

Michael Billington

The Royal Court Today

I was recently asked a rather awkward question at a public meeting. If there was a cataclysmic crisis and I could save only one theatre in London from closure, which would it be? I thought for a few seconds and then came up with the Royal Court. It's not because its work is always better than anyone else's, but the Royal Court, because of its focus on new writing, directly reflects the state of society and fertilises the rest of the theatre. It's perfectly common for writers discovered by the Court to be offered opportunities elsewhere: it's happened in recent years to Mark Ravenhill, David Eldridge, Simon Stephens, Roy Williams and Richard Bean, all of whom have accepted major commissions from the National Theatre. Our TV and film industries also plunder the Royal Court talent-pool of writers, actors and directors. The Royal Court is not just a producing house that does around sixteen new shows a year, it is a seed-bed that allows fresh and emerging talent to grow.

In 1998 the Royal Court won the European Theatre Prize New Realities Award for discovering a new generation of British playwrights. That was, in part, a recognition of an extraordinary period in the mid-1990s when Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, Martin McDonagh, Joe Penhall, Jez Butterworth, Nick Grosso and many others all burst on the scene in a great firework explosion of talent. But I think it would be worth looking at what has happened in the ten years since that award and asking certain questions. Has the Royal Court retained its momen-

tum? Is there the same sense of excitement? And what have been the defining characteristics of the past decade?

Looking back, one should point out that Ian Rickson took over the Royal Court's directorship in 1998 and that Dominic Cooke succeeded Ian early in 2007. Both, in my experience, are very different characters from Stephen Daldry who was in charge from 1995 to 1996, when so much blazing new talent emerged. Daldry was a flamboyant character who was certainly full of big ideas, including the renovation of the whole building: I sometimes felt, however, it was left to others to work out the details of Daldry's innovations. Rickson, in contrast, always struck me as a more cautious pragmatic figure whilst Dominic Cooke, who has succeeded him, is a more radical visionary somewhat in the Daldry mode. It's also worth pointing out that from 1998 to 2010 we had a Labour government in power. This hasn't automatically meant easy times for the Royal Court which claims, with some justice, to be poorly funded compared to some of its rivals: it gets roughly a 16th of the grant that goes to organisations like the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company while turning out just as many productions. But at least the Court hasn't had to endure the see-saw funding and threatened cuts that nearly brought about its closure under previous Conservative governments.

So what has characterised the Royal Court over the last decade? I would pick out four things: a determination to nurture existing writers as well as to look for brand-new ones; a realization that a lot of the more exciting work is currently coming from black and Asian writers; a healthy internationalism that has allowed us to see what is going on in other cultures; a willingness to play host to senior writers, including Royal Court veterans such as Caryl Churchill and David Hare and even to admit into the fold, for the first time, Tom Stoppard.

Let's take the first point about nurturing writers. Rickson talked a lot about "consolidation and growth". That's not as sexy and exciting

as discovering first-time writers which is what Daldry did, but it's equally important. Graham Whybrow, then Literary Manager of the Royal Court, said that one could argue that British theatre is like the music business constantly looking for the next new sound, the next new band, but perhaps it doesn't take enough care of the continuing life of those artists. So Rickson pledged to develop many of the discoveries of the previous regime. In the Rickson years we saw Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* and *4.48 Psychosis* (which sadly proved to be a posthumous work following her suicide), Conor McPherson's *Shining City*, Kevin Eiyot's *Mouth to Mouth*, Jez Butterworth's *The Night Heron*, Michael Wynne's *The People Are Friendly* and many more. Some of these plays proved that second plays are harder to write than first one: Butterworth, who wrote a dazzling first play in *Mojo* about Soho gangsters, came up with a rather diffuse second work. But Rickson proved that you had to stay loyal to writers, and it's good to see Cooke sticking with that idea with new plays from Butterworth and Ravenhill early in 2009. The Court's loyalty to Sarah Kane, after the controversy stirred up by *Blasted*, was also admirable, and I always felt that she was still experimenting and searching for the ideal dramatic form when she tragically killed herself.

