



A COMPANION TO
MODERN BRITISH
AND IRISH DRAMA
1880–2005

EDITED BY
MARY LUCKHURST

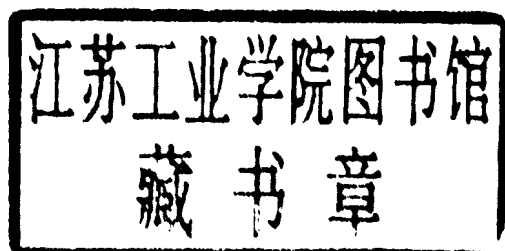


Blackwell
Publishing

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BLACKWELL PUBLISHING

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK
550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

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First published 2006 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

1 2006

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A companion to modern British and Irish drama, 1880–2005 / edited by Mary Luckhurst.

p. cm.—(Blackwell companions to literature and culture ; 43)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4051-2228-3 (alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-4051-2228-5 (alk. paper)

1. English drama—20th century—History and criticism—Handbooks, manuals, etc. 2. English drama—Irish authors—History and criticism—Handbooks, manuals, etc. 3. Ireland—Intellectual life—20th century—Handbooks, manuals, etc. 4. England—Intellectual life—20th century—Handbooks, manuals, etc. I. Luckhurst, Mary. II. Series.

PR736.C575 2006

822'.9109—dc22

2006010966

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 11 on 13pt Garamond
by SPi Publisher Services, Pondicherry, India
Printed and bound in Singapore
by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

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www.blackwellpublishing.com

Acknowledgements

This volume was peculiarly beset with catastrophic events, the first and worst of which was the very sad death of Clive Barker. Clive would have written the essay on drama and World War I; instead readers got me. Following Clive's last exit contributors suffered mysterious palsies, hospitalization, the death of close relatives, the hospitalization of close relatives, chronic administration syndrome, deadline phobia, cricket addiction, and domestic flooding. That this volume was completed at all says much about the extraordinary dedication of its essayists and to all I extend my warmest gratitude. I would like, in particular, to thank John Brannigan, John Bull, John Deeney, Gabriele Griffin, Declan Kiberd, Lionel Pilkington, David Ian Rabey, Anthony Roche and Katharine Worth for very helpful conversations and correspondence. Andy Lavender, Jan McDonald, and Victor Merriman came on board late in the project and delivered superb chapters. Christy Adair, Maggie Gale, Dan Rebellato and Simon Mills all gave useful feedback. John Lennard was, as ever, a generous and enlightening discussion partner. My work on this Companion was greatly helped by financial support from the Department of English's F. R. Leavis Fund at the University of York. My colleagues were supportive and enthusiastic: Laura Chrisman and Victoria Coulson were excellent readers, Lawrence Rainey commiserated heartily, Derek Attridge gave sound advice, and Ben Harker was an astute conversationalist. Mike Corder and Richard Rowland are beyond compare as colleagues and friends. Emilie Pine's proof-reading was a godsend. Thanks go to Duncan Wu, who spoke words of wisdom at critical points. Dawn Fowler and Kate Holeywell gave invaluable help with administration and research. During the summer when I was editing most intently Kai Low's company and cooking made me almost light-headed with happiness. There are no words for Vike Plock's steadfast and careful editorial assistance: she is superhuman and you heard it here first. Lastly, I would like to thank Emma Bennett for commissioning me to do this fantastic project; Astrid Wind for her unfailing and good-humoured efficiency; Fiona Sewell for her meticulous copyediting; Greg Callus for indexing with a conscience; and Tom Hunt for laconic support.

Mary Luckhurst

List of Illustrations

Rejane rehearsing for a Paris production of <i>A Doll's House</i> by Henrik Ibsen	39
A poster advertising <i>The New Woman</i> by Sidney Grundy	55
George Alexander, Mrs Patrick Campbell and Helena Rous in <i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i> by Oscar Wilde	215
Mrs Beere and Herbert Beerbohm Tree in <i>A Woman of No Importance</i> by Oscar Wilde	216
Tim Preece, Alfred Lynch and Norman Rossington in <i>Prisoner and Escort</i> by Charles Wood	344
Ben Tyler-Wray in <i>Far Away</i> by Caryl Churchill	486
Jim Stevenson, Kai Low, Alex Crampton, Fran Trewin, Fiona Cooper and Lewis Charlesworth in <i>Far Away</i> by Caryl Churchill	486
Meredith MacNeill and Paul Rhys in Theatre de Complicite's <i>Measure for Measure</i>	557
Olaf Reincke, Tom Hanslmaier and Konstantin Mishin in <i>Vivisector</i>	557

