

Michael Patterson

Strategies of Political Theatre

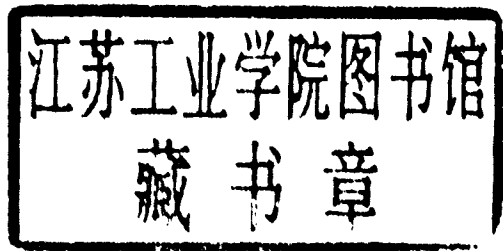
Post-War British Playwrights



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For Kerry, Jamie and Gráinne

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Brief chronology, 1953–1989

- 1953** Joan Littlewood opens Theatre Workshop at Stratford East
- 1954** English Stage Company founded by Ronald Duncan and Neville Blond. Brendan Behan's first play, *The Quare Fellow*, staged by Joan Littlewood at Stratford East
- 1955** Anthony Eden replaces Winston Churchill as Prime Minister
Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952) performed at Arts Theatre, London
- 1956** The Suez crisis. Soviet troops enter Hungary
First season of English Stage Company (now with George Devine) at Royal Court Theatre includes premiere of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. Visit to London of Berliner Ensemble with Bertolt Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *Mother Courage*. Death of Brecht. Peter Brook directs Paul Scofield in *Hamlet*
- 1957** Harold Macmillan replaces Anthony Eden as Prime Minister
John Osborne's *The Entertainer* staged at Royal Court, directed by Tony Richardson. Samuel Beckett: *Endgame*
- 1958** Founding of European Common Market. First march by Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament to Aldermaston
Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* flops after one week. Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* performed at Stratford East before transferring to the West End

Brief chronology, 1953–1989

John Arden: *Live Like Pigs* staged at Royal Court

Shelagh Delaney: *A Taste of Honey*

Arnold Wesker: *Chicken Soup with Barley* staged at Royal Court

1959 The Mermaid Theatre opens

John Arden: *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*, directed by Lindsay Anderson

Arnold Wesker: *Roots*, directed by John Dexter

Arnold Wesker: *The Kitchen*

1960 John F. Kennedy elected US President

Centre 42 founded. Harold Pinter: *The Caretaker*

John Arden: *The Happy Haven*, directed by William Gaskill

Arnold Wesker: *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*, directed by John Dexter at the Royal Court

1961 US invasion of Cuba (Bay of Pigs). Berlin Wall erected

Peter Hall as artistic director of the Stratford Memorial Theatre, leases Aldwych and founds the Royal Shakespeare Company. John Osborne: *Luther*

1962 Cuban missile crisis. First success of the Beatles

Peter Brook's Theatre of Cruelty season. Edward Albee: *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Edward Bond: *The Pope's Wedding*

Arnold Wesker: *Chips with Everything*, directed by John Dexter at the Royal Court

1963 President Kennedy assassinated. Alec Douglas-Home replaces Macmillan as Prime Minister

The National Theatre opens at the Old Vic

John Arden: *The Workhouse Donkey*

Joan Littlewood: *Oh What A Lovely War*

- 1964** Harold Wilson becomes first Labour Prime Minister since 1951. Lyndon B. Johnson elected US President
Peter Brook's productions of Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade*. John Osborne: *Inadmissible Evidence*
John Arden: *Armstrong's Last Goodnight* premiered at the Glasgow Citizens' Theatre
- 1965** Intensification of the Vietnam War. Anti-war demonstrations in USA. Race riots in Los Angeles
Death of George Devine. Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*. CAST (Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre) and the People Show founded. Theatre in Education initiated. John Osborne: *A Patriot for Me*. Frank Marcus: *The Killing of Sister George*
Edward Bond: *Saved*
David Mercer: *Ride a Cock Horse*
- 1966** Wilson announces 'standstill' in wages and prices. Mao Tse-tung: *Quotations of Chairman Mao*
Peter Brook's *US* at Aldwych. Raymond Williams: *Modern Tragedy*
John McGrath: *Events while Guarding the Bofors Gun*
Arnold Wesker: *Their Very Own and Golden City*
- 1967** Pound devalued. 50,000 demonstrate against Vietnam War in Washington. Six-Day War between Israel and Arab nations
Joe Orton murdered. Alan Ayckbourn's first success with *Relatively Speaking*. Peter Nichols: *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*
- 1968** Assassination of Martin Luther King. Student revolt in Paris: the so-called *événements*. Riots in Chicago during Democratic convention. Russians invade Czechoslovakia. Restriction of black immigration into Britain

Abolition of Lord Chamberlain's powers of censorship. David Hare founds Portable Theatre with Tony Bicat. Charles Marowitz opens the Open Space Theatre. Red Ladder and Welfare State founded.

