

## CHAPTER I

# *Playwrights Collectivity and Collaboration*

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On 27 September 1992, John Osborne approached a podium at the Dorchester Hotel to receive a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Writers' Guild of Great Britain. Osborne was without doubt one of Britain's most important post-war playwrights, his first major play *Look Back in Anger* (1956) inspiring generations of writers and other theatre workers, and making the reputation of the Royal Court Theatre – which would become perhaps the most important theatre in the world for the discovery of new plays and playwrights. In recognising Osborne for this award, the Writers' Guild were acknowledging not just his individual career, but implicitly also the remarkable vigour and creativity of Britain's post-war playwriting culture.

Unfortunately, Osborne was suffering from the effects of medication for hypoglycaemia and, to make matters worse, he was drunk. His speech became incoherent, not helped by a pair of ill-fitting false teeth. The audience grew restless as he made rambling and disconnected remarks about Congreve and other topics before declaring, 'This is a horrible profession which has never been held in such contempt; it is awful.' The audience erupted, some jeering the playwright, others defending him. Writer Alan Bleasdale helped the distressed Osborne from the stage, shouting at the audience: 'we are talking about one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century. Shame on you!'. As Bleasdale later told reporters, 'If writers don't look after writers, what hope is there?'<sup>1</sup>

Playwriting in Britain is often booed and cheered. British theatre since the 1950s has produced a vast number of celebrated plays and playwrights whose work has been produced around the world, published, translated, adapted for other media, discussed, studied, and written about. These writers and their works have influenced generations of writers, creating a web of dramaturgical influence and debate distinctive to British theatre.<sup>2</sup> For some, this is to be celebrated. Others contemplate the situation with dismay. As playwright Steve Waters notes, in some quarters, the very idea

of the individual playwright is considered ‘inherently fascist, patriarchal, phallogocentric, phallogocentric’ and should be displaced in favour of ‘collective creation’ (or a greater role for directors, designers, actors, performance companies, etc.).<sup>3</sup>

This chapter will, paradoxically perhaps, be a discussion of the playwright in which plays themselves are rarely mentioned. I want to argue, with Jacqueline Bolton, that we can get a better picture of British playwriting by ‘displac[ing] individual plays, playwrights and premieres from the centre of the narrative’.<sup>4</sup> This is in part to reveal the institutional and industrial forces that underpin the theatre’s engagement with writing, but also to propose that British playwriting since the 1970s is less a story of individualism than of collective action and collaboration.

### Against Playwriting

Before detailing the actions playwrights have taken to defend their working conditions, it is useful to examine some of the criticisms of playwriting. My aim here is to sift between the good and (what I believe are) bad arguments about what is unsatisfying about putting the writer at the heart of theatre. One typical commentator declares opposition ‘to the playwright–director relationship, to text-based theatre, and to naturalism’,<sup>5</sup> yoking together many different and already broad ideas, as if they are all connected. The British playwright’s preference for Naturalism is much exaggerated;<sup>6</sup> as I will show, the playwright–director relationship changes significantly depending on context, and it is hard to know what ‘text-based’ means, given the numerous types of plays and performance texts and performances that make use of them.

It is hard to deny that British plays and playwriting receive very substantial critical attention. It is true, as Jen Harvie points out, that there are many books on ‘theatre’ that talk exclusively about the production of plays, as if they are the same thing.<sup>7</sup> The lionising of the play has undoubtedly obscured other theatrical virtues and other theatre workers, and distorted understanding of plays themselves. But this does not mean that all complaints about playwriting are equally valid. I want to consider just three claims: that playwriting is ‘literary’ (and, thus, untheatrical); that it is ‘logocentric’ (and, thus, philosophically unjustified); and that, for all the plays’ apparent radicalism, it is ‘individualistic’ (and, thus, politically conservative).

The claim that playwriting is a ‘literary’ endeavour is frequently made. Alison Oddey refers repeatedly to the ‘dominant literary theatrical

tradition',<sup>8</sup> which she defines as 'text-led originating with the playwright and emphasising the written word'.<sup>9</sup> Tim Etchells refers to 'the mainstream, the literary theatre', apparently meaning something similar.<sup>10</sup> A much more sophisticated discussion is offered by Harvie, who argues that British theatre has a 'long, strong literary tradition', which is not the compliment it seems to be, as she argues persuasively that the *idea* that British theatre is 'fundamentally literary' is an ideological construction that serves to marginalise other ideas and theatre workers.<sup>11</sup>

Is the post-war British theatre 'literary'? By this I mean specifically, is the theatre really seen to be 'literature'? The evidence is mixed. Theatre is typically reviewed on different pages of the newspapers and by different people from literature. Vanishingly few major playwrights cross successfully into prose fiction or poetry.<sup>12</sup> While Shakespeare's plays are clearly central to Britain's literary tradition, elsewhere relations between literature and theatre are hostile at best. There is a pattern in many post-war British novels – from Margaret Drabble's *The Garrick Year* (1966), via Beryl Bainbridge's *An Awfully Big Adventure* (1989) to Stephanie Merritt's *Real* (2005) – of representing the world of theatre as vacuous, meretricious, poisonous, and predatory. And the mockery goes both ways. In plays like Rodney Ackland's *Absolute Hell* (1952/1987), Harold Pinter's *No Man's Land* (1975), or Mike Bartlett's *Albion* (2017), the literary world is often depicted as drunken, vicious, feeble, and pretentious. In April de Angelis's *After Electra* (2015), one character remarks, 'novels are easy compared to plays. Like taking a crap as opposed to building a matchstick Taj Mahal'.<sup>13</sup>