But the Court has also come up with a fair number of new writers in the last decade. One of the most prolific is Richard Bean who started with two plays based on his own working experience: *Toast*, set in a northern bread-making factory, and *Under The Whaleback* which took place on a Hull fishing-trawler. Bean, like many Royal Court discoveries, moved on elsewhere and wrote a big play about immigration for the National Theatre. In the last decade, the Court has also come up with a number of highly promising young women writers. There's Lucy Prebble whose first play, *The Sugar Syndrome*, dealt compassionately with paedophilia; Laura Wade who wrote a well-crafted black comedy, *Breathing Corpses*, about unfulfilled lives; and, most recently, Polly Stenham, whose first play, *That Face*, dissected a dysfunctional middle-

class family and an incestuous mother-son relationship. It is also a measure of the play's power that it moved from the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs into the West End. It's difficult to find a link between all these diverse plays. New writing has moved on from the *In-Yer-Face* style of the 1990s which put a premium on highly explicit sex and violence. Nothing wrong with that, but today's plays are more likely to be about failing families, disappointed hopes or the apparent collapse of liberal values. Indeed Cooke, when he took over the Court in 2007, caused quite a stir by saying that the theatre needed to reflect more accurately the middle-class lifestyles of the people who made up the bulk of its audience.

However, there is a second key strand in recent Royal Court work that says a lot about where British theatre is heading. We live, quite obviously, in a multi-cultural society made up of people from a host of different ethnic groups. Yet until now the British theatre has been a predominantly white preserve that has only paid lip service to our society's diversity. All that is changing and the Court, to its credit, has been at the forefront of opening up the theatre to new voices. One of the most vocal is Roy Williams who has had a series of plays produced at the Royal Court: *Lift Off* in 1999, *Clubland* in 2001 and *Fallout*, recently filmed by Ian Rickson, three years later. Williams's forte is dealing with the violence of street culture, with the difficulty for young kids in establishing their identity and with the confusions engendered by race. One of the points of his first play was the way that young white teenagers often imitate the Jamaican patois that they hear around them. In *Fallout* he showed the tension between black adolescents and police detectives of the same colour. And in a number of other plays Williams has demolished the myth that there is such a thing as an homogenised black community: indeed one of his major themes is the gulf between British citizens of African and Caribbean origin and the assumption, in particular, that it is hip and cool to be thought Jamaican rather than

African. Roy Williams is now writing for everyone. But he is very much a product of the Royal Court and has done as much as anyone to open our eyes to the reality of life in Britain today.

Williams, however, is only one of number of writers of colour nurtured by the Court. Debbie Tucker Green is an unusual poetic voice and Bola Agbaje made a promising debut with a play called *Gone Too Far* (2008) about two brothers, one raised in Africa and the other in Europe, trying to find their own identities on a London housing estate. Another fascinating play also came from a young Indian woman writer, Anupama Chadresekar. It was called *Free Outgoing* (2008) and dealt, wittily and ironically, with the clash in modern India between an inherited sexual Puritanism and technological advance: it showed, in fact, how a family became social pariahs when their 15-year-old daughter was videoed having sex in a Madras classroom. All this suggests that a lot of the energy in British theatre is currently coming from Black and Asian writers anxious to make their voices heard and who feel that the Court is their natural habitat.

