

## Exporting an Aesthetic, Importing Another? Experimental (Ad)ventures in Contemporary British Theatre

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After the example of Beckett, who radically dismantled traditional dramatic structures and transgressed the conventions of the realistic stage, English theatre, since the appearance of Harold Pinter in 1957, has moved into the terrain of theatrical experimentation, playing on variants of dramatic form in structure and speech and testing new staging possibilities. With few exceptions English theatre embraced all the features of rupture, conflict, ambiguity, diffusion, pastiche and discontinuity that have passed under the convenient rubric of postmodernism. From Pinter's linguistic traps and psycho-chambers to Stoppard's self-indulgent textual mazes, from Bond's marxisant postmodernism and Barker's poeticized cruelty to Kane's and Ravenhill's "new brutalism" and from Churchill's cross-generic theatre to Wertebaker's multi-layered metatheatre, the English stage has steadily exported to the western world an effective as much as innovative theatrical idiom.

At the same time the fear of exhaustion has been haunting playwrights and critics for the last thirty years at least. Among other symptoms the peculiar phenomenon of an unconditional admiration for the production of any new or old Irish play on the contemporary London stage might further confirm the inner state of conflict of a culture that proudly exports its distinct theatre aesthetic abroad but is secretly discontented with its own devices. There may be several interrelated causes for this aporia. Performance art often stumbles over its seemingly triumphant autonomization from the dramatic text, as the gradual decline of Britain's most acclaimed physical theatre company Théâtre de Complicité may suggest. The recently tagged "postdramatic theatre" (Lehmann) does not seem to guarantee a viable future, as Martin Crimp's recent return to more traditional forms in his major play *The Country* (2000) might imply. The "intelligent stage" and "cybertheatre" are hybrid forms which oppose the very essence of theatre as a living art and cannot effectively compete with other

more pure digital visual media. To make things worse, established dramatists and theatre directors are either becoming stale or are turning to film, while many new theatrical voices are only ephemeral sparks in dying embers. What could the future of an avant-garde or an experimental theatre be in the radically changing landscape of the arts in an era of virtual reality and cybernetic technology?

Furthermore, what is the meaning of avant-garde or experimental theatre in the current critical jargon? Are they tautological, contradictory or conveniently overlapping terms? Is their primary concern textual innovation or technical renewal in performance or both and what is the place of progressive ideology in all this? Such questions have never found a satisfactory answer in the course of the centennial or so history of the artistic avant-garde and, even in our present theoretical or critical practices, we still have to face the annoying fact of incessant misappropriations of terms and slippages of meaning. Christopher Innes in his *Avant Garde Theatre: 1892-1992* (1993) excludes Beckett and Pinter from his examination and rather mutely shifts the onus on innovative directors. On the contrary James Roose-Evans in his *Experimental Theatre* (1984), pays more reverence to innovative dramatists and feels the need for the writing of a separate book on *their* contributions to experimental theatre to balance his own concentration on the experimental work of directors. John Bull in his *New British Political Dramatists* (1984) draws a dividing line between the agit-prop and the avant-garde, thus robbing the latter of its undisputed historical association with progressive political thought. Among more recent studies, Judy E. Yordon, in her *Experimental Theatre: Creating and Staging Texts* (1997), concentrates on extra-dramatic sources for experimental performance. By contrast, Erik MacDonald, in *Theater at the Margins: Text and the Post-Structured Stage* (1993), selects existing dramatic texts to demonstrate the innovativeness of "post-structuralist theatre," prioritizing the "post-structured stage" over the historical avant-garde for the former's ability to "provide a basis for either critique or positive social action" (MacDonald 174). Along similar lines Johannes Birringer, in *Theatre, Theory, Postmodernism* (1993) confirms today's collusion of "advanced art" with the "technology of culture promotion" (1993: 182), thus implying the identification of the avant-garde with the ethics of postmodernity. On the other hand, Richard Murphy, in *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity* (1999), attributes the double role of internal and external critical intervention precisely to the historical avant-garde. Trying to ease such theoretical tensions and keeping in line with Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984), I prefer to view the artistic avant-garde as that form of art which continues to question equally forcefully both established social structures and artistic conventions and is in a constant state of ideological and aesthetic shift and repositioning.

