

The Critical Stage: approaches to art, performance, text at the Cambridge Festival Theatre 1929 - 1935

If one role of a dramaturg could be said to be midwife to a new text, another could be said to be the facilitator of theatre culture as more than a series of isolated incidents, linking events and recording work to create a cultural practice with a history and interlinked set of ideologies. Avant-garde theatre does not exist in isolation from the traditional work from which it seeks to distance itself: in the search for the new, old ideas are constantly recycled, reconfigured and – hopefully – transformed. An immersion in ‘cutting edge’ theatre can lead to a dismissal - or ignorance - of past theatrical culture: even as that is what defines our - both audience and practitioners - understanding of what theatre is. In rejecting previous forms to concentrate on the ‘new’, is ‘tradition’ sometimes confused with ‘convention’? The conventional is indeed dull, leading to the frequently reiterated cry that ‘theatre is dead’ – but surely even the most radical of theatre requires a tradition in which to work (indeed without the old there could be no reaction/rejection by which to define the new). Without finding links and continuities – and this I am arguing is the role of the Dramaturg - how can we pin down and define the multiple potential meanings of theatrical language?

Discovering the Festival Theatre, Cambridge, a few years ago, led me to reevaluate my understanding of the ‘new’: this theatre, practising in the twenties and thirties, was the first public non-proscenium arch theatre in Britain, drawing on a wealth of avant-garde writing from across Europe to bring the latest in ‘theatre art’ to the UK. It had close links with the original Gate theatre in London, the only other theatre in Britain to be practising ‘the modern art of the theatre’ (as opposed to West End ‘entertainment trade’ fare (sound familiar?)). It is both astounding and oddly comforting to discover British practitioners have been championing the cause of non-naturalistic theatre in Britain for so long. Theatre that is an art in its own right: more than any of its parts ‘a composite whole’, which looks at the text as ‘theatrical material only’, requiring interpretation in production. On the continent, this idea became ‘director’s theatre’ and the role of the Dramaturg has long been central to such a conception. Dramaturg Claire Pamment and I have been working to bring these theatres to a wider public consciousness: for in mining the past we create a basis for future work: we are not looking backwards, regurgitating old forms, but drawing strength from the inspiration of the past to continue the battle for ‘art theatre’, based on innovation and experiment, rather than on the commercial response to an established text or author. This January we shall be reading some of the more innovative and challenging plays presented at the Gate in the twenties, and holding a symposium on the cultural context of European translation of drama – its production and reception in Britain, looking at modern practice through the filter of the issues that the Gate was dealing with in the 20’s and 30’s: parochialism, suspicion of form, censorship. This last has obviously changed in nature, but we shall be asking, to what extent has the Lord Chamberlain been replaced by a kind of commercial and media self-censorship?¹

What follows is extracted from my dissertation (2000) on the Cambridge Festival Theatre, and examines the history of this extraordinary space.

¹ Please see the end of the article for more information.

all change

the most progressive theatre in england²

The Festival Theatre was founded in 1926 by Terence Gray, a moneyed Cambridge Egyptologist, with Harold C. Ridge, a metallurgist and lighting designer. Designed both literally and imaginatively to promote and experiment with theatre as an art-form, it became ‘the birthplace of the company which...became the Royal Ballet’,³ through the involvement of Ninette de Valois, and spawning The Group Theatre of the thirties, set up by Rupert Doone and Tyrone Guthrie, who met through their work at the Festival.⁴ In being licensed to play to the public, it was unique among avant garde theatres of the time, who avoided the censorship of the Lord Chamberlain’s offices⁵ by playing to a limited membership, like the Gate theatre in London (with which Festival collaborated from 1932-3,⁶ the only theatre in England it recognised as similarly practising ‘the modern art of the theatre’).⁷ Moreover its house policy was defined not by ‘the choice of plays but the manner of their production’.⁸ It was one of the very few British companies to take up the challenge of expressionism, which it optimistically saw as the future of theatrical practice, describing W.J. Turner’s *The Man Who Ate the Popomack* (the Festival’s second production) as ‘a very valuable experiment, for it demonstrates the feasibility, the inevitability of the advent of an expressionistic technique in the English theatre’.⁹

