

**The Changing Situation of Institutions and Practitioners in**  
**British Twentieth Century Theatre**

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## Abstract

### The Changing Situation of Institutions and Practitioners in British Twentieth Century Theatre

This thesis sets out to demonstrate that my published works represent a sustained, substantial, continuous and coherent research effort and an independent and original contribution to the literature in this field. Within the broad subject of twentieth century theatre practice, the thesis looks at my published works in two main and distinct but related sub-areas, the institution and the individual. It deals with my investigation of the ideological currents and tensions within British theatre practice, particularly in relation to differing interpretations of radicalism, focusing on major and representative examples of mainstream and alternative theatre.

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## Introduction

The broad subject of my published works is twentieth century theatre practice and, more specifically, the role of theatre institutions and theatre practitioners in their cultural and social context. The primary research focus is the ideological currents and tensions within British theatre practice, with a particular emphasis on different and differing interpretations of radicalism. All the works deal with historical trends in the theatre, and - set as they are in such a framework - they can be divided into two main and distinct but related and complementary sub-areas of the overarching topic: theatre practice in an institutional context and individual roles within theatre practice. There is, naturally enough, considerable overlap as the two sub-areas are inextricably intertwined and, as a consequence, some titles appear in both categories.

The first sub-area - theatre practice in an institutional context - involves investigation into the processes of making theatre and the relationship between an institutional form and ideological intent.

This sub-area can itself be divided into two parts, focusing on major and representative examples of both the accepted mainstream theatre and the theatre that posed as its alternative. The two strands carry contrasting ideological aims but share similar practical problems in dealing with the consequent tensions between the ideal and its realisation.

### First Sub-area: Theatre Practice in an Institutional Context

My work as editor of, and historical contributor to, *Theatre London* (1980) stands as an introduction to the first sub-area – theatre practice in an institutional context. It rejects the prevailing hierarchy of conventional theatre studies of the time by treating mainstream and fringe theatres on equal terms.

Exploration of the sub-area's first part (the mainstream) is represented by the chapter ' "Home Sweet Home": Stratford-upon-Avon and the Making of the RSC as a National Institution' (2001) and by the two monographs, *Other Spaces: New Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company* (1980) and *Inside the Royal Shakespeare Company: Creativity and the Institution* (2004). These taken together explore the history and practice of a significant national and international theatre company, concentrating on, respectively, the various strands of public legitimacy sought and secured by the company, the role of the Royal Shakespeare Company's smaller theatre spaces in its quest for institutional and artistic regeneration, and tensions in the dialectic between creativity and the institution during the period of the company's first four decades of existence.

Exploration of the sub-area's second part (the alternative theatre) spans the earlier and the later periods of contestatory theatre in Britain in the twentieth century, revealing as well as analysing continuities and discontinuities. The former period is represented by the monograph *The Story of Unity Theatre* (1989), which traces the history of this unique company – amateur, left-wing and collectively organised - over the forty years of its existence and assesses its contribution to British theatre, both alternative and mainstream.

The latter period of the century is represented by several publications. In chronological order, they are: the chapter 'Product into Process: Actor-based Workshops' (1980), which details and assesses the role and value of actor-based workshops in relation to key alternative theatre companies such as the Joint Stock Theatre Company; the co-authored book *Playwrights' Progress: Patterns of Postwar British Drama* (1987), which carries sections on the changing role of the writer and actor in the alternative theatre movement and the institutional tensions that arose from shifting concepts of individual theatrical functions; the co-authored chapter 'Playing on the Front Foot: Actors and Audience in British Popular Theatre, 1970-1990' (2004), which examines performance from an actor's point of view within alternative theatre; the chapter 'Developments in the profession of theatre, 1946-2000' (2004), which charts and analyses the contribution the alternative theatre made in both formal and institutional senses to the development of British theatre practice.

## Second Sub-area: Individual Roles within Theatre Practice

The second sub-area - individual roles in the theatre – focuses mainly on playwrights and playwriting. Despite postmodern attempts to bury this particular theatrical function, it remained at the centre of postwar British theatrical practice, albeit in a position occupied with considerable stress and challenge.

Exploration of this sub-area is represented primarily by two monographs. The first is *Playwrights' Progress*, which charts the social and cultural context of the explosion in British playwriting after World War II and, against this background, analyses the work of important individual playwrights such as John Arden, Howard Barker, Edward Bond, Howard Brenton, Caryl Churchill, David Hare, John McGrath, John Osborne, Tom Stoppard and Arnold Wesker. The second monograph is *Peggy: the Life of Margaret Ramsay, Play Agent* (1997), which looks further at postwar playwrights through the prism of a single, key figure in modern British theatre. The book relates and investigates the career of the most important play agent of the time and evaluates her unique contribution, by way of her influence on her clients and on theatre managers and producers, to creating a serious theatre of scrutiny and debate.

The edited book *Making Plays: the Writer-Director Relationship in the Theatre Today* (1995) also explores the practice of playwriting but on this occasion through the experiences of one writer, Richard Nelson, examined in relation to another theatrical role, that of the director, as well as, more tangentially, in relation to the roles of the designer, the actor, the producer and the critic. The co-edited collection of essays, *Theatre in a Cool Climate* (1999), offers a critique of contemporary theatre from the standpoint of several roles within theatre (playwright, actor, director, designer, producer, manager, literary manager and critic). It provides a range of practitioners with a platform to reflect on their disciplines in the context of state parsimony toward, and media denigration of, theatre. 'Playing on the Front Foot: Actors and Audience in British Popular Theatre,

1970-1990' analyses the particular practical and conceptual problems of the politically committed actor. 'Developments in the profession of theatre, 1946-2000' investigates the changing functions and organisation of theatre roles.

*The Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre* (2002) straddles the two sub-areas, both in terms of my individual contributions to it and my overall strategy and selection as editor.

In the case of the co-authored work, it would be difficult to detail the exact scope and extent of my contribution, as each publication involved a fully collaborative process; credit is shared equally.

### Methodology

My methodological approach in general has been to combine critical study of the existing literature (both direct and contingent) and archival material (ranging from newspaper cuttings and original scripts to photographs and programme notes) with extensive interview. This approach has been determined by the subject matter of my research (i.e. theatre practice rather than theatre text) and provides a rich source of material and opinion, much of which had not previously been placed in the public domain.

### Conceptual Framework

My conceptual approach is shaped by materialism and the postwar theoretical developments within that of feminist, multiracial and post-colonial awareness. I see theatre as a process, a social act and not a neutral collection of formal entities.

Throughout my work, I try to avoid the rigidity of much writing about theatre practice, which is far removed from the realities of actual practice and assumes a formal pattern to, and set of intentions within, theatrical activity that is belied by the happenstance of the

practice itself. However, while honouring the magpie and elusive quality of theatre, I do not surrender to the attitude that it is, therefore, beyond analysis.

