated to improvisation performances, theatre pubs or "artistic laboratories". It is a “golden age, an equivalent to the first Elizabethan era in which a wealth o new writing was accompanied by a prodigious amount of theatre building and a quest for a new expressive forms.”<sup>5</sup> The independent theatre (*fringe*) earns a more visible place and has a substantial contribution to the development of new drama and to vitalise British theatre. Since the 60s there may be observed an obvious bias by strengthening non-commercial segment, which before 1945 was in a tiny minority and apparent marginalisation.

An important landmark in the 60s and also a model for many independent groups is the Theatre Workshop company, led by Joan Littlewood. In a time when the British scene was overwhelmingly dominated by naturalism, Joan Littlewood was among the few creators who were placed against the wave. She looked for new directions, often eclectic, avoiding the limitations of classic stage, the formalism, the rigidity and generally everything related to theatrical "canon" of the period. The modern approach, often radical of classics, the interest in the new drama and actual issues, (re) writing of the dramatic text by using improvisation and

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<sup>4</sup> Roberts, P., *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p.58.

<sup>5</sup> Billington, M., *op. cit.*, p. 162.

participatory methods, the training and the concentration of the artistic act on the expressiveness of the body, the insertion of documentary material in the show, are only part of the inheritance that Joan Littlewood gave to the theatre from which in the next decades many companies, actors and directors will feed. The show *Oh What a Lovely War !*, iconic event of the '60s and the climax of Workshop Theatre Company's work, is distinguished by the composite construction that emphasizes the radical changes of rhythm and tone, the comic or ironic counterpoint, the permanent tension that comes from the juxtaposition of very different aesthetics: dance theatre, realistic acting, parody commedia'dell arte, circus, music-hall. Different from any other production and difficult to be classified – musical, documentary, tragi-comedy - the show is innovative both in content and in form, is „a Trojan horse through which anti-naturalistic, political theatre gained a significant foothold in Britain”<sup>6</sup>.

The second part of the paper investigates the evolution of post-war British drama and the main innovations on thematic and stylistic levels and those in terms of form. The research followed only those directions of drama which, in one way or another, can be considered innovative or using the term proposed by Aleks Sierz, can be included in *new writing*: „a genre characterised by plays which are contemporary in their language, contemporary in their subject matter and often contemporary in their attitude to a theatre form”<sup>7</sup>. *New writing* emphasizes the author, he is „a distinctive auctorial voice”<sup>8</sup>, therefore it excludes other spectacular formulas as: theatre based on images (*visual theatre*), physical theatre, *devised* theatre (the text is the result of a collective process) or *verbatim* theatre (which put on stage documentary sources and interviews), all of which are brought together in the last few years as *new work*.

After 1956, „ the playwright was the new theatrical messiah.”<sup>9</sup>, regaining its central place, long owned by actor or manager / agent, and the model created by George Devine at the Royal Court proved itself to be one of the strongest and most successful. It's Osborne's merit to bring on stage the spoken language, slang, local dialects, very different from the previous rigid politeness, in order to look for authenticity and naturalness, and to attract a new audience of

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<sup>6</sup> Kershaw, B. (ed.), *The Cambridge History of British Theatre, Volume 3: since 1895*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 399.

<sup>7</sup> Middeke, M. (ed.), Schnierer, P. P. (ed.), Sierz, A. (ed.), *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights*, Methuen Drama, London, 2011, p. IX.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>9</sup> Pattie, D. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 68.

young people from middle class. The language and topics, avoided until then by the authors of "well-made plays" will be the main sources of drama refresh. John Arden, whose work combines political issues with poetic language and English folk ballad specific formulas, is one of constant supporters of anti-illusionistic theatricality and appointed Brecht his most important literary model. Arden, particularly by *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* and *The Workhouse Donkey*, his most valuable works, adapted the principles of epic theatre, integrating different registers of language, inventive dramatic structures, dance, puppets, masks, pantomime and a fierce satire of British society. Of all the writers of the theatre of absurd, Harold Pinter uses the most original combination of traditional and avant-garde elements and even if his characters and dialogues are realistic, his plays have a specific fingerprint, outlined from mystery and poetic ambiguity. Fear is the dominant feeling generated mostly by what is outside the room, by the outside world perceived incomplete, alarming and able to surprise. His characters live in a constant suspicion directed towards both those they know and to strangers, but they are yet protective to what they think is theirs, to their micro-universe they are trying to dominate.

A basic element of dramatic construction, but also the hallmark of Joe Orton's originality, is the elegance combined with verbal frenzy and aggression, which causes a permanent contrast between language and plot. He translates tragic situations into farce and a source of comic, using laughter as a way of changing moral principles. Farce is a unique model on which he experiences, starting from classical canon, which he deconstructs, then repositions it in an original and highly subversive way. Iconoclast, juggling between comedy and cruelty, Orton has transferred on the stage his clown instincts and anarchic spirit, creating in an extremely short career three of the most inventive plays of the period.