John Arden: *The Hero Rises Up*

Peter Barnes: *The Ruling Class*

Edward Bond: *Early Morning*

Edward Bond: *Narrow Road to the Deep North*

John McGrath: *Bakke's Night of Fame*

Alan Plater: *Close the Coalhouse Door*

1969 Nixon becomes US President. British troops sent into Northern Ireland in response to sectarian violence

Trevor Nunn takes over Royal Shakespeare Company from Peter Hall

Howard Brenton: *Christie in Love*

Howard Brenton: *Gum and Goo*

Peter Nichols: *The National Health*

John Spurling: *Macrune's Guevara*

1970 Conservative government returned to power, led by Edward Heath. First time 18-year-olds able to vote. US National Guard shoots four student protesters against Vietnam War. Marxist President elected in Chile. Women's Liberation Group and Gay Liberation Front founded

Peter Brook directs *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. David Storey: *Home*

Trevor Griffiths: *Occupations*

David Hare: *Slag*

John McGrath: *Random Happenings in the Hebrides*

David Mercer: *After Haggerty*

Arnold Wesker: *The Friends*

- 1971** Fighting in Vietnam spills over into Laos and Cambodia.
Introduction of internment in Northern Ireland; violence escalates
Founding of 7:84 and General Will. Harold Pinter's *Old Times*
Edward Bond: *Lear*
Howard Brenton: *Scott of the Antarctic*
David Edgar: *The National Interest*
David Edgar: *Tedderella*
Trevor Griffiths: *Thermidor*
Portable Theatre: *Lay-By*
- 1972** Beginning of the Watergate affair. Britain imposes direct rule on Northern Ireland
John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy: *The Island of the Mighty*
John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy: *The Ballygombeen Bequest*
Howard Barker: *Alpha Alpha*
Howard Brenton: *Hitler Dances*
Howard Brenton, David Edgar and David Hare: *England's Ireland* performed in Amsterdam
Caryl Churchill: *Owners*
Trevor Griffiths: *Sam, Sam*
David Hare: *The Great Exhibition*
John McGrath: *Serjeant Musgrave Dances On*
Arnold Wesker: *The Old Ones*
- 1973** Britain joins the Common Market. Arab oil embargo; fuel crisis. Chilean president overthrown by military coup
Peter Hall takes over National Theatre from Laurence Olivier
Edward Bond: *The Sea*
Edward Bond: *Bingo*

Brief chronology, 1953-1989

Howard Brenton: *Magnificence*

Howard Brenton and David Hare: *Brassneck*

David Edgar and Howard Brenton: *A Fart for Europe*

Trevor Griffiths: *The Party*

John McGrath: *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*

- 1974** Worldwide inflation. Wilson replaces Heath, after Heath had failed to rally the nation against the miners in the so-called 'Winter of Discontent'. Violence in Northern Ireland spreads to Britain: terrorist bomb in Houses of Parliament. Nixon forced to resign over Watergate, replaced by Gerald Ford
Joint Stock and Women's Theatre Group founded
Howard Brenton: *The Churchill Play*
David Edgar: *Dick Deterred*
David Hare: *Knuckle*
John McGrath: *The Imperial Policeman*
Arnold Wesker: *The Wedding Feast* performed in Stockholm
- 1975** Margaret Thatcher succeeds Heath as leader of Conservatives. Fall of Saigon
Opening of the Riverside Studios, Hammersmith. Harold Pinter's *No Man's Land*. Stephen Poliakoff: *City Sugar*
John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy: *The Non-Stop Connolly Show*
Howard Barker: *Claw*
Howard Barker: *Stripwell*
Edward Bond: *The Fool*
Caryl Churchill: *Objections to Sex and Violence*
Trevor Griffiths: *Comedians*
David Hare: *Fanshen*
David Hare: *Teeth 'n' Smiles*

John McGrath: *Little Red Hen*

Arnold Wesker: *The Journalists* published

- 1976** First nuclear treaty between USA and USSR. James Callaghan replaces Wilson as Prime Minister. Blacks riot in South Africa. Jimmy Carter elected US President

