

Isabella Imperiali

## A Breeding Ground for Playwrights

The English Stage Company, directed by George Devine, opened its first season at the Royal Court in April 1956, with an Arts Council grant of £7000. «Ours is not to be a producer's theatre, nor an actor's theatre», Mr. Devine announced, «it is to be a writer's theatre... A place where the dramatist is acknowledged as the fundamental creative force»<sup>1</sup>. A writerly vision, then, to move the country towards the stage but also, vice-versa, to produce plays written to focus on contemporary challenges and possibilities.

Devine's establishment of the English Stage Company in the beautiful 1888 playhouse in Sloane Square was a key moment in the history of the development of modern British drama and, I would say, of the development of acting - the two aspects being strictly connected. «Playing in repertoire», said Devine, «means that the public will be able to see several plays in a week, and actors will be able to keep their work constantly fresh by appearing in different parts. That is, of course, an ideal, long accepted in the classical theatre, but there has been no serious long term in England to sustain it with modern plays since Granville Barker's season before the First World War»<sup>2</sup>.

In defining his vision for the future, Devine was looking back to the tradition established at the Royal Court in the early years of the XX

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<sup>1</sup> "Royal Court Theatre 50", Programme of the Fiftieth Anniversary Celebrations, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem.

century by John Eugene Vedrenne and Harley Granville Barker. They had challenged the domination of the actor-manager, and presented plays which ranged from Shakespeare to Shaw, Galsworthy, and Barker himself, though it was the productions of George Bernard Shaw's work that they were best known for. With designer Gordon Craig, Barker introduced minimalism to the stage, leaving space for the play itself.

Devine's ideal was to connect with the latest developments across the Channel, not least modernism. Most of the Council's members of the Royal Court viewed Devine's project with suspicion, but his vision for a theatre of the word, his aim to discover «hard-hitting, uncompromising writers» and create a company that would challenge and stimulate British theatre were all behind his announcing in *The Stage* magazine that the Royal Court was interested in new plays. The call for scripts produced some 700 and the one that stood out was *Look Back in Anger*, John Osborne's outpouring of the anger and frustration of a younger generation, which had already been rejected by 25 managers and producers. In May 1956, directed by Tony Richardson, artistic co-director of the Royal Court with Devine, *Look Back in Anger* opened to empty houses and mostly terrible reviews. But Kenneth Tynan's and Harold Hobson's enthusiastic reviews in *The Observer* and the *Sunday Times*, plus an excerpt of the play screened on television in October drew crowds of young people who had never been to the theatre before. And the phrase "angry young man" – used by British newspapers after the play's success, and derived from the 1951 autobiography, *Angry Young Man*, of Leslie Paul, founder of the Woodcraft Folk – immediately caught the public imagination and passed into the language. The success the play had, first at the Royal Court and then in the West End, in Broadway and all over the world, has been endlessly confirmed by the critics; it is now considered to be the play that marked the beginning of modern British drama.

In 1957 came Osborne's *The Entertainer*, with Laurence Olivier, followed in 1958 by Arnold Wesker's *Chicken Soup with Barley* and, in the following year, the remaining plays of the trilogy, *Roots* and *I'm Talking about Jerusalem*; in 1959 came *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*, by John Arden, who, like Osborne and Wesker, remained closely associated with the Royal Court.

Two years later, in 1959, Tony Richardson's *Look Back in Anger* was the first feature film produced by Free Cinema, a group of cineastes busy projecting onto the screen all the anger, frustration and bewilderment of the younger generation, especially the young proletariat.

The general social climate was one of unrest and a sense of impotence, aggravated by the division of the world into two hostile blocks, armed to the nuclear teeth: yet Britain's "you never had it so good" growing economic prosperity was allowing national cinema and theatre an astonishing renaissance. A fundamental factor here was the Arts Council, which promoted and financed work, including the work of emerging authors.

