

John Elsom



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Post-war British Theatre Criticism

This book sets out the critical reaction to some fifty key post-war productions of the British theatre, as gauged primarily through the contemporary reviews of theatre critics. The plays chosen are each, in their different ways, important in their contribution to the development of the British theatre, covering the period from immediately after the Second World War, when British theatre fell into decline, through the revival of the late 1950s, to the present day in which British theatre enjoys a high international reputation for its diversity and quality.

In this selection, John Elsom is not aiming simply to select the 'best' of theatre criticism, nor the 'worst'. He allows the reader to be the critic of the critics. His selection, however, reveals the widespread changes of response to plays and productions, and thus indicates the evolution of taste over the past thirty years – from J. B. Priestley's An Inspector Calls and the great days of the Old Vic Company after the war, to Harold Pinter's Betrayal at the National Theatre. Among the critics quoted are Kenneth Tynan, Bernard Levin, James Agate, Harold Hobson, Ronald Bryden, Alan Brien, Irving Wardle and Michael Billington; the productions reviewed include Titus Andronicus with Lord Olivier, Pinter's The Homecoming, Beckett's Waiting for Godot, Osborne's Look Back in Anger and Edward Bond's Saved.

For the general theatre-goer, this selection will evoke the great occasions in post-war British theatre. For the theatre student, *Post-war British Theatre Criticism* will provide a valuable source-book for contemporary reactions.

The Editor

John Elsom is theatre critic of the Listener and has written widely on British Theatre, his books including Theatre Outside London (Macmillan, 1971), Erotic Theatre (Secker & Warburg, 1973), History of the National Theatre (with Nicholas Tomalin, 1978) and Post-war British Theatre (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976, revised edition 1979). He is also the author of six plays and is associated with the Bush Theatre in London. He has worked extensively in adult education, and was formerly in the script department of Paramount Pictures. A member of the Liberal Party's Arts Panel, he drafted the party's discussion document on arts subsidy, Change and Choice (1978).

Cover drawing by Feliks Topolski shows some of Britain's major critics at *The Cherry Orchard*, National Theatre 1978

Also by John Elsom:

Post-war British Theatre
Revised Edition
Available in paperback only

Originally published in 1976 to wide critical acclaim, Post-war British Theatre was revised and updated by the author in 1979.

'Probably the best book available on this intricate and intriguing subject. Mr Elsom is immensely knowledgeable; writes a good, lucid prose; he is never pompous, often amusing and thoroughly informative. His brief account of Brecht's influence on British theatre is outstanding.'—Sunday Times

'His book is a model of intellectual organization; it reveals a first-class and outstandingly well-informed mind contemplating the theatrical scene in its relation to politics, religion, philosophy and entertainment.'

—Sir Harold Hobson, *Drama*

'This introduction to the theatrical trends, events and key-figures of the past 30 years manages a sustained juggling act with unusual intellectual showmanship, keeping in the air a glittering miscellany of judgments, theories and facts.'—Observer

'Amazingly, in a book of barely 200 pages, it is all there: every significant movement, every innovative artist, receives due and judicious attention somewhere in the narrative.'—Irving Wardle, *The Times*

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In this book, I have not tried to present British theatre criticism at its best, or at its worst. There are many learned, and even thoughtful, articles in monthly magazines and books which I have wittingly ignored; because my main purpose has been to illustrate the general, not-too-specialised, receptions given to some fifty post-war productions. For that reason, I have concentrated on the daily and weekly theatre columns, occasionally straying from the professional critics to quote from news items, fashion columns, leading articles and even *Hansard*. The focus, however, is upon those journalists whose opinions are thought to affect box-office trade.

British theatre critics have never had the categoric power of the Butchers of Broadway. None of us can kill a show overnight, or guarantee a smash-hit. The circumstances governing British and American theatres (as well as their newspapers) are too different. The investment stakes in West End productions tend to be smaller than on Broadway, and so the need for instant success is less acute. Impresarios can wait for the weeklies to redress any unfair impressions left by the dailies, although, if their resources are running out, they may not wish to do so. The Birthday Party in its original production was off before the only really enthusiastic review (in the Sunday Times) appeared. By contrast a musical like Charlie Girl, which had damning reviews, was nursed into a long-running success.