It was Gray’s project to assure, within the stringent licensing regulations of the twenties, that Festival productions could be freed from the limitations of the immediate theatrical past by the very physical form of the space they played in. Indeed several of the theatres built in response to the twentieth century demand for new kinds of theatrical possibility can be seen to have been influenced (directly or indirectly) by the Festival, for example, The Olivier Theatre at the National Theatre in London, as well as theatres in Edinburgh and Chichester.¹⁰ ‘Theatre’ can imply a building or an ideology; at the Festival these two senses were interdependent. Gray recognised that ‘any stage has a preconditioned architectural frame, which conditions the dramatic material and is inherently resistant to change’;¹¹ and accordingly rewrote the dramatic premise of theatre through stripping out the proscenium arch of the old Barnwell Theatre, on Newmarket Road, Cambridge, and having steps built into the auditorium. It was ‘England’s first modern open-stage theatre’,¹² designed to dissolve the physical barrier between actors and audience, allowing for a style of production that would assign the audience an intrinsic role in the creation of performance; ‘we have striven to tear down the fabric of make-believe and bring the audience more and more onto the

² Section title (8/01/31), 1.

³ Norman Marshall, letter to Bridget Joyce Utting, in *The Festival Theatre, Cambridge 1926-33* (thesis for Southlands College, 1973) (no page number).

⁴ Michael J. Sidnell, *Dances of Death: The Group Theatre of London in the thirties* (London, 1984) p. 47.

⁵ Cf Steve Nicholson, “‘Nobody Was Ready for That’: The Gross Impertinence of Terence Gray and the Degradation of Drama”, *Theatre Research International*, vol. XXI, no. 2 (Summer, 1996), 121-131, for discussion of the issues faced by Gray in attempting to have new and foreign plays passed for public viewing by the censor.

⁶ (7/10/32), 2.

⁷ (8/01/31), 9.

⁸ Norman Marshall, *The Other Theatre* (London, Theatre Book Club, 1950; first publ. 1947), p. 53.

⁹ Gray (29/11/26), 3.

¹⁰ Cf Katheraine Sorley Walker, *Ninette Valois: Idealist without Illusions* (London, 1987), p. 71, and Norman Marshall, ‘The Cambridge Festival Theatre’, *TABS*, vol. XX, no. 1, 7-14 (p. 10).

¹¹ Christopher Innes, ‘Modernism in Drama’, *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. Michael Levenson (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 130-156 (p. 131).

¹² Marshall, *TABS*, 7.

stage'.¹³

The theatre worked to a tight annual schedule of a production per week for three seasons each of eight weeks, in conjunction with the university terms. During the nine years of its existence as an 'art' theatre, plays by writers from all over Europe and America were produced, including over thirty verse-plays and several English premieres. The weekly *Festival Theatre Review* acted as an interface between audience and practitioners, actively encouraging debate which then in itself formed part of the theoretical conception of theatre as a composite whole; seeking 'to fulfil, on the literary side, what the theatre does on the plane of action, it is a vehicle for expression of ideas on the theatre'.¹⁴ It frequently published the criticism, both positive and negative, which it received from its audience, using it as a springboard for a dialectic which in its oppositional nature allowed a clarification of the Festival's aims. Prominent in the *Review* each week was an analysis of the next week's production. Part advertisement, part manifesto, it exemplified the theatre's educative programme; 'It is part of the task of the modern theatre to develop the technique of its audience',¹⁵ elucidating the methodology of production and thereby making its experiment more accessible to the playgoer. The *Review* formed a tirelessly inquisitive body of work, relentless in its problematising of the English theatrical norm under titles such as 'is there such a thing as a play?'.¹⁶

is there such a thing as a play?