In 1958 Devine set up the Court's first Writers' Group, to explore the transition of the author's work to the stage. This led to sessions of improvisation and physical exploration and playwrights were invited to be part of the life of the theatre, to go to rehearsals and to learn by observing the production processes. Successively they created the post of Writer-in-Residence, a playwright who became, for a fixed period, a stable part of the company; then in the Sixties The Young People's Theatre was set up to develop and produce the best new writing by people under twenty six. In 2006 the Young Writers Festival had as their call for scripts: «Say the unsaid. Write the unwritten», which could stand for all the important initiatives and events, all ongoing.

Respect for the playwright, and faith in his or her creativity, including the right to fail and pick themselves up again was honored on the stage in the spare minimalism of the designer Jocelyn Herbert, for years

the Court's main set designer, whose aesthetic still influences Court designers.

Among the most innovative authors who presented plays at the Royal Court during the '50s were also Anne Jellicoe, Doris Lessing, Harold Pinter, John Arden, Wole Soyinka, and Samuel Beckett. Beckett, whose *Fin de partie/Endgame* was staged at the Court in 1957, put the English-language productions of all his plays into the hands of Devine, who directed *Krapp's Last Tape* in 1959 and *Happy Days* in 1962.

The XIX century had nursed the dream of a company to perform specifically British playwrights, principally Shakespeare; in the early Sixties the dream came true in the guise of the Royal Shakespeare Company (1960), directed by Peter Hall, Peter Brook and Michel Saint-Dennis at the Aldwych, and the National Theatre Company, directed by Laurence Olivier at the Old Vic. Both represented an extra challenge for the Royal Court, not least because they were also staging new writers. «Now our success has created a new climate in the theatre and other managements are in hot competition with us»<sup>3</sup>. Devine very forthrightly put it; he fought tooth and nail to wheedle an increase in state subsidies out of the Arts Council – Labour was in power after thirteen years of Winston Churchill's government – which still barely covered their accumulated debts. The Royal Court was forced to work in co-production with West End theatres, battling to assuage the fears of most of its staff and company that it would lose its signature style and artistic independence: this had already taken some knocks from the ongoing attempts at censure by the Lord Chamberlain. Devine never recovered from all this; in 1965 he resigned as artistic director and handed over to William Gaskill, a long-serving member and director of the Court, and died the following year, aged fifty five.

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<sup>3</sup> Ruth Little & Emily McLaughin, *The Royal Court Theatre Inside Out*, London, Oberon Books, 2007, p. 61.

During his reign he never neglected the classics, from Shakespeare to Chekov, Pirandello and Wedekind, but what the Court most prided itself on were the eighty six new British plays that had challenged the artistic, social and political orthodoxy of the day. London audiences had been introduced to thirty seven new playwrights who had pushed back the boundaries of what was possible or even acceptable. As David Hare said, «John Osborne kicked the door down. The rest of us came pouring through»<sup>4</sup>.

Plays like Osborne's *A Patriot for Me* and Edward Bond's *Saved* were refused license to be performed in 1965. To stage them, the theatre had to transform itself into a private members' club. Even so, criminal proceedings were brought against the production of *Saved*, the iconic play of the period and a new landmark in the Court's history. On the eve of his retirement, Devine condemned «the most undemocratic institution in our public life... we must be freed from this antiquated absurdity»<sup>5</sup>.

Britain had to wait three more years, but the battles waged by the vast majority of the stage, especially the companies specializing in theatre research – the name of the Theatre Workshop, directed by John Littlewood, immediately comes to mind – finally paid off, and in the mythical year of 1968 the Lord Chamberlain's Office was finally abolished, state subsidies to the Arts were increased, and the fringe began to flourish.

It was felt that new and more flexible spaces were needed for the different forms of theatre and performance that were developing, and in 1969 the English Stage Company came up with the theatre studio, or "Theatre Upstairs", directed by Nicholas Wright. The first season in-

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<sup>4</sup> "Royal Court Theatre 50", Programme of the Fiftieth Anniversary Celebrations, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Little & Emily McLaughin, *The Royal Court Theatre Inside Out*, London, Oberon Books, 2007, p. 95.

cluded new work by Sam Shepard, Keith Johnstone, Mike Leigh, Bill Bryden, Jane Howell and John Arden.