### Structure

The structure of the thesis follows the categorisation set out above: the first section addresses theatre practice in an institutional context and is divided into two chapters. Chapter One deals with my writings on mainstream theatre, with a particular emphasis on the Royal Shakespeare Company, and Chapter Two deals with the alternative theatre movement, with a particular emphasis on Unity Theatre, London. The second section covers individual roles in the theatre and is also divided into two chapters. Chapter Three focuses on my writings on the playwright and Chapter Four on other roles and how roles have changed since the Second World War. This section is followed by a Conclusion, an Appendix, which comprises a *curriculum vitae* detailing evidence of peer esteem (in addition to the citations mentioned in the thesis) and professional theatrical activity, and a Bibliography.

### Aim

The aim of this thesis is to demonstrate that my published works represent a sustained, substantial, continuous and coherent research effort and an independent and original contribution to the literature in this field.



## Part One: Theatre Practice in an Institutional Context

### Chapter One:

#### The Role of the Mainstream Institution, with particular reference to the Royal Shakespeare Company

Published writings about modern British theatrical institutions as institutions, whether those conventionally perceived as mainstream or, by way of inverting this theoretical presupposition, as representing an alternative to the mainstream, have tended to fall outside the reaches of academia. For those within the university orbit who have essayed this area of research (e.g. Philip Roberts, Rowell), the result has been the 'exception that proves the rule.' However well received and highly valued, it remains a marginalised research activity within theatre studies, albeit one that has grown in stature since I began my research activities.

At that point, much of this history had been focused necessarily on a particular theatre building because of the relative lack of companies in mainstream British theatre. This emphasis had reinforced the tendency of British theatre historiography to comprise little more than an elaboration of a sequence of productions and personalities, underpinned by an account of the building's architecture and furnishings, not by way of analysing its influence on the production and reception of the repertoire but more as a decorative description. This tendency has continued and, consequently, a great deal of the literature rarely rises beyond empirical description (e.g. Coren, Peter Roberts, Trewin). The body of historical work has been supplemented by biography and autobiography, sometimes entertaining and illuminating, sometimes (although rarely) offering a critical analysis or overview.

When I began researching *Theatre London and Other Spaces: New Theatre and the RSC* in 1978 the alternative theatre was treated as existing within its own ghetto, held critically to be quite separate from the mainstream, and there was nothing extensive published on

the interplay between them. My approach in the former book was to treat the two sectors with equal consideration (an approach continued throughout my work, as, for example, in my editorial strategy and entries on mainstream and alternative companies in the *Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre*). My approach in the latter book, *Other Spaces*, was to examine the radical nature of the exchange through analysis of the phenomenon and function of the company's smaller theatres, and the role and work of the director Buzz Goodbody, whose productions had not been dealt with outside the arena of reviews.

Goodbody, who had committed suicide in 1975, was artistic director of the company's first permanent 'other space', The Other Place, and as such had been the person most responsible for the dynamic contribution of the 'other spaces' to the company's artistic renewal. The existing literature on the company as an institution (beyond some journal articles) comprised *The Royal Shakespeare Company: The Peter Hall Years* (1974) by David Addenbroke, a book written in praise of Peter Hall, the RSC's founder and first artistic director. (Addenbroke had trained for the theatre and was on attachment to the RSC during its 1971 season.) Addenbroke describes without much comment or analysis the company's first experiment with an 'other' space, at the Arts Theatre, London in 1962, the 1964 Theatre of Cruelty season at the London Academy of Music and Drama and the Donmar rehearsal room, the Theatregoround (TGR) Festival at the Roundhouse in 1970 and TGR's first season at The Place, London in 1971. Addenbroke's story ends where my investigation began.

As well as reading newspaper reviews, interviews and RSC publications, I was able (with the support of Trevor Nunn, the company's artistic director) to conduct interviews with company personnel as a central part of my research. I was also given access to Goodbody's private papers by her family. Among the items I found there was an historically valuable policy document detailing Goodbody's thinking on the function of what became known as The Other Place, which she founded in a small tin hut in Stratford-upon-Avon, not far down the road from the company's larger and primary auditorium, the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. By quoting in my book from this document,

which had been lost to the company, I was able to make the document public, and I subsequently deposited it in the RSC archive. (It is cited by Marion J. Pringle, *The Theatres of Stratford-upon-Avon, 1875-1992: An Architectural History*, 1994, p. 71.)

The document, allied to my interviews and first-hand knowledge of Goodbody's aims, working methods and productions (I had attended several of her rehearsals and had many conversations with her about the theatre and its social function) proved fundamental to the interpretation and thesis of the book. This thesis was that the company from its outset under Hall in 1960 had contained a massive contradiction between tradition and innovation in its quest to be a living and public presence in the cultural life of the nation and that this tension could not be resolved within the existing theatre spaces available to the company - the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon and the Aldwych Theatre in London - both of which were 'mainstream' spaces. This tension required the company to seek out experimental spaces, which became both a dynamo for further change and renewal as well as a source of continuing discontent and challenge to the company's aesthetic orthodoxy that the company's leadership had to accommodate or rebuff. The sweep and pattern of the company's history meant that when Nunn took over from Hall and needed to renew the institution in post 1968 Britain, he needed an auditorium to serve as the arena for that part of the society that was vociferously proclaiming its discontent with the status quo. The alternative theatre of the period provided the template and much of the personnel through the figure of Goodbody, a feminist and a Communist who had close links to the alternative theatre movement as a founder member of the Women's Theatre Group. She embodied the contradictions of the RSC: a desire to be popular rather than elitist and to interweave the classical with the contemporary but in an institution embedded in convention and supported by a narrow social stratum.

My thesis argued that *The Other Place* and subsequently its London counterpart, *The Warehouse*, prevented the company from ossification, and brought into its ranks a new generation of theatrical artists and practitioners, such as directors Howard Davies and Ron Daniels, the designer Bob Crowley, and the actors Bob Peck and Harriet Walter,

who otherwise would have rejected the RSC. The artists, production staff and administrators who were attracted by and developed their skills at these smaller RSC theatres became the core of the RSC in its next historical phase.

The book's account of Goodbody's work stimulated and became a chief source for later study, especially within the area of feminist theatre. She became seen as the next major female figure in British theatre after Joan Littlewood (e.g. Manfull). Elizabeth Schafer in *Ms-Directing Shakespeare: Women Direct Shakespeare* (1998) quotes extensively from my book in her examination of Goodbody's work (pp. 232-238). Robert Shaughnessy, in *Representing Shakespeare: England, History and the RSC* (1994), cites my book in regard to Goodbody's production of *King John* and its attack on contemporary political practice (p. 134). Joyce Green Macdonald in 'Women and Theatrical Authority', in Marianne Novy (ed.) *Cross-Cultural Performances: Differences in Women's Re-Visions of Shakespeare* (1993), refers to my account of Goodbody's struggle as a woman director in the RSC as well as to my analysis of the company's hierarchical structure (p. 200). Christopher J. McCullough, in 'Terry Hands', in Graham Holderness (ed.), *The Shakespeare Myth* (1988), cites the book's coverage of Goodbody setting up The Other Place and the activities of Theatregoround (p. 125).

*Other Spaces* also served as a quoted resource for several issues (1987-89) of *Stargazer*, a journal dedicated to the career of the actor Patrick Stewart, who had worked with Goodbody and played Shylock in a John Barton production at The Other Place, a production which I explore in my monograph (pp. 69-70).