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Contents

Acknowledgements	xi
List of Illustrations	xii
Notes on Contributors	xiii
Introduction	1
<i>Mary Luckhurst</i>	
Part I Contexts	5
1 Domestic and Imperial Politics in Britain and Ireland: The Testimony of Irish Theatre	7
<i>Victor Merriman</i>	
2 Reinventing England	22
<i>Declan Kiberd</i>	
3 Ibsen in the English Theatre in the <i>Fin de Siècle</i>	35
<i>Katherine Newey</i>	
4 New Woman Drama	48
<i>Sally Ledger</i>	
Part II Mapping New Ground, 1900–1939	61
5 Shaw among the Artists	63
<i>Jan McDonald</i>	
6 Granville Barker and the Court Dramatists	75
<i>Cary M. Mazer</i>	
7 Gregory, Yeats and Ireland's Abbey Theatre	87
<i>Mary Trotter</i>	

8	Suffrage Theatre: Community Activism and Political Commitment <i>Susan Carlson</i>	99
9	Unlocking Synge Today <i>Christopher Murray</i>	110
10	Sean O'Casey's Powerful Fireworks <i>Jean Chothia</i>	125
11	Auden and Eliot: Theatres of the Thirties <i>Robin Grove</i>	138
Part III England, Class and Empire, 1939–1990		151
12	Empire and Class in the Theatre of John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy <i>Mary Brewer</i>	153
13	When Was the Golden Age? Narratives of Loss and Decline: John Osborne, Arnold Wesker and Rodney Ackland <i>Stephen Lacey</i>	164
14	A Commercial Success: Women Playwrights in the 1950s <i>Susan Bennett</i>	175
15	Home Thoughts from Abroad: Mustapha Matura <i>D. Keith Peacock</i>	188
16	The Remains of the British Empire: The Plays of Winsome Pinnock <i>Gabriele Griffin</i>	198
Part IV Comedy		211
17	Wilde's Comedies <i>Richard Allen Cave</i>	213
18	Always Acting: Noël Coward and the Performing Self <i>Frances Gray</i>	225
19	Beckett's Divine Comedy <i>Katharine Worth</i>	237
20	Form and Ethics in the Comedies of Brendan Behan <i>John Brannigan</i>	247
21	Joe Orton: Anger, Artifice and Absurdity <i>David Higgins</i>	258
22	Alan Ayckbourn: Experiments in Comedy <i>Alexander Leggatt</i>	269
23	'They Both Add up to Me': The Logic of Tom Stoppard's Dialogic Comedy <i>Paul Delaney</i>	279

24	Stewart Parker's Comedy of Terrors <i>Anthony Roche</i>	289
Part V War and Terror		299
25	A Wounded Stage: Drama and World War I <i>Mary Luckhurst</i>	301
26	Staging 'the Holocaust' in England <i>John Lennard</i>	316
27	Troubling Perspectives: Northern Ireland, the 'Troubles' and Drama <i>Helen Lojek</i>	329
28	On War: Charles Wood's Military Conscience <i>Dawn Fowler and John Lennard</i>	341
29	Torture in the Plays of Harold Pinter <i>Mary Luckhurst</i>	358
30	Sarah Kane: From Terror to Trauma <i>Steve Waters</i>	371
Part VI Theatre since 1968		383
31	Theatre since 1968 <i>David Pattie</i>	385
32	Lesbian and Gay Theatre: All Queer on the West End Front <i>John Deeney</i>	398
33	Edward Bond: Maker of Myths <i>Michael Patterson</i>	409
34	John McGrath and Popular Political Theatre <i>Maria DiCenzo</i>	419
35	David Hare and Political Playwriting: Between the Third Way and the Permanent Way <i>John Deeney</i>	429
36	Left in Front: David Edgar's Political Theatre <i>John Bull</i>	441
37	Liz Lochhead: Writer and Re-Writer: Stories, Ancient and Modern <i>Jan McDonald</i>	454
38	'Spirits that Have Become Mean and Broken': Tom Murphy and the 'Famine' of Modern Ireland <i>Shaun Richards</i>	466
39	Caryl Churchill: Feeling Global <i>Elin Diamond</i>	476

40	Howard Barker and the Theatre of Catastrophe <i>Chris Megson</i>	488
41	Reading History in the Plays of Brian Friel <i>Lionel Pilkington</i>	499
42	Marina Carr: Violence and Destruction: Language, Space and Landscape <i>Cathy Leeney</i>	509
43	Scrubbing up Nice? Tony Harrison's Stagings of the Past <i>Richard Rowland</i>	519
44	The Question of Multiculturalism: The Plays of Roy Williams <i>D. Keith Peacock</i>	530
45	Ed Thomas: Jazz Pictures in the Gaps of Language <i>David Ian Rabey</i>	541
46	Theatre and Technology <i>Andy Lavender</i>	551
	Index	563

