

Aleks Sierz and Mesut Günenc

In Interview: Key Features of Contemporary British Drama

In this interview on 22 March 2022 in London, Mesut Gunenc talks to theatre critic and historian Aleks Sierz about how his work has influenced contemporary British drama, why he chose the name 'in-yer-face theatre' for 1990s avant-garde plays, and why some writers have rejected the label. They also discuss the differences between experiential and experimental theatre, especially focusing on the work of Anthony Neilson, and finish by considering the key themes that characterize 1990s new writing in Britain.

Aleks Sierz is author of the seminal *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (Faber, 2001), as well as of other work about new writing and post-war British theatre history. His more recent books include *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today* (Methuen Drama, 2011), *Modern British Playwriting: The 1990s* (Methuen Drama, 2012), and *Good Nights Out: A History of Popular British Theatre Since the Second World War* (Methuen Drama, 2021). He has co-authored, with Lia Ghilardi, *The Time Traveller's Guide to British Theatre: The First Four Hundred Years* (Oberon, 2015). Mesut Gunenc is Assistant Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at Adnan Menderes University in Turkey. He is the author of *Postdramatic Theatrical Signs in Contemporary British Playwrights* (Lambert, 2017) and co-editor, with Enes Kavak, of *New Readings in British Drama: From the Post-War Period to the Contemporary Era* (Peter Lang, 2021). He is currently a visiting postdoctoral scholar at Loughborough University in the UK.

Key terms: experiential drama, experimental drama, new writing, in-yer-face theatre, Anthony Neilson, Sarah Kane.

Mesut Gunenc *You wrote an excellent book, In-Yer-Face Theatre (2001), and it was also translated into Turkish, so can you explain how it influenced contemporary British drama?*

Aleks Sierz Thank you for your kind words about my work. Of course, it is very flattering to imagine that my book has had any kind of influence, but the truth is that most journalistic or academic accounts of contemporary theatre are not the work of one person, but rather the result of collective endeavours by groups of scholars, critics, and cultural commentators. They result from both intellectual collaboration and intellectual conflict. So although I am personally responsible for writing *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, and for all its mistakes, missteps and misapprehensions, the influence of the book can be more attributable to the inherent interest of the subject matter rather than to anything that I have personally achieved. (I know this to be true because none of my

other books has had the same effect!) So the conceptualization of the phenomenon of in-yer-face theatre owes everything to a community of endeavour.

Very soon after the book was published I was invited to give a paper on the subject by Stendhal University in Grenoble, and then by [the *Journal of*] *Contemporary Drama in English* to Meissen in Germany; there was a theatre conference, organized by Graham Saunders and Rebecca D'Monte, called 'In-Yer-Face? British Drama in the 1990s' at the University of the West of England in Bristol in which the book was criticized and debated. It was reviewed and praised, reviewed and attacked, and other scholars developed some of its ideas. And then there were other events in London and beyond: France, Serbia, Spain, Poland, Germany, and Portugal (to name just a handful). In all of these, I was fascinated by the response of other people to the upsurge in new writing in British theatre. So that is how

the book influenced our understanding of contemporary drama. At the same time, many British playwrights reacted against it, which I suppose is another kind of influence.

Gradually, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* was translated into Slovenian, Italian, French, and, of course, Turkish. The Turkish version is by Selin Girit, who, as you know, is an important journalist, and I was very happy about discussing the book with her, but I simply can't say whether it had any influence on theatre-makers in that country. What I do know is that it is very interesting culturally when you compare what is shocking in one place with what is offensive in another.