Alan Sinfield in 'Royal Shakespeare', in Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (eds.), *Political Shakespeare: New essays in cultural materialism* (1985), refers to my book in his argument that the opening of The Other Place signalled a split between the company's conservative and radical audiences as consensus politics broke down (p. 169). Andrew Davies, in *Other Theatres: The Development of Alternative and Experimental Theatre in Britain* (1987), also cites my book's account of the influence The Other Place exerted as

the representative of the alternative in the mainstream (p. 190). Joyce Green Macdonald also refers to my account of the influence of political theatre in the RSC (p. 202). Simon Shepherd and Peter Womack in *English Drama* (1996) cite the book's coverage of Goodbody's attempts at The Other Place to resolve the contradictions between the mainstream and alternative (p. 304). Baz Kershaw in *The Politics of Performance: Radical theatre as cultural intervention* (1992) uses my book to support his view that the cultural imperialism of the mainstream in relation to the alternative theatre serves to consolidate its dominance and explicitly associates the death of Goodbody with this tendency to accommodation (p. 137).

Steven Adler in *Rough Magic: Making Theatre at the Royal Shakespeare Company* (2001) draws on the book for his exploration of the founding, aims and role of The Other Place as an alternative space and the contribution Goodbody made to the company through her commitment to both new work and Shakespeare (pp.39-40) as well as for his examination of the financing of The Warehouse (p. 58).

Robert Shaughnessy also refers to my book in his analysis of the history of the RSC and its productions of Shakespeare's history plays (p. 27) and in his discussion of the ambience and physical environment of The Other Place (pp. 165-6) as well as in his examination of the connection between both The Other Place and The Warehouse and the political fringe through Goodbody (p. 164).

Catherine Prentice and Helena Leongamornett in '“The Dillen” in Stratford, 1983', in *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 18, Pt. 1, no. 69, Feb. 2002, refer (p. 50) to my book in connecting the community aspiration of their subject to the opening of The Other Place 'for artistic as well as social reasons.'

Peter Holland in *English Shakespeares: Shakespeare on the English Stage in the 1990s* (1997) places my book in a wider perspective and says (p. 113), 'Directors and companies are still attempting to come to terms with Buzz Goodbody's revolution of the

1970s.’ Commenting on the phenomenon of small space Shakespeare, which the RSC popularised, he writes (p. 274) that my book remains ‘the best account.’

The RSC became the chief mainstream institution in my research output when I published the chapter ‘“Home Sweet Home”: Stratford-upon-Avon and the Making of the RSC as a National Institution’ (2001) and the monograph *Inside the Royal Shakespeare Company: Creativity and the Institution* (2004). By the time of researching these, there had been additions to the literature on the RSC as an institution: a major discursive history, *The Royal Shakespeare Company: A History of Ten Decades* (1982) by journalist Sally Beaman, also wife of leading RSC actor Alan Howard; *Coriolanus in Europe*, (1980) by David Daniell, an account of the company limited to its European tour of *Coriolanus*; Peter Hall’s autobiography *Making an Exhibition of Myself* (1993) as well as his *Diaries* (1983) and books about him (e.g. Fay). The international standing of the company had produced a global sub-industry of commentary, mainly dealing with its productions. Some, such as Peter Brook’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1971), had generated their own international conferences and sub-section on the groaning shelves of Shakespeareana but within this field little had been written on the institution itself (Selbourne is an exception). Cultural materialist academics, such as Dollimore and Sinfield (1985) and Holderness (1988), and some operating within the feminist field, such as Callaghan and Goodman, had dealt with aspects of the company’s practice but not in any extended way. The only book to attempt this was Adler (2001), which, nevertheless, concentrates in an uncritical tone on the RSC in the 1990s under Adrian Noble with little reference to the company’s earlier history and trajectory. Adler, however, who acts as concerned reporter giving voice to those he has interviewed, omits composers/musicians and playwrights/literary manager, and avoids confronting ideological choices.

‘Home Sweet Home’, which appears in a volume of essays called *Talking Shakespeare*, analyses the contradictory roles of the RSC as a local, national and international theatre institution, representing continuity yet continually embodying change. The investigation explores the institutional and aesthetic contradictions of the company, given its aim ‘both to honour authoritatively the truths of texts that are four centuries old and at the same

time to find meanings in them that resonate for its diverse audiences today' (p. 85). It argues that the dominance of RSC productions as a benchmark for Shakespearean production is part of the nationalisation of the company and is consonant with a prevalent but narrow notion of Englishness in the 1990s that increasingly led to the company's narrowness of vision.

Building on that approach, *Inside the Royal Shakespeare Company* argues that:

the story of a major theatre company is... a metaphor of its society... Culture and economics in their own ways conspired to make the RSC's extraordinary achievements a distinctly English success story: the miserly state gave the company just enough subsidy to keep it alive but not enough to allow it to flourish as it wished, and, when its commitment and collective accomplishment thrived in adversity, the best traditions of heroic English amateurism were seemingly endorsed. (pp. xiii-xiv)

The book places this argument in the wider perspective of the company's history under its four artistic directors (at the time of writing, from 1960-2002) and its institutional life in relation to its repertoire, its five theatres (pre Barbican withdrawal in 2002), its internal creativity (including training and development), its connections to its audiences and its (faltering) sense of being a company as it turns into a corporation instead. The book offers a running critique of the development of the company over four decades and of its changing place within British culture, examining the relationship between the company and the state, with a particular focus on the effects of funding, and between the company and the national cultural apparatus. It is a multi-layered chronicle and analysis of the company's working methods, ideology and politics. It examines the crisis of 'high culture' and of the reception of Shakespeare in particular, the role of theatre in contemporary society and the tensions within the RSC's struggle for creative expression as the vitality of its radical vision is continually compromised by the very institution itself, which was established precisely in order to realise and further that vision.

In addition to reading the existing literature, I consulted the RSC archive in Stratford-upon-Avon during the period of a year (with the support of a small research grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Board). I also conducted extensive interviews with RSC personnel covering the broad range of the company's activities and spanning the whole period of the company's history. During the course of the interviews, I unearthed several documents not included in the RSC archive and through the book made them public (for example, an exposition by Michel Saint-Denis of the ideology of the company's Studio, which he founded, and its early programmes of work). The book draws heavily on my own experiences working at a senior level for the company as its Literary Manager and member of its Planning Committee from 1981-1997.

The book also carries a full list of RSC productions from 1960 to 2002/3, which I compiled and which was not available beforehand in any format. The Shakespeare Centre in Stratford-upon-Avon has subsequently used it to correct its own on-line archive of productions.

*Inside the RSC*, which was short listed for the 2004 Theatre Book Prize, is described by Russell Jackson in *New Theatre Quarterly* (vol. xxi, part 3, no. 83, August 2005, pp. 303-4) as an 'outstanding book.' It has, he writes, 'an abundance of detail and strong sense of the historical narratives' and it 'takes its readers "inside the RSC" in terms that relate directly to cultural policies and to the situation of the arts in the UK.' Jackson, in *Shakespeare Quarterly* (vol. 55, no. 2, summer, p. 177) also cites the book for being an 'admirably concise, deeply felt account of the contradictions and vicissitudes that have frustrated impulses toward social and artistic radicalism.'