Gray saw England as 'pitiful in its artistic isolation'¹⁷ from the theatrical revolution sweeping Europe; the *Review* authorises the theory it propounds by citing practitioners such as Appia, Dalcroze,¹⁸ Piscator,¹⁹ and Reinhardt²⁰ among others as precedents; 'In Russia and elsewhere the name of the director, the 'producer' as he has been called in England, has come to the position of prominence; a performance, i.e. a week of theatre-art, created by Meierhold, Tairov, Copeau or another, in his capacity of director and dynamic artist-of-the theatre, being the focal point of interest rather than the contributor of the verbal material'.²¹ The Festival did not however uncritically imitate such theories, hence the qualification that 'the art of the theatre is so composite that there would seem little justification for over-emphasising the producer's share in the resulting work of art, though his were, as it should be, the ultimate conception that results', 'we have never gone further than to advertise the 'producer', as he is called, on an equality with the author'.²² In fact it was Edward Gordon Craig, the British avant-garde actor, director and anti-realist scene designer who was the Festival's greatest influence. Heralded by a contemporary as 'acknowledged by most people on the continent...to be the most significant force in theatre today',²³ his 1905 book, *The Art of the Theatre* provided the *Review* with a rhetoric of renaissance with which to describe and promote its 'art-theatre' ideology.

¹³ Gray (8/01/31), 12.

¹⁴ (23/02/27), 2.

¹⁵ (7/02/31), 6.

¹⁶ (21/02/31), 10.

¹⁷ Gray, quoted in Nicholson, 125.

¹⁸ Joseph Macleod, *Why Not the Theatre?* (Cambridge, 1935), p. 8.

¹⁹ Maurice Dobb (25/04/31), 8-9.

²⁰ (23/11/33), 4.

²¹ (22/5/33), 3.

²² Ibid.

²³ Martin Shaw, *The Observer* (19th November, 1931), quoted in Christopher Innes, *Edward Gordon Craig* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 1.

This was in stark contrast to the the commercial West End, which was still mired, as Gray saw it, in ‘the false realism’ of the previous century; which was ‘a hindrance to appreciation because of its very absurdity’;²⁴ ‘illusion is fundamentally untheatrical’²⁵. Such anti-illusionism was not only expressionist in aspiration, it was also instrumental in the drive to reconfigure the audience’s position within the theatrical experience; ‘a play in performance is a composite thing, acted by many elements besides the cast, and the audience are surely the most important actors in the show’.²⁶ Gray vitriolically rejected the Stanislavskian notion of the audience as a passive consumer; ‘the audience is not supposed to be there at all; theoretically it is composed of individuals looking through keyholes’.²⁷ Lurking beneath the sarcasm is a darker apprehension of theatre’s potential meaninglessness; ‘The present-day audience must adjust its values. In a London Theatre the audience creeps in, listens to a play, claps ritually, and creeps out. It has remained utterly apart.’²⁸ Just as we expect to stage the drama of a novel in the imagination, so the Festival presents the modern theatre as exacting a like response. The ‘war upon naturalism’²⁹ was premised on the notion that the attempt to recreate reality on the stage was to mistake the role of theatre in the presentation of text; ‘we don’t want...our audience to play at visual make-believe or ever to forget that the stage is only the stage.’³⁰

let the audience act³¹

This would seem to define art theatre as an entertainment far closer to literature in the manner of reception, than to popular theatre or cinema; ‘Until the audience realises that it plays the lead, not in the text of the play, but in the emotional interpretation thereof, the really modern theatre cannot effectively dispossess the old and enter into power and ascendancy on the world’s stage’.³² For the Festival’s inaugural production of *The Oresteia*, the audience were warned in advance: ‘will be expected to appeal directly to the mind of the beholder rather than through his sense of the external reality of what he sees’.³³ The *Review* itself makes the claim for the affinity of art-theatre and literature; ‘we exist solely in order to contribute to the survival of the theatre that is an art-form, the theatre which corresponds theatrically to the highest class of literature’.³⁴

The question of reception was inseparable from the features of production. The decision to mime props was not merely an artistic effect but also an attempt to make the audience active in their engagement with the aesthetic nature of play. For the production of T.G. Saville’s *The Oil Islands* (January, 1931), the wings were exposed such that all offstage action was exposed to the audience. When the distraction drew criticism from the audience implicit in the reply was the conviction that the Festival was engaged in educating its audience; ‘We suggest that the rehearsal atmosphere that he dislikes is the atmosphere of intimacy which we are striving to achieve; when he becomes accustomed to the honest admission, instead of an irritating concealment of the “works” he

²⁴ Gray (26/01/31), 1-2.

²⁵ (14/11/31), 4.

²⁶ Gray (29/11/30), 5.

²⁷ Gray (8/01/31), 12.

²⁸ (7/02/31), 6.

²⁹ Marshall, *TABS*, 8.