The indeterminacy of definitions is also doubled by another troublesome issue that might further impede our present investigation: the relentless antagonism between text- and performance-based theatre for prevalence on the con-

temporary stage. Both sides put up equally strong claims to originality and renewal. A cursory look at some currently written articles on the issue within the British theatrical scene would prove that both camps come to the battle armed with valid arguments, while also revealing fatal gaps in their rhetoric. The former socialist dramatist David Edgar, in his recent article "The Canon, the Contemporary and the New" (2001), promotes, not without good reason, the full-bodied drama of narrative, arguments and ideas, while bemoaning the poverty in dramatic scholarship that plagues performance-oriented theatre studies. His argument is sound and it can receive further justification if for a moment we glance at the career of one of the best-known physical theatre groups in Britain in the last fifteen years, the Théâtre de Complicité. Tracing the success of their productions we can mark the decline of their outstanding technique into rather mechanical clichés as soon as the story narrated thins in content or structure. That was the case, for instance, in their recent production of *Mnemonic* (1999), a play devised by one of the founders of the group, Simon McBurney, whereas the majority of their previous, most acclaimed work was based on already existing literary or dramatic texts.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, current theatre practice has also pointed out the degeneration of much recent verbocentric theatre, especially the type loaded with intellectual debate or political thinking, into documentary or pedantic drama which has lost the power of the dramatic imagination. Edgar's own recent *The Prisoner's Dilemma* (2001) as much as Timberlake Wertenbaker's *After Darwin* (1998) and, much more, her latest *Credible Witness* (2001) bear all the marks of a drama which remains too dependent on flat, documentary knowledge of a journalistic or academic nature and loses the flights of artistic vision. The common critical charges against Edgar's play and Wertenbaker's latter one (that they are too "pedantic" or "academic") are fairly grounded.<sup>2</sup> Also Wertenbaker's artificial use of metatheatricity in *After Darwin* proves too stale and forced a device to give life to a flat historical drama that lacks the imaginative power of her great earlier success *Our Country's Good* (1988).

Perhaps the best example of a successful recent argumentative play is Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen* (1998), which manages to counterbalance the perils of mere verbal complexity by means of a spellbinding internal dramatic structure, based on an interweaving flux in argument and emotion. The problem remains, however, if this is the right type of drama for contemporary performance, even if one watches it from the privileged position of a limited number of spectators, placed back stage behind the performance area and facing across

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1. Some of these productions are *The Winter's Tale*, *The Street of Crocodiles*, *Out of a House Walked a Man*, *The Three Lives of Lucie Gabrol*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *The Chairs*.

2. See the relevant reviews of the London theatre critics in *Theatre Record*, issues 16-29 July 2001 and 11-25 February 2001 respectively.

to the main body of the audience, according to the director's clever staging arrangement.<sup>3</sup> Frayn's three characters, even more than in Edgar's or Wertebaker's aforementioned plays, are mere talking heads and one could as well close the eyes and give oneself up to the seductive sensations of beautiful aural language – in other words to an audio-drama. The eloquent conclusion from such recent examples from the British stage could be that all the Artaudian advantages of contemporary experimental theatre seem to have been, regrettably, lost to the conventional, well-written Shavian play of ideas. Or, if some Artaudian features have been retained, as in Edward Bond's recent *The Crime of the Twenty-First Century* (1999), they become a stale repetition of the writer's earlier archetypal images without any effort for new artistic configurations.<sup>4</sup>

At this point a brief reference to two recent productions of two new American political plays, Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul* (2001) and Eve Ensler's *Necessary Targets* (2001) could be suggestive of how a contemporary political theme can be dramatized so as to avoid journalistic or scholarly platitudes. Both Kushner's and Ensler's plays are extremely topical: The former tackles the Taliban regime in Afganistan and the latter the Bosnian war in former Yugoslavia. To break with a documentary linear presentation Tony Kushner divides the play into two parts, the first comprising a lengthy but absorbing monologue by a sophisticated middle-aged British woman, exposing her limited and distorted knowledge of an alien culture like that of Afganistan in a self-complacent British society, while the second transfers the action to Afganistan itself, where the woman's husband and daughter intersect with various social and cultural representatives of this faraway country in their attempt to trace the mystery of her sudden disappearance. Rather than following a realistic narrative Kushner gives to his play a surrealistic twist, which promotes ambiguity and a fascination with the unknown, focusing equally on alien and home culture and the vagaries of psychic life. It is a complex play, which invites an internal voyage rather than a picaresque adventure in the exotic orient. In a similar manner Ensler bypasses the difficulty of accounting for the Bosnian culture, so remote to the average American citizen, by shifting focus on the psychological journey of the two American women volunteers, a psychiatrist and a journalist, who had been sent out to "help" Bosnian women in their distress. Thus both Kushner and Ensler strategically avoid the risks of mirroring a journalistic coverage of repressive cultures

