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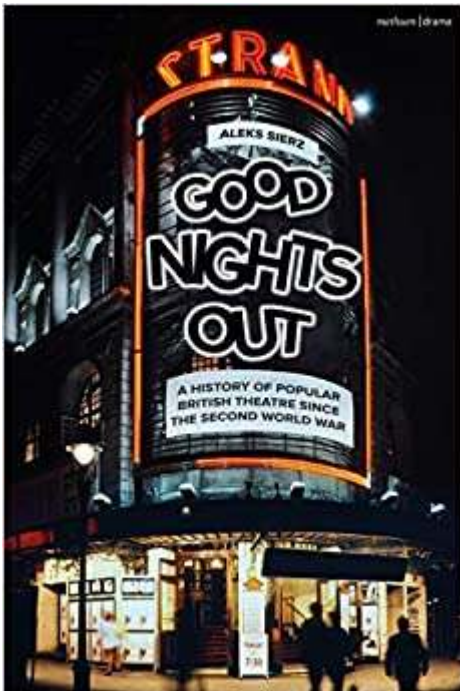
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REFERENCES

Aleks Sierz, *Good Nights Out* (Methuen Drama, 2021), 240p, ISBN-13 : 978-1350200913



- 1 Aleks Sierz, author and theatre critic, also teaches courses on postwar British theatre for various universities, in the UK and in Germany. His most famous contribution to research on drama is probably the coinage of “in-yer-face theatre”, which he has been studying and writing about since the 1990s (*In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, Faber, 2001), but he also published books on prominent playwrights (Martin Crimp, John Osborne), as well as more extensive studies of contemporary theatre in Britain

(*Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today*, Methuen Drama, 2011; *Modern British Playwriting: The 1990s*, Methuen Drama, 2012; and, with Lia Ghilardi, *The Time Traveller's Guide to British Theatre: The First Four Hundred Years*, Oberon Books, 2015). His latest book, published in 2021, concentrates on popular British theatre between 1945 and 2015.

- 2 This brief introduction is a way for me to acknowledge one of the strengths of Aleks Sierz's books, which is that they are always precisely and thoroughly researched, as well as a great pleasure to read. This is the case of *Good Nights Out*. Composed of an introduction, 7 thematic chapters, a conclusion, two appendixes which list shows with more than 1000 performances between 1940 and 2015, one by run length and the other by date, notes, a bibliography and an index, the book is a mine of entertaining and enlightening information. It also offers a rare and therefore all the more valuable insight into commercial theatre, recognising that popular and financial success should not be considered as a sign that the work lacks intellectual and theatrical quality, and that scholars do not sell their soul to the devil by spending time researching West End shows.
- 3 In conversation with Graham Saunders back in April 2021, Sierz explained how the idea for the book came about. Reading Michael Billington's *State of the Nation: British Theatre since 1945* (Faber, 2007), he was struck by the following statement: "Since the truly popular plays of any period are the ones that tend to get omitted from histories of drama, it is worth recalling some of the big crowd-pleasers," and started musing on the underlying suggestion that there might be something wrong about pleasing people. Reading further, he was also fascinated by the figures given by Billington regarding the number of performances of certain plays, and thus discovered *Who's Who in the Theatre*, which includes a listing of the plays that have had long runs, and set out to concentrate on the 100 or thereabout plays which had had more than 1000 performances in their initial runs since 1945.
- 4 The result of this extensive research, conducted mainly at the Victoria and Albert archive now closed and due to reopen only in 2024, is *Good Nights Out*.
- 5 In the introduction, Sierz comments on his nod at John McGrath's own title, *A Good Night Out, Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form* (NHB, 1997), acknowledging that for the left-wing playwright, "popular theatre" was to be understood as political theatre, meant to raise the spectators' political consciousness. That theatre, Sierz playfully suggests, is good for you but rarely popular. Inverting that proposition, he proposes to return to a definition of popular theatre as successful, entertaining, pleasurable, and also more democratic because the spectators do not have to have specialist knowledge to enjoy it.
- 6 Sierz thus sets out to explore the mega-hits, most of them to be enjoyed in London's West End theatres, since the Second World War and his introduction also draws a series of general comments on the shows: 50% of the titles are musical comedies; a third of them are foreign (mainly American and French); most of them are conservative, mirroring the majoritarian view and excluding the minorities; they are written mainly by white male playwrights; and none of them are described as making the canon of postwar British theatre (Osborne, Bond, Pinter or Kane are nowhere on that list), suggesting that the plays that have marked the period have not had much of an audience. Interestingly, those shows are more theatrical than literary: their play-texts are not memorable, but they rely on physical theatre, on farce and spectacle. Sierz also dwells on a relatively common sign of popularity, the ability of those shows, as well as

the artists behind them, to cross over different media, from stage to television and cinema. Their wide audience is consequently even more varied, coming from all classes of society, though Sierz acknowledges a form of “tribal gathering”, enabling the spectators to reaffirm their identity and sense of belonging to a nation. This does not imply that the plays share the same political ideology: on the contrary, their messages are often contradictory, spanning from the reactionary to the radical, and aim first of all at inclusivity, pandering to the tastes of most.