For example, in 1958, Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame* was denied a licence by the Lord Chamberlain, the censor of theatre, because of the line that Hamm says about God, 'The bastard! He doesn't exist!' Beckett changed this from 'bastard' to 'swine', which was acceptable in Britain in the 1950s, but, in the context of a Muslim culture, this change seems odd, inexplicable, and needs to be explained in a footnote. These cross-cultural meanings are quite difficult. In May 2009, I was invited to Istanbul and I met Murat Daltaban at Theatre DOT. The whole company was very generous not only in making me welcome in the city, but also in discussing contemporary British drama, so that was a very good experience for me. In particular, it was encouraging to note that many of the playwrights whom I discuss in my book – Philip Ridley, Mark Ravenhill, Anthony Neilson, Martin McDonagh, and Patrick Marber – have been performed in translation in Turkey.

In the anglophone world – the UK and the USA – the effect of *In-Yer-Face Theatre* was that it established what I would argue is a fertile way of thinking about 1990s British new writing, new plays and avant-garde playwrights. I did not invent the phrase 'in-yer-face theatre', it was a label that many other theatre-makers and critics already used, but I did choose to focus on it; and when you focus on a label, it is always a political act. By that I mean that I would defend the label 'in-yer-face theatre' for two reasons: it focuses attention on the relationship between what's happening on the stage and how the audience are reacting.

So it suggests a kind of intensity, which is a feature of most avant-garde drama of Britain in the 1990s. Second, it aligns the personal sensibility of young British writers of that decade with the cultural sensibility of the 1990s, which was generally quite in-yer-face. So, for example, on the television there were shows like *The Word*, in which people who wanted to appear on TV had to do very humiliating 'reality' things like having a bath in baked beans or live insects. Other examples include the Young British Artists and provocative fashion designers like Alexander McQueen. So, in terms of the era, I thought that this is the best kind of label and better than other labels.

For example, somebody called 1990s British playwrights the 'new brutalists' and somebody else called their work 'neo-Jacobean' theatre, and in Germany they were called the 'blood-and-sperm generation'. All of those labels I find problematic. If you call the plays neo-brutalist, you are just talking about violence when, in fact, there are many other aspects of their sensibility. If you talk about neo-Jacobean, you basically imply that the theatre of today is very similar to the theatre of John Webster – yet there really are very few similarities! So that's the reason why I chose the title, and I'm very happy that many people have embraced this as a way of describing some of the playwrights of the 1990s (Figure 1).

I have to say that the label 'in-yer-face theatre' only applies to a small group of avant-garde playwrights, and that other theatre writers in the 1990s such as Michael Frayn, Tom Stoppard, Alan Bennett, and, of course, David Hare have nothing to do with this kind of sensibility. Although I think that Harold Pinter, because of his interest in Sarah Kane (they met and exchanged letters), was influenced by her work, especially when he wrote *Ashes to Ashes*, his 1996 play. And there were also other kinds of playwriting – for example, Diane Samuels's *Kindertransport* – which have a very different sensibility. Even Conor McPherson's popular *The Weir* is more poetic and imaginative than furiously in-yer-face, although he also includes a story about a paedophile in the play, which is overtly provocative.



Figure 1. *Shopping and Fucking*. Max Stafford-Clark. Out of Joint, in a co-production with the Royal Court Theatre, London, 1996. Mark Ravenhill in front of poster. Photograph copyright: John Haynes.

A lot of playwrights who came after the 1990s deliberately wrote in opposition to this particular in-*yer-face* style. Because playwrights such as Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill were such strong and important characters on the scene, the young people coming after them in the first decade of the new millennium often thought, 'I'm going to write exactly opposite to them!' so there was a kind of opposition effect of the in-*yer-face* phenomenon (Figure 2).

What was the reason for this? Why did they choose to write in an opposite style?

Because they thought that in-*yer-face* intensity was a type of theatre that had already happened, so they thought, 'I want to be original and I want to make a contribution that is different.' In the 2000s you could say, 'Oh, in-*yer-face* theatre – that's so 1990s! It's outdated.' In fact, the other result of grouping different playwrights together is that the

playwrights themselves will always object because each one says, 'I'm a unique playwright and I do not want to be part of any group with other writers!' I completely understand this point of view, but if you are a critic, as I am, writing either about contemporary theatre or its recent history, you have a choice that either every single play is unique and every playwright is unique and you cannot compare them, or you can ask, 'What are the similarities between those playwrights?'