Nevertheless, critics do have considerable power over the commercial success, or otherwise, of productions; and I suspect that, for most people working within the theatre, that is their chief importance. Critics are not to be valued for their opinions but for their impact upon trade; whereas critics like to believe the reverse—that their views are respected and the commercial consequences stemming from them are not of great importance. Directors see critics as rather unpredictable pawns in the publicity game; whereas critics see directors as talented students who need the benefit of objective advice.

The strength of British theatre criticism, such as it is, lies in its

variety. There are more theatre critics in London than New York; and, taken together, their columns represent a wider range of views. If Oxbridge liberalism sets the tone in the weightier papers, as Jonathan Hammond once suggested in *Plays and Players* (November, 1974), fringe directors had the comfort of knowing that two sentences in *Time Out* during the 1970s were of more practical use to them than a column in *The Times*. Actors and directors often believe that there is a conspiracy of critics, who meet in shady pubs adjoining the theatres, swop notes and rush off rudely before the final applause. When the reviews are uniformly good, bad or just imperceptive, they find it hard to believe that there has not been some kind of ganging-up from the press. Usually, however, critics do not discuss what they are about to write amongst themselves, except perhaps to clarify a point which they may have missed. They tend to be over-protective of their opinions, making up their minds in secret, so that they can display the results in their full glory publicly.

Nor, in Britain, does a particular sort of person became a critic. In some European countries, critics are trained within the drama schools. Students have to decide whether or not they wish to become critics; and this choice represents a certain mental attitude – preferring to be a commentator rather than a participant. They also learn at college what the role of the commentator should be; and such images of a critic's job can involve some challengeable assumptions. In the various deliberations of the International Association of Theatre Critics, there is often a clear division between those who believe that their task is to state, objectively and precisely, what happens on the stage; and those who interpret their role more subjectively – as a sounding board for theatrical experiences. On one side, the academics seek for criticism the exactitude of a science; while on the other, there are those who argue that 'scientism' is in itself a cultural phenomenon and that while a critic's job may be to tell the truth (for critics usually agree that they should not tell lies), this involves a wider sensitivity than mere documentary reporting. In some countries, theatre is seen as part of a wider political process, that of educating people into the aims and responsibilities of socialism. With that assumption, a critic's duty is to explain the ideological 'correctness' (or otherwise) of a production.

But in Britain, few start out their professional lives intending to be critics. They have usually drifted into their profession by accident,

without specific training as critics, although they may have received a general arts education. Some start out by being journalists, while others may have wanted to be actors, playwrights or directors. There is a tradition in Britain of practitioner critics, of which Shaw is a good example; and among the critics quoted in this book, Irving Wardle and Frank Marcus are dramatists, Robert Cushman, Michael Billington and Kenneth Tynan have been directors, and others have had practical theatre experience of one sort or another. They are not, therefore, 'eunuchs in a harem', although they could be failed or embryonic sultans.

There are advantages and disadvantages in having professional experience in the art which one happens to be criticising. It is always helpful to know how a play gets put on, the difficulties of working on this or that kind of stage, the problems of casting, the limitations of budgets and the opportunities seized or missed. Theatre critics always have the problem, particularly with new plays, of trying to assess where the real credit lies – with the directors, actors or writers. Many second-rate plays have received bubble reputations through the work of imaginative directors. Critics must learn how not to be dazzled by wealth and how to steel their hearts against excessive displays of poverty. It is salutary for them also to feel what it is like to be on the target end of criticism, how painful it can be to receive a really unjust, dismissive review (perhaps misinformed, too). A bad review can affect not just box-offices, but the whole careers of actors and directors. Conscientious critics may have small nightmares about the mistakes which they perpetrate; but those whose talents are damned by such errors are faced with worse trials than a sharp twinge of conscience.

