

# INTRODUCTION

The 1950s was a curious and idiosyncratic decade, which, from the viewpoint of the 1990s, is a reservoir of distant, yet familiar images, close enough to be relevant, yet far enough away to be the object of nostalgia. It was a period of full employment, of prosperity and social stability, of the birth of the age of television, of the 'New Elizabethan Age' and the Coronation; it was also the decade of the teddy-boys, Elvis Presley and rock 'n' roll, of CND and of the Angry Young Men. In effect, these two sets of images are associated with the two halves of the decade, with 1956 as the watershed, marking off a 'then' from a 'now' in cultural and political history.

Theatre's contribution to this cultural moment was the much-mythicised first performance of *Look Back in Anger*. Criticism of *Look Back in Anger*—and what followed it—has a strong smell of the barricades about it. Taylor described it as a 'revolution' (Taylor 1962:28) and military metaphors abound in most accounts of this 'proletarian upsurge' of emancipated working-class writers in rebellion. Even writers with a more critical stance towards the plays and the theatrical and political values of the New Wave (as we shall call it) accept that this period was 'crucial and formative for what is now the mainstream of British theatre' (McGrath 1981:9). David Edgar has written:

The date, 8 May 1956, was the last great U-turn in the British theatre.... Certainly, whether Osborne likes it or not (and he probably doesn't) all the subsequent 'waves' of the new British theatre follow the agenda he set.

(Edgar 1988:138)

This agenda is actually rather hard to specify, whether one looks for it in Osborne's work or in that of the New Wave generally; indeed,

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the term ‘New Wave’ is itself highly problematic. Viewed in terms of the plays alone, the moment of the late fifties and early sixties is a difficult moment to map with any confidence: there are no manifestos, no obvious ‘schools’ of writing (certainly no school of Osborne), and a diverse, if overlapping, set of concerns. This has not changed over the years; indeed, the sense of a defining contextual ‘moment’ has lessened as traditional literary criteria have reasserted themselves, and independent authorial studies of key figures have become the dominant pattern.

It is also the case that the New Wave, and especially *Look Back in Anger*, no longer appears as seminal as it once did. It seems, quite simply, a different play that we see today from the one that so shocked and inspired its initial audiences. As one commentator recently wrote, ‘stripped of its context it now looks like a feeble period piece, occasionally fuelled by Osborne’s own rage [and] what looked like politically subversive polemic now looks like mere rudeness’ (French 1991). I first taught the play to undergraduates in the late 1970s, when a generation of more revolutionary play-wrights—including McGrath and Edgar—had altered the agenda significantly, leaving students bemused about the politics of this famously ‘revolutionary’ play. A few years later, its politics had become an issue once more—only this time it was the play’s representation of sexuality and gender, its sexual politics, that surfaced, and what had seemed a leftist scream against the constraints of mid-fifties conformism, appeared as an unpleasant apology for misogyny (see Chapter 1).

It is possible now to write a very different history—probably several different histories—of this over-mythicised period. One such revisionist account would centre on Beckett and Peter Hall’s production of *Waiting for Godot* (1955) as the crucial and defining theatrical event (and, perhaps, revalue the work of John Whiting). Such an account would emphasise aesthetically innovative practices, both in writing and its theatrical articulation, and would not foreground questions of realism. In retrospect, there would clearly be a logic to this, given Beckett’s subsequent reputation (notwithstanding the general bafflement that greeted *Godot* at the time).