I thought that bringing playwrights together, even when it did not quite work, was more interesting than considering each one as an incomparable individual. So I would argue passionately that the idea of in-*yer-face* theatre is the best way of conceptualizing British theatre in the 1990s, and that there are many plays which have that typical kind of experiential quality you find in the work of Anthony Neilson and Sarah Kane, as well as their interest in extreme mental states, which



Figure 2. *Shopping and Fucking*. Max Stafford-Clark. Out of Joint, in a co-production with the Royal Court Theatre, London, 1996. Andrew Clover as Robbie, Lloyd Hutchinson as Mark, and Kate Ashfield as Lulu. Photograph copyright: John Haynes.

in some cases derives from the legacy of Antonin Artaud. The idea is that there is nothing we cannot show on stage and, moreover, because we can go to extreme places, extreme states of mind, maybe we should do that – this is playwriting as psychological and emotional exploration. Writers who dive into the deep. The dark. And I think that that is something that interests a lot of these playwrights.

There are other themes that many 1990s playwrights were interested in: abuse, for example, or bodily agonies, and many of their stories were about groups of young people rather than families. I think there are very few plays by young playwrights in the 1990s where you have either parents or grandparents, not to mention uncles, or extended family members across the generations. Especially in recent decades, there has been a lot of family breakdown and you have remarriage of the father or the mother, or both, and blended families with stepchildren, stepmothers and

[step]fathers, and multiple grandparents, and so on. But in the 1990s this was rare on the stage: instead, one recurring theme was absent parents, absent fathers in particular. And many of the plays were boy-gang plays or flat-share dramas about ‘me and my mates’. In addition, another important theme was that of storytelling, the idea that we create reality through our ability to perform narratives: this is a feature of the work of Philip Ridley, Mark Ravenhill, and Jez Butterworth.

Could you clarify the differences between experiential and experimental theatre?

Good question. There is a big difference between experiential theatre and experimental theatre. For me, experimental theatre is something that characterizes all of modernism, so it goes back to Chekhov, Strindberg, and Ibsen, all of whom challenged the standard theatre form of their time, which was usually quite melodramatic, and their work was always originally an experiment: nobody knew if it would work. Their plays were radically different to those that audiences were used to. Within the genre of experimental theatre the initial question that the playwright asks always is, ‘What is my research question? What do I want to discover when I write an innovative piece of drama?’ So with Chekhov, for example, his research question would be: ‘Can I write a play which does not have a standard shape with a definite climax and a resolution that is satisfying to general public?’ And the answer is, ‘Yes I can do that, I have created this four-act play which has a lot of irresolution, a lot of anticlimax.’ At the time, this was an experiment – and it succeeded.

But history also has examples of playwriting experiments which did not succeed, projects which have been forgotten about, roads that were not taken. I’m sure that you could find examples of radical experiments that did not have a lasting influence. In British post-war theatre, the most experimental theatre – except for individual cases such as J. B. Priestley and his ‘Time Plays’ – arrives during the era of alternative theatre after the abolition of censorship in 1968. After that, people were free to do anything they wanted and this resulted in thousands of different kinds of

happenings, performance events, people who were inspired by the Living Theatre of America, and the whole idea of liberation. It was an attack on all conventions. If you look at Hull Truck and Bush Theatre director Mike Bradwell's book about his career, *The Reluctant Escapologist* [Nick Hern Books, 2010], there are some vivid examples. And some of the early plays, for example, of Howard Brenton, have that kind of quality of extremism and experiment. More recently, a theatre-maker such as Tim Crouch is a great experimentalist.

Or can we label him as experientialist?