- 7 Popular theatre is often criticised as escapist and sentimental, but Sierz questions our preconception that this should be a negative. Popular theatre is collective rather than solitary, visceral rather than intellectual, and this is precisely what makes it part of the cultural DNA of the population, part of the shared imagined pop culture of the nation’s imagined community (here Sierz nods at Benedict Anderson).
- 8 The book is organised thematically, with seven chapters, devoted respectively to war, crime, sex, family, class, history and fantasy. Each of these themes is considered as part of the British (imagined) identity, and is then developed along three directions, represented by three qualifying adjectives.
- 9 Thus, war is pictured as comic, tragic and nostalgic. Though most of the plays discussed in that chapter date back to the decades following the war, with many now forgotten even if they were highly successful in their time, the chapter ends with the more recent and equally successful *The War Horse*. But whether performed in the aftermath of the military victory over the Nazis, at a time when it was felt the nation needed reconciliation and social reformation, or in the first decade of the 21st century, the most popular plays are patriotic, celebrating the British fair play and sense of justice. It is nevertheless interesting to notice that the message evolved with time, allowing for more open criticism of the military by the end of the 1950s, and that war plays were less popular after National Service was abolished in 1960. That is, until *The War Horse*, which was created on the subsidised stage of the National Theatre and then transferred to the West End. Financially lucrative, the transfer allowed the theatre to make up for the decrease of subsidies by the Arts Council England between 2012 and 2015: this is one of a few examples which demonstrate that a definitive and clear-cut division between subsidised ie intellectual theatre and popular ie commercial theatre is far from satisfactory: both the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company created mega-hits thanks to the subsidies, and know how to profit from popular success financially, broadcasting extracts of plays as soon as the 1960s and setting up live broadcast in cinemas in the 2010s.
- 10 Chapter two is devoted to crime, which is diversely qualified as classical, farcical and postmodern. Pleasurable because enjoyed from the safety of a comfortable seat in the auditorium, the thriller, like the war play, has followed the same rules for decades: its typical characters are all confined to one place, and the audience should be given enough information to be able to solve the mystery themselves, for fair play’s sake. The Queen of Crime, Agatha Christie, is the breaker of all records, especially with *The Mousetrap* which has been running almost incessantly since 1952 and is now a Great British institution. But the genre is so coded that it was also easily and efficiently satirised, by Stoppard most notably, and also thanks to TV adaptations. Once more Sierz demonstrates that popular theatre offers a wide array of contradictory messages, combining liberal and reactionary views: for instance, Britain’s military and security services are often laughed at in the context of the Cold War, but there is at the same

time a nostalgia for Victorian times and their fixed hierarchies. Sierz quite effectively traces the genealogy of popular theatre, not only through the evolution of genres, but also through the playwrights, actors and directors who appear and disappear at various moments, in various roles, as if the history of theatre were a vaudeville. Thus, we rediscover Laurence Olivier or Kenneth Branagh as sleuth or cunning murderer, and Harold Pinter as screenwriter of a spoof movie adaptation of one of those popular crime plays.

- 11 Chapter three is devoted to sex. Sex sells, whether it is comic, episodic or ironic (once more). Here the abolition of censorship in 1968 marks a great divide between before, when you had to be French to be sexual and when sex was suggested but never shown, and after, with complete freedom (at least apparently) of bodies and morals. But it soon appears that sexual liberation does not necessarily mean progressive views. The play *Oh! Calcutta* (1969) is a case in point exemplifying the contradictions at the heart of popular theatre. It was written by famous critic Kenneth Tynan, an Oxford intellectual and dramaturg at the National Theatre. When created in New York, the revue began with Samuel Beckett's shortest play *Breath* and when it transferred to London, first at the Roundhouse, it was directed by RSC director Clifford Williams (I also discovered that the French texts were written by Eugène Ionesco when the revue was produced in Paris in 1971). The play was attacked on account of the theatre being subsidised, and it suffered from an anti-liberal backlash. It then transferred again to the controversial Paul Raymond's Royalty Theatre, which was famous for its sleazy sex shows. It certainly tested the freedom of the stage, but its general tone remains, especially when viewed today, unpleasantly chauvinistic and sexist, including many instances of sexual violence. But by the end of the 1980s, sex shows and nudity on stage began to wane, for contradictory reasons: porn was more easily available on television, while feminism challenged the inherent misogyny of such shows.
- 12 In contrast, chapter four looks at family, traditional, redemptive and fractured. Sierz describes a rather conservative tendency of post-war plays in the 50s and 60s, to picture working-class families going through tensions but ultimately reconciling. Contemporaneous with *Saved*, Bond's controversial play, they never betrayed the basic goodwill of their vision, which remained traditional and patriarchal. But popular plays cannot cut themselves altogether from the progressive political context in which they are written and performed: when *The Man Most Likely To...* started touring to South Africa, it was criticised for defying the embargo on cultural exchanges with the Apartheid regime. In this chapter, Sierz cites, but does not analyse in detail, Alan Ayckbourn whose quintessentially English comedies about unhappy marriages were highly successful. This is one of the instances which show the limits of defining popular theatre in terms of the number of performances: Ayckbourn, with more than 40 productions in main venues, is cited as Britain's most produced living playwright, though none of his plays reached the 1000 performances set by Sierz. The chapter closes on a study of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* which is another instance of a play originating in the subsidised theatre and enjoying the success of a mega-hit in the commercial circuit.
- 13 Chapter five deals with class, a powerful part of the popular imagination in Britain. Many of the plays explored here tend to refashion well-known fairy tales with low-class ugly ducklings turning out to be upper-class swans and archetypal rags-to-riches stories. But the Thatcher era, increasing the class struggle, elicited an answer not only