Alternatively, both Osborne and Beckett have benefited from the dominance of London over the rest of British theatre—what we shall subsequently refer to as the metropolitanising of culture, a theme explored in Chapter 2—and another history would need to recognise that this is one instance of the general process by which economic and cultural power has been transferred from the regions (and the

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other nationalities within the British Isles) to southern England and London in particular in the twentieth century. There was, for example, a post-war working-class realist theatre alive and kicking before Osborne *et al.* appeared on the scene, only it was in Scotland. A number of established Scottish dramatists, such as George Munro, Joe Corrie and Robert McLeish, had all written plays set among the contemporary Scottish working-class, and which were performed in the late forties and through the fifties (see Stevenson 1987). Until 1950, Scotland had, in Glasgow Unity, a company the prime aim of which was to perform working-class drama (examples of this, such as Ena Lamont Stewart's *Men Should Weep* (1947), were revived in the early 1980s by the Scottish 7:84 Theatre Company). Munro's *Gay Landscape* (1958), which was produced at the Citizen's Theatre, Glasgow, was transferred to the Royal Court, where it could be seen alongside a burgeoning English proletarian drama, which it in some ways pre-empted. It would be more honest, in many ways, to talk of the New Wave as an English, rather than a British, theatre—albeit one that had strong connections to non-metropolitan, often Northern, social experience.

Yet, without denying the validity of these possible histories, I would still want to argue for the centrality of a version of the period that has *Look Back in Anger* as the defining theatrical event and which privileges a complex understanding of realism. This is partly because, no matter what the play may have become in the years that followed, for its contemporaries *Look Back in Anger* was clearly an *event*, the theatrical (and emotional) significance of which was registered in the obituaries that marked Osborne's death in late 1994. 'It would be hard to exaggerate the emotional importance of *Look Back in Anger* to anyone growing up and facing the world for the first time in 1956', wrote Michael Ratcliffe in *The Observer*. 'I remember a performance...which moved me so much that the tears streamed down my face and half the time I couldn't even see the bloody play' (Ratcliffe: 1995). In discussing the play-as-event we must recognise that we are dealing with more than simply the original production, or the moment of theatrical performance. *Look Back in Anger* was toured, televised and eventually filmed; it was commented on widely in both the specialist literary press and the popular media, with both its central character, Jimmy Porter (as an emerging social type as well as a dramatic character) and John Osborne himself (who was often conflated with his hero) functioning as a shorthand for certain kinds of distinctively post-war social experience. There were, then, a multiplicity of 'texts',

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each helping to redefine the others, existing in a range of social and cultural as well as theatrical discourses (see Chapters 1 and 2).

The success of the play was an indication that the social and political expectations of theatre had altered—that the space that theatre occupied in the general culture was now different; what was to Kenneth Tynan in 1955 an upper-middle-class social ritual, a ‘glibly codified fairy-tale world, of no more use to the student of life than a doll’s-house would be to a student of town-planning’ (Tynan 1984:148) was for Edgar ‘for a short time at least... a mirror in which the nation could observe, stark and naked, its own image’ (Edgar 1981:38). This view of the significance of the period is one that connects theatre not so much to aesthetic debates as to social and political ones, and which places the new drama in the centre of a much wider realignment in British society, in which many post-war certainties were challenged and redefined.

This is not to argue that the New Wave was a self-consciously ‘political’ drama in the sense that, say, the theatre of Brecht and Piscator in Weimar Germany of the late 1920s was political, or, indeed, the socialist theatre that flourished in Britain in the 1970s. It did, however, have an ideological role that was often difficult to capture in the prevailing critical languages. The first chapter of this book attempts to provide a framework for understanding this ideological function by drawing on a notion of hegemony. As defined by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, hegemony describes the way that ideological power is exercised in a given society via the manufacturing and manipulation of consent. Consent, and consensus, is a major theme in post-war politics and culture, referring not only to the machinery of government, but also, at a more profound level, to the operation of an entire culture. On the one hand, consensus described the general agreement between the major political parties as to the general lineaments of economic and foreign policy and the role of the Welfare State; on the other, there was a concerted attempt to win consent to a conservative view of the centrality of the family (and of traditional gender roles within it) and to support for established institutions, such as the Monarchy and the Church of England. The break that occurred in 1956, and which was registered in otherwise disparate cultural spheres, was a kicking against a consensus that threatened to stifle debate. Hegemony is never complete, however, and because it can be fought and won in every area of social life, it can be resisted in these same areas as well; and if *Look Back in Anger* and the New Wave were ideologically and culturally important, then

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it was because theatre became one of the main forums in which hegemonic values could be debated and contested.