More subtle is the suggestion that playwriting is an illegitimately 'logocentric' activity. The term derives from poststructuralist critiques of the 1960s and 1970s well known for, among other things, Roland Barthes's idea of the 'death of the author', arguing against letting authorial intentions limit a text's meaning. I have elsewhere argued<sup>14</sup> that this critical literature has been inattentively read and there is no reason to assume that playwrights – whom Barthes barely mentions in his essay<sup>15</sup> – are the only or most obvious target of the poststructuralists. For Jacques Derrida, who coined the term, 'logocentric' refers to a belief in the 'absolute proximity' of 'being and mind, things and feeling'<sup>16</sup> and can refer to any act of communication, verbal, gestural, physical, and more.<sup>17</sup> But all too often, 'logocentric' is misread to refer only to written texts: Janelle Reinelt talks of the 'text-dominated, logocentric stage of European theatre'; Christopher McCullough associates the 'logocentric' with language and opposes it to the 'physical, visual and visceral'.<sup>18</sup>

Far from being filled with unalterable meaning, plays are written to be changed, mediated, transformed in illimitable ways. A play exists in two forms, on the page and in performance, and despite their differences, both are equally full realisations of the play. The play on the page is full of gaps, ambiguities, potentialities that can and should be supplemented by the reader's imagination and theatre makers in performance. Any good play gives rise to multiple, competing interpretations, as the playwright's work is added to by the work of others – actors, directors, designers, audiences. A play is not, and can never be, a complete set of instructions for its own performance; a play is a robustly unstable, singularly plural, simultaneously complete and incomplete object. As such, it seems close to the vision of open, unstable textuality presented by Derrida. Furthermore, an emphasis on performance's spontaneity, improvisation, physical expressivity, direct relation to the audience, and refusal of representation is much closer to what Derrida describes as logocentrism.

Finally, there is the suggestion that playwriting is an individualist pursuit. This suggestion is there in Oddey's disapproving reference to 'the single vision of the playwright' or Tomasz Wiśniewski and Martin Blazk's dismissal of 'the univocal artistic vision of the playwright'.<sup>19</sup> It is true that writers sometimes benefit enormously from the work of others, not just in performing the play, but in helping generate ideas for it. This way of working became common in the alternative theatre of the 1970s (for example, in the methods of Joint Stock Theatre Company) and became increasingly frequent as development processes were offered by theatres in the 1990s. It may seem obvious that this is a kind of co-creation that should require joint credit, but having an idea is not the same as writing a play. In such situations, a great many ideas are produced and the work of the playwright is to choose between them, building an idea coherently.

We might also ask why the writer alone should be accused of individualism. While the playwright is sometimes called upon to credit everyone in the company who made suggestions during a rehearsal or devising process, it is never suggested that an actor who takes a note from a director should share credit for acting the role, or that if a director adopts a stage direction in the text, the playwright deserves co-director billing. In 2004, director Pam Brighton sued playwright Marie Jones, claiming she had given notes on drafts of Jones's smash-hit play *Stones in His Pockets* (1996) and therefore deserved a co-author credit. Brighton lost the case because, as Jones remarked, 'If I hadn't taken those notes, I would not have been doing my job.'<sup>20</sup> There is an irony that playwrights are described as

individualistic, but when they do enthusiastically collaborate they are especially deemed to have stepped beyond their permissible bounds.

What all these criticisms of the individual writer do, ironically, is *construct* the writer as individual. Calling playwriting 'literary' associates the playwright with the conventionally individualised activities of poetry and novel-writing; the misreading of logocentricity seeks to turn a play into dead language, separated off from the imagined vigour of embodied performance.

This is not to deny that playwrights and critics have themselves conived in these myths. Arnold Wesker argued tirelessly against plays being interpreted by directors, as if there were such a thing as a neutral production. Wesker described directors as bullies,<sup>21</sup> comparable to Hitler<sup>22</sup> and Stalin,<sup>23</sup> who do not direct a play so much as muffle and censor it,<sup>24</sup> even, in a terribly misjudged image, 'raping' it.<sup>25</sup> Playwright David Hare has more than once fired broadsides at 'Director's Theatre', accusing it of 'arbitrary pieces of self-advertisement',<sup>26</sup> as if the director's role could ever be invisible. The dramaturgical language that describes plays in terms of 'voice' and 'vision' is deeply individualising, as Bolton has observed.<sup>27</sup> Writers can be overly defensive of their texts, just as directors and actors can crudely miss a play's virtues, but we should not mistake bad practice for all practice. As Harvie says, the prominence of the playwright in British theatre is not a natural phenomenon but is 'discursively and materially' reproduced.<sup>28</sup> In the post-war period, the discursive and material production of the playwright's authority has taken place, I argue, in two distinct phases, beginning with the Royal Court 'revolution' of the 1950s.