As a result of the book, I have been interviewed for the British Theatre Archive Project being undertaken by the University of Sheffield (an interview lodged at the British Library and used to inform an article by Kate Dorney in *Theatre Notebook*, 'Searching for Scripts: Re-writing the History of British Theatre Post-1968', vol. 59, no. 2, 2005, pp. 102-110) as well as by PhD students.



Dimple Godiwala in 'Genealogies, Archaeologies, Histories: the Revolutionary 'Interculturalism' of Asian Theatre in Britain' (forthcoming) cites the book's reference to the institutional racism of the RSC (p. 48).

## Chapter Two:

### The Role of the Alternative Institution, with particular reference to Unity Theatre, London

During my years as a theatre critic and journalist, when I reviewed and wrote about alternative theatre extensively, interviewed many of its practitioners and organised conferences on its social role, I began to reflect on and theorise its function, contribution and historiography (cf. 'Socialist Theatre and the Ghetto Mentality', *Marxism Today*, August 1978, pp. 24-30). In *Theatre London* (1980) and *Other Spaces* (1980), I validated the history of alternative theatre and its place in the theatrical landscape, transcending through ideological and practical commonalities its perceived existence as a set of disconnected sub-activities of the mainstream theatre. In an equality of treatment with the mainstream and in recognition of the influence exerted by the alternative movement, I removed the value distinction then commonly made between the two fields of theatrical activity.

My investigation into the aims, aesthetics, practice and influence of alternative theatre institutions is continued in further publications: in 'Product into Process: actor based workshops' (1980), which investigates notions of collective creation, with a particular focus on the Joint Stock Theatre Company; in *Playwrights Progress: Patterns of Postwar British Drama* (1987), which argues for the centrality of the alternative theatre movement in the revivification of British theatre after 1945; in *Theatre in a Cool Climate* (1999), which reflects on the institutional challenges facing the alternative movement in a privatising, globalising era following the decline of the postwar alternative 'moment' of the 1970s and 1980s; in *The Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre* (2002), which charts histories within and across countries (my own contributions mainly focus on the British context, ranging across the alternative theatre spectrum from the Arts Theatre, Bush Theatre, Embassy Theatre, Open Space and Q Theatre to the more radical Black Theatre Co-operative, Half Moon Theatre Company and Tara Arts); in 'Developments in the profession of theatre, 1946-2000' (2004), which analyses the

growth and role of the alternative theatre institutions in the professionalisation of British theatre; and in 'Playing On the Front Foot: Actors and Audience in British Popular Theatre, 1970-1990' (2004), which explores the performance aesthetics of the alternative institution, in the examples of the Coventry Theatre-in-Education company, Belt and Braces and the Half Moon Theatre Company, in relation to different audiences and mainstream practices.

The shifting distinction between the fringe and the alternative, covering the overlap as well as the differences, is also examined in the above.

My primary and most sustained reflection on the institutions of the alternative theatre comes in *The Story of Unity Theatre* (1989) and the subsequent 'Unity Theatre' (in *Heart of a Heartless World: Essays in Cultural Resistance*, 1995), the entry on Unity Theatre in *The Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre* (2002), and the video *The Story of Unity Theatre* (2003), for which I wrote the script.

The impetus to research this theatre company came from my own experiences in the contemporary alternative theatre movement and my discovery of the ignorance of its own history, a lacuna mirrored in conventional theatre historiography. David Edgar, for example – a leading figure of the alternative theatre movement - wrote in 'Ten Years of Political Theatre, 1968-78' (*Theatre Quarterly*, vol. viii, no. 32, winter 1979, p. 25): 'There are two reasons why 1968 can be taken as the starting date of political theatre in Britain', thereby completely ignoring the existence of a tradition that stretches back to the nineteenth century and beyond.

Unity Theatre was founded in 1936 as an innovatory response within the left to the political crises of the times. It moved artistically beyond the agitprop theatre of its predecessor, the Workers' Theatre Movement (WTM), and, whilst continuing the touring legacy of the WTM, built itself a well-equipped theatre to become one of the leading small theatres of its day. Unity was based in north London but was part of a British-wide movement that it led, boasting a pre-war membership of some 250 groups and its own

magazine. Unity was an amateur club (apart from a brief and unsuccessful professional period at the end of the war). It was self-created and self-organised, offering not only an alternative to the theatre of the West End but also an alternative way of seeing the world, an alternative way of life. It survived through changing political circumstances, including the cold war, until the theatre was destroyed by fire in 1975. As an organisation, it limped on afterwards but faded completely in the 1980s, by which time the new alternative groups, which Unity had helped spawn, had taken on its earlier role. The book examines the ideological as well as the practical struggles the theatre faced and poses questions about the nature and sustainability of dissenting artistic practice.

At the time of undertaking the research for the book, there was a greater amount written on the apparently more revolutionary WTM than on Unity Theatre, a bias in left historiography I had dealt with in 'Socialist Theatre and the Ghetto Mentality' (p. 24), to which Andrew Davies refers in *Other Theatres: The Development of Alternative and Experimental Theatre in Britain* (1987, p. 9).

There was no complete history of Unity's activities. There were a handful of journal articles, several references in general histories and encyclopaedias, a chapter in a book on cultural politics in the 1930s, a published thesis (in German) and an unpublished thesis (in English). They all concentrated on the pre-World War II period when Unity reached the peak of its reputation, or occasionally they followed the story through to the end of the war. Added to their self-imposed limits was a simplistic political analysis and incomplete artistic coverage. Furthermore, the three decades of activity during the cold war years were left uncharted.

My methodology was to read the existing literature, identify and visit the various archives that held Unity material, and to undertake a major project of tracking and interviewing participants who came from across the theatre's four decades of existence.

Archival material, including that of the Unity Theatre itself, was distributed around the country and abroad (in the book's Select Bibliography, I list twelve libraries or archives

that I consulted). These collections were mostly un-indexed and highly partial. Much of the material was undated. I had to interpret their holdings and create a proper historical context in which to place them. For the interview project, I constructed by letter and telephone (in the pre-email and fax era) an internally cross-referenced database, and over a period of years I interviewed participants from different periods of the theatre's life, representing a cross-section of roles at the theatre (I list more than 130 interviewees, many of whom gave me material. Following publication of the book, I donated this material with the owners' permission to a new, unified Unity archive in the Theatre Museum, London, which I helped create.) As with the archive material, I had to interpret and place the information given by the interviewees. I had continually to check the statements of one interviewee against those of others as well as against documentary material (for example, programmes, Unity publications, cuttings, photographs, newspaper and magazine files, and plays deposited in the Lord Chamberlain's archive). From this process of permanent cross-checking, I pieced together a timeline that gave a spine to the research.

I created a chronology of productions from 1936-1983 (both touring and those seen at the theatre), and this became the frame and major tool for organising both the material and the information I was collecting and my own writing up of the research. I increasingly used it to check the memories of interviewees and the details contained in published documents. (The book reproduces this list of all the Unity productions in the above period.)

The scope of the book is both narrative and analytical. I explore the social and political context of the emergence and development of the theatre through its forty years, its means of organisation, both internally (e.g. administration, production department, front-of-house) and externally (e.g. its membership system), its repertoire planning and the repertoire itself, in terms of content and aesthetic, its educational activities (e.g. summer schools, reading classes, discussion groups), and the role the Communist Party and ideological discourse played at the theatre.