³⁰ Gray, quoted in Marshall (1950), p. 54.

³¹ Section title (8/01/31), 11.

³² (8/01/31), 12.

³³ Gray (23/11/26), 4.

³⁴ (24/10/31), 11.

will, we hope, be assisted rather than hindered in a “willing suspension of his disbelief”.³⁵ In this the Festival took its cue from its reading of Shakespeare; ‘the method was “for expression”, that is to say, the aim was to create an effect, to reveal, to inspire, rather than to create a belief in the audience that it was actually looking at persons and events taking place in real life’.³⁶

Much of the ideology of the Festival sounds familiar: it is not dissimilar to the basic tenets of theatre production assumed by many experimental theatre practitioners today. Nevertheless for the theatre culture of the twenties the innovations were startling, and paved the way for theatres to be created in spaces undivided by a large pictorial frame, leading audiences to understand that theatre was not a painting. Meanwhile the Review was expounding the kind of theoretical views that we have come to associate with Brecht, long before his ideas became current in Britain. Companies such as Forced Entertainment, Complicite and Frantic Assembly, as well as a large number of lesser known groups, would seem to embody the Festival's principles today. It is in a different tradition from that of the Royal Court, and yet not so explicitly in opposition to the poetic realism of the Court's heyday as it might seem. One play which brought the Festival into conflict with the Lord Chamberlain's office, which was responsible for the licensing of all plays for public performance (in other words, for the censorship of plays), was *London Docks*, by Wilhem Reupke. The Lord Chamberlain's office objected to the language of the characters: 'This is a characteristic play to be produced by Mr. Terence Gray, who evidently thinks that harlots, ruffians and foul language necessarily mean a "strong" play'.³⁷ Many years before the battle with the censor that through the desire to put ordinary people on the stage finally brought the Lord Chamberlain's power over production to an end,³⁸ Terence Gray's response was to point up the class hypocrisy of what was supposedly suitable for staging: 'You will realise it is a little difficult when you insist that dock labourers shall use the language of the middle class, without the normal expletives of the latter. May I ask why, when the word "bloody" is to be heard in the majority of West-end theatres and music halls, you still insist on its excision from our plays?'.³⁹

This is possibly one of the most important and interesting aspects of the Festival: its battle with the censor. Every play had to be submitted for licence, and a huge proportion were returned to the Festival with requests for cuts, or even occasionally an outright ban. This was not because the theatre was particularly intent on courting controversy; rather, as Steve Nicholson points out,⁴⁰ its desire to stage only the most innovative work, work that corresponded to their idea of 'theatrical material only', meant that they often chose to produce foreign plays influenced by experimental theatrical forms - in particular expressionism. It was not the form which offended the censor, but these were were plays which explored contemporary society, written with no thought given to British censorship (there is some evidence to suggest that British playwrights tended to avoid writing that which might prevent their plays being licenced). At the time, Britain was the only European country with an official censor in the shape of the Lord Chamberlain. Almost every week

³⁵ (31/01/31), 11.

³⁶ (7/02/31), 2.

³⁷ From the "reader's report" by G.S. Street, 24/10/32; from unpublished research by Steve Nicholson. The Lord Chamberlain would employ "readers" to examine the plays submitted for his approval for inappropriate language and action, inviting their comments and recommendation.

³⁸ It was Edward Bond's *Saved* that finally broke the back of the censor, and censorship was ended in 1968.

³⁹ From Letter from Terence Gray to the Lord Chamberlain's office, 31/10/32, from unpublished research by Steve Nicholson.

⁴⁰ In conversation with Steve Nicholson, author of forthcoming publication, *Censorship of British Drama, 1900-1968, Volume One 1900-1932: In the Laps of the Gods*.

letters were exchanged between the Lord Chamberlain's office and Terence Gray, with demands for cuts or alterations: inciting much satirical comment and serious complaint in the Festival Theatre Review. One such article, written in response to the censoring of their translation of Aristophanes' *The Lysistrata* was 'the sleeper awakes/ a tragedy in one act', which depicted the Lord Chamberlain as conversing with 'the masterpiece' he is censoring.