### A Writer's Theatre

As I argued elsewhere, one of the most influential transformations carried out at the Royal Court in the 1950s was to situate the play as the fundamental creative element of a production process and to treat as invisible the contributions of actor, director, designer, and even audience.<sup>29</sup> The Court found a cultural space and audience for 'risky' new plays; they raised the status of the playwright nationally, and of the British playwright internationally. Just before *Look Back in Anger* broke through to national prominence in 1956, poet and critic Anthony Hartley declared: 'I know a number of writers just under or over the age of 30, and I hardly know one of them who would consider writing a play.'<sup>30</sup> By the end of the decade, Tom Stoppard recalled, 'Everybody my age wanted to write plays.'<sup>31</sup> In 1949, the National Theatre Act, which founded the National

Theatre in law, described the proposed theatre as a 'memorial to William Shakespeare';<sup>32</sup> little over a decade later, when the first season opened, *new* plays were a core part of the company's mission. The Hampstead Theatre Club (1959), Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) (1961), and Traverse Theatre (1963) all opened with specific aims to produce new plays. Each of these theatres bears witness to the catalytic effect of the Royal Court in placing the playwright at the centre of theatrical life.

One very significant consequence of this was to transform the field of play publishing. Before the late 1950s, play publishing in Britain fell into two main types: acting editions, led by Samuel French, which were designed for amateur and weekly-rep companies and included much from the prompt book of the original production, such as blocking, props, lighting and sound cues; and prestige hardback collected editions, aimed at wealthy patrons and published many years after the plays had left the stage.<sup>33</sup>

The cultural significance of the new generation of playwrights encouraged three major publishers – Penguin, Methuen, and Faber & Faber – to branch into play publishing. Penguin's 'New English Dramatists' series ran from 1959 to 1970, accumulating fourteen editions and presenting work of around forty new playwrights. Faber, hitherto known primarily for poetry and fiction, published major figures like Beckett and Osborne in mass-market paperback editions. Most important was Methuen which, in 1959, launched the 'Methuen Modern Plays' series, in a distinctive cyan blue design, with Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey*, though the series would go on to publish John Arden, Harold Pinter, Bertolt Brecht, and many others. Critic J. W. Lambert noted the success of these ventures in the early seventies, marvelling that 'plays of quality or peculiar interest . . . are far more widely available than they have ever been before, and are in fact being bought in quantities previously unknown'.<sup>34</sup>

This new play publishing had several consequences. First, simply by publishing more plays, it increased texts' distribution and thus likelihood of revivals, with positive effects on writer income. Second, this new generation of playtexts contained basic information about the original cast and director, but never details of the original production decisions, which encouraged the multiplication of production styles and approaches.

Third, Methuen in the 1970s made a series of commercial decisions that had a significant impact on the canon-formation of contemporary theatre. Although Lambert notes that plays were generating higher sales, in truth, only a few plays sold in commercially significant quantities.<sup>35</sup> Nick Hern, who joined Methuen as Drama editor in April 1974, identified two ways

of increasing the profitability of play publishing: one, finding cheaper methods of production (to reduce individual unit cost); two, finding quicker production methods (figuring that plays sell more during the original production when interest is most intense). To that end, he introduced the cheaply and quickly produced 'New Theatrescripts' series in May 1976, which could be sold before the run was over. In January 1981, with the Royal Court's production of *Touched* by Stephen Lowe, the published text was produced quickly enough to be available on press night. Through the eighties this evolved into the 'programme-text', which meant audiences at the Royal Court typically found the playtext included alongside all the usual production information. This significantly increased the texts' profitability and the plays' distribution.

At the same time as the 'New Theatrescripts' were introduced, Nick Hern also started publishing paperback collected editions of plays, now with a distinctive black spine, initially under the title 'Master Playwrights' (until Caryl Churchill objected to this patriarchal title in 1985 and the series turned into 'World Dramatists' before splitting into 'World Classics' and 'Contemporary Dramatists' for, loosely, dead and living authors). The series started with Pinter *Plays 1* and Strindberg *Three Plays* in March 1976 and, at the time of writing in the early 2020s, has published around 125 playwrights in over 300 volumes. The pattern of the paperback collected edition of plays has since been copied by most other British theatre publishers.

The effect was to create a strong and visible hierarchy between writers. A new writer would go into the entry-level series and then pass up through the various imprints, depending on their success; for instance, a double volume of Stephen Poliakoff's *Hitting Town* and *City Sugar* contained the first plays published in the 'New Theatrescripts' series in 1976; they 'went into blue' republished as a 'Methuen Modern Play' in 1978; then they 'went into black' when included in Poliakoff *Plays 1* in 1990. Although the aim was commercial, the result was to visibly organise the major playwrights of the 1970s and 1980s, pre-selecting and ordering them in vertical ranks. Great though the proliferation of playwrights was, it is striking that it took eight years for a Black playwright (Soyinka) to 'go into black' and nine years for the first woman (Churchill).

By contrast, through the 1990s and 2000s, play publishing was transformed by the advent of cheap digital printing, which made much smaller print runs economically viable. This allowed publishers to greatly expand the number of plays and playwrights they could publish and the number of theatres that could offer a 'programme-text'. One result is that in the second

decade of the twenty-first century the number of playwrights with plays in print is perhaps ten times what it was fifty years earlier, with the arguable consequence that the orderly hierarchies of 1970s theatre writing and writers has broken down, valuably diversifying British play publication, though also making it harder to identify major trends in the new century.