Introduction

Mary Luckhurst

'Modern British drama' is a tricky label and a contested notion. The idea that certain playwrights and certain plays might be representative of various cultures and various communities is troubling. If the English were later than most to acquire a national theatre, it was in many ways because it was not seen to be needed: there was Shakespeare, there was the English language and there was imperial self-regard. The fact that the National Theatre came into existence during the postimperial crisis is no surprise. But recognizing the power of that seismic crisis and acknowledging the continuing quakes is another matter entirely for the English. Only very slowly indeed is that happening, and as Declan Kiberd points out in chapter 2, it has been at the prompting of plays by modern Irish dramatists, which the English have imported to view themselves at a safe remove. 'The project of inventing Ireland', Kiberd says, 'presupposed the task of helping the neighbouring people to reinvent the idea of England' and the 'shaping of the modern democratic *polis* has been rehearsed in the dramas of England over the past half-century'. A major difficulty for the idea of English drama is that it has been consumed by the notion of British drama, just as 'England' has been consumed by the idea of 'Britain'. Englishness needs redefining just as English drama needs re-viewing and reassessing with postcoloniality in mind. Irish drama, Scottish drama and Welsh drama can all be seen to be engaged in the political project of interrogating histories and identities, and reimagining past and present. Drama in England is generally not thought about in this sense, and the academy lags behind the inventive endeavours of many playwrights and theatre companies. The postcolonial agenda, then, is strong in this *Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama*, and because of recent history the forum for much reflection, as Victor Merriman elucidates in chapter 1, is the dramatic traffic that has flowed from Ireland to England and vice versa.

If imperial history is a significant and passionately discussed narrative in this volume then so is the feminist agenda – and in the case of Winsome Pinnock they, of course, overlap, as Gabriele Griffin discusses in chapter 16. 'Postfeminism' is an

invidious ideological construct and there is no credence given to it on these pages. Too many retrospectives of twentieth-century British and Irish drama have paid shockingly tokenistic attention to plays by female authors despite the important advances made in theatre criticism. As Sally Ledger makes clear in chapter 4, there is still a huge amount of work to be done in evaluating the extraordinary contribution of women dramatists in their outstandingly effective political campaign. The post-Ibsen realist project has overwhelmingly been written up as a male enterprise, and unhappy as the term 'women playwrights' is, it will be used as long as the academy treats them inequitably. Periodicity comes into the equation here. The negative constructions of the New Woman still tend to be feted more in conservative plays than in the extraordinary and radical plays by women such as Elizabeth Robins. Suffrage plays still tend to be treated as something apart from the canon. John Osborne has been privileged over an infinitely more progressive Shelagh Delaney. Sarah Kane and Marina Carr are privileged apparently because they write violent plays, and stray into a territory that prejudice has reserved for the masculine. The theatre industry itself has problems: the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), the Royal Court and the National Theatre (NT) have never employed a female artistic director, and women directors find the profession notoriously difficult to navigate. Certain voices, it seems, are still too dangerous to be heard, as Gurpreet Bhatti discovered when her play *Behzti* was closed down because of riots at the Birmingham Rep in 2004 and she had to go into hiding. Without doubt, there are other voices in Britain and Ireland that go unheard – one of the last taboos certainly appears to reside in being an openly lesbian playwright, and lesbian theatre, unlike gay theatre, really struggles with visibility. There are chapters in this volume that look penetratingly at these issues and insist on wholesale re-examination.

If feminist and postcolonial agendas dominate this volume, it is not at the expense of many other vitally important questions. Why the history of modern British theatre, for example, is predominantly refracted through the lenses of three institutions – the Royal Court, the NT and the RSC – is quite baffling. Similarly, the Abbey Theatre with its particular literary and performative traditions has dominated the history of modern Irish drama for good and bad.

The question of the metropolis versus the regions is also raised. Without doubt the histories of regional theatres and performance events in Britain and Ireland have been marginalized, and urgent work is needed to chase away some of the myths about conservatism and the supposed lack of modernist experimentation. Kate Newey reflects on this in chapter 3, wondering at the adoption and naturalization of Ibsenite realism by the English, and what that whole project may have steam-rolled and erased.

This Companion is divided into six parts. The first sets out broad historical and political frames; the second examines modern playwrights and theatrical events that had a profound influence on the mid- to late twentieth century. The third considers specific aspects of class and empire. Part IV celebrates the different comic modes that have been famously deployed by many British and Irish dramatists. Chapters in 'War

and 'Terror' explore the representation of conflict, atrocity and trauma on stage – subjects which have not received enough critical attention from theatre historians. In chapter 26, for example, John Lennard reflects on Holocaust drama in Britain, and in chapter 28 Charles Wood is rightly identified as the most significant living dramatist of war. Part VI traces significant developments in theatre since 1968 and looks at a plethora of very diverse playwrights engaging with a variety of agendas. Many questions are posed, many dialogues conducted. This Companion is polemical and provocative and, hopefully, far from representative.