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3. I am referring to the original London production of the play, directed by Michael Blackmore.

4. This play could be compared, for instance, to another slightly earlier play that Bond wrote in the 1990s, *Coffee* (1995), which shows a remarkable development in the dramatist's theatrical idiom in that it combines the new sharp political sensibilities of the 1990s with a surrealistic (Artaudian) rather than a dialectical (Brechtian) aesthetic. This play is a true testament to a "post-structuralist theatre," working "beyond the vanishing point," at the margins of meaning (See MacDonald).

and war atrocities and of assuming the arrogant, safe, voyeuristic attitude of an all-knowing western eye. They rather reverse the situation and expose the insecurities of the “homebodies” when they come face to face with other cultures and different peoples.

Contrary to the effective strategies of transference and reversal in Kushner’s and Ensler’s cultural and political investigation, the public English plays mentioned above, mainly Edgar’s *The Prisoner’s Dilemma* and Wertenbaker’s *Credible Witness*, remain trapped in a trivialized eurocentric discourse, tame, politically correct and ridden by media wisdom and morality rather than being rough, outspoken, independent and honestly self-critical.

A quasi-fixation on high debate, sophisticated socio-cultural themes and theoretical issues, a love for intellectualism and a self-complacent verbocentricity in this type of contemporary British theatre (features which would also fit in a different sense two other more idiosyncratic writers, Tom Stoppard and Howard Barker) would render the usual charges of “elitism” or “word-wizardry,” voiced by performance inclined critics, not without justification (Woodall). Some supporters of this latter camp have lately strengthened their attacks on the viability of text-based theatre, by either predicting or suggesting its conflation with (or even submersion in) other more flexible visual media like the cinema (Woodall, and Birringer 1998: 6). Others have praised the advantages of the introduction of digital technology to the contemporary stage (see Lovell, and Kershaw).

Pure hi-tech experiments for application in contemporary dance and theatre practice have been carried out especially in American Universities’ performance and media centres. The reports are breathtaking.<sup>5</sup> New terms like “intelligent stage” and “cybertheatre” give the measure of this new technological impetus taking over the contemporary stage. Is the traditional human-driven theatre under siege? Is it pushed to a cyber avant-garde, hand in hand with digital technology or will it die in the hands of digital technology and hyperkinetics, following the advance notice on the “death of the playwright” and the extinction of the performing body? One exciting theatrical advancement of the new technology is the concept of the virtual “performing space,” that is the possibility of mobilizing space, of turning it from a fixed terrain for prop arrangements and body interrelations into an interactive agent itself. This technological achieve-

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5. Note, for instance, in the present volume Johannes Birringer’s very informative article “Dance and Interactivity,” based on his own long involvement with experiments in performance technologies. Also Lance Gharavi’s “Backwards and Forwards: Regression and Progression in the Production Work of i.e. VR,” where he discusses the progress of his experiments on the application of cyber-technology to live theatre in the Institute for the Exploration of Virtual Realities. Also Sue-Ellen Case’s brief account of similar internet and media interactive projects in “Performing the Cyberbody on the Transnational Stage,” published in the present volume.

ment sounds like a real threat against the human factor in the performance; it is another act towards a “posthuman” (st)age, shaping the new conditions of hypertheatre.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, moderate apologists for the digital and mediatized stage try to disperse the fears for a final extinction of a live-bodied theatre. Rob Lovell makes a delicate concession to the necessity of the technician vis-à-vis the computer: “The computer will never replace the technician. Someone –some human being trained in technical skills– will, at least for the foreseeable future, have to hang the lights, build the sets, and converse with the computer and designers.” Further on he designates a benign role for the computer in theatre: “But the computer will give people more power to integrate media into productions, create interactive effects, and coordinate events. It will provide more expressive capabilities to performers, directors, and designers, empowering and enabling the creation of new forms and new theatre events” (Lovell 262). In a similar vein Baz Kershaw declares his concern for a “productive symbiosis” between live performance and digital media and he envisages “a space that equally honours the new digital media and the living presence of the performer, while carrying through principles of immersion and interactivity with an infinite flexibility in its treatment of scale” (Kershaw 210 and 211).