Digging a little deeper, however, the Court's effect on playwrights' fortunes seems more discursive than material. Of course, by carving out a space for new plays and making the careers of several major playwrights, the Court had a material effect, but their impact was more reputational than financial or contractual. The Court rarely sought out new plays, mostly relying on writers to send them in, and had no literary manager until 1979; its script development activities were rudimentary; even its fabled respect for writers was not always followed through.<sup>36</sup>

The Court's reluctance to help develop its writers was part of its wholesale acceptance of the idea that plays were spontaneous creations of genius. Osborne described the writing of *Look Back in Anger* as a 'solo dash' fuelled by 'a reckless untutored frenzy',<sup>37</sup> which overlooks that he'd worked as an actor for most of the decade and this was at least his fourth play. Though, as I have shown, the Royal Court opened a space in which a wider range of play forms and styles could be staged, it did very little to change the playwright's working conditions. In some respects, the playwright in 1975 was worse off than in 1945.

### Writing Is Work

In 1972, John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy's epic historical play about King Arthur, *The Island of the Mighty*, was accepted for production by the Royal Shakespeare Company. The play was very long and the authors cut it down before rehearsal. When the director, David Jones, requested further cuts, Arden and D'Arcy asked for a meeting with the actors to discuss the play, which they felt was being depoliticised, and argued that changes were needed before they could reliably see what cuts were possible. This was denied. As a result, the Aldwych Theatre in London bore witness to the unusual sight of two playwrights picketing their own play (Image 1.1).<sup>38</sup> Whatever the rights and wrongs of this case, that theatre workers as well-regarded as Arden and D'Arcy had no recourse than this suggests the unsatisfactory industrial conditions of the playwright in the 1970s. Despite accusations of individualism, one thing that characterises British playwrights since the 1970s is a deep commitment to collaboration and collective action.





Image 1.1 (L–R) Margaretta D’Arcy, John Arden, and their ten-year-old son Jacob Arden picketing *The Island of the Mighty* at the Aldwych Theatre, London, 28 November 1972. (Photo: PA Images)

In the immediate post-war period, it was widely recognised that if you were a playwright you generally worked in highly precarious conditions. The process of getting your play put on was, in J. B. Priestley’s words, ‘haphazard and wasteful’.<sup>39</sup> Managements did not seek out scripts; they waited for plays to come to them.<sup>40</sup> Playwrights were isolated from the theatre, rarely, if ever, getting feedback and advice on a new play.<sup>41</sup> You could wait ages for a decision or even an acknowledgment of your play, which would, in any case, have to hope it pleased whichever star actor happened to be in favour with that management.<sup>42</sup> If it did get on, you would probably have had to accept a low royalty and part with most of the film rights.<sup>43</sup> The producer or actor would typically make changes in the script without consultation. As playwright Clifford Bax noted regretfully, the producer will draw on their experience to ‘turn your play into a semblance of the plays which were most successful twenty years earlier . . . He [*sic*] will remove from your script anything at all strange, beautiful or profound’.<sup>44</sup> Many commentators recognised that one solution might be a subsidised theatre that could allow ‘a progressive theatre with a far-seeing, long-term policy’<sup>45</sup> that could develop new relationships with writers, commissioning plays and training playwrights.

Despite the emergence of several such theatres, however, conditions for the playwright were not markedly different thirty years later. In the mid-seventies subsidised theatre sector, the writer – uniquely – was still paid on the old commercial model. While the director, designer, and writer were paid a fixed rate, regardless of how well the play did, the writer's income was largely dependent on box office royalties. Since, in the subsidised sector, state funding was used to keep ticket prices low, this meant that a side effect of state subsidy was to reduce playwrights' income. In 1978, Simon Trussler remarked that 'the way in which writers and their scripts are treated by the theatre is at best with a kind of breathless sympathy, at worst with an appalling discourtesy and neglect'.<sup>46</sup> Playwrights were, Catherine Itzin wrote in 1976, 'an exploited labour force'.<sup>47</sup>

British playwrights had never had a union. The Society of Authors was established in 1884 but its focus was on literature. The Television and Screen Writers' Guild was formed in May 1959 and became the Writers' Guild of Great Britain (WGGB) in 1965, though, despite John McGrath's entryist attempt to turn the Guild's attention to theatre in the 1960s, it paid little attention to protecting playwrights' working conditions. The Scottish Society of Playwrights was formed in September 1973 as a support network for theatre writers and also, at times, a negotiating body, but there was still no equivalent south of the border.<sup>48</sup> In autumn 1975, however, news leaked that the Arts Council was planning to freeze funding in a way that would have disproportionately affected the fringe. The recently formed TACT (The Association of Community Theatres) and ITC (Independent Theatre Council) called a meeting, on 19 October 1975, at London's Oval House to strategise a common response; in one session, forty playwrights discussed the impact the freeze would have on the few Arts Council schemes designed to support writers, and as a result of the meeting formed themselves as the Theatre Writers Group and, the following year, the Theatre Writers Union (TWU).