The Theatre Upstairs soon took on the role of innovator and challenger which the Court had hitherto held, while the new generation of writers was kept away from the Court's main stage. «As soon as you have two theatres like that», Gaskill acknowledged, «you do siphon off something and you do start to say, well, it's all right for the Theatre Upstairs, whereas in the early days at the Court, anything that was of any quality had to be shown in the main house»<sup>6</sup>. The new plays – by Brenton, David Edgar and David Hare, to give only the obvious names - tended to have working class protagonists, and the roles demanded to be played differently. «Finding actors who could play raw, honest emotion which looked unacted was very hard»<sup>7</sup>, as Anthony Page put it (Page shared the direction of the Court with Gaskill and Lindsay Anderson from 1969 to 1972).

If outwardly the court flourished though, privately there was growing unease, which failed to escape the more perceptive critics. After the performance of the new Osborne *West of Suez*, Mary Holland wrote in *Play and Players*: «When Sir Ralph Richardson makes his entrance...the audience claps for several respectful moments. It seems all too fitting –the knowing star in a well-made hit by our leading dramatist. Who mentioned anger? Who whispers now a theatre of dissent?»<sup>8</sup>. The possibility was also mooted of the English Stage Company's moving to the Old Vic, which had been offered in 1972. In the January 1973 edition of *Play and Players*, Michael Billington asked: «What business has a company devoted to new and often difficult work with a theatre seating 1,000 people? I suspect this could mean the end of everything Devine, Gaskill and others so tirelessly worked for».

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<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 117.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 146.

<sup>8</sup> *Plays and Players*, October, 1971.

The early Seventies proved difficult. Oscar Lewenstein, the artistic director, tended to deny the main stage to a whole group of writers who, in their turn, rejected the trend for plays which could later transfer to the West End as sound financial propositions.

In 1972, however, the Theatre Upstairs offered a début to Caryl Churchill, often considered the most important contemporary playwright and an icon of the British stage. She still works with the Court. *Not I* followed in 1973 (with what became one of the most famous images in the history of stage design: the illuminated, vulvic mouth of Billie, designed by Jocelyn Herbert) and also *Krapp's Last Tape*, directed by Anthony Page, with the supervision of Beckett himself, and performed by Albert Finney. Beckett spent a long time in the Court: he was a close friend of Jocelyn Herbert's, in her turn not so much key designer as Court institution.

Margaret Thatcher's era began in 1979, and was to last eleven long years: the apogee of unbridled liberalism, consumerism, and monetarism. Profit became the overriding criterion as politics penetrated the institutions, and the private entered every sphere, including the media.

In terms of the Royal Court, the '80s and early '90s were distinguished by, among other things, its longest-serving Artistic Director, Max Stafford-Clark (1979-1993). It was a time of rediscovery, of a new kind of theatre of cruelty, and of vital and provocative new work by women playwrights holding a mirror up to the political arena, some critics have suggested.

For all the money problems, in-house battles, and fierce criticism from both critics and the Arts Council, the Court managed to take up the original thread sewn by its founders. The work of the playwright again meshed closely with the ongoing research of the actors.

In 1974 Stafford-Clark had joined with William Gaskill and David Hare to found the very influential Joint Stock company, which pioneered a whole new way of conceiving political theatre. At the same time it created a new way of building up a play in a workshop envi-

ronment of writers and actors working together. Here Stafford-Clark directed some of the most important writers then working for the theatre, including David Hare, Howard Brenton and Caryl Churchill; for the Court, in 1982, the year of the Falklands/Malvinas War, he directed Churchill's prophetic play *Top Girls*, on women and Thatcherism.