But there are also drawbacks to practitioner criticism. The theatre can easily become a very inbred activity, with the same people talking about the same things in the same way. A critic can easily get sucked into a self-perpetuating folly which carries the name of art but which relates to nothing but itself. Failed practitioners who turn critics can also carry with them some of their lost ambitions; and that can have unfortunate consequences — at worst, an underlying tone of 'sour grapes', or, more frequently, a readiness to praise those who are doing what they originally wanted to achieve or to blame those who are not.

No critic, of course, can be totally unprejudiced. However hard he may try for that multifarious receptiveness which only Indian

mystics and High Court judges are supposed to possess, he is inevitably biased, as all human beings are. But even prejudices are not absolute. A telling production can conquer them; and good critics are aware of their familiar tastes and, indeed, are prepared to subject them to continuous self-examination. The discussion of 'values' is the critic's stock-in-trade; and this involves worrying about why one prefers this kind of production to that. Critics, however, often tend to worry about values in a rather abstract way; whereas often their values are subtly determined by what could be called their allegiances.

Critics usually start by having a double allegiance – to their papers (and thus to their readers) and to the theatre. Some (particularly non-practitioner) critics assert that they really have only one allegiance, to their papers. They are, first and foremost, journalists; but journalists who specialise, whether in politics or the theatre, cannot be indifferent to the activity about which they are writing. If they are bored with the theatre, then they are likely to write boring columns, unless, of course, they regard the whole critical activity as an excuse to display their own verbal brilliance. Ambitious journalists will want to write longer and more eye-catching articles; and so, in the scramble for space in a paper, they will try to persuade their editors that the theatre is really a very important cultural phenomenon, worthy of special attention. They may not succeed, but they have to try; and thus they have a vested career interest in maintaining the health of the theatre.

Among the mass-circulation popular dailies and tabloids, very little space is usually given to the theatre, because it is considered to be a minority interest. The journalist is forced to condense his opinions into very few words, with little analysis to support them; and often he can do little more than to recommend or discourage. Since he is also looking for bright copy, he will be drawn into the 'smash-hit', 'disaster' and 'scandal' pattern; and, to that extent, his allegiance to his paper starts to determine the nature of his responses. This book could easily have been just a parade of hyperbole; and the reader may consider that it is sometimes in danger of being so.

In other papers, however, where the editors assume that their readers do regularly go to the theatre or, if not, like to know what is in fashion, the journalist-critic is given a considerable amount of space, and accordingly can develop his or her views. But more space does not mean less allegiance, nor should it. I am not suggesting that

Fleet Street editors seek to dictate editorial lines to their critics; nor do I wish to stress that familiar point that the capitalistic ownership of papers inevitably affects the tenor and content of what we read. That kind of allegiance, as far as theatre critics are concerned, is not the chief problem. But papers do have general images to maintain, which can be expressed in broadly political or class terms – left-wing productions do not usually receive such sympathetic treatment in the Daily Telegraph as in the Guardian – or in such matters as tone and emphasis. You do not read The Times to find out what is happening at the Talk of the Town or Raymond's Revuebar.

A paper's image is important, for that is what attracts regular readers; but it is not fixed. It varies from editor to editor, and from critic to critic; but it usually fluctuates within certain limits. A critic is usually not employed in the first place unless it is thought that he will somehow fit into the editorial grand scheme. I have never quite understood what skills an editor looks for when selecting a critic, but I would imagine that they consist mainly of an ability to write in the style to which the editor has become accustomed, a good knowledge of the theatre and a wide appreciation of our culture. Other qualities could also be valuable – such as imagination and stamina, a talent to write in the dark (in more senses than one) and a high boredom threshold, for, however attractive it may seem to spend five evenings or so at the theatre in a week, the routine can pall.

Another attribute could be added to this list – a readiness to enter into a public debate about the kinds of lives we lead, the society we live in and the alternatives which do, or could, exist. A critic has to have an appetite for speculation, not gullible or utopian, but constructively thoughtful. A critic has to enjoy the process of testing one theatrical vision against another, to understand and appreciate them all on many levels – of fashion, politics, psychological and spiritual insights. He should be impatient when the theatre narrows its range to the expression of very simple or familiar attitudes, but be responsive to new ideas from whatever quarter they may come. There is no such thing, in abstract, as 'good theatre'; for you can see highly skilled acting, beautiful sets and competent directing and still leave the theatre feeling that the experience has been a waste of time. Theatrical excellence lies as much in the quality of the debate as in the techniques of presentation, although often form and content cannot and should not be separated.