It is notable how many of the demands developed by the fledgling organisation in its first few years would have been recognisable to the writers of the 1940s. They also wished to bring an end to the haphazard process of play production, which could include theatres like the National either not responding or holding onto an option for several years; the TWU called for a decision on production within three months and a production date within a year.<sup>49</sup> Like the post-war commentators, they lamented the lack of play development and called for the Arts Council to fund paid dramaturg positions.<sup>50</sup> To reduce the precarious payment

model, the TWU demanded a substantial increase in the advance; initially this was set at £1,500 for a play at the National (around ten times what writers were typically offered) and the box office royalty was to be calculated at full cost (i.e. including the contribution of subsidy). Further, 'no residuals or ancillary rights [were] to be conceded', meaning that playwrights would not be obliged to sign away film and other rights in their script.<sup>51</sup> Fundamentally, the TWU argued that theatres and funding bodies needed to ensure a 'living wage' for writers, then calculated at £60 per week; at a time when the average weekly wage was £72,<sup>52</sup> this was not extravagant, but reflected the Union's recognition, in Edward Bond's words, that 'writing is work'<sup>53</sup> and needs to be remunerated.

With the opening of the National Theatre on the South Bank in 1976, the TWU saw an opportunity to renegotiate standard contracts with all members of what was then called the Theatres National Committee (TNC): the National, the RSC and the Royal Court. The Writers' Guild was technically the recognised negotiating body, despite its relative lack of attention to playwrights, and for a while the National and RSC refused to recognise the new union, until the TWU realised that almost all of the living writers due to be produced by both organisations (including Bond, Howard Barker, C. P. Taylor, David Rudkin, Barry Keeffe, Pam Gems, Julian Mitchell, Robert Holman, Christopher Hampton, Howard Brenton, and Trevor Griffiths) were TWU, not WGGB, members. The TWU therefore called a writers' strike, which ran from 16 January to 25 May 1977, and instructed its members to sign no contracts with either theatre until the TNC agreed to recognise the TWU.

The strike worked and together the TWU and WGGB negotiated a new standard TNC contract, finalised in autumn 1979, with some substantial improvements: the advance for a full-length play was set at £2,000 in 1979 (roughly equivalent to £8,700 in late 2022) at a rough calculation that writing such a play takes the equivalent of six months' work.<sup>54</sup> There was also a 'Bill of Rights' written into the contract that ensured (a) textual integrity, that a play cannot be altered without consultation; (b) consultation over the cast and director; (c) consultation over – and being identified clearly in – the publicity; and (d) the right to attend rehearsals and to be paid while doing so. The principle behind this final point is not to give a writer the chance to control the play's production, but to acknowledge that writers typically do work in rehearsal, giving information, bringing in research, carrying out rewrites, contributing to discussion. In other words, this is a response to a thirty-year complaint that playwrights were blocked from working collaboratively.

The impact of these new writers' unions has been felt throughout the sector. A rather different contract was negotiated at the same time with the ITC, covering fringe and small-scale touring, and in 1986 a further agreement was drawn up with the Theatrical Management Association (TMA), covering commercial theatre. In 1991, the Scottish Society of Playwrights held a strike, organised by Hector MacMillan and Chris Hannan, which succeeded in more than doubling the standard commission for a new play in Scotland, from £2,400 to £5,500.<sup>55</sup> In 1992, both Unions combined to resist a push by the TMA to reduce writers' royalties from 7.5 to 3.5 per cent.<sup>56</sup> These are remarkably effective examples of collective action. Against the popular idea of writers working in splendid isolation should be set the image of more than eighty playwrights, sitting in the Theatre Upstairs at the Royal Court in January 1977, working together for eight hours to analyse and rewrite, in fine detail, the standard contract governing their conditions of work.<sup>57</sup>

### Play Development

The TWU's call in 1976 for a Dramaturgs' scheme did not immediately yield fruit and indeed the Arts Council reported in 1978 that an attempt to instigate one had little take-up.<sup>58</sup> In some respects, by inspiring writers but not substantially changing the conditions in which plays were developed, the Royal Court had exacerbated the problem. Peter Noble declared in the late 1940s that 'small indeed is the number of professional playwrights in this country'.<sup>59</sup> In 1976, the *New Playwrights Directory* listed 150 writers. In 1982, the *British Alternative Theatre Directory* listed 436.<sup>60</sup> In 1978, the Royal Court's literary manager claimed to receive 500 unsolicited plays each year; in 1987, critic Christine Eccles put the figure at 1,000 or more; by the 2000s, the figure was nearer to 3,000.<sup>61</sup> At the turn of the century, it was estimated that at any one time there were around 25,000 copies of unsolicited plays in circulation in Britain.<sup>62</sup>

This proliferation of new writing has contributed to the squeezing of playwrights' income that the union activity had sought to redress, but also the problem of what to do with it all. A concern expressed well into the 1980s was that unsolicited plays were being sent to theatres without acknowledgement or response and various schemes were proposed, unsuccessfully, for a national script-reading network.<sup>63</sup> The problem with a national scheme was that many theatres had distinctive regional, social, and aesthetic profiles, and were sceptical about the value of abstract criteria for what made a good play. But given how few unsolicited scripts make it

to main stages, was it economically viable to employ a script-reader on a full salary to discover, at best, a couple of scripts a year?<sup>64</sup>

A stronger economic case could have been made if the script-reader's responsibilities were expanded to include advising playwrights and developing new plays, but for a long time these plans were thwarted by the widespread conviction that, as a major figure in the early years of the Arts Council put it, 'dramatists are born, not made'.<sup>65</sup> One casualty of this presumption was the dramaturg, responsible for working with plays and playwrights. Although the dramaturg had been a key figure in European theatre since the early nineteenth century, there was resistance to adopting the practice in British theatre. When Kenneth Tynan proposed to lead the literary department of the National Theatre, he asked to be appointed 'dramaturg', but was instead given the more administrative-sounding position of 'literary manager'.<sup>66</sup>