I assess Unity's contribution to theatre as an institution and through its individuals in a variety of roles (such as actors, writers/composers, administrators, 'backstage' production workers). This evaluation covers those who remained at Unity as amateurs as well as those who entered the theatrical profession from Unity (among others, Lionel Bart, Alfie Bass, Michael Gambon, Bob Hoskins, David Kossoff, Warren Mitchell, Bill Owen and Ted Willis). The book examines Unity's pioneering role in vernacular drama, Living Newspaper, educational and documentary-based drama and political satire (in the form of political pantomime and political revue) and in introducing the work of important playwrights (it was the first British theatre to stage a Bertolt Brecht play, it championed the production of Maxim Gorky, it gave the world première of Sean O'Casey's *The Star Turns Red* and the British premières of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nekrassov* and Arthur Adamov's *Spring '71*). The book also reveals Unity's significant contribution to the early history of black performance in Britain as well as to the formation of the alternative theatre of the 1960s and '70s (a movement, the features and context of which are compared to those of Unity).

From these many achievements, I argue and set out to demonstrate that Unity represented the most sustained and successful contribution to British drama by the left as well as one of its most important and enduring initiatives in the realm of cultural politics.

Vera Gottlieb, reviewing the book in *New Theatre Quarterly* (vol. vii, no. 26, May 1991, pp. 196-7) describes it as an 'important book for all students of the British theatre...and for all students of political theatre.' It 'raises crucial questions about the relationships between theatre and politics; artistic concepts and social commitment; theatrical forms and ideological content; people's theatre and the broader society in which it is produced.' She says it is 'meticulously researched' and she supports its view that Unity developed innovative forms, true vernacular theatre and created educational drama. 'As with all thorough and thought-provoking histories,' she writes, 'this book raises crucial issues for the present and the future by illuminating the past.'

The book has become the standard work on Unity Theatre and is quoted as such as well as in relation to particular aspects of Unity's activities as a political theatre. Clive Barker in 'Theatre and society: the Edwardian legacy, the First World War and the inter-war years', in Clive Barker and Maggie Gale (eds.), *British Theatre Between the Wars, 1918-1939s* (2000), cites the book in his survey on political theatre groups (p. 16) and in 'The Ghosts of War: stage ghosts and time slips as a response to war' (*ibid*) cites the book in reference to Unity and Stephen Spender (p. 236). Anthony Jackson in 'Del agit-prop al Unity: el teatro radical de los años treinta y los orígenes del Unity Theatre de Londres' ('From Agit-prop to Unity: radical theatre in the 1930s and the beginnings of Unity Theatre, London', in *Cultura Moderna*, 0, Spring, 2004) acknowledges the article's debt to my book and draws on it throughout (pp. 71-90). Steve Nicholson in *British Theatre and the Red Peril: The Portrayal of Communism 1917-1945* (1999) acknowledges the book's contribution to documentation of alternative theatre outside the mainstream (p. 1).

Simon Shepherd and Peter Womack in *English Drama* (1996), dealing with twentieth century realism, refer to the book's coverage of Unity's drama school in the 1930s and its claim to be the only one in England applying the methods of Stanislavsky (p. 294). They also mention the book's handling of Unity's range of dramatic performance (p. 304). Dan Rebellato in *1956 And All That: The Making of Modern British Drama* (1999) refers to the book's section on British 'red baiting' in the 1945-51 period (p. 13), specifically to a political revue called *Oklahoma* (which caused one member of the cast to lose her job with the Ministry of Defence, p. 14), and to the theatre's links with the Army Bureau of Current Affairs Play Unit (p. 62). Mick Wallis in 'Social Commitment and aesthetic experiment, 1895-1946', in Baz Kershaw (ed.), *The Cambridge History of British Theatre, vol. 3, Since 1895* (2004), also refers to the book's ABCA Play Unit passage and cites the book's 'extended picture of London Unity's bold and various formal innovations'. 'For example,' writes Wallis, '*Babes in the Wood* (1938) attacked the government's policy of appeasement with fascism by turning pantomime into a vehicle for political satire through pastiche.' (pp. 182-3)

Baz Kershaw in *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (1992) refers to the book's section on Unity and the creation of a catalyst for the 1960's counter-culture, especially through the formation of Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre by ex-Unity members and the founding of the AgitProp Information Service at a conference held at Unity (p. 127).

The book's coverage of O'Casey's involvement in Unity and its world première of *The Star Turns Red* is cited in Steve Nicholson (1999, p. 110) and in a forthcoming book on the playwright by Christopher Murray. Andy Croft in *Comrade Heart: A Life of Randall Swingler* (2003) draws on the book for much of his account of Swingler's time at Unity (pp. 81-3, pp. 99-100, pp. 117-8 and p.130). Adrienne Scullion in 'Glasgow Unity Theatre: The Necessary Contradictions of Scottish Political Theatre', in *Twentieth Century British History* vol. 13 (2002), cites the book in relation to the life of Robert Mitchell, a Unity activist (p. 235).

The book's groundbreaking coverage of early black performance history is acknowledged in Stephen Bourne, *Black in the British Frame: The Black Experience in British Film and Television* (2001, p. 31), Deidre Osborne, 'Writing Black Back: An Overview of Black Theatre and Performance in Britain' in *Studies in Theatre and Performance* vol. 26.1 (forthcoming, 2006), Dimple Godiwala (ed.), *Alternatives Within the Mainstream: British Black and Asian Theatre* (forthcoming,) and Susan Croft (ed.), *Black and Asian Performance at the Theatre Museum: A User's Guide* (2002, p. 19).

Further evidence of peer esteem is the invitation I received to speak on Unity Theatre at the launch of the Archives Hub at the University of Manchester in 2003 and the invitation from the University of Exeter Press to submit a proposal for a volume of Unity plays and a selection of articles from Unity's magazine *New Theatre*.



## Part Two: Theatre Practice by Individual Role

### Chapter Three:

#### Individual Roles in the Theatre, with particular reference to Playwrights

As a corollary to my analysis of institutions in the mainstream and the alternative, my examination of contemporary theatre has investigated the contribution and changing function of individual roles, most particularly that of the playwright. I have undertaken this area of research through the exploration of the role itself, the role in relation to other roles in theatre and the theatrical infrastructure, and the work of individual writers in their social and political context. In doing this, I have argued against the trend of purely literary interpretations, which deny the influence on the aesthetic of such considerations, and for the importance of contextualising the role in its practice. By investigating the process of production, I have explored the difficulties faced by playwrights not only in expressing a radical voice in their texts but also in having that voice heard on the stage.