The L.C. (Glancing into the new play.) Dirty....but dull. Dirty but dull....too damned deep.... no entertainment.... got to think of the children....wouldn't matter so much if everyone were married.... it's all those bachelors about... got to look ahead... tough on the nice girls they marry if this stuff got about....

The Festival's production of *Hoppla!* by Ernst Toller, became an event to define the combination of exasperation and desperation with which the Festival responded to the limitations on theatre art imposed by the Lord Chamberlain's fear of offending or corrupting the British theatre-going public. Gray's impatience can already be felt in his response to the demand that the stage direction that Act II, i should open with the characters Eva and Karl in bed together; "the bed business". May I have more detailed instructions as to what I am to undertake shall be omitted? There does not appear to me to be any business in connection with the bed beyond the direction that somebody should get out of it."⁴¹ In fact, the translator, Hermon Ould, of the version of *Hoppla!* used by the Festival had already taken it upon himself to soften the language of the play at points, as A R Pearlman points out in his introduction to his recent translation of the play.⁴² Nevertheless it proved to much at points for the Lord Chamberlain: and for these points in the production of the play, Gray requested permission to substitute the banned section with the formula "Scene, sentence, passage, exclamation, question, reply (as the case may require) deleted by order of the Lord Chamberlain's department".⁴³ A critic of the Festival production comments on the practice: "A megaphonic voice off announces, in lifeless tones, the deletion of passages at various points of the play and on the closed door of a room in a hotel scene the words "closed by order of the Lord Chamberlain appear". This practical method of ridicule moved the audience to much laughter".⁴⁴

As well as making the cuts explicit onstage, the Festival sold the uncensored version of the playtext in the foyer. Gray's advertisement of this in the Festival programme testifies to the extent to which theatre was held to exercise a dangerous influence over audiences: 'Oh yes, you are allowed to read it but you musn't listen to it. Naturally there is all the difference in the world - you must see that. Morality, English morality, is impervious when approached optically, but very vulnerable indeed when attacked aurally'.⁴⁵ It was not merely in anger that Gray chose this method of highlighting the absurdity of the censorship of *Hoppla!*: by doing so, he also furthered the aesthetic aim of the theatre, breaking the action to remind audiences of their place in the theatre: '*the most important element in Theatre is interpretation*'.⁴⁶

Although Gray won over audiences with his methods, the biting satire seems to have been an

⁴¹ Letter from Terence Gray to Comptroller, 23/1/29, from unpublished research by Steve Nicholson.

⁴² *Ernst Toller: Plays One*, Edited and translated with an introduction by Alan Raphael Pearlman, London 2000, p. 44.

⁴³ Letter from Terence Gray to Comptroller, 23/1/29, from unpublished research by Steve Nicholson.

⁴⁴ Anon, "Theatre as Cinema", a contemporary review of the Festival's production of *Hoppla!* From a series collated by local enthusiast, George P Marks. Currently held in the Cambridge City Library Local Studies Collection.

⁴⁵ Gray (23/02/29), 12.

⁴⁶ (26/01/31), 2 (italics in original).

outlet for his increasing disillusionment. He saw the censorship as symptomatic of a philistine British parochialism; 'Whereas every other European government, national and municipal, provides and supports theatres for the practice of dramatic art, the English government... is not even content to leave the art of the theatre to the enterprise of those few artists who are in a position to provide such theatres on their own, they must loose upon such artists every kind of repression and inhibition and impede their efforts at every turn'.⁴⁷ This was not the least of the reasons why Gray eventually gave up the Festival theatre, unwilling any longer to keep up the continual grind against authority entailed by the production of avant-garde theatre in a public space.

It had been the theatre's project, in the search for aesthetic unity, to reinstate theatre at the centre of cultural life, to unify text and performance against the prevailing trend, and its successes - and the subsequent post-war development of theatre in Britain - demonstrates the essentiality of applying theatrical form to dramatic literature. Nevertheless the theatre is barely remembered by most practitioners today. Perhaps this is because it was a directors', rather than a writers' theatre, and therefore left no lasting mark on British drama, except in influence, which is virtually impossible to quantify accurately. It remains true however that, 'in many respects our theatre today is only just catching up with Gray's far-sighted vision'.⁴⁸ The creative and the critical merged in the production of 'fresh forms' which have changed the face of our critical understanding of the relation between text and theatre. For during its existence, at least for its audiences, drawn from London as well as Cambridge, it succeeded against the odds in reinstating theatre as an essential aesthetic experience, achieving W.B. Yeats' desire to plunge art 'back into social life';⁴⁹