But several factors in the 1980s shifted the theatre culture towards a fuller embrace of play development. First, playwright unions appeared alongside the development of autonomous writers' organisations. The Scottish Society of Playwrights in 1973 was followed by the Northern Playwrights Society (1975), North West Playwrights (1982), the New Playwrights Trust (1985), Yorkshire Playwrights (1992), Stagecoach in the West Midlands (1992), and the Playwrights' Studio in Scotland (2004). These voluntary organisations attempted to fill the gap, usually on a regional basis, by offering script reading, advice and development, distribution<sup>67</sup> and promotion of plays, and sometimes handled bursaries and other opportunities on behalf of regional arts boards. This, in itself, demonstrated the appetite for training and support.

The Arts Council responded to these developments in the early eighties by changing the previous array of writing support schemes (royalty supplements, playwriting bursaries, contract writers schemes, etc.) into earmarked portions of their grants to major theatres. Several reports, including *The Glory of the Garden* (1984), *Theatre IS For All* (1986), and *The Policy for Drama of the English Arts Funding System* (1996) recommended, with increasing effectiveness, the value of embedding play development processes in theatres.

As a result, development spread. The establishment of Literary Managers at the National Theatre (1963), the Royal Court (1979), and RSC (1981) required conversations within organisations that were necessary structural, not based entirely on a single person's taste, and required the invention of shared dramaturgical vocabulary for describing plays and how they work. Out of these processes, with Arts Council blessing,

emerged further development processes. The Royal Court in the 1980s was led by Max Stafford-Clark, who brought with him the model pioneered at Joint Stock, whereby a writer and director worked with actors, researching, discussing, and improvising before the play was written; in April 1984, the National Theatre established the NT Studio, a research and development wing where ideas for shows (including plays) were developed. In its way, this also marked the influence on the mainstream of processes developed in fringe and alternative theatre – devising, workshopping, and collective creation.

More widely, the growth of creative writing courses in higher and further education from the 1970s onwards also encouraged the idea, as Bolton puts it, of ‘playwriting as a *craft* that may be learned, rather than a *gift*, divinely bestowed’.<sup>68</sup> *Writ Large*, a report on new writing for the Arts Council in 2009, surveyed over 100 playwrights and found that 30 per cent of them had received some kind of writer training.<sup>69</sup> (This may reflect the growth in the university sector: many of the leading figures in the 1956 generation – including Osborne, Wesker, Delaney, Ann Jellicoe, Pinter, and Bond – did not attend university. A comparable list from the 2010s would mostly be university graduates.)

The result was an enormous expansion of script development processes in British theatres in the 1990s. *Writ Large* found that of sixty-five state-funded theatres surveyed, all but one considered the support of ‘new writing’ as ‘core’ to their activities, and all but two had some kind of literary department.<sup>70</sup> Not coincidentally, while in the late eighties new plays made up only 7 per cent of the repertoire (down from a steady 12–13 per cent between 1971 and 1985),<sup>71</sup> by the 2000s, new plays made up an astonishing 42 per cent of the productions in *Writ Large*’s surveyed theatres.<sup>72</sup>

There are risks involved in this new emphasis on play development. Many worry that offering a playwright a reading or workshop is an inadequate replacement for a proper production, or may even be a way of giving the *appearance* of committing to new work.<sup>73</sup> Another risk is that playwriting support begins to set generalised rules that writers are required to adopt, reducing British theatre’s diversity, and stifling the expression of experiences and identities that do not so easily fit conventional forms.<sup>74</sup> Bolton notes that an emphasis on the visually impoverished form of the rehearsed reading encourages an ‘attenuated theatricality’ that reduces the play to the spoken word.<sup>75</sup> More generally, as the cachet in finding new writers grows, it may become more difficult for individuals to sustain careers as the bloom fades on yesterday’s new writer.

The relatively secure status of playwrights in British theatre of the twenty-first century is a product, not of some mystique around the solo-authored written play, but of the collective organisation of playwrights, determined to improve their conditions of work, insisting on the right to collaborate with other theatre workers, developing plays, workshopping, contributing fully to rehearsal, and more. British playwriting's strength is in no small part due to its numerous mutual support networks and its intricate patterns of influence and collaboration, because, as Alan Bleasdale put it, 'If writers don't look after writers, what hope is there?'