Good point: a playwright can be both. There is an overlap, like the Venn diagram, between experimental and experiential. Who is the most experimental playwright of the 1990s? I would suggest, for example, that Sarah Kane's plays all interrogate the hegemonic tradition of British naturalism (as you know, the whole

idea of realism is enormously important in British culture). And one of the things that distinguishes Sarah Kane from a lot of other writers of the 1990s is the fact that she gradually, and more and more consciously, challenges the idea of naturalism, deconstructing it more and more, so she is a very modernistic playwright. Her work has an experimental quality (Figure 3).

For example, in *Blasted* she uses a form that consists of a naturalistic first half and a symbolic, surreal or nightmare-like second half. She challenges the audience to understand this and to see how this new structure of storytelling makes meaning. It was an experiment because it might have failed. Until she wrote the play, no one knew if this was a possible way of writing about masculinity and war. Her most daring experiment is *4.48 Psychosis*, which is an open play-text, influenced, of course, by Martin Crimp and his

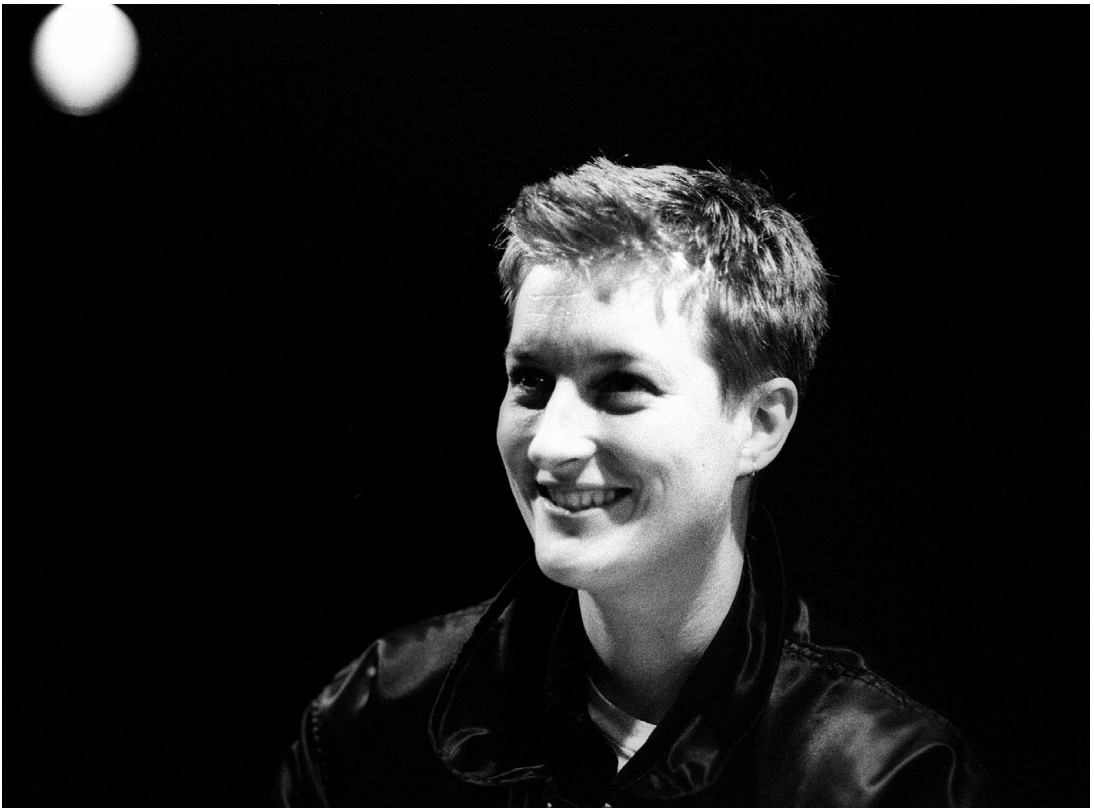


Figure 3. Sarah Kane, 1996. Photograph copyright: Pau Ros.

Attempts on Her Life. Samuel Beckett also experimented with different forms, and both he and Crimp gave theatre a gift: they showed how you can use any kind of theatre form, any kind of experimental style of writing.