The National Theatre opens on the South Bank. Gay Sweatshop founded

Howard Brenton: *Weapons of Happiness*

Caryl Churchill: *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*

Caryl Churchill: *Vinegar Tom*

David Edgar: *Destiny*

Arnold Wesker: *The Merchant* performed in Stockholm

- 1977** US protests about harassment of Czech dissidents

Robert Bolt: *State of Revolution*

Caryl Churchill: *Traps*

David Edgar: *Wreckers*

- 1978** Marxist guerrillas seize power in Nicaragua

Harold Pinter: *Betrayal*

Howard Barker: *The Hang of the Gaol*

Edward Bond: *The Bundle*

Edward Bond: *The Woman*

Howard Brenton, David Hare and Trevor Griffiths: *Deeds*

David Edgar: *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs*

David Hare: *Plenty*

David Mercer: *Cousin Vladimir*

- 1979** Margaret Thatcher wins general election, pursues monetarist policies

Edward Bond: *The Worlds*

Caryl Churchill: *Cloud Nine*

- 1980** Reagan elected US President. Start of Iran–Iraq War
Death of David Mercer
Howard Brenton: *The Romans in Britain*
David Edgar: *Nicholas Nickleby* (adaptation)
- 1981** Greenham Common Peace Camp starts
John McGrath publishes *A Good Night Out*. Samuel Beckett: *Catastrophe*
Howard Barker: *No End of Blame*
- 1982** Falklands conflict
The Royal Shakespeare Company moves to the Barbican
Caryl Churchill: *Top Girls*
Trevor Griffiths: *Oil for England*
David Hare: *A Map of the World* performed in Adelaide
- 1983** Thatcher re-elected with landslide victory
Caryl Churchill: *Fen*
Sarah Daniels: *Masterpieces*
David Edgar: *Maydays*
- 1984** Reagan re-elected. Thatcher confronts unions, especially in the long-lasting miners' strike
Arts Council 'Glory of the Garden' policy
Caryl Churchill: *Softcops*
John McGrath: *Imperial Policeman*
Harold Pinter: *One for the Road*
Stephen Poliakoff: *Breaking the Silence*
- 1985** Gorbachev becomes Soviet leader, initiates *perestroika*, a liberalization of the USSR
Edward Bond: *War Plays*
David Hare and Howard Brenton: *Pravda*

Brief chronology, 1953–1989

- 1986** David Rudkin: *The Saxon Shore*
- 1987** Thatcher re-elected for third term
Caryl Churchill: *Serious Money*
David Edgar: *Entertaining Strangers* performed at the National Theatre
- 1988** Passing of so-called Clause 28, banning the promotion of homosexuality in schools. End of conflict between Iraq and Iran
Howard Barker: *The Bite of the Night*
Howard Brenton: *Greenland*
David Hare: *The Secret Rapture*
Harold Pinter: *Mountain Language*
Timberlake Wertenbaker: *Our Country's Good*
- 1989** George Bush elected US President. Collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe. Dismantling of the Berlin Wall. Vaclav Havel becomes President of the Czech Republic
Caryl Churchill: *Icecream*

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Introduction

This book is about a curious phenomenon. It examines the work of nine talented and innovative British playwrights who shared a laudable but strange conviction: that by writing plays and having them performed, they might help to change the way society is structured.

It is not a new conviction. Over two millennia ago Aristotle's theory of *catharsis*, that by watching a tragedy we may be purged of unhealthy emotions, ascribed a direct social benefit to drama. The Christian Church, while often distrustful of theatre, was willing to use drama as one of the means of propagating faith, giving us our modern word 'propaganda'. Eighteenth-century utilitarianism frequently justified drama in terms of its social usefulness, the German playwright Friedrich Schiller typically entitling his seminal essay of 1784, 'The theatre regarded as a moral institution'.

In the twentieth century, theatre with an intention to convert to a new way of thinking, or at least to challenge old modes of thought, became more overtly political, questioning not so much social morality as the fundamental organization of society, with the emphasis on economics rather than on ethics. Usually informed by Marx's analysis of capitalism, a number of directors and playwrights, most notably Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht, sought to use the stage to propose socialist alternatives to the injustices of the world about them. In so doing they helped to define what we have now come to term 'political theatre', the actual title of Piscator's 1929 book on his work in the theatre.

All theatre is political. Indeed, it is the most political of all art forms. Most obviously, it is presented in a much more public forum than any other art. A novel may be read by more people than see a