Critics who care about maintaining the health of the theatre, are

particularly concerned with furthering the debate; but how can they do so, for they are not principal speakers? Some try to encourage the newcomers – every critic likes to talent-spot – while others look at the theatre system as a whole, to see where and how talent is being frustrated. Others still seek to twist the debate, perhaps towards politics, religion or even Wagnerian opera; and sometimes their preoccupations with what ought to be said in the theatre can blind them to what actually is. The debate goes through fashions. During the 1950s, the concern with Christianity, social propriety and existentialism was very evident in the more serious-minded reviews, just as, in the 1960s, a rebellion against propriety was equally prominent.

Theatre criticism on this level is essentially ephemeral, tied to particular productions, times and places; and one purpose in compiling this book is to show how fashions in theatre criticism change. What have changed very little, however, are the physical circumstances in which critics write their reviews; and I admire the sheer proficiency and intelligence of those daily reviewers, such as Irving Wardle of *The Times*, who manage regularly to produce sensible articles within a couple of hours of the final curtain. I have been lucky enough mainly to work with weekly or monthly columns; but I can guess at the problems of Mr Wardle's job through my experiences of instant radio reviews – for LBC and Kaleidoscope, where I have had, on occasions, to rush from the theatre, writing notes frantically in taxis, before arriving at the broadcasting studio. My most nightmarish experience was in phoning through a radio review of Trevor Nunn's *Macbeth* from a telephone in the RSC's press office, with the actors wandering in and out of the room while I was talking. The most salutary lesson, however, came with two reviews I wrote on John Osborne's A Bond Honoured - one overnight for Paramount Pictures and the other for the monthly magazine, London Magazine.

These two pieces showed me how much my snap reactions could differ from my more considered opinions. My first impressions of A Bond Honoured were very favourable. I enjoyed John Dexter's stylish production, Robert Stephens's athletic performance and the dry wit of Maggie Smith's delivery. I had a good time at the theatre—and said so, for Paramount. For London Magazine, I had the opportunity to work more slowly; and so I went back to the original play, Lope de Vega's La Fianza Satisfecha on which A Bond

Honoured was based, to compare it with Osborne's adaptation. It then became clear that the new version was rather poor; a different kind of play, with a different theme, had been superimposed on the original, with the result that the ending was untidy and perfunctory. Dexter's production had skilfully disguised the weaknesses of Osborne's script.

I have no doubt that the London Magazine article was closer to the truth than the assessment for Paramount; but critics rarely have the time or the opportunity for this sort of prolonged consideration. In any case, it could be argued that my initial reaction was more useful than the later one, for if I originally enjoyed the production, other members of the public were also likely to do so. But is the critic's job simply to test the bath water for other people? I don't think it is. Underneath all the surface problems and attractions which beset the work of critics and the productions which they see, there remains a core of reality which critics ought, however dimly, to perceive and to be able, however incoherently, to express. Some plays are better than others: levels of quality do exist. Ultimately, the critic's task which is a formidable one indeed – is to distinguish between these levels as clearly and accurately as they can. Critics cannot expect many external rewards for what they do – they are neither over-paid nor over-liked. But if they can retain some glimpse of what is good and bad in the theatre, and recognise the degrees of goodness and badness (which is more difficult), their job can be satisfying to themselves and others, even honorable. Within this book, however, I have decided to let the reader be the critic of the critics, although my introductions to the productions may give an indication as to where my sympathies lie.

Collectively, these reviews remind us of the immediacy of the theatrical experience; and I have been fortunate to be able to include some theatre drawings by Feliks Topolski, whose remarkable talent at capturing fleeting dramatic impressions on his sketchpad complements the efforts of others in print. Topolski has been closely involved with British theatre, as observer and designer, since the 1930s; and the full range of his theatrical drawings and paintings require a volume or so to themselves. I am grateful, however, in that he has allowed me to reproduce not only some of his portraits from life but also those evocative sketches, jotted down during performances, from his customary place in the front row of the stalls, where the stage lights reflect down on to his pad.