At the same time, Kane also helped to pioneer the idea of experiential theatre, where the experience of watching the plays is particularly intense and the emotions shown on stage are extreme. In this context, a play such as *Blasted* can be interpreted as both experimental and experiential. But I really would like to argue that the whole in-her-face experiential sensibility was originally created by two theatre outsiders: one is Philip Ridley, whose *Pitchfork Disney* in 1991 at the Bush Theatre shows this kind of experiential idea by being a ninety-minute provocative play, which is just in one location, with no interval, so the intensity is maintained over the whole play. Ridley was a theatre outsider because he did not go to drama school, but to art college. He came to theatre after being an artist who took photographs, painted pictures, and wrote screenplays and novels for young people. As an outsider, he felt comfortable in breaking the rules and thus was able to tap into the in-her-face sensibility of the 1990s and pioneer experiential theatre.

Another influential playwright was also an outsider: Anthony Neilson, who came from Scotland and who developed in the early 1990s a very intense kind of experiential theatre which was taboo-breaking and provocative in its depiction of sex and violence. He always stressed the experiential quality of his work, especially in performance in his early plays, when he deliberately asked the actors to go onstage when the show was not quite ready. He understood that it is possible to rehearse a show too much and lose its essential intensity. So he made his cast come onstage when they were not quite ready, and their panic and adrenalin rush communicated to the audience a certain kind of spirit, energy, or antagonism. His early plays, especially *Penetrator*, worked best in small studio spaces with maybe fifty or eighty spectators, very small spaces, which were perfect for exploring the extremes of feeling. Small studio spaces are hot and have that kind

of crucible effect. Philip Ridley, Anthony Neilson, Sarah Kane, and some of the earlier plays of Mark Ravenhill were interested in exploring extremes of experience and they are experiential in the sense that they aim to give you as an audience member some feeling that is very close to what is being represented. So, if it is sexual violence that is being shown, they want to give you some feeling of this being a violation, a real sense of discomfort, and to challenge you not to ignore it, so the audience is not just sitting back, but is intensely immersed in the feelings shown on stage. But clearly the representation of violence is not the same as the experience of violence: it is a fictional equivalent.

Apart from Anthony Neilson, which playwrights after 1990 can we classify within the experiential theatre?

That's a very good question, Mesut. A lot of the best in-her-face theatre is experiential because that's a theatre method that enables a playwright to deliver their ideas and their work as strongly as possible. They want to create powerful, sometimes fierce, experiences. So the dramaturgy of Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, and Anthony Neilson was definitely experiential, as so are the plays of Philip Ridley, especially *The Pitchfork Disney*, *The Fastest Clock in the Universe*, *Ghost from a Perfect Place*, and *Mercury Fur*. In *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, Sarah Kane talks about her inspiration, which was a play called *Mad* by Jeremy Weller at the Edinburgh Festival in 1992. It had actors who were not professionals. It was not polished; it was raw. And Kane loved this feeling. In the same book, I give other examples by Jez Butterworth, Martin McDonagh, Che Walker, and Rebecca Prichard, and there were many others in studio spaces in the 1990s.

In the new millennium, I would say that Debbie Tucker Green, especially her first few plays, is definitely a candidate for both experiential and experimental theatre. Some of the plays by Dennis Kelly in the 2000s also had that kind of very strong impact. And today occasionally you come across other examples, often female monologues where the intention is to grab the audience and make them appreciate the extreme emotions that the woman

has experienced in her life, such as Phoebe Eclair-Powell's *Fury* and Ellie Kendrick's *Hole*, or, with a broader theme, Ifeyinwa Frederick's *Sessions*. Gary Owen's *Violence and Son* and James Fritz's *Four Minutes Twelve Seconds* are likewise powerful examples of the representation of sexual violence.