### Notes

- 1 See John Passmore and Michael Arditti, 'Mumblings of an Angry Old Man', *Evening Standard*, 28 September 1992, 3; Rebecca Hardy, 'Look Back in Remorse: An Uncharacteristic Morning after Feeling for John Osborne', *Daily Mail*, 29 September 1992, 15; Joanna Coles, 'Angry Old Man's Scribe Diatribe', *The Guardian*, 29 September 1992, 5; John Heilpern, *John Osborne: A Patriot for Us*, London, Chatto & Windus, 2006, 464.
- 2 Compare the grim picture of precarity and poverty in the US in Todd London, Ben Pesner, and Zannie Giraud Voss, *Outrageous Fortune: The Life and Times of the New American Play*, New York, Theatre Development Fund, 2009, and Christopher Bigsby, *Twenty-First Century American Playwrights*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2018, 1–5.
- 3 Steve Waters, *The Secret Life of Plays*, London, Nick Hern, 2010, 184.
- 4 Jacqueline Bolton, 'Capitalizing (on) New Writing: New Play Development in the 1990s', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 32.2 (2012), 209–225, 211.
- 5 Alison Oddey, *Devising Theatre: A Practical and Theoretical Handbook*, London, Routledge, 1994, 4.
- 6 Probably the four most commercially successful British playwrights of the last fifty years – Alan Ayckbourn, Tom Stoppard, Alan Bennett, and Michael Frayn – have barely written a naturalistic play between them.
- 7 Jen Harvie, *Staging the UK*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2005, 115.
- 8 Oddey, *Devising Theatre*, 4, 7, 11.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 10 Quoted in Jacqueline Bolton, *Demarcating Dramaturgy: Mapping Theory onto Practice*, PhD Thesis, University of Leeds, 2011, 110.
- 11 Harvie, *Staging the UK*, 114. Although Harvie does not say this explicitly, her argument leaves open the possibility that it would also be to misdescribe playwriting to call it a 'literary' activity.
- 12 Exceptions would include Michael Frayn as a novelist and Liz Lochhead in poetry.
- 13 April de Angelis, *After Electra*, London, Faber & Faber, 2015, 30.

- 14 Dan Rebellato, 'Exit the Author' in Vicky Angelaki (ed.), *Contemporary British Theatre: Breaking New Ground*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 9–31.
- 15 The sole dramatist mentioned is Brecht, and Barthes refers to the idea of an authorial 'distancing' (*Verfremdungseffekt*), 'the Author diminishing like a figure at the far end of the literary stage', a description of a theatrical event that is, in itself, theatrical (Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' in *The Rustle of Language*, translated by Richard Howard, Oxford, Blackwell, 1986, 51–52).
- 16 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 2nd ed., Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, 12, 11. Indeed, Derrida notes that one characteristic of logocentrism is phonocentrism, a deep suspicion of the written word.
- 17 Indeed, Derrida's first major comments on theatre are to deconstruct Antonin Artaud's plan for a pure act of spiritual communication between stage and audience that bypasses words. See Jacques Derrida, "La Parole Soufflée" and "The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation", *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass, London, Routledge, 1978, 169–195, 232–250.
- 18 Janelle Reinelt, 'The Politics of Discourse: Performativity Meets Theatricality', *SubStance*, 31.2/3 (2002), 201–215, 205; Christopher McCullough, *Theatre Praxis: Teaching Drama through Practice*, London, Macmillan, 1998, 4.
- 19 Oddey, *Devising Theatre*, 4; Tomasz Wiśniewski and Martin Blaszk (eds.), *Between Page and Stage: Scholars and Theatre-Makers*, Gdansk, University of Gdansk, 2017, 9.
- 20 'Director Loses Co-author Claim', *BBC News*, 18 May 2004, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/3724483.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/3724483.stm) (accessed 1 August 2022).
- 21 Arnold Wesker, *Wesker on Theatre: A Selection of Essays, Lectures and Journalism*, London, Oberon, 2010, 42.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 42.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 163.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 48.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 41.
- 26 David Hare, *Obedience, Struggle & Revolt: Lectures on Theatre*, London, Faber & Faber, 2005, 106.
- 27 Bolton, 'Capitalising (on) New Writing', 221.
- 28 Harvie, *Staging the UK*, 116.
- 29 Dan Rebellato, *1956 and All That: The Making of Modern Theatre*, London, Routledge, 1999, chapters 3 and 4.
- 30 Anthony Hartley, 'The London Stage: Drugs No Answer' in Frederick Lumley (ed.), *Theatre in Review*, Edinburgh, Paterson, 1956, 1–15, 4.
- 31 Paul Delaney (ed.), *Tom Stoppard in Conversation*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1994, 78. Stoppard turned 20 in 1957.
- 32 National Theatre Act, 1949, 9 March 1949, 1.
- 33 For example, the most recent play in Terence Rattigan's *Collected Plays: Volume One* (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1953) premiered in 1946.