The co-authored *Playwrights' Progress: Patterns of Postwar British Drama* (1987) charts the topography of British playwriting in the four decades after World War II and, against this changing background, analyses the work of important individual playwrights such as John Arden, Howard Barker, Edward Bond, Howard Brenton, Caryl Churchill, David Hare, John McGrath, John Osborne, Tom Stoppard and Arnold Wesker. An examination of their plays and influence within theatre offers a map through the complexities and contradictions of theatrical development in the designated period of study, reassessing the period as a whole as well as individuals within it and providing a new interpretation that challenged conventional views and theatrical historiography. Playwrights are not idealised as the poets of the age but are seen (p. 7) as prime intermediaries between the theatre and its society - 'passionate and intelligent observers who have traced currents in society in a unique way.' A distinctive feature of the book is the significance attached to the context, not just social and political but also theatrical, in terms of the conditions of production and reception of plays, and how that affects what the playwright wants to say.

The book divides the postwar years into three periods: 1945-1956, 1956-1968 and 1968-1985 (the last year that was able to be included at the time of writing). It offers innovative readings of each period and of the transitions from one to another in an uneven process of attempted renewal within the overall decline of traditional drama. (The contributions of the two authors are not defined in the book; I was the lead author and contributed the greater part of the individual playwright studies as well as establishing the basic approach and structure of the book.)

At the time of the research for this book, whilst it was generally accepted that playwrights played a central role in the regeneration of postwar British theatre, there was little contextualisation of the process or thematic cross-reference either within those periods or across them. The book offers such a framework, choosing as its thematic structure to explore images of the working class, the problems of political theatre and the attendant culture gap, the nation and the gender gap found in the tension between the public and the private. Using this approach, the focus is switched from the leading figures of conventional study to those who were experimenting but who had received little serious consideration, such as Ewan MacColl, while the work of those commonly written about as important, such as Terence Rattigan, is reassessed. This approach is followed through in the choice of playwrights who are given extended individual attention; they represent not necessarily the most successful practitioners but those whose work embodies the pressures and strains identified in the book as critical to the development of theatre.

Dan Rebellato in *1956 And All That: The making of modern British drama* (1999) acknowledges this shift in perspective, especially in relation to the role of the Royal Court Theatre and John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (p. 10). Michelene Wandor in *Post-War British Drama: Looking Back in Gender* (2001, p. 263) describes the book as 'An excellent survey of the postwar playwrights, analysed from a radical, left-wing perspective, linking drama and social and political context.' In particular, she commends the sections on the public and the private, on feminist theatre and on Caryl Churchill, noting that the book 'incorporates critiques influenced by feminism and debates within sexual politics.'

Michael Patterson in *Strategies of Political Theatre: Post-War British Playwrights* (2003), writing on the work of John McGrath and the touring 7:84 Scotland theatre group, refers to the book's analysis of this playwright, his refusal to accept what he deemed the criteria of the middle-class critic trying to apply standard theatrical judgements to work that operated in a different aesthetic domain and his rejection of and denial of any ability to learn from what he saw as 'their' theatre (pp. 117-118).

Vera Gottlieb in 'Theatre Today – the “new realities” ', in *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 13, no. 2, May 2003, referring to the book's analysis of Tom Stoppard - the playwright paired with McGrath in the section on the problems of political theatre - takes up the point that Stoppard's work formed part of a general right-wing intellectual push, which underpinned the election of a radical right-wing government in 1979 (p. 10), and the point that he places moral issues at the centre of his work but without any direct relationship to the problems of world that give rise to those issues (p. 12).

Hersh Zeifman in *David Hare: A Casebook* (1994) cites the book's analysis of Hare's writing of female characters (p. 41) and quotes from the book on this subject (p. 186).

Following on from the study of playwrights covered by *Playwrights' Progress*, the monograph *Peggy: the Life of Margaret Ramsay, Play Agent* (1997) analyses the contribution made by playwrights from the same period. The history and influence of Ramsay are inseparable from the qualities of her clients, who together comprise an outstanding and significant cross-section of contemporary playwriting talent. Among these clients were John Arden, Alan Ayckbourn, Robert Bolt, Edward Bond, Howard Brenton, Caryl Churchill, Christopher Hampton, David Hare, Eugène Ionesco, Ann Jellicoe, Henry Livings, Frank Marcus, John McGrath, David Mercer, John Mortimer, Peter Nichols, Alan Plater, Stephen Poliakoff, Joe Orton, Jack Rosenthal, David Rudkin, Willy Russell, James Saunders, Martin Sherman and Charles Wood.

Through access to her files I was able to see correspondence between her and her playwriting clients, which covered not just the expected business matters but also personal issues as well as her candid views on their work. This material allowed me to offer new insights into the creative practice and process of these playwrights and to reveal new information about their development as artists, particularly at the beginning of their careers, as well as new details on the formation of certain important plays, for example Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, David Mercer's *The Buried Man*, Christopher Hampton's *Total Eclipse* and David Hare's *Knuckle*. Such access also permitted apparently well covered ground to be revisited from a fresh standpoint, for example the life and death of Joe Orton and its canonisation through the biographical and editorial work of John Lahr. (My section on Orton is referred to by Dominic Shellard in *British Theatre Since the War*, 1999, pp. 120-126).

I interviewed many of Ramsay's clients (and included in the book a full list all her clients across the nearly four decades of her life as a play agent). It was important to establish their interpretation of the material I had seen as well as keeping a critical distance from their own memories of the events being researched. As with the research for the book on Unity Theatre, personal testimony had to be cross-checked against published material that might support or contradict the interpretations being offered. Fine judgements as well as keen research techniques were required to handle both published and oral evidence.

During the course of the interviews, several playwrights showed me their correspondence with Ramsay, often completing a sequence of letters that in Ramsay's files was only partial and thus enabling me to present a fuller analysis. Several playwrights (for example, Edward Bond, David Hare and David Rudkin) allowed me to quote from these letters, which, thereby, entered the public domain for the first time.

In uncovering and examining the many interlocking factors involved in the complex processes whereby a play migrates and mutates from the desk of the person who wrote it to the stage where it comes alive for audiences, the book contributes new knowledge to the understanding of the role of the playwright and its centrality to the postwar British

theatrical revival that saw theatre become a forum for serious cultural debate. Of key concern is the ability of the writer to find a form for his or her vision and, once achieved, to protect that vision through the production process.

At the same time, the book continues my challenge to the purely literary approach that abstracts text from its conditions of production.

Publication of the book led to me being commissioned to write the entries on Bolt, Mercer and Ramsay herself for the *New Dictionary of National Biography* (2004). I provided material and copies of documents I possessed for Adrian Turner's biography of Bolt (1998), which acknowledges my contribution (p. xii) and cites my book in relation to Ramsay chastising Bolt for the deleterious effects of fame and wealth on his career (p. 489) and her using Bolt's experience in the film world as a terrible warning to other clients such as Christopher Hampton (p. 489).

My standing as an expert on contemporary playwrights (bolstered by specialist contributions on individual writers such as Robert Holman, Richard Nelson and Willy Russell to theatre programmes and published playtexts) was demonstrated by the invitation to write the Introduction to the sixth edition of the standard international reference work, *Contemporary Dramatists* (1999). I extended this area of study as editor of, and contributor on many playwrights to, *The Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre* (2002). As well as commissioning and editing many entries on playwrights from around the world, I commissioned individual playwrights such as Peter Barnes, Steve Gooch, Frank McGuinness, Alan Plater and Arnold Wesker to be contributors, and wrote my own entries on playwrights in a diverse selection drawn primarily although not exclusively from the postwar years, ranging from T.S. Eliot and John Whiting to Jim Cartwright, Nick Dear, Dusty Hughes, Ron Hutchinson, Ewan MacColl and Winsome Pinnock.