Under the impressive rhetoric of the new technologized theatre discourse it seems almost certain that the only promising way for a future experimental theatre is in the direction of digital technology. Johannes Birringer affirms with satisfaction “the avant-garde’s *spiritual faith* in technological progress” (1998: 4, emphasis mine). But his carefully phrased statement also rings with the ironic echo of an uncomfortable paradox - the alarming question: will the theatre stay alive or is it turning virtual and to what proportion? Again Birringer favours openly the current artistic tendencies towards “dehumanized” hyperkinetics and the “disavowal of [the] organic” (1998: 20 and 23). Baz Kershaw, on the other hand, for all his enthusiastic embracing of technology, links the cyberstage threat with its dark social double of “posthumanity” by admitting the “precarious status of the body in performance in the age of posthuman uncertainties” (210).

However, the one human entity, which remains utterly eclipsed and unvindicated even in the benevolent performance-oriented theorists’ and practitioners’ parlance, is naturally that of the playwright. If the performance and stage crew are given at least a new regulated half-life in a technology-ridden future theatre, by contrast, the playwright is the ineluctable human victim in this selective theatre genocide. In the new postmodern mythic imagery the playwright plays the role of the scapegoat, the sacrificial victim, over whose cadaver high-tech ex-

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6. Gharavi both analyzes the advantages of performing space in computer-aided productions and also notes the fears of “killing the theatre” through such technological intervention. See his article in the present volume.

perts and performers will carry out their “postdramatic” negotiation talks upon the new distribution of power and authority in the realm of cybertheatre.

Surprisingly, however, and despite such gloomy scenarios, the news from the field of new theatre writing itself is not that pessimistic; quite the opposite, I would claim. Theorists who have been fast in announcing and secretly rejoicing over the “death of the playwright,” seconded by researchers in the field of performance technology, have gravely miscalculated: Several new voices from the ranks of writers have risen to contradict them with forceful new messages. New writers for the stage like the late Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, Patrick Marber, Martin Crimp, Joe Penhall, Martin McDonagh have taken on board the task to test, doubt, mock and criticize all the funereal “isms” of postmodern theory and socio-cultural practices, while also looking for ways to match their new explosive thematology with an invigorating theatrical articulation.

Ravenhill made a name with his much debated *Shopping and Fucking* (1996) but it is in later works such as *Faust (Faust Is Dead)* (1997) and, to a lesser extent, *Some Explicit Polaroids* (1999) that he tackles in a catalytic way all the pathological symptoms of the contemporary mediatized consumer society. In fact he mirrors in his theatre all the equivocal images of a “performative society” that Kershaw anticipates in his aforementioned article about the appropriateness of the technologization of the contemporary stage. Ravenhill’s highly inventive and spirited theatre makes a strong reclaim of the playwright’s rights over a thematic and an aesthetic renewal of today’s theatre. In *Faust*, Pete the protagonist’s protests against the insidious rhetoric of virtuality and his final conscious turn to self-willed complicity with it, gives dramatic dimensions to Kershaw’s skeptical optimism about the regulated service of technology in a still human-populated theatre.