To approach theatre in this way is to recognise the importance of social, cultural and political history, and much of the first part of this book will give space to establishing the contexts in which the new drama should be read. However, this is not a book of general cultural history, and I have been necessarily selective (often reluctantly so, as this is a fascinating and important period). My approach has been to lay out the most significant 'themes' that connect with the general argument in Chapter 1, and explore additional contextual material in later chapters where it is relevant to the discussion of particular plays/productions. For example, debates about the nature of changes to the class structure in the wake of affluence are indicated in the early stages of the discussion, and are elaborated upon in Chapter 3 in the course of an analysis of some contextual readings of social realism. Where I thought it would be either interesting or useful, I have indicated sources for further reading.

In considering the anti-hegemonic function of theatre in the period, I have decided, not without reservation, to continue to use the term 'New Wave', particularly in the earlier part of this book. To discuss this theatre in this way is not to minimise the differences between the writers and plays, which are considerable, or to suggest an absolute identity of social and aesthetic concerns. New Wave practitioners seemed united only in their antagonism to a dour, restricted national culture and a political establishment that several of them rapidly joined. And the term New Wave does not only refer to a corpus of texts but also to a theatre sub-culture: it is, therefore, very much a moment of theatrical and cultural history, not just a development in the drama, embracing writers, critics, actors, directors and producers, who shared a (broadly) common relationship to the established theatre and social structures (and often similar, lower-class social origins). In other contexts, these similarities would not have been decisive; to consider the terms in which they were significant is part of the project of the first part of this book.

It may be that since the late fifties, the New Wave has become a new establishment, but it is worth reminding ourselves that the 'revolution' has been, in certain important respects, over-sold, particularly if the institutions of theatre, rather than the plays themselves, are considered (see Chapter 2). The commercial theatre structures, against which the new theatre was pitted, did not disappear, and to talk of a New Wave at all is to debate the activities of a highly

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visible and articulate minority. Nor should we under-estimate the continuities between the New Wave and the 'old' theatre it was presumed to have replaced: *Look Back in Anger* was, after all, a rather old-fashioned play, formally speaking (indeed, its use of many of the familiar conventions of the dominant realist/ naturalist tradition was central to its success).

The development of an anti-hegemonic theatre in the decades since 1956 has not been even. The wave metaphor, first coined by John Russell Taylor (Taylor 1962), has a sense of comforting inevitability about it, but this conceals the fact that each 'wave' has been not only superseded but, in important respects, defeated. One reason for taking 1965 as the rough concluding point of this book (given that all periodisations are to a degree arbitrary and restrictive) is that it was the point at which George Devine resigned the artistic directorship of the English Stage Company (although it was not a gesture of defeat); but two years earlier Joan Littlewood, the artistic director of Theatre Workshop, had left the company for the second time, disillusioned by the compromises she had been forced to make by an ailing theatre system, and Arnold Wesker's Centre 42, an organisation formed to run arts festivals in conjunction with the labour movement (and which represented an important strand in the cultural politics of the new theatre) began to falter.

The prime focus of this book is not theoretical (although I hope that its theoretical assumptions and critical procedures are apparent), and I have tried to find a balance between the contexts of reception and questions of dramatic and theatrical form/tradition: a variety of contemporary sources will be drawn on in order to pursue each of these emphases, particularly reviews. As well as providing a record of a production, rather than a play text, reviews suggest something of the dominant assumptions about what passes as a play in a given period, about what is considered good/bad/ serious/original. Reviewing practice may also be openly partisan; the reviews of Kenneth Tynan, for example, were unashamedly supportive of the new drama, and Tynan played a considerable role in its development.