from left-wing playwrights on subsidised stages but also from playwrights who wrote popular musicals for the West End. This is the case of *Blood Brothers* (1983) which critic Irving Wardle described as “a fable of the two nations”, opposing the rich and the poor. Sierz concludes: “the popularity of the play shows that the resistance of many people to the dominance of the Tories in the 1980s was expressed culturally as well as politically”. *Billy Elliot the Musical* is another example of a musical voicing the ideology of left-wing theatre, and Sierz tells us how, when Thatcher died in April 2013, only three audience members voted against the anti-Thatcher song being sung that night. Nevertheless, the message of the play remains contradictory, celebrating individualism, thanks to which Billy becomes a successful ballet dancer, at the same time as it takes sides with the community of miners ineffectually fighting Thatcher’s politics.

- 14 Chapter six explores history, gothic, Edwardian and pastiche. The popular plays are not history plays. Rather, they offer an escape into another world which reimagines the past. Included in that chapter are adaptations of famous works of fiction which relate them to contemporary concerns. Those adaptations capitalise on the pleasure of recognising well-known story-lines and characters, unashamedly mixing, in the guise of postmodern fiction, different plots in one. Thus, *The Phantom of the Opera*, the third most popular show in the world which boasts 140 million spectators and a gross revenue of 6 billion pounds, repeats and coalesces the stories and characters of Beauty and the Beast, the Pygmalion myth, Frankenstein, Don Giovanni and Faust, among many other references. Thus also, *39 Steps* recasts Hitchcock’s film much more than it adapts the novel on which the film was based, and multiplies as many references to other Hitchcock movies as possible, for the pleasure of the spectators.
- 15 The conclusion to this chapter is that popular plays aim first and foremost at offering escapism and fantasy, and fantasy, whimsy, camp and sci-fi, is the subject of the last chapter of the book. Among the plays explored there, one finds more subversive material, with *Salad Days* in 1954, and the even more provocative *Rocky Horror Picture Show* in 1973, which immerses spectators in a parody of sci-fi American movies. Now a cult phenomenon with audiences participating by voicing in unison standardised responses, it has ironically become quite conformist. The chapter ends with an analysis of *Matilda, the Musical*, written by Denis Kelly for the subsidised Royal Shakespeare Company and now a mega-hit in the West End. Once more, this highlights the seemingly impossible combinations of talents that are at the heart of popular theatre, and the inextricable links between subsidised and commercial circuits.
- 16 In his conclusion, Sierz takes up some of the key words repeated throughout his book: popular theatre allows audiences to dream and escape from everyday drudgery. It relies on well-known and easily recognisable stories and characters and explores themes which are all part of the imagined British national identity. This permanence does not mean that there has been no evolution in popular theatre since the Second World War: Sierz notes that by the 1990s, musicals tend to be more left-wing, non-traditional families become the new norm, and racial as well as sexist stereotyping are hardly tolerated anymore.
- 17 We must acknowledge nevertheless, along with Sierz himself, that progress is still needed for the popular theatre to represent and discuss in any acceptable way questions of race: if some plays can be deemed more progressive, and if misogyny or sexual violence are now no laughing subject anymore, minorities are still blatantly absent from most of the plays discussed. This might be further discussed, considering

more recent successes like *Hamilton*, or the fact that gender-blind and colour-blind casting is now the usual practice everywhere, which in itself raises many questions: are popular shows trying to erase the question of race and racism behind a superficial layer of inclusivity and naïve good will? Considering this tendency alongside the “colour-wake” casting of Debbie Tucker Green, for instance, is also enlightening.

- 18 One might also regret that Sierz’s perspective centres too much on London-based theatre, as if success was not possible outside the capital. But that should be considered more as another suggestion for further analysis, maybe by another scholar, than as a criticism of this book, which will certainly stand as a reference. Indeed, Sierz manages to grip his readers with astonishing stories of success, dazzling star-strewn shows and awe-inspiring figures which help fathom the prodigious importance of popular theatre in contemporary Britain.
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Mots-clés: théâtre populaire, théâtre privé, comédie musicale, succès du boxoffice, West End, évasion, fantaisie, plaisir

Keywords: popular theatre, commercial theatre, musical, mega-hit, West End, escapism, fantasy, pleasure

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