Ravenhill challenges the myth of “posthumanity” on a double front. On the one hand, his two characters in *Faust* discover that playing lethal games on internet cyborgian bodies does not necessarily eclipse the bloodied reality of physical mortification or violent extinction of the biological body since they end up with a real self-induced death at hand, an actual dead body, which they must conceal to avoid their own incrimination. It proves therefore that in actual postmodern social practice the intelligent Baudrillardian “hyperreality” is a fraudulent chimera, a hypothesis we have eagerly endorsed in order to enter the media-assisted but also intellectually promoted game of a posthuman, cyber-reality. In the course of Ravenhill’s play a rift develops between the intellectual Alain, a much revered French intellectual parading his new impressive book on the “death of Man” and “the end of history” on the all-eager American media talk shows, and the down-to-earth Pete, who has, in cold blood, confiscated his internet magnate father’s new software program “Chaos” in order to trade his own material profit. An apparently impotent Pete stands in revolt against all the new mysts of a “posthuman” age, proves them fake and exposes them as dangerous impostors of humanity for their own material gain – be it fame or money. Empowered by his own discovery, Pete, a former uncritical fan of mediatized

existence, comes back, refusing his media mesmerization, reclaiming for a deceived humanity a good share of the immense wealth and power of a simulating, scheming cyber society. The contemporary Faust (Alain) may simulate his own death, but Pete will hold on to an agential role in a performance consumer society out of his own will.<sup>7</sup>

But Ravenhill's critique of the new sociological term "posthumanity" also extends to the world of the theatre. The provocative texture of his work in all aspects of dramatic creation –characters, images and ideas– pitted against an emphatic use of video in performance, also mirrors his energetic refutation of another relevant theatrical myth of the postmodern intelligentsia, the death of the playwright and the concomitant death of the dramatis personae as fictional and acting bodies. Ravenhill resurrects them both and gives them a fresh agential role in the new mediatized mythological discourses that govern postmodern society and its corresponding theatre industry. In that sense he voices an explicit critique against the idea of a postdramatic, virtual theatre (see Lehmann, and Zimmermann) and sets up new models of dynamic human interaction with cybertheatre as anticipated in Kershaw's theoretical position that I quoted earlier.

Ravenhill's achievements at the crossroads of millennial social and theatrical mutations are not unmatched by other contemporary writers. Preceding him by several years Howard Brenton explored the multiple possibilities of narrating history through performance art and the assistance of audio and visual media in his experimental *H.I.D. (Hess Is Dead)* in 1989. Writing her extraordinary *The Skriker* in 1994 Caryl Churchill playfully compared TV simulation to the old world of fairies and superstition, pointing out Foucauldian machinations in the manipulation of popular fantasy.<sup>8</sup> Patrick Marber's *Closer* (1997) tackled the disfiguration and dehumanization of close personal relations through the internet. Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* (1997) cleverly played on the threat of immateriality and virtuality upon the various forms of corporeality and facticity of traditional theatre as a result of the invasion of the high-tech media. In his play the traditional concept of a demarcated dramatis persona melts into a string of unauthenticated scenarios and the performers find themselves at a loss before the absence of well-tailored roles to play (Zimmermann). Marber and Crimp give their own theatrical versions of a posthuman and a postdramatic situation and, far from being dead, they make, in a similar way to Ravenhill, a very vital personal contribution to the on-going theoretical debate, reclaiming a strong, privileged position for the contemporary playwright. In their subsequent works, *Howard Katz* (2001) and *The Country* (2000) respectively, by reworking

7. Johan Callens's article "Sorting Out Ontologies in Mark Ravenhill's *Faust (Faust Is Dead)*," makes an interesting analysis of this play, offering a postmodern interpretation of the myth of Faust, "an unabashed fictional crossbreed between Foucault and Baudrillard" (170).

8. For a fuller discussion of this play see Elizabeth Sakellaridou (1995: 47-58).



on more traditional forms, they seem to take the argument further by casting a doubt on the finality of such hurried and precarious new terms as “posthuman” and “postdramatic.” As a matter of fact, these two plays are apparently advocating the opposite: For all its possible defects and weaknesses *Howard Katz* is by far a human(ist) play, strongly indebted to the existential questions in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, while *The Country* is an unquestionably dramatic play with three distinct on-stage characters, even if their identity boundaries look elastic and some of their lines may be left teasingly interchangeable.<sup>9</sup> Marber and Crimp, perhaps in a less explosive manner than Ravenhill, have created a personal theatrical idiom informed by current experiential and ideological realities and they take experimental theatre to subtler forms of thematic and aesthetic inquiry.<sup>10</sup> They also give a rigorous negative answer to Birringer’s necrological predictions about the state of a millennial dramatic theatre as “a last futile gesture” (1998: 6).