The Court had taken as its original aim to tell the stories of real people. This idea now re-emerged: «I take the theatre as a tool for investigating areas of our society that have possibly been neglected by journalism», Stafford-Clark said, «It's a way of investigating both history and contemporary events»<sup>9</sup>. Churchill's *Serious Money*, staged in 1982 and directed by Stafford Clark, was inventive, ingenious, and the most commercially successful play of Clark's regnum. Written and constructed according to the Joint Stock method of getting the actors out of the theatre and into the social group the play focused on, interviewing the protagonists (but without recording them) then back in the theatre, in the playwright's presence, "replaying" words and gestures from memory. For *Serious Money* the company met up with city traders and stockbrokers, so that the world of Yuppies entered the Court both on the stage and in the auditorium, where the objects of Churchill's caricature lapped up her merciless satirical shredding and loved every minute of it. But there were also, as Churchill remembers, people who «were appalled and left saying God, this government, this City, we must stop all this»<sup>10</sup>.

In '92, when the theatre was again financially viable, its management was gradually handed over to Stephen Daldry who, besides being able to count on a substantial increase in Arts Council funding, also

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<sup>9</sup> Maeve McKeown, *Max Stafford-Clark – Education Resource Pack*, Out of Joint ([www.outofjoint.co.uk](http://www.outofjoint.co.uk)), 2008, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Ruth Little & Emily McLaughlin, *The Royal Court Theatre-Inside Out*, London, Oberon Books, 2007, p. 254.



went out looking for private sponsors, and started collaborating with the National Theatre Studio to try to push new work into being. Between 1994 to 1997, the theatre Upstairs which had often been closed during the previous regnum, presented a wealth of new plays. Some were legendary - Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking*, Jet Butterworth's *Mojo*, and Conor McPherson's *The Weir*.

In 1994 the *New York Times* described the Royal Court as the most important theatre in Europe. The following year it received grants from the Arts Council, *via* the National Lottery, to start on the long-overdue renovation of the beloved but battered Victorian playhouse. The company moved to West End Theatres: the Ambassadors (which replaced the Court Upstairs) and the Duke of York's. Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking*, which opened in 1996 at the Ambassadors, became the play of its period, staging the generation of middle-class "angry young adolescents", a mixed-up generation which had brought itself up with practically zero guidance (not least in Northern Europe, we should perhaps add) in a non-culture of drugs, violence, and planned obsolescence which applied equally to personal, physical relations, producing anger, isolation, and frustration. The brutal scenes staged by Ravenhill, fragmentary and often doused in black comedy, reflect a group of twenty-year-olds' cynicism and lack of connection with their inner selves. The themes were picked up by playwrights again and again during the '90s. The idea behind these 'blood and sperm plays' wasn't simply to shock, but directly to traumatize, to deliver a below-the-belt blow and to smash the reality into the audience's face – hence the tag of 'In Yer-face Theatre' coined by Aleks Sierz in his book<sup>11</sup>.

In 1998 the Royal Court was awarded the Europe Prize New Theatrical Realities for discovering a new generation of British playwrights.

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<sup>11</sup> Aleks Sierz, *In Yer-face Theatre, British Drama Today*, London, Faber & Faber, 2001.

In the same year the Court's artistic direction went to Ian Rickson who, in April, soon after the suicide of Sarah Kane, presented *Cleansed* in the 600-seat Duke of York's theatre. The intense, dark descent into the abyss of depression staged in Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*, and presented in the newly-restored Royal Court that opened its doors in February 2000, is almost a counterpart to the icy atrocity of a world Caryl Churchill reminds us is not *Far Away*. When Rickson took over, he stated that rather than just putting on raunchy new plays, he wanted «to create a culture where those writers could really grow and develop, with the key aim being to get them on the main stage»<sup>12</sup>.

Dominic Cooke has been the artistic director since 2007, and continues, with amazing verve, to propose innovative ways of getting young audiences into the Court where they can face up to and clash with words, the verbal text, however fragmented and shattered.

I'm greatly impressed by the attention the new theatre pays to its younger audiences. Where else is such attention given to their hidden dread and nightmares: all the anxiety which our generation wasn't able to avoid for them? We can only hope that the magic touch of theatre can to some degree staunch the open wounds which the new British theatre has been brave enough to show in public.

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<sup>12</sup> Ruth Little & Emily McLaughlin, *The Royal Court Theatre-Inside Out*, London, Oberon Books, 2007, p. 372.