The Old Vic at the New Theatre (1944–49)

The Old Vic theatre in Waterloo Road was bombed in 1941; but Tyrone Guthrie had kept an Old Vic company together, touring regional theatres from a base in Burnley. In 1944, however, Guthrie and the Vic-Wells governors decided that the Old Vic should return to London. One of the governors, Bronson Albery, was an impresario who owned the New Theatre, which he offered to the company as a temporary London home. Guthrie arranged that a new management team should be formed for the London seasons, consisting of Laurence Olivier and Ralph Richardson, who were both released from the Fleet Air Arm for the purpose, with John Burrell, a young drama producer from the BBC.

The first seasons were triumphant. I doubt whether any British company, before or since, made such an immediate impact on the public mind. Thirty years later, young actors were still mimicking Olivier's Richard III, a performance which they could not have seen except in the screen version. This performance, together with his remarkable double-performances as Hotspur and Justice Shallow in the *Henry IV* plays and as Oedipus and Mr Puff, raised Olivier's reputation as a classical actor above those of his contemporaries, which included John Gielgud and Donald Wolfit. He was widely regarded as the greatest living actor; but he was also a matinée idol—one paper disapproved of the fact that he was being given the kind of reception by teenagers associated with such pop stars as Frank Sinatra—and a patriotic symbol. His film of *Henry V* went on general release in 1945.

Richardson's performances as Peer Gynt, Falstaff and the Inspector in J. B. Priestley's An Inspector Calls were also acclaimed; and the Old Vic company included Sybil Thorndike, Miles Malleson, George Relph, Harcourt Williams and Margaret Leighton. The presence of such an acting team in London during the last months of the war was inspirational. British theatre-goers boasted that despite the doodlebugs and flying bombs, London possessed the finest acting company in the world. In 1945, the first formal steps were taken to unite the Old Vic with the Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre

Trust in a joint initiative to establish a British National Theatre, which eventually led to the passing of the first National Theatre Bill in 1949.

In the meantime, the Old Vic in a sense behaved like a national theatre. In 1945, Olivier led the company on a remarkable six-week summer tour of Europe. They were the first foreign company to be invited to play at the Comédie-Française, where they were rapturously received. They also visited Germany where the response, perhaps surprisingly, was not less enthusiastic. The Staatliche Schauspielhaus in Hamburg, which had miraculously survived without too much war damage, was packed with cheering audiences. They also played a matinée for the soldiers whose grim task was to care for the survivors and bury the dead at Belsen. Their Belsen visit was a harrowing experience. 'I'll never get over today,' wrote Sybil Thorndike afterwards, 'never.'

In preparation for the establishment of the new National Theatre, Olivier, Richardson and Burrell proposed to the Old Vic governors that a training centre should be incorporated into the Old Vic organisation. It was to consist of a children's theatre, a training school for actors and an experimental studio; and two directors associated with the pre-war London Theatre Studio, Michel St Denis and George Devine, were invited to run it with Glen Byam Shaw. According to Irving Wardle's *The Theatres of George Devine*, St Denis, a French director inspired by the work of Jacques Copeau and the *Compagnie des Quinze*, provided the original outlines of the scheme, while Devine was its dogged organiser. Of the three sides to the Old Vic Centre, the actors' training school was probably of greatest long-term value, for it furnished Britain with many of its best actors and directors of the coming generation.

The Old Vic seasons at the New, however, proved to be one of several false dawns for the National Theatre. In 1949, Olivier, in Australia touring with the Old Vic company, and Richardson, who was filming in Hollywood, were curtly informed by the new chairman of the Vic-Wells governors, Lord Esher, that their contracts would not be renewed. It was a great blow from which the Old Vic took years to recover; and indeed it never regained its former pre-eminence. The Old Vic Centre was soon to be disbanded, with Glen Byam Shaw moving to the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford, Devine eventually establishing the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre and St Denis accepting an