- 34 J. W. Lambert, *Drama in Britain 1964–1973*, Essex, Longmans for the British Council, 1974, 5.
- 35 In 1978, according to Nick Hern, new play sales rarely exceeded 250 copies, ‘Towards a National Playwrights Conference, Part III’, *Theatre Quarterly*, 9 (1979), 65–82, 69.
- 36 John Osborne recalls being excluded from rehearsals of *Look Back in Anger* in *Looking Back: Never Explain, Never Apologise*, London, Faber & Faber, 1999, 197–198.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 277.
- 38 See Catherine Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain since 1968*, London, Methuen, 1980, 32–34; John Arden and Margaretta D’Arcy ‘Playwrights on Picket’, 1973, in John Arden, *To Present the Pretence: Essays on the Theatre and Its Public*, London, Methuen, 1977, 159–172; Albert Hunt, *Arden: A Study of His Plays*, London, Methuen, 1974, 157–164.
- 39 J. B. Priestley, *Theatre Outlook*, London, Nicholson & Watson, 1947, 37; Richard Findlater, *The Unholy Trade*, London, Gollancz, 1952, 120.
- 40 Priestley, *Theatre Outlook*, 37–38; Hartley, ‘The London Stage’, 14.
- 41 Priestley, *Theatre Outlook*, 57; Findlater, *The Unholy Trade*, 119–121; Peter Noble, *British Theatre*, London, Theatre Yearbooks, c.1948, 139; though Robert Speaight cites the exception of E. Martin Browne’s Mercury Theatre which was a kind of ‘workshop’ for budding verse dramatists (Robert Speaight, *Drama since 1939*, London, Longmans Green for the British Council, 1947, 52).
- 42 Hartley, ‘The London Stage’, 4.
- 43 Clifford Bax, *Whither the Theatre...? A Letter to a Young Playwright*, London, Home & Van Thal, 1945, 6.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 8.
- 45 Noble, *British Theatre*, 139.
- 46 ‘Towards a National Playwrights Conference’, 74.
- 47 Catherine Itzin (ed.), *New Playwrights Directory 1976*, London, TQ, 1976, 5.
- 48 Ian Brown, ‘More to Come: Forty Years of the Scottish Society of Playwrights’, *Edinburgh Review*, 137 (2013), 90–99.
- 49 Itzin, *New Playwrights Directory 1976*, 7.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 52 Viv Groskop, ‘Was the Summer of 1976 the Best Britain Ever Had?’ *The Guardian*, 30 July 2016, [www.theguardian.com/society/2016/jul/30/was-summer-1976-best-britain-ever-had](http://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/jul/30/was-summer-1976-best-britain-ever-had) (accessed 28 July 2022).
- 53 Quoted in Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution*, 88.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 313. By way of comparison, Itzin notes that Howard Brenton had been paid an advance of £350 from the National Theatre for *Weapons of Happiness* in 1976.
- 55 Brown, ‘More to Come’, 96.
- 56 Jane Woddis, *Spear-Carriers or Speaking Parts? Arts Practitioners in the Cultural Policy Process*. PhD Thesis, University of Warwick, 2005, 204.

- 57 Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution*, 311.
- 58 'Towards a National Playwrights Conference', 67.
- 59 Noble, *British Theatre*, 139.
- 60 Itzin, *New Playwrights Directory 1976*, 57; Catherine Itzin (ed.), *British Alternative Theatre Directory 1982*, Eastbourne, Offord, 1982, 15.
- 61 'Towards a National Playwrights Conference', 66; Christine Eccles, 'The Unsolicited Playscript... and Its Almost Inevitable Return', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 3 (1987), 24–28, 24; Personal Interview with Chris Campbell, 22 August 2019.
- 62 Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, London, Faber & Faber, 2001, 236. This figure includes multiple copies of plays sent to more than one theatre, but still suggests several thousands of individual plays.
- 63 Woddiss notes that in 1986 the Arts Council commissioned a feasibility study for a 'National Playscript Centre' and in the early 1990s, the New Playwrights Trust proposed another such scheme in its submission to the National Arts and Media Strategy, *Spear-Carriers or Speaking Parts*, 225–226.
- 64 Martin Esslin makes this point in 'Towards a National Playwrights Conference', 66.
- 65 Charles Landstone, *You and the Theatre: A Pocket Guide*, London, Macdonald & Evans, 1948, 16.
- 66 Eccles, 'The Unsolicited Playscript', 24; Mary Luckhurst, *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, chapter 6. Luckhurst points out that the term 'literary manager' seems to have been popularised by William Archer and Harley Granville Barker's plans for a National Theatre (1904, 1930), though she notes this role was much more developed than the one Tynan was able to fulfil.
- 67 In the early 1950s, if several copies of a play were needed, it was still common for plays to be sent to a typist, a prohibitively expensive cost for many writers; otherwise a playwright would have to trust their one or two copies to the post. Things began to get cheaper with the invention of the first commercially available plain-paper A4 photocopier in 1959. Even so, the cost of reproduction and postage was still challenging in the 1970s, hence the playwrights' organisations offering copying facilities to members and the TWU campaigning for the Arts Council to support these ventures financially (Itzin, *New Playwrights Directory 1976*, 6). The invention of the email attachment in 1992 would eventually eliminate these costs altogether – though perhaps it also partly explains the Royal Court's 3,000 unsolicited scripts in the twenty-first century.
- 68 Bolton, 'Capitalizing (on) New Writing', 213. Italics original.
- 69 British Theatre Consortium, *Writ Large: New Writing on the English Stage 2003–2009*, London, Arts Council England, 2010, 106.
- 70 *Ibid.*, 79.
- 71 Ian Brown and Rob Brannen, 'When Theatre Was for All: The Cork Report, after Ten Years', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 12.48 (1996), 367–383, 381.

- 72 British Theatre Consortium, *Writ Large*, 53. The figures are not strictly comparable, as the 1980s Arts Council figures separate 'new plays' from children's work and adaptations, even though these might be new writing, and they also have an entirely separate category for Ayckbourn, undifferentiated between his new and old plays. Even so, the figures suggest a substantial increase.
- 73 See Bill Gaskill's remarks in 'Towards a National Playwrights Conference', 69, or Caryl Churchill in Nicholas Wright, *Playwrights*, London, Royal National Theatre, 1996, 19.
- 74 See Steve Waters' remarks in Luckhurst, *Dramaturgy*, 214; Michael Bhim in Harry Derbyshire, 'The Culture of New Writing', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 18.1 (2008), 131–134, 132.
- 75 Bolton, 'Capitalizing (on) New Writing', 221.