Another vital aspect of the contemporary stage, which has also been lately contested from within is the strikingly but unsubtly tagged “in-yer-face” theatre. I shall make a digression here to join Ravenhill’s and others’ mockery of the ease with which we tend to embrace new high-sounding terms and turn them into a new religion. In the words of Erik MacDonald it is the role of the “post-structured stage” to “[elevate] ‘play’ and ‘theatricality’ as viable philosophical and theatrical modes and [inculcate] the stage with a heterogeneity that is recklessly calculated to disrupt the authoritarian vestiges within theory itself” (174). It is one more credit to the new throbbing life of British theatre that the critique of “new brutalism” has also entered its agenda. I am referring in particular to Martin McDonagh’s controversial new play *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001), which has divided the critics (more or less like Kane’s *Blasted* and Ravenhill’s *Shopping and Fucking* a few years earlier) regarding the reception of the wild savagery of raw and insistent butchery dominating the majority of its scenes. Although the obvious target of the writer’s critique is the hypocritical ideology and fake sentimentalism covering much of today’s terrorist action –in this case in Ireland– the play launches a parallel attack on the trendy aesthetic of explicit violence on stage. Written and performed several years after the critical sensation of *Blasted* and *Shopping and Fucking*, which transferred on stage the al-

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9. Crimp has expressly avoided allotting concrete speaking parts to his three named characters, Corinne, Richard and Rebecca. The lines of dialogue are given consecutively with an initial dash to mark the change of speaker but the allotment of the actual lines to a specific character is left to the discretion of the director/reader.
  10. Richard Murphy in *Theorizing the Avant-Garde* devotes a chapter to the postmodern aspects of the avant-garde. His descriptions and definitions create a locus that could accommodate the type of theatre produced by the writers under discussion, a theatre that “aims [...] to ‘parody’ or to ‘de-aestheticize’ [received ideas] in order to question both the position of such ideas within the conceptual vocabulary of the period, as well as their role within affirmative culture as a whole” (256).

ready thriving film and TV realistic death-torment-and-horror sensations, McDonagh's play is an extreme satirical postscript to the issue, highly skeptical about the excesses of such stark realism in the representation of physical brutality and critical of the ineffectuality of now stale shock tactics. The intended ridicule of the "new brutalism" aesthetic in McDonagh's play challenges from within current theatrical praxis the seriousness and validity of yet more impressive crude neologisms on the issue such as Aleks Sierz's adoption of the phrase "in-yer-face theatre" for the title of his book-length critical study of the "new brutalism" cult on the contemporary English stage.<sup>11</sup>

The vigorous critical attitude of several new dramatists against the brainwashing power of the theoretical nomenclature and also against the impetus of the new technology industry attests to their purposeful move towards the creation of a fresh, meaningful role for the playwright in the new directions that the contemporary theatre is forced to take. Beyond their active involvement in the theoretical debates of postmodernism and the formal questions on textuality and performance one should also note the pervasiveness of some of their themes, whose open treatment would make previous generations rather uncomfortable. Among formerly taboo subjects sexual pluralism seems to have been reasonably accommodated in the modern stage repertory from the 1960s onwards. The position of the psychotic individual vis-à-vis societal and epistemological practices has been a more distressful and perilous subject to tackle.

Kane's disturbing autobiographical theatre of authentic psychosis (also under the impression of her untimely death and the publicly expressed sympathy of famous dramatists like Harold Pinter and Caryl Churchill) sanctioned a new interest among playwrights and audiences alike into the apocrypha of the human psyche. In this new niche of theatrical investigation Joe Penhall, among the new writing voices, has pronounced a keen and steady interest. He makes an explicit statement on the issue in the first volume of his collected works and his strong fascination with "stories from dark places" (Penhall 1998: xv) is graphically demonstrated in the thematic choices and the dramatic developments of earlier plays such as *Some Voices* (1994) and his acclaimed recent play *Blue/Orange* (2000). The manipulative subtextual power of his sparse language may sound familiarly Pinteresque but what is new in Penhall's strong theatrical idiom is the way in which he yokes a sharp, grim view of contemporary society and institutions with the dark desires, fears and delusions of the human psyche.