*Making Plays: the Writer-Director Relationship in the Theatre Today* (1995) uses the work and professional experiences of one playwright, Richard Nelson, to investigate the

practice of playwriting more widely, primarily but not exclusively in relation to another central theatrical role, that of the director, David Jones. (Jones also offers insights into the practice of other playwrights, such as John Arden, Margaretta D'Arcy, Graham Greene, David Mercer, Harold Pinter and Hugh Whitmore). In particular, the book complements *Peggy: the Life of Margaret Ramsay, Play Agent* in exploring the process by which a play is transformed from a preliminary text through the revisions and embodiments of the rehearsal and production process into a performed play offered for consideration before critics and audiences. As there was little published on the role and experience of the playwright in this process, especially during rehearsal, the book aimed to redress the balance in providing a more complete exploration of theatrical creative practice. As editor as well as participant in some of the interviews that form the basis of the book, I shaped the material and gave the book its structure and point of view.

The co-edited collection of essays, *Theatre in a Cool Climate* (1999), which offers a platform to two playwrights, Harold Pinter and Winsome Pinnock, also supplements my other writings on the theatrical infrastructure available to the playwright through the chapter I wrote called *That's Entertainment!*, based on my experience as a literary manager. Deidre Osborne and Barry Boles in 'Beyond Victimhood: Agency and Identity in the Theatre of Roy Williams', in Dimple Godiwala (ed.) *Alternatives Within the Mainstream: British Black and Asian Theatre* (forthcoming), cite the Winsome Pinnock chapter (p. 173).

## Chapter Four:

### Individual Roles in the Theatre and How They Changed Postwar

*Playwright's Progress*, in its first, thematic section, analyses theatrical practice in its social, political and cultural context and argues for the importance of what might be termed the conditions of production, distribution and reception in any study of theatre. Through the book's periodisation, it charts the complex interplay of forces that shaped the postwar theatrical structure and hence the roles played within it. Along with the external forces for change, the internal forces highlighted are the growth and subsequent relative decline of public funding, the expanding importance of professional organization, and the impact of technological change, which might have seemed slight before the 1970s but which was of great significance. As has been seen, playwrights are placed at the heart of the process, but consideration is also given to actors, especially in the alternative theatre as they became performers and championed collective creation. The role of ideology and, in particular, a radical impulse within theatre is also examined in relation to its dynamic influence on the development of theatre and the problems attached to pursuing a radical aesthetic.

Baz Kershaw in *The Politics of Performance: Radical theatre as cultural intervention* (1992) supports the book's approach and cites it in reference to the partial nature of much theatre historiography, which in its common form avoids dealing with production practices (p. 45). Chris Megson in '“The spectacle is everywhere”: tracing the situationist legacy in British playwriting since 1968', in *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 14, no. 2, May 2004, echoes this point (p. 19) in citing the book's treatment of the impact of the events of 1968 and the ways in which 'conventional practices have given way under great strain to new ones.'

The chapter 'Developments in the Profession of Theatre, 1946-2000' follows on from the research carried out for *Playwrights' Progress* but, as well as extending the years under

consideration because written later, approaches the entire period from a different perspective. Using a similar methodology and theoretical approach, the focus of this investigation is switched to the ways in which the theatre has developed as a profession. The chapter explores how major concerns for postwar reconstruction were identified in the late 1940s but the opportunity for radical change was lost. Nevertheless, the theatre was transformed in unexpected and unplanned ways, both as an idea and in its social and cultural functions. As the book says (p. 378), 'A fairly homogenous craft-based industry based on a small number of closely related systems of production became a highly complex and differentiated industry with an increasing number of overlapping sectors more or less embedded in a technology-driven, mass leisure culture.' The chapter focuses on four main areas of development and tension within that development: the theatrical infrastructure, the new and changing roles within theatre, the patterns of employment and training that underpin those changing roles, and the professional organisations that seek to organise those roles.

*The Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre* supplements my other writing in this area. The entries I contributed cover an extensive range of theatrical functions - actors, architects, designers, directors, choreographers, managers and producers - and my thematic entries cover contingent aspects of theatre, such as the function of the Lord Chamberlain, casting, funding, political theatre, the role of the dramaturg and black theatre in Britain.

The chapter 'Playing on the Front Foot: Actors and Audience in British Popular Theatre, 1970-1990' follows on from my investigation of actor-based workshops as a marked feature of the alternative theatre movement of the postwar period (Chambers, 1980). It examines the particular practical and conceptual problems of the politically committed actor and thereby combines two important themes of my research.

*Making Plays: the Writer-Director Relationship in the Theatre Today* explores the role of the playwright and the director in the creative process of producing theatre but it also considers the role of actors, designers, producers and, finally, critics in the process.



Directors have traditionally been secretive about the rehearsal process but here the director concerned, David Jones, is refreshingly open, and through the playwright Richard Nelson new insight is gained into the work of other directors, such as Liviu Ciulei, Roger Michell, Trevor Nunn and Andrei Serban.

The collection of essays *Theatre in a Cool Climate* offers a critique of contemporary theatre from the standpoint of several roles within theatre (playwright, actor, director, designer, producer, manager, literary manager and critic). It provides a range of practitioners with a forum in which to reflect on their disciplines at the end of one millennium and the beginning of another, at a time when live theatre was generally perceived to be (yet again) in crisis. As well as publishing the views on this subject of established practitioners (renowned directors, playwrights, actors and critics such as Richard Eyre, Harold Pinter, Simon Russell Beale and Irving Wardle), the book also gives room to less well-known counterparts (such as Winsome Pinnock, Cleo Sylvestre and Joyce McMillan) and to those whose voices are rarely heard, such as administrators, dramaturgs, producers and designers.

The most sustained analysis of an individual role is contained in *Peggy: the Life of Margaret Ramsay, Play Agent*. I was given permission to write the book by Ramsay herself and, as a result, had unprecedented access to her files. They contained correspondence over many years between her and a wide range of theatrical people: directors, producers, designers, managers, other agents, actors and playwrights. This correspondence threw new light on a number of individuals and productions as well as offering fresh interpretations of the processes by which they operated in their respective roles.

The book relates and investigates the career of Ramsay, the most important postwar play agent, who set up her firm in 1954 and ran it until her death in 1991. The book analyses her unique contribution, via her influence both on her clients and on theatre managers and producers, to creating an imaginative and fertile theatre that had not just national but international and lasting reach.

There was no literature to draw on, either about play agents in general (there were a few books on or by literary agents) or on Ramsay in particular. She was a person notoriously shy of publicity and public self-promotion. She forbade her inclusion in reference books and the like because she did not regard herself as of prime importance but rather the plays her clients wrote. Her permission to carry out my research, therefore, was a prerequisite of undertaking the book and, as it turned out in practice, a prerequisite for many of her clients agreeing to talk openly to me about her.