Can we classify Anthony Neilson as part of the in-yer-face sensibility or can we classify his plays as experiential drama? Because he himself does not accept that he is part of the in-yer-face sensibility.

You know the irony of this, Mesut? He was one of the first theatre people who used the expression 'in-yer-face theatre'. When you look on my website, there is a whole section, called 'A Brief History of In-Yer-Face Theatre', about how this label originated, and Neilson was one of the first to advocate it in 1995. And when I interviewed him for my book, he did not object. Obviously, afterwards, he claimed that he didn't like the label, and that is perfectly understandable. Conflicting views are part of the discourse in which ideas about history, even what happened in the recent past, are formed. I really don't mind because, despite all the loose talk about a post-truth society, facts are still facts, and Neilson was quoted as using the phrase 'in-yer-face theatre' in print.

As you said before, a playwright tries to be original.

Yes, that's exactly right, so Neilson did not want to have that particular label attached to his work, but for me it is quite clear that he is definitely an in-yer-face playwright. He has also written plays that are not in-yer-face at all. Playwrights often write in a variety of styles during their career, so for example Neilson has written a lot of plays which are examples of devised theatre. He is interested in doing other things than just writing about heavy, emotional situations. But then he returned to the Royal Court about five years ago with a play called *The Prudes*, which is quite explicitly about sexuality, and he sometimes does performances which are experiential, furious and strong, while, [at] other times, they are more relaxed, more comic.

You have to remember that in-yer-face theatre is not only a sensibility, but also a series of theatrical devices. So any playwright can

write work in various styles – for example, Martin Crimp, who was part of an older generation, so I did not include him in *In-Yer-Face Theatre*. [Crimp] premiered a play called *The Treatment* in 1993, in which there is explicit sex, violence, a woman plunging a fork in a man's eyes – the kind of things that soon became quite standard for the 1990s. Physical pain is definitely a theme in the 1990s theatre, so he uses these devices, but also he then translates classical French theatre plays and absurdist drama. He has done many things in his career and to call him in-yer-face playwright is limiting, but he has produced work, especially at the Royal Court, which could easily fit that label. In fact, in-yer-face theatre can be understood metaphorically not as a movement, but as an arena of theatre which playwrights can enter, use devices for their own purposes, then maybe leave the arena and do something else entirely.

That is right, because historical periods, wars, plagues – all of them – affect playwrights and theatre in some periods, and some distinctive playwrights enter the new periods creating new plays and later leave the scene so that other playwrights come to produce new and original things.

Absolutely, I completely agree. After the 1990s, you have playwrights such as Charlotte Jones, who wrote *Humble Boy*, a play about the family, quite imaginative, with images of bee-keeping, astrophysics, and gardening, so it has got lots of ideas, but the core is about family relationships, about a mother, her son, and his ex-girlfriend, all of these kinds of things. So, if you like, the family play returns. The war on terror then marks the return of the big political play, and gives dystopian fantasies a shot in the arm.

Also, I forgot to mention that, if you want one key theme that characterizes 1990s new writing in Britain, it would be the crisis of masculinity, in which men – following two decades of feminism and the restructuring of heavy industry – become uncertain about their traditional roles. There is this sense that masculine identity is being questioned. If the man is not the only person who brings the money into the family, if the woman is also working, then in some communities,

especially (but not only) in working-class areas, there has been a crisis of male identity. And I suppose you could also relate this to the idea of toxic masculinity. Characters like Ian in *Blasted* or the young men in *Penetrator* are portrayed as quite toxic. It often makes good theatre but, of course, it is also a social problem and we still see plays about this subject. There's also a long tradition of male playwrights writing in a woman's voice, a kind

of ventriloquism. If you go back to James Joyce, the end of *Ulysses* is a long female monologue. And in these cases you have to ask: if you are a woman, would you really think like that? Or is it just a male fantasy?

It seems that we have run out of time. Thank you so much for your sharing your thoughts with me.

It has been a real pleasure. Thank *you* very much for your excellent questions.