The plays of Edward Bond are a combination of ideology and stylistic experiment based mainly on the parable - a form of meta-theatre, with history (narrative) and satire as subordinated genres sometimes calling the postmodern formulas. Being a very prolific dramatist, Bond has the ability to surprise: *Saved* is „one of those rare works of art, like Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* or Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, that can be said to have rearranged the cultural landscape"<sup>10</sup>; *Early Morning* – a surrealist farce that a surrealist farce having a nightmarish vision of England during the Victorian era is related to the world of Jarry, Goya or Bosch; *Lear* -

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<sup>10</sup> Billington, M., *State of the Nation*, op. cit., p. 179.

a radical reinterpretation of the original model in epic theatre; *Bingo's* main character is Shakespeare, is a partly fictional construction of the last years in the life of the great playwright; *The War Plays* – a major work, made of three independent plays, and as many apocalyptic visions of a post-atomic future.

Tom Stoppard is one of the few authors who, by the complexity of the topics and by his style in a permanent dynamic, cannot be situated in any movement or theatrical current. He always managed to reinvent himself and all his work is characterized by the intelligence of the dialogue, by linguistic virtuosity, by ingenious plots and a remarkable innovation on dramatic structure. Stoppard creates *comedies of ideas*, where he explores various narrative techniques, his plays always having a fresh and playful tone, the best examples being: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, *Jumpers*, *Travesties*, kinds of absurd theatre, or *Arcadia*, *The Real Thing* și *The Coast of Utopia*, kind of realistic plays.

A distinctive chapter is dedicated to feminist drama that defines itself more clearly by the mid-70s, first through alternative theatre companies (The Women's Theatre Group, The Monstrous Regiment), then through singular voices like Pam Gems, Sarah Daniels sau Caryl Churchill. The plays of Churchill are full of symbols, mythical elements, poetic and surreal images, she is interested in the history and the class ideologies, political and sexual oppression, but also approaches issues concerning nuclear annihilation, the fall of communism and the new biotechnological revolution, searching through stylistic experiments and non-realistic theatre forms to permanently challenge the audience. An exciting playwright is Timberlake Wertenbaker, whose work questions the issue of identity, individual and global, the conflicts generated by rankings of gender, race and nationality, but her vision is in many ways in contrast with the predominant directions of British post-war theatre. While social realism particularly deals with British contemporary life and traditions, pursuing topics in the world of workers, Wertenbaker frequently resorts the mythology or history.

The '90s brought a major change in British theatre, a revolution, generated by a new wave of playwrights who use multiple forms of theatricality, bringing a unique and radically shocking aesthetic often through language and topics that explore unspeakable areas of imagination and society. The emblem of this new way of writing and making theatre is violence, verbal or visual, violence assumed that becomes the support of a very strong message, but also the symbol of the



world we live in. Defining for *in-yer-face* period is the work of Sarah Kane, who succeeds in a short work to set new directions and ways of expression, to provoke and to generate controversy, especially to bring on stage extreme emotions. While in the first plays, *Blasted*, *Phaedra's Love* and *Cleansed*, images are defining for dramatic structures, in the last two, *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis*, the poetic language is the very base of construction.

Mark Ravenhill's favourite themes are related to what is specific to contemporary world: the culture of digital era and urban lifestyle, violence, consumerism, the effects that globalization and the media have on individuals, drugs, homosexuality and sexual identity. His most ambitious and important project is *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat*, an epic series of sixteen short plays, an investigation of the effects of war on individual and political life and, ultimately, a critique of the "export" of democracy that Western countries proclaim when they start wars.

One of the most inventive playwright of the last decades is Martin Crimp, whose work is multifaceted, with dense and subtle dialogues and images, disturbing plot and very distant from existing conventions. His plays find their place in the large area of imaginative theatre, sometimes symbolic, sometimes abstract, making a way to opened interpretation. They were often seen as being bizarre, because they bring the unfamiliar in familiar and permanently and surprisingly combine dualities like public and private, group and individual, comic and dramatic, told and untold, text and subtext, ethical and aesthetical. Martin Crimp's Theatre is poliform and enigmatic, subtle and threatening, or as one of his characters proclaims: "a theatre for a world in which theatre itself is dead"<sup>11</sup>.