The book charts her personal story and relates it to the unique and contradictory way in which she interpreted and acted out the role of play agent, from being a child in South Africa and the importance of landscape and literature to her imagination as a means of mental escape, through formal education to early marriage as another means of escape, this time of a physical nature by travelling with her husband to England and leaving him the moment she stepped ashore. It examines her life as a lone woman in England in the 1930s without any means of support, her turn to touring in opera and theatre, then after the war to her work as an actor and play reader at the Bristol Old Vic and briefly running the fringe Q Theatre, west London, where she promoted new plays. Having become through happenstance a perceptive play reader for several commercial managements, she was persuaded by friends to become an agent, but she pursued her new calling with a distinctive and motivating philosophy that owed a great deal to Schopenhauer, Jung and a nineteenth century Romantic view of Art and its importance.

The book explores how she practised her philosophy in relation to her clients, using extreme and often blunt candour about their work to force them to understand the burdens of talent, and, as an indispensable complement to this approach, disregarding money and success (although she enjoyed both). She warned John Osborne (whose plays she admired but who was not her client) not to take taxis if he wished to retain his creativity, and, without consultation, turned down work for her clients, for example David Hare and Ann Jellicoe, because she thought it would be bad for their development. (When they discovered this, Hare and Jellicoe admitted she was right, but not all her clients were as

understanding). 'Once an author has become successful and famous,' she wrote to Robert Bolt (p. 91), 'it becomes difficult to speak the truth, and this is why people like Rattigan become bloodless, because in time people fear to give them anything but lip service for self-preservation's sake.' She told Bolt (p. 91) that his couple of Oscars were not helpful ('I spit on them'), and that 'Success when indulged in saps people's character and drains their true potential talent away.'

She nurtured her clients through what would now be called 'tough love' and often lost interest in them once they had become famous. Her office was a physical shambles and she ruled with Victorian thrift and discipline, but she also was known for her unexpected gestures of kindness. She changed the way agents behaved and were regarded in the profession. Both traditional and modern, she was a major force in the creation of a new kind of theatre, through her clients' work at the main new play theatre, the Royal Court, through the promotion of new plays in the commercial sector, often with the producer Michael Codron, and, despite her condescension towards the fringe, through her support for its theatres and the opportunities it gave her writers to write what they wanted.

Dominic Shellard in his section on agents in *British Theatre Since the War* (1999) uses Ramsay as his only example and draws heavily upon on my book (quoting six times) for his analysis and commentary (pp. 119-126).

The book won the inaugural Theatre Book Prize awarded in 1998 by the Society for Theatre Research.

## Chapter Five:

### Conclusion

In the four chapters of this thesis, I have attempted to build a full picture of my contribution to the study of twentieth century theatre practice and to cite examples of peer esteem that support my contentions regarding the significance of this contribution. I have traced two major and inter-related thematic sub-areas in my writings, namely theatre practice in an institutional context and individual roles within the theatre.

In both, I have dealt with the mainstream and the alternative theatre, and with the interaction between the two. More specifically, in the first sub-area, I examined the Royal Shakespeare Company and Unity Theatre, London respectively. I have analysed their patterns of continuity and discontinuity, the dynamics of their growth and decline, and tensions created by the institutions in balancing a radical vision with the need to survive. In the second sub-area, the major concentration was on the role of the playwright, both in itself and in relation to other theatrical roles and its place in the development of British theatre. I have investigated and evaluated the creative processes involved in playwriting, both in terms of the writer's composition and in terms of the journey a script takes from the writer to the stage. In this process, I have examined the role of external factors, both social and theatrical, and the problems the playwright faces in sustaining a radical vision from the page into a production.

My research has approached theatre practice as a historically developing and fluid genre that requires an informed understanding of its features for it to be analysed properly and usefully. My research has examined the function of theatre and theatre practitioners in their social, political and cultural context, in particular in relation to the ideological currents and tensions within interpretations and expressions of radicalism.

I believe I have demonstrated the ability to investigate and evaluate critically, and that my research and published writings have made a contribution to scholarship. I believe I

have shown that my published writings represent a sustained, substantial, continuous and coherent research effort, and an independent and original contribution to the literature of this field.

## Appendix

### Colin Chambers: *Curriculum Vitae*

#### Employment:

1973-80: Freelance arts journalist and theatre critic (contributing to newspapers, magazines, journals and radio programmes)

1980-81: Literary Assistant, Royal Shakespeare Company

1981-97: Literary Manager, Royal Shakespeare Company (in which capacity worked with more than 80 playwrights on their new plays and on adaptations for the company. Extensive dramaturgical work included preparation in 1988 of *The Plantagenets* texts.)

1997-98: Repertoire Consultant, Royal Shakespeare Company

1999- : Senior Research Fellow, Performing Arts, De Montfort University, Leicester

#### Peer esteem:

Alongside the citations of my work that are detailed in the body of the thesis, evidence of peer esteem can be found in the invitations extended to me to serve on the Universities Funding Council Research Assessment Panel (Drama) in 1992 and the Higher Education Funding Council Research Assessment Panel (Drama, Dance and the Performing Arts) in 1996, and to lecture both at home and abroad at institutions such as: Yale University, New York University, Ithaca College, Georgetown University, Goldsmiths College,

Royal Holloway College, the University of Exeter, the University of Manchester, the University of Hull, Rose Bruford College, the Drama Centre, Central St Martin's College of Art and Design, Motley Theatre Design School and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

I am a member of the advisory board of the Centre for Performance Translation and Dramaturgy (The Performance Translation Centre, 1997-03), University of Hull.

I have also spoken on theatrical matters on many panels and at public events, e.g. National Theatre Platform performances and the Cheltenham Literary Festival.

Professional theatrical activity also includes:

*The Learned Ladies* by Molière (co-adaptor with Steven Pimlott from translation by A.R. Waller, performed RSC, Stratford-upon-Avon, Newcastle, London 1996/7; Nick Hern Books, London 1996)

*Kenneth's First Play* (co-author and co-director with Richard Nelson, performed Stratford-upon-Avon, Newcastle, Plymouth, London, 1997/8; co-author of Introduction, Commentary and notes, Methuen, London, 1998)

*Tynan*, an adaptation of Kenneth Tynan's *Diaries*, (co-adaptor with Richard Nelson; first performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company in The Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 2004, Faber and Faber, London, 2004)

**Associate Director, world première *Madame Melville* by Richard Nelson, Vaudeville Theatre, London (2000)**

**Dramaturg and co-writer on Drama Centre Workshop Project on London's poor, Music Hall and Mayhew, July 2004.**

**Adapter of *The Mad World of John Maddison Morton*, Orange Tree Theatre Workshop, April 2005.**

**Member of the Critics' Circle and International Association of Theatre Critics (1974-81)**

**Co-ordinated New Plays Project with Prof. Pamela Howard, Theatre Design Department, Central St. Martin's College of Arts and Design (1985-90)**

**South-West Arts, adviser on establishment of Literary Manager post**

**Consultant: West Yorkshire Playhouse; National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts; BBC TV Fictionlab; Intellect Books; ACT Productions**

**Unity Theatre Trust, member 1989-95; vice-chair 1993-95**

**Hackney Empire, board member 1989- ; chair of Preservation Trust 1990-94**

**Member, Royal Shakespeare Company Higher Education Advisory Group, 2005-**



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