'You have provided the undergraduate with a haven of refreshment from the banalities of the conventional stage, you have supplied the thinking man with endless food for thought, the critic with endless material for criticism and the disputant with much weighty matter for discussion. The artist, you have supplied with inspiration, the journalist with copy; to the babbler you have given a subject for decent conversation and the philistine a target at which to scoff'.⁵⁰

From 12 - 16 November 2002 Context Theatre staged a series of one day events to celebrate the existence of the Cambridge Festival Theatre 1926 -1935. There were three phases to each day: the play (or two - as on the 13th) was workshopped by a director and actors, the play was read before an audience, and then actors and audience gathered in the Arts Theatre Circle bar to discuss the play and/or to hear a talk given by an expert on an aspect of the theatre's history. The simplicity in structure allowed for an enormous variety in practice - each reading created its own aesthetic. The constant was the design - a pair of screens designed with an expressionist influence by State of Design architect, Sabin Anca, who was responsible for the reconstruction of the actual Festival Theatre a few years ago. These could be used in a wide variety of ways - the drawings can be found on Context's website. The plays read were: *Hoppla!* by Ernst Toller, directed by Zoe Svendsen; *On*

⁴⁷ Gray (23/02/29), 11.

⁴⁸ Cave, p. 12.

⁴⁹ *Explorations*, p. 300.

⁵⁰ Open letter addressed to Gray by 'one of the undergraduate papers'; Marshall (1950), p. 70-71.

Baile's Strand by WB Yeats, directed by Tim Cribb; *Nishikigi*, directed by Claire Pamment; *The Adding Machine*, directed by Simon Godwin; *Woman's Honour*, directed by Rebecca Manson-Jones, and *Maya* by Simon Gantillon, directed by Erica Whyman.

Talks given after the readings by Iain Mackintosh and Dr. Steve Nicholson illuminated much about the position of the Festival Theatre in relation to wider theatrical trends, providing a context for the original production of the plays read. Iain Mackintosh, eminent theatre architect, who designed the Cottesloe and who is advisor to the RSC, once described the Festival as 'possibly the most successful open stage ever created in Britain'.⁵¹ Steve Nicholson, Head of Theatre Studies at Huddersfield University and expert on the history of stage censorship, lent us fascinating material from his research into the archives of the Lord Chamberlain's office, relating to the battle Terence Gray fought for the European and American avant-garde to be staged in Britain: I've quoted from some of this material above. We recorded the texts and played them as the audience were coming in for the reading of *Hoppla!*. Dr. Jean Chothia shed light on the original performance context of *Woman's Honour*, whilst Tim Cribb explored the use of masks in readings, inspired by Japanese theatre and Yeats' dictum that the Fool and the Blindman should be masked in *On Baile's Strand*.

The intensity - and enjoyment - of the readings was out of all proportion to the size of the events. It is rare in the current climate to find everyone - actors, audience and academics alike - equally engaged in a particular theatre event. In this, I like to think we achieved our aim of conjuring the spirit of the Festival, extending the Festival's invitation to a modern audience 'to come to the theatre as to a party, and act there in their imaginations according to the pattern of the play'.⁵²

Readings will be taking place at the Gate Theatre, Notting Hill, 13-15 January at 7 pm, of three extraordinary plays important in the avant-garde history of the Gate and the Festival. These will be accompanied by a symposium on censorship and the avant-garde in British Theatre at 4 pm on Monday 13th January, chaired by Erica Whyman and with a panel of experts in the field.

Monday 13 Jan 7 pm	<i>Hoppla!</i> by Ernst Toller
Tuesday 14 Jan 7 pm	<i>From Morn to Midnight</i> by Georg Kaiser
Wednesday 15 Jan 7pm	<i>Maya</i> by Simon Gantillon

Zoe Svendsen
Director
Context Theatre
www.contexttheatre.co.uk

[PDF downloaded from www.contexttheatre.co.uk]

⁵¹ Architect, Actor and Audience, Iain Mackintosh, London 1993, p. 50.

⁵² (7/02/31), 6.