Simon Stephens's plays are characterized by a complex dramatic structure, composed mostly of short scenes, disparate, yet intimate, involving few characters and dramatic concentration. These miniatures are made of an assembly, sometimes dense, with relationships and characters paint in details, but sometimes the result is fragmented, and the audience have the task to complete the "blanks". Moreover, Stephens often prefers what remains unsaid, not shown, and proves to be a master of open endings. Debbie Tucker Green finds inspiration in both, culture of black artists, and also in the European one, but her work is undeniably very original in the way it manages to combine the influences that come from drama, poetry and music. This is reflected especially in the way of writing the dialogues characterized by rhythm and repetition,

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<sup>11</sup> Crimp, M., *Plays Two*, Faber and Faber, London, 2005, p. 255.

linguistic inventiveness and a certain stylization, but also by incorporating the spoken language, with fragmented and overlapping phrases. Tim Crouch, a „Pirandello for a modern audience”<sup>12</sup>, proposes new approaches in terms of dramatic writing and staging, experiencing on the direction of theatrical form and narrative content. His style stands out through the intelligence of the dialogue, the comic specific to the theatre of the absurd, the way the story is embedded in the text and especially through the ways they have to reach to the public.

The last part of the paper is dedicated to those spectacular formulas called generically *new work*, here the playwright doesn't have a central place anymore, hence they are somewhere outside the text based theatre. These are steps where solitary vision is replaced by the collective effort of a creation team. *New work* is a territory being in a permanent expansion and that often involves elements, tools and techniques from other arts or calls modern technology. In the first chapter is studied the activity of some companies that we find to be relevant from the point of view of the mission, of organizing principles, of promoted aesthetics and of methods. Joint Stock Theatre Company was founded in 1974 by a group of playwrights and directors in order to create dramatic texts and performances through collaborative methods. Welfare State International is an experimental theatre company founded in 1968 which became known for street events or other alternative spaces. For nearly forty years Welfare State International collaborated with engineers, sculptors, poets, musicians, pyrotechnics, using fire, ice, sound and light as the basic material for creating innovative ceremonial performances, festivals or carnivals, temporary installations, multimedia events or various forms of theatrical procession.

Another chapter is committed to documentary theatre, a formula increasingly used by playwrights and directors, when they survey events or topical issues, national or local history, issues related to communities or marginalized groups. A first phase in the evolution of this genre in the UK is related to the work of Peter Cheeseman, who in the 60s makes the first productions in which the text of the show consists of interviews conducted exclusively within communities. Like archaeologists discovering the past, the director, playwright and actors research oral histories of the region, record them, select them, and then change them into lines and lyrics for songs. In the 90s the documentary theatre becomes actual again in a very new formula at the Tricycle Theatre in London, through some tribunal-plays which reconstruct controversial

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<sup>12</sup> Bassett, K., *An Oak Tree. Look deep into his eyes – and surrender*, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/an-oak-tree-traverse-edinburgh-305866.html>

investigations. The productions take the form of real trials, with actors playing the roles of witnesses or those serving justice and are based on witness statements and other information recorded during the survey. There are also analysed performances that combine fictional scenes with interviews, news and documents. *Talking to Terrorists*, a play by Robin Soans, is the result of a process that lasted almost a year and is based on interviews with 29 people ("subjects") who have some connection with the phenomenon of terrorism. David Hare, one of the most important contemporary dramatists uses *verbatim* documentary in *The Permanent Way*, which investigates British railways privatisation and in *Stuff Happens*, a thorough epic reconstitution of the events that led to the American-British military intervention in Iraq in 2003.

Alecky Blythe, the artistic director of Recorded Delivery company, uses a different method. She creates plays from interviews that are processed but are not written. The show is rehearsed and played with actors wearing earphones, to listen to the edited material and reproduce not only the words but also the voices footprint, including pauses, hesitations, coughing. In *Come Out Eli*, she researches an event from 2002, when a young man followed by the police, takes an hostage and locks himself in a flat. Blythe uses a collage of interviews, some taken even during the siege, others soon after, from those who watched the event from the street, to show how a divided community becomes united in a common purpose. With the performance from, *The Girlfriend Experience*, Blythe shows that verbatim theatre can be very comic, even if it processes a "serious" theme as prostitution.

In the 2000s on the British stage emerges the concept of immersive theatre. Although vaguely defined, it basically designates those productions, large or small, involving commitment and intense experience, visceral, from the spectator. He is offered the opportunity to interact with the performer and space, to directly influence and create a theatrical experience that will be unique and personalized. The show awakens the adventurous spirit of the spectator, stimulates his imagination, curiosity and responsibility, allowing him to discover and explore highly detailed theatrical images, objects and secret rooms. It becomes an active element in merging the observer and performer, as in the case of productions of Shunt Collective, Louise Ann Wilson or Nimble Fish. The company dreamthinkspeak, led by Tristan Sharps, is characterised by a unique approach in terms of how exploiting architectural details, acoustics, mystery and history of spaces, combined with text, sound and video to create meditative essays about absence, loneliness or disappearing worlds.

Immersive theatre often provides experiences for a single participant, in which a performer plays for/with a spectator, productions called "one-to-one performance", or "one-on-one performance". There are also cases when productions for only one participant involve several performers, such as those made by Il Pixel Rosso company.