This brings me to my third point about the Royal Court's internationalism and an extraordinary experience I had earlier this year. I had complained in a newspaper article that, although the media was filled with stories about British Muslims, particularly after the bombings that occurred in central London in the summer of 2005, the Muslim experience was hardly ever reflected in the theatre. I was then invited to the Royal Court to meet a group of Muslims who had been recruited by the theatre's Young Writers programme to attend workshops. Invitations had gone out to schools and colleges to send along anyone interested in writing plays. About twenty had been selected to undergo a fairly intensive training programme offering advice and instruction about writing plays. I met a group of these Muslim teenagers and was bowled over by them. I noticed that they were split into male and female groups in order to satisfy parental requirements, but what was even more striking was how all these writers said, without being dog-

matic or preachy, that for them creativity was inseparable from faith. They were keen to express the tensions that existed within the Muslim world between different generations and between their religion and the demands of western secular life. But belief for all them was a given and, as I left them, they were all looking for a room in which to conduct their regular prayers. I mention this only because if I met with a group of young non-Muslim writers I'd be surprised if any one of them talked about the centrality of faith to their lives. It's a measure of the Royal Court's enlightened approach that one of the plays that emerged from this workshop was scheduled for production in 2010.

The Royal Court also has an International Department, run by Elyse Dodgson, that carries out writing workshops all over the world. And the theatre's domestic programme over the past decade has been enlivened by work from a variety of cultures. We've seen plays from Russia by the Presnyakov Brothers, from the Ukraine by Vassily Sigarev, from Germany by Marius von Mayenberg, from Spain, from Scandinavia by Jon Fosse and from France by Christophe Pellet. It would be over-idealistic to claim that all plays travel equally well. Fosse's work, *110W* performed all over Europe, has yet to gain a foothold in Britain. And I sometimes think that British critics are a parochial band who respond eagerly to work from America or Ireland but who remain coldly indifferent to work from other sources. At least, however, over the past decade the Court has opened its doors to the wider world.

The fourth point I made about the Court is that it still plays host to a writer from an older generation. Caryl Churchill, now in her seventies, is the nearest thing it has to a house dramatist and continues to write cryptic, experimental plays. Her most recent, *Drunk Enough To Say I Love You?* explored the special relationship between Britain and America in sexual terms and suggested there was an element of sado-masochism or dominance and submissiveness in the Bush-Blair relationship. What makes Churchill remarkable, however, is that she never

stands still and re-invents the dramatic form every time she puts pen to paper. David Hare, who records the public world with a journalistic flair and honesty, has also had two key works at the Court in the past ten years: *Via Dolorosa*, which was an account of his trip to Israel and the Palestinian territories, and *The Vertical Hour* which dealt with an American academic's engagement with Iraq. And Tom Stoppard, as I've said, made his Royal Court debut with *Rock 'n' Roll* which was a highly articulate lament for the way Britain was allowing its basic freedoms to be eroded while people in Eastern Europe, specifically the Czech Republic, were discovering the delights of democracy.

So the Royal Court, which in 2006 celebrated fifty years of continuous production of new work, retains its vitality and remains an indispensable theatre. As a critic, one inevitably has cavils about its programming. A few years ago I attacked the proliferation of 90-minute plays which I felt fit into an easy formula. I said that dramatists were obviously free to write at whatever length they chose. But I saw dangers - and I still do - in settling for a one-act format. It meant that dramatists could focus on a single situation without necessarily showing how characters developed over a period of time or depicting what had led them to their present predicament. One or two writers were angered by my comments, but I stand by them. And I still hunger, especially on the Royal Court's main stage, to see plays with an epic vision that allows ideas room to breathe. A classic case was a play produced early in 2009, *Now or Later* by the American Christopher Shinn, which was set on the eve of an American Presidential election and that tried to cram everything, from attitudes to Islam to the generation-war, into under 80 minutes. I also felt a vague unease when, as in autumn 2009, the Court's main stage was occupied entirely by American work.

But these are relatively minor gripes as, on the whole, the Royal Court is still at the cutting edge of British theatre and continues to hold a mirror up to society. Even after half a century of devotion to new writing, it has retained its essential freshness and remains a model to

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other countries. When people outside Britain ask me how they can foster a new-writing culture, I always offer the same answer. Create an institution like the Royal Court, single-mindedly dedicated to new writing, and you will find that the plays will quickly follow.