Critical judgements may be particular to the critic, or the journal for which he/she is writing, but are frequently more widely held— are indicative of an *interpretative framework* that is comprised of the main assumptions that a critic brings to bear on the material, and which is rarely his/hers alone. The concept of interpretative frameworks is an important one in this book, for they can be both aesthetic in nature (and refer to dominant models of theatrical form and traditions of

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representation), and socio-political: sometimes they are both simultaneously, and there is, especially in the initial responses to the New Wave, a constant slippage between formal and ideological responses. Interpretative frameworks are also important to a sense of what constitutes a critical 'moment'. The term is an elusive one, and in the present context refers mainly to a period in cultural history where a variety of developments, which are simultaneously artistic, political and cultural in a wider, more sociological sense, intersect in a way that is registered at the public level—is made *conscious* in a new critical language, a new imagery, that is fashioned for the purpose. Within the New Wave, there are in fact two critical moments. The first is that of Anger, which, properly speaking, belongs to the early or middle years of the decade; in this sense, *Look Back in Anger* is the only truly 'angry' play. The second, which will have a more substantial presence in this book, is that of Working-Class Realism.

A discussion of realism provides us with an additional context that was central to the cultural role that the New Wave was required to play after 1956. This is partly because the languages of realism—diverse and contradictory as they sometimes are—relate questions of form to political and social purposes, and this is a principal reason why debates about the nature of realism are central to this study.

Realism has been used, as Raymond Williams has usefully reminded us, in a number of contexts (see Williams 1977 and 1981), to refer to a set of specific intentions, that are often political and moral in focus, and to describe a particular tradition of representation. It is also a term that is ever-present in the critical discussion of the New Wave itself and of other cultural forms in the period. There are realist novels and realist cinema, too, and all three genres were discussed within the same broadly similar critical frameworks; indeed, the moment of Working-Class Realism, which has a considerable presence in British culture in the period, embraces them all (see Chapters 3 and 4). Realism was also the ground on which certain new developments in the theatre were established, particularly those associated with dramatists such as Edward Bond and John Arden, which entailed the rejection of existing theatre practices (see Chapter 5) and a negotiation with other traditions, for example British popular theatre and Brecht, which were compatible with certain definitions of realism. Indeed, this book follows Brecht in defining realism in terms of ideology and politics rather than dramatic method.

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New Wave theatre bears comparison with realist cinema. Cinema, too, had its New Wave, which was largely comprised of figures who already had a presence in the theatre—Lindsay Anderson and Tony Richardson, for example. And the new realist films were invariably based on proven successes in other media; Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* and *The Entertainer*, Delaney's *A Taste of Honey*, Wesker's *The Kitchen* and Behan's *The Quare Fellow* were all made into films. New Wave cinema also helped to redefine the terms in which the originals were read, both signifying a move beyond 'Anger' into 'social realism', and emphasising the degree to which the New Wave in general was a realist theatre. For these reasons, the relationship between theatre and film will be considered in some detail here.

Some concluding remarks: I have assumed that most readers of this book will have at least read the plays under discussion, and I have not included plot summaries, except where they are required for the analysis. Also, I have focused largely on the better-known texts from the period, and most of the plays discussed are those that were thought to be of interest at the time they first appeared; indeed, it is *because* these plays were thought to be of immediate value and were widely debated that they are important to the kind of contextual analysis that follows below. There are some inevitable omissions, as well. In addressing issues around realism, I have reluctantly continued the practice of marginalising certain texts and practices that do not easily fall within its ambit, yet are of interest; the work of women writers in the period—Ann Jellicoe's *The Sport of My Mad Mother*, for example—deserves more attention than it normally receives.

Finally, I am indebted to the kind of criticism that has surfaced in recent general accounts of post-war cultural history, where the questions posed are similar to those asked here. Stuart Laing's *Representations of Working-Class Life: 1957–64*, Robert Hewison's *In Anger* and John Hill's *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956–63* have been of particular value.