Bryone Lavery's new play *Frozen* (1998) dives into similar dark waters in a fairly complex manner: it focuses on the psychotic individual drawn to pederasty and infanticide. The recent case of the discovery of the murdered bodies of two missing ten-year-old girls in England stresses the topicality of this theme. But

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11. Johannes Birringer also notes the ambiguity of heightened practices of physical brutality in contemporary performance which he tends to see as a new exploitation of the equivocal "truth" of emotion or personal experience" (1998: 15).

the real value of the piece, as in several of the plays I discussed so far, lies not in topicality per se as in the subtle and sophisticated manner of its representation. Lavery presents the case from three separate viewpoints; the psychotic murderer's own narrative, that of the victim's mother and the scientific investigation into the case by an American psychiatrist. The three main characters have interlocking monologues, where they reveal themselves and their mental and emotional connection with the murder, the victim and the victimizer, and also dialogical scenes, where they shift between roles of interconnection with other characters and with the social structure. The punctuation of the scenes and their stage representation, based mainly on the virtuality of lighting rather than on a material set and props, creates a spellbinding effect of a magical theatre of words, bodies and multi-shaped shadows that vindicates the boundless resources of good, imaginative theatre for renewal from within and in interactive dialogue with other concomitant arts and technologies. The dramatic texture and the *mise-en-scène* of Lavery's play are as fresh as they can be and it is interesting to hear her state in a recent interview, in utter simplicity, her great admiration for the stark dialogue and images of Greek theatre and her strong belief in catharsis.<sup>12</sup>

Lavery's extraordinary, innovating achievement is a good case in point to prove once again that the great theatrical tradition of the past does not have to die to allow experimental theatre to breathe. On the contrary, it can still be an infinite source of inspiration for inventive and imaginative writers and directors. Howard Barker, from the older generation of writers, whose complex work has been unduly suppressed from the major British stages, has always been in dialogue with the classics. His rich and ferocious language, his mythological characters and situations, his stunning images and obsessive themes are contemporary answers to ancient forms of theatrical creation by an artist, who toils indefatigably for the experimental and the new. As a visual artist himself he brings to his *mise-en-scène* an enriched perspective of space and visuality and, by introducing to the stage the new materials of plastic and installation art, he gives his theatre a contemporary touch of materiality and plasticity reminiscent of the current aesthetic of technological construction.

Constructivist sets of course were widely used by the Russian avant-garde theatre at the beginning of the last century but for the British theatre this is a rare practice. In that sense Barker's elaboration for the renewal of this aesthetic in recent years deserves a lot of attention. After the production of *Ursula* in 1998, which made emphatic use of pictorial elements and introduced metal, especially sheet-iron as a constructive material for props, Barker made more extensive use of the new constructive art technology in *Und* (1999) and *He Stumbled* (2000), creating functional installation sets, highly commented on by the

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12. See the programme of the National Theatre production of *Frozen* at the Cottesloe Theatre (Summer 2002), directed by Bill Alexander.

critics. As a constructive, basically mechanical, technology this can certainly not be compared to the flexibility of the effects produced by the digital technology that I discussed earlier.<sup>13</sup> However, Barker's recent theatre should be seen as an important example of a composite scenic art which makes imaginative use of the latest developments of visual and figurative arts while keeping up the highest quality of verbal complexity, sonority of speech and performative skills in production. Barker takes pride in calling his theatre "anti-human-ist" (hyphenation mine) but it is certainly not "postdramatic" nor "posthuman." It is densely populated, engineered and manoeuvred by humans both in the dramatic structuring and the stage production.

The fullness of some of Barker's recent theatre and Lavery's *Frozen* as much as the strong theatrical discourse of Ravenhill and other new writers on the conspiratorial trust between consumerism, media virtuality and postmodern theory against humanity strongly suggest that the old theatrical vessel is not empty yet. It is still swelling with ideas and it is even capable of remodeling itself. The additional fact that contemporary British theatre continues to be in great demand abroad, especially in other European countries, turns it into an exporting giant in its own right. The new digital technology may be, naturally, pressing to enter but not to siege and destroy; only to interact and empower. The actual dynamics for renewal are still to be sought from within. The accounts of import and export are laboriously kept in balance.

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13. Birringer certainly sees contemporary hyperkinetics as the natural evolution of the "constructivist [...] biomechanical cosmokinetic apparatus" (1998: 20).

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