Punchdrunk, the name most often cited when speaking about immersive theatre, stands firstly for productions played in large spaces, former administrative or industrial buildings, without personality, neutral but which allow the creation of labyrinthic universes composed by a network of corridors interconnecting various rooms. Each room is approached differently and impresses by its plasticity, sometimes by the abundance of details, sometimes by cold and strange minimalism, they are hyper-realistic or abstract, suggesting that they are inhabited or, conversely, seem abandoned for a long time. *Faust* (2006) is set in a huge warehouse, with five floors and more than forty rooms, inspired by the aesthetics of Edward Hopper's paintings. The interfusion between space, movement and sound transformed the classical myth in an epic journey, multifaceted and multi-sensorial. *Sleep No More* was revived in two American productions, in 2009 in Boston and in 2011 in New York, the last one in a building with six floors and about 100 rooms. The performance places Macbeth's tragedy in the 40s, using film noir aesthetic and references to Alfred Hitchcock's work, both visually and through sound universe. Other hallucinatory experiences are shown in the performances: *The Masque of Red Death* (2007), a Gothic nightmare inspired by the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe, played in a former archives building, *Tunnel 228* (2009), an experiment of visual theatre played in the catacombs under Waterloo Station, where the atmosphere of *Metropolis*, Fritz Lang's film, meets with an art gallery populated by surreal objects and a dark vision of the future, or *The Drowned Man: A Hollywood Fable* (2013), which transforms a former post-office building in a fictional film studio in the '60s, and the story of Woyzeck becomes a pretext for the two narratives "in mirror", *The Borrough* (2013), a sonorous escape where a single „spectator” moves on a certain route in a small town near the North Sea. Punchdrunk's performances primarily mean travel, discovery and interaction, essential for the public to be an active, out of apathy and inertia that usually exist in the theatres' buildings. Wearing a mask, the spectator is almost forced out of passivity, has to make choices and set his own route.

Theatre experience facilitated by immersive sound, mainly, but not exclusively, in recent years has become a practice commonly used in various forms by many British artists. Silvia

Mercuriali made many theatrical experiments, the most important being *Romcom* (2003), and *Etiquette* (2007), where the participant has a double role, the performer's and the spectator's, a formula that she called *Autoteatro*. A similar direction explores Duncan Speakman in many productions called *Subtle mobs*: the audience are invited to download from internet audio files and, following the instructions, to move towards a certain place, at a certain time. The performance for earphones, *Linked* by Graeme Miller, lead the listener on a way where twenty transmitters provide hidden voices, memories and testimonies recorded by those who have lived or worked in the area now occupied by a highway. In *Coriolanus* (2012), directed by Mike Pearson and Mike Brooks in a giant hangar, the audience moves freely through this area while in the headphones they can hear the lines and the soundtrack.

Complete darkness brings mystery, risks and a challenge and at the same time makes emotional experience in such production to be intense and strange. Performances centred on that aesthetic darkness are a relatively recent phenomenon, but have roots in the sixteenth century. Probably the closest to the actual formula is the installation *Dialog im Dunkeln* (*Dialogue in the dark*), created in 1988 by Andreas Heinecke, visitors are led by blind guides in specially built rooms without light, where sound, smell, temperature, drafts and textures transmit daily media features, such as a park, city or bar. One of the well known and perseverant companies from this field is Sound & Fury, with performances like: *War Music* (1998), a modern adaptation of fragments from *Iliada* by Homer; *Kursk* (2009), a dive into the darkness and cold of the sea, which recreates the atmosphere of a nuclear submarine haunted by sounds and echoes ; *Going Dark* (2010) suggests a journey through the universe from the perspective of an astronomer who loses his sight and how the disease changed his relationship with his son. The Bad Physics company uses masks in order to experiment with other senses through objects and substances that stimulate touch or smell.

The most important physical theatre company is Complicité, which created a complex work comprising devised theatre productions, adaptations of classical texts, radio shows, installations that use resources from different artistic areas. A representative show of the company is *The Street of Crocodiles* (1991), based on the short stories of Bruno Schulz. Another show where technology has a very important place is *The Elephant Vanishes*, an adaptation of three short stories by Japanese author Haruki Murakami. Frantic Assembly, another important company for physical theatre, was founded in 1994. The choreographic moments of the

performances are the result of exercises, some simple, others very complex and differ depending on the specifics of each production. The most important and well known production of the company is *Look Back in Anger*, an adaptation of Osborne's play. Forced Entertainment is an experimental theatre company founded in 1984, by Tim Etchells. Their projects are the result of a collaborative process and are based on improvisation, experimentation and debate. The company is known and appreciated in the UK and abroad, not only for experimental theatre performances, but also for art installations, photographic projects, performances of digital writing projects online, marathon performances, interactive walks.

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